

“Kimberly Belle has crafted the perfect thriller.

MAGNIFIQUE!”

—ALEX FINLAY, author of *What Have We Done*

the
**PARIS
WIDOW**

Bestselling Author of *THE PERSONAL ASSISTANT*

**KIMBERLY
BELLE**

a novel

“Kimberly Belle has crafted the perfect thriller.

MAGNIFIQUE!”

—ALEX FINLAY, author of *What Have We Done*

the
**PARIS
WIDOW**

Bestselling Author of *THE PERSONAL ASSISTANT*

**KIMBERLY
BELLE**

a novel

Praise for the novels of Kimberly Belle

“Riveting suspense, truly surprising revelations, and silky smooth writing make this one unmissable!”

—Joshilyn Jackson, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Never Have I Ever*

“An enthralling plot with compelling characters that make it impossible to pull yourself from the page. Belle has hit another one out of the park!”

—Liv Constantine, internationally bestselling author of *The Last Mrs. Parrish*

“Belle explores the shocking depths people will go to keep their secrets buried in her latest slow-burn thriller before building to an explosive and unexpected finale. A must-read!”

—Mary Kubica, *New York Times* bestselling author of *She’s Not Sorry*

“Absolutely superb. Kimberly Belle is the queen of domestic suspense.”

—Cristina Alger, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Girls Like Us*

“A spellbinding tale of lies and deceit that unfolds piece by devastating piece.”

—Samantha Downing, bestselling author of *My Lovely Wife*

“Masterfully written... Belle has outdone herself with this thrilling and emotionally complex tale.”

—Jennifer Hillier, bestselling author of *Jar of Hearts*

“Not even the most astute suspense fan will see what’s coming until the final, jaw-dropping twist. Five breathtaking stars!”

—Heather Gudenkauf, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Everyone Is Watching*

“The suspense builds rapidly... A compelling adventure.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

“A surprising and fast-paced read.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“With plot twists around every corner, Belle isn’t afraid to keep her readers guessing until the very last page.”

—*Booklist*

The Paris Widow

Kimberly Belle



*To Bella.
This one's all for you.*

Contents

[Prologue](#)

[One](#)

[Two](#)

[Three](#)

[Four](#)

[Five](#)

[Six](#)

[Seven](#)

[Eight](#)

[Nine](#)

[Ten](#)

[Eleven](#)

[Twelve](#)

[Thirteen](#)

[Fourteen](#)

[Fifteen](#)

[Sixteen](#)

[Seventeen](#)

[Eighteen](#)

[Nineteen](#)

[Twenty](#)

[Twenty-One](#)

[Twenty-Two](#)

[Twenty-Three](#)

[Twenty-Four](#)

[Twenty-Five](#)

[Twenty-Six](#)

[Twenty-Seven](#)

[Twenty-Eight](#)

[Twenty-Nine](#)

[Thirty](#)

[Thirty-One](#)

[Thirty-Two](#)

[Thirty-Three](#)

[Thirty-Four](#)

[Thirty-Five](#)

[Thirty-Six](#)

[Author's Note](#)

Prologue

Nice, France

What seems to us as bitter trials are often blessings in disguise.

—Oscar Wilde

At Nice’s Côte d’Azur Airport, the pretty woman coming down the Jetway looked like every other bleary-eyed traveler. Rumpled T-shirt over jeans with an indeterminate stain on the right thigh, hair shoved into a messy ponytail mussed from the headrest. A backpack was slung over her right shoulder, weighed down with items that weren’t technically hers but looked like they could be. She’d sorted through them on the seven-hour flight, just long enough to make the contents feel familiar.

“Don’t lose it,” the Turkish man said when he hung it on her arm, and she hadn’t.

The Jetway dumped her into the terminal, and she trailed behind a family of five, past gates stretched out like spider legs, along the wall of windows offering a blinding view of the sparkling Mediterranean, a turquoise so bright it burned her eyes. The backpack bounced against her shoulder bone, and her heart gave a quiet little jingle.

She made it through passport control without issue, thanks to her careful selection of the agent behind the glass. A man, first and foremost. Not too old or too young, not too handsome. A five to her solid eight—or so she’d been told by more than one man. This one must have agreed, because he stamped her passport with an appreciative nod. Frenchmen were like that. One smile from a woman out of their league, and they melted like a cream-filled bonbon.

