

# A Paris Odyssey by Axel Forrester

## Chapter One

Gare du Nord, Paris, France



When I stepped off the train at Gare du Nord, I reached for my wallet, only to discover it was gone. Checking the pocket of my backpack I found that the keys to my flat were also missing. Next, I fumbled inside my coat pocket. No passport. So expertly had I been pick-pocketed that I had finally arrived in Paris with no identification, no money, no credit cards, and no keys to my friend's flat. As the shock of this spread across my body, despair set in, and I lowered myself right there on the platform to a crouching position with my arms around my suitcase and backpack.

'Welcome to Paris!' said an evil, scratchy voice inside my head, like the one you'd imagine a gargoyle to have.

*OK then*, I told myself, as I brought my luggage closer to my chest. *The rules here are different*. I'd thought that growing up in Los Angeles, I'd be somewhat prepared for a big place like Paris, but I was wrong.

Of course, I hadn't been on trains much in LA. I had a car like millions of other people in California. You're safe in a car, with the doors locked.

Katie did warn me about pickpockets, which is why I had put important stuff in different places, but that didn't matter. Somehow it was all gone! Keys! Wallet! Passport! I was trembling now, hugging my backpack tightly.

*'Snap out of it!' yelled my inner travel warrior, jerking me to attention. You've been to CHINA and back again. You can handle PARIS. Pull yourself together, man!* Like any hero in a tight spot, I knew there'd been a big loss, but now it was time to take inventory of what I *did* have, of what was left. To my great relief my two cameras, one analog, one digital, were still around my neck, which was probably why they hadn't been stolen. The other thing of value I had left was my cell phone in my back pocket. Was it time to call Katie? She'd get this fixed in no time. But it seemed awfully soon to call for help. Some part of my manly pride said, *NO, Grant Decker. You can figure this out on your own. At least your phone works here. You have options.*

One thing I had remembered to do was write down the emergency numbers from my credit cards and store them in another place. I reached into my shirt pocket. Yes. It was still there, the little piece of paper with the lost or stolen numbers. *Smart man!* All I had to do now was get out of the station, get a signal, and make the call.

I looked all around me, as I stood up on shaky legs. Now, where was the sign showing the way out to the street? *Exit* in America. *Way Out* in Britain. What was it in French? There were so many tunnels and signs. I didn't understand a word on any of them. Katie had tried to get me to practice a few French phrases, but I'd paid no attention. I was only going to be here four weeks. My pronunciation of French was awful. Might as well not embarrass myself.

All the signs seemed to lead to some place called SORTIE. Sortie here. Sortie there. Oh, come on! They couldn't *all* be going to this SORTIE place unless ... maybe it was a vast circular road around this insanely large train station.

The crowds from the train were long gone. More trains pulled up, more people got out, repeatedly. In waves. I watched them. All these faces. Preoccupied. Tired. Worried. But none of them lost. Leaves letting go of branches and hurrying on the wind. They all knew exactly where they were going. I should follow someone. But who?

In one of the quiet lulls, I noticed the only people hanging about here. They were not waiting. Purposeful, yet relaxed. Unhurried. These were old men. Wearing ragged suits, they needed a shave, lounging on benches reading newspapers or moving very slowly down the platform, clutching a tall dark bottle by the neck. One man was fast asleep on the tiled floor, snoring, his hair straining in all directions, as if trying to escape his head. Two other men were facing each other on a bench, deep in conversation.

Moving toward them, I noticed they had stopped talking when they saw me and now frowned. They appeared to be offended by *my* appearance. When I opened my mouth to speak, I had to stop. What was the French word for hello? There was only my stunned silence. What I did was wave. They turned back to their discussion. To my American ear, their French sounded refined, civilized, and intimidating.

There was the swoosh and flutter of pigeon wings, darting above my head, a sound I knew and should have taken comfort in, but instead I held fast to my cameras and the fear of all I didn't know. As I watched, they flew up into a shaft of light, coming from a high window. And there it was, my impulse to take a photo, only I'd missed my chance, standing there without a tongue.

