

MURDER
ON THE
LEFT BANK

CARA
BLACK

**SOHO
CRIME**

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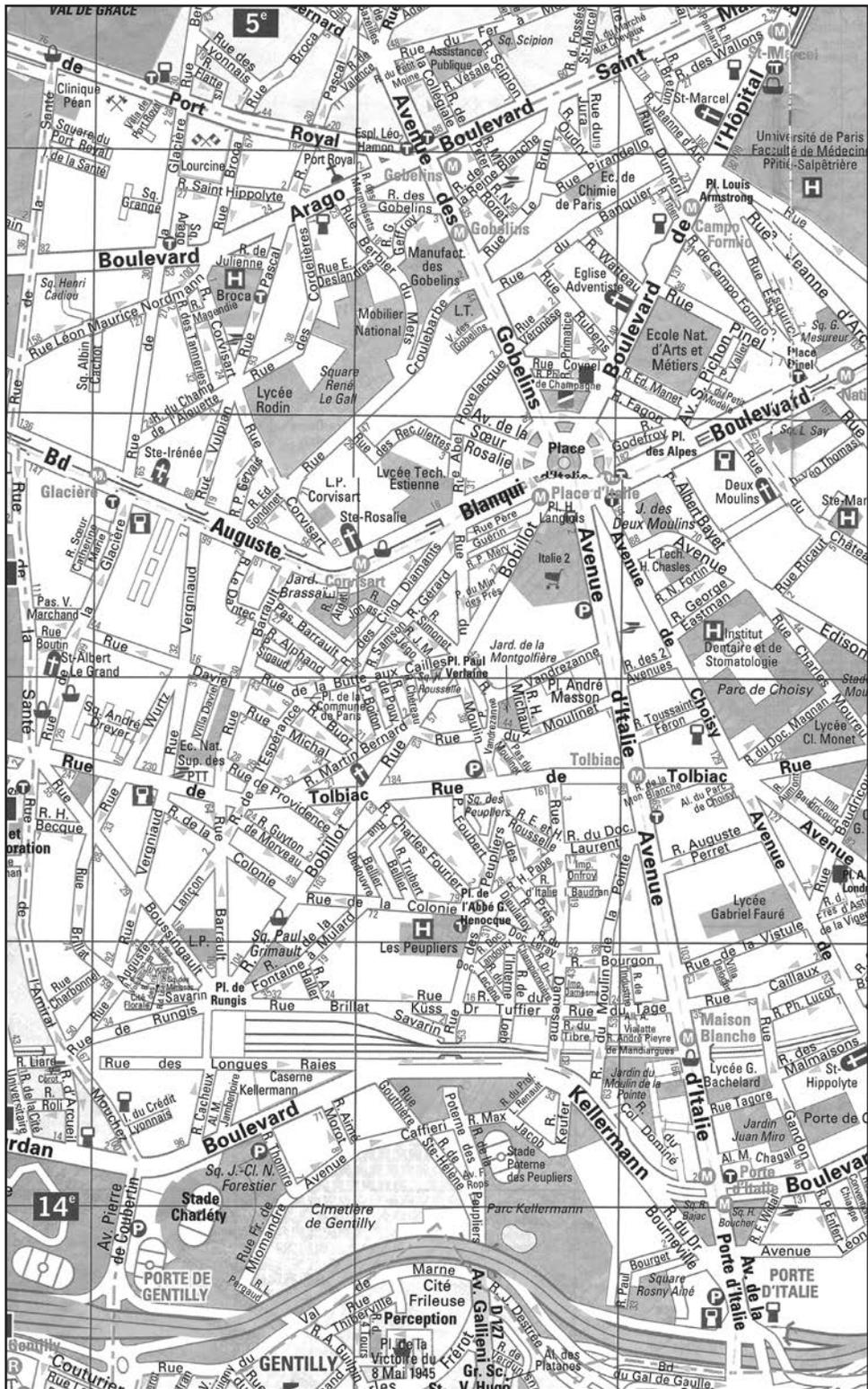
For the ghosts, near and far, and the poet of twilight

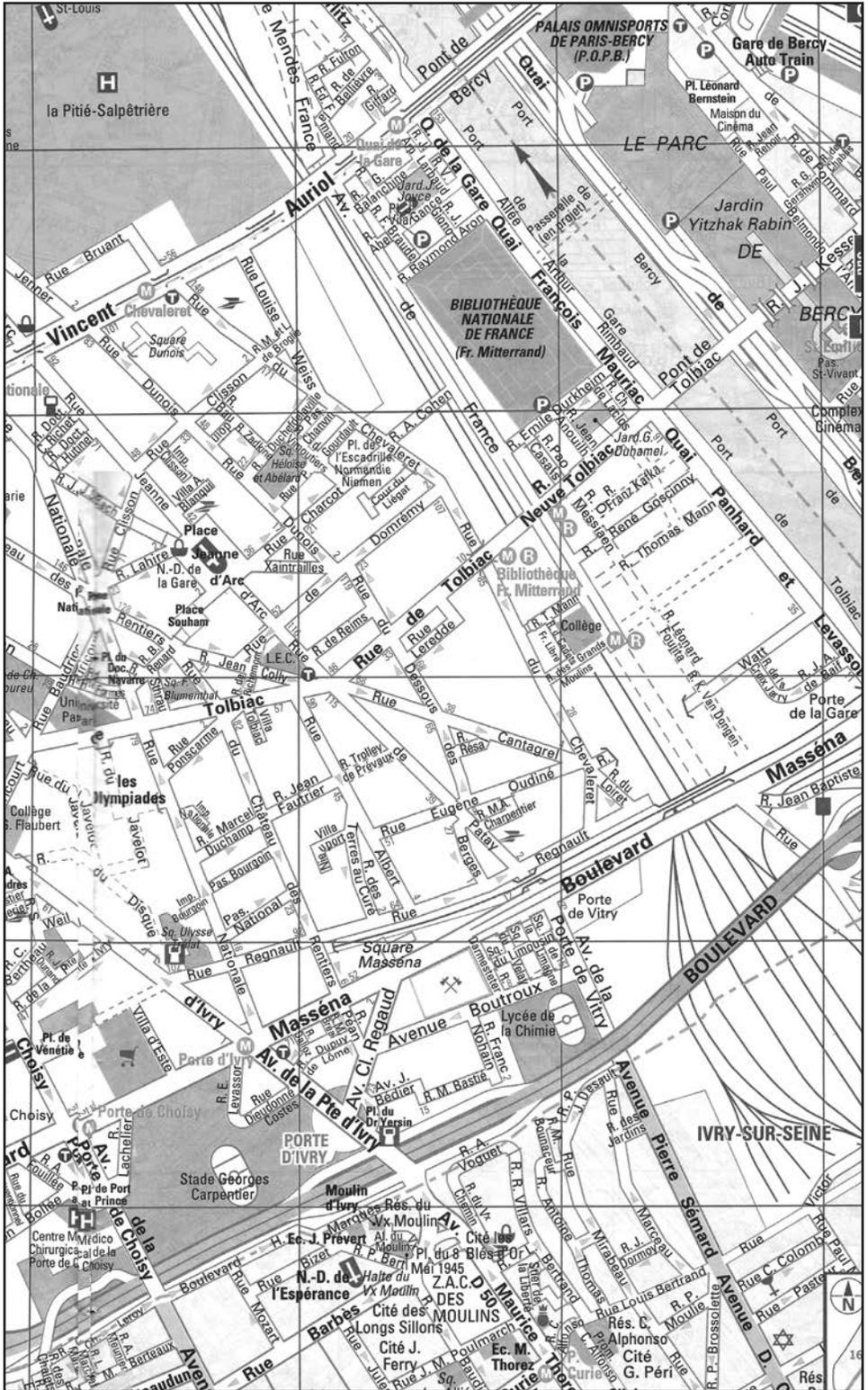
“We must push against a door to know that it is closed to us.”

—Michel de Montaigne, sixteenth century

*“We see only what we are ready to see . . . taught to see . . .
and ignore everything that is not a part of our prejudices.”*

—Dr. Jean-Martin Charcot, nineteenth century





Paris • Early September 1999 • Friday

PALE AFTERNOON LIGHT filtered into Éric Besson's wood-paneled office as Monsieur Solomon untied the twine that bound together a bulging old notebook.

"We were prisoners together in a POW camp," Solomon said, wheezing, as the lawyer took hurried notes. "Stalag III-C, east of Berlin. Pierre saved my life." Another wheeze. "You understand why I did what I did."

