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LUANNE
RICE

Secrets of Paris

A Novel

*"Secrets of Paris has warmth, charm, wisdom
and a great deal of heart." —San Francisco Chronicle*

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with Joseph Monninger
The Letters



*Secrets
of Paris*

A NOVEL

LUANNE
RICE



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2011 Bantam Books Trade Paperback Edition

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Published in the United States by Bantam Books, an imprint of The Random House Publishing Group, a division of Random House, Inc., New York.

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Originally published in hardcover in the United States by Viking Penguin, a division of Penguin Books USA Inc., in 1991.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Rice, Luanne.

Secrets of Paris: a novel / Luanne Rice.

p. cm.

eISBN: 978-0-553-90817-6 I. Title.

PS3558.I289S44 1991

813'.54—dc20 90-50746

www.bantamdell.com

Cover design: Brigid Pearson

Cover images: © TanMan/Getty Images (sunset), David Sacks/Taxi/Getty Images (couple), Jan Martin Will/Shutterstock (Seine)

v3.1

For Max, Olivier,
and Amelia Onorato,
with love

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Also by Luanne Rice

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About the Author



What I am about to communicate to you is the most astonishing thing, the most surprising, most triumphant, most baffling, most unheard of, most singular, most unbelievable, most unforeseen, biggest, tiniest, rarest, commonest, the most talked about, the most secret up to this day, the most enviable, in fact a thing of which only one example can be found in past ages, and, moreover, that example is a false one; a thing nobody can believe in Paris (how could anyone believe it in Lyons?).

—FROM MADAME DE SÉVIGNÉ TO COULANGES,
DECEMBER 1672

LYDIE McBRIDE OCCUPIED a café table in the Jardin du Palais Royal and thought how fine it was to be an American woman in Paris at the end of the twentieth century. The sun warmed her arms. People strolled along the dry paths, and the silvery dust mingled with the smell of strong coffee. It was one of the first hot spring days. Then something happened—cup clattered on the waiter's tray, or the breeze shifted, and Lydie thought of home. She felt a keen hankering for it: for her family, for her block in New York City, for the racetrack, for strangers speaking English.

"May I borrow your sugar?" someone asked in a low voice.

Lydie jumped. She had just been longing so hard to hear the English language, she wondered for an instant whether she had conjured the sound out of the May air. But then she regained her composure.

"Of course," she said, passing the china bowl to the woman at the next table. She watched her, a tall woman Lydie's age with dark hair twisted into a chignon, stir two sugar cubes into her coffee. This woman wore red lipstick perfectly; her eyes were hidden behind black sunglasses. Lydie, who never wore much makeup and had the sort of flyaway red hair that always looked uncombed, had the impression of much gold jewelry.

"I need some quick energy," the woman explained. "I just had a fitting at Chanel—a shopping experience that never fails to take the heart out of me."

Lydie smiled at the way she made shopping at Chanel sound like torture—somehow Lydie knew that she lived here.

"What brings you to Paris?" the woman asked.

Lydie hesitated, trying to formulate the short version of a complicated answer. "Well, for work. Michael—my husband—is an architect. He's working on the Louvre, part of an international exchange program. And I'm a stylist."

"A stylist? As in hair?"

Lydie laughed. "No, I work with photographers, doing pieces for magazines and catalogues. I set up the shots. The editor tells me what he wants in a photo layout, and it's my job to get

all the props.”

“I think my husband uses stylists,” the woman said. “He’s in the jewelry business.”

“Yes,” Lydie said, nodding. “I work with jewelers a lot. He’s French?”

“Yes, but we met in America ...” The woman trailed off, as if she thought the conversation was going on too long or growing too intimate. “I’ll tell you something,” she said. “I met my husband one day, he took me to Guadeloupe the next weekend, and then I enrolled in Berlitz and then he asked me to marry him. You’ll think I’m crazy, but it all took place in less than five weeks. The French understand, but Americans never do.”

Lydie leaned forward, and she captured the moment, sure as a photograph: the way the sun struck the woman’s hair, the blaze of primroses in a jardiniere behind her head, Richelieu palace casting a shadow on the garden. “I don’t think that’s crazy,” Lydie said. “I believe in love at first sight.”

“Well,” the woman said. She checked her watch, a tiny gold one with Chinese figures instead of numerals. Then she looked at the sky. “I should go. I’m running late.”

Now Lydie checked her watch. She had planned to go to the Bibliothèque Nationale, to look up details of seventeenth-century weddings for a piece in *Vogue*. Then, like the woman, she gazed up. She felt unwilling to leave. The palace against the blue sky looked dark and ancient, as if it had stood there forever. She wanted to stall for time, to prolong this pleasant casual conversation with another American. “Where are you off to?” she asked after a moment.

“Oh, home,” the woman said. “I told my housekeeper she could go online.”

