

# THE PARIS DIVERSION

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## I

PARIS. 8:44 A.M.

A siren wails, far away.

Kate Moore is lingering in front of school, her daily dose of sidewalk-swimming in a sea of expat moms, gossip and chitchat and a dizzying ping-pong of cheek kisses, usually planted on both sides of the face but sometimes three pecks, or for some lunatics four separate kisses.

It's an international school. All the parents are transplants from dozens of different countries, with different ideas about what constitutes the proper sequence. It's an etiquette minefield, is what it is. And etiquette has never been Kate's forte.

She cocks her head, trying to discern if the siren is approaching or receding, an instinctual habit—a professional obligation—of assessing potential levels of danger. Here in Paris, at this hour, sirens are unusual. This city is less noisy than other global capitals, London or New York, Mumbai or Hong Kong. And much less than where Kate lived before here: Luxembourg, perhaps the least noisy capital in the world; and Washington, which doesn't even make the cut of the twenty most populous US cities.

But Kate has traveled plenty. For her job, dispatching her to far-flung destinations in Latin America and Europe.

And for the past few years for adventure, driving around the Continent in their aging station wagon, with their EU driver's licenses and bilingual kids.

Other metropoli have all seemed like more aggressive aural assaults than Paris, with more insistent car horns honked more frequently, more idling trucks and unmuffled motorcycles, jackhammers and pile drivers and bass-heavy music blaring from souped-up sound systems, fire trucks and ambulances and police cars in hot pursuit, the unmistakable urban sounds of urgency, emergency.

It's in the mornings when Paris feels especially hushed, and in particular this slice of the *septième*, sleepy cafés on the quiet corners of narrow streets, well-dressed women depositing well-groomed kids at the towering green door of the school's fortress-like façade, forbidding stone walls from which no sounds can escape, nor for that matter children.

The siren grows louder, nearer.

A curbside fence prevents the kids from running into the street, getting hit by cars. Every school's sidewalk is lined with these fences, festooned with locked-up bicycles and kick-scooters decorated with decals of football clubs, pop singers, flower petals.

The kids are absolutely safe in there.

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After the *Charlie Hebdo* massacre, sirens began to take on a new significance, triggering more vital concerns. Then the

November attacks ratcheted up the tension further, and then again the Champs-Élysées shooting, these events produced a permanent propensity to generalized panic.

Sirens no longer suggest a multicar pile-up on the *périphérique* or a gangland shoot-out in St-Denis—somebody else’s problem, somewhere else. These days, sirens could mean a nightclub shooting, hostages in a grocery store, a madman in a museum. Sirens could mean that Kate should storm into school, drag out her children, initiate one of her emergency protocols, go-bags from the linen closet, the always-gassed-up car in the garage, speeding out of the city toward the secret farmhouse in the Ardennes, or the airbase in the Ruhr, or somewhere else, anywhere else.

These days, sirens could mean anything.

It’s what everyone is talking about, the shopkeepers, restaurateurs, hoteliers. Tourism is down. Locals are wary. Customers scarce. Soldiers and police patrol the streets in threes and fours, heavily armed, flak-jacket clad. Not only near the ministries and embassies, the busy commercial boulevards and the famous monuments, but everywhere, soldiers are loitering even here, on sedate residential streets.

The military has become a permanent presence, the new normal. Sharpshooters have taken positions in the latticework of the Eiffel Tower, the flying buttresses of Notre-Dame, the neoclassical roof of the Arc de Triomphe. Everyone is getting used to it.

This is how a police state happens, isn't it? An emergency that never subsides. Everything is getting worse all the time, so the far-right steps in and promises to solve it all—the taxes, the unemployment, the poverty and immigration and terrifying violence out in *les banlieues*, Balkan gunrunners and Albanian drug dealers and Corsican mobsters.

The police suit up, and never stand down.

People are talking about getting out of town, buying a crumbling pile of château in the country, starting a bio-dynamic vineyard or an eco-friendly bed-and-breakfast. Or to hell with it, leaving France entirely, moving to Zurich, to Helsinki or Lisbon or Edinburgh, places that are immune, or seem to be.

