

The
LOST
CASTLE



a novel

KRISTY CAMBRON



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

The Lost Castle

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One line quoted from the song “Blackbird”; lyrics written by John Lennon and Paul McCartney, released in 1968 on *The Beatles* album. Copyright owned by Sony/ATV Music Publishing.

Brief quotation from Paul Verlaine’s poem “Chanson d’automne” (“Autumn Song”) in chapter 21, published in his first collection *Poèmes saturniens* in 1866.

Publisher’s Note: This novel is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author’s imagination or used fictitiously. All characters are fictional, and any similarity to people living or dead is purely coincidental.

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*For Margaret and Juanita Maxine,
with fairy-tale love, for unlocking the legacy
of childhood stories in my life.*

*If I'm honest, I have to tell you I still read fairy tales,
and I like them best of all.*

—AUDREY HEPBURN

PROLOGUE

*Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins
and will raise up the age-old foundations;
you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls.*

—ISAIAH 58:12

PRESENT DAY
LES TROIS-MOUTIERS
LOIRE VALLEY, FRANCE

Crumbling walls were rare, beautiful things.

They could display vulnerabilities without shame, for they'd already proven their worth in surviving generations-deep fractures and a multitude of fallen stones.

Ellie held her breath as Quinn rowed their dory along the back of the moat surrounding the castle ruins. Her first full view in a clearing of weathered stone, night sky, and moon glow unimpeded by the thicket of trees. Save for a bird's distant cry and the delicate ripple of the oars cutting through still water, the forest, too, appeared hushed. Maybe even in league with their plan.

To be struck down so—she hadn't expected it, even when she'd found herself face-to-face with the object of her quest. She edged up in her seat, kneeling in the bow. The dory wavered with the

instinctive move. The only way to catch herself was to grip the side, digging her nails into weathered wood and peeling paint as she stared headlong into the storybook scene.

Moonlight illuminated castle walls.

Ghostly ruins took shape before her eyes, forms cutting through the mist and rising against the backdrop of trees. A shiver commanded attention as the chill of a night breeze swept along Ellie's skin, dancing wavy locks of ebony against her cheek. She brushed them back without care.

Quinn held the oars out in the water, using the drag to slow them, the dory bobbing like a cork on the surface. They drifted there for a moment, quiet in the shadow of what the locals called *The Sleeping Beauty*. Château des Doux-Rêves—the castle of sweet dreams.

"There she is," he whispered, his Dubliner upbringing still managing to shadow even the few words spoken between them.

"No wonder they call her *The Sleeping Beauty*. Now that I see her . . . She's every bit of both, don't you think?"

A whisper of stories, hushed for generations, drew Ellie like a string had been tethered to her heart. Enough that she could focus on the silence of the place, as if the hallowed walls and tumbled stones had a secret language all their own. What remained was long buried—ivy-covered stone, hemmed in by scrub trees and underbrush that had faded from green in the last of summer's days and now burned with the height of autumn's gold. Roofless bones spread from foundation to sky in crumbling turrets and an impressive tower that slept six stories high. Arched doorways and intricately carved filigree window frames were frosted under shades of white-blue light, working together to cut a form like lace had been punched into the ink sky.

She'd convince Quinn somehow. Trek back through the woods

on foot if she had to. Anything to find the story buried in that place.

Ellie shifted her gaze. The view, previously concealed from behind the castle, opened up to a clearing—a valley hidden by the grove of trees. She stared at a sight she'd seen before.

The rock wall . . . rounded arch and the opening for a gate that was now missing . . . arbor rows spread out behind in a vineyard rich with the harvest to come. Though time-weathered and now buried under thicket and thorn, this place was familiar; an ethereal memory she hadn't lived herself, but one that remained etched in her mind nonetheless.

A forgotten photo had been taken there in the summer of 1944. The very place her grandmother had once stood.

The scene where her own story had begun.



ONE

JULY 14, 1789
LES TROIS-MOUTIERS
LOIRE VALLEY, FRANCE

The letter recounted devastating news: Baron le Roux had been shot dead.

He'd been discovered facedown in the cobblestone street outside Saint-Lazare, his grown son, too, laid out beside him as wheat barns burned in the background.

Aveline Sainte-Moreau abandoned her mother's instruction on the strict propriety of a lady's posture for the first time in her life, sagging her ball gown in a mass of satin and panniers crumpled against the stair rail. She fused her gloved palm in a white-knuckled grip around a scrolled iron spindle, holding fast, tears rolling free from her lashes, her breaths hollow and shaky as the full weight of her sister's letter washed over her.

