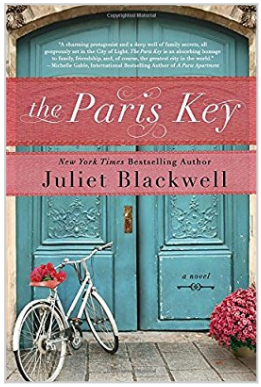

The Paris Key

By Juliet Blackwell

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Paris never really left Genevieve, and, as her marriage crumbles, she finds herself faced with an incredible opportunity: return to the magical city of her youth to take over her late uncle's shop. But as she absorbs all that Parisian culture has to offer, she realizes the city also holds secrets about her family that could change her forever, and that locked doors can protect you or imprison you, depending on which side of them you stand.

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for *The Paris Key*

“Juliet Blackwell offers a compelling storyline with a charming protagonist and a deep well of family secrets, all gorgeously set in the City of Lights. The sights and smells of Blackwell’s Paris lingered long after I turned the last page. *The Paris Key* is an absorbing homage to family, friendship, and, of course, the greatest city in the world.”—International Bestselling Author Michelle Gable

“In this witty, warm, winsome novel, Blackwell draws back the curtain on Paris’s complex past while celebrating its vibrant present. Her generation-spanning tale combines intrigue and passion with a flawless ear for language and a gift for sensory detail. If The Paris Key doesn’t make a Francophile of you, nothing will!”—Bestselling Author Sophie Littlefield

“A gorgeously plotted novel woven with luminescent charm, *The Paris Key* gleams as brightly as the city herself.”—Rachael Herron

Praise for Juliet Blackwell

“Juliet Blackwell sits firmly on my list of must-read authors!”—Victoria Laurie, New York Times bestselling author of *No Ghouls Allowed*

“Juliet Blackwell is a master.”—Fresh Fiction

“Just when I think Juliet Blackwell can’t get any better, she ratchets it up a notch.”—Lesa’s Book Critiques

“[Juliet Blackwell’s] writing style made me feel as though I was with each character, sharing emotions, actions, and anticipating the next moves. When I find an author who can provide this much reader involvement, I put her on my ‘must read’ list.”—MyShelf.com

About the Author
Juliet Blackwell is the *New York Times* bestselling author of the Witchcraft mysteries (*A Vision in Velvet, Tarnished and Torn*) and the Haunted Home Renovation mysteries (*Keeper of the Castle, Home for the Haunting*). This is her first work of women’s fiction. She lives in California.

Chapter One

Her uncle Dave always used to say, “Remember the locksmiths’ code, Genevieve. Never reveal the secrets you find behind locked doors, and never—ever!—abuse the power to open a lock.”

Genevieve pondered this morsel of advice while Jason, her soon-to-be-ex-husband, spoke.

Uncle Dave had been on her mind a lot lately. For one thing, she kept dreaming about kneeling before a locked door, hearing his ever-patient voice in her ear as she tried repeatedly (and unsuccessfully) to pick the lock. For another, her uncle's recent death had left her with a hollow feeling: sorrow mixed with regret.

Dave's passing also left his Parisian locksmith shop unattended.

"I've never met a person as locked down as you are," Jason was saying as he leaned back against the stainless-steel Sub-Zero refrigerator (wide enough for party platters) that cost as much as Genevieve made in a month. His stance was belligerent—hands on hips, gym-toned chest thrust forward—but his liquid blue eyes conveyed contrition mixed, annoyingly, with a touch of self-conscious pity. "How can you even *think* of moving to Paris while we're in the middle of this? There are papers to sign, and lawyers to meet with."

"Sounds like the perfect time to leave the country," she said, "you have to admit."

"Be reasonable, Genie."

She winced. Yet another reason to move to Paris: The French knew how to pronounce her name. *Genevieve.* Not Jenny or Genie or even Jen-a-*veev*, but *Zhohn-vee-ev*. Was it any wonder her marriage hadn't worked out? That's what she got for marrying a man who couldn't—or wouldn't—say her name properly. But he wasn't the only one; even her best friend, Mary, called her by her surname: Martin.

All things considered, Genevieve decided, it was her mother's fault. They weren't French, after all. Her mother had spent a few weeks visiting her brother in Paris the year before Genevieve was born; a framed photo had rested on her bureau: Angela and Dave, him smiling and goateed, her with wind-whipped hair. The two of them were bookended by gargoyles high atop the Cathedral of Notre-Dame, the city laid out in the background. But was that one trip abroad reason enough for her parents to saddle their daughter with such a hard-to-pronounce name?

"It's not as though I planned my uncle's death," Genevieve said, consciously trying to accede to Jason's wishes, to be reasonable. "Someone needs to go tend to things."

"He has a daughter, doesn't he? Let her take care of it."

"Catharine doesn't know the first thing about locks."

"And you do, don't you? Sometimes I think that's all you care about."

Out of habit, she reached up to play with the rusty key that had hung on a copper chain around her neck ever since her mother's untimely death, when Genevieve was fourteen. To modern eyes it looked nothing at all like a key. More like a hunk of rusted metal.

Around here, often, this key put people in mind of the Oakland hills conflagration, the wildfire that ate through hundreds of splendid homes and claimed twenty-five souls. In the smoldering aftermath, heartbroken owners went back to sift through the rubble, collecting items from their former homes that they would later incorporate into shrines: twisted slabs of glass, slumped shards of metal, half-burned albums with a few miraculously intact photographs of Grandma.

And keys: some twisted and charred, others still jingling in pockets, ready to open doors that no longer existed.

Years later, having rebuilt with better, treeless views of San Francisco, homeowners displayed these fragments of their old lives in niches, or hung them by fishing line from pieces of gray driftwood. While

sipping cocktails they would retell the story: the unseasonably warm day, the shifting winds, the panicked warnings to evacuate. They would speak of wrangling cats and grabbing heirlooms and locating passports; of fleeing down the snakelike turns of hillside roads, a wall of black smoke at their backs. They would think, but not say aloud, that it was unfair that their beautiful homes should have blazed in the inferno while the rest of Oakland—much of it due for a good burning—had remained intact.

The key Genevieve wore around her neck had nothing at all to do with the Oakland hills fire, but she let her neighbors assume it did. It was easier that way. All she had to say was “the fire,” and people nodded and looked away. They treated her with hushed tones, allowed her to avoid their eyes.

