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PARIS

a novel

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a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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Published by Revell
a division of Baker Publishing Group
PO Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.revellbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Sundin, Sarah, author.

Title: Until leaves fall in Paris / Sarah Sundin.

Description: Grand Rapids, MI : Revell, a division of Baker Publishing Group,
[2022]

Identifiers: LCCN 2021023642 | ISBN 9780800736378 | ISBN 9780800741051
(casebound) | ISBN 9781493434152 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: World War, 1939-1945—Fiction. | Paris (France)—Fiction. |

GSAFD: Christian fiction. | LCGFT: Christian fiction.

Classification: LCC PS3619.U5626 U58 2022 | DDC 813/.6—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021023642>

This is a work of historical reconstruction; the appearances of certain historical figures are therefore inevitable. All other characters, however, are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Published in association with Books & Such Literary Management, 52 Mission Circle, Suite 122, PMB 170, Santa Rosa, CA 95409-5370, www.booksandsuch.com

Baker Publishing Group publications use paper produced from sustainable forestry practices and post-consumer waste whenever possible.

21 22 23 24 25 26 27 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

In fond memory of Lucille McClure
and the Lucille McClure School of Ballet.
I still feel that invisible string.





1



PARIS, FRANCE

WEDNESDAY, MAY 29, 1940

As long as she kept dancing, Lucille Girard could pretend the world wasn't falling apart.

In the practice room at the Palais Garnier, Lucie and the others in the *corps de ballet* curtsied to Serge Lifar, the ballet master, as the piano played the tune for the *grande révérence*.

Lifar dismissed the ballerinas, and they headed to the dressing room, their pointe shoes softly thudding on the wooden floor, but more softly than ever. Since Germany had invaded the Netherlands and Belgium and France earlier in the month, dancers were fleeing Paris.

"Mademoiselle Girard?" the ballet master called in Ukrainian-accented French.

Lucie's breath caught. He rarely singled her out. She turned back with a light smile full of expectation and a tight chest full of dread. "Oui, *maître*?"

Serge Lifar stood with the erect bearing of a dancer in his prime and the authority of the choreographer who had returned the Paris Opéra Ballet to glory. "I am surprised you are still in Paris. You are American. You should go home."

Lucie had read the notice from US Ambassador William Bullitt in *Le Matin* that morning. Yes, she could sail with the other expatriates on the SS *Washington* from Bordeaux on June 4, but she wouldn't. "This *is* my home. I won't let the Germans scare me."

He glanced away, and a muscle twitched in his sharp-angled cheek. "The French girls would gladly take your place."

"Thank you for your concern for my safety." Lucie dropped a small *révérance* and scurried off, across boards graced by ballerinas for over sixty years and immortalized in Edgar Degas's paintings.

In the dressing room for the *quadrille*, the fifth and lowest rank of dancers, she squeezed onto a crowded bench. After she untied the ribbons of her pointe shoes, she eased the shoes off, wound the ribbons around the insteps, and inspected the toes for spots that needed darning.

Somber faces filled the dressing room, so Lucie gave the girls reassuring words as she shimmied out of her skirted leotard and into her street dress.

Lucie blew the girls a kiss and stepped into the hallway to wait for her friends in the *coryphée* and the *sujet*, the fourth and third ranks.

She leaned against the wall as dancers breezed down the hall. After six years at the Paris Opéra Ballet School, Lucie had been admitted to the corps de ballet at the age of sixteen. For ten years since, she'd felt the sting of not advancing to the next rank, tempered by the joy of continuing to dance in one of the four best ballets in the world.

"Lucie!" Véronique Baudin and Marie-Claude Desjardins bussed her on the cheek, and the three roommates made their way out of the building made famous by the novel *The Phantom of the Opera*.

Out on avenue de l'Opéra, Lucie inserted herself between her friends to create a pleasing tableau of Véronique's golden

tresses, Lucie's light brown waves, and Marie-Claude's raven curls.

Not that the refugees on the avenue would care about tableaux, and Lucie ached for their plight. A stoop-shouldered man in peasant's garb pulled a cart loaded with children, furniture, and baggage, and his wife trudged beside him, leading a dozen goats.

"What beasts the Germans are," Marie-Claude said. "Frightening these people out of their homes."

"Did you hear?" Véronique stepped around an abandoned crate on the sidewalk. "The Nazis cut off our boys in Belgium, and now they're driving north to finish them off."

Marie-Claude wrinkled her pretty little nose. "British beasts. Running away at Dunkirk and leaving us French to fend for ourselves."

"Let's go this way." Lucie turned down a less-crowded side street. "It's such a lovely spring day. Let's not talk of the war."

"What else can we talk about?" Véronique frowned up at the sky in the new Parisian mode, watching for Luftwaffe bombers.

At the intersection ahead, a blue-caped policeman carrying a rifle—still a jarring sight—checked a young man's identity card.

"I wonder if he's a German spy," Véronique whispered, her green eyes enormous. "I heard a parachutist landed in the Tuileries yesterday."

Lucie smiled at her friend. "If every report of a parachutist were true, the Germans would outnumber the French in Paris. We mustn't be disheartened by rumors."

In the next block, a middle-aged couple in expensive suits barked orders at servants who loaded a fancy automobile with boxes.

Marie-Claude brushed past, forcing the wife to step to the side. "Bourgeois beasts."

Lucie's mouth went tight. Typical businessman who lobbied for war to get rich and fled when war threatened those riches.

The ladies passed the Louvre, crossed the Seine, and entered the Latin Quarter on the Left Bank, home of artists and writers and others of like mind.

They turned down rue Casimir-Delavigne, and the cheery green façade of Green Leaf Books quickened Lucie's steps. She'd always thought a street named after a French poet was a lovely location for a bookstore.

