

## Dusty Dexter PI – The Paris Case, Jan Richards

*Did you read the first section in the newspaper? If so go to Chapter 2.*

### Chapter 1

Missing?! Mary.

She sure wasn't missing last night when she crashed my date with Marcel. Most tourists consider themselves lucky to see a Frenchman through the window of the tour bus, I had a date with one. Post dinner we were taking a walk, in Paris. I was about to get my first real French kiss.

Then I saw Mary – single supplement tour member, designer of lingerie for larger ladies. She was standing under a street lamp with her round face, and her big round eyes, and her handbag clutched to her round stomach.

I got distracted. Marcel got distracted. The kiss was interrupted.

And now Mary's missing.

I plunk the phone back on the cradle. That was Bridget, world's most sour tour guide, and as usual the bearer of bad news. Or is it bad news?

I'm Dusty Dexter, Private Investigator. Ok, I've only ever cracked one case, but it was a big one. I smashed an international drug ring. Well almost, the cops didn't catch all the bad guys, but that wasn't my fault.

Anyway, I'm keen to prove myself. And it's not like Red, my boss and a former cop with a question over her exit from the force, is gunna give me another case. At least not 'til I finish the PI course, and that's not happening, not anytime soon anyway.

Still Red's not here and Mary's missing. And that puts me in the prime position to pick up a missing person's case.

I settle back on my bed, lock fingers behind my head, cross my legs.

Outside, a wedge of Paris that never made it into a travel brochure – narrow lane, stained building. A backlit sign, H O T E L, no light behind the E.

Not that I'm complaining, trip's free. Janet, she's my best friend and the twin part of our twin-share accommodation, bought a \$2 ticket in a raffle. When she won, she asked me to come along. I said yes, offered her a buck.

Janet's bed's empty. She's gone for a run every day of our 21-day, 12-country tour of Europe. She thinks she's disciplined, I think she's obsessive.

Proof. Her suitcase is like a 3D jigsaw, each bit fits into a special place.

Then there's the zip-lock bags with labels. A baggie recently labelled SCOOTERS is filled with brochures. Janet's decided scooters are cool, and environmentally friendly, but mostly cool. And they might be cool when ridden by a French woman in six-inch heels and skin-tight pants, long dark hair cascading from her helmet. Put Janet on a scooter in her Nike swoosh runners and Nike swoosh sports gear, putt putt putting up the hill at Alex Headland and it's not gunna be cool, it's gunna be lame.

Wish I hadn't told Janet I saw Mary on the bridge last night. Didn't have much choice. Instead of flouncing in the door this morning with a smile on my face, I was tucked up in bed by midnight explaining what went wrong with my date. And Janet's not the type to forget, even if it might be in my best interests.

Janet was jealous.

I arranged the date before we left. The French lessons we took came in handy, 'though I didn't learn much French. Professor Craig ran the course, but one of our tutors was Jacques – he was gorgeous, young, French, and he had a father, a single father, in Paris. Jacques introduced me to Marcel, we emailed, and Marcel offered to take me out when I got to the City of Love.

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I talked up the date. In the photos Marcel was as good looking as Jacques, just a bit older, sophisticated, handsome ... French.

When he walked into the foyer last night – raincoat flapping behind him, red scarf loose on his shoulders, wavy dark hair – the women in the tour group gawped.

Marcel took my hand, kissed the top of it.

Janet smirked, raised an eyebrow.

The date went well. Marcel's Eeenglish wasn't great, and my French is limited to "Where is the train station?" and "I have lost my passport", but we had body language.

After dinner he suggested a walk, draped his raincoat over my shoulders, wrapped his scarf around my neck. He was showing me the statues on the bridge, standing close. I leant into him.

Then I saw Mary.

After a while of her looking at me and me looking at her, she waved, then she walked over. She looked at Marcel, looked at me, didn't say a word. So I say, "What's up Mary?" irritated, and still she says nothing. So I figure she's lost, but she shakes her head. Then she walks back across the bridge stands under the street lamp again.

It's weird, but I'm happy to leave her there, if that's what she wants, get back to the kissing. But Marcel's changed his mind, says, "Doostee, I take you 'otel, leetle walk". And that's the end of my date. No matter how I tried, Marcel wouldn't succumb to the Dusty charm, "Zee moment ees vaneesh".

So I was home early, and Janet teased me for half an hour. No, she's not gunna forget.

And now, so Bridget says, we've got another day in Paris while the cops look for Mary. And that means I've got another chance at a date with Marcel, and a missing person's case. It's not all bad.

The H O T E L sign flickers and flicks out. It's 6.30am, and I need to come up with a plan.

## Chapter 2

So, I've got a case, well not technically, but I'll sort that later.

First up, I want to get into Mary's room, check it out, see if I can find any clues, then I'm going to the bridge. Wonder which room she's in? Could phone Bridget back, but she hates me. Could wait for Janet to get back, she'd probably know. Could call reception. Why don't I just wander down the hall, maybe there's some crime scene tape or something. How am I going to get in?

I find my room key beside the phone, pull a hotel bathrobe over my shortie pyjamas, open the door.

Mostly we've all had rooms on the same floor. Like we don't get to see enough of each other, forty-one of us crammed into a forty-two seat tour bus.

Before the trip, I was thinking a busload of hard-drinking, hard-playing, 30-year-olds more interested in getting laid than looking at historic European treasures. What I got, was self-funded retirees who sniffed the wine, discussed the food, banged on about golf or bowls or bridge and ordered their cappuccino in butchered French, or Italian, or German they learned from language CDs.

Mary, thanks to the single supplement, had a room of her own, a spare seat beside her on the bus. I had Janet.

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I walk down the hall ‘round the corner and, stationed outside a door, is a real French cop, I mean gendarme, in uniform. Gotta be Mary’s room. He leans against the wall, bored, plays with his peaked cap, he’ll no doubt appreciate the Dusty Dexter charms. I’ll talk my way in.

I smile, “Exscuzay mwah. Parlay vouz Onglayze?”

“Yes.”

That’s good, I’ve exhausted my “conversational French”.

Another smile and a shrug that causes the robe to slip off one shoulder. “I guess this is Mary’s room.”

Nothing. Maybe his English isn’t that good. I gotta get in there.

“Mary was my friend.” I know what friend is... “Mary mon amee.”

“I understand. No informacion. Unless you know where find Mary?”

“Me! No, I’m lookin’ for her.”

I need an excuse to take a look inside.

“I leant Mary something, maybe I could take a look, see if it’s in there, in her room.”

A fetching smile.

“No go in.”

“My guide book.” Fast thinking Dusty, and since you’ve never owned a guide book creative too. “We’ve got another day in Paris, since Mary’s missing. I need my guide book, I leant it to Mary.” Another smile, another shoulder shrug and the robe slips right off my shoulder opens across my \$10,000 assets. “Can watch me look for it. Won’t take a sec.”

He seems to debate this, then he turns and opens the door, indicates I can enter.

Too easy. Haven’t the French heard of a crime scene, forensics? Don’t they watch CSI? I know they televise it here. In the past three weeks I’ve seen CSI dubbed into different languages all over Europe. At night, when we haven’t been checking out English-speaking bars, or consuming another “included” five-course meal, while Janet’s been writing her blog and updating her Facebook, I’ve been watching CSI, trying to figure out what’s going on without the words. It’s not that hard, in fact I’ve picked up quite a lot of handy tips – and it’s more fun than studying the PI course.

I go into Mary’s room, he follows.

Neither bed’s been slept in. Mary’s suitcase is on a bed, stuff spills out like she’d been looking for something, but that’s what you do with a suitcase – unless you’re Janet and you know where everything is. Mary’s Mac Air sits beside it. Mary never went anywhere without her laptop, ran her business on it. If there’s a clue, it’s in the laptop, that’s what I gotta get.

The gendarme. “Guide book.” He points to the bedside table.

Kidding me! The last thing Mary would have is a guide book, she was an Apple iPhone, iFreak. When she wasn’t oohing and aahing over crumbling ruins or sighing over stained-glass windows she was running Cupcake’s Online Lingerie for Larger Ladies over the internet.

He picks it up, hands it to me. “You guide book?”

“Yeah. Thanks. Mercee.”

Then he strides back to the door and ushers me out.

Janet’s back from her run, face pink. She glares at me, both hands on her hips. “We leave this morning, look at your luggage. I’m sick of it, I’m not helping you pack.”

“Chill.”

“You need to learn responsibility.”

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What happened to the post-run high? “Chill. We’re not leaving today.”

She gives me a look, trying to figure out if it’s a joke.

“Bridget called. Mary’s missing. We’ve got another day in Paris.”

I sit on my bed, flip through the guide book.

“What do you mean missing?”

“I dunno, missing. Not in her room.” I can vouch for that. “Cops are looking for her.”

The guide book’s full of notes in scrawly, curly, girly handwriting, and asterisks and circles.

“You’re serious. What did she say?”

“Not much.” I run the conversation, not a conversation, just Bridget talking at me.

