

THE
RELUCTANT
MATADOR

ALSO BY MARK PRYOR

The Bookseller

The Crypt Thief

The Blood Promise

The Button Man

A Hugo Marston Novel

THE
RELUCTANT
MATADOR

MARK PRYOR



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*To Henry, my cuddle-bug, my giggling partner, my tough-tackling toad.
Best of all, my son. Be all that you can be, but remain all that you are—
sweet, thoughtful, funny, a light of my life.*

AUTHOR'S NOTE

As much as I love Paris and Barcelona, I have been forced to take occasional liberties with their history and geography. Events have been created and streets invented to suit my own selfish needs. All errors and misrepresentations intentional and otherwise, are mine and mine alone.

CHAPTER ONE

A gentle breeze greeted Hugo Marston as he stepped out of his apartment building onto an empty Rue Jacob. At seven a.m. on a Sunday, the tourists and working people of Paris were still sleeping, though Hugo knew the calm and quiet wouldn't last much more than an hour.

He felt a rumble in his stomach, already picturing the treat he'd planned: pancakes, maple syrup, bacon, sausages. . . . He did this once or twice a year—the Texan in him yearning for a ranch-sized breakfast to start an otherwise empty weekend. He tucked his hands in his pockets and started to stroll toward the River Seine, the early-morning air clean and invigorating.

It didn't take long, though, for a sliver of impatience to tug at him as he walked. This breakfast wasn't just for himself; it was a chance to check in with the young lady who was the closest thing he had to a daughter. A young lady who was a stranger to Paris and, unless he'd read her tone wrong, a young lady in some measure of trouble.

Amy was in Paris for the same reason any nineteen-year-old American girl might be—to see the sights and make her fortune. She was the daughter of Hugo's friend and former colleague, Bart Denum. Stepdaughter, to be precise. Her last name was Dreiss, not Denum, but in every way other than legal, she was Denum's baby girl. Hugo had come to know her as a result of an accident that had savaged his life and theirs—Hugo's first wife, Ellie, had been a passenger in the car Amy's

mother was driving when they were hit by a pickup truck. The old man driving it hadn't seen the stop light, or perhaps had ignored it. Police said that the man was sober, just old, and that was no crime.

Old or not, crime or not, Hugo had lost the love of his life that evening, and Amy had lost her mother. It was a shared tragedy that brought Bart and Hugo closer and Amy deeper into Hugo's world. She was the sweet, pretty girl flitting in and out of his life whenever he and Denum hung out on weekends and holidays, the teenager who never became surly, just hugged a little less. She wasn't just Denum's little angel, she was his entire world, and Hugo adored her, too.

Hugo had spent a few minutes with Amy the week she'd come to Paris. It was the first time he'd seen her in more than three years, and he was startled by how much she'd changed, how she'd blossomed from a spidery, awkward teenager into a beautiful young woman. They'd had coffee in Montmartre, sitting outside a café that sprawled onto a cobbled street, one of the narrow, winding roads that snaked up toward Sacré-Coeur Basilica. She'd been as bubbly as he remembered, but he also had the sense she was there to explore on her own, and that Hugo was the surrogate father she didn't need watching over her shoulder. After half an hour, Hugo gave her his business card, scribbled his cell number and home address on the back.

"Go have fun, Amy," he said. "I'll get the coffee. You can get the next one when you get a job."

She took the card. "Thanks, Hugo."

"Call if you need anything. Anything at all. Or just show up; I'm always home."

"Not much of a party animal, huh?"

"No, but that reminds me. If you show up, you might meet Tom."

"Boyfriend?" She winked.

"Feels like it sometimes. He's an old friend from my FBI days. Your dad knows him, I think. Anyway, let's just say he's the wild one. Don't lend him money or buy him a drink."

"He sounds like fun."

"Tom is . . . fun." Hugo laughed. "But things never end up where

you think they will. You can trust him with your life, no doubt, but if you go out partying with him, you usually end up having to.”

Her laughter tinkled and several men nearby eyed her with undisguised interest. She reached over and kissed his cheek. “I’ll call if I need anything, I promise.”



She had called, five days ago. She wouldn’t tell him why or what she wanted, only that she needed to talk to him about something that she couldn’t tell her dad, not yet. Hugo hadn’t been comfortable with that but had suggested that they meet at a restaurant appropriately named Breakfast in America. She agreed but made him promise not to tell Bart anything, not until they’d spoken.

