

The School with Chocolate Air

by

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Chapter 1

One Day You're Up

J'entre dans la salle de classe, je regarde autour de moi. Je vois les élèves et le professeur, je dis bonjour au professeur, je prends mon place.

That was Betsy Butter's first French lesson, at the start of her freshman year in high school. She memorized it with a sense of great importance as if this foreign language were linked to her future, her destiny. When she spoke in French, she was no longer an average fourteen year old from a suburb of Chicago, but, in her mind, a globe-trotting sophisticate.

She stood at the bathroom mirror on that October morning, with ear buds, absorbed in her audio French lesson. She tried in desperation to do something glam with her long, thick and straight chestnut hair like a Parisian might wear. She'd been inspired to try something new by the detailed description by Yvette and Joelle, the imaginary teenagers in the French lesson, of the stylish people walking down the Champs Elysée in Paris.

When she saw what time it was, she settled for her signature pony tail and dashed to the garage to catch her ride to school with her parents. The refrigerator chalkboard was as far as she had to go before she knew she'd be walking the ten blocks to Lake Forest High

that morning. “No, problem,” Betsy said to herself, “it’s a beautiful autumn day and I can imagine I’m a model walking down a street in Paris.” At five feet eight inches, Betsy was tall for her age and thin, but not skinny, and very graceful like a dancer. She didn’t have any boobs like most of her friends, but she had the height and shape of a runway model and that gave her some consolation. Her mother always told her she was “a beauty in the making”.

Her mother’s chalked scrawl read, “Love, called out to you, but no reply. No time to come looking. Can’t miss the train. Dad has a big meet, can’t be late. Take Zip bags out of freezer at five. Should be home by seven. Will call. Remember we love you, Mom.”

That was the way the routine day started for Betsy with nothing unusual during the school day. In fact, getting an A on her French test and a B on her English paper made it quite a good day. She’d called her mother’s phone several times after school to share her good news and ask what meals she wanted defrosted, but her mom hadn’t answered.

The routine day had turned into a less than routine night. It was dark, late, for a week night, and Betsy’s parents weren’t home. She tried phoning their cells; her calls went straight to voice mail. “Where are my parents? Why don’t they pick up?”

Betsy heard her voice start to crack like she was about to cry, when she called her best friend, Susan Traa.

“Bets, why do you sound so upset?” Susan asked. “Chill, girl. Hold on while I ask my mom what to do.”

“Betsy, it’s Virginia, kiddo. I hear your folks are late tonight. I’m coming to get you for the night. No worries, they probably missed the last train. See ya in ten.”

At ten thirty, Susan and Betsy were making up the guest bed in Susan’s room and giving Betsy’s toy poodle, Chèrie, her water and food. Betsy was too upset to eat, but Mrs. Traa called them into the kitchen for cookies and coco to calm and distract them from the tension pervading the entire house.

“I’m going over to Walgreen’s for batteries, hon,” said Jim, Susan’s dad. “Need anything?”

“Anybody want anything?” Virginia shouted.

“Yeah, how ’bout some ice cream,” Susan injected, “anything with chocolate, like chocolate chip or Rocky Road. O.K., Bets?”

“Whatever you want, Suz, I’m not hungry.”

“O.K., I’m going. Be back in thirty.”

While Mr. Traa was gone, Susan and her mother tried valiantly to lighten up the room with conversation about school romances and other gossip, while munching on cookies and drinking cocoa, hoping Betsy would join them. It was all in vain. Betsy wasn’t about to eat or drink. “She’s really, really worried,” Susan said to herself. They heard the car door slam in the garage and waited for Jim Traa and the ice cream to add more distraction. They were surprised when he came inside, that he wasn’t alone. A police officer was with him and everybody’s heart was in his throat. This couldn’t be good.

Jim Traa immediately went toward the girls and wrapped them in his arms. Next, he held tightly onto Betsy and led her into the family room and onto the couch. The officer removed his cap and took the armchair facing the sofa. Susan and her mother sat tensely on the couch next to Betsy.

“Betsy Butters, I’m Bob Miller with the Highland Park Police. Your cousin, Dr. Roberta Finkleman, asked me to come over to the Traa’s and explain why you haven’t heard from your folks.”

“What’s my cousin have to do with this? Where’re my parents?”

“Your cousin is a doctor and the emergency contact on your parents’ cell phones; she was called about an hour ago when we found out who to call. Betsy, your mom and dad missed their train and took a ride from a man in your dad’s office, a Mr. Singer. When they reached Highland Park, Mr. Singer lost control of the car. We think he had a heart attack or stroke. There was an accident and your parents didn’t make it. I’m—”

Mrs. Traa and Susan were embracing Betsy before the officer could say how sorry he was and how he wished he did not have to be so blunt; there was no easy way to tell this news to anyone.

Betsy didn’t remember much after “parents didn’t make it”. She felt really, really cold, her teeth were chattering, her hands and feet went numb, and then she passed out.

When she came to, she was in the emergency room at the Lake Forest Hospital hooked up to a machine and breathing through a cup over her nose and mouth— it was oxygen. She was feeling O.K. physically, but she didn’t understand what was happening. Her parents couldn’t be dead. The officer must have it wrong. She had to call her cousin

and get to her parents. They'd explain everything. They wouldn't just go away like that and not talk to her. "Oh, God, my parents, my mommy and daddy, I need to help them, they need me. Help me!" Betsy cried. She was sobbing hard, her body was trembling.

The Traas wished they could blink their eyes and bring the Butters back to life, but all that Susan and Virginia could do was to wrap their arms around Betsy, stroke her head, squeeze her hands, and kiss her cheeks. They repeated that they would stay with her and help her. She was not alone.