And I’m not keen on mentioning the bridge. “That’s it.”

Janet gives me the I-want-more both palms open, wide eyes.

I shrug.

She picks up the phone. Janet doesn’t need to ring reception, knows which room Bridget’s in. Every place we’ve been, after we check in, Janet checks Bridget’s room number, “in case of emergency”. Obsessive.

She listens. “On the bridge? What bridge?” A look at me.

*The bridge.*

She repeats. “Handbag. Statue. Not the first. Leaving tomorrow. Breakfast room, 8am. Got it.”

I concentrate on the guide book, like I’m not welcoming interruption.

Janet. “She went missing off the bridge, the bridge where you saw her last night.”

There’s an accusation in her voice.

I know. But, come to think of it, I don’t understand how can you know where someone went missing? If you know where they went missing, how can they be missing?

Janet continues. “They found her handbag.”

Mary had her handbag, clutched to her belly, like she was never going to let go of it.

“It was hooked over a statue.”

A statue. Marcel and I were looking at a statue.

“That’s not all.” Janet pauses for emphasis. “Mary’s not the first woman to go missing off Pont Mirabeau.”

There’s a serial killer on the loose. Now that’s a case.

I’ve never hunted a serial killer before, better get cracking.

I pull on jeans.

“Where are you going?”

“The bridge.”

“Why?”

“I’m gunna find Mary.”

“I suppose you think this is a case.”

“It is a case, Janet. A serial killer’s on the loose abducting women from a bridge in Paris.”

“We don’t know that. Bridget said the cops think she’s missing.”

“What would Bridget know?” Bridget and I don’t get on. Some tour guide - she’s more like a drill sergeant with her tight-furled umbrella, boxing kangaroo impaled on its tip.

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I can see the wheels turn in Janet's head, it's taken a while but she's realising this is a story – missing woman in Paris, possibly the victim of a serial killer. Janet Jones, reporter on the scene.

Then the wheels start going round in my head. If it is a case, I need to get paid. One thing Mary wasn't short of was cash. The Cupcake's Lingerie website, according to the counter, had millions of hits. I reckon plenty of them were pervs searching for porn, still the mansion in Minyama Waters and the interest of the "larger ladies" on the tour group mean someone's using the shopping cart.

Mary's family will be able to fork out the necessaries to have her found. And I, Dusty Dexter PI, being her friend and fellow traveller, am the ideal person to put on the case.

Janet heads to the bathroom, "Two minutes, I'm coming with you."

I pull on jeans, flats, a sexy top, fluff my hair.

While Janet showers I flick through Cupcake's guidebook. There's one page with the corner turned over – Montmartre, with asterisks beside a huge white church, of course, the Musee de Montmartre, Moulin Rouge and a museum, the Museum of Eroticism. Naughty Mary. In the margin a scrawl: "*Ideas for new range?*"

Janet emerges in jeans and a t-shirt, that says she's "going for gold", pulls on her runners, throws her backpack over her shoulder. Janet looks like a tourist.

### Chapter 3

In the movies, Paris looks great in the rain – shiny cobblestones, fuzzy neon lights – in real life, it's grey and wet. The mist turns last night's blow-dry into wet blond fairy floss.

Janet, pulls a cap out of her backpack and pulls it over her cropped hair, hunkers her head down between her shoulders, strides off. She knows where we're going – mapped the route on her iPhone before we left the room.

The bridge is close – it was only a couple of minutes walk, after the interrupted kiss and Marcel saying it was time to go home. "My booteefool Doostee. Phon next time Parea." I will Marcel, I will.

Janet points, excited. "Pont Mirabeau."

After three weeks forced appreciation of "stunning scenery" and "historic architecture" Pont Mirabeau fails the wow-factor test. No gold, no flying horses.

Marcel talked about the bridge. I try to remember what he said, impress Janet. "Some bloke, Apollo, wrote a love poem about the bridge. It's famous."

"Appolinaire."

Janet's got a Wikipedia link embedded in her brain. Between Janet and Bridget, this holiday's been one long history lesson. A bit of history's ok, but I've been in more churches or citadels or cathedrals in the past three weeks than I have in my life, including weddings and funerals.

A case is just what this holiday needed, pity we have to go home tomorrow.

"Marcel," My French date, in case Janet's forgotten, "brought me here because it's the most romantic bridge in Paris."

"Didn't work."

"Thanks to Cupcake." I'd taken to calling Mary Cupcake, on account of the website. It had taken off. Most of the people on the tour started calling Mary Cupcake. She didn't seem to mind.

Cars whizz past as we walk along the bridge. The mist settles into a drizzle. I can barely make out the other end of the bridge, the buildings behind it.

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Janet stops to peer down at one of the statues, like Marcel and I did last night.

“The statues each have a special meaning.”

How does she remember this stuff?

“The bridge was designed by-”

I interrupt Janet’s travelogue. “Look.” Another gendarme, arms crossed, gun on his hip, standing where Marcel and I were when I saw Mary. I point. “She was standing under that lamp.”

We walk up to the gendarme, crime scene tape cuts off a section of the bridge railing, winds around the top of a statue.

Wind whips down the river. I reach into my handbag for my scarf come up with Marcel’s, red, remember he wrapped it around me as we left the restaurant. I wind it around my throat, button the coat over it.

Maureen/Doreen, golfing buddies from the bus tour, stand a respectful distance from the gendarme, wave.

I want to talk to the cop, walk up, give him my best, “Ghe ne parler pas Fronsayze.” I learned enough French to explain I don’t speak French.

He stands, legs spread, arms crossed, big biceps, Gym Gendarme, says, in English. “Away from zee tape.”

I lean over the bridge, look down at the statue.

He says, “Back from zee edge.”

Time to work some Dusty magic, loosen him up, like the last gendarme. “Your English is very good.”

Nothing.

“Mary was my friend, we were on the tour together. Mon amee Mary.”

“I unnerstan. Back from zee edge. Zees crim scene.”

Gym Gendarme needs his protein pick-me-up, and he’s been watching CSI. I get back from the edge.

Janet. “J’adore Paris. C’est tres jolie.”

High school French, I could have done that. “Oui.”

She points at the statue. “Is this where Mary left her handbag? Sac, Mary?” She points to my handbag, the tip of the statue just visible behind the railing of the bridge.

A nod.

“Where is le sac now?” She says it loud, slowly, deliberately.

He’s French, Janet, not deaf, and he speaks English.

He shakes his head.

It’s time for flattery. “You go to the gym?” I look at his biceps. “Very strong.”

“Oui.” A hint of pride, a small flex.

Works every time. “Did Mary jump? Was she pushed? Have you found a body?”

He points across the bridge, Maureen/Doreen lean on the railing, look over the edge.

“Boats. Search zee riveer.”

Ah. “Thanks.” I smile. “Mercee.”

We dodge traffic, join Maureen/Doreen – cheap jeans, fleecy jackets from Kathmandu. One short and fat, the other tall and fat, grey hair, saggy chins, bum bags. I wave, can never remember which is which, mumble something that ends with een.

On the Seine, slick in the grey light, are two police boats, crews on deck, spotlights trained on the water.

Maureen/Doreen, the tall one, sober voice, “They’re looking for Mary.”

Why would a serial killer hang her handbag off a statue, kill her, then throw her in the water? Do they think she jumped, or someone pushed her? What about the other women, did they leave handbags? Did they disappear as in dead, or as in permanently missing?

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Mary sure was behaving strange on the bridge – standing there, like she was waiting for someone. Then I remember the conversation I overheard her having on the phone yesterday. It sounded like she was arranging to meet someone and I made a joke, asked if she had a date too? She said it was business. Mary was meeting someone. There's no way she jumped, she was loving the tour. But why was she meeting someone in the middle of the night on a bridge? Did she meet them? Or did someone else come along? Too many questions.

Maureen/Doreen. "We saw Mary on the bridge last night." They look at each other, grave looks.

She's Mary now, not Cupcake.

She continues. "We asked her if she wanted to walk back with us. She said she wanted to stay on the bridge for a while longer." Shake their heads, heavy with responsibility. I didn't see either of them. "Why were you on the bridge?"

Maureen/Doreen – the short one. "I was taking photos. It's the most beautiful bridge in Paris."

More of the tour group join us.

Prue's wrapped in her oversized fake suede jacket, faux sheepskin lining. It bulges across her stomach, tight around her bum bag. She glances back at her charge, Nikita, who sulks behind her.

Nikita looks like shit, as usual, no doubt the result of another long night out.

"How's it goin' Nikita?"

Shakes her head.

Prue throws me a dirty look. "You think after what happened I was going to close my eyes last night? Give her another opportunity. Her mother will never forgive me."

Nikita shrugs, game's up. No more waiting for Prue to take her sleeping tablet, start snoring, before sneaking out. Nikita doesn't seem too upset, tour's over.