He’d almost broken that promise. Two texts and one phone call to confirm their meeting had gone unanswered. But then, yesterday, she sent one brief e-mail saying she’d be there, so he decided to wait and talk to her at breakfast. No need to panic Bart if she’d just lost her phone. He just hoped she’d show.

As he got close to the river, Hugo noticed a crowd gathered at the end of the Pont de l’Alma, their shouts quickening his step as he approached the bridge. He scanned the area to spot the problem but saw only the panicked faces of the crowd. He saw some people reaching for cell phones while others pointed down to the water. Two men broke from the group and started for the steps that led down to the river, and instinctively Hugo broke into a run. The three reached the bottom of the steps at the same time and one of them shouted at Hugo in French, telling him what he’d already guessed.

“There’s someone in the water.”

“Alive?” Hugo asked.

Neither man responded, and in seconds they were at the edge of the walkway, leaning over the metal railing as all three peered down into the murky water of the Seine. At first Hugo saw nothing, heard only the people on the bridge above shouting and the panting of the

two men beside him. The water gave off a brackish, stale odor, and he wrinkled his nose.

Then he saw it—a shadow beneath the surface, barely three feet from the walkway. One of the other men, a young, black man in jeans and a brown leather jacket, saw it, too. The man hopped over the railing and crouched on the lip of concrete beside the water, one hand on a vertical rail and the other reaching out toward the object.

“I thought I saw movement, before we came down,” the second man said. He was white and in his fifties, gray-haired but trim, wearing a blue suit with no tie. Expensive leather gloves poked out of his jacket pocket.

“From the bridge?” Hugo asked.

“*Oui.*”

“I can’t reach,” the black man said, “grab my wrist so I can lean farther out.”

The water was unusually high thanks to a wet summer in Burgundy, where the Seine began its journey. Here, in Paris, the river lapped at its artificial banks, threatening to spill over, and yet it seemed to Hugo the waters wanted to hang on to their human prize, taunting the rescuers by keeping the black shape out of their reach.

“I have a better idea,” Hugo said. He slipped off his belt and ran the end through the buckle to make a short lasso. His eyes scanned the water, hoping to see a splash, a wriggle, any movement at all. Nothing. He handed the belt over anyway.

The young man leaned out and flicked the loop of the belt toward the form in the water, but they all recoiled as the body suddenly rolled over.

“*Vite!*” the older man said. “He’s still alive!”

On his third attempt, the younger man splashed the water and grabbed an arm, pulling the unmoving figure to the bank. The three of them groaned and strained to pull the limp body up over the railing and lay it down on the concrete walkway.

“*Merde*, it’s a woman,” the young man said.

A naked woman, with dark-brown skin that had grayed with cold

and exposure to the water. Hugo reached down and put his fingers on her throat, concentrating on feeling a pulse. His companions remained kneeling beside her body, staring. Staring not because the girl was naked, Hugo knew, but because the scene was surreal. Like him, they'd probably been out walking before the city woke, enjoying the cool October morning and savoring the gentle breeze playing up from the Seine. And now they were looking at a still, lifeless, young woman, battered and drowned by the river that until now had been an object of beauty to them.

"She's dead?" the older man whispered.

"*Oui*," Hugo said. He suspected she'd been dead for some time, her body cold and not just from the water. That claylike cold that all corpses possessed, the human body returning to its natural state, to the earth. Of the earth.

"Are you sure?" asked the younger man. "She moved in the water, we saw her. We should try CPR."

"No, it won't help," Hugo said. "She's gone. The movement was the current or maybe gas escaping from her body. A fish bumping her even, but she's dead for sure. And in case this isn't an accident, it's best we touch her as little as possible."

Hugo heard the distant wail of sirens, the cavalry arriving much too late on this occasion. He leaned over the body, careful not to touch any part of her, his FBI instincts kicking in, the policeman in him wanting to get a start on finding out how this young woman died. Maybe an accident, maybe suicide. Or possibly murder, his own field of expertise. He'd left that world behind when he joined the State Department to head up security at the US Embassies in London and now Paris. Or so he thought. Several times he'd been drawn back to his former life, been forced to use the skills he'd learned at the behavioral-sciences unit in Quantico to track down a killer. He had no great desire to do it again and would be happy to turn things over to the Brigade Criminelle, Paris's force responsible for handling kidnappings, arson, and murder. Hugo checked himself as he always did: *If this is murder*.

