

Dusty Dexter PI – The Paris Case, Jan Richards

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PART Three

Chapter 14

Marcel wants me to cook.

He says he cooked me a meal in his home, wants me to return the favour, asked for a traditional Australian meal. What's a traditional Australian meal? Damper? A barbecue? Don't have a barbecue, don't have a working oven. I don't cook.

Sure I cook to eat, stir fry – pre-sliced beef, pre-cut vegetables, pre-packaged sauce, rice in the microwave.

Even if I attempt to cook, I don't have cooking equipment, I don't even have appropriate cutlery, crockery. My wine glasses were pinched from local pubs, or from wine tastings, complete with logos.

I phone Janet.

“Marcel wants me to cook.”

Laughter. More laughter.

“What am I gunna do?”

“Get takeaway.”

I hang up.

A text message from Janet: Would phone but can't speak for laughing. Phone Maria, get something from her, pretend you cooked it.

Maria.

I phone. “Maria, I have to cook for Marcel. Can you-”

Laughter. More laughter.

“Ok, when you're done.” I wait for the laughter to subside. “So, what are we gunna do?”

“Can you reheat lasagna?”

Not very Australian. “He wants Australian.”

“I do pastas, Dusty, salads. Tell him there's a lot of Italians in Australia.”

I can do that.

“Can you make a salad?”

Guess so. “You make nice salads.”

I remember Marcel in the kitchen, wafting the cooking aromas in front of my nose.

“Can I get the lasagna in a pan, so it looks like I cooked it.”

“You wanna buy a whole lasagna?”

“No.”

“You can freeze it.”

The freezer's for double choc ice-cream, not lasagna.

“He might want more than one serve.”

Shit. “How about I get four serves.” Put them together, look like I cooked the whole thing. “And salad.”

“What sort of salad?”

“Salad that goes with lasagna.”

“Entree?”

Bloody hell.

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“Dessert?”

“Yes. Yes.” Wine. “What wine goes with lasagna?”

“Try a New Zealand ...”

I forget Maria’s a Kiwi, don’t even hear the accent any more. “Australian.”

“Try a burgundy, or a pinot noir.”

“Thanks.”

“When?”

“Tomorrow night.”

“Suppose you need the pan too?”

“Yeah, one that can go in a microwave.”

“What?!”

“Oven doesn’t work.”

“You think Marcel’s stupid?”

“I think he can cook, and he wants a nice meal.”

“I will deliver.”

“Thanks Maria.” Shit plates. “Maria!”

“What?”

“Can you bring plates?”

“Unbelievable. Anything else?”

“Wine glasses.”

“You owe me.”

“I know.”

“Big time.”

Dinner sorted. I finish the Ocean World proposal – it’s pretty good, if I do say so. A reworking of successful promotions in marine attractions in the US and Canada. Love the internet.

I send Evan an email telling him it’s done, he’ll have it Monday morning. It’s a big launch, will give me a few months work.

I close my laptop, take it inside. Grab a beer from the fridge.

The phone, Red. No small talk, just straight into it. “Nothing in the report. French police talked to the Australian police who talked to the family. No reason to suspect suicide, Mary was happy. Husband’s release from jail was not seen as a reason for her to be upset as she had visited him in jail. No indication her family wanted to off her. Described as a happy family devastated by the loss of their mother. No indication she had arranged to meet anyone on the bridge. Disappeared between midnight, when she was seen by you, and 5am when the jogger saw the handbag. Since then no use of her credit cards, bank accounts, passport, email, Facebook etc. Her body has not been found. The report has gone to the coroner’s office. That’s it.”

“I’m about to look at her laptop.”

“Doubt you’ll find anything. Dusty, Forget about Mary. Do some work, concentrate on the French boyfriend. Or Hank. *One* or the *other*.” It’s pointed.

I retire to the balcony, put my feet up on a chair, swig from the bottle.

Dead end after dead end – no body, no suspects. Wonder if Janet got the photos from Maureen and Doreen.

Dial. “It’s Janet, thanks for phoning. Sorry I can’t take your call I’m either working or training. Please leave a message and I’ll get back to you.”

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That's Janet, working or training. Janet needs a life. "Janet. Have you got the photos from Maureen and Doreen? Let's have a look at them tonight, your place."

Tomorrow night I'll be busy, and the night after that, and who knows how many nights Marcel will be in town. Marcel – wasn't sure how I felt about him being here, but now he's here, and here to see me, I'm glad. Not that I want him to stay forever. He sure made an impact at Mary's place. Everyone wanted to talk to the handsome French man, and he made a big show of being with me.

I should clean, at least the bathroom. In the morning.

I lift the cover on the Mac Air. I'm not familiar with how they work, push what could be an on button. Nothing, maybe needs charging. I'll have to get Janet to help me.

I finish the beer. Contemplate tomorrow night's dinner.

Janet texts me. "Home at 6pm. Come over. Have information."

Janet's cat winds itself around my ankles, tail flicks between my legs – Cheeky, Bernice's replacement. Janet blames me for Bernice's... accident. It wasn't my fault. It's not like I personally chopped Bernice's head off, boxed the two parts, deposited them on our respective coffee tables like gifts. When you deal with bad guys, bad things are gunna happen.

Cheeky continues to purr, rubs her wet nose on my calf. I nudge her away, she hisses, glares at me, then starts purring and rubbing again.

I yell over the water of the shower. "Want me to feed Cheeky?"

"Thanks."

I choose an individual serve gourmet salmon and chives, pull back the cover, spoon it into a bowl. "If you were mine you'd be eating Woollies home brand." The purring goes up a notch as she eats.

Janet's laptop's on the table. I turn it on, then order a supreme pizza, no anchovies.

"Rode to Pelican Waters and back. You're on your own tomorrow morning, riding to Noosa." She's dressed in leggings, a skin tight exercise top – hip bones stand out, no body fat.

"Thought I might have a morning off, seeing Marcel tomorrow."

"More reason to keep it up."

"Marcel liked the merchandise."

The pizza arrives. We drink beer and eat. The cat jumps up onto the back of the couch, starts to clean herself behind my ears. I nudge her.

"That's her spot." Janet's indignant, she's besotted with Cheeky, and extra protective since Bernice's untimely demise.

I move to the other end of the couch.

"Had a quick look at the photos, can't see anything."

More dead ends. "Red got the police report. Nothing."

"Still looking into the son, think he's dodgy. Reckon Mum disappearing is the best thing could happen from his point of view, means he can do what he wants with the business."

"Not illegal though?"

"Not that we know, so far. Reckon Carlie's dodgy too."

I agree with that.

"How about the g-string. Who wears white trousers and a g-string to their mother-in-law's memorial service?"

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I nod, summarise. “So mum disappears and life goes on. Family inherits, everyone’s happy. The only negative I can see is that Lisa doesn’t like Dad. But that’s understandable, he disgraced the family.”

She twists the top off another beer, happy in the knowledge she’s burned off a six-pack.

I look at the beer, down at my mini Michelin, back at the beer. Fuck it. I take a slug. “Prue was upset I caught her lying. Said she went for a walk, it rained, she came back. She reckons Mary was having a thing with Professor Craig. She saw them together, he gave Mary some box. Talked to The Prof, he said it was a Marie Antoinette thing Mary bought, wanted to show him. Said there was nothing between them, but then he would.” Another pull at the beer. “Nikita said Prue and Mary fell out over a man, maybe Prue’s jealous, might fancy The Prof.”

“Professor Craig and Prue, or Mary. Images I don’t need.” Janet screws up her face.

