

BY THE SEAT OF HER PANTS

BETSY BUTTERS BOOKS

Book 2

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Chapter 1

CHRISTMAS VACATION IN PARIS, FRANCE, OMG!

“Pencils down, Blue Books closed, mademoiselles. Please stand and bring your exams to the front of the room.” With that said, Mr. Rowland proclaimed, “You are free to leave for Christmas break. Amusez-vous, bien. I’ll see you, next year, in our beautiful winter school in Crans-Montana.”

“Free!”, “Libre!”, “Out of here!” were just a few of the cries when the last of the Americans’ exams, English literature, was over. Now, the fun could begin for the students in the exclusive Swiss boarding school for girls, Château Mont Blanc. With the exception of core classes in English for the Americans, the students from around the world weren’t allowed to speak, write, or read in any language, other than French.

Betsy Butters practically flew from the study hall to her room in the turret to finish packing for her trip to Paris, France. She was the youngest and tallest in the school, a fourteen year old from Lake Forest, Illinois, who barely spoke a word of French a few weeks prior. Now, she was going to Paris, France, for Christmas. It didn’t take away her pain at spending her first Christmas as an orphan, but thankfully, she would be distracted non-stop.

“Hey, Bets,” Jenny shouted, “how’d it go?”

“I’m not sure. It was all essay questions and *Paradise Lost* has been a losing cause for me since day one, but I’m not going to let Milton or Mr. Rowland ruin my vacation. Say, Jen, are you going home to England for Christmas?”

“No. I’m going to stay with friends in Geneva who go to university and then take a few days to go to Lyon.”

“Why Lyon?” Betsy asked. “Are you keeping a secret admirer secret from us?”

“No, again. My friends in Geneva are going, and asked me to tag along. It’s going to be a wild adventure. You know by now, I’m always up for the unknown and the wild, don’t you, Bets? Say, do you have a way I can reach you in Paris, in case my friends and I make our way up there?”

“I’ll get you Maria’s cell phone number before we ‘bounce’.”

“I’m glad you’ll be far away from madame over vacation. I’d worry about you if you had to stay here with her. If, you know what I mean?”

“Oh, I can’t even think about that, Jen. I’m terrified enough what will happen when she next calls me into her office, alone.

“Do you think she knows the Van Gogh in her living room is a fine fake, and I’m the one who put it there?”

“Look, Bets, only an idiot would mistake your lovely fake for a real Van Gogh. But, if she had legit provenance to the original you removed, she would have had the cops here, tout de suite (right away). The château would have been searched from the turret down, and everyone interrogated. You would have been chained to a pillar in Château Chillon or juvie, long before now. Nothing has happened, nada. To me, that’s proof that she knows the painting was stolen by the Nazis, and she had no claim to it. I’m not sure she knows where the original ended up, so she might not know who stole it, yet. As soon as she finds out it’s in your hometown, in the possession of your BF’s mother, all bets are off on what she may do.”

“I wonder, if she wonders, if I was sent here just to get back the painting and return it to its legit owner, or if she knows it was all unplanned and cosmic that I found it, and just, by chance, knew the real owner?”

“It’s so phenomenal that it all happened by coincidence, Bets, that I don’t think she’d believe it. I can hardly believe it, and I know it’s true. The entire art world thought the painting was destroyed during WWII, and you come here out of the blue, just happen to know its legal owner, and the rest is history. As for wanting revenge, I still think she has more stolen booty, and if she knows it’s you who stole her Van Gogh, she’d prefer to have you out of her hair and back in good old Lake Forest, Illinois, USA.”

“Well, Jen, I can’t worry about it all the time, or I’ll go bonkers. All I do know is that I never want to get caught up with stolen art again. I have a lot of guilt about what I did, and yet, I don’t, because madame was never the legal owner. Whoa! Look at the time. I’ve got to get going, or Maria and I’ll miss our flight to Paris.”

Chapter 2

FAIRY TALES DO COME TRUE

Just past the customs area in Charles de Gaulle Airport, a neatly uniformed chauffeur stood with a placard high above his head that read “Green Shuttle, Mademoiselle Dias.”

“I see him, Maria,” Betsy shouted as she made wild hand gestures to get his attention. “Our driver is just outside customs.”

“OK, chica. We’re almost on our way to fun and family.”

Betsy gave the customs inspector a big smile, and like the inspector who welcomed her to Geneva, this fellow was “all that and a bag of chips”. As she flirted with the inspector and he checked her passport and suitcase, she asked Maria, “Where do they get these good looking customs guys?”

“I think you’re just a sucker for a guy in uniform, chica, but he is very sexy, and he is passing us on through. Allons-y (Let’s go).”

“I can’t believe it. I’m in Paris, France!” Betsy sang as they handed their suitcases to the chauffeur and dashed over to the freshly washed and polished silver mini-van.

As the driver approached the car to slide the door closed, he handed Betsy a beautiful wicker basket lined with a white linen cloth and said, “I’m Antoine, your chauffeur. Bienvenue à Paris. We have an hour to be at your destination, mademoiselles. Monsieur Dias ordered a basket of déjeuner (lunch) for you to enjoy

during your trip. Bon appétit and please use your seat belts during the ride.” The van door was closed, and their trip began.

“Let’s see what Papi ordered for us, Bets. Not bad. We have ham and cheese and gherkin sandwiches on French bread, macaroons, and oh là là, Puilley–Fumé! My father is just, the best. He spoils me and my mother every day. Let’s enjoy our lunch. We don’t eat dinner until nine p.m., and sometimes even later, by the time my mother finishes dressing for the evening.”

“Does she dress for dinner every night, Maria?”

“Unless she’s on her deathbed, she does. My mother comes alive, at night. Wait until you see the wardrobe, the hair, makeup, and her jewelry is quite spectacular. My father wants all eyes on her when we go out for the evening. Prepare yourself, chica. Evenings with my parents are not like in school.”

The driver took the Périphérique highway into central Paris from the airport, and much like a drive from a US airport into the city, not much to see. The girls were already giggling from drinking their wine too quickly, like water, when Antoine opened the partition between him and his passengers to announce, “We are now on the George Mandel Avenue. That that will take us, directly, to the Place du Trocadéro and Avenue du Président Wilson. Soon you will see the Palais de Chaillot and the Jardins du Trocadéro. You will be able to see the Tour Eiffel beyond the jardins, perhaps your first time, non? You might want to prepare for your arrival.”

“I’ll try and shut up Bets, so you can remember the first time you saw the Eiffel Tower,” Maria caroled as she started to brush her hair and grab her lip gloss from her huge handbag.

“I’ve got goose bumps, I’m so excited, Maria. A few weeks ago, I was imagining what it was like to walk down the Champs Elysées, and, now, I’ll be staying a hop skip and a jump away from it *and* the Eiffel Tower,” Betsy proclaimed as she put her brush back into her tiny purse. “I must get a new purse to hold all my stuff. I can’t stand this tiny bag.”

“Oh, we’ll be going shopping everywhere for Christmas gifts and I know just the ‘hood in Paris for you to find tons of gorgeous used purses, clothes, whatever. You’ll go crazy and it’s not very expensive, ‘cause it’s all second hand.”

“OMG,” Betsy shouted. “Look, Maria, it’s the Eiffel Tower, for real!” She stared at the iconic structure and everything in the foreground as they approached the nineteenth century stone apartment building in the tony sixteenth arrondissement of Paris. They were within eyeshot of the Eiffel Tower, Champs Elysées, Tuileries Garden, the Louvre; and a short walk to Île de la Cité, Île Saint-Louis, Notre Dame Cathédral, Saint Germain des Prés, the Sorbonne, and many more fabulous places.

“Here we are, chica. Mi casa es tu casa!”

