

The multimillion-copy bestselling author of

*Me Before You*



# Jojo Moyes

# Paris for

# One

**'Beautiful'**  
*Hello!*

**'Heartwarming'**  
*Mail on Sunday*

# And Other Stories



Paris for One and  
Other Stories

**Copyrighted Material**

*By the same author*

After You  
The One Plus One  
The Girl You Left Behind  
Me Before You

**Copyrighted Material**

# Paris for One and Other Stories

JOJO MOYES



PENGUIN BOOKS  
**Copyrighted Material**

PENGUIN BOOKS

UK | USA | Canada | Ireland | Australia  
India | New Zealand | South Africa

Penguin Books is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies  
whose addresses can be found at [global.penguinrandomhouse.com](http://global.penguinrandomhouse.com)

Penguin Random House UK,  
One Embassy Gardens, 8 Viaduct Gardens, London SW11 7BW

[penguin.co.uk](http://penguin.co.uk)



Penguin  
Random House  
UK

'Paris for One' was first published in Penguin Books, 2015; 'Between the Tweets' was first broadcast on Radio 4, 2011; 'Love in the Afternoon' was first broadcast on Radio 4, 2010; 'A Bird in the Hand' was first published in *Woman & Home*, 2009; 'Crocodile Shoes' was first published in *Woman & Home*, 2011; 'Holdups' was first broadcast on Radio 4, 2014; 'Honeymoon in Paris' was first published in digital in Penguin Books, 2012; 'Last Year's Coat' was first published in *The Coffee Shop Book Club* by Orion, 2013; 'Thirteen Days with John C' was first published in *The Book Lovers' Appreciation Society* by Orion, 2009; 'Margot' was first published in *Stylist*, 2014; 'The Christmas List' was first published in digital by Bragelonne, 2014

First published in 2016

First published in Great Britain in this edition 2017

Published in Penguin Books 2017

001

Copyright © Jojo's Mojo Ltd, 2016

The moral right of the author has been asserted

No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner for the purpose of training artificial intelligence technologies or systems. In accordance with Article 4(3) of the DSM Directive 2019/790, Penguin Random House expressly reserves this work from the text and data mining exception.

Set in 12.88/15.24 pt Garamond MT Std

Typeset by Jouve (UK), Milton Keynes

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,  
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

B FORMAT ISBN: 978-1-405-92816-8

OM PAPERBACK ISBN: 978-0-718-18747-7

Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable future  
for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made from  
Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.

Copyrighted Material



For my mother, Lizzie Sanders

**Copyrighted Material**

**Copyrighted Material**

# Contents

Paris for One	1
Between the Tweets	135
Love in the Afternoon	147
A Bird in the Hand	161
Crocodile Shoes	177
Holdups	189
Honeymoon in Paris	203
Last Year's Coat	289
Thirteen Days with John C	301
Margot	317
The Christmas List	325

**Copyrighted Material**

# Paris for One

**Copyrighted Material**

**Copyrighted Material**

# I

Nell shifts her bag along the plastic seating in the station and checks the clock on the wall for the eighty-ninth time. Her gaze flicks back as the door from Security slides open. Another family – clearly Disney bound – walks through into the departure lounge, with baby stroller, screaming children, and parents who have been awake way too long.

For the last half hour, her heart has been thumping, a sick feeling high in her chest.

‘He will come. He will still come. He can still make it,’ she mutters under her breath.

‘Train 9051 to Paris will be leaving from Platform Two in ten minutes. Please make your way to the platform. Remember to take all luggage with you.’

She chews her lip, then texts him again – the fifth time.

Where are you? Train about to leave!

She had texted him twice as she set off, checking that they were still meeting at the station. When he didn’t answer, she told herself it was because she had been on the Underground. Or he had. She sends a third text, and a fourth. And then, as she stands there, her

**Copyrighted Material**

phone vibrates in her hand and she almost buckles with relief.

Sorry, babe. Stuck at work. Not going to make it.

As if they had planned to catch up over a quick drink. She stares at the phone in disbelief.

Not going to make this train? Shall I wait?

And, seconds later, the reply:

No, you go. Will try for later train.