The beer’s cold, good. “Bridget refused to explain why she went out. I reckon she’s a suspect.” Although I can’t see wizened Bridget hauling the substantial Mary over a bridge, and just because she earned more money on the trip than Bridget did.

Janet logs into Facebook, goes to Maureen’s page.

“Maureen’s on Facebook!” I’m surprised.

“Everyone’s on Facebook, Dusty, and most people actually use it.” She’s having a dig. “Show you the photos from the bridge.” Clicks on an album of Paris, finds the bridge photos. A couple of long shots, the bridge and statues – one with the Eiffel Tower in the background, lit up like a giant Christmas tree. Some photos on the bridge, Doreen standing beside a lamp post, then Maureen standing beside a lamp post. A couple of shots along the bridge, people in the background.

Janet opens a long shot. “This is the one where they think it might be Mary.” At the far right hand side of the frame a figure stands beside the statue where Mary’s handbag was found. It could be Mary, stout, fair hair, back to the camera.

I’ve got Mary’s laptop, pull it out of my handbag. “Any idea how these things work?”

“Can’t believe you did this. They’ll realize it’s gone. Probably already know. They know you were in her room.”

“Don’t know it was me. Dozens of people went through the house. It was like a bloody open for inspection.”

She fiddles, opens it. Can’t get it to turn on. “You get her charger?”

“No.”

“Could get Mitch to take a look.”

“You back on speaking terms?”

Janet and Mitch trained together for two years. Janet was keen on him, he wasn’t keen on her – turns out he’s gay. Not only did Janet not realize he’s gay, she made a pass at him. The friendship cooled for a while. Janet blames me ‘cos I told her to get proactive, I reckon she shoulda known he was gay.

She goes back to her iPad, Facebook. “Shit.”

“What?”

She reads: So now Douglas inherits. How handy is that. 2 ½ years isn’t enough for the pain and suffering he caused.

“Who’s that?”

“Rippedoff. Could be anyone.”

“He ripped off client’s money didn’t he?”

“Yeah. Investors.”

“So there’d be lots of people pissed off.”

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“Guess so.”

I’m joining together some dots, not sure where I’m headed. “He gambled the money, so it’s gone. They get anything back?”

“Don’t know.”

“Think we need to know more about this, Janet.”

“Another comment: Bastard should rot in jail.”

“Maybe Douglas shoulda kept a lower profile at the funeral. Instead of playing real estate agent, showing people around the house.”

“Another comment: Money from the house should go to the people he ripped off.”

“Didn’t you say the house was all Mary’s money?”

“Yeah, but you can see their point. Why should Douglas get his share of two mill, when they get nothing from their life savings?”

Point taken.

“Listen to this. It’s from Thetoyshop: There’s more to this than you know. ”

“What’s it mean? A kid’s shop?”

“Adult toys.” Janet types: What things?

Reply: Come and talk.

“Where are they?”

Janet: Where are you?

Reply: Address is on the website.

Janet follows the links, the website features toys, modern versions of some I saw in the eroticism museum, sex gear.

“There’s an outlet in Maroochydore, Aerodrome Road. Must be it.”

“Let’s go.”

“We can’t drive, we’ve been drinking.”

Janet, always following the rules, then I have a great idea. “Let’s take the scooter.”

“The scooter!”

“Sneak up the back streets, it’s only a couple of minutes.”

“What if I get pulled over?”

“You’ve had two beers. I check her stubbie, one and a bit.”

“The scooter’s not a toy, it’s a vehicle.”

“Won’t get pulled over for speeding.”

“Besides,” she tries another tack, “It’s night, they won’t be open.”

“Bet they will. It’s a sex shop, probably do their best business after hours.”

I’m heading for the door, Janet’s still on the couch.

“It’s a lead. Maybe he knows something.”

She stands.

“I’ll drive if you like.”

“No way.”

She takes the back streets through Cotton Tree, stops across the road.

“Why are you stopping here?”

“Don’t want people to see the scooter outside.”

“Why not?”

She pulls off the helmet. “It’s a sex shop, Dusty.”

Janet’s a bit of a prude. “Park it out the back. Sign says ‘entry at rear’. You reckon that’s a joke?” I giggle.

Janet giggles, pulls the helmet back on, starts her up.

In the shop windows a couple of mannequins in lingerie. Looks like Cupcake’s racier range. We roll to a stop out back, only one other vehicle in the parking lot.

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I'm pumped, finally we've got a lead, maybe. Janet's not so pumped, stores helmets. I can see her wavering, any minute she's gonna ask to stay outside.

"How about I stay guard?"

"It's a sex shop Janet, that's all. Probably some old sheila with varicose veins at the counter, peddling soft porn."

"The scooter's probably not safe here."

"If you want to stay, miss the fun. Could be a lead Janet, maybe help you with your story. Whatever." I head for the door.

I expected dim lighting, it's not, want you to see the merchandise. Behind the counter is a woman in jeans and a top, middle aged, non-threatening.

I take some time. There's a stimulation sale, ha ha, 20% off boxed vibrators in candy colours.

Janet stands, still, looks like she's afraid to touch anything, like it might bite.

I approach the counter, Janet follows.

"Don't suppose you're Thetoyshop from Facebook?"

"You got here quick."

"Gotta follow up leads." I'm Dusty Dexter, Private Investigator, this is Janet." We shake.

She shakes Janet's hand. "Janet Jones, Investigate Journalist."

The woman. "I'm Suzi. I've been following the Facebook page. Mary was a supplier, she indicates the lingerie. It's popular."

"Yeah, we know. She made a lot of money out of it."

"She did."

Janet. "So what do you know about Mary we don't?"

"Mary wouldn't have killed herself, and she wouldn't have disappeared. She was making too much money, had too many plans."

"What sort of plans?"

"Don't know exactly, but I reckon she was in love."

Love. My mind jumps back to Prue's allegations, Nikita's comments, Professor Craig. Maybe there's something in it.

Suzi continues. "Plus." She pauses. "I run an online business. They can make money, good money. Mary and I talked business, she was a good businesswoman. But a two-million-dollar mansion on the Island?" She says it like she doesn't believe it.

"What are you saying?"

"Follow the money."

"So if she didn't make it selling lingerie, how did she get it?"

A shrug, then. "Look at the son, too. Grant."

Janet. "Why?"

"Like I said, follow the money."

I must look blank.

Suzi explains, as though we're slow. "I'm talking money laundering. The lingerie business as a cover, to clean up money coming from somewhere else."

Janet and I look at each other. What did Janet's accountant friend say, more money coming in than there should be.

"And steer clear of Charlie, she's a real piece of work." Suzi's on a roll, I don't interrupt. "Sell her mother, or her mother-in-law. Mercenary bitch. My opinion, married Grant to get to Mum's money. Wouldn't put it past her to push Mum off a bridge."

"They were all here."

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“Just sayin’”. She shrugs. “Mary didn’t jump, and I doubt she fell, she was too smart to do somethin’ that stupid.”

That’s what I thought.

Then I hear sirens, and screeching tyres out back.

“Shit. Not again.”

Janet. “What?”

Suzi. “Cops.”

Car doors slam, then the shop door opens. Hank strides through.

“Nice scooter Janet, thought I’d find you here. Dusty. Suzi.”

Suzi. “Senior Sergeant Stern.”

“Hank.” I want Suzi to know I’m close with Stern, although at the moment, I’m not.

Janet. “Why did you think you’d find us here?”

“We’re watching the Facebook page.”

Of course they are.

The other sergeant is in uniform. He wanders around the shop, then behind the desk.

Suzi. “I’m a legitimate businesswoman, you won’t find anything you shouldn’t. You never do.”

