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Inquiries should be addressed to  
Seventh Street Books  
59 John Glenn Drive  
Amherst, New York 14228  
VOICE: 716-691-0133  
FAX: 716-691-0137  
WWW.SEVENTHSTREETBOOKS.COM

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*To Natalie, whose bright eyes and kind heart bring me joy every day.*



## AUTHOR'S NOTE

**A**s much as I love Paris, I have been forced to take occasional liberties with its history and geography. Events have been created and streets invented to suit my own selfish needs. All errors and misrepresentations, intentional and otherwise, are mine and mine alone.





# CHAPTER ONE

PARIS, 1795

**T**he man moved from the upstairs window to his desk near the fire. He sat slowly; the damp and cold that had saturated Paris for two weeks had stiffened his back and legs, all the more irritating because it was supposed to be summer. The fire in the grate hadn't made a dent in the chill just yet, but its crackle and spit were good comfort, and soon the flames would roast the stone of the fireplace to warm up the room—and him.

Once seated, Albert Pichon smoothed a hand across the blank page in front of him and picked up the quill that his new *domestique*, Laurence, had prepared. He grunted with satisfaction when he saw that the young man had obtained, without having to be told, a feather from the left wing of the goose; Pichon had many eccentricities, and this was one, but if pressed he would insist that the curve of this shaft fit his hand better than a right-winged feather did. And if he was willing to pay a little more for the left wing, wasn't he entitled to his quirk?

This letter, however, was no mere whim. It was perhaps the most important thing he'd ever written. In fact, he wasn't unnecessarily scaring himself by thinking that more than life depended on it. The man who would receive his communiqué, along with the small box that would accompany it, was one of the most influential men in the modern world—and gaining influence by the day.

Out of habit, Pichon reached for the small knife that lived in his waistcoat pocket, opened it with some trouble, and grazed the blade across the quill's tip, perfecting the arrow-point and checking the tiny splice that would draw up the oak gall ink.

Rituals completed, he sighed, reminded himself of his opening lines, and began to write, all but the salutation in English.

*Cher Monsieur,*

*I hope this dispatch finds you in good health and, please, do forgive me for dispensing with further formalities but time presses in on me and I have come to think that perhaps more than this one life depends on your receipt of, and trust in, my words. One life, for certain.*

He wrote with more care than flourish, the muscles in his hand loosening as he worked. In the quiet of his study, the steady scratch of his quill whispered to him like the words of an earnest friend, plaintive and promising. It was an ordered liturgy of sorts, the dip of his pen into the inkwell, the dab of his blotting cloth, and the gradual birth of his sloping letters, and together they mesmerized the old man as he worked such that his desperate message flowed easily onto the page. Slow and steady, they fell, words of hope and promise, yet leaving behind a wretched taste as he brought them to life with his hand and mouthed them with his dry, cracked lips.

Once, he was startled when a burst of wind shook the glass in his window. A tiny drop of dark ink fell wayward from his quill as he jerked, and he dabbed at it like a nurse sopping blood, the only unwanted stain on the paper. Fortunately, it was not enough to require him to start again—as if he had time.

He was more than halfway through when a gentle knock interrupted him, but he didn't mind because it heralded the arrival of his nightly serving of wine. Laurence waited for the command to enter before letting himself in and placing the open bottle and empty glass in front of his master. Beside the bottle he placed a small wooden box, three inches long, plain and unadorned, its small hinges of brass simple

but strong. It would hold what Monsieur Pichon and Laurence had taken to calling “the gift,” *le cadeau*.

“You don’t want to put *le cadeau* in with the letter, monsieur?” Laurence asked kindly. “I can fold it well, it will be safe. That way they can’t be separated.”

Pichon sighed. “You are kind, but I think the box will be better. If only that reaches him, I think he will understand. At least, I hope he will.”

With a respectful nod Laurence went to the fire, adding two logs and nestling them into place with his boot. He turned to Pichon and asked, “Is there anything else you need, monsieur?”

Pichon smiled. “You are doing well, Laurence, I thank you for the attention you pay to me.”

“It is my good fortune to work in your household, monsieur.”

“*Bien*. I need to finish this, I don’t have much time.”

“An hour, monsieur, you have another hour, almost. When he gets here I will show him in, and even then, if he has to wait I’m sure he won’t mind.”

“Perhaps not. And perhaps the urgency is all mine but . . .” He sighed again. “Are we doing the right thing, Laurence? We are playing with one life and two entire nations and yet somehow that one life seems so much more . . .”

“Because it’s the one you are closest to.” Laurence gave his master a gentle smile. “History will judge these days, monsieur, it is not for us to do so. We must only live them the best we can.”

Alone again, the man gently cleaned away the ink that had crept too high up the quill’s shaft and continued to write. The rhythm took over again, scratching, dipping, blotting, scratching again. By the time he had finished, two sheets were filled with his words. Leaning back to relieve the ache in his shoulders, he read the letter aloud to himself once, then again.

