

IN
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This book is a work of historical fiction. In order to give a sense of the times, some names of real people, places and events have been included in the novel. They are used fictitiously. The names of nonhistorical persons and events are the product of the author's imagination. Any resemblance of nonhistorical persons or events to actual ones, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

To the memory of Uncle Ben (Bennett Michael Augustin, 1902-1989),
the keeper of the stories, and to the memory of all the ancestors
who made the journey to America

For all the Augustin descendants,
with the hope that they will embrace and cherish the stories

"Oh Liberty, what crimes are committed in thy name!"

Last words of Madame Marie-Jeanne Roland at her execution,
Paris, France, November 8, 1793

PART ONE

FRANCE, 1792

CHAPTER ONE

Jean Baptiste Aubert was so engrossed in pulling up the weeds crowding the basil plants that he didn't hear the angry shouts of the mob until they neared the high walls of the monastery garden. It was a pleasant September day in Paris, the sun warming the young man's shoulders as he leaned over the herb garden. He sat back on his knees, brushed the soil from his long, slender fingers, looked up and listened. He wondered what injustice had inflamed the agitated Parisians today and moved them to demonstrate again in the Left Bank neighborhood. As the cries of the crowd grew louder, Jean was able to make out the slogans they shouted.

“Vive la Nation! Vive la République!”

In the three years since a crowd of Parisians and soldiers had stormed the Bastille prison, France was a changed country. Paris was intoxicated with revolutionary fervor that could turn crowds into vengeful mobs, fueled by rumors and fears. Jean stood, hurried to the wall and looked through one of the fissures where pieces of the ancient bricks had crumbled. On the street a crowd of men and women carried iron bars, pikes, knives and hatchets, their faces contorted with hate, their voices shrill with rage. The men wore red woolen liberty caps, the mark of the *sans-culottes*, and the long, baggy trousers of laborers, shopkeepers, artisans and the poor that set them apart from the aristocracy. The working-class women wore aprons over their blue striped skirts, and on their muslin bonnets they displayed the tricolor cockade, the knot of ribbon that symbolized the Revolution. Across their chests both the men and women wore wide sashes the color of blood. The thud of their wooden clogs pounded out a militant rhythm as they marched.

Jean watched as the last of the mob passed by the wall and rounded the corner, shouting as they headed toward the front entrance to the monastery.

“A bas le clergé!” “Down with the clergy!”

“Mort aux prêtres!” “Death to the priests!”

The young theology student shivered as an icy fear swept through his body. The mood in Paris this summer had been particularly anti-church. The venerable institution was now under the authority of the civil government, church property had been confiscated and sold, and religious orders suppressed. The Pope was burned in effigy in public gardens. Groups of women had invaded convents and beaten the nuns. Clergy who refused to sign an oath of loyalty to the revolutionary government were rounded up and imprisoned.

Within seconds Jean heard loud pounding from the front of the monastery, and when the massive entry door collapsed, the ground shook beneath his feet. Heavy footsteps and shouts echoed through the building. The cries and prayers of the startled monks joined the tumult, their *Notre Père* and *Sainte Marie* cut off in mid-sentence. The worst of the revolutionary fervor had invaded this sacred sanctuary, and Jean feared the mob would not be satisfied until everyone in the monastery was dead. His first impulse was to run inside to help defend the monks who had housed and befriended him when he'd arrived alone in Paris. But what could he do? He was no match for knives and hatchets. Jean had promised to devote his life to serving God. Was his life destined to end in this senseless way, the victim of a crazed and irrational mob?

Jean scanned the garden. There was no place to hide, except for a small tool shed. Surely, they'd search there. What should he do? The sounds of carnage were coming closer. His heart beat wildly. He heard the back door of the monastery open and he whirled around. A brown-robed monk stumbled out of the building and collapsed face down on the stone walkway. Jean rushed over and knelt down. He eased the man over to his back and recognized the contorted face of Brother Paul. Blood poured from a deep gash across his head and spread down his face, forming a red pool on the gray stone. The monk's eyes swam in their sockets, his skin was white and clammy, his body trembled and he breathed in short gasps.

Jean leaned closer. *“Mon frère, let me help you.”* He took off his waistcoat, folded it and placed it under the monk's head.

