

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

*Did you read the first section in the newspaper? If so go to page 3.*

### PART TWO

#### Chapter 9

“Don’t stop, you’re pathetic, you’ve only run five hundred metres.” Janet dances around me on the balls of her feet. “Should have come running with me in Europe.”

Wish I was still in Europe. Waking up late, Marcel beside me, aroma of fresh warm croissants wafting up from the patisserie on the corner.

Janet bounds off, I stumble behind her chest heaving, gasp for breath. I prefer to swim, but the muffin/croissant top requires harsher measures.

She does a loop, comes up behind me. “More effort Dusty, or you’ll be ordering from the Cupcake catalogue.” She sings it, runs off with it still in the air.

Bitch. I jog.

Take your mind off it Dusty, think about the case. A body, a dead woman with a bullet hole in her head. The first woman who went missing off the bridge. That makes it different. That makes it a real case.

I shuffle/jog/walk, ahead see a dozen people in a trendy camouflage - jungle print board shorts, singlets. Boot camp on the beach. Most of them look as fit as I am, groan, struggle, sweat as they crawl through the soft sand on their forearms, wriggle their torsos.

Up front is the drill sergeant. He barks orders, yells at individuals, urges them to improve their performance. I’m guessing that’s the intent, basically he’s calling them “lazy fuckers” who should move their “lard arses”.

And I thought Janet was bad.

I attempt a bit more pace as I get even with them, don’t want look like a loser.

Then I realize the yelling is coming from Hank. Shit. I’ve been avoiding Hank since I got back, but I’ve been thinking about him. I’ve been tempted to phone, call off the break, but I’m not sure how he’s going to react – I mean everyone knows about Marcel, and my French affair, I’m sure Hank knows.

Hank’s drill sergeant voice barks, “Break.” Then barks in my direction “Dusty!”

Bugger. Time to face the music.

He bounds over to me. “Like to join us?”

He’s taking the piss.

Hands on my knees, I glance over at his victims, most on their backs whimpering, brushing sand off dripping faces.

“No thanks.”

Hank’s wearing camouflage trousers with lots of pockets, tight around his butt, a grey t-shirt that’s stretched across his chest, a logo reads “Tough Mudder”.

“What’s this?” I wave an arm at the wounded warriors prostrate on the sand.

“They’re doing Tough Mudder, I’m training them.”

He sees my lack of comprehension, or realizes I can hardly speak, explains. “It’s an obstacle course, ice-water, mud tunnels, walls, ropes, up to 10,000 volts of electricity.”

Sounds even worse than triathlon.

“Designed by British Special Forces, it’s hardcore. They compete in teams, help each other out. All about stamina, strength, teamwork. They need to get fit.”

My heart rate has returned to normal, the kind of normal it is around Hank. “Since when did you start training people?”

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He shakes his head, “They asked me. Some people think that as former captain of the south-east Queensland rugby team and current captain/coach of the Maroochy A-grade team, I might know something about training.”

He doesn’t need to explain. Hank has proven his athletic prowess to me on a number of occasions, and none of them involved a football.

He looks at the bunch under his command. “Hang on a sec.” He bounds back to them, yells. “Into the water, around the buoy, back. Do not remove your clothing.” Bounds back.

“What’s with the yelling? And the gear?” Hank doesn’t normally do camouflage.

He smiles, “Tough Mudder’s a state of mind.”

He’s enjoying this, the yelling, and the training. “You doing it?”

“Yep.”

The Tough Mudders-in-training swim out to the buoy - many are not swimmers. Hank watches them.

“How come you don’t have to train?”

“They need a leader. I do enough.”

I know that’s true. What am I supposed to say now? About us, the break?

Hank does it for me. “I know about the French pansy. Want a real man, you know where to come.”

This is like the Senior Sergeant Stern from the early days, the tough guy cop who dressed me down, so to speak, for uncovering an undercover drug operation. His charges drag themselves out of the water, clothes stuck to their bodies.

“Gotta go.” He runs up the beach beside them, near the dunes calls them to attention. Then he picks up medicine balls like they were beach balls, tosses one to a girl in a Tough Mudder t-shirt. She collapses onto the sand, medicine ball in her lap.

I put my head down, jog. At the end of the spit I stop, bend over, control the urge to vomit, then sink onto the sand on all fours, pant like a dog.

Janet’s halfway down the rock wall. I wait, as my breathing settles look back towards Hank and the almost-Tough Mudders.

You have to run Dusty, not far, not fast, just enough to do some good.

Janet pounds down the high-tide mark. “One kilometre Dusty, and you didn’t run all of that, not good enough.” She’s not even breathing hard. “Soft sand on the way back. Come on. Runs up the beach, puffs of white sand behind her feet, I shuffle along on the hard stuff at the low-tide mark.

As I approach the Tough Mudders I jog faster, give Hank a wave. His troops, clothes caked with wet sand, are racing each other, diving for small sticks.

I concentrate, try to ignore the lead in my thighs. Keep going Dusty, show some Tough Mudder-style stamina. Air rasps in my throat, sweat runs into my eyes.

The dead woman, gotta find out who killed her, what happened to Mary. And I think about being alone, on the bridge, in the middle of the night, with a man with a gun. A man who threatened me, told me to go home.

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As I run past the Tough Mudders Hank yells, “Dig deep, lazy fuckers.”

I dig deep, as deep as I can. Focus on the dunes, the casuarinas, the surf club, a few body surfers who swim all year round - bob up and down, chat in the water.

“Not much of a first effort.” Janet takes off her runners, pulls down leggings, Speedos underneath. Then she puts a plastic bag over one foot, balances on the other. Pushes the plastic covered foot down one leg of the wetsuit, repeats the performance with the other leg. She grabs the zipper tag behind her and pulls it up.

I strip to my Speedos, try to hold in my stomach, give up. At least I’m not a wimp, no wetsuit.

“Swim down to the tower, then back.” She runs into the ocean, high-stepping.

I do the slow entry, enjoy the cold water on my hot sweaty skin. I stand with it around my legs, pull on my cap, suck on goggles. Feel the cold in my muscles, step by step, until I’m in seawater up to my armpits, pause, then slide under the surface, water seeps under the cap onto my scalp.

Janet’s waiting. “Meet you there.”

I’m stuffed from the run, but I can do this. My arms find their rhythm. Through the clear green water I watch the air bubbles as I breathe out, see the indentations tiny waves make in the sand below. Slide across the top of flat water.

As I rinse off, shower as cold as the ocean, Janet talks to her triathlon buddies – lycra suits with logos, shaved legs, bulging calves. “Ran back in the soft sand, couldn’t do much today, giving Dusty a bit of training, get her going.” They look at me, nod, as if they can see how badly I need it. Fuck off. Janet’s training every day, sometimes twice a day, making up for what she didn’t do while we were in Europe.

The Tough Mudders-in-training struggle up the beach, carry medicine balls, other instruments of torture. Hank orders them to the showers and they pull off sandy clothes, dump them in piles, shower sand off their bodies out of their hair, Speedos.

They crack jokes, laugh, one bloke shadowboxes under the shower spray. They’re pumped.

I wave to Hank, head across the road to Seachange with Janet and her buddies, chains whirl on expensive bikes, shoes clack on the bitumen.

The café buzzes with adrenaline and caffeine, like it does early every morning. Maria leaves the espresso machine to give me a kiss. “Latte?”

I nod, “Skinny.” At least I’m trying.

“Janet?”

She peers at the juice menu. “I’ll have a Sunshine Special.” Juice with supplements. Her triathlon buddies order similar healthy options – one wants a wheatgrass shot. Wanker.

We find a table, dump backpacks. The wind’s picked up, moves the fat blades of the pandanus, but in the bay, protected by the headland, the ocean’s still flat, the bouys from the shark nets yellow against the blue-grey water.

Maria delivers drinks. “First run since the holiday?”

How can she tell?

“You going to get fit?”

I nod.

“I’m helping her.”

“Janet’s nominated herself my coach.”

“She needs me, can’t motivate herself. No willpower.”

“I’m just not obsessive.”

Janet downs her juice.

“Heard from your French man?” Maria knows about Marcel, everyone knows about Marcel.

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“Yes,” I smile. “He’s emailed every day.” This surprises me, it’s not as if I’m likely to see Marcel again.

“Any news on the woman who disappeared?”

“French police have sent their report to the coroner,” Janet says. “Going to do an investigative piece.”

Janet the investigative journalist.

I’ve got a plan, a start of a plan. “I’m going to talk to her family. Get some inside information.”

“Let me know when, might come with.” To Mary. “Dusty thinks she can turn Mary’s disappearance into her next case.”

“And you think you can turn it into a Walkley.” I reckon I’ve got more chance. “It *is* a case. There’s a dead body.”

“What dead body?”

Only heard last night, haven’t mentioned it, wanted the element of surprise. “The first woman who disappeared.”

“Shit.” Mary.

“How did she die?” Janet.

“A bullet to the head.”

## Chapter 10

The body makes it different. A bullet to the head’s a long way from a staged disappearance. It’s not like she’s not living it up somewhere with a new identity and a French lover.

And it makes Mary’s disappearance look less like a missing person’s case, more like a serial killer case.

I’m not sure if this is good or bad.

Maybe the man on the bridge shot her, or knows who shot her.

I did what he told me to do, I came home. But that doesn’t mean I can’t find out what happened to Mary.

I’m hungry. Exercise makes you hungry. So I’m refueling, with a giant double-choc muffin I got from Maria after Janet left the café this morning.

While I’m eating, I’m working on an excuse to visit Mary’s family. I want to get a feel for them, tell them what I know, get them to hire me.

I phone Janet. “Know anything about the family?”

“I’ll do some research.”

Janet’s a research person, I’m an action person. “I’ll arrange a meeting.”

“Going to put up a Facebook group, see if we get any leads.”

“A what?”

“Should use your Facebook, Dusty. I’ll start an open group, in Mary’s name, put in the details we know, that we think her death’s suspicious, see if I get anything. Someone might know why she was on the bridge, who she was meeting.”

I know who she was meeting, a bloke with a gun. Janet seems to have forgotten I got held up at gunpoint on the bridge. What would have happened if Marcel hadn’t turned up? I could be disappeared, my favourite handbag - the one I bought with the expenses money from my last job - looped over the statue. I could have been a body, waterlogged, nibbled, washed up downriver, discovered by someone walking their dog. I mean, it’s a tough job being a private investigator, and I’m up for it, but a man with a gun is a man with a gun. And a pump-pack hair spray is not an effective tool of self-defense.

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Janet's still rabbiting on.

"Facebook's for people who need a life, Janet. I'll set up the meeting with the family, you get background."

