

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS

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# Dial M For Merde

Stephen Clarke

## About the Book

**In the South of France, Paul West has a license to thrill.**

He has just received an offer he can't refuse: two weeks in the sun, all expenses paid, with a beautiful blonde called Gloria Monday.

But it soon becomes obvious that M, as Gloria likes to be known, is not really interested in holidaying with Paul. She has bigger fish to fry.

Meanwhile Paul's best friend Elodie is getting married, and Paul has been asked to do the catering. Cooking for the French is a risky assignment at the best of times, but Paul assures Elodie that nothing can go wrong.

Or can it?

When Paul discovers that M's real target is France's biggest fish of all - the new President - and that he's coming to Elodie's wedding, he realises that the merde really is about to hit the fan...

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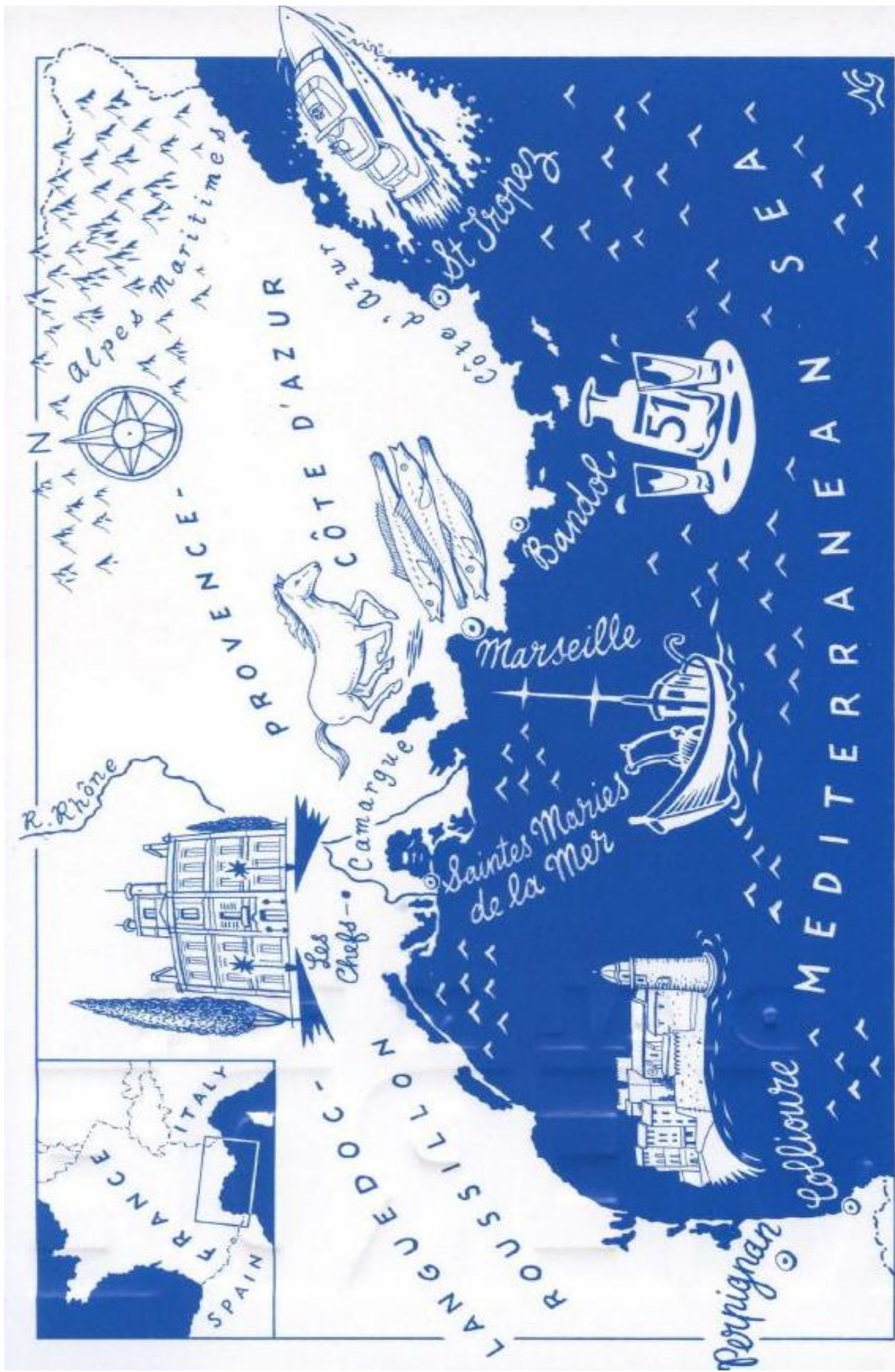
ALL THE PRESIDENT'S MERDE

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# Dial M for Merde

Stephen Clarke

*Faust*: 'Give me a week and I could seduce even an innocent young creature like her.'

