

Colette

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this book to my grandparents, Raymonde Vinter, Roger Vinter, Michelina Zambelli, and Antoine Zambelli, who never hesitated to give of their time to help me grow and thrive.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

While this novel is a work of fiction, I interviewed my grandmother before she passed to get the feel for what life during World War II, and especially life in Paris, was really like. So once again I must thank Raymonde Vinter for her contribution to my work. I also thank my husband, children, and parents for their unrelenting support.

Colette

CHAPTER 1

Paris, Summer 1938

Colette and her friend Anne rushed across the boulevard Saint-Germain. They had just finished their last exam and were finally corporate secretaries. Most young French women would give their left arms to be in their shoes. At eighteen years of age, Colette and Anne had jobs lined up and the world at their feet. After a short walk, they reached the terrace of the Café Saint Michel. They sat down at their favorite table, ordered the aromatic brew so typical of the

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country, and waited for the students of the Sorbonne to come out in swarms from the old building across the street. Soon the boulevard Saint Michel would be bursting with activity. The cafés' terraces would fill with young people eager to celebrate the onset of summer. There would be singing and maybe dancing. And there would definitely be flirting.

Colette was concentrating on watching a lanky, brown-haired boy holding a checkered flat hat in his hands hurriedly cross the street, when her view was obstructed by a very tall figure. The man in front of her must have been six feet four, at least. He looked very distinguished and not at all at ease in this environment. As a matter of fact, he looked kind of lost. His blond hair was shimmering in the sun, and his angular jaw made him look very masculine. Colette could not quite make out the color of his eyes but decided they must be blue. "What did this man want?" she wondered. At that very moment, he approached her, and in a very approximate French attempted to ask for directions to the Boulinier bookstore, after he introduced himself as Adam Walker. Colette was charmed to hear such an accent and figured that he must be a tourist from the United States of America. Since she was at the top of her class in English, she thought she would help him in his own language and spare him the indignity of having to stumble through the conversation in

French. And instead of explaining to him that he only had to walk toward the boulevard Saint-Germain and stop about three blocks before he reached the Seine River, she opted to take him there herself.

As they walked along the boulevard Saint Michel, Adam could not help but notice that Colette was a very attractive young woman with the most eye-catching attributes. Indeed, not only was she beautiful, with her petite frame, long brown hair, blue eyes, and heart-shaped face, but she also spoke his language. And how refreshing was that? He had not uttered a word of English since he had arrived a few days earlier. This assignment was supposed to be easy; find the book his old colleague needed for his research, purchase the item, and travel back to the University of California at Berkeley, where he could go back to his own teaching. This was really supposed to be a vacation, a few weeks in France, where he could enjoy the women and the wine before going back to a quiet life in sunny California. Instead, he had gotten headache after headache as he realized that his high school French was far from being fluent. Now he knew. His teachers had lied to him. And he smiled to himself.

But this was only his cover. Tonight, he would have to meet with his informant. As a member of the United States intelligence community, Adam had been sent to France to gather information in

order to prepare for the possibility of war. The rise to power of Adolph Hitler and the general tension in Europe appeared to be indicating an impending conflict. The United States would want to stay away, but it still needed to evaluate the scope of the problem and the impact on their barely recovering economy. Of course, Adam had to blend in with the French as much as he could during his stay.

But he was not off to a good start. As he was about to cross the street, Colette pulled him back as hard as she could and almost made him lose his balance. He was about to ask her for an explanation when he saw a white Delahaye cabriolet zoom by right where he would have stood, had Colette not interfered with his plan. This sweet little woman had effectively saved his life.

And before he could say a single word, she smiled at him and said, "This is Paris, sir, and French men are mad men on the road. You really need to pay attention if you want to stay alive."

Colette had no idea how right she was. If Adam wanted to stay alive, in his line of work, he needed to be on his toes at all times. There would be no more daydreaming about this woman or anyone else for that matter. He had to stay focused.

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Once they reached the bookstore, Colette was entrusted with the title of the book Adam was hunting for, so she could ask the store owner as to its whereabouts. After she learned where the book was located, they walked through the aisles, smelling and looking at all the beautifully decorated masterpieces that lay in front of them. But within minutes, Adam had purchased the old volume he was seeking and was walking out with Colette. He liked her. She was his damsel in shining armor. He liked her so much that he was going to ask her to be his guide for the remainder of his trip. It was a crazy idea, really, not one that would be conducive to much spying. But first he would ask her out to lunch the next day to thank her for all her help.

All too soon, they arrived back at Anne's table. The faithful friend had been holding down the fort by herself and making sure seats were still available for Colette and her potential guest.

The wind had picked up a little, so Colette held her lightly flowing skirt close to her body as she sat down on the chair next to her friend. And when asked if he would sit with them for a while, Adam was more than happy to oblige. He did not want to be left to his own devices so early in the evening. After all, his meeting was not until ten o'clock that night. The sun was still shining, and the air was still warm and breezy as only the best of days can be in Paris. Colette

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ordered lemonade for herself and a glass of red wine for Adam. Once Adam shared his plans with his young new friend and made his offer, she accepted the job of being his tour guide; after all, she had a few weeks' vacation before her new career would get under way. She would take full advantage of that time and gladly play tourist with the tall, handsome American. She had been right. His eyes were indeed blue, the deepest, most beautiful blue she had ever seen.

As Adam was walking back to his hotel on rue de Rivoli, he realized that as smitten as he was by Colette he knew very little about her. How old was she? How many brothers and sisters did she have? Were her parents still alive? Why had she chosen to become a secretary instead of going for a university degree? Did she want to move to the States? Now, where did that last question come from? He had just met the girl for heaven's sake, and she had just become part of his cover. Anyhow, tomorrow, when she picked him up, he would have to ask most of them. He wanted and needed to know everything about her. And in spite of the wonderfully mellowing wine he had ingested in her presence, he knew that tonight, he would not find sleep easily.

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He finally reached the corner of the rue de Rivoli and rue du Louvre. He was to meet a young Frenchman named Richard, and would acquire the file he needed to do a thorough analysis, which he would then present to Franklin D. Roosevelt in person within the next couple of months. This file represented essential intelligence gathered from many European countries over the last six months. He had been told that his contact was fluent in at least five languages and that he was able to pass as a citizen of at least as many countries. Once the exchange was made, Adam headed back to his hotel.

