

DO YOU BELIEVE IN LOVE AT
FIRST SIGHT?

PARIS IN A DAY

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BOOK 1 – JULIE

So Much Can Happen, In Paris, In A Day...

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Paris on a Summer Saturday, 1989.

Stepping from the darkness of the Metro station into the bright sunshine outside, Julie blinked a couple of times at the man in front of her. She lifted her hand to shade her eyes. Yes, he did seem to be real even if he looked as though he'd stepped from a movie set in 1981. What on earth is he wearing? She looked nervously at her friend, but he was already walking away. It seemed they'd decided to follow this man who had accosted them as soon as they left the Metro. Lying in wait for unsuspecting tourists. Well, thought Julie, he's met his match here; I am the most suspecting tourist in the city. Suspicious, she corrected her inner voice, the word is suspicious. She rolled her eyes at herself and followed the guy. Her friend didn't seem concerned and it wasn't like they had much choice, lost as they were.

The man was friendly, really friendly, she had to give him that. They had broken the unwritten law of backpacking;

standing, obviously lost, in front of the Metro. He'd been sitting on a stool at what looked like the back entry to a café across the street and seemed to be very keen to offer his help. Decidedly predatory behaviour, Julie thought immediately, keeping a bit of distance between them. The fact that his jacket was modelled on Michael Jackson's *Thriller* costume only added to his air of danger. Or ridiculousness. She had never seen anyone wearing a jacket like it.

They walked past the back entry of the café he had come from and glancing along a laneway, Julie could see a busy square, the morning market in full swing, but their self-appointed guide took them along a narrow side street, leaving the busy market behind. Julie hoped the quiet lane would bring them back around to a street with more people. Or witnesses, she joked quietly, nudging her friend who had dropped back a little. He had been walking beside the man in the red jacket but had obviously decided against it.

This man, the one she called her friend, wasn't really a friend. He was, at best, a traveling companion. They'd met on the train, both holding a copy of the green brochure from a youth hostel in Paris. '**Yout Hostel**' the bold white font read. Julie's cousin had recommended it after a stay the previous summer. Julie was unnerved by the word '*yout*', but her cousin had said it was excellent regardless of the poor spelling. Julie was a stickler for spelling.

Relieved to finally be in Paris after the three weeks she'd spent on the road, Julie was looking forward to finding the hostel. She desperately wanted a hot shower and a good sleep before heading to her home-bound train early the next morning. She would board the ferry and not look back. What was supposed to be a relaxing break before starting her new job had turned into an exhausting ordeal. She had visited Paris a few times and had seen all there was to see, so she would spend her last day of vacation relaxing and reading.

Following the man in the red jacket, she found it hard to enjoy the impromptu tour through what looked like very

pretty streets. For starters, her French wasn't just rusty, it was a car-wreck on cinderblocks. She had studied Chinese and Spanish at school and was forcing her mind back to primary school French lessons with Madame Hook. Madame Hook was a very pretty young woman from Marseille who had married an Englishman. Most of the boys in the class were deeply in love with her and the rest of the class found it hard to concentrate on the lessons because Madame Hook's husband was a Captain in the Royal Navy. That was too much information for her class. Nobody learnt much French that term but by the following term he had made Commodore.

The day was heating up as they walked, even in the shady laneways. Julie felt a trickle of sweat run down her back and into her jeans. The guy in the red jacket continued just a few steps ahead, talking and walking. She smiled at him and nodded. Not for the first time, she wondered what the big deal was about traveling. They say the best thing about traveling solo is meeting new people. In Julie's opinion, it was also the worst thing. Here she was, following a stranger along a deserted street. She pictured her mother's

disapproving face. Mother had warned her about strange men and here she was with two of the strangest. She looked at her current *travel companion*. He was a man of few words, but she felt safer to have a tall, muscly guy with her, even if he didn't laugh at her jokes. She even managed to overlook that he hadn't even introduced himself.

Julie focused on the man in the red jacket again. He gestured, smiling, animatedly. He pointed at a blue plaque on the wall of a building. He was obviously describing their surroundings. She held tight to her backpack out of habit but was surprised to find herself relaxing a little during the walk. He turned and smiled at her. It was a nice smile, so she smiled back. She *was* actually enjoying herself, a novel experience for her, although her travel-buddy still seemed unsure, constantly looking from the tattered map back toward the crowded square.

He stopped midway along the quiet laneway. There was a flight of stone stairs. He began to talk, pointing along the street and up the stairs. Julie nodded enthusiastically. She

had no idea why she was pretending she could understand him. He could have been reciting poetry – or the phone directory - for all she knew. Her travel-buddy was still engrossed in his map. He kept turning it around and scratching his head, so he did not have an air of someone who knew where they were going.

The man in the red jacket kept talking. It was getting warm. He must have been boiling in that jacket, but he looked cool as a cucumber. To his credit, he didn't seem worried that they couldn't understand him, although when his hand reached for hers, she smiled and gave a little shake of the head.

She was sure it was just a cultural thing and not a come on, and he hadn't looked at all disappointed when she'd refused to take his hand. She'd experienced her share of extended hands throughout Europe, her acquaintances on the road breezily dismissing the gesture as cultural. They were so well-travelled, blasé and mature, she thought, hoping that she would be that way by the end of her trip. She didn't even like holding her boyfriend's hand, she had

said, to laughter. The real joke was that she didn't have a boyfriend.

Perhaps he was offering to take her heavy backpack, she thought. Either way, hand or pack, she wasn't giving him an inch. Her travel buddy had given up on the map and now kept his eyes on his feet. Their guide turned and bounded up the stairs, so Julie and her friend followed. Perhaps he was offering to help her up the steep stairs, she thought. They reached the top of the stairs and kept walking. She could hear the noise of the market again, getting closer. It was a beautiful day. The sunlight filtered through the leaves on the tree in the middle of the square. Julie was relieved that they had left the rain behind in Amsterdam.

“*La!*” the man said, pointing at the sign across a tree-lined street. ‘*Yout Hostel*’ the sign read. No ‘h’, just like the brochure.

From where they stood, she could just make out the market square along another narrow street. He pointed at the brochure and smiled, talking the whole time.

“Oh, *merci*.”

Her now apparently *ex*-travel buddy simply made his way across the street without a thank you or goodbye. Julie reached for the 10f note in her pocket and offered it to her impromptu guide, who had turned out to be quite the gentleman. He looked a little amused and started again to speak in rapid-fire French.

“*Je ne comprends pas*.”

Julie remembered enough French to tell someone she couldn't understand them. And she could order a coke. She called it survival French.

“Oh,” he said, “you are *Anglaise*?”

He was smiling. He had brilliant white teeth and black hair that curled at the back. He was actually very nice looking now that her panic and adrenalin had abated.

“Anglaise. English, Oui.”

“Why did you not tell me? I have just told you everything about these streets. In French!” He laughed, bending over, slapping his knee. It seemed such an old-man gesture.

She felt her face burning.

“I am called Eric,” he said, and this time she shook the hand that was offered.

“Hi, Eric. I am called...” she began, “er...I’m Julie.” She was blushing the colour of his jacket.

“So, there is your *Yout Hostel*. I am not sure what happened to the ‘h’.”

He said ‘h’ in the French way, of course; ‘hash’ It made Julie smile. He smiled again and Julie felt her knees go weak in a couple of places. It was a new and unsettling feeling, but not unpleasant.

“If you like, get settled and if you want to have some lunch, come back and see me at my café, mmm?”

“Oh...” she said, looking back the way they had come.

“You just need to cross the big square, where the market is, and you will find the Metro. And me! I brought you the long way because the market is crazy and the streets are so beautiful,” he said, looking towards the square.

“Um, okay, it’s your café?”

“It’s my mother’s café and my cousin, Charlie, has the bar opposite. You can’t see it from here, but it’s past the market.”

He pointed down the street to where she could see the market vendors packing away their wares.

“Okay, Julie, I need to get back to the café, my mother will need help now that the market is closing. That is our very busy time. You will come, around two?”

Eric was backing away from her towards the square, rather than the way they had come through the quiet back streets.

“Yes, okay! Why not?” Julie gave him an awkward, two-thumbs-up gesture that she instantly regretted, keeping the smile on her face even though she was dying inside.

Oh, Julie, why are you so weird?

His jacket is weird. He might like weird girls her inner voice said. For the first time it sounded quite supportive; it usually mocked her relentlessly and sounded exactly like her sister.

Eric laughed and punched the air, looking happier than anyone she had ever seen before.

Yes, definitely weird.

Making her way across the small square, her face still burning with a mixture of embarrassment and something that may or may not have been joy, she gratefully put her backpack down and waited at the small reception desk for someone to help her.

Chapter Two

The guy from the train was still waiting in the cool gloom of the small foyer but didn't acknowledge Julie. She refused to think of him as a travel buddy or friend anymore. He sat on the floor, the contents of his pack spilling around him. Now *that* guy is weird, she thought, turning around to face the small reception desk. She could see the silhouette of a person through the lace curtain on the door behind the desk. She placed her brochure on the desk and practiced her speech. Bonjour, she v... what is that word, she thought. Un lit, that's it, don't pronounce the t, she reminded herself.

“Hello?” Julie called.

Her ex-travel buddy looked up at her and grimaced.

“You shouldn't have done that,” He growled in deeply accented English.

Before Julie could ask why, the door opened and a short, balding man popped his head through the opening, a scowl

on his face. He looked from Julie to the guy and back again, rolled his eyes and shut the door again.

“He told me he has no room. All the dorms are full. I am going to another hostel. I called my friend and now I am waiting.”

He pointed at the pay-phone box built into the corner of the lobby. It was accompanied by a table-football game, a cigarette machine and various smoke-stained easy chairs. Julie was unsure if he was asking her to accompany him.

“Right. Thanks,” she said.

