

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

# LESLIE MEIER

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—KATE CARLISLE,

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A  
LUCY STONE  
MYSTERY

# FRENCH PASTRY MURDER

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FRENCH PASTRY MURDER

Published by Kensington Publishing Corporation

A Lucy Stone Mystery

# FRENCH PASTRY MURDER

LESLIE MEIER



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*For Anne Toole*

## Chapter One

Lucy Stone shut her eyes tight and rolled over, trying to ignore the ringing phone on her bedside table. When that didn't work, she wrapped a pillow over her ears and held it tight, but the ringing continued. She knew who was calling, and it was beginning to be a nuisance, these phone calls at five and six in the morning. Sighing, she glanced at the clock, which read 6:30, noting a small improvement in timing. She picked up the handset and pressed it to her ear, bracing for the coming verbal onslaught.

"Mom! It rang and rang. I thought you'd never answer. I thought something had happened. . . ."

*If only*, thought Lucy, imagining herself someplace far away. A desert island, perhaps. "No. I'm fine. I'm right here, in bed. You woke me up."

"I'm sorry. I can't get the hang of this time difference. France doesn't switch to daylight savings for a couple more weeks. . . ."

Lucy wasn't up to making complicated time zone calculations, but she knew the clock had sprung forward last week. "It's six thirty here, in the morning, and I was asleep."

"I'll try to remember . . . but it's just . . . well, I . . . I . . ."

Lucy gritted her teeth, wishing she could avoid hearing the sobs of her oldest daughter, Elizabeth. "There, there," she murmured. "It's not so bad. . . ."

"It is! It's h-o-o-rrible!" exclaimed Elizabeth, her voice wobbling through her sobs. "I ha-a-ate Paris!"

Despite her affection for her oldest daughter, Lucy was finding it hard to sympathize with her constant complaints about her new situation. After working in Palm Beach for the luxurious Cavendish Hotel chain, Elizabeth had recently been promoted to assistant concierge in the Paris hotel. To Lucy, it seemed like a fantastic opportunity, especially since she herself had always dreamed of going to Paris but had never managed to make the trip.

"I know change is never easy," admitted Lucy, in a consoling tone.

"Everything they say about the French is true," declared Elizabeth. "They're rude and bossy, and they talk too fast, and when you ask them politely to '*Répétez, s'il vous plaît*,' they give you a condescending little smile and switch to English. How am I supposed to improve my French if they always speak to me in English, huh?"

"They probably think they're being helpful," said Lucy.

"No, that's the last thing on their minds. They're putting me down. That's what they're doing."

"It's easy to feel a bit paranoid when you don't quite understand what people are saying," suggested Lucy.

"Paranoia? Is that what you think? That I'm paranoid?" She paused. "You know what they say about paranoia. You're not paranoid when they're really out to get you."

"Who's out to get you?" asked Lucy.

"They all are, especially my coworkers. I know they're just aching to get rid of me

and take my job, they don't think I deserve it."

"Maybe you're the one who doesn't think she deserves it," said Lucy, hastening to add, "But you do. You did a super job in Palm Beach."

"That's yesterday's news," muttered Elizabeth. "Nobody here knows, or cares, about Palm Beach." She sighed. "I really miss my cute little apartment with all my nice stuff."

Lucy was busy listening between the lines, suspecting Elizabeth didn't actually miss her West Palm Beach apartment all that much but did miss her boyfriend, Chris Kennedy. Elizabeth hadn't been talking about Chris much lately, and Lucy suspected the relationship hadn't survived the long-distance separation.

"The place I've got here is tiny and grotty," continued Elizabeth, "and I really do have the roommate from hell. Sylvie has taken the bedroom all for herself, and I have to sleep on a fusty old futon. I think I'm allergic to it. And she smokes!"

"It's a big adjustment, but you'll manage," said Lucy, yawning and thinking longingly of her morning cup of coffee. "And you'll be a better, stronger person for rising to the challenge."

"Mom, that doesn't sound like you," said Elizabeth, finally lightening up. "What have you been smoking?"

"Nothing," insisted Lucy, "nothing at all. But I did watch Norah on TV yesterday. She had one of those motivational people on. 'If you dream it, you can do it.'"

"It's not that easy," said Elizabeth. "Sometimes your dreams turn into nightmares. Or *cauchemars*. That's what the French call them."

Lucy found herself smiling, satisfied that once again she'd talked her daughter off the ledge. "Hang in there, sweetie. Mommy loves you. And Daddy, too."