Soon enough he reached his destination, He asked for the key to his room and went straight up so the clerk would not start a pointless conversation. He had had enough French for one day and only wanted to go to his room so he could look at his newly acquired file.

To try to calm down, he opted to take a bath. But through the soap suds, all he could see was Colette and her warm, gentle smile. He would count the seconds until he could see her again. And instead of counting sheep, he did just that. It was obviously not a very effective sleep aid, and Adam saw the sunrise before he was able to close his eyes.

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Colette was walking on air. She would see Adam tomorrow, and the day after, and the day after that, and for the next three weeks. She had taken the metro to the twentieth arrondissement, where her parents lived with her maternal grandparents. She was grinning from ear to ear as she walked in the door of their apartment. She kissed them all to say hello and waltzed to her room. Her little brother, fourteen-year-old Pierre, looked shocked. What had gotten into Colette? She had never acted so dim-witted before. Her twelve-year-old sister, Josette, had a similar expression on her face. And without even consulting each other, both youngsters ran after her. They always wanted to know everything about their older sister's life, and Colette obliged them by regaling them with stories of the day's escapades. But today was special. She wanted to keep this adventure to herself. She felt as if sharing it would make it disappear. So she talked about her exams, her graduation, and her upcoming job. She discussed the singing and the laughing that went on in the cafés and the frenzy with which all the students wanted to celebrate, but she did not utter a word about her striking and oh-so-temporary new boss.

Once she was done with her daily show-and-tell, she put on her cotton nightgown and went straight to bed. She wanted to get her beauty sleep before she met Adam the next day. She fully intended

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on making him notice her. She wanted her first kiss to be with this man she had just met. She just knew it was going to be special. And unlike the man of her dreams, she fell asleep within seconds.

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CHAPTER 2

When Colette woke up, everyone was still asleep. Even her grandparents, who generally started their day at dawn, were not out of their room. For once, she would surprise them all and make them black coffee so they could have a fresh cup without having to brew it themselves. After she was done with a breakfast that consisted of a big bowl of café au lait and buttered toast, she washed her hair, ironed her dress, and polished her shoes. By then the house was stirring, and her sister joined her in her room. She had just put on her favorite dress with bouffant sleeves and a well-adjusted waist.

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Eager to have her sister's opinion, she asked, "What do you think? Do you like the beautiful flowers on the fabric, or is it too much?"

Before Josette could reply, Pierre, who was passing by Colette's bedroom in his pajamas, teased, "You look like a big flowerpot. Beware of the bees out there!"

Josette said reassuringly to her older sister, "Of course not! You look beautiful, as always!"

And on that note, Colette said good-bye to her family and left for her temporary job. As she walked outside, she thought she should take the subway and head for rue de Rivoli. She was to meet Adam at his hotel so she could accompany him on his Paris discovery.

The trip was not too long, and soon she was waiting for him in the lobby. His arrival took her breath away. The man was just too tall. And his shoulders were just too wide. He was wearing a very proper brown tweed jacket, navy-blue slacks, a blue cotton shirt, and a matching tie. If the weather was going to be any hotter than it had been the previous day, Colette thought that the poor man would surely melt on the spot. She bade him a good morning and pointed him toward the door.

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Adam could not wait to see Colette again. He had barely slept, and so when the sun came up, he was ready to meet her in the lobby. She, of course, did not arrive until a few hours later. She looked young and beautiful in her freshly pressed flower-print dress, with her long hair flowing over her shoulders, her big blue eyes, and her well rested face with her angelic smile. He greeted her with a warm handshake and walked toward the door as she had instructed him.

Once they were on the boulevard, Colette entrusted Adam with her plans for the day. They would first go to the Eiffel Tower and walk on the champ de Mars. They would then have lunch in a bistro by the Seine River and would end the afternoon with a walk in the Luxembourg Gardens. It would be a full and tiring day, but much would be accomplished, and Adam would be satisfied he was getting his money's worth of Paris adventures.

So Colette led him through the maze that eventually got them on the metro and out into the fresh air near the Eiffel Tower. And as they climbed up the iron structure, Adam could see Paris in all its glory. The view was magnificent. From the Sacré Coeur to Notre Dame, he could see all the old buildings that spanned the city. Colette's enthusiasm for her hometown was catching, and Adam soon believed he was looking at the most beautiful town in

the world with the most attractive woman he had ever seen.

By the time they walked back down, they were starving. Since the Eiffel Tower was right on the Seine, they were able to get to their restaurant within a few minutes. The place was a typical French bistro where the food was prepared family style by the owner's wife. They ate the dish of the day, a *petit salé aux lentilles*, the only dish served in the establishment, and a dessert of *îles flottantes*. The meal was served with a nice ruby-red wine that mellowed the senses, the kind of wine that would make anyone drinking it want to go for a nap under a tree in a quiet park. But to Adam's great surprise, instead of looking for the most luscious grass under the thickest tree, Colette ordered coffee and asked for the day's newspaper.

They spent the next hour reading and discussing current events. She too had been worried about an upcoming war. She was concerned about Hitler and the fact that European countries were not preparing for a conflict. Granted, they had fought the last war thinking it would indeed be the very last. But hiding their head in the sand regarding Germany's advances toward a conflict was just plain ridiculous, explained Colette. The young lady was more than a pretty face. She was smart, and she understood much more about the intricacies of world politics than most

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American young women her age. She was a delight to be around.

Once Adam paid the check, they walked through the Luxembourg Gardens and found a nice tree that would allow them to digest peacefully. They sat down on the grass, and Adam loosened his tie as the day was getting warmer and warmer.

And as he was staring at Colette, wondering what hold this woman had over him, she said, “There is going to be a thunderstorm soon.”

“And how do you know that?” replied the young professor.

She answered, a little surprised by the question, “It’s obvious. The swallows are flying low. That generally means that a thunderstorm is coming. And that’s good because it will clear the air, and tomorrow will be much cooler.”

That was music to Adam’s ears. He was dying in his tweed jacket and long-sleeved shirt. Thank God he had loosened his tie, but that was only helping a little.