Chapter 2

With a Relative Like This Who Needs Enemies?

“I know you’re her guardian, Dr. Finkleman,” Jim Traa said while making a smirk, and flaying his free hand to indicate to Virginia that he was talking to a hard case.

“I’m just saying as someone who’s been with her for the past several hours and a father of another fourteen year old, that it would be less traumatic for Betsy, if you’d come over to our house to talk about everything. Susan is Betsy’s best friend and Betsy’s dog, Chèrie, is here too. A much less traumatic setting than a doctor’s office, don’t you agree, doctor?” He snapped closed his cell phone and shook his head in disgust.

“She hung up on me,” he told Virginia. “She won’t come here. She wants me to bring Betsy to her office at eight tomorrow, no at eight this morning, and without her dog or anyone else other than you. She’s pissed because she has to cancel her appointments for tomorrow to, and I quote, ‘Deal with this situation’.”

Mrs. Traa did everything she thought would spoil Betsy before she left to face her cousin and guardian, Dr. Roberta Finkleman. Virginia made her award winning cinnamon rolls which took first place in the Lake Forest Food Fair, and more cocoa with whipped cream and shaved chocolate. Susan didn’t say a word. She understood what her mom was trying to do.

Chèrie knew something was very wrong and refused to leave Betsy’s side. Everyone had been up since six a.m. the day before; the shock of what they were experiencing must

have boosted their adrenaline. Everybody was *wired*. The Traas wanted to be available for Betsy as much as Dr. Frankenstein (Betsy's name for her) would permit.

Mrs. Traa decided to stay at home with Susan. Mr. Traa would drive Betsy and offer to do whatever he could to assist Dr. Finkleman to save her taking time away from her practice to drive to Lake Forest. The Traas hoped Betsy could remain with them at least until after the funeral. Mrs. Traa already was prepared to suggest to Dr. Finkleman that Betsy live with them for the remainder of the school year. She thought that was the least traumatic for Betsy and Chèrie and for all of Betsy's friends and her parents' friends in Lake Forest.

This was going to be devastating to everyone who knew the Butters. Sheila Butters was president of the art club, and Louis volunteered his time and resources to The Chicago Art League, Friends of the Lake Forest Library, and Historic Preservation of Lake Forest. Sheila was one of the few ladies in Lake Forest who wasn't a fantastic baker, but she bought the best cakes, cookies, and pies to contribute to charitable bake sales.

It was an hour's drive from Lake Forest to the doctor's office in Skokie, with all the morning commuter traffic. Betsy sat very quietly, staring mindlessly out the passenger window. She was emotionally numb, physically exhausted, and nauseous. She'd never been to her cousin's office; in her entire life she'd always thought of her as cousin, Roberta, never Dr. Finkleman.

The receptionist and two nurses were already busy at work when Betsy and Jim arrived. Because it was before office hours, they had to wait for the outer door to be unlocked and then locked once they were inside.

The interiors were elegant, but sterile; beige and dark brown marble tile floors in a checkerboard design, polished plaster treated walls, also beige, and no surprise, two traditional style arm chairs and one loveseat in beige leather. The only warm touch was a vase of fresh yellow daffodils on the beige marble coffee table. Other than the flowers, the table was covered with issues of *New Beauty*, *Dermatology Times*, *Town & Country*, and *People*.

The perky receptionist Stella gave Betsy a genuine smile, told her how sorry she was for her loss, and asked if she or Mr. Traa wanted coffee or a soda.

“I know she feels bad about my parents and my having a Finkleguardian,” Betsy thought. Betsy and Jim had just sat down when Dr. Roberta Finkleman came out from behind the nurse’s reception counter, walked directly past grieving Betsy, and extended her handshake to Jim Traa. He figured her for a woman in her late thirties.

“Nice to meet you, Mr. Traa,” Roberta said without any facial expression. “I’m sorry we meet under these difficult circumstances, but I think I have a *solution* to the circumstances that will be acceptable for Betsy and me and honor the wishes of my late aunt and uncle.”

The doctor had a professional manner more like a computer tech than a professional who deals with people. She was short and compact. Her body, like her personality, was tightly constrained. Her hair was short and very black, cropped close to her head in a feathered cut; full lips with clear gloss and wide brown eyes accentuated with thin black liner and mascara. There was neither family resemblance nor personality similarities between Dr. Finkleman and Betsy.

“Hello! Where’s the concern for *me* in all this blather?” Betsy thought.

Finally, Roberta walked over to Betsy, hugged her tightly, and said, “I’m so very, very, sorry, Betsy. I don’t know what to say. This is as big a shock for me as for you.” Then she asked Jim Traa to stay in the reception room while she spoke with Betsy privately in her office.

For those first moments, Betsy thought it might not be as bad as she thought to have her cousin as her guardian. Betsy tried to stand up tall as she followed into the doctor’s office. The door was closed and her cousin seated herself behind a bulky antique oak desk that filled most of the space. Diplomas and photos of her with other doctors cluttered the wall behind the desk. Betsy sat down facing Roberta in the only chair in the inner office; a hard, high back, cane chair with no cushion. The silence was uncomfortable. Betsy looked down at her lap and gripped each hand on the edge of the chair.

Roberta put on her thin Ben Franklin style wire rim reading glasses, glanced down at a stack of papers, and back up at Betsy. Without any emotion on her face, Dr. Finkleman began a recitation more like a presentation at a medical conference than a family member consoling a fourteen year old who’d just been orphaned. “I read the legal documents from

your parents' attorney late last night, and again this morning. I'm guardian to you and executor of your parents' estate. Do you understand what that means?"

