



LEFT

TO

RUN

(AN ADELE SHARP MYSTERY--BOOK 2)

BLAKE PIERCE

An Adele Sharp Mystery

Blake Pierce

Left To Run

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»

Pierce B.

Left To Run / B. Pierce — «Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»,
— (An Adele Sharp Mystery)

ISBN 978-1-09-431326-9

“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 RUN is book #2 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.

A serial killer is ravaging the American expat community in Paris, his kills reminiscent of Jack the Ripper. For FBI special agent Adele Sharp, it's a mad race against time to enter his mind and save the next victim—until she uncovers a secret darker than anyone could have imagined. Haunted by her own mother's murder, Adele throws herself into the case, delving into the grisly underbelly of a city she once called home. Can Adele stop the killer before it's too late? An action-packed mystery series of international intrigue and riveting suspense, LEFT TO RUN will have you turning pages late into the night. Book #3 in the ADELE SHARP MYSTERY is now available for pre-order.

ISBN 978-1-09-431326-9

© Pierce B.

© Lukeman Literary Management Ltd

Содержание

CHAPTER ONE	8
CHAPTER TWO	13
CHAPTER THREE	16
CHAPTER FOUR	18
CHAPTER FIVE	21
CHAPTER SIX	23
CHAPTER SEVEN	28
CHAPTER EIGHT	33
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	36

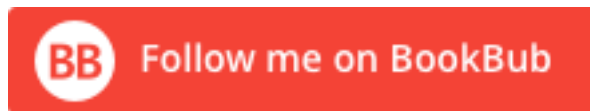
Blake Pierce

Left To Run (An Adele Sharp Mystery—Book Two)

Blake Pierce

Blake Pierce is the USA Today bestselling author of the RILEY PAGE mystery series, which includes seventeen books. Blake Pierce is also the author of the MACKENZIE WHITE mystery series, comprising fourteen books; 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 six books; of the KATE WISE mystery series, comprising seven books; of the CHLOE FINE psychological suspense mystery, comprising six books; of the JESSE HUNT psychological suspense thriller series, comprising seven books (and counting); of the AU PAIR psychological suspense thriller series, comprising two books (and counting); of the ZOE PRIME mystery series, comprising three books (and counting); of the new ADELE SHARP mystery series; and of the new EUROPEAN VOYAGE cozy 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.



Copyright © 2020 by Blake Pierce. All rights reserved. Except as permitted under the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, no part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed or transmitted in any form or by any means, or stored in a database or retrieval system, without the prior permission of the author. This ebook is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This ebook may not be resold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each recipient. If you're reading this book and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your use only, then please return it and purchase your own copy. Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author. This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, organizations, places, events, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictionally. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental. Jacket image Copyright JakubD, used under license from Shutterstock.com.

BOOKS BY BLAKE PIERCE

EUROPEAN VOYAGE COZY MYSTERY SERIES

MURDER (AND BAKLAVA) (Book #1)

DEATH (AND APPLE STRUDEL) (Book #2)

CRIME (AND LAGER) (Book #3)

ADELE SHARP MYSTERY SERIES

LEFT TO DIE (Book #1)

LEFT TO RUN (Book #2)

LEFT TO HIDE (Book #3)

THE AU PAIR SERIES

ALMOST GONE (Book#1)

ALMOST LOST (Book #2)

ALMOST DEAD (Book #3)

ZOE PRIME MYSTERY SERIES

FACE OF DEATH (Book#1)

FACE OF MURDER (Book #2)

FACE OF FEAR (Book #3)

FACE OF MADNESS (Book #4)

A JESSIE HUNT PSYCHOLOGICAL SUSPENSE SERIES

THE PERFECT WIFE (Book #1)

THE PERFECT BLOCK (Book #2)

THE PERFECT HOUSE (Book #3)

THE PERFECT SMILE (Book #4)

THE PERFECT LIE (Book #5)

THE PERFECT LOOK (Book #6)

THE PERFECT AFFAIR (Book #7)

CHLOE FINE PSYCHOLOGICAL SUSPENSE SERIES

NEXT DOOR (Book #1)

A NEIGHBOR'S LIE (Book #2)

CUL DE SAC (Book #3)

SILENT NEIGHBOR (Book #4)

HOMECOMING (Book #5)

TINTED WINDOWS (Book #6)

KATE WISE MYSTERY SERIES

IF SHE KNEW (Book #1)

IF SHE SAW (Book #2)

IF SHE RAN (Book #3)

IF SHE HID (Book #4)

IF SHE FLED (Book #5)

IF SHE FEARED (Book #6)

IF SHE HEARD (Book #7)

THE MAKING OF RILEY PAIGE SERIES

WATCHING (Book #1)

WAITING (Book #2)

LURING (Book #3)

TAKING (Book #4)

STALKING (Book #5)

KILLING (Book #6)

RILEY PAIGE MYSTERY SERIES

ONCE GONE (Book #1)

ONCE TAKEN (Book #2)
ONCE CRAVED (Book #3)
ONCE LURED (Book #4)
ONCE HUNTED (Book #5)
ONCE PINED (Book #6)
ONCE FORSAKEN (Book #7)
ONCE COLD (Book #8)
ONCE STALKED (Book #9)
ONCE LOST (Book #10)
ONCE BURIED (Book #11)
ONCE BOUND (Book #12)
ONCE TRAPPED (Book #13)
ONCE DORMANT (Book #14)
ONCE SHUNNED (Book #15)
ONCE MISSED (Book #16)
ONCE CHOSEN (Book #17)

MACKENZIE WHITE MYSTERY SERIES

BEFORE HE KILLS (Book #1)
BEFORE HE SEES (Book #2)
BEFORE HE COVETS (Book #3)
BEFORE HE TAKES (Book #4)
BEFORE HE NEEDS (Book #5)
BEFORE HE FEELS (Book #6)
BEFORE HE SINS (Book #7)
BEFORE HE HUNTS (Book #8)
BEFORE HE PREYS (Book #9)
BEFORE HE LONGS (Book #10)
BEFORE HE LAPSES (Book #11)
BEFORE HE ENVIES (Book #12)
BEFORE HE STALKS (Book #13)
BEFORE HE HARMS (Book #14)

AVERY BLACK MYSTERY SERIES

CAUSE TO KILL (Book #1)
CAUSE TO RUN (Book #2)
CAUSE TO HIDE (Book #3)
CAUSE TO FEAR (Book #4)
CAUSE TO SAVE (Book #5)
CAUSE TO DREAD (Book #6)

KERI LOCKE MYSTERY SERIES

A TRACE OF DEATH (Book #1)
A TRACE OF MURDER (Book #2)
A TRACE OF VICE (Book #3)
A TRACE OF CRIME (Book #4)
A TRACE OF HOPE (Book #5)

CHAPTER ONE

Beneath an evening sky dripping with the final glimmers of sunlight, Adele glanced at Agent Masse's trembling hands. His upper lip was beaded with sweat, and his Adam's apple bobbed as he stared down the barrel of his service weapon. Noting her attention, Adele's new partner flashed an uneasy smile followed by a quick thumbs-up. The gesture caused Masse to momentarily release his weapon with one hand, before uneasily readjusting his shaky grip.

Adele resisted the urge to scowl. Her eyes narrowed over her own sidearm, which pointed steadily down the open-air walkway on the second level of the motel. On their right, a thin, rickety white railing—half rust and half steel—provided a precarious barrier between the stretch of hall and the courtyard below. Backup was delayed—something about a gunman at a gas station that had rerouted most of the units in the area. But they couldn't wait. Hernandez had proven slippery in the past. For now, all she had was Masse and her own sense of foreboding.

Adele glanced over the railing at the rectangular pool; the unnaturally blue water reflected the residue of the evening light in crystalline flashes and gentle motion. A diving board on the opposite side occupied the space next to a metal entry ladder dipped into the water. The heavy scent of chlorine lingered in the air, mingling with the proximate buzz of traffic from the adjacent street. Glimpses of stagnant cars could be spotted through the gaps in the motel's separate wings.

"Eyes up," Adele murmured, quietly.

Her back pressed into the popcorn siding of the low-rent motel. She felt a trickle of dust against the nape of her neck, but kept her motions steady as she eased forward, sliding along the wall. A woman stared out from a window across the courtyard, owlishly surveying the FBI agents' approach.

Adele glanced at the distant woman and gave a slight shake of her head. The motel tenant ducked out of view behind the window streaked with greasy fingerprints and breath stains.

Agent Masse bumped into Adele, jarring her attention back to room A7. She flashed a scowl at her new partner. "Careful," she muttered in a ghost of a whisper.

Masse raised a placating hand, again releasing his grip from his service weapon. Inwardly, Adele suppressed a groan of frustration. As cantankerous as he was, one thing could be said for John Renee; he despised amateur hour. Now, back in San Francisco, Adele found she missed the tall, scar-faced French agent.

Purely professionally, of course. *Of course.* John was an excellent shot, reliable when faced with danger, and—most importantly—he wouldn't keep bumping into her outside a killer's motel room.

"Would you stop that, please?" she whispered at last after the third accidental knee into her thigh as they both eased up the walkway.

"Sorry," Agent Masse said, a bit too loudly.

Adele stiffened. From within A7, she thought she heard movement. She stared at the door, her pulse in her ears. Then all fell silent.

Adele waited, wetting the edge of her lips, her ears perked, her eyes fixed on the silver door handle beneath the card-reader slot.

Jason Hernandez. Suspected of two counts of barbarous murder. Adele had spent the previous week going over the toxicology reports. Jason had pumped his victims full of methamphetamine before bludgeoning them to death in the living room of their own home.

Allegedly, she thought to herself. Images flashed through her mind. She pictured crimson stains on an ornately patterned Turkish carpet. She recalled the horrified expressions of the cleaning staff who'd found Jason's work. And of course, the crimes had occurred in the Hills. Rich and famous couple murdered? Step aside, homicide, hello, FBI.

Adele nodded toward the door, keeping her weapon raised. Her new partner hesitated.

She tried not to roll her eyes, but in a fierce whisper said, "Key card. Hurry!"

