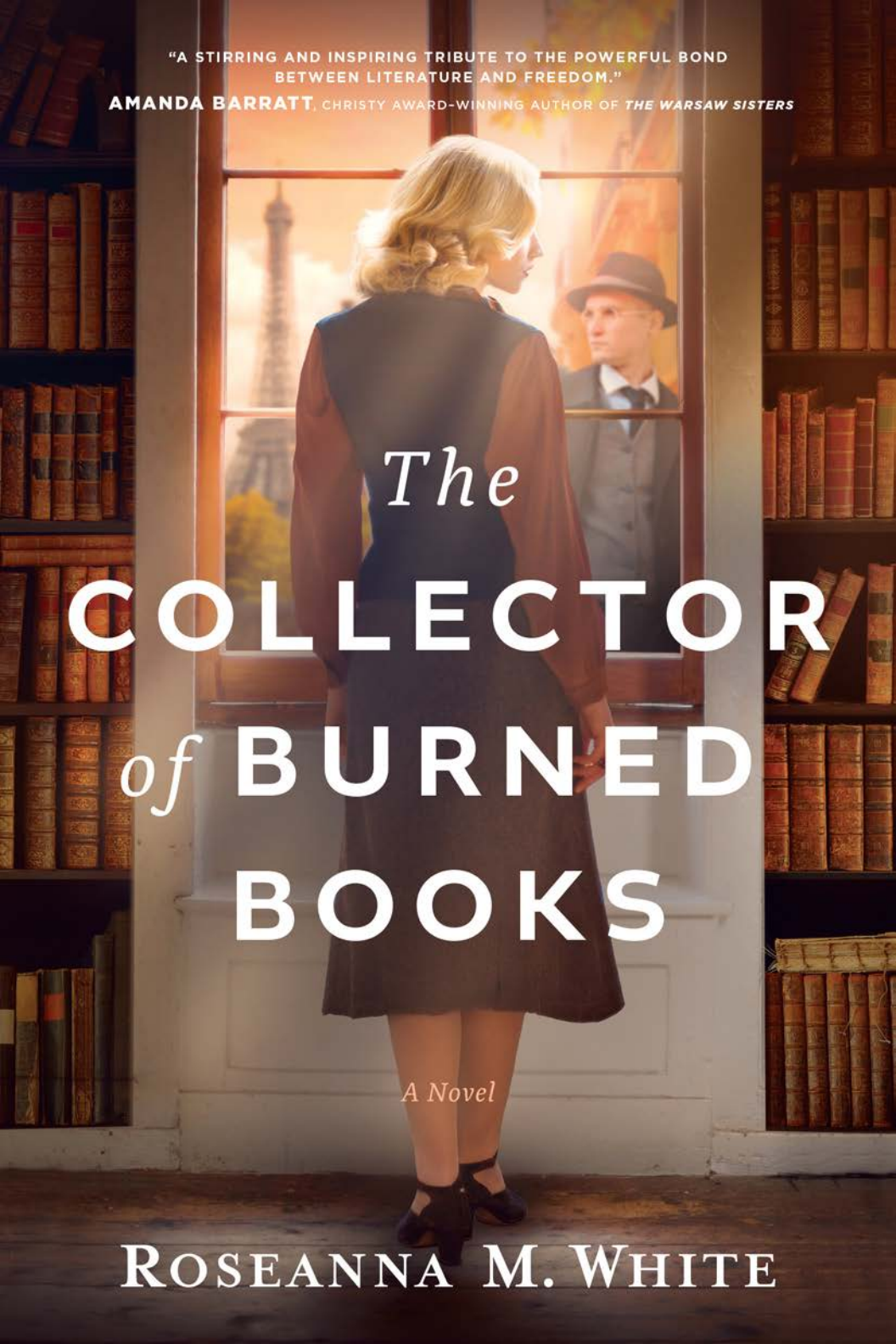


"A STIRRING AND INSPIRING TRIBUTE TO THE POWERFUL BOND
BETWEEN LITERATURE AND FREEDOM."