Antoine carried their luggage to the front door of the magnificent building, where an older gentleman in a butler’s uniform was waiting to open the locked glass and wrought iron doors. The two exchanged pleasantries in French, Antoine wished the girls a Merry Christmas and Happy New Year, and said he’d be back to “collect” them for their return to Geneva.

“Not so fast, Antoine,” Betsy replied. “I just got here, and I already think I never want to leave.”

The butler, Pablo, was already in the old fashioned gated elevator cage waiting for Maria and Betsy.

“Come on, chica. Let’s go see my folks.”

Little Maria practically flew into her father’s embrace when he greeted them in the foyer. “Papi, I’ve missed you so much. I’m so happy to see you,” she blurted in Spanish. “I want you to meet my very good, and very tall friend, Betsy.”

Señor Luis Dias gave Betsy a kiss first on the left cheek and next on her right, followed by a big hug. Maria started laughing. In English, her father asked, “What’s so funny, chata (shorty)?”

“That’s what’s so funny, Papi. We are so short next to Betsy, it looks like she could take you down, and put a choke hold on you without messing her hair. Is Mami here?”

“She’s out with Chela getting all the foods you like to eat and a few surprises for Père Noël to put under the tree. If you aren’t too tired, Pablo just put the fresh tree in the living room and the boxes of ornaments and lights. We can start to trim the tree and visit, while we wait for Mami.

“Maria, we are going for a special dinner tonight, and I think you should stay in and rest a little, but tomorrow, I think Betsy and you should walk the Champs Elysées. It’s lined, this time of year, with the charming wooden stalls selling everything traditional in France at Christmas time.”

“Where’s Betsy, Papi? Betsy, where are you?” Maria called out, as she walked the hallway that extended from the foyer.

Pablo stood outside the entry to the living room and told Maria that Mademoiselle Betsy was staring out the living room window.

Maria entered the room and saw Betsy in front of the floor to ceiling French windows transfixed by the view before her. It was a direct view of the Jardins du Trocadéro in the foreground, the Pont (bridge) d’Iléna, followed by the Eiffel Tower and the Champ de Mars park, in the background. Maria had seen this many times before. She couldn’t appreciate Betsy’s excitement with the iron lattice tower that is one of the most recognizable structures in the world.

“Hey, chica, you can see the sights of Paris every day until we go back to prison. How ’bout we have some fun decorating the tree and planning where to go, tomorrow. Trust me, the Eiffel Tower isn’t going anywhere,” Maria added with her signature throaty chuckle.

“Oh, Maria, it’s like a fairy tale here. Look at this beautiful room with all the ornate moldings, the tall ceilings, and French windows that look onto a post card view of Paris. Thank you so much for inviting me. I will remember this day my entire life.”

“Yeah, yeah, chica. Don’t go all sappy on me. Let’s go. Papi is waiting with Champagne and popcorn for us to nosh and string for the tree.”

Chapter 3

MY LAST DUCHESS

“Hola, darlings, I’m home.”

“It’s Mami.” Maria shouted, as she jumped down from the step ladder she needed to put ornaments on the tree.

“Dulcira, you are home at last!” Mrs. Carmen Dias said. “Chela, bring the packages into the living room. The girls are here.”

Betsy watched Mrs. Dias embrace Maria and she started to cry. She didn’t know how it happened, but she couldn’t control the tears. She felt like an idiot, standing in this beautiful room, with these elegant people with tears running down her face, and not a tissue in sight.

“Darling, let’s get you a tissue,” Mrs. Dias said as she dashed over to Betsy and wrapped her arms around her in a motherly embrace. Maria and her father, and even Chela, broke into laughter. Their laughter was contagious, and, soon, Betsy and Mrs. Dias were also laughing.

“Mami, Betsy is so tall, you need the step ladder to hug her.”

It was a very funny sight. Mrs. Dias came up to Betsy’s chest, and her arms were wrapped around her hips instead of her shoulders. To everyone’s relief, the spontaneous laughter stopped Betsy’s tears.

“Chica, don’t be sad. How stupid of me. I forgot it’s your first Christmas without your parents. I’m such a dope. I just can’t imagine what it would be like to not have my papi and mami. I’m so sorry, chica. Please forgive me for upsetting you. You know my family is your family and there are hugs for you, too.”

“Absolutely,” Mrs. Dias added. “We are going to be one family and share a wonderful time. It is normal for you to cry and we are here for you, Betsy. As a mother, I think your parents would want you to embrace every moment of your time in Europe. Unfortunately, life brings all of us too many times for tears and regrets. I do not want your memories of this time to be one of sadness, but of friendship and fun times. Luis has planned a marvelous evening for all of us to celebrate your first night in Paris.

“Let’s start the tree trimmings and then rest, and prepare for this evening.

“Oh, Chela, I almost forgot. Bring in the darling berets we bought for the girls.”

Chapter 4

REGAL REPAST

“Maria, I don’t think I have anything to wear to a fancy restaurant in Paris. Maybe I should stay here and have fun decorating the tree with Pablo and Chela and you can tell me all about it. I won’t suffer with snacks and the Eiffel Tower outside my window,” Betsy said in all seriousness.

“Oh, Bets, you don’t know my mother. Wait until we look in the armoire in our bedroom, before you feel like poor Cinderella.”

Betsy didn’t understand what Maria meant by that, until they opened the antique French armoire in Maria’s bedroom, and found it fully stocked with boutique clothing and shoes to make any girl turn green with envy.

“Are you kidding me?” Betsy remarked in amazement. “It’s a store in an armoire, but I can’t fit in any of your clothes or shoes.”

“Of course not, Silly. My mother researched your sizes when she knew you were coming, and she bought things, just for you.”

“Are you kidding me?” Betsy remarked, again.

“Stop saying that, Bets. You sound like an idiot. My mom called the school and madame probably had Nina write down all the sizes in your clothes and shoes. Look, you’ll see that everything on the pink satin hangers labeled ‘Betsy’ will be in your size and these shoes, for a small giant, on the shoe rack are for you.”

Betsy just stood frozen staring at the open armoire with her mouth open. “I can’t believe it. I’ve never known people who live like this. I can’t believe your mother would do all this for me. She doesn’t even know me. How can I every return the favor?”

“You never know when I might call on you to collect for my parents’ generosity, so watch out, Betsy,” Maria said with one of her famous chuckles.

“Oh look, Maria, the lights just came on in the Eiffel Tower, and there are snowflakes coming down. It’s just like a dream. I have to pinch myself to make sure this is all for real.”

“Betsy, I think we should take a bath and get dressed for dinner. If you like, we can go out and walk around, until it’s time for dinner.”

“Sounds like a plan. I’d love to call Susan in Lake Forest, but I don’t want to call long distance on your cell phone.”

“Why don’t you hold off on the phone call, until you’ve seen something more than the Eiffel Tower out of a window? You take your bath, while I decide what I ‘m wearing.”

“Yeah, OK. I’m just so excited; I don’t know what to do first.”

The girls bathed and dressed, and took turns applying eye shadow and mascara to each other’s eyes. “This Boots No. 7 Perfect Eye Mousse is the best,” Maria said as she gently colored Betsy’s big brown eyes with Vanilla and Fudge.

They each wore high ponytails. Maria wore high heels, but Betsy wore butter soft, squash heels. “I can’t wear those high heels tonight, Maria. I’d feel like a giant next to all of you, and I’d probably start slouching to compensate.”

“Maybe you’ll meet a sexy giant over vacation, Bets, and you can wear the high heels with him.”

“Yeah, maybe the Hunchback of Notre Dame! I think you’re pushing the fairy tale too far, Maria, but I can always dream.”

“Maria, Betsy,” Chela called as she knocked on the bedroom door. “Time to leave for dinner, in ten minutes.”

Maria and Betsy stood in the foyer already wrapped in faux fur coats and their red Christmas mohair berets that Mrs. Dias had bought that afternoon.