She sat on one of the chairs in the lobby and began undoing the buckles of her pack. This is what she did when she felt awkward. She took the book from the top of the pack and started reading. She’d finished it before she reached Athens and really should have swapped it for another at one of the hostels, but she was afraid she’d be accused of stealing. She and her ex-friend sat in silence for what seemed like an eternity.

Julie checked her watch but didn't see the time. She wasn't sure what to do. She hadn't encountered a full hostel before. A man's voice echoed across the square outside and Julie found herself hoping it would be Eric. Her inner voice began to mock again. Annoyed at herself for being such a cliché, she turned to see a group of men walking towards the hostel. They were all tall, blonde and wearing various rock band t-shirts.

“Anders?” one of them called. He looked like Kevin Costner in *Dances with Wolves*. *Anders* jumped up and grabbed his pack, bolting through the door as the group crowded around. There was a lot of handshaking and shouting. They were clearly overjoyed to see their friend. The group seemed to fill the tiny street as they took turns shaking hands with *Anders*. It was nice to finally put a name to a face.

Thanks, bye, *Anders*. Have a nice life.

Julie smiled at her own sarcasm. If she could have high-fived her inner-voice she would have. She turned in the

faded, yellow seat and watched Anders and his friends walk back towards the stairs she had taken with Eric.

Eric.

Not one person over the course of her three-week holiday, from London to Athens and back to Paris, had shown her the slightest interest. At times, it was almost as if she was invisible. Now, here was a man, with his own café, showing a lot of interest. A handsome man, her inner voice pointed out. She had no precedent for this. Nothing like this had ever happened to her before. There has to be something wrong with him, she decided. Definitely a serial killer. He was wearing a red leather jacket in the middle of summer after all.

Julie sat back into the chair and rested the book on her lap. Her sister, Jane, the real one, not the voice in her head, was always telling her that all foreign guys are perverts and there was only a small step down from pervert to serial killer. Julie furrowed her brow, trying to come up with another conclusion as to why Eric might have been so keen to see her again. She allowed herself a moment to

consider that he might have actually found her attractive and waited for the mocking to start. Radio silence. What would Jane know anyway? She was twenty-five and thought a hen weekend in Blackpool the height of sophistication.

Two girls walked through the foyer and smiled at Julie on their way out the front door. She watched them go. An old couple walked hand in hand through the square, the husband pulling the shopping behind in a floral trolley. The market was finished; people were heading home for their afternoon nap. The city would be deserted for the next couple of hours, so she really had to get her accommodation sorted or she'd be sleeping on the platform at Gare du Nord, an idea that did not appeal one bit.

She stood and pushed her book back into her pack. Standing in an empty foyer wasn't getting her anywhere. She was about to pick up her discarded brochure from the desk and go on her way when she noticed the man's

silhouette was once more approaching the lace-curtained window.

The door opened and the small man surveyed the foyer.

“Il a quitté?” he said softly.

“Er, *je ne comprends pas. Je parle Anglais,*” Julie stammered. She blushed and Madame Hook’s pretty but disapproving face came to mind.

“He has gone? The German?” The small man spat the words out.

“Oh yes, he left, he said you had no rooms?”

“No room for Germans, no, but you can’t print that in a brochure, can you?”

“Um, no...”

Awkward silence.

“Is it just you? You want a dorm bed? Only women in that part of the hostel, okay?”

“Yes!” Julie seemed to startle the elderly man with her enthusiasm. “This is turning out to be an excellent day! And to think I wasn’t even going to come to Paris. I’ve been here a few times and it’s not really my cup of tea.”

The man handed her the key but looked as though he wanted to snatch it back.

“*Mademoiselle*, Paris is the best city in the world.” He puffed his chest up. Julie couldn’t believe she had just offended the old man, only the second person who had shown her any kindness in the last three weeks. The first being Eric, but he was possibly only after *one thing*, or was a serial killer.

“No, I love Paris, really, I just don’t know it well. I haven’t been here since I was twelve. It’s boring for a little kid.”

The smile that had been inching across his face with the word ‘love’, fell into a frown again around about the word ‘boring’.

“I’m sorry, I am being so rude. It was a school trip and I was homesick. I am going to enjoy Paris this time. I promise!” she said.

He put his hand on his chest over his heart and closed his eyes. “This time, in Paris, you are going to fall in love!” he said softly.

Julie was pretty sure he was talking about falling in love with the city, but she realised that she was suddenly open to other possibilities.

Chapter Three

Julie had hoped the bar would be more crowded, but she was fairly sure Eric would not be able to see her from her vantage point. Her heart was still pounding from the altercation with the strange girls in the hostel and she was praying her belongings would be safe with them.

It was all a blur.

She could recall the key in her hand, and see herself trailing after Agnethe, the statuesque woman who materialised at the lace-curtained door, seemingly at the rattle of keys. Then suddenly it seemed like Julie was standing in a messy dorm room surrounded by angry women shouting at each other in a language she couldn't understand. The group of equally statuesque blondes seemed unimpressed to have another roommate, but Julie could only glean this information from the daggers they were shooting her, and one woman's apparent reluctance to take her belongings from the only spare bunk in the room.

Agnethe simply stood and pulled the gear from the bunk, dumping it in the middle of the card game the girls had been playing. Unlike the other girls in the room, Julie was terrified of Agnethe but grateful she was on her side in the exchange.

“Your bed, dear,” Agnethe said, waving her hand like she was on *New Price is Right*.

“Thanks...” Julie smiled weakly and dumped her pack on the lower bunk. Agnethe said something to the group of women and made a chopping action with her hand. Julie gulped and tried to smile in their direction. She’d felt like she was going to wet herself right in front of them. Boarding school, all over again. Turning her back, she slipped the padlocks on the zippers and quietly slipped the bike-lock around the timber bedpost and through the straps. A thief would have to use a knife if they wanted to go through her pack. Not that there was anything of any value in it. All her money and valuables were in her daypack or hidden in various tricky spots in

her clothes, but she didn't fancy coming back to the room to find her dirty underwear strewn everywhere.

Again.

After pulling the blanket over her pack, she studiously avoided the gaze of the group of women and left them to their cards.

She wandered the streets around the hostel, discovering quaint squares and tree-lined streets. Taking care not to get lost and miss her lunch with Eric, she walked in gradually larger circles, always making her way back past the market square. Eventually, her roving brought her to a terrace with an incredible view of the city. She had no idea she was so high up, the white domes of the *Sacre Coeur* shimmered in the summer sky just above.

There was not another soul in sight and as Julie absent-mindedly reached for her stolen camera, she suddenly felt lonely. She wasn't home-sick; there was nothing at home to draw her back. As she made her way back to the square once more, she happened across a marriage procession,

making its way to the local *mairie*. The bride and groom arm-in-arm so unlike the weddings at home.

Watching the wedding party disappear into the old building, Julie considered what kind of person she might be if she'd grown up here in Paris, rather than the grey back streets near the A58. Like a cloud moving in front of the sun, her mind found its way back to the nasty exchange in the hostel. What was it with people?

Julie felt she had zigzagged from one frustrating encounter to another on this supposed 'vacation' and frankly she couldn't wait to get back to London. She didn't want to think about the new job she was starting in less than 48 hours, where no doubt, she would have a new group of people to try to understand. Her new London flatmates had seemed nice enough, but she found herself wondering how long it would take her to mess that up. When would she be able to just fit in without first putting her foot in her mouth and tripping up in every new encounter?

Perhaps she was being a little hard on herself. Agnethe was – helpful, and the elderly man at reception had been

nice to her - eventually. He'd turned out to be a sheep in wolf's clothing, even if he was a racist. When were the old people going to realise the war was long over and the Germans weren't their enemy anymore? It was nearly the 90s for crying out aloud.

Rather than go directly to the café that was very busy, Julie decided to have a Coke at the bar opposite. Was this Eric's cousin's bar? The attractive girl behind the counter looked right through her, but Julie found a seat inside, with a vantage point for watching Eric at work.

Julie sipped her Coke and watched as he expertly traversed his mother's crowded café, tray held aloft, skilfully placing the large, white china plates in front of the diners on one table, then deftly retrieving his notebook to take orders at the next. He was like a dancer in his black pants and long white apron, his hair slicked back, as he wound his way between the tables as though he was dancing the *Paso Doble*.

Julie lifted her glass to her lips and took a sip, her eyes not leaving Eric as he walked back into the café, towards what

she guessed was the kitchen. He stopped and seemed to be talking to another staff member, when he suddenly turned on his heel and looked directly at her, lifting his hand in a friendly wave, the same huge smile he had shown her earlier plastered across his face. Julie spat her mouthful back into the glass, looked up and realised to her horror that the bartender had been watching her. The gorgeous French girl turned away. Oh, Julie. Weird!

Julie smiled weakly at the bartender, but she had already returned to polishing glasses, stacking them in a wire basket. Eric still appeared to be looking in her direction, so she lifted her hand to wave back. He left the busy café and walked into the sunny square. He had seen her, and he was on his way over. Wiping his hands across his apron, he smiled at two women in the square who stopped and talked to him.

“Oh. Silly...”

How could she have thought he'd been looking at her, waving at her? She pushed her drink away. He hadn't been smiling and waving at her at all. At least he wouldn't have

seen her spit her Coke back in the glass. With the sun-drenched square between them, she would have been invisible to him in the dark bar.

Eric stood in the bright sunshine, talking to the women before directing them into the restaurant. Watching them go into the café, he smoothed his hair down and turned again towards the bar. Holding her breath, Julie looked down. He was coming her way after all. Panicking, she turned her back to study the wood-panelled wall, covered in advertising for the lotto and scratch tickets they sold at the tiny Tabac counter at the rear of the bar.

