

WHILE PARIS SLEPT



A mother whispers goodbye.
It is the end. But also the beginning.

RUTH DRUART

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PARIS
SLEPT**

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*To Jeremy, Joachim and Dimitri
my inspiration for this story*

And in memory of my grandmother Diana White

‘Let us sacrifice one day to gain perhaps a whole life.’

– From *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo

Part One

Chapter One

Santa Cruz, 24 June 1953

Jean-Luc

Jean-Luc lifts the razor to his cheek, glancing at his reflection in the bathroom mirror. For a split second, he doesn't recognise himself. Pausing, razor held in mid-air, he stares into his eyes, wondering what it is. There's something American about him now. It's there in his healthy tan, his white teeth, and something else he can't quite identify. Is it the confident way he holds his chin? Or his smile? Anyway, it pleases him. American is good.

With a towel wrapped round his waist, he wanders back into the bedroom. A black shape outside catches his eye. Through the window, he sees a Chrysler crawling up the street, coming to a halt behind the oak tree out front. Strange. Who would be calling at seven o'clock in the morning? He stares at the car, distracted, then the buttery smell of warm crêpes wafting up the stairs calls him to breakfast.

Entering the kitchen, he kisses Charlotte on the cheek,

then ruffles his son's hair in way of greeting. Glancing through the window, he sees the car is still there. He watches as a lanky man extracts himself from the driving seat, craning his neck, peering around – like a pelican, he thinks to himself. A stocky man emerges on the other side. They walk towards the house.

The doorbell cuts through the morning like a knife. Charlotte looks up.

'I'll go.' Jean-Luc's already on his way out. He slips the chain from the lock and opens the door.

'Mr Bow-Champs?' Pelican Man asks without smiling.

Jean-Luc stares at him, taking in the dark navy suit, white shirt and plain tie, and the arrogant look in his eyes. The mispronunciation of his name is something he usually lets go, but something pricks his pride this morning. Maybe it's because the man is standing on his doorstep. 'Beauchamps,' he corrects. 'It's French.'

'We know it's French, but this is America.' Pelican Man's eyes narrow a fraction as he sticks a shiny black shoe across the threshold. He peers over Jean-Luc's shoulder, then his neck clicks as he turns, cocking his head to one side, looking at the car port where their new Nash 600 is parked. His top lip curls at one corner. 'I'm Mr Jackson, and this is Mr Bradley. Mr Bow-Champs, we'd like to ask you some questions.'

'What about?' He adds inflection to show his surprise, but his voice sounds false to his ears – an octave too high. Muffled sounds of breakfast reach out to the doorstep: plates being stacked, his son's light laughter. The familiar noises echo around Jean-Luc like a distant dream. He closes his eyes, clutching at the vanishing edges. A seagull screeching calls him back to the present. His heart beats hard and fast against his ribs, like a trapped bird.

The stocky man, Bradley, leans forward, lowering his voice. 'Were you taken into County Hospital six weeks ago after a car accident?' He stretches his neck, as though hoping to gather information about the life inside the house.

'Yes.' Jean-Luc's pulse races. 'I was knocked over by a car rounding the corner too fast.' He pauses, taking a breath. 'I lost consciousness.' The doctor's name, Wiesmann, springs to mind. He fired questions at Jean-Luc while he was still coming round, feeling foggy. 'How long have you been in America?' he asked. 'Where did you get the scar on your face? Were you born with only a finger and a thumb on your left hand?'

Bradley coughs. 'Mr Bow-Champs, we'd like you to accompany us to City Hall.'

'But why?' His voice comes out as a croak.

They stand there like a blockade, hands behind their backs, chests thrust forward.

'We think this would be best discussed at City Hall, not here on your doorstep, in front of your neighbours.'

The veiled threat tightens the knot in his stomach. 'But what have I done?'

Bradley rolls his lips together. 'These are just preliminary enquiries. We could call the police in to assist, but at this early stage we prefer . . . we prefer to get the facts straight. I'm sure you understand.'

No, I don't! he wants to scream. *I don't know what you're talking about.* Instead, he mumbles assent. 'Give me ten minutes.' Closing the door in their faces, he returns to the kitchen.

