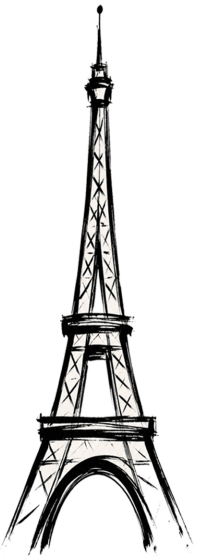

NOW THAT YOU'RE MISSING

ALLAN EVANS

STILLWATER
STORY HOUSE

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For the one who shared Paris with me, and every adventure since.

Also by Allan Evans

Killer Blonde

Killer Smile

Killer Instinct

Abnormally Abbey

Class Clown

Spook Squad

NOW THAT YOU'RE MISSING

CHAPTER 1
THE WATCHLIST

"Who are they?"

The French intelligence office, far removed from the opulent suites of political appointees and senior management, was lit by a single brass desk lamp. It was the sort of spartan office where far too many life-or-death decisions had been made. The pair stood over a surprisingly crisp surveillance photo. "Americans. Four of them. Same surname—Woods." The man's voice was clipped, his tone as worn as his years.

"I'm assuming they are related." The woman was younger—less than half his experience—and dressed accordingly, in a tailored Chanel skirt suit and expensive heels that whispered power. She liked turning heads. That much was obvious.

"Yes. Two married couples. Brothers Benjamin and Marcos Woods, traveling with their wives, Harper and Olivia. Benjamin and Harper are late twenties. Marcos and Olivia, mid-thirties. They landed this morning on a Delta non-stop from Minneapolis–St. Paul."

"Any indication of why they triggered the alert?"

"Beyond them landing at Charles de Gaulle?" He ran a hand down his jacket sleeve, wiping away an imaginary speck of lint.

"Spare me." Her tone cut like a blade. "Millions of people fly into Paris each year, but only a few are put on our security watchlist."

"Let me explain the protocols." His sigh told her he'd had this talk with younger agents too many times for his liking. "The French security services work in tandem with Interpol and a raft of allied government agencies to safeguard our nations from security threats. Their data is intermingled with ours to protect sources. Policy says agents must have reasonable suspicion to put a person on the watchlist. But the watchlist notification doesn't disclose what those suspicions are based on, and as is often the case, governments will neither confirm nor deny whether they have added an individual to the list. It's not a great system. The upshot? A name, face, or passport triggered a computer relay somewhere, and the system flagged them as people of interest."

"It's not particularly helpful, is it?"

The senior man laughed. "It is not. We don't know why or even which of the four triggered the watch."

"So, what do we do then?"

"We watch them," the older man said, shrugging. "There's a reason it's called a watchlist. One or more of the Americans has a secret we must uncover."

"They don't look like terrorists, except maybe this one," she said, putting a finger on the face of a clean-shaven man with dark hair. It was the eyes.

"You just singled out the law enforcement officer in the group," he laughed. "But he does have sinister eyes. And as they say, the eyes are the window to the soul." He checked his watch. "Put a tail on them. Two teams. I want to know where they're going, who they talk to, and most importantly, why these small-town Americans ended up

on our list. They may not be terrorists, but there's something that raised flags in our system. They likely pose some sort of threat."

"If there's one thing we're good at, it's the brutal neutralizing of whatever threats Mother France may face." She flipped her highlighted hair back. "And that's why I like my job."

And the opportunity for advancement, the older man thought. *No matter who she had to crush to get it.*

CHAPTER 2
TAKE MY BREATH AWAY

Accidents, as they say, rarely happen in isolation—they pull the world into their orbit, demanding attention and judgment. Harper's collision occurred mere steps from the hotel entrance, where tourists with cameras and locals with baguettes swarmed the sidewalks, and breakfast patrons filled the outdoor cafés with the clatter of cups and lively conversation. The moment was impossible to ignore.

