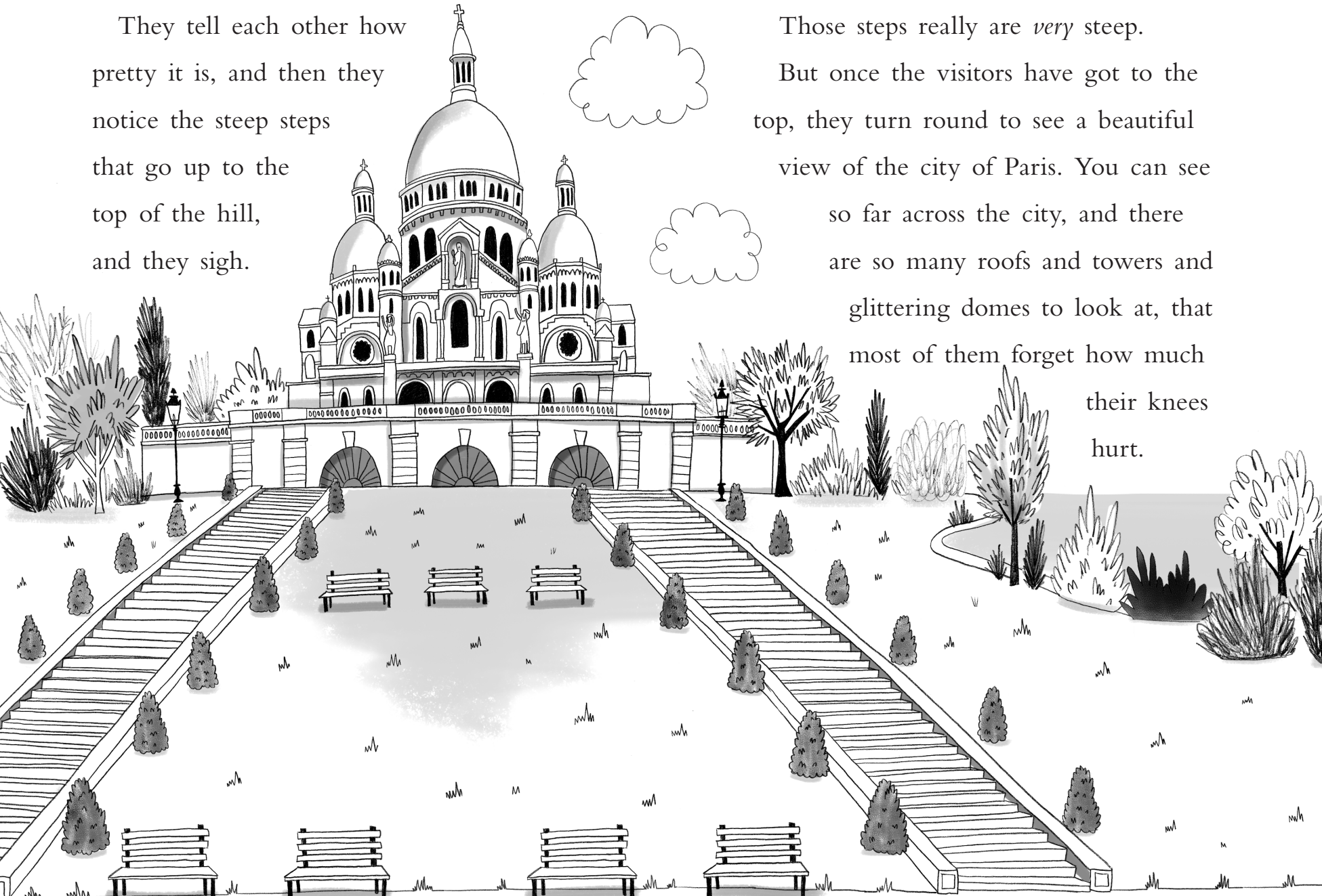




In a great big city, in the middle of France, is a church that stands on a hill.

The church is white, with a dome on the top, and it looks like a wedding cake. It's a very old church, and very famous, so every day lots of people come to visit.

They tell each other how pretty it is, and then they notice the steep steps that go up to the top of the hill, and they sigh.