"I know," replied Elizabeth. "Thanks for listening."

"Anytime," said Lucy. "But preferably after lunch. Call me after you've had lunch. I should just about be finishing my shower then."

"I promise, Mom. Bye."

Lucy replaced the handset in its holder and flipped back the covers, getting out of bed. Winter tended to linger well into spring in the coastal Maine town of Tinker's Cove, and it was chilly in the upstairs bedroom on this mid-March morning, so she quickly put on her robe and slippers and hurried downstairs to join her husband, Bill, in the toasty warm, bacon-scented kitchen.

Bill was a much-sought-after restoration carpenter who fixed up vacation homes for old-time Yankee families from Boston and Wall Street hotshots. He was already dressed for the day in a plaid flannel shirt, jeans, and work boots. His still sported a healthy head of hair and a full beard, but the brown was now mixed with gray. "Elizabeth again?" he asked, filling a mug with coffee and handing it to her.

Lucy cradled the mug in both hands and took the first, life-giving sip. "Yes. She hates everything in Paris—the people, her roommate, her job."

The toaster popped, and Bill buttered a couple of pieces of toast, arranged them on a plate, and added the eggs and bacon he'd been frying. He sat down at the table and took a bite of bacon. "An improvement," he said philosophically. "Yesterday it was the entire country, all forty million Frenchmen, or however many there are now."

Lucy joined him at the table. "You are an optimist," she said with a sigh. "I'm disappointed in Elizabeth. I really am. This is a wonderful opportunity, and I don't

think she's taking advantage of it." She paused, taking another sip of coffee. "You know, I took French in high school. I bet I could get along just fine in Paris."

That thought remained in Lucy's mind as she got herself ready for the day and saw her two younger daughters, who were still living at home, off to school. Zoe usually caught a ride with her friend Renée, shunning the school bus now that she was a junior at Tinker's Cove High School. Sara drove herself to nearby Winchester College in an aged, secondhand Civic. Lucy's oldest child and only son, Toby, lived on nearby Prudence Path with his wife, Molly, and their just-turned-four-year-old son, Patrick.

Since it was Thursday Lucy didn't have to get to work early; the deadline for the *Pennysaver* newspaper, where she was a part-time reporter and feature writer, was noon Wednesday, and the paper came out on Thursday, giving the staff of three a brief reprieve before they started work on the next week's edition. For years now she'd met three longtime friends for breakfast on Thursday mornings at Jake's Donut Shack; they all considered this weekly get-together a top priority.

This morning she was eager to share her anxiety about Elizabeth with the group and get their input, as they were all mothers and had plenty of experience guiding their children through young adulthood. When Lucy arrived, she found Rachel Goodman and Pam Stillings already seated at their usual table. She gave a wave to Norine, the waitress, and joined them.

"Another phone call," she began as Norine set a mug of coffee in front of her. "At six thirty this morning. Elizabeth is driving me crazy."

"She's all alone in a strange country," said Rachel, who was a psych major in college and had never gotten over it. "She feels alienated," she said, twisting a lock of long, dark hair. "She needs lots of support."

Lucy took a swallow of coffee, then shook her head. "I can't believe she's not rising to the occasion. I mean, what I wouldn't give to be in her shoes."

"I know," agreed Pam Stillings, who was married to Lucy's boss at the *Pennysaver*, Ted Stillings. "Imagine being young and beautiful and in Paris!" Pam was a free spirit; she still clipped her hair into a ponytail and often wore the poncho she'd picked up during her junior year in Mexico.

"It's not that simple," insisted Rachel, adjusting the horn-rimmed glasses that covered her huge brown eyes. "Life isn't like perfume ads. Elizabeth is in a completely foreign culture. They even speak a different language. It's no wonder she's struggling to find her footing."

"I guess so," grumbled Lucy, looking up as Sue Finch arrived.

Sue was the glamorous member of the group, and this morning was no exception. Her glossy black hair was styled in a flawless pageboy, and she was wearing skinny black jeans and a bright color-blocked tunic. "What do you guess?" she asked, slipping into her seat.

"That it's entirely normal for Elizabeth to be miserable in Paris," answered Lucy.

"*C'est dommage*," cooed Sue, adding a translation for the others. "It's too bad. I love Paris. I love everything about Paris. . . ." She curved her scarlet lips into a smile, seeing Norine approaching with a coffeepot. "Except the coffee cups are too small and everyone smokes."