Betsy said she had a general idea, but she needed her cousin to explain it more before she could ask questions.

"Betsy, I have patients coming in a few minutes. I can't explain all the legal terms to you now. What you need to know is that I must decide where you live and go to school. I control the money and investments your parents have to take care of you until you're twenty-one. The estate is the word for everything belonging to your parents: money, investments, your home, its contents, cars.

"Today I need you to help me prepare for the funeral the day after tomorrow. I'll think about the house and where you'll live and go to school between now and the funeral. After the funeral, I hope to tell you what I decide is best for you and for me. What I need you to do is to go back to Lake Forest and pick out the clothes you want to give to the mortician to dress your parents for their caskets. The mortuary will send a messenger to your house and pick up the clothes after two p.m. Do you think you can do that for us this morning?"

Betsy couldn't contain her pain any longer. With a small hiccup sound, her sobbing began. "I don't understand what's happening, Roberta? Where are my mom and dad? I want to see them!"

Betsy was crying uncontrollably, tears flowing down her cheeks, mucous from her nose, her eyes almost swollen shut from the continuous crying. She was a mess. Roberta offered her tissues from a drawer in her desk without saying anything, or moving to comfort Betsy. Instead, Roberta rose, walked out of her office, and left Betsy slumped in emotional pain and beginning to realize that it wasn't going to be good having her cousin as her guardian. Roberta Finkleman didn't want to spend time on her young cousin, she had her own life. Betsy wished this were just a bad dream, but she knew it was her new reality.

She heard short bursts of conversation between Roberta and Mr. Traa in the outer office. She couldn't hear what they were saying; and the tone wasn't friendly. Very quickly the door opened, the kind nurse, Stella, came in and helped Betsy out into the reception area.

Betsy blurted, “When can I see my parents? Where’s the funeral? Why can’t I help?”

Dr. Finkleman’s first patient was just coming to the front door. Quickly the doctor replied, “You’ll see them before the funeral, all by yourself. For now, you take care of the clothes and try not to worry. Everything will be explained after the funeral. Okie, dokie, Betsy?” she added with a forced smile. “Mr. Traa will take you home and we’ll talk, soon. Stella, give Betsy a box of tissues to take with her for the drive and some sodas.”

Dr. Finkleman spun around stiffly in place like a soldier and went back into her inner office. The kindly nurse, Stella, no longer had a smile on her face. The tension was contagious.

Jim Traa grabbed Betsy’s hand, squeezed it tightly and gave her a wink. “It’s pretty lousy, no it’s worse, but we’re not leaving you. Look, how ’bout we stop at Fuddruckers on the way back and have some lunch, whatever you want, O.K.?”

It wasn’t a normal response on Betsy’s face, but it was a whole lot better than any in the past twelve hours. “Yeah, maybe we could take stuff back to your house and we could all eat together.”

“Sure, sounds great. You try and relax a little on the way and maybe you can plan what takeout to order for Susan, Virginia, and yourself. I know what I’m having, The Works burger. I never try anything else. How ’bout you?”

“That’s my favorite too, all the bacon and cheese, yum.”

The trip back was much faster and they were way ahead of the huge lunch crowd. When they ordered the special burgers, milk shakes and sides of fries and fried mozzarella sticks, it was a little break from the sorrow in their lives. The manager personally took their order. Sensing that someone needed a little cheer after seeing Betsy’s swollen red eyes, he handed out complimentary Fuddrucker’s famous “Tricked Out Nachos”, and chili cheese fries with sour cream and chives.

Loaded down with three bags each, they continued on to Lorraine Lane in Lake Forest. Jim phoned Virginia about a mile out. She and Susan and Chèrie were all waiting to welcome them home. They’d already planned to eat outside at the picnic table and the Fuddruckers feast was a fun diversion for them too. For a short time, there was a little laughter and light conversation before the difficult truth had to be revisited. Jim had called Virginia while Betsy went to the lady’s room in Fuddruckers to splash cold water

on her face. Virginia and Susan knew about the icy cold reception from Dr. Finkleman, and the unkind task ahead of selecting funeral outfits for Betsy's parents.

What was worse was how distant Roberta was with Betsy. This was her family, a first cousin, and she'd seen Betsy several times a year since she was born. The doctor was much older than Betsy, but the grandmother had lived in Roberta's childhood home and she and Betsy had celebrated many holidays together. Betsy had always looked up to her older cousin because she was so smart in school.

Virginia was very concerned. She didn't think the doctor wanted to be involved; she was taking her frustration out on an innocent, young girl who was just orphaned. She filed that thought away for now and thought to herself how to get the funeral clothing assignment accomplished in the least upsetting way for Betsy.

"Susan and Betsy, please come into the kitchen, and bring Chèrie, too." The girls came in from the yard, Betsy cuddling Chèrie, and Virginia grabbed her car keys from the peg on the wall. "Let's pop over to Betsy's and find the clothing she likes the most that her mother and father wore for special occasions. Let's dress them to the nines. After all they are on their journey to Heaven, and we want them to look their best."

It was a weak attempt at making a daunting task less formidable for a fourteen year old, but Virginia didn't have time to analyze everything. She thought making it a group project would move it along faster with less time for Betsy to get lost in memories of her deceased parents, and the times when she'd seen them in the clothes she was packing for a total stranger to dress them for their funeral. "It's so final, that's it," Virginia said to herself, "the last glimpse before total separation on a physical level from the people who gave you life, the people you loved and relied on to be with you until you were an older adult."

"Here we are, Betsy. Oh my, look at the fantastic flowers, candles, messages, and stuffed animals filling the front porch. My Lord, Betsy, do you feel all the love and support for you from all over Lake Forest? I do. I can almost touch it."

