



John Matthews

P A S T
IMPERFECT
#1

The Top Ten Bestseller

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Past Imperfect #1

Matthews, John

E-media books (2013)

Past Imperfect # 1

John Matthews

E-Media Books

Past Imperfect #1 is part of a two-book set. Book #1 has a build up of events with some issues resolved and ends on a cliffhanger. However, Book

#2 is required for the full denouement and resolution to ALL issues.

Book #1 is approx 270 pages and Book #2 approx 360 pages. Both parts #1 and #2 are available on Kindle.

As well as being a novelist, John Matthews is an experienced journalist, editor and publishing consultant, though after the success of *Past Imperfect*, which became an international bestseller, he has devoted most of his time to writing books. In 2004, *The Times* compiled a list of top ten all-time-best legal thrillers which included *Past Imperfect*. John Matthews lives in Surrey with his wife and son.

Links for Past Imperfect #2

[Book #2 Kindle USA](#)

[Book 2 Kindle UK](#)

[John Matthews Website](#)
[link](#)

**Books also available by
John Matthews on Kindle:**

**Hot off the Press – My
latest book:**

Letters From a Murderer

Kindle USA

Kindle UK

Reviews link here:

Past Imperfect

Book #1 Kindle USA

Book #2 Kindle USA

Book #1 Kindle UK **Book**

2 Kindle UK

Ascension Day

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The Second Amendment

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Two Boys.

One Murder.

*Sometimes justice takes more
than a lifetime.*

*A Car accident in California,
a deadly assault in Provence,
and two boys thirty years
apart are left fighting for their
lives.*

*Dominic Fournier is the
French detective who finds*

himself at the heart of a landmark case spanning three decades and two continents. An investigation which takes him from a sleepy rural village to the corridors of power, a simple provincial case which becomes one of the largest and most important in criminal history. The case of a lifetime, but one that seems impossible to win...

Fornier's only hope is to prove the link between two lives thirty years apart... the final missing key.

A compulsive journey through forensic, medical and psychiatric evidence between France, America and London; a breathless paper-chase of clues extracted from a young boy's psyche; revenge, blackmail, a trail of intrigue and blood behind a trial that

*captures a nation... and a
desperate race against time
against a killer who will stop
at nothing to bury his past.*

For Sean

And for my family close at heart

Press reviews for Past Imperfect:

'Matthews maintains the suspense... an engrossing odyssey into the seamy side of a world that is so near, yet sometimes seems so far. Compulsive reading.'

- *The Times*

'Impressive... strong characterization and a relentless race against time to avert the worst carry the reader along the thick pages of this psychological and legal thriller with a difference.'

- Time Out

'Intriguing thriller (with a) ...dogged and sexy French detective. Treat yourself.'

- *Prima*

'One of the most compelling novels I've read... an ambitious and big novel which will keep you enthralled to its last page.'

- *Cork Examiner*

'A classy, well-written and unusual thriller.'

- *Yorkshire Post*

'Matthews delivers one of the best debut

thrillers in years, brave, ambitious and remorselessly entertaining. Past Imperfect is a stunner.'

- *Dublin Evening Herald*

PROLOGUE

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PROLOGUE

Provence, June, 1995

The three figures walked along the rough track alongside the wheat field. Two men and a boy of eleven.

The older of the men, Dominic Fornier, was in his late fifties. A stocky figure just short of six foot with dark brown hair cropped short and almost totally grey at the sides. Another twenty metres ahead would be the best vantage point, he thought, his eyes scanning the broad expanse of the wheat field. Soft brown eyes with a faint slant at the

corner. A slant that somehow made them sharper: knowing eyes, perceptive eyes. Eyes that had seen too much.

The younger man, Stuart Capel, was an inch shorter and slim with light brown almost blonde hair. Mid-thirties, the first faint worry lines showed more prominently as he squinted against the sun and the glare of the bleached white field. Dominic could see the slight resemblance between Stuart and the young boy; though the boy's hair was a shade lighter and a few freckles showed across his nose and cheeks. Fresh faced, happy, but Dominic could still sense the slight barrier, a distance and detachment in the boy's eyes that betrayed the pain and scars of the past months.

As they shuffled to a stop, Stuart asked: 'So is this where it happened?'

'Yes, more or less.' Dominic pointed. 'About five metres ahead on the left.'

Stuart looked at the area of wheat, and it told him nothing. Barely a foot high after being cut down to stubble in the early summer, it was silent, eerie. No hint of the events which now brought them to this spot. What had he expected? He looked across, at young eyes and a distant look that now he knew so well; but there was no glimmer of recognition. As usual, little or nothing while the boy was awake. Probably now even the ghostly shadows finally faded from the edges of his dreams. Acceptance. Stuart wondered.

Six months? It seemed far longer as Stuart's mind flicked through the nightmare odyssey which had finally led them here today. And now the with the trial, so much would hinge on the events of the next days and weeks. Is that what he'd hoped for by asking Dominic Fornier to bring them out here: a final closing of the book, a laying to rest of the ghosts in both their minds?

To the right of the lane were pine trees and thick bushes clinging to an embankment which dipped down towards the small river tributary thirty yards away. Stuart could hear its faint babbling above the gentle wind that played across the field.

He reminded himself that whatever

pain and anguish he'd felt, for Dominic Fornier it must have been much worse. The case had plagued Fornier for over thirty years. From a young gendarme to a Chief Inspector, from a provincial case to now one of the largest and most intriguing in French legal history. '*The trial of the decade*,' *Le Monde* had apparently headlined it. And equally it had ripped apart Fornier's own family life.

Dominic lifted his eyes from the field and into the distance, towards the village of Taragnon. *Blood patches dried brown against the bleached sheaves. The small face swollen and disfigured.* Dominic shuddered. The images were still stark and horrific all these years

later.

The field and the view had remained constant, thought Dominic, but everything else had changed. Everything. How many times had he stood in this same field the past thirty years? Searching for clues and the missing pieces of his own life. One and the same. The last time he'd visited in the Spring just past, he'd cried: cried for the lost years, cried for the family and loved ones long departed, cried for his own and Taragon's lost innocence. One and the same. Cried and cried until there was nothing left inside.

For a moment he thought he could hear the goat's bells again. But as he strained his hearing above the soft sway of the

wind across the field, he realized that it was the distant church bells of Bauriac, calling morning prayers... *the many services through the years: christenings, marriages... funerals...*

Dominic bit his lip. He could feel the tears welling again with the memories, and turned slightly from Stuart and the boy as he scanned the silent panorama of fields and the rich green Provence hills beyond. And as the pain of the images became too much, he closed his eyes and muttered silently under his breath, 'Oh God, please forgive me.'

ONE

California, December, 1994

Fields of gold. Burnished wheat under the hot sun.

Eyran could feel the warm rush of air against his body as he ran through the sheaves, thrilling to the feeling of speed as they passed in a blur, springing back and lashing lightly at his legs and thighs. It was England. He knew instinctively, even though there were no guideposts in the dream from which he could be sure. The field where he used to play back in

England was on a hill, a slow incline which led down to a small copse of trees with some of his favourite hiding places. Another wheat field rose beyond, linking in turn to fields of cabbages, maize and barley. A colourful and lazy patchwork of green and gold stretching towards the horizon.

But the field in the dream was flat, and Eyran found himself running through frantically looking for those all so familiar landmarks. The hollowed tree in the copse where he had built a camp, the small brook that ran into the copse from Broadhurst Farm – where Sarah was on some days with her labrador. The field stretching out before him remained obstinately flat, no matter how

fast he ran and how many sheaves he pushed past. The line of the blue horizon above the gold stayed the same. Though he knew somehow that if he kept running, the scene would change, he would see that all so familiar incline towards the copse, and he picked up the pace, a tireless energy driving him on. The contours changed suddenly, he could see what looked like the brow of a hill just ahead. But the position of the sun was also different, shining straight into his eyes and moving closer, closer - blotting out the hill ahead, then the horizon. Fading the golden wheat to stark white and searing his eyes as it became one blinding blanket of brightness.

Eyran awoke abruptly as the light hurt his eyes. Looking from the car window, he could see the car lights shining at them from one side start to swing away, taking a left at the four way junction. He didn't recognize any landmarks, though he knew they must have driven some way since leaving their friends in Ventura. He heard his father Jeremy mutter something about the junction they should take for joining highway 5 for Oceanside and San Diego, then the crinkling of paper as his mother in the front passenger seat tried vainly to unfold a large map to the right place. They slowed slightly as his father looked over intermittently at the map.

'Is it junction 3 for Anaheim and Santa

Ana, can you see?' Jeremy asked. 'Maybe I should stop'.

'Maybe you should. I'm no good with these things.' Allison half turned towards the back seat. 'I think Eyran is awake in any case. He's got school tomorrow, it would be good if he slept some more.' Allison turned and gently stroked Eyran's brow.

Eyran slowly closed his eyes again under the soothing touch. But as his mother's hand moved away and he realized she was looking ahead again, his eyes instinctively opened to stare at the back of her head, focusing on her golden blonde hair until it became almost a blur. Willing himself back into the warmth of the wheat field and the

dream.

Allison noticed Jeremy gripping the steering wheel hard as he talked about a problem case at work. His eyes blinked as they adjusted to the fast dying dusk light. Signs now for Carlsbad and Escondido.

She stole a glance back at Eyrán. He was asleep again, but she saw now that his brow was sweating, the neck of his shirt damp. She pulled the blanket covering him lower down to his waist. Early December and the weather was still mild, temperatures in the late sixties, early seventies. Two weeks to school breaking up, with the trip to England to see Stuart and Amanda only

days after. Part of her mind was already planning: how many days she should arrange for Helena to visit during their three weeks away, fresh food left in the fridge, clothes, packing, what woollens and coats to take.

‘We should be back within an hour,’ Jeremy said. ‘Shall I give Helena a call on my mobile?’

‘Up to you. She’s preparing something, but that’s only going to make us forty minutes earlier than we said.’

Jeremy looked over as a large double trailer truck sped by, and checked his speed: 57 mph. The truck must be touching seventy. He shook his head briefly.

He didn't notice the motorbike change

lanes without warning ahead of the truck, nor the sudden swerve the driver made in the cabin to miss the bike. The first thing he noticed was the lazy snake like undulation at the back of the trailer, twisting abruptly at an angle and into a jack-knife which finally pulled it away from the cabin.

There was a suspended moment as it happened. As if in one blink everything was still: the road, the trees, the roadside signs and hoardings, the grey dusk sky; the landscape rolling past suddenly frozen. And then in the next blink the trailer was rushing towards him.

Jeremy braked hard and turned the wheel sharply away - but the suddenness

with which the trailer flew at them made him gasp out loud. '*Oh... Jeez!*' He braked harder, wrenching the wheel frantically away from the large grey steel block floated inexorably upon them, filling the windscreen and his view as it scythed through the front of the Jeep.

He heard Allison scream as the Jeep tilted sharply with the impact, and felt something jam hard into his stomach and ribs, pushing the air from his body as the windscreen exploded and shards of glass flew past them like blizzard snowdrops. Numbness more than pain hit him as the engine block was shunted back, severing his right leg just below the knee joint, and the first two rolls of

the Jeep became a spinning confusion of sky, road, grass verge. Then darkness.

He remembered awaking once later. He could hear voices, though they were muffled and indistinct. When he tried to focus, the people seemed to be far away, though he could see clearly the arm of a man leaning over and touching his body. He found it hard to breathe, as if he was gargling and choking on warm water, and a jarring pain gripped his stomach and one leg. He must have lay there for some while, at times almost succumbing to the welcome release of the darkness, but knowing somehow that the pain was his only tangible link with consciousness and life.

He mouthed the word 'Eyran', but the

man by his side didn't respond, nor could Jeremy in fact hear his own voice.

As finally they lifted his body, the lights twisting and spinning briefly to one side and away, the voices faded and he drifted back into the darkness.

Stuart Capel looked at his watch: 10.40 pm. - 2.40 pm in California. When he tried his brother Jeremy's number earlier it was on the answer-phone, so he'd made a note to call again in the afternoon.

Only two or three weeks to go and so much to plan. He hadn't seen Jeremy and his family for almost two years. He had ten days off work over Christmas while they were over, but the problem was he

couldn't remember if it was the 16th or 23rd when they arrived. All so precise Jeremy, phoning him almost a month ago, going painstakingly through flight numbers, dates and times. Somehow he'd ended up with the flight number and the time on his phone pad, but not the date. The problem was, the same flight number left at the same time each week.

If he had to ask Jeremy again, it would probably provoke a comment. A short snub that said it all: I'm organized and you're not, I'm successful because I plan carefully, you've suffered in business because you don't. All so precise Jeremy. Each step of his life carefully mapped out and planned. From University at Cambridge, through

London Chambers, then re-taking exams in the US and six months in Boston as a stepping stone to a San Diego law firm.

Stuart's life and career had been in almost complete contrast. A massive rise in the eighties in design work for print media, then the slump. Two partnership break ups followed and he was almost bust by the late eighties, only crawling his way out the last few years. Methodical planning had never worked for Stuart, and nearly all of his arguments with Jeremy revolved around the same thing: Jeremy trying to suggest some well staged plan, Stuart telling him at every turn why it wouldn't work, what would probably arise to fuck it up, and finally they'd reach the subject of Eyran.

Stuart would strike back by complaining that Jeremy was trying to structure Eyran's life too carefully, the boy was being stifled. He sensed a kindred spirit in Eyran that was somehow lost on Jeremy, a curiosity and thirst for life that Jeremy so often quelled by trying to map out his son's life to finite extremes. Jeremy loved Eyran, but had little grasp how important it was to allow the child some freedom. Some choice.

The last get together almost two years ago, Stuart had taken his family out to California. He'd put his foot in it by mentioning some of Eyran's old friends in England. Could Eyran write them a postcard or perhaps get them a small

memento from San Diego zoo? Jeremy had shot him a dark look, then explained later that they'd had problems with Eyran being homesick and missing his English friends. Only in the last six months had he settled in more and not mentioned them.

Later in the same holiday, Jeremy had poured cold water on Stuart's plans to expand into multi-media production, and they'd had more words. Of course there were risks, Stuart explained. Anything that depended on creative input, market forces and an unpredictable general public was a risk. As usual, Jeremy was blinkered; Stuart might as well try and explain Picasso to a plumber.

Stuart made a mental note: *Eyran's*

friends in England, advice about Eyran's upbringing and future, current business activities which might be viewed as risky. Any other no go areas for his conversation with Jeremy?

He made the call again, but it was Helena, the visiting Mexican maid, telling him that they were away, 'Hup state till later tonight... about nine o'clock. You want I ask them to call you when they get back?'

'No, its okay. I'll set an alarm call early and phone them back.'

He arranged the call for 6.30 am, 10.30 pm California time. One finger tapped at the receiver for a second after putting it back. Fleeting unease. He pushed it as quickly away, told himself it

was just his nerves settling back from steeling for possible confrontation with Jeremy.

Dr Martin Holman, at thirty-four the youngest of Oceanside's three head ER consultants, heard the babble and commotion of voices a second before the emergency doors swung open. He was aware of two gurneys heading to different parts of the room, and then his attention fell on the young boy.

'What have we got?'

'Accident victim. Ten years old. Head injuries, but the chest's the most severe: two cracked ribs, possibly a fractured sternum as well.' The paramedic spat the words out breathlessly as they wheeled

the gurney rapidly towards a bed.

'Conscious at any time?' Holman asked.

'No. He's been out since we loaded him. Breathing blocked - so tracheal, respirator, plasma to keep up the volume. The normal. But still his blood pressure and pulse dropped the last few minutes in the ambulance. Last pulse reading was forty-eight.'

'Okay. Let's get him up and attached. One... *two*.' They lifted the boy in unison onto the bed. Holman called over two nurses and a junior doctor, Garvin, to attach the monitors: pulse, respiration, central venous and arterial pressure. Within a minute, the readings and a steady pulse bleep were there for

Holman. But he was immediately alarmed: Blood pressure 98 over 56, and pulse only 42 and dropping... 40. Something was wrong. Seriously wrong.

'More plasma infusion!' Holman snapped at Garvin. 'Do we know blood type?'

'O Positive.'

Holman instructed a nurse to arrange a supply for transfusion, then looked back to the boy. The pulse stayed stable at 40 for a few seconds with the increased plasma, then dropped another notch... 38. Holman began to panic. By the early 30s, it was all over. The boy was dying!

He scanned rapidly - the chest bandaged and blood soaked, the face and head bruised with heavy contusions -

looking for tell-tale signs. Blood loss was heavy, but the plasma infusion should have compensated. He moved around, feeling the boy's skull, shining a penlight into the eyes. No responsiveness. There was probably internal damage, but no alarming swelling to cause the current problem.

'Thirty six!' Garvin called out with alarm.

Then Holman noticed the unevenness of the boy's chest: one part of his lungs wasn't expanding! Possibly a broken rib puncturing one lung.

He nodded urgently at the remaining nurse: 'Trochal cannula! Set up a plural drainage.'

Holman cut through the chest

bandages and then slowly inserted the cannula, a hollow metal pipe with a cutting edge, between Eyran's ribs and into his left lung. He then fed a thin plastic pipe through the cannula, and at his signal the nurse activated the pump. It started sucking out blood from the flooded lung.

Garvin announced: 'Thirty four!' And Holman muttered under his breath, 'Come on... *come on!*' It had been a good day so far, mostly only minor injuries. He'd been hoping to finish his shift unscathed at midnight. *Don't die on me now!*

Holman looked anxiously between the cannula pipe and the pump. It was a race against time. Hoping that enough blood

could be pumped from the lungs to restore blood pressure and respiration before the pulse dipped too low. But when blood pressure fell to 92 over 50 and Garvin announced pulse at 32 - then after only a few seconds' gap, 30 - Holman realized with rising panic that it was a race he was losing.

Garvin's shout of 'Bradycardia!' and the boy lapsing into cardiac arrest came almost immediately after. The pulse became a flatline beep.

Holman had already signalled the nurse, and now prompted urgently: 'De-frib!'

Garvin put the electro-shock pads into position, but Holman held up one hand, counting off the seconds... *six... seven*. It

was a calculated gamble. Holman knew that as soon as the heart started again, fresh blood would be pumped into the lungs. Each extra second gave him more chance of clearing the lungs and stabilization. *Ten... eleven...* Garvin looked at him anxiously, the flatline beep sounding ominously in the background... *thirteen... fourteen...* 'Okay... Clear!'

Holman stepped back as Garvin hit the charge. The shock jolted the boy's small body dramatically.

But there was nothing. The flatline pulse still beeped... *nineteen...* Holman's jaw set tight, frantic now that he might have mis-timed it, left the de-frib too long. *Twenty-one* seconds now the heart

had been stopped! He leant across, put one hand firmly on the boy's chest and started massaging. It was thick with blood, and with the cracked ribs and sternum, Holman feared he couldn't apply the pressure he'd have liked. *Twenty-eight... twenty-nine...*

Still nothing! The beep a persistent, infuriating reminder. He didn't need to look up. He leapt back, signalling Garvin. 'Hit it again!'

Another shock and jolt. But with still no pulse signal, Holman feared the worst. He leant back over for another massage, his hands now slippery with blood on the small frail chest, trying to feel deep with each push down, silently willing back a spark of life. Beads of

sweat massed on his forehead. Only minutes since the boy had been wheeled in, and his nerves were gone, fighting now to control the trembling in his hands to hold the massage rhythm... *forty-three... forty-four*. If he lost the boy now, he doubted he could face another patient the rest of his shift.

But already he knew there was little hope. One more de-frib, and then that was it. By then the boy would have been dead almost a full minute.

Fields of wheat, swaying gently in the breeze.

The incline changed suddenly, without warning. Eyran could see the small copse of woods at the end of the field

and ran down the hill towards it, excitement growing as he got closer. Inside the copse, it was dark and damp, the air cooler. He looked for familiar landmarks that would lead him towards the brook, picking his way through the darkness. At one point he thought he was lost, then suddenly the brook appeared ahead from behind a group of trees. He felt uncertain at first, he couldn't remember the brook being in that place before. As he got closer, he could see a small figure hunched over the brook, looking into the water. He thought it might be Sarah, but there was no dog in sight. The figure slowly looked up at him, and it took a second for recognition to dawn: Daniel Fletcher, a young boy

from his old school in England who he hadn't seen for years.

He asked what Daniel was doing there, it wasn't the normal place he played, and Daniel muttered something about it being peaceful. 'I know,' Eyran agreed. 'That's why I come here. It's so quiet. Sarah comes down here with her dog sometimes as well.' Then he remembered that Daniel lived almost two miles beyond Broadhurst Farm. 'It must have taken you ages to get here. Do your parents know you're here?'

'No, they don't. But it doesn't matter, I haven't seen them in years.'

'In years! Very funny.' Though Eyran could see that Daniel wasn't smiling. He was looking soulfully back into the

water, and some small quirk told him that something was wrong, that all of this wasn't real, it was a dream. Then he recalled with a jolt what it was: Daniel had suffered with acute asthma, he'd died at the age of six after a severe bronchitis attack, over a year before Eyran left for California. He remembered now the service of the school chaplain, the whole school tearful, and how all the boys who had picked on Daniel for his frailty had felt suddenly guilty. He could see Daniel's pigeon chest struggling for breath, hear the faint wheezing. Eyran was startled by a rustling among the trees, preparing himself to turn and run before seeing that it was his father walking through.

He felt nervous because he'd never seen his father down by the copse before. He knew instinctively that he must be late returning home or have done something wrong, and mouthed 'I'm sorry', almost as a stock reaction.

His father looked thoughtfully down at Daniel before waving his arm towards Eyran. 'You must go home now, Eyran, you don't belong here.'

Eyran started to move away, then realized his father wasn't following. He was staying by Daniel at the side of the brook. 'Aren't you coming with me now, Daddy?'

His father shook his head slowly, his eyes sad and distant, and Eyran looked out of the copse to find that now it had

become dark outside. The darkness was a solid black blanket, the wheat field seeming to stretch endlessly into the distance, as before, with no hills and contours which he recognized. 'But I could get lost', he pleaded, just before his father turned and disappeared back into the darkness of the woods.

Eyran started to tremble and cry. He sensed that he must do as his father said and try to find his way back home, though he was struggling desperately at the same time to understand why his father had deserted him to fight back through the darkness on his own. If he could just get back home, he knew that all would be well. But the darkness of the field was deep and impenetrable,

with no familiar landmarks.

TWO

Provence, August, 1963

Alain Duclos saw the boy a few hundred yards ahead walking at the side of the road. His figure emerged like a mirage from the faint shimmer of the August heat haze.

At first Duclos wasn't going to stop. But there was something about the boy's tired posture and profile that made him slow down. As he drew close, taking in the boy's curly hair and olive skin, the sweat on his brow and his flustered

expression, he decided to stop. The boy was obviously tired and something was troubling him. The side window had been wound down because of the heat. Duclos leant across as he pulled over.

'Can I give you a lift somewhere?'

The boy was hesitant and looked back towards the far ridge of the fields for a second. 'No. No, thank you. It's okay.'

Duclos guessed his age at no more than ten or eleven. He couldn't help noticing how beautiful the boy's eyes were: green with small flecks of hazel, in contrast to his deep olive skin tone. The eyes betrayed the boy's anxiety. 'Are you sure?' Duclos pressed. 'You look as if you've lost somebody.'

The boy looked back towards the

ridge again. 'My bike broke down back there just beyond the field. I was walking to my friend's house, Stephan. His father has a tractor with a trailer to pick it up.'

'How far is it to Stephan's house?'

'Four or five kilometres. It's the other side of the village. But it's okay, I've done the walk before.'

Duclos nodded knowingly and smiled, pushing the door ajar. 'Come on, you're tired and it's hot. I'll run you there. It's too far for you to walk'

The boy returned the smile hesitantly. For the first time he looked the length of Duclos' car, the sudden excitement at the prospect of a ride in a sports car showing. 'If you're sure it's okay.'

Again the reassuring nod and smile as the boy got in. Duclos leant across to shut the door, revved twice quickly as he checked the mirror, and pulled out. They both sat in silence for a moment as the car picked up speed. Duclos noticed the boy looking at the dashboard and leather seats, then lifting up slightly to take in the sloping bonnet. Duclos answered his obvious curiosity.

'It's an Alfa Romeo Giulietta Sprint, 1961. Custom colour, dark green. I wanted one of the classic Italian racing colours - red or dark green, but I thought the red was too loud. I've had it just under two years. Like it?'

The boy nodded enthusiastically, now checking out the small back bench seat

and view through the coupe rear window.

'What's your name?' asked Duclos.

'Christian. Christian Rosselot.'

Duclos checked his watch: *12.48pm*. He'd made good time since leaving Aix-en-Provence. Duclos knew now what had made him stop. The boy reminded him of Jahlep, the young Algerian boy his Marseille pimp had found for him and had become a favourite on his last few visits. Except more beautiful. The skin pallor wasn't as dark as Jahlep's and had a smoother tone like polished cane, and his large green eyes with hazel flecks were striking beyond belief. The boy was wearing shorts, and he found himself looking over at the smooth

copper of the boy's legs. They'd already gone a kilometre and a half, Duclos estimated, when he noticed the roadside sign: *Taragonn, 1.3km*. The friend's house wasn't far past the village. There wouldn't be much time. Duclos glanced again at the boy's legs. His mouth felt suddenly dry. He had to think of a device to get himself alone somewhere with the boy, and quickly. A few hundred yards ahead he saw a roadside farm track. Duclos slowed down and stopped just past it.

'I've had a thought. If we get to Stephan and his father's not there or for any reason can't help out - it's a wasted journey. I've got some tools in the back, I'll run you back to the bike, and if we

can't fix it I'll rope it into the boot and run you home with it. Where do you live?'

'Almost three kilometres that way from where the bike is now.' Christian pointed behind them and slightly to the east. 'But it's okay. I'm sure they will be there. Stephan's father is always working on the farm.'

Duclos shrugged. 'The problem is, if they're not there you're going to be stuck.' He backed into the farm track, checked briefly for traffic, then turned out heading back the way they'd come. Just take control, his instincts told him. The boy's protests weren't strong. 'Look, it's no trouble. In any case I've just remembered I should have picked up

something at the patisserie back in Varages, so it's not putting me out of my way.'

Duclos wondered if the boy was suspicious. In the wake of his insistence, the boy had finally nodded and smiled, though hesitantly, then hastily looked away through the side window. It could have been his normal awkwardness with strangers, or perhaps he was suspicious. It was hard to tell either way. Duclos was now more concerned of passing anyone who might see them together. After almost a kilometre, a truck came towards them with a company name and MARSEILLE in large letters on the side. With the height of the cab and the speed they'd passed each other, Duclos

doubted the driver had paid them any particular attention. For a moment he thought to himself, 'Just drop the boy off, leave him alone, continue on to Salernes.' But the urge driving him on was now too strong. A mixture of excitement, curiosity, anticipation, the thrill of the unknown. He found it impossible to resist. They'd just passed the point where he'd first picked up the boy.

'Is it far now? Duclos asked.

'No, just under a kilometre more - it's on a rough track between two farms.'

The patchwork of green and gold pastures each side were faded with the summer heat. After a long flat stretch, the road curved and they were passing a

peach orchard, only part of which appeared to be harvested; uneven grass patches grew between the trees on its far side. Christian lifted one arm to indicate the pathway.

Turning in, Duclos could see that a hundred yards ahead the peach orchard verged into woodland. The track then ran between the orchard and the woods, and the grass was long and unkempt closest to the woods. The boy was pointing to where he'd left his bike.

'Just up there on the left, where the grass is long. I tried to hide it so it would be safe until I got back.'

With the bumpiness of the track, Duclos had changed down to second. Those legs. Those eyes. His pulse

quickened with anticipation. But at the same time he felt nervous and uncomfortable. With Jahlep it was always pre-arranged, the young Algerian boy a willing participant. Now he was facing the unknown.

A crow cawing high in the tree-tops to one side momentarily drew his attention, and as he glanced up towards it the sun's brightness momentarily whited out his vision. Though he knew it probably wouldn't white from his mind what was about to happen.

The man down by the riverside, Gaston Machanaud, also heard the crow cawing and a second later he heard and saw the car passing.

Though only the top of it from where he was: the river bank dipped down sharply from the farm track and the car must also be very low slung, he thought. Still instinctively he found himself ducking down slightly out of its view, because he knew he shouldn't be where he was at that moment. Then seconds later the car was gone from view and he straightened up again and continued fishing.

A while later he wondered whether he heard someone calling out from the nearby field, but as the nearby crows started cawing again he thought it was probably some other crows on the far side of the field. He listened out for a moment for other sounds, but all that

reached him was the gentle swaying of the trees and the wheat field in the breeze.

Duclos hoped that the gentle swishing of the wheat in the wind had shielded any sounds they might have made. But there was nobody nearby that he could see and no cars had passed. Even if they had, their position was shielded from the passing farm track by the high wheat sheaves.

After a moment, Duclos gathered his composure and looked down at the boy. He knew that he would have to be stern to warn the boy off. He reached out and gripped the boy's shoulder.

'Look at me. Look at me!' Duclos

gripped tighter and shook the boy until he looked up. The boy's face was streaked with tears and he made a vain effort to wipe away a fresh tear with the back of one hand.

'What happened today never happened, you understand. It never happened!' Duclos looked at the boy intently, as if by staring and continuing to shake the boy's shoulder he could force his will home.

'It's our secret, and you're to tell nobody. *Nobody!* If you do, I'll come after you and kill you. I know where you live now, it will be easy for me to get to you.'

The boy nodded after a second. Duclos shook his shoulder once more for

emphasis. 'You understand!'

But once again the boy's eyes betrayed him. Mixed with the fear, Duclos could see the uncertainty and confusion. He knew that whatever the boy agreed now, later he would be faced with awkward and insistent questions from his parents about the afternoon, and he would finally talk. The police would be called. With his distinctive car, he would be easily found, would face a trial, public humiliation and a jail term; his life and career would be ruined. His dreams and plans of becoming Assistant Public Prosecutor in Limoges within three years would be over.

He knew in that moment that he would probably have to kill the boy.

Duclos sat close to the window in the restaurant. From there, he had a clear view of his car at the far side of the car park. It was out of the direct path of people approaching the restaurant, but still he couldn't be too careful.

Having decided what to do, it had taken him almost fifteen minutes to secure the boy, ripping up the boy's shirt and using some rags from his car to tie his hands and feet and gag him. Space in the car boot had been very restricted, and he huddled the boy tightly next to the spare tyre in almost a foetal position, the arms draped over the tyre itself. He warned the boy not to make a sound or move about, otherwise he'd feed in a

hosepipe from the exhaust and gas him. The boy had nodded fearfully, his eyes wide. It was the last image he remembered as he shut the boot lid - those eyes staring back at him, questioning, pleading.

At first Duclos wasn't sure why he'd delayed. It had just felt wrong killing the boy then and there on the spot. And he wanted time to think. But was the delay just to steel up courage for what he already knew was inevitable, or was he having second thoughts? In the end what he thought about most was if he had to kill the boy, how best to cover his tracks? He didn't want to take any action hastily.

The effort of tying up the boy and

bundling him into the car in the heat had tired him. Duclos' clearest thoughts only came as he drove away, jig-saw pieces matching with how he saw the crime being re-constructed by investigators based on his past experience with forensics. By the time he reached the outskirts of Taragnon, he'd worked out most of the details, and the restaurant was an integral part of that plan. He checked his watch: *1.41pm*. Timing would be the key. Ideally, he should stay just over an hour.

Duclos had already looked at the menu, and scanned it briefly again as the waiter came over.

'Plat du jour, but with the veal cassoulett, please. The mushrooms to

start and the l' île flottant to finish.'

'And for the wine?' the waiter asked.

'Vin rouge, please, and some water. What is the house red that comes with it?'

'Chateau Vernet. It's quite good, fairly full.'

Duclos didn't ask the year. The house wines were nearly all non-descript recent vintage. In any case in the hot weather he normally mixed house wines with water, though if it was good he might savour one glass on its own.

The restaurant was the first that he saw after Taragnon with a reasonable car park in front. It was important that he could see the car while he ate. Simple and café style, it was very close to the

village, less than a kilometre, and the roadside sign advertising Plat du Jour at only F3.40 had attracted a reasonable crowd that lunch time. Almost half full, Duclos counted another eight cars and two trucks in the car park.

The waiter had put his order into the kitchen and now returned with his wine and water. He poured the wine but left the water for Duclos to help himself. Duclos took a sip; it was full bodied, but had a slight acid aftertaste. Palatable but unexceptional. Duclos added some water, and noticed the other waiter behind the bar look over briefly. He was more surly and curious than his own waiter, and had been by the front window serving, looking out as Duclos

pulled up and walked in. He could tell the look, he'd seen it a thousand times: young, nice car, nice clothes, *Rich kid!* Everything bought and paid for by his parents. The waiter, little more than his own mid-twenties, was slaving behind the bar day and night thinking that meanwhile kids like himself whiled away their summers on the coast on their parents' money.

But in Duclos' case, the resentment was misplaced. He'd come from a family probably no better than the waiter's, his father just a simple works foreman in a local pottery factory. It had taken his father years to work up to foreman through various positions on the factory floor. Then three years later a badly

stacked crate fell and injured his back. After increasing time off for treatment, he was forced to work part time, then the company finally wanted to let him go. The company was inadequately insured, the compensation poor, and it was only by involving a lawyer and the threat of a large suit that his father had finally won the day. The company paid for treatment, gave a six month pay cash settlement and a full time office position for his father handling inventory.

Only thirteen at the time, the object lesson of how the lawyer had managed to save the family when his father was virtually powerless had stayed strongly with Duclos. The power of being able to wield the law like a heavy sword to get

what you wanted from life. He worked hard at school and graduated to take Law and a second of Business studies at Bordeaux University.

At twenty-one, three months after graduation, he'd joined the Public Prosecutor's Office in Limoges. The first year as a *stagiaire*, then two years with case preparation for the Assistant Public Prosecutor and some lesser cases which he handled himself. But in the last year he'd handled a more important caseload, including two landmark cases for the Head of Public Prosecution who was retiring in three years. Everyone would then move up a rung, and he was one of three lawyers in line for Assistant Public Prosecutor. His success rate with cases

was higher than the other two and his file preparation was noted for being meticulous. Three more years of hard application and the job was his.

The waiter came up with his mushrooms. He looked over towards his car again as he ate. He'd worked too hard for too long to give it all up now.

The friend that he was staying with in Salernes, Claude, he'd met at Bordeaux University and they'd stayed in close contact since. This was Duclos' sixth visit in four years, invariably for three weeks in August or ten days at Easter. Claude's family owned one of the area's largest vineyards, the main château had its own grounds and pool, and the Cote D'Azur was just over half an hour's

drive away. Idyllic, particularly for summer vacations. Duclos would usually sneak off at least twice to Marseille to see his pimp and Jahlep, making an excuse about visiting an aunt in Aubagne; a boring but necessary social visit. Claude had never been suspicious.

Through the years he'd got used to covering up, had become quite professional at it. There had been no steady girlfriends, but he was not unattractive and with his position he'd always been able to find girls for special dinner dates or work related functions. Keeping up appearances.

Finishing the mushrooms, the main course arrived after a few moments. Duclos checked his watch again. He'd

been there twenty-five minutes. He might have to take coffee and brandy to stretch the time.

There was one small element still missing from his plan, and it began to trouble him increasingly. He dwelled on it through the cassoulet. Only as he was close to finishing, topping up his wine with water for the third time, did something strike a chord; he looked thoughtfully at the bottle. He wondered. It could work, but would there be enough water in the bottle? The thought was still gelling when an out of place movement in the corner of his eye made him look past the bottle towards the car park. His nerves tensed. Two women who had just left the restaurant were approaching the

car next to his. As one went to open the car door, the other appeared to be looking over at his car. Was she just admiring it, or had some sound alerted her? She stood there for a moment, then finally looked towards the fence behind and got in. The car backed out and moved away. Duclos relaxed.

But his peace of mind was short lived. Minutes later a truck pulled in and took the vacant space, obscuring his view of his car. Duclos felt immediately ill at ease; now he could only see part of the furthest rear tail light.

He found it hard to concentrate on the rest of the meal. When the l' île flottant arrived, he ordered coffee and brandy from the same waiter to save time.

Fifteen minutes more. The waiting was infuriating. His nerves had built to fever pitch by the time the brandy arrived. He had to steady his hand as he lifted the glass. He wasn't sure if it was the aftershock of what had already happened, or what he knew he faced. The other waiter was looking over at him again with that same curious expression. Or was he reading too much into it, seeing imaginary demons and problems? He just knew that he had to get out of the café fast. Having steeled his nerves over the past hour, he knew that if he didn't do it soon, he might never be able to. His composure and resolve would be gone.

Mopping his brow, Duclos signalled

to the waiter. The waiter finished up an order three tables away and came over.

'The bill, please.' The waiter had turned to go when Duclos realized he'd forgotten something. He pointed to the bottle on the table. 'And some bottled water to take with me.'

The bar was noisy with conversation and the gentle clatter of cutlery. Duclos closed his eyes, fighting to calm himself while he waited for the bill. Had he appeared agitated? Was the timing right? *Had the woman by his car earlier heard something?* Thoughts of what might have already gone wrong and potential pitfalls yet to come jumbled hopelessly with soul searching. What might have been if he hadn't gone to Aix

en Provence that morning? If he had never seen the boy at the roadside? All those years of reading affidavits from people who'd got themselves into hopeless messes, and how he always knew so much better. He shook his head in disbelief.

It took another six minutes to pay and receive his change, and by that time Duclos was trembling uncontrollably. He smiled and tipped generously, hoping that his nervousness wasn't outwardly obvious. He wanted them to remember him, but not in that way.

Getting back into the car, Duclos let out a deep sigh and fought to calm his trembling hands as he gripped the steering wheel. He felt nauseous and his

mind was spinning with a thousand conflicting thoughts - and finally the build up of nerves overtook him and his body slumped defeatedly. He didn't think he could go through with it.

In the dark, the first thing Christian became conscious of was the sound of his own breathing.

He felt hot in the boot, despite being without his shirt. He'd managed to control his tears, but his body still trembled violently. How was he going to explain his shirt being destroyed when he got home, and why did the man have to tie him up and put him in the boot out of sight? He just hoped the man wasn't going to hurt him again. He knew that he

would probably have to tell his mother what had happened. She was going to be furious; she had warned him so often about talking to strangers. But the man had reminded him of his cousin François who worked with one of the perfume companies in Grasse - not like the rough men he'd imagined.

Christian began to dwell on the man's threat. *If you tell, I'll kill you... I know where you live now, it will be easy for me to get to you.* Perhaps he could swear his mother to secrecy; though if she still had to tell the police, surely they would protect him. For what the man had done, would he be locked up so that he couldn't get to him, and for how long?

Christian listened to the monotonous drone of the car engine and the wheels spinning on the road. He strained to hear noises beyond. After a moment, there was a faint rushing sound, perhaps a lorry or car passing, then nothing. How far had they gone? It was difficult to judge speed, the only guide changing echo tones when they passed buildings. The echo was there for a while, then gone briefly before returning for a long continuous stretch. They were passing through Taragnon, unless they'd branched off and it was Bauriac. Ponteves was too far.

After a while the echoing stopped, another faint rush of something passing came immediately after, and not long

after they slowed; he felt the car turn, then they stopped. And then the long wait.

The heat built up insufferably in the confined space. His body was hunched up tight and he could feel the twinge of cramps in his legs. For a while he wondered if the man had gone off and left him. At moments he could hear distant voices and thought about kicking the side to attract attention, the only action allowed him with the ties and gag. But they were distant enough that they might not hear, and what if the man was still close by? He waited.

With time passing, he became more fearful what the man might do to him. He found it difficult to breathe with the

extreme heat, the hot air rasping uncomfortably at the back of his throat. He started to feel faint. It was then that he remembered the coin in his pocket: the silver twenty lire given him by his Grandpapa André. The luck token he took with him everywhere. It was in his left hand pocket. With his hands tied, it took a minute to fumble in his pocket and finally have it in his grasp. Moving his arms back over the spare wheel, he grasped the coin tight in his right hand and started a silent prayer: That the man wouldn't hurt him again, that he would be home soon, that the police would find the man and lock him up, and that his mother wouldn't be too annoyed when he told her what had happened.

The heat made him tired. He was on the edge of sleep when some voices snapped him alert. Unlike the other voices they were coming closer, until he could hear them virtually at the side of the car. There was some shuffling and the sound of a car door opening. He pondered on the action only for a moment - then kicked back with his legs against the back metal panel. Then waited, listening. Nothing, except some fumbling and another car door opening. He kicked again, but at that moment everything was smothered by the rushing of a car or truck passing. Then he heard the car doors closing. The engine started. The car backed out and moved away. Christian let out a long sigh and

bit his lip.

Shortly after he succumbed to the heat and dozed off. He had started to think about the farm, and it filled his dream. There was a small stone wall in the main back field against which wild strawberries grew. One summer he'd cut down an area of the strawberry brambles and built a small hideaway house against the wall with wood and patched straw. He was in the hideaway when he heard his father Jean-Luc calling. He decided to stay hidden a minute, then leap up and startle his father. On the third call, he jumped up onto the ridge of the wall. But his father kept scanning the horizon; he hadn't seen him. Christian started waving one arm

frantically. Once more his father scanned back and forth, more slowly and purposefully this time, calling his name yet again. For a moment more his father stood looking blankly across the fields, then finally turned resignedly and headed back across the farm courtyard to the back kitchen door.

Christian jumped down from the wall, calling his father's name desperately as he ran towards him. But as he ran, the grass gradually became longer, obscuring his vision of the courtyard and his father. He became confused and lost. He could never remember the grass being that long, and now that he couldn't see the farm he'd lost all direction. He continued running, calling his father's

name frantically; but with still no answer, he felt increasingly lost and was becoming tired. It was getting dark and he was frightened. He called his father's name once more with no response, then sat down defeatedly among the tall grass. He started crying. He felt deserted by his father. *Why didn't you come and find me?* After a moment the ground seemed to reverberate and shake with the heavy drone of an engine. The noise and movement perplexed Christian, and the only thing he could think of was that his father had brought the tractor out to try and find him.

That hope only quelled his tears slightly; he was still crying as he awoke to the reality of the boot and the rough

track they were driving on. They had obviously turned off again from the main road. How far had they gone? He realized with a sinking feeling that he'd completely lost track of time and distance; they might be too far from Taragnon for his father to find them. Suddenly he felt as lost and alone as in the dream. Fear and dread crept over him and his body started trembling again.

Then he noticed with sudden panic that something else was wrong. Grandpapa André's coin was no longer in his hand. His right hand had relaxed slightly open and it had probably slipped from his grasp with the track's bumpiness. He started feeling for it in

the dark. It was not on top of the wheel hub; the top of the hub was smooth metal, except for several small oval holes around its rim. They were too small to reach into, especially with his hands tied; if the coin had fallen through one of them, he wouldn't be able to retrieve it. He started feeling around the edge of the tyre.

The car had stopped without Christian noticing. He was still searching for the coin when the boot lid opened and the bright sunlight flooded in, blinding him.

THREE

Provence, August, 1963

Dominic Fornier sat in Café du Verdon and enjoyed his normal breakfast of coffee with hot bread and paté. The coffee was large, in a cup almost big enough to be a soup bowl, and he always kept one piece of bread without butter or paté just to dip in it. It was 3.40 pm. An unusual time for breakfast, but then he had been on all night duty in the police station and had woken less than an hour ago to return for the afternoon shift.

