

Dusty Dexter PI – The Paris Case, Jan Richards

Did you read the first section in the newspaper? If so go to Chapter 18.

PART 4

Chapter 17

I need a plan. All I've got is bits and pieces that don't go together. Janet would do a list, put it all down on paper then put it in a zip-lock bag with a label.

I could brainstorm. With myself?

The phone rings.

Janet, frantic. "Carlie ran me off the road, dented Kermie."

Knew she'd call the scooter Kermie.

I concentrate, Janet babbles. "Carlie said they had us on tape returning the laptop, said she was going to turn us into the police."

"Settle. Janet. You ok?"

"Yeah."

"Red and Hank know we were going to return the laptop. We'll be ok. Red and Hank are interested in Grant and Carlie, not us."

Janet gulps air.

"Come over here. Let me see Kermie. We'll have a beer."

"Ok."

Janet and I will brainstorm. Maybe I should write down some dot points.

I need to go back to the beginning. What's the beginning? Mary's guide book. I find it, where I dumped all the other brochures and stuff I picked up on the tour.

I flick through it – squiggly girly writing, circles around places to visit. A flap inside the back cover, a map. A post-it note is stuck inside the flap, haven't noticed that before. On it three phone numbers, and an email address.

I look at the numbers. The letters MM and the first number. I check it with my phone, the man with the gun. The second number MP. The third number MR. Then the email address, the same address that sent Isobel's mother the link to Sweetie's. Mary and Juliette Clement were contacting the same man, the man with the gun.

I dial the first number. It rings, but no response. The second number, no response.

The third. A long wait, then, "Bonjour." A woman's voice, tentative.

"Hello? Who's this?"

She hangs up.

My phone rings. "Hi Marcel."

"Doostee."

"We going out tonight?"

"Doostee. Sorree. I vork. I taek, how you say, raeen chek?"

"Rain check. Sure."

"I phon toomorro."

"Ok. Marcel, what work are you doing?"

"Eez complicate eexplain."

"Sure. Talk tomorrow."

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Kermie's lime-green retro-style front fender is scratched and dented where Janet mounted the kerb avoiding Carlie.

Janet's pissed off, wouldn't even drink beer. Took Kermie home. Said she was going trawl through the stuff they got from Mary's laptop, research Grant and Carlie. She's got Carlie in her sights.

I don't get to brainstorm. Instead I proof the proposal for Evan, watch CSI – decide I prefer it in another language.

No date, no Marcel. I reheat lasagna.

I wake up, guide book on my chest. What woke me? I ditch the book, ears on alert, eyes adjust to the dark.

Is someone in the house?

A bang, followed by a hiss. Someone's in my house. What the?!

I slide off the bed, remember the taser, pull it off the charger.

Quiet.

Maybe my intruder's trying to figure out where they are. Like in the wrong house, loser. And, as you can see, there's nothing worth stealing. Go next door.

I grip the taser. What did Red say? Hold it out in front, aim for the widest part, usually the chest.

It's been charging for days, should bring down an elephant.

Finger on the trigger.

Shoes across the lounge room, down the hall. Not much attempt to be quiet now.

I stand a metre from the doorway at the entrance to the bedroom – heart beat's up there. Deep breaths Dusty. Be calm. You are a Private Investigator, be proactive. What if he's got a gun? Red should let me have a gun. Gotta study, Dusty, do the PI test.

No time for regrets.

As the figure turns the corner, enters the room, I give him both points. Two good hits.

He screams. "Putain."

"Marcel?!"

Falls to the ground.

I turn on the light.

Marcel is face down, body twitches.

"You said you weren't coming."

I roll him over – face contorted, arms and legs rigid. His belt is wrapped around his right fist.

Another groan.

I'm not sure whether to call the ambos, or slap him around the face for sneaking around, scaring me. Not that I *was* scared. I decide against the slap, think I've done enough damage.

He starts to recover.

"I'll get you a glass of water."

When I return he's propped up against the wall, legs out in front.

"What are you doing here?"

"Eez surpriz." He says it with a pained smile.

Sure was. "You coulda phoned."

He still holds his belt in his hand.

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“What’s with the belt?”

“Surpriz.”

Bugger. All he wanted was a shag and I gave him a few thousand volts. Well, he shouldn’t go sneaking around in the middle of the night unannounced.

“What did you call me? When I zapped you?” It wasn’t nice, I could tell that.

“No reemembr.”

Putain. I can still hear it. I’ll Google translate it.

He holds up the water. “Vino?”

He must be ok. I decide against calling the ambos. What would I say? My lover turned up unannounced, ready for love. Except I thought he was a burglar, so I pulled out the taser I’m not supposed to have and blasted him. They’d take the taser, and I might need it again.

I go to the kitchen, return with two glasses of wine.

Marcel’s on the bed, the taser is still on the floor.

He points at it. “Why keep?”

“I’m a private investigator.” I pick it up, reassemble the electric prongs, put it back on the charger. Shove it under the bed.

Marcel picks up Mary’s guide book, I grab it from him. He gives me a puzzled look.

“It’s Mary’s. I’m gunna find out what happened to her.”

“Mary’s!” Surprise in his voice, then a sigh. “Always Mary.”

“It’s my job.”

“You be pay for thees?”

What is it with everyone? “I’m gunna find Mary, and her mother. I’ve got a lead.”

I’m about to tell him about the numbers, but Hank’s face pops front and centre, and I stop. I don’t think Hank’s right about Marcel, but there’s no need to tell him everything I know. I toss the guide book on the floor, sit on the bed beside him.

“You ok?”

A nod, and he holds up the glass. “Vino.”

“Vino.”

Chapter 18

My legs stop. They were running, well jogging, shuffling/jogging, then they stopped. It wasn’t a conscious decision. What with the taser incident and the drinking wine half the night, I didn’t get much sleep.

Not that we spent the night like lovers are supposed to. We didn’t. Marcel may have arrived ready for lurve, but there was no lovin’ last night. After the zap with a taser he was more interested in drinking. Drank a bottle of red, fell asleep. During the drinking, I tried to find out what his business here was, but he lapsed into unintelligible Franglaise.

I dump twice the recommended daily allowance of Dick Smith’s Bush Man’s Breakfast cereal into a bowl with full cream milk.

As I slurp and crunch I walk out to the deck. Leads, I need leads. Or maybe I need to follow up leads I’ve already got, first I have to figure out what they are.

I want to find out more about The Prof, his retirement plans.

Text Janet: What’s Professor Craig’s number?

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She sends me a contact list for Professor Craig Craigh. Who would do that to their kid?

I dump the empty bowl in the sink, pick up the phone.

“Hello?”

“Professor Craig, it’s Dusty Dexter.”

“Dusty. How can I help? You’re not still investigating Mary’s tragic death?”

Tragic death. There’s no body!

“Yes, I am. There’s no body, so there’s still the question. Is she alive? Is she dead?”

What was I going to ask him? Possibly should have thought this through before I phoned. “I know you were friendly with Mary, you must want to know what happened to her.”

No comment, not even breathing. Does this guy breathe? Or does he just regurgitate information? Prue sure seems to think he’s a real, red blooded hunk of man.

“Professor Craig, I heard you went to the Sorbonne. I don’t suppose that was the same time as Mary?”

A laugh. “No. That was a long time ago.”

Right. “And now you’re retiring I hear.”

A pause. “Who told you I’m retiring?”

“Jacques.” I dump him in it. “I didn’t realize it was a secret.”

Hasty. “It’s not a secret. It’s just not common knowledge. Yet.”

“When do you retire?”

Another pause. “This week.”

It’s the middle of semester. “Have you got plans?”

Exasperated. “Not really.”

Professor Craig’s old, but he’s a bit young for retiring. “Nice to be able to afford to retire.”

“I won’t retire completely, I’ll do some work.”

“Teaching French?”

“No, English actually.”

“Who to?”

Another pause. “People who want to learn English.”

He’s stalling. “French people who want to learn English? Instead of English people who want to learn French.” I say it with a smile in my voice. It’s a reasonable comment I figure, the reverse of what he’s doing now.

His response is testy. “I don’t only teach French Dusty. I speak a number of languages.”

“Right.” Professor! I don’t see where this is getting me. “Well, have fun. In your retirement, semi-retirement.”

“I will Dusty.” He hangs up.