Besson capped his pen. The effort of talking had cost Monsieur Solomon, who was in his eighties, and he reached for his oxygen mask. After several labored inhales, he grabbed Besson's arm with a crab-claw grip. "But Pierre's gone now," Solomon said. "It's all written in there: my confession, the amounts, dates. Years of entries."

Besson reached across his desk to take the notebook from the old man's shaking hands. He opened the well-worn volume to see columns of names and numbers, an accountant's tiny, perfect handwriting. He turned page after page, his eyes catching on names and franc amounts as it gradually dawned on him what he must be looking at.

Monsieur Solomon's rheumy brown eyes bored into the lawyer. "I'm dying. Get this to the right person."

Besson reached for his briefcase. "Tomorrow, first thing, I promise."

“Non, you must do it now.”

A real pain, the old geezer. He’d waited fifty years to do the right thing, and now he couldn’t wait one more day. “*Alors*, I’ll keep your notebook in my safe. You don’t have to worry—”

“Now,” Monsieur Solomon interrupted. “This can’t wait. I won’t leave until you send a note to *la Procureure de la République*.”

The old coot had barged into Éric Besson’s office without an appointment—as well as anyone could barge with an oxygen machine. “My secretary’s left already. I literally should be in court right now . . .”

Monsieur Solomon pointed a knobby arthritic finger toward the adjoining room. “Get that boy there, your helper. You trust him?”

“He’s family, but—”

The old man stomped his shriveled leg. “If you can’t trust family, then who? Send him.”

Another bout of wheezing.

Worried that the old man would be carried out of his office on a stretcher—or worse, in a box—Besson stepped into the adjoining office, where Marcus was assembling a new chair. Marcus was Éric’s sister’s boy, a gangling, baby-faced eighteen-year-old with curly hair and the beginnings of a beard.

“Here’s another job for you, Marcus,” Besson said. “I need you to run this to *la Proc*.”

“But I’ve got plans with Karine. A date.”

Besson reached in his pocket for a wad of francs. “Do this, okay?”

Marcus glanced at his cell phone. “How long will it take?”

“Back and forth in a taxi, twenty minutes, that’s all.”

Besson shoved the old man’s twine-bound notebook, its handwritten pages spilling out, into a plastic Monoprix shopping bag,

knotted the plastic handles together, and zipped the sack into Marcus's backpack. "Go right away."

"Why can't it be tomorrow?"

Besson lowered his voice to a whisper. "Please, it's important, Marcus."

"Who is this old fart?"

"A friend of my mother's. Long story." The door buzzer sounded. Besson's colleague had arrived to pick him up for court in Meudon. "Marcus, just get this to *la Proc*. Tell her I sent you. Don't talk to anyone else. Don't meet anyone on the way except a taxi driver at the stand on the corner. *Comprends?*"

MARCUS, PERSPIRING, LOOSENED his collar as he shut his uncle's door and scanned Boulevard Arago. In the humid afternoon, a woman walked her schnauzer; a car radio blared news into the velvet air. No taxi at the stand.

Et voilà, Marcus would pocket the taxi fare and catch the bus. His uncle would never know. Marcus turned onto narrow rue Pascal and hurried through the dim tunnel created by the street that passed above it a block later. The tunnel echoed with his footsteps and with the rumbling of the cars passing overhead. The old notebook heavy in his backpack, he headed up the stairs to Boulevard de Port-Royal. Marcus was almost at the bus stop. He savored the thought of the money in his pocket.

His cell phone vibrated. His uncle. He ignored it.

Marcus scanned the sidewalk. Karine was standing near the bus stop and waved. Another call from his uncle. He ignored this one, too.

"You're late." A big pout on her red lips. He eyed her lace cami-sole top and hip-hugging jeans. "My friend's letting us use her place, remember?"

Marcus pulled her close. “We’re going to a hotel. No attic room with bedbugs in the mattress today.”

Karine shook her head. “On your allowance?”

He glanced at the time. “I’ve got to take care of a quick job first.”

Karine’s mascaraed eyes gleamed. “Why wait?”

What was the rush for the old fart—would an hour matter? “You’re right. Meet me at the hotel on Cinq Diamants. Let me stash this first.”

KARINE’S PERFUME FILLED the hotel room. Marcus laughed as he came up from under the duvet damp with their sweat. His laugh was cut short as a huge male arm caught him in a choke hold from behind. He gasped for air, tried to grab at the arm around his neck, but his wrists were yanked behind him, then flex-cuffed so tight the plastic cut his flesh. He was dragged off the bed and dropped facedown on the carpet.

The contents of his backpack rained down on his naked back. “Where is it?” a voice said.

Fear paralyzed him. He couldn’t breathe.

A kick to his ribs. Then another. “Where did you put it? Tell me or I’ll keep it up.”

“I don’t . . . know . . .”

“Of course you do. Where’d you hide it?”

All this over a stupid old notebook? But he couldn’t fail his uncle. Maybe he could talk his way out of this, get this animal to untie him and then . . . what, jump out the window? What about Karine? “Let me up . . . and I’ll . . .”

He coughed into the beige rug, his mouth furred from inhaling the dust and pilling. The flex-cuffs, slick with his blood, bit into his wrists like wire.

Karine was screaming . . . or was that him?

He couldn't see anything but beige and then the blindfold. His body was jerked up and slapped across the desk, the impact nearly snapping his spinal cord.

"I'll ask again. Where is it?"

"What do you want?" Marcus asked.

"Cut to the chase, kid. Then your fingernails will stay on . . ."

Paris • Late September 1999 • Monday Morning

HUMIDITY HOVERED IN the air, waiting for the drop in barometric pressure to drag Paris into autumn. A few leaves had turned and soon would carpet the cobbles yellow brown, red, and orange. It wouldn't be long before Aimée Leduc would have to break out her wool scarves. It was her first autumn as a mother, and for some reason, the changing temperature filled her with a sense of foreboding.

In Leduc Detective's office, Chloé squealed on the changing table while Aimée replaced her leaking diaper. Aimée had a meeting and wished her nanny would hurry up. She loved having her ten-month-old with her at the office in the mornings, but business was business; Aimée still had to earn their baguette and butter it, too.

Just then the frosted glass door buzzed open. Babette entered, accompanied by a wave of stale air from the landing. "*Désolée*, got held up by the Métro strike."

Another Métro strike. Tomorrow it would be nurses or bus drivers. September always brought the usual disruptions.

Behind Babette stood a tall man wearing a suit and dragging a rolling suitcase.

"This monsieur said he's here for a consultation," said Babette.

Consultation? No way—Aimée was on her way out the door to her emergency client meeting, and she still had an overdue proposal open on her laptop.

"Afraid not, monsieur," she said, wrangling Chloé's squirming,

tiny feet through the leg holes of a onesie. “Today is completely booked.”

“Forgive me for intruding, Aimée,” said the man.

Aimée looked up. This time, she recognized his receding hairline. “Éric?”

It was Éric Besson, a thirtysomething intellectual property lawyer, buttoned-up and conscientious, the husband of the second cousin of Aimée’s best friend, Martine. He looked as if he hadn’t slept. Aimée had last seen Éric at one of Martine’s huge family parties . . . a wedding, baptism—she couldn’t remember.

“I hate dropping in,” he said, his voice higher than she remembered, “wouldn’t if it weren’t important.” Before she could ask if Martine had sent him, he’d wheeled his roller bag to her desk. “*Alors*, I’m catching a train to Brussels, giant court case. Please, can you give me five minutes?”

“Late night, eh?” She gestured to a chair. “Have a seat. Let me just finish a couple quick things.”

Outfit accomplished, she quickly repacked the baby bag and kissed Chloé’s warm pink cheeks. Babette waved Chloé’s chubby hand as they headed out for *bébé* swim. Then Aimée opened her laptop, scanned her proposal’s last paragraph, and hit SEND. “You’ve got my full attention.”

Éric set a police homicide report on her late father’s worn mahogany desk.

“What’s this?” she asked, surprised. She sat back, felt a pressure in her chest. “*Non*, don’t answer. You know I don’t do criminal anymore.”

Not since her father’s death in the Place Vendôme explosion, when she’d inherited the agency and vowed from then on she’d do only computer security. That horrific day played in her mind: her father’s melted glasses, his shoe . . .

Éric's anguished voice shook her from her reverie. "Alors, it's all my fault. I shouldn't have asked Marcus to do it. Never. I only wanted to help the old man. Now they're both dead."

Éric opened the folder and set it in front of her. Against her will, Aimée's gaze was drawn to the pages. A homicide investigation about a young man whose body had been discovered in the thirteenth arrondissement. In God's name, why was Éric showing her this?

"Should you even have a file like this?"

