

ALLISON PITTMAN



*The
Seamstress*

Praise for novels by Allison Pittman

The Seamstress

“Allison Pittman has taken a minor but memorable Dickens character and created a whole world for her, thoroughly researched and beautifully detailed. The seamstress’s rags-to-riches-to-rags story is an endlessly fascinating and touching one. You’ll find yourself caring deeply not just about her, but also about everyone she cares for.”

GINA DALFONZO, founder and editor of Dickensblog

“I finished reading *The Seamstress* three days ago and can’t stop thinking about it. Well-drawn characters inspired by Dickens’s *A Tale of Two Cities*, and exquisite writing in the spirit of Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables*, combine in Pittman’s latest novel of life and faith amid the upheaval of the French Revolution. Researched in great detail, a brilliant and ingenious work, not to be missed.”

CATHY GOHLKE, Christy Award–winning author of *Until We Find Home* and *Secrets She Kept*

“Destined to be a classic in its own right, *The Seamstress* is everything I love about historical fiction. The robust characters not only interact with real and pivotal events, but they embody the attitudes of the day in ways that are accessible for the modern reader. Pittman’s power of language drew me deep into revolutionary France, and her accurate and sensitive portrayal of the turmoil earned my undying respect. *The Seamstress* is an intricate tapestry hemmed in truth and grace. A masterpiece.”

JOCELYN GREEN, Christy Award–winning author of *A Refuge Assured*

“Set amid the tumultuous French Revolution, *The Seamstress* is unabashedly profound and yet crafted with such care that I relished every heartrending word until the very last one. Through the lives of vibrant and genuine characters, notes of love, faith, and loyalty rise from its pages—all striking with one unanimous chord of *courage*. Allison Pittman has woven a novel that fortifies the spirit brick by brick so that as a nation is broken and transformed, so takes new shape yet another landscape: the reader’s heart. *The Seamstress* is an absolute masterpiece with all the makings of a classic, and is one of the finest novels I have ever read.”

JOANNE BISCHOF, Christy and Carol Award-winning author of *Sons of Blackbird Mountain*

“In *The Seamstress*, Allison Pittman has given us a novel of revolutionary France sweeping in its scope, a story of hope and despair, strength and frailty, courage and cowardice seamlessly stitched. With its pages filled with characters who will haunt the heart long after the last is turned, it is a story hemmed in triumph—of the human spirit in the midst of national chaos, but even more of Christ’s infinite love, transcending ideology, reaching alike into palaces and poverty. I finished this novel with a holy hush in my soul.”

LORI BENTON, author of *Burning Sky* and *Many Sparrows*

“In the midst of revolution and royalty, Pittman weaves a captivating tale of two cousins whose humble beginnings birth remarkable journeys. A beautiful, rich tale of love, loss, and amazing faith, *The Seamstress* is a book that haunts, satisfies, and inspires all at once. I loved this book!”

HEIDI CHIAVAROLI, author of *Freedom’s Ring* and *The Hidden Side*

“*The Seamstress* is a study in nostalgia: carefully evoking a classic while establishing itself as a classic in its own right. Deftly and intelligently nodding to its magnanimous source material, *A Tale of Two Cities*, it remains confident as its own entity. Appealing equally to Dickensian readers and the uninitiated, *The Seamstress* is a lush, moving, and brilliantly sewn world. The thinking reader’s inspirational read, it is at once rich, beguiling, and accessibly readable. Its aftertaste will spoil you for any other story for a long, long while.”

RACHEL McMILLAN, author of the Van Buren and DeLuca series

Loving Luther

“Accessible writing infused with romantic tension creates a provocative and heartwarming read.”

LIBRARY JOURNAL

“*Loving Luther* is a sophisticated, provocative novel . . . with depth, and it is unexpectedly touching.”

FOREWORD MAGAZINE

“Pittman pens an exquisite tale based on the limited historical sources about Katharina von Bora, capturing the emotions of a nun grappling with the idea of bondage to the church versus a new and unfamiliar freedom in faith.”

BOOKLIST

“Although Pittman’s previous novels have been set in the United States, she feels quite at home in 16th-century Wittenberg. This novel should be of interest not only to readers of Christian fiction, but to readers of general historical fiction as well.”