She thanked him and slid her passport into her pocket.

In it were stamps to every country in Europe and the Americas, from her crisscrosses over every continent including Antarctica, from her detours to bask on the famous beaches of Asia, Australia, the South Seas. More than once, she’d had to renew the booklet long before it expired because she’d run out of empty spots for customs agents to stamp. She was particularly proud of

that, and of how she could look any way you wanted her to look, be anyone you needed her to be. Today she was playing the role of American Tourist On A Budget.

At baggage claim, she slid the backpack down an aching shoulder and checked the time on her cell. Just under six hours for this little errand, plenty of time, assuming she didn't hit any unexpected roadblocks. If she didn't get held up at customs, if the taxi line wasn't too long, if traffic on the A8 wasn't too awful, which it would be because getting in and out of Monte Carlo was always a nightmare at this time of year. *If if if*. If she missed the flight to London, she was screwed.

A buzzer sounded, and the baggage carousel rumbled to a slow spin.

At least she didn't look any more miserable than the people milling around her, their faces long with jet lag. She caught snippets of conversation in foreign tongues, German, Italian, Arabic, French, and she didn't need a translator to know they were bitching about the wait. The French were never in a hurry, and they were always striking about something. She wondered what it could be this time.

Thirty-eight eternal minutes later, the carousel spit out her suitcase. She hauled it from the band with a grunt, plopped the heavy backpack on top and followed the stream of tourists to the exit.

Walk with purpose. Look the customs agent in the eye. Smile, the fleeting kind with your lips closed, not too big or too cocky. Act breezy like you've got nothing to prove or to hide. By now she knew all the tricks.

The customs agent she was paired with was much too young for her liking, his limbs still lanky with the leftovers of puberty, which meant he had something to prove to the cluster of more senior agents lingering behind him. She ignored their watchful gazes, taking in his shiny forehead, the way it was dotted with pimples, and dammit, he was going to be a problem.

He held up a hand, the universal sign for *halt*. "*Avez-vous quelque chose à déclarer?*"

Her fingers curled around the suitcase handle, clamping down. She gave him an apologetic smile. "Sorry, but I don't speak French."

That part was the truth, at least. She *didn't* speak it—at least, not well and not unless she absolutely had to. And her rudimentary French wasn't necessary just yet.

But she understood him well enough, and she definitely knew that last word. He was asking if she had something to declare.

The agent gestured to her suitcase. “Please, may I take a look in your luggage?” His English was heavy with accent, his lips slick with spit, but at least he was polite about it.

She gave a pointed look at the exit a few feet away. On the other side of the motion-activated doors, a line of people leaned against a glass-and-steel railing, fists full of balloons and colorful bouquets. With her free hand, she wriggled her fingers in a wave, even though she didn’t know a single one of them.

She looked back at the agent with another smile. “Is that really necessary? My flight was delayed, and I’m kind of in a hurry. My friends out there have been waiting for hours.”

Calm. Reasonable. Not breaking the slightest sweat.

The skin of his forehead creased in a frown. “This means you have nothing to declare?”

“Only that a saleslady lied to my face about a dress I bought being wrinkle resistant.”

She laughed, but the agent’s face remained as stony as ever.

He beckoned her toward an area behind him, a short hallway lined with metal tables. “*S’il vous plaît*. The second table.”

Still, she didn’t move. The doors slid open, and she flung another glance at the people lined up outside. So close, yet so far.

As if he could read her mind, the agent took a calculated step to his left, standing between her and the exit. He swept an insistent arm through the air, giving her little choice. The cluster of agents were paying more attention now.

She huffed a sigh. Straightened her shoulders and gave her bag a hard tug. “Okay, but fair warning. I’m on the tail end of a three-week vacation here, which means everything in my suitcase is basically a giant pile of dirty laundry.”

Again, the truth. Miami to Atlanta to LA to Tokyo to Dubai to Nice, a blur of endless hours with crummy movies and soggy airplane food, of loud, smelly men who drank vodka for breakfast, of kids marching up and down the aisles while everybody else was trying to sleep. What she was wearing was the cleanest thing she had left, and she was still thousands of miles from home.