There was an odor. Sweat. Old socks. Beer. My shoulder was tapped, and I jumped, gripping my two cameras to my chest. No one was going to take these off me. If it came to blows, then so be it! As I turned, one of these men who hung around stood there staring at me with rheumy eyes and a down turned mouth, a sad clown from a distant time. He spoke softly to me, trying not to scare me, but I understood nothing. I waited for him to put his hand out for money, but he didn't. It took me a moment to realize that he felt sorry for me and was trying to help me somehow. He spoke again, slowly, kindly, as if to a child, or a small animal. Again, I it meant nothing to me. I tried out my voice. Squeaky and apologizing.

'I'm sorry, I don't speak French. I'm very sorry.' None of the French phrases Katie had so thoughtfully made me write down came to mind.

'Lost?' he said, in English. There was a sparkle in his eye.

And now, at the sound of my own language, my heart swelled up like a balloon in simple, fragile hope.

'You speak English?' I almost grabbed his hand, but sensibly pulled it back and bowed instead. 'Thank you! Could you please show me the way out of this place? Way out? Exit?'

'Sortie?'

I blushed.

'Sortie means exit?'

'Oui.' *And that means, yes.* I was remembering now.

Some part of my brain finally lit up. Flashbacks came to me, of the movie *An American in Paris* with Gene Kelly. Having grown up in Los Angeles, I'd been raised by the movies. As the only son and youngest child of my parents, I was a lonely kid, and the movies were the place I went to escape. Making my own way around LA on my bike, I went to revival houses, big old cinema houses, or any hole in the wall where I could see flickering images, hear the clicking of a projector and smell fresh buttery popcorn. I even found places that showed silent films on Wednesdays with someone banging away on an ancient piano to accompany it. The movies taught me just about everything I knew about the world. And now, Gene Kelly was entering my mind, calming me with his graceful dancing across milk-splattered streets meant to look like Paris.

The old man took me by the arm, and we walked toward the *sortie*, shuffling together like *two* old men. I was just forty, but at that moment was feeling more like eighty. Paris had defeated me already, upon my *arrival*. Taking it slow, maybe I could start again.

*Sortie*. It was all over the place. I'd been staring at the exit signs for well over an hour without any comprehension. Perhaps I should have learnt THIS useful word for my first ever trip to Paris. Katie must have assumed I knew it. She'd lived in the UK all her life and her ear had become used to French. Paris was not a foreign place to *her*. But to an American, Paris is half a world away. As foreign as China.

Katie and I lived in the tiny town of St. Ives, in Cornwall, where I first met her. Our daughter, Ariel, was now seven. St. Ives is a peaceful little corner of England, where nothing

much happens, and we like it that way. But my boss, Leslie Stringer, told me she'd had just about enough of my nice quiet photographs of Cornwall. She wanted me to go to Paris and jazz up my photographs with a bit of glamour, a bit of depth. She got me a grant and was sending me to Paris to discover something new with my camera. She wanted me to 'grow as an artist' and was sure a month spent in Paris taking pictures of whatever interested me would do the trick. 'All the great fashion and street photographers do it. You'll come back with fresh eyes!' And her eyes were glowing when she said it. I knew Leslie was a big fan of Paris. She had a flat she kept there for her 'get away' trips. 'I'd rather live in Cornwall and escape to Paris rather than the other way around,' she told me. I guess she thought this would be good for me too. And since there was grant money for me to go, why not? Leslie was going to feature my pictures in the next edition of *Cornwall Now*, a rather daring move on her part. 'You know, country mouse, city mouse kind of thing. What the country mouse sees in the city.' I took slight offense at this, I was from Los Angeles after all, not Cornwall. But she was the boss and I'd go along with her grand experiment. I was being paid to and, I considered her a friend. I knew she was trying to help me be a better photographer, expand my ways of seeing.

Leslie showed me her books about the great photographers of the Paris of the 1950s – guys like Robert Doisneau, the one who took those unforgettable black and white pictures of couples kissing. You know the ones. Even in America, I knew them. And there was Henri Cartier-Bresson, who caught those empty Paris streets with all their twists and turns, kids carrying wine bottles, and old men reading newspapers. He took pictures of models too, in the streets, and policemen and scenes with people from all walks of life.

