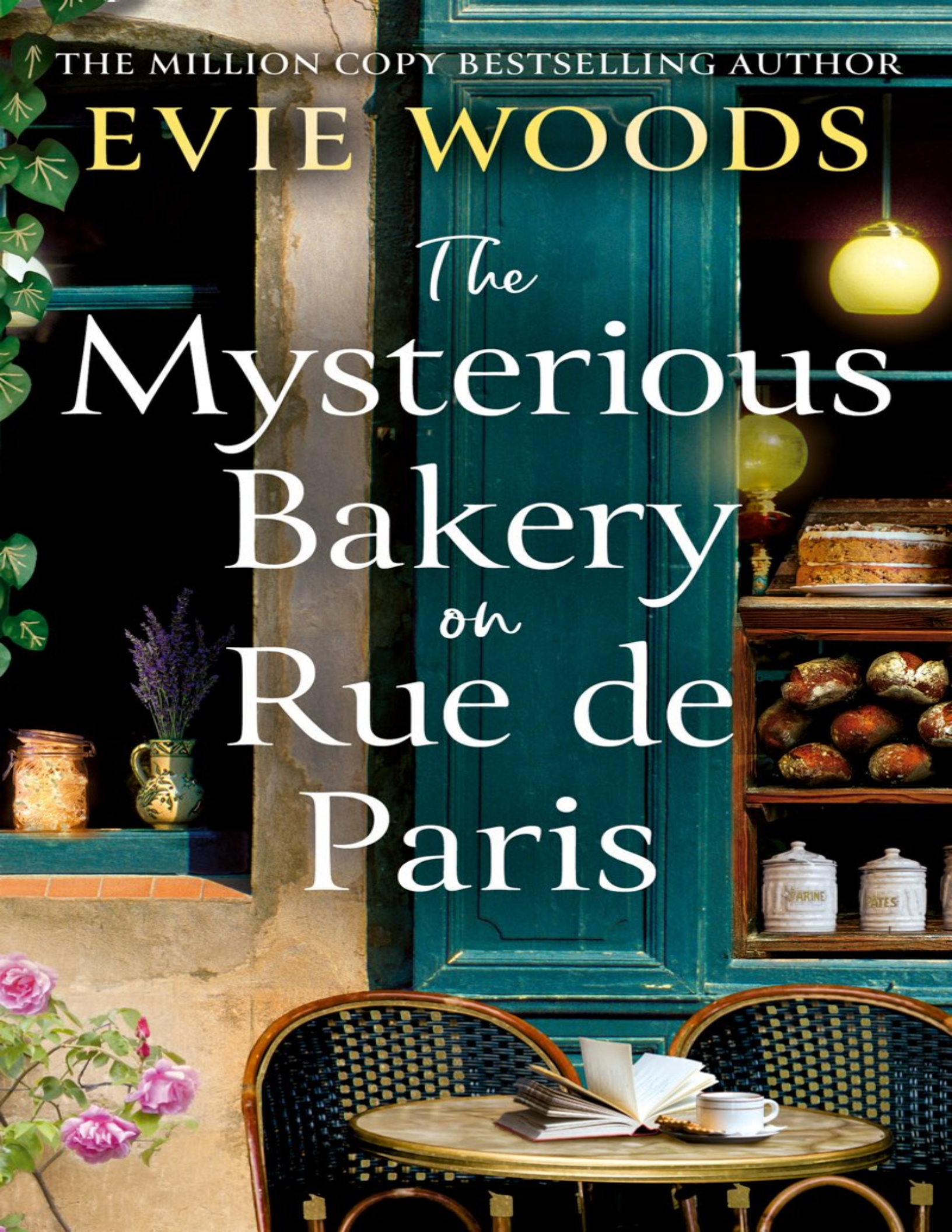


THE MILLION COPY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

EVIE WOODS

*The*  
Mysterious  
Bakery  
*on*  
Rue de  
Paris



# THE MYSTERIOUS BAKERY ON RUE DE PARIS

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EVIE WOODS



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*To all those with a taste for magic*

## Prologue

Nestled among the cobblestone streets of Compiègne, there existed a bakery unlike any other. When customers crossed the threshold, they found not only sustenance for the stomach, but also for the soul. In the soft light of dawn, the baker began each day in the basement with flour-dusted hands, working a secret ingredient into the dough.