Those steps really are *very* steep. But once the visitors have got to the top, they turn round to see a beautiful view of the city of Paris. You can see so far across the city, and there are so many roofs and towers and glittering domes to look at, that most of them forget how much their knees hurt.

The view is so beautiful that hardly any of the visitors look back at the steep grass slope, and the steps they've climbed. They never think about what's underneath.

Or who...

Only a very few people ever find out, and this is *their* story.



CHAPTER ONE

Sophie peered out over the view, watching the sunlight sparkle on the windows, and wondering who lived there, under the roofs. She couldn't see her own house from here, or she didn't think she could, anyway. She hadn't lived in Paris for long enough to know.



The city *was* very beautiful, but it still didn't feel like home. Sophie sighed, and rested her chin on her hands. She missed her old house, and her old bedroom, and her cat, Oscar. Grandma was looking

after him while they lived in Paris, but Sophie was sure that Oscar missed her, almost as much as she missed him.

“What are you looking at?” Dan squashed up next to her, leaning over the stone balcony.

“Just things,” Sophie said vaguely. “The view.”

“Boring,” Dan muttered. “This is taking ages. And I'm hungry.” He turned round, holding his tummy in both hands and made a starving face at Sophie. His nose scrunched up like a rabbit's, and Sophie smirked. She crossed her eyes and poked her tongue out at the corner of her mouth to make Dan laugh. After all,

even a wonderful view can be boring when you've been looking at it for a *VERY LONG TIME*.

All the people who live in Paris love their city so much, and many of them walk up the steep steps to the church on their wedding days to have their photographs taken next to the wonderful view. But it can take an awful long time to get the photographs right, especially when it's windy and your auntie's wedding dress won't stay still properly.

"Sophie and Dan! Stop making faces like that! You're making Dad giggle, and he's supposed to be taking romantic photos!" Mum glared at them, but Dad

rolled his eyes, and stuck his tongue out at Dan. Sophie thought Dad might be a bit bored with the photos as well.

This church was one of Sophie's favourite places in Paris. It was so pretty, and there was the fountain to look at, and all the people. She even liked its name, *Sacré Coeur*, which meant Sacred Heart. Sophie thought it was very special to have a whole church that was all about love. Auntie Lou's wedding had been beautiful too, but Sophie had got up early for Mum to curl her hair and fuss over her dress, and she was tired of having to stand still and smile.

"Go and play," Auntie Lou suggested.

“Go and run around for a bit. You can come back and be in the photos later.”

“Later?” Dad moaned. “I thought we’d nearly finished!” But Sophie and Dan were already halfway down the white marble steps, and couldn’t hear him.



“I wish we’d brought a ball...” Dan said, as they stopped in front of the fountain that stood below the balcony. He was looking at the grassy slope of the hill. “Do you think Mum would mind if we went home and got one? It wouldn’t take five minutes.”

“Yes, she would! And anyway, even *you* couldn’t play football on that grass,” Sophie pointed out. “It would just roll down to the bottom.”

“Exactly. That would make it more fun! Uphill football, I’ve just invented it. I might be famous!”

Sophie shook her head. “I don’t think all the people taking photos would be

very impressed either. There are loads of them. They'd tell you off."

"Huh." But Dan looked round at all the visitors, and realized Sophie was right. No one looked as if they wanted to play football. And there was an old lady sitting on the bench over there with a really pointy umbrella, the kind with a parrot's head handle. She looked like she'd happily use the pointy end to stab footballs, and even the parrot seemed to be giving him a fierce glare.

"Race you up and down the balustrades then!" He grabbed her hand and hurried her down the two flights of stairs to the path.

Sophie squirmed. The balustrades were the stone slopes at the sides of the steps. They were wide and flat, and Dan loved to run up and down them. He'd discovered the game the first time they came to visit the church, just after they'd moved to Paris, and since *Sacré Coeur* was on their way home from school, he'd been practising. But the game made Sophie feel sick, especially when it had been raining and the stone was all slick and slippery. She was sure that he would fall off.

"Come on, Sophie!" Dan hopped up to the stonework. "You get up on the other side. Bet I can beat you back to the top!"