"Regulars for everyone?" asked Norine. Receiving nods all round, she left the pot on the table and trotted off, scribbling on her order pad.

“That’s one of Elizabeth’s major complaints,” said Lucy, picking up the conversation. “She says her roommate smokes all the time and stinks up their apartment, which is tiny.”

“I can’t seem to work up much sympathy,” said Sue.

“You are hard-hearted,” teased Pam as Norine arrived with a sunshine muffin for Rachel, yogurt topped with granola for Pam, and hash and eggs for Lucy. Sue never had anything more than black coffee and lots of it.

“No, I’m not,” insisted Sue. “In fact, I have some amazing news. Norah is doing a show about women who make a difference. . . .”

They all knew that Sue’s daughter, Sidra, was a producer for Norah Hemmings’s Emmy-winning daytime TV show. “And you’re one of those women?” asked Lucy, jumping to a conclusion.

“No. At least I don’t think so. But Sidra says Norah wants to tape the show right here in Tinker’s Cove.”

“Here? Why here?” asked Rachel.

“Sidra says she thinks it’s because Norah has that fabulous vacation house here and she’s exhausted and wants a bit of a break. So she’s going to tape the last show of the season here, and then she’s going to turn off the phone and lock herself in her twenty-two-room mansion by the sea for a period of silent rest and recuperation.”

“She’s got millions of dollars and dozens of assistants who do everything for her, including walking the dog and running her bath. How can she be exhausted?” asked Pam.

“It’s the constant pressure to perform. I’m sure it’s terribly stressful,” said Rachel. “She needs time and space to get in touch with her authentic self.”

“Just turning off the phone sounds wonderful,” said Lucy. “With twenty-two rooms, do you think she’d have one little room for me?”

“I doubt it,” said Sue, grinning wickedly. “But Sidra says we can all have free tickets to the taping.”

“Aren’t they always free?” asked Pam.

“Don’t quibble,” admonished Sue. “Just think, you get to see the show live without having the expense and trouble of traveling to New York.”

“Wow,” Pam said cynically. “Can’t wait.”

As it happened, Pam didn’t have long to wait. In a matter of days a crew of workmen arrived and began constructing a temporary enclosure on the Queen Victoria Inn’s spacious outside deck overlooking the cove. A stage with a seating area for guests was placed in front of large glass windows that provided a fabulous view of pine trees and a scattering of houses with steeply pitched roofs, and a glimpse of the harbor, where a few boats bobbed in the choppy waves, newly freed from the ice, which had melted only a few weeks ago. Heavy-duty power lines were installed for cameras and lights, and propane heaters and theater seats were added for the comfort of the audience.

Lucy covered the entire process for the *Pennysaver*, which got only a few letters demanding to know why Norah hadn’t used local workmen instead of sending her own crew of carpenters. Most Tinker’s Cove residents were caught up in the excitement, eagerly awaiting the glamorous TV star’s arrival and looking forward to seeing the

show live in their very own hometown. The free tickets quickly became a hot commodity, and those lucky enough to hold them got cash offers from people who wanted to see the show, but few gave in to the temptation to sell, refusing even fifty and a hundred dollars per ticket.

When the big day finally came, Lucy and her friends were seated in the very first row.

“It pays to have connections,” said Sue. “I’m sure Sidra got these seats for us.”

She pointed to her daughter, who was holding a clipboard and conferring with a lighting technician. Tall and New York City thin, she looked terribly professional in tailored black slacks, a gray cashmere sweater topped with a chunky necklace, and leopard-print ballerina flats.

“The lighting is always beautiful on the Norah show,” said Rachel. “I don’t know how they do it, but the people in Norah’s audience always look terrific.”

“Norah always looks amazing,” said Lucy. “She’s no spring chicken, that’s for sure.”

“I bet she’s had plastic surgery,” snorted Pam. “It’s easy to look good when you can afford face-lifts and facials and professional makeup.”

“I think it’s the hair,” said Sue. “When your hair looks good, you look younger. Frizz makes you look older.”

“Really?” asked Lucy, who was suddenly painfully aware that she hadn’t bothered to style her hair that morning but had given it only a good brushing.

Sue nodded. “Lucy, you should blow-dry every morning.”

Lucy was about to protest that, what with breakfast and getting the girls and Bill out the door, she didn’t have much time for herself, but she was distracted when Sidra came over, kissed her mother, and asked if they were all comfortable.

“Front row seats. We feel very special,” said Pam. “I suspect you had something to do with it?”