She let go of the handle, and the suitcase spun and wobbled, whacking the metal leg of the table with a hard clang. Let him lug the heavy thing onto the

inspection table himself.

She stood with crossed arms and watched him spread her suitcase open on the table. She wasn't lying about the laundry or that stupid dress, which currently looked like a crumpled paper bag. He picked through her dirty jeans and rumpled T-shirts, rifled through blouses and skirts. When he got to the wad of dirty underwear, he clapped the suitcase shut.

"See?" she said. "Just a bunch of dirty clothes."

"And your other bag?"

The backpack dangling from her shoulder, an ugly Tumi knockoff. Her stomach dropped, but she made sure to hold his gaze.

"Nothing in here, either. No meat, no cheese, no forgotten fruit. I promise."

She'd done that once, let an old apple sink to the bottom of her bag for a hyped-up beagle to sniff out, and she'd paid for it with a forty-five-minute wait at a scorching Chilean airport. It was a mistake she wouldn't make again.

"Madame, please. Do not make me ask you again."

The little shit really said it. He really called her *madame*. This kid who was barely out of high school was making her feel old and decrepit, while in the same breath speaking to her like she was a child. His words were as infuriating as they were alarming. She hooked a thumb under the backpack's strap, but she didn't let it go.

And yet what choice did she have? She couldn't run, not with those senior agents watching. Not with this pubescent kid and his long grasshopper limbs. He'd catch her in a hot second.

She told herself there was nothing to find. That's what the Turkish man had promised her with a wink and a smile, that nobody would ever know. He swore she'd cruise right on through customs. And she had, many, many times.

As she slid the backpack from her arm with another dramatic sigh, she hoped like hell he wasn't lying. "Please hurry."

The agent took the bag from her fingers and emptied it out on the table. He took out the paperback and crinkled magazines, the half-eaten bag of nuts with the Japanese label, the wallet and the zippered pouch stuffed with well-used cosmetics that had never once touched her face. He lined the items up, one after the other, until the contents formed a long, neat row on the shiny metal surface. The backpack hung in his hand, deflated and empty.

She lifted a brow: *See?*

But then he did something she wasn't expecting. He turned the backpack upside down, just...upended the thing in the air. Crumbs rained onto the table. A faded receipt fluttered to the ground.

And there it was, a dull but discernible scraping sound, a sudden weight tugging at the muscles in his arm, like something inside the backpack shifted.

But nothing else fell out. There were no internal pockets.

"What was that?"

"What was what?" With a clanging heart, she pointed to the stuff on the table. "Can I put that back now? I really have to go."

The agent stared at her through a long, weighted silence, like a held breath. Hers.

He slapped the backpack to the table, and she cringed when he shoved a hand in deep, all the way up to his elbow. He felt around the sides and the bottom, sweeping his fingers around the cheap polyester lining. She saw when he made contact with the source of the noise by the way his face changed.

The muscles in her stomach tightened. "Excuse me. This is ridiculous. Give it back."

The agent didn't let go of the backpack. He reached in his other hand, and now there was another terrifying sound—of fabric, being ripped apart at the seams.

"Hey," she said, lunging for the backpack.

He twisted, blocking her with his body.

A few breathless seconds later he pulled it out, a small, flat object that had been sewn into the backpack lining. Small enough to fit in the palm of his hand. Almost like he'd been looking for it.

"What is this?" he said, holding it in the air between them.

"That's a book." It was the only thing she could think of to say, and it wasn't just any book. It was a gold-illuminated manuscript by a revered fourteenth-century Persian poet, one of the earliest copies from the estate of an Islamic art collector who died in Germany last year. Like most of the items in his collection, this one did not technically belong to him.

"I can see it's a book. Where did you get it?"

Her face went hot, and she had to steady herself on the metal table—the same one he was settling the book gently on top of. He turned the gold-leafed paper with careful fingers, and her mind whirled. Should she plead jet lag?

Cry or pretend to faint?

“I’ve never seen it before in my life.”

This, finally, was the truth. Today was the first time she’d seen the book with her own eyes.