“Genie, are you even listening to me?”

“Tell you what,” Genevieve said. “I’ll make this easy: All I want is a ticket to Paris and enough money to take over my uncle’s locksmith shop. You can keep the rest.”

Suspicion clouded Jason’s beautiful eyes.

Genevieve had always thought herself smarter than her husband, her mind able to make quick logical leaps that evaded him. Still, he was much more successful than she. Jason was in software sales. He wooed his clients with truffles made from organic free-trade cocoa, hand rolled in powdered sugar by single mothers at a women’s collective in Berkeley. Jason felt virtuous when he bought these chocolates, the clients felt good about eating them, and, fueled by sugar and caffeine, they placed software orders in record numbers. “It’s a win-win,” was one of Jason’s favorite phrases, and he lived by that credo. But then, fate had been kind to him: Tall and well built, with light brown hair and blue eyes, he worked out religiously, dressed fashionably, and had a knack for remembering names. Nothing in Jason’s experience had suggested that life was anything other than a series of mutually beneficial relationships. Win-win.

What business had someone like Genevieve, she wondered for the hundredth time, had marrying a lighthearted optimist?

A thick sludge covered the bottom of her coffee cup. A freebie from a fund-raiser luncheon, the mug was the perfect size and weight, and she relished the way the palm of her hand cradled it, telegraphing the warmth of its contents to her blood in the mornings. Because although their house was expensive, it was old and drafty and always cold, built in a stand of redwoods on a hill overlooking Oakland and the San Francisco Bay. On a clear day an astute viewer might catch a glimpse of the Golden Gate Bridge, an earthy shade of Tuscan red gleaming in the sunshine. But clear days were rare. The house was engulfed by fog most mornings and by clouds most afternoons, and the soaring trees reached up into the haze and dripped dew onto the roof, the water tap-tap-tapping in a steady cadence that Genevieve found pleasant but Jason did not.

Genevieve knew Jason would have preferred to toss her old chipped mug into the trash in favor of the creamy bisque coffee set he had bought in a tiny Italian boutique in San Francisco’s North Beach not long after they married and moved into the house with the blue door. “It’s called Bianco de Bianco,” Jason had said, showing off the ceramics to their guests as they lingered over after-dinner coffee. “You mean ‘white’?” Mary had asked in her signature dry tone. Genevieve had snorted; then, in penance, had remarked upon the set’s simple, refined beauty. That was back when she had been careful to protect her husband’s feelings, his pride. Not anymore.

Clearly this marriage is no longer mutually beneficial. Genevieve wondered whether the woman Jason had been seeing, Quiana, found their affair a win-win.

“Are you serious?” Jason asked, looking at Genevieve out of the corner of his eye. “All you want is a

locksmith shop?”

“Maybe I’ll take this cup, too.”

She could almost make out the sound of wheels grinding as Jason considered her offer, searching for the catch. “How much are we talking? What’s a locksmith shop in Paris worth?”

Priceless. “I’m not sure. I’ll need to speak with my cousin Catharine and figure out the details. For the moment, I just want the plane ticket.”

“Genie . . .” Jason’s voice dropped, becoming gentle, earnest. “What in the world are you going to do in Paris? You’re a copy editor, not a locksmith.”

“Suddenly you’re a fan of my copyediting?”

“At least it’s a real job. Locksmithing is a . . . a dream. A childhood memory.”

His words sent Genevieve’s mind tripping over the memory of all the locks she had mastered at her uncle’s side: the double-ball padlock and dimple devices she practiced on until she was ready for Schlage’s side pin. She could hear their soft clicks and whirs in her mind, drowning out Jason’s words.

“Genie . . . you don’t have to do this. We could see a marriage counselor, work things out. How many times do I have to say it? It was a mistake. I’m *sorry*. It didn’t mean anything; it just happened. . . .” He trailed off, shook his handsome head. Remembered what his life coach told him about being a man and taking responsibility. “No, that’s not right. No excuses. I’m so sorry I hurt you, Genie.”

Genevieve continued searching the contents of her coffee cup without responding.

Here was the truth: *Deep down she didn’t care.* She was using Jason’s affair as a reason to demand the separation, but it was the very fact that she couldn’t get herself to care that made her realize they should divorce. When they first met, she had been dazzled by Jason’s straightforward, sunny disposition; now she found it stifling, exhausting. Unbearable. Jason was not a bad man. He needed something from his partner that Genevieve could not give; must he be condemned for that? And yet, publicly, she *did* place the blame on him, citing his affair, feigning heartbreak, taking the easy way out. Allowing people to make assumptions, just as they did about the key she wore around her neck.

She reached up to brush her fingers along the rusty talisman, warm from her skin.

Genevieve had found the key while cleaning out her mother’s lingerie drawer, not long after she died. It had been swathed in Bubble Wrap, in an airmail package.

With it was a note written in a spidery, all-caps scrawl: *YOU HOLD THE KEY.*

It was postmarked Paris.

Chapter Two

1997

The uncle she had never met picked her up at Charles de Gaulle Airport, which she learned the locals called

Roissy. They drove toward Paris in the smallest car Genevieve had ever seen, past hulking blocks of cement buildings that made up dismal housing projects and industrial sites. At long last they exited the thruway and began inching through thick traffic in the streets of Paris. Ominous skies were drizzling more than raining: a sluggish, lugubrious wetting. Parisians hunched over in their coats and boots, collars turned up, wielding umbrellas like weapons on the crowded sidewalks.

Everything, from the darkening sky to the balconied buildings to the trash in the street, was some dreary shade of gray. Why did people speak of this city with such adoration? Her mother always used to refer to Paris as "the City of Lights," her voice taking on a rare reverential tone when she spoke of it.

"How was your trip?" asked Uncle Dave as they drove.

Genevieve shrugged in response, not wanting to look at him.

Dave was an old man, Genevieve had realized with a shock when she first set eyes on her uncle in the airport. He had a full head of white hair and a Don Quixote–style goatee, and he walked with a limp. At more than twenty years her mother's senior, Dave seemed more grandfather than uncle. According to family lore, a teenaged Dave had come to Paris to help rebuild after World War II, fell in love with a Frenchwoman named Pasquale, married, and never returned.

