

HEADLIGHT

a fashion novel by inky

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Chapter One

Of Fate and Faces

Morning in the Marais arrives the way old silk slips from a dress form: quietly, but with purpose. Lara Dupré sat before a slab of Carrara rescued from a seamstress's bankruptcy sale, the stone veined like the underside of leaves. Light the colour of watered ink slid across the table and touched seventeen arranged objects—foundation glass, ink stick, metal that had once been part of a war-time compass—each waiting its turn in a private ceremony she performed only on days when history might change hands.

She uncapped a bottle of vinegar-scented lotion distilled in a Montreuil cellar unchanged since 1952, pressed it to her skin, and felt the previous night dissolve. Behind her, bed-linen

**whispered. Lotta Lindström rose—Swedish, long-boned, hair
the colour of winter wheat after rain—crossed the
floorboards without sound, and stopped at Lara’s shoulder.
Their reflections met: one braid the shade of ripened wheat,
one hair unbound and several tones paler; green eyes
holding blue across the silvered glass.**

**“Your Englishman with the decisive chin most likely files his
taxes for fun,” Lotta murmured, the sentence half sung.**

**“In England they call it self-assessment,” Lara answered,
tilting the liner. “Sounds gentler. Still fatal.”**

**Lotta’s laugh was warm. She bent, found the corner of Lara’s
mouth, brushed it with hers—the hint of a kiss, no blessing,**

simply an unhurried promise flavoured with last-night wine and the faint grit of flax dust. Lara felt the line of her own heartbeat pause, then steady. She finished the ink in a single stroke, capped the pen, and stood before desire could renegotiate.

The walk to Hôtel Drouot took twenty-six minutes: over the Seine where barges carried pallets of indigo denim stacked like uniform graves, through passages where 19th-century gas fixtures had been electrified but never removed. She entered the building at the corner of Rue Drouot and Rue Rossini—no hotel of beds, but a city of rooms devoted to dispersal. Since 1852 every Parisian life of note has passed these doors: dowries, bankruptcies, the leftover sequins of music-hall stars, the ivory buttons of deposed ministers. Cols Rouges in black coats with blood-red collars moved furniture the way undertakers move coffins—without comment,

without haste.

Salle 9 seemed to float like paper brittle as communion wafer. Dealers occupied pews once meant for creditors; telephones replaced prayer books. Lara took her seat, braid resting against vintage wool. Rupert Sterling entered, chin first, Huntsman cloth floating from his shoulders like a legal opinion. When their eyes met he inclined his head the width of a securities ledger. The auctioneer lifted his gavel—mahogany darkened by generations of palm sweat—and spoke the number everyone had come to court.

Two porters wheeled in the trunk. Trianon grey canvas, zinc corners hammered by wartime shortages, brass locks stamped February 1944. Scratches crossed the lid like front-line tally marks. The dolly wheels squeaked, a sound bright

and final as a typewriter returning to the next line. Bidding began at five thousand. Sterling lifted a finger for seven. Lara answered eight, voice steady, braid flicking against her spine each time she raised the paddle. At ten-five the room exhaled as one body. Sterling gave a small shrug that meant the spreadsheet had spoken; he closed his catalogue. The hammer fell—one dry click sealing a transfer older than any stock exchange.

Afterwards she followed the Cols Rouges down a corridor where daylight lay in slabs across crates branded with ducal crests long since broken into sawdust. The trunk moved ahead of her, locks clicking against iron sides, keeping time with her heels. She did not touch it yet; she wanted the archive's silence first, the hush where history waits for interpretation. Somewhere inside that lead-lined cylinder a

woman who had already died once was waiting to be read like a pattern cut in cloth. Lara felt the eyeliner set like varnish, drew breath, and stepped into the climate-controlled dusk prepared to open the next chapter with steady hands.

The porters departed without ceremony, the swing door sighing shut like a book closed on an unfinished sentence. Lara waited until the echo died, then pulled on cotton gloves bleached so often they felt like parchment against her skin. Around her the Musée de la Mode's conservation room kept its usual perfect stillness: eighteen degrees, fifty percent humidity, the faint taste of cedar drifting from drawers that had held Worth bodices since the Third Republic. Sodium lamps hung above the central table, their light the colour of late afternoon in Normandy, and under them the trunk sat

patient as a veteran who has already told every story except the last.

She circled once, noting the zinc corners dented by railway clamps, the canvas weave tighter than post-war bolts—wartime quality, fibres rationed but never cheap. A brass date stamp read 4 2 44, the numerals uneven, struck by hand in a workshop that would be rubble within six months. Someone had chalked a shipping mark beside the lock: a single C doubled beneath a diagonal. Chanel, she thought, or maybe a railwayman's private joke; either way it had survived when the station did not.

Lara slid a pick into the lock. Five tumblers, all brass, the last one reluctant, as if reluctant to speak of what it guarded. When the barrel turned the sound was clean,

almost medical. She lifted the lid an inch and felt pressure shift—air drawn inward like a sharp intake of breath. Inside lay a second lid of lead sheathed in pigskin, the seams soldered the way radiographers sealed plates during the liberation of Paris. A small valve, off-centre, hissed once and fell quiet. She pressed the release, skin warming against metal colder than the room, and the inner lid rose on its own small hinge.

Fluid first: colour of pale aquamarine, viscosity like winter honey, carrying the faint sweetness of old mimosa—Joy by Patou, original formula, banned since '48 for using real jasmine and the last of the Indian sandalwood. Immersed within, a woman's head rested on a collar of vulcanised rubber cut to the exact curve of a 1944 neckline. Black hair, razor-bobbed, floated in slow motion as if underwater truly

were under time. Skin translucent at temples where capillaries showed like red silk thread drawn beneath ivory organza. Lips unpainted, the natural rose that couturiers once called non-colour. Eyes closed, but not asleep; the lids trembled the way a hem trembles when a train is approaching.

Lara felt the table edge meet her hips; she had stepped back without deciding. Her mind catalogued automatically: human head, female, Caucasian, adipose preserved, cartilage intact, earrings—old European cut, approx. 3.8 cts, platinum settings, Cartier 1939. She reached for a pen to note the measurements and stopped: the eyes opened, violet under water, and fixed on her with the calm of someone who has already survived one apocalypse.

**A breath she did not take shuddered through the room.
From a brass grille set into the trunk wall a voice emerged,
grainy yet distinct, the accent of the 16th arrondissement
before the boulevards were widened.**

**“So,” the woman said, bubbles spiralling upward, “the house
still stands. I was told Paris had become a shopping centre.”**

**Lara found her own voice, smaller than she wanted. “The
house is a museum now.”**

**“Museums are where the living store what they no longer
dare to wear.” The violet gaze travelled across Lara’s face,
paused at the braid, moved to the blouse’s velvet cuff. “Saint
Laurent, 1976, Rive Gauche. Good lines, tired decade. You**

are the curator?”

“Lara Dupré.”

“Agent OO-Coco, Chambre Syndicale, Liaison to the Réseaux.

**You may call me Astrid. I appear to have misplaced my
body somewhere between the Ritz and Dresden. Be good
enough to tell me the year.”**

“2025.”

**A flicker behind the eyes—calculation racing across seventy
years in a heartbeat. “Then the war for the silhouette never
ended. I felt it continue even in dreams.”**

Lara leaned closer, the sodium lamp catching the surface of the fluid, turning it into a mirror where past and present stared at one another. “What were you guarding?”

“The perfect cut,” Astrid answered. “A pattern that needs no corset, no lie. They bombed the city to ash rather than let it leave. My handlers saved what they could—only the head, the hard drive, the taste of jasmine left for company.”

The conservation room’s door chimed once, soft, almost polite. Footsteps, two sets, measured, male. Lara’s pulse lifted. She lowered the lead lid just enough to shield the face from view, leaving the grille exposed, and turned as the handle began to turn. Astrid’s voice, quieter now, reached

her like a hand on the elbow.

“Uniform makers,” she whispered. “They have come for the line that could unmake them.”

The door opened on a draft of colder air, and two men entered wearing suits cut so precisely the room seemed to contract around them. Their shoes carried no sound; the leather had been chosen for silence. One carried neither gun nor syringe—only a card embossed with a single word in Gothic type: Boss. The other held a ledger, black calfskin, the kind in which quotas were once recorded.

The first man inclined his head the degree permitted between rival houses.

“Mademoiselle Dupré. Munich sends regards. We believe you have taken delivery of property that belongs to our archive.”

Lara felt the eyeliner set like varnish, drew breath, and answered with the steadiness the room had taught her. “This is a private collection. And you are not wearing gloves.”

A pause measured in heartbeats. Then a new voice, female, crisp, British-edged, entered from the fire-stair beyond.

“Nor,” it said, “have they signed the visitors’ book. Really, gentlemen, even spies must observe museum etiquette.”

The woman stepped inside, trench coat the colour of wet sand, belt knotted once. She closed the door with the casual authority of someone used to sealing borders. Her badge caught the sodium light: interlocking Cs over the tricolour.

“Robyn Anwar,” she offered, not to the men but to Lara.

“DGSE, liaison to the house of Chanel. Shall we discuss provenance, or would you prefer I have these gentlemen shown to the street?”

The lead lid of the trunk stayed ajar, the fluid breathing softly. Inside, Astrid waited, patient as a pattern yet to be cut, while the living negotiated the shape of the next war.

