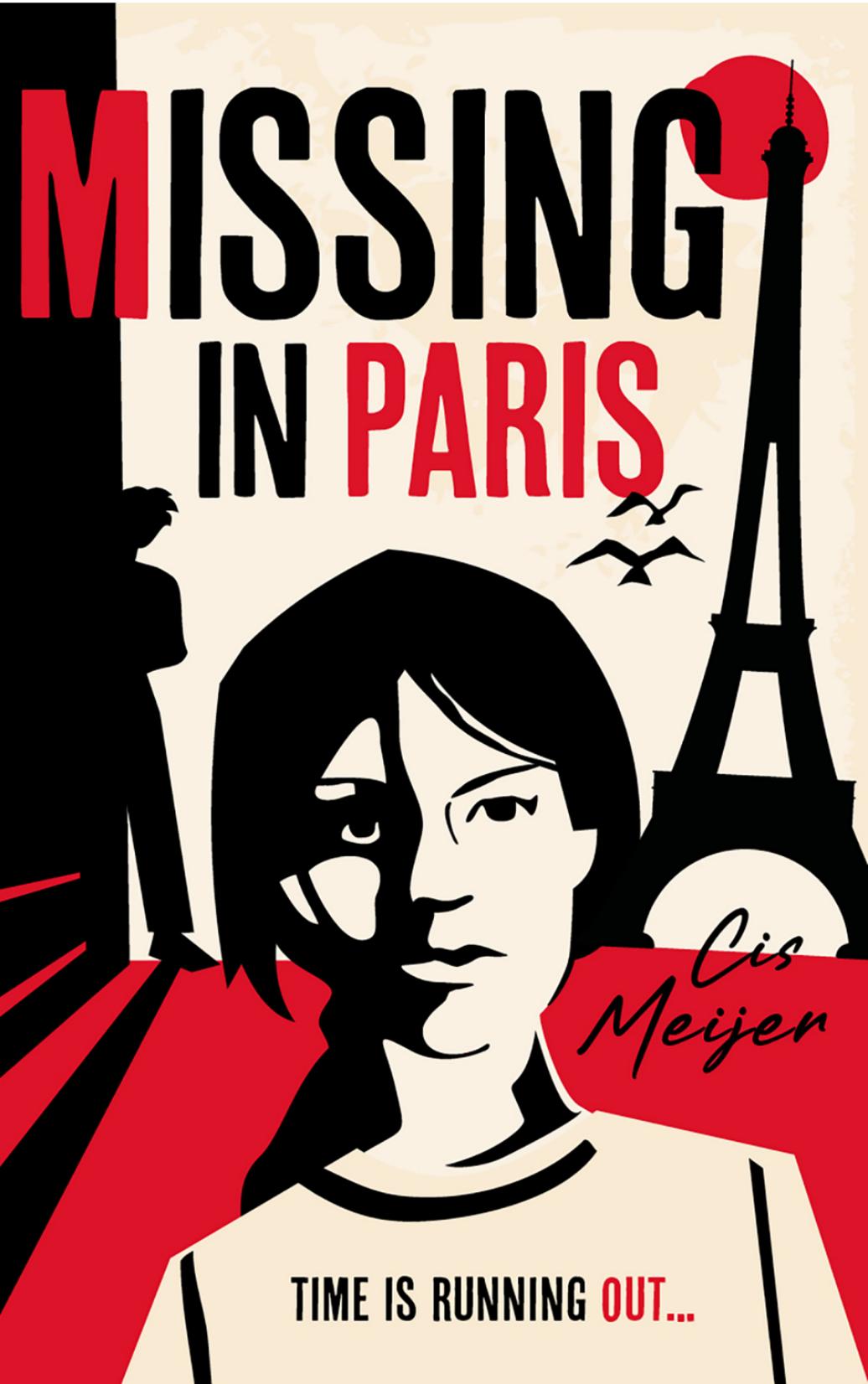


# MISSING IN PARIS



*Cis  
Meijer*

TIME IS RUNNING **OUT...**

Cis Meijer

# Missing in Paris

 UITGEVERIJ  
De Fontein |  
JEUGD

# PROLOGUE

*It is pitch-dark in the outhouse. Shaking, I rub my clammy arms. The sultry heat of the afternoon has given way to a sweltering night. Now that I can't see a thing, my other senses are on alert. A curious smell tingles in my nose. Slightly sweet, but it also smells like the polder, after it has rained. A lock of hair sticks to my cheek. I brush it loose. At the same time, I try to get my bearings. Which way should I go?*