Agent Masse stiffened like a deer caught in headlights. The young agent stared at the side of Adele's face before her words finally seemed to register. Now moving too quickly, as if to make up for lost time, he hurried past her, rubbing against the rusted white railing facing the pool. His hand darted to his right lapel pocket, where he fiddled with a button.

Adele stared in disbelief.

Masse's cheeks reddened, and he mouthed *Sorry* while finagling the button a bit more. He couldn't seem to undo it. With a wince, Masse holstered his weapon and, now with both hands, he reached up and unbuttoned the pocket. Finally, his gun still holstered, he pulled out the key card the motel clerk had provided. With a still quivering hand, the young agent inserted the card in the door. A small green light flashed over the L-shaped handle.

Masse stepped back, his young face surveying Adele.

She nodded pointedly at his hip.

Again, blank face.

"Your weapon," Adele said, through clenched teeth.

Masse's eyes widened and he quickly unholstered his weapon a second time and leveled it on the door. The windows to A7 were closed, and the curtains blotted out the light.

"He's armed and dangerous," Adele said, beneath her breath. Normally, the second part of that sentence seemed redundant, but with Masse, she couldn't be sure. "If you see a weapon, don't give him the opportunity. Understand?"

Agent Masse stared at her, shivering where he stood, but nodded. Adele swallowed, staving off any of her own nerves. She adjusted her grip, feeling the cold heft of her weapon against her cupped hands. She endeavored not to betray her own discomfort—firearms and all they encapsulated had always been her least favorite part of the job.

Masse took a position on the opposite side of the door. With a significant look in her direction, he reached out with his right hand, his left still holding his weapon, gripped the door handle, and then—

The door banged open. A wild shout emitted from within and someone slammed into the faux wood from the other side, sending Masse reeling.

Her partner fired once, twice—without aiming. Agent Masse was sent stumbling to the ground by the continued momentum of the door. The bullets struck the ceiling. A blur of motion burst from within the motel room, streaking onto the walkway. The blur held something metal glinting in one hand.

A weapon?

No. Too small. The figure didn't turn left or right, and instead, with a shout, dove over the railing, lunging toward the pool below. The sound of Adele's curse chorused with the loud *splash!*

Adele trained her weapon and took three quick side-steps of controlled motion toward the railing. Her eyes flitted to the blue pool, then darted to the circling hedges. She leveled her weapon on the retreating form below...

...and recognized him immediately from his sheared head down to the twisting tattoos of two snakes looping over his ears and curling at the base of his neck. The tongues of the snakes intertwined, tied in a knot between his shoulder blades. Jason Hernandez wasn't wearing a shirt. He had a bit of a paunch, and his baggy pants were soaked against him now, but this didn't stop the man from pulling himself with grunts out of the pool, then stumbling away from the edge, dripping wet and gasping as he tried to hop the hedge. He ended up tripping and cracking branches, landing in the brush, before—spitting and cursing in Spanish—he regained his feet and hurried toward the gap between the two wings of the motel, heading for the busy street.

Adele's finger tightened on the trigger, her teeth clenched.

"Stop!" she shouted.

He didn't. Again, she spotted something metal clutched tight in his right hand. A knife?

A clear shot. She had him in her sights. But no—he was unarmed. Most killers didn't *need* weapons though. *Alleged killer*, she reminded herself. Adele lowered her weapon and raced past where her partner was still trying to recover from a motel room door to the face. His nose poured blood and he had a dazed look where he sat massaging his chin.

Adele hurtled past, yelling, "He's getting away!" She sped to the end of the walkway without looking back. No footsteps echoed in pursuit, suggesting her new partner was out of commission for at least a bit longer. Adele set her jaw as she reached the circling metal stairs and flung herself down them three at a time.

Firearms were not her forte. But finding criminals was. She circled the stairs with leaping strides, watching as Jason raced toward the street.

Adele lost sight of him as she cleared the staircase and also moved toward the street. But after a few strides, she pulled up short and hesitated, gasping, next to the browning shrubbery circling the blue water.

Would Jason really use the busy street? People would see him. This part of the city was patrolled rather heavily. Jason would know this. Her mind flipped back to the flash of metal she'd spotted in his hand. A knife? No. A weapon? Too small.

Keys. They had to be.

Her eyes flitted briefly back toward the walkway above. Keys to the motel? No. They'd used a keycard. She turned away from the street, her eyes scanning the length of the second wing of the motel around which the suspect had disappeared. Would he double back?

Car keys—they had to be, right? Jason's truck was in the motel's parking lot; they'd seen it on their way in.

Adele nodded to herself and then, instead of heading for the gap between the buildings which led to the street, she turned and sprinted in the opposite direction. The motel's parking lot was situated behind the buildings, hedged up against a large wooden fence, and bordered on all four corners by new red dumpsters with black lids.

A hunch. But sometimes a hunch was all an agent had to go on.

Adele could hear sirens in the distance, but they were still faint. She was on her own. She glanced back over her shoulder toward the stairs, noticing her partner slowly moving down, a dazed look still on his face as he shook his head. He staggered a bit, blood still streaming from his nose.

Adele exhaled a resigned sigh as she hotfooted in the direction of the parking lot. She hopped another small hedge, grateful for all the time she spent jogging in the mornings. She hurried along the side of the registration office, and then sidled past a chain-link fence and a red dumpster positioned at the back of the offices. The odor of two-week-old garbage wafted on the air and clung to her clothing. She ignored the smell and grunted as a jutting section of fence snagged her suit; a quiet rip, a flash of pain. But she pushed through, ignoring the tear through her outfit.

Adele slid between the chain-link fence and the odoriferous dumpster before pulling up short and staring at the large black truck with jutting mirrors. The vehicle parked halfway between two spots behind a minivan.

The front door to the truck hung open.

Jason was already scrambling into the driver's seat. He shot a look in her direction, then cursed loudly before slamming the front door and jamming his keys in the ignition. She heard a muffled rattling sound, and a string of oaths in Spanish.

She raised her weapon, pointing it at the window. "Stop or I'll shoot!" she yelled.

But Mr. Hernandez ignored her. He continued fumbling with the keys. Finally, at last, the engine revved. Jason stared out the window, his eyes wide in panic. The twisting tattoo of the two snakes seemed to pulse against his skin, and veins protruded from his temples.

He muttered something she couldn't hear through the glass, then shifted into gear. He slammed the gas. There was a squeal of tires, and the truck darted forward, nearly colliding with the office

building. Jason cursed inaudibly and readjusted his gear shift before glancing over his shoulder and preparing to reverse.

Unlike the motel, Jason's truck was in immaculate condition. The windows were clean, and the truck itself didn't carry a single chip or dent. Some of the eyewitnesses who'd seen Hernandez follow his supposed victims home had claimed it all started when Mr. Carter nearly rear-ended Jason's truck.

Adele kept her weapon trained and braced herself, shoulders set, feet apart. "Stop, FBI!" she shouted.

"Agent Sharp!" a voice called over her shoulder. For the briefest moment, she flinched and glanced back.

Masse was stumbling through the building nearest Jason—clearly he'd run around the street, going the long way. But now, this meant he was closer to the truck than she was. Masse spotted Jason; the young agent's eyes widened, and he raised his weapon.

"Wait!" Adele snapped.

But Masse unloaded three rounds. Two struck the hood of the truck; the third shattered both windows, piercing clean through one and out the other. None of them hit Jason Hernandez.

But, through the now scattered glass of the truck's window frame, Adele had a good long look at Jason's expression.

He was no longer fiddling with the wheel or the ignition. He stared through the shattered glass, his eyes wide as if haunted, his features pale now. He stared at the smashed pieces of glass, and then his eyeline traced the hood of his car toward the two smoking bullet holes in the front of his beloved vehicle.

"*Putta!*" he screeched. Hernandez scrambled across the seat and flung open the passenger door before stumbling out. He was now on the opposite side of the vehicle from Adele, but closer to Masse.

Adele tried to hold her posture, but growled in frustration; she'd lost line of sight. She moved quickly, still with controlled motions, trying to keep the two quantities within field of vision as she hastily circled the parking lot.

Jason started toward Agent Masse, ignoring the gun waving in his face and Adele skirting around from behind. As she repositioned, Adele glimpsed his expression: Jason's eyes were dilated, blood vessels throbbing in his neck and forehead.

"*Cavron!*" he screeched, glancing from his ruined truck to the FBI agent who'd shot it. He seemed entirely indifferent, or perhaps unaware, regarding the weapon in Masse's still trembling hands.

Adele's earlier cry of "*Wait!*" only now seemed to register with Masse. His trigger finger was still white against the mechanism, but he seemed frozen. He waited, hesitating, glancing between Adele and the approaching form of Hernandez. He hesitated for a second too long.

"No—don't!" Adele shouted, but too late.

Jason surged forward, ducking Masse's line of fire, and tackled the young agent around the waist, sending both of them clattering to the sidewalk.

Adele rushed forward, looking for an opening, her weapon raised. The cold concrete of the parking lot and the safety barrier provided a harsh surface against which Masse's shoulder blades slammed once, twice as he tried to rise. But Jason snarled, punching and scratching the agent's eyes.

"Get off him!" Adele shouted. Then she fired.

Masse loosed a cry of terror. Hernandez, though, grunted in pain, spinning like a top and slamming into the ground next to the agent he'd tackled.

"First one is the arm," Adele snapped, weapon trained on Hernandez. "Keep struggling and the next is going in your chest, understand?"

The sound of cursing and crying faded from Jason's direction where he rolled back and forth, his teeth flashing as they gritted in pain, and he pressed his head against the rough sidewalk. Rivulets

of red stained his fingers. Every few moments he would look away from his injured arm and turn toward his steaming truck, shaking his head with a renewed anguish.

Adele sighed, then put her hand to her battery-powered field radio. “We’re going to need medical,” she said.

She glanced between her partner, who was still shakily getting to his feet, and Hernandez’s writhing form. She sighed again. “Better make it two.” Then, with a roll of her eyes, she approached Jason, handcuffs emerging from her belt.

CHAPTER TWO

Adele loosed an explosive gust of breath, listening to the quiet creak of hinges as her apartment door closed behind her. Four hours of ridiculous paperwork and interviews later, Adele was glad to be back home.

