

Lost in Paris

By Anne Swardson

I weighed my words to make sure I got them exactly right. This job was important.

“So, Virginia, you last saw your father Tuesday afternoon, two days after you all arrived in Paris?” The woman sitting across from me nodded and looked anxiously at her husband, seated next to her.

The two could not have appeared less similar. Virginia Ackerman was disheveled, sweaty, and shaped like a brick. Her husband, Kirk, was arrogant, cool and skinny.

Kirk added his two cents, as I could already guess he would. “Tuesday afternoon about 3, to be precise. After lunch. Greg said.”

I held up my hand. “Please, let your wife reply,” I said firmly. “It’s her father.”

Virginia took a deep breath. “It was supposed to be a special trip for all of us. Dad used to live here when he was younger, before he met Mom. He was paying for everything. Maybe that’s why he was going out to cash traveler’s checks. He never brought Mom here and ever since she died—”

“This is why you shouldn’t be answering the questions,” Kirk interrupted. “Since you can’t get to the point, I’m going to. Greg said he’d be gone for 30 minutes. But he didn’t take his cell phone and, obviously, he didn’t come back. And your pathetic cops say it’s too soon to look for him since he’s a responsible adult.”

“He’s not all that responsible,” Virginia interjected. “He’d been acting spacy since we got here. He couldn’t find his way around the neighborhood even though it was where he used to live, and he couldn’t seem to remember his French even though he used to speak it fluently.”

“And what did the cops say when you told them this?”

Kirk and Virginia both spoke at once, but it was clear that they hadn’t had a pleasant encounter with the Paris police force. Especially the top cop.

“What was the name of this officer?” I asked.

“It was Jacques Bass....” Kirk took another look at the brand-new nameplate on my desk. Julie Bassin, P.I. “Why, he had the same last name as you!”

I’d been afraid of that. “Yes, my ex-father-in-law. Jacques is a commander in the force and he’s a pain. I’m glad you came to me. Tell me more about your father. His age, his likes and dislikes. What he planned on doing in Paris. What was his occupation? What else did he do in Chicago? Did you grow up there, Virginia?”

“Yes,” she said. “On the north side, not far from the airport. He was a pipefitter and a very proud union member. And religious: He made us go to St. John of Rila all the time. My brother and I hated it.”

“What kind of church is that?”

“Bulgarian. Did I not say he immigrated from Bulgaria? He went from Plovdiv to Paris, and a few years after that to Chicago. I’ve always wondered why he left here. Anyway, he never taught us the language but he always spoke English with an accent.”

“And not well,” Kirk chimed in. “He wasn’t very educated.” Virginia glared at him.

“Anyway,” she went on, “he was retired and lived on a pension. We were surprised when he said he wanted to pay for the trip, but figured he’d been saving up for it.”

“And I could have afforded to treat us all,” Kirk said. “I make a good living, if I say so myself. A very good living.” Virginia rolled her eyes.