



# A RECIPE for TROUBLE

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# CHAPTER ONE



Alice stared at the Eiffel Tower and dared herself to add more fireworks. *There is always room for improvement*, she thought. She had spent all morning crafting icing into the city's most famous landmark for the top of an anniversary cake. Sugar strands criss-crossed one another in a perfect replica of the tower's girders. She had made the viewing platform in paper-thin sheets of caramel and added icing miniatures of the bride and groom, with the swirls on the woman's dress picked out in silver. It was gorgeous.

But not gorgeous enough for Alice. She had added spun-sugar orbs to look like fireworks exploding from the top of the tower, and now she decided that she could top even *this!*

Alice cupped the icing bag in one hand and leaned in close to one of the orbs of whisper-thin sugar strands. She held her breath and placed a small dot of glistening white icing on an individual strand. She gave a light twist and left a single star hanging from the wisp of sugar. Alice worked quickly, adding more stars here and there, till she was sure she had just the effect she wanted. She reached down to her worktop, took a pinch of sparkling sugar dust,

and sprinkled it lightly over the wet icing stars. She stood back. *Now it was perfect.*

Alice looked across the shop to where her mother was packaging up biscuits for one of Paris's most exclusive hotels, a regular order for their famous pâtisserie, *Vive Comme L'Éclair*.

"It's done, *Maman*," she said.

Madame Éclair came to look. "It's a masterpiece, as always, Alice." She gasped as she noticed the shimmering icing stars.

"Are you all finished for today, *Maman*?" Alice asked. Now that the cake was ready, it would be rather useful to have the shop to herself for a while. She had plans to make. Plans that did *not* involve her mother.

"Two gâteaux to make for tomorrow morning," said Madame Éclair, "and *then* we can have a rest."

Alice glanced at the clock and frowned. "I'm afraid I used up all the angelica, *Maman*," she said, hoping that her mother would not check the half-full packet in the *Vive Comme L'Éclair* storeroom. "I could pop to the market..."

"The market! Certainly not," said Madame Éclair.

"I need to go to Minou's to settle our bills anyway, and they sell the finest sugared peels in Paris. Besides, we need more cream. I don't know how we get through quite so much." She raised an eyebrow meaningfully at the small grey and white cat that sat on the doorstep, its nose pressed hopefully to the glass. Alice stifled a grin. It would take at least fifteen minutes for her mother to go to Minou's and back. Twice as many if Monsieur Minou was in a talkative mood. Madame Éclair folded her apron on the counter and reached for her handbag. On her way out of the shop she reached down and tickled the cat on the top of its head.

"She'll be back soon, Casper, and I'm sure there will be something in her bag for you," Alice said to the cat. "Now, settle down. I'm busy."

The cat yawned and curled up on the step, not caring how many customers it might trip up. Alice glanced at her wristwatch and got to work. She folded and filled another icing bag, swept a damp cloth across the marble counter and, working as quickly as she could, piped an intricate plan of the rooms and staircases of Le Château de Papillon on the counter. She had spent the last two weeks

practising this map and she was sure she could draw it in her sleep. She had studied it daily since she'd found it in a package left for her underneath a bench by the Arc de Triomphe. On the back of the note were Alice's instructions for her evening's mission.

These notes had begun to appear a year ago. The first was delivered to the shop, a simple puzzle in an unsigned birthday card. Then there were crosswords, ciphers and treasure hunts, which Alice solved in a flash. Alice had thought it a fun game and suspected *everyone* of being their author, even Madame Éclair with her love of mystery books. But as the notes became more serious, Alice realised that her mother had nothing to do with it. Someone was training her to be a spy and, although it would have been a surprise to most thirteen-year-olds, it was not a surprise to Alice. "*You are capable,*" the tenth note had said. "*And you know why.*" From then, the notes began to direct her to parcels hidden around Paris containing presents of skeleton keys, a lockpick set and notebooks full of secret codes that she read deep into the night with a torch under her blankets. And then, four months ago, Alice had

been sent on her first mission, to pass a secret note to a woman who was waiting for her by one of Paris's bridges. It had been her first real test, and she had aced it. More missions had followed: collecting parcels, intercepting notes, eavesdropping in cafés. Tonight, though, was different. Tonight was going to be her biggest mission yet.