Emails. I couldn’t brainstorm last night, but I did send the numbers from Mary’s guidebook to Mitch, figured it can’t be that hard to trace a number back to a person.

Yes! An email from Sly, via Mitch.

Holy shit.

The MR number belongs to Marcel Lecoq at an address in Rouen. The MP number belongs to Marcel Lecoq, his address in Paris. The mobile is untraceable. Marcel is the link.

Hank, I take it back.

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Red would demand, at a time like this, I advise her of the information. I consider that for several seconds, decide against it.

This is it, my big chance. I can break this case. I have close personal access to one of the main suspects. Dusty Dexter, Private Investigator, this is your case.

Email to Isobel Clement: Isobel, I have a lead on your mother. I found two phone numbers in Mary's guide book. One of them is an address in Rouen (by Google maps this looks not far from Paris). When I phoned the other day a woman answered, it could have been Mary. You should go to Rouen, and see if anyone is there. If Mary's there, talk to her. She may know what happened to your mother. Please report back to me as soon as you can. Dusty Dexter, Private Investigator. PS there's something you need to think about. Is there any reason your mother would want to disappear?

I'm on a roll, I have leads, big leads. What next? I boil water for tea, think. Maybe there's more in the guide book. I search the bedroom, the floor, the bed covers. It's not there. Marcel pinched the guide book. He would, wouldn't he. Too late Marcel, I've got you. I don't quite know what you've done, but I'll figure it out.

What do I do now? Marcel's leaving in two days, that much I understood last night. "Zee beesness eez feeneesh." I have to set him up, or uncover enough to take to Red and Hank, in a hurry.

The phone. Janet. "Did you run?"

"Yeah." Janet wouldn't consider it running, I do.

"How about breakfast? At the cafe. Got lots to tell you."

I look at the empty cereal bowl. "Sure." Well, I did run.

"Be there in fifteen."

I shower. Do I tell Janet my suspicions about Marcel? She might come in handy. Maybe I tell her a little bit, will play it by ear.

Janet hands me the pink helmet, pats the seat behind her. I don't object, still haven't filled up the VW. As we putt along the waterfront I wonder if, when, I break this case, Red will see how good I am, maybe put me on full time. Maybe reconsider the gun.

I yell in Janet's ear. "Accidentally zapped Marcel last night."

She glances back, bangs my helmet with hers.

"Thought he was a burglar."

Yells. "What happened?"

"He fell on the floor."

And we both start laughing, like lunatics. Helmets bob up and down, as we putt along on the back of a lime-green scooter.

I'm not that hungry, order a latte, low fat as a concession to Janet's no-fat flat white. Add a bacon and egg roll.

Janet's got her iPad. "I stirred 'em up last night." She gets the RIP Mary Facebook page up. "Take a look."

I look, there's a string of Mary sightings.

"What?"

"I put up a question, under a fake name. 'Have you seen Mary? There are people who would profit if she was dead.'"

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“Why did you do that?”

“Wanted to see if it would wash out anything.”

“Did it?”

“Lots of sightings. Probably all dodgy, but I’ll give them to the cops.”

“Probably already got them. They’re monitoring it, remember.”

“True. More interesting, a comment from Douglas.” She scrolls down the screen, points.

Douglas Moreton: “I miss my wife every day. If you have seen her, I’d like to talk. I could offer a reward for information.”

Reward. “I might know where she is.”

Now it’s Janet’s turn to look surprised.

So I tell her about the phone numbers in the guide book, and Sly’s addresses.

“Marcel!”

“Marcel.”

“He’s the link?”

“Yep.”

“You tell Red?”

Always Red. “No. When I rang the Rouen number yesterday a woman answered, could have been Mary. I emailed Isobel, told her to go up there, take a look.”

“Should tell Red.”

“I will, when I’m ready.” I deflect. “Any more on Grant and Carlie?”

“Yeah. They were pissed about the Mary sightings.” She takes the iPad, finds what she’s looking for. Shows me.

Carlie: You people are taking advantage of a grieving family. I am going to the cops to get this page taken down.

The deflection doesn’t last long. “So you think Mary disappeared on purpose. That Marcel helped her, and that she’s in his house in Rouen.”

“That’s what I’m thinking.”

“Bloody hell.”

Reward. “What’s the reward?”

“Does Marcel know you know?”

“No!”

“How come you zapped him?”

“He said he couldn’t come over, had business, I went to bed. Woke up when I heard someone in the house, thought it was a burglar. When he walked into the bedroom I zapped him. Good shot too.” I picture him on the floor, remember the belt wrapped around his hand. “He was taking off his belt, ready for some Dusty time.”

“Was he ok?”

“Yeah. Drank a bottle of red, fell asleep.”

“So he doesn’t know you suspect him?”

“No.” But he’s got the guide book, so he knows I’ve got his numbers, but he doesn’t know I know they’re his numbers.

“Why would Marcel be helping Mary, and Isobel’s mother, to disappear?”

“My question exactly.”

“What does Marcel do?”

“Something in government.”

“What government business would he have over here?”

Good question. “Dunno. I do know he’s leaving day after tomorrow. Do you think, if I crack this case, Red’ll give me a gun?”

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“Hope not.”

“Gotta take Kermie for a quote, then I’ll take you home.”

The scooter’s nose-in to the kerb, its lime-green retro glory overshadowed by the Harley parked beside it. Wheels with silver spokes four times the size of Kermie’s, lots of shiny chrome. Fat exhausts snake to the rear.

Thighs astride the beast is a real bikie, in leathers with patches, a full-face helmet, skull on it. The helmet faces in our direction, appears to watch us hop on Kermie.

Janet starts him up, can’t even hear the sewing machine whine over the throaty roar of the Harley. The Skull gives the throttle a couple of twists, just to make sure we know his is bigger than ours.

Janet backs up, edges out into the traffic. The Skull does the same, then sits alongside us, on our inside. People stare – little green Kermie and the Hells Angel, or whatever he is.

Janet grips the handlebars, she’s not liking the display of aggression. She stops at a red light. The Skull puts his arm out, indicates he’s turning left, seems to indicate we should turn left too. Janet shakes her head, no. He indicates left again, the light changes. The Harley’s front wheel crosses in front of Kermie. Janet has no choice, turns left towards the spit.

We drive, side by side, Kermie and the mean machine. The Skull faces us, intimidating.

I’m tempted to give him the finger, but I don’t think it would help the situation. And in my lolly pink go-kart helmet, I don’t think it would carry the necessary clout. I have the capsicum spray in my handbag, but how do you spray a helmet? I really need a gun.

We continue, in tandem, down the road, around the roundabout. I give Janet a squeeze, let her know she’s got my support.

What’s his plan? Do we keep going, around the park, back where we’ve come from? How long can this go on? It’s not like we can outgun him.

We putt along at 40ks, the scooter’s optimum speed, he idles beside us, relaxed.

Janet navigates the park. I glimpse ocean on the left, river off to the right, The Skull beside us. He edges closer, indicates we should turn off. Janet points at the sign, No Public Access, but he ignores her, herds her through open chain-mesh gates.

It’s a concrete yard where they load and unload trawlers. A forklift glides back and forth, stacks pallets. Blue plastic drums sit on top of each other beside refrigerated storage units. Two fishermen handle a yellow net.

The bikie pushes us close to the edge of the wharf – narrow ledge, then water.

The last time Janet and I were here, we got shot at by cops, after we accidentally uncovered their undercover operation. We had to swim for our lives. We got out ok, but Janet wasn’t happy. Neither was Hank, or Red.

The bikie seems to have us where he wants us. He lifts the visor of his helmet, sunglasses, a red handkerchief over his face.

We wait.

He pulls down the hanky, shows yellow teeth. “You’re out of your depth. Stop, and we won’t have a problem.”

Forceful. “Stop what?”

“Stop annoying Grant and Carlie. They have friends.”

If this dude’s a friend...

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He pulls the hanky up, pulls the visor down. Then he works the throttle, lets us hear the engine, does it again.

I can't help myself, give him the finger.

The Skull shakes side to side, then the engine roars. He swings the bike around in a big circle, wheels squeal on the concrete. He pauses, throttles again – more circles, smoke off the tyres, smell of burning rubber. Then he rounds away towards the forklift, turns, pauses and takes off towards us. He lifts the front wheel into the air, drops it as he gets close, swings around.

