

LEFT

TO

DIE

(AN ADELE SHARP MYSTERY--BOOK 1)

BLAKE PIERCE

An Adele Sharp Mystery

Blake Pierce

Left To Die

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»

Pierce B.

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— (An Adele Sharp Mystery)

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“When you think that life cannot get better, Blake Pierce comes up with another masterpiece of thriller and mystery! This book is full of twists and the end brings a surprising revelation. I strongly recommend this book to the permanent library of any reader that enjoys a very well written thriller.” --Books and Movie Reviews, Roberto Mattos (re Almost Gone) LEFT TO DIE is book #1 in a new FBI thriller series by USA Today bestselling author Blake Pierce, whose #1 bestseller Once Gone (Book #1) (a free download) has received over 1,000 five star reviews. FBI special agent Adele Sharp is a German-and-French raised American with triple citizenship—and an invaluable asset in bringing criminals to justice as they cross American and European borders. When a serial killer case spanning three U.S. states goes cold, Adele returns to San Francisco and to the man she hopes to marry. But after a shocking twist, a new lead surfaces and Adele is dispatched to Paris, to lead an international manhunt. Adele returns to the Europe of her childhood, where familiar Parisian streets, old friends from the DGSI and her estranged father reignite her dormant obsession with solving her own mother’s murder. All the while she must hunt down the diabolical killer, must enter the dark canals of his psychotic mind to know where he will strike next—and save the next victim before it’s too late. An action-packed mystery series of international intrigue and riveting suspense, LEFT TO DIE will have you turning pages late into the night. Books #2 and #3 in the series – LEFT TO RUN and LEFT TO HIDE – are also available for preorder!

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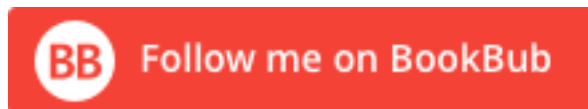
Blake Pierce

Left To Die (An Adele Sharp Mystery—Book One)

Blake Pierce

Blake Pierce is the USA Today bestselling author of the RILEY PAGE mystery series, which includes sixteen books (and counting). Blake Pierce is also the author of the MACKENZIE WHITE mystery series, comprising thirteen books (and counting); of the AVERY BLACK mystery series, comprising six books; of the KERI LOCKE mystery series, comprising five books; of the MAKING OF RILEY PAIGE mystery series, comprising five books (and counting); of the KATE WISE mystery series, comprising six books (and counting); of the CHLOE FINE psychological suspense mystery, comprising five books (and counting); of the JESSE HUNT psychological suspense thriller series, comprising five books (and counting); of the AU PAIR psychological suspense thriller series, comprising two books (and counting); of the ZOE PRIME mystery series, comprising two books (and counting); and of the new ADELE SHARP mystery series.

An avid reader and lifelong fan of the mystery and thriller genres, Blake loves to hear from you, so please feel free to visit www.blakepierceauthor.com to learn more and stay in touch.



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CHAPTER ONE

Twenty-nine, twenty-eight, twenty-seven...

The numbers played through Adele's mind like grains of hot sand slipping through an hourglass. She shifted uncomfortably, adjusting the neck pillow she'd purchased at the Central Wisconsin Airport. She pressed her forehead against the cold glass of the Boeing 737, her gaze tracing the jutting wing stabilizers and then flicking across the patches of clouds scattered across the otherwise blue horizon. How many times had she stared out of a plane window like this? Too many to count.

Twenty-six, twenty-five...

Why had he stopped at twenty-five?

Adele closed her eyes again, trying to push the thoughts from her like pus from a wound. She needed her sleep. Angus would be waiting for her back home; it wouldn't do to show up baggy-eyed and frazzled, especially not with what she guessed he had planned for tonight.

The thought of her boyfriend drove some of the worries from her and a small smile teased its way from her lips, hovering in a lopsided fashion. She half glanced through hooded eyes down at her left hand. Adele wasn't much one for jewelry, but her fingers seemed particularly bare. At thirty-two, she had half hoped, in a small, concealed part of her, that at least her ring finger would have been occupied by now.

Soon. If Jessica's texts were to be believed, and the cryptic nature of Angus's last call—soon her hand wouldn't be so bare.

She smiled again.

Why had he stopped at twenty-five?

Her smile became fixed as the thought interjected itself once more. She almost reached for the briefcase she had stowed under her seat, but then exhaled deeply through her nose, her nostrils flaring as she attempted to calm herself. She needed sleep now. The case could wait.

But could it really? He'd stopped at twenty-five. The Benjamin Killer was what they were calling him, after the story of Benjamin Button—a crass, gauche moniker for a vicious murderer. He killed them based on age. Gender, looks, ethnicity didn't matter to him. He had started with that twenty-nine-year-old man—a middle-school coach only a few years younger than Adele. The next was a woman with blonde hair and green eyes, just like Adele. It had stuck with Adele when she'd first seen the woman's photographs.

She'd worked with the FBI for nearly six years now, and she had *thought* she was good at her job. Until now. The Benjamin Killer was taunting them. For the last three weeks, Adele had visited the residences of the victims, looking for a lead, for anything that might point her to the bastard. Every two weeks, another body dropped, yet she wasn't any closer to identifying a likely suspect.

Then, last month, the pattern ceased. The killings had stopped. Adele's weeks of work traveling from Wisconsin to Ohio to Indiana, trying to put together a pattern, had turned up squat. They were at the deadest of ends.

Three weeks wasted, dwelling on the sick thoughts of a psychopath. Sometimes Adele wondered why she had joined the Bureau at all.

The FBI had contacted her directly out of college, but she had wanted to consider her options. Of course, given her three citizenships—German, French, and US—it had been a near inevitability, she supposed. Her sense of duty, her loyalty to the law, had only been further fanned into flame by her father. He'd never managed to rise higher than the rank of staff sergeant over the course of his long and dignified career, but he exemplified everything Adele admired of those in the service. Her father was a bit of a romantic. He'd been stationed in Bamberg, Germany, and married her French mother, who had given birth to Adele on a trip to the US. Thus the triple citizenship, and a daughter for whom the thought of staying put in anything smaller than a country brought on a serious case of cabin fever.

Some people called it wanderlust. But “wander” implied no direction. Adele always had a direction; it just wasn’t always obvious to those looking in from the outside.

She reached up and brushed her blonde hair out of her eyes. In the reflection of the glass window, she spotted someone staring at her over her shoulder.

The lawyer sitting in 33F. He’d been ogling her since she’d gotten on the plane.

She turned lazily, like a cat stretching in a beam of sunlight, and peered across the ample belly of the middle-aged man sleeping next to her and contributing a light dusting of snores to the ambience of the cabin.

She gave a small, sarcastic wave to the lawyer. He wasn’t bad-looking, but he had a good twenty years on her and the eyes of a predator. Not all psychopaths engaged in bloody deeds in the dead of night. Some of them lived cushy lives protected by their profession and prestige.

And yet, Adele had a nose for them, like a bloodhound with a scent.

The lawyer winked at her, but didn’t look away, his gaze lingering on her face for a moment, then sliding down her suit and traveling across her long legs. Adele’s French-American heritage had its perks when it came to the sort of attractiveness that men often described as “exotic,” but it came with downsides too.

In this case, a fifty-year-old downside in a cheap suit and even cheaper cologne. She would have guessed, based on his briefcase alone, that he was a lawyer, even if he hadn’t dropped his business card “accidentally” when he’d spotted her sliding past him into her seat.

“Want my nuts?” he said, smiling at her with crocodile teeth. He waved a small blue bag of almonds in her direction.

She stared him coolly in the eyes. “We’ve been in the air for an hour, and that’s what you came up with?”

The man smirked. “Is that a yes?”

“I’m flattered,” Adele said, though her tone suggested otherwise. “But I’m about to be engaged, thank you very much.”

The lawyer shrugged with his lips, turning the corners down in as noncommittal a gesture as likely to have ever graced a courtroom. “I don’t see a ring.”

“Tonight,” she said. “Not that it’s any of your business.”

“You’ve still got time. You want them?” He offered his almonds again.

Adele shook her head. “I don’t like that type. Too salty, small, and old—I’d check the expiration date if I were you.”

The man’s smirk became rather forced. “No need to be rude,” he muttered, beneath his breath. “Bitch,” he added as an afterthought.

“Maybe.” Adele turned away from the man, rolling her shoulders in just such a way that her suit jacket slid open, presenting the man with a perfect view of the 9mm Glock 17 strapped to her hip.

Immediately, the man turned pale, his eyes bugging in his head. He began to choke, trying to cough up an almond which had lodged in his throat.

Joining the FBI did come with its perks. Adele turned back, pressing her forehead against the window once more, trying, again, to drift off to sleep.

Her Uber driver pulled up outside the small apartment complex, coming to a squealing halt on the curb across from a large hub of mailboxes. Streetlights glowed on the gray sidewalk, illuminating the concrete and asphalt in the dark. Adele retrieved her suitcase and briefcase from the back seat, her arms heavy from the day of travel.

Three weeks since she'd seen Angus. Three weeks was a long time. She exhaled softly, tilting her head back so her chin practically pointed toward the night sky. She rolled her shoulders, stretching. She had managed to get a little sleep on the flight, but it had been at an odd angle and she could still feel the crick in her neck.

The Uber peeled away from the curb with another squeal and a screech as the driver rushed off in search of his next passenger. Adele watched it leave and then turned, marching beneath the tastefully placed palm trees that the landlord had planted the previous year. She peered up at the orange glow in the second window facing east.

Angus was still waiting up for her. It was only nine p.m., but Angus was a coder for a couple of start-ups in the city and he often kept strange hours. San Francisco: the hub of the gold rush of tech—or silicon rush as some were calling it.

Adele had never expected to be wealthy, but with the equity pay-offs Angus had received from his last company, things were about to change. And, judging by the words after his last phone call, Adele felt they might be changing very soon.

"I need to talk to you about something," he'd said. *"It's important."*

And then her friend Jennifer, an old college roommate, had spotted Angus outside Preeve & Co. on Post Street. If anyone knew the jewelers in this city, it was Jennifer.

Adele approached the apartment and pressed the buzzer. Would he pop the question tonight? Of course, she'd say yes. As much as she loved travel—exploration and adventure were in her blood—she'd always wanted to find someone to travel *with*. Angus was perfect. He was kind, funny, rich, handsome. He checked every box Adele could think of. She had a rule about dating men at the Bureau—it had never worked out well in the past.

No, dating a civilian was much more her style.