She flipped a light switch and peered into the cramped space as she rolled her shoulders and winced against a sudden pulse of pain. Adele glanced down at her side and, for the first time, noticed a stain of red on her white undershirt beneath her suit.

She frowned. Wincing again, Adele scanned her small apartment as she went to the kitchen sink, resignedly untucking the front of her shirt from her belt.

A new place. The lease only lasted two months at a time. It had been too expensive to stay in the old apartment. After Angus left, Adele simply wasn't paid enough to keep up rent South of Market, where Angus and his coding buddies had congregated. Now, having moved to Brisbane, she found she didn't mind the change. It wasn't loud—which she had her neighbors to thank for—though the place was little more than a kitchen, a TV, and a bedroom with an en-suite bathroom. All of it, even somehow the TV, smelled a bit of mold.

It wasn't like she spent much time at home anyway.

Adele winced again as she pulled her shirt from her belt and examined the long scratch against her skin. She grimaced in recollection. A gift of the chain-link fence, no doubt.

"Damn rookies," she muttered beneath her breath.

Agent Masse was young. Only a few months out of training. Adele doubted she'd been much better on her first collar, but still... that had been a debacle. She missed John. Last time they'd met, though... things had grown awkward. She remembered the late-night swim in Robert's private pool. The way John had leaned in, the way she'd recoiled, almost reflexively.

Adele frowned at the thought and immediately wished she could take it back. Instead, she reached for a clean length of paper towel from the counter and began running hot water. She opened the cabinet over the fridge and snagged a bottle of rubbing alcohol. She dabbed it against the towel and pressed the makeshift disinfectant wipe to her ribs, wincing yet again.

She moved over to the single chair in the kitchen, pressed against the half table between the fridge and the stove, and took a seat facing the wall, dabbing the strong-smelling paper towel against her scrape. At last, as she leaned back, she let out a long breath.

Absentmindedly, she glanced over her shoulder toward the door. Two bolts and a chain lock ornamented the metal frame, remnants from the previous tenants.

The chair creaked as she adjusted herself and leaned one elbow against the table, staring at the surface of the smooth wood. She shifted again, if only for the sake of the noise. The apartment was so quiet. Living with Angus, there would always be a TV show running or some podcast blaring from his room while he worked on a coding project. For the couple weeks she'd spent with Robert back in France, she would often find herself in the same room as her old mentor, enjoying his company by the fire as he read a book or listened to concertos on the radio.

Now, though, in the small, stuffy San Francisco apartment... it was all so quiet again.

Adele shifted once more, listening to the creak and protest of the poorly constructed chair. A phrase from her childhood, one of her father's favorites, crossed her mind. "*Simple things please simple minds.*" In a sort of phantom protest, Adele wiggled in the chair, listening to the strangely consoling creak of wood one last time, before she gritted her teeth, still pressing her makeshift disinfectant wipe against her wound, and then she regained her feet and trudged down the hall.

"Bloody Renee," she muttered.

Jason Hernandez never would have bolted if John had been there. She missed France. After the interview with Interpol, she'd spent some time with Robert. A nice time—refreshing in its own way. It had given her an opportunity to look for her mother's killer.

Adele pushed open the bathroom door at the end of the hall and stood in front of the mirror. It was a small, cramped bathroom. The shower sufficed as Adele hadn't taken a bath in nearly six years. Showers were far more efficient. The Sergeant—her father—likely hadn't taken a bath his entire life.

She sighed again as she undressed and stepped into the shower, turning on the hot water, but the spray was still lukewarm. Another little flaw of the new apartment. The water pressure wasn't great either, but would have to do.

As Adele stood beneath the tepid drizzle, she closed her eyes, allowing her mind to wander, pushing past the events of the day, of the past couple of months back in the States.

Words played through her mind.

"...Honestly, it's funny you left Paris, you know that? Especially given where you worked."

She sighed as the water soaked her hair and began to drip down her nose and cheeks in slow uneven pulses, matching the temperamental jets from the showerhead. Yet she kept her eyes closed, still mulling over the words. They echoed—sometimes even when she slept—resonating in her head.

That's what the killer had said.

Back in France. A man who'd sliced his victims and watched them bleed out, helpless and alone. She and John had caught that serial killer, but not before he had nearly murdered her father. He'd nearly killed Adele, too.

The bastard had worshiped her mother's killer. Another murderer—so many of them.

Adele's brow bunched in the stream of water as she clutched her fists and her knuckles pressed against the cold, slick white plastic pretending to be porcelain.

John had killed the serial killer before he'd ended Adele, but that had only left her with more questions. Part of her wished he'd been allowed to live.

Why was it funny she'd left Paris? That phrase haunted her now. She kept running it through her mind. *Funny you left Paris... especially given where you worked...* Almost like he was teasing her. They had been talking about her mother's killer.

Paris. She was nearly certain now. Her mother's murderer had *lived* in Paris. Perhaps he still did. He would be what, fifty? Adele shook her head, sending water droplets scattering across the shower onto the slick floor.

She gritted her teeth as more lukewarm liquid pulsed in uneven jets from the nozzles.

In a surge of frustration, she twisted the knob the full way, but the water didn't warm. Adele blinked, her eyes stinging against the trails of liquid inside the slope of her cheeks. She stared in anger at the shower knob, the arrow pointing at the culmination of a red slash.

"Fine then," she muttered.

She grabbed the handle and twisted it the other way. Small disciplines compounded over time. The cold water began to arc on her head and sent goosebumps rising on her arms. Adele's teeth began chattering within moments, and the pain in her side faded to a numb chill as the cold water turned frigid.

Still, she stayed in the shower.

The killer had taunted her. As if he'd known something. Something she'd missed. Something the authorities had missed. What was relevant about her workplace? That part bothered her the most. It was almost as if... She shook her head again, pushing back the thought.

But... what if it was true?

What if her mother's killer was somehow connected to the DGSI? Maybe not the agency itself, but the building. Perhaps there was a proximity. What else would make sense of his words?

Especially given where you worked...

The man John had shot had known something about her mother's killer. But he'd taken it to his grave. And the Spade Killer, the man he had worshipped, the man who had killed her mother, was still out there.

The cold water continued to seep down the angled slope of her shoulders, and she drew in small, quick breaths against the sensation, but still refused to move.

She would be sharp next time. They had asked her to join a task force with Interpol on an as-needed basis. But Adele was itching to return to Europe. She liked California, and she liked working with the FBI, especially with her friend Agent Grant as supervisor. But her desire to solve her mother's murder required a level of proximity.

Finally, pushing one forearm against the glass door, gasping, Adele twisted the shower knob.

Mercifully, the freezing water stopped. She stood trembling in the glass and plastic partition for a moment as the water dripped off in quiet taps.

Whoever designed the bathroom had placed the towel rack on the back of the door on the opposite side of the room. It took a few steps to reach it, and though she had a bathmat on the floor to absorb water, she preferred to wait in the shower a bit to dry off before stepping out.

And so she waited, thinking, contemplating, shivering. She thought of another time, soaked in water, also shivering...

A flash of warmth crested her cheeks. She thought of swimming in Robert's pool—John had come over for an evening...

He was insufferable. Rude, obnoxious, annoying, unprofessional.

But also handsome, said a small part of her. *Dependable. Dangerous.*

She shook her head and stepped from the shower, causing the glass and metal door to squeak open and slam into the yellow wall; a few flecks of paint chips fell from the ceiling. Adele sighed, glancing up. Already patches of mold had formed beneath the coating. The previous tenant had painted over it, which had only served to disguise the issue.

Perhaps she should text John.

No, that would be too familiar. An email then? Too impersonal. A call?

Adele hesitated for a moment and reached for her towel, pulling it off and drying her hair. A call might be nice. She reached down to her side with the scrape and winced against the minor injury.

Some wounds healed slowly. But other times, it was best to avoid a wound altogether. Perhaps it was better she didn't call John at all.

Exhaustion weighed heavily on her shoulders as she moved through the house to the bedroom. Her eyelids were already beginning to droop. Three hours of overtime, filling out paperwork and justifying the shooting, had taken their toll.

It was a horrible thought, but Adele was starting to wish for a case in Europe.

Perhaps something that didn't hurt anyone too badly. Just something to get her out of California. Out of the small, cramped apartment. It was too quiet. For some people, the sounds of other human beings moving around, enjoying their lives, assuaged them. It staved off bouts of loneliness.

Adele sighed again, and she moved into her room, donning bedclothes. She reaffixed a bandage on her scrape and tried to push back any further thoughts of animosity toward her new young partner. She flopped into bed and lay there for a few minutes.

In the past, she and Angus would watch TV as they drifted off. Sometimes he would read a book, narrating it line by line out loud so she could enjoy it too. Other times they would just snuggle and talk for a few hours before they drifted off.

Now, though, she lay in her bed. No TV. No books. Just quiet.

CHAPTER THREE

Melissa Robinson moved up the apartment steps, humming quietly to herself. In the distance, she heard the bells from the city. She paused to listen, her smile only widening. She'd been living in Paris for seven years now, yet the sounds never grew stale.

She turned up the next set of steps. No elevators in this apartment. The buildings were too old. *Cultured*, she thought to herself.

She smiled again and took the stairs one at a time. There was no rush. The new arrival she was going to meet had said two o'clock. It was 1:58. Melissa paused at the top of the landing, glancing out the wide window into the city beyond. She hadn't grown up in Paris, but the place was beautiful. She glimpsed the old, yellowed stone structures of buildings older than some countries. She noted the angled pattern of apartments and cafes and crisscrossing streets through the heart of the city.

With another contented sigh, Melissa reached the door on the third floor and politely extended her hand, tapping on the frame. A few moments passed.

No answer.

She continued to smile, still listening to the bells and then glancing back out the window. She could just see the low-peaked steeple of Sainte-Chapelle spiraling against the horizon.

"Amanda," she called out, her voice pleasant.