She is too shocked to be angry. She stands still as people get to their feet around her, pulling on coats, and punches out a reply.

But where will we meet?

He doesn't answer. *Stuck at work*. It's a surf- and scuba-wear shop. In November. How stuck can he be?

She gazes around her, as if this might still be a joke. As if he will, even now, burst through the doors with his broad smile, telling her that he was teasing her (he is a bit too fond of teasing her). And he will take her arm, kiss her cheek with wind-chilled lips, and say something like, 'You didn't think I'd miss this, did you? Your first trip to Paris?'

But the glass doors stay firmly shut.

'Madam? You need to go to the platform.' The Eurostar guard reaches for her ticket. And for a second she hesitates – *will he come?* – and then she is in the crowd, her

**Copyrighted Material**

little wheeled case trailing behind her. She stops and types:

Meet me at the hotel, then.

She heads down the escalator as the huge train roars into the station.

‘What do you mean, you’re not coming? We’ve planned this for ages.’ It is the annual Girls’ Trip to Brighton. They have travelled there, on the first weekend of November, every year for six years – Nell, Magda, Trish and Sue – piled into Sue’s old four-wheel drive or Magda’s company car. They would escape their daily lives for two nights of drinking, hanging out with the lads from stag weekends, and nursing hangovers over cooked breakfasts in a tatty hotel called Brightsea Lodge, its outside cracked and faded, the scent of its interior suffused with decades of drink and cheap aftershave.

The annual trip has survived two babies, one divorce, and a case of shingles (they spent the first night partying in Magda’s hotel room instead). Nobody has ever missed one.

‘Well, Pete’s invited me to go to Paris.’

‘Pete is taking you to Paris?’ Magda had stared at her as if she’d announced she was learning to speak Russian. ‘*Pete Pete?*’

‘He says he can’t believe I’ve never been.’

‘I went to Paris once, on a school trip. I got lost in the Louvre, and someone put my sneaker down a toilet in the youth hostel,’ said Trish.

**Copyrighted Material**

‘I snogged a French boy because he looked like that bloke who goes out with Halle Berry. Turned out he was actually German.’

*‘Pete-with-the-hair* Pete? *Your* Pete? I’m not trying to be mean. I just thought he was a bit of a . . .’

‘Loser,’ said Sue helpfully.

‘Knob.’

‘Prat.’

‘Obviously we’re wrong. Turns out he’s the kind of bloke who takes Nell on romantic weekends to Paris. Which is . . . you know. Great. I just wish it wasn’t the same long weekend as *our* long weekend.’

‘Well, once we’d got the tickets . . . it was difficult . . .’ Nell mumbled with a wave of her hand, hoping nobody would ask who had actually purchased these tickets. (It had been the only weekend left before Christmas when the discount had applied.)

She had planned the trip as carefully as she organized her office paperwork. She had searched the Internet for the best places to go, scanning TripAdvisor for the best budget hotels, cross-checking each one on Google, and entering the results on a spreadsheet.

She had settled on a place behind the rue de Rivoli – ‘clean, friendly, very romantic’ – and booked an ‘executive double room’ for two nights. She pictured herself and Pete tangled up in a French hotel bed, gazing out the window at the Eiffel Tower, holding hands over croissants and coffee in some street café. She was only really going on pictures: she didn’t have much

**Copyrighted Material**

idea what you did on a weekend in Paris, apart from the obvious.

At the age of twenty-six, Nell Simmons had never been away for a weekend with a boyfriend, unless you counted that time she went rock-climbing with Andrew Dinsmore. He had made them sleep in his Mini, and she woke up so cold that she couldn't move her neck for six hours.

Nell's mother, Lilian, was fond of telling anyone who would listen that Nell was 'not the adventurous type'. She was also 'not the type to travel', 'not the kind of girl who can rely on her looks', and now, occasionally, if her mother thought Nell was out of earshot, 'no spring chicken'.

That was the thing about growing up in a small town – everyone thought they knew exactly what you were. Nell was the sensible one. The quiet one. The one who would carefully research any plan and who could be trusted to water your plants, mind your kids, and not run off with anyone's husband.

No, Mother. What I really am, Nell thought as she printed off the tickets, gazing at them, then tucking them into a folder with all the important information, is the kind of girl who goes to Paris for the weekend.