Years ago, when I was an art and photography teacher back in California, I taught my students about these photographers. They were among the many great ones I admired. They were *artists*, but I wasn't sure I was one. So, what was I going to do now? Here in Paris? I had no idea how to make art or where to find the things she wanted me to take pictures of. Leslie had given me a blank canvas and the keys to her flat in Paris. Now I'd lost those keys, had no money or passport, and no idea what to do next.

When we came up all those stairs into the sunlight, I had to shield my eyes, the brightness was so startling. The old man was holding on to my elbow and leading me up the stairs like I was on crutches. I did have a crippling ignorance of Paris. His helping me was an act of pure kindness. *Well, maybe*, said my cynical side. *There's nothing left to steal*. My hands went to the two cameras around my neck. *Oh yes, there was*.

We came to a bench, and he offered it to me with his extended hand. *Good manners*. This man, looking every bit like a vagrant, carried himself like a king. He was in no rush and had complete command of himself and his surroundings. He knew the rules here. I did not. This moment of pause was welcome. I sat down and then he sat beside me. He clasped his hands over his belly, while I held tight to my cameras, and together we watched people emerge from the train station. But just having the sun on my cheeks and some fresh air was helping. I badly needed this rest, and he seemed content to stay here with me and take one too.

After some time had passed, he turned to me and said, 'Where to go?'

I had to think. *Sketchbook. The address of Leslie's flat was written there.* Unzipping my backpack, I pulled out a little black book and flipped through the pages until I found it.

'Rue St Martin.'

'Ah!' His face lit up in wonder as he pointed to the road. 'Here!'

'This street?' I could hardly believe it. Was it just dumb luck that we had come out this sortie from the Gare du Nord to the road I was looking for? Leslie said it was easy to find from the station. If I could just get to the flat and knock on the communal door, perhaps the landlady would have pity on me and let me in. My newly formed cynical side, however, was on high alert. Perhaps the old man wanted to come along because he expected a reward of some kind. Or perhaps, he was going to take me down some side street, hit me on the head and take my cameras. I was clearly too weak to fight him.

'Let's go. I walk you,' he said, as he stood up and smiled at me.

My face became a mask of fear, and he saw it. The pity came back to his eyes. I must have looked like a pathetic American tourist, afraid of everything. He sighed heavily and took a step back as if to give me room to collect myself.

'It's OK,' I said, my hands out, fingers splayed, like I was trying to calm *him* down.

'Thanks for your help. I'll be fine now. I'll find it myself, thank you.' Standing up, I waved like a lunatic, hoping he would take the hint and leave, but he just stood there with searching eyes.

'Coffee?' He asked, pointed across the street to a little café.

I wanted one badly, but I shrugged my shoulders and did a bad imitation of a tramp with empty pockets. *No money.*

He pulled me by the arm and touched his chest. *He* was going to buy *me* a coffee. This was unexpected and somewhat humiliating, but at the time I wanted a coffee more than anything and didn't protest. For the second time that day, this man rescued me. We shuffled across the road.

When we were inside the little cafe, he drew me to a table and sat me down. Releasing my backpack and suitcase to the floor, I clutched the two cameras around my neck. With wide eyes I took in my surroundings. A Paris café. Elegant. Intimate. The walls a pale shade of green, like a new leaf. There were black and white photographs in dark wood frames. The Eiffel Tower. The Seine. Lovers holding hands.

Glasses tinkled. There was laughter. Voices all around me were speaking French, effortlessly. The sound was a river of words passing by me. Incomprehensible. Pleasant. A babbling brook. The cafe had the same chairs and tables in every movie I'd ever seen about Paris. Woven rattan with a familiar pattern.

A waiter stopped in front of us, dressed in black with a long white apron wrapped around his slender physique. His face was a smooth, hard surface. The expression one of coolness as he took us in, an incongruous pairing of a Paris vagabond and an American tourist. My savior spoke.

I understood that at least, two coffees. The waiter took the order with a nod of his head. Then disappeared.

The old man smiled again, raised his shoulders, and then dropped them. We couldn't very well have a conversation. But it seemed polite to try.

'Me Grant,' I said, pointing to myself like I was *Tarzan*. Then I pointed my finger at him.

'Maurice,' he said, and bowed. Clearly *not* an ape man.