“I’m interested in other things.”

If he’s watching the Facebook page, it’s to do with Mary. Didn’t know Hank was on Mary’s case, gave me the idea he wasn’t interested, and Red never said anything.

He was at the memorial service, and he was talking to Grant.

Hank. “So what do you know that we don’t?”

Suzi. “Mary was a supplier, and an excellent businesswoman. And I don’t think she jumped off a bridge, that’s all.”

Hank picks up a boxed dildo from a display on the counter. The packaging features a woman in red lingerie. The dildo, behind its clear plastic cover, is red. He holds the box in long sturdy fingers.

My thoughts are distracted, my body responds. I can feel his body heat, and mine.

Hank asks. “Anything else?”

Suzi. “No.”

“Know Grant, her son?”

“Yes.”

“And?”

Suzi’s not talking like she was when it was just us girls. “Don’t like him.”

“He ever approach you with anything other than lingerie?”

Suzi pauses long enough that it’s clear he has. “What do you mean?”

“I’m asking the questions.”

“You arrive with your lights flashing, so everyone knows you paid me a visit. I’m not saying anything.”

She’s scared, of Grant, not Hank.

“We’re going.” He hands her a card. “Give me a call, we’ll meet.” Then he turns and heads for the door.

He doesn’t say goodbye. What can I expect.

Suzi. “You know Stern.” It’s not a question.

Janet speaks for the first time since Hank arrived. “They had a thing. Dusty blew it.”

“Thanks, Janet.” To Suzi. “Why didn’t you tell him about Grant?”

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“I don’t want Grant, or Carlie, to think I talked to the cops.”

I repeat her words. “Follow the money.”

She nods. “And keep clear of that pair. They’re dangerous, and they have dangerous friends.”

“Did Mary have dangerous friends?”

“Not that I know of, but she wasn’t an innocent either.”

Back at Janet’s place I take a swig of the beer I’d left on the coffee table, pick up her laptop.

Follow the money. I Google sexy lingerie, get lots of hits, including cupcakelingerie.com. Can you make enough money selling online lingerie, to build a mini French palace on Miniyama Island?

It’s a big world out there in cyber shopping land. I scroll down, hotlingerie.com, lingerieonline.com, lovinlingerie.com, lots of competition. Sweetie’s plus size lingerie, even competition in undies for big girls. I open the site.

Sweetie’s features sexy, curvy women in floaty frothy bits of chiffon and lace. Same, same. Where Cupcake’s women lust after cupcakes, the Sweetie’s models lust after a hunk in well-filled black jocks. He’s in the background of almost every pic, either from the front, or the back – often both, thanks to an appropriately placed mirror. He’s cut off at the chin, emphasis on the six-pack and biceps, or the butt and sculptured shoulders.

Janet sits beside me.

“Look at this.”

“Nice.”

“Could be Hank, except this bloke’s got no tats.”

“Photoshop tats off, easy. No face, no tats, no moles, could be anyone.”

Could be Hank.

“Website could be anywhere.”

True. And I can’t see Hank posing in jocks. Hank’s not big on jocks, likes the boys to breathe.

I continue to study the stud, but Janet wants the laptop. “What?”

She grabs it, goes back to Facebook. “Since Suzi’s comment about Mary there’s been more, lots more. They’re taking it to mean Mary was in on Hubby’s scheme. Reckon she knew about the money. Some say she was involved.”

“Didn’t the cops say she wasn’t?”

“Yeah.”

“I guess there would be people who don’t like Mary, or Douglas.”

“I guess there would.”

She reads. “There’s a message for you, from Isobel Clement?”

“Girl I met on the bridge. Gave me the number, the guy with the gun.”

“Right. Says: Private Investigator, please contact me, I have news.”

“She gave me her email address, tell her I’ll email her.”

Janet types.

“Can we go back to Sweeties?” I wanna have another look at the sweetie with the peccs.

Janet doesn’t object.

Chapter 15

The running's getting easier, a bit easier.

As I jog, make that walk/jog/shuffle, I go over the case.

Mary phones someone, arranges to meet him – him being a nasty dude with a gun. She stands on the bridge, for hours, then disappears, handbag found hanging off a statue on a bridge like four women before her. One of the bodies is found six months later, shot, no other bodies have been found.

Mary was making lots of money, had a great holiday, enjoyed her work. Mary was maybe in love with Prof Craig. Mary's husband went to jail for fraud, just got out. Mary lived in a big flash house she says was paid for with lingerie money. Suzi says Mary was not innocent. What does that mean?

I'm on my own, Janet's riding to Noosa. I ran from home down the hill, easy. Not so easy now I'm on the beach – it's high tide, there's not much hard sand. Still, I'm trying, and hoping Hank and the troops will be training. I wanna talk to Hank, tell him what Suzi said about Grant, make sure he's really it taking an interest in the case, find out what he knows.

Hank doesn't stop as I approach. Bugger. I walk up the sand. He orders his charges to jog to the tower and back.

I puff. "Hi."

"Busy. What do you want?"

Ok, so he's pissed. I've got a French boyfriend in town, I get it, but we're on a break. Remember Dusty, it was your idea to have the break. "Suzi said something, before you got there."

"Mmmm."

"Doesn't like Grant. Thinks he's using the lingerie to clean up money."

"We're watching Grant and Carlie."

"Watching me?"

"Always Dusty, make sure you don't uncover an undercover operation, like you did last time."

"You gotta keep me in the loop."

"No, I don't Dusty. You're not part of a police investigation. You're not a Private Investigator. Even if you had a client, which you don't, you're not 'in the loop'."

Ok, if that's the way you wanna play it. I like working on my own, that's what I did last time. Took the risks, got the payoff. Who found the bad guys? I did.

"See you then."

He takes off after the troops, tight butt in sports skins, shorts over the top.

I watch the butt. Know where you can get a job, decide you want to earn some cash on the side, bit of beefcake next to women in lingerie.

I walk back up the hill, then jog up the drive, the stairs, grab the phone. I dial Janet while I'm still breathing heavy. "Don't forget to get Mitch to check out Mary's computer."

"Said he'd do it this arvo. You go for a run?"

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“Yeah.”

“How far?”

“From home, along the beach, back.”

“Not bad Dusty.”

“Also. Want everything you can get on Douglas, the whole fraud thing. You said Mary visited him in jail. That doesn’t mean she loved him. I mean, she was on holidays in Europe when he got out, not at the gate to welcome him with open arms.”

How do I find out if she really was having a thing with Professor Craig?

The scooter putts up the drive. What now?

I lean over the balcony, watch Janet remove her helmet.

“I’m going to see Mitch, about the laptop. Wanna come?”

Another ride on the back of the green machine. Still, it’s not like I’m doing anything. Marcel doesn’t arrive until tonight, and all I have to do is clean the house. That can wait.

“Sure.” I pull on leggings, flats, a tiny dress/top, put my hair into a pony tail. Casual, yet sexy. Not that it matters, Mitch is gay, and Janet’s in sports gear, as usual.

I take the pink helmet, pull it on, velcro it up.

It’s a nice day – sunny, warm, no breeze. Best time of the year. I settle on the back as we putt along the esplanade. Locals and tourists drink coffee, gaze at the water, breathe the salty air.

Janet points out a vacant bike park, yells, “Never have any trouble getting a park now.”

Yell back. “Wow. The advantages of driving a green sewing machine.”

“You’re just jealous.”

“No, I’m not.” Really, Janet, I’m not.

We putt down Brisbane Road, over the river, take a left.

“Where’s Mitch live?” In her ear.

“Point Cartwright.” Loud.