HISTORICAL NOVEL SOCIETY REVIEWS

“*Loving Luther* showcases author Allison Pittman’s genuine flair for compelling and memorable storytelling.”

MIDWEST BOOK REVIEW

On Shifting Sand

“Pittman manages to . . . satisfy readers’ thirst for drama, deceit, and deliverance.”

BOOKLIST

“Demonstrating her versatility as a novelist, Pittman has written a moving tale of temptation, surrender, guilt, and redemption.”

LIBRARY JOURNAL

“Pittman effectively contrasts the repercussions of forgiveness when it is withheld and granted.”

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

“Pittman makes a departure from her usual genre with an elegantly written novel. . . . The tale is so well told it will stay with you.”

ROMANTIC TIMES

The Roaring Twenties Series

“Defly intertwining the 1920s plotline with diary entries, Pittman’s third series outing is filled with family drama, suspense, and enough twists and turns to keep readers engrossed until the very end. This tale of truth and forgiveness will attract fans of Francine Rivers, Rosamunde Pilcher, and those who enjoy family sagas.”

LIBRARY JOURNAL on *All for a Sister*

“Pittman handily captures the societal extremes during the Jazz Age, and her focus on the roles of women, from demure traditionalists to the influential McPherson and the ‘modern’ woman, adds a nuanced level of conflict to this entertaining novel.”

BOOKLIST on *All for a Story*

“Pittman skillfully paints the complete picture of this bold female character. Readers of inspirational fiction will be stirred as this story of longing unfolds, revealing testimony to true contentment.”

BOOKLIST on *All for a Song*

“Mesmerizing. . . . Allison Pittman’s latest novel is a delight to read, having been woven together with beautiful narrative, stirring faith, and characters you will connect with. . . . *All for a Song* is a book that will not only entertain you, but will leave you thinking about why we make the choices we do, and even how we use the gifts God has given us. I award this book my highest recommendation, and a rating of 5 out of 5 stars.”

CHRISTIAN FICTION ADDICT on *All for a Song*

“*All for a Song* proves Allison Pittman is not only one of the most talented and literary writers in the CBA but also an author with a tremendous writing range. Never afraid to confront subjects that have a bit of edge, Pittman sets the coming-of-age story of innocent Dorothy Lynn against the Evangelical fervor strummed up by charismatic speaker Aimee Semple McPherson. The result is an engaging and unique experience that reads like a breath of fresh air in a market filled with many similar historically influenced tales.”

NOVEL CROSSING on *All for a Song*

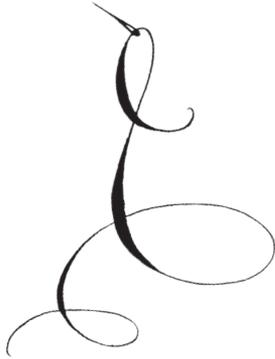
The Sister Wife Series

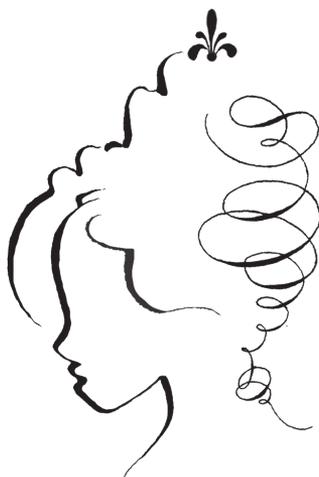
“Once again Pittman tells an engaging story in which the characters are moved to examine their faith and make difficult decisions. Readers who enjoy CF dealing with family relationships and crises of faith will appreciate it.”

LIBRARY JOURNAL on *For Time and Eternity*

“In the second book of the Sister Wife series (*Forsaking All Others*), the characters are unforgettable. Pittman pulls the reader into her stories and gives them a glimpse of the values the Mormons believe in.”

ROMANTIC TIMES, 4½ stars





The Seamstress

— a novel —

ALLISON PITTMAN



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The Seamstress

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The Seamstress is a work of fiction. Where real people, events, establishments, organizations, or locales appear, they are used fictitiously. All other elements of the novel are drawn from the author's imagination.