"I have a friend who got me a copy. The *flics* are writing off Marcus's murder as a drug deal gone wrong." Éric's shoulders heaved, and he covered his face. "He was only eighteen years old."

Aimée moved toward his chair and put her arm around him. "Zut, how did you get involved? You're an intellectual property attorney! This is a murder investigation."

"It involves you, too."

"Moi?" She doubted Éric had ever stretched the truth in his life. But there could always be a first time.

He wiped his tear-stained cheeks with the back of his hand. Glanced at his Rolex. "Please, Aimée, let me explain."

He seemed so shaken. She had to at least listen.

"I'm sorry, but it has to be quick. We both have places to be." As she spoke, she reached under the pile of files on her desk and pressed the button on the digital recorder hidden there. Standard procedure.

Éric wiped his eyes. Took a breath. "My mother grew up next door to a woman named Marie. They were best friends. Marie became a tapestry weaver, an *haute lissier*, at Gobelins."

Aimée suppressed her impatience.

"Marie married Léo Solomon, an accountant for the tapestry factory. He had been a POW in a German stalag. Marie and Léo were good friends of my parents. Last year, before my mother died, she told me Léo needed my help. She never explained, but I promised I

would help him if he ever came by my office. Two weeks ago, out of the blue, Léo turned up, towing an oxygen tank. He was dying. Léo had a secret and insisted the truth had to come out.”

Aimée tried not to look at the time. “What does any of this have to do with me?”

Éric’s hands shook. “I’m getting there. Besides his work at Gobelins, Léo also did accounting for his friend Pierre Espinasse, who’d saved his life in the POW camp. Pierre had become a policeman, as had three others they’d known in the camp. Pierre was totally corrupt.” He took a breath. “Early in the fifties Pierre coerced Léo into funneling the officers’ illegal kickbacks into investments. Léo owed Pierre his life. But he always felt guilty about helping them launder the money, and he kept a record of everything, a notebook he filled with every detail of these investments for fifty years. Every person involved, every transaction.”

“You saw this notebook?”

Éric’s shoulders twitched. “It’s a handwritten confession, with fifty years of evidence to back it up. It names names—politicians, ministers, business bigwigs, police . . . It’s explosive.”

Aimée nodded. She believed it. “You recognized these names?”

“Some. I made a few notes, but . . .” Éric’s thick brows knit. “Aimée, these *flics* taught at the police academy, knew your father.”

Aimée felt a sinking in her stomach. On some level, had she been expecting him to say that? The corrupt *flics* who’d killed her father. “The Hand?”

Éric nodded. “That’s what Léo Solomon called them.”

Her hands were clenched so tightly her knuckles were white against the desk. Her father’s desk.

For almost thirty years, the Hand had diverted funds, taken kickbacks, arranged cover-ups for ministers and politicians. *Libération* had described the group as “endemic, institutional

corruption, top to toe” and *Le Monde* had called it a “deep-rooted protection racket run between police and government ministries.” Aimée was the one who’d exposed them.

How could there be any remnant still running these schemes? Her lips pursed. “I thought I’d taken care of them.”

“According to Léo’s confession, the Hand’s morphed like a hydra. There are all kinds of business arms.”

“But you have the notebook, written documentation. You can get it to *la Proc* and get it all sorted out. I still don’t see what this has to do with me—”

“Your father’s name was in there, Aimée.”

Liar! she wanted to scream. Not her papa . . . no way did he ever take payoffs.

“From the little I read, I think he’s implicated. I thought you should know.”

“There’s proof?” Her voice shook. Could she believe this? “*Alors*, I’m glad you told me—”

“*Non*, you’re not.” He stood, checked his phone. “The notebook was stolen. When Léo gave me the notebook, he wouldn’t let me keep it in my safe. He insisted I send it directly to *la Proc*. Marcus, my sister’s boy, was working for me, so I sent him as a courier.”

He pointed to the homicide file.

“Marcus never showed up at the prosecutor’s,” he said. “Never answered his phone. Two days later his body was found.”

Her blood ran cold. An eighteen-year-old boy murdered to cover up dirty police work? “You mean you think the Hand got to him? Didn’t you say it was drug related?”

“The investigation claims Marcus was a druggie. A lie. Marcus was studying for his baccalaureate. Into girls, not drugs. He was on his way to meet his girlfriend, Karine, when I gave him Léo’s package to take to *la Proc*. Karine has disappeared, too.”

Convenient. “Did Marcus tell this girl, Karine, what was in the notebook?”

“Marcus didn’t *know* what was in the notebook. He wouldn’t have had time to look—he was to take it directly to *la Proc*. And no one knew where he was going; I gave him strict instructions. None of this was arranged in advance. But he was murdered on his way to deliver it.”

Goosebumps rose on Aimée’s arms.

“Maybe you can find out more about this Karine. Computer investigation, that’s your expertise, *non*?”

He made it sound easy.

“It’s not much, but all my notes are there. Please find her.”

“Why should I get involved in any of this, *Éric*?”

“Your father was murdered by the Hand. I read in the papers about what you did. But is it really over, Aimée? A lot of people got ‘retired,’ and a lot of scandal got swept under the rug. White-washed. But *Léo* wrote it all down.”

“And an old man’s notebook is going to prove what? No doubt it’s been destroyed by now anyway, *c’est ça*?”

“Please, Aimée. My sister asked me to give her son a part-time job, and instead I got him killed. All I’m asking you is to help me find Karine.”

She hated missing-person cases, even if her *grand-père* had built Leduc Detective’s reputation on them. Bile rose in Aimée’s throat as she scanned the photocopied police report.

“You’ll find her, Aimée?”

She had a baby to raise, a business to run, and a partner who’d shoot her if she took on any more cases. But Papa . . . Papa’s name . . .

She nodded. “We keep this between us, *Éric*.”



IF SHE DIDN'T hurry, she'd miss the whole computer security meeting. She stuck Éric Besson's materials in her secondhand Vuitton bag. In her head she could already hear René, her partner, saying, *Don't get involved*.

In the taxi, Aimée checked to make sure there was no lipstick smudged on her teeth. Despite her sweating palms, she reapplied mascara and paged through her notes. Checked there were no teething biscuits hiding in the pocket of her vintage Lanvin suit—a steal at the flea market.

Now she stood in a makeshift office on the ground floor of the Bibliothèque François-Mitterrand. It reeked of fresh paint. Leduc Detective had snagged the new *bibliothèque*'s contract, along with a headache. This library had been President Mitterrand's baby, although it was realized only after his death, and it had been riddled with technical glitches from day one. The ground it was built on was cursed, the old timers said—it had once been the rail yard where Jewish deportees' confiscated goods were packed and sent on to the Reich.

The pink-faced, fiftysomething *fonctionnaire* threw a report on the office desk. "*Mon Dieu*, network connection problems? Isn't that what we hired you to iron out?"

"*Bien sûr*, monsieur, and we have," she said.

René Friant, all of four feet tall, took out a handkerchief to wipe his wide brow. "However, subsequent problems have arisen."

"*Évidemment!*" the *fonctionnaire* snorted. "Eh, why has the system crashed? What are you doing about it?"

René opened a file. "Our reports show an external system caused the disruption."

"What does that mean, 'external'?"

As if they'd ever be able to make this clueless administrator understand the inherent problems in the library's poorly designed

computer system. An old-school classicist, he'd proudly boasted he didn't own a computer himself. If the *fonctionnaire* didn't appreciate how complicated their job was, they'd lose this big contract.

Eyeballing the tight suspenders he wore over his blue button-down, Aimée summoned a smile. "Let us show you how we've outlined the problem." Aimée prompted René with a meaningful look. René was much better at outlining complicated tech concepts for laypeople.

"We're here to help, monsieur." René beamed, exuding the famous Friant charm. "Let me explain."

Again wiping his brow with his handkerchief, René launched into his spiel.

Trying to keep her distracted mind from wandering back to Éric Besson and his missing notebook, Aimée surveyed the showpiece library, which had been open fewer than three years and plagued with catastrophes from day one. She knew it had been built not only without consulting technicians but also without consulting librarians. Mitterrand had dreamed of glass-windowed towers, which had looked breathtaking on the architectural plans but had ruined the books with direct sun exposure. The computer system crashed daily; students were unable to check out books; the librarians went on strike. The list went on.

"We've employed antivirus software to detect malware that's exploited your system's vulnerabilities," René was saying. He reached for his bottle of water. "We have automatic patching systems fixing that."

"You mean this service?" The *fonctionnaire* pointed to a report. René nodded midgulp.

"*Exactement*," said Aimée, stepping in. "However, monsieur, you have to remember that software vulnerabilities aren't the most common attack vector."