It was a regular ritual. The café owner Louis knew his order off by heart now, and had almost worked out his sequence of shifts. One large coffee with milk, third of a stick loaf sliced in half, one half plain, the other half with pâté, coffee refill half way through.

The café overlooked the main square and fountain at Bauriac and the police station was only fifty yards to the right of the square on the road flanking the town hall. The town hall and Louis' café were the most imposing structures overlooking the square. Neo-classical, the town hall should have been far more imposing, but Louis had compensated by putting out striped blue canvass awnings and a row of tables with Martini umbrellas.

Particularly busy in summer, it was only from Louis' pavement frontage that tourists could appreciate the town hall façade and the ornate fountain at the centre of Bauriac's square.

There were a few tourists there that afternoon. Dominic could spot them a mile away. Shorts, leather strap sandals and cameras. Always cameras. Louis grunted his way past Dominic's table as he served some of them. The front doors to the café were wide open and from the juke box inside came the strains of Stevie Wonder's 'fingertips'. Louis gave a mock bump and grind to it on his way back into the café and twirled his tray in one hand. Dominic smiled. It had been his one contribution to Louis juke box:

decent music. Stax, Tamla, the Drifters on RCA, Sam Cooke, Ben E King, Booker T, and now a new artist called Stevie Wonder. All of it American soul brought in through his uncle's export business in Marseille, and practically none of it available in France for at least two to three months. Sometimes never. It was improving now, but when he'd first started getting records through his uncle in the late 50s, only a selected few American soul releases made it to French shores.

None of the tourists on Louis terrace, unless they were American, would have heard Stevie Wonder's new record yet. They seemed oblivious as they sipped their teas and cokes or ambled off for

photos in front of the fountain or town hall. They hadn't come to France to listen to American soul. The records were there just for the benefit of himself and Louis and the growing number of discerning late nighters. A welcome escape from the syrupy tones of Sacha Distel, Serge Gainsbourg, the Singing Nun and the endless pop rock which filled the French charts and, since Louis had installed the juke box, it drew an increasing crowd of young locals on their solexes and vespas with a sprinkling of 100 and 150cc bikes. Lightweight rockers. Mostly between the ages of fifteen and twenty-two, they came in heavier numbers on Friday and Saturday nights, nearly all of them

locals. Louis' hunch about installing the juke box had worked.

Those over twenty-two mostly had larger bikes or cars and would head off to the clubs or discos in Aix, Draguignan or even Marseille or Toulon. But for local entertainment, apart from the town cinema and one other bar with music near Taragnon, Louis had the market cornered.

Bauriac's population was just over 14,000 and, even with the surrounding towns of Taragnon, Varages, Ponteves, St Martin and La Verdière, which came under the administration of Bauriac's town hall and gendarmerie, overall area population was still under 35,000.

Dominic Fornier was one of eleven

gendarmes stationed in Bauriac, and at twenty-six, was the youngest of two Senior Warrant Officers there, having transferred from Marseille just the year before. Head of Station and the four other area gendarmeries was Captain Tobias Poullain, thirty seven, locally born but now just biding time by tending provincial turf; advancement meant transfer to Aix en Provence or Marseille and a City Administrative position with a shot at Colonel, and Poullain hoped to make it there by forty. Station veteran was Lieutenant Eric Harrault, forty-nine.

Harrault's knowledge of past Bauriac cases and general procedures between the station and the local courts was absolute, and as a result he spent much

of his time desk-bound. Without Harrault for reference or procedural advice, the station just didn't run smoothly.

Louis was at the side of his table. 'Coming by tonight?'

'I'm not sure. Depends how heavy my shift is. I might be too tired.'

'Too tired at your age.' Louis waved one arm dismissively. He nodded towards the boulangerie. 'Why don't you ask Odette? Valérie will probably be coming.'

'Maybe.' Odette was a fresh faced nineteen year old serving in the bakers whom Dominic had been dating the past four months. Nothing too serious. Dominic tried to restrict dates to no more than two a week, particularly with

his other commitments at home. With him not finishing until midnight it would be too late in any case for a full date, though the sight of Louis fighting to win Valérie's affections was well worth a visit. 'I'll probably come by on my own for a quick brandy, keep you company at the bar.'

On Valérie's last visit, Louis had put on Sam Cooke's 'Another Saturday Night', which Dominic had brought him only a few weeks before. Coming out from behind the bar like a matador, Louis dramatically threw his shirt to one side. Now down to his vest, Louis felt that it showed off his physique, and with his dark and brooding Corsican features he saw himself as another Victor

Mature. Dominic teased him that he looked more like Bluto. The wrong side of forty, too much of his own short order cooking had long ago rounded out most of his muscle definition. Louis' bull like figure trying gracefully to imitate something between the jive and the tango with Valérie was a sight to behold.

'Should be a good crowd later tonight,' Louis commented.

Dominic nodded. Calling by when his shift finished at midnight was probably good timing. After 11pm the bikers normally thinned out and more young couples came in on their way back from the cinema. Cleopatra was showing for a second week. Louis was probably right, the turn out should be good. 'I'll only stay

an hour though, then I should get home.'

Louis grimaced understandingly. Dominic not wanting to spend too much time away from his sick mother was by now almost common knowledge. Dominic's elder sister lived in Paris with her husband and only visited periodically, so Dominic had shouldered most of the responsibility. Diagnosed just over a year ago, less than two years after burying his father, his mother's cancer had been the main reason for his transfer from Marseille. Why he restricted his dates and tried not to stay out too late. Dominic knew that there wasn't much time left to spend with his mother.

Dominic was distracted. Servan, one

of the young station Sergeants, was running across the square towards the café. Louis stared as well. The last time he'd seen a gendarme running was when the newly installed alarm had gone off by mistake at the jewellers around the corner. Something was wrong.

Servan was breathless as he approached Dominic's table. 'A young boy has been attacked out towards Taragnon. Poullain's just radioed in. He's on his way there now. He wants you to assist, and take myself, Levacher and another sergeant. We're to meet him there.'

'Where's Harrault?'

'He was with Poullain at Tourtin's farm when it happened. One of Tourtin's

outbuildings was broken into last night. When Poullain got the call, he left Harrault taking the statement.'

'How old is the boy?

'Anything from nine to twelve years old. We still don't have any firm identification.'

'Is the attack bad? How badly is he hurt?' The surprise came through in Dominic's voice. This was Bauriac. They hardly ever faced anything more serious than a stolen tractor.

Servan was hesitant and looked away slightly. He either didn't know or didn't want to talk too openly in front of Louis. 'I think you should get the details from Poullain.'

The 2CV rattled along the rough track alongside the wheat field. The basic black gendarme squad car, it felt as if it was made from old tin cans and powered by a lawnmower engine and rubber bands. Dominic hated them with a vengeance. The track was on a slight incline, and with three passengers the engine whined in protest.

Servan pointed the way. 'I'm sure this is the right track, the river's to our right. About one hundred and fifty metres up, Poullain said.'

Rounding a curve, they could see the lane cordoned off with rope fifty metres ahead. Poullain's black Citroen C19 was parked one side with an ambulance behind.

Poullain was down to his shirt sleeves and his flat gendarme cap was off too. Beads of sweat massed on his receding hairline and he was in the midst of a heated argument with one of the ambulance medics as they parked the car. Poullain was not very tall, but he was quite stocky and in any confrontation fought to make a powerful presence with effusive and rapid arm movements. As they approached, he was almost hitting the medic repeatedly with the back of one hand to emphasize his case.

Poullain looked past Dominic and snapped at Servan. 'Did you bring the camera?'

Servan nodded hastily. 'As you asked.'

And ran back the few paces to the car to get it.

Poullain was impatient and flustered. When Servan came back with the camera, an old Leica 35mm with a dented and chipped black frame, Poullain barked, 'Are you any good at taking pictures?' Servan shrugged as if to say 'okay'. 'Then take them yourself so that we can get rid of this prick.' Poullain looked disapprovingly at the medic, then down at the figure of the young boy on a stretcher at the medic's feet. The medic was holding an oxygen mask to the boy's face.

Poullain turned his back and let out a deep sigh as Servan moved around for best position and angle. Dominic was

close behind and studied the boy's face as the shutter clicked away. The medics had obviously cleaned much of the blood from the face. But facial bruising and swelling was so intense that the bone structure looked distorted, and blood was still caked thick in his hair. A bandage was wrapped around part of the boy's skull and under his chin. A few paces to the side, Dominic could see a flattened area of wheat sheaves with dried blood patches. A large oval patch with two smaller patches and some spots and splashes radiating out. Dark brown against the bleached white sheaves. Dominic shuddered.

After five pictures, Poullain waved the medics away with a few curt words

about making contact later, and directed Servan's attention to the blood patches, pointing out some suggested positions for two or three close ups that he would need. The medics loaded the boy aboard the ambulance and backed down the lane. Poullain looked up at Dominic.

'Sorry about that. First the medics say that they can't move the boy, he could choke on his own blood, and they spend time cleaning him up and putting a pipe down his throat. I say, fine, I need some pictures in any case. But as soon as they're finished, they want to move him. By this time I can see you approaching - but they don't want to wait. I end up arguing with them to gain one minute.' Poullain dabbed at his forehead with the

back of one sleeve. 'Look, Fornier, I want you to assist in this. There's two reasons. First, there'll be an awful lot of paperwork and notes. Second, we're going to be talking with a lot of outside units, particularly from Marseille. A forensics team are on their way from Marseille now.'

'What about Harrault?' Dominic asked. Harrault's seniority would normally have guaranteed his role in assisting, particularly on a major case.

'Harrault will do what Harrault does best. He'll take our notes and reports and make sure the filing with the Aix Cour d'Assises runs smoothly. This will no doubt end up there, particularly if it becomes a murder case. The medics said

that it's going to be a close call whether the boy lives. Harrault's going to spend half his time running reports between us and the examining magistrate and Public Prosecutor's office in Aix. I want you to assist and take notes, ensure the reports reach Harrault in good shape, and liaise and smooth out any problems with the boys from Marseille. I don't want us to lose control on this one.'

Dominic wondered what was more important. His good shorthand for taking notes or his three years with the Marseille force. Obviously Poullain was worried about getting upstaged by Marseille. The boy wasn't even at the hospital, might not last through the night, and already Poullain was more worried

about the politics of the investigation. Afraid of losing a major local case that could boost his career.

'Who's coming from Marseille?' Dominic asked.

'I don't know. I radioed in and was advised that a forensics team would be dispatched. Wasn't given any names.'

Servan was at their side with the camera held limply, waiting for more directions. WO Levacher was looking thoughtfully towards the river.

'Have you brought the sticks?' Poullain asked.

'Yes'. It was Levacher who answered. He turned back to the 2CV to get them. They'd stopped for them at a hardware store on the way, but it was obvious they

were still wondering what they were for.

Poullain pointed towards the wheat field. 'Levacher and Servan, start from three metres out from the blood patches and head out across the wheat field keeping two metres apart. Then at the end turn back and cover the next four metre stretch. Use the sticks to part the sheaves. We're looking for items of clothing, even small fragments of cloth or buttons and sweet wrappers. Any possible clues. And the weapon used in the attack - a heavy stick or iron bar, or perhaps a rock with tell tale blood stains.' Poullain pointed towards the river. 'Then take the bushes along the river bank. Also, look in the shallows. As I say, *don't* disturb the three metres

around the blood stains. Leave that for forensics.'

Poullain surveyed the wheat field as Servan and Levacher headed out with their sticks. He shook his head slowly after a moment. 'Who on earth would do such a thing?' A rhetorical tone, so Dominic merely joined him for a second silently watching their progress tapping across the field like blind men.

'Who discovered the boy?' Dominic asked.

'The man from the farm behind, Marius Caurin. This track provides the only access to his farm. These fields are owned by his friend who is on an engineering contract in Orleans - that's why some of them are untended. Marius

just plants the few extra fields he can cope with.'

A light breeze played across the field. As it shifted direction, they heard the sound of a car approaching. It was a large black Citreon C25 pulling in behind Poullain's car with three men inside. Probably the team from Marseille. Poullain greeted them, then introduced Dominic.

They walked towards the bloodstained area. Dominic stayed in the background as Poullain pointed and brought them up to date on events. He explained that the boy might be facing an operation in hospital at Aix en Provence, so would be studied by the medical examiner there. They could confer with

him later. The main thing now was gaining information from what was left: blood group and some indication of timing for the attack. Were all the stains the same group as the boy, or were any different?

Dominic smiled to himself. In his fifteen years of policing in Bauriac, Poullain had only seen one murder, an almost predictable domestic crime of passion, and two manslaughters: one domestic, one bar fight. Yet he was handling this with all the casual aplomb of a Marseille veteran used to fishing bodies out of the harbour every day. No doubt driven by his fear of being upstaged from outside.

None of them were really prepared

for this. He'd seen the shock on Servan's face when he'd leant over the boy to take the first photos. Servan had gone deathly white and looked sick. The other rookies had only managed to maintain some composure by keeping in the background. None of them had come close to the boy and studied his face the way he had. Seen the massive bruising and fractures, seen where his small face had been mashed half to a pulp, part of his skull only held in place by a bandage. This was Bauriac, and if they stayed their distance, perhaps they could still cling to the illusion that things like this just didn't happen in their area.

Even he'd found the sight of the young boy disturbing, despite having been

directly involved in five murder cases in Marseille. Perhaps it was because the victim was so young; none of his previous cases had involved children. *Who on earth would do such a thing?* The one moment, staring silently across the wheat field, when Poullain had shown his true emotions. The rest of the time he'd been too busy sparring to try and prove he was in control.

One of the forensic team was walking to his car with a set of small clear polythene bags. Another was crouching, now examining further up the rough track. He looked over at Poullain.

'It's been too dry, and the track is too uneven and dusty. I doubt we'll get any decent imprints.'

Poullain nodded, and asked the team leader Dubrulle about progress. Dubrulle explained that they would probably be at least another thirty or forty minutes, then they would head over to Aix and see the medical examiner. 'It could be he'll have some information by tomorrow morning. Our first lab test results won't be ready till tomorrow afternoon.'

Servan and Levacher were half way back on their third sweep and Levacher had his jacket unbuttoned with the heat. Poullain's radio crackled with a sudden harsh, distorted voice. Poullain went over to it.

Dominic couldn't hear what was said. He saw Poullain look down thoughtfully

after a moment. The conversation appeared quite staccato, apart from a stretch towards the end of the call when Poullain waved his arms in a struggle for emphasis and then checked his watch as he finished.

Poullain was pensive as he approached. 'A call's come in to the station from a woman saying her son's missing. It's the only call of that type they've received today. The boy said that he was going to a friend's house on his bike and should have been there for one-thirty. He never showed up. But it's only four-forty now, it could be too early to jump to conclusions. You know what kids are like. The boy could have gone to another friend's house or disappeared

for sweets or to play somewhere else.'

'How old is her boy?'

'Ten. The age is right.'

On a bad month, the station might get three missing person alerts, sometimes two months would go by with none. Most were false alarms, but the timing and age of this one narrowed the odds. Dominic could sense Poullain delaying the inevitable. He recalled the incident of a young boy who'd died falling down a disused well the previous autumn. Facing the relatives with the news had unsettled Poullain for days. This time he would probably send someone else.

Dominic looked out thoughtfully across the field. 'What's her name?'

'Monique Rosselot.'

FOUR

Monique Rosselot looked out onto the farm courtyard. From the kitchen, a mass of bougainvillaea covered the wall on one side. Christian had been only six when he'd helped his father, Jean-Luc, plant it; now it was a profusion of pink flowers.

Christian's bike rested on the corner of the wall just past the bougainvillaea. Jean-Luc had come back with it just twenty minutes before, having followed the path Christian normally took to Stephan's house. At first she'd felt

relieved: the bike's brake was jammed. At least that might explain some of the delay, walking would have taken him far longer. But still he should have been there by the latest at 2.30 pm. It was now 5.45 pm. Where had he gone? Perhaps he'd stopped off in Taragnon for a drink or sweets, the walk would have tired him and made him hot and thirsty. Though still that would only account for another forty minutes or so. He must have met another friend in Taragnon, gone off to play somewhere else and lost track of time. It was all she could think of.

When Jean-Luc had come back with Christian's bike, their daughter Clarisse had asked, 'Is Christian lost

somewhere?' Only four, she'd seen her parent's consternation and picked up on part of their conversation.

'No, it's all right. He's just late seeing his friend because his bike broke down.' Christian was so protective and caring of Clarisse; he was like a second father to her, sharing his own sage past experience of the pitfalls and problems of being five. But she was too young to be worrying along with them.

Monique bit her lip. It was over an hour since she'd called the police. The nearest phone was over a kilometre away, and in the intense heat the walk had been exhausting. On her return she'd felt sick and went into the bathroom, leaning over the sink. Despite her

stomach still churning, in the end nothing came. She'd caught her reflection in the mirror as she looked up; she'd aged five years in the last hour. She felt physically and emotionally drained. *Where was he?* Why hadn't anyone called by? The waiting was killing her nerves. Jean-Luc had headed off on another search and probably wouldn't be back for forty minutes or an hour. She resolved finally that, despite the long walk, if she hadn't heard anything from the police within half an hour, she was going to put through another call.

In the end she was saved the trouble. Just ten minutes before planning to leave, the black Citreon 2CV pulled into their courtyard and two gendarmes got

out.

It was almost 1 am. Louis' bar had been crowded, but the numbers were beginning to thin out. Louis had been dancing earlier with Valérié, but now she was talking with a friend in the corner while he put away some glasses and had a Pernod with Dominic at the bar. Dominic was out of uniform, in slacks and a short sleeved polo shirt, nursing a brandy.

'Who saw her?' Louis asked.

'Harrault and Servan. Poullain was going to send me at first, but there were too many notes to take from the afternoon, recording times and early findings from forensics and our own

team. In the end he sent Servan to pick up Harrault. He's the most senior. Poullain thought if anyone he'd bring the right tone.'

'Where's Monique Rosselot now?'

'Probably still at the hospital. Harrault ran her and the father there and stayed with them the first hour, introduced them to the main doctors, got as much information as possible and tried to console them. The doctors were operating at midnight, the boy's probably still in there now. The father headed back with the daughter, but Monique said she would probably stay the night.'

'What are the boy's chances?'

'Not good. There's a lot of internal cranial bleeding and damage. If he lasts

through the operation and the next twenty four hours, the doctors say his chances will increase. But brain damage is heavy and even if he survives, he could be severely disabled.'

Louis reached for the bottle and topped up his Pernod, swirling it briefly in its narrow glass before tipping it half back. 'God, this must be rough on her. Have you seen her before? She's quite a woman.'

'No, I don't think I know her. Harrault said that she was quite pretty.'

'Quite pretty. Huh! Let me tell you, Monique Rosselot is one of those rare beauties that you only see once in a while. In Bauriac, those once in a while's are even rarer. Even on the coast

she'd stand out - I'm amazed you don't know her. When are you seeing her?'

'Sometime tomorrow. We haven't asked her any questions yet, it seemed inappropriate while she's still grappling with whether or not her son will live. I'll see her with Poullain tomorrow, we'll arrange it around the timing of her hospital visits. If she's at the hospital all day, then we'll go there.'

Louis raised his glass, taking another quick slug. '*Salut*. Let me know what you think when you've seen her. I warn you now, you'll be spoilt for other women.'

Dominic smiled. Louis the lecher. Louis the connoisseur of women. Three tables could be calling for service and Louis would stop to admire at leisure a

beautiful woman passing. The fact that Monique Rosselot was married was immaterial, she was still there for the admiring. Harmless voyeurism. But Dominic wondered if Louis knowledge of Monique Rosselot went deeper than that. 'Do you know her well?'

'Not personally. She's been in a few times and we've spoken briefly once or twice, but that's all. She used to come in more when her boy was younger. But my barman, Joel, is quite friendly with the father Jean-Luc, and Valérié knows one their neighbours. And you know me, if there's a beautiful woman involved I'll spend half the day talking, I'm not choosy who I speak to. Probably why I spend so much time talking to you.' Louis paused

for effect and chuckled. 'No, seriously, you know what Bauriac's like, people talk a lot, and they came here, what, seven or eight years ago - the boy was just a toddler. People are particularly curious about newcomers. Questions were thick and fast the first year they arrived.'

'Did many of them get answered?'

'A few. It seems she had her boy when she was under age, no more than fourteen or fifteen when he was conceived. Nobody knows exactly. Jean-Luc's family gave him a hard time, not only about being careless with an under age girl, but her background. Her mother's half Moroccan, half Corsican, and her father's French - but the

Moroccan and Corsican blood is predominant in her features. His family's prejudice starts to show through. Cheap young Moroccan whore seduced their poor young boy, which is laughable seeing as he's ten years older than her. Don't they have prostitutes at the age of twelve on the street there? You know the type of comment. In the end they had a bellyful of it and moved. She was more resilient than him, I hear; she could have stayed and put up with it, but he insisted on moving. Cut himself off entirely from his family, had little or no contact with them. When the little girl was born, they just sent a photo, no invitations to the christening, nothing.'

'Where did they come from?'

'Beaune, not far from Dijon. But it was out of the frying pan and into the fire. What with the fact that they were newcomers and her dusky looks, she attracted more than her fair share of attention. You couldn't really call it prejudice, but it was curiosity so blatant it was almost rude. You know, the way you would expect a lost tribe to react upon seeing their first explorer. I was probably one of the darkest skinned people in Bauriac until she arrived, and I attracted a fair bit of attention in my time, let me tell you. It took a few years for Monique to be accepted here, for them to look beyond her colour and realize what a nice person she is. And by the time your mother and you arrived,

they'd practically been numbed into acceptance.'

So this is what all this was about, thought Dominic. Why Louis had been so inquisitive about Monique Rosselot. It was all Bauriac newcomers together time. Battling against the odds of small town minds and prejudices. It was difficult enough being a newcomer without standing out as one and, true enough, when his parents had arrived four years ago, his mother had encountered a few raised eyebrows. Her lineage was part French Indonesian, part French, and Dominic's father had been pure French Alsace. By the time it reached Dominic, the Indonesian blood had left only a slight almond slant at the

corner of his eyes, looking almost out of place with his proud gallic nose. Girls either found it endearing and mysterious, or they didn't like him at all. It might have caused some problems at the station too, but Dominic could never be sure; the fact that he was newly transferred and enjoyed Warrant Officer status so young were reasons enough for resentment.

Louis had travelled up from Marseille thirteen years ago to be the chef at the Café du Verdon, and when the owner had died four years later and the relatives were keen to sell on, he'd mortgaged his neck between the banks and private bills of exchange to take over. Only in the last few years, having

cleared the bills of exchange, had Louis enjoyed the fruits of his labour. Dominic could imagine that the locals had not been too keen on a Corsican owning such a prominent local establishment, especially all those years ago. Marseille was teaming with migrant workers and cosmopolitan mixes, and the tide of invasion by outsiders and foreigners was accepted on the coast fifty kilometres away, but not in Bauriac.

Louis was shaking his head. 'It's hardly believable, something like this. Her and Jean-Luc have been through such a tough time already. They've had to work so hard to make a go of that farm, they were sold a real pig in the poke. Previous owner saw them coming

a mile off, as locals often do with people like us from outside. Bastard. Drainage was bad, top soil and yield was poor, it's been a real struggle for them. And she dotes on that boy. I don't know how she'll get over this.'

Dominic nodded thoughtfully. He was still trying to get a picture of Monique Rosselot. She sounded quite exotic, a rare beauty according to Louis; surely he'd have seen her in the past year. He realized then how closeted and predictable his life had become the past seven months, his time spent between the gendarmerie, home with his sick mother, and the occasional drink at Louis. Even on his dates with Odette, they always went to the same places: the cinema, the

Café du Verdon, or on the rare occasions they felt more adventurous, on his bike to a favourite club in St Maximin.

Valérié was up at the bar, ordering drinks for herself and her friend. A Marie Brizard and soda and a glass of red wine. 'You having another dance soon, Louis?'

'Maybe later. I'm not as young as I used to be.' He smiled as he watched her walk back to the table with the drinks. 'How's Odette these days?'

'Okay. A bit too demanding. Wants to go out every night. I just don't have the time, even if I did have the energy and the inclination.'

'What first attracted you to her?' Louis leant forward slightly. He lowered his

voice conspirationally. 'Come on, you must remember that. That first flush of romance.'

Dominic thought for a moment. 'I think it was when we first went on a picnic. The way she wrapped her mouth around a bread stick sandwich. I knew then she was the girl for me.'

Louis smiled broadly. 'Is that the only qualification your girls need?'

'No. I quite like it if they're good at yoga and can put their ankles behind their ears.'

Louis guffawed so loudly that Valérié and her friend looked over briefly. Still chuckling, Louis poured another Pernod. 'You're a card, Dominic. An absolute fucking card. Excuse me.' He swept out

from behind the bar and, half kneeling with a bar towel draped across one arm, asked Valérié to dance. Ray Charles 'Take these chains' was playing on the juke box.

Dominic took a quick slug of brandy and smiled to himself. Normally, he was quite considerate and romantic with women. But that wasn't the image Louis wanted to hear. Louis would probably have been happier to hear he'd split with Odette, back to how he was the first five months in Bauriac: different dates every other week, screwing his way endlessly through the local girls in search of nirvana. That at least was the idyllic, swashbuckling image in Louis' mind. In reality, half of the dates had been a

disaster; Dominic didn't know it was possible to go out with so many girls and still feel so lonely. The only consolation had been, editing the dates down to just the highlights, that he'd kept up his stock of bar stool stories for Louis.

Dominic watched Louis and Valérié dancing, smiling as one of Louis' rogue hands drifted down towards her bottom in the clinches. After Ray Charles came the Crystals 'Da Doo Ron Ron.' Louis' attempt at the jive looked more like a flamenco dancer in the grips of epilepsy, and Dominic fought to keep a straight face. Louis thought of himself as a good dancer and Dominic didn't want to spoil a good friendship by shattering that illusion. After a moment his thoughts

took over and the dancing and music faded into the background.

Tomorrow would be a big day. They would have the first forensics report, plus the findings of the medical examiner. They should know the timing of the attack, the exact weapon used, any other blood groups found and any other irregularities. They would hopefully get the first responses to appeals for witnesses in the area, and he would meet Monique Rosselot for the first main interview to learn the boy's last movements before the attack.

They should also know if her son was going to live.

Dominic wasn't sure if it was the events

of the day or the two brandies at Louis, but it took him a long while to get to sleep. He'd checked on his mother on coming in; she was already fast asleep. Often, if she was awake, he would bring her a hot chocolate and they would talk for ten minutes. Her weight loss in the past four months had been more dramatic, but her mind was still lucid, so Dominic grabbed whatever conversations he could. He knew that at any day her mind could slip.

If the day hadn't been too eventful, they would reminisce: the days from his childhood in Louviers near Paris were the most memorable. Some of the memories jumbled with the events of the day as he tried to get some sleep. Images

of the young boy, the dark blood against the bleached white wheat, preparing himself for the interview with Monique Rosselot, flashes from his own childhood and thinking of his own mother as she was then, how she could have possibly coped with anything so horrific. It was the closest he could come to trying to understand how Monique Rosselot felt.

His bedroom's French windows led onto a small first floor patio overlooking the garden. Left partly open with the summer heat, the sound of the wind through the trees outside wafted gently in. After a while, he finally drifted off to sleep.

The dream came three hours later. He

was a boy again in Louviers, and the wheat fields stretched out endlessly before him. The sheaves seemed so tall, he could hide among them and nobody would find him. He walked ten paces into the field and crouched down, holding his breath as he hid; the sheaves were at least a foot above his head.

Then suddenly he was looking down at the field. He could see the gendarmes tapping across the field with their sticks to find him. He felt suddenly that he'd done something wrong, but didn't know what, and he wasn't sure whether to leap up and let them find him. But in the end he stayed crouched and hidden. He could hear them tapping closer, closer, and his heart pounded with the sound of their

nearby movement. Though looking down from above, he could see that they'd already passed him.

A gentle breeze wafting across the field suddenly became more violent, bending the sheaves almost at a right angle. Their gentle threshing with the sticks was drowned out by the sound. He stood up after a moment and was clearly exposed. But the gendarmes were looking away, holding onto their caps and shielding their faces from the harsh wind stinging their eyes. He called to them, but his voice was lost among the wind and the wild rustling of the sheaves...

Dominic woke up with a start. He was sweating profusely. Outside, the wind

had risen and the branches of the trees close by his window whipped back and forth. He got up and walked onto the small balcony, looking down onto the garden. There was a tall jacarandah tree close by, and its branches and leaves moved like surf rising and falling with the wind. It could be the first stages of a mistral, Dominic thought, or hopefully a small summer storm that would blow over by the morning.

Dominic's heart was pounding. He wasn't sure if it was the dream or something else that he suddenly remembered would happen the next day. A reporter from *La Provençal*, the area's main newspaper, had called the station that evening. Two hours later Poullain

had released a statement that would no doubt appear in the paper the next morning.

The attacker would know then that the boy he had left for dead was still alive. He would feel threatened; the boy could possibly later talk and identify him.

FIVE

When the phone call came about the accident, at first Stuart thought it was his alarm call, but it was Helena. Stuart's clock showed 6.08am.

She was babbling and incoherent, and *'Is terrible.. so sorry,'* were repeated among the jumble, along with a number he should ring for the Oceanside police who had called her just ten minutes before. Emerging from his drowsiness, Stuart tried to clarify some points, but Helena was not very forthcoming, as if she either didn't know much or didn't

want to be the messenger of bad tidings. The tears and the trembling in her voice betrayed the worst.

When Stuart got through to the Oceanside police, he was asked to call back in ten minutes. 'Lieutenant Carlson has all the details for that. He should be finished with his interview then.'

After confirming his relationship as Jeremy's elder brother and Eyran's uncle and godparent, Stuart felt himself go numb as Carlson went through the catalogue of horror, as if it was a routine shopping list: 'We have one female, Caucasian, pronounced DOA at Oceanside County General. The other two occupants of the jeep, a Caucasian male and a young boy are both still in

emergency. The boy was critical at one point, but he's more stable now. We're waiting on more updates. Can I ask, sir, do you know of any other relatives the victims might have here in California who we can contact?'

'No, I can't think of anyone. We're all here... here in England. We've got an uncle in Toronto, but we haven't seen him in years.' Stuart felt lame and helpless due to the distance, an image of Jeremy and Eyran cut off and alone. He knew he should be there with them.

'Can I rely on you then to make contact with your sister-in-law, Allison Capel's relatives in England.'

'Yes, yes... of course.' Stuart was still numb, trying desperately to work out

how he could get out to California quickly. He'd never actually met Allison's parents, only a sister over six years ago at one of Jeremy's parties. To his side Amanda was stirring, squinting over at him quizzically.

'From identification found in the car, we have your brother's age, thirty-eight years old, but not that of your sister-in-law or the boy.'

'Allison was thirty-five, I think. Eyran was just ten years old last April.'

'What number can we reach you on to inform you of any developments?'

Stuart gave Carlson his home number then, as an afterthought. 'I'll give you my work number as well, just in case you don't hear anything from the hospital

before tonight.'

But as he said the words, it suddenly hit Stuart that he couldn't possibly just sit there through those hours waiting for the phone to ring, knowing that Eyran and Jeremy were laying in hospital beds ten thousand miles away. He made the decision. 'I'm coming out there. I've been thinking about it as we've spoken. I've got to be there with them.'

'That's your prerogative, sir, but with all due respect, we might know something within the next hour or so from the hospital. They're both in emergency right now.'

'That's okay, I'll book the ticket and phone you before I leave for the airport, then again just before the flight leaves.'

But I've got to start making my way out there.' Amanda was sitting up now, following every word of the conversation.

'I fully understand, sir. I'll wait to hear from you.'

It took Stuart only half an hour to make all his travel arrangements, part of which was explaining the situation to an incredulous Amanda and leaving her a few vital numbers to contact. All San Diego flights routed through L.A, though there was an average four hours delay between connecting flights. The first direct flight to L.A was an American Airlines flight leaving at 10.55am from Heathrow, and from there a bus or train could take him down to Oceanside, 55

miles south of LA.

On the flight out, Stuart tried to read a magazine or a book, anything to distract him. But he just couldn't concentrate, he found himself scanning the words blindly, his thoughts still with Eyran and Jeremy, trying to read something into Carlson's bland status report on the call he'd put through just before the flight announcement. The news from the hospital was that Eyran was out of emergency and had been transferred to intensive care, and that Jeremy was still in emergency.

Stuart put down the magazine and closed his eyes briefly, knowing that sleep was hopeless, but trying to force

some calm into his nerve-racked body. He let the images wash over him slowly: the night they celebrated Jeremy passing his bar exams, Jeremy helping him unload some antique timbers for the cottage, Eyran asking for a ride in the sports car he'd bought to celebrate the first major account of his new agency, the surprise on Jeremy's face when he turned up in the hospital with a half bottle of scotch in his coat pocket the night Eyran was born. 'What, no cigars?'

Eyran. So much of their lives had revolved around Eyran. He remembered now that it had been almost eight months since he'd seen Jeremy when Eyran was born; yet another futile argument that had forged a divide. As the first born of the

two families, Eyran had created a bond that just wasn't there before. A simple focus of love and affection which crossed over any boundaries and past differences between himself and Jeremy. The petty arguments continued, but suddenly Eyran was an overriding force pushing them into the background.

Probably even Jeremy sensed he had become more than just an uncle, he'd stepped into the role of a second father to Eyran. The fact that he'd been unable to have children with Amanda, despite numerous tests and clinics, had intensified that bond. Eyran became like the son he could never have.

After another year of trying vainly with Amanda to have a child, they'd

applied for adoption, taking Tessa as a two year old eight months later. Amanda had suggested a boy, admitting in the end that she thought Stuart had wanted a boy because of Eyran. He said that he wanted a girl because he didn't want their child seen as some sort of replacement for Eyran. They'd both told only half the truth. Stuart didn't want a child that might eclipse Eyran, perhaps dilute or distract his affection for the boy. A girl could be seen as a separate entity. Amanda had wanted *any* child that would return Stuart's focus to his own family, breaking what she felt had become an unnaturally close tie between himself and Eyran. He remembered Amanda's anger brimming over one day,

as not for the first time he brought home two toys, suggesting that they drive over later to give Eyran his. 'Is this your idea of the perfect family, Stuart? A girl in our family and a boy in your brother's.'

Throughout, Jeremy had never shut Eyran out of their lives. He could have become jealous and guarded about the relationship, fearing that Stuart might steal some of the limelight of Eyran's love and affection. Yet he seemed to welcome it, as if he understood that somehow it fulfilled something he himself could not provide: a kinship of free spirit and shared likes and dislikes. Jeremy appeared happy in his role as guardian angel, of *both* of them: warning Stuart about bad business deals and

investments in the same way that he would warn Eyran about climbing too high or not going near the electrical sockets. Jeremy didn't feel threatened because he saw them just as two boys playing together, one small, one big.

With the excuse that he lacked time to organize everything, he'd left Amanda to phone his partner at work and his father in Wales; but the truth was, he just couldn't face phoning their father and telling him this news. Jeremy had always been his favourite. Only their mother when she was alive had any time for Stuart; she'd died of a brain haemorrhage two years before Eyran was born, and their father, at the age of sixty two, had then decided to take early retirement and

move back from London to his native Wales. Each month either he or Jeremy had dutifully gone up to Wales to visit. But when Jeremy went to California, he sensed that his own family visits were little compensation.

Stuart tried to sleep, but found it impossible until much later, almost three hours after he'd washed down lunch with half a bottle of wine. The sleep was fitful, images of Eyran, Jeremy and their father all jumbled together. Eyran was playing, but the image quickly changed to himself as a child. He was with Jeremy in the derelict warehouse where they played hide and seek, but couldn't find him - and in the end decided that Jeremy must have sneaked out and

headed home. But when Stuart got home, their father David asked where Jeremy was. He didn't want to say he didn't know in case his father worried that Jeremy was lost. So he said that he would go and get him, and ran back to the warehouse.

He went looking for Jeremy again along the rows of dusty shelves and empty crates, telling him that their father wanted to see them; but he knew that Jeremy was purposely staying hidden, thinking it was just a trick. He called out Jeremy's name repeatedly, starting to plead, but only the empty echoes of his voice returned. He started to cry, but the tears weren't for Jeremy but for himself, for what he felt certain was some

dreadful trick being played on him. *How could Jeremy do this, stay lost and let him go home alone to face their father?*

Stuart awoke bathed in sweat. The dream had disturbed him, converging so much of the shock and anguish of the day's events. It washed over him without warning, gentle sobbing shaking his body as he turned away towards the plane window to hide his tears. Guilt compounded his sorrow; so many of his thoughts about Jeremy the past few years had been ungenerous. Anger at him taking Eyran so far away. After a few moments he snapped out of it, telling himself it was only a dream.

Though four hours later, all of Stuart's worst fears were realized as he phoned

Carlson from LAX to hear that his brother had died just over an hour beforehand. And knowing that he couldn't possibly ask Amanda to do this duty, he had to call their father in Wales and above the noise and activity of the crowded terminal, tell him that his favourite son was dead.

SIX

Dominic drove the DS19 so that Poullain could absorb the teleprinter message which had just arrived headed *Palais de Justice, Aix*, from the nominated Prosecutor, Pierre Bouteille - declaring that Poullain's jurisdiction had been granted prime investigative control over the case, but he should liaise with Marseille on items such as forensics. Bouteille had already notified an Examining Magistrate, Frederic Naugier, and a *commission rogatoire générale* had been signed off to empower

Poullain's initial investigative stages. A meeting had been arranged for Thursday at 11.30am, two day's time, to establish the full procedural process. The brief teleprinter message gave no options on time: Poullain was being summoned.

Dominic parked at the far end of the courtyard. The air cushioned suspension settled back as they got out of the car. The Rosselot's farmhouse formed an L-shape around the courtyard, with the garage and some farm store rooms coming out at an angle from the main house. Dominic could see a child's bike resting against the wall of the garage. Pink bougainvillea grew profusely on the same wall, and positioned equidistant between there and the front

door was a small wrought iron table and four chairs. Two palm trees at the end of the courtyard separated the house from the broad expanse of the fields beyond, and a mixture of elm and pine bordered the main road and the short approach to the house. The sound of cicadas was heavy in the air. It was 10.30 am and the temperature was already over 80°F.

Variegated ivy grew up and around the front door frame. As they rang the bell, they could hear a faint clanking sound coming from the garage, competing with the rhythm of the cicadas. They waited only a moment before Monique Rosselot opened the door.

At first she was in half shadow as she

greeted them and asked them in. Dominic only got a quick impression of dark wavy ringlets, large eyes and a simple beige floral pattern dress - but it was enough to catch his breath slightly. Her eyes looked particularly large and striking in the half light of the porch. They followed her into the kitchen. There was hot coffee on the stove which she offered to them.

'It's freshly made just ten minutes ago. I've already had mine.'

Poullain thanked her and said that he would have black coffee, and Dominic followed suit and said yes, but *au lait*. The kitchen was large, with a small fireplace in the far corner. A large rough wooden table with chairs was close to

the fireplace, making up a breakfast area. Monique waved one hand towards the table, 'Please.' Poullain and Dominic took seats on its far side. Dominic observed her closer as she prepared the coffees.

Louis had been right about Monique Rosselot. A rare beauty. Despite the fact that he should have been prepared by Louis' description, he'd still found himself taken aback, his mouth suddenly dry. Her wavy dark hair hung half way down her back, her eyes were an intriguing blend of green and hazel, and her mouth was full and generous. It was an open, expressive face with an almost childlike innocence tempering its sensuality, making her look younger than

the twenty six years mentioned by Louis. Dominic would have guessed her age at no more than nineteen or twenty, despite the faint dark circles no doubt brought on by the past night of worry. He'd heard that she'd stayed at the hospital till past 4 am. Her skin tone was smooth mocha, the outline of her full breasts pushing against the cotton print dress with her movements. She glanced over at them as she poured the coffees, and Dominic looked hastily away. He felt a momentary flush of embarrassment, as if he'd been an unwelcome voyeur.

Monique brought their cups over and set them down, then looked towards the garage and the continuing clanking sound. 'I'd better ask Jean-Luc in now.

He probably doesn't realize you're here.' She went out and crossed the courtyard.

It struck Dominic that he'd only half believed Louis, whose ratings of women's beauty had become increasingly suspect through the years. That was why he'd been caught by surprise. But he felt immediately uncomfortable with those thoughts. He was here to take notes about her son who was barely clinging to life, the last thing she wanted was some gendarme ogling at her.

Jean-Luc came back in the room ahead of Monique while she made the introductions. By the way she faltered, it was obvious she hadn't remembered their names, and Poullain filled the gaps.

Jean Luc took a chair at the far end of the table while Monique poured a coffee for him. His light brown curly hair was deeply receding on both sides, and he was perspiring from his work outside. Some freckles showed on his forehead and arms from the summer sun, his shoulders and forearms were broad from the years of farm work, and there were calluses on his rough hands. But there the farm labourer ended: his eyes were soft and inquisitive and he had a vaguely intellectual air, as if he was an accountant or lecturer who farmed just at the weekends. According to Louis he was in his mid-thirties, but the receding hairline made him look closer to forty, thought Dominic. The contrast in age

between him and Monique looked more marked than it was; they could be father and daughter.

Poullain looked up expectantly at Monique and waited for her to set down her cup and join them. Dominic flipped over to a fresh page in his notebook and Poullain started speaking.

'First of all, my condolences. On my own part and on behalf of the Gendarmerie. I understand, Madame Rosselot, that you stayed with your son until the early hours of the morning.' Poullain looked pointedly towards Monique. 'To bring you up to date, I managed to check with the hospital just before leaving, and your boy has rallied well after the operation of last night.

Though the doctors won't know the full extent of just how successful the operation had been until this afternoon. We can only pray for some improvement.'

Monique nodded appreciatively. She had gone with Jean-Luc to the nearby phone kiosk only half an hour before their arrival to call the hospital, but it was hardly worth mentioning. Poullain realized she was some distance from a phone and therefore checking was difficult. No point in dampening the good intent of his gesture.

Poullain placed one hand firmly on the table top, as if he might reach out to Monique's hand for comfort, but stopped halfway short. 'Now, as painful as this

might be for both of you, we need to go through the times you last saw your son before the attack. When you first realized there might be a problem, and the timing of you finding the bike.' Poullain looked at Jean-Luc. 'We will also need you to show us afterwards exactly where you found the bike. But for now we are trying to establish the timing of events.'

Monique and Jean-Luc glanced at each other briefly, as if deciding who should be main spokesperson. Jean-Luc shrugged and held out one hand. 'You first. I was in the fields for much of the time.'

Monique drew a breath and glanced for a moment out of the window towards

the courtyard and Christian's bike. 'I let Christian out to play at about 11.15. He took his bike because he was visiting his friend Stephan who lives five kilometres away on the other side of Taragnon.'

'What route does he normally take to Stephan's house?' Poullain asked.

'About six hundred metres down the road, a track cuts between our neighbour and the next farm. It goes between two more farms for half a kilometre, then comes out on the main Taragnon-Bauriac road. He goes along the main road through Taragnon village, and the farm is just over a kilometre past.'

'Which side of the road?'

