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THE
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JOHN GRISHAM

THE FRENCH ILLUSION



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PART I

THE HONEYMOON

CHAPTER 1

The surveillance began on the third day of the honeymoon, though the bride and groom had no possible way of knowing it. And why should they have known or even been suspicious? So far in their short happy lives they had committed no felonies, breached no contracts, sued no one or been sued, joined no subversive groups, offended no foreign governments, defamed not a soul, listened to their parents when it mattered, and for the past two years had been thoroughly faithful to each other in every conceivable way. They came from nice families who'd given them proper educations. Who in the world could they have possibly angered or provoked?

A mole inside their trendy Left Bank hotel served them up, and for his treachery he would soon receive an envelope stuffed with enough euros to equal a year's wages. He spent most of his spare time watching the endless wave of tourists attracted to the City of Light. On any given week, at least half of the eighty rooms in the hotel where he worked were booked by Americans, many of them just married. He monitored other hotels as well.

Once their names were in play, it took less than twenty-four hours of online digging to know more about Paul and Chelsea than they could have imagined. But, in this world of shameless self-aggrandizement, isn't that what they really wanted? Their

splashy wedding a few days earlier in Annapolis had drawn three hundred friends and relatives. Dozens of beautiful photos told the story. Chelsea svelte, tanned and toned, and positively radiant. Paul in his fiercely starched naval whites, equally lean and bronzed and ready for command. Both quoted from memory sappy sonnets promising eternal love and bliss and plenty of children. Paul even read an embarrassing poem that made Chelsea cry. There was a close-up of her tears to prove it! For the benefit of her followers she posted a daily schedule of their honeymoon in Paris, evidently in the belief that they were the first couple in history to attempt such a romantic adventure.

The surveillance picked it apart and made plans accordingly. Following the young lovers was easy because their destinations and movements were so clearly telegraphed, and the thought of looking over their shoulders never crossed their minds. They had eyes only for each other. There was no one back there. After each thrilling visit to the Louvre, the Eiffel Tower, Notre-Dame, Sacré-Coeur, and so on, the photos kept coming and the surveillance indexed them against Chelsea's itinerary. The couple was punctual and keen to cover a lot of territory during their eight-day fantasy.

According to her musings on social media, limited of course to her select group of followers but ridiculously hackable, Chelsea fell in love with Paris as a ten-year-old when her mother took her there one summer. Her father and his doctor buddies splurged on an exotic fishing trip to Alaska, and in an act of revenge-shopping her mother called the travel agent. The girls spent a week in a small boutique hotel, rumored to be the favorite of Lauren Bacall, roamed the streets for hours each day, and had afternoon tea in the courtyard. When the tourist sites were too crowded they retreated to the Luxembourg Gardens where they sat in the shade near the Grand Pond and read books about Paris. Chelsea took all the French language courses she could in school and watched videos for hours. During her second year of college she qualified for a semester abroad and lived at the Sorbonne. While her American friends stuck together and tried to avoid speaking French, she

spent weekends with her new French friends and their families. She never claimed to be fluent but was highly proficient and strove for improvement.

Long before he finally proposed, Paul knew precisely where they would honeymoon. He had never been to Paris, but after two years of courting Chelsea he felt as though he knew the city well. Far less enamored with social media than his bride, he made it clear that he was terribly excited about the trip. His priority was a long day trip to the beaches of Normandy. He came from a family of servicemen, and military history was his hobby.

On the fifth day, they left the hotel at 7 A.M. on schedule, a bit early for vacationers and honeymooners but the drive ahead of them would take three hours. They rode in the rear seat of a shiny black Peugeot with Malik at the wheel. The private car had been Paul's idea because they could cover more territory and see more battle sites with a pro behind the wheel. Malik was very much the professional driver—black suit, crisp white shirt, black tie, perfect manners, and excellent language skills. With a captive audience, Chelsea immediately began chattering away in French and within minutes knew that Malik was from Senegal in West Africa, where he grew up speaking French, English, Wolof, and was now studying Japanese. It was good for business. He had been in Paris for fourteen years and had no plans to leave. His wife was a schoolteacher. They had three small children and lived with her parents in a suburb north of Paris.

Paul understood none of the conversation and was soon nodding off.

They went straight to the D-Day beaches, where Paul could have spent days wandering around, trying to grasp the enormity of the courage and carnage of that epic battle. At the American Cemetery, they were deeply moved by the magnitude of the manicured burial grounds, the sacred soil that held the remains of over three thousand American soldiers. Paul managed to locate the grave of a distant relative who died during the initial assault on Omaha Beach.

The concierge had booked lunch in a bistro in the town of Bayeux. Malik had taken other clients there and said the food was excellent. With a sly grin he said he had asked the owner to put on ice a bottle of local white wine, and it was already cold. He escorted them to the bistro, introduced them to the madam of the house, and left to go find lunch on his own. He would be back at 2 P.M. to retrieve them and continue the tour at the war museum in Caen.