“Nothing’s too good for Mom’s friends,” said Sidra. “Geoff and I really appreciate everything you did for us—all the cards and flowers and food you sent.”

Sidra’s husband, Geoff, had needed a kidney transplant at Christmas, and the surgery was made possible through a chain of donors and recipients that included the Cunningham family in Tinker’s Cove.

“How is Geoff doing?” asked Lucy. “He’s been through a lot.”

“It’s amazing. He’s doing great.”

“It must be quite an adjustment, psychologically, I mean,” speculated Rachel, “and not just for Geoff. You both had to face the possibility that his life would be cut short at a young age. . . .”

Before she could continue in this morbid vein, the music started, a lighted sign blinked on, signaling, APPLAUSE, and there was Norah herself, in the flesh. Sidra beat a hasty retreat, while the audience clapped enthusiastically. Norah was a local hero, and there was no need for the sign. They were welcoming her home.

“Thank you,” said Norah. “Thank you. Thank you.” The queen of daytime TV was gorgeous in a shocking pink dress and matching lipstick, her hair a perfectly smooth helmet, her skin aglow, and her teeth dazzling white. She waited while the clapping subsided, then began introducing the theme of her show: women who make a difference. “I’m happy to tell you that right here in Tinker’s Cove you have an

amazing group of women who have worked together for more than twenty years to make a difference for local children.”

Lucy began to have a slight inkling of where Norah was going with this, and nudged Sue. “Could she possibly be talking about us?”

“No.” Sue shook her head. “Don’t be silly. The Hat and Mitten Fund is tiny. I bet she’s talking about the Hospital Auxiliary.”

“Twenty years ago these four moms, all with young children of their own, began collecting hats and mittens for less fortunate children,” continued Norah.

Lucy’s jaw dropped, and she noticed Pam and Rachel were equally stunned. Sue turned and grasped Lucy’s hand. “I was wrong,” she whispered.

“Dubbed the Hat and Mitten Fund, the four moms went from simply collecting donated hats and mittens to actively raising funds to make sure that every child in Tinker’s Cove is ready for school with warm winter clothing, a nourishing breakfast, and a backpack full of school supplies.” Norah paused, adding one of those impromptu asides that made everyone watching the show believe that she was right there in their living room, talking directly to them. “Over the years we’ve added this up. These four women have raised over five hundred thousand dollars. . . .”

Here the audience erupted into enthusiastic applause.

Norah nodded sagely. “I know. Five hundred thousand dollars. It’s a lot of money, and it’s all gone for the benefit of local kids. So now I ask you to welcome these women who make a difference. Sue Finch, Rachel Goodman, Pam Stillings, and Lucy Stone. Come on up, ladies.”

Lucy found herself unable to move, but Sidra was at her elbow, guiding her, and she joined the others, all equally dazed as they made their way up the steps to the stage. It was terribly bright under the stage lights, Lucy was blinking, and the applause was a roar in her ears. Then they were all sitting down on a long couch, and a screen dropped behind them and a video was shown. Lucy recognized Lexie Cunningham and her daughter Angie, and Lexie was saying how the Hat and Mitten Fund had helped her family when Angie was in the hospital, waiting for a kidney transplant. Then a smiling and healthy Angie was shown, sporting her backpack and climbing onto the school bus. The picture faded, the screen slid out of sight, and the audience was once again clapping enthusiastically.

Lucy wanted to get up and tell them to stop, tell them that they hadn’t done anything special, that they’d just seen a need and tried to fill it. She felt like a fraud, unworthy of all this attention. Wouldn’t anybody do the same thing?

“I’m sure these women would all say that they didn’t do anything extraordinary,” said Norah. “But the truth is that just by being good neighbors, by helping others in their town, they have made a real difference. They have made Tinker’s Cove a better place for children and families and . . .” Here she paused dramatically, appealing to the audience. “Don’t you think they deserve a reward?”

From the roar of approval that followed, it seemed that the audience did think they deserved a reward. What would it be?

“An all-expense-paid trip to Paris!” announced Norah as the lilting notes of “La Vie en Rose” began to play and the screen began showing footage of the Eiffel Tower, Notre-Dame, and tourist boats on the Seine.

“Imagine! April in Paris! All four ladies, and their husbands, will be going to Paris

for two weeks, where they will stay in a luxury apartment in the very trendy Marais district, and . . . there's more!"