I browse the Cupcake Lingerie website - size 16 and over, too big and too overdone, all beads, bows, ribbons. Nice robes, black silk, similar to the ones in Marcel's apartment, expensive. I settle on the cheapest item in the catalogue, a cotton throw-over with little cupcakes in bright pink, green and yellow scattered across it. I'll order the smallest size, give it to Janet for Christmas.

I turn on the laptop, check my emails, find another one from Marcel – he's taking an interest in the case.

He writes English better than he speaks it, although the grammar's odd. Maybe he's running it through a translation program, like I did for the assignments in the French classes.

Marcel: Dusty, beautiful, I think of you today, and want to catch up.

Catch up is Marcel's favourite new English phrase.

He continues: I have work Australia, and visit Jacques and you soon.

Visit! It's one thing to have had a French lover in France, another to have one fly across the world. Janet will be jealous.

I send him an email: Look forward to seeing you, Marcel, let me know when you will be arriving. Love Dusty.

Hank. What will Drill Sergeant Hank, think about my French lover flying across the world to see me?

I imagine Hank and Marcel, side by side. Suave, swarthy Marcel, long wavy hair, a little overweight I have to admit, but sophisticated, French. Hank, in combat gear, legs spread, arms crossed, biceps flexed. I know who'd win a fight, but if I had to choose?

Even though Marcel's coming to visit, he'll be going home, and since I've been back, the idea of the romantic French lover has lost a little of its luster, although I reckon Marcel can rekindle that for me.

Face it Dusty, you've been hankering for a little Hank, had almost phoned him. And since you saw him this morning... Should I tell him I want to extend the break, just until Marcel goes home?

It's all too much. I decide not to do anything.

More emails from "friends" on Facebook. My Facebook page was Janet's idea, I ignore them.

I key in the email address, [orders@cupcakelingerie.com.au](mailto:orders@cupcakelingerie.com.au).

What did Mary say her son's name was? Send a quick text message to Janet: What was Mary's son's name, and where's the factory?

Write the email: Hello ..., Firstly I would like to express my sincere condolences I am sure you are very concerned about the disappearance of your mother. I know Mary was a wonderful woman, although I only met her recently while on holiday in Europe. I made an order with Mary – Item J201, size 16. It was a gift for a friend, and her birthday party is tonight. I haven't received the order yet and need to collect it from you today.

The phone beeps, Janet: Grant, Kawana Industrial Estate.

Fill his name in the blank, continue the email: Mary said your office was in the Kawana Industrial Estate so it would be easy for me to drop around to pick it up. Please email me with your address. Thank you, Dusty Dexter. Hit send.

I wait, read a string of emails from Ocean World, Evan. Evan's my boss, well, he will be when I finish the proposal for the launch of the new attraction. Zero interest, but it pays the bills.

Reply: Evan, I have been doing some research, and getting over the jet lag. Will have the proposal to you Friday. Dusty.

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Coffee, no tea. While the jug's boiling I wash cups, dishes, look out at the clothes line, it leans to one side. I take the tea to the deck, put my feet up on the chair opposite. The house is a dump, but it's a dump with a million dollar view and cheap rent, and an owner who refuses to maintain it. He says I can buy it, fat chance. But I could ask Hank to put on his tool belt, fix the floor boards.

I take in the gradually disintegrating surrounds. The decking's rotting. One day the chair will go through and I'll end up downstairs in the slimy puddle where the plumbing leaks converge.

The deck's rotting because the guttering's rusted, rain leaks through like a waterfall. Layers of white paint peel off the weatherboard walls. The railing's rotted – the only thing holding it together is Hank's patch-up job, and the wisteria.

An email, from cupcakelingerie: Sorry Dusty, we have no record of your order, however we do have stock. If you would like to drop around to the factory today before 4pm I will have it for you. 2/17 Service Drive, Kawana. Thank you for your concern about Mary. Lisa is in Paris and says the French police have sent their report to the coroner. It seems my mother's death was an unfortunate accident. Lisa is due to fly home with Mary's belongings tomorrow, we are holding a service at Mary's home on Friday if you would like to attend, Grant.

Accident. I wonder if they know about the body, and the bullethole? They haven't found Mary's body. How can they know it was an accident? Stupid gendarmes. This was no accident, I'll find out what happened to their mother. I just have to get them to pay me.

A horn toots, Janet's out front, on the bloody scooter. I'm not going all the way to Kawana on the back of a lime-green "retro" scooter.

Can't believe she bought it. She got off the plane, walked into a shop, rode out on the bloody thing. And she loves it – talks about the freedom, the wind on her face. It's not a bloody Harley, it's a scooter. She might as well have bought one of those mobility scooters, little flag flying behind her. Won't go over 50ks per hour. Her mates on their bicycles go faster downhill, probably uphill too.

I clatter across the floor, down the stairs, pull the door closed behind me – nothing locks properly, why bother.

Janet pats the seat behind her.

"No."

I pull my keys out of my handbag, point them at the car.

"Come on Dusty. It's fun." She beams.

I indicate the VW cabriolet, gift of the ex before Hank. Hank who's not an ex, yet, but could be depending upon Marcel's visit.

"Feel the wind in your face."

"I can feel the wind in my face with the roof down." The car beeps unlocked.

She opens a compartment, lifts out a helmet – the sort of helmet kids wear when they race bumper cars. It's lolly pink.

"I got it for you, specially."

Pink.

She holds it out, like an offering.

Shit. I give up, shove it on my head, pull the strap under my chin, stick velcro to velcro. Hope no one sees me.

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She turns the scooter around, then goes back down my driveway at about 2ks. The driveway's steep, real steep, and the concrete's cracked, bits missing, but 2ks! I could walk faster.

I need to get the upper hand, which is tough from the back of a scooter. I grab her around her taut middle. Yell. "Guess who's coming to visit?"

She yells back. "No idea."

"Marcel."

"You wish."

"Mixing business and pleasure." And just in case she didn't pick up the emphasis. "I'm the pleasure."

The engine sounds like a sewing machine. We putt putt up Mooloolaba Road towards Buderim, turn off to the highway. She sticks to the left lane, cranks it up to 55ks, cars pass us. Blokes in utes toot their horns, their dogs, chained on the tray, bark at us. Janet grins, waves. So embarrassing.

When we get to Nicklin Way it's bumper to bumper, peak hour, at least we can keep up with traffic. A light ahead turns red and Janet weaves the scooter between the two lanes of stationary traffic to the front.

"What are you gunna do now? It's not like you can drag them off at the lights."

She doesn't seem to have thought of this. When the light changes cars on either side surge ahead, weave around us, people give us the finger, yell abuse out their windows.

"Stick to the left hand lane!"

She putts determinedly, sits in the middle of the lane. I actually find myself thinking it's fortunate the scooter's lime green, and my helmet's bright pink. We're easy to see. I give up, shut up, hold on.

Eventually she turns into the street where the warehouse is, pulls over. She turns to me, yells, "See, it's fun!"

Fun. There's something seriously wrong with Janet. The VW cabriolet, top down, music cranking, that's fun. "I think you need to be aware of the scooter's limitations, Janet." That's all I say.

I take off the pink helmet, try to fluff my hair. Janet flicks her fingers through hers – short, cropped, scooter hair. I pull a tie out of my handbag, work up a messy bun.

I get my act together, focus on the job. "Find out where Mary lived?"

"Yep. Like she said, Minyama Island, on the water."

Expensive, Mary boasted about her business, there being lots of money in online lingerie for larger ladies.

"Let's take a look, after we check out the shop. Did she have a husband?" I should know this, having spent three weeks in the woman's company, Janet will know.

"Said she didn't. She lied. I ran some checks – name Douglas Moreton, in jail, fraud. Got four years, been inside two-and-a-half."

I whistle.

"Accountant. Misappropriation of investor's funds."

"Maybe that's how come the house on the island."

"No. Had a gambling habit, claimed most of the stolen funds went to casinos, blackjack. The house was bought by Mary, proceeds of lingerie business."

"What did you find out about the family?"

"Grant runs the business, fancies himself a developer, small-time stuff. Lisa's a designer, did a TAFE course, took over from Mary."

"Mary didn't do the designs any more?"

"Not according to the most recent story."

"Then why was she looking for ideas in Paris?"

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“Maybe she was going to give the ideas to Lisa. We did stories when she set up the business. Mary did a design degree, got a government small business grant, went online. More stories a couple of years later saying how much money she’s making, won a local business award.”

“Where you get all this stuff?”

“It’s my job.”

We look at the warehouse.

On the awning is the Cupcake logo – huge pink breast-like cupcakes in lace cups, red cherries on top – and the web address.

Janet stows the helmets under the seat, pockets the key.

“I emailed. Told him I’d made an order, need it today. As far as he knows, I’m just picking it up. I reckon we get a feel for them, then tell them we know she was meeting someone, see what happens.”

“I should tell them I’m a journalist.”

Janet and her rules.

“You should tell them you’re an investigator.

Technically, I’m not.

The office is small, two desks with computers, no reception area, no showroom. It’s an online business, people don’t drop in to pick up orders. Grant looks a little like his mother, fair hair, same features similar shape. The daughter-in-law is personal-trainer thin and toned, wouldn’t let a cupcake past her lips.

“Hi, I’m Dusty, called about the order. Sorry about your mother.”

He puts his hand out. “Grant. Thanks. My wife, Carlie.” She lifts her eyes at us. He picks up a plastic shopping bag, pulls out the cotton nightie.

I pull my wallet out of my shoulder bag.

Janet starts in with the questions. “You make the stock here?”

“Out back.” He indicates the closed door. “Dozen machines.”

“Mary was proud of the business, talked about it all the time. Proud of you too, said you were a great business manager,” Janet flatters.

He brightens. “Trying to get into some business of my own.”

Janet doesn’t miss a beat. “Development?”

He looks surprised.

“Told you she talked about you.”

“Guess she also said I should stick with what I know.”

“Think she realised you were your own man.”

Very good, Janet.

“Got some ideas, looking for some venture partners.”

Carlie butts in. “Right now, all we’re thinking about is Mary. Poor Lisa’s over there now. She’s so strong for someone of her age, insisted on going over to collect Mary’s things and talk to the French police.” Carlie looks like she’s going to tear up. “We’re holding a memorial service Friday.”

I butt in, “You don’t think it’s a little early for a memorial service?”

Carlie gives me a look that says don’t butt in to our business.

I continue. “I mean, the cops don’t know for sure what happened, maybe she wanted a bit more of a holiday.”

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Carlie glares at me. “She would have contacted us. She hasn’t used her cards, passport.”

Grant puts an arm around her shoulder. “Mum could be a bit vague. The police said the bridge was famous, some statues, maybe she fell.”