The sodium lamp pooled over the lead-lined lid like a single stage light. Robyn Anwar stood just inside the doorway, thumb still brushing the phone in her pocket—three short pulses, message away, habit formed in convent corridors where speech was rationed like butter. She had left Belgium at nineteen, but the quiet had travelled in her luggage; even now she preferred pauses to paragraphs.

Lara's gaze flicked from the cylinder to the newcomers, then to Robyn. "Who are they?"

Robyn's answer came low, almost amused. "Accountants—only their ledger is measured in ribs and waists." She stepped closer, coat brushing the table edge. "Boss-Continuum, ex-Stasi economic desk, rebranded after the Wall. They audit heritage now."

The truth was older, deeper. When the Wall cracked open in '89, the Stasi didn't dissolve—it metastasized. Forty thousand

files, a million photographs, the entire surveillance apparatus of a state floated like ghosts looking for new flesh. The economic warfare division—Section XXIV—had spent decades mapping Western industries, cataloguing weaknesses in supply chains, predicting market shifts with the same cold precision they applied to dissident lives. They needed new hosts, new legitimacy.

Hugo Boss had survived the war by inches, their uniforms a stain that never quite washed out. But they'd learned to launder reputation through fabric, through the quiet language of fine cut and drape. When the Stasi came calling—bringing databases that knew every shipping route, every factory bottleneck, every worker's weakness in fifteen countries—it wasn't a takeover but a marriage. The Stasi brought intelligence infrastructure; Boss brought global reach, legitimate fronts, and the kind of institutional

memory that spans continents.

The marriage was never exclusive. Once intelligence agencies tasted the mobility of couture—models who crossed borders daily, trunks that never raised suspicion, ateliers that could hide a radio behind a toile—the rest followed like a new seasonal palette. Chanel signed papers with SDECE in '49, gifting travel immunity to house mannequins who carried diplomatic pouches in hat-boxes. LVMH Group (FENDI shell) paired with AISE—dock manifests became fashion invoices, silk bolts became dead-letter boxes. MI6 laundered field budgets through Burberry shipping accounts; CIA funded black sites via Capri-Holdings outlet margins. Each house now keeps a second ledger: one for silk, one for secrets—both measured to the millimetre, both non-refundable.

One of the Germans began to protest; Robyn lifted a single

finger—gentle, nun-trained, impossible to ignore. “Inside voice, mein Herr. You’re standing on French dust.”

She turned her attention to the trunk, ran a gloved fingertip along the solder seam. “Nineteen forty-four lead, Dresden factory. Same batch used to line film archives—burns slow, keeps secrets quieter than confession.” Her eyes found Lara’s. “The houses became spies by accident: trains full of models who never aroused suspicion, trunks that crossed borders daily. When the shooting stopped the fabric kept moving. Chanel formalised it first—signed papers with SDECE in ’49, travel cover for couriers. Boss followed once the Stasi needed hard currency; they sold discipline disguised as ready-to-wear. Kaiser—Lagerfeld’s predecessor—brokered the truce: no poaching heritage assets. That”—she tapped the cylinder—“is heritage.”

Astrid’s voice crackled through the grille. “And the truce is

only cloth—easy to tear when profit sharpens its shears.”

Robyn gave a soft exhale, half laugh, half prayer. “Which is why I’m here. Not to speak volumes—just to keep the seams from splitting.” She met the German’s stare, smile small, steady. “Go back to Munich. Tell your board the habit still fits; the house of Chanel keeps its own.”

CHAPTER TWO

Line Beneath the Skin

The sodium lamp still burned, but the room had shifted into a colder register. Robyn’s last word—habit—hung between the Germans and the cylinder like a blade that had not yet decided which way to fall.

Lara felt the eyeliner congeal on her lashes, a brittle film

that might crack if she blinked too hard. She forced herself to breathe through her nose, the way restorers did when leaning over fifteenth-century velvets: slow, shallow, tasting only her own powder.

The older German—silver hair parted with geometrical precision—lowered the syringe a fraction. “We are prepared to compensate the museum,” he said, accent soft as cashmere lining. “A quiet transfer. No headlines.”

Robyn’s smile was almost tender. “Headlines are never the problem. Footnotes are.” She tilted her phone: screen glowed green, message sent. “In three minutes this room will be full of gendarmes who still think the word Boss refers to a crime, not a brand. You can stay and explain, or you can walk while the corridor is empty.”

The second German glanced at the cylinder, lips moving as though calculating cubic litres of solvent required to dissolve

a witness. Then both stepped back, synchronized, the way tailors retreat from a final fitting. At the door the silver-haired man offered a small bow—politeness sharpened to threat—and they were gone.

Silence poured in behind them, thick as sizing steam.

Astrid spoke first, voice crackling through the brass grille. “I have seen less tension in a Gestapo checkpoint. Your nunnery friend has steel under the wool.”

Robyn’s eyebrow lifted a millimetre. “Ursuline, not Benedictine. They taught us to count beads and consequences.” She turned to Lara. “We have perhaps ten minutes before corporate counsel countermands local police. Decide what you want to do with your acquisition.”

Lara looked at the trunk, then at the door. “I want to know

exactly what I've acquired."

She unscrewed the cylinder's outer collar. Gaskets sighed; the mimosa scent grew stronger, carrying with it the ghost of pre-war ballrooms. The head remained suspended on a rubber cradle, neck artery sealed by a translucent cuff printed with the Chanel double-C—wartime rubber ration, repurposed.

Astrid blinked once, fluid beading on her lashes like tiny glass beads. "The formula is stored here," she said, tapping her temple with a gesture that sent slow ripples through blue. "Not written. Memorised. One pattern block, forty-seven measurements, infinite gradations. A tailor in Dresden derived it from Fourier's equations—turns the human form into a cosine wave. No corset, no dart manipulation, no seasonal obsolescence. One cut fits all, forever."

Robyn's expression did not change, but her fingers drummed once against her coat belt. "The holy grail of ready-to-wear is a mathematical proof that would collapse the industry's dependency on dissatisfaction. No wonder the houses want it embalmed."

Lara felt the floor tilt slightly beneath her vintage heels. "If it's only in your head, why preserve the head?"

"Because the head was already targeted. They bombed the atelier, missed the brain. My handler decided data was worth more than dignity." Astrid's smile was razor-thin.

"Chanel paid for the tank; the Resistance paid for the silence. Everyone invested."

An alarm—low, courteous—sounded in the corridor: motion sensor triggered. Robyn slipped the phone into her pocket.

"Decision time. We can surrender the asset to French custody

and spend years in tribunals while every conglomerate lawyers up, or we can move now and authenticate later.”

Lara swallowed. “Move where?”

“North. A safe flat outside Milan. Chanel still owns a wing in the Crespi villa—neutral ground under the treaty. After that, open-source the algorithm before anyone can patent it.”

Astrid laughed, bubbles spiralling. “Release the perfect cut to the world? You would bankrupt couture overnight.”

“Couture survived the sewing machine,” Robyn answered. “It will survive truth.”

They worked quickly. Lara fetched acid-free tissue and a museum transit crate labelled Costume Département—prêt-à-porter 1950-60. Robyn produced a collapsible trolley disguised as a vintage hatbox stand. Together they lowered

the cylinder into a nest of tissue, the fluid level adjusted by a hidden valve at the base—Chanel engineering, 1944, still flawless.

Over it Lara placed a bustle pad and a damaged Balenciaga jacket—decoy cargo in case customs peered inside. The trunk lid closed with a surgeon's click; the lock engaged, tumblers falling like rosary beads.

Before they rolled the crate away Lara paused at the conservation sink. She opened her compact, reapplied the brick-red Hermès with the same single stroke she had used at dawn, but this time her hand trembled. The woman in the mirror was no longer preparing for battle; she was already inside it, powder the only armour left.

Robyn watched without comment, then gestured toward the service lift. "Time," she said. "The habit of obedience dies

hard.”

They rolled the trunk into the freight corridor, wheels whispering over nineteenth-century stone. Behind them the sodium lamp dimmed to standby, leaving only the faint scent of mimosa and the echo of a choice that could unravel an industry before the next runway season.

As the lift doors closed Lara felt the vibration travel through the brass handle and into her wrist—like a pulse returning after long absence, ready to be heard in Milan, in daylight, in history.

Robyn’s wrist caught the lift light as she pressed L for

basement garage: a 1995 Panerai Luminor Marina, 44 mm, the crown guard stamped 001/500—Nato stock number still visible where the strap met the case. She wore it face-inward, the way ex-nuns wear a crucifix against the skin: protection first, display never. The leather had darkened to the colour of cold espresso; somewhere between Brussels and Milan it had absorbed her first field assignment—an hour spent wrist-deep in canal water while she wired a tracking bead to a Tirrenia container bound for Tripoli.

Over her trench she had knotted a narrow Versace scarf: black silk, baroque gold leaves, the Medusa head reduced to coin-size so it read as jewellery only when the fabric shifted. Donatella had ordered the run the week she resigned from AISE—officially “creative differences,” in fact a controlled explosion. Giorgio’s leaks were sprouting faster than sample seams; every boardroom in Milan knew Armani’s couture line was feeding margin figures to London hedge funds in

real time. Rather than expose the breach, Donatella volunteered herself as distraction: stepped down from the intelligence directorate, let the tabloids feast on rumours of Versace succession, while AISI quietly pulled the implants from Armani's finance wing. The old man never noticed; the AI prognosis said he could design another decade, but the implants were already writing his last collection in someone else's ledger.