Faith started playing softly on the radio. Julie tapped her foot along with the music. She loved George Michael. Suddenly Eric's face was reflected in the mirrored *Hennessey* sign on the back wall as he stood on the threshold of the bar. He smiled when he saw her, and she took a deep breath. He was more handsome without the leather jacket.

“You should come and have some lunch at a decent place.”

He smiled at the young woman behind the bar who stuck her tongue out at him. She said a few words in French to him and he held his hands over his ears. Julie watched the exchange between them, hoping the gorgeous, reed-thin woman in the ripped jeans wasn't Eric's girlfriend. Her cropped leather jacket was like a tiny version of the one George Michael had worn in the Faith video, her midriff was toned and tanned and, was that a piercing Julie could see in her navel? What was it with these people and their pop-star leather jackets?

To top it all off, the bartender had a pixie cut. No one wore their hair like that back home. Julie self-consciously pushed her own desperately-in-need of a wash hair out of her eyes. She had been rocking a *Lady Di* since 1980 but had started growing in out sometime around seeing *St Elmo's Fire*. It looked better when her sister crimped it for her. Julie felt her face begin to burn again. Impossibly cool chicks had a way of being intimidating and completely ignoring you at the same time.

“Bonjour, Julie,” Eric said.

“Er, bonjour...”

“How was your hostel?”

“It’s er...fine. It’s very nice, thank you.”

Eric walked behind the bar and gave the girl a kiss on each cheek. Oh no, girlfriend or ex or something, coming right up. Julie groaned inwardly but kept the smile plastered across her face.

“My cousin, Charlie,” he said. “I introduce to you, Julie.” Julie liked the way he said her name.

“It’s very nice to meet you,” Julie said after finding her voice again.

Charlotte tilted her head at Julie and said something in French.

“I don’t understand...sorry.”

“I love your jeans,” Charlotte said.

Julie didn't have much experience with compliments, but this sounded genuine enough.

“Thanks. I love your hair,” Julie said, and Charlotte laughed.

“Do you want another Coke? This one is warm, I think.” Charlotte placed a tall, fresh glass of Coke on the table and took the other away, winking at Julie as she poured it down the drain.

“Thank you. Oh yes, Eric mentioned his cousin. Oh, *Charlie...*” Julie said.

“You were expecting a boy?” Charlotte swatted Eric with the dishtowel and said something else in French that wasn't very kind, judging by the look on his face.

Julie laughed at the pair, hoping the relief wasn't too apparent on her face. She found she suddenly cared passionately if the guy she had met a couple of hours before had a girlfriend, ex or otherwise. College crushes and unrequited lust for popstars aside, Julie had never

been terribly into boys. Jane always had boyfriends and where did that get her? Knocked up and engaged, living in a pebbledash-semi, that's where.

Julie couldn't remember swearing off boys but that seemed to be the opinion in her family. Imagine what they'll say when Eric rocks up at the door.

Whoa, Julie. Let's not get ahead of ourselves.

Finishing his play fight with his cousin, Eric picked up a tray of glasses and headed back towards the doorway.

"Please come for lunch, Julie. Bring your Coke."

Eric, his hands full, tilted his head towards the door. Julie looked across the square to see that the restaurant had all but emptied in past few minutes, then she looked at Eric. He gestured with head again and he was smiling. It wasn't exactly a smile. What is that look on his face? It was the same face her sister made when she wanted to borrow money from their mother; big eyes and a goofy smile.

Why was he so keen to get her to his café, anyway? Julie looked at Charlotte who was looking at Eric as though he was a stranger.

“Julie, you better go with him. I have never, in all the years this guy has annoyed the hell out of me, seen him make *that* face.”

Charlotte's voice was as gorgeous as her face. How Julie wished she had a French accent. “What face? This is my normal face,” he protested.

“The puppy dog face! Like a little doggie, begging for a treat.” Charlotte shook her head. Julie felt her face redden again but was happy to see Eric blushing, too. Two older ladies drinking wine in the corner watched with rapt attention. Eric placed the tray of glasses back on the bar and walked over to Julie.

“Julie, would you please join me for lunch?” he asked.

A low ‘*oh la la*’ could be heard from the ladies in unison, their wine glasses raised part way to their mouths. Julie softly cleared her throat. She was not used to this kind of attention.

“I’d love to, but you have to tell me why first.”

Each was holding the other’s attention, only vaguely aware of the three other people in the bar.

“Why? That’s a strange question to ask a young man who wants to take you to lunch. Why? Because I’d like to get to know you. I think you are beautiful and intriguing.”

She dropped her gaze and cleared her throat again.

“Well, that’s as good a reason as any. I would have just been happy to know you’re not a serial killer.”

Julie could feel her cheeks burning with what she hoped was a pretty shade of pink. She wasn’t sure why she always had to make a joke if someone said something nice,

and that was easily the nicest thing anyone had ever said to her.

“Ha! Eric? A serial killer. Oh no, he’s harmless.” Charlotte laughed, then turned to her cousin. “I told you not to wear that red leather jacket.”

Julie nodded when Charlotte looked at her for agreement.

Had she really just made a connection with someone cool who worked in a bar in Paris? For possibly the first time ever, it felt great to be Julie Thomas. She stood up, grabbed her daypack, and reached into her pocket and retrieved the Franc notes.

“For the Cokes.”

“No, it’s okay. Eric will pay,” Charlotte said.

Was that a genuine smile? It sure looked like one. Julie looked over at Eric, who smiled, nodding at his cousin.

“*Allons ‘y,*” Eric said and held his arm out for Julie.

“Haven’t you forgotten something?” Julia said, pointing at the tray of glasses.

“I will bring them.” Charlotte interrupted. “Go.”

She slipped her arm into his and they walked out into the bright sunshine. The light really was different in Paris. Summer afternoons never looked like this in Leeds, but then she had never been asked to lunch by a gorgeous man in Leeds.

Eric made sure Julie was seated comfortably and went to the kitchen. The café was traditional and very pretty, sitting on a square with chestnut trees shading the cobblestones. A lone pigeon strutted back and forth across the empty entrance to the metro as the two ladies who had been enjoying a drink in the bar wandered past, dragging their market haul behind them in colourful trolleys. Everyone else in Paris seemed to have disappeared, leaving just her and a couple of other diners.

Charlotte came across the square carrying the tray of glasses as Eric reappeared from the kitchen with two

plates. He was talking to an older woman who, judging by the colour of her hair and her wide-set eyes, had to be his mother.

“My mother’s famous onion soup, to start,” Eric said, placing the shallow dishes on the table, the aroma rising up to meet Julie’s nostrils. Suddenly famished, she closed her eyes and inhaled deeply. Almost involuntarily reaching for her spoon she stopped herself to glance up to see the three of them looking at her. Eric was smiling, while the two women regarded her as if she was a rare bird.

“Er, thank you,” Julie stammered, leaving the spoon on the white tablecloth. She stood up and extended her hand towards the woman.

“*Maman*, this is Julie. Julie, this is my mother, Madame Cher.”

Each time Eric said her name she felt a little shiver.

“*L’Anglaise?*” she said, reaching forward to shake Julie’s hand. Eric nodded.

“*Enchanté,*” Julie said nervously. She had never actually used that phrase in a conversation with a real French person before and hoped she didn’t sound like a complete idiot.

“*Enchanté,*” Charlotte repeated softly, a sweet smile on her face, as though it was the cutest thing she had ever heard.

Julie could feel the heat rising in her cheeks again. Was Charlotte mocking her? High-school experience with other girls her own age would suggest that she probably was, but it didn’t feel that way. It felt as though Charlotte was being genuinely...nice?

Eric’s mother said something to him in French, a fixed smile on her face that was slightly unsettling. Julie’s stomach growled so loudly she was convinced they had all heard.

“*Bon appetite*,” Charlotte and Madame Cher said in unison, before giggling like schoolgirls and heading back towards the kitchen with the glasses.

“Okay, that was...fun,” Julie said. “Thanks for the soup, it smells divine.”

“My pleasure,” Eric said taking a seat.

Julie wondered if the exchange with his mother had seemed completely normal to Eric because she had felt it was more than a little awkward. He, on the other hand, seemed perfectly content. Eating in silence for a few minutes Julie allowed herself to get lost in the salty goodness of definitely the best soup she had ever eaten.

“Have some bread. It is the best in Paris,” he said.

“Of course, it is!” Julie laughed, taking the bread and following his lead, wiping the remains of the soup and devouring it.

“My mother said you are very pretty. Do you want a salad with your chicken or *frites*? Er chips?”

Julie blushed again, momentarily lost for words. With his accent, it sounded as though he said ‘cheeps’ but Julie was still a little preoccupied with his opening statement. This was easily the strangest day she had ever experienced. She had arrived in Paris, feeling lost and ignored by her traveling companion and here she was just hours later, being told she was pretty by a gorgeous guy. Although he had just said it was his mother who thought she was pretty, not him. Eric took her empty dish, saying, “I’ll be back” *Terminator*-style and heading back towards the kitchen. Julie couldn’t help but laugh.

“Chips, please,” she said to his back, suddenly feeling very bold.

Eric turned and flashed that smile again and Julie felt the butterflies in her belly take flight. She watched him place the plates on the empty server, exchange a few words and a laugh with the unseen person in the kitchen, and turn to look back towards her. He winked.

Did he just wink at me, Julie asked herself? She wasn't really sure how to take a wink. The only other man who winked at her was her Great Uncle Edward and he was 82.

Eric walked across the nearly empty restaurant. The only other remaining diners were deep in conversation. An older couple, their heads bent towards one another. Eric interrupted them, shaking hands with the man, kissing the lady on both cheeks. They spoke for a few moments, as Eric refilled their wine glasses. Suddenly, all three turned and looked at Julie, Eric giving her a little wave.