Prue glares at Nikita who glares back – incompatible travel companions. A teenager who wants to be a teenager, on her post-high-school overseas trip, a family tradition she was supposed to take with her mother, Helen. Instead, Mum's at home having chemo and Prue's playing chaperone, and taking the job seriously. At least I've given Nikita some fun times to remember when she's back at uni.

Janet shrugs off her backpack, reaches inside, pulls out her camera. "Get some pics, to go with the story."

"Good. I'll need them too, for the case."

She takes photos of the police boats on the river. We cross back over the road. She photographs the gendarme, still standing arms crossed, the crime scene.

I smile at the gendarme again. "How often do you go to the gym?"

"Every day."

You and Janet, exercise freaks. I nod my appreciation at his musculature.

"Janet, take my photo." I stand beside him, put a hand on his bicep. He looks appropriately grim, but I feel him flex again.

"If she was in the water, how long would it take to find the body?"

"Strong, how say, curreent, Seine. Three, four day bodee float. Maybe never."

"And the other women who disappeared from the bridge?"

He shrugs – that European shrug that means don't ask, or I don't know, or I don't want to tell you – but he says. "Eees meestry. Women deesappear Pont Mirabeau. Le sac on zees statue." Accompanied by a nod at the offending statue, like somehow it's to blame.

"Their bodies?"

"No boddeez." He crossed his arms, stands to attention. That's all I'm getting from Gym Gendarme.

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I need to know more about the other missing women, the other cases. This is big. Is it a serial killer? A missing person's case? A multiple missing persons' case? My excitement level notches up a step or two.

Under the shower, I go over what I know about Cupcake's last movements. Yesterday's phone call - when she said it was business I'd taken her at face value, most of the "larger ladies" on the tour bus had made orders, Cupcake had promised delivery before they got home. Time was running out.

An image, Maureen/Doreen, the short one, fidgety with anticipation of opening her purchase, wriggling into satin and spandex, slipping between the covers with the old man, jumps into my brain. Yeech.

At first I hadn't realised it was Mary behind the brochures that had the ample-bodied female tourists on the bus in deep discussion.

It was Nikita who told me Cupcake Lingerie for Larger Ladies was Mary's business. Nikita had done it for sport, to get back at Prue. Perfect Prue was going to make an order, had filled out a brochure, Nikita had found it. I was surprised, imagined Prue would be a cotton nightie kind of girl, but she was ordering sexy black.

Janet and I had a laugh over the brochure – bodacious bodies in lace and feathers and frills, bustiers with buckles and bells and bows, mounds of flesh partially obscured by fans and dainty shawls. The Larger Ladies lounged on ornate velvet-covered daybeds stacked with silk cushions, or perched, chubby thighs crossed, on spindly chairs.

The collections had names like the Petite Femme Line, the Royal Selection and the top-of-the-range Marie Antoinette Collection. Then there was the Naughty French Affaire range – crotch-less knickers, peep-hole bras.

And it wasn't cheap. Mary could afford not just the "three-week European adventure", prior to meeting up with our group she'd been cruising the "Med". Paris was her last stop.

Which brings me back to last night, and Mary, surprised look on her face, handbag against her belly, in the lamp light on Pont Miraboo. She'd been as surprised to see me as I'd been surprised to see her.

Cupcake hadn't been standing there, on the bridge, in the middle of the night, for no reason. She was meeting someone, and I'm going to find out who.

### Chapter 3

It's time to consider suspects. Whether she jumped, was pushed, whether she's disappeared into thin air, or been abducted by a serial killer with a handbag-over-the-statue signature, no one's above suspicion.

I check out my fellow tour members as they assemble for breakfast. There's a buzz, people in their groups no doubt talking about the disappearance of one of us, Mary. Everyone's gone back to calling her Mary, like they're showing respect. I reckon she liked being called Cupcake.

Bridget's a likely suspect, if only because she's such a bitch. The world's most belligerent tour guide is in the foyer talking to the cops. Even though we're not on tour she's got the broly, kangaroo back in its position on the tip.

We file into the breakfast room, choose tables.

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Prue makes sure Nikita's as far away from me as possible, like I'm the bad influence. The kangaroo kidnap had been Nikita's idea, I just helped her get it. And it was her idea to go out drinking. She had ID, how was I to know she was 17. Sure, we waited until Prue was snoring, but Nikita deserved a night out.

The snatch had been easy. I distracted Bridget while Nikita released the kangaroo from its position of torture. At The Frog and Princess we sat the kangaroo on the bar and ordered drinks. Nikita wanted fruit flavoured vodka, several. We bonded, danced, Nikita cradling the kangaroo, cooing to it.

I didn't hear my phone ring, and if Nikita heard hers she didn't answer. By the time I realised, I had a dozen missed calls, from Prue, from Bridget, from Janet. It was too late to sneak Nikita home, or make excuses – she was in the toilet, still clutching the kangaroo, vomiting in the bowl. And I was the bad guy, again.

Prue and Mary had tolerated each other, and Nikita was too disinterested to push anyone off a bridge.

Maureen and Doreen sit at our table, I decide to stir them up. "You realise you two might have been the last people to see Cup- Mary alive. Makes you prime suspects."

Janet gives me a look, lets me get away with it, but I know she hasn't forgotten I was on the bridge.

And knowing Maureen and Doreen, they would have been in bed by 10, which means they saw Cupcake much earlier than I did. Why was she on the bridge so long?

From the serve-yourself all-you-can-eat breakfast bar I get bacon and eggs. Janet, a bowl with granola, fruit and yoghurt in front of her, pointedly shakes her head. It's my last day, I'll start exercising when I get home. Besides, a few extra curves didn't stop Marcel appreciating the merchandise last night, or almost appreciating the merchandise. I'll fix that.

Bridget enters with three cops, an older one who looks to be in charge, the one from outside Mary's room, and Gym Gendarme who stations himself, quads bulging, at the entrance – I'm guessing in case one of us decides to do a runner.

Bridget taps a spoon against a coffee cup, waits, impatience on her scrawny lined face, for complete silence. She introduces the cops.

"The police would like to ask each of you a few questions, individually." She gives this emphasis, like each one of us might be a guilty party.

"I'm in the process of rearranging your flights home." A sigh. "Fortunately I have been able to arrange accommodation, in your current rooms, tonight. Meet in the foyer at six this evening for your final paperwork, and flight confirmation. I encourage you all to enjoy an extra day in Paris."

She steps aside.

I want my chance to talk to the cop, start a mental list of what I'm going to ask him. Decide to wait 'til last, so he has all the information.

Janet goes first, notebook in hand. I hear her tell him she's a journalist.

One minute later she's back at the table, no notes.

"That was quick."

"Wouldn't talk, wanted to know where I was last night."

"What did you tell him?"

"The truth. I was in bed."

Early to bed early to rise makes Janet a dud suspect.

"Asked if I had an alibi," she glances at me, "I had to say no. Had to tell them you were on a date, didn't get home until midnight."

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So she's dumped me in it.

"Told them you saw Mary on the bridge."

*Right* in it. Thanks Janet.

"It was the truth."

The truth will not necessarily set you free Janet, or in this case, me.

"That means I've got no alibi, it makes me a suspect." She looks at me accusingly.

What about me?

A minute later Maureen/Doreen, Eiffel Tower scarf warming several chins, returns to the table.

"Did you tell him you saw Mary on the bridge?"

The chins wobble up and down. Yes.

"Tell him you took photos?"

"Doreen took the photos."

Doreen's, the short one, must remember that. There could be something in those photos. I wanna get a look at them later, won't push it now.

Doreen also admitted she saw Mary on the bridge – honest country stock, the women from Moree.

Nikita's turn. As she was under house arrest, she's back in no time. Then Prue, she's also back at the table in under a minute. I wait as the other tour members file up then back, long enough to give their names, a "No." then back to breakfast.

It's my turn.

"Bonjour." I put my hand out.

No shake. "Plees seet Maam'. Nom?"

"Dusty Dexter. Call me Dusty." A smile. I was going to tell him I'm a Private Investigator, I can help with the case, but he's not exactly forthcoming. I keep it to myself.

He flicks through his notes finds something underlined several times. "Ghanet say you on breedge. See Mary. Zee time?"

Surely he doesn't think I pushed her off the bridge. Wonder if they've found a body?

"Have you found a body?"

"Zee time you on breedge."

I have to explain. "I had a date, with a Frenchman, Marcel Lecoq. We had dinner at the Two Maggots-"

"Deux Magots." With a smirk.

If you say so. "Marcel suggested a walk on the bridge. He dropped me back here about midnight." The truth, if not the whole truth.

Before he can ask another question I continue. "I can help."

"Expliquer." A pause. "Explain."

"Yesterday I overheard Cup- Mary on the phone, making an appointment, to meet someone. She denied it, but I know she was lying."

"You know thees person she meet?"

"No."

"Where see Mary on breedge."

Bloody Janet.

"She was standing under a street lamp."

"You speak?"

"Yes, she walked over. I asked her what was up?"

"Oop?"

"It's an expression."

A frown.

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“I asked her if anything was wrong. She didn’t say anything, went back to the other side of the bridge.”