AMANDA BARRATT, CHRISTY AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF *THE WARSAW SISTERS*



The
COLLECTOR
of BURNED
BOOKS

A Novel

ROSEANNA M. WHITE

Praise for Roseanna M. White

With her signature blend of page-turning storytelling, fascinating historical details, and enduring themes, Roseanna M. White draws readers into the dark days after Paris falls to Nazi occupation. Corinne and Christian shine in their undaunted determination to preserve books threatened by a regime that seeks to extinguish truth. *The Collector of Burned Books* is a stirring and inspiring tribute to the powerful bond between literature and freedom.

AMANDA BARRATT, Christy Award-winning author of *The Warsaw Sisters* and *Within These Walls of Sorrow*

Courage, honor, and sacrifice born of great love overflow the pages of *The Collector of Burned Books*. Rarely have I read a book with such perfect tension. Meticulously researched, intellectually and spiritually stimulating, compelling and beautifully written, Roseanna M. White has written a book I could not put down, one I will not forget.

CATHY GOHLKE, Christy Hall of Fame author of *This Promised Land*

The Collector of Burned Books is a heart-pounding historical that kept me riveted from beginning to end. Roseanna White, a brilliant storyteller, weaves together a gripping plot about the many dangers of distributing prohibited books during the Nazi regime. As her cast of heroic characters secretly fight for freedom, they risk their lives to spread the truth and protect those they love. *The Collector of Burned Books* should be read by every lover of a life-changing book!

MELANIE DOBSON, award-winning author of *The Winter Rose* and *The Wings of Poppy Pendleton*

The Collector of Burned Books

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of **BURNED**
BOOKS

ROSEANNA M. WHITE



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The Collector of Burned Books

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Prologue

10 MAY 1933

THE OPERNPLATZ, BERLIN, GERMANY

They meant the fire to blaze, to consume, to crackle its way into the night with a ferocity to match their beliefs. They meant it to roar, louder than the so-called fire incantations of the thousands of gathered students, louder than the words Goebbels shouted into his microphone about how this new Reich would be a phoenix rising from the ashes of these defeatist books.

God had other ideas. God and the very nature of the kindling.

Books didn't like to burn. Ilse laughed when he attributed likes and dislikes to books, but it was true. Part of their nature. Their paper wasn't dry kindling, it was pressed with ink and made from pulp not devised for flammability, covered with cloth. And the older books, like the ones on the cart behind him? The ones with leather bindings and gold lettering? The ones on *parchment*?

Those resisted burning like the pyres of martyrs receiving salvation from on high. They would only smolder, more likely to go out than to catch.

These students had it all wrong—backward. Books didn't burn. Books *ignited*. They lit the burning in others. Not with paper and match. With ideas.

But then, that was their very argument.

A misting rain continued to obscure his view out the window, and he watched the scene blur. Black umbrellas crowded the square, but closer to the struggling pyre they vanished. The students closest to the fire burned brighter than the books, ignoring the elements. They were making a statement, and nothing could stop them.

His deepest fear. His deepest dread. *Nothing could stop them.*

He'd thought it impossible. Ludicrous. Germany, his beloved fatherland, had so much beauty and culture and brilliance in its history, in its potential. He knew it because he'd read all these books those students were burning. He knew the minds his ancestors had possessed, the collective knowledge passed down. It was beautiful. It was good. It was fair.

But it hadn't stopped resentments from smoldering ever since the war when he was a child. It hadn't stopped the impossible from happening last year, after Hitler was elected. It hadn't stopped the Nazis from dismissing everyone of Jewish heritage from their positions. It hadn't stopped the nightmare from smoldering on from there.

The ache in his chest hadn't let up since. Wouldn't. Couldn't. It could only grow worse with each book added to the "banned" list.

An arm slipped around his waist, and he didn't need to look down to recognize Ilse. Her sigh was sweet and small and as aching as the hole gaping ever larger inside him. She rested her head against his shoulder. "You saved many of them."

"Books? Yes." He nodded toward the misted panes of glass. "But what of them? What of all those people?"

Her arm held him tight. "We could leave. Like the others. Go to France or England or America."