Reports out of Paris were far worse than anyone had imagined. Closer too, when names put to the dead were among those of their family's most intimate acquaintance since childhood. How could it be that a noble rank of chevalier, the legacy of a baron, and his only son—Gérard, Aveline's own brother-in-law—was thriving one day and simply wiped from existence in the next?

“What of Faubourg Saint-Honoré?”

She scanned Félicité’s letter, searching for mention of the section of Paris in which her own family held residence. Her heart thumped, turning flip-flops beneath the bodice of her gown.

No matter the contents or consequences, even if her world would come crashing down in the span of a single missive, Aveline could not deny herself the penned words. Were her father and sister out of danger? And what of their home? And the friends whose lives were in possible jeopardy but streets away from the Le Roux estate?

Baron Le Roux’s manor has been felled by fire, the family routed with nothing but the clothes on their backs. An assemblage of armed men gathered at the gate bordering the clergy land at Saint-Lazare. Rumor had circulated that they hoarded wheat, salt, and other food supplies, and the people set out to plunder. I know you do not wish to hear of these grievous circumstances, given your sympathies for the rabble—but you must. Father was most aghast when he learned what you’d done. The story of the mysterious lady with the violets is all over court, and he had much to cover on your behalf. Though your name was saved from discovery, thus is the evidence that your sympathies were most ill placed.

We hear tell the baroness and her daughters have been detained in the city. Where and for what purpose we do not yet know. I write these words now only because I stayed with Father and we saw the flames illuminate the night sky. The rabble took torches to the baron’s house and wheat barns, burning them to the foundation. All that remains now are blankets of ash and earth mounded over for fresh graves.

I’d hoped to rendezvous with my dear Gérard for your impending nuptials, but now, all is lost. He left to defend his

father's home and did not return. Rest assured, dear sister—
Father and I have not been assailed.

We are safe . . . but hopelessly broken.

Aveline stopped, running her gloved fingertip over a misshapen circle that blotted the last letters inked on the line. One of her sister's tears?

She squeezed her eyes shut on a sharp intake of breath, daring to imagine the horror and almost immediately wishing that she hadn't when the image of lifeless bodies and burning estates flashed through her mind. "God save their souls."

Desperate for a reprieve from the brutality on the page—and her sister's none-too-gentle reproach of the ill-placement of her sympathies—Aveline turned her gaze to the view looking out from one of the second-story windows of the Château des Doux-Rêves.

The last of evening's light toyed with the twilight sky, sifting shadows through the great canopy of trees that hemmed them in on all sides. A swan danced through the circular moat below, disturbing the water in a rippled kiss along the castle's outer walls. Horses nickered from the nearby carriage house, jovial and quite unaware that anything was amiss in their part of the world. Their innocent melody of clip-clops and neighs drifted through the air as carriages descended upon the road to the front gate.

The castle-turned-château was to be her new home in a fortnight, once she married Philippe, the Duc et Vivay's son. But all thoughts of an elegant white muslin gown, calligraphy-tipped invitations, and a country chapel teeming with high-ranking guests had darkened under a cloud. Was Aveline to suppose they'd move forward without a pause, now that Paris was in upheaval and her own brother-in-law had been killed? Given the rising state of bloodshed in France, everything in their world was poised to change.

Marriages. Alliances. Even love . . . How could such luxuries of the heart survive when death remained such a cruel provocateur?

Candelabras stood guard at marked positions down a hall of leaded glass. The windows lay bare to the night sky, all having been left unlatched along the terrace. A breath of wind caught an edge of curtains, dusting the thick brocade with movement. The solidarity drew Aveline, inviting her to a safe haven while she fought to restore her shredded composure. She'd need all once she descended the stairs. And it wouldn't be long now. A chorus of chattering party guests and tinkling crystal had begun to drift up the stairs, signaling that the engagement fête had already begun.

Aveline leaned against the wall of glass, one slippered foot in the hall and the other mingling with the world just outside on the stone terrace.

Guests of the beau monde emerged from the carriage doors: high-coiffed ladies bedecked in ivory and gold, their male escorts brandishing powdered wigs and equally elegant simpers. They shared oblivious gaiety, from their smiles down to the tips of their buckled shoes. How was it possible that the atrocity of bloodshed could coexist with the luxury of peace, just half a country away? Charred estates had already begun to dot the skyline in Paris. And now that the populace had a taste of vengeance, she couldn't help but fear which estate—and who—might be next to satiate their hunger.

“Excusez-moi, mademoiselle.”

Aveline jumped at the intrusion, jerking her hand upon the stair rail.

Félicité's letter drifted from her fingertips. Aveline watched, helpless, as the folds of paper fluttered down to disappear in the shadows of the grand first-floor entry. She hastily wiped her gloved palm under her eyes, drying any evidence of tears lest someone question their existence on such a night.

