

THE
PARISIAN
CHAPTER

ALSO BY JANET SKESLIEN CHARLES

Miss Morgan's Book Brigade: A Novel

The Paris Library: A Novel

Moonlight in Odessa: A Novel

THE
PARISIAN
CHAPTER



A Novel

JANET SKESLIEN CHARLES

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To my agent, Heather Jackson

But what if we let time pass, looking at an incident in the rearview mirror rather than at the moment of impact? We can wave goodbye to it, but still see it so clearly, captured in a pristine reflection. And what do we gain? Perspective, wisdom, and perhaps not acceptance—some things do not deserve to be accepted, after all—but at least a sense of calm.

—JAMI ATTENBERG,

I Came All This Way to Meet You: Writing Myself Home

Chapter 1

JANUARY 1995

Lorenzo Bruni—head librarian

I'm on the Front Line, the first librarian that people encounter when they enter the American Library in Paris. And let me tell you, people are pains. My colleagues and boss, Quentin Hayes III, have no idea what it's like to deal with the public. Day after day, year after year, I stand at attention behind the circ desk, waiting for patrons to ambush me. Like today. Katie Hunt slinks over to return a pile of torn magazines. Her kid ripped the *Family Circle* to shreds, and she wants all to be forgiven. I want to shout that we're in a foreign country—we can't just go to the store to pick up another copy. But Hayes gave strict orders not to yell. While I'm taping pages, old Mike Roth saunters in with a baguette sandwich sticking out of his book bag. Hayes won't let me kick him out because *he paid for his membership like everyone else*. Before I can inform the loudmouth that the library isn't a picnic area, Jennifer de Narp storms over. Using her Louis Vuitton clutch as a pointer, she calls my attention to a burned-out lightbulb in the reading room and orders me to change it. I want to say that our handyman will handle it, but Hayes won't let me refuse her. She's one of the Select Few, insanely rich donors. While I dig the ladder out of the broom closet, Mazie Chester sneaks past in her neon-green greatcoat. It's been a decade since she paid for a membership, but Hayes won't let me confront her. His logic: if we're nice to her, she'll leave her

fortune to the library instead of to Morris Templeman, her cat. This place is a revolving door of loons.

And speaking of revolving doors, another program manager left without a goodbye. Lizzy cleared off her desk and spelled out “I QUIT” with Saul Bellow paperbacks. We weren’t surprised by the resignation—not many can hack the job, or Hayes—but the choice of Bellow puzzled us. She only lasted six months before she huffed home to Auckland.

Contrary to what you might think, some people don’t *want* to be in Paris. Perhaps their spouse got transferred here for work, and they trailed behind. Countless writers have followed in the soused footsteps of F. Scott Fitzgerald, and they stick around because they have more pride than brains. Or like me, they came to study at the Sorbonne and stayed for love. Bound by a passion for the same subject, many of us fell for a French classmate. Reciting your vows by the light of a hundred flickering flames during a candlelit Mass at Notre-Dame seems romantic. And it is, until the love of your life cheats. By then, there are children. The French divorce court won’t allow you to leave the country—not if you want to go with your kids, anyway. I long to move back to my native Sicily to be closer to family. But until my twins turn eighteen, I’m stuck in Paris. Ten more years to go. In my parenting support group, we call it a prisoner-of-war situation.

When you live abroad, eventually—no matter your age or situation—catastrophe strikes back home. Say your mom gets cancer. You’re torn between returning to nurse her for a few months or staying put to reassure your kids, who are back to bed-wetting because of the split. You choose your children, which means your siblings—who bear the brunt of caretaking—hate you. Your mother passes, *and you weren’t there*. For the rest of your life, guilt is an acid that eats at you.

Anywonder people in this town are wound so tight? To escape the whiny patrons and nagging phones, I follow the nonfiction stacks from 355 (*The Art of War* by Sun Tzu) to 970.3 (*Trail of*

Tears by John Ehle); skirt the spartan back office, where unlike me, support staff work without constant interruption; sneak past the land mine of Hayes's corner office; and climb the clanging metal stairs to the Afterlife.

On this deserted mezzanine, a wingback chair and gray couch bathe in the gentle light that filters through the cracked plexiglass ceiling. Three walls teem with musty classics, while the fourth holds unpublished manuscripts. Encased in matching blue boxes, each tale is an unexpected gift. The engrossing account of a female firefighter who battles blazes and sexism, or the Algerian baker who "rises" to fame when his bread wins the premier prize in the city of Paris's best baguette competition. I've read all but three manuscripts. I just want to sink in the chair to savor a story—and ten minutes of peacetime—before returning to the battlefield.

