

# The Missing Wife

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# Chapter 1

Standing in the line of passengers boarding the intercity coach, Imogen started to panic. A cold sweat dampened the back of her white cotton blouse and she froze on the spot, wedged behind a tall man in a brightly coloured Madiba shirt and an impatient Parisian woman who'd been checking her watch every five minutes for the past half an hour. The woman made a disapproving sound, indicating that she should get a move on, but Imogen stayed where she was, on the bottom step of the coach, clutching the handrail, unable to move.

*'S'il vous plaît,'* said the woman through clenched teeth.

'I'm sorry.' Imogen moved to one side. 'Go ahead.'

The woman pushed her way past, followed by the remainder of the passengers, while Imogen remained at the doorway, unsure of whether or not to board.

*'Madame?'* The driver looked at her enquiringly.

'Yes,' she said hesitantly. 'Yes. I'm . . . I'm getting on now.'

But she could hear his words in her head.

*What on earth d'you think you're doing? You can't manage on your own. You'll make a mess of it. You always do.*

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She shut him out. He was wrong. She wasn't going to make a mess of it. Because she had a plan.

*Don't make a complete fool of yourself.* It was his voice again as her hand tightened on the handrail.

She wouldn't make a fool of herself if she stuck to the Plan. It was foolproof. Hopefully. And she'd already successfully carried out the start of it. There was no need to doubt herself about the rest. Besides, she thought, it's too late to back out now.

*It's never too late.*

This time the words were her mother's, one of the many clichés she'd liked to use on a daily basis. But in this case, they were true. It wasn't too late. She could still walk away without too much collateral damage. Whatever problems that might arise from her actions could be fixed. She could find a way to explain them.

But going back and trying to make excuses wasn't why she was here now. It wasn't why she'd spent so long refining the Plan. Nevertheless, she had a choice. Go forward, or go back. She reminded herself that this was the chance she'd been waiting for. Her first opportunity to execute the Plan. How would she feel if she let it slip away?

She took a deep breath and began to climb the steps.

The coach was comfortable and air-conditioned, which was a pleasant relief after the unexpected humidity of the June day. The exhibition hall had been hot and crowded, and she'd spent a lot of time wishing she'd worn something lighter than the navy wool business suit Vince had told her was appropriate for her business trip to France. But whenever she'd broken out in a sweat that morning, she'd been unsure if it was because of the suit, or because she was worrying

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about what she was intending to do and the way she was going to do it.

She walked down the aisle of the coach. Having let so many people board ahead of her, her choice of seat was limited. She slid into the first one available, beside a long-legged young man with earbuds in his ears who was busy scrolling through playlists on his phone. A student, Imogen decided, as she glanced at his stubbled cheeks, logoed T-shirt and ripped jeans. She felt a pang of nostalgia for her own student years, even though she wouldn't have considered them to have been typical. Unlike many of her peers, she hadn't wanted to travel or have assorted life experiences. She'd wanted to put down roots. Her own roots in her own place instead of somewhere decided for her by someone else. That had been very important to her. Unfortunately.

She gave the young man a brief smile, but he was far too busy with his phone to notice.

The driver put the coach into gear and it moved slowly away from the station.

A few minutes later, they turned towards the Boulevard Périphérique and Imogen's phone buzzed.

She counted to ten before she looked at the text.

*Are you at the airport?* she read.

*On the way now,* she replied.

*How long?*

She looked at the facades of the buildings around her as the coach driver waited for the lights to turn red. They were mainly office blocks of glass and steel. They could have been anywhere in the world.

*Twenty minutes.*

*Text me when you arrive.*

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OK.

*Love you.*

She hesitated before sending her reply. *Love you too :)*

She saw a sign for the airport as they moved forward again. The coach gathered speed, then turned in the opposite direction. She exhaled slowly. The student beside her was still absorbed in his music. Imogen stared out of the window. When the coach passed an exit marked 'Disneyland', she sent another text.

*At airport, it said. Phone battery about to die. Talk later.* This time she didn't add a smiley face.

She picked up her handbag from beneath the seat in front of her and opened it. Then she slid her engagement and wedding rings from her finger and dropped them into the bag. After that, she took a hair clip from a small bundle in one of the side pockets and used it to pop out the SIM card holder on the phone. She took the card from the cradle and held it between her teeth while she closed the phone again. As she bit down hard on it, she realised that the student had begun to watch her.

'You'll damage it,' he said in French as he removed one of the buds from his ears.

'I know,' she said in the same language once she'd taken the card from her mouth.

She balanced it between her thumb and forefinger and began to squeeze. After a while, the SIM card started to bend. She kept the pressure on until it had doubled over and the tiny metallic bands had cracked. The student shrugged. Imogen sat back in her seat and stared straight ahead.

\* \* \*

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Vince Naughton always had a plan. He liked to have his day scheduled and he hated being taken by surprise. Years earlier, at one of those corporate think-ins and staff bonding days, which he thought were a total waste of time, a colleague had called him controlling. Irritated by her snap assessment, Vince had said that he wasn't controlling but he did like to be in control, a comment that resulted in a round of applause from the group and left his colleague looking embarrassed. A few months later, Vince had been promoted and she'd left the company, which made him feel vindicated. It was good to know how things were supposed to pan out, he thought. And good to ensure that they did.