*Mephistopheles*: 'You're starting to talk like a Frenchman.'

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust* (1808)

For legal reasons, I am obliged to stress that this novel *in no way* implies that the current President of France receives sexual favours from his female staff. That would be an outrageous - and totally unbelievable - allegation.

Stephen Clarke, Paris, 2008



To the crew of the good ship Esperanza.

## *The Pitch*

‘Do you want to come to the South of France with me?’

Before the girl had finished her question, my mind was lit up by a shimmering horizon of olive-green hills, with ochre villas crouching amongst the—

No, I told myself, skip the landscape stuff. I cut to a snapshot of a glossy white yacht, a bottle of rosé chilling on ice, and this girl stretched temptingly along a lounger, her skin soaking up the muted September sun.

I opened my eyes, aware that she was speaking again.

And what she said didn’t just bring me back down to Earth - it pitched me headfirst into the Mediterranean.

ALL THAT GLITTERS IS NOT PLATINUM



# *Paris*

## 1

'BONJOUR.'

'Bonjour.' The young woman with metal-rimmed glasses smiled.

Good start, I thought. I'd just got back to Paris after several months in America, where my French had faded away like a winter suntan. It felt good to be topping it up again.

'Je m'appelle West. Paul West.' I slid my credit card across the counter.

'You can speak English with me. Many foreign visitors come to our bank.'

Ah, the new generation of French workers, I thought. While their parents are moaning that their language is being killed off by English, the kids are merrily going global.

'Merci.' I told her she was very kind but I really needed to speak French. 'J'ai travaillé en Amérique,' I explained, 'et mon français, er ...' How did you say 'faded'? And what the hell was 'winter suntan'?

'Mon français est blanc comme l'après-ski?' I hazarded.

The woman was looking confused, so I gave up on the improvisation and returned to the speech I'd prepared earlier. I informed her that I had transferred 'beaucoup de dollars' from California, and wanted to consult my 'solde',

or balance. I was especially proud of myself for remembering 'solde', because I knew that the term 'balance' existed in French and had come perilously close to using it, in which case the bank clerk would have thought that I was anxious to consult my bathroom scales.

'Vous êtes à cette agence?' she asked. Was I with this branch? The answer was no, but I decided to play the English fool. It sometimes wins you favours in France.

'I am now,' I told her.

'Hm.' It hadn't worked. She pushed my card back across the counter and adopted a stern pout. 'If you are not a client of this branch, you must use the machines.' She pointed at the four screens in the entrance lobby behind me.

'Oui, mais ...' I did my best to mime that two of them were out of order, two were being used, and that she was clearly not doing anything very urgent.

'Vous voulez une petite formation?' she asked.

'Pardon?'

'You want me to show you how to use the machines?' she translated.

'Non, merci.' I told her I would try my best to put my card in the slot and choose 'solde' on the screen.

'Très bien,' she said, and went off to shuffle some papers around on a printer. I had been dismissed.

It only took ten minutes for the guy using the 'general banking operations' machine to call up a list of every cheque he'd written since 1990 and order five new credit cards.

At last, I was able to print out my balance, and then spent several seconds reeling in shock at the weak state of the dollar compared to the euro. My cargo of cash had taken a cruel beating during its transatlantic voyage. About a third of it had gone overboard. I was in such deep mourning that I didn't hear the machine beeping at me until it was too late.

'La machine!' I called out to the bank clerk, who was now staring out of the window. She tore her attention away from a passing bus. 'La machine, er, ma carte ...' I made a slurping noise to get my point across.

'You have your passport?' she asked in English. She'd obviously given up trying to deal with my French.

'Why?'

'You must prove your identity before I can open the machine and get the card for you.'

'But you know who I am. I showed you my card a few minutes ago.'

She shrugged. 'I must see your passport.'