He's attracted the attention of the workers, fishermen. They clap, cheer.

Thanks for your support, guys.

He does a few more wheelies, then takes off down the pontoon, front wheel in the air.

At the end, he turns.

"Let's get the fuck outta here."

But Janet's frozen.

He roars down the pontoon, lifts the front wheel a couple more times for effect.

Ok, you've had your show.

But he's not finished. He comes straight at us, only metres away, drops the wheel.

Then, right in front of Kermie, he stops dead. In the same motion leans forward, plants the foot near us on the concrete.

The back wheel swings 'round.

Fuck. It's like slow-motion, spinning black rubber, blur of silver spokes, smoke, coming closer.

Janet's head snaps back, helmet bangs mine.

We dive for the tarmac.

I don't see it, but over the screaming engine I hear the crunch as the wheel smacks Kermie's lime-green retro fender. Seconds later a splash as Kermie hits the water.

The Skull gives a couple more twists of the throttle, rockets off.

I peer at Janet. "You ok?"

"Yeah. You?"

"Yeah."

I crawl on my hands and knees to the edge of the wharf peer down, see a glint of lime-green. Kermie lies at rest, submerged in dirty water.

Janet crawls up beside me. "I'll kill the asshole."

"Least you don't have to get a quote now, for the repairs. Get a whole new scooter."

She gives me a look. Perhaps not the right thing to say, not right now.

Sirens. A cop car, then Hank's unmarked car, then Red.

"Janet, let's get Grant and Carlie off our backs, I'll tell them about Marcel later."

She nods.

Hank's wearing his uniform, faded jeans and a t-shirt, I try not to notice how hot he looks. Red's not wearing her uniform, but she is wearing her scowl. The uniformed cops check out the tyre marks from the bikie's theatrics on the wharf.

Red looks down at Kermie. "Shit. I lost a state-of-the-art tracker on that."

So that's how she knows what we've been up to.

Janet tells her story – about Carlie yesterday, the bikie today. They listen.

Hank. "Was he wearing colours?"

Janet. "No all black, leather."

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“Gang colours?”

“Don’t know, I was driving.”

Hank looks at me.

I shrug.

“Did you see his face?”

“No, he was wearing a helmet, and sunglasses, and a red scarf. Had yellow teeth.”

And he had some moves on the bike.

Hank. “The Facebook page is gone. Stay out of it. All of it. Both of you.”

To me. “Is the Frog still here?”

“Yes.”

“Be careful there too.”

“Sarg!” I salute. Janet gives me a look. I give her a look, dare her to open her mouth.

Then Hank gives me that smile, the one that makes me think I should cancel the break. “Nice helmet.”

Bugger, forgot I had it on. I yank off the pink helmet, fluff my hair.

The cops walk around, talk to the fishermen. They take photos of the tyre marks on the concrete, peer down at Kermie. “We gunna get that or leave it there?”

“That’s my scooter!”

“Not much good to you now.”

“Burial at sea.”

She doesn’t laugh.

The cops leave, Hank leaves.

Red heads towards the Red Hot Security four-wheeler.

“Red, can we get a lift?”

“No. You can walk.”

What did we do?

Under her breath, “another fuckin’ tracker”.

We walk down the spit.

So Carlie and Grant are off bounds. That’s fine with me, I’ve got bigger things to think about. Like Marcel, and Douglas, and the reward.

“How much reward do you reckon Douglas will give?”

“Not much. He’s bankrupt.”

“He’s about to sell a million dollar house.”

“How can you think about a reward at a time like this?”

Time like what?

“I loved that scooter. It was environmentally friendly, and cool.”

It wasn’t cool.

Chapter 19

I wanna contact Douglas, but I don’t want Janet to know. If there’s a reward it’s mine. I don’t have a number, but I have an address. I fill up the VW, use my Visa.

The front gate to Mary’s mini palace is closed. I pull over near the park, sneak along the river bank. I hope Douglas is on his boat, want to avoid Lisa.

A towel hangs out to dry, pieces of clothing.

“Hello! Douglas.”

“What?”

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The sound comes from Mary's garden, the Temple of Love. Douglas is reading a book.

"Hi."

"Wadda ya want? I'm reading."

He's not exactly inviting. I walk to the fence. "I might know where Mary is."

I've got his attention. He marks his place, puts the book on the table.

"Can I come in?" Polite.

"No." He stands, walks towards the gate. "On the boat."

I'm not sure "on the boat" is a good idea.

He strides along the pontoon, barefoot, leaps onto the boat. "Shoes off."

Sir!

He goes inside. I follow, remember the last time I was on a boat, in the middle of the Pacific. Janet and me making a hurried exit over the side, gun shots, then the ten k swim and the up-close-and-personal encounter with the shark.

Douglas's boat is compact, tidy. He sits at a small table, so do I.

"You might be a better PI than I thought."

Thanks for the vote of confidence. "I'm not sure yet, if I've found her. It's being checked out today."

"In Paris?"

I'm not telling him anything 'till I see the money, or at least get the arrangements sorted. "You have to pay for my services." That's better than asking for a reward.

Professional.

"The reward. Knew it would work. It's always about the money."

"You oughta know."

He scowls.

I can see why Mary'd wanna leave this dude behind. "Say Mary is alive. It's pretty obvious she doesn't wanna have anything to do with you."

A snort.

"Why are you so keen to find a wife who doesn't want you? I mean, you got the house, some money. You just got outta jail. Go enjoy yourself."

"Let me tell you a story girly."

I don't like being called girly. I'm a private investigator.

"First I'm gunna make a cup of tea."

While he boils water on a portable burner, I look around. It's not much this boat, cramped. No wonder he was reading in the Temple of Love. It's like the boat where we found the fake coke stuffed in the toilet. Hope there's no undercover cops on lookout.

"Milk, sugar?"

"Yes. One."

He puts an open packet of Ginger Nuts on the table, the tea.

I wanna talk business. "How much is the reward?"

"Depends how good the information is."

"If it's right, it's good."

"Depends on the outcome. I get her and the money, you get paid."

What money?

"I don't, we both get nothing."

"You betta tell me what you mean."

He blows on his tea.

I wait.

"The total of the money that was misappropriated was twenty million dollars."

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20 MILLION. Mary's password.

"I don't know how much she spent, but there should be a fair bit left."

"You mean the client's money you pinched?"

"That's it."

"I thought the money was lost, gambled."

"Let me tell the story, girly."

I dunk a Ginger Nut.

"The scam, the whole thing, Mary's idea. I'm a financial planner, she's an accountant. We set it up. The lingerie business was a cover, for laundering money. Mary's a good accountant."

"You tell the courts that?"

"No. Mary and me had a deal. I do the time, we knew it wouldn't be much, she looked after the kids. When I got out, we were going away."

"What about the gambling?"

"That was Mary's idea, spend some of the money, lose some of it. Make it look like we lost all of it. Most of twenty million went into an account. She's moved it."

"So...?"

"So, she's pissed off with the cash."

I'd got used to the idea of Mary the online lingerie for larger ladies business magnate. Having trouble seeing her as the mastermind of a twenty million dollar scheme to rip off senior's super. "Can you prove it?"

"You find Mary, I'll find the money."

Twenty million. "How much is the reward?"

"Hundred thousand."

Holy shit. "What if she spent it all?"

"I know Mary. She hasn't spent it, she's invested it. Can spend the rest of her life living off it."

Hundred thousand. "If she's disappeared, she's had to give up her business, so she's got no income. She would have kept the money, or a fair whack of it."

He places his tea on the table, leans forward, looks me in the eye. "You got two days. Find her, tell me where she is. I don't hear from you I'm going to the cops."

He's bluffing. "You're not gonna go to the cops."

"That bitch used me like she used everyone else. She gives me my share, or she goes to jail."

"A few days ago you were happy enough to get the proceeds from the sale of the house."

"That was when I thought she was dead. Now, I'm sure it's a set-up. The accounts are empty. She's alive. I know it."

I grab another Ginger Nut, shove it into my mouth whole, crunch. Shake his hand.

"I'll contact you tomorrow."

I chew the Ginger Nut. Mary Moreton, criminal mastermind, embezzler of twenty million dollars. Loopy Marie Antoinette groupie. Staged her own disappearance, and living at large on twenty million.