Then it suddenly came back to me, the one word I should have known.

'Bonjour!'

He laughed and nodded, like the proud parent of a toddler.

'Oui! Bonjour!'

Then another word rose to the tip of my brain.

'Merci! Merci, Maurice! Merci!'

And that was it. Every word I knew in French. I had nothing more. We both stared at our hands for a while and then looked around the café. Other diners looked away when I caught them staring. We were both unwelcome guests here, but it didn't seem to bother Maurice as much as it did me.

I was relieved when the coffee came, along with two little packets of what I'd been trained of late to call 'biscuits' but what in America I'd called 'cookies.' I poured milk and sugar into my cup. My sweet tooth was possibly the only part of me that was excited to be in Paris. Patisseries! That's where I'd find pastries. Heavenly ones, so I'd been told. The coffee hit me like the drug it was and suddenly my brain got busy. *'Shouldn't you be making a call to your bank?'*

I tried to tell the fear in me to relax. First things first. Coffee. Then I would thank the man and drag my suitcase down the long street of Rue St Martin until I found number 290. I'd throw myself on the mercy of the lady in charge of the flats. She would be expecting me. Leslie had arranged it all. Her name was...was...oh, oh, I didn't even have a swear word in French. I had it written in the book somewhere. I'd find it.

While my mind tried to form a plan, Maurice was enjoying his coffee. It was as refreshing him, as it was to me. He sat a little taller in his seat and smiled as he studied the pictures on the walls. I confess, I worried again that he might follow me, and wondered how to politely get him to leave me alone.

'You live near here?' I asked, as if I was going to visit him soon.

He laughed.

'No.' Then, as if trying to turn it into a lesson, he added. 'Non.'

I nodded and repeated. 'Non.' Lesson received. We both sipped our coffee. After some time, the waiter came over and set the bill on the table in front of me. He waited, his eyes meeting mine. I turned to Maurice who put his hand in his pocket and pulled out some coins, laying them on the table. The waiter collected them and gave a small nod to Maurice. To me it was a clear sign that we were to leave the premises. I finished my cup of coffee and set it down but noticed that

Maurice took his time. He'd paid for this spot, and he was going to enjoy it. Just as I was wondering where he laid his head at night, he stood up and pointed to somewhere in the back.

'Toilette,' he said. I understood that one with no trouble. Another French word I knew without knowing it! Maybe I'd be all right after all. I nodded and he disappeared for ten minutes. He was probably having a bath in the sink. Much as I wanted to do the same, I was determined to wait until I had a toilette of my own in the flat that awaited me. I was not prepared to leave my things with this man while I went down the hall into who knew what.

When he returned, looking refreshed, I stood up. We went outside together. I stopped at the pavement and held out my big American hand.

'Merci,' I said again, knowing full well my pronunciation was miserable, but at least it was the right word.

The man looked surprised, and then a little hurt.

'You go now?' he asked.

'Oui!' I was getting the hang of this. 'Merci! Merci!' I smiled. I waved.

'You OK?'

'Oui! Merci!'

He patted my arm, leaving his hand there longer than was strictly necessary. Another kind of fear entered my head. Maybe Maurice expected a little something more in the way of a *reward*. But no. He backed away and smiled a weary smile and then headed back to the train station. I watched him go, a little ashamed of the relief I felt in his going.

When he was out of sight, I turned around and marched down the street, turning my head left and right to try to spot numbers on the buildings. After several minutes of this I was confident I was going the right way. It wasn't exactly close, but I carried on. The bag and backpack were feeling heavier and heavier with each step. Why was I so tired? It couldn't be jet lag. The flight had only been two hours. Of course, it had been about eight hours now since I'd landed and taken the train to Paris from the airport. I wanted to call Katie but thought perhaps I should wait until things were looking a little better.

When I finally found the door, my shoulders drooped. It looked like a fortress! The doors were so *big*. And by now I felt like Dorothy, having just arrived at the doors to the Emerald City. I rang the bell, with hope, and waited. Nothing. I rang it again. Still nothing. Finally, there was a tinny sound of a voice crackling on a wire.

'Oui!'

'Ah! Hello! I mean, Bonjour. I'm Grant Decker. You are expecting me? The American? The friend of Leslie Stringer? I'm afraid I've lost my keys. Do you speak English?'