To that end, he couldn't help but look more closely. The girl

appeared to be twenty years old, at most. With the drawn-down nature of death, it was hard to be sure, but Hugo thought she showed signs of malnutrition. He looked at the older man next to him.

“Can I borrow your gloves?” Hugo asked.

“My gloves? Why?”

“I’m a cop. I want to check something.”

The man handed them over, eyeing Hugo uncertainly. “Shouldn’t you wait for them?” He jerked his head toward the swelling sound of the sirens.

“Probably,” Hugo muttered, taking the gloves. He pulled them on and picked up the girl’s left arm, studying it carefully. He did the same with the right, then rolled her onto her side.

“*Monsieur, s’il vous plaît*, leave her alone!” The voice came from behind him and was a command, not a request. Hugo turned to see two uniformed *flics* approaching. He and the two other men moved away from the body.

“What happened here?” The cop in charge looked to be in his fifties, with a physique that suggested he exercised every day of his life. His head was bald and his eyes were suspicious. His colleague was half his age, slight and pale, and couldn’t keep his eyes off the dead form on the riverwalk. *A rookie*, Hugo thought.

“They saw the body in the water, we just pulled her out,” Hugo said.

“You’re certain she’s dead?”

“*Oui, absolument.*”

The cop knelt beside the body to check for himself. “Then why were you touching her?”

Hugo reached into his pocket and pulled out his embassy credentials. “I didn’t mean to interfere, *monsieur*, I’m a policeman at heart and saw a few things that concerned me. I used gloves and didn’t contaminate the body, I assure you.”

“You better hope not.” The senior cop frowned and plucked Hugo’s credentials from his hand. He scrutinized them for a moment, then looked up. “*Attendez*, you’re Hugo Marston?”

“Yes.”

The *flic* broke into a grin and offered his hand. “I’m Jules Agard. I’m a friend of Camille Lerens; she’s told me all about you.”

Hugo shook the man’s hand and said, “Nice to meet you, Jules.”

“Likewise. She seems to think you’re some kind of crime-solving superhero.”

Hugo laughed. “Then she doesn’t know me very well, but thanks. How is she? I’ve not seen her for a couple of weeks and we’re overdue a coffee, or something stronger.”

He’d met Lieutenant Lerens during a murder investigation the previous year. She was, without doubt, one of the brightest and toughest *flics* in Paris. She had to be because, as far as Hugo knew, she was the only transgender cop in the city. Hugo knew that she still had problems with some older policemen, but her immediate superiors had quickly realized that her abilities and her dedication to her job were in no way related to her gender, and the institutional prejudice that initially blocked her career path eventually crumbled and let her progress up the ranks. Her wicked sense of humor did her no harm, either.

“You should call her,” Agard said. “She spent last night in hospital after being assaulted by a drunk.”

“*Vraiment?* Is she okay?”

“A few bumps and bruises. The *mec* has a few himself, as well as a serious charge to face.”

“Good,” said Hugo. “It wasn’t to do with her . . .”

“*Non*,” Agard said. “Some drunk English tourist. So, what do we have here?” He turned to his colleague. “Don’t just stare, Bellard, get out your notebook and take some statements.”

“*Oui, monsieur.*”

“Fresh out of the academy,” Agard said under his breath. “*Alors*, you said you saw something that concerned you.”

“Yes. I’m guessing this is murder.”

“I’m listening.”

“She’s been in the water a while, a day maybe. The current has pulled her clothes off, but she wasn’t wearing much to begin with.”

“How do you know?”

“Because the current’s not strong enough to pull off pants. Also, because of the marks on her body.”

Agard glanced over at the girl. “Explain.”

“She looks malnourished—you can almost see her hip bones. I think the medical examiner will also find antemortem bruising, though I can’t be sure because of her skin color and the time in the water.”

“You mean she was beaten?”

“I do.”

“Which indicates murder.”

“Right,” Hugo said. “Although her face isn’t marked and she has no defensive wounds on her hands or forearms. But there’s something else, have a look.” Both men crouched beside the body. “You have proper gloves?” Hugo asked.

“*Oui*.” Agard reached into a back pocket and pulled on pale-blue surgical gloves.