“Your housekeeper?”

“Yes. I’m teaching her to use the computer. Didier bought it when personal computers hit Paris in a big way, but it just sits there.”

Lydie regarded the woman more carefully. With her jewelry and clothes and slightly regal bearing, she gave the impression of someone who would want distance between herself and a domestic employee. “Are you training her to do your correspondence?” Lydie asked.

The woman smiled, but the smile seemed distant. “Kelly wants to improve her life. She’s Filipino, from the provinces outside Manila, and she’s here in Paris illegally. She’s just a little younger than I am—she’s been to college. She shares a place with an amazing number of brothers and sisters. Her goal is to get to the United States.”

“And you want to help her?” Lydie asked, sitting on the edge of her chair.

“Well, it’s practically impossible.”

“My parents immigrated to the United States from Ireland,” Lydie said.

“It’s especially hard for Filipinos,” the woman said, again looking at her watch. She gathered her bags and stood. “Well. Hasn’t this been fun?” she said.

“Maybe ...” Lydie began.

“We should exchange phone numbers,” the woman said, grinning.

And while Lydie wrote out her name and number on a piece of notepaper, the dark-haired woman held out a vellum calling card, simply engraved, with an address on the Place des Vosges and the name “Patrice d’Origny.”



Walking down the rue des Petits Champs, Lydie felt in no hurry to get to the Bibliothèque

Nationale. Even though she had hours of research to do for a photo series that was already week overdue, she felt like playing hooky. The BBS wheels on a red BMW 750 parked by the curb caught her eye. Nice wheels, Lydie thought. She had spent many childhood Saturdays at her father's body shop in the Bronx—a cavernous place filled with smells of exhaust and paint, the flare of welding torches, the shrieks of machinery and metal tearing—without seeing many BBS wheels. Her father was the boss but wore blue overalls anyway. He would leave her in the office, separated from the shop by a glass window, coming back every fifteen minutes or so to visit her.

“What happened to that car?” Lydie had asked once, watching another wreck towed in.

“An accident, darling. He hit a tree off the Pelham Parkway, and he must have been drunk because he knew how to drive.”

“How do you know?” Lydie asked, when what she really wanted to know was what had happened to the man.

“See his wheels?” her father asked, pointing at the car, leaning his head so close to Lydie that she caught a whiff of the exhaust that always seemed to cling to his hair and clothes. “They're BBS. A man doesn't buy wheels like that if he doesn't know how to drive.”

To her father, “knowing how to drive” had covered more than mere competence. It was a high compliment and meant the driver was alert behind the wheel, unified with his car and the road, aware of the difference between excellent and ordinary machinery.

Walking away from the red BMW with its high-performance, nonproduction wheels, down the narrow Paris street, Lydie had the urge to drive fast. In America she raced cars for a hobby, but over here she hadn't had the desire. She had resisted this move to Paris. She had told Michael it was because she didn't want to leave her family, which now consisted of only Lydie and her mother. But Michael had said no, what Lydie did not want to leave was her family tragedy.

Eight months before Michael accepted the position at the Louvre, Lydie's father had killed his lover and himself. Margaret Downes. Lydie felt a jolt every time she remembered the name. After forty years of what everyone considered a great marriage, Cornelius Benedict Fallon had fallen in love with another woman. Lydie hadn't known and Julia claimed, even now, to have had no clue. Lydie knew there must have been clues, and she often felt furious with her mother for not seeing them. Because right up until the time the New York City detectives knocked on her door, Lydie had believed in her mother's myth of a happy family.

Lydie was her parents' only child; born relatively late in their marriage, she knew she was beloved. They had raised her to feel confident and live like a daredevil. A favorite story of her father's was of how Lydie at eight, watching the Olympics on television, had suddenly stood and done a perfect backflip off the back of the sofa. The second time she tried, she broke her collarbone. During high school she took up whitewater kayaking, tutoring children in a neighborhood few of her convent school classmates would even visit, and hitchhiking to Montauk on Saturdays. One day her father let her take an H-production Sprite for a spin. The intensity of concentration required to speed thrilled her, and from then on she thought of racing as a legitimate way to drive a car fast.

Cutting through the Galerie Vivienne, remembering that Bugeye Sprite and her old fearless self, Lydie felt her eyes fill with tears. The emotion was so strong she stopped in front of a wine shop, pretending to regard the window display while she cried. She thought of the c

Michael had given her for Christmas, just before the shooting. They had shopped around together, and Lydie had fallen in love with a showroom stock Volvo 740 wagon. Michael had grinned at the idea of his wife racing a station wagon, the car favored by women living in the Litchfield Hills to ferry kids and groceries around Lime Rock. Secretly, he had bought it for her. Lydie closed her eyes, remembering that Christmas morning: in their apartment on West Tenth Street she had opened a small box containing brown leather driving gloves, a map of Connecticut with "Lime Rock" circled in red, and the keys. She hadn't even driven it since her father died. It sat in Sharon, Connecticut, in a garage behind her crew chief's house.