Before long, rumours were whispered throughout the town of a mysterious bakery whose pastries offered a taste of magic that could chase away even the darkest of sorrows. Just one bite of a croissant might bring luck, unlock a precious memory or reveal hidden longings.

But dark clouds were looming on the horizon and when the war began, everything changed.



## Chapter One

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A recipe for disaster doesn't require that many ingredients. An unhealthy amount of wishful thinking, mixed with a large dollop of devil-may-care when it comes to reading maps. Add a sprinkle of desperation distilled from wanting so badly for things to change, and you had the perfect recipe for my current situation – barricaded inside a toilet cubicle at the Gare du Nord with only my shame and embarrassment for company. I wasn't sure when I would come out, if ever, and so I decided that the best thing I could do now was replay all of the events that had led up to this moment so I could make myself feel even worse.

The storm had really taken hold by the time I got to Dublin airport. A leaden sky lashed down rain onto the tarmac and buildings with a fury, as though the Gods themselves had something negative to say about my decision to leave.

‘Paris? In France?’

‘Yes, Dad, we’ve been through this a million times, and I do wish you’d stop saying it as though it’s the outer reaches of Mongolia.’ As I checked I had my passport for the umpteenth time, the trusty old Ford came to a halt outside Departures.

‘I don’t mean to, Edie, it’s just...’ He hesitated, rubbing his early-morning stubble and fixing his gaze on anything but me. ‘Are ya sure now?’

Rushing off to France on a whim seems a bit drastic. Would you not consider, I dunno, getting a cat?’

Great. The only thing worse than having an identity crisis was having it confirmed by your father. I took my phone out of my purse and confirmed that the flight was still on time.

‘I have to go. Listen, I’ll be grand and so will you.’

‘It should be me saying that to you,’ he said a bit sheepishly.

It wasn’t the first time our roles had been reversed. Way before my time, I’d become fluent in the world of adult emotions, and that was why I had to do something drastic. I had to strike out on my own and find out who I could be without my past weighing me down. I had felt so confident answering the ad online. I’d spotted it one night, after a couple of glasses of wine, when I indulged in my usual fantasy of moving abroad. Scrolling through the website English Jobs in France, I typed in ‘Paris’ and suddenly it popped up:

*Assistant manager wanted for a quaint little bakery in Paris.*

*Accommodation provided. English required.*

I’d sat up in bed and stared at the words. This was something I could actually do. It was something I knew I could be good at, despite the language barrier. All at once, my imagination was filled with visions of a chic, sophisticated *boulangerie* in one of the posh *quartiers* of Paris; modern but with a nod to vintage.

Frankly, I was surprised by how quickly I got the job, even without a proper interview. I couldn’t quite believe my luck. A few quickfire questions over the phone, ensuring my fluency in English and a background in the service industry, and that was it. My career path had been something of a cul-de-sac up to that point. I never really figured out what I wanted to do, so I just ended up waitressing in a café. It was meant to be a temporary

thing; an escape from the pressures at home and an easy way to earn some money while I figured things out. But over time, my future became more and more unclear and my job was the only stable thing I had to hold on to. At the age of thirty, I just couldn't see myself doing anything else. Until Paris came calling.

Once inside the airport, I tried to distract myself from the awkward goodbye with my father by trying to choose between a Mac blusher and a liquid eyeliner. I wouldn't ordinarily treat myself, but this was Paris after all. I had to up my game. Just then, I heard a breathy young woman sing the announcement:

'Final call for passenger Edith Lane, travelling to Paris on flight EI754. Please proceed to gate nine immediately, as the gate is now closing, thank you.'

