

When we arrived in Paris, it was the next afternoon. Someday I'll understand all about different time zones and how they work; I had always just imagined it was all a bit of magic. We sauntered through customs and stopped for coffee in the airport. There was no real coffee, not that I recognized anyway. It was bitter, strong stuff with steamed milk. Lee explained that this was café crème and promised I'd learn to love it. It jolted my brain awake, which was a good start.

"Where can we get a cab?" I asked.

Lee shook his head. "We take the Métro. You need the complete Paris experience."

I followed with a smile pasted on my face. I hated any form of transportation that involved going *under* something. Underground, underwater, whatever. I did everything I could to avoid the New York subway system. In traveling from New Jersey to New York, common sense made taking a bus through the Lincoln Tunnel an obvious choice over the G. W. Bridge, but I closed my eyes the entire time while I was trapped underground, then under the river, inches from certain death.

And driving to New York City? In a car? Yes, I knew people did it, but only the very crazy ones.

But the Paris underground station was bright and clean, filled with well-dressed people standing quietly. I felt the tension leave my shoulders. Very nice.

"Now," Lee said, "let me tell you how to navigate France without being an Ugly American."

Martin sighed and rolled his eyes.

"Will there be a test?" I asked sarcastically.

"No, but if you don't pay attention, believe me, you will fail. First of all, when you enter a shop or café, look at everyone and say hello. Bonjour is best, but hello will do. You must greet everyone you see."

“Oh, come on, does anyone really care—

He held up a hand. “Yes. Here, they care. It’s a simple thing, Maggie. Smile and say hello.”

“Got it.”

“Don’t tip.”

“What, never?”

“Never. Here everyone makes a living wage, and a tip would be an insult.”

“What about a cab?”

Lee turned to me, his thin, lined face a mask of despair. “Mags, did you not *hear* me? Why is it that you refuse to listen to anything I say? I’m your agent. I have your best interest at heart, in all things. Do. Not. Tip.”

I looked past him to Martin. “He’s cranky?”

Martin flashed a smile. “Always.”

We emerged from the depths of the Métro directly in front of the Arc de Triomphe. I had to admit, I stopped dead still in the middle of the sidewalk to stare.

I had seen it in pictures hundreds of times, but in real life, the monument was stunning, graceful, and dignified, soaring above worn stone pavers. It was surrounded by a circle of traffic, and beyond the bustle of cars was a band of trees, barely leafed out in bright spring green. And people—the obvious tourists, pointing and taking pictures, and the equally obvious Parisians, walking purposefully, eyes ahead, going about their everyday lives amid the splendor.

Lee nudged me on. “We walk right down here,” he said.

Martin shook his head. “Give the woman a second to be a tourist.”

So I stood there in the early Paris spring afternoon and gawked like a Trekkie at Comic-Con. Lee had to physically take me by the elbow and pull me gently down the street and away.

“That was beautiful,” I said excitedly, pulling my suitcase, my tote bag over one shoulder. “People get to see that every day?”

Lee shook his head. “No, they only take it out on Mondays and alternate Thursdays.”

We were walking down a wide, cobblestone street. “Where are we now?”

“Victor Hugo Avenue,” Martin said. “Lee, why don’t you give her some genuinely useful advice?”

“Like what?” I asked.

“Like, you’ll want to spread butter on everything, then sit there making yum-yum noises while you chew,” Martin said.

I filed that away. I had been known to actually make yum-yum noises while I ate, so this advice seemed pertinent.

“You can buy excellent wine here for around four euros a bottle. Don’t ask the clerk if the price is wrong,” Martin continued. “It isn’t. Also, people will cut in front of you in line. All the time. Just smile. Don’t look aghast and make a loud comment in English, because the French don’t care if someone cuts in line, and most of them understand English and will think you’re terribly crass.”

I hated line cutters so filed this away as well.

We entered a large traffic circle. “This is Victor Hugo Place,” Lee announced. “We’re almost there.”

I found myself grinning. There were cars, beautiful people walking, cafés were open, the air was clear, and the noise was not too deafening. I would have been perfectly happy to sit in the nearest chair and just watch for hours, but Lee kept nudging me along. We turned down a side street, walked past a florist, a gift shop, and a small restaurant, and finally stopped in front of two large wooden doors, intricately carved, with small arched windows at the top and one large, brass knob.

“We’re here,” Lee said, shaking out his key ring and sliding an impressive-looking key into the narrow slot.

I looked up at the doors in wonder, holding my breath. “This looks like the entrance to Moria,” I whispered to Martin.

He grinned. “Almost.”

We walked into a small lobby with a twelve-foot ceiling and marble floor.

“This way,” Lee said, nudging again. “Stop gawking. You’ll be living here. You can stare later. Right now I have to piss like a racehorse.”

Martin and I waited for the elevator with the luggage while Lee raced up the narrow stairs.

“What floor?” I asked.

“Second. He’ll make it in time. He always does.”

The elevator arrived, barely large enough to hold Martin, the suitcases, and myself. “This, by the way, is the *lift*,” Martin told me, firmly pushing the button.

I nodded. “Got it.”

We stepped out into a small hallway, a door to the left, a

door to the right, and the staircase in front of us. The door to the left was ajar, and Martin led the way in.

All the ceilings were tall, with ornate moldings and complicated chandeliers. The floors were smooth hardwood covered by faded oriental rugs, and the front room had floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the street. I practically ran to them and stared out.

“Martin, this is gorgeous.” I glanced around. There was a second parlor, exactly mirroring the room I stood in, even down to the fireplace mantel. There were bookcases everywhere, very eclectic art, and comfortable, overstuffed furniture next to simple but delicate antiques. In the second parlor, a long farm table was surrounded by midcentury, transparent acrylic chairs.

“If I lived here, I’d never leave,” I told him.