I wonder if they know about the body with the bullethole? You’d think the family of other missing women would be the first people the cops would tell. Maybe they’re buying the accident story because it’s easier.

I don’t want to upset them, but I want a case, I need them to realize there’s more to this than an accident, even if it’s a serial killer. I can’t have them just accepting the gendarmes report, having a memorial service and moving on. I’ve got to tell them about the phone conversation I overheard Mary having, seeing her on the bridge. And I’ve got to pick my time.

I pull back. “She enjoyed her last days, loved Paris.”

“And Versailles.” Janet pipes in.

“I bet.” Snarky. Carlie doesn’t like Mary’s fascination with Marie Antoinette.

As I pay, Janet picks up the nightie. “Beautiful work, I’d love to see the factory.”

Grant. “If you like.”

Carlie. “They’re about to go home for the day.”

“Mary talked about it so much, was so proud of it.”

Grant ushers us through the door. Long tables are covered by rolls of the fabrics featured on the fleshy models in the brochure – satins, silks, synthetics in blacks and reds and a range of pastels. Reels hold laces, ribbons, tapes and plastic boxes are full of buttons and beads. In boxes feather boas coil. A size 16 mannequin is draped in coordinating colours. Fabric dust coats the floor.

I can feel a sneeze building, squeeze my nose with one hand, grope in my bag for a tissue with the other.

Janet. “You ok?”

“Sinuses.”

Power cables hang down from the roof, plug into the back of machines, only two of them in use. The women have heads bent, pedals to the floor. The motors hum, sound like Janet’s scooter, but stronger. Their fingers work fast, feed fabric under the needles.

To one side is another desk with a computer and drafting tables.

“That’s where Lisa does the design.” Grant takes us to her table, sheets of drawing paper with scribbled lingerie designs, rough crayon colouring. “Lisa took over the design after Mary went back to uni.”

“What was she studying?”

Janet answers. “French history.”

“Did her thesis on Marie Antoinette and the beginning of couture.” Grant runs his fingers through his hair. “She’s a bit obsessed.”

“I noticed.” Might as well be honest. “So you’ll continue business as usual?”

“Of course.”

“And Lisa, she wants to continue?”

“Mum hasn’t, hadn’t, been too involved in the business for a while, we’ve been running it, making the decisions. It’ll be harder for Lisa, she still lives at home with mum, they’re close. But she has some ideas for other lines, you know, smaller sizes. She’ll be okay when she gets over it.”

As good a time as any for some tricky questions. I finger a drawing on Lisa’s drafting table. “Grant, I heard Mary on the phone, the day before she disappeared. She was arranging to meet someone. Do you know who she could have been meeting, on a bridge, in Paris, in the middle of the night?”

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“The police didn’t say anything about her meeting someone.”

“I told them. I guess they didn’t take me seriously.”

“What did you hear?”

That’s the problem, not enough. “It sounded like she was arranging a date. I made a joke about it.”

“What did she say?” There’s an edge to his voice, he doesn’t want to hear anything that doesn’t fit what he already knows.

“She said it was business.”

“Probably about an order, we got a few orders from the trip, not as many as we anticipated.”

“I was on the bridge, that night. I saw her. It looked like she was waiting for someone.”

“Can’t imagine who.”

Janet decides it’s her turn to do some digging. “Grant, I’m an investigative journalist. The local police are going to get me a copy of the report.”

“I don’t see how it will help. The investigation’s over. Mum’s gone. Lisa’s on the way back. I’d like you to go now.”

Back in the office Janet says. “I’ve set up a Facebook group, so people can express their feelings. In Mary’s name.”

“Don’t do Facebook, leave that to Carlie.”

Carlie lifts her head. “You’ve done what?”

“Set up a Facebook page for Mary, so people who knew her can talk about her, their feelings.”

“I wish you hadn’t, it’s a private matter.” Anger in her skinny face.

“It’s okay love, harmless I imagine.” Grant puts his hand out to her.

I open the door, “Thanks for the tour, see you at the service.”

“By the way,” Janet has one last question. “Your father, Mary said he’s in jail.”

“Was.” There’s an edge to Grant’s voice. “He’s been out a month.” He almost pushes us out the front door.

## Chapter 11

“He’s out.” Janet hands me the pink helmet.

“Wonder if Mary knew hubby was out of the can? Must have. Didn’t exactly race home to see hubby.”

“Don’t reckon they were on good terms. Like I said, she told everyone she was divorced.”

And Grant didn’t seem too keen to discuss Dad. Interesting. “Wonder how Douglas feels about his wife’s/ex-wife’s disappearance.”

“Maybe he doesn’t care.” She hops on the scooter, waits for me to get on behind her.

“Let’s check out Mary’s house, before Lisa gets back.”

She starts it up, bzzzzzz..... like a swarm of mosquitoes.

“Wanna trade this, Grant might take the engine to run one of those sewing machines.” I pull the helmet on over the bun, feel a lump of hair pressing against my head, take it off, free my hair. “Carlie was pissed when you mentioned the Facebook group.”

“And she didn’t like us asking him about his development plans.”

“She’s a bitch, and a snob. Wonder if Mary had a Will?”

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“Would have. She’s the type.” Janet checks the address on her phone, and we set off, a delivery truck goes around the scooter.

The traffic’s cleared a bit, moving faster. Janet sticks to the left lane, over to the side, she’s adapting to the capacity, lack of capacity, of the green machine. I hope it’s a fad, lasts as long as the paddle boarding, and the wind surfing and the jet skiing. Hope the scooter gets retired to the garage before I get creamed by a lorry.

We pull up outside a two-metre high cream rendered wall with an ornate gold gate. Behind it a paved circular driveway and the rear of a massive house.

“Money in nickers for fatties.” There’s a key pad on the wall beside the gate. “Bugger, security gate.”

“Did you think we were going to park out front and walk in?”

I point up the street, several houses away there’s a small park. “Bet we can walk through there and along the river.”

We putt up to the park, a couple of swings and a sand pit, park the scooter, stow helmets. The park fronts the river, and we follow a grass verge past huge rendered concrete and glass structures with pools, Bali-style entertaining areas, pristine lawns, potted palms and pontoons with expensive boats.

“Hope no one’s home, we’re trespassing.” Janet the wimp.

Outside Mary’s place we stop. “Holy shit.”

“Yeah, holy shit.”

I’ve seen this place before, from the other side of the river, it looks like one of the chateaus we saw in Europe – three storeys with columns, French windows and doors across the front, a flat roof with a balustrade, a manicured garden.

Then Janet laughs. “It’s a petite Petite Trianon.”

“What?”

“The chateau Louis gave to Marie Antoinette. Remember, out in the gardens, behind the palace. That’s the Temple of Love.” She points to a small round gazebo in the garden.

“Must be worth a mint.” I bet Carlie would like this place, or like to sell it. “Wonder who gets this in the Will?”

“Very good question.”

“Reckon we should have a look.” I unlatch the gate.

Janet stays outside.

“Just a look around the gardens.” I walk up a pebble path, past an English garden, flowering plants and manicured lawn, up steps to a wide tiled patio, peer inside the windows at ornate furniture, a chandelier. Janet joins me, puts her hands up to the glass.

“Shit.” There’s someone inside. I pull away from the window, stand to the side. Janet races down the steps, across the lawn.

The French door opens, a man in a business shirt, trousers. “What do you think you’re doing?”

Think fast. I shove my hand out. “Dusty Dexter, heard this was Mary’s house. She was always talking about it. Thought I’d take a look.” He declines the shake. “We’re friends.” I point at Janet who is safely outside the gate. “We were on holidays with Mary, in Europe. She told us about the chandelier.” Stop gabbling now.

“You’ve had a look, you can go.”

Who is he? The husband? Grant said he was out of jail. How to find out? Could use the straight-forward method. “Who are you?”

“Not that it’s any of your business, I’m Mary’s husband, Douglas Moreton, I live here.”

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That so? “Sorry for your loss. Beautiful house. Mary loved Marie Antoinette, this place is the spitting image of the Piteete Treeannon, we saw it at Veersayles. Mary had a great holiday.”

Is Douglas a potential client? Maybe he’s more interested in finding his wife than his children seem to be.

He’s still in the doorway, hand on the gold door knob, I can see heavy curtains with gold braid ties.

“Mary said the chandelier was spectacular do you mind if I have a look?”

He hesitates, steps aside, lets me in.

It’s dark. He walks to a wall and hits a light switch – two storeys up light shines through hundreds of glass droplets, on rows of gold candlesticks. The walls are covered in cream gold and red paisley, the ornate architraves feature gold vine. An embroidered rug in cream and gold covers the tiled floor. On it stands dark timber furniture with spindly legs and gold trim, and overstuffed couches in cream and gold upholstery.

A thick brocade cloth, this time in pale blue and gold covers a table with a dozen high-backed chairs, set with cream plates with gold trim and crystal glasses.

On the walls photos of family in heavy carved gold frames – Mary and the kids, no husband.

There are three sets of double doors, all closed.

This is the room where the photos for the lingerie brochure were taken – on the chaise lounge, French windows in the background. I can see Mary, full-length silk robe over a sexy negligee from the Versailles range, fan at her throat, glass beading on her over-sized bra radiating light from the chandelier.

He joins me. “Weighs a ton, had to have the ceiling reinforced, costs a mint to run. After the memorial service people can come back here, you can have a look through the house then. After that it’ll go on the market, put in an offer if you like.”

Nope, he’s not interested in finding his wife, he’s interested in profiting from her death. “What’s it worth?”

He points me outside. “Hope to get well over two.” He adds for clarity, “Two million, dollars.”

Nice. Use your wife’s wake to help sell her pride and joy – caring husband.

“See you Friday.”

Janet’s still standing beside the gate.

I walk towards her, decide to take a look at the Temple of Love. Douglas is already inside, door closed, I wave her over.

The domed temple is supported by columns. In the centre is a statue. I sit on a bench seat, look back at the house. “Douglas Moreton, husband. House is going on the market, he hopes to get over two million dollars.”

She whistles.

“He’s not exactly the grieving husband.”

At the gate we take a last look. “Couldn’t live in the bloody thing, it’s a museum.”

There’s a boat moored on the pontoon, a sail boat, pretty rundown, towels hang off ropes drying in the breeze. I start to walk towards it.

His voice booms. “Private property, you’ve seen enough.”

I wave back at him. “Think it’s time to go Janet.”

She stops me one house down the river bank, hides behind a palm, points at the boat. “My guess, that’s where he’s been living.”

I reckon she’s right, Douglas hasn’t been the king of the chateau for long, maybe he’s still not.

“Should talk to the neighbours, find out how long the boat’s been there.”