“Zees not seem strangh?”

Is he accusing me of something?

“You not theenk to ask Mary walk hom with you and you loveur,” he checks his notes, “Monsieur Lecoq?”

I shrug, it’s easy with hindsight, Grumpy Gendarme.

“Monsieur Locoq see Mary?”

“Marcel doesn’t know Mary.”

“He speak her?”

I shake my head.

“What Mary do?”

“Nothing. Stood there. I told you, I think she was waiting for someone.”

“Deed she have sac, handbag?”

“Yes. She was hanging onto it for dear life.”

“Qui?”

“Yes, she had her sac.”

“See otheur peepeel on zee breedge?”

No. I was concentrating on Marcel, hoping for a real French kiss from a real Frenchman. I wasn’t looking at other peepeel on zee breedge.

He’s waiting for an answer.

“No.”

He closes his notebook. “Thank you Madame.”

“Should check her phone. Find out who she called.”

“No phon, Madame.”

“But she left her handbag.”

“Le sac, no phon.”

Why no phone? “Did the other women leave their phones?”

He seems to debate telling me, decides I can probably find out anyway, this must have been in the papers, online.

He says. “No phon. Five woman meesing Pont Mirabeau, sac same statue. Vaneesh.”

He makes a motion with his hand, fist closed then fingers open. “Peuff.”

Poof. “No bodies?”

“No bodeez.”

“Maybe I can help. I was Mary’s friend. I could contact her family, tell them she’s missing.”

“Gendarme contact familiee.”

“Her Mac Air, I could go through that for you, see if there are any leads.”

“Gendarme search computer.”

He stands, the other cop stands. I wonder if he told them he let me into Mary’s room. Should I mention the guide book? No.

Gym Gendarme uncrosses his arms, biceps bulge through his shirt as he steps away from the door.

“Thank everyone. Pleese enjoy day Paree. We contact if need speak.”

In other words, don’t leave town.

The tour group starts to file out, waiters remove food from the breakfast buffet - a plate of fresh croissants, pastries with fruit and chocolate.

I grab the plate, hold it out. “In honour of Cup- Mary.”

Hands reach out, fingers grip sticky scrolls, flaky pastry. Even Ghanet takes a brioche, no doubt the lowest-fat option. We chew in silence.

## Dusty Dexter PI – The Paris Case, Jan Richards

Prue, raisin snail in hand, is the first to speak. “Bridget didn’t like Mary. I was talking to her the other night, when we were waiting for Dusty to bring Nikita back.” A glare in my direction. “And then last night, when Maureen and Doreen came back, and said Mary was on the bridge, she said she didn’t care. She said she couldn’t wait for the tour to be over. She was,” Prue pauses, “angry. Said we were the worst group she’d had. Ever.”

I almost laugh, but realise the consensus is that it’s not funny.

Prue continues, still looking at me. “She said you were a bad influence on the whole tour. Then she went on about Mary, how Mary had made more money on the tour than she had. And she was mad as hell about the kangaroo. But she went back to the bridge last night, to look for Mary.”

I wonder if she told the cops that, they didn’t question her, or maybe they did, earlier.

Maureen/Doreen, the big one, Maureen, unwraps her scarf, cheeks pink, “Maybe Bridget had a fight with Mary.”

The photographer, Doreen, “Maybe.”

Nods of agreement. Bridget’s gone from respected, if not liked, tour guide to suspect because she said we were a rotten group of travellers.

I don’t buy it.

The plate of pastries is empty.

Janet, lifts her backpack onto her shoulder. “I have to report back. My editor will want it for tomorrow’s paper.”

She addresses the group, assumes the role of tour guide. “We have a free day, but if anyone would like to come with us, Dusty and I will be leaving in half an hour.”

We will?

“We’re going to…” she pauses.

I remember the page turned over in Mary’s guide book. “Montmartre.”

Janet approves. “Montmartre. It’s famous as the bohemian centre of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.”

Here we go again.

“On top is Sacre-Coeur, a memorial to French soldiers. It’s the highest point in the city, after the Eiffel Tower.” Murmurs of recollection at the views witnessed yesterday. “You can climb up the bell tower, there’s a spiral staircase, it’s about 300 steps.” She stops, realises she’s losing them, changes approach. “In Montmartre there are shops and galleries and restaurants, and you can get your portrait done by street artists.”

Some nods.

Janet walks towards the lift.

I head towards the lobby, “See you soon, wanna do something.”

The bridge is the key. The crime scene tape’s still there, but Gym Gendarme hasn’t returned to his post. The boats still search the river.

Did I see anyone, other than Mary, on the bridge last night? Think Dusty. There were people, it’s a city, cars too. I noticed Mary because she was standing in the light, and she was looking at me.

And what’s with the handbag on the statue?

It’s a big statue, a large-breasted woman with a long pole of some sort in her hand, perfect place to loop a handbag, comes right up to the railing, almost. Could Mary reach over? I slip my handbag off my shoulder, lean over the railing, it’s doable.

Five other women, no bodies, so far, handbags over the statue.

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The handbag's a sign of some sort. From whom? The person who goes missing? The person who makes them go missing?

And no phone. I figure, the phone is kept, or dumped, possibly in the river. Phones carry a lot of information. These missing women aren't going to be tracked, either because the person who makes them missing doesn't want to be tracked, or if they make themselves go missing so they can't be found.

I can't see Mary going missing on purpose, she had too much going on. On the other hand, she wasn't on the bridge to take in the sights.

I flick through her guide book.

"Bonjour. Hello." A young woman, size 0, well-dressed, French.

"Hi."

She points at the statue. "Zee meessing women?" It's a question.

"Yeah." I put out my hand. "Dusty Dexter, Private Investigator."

"Isobel Clement." Tiny hand in a leather glove.

We shake.

"Investigateur?"

"Yeah. You know about Mary?"

A nod.

"How?"

"Internet. Zees morning news."

Already.

In explanation. "Motheur, gone." She holds up two fingers, "Deux month."

The daughter of one of the other missing women. I nod.

"Help find motheur?"

"I'm only here until tomorrow. Then I go home."

"Home?"

"Australia."

"Austria?"

"Australia."

Her eyes widen "Australie?"

"Oui. Australie. Down Under."

She sighs. Disappointed.

"Sorry."

She puts her hand into her handbag, pulls out her phone. "I have informacion." A question in her eyes, brow raised. "Like CSI."

CSI, how I do my best study.

"I send. Your numbeur?"

I give her my number.

"What is it?"

"Thees numbeur, my motheur phon. Privat numbeur. I phon, zee man answer. I ask about mother, he deesconnect. Every time deesconnect."

"Ok."

"I give numbeur gendarme," a shrug. She points from me to her. "Phon when you know someseeng."

"Sure." All the way from Australie. "Send me your email address."

She applies herself to the phone. I give her my address.

"Zee polis, do notheen."

"I'll do my best. Mary was my friend." I use a professional voice, like they'd use on CSI.

## Dusty Dexter PI – The Paris Case, Jan Richards

She shakes my hand again – tiny bones. Then she takes a final look over the railing at the statue, walks back along the bridge.

I pocket Mary's guide book.

I don't have my phone turned on, too expensive. The holiday was free, but my financial position, although on the improve, is not ideal. Still I pull it out, power it up.

I read Isobel's message, hit the number, the phone rings, and rings then a mumbled voice, male, answers "Bonjour."

I panic. What am I going to say? Did you kill Mary? Did you make her disappear? I hang up.

As I do I see Marcel walking along the bridge, phone to his ear. He hangs up.

"Marcel? What are you going here?"

"I hear about meeseeng wooman from Australie. I seenk maybe you fren."

"Who were you talking to, on the phone?"

"Jacques. How say, he malade, seek, homseek."

"Homesick."

Marcel's arrival is excellent timing. "I was going to phone, Marcel. We have another day in Paris, while they look for Mary. I thought, maybe we could see each other, tonight."

Marcel smiles, "Ees good. I cook tradisionale Fronsh for Doostee. I geeve address."

I hand him the phone, he keys his address into my contacts.

I walk into the hotel room, a big smile on my face. "Tonight, I have another date with Marcel."

Janet concentrates on her iPad.

Prue's comment about Bridget pops into the front of my brain. "While I'm on my second date, with a gorgeous French man, talk to the night receptionist, find out what time Bridget went out to look for Mary, and what time she got back."

"What are you Dusty Dexter, gendarme? I thought they suspected you, not put you on the case."

Thanks to you. "Don't you want to know what happened? The gendarmes don't seem to have achieved anything. Five meeseeng women, no leads."

"Listen to this. 'A local businesswoman on holiday in Paris disappeared late last night from the famous Pont Mirabeau bridge. Mary Moreton the owner of Cupcake's Lingerie for Larger Ladies, winner of the Sunshine Coast businesswoman of the year award last year, was on the final day of a three-week tour of Europe. French police said she was the fifth woman to go missing from the bridge in recent months. None of the women, or their bodies, have been found. Journalist Janet Jones, a friend and fellow tour member, will provide a comprehensive coverage on her return.'"