Kate hears a second siren, coming from another direction.

The other moms seem to be oblivious to the noise, nattering about nothing. Kate tunes them out, scans the bulletin board next to her, pushpinned with notices for kids' activities, community meetings, nannies, holidays, the week's lunch menu—symbols for organic, for local, for vegetarian—next to the list of every kid's allergies, right out there on the sidewalk for anyone to see.

The goodbyes begin. With all this cheek kissing, it takes forever to say hello and goodbye. Like adding a whole new category of daily chore, now every morning you have to iron a shirt, mop the kitchen floor.

“What time would suit tonight?” asks Hashtag Mom.

“And what shall we bring?” Hashtag Mom never lived anywhere except New Jersey until she was thirty-one, when she moved with her global-banker husband to London, then Singapore, then Paris. Somewhere along the way, she apparently started pretending to be British.

“Bring nothing,” Kate says, “except your good company. Everyone’s coming at seven.”

“Lovely.” Hashtag Mom leans in for her final air-kiss. For Hashtag Mom, everything, always, is hashtag lovely.

As much time as Kate needs to spend kissing all these women, she’s increasingly unwelcome to kiss her own children, not in public, especially not the mortified older one. But Kate is confident that her younger boy is just going along with that pose because that’s what younger siblings do; she knows that Ben still wants his mother’s kisses. So she sneaks them onto his head when Jake isn’t looking, an open secret right there in a crowd.

The sirens are closing in.

Now other people finally begin to react, to tilt their heads, dart their eyes, searching for whatever proximate threat might be attracting the police.

Cautionary tales, the things you hear: the aroma that turns out to be a ruptured gas main, the staph infection that over the weekend becomes an amputated leg. Lessons in vigilance, the things you could’ve done, should’ve done, if only you’d been worried enough, if you hadn’t been so lazy, so selfish, if you’d had the courage to follow your fear from the very first flush. But it’s only in hindsight

that you see it clearly: this was one of those moments.

Everyone turns in unison, to where the narrow street ends at a broad boulevard, glimpses through the gap of a convoy zooming past, motorcycles followed by squad cars followed by armored trucks then more motorcycles sweeping up the rear, all those dark-blue vehicles with lights flashing, a thundering herd galloping in the direction of the river, the museums, the presidential palace, it's all just over there, spitting distance.

Shooting distance.

It's terror that's amassing in Kate, a sense that something is very wrong.

Maybe it's finally here: payback for all her mistakes. Her parenting mistakes and filial ones, her professional mistakes, matrimonial, her wrongdoings in every segment of life. She wakes up every single morning prepared for it to happen, for her life to be assailed.

Maybe it's today.



## PARIS. 8:47 A.M.

The biggest concern is safety. A distant second is discretion. But if you are concerned with neither unintentional detonation nor with being noticed, your options multiply immensely.

There are so many different ways to build a bomb.

Mahmoud has occasionally wondered if he has hallucinated this whole thing, the past two years, everything. It all *seems* so real, but is that not what people think when they are hallucinating?

The bomb that Mahmoud is wearing under his windbreaker is the type that can be easily identified by any layperson, at first glance: bricks of Semtex and a battery-powered detonator connected by wires to a flip-phone, all of it duct-taped to a canvas vest, everything easily visible. Everyone knows what this is. That is the point.

This bomb can be delivered by foot, then detonated remotely, even if the delivery system is no longer functioning.

The world has become prepared for this sort of thing, in the sorts of places where it makes sense. Places like here.

Mahmoud is the delivery system.

This type of bomb is as close as possible to fail-safe. The only drawback: one person must be willing to die. But what is one death? Hundreds of millions of people die every year. We all, obviously, die. Nearly all of us before we think it is our time, many by surprise. So it is a luxury to know when, exactly.

Mahmoud will also carry a second device, not as easily recognizable. The police will have their suspicions: Why would a man wearing a suicide vest also carry a briefcase? What could be the point of the luggage? They will be prepared for various possibilities, they will have detectors, sensors, a mobile laboratory. They will guess just from Mahmoud's body language, from his location, what the most likely scenario is. They will use their equipment to make measurements. Then they will be sure.