After a nice long rest, they opted not to tempt fate and decided to walk back to Adam’s hotel. But about halfway through their journey, the storm Colette had mentioned started throwing buckets of

water at them. They decided to run for it, but by the time they reached the front door, they were both soaking wet.

Colette's hair was dripping little beads of water onto her already soaked dress, now clinging to her body. Adam could just make out a hint of skin under the wet fabric. She looked lovely. He really wanted to be a gentleman; he did not want to scare her off. After all, he was ten years older than her. But he wanted her. He wanted her so badly that his whole body ached. So he leaned forward and placed his mouth on hers. To his great surprise, she pulled back instantly and slapped him as hard as she could.

"I don't know what you are doing, but you have got the wrong impression. I am not that kind of girl," she told him in the coldest tone she could muster.

Embarrassed, and cheek burning, Adam apologized profusely: "I don't know what came over me...You looked so lovely. I just wanted to kiss you, to feel your lips on mine. They just seemed so soft. I really did not mean to offend you. Please don't let this incident stop you from being my guide tomorrow. I promise this will never happen again."

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The next day, and the day after that, and for the whole week, Colette met Adam to help him discover the city she loved so much. They enjoyed having lunch on the Place du Tertre and looking at the artists painting and sketching the various scenes that played out in front of them. Some of the tourists even had their portrait painted on the spot, and one could see that the talent that brewed there was by no means ordinary. And while they walked among the many artists, Adam noticed a man with a beret who was drawing furiously on a napkin. The sketch included a Minotaur, which was rather odd in this environment. However, Adam was riveted to the work of art, and he asked the creator if he could purchase the napkin from him.

The man simply replied, “You like it? Take it. It’s just a study for a painting I am working on.”

Adam thanked him profusely and left with Colette at his side.

From the Arc de Triomphe to the Louvre, they walked together and talked incessantly. They laughed. They even held hands. And this time Colette did not recoil. She even seemed to really enjoy the physical contact. Adam told Colette about his family. He talked about his five brothers and his baby sister, and he told her about their family home in New York, where his parents still lived with the younger

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members of the bunch. He talked about his job as a university professor in California, about his life in general, and the fact that his mother was pushing him to give her grandchildren. After all, he was the oldest. He should really marry first. But nowhere in their numerous conversations did Adam mention his other activities.

Colette talked about her family and about how close she was to her grandparents, her cousins, uncles, and aunts, her brother and sister, and her parents. She talked about how they all had dinner together on Sunday nights, when her grandmother cooked their favorite dishes. She talked about the laughter and the easygoing atmosphere that surrounded them all and how much they really loved each other in spite of their occasional arguments.

Adam was touched by her rendition of her family life. He had always thought his family was tight, but it was nothing like that. He could never talk about them with the warmth Colette had shared as she was describing them all.

The following weekend, Colette and her friends had planned on going on a picnic by the Marne River, where they would also be able to swim. They were going to stay well into the evening and

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build a bonfire. Adam had agreed to join them. Pierre and Josette would be there too. It was going to be a day to remember.

The whole gang had decided to meet in front of Colette's house at nine o'clock on Saturday so they could all drive together to a secluded area of the river where they were to spend the day. A young man who looked very familiar walked toward one of the cars and got behind the wheel. Adam could not really make out his face, but the overall shape of his body reminded him of something. The car quickly filled up with the young people who were joining the picnic. He and Colette got in another car, which followed the first. And the whole group drove to the riverbank. They set up their blankets and food as fast as they could, so they could start eating soon. The air was already sizzling and promised to only get hotter. Some of the guys went swimming while the gals sat around and talked. Adam looked positively scrumptious in the swimming trunks he had gotten for the occasion.

Colette did not look so bad herself, in her navy-blue suit. The small skirt that comprised the bottom part of her swimming attire showed off her long legs quite nicely. She went by the riverbank to get the boys' attention so they could come eat, when she noticed that her cousin and Adam were talking.

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Colette walked over to them and said, “I see you guys have met. Richard is my cousin and one of the smartest guys I know.”

And looking at her cousin, she continued, “Adam is my employer. I have been showing him around the city for the last couple of weeks. He is a professor from the University of California at Berkeley and will be returning home soon.”

“He better,” mumbled Richard, who did not seem happy with this turn of events.

The young man had always been very protective of his cousin, and the fact that his American contact was courting Colette was making him suspicious. He would have to keep an eye on her and see how things evolved.

After lunch, Colette decided to wait the customary two hours before she joined the boys in the river. She described her recent days to Anne, who wanted to hear all the little details of her friend’s adventures. Adam, who had no such respect for the two-hour rule, was already in the water and playing ball with the boys. Colette would have loved to join him sooner, but rules were rules. And at that very moment, she hated the rules. When the two hours were up, the young lady dove into the water without hesitation. She was a really good swimmer and

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enjoyed the feel of the cool water on her skin. The gang always went to the same place on the river, where Mother Nature had created a pool by the side of the riverbed, so they could play all day without worrying about the river's current disturbing their games.

Soon it was time to build the bonfire. They piled some wood they had brought and what they could find in the forest nearby. The evening went as planned. Everyone was enjoying the first days of summer. Some were toasting the occasion a little more than others. Colette had not had any alcohol to drink because she had planned on going swimming again after dinner. However, a young man named Robert had not had the same foresight. And when Colette decided to make good on her plan, the dear boy decided to follow her. She tried to stop him, telling him that he had had too much to drink and should probably not enter the water. But he refused to listen to her and walked right in.

The young woman was swimming peacefully in the middle of the creek when one of her friends yelled, "Colette, I just saw a rat and a couple of snakes in the river."

And since she hated both, Colette decided to head back quickly before she met one of the creatures. But as she started back, she noticed that

Robert was not following her. He appeared to be pretending to drown.

“Stop clowning around, Robert,” she shouted.

But the young man took a final plunge and did not come back up. At that very instant, Colette knew that her friend was in big trouble. She swam back toward him and dove where she thought she might have a chance to find him. The water was pitch dark, and she could hardly see. She extended her arms out in front of her, and as if driven by a supernatural force, she collided with him. The next step was to bring him back to shore.

She came back up to the surface and cried for help as she tried to swim back. She was holding Robert in the rescue position she had been taught at school during physical education classes, but he was too heavy. And all she heard from the shore was, “We can’t see you. Swim closer.”