For the second time in an hour, Julie found herself waving at this good-looking guy who seemed really interested in her. She couldn't help but wonder what he found so interesting about her and she wasn't proud to admit she started to wonder again if he was actually going to lure her to his underground bunker and chain her to the wall. She had never had anyone express this level of interest in her. It felt weird and uncomfortable, but she could get used to it.

She decided to turn her own interest to the empty square, rather than be caught watching him again. Not even the pigeons were out and about on that hot afternoon but something about the shadows on the cobblestones mesmerised her and she didn't hear Eric approaching with their meal.

“Hello? Are you dreaming? *Cocorico!* Wake up and smell the chicken!” he said softly as he placed the plate in front of her.

Almost jumping out of her skin, she closed her eyes and laughed. The interest he was paying her might have felt unusual to someone who was used to being invisible to the opposite sex, but it wasn't creepy. As naïve as she was about boys, Julie knew the difference between interested and sleazy. Deciding to stop feeling as though he was a murderer waiting to get her alone, she giggled at his little joke.

“Thank you. This looks amazing!”

The thin fries were golden, and the rotisserie chicken was the perfect colour, the smell divine. The fact that she had been trying to be a vegetarian for a year was at the forefront of her mind as she imagined biting into the flesh. Her mother's voice, telling her she looked anaemic, how she needed iron and protein, bounced around in her head. A vision of her mother's face swam into view, triumphant smile on her face. She hated the idea of her mother being right about anything but hated the idea of offending Eric more.

Julie watched Eric expertly cutting the meat, knife and fork poised in his elegant hands. At home, she would be picking at this meal with her fingers, elbows on the table, grease running down her chin. She picked up her own cutlery and cut into the tender meat and took a bite.

“*Vous aimez?* Do you like it?” Eric asked between mouthfuls.

“Mmm, yes. It's er, *délicieux.*” She said.

“It’s the recipe given to us by my Grandmother. The man over there is my uncle. Charlie is his daughter, the lady is his girlfriend, not Charlie’s *maman*. She died last year.”

Eric crossed himself.

“My uncle owns the restaurant with my mother. It has been in our family since just after the war. They were just teenagers when they started. They were the only two left, after the war.”

Eric seemed a little emotional sharing this information. Julie was constantly amazed at how fresh the memory of the war seemed to be for many Europeans. It seemed very different in England, at least to her generation. Great Uncle Edward had fought in both World Wars and seemed quite content to pretend none of it had ever happened, even refusing to accept his medals. His son John had collected the little boxes from the local council and placed them on his father’s mantelpiece, only to find them in the dustbin the next morning.

As they ate, Eric asked her question after question about her life, her family and what life in England was like. The sun had begun its descent towards the west as Julie finished the meal, a contented smile on her face. A group of ten or fifteen people had entered the picturesque little square, snapping photos of the art-deco facade of the buildings and the rows of typically French woven seats and small round marble tables in the café. After a few minutes, the men in the group drifted towards the bar, obviously tourists in their shorts and tank tops, colourful daypacks and bum-bags like flags heralding their status as ambassadors from their home countries.

“Canadians!” Eric said quietly. “We love Canadians; they are so polite, and they spend up big!” Not for the first time that afternoon, Julie was startled out of her reverie. They both laughed as Charlotte gave them a grin as the group of tourists found seats around a table.

“I need to get a few things done, and perhaps help Charlie, then dinner service and then I will show you Paris?” Eric said in a rush of words.

Worried she had overstayed her welcome, Julie grabbed her purse, ready to pay for her meal.

“Sure yes, how much do I owe you for lunch, for the Cokes?” she smiled.

“No, it’s my gift to say welcome to my city. I don’t want you to leave, I just have work to do. If I could get you to stay right here all afternoon, I would be so happy.”

His eyes were shining, his right hand covered hers gently. Her skin tingled at his touch.

“I am not sending you away, I... I just...” His eyes seemed to be pleading with her.

“Oh, yes. Of course, you have work to do. I am going to take a look around. I had things planned.”

They stood and Eric looked around the empty restaurant. His Uncle had gone across and was now standing behind the bar pouring beers. Julie felt a strange surge of warmth for this family who seemed so close, so kind to one another, so unlike her own dysfunctional home life. The

warmth was followed by a more familiar emotion, guilt. She didn't know these people; it was unfair of her to compare them to her own family who had struggled under so much bad luck.

“Would you like to come back for dinner? Please say yes.”

“I er...have to meet my friend. She is staying with her family near the Louvre.”

Julie wasn't sure why she had lied about having a friend in Paris but there it lay between them and she was convinced he knew she was lying.

“Okay, I can meet you? I will be finished here at...10. Can I come by and collect you at the hostel? I don't have a car, just my motorcycle, but if your friend wants to join us, we can just catch the metro. Perhaps Charlotte will come too. Her boyfriend works in the Marais; we can go to his bar.”

“My friend, um, is busy tonight, I will meet her for, er...a drink, then we, yes, er...” Julie stammered.

“I will meet you at the hostel. A few minutes after ten. Tonight,” he said, taking charge of the situation.

He leaned across and kissed both her cheeks. Once again, not exactly kisses, just his cheek gently touching hers, a small tingle from the shadow of stubble running up her spine.

“Yes,” she said, when no other words seemed to come.

“Go and see some of Paris and say hello to your friend for me, and I will pick you up tonight.”

“Okay, yes. See you at ten.”

“I’ll meet you here. I don’t need to go back to the hostel.”

“Okay, here. At ten.”

Julie turned away and walked across the square in a daze. This is why she never went out with the boys at college. Even when they asked, they never seemed to mind taking no for an answer. Or not even a no, they always took her

lack of certainty as a no, when she wasn't really sure what to say. Now here was a boy, a man, who had been quite sure he wanted to spend time with her. It felt weird. And nice.

Now to check on her pack in the hostel and go have a drink with her imaginary friend.

Chapter Four

Julie pushed the door to the dorm room open and was relieved to find it empty, except for one sleeping traveller who was snoring at the back of the room, the sheet drawn protectively over her head. Julie had never been much of a traveller either and if she hadn't met Eric, she would probably have been asleep too. Now, she looked out the window at the sunny street, music from somewhere carried on the wind, the chestnut tree casting flickering shadows on the plain white wall. She had only been here a few hours, but Paris felt different this time.

Walking to her bunk, Julie's smile faded as she saw that her pack had been moved, the blanket pushed to one side. With shaking hands, she grabbed her keys from the little pocket at the top of her daypack but realised she wouldn't need them.

“What the fu...” she whispered.

Someone had obviously risen to the challenge and used a knife or scissors to open her pack, removing almost all her

clothes. She leaned her head on the cool metal of the overhead bunk. All they had left were her Snoopy pyjamas, worn without washing for the last twenty nights. A record of sorts. Julie scrunched her nose. No wonder they left them.

There were a couple of old t-shirts, balled up and smelly at the bottom of the bag, her flip-flops for the shower and her little bathroom bag. Even her mascara was gone, but her toothbrush and soap were intact. She wondered if they had stooped so low as to do something awful to her toothbrush.

Julie walked to the window and looked out again at the peaceful square. Through the thick, green canopy she could just make out the stairs she had walked up with Eric only a few hours before. She reached into the little bathroom bag and dropped the toothbrush in the metal dustbin with a clang, just in case someone had used it to clean the toilet.

Despite the four years of hell, it seemed boarding school had its compensations. She had never been so grateful for

her trust issues. The daypack that never left her hands, held her passport, wallet and spare knickers. Jane had called her paranoid when she told her about the spare knickers and t-shirt in her daypack. *You never know*, she had said to her sister, even though her face was blushing crimson. Without even feeling for it, she knew she still had the spare money tucked in her bra and two ten-pound notes in her left sock.

Her camera had been stolen in Italy but the thieves had left the five rolls of used film she had stashed in a pocket.

Hot tears stung the corners of her eyes. If she hadn't met Eric, she would be on a train out of there in five minutes flat, even though she knew she'd miss the last ferry of the day. It wasn't about the clothes; nothing they had taken had been worth much. It was the cruelty of it, the violation. She tucked the soap into her jeans pocket, grabbed her bathroom bag and made for the door.

Mid-afternoon was the best time for a shower if you're staying at a hostel, she had found. The place was usually deserted and the people who were there were normally

sleeping off hangovers or jet-lag. The bathroom was on the landing and she locked the door, jamming the dustbin against it.

It was time for a good old cry in the shower. Julie took a couple of deep breaths and flicked the water on. She pulled out her coin purse and searched for the French francs she had put aside for showers. Her cousin had warned her to make sure she had lots of coins for the shower. And flip-flops. You do not want to shower at a hostel without flip-flops, he'd warned.

Julie made a little pile of coins on the bench at the back of the shower and inserting a couple of coins into the hot water heater stood and undressed as she waited for the hot water to come through. She counted the money that had been hiding in various places in her clothes and realised she had a hundred pounds *and* two hundred francs. She was tourist-rich, using a term her mother used when she went to Spain for the holidays. Julie did a little dance, naked but for her flip-flops. She would use the afternoon to go shopping. She was glad she didn't really have a

friend to catch up with at the Louvre, although she could have used a pal to go shopping with.

Fully expecting a terrible shower, she was pleasantly surprised by the strong flow and nice temperature. *Okay, that's a win then, Jules.* Now for the crying. She stood under the stream of the shower, washing her hair, and scrubbing her face, steam billowing around the small room, fogging up the shower. No tears came, even though the shower was usually her place to have a good cry after something bad had happened. But she realised she didn't feel bad. She wasn't sure how she felt, but it wasn't bad.