At the airport, he had stood outside of customs holding up a hand-lettered sign, black ink on bright red paper: GENEVIEVE MARTIN, WELCOME!

Her Air France escort, who had been tasked with making sure Genevieve didn't somehow become lost on the nonstop flight from San Francisco, was an elegant, slender blonde who filled out her uniform perfectly and called Genevieve "sweetheart" in English with a lilting, melodic accent. Genevieve had hated her on sight and throughout the twelve-hour journey answered her gracious condescension with sneers and eye rolls.

Upon spying Dave's sign the flight attendant gave Genevieve's uncle a frosty nod and handed her charge over to him without a word, disappearing behind doors clearly marked: DÉFENSE D'ENTRER. No admittance.

Despite her attempts to alienate the attendant throughout the flight, Genevieve felt a pang of abandonment as she watched the woman go. Glancing up at the smiling old man with the sign, Genevieve thought, *He could be anyone*. He had shown no documentation, after all. And he didn't look much like the old photo on her mom's bureau. What if he was some creepy French child molester who'd read her name on a list somewhere and decided to pick up an "unaccompanied minor" to do awful things, the kinds of crimes spoken of in whispers?

Genevieve wished her brother, Nick, were here, or her dad. Uncle Dave had invited them all to come; Genevieve had overheard his boisterous voice on speakerphone, declaring that Paris could cure heartache. Her father and brother claimed they were too busy with the farm, but they booked a flight for Genevieve, whether she wanted to go or not. Probably glad to be rid of her, she thought.

"Did you eat on the plane?" Dave asked as they drove.

Genevieve shrugged again. Still, she was relieved he spoke English. She hadn't been entirely sure he would but had been too embarrassed to ask. Her mother, Angela, had told stories about her Parisian brother over the years, and Genevieve had a vague sense that he might be the reason she was saddled with a name that was so difficult to spell, but she hadn't really put all the pieces together. But now she realized that, like her mother, Dave had been born and raised in Mississippi. He even spoke with a slight drawl, reminding her of home. Of

her mom.

Her *dead* mom.

She felt the hot prickle of tears behind her eyes. Threatening, humiliating. Genevieve had come up with a trick to keep them at bay: She bit her tongue and imagined peppermint candy, the red-striped disks she used to steal from her neighbor's candy dish. The metallic tang of blood let her know she'd bit too hard. Not for the first time.

"Well, I hope you're hungry," Dave continued, unfazed by her sullen silence. "Because Pasquale's a great little cook. One thing about living in France, you eat well. Hey—you like croissants?"

She shrugged again.

"You tellin' me you've never had a croissant for breakfast? How about a *pain au chocolat*? No? Why, you're in for a treat, darlin'."

"We eat whole grain at home."

"Oh, well, that's commendable. But a genuine Parisian *pain au chocolat* . . ." He trailed off with a chuckle and a shake of his head.

"Is it breakfast time?" Genevieve asked.

"Oh no, it's almost suppertime. The croissants will be for tomorrow morning. We'll take a walk, see the neighborhood. You'll love it."

She gazed out the foggy window. It was rush hour and the streets were jammed; pedestrians made swifter progress than the cars.

"This corner might not look like much," Dave said as they sat immobilized, watching as the light turned red for the second time, "but this is where the Bastille used to be."

"What's the Bast-ee?" she asked, curious in spite of herself.

"You haven't heard of Bastille Day? It's sort of like Fourth of July, but here it's *le quatorze juillet*, the fourteenth of July."

"Independence day?" Genevieve wasn't great at history. Had France been a colony?

"Not an independence day like in the States . . . but sort of. The Bastille was an old prison that stood right there." As he pointed, Genevieve studied the crookedness of his finger, the gnarled blue veins and ugly brown spots that covered the back of his hand. She tried to reconcile his rheumy eyes and sagging cheeks with old family photos. Dave had been a teenager when he first came to Paris: dashing and romantic, with dark hair and a goatee. More than fifty years ago. He had lied about his age, insisted on enlisting. It was the tail end of the war, but they still needed fresh, uninjured boys. "See that sign over there?"

Genevieve searched but saw nothing more than gray shopfronts, a restaurant, and a bar. Spindly-looking chairs were tilted forward to lean against tiny café tables, glistening in the rain. A clutch of commuters waited for the bus, huddled under a bright yellow awning that looked garish in the otherwise monochromatic cityscape.

“On the corner of the building, there,” Dave said as the light changed and they finally moved on. “Not that interesting, I suppose, in any case. But here’s a good skill to learn: In Paris the signs are usually found on the corners of buildings, not on poles like in the States. So if you’re looking for a street sign, look for a plaque on a building. And sometimes you’ll learn a little bit about history, instead. Almost by accident.”

They pulled behind a sea of cars at the next light. The lanes seemed to be mere suggestions, with cars straddling the painted lines willy-nilly. Ahead, a pair of drivers vied for position and began to argue, the taxi driver opening his door to half stand with one foot out, one foot in, the other yelling through his open window. The cabdriver made a series of hand gestures that, though foreign to her, left no doubt as to their meaning. Genevieve took note for future reference.

The gesturer won the spot and nosed his taxi into the lane.

“So, anyway,” continued Dave, “round about 1789 the French people got tired of the abuse they suffered at the hands of the aristocrats, and stormed the Bastille to release the prisoners.”

Now interested, Genevieve twisted in her seat, looking behind them to see any traces of such a place.

“We can walk by there one day when we’re out sightseeing, if you want,” said Uncle Dave. “But like I said, there’s not much to see anymore. You’d probably like the Eiffel Tower more.”

“I went to a prison once,” Genevieve said.

“Did you, now? Did the judge throw the book at you?”

“I mean, just to visit. With my mom.”

Genevieve had been in the fourth grade. There was a rally planned to protest the imminent execution of a condemned prisoner at San Quentin, the hulking state prison on the shore of the San Francisco Bay. Genevieve had begged and pleaded with her mother to be allowed to go. Angela had hesitated, pointing out that it was Sunday, a school night. But Genevieve’s father had encouraged the outing. “She’s not too young to understand injustice,” Jim had said, making Genevieve wonder why he never joined Angela at such protests.