Mr. Dias stood with a real fur jacket waiting for his wife to make her entrance. When she came down the hallway, it reminded Betsy of a model coming down the runway at Paris Fashion Week. Mrs. Dias was dressed in a couture, coral silk, fitted, knee length dress. She wore only one piece of jewelry besides her wedding ring. It was a pearl and coral choker, with a pear shaped turquoise pendant, set in gold that was encrusted with tiny pearls and coral beads. Her turquoise four inch heels were Louboutin's "Bollywood", hand embroidered with pearl and coral beads. Chela had done Mrs. D.'s hair in a chignon and applied evening makeup, to dramatically make her big brown eyes appear twice the size and very exotic. Her lipstick was coral to compliment the color of her dress. Mr. Dias kissed her on the cheek as he helped her into the silver fox jacket.

Betsy took one look at Mrs. Dias and knew they wouldn't be walking to dinner.

The driver took them to the Hotel Meurice, not far from the apartment and the Louvre Museum. The elegant foyer of the hotel had floor to ceiling mirrored doors, and was filled with oversized floral arrangements. The flowers added color to the monochromatic interiors, and the feeling of springtime in the dead of winter. The interior design for the restaurant, Le Meurice, was inspired by the Salon de la Paix, in the Palace of Versailles. Betsy was overwhelmed with the grandeur and details in the room. "I expect to see Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette walk in and welcome us," she said to herself.

The color scheme was silver and white. Betsy's eyes were immediately drawn up to the fresco painting on the ceiling, and the glitter of the massive crystal chandeliers.

The maître de directed them to a table in the center of the room that overlooked the fireplace at the end of the room. The fireplace had an ornate marble mantle, a large fresco painting above it, and floor to ceiling gilded, mirrored doors, on either side. Massive French windows, draped in heavy white damask, overlooked the

Tuilleries Gardens. The linens, crystal, silverware, and place settings were custom designed for the restaurant.

As Maria had predicted, all eyes were on Mrs. Dias when she walked to their table. Mr. Dias stood proudly at his place until the maître de had helped his wife with her chair and napkin. Betsy was almost afraid to move until she saw Mr. Dias sit down. Maria hadn't paid much attention. She was busy scanning the room for buff guys.

Betsy appreciated Mr. Dias's choice of restaurants for her first night in Paris. The three star Michelin, Le Meurice, was far too sophisticated for Betsy's taste buds to appreciate. She would rather die than have Mr. and Mrs. Dias know that she would have been very happy with a simple cheeseburger and famous French "frites".

They had six courses: soup, lobster, crayfish, duck, rabbit, cheeses, and apple tartlet à la mode. A different wine was served with each course, except with the cheeses. The dessert wine with the ice cream was one of Betsy's favorite things. It was her first dessert wine, a sweet Tokaji Sargá Muskotály Château de Sarospatak. She discreetly wrote down the name for posterity. "You never know when that information might come in handy," she said to herself with a chuckle. "When I'm middle aged, I can throw that name around at a dinner party, and impress all my friends."

Both the girls politely thanked Mr. and Mrs. Dias for the marvelous dinner. "Papi, I'm sure you have several of Paris' finest restaurants on your list of places to take us for dinner, but you don't have to spoil us like this. Betsy and I would be happy with really good peasant food or hamburgers and fries," Maria said with a chuckle. "I just thought I'd speak up before you plan dinners like this for us for every night in Paris."

"I promise I'll contain myself, chata, with the exception of Christmas Eve. I have a lovely holiday planned, and I'm not going to let you ruin my fun."

By the time the girls finished planning where they would go the next morning, it was midnight. "If you want to call your BF in Lake Forest, we can use my dad's cell phone in his office, chica. It's only late afternoon there."

“Oh, I don’t want to make expensive calls like that on his phone, Maria. I couldn’t.”

“OK, I’ll go and ask him first, and then I will bring the phone in our room and you can make the call. He makes tons of business calls to the U.S. on his business phone. He has a great plan for calls worldwide. No worries.”

“I’ll just wait here, Maria. I would be embarrassed to ask him, especially, after all your parents have already done for me.”

In a few minutes, Maria returned with the shiny black cell phone and placed it in Betsy’s hand. “OK, Bets, enjoy yourself. I’m going to take a soak in a hot tub and turn in. It will be time to rise and shine before you know it.”

Betsy dialed her best friend’s home phone, and on the third ring, Susan Traa answered.

“Suz, it’s Betsy. I’m in *Paris, France*, for my Christmas break, and I had to call you right away.”

“Wow, you’re really living the life, Bets. I can’t even imagine what it must be like visiting all the places you’ve been in the last months. Tell me *everything*.”

“I can’t tell you everything, now, Suz, ‘cause I’m using Maria’s father’s cell phone and I don’t want to stay on long. If he has Skype, maybe the two of us can do that with your parents, and Maria and her parents, before we go back to school. I just want to tell you that the Eiffel Tower is what I look at outside her parents’ apartment windows, and I can’t believe it’s all for real.

“Later today, we’ll go sightseeing and shopping for Christmas presents for her parents. We just got here so there isn’t too much to describe, except for the Eiffel Tower, right in front of my eyes, and her parents took us to one of the best restaurants in Paris. It was designed to look like a room in the Palace of Versailles.

“Honestly, Suz, this city is just so beautiful; it’s hard to believe it’s real. Anyway, I better get off this phone. Maria and her parents are so generous. I don’t know how I’ll ever return the favor.

“How is Chèrie? I miss her and you guys so much.”

“She’s fine, Bets. We’re all fine, and we miss you too. Kathy and Sally and Jon all say hi, too. And so do the twins. Everybody misses you, even Miss Little. Mrs. Newshell wants to know how the French is progressing for you.

“Say, maybe Maria and her parents can come and visit Chicago and they can all stay here at our house. Wouldn’t that be fun?”

“Maria would have fun, but I think her parents would be bored with our normal lifestyle. These people live like royalty. Well, I’ve got to go, Suz. Give your mom and dad and Chèrie a big hug for me. Maybe we’ll Skype in a few days. Merry Christmas and Happy New Year to everybody. Love you.”

“I love you too. Eat croissants and pastries for me.”

“Ciao, Suz,” Betsy said as she ended the call.

Chapter 5

SHOPPING WAS NEVER LIKE THIS

It was eight am and everyone in the apartment had been awake for two hours, except for Mrs. Dias.

“Girls,” Mr. Dias called as he knocked on their door, “are you dressed?”

Betsy was the first to the door like a puppy ready to bound out into the morning air.

“Bonjour, Mr. Dias. Did you sleep well?”

“Yes, marvelously, thank you. I want you and Maria to feel free to get out and enjoy breakfast at Café de Paris. It’s a pleasant café not too far from here, where many young people like to go for all meals. It’s one of the few cafés open for breakfast, before nine am. You can always eat here with us, but it is your first morning in Paris, and I know you’d prefer to get out into the city.

“Maria is always sleepy this early, so I’m giving you the mad money to take for your shopping and sightseeing. Here’s a cell phone in case you want to call me. Maria knows all you need to know about Paris, for today. I’ll wait in the salon to say good-bye. I assume Maria is still in the dressing room, non?”

Betsy shook her head up and down and politely took the money, neatly folded in a Cartier money clip. She hesitated before she slipped it in her tiny handbag. “Mr. Dias, exactly how much money is this? I’d like to keep track of what I spend.”

“I knew you were an intelligent young lady. You’ll be a good influence on Maria. You have four thousand euros. Please keep Maria from buying shoes and clothes, today, or you won’t have money left for lunch. This is for breakfast, lunch, and gifts for Christmas. And, Betsy, please buy something for your good friend in America with this too. Don’t even think about arguing with me about it. Enjoy.”

