

# EIFFEL IN LOVE

By Anne Swardson

I was walking under the Eiffel Tower, on my way to check on my workers. The thousands of light bulbs planted along its flanks were sparkling. I almost felt warm. That doesn't happen a lot in this country.

But as soon as I turned the corner and saw my line of souvenir sellers, trinkets laid out before them, I saw that Ibou was loafing. Again. Hands in the pockets of his worn jeans, he gazed over the heads of the tourists streaming out of the Métro. Not once did I see him pick up a toy Eiffel Tower and wave it in front of the passing hordes, on their way to see the real thing.

I was in his face in three bounds.

“What are you doing? I give you the best location in the territory and you waste it! You ignored those Koreans who just passed!”

“Boss, I'm sorry! Don't move me somewhere else, I promise I'll do better for you. Oh please, boss!” His brown eyes filled with tears.

I eased my grip. How could I discipline the boy? He looked at me the way Léo used to when he came home late at night in Dakar, with alcohol on his breath. I beat him every time, screaming that he needed to make something of himself.

I wasn't going to make that mistake with this one. Softly patting his arm, I said: "Look at Mustapha and do what he does."

Five yards away, Mustapha was indeed in fine form. The towers and other gewgaws on his blanket were laid out in military precision. The looped handles on each end of the cloth were pulled away from the edges, ready for emergency action.

"*Ciao bella*," he called cheerfully to a dark-haired Italian girl and her boyfriend. Without losing eye contact, he bent over and picked up a three-inch silver tower, holding it right in front of her eyes. She reached out her hand for it while motioning to her companion to pay.

Suddenly, sirens wailed from all sides of us. From the direction of the tower came pounding footsteps. I could hear the cops tearing around the corner from the avenue as well. Doors slammed; whistles screeched.

Ibou, Mustapha, and the others rolled up their scarves like carpetbags, merchandise inside. I jerked my head in the direction of the Seine. Without a backward look they scampered across four lanes of two-way traffic, Mustapha almost getting grazed by a black motorcycle. They could hide in the bushes there until the coast cleared. Which wouldn't take long.

I myself went nowhere. There's no law against being a tall, elderly Senegalese in clean clothes, a legal work visa stamped in his *carte de séjour* ID. I had no scarf, no tinny little towers, no coin stash in a fanny pack around my waist. I leaned back against the fence and watched, arms folded, as the flow of cops went by in both directions. They didn't even glance across the street toward my salesmen-in-hiding.

"Nice going, Doctor," said a voice at my elbow. "I'm sorry that I couldn't give you more warning." The stocky cop stuck her face in mine as if interrogating me and took hold of my arm.

What couldn't be perceived from a distance was how loose her grip was and how polite her voice.

“How’s your business these days?”

“*Très bien, merci, Jeanne,*” I said, playing along by drawing back as if intimidated. “It’s nice to see you again. I hope your force has all the resources it needs.”

I discreetly withdrew some bills from the inner pocket of my blue windbreaker and folded them into the hand that was holding my upper arm. And I gave her another present: “As I was coming over here, I happened to see quite a few men from Keba’s gang operating directly under the tower. That’s quite a violation of the rules, don’t you think?”

She let go of my arm and straightened her brimmed hat.

“Without question, *cher docteur*. We’ll have to pay them a visit.” She turned away and beckoned to her men to follow. With the sound of tramping feet and rattling batons, they were gone.

I looked across the street and nodded. Within seconds, Ibou, Mustapha and the others were back at their posts, importuning the passersby. Or, in the case of Ibou, gazing into the air amid the rubble of disordered toys at his feet.

Someday I’ll have to do something about him, I thought to myself as I walked toward the tower, enjoying the sight of Keba’s men sprinting away from it, police whistles sounding behind them. The rolled-up scarves under their arms occasionally spurted out a replica tower that bounced merrily along the pavement.

The sky was showing no sign of clearing, even though it was June. A tricky time of the year. Get too much sun and the tourists become so enchanted with the tower that they make straight for the real thing. Rain, on the other hand, cuts into visitor numbers.

I looked up. Could a man love a structure? If so, the tower was my girlfriend. She was beautiful. She was feminine—that delicate steel latticework! She had a blazing temper, as witnessed by anyone who had seen the Bastille Day fireworks climb up and down her flanks. And she provided the bounty that kept me and my crew alive, in a country where we didn't belong. Especially generous since she was French and we weren't. But I could never have survived without her.

Working under her spire, I made more money than I ever had doing surgery in Senegal, with little equipment, scant anesthetic and, sometimes, no power. The baby towers we sold here were brighter than the operating room back home.

I didn't see the black limo with Chinese diplomatic plates until it pulled up in front of me. The backseat window opened a bit. A familiar voice spoke.

