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THE
FORBIDDEN
ATLAS



SAM SEDGMAN

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For Maya, who can always find the path



‘He who contemplates the depths of Paris is seized with vertigo. Nothing is more fantastic. Nothing is more tragic. Nothing is more sublime.’

Victor Hugo

‘I wisely started with a map.’

J.R.R. Tolkien

<map of Paris – to come for page x-xi>





PROLOGUE

Rue Descartes

The avenues of Paris glowed gold in the winter darkness, draped across the city like a spiderweb. Nestled among them, tucked on to a narrow street running north to south like the crease of a map, the window of a rare book shop shone like a piece of amber, its light dancing in Carmen's eyes like a firefly.

A hush fell over the cobblestones as she switched off the ignition of her motorbike, removing her helmet and letting her breath steam into the bitter night air. She glanced up and down the pavement, pleased to find it deserted. Carmen liked Paris. Even in the heart of it, you could still find pockets of quiet. It made her job far easier to do.

She ignored the *Fermé* sign dangling in the window

and pushed open the door. The shop smelt of crinkled paper, wood polish and dust. Tables were piled with beautiful hardbacks wrapped in protective plastic. Cabinets and shelves stretched high on the walls, stocked deep with chunky leather-bound volumes, rolled parchments and maps.

‘Mademoiselle?’ The shopkeeper appeared from a stockroom at the back, carrying a stack of books. He was a slight man with a waistcoat, rolled-up sleeves and a whiskery white moustache. He set the books down on the counter. ‘I am afraid the shop is closed.’

‘But I’ve come *such* a long way,’ said Carmen, batting her eyelashes. ‘Please. I’m looking for something very important, and you’re the only person I trust to get it for me.’

The man puffed out his chest slightly.

‘Well. We are one of the only specialists of our kind in the city,’ he said, adjusting his waistcoat. ‘What is it you seek?’

‘I’m looking for a rare map of Paris,’ said Carmen.

‘Then you have come to the right place,’ said the shopkeeper. ‘Maps are our speciality. Are you hunting a particular historical era?’

Carmen smiled. ‘I want the Laval Projection.’

The shopkeeper tensed, stepping back a little from the counter.

‘Why ... that is a *very* rare edition indeed, I don’t believe that I’ve ever had the pleasure of—’

‘It is one of a kind,’ said Carmen, placing her fingers on the counter and looking at the man with calm, focused eyes. ‘And I know that you have it.’

The man swallowed. ‘I’m afraid you’ve been misinformed.’ But Carmen saw his eyes flick downwards, to a metal safe beside the desk.

‘You procured a copy of the Laval Projection last month,’ said Carmen, walking slowly around the counter, trapping the shopkeeper behind it. ‘For the girl. And the two of you worked to unlock its secrets.’ She tapped the safe with the toe of her boot. ‘I think you succeeded.’

‘I haven’t, I swear.’ The shopkeeper shuffled backwards, stumbling into an antique map of France framed on the wall behind him.

‘Don’t lie to me,’ said Carmen, coming closer. ‘I can spot a fraud as easily as you.’ She smoothed down one of his waistcoat lapels. ‘What’s your name?’

‘B-Bernard.’

‘Well, Bernard ...’ Smiling, she gripped his waistcoat in a fist. ‘Are you going to help me, or are you going to make things difficult?’

Bernard’s lip quivered. ‘You seek the Atlas, don’t you?’ he asked.

Carmen's grin widened.

'Who *are* you?' he asked.

'That's not important,' said Carmen, shaking her head. 'Now be a good boy and open the safe for me.'

'P-please,' Bernard stammered. 'I don't know anything! The Atlas, it ... it's only a myth. Harmless fiction!' He let out a terrible chuckle.

'I've never been a fan of fiction.' Carmen slammed him backwards into the map of France, splintering the glass into a bullseye of cracks. Bernard gasped in fear.

'Open the safe,' Carmen snapped. 'Now.'

She released her grip and Bernard stumbled across the floor, kneeling to twist the dial on the safe with a shaking hand. The door swung open and he pulled out a brown leather poster tube.

