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Opening extract from

Anna and the French Kiss

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chapter one

Here is everything I know about France: *Madeline* and *Amélie* and *Moulin Rouge*. The Eiffel Tower and the Arc de Triomphe, although I have no idea what the function of either actually is. Napoleon, Marie Antoinette, and a lot of kings named Louis. I'm not sure what they did either, but I think it has something to do with the French Revolution, which has something to do with Bastille Day. The art museum is called the Louvre and it's shaped like a pyramid and the *Mona Lisa* lives there along with that statue of the woman missing her arms. And there are cafés or bistros or whatever they call them on every street corner. And mimes. The food is supposed to be good, and the people drink a lot of wine and smoke a lot of cigarettes.

I've heard they don't like Americans, and they don't like white sneakers.

A few months ago, my father enrolled me in boarding school. His air quotes practically crackled over the phone line as he declared living abroad to be a "good learning experience" and a "keepsake I'd treasure forever." Yeah. Keepsake. And I would've pointed out his misuse of the word had I not already been freaking out.

Since his announcement, I've tried yelling, begging, pleading, and crying, but nothing has convinced him otherwise. And now I have a new student visa and a passport, each declaring me: Anna Oliphant, citizen of the United States of America. And now I'm here with my parents—unpacking my belongings in a room smaller than my suitcase—the newest senior at the School of America in Paris.

It's not that I'm ungrateful. I mean, it's *Paris*. The City of Light! The most romantic city in the world! I'm not immune to that. It's just this whole international boarding school thing is a lot more about my father than it is about me. Ever since he sold out and started writing lame books that were turned into even lamer movies, he's been trying to impress his big-shot New York friends with how cultured and rich he is.

My father isn't cultured. But he is rich.

It wasn't always like this. When my parents were still married, we were strictly lower middle class. It was around the time of the divorce that all traces of decency vanished, and his dream of being the next great Southern writer was replaced by his desire to be the next *published* writer. So he started writing these novels set in Small Town Georgia about folks with Good American

Values who Fall in Love and then contract Life-Threatening Diseases and Die.

I'm serious.

And it totally depresses me, but the ladies eat it up. They love my father's books and they love his cable-knit sweaters and they love his bleachy smile and orangey tan. And they have turned him into a bestseller and a total dick.

Two of his books have been made into movies and three more are in production, which is where his real money comes from. Hollywood. And, somehow, this extra cash and pseudo-prestige have warped his brain into thinking that I should live in France. For a year. Alone. I don't understand why he couldn't send me to Australia or Ireland or anywhere else where English is the native language. The only French word I know is *oui*, which means "yes," and only recently did I learn it's spelled o-u-i and not w-e-e.

At least the people in my new school speak English. It was founded for pretentious Americans who don't like the company of their own children. I mean, really. Who sends their kid to boarding school? It's so Hogwarts. Only mine doesn't have cute boy wizards or magic candy or flying lessons.

Instead, I'm stuck with ninety-nine other students. There are twenty-five people in my *entire senior class,* as opposed to the six hundred I had back in Atlanta. And I'm studying the same things I studied at Clairemont High except now I'm registered in beginning French.

Oh, yeah. Beginning French. No doubt with the freshmen. I totally rock.

Mom says I need to lose the bitter factor, pronto, but she's not the one leaving behind her fabulous best friend, Bridgette. Or her fabulous job at the Royal Midtown 14 multiplex. Or Toph, the fabulous boy at the Royal Midtown 14 multiplex.

And I still can't believe she's separating me from my brother, Sean, who is only seven and way too young to be left home alone after school. Without me, he'll probably be kidnapped by that creepy guy down the road who has dirty Coca-Cola towels hanging in his windows. Or Seany will accidentally eat something containing Red Dye #40 and his throat will swell up and no one will be there to drive him to the hospital. He might even die. And I bet they wouldn't let me fly home for his funeral and I'd have to visit the cemetery alone next year and Dad will have picked out some god-awful granite cherub to go over his grave.

And I hope Dad doesn't expect me to fill out college applications to Russia or Romania now. My dream is to study film theory in California. I want to be our nation's greatest female film critic. Someday I'll be invited to every festival, and I'll have a major newspaper column and a cool television show and a ridiculously popular website. So far I only have the website, and it's not so popular. Yet.

I just need a little more time to work on it, that's all.

"Anna, it's time."

"What?" I glance up from folding my shirts into perfect squares.

Mom stares at me and twiddles the turtle charm on her necklace. My father, bedecked in a peach polo shirt and white

boating shoes, is gazing out my dormitory window. It's late, but across the street a woman belts out something operatic.

My parents need to return to their hotel rooms. They both have early morning flights.

"Oh." I grip the shirt in my hands a little tighter.

Dad steps away from the window, and I'm alarmed to discover his eyes are wet. Something about the idea of my father—even if it is *my father*—on the brink of tears raises a lump in my throat.

"Well, kiddo. Guess you're all grown up now."

My body is frozen. He pulls my stiff limbs into a bear hug. His grip is frightening. "Take care of yourself. Study hard and make some friends. And watch out for pickpockets," he adds. "Sometimes they work in pairs."

I nod into his shoulder, and he releases me. And then he's gone.

My mother lingers behind. "You'll have a wonderful year here," she says. "I just know it." I bite my lip to keep it from quivering, and she sweeps me into her arms. I try to breathe. Inhale. Count to three. Exhale. Her skin smells like grapefruit body lotion. "I'll call you the moment I get home," she says.

Home. Atlanta isn't my home anymore.

"I love you, Anna."

I'm crying now. "I love you, too. Take care of Seany for me."

"Of course."

"And Captain Jack," I say. "Make sure Sean feeds him and changes his bedding and fills his water bottle. And make sure he doesn't give him too many treats because they make him fat and

then he can't get out of his igloo. But make sure he gives him at least a few every day, because he still needs the vitamin C and he won't drink the water when I use those vitamin drops—"

She pulls back and tucks my bleached stripe behind my ear. "I love you," she says again.

And then my mother does something that, even after all of the paperwork and plane tickets and presentations, I don't see coming. Something that would've happened in a year anyway, once I left for college, but that no matter how many days or months or years I've yearned for it, I am still not prepared for when it actually happens.

My mother leaves. I am alone.