Michael had told her about the Louvre position as if he were giving her a gift even greater than the car: the gift of adventure, a year in Paris. But Lydie hadn't wanted to come. She had wanted to stay in New York; she couldn't imagine leaving her mother. She couldn't imagine leaving the scene. But in spite of lacking heart, she couldn't say no to Michael, who was incredibly excited about the move. And then, the day had come to pack their things into a crate that would cross the Atlantic on a Polish freighter.

Julia had sat on Lydie and Michael's bed, watching them pack. Lydie knew that although her mother felt abysmally sad at seeing Lydie go, she wouldn't dream of speaking up. Julia would think that by doing so she would spoil Michael's happiness. She was plump, especially in the bosom, with soft, curly gray hair and, even then, a perpetually happy expression in her blue eyes. Lydie could hardly bear to look at her that day; she rummaged through a dresser drawer. Coming upon her driving gloves, Lydie slipped them on, flexing the new leather.

"Can't wait to see you drive at Le Mans," Michael said. "It's only about two hours from Paris."

"I can't wait," Lydie said, doubting even then that she would drive in France.

"Oh, you two will have such a ball," Julia said, grinning. "All the museums and the restaurants. Your aunt Carrie and I spent a weekend in Paris one time. It was lovely."

"Flying to Paris from Ireland is like taking the Eastern Shuttle to Washington," Michael said. From his tone Lydie could tell he felt grateful to Julia for her enthusiasm.

"Well, we took the boat, but yes—distances are so different over there. It's a short trip from Paris to anywhere in Europe. You'll have a marvelous time."

"It'll be great," Michael said, speaking to Lydie.

She said nothing, but smiled at him. He was trying to assemble a cardboard carton. The sight of her tall husband—a whiz on any basketball court but a klutz when it came to anything remotely mechanical—trying to transform a sheet of corrugated cardboard into a vessel that would actually hold their belongings made Lydie laugh.

"Here, let me," she said, folding flaps, slapping on the plastic tape without even taking off her gloves.

"What a woman," Michael said, bending down to kiss her.

"She's one in a million," Julia said. "After she won her first race at Watkin's Glen, her father said she could do anything. Do you remember that nice dinner we all had afterward?"

"Sure," Lydie said, quivering with the memory. They had drunk champagne, and after dinner her father had bought her a cigar. She could picture her parents perfectly: their proud smiles, her mother's girlish smile, the absent way her father reached over to touch Julia's shoulder. It killed Lydie to think Margaret Downes had already brought her car in for its second paint job in six months, that Neil had already fallen in love with her. The happy

expression on her father's face that night, so full of love, had been for Margaret.

Lydie crouched, assembling another carton. Michael sat beside her, pulling the tape out of her hands and holding them tight; he knew what the memory meant to her. Julia said nothing, looking on. She had started to cry but stopped herself. Lydie eased her hands from Michael's grasp, ripped off a piece of tape, closed a seam. Every crack she taped, every box she built, brought her closer to leaving. And, somehow, the idea of leaving the scene of her father's death and crime filled her with doom. She felt wild with an abundance of unfinished business.

"A year in Paris," Julia had said. "I can't imagine any couple who could enjoy it more than you."

But it wasn't working out that way, Lydie thought now, entering the Bibliothèque's vacant courtyard. With their great luck, she had thought they would be the most frivolous pair in Paris. But Michael's exhilaration had turned to patience; he was waiting for Lydie to get back the spirit he had fallen in love with. So far it hadn't happened. Since coming to Paris, Lydie felt a gulf widening between herself and Michael, and she couldn't do a damned thing about it.

Just before a race, Lydie always experienced a vision. In a flash she saw the crash, the rollover, herself paralyzed in a hospital. And the vision always refined her concentration, made her take great care and drive more safely. Now, walking numb through the streets of Paris, she felt as if the crash had happened, and she hadn't even seen it coming.



"Why didn't anyone tell us it stays light in Paris till midnight?" Michael McBride asked. He was watching Lydie cook dinner. They stood in the kitchen of their Belle Epoque apartment overlooking the Pont de l'Alma. A roasting chicken sizzled in the oven.

"It's nowhere near midnight," Lydie said, smiling. "It's ten-fifteen, and the sun's going down."

"Lydie!" Michael said, feeling impatient but vowing to stay calm. "I think you're missing my point. All I'm saying is that the sun would have set two hours ago in New York. It's something different, and I think it's neat."

"Paris is farther north than New York," Lydie said. "New York is actually on the same parallel as Rome."