On the way, they sang her mother’s favorite childhood song: *“I love you, a bushel and a peck, and it beats me all to heck, how I’ll never tend the farm. . . .”*

But once they arrived, things turned grim. The crowd milled around, chanting, witnessing, crying, or praying for a man none of them had ever met. The musty wool blanket scratched Genevieve’s neck when her mother wrapped it tight around her shoulders to ward off the chill blowing across the bay. Well-dressed television reporters checked their lip gloss and applied hairspray; bulky news vans bristling with antennae were parked in driveways rented from the locals; cameramen hoisted their equipment on their shoulders and scanned the crowds, looking for a good shot. A few reporters were interviewing random protestors, but most were waiting, as they all were, for something to happen: for the governor to issue a reprieve or for the executioners to act.

Genevieve had gazed through the gates at the well-lit, Art Deco façade of the massive penal structure, her mind conjuring lurid images of what went on inside those walls.

She knew she was supposed to care about the man who was about to die, but what caught her imagination was the town itself. It had an ice-cream parlor and a post office and sat right on the water, little clapboard

houses inhabited mostly by prison staff and their families. A sweet little main street, like a movie set . . . but what about their monstrous neighbor at the end of the lane? How did the residents manage to drift off to sleep? Did they shrink from imagined faces in their windows? Did they wonder if this was the night a convict might scale the walls, jimmy the lock, sneak in to exact a grisly revenge?

It made Genevieve shiver to think of that face in the window.

Angela had gathered the prickly blanket tighter around Genevieve's ears and pulled her daughter to her side, wrapping her arm around her.

The back of her mother's arm looked like melted ice cream, its skin puckered and shiny, yet to Genevieve the scars were familiar and comforting. She liked to run her finger over the strange surface; it felt slippery and hard, like plastic, so different from regular flesh. Whenever she asked her mother what had happened, Angela would say only that there had been an accident. If Genevieve pushed for an answer, Angela would reply, with a rare edge to her voice, that life was complicated and it was impolite to stare.

Genevieve had craned her neck to study her mother's face in the hazy yellow glow of the streetlamps. Angela was pretty (thick auburn hair, chocolate brown eyes, even features) and Genevieve noticed how some of the dads would linger at the school gates to talk with her. But Angela never responded, rarely smiling, always holding herself apart; "aloof" was the word Genevieve once heard someone use to describe her mother. She had looked it up in the dictionary, but to Genevieve it didn't describe Angela. Angela was too good for them, was the problem.

But then Angela had looked stricken, tormented by the stranger's imminent death.

"Do you know him?" Genevieve asked, embarrassed that she hadn't thought to ask earlier.

Angela looked down at her, an uncomprehending look on her face. "What?"

"Do you know the man they're going to execute?" Genevieve clarified.

"No, baby," said Angela. "I just . . . I just think it's wrong to kill."

"No matter what?"

"No matter what."

"Even if it's self-defense?"

Genevieve would have thought it impossible, but the sorrow on her mother's face seemed to intensify, her brown eyes gleaming with unshed tears.

"Like, I mean, if someone was trying to kill you," Genevieve hurried to explain, not wanting her mother to think she was an ogre, that she thought it was okay to kill. "Then it would be okay to do it to them first, right?"

Angela nodded slowly, looking back toward the prison. When she spoke, her voice was hushed. "Yes, I suppose self-defense is a different matter altogether. Hush, now, baby; let's remember why we're here."

Genevieve fell silent. The cold salt air stung her cheeks, and her stomach growled. But she didn't complain. She knew she was supposed to feel sad for the man, but the truth was she hoped there would be more protests, that this would become a regular mother-daughter event. It felt special, grown-up, even magical to

be outside in the middle of the night, stars sparkling overhead.

No reprieve was granted. At 12:13 a.m. an announcement was made: The man had been put to death. A few protestors lingered, gathering in prayer circles or making statements to the press, but most shuffled back to their cars in silence.

Angela had driven them home, her cheeks wet with tears. It was only as they were nearing the farm that Genevieve realized she didn't know what the man had done to earn his death sentence. The sad, distracted look on her mother's face kept her from asking.

She was sorry, now, that she hadn't. There were so many things she wished she had asked her mother when she had the chance.

"What had they done, the prisoners in the Bast-ee?" Genevieve asked her uncle.

"Offended the king in some way. They were political prisoners."

"Were there a lot of them?"

"Good question!" Dave chuckled and shook his head. "Actually, turns out there were only seven prisoners in the Bastille at the time, but it was a symbolic victory. And never underestimate the power of a symbolic victory. Now, see that river, right there? That's the famous Seine."

The river was a black expanse in the rapidly fading light. A series of small bridges lit by ornate streetlamps straddled the water, leading to yet more bleak buildings on the other side.

"And here we are, home at last," Dave said as he turned onto a tiny street with cobblestone sidewalks.

Genevieve looked up just in time to catch sight of a small plaque on the side of a building. Craning her neck, she made out white letters against a faded blue background.

"Village Saint-Paul?" she read.

"Village Saint-Paul," Dave repeated with the French pronunciation. "One of the oldest neighborhoods in all of Paris. Full of nooks and crannies, little lanes and courtyards with no cars allowed, just the occasional bicycle. We're known as the antiques district, people come from all over to shop, and we have a few big outdoor antique fairs every year."

"Oh."

Dave looked at her with amusement. "You don't like antiques?"

She shrugged.

"I'll tell you a secret," he said in a whisper. "I don't care much about them, either. Not antiques per se, anyway. But I do love antique keys and the old houses they belong to."

Dave stopped the car in the middle of the street, killed the engine, and got out, circling around to get her suitcase and bag out of the trunk. Genevieve followed suit. It made her nervous that they were blocking the way, but there weren't any other cars on this narrow side street. In fact, there seemed to be no life at all.

"This is it," he said proudly, gesturing toward a storefront. The lights in the shop were out, so all she saw

was a display window in the anemic glow of a streetlamp that barely cut through the cool mist of the evening. A wooden sign over the window read: UNDER LOCK AND KEY.

“It’s in English.” The one thing Genevieve had been prepared for upon her arrival in France was not to be able to understand anything.

“Yep, I keep meaning to come up with a better French name but never quite got around to it.”

“Do people here speak English?”

Dave chuckled. “Not so’s you’d notice. The younger folks more than the older ones. But I went with the English saying because the French word for locks, *serrures*, was hard for an old country boy like me to pronounce. And besides, after the war Americans were pretty popular around here.”