She remembered the first time she'd come to Paris. It had all seemed overwhelming. Seven years ago, an expat from America, resituating in a new country, a new culture. Knocks on the door had been a welcome distraction at that time. Melissa knew many of her friends in the expat community had a difficult time adjusting to the city. It wasn't always as friendly at first blush, especially not for Americans, or for college-age kids. She remembered her time on an American campus for the first two years. It was as if everyone had wanted to be her friend. In France, people were a bit more reserved. Which, of course, was why she helped organize the group.

Melissa smiled again and tapped on the door once more. "Amanda," she repeated.

Again, there was no response. She hesitated, glancing up and down the hall. She reached into her pocket and fished out her phone. Smartphones were all well and good, but Melissa preferred a bit of an older style. She scanned the old flip phone and noted the time on the front screen. 2:02. She scrolled through the text messages and scanned Amanda's last text.

"I'd be happy to meet you later today. Say, 2pm? Looking forward to the group. It's been hard making friends in the city."

Melissa's smile faltered a bit. She remembered meeting Amanda—a chance encounter in a supermarket. They'd hit it off immediately. The bells seemed to fade in the distance now. On a whim, she reached out and felt for the door handle. She twisted and found that it turned. A click, and the door shifted open just a crack.

Melissa stared.

She would have to make sure Amanda knew about the dangers of leaving her door unlocked downtown. Even in a city like Paris, caution preceded safety. Melissa hesitated for a moment, caught in a crisis of conscience, but then, at last, she eased the door open completely with a gentle prod of her forefinger.

"Hello," she called into the dark apartment. Perhaps Amanda was out shopping. Maybe she'd forgotten the appointment. "Hello, Amanda? It's me, Melissa from the forum..."

No answer.

Melissa didn't consider herself a particularly nosy sort. But when it came to Americans in Paris, she had a sense of kinship. Almost like they belonged to the same family. It didn't feel so much like intruding as checking in on a little sister. She nodded to herself, justifying the decision in her mind before she stepped into the apartment of a woman she'd only met once before.

The door creaked again as her elbow brushed against the frame, causing it to shift open even more. She hesitated and thought she heard voices from down the hall. She popped her head back out and looked up the hallway toward the edge of the stairs.

A young couple moved along the banister, noted her, and instead of nodding or waving, continued on their merry way. Melissa sighed and moved back into the apartment—and then froze. The fridge was open. A strange slant of yellow light extended from the compartment across the kitchen floor.

Amanda was there. Sitting on the floor, facing the opposite wall. Her back was half against the cabinet, one shoulder blade pressed against the wood, the other extending past, her left arm resting on the floor.

“Did you spill something?” Melissa asked, stepping even further into the darkened room.

Wine puddled on the ground beneath Amanda’s left arm. Melissa took another few steps and turned to face Amanda, still smiling.

Her smile froze. Amanda’s dead eyes stared up at her, gaping over a thick slit in her neck. Cold blood stained the front of her shirt, spilling down to the floor where it had thickened against the linoleum.

Melissa didn’t scream, nor did she shout. She merely gasped, her fingers trembling as she struggled to fish out her inhaler. She stumbled toward the door, grabbing her inhaler with one hand and snagging her phone with the other.

After a few puffs of air, she loosed a gurgled groan and, with trembling fingers on her flip phone buttons, she tapped 1-7 for the police.

Still gasping, back against the wall outside the open door to the apartment, she swallowed and waited for the operator to pick up. Behind her, she thought she could hear the vague, fading sound of liquid dripping against the floor.

Only then did she scream.

CHAPTER FOUR

Adele checked her smart watch, cycling through the different screens that kept an eye on her heart rate, movement, music... She inhaled through her nose where she stood in the doorway of her apartment and glanced up at the clock. Four AM exactly. Plenty of time to get in a two-hour run before work. She adjusted the sweatband holding back her hair and glanced over her shoulder toward the sink.

She had left her plastic Mickey Mouse bowl sitting on the metal partition between the sink and the counter. Normally, Adele cleaned up the moment she made a mess. But today, in the small, quiet apartment...

"It can wait," she said to no one in particular. Which, of course, was part of the problem.

Last night had been one of fitful rest, sleep eluding her. Adele stood in the doorway as the digital watch ticked to 4:01. She glanced back at the sink, then muttered beneath her breath and reluctantly strode into the kitchen, grabbed her plastic bowl, and turned on the water with an irritated snap of her wrist. She rinsed out the milky residue in the bottom, placed the bowl in the dryer rack, and headed back toward the door.

Before she could turn the doorknob, though, a quiet chirping sound caught her attention. Adele's eyes darted to the kitchen table. Her phone was vibrating.

She frowned. The only people who would call her this early were her father in Germany, or work.

And she had just spoken to her father a couple of days ago. It was little surprise, then, when she glanced down at the glowing blue green screen depicting a single word in white letters.

Office.

She picked up her phone as the buzzing noise faded. Adele read three simple words in black text flashing across her screen. *Urgent. Come in.*

Adele removed her sweatband and hurried back to her room to change into work clothes. The jog would have to wait.

From the parking lot, through the security checkpoints, Adele only paused once to drop off coffee to Doug, one of her friends on the security team. By the time she reached the fourth floor, and Supervising Agent Grant's office, she could already hear voices through the opaque glass door.

Adele pushed in and pulled up short.

Two large TV monitors set in the wall depicted faces Adele recognized. On the left, over Grant's desk, Executive Foucault, the DGSI supervisor. On the right, situated near a blue-tinted window with a view of the city, Adele spotted Ms. Jayne, a correspondent for Interpol who had first proposed the idea of a joint task force headed up by Adele.

Agent Lee Grant, who'd been named after the two generals in the Civil War, stood behind a metal standing desk, her fingertips steepled beneath her chin, a troubled expression on her face. She glanced up at Adele, waving her in with quick scattered gestures. Agent Grant's office was sparse, with a yoga mat in one corner and a pile of workout DVDs hidden beneath a blue plastic binder next to her desk.

Agent Grant gestured to one of the empty stools in front of her standing desk and waited for Adele to sit. At last, she cleared her throat, regarding Adele with a nod, and said, "They need you back in France."

Adele looked between the TV monitors. Ms. Jayne's and Foucault's gazes were just a bit off, each of them glancing at the various screens at their disposal rather than looking directly into their cameras. Still, Adele couldn't help but search the gaze of Ms. Jayne and the DGSi executive, trying to discern their motives.

"Is it bad?" Adele asked, hesitantly.

Ms. Jayne cleared her throat, and in a clear, crisp voice, said, "Only two victims so far. I'll let Foucault fill you in on the details." Ms. Jayne was an older woman, with bright, intelligent eyes behind horn-rimmed glasses. She had silver hair and was a bit heavier than most field agents. She spoke without an accent, suggesting she'd mastered the English language, but it didn't seem as if it were her native tongue.

On the other screen, Executive Foucault's dark eyes narrowed over a hawkish nose; he shook his head and seemed to be glancing down off screen—there was the sound of rummaging papers.

"Yes, yes," he said in heavily accented English. "Two dead. So far. Two Americans," he added, glancing up at the screen. "Or, at least, were Americans."

Adele frowned. "What do you mean?"

Foucault's gaze flitted across the screen one way then the other, not quite lining up with anyone in the room, but suggesting that perhaps he was glancing between portions of his own computer screen.

"Expatriates," he said. "Americans now living in France. Both had visas, but were applying for citizenship, or at least one of the victims did. The other only recently arrived."

Adele nodded to show she'd heard. "So why do you need me?"

Ms. Jayne cleared her throat. Her voice came clear, even through the crackle of the speakers. "We need someone who's familiar with the DGSi, but who America is comfortable investigating their own. The unique nature of the crimes could also use someone with your expertise."

Adele frowned. "What unique nature?"

Foucault replied, "Two dead so far. Throats slit, nearly ear to ear." He adopted a grim tone and continued, "I'll send the files along as soon as I'm cleared by the coroner. Both young women, both recent arrivals. We're investigating, of course, and I'm sure our agents will come up with some good leads, but," he frowned again, glancing at his computer screen, "Ms. Jayne seems to think it would be wise to involve you early on. I can't say I fully agree, but it's not my hill to die on."

Adele raised a hand while he spoke, waiting for him to finish. He noticed this, and nodded for her to speak.

"How long between the murders?" she said.

The executive replied without hesitation. "Three days. The killer is quick. It's worth noting there's no physical evidence at the scene."

Adele shifted in her seat, realizing this chair didn't make as much noise as the one back in her kitchen. "What do you mean?"

"I mean there's no physical evidence."

"None?"

Foucault's frown deepened, his bushy eyebrows pressing together. "None at all. No fingerprints, no traces of hair or saliva. No sexual assault that we could find. The cuts alone, according to the coroner's initial report, were strange. Whoever did this slit their necks, but did so without a quavering hand—a practiced motion."

"And what does that mean?" Adele asked.

"If I may," said Agent Grant, speaking for the first time from behind her standing desk, "cuts and slicing wounds carry a sort of signature. Whether the attack was left-handed, or how strong they were, or how tall..."

Foucault nodded with each passing word and cleared his throat. "Exactly. But these particular attacks were done by someone without much signature at all. There's no physical evidence. No sign

of a struggle. No forced entry. Nothing suggesting any foul play, except, of course, two corpses in downtown Paris.”

“Well,” said Ms. Jayne, peering through the screen now. Her eyes seemed to have readjusted for a moment, now fixating firmly on Adele. “Are you ready for your flight?”

Adele flicked her eyes to Agent Grant and raised her eyebrows.

Grant hesitated. “You sure you don’t want to spend another couple of weeks with Agent Masse?” she said, her tone betraying no emotion whatsoever.

Adele scowled.

Grant’s eyes twinkled in a morbid sort of humor. “I’ll take that as a no. Already signed for your leave and reassigned Masse. You’re good to go.”

Adele tried to suppress the sudden jolt of emotion—she was a professional, after all—but as she pushed from her chair, she couldn’t help but feel excitement at the thought of returning to France.

“Is there anything else I should know?” she asked, glancing at Foucault.

“I’ll send you the reports,” he said with a shrug. “But they’re short. As I told you, not much evidence. There is one thing. A strange detail, but certainly important...”

“What?”

“The first victim’s kidney was missing.”