A byline on a downpager and a pointer to a future story, good work Janet. "It's not very long."

She sends the email.

"Did you do any research?"

"What sort of research?"

Like before you wrote the story. I thought you were a reporter? "On the missing women, online?"

"It's just a teaser, I'll do it later."

## Dusty Dexter PI – The Paris Case, Jan Richards

I grab her iPad, Google – missing women Paris handbag statue – get lots of hits. I find newspaper articles, turn on translate, read them in something close to English.

The first woman disappeared six months ago, left her handbag on the statue. Three other women since then, all French, then Mary the first Australian. No bodies, no conclusions. None of the women have been seen since.

Few facts, lots of conjecture.

One theory is that the women arrange to meet someone on the bridge, three of them were members of online dating services, that a killer is arranging the meetings through the dating service, then spirits the women away, or tosses them into the river. The handbag on the statue is his signature.

Another theory is that the women meet someone who then helps them to disappear, or that they disappear themselves. That theory doesn't have a reason for the handbag being left looped over the statue, except that as they change their identity they don't want the handbag any more.

Then there's the suicide line of thought. The women hang their handbag over the bridge and jump into the Seine. The river swallows up the bodies, they get eaten by fish, big fish, or washed downstream, may never be found.

There's no way Cupcake offed herself, she was having too much fun for that.

There have been calls for police to man the bridge, and apparently police presence has been increased. I don't remember seeing gendarmes on the bridge last night.

Janet's searching zip-lock bags of brochures.

I ditch the iPad thumb through Mary's guide book. Why so interested in Paris, we were only here two days? "Was Cupcake going back home with the rest of us?"

"I think so. Why?"

"Just wondered. She was on that cruise before she met up with us. Maybe she was staying longer."

A mumble, "Don't think so."

Janet finds whatever she was looking for, unsheathes some brochures. "Montmartre."

I'm going to have some input into the itinerary today, based on Mary's guide book. "Mary was going to," I open the page, read, skip the church, "some museum of erotica, and Moulin Rouge."

She cuts me off. "How do you know? What's that?" She grabs the guide book. "Where'd you get this?"

"Mary's guide book. Mary's room. Gendarme let me in. Used some Dusty Dexter charm."

She ignores the charm comment, says, "Haven't they seen CSI?"

"My thoughts exactly."

"You reckon he told the other cops?"

"Don't know. Not my fault if he didn't. They didn't ask, I didn't tell."

Janet smiles. We're partners in crime again, and we have a lead the cops don't have. It's like when Janet helped me crack the drug ring. We make a good team – I come up with the ideas, take the risks, she does the research. Janet's a behind-the-scenes person, she just doesn't know it.

"Why would Mary have a guide book? We're only in France two days."

You're catching up Janet.

"Besides. Mary had her iPhone, and the Mac Air." She looks at the guide book like it's a foreign object. "You sure it's hers?"

I take it back read. "Ideas for next range'. Written beside the erotica museum."

Janet digests the information, I help her out. "Looks like Mary intended to spend more than a couple of days in Paris."

## Chapter 4

There's no throng of tour members in the lobby eager to join Janet as guide of Montmartre. I reckon they're as keen for some personal space as I am – tour-bus friendships only go so far.

We hail a taxi, join a moving mass of vehicles traversing the roundabout at the Arc de Triomphe. Tourists amble around the base, peek over the top, peer down the Champs Elysee, take photos.

Janet's taken 3000 photos, posted a continuous stream on Facebook. I told her she's a techno narcissist – I read about it, people who have all these "friends", "followers", live their life in front of everyone. She said she's sharing.

Scooters, Smart cars, taxis, crappy and expensive European models merge, horns beep. Chaos, but it seems to work.

Janet keeps glancing at the blue dot on her iPhone, making sure the cabbie isn't ripping us off, or absconding with two Australian tourists.

I decide to provide my own travelogue. "On our left the Arc de Triomphe." What did Marcel say? "The symbol of the power of France."

Janet gives me a how-did-you-know-that look, glances out the window. "How romantic, a white wedding in Paris."

A tiny Japanese bride in a fountain of white and her groom in a long silver coat stand either side of an ornate lamp post, pose for photos. When a gust catches the dress, messes layers of tulle, a bridesmaid in a red cocktail dress and needle heels repositions fabric, retreats.

Janet believes in happily ever after, although there's no sign of her having a white wedding, in Paris, or anywhere, anytime soon. Janet's last crush turned out to be gay, and her holiday romance is still back in Vanuatu.

"The City of Love." She says it with a sigh.

"You bet. And tonight, some of that French lovin's comin' my way."

"You're so crass."

And you're jealous.

The taxi stops at traffic lights beside a florist, rows of flowers in buckets on the footpath, red, pink, yellow, white surrounded by lush green.

"Wanna buy a rose at home you have to go into the shop, ask them to take one out of the fridge."

"It's the weather, at home they can't put them outside." Janet states the obvious.

"Can't wait to get home."

"We'll be running at 5.30am."

"Who said anything about running?"

"You'll be running. You'll put on one of those skin-tight tops and a pair of leggings and your stomach'll roll over the top and you'll be running."

I know she's right. Hate running.

She juggles the phone, and her stack of brochures. "We'll see Sacre Coeur soon."

I point. "That'd be it." The white dome, spires are visible through the front windscreen.

The boulevard is lined with buildings, like you see in French movies – six storeys high, lacy ironwork, sculptures above doorways, tiny attic windows in the roof line. It's

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pretty, maybe too pretty. I wonder where the dirty side of Paris is. “We need to see Moulin Rouge, it’s on Mary’s list.”

“Shouldn’t be far, on the left.”

“Let’s get out.”

“Sure. Then we can walk up the hill.”

I look up, can’t see the top of the hill now for buildings. “Let’s just look at it from here.”

We crawl past. Through traffic I glimpse the red windmill, sandwiched between buildings, a red sign reads Moulin Rouge another reads Bar. That’s it.

“Where’s the elephant?”

“What elephant?”

“In the movie there’s a big elephant.”

She shakes her head, goes back to the phone.

“With Nicole Kidman, Ewan McGregor – great costumes, hot dancing, too much singing.”

“I know the movie Dusty.”

No elephant.

We turn up a side street, another Moulin Rouge sign, a shopfront with an awning. Janet. “That’s the original stage entry, you can buy memorabilia.”

I want one of the red boas in the window, but I don’t want to walk up the hill.

The street’s narrow, scooters navigate cars.

“I’m buying a scooter as soon as we get back.”

“So you said. Why not stick with the Yaris, it’s pretty much a scooter, just with a bigger body.” It’s a joke, she doesn’t smile.

“They’re economical, good for the environment.”

“What do you care about the environment?”

“They’re cool.”

The argument’s getting stale. I’m hoping she’ll get over it, there’s no way I’m getting on the back of a scooter.

On the pavement people check out produce in trays, the front window of a Sandwicherie is stacked with baguettes spilling bright fillings. On a doorstep an old man, white socks with his dark shoes, reads a newspaper, a few metres away coffee drinkers at tables on the pavement.

The buildings aren’t as ornate as those on the Boulevard. I like this better, still, I can’t wait to get home to the esplanade, where the coffee shops aren’t squashed together. I’m sick of sitting in tiny chairs at tiny tables, overheating bodies crammed side by side in tiny restaurants. I want to stretch out, smell the salt air, see the beach.

The street’s cobbled, makes a popping sound under the taxi’s tyres. Then the driver stops, points, “Montmartre.”

“Great, let’s get coffee, and a croissant.”

“You just had breakfast, we’ll go to Sacre-Coeur first.”

The narrow streets are packed with souvenir shops – posters of girls dancing the cancan in the windows, scarves and berets on stands outside the doors. It’s touristy, and I love it. I want another tacky trinket to add to the collection in my suitcase.

“Around that corner.”

Another church, I can hardly wait.

“The views over Paris will be spectacular.”

Janet throws her backpack over her shoulder, pulls the other arm through, adjusts it. That’s her serious sightseeing look.

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It is spectacular. Just like in the movies, postcards – high above Paris, chimneys on every roof top. The wind buffets me, I shove my hands into my pockets, feel Cupcake's guide book, open it to Montmartre. There has to be a clue here, somewhere.

Janet wants to get inside the church, hefts her backpack, "Come on."

As we're walking up the steps I see Nikita, cigarette behind her back. "I'll just go say hi to Nikita, see you inside."

Hair unwashed, eyes showing signs of last night's makeup underneath today's makeup, Nikita tugs on the cigarette.

"You okay?"

"Didn't get much sleep. Prue wouldn't take her eyes off me."

"Surely she didn't stay up all night to make sure you didn't go out."

"Not exactly."

What isn't Nikita telling me?

"She ran out of pills." She sniggers. "Was really pissed off. Said she brought just the right number." Another drag. "I pinched a couple."

"Why?"