'Here,' he said.

Carmen took the tube and delicately unbuckled its brass fastening. She peered inside, raised an eyebrow, and then turned back to the shopkeeper.

'It's empty,' she said, turning the tube upside down.

'What?' Bernard looked horrified.

'How disappointing,' said Carmen, shaking her head. She went to refasten the tube, and frowned. On the inside of the lid, someone had scrawled a symbol in

marker pen: a \oint – spiral shape, sliced by a diagonal wavy line. She'd never seen it before.

'She must have taken it with her,' said Bernard, a relieved laugh falling out of his throat. He sat back against the safe and looked up at Carmen, defiant. 'Samira's the smartest person I know. You'll never find the Atlas. Because you'll never find her.'

Carmen tutted, tracing the symbol with her fingernail before dropping the tube to the floor.

'I always get what I want, Bernard.' The shopkeeper pressed himself back into the corner. 'And I *want* the Atlas.' She stood over him. 'So why don't you tell me where Samira's hiding?'

'I don't *know*!' Bernard swallowed in fear. 'P-please. She's my friend.'

'Don't make me ask a second time.'

Bernard's lip quivered as he lifted his chin. He shook his head.

'Oh, Bernard.' Carmen sighed. 'You picked a bad night to be brave.'



LE MÈTRE

FIRST



Musée des Archives Nationales

Until the gunshot, Isaac's biggest worry had been giving a speech.

He didn't like being the centre of attention. So when he'd been invited to Paris, to be presented with a special honour in front of a crowd of people, and his dad had said he ought to say a few words to thank everyone – in French, no less – Isaac had got very worried indeed.

He wasn't any good at speaking French. He could count to twenty and ask for directions, but that wasn't quite enough to say thank you to the International Bureau of Weights and Measures for giving him and his friend Hattie a special medal for rescuing the world's clocks from disaster last October.

‘I’ll do the French stuff,’ Hattie had said. ‘French is easy. You can just say thanks in English.’

But even that was worrying. He’d written a few lines on a piece of paper and folded it into the jacket pocket of his scratchy suit, in case he couldn’t memorise it. Isaac found words difficult. He was much better with numbers.

The gathering was taking place at the National Archives in the heart of Paris. It was where the government stored important documents from the history of France, like letters from kings and the blueprints of famous monuments. Sometimes they put on exhibitions, showing parts of their collection to the public, and that night they were throwing a party for the grand opening of their new one. It was here, among the champagne glasses and invited guests, that Isaac and Hattie were to be honoured.

A thunderstorm had been curdling the sky all afternoon, and rain hammered at the windows as Isaac and his dad climbed the grand stone staircase towards the exhibition room. The party was already in full swing.

‘There you are,’ said Hattie, dashing out of the crowd to greet them. She wore a black-and-gold dress that sparkled as she ran, a pair of big black boots clomping on the carpet. ‘We thought you’d got lost.’

'No, just soaked,' said Isaac, watching his jacket drip rainwater on to the carpet. 'Are we late?'

'We're not late,' said his dad, brushing raindrops from his beard. 'I forgot the umbrella, not the time.'

'Harriet, why are you still wearing those awful boots?' A slender woman in a sharp red dress appeared behind Hattie, placing a hand on her shoulder. 'Where are those nice shoes you said you'd change into?'

'I must have forgotten them when we left the hotel, Mama,' said Hattie, with a sly smile at the floor.

'Hmm.' Her mother's mouth pressed into a line.

'Hello, Patricia,' said Isaac's dad, reaching out and shaking her hand. 'How was your day at Versailles?'

'Most improving,' Hattie's mum replied brightly. Patricia Tan was a tall woman with an immaculate bob of black hair, and eyes that never quite seemed to stop moving. 'I am so excited to see my little girl be honoured tonight.' She squeezed her daughter's shoulder, and Hattie wriggled out from it.

'Where do we have to do the speech?' Isaac asked, his eyes flicking around the room. It was larger than he'd thought it would be, and full of people wearing smart clothes, sipping champagne as they admired objects in glass display cases.