“What do you mean by that?” The *fonctionnaire* plopped down on a large leather chair, which emitted a “puahh.”

It sounded like a fart.

“The most common way hackers of all stripes break into networks is stealing passwords,” she said. “Then they set up man-in-the-middle attacks to piggyback on legitimate log-ins and masquerade as authorized users.”

The administrator rubbed his forehead. “So you’re saying what exactly?”

“Credential stealing was how your network was penetrated,” Aimée said, trying to keep her voice even. “With your permission, monsieur, we’ll revamp your authentication systems with two-factor authentication, one-time passwords, physical tokens, and a bar code authentication.”

Hydrated now, René took over again. “None of these measures is foolproof. But our firm will monitor constantly, detect attacks, and respond quickly to maintain your network security more effectively.”

René handed the administrator a folder with Leduc Detective’s logo on it.

“It’s all in there,” René said. A final dashing smile to close the deal. “We know you want the system humming efficiently. We want to help you achieve that.”

Ten minutes later, a semipacified administrator signed off on their updated services proposal.

Outside, Aimée and René stood on the pedestrian walkway. Behind them loomed Bibliothèque François-Mitterrand’s four glass towers and a forest of cranes over construction sites. Forlorn abandoned factories, covered in graffiti, stood semigutted amid the revitalization of the new Rive Gauche.

She noticed accusation in René’s large green eyes. “You were winging it in there, Aimée.”

“Let’s get away from the relentless earthmovers.”

At the quietest café they could find, Aimée gravitated to the counter and ordered a large mineral water. Only when she noticed René’s wince of pain as he climbed up on the high stool did she remember how badly his hip dysplasia was acting up. *Merde*. Thoughtless.

Better to pretend she hadn’t seen it.

But she couldn’t.

“You all right?” she asked.

A snort. “Apart from having a partner who comes unprepared for a huge client meeting?”

“*Alors*, I did prepare! But you were *parfait*. *Comme d’habitude*. You got the deal done.”

The Badoit, beaded with moisture, arrived. The waiter, in his long white apron, averted his gaze from René’s short, dangling legs.

René’s eyes flashed with anger. Instead of massaging his ego, her remark had had the opposite effect. “And you were late. Like always.”

“*Desolée*.” She had to shift his mood. “*Très distingué*,” she said, pointing at René’s new cocoa cream linen suit. René set the bar for dapper at any height.

“Don’t think you can distract me like that.”

“What do you mean?”

René pointed to the police report sticking out of her open bag, only half-obscured by baby wipes. “Why do I have a bad feeling that was what made you late?”

Great. Why did she always forget he read her like one of those sun-damaged books in the library? She’d thought she could get away with not even telling René about Éric’s visit, had planned to dedicate a few online hours that afternoon to finding Karine. Or trying to, at least.

“We agreed when Chloé was born, Aimée. No cases beyond our workload and to always be up front and transparent with each other. And absolutely no criminal cases. Remember?”

“You’re right.” Up front and transparent? *Bon*, instead of lying to her partner, she’d give him an edited version. “Remember Éric Besson, the nerdy lawyer who is always at Martine’s parties?”

René sipped his fizzing Badoit. “You mean the Dungeons and Dragons aficionado?”

René, an aficionado himself, never missed an opportunity to find fellow D&Ders. So far, a good sign.

“That one.” She pointed to the police file. “So the poor guy blames himself for this kid’s murder.”

“How does it involve you?”

She hesitated. Bought time by downing her Badoit. The mineral water’s sodium on her lips made her stomach growl. All she’d had to eat that day were the remnants of Chloé’s yogurt and a crumbling teething biscuit she’d found in her bag. No time for breakfast.

“What aren’t you telling me?”

She sighed, described haggard Éric Besson’s visit, his begging her to find his murdered nephew’s missing girlfriend. She left out the part about the notebook and her father.

“Terrible but not your problem, Aimée.”

“Did I ask to get involved, René? Two hours digging and I’ll find her.”

“You agreed to help him and weren’t going to tell me?”

Hurt filled his big green eyes.

“It’s not like that, René. Éric needs help. You would have done the same, *non*?”

René’s phone rang. Uncharacteristically, he answered it right away. “*Oui*. At two?” He glanced at his watch. Wiggled off the stool. “I’ll make it.”

He hung up and set down his phone to root in his linen jacket pocket for his car keys. A new girlfriend? Hot date?

She hoped it was that programmer she'd introduced him to the week before. Curious, she stole a glance at his phone. But at the top of the call list was a medical office. "Got a doctor's appointment, René?"

He paused. "Why do you say that?" He sounded more startled than annoyed.

"Psychic powers."

"You snooped," he said, glancing at the call list as he picked up his phone. "Allergies." He threw some francs on the counter. "Back at the office later."

And he'd gone.

Downstairs, she looked up the clinic's name in the old much-thumbed phone book in the phone bank by the WC. Back at the counter, she called the clinic.

"*Bonjour*, I'm looking for an allergy specialist—"

"Mademoiselle," interrupted a stiff voice, "this is a cardiac unit."

Aimée hung up. Talk about being up front and transparent. Why hadn't René told her?

SHE COULDN'T GET it out of her head as she rode the bus to the office. René's thirst, his perspiration, his bad temper. There'd probably be a simple explanation—maybe he'd just gone for a checkup. He'd be all right, wouldn't he?

She drummed her fingers on the bus seat as her call to his phone went to voice mail. Left a message. Next to her, a middle-aged woman was reading a recipe in *Femme Actuelle*. Aimée felt the hunger pangs. *Tripes à la mode de Caen* sounded good to her right then, and she hated tripe. She pushed the thought of food aside and tried to concentrate on the homicide report, which

she shielded from prying eyes with an *ELLE* magazine. A breeze carried the smell of freshly watered greenery and musky foliage through the open window as the bus passed the Jardin des Plantes.

She'd need to multitask when she got to the office, try to squeeze in her search for Karine while she was implementing the Bibliothèque François-Mitterrand project. Finish it all in time to get home and give Chloé a bath.

As the bus crossed Pont de la Tournelle, Aimée turned a page. Read the horrific details about the discovery of Marcus's body when it was recovered in the rue Watt and let out a gasp.

"Those models. Too thin, eh?" The woman next to her nodded knowingly. "A scandal."

If only it were that.

STRUGGLING OUT OF the wire-cage elevator onto her office landing, Aimée hoisted her heavy Vuitton bag, which kept slipping off her shoulder, and punched in the door code. Leduc Detective's frosted glass door clicked open. In her rush, her Louboutins slipped on an envelope lying on the wood parquet.

She grabbed the door frame in time and righted herself. *Merde*. Someone must have slipped the envelope under her door. Another notice from the landlord attempting to hike up her rent?

She tossed the envelope on her desk, ground coffee beans, and brewed herself an espresso. The real thing—hopefully it would get rid of the bad taste left by the homicide report. Afternoon light—the hue of faded parchment—warmed her wrists as she powered up her computer.

The first sip of espresso, sweet and strong, was just hitting her as Maxence, their Québécois intern, entered. He was lugging a box of computer paper. Grinning, he dumped the paper in the corner and set a stack of mail on her desk.

“I’m making up hours, Aimée,” he said, peering at her for approval through his long Beatle bangs. He wore a black turtle-neck despite the September warmth. “René said it was a good time, with all the Y2K preparations and the *bibliothèque’s* issues. Shoot me anything you need updated.”

“*Parfait.*” She’d off-load those mind-numbing report updates and tick that off her list. Already this afternoon looked more manageable. She downed the rest of her espresso and plugged in her phone to recharge.

But no sooner had she sat down than the phone started ringing. A seemingly endless parade of client calls—it wasn’t until two hours later that she got back to Éric’s notes on Marcus.

Éric had little information about Karine—he didn’t know her last name, address, or school affiliation. Marcus had never told him how they’d met, where they hung out.

Great.

What Éric did know was that she lived in the housing towers in the thirteenth arrondissement and that she was of Cambodian origin. No wonder the *flics* couldn’t find her. Who could without a name, a school? A Cambodian girl in the notorious block towers in *la petite Asie*, the area of the thirteenth often mistakenly referred to as Chinatown, where many of the inhabitants were of Southeast Asian heritage.

That information narrowed it down to what, thousands of possibilities? If Karine had been murdered, no corresponding bodies had appeared at the morgue. But as the saying went, “no one ever dies in Chinatown, left or right bank.” Passports and IDs were sold and passed on.

And no one talked to the *flics*.

