

Guillaume Musso

A MIX-UP IN HEAVEN

a novel

Excerpt translated by Jeremy Leggatt



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Today is the first day of the rest of your life.

Anonymous inscription on a bench in Central Park

A January morning over New York Harbor as day turns into night...

High up in the sky, in the middle of northward-racing clouds, we fly over Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty. It is cold. The whole city is paralyzed by snow and blizzards.

A bird with silvery feathers suddenly dives down through the clouds and speeds like an arrow toward the serried line of skyscrapers. Oblivious to the snowflakes, it is drawn by a mysterious force drawing it to the north of Manhattan. Emitting small excited cries, it flies over Greenwich Village, Time Square and the Upper West Side at bewildering speed to settle on the entranceway to Morningside Park, very close to Columbia University.

In less than a minute a light will appear on the top floor of a small neighborhood building.

But for the moment a young Frenchwoman is enjoying her last three seconds of sleep.

6:59:57

:58

:59

7:00:00

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When her alarm roared out, Juliette swept a carelessly directed arm across the bedside table, knocking the instrument to the floor and putting an immediate stop to the hateful buzzer.

Rubbing her eyes, she emerged from beneath her eiderdown, placed a foot on the gleaming wooden floor and took a few blind steps before catching her feet in the carpet which slipped on the waxed woodwork. Annoyed, she quickly rose and grabbed her glasses. She hated wearing them, but shortsightedness and her stubborn refusal to wear contact lenses made them indispensable.

On the stairs, a miscellaneous collection of mirrors reflected the image of a twenty-eight-year-old woman with shoulder-length hair and an impish expression. She pouted sulkily at her reflection, then hastily tried to restore some order to her hair by rearranging a few golden tendrils dangling about her face. Her low-neck T-shirt and tiny lace panties gave her a sexy, cheeky look. But this pleasant picture didn't last: Juliette wrapped herself up in a warm Highland blanket and hugged her hotwater bottle, which was still warm, to her stomach. The heating had never been a strong point in this apartment she shared with her friend Colleen.

"And to think our rent is two thousand dollars a month!" she sighed.

Still muffled, she hopped down the stairs, her feet together, and pushed open the kitchen door with a swift movement of her hip. A plump tabby that had been watching her for several minutes leaped first into her arms and then onto her shoulder, threatening to tear up her neck with its claws.

"Just you stop right there, Jean-Camille!" she yelled as she grabbed the cat and set him back on the floor. He meowed angrily before leaving to roll himself up in a ball in his basket.

Meanwhile, Juliette put a saucepan of water to boil on the stove and turned the dial on her radio:

"...Violent snowstorms which have paralyzed Washington and Philadelphia for the past forty-eight hours and are spreading northeastward, slamming full force into New York and Boston.

"Manhattan woke up this morning to a thick layer of snow, blocking traffic and bringing the city to a virtual halt. Airline departures will be drastically

curtailed by the storm, with all flights from JFK and La Guardia canceled or delayed.

“Conditions on the roads are also extremely difficult, and the authorities advise drivers to avoid using their cars whenever possible. Subways should function normally, but bus services will be severely curtailed. Amtrak has announced reduced rail services. And for the first time in seven years, the city’s museums, zoo and major monuments will be closed to the public.

“This storm is the result of a warm front from the Gulf of Mexico and cold front coming down from Canada and will move up the coast throughout the day toward New England.

“We advise extreme caution. You are tuned to Manhattan 101.4. Give us ten minutes and we’ll give you the world.”

Juliette shivered as she listened to these words. Quick, something to keep her warm. Still muffled to the eyeballs, she settled onto the windowsill and gazed through the glass at a city draped in a heavy white coat.

The young Frenchwoman was already homesick, because she knew that before the end of the week she would be leaving Manhattan. The decision had not been an easy one, but she had to bow to the inevitable: although Juliette loved New York, New York didn’t love Juliette. None of her hopes and none of her dreams had ever been fulfilled in this city.

On leaving high school, she had attended a preparatory course in literature, then earned a Masters at the Sorbonne while acting in student drama clubs. She was then admitted to the Cours Florent, a prestigious Paris drama school, where she was considered one of its most promising students. At the same time, she networked with casting agencies, shot two or three commercials, and appeared in several TV films. But all her efforts came to nothing. She watched as her ambitions steadily faded and she was forced to accept supermarket gigs or boardroom performances, theatrical pieces at birthday celebrations, or EuroDisney performances disguised as Winnie the Pooh.

Her horizons appeared to be shrinking, but she did not allow herself to be discouraged. Taking the bull by the horns, she made the great leap to the United States. Dreaming of Broadway, she landed full of hope in the Big Apple with an official status as an *au pair* girl. Didn't people say that if you made it in New York you could make it anywhere?