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Good thinking, Janet.

We push the buzzer on the security pad on the house next door, no answer, try the other side. We're about to leave when it clicks, we push a gate open. An elderly man, boat shoes, long shorts, polo shirt appears at the front door.

Janet takes over. "Hi Sir, I'm Janet Jones, reporter. Doing a story on how many people who live on the river actually have boats. Ask you a couple of questions?"

"Sure."

"Got a boat?"

"Not any more, wife made me get rid of it, said it cost too much in upkeep seeing it wasn't being used."

"No answer next door, she indicates Mary's place, but I see a boat out front. Get used much?"

"Arrived week or so ago. The husband. Been *inside*, musta got out. Arsehole stole a lot of people's savings"

Just what we needed. "Thanks mate."

"Cheers."

A couple of kids are standing beside the scooter.

"Rad scooter."

"Seriously sick."

Janet grins, "Yeah."

We hop on, she gives me a self-satisfied look. "See rad scooter."

"They're twelve Janet."

Her watch beeps. "Take you home. Going training."

"Come over after, I'll get some beers. Go over our notes."

She nods. "You done any work since you got back?"

"Course." But not enough. Need to do Evan's proposal, get some income. I can't see the Cupcake Case being much of an earner, no one seems to have much interest in looking for Mary.

I make tea, go back to the kitchen for a classic dark Tim Tam and a chocolate orange slice, sit down at the dining table, open the laptop. Time to concentrate, work. Do not read emails.

I cruise the net, search for marine parks, find a few in the US. I log onto their media sites, come across some excellent promotions I can rework. A couple of hours later I have the bones of the proposal. Evan will be happy.

I move the laptop outside, sun low in the sky, ocean a silvery grey, not a cloud in sight. The wind's a light north-easterly. Autumn, love it.

Emails.

Marcel, again: Dusty. I fly to Australia Friday. I look forward to we meet. I phone when arrive. Kisses Marcel.

Must book a wax. Dusty Dexter will have to look her best for her French lover. I email him: Look forward to seeing you Marcel, we will have so much fun, I will show you the beaches, take you swimming. Dusty.

A group of cyclists speed down the street and around the corner. My legs are heavy and tight after this morning's run – I prop my feet on the chair opposite, the muffin top rolls over my waistband. Have to run again tomorrow, Dusty, get some momentum.

I peer at the screensaver. The best of the glamour shots I had taken after the case, my first case. The footage, and the story about me cracking the international drug smuggling ring,

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was news, bumped the triathlon off the front page. As a PR professional I knew it would be a good idea to have photos on hand for publicity. So, I haven't had to use them yet, it's early days.

I look hot. Blond, pouting, good legs, great tits, nice butt – may have photoshopped that a bit, I didn't ask. She posed me with a detective's hat, a trench coat, lingerie, a gun. Hank would like the pics. Have to decide what to do about Hank.

I go back to the emails. One from Janet: The Facebook group is RIP Mary Moreton. Take a look, tell me what you think.

I log on, ignore my news feeds, find the page. There she is, several nice photos taken by Janet during the trip.

The description reads: Mary Moreton disappeared from Pont Mirabeau in Paris on the final night of her tour of Europe. Her handbag was found hooked over one of the bridge's famous statues. The French police have not found Mary, or her body, and have closed the investigation. They consider it to be an accident. I was on tour with Mary, and I am aware Mary was meeting someone on the bridge that night. If anyone knows anything that may help sort out what I believe is the mystery of her death, please join the group and post your comments. Friends of Mary's are encouraged to remember her as they knew her and to post their comments on her life.

There are already several members, among them Carlie Moreton, a sophisticated headshot and the message: Sadly my mother-in-law Mary is no longer with us. The French police have assured us, to our satisfaction, that Mary's death was an accident, that she fell when looking at the statues on the bridge. Her family request that she be remembered with dignity.

In other words no mystery, as far as they are concerned, and no desire for her death to be investigated.

Jacques is also a member, cute photo, and Nikita.

Jacques says he met Mary through French classes and she was a "lover of French history. I hope Mary have wonderful days in my country".

Nikita, black hair and moody eyes: Farewell Mary. Even though I did not know you well, I felt we bonded on the tour of France. RIP.

Yeah right, the only time I saw Nikita talk to Mary was when she had that brochure with Prue's order – remember Prue's reaction, the way she stormed away from the table.

No one says they know who Mary was meeting on the bridge. No hint of mystery.

I join the group. Post a comment: I saw Mary that night, on the bridge, she was waiting for someone. And I heard her the day before arranging a meeting. Someone must have seen something.

Maybe that'll get a response.

Time for a beer while I wait for Janet. I take the laptop inside, sit it on the dining table, flick the light switch.

Inside, the house looks okay, since Janet helped me paint it, and the rugs hide most of the stains on the floor.

The decorations, such as they are, distract from the general decay, and the yellow and blue lounge is trendy. So's the dining suite I picked up at Freedom's last summer sale, following the completion of a very profitable job with Ocean World.

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A couple of pots with straggly palms - should replace them, they don't seem to have survived the absence in Europe – a bookcase full of paperbacks, DVDs and nick nacks, a few bright prints.

The view's what makes it, even at night, lights all the way up the coastline. I'd love to buy it, but I'd need to win Gold Lotto.

I grab a packet of potato chips, lime and black pepper, from the pantry, a Pure Blond from the fridge, shoulder the door closed. Take a bottle of no-label chardonnay out of a cupboard, put it in the freezer beside the frozen double-choc ice-cream and a half-bottle of vodka.

I bypass the laptop and retire to my favourite spot, feet elevated, watch the lights come on.

Text Janet: Bring curry, butter chicken, rice, garlic raita. Hav beer wine.

Text from Janet: Half an hour.

She'll be debriefing with the triathlon freaks – checking times, planning the next training session. Later she'll input the data into her iPhone. They'll go home for healthy meals and an early night, Janet will shower, feed her cat, come here for curry, beer, wine and possibly a night on my couch. At least Janet still enjoys life, if she didn't I'd sack her as bestie.

Marcel. I can understand why he'd jump on a plane, it was a pretty good night. Business, family and pleasure. I make an imaginary toast. "To pleasure."

Janet puts the scooter up the near-vertical driveway. I hear her climb the stairs, pull myself up off the chair, legs tired.

"When are you going to get the oven fixed?"

"Not worth it."

She dumps a plastic bag full of plastic containers onto the bench top.

I open the pantry, take out plates, grab knives and forks. We divide butter chicken and lamb korma, rice, riata. I get two beers, my plate, head out to the deck. "You see the comment from Carlie on Facebook?"

"No."

"Says the family is happy with the cop's conclusion that it was an accident, fell when she was looking at the statues. Remember her with dignity, something like that."

"We wait, we'll get something." She sits beside me, the way we always sit on the deck, both facing the street, the view. Like alfresco dining in Paris, just different scenery, and food you can eat.

"Jacques is already a member, and Nikita?" I'm surprised it has reached so far so fast.

"I sent an invitation to all my friends."

"Since when did Jacques and Nikita become Facebook friends?"

"Jacques when we were doing the French classes, Nikita on the trip. You ought to use Facebook."

You're the techno geek, Janet, I prefer conversation face to face. "I added a comment. Said I saw her on the bridge the night before, and that she was meeting someone."

She digests this, chews a mouthful of curry, nods. Then she breaks off a hunk of riata, dunks it in the curry sauce shoves it into her mouth.

"I did some work on the proposal for Evan, had some good ideas for promoting the new shark tank."

"About time." More curry, washed down with beer.

"We eat, drink beer. "You know, I reckon we should stir up the Moretons a bit."

"Yeah?" She's still concentrating on the curry, Janet's a one-thing-at-a-time girl.

"Post a comment. Something about how they haven't even found Mary's body and they're already planning to put the house on the market."

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Janet demolishes her curry, returns to the kitchen for more.

“Where do you put it?” She’s thin, almost six foot tall, sinew rather than muscle.

She looks at my stomach. “Same place you put yours. It’s a simple equation Dusty, input versus output.”

Bitch. I put plates in the sink, throw plastic containers in the bin, grab more beers.

Janet has my laptop open.

“Hey. We got Lisa.”

I take out empty beer stubbies, slip full ones into the coolers.

“Says: Thank you for your concern, I don’t believe there was foul play in my mother’s death, it was an unfortunate accident. I am happy that she enjoyed her last days in a place she loved.”

“Why won’t anyone listen? Do they think I’m making it up? Maybe the family set her up, wanted to get rid of her. Scheduled a meeting with someone who pushed her over. Maybe they’re all in on it, want to sell the house, take over the business.”

Janet’s not convinced. “They’d have to know someone in Paris.”

“Maybe they do.” Even I’m not that hopeful on that count. “I want to have a look at Mary’s stuff. We need to get her laptop. When she wasn’t on the phone she was on the laptop. That might tell us something.”

“How are we going to get that?”

“Steal it. Lisa’s bringing back her stuff. Ask Lisa if we can see her bag, say we lent her something, want it back. Pinch the laptop. Worked with the guide book.”

“You’re on your own.”

I pull the cotton nightie over my clothes, cupcakes scattered across the front, use my beer as a microphone. I pretend to be Shirley Temple sing: “On the good ship Lollipop, it’s a nice trip into bed you hop, and dream away, on the good ship Lollipop.” I have no idea how I know the words, if I know the words. Don’t care, repeat them over and over.

Empty stubbies, wine bottles, litter the table. Most of the lights we watched come on have been turned off – except the street lights, still bright, a line running up the edge of the coastline.

Janet slurs, “I am an investigative journalisht. Thish myshtery will be investigated. No shtone will be left unturned.” She pounds her hand on the table, upends her glass, grabs it, spills wine over herself, the floor. “Janet Jonesh will uncover the shtory behind the shtory.”

She shoves her hand into a packet of potato chips, pulls out a handful and shoves them into her mouth, crunches – Janet only eats chips when she’s pissed. “We musht inveshtigate the family. Break into the offish and hack into their computersh.”

That’s an idea.

Janet lurches to her feet again, makes her way to the couch, falls onto it. “Jusht have a little resht.”

Janet has no staying power. I finish my glass of wine, look at the lights. Break into the office. We’ll do that. Tomorrow.

## Chapter12

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

Marimbas. The alarm. My brain switches into auto mode, takes my body with it. It throws my legs over the side of the bed and I stand, except the muscles in my legs are so tight I can't stand properly.

Shit. I walk, stiff legged, to the bathroom. My mouth tastes like last night's curry. I burp, acid in my throat.

As I sit on the toilet I realise I'm wearing the cotton nightie, remember the good ship lollipop. Big night. What was the last thing I thought? The thing I had to remember when I woke up this morning? Nothing.