Chela called out, “Mademoiselle Betsy, we have charge accounts at Printemps, Galeries Lafayette, and Bon Marché, but please control Maria’s spending for clothes and shoes. She doesn’t need any more of those. Mrs. Dias is still sleeping, but she’d like you home by seven to rest before you go to dinner.”

Maria, before her morning café crème, always looked like a sleepwalker. She was dressed, but clearly not awake, or in any mood for light conversation. She and Betsy kissed Mr. Dias good-bye, and Pablo escorted them down to the rez de chaussée (the ground floor).

“Mademoiselle Betsy, Pablo said, I suggest you cross to the Left Bank, walk past the Eiffel Tower, and follow the quai in the direction of Notre Dame. When you reach the Pont Neuf that leads to the Île de la Cité, turn right onto Rue Dauphine, walk to Rue Buci and take Buci to the right. Maria should know the way to Café Paris in her sleep, but, now, you’ll know where to go if Maria remains unresponsive. Enjoy your day. À bientôt.”

Maria looked like a well dressed sleepwalker, and in her customary way, wasn’t in the mood for talking. She let Betsy lead the way looking at every object along the way, as if it were the most magnificent thing she’d ever see.

“The French should make you a spokesperson for Paris, Betsy. You’re staring at the grass like it’s solid gold.”

“Ah, Maria, you are beginning to awake.”

“Not before my coffee, but we’re not far away. I’ll let you enjoy the walk. We’ll make a special trip to the Eiffel Tower and a lot of the other monuments, but today we must get presents for my parents and Chela and Pablo. We’ll go to all the wonderful

shops in Le Marais where our money will buy much more. I want to look for an antique pipe for my dad and some antique hair pieces for my mom's chignon."

"Look, Maria. There's an ice skating rink, and what are all these cute sheds?"

"Oh, this is one of many of the holiday marchés de Noël in Paris. Each shed sells gift items like slippers, scarves, berets, jewelry, toys, and handmade stuff, like soaps and candles. And, they sell favorite French wines, chocolates, and cheeses; almost anything edible. We'll have plenty of time to walk by stalls wherever we go, so let's go straight to breakfast. I need my coffee and croissant."

"Oh, I see Notre Dame ahead. It's so much bigger than I imagined. And the café is not too far from it, right?"

"Yes. It's hard to get too lost in Paris with all the landmarks to give you a sense of direction. If you got lost today, all you need to do is go back to the Eiffel Tower and you'd find your way to Avenue du Président Wilson. I have no sense of direction, and the only places I get lost, in Paris, are in the department stores."

They arrived at Café Paris and sat outside under the heat lamps with huge cups of café crème. Soon, they were filling themselves with salmon omelets, and freshly baked croissants. "This café is just like in the movies and the photos in my French book back home."

"It's nice because it has fewer tourists, like us, than some of the other cafés. Lots of students and young workers come here, Betsy. As a maven in fashion, I see casual dress and dress for work here, but no tourists dressed like slobs. There's just no excuse for leaving the house looking like you're ready to clean a garbage can. Chica, keep scanning for cute guys."

The waiter, Skip, was very nice, and very, easy on the eyes. He had an attractive, French, *je ne sais quoi* (I don't know what), and he wanted to speak English with Betsy. The consummate student, Betsy insisted on using her French. He told them he was an economics major at the Sorbonne, and hoped they'd come back for lunch or dinner, and to meet some of the regulars.

Maria was just waking up, when Betsy paid the bill and left a generous *pourboire* (tip) for the polite and good looking fellow student.

“I’m back with the living, Bets. Ah, I know we said we’d first walk the Champs Elysées, but Betsy it’s so close to home, let’s give you a look at some of the most chic shopping in all of Paris at Place Vendôme. We’re almost there, and I think the experience is just so *très* (very) educational. Just follow me, and I’ll fill you in while we walk.

“On Avenue Montaigne, there’s Chanel’s original boutique and one of many Vitton stores, and Dior. Place Vendôme is home to La Croix, Givenchy, Balman, Hermès; just so many of the biggest names are all together.

“Say, maybe, we can buy some lingerie at Alice Cadolle boutique. She invented the brassiere, in 1889. This is really out of sight stuff. It’s sexy and elegant; sort of the haute couture of “foundations”, as the fashion industry calls undergarments. Even if we can’t afford anything but a garter, it’s worth the trip.

“Maybe we can get a tie for Papi at Hermès, and a silk scarf for Mami. And, I love to buy perfume at Guerlin; that’s one place Mami goes for skin care.”

It wasn’t long before they were in front of Caron on the Avenue Montaigne. “Betsy, you *must* see this parfumerie.”

They went inside and immediately were transported into a space that resembled a room in a palace. It had marble floors and columns, exquisite crystal chandeliers, and the air was perfumed with the scent of sweet floral bouquets. The boutique was filled with the most beautiful perfume filled bottles that Betsy had ever seen, and empty crystal bottles of all shapes and sizes. Maria led Betsy to a counter with Caron’s Baccarat crystal fountains. They were elegant perfume filled crystal urns shaped like bell jars. Each urn had a bronze spigot from which the perfume was extracted into a tiny bronze receptacle that looked like a thimble sized bowl. The perfume was then poured from the tiny receptacle into one of many bottles of different sizes and shapes.

“You must sample one of Caron’s twelve legendary perfumes, Bets. They are the rarest in this parfumerie and very, very, expensive scents.”

The sales girl who greeted them looked like a fashion model from head to toe. She was dressed in a pink and gray nubby wool suit and ivory colored silk blouse, and Hermès silk scarf in pink, blues and grays. Her hair was perfectly coiffed, and her makeup was just right for daytime. Maria asked her if she could please decant and bottle into a standard crystal bottle, one half an ounce of “N’Aimez Que Moi” (Only Love Me).

“This is one of my mother’s favorite scents, Bets. I want to buy it for Mami for Christmas.

“Mademoiselle, Maria asked politely, would it be possible to give my friend a small sample of N’Aimez Que Mois?”

“Mais oui, mademoiselle,” she said with a beautiful smile as she drew a crystal stopper from a small sample bottle, inserted a clean plastic wand in the liquid gold perfume, and drew it across Betsy’s inner wrist.

Betsy raised her wrist to her nose and gently inhaled. “Oh, that’s pure Heaven.”

“This scent, mademoiselle, was created in 1916, by Caron’s founder, M. Daltroff,” the salesgirl said with a sense of global importance.

Next, she opened the spigot on the Baccarat fountain and decanted one half ounce of the perfume into the small bronze bowl. She poured it into a Caron crystal bottle and finished the bottle with a beautiful gold braid.

“Now, mademoiselle,” Maria asked, “Could you suggest a lovely scent from the contemporary perfumes for my friend. I want to buy her a small bottle as a souvenir of her visit to Paris.”

“Mais oui, mademoiselle,” she replied as she prepared a new sample for Betsy’s wrist. I think your friend may like this scent. It’s fresh and lively, and lovely for a young lady on any occasion, day or night.”

When Betsy inhaled the fragrance, it reminded her of green apples and spring flowers. “Oh, it’s so delicate and feminine. Not too heavy or too sweet. I love it.”

While the salesgirl completed the order, Betsy and Maria looked at the one-of-a-kind crystal bottles, limited edition bottles, and porcelain boxes on display. Betsy paid

the salesgirl from the money Mr. Dias had given her, and they left the parfumerie feeling very chic and sophisticated with their Caron shopping bags. They were thrilled when they saw the salesgirl had given each of them a few tiny glass viles filled with samples of different scents from Caron's line of contemporary perfumes.

"That would make Yvette and Joelle green with envy," Betsy said with a smile as she swung her Caron shopping bag.

"Who are Yvette and Joelle, Bets? Friends from home?"