“Thought he lived in Mooloolaba.”

“Just moved. Got a view.”

Nice for Mitch, so have I.

She takes her eyes off the road, turns. “He’s got a boyfriend.”

I laugh. A few months ago Janet was lusting over Mitch, made the big play, now she’s buddies with him and his boyfriend. She’s resilient, I’ll give her that.

Janet’s in drought again, post holiday romance. I’ve offered to hook her up with someone, but she says she’s not interested. Reckons her Vanuatu lover is thinking of going back to uni, right here. I think she’s dreaming, but I’m not knocking him. The lover with the crinkly hair and the huge smile got us out of Vanuatu before the drug runners with guns realized we were still alive.

Janet veers to the left, cars pass us. At least she’s now aware that not everyone is happy to putt along behind a scooter.

We turn up Pt Cartwright Drive, putt into the car park at the top of the hill, she noses into a corner. I pull off the helmet, pull out the hair tie, get some air back into my hair.

Janet gets the laptop out of the helmet compartment, locks it.

“What about the helmets?”

“Carry them.”

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She swings the helmet as she walks towards the entry of the first high rise. Janet thinks she looks cool. It's not cool, we're so not cool. I shove mine half in my handbag.

Janet pushes the button for level 8. Janet hates heights.

"You been up here before?"

"No."

"Eighth floor, and on top of a headland. Long way up. You gonna be ok?" Has she thought about this?

"Sure." But it's uncertain. Maybe that's why she brought me.

The lift opens, Janet steps out. A big window, lots of sky, lots of water. Lots of air. Janet takes a deep breath, backs up.

Like I thought. I grab her arm and we head down the corridor. She stops in front of a door, clutches the helmet to her chest, knocks.

Mitch appears in board shorts, no shirt. Red hair on his chest. "Hi."

Janet squeaks "Hi," walks a few steps into the unit, more glass, more sky, water.

She backs against a wall.

Mitch. "You ok?"

I explain. "Janet's not good with heights. G'day Mitch."

"Dusty."

A young man appears – jeans, t-shirt, dark hair. Mitch's opposite.

"This is Jaye."

"G'day Jaye."

Mitch prises the laptop from Janet's armpit, hands it to Jaye. "Jaye knows even more about computers than I do. Coffee?"

"Thanks."

Janet sits on a couch, grips the helmet, seems incapable of speech. She stares at the coffee table.

"Coffee Janet?"

She looks up, eyes drawn to the expanse of blue, shakes her head, goes back to focusing on the table.

Jaye opens the laptop. "Got a charger?"

"No."

He disappears, returns, plugs it in. Gives it a minute then opens it up, turns it on.

"What's the password?"

"No idea."

"Janet?"

She shakes her head.

"It's password protected."

"So that's it, we can't get in?"

"I'm not a hacker."

Shit.

Mitch works a pod coffee machine, returns with coffees, hands one to Janet. "Didn't know you were scared of heights."

Janet is mute.

I wanna get into the laptop. On CSI a password never stops them getting into a computer. "Can't you run some password program or something?"

He shakes his head.

Janet's doing slow breathing.

The coffee's not bad, should get one of these machines. When I get paid. "You know a hacker?"

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Mitch and Jaye look at each other. They know a hacker.

“Can we give him the laptop?”

Hesitation, more looks back and forth.

Mitch. “Jaye’s ex.”

Jaye. “He’s bad news.”

Aren’t all exes. “What’s his name?”

“Sly. That’s his online name, what he goes by.”

“Where’s he live?”

“He won’t see you. I’ll have to take it to him.”

Mitch isn’t happy.

Janet’s pale.

“I think we oughta go.” I grab Janet by the arm, pull her off the couch. She looks down at the floor. I point at the laptop. “Let me know how you go.”

Mitch lets us out the door.

In the lift Janet finally lifts her eyes, there’s sweat on her top lip. The last time I saw Janet’s height phobia in full flight was when the Thugs took us up in a crane. I got covered in vomit. She’s still heavy breathing. “You’re not gunna throw up are you?”

Shakes her head, silent on the way down.

“Maybe we should have a little sit down, before we drive back, or I’ll drive.”

She looks up at the building from the safety of the lawn out front. “I’m ok.” Voice wavers.

We head for the scooter. I’m trying to lighten the atmosphere, get a laugh. “Have you given it a name?” Janet names things like cars. I bet she has, just hasn’t told me, in case I make fun of her.

She doesn’t say anything so I give her a suggestion. “How about... Kermit.” Sing, “It’s not easy being green.”

“Shut up, Dusty.”

“Who’s that?” There’s someone sitting on Kermit’s seat.

“What the!” Janet runs towards Kermie.

It’s Carlie.

Janet stops.

Carlie shows no sign of moving her skinny butt. In fact she’s making a point. She waits ‘til we get up close then says. “What fucking idiot, or two fucking idiots, would take a lime-green scooter when they break into someone’s business.”

Shit. Must have been cameras, or something. I remember what Suzi said, Carlie’s bad news, but I reckon I can take her. Easy if I had Janet on my side, but I’m not sure she’s sufficiently recovered from the height experience.

Carlie holds a hand out. “Keys.”

“No.” Janet’s still pale, but she’s protecting Kermie.

“You don’t give me the keys I’ll push it off the headland.”

I give Janet a let’s-play-along-with-her look, Janet hands her the keys.

Carlie starts Kermie up, pats the seat behind her. “Get on. Both of you.”

We hesitate. I can see Janet doesn’t want to see Kermie disappear.

“Not going far.”

We squeeze on behind her. I’m thinking that I don’t have a capsicum spray, or a taser in my handbag, just the hair spray. I pull on the pink helmet, search in the bag with one hand, hold onto Janet with the other.

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Carlie doesn't take the road, heads up the path through bush to the lighthouse. People, dogs, move out of our way, three women putting along a pedestrian path. At the lighthouse she takes the path around the back. Stops, engine running.

I've got a grip on the pump-pack hairspray.

Janet's shaking – not sure if it's anger or still the height thing. The scooter's close to the edge, below is rock. It's a long way down, you'd die if you went off this cliff.

Carlie climbs off, engine running, a hand on the handlebar, twists the throttle. Addresses us: "This is what you are going to do. You are going to leave us alone. You are going to stop looking into our business and our lives. You are going to stop the Facebook page." Another twist of the throttle. "And you are going to return Mary's laptop."

"What laptop?" I want to spray the bitch real bad, wish I had real spray.

"You have until tomorrow. You know where to find us. If you don't return Mary's laptop, I'll come looking for you, and your silly green scooter. And next time I won't stop at the edge." Final twist of the throttle.

Is that it? Should I give her a spray?

"Now, get off."

What?

"You don't think I'm going to walk back to my car do you?"

We get off. She backs the scooter up, then rides it down the pathway. Janet runs after her.

When I get back to the carpark Janet's reclaimed Kermie. Carlie's nowhere to be seen.

Janet's red-faced. It's a combination of post-phobia stress, and post-being-threatened stress. Well, I think it is.

She says. "She made fun of my scooter."

Sorry? She just told us she was going to push us off a cliff. That kinda stuck in my head more than the comment about Kermie.

"She said she couldn't believe we took a green scooter to break into a business. She laughed."

I didn't want to take the scooter to a B & E. I think it, but no way am I gunna say it.

"She thinks we're a joke."

Now that's different. "We're not a joke. The fact she was here proves we're onto something. We gotta get into that laptop."

"They know we've got it, we have to give it back."

"We don't have to do anything."

"You wanna go over a headland on a scooter?"