Betsy put Chèrie down on the porch, and the three of them began reading the prayers and messages, even small audio recordings inside greeting cards, all expressing love and support for Betsy, and prayers for her parents.

Even Mrs. Newshell, her first year French teacher and ninth grade advisor, had baked her famous banana bread and attached a note, "I'm here whenever you need to talk, or just want more bread. My deepest sympathies," Sally Newshell.

There wasn't time for all the beautiful notes and remembrances, flowers, foods and stuffed animals. They had to select the clothing before two p.m., and they only had an hour.

When they went into the house, Betsy said, "I've come into an empty house before, but now it's almost as if the house knows mom and dad aren't returning. The house feels like it is sad too and doesn't know what will happen to it."

"I know, Bets," Susan said, "it feels different in here than before. Doesn't it, Mom?"

"Oh my, yes," Virginia thought to herself, "their energy, their spirits are no longer in the air, you can feel the void."

Ignoring Susan's comment, Virginia wanted to change the subject to something less heavy. "Betsy, take us to the master bedroom. We don't have much time before the messenger comes."

There wasn't a delicate way to do this task. They were touching the clothes of loved ones who'd been alive yesterday, and choosing outfits for their burials. This was a cruel task to assign a young girl. Virginia thought there must be a kinder way to do this. Dr. Finkleman was Betsy's relative. She should have come to Lake Forest and done this with her cousin, Betsy, but the doctor apparently put her own needs before Betsy's. Virginia was very concerned about how Roberta would change Betsy's life.

"I like this periwinkle blue suit for my mother. She wore it for Easter Sunday last year and we had a wonderful brunch in the Botanical Gardens. She was happy and laughing with my Dad and me and our friends, the Singers. For my dad, I'll pick the dark blue pin stripe suit he wore that day, and his favorite red tie." Betsy kept the suits on the hangers and handed them to Virginia. Shoes and undergarments were chosen next, and then Betsy had to decide if jewelry was permitted. "Virginia, is it O.K. if we put earrings on my mom?"

"I don't know, Bets," Virginia said. "If they're costume jewelry it's probably O.K., but valuable jewelry, I don't recommend. You might want to keep those, and your

guardian might have an estate sale of the things you don't keep. What earrings did you have in mind?"

"I know Mom liked these antique earrings that my dad gave her for their first anniversary. They are solid gold, but I'd like her to have them with her."

"Why don't you take them with you to the funeral home before the service? If the funeral director and your guardian approve, he can have them put on your mom then. I don't think giving fine jewelry to a messenger is a good idea."

"You're right, Virginia. I'll keep them with me for now. I think we have everything for the messenger. I'm getting really depressed; do you think we can wait outside on the front porch?"

Virginia and Susan took all the clothing and let Betsy take in all the expressions of sympathy on the porch. Chèrie stayed close on her heels sniffing at the toys and food and wagging her tail.

It wasn't long before a white van pulled into the driveway with Flash Messenger Service painted in a lightning bolt design on its side panel. The driver was an older man, with a white shock of hair combed over his brow and a kindly smile as he approached them. In a gesture of courtesy, he removed his Flash Messenger cap, approached the porch and introduced himself.

Virginia quickly gathered up the clothing, and bags of shoes, and underclothing. The messenger took the things from her, put them in the van and returned with a clipboard. "Just need a short description of the items and your signature and I'll be out of your hair." Virginia wrote the description and number of items, signed for Betsy, took the receipt, and the driver was off.

It was too difficult to stay at the Butter's residence; they locked up, took some of the things on the front porch with them, and returned to Lorraine Lane. Mr. Traa was at his office. The house was quiet, and all four of them found a comfortable chair, or couch and quickly fell asleep.

While Betsy continued sleeping, the Traas planned what they would do to help her make it through the ordeal of the funeral, and the next meeting with her cousin/guardian. Nobody thought it would be a solution with Betsy's happiness in mind.

Chapter 3

The Day after Tomorrow

It was as bad as she expected, the worst day of her life. She didn't know what to do with herself as she stood looking at the two people in the open caskets in the Weinstein Funeral Chapel in Skokie, Illinois.

They were her parents, but they were like mannequins, not real people. The life, the spirit was gone. She didn't feel their presence, the love and security the three of them had shared. Her cousin thought it best for her to keep the earrings for herself to help remember her mother. Betsy didn't need a pair of earrings to remember her mother, she had fourteen years of memories of her mother and father inside of her, and that's how she would keep them alive for her, always.

She put a note inside the casket of each parent. The message was the same for each, "I love you forever, please watch over me. Your, Betsy. xoxoxoxoxo"

The chapel was overflowing with visitors for the Butter's service. There was no living immediate family other than Dr. Finkleman; Betsy had thought of family friends as family.

Susan had no trouble getting the word out to the kids in Lake Forest High and many of the seniors volunteered to drive any friend of Betsy's to the service. When the seats were filled, the friends of Betsy and of her parents lined the reception hall outside the chapel. Jim and Virginia had contacted other friends of the Butters and each of the couples offered to do what Betsy would have done if she'd been an adult.

The floral arrangements were so many that after the service they would be taken to several seniors' homes for the residents to enjoy. Several caterers, who had catered for the Butters' or the Traa's charitable and community events, provided the refreshments for after the service.

The Lake Forest First Presbyterian Church choir performed the hymns, and the service was presided over by a rabbi and a priest. It was an ecumenical event to remember. Betsy could only hope that her parents were somehow seeing and hearing, or sensing this beautiful tribute to them. She remembered the speeches and the laughter and tears, the hugs and hand shakes, the food and drink, and most of all, the emptiness when the day had finally ended with the private interment in Lake Forest Cemetery.