"Sort of. They are characters in my French audio lessons back home. One of my favorite lessons is a promenade Yvette and Joelle take along the Champs Elysées with all the chic Parisians. I never planned on so many sloppily dressed tourists with cameras and stupid caps."

"Well, chica, next, we should take time to walk over to Coco Chanel's. It's a historic monument, in my mind, just as much as Notre Dame and the Sacré Coeur."

"Maria, we should make a plan of where we are going, and when, so we see the highlights of Paris as well as shop 'til we drop. Otherwise, all we'll accomplish is spending money and window shopping."

"I thought that was the plan, Bets."

"No, Maria. It might be OK for you, but I may never get a second visit to Paris, and I want to see the art in Le Louvre. We will be in Notre Dame on Christmas, so that covers that. I know I can't possibly see every major monument and visit every arrondissement in Paris, but I would also like to walk through Montmartre, and see the view of Paris from the top of the Sacré Coeur Basilica, and go to the top of La Tour Eiffel."

"Well, all right. You do have a point. Let's cut back on the shopping destinations to a very few. After a visit to Chanel on Rue Cambon, we should stop in Alice Cadolle, and buy a bra, at the very least. I want to pop into Hermès to buy gifts for my parents. Printemps department store has a beautiful stained glass dome, and wonderful window displays at Christmas, and they carry Miu Miu. I'm dying to buy some Miu Miu. I think I'll choose Printemps as our sole department store. I hate for

you to miss Galeries Lafayette and Bon Marché. Maybe if you get tired of historic monuments and museums, we'll have time for more shopping.

“That leaves us your request to window shop on the Champs Elysées, and there's one quarter in Paris that is an absolute *must* for your visit. The area called Le Marais has beautiful stone buildings from Medieval and Renaissance times. It once was the favorite neighborhood for nobility to live. And the “Pletzl”, or Jewish quarter in Le Marais, is one of my favorite places in Paris with all its galleries, shops, and fantastic food. The best falafels in all of Paris are sold at L'As du Falafel. And the Chinese quarter is in Le Marais, too. Jewish, Eastern European, and Chinese food in one place. It doesn't get much better than that.

“The narrow winding streets and all the little shops are like the Paris of long ago, before all the wide boulevards were built. We're going there to look for hidden treasure in the famous Paris Puces (flea markets). Marché de Vernaison on Rue de Rosiers and Avenue Michelet is our target. This is the main market in all of the markets that make up the humungous Les Puces. It's where the Saint-Ouen Puces began in the 1920s. This market alone has several hundred stalls, Betsy, and a reputation for being the least organized, but also, one of the cheapest. You need to take time to look through a huge area to find a treasure. I think you'll find your next big purse in there, somewhere, and maybe some gifts to send home.”

“I'm exhausted already, Maria, and we just left Caron. I promised your dad and Chela that you wouldn't buy a lot of shoes or clothing. Please don't, or they'll be angry with me.”

“No, Bets, Miu Miu is the only designer I'll look at this trip. We'll give you a quick tour of Paris, buy our Christmas gifts, and your new purse. All the rest of the time, we'll visit the Louvre and other landmarks and get blisters like all the other tourists,” Maria said with a chuckle.

“Maria, I need to sit down. Let's go over to Café des Deux Magots, so I can say I went there. I know it's a tourist trap, but I want to have a snack where famous writers and artists used to chill together.”

“No way, Bets. Deux Magots is more than two kilometers (more than a mile) from here, on the Left Bank. Let’s go to another famous place, Café de la Paix. It’s very close and even though it’s morning, I know you’ll love trying the vanilla millefeuille pastry with your coffee. It’s delish.”

“Sounds, formidable (terrific). The sugar high will get me through the shopping. Maria, there’s no way we can shop at all the places you want in one day. At the café, let’s make a plan for today and tomorrow.”

After taking a peak at the beautiful ornate ceiling and interior décor, the girls enjoyed a leisurely time out on the terrace at Café de la Paix. They were sufficiently warm with their camel’s hair capes over cashmere sweaters and French jeans. Betsy couldn’t get enough of sitting outside at the cafés in Paris, where people watching is a pastime.

There were elegantly dressed French grandmothers with their beautifully dressed grandchildren, casually dressed students, professionals in suits, and too many, sloppily dressed tourists. The girls enjoyed hot chocolates and shared a millefeuille (caramelized layers of puff pastry filled with a light vanilla flavored cream). They would have liked to have taken off their leather boots and massaged their feet, but that was just too petit bourgeois (lower middle class) a thing to do in this elegant setting.

“Too bad there isn’t a collection of stylish uniforms that all tourists are required to wear when they come to Paris,” Betsy said, half joking and half in all seriousness, as they walked to the Chanel boutique.

They decided to fill the day stopping at Chanel, Hermès, Alice Cadolle and Printemps department store. Le Marais would take up the entire second day. Betsy insisted that besides the shopping, they walk in La Place des Vosges, the oldest and what some consider the most beautiful square in Paris; and take a look at the former Royal pavilion, built in 1604, and Victor Hugo’s home where he wrote *Les Misérables*.

When they arrived at Chanel, Maria announced, “You are about to enter a place of fashion history,” as she pushed open the glass front door to #31 Rue Cambon. “You can have the Louvre, I’ll take Chanel!”

Betsy’s eyes were immediately drawn to the focal point of the first floor: a grand white spiral staircase with a black stair rail and faceted mirrored walls from the ground level to the uppermost fourth floor.

“Wow, this is just so elegant. What a wonderful idea to mirror the walls all the way from the ground to the top floor.”

“My mother told me Coco Chanel lived here. She designed this mirrored staircase so that she could stand in one spot and see what was happening on all four levels. The first floor is the boutique; the second floor has the haute couture fitting rooms. Mami takes me with her up there when she has fittings. The third floor is Coco’s apartment that is maintained just as it was when she died, in 1971. The fourth floor is the famous atelier or fashion workroom. Now, Karl Lagerfeld designs for Chanel in that same atelier.”

Betsy and Maria had a marvelous time looking at the famous handbags, sweaters, scarves, jewelry, shoes and prêt à porter (ready to wear) items, before taking one last glance at the reflections in the mirrored stairway.

“You know, Betsy, we might not be wearing pants today if it weren’t for Coco Chanel. She’s the designer of high fashion who made it fashionable for women to dress in pants, and we’ve never looked back.”

“I didn’t know, Maria. Thank you, Mlle Chanel,” Betsy called out as they reluctantly left the boutique.

“Here’s some more fashion trivia for you, Bets. Coco never slept in her apartment here, but in her apartment across the street in the Ritz Hotel. This apartment has no bedroom. She used it only as a place to entertain her friends.”

“Maria, too bad there isn’t a class in school on fashion, you’d get an easy A.”

“I won’t argue with you about that, Bets. I think I may study fashion when I graduate from my required schooling. One day you may be wearing a Maria Dias.

Oh, one more interesting factoid. When Coco Chanel died and her staff tended to her personal things, they discovered that she had only three complete outfits in her wardrobe.

“Those three were the most essential for a fashion forward woman, no doubt. I’d love to know what they looked like.”

Chapter 6

SHOP 'TIL YOU DROP

“Let’s stay on plan, Maria. Hermès, next, and then, Cadolle and Printemps. Besides your parents, we need gifts for Chela and Pablo, and I need to buy your parents and the Traas gifts, with my own money.”

“Don’t worry if you need to use Papi’s money for some of your gifts, chica. Paris isn’t the place to shop without plenty of mad money, and Dr. Frankenstein (Betsy’s nick name for her cousin/guardian Dr. Finkleman) never had this kind of spending in mind for you.”

“No, thank you, Maria. I love you for offering, but I’ll find something for everyone within budget. I’ll find things in the marché de Noël near your apartment or in Le Marais, tomorrow. No worries. It’s not the price, but the thought that counts.”

