

Paris • Late October 1999 • Monday, Midafternoon

THE YOUNG WOMAN stumbled on the cobblestones in her worn shoes, fist in her pocket, clutching the steak knife she'd nicked from the café. She'd felt eyes watching—fear had charged up her back, impossible to ignore. Her gut had screamed at her to get out of there.

Now.

Why hadn't her contact showed?

A car engine revved up, gears scraping. She glanced back and saw a black Renault slide onto Boulevard de Picpus. Her heart pounded.

Walk faster. Keep going. Past the boule players and around the bandstand. The sky was oyster grey. She could make it to the Métro station at Picpus.

At École Saint Michel, parents and small children waiting for school dismissal clogged her path until they took in her homeless appearance, which made them scatter. The swollen clouds opened in a downpour.

She heard the car's clutch grind.

She broke into a run, lungs heaving, shoelaces flying. Turned the corner onto Avenue de Saint-Mandé. She could hear the car gaining on her. Any moment it could jump the median, ram her against the stone wall. Dripping wet, she sprinted toward the Métro steps ahead of her. She could make it. Get

the documents to the only person she trusted and prevent a disaster.

A car door slammed. Footsteps slapped the wet pavement behind her. What if she got stuck on a platform—caught in the Métro? She reconsidered.

The double-grilled gate to a nearby building's courtyard was standing open as a car pulled out. In the pelting rain, she ducked inside, ran through the courtyard, scrambling past the parked cars and through an open portion in the fence to the empty adjoining lot, which was being paved. Its old gate opened onto a convent's grounds.

She skidded on the wet grass, perspiring in her oversized jacket, and ran along the stone wall. Past the cemetery, through the brown wood door to the tree-lined convent grounds. No one would find her there, at the Petites Soeurs des Pauvres homeless shelter. Through the grey haze of rain and the branches of the fig trees, she could make out the white habit of the intake nun.

And then she was caught from behind. She gripped the steak knife in her pocket and whirled around—she recognized the man. “Don’t touch me—”

“Running your mouth, *salope*?”

She struggled as he pushed her against the wall. Kicked at him desperately.

“Where’s the—?”

She tried to scream, but he covered her mouth with his hand. His sour breath in her face. She fought to aim the knife at him.

But he caught her fist in a grip like an iron vise and twisted, turning her own force against her. *Trained reflexes*, she thought—her last thought, as the steak knife plunged into her neck so deeply it hit the wall behind her. Blood pumped out of her carotid artery, staining the raindrops on the rhododendron blossoms. Her eyes glazed and the grey went black.

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AIMÉE LEDUC SMOOTHED down her little black Chanel dress in the dining room of le Train Bleu, the belle-epoque resto above the Gare de Lyon. In need of courage, she reached for a champagne flute of Kir Royal. All of a sudden, the faces around her blurred, and the room spun. She gripped the tablecloth, bunched it in her fists, and closed her eyes. Took a deep breath. Then another. The dizziness passed, quickly as it had come.

She could do this.

Determined, Aimée found her balance in her reheeled Louboutin ankle boots. Managed a wide smile and mounted the stage, heading toward the speaker's podium, where the host was waiting to introduce her. This tech conference, whose attendees were select and mostly men, had invited her to give the keynote address. An honor and a challenge on her first week back at work after a concussion that had kept her on bed rest for a month. But she'd recovered, hadn't she?

She eyed the players—the CEOs hungry for an edge in the world of *la start-up*. She had a mission: to network and pull in new clients for Leduc Detective's computer security services. Already, she felt the sweet tingle of new contracts. She'd thought up a great hook for her speech and was braced for industrial flirting over *apéros*. All week she'd rehearsed her speech, the talking points, memorized each pause for emphasis.

Now she nodded as she was introduced. She caught the glare of her rival in the audience. Marc Fabre, the tech entrepreneur with a shaved head that glinted in the chandelier's light—he'd tried to lock down this keynote for himself, she knew.