'On the left as you come out of Taragnon. It's set back a few hundred

metres from the road. From the roadside you can see mainly vines, though they also have some fields for grazing.'

'What is the family name?'

'Maillots.'

'And your son never arrived there.'

Monique looked down and bit her lip. Dominic noticed that she looked at them directly only at intervals, the rest of the time she looked down at the table or at the notepad as he recorded the interview in shorthand. 'We didn't know straightaway. We're not on the phone, nor are they. I finally called Jean-Luc in from the fields at just past 4 pm. We had expected Christian back by 3 pm, and normally he's very good with coming back on time. Jean-Luc went over to

Stephan's house and checked. They hadn't seen Christian. That was when Jean-Luc checked back along the route Christian normally took and found the bike. At first we thought that with the bike broken down he'd decided to walk the rest, which would have taken him far longer - then perhaps he'd got distracted and stopped off in the village.'

'How far away was the bike?'

Monique looked at Jean-Luc. Jean Luc answered. 'Almost towards the end of the track down the road. Not far from where it joins the Taragnon road - a few hundred metres at most.'

'So it looked to you as if Christian had walked the rest of the distance to the main road, then the two kilometres to

Taragnon village.'

Jean-Luc nodded. Poullain paused for a moment, looking over at Dominic's notes and taking stock of the information so far. Christian was found on a farm track little more than half a kilometre from the Maillots' farm, but on the other side of the road bordering the river. But somehow the boy had made it through the village. Poullain voiced the thought. 'The first thing to find out is who in the village might have seen your boy between midday and three pm. Because we will then at least know if he walked through the village or was transported through by someone he met at the roadside.'

Monique and Jean-Luc looked at each

other for a second. Something troubled them about this comment. Jean-Luc was the first to speak. 'If he was on foot, the problem is he could have cut through the fields behind the village. On his bike it's not possible, but on foot there's only a few stone walls and small fences to negotiate.'

'Is it likely he cut across?' asked Poullain.

Jean-Luc shrugged. 'It's a possibility. It's something he's done before. In any case, he would probably cut down and walk the last hundred metres of the village heading for Stephan's house. There's another track there.'

A hundred metres at the end of the village, Poullain considered. It was

quiet, the main village establishments petering out. If the one or two shopkeepers there hadn't seen the boy, it proved nothing. Yet if the boy had walked through the entire village, past boulangeries, patisseries, the main square and cafés, without being seen - it would have been a different matter. He'd already assigned three men to call on village shops from early that morning, and had been hopeful of their findings. Now he wasn't so sure. Poullain couldn't even remember what shops there were in those last hundred metres. The disappointment showed on his face.

On a fresh page Dominic had been making a small diagram of Taragnon: the path from the Rosselots to the main road,

the Maillots' farm, and the track by the river. It was a simple triangular drawing, with distances in metres between Xs marking where the bike was left and the boy was found. While his pen hovered for Poullain to speak again, he took a quick scan of the kitchen: dried flowers, ornaments, flour and spice jars, a plate wall clock with *Portofino* in scrawly black loops below a background harbour scene, no photos. Little in the kitchen said anything about the Rosselot's lives. Though the kitchen was where the coffee was, Dominic couldn't help wondering if they hadn't been asked into the sitting room for another reason. The Rosselots didn't want too deep an intrusion into their

lives.

'So finally you made the call to the police station just before 5pm, when it was clear that your son had not turned up the Maillots' farm and you had found the bike abandoned.' Monique muttered yes, and Jean-Luc merely nodded. Poullain glanced briefly at Dominic's crude diagram, as if for inspiration. He voiced his thoughts in staccato fashion as they came to him, as if he was at the same time refreshing his own memory. 'Your son was originally discovered at about three-fifteen by a neighbouring farmer, just half a kilometre from the Maillots farm. We arrived on the crime scene within forty minutes and received your call almost an hour later. We

subsequently made some confirmations of identity, to be sure the boy was yours - and two officers were sent to you an hour and quarter after you called. We suspect - although we cannot be totally sure until all the medic reports are in - that your son was attacked within an hour of being discovered.' Poullain looked keenly between Monique and Jean-Luc as he related the sequence of events. This was the first time they were hearing this information, and he wanted to see their reactions.

Jean-Luc stared back blandly, and Monique looked mildly expectant, as if she sensed Poullain wanted to add something vital. Dominic noticed Poullain unclench one hand and wave it

to one side. The difficult part was coming, and he was struggling for emphasis before the words were even formed. 'I want you to think about this for a moment before you answer. But are there any relatives, any cousins or uncles, or any friends or neighbours, that have shown a special interest in Christian? In a way that perhaps might be described as a bit over friendly or unusual.'

Poullain was doing this by the book, though Dominic. Most child molesters were found close to home with a relative or friend. Often the dividing line between a natural fondness for children and an 'unnatural' interest was impossible to determine.

Monique appeared nonplussed at first. Then finally it dawned on her what Poullain was aiming at and her face clouded. But as she spoke, her voice faltered, as if she was still struggling to comprehend. 'I don't think there's anyone we know like that.' She looked hastily towards Jean-Luc for support. '...But I don't understand. Why do you ask this?'

Poullain smoothed back his crown. Faint beads of perspiration had broken out on his forehead and he looked uncomfortable. 'Believe me, I'm sorry to have to ask you this. But when I checked this morning with the medical examiner, we suspected already that unfortunately your son was sexually assaulted before he was beaten, and this

was confirmed. We know only a little about the timing of the attack or the sexual assault, the full details will come out later from forensics and blood sampling. But we do know at this stage that a sexual assault took place.' Poullain exhaled slightly; a part sigh, part release of tension. 'I'm sorry to have to bring you this news.'

Monique's lip trembled as she stared at Poullain. It took a moment for what he'd said to sink in. Then she turned sharply away, got up and walked over to the window, her back to them. Her shoulders slumped and she cradled her head in one hand, shaking it slowly. Her jaw line tensed as she fought back the tears.

Jean-Luc stared at his wife's back for a moment, unsure whether to get up and comfort her. There was some awkwardness, some tension between them. In the end he stayed where he was and looked down at the table, smoothing it with one hand. His face was slightly flushed; a mixture of anger at Poullain's news and frustration. He wasn't there to save his son, and now he even felt too impotent to comfort his own wife.

Dominic noticed the muscle's tensing in Jean-Luc's neck and thick forearms as he struggled for fresh resolve. There was silence for a moment. The sound of cicadas from outside was broken only by the crackling of Poullain's radio.

Finally, Jean-Luc commented, 'As my

wife said, I'm sure we don't know anyone like that. Christian is a very loving, trusting child - but we know nobody who has taken advantage of that trust, or would do so.'

Poullain grimaced understandingly. 'I'm sorry I had to ask. But as you appreciate, we have to explore every possibility.' As the radio crackled again, Poullain asked Dominic to answer it.

Dominic left the main door open as he crossed the courtyard to the car. It was Harrault from the gendarmerie. He brought Dominic up to date on progress. Three gendarmes had been out calling on shops in Taragnon from 8.30am, and the item appearing in the morning's *La Provençal* had also attracted some calls.

Harrault felt that Poullain should know about one lead in particular. 'Madame Véillan from the charcuterie was driving out towards Ponteves yesterday and saw Gaston Machanaud on his moped, coming out of the lane where we found the boy. It looks like we might have struck gold quickly.'

Dominic knew Machanaud. He was a casual farm labourer who filled in with some local poaching. 'What time was this?

'Just after three. Madame Véillan aimed to be in Ponteves for three-fifteen, so she was quite sure of the time. About fifteen or twenty minutes before the boy was found.'

Dominic confirmed that they would be

returning to the station before heading out to see the medical examiner, so they should have time to go through the call notes. Hanging up, he noticed Monique Rosselot still by the window. She had stopped crying and was staring at him resolutely. Large, soulful eyes which seemed to look right through him.

Alain Duclos left the Vallon estate early to buy a morning paper, deciding to head to Brignoles for his morning coffee. He wanted to look through the paper in private, not with Claude or his father looking over his shoulder.

He picked up a copy of *La Provençal* at a news kiosk close to the cafe, took a seat at one of five outside tables, and

folded out the paper. He scanned the front page: Krushev and the nuclear test ban treaty in Moscow; four dead in floods in Tournin; Marseille warehouse fire, two dead; French Navy aids 6,000 stranded cruise passengers. Nothing there. He felt a twinge of anxiety. A murder should have taken precedence over the warehouse fire - it should have been there. He flicked over the page, and was rapidly scanning page two, when the item caught his eye on page three: **BOY SAVAGELY ATTACKED IN TARAGNON.**

It was a sixth of a page entry describing the discovery of the boy by a local farm worker and the police questioning of people in the village.

Two thirds of the way down, Duclos froze; he had to read the paragraph over again before it sunk in: *The boy suffered severe head injuries and is now in hospital. The police and the family are awaiting news from doctors as to the extent of the injuries.* The name of the hospital wasn't mentioned. Duclos felt numb and stared blankly at the same paragraph, the text fading out of focus. He felt suddenly faint, an icy chill gripping him. *The boy wasn't dead!*

He'd found the lane only three minutes from the restaurant, his resolve rebuilding on the way. Everything had gone well, except in the final moments he'd been disturbed by the tinkling bells of a shepherd's goat flock being moved

into the adjacent field. But he was sure he'd felt the skull crush, the blood spilling out. Another few seconds and he'd have been able to check the pulse in the neck or wrist. *Check that...*

'*Monsieur*. What can I get you?'

It took a moment for Duclos to detach himself from the paper and register the waiter's presence. His voice broke slightly as he answered. 'An orange juice, coffee with milk and a croissant.'

The waiter nodded and moved away. Duclos' hands shook as he closed the paper and folded it on the table. How could he have made such a mistake? The boy could have already identified his car; in no time the police could trace it back to Limoges. A few more phone

calls and they would know he was on holiday and where he was staying. The police could be at the Vallon estate that same day, they might even be there on his return. He shivered involuntarily, his stomach churning with fear. Suddenly he felt very alone and vulnerable. He couldn't go back to the estate, and he would also have to change his car. Perhaps he would head for Monte Carlo and the Italian border, or the other direction, to Spain. Then what?

He wiped the sweat from his brow. He realized he wasn't thinking rationally. Closing his eyes, he fought to calm his nerves and think clearly. His own breathing seemed louder in the self imposed darkness, his heartbeat

pounding a solid tattoo through his head along with the sounds of passing traffic; he had to concentrate to filter any clear thoughts through. A few minutes passed before the faint background shuffle and rattle of the tray of the waiter returning made him look up again. Some ideas had started forming.

As the waiter set down his breakfast, Duclos asked if he had a telephone.

'Yes, at the back of the cafe.' The waiter pointed.

The bar was narrow and busy, and Duclos had to edge and push past the workmen and truck drivers having early morning coffees with brandy and pernod chasers. The large directory on the shelf beneath the phone was the first thing

Duclos reached for. He leafed through it rapidly. There were only two hospitals he could think of in Aix en Provence where it was likely the boy could have been taken, and one in Aubagne. The name of the second large hospital in Aix had momentarily escaped him, he had to call out to the barman to be reminded. Duclos took a pen from his shirt pocket and grabbed a serviette from the counter to write on as the barman mouthed the word above the noise of the bar: Montperrin.

Duclos noted the numbers from the directory of the three hospitals on the same serviette, then made his way back to the tables out front. He didn't want to call from the bar - too many people

close by who could listen in. He took a quick sip of orange juice and coffee, put down enough money to cover the bill, and left. Turning the corner, he found a phone kiosk. He dialled the Montperrin first.

'I wondered if you could help me. I understand you have a young boy at your hospital by the name of Christian Rosselot. He would have been brought in just yesterday.'

'One moment.' Duclos could hear the flicking of paper. It went on a long time, as if the receptionist was checking twice. Finally, 'I'm sorry, I don't see anyone registered by that name.'

'Thank you,' Duclos called the second Aix-en-Provence hospitals.

'Centre Hospitalier.'

'I'm sorry to trouble you. I understand you have a young boy registered at the hospital, brought in yesterday. Christian Rosselot.'

'And who may I ask is enquiring?'

'He's a friend of my son Michel from school, Michel Bourdin. I wondered what room he might be staying in - we would like to send some flowers and perhaps visit.'

'Ne quittez pas. One moment.'

Duclos was nervous during the wait. He had no idea if she was suspicious or what instructions she was receiving the other end. It was a full minute before she returned.

'The boy is still in intensive care. But

when he can be moved, he will be in one of the five private annexe rooms of Benat ward.'

'When will that be?'

'It could be tonight, tomorrow, or even two days or a week from now. He's still in a coma now and can't be moved. Until he's conscious, there are strict instructions in any case for no visitors but family. But if you still want to send some flowers, they'll be put in his room.'

'Yes. Thank you. That's a good idea.'

Duclos felt a twinge of relief as he hung up. But he knew it could be short lived. At any time the boy could regain consciousness and talk. He just couldn't sit back and let that happen.

SEVEN

The light of a single candle reflected against the glass. Monique Rosselot's concerned profile was caught in its glow, looking through the large glass partition towards her son in intensive care. The partition separated the small preparation and observation room, no more than eight foot square, from the main intensive care room. Monique Rosselot sat in one of three chairs close to the glass. She'd been allowed to bring in a candle, only one, and light it as part of her daily bedside vigil, two to three

hours each visit.

The attending nurse had been gone for a full minute. Monique decided to go inside the intensive care room. There was no chair, so she knelt at Christian's side.

After a second of studying his features thoughtfully, she reached out and started tracing one finger gently down his face. Memories flooded back of the many times she had stroked his face, of him smiling back at her at bedtime, asking her to read him a story.

His skin had been warmer then, and it felt strange and somehow remote stroking his skin with no response. No smile. No bright eyes turning towards her. She had to be careful as she ran her

finger down not to disturb any of the tubes feeding and monitoring. The story read, she would reach out and ruffle his hair. Only now, his head had been shaved clean, his skull marked out for the tests they'd made. Stitches marked a grotesque gash to one side.

Monique closed her eyes and gripped Christian's hand. But it felt even cooler than his face, and suddenly a pang of fear gripped her inside. Oh God, *please... please don't let him die!* Her eyes scrunched tight at the unthinkable, Christian's prone figure blurred through tears as they slowly opened again.

She tried to push from her mind what had been done to him, the cold hard details from the two visiting gendarmes:

the sexual assault... the repeated blows which had left him for dead. Her tears had mostly been in private - but then that had reflected how she'd felt almost throughout her vigil. Alone. Jean-Luc had merely absorbed himself more in his farmwork to cope. He'd only visited the hospital once with her.

Now, gripping Christian's small hand in hers, she wouldn't have wanted it any other way. She probably wouldn't have grabbed this moment of intimacy if Jean-Luc had been with her. She'd only done this once before - and then too had felt like a thief sneaking in and stealing something she shouldn't. Stealing a few minutes of intimacy with her son. Perhaps their last...

She shook her head. *No!* That wasn't going to happen! She would see Christian smile again...*feel the warmth of his embrace.* She gripped the small hand tighter, willing the message home. Willing Christian to awake.

The candle burning reminded her of birthdays, and she remembered then that it would be Christian's birthday soon - her mind flashing back to past birthdays with him smiling in the glow of the candles. Unwrapping presents expectantly. The Topo Gigio doll. A model car racetrack. His bicycle only last birthday. The house filled with joy and laughter. And suddenly she felt more assured: *his coming birthday!* Something close and real on which she

could focus, could actually picture Christian's presence. 'It's your birthday soon, Christian,' she muttered. 'There'll be some great presents for you. I'll bake a cake. Bigger and better than you've ever seen before.' In her mind's eye, she could imagine Christian looking on with wide eyes and smiling at the oversized cake. And in that brief moment, she felt sure that Christian would awaken, was able to ignore the coldness of the small hand in her grasp. 'We'll all be there...'

'Now let us see what we have here.' Dr Besnard, the Chief Medical Examiner, had a manila folder already opened in front of him, as if he'd been studying it before they entered. A duty

nurse ushered Dominic and Poullain to upright seats opposite his large mahogany desk. Poullain knew Besnard from four previous cases, mostly car accidents.

'...Young boy, Christian Yves Rosselot. Ten years old. Eleven on the 4th September - just over two weeks from now. Admitted on 18th August at 4.38 pm.' Besnard flicked forward a page and then back again. In his early fifties, he was bald except for some long wisps of greying brown hair. He cradled his head for a moment, smoothing the wisps across as he looked up again. 'So. The medics recorded arriving on the scene at 4.03 pm. The boy was wearing shorts but no shirt, and he was laying

face down, his back exposed. There was blood visible on his head and shoulder, quite thick, obviously from a wound to the head. Some smaller blood spots were noted on the boy's back - from the same wound - and also a blood trail, mostly coagulated, on the boy's inside thigh. This was obviously from a separate wound. The shorts were therefore cut with surgical scissors, and the blood flow was discovered to have come from the rectal passage. The wound was not active, there was no fresh blood, so their efforts were concentrated on the head wound.' Besnard looked up at Poullain periodically, marking off his position in the file with one finger as he glanced at

Dominic, as if waiting for his notes to keep pace.

X-rays, complex fractures, haematomas, somatosensory cortex.

The pages of Dominic's notepad were already filled with notes from the surgeon who'd operated on Christian the night before. Medical notes in shorthand were a nightmare. Effectively only the conjoining words could be shortened. Poullain had arranged that Dominic take the notes, then wait on Poullain for the meeting with Besnard. But there had been a spare thirty minutes for Dominic in between.

Pale green tiling and cream emulsion walls. The clatter of heels and voices along bare and stark corridors. Dominic

found the atmosphere unsettling. He'd spent far too much of the past year in hospitals. *Images of the doctor approaching, footsteps echoing ominously, telling him the results of his mother's biopsy. A year, two years if she was lucky. No, unfortunately there wasn't much they could do except administer morphine in the closing stages to ease the pain. Check ups every three months, but let us know if the pain becomes too much in between...*

'...Clearing the airway of any residual blood was a priority, so a tracheal tube was inserted.' Besnard's finger ran quickly down the page. 'Fortunately, the boy was face down, otherwise he would

have probably choked on his own blood before they arrived. The wound was cleaned and the source of the blood flow as a ruptured blood vessel was discovered, as was a likely skull fracture - though not immediately the extent of the fracture. That showed up later on X-ray. Badly bruised and broken skin also on the right cheekbone, blood by then coagulated, possible fracture beneath. The patient was therefore bandaged both to stem the blood flow and support the skull, oxygen was administered once the airway was cleared, then he was transported here to the hospital - from which point on Verthuy in emergency attended. Conclusions from the medics report and

Dr Verthuy? First of all, time of the attack.' Besnard looked up pointedly. 'From the extent of blood coagulation around the main wound and rate of new blood seepage, their estimate was that the attack took place any time between an hour and an hour and a half before they arrived. As for the other injury - to the boy's rectal passage - this was more or less the same time, possibly only minutes beforehand. But probably the most interesting factor was from Verthuy's note on the boy's sexual assault. He discovered varying degrees of rectal inflammation and damage - suggesting that in fact *two* attacks had taken place at entirely separate intervals.'

Besnard's pause for emphasis had the desired effect on Poullain. Poullain sat forward keenly. 'Two attacks? How far apart?'

'Thirty minutes, forty minutes - one hour at most. But definitely two separate assaults. One area at the neck of the rectal canal which had been bleeding had almost completely coagulated by the time the second attack was made.'

Dominic could sense that Poullain was still grappling with the timing of the attack when he was hit with this new information. Dominic had already written on his pad: *Attack, 1-1½ hours before medics arrive: 2.33 - 3.03 pm. Anything from 12 - 42 minutes before discovery. Sexual assault minutes*

beforehand. Now Dominic wrote: *Separate sexual attack, 30 - 60 minutes prior to final assault*. That meant that at the outside estimate the attacker had stayed close to the path up to an hour and half, resting a full hour in between; and at the least, he had stayed there almost forty-five minutes, resting for half an hour. Surely someone else would have come along the path in the time. Where had he hidden?

'Any semen detected on either attack?' asked Poullain.

'No, none. Verthuy found nothing in the rectal passage apart from blood and inflamed tissue. All the blood is also of one type, B positive, the boy's blood group. Our attacker obviously was

careful and pulled out to ejaculate. Did forensics find anything?'

Poullain pictured the succession of polythene bagged samples taken from the wheat field by the Marseille team. Their report was due the next day. But they didn't know till now that the attacker had probably ejaculated on the ground. Would they have looked for that as a matter of course? A few droplets of semen among the wheat, probably by then hopelessly dried and crystallised by the heat of the sun. If not, by now it had probably been washed away with last night's rain. 'I'm not sure yet,' Poullain commented. 'I'll know tomorrow.'

'Other points of interest in Verthuy's report...' Besnard's finger skipped a few

paragraphs. 'Instrument of attack, a rock or large stone, determined from rock particles found in the boy's hair and embedded in skull tissue. Four blows in total, one breaking the skull and rupturing a blood vessel. Another blow tore heavily through the skin and shattered the right cheekbone. Bone fragments were removed, though constructive surgery will later be required for the cheekbone. Eleven sutures were required for the skull wound, eighteen for the cheek. Suspecting internal cranial haematomas, Verthuy ordered a series of X-rays at 5.32 pm - 54 minutes after the boy's entry into emergency. The boy was comatose throughout - and still remains

so - with the only break from intensive care for surgery last night, at the hands of Dr Trichot... notes of which you already have.' Besnard nodded towards Dominic. 'Trichot's full report is expected sometime tomorrow. But I can let you have a copy of Verthuy's report now. You might find something small that I haven't covered in summary.' He passed across a carbon copy.

While Poullain flicked through, Dominic asked, 'Any estimates for how long for each sexual assault?'

Besnard looked forward, then back a page. 'No longer than a few minutes for each one, though Verthuy suggests the second was perhaps shorter purely because it was less forceful.'

They were silent for a second as Poullain continued looking through the folder. Finally he looked up. 'Possibly there'll be some questions when I read it in more detail back at the gendarmerie, but that's fine for now. Thank you. You've been most helpful.'

Besnard came out from behind his desk to show them out, making small talk about the continuing August heat and how it slowed work. Doctors and gendarmes were probably the only city officials not to disappear for the month en masse to the coast. 'Call of duty or foolhardiness, you tell me?'

The corridor was quiet as they made their way along and down the stairway. Activity increased as they approached

the first floor.

'What arrangements for Machanaud's interview tomorrow?' Dominic enquired. Poullain had decided earlier they would interview Machanaud the next day, but the time and place hadn't been fixed.

'I think we should go out to visit him initially, try not to make it look too official and serious. If a second interview is necessary, we'll ask him in. Apparently he's working at Raulin's farm most of tomorrow, but we should try and get to him by eleven-thirty, before he has a chance to hit the bars.'

'And the other leads that came in today?'

Poullain looked at Dominic pointedly.

'Let's not lose sight of the fact that at present Machanaud is our main suspect.'

A curt reminder that earlier that afternoon they'd had words for the first time on the investigation. Machanaud was a drunkard, a part-time poacher and vagabond, and with his wild stories and bar room antics when drunk, was viewed as odd by at least half of Taragnon... *but a murderer?* It was ridiculous, and Dominic had made the mistake of voicing that thought. But what was the alternative? The enquiries had centred on anything out of place. In Taragnon, imbued strongly with the belief that nobody local could do anything so atrocious, this had translated into *people* out of place. The only other

leads were a van with Lyon markings and a traveller passing through.

As if appeasing for his previous sharp tone, Poullain commented, 'You'll probably be pleased to hear that another lead came up late this afternoon. Cafe Font-du-Roux, just over a kilometre from where the boy was found. Barman saw a green Alfa Romeo coupe he hadn't seen before, its driver had lunch there.'

But Dominic wasn't particularly pleased. It was too simplistic: *misfits*. Machanaud because of his oddball nature at times, and now three others purely because they were strangers. Village thinking was one track, and Poullain and his merry men lacked the imagination to push it that one stage

further.

Ahead a crowd at the reception caused a small bottle jam for people entering and exiting the hospital. Doctors and nurses criss-crossed the passage from the main admittance hall and emergency. A face among the crowd stared at them briefly, startled and concerned. But among the milling confusion of people it hardly registered, and the figure turned and was lost again in the crowd as it made its way swiftly out of the hospital.

Alain Duclos headed for the coast. At first, he had decided on Cannes and Juan-les-Pins, but then he realized he just couldn't face the people and frenetic

activity. He headed instead for St Tropez. The village was quiet and the beach wasn't too crowded; because of its expanse, there were wide open areas where Duclos could walk and think or sit in solitude away from the groups of sunbathers.

He wondered if the gendarmes had noticed him at the hospital. He kicked himself now for taking such a risk. But he'd found it difficult to think clearly or function since reading the newspaper and phoning the hospital. Leaving the bar that morning, he'd headed out of Brignoles towards Castellane and the mountains. He stopped close to the Point Sublime and looked out over the Canyon du Verdon. The view was breathtaking,

the wind sweeping up sharply from the valley floor, ruffling his hair. He closed his eyes and let the refreshing coolness play over his skin. But it did little to clear his thoughts: *the wind playing through the treetops in his final moment of pleasure, the rustle of wheat sheaves as he brought the rock down repeatedly on the boy's skull. Shifting wheat, rising and falling on the wind... white noise merging with the sound of waves gently breaking.*

He opened his eyes. Slowly he scanned the horizon of St Tropez bay: two distant yachts and a fisherman's boat showed as white flecks against a deep blue canvass. Children played in the shallows. The view was different now,

but the images in his mind remained the same. Perhaps he hoped the grandeur of the vistas would override the images in his mind, or was he simply seeking solitude? Space to think clearly. In the end, none of it touched his soul. He still felt desperately empty inside and confused.

After the mountains he'd headed back to the Vallon estate for lunch. Claude and his father had hardly seen him in the past twenty-four hours. He'd picked at his food through lunch, struggling even to make small talk, and he was sure they'd noticed his pre-occupation. The obsession haunted every spare moment when his thoughts were free; respites through outside distractions were brief.

The sun was weak now above the bay. It was almost seven thirty. He hoped to make a better show of it that night for dinner at the estate, and headed back.

Dinner was impressive: caviar d'aubergines, daurade cuite sur litière and geleé d'amande aux fruits frais, served by the estate chef. There was vintage '55 red wine from the Vallon cellars, and cheeses, coffee and cognac to finish. The conversation was animated, Claude talking about arranging a day on one of the Carmargue ranches, and Duclos even managed his own anecdote about one of his first disastrous experiences riding a Brittany seaside donkey. Though later his conversation petered out, the images resurging to

plague him, and he excused himself early and went to bed.

It was difficult getting to sleep. He kept replaying in his mind entering the hospital, pushing past the crowd by the reception - then seeing the two gendarmes and turning quickly away. He could have milled with the crowd for a moment, kept his back turned until they'd gone, then continued along the corridor. If only he'd kept his head.

The night was hot, humidity high, and he turned incessantly to get comfortable. Sleep finally came after almost two hours. The dream was confusing. The boy's eyes were looking back at him from the darkness of the boot, haunting, pleading. Then the boy was playing in

the shallows at St Tropez, and Duclos was hovering above him with the rock, silently willing the boy to move away from the crowds. But when the boy looked up at him directly, he was smiling, his eyes suddenly mischievous and defiant. The boy was mouthing some words softly, and Duclos had to move closer to hear what he was saying. The words were a tease, whispers almost lost among the wash of the surf. Thin red strands appeared like spider webbing, slowly thickening, seeping across the clear blue shallows, blood that at any minute others on the beach would see. '... As soon as I open my mouth, they will know... *they will know!*'

Duclos awoke with a jolt, almost

knocking the clock off his small side table as he grappled to look at the time: 5.10am. His hands were shaking. He knew it would be impossible to get back to sleep, so he went down to the kitchen to make coffee. He decided to sit on the chateau's back terrace overlooking the pool and watch the sunrise. He was on his second cup of coffee just over an hour later when Claude joined him.

After a few attempts at small talk, Claude sensed his consternation and asked what was wrong. Knowing that he might get the same questions over the following days, he answered that it was a girl he'd met two days ago at Juan les Pins. He'd arranged to meet her on the same stretch of beach the afternoon

before, but she hadn't showed.

Claude half smiled. 'She must have got to you badly. You look quite ill.'

Quite ill? In different circumstances, Duclos would have burst out laughing. Claude could be such a prat at times. In the end all he managed was a weak smile in return. But at least the past torturous hours had strengthened his resolve. The obsession was destroying him, the constant fight to keep hiding it fraying his nerves, and he just couldn't cope any longer. There was only one way to end it. He would have to return to the hospital.

Dominic opened the door slowly. The first thing he saw was Monique

Rosselot's profile reflected in candlelight against the glass screen. Shapes beyond the glass were more indistinct with the reflections.

Monique didn't notice him immediately, and Dominic gave a small nod of acknowledgement as she finally looked up. Then he looked towards the prone figure of Christian beyond the partition. The wires and intravenous feed tubes looked somehow obscene on such a small body. Desecration. Apart from the tubes, the harsh reminder that doctors were fighting for his life, the boy looked like one of Botticelli's gently sleeping angels. Though his burnished curls had gone, shaved off for the operation the night before.

The pain of the ordeal, the daily waiting without knowing, was etched on Monique's face. Her anguish was almost tangible, pervading the small room - though he knew that the full depth of her pain was beyond him. He could understand it and feel desperately sorry for her, without really feeling it himself. Would it make him deal with the investigation more effectively if he had? Make the battle he feared was brewing with Poullain over charges against Machanaud any easier?

Dominic eased the door shut. Monique looked up again fleetingly, a faint pained grimace of thanks or good-bye through the closing gap. He didn't want to disturb her. He'd had to call

back to the hospital to pick up the final surgical report, so decided to look in for a moment. Some visual reference to match with the medical descriptions. In answer to his concern about the boy's safety, they'd only been able to allocate a gendarme two hours each day, though when Monique Rosselot wasn't visiting, Besnard had assured that a nurse would always be in attendance.

Dominic shook his head as he made his way down the corridor. Poullain. Machanaud. The interview with Machanaud hadn't gone well. Still, it had only been a casual visit to the farm where Machanaud had been working that morning, the true test would come tomorrow with the official interview in

the gendarmerie. But why would Machanaud lie about his whereabouts? Dominic had no ready answers to that when Poullain posed the question, and Poullain's keenness had been sickeningly transparent: 'Other than to shield his own guilt.' Suddenly the question was rhetorical; Dominic's opinion was superfluous. Dominic could imagine Poullain already preparing the charge statement in his mind, one hand playing distractedly with his handcuffs. The glory of the case solved early.

Dominic made his way out of the hospital and started up his bike. Evening traffic in Aix was light, and within minutes he was on the N7 heading for Bauriac. Officially, his duty shift had

ended half an hour ago, the hospital had been his last call after picking up the forensics report from Marseille. But Poullain wanted summary notes on both reports by 7am, so he would have to do them later that night.

The day had been busy: the meeting with Pierre Bouteille had taken over an hour and a half in the morning. While a prominent case for Bauriac, filed under *grievous assault* it was probably just one of many such regional cases on Bouteille's desk. Court clerks with files and the telephone interrupted at intervals throughout. Bouteille would now determine the best point of crossover: general to official enquiry and handing over to the examining magistrate,

Frederic Naugier.

Dominic panned back again through the meeting and the events of the day, trying to pick up on small details that might be significant; but his thoughts were dulled by overload. He found it impossible to focus.

He pulled back on the throttle. The wind rush was fresh, exhilarating.

Alain Duclos circled the hospital for the third time. Each time he took a different street a block further away, until he felt sure he'd covered all the streets within reasonable walking distance of the hospital. He didn't want to make the same mistake as the day before, almost walk into two gendarmes.

The black Citroen 2CVs and DS19s were practically standard police issue. He saw only one black 2CV two blocks away; stopping briefly and looking inside, it had no police radio. He turned the corner and went another two hundred yards before parking. The hospital was now four blocks away; he was conscious too of his conspicuous car, of it not being seen too close to the hospital.

Duclos kept close to the buildings as he walked along, turning his head from the road as cars approached. It was relatively quiet that time of night: *8.16pm*. Only three cars passed in the first two streets. Turning the corner, he passed a busy restaurant with a large picture window looking out onto the

street: a babble of voices, some muted laughter and merriment, a lone face catching his eye as he scurried past. It brought home stronger the solitude of his mission now. He should be with Claude and some friends at a restaurant on the coast; instead, he was sneaking through the back streets like a thief, his nerves at fever pitch. His eyes had probably looked wild and startled to the people he'd passed in the restaurant.

At least this time he'd planned more thoroughly. With a story that his son went to the same school and he wanted to ensure that flowers arrived while Madame Rosselot was there, the receptionist informed him that she normally visited every day, arriving

anything between four and five and staying two or three hours. 'Though on two occasions, she also visited in the morning for an hour or so.'

He timed to arrive just after the evening visit. Rounding the next corner, the hospital entrance was fifty yards ahead. He paused for a second, taking a deep breath, then continued at a steady pace; he didn't want to look hesitant, he stopped at reception and asked what he wanted.

There was a small crowd at the reception, and the two nurses behind hardly paid attention. One had her head down, studying something in the register, the other was deep in conversation. Duclos only gave them a brief sideways

glance, not wanting to attract undue attention as he made his way quickly through the main hallway to the stairway and elevator.

He waited only a second before deciding on the stairs. Too many prying eyes close by in the elevator, people who might talk to him, ask him which way for so and so ward, notice on which floor he got off. On the stairs he would be far more anonymous. Second floor, far end of corridor, room 4A. His heartbeat seemed to pulse through to his head, its rhythm almost matching the stark echo of his footsteps as he made his way along the second floor corridor. At its end was a T where it split in two directions, with markings and arrows

indicating the different departments. It looked like 4A was close to the end. Duclos shortened his step as he got close to the door. Almost unconsciously he held his breath the last few steps, reaching one hand out for the door handle.

His hand hovered by the handle for a second - then he retracted it, wiping the sweat that had built up on his palm on his trouser leg. The plan was straight in his mind: if anyone was there or he was confronted, he would say that he'd arranged to meet Mrs Rosselot. '*Had he missed her?*'

Another deep breath, forcing the air deep into his lungs to calm his nerves - he reached for the handle, turning it...

The room opened out before him: A woman's profile, dark hair, a candle glowing... a bed and instruments through a glass partition. A split-second impression. The woman started to look up - Duclos closed the door again equally as swiftly. A sudden exhalation, release of tension, he headed quickly away - afraid that the woman might come to the door and open it, look out to see who had been there. Not daring to look back, Duclos listened intently for sounds behind him. None came. He turned the corner of the T. Safety again.

He was sure the woman hadn't seen him. It was probably the boy's mother, Madame Rosselot. He cursed his bad luck - she should have left at least fifteen

minutes ago. Suddenly a door to his side opened, startling him; he almost jumped out of his skin as a nurse and hospital porter came out. Duclos covered hastily with a sheepish grin, but they hardly paid him any attention as they headed towards the stairs.

Duclos thought about giving up, heading back out of the hospital, coming back another day. His nerves were shot, a trembling deep in his stomach, his body weak from lack of sleep and nervous anticipation. But he knew that if he left now, he would never come back, he wouldn't be able to face the same ordeal again. He went across to a bench a few paces to one side with a clear view of the stairway and, when he leant

across, the full length of the corridor and room 4A at its end. Perhaps he could wait it out. She was already fifteen minutes late, how much longer could she stay?

He fought to relax again, breathing deeply and steadily. But with each passing minute he became increasingly agitated. Two fresh sets of heels he'd heard, only to lean over and see people coming out of other rooms. False alarms. Only a few minutes had passed, but it seemed like a lifetime.

Another set of heels, faint at first, started their echoing clipping. He leant across half expecting another false alarm - then pulled back quickly, catching his breath. *At last!* His pulse raced, counting

each beat of the slowly receding footsteps.

He waited a full twenty seconds after they had faded down the stairway, then concentrated on the sounds around for a moment. No fresh footsteps on the stairway or the corridor.

He got up and made his way along, covering the distance steadily, half of his senses attuned to the sounds around, the rest focused on what lay ahead: *the door*... approaching closer the last few footsteps, reaching out for the handle, listening for a brief second for any sounds beyond. Nothing. The corridor was empty, no fresh footsteps approaching. Slowly he turned the handle, the door opened, the view

steadily expanding... *nobody inside!* A quick release of breath. Then he looked through the glass screen to the larger room beyond, stepping fully into the small ante-room, closing the door quickly behind him.

The boy lay beyond the glass partition, his skin pallid like yellow porcelain, wires and tubes connected and monitoring. It was certainly the boy from the day before, and there was nobody else in the room. Duclos' mouth was dry with anticipation. The boy's breathing was probably so shallow that all he would have to do was reach out and cover his nose and mouth for a minute to finish him. But he would have to be quick - at any moment somebody

could come back in the room.

His nerves were racing, his palm suddenly clammy on the handle of the door to the main room. His whole body trembled and he felt cold, even though the night air was close to 80°F. With a final deep breath, he opened the door and stepped inside.

'When this old world starts getting me down, and people are just too much for me to face... I climb right up to the top of the stairs and all my cares just drift right into space. On the roof, the only place I know... where you just have to wish to make it so...'

Dominic lay on his back on his bedroom terrace, staring up at the star lit

sky above Bauriac, the Drifters on his record player, soothing his thoughts. It was one of the best songs of the year, his favourite. The record had been in his collection and on Louis' juke box since early January, just as it was climbing up the American billboard charts. Files and notes lay scattered over his bedroom floor. He'd finished his summary report for Poullain - all but the last paragraph. He'd searched for the right tone, that key phrase which neatly encapsulated everything, before finally giving up after half an hour and deciding on a break to clear his thoughts.

His mother had gone to bed over an hour before with some hot chocolate and biscuits, just after ten. The day's basic

household activities seemed to tire her earlier by the day. He'd positioned his record player close to the double terrace doors so that it didn't disturb her asleep downstairs.

His mind drifted back to Algeria. The Foreign Legion. Where he'd first found the habit of laying on his back staring up at the stars. The desert sky had been even more spectacular, crystal clear skies of deep blue velvet sprinkled with a snowstorm of stars. After a few months, the idea had caught on with half the platoon. Somebody would light a camp fire, he'd spend a while rigging up his record player to a car battery and would put on some Ray Charles or Sam Cooke, and on occasions some hashish

would appear that somebody had picked up at a souq. It was easier to get hashish in Algeria than alcohol. The sessions made him popular with comrades. The thought that they were laying in the middle of the desert, cut off from civilization and all they knew, yet listening to the very latest sounds courtesy of Dominic's uncle almost two months before the rest of France had the privilege. It somehow made them feel in touch, in tune. Compensated for the isolation.

The legion had left its scars. Not so much on him personally - he'd been a back room radio and communications sergeant and had hardly seen any fighting - but with his present career. The

gendarmes treated ex-Foreign Legion recruits with an air of suspicion, as if they were all unarmed combat experts or reformed cut-throat murderers. At the end of the last century with uprisings in Morocco and Algeria, many recruits had come from the French prison system, an alternative to the Bastille or Devil's Island - but not in the last few decades.

Dominic didn't trouble to put them right, tell them he'd hardly seen any action during the Algerian war. Sometimes the tough guy image had its advantages; colleagues were careful not to tread on his toes. Local prejudices could be used to advantage - but he feared that they might work against Machanaud if the interview didn't go

well tomorrow.

The forensics report revealed little. The blood tested was the boy's group, no semen deposits were found, and there were no startling fibre discoveries. Rock particles found in the blood confirmed the medical examiner's suspicion about murder weapon. Though no blood stained rock had been found by the search team, nor the boy's shirt, and the few items of paper from the field and a man's torn jacket and shoe by the river bank looked too weathered to be connected. Still they'd been passed to forensics for checking.

With little or no forensics findings, they became more reliant on the timing of the attack and eye witnesses - which

pointed back to Machanaud. But with his protest to Poullain the day before that it was ridiculous to suspect Machanaud, he was just a troublesome drunkard and poacher - if Poullain's look of thunderous reproach was any gauge of local opinion - Dominic feared it could rise swiftly against Machanaud. Like himself and Louis, Machanaud was from outside, originally from the foothills of the Pyrannees, and had been in Bauriac less than three years. More than a few times, Dominic or others from the gendarmerie had been called to a local bar because of Machanaud's drunken antics. Machanaud would usually either want to sing or fight, or both. Having warmed up for the evening's renditions

with stories of his wartime exploits, how as a young lad of eighteen in the *resistance* he tried to blow up a Nazi truck with vital supplies; but the truck spun off the road and hit him and he'd ended up with a metal plate in his head. Most villagers thought he was half mad and treated him with a mixture of suspicion and contempt.

Perhaps the other leads would prove fruitful and divert attention away from Machanaud. When he'd phoned the gendarmerie earlier, Servan brought him up to date on progress: a green Alpha Romeo had been seen in Pourrières, the number taken, and they were now putting through a trace request with vehicle registration in Paris. The Lyon van was

seen sixty kilometers away about the time of the attack, and no news yet on the passing traveller.

Dominic sat up. Filtering down through his thoughts, his summary notes finally gelled. He went back to the folder before the thought flow went, and wrote: *Distinct lack of forensic evidence. No other blood groups other than the boy's, no semen, no fibres. The weapon cannot be found, nor the boy's shirt. Whoever committed this crime was extremely careful. If we are to suspect Machanaud, then we also have to ask ourselves - is he really the type to be this careful and meticulous?*

Dominic scanned quickly back over the report. The time gap between the two

attacks had introduced a new, puzzling perspective, but with no specific relevance to suspicion of Machanaud. Whoever had made the attack, the question was the same: Where had they been in that time? No other area of flattened wheat had been discovered, and from the strength of body imprints where the attack was finally made, the Marseille teams' view was that it had been occupied for no more than ten minutes. The supposition was therefore that beforehand the boy and his assailant had been by the riverbank, mostly obscured by trees and bushes from the bordering farm lane, or somewhere else?

The record had finished without

Dominic noticing, the needle clicking repeatedly on the inner circle. Dominic took it off and put on Sam Cooke's 'Another Saturday Night', then came back onto the terrace. He closed his eyes for a moment as he laid back, then opened them again, letting the broad blanket of the sky and the mass of stars sink slowly through his consciousness, suffuse through his body until it touched every nerve end. Touched his soul. Solitude.

A single candle flickered at the back of his mind. Monique Rosselot's profile, partly in shadow against the dancing light, a raw essence of beauty and motherhood hoping and praying that her only son lived. He remembered in Algeria a woman at the souq in El

Asnam. He never normally paid much attention to the local women, generally a non-descript rabble covered from nose to toe in black sheets. This woman had been dressed the same, except that her eyes above her face mask had been large and captivating - and she'd met his stare for a second longer than was probably considered discreet. Her eyes laughed at him provocatively, hazel with green flecks, soulful, bright. Then she was gone, disappearing quickly among the market stalls and back street warrens of the souq. Many times since he had wondered what her face looked like, images forming in the flames of the campfire or from the starry depths of the velvet sky during those long and lonely

desert nights. But the image that superimposed now, as the face veil was gently removed, was of Monique Rosselot. He shook the image away.