"We'll see you upstairs." Véronique blew Lucie a kiss.

Lucie blew a kiss back and entered the English-language bookstore, a home for American and British and French literati since Hal and Erma Greenblatt founded it after the Great War. When Lucie's parents moved to Paris in 1923, they'd become fast friends with the Greenblatts.

Bernadette Martel, the store assistant, stood behind the cash register, and Lucie greeted her.

"Hello, Lucie." Hal peeked out of the back office. "Come join us."

"Okay." She flipped back to English. Why was he in the office? Hal liked to greet customers and help them choose books, while Erma did the bookkeeping and other tasks.

Lucie made her way through the store, past the delightfully jumbled bookshelves and the tables which fostered conversation about art and theater and the important things in life.

Boxes were piled outside the office door, and inside the office Hal and Erma stood in front of the desk, faces wan.

"What—what's wrong?" Lucie asked.

Hal set his hand on Lucie's shoulder, his brown eyes sad. "We're leaving tomorrow."

"Leaving? But you can't."

"We must." Erma lifted her thin shoulders as she did when her decisions were etched in stone. "In Germany, the Nazis don't allow Jews to run businesses. I doubt it'll be different here."

"They won't come to Paris." Lucie gestured to the north

where French soldiers lined the Somme and Aisne Rivers. “Besides, you’re American citizens. They won’t do anything to you. Our country is neutral.”

“We can’t take any chances,” Erma said. “We’re going to Bordeaux and sailing home. You should come too.”

Lucie had already told them she’d never leave. But as a Christian, she could afford to remain in Paris, come what may. She could never forgive herself if she persuaded the Greenblatts to stay and they ended up impoverished—or worse.

An ache grew in her chest, but she gave them an understanding look. “You’re taking the SS *Washington*.”

Erma stepped behind the desk and opened a drawer. “If we can.”

“Hush, Erma. Don’t worry the girl.”

“If you can?” Lucie glanced back and forth between the couple.

“We don’t have money for the passage.” Erma pulled out folders. “It’s tied up in the store.”

Lucie’s hand rolled around the strap of her ballet bag. “You can sell the store, right?”

Hal chuckled and ran his hand through black hair threaded with silver. “Who would buy it? All the British and American expatriates are fleeing.”

“What will you do?” Lucie’s voice came out small.

“We have friends.” Hal spread his hands wide as if to embrace all those he had welcomed. “Lots of friends.”

Erma thumped a stack of folders on the desk. “I refuse to beg.”

Hal dropped Lucie a wink. He’d beg his friends.

What if those friends didn’t have the means or the heart to help? What if the Germans did conquer France, including Bordeaux?

A shiver ran through her. Lucie couldn’t let anything happen

to them, not when she had both the means and the heart. “I’ll give you the money.”

“What?” Erma’s gaze skewered her. “We can’t take your money.”

“Why not?” She entreated Hal with her eyes, as if she were thirteen again and asking him to dip into the allowance from her parents for new pointe shoes. “I’m practically family. I lived with you for three years. Because of you, I could stay in the ballet school when my parents returned to New York. You’ve always said I’m like the daughter you never had.”

“You’ll need your money to get home.” Erma flipped through a folder. “When the bombs start falling, you’ll change your mind about staying here. Look what Hitler did to Warsaw and Rotterdam.”

It wouldn’t happen to Paris. It couldn’t. “I’ll be fine. I want you to have my money.”

Hal turned Lucie to the door. “Don’t worry about us. Now, I know you’re hungry after practice. Go. Eat. We’ll talk to you tonight.”

Out into the warmth of the store, her home, but it was all falling away, falling apart. The Greenblatts—leaving. The store—closing.

Green Leaf Books was their dream, their life, and they were giving it up.

Ballet was Lucie’s dream. Her life. Could she give it up? If she did, what would she have? Who would she be?

She rose to demi-pointe and turned, taking in the shelves and tomes and the rich scent, and she knew what she’d have, who she’d be.

Lucie whirled back into the office. “I’ll buy the store.”

Erma looked up from the box she was packing. “Pardon?”

“I’ll buy the store. Not a gift. A business transaction.”

Hal’s chin dropped. “Sweet Lucie. You are so kind. But you—you’re a ballerina.”

“Not anymore.” Although she did stand in fifth position. She breathed a prayer for forgiveness for lying. “Lifar plans to cut me. I need a job. I’ll run the bookstore.”

After twenty-five years of marriage, Hal and Erma could speak volumes to each other with a glance. And they did. Then Erma sighed. “But Lucie, you’re a *ballerina*.”

Lucie’s cheeks warmed. True, she wasn’t terribly smart, especially with numbers, but at least she’d read all the books the Greenblatts had recommended. “I’m good with people, with customers—I can do Hal’s job. And Madame Martel helps with the business end of things. She can do your job. She and I—we can run the store.”

“Lucie . . .” Hal’s voice roughened.

Her eyes stung. Her lashes felt heavy. “And when we kick the Germans back to where they belong, this store will be here waiting for you. I promise.”

Erma stared at the folder in her hands, her chin wagging back and forth. Wavering.

“I want to do this.” Lucie swiped moisture from her eyes. “I need to do this. Please. Please trust me with your store.”

Erma set down the folder and came to Lucie, ever the stern one, the practical one, the one to say no. She gripped Lucie’s shoulders and pressed her forehead to Lucie’s. “It’s yours. You dear, dear girl.”

Lucie fumbled for Erma’s beloved hands and tried to say thank you, but she could only nod. Then she broke away and ran out, ran upstairs to her apartment.

Now she couldn’t change her mind about leaving Paris. Now she had to resign from the ballet.

And she had to figure out how to run a bookstore.