

“Made me think and cry and rage and smile at mankind’s capacity for both beautiful, selfless love and terrible, heartbreaking cruelty.”

—NATASHA LESTER, *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR



While
Paris
Slept

a novel

Ruth Druart

*While
Paris
Slept*

RUTH DRUART



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

And in memory of my grandmother Diana White

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“Let us sacrifice one day to gain perhaps a whole life.”

—*From Les Misérables by Victor Hugo*

Part One

Chapter One

Santa Cruz, June 24, 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 recognize himself. Pausing, razor held in midair, 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 around 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 driver's seat, craning his neck, peering around—like a pelican, he thinks to himself. A stocky man emerges on the other side. They walk toward the house.

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

"I'll go." Jean-Luc's already heading that way. He slips the chain from the lock and opens the door.

"Mr. Bow-Champ?" 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.

“Beauchamp,” 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 in one corner. “I’m Mr. Jackson, and this is Mr. Bradley. Mr. Bow-Champ, 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 around, 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-Champ, 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 neighbors.”

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

Bradley rolls his lips together. “These are just preliminary inquiries. 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 toward 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 color 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 gray 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 toward 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 parlor. This life he's come to love.

Chapter Two

Santa Cruz, June 24, 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 cleaning. 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 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 hood rounding the corner: Marge from across the road. I watch her struggle with shopping bags while one of her twin boys chases the other around 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 neighbors' 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 hypothesizing, 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 shopping carts 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 favorite.

Two packs of chicken breasts, a pint of milk, and four lemons look lost and forlorn at the bottom of the 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