Michael let it drop. If he opened his mouth again, he knew Lydie would come back with another rebuttal. They kept just missing each other these days. Sometimes they had full-scale fights. Like yesterday, when Michael had asked Lydie to meet him at Chez Francis for dinner and Lydie complaining bitterly about how she missed Chinese takeout. Then Michael had accused her of deliberately trying not to enjoy their year in Paris and Lydie going on and on about eggrolls.

Still, watching her now, he felt a shock of love for Lydie. She moved around the kitchen with an unconscious grace, a small frown on her face when she concentrated on cooking the meal. He'd seen that same expression on her face when she raced cars. She looked delicate with her pale skin and fine reddish-gold hair, but Michael had always thought of her as a tiger: strong, always moving, ready for anything.

"I met someone in a café today," Lydie said. "An American."

“Oh?” Michael said.

“We talked for a while, and it made me realize how much I’ve missed that. Someone to talk to.”

“What do you call what goes on between us?” Michael asked. “A silent movie?”

Lydie smiled and laid down her wooden spoon. Taking her hand, Michael led her into the living room. He still felt a jolt when he came upon their furniture, which for seven years had sat in the same New York apartment, here, across the Atlantic, in Paris. There were the loyale mahogany table, the seascape by Lydie’s mother, the sofa covered in a pattern Lydie called “flame-stitch,” the ugly lounge chair his father had given him for his thirty-fifth birthday. Lydie, as a stylist specializing in interior design, had great taste, and it had pained Michael to inflict that eyesore on her. But she had said it wouldn’t do to hurt the old man’s feelings.

“Her name is Patrice d’Origny,” Lydie was saying. “She’s married to a Frenchman and lives here permanently.”

“Why don’t you ask them for dinner?” Michael asked.

“Maybe,” Lydie said. Although her voice still sounded subdued, her eyes looked happier than Michael had seen them in quite a while. After eight years of marriage, the sight of her smiling eyes, hazel framed with thick blond lashes, made the back of Michael’s neck tingle. The feeling of excitement saddened him, because it was the only important thing between them that still felt true. He wanted to kiss Lydie, but she seemed to be concentrating on something.

“Why say ‘maybe?’” he asked. “Why not just invite them?”

Lydie cocked her head slightly, as if she was trying to figure out her own hesitation. But the moment passed quickly. “Why not?” she said.

From her indolent tone, Michael doubted that a dinner with the d’Orignys would come to pass. He cursed himself for the disappointment he felt toward Lydie. But he’d been through all with her: the sorrow, the mourning, the struggle to understand, and there didn’t seem an end to it. Maybe he wouldn’t feel so deprived if the contrast were not so great. Old Lydie versus new Lydie; he loved the old Lydie better.

He could see her now, one October day at Lime Rock, the old Lydie speeding them around the track. She wore her racing overalls and sunglasses; she gripped the wheel with wicker intensity. “You scared?” she asked, possibly wanting him to be. But he wasn’t. He was fascinated. He loved riding with her while she cranked the Volvo wagon up to 135 MPH. Seven miles down Route 112 Michael had pulled off the road and there, behind a red barn, Lydie dropped her overalls, laughing because she wore nothing under them, wanting Michael to be amused. Amusement was not what he remembered feeling. He remembered pulling her close, kissing her, feeling her shiver in the autumn air, making love to her on the cold ground.

And the words “cold ground” made Michael think of Neil Fallon. He and Neil had gotten along well, more like friends than father- and son-in-law. But Michael laid the blame for Lydie’s transformation directly at Neil’s feet. The man had lived his whole life as a good husband and father, an average businessman who had cared more about coming home for dinner every night than making a million dollars. He had devilish charm; on a bet he had truly, before witnesses, sold drunken Dennis Lavery his own car. With his elegant profile and wild black hair, Neil was so handsome that even Michael noticed. He was a Lion and a Knight of Columbus, a regular churchgoer who could be seen passing the basket at nine o’clock mass.

at St. Anthony's. By the time he started spending time with Margaret Downes, he had established himself as such a pillar that Julia and Lydie never questioned his absence or his preoccupation. So how could Michael blame Lydie for falling apart when Neil, with his sharp-tongued, gentle-eyed Irish devil act, had turned out to be the Devil himself?

Michael knew that he was the only person Neil had told about Margaret Downes. Two nights before the shooting, Michael dropped his own car off at Neil's shop and hung around waiting for Neil to give him a ride home. Dented or mangled cars filled the six bays. Welding torches roared. An irate customer leaned across the office desk, haggling over the cost of replacing his Ford LTD quarter panel.

"I can't leave yet, but let's get out," Neil said, frowning, leaving his Danish office manager to placate the customer.

They road-tested a Ford pickup, down Zerega Avenue to the Hutchinson River Parkway. Neil drove easily, playing with the wheel and accelerating in a way that reminded Michael of Lydie. They headed north, toward Connecticut.

"What's up?" Michael asked after a long while; he had never known Neil to maintain silence for more than a minute, and it alarmed him.