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A Prayer

*God of heaven, see me now
'Neath stars and moon and darkest cloud.
Grant me dreams to sleep in peace,
And with the sunrise in the East,
Wake me to a glorious day.
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—I pray,
Amen.*

Une Prière

*Dieu des cieux voyez-moi maintenant,
Sous les étoiles et la lune et les nuages gris,
Accordez-moi le sommeil de rêves tranquilles.
Et au lever du soleil à l'est,
Réveillez-moi pour voir un jour glorieux.
Au nom de Dieu le Père, le Fils, et le Saint-Esprit—je prie,
Amen.*



PART I

Le Printemps (Spring) 1788

Dieu des cieux voyez-moi maintenant . . .



L'épisode I

Renée

MOUTON BLANC, LA VALLÉE

My first and last memories are my cousin Laurette. She wasn't quite three years old when I came into the world, but her arms were sturdy enough to hold me, and my mother never missed an opportunity to thrust me upon her. Laurette's was the breath on my cheek as we slept, curled together on the tiny mat in the corner of our tattered house. She spoke the nightmares away, softened my bread with milk, entertained me for hours on end with a knotted string and games of cat's cradle.

Our mothers were sisters, sharing a house on the fringe of our village—Mouton Blanc, named for the white sheep that produced fine, prized wool. Our family never owned any sheep of their own. We had no farm, no land. Only two rooms and a fire, but subsisted on the prosperity of the town. Laurette and I grew up smelling their roasting meat, and shared tiny portions cooked in stew. We walked through the bustling market square, past baskets overflowing with harvest, watching our mothers trade small coins for the remnants hidden behind the

merchants. The yeasty smell of the baker's shop meant a fresh, hot loaf of bread, and a crossed bun handed over the counter for the two of us to share, bite by bite.

My father was unknown to me, and if my mother knew his name, she never uttered it. I was given no fanciful tale about a dashing stranger, or a wandering minstrel, or a farmer's son overtaken by desire. I asked once if I could call Laurette's father my own, as we shared the same roof and table, but was delivered a slap to my face that left the mark of my mother's hand for nearly a week. I never asked again. At the time (I was probably six years old) I assumed my mother reacted so harshly because she wouldn't want such a man for my father. My uncle was short-tempered and often drunk, quick to violence and raging. But then, as I grew older, I noticed the way he looked at my mother—she was the more beautiful of the two sisters—and having learned a bit about the workings of men and women, I wondered if I hadn't come close to guessing the truth.

Though our household was never prosperous, it was, for the most part, quiet. Content. Laurette's father worked for different farmers, hiring himself out during the shearing season and throughout the year, mending fences and whatever day labor he could get. Always, it was enough to feed us and allow him nights at the tavern to drink up the rest. Our mothers did village work, too, carding great sacks of wool, teaching both of us the art as soon as our hands were big enough to fit the wooden paddles. Laurette never mastered the skill, but I loved any moment my hands were occupied with creating. Mother would barter old clothes from the rag man, and spend winter evenings cutting and mending, turning women's skirts into boys' breeches and old nightshirts into christening gowns, edged with lace tatted from spinners' scraps.

I was too young to take note of all the changes as they happened. Realization dawned that we had less money. Less food.

Less everything. I understood the years of drought and the toll they took on the local harvests, but I had no concept of the role the king played in the slow death of our town. I didn't know he took good grazing land and gave it to the Church. I didn't know he imposed taxes beyond what my neighbors could pay. Therefore, I didn't understand the hopelessness that would drive Laurette's father to kill her mother in a drunken rage, nor the hanging that left us equally fatherless. Even more, I could not fathom a grief that would cause my mother to simply walk away one night, leaving us equally orphaned. I was ten, Laurette was twelve, and we lived for nearly two months on the scraps of neighbors' charity before anyone else even knew she'd gone.