She turned to find Fanetta, the maid who'd been assigned to her upon arrival at the castle, a composed statue waiting just behind.

"Je suis désolée." The young woman began her apology, her auburn-tipped crown in a modest bow, even as her gaze drifted over the stair rail. "I am sorry to disturb you, milady."

Aveline stole a glance to where the letter had fallen. She'd have to wait and retrieve it when she ventured downstairs. Until then? Smoothing her composure was all she could do. She straightened her carriage with a notch of the chin, the strict demands of her station so second nature, they owned her even without the benefit of her mother's presence. "Yes. What is it?"

"Pardon, but Lady Sainte-Moreau had wished to attend your toilette this eve. She bid me to fetch you and ask after the time to arrive." Fanetta shifted her attention to Aveline's ball gown. Ivory and blush satin fanned out in lithe folds at the sides and back—graceful and lavish, but clearly not the cut of an afternoon tea gown. "But it appears your ladyship has already dressed for the evening . . ."

She was weary of the fashion in Paris for women of her station to engage in a grand ceremony of the toilette time. Who needed a gaggle of attendants to flit over a lady's every whim? For the future Duchess of the House of Vivay, it would be a near ironclad expectation. But they weren't in Paris. Aveline was to be ushered into the highest ranks of the French peerage while hidden away at a château in the Loire Valley, and she hadn't the stomach to continue the fluff of court a single day longer.

Not even on the night of her own engagement ball.

"I hadn't the inclination to delay in preparation for the ball merely so as to garner an audience before it. The toilette was simply impossible this eve."

"Of course, mademoiselle."

Awkwardness befell the air between them, Fanetta's station

understood but clearly in conflict with a decree from Aveline's mother. The maid waited for Aveline to voice her bidding, keeping her eyes downturned until she received it.

"What I mean is, I'm afraid I haven't anyone to observe the delicacies of your coiffeur this eve, Fanetta. My mother is the only lady in residence who would care to keep up the practice of Paris. But just between our ears, might we help my mother to quietly forget the impropriety as long as she is here visiting with us—and then we may abolish the practice thereafter?"

A spark of amusement flashed in Fanetta's eyes. She inclined her head, working diligently at cloaking a smile. "Very well, mademoiselle. I daresay her ladyship may have already gone downstairs. She left in haste, as she did not wish to risk also missing your debut."

"And she will not. I've been assured the announcement will not come until midevening." Aveline tugged at the tiny creases of her gloves, a task employed to hide the slight tremble of her hands. "She will have ample time to find her honored place in the dining hall when the duke calls the party to attention."

"Of course, mademoiselle. Then I shall give you this." Fanetta outstretched her hands on a curtsy and presented a gold filigree trinket box glittering from the center of a silver letter tray. "I was told to take it to your chamber for presentation during your toilette, but you had already gone."

"What is it?"

"A gift—for mademoiselle."

"For me? But who . . . ?"

"The Duc et Vivay's son. Just as your family has commissioned an engagement portrait of your ladyship to gift your betrothed, you are offered a gift in return. I'm told to relay that when you accept this token you are now a part of the House of Vivay, and wear it this

eve so the Duke et Vivay's son knows the bride-to-be the moment she enters the ballroom."

A gift so her betrothed would know her on sight? It read as thoughtful, but perhaps still the hallmark of a matrimonial arrangement brokered between two fathers.

Young women of her station were seldom given the compliment of knowledge beyond the art of fan waving or how to breathe in a corset, let alone the freedom to decide whether a man's temperament made him a worthy candidate for marriage. After not even seeing her betrothed's face, Aveline would enter the ballroom with every disadvantage imaginable—especially after her sister's missive had so weighted her heart. Philippe, on the other hand, could enjoy anonymity for as long as he wished.

All she could do now was breathe deep and pray the gesture was a forecast of some tenderness to come.

Aveline took the trinket box in hand, adding a polite, "*Merci*," before gently lifting the delicate clasp. The hinge gave without a sound, revealing the treasure inside: a gold fox brooch edged in diamonds, citrine, and tiny pearls. The precious stones winked back at her, the soft lines of the fox tail glittering in the candlelight.

"A fox." Fanetta nodded approval. "That is a gift befitting a queen of this house, as the symbol of the Vivay family."

"It is a curious creature for a family crest."

"Fox roam free in the vineyards in all directions, mademoiselle. Feeding on the grapes, hunting for bird nests in the arbors . . . generally causing disruption for the workers here. But they've long been associated with the House of Vivay. Why, the deep wood beyond this hall of windows is so named *Bosquet du Renard* because of them."