"I'm in love," Neil said, staring straight ahead.

"With someone ..." Michael tried to hide his shock.

"With someone besides Julia," Neil said, finishing Michael's thought for him.

"What are you going to do?" Michael asked, with full Catholic knowledge that Neil could never divorce Julia, that Neil was talking about a mortal sin, that the situation was impossible.

"Not a damn thing. She won't leave her husband," Neil said, his voice bleak. "I want to see Margaret tonight; I'll have one of the fellows drive you home."

"That's okay," Michael said. "I'll take the subway."

"I want you to tell them you left me working at the shop."

"You want me to lie to Lydie and Julia for you?" Michael asked, making it as plain as possible that he thought Neil had sunk very low. Was Neil implying that if Margaret would leave her husband he would leave Julia?

"Yes," Neil said, sounding remote, without a trace of defiance. Then he shot Michael a dark look. "If you ever did this to Lydie, I'd kill you."

That was in Michael's mind now as he stared across his Paris apartment at Lydie: her father telling Michael he would kill him if he ever betrayed her. It had struck Michael odd at the time, for Neil to threaten, even if he hadn't meant it, to kill Michael. It proved that killing was on his mind; two days later he had shot himself and Margaret.

"I know what," Michael said to Lydie. "Get on the telephone, call your new friend, and ask her out to lunch tomorrow."

"Right now?" Lydie asked.

"Sure. Before you forget all about each other," he said, for he doubted she would call on her own.

Lydie went through her briefcase, found Patrice's card, dialed a number on the phone. Turning his back, Michael walked to the window. He heard Lydie speak French, then English. Horns blared on the Avenue Montaigne. The tour boats plied the river Seine beneath the window; their spotlights shimmered across the white walls, a twinkling of pale yellow, peace.

and silvery gray.

“She invited me over,” Lydie said, coming toward Michael. “Tomorrow, to her apartment on the Place des Vosges.”

“That’s great,” Michael said. He felt a mixture of things: relief, as if this new friend Lydie’s could give to her some of the things Michael found himself increasingly unable to give, and hope. Hope that this could make her happy. He thought of her walking to the Place des Vosges tomorrow, of all the wonderful parks and monuments she would pass. The Grand Palais, the Champs-Élysées, the Place de la Concorde, the Tuileries, the Louvre. Let Paris make you happy, he thought.

“I’d better check the chicken,” Lydie said. Michael had often heard her mother’s theory that roast chicken was the truest test of a good cook. He went to her then, held the back of her neck. She tilted her head, and he looked into her eyes, golden in the halflight. He kissed her, thinking of the places they had kissed in spring: at the track, underwater, on a peak in the White Mountains, in Florence, on a hot subway platform at Fourteenth Street, now in Paris. The kiss felt right, and so did his arms around his wife. But the rest of it was unfamiliar. He thought the word “wife.” It meant possession, love, sex: in that order. Then he thought “Lydie,” which had once meant everything in nature and the world, and wished that it did not now only mean “wife.”



You have taken my daughter on the most beautiful voyage in the world. She was thrilled with it, but you took her up and down mountains, exposing her to the precipices of your Alps and the waves of your Mediterranean. I am somewhat inclined to scold you, but not until I have embraced you tenderly.

—TO MONSIEUR DE GRIGNAN, JUNE 1672

LYDIE WAS AWAKE at dawn the next morning. Michael slept beside her. His back was tan and muscular, his light brown hair tangled on the pillow. She watched him, trying to tell whether he was dreaming. She pressed closer to him, their bare bodies sticking slightly with sleep sweat. She kissed his shoulder.

She thought of her date with Patrice today, and for the first time she thought that maybe coming to Paris was the best way to forget. She had resisted coming, to put it mildly, at the beginning. The destination, Paris—imagine!—had paled compared to what she was leaving behind: one despondent mother and her father's grave. Yet she had always wanted to live in a foreign country. It had seemed her destiny. The pretty accents of her parents and relatives, her mother's stories about Clew Bay and her father's about Dublin had constantly reminded her that the world went beyond her block in New York.

Lydie had visited Ireland, at sixteen, with her parents. Ireland, although beautiful, had frightened her. From her parents' tales she had expected soft edges: verdant pastures, gentle rain, cozy priories, friendly people who earned their livings as farmers and stonecutters. Instead, she was struck by the feeling of danger: by the coastline, steep and intricate as a Gothic steeple, by gray stone churches, grim, in every market square, by an undercurrent her parents had not prepared her for.

There were people who still remembered her parents, people Lydie had heard about her whole life, who seemed at once gentle and fierce. The combination had alarmed her. Her mother's people were intense when it came to their memories, to Ireland, to the Church. Her father's people, in Dublin, no longer attended mass, and they were intense about *that*.

