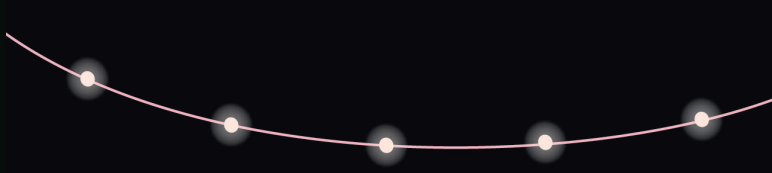


One night in the world's best
place to fall in love.

Kiss Me in Me PARIS

by
Catherine
Rider





Serena Fuentes won't waste one moment of her whirlwind trip to Paris. She has it all mapped out, right down to the photos she will take, and the last thing she wants is a change in plans.

Yet suddenly she's touring the city with Jean-Luc, a French friend of her sister's boyfriend. He has to take pictures of his own if he ever hopes to pass his photography class, and his project totally slows Serena down. Why can't he get with her program?

One minute they're bickering, the next minute they're bonding... and soon they're exploring corners of Paris that Serena never imagined.

A romantic adventure for anyone who sees the possibilities in a spontaneous tour of the City of Lights with a charming French stranger, and anyone who's ever wondered if true love is waiting on the other side of the ocean.

KISS ME
IN PARIS

KISS ME IN PARIS

~ BY ~

CATHERINE RIDER



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To Lila, who I will never be able to thank enough

~ CHAPTER ONE ~

SERENA

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 21, 9:15 A.M.

This has to be what being dead feels like!

Even though I managed to sleep a little on my red-eye flight from New York, I'm still jet-lagged enough that my body feels far away. The street (or *rue*) in Paris's 7th arrondissement, where my big sister, Lara, is staying, looks like a faded photocopy of itself. But that might just be the December fog, which is so thick I didn't see *any* of the sights that Google Maps said my taxi was driving past — not even the Eiffel Tower!

I stumble out of the taxi and try not to face-plant on the sidewalk. Wouldn't *that* be a perfectly pathetic start to this trip — a two-day family adventure I dubbed “the Romance Tour.” Some tour! Mom had to bail at the last minute, and Lara ignored all my “Can you pick me up from the airport?” emails, so right now, this is beginning to feel like the exact *opposite* of a “family trip.”

I look left and right (my stiff neck screaming at me not to move so fast), scoping out as much of the street as the fog will allow. A cobblestoned road crawls away. The black awning of a café sits on top of the fog like a mud stain.

Maybe I shouldn't have spent so much time doing Google Image searches of Paris in the run-up to coming here. Everything looked so perfect on my laptop screen back home — all golden-hued street scenes and cafés dripping with flowers — that I'm starting to feel a little irked about how the real Paris looks: cold, dark and angry, just like any other city.

Then I look at the apartment building. The vintage brickwork and the way the wrought-iron balconies disappear into the fog makes everything feel so ... *foreign*. In this moment, I feel every one of the 3,624 miles Google told me there were between here and home. I kind of wish I was in familiar old Brooklyn right now and not on some strange street in some strange city wondering why I'm looking at a *black* front door with a silver wreath, when Lara had told me the door would be red with a holly berry wreath. *Please* don't tell me that I somehow managed to direct the taxi to the wrong address. I can't even check my phone (*of course* I paid for a data roaming add-on), because it's in the left side pocket of my parka, which is currently barricaded by the tote bag that's hooked over my left shoulder. I'd have to set my bag down to free my arm — and honestly, I'm way too exhausted for that to be worth it.

Great idea to come in on a red-eye, Serena.

At least I'm in the right arrondissement, which is the fancy French word for Parisian neighborhood. The 7th might be one

of the fanciest, because my guidebooks tell me that the Eiffel Tower is in this neighborhood, and so is the Musée d'Orsay, a few other Musées and the resting place of Napoleon. It would normally have been *way* beyond my accommodation budget for the Romance Tour, thanks to being centrally located on the Left Bank of the Seine River, but Lara *au pairs* for a family here in the city. A part of me is a little envious of how she found a part-time job she can easily fit around her studies, in *Paris*. But this is also the first time in history Lara has actually made something *easier* so ... can't complain.

There is a flight of six stone steps up from the sidewalk, and I'm not only lugging my tote bag but a suitcase that weighs exactly fifty pounds (I know because I weighed it at home, on the scales in both my bathroom and Mom's, before I set off for JFK, maxing out the airline's allowance for checked luggage). After an eight-hour red-eye, these fifty pounds feel more like two hundred, and these six steps might as well be Mount Everest.

Get a hold of yourself, Fuentes, I think, trying to give myself a pep talk. You've run half marathons! You can carry these fifty pounds up a few more steps.

Besides ... remember why you're here.

I shake out my hands, trying to de-crimp them. Then I hold my tote bag tighter to my ribs, grab the handle of my suitcase, grit my teeth and give a grunt that I am too tired to be embarrassed about — not that there's anyone on this *rue* to hear it.