Which was why, when he turned into the car park at the hotel in Cork, he was within ten minutes of the arrival time he'd set himself – the ten minutes was to allow for the unexpected. Vince believed in allowing for the unexpected. It was why he was one of the company's better associates. He thought of every eventuality. Very few things ever surprised him. He planned for the worst and hoped for the best. It had served him well all his life.

He parked the car, checked in at reception and went to his room. He'd specified a first-floor room if possible, and he was pleased that the conference organisers had met his request, although the room itself overlooked the car park instead of the river, which he would have preferred. Nevertheless, everything else was fine: the Wi-Fi worked, there were tea- and coffee-making facilities, and the TV was a modern flat-screen on the wall.

He sat on the bed and sent a text.

*Arrived on time. Room OK. Text me when you're home.*

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Then he left the phone on the bed and went into the bathroom to have a shower.

According to the bus timetable, the journey would take more than eleven hours. There were, of course, infinitely quicker ways to travel from Paris to the south-west of France than by road (although if she'd driven herself, Imogen knew she could easily have cut the time in half). A flight would have taken less than ninety minutes, but catching a flight meant having to give your name and credit card details, and she hadn't wanted to do that. The train would have been the best option of them all, given how superb the French rail system was, and would have had the added advantage of taking her exactly where she wanted to be. However, although she might have been able to buy a ticket without having to reserve it, she felt sure there were plenty of CCTV cameras throughout the marble concourse of the ultra-modern Montparnasse station, and she didn't want to be caught by any of them. She'd watched too many news reports with grainy images of unsuspecting people going about their daily business not to know that public places were hotbeds of CCTV surveillance. She realised that it was possible she'd been caught on camera buying the coach ticket too. But she didn't think so. Besides, nobody would have expected her to take a bus. That was why it was part of the Plan.

It began to rain as they arrived at their first stop, four hours into the journey. Imogen dodged the languid, heavy drops as she hurried into the service station and made her way to the ladies'. In the cubicle, she took the battery out of her phone and threw it into a red plastic bin. At their next stop, another four hours later, she disposed of the phone

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itself in a blue bin near the coach park. It was the first time in more than fifteen years that she hadn't had a mobile phone, and it was a strange sensation. Even though the phone had been useless without the SIM and then the battery, it had been a part of her. Now it was gone. She wanted to feel that everything it signified was gone too, but the truth was that she wasn't feeling anything at all. Other than apprehensive. Or maybe just scared.

When she got back on to the coach, the student was playing a game on his own mobile, his fingers tapping urgently at the screen. He looked up as Imogen settled herself in her seat and gave her a faint smile before turning back to the game.

She was pretty sure that she'd received more texts by now.

*Are you home yet?*

*Where are you?*

And then perhaps the voice message.

'Haven't you charged your damn phone? Ring me.'

But she wouldn't be ringing. That was part of the Plan too. And because she'd destroyed her phone, she had to stick to it.

She held her hands out in front of her. They were shaking.

The student finished playing his game and took the buds from his ears. He turned to Imogen and asked if he could get by her so that he take his rucksack from the rack. She stood up while he got his bag and rummaged around in it. Then he slid back into his seat and she sat down again. He lowered the plastic tray in front of him and put a bottle of water and a triple-decker sandwich wrapped in cling film on it. He had other food too – a Kit Kat, a chocolate muffin

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and a couple of bananas. He offered one of the bananas to Imogen.

'No thank you.' They continued to speak in French.

'Are you sure?' he asked. 'Maman packed all this for me. I like my food, but two bananas is one too many.'

'It's good of you to offer,' said Imogen. 'But I'm not hungry.'

'Fair enough.' He unwrapped the sandwich and took a large bite.

Imogen tried not to look at him. Without a phone or a magazine to distract her, it was hard to stare straight ahead.

'Do you mind me asking why you trashed your SIM card?' he asked when he'd finished the sandwich.

She hesitated before replying. 'I wanted to get away from it all.'

'You could've simply switched the phone off.'

'It's not the same.'

'A bit drastic nonetheless.' He grinned at her.

'But at least I know I can't be tempted by it,' she said.

He nodded and turned his attention to the muffin. It disappeared in two bites and he spoke again.

'Are you on holiday?' he asked.

'Um . . . sort of,' she said. 'I was working and now I have some time off.'

'Cool,' said the student. 'I've got summer work in a vineyard.'

'That'll be fun.' Imogen's plan hadn't included talking to anyone, because she hadn't anticipated casual conversation with random strangers. She wasn't used to it. Besides, she'd wanted to remain anonymous, forgettable. But it was an unexpectedly welcome distraction. Anyhow, the student was

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doing most of the talking. All she needed to do was nod a few times.

‘What’s your name?’ he asked, during a pause.

‘Imo . . . gen,’ she mumbled.