*Cautiously, I take a step and notice how much I am trembling. Is it because I am tired? Or is it a warning from my body? A warning of the invisible enemy, who is ready to strike again, to finally eliminate me. No, don't think about it! I take another step and slowly move my head back and forth to take in every sound. My neck still feels stiff from that attack. What has happened to Nina? The thought that something horrible could happen to her – or worse, could have happened to her already – is unbearable. It cannot be! I must find her, I must keep going! I am not afraid, I lie to myself.*

*Fragments of violin sounds invade the space. Everything within me is telling me that I am on the*

*right track. In my head, I hear the warning again: 'You are entering dangerous territory.'*

*I tilt my head to better hear where the music is coming from. Is there a door somewhere that gives access to the house? Feeling my way, I awkwardly shuffle forward a few steps. I bump into something. A table. Step by step, I push past it while sliding my hand across the top. I hit something hard standing on the table. Carefully, I slide my fingers over it. It feels cool, slightly rough, sticky. My fingers tremble terribly. Don't be afraid... Don't be afraid. My hand slides further up, following the curve of the object. The top is round like a ball. Slowly, my fingers slide down. I feel a bulge. It looks like...*

*I flinch. Quickly, I withdraw my hand. Is it what I think it is? On the other side of the thing, I feel the same bulge. I move a finger over my ear, from the top to my earlobe. With my other hand, I grab one of the protrusions again, to compare. The same shape. And I smell something familiar. On the palm of my hand, on my fingers. That smell of the polder again... I've smelt it on someone before. Definitely. But on whom?*

*Pensively, I bend down and bring my nose close to the thing. I sniff the scent again. Think! Who have I smelt this scent on before? Where? When? I am sure: the answer is somewhere deep in my memory.*

# 1

There's a postcard on the doormat. A perfectly ordinary postcard, with a crumpled corner near the stamp. A thick postmark on it. That's strange; we agreed on one card a week. This is already the second one. As I reach for my sports bag, I keep staring at the card. I kneel and pick it up.

*All is well with me, hope you are good too. Love, Nina.  
PS Say hello to Mum.*

Why did Nina write *Say hello to Mum*? Where does she get the idea that I can say hello to Mum? An uneasy feeling settles in my stomach. We haven't spoken to Mum in years. Is this some sort of sick joke? Or... is she delusional? Confused? Writing something like this to be funny... No way. Nina would never do such a thing, would she? We've had too much grief for that. Fretting, I read the first sentence on the card again, with Nina's voice in my head. Exactly the same words as in recent weeks. Is it true, is everything really going well? Why would she lie? I study her handwriting. It looks so carefree. Flamboyant. Long strokes on the

y and the g. A huge capital N. Blotchy here and there. Floating next to Nina's name is a scrawled flower on a stem. The postmark is from Paris. I check the date. Four days ago. On the front is a picture of the Eiffel Tower. An ordinary card. Except for the strange PS.

I look at my watch. My softball practice starts in half an hour. I really have to leave soon; anyone who arrives late risks being put on the reserve bench. No way! Quickly, I unzip the bag's side pocket and shove the card in. Then I look at my wristband. Three red intertwined strings. Nina and I made the bands for each other as a symbol of our strong bond. Nothing or no one can come between us.

I drop my gym bag on the floor and grab the wristband at the frayed end by the knot. I try to bring her face into focus in front of me, as sharply as possible. Sometimes that works. Often, we know how the other is doing without having seen each other. I whisper, 'Nina, are you really okay?' In my mind's eye, I see my sister's face. I focus on her expression. How does she look? Desperately, I squeeze the string. I can't get a clear image of her eyes. It is as if I am looking through a camera that refuses to focus. Then I squeeze my eyes shut and let go of the string. I startle. She looks frightened. Hollow eyes. Pale.