Sam Cooke was singing '*...It's hard on a fella, when he don't know his way around. If I don't find a honey to help me spend my money, I'm gonna have to blow this town...*' It reminded Dominic of one of his last dates with Odette; the song had been playing at a fairground they'd visited in Draguignan. Another Saturday night. Bright lights, candy floss, a fluffy baby blue toy cat he'd won for her at the rifle range. But the single candle burned through, the sullen but proud profile half in shadow reflected against the glass. He found it hard to get

the image of Monique Rosselot out of his mind.

EIGHT

Session 1: 11.06am, 16th February, 1995

Stuart Capel looked anxiously at the door ahead. Through it he could hear only muted mumbling; only the occasional word could be picked up clearly. He leant forward keenly, his arms resting on his knees.

Around him were a mixture of diplomas - Dr David Lambourne, *PhD*, *MR Psych* - and theatre posters. Collection of magazines on a small

coffee table. No receptionist, just an answerphone that would kick in. Only two calls the past fifteen minutes.

But despite Stuart's posture - every nerve and muscle tense, his jaw set tight - his eyes were dull and unfocused. Dulled by the nightmare of the past two months. Clinging to one last chance as his hands clasped and unclasped. Oh God, I hope this will help. *I hope this will help...*

'... and so you'll be twelve soon, Eyran. Is that right?'

'Yes, in April. The fifteenth.'

'And what would you like for your birthday?' Lambourne asked. 'Any thoughts?'

'I don't know, really. I was going to get a surf board in San Diego.' Eyran drifted off for a second, scanning the ceiling. The couch he was laying on was old and over-stuffed, with a fading floral print. It would have looked more at home in a country cottage than a psychiatrist's office in Holborn. 'Perhaps a new bike. Some more computer games.'

'Have you thought of asking for a pet? A dog, maybe.'

'No, not really. But the boy two doors away has got a red setter. We went playing in the fields with it a few days back.'

'Did you get on well with the boy?'

'Yes, sort of. His name's Kevin. He's

two years older than me. He was asking a lot about San Diego, said that he'd like to go there.'

Fresh faced, light-brown hair. A few faint freckles across the bridge of his nose. It was difficult for Lambourne to relate the boy before him with what he knew from the report on his desk: *Accident victim. Nineteen day coma. Temporal and parietal lobe trauma. Both parents lost in the same accident.* And now possible psychological discordance: increasingly violent dreams and development of a secondary character to push away acceptance of his parents' death.

'Have you ever had a pet before?' asked Lambourne.

'No. But I like them, dogs more than cats.'

'Maybe you should ask your uncle for one. With all of those fields around, it could be fun. The perfect place for a dog.' It had come out of his discussion with Stuart Capel the day before: new object attachments to help diminish what Eyran had lost. 'And at school. Any friends yet? I understand that you started at the beginning of last week.'

'Only one. Simon. He was at my primary school from before in England. I didn't know him so well then, but we're becoming friendlier now.'

'And how are you getting on with Tessa?'

'Okay. But she's a few years younger

than me. She has her own friends.'

David Lambourne looked down at his notes briefly, was about to ask another question about home or school, trying to gauge how Eyran was settling in, when Eyran continued.

'My other old friends from before are too far away. Though I went over to Broadhurst Farm the other day with Kevin. Being there with his dog reminded me of Sarah and Salman, her labrador. We used to play there years ago, before I went to America. They were in one of my first dreams.'

Too early. Lambourne didn't want to explore the dreams yet. His first aim was to put Eyran at ease, establish comfortable ground: birthday, presents,

friends, possibly a pet. From his two hour meeting with Stuart Capel the previous day, he'd planned his guideposts well: he knew that the mention of a pet would trigger Eyran mentioning one friend, school another. But the past kept interjecting - San Diego, old friends and memories - spoiling the rhythm.

'How are you settling in at your Uncle's house. I understand you're right out in the country. It must be nice.'

'Yes, it's very nice. My room looks over fields at the back.'

'So, they've given you one of the best rooms in the house.'

Faint smile from Eyran. The first so far. Stuart Capel had told him Eyran

smiled rarely, uneasily, was generally slow to respond. It was one of Stuart's main areas of concern. 'And you've got all your favourite things around you...'

Lambourne continued building on areas of familiarity - but the answers gradually became more stilted and relied on past reference. Understandable. Eyran had only been in the house six weeks; his main memory of it was from when he lived with his parents nearby. Eyran was still pre-occupied with the old house, its position and distance from his uncle's house.

'It's only four or five miles away, and Broadhurst Farm is just at the back. When I look out of my bedroom window now, there's a hill in the distance. It's not

too far the other side of that.'

'And that's where you went with Kevin the other day? That's quite a distance to walk.'

'It wasn't too bad. I wanted to see how it had changed from before. Perhaps I might have bumped into some of my old friends there. It was strange, the pond was much smaller than I remembered. And in one of my dreams, it was enormous.'

Present. Past. And now the dreams again. It was a hop-scotch. Each time Lambourne dragged him to the present, Eyran leapt back.

'The week before, I drove past there with Uncle Stuart. But we just looked up from the field behind that leads up to the

copse. We didn't go in.'

'I see.' Stuart Capel had mentioned the significance of the copse, that at least two of Eyran's dreams had taken place there. But Lambourne didn't want to let on that he knew. It was important that Eyran revealed the significance in his own words. Although Lambourne had planned to delay exploring the dreams until the second session - one area of the dreams might be worth exploring now.

'In the dreams, who do you see most? Your mother or your father - or do they both appear equally?'

'My father appears more. In the first two dreams, my mother didn't appear at all. Then when I did finally see her, she was distant, out of reach. In another

dream, I wasn't even sure whether I saw her or not. It was misty, and I thought she was just ahead of my father, but I might have just been imagining it. It wasn't very clear.'

'And do either of them speak to you in the dreams?'

'My father has twice, my mother never. On the one occasion I was sure I saw her, she was turned from me, walking away. And I was trying to catch up.'

'I see.' Lambourne glanced at his notes. One area where the dreams offered a convenient allegory; it would have been awkward to ask straight out which parent Eyran felt closest to.

'Did you catch up with your parents in

any of the dreams?'

'No. My father was closest, but he always remained just out of reach.'

'Do you think there's any reason why your father appears more than your mother in the dreams? Were you closer to him?'

'When I was younger, no. But as I got older, I felt I could talk to him more. You know, if I was having trouble with someone picking a fight, some problem with my bike, or selection for the school football team. I just felt he'd know more about those things than my mum.'

'So you went to him for help, confided in him more. But you felt equally close to both of them?'

'Yes.'

'And did you love them both equally - mum and dad?' Stupid question, but it was necessary to have Eyran say it, admit the attachment before he started suggesting other object attachments.

'Yes.'

'And do you miss them?'

Longer pause this time; Eyran's brow was slightly furrowed. 'Yes, of course...'

Clasping. Unclasping.

The muted voices through the door after a while made Stuart's mind drift. Back through the nightmare which had finally brought him to David Lambourne's office.

Hands clasped behind his back as he looked out at the view: two large palm

trees like sentinels either side of the garden. A faint mist rising from the swimming pool. December in Southern California.

Moment's break from packing boxes with Jeremy's personal papers and mementoes. Behind him, Helena, Jeremy's Mexican maid, saying something he didn't quite catch. On arrival, she'd grasped his hand extended in greeting in both hers as she looked deep into his eyes and expressed her sorrow. He could tell that she had been crying, and as she kept grip a second longer, willing home her emotions with eyes brimming with watery compassion, she burst into tears again. He'd cried enough on the flight over and since,

identifying the bodies of his brother and Allison in the morgue, seeing Eyran laying helpless and prostrate in the hospital bed - to be able to join her.

Death. The morning mist somehow mirrored his mood. Looking through the sliding windows towards the pool and patio; happier times. Jeremy at the barbecue, Eyran and Tessa swimming, Allison and Amanda sipping Long Island iced teas and preparing a salad. He snapped himself away, back to packing boxes. Another minefield of memories: Jeremy's diplomas from Cambridge and his bar exams, photos with his old rugby team in Hertfordshire, him and Jeremy sitting at a restaurant table in Mykonos, one of their few holidays together.

They'd been in their early twenties and Stuart couldn't even remember the name of Jeremy's girlfriend at the time who had taken the picture. Two boxes had already been filled with a mixture of photos, papers, mementoes and small ornaments. How long did it take to tidy away the personal effects of a lifetime? Leave the room neat and tidy, so no memories, no trace remained.

The day before had been a nightmare, a blizzard of paperwork and officialdom. Forms to be filled out at the police station and morgue, more at the hospital, then onto Jeremy's employers, Hassler and Gertz, to deal with Jeremy's probate and insurance details.

It seemed that all he'd done since

arriving in California was sign papers; autograph his brother's aftermath. Perhaps it was all part of the grieving process. 'You've now witnessed and signed fifteen papers relating to your brother's death, surely you can now finally accept that he is dead.' Hadn't he read somewhere that the grieving process didn't start until *after* acceptance.

Then when Stuart went finally into Eyran's room, the thought of Eyran at that moment in the hospital deep in coma, barely clinging to life - gripped him hard. Posters of Pamela Anderson, the Power Rangers, Jurassic Park, the Daytona racetrack. It was amazing how quickly they grew up. Had he started

thinking of girls when he'd been eleven? From the stereo and a small stack of CDs to one side, he picked out four: Janet Jackson, Seal, Madonna, UB40. Quick scan of the rest of the room - probably the last time he would see it: a semi-precious rocks and minerals collection, some model sports cars, an SX25 computer with a small box of disks, a signed baseball bat, a model dolphin from San Diego SeaWorld, a large corner box full of assorted toys - many obviously from when Eyran was much younger.

Stuart bit his lip as he packed. But at least this duty carried with it a bit more hope. Mementoes for the living.

Hands clasping.

Clutched tight to the report as Eyran's surgeon in California, Dr Torrens, delivered his stark prognosis.

Traumatic intracranial haematomas. Two small parietal lobe haematomas. Larger temporal lobe haematoma. Risk of oedema. Irregular EEG recording.

But which one had carried the possibility of later psychological disturbance, thought Stuart. *Which one?*

At the time, all he'd hoped and prayed for had been Eyran awaking; he hadn't looked beyond. Torrens had mentioned only the possibility of later disorientation of direction, topography and shapes due to the temporal lobe haematoma. Usually hardly noticeable

outside of reading detailed maps or directions, or sorting out complex puzzles. 'If that's all we're facing, be thankful.'

In the end there had been two EEG activity recordings: 94 hours and 17 hours respectively before Eyran finally waking. In answer to his key questions - chances of survival, how long the coma might last and degrees of damage that might persist if and when Eyran finally awoke - Dr Torrens seemed reluctant to speculate, hiding mainly behind textbook statistics from a cross section of American hospitals. Stuart recalled that 14% of coma victims made a full recovery and another 14% made recoveries with impairments so slight as

to be unnoticeable, though a daunting 49% did not survive at all, the mid-ground taken up by cases ranging from moderate disablement to complete vegetative states.

Easy to get lost in the medical terminology, Stuart thought. Acceptance by conditioning. Concern and grief, all so real when focused on a loved one, swallowed up as part of the grander scale of general statistics affecting all coma patients. The first shock had come learning that Eyran's heart had stopped for 54 seconds when first admitted. Stuart had asked if that might have contributed - but Torrens felt that the direct head injuries and cranial haematomas were likely the prime cause

of coma.

Clasping - as a nurse had led him finally to Eyran's bedside - an image to match with Torren's stark report. Tubes and wires feeding and monitoring, Eyran's face grey and wan. He found it hard to relate with the Eyran he remembered, so full of curiosity and enthusiasm - and suddenly came to mind a day out in his sports car, Eyran at his side, cheeks rosy with the crisp air.

Eyran had been only six, and they were driving up Highgate Hill. Stuart pointed theatrically towards the cemetery. 'Do you know who's buried there? Karl Marx!' To which Eyran's eyes lit up with enthusiasm. 'Was he one of the Marx brothers?' It had remained

part of Stuart's dinner party repertoire for almost two years.

Talk to him, Torrens had said. Familiar voices, shared memories. Stuart started with the Karl Marx incident, then went on to relate another story from when Eyran had been seven and asked him what was the rudest word. At first, he'd tried to avoid it by saying he didn't know, but Eyran was persistent. 'But you must know lots of rude words at your age, uncle Stuart.' Knowing that he couldn't easily escape, but not wishing to get into trouble with Jeremy for teaching Eyran rude words, he'd finally offered 'Codswollop'.

'Is that the rudest word?'

'Yes, absolutely. It's a terrible swear

word - never to be used.'

'But is it the rudest, rudest?'

'Yes, it's the rudest, rudest. You must never, *ever* say codswollop.'

A moment's thought as Eyran compared with what he'd heard in the school playground. 'Is it ruder than fuck?'

Jeremy had burst out laughing when Stuart told him, finding Stuart's vain attempt to preserve his son's already tainted innocence particularly amusing; yet another dinner party anecdote. Eyran too had been let in on the joke later when he was old enough. But relating the story to Eyran, hearing only the echo of his own voice, Stuart found it unsettling. Like a comedian on stage with no

audience.

And so half an hour later when his one man dialogue ran out of steam - he turned to the CDs he'd brought from Eyran's room and let Janet Jackson take over. *Familiar voices, familiar music.* Torrens had arranged for a player.

But now listening to the muted mumbling beyond Lambourne's door, he recalled with clarity the feeling that had crept over him in that instant. Dreading the moment - if and when his tearful wishes of Eyran awaking were fulfilled - that he would have to tell Eyran his parents were dead.

And when that moment did finally come, the haunted, lost look in Eyran's eyes - still lingering days and even

weeks later. He should have guessed then that a part of Eyran would always cling on, refuse to accept.

David Lambourne flicked back through Torrens' report. So, what did he know after the first session? The first aim had been to judge Eyran's responsiveness.

Made just four days after Eyran had revived from his coma, the report showed ten to fifteen percent impairment on conventional thought and speech response. If anything, there had been improvement since then; Eyran's response had been slow on very few questions. Though perhaps when he entered the more complex and

problematical areas of Eyran's dreams, responsiveness would drop. The barriers would go back up.

Thirty eight percent below average on IQ puzzles. Lambourne couldn't help much there: the best indicators would come from maths results at his new school. Or perhaps he could get some standard tests from St Barts for the Capels to do at home.

But the main problem was Eyran's increasingly violent dreams, and the key question: were they a by-product of the accident and the coma, some chemical imbalance causing dementia; or a defence mechanism of Eyran's subconscious, unwilling to accept that his parents were dead?

With the first, Lambourne realized he'd have limited control, swept along on the changing tide of the condition, leaving him little range within which to wield influence. Damage limitation. But if it was the latter, he'd have far more control, and at first glance the analysis was straightforward: Eyran couldn't accept that his parents were dead, so his subconscious had manifested various scenarios, played out through his dreams, where he could find them alive. Text book Freud denial/ mourning/object attachment.

Though Lambourne had conducted his main studies in the Freudian school, he liked to think that he'd kept an open mind on later theories and papers - some of

them contradictory to Freud's principals. Jung, Winnicott, Adler, Eysenck, and then the later radicals Lacan, Laing and Rollo May. Twenty-two years in practice, seventeen of them at St Barts, Lambourne prided himself on keeping up to date with his papers and readings, felt that he was better equipped than most to pick and choose at the smorgasbord of psychoanalysis, return with the plate most suited to his patient.

Lambourne looked around his office. The furniture had hardly changed since St Barts. The same old floral pattern sofa, his upright padded seat chair, a rolled top walnut desk, the dark oak coffee table with a few magazines strategically scattered. Stuffy, country

cottage atmosphere which he felt put patients at ease.

Or perhaps it was all just a replica, a home away from home modelled on the Buckinghamshire country house he'd left his wife in their divorce settlement six years previous. Now he was just a weekend father to their two daughters. He'd learnt more about object loss during the divorce than through the years of study and practice; for the first time he'd actually felt what his patients fought to describe in bland monotones. He could help solve their problems, but not his own.

He'd left St Barts a year after the divorce and decided to combine costs by living in. He loved the theatre, and the

main theatre areas and Covent Garden were a short stroll away, past old book, stamp and curio shops, and one in particular he'd discovered specializing in old theatre posters.

He never used the armchair, always the straight backed chair. The armchair made him appear too relaxed, distant from his patients; while in the hard back chair, he invariably ended up leaning forward. He looked more interested in them. Throughout the first fourteen years of his practice, he'd smoked a pipe, but with the more responsible age of doctors taking the lead with non-smoking, had given up. He immediately found his pipe hand, his left, at a complete loss, and so sucked at an empty pipe during sessions

for another three years, felt that chewing on the mouthpiece helped him concentrate - until one woman patient had been bold enough to question what he was doing. As he'd explained, her puzzled look had made it clear just who of the two of them should be on the couch. So now there was no more pipe, just one orphaned hand.

Jojo? Eyran's imaginary dream friend who always promised he could find Eyran's parents. A simple invention to support non-acceptance of their death, or a possibly threatening secondary personality? Lambourne wondered.

One of the key factors was going to be separation from reality, if any illusions in the dreams started crossing over into

Eyran's thoughts while awake. And if they did, to what extent might Eyran accept or adopt them? At present, they were at arm's length. But Jojo trampling through Eyran's conscious thoughts could be disastrous.

There was also the maze of object attachments to fight through: not just Eyran's loss of his parents, but attachments and memories with the house in San Diego, their previous house in England and old play areas - which perhaps due to their closeness to his uncle's house were resurging strongly.

Finding his way through was not going to be easy. He would need to follow the threads carefully in order to draw out Eyran's perception of Jojo in the right

way, then press hard to break Eyran away from Jojo's subconscious influence. Yet too hard and all trust and patient transference would be lost.

It was going to be a delicate tightrope, and Eyran would probably resist him all the way. No child wanted to face that their parents were dead, and the dreams and Jojo were probably the only sanctuary Eyran had left.

NINE

The courtyard was in Moorish style, in the *Panier* quarter of Marseille. Two sides framing the courtyard were the house itself on three floors, the third the blank wall of the adjacent building. The fourth, and the entrance to the courtyard, were large solid wood double gates studded with black iron, with a small door with buzzer inset one side: the brothel's main entrance and all that was visible from the narrow street. Emile Vacheret's establishment was discreet, its façade anonymous, as its many

regulars preferred.

The centrepiece of the courtyard was a small fountain edged with blue and white mosaic tiling, and window sills throughout the building had the same pattern edging. Some white doves played and strutted in and around the fountain. While he waited, Alain Duclos looked out through the ground floor french windows towards the fountain and courtyard.

Prostitution was legal, so the anonymity of the building was for the benefit of clients and for the small side attractions offered clients which weren't so legal. The room's cleaners, servants and waiters in the bar were all young boys, mostly from Morocco and Algeria,

between the ages of twelve and nineteen - though the youngest age on any identity card was sixteen, in the event of a police raid. Vacheret paid heavily to the local precinct each month. The boys' functions as waiters and room cleaners were mostly a cover; they were also there for the client's pleasure, if so required. For heterosexual clients, which was indeed seventy percent of Vacheret's trade, a choice of girls would be paraded in, and the boys just served drinks and made the beds afterwards.

Duclos sat on the bed as Vacheret introduced two new boys who had arrived in the last week, as possible alternatives to his favourite of the last few visits, Jahlep. The two boys wore

claret red baggy harem trousers and round neck white shirts. One was very young, possibly twelve, while the other was closer to fourteen or fifteen. Duclos concentrated on the younger one as Vacheret explained that he was a mulatto from Martinique, exquisite light brown eyes, delicate complexion, brand new the last week, hardly touched. Vacheret might as well have been trying to sell him a used car, Duclos thought. True, the boy was exquisite, cream brown skin, just the age he liked. But he just couldn't concentrate and get up any enthusiasm.

Noticing his hesitancy, Vacheret commented, 'What's wrong, you want a drink while you decide or is there something private you want to ask me

about them. Shall I send the boys away?'

'I'm not sure. Perhaps. Give me a minute.'

Vacheret ushered the boys away and sat down beside Duclos. 'Have you decided on Jahlep again, but you didn't want to say so in front of those two. Or are you just undecided between Jahlep and this new boy? Perhaps you could try the two together?' Vacheret raised his eyebrows hopefully.

Beads of sweat stood out on Duclos' forehead and he looked troubled, his eyes darting as he contemplated the floor. 'Look, I'm sorry. I can't think clearly about the boys for the moment. Maybe later. But there's something on my mind, something I'd like to ask you

about first.'

Vacheret nodded, suddenly pensive, barely containing a half smile; he was sure that Duclos was about to enquire about some bizarre practice or fantasy, something he'd been too coy to mention before. It always tickled him, this part, clients admitting their secret sexual desires; it was almost like being a psychiatrist or priest, finally clients got around to what was *really* troubling them.

But as Duclos explained what he wanted, Vacharet's expression became slowly graver. This wasn't what he expected.

Crossing the courtyard as he left twenty minutes later, Duclos could see

the misty shape of a girl rolling up one black stocking through the net curtains at a window to one side. She had wild red hair and was naked except for a garter belt and the one stocking, and was sitting on the edge of the bed facing the window. Because she was close to the window, she saw him and smiled, gradually parting her legs wider. Duclos turned away and headed for the courtyard door. If he'd stayed, she would probably have put on a little show for him, but he wasn't interested.

He phoned Vacheret that night and, as arranged, Vacheret gave him a name and a time and place to make contact.

The room where Machanaud was taken

to was at the back of the gendarmerie. The main window was open with the heat, its grey wooden shutters closed. Only faint slats of sunlight filtered in, so the main light, a football sized glass sphere screwed to the ceiling, had been switched on. The rooms at the back, away from the traffic and looking onto a car park shared with the Town Hall, were quiet.

Machanaud had arrived at 11.30am, as scheduled. But Poullain had made him wait in the room on his own for almost twenty minutes. Dominic timed and dated an interview form, and made notes as Poullain started with Machanaud's main background details: Age: 39; Town of birth: St Girons; Place of residence:

Seillons; Occupation: farm labourer. Past convictions? Machanaud could recall two past convictions, but not the dates, so Dominic took the details from the past charge sheets: drunken and disorderly in March of that year and poaching the previous October.

Machanaud looked older than his age, Dominic always thought: closer to mid or late forties. His skin was weathered and pitted, his thick brown hair long and unkempt and heavily greased back in an effort to make it look tidier; though all too often a lank forelock would break loose and hang across his face. When drunk and in one of his more rebellious moods, the one eye that wasn't covered by hair gave the impression of leering

wildly.

Poullain waited for Dominic to stop writing, then started with a general summary of Machanaud's activities on the 18th August , most of it purely skimming details from their interview of the day before. Then Poullain went back to the beginning, going into more specific timings. 'So you left after finishing work at Raulin's farm at about eleven, is that right?'

'No, closer to twelve.'

Poullain was testing. Machanaud had told them twice before that it was twelve. Eleven was closer to the time they thought he had left from their interviews the day before both with Raulin and Henri at Bar Fontainouille,

who seemed to remember Machanaud calling in and leaving earlier. 'And you went straight on to Bar Fontainouille from there?'

'Yes, that's right.'

'How long would that take, do you think?'

'About fifteen, twenty minutes.'

Poullain spent the next ten minutes running through Machanaud's movements: Bar Fontainouille at 12.15pm, leaving just before 2 pm for Gilbert Albrieux' farm where he'd planted some vines the February past. Albrieux apparently hadn't been there to see him, but after a quick check of the vines Machanaud claimed he sat on a stone wall and had a sandwich. After

half an hour, he then headed off to Leon's.

Dominic felt the tension building with each question, or maybe it was because he knew what was coming: Poullain was slowly circling in for the kill.

'So, it's what - only ten or twelve minutes from Albrieux' to Léon's bar. What time did you arrive there?'

'About two thirty-five, two forty. But I only stayed about an hour, because I had to be back at Raulin's for the late shift at four o'clock.'

Dominic looked at his notes. Effectively all that Machanaud admitted to was being on his own for about half an hour after two o'clock. Their various interviews from the day before told a

different story. Raulin didn't recall seeing him after 11am and although Henri at Bar Fontainouille wasn't sure what time Machanaud arrived, he was certain of the time he left, at about 1pm, because of when he started serving set lunches that day. Léon too wasn't sure what time Machanaud had called in, but they had the firm sighting from Madame Véillan which would have put Machanaud at Léon's at about 3.15pm. That left almost two hours unaccounted for between 1pm and 3pm.

'Did you go anywhere on the way back to Raulin's?'

'Just to pick up some tobacco, but that's just a few doors from Léon's. It only took minutes.'

'And in all of your travels on that day, did you happen to see a young boy?'

The question threw Machanaud. All of his answers had been carefully thought out to defend their suspicion of him poaching. Why else would the questions be angled so insistently around the two hours he'd been by the river? The continued questioning, the fact that they seemed to be taking the issue so seriously, for the first time started him wondering. 'A boy? What has that got to do with anything?'

'I don't know, you tell us.' Poullain's easy manner, asking questions at a steady pace, suddenly went. 'What time did you meet him - half past one, two o'clock? Where was it you first picked

him up: in the village, or near the lane?'

Machanaud was perplexed. He ruffled his hair uneasily. 'I was at Bar Fontainouille, I had at least two drinks with Henri himself serving at the bar. I couldn't possibly have met anyone then.'

'Except that you left the Fontainouille an hour earlier, at one o'clock. And yes, you went to have lunch with your knapsack. But instead of going to Albrieux' place, you went down to the river by Breuille's land. And on the way there, you met the boy.'

Machanaud blinked nervously and looked down; then across briefly towards Dominic's notes. So they knew he'd been down by the river at Breuille's, probably guessed that he'd

been poaching. But why the insistence about this boy? 'I don't understand why you're asking all this. I don't know anything about a boy.'

'Oh, but I think you do.' Poullain went in for the kill; he leant forward, his body rigid with intent. 'Your account of the entire day is complete fabrication. Not one bit of it is true. The only thing we know for sure is that you were seen at three o'clock by Madame Véillan, coming out of the lane at Breuille's farm.' Poullain's voice was rising feverishly. 'The same place where minutes beforehand a young boy was left for dead with his skull smashed in!'

With a sickening sensation, it suddenly dawned on Machanaud why

Poullain had been asking about the boy. He'd heard about the attack, it was the talk of the village, but there had been no mention of where. 'Are you trying to tell me that this boy was found on the lane to Breuille's farm?'

Machanaud's tone of incredulity only served to anger Poullain deeper. 'You know he was, because that's where you left him - just after you smashed his head in with a rock!'

Machanaud shook his head wildly. 'No! I told you. I had nothing to do with that boy, I never touched him.'

'So are you now trying to say that you were there and saw the boy - but you never touched him.'

Machanaud was confused, his voice

breaking with exasperation. 'No, no. I *never* saw the boy. I know nothing about him. I went from the Fontainouille, a short break for lunch, then straight onto Léon's.'

'Léon doesn't remember seeing you until at least three-fifteen.' It was a bluff, but Poullain was more confident of Madame Véillan's time keeping than Léon's. 'And Henri says that you arrived at eleven and left about one.'

'That's impossible,' Machanaud spluttered desperately. 'I was still at Raulin's until twelve.'

'Raulin says that he didn't see you after eleven, and that's the time he has entered in his book for you finishing that day.'

'There was some extra work on the bottom land. He probably didn't see me there.'

Poullain ignored it. 'Henri knows for sure you left at one o'clock, because that's when he starts preparing lunches. And between then and Madame Véillan seeing you leave the lane - that's almost two hours.' He leant forward until he was close to Machanaud, his tone low and menacing. 'Two hours in which you calmly took your pleasure with this boy, before deciding that you'd have to kill him. What did you do to keep him quiet in the meantime - tie him up?'

Machanaud was cold with fear. He had been shaking his head at Poullain's bombardment, stunned by the sudden turn

around of events; surely they couldn't really believe that *he* had attacked this boy. If it was just a ploy to get him to admit to poaching, they'd succeeded. He was so frightened, he'd run for any sanctuary. 'Okay, I admit it, I was there. But I know nothing about the boy - I was poaching.'

'I see.' Poullain looked down thoughtfully, drawing a deep breath before looking up again. 'And how long were you there?'

'Two hours.'

'And have you been to that stretch of river before?'

'Yes, two or three times, I don't remember exactly.'

'Any particular reason why you favour

there?'

'The fish are no better than elsewhere - but Breuille is away. Less chance of getting caught, and even if I am, he's not around to press charges.' Machanaud risked a hesitant smile.

Poullain considered this for a moment. 'So now you're trying to tell us that all of this morning's subterfuge, all of this lying, was purely to cover up the fact that you were poaching. Even though you know Breuille's away and therefore charges can't be pressed.' Poullain looked disgustedly towards Dominic. He waved one hand dramatically. 'Pah! It is not even remotely believable.'

A swathe of hair had fallen across Machanaud's face. He cut a sad picture;

like a lost and bewildered animal. A lamb to Poullain's slaughter. His eyes darted frantically. 'But Marius Caurin is still around caretaking the land - I even saw him head out at one point on his tractor. He could have seen me.'

'Even if we accept this ridiculous story that you were poaching, you expect us to believe that you spent two hours calmly fishing while a young boy was savagely raped and assaulted not yards away - and you saw absolutely *nothing*.'

Machanaud looked pleadingly towards Dominic, clutching out for any possible support. Dominic looked away and back to his notes. Whatever misgivings Dominic might have with Poullain's interview tactics, it was the

first golden rule: unless a two pronged assault had been previously agreed, the interview witness remained silent. He had already made his thoughts clear to Poullain about suspicion of Machanaud. Any comment about what arose in the interview itself would have to wait till later.

Machanaud was desperate, spluttering, 'The river bank dips down at points. The lane is partly obscured by trees and bushes. Somebody else could have come along without me seeing.'

'Yes, they could. But that same person couldn't possibly have stayed on the lane for all that time without the risk of someone coming along and seeing them. And yet if they hid in the only place

possible - down by the riverbank - you would have seen them. But the real reason that you saw nobody else, is that there was only one person down by the river bank - *you.*'

'No...*no*...'

'...And it was there that you chose as your hiding place, a place you know well from past visits, while you molested the boy. Concealed from anyone passing. Twice you sexually assaulted him; then later, to cover your tracks, afraid that he would talk, you picked up a rock and -'

'*No!*...' Machanaud rose to his feet, slamming one hand on the table. His head had been shaking slowly, his low and repeated groans of 'no' finally rising

to a crescendo.

Poullain let out a final exasperated breath, looking towards Dominic. 'Just take him away, I'm sick of hearing his lies.'

'What do you want me to do with him?'

'Put him in the holding cell for a few hours, let him cool his heels. Perhaps he'll remember something with a bit more sense. We'll decide then if we're going to hold him longer.'

The arrangement was that Duclos meet the man in front of the Fort St Nicolas in Marseille. From there, they could walk across Boulevard Charles Livon and into the Parc du Pharo to discuss their

business. At dusk, the number of park strollers would be thinning out; it should be quite private.

The time and place had been arranged through Vacheret, and the man was known as Chapeau; obviously not his real name. Duclos had already waited ten minutes, gradually becoming more anxious, dwelling stronger on what he was waiting there for. Conscious suddenly of every small sound and movement around: the wind ruffling a flag on the fort, a stray cat tugging at a bag in a nearby bush, the shuffle of people approaching and walking by; uncomfortable if someone looked at him as they passed, catching his eye. For God's sake, hurry up. He couldn't take

much more of this waiting.

While he was distracted for a moment by a coach that had pulled up in front, collecting a stream of tourists shepherded aboard by their guide - a man was suddenly at his side. He seemed to emerge from nowhere among the throng leaving the fort, and Duclos was slightly startled. He hadn't seen him approach.

'Your name is Alain?' the man enquired.

'Yes.'

'We have some business to discuss, I believe.'

Duclos merely nodded. It was obviously Chapeau. There was something familiar about him, but

Duclos wasn't totally sure. 'Were you across the road a moment ago, looking over?'

'Yes I was.' Chapeau didn't offer to explain why, which unsettled Duclos further. They walked in silence towards the park. Duclos took the opportunity to study him closer. No more than thirty, skin quite dark, tight knit curly dark hair, heavy set and jowly; probably Corsican judging by the accent, Duclos guessed. One eye was slightly bloodshot and yellowed in the corner, as if he'd been hit close to it. Or perhaps it was a permanent ailment. The nickname intrigued Duclos; the man wasn't wearing a hat.

'What is it your friend wants done?'

asked Chapeau.

At the mention of friend, Duclos was wary just how much had already been discussed. 'What did Vacheret tell you? Did he explain the problem and what needed to be done?'

'No. Just that you had a friend with a problem, nothing more. You know what Vacheret is like, afraid of his own shadow. Doesn't like to get involved.'

Duclos grimaced weakly. Good. He had spun a story to Vacharet of a married friend who played both sides getting into trouble with a rent boy and his pimp. The pimp was threatening blackmail by informing his friend's wife. Some muscle was required to warn him off. Duclos knew that Vacharet had

milieu contacts and would be able to recommend someone. The pimp was streetwise, so it should also be someone with a reasonable reputation, perhaps a few hits to his credit, otherwise the warning would carry no weight. Thankfully, Vacharet had been worried about complicity, didn't want to know too many details. *'I'll just give you a number, the rest is up to you.'* For the same reason, Vacharet had obviously said little to Chapeau. Even if he had, Duclos would have covered by claiming that for obvious reasons he hadn't wanted Vacharet to know all the details. Now none of that was necessary, except to maintain the subterfuge that the boy who was laying in hospital in Aix-en-

Provence was a rent boy, and that his friend was responsible for the attack.

'Why did your friend attack him in the first place? Chapeau asked.

'Blackmail. My friend is married; this is one of his little indulgences on the side that he tells me he's only done a few times and was trying to get over. But this time he got caught out - the boy was threatening to tell.'

'And your friend didn't finish the boy off?'

'No.'

Chapeau pondered over this information. 'So now he's afraid the boy will wake up and tell?'

Duclos nodded. They'd walked almost two hundred metres into the park. A few

evening strollers passed, staccato breaks in a conversation they were both being careful to keep out of anyone else's earshot. At times, the pauses were unsettling; Chapeau left long gaps after people had passed.

'Why the hospital at Aix?' Chapeau asked.

'They were driving out of Marseille into the country, and they got into an argument. It just happened that Aix was the nearest town - so the boy was taken to the main hospital on Avenue Tamaris.'

'What's the boy's name?'

'Javi. But it's just a nickname. I don't think he knows the boy's real name.'

'And has he known him long?'

'I don't think so. Just a few months, at

most.'

Another silence. Something didn't add up, thought Chapeau. Though he thought he knew what was wrong. As usual, Vacheret had been tight lipped, except on one simple question: how was this Alain known to him? A client. For the girls or boys? Boys! And now Alain was talking about problems with a rent boy and a friend. It could be just a case of all gay boys together, but it was too much of a coincidence for comfort. Chapeau was sure the friend was pure invention - it was this Alain himself who had the problem with the boy and now wanted him killed. But there was no point in confronting him and possibly frightening off a good paying client. More fun to

see, if pushed, if he still clung to the story. 'Your friend likes fucking young boys, does he? What's wrong - can't he get it up for his wife anymore?'

'I don't know, you'd have to ask him yourself.' The irritation in Duclos' voice was barely concealed. He bit back, hoping to pique Chapeau a little. 'How did you get the nickname? I don't see a hat.'

'No that's true, you don't.' Chapeau smiled wryly, as if he was about to elaborate then suddenly decided against it. They walked in silence for a second. Chapeau let out a long breath. 'Hospitals are risky. It's going to cost extra - seven thousand francs.'

Duclos went pale. Even at what

Vacheret had estimated, 5,000 - 6,000 francs, it had been a fortune: over half a year's salary and a third of his savings. Now it was going to cost more. 'I'm not sure if my friend can afford that. He was expecting it to be less.'

'There's people around in a hospital, more risk of being seen, some sort of diversion will probably have to be created. I'll have to visit at least once beforehand to work out what that diversion might be. It's not worth doing under seven thousand.'

'But the boy's half dead already. All you have to do is sneak in and cut off his life support, or put a hand over his mouth. My friend even knows the room he's in and the layout.'

Chapeau's brow furrowed. 'So your friend has actually been there?'

Duclos faltered, looking away for a second as a young couple passed. The memories of the day before came flooding back. He'd known from the outset that it would be hard to skirt around the issue; it was vital to pass on detailed information so that Chapeau didn't start phoning the hospital. The only way his imaginary friend would know that information was if he'd actually been in the room. 'Yes - at first he thought he might be able to deal with the problem himself.'

'How close did he get?'

Heartbeats. The nightmare was still vivid. The sound of his own heartbeat

and pulse almost in time with the bleep from the life support machine. Stepping closer... reaching out. *Sounds in the corridor. A moment's pause as he went to put his hand over the boy's mouth. Voices outside getting closer, more prominent.* '...He was actually inside the room when he got disturbed.'

Chapeau's tone was slightly incredulous. 'What? Your friend gets a second chance at it - and still he can't manage to finish the boy off?'

Fighting to control the trembling as his hand closed in, feeling for a second the boy's shallow breath on his palm. Warm vapour, cool against his sweat. Indecision. Then quickly retracted... sudden panic as he heard voices almost

upon him... 'I told you, he was disturbed. What else could he do?' Duclos stammered.

'I don't know. You tell me.' Chapeau half smiled. 'Sounds to me as if your friend's a bit of a gutless shit.'

Duclos didn't answer, turned away, biting at his lip. Coming out of the room, the worst part had been realizing that the people outside had already passed; he could have stayed a moment longer. He even thought for a moment of going back inside - but his nerve had gone. He had been close, *so close*.

Chapeau savoured his discomfort for a moment before commenting more philosophically, 'Still, I suppose if it wasn't for friends like that, there'd be no

need for people like me. Shall we conclude matters?'

It took another ten minutes for them to run through the other details: room number, position and floor, best timing, payment arrangements. Chapeau took the point of the urgency of the situation; at any moment the boy could wake up. He would try and make a reconnaissance of the hospital, work out a diversion and hopefully execute the plan all in the same day: tomorrow.

They were coming to a point in the park where both the marina and the old harbour could be viewed: a succession of white masts speared the skyline, stretching back towards the town. Again it reminded Duclos that this was his

holiday; he should have been out sailing on the Vallon's Jonquet '42, the wind in his hair, then afterwards grilled sea bream or swordfish washed down with a glass of chilled white wine in a cafe overlooking the old harbour. Instead he was negotiating murder and being taunted by this Neanderthal prick, who was also going to take almost half his savings for the privilege. But hopefully the whole sad saga would soon be over. That was what he was paying for. The thought of the freedom ahead, of not having to go through this nightmare again, made it all worthwhile. Means to an end. He took a deep, refreshing breath of the salty air of the harbour.

As they concluded, Duclos asked how

the boy was going to be killed, but Chapeau said that he wouldn't know till after the first visit. Chapeau had given nothing away. Twenty minutes of conversation and Duclos knew nothing about the man; he was still the same shadowy figure as when they'd entered the park.

Chapeau asked if he was heading back towards the fort, but Duclos said he wanted to enjoy the last rays of sunset over the harbour. Truth was, he couldn't bear to stay in Chapeau's company a moment longer. The man made his skin crawl. Duclos found a bench near the apex of the harbour walk as Chapeau headed back. A part of him felt relieved at the action he'd taken, but yet another

felt strangely uneasy.

Had Chapeau suspected him of lying? He'd kept everything as remote as possible: the friend, a disagreement with a rent boy, the nickname. It was unlikely Chapeau would tie anything in with the recent newspaper article, even if he had seen it. And with the depth of detail provided about the room's position and best timing, he doubted Chapeau would call the hospital. Surely it was unlikely that all his precautions would collapse? The thought of what Chapeau might do in response sent a shiver through his body.

Duclos looked away from the harbour view for a moment, watching Chapeau's figure as it receded into the distance, faintly silhouetted against the dying light.

And for a while his strong will to believe he'd taken the right action fought hard against the fear of what new horrors he might have introduced.

Dominic was called to the teleprinter as soon as the message came through. It was from the gendarmerie in South Limoges, and read:

Your enquiry regarding Alain Lucien Duclos. Not at the Limoges address you supplied from vehicle registration. However, Monsieur Duclos is known to us. He is an Assistant Prosecutor attached to the main Cour d'Assises in Limoges. According to work colleagues, he is currently holidaying

with friends at the Vallon estate near Cotignac, Provence. Trust this is helpful.

*- Head of
Station, Captain Rabellienne*

Dominic ripped the message from the printer. The corridor and reception was busy, and he found Poullain in the back mess room having coffee with Harrault. He handed the message across and waited a moment as Poullain read it.

'Do you want me to make initial enquiries?' Dominic asked.

Poullain was hesitant as he lifted his attention from the message. 'No, no - it's okay. I think I'd better phone first - then

we'll probably go out there together.' It looked like a waste of time, a complete mis-match, thought Poullain. An Assistant Prosecutor staying with one of the area's largest landowners and more highly regarded citizens: Marcel Vallon. It would need personal kid glove treatment; Vallon was good friends with the Mayor, they played golf together and belonged to the same Masonic lodge. Poullain looked at his watch. They had a meeting about the Rosselot case scheduled for late afternoon with Bouteille, the Prosecutor in Aix en Provence. 'If we can see this Duclos late morning or lunch time, since we have to pass through here again on our way to Aix, do you think you could have the

notes typed up and put in some semblance of order before tomorrow's meeting?'

'Yes, I think so.' Dominic faltered only for a second; another lunch time with a rushed sandwich.

'Good. Let's plan for then. I'll phone within half an hour. Anything new from Machanaud?'

'No, not really. Apart from the car sighting he mentioned. As you requested, we got him to sign the forms and hand over his identity card, then let him go just before eleven last night.'

Without sufficient evidence to hold Machanaud, it was all they'd been able to do: a standard '*local police to be notified if moving*' form, and holding his

identity card. Without it, new housing, jobs or any form of social registration for Machanaud would be practically impossible.

Poullain had already half discounted the car sighting. It had been so vague: a dark car, perhaps blue or dark grey, sloping at the back, possibly a Citrëon DS. When pressed, Machanaud admitted he'd only caught a quick flash of it between the bushes - but what he was sure of was that it had left only minutes before him. How convenient? Machanaud knew that if he didn't come up with another possible scapegoat things were looking grim for him, and after a couple of hours alone in the jail cell, he came up with one. *Quelle*

surprise.

Poullain glanced again at the brief message. It looked like it would come to nothing, but you never knew. If nothing else, it would at least demonstrate they were being thorough and exploring all options. A bit of dressing for when they laid Machanaud's head on a plate for Bouteille and Naugier.

TEN

The car tyres of the Citroën DS19 crunched on the gravel driveway. The front of the building was an imposing but flat three story Provençal masse, its line broken only by frequent window boxes and a long terrace at one end running above the garage. A row of neatly manicured cypress firs framed the semi-circular sweep of the driveway, with two smaller trees in large pots each side of the entrance.

Vallon's servant came out to greet them and showed them through the

house, along a wide main hallway then into a narrower corridor towards the door at its end: the library. Marcel Vallon was nowhere to be seen. He'd ascertained on the phone with Poullain that his presence wouldn't be required. While Poullain had assured him that it was nothing too serious, something just to help with their other enquiries, Vallon had made it patently clear their visit was an intrusion, a favour granted only by his good nature. Don't take advantage, was the silent undertone. Poullain was therefore already nervous about the visit, complaining on the drive over that it would be a waste of time, would serve no purpose other than to upset Vallon. He'd probably get a call from the Mayor

in a day or so.