As Adele took the elevator to the second floor, she couldn't control the smile spreading across her face. This time, it wasn't the lopsided, wry look of resigned amusement she'd had on the plane while trying to fall asleep. Rather, she could feel her cheeks stretching from the effort of trying to control her grin.

It was good to be back home. She passed apartments twenty-three and twenty-five on the way to hers. For a moment, her smile faltered. She glanced back at the golden numbers etched into the metal doors of the residences. Her gaze flicked from one digit to the next, her brow furrowing over her weary eyes.

She shook her head, dislodging her troubled thoughts once more, and turned her back firmly, facing apartment twenty-seven. Home.

Lightly, she knocked on the door and waited. She had her own key, but she was too tired to fish it out of her suitcase.

Would he pop the question in the doorway? Would he give her some time to settle?

She half reached for her phone, wondering if she should call the Sergeant before he went to bed. Her father would stay up long enough to catch the rerun of *8 out of 10 Cats*, his favorite British game show, so there was still time to call him and tell him the good news.

Then again, perhaps she was getting a bit ahead of herself.

Just because Angus was spotted outside a jewelry store, didn't mean that he'd already *purchased* the ring. Perhaps he was still looking.

Adele tried to control her excitement, calming herself with a small breathing exercise.

Then the door swung open.

Angus stared out at her, blinking owlishly from behind his thin-framed glasses. He had a thick jaw, like a football player, but the curling hair of a cupid ornament. Angus was taller than her by a few inches, which was impressive given Adele's own height of five foot ten.

She stepped over the threshold, nearly tripping on something in the door, but then flung out her arms, wrapping Angus in an embrace. She leaned in, kissing him gently, closing her eyes for a moment and inhaling the familiar odor of citrus and herbal musk.

He pulled back, ever so slightly. Adele frowned, stiffening. She opened her eyes, peering up at Angus.

“Er, hey, Addie,” he said, calling her by the nickname he’d used when they’d first started dating. “Welcome back.” He scratched nervously at his chin, and Adele realized he had something strapped over his shoulder.

A duffel bag.

She took a hesitant, awkward step back, and again nearly tripped over the item in the door. She glanced down. A suitcase—not hers. Her suitcase and briefcase were still in the hall where she’d left them.

She glanced from the suitcase to Angus’s duffel bag, then back at her boyfriend.

“Hello,” she said, hesitantly. “Is everything all right?”

Now that she looked, she realized Angus’s glasses had distracted her from his eyes, which were rimmed red. He’d been crying.

“Angus, are you all right?”

She reached out for him again, but this time he ducked the gesture. Her arms fell like lead to her sides and she stared, all sense of euphoria that had been swirling in her chest in the elevator deflating from her like air from a balloon.

“I’m sorry, Addie,” he said, quietly. “I wanted to wait—to tell you in person.”

“Tell—tell me what exactly?”

Angus’s voice quavered as he looked her in the eyes. “Christ, I wish it didn’t have to be like this,” he said. “I really, really do.”

Adele could feel her own tears coming on, but she suppressed them. She’d always been good at managing her emotions. She completed another small breathing exercise; small habits, compounded over time. She looked Angus in the eye and held his gaze.

He looked away, rubbing his hands across the strap to his duffel bag in short, nervous gestures.

“It’s everything,” he said, quietly. “I won’t bother you. The place is yours. I’ll pay my side of the lease for the next year. That should give you time.”

“Time for what?”

“To find a new place, if you need. Or another roommate.” He half-choked on this last word and coughed, clearing his throat.

“I don’t understand... I thought... I thought...” Again, she suppressed the wave of emotions swelling in her. The way a sergeant’s daughter knew how. The way a trained agent knew how. She scanned him up and down and spotted the glinting silver Rolex displayed on his wrist.

Jennifer had been right. He *had* visited a jewelry store. The watch had been something he’d wanted for a while now.

“God, Addie, come on. Don’t make this tough. You knew this was coming. You had to have known this was coming...”

She simply stared at him, his words passing over her like a gusting breeze. She shook her head against the sound, trying to make sense of it. But while she could hear him, it sounded like his voice was echoing up from a deep well.

“I didn’t see it,” she said, simply.

“Typical,” Angus said with a sigh. He shook his head and pointed toward the kitchen table. “My key is there. All the bills are paid and the stubs are beneath the coffee tray. You’ll need to water and feed Gregory, but I stocked up enough for the month.”

Adele hadn’t thought about the turtle they’d gotten together. She hadn’t had much time to take care of the thing. At least Angus had.

“What do you mean?” she said.

“About Gregory? I figured you might want him. I’ll take him if you don’t, but I didn’t want to steal him if you cared or—”

“You can have the damn turtle. I mean why did you say ‘typical.’ What’s typical?”

Angus sighed again. “We really don’t have to do this. I—I don’t know what else to say.”

“Something. You haven’t said *anything*. I come home from three weeks on a work trip to find my boyfriend of two years packed up ready to leave. I feel like I deserve *some* explanation.”

“I gave you one! Over the phone. I said we needed to talk when you got back. Well, here’s the talk. I’ve got to go; I have an Uber coming.”

Vaguely, Adele wondered with a dull humor if the same Uber driver would come pick Angus up.

“Over the phone? You talked about a movie night, right? Said something about going out with your friends.”

“Yes, Addie, and I said that I was tired of not having you with me. Remember that part? Christ, for an investigator you sure suck at figuring out what’s beneath your nose. You’ve been gone for twenty days, Addie! This is the third time this year. Sometimes it feels like I’m dating a phone app, and that’s *when* you have time for a quick ten-minute call.”

Adele shook her head. She stepped back and retrieved her own luggage from the hall and dragged it over the suitcase in the door. She shook her head as she moved, frowning. “That’s not fair.”

“Isn’t it?”

“I thought...” She trailed off again, still shaking her head. She glanced down at her left hand and felt a sudden surge of embarrassment. Humiliation was the one emotion she had never quite learned how to suppress. She felt it swirl through her, bubbling in her stomach like hot tar. She felt her temper rising and set her teeth. Growing up with three passports, three nationalities, three *loyalties* as some saw it, Adele had been forced to weather all sorts of comments and jibes at her appearance, at her heritage. She had thick skin, with some things. Pervs on board jet planes were easy enough to handle.

But vulnerability? Intimacy? Failing in those areas always left her with a deep pit of self-loathing formed by humiliation and fear. She could feel it clawing its way through her now, ripping apart her calm, tearing down her facade.

“Fine,” she said, her face stony. “Fine then. If you want to leave, then leave.”

“Look, it doesn’t have to be like that,” Angus said, and she could hear the hurt in his voice. “I just can’t do it, Addie. I miss you too much.”

“You have a hell of a way of showing it. You wanna know what’s funny? Christ—I can’t even believe it.” She snorted in disgust at her own stupidity. “I thought you were going to marry me. I thought you were going to propose. Ha!”

Angus shook his head in small, jagged little motions that caused his curly hair to shift. “You’re already married, Adele. And you’re loyal—I know you won’t cheat.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I should have known when we first started dating. The signs were there. But you’re just so damn pretty, sexy, smart. You’re the most driven person I know. I guess—I guess I didn’t want to see it. But you’re married to your job. I’m second place. Every time.”

“That’s not—”

“True? Really? Say it if you believe it. Tell me that next time you get a call to go out of state for three weeks that you’ll turn it down. You’ll request to stay at the office here. Tell me you’ll do that, and I’ll stay. Hell, I’ll march right back in our room and unpack this damn minute. Tell me you’ll say no if they call.”

Adele stared at him, the hurt in his voice and in his eyes pricking her pride and deflating her once more. She studied his eyes behind the glasses. She hadn’t realized just how long his eyelashes were over his dark stare. It hurt to look at him, so she averted her gaze.

“See,” he said after a moment of silence. “You can’t. You can’t promise that you’ll choose me first. I hope it’s worth it, Addie. It’s just a job.”

He began to step past her, into the hall.

Adele didn’t turn, preferring to stare sightless across the small space of their cramped apartment.

“It isn’t,” she said, listening to the sound of Angus’s retreating footsteps. “It’s not just a job...” She clenched her fists at her sides. “It isn’t.”

She heard him heave a massive sigh. She could feel him watching her, paused in the middle of the hallway. For a moment, she half hoped he would turn back, tell her it was all some big mistake. But after a moment, he said, “There’s food in the microwave, Addie. I saved you some leftovers in the fridge as well. You should be good for a couple of days.”

Then the elevator doors dinged, there was the sound of shuffling feet and rolling wheels, and when Adele turned back around, Angus was gone.

CHAPTER TWO

Stars winked down at Marion, coy twinkles of light witnessing the twenty-four-year-old woman's progress from the small coffee shop out into the heart of the city's night. The many odors of the Seine wafted on the air, confronting her with the scent of river musk and the residue of the bakeries which had closed until morning. The blare from the horns of impatient drivers replaced the usual sounds of bells which normally tolled across the city. She heard a low, buzzing noise. Listened for only a moment, then placed the sound as that of a tourist boat zipping by beneath the arching structure of the Pont d'Arcole.

Marion exhaled softly as she stepped from the coffee shop onto the sidewalk, taking it all in. This was her city. She'd lived here her whole life and had no intention of ever leaving. One could grow old and still not find all the adventures hidden within the historic place. She nodded in greeting at an elderly couple walking past, recognizing them from the intersection of their nighttime routines.

"Off into the night, I see?" said the old man in rasping, clipped French, speaking with the undertones of a fellow from the countryside. He winked as he passed and then winced as the accompanying madame tweaked his ear.

"As always, monsieur," Marion called back, meeting his smile. "Out to meet some friends."

She bid the couple farewell with a nod and a skip in her step. Then she strolled up the sidewalk, heading toward the river and turning on the corner. She often walked alone late at night—it had never bothered her. This part of the city was well lit, after all, wreathed in security lights and traffic beams which reflected off the glass of the many windows spotting the apartments and shops.

She moved along the sidewalk, turning down another street in the direction of the club where her friends would be waiting. She hotfooted along the illuminated walkways as she checked her phone, spotting an unopened message.

Before she could read the text, however, Marion heard a noise behind her, which distracted her from her phone for the moment. She glanced down the illuminated street, scanning the stone steps and stairwells of the many looming buildings. A stone's throw away, a man limped along, holding a small bundle in one arm. A moment passed. Then the bundle emitted a crying sound, and the man ducked his head in embarrassment, making shushing noises and trying to calm the infant.

Marion smiled at the man and his baby, then returned her attention to her phone. She tapped the screen to read the message. But before she could...