The agent looked up from the Arabic symbols on the page, and she didn’t miss the gotcha gleam in his eyes. The way his shiny forehead had gone even shinier now, a million new pinpricks of satisfied sweat. His gaze flitted over her shoulder, and she understood the gesture perfectly.

He was summoning backup.

She was wondering about French prison conditions.

His smile was like ice water on her skin. “Madame, I must insist you come with me.”

One

Stella

Paris

I grab Adam's hand and tug him hard to the left, dragging my husband into a somewhat sketchy Parisian alleyway. Smooth beige limestone stretches up on either side of us, darker at the bottom with grime from passing bikes and cars—not that many could fit through here at one time. The alley is no wider than a one-way street.

Adam falls into step behind me. There are no sidewalks here, just a narrow street with a bend up ahead and tall buildings rising on both sides, and we stick close to the walls just in case. We've been dodging Parisian traffic long enough to know that cars in this city don't stop.

I pause to point to a pile of brown goo wedged in cobblestones. It's late June, and smells of the city summer roll on a light breeze: baked bread, geraniums bursting into bloom, heated tarmac, dog poop.

"Don't step in that."

Adam's sole misses it by half an inch, but he doesn't complain about the close call or the sketchy alleyway, and he doesn't bother mentioning the many cafés and restaurants we passed along the way. When it comes to food, I like things that are off the beaten path.

"I just hope it's still here," I say, even though I've already prepared him for the possibility it might not be. My husband loves a good plan. He likes beginning every morning with a mental run-through of the day's agenda, one that leaves little room for spontaneity. His calendar is a color-coded work of art. He does best when I give him advance notice of any deviations.

But it's not like I could call ahead for a reservation. The last time I was here was ages ago, and I don't remember the restaurant's name or the exact address, only the general location. There's a very real possibility the restaurant no longer exists.

"It better be, because I was promised food so good that it'll make me fall to the ground."

A painfully chic Parisian I once knew told me that about this place, and I

didn't understand her zeal until she made me try the *galette trois fromages* and I almost died. *Falling to the ground* is a Frenchism for *faint*, and my friend was right. That first bite was practically orgasmic.

Up ahead, a motorcycle comes squealing around the corner, a dark figure in head-to-toe black gunning the engine in our direction. We press ourselves to the wall and wait for him to whiz by, close enough to stir my clothes and hair. Adam's fingers wrap around mine tight like a glove.

"How much farther?" he says once the growling engine has faded. His dark shades, the ones he bought at a junky tourist shop in Portofino, have slid down his nose. He looks at me over the brim. "I'm starving."

I grin and tug him onward. "Almost there. And you're always starving."

My husband's endless appetite is one of the quirks I love about him, along with his knobby fingers and wonky pinkie toes, his habit of talking to himself in the car and in the shower, and that look he gets on his face when he's haggling for a precious antique: victory mixed with boyish wonder. These past few days in Paris, we've bounced from café to *brocante* to *boulangerie* to *marché aux puces* to *crêperie* all day long, with an occasional peek at the Seine or the Eiffel Tower in between—all of which was fine by me. I've seen all the sights anyway, multiple times.

"I'm not meeting you in Europe to play tourist," I told him when we began planning this adventure, a tagalong vacation tacked onto Adam's work trip. "I'm coming so we can experience life like the Europeans do. Eat where they eat. Shop where they shop. Learn a couple of key phrases so we can speak to them in their own language. Believe me, when it comes to getting a reservation or having a shopkeeper help you out, a few phrases go a long way. I want people to see us and think we're locals."

Not that Adam is one of *those* Americans—the ones who don white running shoes under baggy jeans and a polo, or bitch in shouty voices about how nobody here speaks any English. Adam lives in slim-cut pants and battered brogues, and there's not a shirt in his wardrobe that isn't collared. He prefers restrained over flashy, dark tones over bright patterns or colors. It's another thing I love about him, that he dresses like he stepped out of an Italian movie set in the 1950s. When he walks into an antique store anywhere in the world, the shopkeepers think he's one of them.

And his French is excellent.