She shrugs skinny shoulders. "To try."

Glad I haven't got kids.

She lights another cigarette off the butt of the first. "You going to figure out what happened to Mary?"

"Maybe."

Nikita wants to tell me something.

I ask, "What do you reckon happened?"

Another shrug, those shrugs speak, but what do they say?

I put my head to one side, it's a question, but she'll only tell me if she wants to.

She wants to. "I woke up, like 3, 4am. Prue wasn't in the room. This morning I asked her where she went..." Nikita's telling a story, wants to get across a point.

"What did she say?"

"Said she couldn't sleep, went for a walk around the hotel."

"Fair enough."

"She wore her jacket – that gross fake thing. I know because it was wet, hanging in the bathroom this morning."

"Maybe she went for a walk before breakfast, while you were sleeping."

"No, she was reading."

"You're saying maybe she went to the bridge?"

She sucks nicotine.

I can't see why Prue would want to push Mary off a bridge, and I can't see her walking the streets at night alone either.

"I'm just saying she was out, and I bet Miss Prissy Prue didn't tell the cops she was out."

Point taken.

"You going inside?"

"Might wait this one out."

Nikita flicks ash, "Can't wait to get home."

We stand in silence, wait.

Prue and Janet appear at the top of the steps, evangelical smiles on their faces. They stride towards us. Janet holds a brochure, finger marking her place, points at a picture. "I'm climbing to the top of the bell tower." She doesn't even ask the question. "See you in the square, where the restaurants are, half an hour."

I smile at Prue, "Let's have coffee."

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She glares at Nikita, “You should have breakfast.”

Nikita shrugs.

A portrait artist, beret on his head, palette in hand, beckons Nikita. “Tres jolie, mademoiselle. I paint.”

She smiles, flutters her eyelashes. Prue grabs her elbow, moves her along. Dozens of artists sit under umbrellas, canvases on show, as tourists with plastic shopping bags cruise.

I see a poster, a French man with a hat, red scarf and a dark jacket – stylish, like Marcel when he walked into the lobby last night. Marcel’s a walking French cliché. I buy the poster, and one with cancan girls.

We choose a restaurant and sit among alfresco diners crowding tables along the pavements and in the square. It’s a tourists’ paradise – historic cathedral in the background, food and booze in the foreground. A gust lifts the corners of the red table cloth, flutters red and white striped awnings.

Nikita orders Coke and a croissant from a waiter who speaks to us in English.

Prue wants black coffee, doesn’t add milk or sugar, as if it would show weakness. She’s a do-gooder, never says a bad word, although Nikita seems to have tested her. What did Janet say? Prue helped Nikita’s mother while she was having chemotherapy. When mum wasn’t well enough to come on the holiday, she asked Prue if she wanted to go, and look after Nikita. I smile, I wonder how well Prue knew Nikita, if she realised what a challenge she was taking on.

“So Prue, holiday’s over, what are you up to when you get home?”

She doesn’t like me, but she makes conversation. “Helen will need me.”

Nikita looks at me from underneath dark eyelashes, rolls her eyes.

“I saw that. You’re a thankless little B.” She doesn’t say the word.

“Didn’t sleep well Prue?” I shove almond croissant into my mouth.

“Someone stole some of my sleeping pills.”

“Why so much trouble sleeping?” I thought she’d sleep the sleep of the good.

She spits at me. “How could you take a young girl out and let her drink so much she’s vomiting half the night?”

It occurs to me Prue doesn’t know Nikita was out almost every night. She thinks it was a once-off, and my fault. I’m a big girl, can take the blame, but I can still rock Prue’s boat. “Tell the cops you were out last night?”

She gives Nikita a look that would stop a rhino. “Telling tales are we Nikita? Like I told her, I needed to walk, I couldn’t sleep. I had been very worried about Nikita, though God knows why.”

She drains her cup, stands, hands Nikita some cash, “I Imagine you can find your way back to the hotel. I’ll see you for the briefing tonight. And don’t think you’re leaving the hotel after that. I’ll be keeping an eye on you.” She leaves.

Nikita pockets the cash. “Don’t think she likes me much.”

“You and me both.”

“Doesn’t like Mary either.”

Is Nikita stirring, or does she know something? “What do you mean?”

“Think it was something to do with a man.”

“Kidding me!” The concept of either Mary or Prue with a man is hard to imagine. The idea of them fighting over a man is even more difficult to grasp. I reckon this is teenage fantasy.

“It’s true.”

“What man?”

“I don’t know.”

## Dusty Dexter PI – The Paris Case, Jan Richards

Janet takes the chair Prue vacated. She has red patches on her cheeks and a smile on her face.

“The view’s amazing from up there. Narrow staircase, have to stand side-on in little corner bits to let people go past. Some American woman nearly had a heart attack. Took heaps of photos. Can see all over the city – Eifel Tower, Arc de Triomphe, Invalides, the river.” As she struggles out of her backpack, unbuttons her jacket.

The waiter arrives, she orders a coffee, I order another coffee, Nikita orders another Coke, finally has some colour in her face.

“Croissants are lovely.”

Janet eyes the plate in front of me, shakes her head.

I lick my finger, mop up a litter of flaky pastry and tiny bits of almond. “Prue went out last night, late.”

Nikita nods.

“Reckons she walked around the hotel, but Nikita said her jacket was wet this morning, hanging in the bathroom. Tonight, when you talk to reception about Bridget, check on Prue too.”

Janet pulls out her iPhone, finds the calendar, adds another reminder.

“I want an iPhone, but Mum said I have to wait ‘till I can pay for the calls myself.”

Nikita sucks up Coke.

“You got a job?”

“Red Rooster.”

I show Janet the posters I bought.

She mistakes the purchase for an interest in art. “There’s a Salvadore Dali museum.”

I give here the not-another-museum-or-art gallery look. Where was it Mary wanted to go? I pull out her guide book.

“Let’s go to the Montmartre museum.”

Janet takes the guide book, reads. “It’s in a townhouse where artists used to live.

Emphasis on the belle époque.” Assuming Nikita and I don’t know what that is she explains. “The bohemian lifestyle.”

My kind of place, Mary’s kind of place? “Where?”

“Around the corner.”

Nikita tags along, seems I’ve taken over Prue’s role, not sure I like it.

The townhouse is in a side street, cobble stones and more old buildings. Pictures of cancan girls in my head I imagine artists staggering home after a night at the Moulin Rouge drinking absinthe – girls with frilly knickers, young men with jaunty hats, stylish scarves, drunk and horny.

Did Mary consider her lingerie art? Maybe.

The rooms are tiny, some of them set up like they would have been. In a corner a bar, mannequins with layered petticoats. It’s not Mary’s style, her designs work on the less-is-more basis, as much as they can considering the amount of flesh to be covered. Still, who knows where inspiration comes from, and maybe that wasn’t the only reason she wanted to come here. But I’m not getting any leads.

Nikita nicks outside for a cigarette.

Janet’s bought the audio tour, has the headphones on. She waits until the segment’s finished then points out the window at what looks like a small overgrown vineyard, educates me. “That’s the last vineyard in Paris, they make about a thousand bottles a year, sell them for charity.”

## Dusty Dexter PI – The Paris Case, Jan Richards

Is it time for wine yet? The French sure can do wine, I've done my best to do appreciate liquid French culture.

Janet refers to the guide book, "Mary circled the museum of erotica, near the Moulin Rouge. Why don't we walk down the hill, take a look."

Better than walking up the hill.

Nikita finds us and Janet leads the way, iPhone in hand. We walk down narrow streets, past a windmill - accompanied by another tour guide talk from Janet – and more shops and cafes and stands loaded with fruit. Another shopfront is packed with cheeses, the pungent smell crawls out the door. I watch Nikita dramatically pinch her nose. I'm with you kid, don't get this French thing about off cheese.

Moulin Rouge. "I'm gunna get a boa." Nikita and Janet follow me inside, browse. I drape a few boas around my neck – fluffy, feathery, red and black froth. I pose, saucy. Janet ignores me and Nikita seems to think I'm a dick. When in France. I buy one, wear it.

Down the road at the Musee de l'erotisme the focus, as would be expected from its name, appears to be on the act of procreation, not the miracle of life. I read from the guide book, "A tribute to the primal appeal of human sexuality". Out front are two sculptures, seated naked men with breasts and big bellies and fat thighs, their bits conveniently hidden. They look up at us.

I'm keen to go inside, after all Cupcake was coming here. Janet volunteers to stay with Nikita. She wants to come in, but Janet steers her away.

The museum's full of penises, giant erect penises, and vaginas, lots of vaginas, in different combinations and positions. They're doing what comes naturally. Sex acts to suit every imagination in statues, pictures and drawings. Historic penises and vaginas, contemporary kitsch. I'm right at home in the boa.

I reckon Marcel would take this museum in his stride, not sure what Hank would think.