Charlotte is sliding a crêpe onto a plate. 'Was it the postman?' she asks without looking up.

'No.'

She turns towards him, a thin crease across her forehead, her brown eyes piercing him.

‘Two investigators . . . They want me to go with them to answer some questions.’

‘About the accident?’

He shakes his head. ‘I don’t know. I don’t know what they want. They won’t say.’

‘They won’t say? But they have to. They can’t just ask you to go with them without telling you why.’ The colour drains from her face.

‘Don’t worry, Charlotte. I think I’d better do what they say. Clear things up. It’s only questioning.’

Their son has stopped munching and is looking up at them, a tiny frown on his forehead.

‘I’m sure I’ll be back soon.’ Jean-Luc’s voice rings false in his ears, as though someone else is uttering these words of comfort. ‘Can you call the office; tell them I’ll be late?’ He turns to his son. ‘Have a good day at school.’

Everything has gone still, like the hush before a storm. Quickly he turns and leaves the kitchen. Normal. He must act normal. This is only a formality. What can they possibly want?

Ten minutes. He doesn’t want them ringing the bell again, so he hurries into the bedroom, opening the drawer in the wardrobe, glancing at his ties coiled like serpents. He picks out a blue tie with tiny grey dots. Appearance is important in a situation like this. He takes his jacket off its hanger and walks back down the stairs.

Charlotte is waiting in the kitchen doorway, her hand over her mouth. He takes it, kissing her cold lips, looking her in the eye. Then he turns away. ‘Bye, son!’ he shouts towards the kitchen.

‘Bye, Daddy. See you in a while.’

‘Catch you later, crocodile.’ His voice cracks, missing the right note again.

He senses Charlotte’s eyes on his back as he opens the front door and follows the men to their black Chrysler. He takes a deep breath, forcing the air down into his abdomen. Now he remembers hearing the storm break in the middle of the night; can feel the earth thick with water, starting to evaporate already. Soon it will be humid and hot.

No one speaks as they drive past familiar houses with large, open lawns reaching out to the sidewalk, past the paper shop, the baker, the ice-cream parlour. This life he’s come to love.

Chapter Two

Santa Cruz, 24 June 1953

Charlotte

I stare out the kitchen window, though the black car vanished many minutes ago. Time feels frozen. I don't want it to move forward.

'Mom, I can smell burning.'

'*Merde!*' I grab the pan from the stove and throw the blackened crêpe into the sink. My eyes water as smoke fumes swirl up. 'I'll make you another.'

'No thanks, Mom, I'm full.' Sam hops off the stool and darts out of the kitchen.

As I glance around, the remnants of the disturbed breakfast fill me with panic. But I have to pull myself together. Slowly, I climb the stairs, going into the bathroom. I splash cold water on my face, then slip into the dress I wore yesterday and go back downstairs.

Sam bounces up and down at my side as we walk to school. 'Mom, what do you think those men will ask Dad?'

‘I don’t know, Sam.’

‘What could it be, Mom?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Maybe it’s about a burglary.’

‘What?’

‘Or a murder!’

‘Sam, be quiet.’

He immediately stops hopping around, dragging his feet instead. A pang of guilt shoots through me, but I have more important things to worry about.

When we get to the school gate, the other mothers are already walking back home.

‘Hi, Charlie! You’re running late today. Coming over for a coffee later?’ Marge’s voice rings out from the group.

‘Sure,’ I lie.

After dropping Sam off, I dawdle around the gate to give the others time to get ahead. When I see they’re far enough in front, I walk home slowly, loneliness threatening to engulf me. I’m half tempted to join them for coffee, but I know I won’t be able to hold myself back from blurting something out. There’s a chance that no one saw the car come for Jean-Luc this morning, but if someone did, I’d need to have a story ready. They’ll want to know all the details. Yes, it’s best to avoid any contact.

Once home, I go from room to room, plumping up the cushions on the couch, washing up the breakfast things, rearranging the magazines on the coffee table. I remind myself that there’s no point worrying, it won’t help anyone; after all, he’s only been taken in for questioning. I should do something practical to keep my mind occupied. I could mow the lawn, save Jean-Luc the trouble.