She's got a point. "So we gotta get Sly to get into it, copy what's on it, by tomorrow. Drop it back when they're not looking. Phone Mitch. Tell 'em we need it back tomorrow."

She phones.

I pull out my phone, need to talk to Red. Have to remove the helmet, forgot I had it on, must have looked like a dick walking back down the path. Damn.

"Red. I'll be there in ten." I remember we're on the scooter. "Make that 20. Need a spray, and a taser. Explain when I get there." I don't give her a chance to interrupt.

Janet has talked to Mitch. "They're not happy, but they'll do it.

I pull out the spray. "Was ready to spray her, if it came to that."

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“With hairspray!”

“It worked on the guy with the gun.”

“No it didn’t. You sprayed, then you ran. Marcel was there. By the time you turned around the guy had gone.”

She starts the engine, the sewing machine hums into life. “I’m not going to take this. I’m going to find out everything I can on those scum. And I’m gunna expose them. There’s something going on here.”

Way to go Janet.

“Get on.”

I obey, throw a leg over Kermie, “Yes, Ma’m.” I pull the pink helmet back on, big smile on my face. This is more like it, me and Janet, chasing the bad guys. Or are they chasing us? “Drop me at Red’s place. Need that hardware.”

Red came through, which surprised me. Sure she asked me about the PI course, I lied. Then she gave me the gear, a taser and a spray. Explained how the new taser worked, reminded me to keep it charged.

She’d talked to Hank about Suzi, they’re investigating Grant and Carlie, looking at the money laundering, trying to find out where the money comes from. Red also gave me the speech about not actually having a paying client.

Then she asked me what I knew about Marcel, how I met him. I told her about Jacques and the French classes. And she asked me about Prof Craig. She’s taking more interest in the case, which is a good thing. I must be onto something.

I need to make some notes, decide on the next step, but first, I need to clean the house for Marcel’s visit.

I check my emails. Isobel Clement, again. Forgot to contact her.

Isobel: Hi Dusty, I suppose you have heard about the body that was found. It washed up down river. It was the first woman to go missing off the bridge. She had been shot.

Isobel’s written English is very good, better than her speaking English. Or she has an excellent translation program.

She continues: Did you have any luck with the phone number I gave you? I have another lead, I found a link in Mother’s computer I think is related to her disappearance. I will find it again and send it to you. If you are coming back to Paris please let me know. I hope we can work together to find the missing women, before any more are found dead.

I wonder if Isobel has any money?

Email her: I’d like to help you Isobel. I’m working on leads here, and making good headway. Before I left Paris I made contact with the man whose phone number you gave me. I met him on the bridge. He threatened me with a gun. Please send me the link and I will investigate it. I can’t see myself getting back to Paris any time soon, unless you want to take me on as a client, and can pay the fares. So far the time I’ve put into this case has been unpaid, and my boss isn’t happy. Cheers, Dusty.

I can’t see Isobel coming up with the fares, although you never know, maybe her mother had money, like Mary.

Maria arrives with the food, puts it in the fridge. “Are you going to clean up?”

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“Yeah. Now.”

“Good.”

As well as the food there is a box with plates, glasses.

“You are a darling Maria.”

“I know.”

Chapter 16

I clean. This means I vacuum, and arrange the rugs to cover the worst of the stains on the floorboards. I use a variety of wipes on the bathroom which remove the most recent usage. The bathroom hasn't aged well – the mirror is spotty and cracked, the basin stained. The shower curtain's new, bright fish swim in an aqua ocean, designed to distract from the general decay.

I don't have candles, or flowers, or romantic table settings. I'll tell Marcel this is the way we do it in Australia.

Then I set up Maria's plates, glasses on the deck – on the table Hank fixed after we broke it during the mutual enthusiasm of our first shag.

I shower, pull on sexy underwear, over the top tight jeans, a low-cut top. A little red lace peeps out, draws the eye to the double Ds. I know how to dress to impress. Fluff the hair.

Ready.

This time, it's on my terms. I'm not the romantic heroine, I'm more of an action adventure girl. And I'm ready for action.

Jacques is dropping off Marcel, I want to ask him some questions about The Professor. Sure Prof Craig told me there was nothing between him and Mary, but then he would, Professor shagging student is a no-no. But Jacques might know something, might be prepared to share a rumour, some gossip.

The taser's on the charger on the kitchen bench. Better move that, Red said to keep it quiet. I take it into the bedroom, plug in beside the iPhone charger, shove it under the bed.

A scooter buzzes up the drive. Janet? She knows I've got a date. I peer over the balcony. Jacques, Marcel on the back.

I bounce down the stairs, throw the door open. Smile.

A fibro wall divides the carport from the remainder of the underneath of the house. The wall has holes in it – look like they've been created by errant swings of a gardening implement, or perhaps something more malicious. The holes allow glimpses of the soggy convergence of the plumbing leaks, littered pieces of broken fibro, discarded planks, broken pots.

Marcel peers through a hole.

So it's not Paris, it's a beach house.

He turns his expression into a smile, “Doostee.” Kisses me on the cheek, the other cheek, the first cheek. I'd forgotten the three kiss hello, missed the second, came back for the third.

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Then Jacques, I get the kiss routine right.

“Come upstairs. The view’s fantastic. Can you stay for a beer Jacques?”

Marcel nods permission.

Like all my visitors, at the top of the stairs Marcel and Jacques see the view, walk through the lounge room straight to the deck. It’s a good thing, takes the emphasis off the interior.

I meet them with beers in holders. Maria didn’t supply beer glasses.

“Eez booteefool.” Marcel’s looking at the view.

I point out the sights, light fading. “That’s Alex Headland, Mount Coolum, beach all the way to Noosa.”

Jacques is impressed. “You rent?”

“Yes. Cheap. The house is a dump, but that’s worth it.”

“My friend live in unit.” He points towards the headland.

“Where do you live Jacques?”

“Ooniversitay.”

We sit in deck chairs, two gorgeous Frenchmen and me.

“Can I take a photo?”

I get my iPhone, they stand, backs to the view. Then Jacques takes a photo, Marcel’s arm around me.

I hand Jacques the phone, “Put it on Facebook for me.”

“Sure.”

Marcel, irritated. “Nooo Feecebook. Romance eez personal.”

Not these days Marcel.

Jacques is finishing his beer, has someplace better to be than with Dad and his girlfriend. Need to talk to him before he leaves.

“Jacques. I heard a rumour, about Professor Craig?” I say it as a question. “Students know everything. You heard anything?”

A glance at Marcel, he shakes his head. Jacques defers to his father, must be a European thing.

“They say he was having a thing with Mary?”

Another shake. “Professeur Craig help Mary with thesis.”

“I didn’t know they did French history at the uni here?”

“No. She study Brisbane. Professeur Craig know European history, he geev advice.”

Marcel interrupts. “Jacques moost meet hees freen.”

Jacques stands, skulls the remains of the beer.

“If he’s an expert in French history, why isn’t he teaching it?”

“Professeur Craig teach many language. He study Sorbonne.”

Then he puts down the empty stubby, kisses Marcel, then me, and I show him down the stairs.

As I return I watch Marcel drum his fingers on the arm of the deck chair, a crease between the arched eyebrows.

I have to admit, there isn’t much chemistry between us tonight, now Jacques is gone that’ll change. I lift the girls, open the blouse a little more, put a smile on my face.

I kiss Marcel on the cheek, sit. I have no idea what to say. You’re a PR girl Dusty, aimless senseless conversation is what you do.

“Marcel, do you like Australia?”

“Eez, how you say, casueel. Lay back.”

“Yes.”

“I want go beech.”