She was totally alone for the first time in her life, except for the Traas. She knew they loved her and were looking out for her, but they weren't family. Her best friend's parents were now the closest to parents that she had. "What would I do without them?" she asked herself as she wiped her tears with the last fresh tissue in her pocket.

She took one final look at the setting as the caskets were lowered into the ground and whispered to herself, "If you must lie buried in the ground for eternity, I can't think of a more beautiful and peaceful place. I promise I will come to visit you whenever I can. I love you."

Chapter 4

Bon Voyage

The last place she thought she should be was Wildfire restaurant in Glenview, but that's where she was one hour after seeing her parents' caskets lowered into the ground.

Dr. Finkleman was in a festive mood for someone who'd just left a funeral. Betsy didn't get it, but Virginia thought, perhaps, Dr. Finkleman meant this to be a celebration of the Butters' lives, not an evening of mourning. Virginia and Jim joined in as Roberta raised a toast to Louis and Sheila. The girls were invited to share the Montepulciano, a little wine was what the doctor ordered. Dinner was delicious.

Everyone ate with gusto except Betsy, who picked at a meal she would normally have consumed like a true gourmand. Five desserts were ordered for everyone to share: turtle, and key lime pie, fudge brownie a la mode, raspberry flan and five layer coconut-lemon cake.

Satiated and mellowed, the doctor asked the waiter to clear the table and bring her the bill. After the waiter returned the doctor's credit card and receipt, Dr. Finkleman cleared her throat and launched into one of her professional recitations. "Betsy, I'm not going to ask the Traas to leave while I discuss my decisions as your guardian unless you object."

"No, I want them to stay."

"Betsy, I spoke with your guidance counselor and she tells me that your passion seems to be foreign language and cultures. Is that right?"

“Oh, yes, Roberta, I could study French all day, and in college I can study more than one language. In Lake Forest High, I have to choose between French and Spanish. I read on the Internet that linguists recommend learning French before Spanish, so I’m doing that, but I want to learn Spanish, Chinese and Russian too.”

“Well, I’ve done research on schools where you can study French and learn first hand about foreign cultures, because you live and study with girls from France and other foreign countries. Doesn’t that sound marvelous?”

“Yeah, but what about Lake Forest? I don’t want to leave my friends and my home.”

“Betsy, there’s no way we can keep the home in Lake Forest. It has to be sold and the proceeds invested to pay for your support. The sooner we get it sold, the less money from your parents’ savings has to be spent to maintain a family house. I’ve thought about it, and it makes the most sense to make sure your life gets back to normal as soon as possible, and the finances in your parents’ estate get maximized.”

For a few moments nobody said anything. Next, Betsy asked the obvious, “So where am I going if I can’t stay in Lake Forest?”

“You’re on your way to Switzerland, Betsy, to the pensionnat de Château Mont Blanc, near Geneva! Doesn’t that sound exciting?”

“What’s a pensionnat?”

“It’s a boarding school. This one’s for girls only. There are students of different ages from all over the world. Some come to learn French and other languages and cooking, interior design, art and art history. Others come to prepare for exams to enter European universities. The Americans come for French and special American classes that are needed to graduate from high school in America. You’ll be there for academics, but you may take an art class for your non academic hour. I know you like to sculpt and paint like your father.”

“What about Chèrie and my things? How can I go so far away from all my friends?”

“Betsy, this isn’t the Dark Ages. We have cell phones, Skype, email, and maybe the Traas will keep Chèrie. You can visit her when you come home for summer vacation. We can’t debate about this. I’m entrusted with your care and management of the finances, and I’ve made the move. The tuition was been wired to the school. Long goodbyes will only make you more depressed.

“I have a list of the clothing and other things you should pack; everything else you will get in Switzerland. If the Traas help you, I think you can be on your way next week to your new school. All righty, then. You’ve already missed a lot of the fall term, so it’s time to hustle!”

Virginia and Jim knew what Roberta Finkleman was doing. The solution did get Betsy out of her hair, and it probably wasn’t as cold a solution as it seemed to Betsy. After all, other than the doctor, Betsy had no immediate family and somehow Betsy had to be supervised, housed, educated, and entertained. This was a one stop fix, and Betsy would be immersed in all things French and foreign to her life in Lake Forest.

Betsy was speechless, crumpled physically and emotionally. She’d had too many shocks in less than a week. She hadn’t processed the death of her parents. Now, she was being packed up like an unwelcome house guest and sent to a strange place across the Atlantic Ocean.

The doctor was the first to stand, and grab her purse and doggie bag with Betsy’s uneaten filet. Next, she leaned down to kiss Betsy’s cheek. “Bon voyage, Bets.” She patted Virginia’s back, looked at the Traas, and said she’d call them in the morning with the timetable. If they couldn’t keep Chèrie, she thought her nurse Stella would love to take her. “Au revoir,” the doctor caroled. Then she was gone in a flash.

“Too darn efficient,” Virginia thought to herself.

Chapter 5

Dépêche-toi

Swept up like a brittle autumn leaf in a Lake Forest wind storm, Betsy mindlessly followed commands with a minimum of thought or feeling. Her consciousness couldn't be taxed anymore. Eat, sleep, pack.

When she stopped to look at everything in her home, all the material symbols of her life with her parents, she would cry. Soon she forced herself to stop thinking and just function on a physical level. Susan and her parents were very concerned about Betsy's mental state; she was withdrawing from reality more everyday.

