

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

LUCY FOLEY

A NOVEL

AUTHOR OF
THE REESE'S
BOOK CLUB PICK

THE
GUEST
LIST

THE PARIS
APARTMENT

THE PARIS APARTMENT

A NOVEL

LUCY FOLEY

The logo for William Morrow, featuring a stylized, cursive lowercase 'wm'.

WILLIAM MORROW

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Dedication

For AI, for everything.

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Prologue

Ben

Friday

His fingers hover over the keyboard. Got to get it all down. This: this is the story that's going to make his name. Ben lights another cigarette, a Gitane. Bit of a cliché to smoke them here but he does actually like the taste. And fine, yeah, likes the way he looks smoking them too.

He's sitting in front of the apartment's long windows, which look onto the central courtyard. Everything out there is steeped in darkness, save for the weak greenish glow thrown by a single lamp. It's a beautiful building, but there's something rotten at its heart. Now he's discovered it he can smell the stench of it everywhere.

He should be clearing out of here soon. He's overstayed his welcome in this place. Jess could hardly have chosen a worse time to decide to come and stay. She barely gave him any notice. And she didn't give much detail on the phone but clearly something's up; something wrong with whatever crappy bar job she's working now. His half sister has a knack for turning up when she's not wanted. She's like a homing beacon for trouble: it seems to follow her around. She's never been good at just *playing the game*. Never understood how much easier it makes life if you just give people what they want, tell them what they want to hear. Admittedly, he did tell her to come and stay "whenever you like," but he didn't really mean it. Trust Jess to take him at his word.

When was the last time he saw her? Thinking about her always makes him feel guilty. Should he have been there for her more, looked out for her . . . ? She's fragile, Jess. Or—not fragile exactly, but vulnerable in a way people probably don't see at first. An “armadillo”: softness beneath that tough exterior.

Anyway. He should call her, give her some directions. When her phone rings out he leaves a voicenote: “Hey Jess, so it's number twelve, Rue des Amants. Got that? Third floor.”

His eye's drawn to a flash of movement in the courtyard beneath the windows. Someone's passing through it quickly. Almost running. He can only make out a shadowy figure, can't see who it is. But something about the speed seems odd. He's hit with a little animal spike of adrenaline.

He remembers he's still recording the voicenote, drags his gaze from the window. “Just ring the buzzer. I'll be up waiting for you—”

He stops speaking. Hesitates, listens.

A noise.

The sound of footsteps out on the landing . . . approaching the apartment door.

The footsteps stop. Someone is there, just outside. He waits for a knock. None comes. Silence. But a weighted silence, like a held breath.

Odd.

And then another sound. He stands still, ears pricked, listening intently. There it is again. It's metal on metal, the scrape of a key. Then the clunk of it entering the mechanism. He watches the lock turn. Someone is unlocking his door from the outside. Someone who has a key, but no business coming in here uninvited.

The handle begins to move downward. The door begins to open, with that familiar drawn-out groan.

He puts his phone down on the kitchen counter, voicenote forgotten. Waits and watches dumbly as the door swings forward. As the figure steps into the room.

“What are you doing here?” he asks. Calm, reasonable. Nothing to hide. Not afraid. Or not yet. “And why—”

Then he sees what his intruder holds.

Now. Now the fear comes.

Three Hours Later

Jess

For Christ's sake, Ben. Answer your phone. I'm freezing my tits off out here. My Eurostar was two hours late leaving London; I should have arrived at ten-thirty but it's just gone midnight. And it's cold tonight, even colder here in Paris than it was in London. It's only the end of October but my breath smokes in the air and my toes are numb in my boots. Crazy to think there was a heatwave only a few weeks ago. I need a proper coat. But there's always been a lot of things I need that I'm never going to get.

I've probably called Ben ten times now: as my Eurostar pulled in, on the half hour walk here from Gare du Nord. No answer. And he hasn't replied to any of my texts. Thanks for nothing, big bro.

He said he'd be here to let me in. "Just ring the buzzer. I'll be up waiting for you—"

Well, I'm here. Here being a dimly lit, cobblestoned cul-de-sac in what appears to be a seriously posh neighborhood. The apartment building in front of me closes off this end, standing all on its own.

I glance back down the empty street. Beside a parked car, about twenty feet away, I think I see the shadows shift. I step to the side, to try and get a better look. There's . . . I squint, trying to make out the shape. I could swear there's someone there, crouched behind the car.

I jump as a siren blares a few streets away, loud in the silence. Listen as the sound fades away into the night. It's different from the ones at home—"nee-naw, nee-naw," like a child's impression—but it still makes my heart beat a little faster.