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“Sure. After we eat we can walk to the headland, look at the water.”

“No. Tonight we make lurve.”

That’s better. He gives me the romantic Frenchman smile, the one I remember.

“You steel eenvesteegate Mary.”

“Yes. I’ve got some leads. Her family’s dodgy, Janet and I are looking into them. And since the police found the body of the first woman, there’s a real possibility Mary’s dead too. And I’ve got a lead in Paris.”

“Paree?”

“Yes. Isobel, who gave me the phone number of the man I met on the bridge. She found a link, she’s sending it to me.”

“Leenk?”

“Haven’t got it yet. Maybe I’ll go back to Paris, follow it up.” I think my chances are slim, but I like the idea, and it’s time to be proactive, take charge. I’m getting nowhere fast at the moment.

“You come back Paree avec me.”

I laugh. “Can’t afford it.”

My phone rings, I ignore it. Then a message. I glance at it. Hank: The Frenchman is not what he seems.

Jealous.

“Shall we eat?”

I reheat lasagna, add dressing, toss salad, grab the red. As I head for the deck I notice Marcel has my phone, puts it down as I approach.

“Teechnology. Too compleecate.”

“For me too. Only know the basics. Janet’s good with phones.”

“I look for peecture.”

I pick it up, Hank’s message on the screen. Find the photo Jacques took, show it to him.

I fess up about Maria’s food, don’t want Marcel thinking I’m going to cook for him every night.

He laughs. “Australien voman not like French voman.”

No.

He’s not playing the part of the romantic Frenchman tonight, maybe he’s taking my lead. And the chemistry we had in France is a little out of synch. Even his Eengleesh is harder to understand than I remember.

We drink the red.

“I theenk we walk.”

He’s changed his mind, and I reckon it’s a good idea. Some fresh air, the chance to stand side by side, look at the lights on the water, bring back the physical intimacy.

Worked with Hank, not that we needed encouragement. We’d shag, go get takeaway, walk, then shag again. Shagged on one of the picnic tables on the headland once – around the back, out of the light. I’d mentioned it was against the law to shag in a public place, which seemed to make him enjoy it even more. I reckon that’s the only way Hank would break the law. Hank’s like Red where the law’s concerned. There’s black and white, and nothing in between. Although I find myself revising this judgement as I remember Red picking the lock at cupcakelingerie.com the other night. Maybe they have a more relaxed attitude to the law

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than they make out. Maybe that's the key to the incident. One day I'll find out the truth behind the incident.

The air's cool and my top's light. I hug my arms around myself. We walk along the path on the headland. It's a world away from the walk over Pont Miraboo, no statues, no ornate lampposts. No Mary.

The water's inky. Lights at the surf club pick out small frothy waves at the shore.

"Eez booteefool. In Paree, stars not so bright."

The last time I was on a headland Carlie was turning the throttle on Janet's scooter, threatening to push us, and Kermie, over the edge.

We stop at a viewing platform, look out to the ocean some distance away.

Marcel leans over, looks down. "Ees far?"

"Not really."

"Not like Pont Mirabeau."

He's remembering our romantic walk.

"No. No statues, no river."

"Non."

Not the spot to push someone over, drown them, although it's probably far enough to break someone's neck.

Marcel pulls me to him, kisses me, a French kiss, the one I missed on the bridge. I knew the walk was a good idea.

He puts his hand inside my top, frees one of the girls. "We go hom. Make lurve."

I wake up to noise in my kitchen. I like waking up to noise in my kitchen. In the most recent past it's been Hank, making plunger coffee to go with the croissants from the Continental bakery down the road.

Today it's Marcel. Then two voices, unmistakable French accents, speaking French. Tension.

I make out one word. "Merde." Marcel's voice. Then "Imbecile!"

Jacques seems to be apologizing, then I hear him say "Professeur Craig".

Why would Marcel be angry?

I slide out of bed, trip over the cord to the taser, land against the cupboard door with a bang. Damn, forgot it was there, must be charged by now, shove it back under the bed.

The voices stop.

I grab my robe off the door handle, pad out to the kitchen. "Good morning Jacques." Give Marcel a kiss.

"Doostee, I make coffee."

"Great." I wanna know about The Prof, but I'm not sure how to ask. Out with it. "I heard you mention Professor Craig. Is he ok?"

Jacques says nothing.

Marcel. "Jacques close to Professeur Craig, he upset. Professeur Craig retire."

Oh. Wonder if Mary knew that, or Prue? Wonder if it makes any difference?

"He help Jacques."

"Sure."

I find three mugs, Marcel puts milk into the microwave, heats it then pours lots of milk, coffee into the mugs.

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Café au lait.

“Today, I weeth Jacques.” He puts an arm around Jacques shoulder. “I no see son loong time.”

Ok. I thought we were sightseeing, but it suits me. Janet and I gotta get that laptop back, go through whatever’s on it.

“I phon. Thees eevening we catch up.”

Sounds good to me. I lift my mug. “Cheers.”

Janet’s scooter. I grab my handbag, complete with taser and spray, race down the stairs.

I pull on the helmet, wrestle with the messy bun. If I’m gunna be spending so much time on this thing, I gotta sort the hair. I’d insist on taking the VW, but the tank’s almost empty, and I haven’t been paid by Evan for the proposal, haven’t sent the invoice. Still, even Janet’s Yaris would be better than another trip on the scooter.

“You don’t think the Yaris is jealous, you spending so much time on Kermie?”

“It’s cheaper, better for the environment.”

Whatever.

At Seachange I thank Maria for last night’s meal. Tell her the lasagna was appreciated, Marcel ate two slices, which leaves me with leftovers. “I’ll bring the plates over later.”

“You tell him you cooked it?”

“No. Didn’t want him thinking I was going to do it again.”

Maria laughs.

I order up big, Marcel and I got some exercise last night.

Janet. “So the date was a success?”

“Yeah.”

“I thought you were spending the day with lover boy, showing him the sights.”

“Said he wanted to be with Jacques. Fine by me.”

She pulls a folder out of her backpack.

I want to get in first. “I asked Jacques about The Prof. Said he hadn’t heard anything about him having a thing with Mary. But this morning Marcel and Jacques were arguing. When I asked what it was about, Marcel said The Prof’s retiring. That Jacques is close to him, is upset. Get the feeling there’s more to it.”

She shrugs, opens the folder.

“Also got a message from Hank, while Marcel was there. Said ‘more to the Frenchman than there seems’, something like that.”

Janet. “He’s just jealous.”

“That’s what I thought.” I smile. Drill Serg Hank wants me, I know it.

Janet takes the floor. “Last night, while you were doing whatever you were doing, I went back to Suzi.”

“Buy anything?”

“I don’t need sex aids, Dusty.”

“Why not? Not like you’re getting any.” Janet needs to loosen up, a little stimulation might relax her a bit.

“Do you wanna hear about this?”

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Tetchy. I nod, sip coffee. “Gimme it.”

“Suzi spoke to Hank, and Red.”

How come I didn’t know this? Is that why Red asked me those questions yesterday?

“Red’s working for Suzi.”

Now I’m pissed. “Why didn’t Red tell me this?”

“It only happened yesterday.”

“I spoke to her yesterday.”

Janet shrugs. “Grant and Carlie are threatening Suzi.”

“Why?”

“Wanted her to put extra cash through for lingerie, for a commission. She said no.

They threatened her.”

“And Red and Hank are looking into it?”

“Yeah. Want us to stay out of it, stay away from Carlie and Grant. Red says we should return the laptop. Leave it outside Mary’s house or something.”

“We haven’t got it.”