But I see that moron Roth left half of his ham sandwich on a shelf, the butter soaking into *David Copperfield's* spine. I fetch a paper towel to mop up his mess.

"Hell is other people," Sartre wrote. Certainly while sitting in the American Library in Paris.

Chapter 2

JANUARY 1995

Lily Jacobsen—job applicant

Six years ago, when my best friend and I landed in Paris, our first stop was the Eiffel Tower, where we savored our escape from wheat fields and church socials. In daydreams, I'd pictured us alone, the vast esplanade ours. But there were thousands of people, more on this city block than in our entire hometown. I breathed in the buttery aroma of crepes from *le snack-bar*. Even the air was different here—filled with energy, with the sound of taxis (taxis!) honking, siblings laughing as their cameras clicked, lovers murmuring to each other. Milling under the latticed iron legs, some folks gaped at a pair of shiny-faced soldiers on patrol, each carrying a Kalashnikov; others bought trinkets (Eiffel Tower key chains or bottle openers) from street hawkers; but most were like Mary Louise and me—they peered up in absolute awe.

After jostling between busloads of tourists to board the elevator, she and I lingered on the top. First, we soaked in the view of the city, which seemed to go on forever, like the plains back home in Montana. Then, she sketched the people in the park below, while I penned a postcard to my neighbor Odile, the Frenchwoman who'd set us on this path. *We're here, we're here, we're here! Following our dreams, seeing where you lived and loved and read.* I slid the card into the yellow mailbox so it would have a postmark from la Tour Eiffel on July 14, 1989, the bicentennial of the French Revolution.

Mary Louise and I crossed over the invincible lawn of the Champ de Mars, where Parisians picnicked on park benches. Near a trellis of jasmine, a group of girlfriends in bright bustiers clinked champagne glasses—maybe to celebrate Bastille Day, maybe just happy to have a day off work. Looking closer, we noted their guilotine earrings, a playful, macabre commemoration of *La Révolution*. Everything was astonishing to us—flowers, food, fashion. We didn't know which way to turn our heads.

Continuing along, we found ourselves in front of a pastry shop. The window display was as intricate as any painting in a museum. We only meant to pop in, but the cakes—small pieces of perfection—deserved our full attention. The customer in front of us couldn't make up his mind. Who could blame him? The éclairs were long and slim; the Paris-Brest, named for the famed bicycle race, were shaped like wheels; and the *religieuses* were plump, like the nuns who'd inspired them. When it was our turn, I said, "*Deux éclairs au chocolat, s'il vous plaît.*" The words felt as good on my tongue as the chocolate.

Following the shadow of the Eiffel Tower, Mary Louise and I turned onto a side street and headed down the block, toward the banner that heralded the hallowed American Library in Paris. I touched the blue canvas, needing to feel concrete proof that we were actually here.

When I was a kid, listening to Odile's stories, especially of her time working at the ALP, had made me want to live in France. Mary Louise and I hatched a scheme to study at the Sorbonne. With Odile's help, we figured out the application process and the visa paperwork. Though I was the one who wanted it the most, I wouldn't have been brave enough without Mary Louise.

Now, her eyes met mine. "Ready?" she asked.

"*Oui, oui, oui!*" I gushed. Some people burst into song when they are happy; I burst into French. Fortunately, Mary Louise was used to my weird ways.

I tugged on the brass door handle. Beyond the deserted wel-

come table I spied tall racks of magazines, a scraggly palmetto that reached toward the window, kids playing with blocks in the children's room. Mary Louise followed me to 820, where we opened Odile's favorite books, *The Priory* and a dog-eared copy of *Persuasion*, to scour the cards for her signature. In the reading room, I ran my fingertips along a scarred table and wondered if the backward braille of indentations had been formed by her pen. At the circulation desk, I searched for Odile in the eyes of the dapper librarian, but at the mention of her name, his expression remained blank.

I asked him about Odile's long-lost friend, Margaret Saint James. They'd worked together at the ALP during the Occupation, but war and betrayal had separated them.

He raised a brow. "You expect to find employees from fifty years ago?"