I glance back at the shadowy area behind the parked car. Now I can't make out any movement, can't even see the shape I thought I glimpsed before. Maybe it was just a trick of the light, after all.

I look back up at the building. The others on this street are beautiful, but this one knocks spots off them all. It's set back from the road behind a big gate with a high wall on either side, concealing what must be some sort of garden or courtyard. Five or six stories, huge windows, all with wrought-iron balconies. A big sprawl of ivy growing all over the front of it which looks like a creeping dark stain. If I crane my neck I can see what might be a roof garden on the top, the spiky shapes of the trees and shrubs black cut-outs against the night sky.

I double-check the address. Number twelve, Rue des Amants. I've definitely got it right. I still can't quite believe this swanky apartment building is where Ben's been living. He said a mate helped sort him out with it, someone he knew from his student days. But then Ben's always managed to fall on his feet. I suppose it only makes sense that he's charmed his way into a place like this. And charm must have done it. I know journalists probably earn more than bartenders, but not by this much.

The metal gate in front of me has a brass lion's head knocker: the fat metal ring held between snarling teeth. Along the top of the gate, I notice, is a bristle of anti-climb spikes. And all along the high wall either side of the gate are embedded shards of glass. These security measures feel kind of at odds with the elegance of the building.

I lift up the knocker, cold and heavy in my hand, let it drop. The clang of it bounces off the cobblestones, so much louder than expected in the silence. In fact, it's so quiet and dark here that it's hard to imagine it's part of the same city I've trundled across this evening from Gare du Nord: all the bright lights and crowds, people spilling in and out of restaurants and bars. I think of the area around that huge cathedral lit up on the hill, the Sacré-Coeur, which I passed beneath only twenty minutes ago: throngs of tourists out taking selfies and dodgy-looking guys in puffer jackets sharking between them, ready to nick a wallet or two. And the streets that I walked through with the neon signs, the blaring music, the all-night food, the crowds spilling out of bars, the queues for clubs. This is a different universe. I look back down the street behind me: not another person in sight. The only real sound comes from a scurry of dead ivy across the cobblestones. I can hear the roar

of traffic at a distance, the honking of car horns—but even that seems muffled, like it wouldn't dare intrude on this elegant, hushed world.

I didn't stop to think much, pulling my case across town from the station. I was mainly concentrating on not getting mugged, or letting the broken wheel of my suitcase stick and throw me off balance. But now, for the first time, it sinks in: I'm here, in Paris. A different city, a different country. I've made it. I've left my old life behind.

A light snaps on in one of the windows up above. I glance up and there's a dark figure standing there, head and shoulders in silhouette. Ben? If it were him, though, he'd wave down at me, surely. I know I must be lit up by the nearby streetlamp. But the figure at the window is as still as a statue. I can't make out any features or even whether they're male or female. But they're watching me. They must be. I suppose I must look pretty shabby and out of place with my broken old suitcase trying to bust open despite the bungee cord wrapped around it. A strange feeling, knowing they can see me but I can't see them properly. I drop my eyes.

Aha. To the right of the gate I spot a little panel of buttons for the different apartments with a lens set into it. The big lion's head knocker must just be for show. I step forward and press the one for the third floor, for Ben's place. I wait for his voice to crackle through the intercom.

No answer.

Sophie

Penthouse

Someone is knocking on the front door to the building. Loud enough for Benoit, my silver whippet, to leap to his feet and let out a volley of barks.

“*Arrête ça!*” I shout. “Stop that.”

Benoit whimpers, then goes quiet. He looks up at me, confusion in his dark eyes. I can hear the change in my voice as well—too shrill, too loud. And I can hear my own breathing in the silence that follows, rough and shallow.

No one ever uses the door knocker. Certainly, no one familiar with this building. I go to the windows on this side of the apartment, which look down into the courtyard. I can't see onto the street from here, but the front door from the street leads into the courtyard, so if anyone had come in I would see them there. But no one has entered and it must have been a few minutes since the knocking. Clearly it's not someone the concierge thinks should be admitted. Fine. Good. I haven't always liked that woman, but I know I can trust her in this at least.

In Paris you can live in the most luxurious apartment and the scum of the city will still wash up at your door on occasion. The drug addicts, the vagrants. The whores. Pigalle, the red-light district, lies just a little way away, clinging to the coattails of Montmartre. Up here, in this multi-million-euro fortress with its views out over the city's rooftops, all the way to the Tour Eiffel, I have always felt comparatively safe. I can ignore the grime beneath the gilt. I am good at turning a blind eye. Usually. But tonight is . . . different.