Brother Paul tried to focus his eyes on Jean. “No, my son,” the monk whispered with difficulty, “...you must go...over the wall...save yourself...to serve God.”

Jean turned to look at the high garden wall. Could he get over it? He was slender and lithe. Perhaps there were enough chinks to support a foothold. But how could he leave his injured friend, the man who had counseled him and helped him with Latin and Greek? He looked at Brother Paul. The monk's breathing was becoming weaker and his eyelids fluttered.

"God be with you, *mon frère*," Jean said, gently taking the monk's hand and guiding it across the dying man's chest in the sign of the cross.

"And...with...you." The monk struggled to mouth the words that were his last.

Jean closed the man's eyes and whispered a prayer for his soul. He stood and listened. The clamor of violence and destruction was moving through the monastery and coming closer. He ran to the wall and found his first foothold an arm's length from the ground, grasping higher bricks and pulling up with arms made muscular by years of work in his family's vineyard. He struggled to find other fissures that would bear his weight, slipping several times, scraping his arms and legs on the rough bricks. Beads of sweat dripped into his eyes. Strands of hair fell across his face. He reached the top, swung his body over the wall and released his hold, falling to the other side. When he hit the ground, a sharp pain shot through his right ankle. His body went limp and he lay on the ground, trying to catch his breath and muster the strength to move. He rose slowly and stumbled away from the monastery wall into the narrow street, just as he heard angry shouts burst into the garden. Had they seen him go over the wall?

The street was crowded with people of all ages, but their attention was drawn to the sounds of the massacre in the monastery, and no one seemed to notice the young man limping along the cobblestones. Eager to investigate the disturbance, the throng pushed its way between the carriages and wagons to the monastery entrance, and onlookers were swept along. Jean's heart was pounding and his ankle throbbing. His instinct was to get away from the chaotic scene. Yet he knew if he joined the crowd of voyeurs, however repugnant that was, he was less apt to be noticed. The old shirt and loose trousers he wore to work in the monastery garden would help him blend in with the laborers and beggars on the street.

As the curious crowd approached the monastery entrance, the violent work of the mob was apparent. The iron gate was spread open, the front door knocked down and every window broken. The onlookers pressed through the gate and into the courtyard, vying for a prime spot to view the bloody assault. Jean felt himself being pushed along with a jab to his back. He struggled to keep his balance. He saw the attackers tossing brass candlesticks, silver crosses and a gold chalice out the monastery windows.

Wash basins, cooking pots and chamber pots were strewn about the courtyard. Men carried out sleeping cots and kneeling benches. Nearby, two women were setting fire to a heap of books dragged from the monastery library and piled on the ground. Jean watched as the black smoke rose, and bibles, Psalters, prayer books and theology tomes turned to ash.

A cheer burst from the onlookers as the mob dragged the bloody, mangled bodies of the monks from the monastery, some still clutching their rosary beads, and threw them into a horse-drawn wooden cart parked on the street. Jean recognized several of them – the librarian, the choirmaster, even the cook. A few watchers in the crowd kept silent, and Jean saw one man make the sign of the cross. Children stared, their mouths agape. An old woman wiped tears from her face and a young pregnant woman fainted. One of the attackers, a burly man with an unshaven face, raised a pike that held the head of the *Abbé*, the monastery's superior. The rioters fell in behind him and paraded through the monastery gate and down the street, breaking into the revolutionary song: "*Ça ira, ça ira!*" "It will happen, it will happen!" As the cart carrying the bodies of the monks pulled away, legs and arms of the dead dangling over the sides, looters from the crowd swarmed over the monastery grounds to claim the spoils of the invasion. Jean realized how close he had come to being in that cart. Overcome with a wave of nausea, he bent over and heaved, his whole body chilled, his limbs weak. He gulped air until his breathing quieted.

As the grisly drama in the courtyard wound down, the watchers drifted off, returning to their daily routines in the streets and shops of Paris. Dazed, Jean leaned against the iron fence for support, shifting his weight from his throbbing ankle. The pain had spread to his foot and along his shinbone. He grimaced and fought back tears. Had he broken a bone? A sense of profound sadness swept over him, surpassing the terror he had known earlier in the garden. Alone now at the scene of the horror he'd witnessed, his chest shook with sobs he couldn't stifle. He grieved for the loss of the monks who had become his friends. But beyond that, he grieved because the life he'd planned, the world he had counted on and trusted, were lost. The Revolution had come to this – this madness, this inhumanity. The lofty aims of the Revolution's philosophers and leaders to ensure the rights of all French citizens, to eliminate the excesses of the aristocracy and the church hierarchy, had morphed into irrationality, revenge and blood lust. Was the philosophers' belief in the perfectibility of humanity a foolish dream? What had happened to the ideals of *liberté, égalité, fraternité*? What was happening to his country?