Maria bought silk ties and scarves in Hermès for her mom and dad, and both girls bought a push up bra in Alice Cadolle. The saleslady went into the dressing room with each of them and took measurements. She had them each try on half a dozen bras for style and fit. Maria insisted on buying two bras and assorted bikini panties, and a French garter as her Christmas gift to Betsy. Her favorite bra and panties had tiny raspberry filled chocolate macaroons printed on them. Her other favorite had black French poodles printed on pink cotton.

“I feel like a new person in my Cadolle foundations, Chica. Thank you, mille fois,” Betsy said as she hugged Maria outside the boutique.

“Careful where you swing those shopping bags, Bets. I bruise easily. I accept your thank you. Now, let’s get moving.”

It was the most beautiful department store Betsy had ever seen. Printemps-Haussmann covered several city blocks. The focal point of the historic monument was the Art Deco stained glass dome, part of the pavillion built for the 1930’s World Fair. When Au Printemps (Printemps) was built, in 1865, the concept of a department store where everything could be bought under one roof and at fixed prices was a revolutionary concept.

“These Christmas windows are like miniature stage sets, Maria.”

“Printemps is known for its elaborate window displays for every season, but I like the Christmas displays the best,” Maria replied.

After ten minutes of looking at the window displays, they stood inside at the store directory kiosk and mapped out how they would shop in the overwhelming space.

“There’s no way we can give you a tour of all the wings of the store, Betsy, but we must go to the men’s wing for some things, the women’s for others, and you might want to visit the wing for the home. First, I want to take you to the roof for a fantastic surprise. Don’t panic, we are riding in elevators.”

When they reached the ninth floor, Maria led the way to the outdoor Le Déli Cieux, the deli in the sky. “See Betsy, you don’t have to go to the top of the Eiffel Tower to see Paris. How’s this for a postcard view?”

Betsy was already taking photos of the view of the Eiffel Tower, the Sacré Coeur Basilica, in Montmartre, and the Opéra. “I never thought I’d get to do some real sightseeing in a department store, Maria. This is awesome.”

“And we’ve saved our feet. That’s what I call painless sightseeing.” After Maria pointed out Paris landmarks, they went down to street level and tackled the gifts for men. When they found something for Mr. Dias and Pablo, they went to the women’s wing and bought gifts for Chela and Mrs. Dias.

“Next, we go to Miu Miu, Betsy, for my fashion fix.”

“Oh, I don’t know, Maria. I promised Chela you wouldn’t go crazy and buy more clothes and shoes.”

“Don’t worry, Betsy. I’m only going to buy one or two things and no shoes or bags. If you want to go to another part of the store to look for gifts for your friends, we can meet back at the World Bar for lunch in an hour.”

“Yeah, I think I’ll look and see if anything here is affordable for me. I still think I’ll find my gifts at the Christmas markets or in Le Marais, but I’ll have fun roaming around for an hour. See you at the restaurant.”

Betsy had never seen so many brand names in fashion in her life, all in one store. There was no way she could buy her gifts there on her budget. She decided to enjoy shopping with her eyes only and save her money for the next day.

When the girls met up, they devoured cheeseburgers and frites (fries) at The World Bar. It’s designed to look like an American or British sports bar. After lunch, Maria had to take Betsy to Le Brasserie, directly under Printemps’s magnificent Art Nouveau stained glass dome. The dome was created in 1923, by Louis Brière, a great master glass maker, in a floral pattern composed of than three thousand pieces of stained glass. Betsy craned her neck to study the dome as they sipped Red Bulls, and Betsy took photos.

“OK, Maria,” Betsy inquired, “What damage did you do in Miu Miu?”

“Oh. Not to worry, Betsy. I put everything on the charge account and the few things I bought are being delivered. I’m so short, I always have to have alterations. ”

“I have a bad feeling that you went crazy. I should have stayed with you, but you would have bought everything, anyway. So tell me what you bought, so I can drool.”

Maria launched into a nonstop monologue about the separates she bought in Miu Miu, while they rode the elevator down. Next, they bought fresh raspberry macarons at Ladurée before exiting Printemps for the nippy air of hiver (winter).

“Mission accomplished for today, Maria. I’d like to walk the stalls of the marché near the Eiffel Tower and buy a few gifts for your parents and the Traas. Do you want to go with me?”

“Good idea. It’s beginning to snow and I’m in the Christmas spirit. Shopping in the marché is the perfect end to our day of shopping. The stalls sell so many great stocking stuffers, except in France, we don’t put stockings for Santa, we put a shoe under the tree for Père Noël to fill. Let’s go, and then call it a day. We’ll have just enough time for a hot bath before we have to dress for dinner.

“Hey, Bets, I have a great idea. Let’s shop the marché Champs Elysées instead of the marché Trocadéro. It’s so beautiful with all the trees strung with Christmas lights, and you can get your walk like your imaginary friends and shop for gifts at the same time.”

“What a great idea. Yvette and Joelle would approve. Allons-y (Let’s go).”

Chapter 7

A SIMPLE LITTLE DINNER

The girls covered only a fraction of the festive wooden sheds along the Champs-Élysées, but they had found a bounty of treasure. Betsy was pleased with herself for finding all sorts of treats and presents while staying under budget.

“I still have money for tomorrow, and I’ve found some fun things to stuff in your parents’ Christmas shoes, and souvenir stuff for the Traas. I have French handmade soap bars for all the females on my list, scented in an unusual assortment: chocolate, vanilla, French lavender, violet and lemongrass. For the gentlemen, I have bath soaps scented in Kaffir lime, Bay Rum and espresso coffee, and camel’s hair ear muffs for winter. I also have sleeping masks for your mother, Susan, and Mrs. Traa that look like French masquerade ball masks, and decorative chignon hair pins for Chela. For the Christmas tree and snacks, I have gingerbread people, macaroons, and pistachio nuts.”

“Well done, Bets. Not the usual shoe stuffers and something they don’t already have.”

As soon as they entered the apartment, Chela was helping them with their bags and asking about where they went. “Come in the kitchen for a tea and fill me in before you get ready for dinner. Your mother is at David Mallet’s studio getting her

hair done and your father is out shopping for Christmas gifts. He's taken your advice, Maria and planned a simple dinner for tonight at Le Bristol."

"No way José," Maria replied. "There is no such thing as a simple meal at Le Bristol."

She was right, of course. Le Bristol is among the finest of Paris' legendary five star hotels.

"You'll love the French cage elevator Betsy, it's so romantic. It reminds me of the elevator in the hotel in the classic Audrey Hepburn, Cary Grant movie, 'Charade'."

"Maybe they filmed it at Le Bristol, Maria. It was filmed on location in Paris," Betsy added.

"Well, we better inhale our tea, Chela, and get ready for dinner," Betsy said. "No fair peeking in our shopping bags except for these. You might want to put the cheeses in the cooler and the gingerbread in a tin."

Betsy was getting very spoiled bathing in a huge marble tub with designer perfume scented bubble bath, fussing over what clothes to wear to dinner, and anticipating another dinner in a five star hotel.

What Mr. Dias thought was a simple dinner, was anything but simple, for most mortals. The driver took them only a few blocks from the apartment to Le Bristol Hotel and the Epicure restaurant on the rue Faubourg Saint Honoré. The Bristol's restaurant is in a spacious, airy, crisp white and young feeling space with huge windows that overlook the garden's magnolia trees. A roaring fire was glowing in the fireplace and floral bouquets added artistic splashes of color.

"It must be magnificent to eat here when the trees are filled with blossoms," Betsy said as they sat down at a table next to one of the large windows. The trees were filled with tiny Christmas lights, and the dusting of fresh snow made everything look like a winter wonderland.