Normally this wouldn't have been a problem, because I almost always carry my passport with me in case I get deported from somewhere at short notice. But I'd come straight from the airport, dumped my luggage at my new apartment and nipped out to see whether I was solvent in euros. My passport was currently nestling in the small front pocket of my shoulder bag, along with my boarding-card stub, a tube of mints and a Los Angeles gym membership card.

'I don't have it on me,' I confessed.

'You must bring it here.'

'But the bank's closing in five minutes, isn't it? Will you wait for me?'

Her answering smile was as angelically innocent as her words were merciless. 'We open at eight forty-five in the morning,' she said.

My phone began vibrating in my trouser pocket. The number wasn't showing on the screen, so I took the call, irrationally hoping that it would be someone from the British Embassy offering to 'copter in a duplicate passport within the next four minutes.

'I'm staring at your underpants,' a female voice informed me.

'My underpants?' I looked down to check that my zip was securely fastened. 'So what colour are they?' I challenged.

'Black,' came the answer.

'Oh yeah?' Trouble was, like any sane man with more important things to think about, I had no idea what colour my underwear was that day.

'And why is there a six-pack of condoms in your pocket?'

'Condoms? I don't have any condoms.' My pockets were empty of everything except my keys and enough cash to buy a baguette. There wasn't even a credit card any more.

I turned away from the bank woman, who was now looking at me as if she might not open up tomorrow morning after all.

'Yes, a packet of French condoms,' the caller went on. 'It says, "For the intense stimulation of both partners." You want to know how they say that in Belgium? "Extra genoot voor beide partners." I must remember that in case I ever feel like fucking a Belgian.'

At last the penny dropped. It was Elodie, an old French friend of mine, whose conversation was almost always about money or sex, or - when she was describing her last 'house-sitting' job in New York - both.

She explained that she wasn't spying on me from outside the bank. She was inspecting a collection of my underwear and other private belongings that had recently been relocated to her apartment by my ex-girlfriend Alexa. There wasn't much, she said, but I might like to pick it up because it was getting embarrassing explaining to people why there was a bag of male clothing in the corner of her bedroom.

'You've seen Alexa?' I asked. 'How is she?'

Elodie tutted. 'Forget Alexa,' she said. 'I adore her, but haven't you noticed the "ex" in the middle of her name? You must forget your exes. That's why they're called exes. If

you were meant to think about them all the time, they would be called nows.'

'But I'm one of your exes,' I objected, 'and you're calling me.'

'No, no, Paul, you were never really a boyfriend. We just had sex for sociological reasons. We were sharing an apartment, you were single, I was taking lots of drugs ...'

'Gee, thanks,' I said.

'Are you free now?' Elodie asked. 'Do you want to meet up?'

'Yes, there's nothing useful I can do till tomorrow morning. I can't even buy myself dinner.' I looked at the bank woman, who was now standing by the glass exit door. She met my stare with shameless indifference. She even held up a set of keys to show that she was about to throw me penniless into the street.

'Let's meet at the Vélib station in the rue des Ecoles,' Elodie said. 'We'll go for a ride.'

'The what station?' I asked.

'Vélib. You know, the rental bikes.'

'Oh yes, I read about them. But don't you need a subscription to hire one?'

'No, all you need is your credit card.'

## 2

A dozen impatient Parisians were huddled around what looked like an eight-foot-tall TV remote control planted in the pavement. Spread along the street in front of this tower was a row of identical bicycles. They all wore grey body armour on their handlebars and frame, and had a silver basket over their front wheel.

Elodie was huffing down the neck of the man in front of her.



Her blonde hair was longer than when I'd last seen her, and her ponytail was tighter. She'd relegated her time in America to the past, it seemed, and was now dressed in a loose grey skirt and tight white blouse, a glistening black handbag in the crook of her arm. A classic Parisian mademoiselle.

No, that wasn't right. She'd lost the mademoiselle's air of trying to evolve an identity. She'd become a fully formed French 'dame'. Yes, that was it - she looked like her mum. Scary, I thought, only twenty-six and she'd already adopted the look she'd have for the rest of her life.

Now she was using all her fully evolved Parisian guile to avoid wasting her time in the queue to rent a bike.

If I got the gist right, she was giving orders about how to log on to the Vélib system to a harassed man, who was sweating and gritting his teeth and rapidly losing any desire to ride a bike ever again.