I pull on my gardening shoes and drag the lawnmower

out from the garage. I've seen Jean-Luc pull the string on the side to get it started, so I give it a tug. Nothing happens. I pull again; this time something inside spits, but quickly dies. Now I pull harder and faster. Suddenly it's whirring away, pulling me with it. It stinks of gas, though I quite like the smell.

The rhythm is soothing, and I'm disappointed when the job is quickly finished. I put the mower away and go back into the house.

Maybe the living room could do with a clean. As I take the vacuum cleaner out from under the stairs, I remember that I did this only yesterday. Defeated, I slump to the floor, the thick vacuum pipe still in my hand.

The past is flooding back. Jean-Luc never lets me talk about it. In his pragmatic way, he told me to leave it behind, where it belongs. As if it were that simple. I have tried, I really have, but I can't help my dreams when I'm fast asleep, where I see my mother, my father. Home. These dreams leave me with a yearning for my family that casts a long shadow. I have been in touch with them; I wrote once we'd settled down and found somewhere to live. My mother wrote back; a short, curt letter saying that Papa wasn't ready to see me yet. He still had some forgiving to do.

I wander back into the kitchen and stare out the window, willing Jean-Luc to come back. Released from questioning, suspicions unfounded. But there's only the empty street.

The distant sound of a car engine sets my pulse racing. Leaning forward so my nose almost touches the window, I peer out. *Please God, let it be him.* My stomach plummets when I catch sight of a familiar blue bonnet rounding the corner: Marge from over the road. I watch her struggle

with bags of shopping while one of her twin boys chases the other round the car. She glances over in my direction. Quickly I back away to the side of the lace curtains. Secrets and lies. What does anyone really know about their neighbours' lives?

I have no desire to run into anyone today. If someone saw the black car, all the mothers will know by now. I can imagine them hypothesising, getting excited. No, I need to get away and distance myself. I could go shopping to another town, where I won't bump into anyone; somewhere large and anonymous, like one of those big supermarkets.

I grab my purse, take my keys off the hook by the front door and get in the car before anyone can see me. As I drive north along the coastal route with the window down, the wind blows through my hair. I love driving fast; it gives me a sense of liberty and independence. I can pretend to be anyone I want to be.

After half an hour, I spot a sign for Lucky Store. Turning left off the highway, I follow the arrows till I see a parking lot packed with station wagons. I spot one of those burger places and a merry-go-round. Sam would love it here; maybe we should bring him one Saturday and make a day of it. Normally I avoid these large supermarkets, preferring to shop locally, where I can ask the grocer for his crunchiest apples, or the butcher for his leanest cut. They always take their time to pick out the best produce for me, appreciating that I care.

I don't feel comfortable in this massive supermarket with its endless rows of brightly displayed food. Housewives in full skirts and smart heels with waved hair push enormous trolleys piled high with jars and tins. It fills me with a nostalgia, a yearning for home, for Paris.

Chicken, I tell myself, that's what I'll cook tonight, lemon chicken. It's Jean-Luc's favourite.

Two packets of chicken breasts, a pint of milk and four lemons look lost and forlorn at the bottom of the shopping cart when I reach the cash register. I feel embarrassed, but I couldn't concentrate on what else we needed for the week.

The cashier looks at me strangely. 'Do you want help bagging, ma'am?'

Is she being sarcastic? I shake my head. 'No thank you. I can manage.'

My stomach rumbles loudly as I put the solitary brown paper bag in the trunk. I didn't have any breakfast. Maybe I should get a burger, but the mere thought of it turns my stomach. Instead I drive home, praying Jean-Luc will be back.

I park the car in the drive and hurry to the front door. It's locked. He can't be there. Why would I think he would be? He'd have gone straight to work anyway. I know he'd have been worried about being late as it was.