A loud buzz. Giving the door a push with my shoulder, it opened.

I heard a distant slapping sound which grew louder. Footsteps approached me, coming down a spiral staircase, echoing on the walls. Waiting patiently at the foot of the stairs, I ran my hand through my hair, which must have been a mess after all I'd been through. My hair tends to have a mind of its own.

The first thing I saw was the long skirt. Then, worn shoes. A long apron. The woman looked like an extra from the set of *Les Misérables*. Her arms were crossed, and she stood on the third step, towering above me, with disdain.

‘Vous ne parlez pas français?’

My brain turned around three times and then went to sleep.

‘Non.’ Then again. ‘Merci.’ Oops. I just said thank you. ‘I mean, sorry. Very sorry.’

‘American.’ She spoke the word like a curse.

‘Oui.’ I was hoping she was impressed, even just a little, that I’d made it.

‘Grant Decker. Leslie’s friend.’

She closed her eyes a moment, as if counting to ten, and then blinked them open.

‘Your passport.’ She took two more steps and extended her hand.

‘I was robbed, Madame...Madame...’ I strained to remember what Leslie said her name was. ‘Madame Garnier. They got my passport, my keys, my bankcards, my money.’

Her shaggy eyebrows came together in consternation.

‘But I had the address. Leslie Stringer sent me?’

I fumbled in my backpack and pulled out the sketchbook, found the address and held it out for her to scrutinize.

She took a deep breath and then her mouth settled into a scowl.

After turning around, she started up the stairs again. One foot, whack. The next foot, whack. A clawing hand gripped the dull wood railing. She stopped and looked back over her shoulder at me.

‘Come!’ she boomed.

I snapped to attention, slung my backpack over my shoulder, picked up my bag and mounted the squeaky stairs behind her. For what seemed like ten minutes we climbed them together like mountaineers tethered to one another. It was three floors, a lot of steps. She stopped and unlocked the door marked with the number seven.

After ushering me in, she threw the keys on a table in the room. A quick survey showed a single bed next to an entire wall of books. That was Leslie for you. An avid reader.

‘You make new keys.’

‘Where?’

‘Train station.’

‘Oh. All right. Yes.’

She took a step closer and put her enormous finger in my face.

‘You report to Police!’

I blinked.

‘Police?’

‘The robbery! You tell police.’

‘What? Oh no, no, no, that’s all right. No need.’ We didn’t report crimes in LA. I tried once, but the officer on the other end of the phone just laughed.



Mrs. Garnier stiffened. Her eyes wide open.

'You must! Tomorrow. Police.'

*Right. OK. This is what they do in Paris!*

'Oui, Madame.'

She nodded and seemed satisfied.

'You get more money?'

'Oui. I'll call my bank now.'

I smiled, trying to appear confident and capable.

She rolled her eyes, shrugged, pointed to the laminated piece of paper with the WIFI code on it. Then turned to leave me to it, slamming the door behind her.

I dropped my bag and backpack to the floor and collapsed into the one padded chair. My muscles unclenched for the first time in hours. How long had I been like this? I pulled the code closer and entered it into my phone. The time changed. Was it just three in the afternoon here? It seemed like I'd left the UK weeks ago. I sighed. Oh well. At least I had a roof over my head now and was in a *compound*. Well protected. *Thank you, Leslie.*

After some minutes of silent prayer and meditation, I found the international emergency number from the back of my bankcard. To my astonishment someone answered.

'Hello? You've reached the Lost or Stolen number at HSBC. I'm Ron. Who am I speaking with?'

'Grant Decker. This is HSBC?'

'Yes, indeed, Mr. Decker. Are you calling to report your card lost or stolen?'

'Uh...yes...'

We went through all the security questions, and I had all the answers written on my little bit of paper.

'I'm so sorry this happened to you.' He said it gently, like he might be speaking to someone mad or dangerous. 'Now, was it lost or stolen?'

'Stolen. Pickpocketed. Right when I arrived in Paris.'

'Oh, that's the worst. Happened to me too. Awful. I'm so sorry. You weren't injured, were you?'

The concern had escalated.