“Good. Roll her onto her side.”

With a grunt, Agard tipped the girl’s body to reveal her back. “What am I looking at? Those circles?”

“Yes. Cigarette burns would be my guess.”

“*Merde*, domestic abuse. That makes me so angry, and look how many there are. She was basically tortured before being killed, poor girl.”

“Yes, I’m afraid she was.”

“*Merci*, Hugo. I’ll make a note of all this. We’ll find the husband or boyfriend who did this, I promise.”

They shook hands, and Hugo resumed his walk, trying to shake off the image of the young woman. But as he crossed the bridge, the river beneath him looked gray and slick, cold and lethal, utterly devoid of mercy for even a poor, tortured girl. He shivered as a breeze caressed his neck, and he quickened his stride.

As he turned onto Rue de Rivoli, Hugo’s phone vibrated in his pocket. He checked the display, and immediately his spirits lifted. It was Claudia, the only woman he’d felt anything for since his divorce.

Claudia, the bright-eyed reporter, daughter of French nobility, classy, sexy, and, Hugo suspected, not quite as interested in him as he was in her.

“Claudia, *bonjour*.”

“Hugo, how are you?”

“Fine. On my way to breakfast but I got waylaid.”

“Breakfast by yourself?”

“No. The daughter of an old friend is over here looking for work; I’m meeting her at the restaurant.”

“Oh, that’s nice. What kind of work?”

“Modeling.”

“Runway or commercial?”

“No clue. They’re different career paths.”

Her laughter was soft and made him long to see her. “Oh Hugo, you’re so cute. I do miss you.”

“Then join us.”

“Where are you going?”

“I’m having my biannual craving, so we’re meeting at Breakfast in America.”

“I wish I could, but I have plans. Although, the most handsome man in Paris, off to breakfast with a model. I should probably interfere for my own interests.”

“Didn’t know you still had an interest,” Hugo said, suddenly feeling like a needy teenager. “Sorry, that came out wrong.”

Claudia laughed again. “Silly. That’s why I was calling. I’d like to see you. Have drinks then dinner, spend some time together.”

“I would like that, very much.”

“Tonight?” she asked.

“Tonight is perfect.”

“I’ll come by your apartment at seven, we can take a stroll and choose somewhere along the way.”

They rang off, Hugo’s mood immediately improved, and he began to enjoy his walk along Rue de Rivoli, the city opening up around him. He slowed as he passed a crepe vendor, the man’s hot plate filling the air with

the alluring aroma of his paper-thin pancakes. A pair of grateful businessmen took hot cups of coffee from the vendor, lips pursed in unison as they blew steam from the cups. Hugo walked on and allowed his mind to linger on Claudia, the socialite and professional woman who could chill politicians with a look, and who could also giggle like a schoolgirl and dance in her underwear to make Hugo laugh. Well, laugh for a little while because Claudia's underwear tended to provoke other reactions in Hugo, reactions that brought out more of Claudia's talents.

He was smiling as he turned onto Rue Malher, replacing the delights of Claudia with the prospect of a gigantic breakfast. He checked his watch: not quite eight, which made him a few minutes early.

He loitered outside the restaurant, waiting for Amy, trying to suppress the rising worry that she wouldn't show. He distracted himself by watching the other people on the street, several passers-by, tourists, and dog walkers, all with their own missions, and of marginal interest to Hugo. One man caught his eye, though, a man who lingered across the street, walking in little circles, his head down. Hugo surveyed him, wondering what he might see, what he might be able to deduce about him. The man was tall but slightly built and maybe Hispanic. He wore jeans, a white shirt, and a blue blazer, and the clothes fit him the way a wealthy man's clothes always fit. A gold watch caught occasional flashes of the sun as the man ran his hands through his hair every thirty seconds or so, and a matching necklace told Hugo the man made good money, and liked to spend it. As Hugo started to lose interest, the man glanced over and seemed to hold Hugo's eye for a second too long. It was nothing Hugo could identify, and certainly nothing he could ever explain rationally, but in his time as an FBI agent he'd learned that people have a sixth sense, a tingle in the back of the neck, for a reason. He'd trusted his sense in the past, and never regretted it. The man looked away, and Hugo studied him more closely. As if to block Hugo's gaze, the man turned his back, fished in a pocket for his cigarettes, and lit one up.