Lying in bed, Lydie remembered the time she and her father had climbed Ireland's highest mountain. The memory, vivid and exact, was one of her most powerful. Croagh Patrick, named for the saint, overlooked Clew Bay and the countryside outside Westport, where Lydie's mother had grown up. The ascent had been fun: a lark. Lydie had pretended to be Maria von Trapp crossing the Alps in *The Sound of Music*. At the various holy points along the way she had interrupted her fantasy to do the requisite Catholic rituals like walking seven times around the statue of Saint Patrick while saying seven Hail Marys.

At the summit she and her father had picnicked on salmon they had caught fishing with her uncle in Sligo the day before. After lunch they had prayed together. Lydie remembered saying

the rosary out loud. It was then that Lydie started feeling terrified. The prayers had given her the idea she might fall off the mountain. After all, wasn't the purpose of prayers to shorten your time in Purgatory? To speed you into heaven? But to get to heaven, didn't you have to die first? It was late in the day; they began to descend. She remembered walking through clouds, down the jagged, precipitous trail. Thousands of feet below there were green pastures leading to the rocky shore and the glittering bay, the green and blue as true as colors in the spectrum. With every step Lydie had grown dizzier, more breathless. She stumbled, and in her memory she saw one foot step off the mountain's edge. Her father had hugged her tight, holding her face against his wool coat, damp from clouds and the salt air. "Steady there," he had said. "Are you scared? You know your mother and I climbed this mountain every year when we were young. Everyone in Ireland does. It's the safest place on earth to be—the saints will look after you. Especially you."

Lydie had wanted to believe it was true. Wasn't her uncle a priest in Dungannon? Hadn't her mother washed the cardinal's clothes? But she had a terrible vision of her father falling off the mountain. She saw him hurtling through the air, the father she loved, and not even Saint Patrick could save him.

On that trip, Lydie knew that she wanted to live in a foreign country, but not Ireland: one that was southern, sensual, rich with cathedrals, tapestries, and vineyards. Lydie had wanted to live in a country whose beauty was not rugged and terrible, a country that celebrated its saints' days with fireworks going off in the little villages instead of pilgrimages up the dangerous holy mountain.

Now here she was in France. She snuggled closer to Michael, who stirred. France satisfied her in every way except that it was far from the heart of her family. In spite of the art, beauty, and romance, everywhere Lydie went she felt as though she were missing something back home. She wondered how her mother was getting on without her. It made her sick, really ashamed, when she remembered one day last week. She and Michael had met for a glass of wine. They had sat at a café across the Seine from the Louvre and the Jardin des Tuileries. Michael was silent; he seemed to be thinking about something that had happened at work. Sitting there, Lydie just absorbed the scene.

The sun cast gold light on a row of poplars that must have stood there since the time of Napoleon. Holding Michael's hand, Lydie had gazed at them. She had imagined the great artists who had sat in the same spot. She had pretended to be Monet regarding the poplars, she had just started to see them as an Impressionist would, all light and color, when she had a vision of her home. It was twilight; there was her mother standing alone in the walled garden behind her house. Her mother's face was sad. Lydie blinked hard, to get rid of the image. She wanted to enjoy the present. But the idea of home was a veil, and there were days Lydie couldn't lift it to see Paris.

She had squeezed Michael's hand. "You're a dear man," she had said.

"Who am I?" Michael had said. "Monsignor Mangin?"

"Oh, God," Lydie had said, catching his drift. "I do sound like my mother, don't I?"

"Give it another try," Michael had said.

"You make me weak in the knees, baby."

"Much, much better," Michael had said.

Lying in bed, Lydie remembered that. Her thoughts returned to her parents. Julia and

Cornelius, known as Neil, had sailed from Ireland to New York the same year but separate when Julia was nineteen and Neil was twenty-five. They had met at night school, where Julia was a student and Neil a janitor. Julia washed the cardinal's clothes at St. Patrick's by day. One day the cardinal found her crying. "What is the matter, child?" he had asked. Of course Julia cannot remember his exact words, but that is the phrase distilled from years of retelling: "What is the matter, child?"

"I am homesick, Father," Julia had said.

"Ah, do you know the poem, by Yeats, 'Under Saturn'?"

Well, no cardinal would really expect a young Irish washerwoman to know Yeats, but Julia had stood tall, tears running down her cheeks, and recited " 'I am thinking of a child's vow sworn in vain, never to leave the valley his fathers called their home.' "

Then the cardinal had asked where she had learned the poem, and Julia had said " school, in Ireland, Father."

"Do you miss school?" the cardinal had asked.

"Oh, yes, Father," Julia had said.

And so the cardinal had arranged for her to take evening courses in education at Marymount, where Neil Fallon worked a second job as the night janitor, trying to save enough money to start a business. They fell in love and married by the spring semester. Within four years, after two miscarriages, they had Lydie, and within six Julia had her degree. And now, forty years later, Neil had been dead eleven months.