Virginia and Susan did all the packing for Betsy. Jim was on the phone with Dr. Finkleman everyday at five p.m. He had to update her on the progress of getting Betsy's things boxed for storage, before the estate sale people could come to catalog everything in the house for a sale.

Dr. Finkleman had a rigid timeline for Betsy and for disposing of the house and its contents. Jim thought the doctor might also have Betsy on the list of what to dispose. Unless he told Roberta how Betsy was doing, the doctor didn't discuss her as anything more than a task to complete before the flight to Switzerland. "I'm not worried about that," the doctor would say to Jim when he expressed his concern for Betsy's mental state.

The Traas could appreciate the doctor's efficiency, but it was on an accelerated track that didn't account for human emotions, and a certain amount of time for a young girl to begin to work through the natural stages of mourning.

Nothing, including her young cousin's well being, stood in the way of Dr. Finkleman's timeline for sending Betsy off to Europe and selling the Butters' family home. The suitcases were packed, the boxes for storage sealed and labeled, and the Traas would adopt Chèrie as a second child.

Everyone under Dr. Finkleman's command was running on adrenaline on the day before Betsy's departure. Virginia had been pumping Boost drinks into everyone, except Chèrie, since the funeral. Vitamin waters, trail mix, string cheese, Laughing Cow cheese, Triscuits, and live culture yoghurt were stock piled. If meals weren't easy for any of them to consume, at least the grazing foods were nutritious.

Betsy wasn't eating much, but the Traas had an all American barbecue as a send off dinner the night before her departure. Friends of Betsy or her parents were invited and the Traas put on a marvelous spread of barbecued brisket, short ribs, chicken, corn, slaws, relishes, and homemade desserts. Friends brought more food and drinks. Virginia knew if there were any leftovers, she'd have a few dinners already prepared. She could use a break after the whirlwind preparations for Betsy's departure.

It was almost midnight when Betsy kissed the Traas goodnight, and fell into bed with Chèrie for her last night in Lake Forest for a long time to come.

Chapter 6

Never Say Good-bye

There was no easy way to say good-bye without sadness. Nobody said it that morning. Hugs and kisses were exchanged between Betsy, the Traas, and Chèrie, and then time had run out. The gangway door was being closed to Air France flight 227, en route to Geneva, with a stop over in New York City. Ready or not, it was time for Betsy to move on.

Her legs were wobbling like Jell-O. Betsy was all alone, really alone, for the first time in her life. She had no parents, no friends, and no home address. She was on a plane headed for a foreign country thousands of miles from the only place on the globe she'd called home.

The seat next to her was occupied by a smartly dressed elderly lady with fly away cotton candy white hair, thin lips in hot pink lip gloss, and brilliant green eyes. Her name was Mrs. Rosenberg, and she was only going as far as New York City, where she lived. She immediately covered her eyes with a black satin sleep mask, popped earplugs in her ears, and settled in for a nap.

With nothing else to do, Betsy unwrapped her earphones, found a channel with the Foo Fighters, and waited for the take off.

She wanted to see if they would fly over anything she recognized. On a trip she'd taken with her parents to Florida, she'd seen Lake Forest from the plane when it took off and turned around to head on its flight path.

They had a long wait on the runway. Just as Betsy was ready to close her eyes and take a nap, the plane surged forward, the wheels were raised, and up they climbed. Up, up they ascended and into a turn that took them right over the Lake Forest High School.

Tears welled into her eyes; but not wanting to look like a cry baby when she reached New York, Betsy forced herself to hold in the tears and think about the school mates she was about to meet. Her cousin had arranged for her to be on the same flight with a few other girls who were going to the same school in Montreux. They would board in New York City, and then, she'd have plenty of conversation for the long flight over the Atlantic Ocean.

Landing gear down, there was the screech of brakes and the long taxi to the terminal. Finally, the seatbelt light went off and it was time to disembark. Ready or not, Betsy was on her way to find the girls who might be as frightened as she about this unknown adventure.

She didn't have to look far to see two girls several years older than she standing together and talking. Were these the girls going to her school? As she approached them her insecurity loomed, she felt herself stooping. These girls were dressed like women, not girls, and they had make up and hair styles like college girls. She looked like a silly school girl and they looked like fashion models.

"Hi, are you going to Château Mont Blanc?" Betsy asked.

Almost in unison, they said yes. The tall slender blond with a pageboy, cerulean blue eyes and a face reminiscent of Grace Kelly, was Valerie Jones from Greenwich, Connecticut. She was a twenty year old model and wanted to learn French before she modeled in Paris with photographer Hendrick Soames (whoever he was).

Susan Whitaker was a sophisticated and aggressive looking eighteen year old. She had wise, deep green eyes, and a chin length angular haircut with thick bangs hiding her beautiful eye brows. Her lips were full and busy moving as she talked and juggled a cigarette at the same time. She looked like she could be in trouble with adults and just not

care. Betsy wasn't sure about her. "I'm in seat fifty-four," she said, "where are you guys?"

Valerie was no where near seat fifty-four; Susan was only a few rows away, but not close enough to talk. "Is anybody else going with us?" Betsy asked with a hopeful tone.

In an accent similar to a character in *My Cousin Vinny*, from behind her, Betsy heard, "Hey wait for me, you guys." Betsy saw Valerie and Susan roll their eyes before she turned around to see a tiny butter ball of a teen, also older than she, with practically no hair. It was more like platinum blond fuzz. She had a pixie nose, and small pale blue eyes theatrically made up in purple eye shadow, black liner and false eyelashes. A cigarette was dangling from the corner of her sliver of a mouth. She asked if it was time to go.