“Get in,” said Victor.

*Merde.* I hadn't anticipated hearing from him this early in the month. I slid into the car. The limo didn't move. There was no danger of a parking ticket. The cops all knew who he was, even if they, like me, didn't know his Chinese name.

He was dressed in Armani, as always. As always, he got right down to business.

“Your Eiffel team is below quota this month.”

“It's been rainy. That and the terrorism are really depressing the tourist numbers,” I said. “Plus, the cops are all over us.”

“That's not good enough. Your people aren't pulling their weight, and you know it. Get rid of anyone who isn't doing his share. I'll be back here before my dinner date, and I want to see some progress.”

He gestured straight ahead, at the tower. He often ate at the Jules Verne, on the tower's second level. A three-star restaurant. A tourist trap, many said. His bodyguards always cleared a path through the crowds to the private elevator—no way Victor would wait in line. My poor tower, what must she think about such a man supping in her innards?

I got out, feeling as depressed as the gray sky above me. I couldn't fire Ibou, any more than I could have fired Léo. My thoughts flashed back to Dakar. The motorbike, the broken body lying crushed under a yellow bus. People walking to and from the market, scarcely looking. I could repair a lot of damage in the operating room, even with the power blackouts and the poor equipment. For my son I could do nothing.

A light hit my eye and I looked up. Was it the top of the hour already? Time for the tower to sparkle for the tourists? No. I looked again, and saw the source: a single bulb, on a beam on the side facing me, blinking away. One light, right in my eye, as if it were meant for me. Must be a malfunction, I thought.

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I never got to have that talk with Ibou. By the time I got back to our selling location, a line of police tape stretched across the sidewalk. A screen blocked a section of the Champ de Mars, the park where the tower stood.

I started to walk toward it, then ran. I think in my heart I knew what had happened.

"*Docteur*, I'm sorry." It was Jeanne, heading toward me with a grim expression. "It was fast. Whoever did it must have used an incredibly sharp knife."

For a second I told myself that perhaps the victim had been Mustapha. Then I saw that he was crouched on a stool, being interviewed by two officers.

I must have swayed a little. Jeanne took my arm and led me over to a bench, sat me down. Was I breathing? Was there still air? It was as if the whole world was in stop-motion. Not even on the little boat across the Mediterranean, where someone died at least once an hour and had to be tossed overboard, had I felt like this.

“No one saw it,” Jeanne said. “He apparently went off into those bushes”—she gestured at the spot where the screen hid the edge of the park— “and his body was found there.”

I shook my head. “I was only gone for 15 minutes or so. How could this happen?”

Jeanne gave me a sympathetic look. “You know your business better than I do. Was there someone from Keba’s group who didn’t like him?”

“I don’t know. I’ll ask around, and if I hear anything I’ll tell you.”

She nodded. “It’s on you, *mon ami*. You know the department isn’t going to give me any time or resources on this.”

The cops had let Mustapha go, and I walked over, trying not to look at what was being loaded onto the van that would go to the morgue.

“You saw nothing?” I asked him.

“Boss, he walked away. Maybe to take a leak in the bushes? When you’re not here, he does that a lot. Um, did that a lot. Anyway, I didn’t see anything. Can I start selling again? I can take over his stuff until you get someone else.”

“Is it all business for you, Mustapha? Your comrade is dead! Show a little compassion!”

“You know as well as I do that he didn’t like the work. Give me a chance and I’ll show you I can sell more than you ever imagined. Please.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the police taking down the screen and reeling in the tape. One dead African trinket vendor was worth about 20 minutes of police time, and that's all poor Ibou was getting. I gave Mustapha a nod; I could stay there no longer.

Lost in my thoughts as I walked, I found I was directly under the tower. Her legs, the base of each far bigger than the square footage of my apartment, surrounded me, skirt-like. I was directly under her center; looking up seemed almost obscene.

"You saw who killed him, didn't you? If only you could speak." I kept my voice low. The police didn't like old Black men talking to themselves—or to a building—in the midst of thousands of tourists.

"Hey, sorry about Ibou. Any idea who did it?"

It was Keba, my biggest rival. As usual, he was wearing a dirty red windbreaker, faded blue jeans and a condescending expression.

I glared at him. "What's it to you? You want to poach on my territory?"

"That loser sold less than half of what my worst men bring in in a day. But now that you mention it, maybe we should talk about joining forces. The only good vendor you have left is Mustapha. If we worked together, I could train up all your men, especially now that the worst one is gone." He couldn't keep the note of triumph out of his voice.

"Keba, I'll go back to Senegal before I sell out to you. And I'm not about to do that."