The alleyway opens onto a small square, a steady stream of honking cars and growling bikes weaving aggressively around a pretty park the size of a

postage stamp. People mill around on the sunken grass, getting dragged by dogs on leashes or chatting by a bubbling fountain. Well-dressed people, women with blowouts and high heels, men in linen jackets complete with elbow patches. This is the 6th arrondissement, a district filled with palaces and ancient churches and million-dollar apartments, like the ones that line this square. You can tell by the windows hung with overflowing flower boxes, by the ornate Art Nouveau railings on the shallow balconies, their double doors flung wide to let in the breeze.

Adam's gaze is focused lower to the ground, scanning the restaurants on the bottom floor. "Which one?"

I point to a tiny terrace under a yellow-and-white-striped awning, where three rickety café tables are jammed between concrete planters bursting with hot-pink bougainvillea. To the right, a plain wooden door stands open. No sign, no posted menu. And not one single solitary tourist.

In other words: perfection.

"Grab that one," I say, pointing to the table at the end, where an elderly couple just finished their coffee. The woman is already standing, already gathering up her things, while her husband wedges a colorful euro note between the cup and saucer. "I'll go in and tell the chef to get busy."

We have allotted an hour for this meal and not a second more, to comfortably make our 5:00 p.m. flight. If we'd asked the hotel concierge, he would have directed us to Café de Flore or Les Deux Magots, infamous tourist traps that charge twenty euros for a cup of halfway decent coffee. Last meal, best meal, I promised Adam, and the perfect way to cap off what's turned out to be the trip of a lifetime.

Amsterdam. Malta. Bilbao. The Amalfi Coast. Luxembourg. Paris. Six countries, ten stops, twenty-one glorious days zigzagging through my favorite spots in all of Europe, places I've been to dozens of times. Only this time I'm seeing them with Adam.

Another thing I adore about my husband? He loves to travel as much as I do.

I step inside the restaurant to a dizzying scent, coffee and cheese and sizzling meat. It's still on the early side, but the staff is in full swing, bustling preparations for the lunch crowd. My French consists of mostly nouns, and I apologize as best I can for our hurry, stumbling over what I hope conveys the message that I couldn't leave Paris without introducing my husband to the best galettes in all the city. The waiter looks bewildered, his slow head shake

indicating he's still trying to puzzle out meaning from my torrent of horrendous grammar, but the chef's wink tells me he got the message.

Adam is settled by the time I return, his back pressed so far into the bougainvillea that it hangs over both shoulders, long braids of fuchsia flowers trailing down his crisp white shirt. He's scrolling through something on his phone, his big body balanced on the flimsy wooden café chair, and I pause for a moment to drink him in. That defiant cowlick in his dark hair, his scruff that's a few days beyond a five-clock shadow, his long legs outstretched in the morning sunshine.

My husband is beautiful, but the most beautiful thing about him is that he doesn't know it. He doesn't notice all the eyes that flit to him whenever he walks into a room, doesn't register all the head tilts. I pointed it out to him once back when we first started dating, and he said it was me, that those people were looking at *me*. I fell a little in love with him that day, because even when he's aware of the attention, he doesn't think it's for him.

"Gallettes are on the way," I say, sinking onto the chair across from Adam. Something beige and green flashes on the screen of his phone, a photograph of something ancient. Some kind of architectural antique, I'm guessing, the kind he sells in his shop. "Admiring your new babies, I take it."

Parquet floors and terra-cotta tiles smooth with age. Mantels and columns carved with fleurs-de-lis. Gilded mirrors and stained-glass windows and Louis XIV doors—those are his babies, gorgeous, complicated pieces reclaimed from Parisian apartments and country estates, from castles and châteaux. It's what he was doing here before I arrived, buying centuries-old artifacts for the Francophile architects who frequent his Atlanta shop, enough pieces to fill a whole shipping container.

He tosses his sunglasses on the table, holding his phone so I can see. "Hey, gorgeous. Take a look at this one."

I lean in and look at the screen, the heart pendant Adam gave me in Venice bouncing against my chest. "What am I looking at?" A complicated slab of matte white and shiny gold. "What is that?"

"It's a wall molding. That's twenty-four-karat gold leafing, and it's original, which is a miracle, considering its age. Late nineteenth century, salvaged from a home that once upon a time belonged to a French industrial family. They sold off most of their properties in the Great Depression. Do you know what they call the first upstairs floor in a Parisian apartment building? The 'noble floor.' Antoine told me that."