So what if some horrible person had stolen some old sweaty clothes? She dropped a couple more coins into the little heater and let the water run over her head. She always felt strange, but this wasn't a bad strange. It was weird; nasty women had stolen her clothes and her favourite mascara, and she still felt like smiling, a very different feeling for Julie. She settled on *different but not bad.*

She let her thoughts go to Eric. She'd always dreamed she'd meet someone one day who seemed to actually like

her, rather than just wanting a snog and a grope in the back of the bus. Jane always said French guys couldn't be trusted, but Eric seemed far more trustworthy than any of the boys from college. Or school. Plus, she wasn't sure her sister even knew any French boys.

She could feel the shower getting cooler as her money ran out. Shutting off the water she dried herself off with the shirt she had been wearing and gratefully dressed in her clean knickers and t-shirt, pulled on her jeans and ran her fingers through her hair. There wasn't much she could do with her hair; she tousled it and hoped for the best. She put everything in her daypack and checked her teeth in the mirror.

There was just a single coin left sitting on the bench. I had a piece of hard, dried gum attached to it. Slowly her gaze lifted to the water heater on the wall. If she pushed the coin in, it might jam in the opening and no-one would have any hot water. That would teach those horrible girls to steal and damage someone's belongings. She only considered it for a few moments before deciding against it. Knowing

her luck, it would probably jam a bit further in giving everyone free hot water forever.

Julie sighed heavily and gathering up her few belongings she carefully re-organised her daypack. She shoved the pound notes into her bra and put the francs in her wallet. She would change the pounds if she had to, but she was sure she had enough francs to buy a cute dress or top to wear that night.

So, this is what it felt like to have a date, in Paris. Giving her hair one last scrunch in the mirror she dragged the dustbin away from the door. She looked at the sturdy bucket and narrowed her eyes. She could fill the dustbin and soak every mattress in the dorm. That would teach them a lesson. But she thought of the kind man who had offered her the bed, and Agnethe, who would probably have extra work to do to drag the mattresses out into the sun. She gently placed the dustbin on the floor and slid it under the bench with her foot.

Julie made her way down the stairs and out into the sunny Paris afternoon, wondering if she could find a hair stylist willing to do something with her very English hair.

Retracing her footsteps back towards the main square, she was amazed to see that it was completely deserted. She could see Charlotte and her father talking behind the bar. Charlotte raised her hand and waved in Julie's direction. Instinctively she looked around to see who Eric's cousin was waving at. Of course, there was no one else there. 'My gorgeous French friend just waved at me,' Julie sang in her head. I have a gorgeous French friend! Waving and smiling she kept walking back towards the Metro station even though she truly had no idea where she was headed. It was a hot Saturday afternoon in Paris; most of the hair salons would be flat-out getting their stylish clients ready for their fancy parties or whatever it was they did in Paris on a Saturday night.

She was nearly at the Metro entrance when Julie caught sight of herself in the closed glass café doors. Was Eric behind there preparing for the evening service? She was

suddenly glad the gorgeous French man was not in sight. Oh God, Jules, look at your frizzy hair! If she'd had a hair dryer, she might have been able to try for a Heather Locklear flick, but with her air-dried hair, she looked more like she'd just stepped off the set of EastEnders. She put her head down and started down the metro stairs. Lost in her thoughts she realised someone was calling her name in a cute French accent, and it was getting closer.

“Shjooliiiiiiii! Shjooliiiiiiii!”

Julie turned and came face to face with Charlotte. As hot as it was, she had her cute leather jacket slung over her shoulder and carried a tote bag with peace signs all over it. Julie wished she had a week to study Charlotte so she could go home just a little bit French.

“Where are you going?”

“Err, I was going to meet my friend, but I...lost some things and now I have to go shopping.”

“I like your hair like this, it’s a bit wild.” Charlotte scrunched Julie’s hair. “Can I come shopping with you? I need a new outfit for tonight. I am seeing my ex-boyfriend.”

Charlotte was very unemotional about the way she said this, but Julie got the feeling she wanted this boy to regret his decision. He must have been a recent ex-, Julie thought, remembering Eric mentioning something about a boyfriend joining them after work.

“Er, sure. I’d love to go shopping with you.” Julie couldn’t believe her luck.

They continued down the Metro stairs. “Do you know someone who could do my hair?”

“Yes! Of Course, Give me a moment and I will run back and use the *Minitel*. Oh, I know the perfect person!”

Chapter Five

The afternoon with Eric's cousin was as enjoyable as the lunch with the man himself. After a quick espresso standing at the zinc bar of an ancient looking café, Julie followed Charlotte down a narrow alley that opened into a courtyard flanked on one side by a tiny hair salon and on the other by what looked like the busiest fashion store in Paris.

“Beatrice is the best stylist in Paris, I am sure. She finishes at five, but I begged her to fit you in. I said you were desperate.”

If her mother or sister had told her she was in desperate need of a haircut, she would have taken it personally and it would have been meant that way. But when Charlotte said it, somehow it seemed genuine. It must have been the accent and the absence of an accompanying Ugly-Sister style sneer. Feeling a little like Audrey Hepburn in *My Fair Lady*, Charlotte introduced her to Beatrice, a diminutive hair stylist who looked as though she'd had a very busy day, covered in other people's hair as she was.

Beatrice showed Julie to the only available chair, the other four in the tiny salon were full, the space heaving with music, conversation, and cigarette smoke.

Julie sat, her daypack on her lap, as Charlotte and Beatrice stood over her, both running their hands through her hair, *tête-à-tête*, their faces serious. After a few moments of very serious conversation, Charlotte waved goodbye, crossing the courtyard and disappearing into the crowded store opposite. Beatrice put a silky black cape over Julie's clothes and fastened it gently at the neck. The stylist said something, but Julie just smiled and nodded. The music was loud, and she was enjoying herself so much she wouldn't have cared if Beatrice decided to shave her head. Her inability to trust anyone apparently didn't include unknown hair stylists in a back alley in Paris.

The song changed and a deep beat pulsed through the salon and Beatrice smiled, took her brush from its leather holster and began running it through Julie's hair. She seemed to be studying the hair, gently shaping it this way and that, parting it on the left then the right. Julie watched

her in the mirror, mesmerised by the care and attention. Eventually, Beatrice nodded her head and said ‘*Bon*’ the way Madame Hook always had and took out her scissors.

Forty minutes later, Julie sat while Charlotte and Beatrice stood behind her, staring into the mirrors. Charlotte had a bulging bag of clothes at her feet. A single tear ran down Julie’s cheek and she reached up and squeezed Charlotte’s hand that was laid gently on her shoulder. What had been a shaggy mess was now a sleek shoulder-length bob with a few shorter layers framing her face. Julie couldn’t remember a time when her hair looked this good and between the pounding music and the emotion, she was lost for words. The rest of the clients in the salon were admiring Julie’s new hairstyle, commenting and smiling. This day keeps getting better, Julie thought.

“You are happy?” Charlotte leaned down and said into her ear.

Julie could only nod as a few more tears made their way down her cheeks. She threw her backpack over her shoulder and followed Beatrice to the space under the stairs that

doubled as the office in the busy salon. She paid Beatrice and desperately wanted to hug her, but she knew that French people didn't hug, as a rule. They did exchange the obligatory air kisses on each cheek and said goodbye numerous times and soon Julie was walking arm-in-with her new French best-friend into the now-empty courtyard, where Julie was disappointed to see the store opposite was closing.

“Thank you, Charlotte.”

“Oh, my pleasure. I knew you would look fantastic with your hair like this.”

“The only problem is the store is closing and I need something to wear tonight. Some girls in my hostel stole my clothes.”

Charlotte was horrified and promised Julie she would go back to the hostel to sort things out.

“To be honest, I don’t really care. My clothes were all old and not very nice. I am happy to wear this tonight if you think Eric won’t mind.”

“The way Eric looks at you; you could wear a potato sack. But who cares what he thinks? What would you like to wear?”

Julie had never really worried too much about clothing. Jane had been the fashion-plate in the family, at least that’s what their mother always said but Julie thought this was to justify making her wear all her sister’s cast-off clothing.

“What do you think would suit me? I like your style.”

“Let’s go to my place. The store opposite Beatrice’s salon is a vintage store. They had a sale today, so I grabbed heaps of things. We can share!”

Charlotte gestured to the bulging bag in her right hand, and Julie smiled and hugged the other arm, the one that was linked through her own. She would have pinched herself if she’d had a free arm.

Naturally, Charlotte lived in a tiny attic apartment on the 5th floor of a picturesque old building that had views across Paris if you stood on the edge of the bath and pulled yourself up through the skylight. Like Julie's own bedroom, Charlotte's studio was a mess. Clothes were piled on every available surface; a rail had been suspended from the ceiling and it was crammed with coat hangers. The room resembled the vintage store opposite the salon, even more so after Charlotte upturned the bag onto the couch to sort through her new purchases.

Charlotte told Julie to find some things she liked while she grabbed a drink. Julie had been expecting a glass of wine, or a beer, but Charlotte went to the corner that could be described as a kitchen if you were being generous and pulled a 70s print curtain back to reveal a tiny bar and began pouring shots of vodka. The sun had dropped below the surrounding buildings leaving that blue colour in the sky that Paris is famous for, and Charlotte bent to click the play button on a hidden stereo. A French song Julie had never heard played and Charlotte did a couple of little dance steps towards Julie, handing her the shot a shot glass

and raising her own before tipping her head back and downing it in one swallow.

Julie had never had a shot of anything, let alone neat vodka, but she tipped her head back the way Charlotte had and swallowed the surprisingly mellow liquid. Her new friend was already in the kitchen refilling her own glass and motioning for Julie to bring hers over. Taking a couple of steps to the kitchen area and held her glass up. ‘Why not,’ she thought.

“I want to work in fashion. To be a buyer for a chain or department store. That would be my dream job.” Charlotte spoke quietly, as though confessing a sin. She and Julie swallowed the shots of vodka.