Colette quickly decided she would not die for this idiot who had not followed her advice, but she would at least do her very best to save his sorry hide. So she started swimming under water as fast as she could while keeping her friend’s head out of the water. Whenever she needed a breath, she would come back up for air and let him go under for a second or two. She kept this up until she was near

enough for Adam to jump in and help her through the last couple of yards. They pushed him onto the riverbank and placed him on his side. Soon he started coughing, and water came out of his mouth. His breathing became regular, and his color improved within seconds. Colette breathed a sigh of relief. Robert would be fine. Her whole body ached, and she knew it would be a lot worse tomorrow, but she had managed to save that idiot's life. All in a good day's work, she thought as she smiled to herself.

Adam was observing her. He was extremely impressed with her coolness under pressure. She had not panicked. She had done exactly what needed to be done to save the young man without putting her life in danger. He was so proud of her. And at that very moment, he knew he wanted her to be his and his alone.

Adam had hired the talents of the hotel's concierge to find the perfect ring. Today was the day. They had gone to the Cluny Museum, and he was waiting for the right time to propose. Finally, in the medieval gardens, in the *jardin d'amour*, by those beautiful roses, Adam went on one knee and asked Colette to marry him. She did not reply right away. She looked stunned. Adam was holding his breath. He had never considered the option that she would

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turn him down. He had had to rush through the courtship because he was going home soon. He wanted her with him. He wanted her. And after what seemed like an eternity, Colette said a simple, barely audible yes.

Adam rose and kissed her hard. She was finally his. Colette did not pull back, but she was surprised that she was not seeing stars. She had always assumed that she would see them when she kissed her husband. But those were childish notions, she had told herself. She was now a grown woman about to get married to an intelligent, handsome, witty, and charming American professor.

CHAPTER 3

The next couple of weeks were a combination of joy and sorrow. Colette's family was showing a supportive united front, but her grandmother was spending more time than usual wiping her eyes. She had claimed her allergies were really bad this time of year. Pierre was telling jokes constantly, and Colette had even heard someone crying in the bathroom a few days earlier. She had to admit that she also had mixed feelings. On the one hand, she was marrying a man who would put most of her male friends to shame. He was so manly. On the other hand, she was going to move halfway around the world and rarely see her family, if she ever saw them again.

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Adam had taken care of all the paperwork with the help of Colette's friend Anne. Everything was ready to go. Rather than have a church wedding, for which they did not have time, they would marry at city hall. The important thing was that she become his wife in time for the long journey back. They would travel by boat to New York and then, after visiting with his family for a few days, they would take the train to San Francisco.

When Colette's father had heard the news, he had almost collapsed. His little girl was going to move halfway around the world, far, far from where he could protect her. There was only one thing he could do, and this would require that all of his contacts work on his behalf quickly.

Time was of the essence. He took Colette aside and told her the family secret. She now needed to know.

So he started. "Honey, you are old enough to understand now. And as you are going away, I need to find a way to protect you even when I am not around. Your mother and I are Freemasons. We do not belong to the same Masonic body because we are of different genders, but we nonetheless have the same brothers and sisters."

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Colette's mother interrupted. "You know, Colette, Freemasons are present all around the world. They keep their membership secret because of all the persecution they have suffered through history, and most recently in Spain, but they will always welcome and help a brother or sister in need."

Colette's father continued the explanation. "It normally takes a long time to gain membership, and the person who wants to join generally has to ask herself. But here we do not have time. I want you to trust me and become a Freemason before you leave. What do you say?"

Colette was taken aback by this revelation. She had had no idea. She knew of Freemasons and their moral values, and she even suspected that she had known some Masons. But her own parents? That was a surprise. She decided on the spot that if her membership would make her father feel better about her leaving, that was the least she could do.

So she agreed. And a few days later, she was initiated into her mother's lodge. Many rules had been broken, but her parents' influence had made this possible. She was made aware of the responsibilities that came with the membership and received a small list of women and men who lived in the United States and who would welcome her once she got there. No one was to know that they themselves were

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Freemasons, and her own membership was to remain a secret. She was given the signs that would help her make contact, and she said good-bye to the women who had welcomed her into the sisterhood just a few hours prior.

To Colette's parents' dismay, the wedding was a quick event, and their daughter spent her wedding day busily closing up her suitcases rather than being the belle of the ball. In fact, just before the ceremony, Colette's dad had asked her, "Honey, is this really what you want to do? You are still so young, and you have so much time ahead of you. I am worried you were rushed into this and did not think it through."

Colette looked at her dad with a brave smile on her face and replied, "I really want to do this. Don't worry; I will be fine." And she walked to her seat to wait for the mayor to link her life to Adam's forever.

For the first time in her life, Colette woke up as Mrs. Adam Walker. Her wedding night had been even more surprising than her first kiss. Adam had come to bed, taken off her nightgown along with his own clothes, spread her legs, and plunged into her as if he was diving into the ocean. The initial pain had

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been so intense that it had taken her breath away. But after a minute or so, the whole process became something that might have been enjoyable if her husband had given her a little more time to warm up to the idea. “There has to be more to it than that,” thought Colette as she waited for her husband to wake up.

Tired of looking at Adam’s sleeping figure, Colette got up and went to the kitchen to take her last breakfast with her family. Grandmamma had been crying. It was obvious. So had her mother and sister, who were wearing sunglasses in the house. The mood was somber, and the breakfast just did not taste the same. It had a bittersweet quality that Colette knew she would never forget. And as she was walking back to her room to get dressed, her grandfather stopped her in the hallway. He reached into his pocket and pulled out his gold pen, the one he always wrote with, the one that had been with him since he had been a very young man.

He handed it to Colette and said, “Here, you take it with you. This way I know you will always have a pen to write with...and to remember me by.”

He kissed her cheek and left without another word. Colette stood there committing to memory the smell of her grandfather’s aftershave. He was such a gentle man, a man of few words. But he was always

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there to lend a sympathetic ear and offer advice when asked. Colette had known that it would break her heart to say good-bye to her family, but she had not realized how difficult it would really be. And two hours before her departure, she finally felt the overwhelming desperation that came with her decision.