“Who’s Antoine?”

“Antoine Bernard. He owns a shop similar to mine in the 18th. I met him a couple of years ago at the Saint-Ouen market, and he’s become my ears on the ground for pieces like these, a dime a dozen here but the kind Americans pay top dollar for.” Adam drops his gaze to his cell phone screen, tapping it with a long finger. “Anyway, I bought eight.”

“And you got them for a steal, didn’t you?”

He gives me a lopsided grin. “How’d you know?”

“Because you have that look on your face.”

“What look?”

That look when his eyes go all bright and dancing, when his cheeks turn pink and shiny.

“Satisfied and proud and a little bit stunned, all at once. It’s the same look you get after a really hot—” I grin and lift a brow, but I don’t say the word out loud.

“Oh, you mean orgasm?” His voice is a whole decibel louder than it needs to be. “A really hot orgasm?”

I shush him, sending a pointed glance to the couple beside us, sharing a slice of tarte tatin.

“This is Paris, Stella. I’m pretty sure you can say the word *orgasm* out loud here.” He really leans into the word again, his grin growing wider. This is not a smile fit for lunch terraces or antique shops. “But you’re not wrong. Deal hunting does feel a lot like sex. Same buildup of excitement and adrenaline, same release of endorphins when you score.”

A pretty blonde with a flock of swirling butterflies tattooed up a bicep brings us our food, more galettes than the two of us could ever eat, wild mushroom and artichoke and sharp chèvre, a Florentine thick with wilted spinach and melted cheese. I sit back and let Adam take the first bites, smiling at his sounds of appreciation, which were much like mine the first time I tried them.

“You did not oversell this place,” he says once he’s tasted them all. “These galettes are freaking delicious.”

I think about the million things we have to do when we get home. The hours Adam will spend catching up at the shop and the fundraiser I’m supposed to help cater tomorrow night, the laundry and the lawn and the mountain of mail we’ll have to sort through. I think these things, and I don’t want to leave.

“So,” he says, dragging his knife through the mushroom galette, cutting off another generous slice, “what was your top best?”

It’s something we do often—at the end of a day, an experience, a trip—name the thing that stood out to us the most. That one, singular moment that will become a top cherished memory. I don’t have to even think about it.

“That’s easy. You almost getting mowed down by that bicycle in Amsterdam. You squealed like a little girl.”

Even now, weeks later, the memory makes me giggle. Adam stepping into the bike path that cuts through the middle of the Rijksmuseum, thinking it was a sidewalk. The oncoming cyclist leaning on his bell, the screaming and flailing of arms—mostly Adam’s as he leaped out of the way. I’ve never seen him move so fast.

“That asshole came out of nowhere, and I’m pretty sure that bike was electric, which how is that even allowed? He must have been doing fifty miles an hour.”

“Dutch bikes and trams, I told you to watch out for those things.” I pause for a bite of artichoke, grinning at him across the table. “What was yours?”

He takes a moment to think, staring out into the square, his gaze climbing the buildings on the opposite side, snagging on the prettiest one. On the second floor, the windows are thrown open, the sheer curtains just inside billowing in the breeze.

“You think they’re all going to be so cliché. Everywhere we went, I mean. We’ve both seen them before, and they’re all so recognizable—listed in every guidebook and travel site as Must Sees, pictured on everybody’s social medias. Notre Dame, Amsterdam’s canals, the pastel buildings on the Italian coastline. You know going in these places are going to be tourist traps, but then you get there and you don’t care. They’re exactly like you thought they would be and, at the same time, the most beautiful thing you’ve ever seen.”

I fall silent, because how many times have I tried to explain why my blood pumps hotter, why my heart beats more fiercely in a foreign land? A million, at least. For me the allure of a faraway place is a visceral, emotional thing. I’ve never been able to find words that give it enough weight. And now Adam just did. Without even trying, he found the exact right words.

I stare out into the square, where the sun sneaks through gaps in the cluster of trees and paints the grass and cobblestones with gold, and I sigh. “You want to stay another night?”

“I wish we could.”