I blink my eyes. The image is gone. I close my eyes again, but nothing more comes. Alarmed, I take the card out of the side pocket of my sports bag again. If I leave in fifteen minutes and cycle really hard, I will

be just in time for training. My eyes shoot back and forth over the words on the card. I refuse to believe that *PS Say hello to Mum* could be a joke. There must be something behind it. But I just can't think what. And why didn't she stick to our agreement? Standing on the platform, just before her last departure abroad, she said that she would send one card a week, as a sign of life. 'One card a week, no more, no less.'

'I promise,' she said deadly serious. 'Word of honour.'

I believed her. Of course. That agreement was there for a reason. Keeping your word and having no secrets from each other. The bracelets we exchanged were to remind each other of this. *No secrets from each other*, pounds through my head and the uneasy feeling in my stomach tightens like a rope knot. What if Nina has secrets from me after all? No... Could she? My conviction that our strong bond goes without saying suddenly gives way to doubt. I shake my head. She is not like our mother. I think back to how she left Nina, Dad and me five years ago. Just like that, she left for the other side of the world. Back to where she came from. The lousy note that she left behind... I get a lump in my throat. That she had chosen her secret lover and had no choice but to follow her heart. How could there be no other way? What about Nina and me? And Dad?

'If I break my promise, you can come and get me,' Nina said, laughing. Then she grabbed her backpack, blew a kiss and boarded the Thalys. That was two

months ago now. I rub my temples. Two cards in one week... Something's not right. Unless... unless she just wants me to come and get her. Is something badly wrong with her? The frightened look I saw in her eyes just now scares me.

I hold my ear to the door of my father's practice. He mumbles. There is no second voice. No murmuring, no blubbing. No client.

'Dad?'

'Yes, yes, am working.' He sounds distracted.

I open the door and see him staring at his computer screen. He looks at me with eyes narrowed, his inquisitive psychiatrist look. That look of, 'I know what you're thinking.' Irritating. He hardly ever knows what's going on with me and certainly not that I miss Nina.

'Look at this. A card from Nina.'

He looks up, wearily. His collar is crooked.

'Why are you still wearing your smart suit?' I ask. 'You don't have a client anymore, do you?'

I hold the card by the crumpled corner in front of his face. He runs a hand through his hair absentmindedly. 'I have to go through another file on someone. What about you? Shouldn't you be training?'

'In a moment.' I wave the card in front of his nose. 'Look at this. Nina writes: "Say hello to Mum".'

'A peculiar sense of humour,' he says, flatly and without looking up.

‘Peculiar? I think it’s spooky. It’s not like her. And, you know, it’s already her second card in a week.’

‘What do you mean spooky?’ He grabs the card, turns it over and peers at the image of the Eiffel Tower. ‘I don’t see anything out of the ordinary.’

‘Don’t you think it’s strange?’ It requires some effort for me to let go of the card, as if I am handing over something precious.

He shrugs his shoulders. ‘The Eiffel Tower, there’s nothing strange about that, is there?’ He holds the card in such a way that the Eiffel Tower looks crooked. ‘Besides, I still think it’s an ugly thing.’

‘Careful, give it back here.’ I hold up my hand. ‘It’s not right. Two postcards. She promised to only send one a week. What do you think?’

My father looks from the postcard to me and says nothing.

‘Maybe we can find out where she is,’ I say.

‘What do you think? Nina only comes back when she feels like it.’ He hands the card back. ‘If she finds out we’re looking for her, she’ll shut herself off from us. It’ll just turn into another argument. I don’t want that anymore,’ he says with a determined look in his eyes. ‘I really don’t.’

‘But we can still try,’ I say. ‘Secretly?’

‘Secretly? We have no idea where she is.’ He sighs.

‘In Paris? I’ll make something up, Dad, really. We’ll find her and then I’ll make sure she comes home with us.’

‘Lottie, don’t get carried away. What does it matter if she sends two cards in a row?’