'There's a stage in the corner,' said Hattie, pointing to

where a string quartet played under a spotlight. Isaac saw it, and his heart started beating a little faster.

‘Monsieur?’

Isaac jumped as a uniformed waitress offered him a tray of canapés.

‘Oh!’ He took a tiny pancake with smoked salmon on it. ‘Tha— Mercy boo coop.’

‘*De rien.*’ The woman stifled a laugh with a smirk, and Isaac went red.

‘I heard Balthazar Blaise will be introducing you,’ said Patricia, taking a canapé and sounding thrilled.

‘Who’s Balthazar Blaise?’ asked Isaac.

‘One of the richest men in Paris. He’s an old friend of mine and an incredibly generous donor to the opera, the ballet, and the National Archives of course,’ said Patricia. ‘He’s a very important person for you to meet, Harriet.’

‘Yes, Mama.’ Hattie rolled her eyes. ‘I’m going to show Isaac around.’

‘I’ll find Luc and see what the plan is,’ said Isaac’s dad. ‘Don’t go far.’

‘We won’t.’

Hattie yanked Isaac’s hand and dragged him off into the party.

‘I found the weirdest thing,’ she said, marching them

around a glass-topped table filled with old letters and books. 'You and your nerd brain are going to love it.' She stopped in front of the wall, where a metal rod was framed behind heavy security glass.

'*Le Mètre*.' Isaac read the sign. 'The ... the metre?'

'The *first* metre,' said Hattie, eyes wide. 'Like, the first one ever. This was the ruler they used to make all other rulers. It's made of platinum, it must be worth loads.'

'It is priceless, in fact.'

The children turned to see a grey-haired woman in an electric-blue dress. Square black glasses framed her long face, which was wrinkled with laughter lines.

'Forgive me, I heard you talking,' she said. 'I'm Eveline, curator of the exhibition. *Le Mètre* is one of our most treasured objects.'

'How much is it worth?' asked Hattie.

'Ah, you are a woman of business!' Eveline chuckled. 'All right. As you say, it is made of platinum, one of the world's most expensive metals. It would fetch about ... sixty, seventy thousand euros if you were to melt it down.'

Hattie gave a low whistle.

'But you would not melt it down of course,' Eveline continued. 'Its value as an object is much greater. It was

not crafted from platinum to make it expensive.’

‘But to make it stable?’ Isaac asked.

‘Yes,’ said Eveline, flashing him an impressed look. ‘What makes you say that?’

‘Platinum’s a noble metal,’ said Isaac. ‘It hardly reacts to anything. I guess if you wanted to make a ruler, it would be important it always stayed the same length. Most metals don’t.’

‘Quite right,’ said Eveline. ‘Iron, for example, expands a great deal when it’s hot. I’m told on a sunny day the Eiffel Tower grows fifteen centimetres taller.’

‘So why’s it priceless?’ asked Hattie.

‘For the ingenuity of the French nation it represents,’ said Eveline proudly. ‘After the Revolution, France devised new measurements for a new Republic, based on fundamental constants of the earth. We decided a metre should be one ten-millionth of the distance from the North Pole to the Equator. After the painstaking measurements were complete, we made this bar, and placed it here in the Archives as a record of our achievement.’

‘Is that before or after you chopped off the heads of the king and queen?’ Hattie asked.

‘After.’ Eveline laughed. ‘Though there was much head-chopping for several years.’

‘I didn’t know France invented the Metric System,’ said Isaac.

‘But of course,’ said Eveline. ‘Why do you think it works so well?’

‘Isaac! Hattie! The children of the hour.’

A familiar Frenchman with a well-groomed beard and sharp turtleneck jumper clapped a hand on Isaac’s shoulder. It was Luc Bouchard, a friend of Isaac’s dad, and the reason they had been invited to Paris.

‘Bonsoir, Eveline,’ he said, kissing the museum curator on both cheeks.

‘Bonsoir, Luc, and thank you for inviting two such intelligent children,’ Eveline replied with a wide smile.

