

HER OWN REVOLUTION by Debra Borchert

EXCERPT

Chapter 1

Paris

August 3, 1793

If I had the same rights as a man, I would not have to dress as one.

After waiting for Cook to leave for the market, I raced through the kitchen, down the servants' stairs, and into the cellar. The pungent odors of ripe apples, stale wine, and fusty onions thickened the air. I pulled out my bundle from behind the vinegar cask and unbuttoned my gown.

The irony of having to masquerade as a man to have equal rights made me want to spit in Robespierre's face. I wrapped a strip of cloth tightly around my breasts. All the talk of *Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité*. I pulled on my brother's tunic.

Liberty? All women were free to do was starve. I stepped into my brother's breeches and knotted a ribbon at my waist.

Equality? Pah! Our latest government passed a law enabling all men to vote. I tied my neckcloth.

Brotherhood? What about sisterhood? I shoved my arms into the waistcoat. After four years of governmental discussion, girls were finally guaranteed an elementary education. But universities were still closed to women.

Voices from the kitchen stilled me. If my stepmother caught me, she'd send me to a nunnery. My fingers grew numb from grasping the frock coat lapels. Her heavy footsteps headed for the dining room. I shook out my stiff hands.

We had won the right to divorce, but how were all the divorced women supposed to support their children? The memory of Lisette, my former neighbor, standing amongst the prostitutes gathered at the banks of the Seine, calling and taunting sailors, chilled me.

I stomped my feet into the too-big boots. An unmarried woman's signature was still worthless. But not in America—there women could own businesses and property. I should have gone to America with Henri. I should not have been so stubborn. I had been his mistress for a year, why had I refused to accompany him as one? I adjusted the breeches, trying to ignore my own nagging voice: He never said, I love you.

Coiling my hair into a bun, I pushed my brother's tricorne down over my curls, opened the cellar door, and peeked out into the late afternoon. A steady rain beat upon the cobbles, washing chamber-pot slops into the gutter at the street's center. The heels of my brother's boots were higher than my usual shoes, and I concentrated on keeping my balance as I straddled the gutter.

Staying on narrow back streets, I adjusted my gait, trying to appear confident. As was my habit, I began to pick up my skirts but clutched the frock coat instead and looked around for anyone who might have seen me.

If caught impersonating a man, any other woman would appear before the Public Prosecutor—my father—who would order her head shaved and sentence her to an insane asylum. But if I were arrested, I would disappoint my father, who would feel obligated to make an example of me. As he had recently sentenced Charlotte Corday, the first woman to be guillotined, I feared being dragged before him far more than eight-months in a madhouse.

I splashed through puddles. If I didn't sail for America soon, my stepmother would have me married to an old goat I didn't love. But if I had identity papers proving I was a man, I could get a job that paid enough money for passage. Henri had urged me to visit his printer friend, Pierre. How would I convince Pierre to make false papers—a traitorous crime, for him and me? What if Pierre refused, or worse, told my father? I'd make Pierre agree. Today.

Dark gray clouds hung over the river and twisted up the turrets of la Conciergerie, the new home to Marie Antoinette. Even if Henri couldn't marry me, I was going to join him in America, no matter what crimes I had to commit. Surely he'd tell me he loved me when he saw me again.

Rain slid down the back of my neck, making me shiver. I pulled up my collar. The only right women earned that was equal to a man's was the privilege of facing Madame Guillotine.