But Émile Gagnon found us. Rather, we found him. I would guess that his flock still numbered five hundred head at the time, and Laurette hoped we would find work—in his kitchen, in his fields. Winter was coming and we had nothing to fill our bellies or warm our hearth. We'd heard him one day at the inn, *Le Cochon Gros*, the same place that slaked my uncle's thirst and nourished his anger. Gagnon was lifting a toast to the fine price he'd fetched for his wool, wishing a blessing on the carders and spinners, the weavers and tailors who take the humble offerings of his sheep and make clothing fit for the king.

"Think of it, spun fine and stretched over the queen's legs . . ." one of his fellow drinkers said, the rest of his comment spoken low and drowned out by raucous laughter.

It was Laurette who approached Gagnon. Looking back now, I realize what a young man he was. Everybody in town spoke of him with such glowing reverence, he might have been a founder. But he was only twenty-two—old enough to laugh at an off-color joke, but young enough to be embarrassed by it. He, too, was an orphan, if a grown man could be called such, having inherited his farm when his parents died in quick

succession of a fever. Not a year later, he became a widower, losing his young wife and newborn child within an hour of each other. While some men might have turned bitter in the wake of so much loss, Émile Gagnon grew stronger.

He had turned away, a blush on his cheek, when Laurette walked right up to him.

“It’s a fine thing,” she said, “to ship everything away and leave nothing for your poor neighbors who are facing a winter with our dresses worn clean through.”

That very evening we had a new home in Gagnon’s barn. The small one, meant only to house his milk cows and dogs. It smelled of sweet hay and felt warm, with straw-stuffed ticks and feather pillows waiting in the loft. The walls were thick, the roof solid shingles, and while Gagnon said he wouldn’t risk the danger of a stove to heat the room as we slept, we had the promise of hot irons during the coldest of winter nights.

For six years we have lived here. His sheep, our sheep, and this spring afternoon, Laurette and I lie next to each other, two shepherdesses stretched out on a carpet of green grass as they graze nearby.



“Your turn, Renée.”

Laurette’s voice is slow, the words almost slurred to a stop. I look over to see her arm flung across her eyes, blocking out the piercing sun.

“You’re not even looking.”

“I trust you.” There’s a hook of a smile at the corner of her mouth.

“All right.” I turn my attention back to the vast sky above, dotted with clouds. “I see your rabbit.” Pointing, the tip of my finger traces what could be a long, floppy ear. “But I’m afraid he’s done for.” I rise on one elbow and describe the mass of dark-gray

clouds newly formed to the east. “Three dogs—or maybe one, like Cerberus.”

“Cerberus?” Laurette never did pay as much attention to Gagnon’s stories as I did.

“Cerberus, the three-headed dog that guards the gates of the underworld. Your little rabbit doesn’t have a chance.”

“Let them have it. They’re probably hungry. I know I am.”

I am, too, but I don’t say so. Complaining about hunger is like complaining about being alive. It seems ungrateful, knowing we had our fill of bread and butter early this morning, and would find a good, filling bowl of soup upon our return. In between, we’d shared a flask of water and a boiled egg each.

“If only we could catch it,” I say. “We could eat it ourselves, or most of it, anyway. And give the scraps to the dogs. Everyone, happy happy.”

She lifts her arm enough to show me one open eye. “Even in fantasy you are practical.”

I lie back down. “And even when there’s nothing to be done you are lazy.” She laughs, short and hearty, and I grin beside her. “Your turn.”

“*Non.*” She hums the word. “Why waste our time finding stories in the sky when we can drift off and find them in a dream?”

“Because we have to bring the sheep in.”

“There’s at least an hour before sunset.” She settles in for comfort. “Do what you want with your time; I’ll do what I want with mine.”

Soft snores come within minutes, and I sit up, then stand up, brushing the dry grass from the back of my skirt. Looking out to the east, the same direction where my doglike pack of rain clouds seems to be gathering strength, I can just make out the white, woolly flock grazing on the horizon. More and more the air smells like rain, and I think it’s best not to wait. Rain

makes the sheep sluggish. Given the chance, they would stand still and turn into soggy statues.

Not far, a massive stone offers a better view, and I climb up, my bare feet gripping the smooth surface. Once standing, I bring two fingers to my mouth and whistle a distinct five-note command. Within seconds there is movement on the horizon. Two small, quick forms. Cossette and Copine, the dogs I helped train since their birth, are running in circles around the herd to gather it.