Mr. Dias had ordered dinner ahead, and as usual, it was many courses of gourmet food. There was nothing simple about this dinner. They began with macaroni filled with foie gras, artichoke, black truffle, and covered with fresh parmesan cheese. The

fish course was blue lobster with polenta, asparagus and black truffle. For the meat course, they had an entire pig from snout to toe with mashed “ratte” potatoes, and saddle of lamb with gnocchi. After an assortment of five French cheeses, they barely had room for a Manjari, (seventy percent French chocolate in an origami shape with iced coconut milk and hot chocolate elixir).

Maria’s parents saw several of their friends across the room and excused themselves to go and say hello. Once again, all eyes were on Mrs. Dias. This time she was in a gray matte wool sheath with gray and white pearl jewelry. Her hair had been cut in layers to frame her face and fall to her shoulders. A red rinse gave her dark brown hair the color of a Bordeaux wine. Mr. Dias proudly escorted his wife across the room.

“Tomorrow is the day before Christmas Eve, chica,” Maria announced as they jumped into their beds at midnight.

“Sleep tight, Maria. We need to be on our game tomorrow to complete our shopping and get back here in time to dress for your father’s festivities. We don’t want to spoil his fun.”

“Absolument, Bets. We’ve a whole lot of shopping to do tomorrow. Sweet dreams.”

Chapter 8

THE MOST HANDSOME GIANT IN PARIS

The next morning, Betsy was into her Paris groove. She automatically steered Maria, her sleep walking friend, safely into the chilly morning air and onto the path for their first order of business.

“What’s the rush?” Maria questioned as she struggled to keep up with her long legged friend’s pace.

“I’m not going to waste time going over our itinerary for today, Maria, before you’ve had coffee and sustenance. It’s a waste of time.”

Their friendly waiter Skip was there to greet them when they went inside Café Paris to check out the assortment of fresh pastries to order with their café crèmes.

“And how do you like the city of Paris, mademoiselles?” he asked as he served them at an outside table for the second morning.

“I don’t think I want to leave,” Betsy replied. “It’s the most beautiful city I’ve ever been in, and I haven’t been to any museums or monuments, yet. No more shopping for me, after today.”

“Speak for yourself.” Maria chimed in. “You can go to the historic spots and I’ll cover the after Christmas sales.”

Skip laughed at Maria’s comment and told Betsy, “The Louvre is an overpowering space with incredible works of art. You can spend a week in there and just scratch the surface. I have a good friend who works part time as a guide. He’s the cousin of my roommate and I think you’d enjoy his tours.”

“Please give me his name and when I get to the Louvre, I’ll ask if he’s giving any tours.”

“His name is Alex Petrov.”

“Got it. Thanks, Skip.”

“What’s this? A bloody conspiracy to visit museums?” Maria joked. “We shouldn’t leave you a tip for encouraging cultural activities, Skip, but I like you, anyway. You remind me of my father, and, besides, Betsy is carrying all the money.”

“Well, I hate to eat and run,” Betsy said, “but we must finish our Christmas shopping before tomorrow. After Christmas, it’s all landmarks and museums for me. I won’t have any money left for shopping in this city.”

“If I don’t see you tomorrow morning,” Skip replied, “have a beautiful Christmas in Paris, mademoiselles. I look forward to seeing you, soon.”

The girls were wide awake and eager to shop in Le Marais. Before they headed into the famous Paris flea markets, Les Puces, they stopped at La Place des Vosges. The peaceful central park is the oldest square in Paris. The red brick and stone structure of thirty-six connecting buildings that surrounds the park was built in the seventeenth century for King Henry IV as his lavish residence within the city. The buildings now are home to shops, and cafés. The #6, The Maison de Victor Hugo, where he lived from 1839 until his death in 1885, is now a museum.

“It was in this very apartment that he wrote *Les Misérables*,” Betsy read to Maria from her guide book. “I can’t wait to tell Madame Tusse.”

“I think we’re going to read it in the winter school, Bets. Enjoy the visit today and remember it when you’re struggling to understand the French text,” Maria said with her signature chuckle.

Before she realized it, Betsy found herself in the heart of the narrow and winding streets in Le Marais. It was lined with charming old buildings that made her feel like she’d been transported back in time. Maria was now comfortably back where she could shop ‘til she dropped. “Follow me, Bets. We’re in the historic Saint-Ouen flea market, and almost at Marché Vernaison. You’ll be overwhelmed by all the goodies stacked everywhere, but we’re going to take our time and look through everything to find our treasure.”

“Let’s recap what each of us is looking for in case I spot something you want and vice versa,” Betsy instructed.

“I’m looking for an antique pipe or pipe holder, antique hair accessories, old silk scarves, and antique evening bags,” Maria recited.

“I’m looking for an old book on art for the Traas, or any small art related memorabilia, antique barrettes for Susan, a small antique item for your parents’ apartment, and a big old cloth handbag or satchel to replace my old pony skin bag.”

“Maybe we should divide up, and rendezvous outside of this building every half hour,” Maria suggested.

“Sounds good. Meet you back outside next to that big, old, antique flower cart in thirty minutes. Here’s half of the money we have left,” Betsy added, as she carefully handed Maria the euros. “I don’t want to give you all of it at one time, but if you must have more, we have it. I’m maintaining my honor and buying all my gifts within my paltry budget.”

Two hours later, Maria and Betsy were satisfied with the treasures they had uncovered. Every item on their wish list had been found to their satisfaction.

“I would like to look in a few other places in the flea market for a piece of horse or cow hide. Maybe a shoemaker can sew it onto this big old satchel,” Betsy declared.

“Then I’ll have my signature pony purse, once again. Otherwise, I’m thrilled with the antique auctioneer’s gavel and artist’s easel for Susan’s parents, silver barrettes for Susan, and a crystal paper weight for your parents.”

“You did well, Bets, and so did I. I found a great antique pipe and a rack for Papi, chignon and hat pins for Mami and Chela, and an antique magnifying glass for Pablo.”

“Let’s walk over to #34 Ave. des Rosiers for the best falafel in the city at L’As du Fallafel (The Ace of Falafel),” Maria suggested. “We can ask in shops along the way about pony skin scraps.”

“Pardonnez-moi,” Betsy asked a withered old Frenchman at the entrance to a shop with antique horse saddles, stirrups and reins, “Avez-vous des pièces du peau de poney (Do you have any pieces of pony skin)?”

Very slowly, and with the help of a walking stick, the old man rose from his chair at the entrance to the shop and began to shuffle into the shop’s interior. Betsy and Maria

followed as he walked each aisle poking at the piles of horse blankets and remnants of horse hide.

“Ici (Here),” he said in triumph. “Ici en ce lieu (Here in this place), mademoiselle,” he said pointing at a pile with his finger.

“Merci, monsieur,” Betsy said, all excited in anticipation of another treasure found.

“Maria, come and help me, please. I need you to hold all my stuff so I can search through this pile.”

Maria took all of Betsy’s bags and sat on the floor. After a few minutes, Betsy called out in triumph, “Got it. It’s perfect.”

She happily paid the old man the equivalent of twenty dollars and asked if he knew a shoemaker nearby who could stitch the hide to the satchel. He walked her outside and gave her directions to his cousin’s store down the street. An hour later, Betsy had her new signature spotted pony skin satchel.

“I told you we’d do well here, Betsy, and we actually have money to take back to Papi.”

“Maria, if it’s OK with you, I’d like to take this stuff back to your house and then go to the Louvre for a few hours. Tomorrow is Christmas Eve and we’ll be busy wrapping gifts and celebrating with your parents.”

“Yeah, OK, chica. Let’s grab one of those fab falafels, and get some to take home for everyone.”

“Sounds like a plan. Lead the way.”

The falafel shop had a very long line. Maria told Betsy it was more than worth standing in line for one of these sandwiches. “We could easily share one, Bets, they’re huge, but it’s too messy to try and share, and you can easily handle the whole thing.”