“We have.” She points towards Kermie. “I picked it up this morning, while you were sleeping, or whatever.”

Just because I got laid and you didn’t.

“And.”

This is gunna be good, and she knows it.

“We got a copy of her hard drive.”

That is good.

“Sly got in.”

“Good work Sly.”

“Not that I think it’ll do us much good. I only had a quick look. Emails wiped clean. Same with her search history. Lots of business stuff. Lots of pictures, photo shoots for lingerie lines. Haven’t been through them all.”

Maria arrives with breakfast.

“You gotta be kiddin’ me.” Janet is eating fibre with no-fat yoghurt on top.

I’m eating the works, bacon, eggs, hash browns, thick toast. “Gotta keep my energy up.”

“Bet you didn’t run this morning.”

“Had plenty of exercise last night.”

“So it’s still going good?”

“Yeah.” Goodish.

“Yeah?” Janet knows me too well.

“He’s not playing the romantic hero any more, more like the French lover on holidays in Australee.”

“Hank’s not happy.”

No, and I feel a bit bad about that. Change the subject. “What are Hank and Red gunna do?”

“Hank’s following the money. Red’s protecting Suzi.”

One night I’m out of communication enjoying a little recreational shagging and Janet gets more info than in the past two weeks. I gotta get back in the loop.

“You do any more research on them?”

“Yeah. Almost nothing on Grant and Carlie. Stuff on Douglas, but mostly what we knew.”

“So tell me about Douglas.”

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“He was an accountant, invested money for people. Mainly retirees, rich widows. He siphoned money off the top, put it into his own account. Then he took bigger chunks, invested. The idea was that when people wanted the money, he’d give it back. Somewhere along the line something went wrong. Story he told the court was he started gambling, stole more to cover the shortfall, eventually the whole thing fell in a heap. At the time of the trial there were demonstrations outside the court, people who lost their life savings. Lots of stories. It was pretty bad.” She stops to chew museli.

“So how much of their money did the people get back when it went belly up?” I shovel in scrambled eggs, bacon.

“None.”

“Shit. Must have been some very pissed off investors.”

“There were. And they didn’t like that Mary was living in a big house on the island while they had nothing. According to Hank, cops went all over Mary, couldn’t find anything shonky.”

I spear hash brown. “Maybe Grant takes after Mum. Maybe Mary *was* laundering money.”

“Not that they found. Big markup on large smalls.” She smiles at her joke.

“Mary visited Hubby in jail, he’s done his time. End of story, unless you’re one of the people lost all their savings. That’s pretty much it. What about Grant and Carlie?”

“Leave it to Red and Hank. They want us to back off, and be careful.”

I’ve heard this before. My first case Red and Hank tried to take it away from me. Grounded me like a bloody teenager. Not this time.

Then Janet opens her handbag, so I can see inside. She’s got capsicum spray! “Red gave me it.”

She lets me digest this. Red gave her a spray. That means she’s got real concerns. Red doesn’t hand out hardware, not without a good reason.

At least she didn’t give her a taser. I’m the investigator, I’m the one in charge, not Janet. And I’m not going to let Red, or Hank, or Janet take this case away from me. “What are you going to do this morning?”

“Go home, go through the computer.”

“I stole that computer.”

“You wanna go through it?”

No.

“Then we’re gunna take it back.”

We.

“I got a plan.”

Since when does Janet have plans? “What am I gunna do?”

“You’re gunna talk to me.”

I jump, it’s Red, in Red Hot Security uniform, complete with cap, gun and scowl.

Even I’m awed by her presence, and I’ve seen Red naked. Not that I wanna remember that, it was an accident, an unpleasant experience for both of us. It was right after the sighting Red found me the house, suggested it was time to move on, move into my own place.

Janet finishes the museli, downs the last of her coffee. “I’m outta here. Pick you up at home in an hour.”

And I get the feeling I’ve been set up. That Red arranged for Janet and me to have breakfast so she could talk to me. Why didn’t Red just ring, tell me to come to the office?

Red orders the works.

As Janet putts off on Kermie, an unmarked police car pulls into the loading zone, Hank steps out. This is a set-up, and I think I’m in trouble.

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“We need to talk.” Red unwraps the serviette from around the knife and fork, straightens it under her palms, sets the knife and fork in front of her.

Hank orders the works.

I get the feeling I’m going to be interrogated. Why?

I need to take control. “Janet told me about your little meeting yesterday. Ok, I’ll stay away from Carlie and Grant. We’re gunna take the laptop back. All over.”

“That’s not what we’re here to talk about.” Hank.

What are we here to talk about?

“We need some answers.”

“About what?”

Then Hank says, “I’ve been talking to the French police. They’ve been working on a theory that the women disappear for a reason. They want to disappear.”

I interrupt, “What about the dead body?”

“They accept that puts a hole in the theory.”

I laugh.

“Can I continue?” Sergeant Hank.

“Knock yourself out.”

“It’s not easy to disappear, costs money. And you have to know people. People who can get you new ID, passports, bank accounts. You have to leave behind your former life. And you have to start a new one. More money. And you have to stay disappeared, you can’t just pop up again, say for your daughter’s birthday.” He stops, but I figure he’s not finished.

I nod.

“Until Mary, all the women who disappeared have been French. Police have checked all leads, and the women have all been very careful about covering their tracks. With Mary, because she’s Australian, and she has much less contact with people in France, there’s a chance through her they can trace back to the people in France she’s been in contact with. They suspect people in France helped her disappear, provided her documents.”

What he’s saying makes sense. “I still don’t get why Mary would want to disappear.”

Hank holds up a fist, counts off reasons.

Puts up the thumb. “One, she was involved in a court case for fraud. Even though she was cleared, lots of people think she must have known what her husband was up to. Think she profited from his fraud. She has enemies.”

The pointer finger joins the thumb. “Two, her husband was about to get out of jail and stir that all up again.”

Middle finger. “Three, she had completed a thesis on Marie Antoinette, even did some study in Paris.”

Ring finger. “She holidayed in France several times in the past few years, apparently spoke the language well.”

Is he going to add the little finger? No. Seems he’s run out of points, and they don’t seem very convincing to me.

I hold up my fist. Up goes the thumb.

“One. She was making lots of money through a business which she loved, why would she leave that?”

Pointer finger. “Two. She was close to her children, worked in the business with them. Why would she leave her family?”

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Middle finger, “Three, she visited her hubby in jail, supported him through the trial. Why would she leave when he was coming home?”

Ring finger. “Four...” Don’t have a four. Got it. “Four. Sure, she loved France. She visited, she studied it, she was obsessed with Marie Antoinette. But why would she wanna live there? She created her own French palace on Minyama Island.”

I’m going to five, wanna beat him. Cincher. “The bloke she was gunna meet on the bridge wasn’t giving her a passport, he had a gun.”

Hank. “Red told me about the man with the gun. You didn’t tell the French police about him. Why?”

“We were leaving in the morning. And nothing happened. I got away.”

“Let’s talk about the man with the gun. From the beginning.”

Maria delivers two breakfasts. They eat, I talk.

“I went back to the bridge, after breakfast, after the police questioned us. I wanted to figure out what happened to Mary. There was a woman on the bridge, Izohbel Clohmont.” I say it like she did. “She asked if I knew the missing woman. Said it was already online, about Mary disappearing, the handbag on the statue. Her mother disappeared a few months earlier. She gave me a number, said she’d given it to the police, but never heard anything. Asked me if I’d help her find her mother, since I was already on the case for Mary.”

They give each other a look.

I ignore it. “I rang the number, a man’s voice answered, French. I hadn’t thought about what I was going to say, so I hung up.” Quickly add. “I rang back later, asked him to meet me, on the bridge, at midnight.”