The herd is small now, little more than one hundred, and they move at a purposeful trot. The dogs flank them, taking on a pose that makes them look like two wolves stalking prey rather than beloved companions bringing them to safety. Thus, the sheep obey. I feel a certain pity, knowing that they live in a constant state of fear. Always feeling chased, hunted, watched. Ever alert and uneasy, their rest coming only when they are safely stabled in the yard. Or, better, in the barn, where the dogs sit as sentries outside, out of sight.

“You think they’d learn,” I told Gagnon one afternoon when the sheep, grazing on the new, lush grass, shifted and startled with each movement of the dogs.

“Learn what?”

“That the dogs mean no harm. That they are champions, protectors.”

“They’re safer to keep their guard up,” Gagnon said. “The dogs feel nothing for the sheep. They act in obedience to us. They run circles because it’s a game, because we feed them. Their loyalty is to their own survival. If we ever stopped feeding them, left them to their own instincts, be certain they’d feed themselves somehow. The sheep are the smart ones. Better to live by the instinct God gave you than to be fooled by tricks and manners.”

Now my instincts tell me to get ourselves home quickly, where we can have our hunger sated by whatever waits in the

pot before tucking ourselves safely up in our room. I blow another signal, and the dogs break, double back, and begin to run. The sheep run with them, their woolly heads filled with fear at the chase. When they are close enough, I whistle again. Cossette and Copine drop to the ground, and the sheep come to a dead stop, their hooves rooted in place.

There's a rumble of thunder in the distance, and by the time I return to Laurette, she is sitting up and waiting.

"We'll have to hurry," I say. "To beat the rain."

She waves me off. "Afraid you'll melt? Like you're made of sugar?"

I want to say something back, but hold my tongue. This has been characteristic of my cousin of late—short, barbed remarks that make me feel my status with her has changed. Not really an enemy, but a rival of sorts. For all of our lives we have occupied the same space in the world, but there are moments like this one where I feel her nudging me away.

And so we walk. A brisk pace, but comfortable, the sheep behind and then beside us, responding to the pace set by the dogs, who seem much more eager to reach shelter than we do. The drops begin when we are in sight of the farm. It's nestled in a valley, bordered by a stream. There's a large, fenced corral for the sheep, as well as a long, flat building to house them in the winter and on nights like tonight. Gagnon's own house is a simple stone structure, and I can see smoke coming from the chimney promising a good fire and supper. By the time we arrive at the gate, the storm has broken out in earnest and Gagnon, wearing a waxed wool coat and broad-brimmed hat, meets us on the path.

"Go in!" he shouts above the storm. "I'll get them settled."

We obey, breaking into a run, new, soft mud beneath our toes. Every hour of a day spent beneath the sun washes away, our sweat replaced by sweet, fresh rivulets, our skin cooled.

We take off our sodden caps and unfasten our hair, raking our fingers through to distribute the wet. How disheveled we must look when we finally burst through Gagnon's door, thoroughly soaked, teeth chattering.

"W-we have to ch-change," Laurette says. "Or we'll catch our death."

"Change into what?" I have one other dress—same as she—and it is across the yard hanging on a hook next to my bed.

"Here."

I follow her into the great room, where a long trunk sits beneath a window, its lid a cushioned seat. Inside, Gagnon keeps blankets and linens. With the authority of a mistress, Laurette opens it, rummages through, and takes out an old, yellowed shirt and two blankets.

"Strip down and put this on." I obey, comforted by her maternal tone, but feel a new onslaught of cold when my skin is bare. She strips, too, and I'm struck—not for the first time—how much more of a woman she is than I. True, she's almost three years older, but she'd already developed the soft curves of her body when she was my age. While I'm rolling up the shirt-sleeves, I'm aware of the thinness of the material that falls past my knees. Such a garment would not suit Laurette. She might as well wear nothing.

In fact, she seems prepared to do just that, wrapping the thin blanket around her shoulders, holding the ends tight against her as she shivers by the fire. With her back to me, I notice a small hole right in the middle of the fabric, just atop her back-side. Moths, I suspect, eating right where the blanket had been folded in the trunk.