I slide behind the wheel.

Hundred thousand dollars. What I could do with a hundred thousand dollars. First-

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A knock on the window. Lisa.
Shit. I push the button, it rolls down. “Hi.”
“Thanks for returning the laptop.”
What’s her game? It’s not like she lent it to me.
“I’m guessing you had as much luck getting into it as we did.”
So that’s it. I’ll show you I’m smarter than you Lisa. “Password’s twenty million. 2 0
M I L L I O N.”
She almost controls a look of surprise.
“Won’t find anything in there.”
“Of course not. She has nothing to hide.”
Maybe, maybe not. Depends whether you believe Douglas. Do I believe Douglas?
“I know you were talking to my father.”
And?
“He’s clinging to hope, that’s Mum’s alive. Even if she was, she wouldn’t want
anything to do with him. He destroyed our family.”
Did Mary let Dad take the rap? All the way down the line, from the cops, to the kids.
“Leave it alone. There’s nothing. We’re moving on, you should too.” She turns, walks
away.
I push the button, as the window slides up watch her. How would you feel Lisa, if I
told you Mum was behind the fraud? How would you feel if I told you Mum was maybe
alive, in France? Living off twenty million.
I start the car.

At this point I figure I’ve pissed of a few people, and could be about to piss off more. And
that’s aside from Grant and Carlie.

There’s Marcel. If he’s involved, and it looks like he is, he knows about the phone
numbers, and he knows I’m onto him. It occurs to me he has possibly known all along.

Then there’s Mary. If Isobel finds her, Mary’s likely to be pissed, and the first thing
she’ll do is contact Marcel.

I need to keep Marcel at a distance. The belt, wrapped around his right fist as he
contorted on the floor. Was he? Would he? No.

Then there’s the matter of the hundred grand. How do I know I’m gonna get the
money? It’s not like I can get Douglas to write me a note: I, Douglas Moreton, promise to
give you, Dusty Dexter, \$100,000 from the \$20,000,000 I ripped off clients, if you deliver my
disappeared wife to me.

Gotta get some protection, but Red’s pissed. And Hank’s still miffed about the break,
and the Frog. Besides, I wanna solve this case.

I betta call Janet. I’ll convince her it’s best we stick close for a couple of days. She’ll
be happy, won’t want Grant or Carlie sneaking up on her.

I haven’t heard from Marcel, whether he intends to visit tonight...

I need a day, so Isobel can get to Rouen, get back to me.

I pick up the phone, there are half a dozen missed calls, messages.

First I text Marcel: Have to work. Let’s catch up tomorrow night.

Then I check the missed calls. Red and Janet.

Red’s probably still pissed about the tracker, not that it was my fault it got drowned.

I phone Janet. “Hi.”

Dusty Dexter PI – The Paris Case, Jan Richards

“What have you been doing?”

“Trying to earn an income.” A big income.

“Have you heard?”

“Heard what?”

“The cops just raided cupcakelingerie.com took away Grant and Carlie.” She rushes on. “They found a room, out back, hidden behind a whole lot of fabric. A machine for making tablets. Grant and Carlie were making Es selling them to the bikies. They were laundering the money through the lingerie business.”

Like mother like son and daughter-in-law. Wonder if Mary knew about the side business.

“You there?”

“Yeah.”

“Reckon we should celebrate.”

“Yeah.” And it works in with my plans to keep Janet close. “Curry tonight, my place.”

“After I run.”

Whatever. “Bring the spray.”

“Why?”

Good question. “Carlie and Grant still have friends.”

“Good thinking. See you at seven.”

Suppose I should call Red.

I go in hard. “Red. Heard about Grant and Carlie. Hank must be happy.”

“Get over here. We need to talk.” The phone goes dead.

Red could use some people skills.

And where’s here? No need to guess. Even though it’s Sunday, here is Red’s office.

Red’s always tough, but Red with a bee up her arse is never going to be good. At best I’ll get a lecture, at worst some kind of Red-style punishment. I try to think of the last time she ripped into me. It was after Janet and me got home from Vanuatu. Red didn’t see the big picture, didn’t see that I’d taken initiative, acted on the information at hand. No. She went on and on about not knowingly putting a fellow operative into a dangerous situation. Not reporting back to her. Not taking proper care and precautions.

I pick up donuts, coffee, not that I think it’ll help.

I put the donuts on the desk, hand her the coffee. No “thank-you Dusty”.

She takes the cup, pulls off the lid, peers inside.

Like it might not be just a long black, like it might be a coffee-cup sized bomb or something.

She replaces the lid, sips. Then she rips open the bag of donuts, grabs the glazed caramel, stuffs half of it into her mouth. She looks at me as she chews.

I wait, for whatever.

She swallows. “There are some things you need to know.”

I lick icing sugar off my lips. So far so good. “Like?”

“For some time Senior Sergeant Stern and myself have been working on a theory.”

Senior Sergeant Stern, not Hank, or even Stern. Why so formal?

“So I heard. Janet told me. They got Grant and Carlie.”

“That’s only part of it, a nice side benefit. There’s a bigger picture.”

Red’s letting me in on a bigger picture. This is good. I go for a gazed original.

Dusty Dexter PI – The Paris Case, Jan Richards

“Senior Sergeant Stern did some,” she pauses, “undercover work.” She smirks.

“What’s so funny?”

“Shuddup.” She puts the coffee on the desk. “I’ll go back to the beginning. The fraud case, Mary and Douglas. Stern and I didn’t work it, we just watched. We were never convinced that Mary was innocent. We never thought it added up, but they couldn’t prove Mary was involved, and Douglas always said it was just him.”

Bugger. Just when I get within reach of a hundred grand Red and Hank are sniffing around. I keep my mouth shut.

“Mary wanted a model for a lingerie range, I saw the ad, suggested Stern take the job, get some inside info.” The smirk’s back.

I don’t get it.

“They took photos at her house, big girls in lingerie, with Hank in the background.”

I get it. “Sweetie’s lingerie.”

“How’d you know?”

“Isobel sent me a link. I saw the photos. I told Janet it looked like Hank. They photoshopped them.”

“He demanded that they didn’t show his face, or anything identifying, like the tats.”

“So Sweetie’s is also Mary.”

She continues. “At first, when the photos didn’t show up on the Cupcake website we thought they didn’t like them. Gave Stern a hard time, said he didn’t make it as a model, even without his face. And he didn’t find out much while he was doing the shoot. Had a bit of a look around the house. Noticed all the family pictures, no pictures of Douglas, but we didn’t learn anything we could use. Then one day he’s searching around and he sees the photos, on Sweetie’s. That’s when we knew she had another business.”

“Why would she want another business?”

“It’s expensive to disappear, then you have to live. If she had a business she’d still have an income.”

Makes sense. But it doesn’t help Douglas’s case of the missing 20 million. If she had twenty mill, why would she need another business. Maybe Douglas is taking me for a ride, just wants to find the wife.

I become aware there’s someone behind me, turn. It’s Hank.

He sits, continues where Red left off. “And we think you know more than you’re letting on.”

Shit. When you need time to think, deflect. “Nice photos. Knew it was you. Told Janet.”

“Dusty.” Red.

Tell them as much as you can, without mentioning Douglas and the money. “Isobel sent me the link, to Sweetie’s. It was something the man with the gun sent her mother.”

Red. “I doubt the missing women would be in contact with each other.”

Hank agrees.

Me. “Maybe Isobel’s mum’s a chubster. Maybe he thought she might like to buy some lingerie. Or perv at the hunk in the pictures.” I giggle.

“Dusty!” Red, but she’s wearing the smirk.

Hank. “What else do you know?” He reaches for the remaining donut, strawberry filled.

That was mine.

“Janet’s still looking at the stuff from the laptop, but I don’t think she got anything.”

Hank. “What else do you know?”

Cranky Hank.

Dusty Dexter PI – The Paris Case, Jan Richards

“I found Mary’s guide book.”

“When?”

“Where?”

“Where is it now?”

“What did you do with it?”

“It’s gone.”

Silence. I’m expected to continue. “It had some numbers in it, inside the back cover.”
More silence.

Hank brushes icing sugar off the front of his t-shirt, pulls out his notebook. “What are they?”

“Like I said, the guide book’s gone.”

“How can it be gone?”