A strange silence fell over the room for a moment, and the two crackling screens and the two agents in the San Francisco office waited, all of them frowning.

“Her kidney?” said Adele.

“Just so,” said Foucault.

“Is the killer taking trophies?”

The executive shrugged, his thick brow narrowing over his sharp nose. “Well, that’s what you’re here for, isn’t it? You provide the answers. It’s my job to provide the questions. I’m told Ms. Jayne has already purchased your ticket. First class. Your flight departs within the hour.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Adele frowned at her laptop, leaning back in the first-class seat provided to her by Interpol. The plane shuddered as it cut through the sky, but Adele had closed the adjacent blind, allowing the glow from the computer screen to illuminate the cramped portion of airplane cabin.

She found herself twisting the strap to her laptop bag nervously where it rested in the empty seat next to her, surveying the information on the screen again. Once she read a case file, she rarely forgot the details.

She settled in, leaning against the curving white wall of plastic, her eyes flicking from paragraph to photo.

Two dead so far. Three days apart. A rapid pace, even for a serial killer. No physical evidence of any sort. A missing kidney in the first victim and a pending coroner's report for the second. Would she also be missing a kidney?

Young women, both. Expats—Americans now living in France. Recent arrivals, too. Both killed so quickly they hadn't even reacted. That was the only explanation for the clean nature of the cuts. No jagged slices, no signs of a struggle. One moment, the young women had been alive, in their own apartments, the next, seemingly as if by a ghost, they had been snuffed out.

Adele doubted the women had even seen it coming. Not much to go on—not yet anyway. Still, she kept the window blind low, listening to the churn of the engines as they hurtled through the air. Her eyes narrowed as she scanned the case file again and again... and again.

She'd been able to connect to the Charles De Gaulle Airport Wi-Fi, and her eyebrows twisted down as she looked at the most recent message from Robert Henry, her old mentor and friend. It said: *Sorry, dear, I won't be picking you up. They sent another agent.* Then he'd included a series of emojis and smiley faces.

She paused, then typed: *No problem. I'll see you at the office. Who did they send?*

No response. Adele shook her head as she exited the walkway and entered the main terminal, greeted by the odor of overpriced coffee and stale pastries from the airport restaurants. Her eyes flicked along a series of shops; one for curio items, and another a bookstore. Adele pushed her phone back into her pocket, moving quickly through the airport toward baggage claim. Last time, she'd been paired with John—likely it would happen again. But they'd left things awkward after the last visit. While she and Robert had messaged each other every few days in the month since she'd been in France, John hadn't reached out once.

Neither did you, a small voice reminded her.

But she pushed it away with a slight shrug. She reached the baggage claim and watched as the luggage circled the metal slatted conveyor belt; she waited patiently, but still never fully managed to shake the anticipation clotting her chest.

At last, she managed to retrieve her bag, waiting for a space to clear around the claim.

She found herself brushing her hair behind her ears and straightening her outfit even while she approached customs and waited for the border agent to survey her special detail passport and papers. *Get a grip,* she thought scathingly. Why was she so concerned about her appearance all of a sudden? John or not, why did it matter? Adele was taller than most woman, but not unusually so—her long, dirty-blonde hair framed features that hinted of her French-American heritage. Exotic, some said. A single mole stippled the top of her lip, a source of insecurity as a teenager, but no longer.

Adele thought of the last night she'd seen John, swimming in Robert's private pool on his estate. The way John had been at the start of the evening, followed by how he'd behaved toward the end. He had tried to kiss her, hadn't he? Had she misinterpreted the gesture? Whatever the case, when she'd pulled back, he'd been offended. He'd left shortly after.

In defiance to her burbling emotions, Adele messed her hair, intentionally disheveling her bangs. Then, setting her jaw, she wheeled her suitcase through customs and out into the receiving area of the airport.

Her eyes scanned the crowd, looking for the tall, lanky form of her previous French partner. But as her gaze looked over the waiting crowd, there was no sign of John. Her smile—which she hadn't realized was displayed—became rather fixed as her gaze settled on a suited woman standing against the tinted glass of the window facing the streets outside the airport.

Her smile faded completely as she recognized the woman's pursed lips and her silver hair pulled into a bun. The woman resembled a no-nonsense supply teacher, or perhaps a nun out of smock. Not a single strand of hair was out of place, and even the wrinkles along the edge of her eyes seemed to stretch as if attempting to stand to attention.

An agent she'd worked with before... But not John.

This particular agent had been Adele's supervisor back when she'd worked for the DGSI. She also had been demoted, an unfortunate scenario whose blame had been placed solely on Adele's shoulders. Every ounce of scorn and impatience displayed itself in every crease and glint in Agent Sophie Paige's eyes, but at last, she raised a hand and gave a quick jerking gesture in Adele's direction.

Not a wave, but more a beckoning call like a master calling their pet hound. Adele stood frozen for a moment, feeling people jostle past her as they moved to greet waiting family or friends. The still air swelled with laughter, the sound of bodies embracing, the quiet murmurings of exhausted travelers retreating from the airport and hurrying with relief toward waiting cabs or cars on the curb.

For the briefest moment, Adele had to resist the urge to turn right around and march back onto the plane, leaving Sophie Paige and her scowl standing by the window.

But at last, she mustered up the residue of her courage, quickly brushed her hair back into place with furtive motions, and moved toward the waiting form of her past supervisor and new partner.

CHAPTER SIX

Removed from the center of Paris, in the northwestern suburbs of the Ile-de-France region of the capital, Adele kept her eyes forward as the car pulled up to the fourth floor of the DGSI parking structure. The afternoon drive had proceeded in complete silence; now, Agent Paige brusquely exited the vehicle, calling something over her shoulder about meeting with Foucault. She left Adele alone to meander her way through security to her old mentor's office.

Stepping into Robert's office was a relief.

Adele could feel her shoulders sagging as if a weight were lifted as she stepped through the door with a quiet knock on the frame. The day's travel weighed heavy, but her spirits lifted as she scanned the familiar room. The walls still carried the same framed pictures of old race cars and beneath them shelves of dusty books with cracked leather covers. Two desks now sat in the room. The second desk had been placed by the window with an upright leather swivel chair behind it. On the desk a small, golden nameplate read, *Adele Sharp*.

Hearing a man clear his throat, she redirected her attention to the first desk and its occupant.

Robert Henry was already standing. He often stood when a woman entered the room. The short man was straight-backed with a long, curling mustache oiled and dyed black. He wore a fine-fitting suit, which Adele guessed had been tailored specifically for him. Robert came from wealth; he didn't need the job at the DGSI, but he enjoyed it. Perhaps this was the reason he had one of the best records at the department. Robert had once played soccer for a semi-professional team in Italy, but had returned to France when he'd been recruited by the French government long before DGSI existed.

The small French man examined Adele for a moment, but his eyes twinkled, betraying the smile which hid behind his lips.

"Hello," said Adele, unable to resist a smile of her own.

Robert Henry smirked now, flashing a row of pearly whites missing two teeth. Adele had heard many stories to how he'd lost the teeth, each of them more far-fetched than the other.

They held eye contact across the room, watching each other for a moment.

Then Adele said, "You use too many emojis." Some of her bad temper from earlier began to fade in the face of her old mentor and friend.

Robert sniffed. "I consider it an art form."

"Mhmm," said Adele. "Weren't you the one who told me the advent of cartoons was the death of culture?"

Robert set his shoulders and with a prim wiggle of his chin replied, "A genteel man knows how to admit when he's wrong."

Adele's smirk turned to a good-natured grin. Robert Henry had been like a father to her for many years. Her own father wasn't a fan of affection, but Robert was the sort who went out of his way to make sure Adele felt welcomed and comforted. Robert owned a mansion, but he lived in it alone, and often welcomed the opportunity to have guests. Adele would be staying at his house for her time in France.

"Took you a while," said Robert, glancing at his watch. The glistening silver timepiece looked like the sort of item that might've belonged on a banker's wrist. Robert adjusted his cuff links and nestled the watch beneath the edge of his perfectly pressed sleeve.

Adele leaned her suitcase against the doorframe, placing her laptop bag on the floor. "Whoever scheduled my flight gave me a three-hour layover in London," she said. "Then it took some time getting the car—we had to walk to the other side of the airport. Someone more petty might think she did it on purpose just to frustrate me."

Robert frowned. "She? Who did Foucault pair you with?"

Instead of answering, Adele strode across the room and extended her hands, embracing the smaller man. She wasn't particularly tall, but Robert was still three inches shorter. She hugged her old mentor, and felt a warmth through her chest. He was smaller than she remembered, though. Almost... frail. Though Robert dyed his hair and his mustache, Adele couldn't shake the notion he was aging. She separated from her old friend and smiled again. "We'll be working out of your office, I hear," she said.

Robert patted her on the shoulder in a comforting way. "Yes—that's yours." He nodded to the desk with the name plate.

"You put it by the window. I appreciate that."

"I remember how you liked the view last time you were here," said Robert with a shrug. He lowered his hand and moved back to his own desk chair, emitting a quiet groan as he lowered himself, settling with a soft sigh.

"You all right?" asked Adele.

Robert nodded, waving away any further questions with a dismissive gesture. "Yes, of course. The old bones just don't move like they used to. I'm afraid I won't be in the field with you."

Adele gave a noncommittal nod. "Figured you wouldn't be. We just need someone to keep track of things back here, anyhow."

Robert was no longer smiling. His gaze seemed heavy all of a sudden.

"You're not sick, are you?" Adele blurted out. She wasn't sure where the question came from, but it ushered forth before she could stop it.

Robert smiled and shook his head. "No, not that I'm aware of. But," he tapped his fingers against his desk, and then glanced at the computer screen across from him, "I'm learning how to use it better. Email is hard. But I figured, well, for your sake..." He trailed off, glancing at her.

Adele felt a flush of gratitude. She knew how much Robert despised technology. Despite the number of emojis he used in his texting, he'd been stubborn on the advent of computers. Still, she had demanded Interpol allow Robert to be a part of her team. That was the deal she'd made with Ms. Jayne when hashing out the contract.