Before she knew it, her travel trunks were in the car and she was standing on the sidewalk kissing everyone good-bye.

Her grandmother managed to hold the tears long enough to whisper in Colette's ear, "You are the firstborn of my grandchildren. There has always been a special bond between us, Colette. I will always love you the most. But this is our secret."

Then she kissed her granddaughter's cheek and walked back into the house.

The rest of the family kissed her in silence, too afraid that words would break the dam that prevented their tears from flowing freely. All the women were wearing sunglasses even though the sky was as gray as their mood. Even Anne, who had come for the occasion, was following this new trend.

She hugged her friend fiercely and said, "That pen your grandfather gave you is also good for

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writing to your friend. Don't forget me, and know that I will always be here for you if you need me."

And before Colette could reply, Adam pushed her in the car. And with a coldness that was new to their relationship, he told his wife, "Don't you think you have made enough of a spectacle of yourself?"

Colette's anger rose to the occasion. How could her new husband be so insensitive to her pain? How could he even make such a comment when she was doing all she could not to start sobbing like a little child? She had just abandoned her family, broken their hearts, and possibly made the biggest mistake of her life. And as she took one last look at them she saw a tear escape from behind her godmother's sunglasses. She wished she could wipe that tear away and make the older woman feel better, but she knew it would be a long time before she could kiss her cheeks and hug her again.

They traveled to Brest to catch the ship that would take them to America, and once onboard, things seemed to get a little better. Adam relaxed and slowly became his charming self again. Thankfully, neither Adam nor she seemed to be affected by sea sickness. Maybe Colette had overreacted. Adam was

able to make her laugh almost constantly. Yes, she would be happy with him.

They spent their days walking on the deck and their nights making love. Even in that department, things had improved. The experience was enjoyable, and falling asleep in Adam's arms was very reassuring. He must love her. After all, he was always so physical, holding her hand, reaching for her when they crossed other couples on the deck, putting his arms around her shoulders when she looked cold during their evening stroll. He had even requested a table for two, where they took all their meals together, uninterrupted by the other passengers' discussions.

But sometimes he still had reactions that puzzled and worried her a little. One day, she had been writing a letter to her family to tell them about her wonderful cruise when Adam walked in.

After inquiring about her current activity, he grabbed the piece of paper she had been writing on, tore it into small pieces, and said, "I am your family now, darling. You really should concentrate on me."

Colette instinctively knew not to reply or even make eye contact. She got up from the desk and walked up to her husband. With a shy little smile, she went on tiptoe and kissed him on the mouth. Adam did not need any more encouragement than that to

COLETTE

take his wife to bed, even in the middle of the afternoon.

Even though she was enjoying her husband's company, Colette could not wait to land on the American continent. She would meet her new brothers and sister, her mother-in-law, and hopefully the father-in-law Adam hardly ever talked about. She suspected the relationship between the two men was tense, but her husband had not shared any of the specifics with her.

Finally the big day arrived. They were taken to Ellis Island, where Colette was processed in a flash with her husband's help. She was shocked to see the long line of immigrants waiting for their fate to be decided while she was being ushered from one office to the next, each time getting closer to the exit point. Indeed, Adam had showed some paperwork and an official-looking card, and that seemed to have been enough to get them out of the immigration building rapidly. She had no idea what the card was. Every time she got close to seeing it, Adam would somehow find a way to obstruct her view. And before she knew it, she was out on the street, ready for her new adventure to begin.

COLETTE

As it was the end of July, New York was really hot and humid. Colette had never thought it possible for the weather to be as inclement as it was in Paris before a summer thunderstorm. But New York was by far the dampest and warmest environment she had ever experienced. And then she saw them. They all looked a little like Adam. They had the same golden hair and blue eyes, the same facial features, and the same broad shoulders. They were obviously all his brothers.

She had painstakingly learned all their names and distinguishing features while she was on the boat.

So she approached the first one and said, "You must be Joe. You are just as Adam described you. I am so pleased to meet you." And then she said to the next, "And you must be James." And she continued until she got to the last one. "You must be Peter, the youngest. You have the same name as my little brother. I just know we are going to get along famously," she said.

And the whole clan was in love with her instantly.

Adam was praised for his choice of bride. Even his father adored her. His sister could not have been happier to finally have a sibling of her own sex even if it was through marriage.

COLETTE

His mother took Colette everywhere. She introduced her to all her friends and even to some of her enemies. She seemed so proud of her new daughter-in-law. All were enthralled with Colette's personality, looks, homegrown sophistication, sweetness, and accent. She was the toast of the town.

One evening, as Colette was getting ready for one of the numerous parties she was attending, she heard a knock on the door. She opened it, and her mother-in-law walked in. She seemed in a hurry. The older woman grabbed her daughter-in-law's hands and kissed her soundly on the cheeks. Colette was stunned. With extreme rapidity, her mother-in-law had given her the recognition sign, and she was now smiling at her. Colette returned the coded signal and grinned right back. Her mother-in-law was also her sister. Her father had told her she would find Masons everywhere, but she was not expecting to meet one in her husband's family.

The older woman finally spoke. "Your mother's letter arrived today. So I was just informed. It did take some time for her to find me, but she did. And I am so glad. Adam knows nothing of my membership, and I think it would be wise if you did not divulge yours to him either."

COLETTE

The two women talked for a while longer and finally parted so Colette could finish getting ready.

Colette loved her new in-laws at least as much as they did her. She shared secrets with Stephanie, her sister-in-law, and the two young women went together to the symphony, to various stores, and even to the movie theater. And of course, a special bond had developed between Colette and her mother-in-law. Even the dreaded father-in-law had been a sweetheart. They had had a few conversations and had enjoyed reading the paper together every morning at breakfast. She could have stayed with her in-laws forever. But soon it was time to say good-bye again to go west and settle down in Berkeley, California, close to the university, where Adam taught Political Science.