It's already three o'clock. Sam needs picking up from school in thirty minutes. Maybe today it would be better to be late than early. Early means I'll have to exchange banter with other moms. He could walk home alone – some of the children do – but I love picking him up; it's my favourite time of the day. When I was a girl in Paris, all the mothers came to pick their children up, ready with a baguette filled with a row of dark chocolate squares. It feels like a family tradition to be there waiting for him at the end of the day. But today, for the first time, I'll be five minutes late. That gives me twenty-five more minutes to kill.

I put the chicken in the fridge and wash my hands, scrubbing my nails with the old toothbrush on the

windowsill. My father's voice rings in my head. 'Clean nails are a sign of someone who knows how to look after themselves,' he'd say whenever he caught me with dirty nails. 'Like shoes,' he often added. 'You can tell a person by their nails and their shoes.'

'Not in America,' I'd tell him now, if I saw him. 'In America they look at your hair and your teeth.'

As I put the toothbrush back, I look out the window, trying not to get my hopes up. The street is empty. My stomach rumbles again. I feel a little light-headed. I should eat something sweet. Lifting the tin from the top shelf, I wrap a cookie in tin foil for Sam and break another in half for myself. I nibble at it, worried it will give me stomach cramps, but it makes me feel better, so I eat the other half too.

Twenty minutes left. I go upstairs, into our bedroom, and sit at the dressing table. Taking the real-bristle hairbrush out of the top drawer, I brush my hair till it shines. The mirror tells me I'm still attractive: no fine lines, no grey hair and no loose skin under my chin. All is in order externally. It's my heart that feels one hundred years old.

I get up and smooth out the quilt, made by the Amish in Pennsylvania; hundreds of perfect hexagons stitched together by hand. Our first holiday together. Sam had just learnt to walk, but was still unsteady on his feet and took a few tumbles. I remember trotting ahead of him, ready to break his fall.

Ten minutes to go now. I go back downstairs, wandering through the rooms. Finally, I open the front door. The bright sunlight hits me and I go back inside for my hat. As I walk down the garden path, I wonder, not for the first time, why Americans prefer to leave their gardens open,

without hedges or brick walls. Anyone could walk right on in, up to the house, and stare in through the windows. It's so different to French gardens, which are always encircled by high walls or thick bushes, discouraging callers who haven't been invited.

Jean-Luc loves the openness here. He says that what happened in France could never happen here because everyone is frank with each other; no one would have denounced their neighbour then gone to hide behind closed doors while they were taken away. I don't like it when he talks like this, idealising his new country. I can't help feeling it's disloyal to France. Years of hunger, fear, deprivation – these things can change a good person into a bad person.

'Charlie!' Marge calls over from the yard opposite, interrupting my thoughts. 'Where were you today? We had coffee round at Jenny's. We thought you were coming.'

'Sorry.' My heart misses a beat, and I cover my mouth with the back of my hand to hide the lie. 'I needed to do a big shop. I went to Lucky Store.'

'What? You went all the way out there? I thought you hated those enormous shopping malls. You should have said. I'd have gone with you.'

'I'm sorry I missed the coffee.'

'Don't worry. We'll be round at Jo's on Friday. Listen, I need to ask you a favour. Could you pick Jimmy up for me, please? I gotta take Noah to the doctor. He's running a temperature and I can't get it down.'

'Sure.' I attempt a smile, but I feel like a traitor with these neighbours I've known for years.

'Thanks, Charlie.' She flashes me a wide smile.

As I walk to school, I remember how the neighbours made us feel so welcome from the day we arrived in Santa

Cruz, nine years ago. Within the week we'd been invited over, not just for an aperitif, but for a barbecue. I was touched by the way they all got together for the occasion, their loud, cheery voices declaring how happy they were to meet the new family. A large beer was thrust into Jean-Luc's hand and a glass of white wine put into mine as soon as we stepped into the garden. They fussed over Sam, and a shady place under a tree was found for him to sit on his baby blanket, surrounded by brightly coloured toys. There didn't appear to be a formal structure to the proceedings, not as far as I could see anyway. It was a free-for-all, and as soon as a piece of steak was ready, the guests would swarm to the barbecue. I was grateful when a man handed me a plate with food already on it. We sat wherever we liked, pulling wooden chairs around to join groups.