At the time, she'd heard whispers and rumors that the DGSI was trying to edge Robert out of his position—a mandatory retirement. She felt a flash of frustration. The thought of anyone taking Robert's job was unconscionable. They'd built DGSI's homicide division, in part, with his efforts. He had made a name at other agencies long before the DGSI had even formed, which had attracted many new recruits. Adele respected most of the agents who worked for France's intelligence agencies, but there were none she respected more than Robert. He was clever in an intuitive sort of way, and he was rarely wrong. The last case in Paris, he'd insisted the killer had natural red hair, and he'd noted the vanity of it. She hadn't been sure, but in the end, it had proven an accurate deduction.

Still, she remembered her interactions with Executive Foucault. The frown on his face when she requested Robert's help. The agency was trying to whittle back personnel. Now, though, with his help on the Interpol attaché, she'd tied Foucault's hands.

"I need you," she said, simply. "You're the best at what you do."

Robert shook his head, sighing as he did. "I don't know if that's true, dear," he said, his voice creaking all of a sudden.

"It is. Don't worry about the computers; you'll figure it out. I'm sure. We just need someone to touch base with, to coordinate from back here. I wouldn't want anyone else."

Robert nodded again, his expression still glum. "I'm old, Adele. I know I might not look it." He ran his hand through his clearly dyed hair. "But this agency, this place, I think it's for the younger folk now."

Adele's brow dipped. "Why are you saying these things?"

Robert waved a hand. "It's not important. I'm grateful. Likely, if you hadn't asked for me, I would've been out of the agency within the week."

Now Adele's frown turned to a scowl. "You heard that? Did someone say they were trying to get rid of you?"

Robert just shook his head. "I am an investigator. I'm not meant to be stuck behind a desk. Sometimes you just know these things."

"You're thinking too much. You're invaluable—trust me. And besides, if you go, then I go."

Robert smiled at this comment and tapped his fingers together. "Fair enough. Computers aren't my forte, but I'll try my best. But you still haven't said, who did the executive pair you with? John?" His eyebrows flicked up ever so slightly. A small glimmer of a smile edged the corner of his lips, but Adele shook her head, quieting his expression.

"Agent Paige," she said with the gravity of a judge's gavel.

Robert stared at her.

She shrugged.

He continued to stare.

"I didn't ask for it," she said.

"Sophie Paige?"

Adele glanced back out the door, checking that the hall was clear, then nodded. "Looks like. She was about as happy as I was."

"Doesn't Foucault know your history?" said Robert, his voice rising.

"It's fine," Adele replied in a hushing voice. "I don't know what the executive does or doesn't know. But it is what it is."

"And what about John?" Robert demanded.

Adele waved a hand airily, as if the thought hadn't really crossed her mind. "You mean Agent Renee? Well, I think he's working another case. That's what Paige said."

Robert's manicured eyebrows hung low over his eyes like dark clouds threatening a storm. "Paige," he said with a grunt. "Now I know why Foucault didn't tell me."

Adele hesitated. There was something in his tone she couldn't quite place. "What do you mean?"

Robert was still frowning at his fingers, though, and Adele had to repeat the question. His eyes darted up at last. "Oh, I mean, nothing, or—except, he knows how I feel about you. And Paige hasn't exactly been the warmest towards you since the incident."

Adele paused, studying her old mentor. She knew Robert would take her side. But there'd been something more to his tone. Something behind his frown that she didn't quite understand. "Have you had words with Paige since I left?" she asked, slowly.

"Words? No." He trailed off as if preparing to add more, but then he seemed to decide against it and gave a quick shake of his head, latching his fingers together and folding his thumbs on top of each other. "No, nothing like that. I'm sure both of you can be professional though, yes?"

Adele shrugged. "I can if she can."

"*Magnifique*," he said. "I hope you slept on the plane, though. Foucault wanted to meet the moment you landed."

Adele nodded, her lips pressed firmly together. "Agent Paige is already in his office," she said. "We're to start right away?"

Her old mentor nodded as he pushed out of his chair and moved with stiff motions around the edge of his desk. "Leave your suitcase here," he said. "I'll send someone to take it to my home. Come now."

Robert took her by the arm, looping her hand through the crook of his elbow, and escorted her to the elevator. Robert was old-fashioned, and there were some who thought of him as pompous. But to Adele, his behavior only summoned a fond amusement.

They waited for the quiet ding of the elevator and stepped into the compartment. For the briefest moment, Adele's finger hovered over the button for the second floor—John's office would be there. Was he in? No—now wasn't the time. There wasn't a gap of three weeks between kills like the last

time. Three days. That's all that had passed between the killings. A rapid, startling pace. A pace that might only get worse.

Adele pressed the button for the top floor and, with Robert next to her still holding her elbow, she waited as the elevator carried them up and toward the office of the executive.

Paige sat by the window, a familiar comfort in the way she reclined in the office chair. Executive Foucault himself peered out from beneath a hawk-like brow, gnawing on one corner of his lip and shaking his head.

Adele and Robert stood, waiting, watching. Foucault's eyes fixed on his computer screen and his expression only darkened. "This is it?" he asked, glancing up. "Nothing new?" His eyes darted to Agent Paige, whose own gaze bounced to Adele as if redirecting the executive's ire.

Adele hesitated. Sunlight streamed through the open window of the executive's large office—the gusting air ushered out some of the scent of cigarette smoke, but the odor still clung to the walls.

"I just arrived," Adele said, hesitantly, unsure if she was being blamed for something. "I was planning to settle at Robert's..." She trailed off at the look on Foucault's face and then cleared her throat. "Honestly, I slept on the plane. We can start this afternoon. I'd like to see the crime scene of the second victim."

Foucault nodded, waving a hand. "Yes," he said, his thick eyebrows narrowed over his dark eyes. "That would be best. We don't have time to wait on this one, hmm? No." He nodded toward Paige. "You two have worked together before, yes?"

Paige continued to sit in silence by the window. She nodded once. Adele also nodded.

After a few moments of awkward silence, Robert intervened, clearing his throat. "A strange one, this," he said, quietly.

Adele kept her eyes fixed on Foucault, but nodded in agreement.

Robert grunted as the attention in the room shifted from Adele to him. "The victims must have known the killer," he said. "A friend? Maybe a family member?"

Adele turned her face slightly, rolling her head against her shoulders. "Maybe. Or maybe the killer snuck up on them. A landlord? With a key?"

Robert hesitated for a moment and silence reigned once more. At last, he said, "What do you make of the missing kidney?"

"You've been over the files?"

"Second report isn't in yet." Robert paused, inclining an eyebrow toward Foucault in question.

The executive nodded. "They're working on it, but it's taking some time. Full report should be in soon."

Robert nodded and this time addressed Foucault, moving across the room to peer through the open window into the street below. A small, pink-painted cafe occupied the street across from the DGSI.

"I did read the first report," he said. "Only the kidney missing. Why do you think that is?"

Paige and Foucault both stayed silent. But Adele glanced across the room toward her mentor, watching the way the afternoon sunlight illuminated the side of his face and cast shadows against the carpeted floor.

"Trophy collecting?" she said.

"Perhaps," said Robert. "Makes sense."

"What else?"

Robert shrugged and his gaze snapped to Foucault behind his desk.

The executive's frown deepened. "That's what you're paid to find out," he said. His eyes darted between the three agents and he reached out, patting the side of his computer. "We need more information, and you don't have much time to provide it."

Adele noted the quick way in which *we* became *you*. She paused, then said, quietly, "I've been thinking about the victims. Both of them expats, yes? Growing up, I had some experience with that community—not much, as my mother was local. But some American friends at school whose parents relocated for work." She paused. "They're a vulnerable community. Isolated a lot of times—barriers in language and culture. Perhaps the killer is using this to get close to them. Exploiting loneliness or a pressure to please the host country."

Foucault took this with a nod and shrug. "Explore all possibilities," he said. "Just," he paused, "don't make it personal." He turned from Adele. "Agent Henry, you'll be staying here, I presume?" Foucault's gaze flicked to the smaller man.

Robert rubbed his mustache. "I'll leave the field work to the youngsters, I think."

Foucault returned his attention to Adele. "Second crime scene?" he said. "It's still under our supervision."

"I'm ready to start if she isn't too tired," Paige said, speaking for the first time since they'd entered the room. The comment seemed innocent enough, but something about it raised Adele's hackles.

Now that the attention was once again on her, Adele inhaled softly.

Americans in France, expats—she felt a kinship with them; a camaraderie. Adele knew what it was to move from country to country, to reestablish roots, to build a life once more.

But these lives had been built only to end with bloodstains on the floor of their apartments. No physical evidence. No sign of a struggle. No sign of breaking or entering.

Now wasn't the time for rest.

"I'm ready when you are," said Adele, already turning toward the door.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Adele ground her teeth in frustration, tapping her fingers impatiently against the woodwork of the door frame that led into the apartment. She glanced at her watch for the tenth time in the last thirty minutes and her eyebrows lowered even further over her eyes, darkening her countenance as a flash of impatience jolted through her.

“Christ,” Adele muttered. She frowned as she glanced up and down the street, tracking the flow of vehicles. She kept trying to spot any government issues, but found her attention drawn only to the loaner she’d parked against the curb by the empty meter. It was still afternoon, with the sun high in the sky, dipping only slightly in the horizon.

Adele and Sophie had taken separate vehicles, as Adele would be heading to Robert’s straight from the crime scene.

She leaned against the railing leading up the concrete steps and turned back toward the front door of the apartment. For a moment, she considered entering on her own. But generally, protocol dictated two agents were required on scene in tandem. On her first day back on the job in France, Adele didn’t want to stretch boundaries. Still, Agent Paige was making it difficult. Already, she was nearly thirty minutes late.

Adele let out a low growl. She’d made arrangements with Robert to take her luggage to his house, and then driven straight to the crime scene. The drive had taken twenty minutes. Paris was one of the few cities with next to no stop signs. It was rumored there was one stop sign, somewhere; Agent Paige must have found it and not known how to proceed.

Nothing else explained why Adele had been waiting on Paige for half an hour.