Malik parked on a narrow street off the town square and found a seat at an outdoor café. It was midday in France, a crucial moment of the day when the French forget about everything but tending to the needs of their stomachs. The café was busy but not packed. He ordered a goat cheese salad and a bottle of sparkling water. As he waited, he checked his phone for messages and emails. It was a beautiful day in late April, sunny without a cloud to be seen.

He was halfway through his salad when a slim young woman in tight jeans appeared at his table and said, meekly, "I'm sorry to interrupt, but I think I'm lost." She had an innocent voice, a comely smile, and red curly hair. Her eyes were hidden by thick sunglasses.

Ever the professional, and not wanting to interrupt his lunch, Malik said politely, "I'm from Paris and I don't know this town very well."

She offered an even bigger smile and said, "I'm trying to get to Paris." Perfect unaccented French, obviously a native.

Suddenly, a man on an orange bicycle veered off the sidewalk and crashed into a nearby table where two Finnish tourists were having their lunch. Glasses, bottles, bowls, plates, flatware, food, water, wine, all went flying as the table flipped while everyone yelled. Water splashed onto the back of the girl with red curls. Malik jumped to his feet, as did others, to lend a hand. The girl deftly slipped two capsules of chloral hydrate into his glass of water.

Waiters were quick on the scene. The cyclist got to his feet, apologizing profusely and offering to pay for his damages. Lunch was ruined but the Finns were too shocked to be angry. They

wiped food from their shirts as they tried to compose themselves. A waiter led them to another table and promised quick service. The cyclist kept apologizing. Malik would remember that he had a slight accent and was probably of North African descent.

Once order was restored and everything was back to normal, Malik sat down to finish his lunch. The girl was gone and forgotten, but fifteen minutes later she reappeared and sat across from him as his head began to nod. "What do you want?" he asked, his words slurring.

"Are you okay?" she asked in a louder voice.

"What do you want?"

"Let's talk about Paris, shall we? Are you okay?"

"I'm not sure. I'm not sure. I can't see very well."

She clutched his hand on the table as if they were friends. The chloral hydrate hit hard and he began to slump. She slid his plate and glass to the side. When he fell from the chair, she exclaimed, "Oh my God! He's having a heart attack. Please! It's an emergency!"

Having just recovered from one jolting interruption to their lunch, the other diners were slow to react to a second one. The girl was kneeling next to Malik, touching his chest and his forehead, speaking loudly, begging for help. In the midst of her histrionics she managed to take his keys from a pants pocket. When Malik failed to respond, a waiter took charge and checked his pulse. The girl cried and shrieked as if he was dying, and as she backed away she managed to tip over his glass of water. More chaos. Another tourist claimed to be a doctor and knelt down to examine Malik, who was not responding. The girl continued to back away as the crowd grew. By the time the ambulance arrived, she had vanished again.

Inside the restaurant down the street, Paul and Chelsea lunched on grilled sole and sipped cold wine. Paul was eager to see the D-Day museum in Caen, the largest of many in Normandy. Chelsea cared little for the military stuff but gamely hung on. Tomorrow she would drag him to an exhibition of modernist sculpture. Back and forth, the ping-pong game that would prove crucial to

a happy marriage. They heard a siren in the distance but thought nothing of it. No one else in the restaurant stopped eating to look around.

The reckless bike rider changed quickly into all black—suit, shoes, tie. Only the shirt was white. For a nice touch he added a smart black chauffeur's cap. He took Malik's Peugeot for a spin around town to get a feel for it and to check his routes. He filled the tank, then waited on a bench across the street from the restaurant. He covered his mouth and nose with a light blue disposable mask.

At 1:50, Paul and Chelsea emerged and reached for their sunglasses. Their new driver waved at them and turned on the charm. He said his name was Laurent and he was from the same car company. He gave them a business card as he explained that Malik was rushing back to Paris by train to see about his wife. She had been injured driving to work only hours earlier and was in the hospital. Laurent apologized for wearing the mask and explained that he was getting over the flu and his employer required a mask. He pointed to the same black Peugeot across the street and apologized for any inconvenience. Paul and Chelsea could think of none. Without hesitation, they got into the rear seat; Laurent got behind the wheel and clicked on the child locks. He asked them about lunch, said it was one of his favorite places, and off they went in the direction of Caen, a half hour away.

Chelsea began grilling Laurent about his Frenchness. He claimed to be of Moroccan descent but his parents were both born in Lyon. They had tried to make him learn Arabic at home but it didn't stick. He considered himself thoroughly French, though he was proudly Muslim. He informed them that there were over half a million Moroccans living in France.

On the outskirts of Bayeux, Laurent was talking away as he pulled a thin cord that was attached to an aerosol canister under the front passenger seat. Silently, a strong but odorless dose of nitrous oxide entered the airspace of the rear seat.