"Hello, little woman, is all things good and well?"

She turned, startled by the broken French as much as the sudden proximity of the man and his child. He was now walking alongside her, making cooing noises toward the bundle in his arms every couple of steps. She frowned at him for a moment, gathering her nerve. Then she stowed her phone. The text would have to wait. She never wanted it said that Paris was as inhospitable as some of those in the tourist districts wished it were.

The man wore his smile like makeup and his eyes twinkled genially, reminding her of the sparse stars above which had managed to push their way through the city lights.

"All things are well," she said, nodding. "How is your evening?"

The man shrugged, causing the wool cap on his head to shift a little. He reached up and tugged it off with his free hand, stowing it on top of the bundle in his arm.

This struck her as rather odd, and she said as much. It was as her mother always said: the women of Paris ought never fear their opinions.

"You will smother the child," she said, pointing toward the hat.

The man nodded as if he agreed, but made no move to adjust the garment. He seemed, almost, to be waiting for something. He scratched at his red hair, which tumbled past his face in loose, sweaty strands.

After a moment, he caught her eye. “The child likes shade,” he said. His French still came on with a thick accent. “Say, do you know the course to—to—how do you say it—the water structure? No—hmm, the bridge!”

Marion shook her head in momentary confusion, but then smiled back at the man, meeting his pleasant expression with one of her own. “There are a few bridges. The nearest one is along this street, across the walk and down the stairs near the wharf.”

The man winced in confusion, shaking his head and tapping his ear. “What is this?”

She repeated the instructions, carefully. Obviously, this man was a lost tourist, though she couldn’t quite place his accent.

Again, the man winced, holding up his free hand apologetically and shaking his head once more.

Marion sighed. She glanced over her shoulder, back up the street in the direction of the club. Her friends would be waiting. Then she returned her attention to the man and his child, her eyes darting to his pleading expression, and she felt a surge of pity.

“I will show you, all right? It isn’t far. Follow me, sir.” She turned, heading back the way she had come. She suppressed all the bitter thoughts about tourists that half the city circulated in casual conversation. She quite liked tourists, even if they were a bit dense.

The man seemed to understand her well enough this time and fell into step, cradling his child with the cap on top.

“You is a demon,” said the man, his tone filled with gratitude.

Marion frowned at this.

The man hesitated, then urgently amended, “No—I mean *angel*. So sorry. Not demon—you is angel!”

Marion laughed, shaking her head. With a wink of her own, she said, “Perhaps I am a bit demon, too, hmm?”

This time it was the man’s turn to laugh. The baby cried again beneath the hat and the man turned, whispering sweetly to his child.

They crossed the street and Marion led the man down the stairs by the wharf. Already, the bridge was in sight, but the man seemed so distracted with his child that Marion felt bad about abandoning him without taking him direct.

As they descended the stairs, dipping beneath a dank, stone overpass, the area became less illuminated. There were far fewer people around now.

“We are here,” said the man, his French markedly improved all of a sudden.

Marion glanced at him, then noticed something odd. The man noticed her gaze and then gave an apologetic shrug. He dropped the blanket. A small, toy baby—the type that would cry with their bellies pushed—was strapped to the man’s forearm. The baby’s plastic eyes peered out at Marion.

The man winked. “I told you he likes the shade.”

Marion wrinkled her brow in pleasant confusion.

A moment too late, she saw the surgeon’s scalpel in the man’s left hand. Then he shoved her, hard, the plastic doll crying quietly in the night.

CHAPTER THREE

Adele stood before the stone steps of the school, eyeing the crowd of children with the greatest of suspicion. She shook her head once, then glanced up at her mother. Her gaze didn't have to travel far; already, Adele was taller than most of her classmates. She had hit a growth spurt when she still lived in Germany, with the Sergeant, and it hadn't seemed to stop until this year.

Now fifteen, Adele found the boys in Paris paid more attention to her than the ones in Germany had. Still, as she stood studying the flow of students into the bilingual secondary school, she couldn't help but feel a jolt of anxiety.

"What is it, my Cara?" her mother asked, smiling sweetly at her daughter.

Adele wrinkled her nose at the nickname, wiping her hands over the front of her school sweater and twisting the buttons on the cotton sleeves. Her mother had grown up in France, and had particular fondness for the Carambar caramels which were still popular in candy shops and gas stations. She often said the jokes written on the outside of the caramel's wrappers were a lot like Adele: clever on the outside with a soft and sweet middle. The description made Adele gag.

Adele Sharp had her mother's hair and good looks, but she often thought she had her father's eyes and outlook.

"They are so noisy," Adele replied in French, the words slow and clumsy on her tongue. The first twelve years of her life had been spent in Germany; re-acclimating to French was taking some time.

"They are children, my Cara. They are supposed to be noisy; you should try it."

Adele frowned, shaking her head. The Sergeant had never approved of noisy children. Noise provided only distraction. It was the tool of fools and sluggish thinkers.

"It is the best school in Paris," said her mother, reaching out a cool hand to cup her daughter's cheek. "Give it a try, hmm?"

"Why can't I homeschool like last year?"

"Because it is not good for you to stay trapped in that apartment with me—no, no." Her mother clicked her tongue, making a tscking sound. "This is not good for you. You enjoyed swimming at your old school, didn't you? Well, there is an excellent team here. I spoke with my friend Anna, and she says her daughter made tryouts the first year."

Adele shrugged with a shoulder, smiling with one side of her mouth. She sighed and then dipped her head, trying not to stand out over the other children so much.

Her mother gave her a kiss on the cheek, which Adele returned halfheartedly. She turned to leave, hefting her school bag over one shoulder. As she trudged toward the school, the sound of the bell and milling children faded. The secondary school flashed and the walls turned gray.

Adele shook her head, confused. She turned back toward the curb. "Mother?" she said, her voice shaky. She was now in the park at night.

"Cara," voices whispered around her from the looming, dark trees.

She stared. Twenty-two years old. It had all ended at twenty-two.

Her mother lay on the side of the bike trail, in the grass, bleeding, bleeding, bleeding...

Always bleeding.

Her dead eyes peered up at her daughter. Adele was no longer twenty-two. Now she was twenty-three, joining the DGSI, working her first case—the death of her mother. Then she was twenty-six, working for the FBI. Then thirty-two.

Tick-tock. Bleeding.

Elise Romei was missing three fingers on each hand; her eyes had been pierced. Cuts laced up and down her cheeks in curious, beautiful patterns as if gouged into felt, glistening red.

Tick-tock. Adele screamed as the blood pooled around her mother, filling the bike trail, flooding the grass and the dirt, threatening to consume her, to overwhelm her...

Adele jerked awake, gasping, her teeth clenched around the edge of her blanket, biting hard to stop the scream bubbling in her throat.

She sat there in her bed, in her and Angus's small apartment, staring across the darkened room, breathing rapidly. It was all right; it was over. She was fine.

She reached out, groping for the comforting warmth of Angus, but her fingertips brushed only cool sheets. Then she remembered the previous night.

Adele clenched her teeth, closing her eyes for a moment. The air felt chilly all of a sudden. She reached up and brushed back her hair. Every bone in her wanted to lie back down, to return to the warmth and safety of her covers. Sleep frightened her sometimes, but her bed was always a welcome shelter.

She forced her eyes open, clenching one fist and bunching it around her pajamas beneath the covers.

Safety and warmth bred weakness. The Sergeant had often said, when she was growing up, that the difference between sluggards and winners was their first decision in the morning. Those who put their heads back to the pillow would never amount to much in life.

And while she was no longer a six-year-old little girl, Adele still swung her legs over the side of the bed, kicking off her covers. Slapping her feet against the vinyl floor. With practiced and deft motions she made her bed, arranging her sheets and tucking the corners of the blankets beneath the mattress.

She moved across the room toward where the turtle sat in her glass display case. She and Angus had argued about the gender of the creature—they still weren't sure. Angus thought of him as a boy, yet to Adele, the turtle was clearly a girl. The thought of Angus sent a jolt of discomfort through her, and she swallowed, pushing back the surge of emotion.

Using the provided spoon, she measured the turtle's food into its aquarium, watching the creature meander slowly around the habitat of small stones and faux leaves. Gregory had woken up before her—how embarrassing.

She glanced at the red numbers on the digital clock by her bedside. 4:25 a.m. Perfect. She'd woken before the alarm had gone off. The start to any good routine required an attuned body.

Adele quickly dressed into her jogging clothes and left her apartment. There was no sense in waking early unless she put her time to good use, so 4:30 to 6:00 every morning was the slot for her morning run. Some people listened to music while they exercised, but Adele found that it distracted her. Effort and discomfort required attention.

When she returned from her jog, Adele went directly to the cupboard over the stove, dragging out a box of Chocapic. She wiped sweat from her forehead and focused on her breathing as she poured herself a bowl of the chocolate cereal. She ordered it from France—a small luxury, but a childhood favorite. They didn't make cereal the same way in the US.

Adele grabbed her cereal and a spoon, then hurried to the shower. Small habits compounded through time. Minutes wasted in the morning led to minutes wasted in the day. Angus had often teased her about eating cereal in the shower, especially that time when she'd accidentally swallowed soap, but it was another habit of hers she refused to give up. The secret to success lay in routine.

It was as she stepped out of the shower, toweling her hair with one hand and carrying an empty bowl in the other, that Adele heard her phone chirp from the other room.

She glanced at the digital clock beneath the steamed mirror, frowning. She kept a clock in every room. 6:12 a.m.

Strange. Who would be calling her this early?

Adele quickly dried off and got dressed, pulling her shirt on as she hurried out the bathroom door and stumbled into the kitchen.

"Hello?" she said, lifting the phone to her ear.

"Agent Sharp?" said the voice on the other end.

“Yes?”

“It’s Sam. We need you to come in.”

Adele frowned, lowering her faded, plastic Mickey Mouse bowl into the sink. “As in now?”

“As in an hour ago. You better hurry.”

“You sure? I was told I had three days.”

There was a sigh on the other end and the sound of voices in the background.

“Vacation is going to have to wait, Sharp.”

“Can I ask why?”

“The Benjamin Killer dropped another body last night. How soon can you—”

“I’m on my way.”

Adele didn’t even clean her bowl—normally a sacrilege in her house—before rushing to don her work clothes, shoes, and jacket and racing out the door.

Twenty-six. Twenty-five. Twenty-four.

CHAPTER FOUR

Speed limits often felt like suggestions when new leads developed in a case. Still, Adele did her best not to rankle San Francisco's finest—especially not this early in the day. The closer she got to the heart of the city, the more the traffic slowed.