Lydie and Michael went about their morning ritual. In Paris they had separate bathrooms, but only one person could use hot water at a time. Lydie showered first while Michael shaved. When he heard her shower stop, he stepped into his own. Lydie boiled water for coffee. Since she took longer to dress, Michael went to the *pâtisserie* for croissants. On his way back to the apartment, he bought the *International Herald Tribune*. This early-morning, wordless cooperation was one thing Lydie loved about marriage. They knew each other so well. Lydie knew that Michael liked silence at the breakfast table; he was probably reviewing his schedule for the day.

Their breakfast table overlooked Avenue Montaigne and Montmartre in the distance. The early sun lit the Basilica with white light, and to Lydie it looked holy, the way it might appear in a child's prayer book. She broke off a piece of croissant, savored the flavor of butter and yeast. She drank her *café crème* slowly; when the cup was empty, she would have to leave for work.

"I should go in a minute," Lydie said. "I have a shoot at Tolbiac."

"Tolbiac? Chinatown?"

"Yes. For a young French designer who wants nothing French in the background. He'd love to shoot the ad in Hong Kong, but he can't afford a location outside Paris."

"Where do you come up with your ideas?" Michael asked, laughing. "Chinatown in Paris? I'll be damned."

"And this afternoon I meet Patrice," Lydie said. "I wonder if her husband is d'Origny of d'Origny Bijoutiers. I'm sure it's family-run."

"What is it?"

“One of the super-snazzy jewelry houses in the Place Vendôme. I’ve borrowed from them. For a layout on Hungarian royalty I used a d’Origny pearl collar made of two hundred pearls. One hundred ninety-eight were white, but one was black, another pink. Baroque. Very beautiful and odd.” Lydie grew silent, as she often did when recalling an old layout or planning a new one.

“I remember that piece,” Michael said. “I’m glad you’re seeing Patrice, you know.”

“I know,” Lydie said. Michael had never kept watch over Lydie’s friendships before, but now Lydie wondered whether Michael wanted someone to take her off his hands.

“Have I told you George Reed is coming from the United States today?” Michael asked.

“No,” she said, surprised that he had not. George Reed was Michael’s immediate superior at Rothman, Inc., the man who had arranged for Michael to work on the Louvre in exchange for the participation of a French architect on the National Gallery project in Washington, D.C.

“We have a meeting at the Ministry of Culture,” Michael said.

Lydie stood, faced Michael. He slid his arm around her neck and kissed her. His neck smelled like soap and powder. His remark about Patrice stuck with her, made her wonder how far apart they had grown. She couldn’t even ask him if he meant what she thought he meant: would it be a great relief to him if Lydie found a confidante? They stood there for a few seconds, hugging. Lydie didn’t want to let go.

Later, stepping aboard the Métro, she tried to imagine Michael’s meeting with George. Michael’s contacts in France were not being as cooperative as everyone had hoped they would be. The work was not moving swiftly. It seemed that French architects and designers resented the assignment of an American to turn the Louvre’s Salle des Quatre Saisons into an information center. Even Charles Legendre, Michael’s assigned liaison, lagged when it came to introducing Michael around.

Lydie knew that Michael planned to create a seventeenth-century atmosphere in the Salle. In spite of the conservatism of his ideas, he was having trouble convincing curators to find him paintings by Poussin and la Tour. He had located a master artisan from Burgundy to build an information desk similar to tables by A.-C. Boulle, cabinetmaker to Louis XIV, but the Ministry had so far refused to approve the work order. One terrific plan for repairing the mosaic floor and another for redirecting the flow of tourists existed only on paper. And Michael’s worries were not eased by the knowledge that his French counterpart in the United States had already met the President and First Lady, who admired the new painting gallery he had designed for Washington’s National Gallery.

Lydie had a vision of Michael shaking George’s hand, grinning a little too earnestly, perhaps. His mother had once told Lydie that as a child Michael had suffered stomachaches whenever he felt he had disappointed someone—his family, a teacher, his basketball coach—and Lydie knew he still did. She felt a rush of sorrow and love for him, the man she loved more than anyone in the world.



The photographer, the models, and Jean-Claude Verglesses stood on the sidewalk in front of Chinatown’s largest supermarket. Lydie waved, introduced herself to the photographer, and bumped cheeks with Jean-Claude. He wore a blue work shirt and had his blond hair tied back. He’s trying to look like a designer for rock stars, Lydie thought. She surveyed the

street. Men were hauling carts of cabbages from a flatbed lorry into the store. Five of Chinese women dressed in black passed by; one spoke angrily to the lorry driver for blocking the sidewalk.

“Remember, Lydie,” Jean-Claude said in French, “the dresses speak for themselves. Nothing elaborate, all right? I want a squalid backdrop for these things.”