At the top of Everest, I push the buzzer for Apartment 15. The voice on the intercom is crackly and speaking a rapid French that I don't understand at all, but it's still a voice I'd know anywhere.

“Lara, it’s me,” I tell my sister.

“*Serena?*” I wonder if she’s just woken up because she sounds surprised. *She didn’t seriously forget about the Romance Tour, did she?*

Lara tells me to come to the fourth floor. *Awesome.* I drag my exactly-fifty-pound suitcase up the stairs — because *of course* there’s no elevator, and *of course* Lara hasn’t thought to come and help me — and I look at the numbers on the apartments on the fourth floor: *10, 11, 12 ...* There are three apartments on each floor, so Apartment 15 is *not* here. I have to schlep up *another* flight of stairs, because I’ve just remembered the ground floor isn’t considered the first floor over here.

Why? Whyyyyyy, Europeans?

“So, wha ... What are you doing here?” Lara’s standing in the doorway of Apartment 15, waiting for me. I’d have been relieved to see her if she didn’t look so completely confused. She’s in sweats, and her hair (she got the lustrous waves, while I got the wild, frizzy curls) is kind of all over the place, supporting my just-woke-up theory. She’s still got her signature bright-red lipstick on, though. I’m not sure I’ve seen her without it since she started high school.

I ignore her for a moment, heaving my suitcase into the apartment, straight into a bright and spacious living room, where I prop it against a couch. “Give me a minute,” I tell her. Then I point to one of the doors leading off the living room. “Bathroom?”

“Yeah,” she says, looking like she thinks this is a weird dream she’s going to wake up from any second.

When I come back from the bathroom, I walk by her and

collapse onto the tan couch. It's so soft and squishy I nearly bounce off. I notice a small Christmas tree in a corner. It's decorated with black-and-gold bows. So chic, so *French*. I get myself together and give Lara my best glare. "Sooooo ... what happened this morning? You forgot to check your phone for an email from your sister? You forgot about our plan to see all the sights our parents saw on their honeymoon? You forgot about the *Romance Tour*?"

"I didn't *forget* ..." She sits on the arm of the couch, looking at me like *I'm* the flaky one. "But you know ... once Mom got called away on that conference, I kind of assumed we'd be calling off the whole Paris thing, and that you and I would fly separately to London to meet Mom on Christmas Eve."

Jet lag has not only made my eyes go a little weird, it seems to be scrambling my brain. Because that's the only reason I could be imagining my sister forgetting about our *carefully thought-out* plans to travel through Paris, seeing all the places our parents did when they honeymooned here almost exactly twenty-five years ago. I spent a weekend's worth of hours — time I could've spent studying for finals, which, believe me, are no joke at Columbia — coming up with our itinerary. I'd emailed it to Lara and asked for her thoughts. Not that I ever heard anything back.

Oh, God. It's all making a terrible kind of sense.

I stare at her, hoping to win her back with facts. "Counterpoint. I told you I was still coming to Paris."

"You did? When?"

I sit up, as much as I can — it's not easy. The couch is trying to swallow me, and I'm tired enough to let it. "In *every email* I've sent you this week. I said, three times, 'Can't wait to *see you*

in Paris, sis!’ I told you the flight number, my arrival time ... I told you how much money to set aside for food and Metro fares. Literally the only thing you had to take care of was meeting me at the airport!”

“I thought the tour was called off,” she says weakly. “I ... I’ve been really busy. I haven’t been checking email that often.”

Meaning you haven’t been reading my emails. “Just because Mom can’t make it, that doesn’t mean *we* can’t do the tour and put together a scrapbook to give her on New Year’s Day” — I’m telling her this even though I’ve said exactly these things in all the emails she obviously *didn’t read* — “while we’re all together in London, for their twenty-fifth anniversary. You know New Year’s Day has been hard for Mom since ...”

I don’t finish that sentence. I can’t.

Then my sister gives me what the family calls the Lara Look — wide-eyed, her expression frozen like her brain’s a computer that has eighty-four tabs open, all of them trying to download something and a couple of them troubled by adware. It’s the look she always gives when she *knows* she’s screwed up. She mumbles something about being really sorry. “I thought you were emailing to remind me to get Mom a Christmas gift.”

“Did you even do *that?*” The words are out before I can stop them. I know Lara well enough to know that when she’s giving the Look, she’s also beating herself up. I shouldn’t make it worse, but I can’t help it this morning — I’ve traveled 3,624 miles with a suitcase that weighs one-third of me!

“I was going to pick something up in Madrid.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose, feeling a stress headache coming

on. “Madrid? What are you talking about? Madrid has *never* been a stop on the tour!”

A sheepish look crosses her face. “Well, I ... wasn’t talking about you and me.”

It’s only now that I notice her red lipstick is slightly smeared, in addition to the messy hair, only now that my nose twitches at the scent of cologne that has been present this whole time.

Lara has *company*.

I look around, like he might be standing perfectly still in a corner or something, but he must be hiding in another room. If only I knew the French for “Come out, come out, wherever you are!”