In the margin of the homicide report, someone had written in red pencil, *Find a grain of rice in that rice bowl?*

She listened to her recording of *Éric's* visit, replaying it to see if she could catch anything between the lines. *Éric* mentioned Marcus's mother, his own sister, but no additional information. Where was she, and what would she know? *Aimée* made a note to ask *Éric*.

Meanwhile, where had Marcus and *Karine* been headed on their date? A date meant what to an eighteen-year-old—a movie, a meal? In her student days—not so long ago—it was a jump under the sheets in the hours stolen from study group. Never at home, where you might run into family, or at a hotel, which cost money. In her case, she'd usually made use of a friend's place.

According to the investigation file, there were no reported fares from the taxi stand on Boulevard Arago the afternoon Marcus disappeared. Nor were there any young male passengers matching Marcus's description deposited at le Tribunal within an hour on either side of his departure. She studied the police note regarding Marcus's cell phone. They'd triangulated his last call location via the cell phone towers. A place to start. She put that on her follow-up list.

René always said, think of statistics as your friend. Using her newly won streamlined Bibliothèque François-Mitterrand portal access, *Aimée* started paging through census records she would otherwise be able to review only onsite. By law, French censuses didn't ask questions regarding ethnicity or religion, but they did gather information concerning one's country of birth. As of the 1990 census, there were almost eight thousand Cambodian-born Parisians, and close to half were former Cambodian citizens who had become naturalized as French.

She sat back. Drummed her pencil.

How could she find *Karine*?

MANY OF THE Cambodians in Paris had fled the Khmer Rouge's bloodbath. If *Karine's* parents had been part of that wave

fleeing Pol Pot and emigrated in the seventies and Karine was Marcus's age, give or take—so born around 1981—she most likely was a French citizen. But no missing person report for her had been filed, according to these notes.

The single police line of inquiry to find Karine had been confined to the known Cambodian clubs and bars. The usual path *flics* investigated for call girls. It had turned up nothing. Aimée saw no link to vice—where had the idea that Karine worked the streets come from anyway?

Aimée put that aside. Would think about it later.

She'd widen the census search net, define new filters using a three-year age range and targeting the thirteenth arrondissement.

Two hundred and sixty Asian females, not one with the name Karine. Her parents might have registered her with a Cambodian name—but then how in the world would Aimée find her?

She scanned Éric's notes again. There was no mention of the *flics'* checking out the towers.

She combed through the homicide file. It showed a thorough investigation in some areas, in others only very cursory inquiry or no inquiry at all. That bothered her. A lot.

She glanced at Maxence, who was working on René's computer, headphones on.

She'd map out the little she knew. Things stood out if you put them down, her father always said.

The white dry-erase board was taken up by their project status updates, so she unrolled the butcher paper. Tacked up a sheet and got her markers out.

Karine

Background Cambodian, age and address unknown.

Date with Marcus—location unknown.

Marcus Gilet (nephew of Éric Besson)
Found in rue Watt in the thirteenth
Lived in the thirteenth above Besson's office on Blvd. Arago.

After a moment's thought, she added:

Léo Solomon
Gobelins accountant
Address unknown

Léo had been the one who'd started this, the one who'd worked for the Hand.

She pulled out a detailed street map of the thirteenth arrondissement and tacked it below. With her marker, she drew X's on the following locations: Éric Besson's office, the last ping from Marcus's phone, the tunnel in rue Watt where his body was found, and Gobelins, the tapestry factory where Léo Solomon had worked.

As strong as Éric's belief was that Marcus's murder was connected to the notebook, there was no proof.

Neither Marcus's wallet nor his phone had been recovered.

The handful of numbers the cell company had identified on Marcus's call record belonged to Éric, a tutor, and a cinema. Hadn't this kid had a life?

How had he arranged a date with Karine? Old-fashioned notes and letters? Smoke signals?

Or he'd had a burner phone for his private life. Aimée had at his age. Well, back then it had been a pager.

If such a phone had existed, the *flics* had found no trace of it. Too bad. Aimée could have called in a favor with her connection at France Télécom. Maybe she could have found Karine that way.

She rubbed her eyes, tired from staring at her screen all

afternoon. She needed to get out, breathe the air, and walk the cobbles—plus she had a burning desire to see the spot where Marcus’s phone had last been pinged.

The last place he was seen alive? Maybe the girl had been seen, too?

If you didn’t visit the crime location, it wouldn’t be real to you, her father used to say. Go smell it, breathe it, until you get the feel of the place. Know it, and you’ll have a better shot at knowing your victim.

She’d go on her way home. First, though, one last cross-check: she’d try to figure out if any of the 260 Asian females lived or had lived in the towers. The family might have moved, but it gave her a starting point.

It took longer than she’d hoped—there were four different addresses to check. Of the four women who lived in the towers, only one’s name began with a K—a Kalianne. Aimée ran a name search; Kalianne came from the Khmer word meaning “little darling.” A counterpart to the French Karine?

If Aimée were to call on the phone, it might panic the girl’s family. Better to go in person.

But she needed more.

Benoît, the hunk she’d been seeing, taught Asian studies at the Sorbonne—almost as convenient as the fact that he lived across the courtyard from her. She liked Benoît’s company as much as his cooking and his amazing skill under the duvet. But his phone went to voice mail; he and his sister, whose baby daughter, Gabrielle, shared childcare with Chloé, must still be away on their parents’ anniversary trip. *Merde*. Aimée left a message.

With only an hour before Babette was off duty for the night, Aimée had to get moving.

Maxence took off his headphones as she grabbed her jean jacket and scarf. “I’m coding until René returns,” he said.

Merde again. Why hadn't René returned her call?

"Anything else you need?" He grinned. "Always ready for a mission."

"Maybe you can see what you can learn about this older *mec* Léo Solomon." She copied down his details quickly for Maxence. "I'd like to find out all the firms he did accounting for."

Maxence loved a challenge. "On it."

LATE AFTERNOON WIND scattered red paper candy wrappers and blew them up against the stained concrete wall. Students, the after-school lycée loungers, hung out in front of the Asian grocers' shops. The faces reflected the quartier's diverse ethnic population.

Aimée felt conspicuous—her Lanvin suit pencil skirt, selected for the meeting at the *bibliothèque*, wasn't quite dressed down enough with an Indian scarf, jean jacket, and ballet flats. As the sole non-Asian in sight, she stood out.

She followed an old grandma with full shopping bags from Loo Frères, an Asian *supermarché*, into the tower's vestibule, holding the door for the old woman after she entered the door code.

The tower was a characterless reminder of seventies architecture. At least the elevator worked, even if its gears ground with juddering fits and starts. The ride gave Aimée time to polish up her story.

She got off on the fourteenth floor. The scuffed, once-green linoleum almost matched the greasy celadon concrete walls. She knocked on the apartment door—she was starting with Kalianne, whom she hoped would turn out to be Karine. No answer.

She listened for sounds—conversations, a *télé*, or a radio. Nothing. Cooking smells came from down the corridor.

She'd try the next address. This time she took the stairs. All the addresses she'd culled were in this building, thank God.

A girl of about twelve answered the door in yellow pajamas and pigtails. “*Oui?*”

“Would your sister Karine be here? Her school gave us permission to contact this address about the scholarship.”

“My big sister?”

“*Desolée*, did I get her name wrong?”

“Well, they call her Camille at school. But now she lives in Toulouse with my aunt.”

An older man came to the door. He wore an undershirt and scratched his chin. “What you want?”

Aimée vaguely described a scholarship for Cambodian students. He shook his head. “No kids in school except this one.”

“What about the Cambodian families in this building? I’m looking for Kalianne, or maybe you know her as Karine. Do you know her?”

“Never heard of her.”

She got basically the same answer at the other apartments. No one knew a thing. Or if they did, they kept quiet. Not that she blamed them if they covered up for their own. In their shoes, she might do the same.

Of the four Cambodian girls living in the tower who had come up in Aimée’s search, Kalianne was the only one unaccounted for.

Back on the fourteenth floor, Aimée’s calves ached, and there was still no answer to her knock. She pressed an ear to the door. The apartment on the other side was silent. Most likely everyone was at work.

She followed the smell of coriander, garlic, and chilies several doors down. Her stomach rumbled.

A woman in a lab coat answered Aimée’s knock. Her brown hair was clipped up, and she wore latex gloves. Wonderful, spicy smells filled the apartment, which was jammed with teakwood furniture.

She took one look at Aimée. Shrugged. "I've already told the housing council, I'm here with permission to administer home treatment. Monsieur Khee is a housebound diabetic."

"*Alors*, it's not that," she said. "Sorry to take your time, but I'm desperate. I'm trying to reach the family in 1401. Their daughter's applied for a scholarship we're offering to Cambodian students. I wonder if Monsieur Khee can help me locate her, Karine or Kalianne—"

"He's just had a treatment. I don't think—"

"Who's there?" a man's voice demanded.