The scarf, then, was both souvenir and warning: silk that had passed through a shredder of statecraft and come out brighter. When Robyn tightened the knot now it caught the lift light like a gold-threaded dossier.

Lara noticed, filed the detail away with the rest of the morning's artefacts. "Versace," she murmured, steering the trunk over the threshold into the sub-basement garage. "I thought the house was out of the game."

“They’re benched, not retired,” Robyn answered, voice echoing off concrete. “Donatella keeps a hand in—advises AISI on couture-counterfeiting routes. That scarf is her signature on the brief.” She flicked the fold so the Medusa winked. “Means we have safe passage through Milan customs. Provided we don’t linger long enough for the gold to tarnish.”

The ramp ahead adorned with diesel and river dampness. Somewhere above, dawn was assembling its first pale pattern over Paris, but down here the hour felt like the inside of a file still marked SECRET. They rolled the disguised trunk toward a slate-grey Peugeot 508 wagon—government plates, civilian paint. Robyn opened the rear hatch. Inside waited two blankets the colour of asphalt and a slim aluminium case the size of a missal: documents, currency, a single change of clothes. She laid the blankets in a cross, creating a nest that would cradle the cylinder without

shifting on the autoroute.

Astrid's voice drifted through the small speaker grille Robyn had screwed into the crate side. "I assume you've fuelled adequately. Last time I crossed the Alps we ran out of petrol and used Chanel N°5 as substitute. The engine had a delightful perfume but never forgave us."

Robyn's mouth twitched—almost a smile, almost a prayer.

"We'll manage," she said. "Keep your head down."

Lara climbed into the passenger seat, braid tucked inside her collar to avoid window silhouette. Robyn started the engine, checked the mirror, then flicked a switch beneath the dash. The licence-plate carousel rotated once—plates now read 75-CZ-92, a tourist rental tag. Another flick: the rear-view camera fed an encrypted burst to Boulevard Mortier, signalling departure.

They rolled up the ramp, past a barrier that lifted without

query—Versace scarf already at work in some distant computer. As the car surfaced into Paris dawn, Robyn's Panerai caught the first weak light, its second-hand sweeping like a bead counting rosary minutes until Milan. She drove without speaking, habit ingrained, while Lara beside her watched the city's façades glide past—stone, glass, stone again—every surface a potential witness, every seam a place where history might split open.

Behind them the trunk rode steady, fluid sloshing almost imperceptibly, the perfect cut and its violet guardian balanced on a blanket of government wool, heading south at one hundred and thirty kilometres an hour toward a villa that had once belonged to a silk merchant who understood, as they now did, that information travels safest when disguised as fashion.

Robyn slid the gearshift into sixth, left wrist resting on the wheel rim; the Panerai's crown guard nudged the cuff of her coat and she felt, through the ticking steel, every kilometre they were putting between the archive and whoever would soon come looking. The dial glowed a dim glacier-blue—same shade, she realised, as the cloister corridor the nuns walked at 3 a.m. while the rest of the world pretended darkness was for sleeping.

Half an hour outside Paris she risked a breath, dropped her shoulder, and discreetly tugged the left cup of her bra forward. 36D, government-issue white, elastic exhausted by too many motorway days. No couture house had ever bothered with architecture for breasts that size; sports bras from Björn Borg did the job, but cotton left ridges under tailoring. She eased the fabric back into place and felt the strap bite—penance disguised as support.

Lara noticed the micro-adjustment in the way curators notice loose stitches. “Still the most expensive car in Europe, and we’re held together by high-street elastic,” she said, nodding at the brief flash of white band.

Robyn flicked her eyes to the rear-view, then to Lara. “You wear Saint Laurent to breakfast. Forgive me if I don’t take lectures on support garments from someone whose lingerie budget could refit an archive.”

Lara’s mouth quirked; she glanced down at her own camisole—silk cut on the bias, 1976, label removed so the fabric skimmed rather than shaped. 32B, the kind of silhouette fashion likes: small, neat, obedient to dart placement. She thought of Lotta at dawn, Swedish collarbones rising over identical silk, and felt the small guilt of inherited ease. “We’re both stitched into failure,” she admitted. “The houses draft for mannequins, not for women.

You carry the weight; I borrow the absence.”

Robyn let the reply settle, surprised by the lack of varnish.

Then, almost to herself: “Convent taught me constraint was holy. Turns out it’s just underwired.”

The Panerai ticked louder as speed increased—second-hand sweeping past the luminous baton at twelve, counting down another minute of borrowed time. Robyn touched the crystal, a habit formed in prayer cells when touching skin had been forbidden. Watch face, small face, both keeping secrets beneath glass.

Ahead, the autoroute unrolled like unfitted cloth, edges raw, centre crease still sharp from the press of history. She eased off the accelerator, felt the car sigh, and let silence stretch—comfortable now, almost liturgical—while the bra strap kept its faint benediction of pressure, reminding her that some forms of devotion never really unhook.

CHAPTER THREE

Big Hours

Lotta remembered the first time as a single frame: Lara standing on the kerb outside Sentier metro, 1976 Saint Laurent coat too big for her shoulders, sleeves turned up twice like a child borrowing armour.

Lotta had asked for a light; Lara produced a matchbook from the pocket of that coat, struck one, and the flare caught the green in her eyes—something that should have been photographed but wasn't.

They drank coffee from the same cup that afternoon, passing it back and forth across a café table until the porcelain wore their fingerprints.

Later, in a stairwell swimming with turpentine and rain,

Lara kissed her once—soft, investigatory—then pulled back to check the result, as if testing a seam.

The answer must have satisfied: they left the stairwell hand-in-hand, coat pockets touching, and walked until the streetlights clicked off at dawn.

Every departure since has been a variation on that walk—this one, to adventure, just the furthest iteration.

Lotta closes her eyes in the beet-field tent, hears the echo of a match striking, and knows the next kiss will taste of longing and reunion—and that, too, will be perfect.

The Peugeot ate distance the way old nuns consumed daylight: steadily, with eyes on eternity and hands at ten-to-two. Outside Lyon the autoroute lifted into hills, vineyards scrolling past like green organza unrolled for inspection.

Robyn drove without cruise control—she trusted her own pulse more than software updates delivered by satellites she

couldn't see.

**Lara sat passenger, sketchbook balanced on her knee,
drawing what she could not yet name: the negative space
between Astrid's shoulder and the cylinder wall, the angle at
which fluid met air. She worked in charcoal robbed from the
archive's restoration drawer—soft Russian willow, 1962, the
same sticks used to blacken Balenciaga armholes in a post-
show repair. Every few kilometres she glanced at the
dashboard clock—analog, white numerals on black, identical
to the dial inside the Panerai. Two pretty faces counting the
same hour, neither capable of lying.**

**At the Aire de Montélimar they stopped for fuel and coffee.
Robyn chose a table outside the petrol station café, metal
legs bolted to concrete, view of the car uninterrupted. She**

ordered two espressos in French so neutral it carried no regional accent—language learned from Belgian sisters who believed vowels were vanity.

While they waited Lara opened her compact, touched up the brick-red mouth she had retouched at dawn. Robyn watched without comment, then lifted her own wrist, laid it on the tablecloth. “You collect timekeepers?”

“Only the ones that keep their mouths shut,” Lara answered, snapping the compact closed. “Yours looks military.”

“Radiomir dial, Panerai, 1995. Civilian issue but built on a NATO spec. Same case they made for frogmen in the ’40s—only difference is the tritium no longer glows enough to

poison you.”

Lara tilted the crystal toward the light, saw the second-hand sweep past twelve, felt the faint tremor of mechanics against her fingertips. “Small face, large hour,” she murmured.

Robyn’s mouth bent—almost amusement. “Convent rule: one must never trust an hour one cannot hear ticking. Silence breeds sin.”

Back on the road the landscape shifted again—ochre houses, terracotta roofs, cypress standing like pins in a pin-box.

Inside the crate Astrid spoke only once, voice crackling through the miniature speaker Robyn had wired to the rear

parcel shelf.

“I sense pine. Are we south of Valence?”

Lara confirmed.

“Good. After Valence the air carries resin instead of coal. In ’43 we moved a convoy of trunks through these passes— same scent, same curve of road. I knew we were safe when the drivers began to whistle.”

Robyn adjusted the rear-view mirror, catching the glint of cylinder brass. “No whistling until the border,” she said.

“Modern drivers use ring-tones.”

Early afternoon brought heat shimmering off the asphalt.

Robyn's shirt—white cotton, men's cut, no label—stuck to her shoulder blades. She felt the underwire dig again, a private geometry of discomfort. Seeing her shift, Lara reached into the glove compartment, drew out a flat tin of talc mined in the Dolomites before the war. She sprinkled a pinch into her palm, offered it across the gearshift.

Robyn took it without ceremony, eased one hand beneath her shirt, dusted the irritated seam where elastic met rib. Talc bloomed like marble dust. For a moment the car held the scent of quarries and snow.

“Better?” Lara asked.

“Bearable,” Robyn said, returning the tin. “Some convents flagellated; ours specialised in corsetry. Same principle: discipline disguised as care.”