"Let me see that," I say. "Take it off. I have an idea. Bend down." This, because I barely reach her chin, and I slip the blanket over her head.

While rifling through the contents of the trunk, Laurette

had tossed a long strip of linen to the side. Picking it up now, I place it across her stomach, thread it through a smaller moth-hole near the small of her back, and wrap it back around, securing the loose blanket with a knot at her waist. The result is a dress, its hem long past her knees, the sleeves wide like tulips at her elbows. There's a clean line of color across her chest, outlining the bodice of her daily dress. Here, the fabric takes a sharp plunge beneath it, creating a soft V shape and an unprecedented view of the figure beneath.

"Aren't you the clever one, *Cousine*?" She puts her hands on her hips and parades around the room.

"It'll do to keep you warm, at least."

We gather our wet clothes and spread them out on the floor in front of the fire. Laurette steps carefully between our garments and ladles out a bowl of soup for herself, then one for me.

"Shouldn't we wait for Gagnon?"

"He'd want us to be warm on the inside and out. He's good that way, *non*?"

"He is." I accept the bowl, my hands gradually growing warm through the wood, and blow on its contents. There are large chunks of vegetables—carrots and turnips and onion—but no traces of meat. Still, the soup is flavorful and filling, and in my hunger I slurp it from the wooden spoon so quickly it burns the roof of my mouth. It's not long before I am full. Or, at least, full enough. Before either of us can be tempted to ladle a second portion, I take my bowl—and Laurette's—and dunk them in the bucket of wash water before returning them to the cupboard.

Outside, the storm rages so loudly it takes a while to distinguish a pounding on the door from the sound of thunder.

"You locked the door?" I cross the room to open it, as Laurette shows no sign of getting up from her comfortable slouch by the fire.

“Couldn’t very well have him coming in while we were changing, could we?”

Scowling over my shoulder, I lift the heavy latch and let the wind push the door. Gagnon enters, rain pouring off his cloak creating a puddle on the floor. He hangs it on a spike and I fetch a bowl to place underneath it, all while he feigns irritation, saying, “That’s a fine thing, to lock a man out of his own home on such a night.”

“Come, sit,” I invite, “and warm up. I’ll fetch you a bowl.”

He waves me off, but comes to his high-backed chair by the hearth, staring not into the flames, but at the empty dresses stretched across the floor. His is a handsome face, with broad features that give him an appeal much younger than his years. Though Laurette and I are nothing like the girls we were when we first arrived, he remains unchanged. True, he is our patron, but the years between us seem compressed. On evenings like this, I can easily make the mistake of thinking we are peers.

He wears his hair cropped close, joking that it gives him a sense of camaraderie with his sheep during shearing season, and a thin beard stretches across his cheeks and chin. He rubs it now, absently, and I know in this very moment he is lost in the memory of the woman who wore one of those dresses before. My own means nothing, as it was handed down to me two years ago when Laurette could no longer fit into it. But the other, the blue, once belonged to Gagnon’s wife, dead since the year before Laurette and I came to live here. The dress looks like an empty life rumped on the floor, and I don’t doubt Gagnon is remembering the sight of his wife within it.

A clap of thunder startles all of us, and the room is lit white by lightning. We all laugh nervously.

“Doesn’t seem to be letting up anytime soon,” Gagnon says. “Short walk to the barn will soak you to the bone. Best plan to stay in the house tonight.”

“If you think so,” Laurette says, stretching her arms and legs, arching her back like a cat on a cushion. “I could curl up right here and go to sleep. I already have my blanket.”

“I see that.” Gagnon squints and takes on a teasing tone. “You look like a monk.”

I am quick to defend my work. “She doesn’t, either!”

But lazy Laurette finds the energy to join the joke. She gets up from the chair and adopts a posture of piety, folding her hands on an imaginary belly, and chanting nonsense syllables meant to sound like Latin in the deepest voice she can muster.

“There’s no hood,” I protest, though the two ignore me. “And it’s the wrong color. Since when have you ever seen a monk in anything other than black? Except maybe brown. But never anything quite so—”

“Fashionable?” In an instant, Laurette changes everything, becoming a woman of the queen’s court, one hand held aloft, the other fitted nicely at her waist.