'Press the green button. The green button with a V on it. Here.' Elodie leaned forward and jabbed a long, pink-varnished fingernail at the little keypad. 'No, don't put your credit card in yet. Did it tell you to put your credit card in? No. Push the red button. Red! Honestly, now you've crashed it. Let me try.'

With a swivel of her hips, Elodie slid in front of the little screen and the poor man was a mere spectator. This new bike-sharing scheme had been publicized as an almost hippie-style communal operation, but the Parisians had instantly turned it into a Darwinian test of your powers of self-assertion.

'Bonjour, Paul.' Elodie offered me her cheeks to kiss, and gave me her usual top-to-toe examination, as if she could tell how often, and with whom, I'd been having sex recently. 'You're looking good,' she said. 'Very Californian.'

'Madame?' A guy behind Elodie, an office worker in a suit who was probably in a hurry to cycle home, was starting his own Darwinian campaign.

'Oui, oui, I can't go faster than the machine, can I?' Elodie snapped. She jabbed the green button and put her credit card in the slot. 'I don't believe it,' she said to me, in French so that the guy behind her would understand. 'The system has been up for I don't know how long, and there are still idiots who don't know how to use it.'

'Oui,' I agreed. My French was too Californian to say any more.

'Even if it's hypocritical of me to complain,' she went on in English, 'because I am going to marry one of them.'

'You're what?'

She giggled at my amazement, the happy gurgle of a girl who's just sprung a massive surprise on a guy.

'I'll explain later. Now can you go and get the bike from stand number twelve? Just press the button and pull the handle thingy.'

Elodie rented a second bike for herself, and we were away.

I didn't know where we were going, and I didn't much care, because I spent the first few minutes praying that I wasn't about to die.

Following a chic Parisian girl around on a bicycle is a mixture of intense pleasure and abject terror. Although it is a joy to admire the way her artistically sculpted *derrière* bounces and flexes on the saddle, this joy is tempered somewhat by the realization that she has been programmed since birth to ignore red lights and to freewheel down one-way streets the wrong way, even when the density of the traffic makes it obvious to a non-Parisian that death is the only possible outcome.

'Yes, I'm getting married,' she shouted over her shoulder as an oncoming van beeped furiously at her and looked certain to bring her engagement to a bloody end.

'Is he American?' I asked, shutting my eyes and praying as the van whisked past, a millimetre from my ear. 'That

plantation owner we met in Louisiana?’

‘Oh no! A French girl cannot possibly marry an American from anywhere except New York or California. It would be too cruel. No, my fiancé is—’ She shot across a busy junction, and the last word was drowned out by a screech of taxi brakes.

‘He’s what?’ I asked when I had pedalled gingerly through the traffic jam and caught up with her again.

‘He’s French. I met him at a Vélib stand. He didn’t know how to get a bike, and I helped him hire one - with a *platinum* credit card.’ She turned around to stress the key word and almost killed a young guy trying to cross the road, who’d dared to assume that she might stop at the red light.

I pulled up and took the full force of the pedestrian’s tirade against undisciplined bike riders. He was carrying a motorbike helmet, and ranted at me about ‘Vélibeurs’ being amateurs and giving two-wheelers a bad name. All I could do was nod and shrug, while Elodie giggled at me from the far side of the crossroads.

‘You should be grateful to Valéry,’ she said, pedalling away as soon as I drew level with her.

‘Who?’

‘Valéry, my fiancé.’

‘He’s called Valéry?’ These poor French guys stuck with girls’ names, I thought. It’s no wonder they have to prove their virility by trying to shag every female they meet.

‘It’s a very traditional man’s name,’ Elodie said, swivelling in the saddle to glower at me, and swerving into the path of an oncoming bus. ‘A president’s name,’ she shouted above the hoot of panic from the bus driver.

‘Why should I be grateful to Valéry?’ I asked when she was back on track.

‘It was his credit card that hired your bike for you.’

‘He gave you his platinum card?’

'Yes, of course,' she said, bumping up on to the pavement to avoid a red light, and narrowly missing an old man who had chosen a bad time to totter out of a boulangerie. 'He has lots of cards,' she added, above the man's yelp of terror.

'I don't want to insult your future husband, but is he crazy?' I asked once we'd reached the safety of an empty side street.