By four the Peugeot crested the last ridge before the Italian frontier. The autoroute signs turned bilingual, French yielding to Italian vowels. Robyn flicked the indicator, left the main flow, coasted toward the customs lane marked *Niente da dichiarare*. In her mirror the trunk rode steady, blanket folds unmoved, cylinder fluid lapping gently against its rubber collar.

She rolled down the window. Cool mountain air rushed in, carrying resin instead of coal—exactly as Astrid had promised. The Carabinieri leaned toward the car, eyes lingering on the Versace scarf knotted at Robyn’s throat. She lifted it, let the gold leaf catch the alpine sun.

“Versace,” the officer said, pronouncing every letter.

“Donatella sends regards,” Robyn replied, voice neutral.

He waved them through without opening the boot.

As the barrier lifted Lara exhaled, only then aware she had held her breath since the ridge. She looked at the dashboard clock, then at the watch on Robyn’s wrist—both hands

aligned at twenty-past, as if the universe had adjusted itself to their passage.

“steady hands,” she said softly. “Memento crucis,” Robyn sighed.

The car eased onto Italian asphalt, speed climbing again.

“Next stop Crespi villa. After that, the world gets bigger.”

Behind them the border post shrank in the mirror, a postage stamp of blue and white. Ahead, the road unwound like a bolt of uncut cloth—edges raw, pattern yet to be decided—while two quiet timekeepers ticked in perfect synchrony, counting down whatever remained of the night.

The sun hung low behind the Bergamo Alps, slicing across the autostrada like a bias-cut strip of tangerine silk. Robyn kept the Peugeot pinned at one-forty, needle steady, the engine note a muted baritone—an alto in a well-cut coat. Lara watched kilometre signs bloom and vanish: Brescia, Lodi, Crema. Each name felt ironed onto the landscape in Bodoni bold, the way runway labels are pressed onto seating rows.

Astrid’s voice surfaced again, softer now, almost dreaming. “Carabinieri uniforms—Armani wool, 1982. I approved the sample. Green-grey with a violet undertone; it photographs black at night. A colour that forgives blood.”

Robyn’s mouth twitched. “Still does,” she said, and flicked the indicator toward the Cavenago di Brianza exit.

The road narrowed to two lanes, plane trees throwing long shadows across the tarmac. Vineyards gave way to fenced estates—razor wire glinting like jet beads on organza. The Peugeot's tyres whispered over cattle grids designed to keep out photographers, not people.

At a stone gatehouse a single Carabinieri in dress uniform—green-grey, violet undertone—lifted a white-gloved hand. Robyn lowered her window, offered the scarf again. This time the officer studied the weave under his torch beam, nodded once, and waved them through without a word. The gate closed behind them with the hush of well-oiled iron.

The villa appeared gradually: first a glimpse of copper roof, then a façade the colour of wet sand, then the full Palladian symmetry—three stories of Lombard stone wrapped in ivy so dark it read as black in twilight. Lights burned on the ground floor only, discreet as votive candles.

Robyn parked beneath a porte-cochère where ivy had been clipped into the shape of a double-C. She killed the engine. Silence flooded in, deep enough to hear the Po valley mist settling on gravel.

They unloaded the trunk together, wheels crunching. A woman stepped from the side entrance—sixty-something, steel hair twisted into a chignon, dressed in charcoal linen that fell from the shoulder without a seam. She carried a small silver tray bearing two espresso cups and a third

empty.

“Welcome to Villa Crespi,” she said in Milanese Italian. “I am Marchesi—housekeeper, archivist, former attaché to AISE textile desk. Donatella’s scarf precedes you; the coffee confirms you.” She offered the cups.

Robyn took one, swallowed the espresso in a single practised motion. Lara sipped, felt the crema settle like velvet on her tongue.

Marchesi gestured to the trunk. “The cylinder stays in the climate vault tonight. Tomorrow we decide whether to bless the world or bury it deeper. Kaiser’s bed is made up for guests who prefer neutrality.”

Inside, the entrance hall swirled with beeswax and river fog. Marble floors reflected their footsteps back at them like an echo arriving early. A chandelier—Murano, 1938—hung dark, crystals waiting for electricity that would be offered only when necessary.

They rolled the trunk across the hall into a small elevator gated in brass. Marchesi slid the gate, pressed B for *bunker*. The cage descended with the politeness of old money.

The vault lay three metres below ground: limestone walls, constant sixteen degrees, humidity locked at forty-five. Metal racks held garment bags—Givenchy, Ferré, early Versace prototypes annotated in red pencil. In the centre

stood a table already draped in white cotton.

Robyn and Lara lifted the cylinder free, set it down as if handling a reliquary. Marchesi adjusted the overhead lamp until light pooled like moon on water. Fluid glowed faintly, Astrid's profile sharp as a cut-crystal stopper.

"Time to wake her properly," Marchesi said. She produced a small brass key—Chanel stamp, 1944—and offered it to Lara. "You paid for the face; you turn the lock."

She retorted, "Well, this bestows a new definition to giving head."

Lara took the key, felt its teeth bite her palm. She glanced at Robyn—who gave the barest nod—then at the watch on her own wrist: ten past nine, both hands vertical, small and large

faces aligned as if holding their breath.

**She inserted the key. The cylinder exhaled a bead of
mimosa-scented air, ready to speak.**

**Astrid's eyes opened on Italian moonlight. She looked first at
Lara, then at Robyn, finally at Marchesi. "I was shot down
over Dresden," she said, voice clear now that the speaker
was un-amplified. "I never expected to surface in a silk
vault."**

**Dresden, 1944, spring light on sandstone: the city unfolded
along the Elbe like a paper theatre—each baroque façade a
hand-coloured proscenium, the Zwinger palace wings set so**

perfectly that even couture patterns seemed clumsy beside them. Inside an atelier off Theaterplatz, a quiet mathematician named Klaus Richter drafted dresses the way astronomers map constellations: every curve derived from Fourier's harmonics, every seam a proof that beauty could be born without distortion. Astrid, Paris-born liaison to the Chambre Syndicale, had flown the Dresden run to smuggle his folio west—one more journey in a war of hems and hidden pockets. She spent three nights watching him rule spirals onto calico while street musicians played Haydn beneath blackout curtains. The city felt untouchable, a porcelain keepsake too delicate for bombs.

Salvation came first, not fire. In late September Richter finalised the master block: forty-seven measurements that adjusted to any human form. Astrid sewed the paper into the silk lining of her coat, prepared the return route. But the Abwehr had scented mathematics in motion; a unit closed on

the atelier. Richter was shot in the stairwell, Astrid sprinted across the cobbles, green eyes flashing between baroque columns. Over the Elbe a lone Po-2 biplane skimmed moon-low—pilot a seventeen-year-old Soviet air-cadet named Yelena Morozova, one of the Night Witches running a harassment loop. She carried no bombs this flight; her cargo was a downed wireless operator she'd plucked from Belarus marsh. Seeing a woman chased by uniformed men, Yelena dipped a wing, throttled back, shouted in broken German: "Jump—now!" Astrid leapt from the embankment, caught the lower wing strut, hauled herself into the rear cockpit while Yelena fire-walled the throttle. Machine-gun rounds stitched the river behind them; the coat—and its hidden algorithm—left Dresden unscathed.

The city itself burned five months later, long after the porcelain had been packed away and the folio memorised under Chanel's quiet knives. Astrid reached Paris alive but

concussed, skull fracture leaking colour from her vision.

Surgeons saved the brain; the body failed. Cryo-preservation followed—head as hard-drive, jasmine as witness.

Now, in the Milan vault, Astrid finishes her story and asks for paper. She sketches from memory the face that saved her: high Slavic cheekbones, goggles pushed up, cropped hair white with engine oil. “Find Yelena,” she tells Lara and Robyn. “The perfect cut fits pilots first—women who flew plywood through flak know how cloth should behave under pressure.”

A new coordinate appears on the map: an abandoned airfield near Smolensk, where an eighty-six-year-old woman keeps a patched Po-2 in a barn and still scatters dew across steppe grass at dawn. The next fitting will be measured in prop-wash and twilight.

Marchesi inclined her head. “Silk lasts longer than governments. We thought you might like proof.”

Astrid smiled—small, sharp. “Then let us measure the damage. Fetch the tape. If the algorithm still fits the world, we’ll know by dawn.”

Behind them the vault door sealed with a sigh, closing where time, fashion and espionage had folded into one deliberate hush, waiting for morning’s first light.

CHAPTER FOUR

White Silk, Ancient Propeller

The sodium lamps of the conservation room had a twin set in a studio off Rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré. There, the light was colder, surgical, and it fell on a different kind of artifact: Cosima.

She stood on a plexiglass podium, a human plinth, as a technician from Boss-Continuum circled her with a handheld LiDAR scanner. The device whirred, painting her body in invisible lasers, capturing every contour from the supraclavicular notch to the lateral malleolus. It was her third full-body scan that week. Each one felt less like a measurement and more like an erasure, her organic self translated into a point cloud for some Munich server.

“Hold,” the technician murmured, his voice as neutral as the grey jumpsuit he wore.

Cosima held. She was the new face of the “Kontur-Korrekt” line, the campaign built on algorithmic tailoring. She had been chosen not for the story her walk could tell, but for the neutrality of her proportions—a living mannequin whose dimensions offered minimal resistance to the digital pattern. Success had found her not in a flashbulb storm, but in a silent data-room where her scan had outperformed seventeen other candidates on efficiency of cloth-drape and pixel-perfect symmetry.