"*Attendez*," said the nurse. "I'll ask him."

By the time the nurse returned, Aimée was so hungry, all she could think about was whatever was cooking.

"Half-breed," the nurse said, "his words. Monsieur Khee asked if she would qualify."

Aimée was taken aback.

"The girl's part Cambodian, part French," said the nurse, looking embarrassed. "Is the scholarship only for full Cambodians?"

"We're not allowed to ask that question on our application forms," Aimée said carefully. "Does Monsieur Khee know how I can reach her?"

"He hasn't seen the family for a while. Several weeks. Heard they've moved out."

At about the time of Marcus's murder?

"A Fukienese family will move in. Monsieur Khee likes that. He's Fukienese."

"Does he have any idea where they went?"

"That's all he knew."

Nothing more to learn here. Yet she couldn't give up without finding something. The nurse had been more forthcoming than anyone else. "Do you treat any Cambodian patients?"

“Not since last year.”

Monsieur Khee called from the back, “What’s she want now?”

The nurse started to close the door.

“Isn’t there any place where Cambodian kids in the building hang out?” Aimée said in a rush.

The nurse paused. “The Cambodian lycée kids stick together. It’s all very segregated. Try Bánh Tân Tân, the pâtisserie. They hang out there.”

“NO HURRY, AIMÉE,” said a breathless Babette on the phone. “We just got back from the park. Dinner will take a while. Take your time.”

A jewel, Babette. “*Merci.*”

Outside the building, Aimée felt eyes on her back. She pulled out a file, pretended to consult it, and headed in what she hoped was the right direction.

From the lycée loungers, she heard snickers as she went by. “. . . *la bureaucratie*, regulations . . .” Good, let them think she was a pencil-pushing *administratif* from social welfare. Nice cover. She’d use that more often.

She noticed how they nodded to a young man with short-cropped hair, gang tattoos on his neck.

Aimée smiled at the young Asian woman sweeping the candy wrappers and sodden leaves off the cracked pavement in front of Bánh Tân Tân, which specialized in Cambodian and Vietnamese pâtisserie. Scents of coconut milk and toasted sesame drifted from the shop’s open door.

“*Bonjour*, my friend says you bake the best *boua loy*.” Thank God the bright window held a photo display of sweets with their names written phonetically in large roman letters. “I hope you’ve got some left.”

“*Bien sûr.*” The woman smiled. She was in her late twenties and had brown streaks in her black bob. “Our baker remarried; hence the Vietnamese name. But your friend was right—we’re the best.”

The shop’s interior was adorned with red good luck banners, and gold-flecked lanterns—*exotisme* anchored by butter. A bright-colored shop inviting happiness, Aimée thought. Chloé would love it. “What’s that?” Aimée pointed to what seemed like pastel sticky rice wrapped in banana-leaf bundles.

“Ah, that’s for the Pchum Ben festival.”

Aimée had to appear interested, keep the conversation going, and steer it toward Karine. “So it’s a special festival tradition?”

“To feed the hungry ghosts,” she said, smiling. “It’s to honor our ancestors and relatives. *Alors*, in April, during our Cambodian New Year, there’s a line out the door,” she said, the lilting accent to her French tempered by glottal syllables.

“I believe it,” said Aimée, taking in the trays of mostly Cambodian sweets, along with macaroons and rainbow gâteaux. “But I heard after school there’s a rush.”

“You missed it,” she said.

“*Zut*, thought I’d see Karine.”

No reaction. The young woman used aluminum tongs to pick up the sweets Aimée pointed out. An older woman wearing an apron brought a tray of fresh, hot, steaming buns. “My auntie just baked our sweet red bean specialty,” the young woman said. “Like to try?”

At this rate, Aimée would buy up the shop. “Karine’s told me how good they are.” Stupid. Think of something smarter. “Give me two.”

Again no reaction. Had she blown this? Made a fruitless trip to end up with only a mountain of sweet calories to bring home?

“Ah, stupid me,” she said, frowning. “You’d know her as Kalianne. Her boyfriend, Marcus, works for my friend Éric. That’s how

I know her.” That sounded as awkward as she felt. But she was chasing a hunch.

Just then a woman rushed in flourishing a receipt. Pointed at a birthday cake with an inscription in green icing. An excited conversation in Khmer ensued.

Aimée noticed the wall behind the tall rolling dolly racks was covered in photos—snapshots of customers, young and old, eating the signature sweets.

“Help her. Go ahead.” Aimée took one of the red bean confections off the tray and stepped back to study the wall. Starving, she wolfed down the pastry in two bites. Then another. The sweet bean paste stuck to her teeth, and she was already suffering a sugar high by the time she saw what she was looking for.

“I can ring you up now, mademoiselle,” said the young woman, smiling.

“Call me Aimée. You’re Lili, *non*?”

The young woman cleared her throat. “*Oui* . . .”

“Lili, you’re here in the photo with Karine and Marcus.” Aimée pointed to a smiling trio of Lili, squinting in the sun; a tall, curly-haired boy with the beginning of a beard; and a stunning half-Asian girl. Their names were written in pink marker underneath. “Where’s Karine?”

Fear flashed in Lili’s eyes. “How would I know?”

“We need to talk, Lili. Now.”

“I’m working.”

Lili plastered a smile on her face as the auntie brought in new hot trays of sweet bean buns. As Lili rang up Aimée’s purchases, Aimée pulled the photo off the wall and stashed it in her pocket. Lili handed her a fragrant bag.

“Lili, it’s talk to me or the *flics*. Got a preference?”

“You’re some kind of what . . . undercover?”

Aimée shook her head. “*Pas de tout*. I want to help Karine. Get her out of some deep trouble. I’m the only one who can.”

Lili looked around uneasily.

“If you don’t talk to me, I’ll be asking your auntie.”

Lili hesitated, then wrote an address on the receipt. “Buy a ticket and go inside. Thirty minutes.”

AIMÉE FOUND THE address behind the *mairie* of the thirteenth on Place d’Italie, a gargantuan Italianate Haussmann building.

The meeting place was a historic Haussmannian theater. Atop the façade she saw a sculptured frieze with the figures of Tragedy and the voluptuous goddess Comedy—attributed to a young Rodin.

Not the meeting point she’d expected.

Inside, she found an exhibition of vintage movie posters and a ticket booth.

“Film’s started, mademoiselle. Would you like to wait for the next showing?”

A film buff, she hated arriving after a film began.

“*Non, merci*,” she said. Bought a ticket.

It took a moment for Aimée’s eyes to adjust to the darkness. She felt her way along the back of dark velvet seats. Only a few were occupied. The silhouetted heads were black blobs against the screen. The black-and-white silent film was accompanied by a pianist dramatizing the score.

Mon Dieu. She’d never seen a silent movie in a theater. The piano pulled the story along, punctuating, highlighting, rippling, and fading with an ever-changing tempo.

The iconic actress, Louise Brooks, had the biggest eyes. Black, fathomless. Her expressions spoke volumes. A curious radiance haloed her face—Aimée realized it must have come from the glow of a backlight.

Where was Lili? Had she given Aimée the slip and a bogus address?

“Ssss, here,” a voice said.

Aimée found Lili in the last row.

She wedged herself into a seat. “Where’s Karine, Lili?”

“I don’t want trouble. *Compris?*” Lili’s soft accent dangled on each syllable.

“*Bien sûr*. She’s in danger.”

“Me, too, if this gets back. And I don’t see how it can’t.”

But she’d shown up. Must have something to say. “I’m a PI. Talk to me. It’s safe.”

“*Quoi?*”

“*Détective privé*. Marcus’s uncle hired me.” Not exactly a lie. “You know Marcus was murdered, *non?* And Karine is missing? The *flics* blame it on drugs, call Karine a hooker, but it’s not true, is it?”

Lili stood. “*Non*, don’t involve me, please.” She disappeared into the shadows.

She’d blown it.

Aimée caught up with Lili under the exit sign, where she stood trembling against the burgundy velvet curtains. The piano music crescendoed.

“*Desolée*,” Aimée said, rummaging through her brain to find the right words. “I’m trying to help Karine. Can you help me?”

Lili looked ready to bolt. “I don’t know anything.”

“You’re afraid. I understand.”

“Understand?” Her lips quivered. “How could you understand?”

“*Alors*, you’re here. You want to help Karine. So do I.” Aimée had to think of how to get through to this scared young woman. “Marcus was murdered, and Karine’s in danger. Please tell me what you know. Please. I won’t mention your name to the police.”