“I’m starting my new job, on Monday. My *dream* job.” Julie froze. Her new (only) friend had just confided something in her, clearly; she had whispered it. And she had broken the confidence by bragging about her own job. But it wasn’t really bragging, because she was absolutely terrified. It wouldn’t last, *everyone* had told her. She just

wouldn't make it in television. London would eat her up and spit her out.

“Really? How fantastic!”

Charlie turned to her, smiling, and took both of Julie's hands in her own. Julie looked down and also spoke in a whisper.

“Yes, I'll be the third assistant to the head of children's programming at the BBC, which sounds far dreamier than it really is. I'll be someone's servant, but I'll be working in television which is what I set out to do.”

Charlotte put her fingers through Julie's, making a steeple with both hands. “That is *formidable*, brilliant. And now you have your new hair, you'll be *on* the television, not being someone's servant.”

Julie snorted, making self-deprecating remarks, just as all good English girls do. Charlotte dropped Julie's hands and drew her into a quick hug.

“And I will do your wardrobe,’ Charlie said, handing her a leather skirt. Julie crumpled her nose and laughed.

They began to sort through the clothes in earnest, Charlotte holding up each piece and telling Julie she would look *ace* or *magic*, pronounced ‘*mashjick*’ in her pretty accent. Deciding on an outfit after much negotiation, they applied their makeup and debated about shoes. Julie was more than happy to stow her tatty sneakers in her daypack, wishing she had something a little more stylish to carry but reluctant to let it out of her sight.

She felt so comfortable with Charlotte, as though they had been friends for years, something she had never really experienced with any of her friends at home, and certainly not with anyone she had met while backpacking. It may have been the vodka, she laughed to herself.

Charlotte directed Julie to sit in front of a mirror and she stood in front of Julie, blocking her view of the mirror. She opened a low cabinet that was covered in bright stickers advertising everything from holiday destinations to makes

of cars and pulled out a silver box full of makeup and brushes.

“Now don’t move...” Charlotte said.

She bent close to Julie and began applying liquid eyeliner. “It’s cold!” Julie squealed through her teeth, but she didn’t move.

“Just a little rouge...and a red lipstick... et voila! You can open your eyes.....now.”

Charlotte stood back and crossed her arms across her chest. Julie gasped at the Cleopatra-style eye makeup and wished she had her camera with her. Jane would never believe she looked this good. After admiring herself, Julie helped Charlotte lace herself into the tight vinyl pants she had picked up for a song at the sale. Charlotte had been adamant that Julie should wear the shiny black pants, but Julie was happy that she had been just as resolute. Charlotte looked much better in them than she did anyway.

Narrowly avoiding an outfit like Sandy's at the end of Grease, Julie was elated with her final ensemble of floaty summer dress and wedges paired with a scarf that Charlotte expertly knotted at her throat. After one last shot of vodka, they rode the Metro back to the bar so Charlotte could do her evening shift. Her father seemed very happy to see her and he smiled warmly at Julie as he handed a dish towel to his daughter. Claude didn't speak any English but tried a few exploratory sentences with Julie until his elegant girlfriend jumped in to translate. She spoke softly and slowly as if she was speaking to a small child.

“Claude, Charlotte's papa, said you both you look very nice, although his daughter's pants are too tight. He was very happy to see Charlotte go with you today. She hasn't many friends since the breakup... you know?”

Julie didn't know what Claude's girlfriend was talking about, but to avoid any awkward explanations, she nodded and made what she hoped was a sympathetic face. The impossibly elegant woman clasped her hand warmly and

whispered ‘thank you’ to a very confused Julie. Claude joined her and shook Julie’s hand but in a far more business-like manner. They waved goodbye. Charlotte was busy behind the bar so Julie sat in the corner, peering out the window, trying to see if she could work out which white-aproned waiter was Eric in the bustling restaurant across the square.

The bar was very busy, so Julie jumped up to help Charlotte behind the bar. Stowing her daypack in what she hoped was a safe place, she put a small black apron on over her dress and began to pour a glass of wine for a customer. She’d worked her way through college and university in a series of restaurants, so she knew her way around a wine bottle. Charlotte shot her a smile. Julie would never have believed that she’d feel so lucky to be back behind a bar.

The last customers left the bar, catching Julie by surprise. Is it that time already, she thought? Her feet should be killing her, but the wedges Charlotte had given her to wear

still felt like slippers. They pulled the chairs and tables into the bar and wiped down the benches. The bar was closed on Sundays, Charlotte said, sounding relieved.

“I won’t bother cleaning. It’s been a long day. I’ll come early on Monday. It’s Saturday night, I’m not spending my time cleaning!” she declared.

Julie wouldn’t have cared one bit. She felt as though she was walking on air, even as she wiped up spilled beer on the laminate countertop. As though she had been watching the second hand on the clock, Charlotte called ‘*time*’ as the clock struck ten. She let out a whoop and grabbed their bags from under the bar. Julie realised she had totally forgotten about her daypack for the first time in three weeks. Relieved it was still where she had stashed it, she discreetly felt for the emergency money in her bra, pretending to check her appearance in the mirrors lining the walls. Almost not recognising her own reflection, she liked what she saw, for possibly the first time ever.

“Beautiful,” a voice said.

She turned to see Eric helping his cousin pull the glass concertina doors closed. He was smiling at her. The butterflies that had started swarming at lunch threatened to escape from her belly. He had changed out of his black and white uniform and Julie was happy to see the red jacket hadn't made a repeat performance. Instead, he wore a denim shirt with patterned sleeves, rolled back at the wrists.

“Thanks. You're not bad yourself.” A typically back-handed English compliment was all Julie could manage considering she felt like jumping into his arms and kissing him. This was a feeling new to Julie. She'd never felt that was something she had wanted to do to a guy before. Unless you counted George Michael.

A sudden rap on the door broke the spell and Julie looked past Eric to see a tall, dark, handsome stranger tapping on the glass.

“*Allons 'y!*” Charlotte sang, obviously happy to see the gorgeous man at the window.

Could this be the mysterious boyfriend? Locking the doors Charlotte said something in rapid French to the newcomer and he looked at Julie. She felt herself blush.

“Julie, this is Mo. He’s a friend from college,” Charlie said.

Mo extended his hand and Julie shook it. They made small talk as they walked to two motorbikes parked in the alley behind the cafe. Julie was amazed to see Charlotte hand a helmet to Mo and take the handlebars, while he hopped on the back. Eric handed her a helmet and she followed suit, happily wrapping her arms around his waist, unlike Mo who simply held the grip at the back of the seat.

“Ready?” Eric asked, giving her hand a squeeze.

She nodded, accidentally clashing her helmet with his. He just laughed and kicked the bike into life while Charlie and Mo drove off into the night.

Chapter Six

Hurling through Paris on a motorbike had never been high on Julie's to-do list in life, but once her legs stopped shaking, she found herself enjoying the sensation of the lights flashing past. She'd only been on a motorbike once, and once had been enough. Watching the city flash past, she wondered where *this* Julie had been hiding all these years. The Julie who followed strangers down quiet streets in Paris. The Julie who got on a motorbike with a man she had just met. The Julie who let strangers choose her clothes. She quite liked this Julie, she decided.

The bikes purred to a stop in a street pulsing with noise and people. The surrounding streets were deserted but this seemed to be the place to be on a Saturday night in Paris. They locked the helmets to the bikes and Eric took Julie's hand to cross the busy street as though he's been doing it all his life. He seemed to know everyone, and those he didn't know seemed to gravitate towards the gorgeous Mo.

Eric kept hold of her hand as they made their way single file into the crowded club. The space looked as though it

doubled as a restaurant earlier in the evening but now the tables were pushed to the side of the room to reveal a dance floor complete with squares of coloured lights in various colours. Dancers twirled expertly across the floor as though it was the final of the Blackpool Dance Festival. Julie had seen young French kids dancing like this before so it wasn't a huge shock, but she was terrified Eric would drag her onto the dance floor. She had only just perfected the feet-together-arm-waving dance style favoured at school dances. Perfected, she decided, was probably too strong a term.

Charlotte disappeared into the crowd after making a drinking gesture, tipping her hand towards her mouth. Eric still had Julie's hand and released it only when they found a group of people that Eric and Mo obviously knew. There were the obligatory kisses, introductions, and handshaking. Julie smiled at everyone but between the music and the noisy crowd she had little hope of hearing anyone, let alone understanding them.

Charlotte reappeared with a tray of drinks and a big smile. A handsome guy stood behind her talking to Mo.

“That’s Rueben. Charlie’s boyfriend. Er, ex-boyfriend.” Eric spoke as quietly as he could, considering the raucous noise in the room. His lips on Julie’s ear made her shiver. She turned her head to hear him better. He lifted her hand and brushed his lips over her knuckles. The noise in the room seemed to be drowned out by the pounding of her heart. Julie had never read one of the romance novels her mother devoured weekly. The covers were bad enough. But she was pretty sure if she’d read what Eric had just done in a novel she would have howled with laughter. She wasn’t laughing now.

“Eric! *Ca va?*” a booming voice said from somewhere in the real world.

Julie and Eric were both startled, as though a gun had gone off, and laughed at themselves. Eric introduced Julie to Rueben, and they tried to talk over the music. Rueben’s grandparents lived in Leeds and he had been to visit a few times.

“Leeds is very different to Paris,” he said, his eyes wide. “My grandfather wants me to take over the business there, but I couldn’t live in Leeds. Oh, sorry, that was rude of me.”

“Not at all, I’m moving to London,” Julie assured him.

“Now London I could do! I love it, but it’s a little scary with the bombs and the IRA. Who need that?”

“Er, yeah. I’m starting a job with the BBC. I’ve done a few internships, in the newsroom. It is frightening, but I guess I try not to think about it. That’s what we British do. Just keep calm and carry on, as the saying goes.”

Charlotte had quietly slipped into position next to Rueben and was studiously examining her fingernails during the short conversation.