“I had it, then I went looking for it this morning, and it’s gone.”

“So who could have taken it?”

They look at each other. “Marcel.” In unison.

Hank. “Did you ring the numbers?”

Of course I rang them, but I’m not telling you that. And I’m not telling you that Isobel is probably on her way to finding Mary right now. If I tell, they’ll have the bloody gendarmes there in minutes. And there goes Mary, and my hundred thousand.

Red. “Did you ring the numbers?”

I hesitate, too long.

My handbag is on the floor, between us. Hank picks it up, hands it to me. “Your phone. Please.”

Bugger. I hand it over.

He scrolls through my calls, writes down the numbers. I wonder how much time I’ve got. I won’t hear from Isobel until tomorrow.

Hank stands. “Marcel’s involved. We don’t know how involved, but we suspect very involved.”

Red. “We think he came over her to keep an eye on you. He has no business here, that we can see.”

What they’re saying is, it wasn’t the Dusty Dexter charm that brought him here. I could debate that, tell them about how great it’s been while he’s been here, but it wouldn’t be true. And Hank’s beside me, muscled thighs level with my face. And all I can see is those pics on the Sweetie’s lingerie website.

On his way out the door Hank says. “You and Janet, stick together. And I’d suggest you tell Marcel you can’t see him tonight.”

“Already did. And Janet’s coming for curry.”

Do I mention zapping Marcel? Why not. At this point, I’m ready to cancel the break right now. “One more thing.”

Hank turns, Red lifts her head from her coffee.

“Marcel came over last night, late.” I hurry to correct any wrong impressions. “He told me he wasn’t coming, had business. I woke up, heard a noise. There was someone in the house. I thought it was a burglar. The taser was on the charger, under the bed, I grabbed it. When he came in the door I zapped him.”

“Marcel?”

“Marcel!”

“Yeah.”

“Why do you think he was there?” Red.

Dusty Dexter PI – The Paris Case, Jan Richards

Isn't that obvious? But I don't want Hank to get the wrong idea. "I gave him a glass of wine, he fell asleep. We haven't been getting along too good."

Hank. "I'll put him under surveillance. You won't have to worry about him."

I'm not worried.

"In fact, we'll put him on the next plane. The Frogs can look after him." And he walks out the door.

I make to follow him.

"Dusty!" Red.

I sit.

"You are supposed to work with me. When will I ever get you to understand that?"

Here comes the lecture, one I don't deserve. "If you tell me stuff, I'll work with you."

"It's a two-way street."

I shrug.

A sigh. "Go home, make sure Janet stays the night. Come back here tomorrow."

At home I log onto my internet banking, imagine \$100,000 in my super-savings account – the account that currently contains \$22.

The Yaris comes up the drive, I almost miss the whine of the scooter.

We sit on the balcony. Eat curry, drink beers.

Janet congratulates herself on flushing out Grant and Carlie.

I'm not sure what part she played in their arrest, but Janet seems to think it's all her doing. I let her take the credit. I tell her about the conversation with Red and Hank. About Hank putting Marcel on the next plane, back to cops in France.

I don't mention my conversation with Douglas.

I'm hoping Isobel will get to Mary before the cops do. Unfortunately, I figure once she realizes she's been found, Mary will disappear again. I found her once, I can find her again. And Douglas will know she's alive, there's gotta be something in that for me. That's if Douglas is telling the truth.

Janet takes plastic containers and plates into the kitchen, returns with more beers. She's wearing the pink helmet. I had it when I got home after the run-in with the bikie, dumped it on the couch.

"I'm gunna get another shooter, jush like Kermie."

She's more pissed than I thought.

"I washn scared." She makes like she's got her hands on the handlebars, revs the throttle. "I could do wheeliesh."

I laugh at the thought of Janet, on Kermie, chucking wheelies, acting tough.

"Shnot funny."

She bends her knees, races from one end of the deck to the other. She pretends to lift the front of the bike, stops in front of me. In the pink helmet, the leggings, and the skin-tight top – on it a red heart and the legend, PUMP IT – she looks more like one of those skinny dolls with big round heads than a ferocious bikie.

She does a couple more laps, chucks a few more pretend wheelies. Then she plonks herself into the seat beside me. She pulls off the helmet, places it on the table, strokes it.

"Gunna get another shooter."

All the energy has gone out of her.

"It's been a big day. How about a nap?"

Dusty Dexter PI – The Paris Case, Jan Richards

She lets me guide her to the couch, lies down.
I get her a rug.
“Whersh my phone?”
I put her handbag on the floor in front of her. “Jush have a shnooze.”
And she passes out.

Chapter 20

A phone rings, my mobile, it's in the lounge room. I struggle out of bed.
Janet's voice. “Hello?”
I turn on the light, put my hand over my eyes.
Janet. “Who? It's not Dusty, I'll get her.” She hands me the phone.
“Hello.”
Isobel. “It's Mary. She say not Mary, but I see photo.” Sobs.
“You ok?”
There's a lag, she talks over me. “In the house, in Rouen. I knock on door, she answer. I tell look for motheur.” More sobs. “She say” the sobs hit a crescendo, she chokes.
“She say, ‘maybe motheur have reason deesapeer’.”
Mary. I've found Mary.
“Say I ruin eeverysing, slam door in my face.”
“Isobel. It's ok.”
“Motheur alive. I know. I going to polis.”
I want to tell her it's not a good idea, but I know it's only a matter of time before Hank and the French cops figure it out anyway. I can see my hundred grand slipping away.
“Isobel, why don't you go home. The police already know, I told them. Phone them when you get home, when you've had time to settle down.”
Calmer. “Thank you Doostee. I will find motheur.” She hangs up.
Janet's making tea. “What was that?”
“Just a sec.”
Mary wants to disappear, who am I to stand in her way? Besides, if the cops find Mary, I have no chance of getting my reward. I stroll out onto the deck, scroll thought my recent calls. Noise of the kettle in the background, I ring the Rouen number.
Mary answers.
“It's Dusty. The cops know where you are. If you want to, you better run.”
I walk back into the lounge room. The kettle boils, Janet pours water over tea bags.
“It was Isobel, she found Mary, in Rouen. She's going to the cops.”
“You were right.”
“I was right.”
“Do you think Mary will realize we're onto her?”
Oh yeah! “I reckon.”
“Well, Marcel's on a plane, and the cops are onto Mary. I reckon that's the end of it.”
I hope not.
I take a second cup of tea to bed, consider my options. I'm hoping Mary's out the door before the cops arrive. If I tell Douglas I warned Mary, he'll see I'm on his side. All we've got to do is find her again. I'll visit Douglas first thing.

Dusty Dexter PI – The Paris Case, Jan Richards

“You killed my husband.” It’s a shriek, from inside Douglas’s boat. I recognize the voice, but I can’t place it. I don’t want to interrupt a family argument, but I need to talk to Douglas.

As I back down the stairs, I yell. “Everything ok? It’s Dusty.”

“What the fuck are you going here?” It’s Bridget, tour-guide with an attitude problem. What the fuck is she doing here?

Douglas, in striped flannelette pyjamas, is standing beside the bed which he’s clearly just got out of.

Bridget is several metres in front of him. Her face is red, tears slide down her cheeks, snot runs from her nose. In her hand is a gun. It wobbles, but maintains its focus on Douglas.

What the fuck is going on here?

Bridget, to me. “Go. Get outta here.”

Douglas. “I’m telling you the truth. Dusty knows the truth. Ask her.”

Bridget. “What the fuck would she know?” She trains the gun in my direction.

“I don’t know anything.”

Douglas. “Tell her what I told you about Mary.”

“What’s it got to do with Bridget?”

Bridget. “You killed my husband. You stole his money. You stole his pride and you stole his life.”

Douglas. “It wasn’t me.”

Shit. Bridget’s husband must be one of the people Douglas, and Mary if I believe him, ripped off.

Bridgette. “You have to pay.”

Douglas. “Dusty, tell her.”

Bridget, to me. “Get outta here, or I’ll shoot you too. Don’t think I wouldn’t like to shoot you, I’d love to.”

I look at the stairs. It would be smart to go up the stairs, call the cops. But I wanna talk to Douglas, I don’t want him dead, he’s no use to me dead.”

On the other hand, in the state she’s in, Bridget might shoot me, if only to get back at me about the kangaroo.