An athletic tourist in sleek, designer activewear barreled into a scruffy man in a thrift store wardrobe. He looked as if he'd been simply passing the entrance when Harper met him like a Peterbilt would a deer. He got the worst of it, the clash sending him sprawling onto the pavement, drawing the sharp stares of bystanders and the immediate intervention of nearby French police.

The local police abandoned their coffee and croissants, running to assist the tourist. With recent heightened security, officers were being especially vigilant. It probably didn't hurt that the tourist in question was gorgeous.

The woman, Harper Woods, reached for the man's hand to help him to his feet.

"Stay where you are," the younger of the two gendarmes shouted. Harper released the vagrant's hand, and he fell back on his rear, eliciting gasps from the onlookers.

She turned on the approaching lawmen, frustration coloring her face.

"Look. I am no damsel in distress." With her hotel looming behind her and the man crumpled before her, she gestured grandly. "I don't need rescuing from the tower."

Based on the way the pair of mustached gendarmes looked around, a visitor might think they didn't have metaphors in Paris.

One policeman was young, eager, and burly with gym muscles; the other was close to retirement and wore the weary look of having seen it all before. Both were armed, but for the moment, their sidearms remained holstered. A smallish crowd lingered in front of the hotel, hoping to catch something salacious or at least social media-worthy.

"Mademoiselle." The august lawman managed to cram an entire opera of condescension into that one word. How he could pack so much patronizing weight into a single syllable was beyond Harper. If it were an Olympic sport, this guy would've taken gold.

She cocked her head and jabbed a finger in his direction, her tone sharp enough to slice through his self-importance. "Surely there's someone out there who actually needs your help. Maybe there's a cat in a tree who is in need of rescue, but I've got this. I'm perfectly capable of taking care of myself."

The conviction in her words wasn't for show. It was the truth. Harper had always taken care of herself.

She'd never had a choice. Losing her parents young had made sure of that.

The lawman's expression didn't change, but Harper could almost feel his disapproval radiating off him, thick and suffocating, like high school boy aftershave. She didn't flinch. Instead, she held his gaze,

her jaw set, her chin tilted just high enough to make her point clear: she wasn't the damsel, and this wasn't his fairy tale.

"But," the policeman began, gesturing to the man sprawled on the pavement. His threadbare clothes looked less thrift store and more dumpster behind the thrift store. His scraggly beard and matted hair completed the picture. Anyone might be surprised by the immaculate state of his teeth if they looked closely, but no one looked. No one ever examined the unhoused. That was the whole point, wasn't it?

"He attacked you. We saw it with our own eyes," the officer insisted, pointing toward a nearby sidewalk café. Two overturned wrought-iron chairs showed where the gendarmes had been enjoying breakfast before the commotion.

Harper sighed, tugging on her sleeve. "He's nothing," she said dismissively, her voice cool but firm. "We collided. Honestly, I probably wasn't looking where I was going. Promise I'll be more careful next time."

The policeman's gaze flicked from the man on the ground—still groaning softly—to Harper, his expression a blend of confusion and reluctant respect. "What will we do?" he asked, half to himself, as though the situation had been dropped in his lap like an uninvited guest.

"Well," Harper said, flashing a tight smile, "you could start by finishing your breakfast. Those croissants won't eat themselves." She checked her watch with exaggerated intent and took a deliberate step back. "I'd love to stay and debate civic responsibility, but I've got places to be. Thank you for your concern."

The older lawman opened his mouth as if to protest, but then thought better of it. He stepped aside with a faint shrug, his duty apparently satisfied for the moment.

And Harper? She didn't wait for an official dismissal. She turned on her heel and strode off, her pace brisk, her posture unbothered. But as she left, she couldn't help but smile. Accident, she'd said. Sure. But in her defense, she hadn't meant to knock him off his feet.