If it were only about the words, the paper, the ink, the bindings, maybe he would. If the books were his only concern, he could preserve them elsewhere—that was the beauty of books. One could never destroy them all. One could only make a weak-flamed statement with a few.

But it wasn't only the books. It was the generation so quick to denounce them. "I can't, Ilse. I can't abandon them."

She knew it, but still she sighed again. "What then? Will you stay and fight? Be a voice of reason in the madness? It'll get you sacked, at best. Arrested, quite possibly. And what of me then? What of *us*?" She moved her other arm, and even in the darkness he knew what she would be doing. A new move, but one that had already become familiar. She pressed a hand to her stomach, protective and awed, over the little life growing within.

It was his turn to sigh. "When I was eight, when we first moved onto Sonntagstraße, there were a few bullies that liked to torment Rolf. They would make fun of his lisp. Have I told you this story before?"

His wife shook her head against his shoulder, and he could feel her smiling. "No, but I can imagine where it's going, knowing how protective you were of your brother. You confronted them?"

She knew him well. He smiled a grim smile, no brighter than the half-hearted bonfire outside. "I tried. But I was eight, small for my age. They were . . . I don't know. Ten? Twelve? I got a bloodied nose, two black eyes, and a cracked rib for my gallantry."

"Aw," she crooned at him, running a hand up his rib cage. "My poor knight! What did you do? Or your parents?"

The flames in the square struggled, leapt when more kerosine was splashed onto them, painting oranges and yellows on the rain-blurred windowpane. His students shouted, arms pumping the air. As if they could bully away the ideas they found so offensive.

"My father sat me down, after Mutti had patched me up. He praised my bravery, my courage. My desire to protect the innocent, no matter the cost to myself."

Ilse breathed a laugh. "That sounds like him."

"Mm. And then he looked me in the eye and told me what I lacked was discernment. I had failed to consider that I was outnumbered five to one, and that I was fighting well above my

weight-class. I had failed to take into consideration that the fight was doomed. Lost causes are all well and good, he said. But sometimes we must bide our time. Grow. Let them grow softer, kinder, wiser themselves. Or at least wait for help to arrive. Otherwise we find ourselves unable to fight at all, because we've been defeated too thoroughly."

"Choose your battles," she said on a low exhale.

"And bide your time. Not for revenge—but for the chance to build friends instead of enemies. That's what he told me that day. That the only way to defeat a bully was to win him over. The only way to truly defend what you believe is to make your enemy believe it too. Make him your friend."

"And did it work? With those bullies?"

At the thought of Erik, he wanted to smile. At the sight of the brighter-now fire, he couldn't. "One of them. The ringleader. The others drifted away when he changed. It's ideas that win, Ilse. Ideas that always win. We just need to bide our time, until they're ready to listen again."

"But from here? Darling, they're mad, it's *all* mad."

It was. But that only reminded him of something his godfather had said a few years ago, before his opinions had forced *him* from Germany. "It's as Josef said. Madness can never be cured from the outside. It can only be healed from within."

"Josef *left*, my love."

"Josef gave up. Consigned them to their madness." He shook his head, almost wishing he could do the same. But deep down, he was still that eight-year-old boy, ready to take on five neighborhood bullies just to keep them from taunting his brother. "I can't do that."

As if to mock him, the flames reached higher through the night.

One

14 JUNE 1940

CHAMPS-ÉLYSÉES, PARIS, FRANCE

It was a parade for no one. Or, no. It was a parade staged only for the cameras set up along the street, one of which ticked and whirred outside the door she'd ducked into five minutes before, when she heard the tanks coming. Corinne Bastien had no good reason to be standing now in Cartier, watches that cost a year of her professor's salary displayed in their glass cases behind her. No good reason at all.

But several very bad ones. She watched the panzers roll slowly down the street, soldiers waving from the hatches as if to adoring crowds, smiles wreathing their faces.

The streets were empty, but for those cameramen.

Corinne pressed the book she held to her stomach. An older man stood beside her, another erstwhile pedestrian caught outside when the Germans approached. He'd been in front of her. He'd begun trying all the doors that weren't boarded over—shut, locked. That was when the proprietor—or perhaps only a clerk?—from Cartier swung open his door and motioned them inside.