I go to check my reflection in the mirror that hangs in the hallway. I pay close attention to what I see in the glass. Not so bad for fifty. It is partly due to the fact that I have adopted the French way when it comes to maintaining my *forme*. Which essentially means always being hungry. I know that even at this hour I will be looking immaculate. My lipstick is flawless. I never leave the apartment without it. Chanel, “La Somptueuse”: my signature color. A bluish, regal color that says: “stand back,” not “come hither.” My hair is a shining black bob cut every six weeks by David Mallet at Notre Dame des Victoires. The shape perfected, any silver painstakingly concealed. Jacques, my husband, made it quite clear once that he abhors women who allow themselves to go gray. Even if he hasn’t always been here to admire it.

I am wearing what I consider my uniform. My armor. Silk Equipment shirt, exquisitely-cut dark slim trousers. A scarf—brightly patterned Hermès silk—around my neck, which is excellent for concealing the ravages of time to the delicate skin there. A recent gift from Jacques, with his love of beautiful things. Like this apartment. Like me, as I was before I had the bad grace to age.

Perfect. As ever. As expected. But I feel dirty. Sullied by what I have had to do this evening. In the glass my eyes glitter. The only sign. Though my face is a little gaunt, too—if you were to look closely. I am even thinner than usual. Recently I have not had to watch my diet, to carefully mark each glass of wine or morsel of croissant. I couldn’t tell you what I ate for breakfast this morning; whether I remembered to eat at all. Each day my waistband hangs looser, the bones of my sternum protrude more sharply.

I undo the knot of my scarf. I can tie a scarf as well as any born and bred Parisian. By it you know me for one of them, those chic moneyed women with their small dogs and their excellent breeding.

I look at the text message I sent to Jacques last night. *Bonne nuit, mon amour. Tout va bien ici. Good night, my love. Everything is fine here.*

Everything is fine here. HA.

I don’t know how it has come to this. But I do know that it started with him coming here. Moving into the third floor. Benjamin Daniels. He destroyed everything.

Jess

I pull out my phone. Last time I checked Ben hadn't replied to any of my messages. One on the Eurostar: On my way! And then: At Gare du Nord! Do you have an Uber account?!!! Just in case, you know, he suddenly felt generous enough to send a cab to collect me. Seemed worth a shot.

There is a new message on my phone. Only it's not from Ben.

You stupid little bitch. Think you can get away with what you've done?

Shit. I swallow past the sudden dryness in my throat. Then I delete it. Block the number.

As I say, it was all a bit last minute, coming here. Ben didn't sound that thrilled when I called him earlier and told him I was on my way. True, I didn't give him much time to get used to the idea. But then it's always felt like the bond between us is more important to me than it is to my half brother. I suggested we hang out last Christmas, but he said he was busy. "Skiing," he said. Didn't even know he could ski. Sometimes it even feels like I'm an embarrassment to him. I represent the past, and he'd rather be cut loose from all that.

I had to explain I was desperate. "Hopefully it'll only be for a month or two, and I'll pay my way," I said. "Just as soon as I get on my feet. I'll get a job." Yeah. One where they don't ask too many questions. That's how you end up in the places I've worked at—there aren't that many that will take you when your references are such a shitshow.

Up until this afternoon I was gainfully employed at the Copacabana bar in Brighton. The odd massive tip made up for it. A load of wanker bankers, say, down from London celebrating some Dick or Harry or Tobias' upcoming

nuptials and too pissed to count the notes out right—or maybe to guys like that it's just so much loose change anyway. But, as of today, I'm unemployed. Again.

I press the buzzer a second time. No answer. All the building's windows are dark again—even the one that lit up before. Christ's sake. He couldn't have turned in for the night and totally forgotten about me . . . could he?

Below all the other buzzers there's a separate one: *Concierge*, it reads in curly script. Like something in a hotel: further proof that this place is seriously upmarket. I press the button, wait. No answer. But I can't help imagining someone looking at the little video image of me, assessing, then deciding not to open up.

I lift up the heavy knocker again and slam it several times against the wood. The sound echoes down the street: someone must hear it. I can just make out a dog barking, from somewhere deep inside the building.

I wait five minutes. No one comes.

Shit.

I can't afford a hotel. I don't have enough for a return journey to London—and even if I did there's no way I'm going back. I consider my options. Go to a bar . . . wait it out?

I hear footsteps behind me, ringing out on the cobblestones. Ben? I spin round, ready for him to apologize, tell me he just popped out to get some ciggies or something. But the figure walking toward me isn't my brother. He's too tall, too broad, a parka hood with a fur rim up over his head. He's moving quickly and there's something purposeful about his walk. I grip the handle of my suitcase a little tighter. Literally everything I own is in here.

He's only a few meters away now, close enough that by the light of the streetlamp I can make out the gleam of his eyes under the hood. He's reaching into his pocket, pulling his hand back out. Something makes me take a step backward. And now I see it. Something sharp and metallic, gleaming in his hand.