‘Isaac, your dad said you’d need this.’ Luc handed him a towel, which Isaac gratefully began to use on his soggy hair. ‘It’s almost time for your big moment. Let’s get you to the stage.’

Isaac’s heart jumped into his throat as Luc steered them through the crowd, Eveline following behind. It was really happening. He was going to have to talk in front of all these clever, well-dressed people. He saw the microphone and the spotlight getting closer, and felt his mouth going dry.

His dad and Hattie’s mum stood proudly beside the stage. No matter where he went, Diggory Turner always

looked a little dishevelled, and the wrinkles in his shirt and the messiness of his beard seemed even more pronounced next to Patricia's smart red dress. Beside them, a portly man with a bald head and a wide smile reached out to shake Isaac's hand.

'Bonsoir! Vous êtes Isaac et Harriet?'

'I ... um ...' Isaac stumbled.

'Oui, Monsieur Blaise? Enchantée,' said Hattie, dropping into a light curtsy. Isaac saw her mum beam slightly wider.

'Patricia, you did not tell me your daughter was so charming!' Blaise laughed, and Patricia blushed. *'Et Isaac? Est-ce que vous vous amusez ce soir?'*

'I ... don't speak French,' said Isaac, tucking the towel under his armpit and feeling more awkward by the second.

'Ah, the one thing the genius child cannot do!' The bald man guffawed and the adults around him joined in.

'Sorry,' Isaac added.

'No need.' The man smiled. 'I am Balthazar Blaise, I will be introducing you. Don't mind Omar, he is my bodyguard.'

Isaac flinched as a beefy man in a suit appeared behind Blaise as if from nowhere. His neck was as thick as Isaac's leg.

‘We are about ready to begin, I think?’ Luc suggested to the gathering.

‘*Oui, oui.*’ Eveline nodded, marching over to the stage. ‘*J’y vais.*’ She tapped a fork against the edge of her champagne glass, drawing the gathering to a hush. Then she began speaking into the microphone, making sweeping gestures with her arms at the exhibition pieces throughout the room. It was all in French, and Isaac couldn’t understand a word.

‘You’re dripping.’

Isaac turned, and saw Omar the bodyguard behind him. ‘Your jacket,’ the man said quietly, pointing to rain-water gathering on the hem.

‘Oh. We got caught in the storm,’ Isaac mumbled.

‘Want mine?’ the bodyguard offered. ‘Little big, but it’s dry.’

‘Really?’

‘Sure.’ Omar shrugged off his jacket and passed it to Isaac, who pulled his folded speech from an inside pocket before putting it on. The bodyguard’s blazer felt enormous on him but it was, crucially, not soaking wet.

‘Thanks,’ he whispered, as Eveline welcomed Balthazar Blaise to the microphone. Omar shuffled to the edge of the stage.

‘We’re next,’ said Hattie, nudging Isaac in the ribs.

He nodded, unfolding his speech. His eyes widened in horror. The paper was soaked through from the rain, and all the words had run together in a mess of blue ink. It was unreadable.

‘Oh no,’ he mumbled, as the crowd burst into a peal of laughter at something Balthazar Blaise had said. His heart was pounding like a kick drum.

‘Bright smile, deep breath,’ said Hattie. Isaac looked up and saw she was talking to herself. Balthazar Blaise was building to a crescendo.

‘... Mesdames et messieurs, j’ai l’honneur de vous présenter Harriet Bassala et Isaac Turner!’

A round of applause erupted from the audience and Blaise swept his hand out to welcome them into the spotlight. Hattie’s face split into a wide grin as she stepped forward, and Isaac promptly tripped on the edge of the stage. Omar helped him up.

‘You’ll do great,’ he whispered.

Isaac followed Hattie meekly to the microphone, where she was already saying something in fluent French. The crowd chuckled at it, and he saw her smile. His tongue felt like it had grown fur. He looked down again at his ruined speech. Did that say *gratitude*?

‘Isaac?’ He looked up as Hattie said his name. The

crowd had gone silent, staring at him. ‘Your turn,’ she whispered.

‘Uh ...’ He shifted forward into the spotlight. It was painfully bright. ‘Th-thank you,’ he began, blinking. ‘Thank you for having us. I ...’