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He sits in the rear of the panel van, GOUPIL ET FRÈRES ÉLECTRICIENS on the dingy side.

After months of planning, the final arrangements were pulled together hastily. Mahmoud does not understand all the factors, or perhaps any; there is much more to this than anyone is telling him. For all he knows, he has been lied to repeatedly, more or less constantly, about everything.

Nearly everything. Some things he knows to be true. He has seen proof.

The problem with the van—although not, in the end,

Mahmoud's problem—is that because the event will happen in a heavily monitored neighborhood, the police will have access to copious surveillance footage. It will take only minutes to procure the video of Mahmoud stepping out of this vehicle, then trace the van's movements backward through the various state-owned surveillance cameras that are affixed to the walls, streetlights, and traffic lights, as well as the private cameras at jewelers and banks and hotels and ministries, new cameras are mounted every day, ever cheaper and easier to install, to network, to identify a specific timeframe, compress the file, e-mail it to investigators.

There is no way to evade surveillance.

This necessitated complex logistics just to get Mahmoud into the vehicle. A system whose sole purpose was to deliver one man to one spot on one occasion.

Him, here, now.

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This tradesman's van is hand-stenciled with a nonexistent address, a fictional phone number; there is no Goupil in Paris who is an electrician with his brothers. There are no tools in the rear, no supplies, no other passengers. The steel floor is hard, the shock absorbers ineffective. Mahmoud feels every bump and pothole in his tailbone, his spine, even in the back of his head as it clunks and thumps against the side, which he does not much try to prevent, even relishes to some extent.

Recently the concepts of pain and death have been consuming his thoughts, especially late at night, when he reaches to the other side of the bed. His hand always comes away empty.

There are no windows back here. It is weak light that comes through the front windshield, on the far side of the high-backed seats. Mahmoud's angle does not allow a view of any but the tallest or closest structures, difficult to identify in the whirl of whizzing by, set against a small slice of sky.

Mahmoud cannot tell which direction the van is headed in, cannot keep track of the turns. Even the passing of time has become difficult to gauge. He does not know the exact destination, but he does know it will be in central Paris. All the same to him. He has lived here only a few years, but that has been long enough to learn to hate the whole beautiful place.

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The van swings around a turn, too fast, and Mahmoud slides on his seat.

He tries to adjust his tight rubberized underwear. A very uncomfortable garment, but he understands the necessity. In fact he asked for it.

Mahmoud catches a glimpse of something through the windshield, a tall wide column, nothing on either side of it, just the bright blue sky pierced by this verdigris bronze. He recognizes this structure, it is . . . he knows this . . . ?

There are so many monuments here, statues, obelisks, fountains, the French are keen on memorializing events, celebrating themselves. What is this one called . . . ?

Mahmoud visited many of these sights back when they first moved here, dutifully trekking to one tourist attraction after another. He noticed the looks he received, he observed the security guards, many of them just like him, North Africans, Middle Easterns, dark-skinned men issued uniforms and badges and walkie-talkies, told to keep an eye on anyone who looked like themselves. Jobs to pay the rent, to feed their families, to purchase the things you need, maybe sometimes a few you simply want.

The driver shifts into PARK, hops out, then seconds later jumps back in.

Mahmoud wondered if these security guards lost sleep, wracked with guilt about how they earn their livings, about the types of men they had become, men who themselves were subjected to the same injustices and sleights and distrustful looks, all reliable constants, like the gray skies. It was only their absence that surprised—a sunny day, how glorious.

Today is a sunny day.

Ah! He remembers the name of this place, that square with the column in the middle, perimeter lined with the most expensive of jewelers, the fanciest of hotels: the place Vendôme.

It is a relief that he has not completely lost his memory. But then, what does it matter?

It was not Mahmoud who had wanted to move to France. That had been Neela's desire, her dream. He had been swayed by her passion, her conviction. For the children, she said. For me.

And then look what happened. What they did to her.