CHAPTER 4

After their long train ride, they arrived in Oakland, California. The city was just a few miles from San Francisco, but it appeared to be a world away. As Colette exited the train station, she was shocked to see the poverty surrounding her. This was nothing like what she had read about in the various magazines her father had sometimes brought home for her mother. None of the glamour that had been described for her shone through here. This was not the California she was expecting. On top of that, Oakland was enjoying the advances of the nasty summer weather that San Francisco often experienced. Indeed,

the weather was its usual summer day fog with temperature competing with a cold winter day in Paris. Colette had not expected this kind of climate at all. She had assumed that San Francisco was like the rest of California, which had been described to her by her teachers as being close to the French Riviera or even Morocco. And obviously this was neither. But in spite of that surprising turn of events, she welcomed the coolness that surrounded her after the tiring heat she had experienced day in, day out in New York.

She followed her husband to the taxicab that would take them home, and she prayed that her new place was far away from the destitute landscape she was now staring at. The houses were decrepit masses of peeling paint. Weather-beaten wooden shingles barely hung on the roofs, and children wearing rags were playing in water-filled potholes in front of their homes. The women were sitting on their front porches, disinterestedly watching their broods, probably wondering how they were going to feed them that night. Some held babies who appeared to be peacefully sleeping, unaware of the difficulties of life.

Colette felt instant relief when the cab left the area. And to her surprise, after a few minutes ride, the car stopped in front of a small yet quaint house. The street was quiet, and all the houses appeared well kept and nicely decorated. Obviously, this neighborhood

had not been as touched by the Depression as the one she had seen by the station. Her husband took her hand and walked her to the white house with the beautiful rosebushes on each side of the door.

He opened the front door, and said, "Welcome home, honey. This place is now yours."

Colette looked around and decided that the residence needed a woman's touch. It was dark and stuffy. The interior was clean but lifeless. And soon she found out that Mrs. Pearce, the housekeeper, was responsible for the spotless environment Professor Walker was living in. Unfortunately, as kind as the old woman was, she did not have a taste for decoration, and thus that job had been left to Adam. And the result was as expected: functional, somewhat comfortable, but extremely ugly. As the woman of the house, Colette would have to change all that, and fast. Her sanity and well-being depended on it. She would have to get flowers from the garden. At least that would quickly add a touch of color to the austere décor. But that would have to wait.

Adam had taken her straight to the bedroom, where he had demonstrated the comfort of his home. They had both fallen asleep soon after, exhausted by the trip and the efforts they had just exerted.

Colette woke up feeling sticky and in need of a bathroom call. She got out of bed and started looking for the appropriate room. On the way, she found Adam's study with all the books he had accumulated and the papers he was working on lying here and there, sometimes on his big mahogany desk, sometimes on shelves, and even occasionally on the floor. This room was definitely not as clean as the rest of the house. Maybe Adam had declared it off limits to the poor woman in charge of maintaining order in his house. Or maybe he was just a very quick worker and could make a mess in his office as rapidly as he could have orgasms in bed.

The next few days were just spent going from one house to the next, meeting all of Adam's friends and colleagues. Colette felt like a monkey at the zoo. She was the object of so much scrutiny that she sometimes wanted to go home and hide in her room for the next few months. Besides, she was not sure she liked these people. They drank too much, were too loud, and sometimes too friendly. She had had to fight off the advances of the English department dean and the groping hands of Professor Henri Williams, Adam's best friend. But day after day, her husband insisted on going to these parties. And soon enough it was time to return all the invitations and host their own.

COLETTE

Colette could finally do something she enjoyed. She was going to make them all her favorite dishes and hoped that at last they would take the time to actually get to know her. So she asked Mrs. Pearce to show her where she could shop for the ingredients she needed. The older woman graciously obliged. Colette had liked Mrs. Pearce instantly. The old woman was a widow and had not been blessed with children. So she took her role as Colette's advisor very seriously.

Their first stop was at the butcher shop, and once again Colette was surprised. The meat was not prepared the same way as it was in France. She could not recognize any of the cuts she was used to. So she spent some time discussing her dinner plans with the very knowledgeable butcher's wife to determine what her best options were for her planned dinner. By the time she left the store, she was relieved to have met this wonderful woman who was so eager to help, and she was happy with the purchases she had just made.

Their second stop was at the small grocery store just a block from her house. Mrs. Pearce introduced her to the owner's wife, Rosie. The young woman had a friendly smile and a strong, honest handshake. She looked people straight in the eyes, while her own eyes reflected all the kindness and decency she carried inside. Colette liked her instantly. She made her purchases and promised to come back

very soon for a longer chat. Rosie was the first person who seemed to really care about Colette's thoughts and opinions. She had not undressed her with her eyes, nor had she asked her where she had bought her clothes or how much she had paid for them. And that was greatly appreciated.

The third stop was at the bakery. Yet again, Colette was in for a shock. There was no French bread, no baguette, no *pain de campagne*, only some strange-looking dinner rolls and a mushy loaf of bread. The dessert, she realized, would have to be homemade because there was no decent fruit tart around.

So she rushed home and started cooking frantically. Dinner was ready to serve on time, the dessert was cooling in the pantry, and Colette had even had time for a quick bath and a change of clothes before all the guests arrived. Mrs. Pearce could set the table before she went home, and Adam could entertain his friends for a few minutes alone if Colette needed extra time to get ready. She wanted to look beautiful for her husband and make him proud.

And proud Adam was. The dinner was a success. Colette was a fine cook, and French cuisine was already considered one of the best in the world. The guests were enthused by the meal, the setting, and the hostess. One of them even commented,

COLETTE

“Those little pastries are just like little bites of heaven.” Colette held her tongue as she watched the woman scarf down most of the platter, but she thought, “Watch it, lady, soon these little bites of heaven are going to be hell on your hips.”

Yes, the hostess of the day had pulled it off. She looked magnificent in her semiformal cocktail dress, and for once she actually had some intelligent conversation regarding world events and the slow recovery from the economic fiasco the United States and Europe had experienced.

When the guests finally left, Adam retired to his study while Colette tidied up the living and dining room. She was taking the garbage out in the dark when she hit what felt like a brick wall, nearly knocking her off her feet. Fortunately, the brick wall had strong arms and hands that steadied her before she preceded the refuse into the trash can.

“I’m so sorry,” the wall said,” I was not expecting anyone here at this time of night. My name is John. I’m your next-door neighbor and a student at the university. Well, actually, I will be starting next week.”

Colette looked up and saw that her talking wall was none other than a young Asian man about her own age.