Earbuds in, "Vacation" by the all-female eighties band The Go-Go's playing, she headed up the cobblestones of Rue Joseph de Maistre. Motorbikes lined one side of the narrow street, shops and cafés the other. Everything around her felt worlds away from home, and she loved that. Montmartre felt almost absurdly charming, like Paris had decided to parody itself with cobblestones, cafés, and artists on every corner. Harper slowed down on the cobbled streets and winding alleys, admiring the lively atmosphere and the bohemian-inspired people. She stopped at one of the many breathtaking vistas, which left her speechless.

Once again checking her watch, Harper headed for La Mère Catherine. She'd discovered the charming bakery and café on her first day in Paris. The rustic interior, with distressed walls and wood floors, was warm and inviting. The café smelled of espresso, butter, and sugar—croissants, pain au chocolat, and enough pastries to sabotage a week of discipline.

Checking her reflection in the café window, Harper gave her hair a quick, saucy toss, as if the toss alone could inject her with the confidence of someone who actually had it all together. She squared her shoulders, took a breath, and sauntered in like she owned the place.

"Good morning, love," she said, sliding into the seat across from her husband without missing a beat. Ben glanced up from his coffee, a sweet, crooked grin spreading across his face.

The opening notes of "Take My Breath Away" by Berlin played in her mind, uninvited but somehow perfect. Even here, in the middle of Paris, surrounded by effortlessly chic Parisians, he still managed to look like a lumberjack who'd taken a wrong turn and ended up in the land of croissants and couture.

Tall, broad-chested, with a beard that could probably double as a wildlife sanctuary, and hair that was just a little too long to call professional, Ben turned heads. Lots of heads. Harper had learned to ignore the occasional appreciative glances—or at least pretend she didn't see them. In her opinion, he made plaid and practicality look annoyingly good.

Even though he wasn't actually a lumberjack, he worked for the Department of Natural Resources. And back in Minnesota, that was the next closest thing.

"How was your morning run?" He handed her a glass of water.

"Exhilarating." She gave him a smile that reeked of implication. "Hope your recovery nap helped." He'd looked pretty drained when she left, telling him to go back to sleep. There would be more to come later. "Vacation sex is the best."

Ben got that goofy grin she so adored. "The way the bed and walls shook, the other guests must have thought there was an earthquake."

"Just the way I like it."

"*Bonjour*," a server said brightly when she arrived at the table. "Welcome to La Mère Catherine. Coffee?" Harper asked for a mocha latte and took the offered menu card.

"*Oui*," Ben attempted, then shook his head. "Sorry, that's all I got."

The server laughed as she left.

"You're good with languages. Can you explain French to me?" Ben asked playfully.

"It's basically Spanish, but you speak in cursive."

He laughed. "It's like you have a word with 11 letters, but you only pronounce four of them."

"Yes, you have it. Cover the second half of the word, squint and pronounce only the vowels you think you see."

Harper reached across the table and held his hand. "It's good then that you can fall back on data as your second language." Even though Ben worked outdoors, he made a surprisingly robust salary on his side gig, making sense of client data.

Ben should have laughed but said nothing as he gazed across the table. Evidently something was on his mind this morning. "Today would be the perfect day for you to start writing."

"But I write every day."

Ben laughed. "But that's boring writing."

Harper disagreed. It might not be boring, but to most people it wasn't especially exciting writing, either. Most of the pieces she wrote were instruction manuals for medical devices. Since graduation, Harper worked as a technical writer for a consulting firm, with her two largest clients being 3M and Medtronic.

"How about this?" Ben said. "Before we meet up with my brother and Olivia for touristy things, you take your laptop someplace. Find

a nice café overlooking the city and finally start writing your spy thriller. You've always talked about this dream of yours."

Harper gazed out the window. She didn't know how many people dream about writing a novel, but she did. Harper literally grew up reading the spy thrillers of Robert Ludlum. Set in exotic locales, they often pitted a lone hero against a vast conspiracy with the potential to bring down governments. She'd devour each new novel after bringing it home from the library or used bookstore. Being such a voracious reader was likely what got her interested in writing in the first place. But bills needed payment, so technical writing came first.