Mary Louise opened her mouth, probably to say something conciliatory like *Not expecting, just hoping*, but I cut her off. "The Arc de Triomphe and Café de Flore are still here," I shot back in the same snotty tone he'd used with me.

"Why are you always so rude?" Mary Louise chided when we were back on the boulevard.

"He started it."

She grimaced. "As always, you ended it."



On my own, I tracked down Margaret's old atelier, which was located near the Montparnasse Cemetery. The current owner told me she'd retired and gone to South Africa to be with her daughter. I wrote to inform Odile and asked if she wanted me to keep digging. *It's a blessing to know she's with family*, she penned in elegant cursive. *I don't want to get my hopes up again. No more talk about the past. Let's look to the future. Tell me about the Sorbonne.*

The classes were challenging. Marie Louise and I tried to take notes, but the professors spoke more quickly than we could write. Luckily, there was respite on weekends. In the leafy allées of the

Tuileries, we shared picnics of baguettes and rotisserie chicken with other students—Yuka from Tokyo, Claudio from Seville, Mireille from Mulhouse. Even though we met new friends from all over the world, I still found Mary Louise the most interesting, the one whose opinion mattered the most, the one I wanted to spend time with.

At the tip of Île de la Cité, an island in the middle of the Seine, she balanced her easel on the cobblestones, sketching the willow tree whose slender branches licked at the river while I scribbled in my notebook, inspired by couples holding hands, by the accordionist playing “*La Vie en Rose*,” by the wistfulness of the clouds. She and I got lost in the labyrinths of the Louvre—the museum map was little help in navigating nine miles of corridors. *Can you believe we’re here?* Our eyes would meet, and we wouldn’t have to say a word. We roamed narrow streets until our feet throbbed, then we jumped on random city buses to admire chic *quartiers* in stop-and-go traffic. There was the blue bistro, its waiters in smart tuxedos; the mime breakdancing before the bronze statue of Ben Franklin; the melancholy shopgirl who stared out the window. Sometimes, I thought Mary Louise resembled her. When she thought I wasn’t looking, her mouth puckered the same way it did when she was about to cry. I worried she didn’t want to be here, that I’d pressured her into following me to France.

At the end of our first semester, late one night, curled up on our futon with only the dregs left in the bottle of red, I worked up the courage to ask, “Do you regret coming?”

“What makes you think that?”

“I miss my family, too.” I leaned forward, hoping she’d confide in me. “I wouldn’t blame you if you want to go back.”

She rolled her eyes. “To what? Cruising Main Street? That place is a dead end.”

I frowned. “I wouldn’t go that far.” Now that we lived thousands of miles away, I missed our small town.

“It was different for you.” Her fingers twitched, which meant

she was dying for a cigarette. “You were the smart one, I was the fuckup.”

“That’s not true.”

“In high school, you talked me out of doing dumb stuff.”

“Like what?” I demanded.

“That custom cutter whose eyes were as green as his John Deere combine.”

I snorted a laugh. “He was cute. But I said ‘what,’ not ‘who’!”

“Same dif. When Billy and I ditched class to make out under the bleachers, you talked sense into me. Without you, I might have been a teen mom, a dropout stuck cleaning motel rooms. You believed in me and made sure I graduated. You showed me the possibilities of the future. My possibilities. My future. No one in my family went to college. No one even had a passport. No one dreamed big for me like you did.”

“*Tu es fantastique.*” I didn’t say that her parents didn’t know her like I did.

Paris represented a fresh start for both of us—one where Mary Louise would find her path, and I would no longer be the tongue-tied teen who couldn’t talk to boys. I even spoke up for Mary Louise, who struggled with French. I would pen my debut novel, then return to my hometown a literary success. I wanted so much for us—fame, happiness, great boyfriends. Together, we’d accomplish what we could not alone, I told myself, without realizing that she’d responded to my question without answering it.

We were in France to be *artistes*, even if we often felt homesick and lost. I felt eclipsed by the city’s literary greats, so she talked up my chapters. What started as a tale of a girl running away from a suffocating small town became the story of a young woman seeking love in the world’s most romantic city. Between Jean-Luc, who stood me up; Pierre-Antoine, who put me down; and René-Charles, who used me to correct the wonky English of his dissertation, then dumped me when he was awarded his Ph.D., I wasn’t making much progress on finding that great romance. Neither was

Mary Louise. André dated her in the hope of getting a green card. Mickael had a goal of sleeping with a woman from every country. She was an unsuspecting character in chapter 43 of *Around the World in 80 Lays*.