‘Because... because she just wouldn’t do that. I was allowed to come and get her if she broke her promise.’ For a moment I hesitate, searching for the right words. ‘And that card, it seems different from the other cards. I don’t trust it.’ I hear myself just how foolish my words sound.

‘Don’t be silly,’ says my father. ‘You know...’ he starts in a determined tone, but before he can say anything else, I leg out of his office. In the doorway, I turn around. ‘I’m not crazy! And maybe I don’t have a good explanation, but something strange is going on, I can feel it. We have to find out what it is.’ There’s no point bringing up Nina’s fearful look, which I just saw in my mind. He would probably start a whole other argument about the working of the brain, tunnel visions and wishful thinking, scientifically invalidating my feelings.

‘I just feel that there will be a fight with Nina. I won’t have it. Full stop. End of discussion.’ After one last angry look, he turns back to his computer screen.

‘You’re the one arguing, not me,’ I say.

He does not look up.

Nice and easy, shutting yourself off from the world and calling me crazy, I want to say. I ball my fists. If there is something seriously wrong with Nina, I would have the fiercest argument if it meant finding her. I slam the door to my father’s practice. Then I

think about training. I look at my watch. It already starts in ten minutes. The thought of ending up on the reserve bench makes me even more anxious than I already am. But Nina comes first. Before I go to the club, I want to study her card one more time. I feel like I'm overlooking something. Hurriedly, I walk to the living room, where I bump into our cleaning lady Paula. Even though she hasn't been babysitting us for years, she continues to pay her visits.

'I'll hang these ironed shirts for your father in his closet and then I'll go home, sweetheart,' she says. 'If you have any ironing for me... I'll be back tomorrow.'

'No need, I don't have anything.'

From the corridor she shouts something else, something about cobwebs, but I am already not listening. I put the postcard against a candlestick, next to a framed photo of Nina. Her glossy locks, secured with a flower pin above her ear, hang well over her leather jacket. She has full red lips and eyes with long dark lashes. And she has something very special, something almost unheard of. Her eyes are different colours. I look at Nina's brown eye. What do you want, she seems to be thinking. Then I focus on the green eye, which also looks at me boldly. My sister is beautiful. And she is sweet and tough and goes her own way, sometimes a bit too much.

I tie my hair together loosely in a high ponytail and look at myself in the mirror. I am blonde, just like Nina. I see the frown in my forehead, my worried

look. Think. Look. I pace up and down the row of postcards I put against the mirror. The conversations she had with me before she travelled, how the past few months have gone... Everything buzzes through my head. When Nina was just eighteen, she considered herself old enough to go abroad on her own. She wanted to be an international fashion model. She was getting more and more assignments in the Netherlands, but she wanted to reach the top. To work with the very best photographers, to see the world, meet interesting people. Nina packed her things, took her portfolio with model photos in it under her arm and off she went. Chasing her dream.

Her first stop was Antwerp. She stayed with a friend there, had an appointment with a modelling agency and was supposed to go to the Fashion Museum. She emailed me at one point that she had ended up at an underground party where people were tripping on ecstasy. I was shocked. I persuaded dad to go and get Nina and bring her back home. She resisted. She refused to go with him, she refused to stop realising her dreams on command. Since then, she no longer lets us know where she is staying and only writes *All well with me, hope you are good too. Love, Nina* on each postcard. The stamps on the first two cards are from Milan. Then I received five cards from Paris. Including today's that makes six. I suspect that Paris is her permanent residence now. At first glance, all the cards look perfectly normal. But still... I look at her last card

again. Why does this one seem different? I take the cards and place them side by side on the table. Something is wrong. I feel it. I just have to figure out what.