He hadn't needed to tell them to hurry. The rumble of tanks that shook the ground beneath their feet had done a fine job of that.

She shouldn't have been outside. She'd known the risk, even before the announcements appeared this morning cautioning all citizens to remain indoors. But she'd run out of time yesterday, and she'd still had two loads of books to drop off. If she hurried, she'd told herself, she'd be fine. She knew Paris far better than the invading German army. She could avoid them. Be invisible. Make her deliveries in two different batches and then scurry back into her burrow like the scared little mouse they'd expect her to be.

The streets were *empty*. Never, in the fifteen years she'd called Paris her home, had she seen them like this, not even during the bombardment earlier that month, and it was every bit as haunting as the German words shouted from loudspeakers. "*Welcome your liberators, citizens of Paris!*"

"Liberators," the man beside her muttered, looking as though he'd like to punctuate the curse by spitting on the floor. If so, then the expense of that floor stopped him. Or perhaps his manners. He, at least, looked like he belonged on the Champs-Élysées. Trousers and shirt and jacket, all tailored. Shoes of leather so fine her fingers itched to touch them, to see if they were really as smooth and buttery as they looked. A gold watch gleaming from his wrist that could have come from this very store.

Clearly *he* hadn't just been making a delivery to someone whose flat was above the Arcades.

On the other side of her, the merciful clerk touched two fingers to his forehead, his heart, his left shoulder, his right. "*Sanctus Michael Archangele, defende nos in proelio, contra nequitiam et insidias diaboli esto praesidium.*" His voice was soft and low, barely a whisper.

She translated the familiar words in her mind without thought, praying them along with him, making a mirroring motion with

her right hand. *St. Michael the Archangel, defend us in battle, be our defense against the wickedness and snares of the devil.*

Monsieur Fine Shoes snorted. “We have already lost the battle, my friend. Or haven’t you noticed? Cross yourself all you want. God has abandoned us. The evil is *here*.”

Corinne lifted her chin even as she gripped the book more tightly. “The cross isn’t meant only to ward off evil, *monsieur*. It’s meant to strengthen us against it.”

Another snort as fine as his shoes. “France has no strength left. Your cross is about as effective as the Maginot Line proved to be.”

Swallowing past the sudden tightness of her throat, Corinne turned to the shopkeeper. “Is there a back door I could use?” She had work still to do today, even if every business in Paris was boarded up and closed. Even if nearly everyone she knew had fled the city days ago in a march as silent as a procession of ghosts. Even if her university had barred its doors and hunkered down.

The clerk nodded, and the dull gleam in his eye seemed to say he understood her need to keep moving. He held out a hand toward the glass cases, the space behind them, and the door that opened up into the back rooms.

The cases were as empty as the streets. No gold and diamond and platinum winked out at her. She hadn’t even noticed that when she’d hurried inside, and she could hear Uncle Georges in her head, chiding her for her inattention. *If you want to remain unseen, he had said uncountable times, then you must see everything.*

Her fingers twitched over the fabric casing of the book she clutched, fighting even now against the retort that she had voiced nearly as many times. *I see words, Uncle. Ideas. Not things.*

She had to learn—that was the lesson he’d been drilling into her for the last year. If she wanted to help, if she wanted to do something other than run away like everyone else she knew, if she wanted her efforts to *matter*, whether the Sorbonne let her teach or not, then she had to *learn*.

The clerk paused once off the showroom floor to look back at her. She found herself suddenly aware of her hastily selected skirt and blouse, the lack of care she'd given her hair, the slapdash application of red lipstick. *She* certainly didn't look like she belonged in Cartier, and this man would recognize that in a glance. He had eyes strangely like Uncle Georges's—aware, alert. He saw her.

But he smiled, sad as it looked on his aging face. "I am Hugo."

"Corinne." She dug up a smile of her own, though it surely looked no gladder than his. "Thank you. For . . ." She motioned to the front door, locked again behind them, and then to the back door she could glimpse at the end of the hallway.

"If we do not help each other, who will? These are times to be *more* willing to reach out to our neighbors, not less."