Then I notice ... *other suitcases*. None as big as mine, but there are three of them, surrounding the fancy coffee table in the middle of the room.

“What’s going on?”

Lara tucks her hair behind her ears, then crosses her arms over her chest. Looks at the floor. “Damn it, this is a total disaster.”

“You’re seriously going to Madrid? What are you going to Madrid for?”

Then, the reason Lara has been too busy to read any of my emails comes strolling out of one of the doors. He’s a tall dude who is (of course) model handsome even while wearing a jersey of what I figure is some French soccer team. High cheekbones, sun-kissed skin, dark wavy hair that’s a bit long but somehow perfectly swept back. He smiles at me, then mumbles something to Lara, in French. She mumbles back, “*Tout va bien*,” a couple times.

Then the guy looks at me and moves forward, holding out his hand and nodding. “*Bonjour*.”

I accept his handshake, hoping he's not going to try to pull me in for a double-cheek kiss, because I suck at those even when I'm well rested. (*Right cheek first? Left cheek first? Oh, sorry, we totally misread each other and now my nose is in your mouth.*) I'm so annoyed with Lara, I don't say "Bonjour" back to him — I say, "Hey, what's up?" in the broadest, flattest-A, most *American* accent that I can manage. I actually get a bit of a Southern twang in there, even though I've never been south of Philadelphia at any point in my life.

One corner of his mouth rises in a half-smile, and I can't tell if it's a smug smirk or not. "We 'av confusion, *oui?*"

Lara's still looking at the carpet. "Serena, this is Henri. Henri, this is my little sister, Serena. She just got in from New York."

Henri smiles the second half of his smile — okay, he's not smug — then nods as he looks back to Lara. He says something in French; Lara replies in French. Henri says something else in French, and I wonder if it's all right for me to go in the kitchen and make myself a cup of coffee, but I can't do that because I'm slowly sinking back down into the couch. So tired. Henri's rubbing Lara's arm in what looks like a reassuring way. I can see from the soft, tender look in his eyes that this dude is super-into my sister, and I wonder — not for the first time — how she copes with her studies and her job if every week she's falling in love with a new guy.

Then I tell myself not to be bitter about people being in love, just because I've never even been in serious *like*.

"Hey," I interrupt all the French. Sit up straight. "Real life — no subtitles. What's going on?"

Lara looks at me, half-throwing up her hands, then running

them through her hair again. “Since Henri and I won’t be seeing each other for almost a month, when classes start up again, he bought tickets for us to go to Madrid for a couple of days, before flying to meet you and Mom in London.”

Wow. Lara’s going on a trip with a guy? She *never* does anything like that. It’s way too much commitment.

Henri makes a show of giving a shrug that’s more gallant than Gallic. “Zis is your sisterr. We can go to Madrid in Januaree. It will still be there, *non?* Eets okay, *tout va bien.*”

Lara’s got a pained look on her face, and I can tell that this scheduling conflict is not an accident. She’s always wanted to go to Madrid — and, now that I think about it, she hasn’t been all *that* enthusiastic about the Romance Tour. Maybe because it involves talking about Dad, and Lara *never* brings him up.

My sister might be scatterbrained sometimes, but now I’m wondering — have *I* been oblivious?

“No, you know what?” I say, making a snap decision. This whole tour was *my* idea. The scrapbook will be a nice gift for Mom, but there’s something else I want from this trip. And maybe I can only get it if I do this by myself. “You guys should go.”

“Are you sure?” Lara is still looking pained, and I’m kind of glad that she feels bad for leaving, even though it’s obvious she’d rather be in Madrid.

“I’m sure. Just make sure you get Mom a *great* gift!”

Lara hugs me — grateful *and* relieved, I can tell. “Thank you, Serena. You’re the best!”

She doesn’t have to tell *me* that. “Shut up — no, I’m not. And anyway, at least I can get some sleep — I’ll crash in your room.”

The Lara Look is back. “Ugh. The thing is, the family I work for has gone to Zurich for Christmas, and this apartment is being deep-cleaned while they’re gone. I promised them the place would be empty when the cleaners arrived — which is today.”

As I sigh and briefly look up to the ceiling, she reaches out to me. “It’s only one night, though — maybe you could get a hotel?”

Numbers fly through my mind, as I try to make a Paris hotel room fit my budget, not to mention my plan. I would need one hour — at least — to find a hotel, then thirty to forty-five minutes, probably, to get to said hotel and drop off my luggage, and at least ninety euros (but probably more if I want clean sheets and no bedbugs) to pay for it all ...

“I’m not sure I can afford it.”

Lara turns back to Henri, apologetic. “Maybe I should stay ... I can’t leave my little sister alone in a strange city.”

But Henri is smiling and taking a cell phone from his back pocket. “Eets no *problem*. I ’av idea.” Then he dials and has a super-fast, very French conversation with someone. In less than two minutes, *voilà* (his word, not mine):

“Eets okay. You sleep with our friend, Jean-Luc.”