She glanced along the street, toward the gap between the blocks of buildings. She swallowed, staring toward the open path across the street, with hints of green hidden within. Something she loved about Paris had been the little passages and hidden gardens ready to be explored as if through some labyrinth crisscrossing the hunched buildings. The French had a special word for those who walked aimlessly, enjoying the side roads and gardens: *la flânerie*. Adele couldn’t remember the last time she’d relaxed enough to walk aimlessly. And now certainly wasn’t the time.

With a final puffing breath of frustration, Adele turned to the doors and moved to buzz the bottom button marked *Landlord*. He’d been instructed to let her in. With or without Paige, Adele was determined to see the crime scene of the second victim.

Before she could push the buzzer, though, there was a quiet screech of tires. Adele glanced over her shoulder and spotted a second SUV with black tinted windows parking behind her own vehicle. Agent Paige’s silver hair appeared over the top of the doorframe as she exited the driver’s seat, taking her sweet time about it. The older agent paused on the curb, then snapped her fingers as if realizing something, turned back to her car, opened the door, and began rummaging around inside.

Adele stared; it took nearly a minute before Paige found whatever she’d been looking for, and then once more, at a snail’s pace, began to move toward the stairs to the apartment. She gave a noncommittal grunt in Adele’s direction.

Adele suppressed her temper. She would have to work with Paige for the duration of the case, and starting off on the wrong foot wouldn’t help anything. But it almost seemed like her assigned partner was intentionally dragging her feet on this one.

“I thought we agreed to come straight here,” said Adele, trying to keep her tone neutral.

Paige shot Adele a long look out of the corner of her eye. “Yeah? I’m not usually in a hurry to waste my time. The crime scene monkeys have already been over this. Not sure why we’re here.”

Adele turned fully now, looking away from the apartment doors and the buzzers to face her partner. “We’re here,” she said, gritting her teeth, “because I want to examine the crime scene myself. Is that all right with you?”

Paige picked at her fingernails, flicking whatever she found onto the sidewalk. “You’re not going to discover anything new.”

“Maybe not, or maybe so.”

Adele could smell Agent Paige’s perfume, though to call it perfume would have been a stretch. Her partner smelled of soap; not scented soap, but rather a sort of plain cleansing odor that hearkened of hygiene and simplicity. Agent Paige wore no earrings, nor jewelry of any kind. She had a strong profile with a roman nose and sharp cheekbones. Adele remembered her first year at the DGSI, working under a taskforce with Agent Paige—she’d been intimidated by the older woman then, and, judging by the twisting swirling in her gut, the sensation hadn’t faded.

Adele had never visited Sophie’s family, but she knew from discussions with other agents that Paige had five children of her own, all of them adopted. And yet, in Adele’s experience, she’d never seen the woman miss a day of work. It had taken some digging, when she’d been at the DGSI, but by the sound of things, Agent Paige’s husband stayed at home, taking care of the kids while his wife worked long hours for the government.

Paige returned Adele’s look of annoyance, and in answer, Adele reached out and slammed her thumb on the buzzer for the landlord. It took a moment, then the doors buzzed. Sophie pushed open the front door, moved in, and allowed it to swing shut behind her.

Adele had to hurry forward to jam her foot in the gap, catching it before it closed fully.

Adele stared in frustration at the back of the older agent’s head. Again, not a single hair was out of place. Paige’s clothing was neatly pressed, her suit jacket a charcoal gray, matching her pants.

Adele had never particularly enjoyed her old supervisor’s company. The last time she’d interacted with the woman, on the previous case in France, Paige had caused trouble.

“Excuse me,” said Adele, keeping her voice low, “do we need to talk?”

Paige acted like she hadn’t heard, though, and continued toward the stairs.

Adele took a few hurried steps to catch up with the older woman, and she reached out, gently placing a hand on the other agent’s forearm. As if she’d been scalded, Paige whirled around, a snarl on her lips. “Don’t touch me!” she snapped.

Adele’s eyes flicked to the woman’s holster beneath her parted jacket. She lifted her hand, raising it in a placating gesture. “Apologies.”

“What do you want?” Paige said, scowling. “We’re doing it your way, aren’t we? We’re here wasting time instead of talking to witnesses.”

“What witnesses?” Adele said, biting back further retort.

“The American. The one who found the body.”

Adele shook her head. “She found the victim, but she didn’t *see* anything.”

Paige pursed her lips. “It would be a better use of our time than going over an empty crime scene. You read the report, didn’t you? No physical evidence. There’s nothing for us here.”

Adele huffed, shaking her head. She reached out as if to steady herself, gripping the wooden banister of the railing that led up the apartment steps.

She could hear the jingle of keys and the sound of footsteps approaching as the landlord made his way across the hall. She glanced past her partner, over the banister and through the wooden rails, to spot an old, bald man with a bit of a paunch and a stained sweater moving toward them.

Adele lowered her voice, trying to keep calm as she said, “You can contact the officers with the American. They’re on standby. Tell them to bring her here, if you want. We’ll interview her after; better here than the station, anyway.”

“Fine,” said Paige. “Maybe I will.” She reached for her phone and fiddled with it for a moment.

Adele waited as the landlord approached, hoping this was the last heated exchange for the moment. It wouldn’t do to look unprofessional in the face of public speculation.

The landlord glanced between the two women, seemingly ignorant of the bad blood. He adopted a simpering, oily smile and said, “I can show you to the room.” He paused for a moment, his smile still

stretching his lips like taffy. “Just out of curiosity...” He paused, as if waiting a rehearsed number of seconds. Then he said, “When will I be able to rent out the apartment? There are bills to pay—”

“I’m Agent Sharp,” Adele interrupted. She studied the man. “This is Agent Paige.” She reached into her pocket and flashed her badge, as well as the Interpol credentials Robert had given her.

The landlord waved them away without glancing toward either ID. Paige was still glancing at her phone, ignoring the man.

“I can show you,” he repeated.

Adele gestured with a hand up the stairs and allowed the landlord to take the lead, following him at a slow pace as he breathed heavily, moving up the stairs one at a time. When they reached the third-floor landing, he clicked the keys into the lock and twisted, pushing the door open. Adele examined the keys, then glanced at the back of the landlord. “You didn’t enter the apartment a couple of days ago, did you?”

The landlord regarded her, and then after a moment, his face adopted a horrified expression. He immediately began shaking his head wildly, causing his jowls to jiggle. “No,” he insisted. “Certainly not. I never enter the apartments. The keys are just for emergencies.”

Adele raised her hands. “Does anyone else have access to a set of keys?”

The landlord shook his head firmly. “Only the apartment tenant. And myself. And I don’t use them,” he repeated.

Adele nodded to show she’d heard, watching as the man pushed open the apartment door and stepped aside, gesturing for the two agents to enter.

The agents ducked under the crime scene tape crisscrossing the door. Adele moved onward and glanced at the tile floor.

Already, most the blood had been cleaned up. Photographic evidence had been taken of the scene, and previous investigators had come through to catalog everything. Adele glanced around the kitchen; she noted a few stains of blood against the cabinet next to the fridge, as well as along the tile floor. She moved over the stains and glanced at the fridge. It was closed now.

Besides the closed fridge door and the missing stain, the crime scene looked exactly the same as the photos. The body had long since been taken to the coroner, and the final report would be forthcoming soon enough.

She hated to admit it, but there wasn’t much to be seen. No physical evidence. Just liked she’d been told.

They’d already dusted and scanned for fingerprints all along the counters, the fridge, the body. And still, nothing had shown up. Nothing besides the victim’s own fingerprints.

The second victim had been found with her back against the cabinets, facing the fridge. This meant whoever had attacked her had done so quickly. There had been a bit of blood spatter, but not much. There’d been no signs of defensive wounds on the body. No struggle whatsoever.

“Do you think she knew the killer?” Adele asked, quietly.

Agent Paige said, “Maybe.”

Adele stepped daintily over the faded pool of blood. She walked to the fridge, and, using her pocket to sheathe her hand, she grabbed the handle and pulled it open. There were still groceries in the fridge. Old sandwiches rested in the crisper, and a large jug of milk sat nestled next to a dozen eggs. Otherwise, the fridge was mostly bare. Adele regarded the cabinets where the woman had been found, sitting on the floor in a pool of her own blood.

She examined the wooden block of steak knives next to the sink. All the knives were accounted for. They’d been scanned for blood and cleared. The killer had taken his weapon with him. They still didn’t even know what he had used to kill the woman.

Adele reached up, opening the freezer. There were two trays of ice, a tub of ice cream, and some frozen pizzas. The ice cream container was stained with melted, then refrozen, streaks on the side, and one of the trays of ice was completely empty. Adele pursed her lips; it was a personal pet

peeve, but she hated when people put empty ice trays back in the freezer. She glanced at the ice cream container, and then her eyes flitted to the frozen pizzas. Cauliflower. She wrinkled her nose, but felt a sudden flush of embarrassment as she studied the food.

What had she been expecting to find?

She eased the freezer door shut and turned back to survey the room. There was no indeed physical evidence. She regarded the sink and noted a slow drip. She moved over and twisted one of the handles. The drip continued, one droplet at a time. *Tap, tap.* Droplets struck the metal basin.

“Is the witness coming?” Adele said, glancing over at Paige.

The older woman was still watching the skyline through the window. She grunted, “On her way.”

Adele cleared her throat. “What was her name again?”

“Melissa Robinson. Also American—she found the body.”

Adele set her lips. “How do you think we should approach questioning?”

Agent Paige shrugged again. “You’re the Interpol operative. I’m just here following your lead. Do what you want.”

Adele hesitated, staring across the crime scene. She nodded once, then, in as diplomatic a tone as she could summon, she said, “I think we need to have a chat.”

Paige finally looked away from the window and raised a silver eyebrow.

Adele approached carefully, coming to stand in front of the older woman, though part of her wanted to hide in the corner of the room. The scent of soap was even stronger than before as she met her partner’s gaze. “This doesn’t have to be painful, but I have a feeling you’re not putting in as much effort as you could.”

Paige betrayed no expression for a moment. At last, she shrugged and said, “I’m not in charge of your feelings. Maybe you should do a better job controlling them.”

Adele stared at the older woman. “I don’t believe this is helpful.”