Still, we didn't give up—on our art or on finding boyfriends. On Saturday nights at the Basement Brasserie, over bottles of inexpensive Bordeaux, we hung out with a handful of friends. Whenever one spoke in French, my gaze flitted to Mary Louise, who nodded along. I always ensured she was able to follow, sometimes whispering snippets of the conversation in English. When she responded in pidgin French, I listened, always interested in her opinion. A classmate had called our friendship “*fusionnelle*,” as if Mary Louise and I had been fused together, forged from small-town life.

As we scoped out Frenchmen, I joked that we should contact Guinness to find out if Mary Louise or I held the record for crap dates.

“It would be a tie,” she told the others.

“What was your worst date?” I asked her.

She stiffened. “I don't want to talk about it. And you shouldn't write about my failures.”

I wanted to argue that the dates weren't failures—those guys were jerks, and it wasn't her fault. But when she used that stilted tone, I knew not to argue.

An author's apprenticeship is a million words. I wrote during every spare moment—on the bus between tutoring sessions, on nights that Mary Louise spent with one of her on-again, off-again boyfriends. I'd planned to write a romantic comedy, but the novel had too many disappointing first dates and false starts. Though it meandered more than I'd intended, the plot was coming along. I couldn't say the same about my career. After graduation, it had taken months of sending out résumés to finally receive job offers.

Mary Louise worked as a receptionist at an upscale American dental clinic, while I was hired at Wall Street English. Teaching corporate jargon was not how I envisioned my career. Each time

I entered the classroom, my middle-aged students winced. The bankers insisted that my English class was a “hostile takeover” of their beloved French. The realtors complained that they were forced to “speak le business” in order to kowtow to international clients snatching up the best Parisian properties. I’d been certain my love of language would win them over, but after twelve months and fourteen days of their steaming resentment, I accepted my failure. Resigning had been a relief. To cover my share of the rent, I tutored enthusiastic pupils after school and on Saturday mornings. With the freedom to write during the day, I’d told myself it would take two months to polish my novel, and two more to sign with an agent. That was a year ago.

In Paris, almost everyone I knew wanted to publish a book. We came from Perth or Birmingham or Fargo with our Fitzgerald dreams and Hemingway aspirations, certain that the City of Light would nourish us.

Outside the university cocoon, Mary Louise and I soon learned that Paris was a big city like any other. Expensive. Agitated. Aloof. Even years after our arrival, she and I still shared a studio on the fifth floor of an old building. There was no elevator, but the steep servants’ stairs kept us in shape. If we peered out into the courtyard through our only window, we could look down on rich people—the portly CEO who brought home a gorgeous man every Friday night, the heart surgeon on the fourth floor whose lips were always pursed. It wasn’t much of a view, but we told ourselves it didn’t matter, we had all of Paris.

Our linoleum flooring was peeling, and the brocade wallpaper had bald spots, but we covered them with Mary Louise’s pastel painting of the Eiffel Tower. Her other canvases leaned against the walls. My manuscripts and accompanying letters of rejection were stacked in the corner. We used the pile as an end table; coffee rings stained the cover page of *French Kisses*, the chronicle of our misadventures with Parisian men. “We write to taste life twice,” Anaïs Nin said, and I took the adage to heart.

Today, on the way home from my final tutoring session of the day (triplets with wealthy parents), I splurged on some flowers for Mary Louise to commemorate the fourteenth, the date of our arrival in France. Marcelle, my favorite character in *The Library Card*, insisted that if you keep a bottle of champagne in your refrigerator, you'll always find something to celebrate. Life is hard, so it's vital to mark each victory. Thus, on the fourteenth of each month, Mary Louise and I commemorated our rebirth in Paris, our French-iversary.

Recently, she'd been withdrawn. We'd known each other since kindergarten, and for the first time in our lives, I couldn't discern what she was feeling. We ended up having what I called wordless fights: we'd talk until she retreated behind a wall of silence. Was it something work-related? Mary Louise didn't love answering phones in the dental office. When I suggested finding a better job, she retorted that the money was good. When I asked if she and her ex-boyfriend had a fight, she told me to mind my own business. Maybe she was still down because of what that obnoxious art dealer said about her paintings. Or maybe it was last night.