Susan and Valerie shook their heads in the affirmative and the curious little lady waddled over to the waiting area to grab a carry on. Her skirt was so short and so tight that Betsy thought it might tear mid-waddle. To add to her "crashy" look, the girl was wearing three inch stiletto heels. Without heels, Betsy judged her just under five feet tall. When she returned, she went up to Betsy and asked, "You too? I'm Cheyanne, from New York City."

Trying to be diplomatic in identifying Cheyanne's accent, Betsy asked, "Are you from Manhattan?"

"I'm from Westchester Square, *the Bronx*. Where you from?"

"I'm from a suburb of Chicago, Lake Forest."

Betsy had found the person sitting in the seat next to her. She wasn't sure she was going to enjoy the flight. She hoped she'd understand what Cheyanne was saying. They heard the steward announce the flight to Geneva was ready for boarding.

"That's some bag you got, Betsy. A purse covered in pony skin," Cheyanne shouted loud enough for most of the waiting room to hear.

Embarrassed, Betsy replied in a normal voice, "My mom gave this to me for my birthday this year. No ponies were hurt. It's fake, but it is big enough for me to use as a small suitcase for overnights or to carry my poodle, Chèrie. My mom just died and I don't ever want to lose this purse. It reminds me of her."

“Geez, I’m sorry,” Cheyanne said. “My ma died when I was born. It’s a bummer with no ma. It’s just me and my pop. I’m the only girl he’s got and he says I’m all he can handle.”

Betsy hoped Château Mont Blanc had a translator for Cheyanne who spoke whatever it was she spoke instead of English. Betsy didn’t think Cheyanne was a student or interested in learning French, but her crashy make up, dress and speech could be misleading. Still, Betsy would never imagine a girl like Cheyanne in a Swiss “pensionnat de jeunes filles”.

When they boarded the plane, Betsy was surprised to see so many young guys in US Army uniforms; she’d never been in the same place with that many soldiers. They were quite rowdy and the aircraft, unlike earlier, reeked of alcohol. The soldiers must have boarded directly from the tarmac without coming inside the terminal with the civilian passengers. She could see a US Army airplane parked close to the Air France. She didn’t know where they’d come from or where they were going, but many of them looked and acted drunk.

Betsy was walking behind Cheyanne and several soldiers lunged out of their seats to grab Cheyanne’s bum or boobs. Cheyanne just kept waddling by their seats. Betsy couldn’t see her face, but she heard Cheyanne say, “Let’s have a brew latter.”

This flight across the Atlantic was going to be longer than she’d imagined. They reached their seats and settled in for take off. Cheyanne didn’t seem a bit upset by the pawing and cat calls; quite the contrary, Betsy thought Cheyanne liked it.

It was dark outside and Betsy kept her eyes on the twinkling lights of New York as the plane climbed and turned and headed away from the USA over the Atlantic Ocean. Before she knew it, everything was black except for the twinkling lights on the plane’s wing. This was it: she was leaving her country, her home and everyone she knew. She thought to herself, “This must be part of growing up.”

They were served a warm ham and cheese sandwich with hot mustard sauce on a croissant, chips and a chocolate brownie for dinner. Betsy had two diet Cokes; Cheyanne asked for a Bud, but she didn’t have the proper ID and the steward wouldn’t serve her alcohol. Cheyanne said she wasn’t tired and was going to talk to some of the “smoking”

soldiers. Betsy was actually relieved that she was leaving her alone. She had a new issue of *In-Style* in her big pony purse to keep her busy.

She awoke to the hum of the engines; the cabin was in dark except for a few reading lights. Cheyanne wasn't in her seat.

The steward walked by a few minutes later, and Betsy asked him how much longer. He said they were about two hours out, before beginning their descent into Geneva. The captain would tell them when he began the descent.

Betsy had to go pee or she wondered if she should now say it in French, pee pee. As she made her way to the toilets in the back of the cabin, she saw fuzzy platinum blond hair poking out above a big army green/brown colored blanket in seats sixty-four and sixty-five.

A soldier's jacket was strewn over the blanket. Betsy studied the insignia on the sleeve and saw the name Scanlon on the pocket flap. Nothing else was showing except two bare feet poking out the other end. No, there were four feet and two were men's feet with black socks. The soldier in the seat behind them scolded her in a drunken slur, "Don't disturb my buddy, little lady. He's caught an awesome 'fly'." Apparently, Cheyanne had found an Army man to keep her busy on the long flight.

When she returned to her seat, Betsy managed to fall asleep for almost an hour. She was awakened by a call button to find the new day dawning. Against the pale blue sky an egg yolk sun appeared on the horizon. The fasten seatbelt sign was flashing and the captain announced the plane was beginning its descent.

The steward asked the passengers to return to their seats, put their tray tables upright and fasten their seatbelts. Cheyanne was a no show. Betsy couldn't have cared less. The descent was much faster than the take off and very quickly the wheels were lowered and then the thump, thump of the wheels to the pavement, fast breaking, screeching, and taxing to the airlock.

Betsy exited the plane and made her way to the waiting area as Roberta had instructed her. She was to look for a driver with a sign with Château Mont Blanc and go in his car with the other girls to school. It was easy to spot the sign and she hurried over to the driver. "Bonjour," she said. "Parlez-vous Anglais?"

“Yes, mademoiselle,” the driver said, tipping his cap in respect, “if you give me zee billet, the ticket for your valise, I will collect it. I wait for the others and then we get all the suitcases and go to the car.” Betsy handed him her luggage stub and turned around to the sound of laughter of young girls. Susan and Valerie were in high spirits. Betsy didn’t know what was so funny until they approached her.