I grab the plastic mug fill it with water, gulp it.

As usual my speedos are still in the backpack. I pull the nightie over my head, pull off the leggings and t-shirt underneath. Then I struggle into the sticky togs, must give them a wash, pull on yesterday's running tights, and top.

As I hobble through the lounge I notice Janet has left, probably already cycled to Caloundra and back.

My calf muscles are so tight I have to turn side-on to go down the stairs. Should run to the beach, it's only about a k, loosen up. I hoist myself into the car, back down the drive.

When am I going to start behaving like an adult? My hand reaches for the glove box, jam sunnies on my face before I crest the hill – sunlit sky and bright blue ocean fill the front windscreen, a physical smack in the face.

As I sit at the lights I rummage through the pocket of my swimming bag, find Panadol. I pop a couple, can't get up enough saliva to swallow. See a water bottle on the passenger-side floor, reach over. A dribble in it, wonder how long that's been there? I swill it around my mouth, swallow, the Panadol stick in my throat. Do not vomit. More swallows, they work their way down my oesophagus.

I'm not running today, just have a nice swim, don't care what Janet says.

As I turn into the car park a pack of cyclists cut me off, four, five abreast, slow in front of me. Janet gives me a wave – unbelievable it's the same woman who collapsed on my couch a few hours ago.

I park, stiff-walk along the beachfront, find them near the showers – bikes, helmets locked to lamp posts, shoes shoved into backpacks.

Janet sees me, laughs. Her mates follow her gaze, she says something. They double over laughing at me. Bastards.

Once I'm within earshot Janet sputters, "Legs a bit stiff Dusty?"

More laughter.

Should have stayed in bed, but I'm not gunna let these freaks get the better of me.

I grunt, head towards the steps to the beach. At the top step I try to go down them like nothing's wrong, but the muscles are so tight I have to resort to the crab walk again.

Janet's almost pissing herself, so are her mates.

I snap, "Happy to provide some entertainment."

At the bottom, walking in the sand's not much easier. I shuffle across the soft sand to the hard stuff. You can do this, Dusty, I put my head down, lift one leg, try to push off with the other foot, make like I'm going to run, but it doesn't work properly. My feet, calves, thighs scream at me, "we can't do this". Should have massaged, stretched, something. I try walking, stretch muscles, even my butt is stiff.

Janet's with her buddies, girls in tri suits, flat stomachs, firm thighs, blokes in skin-tight lycra, most of them not packing much in the lunch box on an autumn morning.

I pretend I'm doing stretches.

Janet yells back at me, "Soft sand, Dusty", with a laugh.

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Shit. I work up to a wonky walk, then a faster walk, start something like a shuffle-run along the water's edge, sun burns into my forehead. I find the really hard sand, try not to think.

Walkers, some with dogs, say good morning, I smile, more a grimace. The others get well ahead, I let them, but I keep going. At the lifesavers tower half way along the beach, I stop, walk, start again.

Shit, the Tough Mudders, I'd forgotten about them.

Hank's out front, demonstrating push-ups in the sand.

I'll turn around, he won't notice me. Too late. Hank leaps up, brushes sand off his hands, barks an order. The Mudders continue push-ups, Hank walks towards me.

Double shit. I shuffle up to him, breath rasps. "Ok, laugh at me."

He stifles a grin, but it's at the edges of his lips.

"Join the Tough Mudders you really wanna get fit."

Still can't speak properly, but I manage, "Who said I wanna get fit?"

"Why are you running?"

Grudgingly, "Spare tire."

He looks at it, gives a slight nod.

That brings back my powers of speech. "Thanks Hank. Besides, why would I want to join you idiots? So I can do some obstacle course, get zapped by an electric current?" I warm to my theme. "Should bring your taser along to training, add some random zapping. Get 'em used to it."

He half seems to be considering it, smiles. "I use positive motivation not negative."

Whatever. I get enough of that shit from Janet.

Then he says, "Heard the Frog's coming back."

News travels fast.

I don't want to piss Hank off, not too much. "Wants to see his son, he's here at the uni." It's not a lie, but it's not the whole truth. "Got business here." Still not the whole truth.

"What business?"

"Dunno." I want to bring Hank 'round. "Like to talk to you about the case."

"What case?"

"Mary missing. From the tour." I'm sure he's heard about it.

"Talk when the Frog's gone home. Few things we need to talk about."

He's pissed.

"Don't let me hold you up." And with that he jogs back to the Tough Mudders, joins them on the sand.

I shuffle on. The others run towards me, then past me, on their way back. I turn around as soon as they pass, hope Janet doesn't notice.

They're all in the water by the time I get back. I pull my cap over sweaty hair - it catches, pulls - suck on my goggles. Take the slow entry, then get into a groove, long slow strokes, let my legs drag. I lift my head and line up the buildings on Point Cartwright then I relax and think, do some of my best thinking in the water.

Why doesn't Mary's family want to know about the person she was meeting on the bridge? Why are they so keen to believe it was an accident? Sure there's the money, but there's got to be more to it, hasn't there? Grant said Lisa was close to her mother, I'll talk to Lisa when she gets back. I can understand the husband wanting the money, even the son, and certainly the daughter-in-law. The office! That was it, Janet's great idea. We need to break into the office, hack into the computers.

At the coffee shop I corner Janet, dump my backpack. "Remember what you said last night, about breaking into Cupcake's office? I reckon it's a good idea."

"You crazy?"

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“You suggested it.”

“I was pissed.”

“You have good ideas when you’re pissed. Come over at six. We’ll do it after dark.”

“I am not breaking into any office.”

“I’ll arrange the breaking and entering, you look at the computers.”

“Why can’t you take no for an answer.”

“Come on Janet. We’re a team. It’ll be fun.”

“Fun!”

Maybe that was the wrong word.

“We get caught, I go to jail.”

“So do I.”

She shakes her head.

“I’ll check out the security cameras, make sure it’s ok. All we do is sneak in, have a look at the computers, sneak out. No one will even know we were there.”

“How are we going to get in?”

“Lock picks.” It’s some time since I picked a lock, although I got quite good at it. I’ll need to get some practice, and tools. “It’ll only take me a second, and we’ll scope the area first, make sure no one’s around.”

Janet sighs.

That’s a yes. “I’ll contact you, when I know there’s no cameras.”

I approach Maria, order another coffee. “Where’s Red?” Red’s my other boss, or she would be, if I finished the PI certificate. At the moment, I’m sort of casual, which means unless I find my own client, and the funds, I don’t get paid.

“She’ll be here later, kids keep nicking the tips jar, she’s going to patrol, scare them off.”

Red’s also Maria’s partner, and official security for Seachange café.

“I’ll drop in. Want to catch up with her.”

I spend an hour completing the proposal for Evan, email him an outline, then I head back down to the café to see Red. She is indeed patrolling, in her uniform, Red Hot Security logo on the pocket, fire-engine red hair pokes out from under her cap. Red’s five foot nothing, fifty kilos wringing wet, but she has attitude, and a gun.

“Hi Red. Keeping the hoons at bay?”

“Little pricks, teach them a lesson if I find ‘em.”

Maria calls her, deposits a late breakfast on a table, bacon, eggs, the works. I could do breakfast, after all I had a run.

She sits. “Wadda ya want?”

“You know that woman disappeared when we were on holidays?”

She nods, eats.

“Had a business, Cupcake Lingerie, in the industrial estate, warehouse. She a client of yours?”

“No Approached them, weren’t interested.”

That’s good, won’t have to worry about security patrols, or cameras, Red has that pretty much covered around here.

She slides bacon in runny egg. Could go eggs.

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Concentrate. “Family’s happy with the police report, reckon it was an accident. I’m not so sure.”

She peers up at me from under her eyebrows.

“Day before she disappeared, I heard her on the phone, arranging to meet someone. Then the night she disappeared, I was on the bridge, saw her. She was there for hours. Must have been meeting someone.”

Red uses toast to mop up the rest of the egg. “So you think the Frog cops got it wrong.”

“Yeah.”

“Tell ‘em what you saw?”

“Yeah. Don’t think they took me seriously. There’s more.”

“There’s always more with you, Dusty. More of the bad, rarely more of the good.”

That’s harsh.

She washes down bacon and eggs with orange juice.

Maybe I could just pinch one of her hash browns.

“Like for instance the PI certificate. Do you have any good news for me on that front?”

“I’ve been on holidays.”

“Always an excuse.”

“I’ve got a lead.”

“Do you have a client?”

“No.”

Red likes to get paid. Not that I don’t like to get paid, I do. And I learnt a good lesson on my first case. Get a client with lots of money. Like rich widows, they’re good – I even got a trip to Vanuatu. So it included a ten k swim in shark-infested waters, it all turned out ok in the end. Except for Janet breaking her ankle, but that wasn’t my fault. And we found out who the bad guys were.

I realize the problem with this case is the woman with all the money is the person who’s missing. Wonder if Isobel has any money?

She gives a deep sigh. “What’s the lead?”

“I met the bloke. I think he’s the one they’re meeting.”

“What?!”

“It’s a long story.”

“Better tell me then.”

“Can I get a coffee?”

“No. Haven’t got all day.” The last hash brown disappears, she stands, adjusts the gun belt. “Talk while we walk.”

And so Red and I patrol a few hundred metres of Esplanade, scaring off any kids who might be thinking about clearing out the tips jar. And I tell her about meeting Isobel, how her mother is one of the missing women, and about the number she gave me. Then I tell her about meeting the bloke on the bridge, and the gun.

“You met a man you suspected was responsible for the disappearance of five women, alone, at midnight, on a bridge?”

“I got away.”

“And your only defense was a pump-action hair spray?”

She makes it sound like I was unprepared. Ok, maybe I was unprepared, still I cleaned out the nozzle.

“He held a gun at you. Did you tell this to the French police?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

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Truth is, we were leaving the next morning, and although Janet suggested calling the police, I never got around to it. “I didn’t think they’d be interested. Isobel said they weren’t interested in the phone number. They just want to make out it’s an accident, forget about it.”

“Police don’t just want to forget about five missing women, Dusty.”

“They told Mary’s family it was an accident.”

“Off the pavement.” She yells at an eight-year-old on a skateboard. “You say they found the body, of the first woman.”

I nod. “Bullet hole in the head.”

“I’ll look into it.”

By look into it she means talk to Hank. “Thanks, Red.”

“And you think family’s dodgy?”

“All seem too keen on the money, don’t seem to care how she died.”

“Look into them too.”

“Awesome.”

Now all I need is to get the lock picks. “By the way, locked myself out, got your lock picks?”

“Why don’t you just climb in the window?”