COLETTE

And with a big smile on her face, she replied, “My name is Colette. I am Professor Walker’s wife. It is very nice to meet you, John. If you will forgive me, I will extricate myself from this rather smelly situation. But I would love to continue our conversation in full daylight and by the rosebushes, if it can be helped. I am sure it would be much more agreeable to both of us.”

John laughed at her introduction and promised to take her up on her offer as he watched her retreat into the darkness.

CHAPTER 5

Colette had been married to Adam for two months when she realized she had not had a period since before the wedding. She wished Mrs. Pearce was still around so she could ask her for advice, but the old woman had retired and moved in with her sister, who lived in Sacramento. She had felt that now that the professor was married, he did not need her services anymore. So Colette went to see Rosie to ask her for the name and address of a local doctor. Rosie obliged and even took Colette to him herself. The two women had become friends very quickly. And both

were overjoyed to learn that Colette was pregnant. Her baby was to be born the following April.

The expectant mother could not wait to give her husband the good news, so she decided to visit him at his office on the university campus. It took her some time to locate the appropriate building and even longer to find the right office. The door was slightly open, which allowed her to see that there was a beautiful blonde sitting on her husband's desk. He was apparently discussing the finer points of his prior lecture. The woman was most likely a student, and Colette was appalled at how this girl was throwing herself at her husband. Expectant mother or not, Colette really wanted to teach her a lesson, scratch her eyes out and pull all her hair so she would look like the hairless rat she was. But instead, she took a deep breath and walked right in.

She went to her husband, kissed him right on the mouth, and said, "Hello, darling." She then turned to the student, and with a big smile told her, "Hello, I'm Mrs. Walker, Professor Walker's wife. You must be one of his students."

The blonde looked shocked and a little embarrassed. She got up, mumbled some good-byes, and left as quickly as she could.

COLETTE

Satisfied that she had erased the competition without causing an embarrassing scene, Colette turned to her bewildered husband and said, "I came here because I could not wait to give you the good news. I went to see the doctor this morning, and we are going to have a baby."

The professor went from bewildered to stunned in half a second flat. He could not believe his ears. He was going to have to share his wife with a baby. He had always known this would eventually happen, but he had hoped it would take a lot longer. Besides, he had never thought that his governmental activities went well with having children. This was just not going according to plan. The wife asset was turning into a liability, and fast. He did not speak.

Colette was surprised. She had expected a joyous response, one that would show her how much her husband wanted the baby. After all, he had told her that his mom was pressuring him to get married and have a child.

Finally, he looked at her and said, "We'll talk about it tonight when I get home. I have a lecture to give in five minutes."

Colette had been waiting for hours. Dinner was cold. The living room was dark, and still there

COLETTE

was no sign of Adam. When midnight struck, she went to bed. She was crying silently when she finally heard the front door. She stayed put and waited for him to join her. He finally walked in the room. He smelled of alcohol and tobacco. He was not very steady on his legs and almost fell on her when he went to grab her. He ripped her nightgown, turned her over, and without a single word, took her with a roughness she had never experienced before. He then rolled over and went to sleep. Colette felt humiliated. He had taken her like an animal, had given her no respect, and she did not even understand why.

She had wanted to talk to him, to try to understand where all this anger and hatred had come from. But when she woke up, he was gone. And it was just as well. A wave of nausea went through her, and she had to sprint to the bathroom to make it to the toilet on time. Things could not get any worse. Her husband hated her, and her baby made her so sick she could hardly move. If only Rosie could come and walk her through this.

As if her friend had sensed her need, the doorbell rang. And when Colette opened the door, Rosie was standing right there with a questioning look. She said, "I came by because I got worried when you did not stop by this morning at your usual time. What's going on?" She grabbed Colette with both arms and wrapped her in a blanket that was

thrown negligently on the sofa. As Colette told her friend what had happened, Rosie became incensed. What was Adam thinking? Had he gone completely mad? On top of the humiliation he had inflicted on his wife, he could have hurt the baby. Rosie's husband would give anything to have a child. They had been trying for six long years, and nothing. The doctor had even suggested they adopt. But they kept on trying. And as difficult as it would be to see Colette's pregnancy develop, Rosie would be by her side to support her. That's what friends did. They helped each other.

The women spent the day together after Rosie told her husband what happened. The poor man had shaken his head and told them to let him know if they needed any help.

As they walked back toward Colette's house, they ran into John, who was coming back from class.

"Hello, John. It's so nice to see you again, and this time in a setting that must be so much more pleasant on your nose. At least you will now know for sure that I was not trying on a new French perfume," she said, laughing.

John laughed also, turned different shades of red, and finally whispered, "I never thought that for a minute."

COLETTE

He said his good-byes and ran home.

Rosie, who had not missed a beat, inquired as to what was going on. Colette explained how they had met and that John was just the next-door neighbor who was attending the university.

Rosie frowned and asked, “Are you aware that John really likes you?”

“John does not know me,” Colette replied. “Besides, he knows I am married.”

That was really irrelevant, and both girls knew that.

And before Rosie went home, Colette decided it was time to tell her friend about her Masonic lineage. She would need her help in contacting some of the women on the list her parents had given her.

Upon hearing the confession, Rosie smiled and just said, “I had the feeling you were one of us.”

She proceeded to give Colette the sign, and when the young woman returned it, she said, “We are sisters. I should have known. Our next lodge meeting is next week. I will take you to the meeting and introduce you to the others.”

COLETTE

In the next few months, Colette often crossed paths with John. The young man seemed to always be coming back from school or leaving for an errand when Colette was coming home with grocery bags. He would help her bring them in and put things away. He would then respectfully say good-bye and disappear until the next time she brought groceries home.

Every morning she could see him do a series of strange moves in his backyard. He was oblivious to the fact that she could see him as he was practicing what appeared to be a form of martial arts. He always practiced bare chested, wearing only loose black pants that moved with his limber legs. Hiding behind her curtains, Colette could see the ripples of perfectly shaped muscles as he performed the exercises. He was a beautiful man with an equally beautiful body. But she was married.

So to alleviate her conscience, when she would discuss her morning show with Rosie, she would tell her friend, “Yes, I know. I am married. But really, it does not matter where I get my appetite as long as I eat at home. And I assure you that I only eat at home.”