Alice stared down at the plan. It was a perfect replica of the mayor's mansion. Success depended on her accuracy. A curve of stairs ran down into a grand lobby, beyond which lay a square labelled "*BallRm*" in iced shorthand. A second layout showed rows of rooms, with doors and windows emphasised in dashed strokes.

Marking these was important. One must always be sure of an exit. A row of dots led from a room marked "*Kitchen*", through the house and to a corridor of bedrooms. It ended with a question mark.

"Through the kitchen at seven o'clock, up the backstairs," murmured Alice, smearing the glossy dots as she followed the trail with her finger. There would be at least thirty servants in the kitchen, more on the stairs. She marked out the quickest route to

the upper floors, trailing her finger through one of the doorways, round a gallery and away from the Master Bedroom. At the end of the corridor, she tapped her finger against the question mark. "And then I just have to find the right room."

She glanced at the clock on the wall. Madame Éclair would be at least another ten minutes. Alice drew from her pocket a folded note and a sealed envelope. She smoothed the note flat on the counter and read her instructions again.



Tonight we entrust you with foiling *La Renarde*, the most dangerous of France's enemies. Renarde has been smuggling microfilms packed with information that would be of great interest to our enemies. She is cunning, like the fox she is named after, but we have faith in you. Our information is that she will be at the mayor's mansion tonight, with a microfilm that she has stolen from one of our agents. That microfilm contains information about many spies working against France. We must get it back. We have seen the guest list and we suspect she will travel as Isobel Smythe. Find that microfilm and take the metro to Mairie de Montrouge. When you reach the station, and only then, open our second card.

Alice stared at the sealed envelope containing the second card. Then she picked up her icing bag once more and drew another, larger question mark on the edge of the map. "And after I track down *La Renarde*," she said to herself, "will I finally meet you?" She stared at the question mark. She had been invited to deliver this microfilm in person, not leave it under a bench in a park. She was sure that meant that tonight, she was going to meet whoever had been leaving the notes.

"I think I already know who you are," she whispered. "But it can't be you. It just can't. Because the dead don't write notes."

She shook her head and dashed her hand across the question mark. She was Alice Éclair, expert pâtissière and France's youngest and keenest spy. She had no time for daydreams. She had a traitor to catch.



At five o'clock, watched in awe by the delivery boy, Alice packed her Eiffel Tower cake into a box with *Vive Comme L'Éclair* printed on the front and tied it closed. She handed it to the smart young man. His

mouth had almost hit the floor when he saw what she had achieved. Alice had grinned back at him. People often underestimated what she could do. She supposed it was because she was only thirteen. Her mother stifled a laugh as she waved the young man, still doing a perfect imitation of a trout, out of the shop. The cat miaowed in annoyance as he nudged it out of the way with his foot.

Madame Éclair stuck her head out of the door. "Home," she said firmly, and the cat, knowing that there would be no more treats today, slunk off down the street. Madame Éclair closed the door, turning the sign that hung at the window from *Ouvert* to *Fermé*.

"Another triumph, Alice," she said. "What should we do with our evening, do you think?"

Alice smiled. It was time for the first part of her plan. She reached under the counter and drew out a brown paper parcel sealed with the label from her mother's favourite bookshop. Madame Éclair opened it with a squeal.

"The new Christie!" she exclaimed. "But, Alice, Monsieur Boudet was sure he would not be able to get it till next month." She paused, and bit her lip.

“Darling, would you mind if I started it this evening?”

Alice laughed, while her heart gave a mini leap of triumph. She had known her mother would not be able to resist making a start on the most sought-after mystery book of the year.

“I will be fine,” she said. “I want to work on some new cake designs, so I’ll be busy myself.”

Two hours later, Alice slipped her bedroom window open, wincing as the latch creaked. She swung herself on to the sill and expertly shinned down the drainpipe, landing with a soft thud on the pavement below. She glanced up at her mother’s window. There was always the chance that she might put her book down, look out and wonder precisely why her daughter was clambering down a drainpipe. Thankfully, the curtains remained closed. Alice ran through her plan for the night once more, just to be clear, feeling a prickle of excitement under her skin in spite of the danger.

She straightened her coat and ran off into the dusk.



At seven o’clock, Alice slipped into the kitchen of the mayor’s manor house on the edge of the city,

straightening the crisp white maid's hat that was perched on the back of her bobbed hair. A small army of staff was receiving orders from a stern-looking housekeeper, who was ticking items off a list in her hand. Alice could hear the whispers of one of the maids saying that "everyone who was anyone" was in the house that night, but she did not let her glance move from the housekeeper at the front of the room. She was here to blend in.