'No, he's just very, very kind. He's a total *chou-chou*. He's lived his whole life in the cocoon of his family, and he works for a private bank, so he thinks that everyone in the world is rich and civilized. And I have no intention of - how do you say? - disabusing him.'

'Doing what?'

'Telling him he's wrong. Well, not yet anyway.' Her laughter filled the narrow street, and a young guy smoking at his apartment window waved down to her. Like many Parisian men, he probably thought that if a girl laughed within twenty yards of him, she wanted to sleep with him.

'But Elodie, even *you* can't be that cynical about marriage, surely?'

'No? You know, the best marriages end in death.'

'What?'

'Bad marriages end in divorce, good ones in death. What's to be positive about?'

I must have looked shocked. Even tough-girl, business-school Elodie didn't come out with statements like that very often.

'It's OK, Paul, I'm only joking. I love him. It's just that I don't really care about getting married. Well, not yet, anyway.'

'So why are you marrying him?'

'Aha, c'est ma surprise! Now come, you must teach me to dance.'

It took us a few goes to find a Vélib stand where we could return our bikes. The touristy areas down by the Seine were favourite dropping-off points and were all full, so we ended up parking them near the gare d'Austerlitz.

As we walked towards the river, Elodie told me some more about this instant courtship of hers. She'd met the guy just weeks before and they were already engaged.

'He's called Valéry de Bonnepoire,' she said proudly.

'He sounds like a medieval princess. Er, prince,' I corrected myself.

'I suppose he is, a little. Except that he takes more cocaine. All the really chic men in Paris do, you know. And Valéry is très, très chic. He comes from a grande famille.'

'Lots of brothers and sisters?' I asked.

'No, you imbecile. Well yes, he has five or six brothers or sisters or something, but no. A grande famille is one of the noble Catholic families of France. They have chateaux and horses and stuff. The private bank he works for is *their* private bank.'

'So you're not marrying him for his money, then?'

'Quelle idée!'

Pausing only to yell at a Vélibeur who failed to stop at a red light to let us cross the road, Elodie led me down to the river bank, where a group of firemen were unravelling hoses and testing for leaks. Several of the young, muscular guys stopped work to admire Elodie as she clip-clopped past on her low heels.

'Vous allez danser?' one of them asked.

'Yes, but not with you,' she answered, grinning, and took my arm.

'Dance?' I said nervously. Above the noise from the street, I could hear amplified music. Not very good music,

either. A warbling voice and someone trying to drown a saxophonist.

‘Yes. I never learned to waltz,’ Elodie told me, ‘and you can be sure that the wedding party will begin with a waltz. You must help me to learn.’

‘There are waltz classes down by the river?’ I asked.

‘I hope so, yes.’

The river bank here was wide, and people were sitting on lawns, benches and in small amphitheatres, chatting, picnicking or drinking wine they’d brought along. The setting sun was glinting off the churning wake of a river police speedboat, its crew of four out for an evening joyride. Flashbulbs were popping at them from the top deck of a glass-sided bateau mouche that was speeding its cargo of tourists back towards Notre Dame.

‘Up here,’ Elodie said, climbing a set of concrete steps towards the source of the warbling. I finally identified what sort of music it was, and the blood clotted in my veins.

On a flat area overlooking the river, fifty or so people were doing the typically French dance that they call ‘le rock’. Couples, ranging in age from eighteen to fifty, were pirouetting, holding hands, pulling each other in and out, jiving to a soundtrack of old-school rock ‘n’ roll, with a French crooner doing an impression of Elvis with a chronic sinus problem. I’d been outside France long enough to forget their lasting passion for this kind of music, which had caused me so much suffering when I’d lived here. The last time had been at an outdoor dance a lot like this one, when I’d been forced to grab my ex-girlfriend’s drunk dad and do ‘le rock’ with him to deter his attempt to molest an old lady in Breton folk costume. The memory still made me sweat.

The music was pounding out of a stack of speakers clustered around a sculpture that looked like a giant TV aerial. A guy in a ‘Vive le rock’ T-shirt was crouching by the speakers checking cables.

'Come, we will ask him,' Elodie said, pulling me in a precarious zig-zag between the dancing couples. She bent down and shouted her question into the guy's ear. He grimaced to show that he hadn't understood. She shouted again, and his grimace turned into a look of complete bafflement. He shook his head and laughed.