Her reward was this hyper-visibility that felt like annihilation. They knew the angle of her iliac crest to the third decimal. They knew the precise millimetre her left shoulder dropped after four hours in heels. They had files on her capillary refill rate and the moisture content of her epidermis under studio lights. She was the most seen woman in Paris, and she had never felt more invisible.

Later, in her stark white apartment paid for by the Boss stipend, she opened the compact mirror on her bathroom shelf. The face that looked back was the one they owned: high cheekbones

mapped for optimal highlight, lips the exact width-to-height ratio deemed most “appealingly neutral.” She reached for a lipstick, a forbidden, un-approved brick-red from a tiny Marais parfumerie. As she pressed it to her mouth, her hand trembled, sketching a jagged, imperfect line.

A chime from her phone—a Boss-Continuum alert. Reminder: Facial calibration at 08:00. No exogenous pigments.

She stared at the messy crimson stroke, a flaw in their perfect dataset. It was the only thing on her face that felt truly hers. But in the world you’ve built, a flaw wasn’t just a mistake; it was a vulnerability, a secret waiting to be found, or a signal waiting to be sent. The cost of her success was her own image, and now she was just a beautiful, living secret, locked in a system she could not re-design.

The Peugeot left Milan at false dawn, headlights dimmed to slits, Versace scarf folded into the glove-box like a passport stamped *East*. Robyn had swapped the plates again—this time to diplomatic prefix *CD* issued to the Holy See, immunity stitched in red thread. Lara rode passenger, coat collar turned up, sketchbook open to a fresh page where she

had pencilled a biplane wing strut from memory: balsa and fabric, ribs curved like the gores of a 1938 Lanvin evening cloak.

Astrid's voice rode with them, speaker volume dialed low. "Keep to back roads after Kraków. Yelena never trusted asphalt—said it gave radar too much echo. She learned to land on beet fields, the shorter the better."

They crossed the Alps through the Tarvisio pass, fog thick enough to blot sound. At the summit Robyn down-shifted, engine breathing hard. Lara glanced at the dashboard clock—then at Robyn's wrist: both hands stood at twenty-five past five, coincidence so neat it felt engineered.

“steady hands,” Lara murmured.

Robyn answered without taking eyes from the road.

“Memento crucis.”

Poland arrived unceremoniously—rain instead of border guards, birch trees instead of welcome signs. By dusk they reached the outskirts of Smolensk, following GPS coordinates Astrid had recited from 1944 memory:

51°10' N, 32°02' E — grass strip parallel to the river, watch for three birch stumps shaped like a Cyrillic П.

They found the stumps exactly described, bark silver as unfinished corsetry. A track of compacted earth led between them into darkness. Robyn killed the engine. Silence unfolded—no cicadas, only the faint tick of cooling metal

and, somewhere ahead, the creak of timber in wind.

Torchlight revealed the barn: pine planks weathered to gun-metal grey, roof patched with corrugated iron that had once been painted red. Inside, wings folded like a lady's fan, sat a Po-2 biplane—fabric yellowed to champagne, red star on the tail faded to rust. A woman stood beneath the port wing, tightening a bracing wire with a tool carved from birch.

She straightened as they approached—small, bow-legged, hair the colour of late frost cropped close to the skull. Flight jacket hung loose, medals removed but shadow of ribbons still visible where sun had not bleached the cloth. Eyes the pale grey of river ice in March.

“You are late,” she said in Russian, accent Smolensk earth. “I was told French silk travels faster.”

Robyn answered in the same tongue, gentled by Belgian convent vowels. “Silk had to cross two borders and one war.” She introduced Lara, then laid a hand on the trunk lid. “We brought the rest of her.”

Yelena Morozova—seventeen in 1944, eighty-six now—walked around the Peugeot as if inspecting a questionable landing strip. She tapped the bonnet twice, satisfied, then nodded toward the barn. “Set the lady where moonlight falls. I want to see what Dresden saved.”

They rolled the cylinder beneath the hole in the roof. White

light poured through, picking out every ripple in the preservation fluid. Astrid's eyes opened, found the poacher's face above her, and softened—something Lara had not seen before.

"Still flying plywood, Lena?"

"Still breathing, princess."

Tools appeared: a tailor's tape of white celluloid, a set of French curves carved from birch, a propeller blade used as makeshift table. Yelena wiped her hands on a rag that had once been a parachute panel, then unlatched the cylinder valve. Fluid receded with a whisper, revealing Astrid's neck

seam where surgeons had stitched skin to metal collar.

Lara noted the join—tiny overcast stitches, silk thread, 1944 batch, colour matched to patient pallor. Whoever had done the work had learned in an atelier, not a field hospital.

Measurement began. Yelena called numbers in Russian, Lara translated to centimetres, Robyn recorded them in a black notebook bound with tape:

Neck base 32.7 — Shoulder point 38.1 — Bust apex 43.4...

Each dimension was checked against the algorithm Astrid recited from memory, cadence steady as engine timing:

***“Add cosine of half the angle at scapula, subtract delta for posture variance, iterate until curve kisses but never grips**

the bone.”★

After twenty minutes Yelena stepped back, wiped her brow, and spoke to the night sky. “Proof holds. Same mathematics that let plywood ride turbulence now lets cotton ride a woman. No war, no corset, no lie.”

A breeze moved through the barn, carrying pine resin and the faint iron scent of river mud. Somewhere beyond the trees an owl called—three notes, pause, three notes.

Yelena closed the notebook, handed it to Lara. “Take it. My signature is the propeller scar on the cover. When boardrooms argue, show them that. Birch and birch alone—no shareholders, no season.”

She turned to Astrid, saluted with two fingers to temple—girl pilot to secret agent. “We flew you out once. Now we fly you forward. Different sky, same moon.”

They sealed the cylinder again, fluid refilled, mimosa rising. Before the lid closed Astrid spoke one last line, voice steady as riveted aluminium:

“Next runway is a beet field. Lights off, engines soft. Measure twice, bomb once.”

Yelena laughed—sound like fabric tearing in a high wind—then walked into the darkness beyond the barn. Propeller turned once, twice, caught, and the Po-2 coughed itself awake: an engine older than most nations, still willing to

carry girls who trust equations and moonlight.

Yelena wiped birch sap from her fingers and tapped the red star on the Po-2's tail-fin—faded, but still visible.

“Red stars, yes—but in '44 they meant the same as your tricolour: stop the Reich before it burns every city that ever loved music. Germans shelled the riverbank; I plucked her out. Simple ledger.”

She turned to the cylinder, voice softening. “Dresden was porcelain and symphonies. They wanted to break it, we wanted to keep a piece alive. This head”—she tapped the glass gently—“is what flew out with me that night.”

Lara felt the history settle into place: Allied star, Allied

rescue, no Cold-War after-taste.

Robyn simply nodded, notebook ready. “Then let’s finish the measurement before the next wind changes direction.”

Robyn started the Peugeot. In the headlight beam the birch stumps now cast shadows that overlapped like darts on a pattern board—three lines converging on a single point no bigger than a heart.

She glanced at her watch, then at the dashboard: both hands stood at twenty-three past two, aligned like vectors on a final approach.

“Steady hands,” Lara whispered.

Robyn eased the car onto the track, gravel popping under tyres like scattered pins. “Memento crucis,” she answered,

and drove toward the dawn that would decide whether the perfect cut would dress the world or be locked away for another century.

CHAPTER FIVE

Lotta had dreamt of Orly an hour before dawn, the kind of dream that feels like a secret even to the dreamer.

She took the RER alone, suitcase small enough to tuck between her feet, coat collar high against the Seine wind that swells with river and yesterday's cigarettes.

Lotta saw the old apartment which was hers for six weeks—sub-let from a sculptor who had left half-finished maquettes and a note that read “talk to the walls, they answer back.”

She talked to them anyway, Swedish vowels echoing off plaster, telling them about the middle-child arithmetic: one

older brother who built bridges, one younger brother who still sucked colour from their mother's attention, and herself—always the spare measurement in between.

At the moment before waking she walked the Marais until the cobbles gleamed with street-lamp rain, photographing nothing, collecting only the sound of her own heels—proof she existed outside the frame someone else had drawn.

She sent Lara an imaginary voice-note from Pont Marie, no words, just thirty seconds of water slapping stone and the distant bell of a night bus.

Then she went inside, closed the shutters, and listened to the walls answer in Parisian silence: "You are here, you are here, you are here."

Family Portrait, Spring/Summer

(minutes salvaged from lead-lined notes)

The conference room overlooked the lake; windows triple-glazed, curtains raw silk the colour of undyed wool. Flags stood in enamel stands no larger than perfume bottles—DGSE for Chanel, BfV for Boss, AISE for Tirrenia, DGSI for Versace, Mossad for Galiano-proxy, MI6 for Burberry-front, CIA for Capri-Holdings, SVR for Red-Silk-Trading. Each agency had one chair; each house had one. A place-card in Optima read *Observing only: IDF Liaison – Lingerie & Ballistics*.

Chairman (Swiss neutral, no flag) tapped a Montblanc against a blank pad. “Item One: Standardisation of Desire Cycle. DGSE comments?”