She tapped her fingers against the wheel in frustration, berating the drivers around her silently in her head. As she glared out of the tinted window of her Ford sedan, Adele couldn't help but wonder if perhaps Angus was right. Maybe she was married to the job.

A three-day vacation—that's what they'd promised her. Yet, here she was, rushing into work the moment they snapped their fingers and whistled. Just like a good little girl.

Adele clenched her teeth, pushing the thought from her mind. It wouldn't do to dwell on such things. Especially not with what was at stake.

Who had he killed? Would they be able to find new evidence?

"I'm coming for you, you bastard," she murmured. "I'll get you this time." Adele had spent years trying to shed the accent developed over a life lived overseas. But when she got upset or angry, traces of her heritage would peek through, making themselves known in the lilt of her words. "Damn it," she muttered, slowing her speech, flattening the vowels. "Damn it," she repeated, more precise, more careful. No emotion. No accent. "Damn it," a final time. Hours like this, in front of a mirror, had all but chased the reminders of her past from her speech.

She nodded in satisfaction, then glanced over and realized the woman in the lane next to her had her window down and was staring at Adele, her plucked eyebrows high on her fat-injected forehead.

Sheepishly, Adele rolled up her own window. She flashed a smile and a wave, then stared resolutely ahead for the rest of the slow, snail's pace of a drive. She made one more stop just before reaching the office—pulling through a Starbucks drive-through and grabbing a large black, no sugar.

She reached the private lot for the San Francisco field office a half hour later. The two layers of security hadn't caused trouble once she flashed her ID. She adjusted her jacket and doubled-checked the buttons as she hurried into the east branch through the elevator from the car park.

Another row of metal detectors and men in suits with bored expressions, who smelled like stale coffee and cigarettes, eventually gave way to a long, beige hallway.

"Agent Sharp," said one of the older men, tipping an imaginary cap in her direction from where he squatted on a three-legged stool between the metal detectors.

"Hey, Doug," she greeted him with a wave. She smiled at the man, admiring the neat press of his collar and the shine of his shoes. "Looking sharp as always."

He chuckled, a low, rasping sound. Doug had been a field worker about twenty years ago, but had taken some shrapnel on his last assignment which had confined him to the office. His inability to make rank, however, had nothing to do with shrapnel and everything to do with a complete disdain for office politics. Some in the office thought the elevators needed a "Beware of Doug!" sign. He rarely played nice with others, yet had taken a fondness to Adele that had nothing to do with her gender or her looks. She extended the black, sugarless coffee on top of the X-ray machine, leaving the steaming liquid next to the security officer's scarred hand—two fingers were missing, also courtesy of the car bomb that had claimed his career.

"Just how I like it?"

"Thick and bitter with a little bit of caffeine," Adele said, stepping through the security checkpoint and retrieving her briefcase on the other side.

"Just like you, Doug," said one of the other men with a snorting laugh.

"Shut your mouth, slick," retorted the guard. His expression soured, but he turned so the other man couldn't see and winked at Adele, a twinkle in his gaze.

She rolled her eyes. “Sometimes I wonder if I’m enabling you. Caffeine is a killer—mark my words. Give it fifteen years and the FDA is bound to—”

“Yada, yada,” Doug said, and then he tipped the coffee, downing half the cup in two gulps. “Feel free to enable me all you want. Anyway, don’t let us old fogeys keep you, sport. You got the shimmer.”

She turned to leave with a farewell wave, but then paused, heel half raised. “The shimmer?”

“In the eyes. Something’s brewing, right? No—don’t tell me. Might bump my head.”

“Not enough clearance. I get you. But you’re right. Something is up. I’ll see you fellas around—Doug, Steve.” She nodded to both men in turn and then hastened up the beige hallway, her shoes tapping against the marble floor and squeaking every few steps.

She took a turn past an old-fashioned water cooler and some potted plants, then hurried along a row of tight cubicles. The familiar sound of polite murmuring as folks went about their business, answering calls, printing, faxing, clicking away at their keyboards—all of it filled her with a nauseating sense of dread. There were those in the Bureau who wanted her behind a desk. The thought alone terrified her more than any bullet or case.

She reached an opaque glass door set behind a large, rectangular pillar, which nearly completely obscured the door from view. She swallowed, her hand reaching for the handle. For a moment, she paused, listening, gathering her thoughts. Who was this latest victim? Why had he taken a month-long break from his killing? She’d done good work, but he’d slipped through her fingers before. The bosses had to realize that, right?

From the room, she could hear a quiet murmur of voices—one of them soft, even-toned, the other fuzzy and diluted through the glass.

She turned the handle, tapped a courtesy knock with the hand carrying her briefcase, and then pushed into the room.

Three figures waited for her. One sat by the window, a balding man with a long nose, down which he peered into the street below. Another man, taller than average with a strong jaw and a pen behind one ear, sat by a desk, eyeing a large fifty-two-inch TV screen over a conference table.

The other woman in the room was also sitting, but on the edge of the table, her suit pants stained just over the pocket. All three of them, including the face on the TV, reacted to Adele’s entrance.

“Sharp,” said the tall man with a nod. “Glad you could make it.”

“Sam,” she said, returning the gesture of greeting. “What did I miss? And who’s the pixels?”

“Sharp,” said the woman seated at the table, turning slightly so she faced the door. Lee Grant was one of Adele’s few friends in the department, and though she kept her tone professional, there was a weight of concern behind her glance. “How was your flight?”

Adele shrugged. “Long, boring. Sleazy lawyer in business.”

Grant rolled her eyes. “The usual then?”

Adele chuckled softly. “About the sum of it.”

“Well,” said Agent Lee, “we were waiting for you to get started. The pixels, as you put it, belong to DGSi exec Thierry Foucault. I believe you two have a history.”

Adele’s eyebrows invaded the personal space of her hairline, and she circled the table, setting her briefcase down and turning for a better look at the screen. A hawk-faced man with thick eyebrows and even thicker cheekbones glared out from the screen, his eyes flicking around the room. “I don’t believe we’ve had the pleasure,” she said, slowly, racking her brain for any memory of the man’s face.

“The young lady—this is Sharp?” said the face on the screen, still giving the appearance of scowling, though Adele was starting to suspect this had more to do with the arrangement of his features than of his current mood.

Adele tilted her head in a nod.

“I was still at the embassy when you worked for DGSi.” The speakers crackled for a moment, and Adele leaned in, straining to hear. The sound cleared a moment later as Foucault continued. “Four years? Five? A pity you left. France can always use talent like yours.”

Adele had no doubt her file sat in front of the executive, but she kept her smile polite. “It was four. I learned a lot in my position in Paris. I doubt the FBI would have recruited me without the experience.”

“This is the way of it, no?” said Foucault, smirking through the screen. “France creates the things most valued by America, hmm. It is no matter . . . I—I did wonder,” he said, slowly, his eyes flicking down for a moment, confirming Adele’s suspicion about the file. “Why was it you left, eh? Not the weather, I hope.”

Lee glanced toward Adele, then quickly interjected, “Perhaps now isn’t the best time to discuss it,” she said. “We ought to focus on the task at hand.”

But the man on the screen was already wagging his finger. “No, no. It is important DGSi knows who it is we work with. France is no jilted lover—it is important we know who we take back, hmm?”

Adele tried to conceal her frown. What did he mean *take back*? Agent Lee tried to interject again, but Adele cut her boss off.

“It’s really quite simple,” said Adele, hiding her frown behind pressed lips and an impassive stare. “I tracked a killer in France, and he didn’t turn out to be who I thought he was. I felt like it was time for a change.” *Bleeding. Bleeding. Always bleeding.* Adele shivered as her dream flashed through her mind, but she stowed the thought with a swallow and a proud tilt of her chin. She shrugged toward the screen, feeling her suit jacket slide across her shoulders.

Of course, she wasn’t mentioning the months of PTSD after tracking the killer and discovering he wasn’t the culprit behind her mother’s torturous murder. Nor did she feel it appropriate to mention the American forensic psychologist whom she’d traveled to the States with, hoping to set down roots. Chances were, Foucault had all of it in his little file, but as far as she was concerned, it was nobody’s business but hers.

“Does that settle it then?” said Agent Lee, glaring at the screen. She pushed off of the conference table and strode past the man with the hooked nose still standing quietly by the window.

“There is nothing to be settled,” said the screen.

“Not yet, no,” Grant replied, still frowning. “But it might be in everyone’s best interests to let the bygones pass and discuss the events of last night.”

Adele felt a flash of gratitude for her superior. Lee Grant wasn’t just named after two generals on opposing sides in the American Civil War, but she commanded an authority that any agent would willingly follow into battle. Lee’s eyes often narrowed in such a way that they became little more than stormy slits in her naturally tan complexion. The child of an American and a Cuban immigrant, Lee was one of the few people in the office who understood Adele’s roots, especially given the less-than-six-year age gap between them.

“Well,” said Foucault, his voice echoing slightly through the TV speakers. “Do we wait for more, or may we begin?”

Grant glanced at the fellow by the window, who had yet to breach his silence. “I don’t see any point in prolonging any further.”

“Very sorry, very sorry, Executive Foucault,” said the man with the hooked nose at last. He turned away from the glass and leaned his hands against the conference table, staring at the large screen. “Special Agent Sharp has been working this case stateside as Agent Lee mentioned before—we thought it best she was here.”

Adele didn’t recognize this man, but he had the suit and the attitude of a diplomat, or some sort of low-level supervisor who only came out of the woodwork when agencies needed to play nice.

“As for formal introductions: this is SAC Lee Grant,” said the suit, indicating Adele’s boss. “She’s overseeing the investigation. You obviously know Agent Sharp. And Sam Green works for

tech.” The tall man with the pen tucked behind his ear who was seated behind everyone gave a polite little wave, but remained silent.

Foucault nodded politely at each in turn. Then he said, “A pity we could not meet in better circumstances. I have more information since last we spoke. The missing girl is named Marion Lucas. Twenty-four years of age. We are still waiting on some tests, but it is with relative certainty that I can inform you the body we found yesterday matches the pictures provided by Marion’s mother.”

“You mentioned on the call something about shallow cuts,” said Agent Lee, trailing off and allowing the silence to fill the space between her and the TV.

For the first time, Foucault’s lips formed a thin, grim line. “I’ll have someone in the office send the report along.” He gave the smallest shake of his head, causing a strand of slicked hair to fall over his eyes, which he brushed back with one hand, sighing with the motion. “I’ve got to warn you. It isn’t pretty.”