“Doing what you said, being more conscious of security.”

“In the truck, glove box.” She throws me the key, “Bring ‘em straight back.”

Yeah sure. Well tomorrow anyway.

“And Dusty...”

What now?

“I hear the Frog’s coming back.”

“Yeah.”

“You know I wasn’t happy about your relationship with Senior Sergeant Stern-”

I interrupt, “Hank.”

“He did the right thing by you. Be nice to return the favour.”

Not sure exactly what she means. Red and Hank are close, real close. They protect each other, always have. After the “incident” Hank stood beside Red. She still left the force.

“Of course.”

I head for the truck.

Once night, when Hank and I were drinking, I almost got him to tell me about the incident. Almost.

I practice – lock my front door, wriggle lock picks. It takes half an hour, but the lock clicks open. You’ve still got it, Dusty.

The phone, Red. “You in yet?”

“Had to do some errands, get them back to you later.”

“I’m waiting.”

I open the laptop, email Janet: My place at ten. Wear black.

Then I read my emails. Evan’s happy with the outline, I should go ahead. Good.

Marcel’s on his way, and looking forward to catching up. Facebook messages. I log on, go straight to Mary’s group.

The word’s getting out. There are messages of sympathy for Mary’s family, didn’t know she was so popular. But nothing interesting, and no hints about her mysterious meeting on the bridge.

From Douglas Moreton: My dear wife, who stood by me through it all, I miss you so. Just when it was time for us to be together again, you are taken from me.

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Yeah right. Bet he's lying awake at night spending the money.

Grant, under Carlie's login: So sad you were taken from us in your prime.

A couple of messages from people in the French classes, and other uni students. Even Bridget, who according to the receptionist Janet spoke to, did go out again that night: So sad... such a fun member of our tour group...

Liar, liar, pants on fire.

Janet emails back: Any sign of trouble and I'm out of there.

I'm ready, dressed for break-and-enter. Black leggings, black t-shirt, black beret, most of my blond hair hidden underneath.

Janet's wearing black jeans, long-sleeve black top. She's tense. She's also on the scooter.

"We can't go to a break-and-enter on a scooter."

"It's perfect. Be easy to hide, around the side. And no one's going to suspect us of being crims."

Janet's given this some thought, maybe she's got a point.

She hands me the helmet. "I don't like this." She's registering her concern.

"It's not like we're going to steal anything. I pick the lock, when we get in, you look through the computers, see if you can find anything interesting. I'll go through filing cabinets. We hear anything, see anything, we're out."

"When did you learn how to pick a lock?"

"Red taught me, necessary skill for an investigator." I don't mention that over a period of two hours I unlocked my front door three times. I'm counting on rising to the occasion.

We pull on helmets. The sewing machine starts and we putt along at 40ks per hour. Two women dressed in black, one with a pink helmet, on the back of a scooter. Anybody looks at us, probably think we're on our way to a fancy dress party, dressed as cat burglars, which is not necessarily good.

Janet pulls up down the street from cupcakelingerie.com, we sit, watch for a while. Nothing. No lights inside, no cars or trucks on the street, no action of any sort. Business in the industrial estate has finished, as anticipated.

"You got a torch?"

She opens the glove compartment, pulls out a small torch, it works, of course.

"I'll take her 'round the back." She rolls the scooter down the goods entrance. 'Round the back there's a six-foot gate, we park in front of it, I hop off.

In the moonlight the lime-green retro scooter glows like something alien.

Janet takes a black scarf from a compartment, winds it around her head, leaves space for her eyes, nose, mouth.

"I'd leave that, unless you want to look like a burglar."

"What if they've got security cameras?"

"Didn't see any. And Red said she doesn't have them as clients, so chances are, not."

"What do you mean chances are?" Hysteria edges into her voice.

"I asked Red, what else could I do?"

"I knew this was a mistake."

At the back door I pull out Red's lock picks, confidently choose a pick, put it into the door, wiggle. Nothing happens.

"Hurry up." Janet, right behind me.

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“Give me some space.”

Try another one, wiggle it again. “Bit rusty, give me a minute.” I switch picks.

“You don’t even know which one to use. This is ridiculous.” She’s jumping up and down on the spot.

I wiggle, swear.

Then a figure with a torch appears out of the darkness. “What the fuck you two doin’?”

Red.

Janet turns to bolt, recognises the voice, stops. “Scared the shit out of me.”

Me too, although I’m not going to admit it. “Said you don’t patrol here.”

“Don’t. Following you amateurs.”

I don’t like being called an amateur, all I needed was a bit of time.

She grabs the lock picks. I expect her to start on about breaking and entering or something, instead, she expertly chooses a pick, inserts it, adds another. There’s a click, the door opens. “Ten minutes, I’ll wait here.”

“Ace.”

Janet pats her hand on the inside wall, hits a light switch.

“For fuck’s sake.” Red turns it off, hands Janet her torch.

By torchlight we negotiate the sewing tables, electrical cords, rolls of fabric. Janet kicks something, it clatters across the concrete floor.

“Quiet!”

She hisses, “Didn’t see it.”

At the other end is the office door, not even closed. Janet turns on the computers, waits. Her fingers, encased in black gloves, drum on the desk.

I head for the filing cabinets, open the top one. I try to jam the torch between my teeth, like they do in the movies, but it falls into the cabinet.

“Bugger.”

Put my hand in, feel around. On the bottom of the cabinet is a folder. Suspicious, or maybe it just fell out. I move the others so I can slide it up, open it, but I can’t see much, looks like building drawings, decide to take it with me. I grab the torch.

Janet turns Grant’s computer screen so it won’t be visible through the front window.

I go through folders, bank statements, business projections, I think. Can’t exactly steal every file.

Janet hits keys, clicks the mouse. “Don’t know what I’m looking for.”

“Financial records. Why don’t you just copy anything that looks interesting.”

She shoves a USB into the computer. “What do you think I’m doing?” Terse.

Car headlights. We both freeze. A security car cruises the street, slow, I crouch down on all fours, Janet ducks her head behind the computer screen. It’s one of Red’s, stops across the road. A security guard gets out, walks up and down the road, gets into the car, drives off, slow.

Janet hisses. “You said Red doesn’t patrol here.”

“Musta been some other business. He’s gone now.”

I keep opening files, closing them.

Janet works the mouse.

I check stuff in the trays on the desk, knock over a cup of coffee. “Shit”, dregs run onto the desk. I grab Janet’s scarf, mop it up.

“I bought that in Italy!”

Red appears at the door, hisses, “Five minutes,” retreats.

Janet continues with the fingers on the desk as she downloads files. “Come on.” Turns off Grant’s computer, pulls out the USB, sits at Carlie’s. “There’s a password.” She hits a few keys.

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An alarm goes off.

“Shit.”

“Shit.”

Janet jumps out of her seat.

“Turn off the computer.”

But she’s gone. I hit the start button, turn it off.

I make my way through the warehouse.

Ahead, Janet knocks something off a table and I hear whatever’s in it scatter over the floor. Even with the torch, I can’t see, slip on beads or buttons or something, land on my butt, get back up onto my feet in one motion.

Red’s got the back door open, yanks me out, closes the door. She takes the folder from under my arm. “My office first thing.” Then bolts.

I run, leap onto the back of the scooter as Janet turns it around.

Red yells. “You pair are a fuckin’ joke.”

That’s not fair, she let us in.

The scooter puts down the goods entrance, onto the street, picks up speed. As we turn the corner a police car, sirens on, screeches through red lights and back the way we came. Red’s four-wheel-drive, logo visible in the moonlight, pulls out of a side street follows the police back to the warehouse.

“Yee hah! That was exciting,” My heart hammers. “Can’t say life’s not exciting with Dusty Dexter, ‘eh Janet.” I yell in her ear.

She’s hyperventilating, short sharp breaths.

I yell. “You ok? Chill.”

“You... could have... got us... arrested.” It comes out between gasps for air.

Yell back. “It was your idea.”

I settle back, hang onto Janet’s waist, feel the breeze against my face. Why was Red following us? And why did she take the file?

A bit further up the road Janet pulls off to the side. Her breathing’s returned to normal.

“Get off.”

“What!”

“Get off.”

“What did I do wrong?”

“We’re not wearing helmets.”

She’s right. I get off, she pulls out the helmets, hands me mine.

“Never again, you keep your insane schemes to yourself. If you want to get arrested for breaking and entering, go right ahead, I’m not going to jail with you.”

It’s an overreaction, she’ll get over it. “Great getaway vehicle, it’s like you don’t even exist. Cops didn’t even look at us. Feel like a drink?”

“I’m dropping you off, then I’m going home.”

She pulls on her helmet, I’m surprised she didn’t wear that when we were inside.

“Don’t forget your balaclava.”

She puts her hand to her throat. “Shit.”

“Shit what?”

“You used it, to wipe up the coffee!” It’s a wail. “I put it on the desk. I was hot.”

“Did you put it back on?”

“Don’t remember.”

I guess that’s a no.

She searches compartments in the scooter. Pats her neck, her torso – like maybe it’s there, she just can’t see it. It’s not there, which means it’s back at cupcakelingerie.com, or somewhere near it.

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Janet wails. “DNA.”

“Coffee DNA.”

“It’s not a joke.”

“You watch too much CSI.” I think. “We should go back, retrace our steps. Cops might be gone already. I mean, it’s not like we smashed a window, there’s no sign of a break and enter. And we didn’t take anything.”

“You must be joking. We’re dressed like cat burglars, we’re in the vicinity of a crime.” She gets back on the scooter, I jump on behind her, she’s in the mood to leave me behind.

“Never again, Dusty. Never again.”

We putt off into the night.

### Chapter 13

Red’s office is a bunker in the industrial estate, sandwiched between warehouses, showrooms, industrial sheds. It’s not far from cupcakelingerie.com. I park the red VW behind her camouflage-green four-wheel-drive, hit the buzzer on the front door.

A tinny voice. “Who is it?”

“Dusty.” They know me.

“Dusty who?”

Smart arse. “Dusty Dexter.”

I stand back, look up at the security camera.

“Do you have an appointment?”

Who is this clown? Must be new. “Tell Red I’m here.”

Silence, for several minutes, then a click.

A woman behind the counter ignores me, pushes a button, the next door clicks. I open it, it closes, locks behind me.

Red’s in her office, cap on the top of the filing cabinet, RM Williams on the desk beside the gun belt. No computer, just a filing cabinet and two trays, In and Out, both empty, as usual. On one side of the desk a card file like a paddle steamer wheel, hundreds of business cards. When she’s not happy she fingers the wheel, it whirs.

“You’re late.”

Since I don’t have a case you’re not, technically, my boss. “Had a wax.”