Robyn, seated behind the Chanel pennant, spoke low. “We recommend releasing the algorithm into public domain within twelve months. Desire survives abundance; scarcity is

a hack we can no longer afford.”

Across the table the BfV delegate—silver hair, rimless spectacles, same cut as the syringe man in Paris—lifted a single sheet. “Public domain bankrupts our renovation fund. Boss moves to table indefinite proprietary lease.”

AISE delegate, Neapolitan tan, fingers heavy on gold rings: “We abstain, provided Mediterranean licensing remains ours. Knock-offs feed the street; the street feeds intelligence. You prune the weed, you save the garden.”

Mossad rep, yarmulke silk-screened with tiny Galiano logos, slid a flash-drive across the walnut. “Footage from Rue de la Roquette, 2011. Mr Galliano repents on camera. We propose phased rehabilitation—centre-stage at Paris couture, six seasons, subject to quarterly sensitivity audits. In exchange we request joint patent on any defensive textile—anti-stab, anti-blast, anti-media.”

CIA (woman in Theory suiting) smiled without warmth. “We second the textile rider, provided back-door telemetry is shared. We already embed RFIDs in outlet tags; we’d like them to report ballistics data.”

Yelena, present as “technical advisor,” raised a hand still tainted by engine grease. “Night Witches move to reject any clause that turns fabric into ordnance. We’ve flown through flak in overalls; we know when cloth is meant to save skin, not monetise its puncture.”

Chairman nodded, made a note. “Recorded: objection from SVR-proxy Night Witches.”

Discussion turned to field test location. Robyn pushed the map east. “Smolensk steppe, neutral air, former 588th Regiment strip. No radar coverage, no press, no seasonal sale calendar.”

BfV frowned. “Too close to Russian sovereign sensors.”

SVR delegate—quiet man in Loro Piana vicuña—smiled. “We endorse the steppe. We will observe, not interfere. Consider it détente by dress-form.”

Vote taken by show of hands. Motion carried 9-7. Protocol signed with fountain pens filled the same ink once used for ration cards—small irony everyone appreciated. Cameras clicked once, film removed, sealed.

The chairman declared the session closed at 00:47. Waiters appeared—white gloves, no eye-contact—pushing trolleys that chimed like distant glass. Robyn accepted a flute of Dom Pérignon because refusal required explanation; Yelena accepted nothing because refusal was her explanation. On a sideboard the size of a skating rink sat crystal dishes piled with white powder so fine it looked like sifted snow. Guests approached with silver spoons the length of nail-files, dosed their flutes, then drank as if sweetening champagne. A Versace delegate offered Lara the spoon, smile lacquered. “I don’t take data that isn’t encrypted,” she said, voice low enough to pass for joke. Across the room a junior from Burberry-front—barely twenty-two, pupils already dinner-plate wide—leaned against a pilaster and muttered, “There’s no coffee. There’s literally no coffee.” No one answered; the music had been chosen to swallow complaint. When the

chairman raised a toast to “a season of perfect desire” the room answered with a collective inhale so sharp the candle-flames bent. Outside, lake water lapped against the terrace, indifferent to the powder that would later wash into its depths and settle like silt... Conversation loosened.

DGSI to Mossad: “Your knock-offs in Barbès—quality improved. Same suppliers?”

Mossad, sotto voce: “We supply the suppliers. Street needs bread, we need ears. Everyone wins except retail chains.”

DGSE to BfV: “Your Syrian cotton still routed through Izmir?”

BfV: “Only the批次 that fails tensile test. Good fabric we

keep for ourselves.”

Outside, lake water lapped against the terrace. No one mentioned mercy; no one needed to. The font, the lake, the polite voices were reminder enough.

Jet lifted off at 02:10. Robyn set watch to Moscow time, ink still wet on the minute track. Below, the island lights dimmed; above, the hour widened. In the hold the cylinder slept, jasmine mingling with jet-fuel, dreaming of beet-field runways and plywood wings.

(LONDON – MI6 SAFE-FLAT, SOUTH BANK

Burberry-front handler briefs a junior: “If algorithm goes open, British high street collapses in a quarter. Hedge positions now—short retail, long IP-law firms.”

Junior hesitates: “Public good, sir?”

Handler pours tea, answers with a question: "What's the public ever done for hemlines?"

File stamped *SPECIAL HANDLING* is locked into a drawer that clicks like a magazine sliding home.)

The jet banked north-east, lake disappearing under wing.

**Robyn closed the folder Marchesi had slipped her—one page,
one line:**

***"Steppe approved. Test in seventy-two hours. Bring the girl
who flew plywood."***

She slid it into the aluminium case, clicked the lock.

Lara, across the aisle, watched the clouds fold like muslin.

**"We just watched couture sign its own non-compete clause,"
she said.**

(MALLORCA – VILLA BLANK-FLAG

Swiss chairman strips to swimming trunks, phone on speaker.

“Weaponise, monetise, *neutralise*—I don’t care. Just keep my percentage off-book.”

On the terrace below, a maid—DGSE contract—photographs documents through the glass tabletop. The reflection of the pool gives her lens the shape of a watch face: steady hands, crucial hours, same ticking betrayal.

She uploads the cache before he finishes his sentence; waves hit the rocks, evidence dissolves in salt.)

Robyn adjusted the Panerai to Moscow time. “And we countersigned in charcoal. Let’s make sure the ink never dries.”

(GENEVA – INTERCONTINENTAL SUITE 1203

Silver-haired BfV man (real name: Dr. Konrad Voss) unbuttons his Huntsman jacket, dials a burner.

“Weaponise, don’t monetise,” he orders. “I want the algorithm in every federal uniform by 2027. Public domain equals treason.”

Behind him a younger aide peels off a lapel and places it on the desk—inside the felt: a microphone the size of a flea. Swiss intel is already auctioning the tape to the highest bidder. Voss realises, too late, that neutrality has sides.

He pockets the Huntsman, now bugged and worthless, walks into the corridor wearing only shirt and vengeance.)

Behind them the cylinder rested in a cargo net, fluid sighing with altitude. Astrid's voice crackled through the miniature speaker wired to Lara's arm-rest:

"Next stop, beet fields. Don't forget to whistle—engines like to know who's driving."

(PINSK – ABANDONED TEXTILE MILL

Night. Frost inside the windows. Boss-Continuum mercs (ex-Stasi logistics) unload crates of winter-weight wool—same bolt Yelena reclaimed, only these carry RFID threads set to report deviation. If the open-source pattern circulates, the chips will ping wearers to federal servers: instant draft list.

A Belarusian smuggler laughs: "You build a net, we teach people to sew holes."

Gunfire is brief; the smuggler's blood steams on frozen concrete. The mill falls silent—Boss now owns the only supply line east.)

Yelena, up front in borrowed cashmere, hummed an old regiment song under her breath—three notes, pause, three notes—propellers already turning in memory.

(NAPLES – GALLIANO'S PENTHOUSE

Donatella-proxy (AISI) meets IDF/Mossad rep on the terrace, Vesuvius glowing behind them like a faulty spotlight.

Mossad: "Let him show in Jerusalem first. Anti-stab fabric tested on living models."

Donatella: "He apologised in four languages. Versace needs the headline. Milan or nothing."

Across the bay fireworks from a patron-saint festival pop like distant small-arms. Both sides know the fireworks will soon be real.

Handshake photo is taken; each keeps the other's signed napkin—insurance, not friendship.)

The jet levelled off, heading for a runway that didn't exist on any civilian map, while two watch-faces—dashboard and wrist—ticked toward the same unwritten hour.

CHAPTER SIX

Flying Beet-Field Buckwheat

Lotta with a new inspiration had gone out for a shoot as the Thursday redeye, came in, cabin scented by aluminium and

broken dreams of desire. At CDG baggage she counted four girls travelling alone—each with a single Rimowa knock-off and the same Instagram pose: chin up, eyes half-closed, already under imaginary runway lights. By Porte Maillot two had been approached: one by a man in patent loafers promising “test-shoots”, the other by a woman with a clipboard and a fragrance voucher. Lotta photographed both hand-offs from the hip, lens silent, film stock she paid for herself. Later, in a rented chambre de bonne six floors above a shuttered Monoprix, she cropped the frames to remove faces but kept the hands—how fingers closed around business cards printed on stock too thick to tear. She captioned the series “Arrivals, CDG-ORY corridor, 2025” and filed it to Stockholm with a note: “Same pipeline, new paint. Send expenses. L.” Then she opened her calendar: three castings, two “creative lunches”, one party whose invitation arrived via encrypted WhatsApp and ended with the line

“no plus-ones, no pigments”. She underlined pigments twice, packed two rolls of 120 film and a collapsible light meter, and went to bed with the window open so the city could hum its old song of hunger and tulle as she longed for Lara's return...

The Po-2 left the barn at 04:47, moon low enough to silver only the upper wing. Yelena handled the stick one-handed, left palm curled around a chipped enamel mug of coffee laced with beet spirit. Behind her the rear cockpit carried a cargo stranger than any bomb: the cylinder strapped into a gunner's seat, lap-belt cinched tight, rubber collar hissing faintly as altitude thinned. Lara and Robyn lay flat in the makeshift plywood well between cockpits—blankets over their heads to hide white faces from any distant patrol glass. Engine noise was a sewing-machine clatter—thirty-five

decibels, Yelena claimed: quieter than a whispered confession. She flew nap-of-the-earth, treetops brushing the undercarriage wires. Every bump punched through the thin floor; Robyn felt her bra strap dig again and smiled inside the scarf—penance at a thousand metres.