“I think I am going to move to London too, to work in fashion.”

Rueben's head whipped around and the two locked eyes. Julie had no idea what had transpired between them, but obviously, there was a lot of unfinished business.

“That would be great...for you,” Rueben said, brushing his hand down her arm and taking in her great outfit and no doubt, how amazing she looked in it.

“Yes, Julie and I will be flatmates.”

Julie nodded and smiled, going along with the plan as though they had talked at great length about it. As though they had known each other for more than a few hours. It came as a shock to realise that these people, who made her feel so welcome, so alive, had been strangers 24 hours ago.

At that moment, the music stopped, save for the sound of a few notes being played on a piano somewhere. There was a hush and then the whole crowd erupted, surging on to the dancefloor and spilling out into the street. Eric grabbed Julie's hand and spun her. No one had ever spun Julie before and somehow, she managed to turn her feet without tripping over them. Suddenly the entire crowd

seemed to be moving as one, Eric holding Julie's hands and gently showing her how to do the simple steps. Everyone was smiling and singing along in French. Was that song Heart and Soul? The old song she used to pick out while sitting at her Grannie's old piano? It was easily the most wonderful and the strangest sight Julie had ever seen and certainly the most fun she had ever had on a dancefloor.

The song ended and the lights came on. People started packing up chairs and tables, shaking hands with each other and heading out into the warm night, huge smiles on their faces. Eric helped with a couple of chairs, shook a few hands and offered his arms to both Julie and Charlotte. Mo and Rueben followed them to the bikes. Julie was concerned at first, out of habit, that they shouldn't ride the motorbikes after drinking. She was about to say as much but realised they had all had just one drink over the hour they had spent in the café-cum-nightclub.

“We are going to the river. Would you like to go, or would you like me to take you home? To the hostel? Or

to Leeds, if we leave now, we'll be there by Sunday Lunch.”

Eric was grinning at her, but Julie had a feeling he would have taken her home to Leeds if she asked him.

“The river sounds wonderful. Er, what was that about? The Heart and Soul dance?”

“Oh, you know that song? It's from a movie, everyone does that dance at the end every time we have that DJ. I don't even remember who started it, but that's what we do. It's crazy, no?” Eric shrugged in that cute way French boys shrugged.

“It's not exactly crazy...it's cute...” she replied and meant it. At home, yes, it would have been considered completely mad, but here in Paris, for some reason, it worked.

“*Allons 'y,*” he said and walked towards the bikes whistling the tune to Heart and Soul. Julie couldn't help laughing.

Mo climbed on Charlotte's bike while she accepted Rueben's offer to ride with him, shyly taking his hand. Julie was bursting to know what was going on with them but didn't want to seem curious. Eric helped her with the helmet and after making sure she was secure on the back of the bike, hopped on. He started the engine and slowly followed the others under a stone archway and down a winding alley so narrow that she could touch both walls if she extended her arms. How could she have ever hated Paris?

Rueben revved his huge powerful bike and grinning at Mo roared off into the night. Mo let out a whoop and followed, although he had no hope of catching them on Charlotte's smaller vehicle.

“We won't follow those boys. We can enjoy the city,”

Julie watched their taillights disappear in the distance. It was almost midnight and the city was deserted. Yesterday, Julie would have agreed. Not to better see the city but from fear.

“We went fast before. It was fantastic. You love it, don’t you?” she said.

“Of course, it’s the next best thing to flying! But you were shaking. I was worried I scared you. I understand if you don’t want to.” Julie felt her face flushing.

“Allons’y’,” she said, grinning.

Eric stared at her.

“Let’s go!” Julie repeated, wrapping her arms around his waist again.

After squeezing her hands, he revved the bike and rumbled down the empty road in search of their friends. The city lights whizzed by, the air growing cooler as they neared the river. They came to a stop at lights, Julie still gripping tightly to Eric’s back.

“Julie. Look.”

She loosened her grip and looked up to see the flood-lit arches of Notre Dame and the dark river flowing past. Eric

shut off the engine of the bike and there was not another soul or vehicle to be seen, just two people and the midnight bells of the cathedral.

“Midnight Mass. My mother will be in there,” Eric said quietly and crossed himself.

Julie didn't know what to say, so quite against type, she said nothing. Normally, she would have filled the empty silence with inane chatter, but thankfully the light had switched to green, so Eric restarted the engine and nosed the bike down towards the river. They rode quietly along the quay, weaving between parked cars, Julie fascinated by the canal boats tied together in groups gently bobbing in the water. In the distance, she could see a fire and a group of people standing around it, exactly the kind of scenario her mother had warned her to avoid. She realised she hadn't given her mother a second thought for most of the day. She would be mortified if she could see her youngest daughter right at that moment.

After finding a spot for the bike, Eric helped Julie with her helmet. She used the tiny rear-view mirror to check her hair while Eric secured the helmets.

“Your hair looks beautiful.”

“Oh, ah, thanks, yeah it was a mess before, so I was lucky Charlotte helped me.”

“It wasn’t a mess. It was beautiful before, but even more beautiful now.”

Julie stopped smoothing her hair and turned to look at him.

“Who are you?”

“What do you mean? I’m Eric.”

He was genuinely confused by her question. Julie laughed and shook her head.

“I just mean...” She didn’t really know what she meant. They stood and looked at each other for a moment and smiling, Eric offered her his arm once more just as

Charlotte, Rueben, and Mo pulled up, a pile of takeaway pizza boxes tied to the passenger seat of Mo's bike. Julie's mouth started watering as soon as she saw them, and she realised she hadn't eaten since lunch.

They walked towards the fire and were welcomed with open arms, but that may have been the pizza. The fire was stoked while various kids took turns playing music on a surprisingly large number of instruments. Julie couldn't help but compare this gathering with similar groups at home. By midnight, a group of kids hanging around by the river would have been broken up at least twice by the fuzz. Drunk kids would be running amok and smashing bottles and there certainly wouldn't be two young guys literally playing Kumbaya. Yesterday, Julie would have stifled a giggle if she had just happened across the gathering just as two teenagers started playing Joan Baez songs, but today it seemed like the most natural thing in the world. Well, almost.

The moon sat high in the sky and the fire began to burn out as people drifted away or left for the night. Mo had

gone to sit with the musicians, waiting his turn on one of the guitars. Rueben and Charlie sat with their backs against a tree, turned at right angles to one another, but Julie could see their little fingers were touching where their hands rested on the cobblestones. Mo had taken a guitar and began playing around with it before settling into a piece in classical Spanish style. Charlotte saw Julie's face light up at the sight.

“Mo just wants to be a musician, but his family won't let him. He's studying architecture. That's the most creative job they'll allow.”

“Wow, well he's already a musician, I'd say. At least he has a hobby,” Julie replied.

“That's a nice way to look at it. Too bad he hates architecture,” Rueben mumbled.

“For him, it's better than going back to his parent's home in Morocco,” Charlotte said with a tone that implied the subject was now closed.

“So, Julie, tell us all about your new job,” Rueben said.

Julie described what she called her Backwards career, where she had started as an intern in the newsroom, exactly where she wanted to be. It might have been a small radio station in Leeds, but it was challenging and fun. Then after interning in various areas in the BBC she explained, somehow, she ended up with her supposed dream job, as the third assistant to pretty-much-nobody in children’s programming.

“So, I’m about as far from the newsroom as I could be. I was planning to go into journalism, I’ve finished my degree...but it’s a good job.”

“It’s a steppingstone? To where you want to go?” Rueben asked.

“Yes, I guess so...”

“Did your parents tell you to take the job? What to study?”

“No, I chose it. My parents couldn’t care less what I do. I’m the first in my whole family to get my A-levels. First to go to university. First to leave Leeds. My mum told me to take the full-time job at the off-license that my sister didn’t want.”

Rueben shook his head and turned to face her.

“I hope you don’t think I am rude, but if you can do anything, why are you settling for something you don’t really want? Mo wants to be a musician; he was accepted at the Conservatoire, but his father said no. Not everyone gets to do whatever they want. You think Eric wants to work in a restaurant?”

“Rueben, you *are* being rude. I’m sorry Julie,” Charlotte said, laying her hand over Rueben’s on his lap. He relaxed against the tree and put his head back.

“Sorry...”

Julie wasn't sure what to say. Mo had handed back the guitar but the group around him were urging him to keep playing.

“Er, Eric, have you told Julie what you want to do?” Charlotte asked.

Julie turned to look at him, grateful he couldn't see her red face. She had never been able to handle confrontation and blushed at the drop of a hat. How could she have ever thought she could be a newsreader?

“I, er...want to be a pilot...but my mother needs me. Charlie and I have a pact. Whoever gets the chance to do what our heart desires, well, the other one is going to be happy for them but will stay and run the businesses. It's family, you see?”

Rueben said something in French, Julie picked up the word London in the short burst of speech. Eric replied, then Charlotte, their voices rising, then Rueben got up and stalked off into the night. Julie felt uneasy. Charlotte reached across and squeezed Julie's hand.

“It’s okay, he’s upset but not with you. Not at all. We..er... well, we were going to get married and now he is upset about me moving to London...which was a bit of a lie...no a dream. I wanted him to be jealous because he chose his family over me...”

Charlotte jumped up and walked into the dark in the same direction Rueben had gone, while Julie turned to face Eric again, hoping he could explain what just happened.

“It’s very complicated and perhaps I should have caught you up, but today has been a very busy day...boff...” Eric made that sound that only French people make. “Charlotte and Rueben wanted to marry, but Rueben’s mother said no. She has threatened to cut him off from the family, from his brothers. Charlotte’s father does not want her to convert but even so, it can’t be. Rueben’s mother is doing this from love, it’s family, you see? She has chosen his wife...”