As she waited for the host to summon her to the podium, Aimée grew aware of a disturbance. She watched as a man rushed out to whisper in the host's ear and shot Aimée a look before crossing the platform to her.

"Your phone's off," the man said.

Mais bien sûr, she'd muted it for the presentation.

"There's an emergency—it's your daughter's playgroup. They've been trying to reach you, so they called the restaurant."

Her heart dropped. "Has something happened to Chloé?"

"I don't know. You need to pick up your daughter. Immediately."

She felt a jolt of panic. "Was there an accident?"

"I don't know. Apparently, your mother was nowhere to be found."

Of all times. The playgroup was so far away, in Square Cour-teline—Sydney had insisted on it; Aimée had no idea why. But where was her mother? And who could she call to pick Chloé up? Her nanny, a university student, was in class; all her other go-tos were at work.

Whatever was going on, it had to be an emergency for them to have tracked her down at this conference.

She felt like a helpless child. She needed to maintain her composure. She tried not to let her feelings show—her fear and anger and the sinking in her stomach.

Marc Fabre stood and approached the podium, his face radiating concern. "Don't worry, Aimée. I'll pinch-hit for you." Of course he would. He tried to mask the delight in his eyes. "I hope everything's okay."

With her mother? Never. What stunt was she pulling now?

With hurried excuses, Aimée grabbed her bag and the disk with the now-useless PowerPoint presentation she'd prepared. She scurried out of the restaurant, past the gilt arches and murals framed by pastry-like moldings. All those hours of work and rehearsal down the drain.

She tried her mother's phone. No answer. Voice-mail box was full.

Sydney Leduc, Aimée's American mother, a woman on Interpol's most-wanted list, always had an excuse for disrupting Aimée's life. But involving Chloé was another matter. Aimée was so angry she wanted to scream.

Her mother had enthused about this fancy playgroup, a mom and tot "art enrichment" experience. She'd insisted on signing Chloé up for it. And now she'd left her granddaughter alone with a bunch of strangers at a playgroup out in Bel-Air?

Worry creased Aimée's brow as she ran down the stairs and across the lobby by the train platforms. Passengers clustered, the departure and arrival board clicked above her, and the odd pigeon cooed from the art nouveau metal pillars supporting the glass ceiling.

Thank God only one person stood ahead of her in the taxi line in front of the station. A first. She kept punching in her mother's number. Again it went to a recorded message: "This mailbox is full."

Sydney hadn't even left Aimée a message. She flipped hurriedly through her Moleskine, looking for the number of the center that ran the playgroup. Hadn't she written it down?

Rain pattered on the taxi's windshield as it sped alongside the *viaduc*, the old train line. Its planted walkway, the Promenade Plantée, crowned the rose brick arches, inside each of

which nestled an artisanal gallery of one of the quartier's master craftsmen—a woodworker, a gilder, an upholsterer. If only the playgroup weren't so far. Who came all the way out to Bel-Air in the twelfth arrondissement except to visit the zoo and Bois de Vincennes? Well, René, her business partner, did sometimes visit the computer shops around Montgallet.

Aimée searched her trench coat pocket for her Nicorette gum. Popped a piece in her mouth. She didn't miss smoking. Not at all, hadn't craved a cigarette once in the thirty-one days and ten hours since she'd quit. Again.

The playgroup's main number went to voice mail, and she left a message. Her mind was racing.

Why had she trusted her mother? The woman had reappeared in her life out of the blue, as usual, with a determination to know her granddaughter. Sydney had taken advantage of Aimée's condition—bedridden for a month while she waited for the blood clot from her concussion to dissolve—to shoehorn herself into Aimée and Chloé's life. As if Sydney could forge some sort of relationship with Aimée after all these years. It had been a bumpy ride so far.

Could she say she even knew this woman? Her mother was a foreign presence with an American accent and all her secrets. All through her childhood, Aimée'd yearned for her mother, and now, as the proverb went, she realized she should've been careful what she wished for.