I am not at all amused by the spectacle. “What do you know about fashion?” It’s a mean comment, and I’m instantly sorry for the awkward way Gagnon leans back into his chair, avoiding the inevitable conflict.

“As much as you, I imagine.”

“Girls.” With a single, soft word, Gagnon has choked our argument, and Laurette falls back into her chair, sullen. I take up a spot on the trunk bench under the window, my elbows propped on the sill, and watch the rain. It is thick, pouring down the glass in rivulets, distorting the reflected image of Gagnon behind me.



We’ve slept on the floor, trading the comfort of our straw ticking and feather pillows for that of a fire, and my bones—young as they are—pay the price in the morning. Sharp pain between

my narrow shoulders, a hard chestnut at the base of my spine. There's little light in the room, and I've been awakened by the silent crow of my own mind telling me to rise and begin the day, though the sounds of sleep all around me make me wonder what type of beginning this day may have. The only movement I perceive in Laurette is the steady rise and fall of her breast, and the door to Gagnon's room is closed without the thinnest ribbon of light showing through its seams.

Outside, the rain still falls, but without the drama of the night before. Just a steady pour, a single sound, impossible to imagine it is made of so many millions of singular drops.

Creaking like an old woman, I stand and patter my bare feet to the door, opening it to find the gray outside only a few shades lighter than that within. The yard is a great, brown sea, and somewhere across it waits a cow and five goats to be milked, along with dogs to be let loose after a night's confinement.

My dress is on the drier side of damp, so I put it on over Gagnon's old shirt and, taking a liberty I know he would have granted, put his coat on over that. Holding the coat to keep the hem out of the mud, I slosh across the yard—quick enough to keep my toes from getting mired, but not so quick as to risk slipping. Once at the barn, I reach for the latch, high up so the dogs won't open it for the cow's escape, and find it has already been dislodged. That's when I peer through and notice the interior is warm with lamplight, and when I press my ear to a tiny crack in the door, I hear the steady *vsh, vsh, vsh* of the cow's milk above the steady hum of rain.

"*Qui est-ce?*" I know it might be Gagnon. He would not bother with his coat for such a short trek across the yard, but I'd heard nothing of his leaving the house. Heart clenched with the fear that it might be some vagabond escaping the rain, I inch the door open, prepared to bolt back to the house for safety.

“Tiens, Renée.” The voice is familiar, masculine. Comforting.
“C’est moi.”

Marcel.

Immediately, my fear is alleviated. Marcel Moreau is anything but a stranger. Not to us, not to anyone in Mouton Blanc. As far as we know, he has no family, and can claim no roof as his own, yet he has no problems finding shelter. Our little barn is a favorite of his, and I regularly climb down from our loft to find him sleeping on a bed of straw. This morning my only surprise is to find him industrious as he works the cow’s udder, extracting streams of sweet, warm milk.

“It’s you,” I say, thankful to have the cow’s flank between us so he will not know what a pleasant surprise he really is.

A few more squirts and the rough horse blanket falls from his shoulders, leaving him naked to his breeches. His shirt, like our dresses, lies flat on a hay bale, drying. After a moment, I avert my eyes.

“Has Gagnon finally put you to work, then?” I slip out of the greatcoat and hang it next to the rake.

“You’re a fine one to talk. All of you lazing abed in the castle there, while this poor old girl is about to burst. I couldn’t sleep with her groaning.”

“Well, for that I thank you. On her behalf as well.”

My thought had been to change into my second dress, but not with Marcel within eyesight below. To me he is a man, though I know him to be nineteen—just a year older than Laurette, but in possession of a mysterious charm that keeps him often at the edge of my thoughts, and my person nearly frays with nerves. He is, simply, more handsome than anything I could conjure from my imagination. Gagnon likes to tease and say he is “pretty,” with delicate features, perfect teeth, and hair that springs in an explosion of curls reaching to his shoulders. Usually he corrals them into a tail at the nape of his neck, tied

with whatever ribbon has lately been given to him by a village girl. But now—like mine—his locks have been left free to dry.