"Some of the guest rooms will need attention while our guests are at dinner," the housekeeper remarked. "*Rodin Suite* needs fresh bedding and, Marie, could you take care of the flowers in *Monet* and *Gauguin*?"

The housekeeper continued with her list and, one by one, the housemaids gave quick curtseys and left the room to do their duties. Alice attached herself to a small group of rather giggly girls and followed them out. On her way past the housekeeper, Alice flicked a glance at the paper in her hand. The name the note had told her to expect – Isobel Smythe – was not on it. She felt a flash of panic, but carried on after the girls as they moved into the passageway.

She ran the list of names through her mind once

more. *Lady Constance Hardwick, Marie Ardle, Gina Mannitoc* – of course! Clever, but not clever enough. *La Renarde* must be feeling very sure that no one was looking for her. Alice made her way towards the back staircase that would lead to the upper floors. It was full of footmen running up and down with drinks trays, ice buckets and plates of expensive treats. She looked straight ahead and avoided eye contact. Alice had found that no one looked at a maid so long as they gave the air of completely belonging. A moment's hesitation or an uncertain look and she might be spotted.

Squeezing effortlessly past an under-butler with a clattering champagne bucket in his hands, Alice continued towards the second floor and the guest rooms. She followed the route she had sketched out just hours earlier on the bakery's worktop, crossing a gallery and reversing her route to lead away from the main stairs, slipping into an alcove as one of the staff came walking through carrying a pair of gentleman's shoes. On the second floor, she walked briskly down one of the corridors, her eyes flicking from right to left as she took in the names of the rooms etched into shining brass plaques on the doors. At the end

of the corridor, she found the one she was looking for, knocked and, hearing no answer, drew from her pocket the ring of skeleton keys that had been left under a carousel in the Tuileries Garden six months ago. She inserted one into the lock, tested it and frowned. She drew another and, after a little work, she heard the lock click open. Alice slid into the room, being careful to close the door behind her and lock it again.

“Gina Mannitoc” was not a tidy lady. Evening dresses lay strewn across her bed and her jewel case sat wide open spewing diamonds on the vanity table. She had clearly had some difficulty deciding what to wear this evening. Alice ignored all of this and made a beeline for the wardrobe, where a bundle of scarves hung from the handle of the open door and velvet shoeboxes were piled in a teetering heap. She wrenched open the first box, tutted and cast it aside. There was nothing of interest in the second or third boxes either, but in the fourth were the shoes Alice was looking for. She had a pair at home, a gift left for her under a bridge by Saint-Chapelle. They were made by a small workshop in Cannes that asked no questions and provided

elegant footwear for half the spies in France.

She lifted the shoes out of the box and, with one in each hand, felt the weight of them. Discarding the left, she turned her attention to the right, feeling her way around the heel for the tiny catch that she knew would be there. Her nail caught against something on the underside of the sole and she smiled. She pressed the catch and the heel of the shoe sprang open and deposited a film canister into her palm.

“Excellent,” she said, pocketing it. She slid her hand into her other pocket and withdrew an identical roll, which she slotted into the shoe, and then placed the boxes back as they had been. Alice smiled. She was getting good at this.

She moved towards the door and froze.

“I just need my shawl. I want to watch the fireworks later and it’s so cold outside.” The voice was nearby. Just outside the door. Alice heard the sound of the key in the lock.

She scanned the room for places to hide. The bed was too high to conceal her underneath. She would be in full view the minute the woman walked through the door. The shawl might be in the wardrobe so hiding there was out of the question. “*Think!*” Alice

hissed to herself.

"I'll only be a second," the woman called to her companion, tripping lightly into the room. She crossed the floor to the wardrobe and rooted around before emerging with her shawl.

Outside, hanging from the windowsill by her fingertips, Alice listened as the woman hurried out of the room with a slam of the door. She swung herself back up to the sill, removed the ball of soft icing she had wedged beneath the window catch, and leapt back into the room.

Nobody saw her leave.

Nobody saw her make her way down the backstairs and into the kitchen.

Nobody saw her as she crept out into the night.

And if they did? *Well*, thought Alice, running down the lawn at the front of the mansion, *nobody really looks at a maid.*