While they waited in the library, Dominic could sense Poullain's unease returning. Poullain had taken one of three seats by a low round coffee table, while Dominic sat at a small drop leaf desk by the window. A room four metres long and three wide, two walls were lined with books, the atmosphere austere, stuffy. This was old Provence, old money and power. A gentle reminder. They waited almost five minutes before Duclos walked into the room.

A taut smile upon introduction to Poullain, a brief nod towards Dominic. He was only slightly taller than Poullain, and slim, Dominic noted: short dark black hair swept neatly across, a

rounded, almost baby face, eyes so dark green they were almost black. Some women liked that sort of soft, innocent look, thought Dominic; someone to mother. But he couldn't help thinking that some men liked it too.

Poullain started with the niceties of thanking Duclos for seeing them at such short notice and apologizing for the intrusion; it was just a general enquiry regarding visitors to Taragnon five days ago, on the eighteenth. A young boy had been attacked then. No attempt at subterfuge, Dominic noted; no trap for Duclos by drawing him out before mentioning the main purpose of their visit.

'We are as a result talking to anyone

in the area at the time for information. Your car was seen at the Café Font-du-Roux during lunch time that day. I wondered, Monsieur Duclos, do you remember your movements then, last Thursday, particularly before and after your visit to the Font-du-Roux?'

A moment's thought from Duclos, a slow blink. 'Well, I remember stopping at the café. I'd been to Aix-en-Provence for the morning and was on my way back. What exactly did you want to know?'

'Let's start with the time you arrived at the café, if you remember.'

Duclos looked down, feigning deep thought. A hundred times over he'd worked out his timing and what he'd say

if questioned; but coming straight out with it would seem unnatural, pre-prepared. How much hesitance was normal to recall something that happened five days ago? 'It would have been quite late in the lunch period, one thirty, maybe quarter to two. I remember stopping because I knew I wouldn't make it back for normal lunch time here at the estate, and the chef Maurice can be quite strict. He doesn't like preparing separately for late-comers.' Duclos forced a smile. 'Yes, it would have been about then.'

'And did you stay long?'

'Maybe an hour or so. Service was a bit slow when I arrived, they were quite busy. And I had coffee and brandy to

finish.'

'So, you left at what - half past two or so?'

'No, it was closer to three when I asked for the bill. I remember looking at my watch then, because I'd planned to head to Juan les Pins for the afternoon and started to get a bit anxious about being too late. Perhaps five minutes to settle the bill, so about three when I left.'

'Had you arranged to meet someone in Juan les Pins?'

'Nothing particular planned. But I'd seen someone on the beach the day before that I hoped to bump into again. A girl. So I wanted to be there more or less at the same time.'

Poullain looked towards Dominic.

'For our notes, then: you arrived at Café Font-du-Roux at a quarter to two and left at three. More or less.'

'Yes, I suppose it must have been closer to a quarter-to when I arrived. I don't think I stayed as long as an hour and a half.'

A moment's silence. The sound of Dominic's pen scratching on paper. Some distant splashing from the swimming pool in the rear garden and courtyard, which Dominic could just see at an angle if he looked through the window at his side.

Duclos' heart pounded. The timing was etched on his mind: *arrived at 1.38, left at 2.51, three minutes drive to the farm lane, eight minutes off the road*

*with the boy, heading off again at 3.02. Hopefully he'd buried the eleven minutes without them noticing. Surely the barman wouldn't remember the *exact* time he left? He fought to control his nerves; it was vital he appeared calm.*

'And after the café, did you head straight for Juan les Pins?' Poullain asked.

'Yes.'

'Did you stop anywhere or see anyone on the way?'

'No.' A moment's afterthought: 'Oh, except I stopped off at a garage near Le Muy, filled up with petrol, had an oil check.' *Speeds of 110-140 kmph nearly all the way to hopefully bury the eight minutes he'd been off the road with the*

boy.

'Do you remember the name of the garage?'

'No. It was a few kilometres before Le Muy, on the right.' It was the only garage for fifteen kilometres, thought Duclos; they were bound to find it if they bothered to check.

'And what time did you get to Juan les Pins?'

'About a quarter to five, maybe five. I don't remember exactly.' Duclos felt small beads of sweat pop on his forehead, but then it was quite hot in the room. *Pulse racing, palms clammy as he'd stopped by a bin in a deserted alley at the back of town, pushing deep inside the rock and the boy's shirt*

wrapped in a large rag from the car.

'In Juan les Pins, did you go anywhere in particular, perhaps meet the girl you'd hoped to?'

'No, she didn't show. But the café I went to on the beach is one I've been to a few times before. Claude Vallon and I had lunch there just a week ago. The owner knows us.' *If the garage didn't remember him stopping, he was sure at least the café owner would.* Inside his nerves were racing, but it was hopefully going well: pauses at the right juncture, the afterthought of the garage, remembering the timing of leaving the Taragnon café but guessing at the arrival time: accurate details, but not too glib too quickly. Though now he sensed, as

the questions became more direct and personal, that perhaps he was being too compliant. 'But what has my visit to Juan les Pins got to do with this? I thought you were interested in events around Taragnon and the Font-du-Roux?'

Quick retreat and apology from Poullain. 'Yes, yes - I'm sorry. We just need to ascertain people's general movements. We're quite happy to accept that you were not in Taragnon later on. So, earlier, on the way *into* Taragnon, did you see or meet anyone?'

A barely perceptible flinch from Duclos. Poullain didn't notice it, only Dominic; though it could have been the sudden jump in timing and mood, from hours after the event to before, defensive

to offensive. 'Such as this young boy? No, I'm afraid not,' said Duclos. *The final masterstroke to throw forensics: inserting a finger in the boy's rectum and working it brusquely around. Hopefully interpreted as a second attack.* 'There were people walking about in the main street of Taragnon, but I don't remember anyone in particular.'

'You stopped nowhere in or near Taragnon except the café?'

'No.' *The bottle taken from the café. Stripping down to his underpants before striking the boy with the rock. Then washing down with the bottled water and dressing again. No bloodstains.*

Poullain waited for Dominic's note

taking to catch up with them, using the gap to collect his thoughts. Then he re-capped on a few points, mainly clarifying times. At one point, he asked Dominic, 'What time do you have noted for the time that Monsieur Duclos arrived at Juan les Pins?'

'Five or a quarter to.' Dominic was sure Poullain remembered the time; normally statement re-caps were purely to see if the suspect said something different second time around.

'And the time you stopped at the garage, Monsieur Duclos?' asked Poullain. 'I don't believe we covered that before.'

Duclos shrugged slightly. 'I don't know, what is it? Just over halfway

there. About four o'clock, I suppose.'

Poullain nodded slowly, as if still pre-occupied with all the prior information. Then he suddenly went off at a tangent. 'Do you visit your friends here, the Vallons very often?'

'At least once a year. Nearly always in the summer months. Claude Vallon and I went to the same university, Bordeaux.' A slight frown from Duclos. 'Why do you ask?'

Poullain shook his head hastily. 'No particular reason. It's just that your car was reported in response to our request for any strangers to the area - when in fact it appears you're almost an honorary local.' Poullain grimaced weakly. He could hardly admit that he wanted to

know the strength of association between Duclos and the Vallons in case of later problems with his own Mayor. He sighed faintly, bracing his hands on his thighs with an audible slap. 'Well, I think that's just about it, Monsieur Duclos. Thank you for your time.' Poullain stood up, nodded curtly, and shook hands with Duclos. Heading for the door, he turned. 'Oh, I forgot. One thing I meant to ask. You mentioned that when you went through Taragnon, you were on your way from Aix-en-Provence. What time did you leave there?'

Duclos' hammering nerves had settled slightly with the questioning trailing off, but his keen prosecutor's nose made him suddenly alert again. The throw away

question; he'd seen them so often catch defendant's out. *The boy's stark green eyes struggling to look back at him as he pushed his face flat down to the earth, raising one arm with the rock...* 'Twelve-fifteenish, I suppose. It was just a quick shopping trip. I was there probably no more than an hour and a half.'

'Pick up anything interesting?'

'There's a cheese shop and delicatessen I always visit, on Rue Clemenceau. While there I picked up a few other bits and pieces, some olives and pistachios, some aged brandy to take back for my uncle.'

Poullain nodded and smiled. 'Once again, thank you, Monsieur Duclos. And

sorry for the intrusion.'

Started with an apology and finished with one, thought Dominic. No surprise tactics, no ambush; the nature of their enquiry explained clearly. Quite a contrast to the tactics used with Machanaud. The only thing Poullain had pushed for was trying to get Duclos to say he'd left the restaurant half an hour earlier. The vital half hour in which the boy was attacked. Perhaps Poullain was going to wait until they'd checked some of the details from Duclos, then hit him harder on a second interview.

They were led out to the main hallway by Duclos, then the servant re-appeared from the adjoining drawing room and took over.

Duclos went into the drawing room and watched through the window as they crossed the gravel driveway. Overall, he'd been quite convincing, he thought. Controlled his nerves well. Poullain had been easy to handle, had accepted his account of events readily, was almost apologetic; a true system man, obviously daunted by the association with Vallon. The younger one had looked more surly and doubting, but had stayed silently in the background. A junior with no real power, he would present no problem. There was only one thing left to worry about, but hopefully Chapeau would be visiting the hospital soon, if he hadn't already done so. *Screaming, pistoning crescendo, hot white light stabbing his*

mind as he brought the rock down repeatedly... the tinkle of goat's bells from the next field barely breaking through his frenzy and the gentle sough of wind through the trees...

A slow exhalation of breath; sudden relief and letting loose the overflow of built up tension. But deep in his stomach the butterfly contortions he'd been fighting to control the past hour finally got the better of him. He headed for the bathroom to be sick.

Chapeau visited the hospital twice within three hours before a plan started to formulate, the time in between filled in with a leisurely lunch and an afternoon stroll along Aix's Cours

Mirabeau.

The hat he wore was a non-descript brown trilby; a habit acquired from a spell working as a bouncer in a Marseille night club, *Borsalino's*, where he had to wear a bright, wide brimmed trilby. The hat was a distraction, it covered his tight knit curly hair and could be tilted to shade his discoloured eye; it could only be noticed up close, but it was a strong distinguishing feature. He always wore a hat while working, never when not.

On the first visit, he'd walked along the second floor corridor twice, then sat on a bench at its end for a while, watching the movements of people back and forth. From viewing a hospital

porter a few doors down from 4A exit laden with towels, he guessed it was a store room. He didn't notice the porter open or lock the door, so Chapeau waited for a quiet moment when the corridor was empty, then went to check: eight foot long by three foot wide, one side was stacked with linen, towels, cotton swabs, a bucket with mop in the corner, floor cleaner and bleach. No uniforms.

The room gave him an idea, the rest of it slotting into place over lunch. He would have to get a uniform, lighter fluid and a syringe. He returned to walk the corridor again, re-checking positions between the store room and 4A, distance from the fire alarm and the main wards.

Then he sat down on the bench again, one last run through of the plan in his mind.

He looked up; the door to room 4A had clicked open. He watched a woman walk out, long dark hair in ringlets, pale beige dress.

As she lifted her eyes towards him, he leant forwards, resting his elbows on his knees while he contemplated his shoes. All she would see was an apparently concerned trilby, waiting for news from one of the nearby rooms. As she went from view, he headed for the stairs and made his exit.

When they'd gone through best timing, Alain had mentioned that his friend had seen a woman visiting the room -

probably a girlfriend or relative of the boy's pimp. Quite a beauty, thought Chapeau; at least partly Arab, but dressed simply and understated, not the gold hoop earrings, heavy make up and high heels of a pimp's girlfriend. So, she was just a 'friend', though probably her main role was as caretaker and guardian for his various boys, as many as twelve or fifteen under the same roof, a surrogate 'aunty'. With pimps mostly male, women invariably took care of the domestics: cooking, cleaning, shopping.

Over the next few hours he visited three shops in Marseille specializing in hotel and industrial uniforms before finding one close to that of the porters at the hospital. Lighter fluid he picked up at

a nearby tobacco shop, the syringe at a pharmacy.

Now, sitting at a *Panier* bar, he sipped at a brandy and ran through again the projected sequence in his mind.

The only thing still to decide was whether he went back that night or waited till the next morning.

Dominic headed out straight after their meeting with Pierre Bouteille, with Poullain suddenly eager to progress the next stage: alibi verification for *all* possible suspects, not just Machanaud.

He made it to the garage near Le Muy by 7.54pm, then made the deduction from the time he passed Café Font du

Roux: 68 minutes. That meant that if Duclos had left the café at just after three, he would have been at the garage by 4.08 - 4.10 pm.

The garage attendant remembered Duclos car, not only because of the rarity of Giulietta Sprints, but because Duclos had asked for an oil change and whether he might make it to Juan-les-Pins by four thirty. 'Impossible. I told him it would take at least forty minutes - he'd be lucky to make it by four fifty. So it must have been about five past four then.'

Dominic asked if he'd noticed anything unusual, any bloodstains or clothing in disarray - but no on each. Dominic headed off on his bike for Juan-

les-Pins.

The attendant was right. The road was winding for part of the route and it took him 48 minutes. He parked close to the sea front and walked along the promenade, past the pavement artists and makeshift souvenir stands. The promenade was raised so that he was looking over the rooftops of the bars and restaurants tucked in below at beach level.

As Dominic came to the third set of steps leading down, he saw the sign for the *Rififi* to the left. Part bar, part restaurant, at nearly 9 o'clock it was busy with diners. The evening air was still hot, so stepping off the bike he'd taken off his leather jacket. Underneath

was his white epaulette shirt, and he put his gendarme cap back on. A waiter asked how he could help or did *Monsieur* wish to dine?

Dominic explained the purpose of his visit and was shown to the bar to await the owner, a short, stocky man with bushy grey hair in his early fifties who introduced himself as Pierre Malgarin. He looked slightly flustered at the interruption during the busy dining period.

Dominic explained the background and confirmed that Malgarin knew the Vallons. 'Apparently, they dined here about what, twelve days ago or so?'

'About that, yes.'

'Claude Vallon, the son, had a friend

with him - an Alain Duclos. Mid twenties, slim, black hair. Did he come in here about six days ago on his own? It would have been late afternoon, about five o'clock.'

'I don't know. I'm not usually here then, I come in lunch times and evenings. But possibly my head waiter will know.' Malgarin beckoned the waiter who had shown Dominic to the bar. As Malgarin repeated the question, the waiter nodded.

'Young friend of the Vallons. Yes, I remember him coming in for about half an hour or so five or six days ago.'

'Do you remember what time it was?'

'Not really. Just that it was well after lunch time, because we'd cleared up by

then. But for all I remember, it could have been any time between four and six-thirty. Maybe Gilbert will know.' He leant across and involved the barman in the conversation, but the barman shrugged.

'I don't remember exactly. Only what he drank - Campari and lemon. And he asked me if I'd seen a girl: long dark hair, Italian looking, early twenties. She was wearing an orange bikini when he'd seen her on the beach the day before. We get so many girls, I told him, it was hard to place one just like that. I couldn't remember her.'

'Did he call into the bar the day before when he saw the girl for the first time?'

'No. Or at least I don't remember

seeing him. Perhaps he saw her from the promenade or from one of the adjoining bars.'

'Anything unusual about his dress or his manner?'

'No. Not really. Just that he seemed bothered that he might not see her.'

Dominic couldn't think of any more immediate questions. In the conversation lull, the waiter excused himself. The owner asked, 'Has that been useful? Would you like to stay for a quick drink - on the house?'

Dominic was about to decline, then ordered a beer on an afterthought and offered his thanks. Perhaps one of them might remember something else while he waited. He was close to the end of the

bar, with only three lines of tables between there and the beach edge. Two sets of large glass windows had been drawn back so that the front of the bar was mostly open onto the beach.

Dominic sipped at his beer. The sound of gently lapping surf wafted in above the babble of voices and clatter of cutlery. Deep into the bay, Dominic could see the lights of four or five fishing boats; and behind him, from an open air restaurant with a live group by the town square, drifted '*Quando caliente el sol...*'

A sordid investigation with a young boy sexually assaulted and battered? It seemed a million miles from this. Could Duclos really have battered the boy half

to death, then come down here and calmly sipped at Campari and lemon while looking for this girl, *if* she existed? Where had he seen her from the day before? It struck Dominic as a rather convenient underlining of heterosexuality. And if Duclos had been so worried he might miss her, why stop for an oil change and to confirm the time? What was more important: that the attendant remembered him, or to get to see the girl on time?

But despite the inconsistencies, *time* would be the deciding factor. And there simply was not enough of it for Duclos to have committed the crime. Even at excessive speeds, he might have had ten or fifteen spare minutes at most. The

minimum estimate covering both attacks was forty minutes. Given the background of his debates with Poullain over Machanaud, even mentioning the inconsistencies would be seen by Poullain as obstructive and pointless unless something new came up about Duclos' timing. Dominic wished now he hadn't made the trip; he felt deflated. He had set out in hope of deflecting Poullain's one track case against Machanaud, and instead would be returning with information which would help to further seal his fate.

Chapeau poured the lighter fluid generously on the cotton sheet, then bundled it into the corner with some

other sheets and thick towels.

He listened for a second to sounds outside on the corridor: nothing audible. It was important that nobody saw him come out of the small store room. Once the sheets were lit, there was no turning back, he would have to exit immediately. The small room would fill with smoke in seconds.

He lit the sheet and stepped back hastily as the flames leapt. He watched for only a second to ensure the sheets beneath had caught - then exited. The corridor was empty, and he headed past room 4A towards where the corridor angled off at an L, at the end of which was the fire alarm. A few paces past 4A he heard footsteps close to the top of the

stairs. He'd been lucky; two seconds more and he'd have been trapped inside the store room. But it was important also that he wasn't seen rushing away from the store room, and he picked up pace - only just making it behind the angle of the L before they reached the top of the stairs.

The corridor ahead was twenty-five yards long with two doors at its end, three on its right flank and one on the left past a window. The fire alarm was close to the end, just before the two final doors.

Suddenly, the middle of the three doors on his right opened. A doctor stepped out.

Merde! From the sound of their

footsteps, the people who had come up the stairs were also heading in his direction, just about to turn into the corridor. But there were no cries of alarm, obviously the smoke hadn't yet started seeping through the door.

Noticing Chapeau hesitate and look around as if he was lost for a moment, the doctor asked, 'Looking for someone?'

'Dr Durrand,' Chapeau answered, hastily recalling a name he'd seen on the resident doctors list by the reception. Chapeau fought to control his agitation, appear calm.

'You won't find him up here, I don't think. First floor, optimology.'

The two people, an elderly couple heading for a door at the end, passed

them. His porter's uniform shouldn't raise suspicions; it was an almost exact match. *Optimology*? His mind spun, panning frantically for options. His eyes fixed on the number of the furthest door. 'I've just come from optimology, and they said I might find him in 6C.'

'What's the patient's name?'

'They didn't say.'

The doctor shrugged. 'There's nobody in 6C right now. New patient isn't coming in till tonight, and the old patient was moved back to the general ward yesterday.'

'Okay. I'll try there.' Chapeau headed back the way he'd come. Pacing, calming his breath. He silently cursed: crucial seconds had been lost, and the doctor

might later remember him. Behind him, at the end of the corridor, the couple had already disappeared. *Calming*. The sound of the doctor's footsteps receded beyond his own rapid, shallow breaths. But ahead now, at the angle of the L, he could see the first trails of smoke drifting across, misty grey suffused with stark sunlight from the window. And he begged that the doctor didn't turn around suddenly and see it. He listened intently to the sounds of the doctor's fading footsteps between his own, a faint shuffle, a door opening... slowly closing. All too slowly.

Chapeau let out a long breath as it finally shut, then ran the last few steps towards the smoke. A nurse had come

out from the general ward at the far end, looking equally startled as she noticed the smoke. Chapeau lifted one arm in acknowledgement and ran back towards the alarm. Halfway along, he heard the plaintive cry of '*Fire!...*' from the nurse.

He took the small brass hammer on a chain at the side of the alarm and swung it sharply, smashing the glass and releasing the alarm button.

The bell was deafening, echoing from the stark walls and floor. Chapeau ran back swiftly towards the smoke and room 4A. He heard a door open behind him, some muttering, a sudden startled voice - but he didn't look back. As he turned the L and came back into the main corridor, five or six people had come

out of their rooms.

'Is it another fire drill?' someone asked.

Faint babble of replies, more startled voices rising above, the final realization - as the build up of smoke became evident - that this was the real thing. Sudden mobilization, more people starting to spill out of the rooms, most of them from the large general ward at the end. Some were now heading for the stairs and the five or six quickly grew to over twenty. Panic, confusion.

Chapeau suddenly felt more secure among the milling crowd; hardly anyone was paying him any attention. He took the syringe from his pocket. The needle was already attached, and he slipped off

the plastic protection cap. Room 4A was only a few yards to one side. He tucked the syringe neatly up inside his sleeve, and reached out for the door.

A quick intake of breath, but he felt confident. His adrenaline was racing because of the fire and activity around, not nerves. The scenario was perfect. It would all be over within a minute.

It didn't strike him as odd that he'd seen nobody run from 4A until he opened the door wide. No nurse or doctor, nobody in attendance. A split second elation that he'd been lucky and chosen a totally un-guarded moment before realizing - as he looked through the glass screen - that there was no boy either.

'Shit... *Shiiit!*' He stood transfixed, staring at the empty space. Around him, pandemonium was building. He was the only person on the second floor not in motion. A steady stream was now heading for the stairs, and a medic with a fire extinguisher was spraying the inside of the store room while a porter rushed for another extinguisher.

It took a moment for Chapeau to break himself out of his trance and ask someone passing where the boy had gone. He'd stopped three nurses before finding someone who knew. 'He was taken into the operating theatre over an hour ago.'

'Thanks.' Chapeau merged with the throng heading down the stairs. The

porter had joined the medic with a second fire extinguisher. They would probably have the fire out within a few minutes.

In the first floor operating theatre, the alarm bell rang ominously in the background. The Chief Surgeon, Dr Trichot, asked one of the nurses to find out what was wrong.

She came back in after a moment.
'Fire on the second floor, apparently.'

'Is it confined to there?'

'I don't know, I didn't ask.'

Trichot nodded for his assisting nurse to dab his forehead, and silently cursed.
'Let's assume that there's no immediate danger, or at least someone will come

running in when there is, and continue.
Please!

The assisting nurse took the scalpel from him as he held it out tersely. She thrust a self-retaining retractor into the same hand.

The boy, Christian Rosselot, had been on the operating table over thirty minutes now, but they'd lost vital time getting X-rays and angiograms and preparing for anaesthetic. In that time, the temporal skull section by the boy's ear had bulged alarmingly with an active clot.

But two nights ago he'd operated on the boy for a similar clot in the parietal lobe, snatched him within minutes from the jaws of death - and he was determined not to be defeated now. Fire

or no fire. The clanging bell was infuriating, grating at his nerves. It couldn't have come at a worse time. He needed all his concentration at this point. Implements were placed in his hand and taken back without him looking up, the last an electric burr drill. Its high pitched drone lowered as Trichot cut into the bone of the skull.

The extradural cortex was exposed. There was no sign of haematoma, and Trichot began to worry. He would have to go deeper. 'We must go into the subdural.'

Partly gelateneous, Trichot sliced through the dura easily with the scalpel, pulled back with a hook and prompted his assistant to shine a penlight into the

aperture.

Grey and white tissue and vessels reflected brightly under the light; the dark matter of the blood clot only showed up as Trichot widened the arc of the penlight. It was in the upper portion of the temporal. He wouldn't be able to judge its size or remove all of it without a larger incision.

A nod, a dab. Trichot passed back the penlight. 'I'll have to go higher.'

The attending anaesthetist announced, 'Pulse rate sixty to sixty-five,' as the sound of the drill cut in again.

From seventy, seventy-five just a few minutes ago, thought Trichot. He looked across briefly at the blood pressure gauge. It had dropped 20 points to 116

over 67 in the same period. The burr hole made, he started sawing across, joining the two. The bleep rate dropped still further.

‘Fifty-four, fifty-one.’ Now with a note of urgency.

Trichot was sweating profusely. Another dab. It was going to be a race against time. Another ten seconds of sawing, fifteen or twenty seconds to cut through the dura and widen the aperture. Then the time needed to suck away the clot itself would depend on how large it was. How much more would the pulse have dropped by then?

Trichot finished sawing, and pulled back with the hook. All but a small portion of the clot was now visible. The

air pressure sucker was passed across.

'Forty-five....three... dropping fast!
Forty!'

Trichot felt a twinge of panic. Once the pulse rate fell to thirty, thirty-two, it was effectively all over. He'd fought too hard for the boy to let him go now.

The air sucker ate into the congealed dark red mass of the clot. Within twenty seconds, Trichot had removed almost a third of it.

'.... Thirty-eight... *seven.*'

The rate of pulse drop had slowed, but part of the clot was still out of sight. Trichot glanced at the blood pressure gauge: 104 over 61. It was going to be a close call. If the rupture was behind the last portion of the clot; if it was difficult

to reach to cauterize; if the pulse rate dropped more rapidly; if there was more than one rupture. Any one factor meant that he wouldn't make it in time. Beads of sweat massed on his forehead, and his own pulse drummed a double beat to the bleep from the monitor. Trichot moved his way upward with the sucker, praying that the ruptured vessel would soon come into view.

'Thirty-six... *thirty-five!*'

Outside, the alarm bell suddenly stopped ringing. Only the sound of the bleep remained, slowly counting down the seconds Trichot had left to save his patient's life.

Chapeau found a bar three blocks from

the hospital and sat over a Pernod while he pondered what to do. How long would the boy be in the operating theatre: two hours, three? Probably he would be returned to the same intensive care room, but then what? He couldn't use the same fire distraction again, he would have to think of something else.

Nothing came to mind quickly, and Chapeau sharply knocked back another slug of Pernod. He should have made the hit the night before rather than wait till the morning. His best shot had probably now gone; he was going to be hard pushed to come up with an alternative plan that would be so effective and carry such low risk. Worse still, if the boy died on the operating table, there would

be no more chances. He finished his drink, paid, and headed out. He needed a walk to clear his mind.

Early morning, nine-forty, the streets of Aix were coming to life. But Chapeau was in his own world, oblivious to passers-by: planning, scheming, weighing options. He'd walked for almost twenty minutes, blindly window shopping between his thoughts, when a smile slowly crossed his face. It was cheeky and audacious, but why not? He'd always liked a gamble, and the prospect of shafting that little paedophile prick, Alain, somehow appealed to him. He thought it through once more for possible pitfalls, but it was perfect: the timing matched almost exactly.

But he would have to wait over two hours to deliver the news: two pre-arranged phone kiosks and times. One in Le Luc for the midday call, one in Brignoles for the ten o'clock call. Chapeau decided to drive back to Marseille to make the call. At one point on the drive, the audacity of what he was about to do tickled him again, and he burst out laughing.

By the time he made the call, he'd managed to control his mirth. It rang only twice before Alain answered. 'It's done,' said Chapeau.

'When was this?'

'Just this morning. I created a diversion, pumped the boy with a syringe, and last thing I knew they were

in the operating theatre trying to save him.'

'Are you sure he's finished?'

'Don't worry, he won't make it. Also, they won't suspect anything: it will look like he died from complications arising from his coma and the initial injuries.'

They made arrangements to meet and settle payment at six o'clock the next day at Parc du Pharo. Chapeau was sure Alain would probably phone the hospital that afternoon to check, but it was a reasonable set of odds. If the boy made it, he would just have to come up with another plan. If not, for once he'd get paid without having any blood on his hands.

ELEVEN

Third Session.

'...And when you fell back asleep, did the dream return?'

'Yes. But the wheat field had changed, it was different...'

A large reel tape whirred silently in the background. Eyran's eyelids pulsed gently as the memories drifted across. The second session had been disappointing, details of the dreams scant, so Lambourne had decided on hypnosis. The practice had become

increasingly outmoded in his profession, he used hypnosis on less than four percent of his patients: only in the case of deeply repressed thoughts or where normal transference was poor or non-existent. And hardly ever on children.

But with the main clues buried in Eyran's dreams and so much either faded or selectively erased - he'd seen little other choice. He hadn't expected anything significant from the dreams until Jojo appeared after the coma - then suddenly sat up sharply as Eyran started describing a dream just before the accident: his mother folding out a map and Eyran staring at the back of her hair, willing himself back into a previous dream.

'In which way was it different when you went back?' Lambourne pressed.

'It was flat, not on a slope how I remembered. And suddenly it got dark, I couldn't find my way back. Everything was too flat - I couldn't pick out anything to tell me which way was home.'

'Was it important that you reached home?'

'Yes. I had the feeling that if I didn't make it back, something terrible would happen. I might die. Finding my way out of the darkness and home was my way of staying alive.'

Lambourne clenched one hand tight. If there was a significant gap between the two dreams, the accident could have already taken place by the second

dream! Its later corruption after the coma and the introduction of Jojo could speak volumes. 'When did you first start dreaming about the wheat field?'

'I don't remember exactly. Quite a few years back.'

'Was it when you first went to California and started missing your friends?'

'No, I'd dreamt of it before. When we first moved into the house in East Grinstead and I walked into the field, it felt familiar. I had the feeling I'd been there before.'

'And did the dreams always feature the wheat fields?'

'No, sometimes it was the copse and the pond they led to, sometimes the

woods at the back of the old house that led to the field.'

'Did you ever dream of the house itself?'

'I don't remember exactly. Perhaps once before. Then the dream recently where I was looking out of the back kitchen window and saw my parents, and met Jojo again in the woods.'

So, the wheat field and the copse were more significant than the house itself: his own private play areas, whereas in the house his parents were dominant. The house started to feature again only when he was trying to find them; he took the search partly to their territory. 'In the dream about the time of the accident, when you feared you

couldn't make your way back home - how long did you feel had passed since the last moment in the car you remembered being awake?'

'It seemed to come almost straight after. But I don't know. The other dreams seemed to come with little gap, yet they told me when I awoke that I'd been in a coma for three weeks.'

Lambourne scribbled a quick note: *Timing inconclusive. First significant dream could have occurred before or after the accident.* Probably they would never know. 'And was there anyone else in the dream, any of your old friends from the copse?'

'There was someone, but not really a friend. It was a boy from my old school,

Daniel Fletcher. He died just a year before we left for California. And then my father appeared, saying that I didn't belong there, that I should start making my way back. But it was suddenly dark and I couldn't make out anything familiar; and by then he'd disappeared and left me to find my way back on my own.'

'What was the stronger emotion? Anger that he'd deserted you, or fear that you were suddenly alone and lost?'

'I don't know, I felt both. Maybe more confused than angry. I just couldn't work out why he'd left.'

'And was your fear just because you were alone and it was dark, or was it also because you felt you should do as

your father said. You were equally afraid to disobey him.'

Eyran frowned; he looked vaguely uncomfortable. 'It was because I was alone. I wouldn't purposely disobey my father and upset him, but I wasn't afraid of him. He was a very good father.'

'I know.' Lambourne noted the defensive tone; he changed track. 'Which was the first dream that Jojo appeared in?'

Moment's silence. Eyran's eyelids pulsed. 'It was the dream straight after that, again in the same place. The small pond in the copse.'

'And in that dream, tell me what you saw. What happened?'

Eyran's eyelids pulsed more rapidly.

Only grey outline at first, hazy. But gradually the images sharpened, became clear...

Eyran could only just make out the brook in the darkness of the copse at first. A faint mist lingered across its surface. He moved forward cautiously, a figure on the far side becoming gradually clearer as he got closer. It wasn't Sarah or Daniel, it was a boy of about his age that he hadn't seen before, though the trees and mist cast a shadow over part of his face, so he couldn't be sure. He knew that the boy had seen him because he waved and called out to Eyran, his voice echoing slightly across the water.

'Who are you?' Eyran asked. 'I haven't

seen you here before.'

'Yes I know, I don't normally come here. But we have met before, don't you remember?'

Eyran looked hard into the face. It was still indistinct. He felt suddenly uncomfortable admitting that he couldn't remember, the boy seemed so certain they had met before. 'It's the mist... I can't see very clearly across the brook.'

'Then you should come over this side with me.'

Eyran peered through the mist, but as part of it cleared, the expanse of water between them appeared to be much wider, a dark and fathomless lake. All the familiar landmarks of the brook were now far away, out of reach across the

murky depths. 'I'm looking for my parents,' Eyran said. 'My father was here earlier. Have you seen him?'

'No, I haven't. I lost my parents as well. Though it was many years ago - I can hardly remember it now.'

Eyran tried hard to make out the boy's features, tried to remember him, but the shadow across his face and the mist of the lake robbed him of any chance of recognition. 'What's your name?'

'Gigio.' Though the faint echo that came across the lake sounded more like 'Jojo' to Eyran. The boy looked straight across for a moment in silence. The air was cold, his breath misty. 'You don't remember me, do you?'

Eyran could see a tear on the boy's

cheek, though Eyran couldn't believe he was that upset at not being remembered, it must have been the memory of losing his parents. Which reminded Eyran again why he'd returned to the brook. 'I must find my father. He was here only a short while ago.'

'I told you, you won't find him over that side. If you cross over, I'll help you find him.'

Eyran looked down and across the water. It was jet black, murky. He felt afraid of what might lie beneath the surface, imagining water snakes and all manner of creatures, tree roots like tentacles trapping him and dragging him down, thick mud and slime like quicksand. Cold with fear, he shook his

head hastily. 'No I can't come over there. It's too dangerous.'

The boy smiled warmly, raising one arm, beckoning. 'But you must come over. Otherwise you will never find your father.'

Eyran closed his eyes, steeling himself against what he knew he had to do, feeling the cold of the water as first he put his feet in. He stopped for a second, looking imploringly across to the boy. 'Are you sure? Are you sure I have to do this?'

The boy was now openly crying. 'I can't promise you'll find your father, Eyran - I looked for my parents and never found them. But I had to be on this side of the lake, and you belong here

with me. Then at least if you don't find them, you're not alone.'

'But I must find them,' Eyran pleaded.

'I know, I know. I'll help you. If they are here, we'll find them, don't worry.'

Eyran waded slowly deeper, trying to walk as far as he could before swimming. The cold of the water penetrated deep into his body as it came up above his waist. The mist was moving on the surface of the water, partly obscuring the boy on the far side, then clearing. As the water came up to his chest, Eyran started swimming. The mist became denser towards the centre of the lake and Eyran lost sight of the boy completely for a while - then suddenly he was there again. But he still

appeared the same distance away. Eyran didn't feel that he was getting any closer, or perhaps he was losing direction with the mist. Fixing the boy's position when it cleared, Eyran tried to make sure that he stayed swimming in a direct line. During the blind periods he was never sure, and when it cleared again the boy still seemed to be the same distance away. He started to despair and called out, 'Jojo,' seeing clearly the boy's reassuring smile and his beckoning wave before his figure was swallowed up once more in the mist.

At that moment he was conscious of the weight in his legs, thick clinging mud and tree roots pulling at his ankles, holding him back. Or perhaps they had

been there all along, which was why he hadn't been getting any closer. He fought to break free, but the roots slowly raised like tentacles higher up his legs - pulling at him harder. In blind panic he screamed Jojo's name again, the roots dragging him inexorably downward as he struggled vainly to raise his head... the first icy water filling his mouth.

'Break away!...'

He fought hard, thrashing out with his arms, coughing and spluttering as his lungs began to fill, but the grip of the tree roots on his legs was impossible to break.

He felt tricked, cheated by the boy, led into the cold depths of the lake to die. But as he slid deeper into the watery

blackness, the vision of Jojo stayed with him, still smiling re-assuringly and beckoning, reaching out a hand towards him...

'Slipping deeper... I..... I....'

'Break away.... Break away!... '

'...I... Can't breathe... can't...'

'Eyran!... Eyran!.. Break away...'

The rapid pulsing beneath Eyran's eyelids slowly settled. His tortured breathing eased.

Lambourne's mouth was dry, a film of sweat on his forehead. He cursed himself: he should have seen it coming! Cut everything short as soon as Eyran started wading into the pond. He could feel his nerves still racing. He waited a

few seconds more, watching each beat of Eyran's slowly settling expression.

He swallowed slowly. 'So. Outside of the dreams, when you're awake - has Jojo ever spoken to you?' Switch to generalities, thought Lambourne. Avoid specifics.

Eyran's brow knitted slightly; obviously he found it an odd question. 'No.'

'And how do you feel immediately after waking from the dreams? Are you able to believe just for a moment that your parents might be alive?'

Long pause from Eyran. 'I don't know. Just confused, I suppose. And afraid.'

But Lambourne could tell that Eyran was holding back. 'Yet they're enough to

convince you that the next time Jojo might succeed and catch up with your parents. You're willing to trade that for the horrors the dreams might bring.'

Eyran shook his head. 'I don't know. When they start, I don't seem to think about how they might end. I'm just happy that for a few moments I'm somewhere where I might see my parents again.'

'But do you consciously welcome them - knowing that you might see your parents?'

'I don't know. No, I don't think so.'

Lambourne eased back. It was the closest he was likely to get. 'Do most of your dreams occur by the old house in England?'

Eyran took a second to catch up with

the shift in questioning. 'Yes.'

'Do you know why?'

Eyran paused; as if for a moment unsure whether the question was rhetorical and Lambourne would suddenly answer. 'I'm not sure. Perhaps in the dreams that's where I think I have most chance of finding them. Or perhaps I don't think I can do it alone, I need Jojo's help - and I know I can find him there.'

'Are your memories of that particular house stronger than your other house in San Diego? Is that where you recall your happiest times - with your parents, with your friends?'

Eyran's expression relaxed. Lambourne watched the self-realization

sweep slowly across; at least one small piece of the puzzle had slotted in place. 'Yes, I suppose so. I was happier there.'

Lambourne made a final note: *Main object attachments: Father, mother, house in England, old play areas, old friends (possibly now represented through Jojo), house in San Diego.* Quick distillation from the sessions so far; he might change the order later and add to the list, but it was a start.

The session had taken an hour and ten minutes. When he went into the waiting area with Eyran, Stuart and Amanda Capel were already there. Before they left, he arranged and pencilled in the time for the next session.

Lambourne was pleased with

progress so far. Eyran was quite bright and more open and communicative than he'd at first feared. His recall of detail in the dreams strong under hypnosis. But Stuart was right: the smiles were rare. Apart from the dreams, perhaps the only outward sign that Eyran was deeply disturbed.

But the dreams were becoming more of a refuge where Eyran could believe his parents were alive. Jojo was also becoming bolder - in two recent dreams introducing Eyran's father again to maintain the illusion. Lambourne was convinced it was only a matter of time before Jojo crossed over. Eyran would awake one day to find Jojo's voice still with him. From there, his own core

character - and everyone in the outside world telling him his parents were dead - would regress, and Jojo would gain dominance.

The only way was to confront Jojo now, drag him from the dark recesses of Eyran's dreams and strip him bare, let Eyran face the truth, accept: his parents were dead. Only then would he be able to start mourning, adjust to whatever his new life held without them.

But it wouldn't be easy, Lambourne reflected. His nerves were still rattled from the session just past. Like Faust with the devil, he could find himself trading all the way through: a truth for a nightmare.

TWELVE

The news that Christian Rosselot had died reached the Bauriac gendarmerie mid-morning.

The call came from Dr Besnard, the Chief Medical Examiner at the hospital. Poullain wasn't there at the time, so Harrault took the message. Dr Trichot had fought hard to save the boy, but oedema from an active clot caused unforeseen complications. After more than two hours in the operating theatre and three attempts to re-start the boy's heart, all procedures were finally

terminated at 10.52am, and the boy pronounced dead. 'Could you please try and make arrangements to inform his mother straight away, as she normally plans a hospital visit for the afternoon. Thank you. And I'm so sorry to have to bring this news.'

Harrault was in the small room directly behind the main entrance desk. He fell silent as he put down the phone. It was a moment before he got up and looked for Fornier who, as the main assisting investigator, was the first person he felt should know. Fornier was in the general administration office typing. In the same room was Levacher and a secretary.

After confirming some details of the

call, Dominic looked down thoughtfully at his typewriter. He exhaled audibly; suddenly his body lacked any strength to punch the black metal keys. Levacher mumbled the obvious about how awful it was, then after a brief pause asked who was going to tell the family. When no answers came, everyone wrapped in their own thoughts, he added, 'I suppose we'll have to wait for Poullain to decide.'

And the secretary, who had stopped typing at the same time, felt she had her emotions under control until the silence and constrained atmosphere suddenly got the better of her and, shielding part of her face, she hurriedly left the room.

Hushed voices in the corridor,

questions, muted surprise then finally, again, silence. The pall spread through the small gendarmerie as if by osmosis; whispers of death seeping through the cream plaster walls.

Within five minutes, the full complement of nine gendarmes and two secretaries on duty knew. From there, it started spreading through the town. A young sergeant went out to buy some cigarettes; there were two other people in the shop at the time who heard that 'the Rosselot boy had died'. One of the shopper's next calls was the *boulangerie*, where five more heard the news. It ricocheted through the main town shops.

Echoes of death which, by the time

Dominic had fired up a Solex and started heading out towards Taragnon and the Rosselots, had already changed the atmosphere in the town centre. Or was he just imagining it? A nod of acknowledgement from Marc Tauvel re-stacking his front display of vegetables, but then a look that lingered slightly. Madame Houillon following his progress around the square, staring; she was over-inquisitive at the best of times, but now her head was slightly bowed, as if he was a passing hearse. Respect for the dead.

Dominic felt that he couldn't wait any longer before heading out. Poullain was expected back soon, but that could be an hour or more, by which time Monique

Rosselot could have started her way to the hospital. Or worse still, by the way the news was spreading through the village, her hearing it clumsily from a neighbour or tradesman calling by. 'My condolences, I'm so sorry to hear.' Hear what?

Dominic didn't want it to happen that way; after a quick consultation with Harrault, they'd jointly agreed to break protocol by not waiting for Poullain, and Harrault signed out a Solex. Twenty five minutes had passed since the call from the hospital.

Nothing in his past had prepared him for this. All those years stuck in back radio and communications rooms both in the Legion and the Marseille

gendarmierie, he'd had so little 'people' contact. Between the code and call signature manuals, the gun range and procedural guides for arrest, filing and administration, there had been no special training on consoling grieving relatives. How should he phrase it? How would he even start?

On the edge of town, Dominic passed the tannery and leather workshops tucked into a hillside rock outcrop where the road was cut away. Dyes and acids for stripping and treating the skins were heavy in the air; piquant sauce for the smells of death.

Dominic's eyes watered slightly; he wasn't sure whether they were sensitive with emotions or it was a combination of

the fumes and the wind rush on the bike. Eighty yards past, he was clear of the fumes and the smells of the fields took over: ripening vines, lemons, almonds and olives, grass and wheat burnished almost white by the sun. He breathed deeply, but still his eyes watered.

Images flashed before him - the dark brown blood patches against the wheat, the boy being carried to the ambulance, the gendarmes tapping through the field with their canes, Monique Rosselot opening the door to him on that first visit, and the single candle in her daily bedside vigil of begging and praying to God to spare her son. *How could he possibly bring her this news?* The well of his emotions finally ebbed, a gentle

catharsis washing through him without warning, his body trembling against the vibrations of the bike. He bit at his lip and swallowed back the sobs at the back of his throat; no sound emanated, his steadily watering eyes and his trembling body the only release valves.