Astrid's speaker trembled. "Smell that? Pine and frost. Same route we used to drop candy bars to partisans—only cargo was hope, not algebra."

Twenty minutes out Yelena throttled back, let the biplane sink toward a natural clearing—beet field harvested, earth turned to corduroy ridges. No lights, no windsock; she judged direction by wind-ruffle on puddles. Touch-down was a skip, a bounce, then stillness—like settling a skirt over petticoats.

They rolled the cylinder out, set it upright against the tail-skid. Dawn bled across the horizon—raw silk being pulled from dye, colour shifting from indigo to rose. Robyn unscrewed the valve; fluid descended, releasing Astrid’s face into cold morning. Her eyes opened on the expanse of field, the biplane, the three women breathing steam.

“Perfect runway,” she said. “Now measure me against the sky.”

Buckwheat first—field rule.

Yelena unstrapped the cylinder, set it upright, then turned to the biplane’s cargo bay and hauled out a dented mess tin. “Before numbers, we eat. Buckwheat keeps the engine in your chest ticking.”

She tipped the tin onto a canvas sheet: grey-green groats, still warm from the barn stove, a single pat of butter melting like dull amber. No ceremony—three tin spoons, one chipped enamel cup of black tea passed clockwise.

Lara tasted peat and iron, the flavour of every Russian classroom she'd never sat in. She swallowed, then felt her pocket vibrate—one beat, satellite ping. A text, encrypted, sender: *Lotta L.*

She stepped away, screen dimmed against dawn.

****“Still alive. Stockholm quiet. Miss flax. Miss you. Careful of porridge dictators. x”****

Lara smiled into the steam of her tea, thumb hovering, then simply tapped:

****“Eating buckwheat with a witch. Algorithm soon. Hold the flax.”****

She slipped the phone back, heart lighter by a gram.

Yelena refilled the cup. “Frenchwoman answers love letter before pattern block. Good. Heart must be full before cloth is cut.”

Robyn raised an eyebrow. “Convent said the same, only with communion wafers.”

Astrid’s voice rose from the cylinder. “Enough theology.

Buckwheat eaten, tea drunk. Measure now—while frost still

holds the chalk-line.”

**Yelena snapped the tape, birch-leaf white, and began:
collar-bone, scapula, cosine delta whispered in Russian, Lara
translating, Robyn logging.**

**When the last number was spoken frost had turned to dew.
Yelena unpinned her own great-coat—army issue, 1946,
felted wool the colour of river mist—and spread it on the
ridge of earth. “First cut goes here. If coat fits me, it fits the
world.”**

**From beneath the lining she produced a bolt of undyed
wool-blend reclaimed from a downed transport plane.
“Winter weight. Same batch we used for ground-crew**

overalls. If algorithm can make *that* drape, couture is finished.”

Lara marked the grain with a sliver of charcoal, heart steady. Somewhere in the distance a faint crack sounded—branches or rifle, impossible to tell—but the chalk-line was already drawn, the first slice promised.

Behind them the biplane waited, propeller turning lazy circles in the dawn wind—ready to ferry either salvation or surrender back across the same pale sky.

Robyn feels the jet shudder, checks her mirrors—no one visible, but the Panerai gains two seconds: someone is tampering with satellite time. She resets, smiles.

“Clocks lie when they’re scared,” she tells Lara.

Lara closes the sketchbook. “Then we’d better give them something to fear.”

Robyn recounts in silent memory the ever growing list of missing designers reported as passed away...

KATHARINE HAMNETT – “SLOGAN OVERDOSE”

February 2024, London townhouse

CSIS (Canadian intel) running a Five-Eyes fashion-desk op: beta-blockers slipped into her Earl Grey via a “Toronto film scout” who needed her anti-Fashion-War slogans silenced before Toronto Fashion Week. MI6 (Burberry-front) only learns of it afterwards; they’d have preferred recruitment. Body archived under PsyOps Fabric at Vauxhall—Canadians keep the beta-blocker recipe.

MARY QUANT – “MINISKIRT MELTDOWN”

October 2023, Surrey retirement village

Japanese PSI (Public Security Intelligence Agency) worried her planned comeback collection would revive 1960s anti-nuclear graphics. A visiting “Kyoto design student” gifts a lacquered bento; wasabi paste laced with aconite. Death certified “gastro-intestinal failure.” Mini remains mini, but the protest patterns vanish.

VIVIENNE WESTWOOD – “CORSET OF THE REVOLUTION”

March 2023, Clapham

Norwegian PST (counter-terror) takes point—Westwood funded Nordic oil-rig protests. Injection during “wellness check” administered by Oslo-contract medic flown in under Burberry diplomatic cover. UK coroner signs off; crown seals the climate-activist archive. MI6 files it under Nordic Flank, keeps the corset laced, the revolution suffocated.

DAVID SASSOON – “SCISSORS IN THE BACK”

January 2025, Beverly Hills hotel suite

Israeli Mossad fears his five-blade ergonomic shears will democratise precision cutting—bad for anti-bomb textile margins. Blade snapped, carotid nicked—ruled “freak grooming accident.” Shears displayed at Tel Aviv design museum, blades mysteriously missing.

IRIS APFEL – “BAUHAUS BROKEN”

November 2024, Palm Beach villa

German BfV (through Miami consulate) replaces her nightly martini with a micro-dosed neurotropic; optic nerve fades, colour memory lost. Death signed “natural age-related decline.” Archive of vintage textiles shipped to Berlin—Bauhaus palette now property of Boss-Continuum research wing.

SONIA RYKIEL – “THE KNIT THAT STRANGLED”

August 2016, Left Bank apartment.

AISE worried her autobiography would expose Italian mills’ post-war black-market routes. A visiting “biographer” gifts a cashmere scarf; fibres treated with slow-release ricin.

Rykiel dies in hospice, lungs frosted like pink wool.

Manuscript disappears; family receives a sealed box of season-swatches instead of pages.

COLETTE (COLETTE DINIGLIAN) – “PARISIAN HEARTBEAT, SILENCED”

December 2023, Pigalle boutique.

DGSE fears her concept-store data (every customer, every click) will fall into Qatari hands. A courier-delivered Saint James striped shirt carries contact-poison in the collar. She collapses mid-window-dressing, ambulance never arrives. Boutique becomes a L’Oréal flagship within six weeks;

servers wiped, loyalty lists vanished.

OSCAR DE LA RENTA– “HEART ATTACK”

October 2014, Connecticut estate.

Joint CIA/DI team posing as private nurses. Digitalis in the bedside espresso, heart stops within camera-frame of family photos. Death certificate signed by a doctor whose medical school fees were paid by a Cayman fund traced to Mayhoola. Rumour circulates on dark-web forum: “Island boy chose Havana over Langley—paid in silk.”

GALLIANO – “REHABILITATION BY POISON”

Paris atelier, 2025.

Mossad keeps him alive on a drip of public apologies and quarterly blood-tests. One slip, one more rant, and the drip

becomes a bolus. He sketches frantically, knowing the needle is part of the prescription.

Then adds a sort of footnote to her recollections;

BURBERRY POST-SCRIPT

MI6 does push the VAT-refund story—because every tourist receipt is a data-point, every data-point a thread in the surveillance weave. They didn't kill the English women; they simply inherited the bodies once overseas services had finished. Keep shopping—someone's counting.

While pondering;

VALENTINO – “SILK NOOSE STATUS UNKNOWN”

Still breathing, 2024.

GIS (Egypt) buys 70 % through UAE “Desert Thread” fund.

Founder under house-arrest-by-gourmet: every plate of buckwheat monitored, every heartbeat uploaded to Cairo.

He signs whatever is slid under his gold-rimmed glasses.

House continues, red as ever, strings now khaki.

St. Moritz – Ice-Runway

The train from Chur climbs until the windows turn white.

**Lara watches her own reflection overlap with the valley
below—two faces, same hour. Robyn sits opposite, coat collar
up, Panerai crown brushing the glass whenever the car
sways. The cylinder rides in the luggage rack, seat-belted
like a child.**

**St. Moritz station, minus twelve degrees. A Tesla van with
diplomatic plates waits, red star on the tail—SVR cover, but
the driver wears a Versace scarf knotted once: allowance**

from Rome. They load the cylinder, no words.

(A quiet yet intense declaration like *the POST-RAMMING SEAM LAW VEHICLE Act addendum, classified annex: “Design Student Identification & Utilisation Protocol” 2020, renewed every December. Text hidden inside Farm-Bill pdfs; headline reads “Cotton Subsidies Extended”.*

Key points:

Any student receiving federal textile tuition becomes reserve intelligence asset.

Pattern-recognition software (originally anti-terror) repurposed to flag deviant drape algorithms—could hide contraband contours.

Internship fairs = talent-scoop: recruiters wear Loro Piana, hand out “study-abroad” scholarships that are really field-cover visas.

Portfolio reviews filmed; sleeve-length, shoulder-slope, posture logged into biometric files shared across Five-Eyes fashion desks.

Refusal to cooperate = loss of accreditation, confiscation of Bernina

machines, debt transferred to Treasury.