Laurent pinched his mask tighter on his nose. Chelsea was sud-

denly quiet. Paul pushed the button to crack a window but it was locked. He said, "Say, could you lower a window?"

"Sure. Let me turn here." Laurent braked hard and skidded into a turn onto a gravel road.

"I'm dizzy," Chelsea said.

"Where are we going?" Paul demanded. His words were slower, his tongue thick.

"One moment," Laurent said, stopping the car. He turned off the ignition, opened his door, got out, and slammed it. Paul tried to open his too but it was locked. He yelled, "Open the door!" But his words were muffled. Outside, Laurent lowered his mask, stuck an inhaler in his mouth, and took a dose of pure oxygen. Paul was yelling and banging on the window. Seconds passed and he grew quiet.

When they were still, Laurent opened both rear doors to clear the air. The girl with the red curls appeared behind the wheel of a small, unmarked delivery van and parked it between the Peugeot and the highway in the distance. They were at the edge of a farm outside Bayeux. A dilapidated barn was the only building nearby.

"Put on a mask," Laurent said. "And wait a moment."

They watched the traffic from behind a thicket of saplings and wild shrubs. "Now."

From her small first aid bag the girl removed two identical syringes with one-inch needles. She jabbed the first into Paul's neck and gave him a one-cubic-centimeter dose of ketamine. The one for Chelsea went into her lovely left thigh.

Laurent opened his leather attaché case and removed a set of license plates and a screwdriver. As the girl kept watch, he swapped the front and back plates from the Peugeot. He gave the real ones to the girl, who slid them into her backpack and tossed it in the rear of the delivery truck, next to the orange bike. She quickly got behind the steering wheel, started the engine, and drove away without a word.

At 3:17, Laurent turned off the A13 autoroute near the city of Louviers, ninety minutes northeast of Paris. At a busy service station, he found the car's GPS tracker under the dash near the steering column, disabled it, and tossed it in the garbage.

At 4:14, the dispatcher at the car service in Paris received a call from a woman who said she was Chelsea Tanner, that she and her husband were in the town of Bayeux, and that their driver, Malik, had disappeared, along with his car. They were stranded and quite angry about it. A policeman told them that the driver had been taken to the hospital for some reason. Ms. Tanner said she and her husband had decided to catch a train to London to spend a few days. Please inform Malik that they no longer needed him, and don't even think about billing them for the trip.

The call was strange on several levels. First, Malik was a thoroughly reliable driver with a spotless record and not a single complaint in seven years with the company. If he'd had a medical problem, he would have called the dispatcher immediately to make other arrangements for his clients. Second, the caller claimed to be an American and spoke near-perfect English with only a hint of an accent, but it was an accent nonetheless, a French one, and the dispatcher knew it. Third, over four hours had passed since Malik had last logged in, with the drop-off at the restaurant. The long gap in time was confusing. Fourth, why would the American couple suddenly change plans and go to London?

For that afternoon, the car service had seventeen vehicles on hire, all but two in the Paris metropolitan area. The sole dispatcher was expected to monitor all of them, but it was a boring task and she needed several cigarette breaks. When she checked the Peugeot's GPS tracker, she realized it had been disconnected. An alert had been sent at 3:18 P.M., probably when she was outside having a smoke.

The car service had been booked through the concierge. The dispatcher chatted with her supervisor and both decided not to call the hotel. If the Americans wanted to see London, it was their

business. Malik was of greater concern. The dispatcher began calling Malik's cell phone but there was no answer.

At that time, the phone was in a locker in a closet of the semi-private hospital room.

At 4:31 he called and said he was still there, still being treated and feeling pretty lousy. Evidently, he had collapsed during a perfectly normal lunch and passed out. He had not been ill and felt fine during the drive from Paris to Normandy. He was not taking any meds and had no lingering health problems. He had no idea what happened but suspected it was the work of a car-theft ring. Alcohol was not involved because he was on duty, and besides he was Muslim and never touched the stuff. The doctor was waiting for the police to stop by because Malik was worried about his car. It was across town and he had not yet been able to check on it. The dispatcher explained that Ms. Tanner had called, was very upset, and said they were going to London. That was confusing because they had said nothing about London. Indeed, Ms. Tanner had talked of a gallery exhibit the next day on the Right Bank.

The dispatcher also explained that the car was gone. According to their monitor, the GPS tracker had been disabled an hour earlier when the car was near the city of Louviers, halfway back to Paris on the A13.

Malik was still dizzy and had a splitting headache. The doctors would not permit him to drive for another two to three hours. At 5:15, he called again and said his car was indeed missing. A policeman had driven him to the center of Bayeux, to the exact spot he'd parked at noon. Now there was a stolen car, a serious crime, and Malik was going to the police station to start the paperwork.

By then, the black Peugeot was hidden under a tarp in a tractor shed on a small farm near the town of Dreux, an hour west of Paris.

The rear seat was empty.