Concierge

The Loge

I watch her on the intercom screen, the stranger at the gate. What can she be doing here? She rings the buzzer again. She must be lost. I know, just from looking at her, that she has no business being here. Except she seems certain that this is the place she wants, so determined. Now she looks into the lens. I will not let her in. I cannot.

I am the gatekeeper of this building. Sitting here in my *loge*: a tiny cabin in the corner of the courtyard, which would fit maybe twenty times into the apartments above me. But it is mine, at least. My private space. My home. Most people wouldn't consider it worthy of the name. If I sit on the pull-down bed, I can touch nearly all the corners of the room at once. There is damp spreading from the ground and down from the roof and the windows don't keep out the cold. But there are four walls. There is a place for me to put my photographs with their echoes of a life once lived, the little relics I have collected and which I hold onto when I feel most alone; the flowers I pick from the courtyard garden every other morning so there is something fresh and alive in here. This place, for all its shortcomings, represents security. Without it I have nothing.

I look again at the face on the intercom screen. As the light catches her just so I see a familiarity: the sharp line of the nose and jaw. But more than her appearance it is something about the way she moves, looks around her. A hungry, vulpine quality that reminds me of another. All the more reason not to let her in. I don't like strangers. I don't like change. Change has always been dangerous for me. He proved that: coming here with his questions, his

charm. The man who came to live in the third-floor apartment: Benjamin Daniels. After he came here, everything changed.

Jess

He's coming straight for me, the guy in the parka. He's lifting his arm. The metal of the blade gleams again. Shit. I'm about to turn and run—get a few yards on him at least—

But wait, no, *no* . . . I can see now that the thing in his hand isn't a blade. It's an iPhone, in a metallic case. I let out the breath I've been holding and lean against my bag, hit by a sudden wave of tiredness. I've been wired all day, no wonder I'm spooking at shadows.

I watch as the guy makes a call. I can make out a tinny little voice at the other end; a woman's voice, I think. Then he begins to talk, over her, louder and louder, until he's shouting into his handset. I have no idea what the words mean exactly but I don't need to know much French to understand this isn't a polite or friendly chat.

After he's got his long, angry speech off his chest he hangs up and shoves the phone back in his pocket. Then he spits out a single word: "*Putain.*"

I know that one. I got a D in my French GCSE but I did look up all the swear words once and I'm good at remembering the stuff that interests me. *Whore*: that's what it means.

Now he turns and starts walking in my direction again. And I see, quite clearly, that he just wants to use the gate to this building. I step aside, feeling a total idiot for having got so keyed up over nothing. But it makes sense; I spent the whole Eurostar journey looking over my shoulder. You know, just in case.

"*Bonsoir,*" I say in my best accent, flashing my most winning smile. Maybe this guy will let me in and I can go up to the third floor and hammer on Ben's apartment door. Maybe his buzzer's simply not working or something.

The guy doesn't reply. He just turns to the keypad next to the gate and punches in a series of numbers. Finally he gives me a quick glance over his shoulder. It's not the *most* friendly glance. I catch a waft of booze, stale and sour. Same breath as most of the punters in the Copacabana.

I smile again. "Er . . . *excuse moi?* Please, ah—I need some help, I'm looking for my brother, Ben. Benjamin Daniels—"

I wish I had a bit more of Ben's flair, his charm. "Benjamin Silver-Tongue," Mum called him. He's always had this way of getting anyone to do what he wants. Maybe that's why he ended up a journalist in Paris while I've been working for a bloke affectionately known as The Pervert in a shithole bar in Brighton serving stag dos at the weekends and local lowlifes in the week.

The guy turns back to face me, slowly. "Benjamin Daniels," he says. Not a question: just the name, repeated. I see something: anger, or maybe fear. He knows who I'm talking about. "Benjamin Daniels is not here."

"What do you mean, he's not here?" I ask. "This is the address he gave me. He's up on the third floor. I can't get hold of him."

The man turns his back on me. I watch as he pulls open the gate. Finally he turns round to face me a third time and I think: maybe he is going to help me, after all. Then, in accented English, very slowly and loudly, he says: "Fuck off, *little girl.*"

Before I even have time to reply there's a clang of metal and I jump backward. He's slammed the gate shut, right in my face. As the ringing fades from my ears I'm left with just the sound of my breathing, fast and loud.

But he's helped me, even though he doesn't know it. I wait a moment, take a quick look back down the street. Then I lift my hand to the keypad and punch in the same numbers I watched him use only a few seconds ago: 7561. Bingo: the little light flickers green and I hear the mechanism of the gate click open. Dragging my case after me, I slip inside.