In unison they caroled, “Little Miss, ‘the Bronx’, is totally stoned, whacked out. She can hardly waddle over here.” Betsy looked beyond them and saw a disheveled Cheyanne ambling toward them shoes in one hand, overnight kit in the other, her eye makeup smeared on her blouse. She needed a bath.

In her Bronx accent, she asked where she could buy a Starbuck’s. The driver laughed at her and politely responded, “Mademoiselle, this is Genève, Suisse, we have the much superior café, non? If you give to me the ticket for your valise, I go now and get all and then we go to the customs, non?” Susan and Valerie had given him their luggage stubs and were taking coffee orders.

“My treat, Betsy, Cheyanne,” Valerie said. “Anyone want a café crème, sugar, no sugar?”

“Thanks, Valerie, just crème is fine. Merci,” Betsy said.

“Shit,” Cheyanne mumbled, “I can’t find my stub.” She was rummaging around in her purse. She stirred the contents of the purse with her hand tossing and turning cosmetics, pantyhose, a brassiere, bikini panties. “It’s not here.”

“How’d you know?” Valerie said snidely. “It’s a pig sty in there.”

“Hey, driver,” Cheyanne shouted, “can you get my bag without my stub? Say something in French for me?”

The driver said he couldn’t get the valise. It was impossible without a stub, but perhaps with her passport, after all the other baggage was collected, he could get the release of her suitcase.

Cheyanne wasn’t making any friends among her classmates. Now they would have to hang around the airport just because Cheyanne was a disorganized mess.

Susan asked the driver if he’d go get all the other bags and take them to customs so the three of them with stubs could go through customs, while they were waiting on

Cheyenne. “Mais oui, I go now for the bags, and the mademoiselle without the ticket, you come with me to show me your valise.”

Valerie, Susan and Betsy went for the cafés crèmes. Valerie and Susan lit up and smoked while they drank their café. Betsy was making a mental note to herself to remember her first cup of European café crème. It was full fat crème no doubt about it, and the coffee was very strong with a hint of something she didn't recognize. She asked Valerie, and she said it was chicory; added to coffee originally by the French to soften the bitter taste.

While they waited for the driver and Cheyanne, the three girls learned more about each other. Valerie's mother had been a successful model and married a wealthy socialite, Valerie's father. She had two older brothers, one an investment banker with Chase, and the other, a plastic surgeon. Valerie had already spent a winter term in Château Mont Blanc the prior school year. Betsy thought Valerie would be a great resource for learning the ins and outs of this new school.

Susan was the daughter of a New York pharmaceutical CEO. She'd been to several of the best academic boarding schools on the East and West coasts; apparently she really was trouble and expelled from all three of her prior schools. She was super smart; school was easy for her, and she sneaked out at night to go to clubs.

Betsy was the youngest in the group. Cheyanne was seventeen, and according to Susan and Valerie, she was sent to Château Mont Blanc to keep her away from her boyfriend in New York. He was always in trouble with the law, and her father wanted her to stay out of trouble and learn to be a lady. Betsy didn't think that would happen without a true miracle.

“Guys, Marcel, the chauff's at customs wick your bags. I found mine but they won't give it over until all the udder bags on our flight have gone through customs. I'll meet you there, I need cigs.”

It was a long line, but mercifully the soldiers weren't going through the same one. The girls were in line, one after the other, and nobody had any problems. Betsy remembers the kick-ass custom's guy welcoming her to la Suisse in French and English. Cheyanne was next. She looked like she'd slept under a freeway overpass. Marcel told her she was to check herself into the country and the customs inspector would give her a

special paper which he would take to the luggage clerk. If they were lucky, customs would then, inspect her bag, and release it to her, without anymore delay.

The three girls and Marcel waited for Cheyanne to produce her passport so they could get this show on the road. Everyone was tired and hungry and with traffic it was almost an hour's drive to Montreux. The jet lag was kicking in for Betsy. Her feet hurt and she was starting to get homesick.

“Mademoiselle, ton passport, s’il vous plaît!” the customs inspector demanded.

“I can’t find it,” Cheyanne said casually as if it wasn’t a big deal.

“What?” Valerie steamed. “Let me look in that garbage can you call a purse!” Valerie scraped through it and Susan threw up her hands and said, “Marcel, let’s leave Cheyanne here. Take us and leave her until someone from the school can come back and take her to the consulate for a new passport. I’m not waiting here any longer for her. She’s an idiot!”

Marcel was already on the telephone to the school asking for instructions. “Mais oui,” he said, “comment vous disez, monsieur. Yes, Cheyanne, you are not able to enter zee country without a passport. Please stay here in customs. Monsieur Pierre from Château Mont Blanc and a person from the US consulate will come here to make for you emergency papers, until a new passport is made. You are not to leave this room. Comprenez-vous?”

“Yeah, I get the message. I won’t go anywhere. What’s this Pierre look like?”

“He’s tall for a Frenchman, much more than me, maybe forty the age, aviator sunglass over the eyes when he drives, black hair, but do not worry, he knows how you look.” Marcel put all the bags except for Cheyanne’s on a big rolling table and pushed it out to the sidewalk. Soon he had the limo loaded and the girls were on their way, less one disorderly mademoiselle.

Valerie thought Cheyanne should be sent back to New York. “This school won’t know what to do with her. She’ll be in Madame Gastang’s office all the time.”

Betsy said she felt sorry for her. “Sure, she’s bag, but her mom died when she was born. Maybe she’ll straighten out. I don’t think her dad wants her back in New York.”

“I’ve been kicked out of enough schools to know if she doesn’t shape up, she’ll be sent home at Christmas,” Susan added.

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 first 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.