'No. I'm fine.'

'Well, that's a relief! And that's what's most important. Sorry to say, pickpocketing is a terrible problem here. So many unsuspecting tourists, you see. Did you know over 4,000 tourists lose their wallets and passports to pickpockets in Paris every month?'

'What?'

'Astonishing, isn't it? So, you're not alone. Did they get your passport too?'

'They did. How did you know?'

‘These are professionals, Mr. Decker. They work in groups. It was several people who robbed you. A gang. Not just one. Anyway, don’t you worry about a thing. I’m here to help. We’re going to take care of all of it. First things first. Your bank card was taken. Correct?’

‘Yes. And you can call me Grant.’

‘Thank you, Grant. And please, you call me Ron. I’m going to get a new card out to you right away. What is your address in Paris and how long are you staying?’

‘Oh, I’ll be here for four weeks.’ I gave him the address. ‘How long will it take to get the new card?’

‘I will expedite it. You should have it in three days. If you go to the nearest bank which is, one moment...on the Champs-Élysées, I’ll arrange to have some euros there to tide you over until the card comes. Can you find the branch there, Grant?’

I liked that he called me Grant. Every time he said my name, I felt comforted. Like he was a new friend.

‘Yes. I can find it. I still have my map of Paris.’

‘Shall I have 2000 euros there for you? That’s 1,680 pounds and 47 pence.’

‘Crikey!’ I loved any excuse to use that British expression. ‘Do I need that much?’

‘It’s Paris.’

‘Hmmm. How much do you think I’ll need for four weeks?’

‘Oh, that all depends entirely on how much fun you plan on having, doesn’t it?’ He chuckled. ‘Up to you, of course, but you want enough cash to get through your time without a card and maybe some more if you want to avoid fees for getting cash out of a machine. Do you have somewhere safe to keep money where you’re staying? You don’t want to carry too much around on your person while you’re out.’

‘Right.’ I was beginning to understand there was a lot to learn about moving around Paris safely.

Ron explained how to buy a metro ticket. He knew exactly where the key maker was at the station. He was incredibly helpful. On *my* team. He took a long time with me on the phone. Like he had no other customers in the world right now but me.

‘Now the next thing to do after you have money is to go to the US Embassy. As you might imagine, there are a lot of other Americans in your situation, trying to get a new passport. But don’t worry. They’ll do it. Same day.’

‘Same day passport? Really?’

‘It’s the least they can do.’

‘Well...I’m .... impressed.’

‘You can rest easy now. Once you have your metro pass for a month, pick up your cash, get a new passport, duplicate your keys, you’ll be right as rain. The card will be with you in three days. Is there anything else I can help you with, Grant?’

‘No, I... no, I think that’s everything. Thank you, Ron. Thank you so much.’

‘Oh, that’s what I’m here for, Grant. I’ve got you. If anything else occurs to you, just call me back, all right? My personal extension number is 3777. Got it?’

‘Got it.’

‘I’m here for you.’

‘Gosh.’

‘Au revoir, Grant.’

‘Thank you, Ron. Merci!’

‘Oh, very good! That’s the spirit! Don’t let this get you down. Paris is wonderful, you’ll see. This was just a little setback. But we got it sorted for you. Now, if I may offer a little free advice?’

‘Go on.’

‘Put your keys and wallet in a VERY secure place on your person. Pocket in FRONT of you. With another layer of clothing over it. NEVER, EVER have your backpack on your *back*. You can’t see the zippers from there. If you MUST have a backpack, wear it in front of you. Keep your wallet where only you can get to it. Understand?’

‘Yes, yes. Thank you. I’ll do as you say.’

‘Just have to do things a little differently in Paris. That’s all. You’ll learn. It’s part of the adventure of travel!’

Katie would say that too. I liked this guy. He was right. I had to get over this fear now of being robbed. I just had to learn new routines.

‘Right. I’m going to be fine.’

‘Sure, you will. Ride the subways, just for practice. They take some getting used to. Best of luck now. Goodbye, Grant.’

And he hung up.

*What a nice guy!*

For the first time ever, I loved my bank. *This* was great service when I really needed it. Everything was fixed. I could call Katie now and not feel pathetic.

I dialed our home number.