The taxi passed the *commissariat*, a modern behemoth whose architecture gave an incongruous nod to the past with its sculptured caryatids. Beyond were Haussmann buildings overlooking nonphotogenic rail lines. After the roundabout at Place Félix Eboué with the lion fountain Chloé loved, it was just another block to Boulevard de Picpus, which took the taxi through the quartier Bel-Air toward Square Courteline. Near the old bandstand and

sandy *boules* pit, she spotted the playgroup's shop front. The usual marmalade-striped cat sat in the blue-curtained window.

The rain halted. Clouds broke and sunlight slanted down over the puddles, peacock hued from car oil. Drops glistened from the red café awning next door. Aimée overtipped the young taxi driver, *comme toujours*, for late-night taxi karma, and stepped onto the slick pavement.

Chloé, her almost toddler, pounded clay with her chubby fists. She beamed when she saw her mother, and Aimée's heart warmed. That precious rosy-cheeked bundle was almost one year old.

"*Bonjour, ma puce.*" Aimée swooped Chloé up, clayey hands and all. Kissed her warm pink cheeks and inhaled her baby scent.

The teacher, in a clay-smeared smock, took in Aimée's little black dress. Vuitton bag. Gave a strained smile. "We're a parent participation program, *mademoiselle*. Children can't be left here without an adult."

"*Excusez-moi.* I just got the message, but it wasn't clear . . . Did my mother have an accident?"

"Not here, *certainement*. *Pouf*, she was gone, just like that," the teacher said. "We have rules. This is not a day care. *C'est fini, mademoiselle.*"

Great. Aimée's mother had just gotten Chloé kicked out of playgroup.

AT THE CAFÉ next door, Aimée ordered *un lait chaud* for Chloé's bottle and, for herself, *an expresso double*. Checked the conference schedule, wondering how she could salvage some *apéritif* networking time.

"So, *ma puce*, how's *Maman* going to get her job done and butter our baguette if your *grand-mère* flakes out?"

Chloé puffed her cheeks.

“That’s what I thought,” Aimée said.

The white-aproned, pencil-mustached man with an equally thin frame served them at a marble table by the window. “Ah, *mais ma petite*, where’s your *grand-mère*?”

Good question. Aimée wanted to know, too.

“*Malheureusement*, my mother’s not answering her phone,” she said.

“*Mais si charmante*,” he said, “now I’ve met three generations. All I can say is, good genes.”

She smiled in spite of her anger. “Do you remember seeing my mother today?”

“*Non, c’est bizarre.* After playgroup she meets her friend here; they always *prennent un café*. *La petite* here always takes a—”

“Friend?” Aimée’s antennae went up.

“*Ben ouais*,” said the waiter as he wiped the tabletop, lapsing into slangy colloquialism. “The homeless woman from the shelter at the convent. So generous, eh, your mother, helping her out. *Une bonne paroissienne* in action.”

Aimée’s jaw dropped. “How do you mean, *monsieur*?”

The waiter leaned lower, exposing a gold cross on a chain below his collar. “She buys her a *café*, treats her like an equal. *Et alors*, those Sisters of the Poor appreciate volunteers like your mother. The nuns are always trying to involve the community in the soup kitchen.”

Sydney Leduc, a former rogue CIA operative who had been imprisoned for radicalism—now a do-gooder? Aimée’s mother had depths she hadn’t known about.

Or had Chloé’s entire playgroup attendance been a front?

“Ah, you didn’t know?” said the waiter, noticing Aimée’s shock.

“My mother”—it still felt odd to use those words—“keeps things close to her chest.”

“The good ones do,” he said, and crossed himself. A real Holy Roller, this waiter.

Time to get Chloé home. She glanced at the clock. Too late for conference *apéritif* hour.

As Aimée felt Chloé’s diaper—still dry—she grew aware of a knot of people gathering on the pavement in front of the café. Excited voices were raised: “But it’s her.” “Wore that same dirty blue . . .” “You know her, Jacques.”