Her friend would laugh at the French woman’s outrageousness.

COLETTE

Colette was starting to show, and John and she had talked about her pregnancy once. But he was always very discreet and never asked any questions that might embarrass her. But one day, as they were putting the groceries away, the baby kicked for the first time. Colette stopped and put her hand to her baby bump. John got scared and asked, "Are you okay?" Colette did not reply but grabbed his hand and placed it on her abdomen as well. The baby kicked again, and this time into John's hand, as if to say hello to his mother's friend. The young man was in shock. He had just felt a baby moving inside a woman for the first time in his life. And this baby should have been his. He would have been such a good husband to Colette. He had loved her from afar for months, and was smart enough to know that he would never have her. However, he would always be there for her.

With the support of her friends, Colette's pregnancy was moving along just fine. After Rosie had taken her to the lodge meeting to meet her sisters and start her formal training as a Mason, she had had a complete support network that made her life much easier. Sure, she was not good friends with all of them, but they had all demonstrated over time that they would all be there for her if she needed help. And at this point, that was all that mattered. She had heard from her parents through her sisters at the

lodge and preferred to keep it that way so Adam would not be annoyed with her.

Ever since Adam had found out that Colette was pregnant, he had been just horrible. But Colette wanted to make things right. She would have the baby soon, and she wanted Adam to love this child as much as she did. So she decided to take his lunch to him so they could eat together at his desk. But when she got to his office, what she found on his desk was not lunch...well, at least not hers. Indeed, Adam was busy having sex with yet another student of his. That explained a lot. Now she knew why the big professor had not touched her in almost three months, why he was so uninvolved with his child's arrival, and why her pregnancy had been such an ordeal. Thank God there was John...and Rosie...and all the other women...of course.

The walk back to her house was one of the most painful she had ever taken. The humiliation she had suffered that night months earlier was nothing compared to the one she had just suffered. He had known she had been there, yet he had opted not to stop. She had stared at him unable to move for a few minutes. She could not catch her breath. Her chest was swelling almost as quickly as her ankles. At that point she knew deep in her heart she would never

forgive him. She ran out of the building eager to hide from her husband, the humiliation, and the pain. She started to cry. She was crying for the loss of an ideal she realized she would never have. She was crying because her child would never know what it was like to have parents who loved and respected each other. She was crying because she should have paid more attention to her father's warning. He had been right. She barely knew Adam. In fact, she did not know him at all.

Then the pain of the contractions started. She stumbled up the few steps that took her to her front door and collapsed. The pain was so intense, and her tears blinded her. Her water broke. She was going to have that baby on her front lawn. The neighbors would be very displeased with such an inappropriate scene, and so would her husband. But as usual when she needed him, John ran to her. From the window just in front of his desk, he had seen her fall. He cradled her head and calmed her down. He needed to understand what was going on if he was to help her.

He said, "You are going to have your baby. Where is your husband? I will go get him."

She started crying again and begged him not to go. As he was about to send one of his roommates, she told him the whole story. John almost vomited. He wanted to kill Adam. He wanted to hurt him first

COLETTE

and then kill him. How could he even consider hurting such a beautiful, kind, and gentle woman?

But soon the young man said, “Okay. I will send for the doctor, and I will take you inside.”

After summoning his friend, he took Colette in his arms and carried her all the way up the stairs to her bedroom. He put her on her bed and told her to relax as much as possible until the doctor arrived. But Colette would not let him go. She was holding on to his hand as if it were her only way out of this nightmare. So he stayed. He stroked her hair and held her hand with the other. And he felt and lived through every one of her agonizing contractions. He wanted to stop the pain, make her better, and give her a rest. But he knew she had to go through this alone.

The doctor finally arrived, and John was pushed out of the room. Colette’s eyes were huge as she watched her friend leave the room. He knew she wanted him to stay, but he also knew that her wish, for once, could not be his command. He would wait right by the door until it was over or until her husband came home.

He heard her scream and the doctor direct. She was losing steam. He could feel it. And then it dawned on him that she could die. His beloved Colette could leave this earth and never know how he

truly felt about her. He could not let that happen. He tried to walk in, but the door was locked. He guessed the doctor had had more than a few dads come in and try to help when they should have been outside. And the screaming stopped. And John's heart almost stopped along with it. Until he heard a tiny little scream. Someone in that room was not pleased with the doctor right now.

And to his great relief, he heard her laugh, and the doctor said, "You have a son, my dear, a beautiful, healthy baby boy."

And overwhelmed with relief, John started to cry. She had survived. The love of his life would not go away today. After what seemed like an eternity, the door opened, and he was allowed in. Colette looked so tired yet so happy with her baby resting in her arms.

She smiled at him and told him, "John, come meet George. I do believe he has wanted to shake your hand for some time."

John approached the newborn baby and took the tiny hand in his. The baby stirred and looked at him with his brand-new eyes.

The young man was about to speak when Adam walked in, furious and belligerent.

COLETTE

“Get out, you stupid kid. I can take care of my own family!” blurted the professor.

Colette did not want John to go, ever. But she could not find a good reason for him to stay. After all, Adam was the baby’s father and her husband.

However, she came to John’s defense and told her husband, “You should be thanking him, Adam, instead of insulting him. While you were dishonoring your marriage vows on your desk with your student, this man was kind enough to help me into the house and get the doctor to deliver your son. I will thank you to be courteous to him because had he not been there, the neighbors would have feasted their eyes on your child’s birth and his mother’s less than elegant position to accommodate the dear child’s will. I will never forgive you.”

John said his good-byes to Colette and left. The little, frail, gentle woman could say it like it was. And she had let her husband bear the shame with her. She had been humiliated, but she was not going to hide. Good for her!

COLETTE

COLETTE

CHAPTER 6

About the author

Michelina Vinter is a practicing acupuncturist and herbalist residing in the San Francisco Bay area with her two children, her husband, and a sweet little shadow, her son's Havanese. Possessing a vivid imagination since she was a child, she often was told to get to the point—which led to her career as an acupuncturist. Born in France, she left her family and moved to the United States when she was twelve years old. With firsthand experiences in hard goodbyes and long conversations with her maternal grandmother who was born in 1920, Vinter's wisdom beyond her years has led to a fulfilling writing career covering multiple genres.