

The following morning, Avril and Duncan were among the first through the doors at the Foy & Gibson department store. Women, in their floral dresses with matching shoes and handbags, streamed past the glass counters, fanning out in every direction. Avril's eyes swept over the beautifully displayed merchandise on the ground floor. Well-groomed sales assistants busied themselves behind the cosmetic and perfume counters, making final adjustments to the products on display, eager to assist the early shoppers. Avril had little opportunity to browse the department stores when she lived in Paris. She worked long hours and always accepted any overtime that was offered. Even if she'd wanted to shop, there was very little available, and what was for sale was quickly procured by the wealthy.

The simplicity of Avril's aqua linen dress, with its collarless neckline and capped sleeves, set her apart from the sea of boldly printed frocks. Never one to wear large hats, she had placed a small white crescent-shaped band above the chignon at the back of her neck. She'd removed her wrist-length gloves as she'd entered the store, unclipped the bamboo-handled bag Madame Leon had given her, and tucked them safely inside. Her unique ensemble drew the attention of the young saleswomen, who gave her compliments as she passed by and in doing so made it easy for Avril to strike up a conversation with them and, more importantly, ask questions.

Avril could tell that Duncan was enjoying looking at the merchandise as much as she was. She was fascinated by the way he casually browsed and chatted to the staff with camaraderie, often eliciting a burst of laughter, while displaying an amazing eye for detail – and quality. He stopped to feel the texture of a towel, all part of a beach theme displaying hats and sunglasses.

'Some shells and sand on the tabletop would have made all the difference, don't you think?' he said. Avril wholeheartedly agreed.

'And perhaps some large beach umbrellas hanging overhead,' Avril added.

Duncan grinned. 'I agree.' Then he sighed somewhat wistfully. 'I could transform this whole first floor given half a chance.'

Avril sensed some hidden ambitions in the head waiter of Bistro Dubray. 'What would you do to that counter over there to showcase the perfumes?'

Duncan's face lit up as he described the props he'd use to bring the perfume counter to life. A Moroccan theme, he envisioned, with spices and tapestries and moody lamp lighting.

'You remind me of my dear friend, Remi, who I worked with in Paris,' said Avril as they made their way towards the elevators. 'He was so creative, so original. Always coming up with innovative ways to display Monsieur Dior's accessories.'

'You worked for Dior?'

'For more than three years. And it was wonderful. Hard work, but I learnt so much in my time there. Not just about fashion, but people too. And myself, I suppose.'

'Now, that's a story I'll need to hear over lunch! My mother was a beautiful sewer,' said Duncan with unrestrained pride. 'She would have given anything to have worked in a proper fashion house. I can still see her sitting at her machine at night. The clickety-clickety sound of her machine willing me to sleep like a metronome.' Duncan stopped and turned to Avril. 'She's gone now, but oh, how she would have loved to have known you.'

'I can tell her creative spirit lives on in you,' said Avril, and she reached over and squeezed Duncan's hand.

In the elevator, Duncan suggested they meet in an hour as he wanted to go up to the third floor to look at the menswear.

Avril agreed and when the elevator stopped, the doors rattled open and the conductor announced, 'Second floor, Ladies' Fashion, day dresses, skirts, blouses and suits,' she stepped out.

Avril wandered around the ladies' department, studying the vast range of garments available and noticing which designs were being taken to the change rooms and, more importantly, being purchased. To Avril's surprise the shoe department carried a wide assortment of styles, colours and heel sizes. The hat selection was equally impressive. The hour flew past and she met Duncan outside the store as planned.

'Where to take you next?' he said, looking at the streets around them before smiling broadly. 'I know!'

He took Avril's hand and they dashed across busy Bourke Street before the next tram approached. The moment they turned the corner, Avril felt a sudden surge of excitement. This was Flinders Lane, and she would soon discover that it was the heart of Melbourne's fashion district. A treasure trove of wholesale haberdashery, fabric merchants and millinery suppliers lined both sides of the lane. There were pattern makers, fabric cutters and garment makers, all housed in an area between the city centre and docklands on the Yarra River. Avril grabbed Duncan's arm and beamed up at him – she was in her version of paradise.

Cars and delivery vans haphazardly lined the narrow one-way street. Avril read every overhanging sign as they weaved their way down the bustling footpath. Bloomfield's Buttons, Gordon & Frank Fabrics, Brayer Millinery Wholesalers, Parker's Tailoring. The variety of services and fashion suppliers seemed endless and every conceivable item needed for garment making could be found on the lane. The clang and the clatter of the garment makers rang out from behind half-opened doors, and the air carried the heavy scent of sewing machine oil. Avril felt like she could have been in one of the many laneways that made up the fashion district of Paris.

As she peered curiously around the doorway of garment makers Almen & Sons, she saw a woman at a cutting table, running a piece of chalk around the edge of a cardboard pattern. The woman glanced up at Avril, and over the hum of the machines shouted, 'No vacancies, love. Try Hoffman's, this side, further down. They're hiring.'

Avril hadn't asked the woman about work but replied, 'Thank you,' acknowledging the suggestion with a friendly wave.

By mid-afternoon, Avril and Duncan had walked all over the city, down every laneway and arcade, ending up at Pellegrini's for a late lunch. Avril spoke to the waiter in Italian, who was delighted to suggest a dish for them that was not on the menu, then she chatted excitedly with Duncan about everything she'd seen.

'Your accent is adorable! I could listen to you talk all day,' Duncan said. 'What other languages do you speak, other than French and Italian?'

'A little bit of Spanish,' she said, holding up her thumb and forefinger, 'but only a little. And my mother taught me English, which we often spoke at home. She used to say, *If you have another language you have another culture.*'

'Well, what do you think of Melbourne so far?' Duncan asked as they waited for their meals.

'This city is really wonderful. And I must admit, I'm surprised at the range of fashion merchandise. And everyone looks so, so healthy.' She laughed. 'You know, Duncan, there is so much life here, so many possibilities.'

'From Dior to Flinders Lane,' Duncan said with a smile.

'And tell me about you, Duncan. Where did you grow up? Do you have family in Melbourne?'

Duncan said that he was born and raised in a country town called Bendigo. 'Let's just say I couldn't wait to get away.' He had one sister, Elizabeth, who was a nurse and lived in Sydney. He seemed reluctant to say more than that, so Avril didn't press him and he quickly changed the subject, asking about her work in the Paris fashion house.

Avril enthusiastically explained the running of the atelier and the work carried out by the seamstresses, then she started giving him a detailed account of what was involved in organising a seasonal collection. She stopped suddenly and looked down at the starched tablecloth. 'Oh, there I go, rambling on,' she said, embarrassed.

But Duncan just laughed. 'I'm happy to hear your rambling,' he said. 'I want to hear more. Tell me about your plans to start your own business.'

Avril smiled, feeling fortunate to have already made a friend in Duncan. They had similar interests and instinctively she felt like he was someone she could trust. 'I want to get it right,' she said. 'The world is changing, Duncan. Fashion is changing. I can feel it. I discovered that when I worked at Dior.'

'Well, here's what I think,' he said. 'One day, people are going to point and say, *That's her. That's Avril Montdidier.* I think you're going to be a big hit in this town.'

'And I think we're going to be great friends, Duncan Campbell, head waiter, right-hand man,' Avril said, laughing, though she genuinely believed they would.

'I think so too,' Duncan replied.

'Now, tell me all about these horse races I've heard they have here in Melbourne,' she said. 'Apparently, the fashions are spectacular.'