Adele cleared her throat. “You’re sure she was twenty-four?”

Everyone turned toward Adele as if surprised she would interject. An unspoken rhythm governed conversations like these, where a sort of hierarchy dictated the pace of the conversation and permission to speak. But the last thing on Adele’s mind right now was office etiquette.

“Yes,” Foucault replied. “Verified only hours ago.”

Adele shook her head, adjusting her sleeves as she often did when upset or angry. “The killer—did anyone see him?”

“Like I said, we’ll send the report over. It’s important we all—”

“Did you find the body?”

Foucault frowned at Adele. “Yes. He left it where he killed her. Beneath an underpass near the Pont d’Arcole.”

Agent Lee raised a well-manicured eyebrow, her hand absentmindedly passing over the stain on her pocket. Often, Lee would spend full days at the office. She was a notorious insomniac who spent most of her time either working or thinking about work. She cleared her throat now, shooting a questioning glance toward her subordinate.

“A bridge,” Adele explained. “In Paris. Cause of death?” This question she lobbed back toward the screen.

“Exsanguination.” The same grim line creased Foucault’s mouth. “Small cuts, up and down the body. Missing her shoes and shirt. We believe he took those with him. Cuts between the webbing of her toes, along her arms, her cheeks, her breasts. It will all be included in the report.”

Adele could hear her own breathing. The air in the office felt very cold all of a sudden and bumps stood up along her skin. “He let her bleed out.” She turned sharply toward Agent Lee. “The same MO as the Benjamin Killer.”

“The body was found by a couple of tourists,” Foucault added.

Adele gritted her teeth, shaking her head wildly. “I don’t get it. Why’s he in France all of a sudden?”

“It’s been a month,” Agent Lee replied. “Maybe you were getting close.”

“But I wasn’t!” Adele looked at the screen and shook her head. “We don’t have a clue who it is.”

Grant stood framed against the window, standing next to the hook-nosed suit, glancing between Adele and Foucault. Grant said, “Maybe you got closer than you think. Maybe he got spooked some other way. Whatever the case, he could have fled the States for Paris.”

“But to kill in another country? So soon after leaving? Most murderers need time to acclimate. He wouldn’t be comfortable in his surroundings yet. Why strike so soon?”

Lee Grant tapped her teeth with her fingers. The still unnamed suit by the window glanced between the women, keeping quiet like a spectator at a tennis match.

“It isn’t always hard to acclimate,” said Grant. “Vacationers can be ruthless. Remember the incident at the resort down in Tijuana?”

Adele wrinkled her nose. “We don’t know it’s a vacationer, though. What if... What if he’s from Paris?” she said, slowly, savoring the thought. “What if he was in the US on vacation?”

Grant pursed her lips, pressing her back against the tall window. “Interesting thought. Maybe. Either way, traveling to Paris gave him the impetus he needed to strike again.”

“If that’s his mindset, then he’ll only get worse,” said Adele.

Foucault had been sitting quietly, listening for the last couple of minutes. But at this last comment, he broke his peace. “Exactly. And this is the topic of the day, Agent Sharp.”

This time, it was Adele’s turn to tilt an eyebrow in the direction of her supervisor. Agent Lee sighed. “I wanted to tell you in person. I know you had three days off—I know what the last month must have been like. I’m sure it’s been hard on you and Angus.” Her lips curved in a sympathetic way. “But you know everything about this bastard, Adele. He’s going to kill again. You know it, and so do I.”

“What are you asking?”

“They need you in Paris,” said Grant. “I’ve already discussed it with the department supervisors.”

Adele was already shaking her head though, and turned her back on the screen, pacing the room before rounding on Foucault once more. Except now, she was watching Lee, framing her friend against the backdrop of the glowing screen.

“No one knows this guy better than you, Adele,” said Grant. “The DCSI wants you on the ground. You have ties to both agencies, and with your dual citizenship—”

“Triple,” Adele said, softly.

“Come again?”

“Triple citizenship. I’m German, too.”

Grant nodded quickly. “Yes, of course. Triple citizenship. You’re uniquely positioned, Adele.”

“Are you telling me?”

Agent Lee immediately shook her head, causing her chestnut hair, which she always wore in a simple ponytail, to swish back and forth. “No. It’s your call. But if you agree, you’ll have to go now. There’s no time to wait. You’ll have to take your vacation some other time.”

As static crackled the room, coming from the direction of the TV, Foucault’s lips were moving, but she couldn’t hear what he was saying.

“Christ, Sam,” snapped Adele. “We’re the goddamn FBI. Think we could have a clean call?”

The tall tech—who’d remained seated throughout all of this, quiet and watching—was already hurrying over, fiddling with buttons on the TV.

After a moment, the static faded. Foucault tested the mic and then, peering across the room, his eyes slightly off-center—though Adele suspected on his screen, he was staring straight at her—he said, “Well, Agent Sharp? France will have you back. Will you come to Paris?”

“No,” said Adele. Immediately, she felt a jolt of worry. The words had come unbidden to her lips, summoned from deep within her, the residue of past decisions bubbling to the surface.

She couldn’t go to France. Not now. Not so soon after...

She glanced around the room, realizing all eyes were on her. The lights above felt bright all of a sudden, her own breathing sounded loud to her ears. She reached up one hand, rubbing at an elbow but refusing to stare at the ground, though everything in her wanted to avert her gaze.

Christ, Sharp, you’d really throw away a career just to avoid... Avoid what, exactly? Lee Grant said nothing, studying her subordinate with a compassionate expression. Foucault and the diplomat were frowning, but Adele glanced away, locking eyes with Lee.

Of everyone in the room, Agent Lee had her back. But still, refusing a request like this from the higher-ups didn’t come without consequences.

Adele set her jaw and straightened her posture. “I—I can’t go back. Not yet...” *Why not, Cara? Come home.*

Adele shivered and shook her head even more adamantly. “No. I just can’t...I...” She trailed off, images from her dreams flashing through her mind. Memories of a childhood, of a life once lived, played like shadow puppets across her mind. She thought of Doug in security. Perhaps that was to be her fate: relegated to a metal detector with her own sign, *Beware of Sharp: refuses to play nice*.

Career was one thing... But this... This was too close to home. She inhaled slowly, trying to clear her mind. It didn’t *have* to be like last time, did it? Her mother’s case was cold. She wouldn’t absorb herself in it. Not again. This was about the Benjamin Killer. This was about this girl, Marion, and whoever the next victim would be.

Could she really say no? What was she staying for anyway? It wasn’t like Angus had stayed. Why should she?

“Think about it,” said Foucault, studying her. “I’ll send the case file and the doctor’s report. Perhaps you’ll have insight we missed, hmm?”

Adele nodded. She could read a report. Where was the harm in that? Just one lousy report.

“Fine,” said Adele. “Sam, can you forward it to me?”

One small, measly little case file. Perhaps there’d be a clue, after all. Adele puffed her cheeks, then blew softly, exhaling in an effort to steady her nerves.

Why was he killing based on age alone? What did it all mean? *Bleeding, bleeding, ever bleeding...*

Another crime scene, another killer, another murder. All of it flashed through Adele’s mind, leaving cold prickles across her skin as she stared resolutely out the tall glass windows. When would the Benjamin Killer stop? It was like a countdown—a challenge.

He wouldn’t stop on his own. It was the wrong question. The real question echoed, unvoiced in Adele’s brain: when would someone catch him?

She could feel the eyes in the room staring at her, watching, accusing, waiting...

CHAPTER FIVE

The airplane's cabin echoed with the sound of the churning engines. Adele leaned back in her seat, savoring the comfort of first class. She stretched, arching her back as she clasped the armrests with her hands. She reached up and adjusted the small knob that turned on the air conditioning, and then brushed her hair aside as airflow wafted through the cabin. No sleazy lawyers this time.

It had taken Lee all of five minutes to convince Adele to go to Paris.

Her supervisor always knew what to say. And, in this particular case, she hadn't said anything. At least, for the most part.

Adele could still feel her supervisor's gaze boring holes into the side of her skull. Her own mind had done the persuading. Far too many people were given a pass for the sake of someone else's comfort. Killers escaped because of lazy law enforcement. These murderers, these monsters, didn't deserve Adele's complacency. She wouldn't permit them her exhaustion. Nor would she allow them, ever, her fear of her past.

It had been a while since she'd been in France. And, if she was perfectly honest, she missed it.

She blended in well enough, and could speak the language to a degree few people suspected her of being a tourist.

Adele shifted, readjusting her position against the headrest. She steadied herself, breathing softly, inhaling for seven seconds, then exhaling for eight. A small breathing exercise her psychologist boyfriend had once taught her. The same boyfriend she'd come back stateside with.

That relationship had plummeted in a fiery crash. Adele had never been great at dealing with other people's character flaws. Some thought of her as self-righteous, but she considered herself determined.

And when the psych had cheated on her with a mutual friend, she'd decided the relationship had run its course.

Adele reached beneath her seat, pulling out her briefcase and fumbling for the laptop.

Sam had downloaded the report and the files from DGSI before she left. She hadn't wanted to look at them in the car, on the way to the airport. She'd been permitted to pack a small suitcase, which had taken her all of twenty minutes. She didn't travel with much luxury; besides the few changes of clothes and toiletries, Adele had only packed her plastic cereal bowl and a spoon.

She felt her fingers trembling a bit as she clicked the latch to her laptop and opened the computer. She shifted, turning the screen toward the window and away from the aisle. Her eyes flicked up and spotted a couple of children sitting in business class six rows back. It wouldn't do for them to see the screen, and so she shielded it with her body and turned the lid even further.

Of course, she hadn't wasted the drive to the airport. Going over the files of the previous victims had been no enjoyable task, but it had been a necessary one. The killer seemed to have no particular taste Adele could spot. He chose his victims at random, except for their ages.

Her head pounded, and Adele closed her eyes, loath to witness what she knew she'd find. Images played on repeat across the insides of her eyelids. Angus had accused her of being married to the job.

He was only half right.

She was married to the ghosts of victims past. Wed in sheer will to those whose voiceless lips cried for justice.

Jeremy Benthon. Twenty-nine. Father of two. The Benjamin Killer had rushed this time—his first kill. At least, the first that Adele could trace to him. She could see, in her mind, as clear as if a video were playing before her: Jeremy's body on the ground, shoved between the middle-school gym and the dumpster. He was the head coach of the junior basketball team. Two gloves discarded near a fire hydrant. The lab had failed to pull prints.