I grabbed both products and practically threw money at the shop assistant, making a dash for the flight. This was my great adventure and I intended to soak up every second of it. For years I had watched old films with my mother, sighing enviously at elegant actresses like Grace Kelly or Audrey Hepburn, who embodied the kind of self-assured, fearless woman I hoped to be. Just thinking about how we used to lie on the couch together and listen to my mother's old jazz records, dreaming of the day I'd find the courage to be the star of my own movie, brought back bittersweet memories. For when the time came for me to flee the nest, she needed me to stay. Not that she would ever have asked it of me, but it was natural as breathing, caring for her. That was when those movies, *High Society*, *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, became our escape. More recently, my own additions, *Amélie* and *Moulin Rouge*, created a world of timeless fantasy where we could pretend reality didn't exist.

Ever since I could remember, I'd been obsessed with the city of love. My parents had their honeymoon in Paris and spoke about it as though it was the most magical place in the world. Whenever we needed cheering up,

we'd take out their photo album and my mother would point out all of the amazing places they'd visited. I chose French as my foreign language at school and I spoke incessantly about living in Paris one day. My father, being a pastry chef, had always promised that we would go, as a family. But there are some promises you can't keep, no matter how hard you try.



As the rain lashed relentlessly against the plane's oval window, I noticed a tall, silver-haired man scanning the aisles for his seat. There was something in his piercing blue eyes that caught my attention. I tried to arrange my features into a nonchalant yet inviting look and to my great surprise, he smiled back and deftly swerved into the seat beside me.

This is it, I thought to myself, an actual meet-cute and we haven't even left the tarmac yet!

He removed his coat, revealing a distinct white dog collar and a cross pinned to the breast of his shirt. 'Do you mind if I sit here?' he asked politely.

'No, not at all, father,' I sighed, breathless with disappointment. Oh, well, at least God would be keeping an extra special eye on the plane. Which was just as well, for when we made our laboured ascent into the angry sky, I and my fellow passengers recited silent prayers several times over as our flying tin can lurched up and down in the turbulence. Babies cried, children whimpered and I anxiously chewed my nails, wondering why the universe had picked today to unleash a storm.

'Are you all right?' asked the dapper priest at my side, startling me out of my fear-induced stupor.

'Oh, me? Yes of course, I'm grand,' I assured him, decidedly pleased to have a man of the cloth at my side.

‘There’s no need to worry at all,’ he continued, closing the Ken Bruen crime thriller he was reading. ‘I’ve read the end of this particular story, and we all arrive safely in the end.’

This statement, coupled with a mischievous wink, made me laugh and automatically I relaxed a little.

‘What takes you to Paris?’ he enquired.

‘I’m starting a new job: assistant manager of a little bakery.’

‘Well, that’s very interesting. Isn’t it amazing that they couldn’t find someone in all of Paris to do that job?’ he marvelled, shaking his head.

It struck me as most peculiar that this thought had never once entered my head, and it irritated me no end that he was the one to spot such an obvious oversight. I smiled politely in agreement, but inside felt a mountain of doubts towering over my new life. What did I really know about where I was going? And why were they so quick to offer me a job without so much as an interview?

‘Do you have family in Paris?’ he interjected again, not finished with his interrogation.

‘No, no family. Just going on my own,’ I replied in an upbeat tone that felt contrived.

‘Aren’t you the brave one,’ he said.

I wasn’t sure I liked this guy anymore. Every remark made me feel like I was being undermined. I gave a slight nod and turned my attention towards the window, unofficially ending our interaction.

A flash of lightning lit the entire inside of the plane with a blinding spotlight, silencing everyone on board for a moment and then causing the children to cry even harder.

*Oh, shit*, I thought, that’s what you get for being mean about the priest. I kept my eyes closed and, for some reason, hugged my handbag to my chest, as if I’d need it close to hand when the plane went down. I whispered quietly, ‘Help me, Mum, help me.’ Eventually, the captain’s voice crackled

over the intercom and assured everyone that all was well and we were now beginning our descent into Charles de Gaulle airport.