“The number of things you’re unable to believe isn’t my business,” Paige said coolly. She carried the attitude of someone delighting in the frustration of another. Adele’s mounting temper seemed only to further fuel Paige’s enjoyment.

“I didn’t know it was you,” Adele blurted out at last.

Agent Paige’s expression became fixed.

Adele glanced back toward the door, and was glad to see the frame empty, suggesting the landlord was further down the hall. She lowered her voice all the same and said, “I didn’t know. I just saw someone had moved one of the accounting documents out of evidence. I thought it was a clerical error. When I reported it to Foucault, I had no clue—”

“Stop,” Paige snapped, gritting her teeth.

The quiet, quizzical expression of complacency had faded now, like ice melting over a pool, revealing the boiling anger beneath.

“I’m serious,” Adele said, “if I had known—”

“You did what you did.” Paige was scowling now. Her hands, at her sides, trembled against her gray suit. “They demoted me. I’m lucky I still have my job. Matthew was arrested. They questioned him for nearly a week!”

Adele winced. “I’m sorry. All I saw was missing evidence. I didn’t know—”

“God damn what you don’t know,” Agent Paige snapped. She slammed her finger into Adele’s chest, pushing sharply against the younger woman. “You should have come to me. I was your supervisor! You went behind my back, like a little rat.”

Adele stepped back, reaching up and rubbing at her chest, wondering if she’d find a bruise come morning. She shook her head and said, “You moved evidence to protect your boyfriend. I didn’t know what had happened. I didn’t even know you were dating a suspect—”

“He wasn’t a suspect when we started,” Paige snapped, but then trailed off, biting the words with a snarl. “It’s none of your fucking business who I date, understand? And they cleared him. He didn’t do it.”

Adele nodded, trying to keep her posture nonthreatening. “Good. I’m glad. I didn’t know that at the time. All I knew was that someone had moved evidence. If I had known it was you, I would have talked to you. I definitely would have. You didn’t tell me, though. I just saw it missing—”

Sophie snorted and waved a hand at Adele. “Not everything has to be catered toward precious little Adele,” Paige snapped. “Not everything is about you.”

Adele ground her teeth, and she wanted to protest further, but the words wouldn’t come. The situation had been a bad one. Agent Paige had been lucky to keep her job. Her relationship with Matthew, an accountant with the DGSI, hadn’t been public knowledge at the time. Adele hadn’t known her supervisor was dating a suspect in the death of a prostitute. In the end, Matthew had been cleared. But Paige had blamed Adele for reporting the missing evidence. It had turned out Paige was trying to cover for her boyfriend; in the end, though, it had come to light that Matthew had been sleeping with the prostitute. Adele suspected Paige hadn’t known this when she’d hidden receipts and documents suggesting Matthew’s involvement.

Adele had seen the evidence missing, though, and had immediately reported the vanished files. After that, Sophie Paige had been investigated as well as Matthew. Her boyfriend had been cleared of murder charges, but had been fired from the DGSI. Paige would have been fired, but Foucault—for some reason Adele didn’t understand—had gone to bat for her and kept her on, demoting her in the process.

“I don’t like you,” Paige said, simply, all pretenses gone now, her expression once more a scowling, stony one. “I’m not ever going to like you. I didn’t ask for this assignment. I have to bear it. As do you. Now how about you stop wasting my time by dragging me to crime scenes that have already been investigated? Did you find anything new?” she demanded.

Adele hesitated, glancing back toward the kitchen; she was loath to admit she hadn’t. So instead, she said, “When’s the witness coming?”

“You’re insufferable,” Sophie snapped. She turned back to the window and stared out into the city. Adele, her hands trembling from anger, moved to the door and into the hallway, preferring to wait outside for the witness to arrive, rather than spend another moment with Agent Paige.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Adele was startled from her reverie by an officer in uniform tapping her shoulder. She glanced back, turning from the window in the hallway outside the victim's apartment.

"Excuse me," the officer said, quietly.

Adele raised an eyebrow to show she'd heard.

The officer cleared his throat and smoothed his mustache. "The witness refuses to come inside. She says she'd rather talk on the sidewalk. Is that all right?"

Adele glanced at the man, then toward the open door to the apartment. For a brief moment, she was tempted to leave Agent Paige and go talk to Ms. Robinson on her own. But at last, she sighed and nodded. She pointed toward the open door. "Would you mind telling my partner?"

The police officer nodded once, then circled the banister, heading for the door. He gave a polite wave toward where the landlord still waited at the end of the hall, keys in hand. For all Adele cared, he could wait all day. They wouldn't be renting out the place anytime soon. Not yet at least.

She moved back down the stairs, taking them two at a time, hoping to have a couple of moments to speak with the witness without Agent Paige's presence clouding her thoughts.

She reached the ground floor, pushed open the door to the apartment building, and noticed a third car, this time a police vehicle, waiting at the curb. Adele glanced at the front of the vehicle, where a second officer sat on the hood. She had a cigarette in her hand and looked to be lighting it, but when she spotted Adele, she quickly tucked her lighter back in her pocket and flicked the cigarette toward the grate beneath the car's front wheel.

The officer pushed off the hood just as quickly and nodded toward the back seat of the vehicle.

"She refuses to get out," the officer said. "I can make her, if you'd like—"

"Of course not," Adele retorted. "She's not a suspect." She moved toward the rear of the vehicle and peered inside. A dimple-faced young woman with curly brown hair sat in the back. She couldn't have been older than Adele. Perhaps early thirties.

Adele tapped on the door and looked toward the officer expectantly. The officer waved apologetically and then reached into her pocket and clicked her key.

The police car lights flickered; there was a quiet *ticking* sound of the locks. Adele tugged on the handle and opened the door. She peered inside the cabin, ducking low and meeting the eyes of the American woman.

"You're Melissa Robinson?" she asked.

The curly-haired woman nodded once. "Yes, I am," she replied in accented French.

"English or French?" Adele said. The woman hesitated, frowning, and began to speak, but Adele interrupted and said, "How about English? Easier for both of us I'd imagine."

The seamless way Adele switched from nearly perfect French to flawless English seemed to take the woman with the curly hair back a bit. "Are you—" she began.

Adele said, "On assignment. It's a long story." Normally people didn't understand what it was to be American, German, and French. The idea of having three citizenships was lost on most and Adele didn't want to get into it.

She heard footsteps behind her, and with a weary collapse of her shoulders, she glanced back to notice Paige approaching, glaring in her direction.

Adele returned her attention to the police vehicle once more. She still didn't enter the vehicle, figuring it might be perceived as threatening, so instead she leaned forward, her arms pressed on the top of the door, in a sort of sheltering posture, hoping the way she positioned herself would communicate protectiveness to the woman within.

Adele cleared her throat and said, "I'm very sorry you had to come back here, and I'm sorry that we wanted to bring you back upstairs. That was my oversight."

Melissa Robinson nodded, smiling in a small, sad way as if accepting the apology. Adele felt a bit of weight lift from her chest at the American's expression as she continued, "But I was wondering if perhaps you could tell me anything about the victim. Her name was Amanda, is that right?"

"Yes," Melissa said, her voice quavering.

Adele continued to lean in, but she could now hear more footsteps, and could feel Agent Paige coming even closer.

Melissa's gaze flicked from Adele, over her shoulder toward the approaching agent.

"You mind giving us a moment?" Adele said, tight-lipped, to her partner.

Agent Paige leaned against the front of the vehicle, though, peering into the back without greeting the witness. "Go right ahead," she said. Paige made no move to leave. The two officers watched the agents, but stayed where they were on the sidewalk.

With a frustrated sigh, Adele turned back, keeping her expression as pleasant as possible. "Is there anything else you might be able to tell us about Amanda?"

Melissa shook her head almost immediately. "Nothing," she said, stammering a bit. "I barely knew her. We were going to meet for the second time today."

Adele frowned. "Today?"

"I'm sorry, I mean yesterday. It's been rough... Yesterday, early on, before she... when she died." The woman shook her head again, wincing, and she glanced back through the window, up toward the third floor of the apartment building.

"I'm very sorry to hear that," said Adele. "But do you mind helping me out; what do you mean you were going to meet yesterday?"

"I mean," said the woman, "that we met at a supermarket briefly, but for the most part only ever spoke online."

"Online?" said Paige, gruffly, leaning past Adele and shouldering her out of the way so she could peer into the back seat. "What do you mean online?"

Melissa glanced between the two women. "I mean on the Internet. We have a chat room for expats from America. She wanted to meet up; it can be lonely sometimes in a new country if you don't know anyone."

"There are a lot of you here?" Agent Paige said. Adele didn't like the disapproving tone in her partner's voice. Paige issued a soft snort of air, but she kept herself mostly in check. "Don't like the home country, is that it?"

Melissa fidgeted uncomfortably, twisting the seatbelt in her hands. She still had it attached, even though the car was parked. Adele didn't blame her; sometimes people latched onto anything for a feeling of safety.

The woman shifted again and seemed unsure whom she ought to address. At last, she settled on looking at Adele. "We don't dislike our country. At least, not all of us. Not really. There are a lot of reasons someone might move away. Culture, changing jobs. I can't tell you how many hours most of us had to work back home. Sometimes it feels like in America you just live to work. In France, it feels like there is more of a life. Plus there are so many different people you can meet; a common history and architectural beauty..." She trailed off, shaking her head slightly. "I'm sorry, I'm rambling. Don't get me wrong; I do like America too, sometimes," she added quickly. "But everyone has their priorities and tastes. Some people love to travel. Some people want to start over. I can't imagine it's that strange."

Adele shook her head. "It isn't," she said, "but you said you met Amanda briefly before. How?"

Melissa brightened at this. "I... I met her while shopping. We..." She hesitated, her tone slipping. And she swallowed. "We met in a checkout line at Le Grande Epicerie de Paris..."

"The grocery store?" Adele asked.

Melissa's eyes were sad, but a bit of humor crept into her tone as she said, "It's—it's a bit of a joke among our community. The USA section at the store only carries things like peanut butter cups,

popcorn, beef jerky—a funny interpretation of what Paris believes are the staples back home...” Melissa hesitated, then shrugged. “It’s not uncommon for Americans to shop there. Some of us find it ironic; others...”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.