Jeremy had been cut along his chest and groin, and one of his eyes had been slashed. Shaky cuts—adrenaline from the killer’s first. None of the wounds were enough to kill the middle-school coach. Rather, the killer would incapacitate his victims. He was using a substance, but the toxicology reports still weren’t clear. It wasn’t chloroform, and it wasn’t Rohypnol. Whatever he was administering was a combination of sorts, a home brew.

Then, when he had his victims incapacitated, he would go to work.

The second victim. Tasha Hunt. That’s when Adele had determined the killer was using a scalpel. His cuts had become steadier, more confident. Rehearsed. Though, with the single mother from Indiana, he had also used a machete.

Adele gritted her teeth as the memories cycled through her mind. Local enforcement had initially thought the killer was overpowering his victims through other means. But he’d taken off his gloves.

Those gloves by the fire hydrant. A mistake. An oversight—the unforced error of a rookie in his first big game. Except they *hadn’t* been the killer’s gloves. She’d determined they’d belonged to the victim, to Jeremy. So *why* had the killer removed Jeremy’s gloves? Such a strange choice. He hadn’t cut Jeremy’s fingers...

Between the fingers, nearly imperceptible—that’s where she’d found the injection mark. She’d once dated a guy who hid his drug habit by injecting between the toes and fingers. She’d missed it with her boyfriend, all those years ago.

But she hadn’t missed it this time. The Benjamin Killer was careful, calculated... But not perfect. No killers were.

Adele knew she hadn’t missed anything in the files. But, at Lee’s insistence, she had done her due diligence on the drive to the airport.

In the past, she thought perhaps the killer was involved in the medical field, and the drug he used was some sort of dentist’s nitrous or some type of anesthetic. But those theories were quickly debunked by the lab. The scalpel was perhaps too obvious a weapon for a surgeon or anesthesiologist.

Still, the most horrifying part: despite whatever substance the killer was using, though it incapacitated their bodies, the victims retained complete use of their minds. They could feel and sense everything done to them.

The killer would cut them in a private setting, then watch. He would witness, for his own viewing pleasure, the slow exsanguination of the chosen target, and then he would leave, long before they were dead.

He never struck a killing blow. He never struck any vital organs or veins or arteries that would allow the victims to bleed out quickly. A weak man? Adele wasn’t sure. A clever man? Certainly.

He liked to take it slow. By the third victim, he’d perfected his craft: he’d bled Agatha Mencia for nearly four hours before she finally died.

“Sick twist,” said Adele, muttering beneath her breath, her mild accent twisting the “i” sound into “ee.” Adele often tried to maintain professionalism. It was the only way to stay sane in a job like this. But every so often, she would come across killers, psychopaths, that beggared one’s ability to maintain sanity.

Steadying her breathing once more, Adele flicked through the files on her download folder. Finally, wedged up against the window, blocking anyone behind her from seeing the pictures or content of the report, she clicked the newest file uploaded by Sam.

She studied the pictures with cold, clinical calculations, refusing to miss anything. She cataloged as much of the information as she could, her eyes flicking from frame to frame, reading the doctor’s notes beneath each image.

A young woman—shirtless, shoeless. The killer thought he was being clever. But the missing shoes weren’t a fetish. He’d injected her between the toes; Adele would have put money on it.

She skimmed to an image of the scene—beneath a dark, dank bridge. Lonely, out of sight. Adele's gaze flitted back to the image of the girl. Not a streetwalker, nor a girl from a low-rent part of town. A nice girl—a city girl. How had the killer lured her beneath the bridge?

Did she know him?

Adele shook her head, her hair rubbing against the headrest of the airplane seat. Unlikely. The killer wouldn't have risked traveling halfway around the world to kill someone he knew.

Could the killer speak French? Maybe he'd lured her. Bundy used to pull a trick, pretending to be a cripple, or pretending to look for a lost pet. Preying on the compassion of his victims.

Perhaps the Benjamin Killer was doing the same?

The bridge underpass was dark in the pictures of the crime scene, and two rows of cement dividers shielded Marion's corpse from view. Planned then, rehearsed. The killer knew where he was taking her.

Just like with Jeremy. Like with Agatha. The murderer plotted his kills well in advance, choosing the perfect location, like a lover preparing for a first date.

Adele stared at Marion's crumpled body. She could see how he'd shoved her, and then he would have threatened her with a gun? No—she doubted it. Not in France. Though it was still a possibility.

A knife would be enough. Maybe even the murder weapon. Then he would remove her shoes and prick her with the needle.

The lighting was too poor to tell much beyond that. Perhaps this was a mercy.

The killer's handiwork was visible across the Parisian's half naked corpse.

Adele thought she could see the young woman's eyes strained in their sockets, conveying a cry for help. Her pupils dilated, though she would have been unable to move. Adele gritted her teeth yet again; she could only imagine the fear, the pain, the sheer sense of loneliness and helplessness.

Adele flipped through the notes and pictures a second time, refused to skip any of it. Any scene, any moment, any fragment of an instance could hold a clue.

She shook her head, sighing softly. Then she read the report again. Nothing new, simply detailing what it was she'd already seen. Adele read the report once more, and then another time, and another. Each time her eyes perused the words on the screen, reading the horrific crime described in clinical detail, she scanned it for clues, keeping her eyes open, her mind attentive, cataloging every second, every pixel, every discarded cigarette butt and graffiti tag beneath the bridge.

She refused to let him get away. Marion Lucas's pleading, motionless eyes demanded justice. The blood pooling around the young girl cried out for vengeance. And Adele, more than ever, was determined to provide it.

CHAPTER SIX

The Charles De Gaulle international airport was one of the largest ones in Europe. Her shoes tapped against the tiles, and then paused on the whirring escalator. She passed through customs and reached the gate.

Adele scanned the waiting room, her eyes flicking from happy families embracing some new arrival, or chauffeurs in dark hats and glasses holding up small signs, to other travelers who set off alone, their luggage trundling behind them.

Her own briefcase rested on top of her suitcase handle, which she'd extended and held tight, rolling her suitcase along behind her.

"Adele Sharp," said a soft, polite voice. Surprisingly, a voice she recognized.

For a moment, if only that, the thoughts of the case were chased from her mind. The way the person pronounced her name, the words plucked from the air, like a florist cutting flowers and presenting them to a customer, brought back memories.

She looked in the direction of the voice and a smile stretched her face.

"Robert?" she said, her cheeks bunching. "Of course they would send you. Of course!"

Robert Henry stood straight-backed and stiff. He wore an immaculately pressed suit, and had a curved, perfectly manicured mustache on his upper lip. His hair was thicker than she remembered it back in their days working at the DGSI—hair plugs, perhaps? Robert had been the one who'd taken her under his wing. He'd saved her life on at least two separate occasions.

A flood of memories came with this recognition. He was smiling back at her, his hands loosely at his side, his polished shoes heel to heel.

Robert Henry was about three inches shorter than she was. Adele was tall, but not excessively so. Robert had once played soccer for a semi-professional team in Italy, but had returned to France when he'd been recruited in the 1950s by the French government, long before DGSI existed. Now, like his hair, his mustache was also dyed black.

"Robert!" she called, hurrying across the floor, her shoes squeaking against the polished ground. "It's good to see you, old friend."

The small man smiled up at her, extending a hand with a sort of gallant flourish. He took her arm and declared, "You are as beautiful as my sore old eyes remember. I feel the youth returning to my bones as we speak."

Robert didn't even have a hint of an accent. Adele had it on good authority he could speak eight different languages with perfect inflection. As far as investigators went, he was one of the best France had to offer.

"Off to your flattering ways already, I see? And me only fresh off the plane."

"And fresh is the perfect word. Refreshing to have someone who appreciates the importance of sparsity."

His eyes darted to her small suitcase.

"I'll just buy anything else I need. FBI's paying."

"Of course, of course. And how are our American friends?"

"I can't complain. You didn't drive yourself, did you?" Adele grimaced and made a big show of shaking her head.

"Ah," said Robert, a slight frown increasing his otherwise impassive expression. "If you're recollecting that time in Bulgaria, the countryside, I'll have you know, automatic cars are a bane, *non*, a curse on the modern world!"

Adele hid a smirk and wheeled her suitcase around so she could rest an elbow on the raised handle. "Yeah, that's why you hit the light post, is it?"

He scowled in mock severity, clicking his tongue. As he drew nearer, he smelled of a bit too much cologne and a light odor of cigar smoke. “Back to where we left it, I see? No respect. And is it just me, or has your beautiful, glorious accent faded, hmm?”

Adele paused at the smell and the comment about her accent. Her mind wandered for a moment, back to her first days at the DSGI, walking into Robert’s office. The same smell had confronted her, as had the same small, friendly man, with far more gray hairs at the time. She could still remember the neat, tidy office, displaying pictures of racetracks and old sports cars. Robert had no frames displaying family photos, as he had no family.

And yet, Adele’s lips curved slightly as she remembered the way the man had greeted her then. A strange young girl from America, wandering into his office. He’d welcomed her like a niece and immediately had started asking far too personal questions about her health, her love life, her favorite foods.

It had felt like home.

Adele never had a home. She wasn’t German enough, French enough, American enough for anyone to claim her as one of theirs unless they wanted something from her. She spoke with the slightest of accent in *every* language, unable to fully call one hers.

Twelve years in Germany, another fifteen years in France, then the rest in the US. Angus had teased her about traveling so much and never settling. But it never felt right settling anywhere, because... though she hated to admit it, Adele didn’t *belong* anywhere. A girl without a home, and no real family left to speak of—moving so much had familial consequences too.

At the time, on her first day, Robert had seen right through her loneliness. He’d seen her as a kindred spirit and adopted her on the spot.

The small, well-dressed, even-toned man kept Adele by the arm, holding it in the crook of his, and began to lead her back toward the exit. They approached the sliding glass doors and slipped into the stream of passengers leaving the airport. Adele allowed her old mentor to guide her along the streets across the gate lane, to where a parked car awaited them—a Renault sedan with dark, tinted windows framed by black paneling. Adele gave her suitcase to Robert, who hefted it into the trunk.

She moved toward the passenger’s door, but he quickly beat her to it and opened it, ushering her into the front seat with a gallant wave of his hand.

“Thank you,” she said, hiding a smile.

There were some who mistook Robert for a bit of a fool. He was quite showy and enjoyed things like wine and cheese tastings and discussing philosophy. There was a pretentiousness to it, but it didn’t bother Adele in the least. Because she also knew he had successfully closed more cases for the DSGI than any other investigator in the history of the agency—albeit, it wasn’t a very long history.