Fox Grove. Aveline hooked her gloved fingertip around the edge of the drape, looking to the twilight world beyond the glass.

An obsidian sky dotted the mass of shadows with stars, pinpricks of light piercing the bower of trees.

A place for hiding, it seemed.

“I knew the family managed more than one estate. It is quite favorable to hear that the winemaking enterprises are thriving, if not inhabited by a mischief maker or two.”

“Thriving they are!” Fanetta bit her bottom lip to temper her enthusiasm, then tossed a look over her shoulder, as if attentive ears should not be privy to a tidbit of gossip she simply couldn’t contain. “The House of Vivay is thus known to boast a very renowned label of wine, named after the fox. It’s said the king himself even keeps the *Renard Reserve* stocked in his royal wine cellar. And the wine is produced right here, in the heart of the valley. The Duc et Vivay and your husband-to-be own it all.”

“I knew the duke was engaged in provincial enterprises, but I’d not been made privy to them—at least not until now. I look forward to learning more as long as I’m here.”

A wall clock betrayed the brief respite with deep-chested chimes echoing down the hall. Fanetta took heed of the warning that time had bled thin, and turned to look back toward the wing of ladies’ rooms.

“Do you desire powder for your hair? Violet, I think, would best bring out the tones in your ladyship’s eyes and the gold of your hair, of course. We still have time if you’d like to go back.”

“No, *s’il vous plaît*.” Aveline closed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose, sorting her thoughts for the remaining desperate moments before she’d be presented.

She’d swept powder over her face and dotted the tiniest bit of rouge to her cheeks, knowing her mother would comment had she worn none at all. But just thinking on it caused the whalebone corset to strangle the breath from her lungs—even more than usual. It

was ambitious to breathe in one on a good day, let alone on thus. She could stand no more plucking or primping for court . . . not when her world had been cast into such dizzying array.

“No more powder. I think I’d prefer to just be me tonight.”

“Certainly. If you’d wish not.” Fanetta paused, still gripping the tray out in front of her. “And what of the brooch? Would you like to wear it?”

“My betrothed has asked me to.” Aveline had held tight to the brooch, having enclosed it in her fist like a lifeline. She exhaled, letting go, and extended her hand, palm to the ceiling. “So we should comply with the request.”

Fanetta set the tray on a sideboard, waiting as Aveline joined her at the oversized gilt mirror dominating the wall. She took the brooch and went to work, affixing the trinket to the elegant embroidery of the square-bodice ball gown.

Instead of reveling in her reflection, Aveline saw a powdered and primed lady who would descend the stairs with all eyes watching, one who wore a rehearsed smile and a golden brooch, but who was fairly trembling beneath yards of satin. She was poised to step into the coveted role of mistress of a grand château and multiple estates, and become a social princess in the top ranks of the beau monde: France’s most elite nobility.

The nobility from which she’d secretly wished to escape.

The same nobility that was hated—and, with proof now, *hunted*—with hastening fervency.

“There.” Fanetta retreated a step to admire her handiwork. “You are perfect. Surely an engagement ball is just the beginning to your happiness.”

“*Oui*, I’m sure it is.”

Aveline looked at the brooch dominating her reflection, the fox standing out against the blush satin. It glittered at the row of

embroidery edging the top of her bodice, the citrine turning a deep, blazing amber in the candlelight.

Fanetta met her gaze. The partygoers' revelry teemed in the background, reminding them both that the party wouldn't wait for its guest of honor.

"Will there be anything else, mademoiselle?"

"No. Merci, Fanetta."

"Then I will take the trinket box back to your chamber and leave you with this—a note from the Duc et Vivay's son." The maid pulled an ivory note card from the pocket of her apron with *Aveline* written on the front in a lovely, looping script. "And bid you have the evening of your dreams." She offered a faint smile and with hastened steps disappeared into the shadows of the glass-walled corridor.

Aveline stood, feet frozen. Heart battling against the expectations of her position and the ever-present weight to perform them. She'd been jarred by penned words again, but this time, it appeared they were from Philippe—*her fiancé*.

A fresh longing stirred that her betrothed's words would match the thoughtfulness of the gift. Aveline ran her fingertip under the crease to break the circular red seal: a red fox fashioned there too, the image of the Renard crest pressed deep into melted wax.

Drawing in a steady breath, she read, a gloved fingertip resting on the brooch as her one connection to him. But within seconds . . . the last thread of hope to which she'd clung unraveled by the impact of mere words:

Find me in a blue coat with the Renard crest on the lapel.

If you and your mother wish to remain unharmed, please—
do exactly as I say.