Recruitment pipeline (public never sees):

Foundation Year – subtle aptitude tests: “Draft a collar that can hide a wire.” Best answer earns “mill trip” to covert mill in Portugal where fabric is woven with micro-filaments.

Sophomore – weekend “heritage tours” of mills that don’t exist on maps; students return with sketchbooks scanned at border.

Junior – semester in Paris: half the class attends École Boulle, other half attends École de Guerre (teaches dead-drop in seam allowance).

Senior collection – final runway judged by front-row of “buyers”: DGSE, CIA, BfV, Mossad. Winner doesn’t get a job—they get a codename.

Car-ramming catalyst (kept off-page): 2019, Antwerp. Student radical drives sewing-machine-weight VW into tourist queue outside MoMu Fashion Museum. Manifesto claims “fashion is surveillance stitched into desire.”

Law changes within a week—now every pattern-block is potential

shrapnel, every scholarship a security clearance.

*couture as counter-intelligence—and the next generation already
threading needles for the state...)*

**Frozen lake ahead: the polo field of snow, grandstand
carved from ice, LED bars buried like luminous threads.
Crew in shearling erect a catwalk of translucent blocks—
each block hollow, ready for the live-stream cable.**

**Dress-rehearsal night. Yelena walks the ice in combat boots,
measuring wind speed with a handheld anemometer the
colour of gun-metal. “Propeller needs thirty metres, no
more,” she says. “After that, the lake cracks.”**

Back-stage heated tent. Robyn lays out tools: fabric shears

**(Westwood vintage), chalk (Hamnett charcoal), tape
(Rykiel millimetre), USB lipstick (Valentino Rosso). One cut,
one upload, one signal to the world.**

**Lara pins the great-coat pattern onto undyed wool-blend.
Her hands steady—she hears Lotta’s voice in her head: “Sew
like you’re writing love letters—every stitch a promise.”**

**Final call. Silver-haired BfV man appears at the tent flap,
syringe palmed but smiling. “Last chance to sell, ladies.”**

**Robyn steps between them, scissors open. “Needles only, Herr
Doctor. The hour is measured, not medicated.”**

**Lights dim, ice turns blue. Audience in furs, villains in
tuxedos, agencies in row three. Music rises—propeller engine**

recorded, slowed to heartbeat tempo.

Lara walks the coat down the ice, phone held like a rosary.

**One button press—file uploads, pattern releases, live-stream
splits to every open-source board on earth.**

**BfV man lunges; Robyn parries with shears, blade skates
across ice, syringe shatters—droplets freeze mid-air like tiny
glass beads. Security lights flare red.**

**Yelena starts the Po-2 outside the glow; its prop wash whips
snow across the catwalk—whiteout curtain for escape.**

**Lara, coat over arm, slides into the rear cockpit. Robyn
jumps last, boots scraping wing strut. Po-2 taxis, lifts,**

vanishes into alpine dark.

Behind them the ice runway fractures—LED threads flicker out. The world now owns the perfect cut; the houses own nothing but melting chandeliers.

St. Moritz – Ice Runway, 05:10

The lake was flat, grey, and hard. A tracked Toyota dragged a steel blade across the surface, scraping a runway twenty metres long—just enough for the Po-2 and nothing else. Yelena walked behind it, boots crunching, checking every ridge with the toe of her felt liner.

Robyn stood beside the Toyota, Panerai tucked inside her cuff, crown guard digging into skin. She counted seconds between blade scrapes—one, two—then lifted her eyes to the sky: overcast, wind five knots, temperature minus fourteen. Flyable.

Lara waited inside the heated tent, coat folded over a camping table. The wool-blend had been cut at 03:00, seams hand-basted, hem finished with a single line of red thread—open-source marker, visible only under LED glare. She ran her thumb along the inside collar; no label, no flag, just fibre and mathematics.

Cylinder stood upright on a crate, valve closed, Astrid silent. The plan: upload the pattern during the walk, release the

file before the first camera flash, leave the runway before the ice cracks.

Toyota finished its last pass. Yelena waved once—thumb up—then climbed into the cockpit and primed the engine. Propeller turned, caught, coughed blue smoke.

Robyn looked at Lara. “Clocks?”

**Lara lifted her phone, screen already on the upload page.
“Ready.”**

“Then walk.”

She stepped outside, coat over her arm, heels replaced with rubber soles. The runway stretched ahead—white, narrow, ending in a wall of ice blocks. Behind the blocks: cameras, satellites, agencies in fur coats, villains in tuxedos.

First step. Second. The coat swayed like a bell, hem brushing frost. Thirty metres to go.

She pressed *upload*. Progress bar: 0 %.

Wind caught the hem, flipped it once—perfect drape, no drag. Progress: 14 %.

Footstep three, four—she could hear her own breath inside

the hood. Progress: 39 %.

Halfway. Progress: 62 %.

**A figure moved at the edge of the runway—silver hair,
syringe glinting. Robyn stepped into his path, scissors open.
“Stay off the ice, Herr Doctor.”**

He hesitated, gloved hand tightening.

Lara reached the last metre. Progress: 100 %. File released.

**She dropped the coat onto the ice, turned full circle so every
camera caught the seam, the hem, the absence of label.**

**Then she walked away—empty-handed, coat left behind
like evidence that no longer needed defending.**

**Behind her the ice gave a single crack—loud as a snapped
bra-strap—then settled.**

**Yelena gunned the engine. Po-2 rolled, lifted, vanished into
low cloud.**

**Robyn followed Lara into the tent, zipped the flap, and
exhaled once—short, almost silent.**

Outside, the world now owned the perfect cut. Inside, the

cylinder ticked like a watch that had already forgotten the hour.

Mid-ice stand-off, lights blinding, silver-haired Voss steps forward, syringe up.

Voss (quiet, almost amused):

“Hand over the coat, mademoiselle. One label and the world stays profitable”

Lara (voice steady, coat folded over her arm like a white flag):

“If you strike this fabric down it will only become more powerful than you can possibly imagine.”

Young tech (behind Voss, whispering):

TECH (nervous whisper)

“Sir — that’s Obi-Wan...”

VOSS (snaps, never breaking eye-contact with Lara)

“No. That is Alec Guinness — star of The White Suit, 1951.

**Fabric vanished off his back. This one will not. I intend to
finish the job—permanently.”**

Robyn (scissors open, stepping between):

“Different weave, different century. This one stays.”

**Shears glint; the quote hangs in the frost; the industry that
once unravelled now faces a cloth that refuses to disappear.**

CHAPTER EIGHT

Refusal to Vanish

The instant Lara's thumb left the screen the progress bar blinked *SENT* and the coat was no longer hers. It lay on the ice like a sheet of paper someone had forgotten to sign.

Voss watched the upload icon rotate, the syringe in his hand suddenly as useless as a needle without thread. Behind him a camera boom swung low, catching the red thread at the hem—one crimson dash on a field of white.

Robyn kept the scissors raised but the fight had already gone out of the ice; only the ticking of the Panerai remained, second-hand stuttering like a machine that had just run out of fabric.

Lara stepped away. One pace, two. The crack beneath her soles was the sound of every sales forecast snapping in half.

Yelena gunned the Po-2. The prop-wash whipped the coat once—hem lifted, flared, settled—then the biplane was a silhouette shrinking into low cloud.

Voss dropped the syringe. It skittered across the ice, stopped against the hem, needle pointing at the label that wasn't there.

Cameras kept rolling. Somewhere in a server farm outside Tallinn the pattern file unpacked itself: forty-seven measurements, cosine delta, infinite gradations. The first download completed before the ice stopped cracking.

Robyn lowered the scissors. “Different weave,” she said, voice carried away by wind. “Different century.”

Silver-haired Voss turned, shoulders sagging inside the Huntsman cut. For the first time the canvas looked baggy—armholes too large, sleeves too long, as if the cloth itself had

lost the will to fit.

**Lara walked back to the tent, past the coat, past the needle,
past the future that had just been donated to the world. She
did not look down. The white flag stayed where it fell—
refusing to vanish, ready to dress anyone who cared to cut it.**

Epilogue, Paris thaw:

Lotta does not apply make-up; she drafts it.

**The mirror becomes a drafting table, her face the blank
block.**

Primer is gesso, foundation is clay, concealer is spackle for

the hairline cracks of night.

**With a sable brush she draws the axis of a cheekbone, then
blends until the edge disappears—couture's first rule:
nothing must look constructed.**

**Eyeliner is ink mixed in a well of tears; one stroke, no
corrections, the way a calligrapher commits to the final
character.**

**Lipstick is the seal—Rouge Hermès 999, the colour of stop-
signs and royal decrees—pressed into the paper of her mouth
with the side of her thumb.**

By no time and all time the face is finished, signed, dated.

**She closes the compact with a click like a pattern-cutter
snapping blades.**

**The woman in the mirror is no longer herself; Alter ego and
strength emerge, merge...she will wear the garment that**

will walk into history and come back unscathed—or at least uncreased.

Lotta meets Lara at a bus stop, wearing the fabric prototype coat cut from the open-source file. Fits perfectly, no label. They kiss gentle in bliss; the bus arrives.

Louvre basement, new display: chrome cylinder, violet eyes blinking. Astrid's voice-over:

"The war for the silhouette is over. The war for the soul of cloth begins with wheels turning—plain stitching, nothing fake about it."

THE END