Genevieve tried to remember why. She knew the U.S. had been involved in World War II, but she was fuzzy on the details. The Gulf War, Vietnam, Korea, the world wars . . . the dates and details bobbed aimlessly in her head, sticking around only long enough to carry her through whatever test she was taking. Ancient history.

“We helped liberate France from the Nazis,” Dave explained. “Now, can you carry this heavy bag all by yourself?”

She nodded, grabbing her suitcase and hoisting it as best she could. The little wheels on the bag wouldn’t roll on the uneven stones. Dave limped as he led the way into the alcove. *Maybe everyone had scars by the time they grew old,* Genevieve thought.

He unlocked the little shop and waved her through the door.

The locksmith shop was petite, more like a large walk-in closet than a proper store. Its dusty shelves were jammed with locks and keys, doorknobs and doorknockers, decorative hinges and shutter hardware. Small wooden barrels held bolts and screws and other metal tools. It smelled of pipe tobacco and some sort of oil, like a car mechanic’s garage.

One wall was festooned with clocks: cuckoo clocks, painted clocks, clocks with no numbers, clocks in the shape of the sun. Their frenetic ticking filled the otherwise silent space.

“Let me introduce you to your *tante* Pasquale—that’s ‘aunt Pasquale’ in French—and to your cousin Catharine, and then I’ll run and park the car. Let me tell you, Genevieve, parking in Paris is not for the faint of heart. But your old uncle Dave has a few tricks up his sleeve.”

He gave her a wink and opened a small door behind the old-fashioned brass cash register.

“Bienvenue chez nous,” he said. “Welcome home.”

Chapter Three

Mary insisted on taking Genevieve to the airport, located many miles to the south of San Francisco, in the city of Burlingame.

“Those bags are too heavy to schlep on BART,” Mary said. “Besides, I feel like Paris will swallow you up

and I'll never see you again."

"That's not true. And anyway, it's only a flight away. You should come visit."

"Maybe," she answered with a shrug. Mary was nervous about driving on the bridge, so she kept her eyes fixed on the span, her hands wrapped so tightly around the wheel, her knuckles were white. Still, when Genevieve offered to drive, she declined, citing the need to practice.

This had always intrigued Genevieve: Mary was fearless about so much of life, but occasionally some small thing, some everyday function—like signing up for health insurance or driving on the bridge—threw her for a loop.

Mary was an artist. Like Genevieve, she had been on her own from a very young age. Probably that was why they'd gravitated to each other in the crowded coffeehouse where they'd met; Mary asked to share the table, and after trading a few snarky comments about the oddly bewhiskered hipsters surrounding them, they recognized kindred souls. Unlike Genevieve, however, Mary had a straightforward way of saying what she needed and wanted and thought, without subterfuge.

The airport was a series of long lines and overly personal security inspections, but Genevieve barely noticed, buoyed as she was by the prospect of imminent freedom. Her seatmate on the plane was a young Greek man, flying to Paris on business. He was dark and handsome, and despite his nice gray suit and sleek leather briefcase, he smelled like the beach: warm sunshine on bare skin, mixed with exotic spices. After perfunctory hellos, she brought out her book and he put in earbuds and closed his eyes.

The moment the airplane reached altitude, an exquisite blond flight attendant came by, offering flutes of champagne to everyone of legal drinking age. Upon first glance Genevieve had an irrational thought: Could this be the same woman who had escorted her to Paris so many years ago?

No, of course not; far too much time had passed. This was simply what so many Frenchwomen looked like: slender, elegant, gracious—a flurry of adjectives came to mind, not one of which described Genevieve.

Genevieve thought of herself as ordinary, clumsy, even evasive. She had inherited her mother's thick auburn hair and deep brown eyes, but otherwise she felt run-of-the-mill, slightly shorter than average. Thirty-three years old, unhappy, and on the verge of divorce. It dawned on her, only then, that she was almost the same age her mother had been when Angela went to visit her brother in the Village Saint-Paul, a last hurrah before Genevieve was born.

Was she unconsciously retracing her mother's footsteps? That sounded like something Jason would propose, now that he was in therapy. Probably his life coach would suggest that Genevieve had never gotten over her mother's death and that she was running away in search of answers.

No kidding, she thought. Could anyone who hadn't lost a parent early truly understand the extent of the loss? Was it even worth trying to explain?

Angela's death was the brutal dividing line in Genevieve's life: First she had a mother, and then she didn't. The course of the devastation was swift, with only a few weeks from initial detection of the disease to her death. Not even long enough for extended family to be notified and called to her bedside. Her husband and children were still in denial when Angela's remains were whisked away, leaving them stunned and mortified, awkwardly shuffling through their days, tending to the animals, not talking. Angela hadn't wanted a memorial service; instead, she requested that her husband and children sprinkle her ashes at the base of the dusty old sycamore tree, the one that shaded the turkey shed. Nick suggested they plant a rosebush in her

memory, but Angela had laughed and said no, that if the bush died it would be like her leaving yet again. *"The sycamore's a better bet,"* she'd said with a smile. *"Nothing will kill that thing. And I'll be perfect fertilizer."*

Three weeks after Angela's death Genevieve experienced the fresh new hell of Mother's Day. During school Genevieve was allowed to read in the library while her classmates made cards, but she couldn't avoid the fund-raisers selling carnation posies. See's Candies, the local florist, even the grocery store . . . she had felt inundated at every turn by the push to celebrate the mother who had abandoned her by dying, who had left her with a yawning void in her life, a need that ran so deep and dark that Genevieve feared she would never reach the bottom, no matter how far she dared dive into the abyss.

Yet another good reason to move to France, Genevieve thought. *No Mother's Day.*

Or . . . was there? Had they, too, been infected with this Hallmark holiday? Sometimes it snuck up without warning, like in her senior year of high school, when her father took her to Philadelphia for college tours of Penn and Drexel. Jim saw it as an opportunity to teach his daughter a little about history, insisting on shepherding her to see the Liberty Bell and Independence Hall. While walking downtown they spied a plaque dedicated to Anne Jarvis, who had begun the tradition of Mother's Day as a tribute to her own mother, and who then lobbied for it to become a national holiday.

"Screw Mother's Day," Genevieve had muttered under her breath, and Jim, her sad, stoic, somber father, who normally admonished her to watch her language, for once seemed to understand his rebellious daughter.