As the big day grew nearer, she started to enjoy dropping it into conversation. 'Got to make sure my passport is up-to-date,' she said when she left her mother after Sunday lunch. She bought new underwear, shaved her legs, painted her toenails a vivid shade of red (she

**Copyrighted Material**

usually went for clear). 'Don't forget I'm leaving early on Friday,' she said at work. 'You know. For Paris.'

'Oh, you're so lucky,' chorused the girls in Accounts.

'I'm well jell,' said Trish, who disliked Pete slightly less than everyone else.

Nell climbs on to the train and stows her bag, wondering how 'jell' Trish would be if she could see her now: a girl beside an empty seat going to Paris with no idea whether her boyfriend was even going to turn up.

The Gare du Nord in Paris is teeming. She emerges through the platform gates and is frozen to the spot, standing in the middle of crowds of people, all pushing and shoving, wheeled cases crashing into her shins. Groups of youths in tracksuit tops stare sullenly from the sidelines, and she remembers suddenly that the Gare du Nord is the pickpocketing epicenter of France. Her handbag clamped to her side, she walks tentatively in one direction and then the other, temporarily lost among the glass kiosks and escalators that seem to lead nowhere.

A three-note chime sounds on the loudspeaker, and the station announcer says something in French that Nell can't understand. Everyone else is walking briskly, as if they know where they're going. It is dark outside, and she feels panic rising like a bubble in her chest. *I'm in a strange city, and I don't even speak the language.* And then she sees the suspended sign: TAXIS.

The queue is fifty people long, but she doesn't care. She scrabbles in her bag for the hotel printout, and when she finally reaches the front of the queue, she holds it out. 'Hôtel Bonne Ville,' she says. 'Um . . . *s'il vous plaît.*'

The driver looks back at her as if he cannot understand what she says.

**Copyrighted Material**

‘Hôtel Bonne Ville,’ she says, trying to sound French (she had practised at home in front of the mirror). She tries again. *‘Bonne Ville.’*

He looks blank and snatches the piece of paper from her. He stares at it for a moment.

‘Ah! Hôtel Bonne Ville!’ he says, lifting his eyes to heaven. He thrusts the piece of paper back at her and pulls into the heavy traffic.

Nell sits back in the seat and lets out a long breath.

*And . . . welcome to Paris.*

The journey, hobbled by traffic, takes twenty long, expensive minutes. She gazes out the window at the busy streets, the hairdressers and nail bars, repeating the French road signs under her breath. The elegant grey buildings rise high into the city sky, and the coffee shops glow in the winter night. Paris, she thinks, and with a sudden, unexpected surge of excitement, she feels suddenly that it will be okay. Pete will come later. She will be waiting for him at the hotel, and tomorrow they will laugh at how worried she was about travelling alone. He always said she was too much of a worrier.

*Chill out, babe,* he will say. Pete never got stressed about anything. He’d travelled the world with his backpack and still carried his passport in his pocket – ‘just in case.’ When he’d been held up at gunpoint in Laos, he said, he’d just chilled. ‘No point getting stressed about it. Either they were going to shoot me or they weren’t. Nothing I could do about it.’ Then

**Copyrighted Material**

he nodded. ‘We ended up going for a beer with those guys.’

Or there was the time when he was on a small ferry in Kenya, which overturned, mid-river. ‘We just cut the tires off the sides of the boat and hung on till help came. I was pretty chill about that, too – till they told me there were crocodiles in the water.’

She sometimes wondered why Pete, with his tanned features and his endless life experiences (even if the girls sniffed at them), had chosen her. She wasn’t flashy or wild. In fact, she had barely been beyond her own post-code. He once told her he liked her because she didn’t give him a hard time. ‘Other girlfriends are like this in my ear.’ He mimed a yapping motion with his hand. ‘You . . . well, you’re relaxing to be with.’

Nell occasionally wondered if this made her sound a bit like a Furniture Warehouse sofa, but it was probably best not to question these things too hard.

