

Guillaume Musso

ONE DAY, PERHAPS

a novel

Excerpt translated by Jeremy Leggatt



Prologue

No one gives it to you.

You have to take it.

Excerpt from the movie *The Departed* by Martin SCORSESE

*We often meet our destiny
along pathways we enter in order to escape it.*

LA FONTAINE

Imagine...

New York.

The effervescence of Times Square.

Shouting, laughter, music.

The smell of popcorn, hot dogs, smoke...

Neon lighting, giant screens, signs lit up across
the gleaming facades of skyscrapers.

Traffic jams, taxis, police sirens, the sounds of
automobile horns.

And the overwhelming pressure of jostling,
unstoppable crowds. A constant flow of tourists, fly-
by-night vendors and pickpockets.

You are one grain of sand in this crowd.

You are twenty-three years old.

Six feet ahead of you, your fiancée and your best friend are strolling down the sidewalk. Her name is Marisa. You've been together since your first year of high school, and you're getting married at the end of the month. Your friendship with Jimmy goes back even farther. You were raised together in the same working-class neighborhood in South Boston. It's your birthday, and the two of them dreamed up this visit to Manhattan to celebrate. You've just come down from Boston in an old, decrepit Ford Mustang.

You're only twenty-three, but your future already seems settled, hopeless.

Admittedly, very few good fairies bustled about your crib after you were born. Your parents worked hard all their lives, but it was never enough to pay for schooling, and after high school you've worked on construction sites with Jimmy. Your daily bread is cement sacks and scaffolding, sweat and the foreman's bellows.

And your free time? Drinking a few beers after work, going to the supermarket with Marisa, going bowling with friends twice a week.

Somewhat absent-mindedly, you allow yourself to be carried along by the crowds, face raised to the sky, almost hypnotized by the lights. Huge blinking TV screens promise you cars you'll never drive, luxury watches costing ten times what you earn, gowns worn by etherealized women whose eyes will never return your glance.

Your future? A marriage without passion, two or three children, backbreaking work to pay the loan you took out in order to buy a small row house you will never like.

And you'll go on with your bowling, your after-work beers, and your endless talks with Jimmy about reinventing the world without ever being part of that world.

You're only twenty-three and you're already trapped in a life that has no meaning for you. For a long time you've felt alienated from the world around you. Not that you despise your family and friends.

It's something else – *the humiliation of being poor*, which you perceive as a permanent insult. It doesn't affect Marisa or Jimmy who take pleasure in saying "Maybe we're poor, but we're happy."

But are they right?

How can you be certain that life doesn't have a different flavor on the other side of the street?

You're still strolling up the avenue, anonymous in this indescribable bustle. Jimmy and Marisa regularly turn back and nod to you to catch up, but you hold back deliberately.

For several months now, almost in secret, you have started to buy books. You are obsessed by the ever-increasing urge to better yourself, to rebuild yourself along different lines from those you inherited. Mozart and Bach have replaced rap and soul on your Walkman. Despite the mockery of your workmates, you always make use of the noonday break to read through the *New York Times*.

The daylight is beginning to fade. You continue to watch the street show. A young couple emerges laughing from a four-star hotel and climbs into a gleaming car. They have the white teeth straight out of fashion catalogues and a very New England air of relaxation and elegance.

Everything you'll never possess.

In this country, where everyone thinks success depends on you alone, you feel that you are out of place. Often, lying awake in the night silence, you have toyed with the idea of starting again from scratch, going back to school and grasp at your own share of the American dream.

But to do that you'll have to make a clean break from your background, your fiancée and your friends, and you know very well that is not possible.

Or is it?

Camped out on a street corner, an ancient strolling hot dog vendor turns on his radio permanently tuned to the local oldies station. *It's Now or Never*, a perennial Elvis Presley hit, blasts noisily across the sidewalk.

Now or never.

You walk past a newspaper stall and automatically glance at the headlines of the *New York Times*. What's going through your head at this precise moment? Why this somewhat incongruous promise to yourself?

One day, you say to yourself, my picture will be on the front page of that paper.

Within fifteen years I'll be there. I swear it.

Have you any idea of what you're taking on? Have you already realized that you'll think back to tonight until the day you die?

To the moment when you put an end to your former existence?

The moment when you abandoned everyone who loved you?

When you were forced to lose everything in the hope of winning it all?

Now or never.

Submerged in the mass of tourists, you take advantage of a break in the traffic to cross the broad avenue.

Neither Marisa nor Jimmy have seen you.

Now or never.

In exactly thirty seconds, your fiancée will look back. But you will be gone.

Always and forever.

In exactly thirty seconds, you will be on the brink of the greatest and strangest of wagers.

Becoming someone else.