'Idiot!' Elodie flounced away.

'What did you ask him?' I said when we were far enough away to hear each other.

'To play a waltz, of course. They can't listen to this stuff non-stop, can they?'

'I think they can,' I said. 'They're French.'

Further along the river bank, a small audience of picknickers and passers-by were watching two couples swaying expertly to salsa.

'This is no good.' Elodie sighed and turned on her heel.

'Why the rush to get married?' I asked. 'You're not—?'

'Don't be an idiot, Paul. If there's one thing I control in this world, it is my biology.'

'But you've only known the guy, what ...?'

'Almost two months. Yes, it has been - what do you call it? - a whirlpool romance.'

It sounded as though at least one of them had been sucked under like a rowing boat.

'Who asked whom?' I said.

She looked offended. 'Valéry asked me, of course.'

'So it was eternal love at first sight?'

'Yes. I don't really care about getting married, but Valéry ...' She stopped herself and shook her head. She'd obviously been about to reveal something significant, but for once in her life, discretion won the day, and she smiled enigmatically. 'All you need to know is that we're getting married and I have to learn the waltz.'

'And when is the wedding?'

‘Two weeks.’ Before I could even laugh, she went on. ‘You must be there.’

‘Well, thanks, I’d be delighted—’

‘At such short notice, I’ll never find another caterer.’

It turned out that Elodie had already discussed the matter with her father, Jean-Marie Martin, the co-owner of my English tea room in the office district near the Champs-Élysées. The last time I’d seen father and daughter together, Elodie had been furiously lobbing fruit at Jean-Marie’s expensive suit, but family harmony had obviously been restored, because Papa had promised to do everything he could to help with the wedding. Or rather, everything I could. The tea room was managed by Elodie’s brother, Benoit, and the two men of the Martin family had apparently decided that as I was due back from California, I was the ideal candidate for the task of ordering several tons of luxury food for the party, thereby eliminating the need for a costly catering service.

‘Ah, this looks promising.’ Elodie gave me no time to recover my breath as she dragged me towards another of the little riverside amphitheatres, where a small amplifier was broadcasting weird accordion/orchestra music with no discernible rhythm at all. Half a dozen couples, their cheeks pressed together, were shuffling around, deep in concentration.

‘Perfect,’ Elodie declared.

‘But is it a waltz?’ It was impossible to tell.

‘Who cares?’

We climbed down the steps into the amphitheatre and Elodie gripped my waist, waiting for me to take the lead. But I have never learned to waltz, and was afraid that the only place I’d lead her was into the river.

‘Paul!’ Elodie was impatient. There was no escape. I took a few tentative steps, and we both recited ‘*one two three, one two three*’, trying to ignore the fact that our



counting in no way matched whatever rhythm the music was trying to achieve. I found that I got into the dance surprisingly quickly, doing two steps and then having a quick rest on three while I decided where to go next.

'*One two left, one two right, one two over there,*' I told her. '*One two watch out, one two oops, one two excusez-moi, Madame,*' and so on.

Elodie relaxed and began to enjoy herself. 'What about you, Paul? No marriage in two weeks for you?' she asked.

'*One two no,*' I answered.

'You must have had some fun out in California, though. You were famous, right?'

'*One two kind of,*' I admitted.

I'd spent the last few months having my legs photographed. By a freak accident, I (and my knees) had become known for wearing a kilt, and we'd done several photo campaigns and TV ads selling, amongst other things, jogging shoes, socks and - thanks to computer wizardry, I must stress - depilatory cream.

I'd achieved that level of fame where you spend a lot of time travelling in taxis you don't have to pay for, where you get into nightclubs without waiting, and the people there think everything you say is fascinating and are quite keen to sleep with you. The Californian girls I met, though, were thinking about their careers even in mid-orgasm, and weren't looking for a lasting relationship with anyone less important than an assistant director.

'*One two, there was, one girl - oops.*' We hammered into a couple who until then had had their cheeks and upper bodies welded together. Now they were separated at the hip and staring furiously at us.

'*Mais qu'est-ce que vous foutez?*' the man demanded, an old guy in a black suit and slim tie. What the hell were we up to?

'*Je ne sais pas,*' I told him honestly.

'What is zees one two, one two?' his partner demanded, a woman with hair dyed as black as wet tarmac.

'We are doing a waltz,' Elodie told her.

