

Chapter 1



FRENCH LESSON: “GRANDMA” IS GRAND-MÈRE

When you go to Paris,” Grandma Sylvia said to me, “you must ask for a *baguette de tradition*. That’s the good kind. The crust is thin, with just the right amount of crunch, while the interior is light and fluffy.” She continued, and by the twinkle in her eyes, I knew what was coming next. “Just imagine it, Nora. As you turn the cobblestoned street corner, the scent of freshly baked bread greets you, and it’s as warm and welcoming as an old friend. You follow the scent to the bakery, because resistance is futile, and you peer into the window at all of the lovely pastries. There are little apricot tarts and—”

I couldn't stand it any longer. "But, Grandma, *when* are we going? I've been waiting my whole life!"

Grandma Sylvia chuckled as she set down her mug on the table, the rim now red from her lipstick. "You have been waiting an awfully long time, haven't you?"

I thought back to the first time Grandma Sylvia read the story *Madeline* to me, when I was three or four years old. We curled up on the sofa with the pretty picture book, and together we studied the front cover. A bunch of little girls wearing yellow coats and hats stood in front of the Eiffel Tower, and Grandma explained to me that it's one of the most famous and most beautiful structures in the whole wide world.

"Someday, Nora," she'd said, "we will go to Paris and you'll stand under the amazing Eiffel Tower, just like Madeline and the other girls from her school. Right now, it's just a dream, but dreams come true every day. The secret is to make sure you always have at least one tucked into your pocket, so when it's your turn, you are ready!"

I'd never forgotten that.

"Let me ask you a question, my dear," Grandma said now, her pretty blue-gray eyes searching mine. "Why, exactly, do you want to go to Paris?"

More memories popped into my head.

When I was eight years old, Grandma Sylvia gave me a jar of buttons and told me some were old and some were new, but every single one came from Paris. I loved the gift so much, I chose one every day to take with me. It was a way to carry the dream of Paris with me wherever I went, and to feel close to my grandma all at the same time.

When I was nine years old, and Grandma and I started our monthly tradition of a sleepover at her house on the first Saturday of every month, I learned more about Paris than I ever dreamed of. My mother would ride the subway with me into Manhattan, go as far as the nearest corner, then let me walk the rest of the way to the place I was meeting my grandma. It worked out well for us to meet in the city, because it's halfway between Brooklyn, where I live, and Grandma's home in Connecticut. We'd do something fun like visit a museum, go shopping, or have lunch before taking the train back to Grandma's apartment. There, we spent our time playing cards, reading books, and talking about Paris. Grandma Sylvia shared stories and photos with me as if the city was part of her family. She loved her job

working as an assistant designer for a famous fashion company, which took her to Paris once or twice a year.

The way she'd talked about it through the years, I was convinced there was no place more magical than the city of Paris.

So there we were, on the first Saturday in December, sipping our large mugs of hot chocolate at a cute little chocolate shop called La Maison du Chocolat on Madison Avenue in New York City. And Grandma wanted me to tell her why I wanted to go to Paris.

It seemed like I had lots of reasons, but I didn't think she wanted a long list for an answer. I finally decided to tell her in the most honest way I could.

After I wiped my mouth with the fancy cloth napkin, I said, "Since I was a little girl, you've told me about the delicious food and the cool, historical buildings and the artwork and the fashion. I don't want to hurt your feelings, but it's a little bit like if you brought me to this chocolate shop and got yourself something wonderful and only let me have a glass of water. I want to see everything you've told me about for myself!"

I'll never forget what happened next. Grandma sat back in her chair and started laughing. She was quiet

at first, but pretty soon she was laughing so hard she had tears running down her cheeks. It was kind of embarrassing, because a few people looked over at our table and gave us funny looks. But Grandma didn't seem to care.

Finally, she stopped, and as she wiped away the tears, she said, "Oh, Nora. Sweet, sweet Nora. I'm so sorry if I've talked too much about Paris. I thought you liked learning about it."

"I do!" I said. "But I'm ready to *go*."

"Do you know why I've waited so long to take you to Paris?"

"No," I said. "I really don't."

"Because I didn't want you to be too young, so that you'd get tired of lots of walking and get bored. I took your mother when she was eight, and I'm not sure she enjoyed herself as much as I thought she would. But you know what your answer tells me?"

"What?" I asked.

"It tells me you are grown-up, more so than I realized, and I think you are quite ready to go to Paris."

I jumped up and ran around the table to give her a hug.

"When?" I asked. "When can I go?"

“It’s December now,” she said. “You turn twelve in how many days?”

“Ten,” I said.

“Yes. Not long at all. I’m scheduled to go to Paris for work in March. How about I take you with me then, for a belated birthday present?”

“March? Do I really have to wait that long?”

“Yes, I’m afraid you do,” she said. “Besides, winter in Paris can be rather dreary.” She picked up her spoon and stirred her remaining hot chocolate. “You do know it’s not a done deal until your mother gives her permission, right?”

I felt like a deflated balloon as I sank into my chair. I had forgotten about my mother. Things between my mom and my grandma were kind of complicated. Ever since Grandma Sylvia and Grandpa Ted got divorced a few years before, my mom hadn’t spoken to my grandma very much. The divorce had hit my mom really hard. When Grandma left Grandpa, Mom had begged her to change her mind and go back home. I could remember how I’d tried to make my mom laugh after she’d finished talking to Grandma on the phone one time, but she’d burst into tears and locked herself in her room. As time

went by and it became obvious her parents weren't going to get back together, my mom got angrier and angrier.

My dad had tried to make me feel better. He'd told me that underneath all of Mom's anger was a lot of pain. She was hurt, and nothing would make it get better except time. I'd told him I didn't understand why Mom was so hurt. Grandma wasn't leaving *her*. He'd said there were things about the situation I didn't know, and I had to try to understand that Mom's feelings were Mom's feelings, and she was entitled to have them, even if I didn't agree with them.

So, while my older brother, Justin, and I spoke to Grandma on a regular basis, my mom hardly ever did, unless it had to do with the two of us. Mom hadn't even visited Grandma's apartment in Connecticut, where she'd moved after the divorce.

As I thought of my mom, I reached into the pocket of my jeans and pulled out the button I'd chosen that morning. It was a big, cheerful yellow button, because spending time with my grandma was definitely a cheerful occasion. I secretly rubbed the button in the palm of my hand as I tried to calm my nervous thoughts.

"It'll be okay," Grandma told me, reaching over to

touch my arm. "I'm going to do my best to convince her. Don't you worry."

And she did, too. When Grandma asked her the following day, my mom said I could go. I was as happy as a kitty on a warm, sunny day. Grandma said she would buy our airplane tickets soon and we would start making plans. All kinds of plans!

For a month, it felt like I was walking on clouds.

And then, on January third, two days before I was supposed to see Grandma Sylvia again on the first Saturday of the month, the clouds vanished and I came crashing down to earth.

We received the news that while Grandma Sylvia was on a walk to the market just up the street from her apartment, a car hit her. She died instantly.