He rounded the car back to the driver’s side with slow, even steps. As he settled into the vehicle, he glanced over at Adele. “You seem in good health,” he said. He paused for a moment, rubbing the steering wheel, then, noticing the motion, he fell still. “Since you were last here... have things—”

“I’m fine, Robert,” Adele replied quickly, cutting him off before he could finish the sentence. Her tone fell somber on her own ears all of a sudden. She felt a slight flush to her cheeks. “Last time... The strain—it was—”

“You do not owe me an explanation.”

“No, perhaps not.” Adele glanced out the window back toward the milling passengers heading to parked vehicles. Her gaze turned back to the vehicle and traced the interior. She paused for a moment, glancing up at the visor above Robert’s seat. Two small, weathered photographs were tucked in the corner sleeve, in the same way taxi drivers throughout the city displayed photographs of their families.

Except, this photograph was of the DSGI headquarters, and, the second, smaller one was... Adele looked closer and felt a sudden lump in her throat.

The second photograph was of her and Robert standing next to each other—the first day on the job. She recognized her young, smiling face peering out of the dusty picture. She'd never had a home, never belonged anywhere... And yet, there, sitting in the small car smelling of cologne and cigar smoke, she felt more at home than she had in years.

"It is good to have you back, child," said Robert, glancing over at her with a concerned expression. "Are you ready to work?"

Adele nodded, her eyes flicking away from the visor. "I'm not here for any other case besides this one. Understand?"

Robert's eyebrows inched up. "I will not speak of it; I understand. But do *you*?"

Adele thought for a moment, watching as Robert started the engine and checked his mirror, pulling slowly away from the curb.

One case at a time. That's all she had time for. One case.

She stared out the window as they left the airport, pulling toward the heart of the city. In the distance she could hear tolling bells. It was good to be home...

Her expression softened for a moment as she stared out across the city, her eyes tracing the river and darting across the many old structures. As her gaze flitted to the bridges, little more than arches on the horizon, her expression hardened.

This was home, but there was a rat in the basement, and it was up to her to find it and crush it before it could cause any more harm.

The Benjamin Killer had fled the States for a reason and had already killed once since he'd arrived in France. It would only be a matter of time before he killed again.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Six kilometers from the center of Paris, in the northwestern suburbs of the Ile-de-France region of the capital, Adele found herself staring up at the headquarters of the DGSI.

On the outside, it didn't look like much. A small cafe rested next to the sealed structure, with dull pink and orange bricks providing a quaint appearance in comparison to the bleak gray and black building for which it served as a foot stool.

Adele remembered the building well. In her mind, she had rehearsed the number of turns the vehicle made as it circled the closed parking lot behind the headquarters.

Inside, the building was far nicer than she remembered. Fresh coats of paint and up-to-date technology now filled the offices that Robert led her past.

"One thing to say for terrorists," Robert said as he guided her through the building and noticed her curious glance toward a row of high-powered computers behind a glass wall. "They have a singular way of motivating the allocation of taxes. Here, this way."

Robert led her to an open foyer. A receptionist glanced up from behind a desk and cleared his throat with a polite tilt of his head.

"Here to see Foucault," Robert answered the querying glance.

The receptionist nodded and tapped a button on his phone. There was a buzz, then a thick glass door clicked open, adjacent to the desk.

"They're both waiting," said the receptionist.

Adele followed her former mentor into the room.

It was only as she peered out the windows that she realized they were likely on the top floor. These windows didn't face the street, and they were all tinted black.

Still, the view from so high up brought back another tide of memories. She turned from the city toward the room. Immediately, she spotted the man from TV screen back in San Francisco. His eyebrows were even thicker in person and his glower doubly intense. He sat behind an old desk that looked to be made from carved oak. The desk sat surrounded by so much technology, it seemed somewhat out of place in both time and taste, as did the quill and ink pot sitting near an old dial-phone.

"Agent Sharp," Foucault said, speaking with the same light accent as before. "Good of you to come."

She nodded her greeting.

"This is Special Agent John Renee," said Foucault, gesturing to his left. "He will be your partner on the case. He's already been briefed by SOC Grant on the particulars of the previous cases."

Adele glanced to the second man standing by the oak desk. Perhaps a couple years older, with prematurely gray hair on the side which always accompanied the word "distinguished," Agent John Renee was the tallest man in the room. He had a bold roman nose and a burn mark just beneath his chin, stretching down his throat. He had sharp, intelligent eyes and pronounced cheekbones. Overall, he struck Adele as carrying the appearance of a James Bond villain. Handsome enough to stare at, but rough enough to worry about.

She smiled to herself at this characterization, but hid the expression just as quickly, extending a hand toward her new partner.

"Greetings," she said.

"*Français?*" John Renee replied.

Adele shrugged. "*Oui, un peu.*"

John nodded, his close-cut hair just as dark beneath the ceiling light as it had been in shadow. "English, then," he said, carrying the thickest accent of the three men. "I have read the files, *oui*. But I still think I must ask you some questions."

Foucault interrupted. "I'm sure Sharp wishes to settle. Robert, thank you."

John rolled his eyes, but covered by glancing out the window. “The American princess needs her beauty sleep?”

“The American princess is fine,” said Adele, keeping her cool. She glanced toward Foucault. “Actually, if it’s all the same, I’d like to see the crime scene while it’s still fresh.”

Foucault’s lips turned down in a sort of shrug and he nodded. “I have no objections. John?”

The tall man with the military hair cut gave a curt shake of his head. “Have you seen the pictures?”

Adele adjusted her sleeves. “Yes. I’d like to track the girl’s movements, if it’s all the same. Is there anything new I should know about?”

John began to move toward the door without so much as an *au revoir* to the other men. “Lab gave us the results. The body we recovered does indeed belong to Marion Lucas. They found something in her blood.”

“That would be the paralytic. Do they know what it is?”

John shook his head, opening the door and stepping through it before her. Robert frowned from within the room and gave a small nod in Adele’s direction.

“No,” said John. “But they’re looking. We had hoped the FBI might know.”

Adele quickly returned Robert’s farewell, then winced at John. “Afraid not. Never enough of a sample to narrow it down, unfortunately. No matter. How far is the crime scene from here?”

“Follow me, American Princess,” said John. “I know a shortcut.”

Adele hurried after the brash man as he maneuvered quickly through the halls, leading her toward the elevators set at the end of building. She stepped into the first car that opened with John. The crime scene would have answers. It had to.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Adele inhaled the river air, the same air that had now gone stale in the corpse's lungs. Marion's body had long since been taken to the morgue, but her blood still stained the concrete in haphazard patterns, smothering the dust beneath the bridge in tendrils of crimson.

The area remained cordoned off, with sawhorse blockades obstructing the stairs and the walkway on either side. Two gendarmerie stood sentry, but otherwise, Adele and John had the crime scene to themselves.

Adele dropped into a crouch, pointing her finger at the blood. "Why do you think he bleeds them?" she murmured, then flicked her gaze back toward the stairs.

John gave a noncommittal grunt. "Psychos and freaks do psychotic and freakish things," he said.

Adele pushed off her knees and moved over to the stairs, peering up beneath the blockade toward the sound of traffic and pedestrians above. "She lives on Rue Villehardouin?"

Another grunt. "That's what her mother said."

"She must have come down the stairs then. Shops with surveillance cameras?"

John frowned, testing the word in English. "Surveillance?"

"Security," Adele said in English, then repeated the word in French.

"Still checking."

Adele nodded. "Waiting for the warrants?"

John snorted at this, giving her a long look. He scratched at the burn mark beneath his chin as he wagged his head side to side. "How long has it been since you worked here? DGSi does not need warrants."

Adele tucked her tongue inside her mouth and turned back toward the underpass, nodding slowly. He was right, of course. How could she forget? There were those who felt the reach of the DGSi extended far longer than their purpose. She supposed she didn't disagree. But, from the law enforcement side of things, she certainly wouldn't complain. Less red tape meant less time wasted, which meant more criminals behind bars and more citizens kept safe.

Adele shook her head in disgust, glancing around the scene once more. "Nothing new," she said. "Any insights?" She turned, but found John staring across the river, watching the boats pass, a distant look in his eyes. "Hello?" she said. "Is our case boring you?"

He snapped out of his reverie. For a moment, his handsome features hardened, his eyes narrowing over his roman nose. "Yes," he said. "A stupid girl allows herself to be lured beneath an ugly bridge. And now her insides are staining my shoes. So, yes, American Princess, I am bored, and I am tired. Does this count as insight enough for you?"

Adele refused to allow her reaction to play across her face. She knew men like John—men who uttered callous, obnoxious opinions to throw others off guard.

John rolled his eyes, turning back toward the crime scene and facing away from the river. Agent Renee was nearly a head taller than her. His height alone had earned sidelong glances as they'd taken the stairs into the underpass. But Adele refused to let this intimidate her. She stepped right up next to John, surveying the bloodstains.

"The killer must know French," said her partner after a moment.

Adele pursed her lips. "I thought the same. To lure her down here, he had to communicate somehow. Did Marion know English?"

"No. I asked her mother."

Adele jerked her head in a short, choppy motion. "Good. So our killer knows English and French." She exhaled deeply, shaking her head. "Why is he here, though? In France, I mean. Is he French? Vacationing and killing in America?"

“Why must he be French?” John snorted, his accent thicker than ever. “Probably a fat American, eh? Fled to my lovely country like a rat leaving a sinking ship.”

“Either way, why continue killing? He got away with it. The killer escaped the US. Why strike again? He could have gotten away.”

“Eh. He speaks French and English, but he is not so smart, hmm?”

Adele glanced over. “Perhaps it’s you?”

John shot her a sidelong glance, then a smile broke his face. He turned back to the stairs, waving at her to follow. “I wonder that myself, sometimes,” he said. “Come—we go speak with her friends.”

As Adele cast about the bloodstained ground one last time, a voice jarred her from her thoughts. “Hello!” said the voice in French, echoing down the stairs. “Hello, please, may I speak with you, *madame*?”

Adele turned to find the gendarmerie blocking the path of two elderly folk who were leaning against the wooden barricade and peering into the underpass, waving at her. John had paused on the opposite side of the crime scene, facing a different set of stairs. The tall man rubbed absentmindedly at the burn mark along his chin and flicked a questioning eyebrow in Adele’s direction.

“Yes?” Adele said, turning her back on John. “Can I help you?” She peered up, squinting in the sunlight that dappled the stairs and guard rails leading to the sidewalk above.