“You think I worry about *les poulets?*”

The old term for police, since what was now the *préfecture* was once a medieval chicken market. Funny what stuck from centuries ago.

“Who then?”

“The ones with tattoos.”

Aimée’s mind went to the tattooed *mec* who the lycée students nodded to outside the high-rise. “A gang?”

Lili looked at Aimée as if she were a slice short of a baguette. “The Loo Frères *mecs*,” she said.

“Loo Frères? You mean the Asian *supermarché*?”

“They’re more than that. Big influencers, own many businesses, friends with the mayor. The Loo Frères sponsor the New Year parade, and their gang polices Chinatown. No one talks about anything. They make sure of it.”

She opened the exit door to a slit of light in an alley.

Aimée grabbed her arm. “Please, when did you last see Karine?”

Lili hesitated. “They were supposed to borrow my place that afternoon. They went to a hotel instead. That’s the last I heard. Karine doesn’t answer her phone.”

“That’s helpful, Lili, more than you know. Write down Karine’s number, and I’ll try to trace it.”

“I didn’t keep it. Anyway, it’s dead. I think Karine is, too.”

“Or afraid and hiding from whoever killed Marcus.”

Why wasn’t there a flicker of hope in Lili’s eyes? She knew something. Aimée let go of her arm.

“Where would she hide, Lili?”

“Her family left. I don’t know.”

Of course she knew. And now Aimée knew how to find out.

“I have to get back to work.” Lili turned to leave.

“Wait, Lili! Which hotel?”

“Near Butte-aux-Cailles, a small one. On rue des Cinq

Diamants, I think.” She paused. The sun’s pale glow caught on her jade bracelet. “If you follow me or come around again, they’ll know.”

Aimée pressed a card into Lili’s hand. She’d written Éric Besson’s number on the back, too, in case. “Trust me. Call if you hear from Karine.”

Lili stepped out, and the door closed behind her.

Aimée strolled back to the ticket booth. “The young woman who sat by me forgot this . . .”

Aimée showed the clerk a small agenda she’d bought and hadn’t used yet.

“She’s late twenties, Asian. I just thought you’d remember her.” A shot in the dark.

“Oh, Lili,” the clerk said. “She’s our pianist for Wednesday matinees.”

“This looks important—she might need it.”

“That’s so kind of you. She works at the pâtisserie Bánh Tân Tân. Leave it there. Or if she’s already done for the day, I think she just lives upstairs above the bakery.”

Aimée left the theater and called Maxence. “Ready for another mission?”

“Ready and waiting.” Maxence’s voice rose in excitement.

She told him to take petty cash for a taxi and mapped out his assignment. Then she rang Babette. “Will I still make bath time?”

“Chloé’s asleep. Pooped out after *bébé* swim and the park.”

Now Aimée felt guilty. “Can you stay a bit longer?”

After making arrangements with Babette, she headed for the hotel.

THE TWO-STAR HOTEL was the only hotel on rue des Cinq Diamants, the street of five diamonds. Aimée saw no trace of any

diamonds. At least she'd snagged the photo from the pastry shop wall and could question the hotel staff about the trio.

The hotel staff consisted of a middle-aged woman with black roots showing in her dyed red hair, which was mostly covered by a hijab. She sat behind the tiny reception counter massaging her bare ankle. Arabic music played from a thirties-era Bakelite radio. For a two-star hotel, or even a five-star, the place's rectangular lobby looked spotless. A bottle of nail lacquer emitted a stringent alcohol aroma.

Aimée flashed her faux police ID.

"You're new," said the woman. "Haven't seen you before."

"*Brigade spéciales*, undercover," she said, making it up as she went along.

Without a murmur, the woman turned the *livre d'or*—the hotel register—around for Aimée to view. "Be my guest." A smile with several gold teeth.

Aimée flipped back to the date Marcus disappeared. Ran her chipped fingernails up the signatures. Found it.

"Do you recognize this couple?" Aimée covered Lili's face and showed the woman the photo from the pâtisserie wall of fame.

A nod.

"Can you tell me what you remember about them?"

"I do manicures. Professional. You want one?"

Was the woman offering her something else beside a manicure? Information?

Her nails definitely needed it. And she guessed this was the way to get this woman to talk. "How much?"

"Fifty francs," said the woman. "You choose the color. Extras are ten francs."

Aimée nodded and sat in the second chair in the small space behind the reception counter. "What kind of extras can I get?"

“I can tell you about how I clean rooms and how messy that one was.”

Not a direct bribe from a policewoman. But a payment for information—*servis compris*. That worked.

“I’d like the extras,” Aimée said. “All of them.”

Aimée set her phone on her lap, putting aside her worry about Maxence and his mission, and focused on the woman, who introduced herself as Amal.

Amal’s father-in-law’s father had bought the hotel, which was still in the family. Perfect cooperation with the *flics*, *toujours*, but Aimée’s was a new face. During the war, Amal’s father-in-law’s father had printed papers, documents, for Jews. Even once hid a family in the attic. Interesting, Aimée thought, that an Arab family had hidden a Jewish family.

She brought their conversation back to Marcus and Karine.

“The boy registered,” Amal said. “The girl went up.”

“Did anyone else go to their hotel room?”

“Not that I saw.” She thought. “*Attendez*, I do remember a water pipe burst next door. The plumber’s crew had to work in our courtyard.”

Easy to slip inside.

“But you remember the couple well?” Aimée asked.

“So young. Sweet. Most of our clients are in their sixties, pensioners who live here.” Amal sighed. “Laid off from the factories and nowhere else to live. My husband was a boy when they demolished the sugar refinery in the seventies. Such huge rats running up the streets, they paid him for every rat he caught.”

Aimée suppressed a shiver.

More prodding got Amal talking about the room’s condition. “A mess, completely torn up.”

Had it been searched?

“May I see the room?” Aimée asked.

After the promise of more francs for this extra “extra,” Amal agreed. As Aimée’s Bordeaux-red fingernails dried, Amal led her across the small courtyard and up a switchback of stairs. This had probably once been a workers’ hotel, simple and unadorned.

Number 210 held a double bed, a blue duvet, a reproduction painting of the Seine at night, a desk, and chair. Basic. Clean.

Aimée checked the desk—opened the drawers, ran her hands along the spindle legs—and behind the mirror’s beveled edges. No dust. Doubted she’d find anything of value here—especially after two weeks, a thorough cleaning, and probably a police search. Just as she was about to give up, her index finger encountered something sticky. Alert, she got down on her hands and knees. But it was just a cobweb thread. Using her penlight, she searched under the bed. Not even a dust ball. Disappointed, almost dizzy, she stood again. She’d hoped to find something to make this worthwhile.

“Amal, did you see anything out of the ordinary that day? Hear noises?”

“*L’amour*.” She shrugged. “They acted like rock stars . . . you know, tearing the room apart.”

Nothing. What had Aimée expected after several weeks? She sat on the bed, scanned the room again. The view from the window overlooked rue des Cinq Diamants. Across from her was a graffiti mural by Miss Tyk, the rebel tagger who had achieved iconic status and was now a cause célèbre in the art world.

“We want no trouble,” Amal said. “We keep a good name in the quartier—clean, discreet. If things get out of hand, our policy is tell the *flics*.”

In a way, she had.

“*Merci*, Amal. We’ll keep this between us. Great manicure.”

Aimée handed her a card with an alias and the phone number for her answering service. “If you, or your family, remember anything else, give me a call.”

MAXENCE’S CALL CAME as Aimée hiked up the steep cobbled street in Butte-aux-Cailles, “hill of quails.” A maze, this hilltop neighborhood, like an eighteenth-century village, with some passages only wide enough for a cart.

“Reporting in on my surveillance mission, Aimée.” Maxence’s voice almost squeaked with excitement.

“*D’accord*, Maxence, see anything?”

Late-season yellow roses, swollen with their last blossoms, tumbled over a crumbling stone wall and perfumed the night air. Shadows from the streetlights filtered through the tree branches.

“Lili, the one you described, locked up the pâtisserie ten minutes ago. She entered a door around the corner at number fifty-three. A light’s on now in the room above it.”

“Anyone else?”

“Not yet. I’m standing in a doorway. Wait . . . A girl’s gone in . . . Can’t see her face . . . *Non*, now I can see. She looks half-Asian.”

Karine.

What better place to hide than in Chinatown?

“I’m en route,” she told Maxence.

She ran, waving at a taxi up at the corner.

MAXENCE HUDDLED IN the doorway. He was wearing a John Lennon cap and khaki fatigue jacket. “Should I call the *flics*?”

Catching her breath, Aimée panted, “The last ones to call.”