Jean had no idea where to go now or what to do. The world he had enjoyed for two years since leaving his family home, a world of learning, friendship and security, was destroyed. The goal he had set for his life, to serve God and humanity while embracing the ideals of the Revolution, was shattered. His future – if, indeed, he even had one – was now uncertain. He eased his body down to the ground and sat, his sore leg stretched out. How had things gone so wrong?

He had been so excited and hopeful that summer three years ago when news of the new National Assembly and its adoption of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen reached the village where his family lived in the Loire Valley. Almost 18 years old then, Jean was completing his studies in philosophy and languages at the college of the Oratorian order in Tours and was considering the priesthood as a vocation. He hoped to convince his father to let him go to Paris to study at the Sorbonne, site of the country's leading theology faculty. He would earn a graduate degree and dedicate his life to the teachings of the church, perhaps eventually becoming an abbot at a teaching monastery. Believing in Christ's teaching that all people, regardless of wealth and station, were equal in the eyes of God, Jean saw no conflict between his religious beliefs and the aims of the Revolution. Liberty, equality and justice were grounded in love. Wasn't Jesus a revolutionary, reaching out to the poor, the sick, the outcast? Following Christ's example, most parish priests had distanced themselves from the church hierarchy with its life of opulence, ambition and indifference to the needs of the common people. The political aims of the reformers would be bound with the Christian message of love, compassion and brotherhood.

How idealistic he had been, how naïve!

Jean thought back to the talk he'd had with his father about a choice of vocation two years ago as they sat together after the evening meal in their home in Savigny-en-Veron. The late summer sun was slipping below the vineyards at the edge of the small village. A slight breeze brought the fragrance of freshly mown hay through the windows of the family's house across from the village square. Jean's father, Dominique Aubert, *notaire royale* for the bailiwick of Chinon, served as the court-appointed legal clerk for the area. His signature was required to validate all civil documents. A serious, practical man, he valued order and tradition and was respected in the community for his morality and fairness.

"I know you love the church, *mon fils*, and I would be proud to see you wear the robes of a priest," Dominique said. "But I urge you to keep your dreams grounded in reality. You were not born into nobility, so without a title, there is little chance that you can become an abbot, or even less

likely, a bishop.” Calm and steady, the older man did not readily show his feelings, but Jean had no doubt of his love. He also knew he could count on a rational argument from his father. “Will you be content to spend your life as a parish priest like our beloved *curé* Father Sébastien, earning little more than 700 *livres* a year?”

Jean sighed. He glanced over to his mother, Monique, seated with her mending beside the window. She looked up but kept silent. Jean hoped for her support, but this was the talk of men, and it would not be her place to join the discussion. Dominique waited, his deep brown eyes searching his son’s face. Jean knew the man longed to offer more to his son than his middle-class status allowed. Jean’s older brother, Damien, had followed his father’s profession, apprenticing as a notary with an uncle in the north of France. As the oldest son, Damien would inherit the family’s property.

Lillie, the family’s servant girl, came into the room with two small glasses of cognac, setting them on the table between the men. As she leaned down to place the glasses, Jean glanced at the ample breasts that filled her low-cut bodice. He flushed and quickly dropped his eyes, preferring to forget what had happened that summer three years ago. He tried to focus on Dominique’s question. Facing his father, Jean took a deep breath and rushed headlong into building his case.

“*Mon père*, I have no desire to be a part of the church hierarchy and live in luxury. I prefer to teach, if that is God’s will. I want to go to Paris to study theology. With a degree from the Sorbonne, I can teach in one of the monastic schools. You know I have done well in my studies in Tours. My marks were the best of my class. I will apply myself and work hard. I will make you and *ma mère* proud. I.....”