I hesitate. Dusty, you’re a Private Investigator. In my handbag, conveniently strapped across my shoulder is a capsicum spray. I could talk Bridget down, get close enough, spray her.

Bridget turns back to Douglas, the gun goes with her. I undo the flap on my bag, slide my hand inside, find the spray.

“Bridget, I’m sorry about your husband-”

She cuts me off, “You still here? Fine with me.” She points the gun at me. Get over there with him.

Douglas. “Tell her.”

“Mary was in on it, with Douglas. It was her idea.”

“So what. Fucking cow, using my tour to sell her slutty lingerie.”

“Did Mary know who you were? That your husband was one of the people got ripped off?”

“No.”

“But you knew who she was.”

“Everyone knew who Mary was, sweet innocent Mary.” She spits this at Douglas.

Dusty Dexter PI – The Paris Case, Jan Richards

To me. “You don’t get it. My husband was so ashamed he took his life. I had to go back to work, at my age. You don’t think I wanted to be running crummy tours around Europe. I worked, and I waited, until this scum got out of jail. And now I’m getting my revenge. I’m not surprised that slut was involved. Still, she’s dead. Wish I’d pushed her off the fucking bridge myself.”

She backs up against the table, points the gun at me, indicates she wants me to go past her, stand beside Douglas.

It’s a small boat. I keep my eye on the gun, she keeps it pointed at me. I grip the spray. As I’m level with her, I look her right in her red eyes and say. “Mary’s not dead. I spoke to her last night.”

“Bullshit.”

Douglas. “I knew it.”

“Shut up.” Points the gun at him.

I take the opportunity, pull the spray out of my bag, blast her in the face.

She screams. A bang, my ears ring. Bridget slumps, hands to her face. So does Douglas, blood spurts from a hole in his neck.

Shit.

I hear thumps overhead. Feet.

Bridget continues to scream.

Douglas falls back onto the bed, a fountain of blood, across the ceiling.

Voices and feet at the hatch.

I watch Douglas die.

Bridget has one hand at her eyes, the other reaches around on the floor.

She wants the gun. I bend down, pick it up – spray in one hand, gun in the other, arms slack by my side. It’s a bloody scene. I imagine the forensic experts, “you can tell by the blood spurt he was hit here, fell back died here”, “wouldn’t have taken long”, “carotid artery, blew like a geyser”.

Bridget snuffles, wimpers.

A voice behind me. “Dusty, give me the gun.” Hank.

Eyes still on the scene. “It wasn’t me.”

“I know.” Voice gentle, like after we’ve made love.

I hand him the gun.

“And the spray.”

Dammit. Red’s gunna be pissed.

“I tried to stop her.”

Bridget, face even redder after the spray, swollen eyes, lips. “Glad I got the bastard.”

And I know I’m not gunna see that hundred grand.

The cops take Bridget away. She doesn’t go quietly, sees herself as some kind of vigilante hero. As they march her to the police car she screams “he killed my husband, good as if he’d held a gun”.

Already people group on the river bank, mutter, “deserved it” “got what was coming to ‘im”.

I tell Hank how it went down.

Red arrives.

Dusty Dexter PI – The Paris Case, Jan Richards

“You’re late.”

It’s unlike Red to get to a crime scene after the police, usually she’s the first person there. “Minor problem collecting a perp.” She gives Hank a flick of her head, they retire off to one side, whisper.

Hank tells me to go to the station, stay there. He wants a “full statement”.

Red. “Gotta go.” She looks at the spray of blood across the front of my tank top.

I follow her look. “Ruined my favourite top.”

Puts a hand to her cap, fiddles. “You ok?”

“Sure. Part of the job.”

“Come to the office, after you’re done at the station. Debrief.”

“I’m ok.”

“It’s an order.”

Lisa perches in the Temple of Love, alone. I guess she deserves an explanation, and since I was there... There’s also the small matter of her mother being alive. It’s time she knew.

I let myself in the gate, give her a small wave.

A nod.

As I get closer she looks at the front of my shirt – a sound, half gasp half shriek. Maybe I shoulda put something on over the shirt, too late now. She controls herself.

I sit on the concrete seat in the columned pretend piece of France, look back at the pretend French chateau. Did Mary feel like Marie Antoinette sitting here, counting her money?

“I’m sorry Lisa. I tried to stop her, but she fired anyway.”

She looks at me, says. “I don’t care. Douglas ruined my family.”

Always Douglas, not Dad.

“Ruined my mother’s life, turned my brother into a crook.”

Time to mention Mary.

I try to dull the shock, put compassion in my voice. “Your mother’s alive, Lisa.”

“You stupid bitch.”

Not the response I expected. “No. Really. She’s alive.”

“Of course she’s alive.”

She knows!

“You ruined everything.”

Me?

“She’s supposed to be building a new life, in France. Instead, thanks to you, she’s on the run.”

Lisa knew Mum wasn’t dead.

“Marcel helped my mother escape *him*.” She points to the boat.

Lisa knew Marcel was involved.

“You go blundering in where you’re not wanted.”

I don’t blunder, I investigate.

“Now it’s all gone to hell. Marcel’s in the shit. Mum’s had to disappear, again, Craig’s frantic.”

Craig? Professor Craig. Why would he be frantic?

“You don’t even know what you’ve done, do you?”

Dusty Dexter PI – The Paris Case, Jan Richards

“I found your mother.”

“She didn’t want to be found. I knew where she was. She was where she wanted to be.”

“What’s wrong with Professor Craig?”

“Go away.”

Professor Craig and Mary? “Mary and Professor Craig were having a-”

She cuts me off. “They weren’t *having* anything. They were in love. Craig’s on his way to France. They were going to live happily ever after, until you came along.”

Happily ever after? A love story!

“You wrecked everything.”

“I was doing my job.”

“What job? No one was paying you. You were sticking your nose into other people’s business.”

“I’m a Private Investigator.”

“Are you?”

It’s a technicality. “You had a service, for your dead mother. Right here.”

A laugh. “That was good.”

Good?!

Another laugh. “It wasn’t even a proper service. It was my boyfriend.”

“Who was your boyfriend?”

“The man who did the service. Dylan. He’s an actor. He did great, didn’t he?”

I guess so.

“Mum thought it was a nice touch, to have it in the Temple of Love.”

Bloody hell. I add devious Mary to the list of Mary attributes. And what’s Marcel’s place in all of this?

“And Marcel?”

“You haven’t figured that out? I’m sure the cops have. Poor Marcel.”

Poor Marcel? Figured what out?

“Do you even know what Marcel does?”

I mumble, “Something to do with the government.”

“Department of Immigration. Passports, documents...”

She lets me figure it out. Marcel provided Mary’s paperwork. “And Mary got onto Marcel through Jacques?”

“No. Marcel and Craig went to the Sorbonne together, they’re old friends. Craig and Marcel arranged everything.”

“Mary’s not the first. Marcel had done it before.”

“Yes. He helps women out of difficult situations. Or did. Thanks to you, it won’t be happening any more.”

Marcel the good guy, the romantic. I almost feel bad. Still, it’s a complicated, and illegal, way of going about it.

“Why didn’t Mary just divorce Douglas, marry Craig. Like normal people.”

“She knew she’d never get rid of Douglas.”

“Why not?”

“He knew he was onto a good thing. Mum’s business made a lot of money. Douglas liked the money.”

Money. It’s time to mention my chat with Douglas, the chat about the money. Perhaps not the whole chat, no need to let on about the reward.

“Last time I spoke to Douglas.”

“Before you helped get him shot.”

Dusty Dexter PI – The Paris Case, Jan Richards

I ignore that. “He told me about Mary’s involvement in the fraud.”

“Lies. It was all Douglas, my mother had nothing to do with it. Ask the courts, your cop mate.”

I persevere. “Douglas said he could prove it. He wanted me to find Mary, so he could get to the money.”

“He was taking you for a ride.”

Was he? “Why wouldn’t he have been happy with the proceeds from the house?”

“Douglas always wanted more. The lingerie business made good money. He wouldn’t let that go.”

“The lingerie business was a front. It was being used by Grant and Carlie to launder drug money.”

“I didn’t know about that.”

“How were your mother, and Craig, going to survive in France?”

“She had another business.”