We'd attended our friend Paloma's going-away party. Despite the sangria, the gathering felt like a funeral. She was leaving us for a job in Miami. Since she could only take two suitcases, she divvied up her Parisian life, bequeathing books to me, an easel to Mary Louise, pans to Mireille, a futon to Yuka. Our group had been through bad grades, a pregnancy scare, bouts of homesickness, and more and more goodbyes. Though Paloma promised to return, Mary Louise and I knew that Paris was a trampoline town—once students bounced, they were gone for good.

"Another one bites the dust," Mary Louise said glumly as we trudged home.

Our social circle was tightening like a noose around the neck. Soon, our friends would all be gone. A thought bubbled up inside

me: maybe Mary Louise thought we should leave, too; maybe she was unhappy because she didn't want to be here anymore.

Now, I stared at the bouquet of mimosas I'd bought for her. If only she'd tell me what was wrong, I could fix it. If only she would confide in me.

Arriving home, I dumped my messenger bag onto the floor, next to sheets of paper and bits of charcoal. I grinned at the half-formed figures that Mary Louise had drawn. This was a good sign. After she'd pitched her artwork to Parisian galleries, she quit painting.

"What do you think?" I heard her say. She stood in the doorway, probably returning from the bathroom down the hall, which we shared with a Turkish journalist and an Italian singer. She'd braided her curly red hair in a crown, so it wouldn't get in her face as she sketched.

Peering at the drawings, I saw her father, snuff crammed in his cheek, and could practically smell the grease on his shirt after a long day at the garage.

"You captured him perfectly."

She shrugged. Maybe my praise didn't mean much.

I proffered the mimosas.

Mary Louise looked at me askance. "What's this?"

She had to ask? For our French-iversary five months ago, she'd signed us up for a group lesson on how to do *le cancan* at the Moulin Rouge. When I tried to raise my leg above my head like the dancer showed us, I tumbled backward onto the foam mat. Mary Louise joined me there, her belly laugh echoing throughout the theater.

"Something to celebrate the fourteenth," I replied.

"Oh! I guess I forgot."

She put the flowers in our only vase while I spooned some Carte Noire into our French press. I poured the milk, she the coffee, and we curled up on the futon with our mugs. She reeked of cigarettes, which meant she had a new boyfriend, and that he was French. I recalled Julien, who arrived exactly an hour late for

every date, as if his watch were set on Greenwich time. Or Louis, a creepy fashion photographer who took pictures of her while she slept. The one thing the men seemed to have in common was their smelly Gitanes cigarettes. I bawled her out every time they stunk up our studio. Consequence: It had been a while since she'd introduced one of her dates to me.

I hated that she smoked. I resented her secrecy. But fights about both had led nowhere, so I kept my mouth shut.

"I've been wanting to tell you something," she said.

Your latest guy? What's his name, Romain or Pierre? I wanted to tease, but lately she'd been so sensitive that I didn't dare. As I sipped my coffee, I gauged her tone. Concern. "Did something happen at home? Is your sister okay?"

She gnawed on her bottom lip, probably weighing her words. "I'm moving out."

"What?" My hands started to tremble, so I set my mug on my stack of manuscripts. Café au lait sloshed over the rim, turning the type into a milky gray cloud. The announcement had a similar effect on me, blurring my emotions and stirring up questions: Where was she going, and when? Why was she leaving me?

Coffee continued to creep across the page, taking with it any meaning. On any other day, I would have jumped up and dabbed the manuscript with fistfuls of napkins like an EMT performing CPR. After all, my words were my life. But now . . . I sat frozen as Mary Louise sopped up the mess with a cloth. I wanted to tell her not to bother, that the draft was lost, the mood ruined.

A month ago, she'd mentioned apartment hunting, but I hadn't realized she was serious.

"When are you moving out?" I didn't intend to sound angry. "When?" I demanded in a softer tone.

She wouldn't meet my eye. "As soon as you can make rent."

Mary Louise earned good money, and could afford to live on her own, unlike me. I loved teaching teens with my part-time tutoring gigs, but the pay barely covered my share of rent and food.

“What changed?” I turned away, focusing my attention on the bookcase so she wouldn’t see how upset I was. No need for her to feel as bad as I did.

“I need more space. We both do. Everyone our age is either getting married or getting their own place.”

Since when do we care what “everyone” is doing?