The pictures on the screen changed, and it now showed a professional-style kitchen and a chef wearing a tall white toque. "While enjoying all the attractions of the world's most beautiful city, they will also get a week's worth of lessons at Le Cooking School from renowned pastry chef Larry Bruneau!"

Lucy glanced at Sue, thinking that her friend looked as if she'd died and gone to heaven. "I can't believe it," mouthed Sue, nudging the others.

Sidra must have been behind this, thought Lucy. Only Sidra would have known how much Sue, a gourmet cook, would enjoy lessons from a genuine chef. And Paris, that was another of Sue's enthusiasms. Sidra had come up with the idea for her mother, and the rest of them were tagalongs. But that was okay with her. She didn't care about cooking classes; she was more interested in gardens and museums. But she was finally going to get her dream of seeing Paris, and more importantly, she'd be able to spend time with her unhappy daughter. She was smiling, she realized, and she couldn't seem to stop. Now she was actually jumping up and down, right along with her three friends. They were all holding hands and jumping up and down like sorority sisters who all had dates for Spring Fling. They were going to Paris!

## Chapter Two

It was the light. There was something special about the light in Paris, thought Lucy as the minivan rocketed along the Seine River. Maybe it was the time of year, April, or maybe all the gray buildings and the stone embankments that bounded the Seine, but the sunlight wasn't at all like the hearty, dazzling blast you got in Maine. It was thinner somehow, gentler and more liquid, as if it were coming through a filter.

"That's Notre-Dame," said Sue, poking her in the ribs and pointing out the window.

So it was. Lucy had seen the cathedral only in pictures, but there it sat, solid and massive, complete with those amazing flying buttresses, right on an island in the middle of the river. "I can't believe I'm really here," she said.

"Well, you are," said Bill, who was seated behind her in the crowded van.

The van driver had been waiting for them when they got through immigration, holding a sign that read TINKER'S COVE EIGHT. *A touch of humor from Norah*, Lucy had thought, *or, more likely, Sidra*. The driver, Henri, had led them through the chaotic terminal at Charles de Gaulle Airport and through the automatic doors to the even more disorganized scene outside, where roadway repairs were forcing buses, cars, taxis, and vans to jostle for space at the curb.

"This would never happen in the U.S.," Sue's husband, Sid, had declared when a tiny Renault simply stopped in the middle of the single open lane to discharge a passenger, who took his own sweet time saying good-bye to the driver, heedless of the tie-up he was causing. Sid's voice was full of disapproval. At home he designed and installed closet systems and liked everything to be in its proper place.

The four American couples had followed Henri, pulling their wheeled suitcases to a quiet parking area, where he'd helped them load their luggage into the van, arranging it like a puzzle. Then they had all squeezed inside, fitting their American-size bodies into the European-size van.

"I give you tour of Parea, no?" Henri had said, flooring the accelerator and zooming into traffic to be greeted with a chorus of beeps from the other drivers.

The first part of the drive had hardly been scenic. It was the sort of grimy autoroute that you'd find in the United States, leading into Boston or New York. But then they were in the city proper, and it looked exactly like Paris ought to look, with parks and shops and six-story buildings with tiled mansard roofs, French windows, and tiny balconies. Lucy could hardly take it all in.

"La Tour Eiffel," announced Henri, pointing at the iconic structure. Then they crossed the river and were whizzing around the l'Arc de Triomphe, where a huge blue, white, and red French flag hanging from the center of the arch fluttered in the breeze, surrounded by a whirling ring of traffic. Horns blared as Henri took a right, cutting off several miniscule Smart cars, and headed right down the Champs-Élysées.

Then Lucy caught a glimpse of the famous glass pyramid in the courtyard of the Louvre, so quick she would have missed it if she'd blinked, and then they were battling traffic once again on the rue de Rivoli.

“Fantastic shopping here,” said Sue, adding in a reverential tone, “Bay Asch Vay. It’s the very French version of a hardware store.”

“Looks like BHV to me,” said Pam. “Whatever could that mean?”

“It means expensive,” said Sid with a sigh, resigned to Sue’s passion for shopping.

Then they were caught in another whirling roundabout, this time around the tall verdigris column that now stood in place of the Bastille prison, which was destroyed by an angry mob in 1789, sparking the French Revolution.

“They make such a big deal about it, but there was only a handful of prisoners inside,” said Ted Stillings, Pam’s husband. As editor and publisher of the *Pennysaver*, he had a journalist’s commitment to the facts.