Sweetie’s. Mary had it all worked out. “Be handy if she also had twenty million.” I let it hang in the air. “Funny she’d use that as her password.”

There’s activity on the boat. A cop emerges from the hatch, turns, gets down on his knees, the end of a black plastic bag emerges. He grips it, yells for help. Another cop helps him, they tug it up onto the deck. Douglas, wrapped in plastic.

Chapter 21

I’m supposed to go see Hank, give them a statement, but I wanna change my top.

I head home, round the corner, see Janet’s Yaris out front. I’m about to go up the drive when I see a scooter, Jacques scooter, in the carport. Why are Jacques and Janet in my house?

I look up at the deck, no one. If Janet was waiting for me, she’d wait on the deck. She always waits on the deck.

Instead of going up the drive I pull over on the street.

Janet would have called, left a message. I check my phone. It’s still on silent, haven’t looked at it since I got up, drove straight over to talk to Douglas. Bugger.

Missed calls from Hank, Red, Janet. A message from Hank: Where are you? You’re supposed to be at the station. Another message from Hank: Come to the station. Marcel at large. A message from Red: Go to the fucking station. NOW. A message from Janet: Going to your place, meet me there.

Jacques scooter, Janet’s Yaris. There’s something going on here. Why would Jacques and Janet be in my house? I don’t have a spray, and the taser’s on the charger, in the bedroom.

Maybe I should text Hank, or Red. I text Hank: At home. Janet here, Jacque’s scooter. Going to take a look.

Put the phone on the passenger-side seat.

I creep up the side of the house, then sneak into the carport. The door’s open. I creep up the stairs, slow, quiet. At the top step, crouched, I poke my head around the fibro wall, see the back of a head above the couch. Marcel’s grey-flecked glossy black hair.

Marcel must have used Jacques scooter. Marcel who is supposed to be on a plane home, but who is “at large”. Marcel who is no doubt upset with me for exposing his scheme to help women escape their husbands. Something that might see him go to jail. Make that very upset.

Dusty Dexter PI – The Paris Case, Jan Richards

I can't see Janet, straighten up, poke my head around again. Janet sits opposite Marcel, two prongs from a taser attached to the front of her skin-tight PUMP IT top. Taser on the coffee table. She doesn't look happy.

She sees me, but doesn't move. Good Janet.

Marcel smokes, a gun beside him on the couch.

Not good.

This not Marcel the romantic savior of women.

What am I going to do? The taser's out of commission, the cops just took my spray. What about Janet's spray? She normally leaves her backpack on the coffee table, it's not there. Maybe it's in her car. I creep back down the stairs, get to the Yaris. The backpack is on the front seat. I find the spray. Excellent.

A phone rings, my mobile, in my car. Haven't got time for phone calls.

I need a plan.

If I distract Marcel, get his attention on me, spray him, Janet can go for the gun.

I could use another weapon. Knives are in the kitchen, but that's right beside where Marcel and Janet are, at least something to tie Marcel up with.

The cuffs, pink fluffy numbers Hank and I played with. They're in the bedroom. I debate climbing the lattice at the front of the house, but it might make a noise. Like it did that time Hank tried it. Woke me up, got him sprayed in the face, a mild concussion.

I go round the back, climb in the open window in the spare bedroom. I sneak into my bedroom, find the cuffs looped over a jar filled with pink cotton balls. Quiet, I jam them into the back of my jeans.

Back out the window, around the house, then up the stairs. I peek around the corner. Marcel finishes a cigarette, stubs it out on my coffee table. Prick, I got that on sale, at Freedom.

I show Janet I have the spray. I think her eyes show fear. She should have faith, the last time Janet and I did something like this, in the middle of the Pacific, shots were fired, but no one was hurt.

Then I think back to this morning, spraying Bridget. Douglas spurting blood over my top, the walls, the ceiling. Not such a good outcome. And I don't want it to be my blood, or Janet's, all over the furniture.

Janet's right in front of Marcel. Surely Marcel won't shoot, he's a lover not a killer. He helps women and their lovers escape bad husbands. I'm going to count on Marcel's good nature.

I could wait for Hank, he must have got my text. On the other hand, I didn't tell him it was Marcel, just Jacques. Maybe I should go back, send him another message.

Marcel speaks. "Ou est la putain?"

Janet. "She's not a whore."

So that's what it means! Arsehole.

I can stand here, or I can take control. I decide on action, figure I have surprise on my side. Janet will take my lead, she knows the way I work, we're a team. I will save her from a man with a gun. Red will see how good I am, so will Hank.

I take another look at the gun.

I figure if I yell, he'll grab the gun and point it at me, not Janet. So the idea is to spray him in the face full-on, then get my body behind the couch, while Janet grabs him from behind. Then, when he's in pain and can't see, one of us will get the gun.

I give Janet a reassuring smile. She doesn't look reassured, but I guess she's trying not to let Marcel know I'm there.

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I take two steps, stand directly behind him. I position the spray, the nozzle pointed at the back of his head.

Ok. I use my other hand to count down. Three, two, one.

“Marcel!”

He turns. I spray. Janet throws herself on the floor.

The spray hits him full in the face, is followed by a scream and a torrent of French swearwords.

He gropes for the gun. I dive for it, but he gets there first, swings it towards me. Fires. A bullet goes through the couch into the floor, another through the ply wall at the top of the stairs.

I hit the floor. Another bullet, this time past my shoulder.

Shit.

I don't see Janet, but I hear a grunt. I bob my head up, Janet's on Marcel's back. Eyes closed, he screams in pain and anger, tries to dislodge her.

I spray him again, he gets a mouthful, spits, screams.

Janet hangs on like a bull rider, slaps at his arms.

He lifts the gun, points in my general direction, but he can't see me.

I blast again.

A scream from Janet. Oops, must have got her too.

As Marcel roars and bucks I use the spray canister to smash his hand, the gun falls, bounces off the back of the couch to the floor at my feet.

I pick it up, poke Marcel in the ribs. “So who's in charge now?”

Janet slides off his back, both hands to her face. “You sprayed me!”

“Sorry. Didn't mean to.”

“You sprayed me.” It's a wail.

Marcel spits at me.

“So much for the romantic Frenchman.” I poke the gun under his chin. His eyes stream, snot runs out of his nose, face red and swollen.

Janet stumbles to the kitchen, turns on the tap.

“You ok?” I figure it can't be too bad, it's not like I was pointing it at her.

“Yeah.”

I get behind Marcel, poke the gun into the base of his skull. “On the ground.”

He refuses.

“We can do this the hard way, or we can do this the easy way.” I sound like a bad movie, but I'm enjoying the part.

He lashes out. I remind him I now have the power, poke the gun into him again.

Janet returns, wet tea towel to her face.

“Sorry, didn't mean to get you. Can you help me get him down?”

“You bet.” She tosses the towel, jumps on his back again.

I kick him behind his knees, he collapses onto the floor, Janet on top of him. She pushes his face into the rug, puts both bony knees into his back.

I wedge the gun in the front of my trousers, pull out the cuffs. Hank and I had fun with the cuffs. Hank didn't take his work home, but on occasion he didn't mind a little role play.

Marcel struggles, but Janet pushes her knees into his kidneys. I grab one arm, click the cuff on his wrist, get the other arm, cuff them together.

He screams some more, I hear “putain” again.

“I'm not a whore.”

Janet wrenches his arms behind his back, tight.

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Another round of swearing, some in English.

“Take it easy, Janet. I don’t think he’s going anywhere.”

“Take it easy! He tasered me.”

True.

I hand Janet the tea towel, make a “sorry” face. “I just talked to Lisa. She knew Mary was alive, said Marcel was helping women find new lives. He works in Immigration, gets their papers.”

Janet. “The man in Paris, on the bridge, with the gun. He was working with Marcel.”

Makes sense, thought he looked like a public servant. Doing Marcel’s dirty work for him. Trying to scare me off.

I sit beside Marcel on the floor, need to get a couple of things straight. I poke the gun in his forehead. “That first night, on the bridge. Was Mary waiting for you?”

No answer.

“Why was she on the bridge so long?”

“Stoopeed putain.”

Me or Mary? Maybe Mary was early, real early, excited about her new life. “Did you go back and get Mary after you took me back to the hotel?”

No answer.

“Ok, I’m not gunna shoot you, but, we got you. It’s over. How about some answers.”