I could still see the lovely woman's face, Julie, the proprietor of the *boulangerie* on Rue de Compiègne. I recognised the facade immediately – I'd spent long enough drooling over their pictures on Instagram. As I crossed the street, I could hear music in the air. Outside, a trio of musicians played the same classic French soundtrack of jazz music I'd saved on countless playlists. One sat squeezing an accordion, another strumming a guitar, while a tall, thin man wearing a flat cap plucked a double bass. I had arrived! But following a halting conversation of broken English and French, my stupid mistake became clear.

*'Désolée, mais je crois que vous vous trompez,'* Julie said, while placing some cups on a tray for the waitress to take to a table of four.

*Tromper*, I knew that word... *Se tromper* – to be mistaken. I took out my phone and pulled up the ad I had answered. Julie pulled a pair of glasses down from her head and peered at the screen.

*'Ah, voici La Boulangerie sur la Rue de Compiègne. Vous cherchez La Boulangerie sur la Rue de Paris. A Compiègne.'*

My emotions were a swirl of embarrassment and panic. Even my bum cheeks felt as though they were turning red. Despite my broken French, I knew what she was saying. I was at the wrong bakery. Worse still, I seemed to be rooted to the spot. Julie was waiting for me to leave, our business was at an end, and yet I couldn't quite move. I had simply run out of steam. And where the hell was Compiègne?

The waitress returned with an empty tray to the counter and on seeing my face, must have taken pity.

*'I speak some English, may I see?'*

I nearly cried at her kindness. *Keep it together, Edie*, I warned myself. The last thing we needed was a scene! She looked at the screen and nodded affirmatively. *Thank God*, I thought to myself, *at least someone knows where I'm supposed to be*.

'You must take the train to Compiègne, is approximately one hour north of Paris.'

'Sorry, did you say one hour north of Paris? No, there must be some mistake. I'm here to take up my position in the Boulangerie et Pâtisserie de Compiègne ... in Paris,' I said, feeling a little less confident now.

'I can show you, if you like,' she said, pinching the map on the screen. 'See, it is in ze department of Oise, in ze region of Picardy, see? *Vous voyez là?*' she asked, pointing to the map.

'*Oui, je vois*, yes,' I whispered in response, with a sinking feeling in my stomach. I wasn't going to be living and working in Paris at all. And if that was true, what else had I been misled about? The helpful young woman continued and even wrote everything down, as I must have looked completely lost. And besides, what was a 'department' when it was at home?

'*Alors, nous sommes juste à côté ...* we are right beside la Gare du Nord,' she assured me, from where, apparently, I could get a train to the bakery where I actually had a job. Maybe. Did it even exist? Had I been scammed? I thanked them both and followed their directions for the train station, where I now sat, weeping in a toilet cubicle.



'Right,' I said, to no one but myself. I had to do something. I couldn't spend the night in the toilet. I wanted to ring home so badly, but I couldn't let Dad know that he was right and that this had all been some foolish plan to reinvent myself (which it absolutely had). My finger hovered over my



friend Gemma's number. We'd started working together at the same café on the same day and she'd become the closest thing I'd had to a best friend. But even Gemma didn't get to know the real me. I was so used to keeping the sunny side out at home, I'd begun doing it with the people around me, too. That's when I realised that I couldn't call her, either. She had been so enthusiastic about me 'finding my true self'— how could I turn around and tell her the truth? I had no clue who my true self was, and she certainly wasn't here. No. I had to make my own decisions now and stop wondering what everyone else would do in my shoes. First things first, I had to find out if the job I had applied for was real.

I found the number for Madame Moreau – my future employer at the bakery – and after several rings when my heart seemed to stop beating, she answered.

'*Âllo?*' came a croaky old voice.

I recalled the line I had been practising and responded. 'Um, *oui* ... hello, eh, *bonjour* Madame Moreau ... eh, *ici* Edith Lane?' I planned on ending every sentence with a question, as in 'Do you understand me?' Even though I had spent the last few weeks cramming with language apps and watching reruns of *Amélie*, my level of French felt painfully inadequate now.