*Paris.*

She winds down the window, taking in the sounds of the busy streets, the scent of perfume, coffee and smoke, the breeze catching and lifting her hair. It is just as she’d pictured it. The buildings are tall, with long windows and little balconies – there are no office blocks. Every street corner seems to have a café with round tables and chairs outside. And as the taxi heads further into the city, the women look more stylish and people are greeting each other with kisses as they stop on the pavement.

I’m actually here, she thinks. And suddenly she is

**Copyrighted Material**

grateful that she has a couple of hours to freshen up before Pete arrives. For once she does not want to be the wide-eyed innocent.

I'm going to be *Parisian*, she tells herself, and sinks back in her seat.

The hotel is in a narrow street off a main boulevard. She counts out the euros according to the sum on the taxi's meter and hands them to the driver. But instead of taking the money, the driver acts as if she has insulted him, waving towards her suitcase in the boot, grimacing and gesticulating.

'I'm sorry. I don't understand,' she says.

'*La valise!*' he yells. And follows up with something else in rapid-fire French that she cannot understand.

'The guide said this journey should be thirty euros max. I looked it up.'

More yelling and gesticulating. After a pause she nods, as if she has understood, then anxiously thrusts another ten euros at him. He takes the money, shakes his head, then dumps her suitcase on the pavement. She stands there as he drives off and wonders if she has just been ripped off.

But the hotel looks nice. And she's here! In Paris! She decides that she will not let anything upset her. She walks in and finds herself in a narrow lobby infused with the scents of beeswax and something else that she decides is indefinably French. The walls are panelled wood, the armchairs old but elegant. All the door handles are brass.

**Copyrighted Material**

Already she's wondering what Pete will think of it. *Not bad*, he will say, nodding. *Not bad, babe*.

'Hello,' she says, nervous, and then, because she has no idea how to say it in French, '*Parlez anglais?* I have booked a room.'

Another woman has arrived behind her, huffing and puffing as she scrabbles in her bag for her own paperwork.

'Yeah. I have a room booked, too.' She slaps her own paperwork on the desk beside Nell's. Nell shifts to the side and tries not to feel crowded.

'Ugh. I have had a *nightmare* getting here. *A nightmare.*' The woman is American. 'Paris traffic is the *pits.*'

The receptionist is in her forties, with short, well-cut black hair in a Louise Brooks bob. She glances up at the two women with a frown. 'You both have bookings?'

She leans forward and examines the bits of paper. Then she pushes each one towards its owner. 'But I have only one room left. We are fully booked.'

'That's impossible. You confirmed the booking.' The American woman pushes the paper back at her. 'I booked it last week.'

'So did I,' says Nell. 'I booked mine two weeks ago. Look, you can see on my printout.'

The two women stare at each other, suddenly aware that they are in competition.

'I am sorry. I do not know how you each have this booking. We only have one room.' The Frenchwoman manages to make it sound as if it is their fault.

**Copyrighted Material**

‘Well, you will have to find us another room,’ says the woman. ‘You must honour the bookings. Look, there they are in black and white.’

The Frenchwoman lifts a perfectly plucked eyebrow. ‘Madame. I cannot give you what I do not have. There is one room, with twin beds. I can offer one of you a refund, but I do not have two rooms.’

‘But I can’t go anywhere else. I’m meant to be meeting someone,’ says Nell. ‘He won’t know where I am.’

‘I’m not moving,’ says the American, folding her arms. ‘I have just flown six thousand miles, and I have a dinner to go to. I have no time to find somewhere else.’

‘Then you may share the room. I can offer each of you a discount of fifty per cent.’

‘Share a room with a stranger? You have got to be kidding me,’ says the American.

‘Then I suggest you find another hotel,’ says the receptionist coolly, and she turns to answer a telephone.

Nell and the American woman stare at each other. The American woman says, ‘I have just got off a flight from Chicago.’

Nell says, ‘I’ve never been to Paris before. I don’t know where I would find another hotel.’

Neither of them moves. Nell says finally, ‘Look – my boyfriend is going to be meeting me here. We could both take our cases up for now, and when he arrives, I’ll see if he can find us another hotel. He knows Paris better than I do.’

**Copyrighted Material**

The American woman looks her up and down slowly, as if working out whether to trust her. 'I'm not sharing with two of you.'