I sit down at the table with a glass of Coke and straighten my back. All the cards are lying with the text facing up. One by one I look at them. An open notebook lies ready to write down any clues. I compare every letter. Every word. Every comma and full stop. I look from top to bottom, left to right and right to left. The ones from Milan are written in blue pen. I tap my finger on the first card from Paris. Also in blue. The second one from Paris, blue. The third, the fourth and the fifth, too. My eyes flash to the last card. Black. Not ballpoint blue, but ink black. Nina has written the Eiffel Tower card with a black fountain pen. I realise that is not her thing. She doesn't like fountain pens. They leave ink stains on her fingers. Maybe she had no other pen to hand and had no choice at that moment. Because she is in trouble? But if so, why did she write a postcard? Why not just call or text me? I take a sip of Coke and put the glass down. Too close to the card. A drop slides down the rim and rolls onto the letter A. There it splits in two. With pursed lips just barely touching the card, I quickly blow the drops away from the letters. Then my eye catches a smudge, below the loop of the g. A blurred smudge, which suddenly looks like more than the ink has run out. My heart rate shoots up.

There are small scratches in the smudge. Very subtle

ones. Carefully, I move the nail of my index finger over the smeared letter. I hold my breath. Then I feel the breaks that the scored marks have made in the card's hard beige paper. A code? When we were in the same high school, Nina and I used to give each other notes in a secret language whenever we met in the corridor. I peer and squint, holding the card upside down and on its side. What can I make of these faint scratches? I can't see it.

In the bowl once meant for fruit, I rummage among a pile of bills and newspapers, looking for my father's reading glasses. Got them. Hopefully, I can use them as a magnifying glass. With the glasses on, I bend down to just above the postcard. My eyes have to get used to the strength of the glasses, but suddenly I see something. Tiny, yet razor-sharp.

Nina is brilliant. She has scratched discreetly, in the blurry spot. HLP, I read. HLP... That can only mean one thing. Help! Nina is in distress, and she needs me. I have to do something! Don't panic. Breathe calmly. I can't. Hurry. I bite my nail. Are there more codes? Quickly, I run my eyes over the card again, searching for a scribble... a scratch... something. My gaze gets stuck on the messily drawn flower. Then I place my finger on the postcard from Milan and see a drawn daisy behind Nina's name: the leaves are elongated and lying flat, next to each other, they form a circle on top of a straight stem. There's also a daisy on the second card from Milan. The other cards from Paris

each have a daisy on them, too. Nina always draws a daisy behind her name, it's pretty much her trademark. But the flower drawn with fountain pen on this last card is not a daisy. The petals are wider and rounder. I recognise this flower with the winding and hairy stem. In real life it is red. A poppy. What could she mean by that?

I rouse the home computer sitting on the table out of sleep mode, open Firefox and type POPPY in the search window. My eyes shoot across the screen, looking for a lead. On Wikipedia, I read that the poppy symbolises consolation, sleep, dreams, pride and mortality. The Greek god Hypnos, god of sleep, is depicted with a poppy in his hair. Symbol at remembrance ceremonies: the poppy. Consolation... sleep... mortality... Pensively, I return to the search results. What else is known about the poppy? Poppy species, poppies in paintings, poisonous plants such as poppies, oleanders and berries... My breath falters. Poisonous plants? I quickly click on a website.

The poppy, also called papaver and sleeping globe is a highly poisonous plant, I read. Opium is extracted from the poppy... hard drug, addictive... used as a narcotic... causes constricted pupils, breathing difficulties, impaired heart function...

It is as if someone is squeezing my throat. The two cards within a week, that greeting to Mum, the writing with a fountain pen, the scored letters HLP and the poppy... My uneasiness has turned into a great sense

of foreboding. I think again of Nina's fearful look, which hit my retina like a flash of light. Not hocus pocus, I am sure of it. She wants to make something clear to me and she doesn't simply have a problem. I sense that she is in mortal danger.

© 2014 Cis Meijer

For this issue:

© 2023 Uitgeverij De Fontein, Utrecht

Cover design: Studio Jan de Boer

Lay-out: Crius Group, Hulshout

Uitgeverij De Fontein considers it important to handle natural resources in an environmentally friendly and responsible manner. The paper book of this title was therefore produced using paper whose production was certain not to have led to forest destruction.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

ISBN 978 90 261 6836 9 (e-book 978 90 261 6837 6)

NUR 284, 285

[www.cismeijer.nl](http://www.cismeijer.nl)