Most of the men who made their living on the Champs-Élysées wouldn't consider her a neighbor. She had spent her childhood in a town so small it rarely appeared on maps, the countryside laboring to recover still from the last war to maul it. It had been only fifteen years ago that Papa had moved Maman and her to Paris to chase their dreams. Education, for both of them. Careers. Futures.

Papa had given them those dreams. Sometimes she still looked back on those few years she had with her stepfather and marveled at how, short as his time with them had been, he'd changed every single aspect of their lives.

They arrived at the door, but Hugo didn't reach for the knob. He peered through the glass, this way and that. "You will be too young to remember the last time Germans were in France."

"I remember." Most of the memories were vague, writhing things. Impressions more than images. She remembered the hungry days and the haunted nights. She remembered the fear that had so permeated every day of her life, she hadn't even recognized it as such until it faded away. She remembered the lack of color, the yawning emptiness, the sucking mud left in the wake of raging armies.

She remembered stubbing her toe on something, realizing it

was a boot. Seeing the boot had a leg still inside it. She remembered thinking it a corpse she could scavenge food from—then watching in horror as mud-caked eyes blinked wearily, deliriously open.

It was the boldest memory she had from those days, despite the whole scene being mud-brown. *Papa*. She hadn't known it then. But she knew it now. Trapped in that quagmire was the only father she would remember, struggling for one more breath.

Hugo's lips offered another echo of a smile. "Then you remember that when the Germans arrive, the food vanishes."

The hungry days. She nodded, once. Briskly.

Hugo settled gentle fingers on her wrist. "The Germans will want to shop. The owners will return eventually, the stores will reopen. This street will be alive again soon enough. Money will flow—food, perhaps, with it. Come here when you are hungry, Corinne. I will always put something back."

It was the sort of kindness she would expect of family, perhaps from friends. But from a stranger? She knew her confusion was written across her face, likely underscored by every ounce of suspicion her uncle had trained her to have. "Why? You don't even know me."

His answer was to reach up and pull from the neck of his shirt a necklace, tugging until the pendant slipped free. She recognized in a glance the Miraculous Medal—bright blue, like cerulean hope. A nearly exact match to the one she wore around her own neck. The one that rested on the outside of her blouse, where he'd clearly seen it. "This is how he gives us the strength to withstand evil—through each other." He offered another smile, brighter by a degree. "We are here, you and I. While so many are not. We stand. We stay."

"We stand." He *was* like Uncle Georges, he *did* see. Perhaps his eyes had been trained for commerce, for the next sale, for identifying from whom he could earn his commission. But it served him

well now too. She gave him a nod that she hoped said that she saw as well. Or was learning to. "Thank you, Hugo."

He slid the bolt on the door, swung it open, and nodded her outside. "Go with God, *mon amie*."

She slid out into the daylight, nostrils flaring at the odd smell of the tanks' exhaust that filled the streets, mixing with the acrid sting of the oil reserves the French army had set ablaze to keep the Germans from seizing it. Wrong, all wrong. Paris was supposed to smell of baguettes and pastries, flowers and creperies. There should have been laughter from the café across the street, the clinking of wine glasses, music from the concertinas the Gypsies played for the tourists.

The only sound was the clatter of panzer treads over the pavement a street over.

Though the book weighed heavy in her hands, she wasn't about to cross in front of that parade in search of Amalie to give it to her. Instead, she wound her way back to the Boulevard Arago. None of the Métro trains were running, which meant that the half-hour trip took over an hour. Sweat clung to every crevice by the time she turned onto her street, the June sun mocking the metal storm that had rolled in under its swastika banners.

She nearly shouted when she saw the figure locking the door of the library next to her flat. What was Monsieur Kantorowicz still doing in the city? Shrugging off her exhaustion, she ran toward him, arriving just in time to watch as he wrenched the small sign off the building.

Why did it feel like he'd yanked the very heart from her chest? "*Monsieur?* I thought you long gone."

Kantorowicz spun, eyes wide in his long face, though they relaxed again the moment he spotted her, and he huffed out a breath. "Corinne. Where have you been? I've been waiting for you."

She ignored the chide, turned it back on him. "Shouldn't you be on your way to England?"