“Go on.” Hank, Red hasn’t said a word.

“I got to the bridge about 11.30.” I decide not to mention about being at Marcel’s place all evening. “There were a few people around. I stood under the lamppost, like Mary. I didn’t have a spray, or a taser,”

Send an accusing look at Red who told me not to take hardware overseas.

“But I had a travel hairspray in my bag, decided to improvise.” That sounds good. “So I held onto it, in case.” Not going to mention that I took it out, gave the nozzle a clean. “It was almost 1pm when the man arrived.”

“What did he look like?”

“Like a public servant, cheap suit, cheap raincoat. Grey. He didn’t look like a killer. He told me to forget about Mary, she was gone. Told me to go home. I think I said I was going to find Mary. He pulled out the gun, pointed at me. So I pulled out the hairspray, gave him a squirt, then I ran.”

I stop. Don’t want to mention Marcel.

“What happened then?”

“When I turned around he was gone.”

They eat, give each other looks, signals they developed when they were in the force, secret squirrel communication.

Hank. “Mary would know people in France, she lived there when she was studying at the Sorbonne. There’s also the people she knows over here who are French.”

“Like?”

Red. “Like Jacques, and Marcel.”

I don’t want to talk about Jacques, or Marcel. “What about Professor Craig? He studied at the Sorbonne.”

“When?”

“Don’t know. Just heard he did.”

“Who told you?”

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“Jacques.”

Red. “Let’s talk about Jacques, and Marcel.”

Shit.

Red. “How come Jacques is at uni here?”

“Some sort of exchange.”

“How did you meet him?”

“French classes. Janet decided we should take some French classes before we went overseas, conversational French. Seemed like a bit of fun.”

Hank snorts.

I’ll show you. I say, in French. “Ghe ne parler pas Fronsayze.”

They both laugh.

Red says. “Didn’t they cover pronunciation?”

Bitch. I continue. “Jacques was a tutor. Professor Craig was in charge of the program.”

Red. “And Jacques, introduced you to his father.”

I nod.

Hank. “And Mary knew Jacques and Professor Craig from French classes?”

“Yeah. Mary wasn’t in our class, she was in the top class. Also Professor Craig helped Mary with her thesis.” And since Red was in on the conversation I had with Prue about Professor Craig. “There was talk Mary and Professor Craig had a thing. I asked The Prof, he said no.”

Hank. “What does Marcel do? For a job?”

I’m not sure. I asked, was making conversation, but I couldn’t understand what he said. “Something in the government.” I think.

Red. “Can you be more specific?”

“No.”

“You said he’s here on business and pleasure. What business?”

“I don’t know.” Why are they putting Marcel into all of this. “Marcel doesn’t know Mary.”

“How do you know?”

“He was on the bridge, with me, the night Mary disappeared. She walked up to us. They didn’t know each other.”

“What did she say?”

“Nothing. It was weird. She just looked at us both, went back to standing beside the lamppost.”

“She came up to you?”

“Yeah. Then she went away, and Marcel walked me back to the hotel, went home.”

Hank. “Did you get my message last night?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m serious. You don’t know who this Frog is. Be careful.”

Definitely jealous.

“There’s something going on, and we’re going to find out what it is. He could be involved, might even be the link back to France, and the man with the gun.”

Red. “She’s got hardware.”

The hardware’s for protection against Marcel! “You gotta be kiddin’ me.”

“Keep the taser charged.”

Talk about jealous, this is ridiculous. I bet Hank likes the idea of me zapping Marcel, probably remembers when I accidentally zapped him. I’ve had enough. “Is there anything else?”

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They glance at each other, shake their heads.

“I’ll be off then.”

As I walk up the street I think about Marcel.

The first time I phoned the number Isobel gave me, Marcel walking towards me, on the phone. He hung up, said it was Jacques.

Then the second time, the voice that sounded like Marcel, but could have been any Frenchman.

And it wasn’t Marcel on the bridge. He did turn up as the man pulled the gun, but he was protecting me.

I think they’re wrong about Marcel.

I walk up the drive, past the VW. Gotta get some petrol, gotta get some money. Will send Evan an account, he pays fast.

I open emails.

Isobel Clement: Hello Dusty, Here is the link. I don’t know what it means, but it was in an email the man sent to my mother. I know it’s from him because the email address is alongside the phone number in my mother’s contacts.

I click it. It takes me to Sweetie’s plus-size.

I don’t get it.

The scooter. Bugger. I descend the stairs, again, take the helmet.

“This is the plan.” Janet’s in control. “We’ll leave the laptop outside Mary’s house on the island.”

“What if someone sees us?”

“The plan is I drive past the house to the park. You take the laptop, put it outside the gate, press the buzzer, run back to the scooter. We keep going around the island before they even know it’s there.”

Not a bad plan, but maybe not enough. I’m not sure Grant and Carlie will give up, even when they get the laptop back. I think they’re pissed about more than that. Besides, they won’t be able to get into the laptop, if that’s what they want.

“I yell at the back of Janet’s head as we putt along the waterfront. “What was the password. On the laptop?”

Yells back. “Twenty million.”

“2 0 0 0 0 0 0 0?”

“No. 2 0 M I L L I O N.”

“Weird.”

“Yeah.”

We putt over the bridge to the island, past riverfront properties with high walls, electronic gates, massive houses. Mary’s French regency gate is closed, the heavy timber door to the house closed too. All good.

Janet stops the scooter three houses up, at the park. We hop off and she retrieves the laptop from the helmet compartment, hands it to me, hops back on the scooter.

Getaway driver at the read. “Go.”

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I walk, nonchalant, on the lush green footpath, pause at Mary's gate. The buzzer is on a smaller gate, similar to the big one, all curling vines and gold paint. I stand behind the wall, poke my head around look through the gate. All clear. I drop the laptop, push the buzzer and run. The pink helmet wobbles on my head.

I jump onto the scooter behind Janet and she takes off, gets Kermie up to 20ks an hour before I've got myself settled. I hang on as she steadies at 40ks. Then, as we turn the corner at the end of the island, two trucks block the road. Orange witches hats block the footpaths either side. Four workmen in fluorescent jackets, hands on hips, discuss.

Janet. "Shit."

Me. "Shit."

Janet comes to a stop.

I yell. "Go round."

She could mount the kerb, dodge the witches' hats.

She hesitates. Good law abiding citizen, Janet is.

One of the fluoro jackets walks towards us. "Gotta go back that way."

Me. "Can't we go around? It's only a scooter."

"No. Power problem."

Can't exactly explain that we're on a getaway mission.

He jabs a finger in the direction we've just come from, the way back to Mary's house.

Janet looks at me, I shrug. No alternative.

She turns the scooter around, goes twenty metres, stops.

"What?"

"No power. Did the buzzer ring?"

Now I think about it, no. I just assumed they'd hear it in the house. I shake my head. Damn, that means they don't even know the laptop's there. Maybe that's a good thing. Maybe not. "Let's cruise up. See if it's still there."

Janet goes up close to the kerb on the wrong side of the road, stops short of Mary's house. The laptop's still on the grass.

"Bugger."

"Someone might take it."

She's right. "I'll shove it through the gate."

I hop off Kermie, sneak up the footpath. Then I duck out in front of the gate, pick up the laptop, push it through the bars. As I lift my head, the front door opens and Douglas appears.

I race back to Kermie. "Douglas saw me. Let's get outta here."

"At least he can't get the gates open. No power."

True.

As we putt past Mary's house I look at Douglas, give him a wave.

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