I stare at him. “I’m sorry, *what?*”

But Lara has her hands over her face, and her shoulders are shaking from laughing. “That’s not what he means! He means, you can stay in Jean-Luc’s dorm. His roommate is away for the holidays, so you’ll have your own bedroom, all to yourself. It’ll be great.”

“Um ... but I’ll be staying with some strange French guy! No offense, Henri.”

Henri grins at us both, although he looks as lost among our rapid English as I feel during all the French.

“Jean-Luc *is* a little strange,” Lara says. “But he’s actually really nice, once you get to know him.” That last part she says under her breath. I don’t know how much time she expects me to spend with him. I have an itinerary planned, after all, so I probably won’t say more than a few words to this “Jean-Luc” character.

“Also,” Lara goes on, “he’s half-American, so he speaks English really well. You’ll get along just fine. Here” — she writes something on a map of the Paris transit system, which she then hands to me — “this should help you get around.”

I take it and hope my face doesn’t show my disbelief that my own sister doesn’t know me well enough to know that I came here with three maps of the Metro.

“I’ve written Jean-Luc’s number at the top.”

I enter the number into my phone, realizing that I’ve “agreed” to crash with some half-American boy who is really nice but also strange. It’s not ideal, but I don’t see any other choice right now. “Fine,” I say, with a shrug. “I probably won’t see him much, anyway.”

Lara’s looking at me again — confused, like before, but also a little wary and concerned. “You’re really going to walk around Paris all by yourself?”

For a second, I have to look away, because Lara’s eyes narrow in the exact way that our dad’s used to whenever *he* was concerned about me. Whenever I would pretend to him I wasn’t upset about something. I look back at her, hoping my voice doesn’t rat me out by cracking.

“I am. I have to.”

Lara steps forward and pulls me into a big hug — only the second one she’s given me since I got here, nearly five minutes ago, which is way below her batting average. She pulls away from me, holding my hands and staring at me. There are tears in her eyes.

“Mayonnaise?” she asks me. When we were little, we both hated mayonnaise and would vow to eat a jar of it if we ever broke a promise. Even though we are both older, and both kind of like mayo now, it’s still our sisterly code for *Trust me*.

I nod, because I know if I try to speak, my voice *will* rat me out.

Henri clears his throat and says something in French. Lara responds in English: “I know, I know.” Then, to me: “We have to go soon if we’re going to make our train.”

I nod again and dare to speak: “I understand.” Another hug, and then I pick up my exactly-fifty-pound suitcase and haul it out of the apartment.

When I’m at the top of the stairs, Lara’s voice drifts toward me.

“Hey, sis, maybe you should let Henri carry that down for you.”

I’m halfway through insisting that I’ve got it, when my muscles give out, my hand cramps and I watch fifty pounds of luggage tumble down the flight of stairs.

~ CHAPTER TWO ~

JEAN-LUC

9H45

Why did I answer my phone?

I've been ignoring it for the last three weeks, ever since Martine decided that, rather than merely break up, she'd prefer to live in our breakup conversation forever, but today, I actually looked to see who was calling me, in case it wasn't her, and *now* ...

Now, Henri has roped me into babysitting Lara's little sister, because I was the idiot who told him that Olivier would be driving to Lille on some emotional suicide mission to win back his *lycée* girlfriend. Which means there is a spare room at our dorm. Which means I am now taking down all my photographs and clearing out all my notes and equipment from my temporary studio, so this stranded American girl has somewhere to sleep tonight.

Well, I will give her the spare room and the spare key, but I

cannot do more than that. I have a project to finish for when classes start up again in January — and three weeks ago, I had to start *all over again*, because I realized that my very giving ex-girlfriend had so distracted me, I was producing poorly framed, amateurish work. I hope that this American girl doesn't expect me to play tour guide, because I really can't handle that right now. I mean, of course, I'll make sure I'm contactable in case she gets into some sort of trouble. But I can't literally watch her all day.

I'm trying to arrange my photos in a neat pile without looking too closely at them. They only make me wince, especially the shots of rue Lamarck, in Montmartre, at dawn. For some reason, I got it into my head that what those shots needed was to be at a ninety-degree angle. I may have been going for something with that, but I'll be damned if I can remember what it was. Usually, when I look at my photos, I know exactly what I was trying to achieve — even when I don't really meet my own goals. But this time, I cannot remember anything except crouching down and turning the camera over in my hands, as if that was going to magically make things more interesting. It did not.

The corner of my sleeve brushes the pile and several photos cascade to the floor. I'm tempted to yell all the swear words I know in two languages as I pick them up again.

But I don't do this. I take a deep breath and ask myself, is it really the prospect of a houseguest that has me in this mood? Am I sure it wasn't the red badge? The red badge in the bottom-right corner of my cell phone screen that tells me I received a voice mail from PAUL THAYER at 6h05.

Paul Thayer is my father. He lives in New Jersey, so he was

technically calling me a little after midnight, his time, but I would not be surprised if he was confused and somehow thought that Paris was six hours *behind* the East Coast. Either that, or he actually expected me to be up that early. If he knew *anything* about me, he'd know that I've never been a morning person.