Things start to fall into place. “When I rang that mobile number Isobel gave me, and you were talking on the phone, you said you were talking to Jacques, but you weren’t, were you?”

Still nothing. “Give him some encouragement, Janet.”

She wriggles her knees into his back.

I talk to Janet. “Mary was going to live with Professor Craig. Lisa said they’re in love.”

Marcel gives a choked laugh. “Stoopeed putain.”

I’m getting sick of being called a whore.

Marcel. “Craig vant zee money. Craig not lurve Mary.”

So much for the love story.

“Craig not stupeed. Vee share zee monneez.”

“What money?”

A laugh. “Mary, how you say, much monneez.”

“Like twenty million?”

Marcel shows me his red face, eyes squeezed shut. He nods, struggles against the cuffs. “Find Mary, get monneez. All get monneez.”

Another bribe. The second in two days, but I never seem to get close to the money. Maybe I still have a chance, cut a deal with Marcel.

I look at Janet. Look at the cuffs.

She shakes her head. Good honest Janet.

“Craig say Mary hide monneez.”

Craig also thinks Mary has the money. Douglas was telling the truth.

I’m still thinking about some of twenty million.

Janet can see inside my head. She digs Marcel in the back with her knees, he grunts.

“So he wasn’t just helping women find new lives, he was helping himself.” Janet reinforces Marcel the bad guy, just in case I’m taking the bribe seriously.

“Zee veemen, I help zee veemen.” A plea.

“What about the first woman. The one who died?”

“Stoopeed putain. I heelp deesappeer.” A snort. “Then, she want come hom.”

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“So what happened?”

“Eez eemposseeble.”

“Why?”

“Eeemposseeble.”

I look at Janet. “You shot her!”

“Stoopeed putain.”

Bloody hell. He went from helping women disappear to murder to cover his own arse. Nice guy. “And what about the handbags?”

“Zee sac, how you say, rreed erring.”

“Red herring.” The handbags were to put the cops off the track. Make it look like a serial killer with a weird signature.

Sirens.

Cars screech up my drive, doors slam. Feet pound up my stairs.

Hank at the top, looks at me, at Marcel, Janet. “Nice cuffs.”

Red behind him. “Way to go, girls.”

Hank. “You can get off him Janet.”

“He tasered me!” She stays put.

Hank gives a nod, understands.

Me. “And he killed that woman.”

Hank. “The first one? We thought that might be the case.”

Janet. “And Marcel thinks Mary’s got all the money.”

“French police are looking for her, but so far we’ve got no proof she was in on it with Douglas.”

“From your undercover work. More like uncovered.” I giggle, haven’t told Janet it’s

Hank in his jocks on the Sweetie’s website. “Hey Janet-”

Red cuts me off. “Police work.”

I’ll tell Janet some other time.

I pull Marcel’s gun out of the front of my jeans. “He shot my couch.”

Hank laughs.

“What’s so funny!?” But I giggle.

“And the wall.” Janet points to a hole.

Even Red smirks.

I hand Hank the gun.

To Red. “Can I get a gun now?”

“No.” Red, Hank and Janet.

Chapter 22

I’m going for a run. Not because I wanna go for a run, but because I wanna see Hank, and the one place I’m sure to find him is playing Drill Serg, firing up the Tough Mudder contestants.

I wanna cancel the break, and I wanna find out whether they’ve found Mary, or The Prof. I’ve got no leads on Mary – zip, nada, nothing. I reckon if I can find her again, maybe

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she'll be keen to engage my services, not as an investigator, kind of in reverse. I can help her stay ahead of the cops. Well, it's an idea, I'm not sure I'm ready to go to the dark side. If Red found out she'd never give me another job.

I'm not even sure Mary's got the money. I don't have much confidence in Douglas, and maybe Marcel way lying, or maybe he was just guessing too, and The Prof. And there's Sweetie's, still online, still making Mary money to live on.

The running ain't getting easier. I shuffle along the waterline, can see the Tough Mudders up ahead.

Drill Serg Hank yells. "Give me 50!"

His troops drop to their stomachs, start doing pushups. He jogs to me.

I pant. "Hank."

"Dusty, still running I see."

"Yeah. Getting easier." Like hell.

"It will."

I give him a smile, but he keeps glancing up at his troops, he's not giving me much to work with. "Any sign of Mary?"

"No."

"She might not have the money. She doesn't need it, since she's got Sweetie's."

"Sweetie's isn't operating."

"What?" I've been thinking Sweetie's is my way of contacting Mary, keep using the order email to let her know I'm on her side.

"You can make an order, but you don't get a response. It's for show, it's not real."

Bugger. "How do you know?" On the other hand, if she doesn't need Sweetie's, that means she's got the cash, the twenty mill.

"I tried to buy some lingerie."

"Who for?"

A laugh. "As part of the investigation."

Oh! And I realize I'm a teeny bit jealous, don't want Hank buying lingerie for someone who's not me. I make up lost ground. "What about The Professor?"

"Nothing."

"Maybe they're together."

"Maybe."

"Maybe he really did love Mary."

He gives a sort of nod. "Didn't think you were a romantic, Dusty."

Can I segway that into talking about the break? Why not. "I've been thinking about the break."

"Have you?"

"If you want, we could cancel it."

He looks at me, then up at the Tough Mudders. Some continue with the pushups, some lie on their stomachs, faces in the sand. "Bit busy at the moment."

"You could bring your tool belt."

"I'll give it some thought, Dusty." Then he jogs back up the beach.

He'll come 'round. Wounded pride about Marcel, that's all.

Janet runs towards me, on her way back down the beach, I change direction, join her.

"Lazy."

I ignore it, thinking of giving up the running. I deflect. "No sign of Mary, or the Prof. Hank said Sweetie's isn't operating, it's for show. Maybe Mary has got the twenty mill."

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Janet stops.

“What’s up?”

Janet never stops.

“Why’d you go see Douglas that morning he got shot?”

I start to jog.

She jogs along beside me. “Dusty!?”

I’m not sure where’s she’s going with this, let her have her lead.

“You’d talked to him about the reward, hadn’t you?” She doesn’t wait for an answer.

“You wanted to tell him Mary was alive?”

Janet’s worse than a mother. “What if I did?”

“He told you Mary had the money, and if you found Mary, he’d give you some.” It’s not a question.

I continue to jog.

“After Isobel phoned that night, after she saw Mary, who’d you phone when you went out on the balcony?”

I concentrate on the jogging, pant like I can’t speak.

“Mary. You told her they were on to her. Because you thought you’d be in Douglas’s good books, if you told her to run. Still have a crack at some cash. You realize the cops’d be all over that. They’d know you phoned.”

Hadn’t thought about that. Wonder if Hank knows? Red?

“They could get you for obstructing justice.”

They could? They wouldn’t. Would they?

Hmmm, need to come up with a good excuse in case they ask. Maybe that’s why Red’s been frosty, frosty even for Red. Maybe that’s why Hank didn’t jump at the chance to cancel the break. “They can’t be that mad with me. I caught the bad guy.”

“You! You caught the bad guy! I was there, Dusty. I was the one got hit by the taser! I was the one jumped a killer with a gun in his hand. I got sprayed by capsicum spray.”

“I rescued you. A man had a gun pointed at you. I took action, took his focus off you. I put myself in danger, to protect you.”

“You could have got me shot. You should have called Hank, and Red.”

Possibly. “It might have been too late.”

Stalemate. We jog for awhile.

“I didn’t spray you much. I was aiming at Marcel.”

“You’re impossible.”

“Come on, Janet, we’re a team.” Sometimes Janet needs positive reinforcement.

“We did get him good.”

“Sprayed him about four times.”

“Got my knees right into his back. What’s happening about the bullet hole in the couch?”

“Thought I’d leave it, like a reminder, and the wall.”

“Where’d the pink fluffy cuffs come from? Or shouldn’t I ask?”

“I got ‘em for Hank.”

She’s starting to jog at her own pace again.

As she gets ahead I yell, “We’re calling off the break!”

She runs, head forward, gives me a wave.

It was my case, I caught the bad guy, Janet just happened to be there. I was the one took all the risks.

That’s two cases wrapped up. Twice I’ve been proactive, shown I’ve got what it takes. Surely Red will put me on the payroll now. And give me a gun.

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