“It was symbolic,” said Bill, yawning. Lucy knew her husband needed his eight hours every night, and he hadn’t been able to sleep on the overnight flight. Neither had she, for that matter.

“I always feel so badly for poor Marie Antoinette,” said Rachel, who could probably find something nice to say about Idi Amin. “She seems so sweet.”

“I think you’re thinking of Kirsten Dunst in the movie,” said Sue.

“She was married to a fool. Louis XVI was a terrible king,” said Ted.

“The whole system was rotten,” said Rachel’s husband, Bob Goodman, who was a lawyer. “The king could get rid of anybody he didn’t like. He would simply issue a *lettre de cachet* with some poor devil’s name on it, and off he went to prison until the king decided to let him out.”

“It’s still rotten,” said Henri, surprising them all with his command of English. He took an abrupt turn down a quiet, very narrow street and braked in front of a pair of double doors, like old-fashioned garage doors, that were covered with unsightly graffiti. “Voilà. Neuf rue Roger Verlomme.”

They all scrambled out onto the sidewalk and stood awkwardly, looking down the empty street, which was lined with blank walls punctuated here and there with similar doors, all tightly closed. A few windows boasted window boxes planted with ivy and spring flowers, but even they were heavily curtained and offered no clues to the rooms within. Charming streetlights, styled like lanterns, hung here and there from the buildings.

“What do we owe you? How much?” Ted asked Henri as he reached for his wallet.

“No problem. All paid,” said Henri, but seeing Ted replacing his wallet in his pocket, he added pointedly, “Did you enjoy the tour of Paris?”

Sid was on it. He had a couple of euro coins he was intending to give to Henri, but Sue stopped him. “Give him a twenty,” she hissed.

Sid gave her a look as if she were completely mad, and Bill stepped up, slipping Henri a twenty-euro bill. “All set?”

“Merci,” replied Henri. “Have a nice time in Paris.” He paused, indicating a small treed plaza at the end of the street, filled with chairs and tables. “That’s a nice café,” he added before jumping into the driver’s seat.

Then the van was gone, and the eight Americans, tired from the overnight flight, as well as the struggle at the baggage carousel and the long lines at immigration, were standing on the street, next to a pile of suitcases, apparently locked out of their promised luxury apartment.

“What now?” asked Rachel.

“Try the buzzer,” advised Sue, pointing out a keypad fixed to the wall beside the doors.

Rachel pushed the one button that didn’t have a letter or number, and moments later one of the big doors popped open and a slender woman of a certain age, her gray hair beautifully coiffed, and wearing a flattering blue scarf around her neck, welcomed them. “*Bienvenue,*” she said. “I am your concierge, Madame Defarge. This way, please.”

Lucy, somewhat giddy from a lack of sleep, stifled a giggle. She remembered reading Dickens’s *A Tale of Two Cities* in high school, with its unforgettable portrait of a fictional Madame Defarge, who knitted as the guillotine did its gruesome work eliminating the nobility, as well as anyone who opposed the revolutionaries during the Terror.

This Madame Defarge held the door for them, waiting as they gathered up their bags and stepped into a spacious cobbled courtyard, where a tree was leafing out, pots of spring flowers were lined up along the walls, and a few bicycles stood in a metal rack. The courtyard was bounded by several separate buildings, each with a doorway marked by a letter. Their doorway was labeled A, and once inside they found themselves faced with a rather treacherous-looking spiral staircase.

“One flight up,” said Madame, pointing. “First floor.”

“Isn’t this the first floor?” asked Pam.

“No, no. This is the *rez-de-chaussée*,” said Madame. “First floor is one flight up.”

“Better not all go at once,” cautioned Bill, drawing on his experience as a carpenter. “I don’t think it will hold us.”

“Nonsense,” said Madame, leading the way. “This *escalier* has been here since the last century, maybe longer.”

“Probably longer,” sighed Sid, taking in the crooked tilt of the landing.

“The key is special, very dear,” said Madame, holding up an enormous piece of brass hardware.

“I’ll say,” agreed Sid admiringly.

“There’s only one?” demanded Sue. “For eight people?”

“There’s another inside.” Madame adopted the attitude of a teacher. “Now, you must pay attention. In Paris we are very careful to lock the door because of thieves. So you must not, not ever, carry the key and the address together, because then a pickpocket or thief could steal your things.”

Lucy and Rachel found their eyes meeting, somewhat in disbelief. In Tinker’s Cove nobody locked their doors, and residents often had to search for their forgotten keys when they wanted to leave for a long vacation. Some people even left their keys in their car when they ran into the Quik-Stop for a gallon of milk.