Nell holds her gaze. 'Believe me, that is not my idea of a fun weekend away either.'

'I don't suppose we have a lot of choice,' the woman says. 'I can't believe this is happening.'

They inform the receptionist of their plan, the American woman with disproportionate irritation, Nell thinks, considering that Nell has basically just given her the room. 'And when this lady leaves, I still want my fifty per cent discount,' the woman is saying. 'This whole thing is shameful. You would never get away with service like this where I come from.'

Nell wonders if she has ever been more uncomfortable, trapped between the Frenchwoman's lack of interest and the American's boiling resentment. She tries to imagine what Pete would do. He would laugh, take it all in his stride. His ability to laugh at life is one of the things she finds attractive about him. It's fine, she tells herself. They will joke about this later.

They take the key and share a tiny lift up to the third floor. Nell walks behind. The door opens on to an attic room with two beds.

'Oh,' says the American. 'No bath. I hate that there's no bath. And it's so *small*.'

Nell drops her bag. She sits on the end of the bed and texts Pete to tell him what's happened and ask if he can find another hotel.

**Copyrighted Material**

I'll wait here for you. Can you let me know whether you'll arrive in time for supper? Am quite hungry.

It is already eight o'clock.

He doesn't respond. She wonders if he is in the Channel tunnel: if he is, he is at least an hour and a half away. She sits in silence as the American woman huffs and puffs and opens her suitcase on the bed, taking all the hangers as she hangs up her clothes.

'Are you here on business?' says Nell when the silence becomes too heavy.

'Two meetings. One tonight and then a day off. I haven't had a day off this whole month.' The American says this as if it is Nell's fault. 'And tomorrow I have to be on the other side of Paris. Right. I've got to go out now. I'm going to trust that you won't touch my stuff.'

Nell fixes her with a look. 'I'm not going to touch your stuff.'

'I don't mean to be rude. It's just I'm not in the habit of sharing rooms with total strangers. When your boyfriend arrives, I'd be glad if you could hand in your key downstairs.'

Nell tries not to show her anger. 'I'll do that,' she says, and picks up her book, pretending to read as, with a backward glance, the American leaves the room. And it is just at this moment that her phone beeps. Nell snatches it up.

Sorry, babe. Not going to get there. Have a great trip.

Fabien sits on the rooftop, pulls his wool hat further down over his eyes, and lights another cigarette. It is the spot where he always used to smoke when there was a chance that Sandrine would come home unexpectedly. She hadn't liked the smell, and if he smoked inside, she used to screw up her nose and say that the studio apartment smelled disgusting.

It is a narrow ledge, but big enough for a tall man and a mug of coffee and 332 pages of handwritten manuscript. In summer he sometimes naps out here, and he waves daily to the teenage twins across the square. They sit on their own flat roof to listen to music and smoke, away from the gaze of their parents.

Central Paris is full of such spaces. If you don't have a garden or a tiny balcony, you find your outside space where you can.

Fabien picks up his pencil and starts crossing out words. He has been editing this manuscript for six months, and the lines of writing are thick with pencil marks. Every time he reads his novel, he sees more faults.

The characters are flat, their voices fake. Philippe, his friend, says he has to get a move on, get it typed and give

**Copyrighted Material**

it to the agent who is interested. But every time he looks at it, he sees more reasons he cannot show anyone his book.

It is not ready.

Sandrine said he didn't want to hand it over because until he did, he could still tell himself he had hope. It was one of the less cruel things she'd said.

He checks his watch, knowing he has only an hour before he has to start his shift. And then he hears his mobile phone ringing from inside. Damn! He curses himself for forgetting to tuck it into his pocket before coming out on to the roof. He balances his mug on the pile of pages, to stop them from blowing away, and turns to clamber back in through the window.

Afterwards he is not sure quite what happened. His right foot slips on the desk that he uses to climb back in, and his left foot shoots backward as he tries to keep himself from falling. And his foot – his great clumsy foot, as Sandrine would call it – kicks the mug and the pages off the ledge. He turns in time to hear the mug smash on the cobbles below and to watch 332 carefully edited white pages fly out into the darkening skies.

He watches as his pages catch the wind and, like white doves, float into the streets of Paris.