She arranged the drawings in her portfolio, careful not to smudge them. A way of giving me privacy as I absorbed the seismic shift in our relationship. Was it something I’d done—talked on the phone too much, smacked my cereal when she tried to sleep in? Something I hadn’t done—the dishes, taking out the garbage?

“It’s nothing you did or didn’t do,” she reassured me.

A part of me was heartened—as always, she read my mind. Another part was devastated.

We’d always been inseparable.

“I’ll only be a few métro stops away,” she said.

My head shot back. “You already found a place?” Somehow this news stung more than her initial announcement. “I’ll pick up more tutoring hours, or find a second job. I certainly don’t want to hold you back.”

“Don’t be like that.”

Words can reveal or conceal. To hide my hurt, I grabbed a copy of *FUSAC (France-USA Contacts)* and held it to my face. I skimmed the headlines—PRESIDENT BILL CLINTON INVOKES EMERGENCY POWERS. O.J. SIMPSON ON TRIAL FOR MURDER—before moving to the personal ads. Usually, we delighted in the random desires of strangers. (“Can you believe it? This one wants a woman who’ll nibble his toes!”) Coming from a straitlaced town, where folks had a tough time articulating their desires, we admired anyone who could admit what they wanted.

Now, Mary Louise ignored my ignoring her and plunked down beside me. She flipped to the next section, which happened to be job listings.

“You’re certainly eager to turn the page,” I muttered.

She looked like she wanted to say more. I waited for her to confide in me about her mystery guy. Or her future studio. Something.

“I’m worried about leaving you to pay rent on your own,” she said. “Just read.”

HLC, France’s second-best business school (source: *Finance Times*), seeks English instructors. Salary commensurate with degree. Travel costs reimbursed.

“Second-best” instead of “ranked second” brought a bitter smile to my lips. I was feeling second-best myself.

“Clearly, they need you,” Mary Louise said.

“You’re saying that because you want me to take any old job so you can move out.”

“I’m saying it because you’re a good teacher,” she responded in a low, even tone.

“No more business English.”

She handed me the charcoal, and I blacked out the entire ad.

The American Library in Paris is recruiting for a part-time Program Manager. Must be able to work evenings. Modest salary.

“*Oh, là, là!*” I drew five exclamation points beside the ad—a sign, a dream.

This was the first time I’d seen an ALP job advertised. On our visit there, we learned that a yearly membership cost a hundred bucks. I couldn’t justify paying that much, not when the Sorbonne library had a large English-language section.

“There’s probably tons of downtime there, so you’ll be able to write *and* research,” Mary Louise reasoned. “You’ll save money by using their printer. As an employee, I bet you can check out all the books you want and never pay any fines. And Odile will be so proud.”

She was selling me something I'd already bought. Glancing at Mary Louise's canvases propped against the wall, I realized that the sooner I had a steady paycheck, the sooner she'd be free to move out and hopefully resume painting. Last spring, in sundresses we used to wear to church, we'd schlepped six of her sixteen-inch canvases into the métro, zigzagging under the city from gallery to gallery. Ten owners rejected us immediately, but one accorded Mary Louise a chance. Her voice sang as she spoke of inspiration and Cubist techniques, of the esplanade of la Tour Eiffel meeting the plains of our native Montana. Listening to her broken French, I felt a burst of affection. There was no way he could say no.

"Conventional," he said with a dismissive sniff. "Boring."

I opened my mouth to rip him a new one; Mary Louise told me, "It's fine," even though I could see it wasn't. I placed my foot over hers, our shorthand for *I love you and everything will be okay*.

She didn't speak the whole way home.

When I'd dreamed of Paris, I imagined us in Montmartre, in apartments we'd bought. Over sparkling mimosas on my balcony, we'd watch silver clouds settle around the dome of the Panthéon. But we still lived in the studio that was supposed to be temporary. The only things more depressing than the rejections I received for my writing were monthly bank statements that whispered, "Failure." But I was willing to do what it took and knew Mary Louise felt the same.

I reread the program manager job description. My chances were slim. Everyone here was more qualified than me: I'd studied French, but Parisians learned two foreign languages in high school, plus many had college degrees in fields such as research analysis or public relations. I didn't want to go back to forcing bratty bankers to learn English, the sludgy bottom of the job barrel. And I didn't want anything to change our friendship, but I knew that Mary Louise was right: we needed to get on with our lives.

The next morning, I mailed off my résumé and cover letter. Four days later, as I opened a letter from a literary journal and ab-