The stage was plunged into sudden darkness. A polite ‘*Ooh*’ went up from the crowd.

‘What’s happened?’ Isaac asked. The microphone had gone dead. A wave of confusion and relief swept through him.

‘I don’t know,’ said Hattie. ‘Maybe a power cut? Or—’
‘*Non! Arrête!*’ A cry rang through the dark like a thunderclap, and Isaac felt the crowd suddenly tense. Somebody moved on the stage behind him and a flash lit up the room with a *bang*.

Somebody had fired a gun.

Musée des Archives Nationales

There was a half-second, which seemed to stretch out like an hour, when nobody knew what to do. The *bang* echoed around Hattie's eardrums, and she stood frozen in the dark, because she couldn't think of anything else to do with her legs. She wondered if she'd been shot. It would hurt, surely, if she'd been shot?

And then she heard something heavy slump on to the boards of the stage behind them, and somebody screamed, and somebody *else* screamed, and suddenly *everyone* was screaming at once. Hattie grabbed for Isaac's shoulder and felt very, very scared.

Pockets of light began to appear as people drew phones into their palms. Hattie pulled hers out and clicked it into torch mode, sweeping the beam of light across the stage behind them. It landed on Balthazar Blaise, lying prone, gasping under the weight of Omar.

'*Au secours!*' Blaise stammered. '*Aidez-moi!*'

She was about to dart forward and help when somebody yanked her and Isaac back from the microphone by the arms.

'Dad?' she heard Isaac's voice call out. Diggory Turner dragged them down from the stage and shoved them

through a small door at the back of the exhibition room. Hattie collapsed into a heap on the floorboards beside Isaac.

‘Run,’ Diggory said, breathless in the doorway. ‘Get out – as far away as you can.’

‘But ...’ Isaac began.

‘Where’s Mama?’ Hattie asked.

‘She’s safe. We’ll be right behind you. I have to call an ambulance.’ The lights snapped on in the hall. Hattie caught a sliver of mayhem: guests running for the main door; pandemonium on the stage; Eveline kneeling over Blaise and shrieking.

‘Go!’ Diggory shouted. ‘Now!’

He slammed the door behind him, sealing them away from the chaos. Hattie realised she’d forgotten to breathe, and took a great gulp of air.

‘Are you—?’

‘I’m OK, I’m OK,’ Hattie said, trying to reassure herself as they got to their feet. ‘Come on. He said run.’ She grabbed Isaac’s wrist and they fled down a wide gallery lined with benches, heading towards a green emergency exit sign. Isaac skidded on something hard. He lost his balance, tumbling forwards on to the floor with a *thud*, and sending whatever he’d slipped on skittering against the wall.

‘You good?’ Hattie asked, helping him up.

‘Yeah.’ Isaac straightened his glasses. ‘Let’s go.’

But Hattie was staring at the wall.

‘Look.’ She pointed to the slim metal object, which was nestled by the skirting board underneath a radiator pipe. ‘Is that ...?’ She knelt down for a closer look.

‘Don’t touch it!’ Isaac said. He handed her a pencil from his pocket. Hattie took it, and carefully nudged the object into view.

‘OK, yeah,’ she said quietly. ‘It’s a gun.’

They stared at it. And then Hattie felt Isaac gripping her arm.

‘What?’ she asked.

‘*Listen*,’ he whispered.

Hattie did. She heard shallow breaths coming from somewhere further down the corridor.

‘That’s not you, is it?’ she murmured. She felt Isaac shake his head.

‘What are we going to—?’

‘Hello?’ Hattie demanded, standing up and turning round. ‘We know you’re there. Show yourself! I’m ... not scared.’

‘What are you *doing*?’ Isaac whispered. ‘It could be a murderer!’

‘Exactly!’ Hattie whispered back. ‘You want them to surprise us?’

She held up her phone torch. 'Who are you?' she demanded, swiping the beam down the corridor, until the spotlight framed a figure scrambling out from under a bench, reaching up and opening a window.