He nodded thoughtfully and said, *"I'm with you, kid."*

• • •

A flight attendant came by and offered more champagne. Champagne in economy class: You had to love the French. But with the second glass, a gnawing uncertainty took root in Genevieve's belly.

Ever since hearing about her uncle's passing and Catharine's suggestion that Genevieve take over his shop, Genevieve had been absolutely sure of what she wanted. Her mind had remained focused on escape, the safe passage away from her current life that Paris seemed to offer. But . . . who was she to think she could make a new life *anywhere*, much less in Paris? She had already begun the paperwork to request permission to work as a foreign national, but the officials at the Consulat de France had warned her it would be a grueling, time-consuming process.

And even if she succeeded in that, she would have to figure out how to become certified as a locksmith to maintain the business. Genevieve still practiced opening old thrift-store locks while watching TV many evenings, but locksmithing involved more than just picking locks. She didn't even speak French, just a few scattered phrases remembered from childhood, a couple of long-ago courses at college, plus the little bit she convinced herself she could learn online. She had planned to continue to study on the plane, but of course a few hours of intensive language acquisition would not be enough to do the trick. How was she supposed to operate a business in a foreign land, in a foreign *language*?

And the only souls she knew in France were her *tante* Pasquale, who was, according to her cousin Catharine's infrequent e-mails, now beset by dementia; and of course Catharine herself, who had always been a tad strange.

"I don't really like the French," Mary had said with characteristic forthrightness when Genevieve told her she was moving to Paris.

“How many French people do you know?”

“None,” she said with a shrug. “But still.”

Mary was one of the things Genevieve would miss about the U.S. Most of her other friends were conditional: old school friends or work friends or couples friends. Even though Jason was the one who had had the affair, he was keeping the majority of their mutual acquaintances in the separation. With her blessing.

She pulled out her notebook—a pretty one she’d bought for the trip, wrapped in faux red leather and embossed with what looked like ancient scribblings—and began a list. Blue ink on heavy white sketch paper. *I will miss:*

1. Mary

2. Convenience stores open twenty-four hours

3. Mexican food

4. Redwood trees

Her pen hovered above the paper. What else?

Her father had passed away last year. Her brother, Nick? Not really. Not if she was being honest. He was still working the family farm in Petaluma, which was newly chic because trendy, upscale restaurants adored his organic specialties, not only vegetables but things like homemade free-range pork sausage. Nick’s wife was an earnest, well-put-together woman who spoke to the farm animals in baby talk and commuted to a nondescript job in San Francisco’s financial district that paid a good salary, with benefits. They traded occasional phone calls, and there were dinners at Christmas and birthdays, but otherwise they rarely spoke or visited.

Surely there were other things Genevieve would miss. People didn’t just leave their native land without regret. It wasn’t as though she was fleeing war or famine.

After a long moment, she added one more item to her list: *The Golden Gate Bridge*. Then she put away the notebook and opened the computer to continue her French lessons. As the hours ticked by, dinner was served—good food served with free wine, this being a French airline—and Genevieve started two different novels but found herself dissatisfied with each; worked on the *New York Times* crossword puzzle until she was stumped by the name of the German mathematician who invented set theory; then turned back to her French-language page.

The foreign words—most of which contained far too many vowels—started to blur and bob. She closed her computer to save the battery, shut her eyes, and fell asleep envisioning the Paris that she had visited so many years before.

The pilot’s voice came over the loudspeaker: They had begun their descent into Paris.

Chapter Four

Angela, 1983

She is a terrible person.

It doesn't matter how many times Dave tries to assure her that, no, this isn't so; Angela knows the truth.

Perhaps this is why, no matter how she tries, she can't draw a single deep breath. She awakens gasping, night after night, feeling as though she is suffocating.

So she has left her husband, and worse, so very much worse, her son. She left her little boy, Nicholas. Tricky Nicky, they call him, but it is a misleading nickname (Nick name!) because the truth is, he isn't tricky at all. He is honest and straightforward and kind: a good boy with an even temper. Like his father, he is quiet and hardworking and eager to please.

Angela has left behind his sticky hands and clinging arms and the warm, solid weight of him when he sits on her lap, which he does every rare moment he catches her sitting down. She has left behind the terrible burden of the trust in the big brown pools of his eyes, the pure love that shines from his open countenance.

Nicholas is just entering the second grade but already he is helping his father on the farm. Already he is preaching to other children about the benefits of organic vegetables, the importance of appreciating the simple happiness of a pig in the wallow when the sun is setting, the dusty elegance of the sycamore trees, the magic of the "fairy circles" that the baby redwoods create when their mother dies.

Already he understands the importance of the farm not just as a living, but as a vocation.

The farm. Somehow in all the time when Angela was fighting her way out of rural Mississippi, landing a scholarship to college, where she rallied and marched for civil rights and social justice—everything from voting rights to banning the bomb to ending apartheid—she had never imagined herself ending up on a farm. She had grown up on something very closely approximating that, but when Jim talked about going back to the land in such romantic, sweeping terms, she hadn't fully realized what his talk about food-as-politics signified. It meant mornings spent feeding livestock that stank of musk and damp. Days in the punishing sun tending to aphid-infested broccoli and pulling Japanese beetles off the spinach. Evenings spent haggling over endless paperwork, trying to get their farm officially certified as organic. Their future and their son's future dependent on whether it rained too much or not enough, whether the blight or the insects or the drought would deal them a deathblow. It meant never, ever taking a vacation because the farm must be tended to at all times.

It is a good life. She is very lucky. Everyone tells her so.

Still, the farm is as relentless and unforgiving as a child. Its demands are more or less outrageous at different points in the season, but they are always there. Forever in the back of your mind, even when you manage a day trip to San Francisco with girlfriends or a rare evening out with your husband.

If only she could breathe.

It had gotten so bad Angela tried confiding in her mother, of all people. But she laughed at Angela, her words coming over the telephone line, cutting and bitter, saying it's not so easy to run away from real life, is it, missy? Reminding her that she had tried to escape her rural background, even honeymooning in la-di-da Paris, but oh, how the mighty do fall. And telling her to do her duty, take care of her husband and child, and stop whining.

Complaining is the number one sin. Angela knows that. Accept your situation, count your blessings, get back to work. Stop whining.