Hugo stared at the man for a full minute, enough time to conclude that he was up to no good, a simple trick he'd used many times: a

normal person would resent being stared at, would either move away or confront the person doing the staring. This guy, on the other hand, was pretending a little too hard not to notice. Drug dealer? Shaking down a local store? *Nothing to do with Amy, surely. How could he be?*

Hugo took a deep breath and smiled at his own raging imagination. Being so close to crime for so many years, he often had to check himself, recognize that a man leaning against a wall might just be waiting for a lover, that two people on a park bench might just be resting and not spying. Like the poor drowned girl, this man had nothing to do with him, and Hugo had no reason to clutter his own world with imagined crimes. Sure, being head of security at the US Embassy could be tedious, more meetings than action, but peace and a lack of stress was good for the soul.

Hugo's stomach growled and he checked his watch. Ten minutes gone, so time to get a table, to wait with a cup of coffee in his hand. Inside, the place was busy—it always was—but owner Craig Carlson spotted him above the heads of the other customers and waved him to a free table. When Hugo got there, they shook hands.

“Long time, no see,” Craig said. “Flying solo today?”

“Good to see you,” Hugo said. “No, a young lady is meeting me.”

Carlson raised an eyebrow. “Oh, yes?”

“Nothing like that. A friend's daughter, over here for a few months. I'm just checking in with her.”

“Checking in, or checking up?”

Hugo smiled. *Good question.*

Carlson moved off as a waitress arrived with a mug of coffee, and Hugo sat back to wait. Maybe it was the coffee, it was always strong and good here, but Hugo didn't like the way his heart rate had picked up, nor the way he caught himself checking his watch every thirty seconds. He looked out of the window and saw that the man was still there, lighting another cigarette. Hugo shrugged and focused on his coffee, tried to ignore the worry that touched at the back of his neck, the merest brush of cold, teasing fingers. Amy was fine, just late. Like all teenagers, she had a million more important things to do than meet

her dad's middle-aged friend for breakfast. Things like sleep. That she was late should have been no surprise, Hugo told himself. He should have expected it.

Thirty minutes later, Hugo called Amy's cell phone but wasn't even able to leave a message. A metallic voice let him know her mail box was full. He shook his head, stood, and dropped cash on the table to pay for his coffee. He waved to Carlson and stepped out into the street, far from happy about the call he now had to make to his friend across the Atlantic. He took the phone out of his pocket and glanced around, looking for the man in the white shirt and blazer. He was gone.

Hugo dialed Bart Denum in Florida. When his friend didn't answer, Hugo left a brief message, no details just a request for a call back. Before he could put his phone away, it rang and, to Hugo's surprise, it was Claudia again.

"Hello," he said. "Don't tell me you want a rain check already."

"Not at all. Are you with your friend? I'm sorry to interrupt."

"She didn't show up. Everything OK?"

"With me, yes. But I just got a call from Tom."

"At this time of day?" Tom Green, as Hugo had started to explain to Amy, was Hugo's best friend, had been since their days at the FBI Academy. What he'd not told her, and couldn't, was that in recent years Tom had been freelancing for the CIA or, as he put it, was "a semi-retired spook." He lived in Hugo's spare room, at least when he was in the country. Tom never talked about his work, even though Hugo knew his friend battled many demons from what he'd seen and done. Tom's weapons in that fight were his brash, uncouth, and reckless personality, his bluster hiding a deeply troubled psyche. His biggest and most potent weapon had been the bottle. For years, Tom had binged on everything he could, acknowledging his problem only when it almost cost him his life. In recent months, though, he'd been dry, kicking his whisky habit to the curb while maintaining his unreliable and foul-mouthed temperament. And his love for sleeping until noon.

"Yes, at this time of day," Claudia said. "I know, I thought maybe someone had stolen his phone and called me by accident."

“I bet. He went out around eight last night and I didn’t see him come in. I assumed he was sleeping when I left the apartment, he usually is.”

“Well, I’m afraid he needs your help.”

“Can’t find the coffee grinder?” Hugo snorted. “Why call you and not me, the big idiot?”

“Because he’s embarrassed.”

“Embarrassed? That doesn’t sound like Tom.”

“This is a first, even for him. The big idiot pissed off some traffic cops and landed himself in jail. Go bail him out, will you?”