His reaction confused him. He'd witnessed murder before, battle hardened by his years in Marseille. Was it the age of the boy, or Monique Rosselot's strongly displayed devotion for her son bringing him closer to her emotions, *too close: her saddened face in half shadow reflected in the glass against the candle light, tears streaming down her cheeks as he told her that her son was dead. Dead! 'No!*

Oh God, no!' As he uttered the words breathlessly, what lay ahead of him suddenly seemed impossibly daunting: one simple sentence, destroying Monique Rosselot's life, tearing down any remaining vestige of hope. His grip on the throttle relaxed, the bike slowing slightly, apprehension gripping him full force. His conflict was absolute: he knew he had to go. He cared too much to risk her hearing casually from someone else passing. But he dreaded having to utter the words himself.

And so he switched off part of his mind driving the last few miles. *Cared for her?* He hardly knew her. Pushed the thoughts back as he turned his Solex bike into the Rosselot's driveway, parked,

dismounted. Words shaped in his mind, almost on the edge of his lips, all of them sounding so inept, inadequate. *The messenger?* Was that what worried him, being the messenger? Always being remembered as the man who brought the news that her son had died.

As he approached the door, he noticed the boy's bike still against the garage wall, waiting in expectation. His mouth was dry. He took a last deep breath to calm his nerves as he reached for the door knocker and flipped it down twice.

But it did little good. His nerves built to a crescendo, blood pounding through his head as the door opened and she stood there, her young daughter Clarisse in the shadows behind.

He fumbled, the words seeming to catch in his throat, but from the quickly distraught look that came back from her, she seemed to already half know, perhaps from his expression and awkwardness, and he only managed to say, 'I'm sorry, I have bad news. I wanted to make sure I caught you before you headed for the hospital...' before she started pleading.

'No, no, no, no, *no... No!*' A repetitive and steadily rising mantra to hopefully drive the inevitable away, her eyes imploring him as she slowly collapsed to her knees and, her body finally giving way to convulsive sobbing, she let out a single wailing cry.

The cry, painful and desperate,

pierced the still morning air, echoing from the walls of the small courtyard and rising up the gentle slope of the fields beyond. Jean-Luc Rosselot had been working in the west field out of sight of the courtyard for over an hour, digging to find the leak in an irrigation pipe. He didn't see or hear the Solex approaching; the cry was the first thing he heard. He dropped his spade and started running the fifty yards that would bring him in sight of the courtyard. Halfway, another wailing cry arose; a gap, then another.

And already he feared what was the cause before he'd thrashed his way through the last of the dried grass in the almond orchard and the courtyard came

into view. It was like a frozen tableau: the gendarme trying to stand proud with his wife on her knees before him, one hand clutching out and almost touching his ankles. As another cry of anguish drifted up across the field, he saw the gendarme reach out towards her shoulder as if to re-assure, but the hand hovered just above without connecting.

Each of them stood alone, grief unshared; though Jean-Luc felt even more distanced and awkward, looking on. He tried not to accept what the tableau told him, force it from his mind in search of other explanations; but in the end the imagery was too strong, left nothing to interpretation. His son was dead.

His first instinct was to rush towards his wife, comfort her - but after a few paces he stopped. His legs felt weak and he was strangely dizzy, the field seeming to tilt slowly away from him, the light oddly dim in hues of dull grey. And suddenly it seemed ridiculous for him to bound down the hillside, waving, even if his legs still had the strength to carry him, and so he resigned himself and slowly sank down, gave way to the buckle in his knees until he was sitting.

They hadn't seen him; they were faced away and he was still too distant. And so he watched from a distance through the grey haze, through eyes stinging with tears, watched his life and all he loved, all that he had prayed these past days for

God to save, slowly slip away with the tilt of the grey field into nothingness.

The death intensified the investigation and the mood in Taragnon and the surrounding villages. Questions and speculation peppered much of village conversation. Part nervous reaction, there were few other escape valves. New snippets of information about possible suspects and excitement at an impending apprehension replaced their normal daily routines and pleasures. In a village where local gossip and drama was a large part of the daily fare, this indeed was a lavish banquet. But in the lulls, moods were dark and sullen, silent. It was either feast or famine.

The first main change in the case came in a call from Pierre Bouteille notifying Poullain that he had passed over his file to Alexandre Perrimond, Aix Chief Prosecutor. 'The main reason is workload. With this now a murder investigation, I'm afraid I wouldn't be able to devote the time it deserves. I've brought Perrimond up to date on everything. No doubt he'll make contact soon.'

The morning after, '*La Provençal*' carried the news in a three column band at the bottom of its front page, carrying over onto page two. It was the most complete story they'd carried yet of the Rosselot case, going over the initial assault, its impact on the small village of

Taragnon, and police progress. The police were quoted as having a few possible suspects and how they hoped to 'conclude the investigation and press charges within the week.' Poullain had spent almost twenty minutes on the phone the previous afternoon with the reporter. The end of the article went back over other notable child disappearances and murders in Provence over the past decade, mostly from the Marseille and Nice area, underlining the rareness of such incidents in inland villages.

Perrimond made his mark on the case early. Within an hour of being on morning duty, Poullain received a call from his office in Aix. 'I see from this

item in the paper that you have a *few* possible suspects. That is news to me. From the information I was passed by my assistant, Pierre Bouteille, I understood there only to be one.'

'It is still only one. The other suspect mentioned to Prosecutor Bouteille, a certain Alain Duclos, was fully interviewed and later my assistant Fornier checked his details. He's a non-runner. We're still left only with the main suspect in the file, Machanaud.'

'Bouteille might handle things differently, but I like to be informed *before* having to read it in the newspapers.' The phone was put down abruptly.

'Headline chaser,' Poullain muttered

after hanging up. The call put Poullain in a bad mood for the rest of the day. He pressed and niggled at Dominic about small details in their final report, making him re-type it twice before he was satisfied. Most of it went over Dominic's head. He typed mechanically, the words little more than a blur. He was still pre-occupied with how the Rosselots were coping.

Most of the news had come from Louis, whose girlfriend Valérié was friendly with the Rosselot's neighbours, the Fiévets. They were the Rosselot's closest friends in Taragnon. Clarisse Rosselot had stayed with the Fiévets during Monique's daily hospital vigils so that Jean-Luc's farm work wasn't too

heavily disrupted.

Monique Rosselot had hardly left the farm since receiving the news, asking the Fiévets to get whatever shopping and essentials were needed. Jean-Luc had meanwhile buried himself back in his farm work, was out in the fields much of the day. The one time she'd left the house was to use the Fiévets' phone when she'd finally summoned up courage to call her mother in Beaune to break the tragic news. The mother was going to travel down to console her the next day, a day before the funeral. But, according to Valérié, at the same time Jean-Luc was talking about visiting his parents straight after the funeral; he'd had no contact whatsoever with them in twelve years,

but just couldn't break news like this to them over the phone. He had to see them. Monique had complained to the Fiévets that while she understood Jean-Luc's reasoning, the timing was bad; she felt as if she was being deserted when she needed him most.

Louis' message was clear: she was coping, but except for her mother and some neighbourly support from the Fiévets, she was coping *alone*.

Dominic sipped thoughtfully at a beer Louis had poured for him. The first day back at the bar after having seen the Rosselots, Louis had teased and pressed him until he'd finally admitted, yes, she's very pretty. Now the bonhomie had gone, replaced by sullen camaraderie;

trying to understand, through pieces of second hand information, the grief and pain of someone they hardly knew. Dominic wasn't even sure what drove his curiosity: pity for Monique Rosselot, or to assuage his guilt at having brought her the news?

Late that afternoon, Dominic had his worst argument yet with Poullain over Machanaud. The emotions of the day before, the relentless funnelling of evidence now aimed at Machanaud, the words he'd blindly typed that morning - as the mist of his pre-occupation with Monique Rosselot lifted - all converged; and it dawned on him that they were delivering little more than a death warrant for Machanaud. He once again

raised doubts about Machanaud.

'But you were the one who drove out and actually gained corroboration of Duclos' movements that afternoon,' Poullain defended. 'We know he was in the restaurant when the boy was attacked, and he had little or no time spare after he left. It's all in the report - and half of the facts you gained yourself.'

'I know. But some of his alibis fall into place too conveniently, almost planned, and something about Duclos makes me uncomfortable. Also, I'm not convinced about Machanaud. Even if Machanaud was accused of raping a woman, I would be doubtful - but a young boy! We have nothing on him in the past more serious than some

poaching and drunken and disorderly.'

'And you're saying that Duclos *is* the type?'

'Possibly. Let's face it, we know nothing about him. At least with Machanaud, we have something to go by on past form. And based on that, it just doesn't sit right with me.'

'Yes, I suppose you're right, we don't know much about him. When they telexed through from Limoges and told us he was an assistant in the Prosecutor's office, they forgot to mention that, oh, by the way our friendly local assistant prosecutor has a history with bugging young boys. Hope that is useful, but as you appreciate we like to keep that sort of thing quiet with public officials.

Maybe that will follow in their next communication.' Poullain smiled cynically. 'You think that Duclos *looks* the type, don't you?'

Dominic ignored the barb for the second time. 'No, it's more than that, I mean why stop for oil when you're in a rush to see a particular girl and you're worried about being late. Why spend over an hour in a café when time is tight?'

'He probably only remembered the girl and hoped to see her on a whim when he left the restaurant, or perhaps not even until he was at the garage, which is why he asked about timing. There was no specific meeting arranged, as he told us he just hoped she might still

be on the beach that time of day. I don't see anything suspicious.'

'I don't know, it's almost as if he wanted people to remember him visiting at specific times that day. And the girl was just thrown in to underline heterosexuality. Some of the facts are just too convenient the way that-'

'But they *are* the facts, and you seem to be ignoring that,' Poullain cut in. 'Or perhaps you can give us your alternative dissertation on how to prosecute, based on type and looks. He's a bit of a pretty boy, a bit soft and erudite in manner - he looks the type who would bugger young boys. So let's sweep aside all the facts for a moment, especially the fact that he was in a restaurant when the attack

happened, and aim for him. Perhaps you could explain your thinking to Perrimond. He works with assistant prosecutors all day, he might be able to spot the type quickly. Marvellous! Why didn't we consult you earlier, Fornier.'

Dominic bit at his lip and went back to his desk. He should have bided his time; only the day before he'd reflected on just this reaction from Poullain. But he realized now that the boy's death had changed everything, changed the mood and pace of the investigation, that the keen scent for Machanaud's blood could soon drive a hungry pack; a fast rising tide of panic that said 'cry halt early' and swept away his previous resolve.

Bauriac's church bell sounded in the

square, calling the faithful to evening mass. It reminded him that there was a memorial service for Christian Rosselot in three days. Flowers. Incense. Candles burning. *Monique Rosselot on her knees before him... her heart rending cry seeming to pierce right through him and drift, unheeded, over the fields and hills beyond.* Still the memory of that moment sent a shiver through his body. How much longer before that was him, grieving the loss of his mother. Six months, a year? The bell tolled ominously in the background, and he found himself looking towards the window and the sound filtering in with the muted shuttered dusk light. He felt very alone, cold and distanced from the

gendarmerie activities around him, and he tried to escape the fast descending gloom that the bell was striking for the inevitable, for that which he would be helpless to change.

It was almost 6.30 pm when Machanaud called by the gendarmerie. Briant was on desk duty. Machanaud asked to see Poullain and Briant said that he wasn't there and looked at his watch, adding, 'But if you want to come back in forty minutes or an hour, he should be back then.'

'Or Fornier, Warrant Officer Fornier, is he here? He would do.'

'No, I'm afraid that he's with Captain Poullain in Aix en Provence.' Briant

noticed Machanaud sway for a moment uncertainly as he took in this information. He'd obviously been drinking and mixing this now with deep thought didn't go well together. 'Is there anything I can help with?'

A slow blink through bleary eyes, then finally, 'Yes, you can take a note for them.' Machanaud shuffled closer and leant on the counter. 'You can tell them I've now remembered the car that passed. You might want to write it down.' Machanaud waited for Briant to grab a pad and pen from the side, then said the words very slowly, the last part in pronounced syllables. 'It was very low, dark green, a sports coupe. Probably an Alfa Romeo. An AL-FA

RO-ME-O COU-PE. Have you got that?'

'Yes, okay. But you realize that this is only a note. If you want to make this part of any official statement, you'll have to return and speak with Captain Poullain.'

'Okay, okay, I understand. You have your procedures.' Machanaud held up one hand defensively as he stepped back from the counter. 'I just thought it important that they have that note while I remember.'

'Yes, certainly. I'll make sure they get it.' Briant watched thoughtfully as Machanaud shuffled back out, probably back to the same bar where he'd found inspiration to suddenly remember the car.

They'd walked for almost a minute in virtual silence through Parc du Pharo before the package was handed over, waiting for the groups of tourists to thin out. It was a large manila envelope. Chapeau looked briefly inside and saw the small bundles of cash.

'It went well,' he commented. 'Your friend should be pleased.'

'Yes, he was.' Duclos looked back at Chapeau directly for the first time. It had been his main worry: that Chapeau would have read the papers and discovered his lie. It had been quite prominent in '*La Provençal*', but still easily missed for someone only paying half attention, wedged in at the bottom of the front page with no pictures

accompanying. He breathed an inner sigh of relief; obviously Chapeau hadn't seen it. Probably was illiterate or only read comics and gun manuals, Duclos thought cynically. 'I think you'll find it's all there.'

Chapeau walked to the nearest bench, sat down and, partly shielding with the envelope, counted one of the bundles. Then he measured its depth against the others: three bundles each of 2,000 Francs, one half size. Chapeau shut the envelope, folded it over by the flap and stood up with the closest he'd come to a smile in all of their meetings. 'Hopefully your friend can rest easy now.' And with a curt nod, he headed back the way they'd come, leaving Duclos on the

bench.

Chapeau's car, a Peugeot 403, was parked fifty metres back from the main entrance to the park. He'd arrived ten minutes early so that he could see Duclos arrive, get the registration number of his car. It arrived punctually, just two minutes before six: dark green Alfa coupe. A neat compact car for a neat, compact man. Everything in his life was probably neatly compartmentalized, thought Chapeau. He watched Duclos get out and enter the park and then waited a minute before following.

Chapeau flipped over the newspaper on his passenger seat and glanced again at the report at the bottom of the front page. He'd already read it twice earlier

that day, pondering what to do. The last person to cross him so blatantly he'd left with his throat cut in a Marseille back alley.

But with this Alain he wanted to bide his time, learn a bit more about him before taking any action. At one point earlier, he'd laughed out loud at the double dupe; in return getting payment for nothing somehow seemed divine justice. But he couldn't get out of his mind the bad intent that had been there, the possible repercussions if he had killed the boy: a high profile murder case with a whole station of rural gendarmes with little else to do but catch the murderer, he'd have probably had to move to Paris for a few years until

things had quietened down.

Ahead, he could now see Duclos getting back into his car. He decided to follow.

THIRTEEN

'... And in that dream, did you recognize it immediately?'

'Yes. It was the pond at Broadhurst Farm. It only turned into a lake later.'

'And you said that Jojo was already there. Could you see him clearly? What did he look like?'

Stuart Capel tensed as the tape rolled, leaning forward. Lambourne had told him one of the key objectives had been to get a clearer picture of Jojo. Lambourne's notes were in his hand. Headed: *Session 4. 28th February, 1995*. He knew how the notes and the

tape slotted together from the last tape sent.

'I couldn't see clearly... it was too misty, and he was too far away.' Then, after a second: 'I only saw him clearly when I was closer... looking up through the water...'

Silence. Background drone of London traffic. Brief cough from Lambourne.

Stuart could imagine Eyran struggling for a clearer image. Finally: 'His hair was dark, slightly curly, and his eyes were bright - blue or dark green. I wasn't sure.'

'Does he remind you of someone you know perhaps? An old friend or someone from school.'

Longer pause this time. Eyran's low,

regular breathing came over clearly for a second. 'No. But there's something familiar about him - yet I don't know why.'

'Note One.' Lambourne's voice came across in a deeper timbre. Stuart dutifully followed the instruction and read the note: *An initial assumption was that Jojo might be modelled on an old friend, someone from Eyran's past. If that's now to be discounted - why the familiarity?* After the 'Note One' announcement, an eight second silence, then: 'Continues.' In transferring to cassette, Lambourne had put in the break points. It reminded Stuart of linguaphone tapes with gaps left for student repetition.

'Did Jojo tell you where you'd met before.'

'No. I told him I was looking for my parents, and that was when he first offered to help.'

'And you went back because in the previous dream, you'd seen them there.'

'Only my father.' Another long silence. Faint rustling of papers. 'That was when Jojo wanted me to cross over... told me that he'd lost his parents as well and hadn't been able to find them until he crossed over?'

'Did he tell you what happened with them?'

'Nothing then...' Eyran swallowing, clearing his throat. 'Only in another dream... later. But he said it was years

ago - he could hardly remember it.'

'Note two: Shared grief, yet Jojo conveniently has no memory of his loss. Eyran's loss is the main focus. Crossing over could symbolize to Jojo that Eyran trusts him, is siding with him. Yet we know from a later dream that they are together in their search - the barrier has by then been crossed.'

Lambourne's voice on tape reminded Stuart. Reminded him of their first meeting: *'When did you first realize there was a problem?'*

And he'd told Lambourne everything. The nineteen day coma. The hospital. *The nightmares.* Everything except how much he'd resisted finally bringing Eyran to see him. Clinging to the Eyran he

remembered.

Eyran had awoken finally from his coma four days before Christmas.

When did you first realize...? Had it been when he'd first told Eyran his parents were dead? The hospital staff had been briefed just to say his parents were ill, in another ward - until Stuart arrived. But then Stuart remembered seeing that same look in that first moment of greeting Eyran: something distant and lost in Eyran's eyes, almost as if Stuart was someone he knew only vaguely and couldn't be placed for a moment.

Yet it remained through those first hours, that split second delay in

recognition and response. At first, the explanation in Stuart's mind had been the shock and grief and Eyran struggling to come to terms with the unbelievable, the unacceptable. But by the late evening, as Eyran prepared to sleep, Stuart was keen to know Torrens' assessment. How much of Eyran's slowness of reaction was due to the coma, how much could be attributed to shock and grief, was he under any drugs or medication that might cause such an effect, how long might the condition prevail and, most importantly, might it be permanent?

Torrens started with the obvious: it's too soon to tell, he's only been out of a coma a day, yes there has been some recent medication, promethazine, to cool

his body temperature down - though that shouldn't delay his reaction rate. But possibly the shock of his parent's death could cause such a reaction. 'His mind might be numbed by the collection of recent events. It's just awoken, electrical and chemical connections are flexing their muscles for the first time in almost three weeks, and suddenly it has to deal with the fact that his parents are dead. The numbness, the slowness of reaction, could be a form of protection. I doubt if it's all sunk in yet. Did he cry much when you told him?'

'Yes, a bit.' But what had struck Stuart the most was Eyran's eyes looking so lost, desolate. He'd hugged Eyran, expecting a catharsis of sobbing which

in the end had never come; just the same sad, distant gaze through watery eyes as they broke the embrace.

'I don't think we should read too much into it for a few days. I'll run some detailed responsiveness checks then.'

A few days? Stuart had always assumed he'd be flying back with Eyran the next day in time for Christmas.

Impossible. Apart from the necessary tests and monitoring, there were Eyran's other injuries to consider. 'The cracked rib has a way to go yet, and we'd want to re-strap that and run another X-ray before okaying him for a long flight. Don't reckon on him being able to leave before five or six days.'

Staying over Christmas? He knew he

couldn't possibly leave Eyran alone in hospital over those days, but he wasn't relishing the call to Amanda to tell her he wouldn't be back with her and Tessa for Christmas.

As it was, it had taken him over a week to talk openly about his grief with Amanda. So many years sparring with Jeremy, fighting over stupid, inconsequential things - it all seemed such a waste now, so pointless. No opportunity left now for amends, except to whisper emptily, 'I love you,' vapoured breath on the chill air as they'd lowered Jeremy into the ground. The only thing to keep them close the past ten years had been Eyran. If it hadn't been for Eyran, he'd have had the same

relationship with Jeremy he had with his father.

It was the nearest he'd ever come to explaining to Amanda his affinity with Eyran. He'd lived part of his life through Eyran, the childhood he felt he had lost, the mistakes and barriers between his father and himself that he could see being repeated between Eyran and Jeremy. But, at times, he'd taken it a step too far, kidded himself he knew better about Eyran's upbringing, tried to be an alternative father. And he felt guilt for that now: in forging his own close bond with Eyran, trying to be honest broker, perhaps he had stolen some limelight from Jeremy; precious years that now couldn't be replaced.

After explaining Torren's prognosis, brief silence from Amanda. Finally: 'I understand. You have to stay with him.'

But the silence and the tone said it all: *you should be here with us, your family, but how can I possibly protest about favouritism for Eyran, appear heartless by suggesting that you leave him alone in hospital over Christmas.*

'Thanks for understanding. I'll phone Christmas Eve, then again Christmas Day. I can have a long session with Tessa then.'

Christmas at the hospital was a strange affair. Christmas morning everyone gathered in the canteen for a small show, the highlight of which was one of Torrens' colleagues, Walowski,

playing Father Christmas with a heavy Germanic. It was like some exaggerated Robin Williams sketch, with a couple of curvy nurses in short red skirts and black stockings playing his little helpers. Eyran smiled at intervals, but was still too remote and withdrawn for full laughter. Even the first half smiles had only come that morning, opening his presents from Stuart.

Christmas lunch had been laid on for later, but Stuart wanted something less organized, more personal. He got permission from Torrens to take Eyran into town, and they found a lively restaurant a block back from the sea front. The menu was a curious mix of Tex-Mex and Italian with a sprinkling of

Christmas turkey specials. But the atmosphere was wonderfully raucous and joyous, party streamers and cheering, and a small Mexican combo in the corner played a range of Tijuana, Christmas favourites, Tony Orlando, Gloria Estefan and Santana.

They had Taco dips to start and Turkey for the main course. Stuart finished off with brandy pudding, Eyran with pecan and maple syrup ice cream. They found it difficult to talk above the music and background noise and had to shout Merry Christmas as they'd pulled two crackers. But Eyran enjoyed the atmosphere regardless. At least they could lose their emotions within it, rather than feel obliged to speak to fill a

silent void; especially when Stuart knew he'd have to do most of the talking, tip-toeing around such an emotional minefield. He'd already done it for three days at the hospital and was fast running out of safe footholds.

He noticed Eyran's fingers tapping to the band's version of 'Oye Como Va'. *Good*, something at least breaking through the barriers built by the coma, a part of him getting back into the rhythm of life. But the smiles were still infrequent, stilted. Stuart had a Southern Comfort with his coffee, Eyran an elaborate butterscotch flavoured milk shake. As they left, half the restaurant was singing along to 'Knock Three Times.' Outside, the fresh salt air hit

them, even a block back from the beach.

'Let's go down there, walk along for a bit,' Stuart suggested on impulse. Eyran merely nodded, a faint smile threatening to escape.

On the front, the air was bracing. A fresh westerly breeze was struggling to clear some cloud built up, the air warm and moist with salt spray. As they walked, Stuart talked of Tessa looking forward to seeing Eyran. They'd plan something special for New Year's Day when they were all together.

And it was there, walking with the warm Pacific breeze buffeting them from one side, ruffling their hair, that the dam of Eyran's emotions finally broke and he started weeping. He mumbled, 'I miss

my mom and dad,' as Stuart pulled him into an embrace. Then something about remembering Mission Beach where they all used to go for the day together, the words partly muffled against Stuart's chest and then finally lost among the sobbing and the noise of the surf.

'I miss them too. Terribly.' Stuart said, but it sounded so lame; empty consolation. Stuart felt the small body quaking and trembling against him, and inside he felt his own sorrow rising again, tears welling; but this time it wasn't just for Jeremy, but for the strength of spirit and zest for life in Eyran that now also seemed lost. Bitter tears and silent prayers on the mist of the Pacific surf rolling in, willing that the

next days and weeks might see some improvement, bring back the Eyran he remembered.

Eyran awoke in the middle of the night; eyes blinking, adjusting, consciousness searching in that first moment for a reason.

Had he dreamt again, or had a noise perhaps disturbed him? He didn't remember any dream, and no sounds came except the faint swish and sway of trees outside his window as he held his breath and listened intently. He tried to judge if the wind was rising, a storm brewing; but the movement of the branches remained gentle and steady, soothing and swaying, white noise to lull

him back to sleep again.

Was he still in the hospital or at his uncle Stuart's house? He looked at the light coming in through the window and tried to pick out shapes in the room. Faint light from a watery moon: the hospital room had been brighter from street lamps outside, the window larger, and the two large trees his side of the hospital he could never hear moving for the thickness of the glazing. Sometimes the days in the hospital and those in England seemed to merge, then suddenly he would be back once again in his room in San Diego, joy and surprise momentarily leaping inside that everything in between had been a bad dream - before the shapes and shadows

in the room slowly fell into place.

The nightmares and the time awake had sometimes been difficult to separate: the friendly face of his uncle Stuart, voice echoing, telling him his parents were dead; doctors with tests and monitors, smiling faces telling him that everything was going to be alright, his uncle was coming to see him, explain. *'You'll stay with us now, we'll take care of you. Everything's going to be fine, Tessa's looking forward to seeing you.'* The rhythm of the band pumping through his body, people cheering, smiling as they clinked glasses; everyone seemed so happy except him. And so the sleep became a welcome release, transported him back where he wanted to be: the

warmth of the wheat field where he might meet Jojo and they could look for his parents again.

The first dream had been two nights after awaking from the coma. The doctors said that he'd been asleep for nineteen days, but he couldn't recall anything, not even the accident; the last thing he remembered was his mother reaching back, soothing his brow, staring at her blonde hair as he sunk back into sleep.

Only when he saw Jojo in the dream, did fragments of the other dreams start coming back to him, that they'd been on this adventure before of trying to find his parents. After the dream by the pond, there had been another with him and Jojo

pushing their way uphill through thick woodland and bracken. Jojo had said that there was a clearing towards the brow ahead, and from there they would see his parents waiting for him in the valley below. After thrashing through, a light had shone ahead and Eyran could see the trees and bracken thinning, see the clearing, and he ran expectantly towards it, hardly feeling the barbs of the bracken pricking his legs. But as he finally burst free into the light, he awoke.

Since that night, he'd willed himself back into the dream each time before sleep to try and reach the brow and find his parents. Though there had been no more dreams with Jojo, only one with

him alone sitting in a stark hospital corridor waiting for news on his parents from one of the rooms, expecting Jojo to come out at any minute and say that he'd finally found them. But in the end it was uncle Stuart and a doctor, faces forlorn, eyes sad, saying there was nothing that could be done, the doctors tried their best... but your parents are dead. *Dead!* He'd hid his face and his tears momentarily in his hands, and when he'd looked up again the corridor was empty, his uncle and the doctor had gone. He began to fear the entire hospital was empty - that he was the only one there. The last thing he remembered was calling out for Jojo, but no answer came except the hollow echo of his own voice

from the corridor walls.

And so all he was left with was the stark solitude of those waking hours; and sometimes those hours seemed like the nightmare, and the hours asleep and his dreams - the possibility of meeting Jojo and being able to find his parents - became a welcoming and warm reality.

Familiar objects had been placed in his room - his computer, the Daytona racetrack and Baywatch posters - to make him feel at home, as if nothing too much had changed. But unless they could tell him that they'd made a mistake, that his parents were alive and had survived the accident, none of it held any meaning for him. Uncle Stuart and his wife Amanda and Tessa - who tried so hard

to play with him and cheer him - became little more than vague, background voices. He was always trying to remember, play vivid scenes in his mind of how it was: picnics on Mission Beach, a visit to DisneyWorld, hot dogs at the Chargers game, going fishing on his father's boat. Sometimes he could hear his father or mother speaking, recall whole phrases and sentences. The other voices around became an intrusion.

Eyran wondered how far it was to Broadhurst Farm. Four miles, five? He got up and walked towards the window. He left the light off so that the faint moonlight might pick out objects in the garden and the field beyond. A large oak and two elms had lost nearly all their

leaves; only two large fir trees at the end of the garden moved with the wind. The hedgerow separating the garden from the farmer's field beyond, Tessa's climbing frame, the rockery and pond - even small objects became clear as his eyes adjusted. The field beyond was still indistinct, except the faint silhouette of the line of trees on its brow. He wondered if he closed his eyes and willed it hard, if his mind could sail across the farm fields to Broadhurst Farm, put an image in his mind so that when he went back to sleep his dreams might take him there again. But he wasn't even sure which way it was. Was it over the ridge ahead, or over more to the west?

The moon was a watery half through faint mist and cloud. For a moment he thought he saw the dull shapes of figures moving beyond the garden - but as he looked more intently, they were no longer there. It was just the shadow of tree branches moving on the breeze. He closed his eyes and tried to imagine the wheat field beyond the hill, let his mind drift until it was before him. But he'd never been there at night, felt too frightened to let the image linger, and he tried to cast his mind back to how he remembered the wheat field in daylight, running through the sheaves with the warm sun on his back.

But the image never came, it remained dark and cool; shades of grey under the

pale moon. And the field for him in that moment became yet another symbol of death, something that could only serve a purpose in his dreams if he could recall it in daylight. Perhaps he would ask his uncle Stuart to drive past Broadhurst farm the next day.

The first dream Stuart became aware of was six days into the new year. Eyran had awoken screaming, bathed in sweat. Stuart asked him if he'd dreamt like that before and he'd said yes, but they hadn't turned bad like this one. 'What happened in the dreams?

'Different things. It was confusing. Some of it was at the hospital, some at the farm where I used to play.'

'Is that the farm we drove past the other day, just down from your old house?'

'Yes.'

Stuart thought it was quite a normal request that Eyran had wanted to see the old house. Relive old and fond memories. They'd stopped while Eyran studied the front of the house, saw the changes, the different colours on the window frames and doors, along with the familiar: the basket ball hoop still above the garage door that Jeremy had put up. Stuart had a quick flash of Jeremy and him playing basket ball, showing off for the kids. Jeremy had twisted his ankle, sending the kids into guffaws of laughter as he'd hobbled off.

They thought it was all part of the act: Abbott and Costello do the Harlem Globetrotters. They'd been quite close then, lived only five miles apart; in fact Stuart had been drawn to the area on Jeremy's recommendation. And then after only two years, Jeremy left for America.

As they drove off, Eyran asked him to turn right at the end of the road. It was a narrow country lane, and after another two hundred yards or so, Eyran asked him to stop again. Stuart pulled into the first available farm gate entrance. This time they got out of the car and stood, misty breath showing on the crisp air, looking out across the fields. Stuart asked him if that was where they used to

play.

'Yes, there's a small pond in the copse over there.' Eyran pointed towards a wooded area in a dip between the fields, oval in shape, no more than a hundred yards at its widest point. 'Then the wheat field on the other side rises up towards the woods at the back of the house.'

Little more than stubble now, Stuart noted, looking bleak in the cold, misty air. The sun was weak and low in the sky, hardly penetrating a faint mist which obscured its far end. Two crows suddenly crowing loudly and flapping away from a nearby tree broke them out of their moment's reverie.

It was almost a week ago they'd made the drive. 'What frightened you in the

dream?'

'There was a ledge and a drop I didn't see until too late. I started falling.'

'Is there a ledge like that in the field?'

'No, just in the dream.' Eyran blinked slowly. 'Even the pond in the woods is very shallow, at most up to my chest.'

'Are you all right now?'

Brief pause for thought. 'Yes.'

Stuart playfully ruffled Eyran's hair and forced a smile. A vague smile returned. Nothing too harmful, thought Stuart. Just some old memories jumbling, trying to sort themselves out. Probably driving by the old house and the farm fields had sparked it off.

But over the following two weeks, there were three more dreams,

increasingly violent and disturbing, and Stuart began to worry. Most took place in the fields by the old house or at the hospital, though one had been at the house in San Diego, at night with the pool lights on, mist rising from the warm water. Eyran thought he heard voices coming out of the ghostly mist and moved towards it; but it spread quickly and drifted in billows until it engulfed the entire garden and the house, and he couldn't find his way through. Hopelessly lost and frightened, the warm mist clinging all around him, suffocating, he awoke. Stuart asked him if any of the other dreams had involved him looking for his parents, and after a moment's hesitation he'd answered yes, in the

hospital dream.

When Stuart discussed it with Amanda, she'd immediately opted for them taking Eyran to the psychiatrist Torrens had recommended. Stuart wanted to wait, see what the next week or so brought. It had been five days after his return before he'd even mentioned the psychiatrist to Amanda.

Stuart remembered twirling Lambourne's card in his hand without really reading it as Torrens explained: *'Some electrical activity within the brain concerned me. It occurred on two different occasions, but only on the last did it finally reach any motor senses and lead to Eyran awakening. Which meant for the remainder it was largely*

confined to the sub-conscious. It could be nothing, but it warrants keeping in check. Given the tremendous grief Eyran has suffered and coming to terms with the loss of his parents, counselling is advisable in any case.'

'I don't think we should delay,' urged Amanda. 'These dreams are beginning to worry me. Why wait another week or so?'

'I want to give Eyran some natural period of grieving, some time for him to come to terms with the loss in his own way before sending a psychiatrist into the fray to force the issue.'

'I just don't see any dramatic change coming quickly. He's not the same bushy tailed, bright-eyed Eyran we remember,

and the sooner we accept that and try and do something about it, the better. I don't think delaying will help. With the dreams he's having, it could even do more harm.'

Stuart was insistent. 'We don't know yet if his unresponsiveness is as a result of his grief and loss, or a by-product of his injuries and the coma. And I'm not sure a psychiatrist would be able to tell that. Only time will tell. Some time for his grieving to subside.'

Amanda held his gaze for a moment with her best 'you can't be serious' expression. Then slowly shook her head and went into the kitchen. For the next five minutes, he could hear plates and cups moved and stacked and kitchen

cupboard doors closed with more gusto than normal.

Perhaps she was right, delaying was unreasonable. Behind her annoyance, he could almost hear the words she was biting back: *you don't want to face it because you're unwilling to accept anything less than the Eyran you remember. Only a miracle recovery will do for the golden boy.* But she'd spared him the barb, or perhaps wished to avoid what was now a stale and unnecessary argument between them: absorption with Eyran over and above his own family. But that thin line was probably close to being crossed, and she was painfully close to the truth. Part of him couldn't accept Eyran's current

condition, perhaps never would be able to. The psychiatrist was the last line of defence, the final throwing in of the towel: admittance that Eyran was psychologically disturbed and needed help.

'... There was nobody there, just rows of old weedkillers and pesticides... and I recognized it as the shed from our garden. My father warned me when we first moved in not to go in the shed until he'd fixed it... the floor was rotten and the old jars of weedkillers were dangerous. I was confused... I remembered him clearing them away that summer... and now they were back.'

'Did Jojo say anything? Explain.'

'No. I felt the floor shaky beneath my feet... and he held one hand out to me. But as I stepped forward, I felt the floor give way... and I... I...'

'It's okay, Eyran. Step back... back!...'

Stuart was yanked back to the tape. Sharp reminder of the dream when he'd finally relented to Eyran seeing Lambourne. Eyran screaming and Amanda's rapid footsteps on the landing above.

'....I was falling... falling... everything spinning...'

'Back.... Break away. Away!'

Stuart sat forward. His pulse was pounding hard as it had been that night

racing up the stairs. Lambourne had mentioned the danger area of the dream endings; that as much as possible he would generalize or pick out random details. But still he'd been caught out: Eyran in that moment re-living falling, spinning down helplessly.

Silence finally. Only Eyran's rapid, fractured breathing came across.

Lambourne waited a few seconds more. 'You must have been disappointed when you didn't see your parents - Jojo let you down. And has he let you down in other dreams?'

Eyran's breathing easing more. A faint swallow. Stuart picked up on Lambourne's tactic: generalities to shift Eyran's focus. But the sudden leap

seemed to have caught Eyran by surprise. Stuart could feel the tension coming across with each beat of silence on the tape: could imagine Eyran struggling to extricate himself from one set of horrors, sifting frantically through time and misty images, probably only to find himself facing still more. A simple consent, and now he'd put Eyran through this! A pang of guilt gripped him, one hand clutching tight at Lambourne's report.

'I don't remember exactly... *I....*'

Eyran either still struggling for images or pushing away acceptance.

'Do most of the dreams too end abruptly in the same way,' Lambourne prompted. 'Yet with the hope you'll find

your parents right up until the last moment.'

At length a slow exhalation. Final admittance. '...Yes.'

'Note five:' No explanation is offered by Jojo for his failures from one dream to the next. Each one starts anew, Eyran filled with fresh trust and hope. Like an incurable gambler, Eyran conveniently blots past form from his mind, and Jojo is there to convince him that this time they'll hit gold.

Lambourne went back to the early sequence of dreams, before and after the coma, then: 'And during those dreams - the first of running through the wheat field directly after the car accident and the last you remember before awaking in

the hospital from the coma - do any other voices reach you? Did you hear anything from outside?'

'I don't know... I'm not sure.' Eyran sounded flustered, uncertain.

'Try to concentrate. Take yourself back, and try to remember if you heard anything.'

Stuart saw immediately where Lambourne was aiming. After the last session Lambourne commented that what went against the theory of Eyran creating Jojo through non-acceptance of his parents' death, was him appearing *before* Eyran awoke and knew they were dead. Lambourne was digging for subliminal reference. Stuart felt for Eyran in that moment, wished that he'd

been alongside to hold Eyran's hand as he delved back through the darkness of his nineteen day coma.

At length a low, almost indiscernible muttering: 'There was something... a man's voice.' Stuart felt his skin tingle.

'What did it say?' Eagerness in Lambourne's voice; fear that at any second the images would slip from Eyran's mind.

'...That... that the woman was gone, nothing could be done.... but there was still some hope for the other two.' Staccato breathing, the words mumbled in between. '...There was the sound of traffic in the background... then I was being lifted, moved to one side.'

'Was there anything else?'

'Some other voices, more distant... Someone I thought called my name, but I couldn't be sure.' For Stuart, the images were suddenly too clear, too painful. He was still gripping Eyran's hand, only now he was by the roadside while Eyran's shattered and bloodied body struggled for life. Gasps for life now no more than gasps for words. 'Then a lot of movement... some lights passing which hurt my eyes. A voice closer saying that it looked like another late shift, but he hoped to make it up the next day. And another voice, more muffled... speaking on a radio phone. It was answering and crackling. And the siren... the siren again... the siren and the crackling made me feel sleepy.'

'Any more voices?'

Brief pause. 'Only the wheat field then. And Jojo.'

'Note six: Memory of medics and police attending and first few minutes in ambulance. Nothing after that. But it appears there was some subliminal reference for Eyran to draw upon. The fact that he knew his mother was already dead might explain why in the dreams she either didn't feature or was more distant.'

Stuart recalled from the Oceanside medical report that Eyran's coma hadn't been caused immediately by the accident injuries, but by the fast accumulating blood clots and oedema soon after. And while the cranial pressure was still

building, *before...* Stuart bit at his lip. *Oh God.* Eyran had been conscious for a few moments then and, while he was struggling for his own life, had learned of his parents' fate. Stuart could hardly think of a worse scenario.

Stuart's hand was trembling as he came to Lambourne's summary: *Unless we can confront Jojo directly in future sessions, progress could be slow. Working second hand, scant additional light I feel can be thrown on Jojo's core character and motives. My plan would therefore be to side with Eyran over specific questions, instil in him a strong need to know the answers from Jojo - then switch over and try and ask them directly.*

Yet part of that process is in conflict: all other voices are telling Eyran his parents are dead, and Jojo is probably the only crutch supporting that part of Eyran's psyche still clinging on, refusing to accept. The bridge between the two has to be crossed cautiously. Remove it too hastily, destroy the illusion - and Eyran either falls into the void or has to leap towards full acceptance before he is ready. Yet if we don't act quickly, Jojo could become increasingly dominant - it would then be that much harder to wean Eyran away. The threat of schizophrenia would be a stage closer.

Stuart shook his head. Forty minutes of hell approved by a single signature

and now another consent slip was before him: approving Lambourne's foray to confront Jojo. In finally acceding to the sessions, he'd told himself that it was for Eyran's own good - but now he wasn't so sure. He found himself wrestling with the nagging doubt that his own desire to have back the Eyran he remembered might have played a part. This time he wanted to be sure the decision was purely for Eyran's benefit: the pitfalls and dangers against the advantages. Lambourne saw Jojo as a threat, and no doubt he was right; yet in Eyran's troubled mind, with his parents gone, Jojo was probably one of the few friends he felt he had left in this world. And now Lambourne wanted rid of Jojo

with another simple signature.

Stuart picked up a pen, then put it down again. He flicked back through Lambourne's notes for more guidance. But suddenly he found himself biting back tears, and slumped dejectedly, cradling his head in one hand.

FOURTEEN

The small back room was insufferably hot. A ceiling fan swirled slowly, but Poullain could still feel his shirt sticking to his back. He adjusted a small swivelling desk fan so that its sweep cut across him more directly. The telephone rang.

It was Perrimond, the Aix Chief Prosecutor. 'I've had a chance now to think about this new information from Machanaud, and I think your assessment is right. It's a little too convenient that he should suddenly now remember an

accurate description of the car. Has there been much mention of the car in Taragnon or Bauriac?'

'Not so much in Bauriac. But we visited quite a few shops in Taragnon and then the restaurant just outside where Duclos had lunch. The village is small, news spreads quickly, and Machanaud hits the bars heavily, spends half his time leaning on the counter swapping stories with barmen. I think that's how he picked up the description of the car.'

'Yes, yes. I would agree.'

A brief pause, flicking of papers from Perrimond's end. 'So what do you want me to do?' Poullain asked.

'It's up to you. But if you should

decide not to ask Machanaud in to make the statement official on the basis the description has been manufactured from local gossip, I'd support that assessment.'

'I understand.' But he suddenly realized the decision was back with him; he'd hoped merely to provide background and let Perrimond decide. The desk fan cut a cool swathe of air across his chest. More papers turning, then, 'Oh, I had a call from Bayet, the Aix Mayor yesterday. Apparently, Marcel Vallon is quite a close friend of his. Mr Vallon expressed concern about the police questioning of one of his house guests, this Duclos character. Of course, this came a day before this new

information, so I felt quite safe assuring that Monsieur Duclos had merely assisted with some information and was not in any way a suspect.'

The message was clear to Poullain: if they made the statement official, they would be duty bound to question Duclos again. Perrimond would have to backtrack on what he'd said and call the Mayor, the Mayor would have to call Vallon, and he'd have to go cap in hand when he phoned Vallon again to arrange a second interview, this time under far less hospitable circumstances. But he felt uncomfortable making the decision without more support from Perrimond. 'So you think it might be awkward to suddenly put Duclos back under the

spotlight?'

'The awkwardness I can argue with the Mayor. This is a murder case and we have to do what's right and damn the awkwardness. But I would like at least to be armed with a good reason. If at the end of the day it couldn't possibly be Duclos because he was in a restaurant at the time, and if you're already suspicious that Machanaud has merely picked up on the car description from town gossip, I'd rather not make the call. I'd sound foolish. You just phone Vallon directly yourself for a second interview and be prepared for a cold blast of air, and I'll wait for the Mayor to phone again. And if and when he does, I'll tell him it's something routine regarding a sighting of

Duclos' car. Nothing to worry about. Really, Poullain, It's up to you what you do.'

