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Written by Jojo Moyes

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Paris for One

Jojo Moyes



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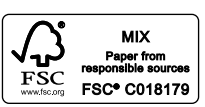
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Paris for One

Chapter One

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 – Disney-bound – walks through into the departure lounge, with buggy, 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 says 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 phone vibrates in her hand.

Sorry babe. Caught up at work. Not going to make it.

As if they had planned to catch up over a quick drink after work. 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 to get 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. *Caught up at work*. It's a surf- and scuba-wear shop. In November. How caught up 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 wide 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 little 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 gone 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.

The annual trip has survived through 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 trainer down a toilet in the youth hostel,' said Trish.

'I snogged a French boy because he looked like that bloke who goes out with Hallé Berry.'

'*Pete-with-the-hair* Pete? *Your* Pete? I don't mean to sound 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 dirty weekends to Paris. Which is . . . you know. Great. I just wish it wasn't the same weekend as *our* 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 got 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 it for two nights. She pictured herself and Pete, tangled up in a French hotel bed, gazing out of 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 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 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, finally, 'no spring chicken'.

That was the thing about growing up in a small town – everyone thought they knew 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

usually went for clear). 'Don't forget I'm leaving early on Friday,' she said at work. '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 onto 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 if her boyfriend was going to turn up.