And Angela will go back. Of course she will. She just needs a little break, just a brief respite. To remember how to breathe. She will go back to Jim and Nicholas and things will be just as they were. Among other things, she has to attend to the canning; she imagines the peaches are almost ready, and when they come, they come with a vengeance, the tree's drooping arms finally letting go its heavy fruit like the rush of falling marbles in one of Nicky's favorite games.

She will go back and she and Nicholas will watch silly reruns of *I Love Lucy* together over organic cornmeal-crust vegetarian pizza, and Jim will fret about the state of the broccoli, and everything will be just as it was, as it always has been.

What she wouldn't give for one deep breath, the air streaming fully into her lungs, that exquisitely sweet feeling of expansion. Of life. Even the radio seems to mock her. In one of the year's most popular songs, the Police keep singing: "Every breath you take . . ."

"Look at everything we've built here," Jim had said. *"The crop's looking good this year. And the turkeys are on track for Thanksgiving sales. We're surrounded by beauty, living the dream. What more could you want?"*

She had no answer for him. Most of her old friends from school had landed regular jobs with stock options and dental plans and benefit packages and lived in tract homes in the suburbs. Imagining swapping her life with theirs makes her feel just as tired, just as breathless.

Perhaps she is experiencing nothing more exotic than an early-onset midlife crisis, like she'd read about just the other day while in line at the grocery store, right after Nicholas—good, obedient Tricky Nicky—refused the candy she offered him, since she wanted to indulge in a Snickers bar herself. She knew she was a bad mother for trying to tempt him. In theory, she and Jim didn't believe in processed sugar, though truth to tell, Angela couldn't give a damn from time to time. Let the poor kid have some fun before he had to start thinking about things like fat-free diets and processed sugar and preservatives.

"Here, have a *pain au chocolat*. The best in the city. Then you can tell old Dave what's going on in that pretty little head of yours."

His tone is light, but Angela knows Dave's heart is breaking for her. She knows he is appalled that she has left her husband and son behind, but he can't know what it's like, that life. The oppressiveness of it; all encompassing, heavy, energy sapping, like the full, wet heat of an August afternoon in Mississippi. When they were kids they had no air-conditioning; at night their mother would place wet sheets on top of them so they could sleep in the still, hot air. Angela remembers that feeling: every inch of her skin damp and feverish, yearning for a breeze, for relief.

She wishes she could tell Dave what is wrong. She wishes she knew herself. Since arriving in Paris she has been sleeping fourteen hours a day, waking only when Pasquale or Dave drags her from bed, insisting she shower and sit at the table. She has no interest in food or conversation, no interest in anything. She wants nothingness.

"Did Jim . . . ? Did he hit you?" had been Dave's first question, before they even got on the thruway from the airport. The natural query of a protective older brother, a brother old enough to be her father. There are snapshots, faded by now to yellow and blue, of Dave visiting from France, always with a young Angela astride his wide shoulders. So many photos that Dave once joked that he used to have a strange sort of growth on his back, but he'd had it removed when Angela was five so she could go to kindergarten without him.

Now he asks again: “Did Jim do something to hurt you?”

“No, Jim would never hurt me,” Angela answers with a firm shake of her head. Her auburn hair gleams in the light streaming through the café windows; her hands shake as she brings the coffee to her lips. The cup is tiny, holding a café au lait about half the size of one typically served in the States. The *pain au chocolat*, on the other hand, is easily twice the size of the typical American concoction. It is bigger than her hand, the hand still wearing the simple gold band Jim had placed upon it ten years ago, only six months after they had met at a peace rally in Washington, DC.

She bites into the pastry. It is huge, yet unlike most overlarge things, it does not lack in taste. The flaky layers are soaked in rich French butter, chewy and crumbly at the same time. The chocolate is soft and creamy, a dark and sensuous experiment in cocoa.

Angela’s eyes flutter closed as she loses herself to the sensual experience of caffeine and chocolate and butter, a memory of the last time she visited Dave, with Jim on their honeymoon.

“Did he have an affair?” Dave asks.

Angela understands why her brother is persisting. In his mind, it makes no sense. Dave adores his wife and always has; he forsook his country for hers, falling in love with Paris just as he did with Pasquale. In Dave’s mind, you built a life upon everyday pleasures, reveling in time spent with family and friends. He had been a neighborhood locksmith for more than thirty years, packing his little black bag and walking or bicycling all over Paris, happily letting people into their houses, opening old boxes and safes, installing safety equipment. He probably owns keys to half the homes and businesses in the city, and yet there is no question of trust with a man like Dave.

In the middle of the day he would take a leisurely lunch at a café with a friend, and at night he would return to a lavish dinner prepared by the apparently ever-patient and pleasant Pasquale, often shared with extended family; on weekends he played *pétanque* with his friends in the Jardin des Tuileries. It is a good life, a steady life.

What about Pasquale? Angela wonders. Does Pasquale ever wish to simply turn and walk away from her husband and child? To leave the cloying embrace of her big extended family, the ones who drop in for dinner, asking for help with child care and finding jobs and making rent?

“No, no affair,” Angela answers simply.

Dave gazes at her across the table, and she knows he wants her to say whatever it is she needs to say. But she has nothing for him. After so many years of tamping them down, swallowing her words whole, she doesn’t know how to explain the things that she is feeling.

“I’ll go back,” Angela finally utters with as much conviction as she can summon. “I’m going back soon. I just . . . I just needed a little breathing room.”

“Ah yes, of course,” says Dave, and Angela sees relief in his blue eyes. “Just a little vacation in the City of Lights, and you’ll be back to your old self!”

The *pain au chocolat* sits heavy in her gut; the coffee churns.

She is suffocating.

She is gasping for breath.

She is a terrible person.

Chapter Five

Catharine had been full of apologies to Genevieve for not being in Paris to greet her “little American cousin” at the airport, but Genevieve was just as glad. She liked the idea of taking an anonymous cab for the long ride into the city, experiencing the trip in silence, by herself. She wanted to be free to let the memories flood her mind, to sate her nostalgia, untainted by the presence of another, by the need for catching up or innocuous questions about the flight.

Still, Genevieve hadn’t anticipated the effects of lack of sleep and the overwhelming, awkward strangeness of arriving, alone and unable to speak the language, in a foreign city.