"There's really no excuse not to start today," Ben continued after the server left with their order. "You should set your novel right here in Paris. There's no better setting for intrigue and romance. Have any thoughts on a plot yet?"

She leaned forward, her passion showing in her twinkling eyes. "I was thinking about a case of mistaken identity. The local intelligence service somehow flags a couple vacationing in Paris. As they fight to stay out of jail or worse, it comes out that maybe one of them really has something to hide."

"*Ooo*," Ben said. "I like it. Some of it sounds like us, some from your imagination. I can't wait to read it."

"I can't wait to *have written* it." Harper laughed. "Dorothy Parker said she hates writing but loves having written. And boy, do I get that. Some days I'd rather have my pubic hairs plucked with a second-hand kitchen appliance in a Walmart parking lot than stare at a blank page. But that feeling when you're done—there's nothing else quite like it." She smiled. "That's why I keep doing this to myself."

Ben leaned back. "It doesn't help that you're such a perfectionist."

She held up her hands. "When you're writing instructions for using a medical device, maybe a little perfectionism isn't such a bad thing."

Ben laughed and ran a hand over his bearded cheek. "You make a good point. But isn't your writing reviewed by editors and proofreaders? They're there to catch anything you miss."

"Yeah. And legal, compliance, and regulatory all get a look at it too." She couldn't help but scoff. "But I'm not going to rely on someone else."

"Harper, at some point, you've got to learn to trust someone." Ben held her gaze.

"Like that's ever going to happen. People let you down."

Ben's eyes flicked up. "Think about NASA. All those brilliant people collaborating to get a rocket to the moon. Engineers, mathematicians, programmers, pilots—they couldn't do it without working together."

"I'd rather crash and burn if I'm being honest. Even thinking about having to rely on anyone makes my skin crawl. Present company excepted," she added quickly, seeing Ben's expression. "That's why I agreed to marry you."

"It wasn't for my unusually large… omelet?" Ben grinned as the server set his breakfast plate down. A second staffer left Harper's waffles and a small pitcher of syrup.

"Not necessarily. Maybe it was your bacon…or sausage." In between bites, they flirted shamelessly, making fools of themselves in front of the other guests. The staff didn't seem to notice or care. They'd seen it all.

After pushing her empty plate away, Harper leaned back, feeling pleasantly full. "What's the plan? Where are we going with Olivia and Marcos today?"

"It's between the Sacred Heart church place and the d'Orsay. Olivia is lobbying for the church."

"It's called the Basilica of Sacré Coeur de Montmartre, and can't we do both?"

"Not well, I guess. There's a lot to see with either. No reason to rush. It's vacation, after all. Let's just wander and take our time." This was Ben in a sentence. Don't rush, and take it all in. So different from pretty much everyone she'd met before.

"Maybe the Basilica first. I'd hate to disappoint Olivia." Despite Marcos, Harper had become friends with Olivia. Maybe not close friends, but Harper cared for her sister-in-law.

Ben's phone dinged. "Speaking of Marcos," he said before answering it. "What's up, bro?"

Ben's smile vanished and was quickly replaced with concern. "No…"

Something was going on. And judging by the worried look on Ben's face, it wasn't good. But where Marcos was concerned, that was hardly new.

Leaning forward, Harper tried to hear what was happening. Ben caught her eye and held up a finger. She waited, drumming her long fingers.

"Okay, let me know." He set his phone down and looked at Harper, worry coloring his face.

"What? What's going on?" It *was* something bad.

"It's Olivia." Shock and pain showed in his eyes.

"What is it?" Harper's heart thumped in her chest, her sense of dread growing.

His voice cracked with emotion. "She's missing."

THE STORY CONTINUES

NOW THAT YOU'RE MISSING

What happened to Olivia?
And what secrets is Harper hiding?

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