Dominique raised his hand and smiled at his son. “Jean Baptiste, I know you are earnest and sincere. And you have applied yourself well to your studies. But these are very uncertain times.” Jean watched his father’s face turn serious as he spoke. “Much dissent erupted when the Estates General met at Versailles last year, and since the Revolution began, the ferment in Paris continues. We have even heard talk of abolishing the monarchy. Some of my contacts in court say they will leave the country if the more radical elements gain power. No one knows where this will end.”

Jean knew that while his father was troubled by the excesses of the royal court, the unfair treatment of the peasants, and the deplorable state of the country’s finances, Dominique believed in the divine right of kings and supported the monarchy.

The older man took a sip of cognac before continuing. “Last year, the mob that attacked the Bastille was entirely out of control. So much violence,

so much unnecessary bloodshed. Even in the more peaceful countryside, rumors that the Revolution would be suppressed bred panic and outbreaks of violence. *Châteaux* were burned. Nobles who resisted were slaughtered with their families.”

Jean saw the anguish in his father’s face. Dominique was a peaceful and honest man, proud of his position as guardian of civil law in this small pocket of France. The son hesitated before responding, careful to show no disrespect to his father. “Yes, Papa, that is true. But things have changed. The violence is over. Paris is calm now. The festival in Paris this summer was a wonderful celebration of the first anniversary of the Bastille’s fall. The king and his family attended, and the soldiers and all of Paris. There was singing and dancing and such a show of unity and joy.”

“Indeed there was, and I don’t mean to sound cynical, *mon fils*. But you know from reading history that lofty political aims are easily sidetracked by self-interest, greed and the struggle for power. No movement, however pure at the outset, is immune to human failings.”

“*Oui, mon père*, I understand.” Jean swallowed, his eyes cast down. Then he looked at his father. “But I sincerely believe that great good will come from all of this, that the lives of the poor will be improved, that we will see fairness and justice for all. I want to be a part of that. If you allow me to go to Paris, Papa, I will remember your words, and I will be cautious.”

The candles on the mantle had almost burned down as darkness began to fill the room. Monique folded up the shirt she was mending and returned the thread and needle to her basket. Lillie stepped into the room.

“*Pardon, madame*. Will you need anything more this evening?”

“No, Lillie. *Bonsoir*.” The young woman made a slight curtsy, sneaked a quick smile at Jean and left to return to her home in the village.

The bell of the village church across the square tolled nine times. Dominique rose and turned to Jean, placing his hand on the young man’s shoulder. “Enough for tonight, *mon fils*. I will talk with your mother about your plans. But I don’t know how she will ever bear to let you go.” He smiled at his wife and took her arm as they left the room.

Jean’s enthusiasm and assurances eventually won over his parents, and, for the most part, he’d brushed aside his father’s concerns about the Revolution and the dangers of Paris. Because of Dominique’s reputation and through his connections, he was able to secure from the local bishop a scholarship for Jean to attend the Sorbonne. He made arrangements for his son to board at a Benedictine monastery on the Left Bank of the Seine, one of the many religious orders in Paris. The monastery served the poor with

weekly food distribution from its large vegetable garden, and the abbot was eager to have the young man's help.

Jean arrived in Paris in early fall. That summer, the Legislative Assembly had voted to require all clergy to take an oath of loyalty to the new Constitution. About half of the lower clergy and most bishops had refused to take the oath. The church was split into two opposing camps. In November, a pronouncement came from the Pope in Rome suspending all priests who had taken the oath. Clashes erupted on the streets of Paris and in towns across France between those who supported the recalcitrant priests and those who defended the oath. It was then that Jean began to have doubts about the course of the Revolution, which was heading into the murky unknown. Perhaps his father's concerns had been prescient.

Now, two years later, the monarchy had collapsed. The country had a written constitution, the first in its history. Hereditary nobility with its hierarchy of titles had been abolished; in the new classless society everyone bore the common title "citizen." France was at war with Austria and Prussia, and Parisians feared an enemy invasion. King Louis XVI and his family, forced from their palace at Versailles, were housed under guard in Paris. Their escape attempt last summer had failed. On a hot August night of lawlessness just weeks ago, a mob had attacked the palace, seeking the king and queen and massacring the Swiss Guards who protected them.

Jean was alone in Paris, with an injured leg, no money, no belongings, no shelter. The city seemed to be descending into chaos. And because of his loyalty to the church and his family's connection to the crown, Jean feared for his life.