It was all so different to Paris. On the few occasions my parents received guests, they would make seating plans for dinner. The guests would wait patiently and quietly for the host to allocate the places. And no one would ever be served a drink until everyone had arrived. Maman often complained about so-and-so being late and making them all wait an hour for their first drink. Well, the war put an end to those dinners anyway.

Here, there didn't seem to be any rules. Women chatted freely to me, their laughter spilling out; men teased me, telling me how sexy my accent was. I was charmed, Jean-Luc even more so. He fell in love with America from day one. If he ever felt homesick, he never mentioned it. Everything was wonderful and amazing for him: the abundance of food, the friendliness of the people, the ease with which anything could be bought. 'This is the American Dream,' he kept saying. 'We must learn to speak English perfectly.'

It will be easy for Samuel, it will be his first language; he'll be able to help us.'

Samuel soon became Sam, Jean-Luc became John, and my nickname was Charlie. We'd been Americanised. Jean-Luc said it meant we'd been accepted, and that in recognition of this warm welcome we'd received, we should avoid speaking French. He said it would look like we didn't want to integrate. So we only spoke English, even between ourselves. Of course, I could see his point, though it broke my heart a little not to be able to sing the lullabies to Sam that my mother used to sing to me. It distanced me even further from my family, my culture, and it changed our way of communicating, our way of being. I still loved Jean-Luc with all my heart, but it felt different. He no longer whispered *mon coeur, mon ange, mon trésor*. Now it was *darling, honey* or worse, *baby*.

The bell rings out across the empty playground, interrupting my thoughts. Children come swarming out, buzzing around looking for their mothers. Sam is easily recognisable, with his dark hair shining out from the throng of blonder heads. His olive skin and fine features tell of different origins. A neighbour once said that his long eyelashes were wasted on a boy. As if beauty could be wasted on anyone. What a strange thought.

Sam looks over, smiling his lopsided smile, just like Jean-Luc's. He's too old now, at nine, to come running up like he used to, and finishes talking with his friends before he wanders over, carefully casual.

I kiss him on each cheek, well aware how much it embarrasses him, but I can't help myself. Anyway, a little embarrassment now and again is character-building.

'Go tell Jimmy he's coming home with us,' I say.

'Swell.' He runs off, but stops suddenly, turning around and taking a step back towards me. 'Is Daddy home?'

‘Not yet.’

Without a word, he walks away to find Jimmy.

When they reappear, I take out the chocolate chip cookie, breaking it in half. Jimmy wolfs his half down.

‘There are more at home,’ I say.

‘Yeah!’ Jimmy runs on ahead. ‘Come on, Sam!’

But Sam walks next to me.

Jimmy runs on anyway, disappearing round the next corner. I put my hand on Sam’s shoulder. ‘Don’t worry, Daddy will be home soon.’

‘But what did those men want?’

‘We’ll talk later, Sam,’

‘Boo!’ Jimmy jumps out at us.

My heart leaps into my throat, and I scream.

Jimmy’s laughing hysterically. ‘Sorry,’ he manages to say between giggles.

When my heartbeat returns to normal, I pretend to laugh too, releasing the tension of the moment.

Jimmy grabs Sam’s arm, and they run on ahead.

When we get home, I set the tin of cookies on the kitchen table in front of the boys. ‘Have as many as you want.’

Jimmy looks at me wide-eyed, grinning from ear to ear. ‘Gee, thanks.’

It brings me a little comfort as I watch them tuck in, enjoying what I’ve made.

‘They’re the best ones yet, Mom.’ Crumbs settle into the corners of Sam’s mouth. Jimmy nods in agreement, his mouth too stuffed to utter a word.

‘Do you want me to make some for your class?’ I offer.

‘No thanks. Just for us,’ Sam looks at me with dark, jealous eyes.

I want to reach out and hold him close, tell him he has

nothing to worry about. That my love for him is deeper than the ocean, that it will last for ever. Instead, I start preparing the evening meal, grating the zest off the lemons, squeezing them, adding the juice to the zest. I slice the chicken breasts before soaking them in the juice. I'm not following a recipe; it's just how Maman used to prepare lemon chicken for Sunday lunch, before the war.