He waved a hand. “I am leaving the city now—though I do not know if I will make it to England or just hide away in some pretty little French chalet.” He tried a smile that fell flat. Concern darkened his eyes. “You have heard, I trust? That we have been officially shut down and handed to the Germans to be destroyed?”

She swallowed, her feet stepping involuntarily toward the library. It looked bereft without its sign. She’d grown accustomed to seeing the German words “Deutsche Freiheitsbibliothek” there on the front. “The Library of the Burned Books.” It had become a beacon. A hand always beckoning her. *There are secrets in here*, that sign had always promised. *There are ideas so powerful the Reich tried to destroy them*.

“I heard.” Her gaze moved back to Kantorowicz as he dropped the keys into his pocket. She’d heard, but she’d railed against it, hadn’t really believed it was true. That it was just going to be abandoned, turned over like a gift to the Nazis.

Her heart thudded as he held out a hand. “You’d better give me your key. You don’t want to be caught with it.”

“What? No!” She still had a load of books to smuggle out before the Nazis arrived, books with carefully encoded markings in their margins. Books she still had to somehow get into the hands of the students scattering all over France, back to their provinces. This was the only purpose she had now, with the university abandoning ship just like the rest of Paris’s citizens. To let them observe, to gather the information they sent back to her, to send it on to the true French government, already in England, via Uncle Georges’s contacts.

Kantorowicz shook his head adamantly. “It is too dangerous. You can be assured that the Nazis will waste no time in confiscating every book in there. You do not want to be seen as an associate of the place, or they’ll lock you up too.”

She wanted to scoff, to insist that no Nazi would look at her and think her dangerous. *No one* thought her dangerous, with

Maman's honeyed curls, the petite frame she'd inherited from her father's side, and the ridiculous lips that made everyone think she was still a teenager long after she'd left those days behind her.

It was her greatest weapon, Uncle Georges had pronounced with a grin. Well, her second greatest. Her mind ranked first, of course. But her deceptively innocent appearance was a strong second.

She hadn't bothered arguing—she'd been using it to her advantage too long, much as Maman chided her for it when she was growing up. An angel with a forked tail, she had called her. Corinne's lips twitched at the memory.

Juste ciel, but she missed her mother. It made her feel far younger than she was, this constant, soul-deep longing for the sole companion she'd had every day of her life, up until a few weeks ago.

Kantorowicz raised his brows and inched his palm closer to her nose. "Now. For your own good."

She was well enough acquainted with his stubbornness to know he'd stand here until she relinquished it, or follow her up to her flat if she claimed not to have it on her.

"Fine." She dug the precious bit of metal from her pocket and slapped it onto his palm.

He leaned over and kissed her cheeks. "Watch yourself, *ma petite*. Be safe."

"You too." Tempted as she was to beg for the key back, she pressed her lips against it. It would look odd, would tip her hand. She would just have to content herself with finding a way in once he'd gone. Maybe she could pick the lock. How hard could it be? Women managed it with a bobby pin in the movies. Then it would be a simple matter of digging out the spare key from the circulation desk's drawer and pocketing it for future use. She gave him a quick embrace, careful to keep the book's title out of view. He'd recognize it.

He was distracted enough that he didn't do more than squeeze her and then step away, toward the auto waiting at the curb. She said a quick prayer that he would make it safely and quickly to wherever he was going.

Holding her ground, she watched until he had the engine roaring to life and was pulling away, so that she could lift a hand in farewell.

Another friend, gone. Chased away by the Nazis swarming her city. The hot sun pounded down, magnified by the injustice of it all, until it lit the coals smoldering inside her. The fuel-tainted breeze fanned the flames higher, brighter.

She looked down at the book in her hands, almost expecting it to burst into flames along with her soul. But this tome had already been condemned to flames, and it had survived. It always would.

She would too. She would burn and she would fight and she would win. No locked door would stop her, no empty flat, no German army, no looming days of hunger. She strode to the door of her own building and then jogged up the stairs to her flat.

Uncle Georges was wrong. Her best weapon was neither her mind nor her looks.

Her best weapons were the books—and she was going to use them well.