## 4

Nell has spent an hour lying on the bed, and she still cannot work out what to do. Pete is not coming to Paris. He is actually not coming. She has travelled all the way to the capital of France, with new underwear and painted red toenails, and Pete has stood her up.

For the first ten minutes, she had stared at the message – its cheery ‘Have a great trip’ – and waited for more. But there is no more.

She lies on the bed, her phone still in her hand, staring at the wall. She realizes that some part of her has always known this might happen. She peers at the phone, flicks the screen on and off, just to make sure she is not dreaming.

But she knows. She probably knew it last night, when he didn’t respond to her calls. She might even have known it last week, when all her ideas for what they might do in Paris were met with, ‘Yeah, whatever’ or ‘I don’t know.’

It was not just that Pete was an unreliable boyfriend – in fact, he quite frequently disappeared without telling her where he was going. If she was honest with herself, he hadn’t actually invited her to Paris at all. They had been talking about places they’d been, and she had

**Copyrighted Material**

admitted that she'd never been to Paris, and he'd said, vaguely, 'Really? Oh, Paris is awesome. You'd love it.'

Two days later she had emerged from her monthly risk-assessment presentation to potential graduates ('Risk assessment plays a vital role in helping organizations understand and manage risk, in order to avoid problems and capitalize on opportunities! Enjoy your tour around the factory floor – and be careful near that machinery!') and found the sandwich trolley outside in the hallway. It had arrived at least ten minutes early. She had gazed at the selection, mentally totting up the pros and cons, and then eventually settled on a salmon and cream cheese, even though it was a Tuesday, and she never bought salmon and cream cheese on a Tuesday.

'What the heck. We got a bonus this week, right? Let's push the boat out,' she had said cheerily to Carla, who pushed the trolley. And then she'd walked to the office kitchen, stopping outside to get some water from the dispenser, and as she paused to fill her cup, she'd found herself listening in on a conversation between two of her co-workers on the other side of the wall.

'I'm going to spend mine on a trip to Barcelona. I've been promising to take my wife since we got married.' It sounded like Jim from Logistics.

'Shari's buying one of them fancy handbags. That girl will blow her bonus in two days.'

'Lesley's putting hers towards a car. Nell?'

'Nell ain't going to Barcelona.'

**Copyrighted Material**

They had both laughed. Nell, her plastic cup half raised to her lips, had frozen.

‘Nell will put it in a savings account. Maybe after doing a spreadsheet. It takes that girl half an hour to choose between types of sandwich.’

“‘Should I go for the ham on rye? But it’s Tuesday, and I usually have ham on rye on Friday. Maybe I’ll go for the cream cheese. I usually have cream cheese on a Monday. But heck, let’s push the boat out!’” They had laughed again at the crude imitation of her voice. Nell looked down at her sandwich.

‘Man, that girl has never had a wild moment in her life.’

She only ate half her sandwich, even though she loved salmon and cream cheese. It had tasted oddly gummy in her mouth.

That night she went to her mother’s. After years of prevarication, Lilian had finally admitted that the house was too big for one person and had agreed to move, but prying her from the place where she’d lived for twenty-five years was a little like prying a snail from its shell. Twice a week Nell would arrive to go through the boxes of memorabilia or clothes or paperwork piled high on shelves around the old house and try to persuade her mother to let at least some of them go. Mostly she would spend an hour convincing her mother that she didn’t need a straw donkey from a Majorcan holiday in 1983, then emerge from the bathroom at the end of the night

**Copyrighted Material**

to find that her mother had snuck it back into her spare room. It was going to be a lengthy process. Tonight it was postcards and baby clothes. Lost in memories, Lilian held up each one, wondering aloud whether they ‘might find another use someday’.

‘Oh, you did look lovely in this little dress. Even with your knees. That reminds me – you know Donna Jackson from the nail bar? Her daughter Cheryl went on one of those Internet dating things. Well, she went out with this man, and when she went back to his apartment, his shelves were full of books about serial killers.’

‘And was he?’ said Nell, trying to shove some moth-eaten wool baby cardigans into a bag while her mother was distracted.

‘Was he what?’

‘A serial killer.’