Julie found herself gasping. Eric continued. “Charlotte is heartbroken but won’t show it. Rueben has threatened to go to America, to leave the family anyway. His mother is

very strict. You can't imagine what she would say if she knew he was friends with Mo."

Julie looked over at Mo who was clearly in his element.

"Why?"

Eric raised his eyebrows at her.

"Religion. Mo is a Muslim. Rue is a Jew. Charlotte and I are Catholic. It's a crazy friendship but that's what happens. Before my father died, he made me promise to take care of my mother, to always obey her and I must stay in Paris because my mother says I must. Charlie is the only one who might get out, perhaps she will come to London and study fashion, as she says."

He finished speaking, his face turned towards the dark river.

"What is it with these old people? Forgive my ignorance, but I don't know anything about religion. I grew up thinking there were only two, Church of England,

obviously, and Catholics. I mean, there are obviously others in England...I'm ignorant, sorry..."

"No, it's okay, just a different kind of life we've lived. I wish I could run away sometimes but I love my family and I do enjoy running the restaurant. My mother wants me to settle down and marry. It's funny, I told her once that I had a dream, I would marry an English girl."

Eric laughed quietly. Julie wasn't sure what to say but she was glad he couldn't see her blushing for the hundredth time. She had never felt the weight of any family expectation; if anything she had begged her parents for the chance to stay at school and bore their ridicule at her attending university.

The music stopped and the group slowly dispersed.

"Shall we go for a ride?" Eric asked.

"Will Charlotte be okay?"

"She will be fine. She has her bike and Rueben will look after her. This could be the last time they see each

other. He won't stay in Paris if he is going to see her all the time. Especially if he has to marry someone else."

"Oh God, that would be awful. Poor Charlotte."

They sat quietly for a few moments watching as a barge made its way against the current of the swiftly flowing river. They were almost alone on the bank; the fire had gone out and the musicians had disappeared into the night.

"Are you tired? Do you want to go back to the Hostel?"

"No, it's strange. I'm not tired at all. At sunrise yesterday I got on a train in Amsterdam but right now I feel like I just woke up."

Eric grinned at her and rattled his bike keys.

Chapter Seven

After zipping through the sleeping city, they had ended up at a flea market on the outskirts of the city. They had a cup of the thickest hot chocolate Julie had ever seen, Eric refuelled the bike, and they headed back towards the city. They circled *Montmartre* before heading down towards the river again, eventually stopping on the dramatic *Pont Alexander III*. Eric climbed onto the thick balustrade of the bridge and Julie leaned on it. They watched the dark river slip silently under the bridge, the first few rays of the sun making patterns on the dark water. Julie decided to climb up and sit beside him. Adrenaline shot through her system. It was easily the most dangerous thing Julie had ever done if you didn't include getting on a motorbike with a strange Frenchman.

“I love Paris,” Julie said quietly.

“*Moi aussi.*”

It was too much for Julie. She turned and slid back down onto the pavement. They watched the sleeping city, not a

car in sight, not even an early boat. The slight breeze was their only companion.

“I love this bridge,” she said.

“*Moi aussi.*” He laughed.

“The old man at the hostel was right after all. I did fall in love with Paris.”

“Only with Paris?”

Julie turned to face him. She could not remember a time when she felt this good, or this happy. Suddenly, Eric climbed up and clung to the lamppost.

“Eric, that’s so dangerous,” Julie said, sounding exactly like her mother.

He looked down at the swift-running river and let go of his grip on the post. Julie gasped and stood back from the rail. Putting both arms out like an acrobat, he quickly walked a few steps and jumped down onto the pavement. She couldn’t believe what he had just done. Everything

seemed to freeze around her as he walked over to her, leaned in, his lips rested lightly on hers.

He smelled...lovely but before she realised what she was doing she pulled away.

“That was a stupid thing to do! Did you think it was going to make me drop my knickers? Argh...guys always only want one thing!”

Julie turned away from him and faced the road.

“No, I don’t. That’s not true. I’m sorry, I just thought we were, *vous savez*, meeting? I thought we had a connection?”

“We do, we did. A connection, yes,” she stammered. What the hell, Julie?

“I just...this is what I do, I don’t let anyone close, and you did a stupid thing, you show-off.”

Julie crossed her arms across her chest. Eric put his hands up in surrender. “I’m sorry, I should have asked if I could kiss you. It was very rude of me.”

Julie took a deep breath and dropped her arms to her sides.

“No actually, I’m the one who’s being rude. You have been an absolute gentleman. I’m just...not used to this kind of thing.”

“Do you mean you have never kissed anyone?”

“No, I’ve had a few...snogs. But not, this...” she said, waving her arms around. She started to laugh.

“You mean, Paris? Yes, it can be...*un peu trop*, I agree!” He was laughing now too. “You are funny. That’s what I like most about you. And it helps that you are so beautiful.” Julie blushed and looked up at the lightening sky. He walked towards her.

“No. I’m not.”

“You are.” He leaned in again and this time Julie didn’t pull away. His lips were soft, and he had a little stubble that tickled her chin. She stepped in, placing her hand on his chest. She had been kissed a couple of times, but never like this. Yes, it was all a bit much, *un peu trop*. Time seemed to stand still, then it was Eric who pulled away, taking her hand in his and raising it to his lips.

“You *are* beautiful.”

To her surprise, Julie felt tears welling in her eyes.

“Why are you crying?” he asked, concerned.

“I’ve never been beautiful before.”

Eric smiled.

“Oh, you’ve always been beautiful; you just haven’t been with people who can see the real thing.”

Julie snorted.

“I’ve been around boys my whole life and not one has ever told me I’m beautiful. They would say ‘*nice legs*’ or ‘*show us yer tits*’ but no, where I come from boys never use the word beautiful.” She laughed despite the tears.

“Who do you think knows beauty? Spotty, skinny English boys or a French man from Paris?” he asked, crossing his arms over his chest and looking smug.

“Is that a rhetorical question?”

Suddenly, Eric literally swept Julie into his arms and kissed her again.

“We should have some breakfast and get on the road,” he said, a little breathlessly, his eyes closed, lips almost touching hers.

“It’s just after six, my train is at nine. The ferry isn’t until four. We have time.”

“I want to take you to Calais, on the bike. I know you have your train ticket, but I am not prepared to let you

go just yet.” Julie tried to think of a reason to protest but couldn’t.

“Okay, why not. I don’t have to worry about my back-pack, no doubt there’ll be nothing left in it now.”

He kissed her again and put her feet back on the ground. They stood and watched the sun come up over the river as the sparse Sunday morning traffic began to make its way into the still-quiet streets. They talked a little and kissed a little more, and eventually, they made their way back to the little square with the chestnut trees where the morning staff were lining up the chairs and tables, polishing cutlery and serving coffee to the early-birds, dog-walkers, and tourists with camera gear.

Eric rode in a slow lap around the square, past Charlotte’s bar that was shut up tight, and pulled the bike up to the back door of the café. Julie wondered how Charlotte’s night had played out and hoped she would have a happy ending. She never would have considered a return to trip to Paris, but now she couldn’t wait to get back to London, so she could start planning another visit. As predicted, she

had most certainly fallen in love with the city and hoped Charlotte would be a friend for life.

Eric helped Julie off the bike and dumped their helmets on a stack of cartons. Eric's mother was in the laneway, speaking in rapid-fire French with a delivery man. Julie was convinced they were about to begin screaming at each other, but suddenly the conversation was finished, and they shook hands with cries of '*à demain*'.

"*Bonjour,*" Madame Cher said, cocking an eyebrow at her son.

"*Bonjour, Maman.* You remember Julie?" Eric spoke English, but very slowly.

"*Bonjour, Madame Cher.*" Julie suppressed a sudden urge to curtsy and felt the blushing rising at her throat. She was worried what Madame Cher thought they had been up to all night. If her own mother was here, she would have been asking what on earth they could find to do all night, in a loud enough voice for the whole neighbourhood to join the conversation.

Eric's mother spoke slowly but Julie still couldn't quite catch what she was saying. Eric quickly explained that his mother spoke no English, and then explained to his mother that Julie's French needed a bit of a polish. She laughed and put her hand out and shook Julie's hand. The smile looked real but after what Eric had said about his mother and her strict manner, Julie wasn't sure she was welcome. Eric kissed his mother and after ushering them into the kitchen, she went back to organising the delivery.

“What was that all about?” Julie asked, trying to keep the mood light.

“She said Charlie left a message on the machine. She is fine. She said to give you three kisses and her address. Oh, I told *maman* I was going to take you to the ferry...and,” he took a deep breath, “*maman* asked me if you were the girl from my dream. The dream I told you about.”

“Oh really? And what did you say?”

“I said I wasn't sure yet.” That grin again.

“So, she’s not worried that I will steal you away from Paris?”

“Of course, she is. But first we have breakfast!” Eric laughed and slapped his knee the way he had when they first met. Was it only just a day since they wandered the tiny laneways behind the market square in search of the famous ‘*Yout Hostel*’? Eric showed Julie to a table in the back of the kitchen, tucked in behind the fridges, the seats were patched and worn.

“Oh, so you woo me with the front tables, but now you’ve got me, I’m behind the fridges?” she joked, pouting for comic effect.

Eric smiled and put his head down level with Julie’s, his cheek brushing hers.

“Now I’ve *got* you?”

Julie smiled.

“Just like the song, Heart and Soul.”

Author Notes

I love incorporating music and cultural references into my work and write quirky, flawed characters who often have no idea what they are doing.

This story was inspired by nothing more than the thought of visiting Paris before iPhones and Instagram. My first visit to Paris was in the early 90s and I find I am often nostalgic for the ‘good old days’ just like Gil Pender from Midnight in Paris.

Like many people in France and around the world, I love Paris. You can join my family of Paris Lovers on Facebook by searching @ParisTimeTravel or by clicking this link <https://www.facebook.com/ParisTimeTravel>

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