

# THE EXPATS

## AN EXCERPT

“Kate?”

Kate is staring through a plate-glass window filled with pillows and tablecloths and curtains, all in taupes and chocolates and moss greens, a palette that replaced the pastels of last week. The season changed, just like that.

She turns from the window, to this woman standing beside her on the narrow sliver of sidewalk in the rue Jacob. Who is this woman?

“Oh my God, Kate? Is that you?” The voice is familiar. But the voice is not enough.

Kate has forgotten what exactly she is halfheartedly looking for. It’s something fabric. Curtains for the guest bath? Something frivolous.

She cinches the belt of her raincoat, a self-protective gesture. It rained earlier in the morning, on the way to school drop-off, mist snaking in from the Seine, the hard heels of her leather boots clicking on the wet cobblestones. She’s still wearing her lightweight slicker, the folded *Herald-Tribune* poking out of her pocket, crossword puzzle completed at the café next to school where she eats breakfast most mornings, with other expat moms.

This woman is not one of them.

This woman is wearing sunglasses that cover half her forehead and most of her cheeks and the entire area of the eyes; there’s no way to positively I.D. whoever is under all that black plastic and gold logos. Her short chestnut hair is pulled back severely against her scalp, pinned in place by a silk band. She is tall and fit, but full through the chest and hips; voluptuous. Her skin is glowing with a healthy, natural-looking tan, as if she spends a lot of time outdoors, playing tennis, or gardening. Not one of those extra-dark deep-fries that so many French women favor, tans generated by the ultraviolet radiation of fluorescent lamps in coffinlike booths.

This woman’s clothes, while not actually jodhpurs and a show coat, are reminiscent of riding. Kate recognizes the plaid jacket from the window of a hideously expensive boutique nearby, a new shop that replaced a cherished bookstore, a swap that vocal locals claim signals the end of the Faubourg St-Germain they knew and loved. But the bookstore’s esteem was mostly in the abstract and the shop usually empty, while the new boutique is habitually mobbed, not just with Texan housewives and

Japanese businessmen and Russian thugs, paying in cash—neat, crisp piles of freshly laundered money—for stacks of shirts and scarves and handbags, but also with the rich local residents. There are no poor ones.

This woman? She is smiling, a mouth full of perfectly aligned, brilliantly white teeth. It's a familiar smile, paired with a familiar voice; but Kate still needs to see the eyes to confirm her worst suspicion.

There are brand-new cars from Southeast Asia that retail for less than this woman's plaid jacket. Kate herself is well-dressed, in the understated style preferred by women of her type. This woman is operating under a different set of principles.

This woman is American, but she speaks with no regional accent. She could be from anywhere. She could be anyone.

"It's me," this woman says, removing her sunglasses, finally.

Kate instinctively takes a step back, stumbling against the sooty gray stone at the base of the building. The hardware on her handbag clanks alarmingly against the window's glass.

Kate's mouth hangs open, soundless.

Her first thought is of the children, a full-fledged panic coming on quickly. The essence of parenthood: immediate panic on the children's behalf, always. This was the one part of the plan that Dexter never seriously considered: the compounded terror—the unconquerable anxiety—when there are children involved.

This woman was hiding behind sunglasses, and her hair is a new color in a new cut, and her skin tone is darker than it used to be, and she has put ten pounds. She looks different. Even so, Kate is astounded that she didn't recognize her at first glance, from the first syllable. Kate knows it's because she didn't want to.

"Oh my God!" she manages to sputter out.

Kate's mind races, hurtling herself down the street and around a corner, through the heavy red door and the always-cool breezeway, under the portico that surrounds the courtyard and into the marble-floored lobby, up in the brass-caged elevator, into the cheery yellow foyer with the eighteenth-century drawing in the gilt frame.

This woman is holding her arms open, an invitation to a big American-style hug.

Rushing down the hallway to the far end, to the wood-paneled office with the rooftop-skimming views of the Eiffel Tower. Using the ornate brass key to open the bottom drawer of the antique desk.

And why not hug? They're old friends, after all. Sort of. If anyone is watching, it might look suspicious if these two people didn't hug. Or maybe it'd look suspicious if they did.

It hasn't taken long to find herself thinking that people are watching. And that they always have been, all the time. It was only a few months ago that Kate had finally been able to imagine she was living a totally surveillance-free life.

Then inside the desk drawer: the double-reinforced steel box.

"What a surprise," Kate says, which is both true and not.

Then inside the lockbox: the four passports with alternate identities for the family. And the thick bundle of cash doubled-over with a rubber band, an assortment of large-denomination euros and British pounds and American dollars, new clean bills, her own version of laundered money.

"It's so nice to see you."

And wrapped in a light blue chamois cloth, the Beretta 92FS that she bought from that Scottish pimp in Amsterdam.