The elderly couple were well-dressed, with long overcoats and thin gloves. Their silver hair was trimmed neatly: the man with a military cut, not unlike John’s—minus Renee’s overly long bangs—and the woman with shoulder-length locks that reminded Adele of her mother’s.

She swallowed at the thought, but pushed it quickly aside as she ascended the bottom steps, pulling within hearing distance.

“Pardon us,” said the man in a rumbling, creaking voice. “But is this where it happened? Where the young girl died?”

Adele watched the man and her gaze flicked to the woman. She hated that her immediate thought was one of suspicion—an instinct honed over years of confronting the worst humanity offered. But, just as quickly, she discarded the notion. Nothing in the killer’s crimes suggested a duo.

She kept her expression pleasant, quizzical. Her French, the same as her English, and the same as her German, sometimes carried an accent. She did her best to hide it, but hadn’t been in practice as much as with English. “You knew the girl?” she said, carefully.

The old couple shared a glance, peering past the uniformed officer who stepped back once Adele approached.

The old man eyed her up and down. “You are not police,” he said, cautiously.

Adele glanced at her slacks and self-consciously tugged at her sleeves. “Er, no—not exactly. I’m working with DGSI, though.”

The old woman frowned, clicking her tongue quietly in disapproval.

Adele decided that mentioning the FBI would only have made things worse. The DGSI had only become an autonomous office a couple of years before she’d joined, and there were some in the public who didn’t approve of the agency’s reputation.

The old woman began tugging at her husband’s arm as if to lead him back up the few steps. “Sorry,” the woman said, still peering disapprovingly at Adele. “We made a mistake.”

“I don’t work with DGSI anymore,” said Adele, thinking quickly in an effort to save the situation. “I’m consulting. Because of Marion—the girl who died.” She made a face like sucking lemons. “Oh, apologies, I-I don’t think I was supposed to mention her name.” She stepped back, peering down the stairs, but also positioning her body in just such a way so that the bloodstains beneath the bridge were visible over the barricade.

She waited an appropriate number of seconds, then turned back, shielding the crime scene again with her body. “A nasty business,” Adele said. “The girl’s mother is inconsolable, as I’m sure

you can imagine. She's from Paris, too. Living all alone now in her apartment. Such a pity—one should never be cursed to see their child leave the world first.”

The old man was peering past Adele, his face turning pale as he surveyed the underpass beyond. The woman had stopped tugging at his arm and her expression softened as she mulled over Adele's words. The woman made the same clicking sound with her tongue, but then sighed. She shook her husband's arm in a permissive sort of way.

“Go on,” said the old woman. “Tell the lady.”

The man continued to stare past Adele, over the barricade, his eyes fixated like he'd seen a ghost. After another tug on his arm, though, he cleared his throat and his dark eyes leveled on Adele.

“The girl—Marion—we saw on the news. Recognized her from the apartment. She lives on Rue Villehardouin as well.”

Adele nodded carefully, her eyes flitting back down the stairs in John's direction, but he was out of sight beneath the underpass. “You knew Marion?”

The old man was staring off again and his wife tugged sharply at his arm once more. “Ahem, yes,” said the man. “We would cross paths occasionally on our nighttime walks. A friendly, nice, pretty—er, nice young girl.” He cleared his throat and retrieved his arm before his wife could pull it off. He leaned over the sawhorse, white knuckles straining where they gripped the barricade.

The gendarmerie reached out to push him back, but Adele gave the quickest shake of her head and leaned in, staring intently into the old man's dark eyes set in his wrinkled face.

“She walked alone,” said the old man. “Said she was going to visit friends—she should not have been alone. Paris is not what it once was.”

“No. Most places aren't,” said Adele. “You saw her leaving her apartment then. What time?”

“Eight? Nine?”

“Half past seven,” the woman chimed in from behind her husband.

Adele nodded. “Did she say anything? Besides that she was off to see friends?”

“No,” said the old man. “She said goodnight is all. But...” Here, his fingers gripped the sawhorse even tighter. “Perhaps it isn't my place to say... But—but—”

“—just tell her, Bernard,” the woman snapped.

“I do not mean to cause anyone trouble,” the old man said.

Adele prompted him with a tilt of her eyebrows. “But...”

“But I saw someone following her. Maybe he was just going the same way... I do not know. But—like I said—I do not wish to cause anyone trouble. However, after hearing what happened to her... I mean, at the time I didn't think anything of it. But now, maybe if I had said something.” The old man trailed off and leaned back from the sawhorse, pressing up against his wife in a protective sort of posture.

The wizened woman looped her hand back through his arm and rubbed affectionately at his wrist in a calming gesture.

Adele, though, for her part, felt anything but calm. She tried to keep her tone in check, but found it difficult with her pulse pounding in her ears. “You saw someone following her? You're sure?”

“Yes,” said the woman at once.

“Well,” said the man, “he may have simply been going the same direction. Like I said, I don't wish to cause any—”

“Sir, if I may, you're not causing any trouble,” said Adele, quickly. She inhaled slowly through her nose, trying to steady herself. She could hear the accent in her words the more excited she got. Now wasn't the time to announce to these two citizens that she hailed from beyond Paris. With folk like these it would only complicate the situation. So she inhaled again, and then, her words pressing on the silence between them, she said, “Tell me *exactly* what you saw.”

For a moment, she thought of reaching for her phone to record the reply, but then decided it might only spook the couple.

The old man shrugged. “Someone following her. Like I said.”

“He carried a bundle,” the woman said. “And—yes.” She snapped her fingers. “He wore a blue shirt.”

The old man frowned, though, his brow crinkling. “No,” he said. “The shirt was green. His shoes were blue.”

“Was he wearing shoes?” said the woman in doubt.

Adele felt her heart sink. She licked at her lips, finding them suddenly dry, and began to step back down the stairs, if only to gain some space to breathe.

“Is there anything else?” she said from a step further down.

The old couple glanced at each other, then, nearly at once, they both replied, “He had red hair.”

Adele had been half-glancing back toward where John awaited, but at this, her gaze flew back to the old couple. She stared at them, searching their expressions for certainty. “Red hair?” she said. “You’re sure?”

They both shared a look, then nodded adamantly.

Adele felt her pulse racing once more. She’d once had a smartwatch when she’d trained for a marathon. Her resting heart rate had always been far too high for how in shape she was—another side effect of the job. And now, she could practically hear her heartbeat in her ears.

“Would you be willing to give an official statement down at the station?” Adele said. “What are your names? Bernard, you said? Last name?”

The old man began to reply, but the old woman tugged sharply on his arm. “You’ve heard our statement,” she said, frowning. “There is nothing more to say.”

“I understand,” Adele began, “but if—”

“Nothing more!” The woman had already half-dragged her husband up the steps, leading him quickly away from the underpass.

The gendarmerie officer glanced at Adele as if waiting for an order to stop them. But she shook her head.

“Let them go,” Adele murmured. “I doubt there’s anything more we can learn anyway...”

She nodded in gratitude toward the officer, then gave a small little salute with two fingers toward the retreating backs of the elderly couple. With a slight skip in her step, she turned and took the stairs, hurrying back toward where John waited.

Red hair. A wig? Perhaps. But a clue either way.

The bastard wouldn’t get away. Not this time.

A smile stretched her lips as she rejoined John on the other side of the underpass, facing a ramp with a long metal rail.

“What are you so chipper over?” John said, frowning. He had a phone raised, pressed against his cheek, and he seemed more grumpy than usual.

“I—” Adele cut herself off. “Who is that?” she said, nodding toward the phone.

John lowered the device and clicked a button on the side, sliding the phone back into his pocket, still frowning. “Marion’s friends. Some boots were able to track them down. They’re waiting for us at the bar.”

“Why do you look pissed off? That’s good news.”

“Oh, yes? It is good? Hmm—well Michael and Sophie are going to be there. You remember Agent Paige, yes?” His tone was now high-pitched and would-be innocent, carrying the malicious undercurrent of bad humor. “She refused to work with you. I cannot emphasize this enough, eh. Refused. Called you a *chienne*—do you remember this word, hmm? It is why I am saddled with our American princess—because Paige would not play nice.”

Adele felt the smile fade from her face with each subsequent word. She swallowed, slowly, a prickle of anxiety spreading through her, tingling down her spine. “Sophie Paige? She’s an agent now?”

“No longer supervising, hmm?” said John, still in his would-be innocent voice. His mood seemed markedly improved all of a sudden. “I wonder why that is? She wouldn’t—no, *god forbid*—she wouldn’t blame *you* for her demotion, would she?” His eyebrows shot up in mock surprise.

“Christ, you’re such an ass,” Adele snapped. She began stomping up the ramp, rubbing her hand against the cool metal of the guard rail. “Are you coming? Or do you want me to interview all our witnesses on my own?”

John didn’t reply, but she could hear him chuckling behind her as he followed.

Inwardly, Adele was a tangle of emotions. Sophie Paige had been her supervisor back when she’d worked for the DGS. And what a mess *that* had been. Surely, after all these years, she wouldn’t still hold a grudge...

“Who am I kidding,” Adele muttered out loud, picking up the pace as she reached the sidewalk and stomped toward the waiting vehicle.

Sophie Paige was *exactly* the sort to hold a grudge. Interviewing a bunch of Marion’s friends with that gargoyle leering over her shoulder sounded about as much fun as pulling teeth.

Two steps forward, one step back.

But Agent Paige or not...

The killer had red hair.

Twenty-five. Twenty-four. No more.

CHAPTER NINE

Adele could feel the radiating glare singeing a hole in the side of her cheek the moment she stepped into Genna's, the old, hole-in-the-wall bar behind the college. Adele scanned the crowded room, her gaze flicking across the many low stools arranged around circular tables. The furniture was scattered over what looked like a dance floor converted into a seating area for an elevated stage at the back.

Adele could still feel Sophie Paige's glare piercing the cramped space from the other side of the dingy room.

Adele refused to look over at first. She kept her chin high and maneuvered with surefooted motions through the scattering of tables and cheap aluminum chairs.

John lumbered along next to her, his mood sour once more thanks to the three red lights they'd hit on the way to the interview Marion's friends.

"They come here often?" Adele asked out of the side of her mouth, keeping her eyes rigidly ahead.

John grunted.

"You said they were here when Marion died. Is that verified?"

The especially tall agent grunted again, but then sighed through his nose as if realizing this response wouldn't curb the tide of queries. His voice creaked with rust as he said, "They come here after work."

"And how come we're interviewing them here?"

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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