‘Well, how would I know?’

‘Mum, did Cheryl come home again?’

Lilian folded the dress and put it to one side on her ‘keep’ pile.

‘Oh, sure. She told Donna he wanted her to wear a mask or a furry tail or something, so she blew him.’

‘She blew him off, Mum. Off.’

‘Oh, what’s the difference? Anyway, I’m glad you’re a sensible girl and don’t take risks. Oh, did I tell you, Mrs Hogan asked would you feed her cat when she goes away?’

‘Okay.’

‘Because I’ll have moved by then. And she said she needs someone completely reliable.’

**Copyrighted Material**

Nell had stared at the little pair of shorts in her hands for a long time before shoving them into the bin bag with unnecessary savagery.

The next morning she was walking across the concourse to work when she'd paused outside the travel agent's. A sign in the window said ONE DAY ONLY, SPECIAL DEAL — 2 FOR ONE — THREE NIGHTS IN PARIS — CITY OF LIGHTS. Almost before she knew what she was doing, she had walked in and bought two tickets. She had presented Pete with them, glowing half with embarrassment, half with pleasure, the next night when they'd gone back to his place.

'You did what?' He'd been drunk, she remembered now, and had blinked slowly, as if in disbelief. 'You bought me a ticket to Paris?'

'Us,' she'd said as he fumbled with the buttons of her dress. 'A long weekend in Paris. I thought it would be . . . fun. We should, you know, go crazy!'

*That girl has never had a wild moment in her life.*

'I checked out hotels, and I've found one just behind rue de Rivoli. It's three-star, but it has a ninety-four-per cent satisfaction rating, and it's a low-crime area — I mean, the only thing they say to worry about is bag snatchers, so I'll get one of those bu—'

'You bought me a ticket to Paris!' He'd shaken his head, his hair flopping over one eye. And then he said, 'Sure, babe. Why not? Nice one.' She couldn't remember what else he'd said, as at that point they'd collapsed on to his bed.

Now she would have to go back to England and tell

**Copyrighted Material**

Magda, Trish and Sue that they were right. That Pete was exactly who they said he was. That she'd been a fool and wasted her money. She had blown off the Girls' Trip to Brighton for nothing.

She screws her eyes shut until she is sure that she will not cry, then pushes herself upright. She looks at her suitcase. She wonders where to find a taxi and whether her ticket can be changed. What if she gets to the station and they won't let her on the train? She wonders whether to ask the receptionist downstairs if she will ring Eurostar for her, but she is afraid of the woman's icy gaze. She has no idea what to do. Paris suddenly feels huge and unknown and unfriendly and a million miles from home.

Her phone beeps again. She snatches it up, her heart suddenly racing. He is coming after all! It will be all right! But it's Magda.

Having fun, you filthy mare?

She blinks at it and suddenly feels horribly homesick. She wishes she were there, in Magda's hotel room, a plastic cup of cheap fizz on the bathroom sink as they fight for mirror space to put on their makeup. England is an hour behind. They will still be getting ready, their suitcases spilling new outfits on to the carpet, the music turned up loud enough to cause complaints.

She thinks, briefly, that she has never felt so lonely in her life.

All great, thanks. Have fun!

**Copyrighted Material**

She types slowly and presses SEND, waiting for the whooshing sound that tells her it has flown across the English Channel. And then she turns off her phone so that she won't have to lie anymore.

Nell examines the Eurostar timetable, pulls her notebook from her bag, and writes a list, working out her options. It is a quarter to nine. Even if she makes it to the station, she is unlikely to get a train that will take her back to England early enough for her to get home. She will have to stay here tonight.

In the harsh light of the bathroom mirror, she looks tired and fed up, her mascara blurred with tears. She looks exactly like the kind of girl who has just travelled all the way to Paris to be stood up by her unreliable boyfriend. She rests her hands on the sink, takes a long, shaky breath, and tries to think clearly.

She will find something to eat, get some sleep, and then she will feel better. Tomorrow she will catch the early train home. It is not what she'd hoped, but it is a plan, and Nell always feels better with a plan.

She shuts the door, locks it, and goes downstairs. She tries to look carefree and confident, like a woman who often finds herself alone in strange cities.