Hank. Not that he's a prude, he's not, and he's built, likes to prance around, show off. I feel a bit bad about Hank. Hank who's idea of a date is a few drinks at the footie club, then dinner at the local curry joint. Hank and I are taking a break. I like Hank, a lot. But he wanted to be there all the time, and he started fixing stuff. It was ok when he fixed the lattice, after the incident with the capsicum spray. But he started turning up and putting on the tool belt and fixing more stuff. I told him, "It's a rental. It's a dump, and I like it this way." Plus, I'm not the type gets turned on by a tool belt. Hank had all the tackle he needed right where it was supposed to be, the tool belt was a distraction. So we're having a break.

I pull out my phone, take some photos.

I wonder what sort of inspiration Cupcake hoped to get here? Mary's lingerie was about "enhancing the allure of the marital bed" and "rekindling the magic of early love". This is about straight-forward lust. And no leads to her disappearance.

Janet gives me an inquiring eyebrow.

Nikita, with a sigh. "I know about sex, I'm not a virgin."

"Lots of penises." What else can I say?

"Men are obsessed with penises," Janet says.

"Yeah." Nikita.

## Chapter 5

Janet sits in front of a plate of shredded vegetables, a green, white and red mound, drinks Perrier. Nikita sucks down more Coke, demolishes something chocolate – dessert, no main course. Janet gave her a lecture, but I figure tomorrow she'll be home, Prue will have

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informed her mother of her behaviour, and mine, and she'll get enough lectures then. And probably have to eat her veg. So I said, "We're in France. Let her eat cake."

I shove bites of a massive baguette stuffed with ham and cheese, no greens, into my mouth, wash it down with a glass of house white.

Janet's planning the next stage of the day's itinerary, brochures spread over the table.

She can play tourist, I'm not joining her. "I'm going back to the bridge."

Janet. "You just went back to the bridge."

"So, I'm an investigator, I'm investigating." I also wanna phone that number again, have to think about what I'm gonna say when he answers. Didn't tell Janet about Isobel, the phone number. "I've got a lead."

"What sort of lead?" Suspicious.

"Isobel Clement, gave me a phone number."

"Who?"

"Daughter of one of the missing women. Saw her on the bridge."

She takes it in. "A woman walked up to you on the bridge, gave you the phone number of a suspect in a murder case that's been going six months." She laughs, sputters greens. "You just gonna phone, say 'Hi, you the murderer?'"

"No, but I am gonna call, arrange a meet."

"A meet. You sound like Tony Soprano."

Nikita glances from Janet to me and back again, seems to be enjoying the exchange.

"I'm a professional."

She sputters again. "I'm going to the archaeology museum near Notre Dame."

"Knock yourself out."

Nikita. "I'm going to the movies. They've got the new James Bond movie, in English."

Janet, "On your own?"

"I'm seventeen."

"She's been getting pissed all over Europe on her own. I think she'll be ok."

The bridge is busy, cars, Parisiennes, tourists with bum bags and cameras. It's not raining, but the clouds look wet. I tie my jacket around my waist, pull off a long-sleeve top, shove it in my handbag. I'm sweating in my jeans. Spring in Paris, autumn at home – cool mornings, ocean clean and clear - my kind of weather.

Along the river is the Eifel Tower, back where I came from the typical Paris buildings, trees on the river banks, green. A tourist boat slides on top of a flat slick-looking Seine.

I check out all the statues, there's only one that would be any good for leaving a handbag, *the* statue. It's huge, a dirty green, the seated woman, naked except for some draped coils. She reaches almost from water level to the top of the railing, octopus tentacles or something underneath her, holds up a long staff. She's not as curvy as the women featured in Cupcake's lingerie, still, from this angle she's very substantial. I take out my phone, look her up. Like Janet said, they each have a meaning, she's commerce. Mary would have liked that, Mary was all about commerce, was good at it. Why would she intentionally leave it all behind? She wouldn't, that's my verdict.

I take some photos of the statue. Can use them to show the family when I get home, show them I did my background research. Get them to let me take on the case. If history and Isobel's experience are anything to go by, the gendarmes aren't going to find Mary.

Which brings me to the phone call. What am I going to say? Who is he? I don't want to accuse him of abducting women, but I do want to talk to him.

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Should I ask him to meet me, on the bridge, tonight? Tell him Isobel's mother gave me his number. That's what I'll do. After my date with Marcel, I'll come back to the bridge, meet him. Pity to cut the date short, but I'd have to get up early anyway to get to the airport.

That should work.

I'll find out how he knew Isobel's mother? If he knew Mary, the other women. See if there's a link. That's a plan.

What if he's a serial killer? I'll need protection? I didn't bring the taser, or the capsicum spray. I've got a travel pack of hairspray, better than nothing – it's a pump spray, and the nozzle's a bit clogged, must remember to give it a rinse. If it comes to it, I'll just have to run.

I tap the number. I'll tell him I got his number from- damn, I don't know Isobel's mother's name. I hit the end call button, check her message. Nothing. I phone Isobel, it was Juliette.

I hit the number again, take a deep breath.

"Bonjour." A deep male voice. He sounds like Marcel, but I guess over the phone any Frenchman would sound like Marcel to me.

"Bohnghor. I want to meet you."

"Pourquoi?"

What? "Juliette Clement gave me your number, she said I should talk to you."

Nothing.

"On the bridge. Pont Miraboo, beside the statue, tonight, midnight."

"Oui." He hangs up.

Holy shit.

## Chapter 6

I buzz Marcel's door, travel-size hairspray in my handbag, but first, the fun. Here I am, in Parea, the City of Lurve, give me your best.

I hoik up the girls. I'm wearing new underwear, bought this afternoon – I figure Marcel for a lingerie kind of guy, not like Hank. The girls are wrapped in red nylon, lace scratches, the matching g-string is doing its thing.

Marcel kisses me the regulation three times on my cheeks, then longer on the lips, takes my jacket, ushers me inside.

This is more like it.

I take it in, all of it, without having to move more than my eyes. The apartment's not much bigger than a big motel room. I remember he said it's his city apartment, he has a house in the country. He said in Paris apartments are for sleeping and not much else – people eat out, live out. I can see why.

Still, it's a room ready for lurve. Candles flicker on ledges, in window frames, in spaces in the bookcase. And flowers, huge bunches of them, fill corners.

The tiny dining table is set, glasses gleam in the candlelight, white plates with gold rims, silver cutlery.

The bed is heaped with red and gold pillows, and is partly hidden behind a Japanese screen over which a shimmering black silk robe has been tossed, nonchalantly. I'm glad I wore the underwear. A French love song plays in the background.

I get that cliché feeling. I had it last night at the restaurant – like I've walked into the middle of a French romance. It's ok, I'm up for lurve, but I'm thinking more a French liaison, a brief affair.

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Then I feel my nose fizz and before I can stop it, or attempt to hide it, I sneeze. Shit. And again, and again. Must be the flowers, I try to explain to Marcel.

He can't believe his gorgeous blooms could be causing the explosions coming from my nose, but he gets the message. He takes the flowers, opens the windows, puts the vases on the window ledge, closes the windows again. A couple of candles flicker then settle.

My nose is full. In the bathroom I blow thoroughly then look in the mirror. I've wiped the makeup off my nose, which is now red, and I haven't got my compact. I try to smear a bit across from my cheeks without much success, figure it doesn't matter. I take a deep breath of fragrance-free air, shove out my assets and venture back into the apartment.

Marcel fusses, checks I'm ok, then plays the French lover, opens champagne, "Voila." Pours glasses. We touch flutes, look into each other's eyes, drink. The bubbles ping in the back of my throat, a sneeze threatens, I control it.

He guides me into the kitchen takes the lids off pots, with his hand floats the aroma past my sodden nose. I can't smell a thing. "Lovely Marcel."

"French cuisine. Thees morning at marchay buy fresh vegetable, 'erb. Thees afternoon I cook."

He explains the first course in unintelligible Franglaise.

It turns out to be ham, melted cheese and shaved zucchini on toast. More bread. Haven't the French heard carbs are fattening?

Between courses Marcel wraps a laundered white apron around his hips, works in the kitchen, opens more wine.

My nose clears.

I'm in Paris, with a gorgeous French man – I'm on my way to having my first French affair. I take the wine into the kitchen kiss him on the lips, warm. I wrap my arms around him, mould my body to his, sip the wine, inhale expensive French cologne. Then I lift my head, kiss him again, longer, deeper, his tongue in my mouth.

He gently pulls away. "Too much hurree, Doostee. Soon we eat-" something or other "boeuf."

Beef.

He places a steaming plate in front of me, watches, waiting for my approval. "Ees good, no?"

"Trez bon, Marcel."

He smiles, cuts himself a piece, puts it into his mouth, licks shiny sauce off his lips. He sighs, "Ma mere, food, familiee." He eats, grabs chunks of baguette, shovels food into his mouth.

It is good. I cut another piece, the meat falls apart in my mouth, the sauce rich and strong.