'I see.' It would be awkward. It would be foolish. It would serve absolutely no purpose because the person concerned was somewhere else at the time. There was only *one* sensible decision to be made, and it was now entirely his to make. No more clues or guidance. 'I think I made my views clear at the outset.'

'Yes you did. Now I've given you my input. I can only deliberate on details you present to me for prosecution, not how or why those details should be gained. While the case is still under a *rogatoire général* and not yet passed to

the examining magistrate - it's an investigative matter. Your jurisdiction.'

Whichever way it went, he would never be able to say 'Perrimond made the recommendation.' He was on his own. 'I understand. If I should decide to pursue the matter, I'll call you first as a matter of courtesy. Let you know whether or not to expect another call from the Mayor.'

Perrimond mentioned that the warrant for Machanaud would be ready the next day and that he would be requesting a pre-trial for only three weeks time. 'Machanaud's defence - probably a standard State appointee - will no doubt try and push for anything up to two months. We'll end up somewhere

between. How's the statement from this woman he used to live with coming along?'

'It will be typed up later, delivered tomorrow when we pick up the warrant.' Through Machanaud's old work place on the Carmargue they'd tracked down a divorcee with three children in le Beausset with whom he'd had a relationship. She'd had a child for him, a girl, but he'd disappeared when it was only three. She hadn't heard from him since, nor had a penny been sent for the child. The tale of bitter desertion, of his hard drinking and violent temper tantrums, lashing out at her and sometimes the children, had been an important breakthrough. Built a picture

that Machanaud was not just a harmless oddball vagabond, he had a temper, was unpredictable and violent when drunk. 'It's quite a strong statement. I think she'll make a good witness on the stand.'

'Good.' The case against Machanaud was looking stronger by the day. That was where their energies should be concentrated; not wild goose chases with this Duclos and him having to fend off calls from the Mayor.

They arranged the time for collecting the arrest warrant for Machanaud, and Poullain commented: 'I should also by then have decided if there'll be any follow up on the car description and Duclos.'

'Very good. I'll see you tomorrow.'

Perrimond bit lightly at his lip just after he hung up. The call had gone well, except at the end he realized he'd sounded too nonchalant; already confident of the decision Poullain would make.

Dominic finished his shift at 7.00 pm. He changed at home, fried two veal steaks, tossed some salad and fifty minutes later sat with his mother on the back porch, sipping some chilled white Bordeaux in the fading evening light. Pale pink, then crimson streaks along the skyline, finally ochre. In the last of the light, his mother asked if he was going to cut back the mimosa in the next few days.

He did most of the gardening now, she'd become too frail, and they'd talked about the mimosa the week before. But he'd just been too busy recently with the investigation; workload should be lighter soon. How was it going? she asked. He made light of it, didn't want to burden her with his disasters: that they were probably charging the wrong suspect and there was little he could do about it. He just said there were two strong suspects, but that evidence was light on the one he suspected the most. Difficult.

They talked about his older sister Janine and her husband possibly visiting from Paris at Christmas; she'd missed the previous Christmas and had come out

at Easter instead. Her boy Pascal was now nine, her younger daughter, Céleste, just six. His mother surveyed the garden fondly, probably remembering her grandchildren running around playing earlier in the year. Then her eyes fell back to the tree and the mimosa. 'It's starting to get strangled. We shouldn't leave it too long.'

'Don't worry, this weekend or next I'll see to it.' The tree. As far as she was concerned, it might as well be the only one in the garden. A young tangerine tree now a bushy six foot high, his father planted it two years before he died. He saw its first blossom, but died before the November when it fruited. His mother viewed it now as a symbol: she'd seen

two years full fruit, how many more would she witness from what her dear departed had planted? And now a nearby overgrown mimosa was threatening its continuing blossom and fruit, and she was too weak to cut it back.

It somehow seemed unjust that after a lifetime's work and struggle, they'd moved to this quiet backwater in expectation of a long and peaceful retirement, and within four years his father was dead. Another two, and his mother was gravely ill.

Dominic lit a night light on the table as it became too dark and they sat like two lovers on their first date. Except that the stories swapped were old and familiar, fond memories. Perhaps one of

the last chances.

Fading light. His mother's skin had a pale yellow translucency to it, looking now even more ghostly under the flickering candle light. He drank faster than normal, swilled away the unwanted thoughts; he was on his third glass to his mother's one before he even noticed. He started to mellow. The sound of cicadas and crickets added rhythm to the night, pulsed gently through his veins.

When his mother finally announced that she was tired and headed for bed, he felt suddenly restless. He sat only five minutes on the empty terrace before resolving to head back into town. She hardly made it past nine these days; the medication sapped her strength as much

as the illness. *Was this what it would be like when she was finally gone? Empty terraces by candle-light, Odette or some other simple shop girl with the right face and the right smile sat opposite just to fill the void.* He needed another drink.

Louis' was half full. He sat up at the bar and Louis, after pouring a beer, asked if he'd seen Monique Rosselot again. Louis' interest was somewhere between the healthy curiosity he showed in any good looking village woman and genuine concern for how she was coping with her grief. Dominic hadn't seen her, nor anyone else from the gendarmerie as far as he knew. 'We probably won't now until the memorial service. There's been

nothing new.' Somebody would probably have to see her straight after arresting Machanaud, tell her that a suspect had been arrested. But he couldn't tell Louis: news could too easily reach Machanaud on the village grapevine.

'I think a lot of people will be going to the service,' Louis commented.

'I know.' Originally shunned, now at least in her worst hour the village would be there for her. It took time to be accepted in Taragnon.

Louis gave him the latest from Valérié through the neighbours. Jean-Luc wasn't coming back from seeing his family for another day or so, might not even make it for the memorial service. Monique was distraught, awkward that she might have

to be alone in front of the village. Tongues would wag: either that they were having problems or that he didn't care about his son's service. Both were far from the truth, Monique had protested to the Fiévets, but that might be the impression given. Louis shook his head. Louis' distant, slightly glazed expression said it all: if Louis had a woman like that, he certainly wouldn't desert her at a moment like this.

They indulged in small talk, and it quickly came around to Odette and his love life. He had only seen Odette once since the investigation had started, had been too busy. But Louis was a master at reading between the lines when it came to romance, was astute enough to realize

things weren't going well. The glazed look was back, broken prematurely by a renewed throng at the bar. Louis excused himself to serve. The cinema had just emptied out, and two tables in the corner had also filled. Louis was obviously going to be rushed, little time for more talk. After a few minutes Dominic knocked back his drink and said his good-byes to a suddenly harried Louis.

His first intention was to head home, but as the night air hit him, he decided on another drink. He aimed his bike for the Maison des Arcs bar two kilometres out of town. It was almost empty, just a few die-hards clustered at the bar. He stayed only for a quick beer and a play on their fruit machine, then went on to the Bar

Fontainouille near Taragnon.

Just past eleven thirty when he arrived, this time he ordered a brandy. It was busy, though most of the noise and activity was towards the end of the room with a group of ten or eleven, mostly men, egging on whichever contestant they'd backed in a table football game. Among the noise and throng, it was a moment before he noticed Machanaud; though Machanaud was already staring at him, and he had the uneasy feeling that he probably had been doing so on and off from when he'd walked in. Machanaud raised his glass. Dominic nodded back and smiled.

He looked just as quickly away from Machanaud, as if he was partly listening

in on a conversation of Henri the barman with a customer two bar stools away. In the corner of his eye he could tell that Machanaud was still looking over at intervals. He wondered if unconsciously he'd sought out Machanaud, he knew this bar was one of his regular haunts. See the suspect on his last night of freedom. Reconcile the image in his mind of the harmless vagabond and poacher with how Perrimond would soon portray him before a jury: woman and child beater, child molester, *murderer*.

Dominic wasn't convinced by the ex-girlfriend's statement, felt that Poullain had prompted too conveniently. She had a hard face, lined and worn and looking ten years beyond her thirty-five years.

Struggling between absent fathers, state aid and part time cleaning jobs to keep food on the table for four children, the bitterness and scars showed in her mannerisms and speech. With Machanaud's illegitimate child she'd probably been unable to get aid. Then suddenly comes the chance of pay-back: *'We can't get you money, but we can get you retribution. Just say the right thing and we'll nail the bastard.'* How often did a woman like that get the system working on her side?

The table football game was breaking up: money was changing hands, coins and notes being slapped on the table side, back patting and jovial abuse, someone suggesting that the loser join

the paraplegic's league. Machanaud started singing a ribald version of Lili Marlene to the cheers of some colleagues.

Perhaps he would simply whisper in Machanaud's ear, 'Go and go now. Get far away. Come tomorrow afternoon there'll be no more chances. They're out to get you and there's nothing I can do to stop them.' Dominic wished now he hadn't come. He felt awkward, could hardly look Machanaud in the eye knowing what was coming the next day. He swilled the last of the brandy in his glass and knocked it back, was suddenly eager to get out. But it was already too late. Machanaud's voice had trailed off mid chorus, he was peeling away from

his group and coming across. A swathe of black hair fell across his face, and he tilted his head as if to see better.

'And how is young Monsieur Fornier this evening?'

'Fine. I was just leaving. But can I get you one before I go?' He held out a 5F note to get Henri's attention.

In the same hand as a *Gauloise*, Machanaud held up a small tumbler with half an inch of pale amber spirit in the bottom. He passed the tumbler across the bar. 'I'll have another eau de vie, if that's okay.'

Dominic ordered and paid, and Henri poured in his normal elaborate style of pulling the bottle gradually further from the glass.

After taking the first swig, Machanaud commented, 'I suppose you'll all be over the moon with this new information.'

Dominic squinted quizzically at Machanaud. Surely the gossip network didn't work that quickly for him to already know about his ex-girlfriend's statement. And was he drunk enough to be sarcastic about his own downfall? 'I don't understand. What information?'

'The car. The car. I suddenly remembered what that car passing looked like. I came into the station two days ago and told your desk sergeant.'

'Who was that?'

'Didn't catch his name. Young chap, brown hair, slightly wavy.'

Briant or Levacher, thought Dominic.

Why hadn't Poullain mentioned it?

'Can't be many Alfa Romeos like that, at least not in this area. You've probably tracked it down already, but don't want to say much. *Salut.*' Machanaud took a quick slug, knocked back half his eau de vie. Then he was suddenly thoughtful. 'Isn't that why you've asked me in tomorrow? Make the statement on the car official?'

Dominic's mind was still reeling. *Duclos car!* 'Yes, yes,' he answered hastily. Perhaps in all the confusion Poullain had overlooked mentioning it. The past days had been a nightmare of notes, typing statements, reports and filing for the arrest warrant. Or perhaps Poullain intended to mention it only once

he had the full statement from Machanaud. Perhaps. It had been Dominic's suggestion to serve the warrant on Machanaud by asking him in to make another statement, rather than trying to serve it outside and risk a scene, fighting to subdue a handcuffed Machanaud all the way back in the car. Now he knew why Poullain had been so keen on the suggestion: Machanaud had expected to be asked in to make his car statement official.

Machanaud noticed Dominic's consternation and leaned over, whispering conspirationally, 'It's okay, if it's awkward to talk about it, I understand.'

Machanaud cut a pathetic image, smiling, probably thinking that half the

local gendarmerie were busily tracking down the car that would solve their largest case in years, and *he'd* provided the vital clue. Totally unaware of the sword of Damocles hovering over his own head. Dominic felt a pang of guilt aiding Poullain's false pretence with the statement. Or was he missing something with Machanaud that Poullain and others saw?

Machanaud with one reassuring hand on Dominic's shoulder, smiling, the harmless poacher. Dominic smiled in return. Tinker, tailor, poacher, *murderer*. Machanaud leering, one hand raised with the rock to smash down on the boy's skull. *Which was the right image?* From the end of the room came

renewed shouting and cheering. Two new contestants had stepped up to the table football machine. Beyond a plume of gauloise smoke, Dominic could smell the eau de vie on Machanaud's breath. *Eau de mort. Water of death.* Machanaud swilling down the boy's bloodstains from his clothing. Dominic shook the images away. The atmosphere in the bar was suddenly claustrophobic, suffocating. He stood up.

'Are you all right?' asked Machanaud.

'Yes, yes. Fine. It's just someone I should have seen, and I suddenly realized I might now be too late.' He looked at his watch: 12.06am. Officially, Poullain finished today's shift at midnight, but often he was still there

up to half an hour afterwards.

Chapeau backed into a side farm track a hundred yards along from the main gates of the château on the opposite side of the road. Some trees and foliage mostly concealed his car, though he had a clear view of its main gates through a small gap. Two days before, when he'd first made the drive, he'd kept a discreet distance from the Alfa Romeo all the way from Marseille, especially on the quieter country road. On that first occasion he waited across from the château fifteen minutes.

Then spent the next day checking with the land registry and vehicle registration in Paris: the château was owned by one

Marcel Vallon, one of the area's largest vineyard owners and wine producers. But the car was registered to Alain Duclos with a Limoges address. So this wasn't Duclos' family house, he was probably a family friend or business associate visiting.

Chapeau decided to return, see if Duclos was staying with the Vallons or whether two days ago had been just a one time visit. After half an hour he saw a Bentley leave, then a delivery van arrive fifteen minutes later. Then nothing for over twenty minutes. Chapeau was getting impatient, it was late morning and the heat was building up, he longed to get moving and get some air rush through the car's interior - when finally

the green Alfa Romeo appeared. It was heading towards him!

He quickly ducked down out of sight, heard the engine drone pass, and raised up again. He counted three seconds, fired up the engine, waited for a Renault Dauphine to pass heading in the same direction, and pulled out.

Harrault was on desk duty and confirmed that Poullain was still in his office, getting ready to leave. Dominic decided to look through the desk register first, then talk to Poullain. Harrault flicked back the page, then stood to one side as Dominic ran one finger down the entries. Nothing. He was halfway through checking back through the entries

when Poullain came out of his office.

He looked between Harrault and Dominic. 'I thought you'd finished a few hours back, Fornier. Looking for anything interesting?'

'Yes. I just bumped into Machanaud. He asked how our enquiries were going after his statement about the car.'

Poullain met his stare for a moment, then nodded towards his office. It was obviously going to be awkward discussing this openly in front of Harrault. As soon as the door was shut behind him, he questioned, 'So. What is the problem?'

'I don't see anything entered in the register.'

'And you won't. Not until I've

discussed the development fully with Perrimond.'

'But Machanaud came in two days ago.'

'If he'd come in five or six days ago, or mentioned it on one of our first interviews, it might have been different.' Poullain walked around his desk, stood to one side of his seat. 'Think about it, Fornier. We've been asking about sightings of his car at bars and shops throughout Taragnon. Half the village has probably heard about it. And suddenly, miraculously, Machanaud remembers what it looked like. Don't be so naive! Machanaud has picked up on the description from village gossip.'

'Is that what Perrimond thinks?'

'No, it's what we have both discussed at length as a distinct possibility. He'll no doubt tell me what he thinks tomorrow.'

Dominic shook his head. 'Regardless of what we think, it should be taken as a full statement and entered in the register. We can interpret it any way we wish after that.'

Poullain was keen to keep some distance in the argument, a pending decision from Perrimond gave him someone detached to blame. 'I have to take Perrimond's guidance as prosecutor. If the statement is so obviously false, is not heading anywhere concrete, there's no point. I can't force him to pursue it. Also, we would probably then have to

question Duclos again - an additional waste of investigative time we can ill afford.'

'Perhaps it wouldn't be such a waste of time. If we mention his car has been sighted, put him on the spot, his story might change. Something new might come to light.'

Poullain stared dully at Fornier. So they were back again to Fornier's groundless suspicion of Duclos. When he thought about Perrimond's concern about the mayor's call, the whole messy background he was stealthily avoiding mentioning, the eagerness in Fornier's voice was almost laughable. 'And what is going to change? All the waiters who saw Duclos while the attack took place

are suddenly going to say they were all wrong. They didn't see Duclos. Or is Duclos going to do it all for us and just say that the waiters were all lying. He wasn't in the restaurant at the time. Wake up! It's not going to happen. There's no point in us even going through the exercise.'

'Is that your assessment or Perrimond's?'

Poullain stared back icily. 'Both!'

It was already clear the answer that would be coming the next day, thought Dominic. The statement wouldn't be made. 'Then I don't agree with it.'

Dominic noticed Poullain openly flinch; then his head cocked slightly, as if he hadn't heard properly, his eyes

darting fleetingly across the desk top for explanations before looking up again. The surprise showed in his face. In their previous disagreements over Duclos, Dominic had always given way.

For a moment Poullain looked undecided how to rise to this new challenge. Then at length he exhaled audibly and waved a hand to one side. A dismissive gesture, as if the whole affair was suddenly unworthy of his emotions. 'And what exactly do you propose to do?'

'If the decision is made not to take the statement, then as the assisting investigative officer, I would like my disagreement of that action recorded.'

'Are you sure that's what you wish to

do? You're aware of its seriousness.'

Dominic felt uncomfortable under Poullain's intense glare, his heart pounding heavily. But he'd gone too far to back down again now. His mouth was dry as he stammered, 'Yes.'

Poullain stared at him a moment longer, then sat down and rubbed his forehead with one hand. Fornier obviously wasn't going to budge, was forcing the issue to its limit. The procedure, normally used only in extreme cases, was to protect officers who felt that a line pursued in an investigation might later reflect badly on their career records; once filed, the complaint would no doubt end up on his area commanding Colonel's desk in Aix.

All manner of awkward questions and complications could arise. Faced with that, perhaps it would be easier to take Machanaud's statement and visit Duclos again, regardless of the fact that it was all a waste of time. Do everything by the book. Perrimond would just have to put up with another call from the Mayor. Poullain sighed. 'Is there anything else?' He looked up only fleetingly, his annoyance evident.

'No.'

'Then I'll make your thoughts known to Perrimond when I visit him tomorrow and pick up the arrest warrant. You stay here in case I'm not back before Machanaud arrives.'

'What shall I tell him if you're not

back by then?'

'Tell him you think it's for a statement, but you won't know for sure until I arrive.' Poullain forced a tight smile. 'If you get your way, you'll be partly telling the truth.'

Chapeau sat in a café in a side street just off Marseille's Rue St Ferréol. Duclos' car was parked twenty yards along in the same road, he could just see its back bumper, was ready to mobilize quickly if it moved, coins already on the table for the black coffee and brandy chaser he was drinking.

At one point following Duclos from the Vallon estate, he thought of giving up. The road headed towards Aix and

Marseille, but most interesting of all it went through Taragnon, the village where the boy was found. For a while he toyed with the enticing possibility that Duclos might stop in Taragnon, perhaps even re-visit the old crime scene - but Duclos headed straight through the village. Shortly after, when Duclos took the Marseille rather than the Aix road, it struck him that Duclos might be visiting Vacheret's for one of his young boys. He decided to continue following.

They were parked close to the main shopping area, and the *Panier* district and Vacheret's establishment were over a mile away. He'd followed to the corner and seen Duclos head in the opposite direction towards the Opera

and the Palais de Justice, before deciding to find himself a café in the small side street and car sit. He'd been there now forty minutes and this was his second coffee and brandy.

Where was Duclos? Shopping no doubt: buying designer shirts and silk underpants, or whatever gay paedophiles liked wearing. Or perhaps a quick stroll in the *Puget* gardens, sitting on a park bench and feeding the pigeons while surreptitiously getting his jollies by watching young boys in shorts play with a football. People like Duclos made him sick. Clean on the outside, dirty inside, and with the cheek to look down their noses at people like himself. He might be a thug and a killer for hire, but there

was no pretence. What you saw, you got. No false labelling.

He sharply knocked back another slug of brandy to quell his growing anger. Little shit. Feeding him a false line to commit a murder that would have had half the gendarmes in the Var hunting him down. The irony and sheer joy of stiffing Duclos for the 7,000 francs was already waning. He wanted more, much more. If he'd actually gone through with the murder, he would have probably killed Duclos straight after collecting the money; followed him out into the country lanes beyond Aubagne, pulled up alongside at the first deserted crossroads, pumped two bullets through Duclos head, and drove on. Bliss.

It had still been a tempting proposition following Duclos to the Vallon estate that first time. But he was glad now he'd shown restraint. If he was patient, nurtured it well, this could turn out to be a long and profitable association. A meaningful relationship. No point in fucking Duclos on the first date. He had been disappointed to discover that Duclos wasn't part of the Vallon family, that would have been a remarkable pot of gold to strike so quickly. But he was obviously a family friend, perhaps came from a similar moneyed background. Waiting and watching, he would soon know.

Chapeau suddenly pushed back from the table, almost spilling his coffee.

Duclos was passing! Heading for his car. Chapeau was poised to stand up and head out, and pointed to the coins on the table for the benefit of the concerned waiter looking over.

Duclos put a shopping bag in his car, leant over, re-arranged something in the back seat for a moment, then straightened up and locked the door again. He started heading back down past the café. Chapeau turned away from the window, looked back towards the bar until Duclos was past, then got up and went out. He hovered by the doorway for a few seconds, until Duclos was about eighty yards ahead and almost at the end of the road, then followed.

He saw Duclos turn right this time,

heading towards La Canebiere and the old port, with the *Panier* not much further on. Perhaps Duclos would end up at Vacheret's after all. Along Rue St Ferriol towards La Canebiere, the shops gradually became smaller and seedier. Cheap souvenirs and cards, carved wood and ivory, beads and caftans, goat skin drums, a delicatessen with goat's cheese and couscous. They might as well be in the kasbah. Half the shopkeepers and people passing were North African.

At La Canebiere, Duclos turned left towards the old port, past the quayside cafés and the Hôtel de Ville. A brief respite of nice cafés and shops, people dining out and looking out over the kaleidoscope of brightly painted fishing

boats in the harbour. Then they turned into the winding *Panier* back lanes: dark and narrow cobblestone streets, washing strung at intervals between the dank stone buildings to catch what few shafts of sunlight filtered through. Some yorrelling in the distance, a radio playing the latest hit from Morocco: wavering pipes and strings that sounded like cats being strangled.

An old man in a black *djellabah* passed Chapeau and, on the corner, in front of a small café with a beaded curtain entrance, a young Moroccan was trying to sell lottery tickets. Wearing a stained pale blue shirt, black trousers and flip-flops, his watery eyes behind dark glasses stared distractedly at the

corner gable of the house across the street. Chapeau doubted that he was really blind, and listened hard beyond his repetitive sales chant for Duclos' footsteps in the next street. Finally he picked it up: to the left, thirty, forty yards down. He waited a second before following.

As Duclos took the next right hand turn, Chapeau realized he was heading for Vacheret's. At the end was a short street that wound up some steps, with Vacheret's not far along in the next street. Chapeau kept a block behind, hidden around the corner, waiting until Duclos had receded deeper into the street before walking in. By the time Chapeau reached the start of the steps,

Duclos was already at its top, turning left towards Vacheret's. The short street was deserted: one side was a half demolished building, the other the blank stone side of a building plastered with posters. Two cats scavenged around a group of rubbish bins at the top of the street. Now that he knew Duclos was heading for Vacharet's, he might as well head back. But he was suddenly curious to see how long Duclos stayed: twenty minutes, it could be a simple business meeting. Forty or fifty minutes and he was probably with one of the young boys.

Chapeau decided to wait it out, found a bar not far around the corner with Vacheret's a hundred yards further up on

the opposite side. It was a small and seedy bar; sawdust over cream and terracotta patch tiling. The barman was fat and wearing an orange T-shirt two sizes too small. From his accent, he was a local Marseilles, though over half the bar were North Africans: two men playing checkers in the corner, two at the bar, and a group of local workmen in blue overalls at another table. The radio was playing Tony Bennett. The barman poured the brandy Chapeau ordered.

Chapeau waited.

An easy listening station, Edith Piaf, Bert Kampfaet and Frank Sinatra followed. A minah bird in the corner chirped in on every other chorus. Chapeau wondered how the Moroccans

liked Frank Sinatra: after cats being strangled, it must sound like golden syrup. It was his kind of music, but the accompanying minah bird and the sounds of checkers being banged down to grunts and shouts started to grate on his nerves. Half the afternoon he'd spent tracking this prick Duclos. And now Duclos was probably in some lavish back room with potted palms, getting sponged down by one pre-pubescent boy while getting his rocks off with another, while he sat in a bar surrounded by grunting Moroccans and a minah bird singing along to Frank Sinatra. Great. His hand gripped tightly at his glass. He looked at his watch: almost thirty minutes. Ten minutes more and he'd leave.

But minutes later, already thinking ahead to the other pieces of the puzzle he'd like to put into place with Duclos, an idea struck him, a smile slowly crossing his face. Perfect. His initial gloating gradually gave way to the worry that it was almost too good, too cheeky, it must somehow be flawed; but after chewing it over some more between brandy slugs, he saw few pitfalls. At the same time it might also get rid of some of his pent up anger and frustration with the little turd. All he had to do was keep close to the end of the bar, look out at an angle until he saw Duclos emerge, then head out a moment beforehand. He put some change on the bar to cover the brandy, ready for a quick exit.

Chapeau sat through Billie Halliday, Maurice Chevalier, Mario Lanza and Brenda Lee, with minah bird accompaniment and checker-slapping percussion, before Duclos finally emerged.

Chapeau stepped out briskly, he was at least eighty yards ahead of Duclos, and hoped and prayed that Duclos didn't suddenly recognize his profile from behind. Ten yards more, six, *two*... he ducked around the corner sharply, taking the steps almost two at a time, now at a half run. He stopped thirty yards down, eyeing up an open doorway in the derelict building for suitability a second before stepping inside. He went two yards in, stepping over the rubbish piled

up. And waited.

The sound of Duclos' footsteps came after a minute. The short street was deserted; Chapeau prayed that nobody else suddenly came into it. A sudden sound from behind. Chapeau jumped, wheeling sharply around to see a cat pulling at a rubbish bag. Its eyes met his for a second in the semi-darkness, then it scampered off. Chapeau's nerves settled back.

Duclos was close. Very close. Footsteps almost upon him.

Chapeau held his breath low, shallow - and as soon as Duclos' profile came into view, he stepped deftly from the shadows and struck out quickly. A right fisted blow to Duclos' cheek. Duclos

hadn't seen him, had only started to turn towards the approaching sound as Chapeau's ham fist connected.

Chapeau swung again, hitting Duclos nose from the side this time, feeling the bone crunch and seeing the blood spurt as Duclos crumpled and fell. This felt good. Chapeau got in a quick left to the stomach as Duclos was going down, then as Duclos hit the ground and lay prostrate on his side, all that was left was to kick. He managed one to Duclos' groin before Duclos rolled over and put his hands down, then made do with two swift kicks to his kidneys.

Duclos started to look back up towards his attacker, so Chapeau pushed one hand against the side of Duclos face,

jamming it hard against the ground. Half kneeling now, he took out his gun, a Heckler & Koch 9mm, and slid it next to his hand against Duclos' cheek. Duclos' eyes shut tight as the cold steel of the barrel pressed home. Chapeau cocked the chamber. The eyes scrunched tighter, a breathless '*non*' escaping. Chapeau savoured Duclos' fear a moment longer before un-cocking and releasing the pressure. Then deftly flipped the gun in the same motion and swung the butt twice sharply against the side of Duclos' ribs; and again lower to his kidneys and stomach. It was a measured attack. He didn't want to kill Duclos: just enough to make him walk like an old man for a week and piss blood.

Chapeau reached across and took out Duclos' wallet from his inside pocket. Straightening up, he gave one farewell kick to Duclos' groin. Keep him away from the young boys for a few weeks. Then he slipped his gun back inside his jacket and scampered off down the steps to the receding groans from Duclos, which brought a smile to his face.

FIFTEEN

'We've got a problem.'

Poullain was in Perrimond's office. The arrest warrant for Machanaud had been duly signed, notarized and stamped. Perrimond passed it across. 'Tell me.'

Poullain started by explaining that he'd already reached the decision not to make Machanaud's statement official for the reasons they'd discussed the other day, when the problem arose: his assistant Fornier had been told about the car sighting by Machanaud while off duty, and was now of a different mind.

So much so that if it wasn't entered officially, he was threatening to file a complaint with the commanding area gendarmerie Colonel. 'Though it might be a complete waste of time pursuing the statement, perhaps under the circumstances it will be less awkward if it is made.'

'Perhaps. Where did this Fornier meet up with Machanaud.'

'In a bar in Taragnon.'

'I see.' Perrimond's nostrils flared and pinched back as if an odious smell had just hit him. Though it was unclear whether his disdain was directed at Fornier or Poullain's lack of control over his staff. 'Leaving aside the implications for a moment, before this

happened with Fornier you personally had made the decision *not* to make the statement official.'

'No point. It's very obviously fabricated and interviewing Duclos again would serve absolutely no purpose. At least two people saw him at the time of the boy's attack. His alibi is solid.'

So now it was down to varying degrees of awkwardness, thought Perrimond: another call from the Mayor or questions from the area gendarmerie Colonel. 'Tell me about this Fornier. What's his background?'

'Young, twenty-six years old. Was with the Foreign Legion in Algeria for four years, then joined the gendarmerie

in Marseille.'

'Did he see any combat action in Algeria?'

'None that I know of. His work was mainly with radio and communications, back room logistics stuff. He took a similar position with the Marseille gendarmerie.'

'What made him move to Bauriac from Marseille?'

'His mother's ill, dying from cancer. He wanted to be close to her, and he put in a request for transfer through Marseille. We had no communications or logistics department, just purely street pounding work, but he took it. He was pretty desperate, feared she might have only six months left, and so was willing

to take whatever was offered.'

'So he has sacrificed career advancement in order to take care of his dying mother. Very noble.' Though from Perrimond's half smile it was difficult to tell if he thought it was noble or just foolish. Then he became more thoughtful. 'Why did you specifically use him to assist on this investigation?'

'My main assistant, Harrault, was in the middle of another investigation. Plus I thought Fornier's past experience with Marseille might come in useful. A fair degree of liaison with Marseille was necessary, particularly with forensics.'

'The complaint, if it's made, will probably end up with Colonel Houillon here in Aix, is that correct?'

'Yes. I get one copy, it's noted and filed, and another goes to Colonel Houillon.'

'I have quite good contact with Houillon.' Perrimond glanced down, brooded for a second, as if his ink blotter might inspire him. He was slow in looking up. 'Look. Say nothing to Fornier for the time being. Tell him the issue is still being decided and you'll know something tomorrow. But I think I have an idea.'

'Anything reported for your area?' Chapeau's voice was husky and muted, as if people unseen might be listening in.

'No. Nothing yet.'

'When did you check last?'

'Just before seven when I finished duty.'

It was over twenty-four hours since the attack, thought Chapeau. It was unlikely the report had been made. His police contact, Jaquin, was a Detective Inspector stationed in the *Panier*. Revenge for a client who had beaten a club girl was the story Chapeau invented; Jaquin would have little sympathy for such a client. The club wanted to be forewarned of being named in any police statement, or perhaps the incident might be reported simply as a mugging. He'd asked Jaquin to check the station nearest the attack. Nothing filed yet. Not even for a mugging.

'I'll phone again at the same time

tomorrow, just in case. Thanks.' But Chapeau knew that most reports were made within hours and had certainly filtered down within twenty-four hours, even if made from another station. The ploy had confirmed what he'd suspected: Duclos had something to hide, didn't want to report the mugging and risk contact with the police.

Giving Duclos a beating had put him on a high for several hours. But it was nothing to what he experienced now, as he thought over the information gathered during the day. Duclos wallet had been a veritable treasure chest of information: identity card, credit card for Banque Nationale, business cards - mostly lawyers from the Limoges area - and a

recent pay-slip. It was for a Provincial Government office in Limoges, Department E4. Four phone calls later he'd ascertained what Department E4 dealt with and, from scale pay rates, Duclos' position.

He'd dropped the credit card in a *Panier* back street a block away. Hopefully someone deserving would pick it up, go on a spending spree. Perhaps the supposedly blind lottery ticket seller: next time by, he'd be wearing crocodile skin shoes and sporting a Rolex. Duclos would have to report the card lost or stolen to the bank, and if it was used fraudulently he would be duty bound to make a police report or be liable for the expense. Hassle with

the bank *and* the police. Perhaps Duclos would just eat the expenditure. Oh, this was fun.

And he felt sure that the best was to come: Department E4. 15,400 Francs per annum. Duclos was an assistant public prosecutor!

Chapeau had only been to jail once. For twenty-seven months at the age of eighteen. He'd been a club bouncer since sixteen, and one night threw out three students who were getting out of hand with the bar girls. One of them landed badly as he was thrown out and broke his collar bone. The boy's father was a leading businessman, a member of the Chamber of Commerce and the golfing partner of a local prosecutor. Charges

for Grievous Bodily Harm were pressed and a three year sentence called for. The trial was a farce, a one-track railroad. Chapeau served all but nine months due to good behaviour.

But one vision had stayed with him strongly through the years: the prosecutor and his assistant huddled in conspiracy through the *Instruction* process and the final trial, then smug and elated as the sentence was pronounced. The boy's father had come over and congratulated the prosecutor. Another triumph plotted on the golf course.

It had been Chapeau's first taste of the system at work. He'd vowed then that if he was to continue making his living from physical enforcement, it would be

done in the shadows and with the buffer of an organization that knew how to work the system. Fifteen months out of jail he became a *milieu* enforcer. At first it was just low key strong arm work: intimidation and threats, the occasional limb broken. The work ranged from small time gambling, protection and loan debts, to non payment on street level drug packets. But within three years he'd progressed to the big league and made his first hit: an area dealer had pocketed heroin with a street value of almost 300,000 Francs, claiming it had been seized in a police raid. Through an inside police contact the *milieu* discovered that wasn't true. It couldn't go unpunished.

He thought again now of the two smug prosecutors, smiling, congratulating themselves. Slowly he twirled Duclos' identity card between his fingers, and smiled himself. A gay paedophile Assistant Prosecutor, his entire life and future now resting in his hands. The circle of revenge could hardly be more poetic. This was going to be much more fun than he first thought.

The memorial service for Christian Rosselot was held at the Church of St Nicholas, fifty yards back from the main Bauriac square. The inside of the church was a microcosm of village life and social stratas.

The first row nearest the altar was

taken up with the Rosselots and immediate neighbours and friends. A dark complexioned woman in her sixties to Monique Rosselot's left, Dominic assumed to be her mother. She was dressed fashionably and well: dark Pierre Cardin blouse and matching pleated skirt, though perhaps a little too much jewellery. Dominic was surprised; when Louis had mentioned Monique's mother visiting, he'd imagined her shrouded in a black *djellabah*, like the drab old widows he remembered from the streets of Algeria.

Jean-Luc had made it back in time, and had also brought his brother and his mother. His father had been too ill to travel. The latest updates from Louis

through Valérié as they'd filed into the church. They stood to the right of Jean-Luc with the Fiévets immediately alongside.

The next few rows were taken up with village people who had an acquaintance or vague connection with the Rosselots: various shopkeepers Monique visited regularly, Jean-Luc's farm equipment and seed suppliers, the family doctor, Louis and Valérié.

The gendarmerie was represented five rows back, with an assortment of mostly unconnected villagers who wished to pay their respects filling another four rows behind. The murder had touched Taragnon deeply: sorrow and gentle weeping alongside those who were just

curious or open-mouthed, trying to catch a glimpse of the Rosselots in the front row.

Four days ago, Curate Pierre Bergoin had held a small funeral service for Christian Rosselot at the burial ground chapel between Bauriac and St Maximin. Only Jean-Luc, Monique, her mother and the Fiévets were present. The family had wanted a private affair, and the brunt of their grief had already been spent away from onlookers.

The memorial service started with the *Requiem æternam*. Dominic looked up as Curate Bergoin's voice echoed around the church: '*...Te decet hymnus, Deus, in Sion; et tibi reddétur votum in Jerúsalem*: hear my prayer; all flesh

shall come to thee. Eternal rest. Oh, God, creator and redeemer of all the faithful, grant to the souls of all thy servants and handmaids departed, the remission of their sins; that through pious supplications...'

There were six of them from the gendarmerie: Harrault, Poullain, Servan, Briant, Levacher and himself. Dominic wondered if the division in their ranks was obvious; Poullain and he were at opposite ends of the group. Since the call late in the day before, they'd hardly spoken.

It had come from Colonel Gastine, his old commanding officer in Marseille. After the preamble of how Dominic was settling in Bauriac, Gastine quickly came

onto the subject of the call he'd had from Colonel Houillon in Aix. 'He might call me once in four months, if I'm lucky. So although he tried to make light of it, the fact that he should trouble to call at all over such a matter made me realize there was something much more serious in the background. Apparently, there's some sort of disagreement between you and your commanding officer over an investigation now in progress. Is that correct?'

So, Pouillain had got to Houillon before him. 'Yes. It's a murder investigation. I don't think my Captain heading the investigation here is looking fully at all the possibilities.'

'You might have very good cause,

Dominic, it's not my position to question. And that's not the problem. Though it hasn't been said directly, only intimated, if anything lands on Houillon's desk, Captain Pouillon is going to request your transfer. He'll argue that he only took you in as a departmental favour to accommodate the fact that your mother was sick and you needed to be close to her. He saw your main usefulness as liaison where Marseille might be involved, such as the investigation in progress; but that if he can't use you effectively, if your working styles clash, there is really nowhere else in the gendarmerie he can deploy you effectively. You'll be surplus to requirement.'

'Where would they transfer me?' Dominic asked meekly. Perhaps if it wasn't too far away, he could commute.

'Rouen is one suggestion, Brest another, or possibly Nancy.'

Dominic felt as if a trap-door had opened. All were at least three hundred miles away. The message was clear: if he didn't tow the line, he'd be sent into exile. His mother would die alone.

'I'm sorry to bring you this news, Dominic. The way Houillon put it, it was almost as if they were doing you a favour by using me as honest broker, warning you. Giving you the option. If you'd filed the complaint, they'd have just shipped you out.'

'They?'

'Houillon was slightly apologetic, as if he felt a bit uncomfortable with all of this as well. So I read into it that someone with far stronger influence than Pouillan was involved. Pouillain couldn't risk directly asking Houillon to get involved like this.'

Perrimond. So in the end they'd all ganged up together to get their way over Machanaud. Put the lowly gendarme in his place, make sure he didn't cause any waves. It had probably all been done with a few quick phone calls, and now he was powerless. A bloodless coup.

'Fratres, ece mystérium vobis dico...'
Curate Bergoin's voice cut through some stifled sobbing from the front rows. '...In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at

the last trumpet: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall rise again incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this, corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal put on immortality. And when this mortal hath put on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting? Now the sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin...

Death? His mother's pale yellow face before him, smiling softly: 'Don't worry, I understand if you have to go. You're young and you have your work and your career.' And him protesting: '*No!* I can't leave you at a time like this. I promised!'

Machanaud screaming at him as he was being dragged from the interview room by Servan and Harrault: 'You betrayed me! I was meant to be here for a statement about the car. I trusted you!' Probably Pouillain had planned it, left him alone for over an hour with Machanaud before he'd returned with the warrant, knowing fully that Machanaud would get edgy without some reassurance. Busily basting their sacrificial lamb while Poullain and Perrimond cemented the final stages of their coup.

With the arrest warrant served and Machanaud's rights read out as he was dragged off to the cells, for the first time it struck Dominic what Machanaud

faced. If convicted, he would probably get the death penalty or would be exiled to a living death in the penal colonies. With the harshness of colony regimes and disease rife, average life expectancy was little more than six years. From his cell window, Machanaud had probably even heard the church bells announcing the memorial service, rallying the emotions of the village against him.

It was a daunting, impossible choice: leave his mother alone to die, or stay silent and allow a man whose guilt he questioned be condemned.

'...*Teste David cum Sibylla.*' Muted weeping now also from an unknown woman towards the back of the church. '*...Quantus tremor est futúrus.* The last

loud trumpet's spreading tone, shall thro' the place of tombs be blown - to summon all before the Throne. Nature and death with fixed eyes, shall see the trembling creature rise - to plead before the last assize. The written book shall be outspread, and all that it contains be read. To try the living and the dead.'

Curate Bergoin offered little guidance.

SIXTEEN

Session 5.

'...Or is it perhaps you're concerned that if we confront Jojo, ask him questions, we'll frighten him off. He won't appear in the dreams to help you again.'

'I don't know... perhaps a bit.'

'The dreams are special between you - and you don't want to spoil it.'

'... It's not knowing what to do.' Eyran's head lolled, as if asking consent of an unseen figure.

Lambourne let the moment ride, let the thought sink deeper home. He'd spent the last twenty minutes setting the mood to draw out Jojo directly, and finally he sensed he was close. 'I think you're a lot surer of his friendship than you make out. You don't think he'd frighten off easily, do you?'

After a few seconds, Eyran exhaled slowly; reluctant acceptance. 'No.'

'But while you might like to know the answers - know how Jojo lost his parents and where, see just how much you have in common - you're not sure how to ask the questions. But that's where I can help you.' Lambourne left a long silence, watching Eyran's reaction: his brow was furrowed then relaxed, his

tongue lightly moistening his lips. The suggestion was fully there now; all he had to do was fill in the gaps. '...You don't need to worry about confronting him – because we can go back to the past dreams and I can talk to Jojo directly.'

Lambourne could see that Eyran was teetering on the brink, fighting between what he'd like to believe - being able to ask Jojo questions, guide some events for once rather than be just a passenger - and what his senses told him was real: the dreams were over, they were in the past. If he could change the past... *the first thing he'd do was bring his parents back alive.* Like a boxer with his opponent reeling, Lambourne knew

that if he didn't keep up the momentum, he could lose Eyran at any moment.

'...But I'll need your help Eyran. Jojo is with you, he's part of you - part of your dreams. If you really want to know the answers, Jojo will talk to me. Of that I'm sure. Will you help me?'

'... I don't know.... *how* would I help?'

'By wanting to know the answers as much as me. You do want to know about Jojo, don't you... know why he's a friend, know what happened to him so that you can better understand why he's there to help you?' Lambourne watched each tick of expression on Eyran's face as the messages went home. Eyran was close to coming to terms with it. 'If you really want to know those things - then I'm sure

it will work.'

Eyran swallowed slowly. 'Yes... I would like to know.'

But Lambourne could read the uncertainty still in Eyran's face. 'If it doesn't work, if Jojo doesn't want to speak to us - then we'll soon know. There'll be nothing lost. We'll just continue as before.'

And for the first time there was a glimmer of acceptance, an easing in Eyran's expression as the portent of failure was lifted. It wasn't the full acceptance he'd have liked, but probably the best he'd get. He pushed the advantage before the moment was lost. '... So let's go back to the last dream you had... try and find Jojo. Tell me, what's

the first thing you see?'

The sudden leap caught Eyran by surprise, and Lambourne could see that Eyran was suddenly perplexed, fighting for images just out of reach. 'Its okay... take your time,' Lambourne soothed. He counted off the seconds as Eyran's breathing slowly settled back.

'... It was dusk, the light was fading fast... I was approaching the copse.'

The dreams were always a tease, thought Lambourne: images not clear, mist that obscured reality, fading light that meant he would be lost in the darkness if he didn't find his parents soon. Jojo always had him on a tight treadmill.

'...There was a figure on the edge of

the wheat field, just before the copse, looking back at me... But I couldn't see clearly who it was.'

'Did you think that the figure might be your father - or Jojo perhaps?'