“And now I want to tell you about the entrance keypad,” continued Madame. “The code is one-five-two-three-A, and you must never divulge it to anyone, or you will put all your courtyard neighbors at risk.”

“One-five-two-three-A,” repeated Lucy.

“Not out loud,” hissed Madame, implying Lucy was revealing a state secret.

“Sorry,” said Lucy, repeating the code to herself like a mantra.

“Now we go in.”

As Madame busied herself with the key, which had to be turned several times, Lucy

imagined what the apartment would be like. Over the years she'd collected a number of *Country French* magazines and catalogs, and she pictured a cozy interior filled with comfy chairs and sofas upholstered in toile de Jouy fabric or perhaps Provençal prints, copper pots hanging from beamed ceilings and plenty of those mustard-colored crocks.

"*Entrez,*" announced Madame, opening the door and revealing featureless gray walls, a huge expanse of parquet flooring, a pair of enormous white leather sofas, a Lucite block serving as a coffee table, and French windows covered with severe blinds. "Very luxurious, no?" she asked.

Lucy bit her lip, trying to hide her disappointment.

"Very modern," enthused Sue. "Roche Bobois, n'est-ce pas?" she asked, naming a high-priced French furniture company with a store in Boston.

"*Peut-être,*" replied Madame with a shrug. "*La cuisine, c'est ici,*" she said, leading them around the corner of the L-shaped space to point out a sleek modern kitchen.

At least that was what Lucy thought it was. There was a huge white marble island streaked with gray, which held a tiny sink and a cooktop, but not even a spoon was in sight. One wall was lined with pale wood cabinets, but the joinery was so subtle that Lucy never would have guessed their function had Sid not picked a spot and pressed against it, popping open a door. "Very nice," was his verdict.

"The bedrooms are this way, down the hall," trilled Madame. They followed her through the dining area, which featured a Parsons table and white leather chairs, and down a long hall, where she opened a door, revealing a huge bed covered with a shaggy white fur spread and a sleek mirrored armoire. "The bath is beyond," she said, pointing to a door that was hidden in the wall. "Who will take this room?"

"We will," said Sue, shouldering her way past her friends.

"*Bien.*" Madame led them to the opposite room, similarly outfitted, which Rachel and Bob agreed would do fine for them.

Pam and Ted got the next room, which left only one door remaining in the hallway. It had a stained-glass window, and when Lucy opened it, she found a rather dated, old-fashioned bathroom with a rolltop tub. "Where's the bed?" she asked.

"The sofa," replied Madame. "The sofa is also a bed."

"This apartment is supposed to sleep eight," said Bill. "That's what we were told."

"*Bien sûr.* Three *chambres* and one sofa bed in the salon."

"We don't have a bedroom?" asked Lucy.

"No, madame. You have the sofa and this bath."

Bill peered into the bathroom. "The tile is cracked," he said. "It needs renovating."

"It is a charming period *salle de bain,*" insisted Madame.

"It's fine," said Lucy, who knew when she was beat. "I've seen worse."

"In a gas station," muttered Bill.

"*Quoi?*" asked Madame, eyebrows raised.

"Nothing," said Lucy, turning to Bill. "I guess we'll stash the suitcases here. What do you think?"

"I think I'd like a nap," said Bill, yawning and heading back down the hall to the living room.

"I hope you'll be very *confortable,*" said Madame. "The second key is in the kitchen drawer. And now I will leave you."

Lucy took advantage of the bathroom, which had a certain boho charm and was

actually more to her taste than the rest of the ultramodern apartment, and freshened up. Then she returned to the living room, where Bill had stretched out on one of the sofas. “You shouldn’t nap,” she said. “It’s better to tough it out and keep going.”

“Who says?” asked Bill, yawning.

“The travel experts.”

“She’s right,” said Sue, joining them. “How’s your room?”

“This is our room,” said Lucy.

“You’re kidding!” exclaimed Rachel, rubbing lotion into her hands as she joined them.

“What a bum deal,” added Pam, seating herself on the other sofa.

“What’s a bum deal?” inquired Bob.

“Lucy and Bill have to sleep on the couch,” said Pam.

“That stinks,” said Sid.

“What stinks?” asked Ted.

“There’s no room for Lucy and Bill, just a sofa bed. At least I think it’s a sofa bed,” explained Sue.