I haven't listened to the voice mail. I don't even need to. I know it will be a variation on the voice mail I got from him *last* Christmas:

Son, I'm so sorry I can't get to Paris this December like I usually do. (He says that like him visiting is an annual tradition, even though he's skipped the last seven years.) But I can make it up to you. Julie and I would really love it if you could make it out to Jersey this summer. You know we'll take great care of you, although I understand you might, uh ... you know, have to stay in Paris for the summer.

The man has not visited me for seven Christmases and seven birthdays but expects me to travel to another continent by myself, to hang out with him and his second family? That we will have things to talk about, bond over? That I'll suddenly connect with his twin sons, whom I haven't seen since he brought them to Paris as screaming toddlers?

I walk out of Olivier's room and into mine. I place my portfolio (the zombie of my project) on top of my laptop and try not to pay attention to how messy and cluttered my desk is. Try not to think — again — about how a photo of Montmartre is always going to be a photo of Montmartre, whether the camera has been turned ninety degrees or not. Try not to think any more about how I am producing uninspired work for this project. Try not to

dread how Monsieur Deschamps, my advisor, is going to give me another one of his lectures. A portfolio of simple shots of Paris, he will say, does not meet the assignment's objective of "telling a story from the city."

"Where are the people?" he asked me on Wednesday, when I popped into his office for an end-of-term consultation. I told him, the people were there — surely, every piece of art contains pieces of the artist?

He told me to "stop being such a pretentious young fool. Connect with your subject. Remember, you're trying to capture a city. A city's heart is not just its streets, its sights — it is in its people."

I chose not to inform him that, having recently broken up with my girlfriend and said goodbye to my dormmates — who all went home for Christmas — I am somewhat short on people right now. And photographing people has never been one of my strengths. Some of my classmates seem to just *know* the right moment to capture a smile. A pensive look or a flash of wonder. But that involves spending time with the subject, keeping them loose, engaged. And then getting them to stand still long enough for you to get a good shot.

Convincing people to stand still has never come naturally to me. And now, four days before Christmas, I have the whole dorm to myself, so there's no one in here for me to even *ask* to stand still. Well, there's this American girl who's due any minute now, but I can hardly ask her, can I? Henri said she had a list of things she *really* wanted to do while she was here. I might be able to venture outside and get some shots of strangers instead. Though I've

barely been able to see more than a dozen meters out my window, because of a thick fog that does not seem to want to lift.

Reception buzzes me, and I go downstairs to the lobby. As stressed and irritated as I am, I still can't stop my brain from noting all the details, in case there's something new to capture. The lobby is kind of drab, with an ancient, artificial Christmas tree in one corner looking like a smudge of moss against the dull brick walls — a weak effort to give the place some “seasonal cheer.” A Latina girl is standing by the front desk, where Thierry the concierge is not even pretending to look up from his copy of *L'Équipe*. In front of her is a bulging suitcase, with a tote bag on top — a traveler with a lot to do while she's here. She's about the same height as me. Her long, slightly frizzy black hair is tied back, and she's not wearing makeup. She has a knee-length, black down parka over dark blue jeans and a purple sweater. Black boots. It's only as I look at her that I realize I was not expecting this inconvenient guest to look both very American *and* naturally stylish. I raise a hand to signal that I'm the guy she's looking for, and she starts to say something that *might* be French.

Then again, it could also be Swahili.

“It's okay,” I tell her. “I speak English. You are Serena?”

“That's right.”

“I am Jean-Luc.” I reach out to shake her hand, but when she takes mine, she leans forward, turning her face away, offering her cheek. I don't expect this from an American girl, so I do nothing — I stand still, holding her hand, until she turns her face to look at me, extracting her hand from mine as if we didn't just have an awkward non-kiss.

Through a weary smile, she thanks me for taking her in.

“It’s okay,” I say again. “You must be kind of tired. Henri said you were on an overnight flight and arrived less than an hour ago.”

“Yep, that’s me. Direct from New York.”

“Let me carry your luggage.” I gesture that she should go upstairs.

“Thank you.” She hooks her tote bag over one shoulder, then walks past me.

Once Serena is halfway up the stairs, Thierry looks up from his newspaper. Gives me a suspicious look. In French, I tell him: “She’s my friend from America.”

I bend down to pick up Serena’s suitcase and almost dislocate my shoulder.

The thing feels like it weighs twenty kilos!

*

Serena is in the living room sitting on the chaise longue, her head leaning back. She’s certainly made herself at home.

“I really hope I’m not putting you out,” she tells me. Like most Americans I’ve encountered in Paris, her voice is so *loud* — like she is yelling at someone, except she is not. It seems to rattle the walls of my dorm.

“It is no problem,” I tell her, dragging the suitcase to the spare room. I keep my body and head turned from her as I wipe the sweat from my brow. “This is where you can sleep. I imagine you will want to rest after your flight, *non?*”

She sits straight up, like a vampire in an old-time Hollywood movie. Swings her legs off the chaise longue. “Can’t. I have a plan! Besides, I made sure to research the best travel pillows, so I slept a little during the flight. And even if I didn’t, I’d still have to get going, because I’m already running behind. I’ve got so much to see. The Louvre, the Seine, the Eiffel Tower. I need to get started!”