“So, you were caught in the rain?”

“Yes.” He continues to milk with perfect rhythm. “Rather, thrust out into it. The accommodations I’d secured for myself became, shall we say, stormy? But I knew here I would find a welcome spot on the floor and a good solid roof, if nothing else.”

I’ve only the faintest notion of what *nothing else* implies, but enough to make my cheeks burn despite the chill, and my legs feel like they’ve turned to mud beneath my skirt. Gagnon always speaks about Marcel in a cautionary tone, saying any man who loves that many women can only truly love himself. Always, Marcel is welcome at our table, welcome to a spot by Gagnon’s hearth, even welcome to shelter in our barn, but Laurette and I have been warned, with absolute clarity of intent, that we are to be on guard in his presence, lest we fall as so many other girls before us.

Cossette and Copine had escaped out into the rain the minute I opened the door, and I spy them now, waiting for a command to come back in. This I give, then hold up my hands against the spattering of water as they shake their coats dry.

“Well,” I say once my own laughter dies down, “it doesn’t look like it’s going to let up anytime soon. Bring the milk in when you’ve finished. I’ll ask Laurette to make us a batch of bread porridge for breakfast. And there’s tea.”

“*Merci*. I’ll be in directly.”

I think of Laurette, lounging on the floor in her makeshift blanket dress and decide I’d better move quickly. Without further conversation, I climb up to our cozy loft and find my basket. Knowing today will be largely spent indoors, I might as well take advantage of the time. I look around, briefly, for anything Laurette might want for a day of leisure. Finding nothing, I grab my comb and two pair of warm stockings and head back

down the ladder, pausing at the bottom rung to enjoy the sound newly added to the morning. Marcel, just under his breath, sings an unfamiliar tune. Its lyrics are nothing more than the hiss of soft consonants, and I want to ask him to sing louder, clearer, but something tells me it is a song I'm not meant to hear at all.

A Note from the Author

This story had its first spark of life when I was standing in front of a class of tenth-grade students, doing my due diligence as an English teacher, making them consider every nook and shadow of Charles Dickens's novel *A Tale of Two Cities*. In talking about the redemption of Sydney Carton and the role the little seamstress played, I tossed off a comment: "I would love to write the story of the seamstress." And for years, as the idea spun around in my head, more questions presented themselves. *How did she come to the guillotine? Why mention a cousin? Would anyone else even care about this?*

Then, in a flurry of Facebook messaging with my dear friend Rachel McMillan brainstorming story ideas, this idea that had been buried for years resurfaced. As usual, I feel blessed to be a part of the Tyndale House family, where acquisitions director Jan Stob caught the same enthusiasm. I am grateful for the opportunity to bring my stories to life through Tyndale House. Thank you, Kathy Olson, for not putting up with my nonsense.

Careful readers of *A Tale of Two Cities* will recognize the seamstress character immediately, and to them I apologize for a novel that is at least 50 percent spoiled. I do hope you'll appreciate how very much I love this work and have tried to be true

to the world Dickens brought to life in his untouchable way. I don't consider this an homage or a retelling of that story at all, save for the final pages. And, again, I ask historians to forgive lapses in facts that result from a desire to pave the path for my characters. Specifically, you'll have to indulge my idealistic portrait of Queen Marie Antoinette. I did strive to faithfully re-create key moments of the French Revolution. The Palace of Versailles was overrun by an army of women; a guard was killed while protecting the queen; the family did attempt an ill-fated escape. However, the role that my Renée plays in all those events is purely fictitious. Hence the fun of writing this story! I also own up to placing a red cap on Marcel's head a few years too early, but he seems like the kind of guy who might have started that trend.

Readers—you have no idea how much I cherish your faithful support, how you've carried my spirit through book after book. Thank you so much for sending me an email at just the right time, for posting encouraging reviews, for welcoming me into your mind for a few hours with every page. If you don't already, please follow me on my Facebook author page, Allison Pittman Author, or on Twitter and Instagram @allisonkittman. You can even enjoy the occasional, infrequent blog post on my website, allisonkittman.com.

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

ROMANS 15:13, NIV