For her first year, her baby-minding job allowed plenty of spare time for improving her English, losing her French accent and attending drama classes. But none of her auditions led to anything better than minor roles in experimental or avant-garde plays, performed in tiny theatres, lofts or church premises.

Later she took a series of small jobs: half-time cashier in little groceries, cleaning woman in a squalid Amsterdam Avenue hotel, coffee shop waitress.

One month later she decided to return to France. Colleen planned to leave the apartment in order to live with her boyfriend, and Juliette had neither the heart nor the energy to seek someone else to share the rent. It was time to admit her failure. She had played a risky game and had lost. She had long considered herself craftier than others, rising above the snares of routine and obligations. But now she felt utterly lost, without landmarks and without structure. What was more, she had exhausted all her savings and her *au pair* visa was long out of date, which made her an illegal alien.

Weather permitting, her return flight to Paris was set for the day after tomorrow.

"Come on, kid. Stop feeling so sorry for yourself."

With effort, she rose and headed for the bathroom. She shed her blanket, stepped out of her underclothes and stepped into the shower.

"Aaaahhhh!" she screamed as she felt the icy stream on her skin. Colleen had bathed first and there was no longer a single drop of hot water.

"Not very nice of her," thought Juliette.

Washing in cold water was a real torture, but since Juliette wasn't the kind to hold a grudge, she was quick to make excuses for her friend: Colleen had just finished a brilliant career as a law student, and

this morning she was negotiating for a job with a distinguished New York firm.

Juliette was no narcissist, but this morning she lingered for some time in front of her looking glass. More and more frequently, one question had been tormenting her:

“Am I still young?”

She had just turned twenty-eight. Of course she was still young, but she was forced to admit that it was no longer the same as when she was twenty.

As she dried her hair she approached the glass, examined her face and saw tiny wrinkles at the corners of her eyes.

The acting profession, already very hard on men, was even harder for women. With women, no one tolerated flaws, whereas with men they were seen as a mark of character and charm. It had always irritated her.

She drew back a little. She still had beautiful breasts, but perhaps they were no longer as perky as two years earlier.

“No, you’re imagining things.”

Juliette had always refused any kind of “adjustment” to her body – enhancing her smile with collagen, erasing wrinkles from her forehead with Botox, raising her cheekbones, creating a little dimple or treating herself to a new bosom. Too bad if she was being naive, but she wanted to impress as she really was – natural and thoughtful.

The problem was that she had lost all confidence in herself. Step by step, she had been forced to abandon her dreams of becoming a stage actress; of experiencing a real love affair. Three years ago she felt that everything was still possible. She could be Julia Roberts or Juliette Binoche. Then, little by little, she had been worn down by the daily grind. It was ages since she had bought a dress, ages since she had begun to live on canned ravioli and steamed pasta.

She had become neither Julia Roberts nor Juliette Binoche. She served out cappuccinos for five dollars an hour, and since that wasn’t enough to pay

the rent she was forced to take a second job on weekends.

Mentally, she went on questioning her looking glass.

“Do I still have the power to seduce? To stir desire? No doubt I do, but for how much longer?”

Looking herself straight in the eyes, she uttered a warning to herself.

“A day will come, perhaps sooner than you think, when no man will turn to watch you go by.”

“And in the meantime, get dressed quickly if you don’t want to be late.”

She pulled on pantyhose and two pairs of socks; then a pair of black jeans, a striped blouse, a heavy sweater and a fringed wool cardigan.

Her eyes suddenly fell on the clock and she began to panic at the hour, which was already late. It would be wise to delay no further. Her boss was difficult, and even though this was her last day of work the weather would be no excuse.

She ran down the stairs, grabbed a hat and a multicolor scarf and slammed the door behind her, taking care not to guillotine her cat, the bold Jean-Camille. He was already looking outside, attracted by the thick covering of snow dumped on the city overnight.

As soon as she put her nose outside, Juliette was slammed by an icy blast. She had never seen New York so calm.

In a few hours, Manhattan had been transformed into a gigantic ski resort. The snow gave the city streets the look of a ghost town and made driving extremely dangerous. Deep drifts had piled up on sidewalks and at crossroads. The streets, usually noisy and crowded, were navigable only by four-wheel drive vehicles, by a sprinkling of yellow cabs, and by rare passersby venturing out in ski boots.

Briefly rediscovering the joys of childhood, Juliette raised her head and gulped down a snowflake. Almost falling, she spread her arms to maintain her balance. Luckily, the subway station was not far. She just had to be careful and not sli...

Too late. In less time than it takes to tell she went sprawling and found herself face down in the snow.

Two students went past, laughing unpleasantly, without attempting to help her up. Humiliated, Juliette suddenly wanted to cry.

Today was certainly beginning badly.