I wonder if she has decided to fight jet lag with coffee. Lots of coffee. So that she can stomp around the most popular sights of Paris. The ones everybody ticks off, like the city is a to-do list.

But then a thought strikes me.

All these places are the most crowded ... where better to find people for my project?

“Well, if you’re sure you don’t need to rest ...” I lean down to gather up my camera, which I’ve been leaving on the coffee table now that Olivier isn’t here to complain about “clutter.” I hook the camera over my neck, letting it hang over my chest. “I have a little bit of work to do on my photography project” — *that’s an understatement!* — “but I guess I could show you around Paris for a little while.”

Serena is digging into the tote bag at her feet. “Oh, you don’t have to do that. I have four maps, an almost fully charged phone and three guidebooks. I’ll be fine.”

She does have all these things. She shows them to me.

“You will not experience the soul of the city from just this book,” I tell her. “You must not go only to museums and tourist sights. You must take the Metro, walk the streets, look at the architecture, listen to the sounds of the city. You must let it speak to you. *Then*, you will feel like you have really been here. If you

let me, I can take you to many great places that the writers of this book never even heard of. *Real Paris*.” I may not have captured it on film — yet. But I know it is there.

“Oh, I’m not here for ‘real’ Paris,” she tells me, picking up one of the guidebooks.

“I do not understand.”

She hesitates, but then her eyes soften and she speaks. “The thing is ... I’m here for my parents. They came to Paris on their honeymoon, almost twenty-five years ago. Both of them always said it was the best, most magical trip they ever took together. And, for the last two years, my mom always gets very sad around Christmas and New Year, because she’s reminded of ... who’s not here. I thought, if I could tour the city, see all the sights they did, put together a scrapbook for her to keep, it will remind her of happier times. Maybe she won’t be as sad this time of year ...”

Her voice catches, and she looks back down to the guidebook. Flicks through it, front to back, then back to front. I can tell she’s not actually reading anything, just keeping herself occupied and letting the moment pass. I can see her struggling to keep emotions off her face.

The camera at my chest suddenly feels heavy. I reach for it and take her photo.

Her head snaps up, and she’s scowling. In fairness, I might have earned the scowl — that was a really private moment I just stole from her. But the photo does look great.

“*Pardon.*” I look at the floor and try to will away the blood that rises into my cheeks. “I am studying photography. It is an ‘abit.”

Yes, I *am* making myself sound just a little bit more French to give myself more chance of being forgiven.

“That’s okay,” she says. I am about to ask her if she studies — and, if so, what — but she is pulling a smart faux leather cross-body bag out of the tote bag and stuffing her guidebooks and itinerary and maps into it. “I should get started. Is there a spare key I can borrow?”

This is a most curious turn of events — a few minutes ago, I was looking forward to shaking off this American girl, but now, as she’s getting ready to leave, I want to follow her. She’s my best hope of getting good shots for my project. It could even be ironic — pretentious crowd shots where the sea of humanity obscures one’s view of the world’s greatest city.

Actually, that’s not a bad idea.

“Surely,” I say, “you would prefer someone who *knows* the city to go with you? What if you get lost?”

“I’m an expert at Google Maps.” But then she pauses, sighs, looks at me. Not withering or offended this time — more curious. “I guess if you want to tag along for a while, that’d be okay.”

For some reason, when *she* says “tag along,” I feel a bit embarrassed.

“But I warn you,” she continues, “I have a lot of places to get to and not a lot of time to get to them, so I think I’m probably going to be moving too fast for you to take any good photos of stuff.”

How does she have so much energy? I shrug, aware that I’m trying to make sure I don’t shrug too “Frenchly.”

“What is first?” I ask.

“The Louvre,” she says, crossing the room to where I left her suitcase. She sets it down and unzips it. Removes a pair of bright

orange sneakers that change my opinion of her sense of style. “And we need to get going, because the whole mix-up with Lara has cost me too much time.”

She changes out of her boots into the hideous sneakers, then scoops up her cross-body bag and is out the door before I can even mentally list what lenses I should bring with me. I hear her voice over her footsteps as she heads back downstairs. I swear, I can hear her from the lobby!

“You coming or what?”

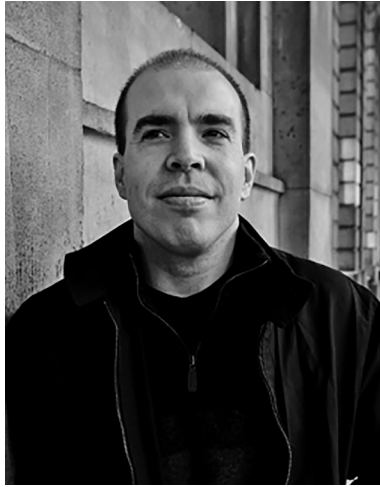
I can tell that this American girl, with the orange feet, is not going to slow down. And even though it feels *wrong* to venture out into the world with only a single lens on my camera — looking at the world with just one pair of eyes, *mon dieu!* — here I am running out the door after her, strangely eager to spend a day seeing a tourist’s Paris.