“Gee thanks, Maria. That doesn’t sound like a compliment.” During their wait, they enjoyed people watching and listening. There were tourists from many different countries as well as many locals. They heard French, English, Japanese, Hebrew, Italian, Spanish, Greek, and something Betsy didn’t recognize.

“Chica,” Maria whispered to Betsy, “did you notice how many good looking guys are here, and besides us, only a few, older females?”

“So? What did you expect? This place is a guy magnet. They’re here for great food, not to meet schoolgirls, Maria. Get real.”

“Betsy, look at that guy up ahead of us. He’s taller than you. He’s really tall. I might have found you a giant in Paris.”

“Shush. You’ll embarrass me, Maria. I mean it. Hush or I’ll step on your toe.”

They finally reached the order window and were starting to give their order, when Betsy felt someone tapping on her shoulder. She quickly turned around to find Skip standing by her side.

“Skip, what are you doing here?” she asked. She was surprised to see the waiter outside of his expected setting. He wasn’t wearing his waiter’s apron and he looked quite delicious in his casual attire.

“Hey a guy has to eat and this is one of the best places in Paris. I’m not working until tomorrow morning. I’m here with somebody you should meet.”

“Me? Meet somebody?” Betsy asked, taken by surprise.

“Betsy,” Skip said, “I’d like you to meet my good friend, adopted little brother, and excellent museum guide, Alex Petrov.”

Betsy could feel the heat in her face as she set eyes on this gorgeous teen. His hair was a very dark brown and it framed his deep blue eyes and devilish grin. And he was several inches taller than her. She was afraid her face was turning beet red and she was making a fool of herself, before she even opened her mouth. In her eyes, he was Alex Pettyfer, the actor, with brown hair.

“Bonjour, Alex,” was the only thing she could say. She felt like an idiot and quickly started to babble in French. “It’s a pleasure to meet you. This is my friend Maria.”

And then, Alex spoke in English, but with a very thick French accent. “Nice to meet you too, Betsy, Maria. Skip was telling me perhaps you’d visit the Louvre and ask for me. Now you don’t need to look for me. I’m in your face? Isn’t that what you say?”

“No, not quite,” Betsy said as she and Maria started to laugh. “You are most definitely, not, in my face, Alex, and I’m very happy you are here.”

“I’m going to wait inside for a table,” Skip interjected. “Alex, you know what I want. And get extra hummus, please. See you all inside.”

Maria and Betsy and Alex had so much fun getting acquainted, that their extensive orders were filled, before they knew it. Skip returned to help with the food and the girls' parcels. "I know the waiters here, an occupational benefit," he joked, "so my friend is keeping our table, but we must hurry."

Soon they were all huddled inside the charming old café and angling for enough space to eat without bumping each other.

"Bon appétit," Skip said as he raised his Coke in a toast. "I suggest we eat first, and then we can talk as we walk."

"That's the best falafel I've ever eaten," Betsy said. "I never thought I'd eat it in Paris."

"Oh, yes. This is a prosperous, multicultural area of Paris. The Jewish community has been here since the thirteen hundred, but not until the late nineteenth century under Napoléon Bonaparte did they experience a sense of permanence. Before that, kings were always expelling them. Then, during WWII, the stability was shattered when pro-German French and the Nazis occupied Paris. After the war, the Jews returned and flourished as well as a thriving Middle Eastern community. My great grandfather owned an art gallery in the Pletzl," Alex told the threesome.

"Was he Jewish, Alex?" Betsy asked.

"Yes and an immigrant from Russia. When the Nazis occupied Paris, they took my great grandfather to one of the camps. My great grandmother never heard from him again."

"Oh, how horrible, Alex," Betsy lamented. "What happened to your great grandmother?"

"Oh my great grandfather had sent her and my grandfather to Dordogne, France, in 1939, before the Germans arrived. My grandfather was three years old, when they left Paris. He never knew his father."

"Did the Nazis take his art from the gallery?" Maria asked.

"My relatives assumed they took everything, but it wasn't only the Germans who took the property of the Jews," Alex told them. "There were the anti-Jewish French led by Marshal Pétain. Have you ever heard of the Vichy government in France?"

“No, I’m not very educated in European history, but I’m sure M. Gastang will discuss it when we study European history after Christmas,” Betsy added.

“Vichy, France, was the capital of the pro-German, anti-Jewish movement in France,” Alex, continued. “The French could have confiscated the art in the gallery, but my great grandmother learned, after the war, that a Nazi general lived in my great grandfather’s building with his gallery space and apartment until the liberation, in 1945. She never knew if it was the French or the Germans who stole the art work and other valuables.

“He owned a few portraits by Modigliani and the artist didn’t paint many portraits. They were the family treasures. My relatives never saw or heard about them after the war.”

“There’s a girl in our school who’s sure the headmistress’s art collection has some art stolen and sold by the Nazi’s during the war,” Maria interjected. “I think she’s just saying that because she hates the headmistress, but I don’t know anything about art.”

“Does your family still own the building, Alex?” Betsy asked.

“No, it’s been sold a few times since my great grandmother had to sell it after the war.”

“What’s in it now?” Betsy asked.

“You’re sitting in it,” Alex answered.

“Wow! That’s what I call living history,” Betsy exclaimed.

“My best friend’s father works in Christie’s as an art appraiser and his wife’s relatives had a valuable Van Gogh stolen right off their wall by the Nazi’s during the war,” Betsy said.

“What a coincidence,” Alex said. “A Van Gogh! Which one, Betsy?”

“*The Painter on the Road to Tarascon*,” she added.

“What a shame. That painting was destroyed when the Allies bombed the German museum where the stolen art was housed,” Alex lectured.

Betsy bit her tongue, before she said anything she’d regret.

“Say you two,” Skip said, “Maria and I are going to walk over to her apartment and drop off the Christmas gifts. Maybe we’ll rent ice skates at Trocadéro and do some skating. Do you guys want to join us?”

Alex turned to Betsy, looked directly at her with his gorgeous blue eyes and asked her if she wanted to go skating or go to the Museum of Modern Art. “It has Modigliani’s, *Woman with a Fan*, his portrait of the same model that he painted in the three portraits stolen from my great grandfather.”

“I’d love to go skating, guys, really, but I really want to see as much art as I can. I may never get back to Paris, and seeing paintings on the internet just isn’t the same. If it’s OK with you, Maria, I’d like to go to the Museum of Modern Art and meet you back home, before dinner.”

“Fine with me, chica. Skip and I will take the bags and check in with Papi. We’ll go skating and meet you back home about sixish, OK?”

“Wonderful. Here’s the rest of your father’s money, Maria. Skip, please don’t let her buy any more clothes or shoes before you get back to her house. I promised I’d restrain her.”

“I’ll do my best, but with all these shopping bags and falafel, I don’t know how we could carry anymore,” Skip said.

“Trust me, Skip. Maria may be tiny, but she can carry ten times her weight in shopping bags.”

“We’ll go straight to her house, in a taxi, with the falafels, while their still hot. Alex, I’ll be home by eight, if you want to hook up for dinner. Just give me a call on my cell, after you take Besty to Maria’s. Amusez-vous.”

I hope you enjoyed the story. If you did, please help spread the word and write a review on Amazon, Goodreads, Librarything or anywhere else you frequent.

This is the second book in a series of the adventures of Betsy Butters. To follow Betsy and learn of her further adventures, please visit:

<http://www.jeniferrubloff.com>

About the Author

Jenifer Rubloff

As a teenager in boarding schools in Switzerland and the US, Jenifer learned from the people she met and the friends she made about different cultures, customs, religions and cuisines. When she sat in her school study halls, on many nights, she'd play 'what if' with her imagination about what could happen in her school with only a small tweak to reality.

As an author of fiction, Rubloff twists reality to share her experiences and fascination with how people and events can be interconnected.