'Ici, c'est le tong-go,' the guy said. The tango.

'And what about them? Are they doing the tong-go?' Elodie pointed at a couple who were simply swaying and snogging.

'At least zey do not say ze one two, one two. C'est pas le tong-go, ça.' The woman's painted-on eyebrows shivered indignantly.

'This is a public park. We have the right to count as loud as we want. Just watch!' Elodie held out her arms defiantly, waiting for me to lead her in another of our imitation waltzes, but I took her hand and led her away.

'Come on,' I told her. 'If you lend me some money I'll buy you a drink.'

## 4

'So who is this Californian girl who is so important that she makes you forget how to count up to three?' Elodie asked.

We had taken another Vélib and ridden to a crowded café terrace at Odéon. Elodie had ordered two glasses of champagne to celebrate our reunion, and the bubbles were reminding me how good it felt to be back in Paris.

'She's not Californian, she's English. We met once in Las Vegas, and then again at Venice Beach, just after you had that fruit fight with your dad.'

'And who is she?' Elodie wasn't going to let the memory of the family dispute distract her from the prospect of gossip to be had.

'An ocean ecologist.'

'A hippy? Does she shave her legs?'

'Yes.'

'And her—?'

'None of your business, Elodie.'

'What's her name?'

'Gloria, but her surname's Monday, so people call her M.'

'M?'

'Yes, like James Bond's boss.'

'I hope she is younger and more beautiful than James Bond's boss.'

I smiled, remembering how I'd last seen M - her body golden in the dawn light of a hotel-room window, her warm, Mediterranean-blue eyes expressing all the fun we'd had since we'd met on the beach about twelve hours earlier, her hair still ruffled from the night as she kissed me goodbye and told me to call her as soon as I got back to Europe.

'And what happened?' Elodie ploughed on.

'We spent one night together before she had to come back to London. That was three or four months ago, before the summer.'

'Do you have her phone number?'

'Yes.'

'So call her now. Why wait?'

I hesitated. There are a million reasons not to call someone you once had a fling with while you were both a very long way from everyday life.

'Do it now,' Elodie insisted.

'No.'

'Look, there's an empty call box. Go over there for some privacy if you want.'

'I'll call her later.'

'Do it now. Now!' This was typical Elodie. Her time at business school had turned her from bullish into a bulldozer.

I sighed and reached for my phone. With her in this mood, resistance was useless.

'M? It's Paul. Paul from Venice Beach?'

I said it as a question, casually, as if two cosmopolitan people like us might forget a night of sex in California.

'Paul. You're back in Europe?' Her voice was as warm as I remembered it. She sounded pleased to hear from me.

'Yeah, in Paris.' No need to say it was my first day back. I didn't want to look desperate. 'You in London?'

'Yes.'

'What are you up to?' I asked.

'Oh, the usual, you know. The ocean isn't getting any healthier. Things need to be cleaned up.' She laughed, as if this was a private joke. 'I'm coming to France for work, as it happens.'

'Yeah? Maybe we could hook up?'

'Sure. I have to go to the south coast. Collioure, down by the Spanish border. Do you want to come with me?' Which was the trigger for my aforementioned fantasies about chilled rosé, a yacht and a sunbathing girl.

'Great,' I said.

'Oh,' she said, as if she was surprised I'd accepted. 'I can't pay you.'

'Pay me? What on earth do you want me to do for you?'

'Ah, sorry, I thought ...' Her voice trailed off in embarrassment.

'I'm not looking for a job,' I told her. 'So I wouldn't expect anything in return for helping you out. Well ...'

She laughed, and we were both teleported back to that hot night in Los Angeles. The pleasure was clearly mutual.

'Alors?' Elodie had finished her glass of champagne while I'd been phoning, and her eyes were bright with alcohol and expectation.

'Does Valéry love you very, very much?' I asked.

'Yes, he's crazy for me. Why?' She looked apprehensive.

'Well, do you reckon he'd mind if we went back to your place right now?'

'What?' Elodie blushed, an event that probably happens less frequently than the creation of a planet hosting intelligent carbon-based life forms.

'I'm sorry, but I just can't wait,' I told her.

'Paul,' she whispered, 'this passion is very un-English of you.'

'I know. Do you think Valéry would understand if we went online straight away and used his platinum card to book me a plane ticket?'