'Hey!' she shouted. 'Stop!' Isaac tried to grab her shoulder in protest, but she had already launched herself down the hall towards the window in pursuit.

'Hattie, wait!' Isaac ran after her. 'It's too dangerous.'

'But didn't you see?' she demanded. 'It was a *boy!*'

Hattie pulled the window wide and stared out into the storm. They were one storey up. Rain hammered on the flagstones of the courtyard below.

'There.' Isaac pointed to a figure in a dark sweatshirt clambering over the roof of the colonnade framing the edge of the courtyard. He glanced back towards the exhibition room. 'We have to get help.'

'It'll be too late, he's getting away.' Hattie grabbed the window frame and began to climb through.

'Are you crazy?!' Isaac said. 'He could be a killer!'

'He doesn't have a gun!'

'But you still won't be able to stop him by yourself!' Isaac protested.

Hattie turned back. 'No,' she said pointedly. 'I won't.'

And she jumped down on to the colonnade, chasing after the boy.

Jardin des Archives Nationales

The rain was fierce. Isaac was soaked through in seconds. The colonnade was a thin flat roof linking the main building of the Archives to the wall at the edge of the estate. Isaac stumbled forward, hunched low to keep his balance, trying to keep up with Hattie, whose boots stomped expertly across the stonework. After a moment she doubled back.

‘He’s gone,’ she said, raising her voice over the rain. ‘He didn’t reach the end wall, he must have climbed down into the gardens somehow.’

Isaac heard a gurgling sound beneath him.

‘There’s a drainpipe,’ he said, pointing down to where the rainwater spiralled into its mouth.

Hattie nodded. Finding where the gutter met the cast-iron pipe, she shimmied down it, running away into the gardens. Isaac did his best to follow, gripping the stonework and nervously prodding his shoes against the wet wall. Almost immediately, his foot slipped and he found himself plunging on to the wet grass one storey below. He keeled over on to his side, the wind knocked out of him, cold mud soaking through his sleeve. It hurt. He felt useless.

A shout drifted through the curtains of rain. It was Hattie. And she sounded scared.

Isaac staggered to his feet and groped his way through a line of bushes, branches smacking him in the face.

‘Hattie!’ he called out. ‘Where are you?’

He heard a shriek from his right, and followed it, pushing his way on to a lawn. Two shadows were tussling on the grass. Hattie’s sequined dress flashed as she struggled, gripping the boy’s waist. It looked like she’d rugby-tackled him, and was grabbing at his backpack as he tried to squirm away.

‘*Lâche-moi!*’ the boy shouted, wrenching free of the straps and punching Hattie hard in the chest, making her gasp for breath. He staggered to his feet, scooping up the backpack.

‘Stop!’ Isaac dashed across the grass and launched himself at the boy. He had no idea how to fight, but his speed and weight toppled his target to the ground like a bowling pin. The boy grunted as they slammed into the mud. He rolled on top of Isaac and punched him hard, sending a flash of pain through Isaac’s shoulder. But as he raised his arm for another blow, he recoiled. Hattie had grabbed the boy’s foot, biting into his ankle like a steak. He squealed, kicking her away, and Isaac rolled out from under him. The boy hopped to his

feet, snatched the rucksack and scarpered across the lawn.

'You OK?' Isaac helped Hattie to her feet.

'I'm fine,' said Hattie, clutching her mouth. 'Quick! He's getting away!'

'But ...'

'We have to see where he goes!' Hattie shouted. And there was no arguing with her.

They staggered over the grass. Isaac saw the boy's shadow slip past a white stone wall, vanishing round the corner into an alley. He led Hattie towards it, gravel crunching under their feet. Cautiously they peered around the edge of the building.

The alley was a dead end. And it was empty.

Hattie ran to the far wall, looking for a way out. But there were no doors or windows in the buildings. When Isaac looked up, he saw only the high stone walls, slicked smooth like mirrors and wet with rain.

'Shh!' Isaac stood still, listening for any signs of life. But there were none – only the sound of sirens and the gurgle of rainwater through the drain.

They stared at each other in disbelief. The boy had disappeared.