Her eyes were gritty and sore. Every part of her felt sticky with the funk of travel.

Upon disembarking from the airplane, she found herself unaccountably irritated that all the signs were in French. Embarrassment washed over her when she couldn’t figure out which line to stand in for immigration, and when it was finally her turn at the kiosk she had a panicked moment when she couldn’t locate her passport. By the time Genevieve made her way to baggage claim, found her bags, and wandered through customs, she began to feel famished: a deep, sickly hunger.

She emerged from the air-conditioned terminal into an unseasonably warm and muggy day under overcast skies. Her leggings stuck to her skin; her jacket was far too warm, but she couldn’t take it off—one arm was holding her purse and her carry-on; the other was pulling her suitcase, which was so heavy she’d had to pay an exorbitant overage charge at check-in in San Francisco.

She fought the urge to calculate what time it “really” was (middle of the night? dawn?), reminding herself instead that this was it: Paris was the new reality.

Paris. Where she didn’t speak the language and knew almost no one.

By the time Genevieve made it to the taxi stand she was covered in a sheen of perspiration and wondered if she smelled as bad as she feared. She could feel a drop of sweat rolling down the center of her back. She had practiced a few lines in French and made a token stab at negotiating the cost of the trip into Paris with the supervisor at the taxi stand, but who was she kidding? At this point she would pay a small ransom to be dropped off in the Village Saint-Paul.

All she wanted was to hide and regroup. To drop her luggage and peel off her clothes and take a shower. To pull herself together, far from chicly dressed strangers speaking their lyrical, unintelligible language.

The cabdriver was North African, and French appeared to be his second language as well, so there was no attempt at small talk as they zoomed down the thruway in the blessedly air-conditioned cab. As her clamminess subsided, Genevieve looked out the window and started to relax. This is what she had remembered: ugly gray blocks of apartments and factories. She could be on the outskirts of Detroit, she thought, happiness suddenly bubbling up. The ordinariness of this approach to Paris seemed almost ludicrous, hiding as it did such a spectacular city. Like a winning sweepstakes ticket presented in a ripped and stained manila envelope, the kind usually tossed directly into the recycling.

Once they escaped the thruway and made their way through thick city traffic to the Village Saint-Paul, Genevieve started to feel fluttery with excitement. She had an inkling of imminent victory, not unlike the

feeling of being close to defeating a frustrating lock.

True, she didn't speak the language. And she hardly knew a soul in France. As Jason had tried his best to convince her, moving to Paris was a foolish, impulsive thing to do.

Still. The last time Genevieve felt this kind of excitement was when she found out her husband had slept with another woman.

That sounded terrible. She knew it did.

And of course it had been wrenching, devastating, painful. She could still recall the nausea, the otherworldly sensation of the world falling away beneath her feet, like being on the Santa Cruz Big Dipper roller coaster with her brother when she was a kid: that queasy, thrilling rush as the cars whooshed down the first tall hill and you weren't sure whether you were about to throw up or were having fun or just wanted everything to stop so you could get off.

But the truth was, Jason's infidelity had cracked open the dark, cramped cell that her marriage had become.

It was a glimmer of hope: her way out.

A new start.

Chapter Six

The cobblestones were uneven beneath her feet, making the suitcase impossible to roll, and the air seemed even muggier than at the airport. But Genevieve was elated to see the neighborhood looked exactly as she remembered from the last time she was here, when she was fourteen.

Nothing had changed.

Of course it hadn't. Given the scale of French history, nineteen years was a blink of an eye, the passing of a dust mote, a single tick of a clock.

The rue Saint-Paul, main street of the fairy-tale-like Village Saint-Paul, dated back to the medieval period. Its minuscule antiques shops, art galleries, and restaurants looked nearly as ancient. The city of Paris was founded by the Romans; Notre-Dame itself was built upon the stone remnants of a Roman temple dedicated to Jupiter. There were catacombs below her feet, still in use, dug centuries before Europeans would ever set foot on what was later dubbed California.

And unlike in America, Genevieve thought, people here would never bulldoze a centuries-old building to construct a 7-Eleven, even if such a convenience store were bound to make a fortune in a place where many shops—even in the capital city—were closed on Sundays and holidays, and in the middle of the day for the long lunch-hour *sieste*.

The big sign on the front of the building still declared: UNDER LOCK AND KEY; DAVE MACKENZIE, PROPRIÉTAIRE. And under it, in French:

SERRURIER: OUVERTURE PORTES BLINDÉES, DÉPANNAGE SERRURE, REFAIRE DES COPIES DES CLÉS, TARIFS COMPÉTITIFS.

As ever, the big bay window displayed ancient keys—not unlike the one she wore around her neck—as well as metal lock plates and padlocks, from the antique to the new. A thick layer of dust muted and unified the inventory.

For a delicious moment Genevieve was tempted to try picking the lock on the shop door, just to see if she could. But there were half a dozen people milling about rue Saint-Paul, window-shopping and ducking in and out of antiques stores. It wouldn’t do to get arrested for breaking and entering on her first day in Paris. So instead she used the key Catharine had sent her in the mail.

She pushed the door wide, stepped in, and paused.

This. This was what Genevieve had wanted. Ever since she’d learned of Dave’s passing, ever since Catharine had urged her to come to Paris, ever since she’d found the e-mails and confronted Jason about his affair with Quiana and realized her marriage was over. Ever since then, Genevieve had wanted to return to this place. Alone. All by herself. To breathe in the mingled aromas of stale pipe smoke and rusty metal and the oil Dave used to maintain his instruments.

As a fourteen-year-old all she had seen were the old keys and locks, the charmingly antiquated world of the locksmith.

But now, Genevieve recognized the contemporary tools of the trade: A relatively new machine for cutting keys sat on the back counter next to a rotating stand full of metal blanks (she remembered Dave teaching her to grind the keys by hand first, then with the machine); on one side wall, new hardware in molded plastic cases—dead bolts, hinges, padlocks—hung from hooks in regimented rows. These concessions to modern life were limited, however: Catharine had warned Genevieve that there was no Internet at the house, nothing more technologically sophisticated than an old broadcast TV, a record player, and plenty of LPs.

Genevieve didn’t even have a cell phone she could use here. It was like being cast back into the 1950s.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Carolyn Fletcher:

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