“It’s a sofa bed,” sighed Lucy, who was leafing through a loose-leaf notebook she’d found in the kitchen, one containing instructions for the apartment, and came upon a lengthy explanation of the operation of the sleep sofa. “But it’s not the kind we’re used to. It’s going to be tricky.”

“France is tricky,” said Bill before dozing off with a snore.

“No, no, no,” said Lucy, shaking him. “It’s noon and . . .”

“It’s actually six in the morning U.S. time,” said Bob.

“Our bodies think it’s six,” agreed Ted, “and they’re wondering why we’ve been up all night.”

“Well, whether it’s six or noon, it’s mealtime, and my body is wondering when it’s going to be fed,” said Pam.

Sue, who had been exploring the kitchen, found the refrigerator concealed behind a wooden panel. “There’s at least a case of champagne in here,” she announced. “And a huge tub of pâté de foie gras.”

“Terrific cabinetry,” said Sid, who was busy opening doors and drawers. “And lookee here. All kinds of gourmet stuff.” He was sorting through a number of cans and jars. “Olives and mustard and looks like jam.”

“My goodness,” said Pam, looking over his shoulder. “It’s like an entire grocery store. There’s coffee and tea.”

“And caviar,” said Sue, examining a tiny can.

“There’s a case of red wine, too,” said Ted, who had found it stored in a utility closet containing controls for the electricity, heat, and hot water.

“Is this all for us?” asked Rachel.

“I think Norah must have arranged it,” Sue said, speculating. “We’re going to be living high on the hog, but we can’t live on champagne and caviar alone. We’ll need to shop for meat and vegetables and bread.”

“There’s supposed to be a Monoprix grocery store on the rue Saint-Antoine,” said Lucy, who was still studying the notebook.

“I can’t wait. I’m starving,” complained Pam.

“The café on the corner?” suggested Lucy. “It says here it’s the closest restaurant.”

“The driver recommended it,” said Sid.

“D’accord,” said Sue. “*Allons-y!*”

“Whatever,” grumbled Bill, hauling himself off the sofa.

The café, Chez Loulou, was hopping when they opened the door and stepped into a crowded bar. “Huit pour le déjeuner?” inquired a tall black man, speaking over the heads of the people standing at the bar.

Lucy glanced around at the crowded room, doubtful they could be accommodated.

“Is there a table?” asked Sue, also doubtful.

“No problem,” he replied, snapping his fingers. In minutes a couple of young waiters dressed in black had appeared and rearranged the tables, lining several together for the group.

“Wow. That was fast,” said Pam, slipping into a bentwood chair.

“I am Loulou,” said the host, distributing menus. “I am afraid today we are out of wine,” he said with a shrug.

“No wine?” wailed Sue. “How is that possible?”

“It is not possible. It is just a joke,” Loulou said and laughed as a waiter arrived with a couple of carafes of house red. “Today the special is *bœuf bourguignon*, Provençal-style.”

“Sounds terrific,” said Pam, and they all nodded their heads in agreement. All, that is, except Sue.

“I’ll have salad,” she announced.

After lunch the members of the group went their separate ways. Sue wanted to go straight to BHV, and Sid agreed somewhat halfheartedly to accompany her. “It’s a hardware store,” she told him. “Really. French hardware. You’ll love it. And it’s not far. We can walk, stretch our legs after the flight. We can also look for that Monoprix grocery store.”

Rachel and Bob wanted to visit the Mémorial de la Shoah, commemorating the French Jews killed in the Holocaust, but couldn’t interest the others.

“Pam and I have a college buddy here in Paris,” said Ted. “Richard Mason. He’s at the *International New York Times*. He told us to call him first thing, as soon as we got here.”

“And I want to see Elizabeth,” said Lucy. “She got the afternoon off to spend time with us.”

“Not us,” said Bill, covering an enormous yawn with his hand. “I’m going to take a nap.”

“You’ll be sorry,” advised Sue.

“Your metabolism will never adjust if you do that,” agreed Ted.

“I don’t care,” said Bill. “I’ve got to get some sleep.”

“Elizabeth will be so disappointed . . .,” protested Lucy.

“You know you’re dying to have a mother-daughter chat,” said Bill, and Lucy had to admit he was right.

After a quick phone call to make arrangements, Lucy agreed to meet Elizabeth at the Cavendish Hotel on the boulevard Haussmann. The Métro posed no threats to Lucy, who had grown up in New York City. In fact, she was quite impressed by the clean station and the trains, which arrived every five minutes. She had no trouble at all