Just how badly do I not want to be alone today?

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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JAMES NOBLE is an editor who also writes under a variety of pseudonyms. He was born and raised in London. He went to primary and secondary school in London. He went to college in London. He got his first — and only, and current — publishing job in London. He has intermediate Cockney rhyming slang, loves pie and mash (though he recoils at the mere mention of jellied eels), and never forgets to “mind the gap.” But he still loses far too much of far too many days daydreaming about what it’d be like to live in New York.

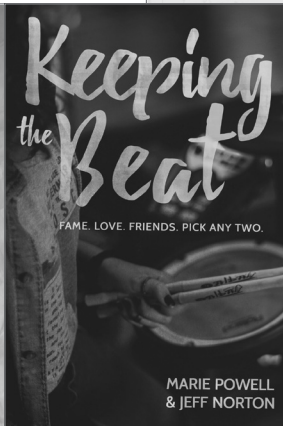
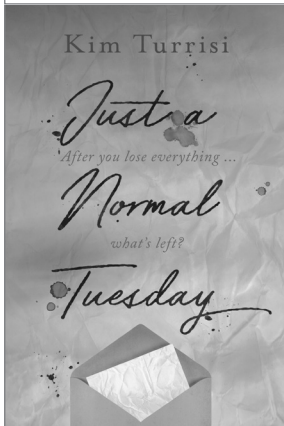
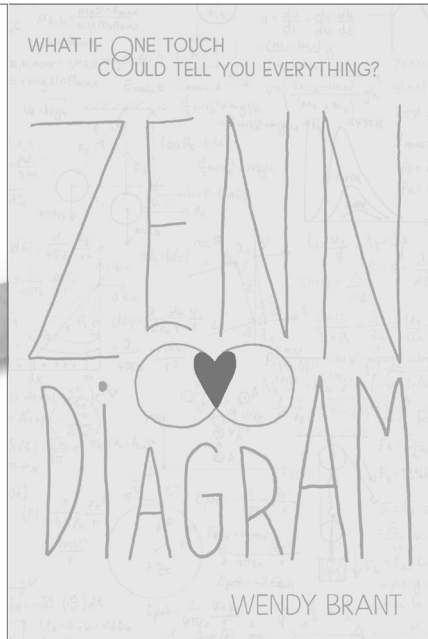
Eternal gratitude to my parents, Debbie and Jimmy, and to my brothers, John and Joe (and Emma!), for putting up with me in all the ways that you do! Much love to the Brennan-Finnegan and Bailey/Cheshire Clans, who I’m proud to call my family. A “mad” hat tip to all the supportive writers I know. Thanks, most of all, to my friend and collaborator Stephanie, whose daily example never leaves any choice but to always be better.



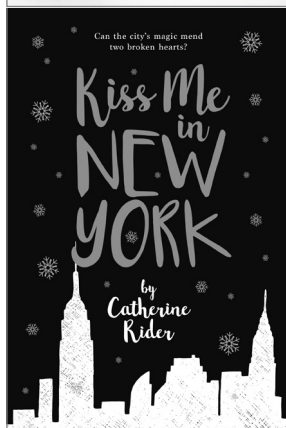
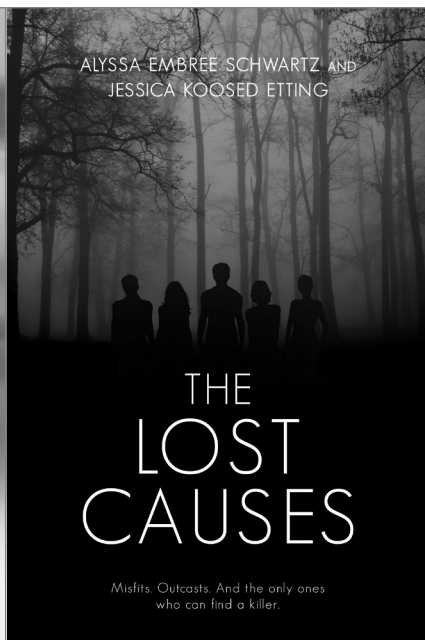
STEPHANIE ELLIOTT is a book editor who moved to New York immediately after college. She has never been mugged, ridden a Citi Bike or been harassed by a rogue Elmo in Times Square (though one did get a little salty with her, once). She feels strongly that bialys are better than bagels, yellow cabs are better than Ubers and pizza must NEVER be eaten with a fork. She loves visiting London, where people are SO polite! She lives in Brooklyn with her husband and five-year-old daughter.

Love and thanks to my parents, my supportive friends, the Elliots, the Lanes and the indescribable city of Paris, which always inspires me. Particularly big hugs to Dan and Maggie, my two loves who are always up for exploring with me. And a special thanks to James, for his love of this story and his amazing contributions!