In the middle of the desk is a file, she prods it with her index finger. “This is what you stole last night.” Then she opens the top drawer and removes Janet’s scarf, tosses it at me.

“And this is what your idiot friend left behind for the cops to find.”

Where’s this going? She’s the one let us in.

“Fortunately I was there when the cops walked through the place. I picked up the scarf.” She takes her feet off the desk, leans on her elbows, puts her hand on the folder. “Is there a reason you stole this folder?”

“Was hiding on the bottom of the drawer in the filing cabinet, thought it might be incriminating.”

She opens the folder, on top is a plan. “A plan, could be anything, no detail. While you were being waxed,” she gives it unnecessary emphasis, “I spoke to Janet, who spent half the night going through the files on the USB she fortunately remembered to retrieve.”

Of course she did.

“The son seems to be more interested in project development than lingerie for larger ladies. Understandable. There may be some accounting inconsistencies, we need to look at

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that.” She closes the folder. “That alarm was probably set off because Janet got the wrong password, which means they know someone was there. If there are hidden cameras, they know who.”

“Bugger.”

“Dusty, as far as I am aware, you are not yet a qualified investigator. Am I correct?”

I shrug.

“And, even if you were, you don’t have a client. So, you’re not getting paid.”

Another shrug.

“Forget it.”

I’m not going to let Red tell me what to do. “I know she went to meet someone on the bridge. I’m going to find out who.”

“I recommend you leave well alone. If they do find out you and Janet were there, and they have something to hide, they could be after you.” She dumps the folder in the bin, returns her feet to the desk. “Go and play with your French boyfriend, or don’t. And don’t lie to me again, I’m not stupid.”

“You let us in!”

She ignores this. Picks up the phone.

Dismissed. I retreat, hear the last door lock behind me as I stand on the street, Janet’s scarf in my hand.

“Hey Janet, I got your scarf.” Go in hard, hope she’s talking to me. “Going to the memorial service? Want a lift?”

“No. See you there.” She hangs up.

Cold. I want to know what’s in the files, about the accounting inconsistencies, and I want her to create a diversion at the house so I can find Mary’s laptop.

I put the top down, crawl along the Nicklin Way. I’ve got time to kill before the service, and I’m hungry, head for Seachange.

Bingo. Janet’s Yaris, in its favourite spot. She’s having lunch, with someone I don’t know – dark trousers, white shirt, tie. I smile, grab a seat, put out my hand. “Dusty Dexter, friend of Janet’s.”

“Peter Gold, accountant.”

So Janet’s getting some advice on the cupcakelingerie.com accounting inconsistencies. “I’m working with Janet on the investigation. How’s it looking?”

He looks at Janet, who clearly hasn’t mentioned me. She nods. “More money coming in than you’d expect, not sure where it’s coming from. Cash sales, not like they’d have a lot of cash sales I wouldn’t have thought.” He shrugs. “Not enough to go on. Looks like a good business, mostly online, heavy on wages. They should outsource, got some contacts in Korea, China, cheaper manufacturing.”

“Should see the house she lives in.”

Janet paints him a picture. “Two mill, Minyama Island. Husband went to jail for ripping off client’s trust funds, Douglas Moreton.”

That gets his interest. “Remember that, gambling habit. Must be out soon.”

“Last month.”

“Story was he blew it all. Kept spending more hoping to cover the shortfall, got in deeper and deeper.” He finishes his coffee. “Have to go.” He stands, picks up an expensive briefcase. “Sorry Janet, not much help.”

“Thanks Peter.”

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“See you again, Dusty.” He gives me an approving look, rushes off to more important work.

She mimics him. “See you again, Dusty.”

“What’s up your arse?”

“Nothing. Except you made me break into a business and steal their files, and if they have any computer knowledge, which I bet that bitch Carlie has, they might figure someone was in there. And they might figure it was me. That’s all.”

I pull the scarf out of my handbag, she snatches it. Maria brings the sandwich I ordered – pastrami, salad, relish on rye – Janet should be impressed, I’m eating healthy.

Instead she says, “Shouldn’t mix carbs and protein.”

I can’t win. “I’m sorry. Okay.”

Janet picks at shredded lettuce left on her plate.

The café’s full of sunburned tourists in board shorts and sarongs, wet towels over the back of seats, plus a few workers lucky enough to get time for a lunch break on the waterfront.

Janet gives me the silent treatment, I finish the sandwich and coffee.

“Still want to get that laptop. Reckon it’ll be at the house. Also need to talk to Lisa, find out how she feels about dad selling the house, see if we can sew a seed of doubt, enough to get her to help us. If not, we find the laptop, steal it. Coming?”

“I’m done with that.”

We take separate cars to the memorial service. I park behind Janet, join her at the gate. It’s gold-painted scrolls and vines attract the attention of the incoming tide of mourners. All that’s missing is a royal crest. The front door’s heavy timber, inlaid with more gold.

Douglas ushers us inside. “Didn’t expect to see you, after the break-in.” He doesn’t elaborate.

Janet grips my forearm, out of his earshot hisses. “They know it was us.”

How? “What can they do here?”

The foyer’s tiled, grey and white, a curved stairway with an ornate handrail leads to the upper levels. We follow mourners through halls lined with flocked wallpaper in cream and gold to the main living room, chandelier ablaze, and then out into the garden.

Twenty or thirty people stand in pairs, groups, many of them well-built women. They talk in quiet, respectful voices. I imagine their underwear, in honour of Mary, lacy underwires with ribbons, matching over-sized knickers. Most of the tour members are here, Prue, Nikita and a woman who must be her mother, Helen, Maureen and Doreen, even Bridget, sour as ever. We wave, Janet steers me into a corner.

In the Temple of Love, on a table, is a picture of Mary. In front of it a large ornate vase with fluted gold-trimmed top – long-stem red roses in it. On the bench where Janet and I sat is a woman, a younger slimmer version of Mary. Must be Lisa. She’s with a friend, or perhaps another family member.

Grant and Carlie talk in hushed voices, friends circle them.

I recognize faces from the French classes, even super Francophile and course head Professor Craig. There’s no sign of Jacques – Marcel arrives today, could be on their way back from the airport.

Red appears beside me in her not-in-uniform uniform – cargo pants with lots of pockets with clips and zips, a polo shirt, Docs – she still looks like the law.

“What are you doing here?”

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“Watching you.”

“I don’t need watching.”

“I think you do.”

There’s more to it than that, Red hasn’t got time to babysit me. I wonder if she looked into the French cops like she said she would. Wonder if she talked to Hank. I think I have to wait for her to tell me.

“Who’s that?” She points towards the Temple of Love.

“Must be Lisa, Mary’s daughter. Looks like her. That’s the Temple of Love.”

“Temple of Love?”

“It’s a copy from the garden in Versailles.” Janet enlightens her. “The house is a copy of the Petite Trianon, also from Versailles.”

“She was obsessed with Marie Antoinette.” I add.

Red takes a good look around, hands on hips, tips her head at the house. “She think she was the bloody queen?”

Janet defends her. “She was studying French history.”

“Looks like she was living it.” She crosses her arms, legs apart, gets comfortable.

I point to the boat, still moored at the pontoon. “The husband’s boat, arrived a couple of days ago.”

Janet butts in. “Just did two years, fraud.”

No towels out to dry today, maybe Douglas has taken up full-time residence in the house. I wonder how Lisa feels about that. “He’s over there, with Grant and Carlie.”

“They’re onto us, I know they are. Douglas said as much.”

Janet’s paranoid.

A young man in a suit walks to the table, the subdued talk stops. “We are gathered here today to remember Mary Alice Moreton in the garden of the home she created and loved.”

I tune out, think about how I’m going to get the laptop, about questions I need to ask Lisa. The voice, modulated, clear, says all the right things, drones on.

Grant walks up into the Temple, stands beside the table, pale blue shirt with sweat rings at the arm pits. He looks at the photograph, takes time to control his emotions. He talks about how much he loved his mother, calls her a woman who cared for others, a wonderful mother and a pioneering online business woman.

Who created a business you’ve been ripping off, maybe. Still, I can’t see him pushing his mother off a bridge, can’t see him arranging for someone else to do it either.

Carlie, average height, thin, fit – spends hours in a gym is my guess. White linen pants around a tight butt, no visible underwear.

I elbow Janet, whisper. “Carly, NVP.”

Janet works her eyebrows up. “You don’t wear a G-string to a memorial service, not your mother-in-law’s memorial service.”

Why not? Janet’s a prude.

Lisa follows Grant into the Temple of Love. Talks about a woman she clearly loves, her imagination as a designer, her passion for art and culture. How happy she is her mother spent her last days in a country she had studied and had wanted to visit for so long.

Lisa’s in control. “I want you to remember my mother, Mary, as a woman who loved life.” She picks up the photo, kisses it, replaces it on the table. As she walks back to the garden Douglas passes her on his way into the temple. Lisa is clearly not impressed, edges away from him, head lowered.

Douglas is calm, white shirt ironed, trousers pleated, matching belt and new shoes. He talks about a wife who always there for him, who recently welcomed him back with open

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arms. I wonder how much truth there is in that. A wife who he knew would be there for him always. How much he will miss her.

Music, more nice words.

I stare at the service program, nice picture of Mary, drift. I'll take Lisa aside, tell her how sorry I am for her loss, then tell her I lent Mary a book, and I'd like it back, a memento of her friendship. That ought to do it. She can take me to her luggage, Janet can distract her while I get the laptop. Better still Red can be decoy, Janet might lose her nerve. Easy, a good plan. I've got my big handbag, almost empty. It'll fit in no worries, no one's gonna notice.

It's over.

Janet hisses. "Can I go now?"

"You go, Red'll help me."

But she stays.

Red. "Help with what?"

"I want to get Mary's laptop."

Red. "You're talking about stealing her laptop?"

"Might have some leads, tell us who she was meeting. It'll be with her luggage."

"French police will have checked it out. Anything important will be in the report."

"Have you got the report?"

Silence. Hank hasn't come through. Wonder if that has anything to do with me?  
"Besides, maybe they missed something."

"You going to ask for this laptop?"

"In a fashion." I explain my plan.

"I'll divert her. You do the theft. To add to break and enter."

"You did the breaking and entering."

"Only because you couldn't."

Grant invites us all to stay, to farewell Mary with a drink, refreshments. We head back to the shade on the patio a long table with a white cloth and plates of sandwiches, fruit and cheeses and crackers. An urn boils, tea and coffee cups are set up, a dripolator with brewed coffee. Further along glasses, and big silver buckets full of cold beers and bottled wine.

That's more like it.

I grab a glass and a beer. Janet and Red have coffee.