"Yeah, well, see what happens when your revenue falls so low your Chinaman gets rid of you." He turned and strolled toward the other side of the tower, where his admittedly disciplined troops had their loaded scarves lined up end-to-end.

Normally at this time I'd go inspect the teams at my other locations—the Tuileries, the Champs-Élysées, Notre Dame. I should be figuring out how to replace Ibou as well. But I was

lost, off my moorings. I couldn't make myself think about any of that. And I didn't want to go home to my solitary apartment in Saint-Denis, in the suburbs. Too small, too smelly, too grim.

Perhaps because of the gray weather, there were surprisingly few tourists queued up in front of the ticket office on the eastern pillar. The line snaked around in only one turn. On a whim, I joined it. In the years I'd run my operation under her wings, I had never mounted to the top of my girl.

I bought a ticket to the second level. I couldn't afford the third. The seller looked at me a little strangely but took my euros. The security guards were another matter. I had to take off my jacket, turn out every pocket, everything short of a strip search. No one pretended I'd been randomly selected, either.

The 30 or so people on the elevator, of every hue and nationality, gasped in unison as it soared toward the skies. And when we arrived, more than a few held back and let others go ahead before they dared step onto the platform.

I walked around the upper of the two decks on the second level, looking at the cream-colored city laid out below me. To the south I could see the Montparnasse Tour, a skyscraper as high as my tower but with much shorter tourist lines. Not enough business for me there. To the northeast, the garden of the Tuileries, between the Place de la Concorde and the Louvre. The Arc de Triomphe at the other end of the Champs-Élysées, with many tourists but hard to access across the world's busiest traffic circle.

I stopped at the deck corner overlooking my line of vendors. I'd never been this high before. As I approached the well-protected edge, I felt a touch of vertigo and grabbed the handrail. That gave me the courage to look down. Far below me, I could see a figure I knew was

Mustapha, bowing and bending as he plied his wares. And I could see waves in the flows of tourists as they stopped to examine what he had to offer.

I started to turn away when my palms felt what seemed like an electric shock coming from the handrail. What? I looked down at the metal bar, then at the other tourists near me, also holding the rail. No reaction from them. I touched it again. Buzz. A short-circuit somewhere?

I was still looking down at the rail when my eyes were drawn to a man approaching Mustapha. He might have had black hair. Wearing something dark. A suit? I could see they had their heads together, as if they were whispering. Then the man left, disappearing into a black car. Mustapha turned back toward his potential marks.

Could that have been Victor? If so, why? I puzzled this over as I retraced the perimeter of the viewing area. One floor above me, behind thick glass walls, was the Jules Verne. Craning my neck sideways, I saw a few occupied tables with white cloths. At one, a couple leaned in toward each other, holding hands and smiling.

My eyes misted over a bit as I walked to the elevator to go down. What was I doing here? I couldn't even ascend France's biggest landmark without being hassled by the authorities. Why was I in a country that despised me, in a job best described as degrading? A country that wouldn't let me work in the profession I had been trained in. That had killed the man I loved like a son.

It didn't take long for the elevator to arrive. Surprisingly, when the doors opened, no operator was inside. I knew every elevator at the tower was supposed to be run by employees. If the tourists noticed, they didn't show it. The doors closed and the lift began to go down.

Then suddenly it stopped, between the second and the first levels. Out of the sound system came music. A woman singing. "*Je ne regrette rien.*" I recognized the voice of Edith

Piaf, saying she regretted nothing. The stirring words went on, a song of determination and courage. I don't regret the good, or the bad, it's all equal, it's all swept away and forgotten. I start again at zero.

I'd heard it before, but it had never touched me like this. My heart lifted. I could go on. I could be strong. I put the self-pity aside and swore to myself that I would find who killed Ibou and make sure he was brought to justice.

And now I had help. My tower was talking to me, I realized. She'd flashed the bulb in my eye, she'd buzzed the handrail to direct my view to Mustapha and Victor. She'd spoken to me in the voice of Edith Piaf.

The elevator resumed its descent, the puzzled passengers muttering to each other. The doors opened and I began to step out—into the stern face of an elevator operator and two security guards. They ignored the other passengers and pulled me aside.

“You stole the elevator!” one of them cried in my face.

“*Monsieur*, how could I do that? There was no one operating it, we all got in! That's all I can tell you.” I shook off his hand. This is what goes on when you're the only Black person around. But I felt strengthened by the discovery of my new ally. My girl wouldn't let anything happen to me.

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Where to start? Maybe I should find out more from Mustapha. He was supposed to end his shift at 8 p.m. but I knew he'd still be there even though it was quarter-past.

“Pack up your scarf and come with me,” I said when I neared him.