Lydie, who rarely did fashion work, nodded. Young designers who could not afford famous fashion stylists would hire her, then try to do the job themselves. “I think we could do something with those cabbages,” she said. Everyone entered the supermarket through the service entrance, and Lydie spoke to the man who owned the store. She had worked here before; he gave her permission to use his cabbages in Jean-Claude’s advertisement.

The cabbages were round, smooth, cool green and white, and they echoed beautifully the lines of Jean-Claude’s pouf skirts. The models perched on the carts while Lydie and the photographer buried their feet and ankles in cabbages. Jean-Claude stood back and smoked. “Cabbages?” he said. “I don’t know about this. What is more French than cabbage? I saw squalid and exotic.”

Street light filtered through the open door. The storeroom had concrete walls; yellowed tape held a faded kung fu poster in place. Lydie smiled at Jean-Claude. “Tell me this isn’t squalid,” she said. He shrugged. A group of workers gathered to watch. The models tried to look detached, as if they weren’t standing in piles of cabbages. The photographer went to work.

Lydie and her entourage moved from the supermarket to the kitchen of Maison de Chine and the warehouse of a Far East importer on Avenue Tolbiac. She had the models squat beside white porcelain statues of the Buddha, a form that, like the cabbages, perfectly echoed the pouf skirts.

“I must wait to see the proof sheets,” Jean-Claude said, “but this might work.”

Lydie knew he wanted the public to believe the pictures had been taken in Hong Kong; she had tried to avoid any background that would give away the Paris location. This was all part of the image, and Lydie understood it. Financial backing would come easier to Jean-Claude if he gave the impression of success. She wondered how old he was. Twenty-five? She had the urge to tell him his ponytail made him look as though he were imitating Karl Lagerfeld, but she did not. She felt fond of him because he was young and because he was desperate to be successful. She considered telling him not to worry. She considered giving him a sisterly kiss on the forehead. Instead she made her expression serious and shook his hand. “I really hope you like the pictures,” she said.

“Do you need a ride home?” he asked.

“Actually, I’m going to the Place des Vosges, if you’re heading in that direction,” Lydie said.

“It’s not far out of my way,” he said. “Come along.”



I wanted my two maids with me so that there would be someone there whom I knew.

—TO FRANÇOISE-MARGUERITE, MAY 1675

WAITING FOR LYDIE McBride to arrive, Patrice walked through the cool rooms of her old house to the bathroom and looked in the mirror. She powdered her cheeks with a sable brush. Patrice loved the regality of makeup. She thought it courtly: the powder, the scents, the brilliant and subtle colors, reminiscent of queens and another age. She dabbed her finger in a pot of scarlet lip gloss and rubbed it over her lips.

Turning from the mirror, she walked directly into her bedroom. She couldn't quite fathom why she felt so anxious about Lydie coming over. Patrice was used to visitors. Since marrying Didier, Patrice had entertained with a vengeance. Dutch diamond cutters, Hong Kong go-between brokers, Australian gem dealers were always arriving with their wives, expecting to be courted with food and wine. Patrice had perfected a foreigner's idea of the true French dinner: paupiettes of sole, then leg of lamb, then cheeses, then petits fours.

For Didier's family and French friends she usually served provincial dishes, the way they themselves did. Sausage and potatoes, pot-au-feu, roast chicken. Didier had known his two best friends since boyhood; his sister Clothilde lived half a mile away. At first they had seemed to embrace her without reservation—telling her all the old stories, making sure she knew where to find the best dry cleaner in Paris, giving her the best seat at their regular tables at Taillevant, La Coupole, Chez Georges. *That* had tipped her off—the way they always treated her with a certain *politesse*. Just last week Patrice had discovered a funky little *salon de thé* in the Place Dauphine, but when she invited Clothilde, Clothilde had insisted they go to her usual spot full of bourgeois matrons in the Rue Royale. Where, of course, she had insisted that Patrice take the seat with the best view.

Patrice had high hopes for Lydie. Although people said Patrice spoke French impeccably, it wasn't the same as speaking your own language: the tongue was only part of it. She looked forward to talking to a married woman her own age, from the eastern United States, with an interesting career. She wondered whether Lydie would find her life frivolous; Patrice lived the life of a housewife and she knew it. In Boston she had managed an art gallery on Newberry Street. Although she had enjoyed meeting the artists, selling their work to appreciative collectors, Patrice had felt happy to give it up. Living in France, Patrice tried to experience everything as the French did—she felt grateful to Didier's friends and sister for showing her the way, even if she also, simultaneously, resented them for it.

Patrice was drawn to things romantic, feminine, and venerable, and for those reasons alone, France suited her. She pulled the tufted chaise closer to the glass doors overlooking the cobbled courtyard, and she settled down to read *Three Women of the Marais*. It was a scholar

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