Something's stuck in my throat. I swallow, it's still there. I try to chew. Shit. I have to get it out. I dip my forehead so the crown of my head is facing Marcel, put two fingers into my mouth, find something stringy, pull. It's half way down my throat. I tug it, pull a piece of string up and out of my throat. Swallow. Breathe.

I glance up. Marcel, continues to fork food into his mouth. I don't know whether he's being polite, or whether he's so engrossed in the food and the memories he hasn't noticed me regurgitate six inches of string.

I put the string on the side of the plate, cut another piece, small, check it for string, then chew, and chew until it turns into mush before I swallow.

Marcel wipes his plate clean, downs a glass of wine, refills and sits back in his chair, satisfied. He watches me eat.

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As he cleans up and prepares dessert I check out the small apartment. Shelves are stacked with novels, reference books, in French and in English. I pick one up, a map of Australia on the front.

“Marcel, you read about Australia?”

He shrugs. “A leetle, when Jacques he go.”

“You read English easily Marcel?”

“Read better than speak.” He lowers his head modestly.

Titles by James Patterson, Lee Child, Denis Lehane. “You like crime novels?”

“Oui. I like, how you say, find zee bad guys. Like you. Maybe one day write book about Doostee.”

I like the idea that someone might base a series of crime novels on me, Dusty Dexter, Private Investigator. I know Marcel’s flattering me, but it’s not out of the realm of possibility, once I get a few more cases under my belt. And the TV clip where I emerged from the ocean, in my togs, after the rescue. That got good hits on YouTube.

“I’m on a case. Or I will be. I’m going to find out what happened to Cup- Mary. Who she met, why she disappeared. Maybe she was pushed, maybe she was abducted. Maybe by someone she knew, planned to meet.”

“Pushed! Non. She fall. Mary tourest, ees magnifique bridge. She, how say, look at statues – like you other night. She fall.” Then he adds in a sombre tone. “Or she joomp.”

“Maybe she met someone on the bridge. Maybe they pushed her in.”

“Non. Acceident. Police say trageec acceident.”

“What about the other women? The police said five women have gone missing.”

He shrugs, that French shrug. “I think waste you time.”

I continue my circuit of his apartment. A TV in one corner, two lounge chairs, a tiny coffee table. On it, a little green box, packing spills out, hangs down the side. I reach out, lift it, am about to look inside when Marcel appears beside me, takes it from my hand, places it back on the table, turns me around to him and kisses me again. This time he’s serious.

We dance, slow and close, his hands all over me. Then he stops, plucks the silk robe off the Japanese screen drapes it over my shoulders and points me towards the bathroom.

I guess I’m supposed to change. I go with the flow, pull off my dress, tie the bathrobe loose, sexy underwear still in place.

When I return, Marcel’s playing, overplaying, the romantic hero. Also in a robe, he lies on the bed among the pillows, leans on his left elbow. He puts his hand out to me, looks like a B-grade movie star.

Am I supposed to be the romantic heroine, ready to succumb? It’s not working for me. In fact, I’m close to laughing.

I pull myself together, give him what I hope is a come-hither look, but instead of joining him on the bed I walk to the windows. My back to him I open them, avoid the flowers in their vases. I breathe the cool wet city air, regain my composure. Candles sputter, go out. I untie the robe, let it fall from my shoulders, turn, smile. This is my show, now.

“You not like French woman, my blond Australien.”

But it doesn’t seem to affect his performance.

## Chapter 7

It’s 11pm and I’m awake, and ready for my meeting on the bridge. I need enough information to convince Mary’s family to pay me to keep looking for her, without getting myself abducted by a crazed serial killer.

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I get out of bed, dress. Where's my handbag? I spy it beside the coffee table, see the little green box. I put the bag over my shoulder, lift the lid on the box, am about to pull out the rest of the paper, see what's inside, when Marcel's series of snores reach a crescendo and he wakes himself up.

Sits up. "Doostee?"

"Marcel. I tried to wake you. I have to leave."

"Porquoi? Why? I weesh we eet breakfast. Fresh croissant from patisserie."

I walk to the bed, kneel beside him, explain. "Marcel, I'm a private investigator. I want to work on Mary's case, I want to find her. I have to learn everything I can before I go home."

He's irritated. "Mary ees gone!" Maybe he was looking forward to more than croissants for breakfast.

"I'm sorry Marcel. I have to go."

"Where go? Is night."

"To the bridge."

"You crazee?"

I'm not sure if he's concerned or angry. Either way, I'm outta here, before he's fully conscious.

I blow him a kiss, grab my coat and head out the door before he's fought his way up out of bed.

I stand right where Mary was, under the street lamp, handbag clutched to my stomach – maybe it was a sign, who knows. Hand inside, I grip the pump-pack hairspray – damn, forgot to clean the pump.

There's no one around, I pull out the spray, push the pump a few times. It's ok, but not like the capsicum spray, that stuff really sprays. I unscrew the top, pull out the tube, make sure the bottom of the tube is clear, put it back in, screw it up. I give a few more pumps, that's as good as it gets. I shove it back in the bag, it's a last resort.

Couples walk hand-in-hand across the bridge, a few cars. No lone man.

Then a group of girls, pissy, totter on their heels to the statue. They giggle, chatter, I can't understand what they're saying.

One girl loops her handbag over the statue, another takes her picture. They check the photo. They take turns, handbags over the statue, photos.

I gotta know what's goin' on. "Exscuzay mwah."

They look up from their phones.

"Parlay vous Onglayze?"

"Oui."

"Why are you taking photos? With the handbags?"

"Ees romantic."

"Romantic?"

"Zee women leave zee life, leave sac. Start new life viss zee loveur."

I can't see Mary as a romantic heroine.

"Why the photos?"

"Facebook. Say look for loveur."

"What if they were murdered?"

"Non!" A chorus.

"The police don't know what happened."

Heads shake. "Ees love story."

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What's wrong with the French?

They totter off.

I take my place beside the statue, focus on the task ahead – the reality, not the French romance.

I want to talk to this man. What about?

“Hi there, are you a French serial killer? And what's with the handbags?”

No more girls taking photos, few people. 12.30am. I'm getting bored.

“Hey, what's the go? What's the MO? Do you lure women onto the bridge at night, promise something then push them off?”

12.45am. I need to pee.

Maybe he didn't understand me. Maybe he's around somewhere checking me out.

A man in a raincoat, long, a hat, walks, head down. He looks around, looks at me.

Shit. I grip the hairspray.

He comes closer.

He stops in front of me, doesn't seem threatening, looks more like a public servant than a killer. Clean shaven, grey skin, a cheap suit under the cheap raincoat – a not-very-well-paid public servant.

I smile, big. “I'm Dusty.”

“What want?”

“Juliette told me she was meeting you.” It's a stab in the dark.

“Non.”

“You came to the bridge.”

“What want?”

Not a conversationalist. “I wanna know if Juliette was meeting you? If Mary was meeting you? Why?”

Nothing, but he isn't pointing a gun at me, that's good. And I doubt he's strong enough to heave a struggling woman over the railing and off the bridge, certainly not Mary.

Then. “You lie. Juliette tell no one.” An edge to the voice.

I grip the spray. Why didn't she tell anyone? Was she dead? Was it a secret?

My hands are sweaty, I've got my finger on the nozzle, but it keeps slipping. “So you know Juliette.”

“Go hom Australienne.”

“How did you know I'm Australian?”

A snort. “You acceent funnee.”

Smart arse.

“Go hom. Teell fameelee Mary deesappeear. Life go on.”

Life goes on. Yeah, I'll tell that to the family. “No.”

“You want deesappeear?”

“You threatening me?”

Then he pulls out the gun, points it at me.

Shit.

I indicate my hand in my handbag, I could have a gun. “Two can play at that.”

A laugh. “No have gun.”

“How do you know?”

“Australienne toureest. No have gun.”

“I'm a private investigator.”

He looks blank.

“I'm on the case. I'm going to find out what happened to Mary. I've got evidence.”

“Eveedeence?”

Maybe he doesn't understand. “I find criminals. Like CSI.”

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“CSI.” Another laugh.

I point my bag at him, fingers tight around the hairspray.

“I don’t want keel you. Go hom.”

“Tell me what happened to Mary.”

He points the gun at my chest. “GO HOM.”

“Did you meet Mary on the bridge?”

“You no go hom. You een troubeel.” He uses the gun to poke aside my handbag, like it’s a toy.

“Are you threatening me?”

“Oui.”

Right. We’re clear then. I don’t think he’s going to shoot me, but I’m not sure. And I need to get outta here, before he changes his mind.

I pull out the hairspray, point it at him, spray him full in the face, and run, right into Marcel who grabs me and holds me tight. “What are you doing here?”

“I worree. I geet up, put on zee clotheeng, find zee taxi. Arreeve now.”

“I’m ok, get the bloke with the gun.”

I turn around, but he’s gone.

To read Dusty’s first case on your eReader or your computer visit the Australian Society of Authors website <http://authors-unlimited.org/author/jan-richards> or for a paperback or Kindle version go to Amazon and search Dusty Dexter PI.