'Um. Do you have a room-service menu? I couldn't find one in my room,' she asks the receptionist.

'Room service? Mademoiselle, you are in the gastronomic capital of the world. We do not do room service here.'

**Copyrighted Material**

‘Okay, well, then do you know anywhere nice I could get a bite to eat?’

The woman looks at her. ‘You want a restaurant?’

‘Or café. Anything. Somewhere I could walk to. Oh, and . . . um . . . if the other lady comes back, will you tell her I’ll be staying this evening?’

The Frenchwoman raises an eyebrow a fraction, and Nell imagines her thinking, So your boyfriend never turned up, mousy English girl? That’s no surprise. ‘There is Café des Bastides,’ she says, handing over a small tourist map. ‘You turn right outside, and it’s two streets down on the left. It’s very nice. Fine to’ – she pauses – ‘eat alone.’

‘Thank you.’

‘I will call Michel and make sure he has a table for you. Name?’

‘Nell.’

*Nell.* The woman pronounces it as if it is an affliction.

Her cheeks flaming, Nell grabs the map, slides it into her handbag, and walks briskly from the hotel lobby.

The café is busy, the tiny round tables outside bulging with couples or groups sitting shoulder to shoulder in thick coats, smoking, drinking, chatting as they look out over the busy street. Nell hesitates and glances up, checking the name on the billboard, and wonders briefly if she can really face sitting in here alone. Perhaps she could just nip into a supermarket and buy a sandwich. Yes, that would probably be the safer option. A huge man with a

**Copyrighted Material**

beard stands in the doorway, and his gaze lands on her. ‘The Englishwoman? Yes?’ his voice booms out over the tables.

Nell flinches. ‘You are NELL? Table for one?’ A handful of heads swivel to look at her. Nell ponders whether it is possible to die spontaneously of embarrassment.

‘Um. Yes,’ she mutters into her chest. He gestures her inside, finds her a small table and chair in a corner by the window, and she slides in. There is a steamy fug on the inside of the windows, and around her the tables hum with well-dressed women in their fifties exclaiming in words she cannot understand, young couples gazing at each other over glasses of wine. She feels self-conscious, as if she is wearing a sign that says PITY ME. I HAVE NOBODY TO EAT WITH. She gazes up at the blackboard, repeating the unfamiliar words in her head several times before she has to speak them aloud.

‘*Bonsoir.*’ The waiter, who has a shaven head and wears a long white apron, puts a jug of water in front of her. ‘*Qu’est-ce –*’

‘*Je voudrais le steak frites, s’il vous plaît,*’ she says in a rush. The meal – steak and chips – is expensive, but it is the only thing she thinks she can pronounce.

The waiter gives a small nod and glances behind him, as if distracted. ‘The steak? And to drink, mam’selle?’ he says in perfect English. ‘Some wine?’

She was going to have Coke. But she whispers, ‘Yes, please.’

**Copyrighted Material**

'*Bon,*' he says. In minutes he is back with a basket of bread and a jug of wine. He puts them down as if it is absolutely normal for a woman to be sitting there on a Friday evening by herself, and then he is gone.

Nell doesn't think she has ever seen a woman sitting alone in a restaurant, apart from that time when she went on a sales trip to Corby and that woman sat alone with her book by the Ladies and ate two desserts instead of a main course. Where Nell lives, girls eat out in groups, mostly curry at the end of a long night's drinking. Older women might go alone to bingo or to a family event. But women don't just go out and eat by themselves.

But as she looks around her now and chews a piece of crusty French bread, she sees that she is not the only single diner. There is a woman on the other side of the window, a jug of red wine on her table, smoking a cigarette as she watches the people of Paris bustle by. There is a man in the corner reading his paper, spooning forkfuls of something into his mouth. Another woman, long hair, a gap in her teeth, is chatting to a waiter, her collar high around her neck. Nobody is paying them any attention. Nell relaxes a little, unwinding her scarf.

The wine is good. She takes a sip and feels the tension of the day start to ooze away. She has another sip. The steak arrives, seared brown and steaming, but when she cuts into it, it is bloody inside. She wonders whether to send it back, but she doesn't want to make a

**Copyrighted Material**