‘Nice to meet you, Jen,’ he said, apparently unfazed by her hesitation over what was a simple question. ‘I’m Henri.’

She didn’t correct him.

He talked a lot. He was twenty years old and studying environmental sciences at Orléans University, and he was interested in winemaking and viniculture. The previous year he’d travelled to California to visit the vineyards there, which had been great, he said, but he was looking forward to Bayonne. Would she like to meet up for a coffee?

She couldn’t remember the last time she’d smiled with genuine amusement, but she did now. Henri was at least ten years younger than her, but he was happily hitting on her. Which was sort of flattering, she supposed, if very French.

‘I’m sorry,’ she said. ‘I won’t be staying in Bayonne. I’m travelling further.’

‘*Dommage,*’ he said. ‘It would have been nice to have coffee with you. But perhaps another time? Where are you from?’

‘Provence.’ She’d lived near Marseille when she was small.

‘My family holidayed in Cannes once,’ said Henri. ‘But I don’t remember very much of it.’

‘It’s a nice town,’ Imogen said. ‘Though very bling-bling.’

He laughed at the English words. And she smiled again.

It was midnight when they finally pulled into the terminus, near the train station in the Aquitaine city of Bayonne. It had stopped raining about an hour previously and the sky was completely clear. Imogen sat in her seat while everyone around

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her stood up. She'd felt herself relax talking to Henri, but suddenly her hands were shaking again. She'd been protected for the last eleven hours, cocooned from the rest of the world as the bus made its way through the country. Now she had to step outside and face it all once more. And she was having to do it on her own. There was nobody to organise her, to tell her what to do. Nobody to help with the Plan.

'Excuse me, Jen.' Henri, who'd fallen asleep a little while earlier, had been roused by the activity and was ready to get off.

'Yes. Sorry,' she said, standing up. 'Enjoy the vineyards.'

'Enjoy your break. If you come back to Bayonne, please call me.'

'No phone,' she reminded him.

'I'm at the Bernard Noble,' he said. 'Look me up.'

She knew she wouldn't.

She followed him off the bus and waved as he walked away, his rucksack on his back. She waited while the driver took the rest of the luggage from the storage area. Her silver-grey case was one of the last to be retrieved. She picked it up and looked around her. Beyond the car park, the surrounding buildings were typically French, their warm brick illuminated by street lights, wrought-iron balconies at their shuttered windows.

She'd memorised the location of the hostel where she hoped to stay, and so, after taking a moment to orientate herself, she crossed the road and walked down a narrow side street. At the corner, she could see the dark green canopy over the door, embossed with the name. She hesitated when she reached it. She'd never stayed in a hostel before. Not having done the student travel thing.

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She pushed open the glass door, which was set into a brick surround. The interior of the building was clean and renovated, with a black and white tiled floor and exposed walls decorated with iron sculptures. A middle-aged woman was seated behind a small reception area, engrossed in a book. She didn't look up until Imogen stood in front of her and cleared her throat.

'Can I help you?'

'Um . . .'

*You can't manage without me.*

Imogen whirled around, convinced he was standing behind her. But there was no one there.

'*Mademoiselle?*'

*You'll fail. You know you will.*

'I . . . I'm looking for a room.'

She realised that she was waiting for the woman to ask her why she'd turned up so late at night. And why she was on her own instead of with him. And where she was planning to go. And what she planned to do. And . . .

'For how many nights?' The woman sounded bored.

'Just one.' Her voice was barely above a whisper. She cleared her throat and spoke a little louder as she repeated herself. 'Just one.'

The woman took an electronic key from the desk, coded it and handed it to her.

'*Premier étage, mademoiselle,*' she said.

Imogen wondered if it was fetching up at a hostel that had turned her from a *madame* to a *mademoiselle* again. She glanced at the bare finger on her left hand before starting up the stairs with her bag. She stopped outside the door of room 14. The card didn't work the first time.

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*You can't manage without me.*

She dropped the key and it slithered along the corridor. It took her a while to pick it up because it kept sliding out of her grip. When she finally had it in her trembling fingers, she inserted it into the lock again the right way up. The light turned green and the door opened.

The room was better than she'd expected. The walls were painted pale cream, brightened by some framed floral prints. The single bed was surprisingly firm. There was a net curtain at the long window, which led out to a tiny balcony overlooking the street. The window also had a pair of green-painted shutters, which Imogen pulled closed. Apart from the bed, the only furniture was a tall, narrow wardrobe, with interior shelving. A full-length mirror was on the wall beside it. The en suite bathroom (the reason she'd picked the Hostel Auberge in the first place; whatever else, she wasn't going to share a bathroom!) boasted a shower, toilet and hand basin. Two dark green towels hung on the rail beneath the sink. Though nothing was luxurious, it was impeccably clean.

It was also empty. She realised that she'd half expected to see him there, waiting for her. She sat down abruptly on the edge of the bed, a wave of relief washing over her. Her breath was coming in short gasps. She put her head between her knees, terrified that she was going to faint.

'I am a strong, capable woman,' she muttered to herself. 'I can look after myself.'

But she wasn't sure she believed it.