She scanned the layout of the building and dimly lit, narrow street. A few men stood smoking by the closed hardware shop. She and Maxence couldn’t stand here long before getting noticed.

“Call a taxi,” she said, rummaging for the lock pick set she kept in her blush case, which was somewhere in the bowels of her bag. “Have it wait on the corner.”

Maxence’s eyes bulged.

“But first you’ll shield me at the door, okay?”

With Maxence standing behind her, she started in on the lock of the door of the two-story building that backed the pâtisserie.

A scooter putted by, and Maxence jumped. Her fingers slipped. She took a deep breath. “Relax, Maxence,” she said. Tried again, concentrating. After inserting the tension wrench, she jiggled the Z-shaped pick to move the pins. She heard the lock click. “Follow the plan, okay?”

Once inside, she shone her penlight beam through a musty corridor, followed it to a postage-stamp sized courtyard lined by garbage bins. Steamy vapor came from pipe vents from the bakery’s oven.

She had to act quick. Another corridor ended in stairs up to the rooms over the bakery. Her collar stuck to her neck in the humidity. She listened for voices, heard a low murmur. For the second time, she used the tension wrench and jiggled the Z-shaped pick. Seconds later, she was inside.

Two women were standing in the stifling attic room, which was packed to the gills with hanging clothes and permeated by baking odors and cheap scent.

“Karine?” Aimée asked.

Karine, her cheeks hollower than they’d been in the photo, ran and crouched in the corner, looking terrorized. Lili grabbed a kitchen knife.

“Get out,” said Lili. “I told you not to follow me.”

Stupid again. Why had Aimée rushed this, put them on the defensive?

“Put the knife down, Lili.” Aimée lifted her hands. Willed her voice to calm. “I’m unarmed. Won’t touch either of you. Karine, I’m Aimée, a friend of Marcus’s uncle Éric. He needs to know what happened.”

Lili lowered the knife but didn’t let go.

Karine looked ready to spring for the window.

“Karine, there’s a taxi waiting at the corner. I’ll get you to safety.”

“She’s better off here,” Lili spat. “Whoever you really are.”

“A detective, as I told you. Please try to understand. Marcus’s uncle deserves to know what happened. And other people are in danger because of what was stolen.”

“Who is in danger?” Karine demanded.

“There was very sensitive information in the book they stole. But you know that. Look, the police are claiming Marcus was a druggie and that you . . .” Aimée knelt down to look Karine in the eye. “They’re claiming you’re a prostitute.”

“What?” said Karine.

“Look for yourself. It’s here in the police report. Page six.” As she took the police report from her bag, she pressed the ON button on her digital recorder as quietly as she could. She opened the folder and paged through so Karine and Lili could see. Aimée watched Lili from the corner of her eye. Saw her set down the knife. Took an inner breath of relief.

Karine’s dark eyes narrowed in anger. “All lies. Marcus and I had been dating for a month.”

“It smells like a cover-up,” Aimée said. “The investigation’s shoddy. Someone has another agenda.”

“What do you mean, ‘agenda’?” Lili asked.

“I’m guessing someone involved in the police investigation wants the notebook,” Aimée said. “Do you know where it is?”

Karine’s expression was unreadable. “What notebook?”

"Marcus promised his uncle he would deliver a notebook," Aimée said.

Karine shook her head. "I don't know anything about a notebook."

"Who came to the hotel room?"

Karine's jaw trembled. "I don't know." She burst into tears, mumbled something to Lili in what must have been Khmer.

"What? Tell me so I understand."

"Leave her alone," said Lili. "I told you, they rented a hotel room. All of a sudden someone came in . . . Karine hid under the covers but heard a man threatening Marcus."

Aimée turned to Karine. "You saw him, didn't you? Describe him."

"They drugged me. I came to as a taxi let me out at Parc de Choisy. I ran. Haven't stopped."

Karine was terrified; Aimée believed that much. But was Karine part of a setup? "Why didn't you come forward?"

A bitter laugh. "You're kidding, right? In our neighborhood, we don't go to the *flics*. It brings more trouble."

In every neighborhood, Aimée thought, but she kept her mouth shut. "You're putting your own life at risk, but that's your call," she said. "Where did the notebook go?"

Again, tears. "What notebook?"

Did she really not know? Aimée couldn't tell.

Karine rubbed her eyes. "The man kept asking, 'Where is it?' but I didn't know what he was talking about. Marcus was a big kid, always hiding things. He had all kinds of stashes."

"Stashes? Like drug stashes?" Had the kid sold dope after all? "Did he deal? Some kind of side business?"

"Marcus, drugs?" Karine said. Lili snorted, and Karine shook her head. "His uncle Éric spent a fortune on collectible fantasy merchandise, role-playing game things. Marcus pilfered

stuff sometimes. His uncle never noticed. He'd hide it in the quartier—it was like a game to him. Then if his uncle didn't miss it, he'd sell it. There's a market for that, but it's so stupid."

"Where would he hide things?"

"I never knew or cared where."

"Then you owe Marcus's uncle the truth." Aimée pulled out her phone. "My job's done. You need to tell him."

Karine wiped her tears away and seemed to gather herself. "Wait, I need a cigarette." She stood, checking the pockets of her trench coat.

"Me, too," said Aimée, going to the door, wishing it weren't true. She needed to alert Maxence. She noticed a missed call from Babette on her phone. It was later than she'd realized. "I'll come outside with you."

But Karine didn't follow her. Lightning-quick, Karine dashed to the bathroom and slammed the door behind her. Aimée rushed after her, rattling the old door handle until it finally turned open. The window was open, and Karine was gone.

Footsteps raced over the adjoining roof. Aimée stuck her head out the window in time to see a flash of Karine's trench coat as she shimmied down a pipe to the courtyard.

"Merde." She speed-dialed Maxence. "Karine's escaped out the bathroom window over the roof. She's wearing a trench coat." She hung up and faced Lili. "Where's she gone?"

"Like I'd tell you if I knew." Lili put her face in her hands.

Aimée surveyed the room more closely. A carryall and a handbag sat in the corner.

"Karine's just a kid," Lili said. She was crying. "She needed my help. She begged me to let her stay. Now look what you've done. I never should have trusted you."

Aimée had never wanted to get involved with this. Fed up

now, she wanted to forget this whole thing. Why should she keep trying to help a stubborn kid who wouldn't listen? She needed to get home; Babette was on overtime. What could she even find out now?

Where the notebook was.

Aimée grabbed the handbag and ran out of the apartment, down the stairs, and across the courtyard. Out in the narrow street, there was no sign of Maxence or Karine. Around the corner, she found Maxence sprawled on the cobbles, his face bleeding.

"Oh my God . . ." she said. "What happened?"

"I saw her!" Maxence said. "But she jumped on a scooter—it was waiting for her. Then someone tripped me."

She helped him up. "You all right?"

Maxence grinned despite the cut on his face. "Didn't get the license plate but caught a leopard tattoo on the scooter driver's arm." He noticed the handbag. "Hers?"

Aimée opened it to check. "She won't get far without it."

In the taxi, she called Éric's number.

"I found her, Éric," she said, thumbing through the handbag's contents: a thin coin purse, a wadded-up fifty-franc note, a Métro pass in plastic chained to the zipper handle. Makeup and cosmetic samples. Change of underwear. A leaflet in Khmer from a takeout.

No cell phone. No ID.

"Then I lost her," she said.

DEFLATED, AIMÉE STARED at the Seine from her balcony, wondering if she'd really tried hard enough to catch Karine.

Yet she'd made good on her word and then some. She'd tracked Karine down. Asked for the truth, tried to help and get her to safety.

Aimée hadn't been able to hold on to the girl. Or puncture her lies. Aimée's insides twisted knowing that Léo's notebook was gone. She hadn't known it existed yesterday, had had trouble believing it today, and now she was bereft at the thought that she'd never see it herself.

She'd wanted the notebook on the chance that it would reveal her father's connection to the Hand—a connection that had cost him his life. But the notebook incriminated a whole lot of other people. Looking at it from the other side, it was a veritable gold mine for blackmailing people.

A warble came over the *bébé* monitor, then a full-throated cry. Chloé.

A bad dream? Wet diaper?

Aimée waited, as it said to do in child-rearing guru Dr. Dolto's book, her bedside bible. Glanced at the clock and started a mental five-minute timer. After two minutes of nonstop crying, she couldn't stand it. Heated a bottle.

She looked out her kitchen window and saw a lone figure walking on the quai.

Ten minutes later, she'd changed Chloé's diaper, given her a bottle, and snuggled beside her on her own duvet. Miles Davis, her bichon frise, licked her toes as she sunk finally into blissful sleep.