We chat, drink, eat. The French doors along the patio are open and people are encouraged to look through the house. Douglas offers to show people around, turns it into an open-for-inspection with a memorial service thrown in.

Janet's uncomfortable.

"If you want to go, go."

"No. Want to talk to Maureen and Doreen, get them to send me the photos they took on the bridge the night Mary died. Might give us a clue."

"Good idea."

Red and I look for Lisa, find her inside talking to Professor Craig. They are on the chaise lounge – red velvet with gold brocade, carved timber legs.

"See you in a few weeks." He gives her a kiss on the cheek.

"Hi Lisa, I'm Dusty Dexter, I was on the tour with your mother, this is Red."

"You're the one who thinks mum was meeting someone on the bridge. The police have investigated, they didn't find any evidence she arranged to meet anyone. It was just a tragic accident."

Why is this family so keen to think their mother fell off a bridge? There's no mention of the possibility of suicide either.

"I heard her on the phone, arranging to meet someone."

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“You probably misunderstood what she was saying. Mum had a lot of orders in the last week, she phoned me a few times to sort out details.”

I back off, but I’m not giving up. It still doesn’t explain why she was on the bridge. “Guess you’re right. Lisa, I loaned your mother a book, hoped I could get it back, a memento of her from the holiday.”

She looks dubious.

“Probably in her luggage, only take a second.”

“I suppose.” She walks us through the hall, up the staircase.

Red tags along, head swiveling from side to side taking in the décor.

“It’s modeled on Marie Antoinette’s Petite Trianon.” Lisa explains the seventeenth century French monarchy look.

“She loved Versailles, I think that was the best day of her holiday.” I’m being Mary’s tour mate.

“I’m sure it was.” Lisa opens the door to a massive bedroom – bed on a raised platform, a four poster with red and gold brocade around the top, matching cover. Floor covered in floral rugs, a make-up table with a huge gilt mirror, brushes and fragrance bottles, a fragile chair in front of it. Three sets of French doors, closed. Outside a balcony, the river, and Douglas’s boat.

The suitcase, laptop case, and Mary’s handbag, are on the bed.

Red’s at a door, back to us, tries to open it, fiddles with the latch. “Boat your mother’s?”

“No. My father’s.”

Keeps playing with the latch, as if she can’t get it open.

Keep going Red.

Lisa removes clothing, places it on the bed. “What are you looking for?”

“A novel I leant your mother.”

“Can’t see anything.”

More noise as Red wrenches the handle on the door.

“I’ll look, it must be difficult for you.” A concerned look at Lisa. “Why don’t you help Red with the door, it’s stuffy in here.”

Her back towards me, I cough as I unzip the pocket in the laptop case.

Lisa opens the door.

Red. “Beautiful view. How long’s your father been out?”

Well done, Red.

Lisa stutters. “About a month.”

I shove the laptop into my handbag, give it a push. Another cough as I zip the flap. Then I pretend to rifle through lacy underwear, and practical cottontails. Wonder if the larger ladies know Mary likes cottontails.

Red. “Thought your Mum might have wanted to be here when he got out?”

“She already had the trip planned.” Lisa turns around.

“Can’t see the book, never mind.”

Red gives me an inquiring look, I pat my handbag.

“Maybe you’d like a copy of mum’s book.”

Mary wrote a book?

“Her thesis, she had it published. Cost her thousands, never sold any, just gave them to people.”

“Love a copy.”

“In the garage.”

What was the thesis was on? “About Marie Antoinette wasn’t it?”

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Lisa smiles, “And her influence on French couture. She studied in Brisbane, but Professor Craig helped her with her thesis.”

So that’s why he was here. “And you knew him.”

“Yes. Mum and Craig are, were, close.”

We pass another bedroom, a big canvas bag on the floor, men’s clothing on the bed.

“See your dad’s living in the house. You know your Mum never mentioned him.”

“I’m not surprised.” Lisa’s not happy dad’s back in town, and she’s not hiding it.

“Grant said you live here.”

“I’m moving out.”

“When it’s sold?”

“I’m moving out anyway.”

She opens the garage door. A silver Mercedes, no doubt Mary’s and a blue Astra, Lisa’s for sure. In a corner a few cartons of books, she hands me one.

“Thanks.”

“I better go, play hostess. Stay for a drink. And forget about trying to find out how Mum died, there’s nothing in it.”

Is she telling us to back off?

As we head back to the patio, I see Hank talking to Grant, hadn’t noticed him before. Wonder how long he’s been here? Why he’s here?

I get another beer. More work to be done.

“Hi Nikita, Prue. You must be Helen, Nikita’s mum. I’m Dusty.”

“The woman who took my seventeen-year-old daughter to a night club, watched her drink until she vomited.” Feisty.

Nikita sucks Coke. Prue glowers. Red looks unimpressed.

What can I say?

She continues. “I’m more angry with my twenty-one-year-old daughter than you.”

Is that good?

“I’m sorry, I didn’t realize how much she’d drunk.” Stop before you blow it. “This is Red, a friend of mine. She’s in security, private investigator.”

Nikita’s interested. “You still think Mary met someone on the bridge.”

“We’re following various lines of inquiry.” Red sounds official.

I remember what Nikita said about Prue leaving the room that night. “Prue, like to have a quick chat with you?”

She hesitates, flicks a glance at Nikita, decides to take the path of least resistance. “Of course, although I don’t see how I can help. Nikita, find your mother a seat.”

She walks to a private corner of the garden, Red and me in pursuit.

“Thanks Prue, just take a second, we’re just hoping to find someone who saw Mary on the bridge later that night. Maureen and Doreen saw her, they’re giving us their photos. I know you went for a walk.”

“I couldn’t sleep, walked around the hotel.”

“Nikita said your jacket was wet, like you’d been outside, so Janet checked with reception the next night, they said you went out around three.”

Her face flushes, neck, even her chest. Prue isn’t comfortable being caught in a lie.

She sighs. “If you must know, yes, I did go out. But it isn’t important I didn’t see anything, that’s why I didn’t say anything.” She’s so angry she’s shaking. “I have trouble sleeping, have done ever since my husband died.” Indignant. “I took sleeping tablets on the

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trip with me, enough for the whole trip, Nikita stole some, anyway I ran out. That's how come I was awake that night, and the night you had Nikita out way past her bedtime."

I know this, want more. Try silence to get her to continue, Red stays quiet beside me. It works.

"I went for a walk. I did go outside, just around the block, it rained, I went back to the hotel. That's it. I was gone less than half an hour. Satisfied."

Prue didn't like Mary, I wonder why.

"Nikita said you and Mary knew each other, before the trip."

She crosses her arms across a squashy bosom. "Not well. I met her at uni."

"What were you studying?"

"Lots of different things. I'm retired, I study through University of the Third Age, sit in on some classes to keep my mind active. The rest of the time I volunteer at the cancer centre, that's where I met Helen, Nikita's mum. I helped her through her chemo, helped the family, that's why she sent me on the holiday, she was too sick to go but she wanted Nikita to go, sent me to chaperone her."

Prue, too good to be true. Or maybe not, maybe just genuinely good. Nikita said something about Mary and Prue and a man. It's so unlikely I'm tempted not to ask, decide to, just to irritate her a bit more.

"I heard you and Mary fell out over a man."

She snorts, reddens even more, shoots a glare at Nikita. "There was no falling out. If you must know Mary was seeing someone, someone she shouldn't have been seeing. I confronted her about it, she denied it of course."

Righteous bitch. "Who."

She spits it. "Professor Craig."

"She did her thesis with him, would have spent time with him, what makes you think it was any more than that?"

"I saw them together, I know what I saw."

"And what happened when you confronted her?"

"She said it was a study meeting."

This is going nowhere. Nikita could be right, maybe Prue fancied Professor Craig, thought Mary was getting in ahead of her. Or maybe she's just a suspicious meddling old bitch. I've had enough. "Thanks Prue." Start to walk away.

"You don't believe me. He gave her something, a little green box. Looked like jewellery."

"But you didn't see what it was?"

"No."

Red and I shrug, but somewhere in my brain an alarm goes off, and I can't think why.

Prue turns and trudges off across towards Nikita and Helen, her pewter leather casuals leaving flat patches in the lush green lawn.

Red states the obvious. "You don't seem to be making much headway."

"One more. Bridget, the sour bitch with Janet."

As I pass the table I grab another beer, a couple of crackers, dunk them in hommous.

"Bridget." I try a smile but my mouth refuses.

"Dusty." Likewise.

"This is Red, private investigator."

Bridget empties a glass of white, puts it on a table. "I'll be off, another trip to plan."

"Before you go. I'm following up all leads, trying to find out who Mary met on the bridge. We checked with reception at the hotel the night she disappeared, they told us you went out, even though you told Maureen and Doreen that you weren't going to go looking for Mary."

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She shakes her head at me. “Without you that tour would have been completely different. You tried to undermine me at every turn, I don’t even know why you went.”

It was free.

Red squares off beside me, but I don’t need her help, and I don’t care what a sour shriveled-up prune like Bridget thinks of me.

“You were pissed off Mary was making more money out of the tour than you were, and you lied about not going out that night. Where did you go?”

“I don’t have to tell you anything.” And she stalks off.

Red puts her hand on my arm to stop me going after her. “We’ll look into her.”

“Ok.” Red’s taking this seriously.

Hank appears beside me.

“Hi.”

“Hi.”

“How’re the legs?”

“Buggered.”

“It’ll improve.”

“I know.”

I wonder if Red’s talked to Hank, I’m about to ask, but I’m interrupted.

At the house, there’s a murmur, then everyone stops talking, looks towards the open French doors. Jacques and Marcel, walk through them stand side by side on the patio. Tall, dark, handsome. It’s like a scene from a French movie – castle in the background, handsome French men in front. Lisa approaches them, Jacques introduces her to Marcel, they shake hands, talk briefly.

Beside me, Red gives a low whistle. “That’d be the French boyfriend. I’d almost turn for him.”

Hanks says, “Wouldn’t ask him to model in his jocks.”

What?! Jealous.

Marcel looks even more handsome, more French, than he did in France. His eyes move around the garden until he finds me. He walks over, kisses me three times on the cheek, then on the lips.

“Ca va, my blond Australien, Doostee.”

“Ca va Marcel.” What else can I say?

Jacques is beside him. “Dusty. I tell you, my father handsome?”

“You did Jacques.”

“Say he like you very much.”

What’s not to like.

“Say he want visit me in Australie. I think want visit you.”

Marcel smiles his French smile. “Man cannot resist booteefool woman.” He takes my hands. “Tonight, Dusty, I see Jacques. Tomorrow I catch up you.”

Sounds good to me.

I notice Hank’s disappeared.

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.