“Boss, it’s still light! Look at my sales!” He patted his fanny pack, which indeed was bulging with change.

“Come on.” I walked toward the tower; he trotted alongside me.

“Did you and Ibou talk much? Or did you ever see him with other people during the day?” I asked.

“Yeah, always. Girls, sometimes, African girls. Or guys would come up and whisper in his ear.”

As I was about to ask another question, the tower began to sparkle. A common occurrence, every hour on the hour.

Wait a minute! I looked my watch. It was 8:22 p.m. Mustapha realized the discrepancy just after I did. His mouth opened, and his eyes turned to the top of the tower. He pointed. The great spotlights on top of the structure were on, rotating to each corner of the city as always—except the time was wrong.

Suddenly, one beam turned downward. Mustapha’s whole body was enveloped in white light. It was as if he was on stage, in a spotlight. He dodged to the right a few feet. The beam followed him. Back the other way, and it still followed him. Dropping his bag, he froze, eyes wide and staring.

In the glare I saw a bulge in his jacket. I reached inside—and pulled out a switchblade.

“It was you! You killed Ibou!” There was a roaring in my ears. I popped open the blade. I’d only cut people to help them before, but I knew how to slice to hurt as well.

“No!” he screamed, and began to run. Because I was behind him, the only direction he could go was toward the tower. The beam of light was still focused on him.

“Jeanne!” I called as I raced after him. “*Au secours!*” That cry for help would bring any *flic* in the area toward us. Sure enough, a line of policeman appeared and charged in our direction. Mustapha broke to the right, me after him with the knife. Because of the cops, he had no choice but to cut under the tower, dodging through the screaming tourists. On the other side came a phalanx of security-patrol soldiers in berets and camouflage uniforms, machine guns at the ready. Mustapha was trapped on all sides.

Ahead of him shone a golden light. The entrance to the private elevator for the Jules Verne restaurant. The tuxedo-clad maître d’ stood there, holding a clipboard. Mustapha bowled him over and charged past an open-mouthed security guard, up a small flight of stairs and into the elevator. I was right behind him. The doors closed and the lift soared upward as I heard Jeanne outside cry to her men to take the stairs.

The elevator was small and I couldn’t get room to strike. Mustapha grabbed my wrist and threw his shoulder into my chest. I bounced off the wall but in my rage I held on to the knife.

“Why?” I cried.

“He made me do it!” Mustapha grunted. He made another grab for the knife, pushing me against the doors—which opened behind me.

I fell out on my back onto the floor. Mustapha leaped over me and raced by the hostess stand, past the coat check and into the restaurant itself. I jumped up and pursued him. Waiters and bartenders streamed after us.

We were in the main dining room. Mustapha shot across the room to a table of four sitting by the glass windows overlooking the city. Asian businessmen. Before anyone could move, Mustapha positioned himself behind one of them and lifted him out of his chair, in a headlock.

Victor.

“Boss, if you knife anyone, it should be him!” Mustapha shouted. “He said he’d have me deported if I didn’t kill you. Ibou found out about it and tried to stop me. I had no choice!”

Victor’s face turned red and a choking sound came out of his mouth.

“Let him go!”

It was Jeanne, her forces arrayed behind her, a pistol in her hand. She stepped forward—

And the lights went out.

Utterly. Not just in the restaurant, but all over and around the tower. The sparkling bulbs, the spotlights and the beams from below that illuminated the structure, all went black. The restaurant was illuminated, barely, only by the lights of Paris far below us. No one moved.

Except me. I had a knife, and I knew how to use it in a dark room. I went to work.

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The tower's operations manager told Jeanne the next day that everything she'd seen could not have occurred.

“We have two backup generators ready to come on at the slightest dip in electric current,” he said, as forensic technicians took samples of blood—there was no shortage of it—from the two bodies lying on the floor, covered by tablecloths. Around them, anxious janitors with buckets and brushes stood by to clean up the mess.

“It is impossible for the power to go off in the Jules Verne, not to mention in the rest of the Eiffel Tower. True, a spotlight was loose in its bracket, but it has been repaired.”

“*Monsieur*, I saw it,” she told him. “Many strange things happened here last night.”

The forensics director pulled her aside.

“Have you seen how they died?”

She looked at the bodies as he pulled back the sheets. A Black man, an Asian man. They were lying on their backs. From their sternums to each hipbone were two deep, clean cuts. A narrow point at the top, widening like a triangle to a broader base at the bottom. Then a narrower cut from hipbone to hipbone. The organs that had been inside were neatly piled to each side.

“What kind of person would do something like that, and why?” he asked.

Jeanne had checked earlier. Air France flight 718 from Paris to Dakar had taken off two hours before, and she knew who was on board.

“I can’t imagine,” she said.