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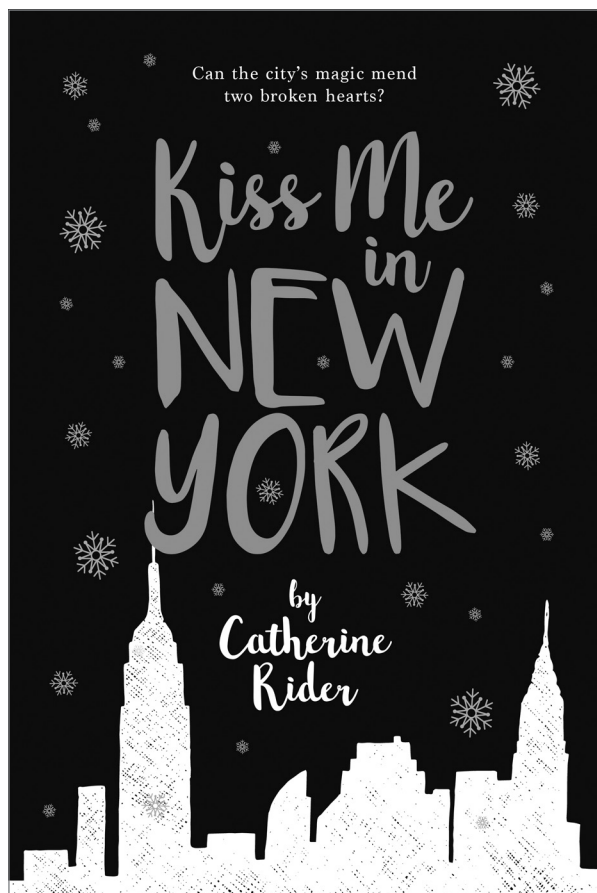


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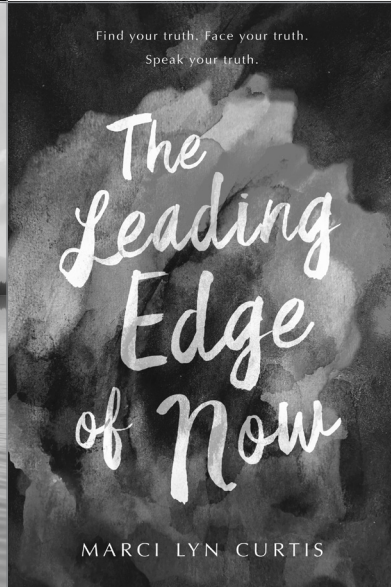
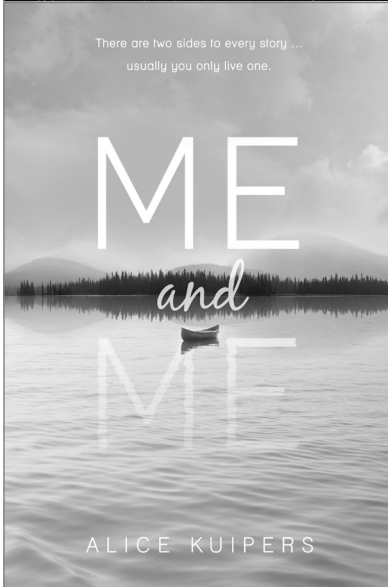
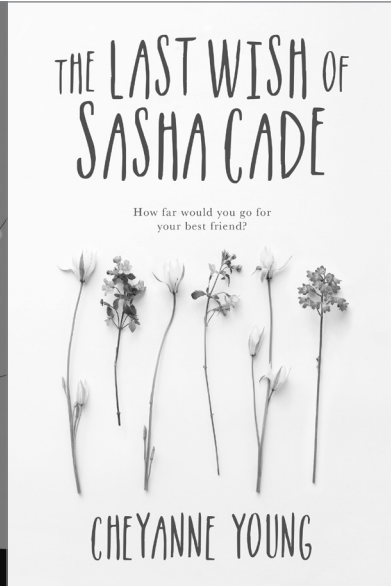
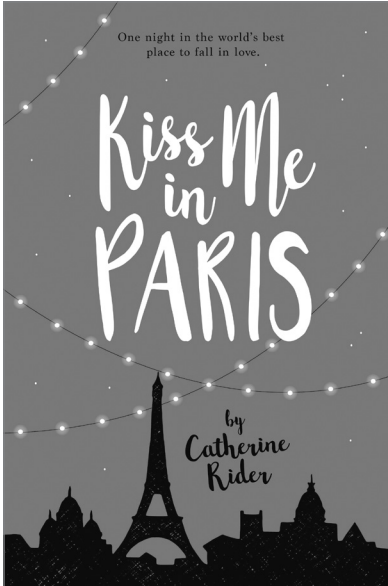


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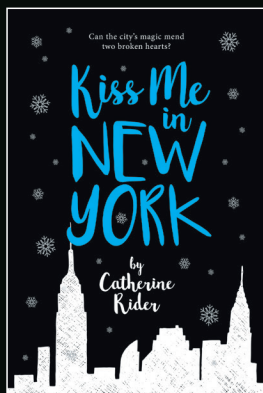
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