Aimée ignored the hubbub and settled Chloé in her stroller, looped the Armani baby bag over the handle. Forget a taxi. The sun shone; pigeons hopped in the puddles. They’d walk to the Métro.

The cashier was deep in a conversation with a young woman wearing an apron tied over her skirt. Her face was red, her eyes tear swollen.

“Knifed,” she said, her voice trembling. “Right in the convent garden.”

The cashier dropped a roll of franc coins. They pinged and danced on the zinc counter. “You saw her, Louise?”

“I wish I hadn’t.”

A nervous tingle went up Aimée’s spine. *Mon Dieu*. It couldn’t be . . . her mother? She set the brake on Chloé’s stroller. “Who are you talking about?”

“*Calme-toi, Louise.*” The waiter, Jacques, had put his arm around the young woman. Looked at Aimée. “*C’est la pauvre*, that friend of your mother, the homeless one.”

Aimée blinked. “But I don’t understand. Is my mother there?”

Louise wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. “I know who you mean. Served her the other day. Didn’t see her.”

Sydney Leduc had done her disappearing act, and now her “friend” was dead—could it be a coincidence?

Out on the street, Aimée dialed her mother yet again. No answer. On Avenue de Saint-Mandé, she pushed the stroller past the police cars and made her way toward the Picpus Métro. Chloé had fallen asleep with her bottle in her hands.

Nuns in white habits clustered at the double-doored carriage entrance of a Haussmannian building, its balconies spilling with red geraniums. The sisters folded their hands in prayer as a gurney clattered over uneven pavers. Aimée's throat caught. With a jerk, the gurney wheels stuck in a crack; the mound of a body under the foil blanket shuddered.

Aimée's gaze caught something falling from the gurney onto the pavement. A worn, mud-spattered tennis shoe with untied laces. Sticking out from under the blanket was a bare foot, its red-lacquered pedicured toes glinting in the sun. A nun made the sign of the cross, then quickly covered the exposed foot with the foil blanket.

"Attention. Move along, *s'il vous plaît*," said the medic.

Instead of moving, Aimée caught the nun's eye. As discreetly as possible, she motioned to the nun. "Sister, I think my mother knew her, that poor woman . . ."

"Tragic."

"Can we talk, please?"

Aimée read hesitation in the nun's eyes. Suspicion? Fear?

"My duties can't wait. I'm sorry," the nun said.

The ambulance doors clanged shut. Church bells sounded.

Chloé's stuffed rabbit fell to the pavement. Aimée scooped up the rabbit and dried its tail off. By the time she looked up again, the nuns were heading toward a gate in the wall, beyond which Aimée saw grass and a garden. The convent. She couldn't let the nun get away.

Aimée reached out to catch the woman's sleeve. "Sister, I'm

worried. My mother abandoned my daughter at her playgroup,” said Aimée. “Just around the corner. Now she isn’t answering her phone.”

“I’m sorry, *mademoiselle*; I don’t understand what that has to do with—”

“Well, normally she’d meet this homeless woman—”

“We prefer SDF, *sans domicile fixe*.”

“*Bien sûr*. But the waiter next door just told me they usually met for coffee at this exact time. Now my mother is missing, and that poor woman is dead. I hope it’s just a terrible coincidence, but . . .”

The nun glanced behind her. One of the sisters was closing the gate.

“Please, Sister,” said Aimée. “I’m worried something’s happened to my mother. Do you know anything about where she might be?”

The nun glanced at her watch. “Come back later. Help serve.”

A flyer for *soupe populaire*, SERVED BY *bénévoles*, an early-evening soup kitchen service, was thrust in Aimée’s hands, and the sister disappeared behind the gate.

Volunteering at a soup kitchen—had Sydney ever been involved in this kind of charity work? Aimée didn’t know the first thing about her mother, but if Sydney had been helping out, had it really just been out of charitable motivations?

Forget the Métro. Aimée hailed a taxi.