Satisfied, he had one last thing to do, something that would, he hoped, convince the recipient of the letter and *le cadeau* of his sincerity. He found a clean corner of his rag and with slow, gentle strokes he

cleaned the ink from his quill. With a dry mouth and a slight tremble in his fingers, Pichon rolled up his left sleeve. That done, he took two deep breaths, gritted his teeth and picked up his knife. He placed the blade against his skin and watched, almost from a distance, as the hairs on his arm parted under the sharp metal and opened up a thin red line. The pain took a moment to reach his brain but when it did, it was a streak of fire erupting from and scorching his arm. He dropped the knife as his stomach rose into his chest and he gripped the edge of the table to avoid fainting.

As the dizziness receded, he took deep breaths to quell the bile that soured his throat and, once under control, he realized that he was gripping the table so hard that his right hand was aching. He released his fingers and flexed the stiffness from them, then picked up his quill, and dipped its tip into one of the rivulets of red that trickled down his arm.

He ignored the pain, concentrating instead on putting on the paper, letter by letter, his elaborate and intricate signature. Two more dips, the sharp quill stabbing like a torturer's instrument, and he drew a quavering line under his name, managing a delicate flourish.

He bandaged his arm, wrapping it like it was someone else's sickly child, wincing as the rough bandage touched his open wound, but relieved as the fire eased into a fierce, insistent throbbing.

As he waited for the ink and his own blood to dry in the now-warm air, his eyes fell to the small wooden box on his desk that would travel with the letter. He ran his hands over its smooth top and then opened it to look inside, his fingers hovering over the contents, *le cadeau*, as though he might by his touching somehow reduce its power or contaminate its authenticity.

He took a final look, hoping that the wisp of a message it contained was enough, and closed the little box for the last time.

He folded the letter and secured it with his wax seal, then placed it on the desk and turned back to the tiny box. With the steady hand of a surgeon, he rotated it in his hands as he dripped red wax along the seam made by the lid. The box was too small for a lock, for one with any significance certainly, and the contents weren't valuable enough to steal,

not in *that* way. But the seal would tell the man who received it that he was the first to open it, that the treasure within came untouched from its source.

That and his letter, Pichon knew, were about the only assurances he could offer his distant ally.

He rose and walked around his desk, taking the letter and sealed box with him, and knelt in front of a wooden chest, a small strongbox that he'd acquired from a dealer on the Ile de la Cité. "Barely used" had been the promise, which meant its owner had probably died of the plague or, more likely in this case, under the knife of a pirate. This chest was more ornate than the traditional sailor's chest, made from walnut not oak, with strong brass hinges and ornamental inlay of the same metal, golden and polished bright by Laurence. And this chest had other attributes, too, secret compartments revealed by sliding wooden panels in the lid and sides, the front itself entirely a façade that folded down and allowed the secretion of larger items. The cleverness of the chest was that it let you think you'd found everything and even now, a year after buying it, Monsieur Pichon had a sneaking suspicion it contained a compartment or two he'd not discovered. Nor would he, not now.

The strongbox already held an assortment of clothes, folded small and tight along with a pair of new, if petite, leather boots. Pichon buried his hands into the box, shoving the clothes aside and pressing his finger into a raised knot of wood that doubled as release. A square of panel gave way, and with great care he slid the small wooden box into the space and let the cover fall back into place; the fit was perfect.

The old man's fingers then moved to the front of the chest and fiddled with the hole where the latch would fall when the lid closed. Pichon poked around in the tiny space until he found the brass tip that slid left-to-right, letting the front fall open. He placed the letter in the space above the hinges and closed up the false front of the box, two treasures hidden away with a satisfying click.

A knock at the door. *Laurence with his guest?*

"Come in," Pichon said.

The man in front of him was barely thirty, and had a tired look to

him exacerbated by his unshaven face and wild, dark hair. “Monsieur Pichon, *comment ça va?*”

“I’m well. You?”

The man didn’t answer, just looked around the room and then down at the chest.

“Is everything ready?” Pichon asked, suddenly wary. “How is . . . *he?*”

“He is still quite sick.”

The man’s eyes had flickered in a way Pichon did not care for. “Sick? *Il n’est pas mort?*”

“*Non*, monsieur, he is not dead. But sick.”

The man finally met his eye and Pichon chose to believe him. “The chest, it’s ready.”

“That’s it? Everything is in there?”

“Yes,” said Pichon. “You will send it ahead and follow as soon as you can?”

“*Oui*. As soon as I can.” He gave a weak smile. “I should take it, and go.”



The man made his way out into the street, the heavy wooden chest in his hands. He felt more than a little guilt as, behind him, Monsieur Pichon watched from his doorway. The young man was not a good liar and took no pleasure in it, and he suspected that old man Pichon had sensed something was wrong.

*Wrong indeed*, the young man thought as he climbed into his carriage. Every man has his own agenda and sometimes circumstances change, requiring honest people to choose a different path.

He placed the chest on the leather seat beside him and left his hand on top, thinking about another box at his home, one not much bigger than this. A box more simple in design and more commonly used, a rectangle of oak that flared out at the sides and contained the lifeless remains of a child.