'*Que voulez-vous?*'

'Yes, well, *je suis* here, in Paris, and um, you're not.'

Silence.

'*Je cherche la boulangerie...?*' My voice wavered.

'*Ah, vous êtes la fille qui va travailler dans la boulangerie, c'est ça?*'

'*Oui*, yes, the girl you hired to work at the bakery. I'm Edith from Ireland – *Irlandaise!*' I sighed with relief at her recognition of my name. I wasn't going mad. The job *was* real.

'*Vous devez aller à la Gare Du Nord, et vous prenez le train à Compiègne, d'accord? A plus tard alors.*'

‘Yes, no, I know that part, it’s just—’

The line went dead.

‘Eh, hello? *Âllo*, Madame Moreau?’

I puffed out a sigh of indignation. ‘Fine, I’ll just Google it, then, shall I?’ Great, now I was talking to myself out loud. The search results for the bakery’s location came up and pointed to a little street with no name.

‘Well, that can’t be right,’ I said, squinting. On top of everything else, I probably needed glasses. Yet another unwanted sign that the years were rolling by, whether I wanted them to or not. I put my phone in my bag and used my irritation as fuel to get out of the cubicle and take some action.

Looking at myself in the mirror, I saw a very sorry sight indeed. The rotund chignon I had so carefully pinned my hair into this morning had completely unravelled, my chic cream coat was creased and the Mac eyeliner I’d bought at the airport had smudged and leaked, giving me watercolour panda eyes. My chin began to wobble at the sight of my dishevelled appearance and my broken dreams.

‘Look, you’re a grown woman; get a hold of yourself!’ I shouted, giving myself a quick smack on the cheek. Wrong move; that just left me feeling sad and bullied.

‘Right, different approach. OK, no one said this was going to be easy,’ I assured myself, like an audio self-help book. ‘Every heroine must face her obstacles and that’s all this is: an obstacle.’ Talking in such a positive tone began to calm me down and I reached for some tissue to start rebuilding my facade of confidence with make-up. ‘So I won’t be living a glamorous life in Paris,’ I mumbled, ‘but this Compiègne place can’t be that far, and who knows, maybe it’s the most picturesque part of France.’ That was the spirit, and besides, how would it look if I gave up on my big adventure before it had even truly begun?

Just then a woman stepped out of the other cubicle, giving me a wary look.

‘Oh, never mind me, just talking to myself!’ I joked, and received a stony-faced glare for my troubles. I was already a major hit with the French, that much was clear.



‘*Alors, ze trains depart every fifteen minutes and ze ticket is twelve euros and fifty cents,*’ said the woman at the ticket desk, who took pity on me and switched immediately to speaking English. ‘I wish you a good journey, Madame.’

‘It’s Mademoiselle,’ I croaked, trying to focus on the map she had given me, full of odd street names and road numbers.

I boarded the train on the Paris–Saint-Quentin line to Compiègne. I found a seat by the window, though by this stage the sky was growing dark and as the train pulled away from the station, the lights of Paris blinked a luminous farewell. Monuments gilded with gold, fountains splashing generously and red-white-and-blue flags flying proudly on every building. I was already leaving Paris behind. I let my head rest against the glass and tried to find some scrap of positivity. I thought back to all of the old films I’d watched with Mum. The storyline never did run smoothly and the good people didn’t always get what they deserved, at least not until the end. I had to believe that, no matter the bumps along the way, the journey would be worth it. Maybe it wasn’t about dreams coming true (although that would be nice). Maybe it was about becoming the kind of person who chases them, regardless. Well, I would soon find out.

I took my phone out and called the number I reserved for very special cases – when my heart really needed a hug. It clicked straight onto answerphone and I heard my mother’s voice singing.

*Smile, though your heart is aching,*

*smile even though it's breaking,  
when there are clouds in the sky, you'll get by,  
if you smile through your tears and sorrow,  
smile and maybe tomorrow,  
you'll see the sun come shining through, for you...*