'I wasn't sure... but as I started to run closer to get a clear view, I came into a clearing of wheat which looked like it had been cut neatly away - and Jojo was sitting there, looking down. He looked sad at first, lost... but as he saw me, he smiled and stood up.'

Lambourne saw an opportunity. 'Did you ask Jojo what was wrong, why he looked so sad?'

'No... no, I didn't. When he smiled and stood up, I was sure then it was my father ahead - and I was keen to point

him out to Jojo.'

Lambourne could see the mixture of doubt and elation on Eyran's face. Doubt that once again he might have ignored Jojo's emotions and feelings - battling with his elation that it might be his father. He would need to deal with the father's sighting first to get Eyran fully focused.

Jojo quickly took control. Eyran described the distant shape fading into the shadows as Jojo looked up, saying that Eyran's father had probably gone deeper into the copse. Jojo started to lead the way. Lambourne tensed as the descriptions rolled, tapping his pencil on his notes. Over a week's delay before Stuart Capel finally signed the consent

slip, and only then because there'd been another bad dream. Lambourne knew that if he didn't succeed in drawing out Jojo now, there might not be another chance.

As Eyran described them in pursuit, heading across the field and through the trees towards the brook, Lambourne's nerves bristled - fearing another dream ending. But this time they headed out of the woods and into an open field the other side, and he was lulled into complacency by the setting and his pre-occupation with returning Eyran to where he first met Jojo. He was only alerted by Eyran's sudden change in breathing - suddenly more laboured, his eyelids flickering rapidly. '...Does the

dream end badly there?'

'Yes... we... there was a dip... *I... I*'
Fractured breathing, Eyran swallowing
on his words.

'It's okay... It's *okay!* You don't need
to go there again. Step back from the
clearing... *step back!*'

Eyran looked startled for a moment.
Lambourne realized then that he'd
shouted. He quickly introduced a calmer,
more soothing tone. 'Let's go back... back
away from the clearing. Yes - that's it....
you're away from any danger now...'

Lambourne left a few seconds gap
between each comment, as if waiting for
Eyran to catch up with him. '...We're
going back to the beginning - back to
where you first met Jojo in the first field.

He was sitting then in another clearing of wheat. You mentioned that he looked very sad. But we never found out why he was so sad.'

Eyran's breathing gradually eased. He looked more settled.

'... You thought perhaps that you should have asked, that he might have been upset you didn't ask. But it doesn't matter - we can ask him now.'

'I don't know... I'm not sure, I...' Doubt and uncertainty returned, swept across Eyran's face like rising storm clouds.

Lambourne could see Eyran retreating, a moment more and the chance would be gone completely. 'But you need to know more about Jojo. You

never ask him anything, yet he's put in so much time helping you, trying to find your parents. Don't you think it's only fair - he'll be upset if you never ask. One night you'll be dreaming, you'll return to the copse, expecting him to be there to help you find your parents... and you'll be all alone. He won't be there!'

Lambourne saw Eyran visibly flinch. But as his expression settled back, Lambourne could see that a glimmer of acceptance had returned. It had been the right ploy: remind Eyran that there was just as much risk in *not* talking to Jojo. It wasn't all one way.

Lambourne spent the next minutes cajoling and reassuring, one minute enticing and luring, hoping that Eyran

would make the decision, then suddenly once again storm-trooping - before Eyran finally relented and he broke through. Entered the elusive world of Jojo.

Lambourne spent the first minutes getting accustomed to Jojo's voice. The intonation was slightly different, slower and more purposeful, but apart from that it was Eyran's voice. Lambourne asked if he was Eyran's friend, where he knew Eyran from, but Jojo was vague '*...from before... it was a long time back.*' He got a similar answer when he asked Jojo about losing his parents. Distant memories, obscured by a haze of time. Lambourne wanted to stay for the

moment with the present and the recent dreams.

'Did you lose your parents by the copse where you first met Eyran. You mentioned that you'd had the same experience as Eyran - that he wouldn't be able to find his parents unless he crossed over.'

'... I only wanted to help. I was over the far side... I couldn't help him unless he crossed over.'

'Did you see him crossing over as a sign that he trusted you. That he wanted your help?' Lambourne knew that he'd have to be more patient talking to Jojo; each response was being fed in turn through Eyran.

'... Yes.'

'But why the copse? Was it familiar - reminded you of where you lost your parents?'

'There was something about it, I couldn't be sure... but I had the feeling stronger in the wheat field. It was a long time ago, though... I couldn't remember clearly.

'The same wheat field where you were with Eyran in the last dream?'

'Yes. But Eyran was running through the wheat field in the first dream... it was that which made me look up and see him from the copse.'

Eyran too had mentioned that when he first moved in the house the wheat field had seemed familiar... *'as if I'd been there before.'* 'You could see him

between the trees - running towards you?'

'Yes, and I... I... felt his concern, his worry as he was running through. I knew that something was wrong.'

'The same concern that you felt when you lost your parents?'

'Yes - I'd felt the same.'

'And that was what first made you feel close to Eyran, made you feel you could help find his parents?' A small nod and a mumble of 'yes' from Jojo. 'Was that the first time you saw Eyran?'

'Yes - *then*. But I knew him from before...'

The past again. 'When was that?'

'I don't know - it was a while... a while ago. It's not clear.'

How far back? Lambourne wondered. How many years did it take for events to fade from an eleven year old's memory? Five, six? Even in the unlikely event they had met as children and the memory had now gone - Jojo's memory of losing his parents wouldn't so easily fade. In inventing Jojo, Eyran had simply buried the details in the past - hopefully out of reach.

Lambourne picked his way through some other dreams for Jojo's interpretation, matching symbolism to a list he'd made earlier: *The brook and the wheat field: familiarity, home. Loss of parents: shared experience. Crossing the pond and entering the woodland shed: trust.* Now he added:

wheat clearing. Mirror images, Jojo filling the gaps that Eyran didn't want to face. But trust had quickly given way to dominance: Jojo always led, Eyran followed.

Lambourne tried to draw Jojo out on the failure of the dreams, but Jojo seemed as surprised and disappointed as Eyran. Even as Jojo submitted to the reality he knew Eyran would have to face, relinquished control, his sense of failure mirrored Eyran's disappointment. 'Do the failures in the dreams make you despair - wonder if each time you might face the same disappointment?'

'Yes, sometimes... but when I see Eyran, I feel hopeful again. And I feel I can't let him down.'

'You feel that he expects it of you - expects you to be able to find his parents?'

'...Yes.'

'But how do *you* feel. Do you feel you can really find his parents?'

Eyran's head lolled slightly, then turned slowly back until he was again facing the ceiling. 'I don't know... but Eyran feels sure I can find them. And he needs a friend to help him. I couldn't leave him on his own.'

Lambourne wondered if that was going to be the pattern: Jojo side-stepping, passing the main responsibilities back to Eyran. 'And you think that your own experience with losing your parents will help?'

'Yes... at least I know how he feels. It seems so... so unfair that it has happened twice.'

Twice? 'You mean - with you and now Eyran. You both experiencing losing your parents?'

'Yes.'

'But you remember so little about your own loss - you said that it was too long ago for you to recall. So how will you be able to help Eyran?' *Create doubt, start chipping away at Jojo's dominance,* thought Lambourne. He watched intently as Eyran grappled with the thought. Eyran's expression was taut; a muscle pulsed momentarily by his left eye.

'If I went back... perhaps I would

remember clearer. Maybe I hope I'll find my parents at the same time... that's why I've returned. Why I want to help Eyran.'

'So you were unable to find your parents when you were there before?'

'No... I never found them.'

The first small admittance of defeat. If he could build on that, get Jojo to admit that he might fail again, then he would be halfway to breaking his hold. 'Do you fear that you might fail with Eyran as well. That you won't be able to find them?'

'Yes... sometimes. But I can't just leave him on his own - give up.'

Lambourne sensed a chink of uncertainty. 'But what if you can't help Eyran find them, in the same way that

you have never been able to find your own parents. Eyran believes they're alive - but do you?'

Eyran shook his head, struggling with images he didn't want to accept. 'I don't know... he needs a friend. He's all alone when he's looking for them. I was alone before - I know how he feels. I must be there to help him.'

Lambourne retreated; a direct assault wasn't going to work. Eyran was still clinging, resisting. Jojo continuing to hide behind Eyran's desire to find his parents and take the passive role as just a helping friend. 'What was it that felt familiar about the wheat field? Eyran said that when he saw you in the field in the last dream, you looked sad. Can you

remember why?'

'I'm not sure. I just felt alone - deserted.'

'Who had deserted you?'

'I don't remember... it was just a feeling. The wheat field, the water running in the nearby brook... it reminded me of something.'

'Did it remind you of losing your parents? Is that why you were sad?'

'Yes... but I wasn't sure. It was somehow different. I tried to get a clear picture... but it was too far back.'

Again the convenient shield. 'If you went back, do you think you'd remember, the images would become clearer?'

'Yes... I think so.'

The answer threw Lambourne; he'd

expected more hesitance and resistance. Why bury the events conveniently in the past, then invite their exposure? Surely the last thing Eyran wanted was him delving back; yet Jojo seemed to be encouraging it. One area where they were in conflict. Lambourne wanted to stay with the present a bit longer, continue exploring the dreams - but he realized the opportunity to go back might not arise again easily. He decided to take the bait, call what he was certain was a bluff. 'So let's go back Jojo... back to where the memories might be clearer.'

Lambourne started by taking Jojo back just over three years, to when Eyran was almost eight: the last months at the old house in England. Nothing. No recall, no

memories. The process was slow; Eyran left long gaps as he mentally jumped time frames and surfaced again. Lambourne prompted by mentioning their play areas by the old house: the copse and the woods at the back, the wheat field at Broadhurst Farm. But nothing triggered a memory. He decided to make the invitation more open. '... Take me back to when you first met Eyran. Was it when Eyran first moved into the house there? Were you friends together then?'

'No... it was from before.'

'Then go back further... back to when you first met.'

Only Eyran's breathing and the faint whirring of the tape reel punctuated the

silence. Lambourne tapped his pen softly on his pad with the passing seconds. As Jojo panned frantically back in his mind through past events and images and almost two minutes had passed with only the sound of Eyran's breathing, now slightly more laboured - Lambourne became sure that nothing would surface. Or that Jojo's recollections would only be vague; the painful memory of losing his parents selectively erased. In the same way that Eyran didn't want to accept his parents were dead - Jojo would have no recall of his.

When Eyran finally surfaced and Jojo's voice returned, it startled Lambourne. He felt numbed, his mouth suddenly dry, and he had to consciously

snap himself out, quickly adjust to the new situation and break the silence by asking the next question.

He knew that he sounded inept, hesitant - hadn't fully made the leap to what he now confronted. His palms were sticky and he was stumbling as he continued with a few rudimentary questions. For the first time he was eager to end the session, and minutes later he stopped the tape recorder and counted Eyran back awake. He needed time to himself, time to think. He didn't mention anything to Eyran or the Capels as they confirmed arrangements for the next session and said their goodbyes.

Lambourne sat back and closed his eyes, easing out a slow sigh. Now

looking back, the signs had been there clearly: *'It seemed unfair that it should happen twice'.... 'It was long ago - from before.'... 'If I went back - perhaps I would remember clearer.'* As much as he suspected Eyran had buried events in the past and so wouldn't want them uncovered, Jojo had been enticing him to go back throughout. Intent on only one track, he'd missed the signals.

But as the implications sank home, he realized he was out of his depth; he'd need help. Even the few closing questions had made him feel awkward: fishing in areas of psycho-analysis he'd barely touched upon. He looked at his watch. Almost three hours before he could put through a call to the University

of Virginia.

SEVENTEEN

The warrant holding Machanaud was an initial detention order signed off by Perrimond for four days, the maximum any suspect could be held without an official arraignment before an Examining Magistrate.

On the fourth day, Machanaud was transported from his cell in Bauriac for a ten o'clock hearing at the Palais de Justice in Aix. Frederic Naugier was presiding, though informally dressed in a dark grey suit; his red robes would appear at later hearings. Perrimond was

to one side of the room, Briant as police escort behind Machanaud, and a *greffier*, court clerk, sat alongside Naugier.

A young duty lawyer was dragged from the floor below to brief Machanaud on what would await him in the proceedings. During a thirty-eight minute hearing, Machanaud provided his main details for the court file, Naugier read the charges against him, and decision on bail was held over to the next hearing in ten days, by which time a state lawyer would have been appointed through the Bar Council.

At the close of the proceedings, summarily Naugier signed off a four month detention order. In that time, he

had to complete the *instruction* process and pass the case to full trial. On murder cases, it was not uncommon for him to sign off two or three such orders. Peuch had already made it clear to Machanaud that bail was unlikely given the combination of the charge and his transient background. Whether found guilty or not at the final trial, unless dramatic new evidence came up during the *instruction*, Machanaud was going to spend much of the next year in prison.

Dominic had bought a TV for his mother four months previous. They were expensive, a luxury item, but it was something to keep her company,

especially during his long evening shifts.

He remembered the first time he saw 'Perry Mason'. French national programming was poor, and slicker American productions predominated. The popular courtroom drama however took time to catch on in France, mainly because the proceedings depicted were alien, bore no semblance to the justice system familiar to the French.

The quick changing drama of different witnesses, surprises, change of pleas and sudden admissions would in France be spread over several months of the *instruction* process. Witnesses were grouped and called in different sessions, and testimony from the victim's family, the police, forensics and expert

witnesses such as psychiatrists were heard in continuing separate sessions. With usually no more than two *instruction* hearings in any one month, the process was long and arduous, and complex cases could drag on seven to ten months before presentation to full trial.

But by that time, evidence and testimony had been boiled down to just the essential facts necessary for a jury and three judges to deliberate. Witnesses could be recalled, but their answers were now no more than distillations of their previous testimony during *instruction*. No rambling, no surprises, no dramatics or sudden about turn admissions. Just the core evidence the

prosecution and defence wished showcased for the jury. As a result even murder trials lasted only a day or two.

Dominic had followed the early stages of Machanaud's *instruction* hearings. After a second hearing at which bail was refused, two weeks later Naugier summoned the Rosselots. Apart from confirming vital details about the last time they saw Christian, what he was wearing and who he had headed out to see that afternoon, Naugier had to formally ask them if they wished to press charges against the suspect held. Almost redundant, since if they had answered 'no', the State would have continued with the prosecution regardless - but it had to be recorded. Jean-Luc responded 'Of

course' while Monique just nodded.

The next hearing almost a month later was to clarify police and forensic findings at the initial crime scene. Dominic was concerned the subject of Machanaud's car sighting might be raised, but the hearings were strictly structured: Naugier conducted all questioning directly and any questions proposed by the defence and prosecution had to be presented to Naugier two weeks in advance, with a full schedule of topics to be raised then made available to both sides two days before the hearing. Perrimond had gone rigorously through the schedule with Poullain and Dominic. There was nothing about the car sighting.

Though in two or three hearings time, Dominic knew that they would start to cover Machanaud's later hearings and statements, and the subject could come up. He was dreading it: having to face Machanaud and his council and change his story for Naugier.

Four days after the call from Houillon in Marseille, he'd decided to throw in the towel and told Poullain that he wouldn't be proceeding with a complaint. Poullain wasted no time in sequestering him and Briant into his back office, closing ranks tightly by ensuring their stories matched. Poullain suggested that they both admit the meetings, but modify the details discussed. 'From what I understand,

Machanaud was drunk on both occasions. I'd be surprised if he remembers exactly what was said.'

Dominic agreed numbly along with Briant, but part of him remained uncertain. Hopefully the subject just wouldn't come up.

From what he heard about Machanaud's lawyer over the following weeks, that hope began to fade. Only twenty-six, Léonard Molet had been in full practice just over three years and divided his time between a private firm and state aid cases. Machanaud had shown alarm at their first meeting that this would be Molet's first murder trial, without fully appreciating how much worse his representation could have

been: most state aid lawyers were inexperienced *stagiaires* still in pupillage, with invariably little or no courtroom experience. Over the weeks, Molet showed his paces and gained Machanaud's confidence, making Perrimond and Naugier at the same time sit up and take notice. Unlike the usual state aid fodder, he gained preliminary notes on time, saw his client regularly, and rebutted with sensible defence-angled questions for Naugier to pose at *instruction*. The case was going to be tightly contested.

While reading from his notes in testimony about the initial crime scene, Dominic felt Molet staring at him intently at one point, felt uncomfortable

that Molet was perhaps measuring him for a later confrontation. Later, towards the end of Poullain's testimony, Naugier cut in, admitting his confusion at the various positions of Machanaud supposedly fishing, the lane and the wheat field, and where the boy was finally found. Naugier had already gone over the details twice without being fully satisfied, and suggested that everything be re-examined at the scene itself. Perrimond and Molet showed scant surprise. Examining Magistrates often visited crime scenes to question suspects and witnesses. The theory was that suspects found it harder to reconstruct an invented story at the scene itself. Discrepancies started to show.

Looking at his diary, Naugier saw that the next *instruction* in sixteen days was for witnesses who had sighted Machanaud on the day of the attack; at that hearing, he would notify both Perrimond and Molet of the date set for a reconstruction.

Facing Molet had unsettled Dominic. He felt somehow vulnerable, that his guilt about covering up showed. He thought seriously about going back on his agreement with Poullain. His mother's condition had worsened the week before and she'd gone in for more tests: if the prognosis was bad, she might only make it another few months. The *instruction* covering the police statements and later car references wouldn't be for at least

six weeks. If he filed the complaint a few days before the hearing and only then warned Poullain of his upcoming change in testimony, it could take them almost two months to manipulate his transfer. *Longer if...* Dominic stopped himself sharply, shaking his head, could hardly believe that he was actually weighing the timing of his mother's death just so that he could come clean and salvage his own guilt.

In the days after giving in to Poullain, he was haunted by images of Machanaud. In one dream Machanaud was alone in the wheat field, calling out as Dominic turned his back and walked away. *'You're deserting me just like the others... Why?'* But as he turned and

looked back at Machanaud, only then did he notice one of Machanaud's hands covered with blood, could see where it had run down his arm, *the bloodied rock discarded at his feet...* and he awoke in a cold sweat, catching at his breath. Even in his dreams he was trying to assuage his concern, convince himself that Machanaud was guilty, he was doing the right thing. But it was little consolation knowing that he was merely joining Poullain and the rabble, and Machanaud's plea about desertion lingered stronger than any other image.

The session with witnesses went smoothly, mostly repetitions of their earlier police statements. Confronted by Naugier with the various witness

statements, Machanaud admitted that he'd lied in his own statements only because he thought the police questioning was aimed at his poaching that day. Naugier didn't pursue the mention of cars or go deeper into Machanaud's police statements: one he would tackle at the reconstruction, the other at the session following. Naugier summarized the proceedings and looked at his diary. The next hearing was the reconstruction to take place at Brieuille's farm: present should be the suspect, defence and prosecution, and all relevant police and medics who attended at the original scene. Date set was in nineteen days time, 22nd November.

Chapeau tried the main Palais de Justice number in Limoges again. When he'd phoned two hours earlier, he was told that 'Monsieur Duclos was in a meeting, but should be free at twelve.' He'd left his name as Emile Vacheret, but no number. He would call back. Originally, he had planned to call closer to the final trial date, but during those months Duclos' memory could have started to fade.

The second time he was put straight through. 'Monsieur Vacharet, yes. One moment. *Ne quittez pas.*'

Then Duclos' voice in hushed tones. 'Emile... why on earth are you phoning me here are work, you know that...'

'Be quiet,' Chapeau cut in. 'I used

Vacheret's name to get through.'

'Who is this? I don't understand.' Duclos spluttered. But it was a stock reaction; suddenly he did know who it was and understood fully. 'Why are you phoning me? How did you get this number? I'm quite sure Emile wouldn't be so stupid as to give it to you.'

Chapeau chuckled. 'No, you're right. But your wallet was a treasure chest of information.' Silence from the other end: only the background clatter of typewriters came through to Chapeau for a few seconds.

'It was *you* the other month,' Duclos hissed.

God, this was fun. Chapeau wasn't sure what was more joyous: the outrage

in Duclos' voice or the sudden flashback of the incident itself. 'Ah, you guessed. And I wanted so much for it to stay a surprise.'

'Look, I just can't talk here.' Duclos voice was muted, edgy. 'I'll phone you straight back from outside. Give me a number.'

Chapeau looked down at the number on the dial and read it out. 'Five minutes, no more. Or I'll be phoning your office back again.' He hung up.

Duclos made a quick excuse to his secretary about seeing a client on the third floor, he wouldn't be longer than twenty minutes. He headed out along the long corridor, then skipped down instead of up. By the time he reached the

main Palais de Justice steps, he was practically at a run.

Chapeau picked up the phone on the second ring. Less than three minutes: impressive. Duclos was even keener than he thought.

'Okay, what do you want?' Duclos' voice came breathlessly.

Obviously no patience left for preamble or politeness, thought Chapeau. What was the world coming to? 'Luckily for you, it looks like they're nailing some poor local poacher for what you did to that young boy.' Chapeau listened intently over the static on the line for Duclos' reaction.

A short intake of breath. 'I don't know what you're talking about.'

Chapeau had no time for fencing. 'Look, I know all about the boy in Taragnon. I saw the whole story in the papers. And I know that there's no friend. It was you - *you* attacked him, and that was why you wanted me to finish him off in the hospital. You were afraid he'd awaken and identify you.'

'You're wrong. It was for my friend. And I know nothing about Taragnon - my friend told me the boy was from Marseille.'

Chapeau read the bluff, could pick up on the tremor at the back of Duclos' voice. If there was any slight doubt remaining, now he was certain. There was no friend: Duclos had killed the boy. But he would have to push hard to

get Duclos to admit it. 'Come on, Duclos. You've got a weakness for the young boys, you're a regular customer at Vacharet's. You want me to believe that this *friend* of yours has got exactly the same problem. And you drive straight through Taragnon on your way from the Vallon Estate to Aix.'

'So does my friend. Whether you believe me or not doesn't really concern me.' Flatter, calmer voice now. 'You seem to be forgetting along the way that the boy was still alive in the hospital. You're the one who killed him. You can't tell your little theory to anyone without incriminating yourself.'

Chapeau allowed Duclos his glorious moment's gloating before dropping the

bombshell. 'That's the beauty of it - I never touched the boy. When I got to his room, he was already in emergency, they were fighting to save his life. I was annoyed at first that I'd missed him; and then it struck me that if the boy died that night, you'd have no way of knowing I hadn't made the hit. So I decided to claim the kill and stiff you for the money anyway. I don't think I've ever had so much fun.' Chapeau sniggered. 'Except that is for beating the shit out of you a week later.'

Longer, deeper silence this time. Chapeau could almost feel the waves of panic at the other end. Duclos' mind racing whether to continue denying, question or retreat. A slow exhalation.

'Why should I believe you now?'

It was a weak protest, more grudging acceptance than doubt. 'You don't have to. Why don't I call the police and tell them about you hiring me to kill the boy, let them work out if the boy died on the operating table or not. After all, they have access to all the hospital records. And then when they turn up to arrest you, you can tell them all about your little friend. As an accomplice, and seeing as the murder you hired me for never took place, you'd probably only get a few years.'

'No, *no*. Don't do that.'

Chapeau savoured the panic in Duclos' voice before commenting, 'So whether it's you or your friend, at least

we've established one thing. You don't want me to go to the police.'

Duclos was slow to answer, his voice subdued, barely audible. 'No.'

'That's a shame, because I had such a strong urge to do my citizen's duty this time. The story of that poor poacher in the paper really touched me. So unfair. You know, I probably have a lot more in common with someone like that than... than someone like yourself, *Monsieur Prosecutor*. It would almost feel like I'm betraying one of my own. I think it would take quite a lot to persuade me to do something like that.'

'What do you want?' Duclos had no energy left to spar with Chapeau. As it dawned on him that Chapeau was

probably telling the truth about not killing the boy and he realized how vulnerable he was, a sinking sensation gripped his stomach. In the past weeks of work, he'd finally started to free his thoughts from the nightmare of Taragnon, but now it was back with him full force. Bleak years of the incident re-kindled with each demand from Chapeau stretched out ahead. He felt physically sick.

Chapeau paused for breath; like a lion circling his prey, now he had Duclos exactly where he wanted him, ready for the kill. But it was too soon. Besides, only a couple of months had passed since he'd probably cleaned Duclos out. 'I don't know yet. I'll have to think about

that one. I'll probably call you again when the date for the final trial for this fellow has been set. There'll still be time then for them to haul someone else in for questioning and acquit him if they get new information.'

'When will that be?' Flat monotone, defeated, washed along on whatever Chapeau suggested. It had taken him almost a month to fully get over the injuries from the beating in the Marseille alley; he was still haunted by the image of the cold steel barrel sliding against his cheek, sure in that moment he was going to die. Duclos shuddered; now once again he felt powerless and afraid.

'Two months - maybe as much as four or five. You know probably better than

me how slow the wheels of justice turn in France. Why don't I send you regular press clippings, keep you up to date.'

'No, no, it's okay.' The thought of regular reminders through the post made Duclos' blood run cold. Surely Chapeau wasn't serious? 'Just phone me when you're ready.'

'I will. In the meantime I suggest you're a good boy and start saving up for when I call. Have you got a piggy bank?'

'You bastard. You slimy *fucking* bastard!'

'Oh, I do love it when you're angry. It gets me *so* excited.' Chapeau blew an exaggerated kiss close to the mouthpiece and hung up.

EIGHTEEN

Voices from the rooms, running feet in the courtyard, a ball bouncing, laughter, crying. Christian biting back the tears after being stung by a bee, Jean-Luc running down the field with Christian on his shoulders and her worrying about them falling, Christian at six holding up his favourite puppet doll, Topo Gigio: he'd left it in the courtyard and some chickens had pecked the stuffing out and an arm was almost falling off. She'd re-stuffed it and sewn the arm that night, tucked it back in alongside him while he

was asleep. Christian running out of the surf at Le Lavandou, helping Jean-Luc by measuring the boules for a local village game, Christian blowing out the candles on his tenth birthday party.

Fragments of memories, some old pictures on the shelves and in albums, Christian's old clothes and toys. All that was left.

Monique had promised herself each time that the next day she'd clear them away... the *next day*. Each time she looked at his room - with each toy and item of clothing in exactly the same place he'd left them that afternoon - it was easy in that moment to believe that he was simply away, a school trip or summer camp, and soon would return.

But as the images flooded back - the police drawing up in the courtyard that first day, her candle-light vigil in the hospital, the young gendarme at her door saying he was sorry... *so sorry* - a cold steel hand of reality reached deep inside her and ripped out her emotions, her very soul, stripped bare every fibre and nerve ending until her pain was rendered down to no more than pitiful numbness, a grey void... whispers in the first empty dawn after his death... '*Oh Christian... Christian*'. Knowing in that moment that there would be no more answer, no kisses like soft butterflies on her cheek, no more embraces and feeling the warmth of his body.... clinging now only to the memory, hugging the top cover of

his bed around her and rocking gently as her emotions flooded over and once again her body sank into uncontrollable sobbing.

Most of her crying had been alone, sitting in Christian's room. Now it had come to symbolize catharsis, the only place in the house where she felt comfortable venting her grief. The rest of the house was for cooking, cleaning, sewing, all the day to day mechanical chores to help push her grief into the background. When she cried, it was just her and Christian, alone. A last vestige of intimacy.

Only once had she been caught, just over a month after Christian's death; Clarisse had been at the door, half

hiding behind the door frame, perplexed. Monique had quickly stifled her tears and rushed to comfort her, feeling guilty.

Clarisse was probably suffering even more than her; at only five, struggling to truly grasp what had happened, let alone come to terms with it. Asking questions about where Christian was now, would he be happy, was it nice in heaven? Drawing pictures of Christian sitting among floating clouds, his Topo Gigio doll at one side, his favourite tree from the garden - an old spreading carob which he used to climb - the other. Clarisse's idea of Christian's heaven.

All they had was each other for consolation, Jean-Luc had been distant, remote. When they'd lost Christian,

they'd lost most of Jean-Luc as well. She had shared her affections equally between the children, but Jean-Luc had always shown more affection for Christian, and now it was more marked. It was as if he was saying: *'I've lost what I care about most in this family, there's little for me here now.'*

Long, bland stares straight through them at the dining table. Little or no interest in any of their activities; whenever any personal involvement threatened to come close, he would make an excuse about cleaning tools or the tractor and head out to the garage. And when his emotions became too much and Monique tried to hug and console him, he'd shrug her off. During

the summer evenings he stayed out late in the fields, but as the evenings drew in he'd make an excuse and head for a local bar. It was as if he could no longer bear to be in their company; or perhaps it was the house itself, reminders of Christian.

Many a time when he was working in the fields, she would look up from the kitchen window and see him sitting on the stone wall at the ridge of the field, staring emptily into space. She would busy herself with chores for a while, and sometimes as much as forty minutes later he would still be in the same position when she looked out.

The Fiévets next door had been helpful and supportive, but they weren't close enough for her to share her

innermost thoughts about Christian's death or the worry of Jean-Luc's increasing emotional distance from her and Clarisse. The town had rallied well behind her, she'd been particularly touched by the memorial service - but at some point afterwards she felt unable to face another village shopkeeper, another sympathetic face and heartfelt condolence. For over a month after the service, she had hardly ventured out, the Fiévets did her shopping.

Outside the church, Captain Pouillain had approached and said that someone was in custody, 'a local vagabond. Justice would soon be done.' A satisfied, firm statement, as if he felt assured the news would salve her pain. She'd hardly

remembered him from the first interview; the only gendarme she recognized from the line in the church was the one who had called to tell her Christian was dead. He stayed in the background, gendarme cap in hand. Most of it outside the church had been sympathy at arm's length - pats on the shoulder, heads hung in sorrow, muttered condolences with eyes downcast, trite offers of help from people she hardly knew. She'd grimaced afterwards at the irony: it had taken the death of her son to make her feel truly accepted in the village.

Apart from the week when her mother had visited, there had been nobody to share her grief - until she looked up and

saw Clarisse at the doorway. So for the past long weeks she'd shared small stories, comforts and hugs with her daughter, fighting to come to terms with the unacceptable partly through the innocent eyes of a five year old - fill the sickening void with whatever vestiges of love and affection remained in her house.

The only thing Jean-Luc had shown any interest in was the trial, seeing justice done. While she'd been still too blind with tears and numb to react to Poullain's statement outside the church, Jean-Luc had nodded enthusiastically, asking several questions before they'd parted. For the first time since Christian's death, he appeared animated,

drawing hard on each word for comfort, solace. Each week he phoned the police station and was brought up to date on the latest stages of the *instruction*. 'Next week, they're all going out to the scene of the crime to re-enact it,' he commented one morning at breakfast, but she'd hardly been listening.

Jean-Luc mentioned it again the morning of the re-enactment, and only then did she pay attention: two mentions, and again a rare show of eagerness - it must be important. Heading out, he said that he would be working in the west pasture. But half an hour later the rising wind made her think about how exposed the west field was, and when she looked to see if Jean-Luc might have moved to

the more sheltered fields at the back, she noticed the car was gone.

As the wind rose, it bent the wheat at an angle. But not evenly: one swathe would be cut sharply at an angle while another remained upright, the path of the wind undulating, weaving patterns through the field like rolling golden surf. The morning air was cool, the wind gusting intermittently, and patches of brief sunshine broke through between the shifting grey clouds, bathing them momentarily in light and warmth.

Dominic looked thoughtfully at the figures ahead as the light shifted. The shadow of a large cloud floated down the bordering hillside like a giant

valkyrie until it hung over them, bathing them in grey, matching the intensity of their mood. Thirteen men in a lonely windswept field, linked only by the death of a ten year old boy. With the shifting light, the wheat sheaves undulating with each pulse of the wind, it was almost as if the field was protesting, trying to evade them and keep its secrets.

The figures huddled close together to be heard. Naugier was going over information with the attending medics, forensics and Poullain, in no particular order. Servan, Levacher and Harrault were just behind closest to Dominic. A *greffier* constantly at Naugier's side made notes in shorthand.

Machanaud stood beyond handcuffed to an Aix prison warden. His turn would come next. Perrimond was to one side of Naugier, Molet the other by the *greffier*. Dominic noticed Machanaud glancing towards the riverbank, his eyes bleary and distant. Perhaps stung by the wind, or was he still in a daze with it all, hardly believing that he was back in the same spot three months later charged with murder, pleading for his life. He'd had a lot of time to contemplate his story. Naugier looked up at Machanaud sharply at intervals as he went over the forensic details.

Naugier then clarified with Machanaud which part of the river he was at that day, and directed Servan to

remain standing where the attack took place. Everyone else was then directed down to the riverside.

'Two hours? And in all of that time, did you see or meet a young boy?'

Naugier's question cut through the air crisply. The assembled group stood silent, expectant. Naugier had spent the first minutes by the river confirming that Machanaud had been fishing, what he caught, and the time he was there - ten past one to just after three - before coming to the key question.

'No,' Machanaud said, with stronger emphasis than his previous answers. Even the furthest in the group heard his denial.

Naugier looked pointedly in both directions. 'Did you see or meet *anyone* in that time?' Foliage further down the riverbank was thin, the view virtually clear; most of the foliage and trees were clustered along the bank's ridge bordering the farm track.

'No.'

Following Naugier's gaze towards the flat bridge a hundred yards downstream, Molet suddenly picked up on the significance. The small bridge connecting the neighbouring farm to Breuille's wheat field was in the police report as '*where we think the boy crossed*', mainly because there were no sightings of him walking through the village itself. But he hadn't realized it

would be so visible.

Naugier pointed. 'You are aware that is the only connecting bridge for some distance. Can you see it clearly from here?'

Molet prayed for Machanaud to suddenly plead short-sightedness, but his 'Yes' came crisply.

'And you saw nobody crossing that bridge throughout your time here that afternoon?'

'No.'

Naugier looked thoughtfully in the other direction, upstream; then he slowly scanned up the river bank towards the path, as if he was following an imaginary line towards where the attack had taken place. 'Monsieur Machanaud.

Can you see the gendarme we left standing on the path?'

'No. I can't see him.'

'And the afternoon you were fishing - did you see or hear anything from the position where the gendarme is now standing?'

'No.'

Naugier nodded. This made sense. The river bank dipped down sharply. The only part of the lane visible was lower down as it sloped towards the road. 'Now let us return to your sighting of vehicles passing that afternoon, starting with the first vehicle. What time would that have been?'

'Maybe forty minutes after I arrived.'

'What sort of car was that?'

'I didn't see. I only heard the noise and the direction it was travelling - up towards Caurin's farm.'

Caurin? Naugier flicked back a few pages in his file for the reference. Marius Caurin owned the farm behind and was the first to discover the boy. He'd been quickly eliminated: his tractor had been seen by at least three people going through Taragnon at the time of the assault, and Machanaud too had mentioned his tractor leaving in his first statement. 'The same Caurin whose tractor you saw heading down the track. What time would that have been?'

'Perhaps forty or fifty minutes before I left.'

Naugier ran through with Machanaud

the remaining car sightings and timings, then flicked forward to some blank pages in his file and started writing: *First car: up at 1.45-50. Second car: down at 2.15 (not heard by Machanaud). Third car: Caurin's tractor, down at 2.25. Fourth car: up at 2.45-50 (heard by Machanaud). Fifth car: down at 3.00, just minutes before Machanaud leaves himself (heard and seen by Machanaud). 3.03-05: Machanaud leaves on his solex, is sighted by...* Naugier looked up towards Poullain. 'What is the name of the woman who saw Machanaud leaving?'

'Madame Véillan.'

Naugier wrote in the name, and added: *3.16-18: Caurin returns to his*

farm and discovers boy. Estimated duration of attack: 40-60 minutes. Time of attack: 1.30-3.00. So certainly Caurin's tractor had passed while the attack was in progress, but possibly the first and second cars as well. He took out and lit a *Gitane* and blew out the first fumes hesitantly. With the various cars passing, if indeed there was someone else there that afternoon, they couldn't possibly have stayed on the lane. The final attack must have been a few minutes at most; any longer exposure in that position would have been too risky. For the rest of the time, they must have...

Machanaud's voice cut in. 'But it wasn't till later that I remembered that

final car clearly. It was an Alfa Romeo.'

It took a second for Naugier to detach from his previous thoughts. He noticed Molet glaring at Machanaud; probably he had pre-warned his client about making uninvited comments during *instruction*. 'From your statement, I thought that it was a Citroën you saw?'

Molet stepped in before Machanaud put his foot completely in his mouth. 'It *was* - on my clients original statement. But later he went into the police station and advised of the change, which from checking I believe has never been recorded. He also later mentioned the same revised sighting to a gendarme in a local Taragnon bar. We expected this to be covered at a later *instruction*, at

which stage my questions would have been put forward for you to pose to the gendarmes in question.'

'A bit late for that, isn't it,' Naugier barked. 'Your client seems to have brought the subject up himself.'

Molet duly nodded and looked down. One of the great inadequacies of the *instruction* process was that the examining magistrate could freely divert, while the lawyers were restricted by the schedule provided two days in advance of each hearing. Diversions were uncharted territory, to be avoided at all costs. The only consolation was that it also worked against the prosecution: Perrimond looked equally as uncomfortable.

Dominic's heart was in his mouth at the sudden change in questioning. He'd resigned himself to prepare for the later *instruction* and tie his answers in with Poullain's. But now with rising panic he realized that Naugier could turn on him at any second and he wouldn't know what to say.

Naugier turned towards Poullain. 'I understand, Captain Poullain, you were the officer who took the original statement regarding the Citreön. To your knowledge was this at any later stage changed?'

Poullain fleetingly caught Perrimond's and Dominic's eye, but hid his concern quickly. 'Yes... I believe so.' He nodded back in the direction of Briant. 'A few

days after his initial statement, Machanaud came into the station and saw one of my officers, Sergeant Briant, and he-'

Perrimond interrupted. 'Sir, I along with the defence council would like to protest. This was something scheduled to go into in more depth at a later meeting. We are therefore - as with Monsieur Molet - totally unprepared with any questions that could add valuable light. I see neither the prosecution or defence case benefiting.'

'That isn't quite how I feel,' Molet countered. 'I see my client benefiting from pursuit of this line of questioning. It's just that I feel he would benefit *more* with prepared questions, as is his right.'

Naugier held up one hand sharply. '*Gentlemen* - in case you both need reminding. I, and I alone, will decide the benefit of any line of questioning at this or any future *instruction* hearing at which you are both present. You may still prepare your questions regarding this subject and propose them at a later date, as originally planned. But this now is for my curiosity.' Naugier pulled hard on his *Gitane*. 'Captain Poullain - I suggest you finish your answer.'

'Monsieur Molet was correct to mention inconsistencies, because that is exactly why no record was made of the change in statement.' Poullain was more confident, firm. The few seconds interruption had allowed him to gather

his composure. 'Machanaud came into the gendarmerie a few days after his initial statement. It was late in the evening and he was very drunk. He advised that he now remembered more clearly the car that passed - it was an Alfa Romeo sports. An open top sports. In checking, there were no other sightings of such a car, but in any case we were about to ask Machanaud in to make his statement official when a day or so later he met one of my other men in a local bar. This time he said that it was an Alfa Romeo *coupé* that he saw.'

Molet exhaled audibly. He could see already where it was heading; his worst fears at the issue being tackled early were being realized.

Naugier gave him a sharp look, warning off any possible interruption, and turned back to Poullain. 'Well, surely one or the other should have been entered.'

'Possibly. But with Machanaud changing his description to an Alfa coupé, we started to have doubts. We had already fully investigated the driver of such a car and eliminated him from our enquiry. He was in a local restaurant at the time of the attack - at least three waiters saw him.' Poullain waved one arm. 'With us asking about the Alfa coupé in the village, there was a lot of local talk. It looked as if Machanaud had simply changed his description to suit. And because the car in question had

been eliminated, we thought such a change in statement could only further incriminate Machanaud. He'd been drinking on both occasions - so we decided as much for his benefit to stick with the original statement. That was the one we trusted most, free from corruption by village gossip.'

Molet shook his head, lifting his eyes skyward as if for divine help. 'So now we are supposed to believe that all of this was done for my client's benefit. Ridiculous! My client's later description of the car was consistent on both occasions. I went over this with him several times.'

'Nice to know *you* are so certain, monsieur Molet.' Naugier raised a sharp

eyebrow. 'Especially when it appears your client was probably drunk.' He turned to Machanaud. 'How much had you drunk the night you went into the gendarmerie to change your statement?'

'I don't know exactly... perhaps a few eau de vies, some beers.'

'A few...*some*? Try to be more precise,' Naugier pressed. 'Did you have more than normal?'

'Yes... yes, probably. I met with a friend I hadn't seen since we worked together in the Spring.'

Naugier looked between Poullain and Molet, as if pressing home a final seal of understanding. Machanaud was a known drunkard and bar slouch. A 'few more than normal' meant that he was ratted.

'Hopefully this has cleared up this misunderstanding. You may, as I mentioned earlier, Monsieur Molet, pursue this line of questioning at a later *instruction* when we go back over previous statements. And Captain Poullain, I would suggest that in future you put *everything* in files you present to me - and let me decide whether or not they should be disregarded.'

The noise of the trees swaying in the breeze seemed much louder in the silence following. Poullain muttered 'I understand', while Molet merely nodded and contemplated some dried leaves floating past.

That was it, thought Dominic. He felt a sudden wave of relief wash over him.

Weeks of worry, and in the end hardly any blood had been shed. The fact that the file entry had been buried equally to avoid local hierarchal awkwardness had never even surfaced, and now looked unlikely to at any later date. Dominic had panicked halfway through that Naugier would suddenly wheel around on him. Only now were the knots in his stomach easing. A low sigh escaped, lost among the wind rush through the trees.

And as quickly Dominic was swept with guilt. How could he be relieved at just avoiding some awkward questions, when what he had witnessed had probably quashed one of Machanaud's last chances of salvation? He followed

Molet's contemplative gaze towards the river: some sunshine broke briefly through the trees, flickering off its surface. Glimmers of hope, fading just as quickly as the clouds again rolled across. He had built up a wariness and fear of Molet, and now found himself empathizing with him.

Naugier drew on the last inch of his *Gitane* and stubbed it out. He looked upstream again, his thoughts returning to where someone might have hidden... *if* there was someone else? No possible refuge on the lane with the cars passing, no other area of flattened or disturbed wheat - so *where*? The view along for the most part looked clear, but he needed a marker to be able to judge distance.

Picking out Levacher, he asked him to go up to where his colleague stood. 'Then walk in a straight line until you are halfway down the river bank.'

As Levacher walked up the river bank, forty yards beyond, Dominic thought he saw a figure peering through the bushes bordering the lane. He was sure it wasn't Servan, he hadn't noticed a gendarme's uniform... but just as quickly the figure was gone.

Levacher re-appeared after a moment. Naugier waved one arm, directing Levacher until he stood halfway down the bank. 'Can you see the gendarme now standing on the river bank?'

Slight pause from Machanaud, then, 'Yes.'

Naugier waved back, shouting, 'Go twenty yards further along and stop.' He asked the same question of Machanaud with Levacher in two more positions further back and received a 'yes' on each one. There were few obstacles along the river bank, the bushes low and sparse.

Naugier instructed the *greffier*. 'Let the record show that the suspect could see a figure clearly along the river bank up to sixty yards past a point running parallel with where the attack took place.'

Molet looked down and slowly closed his eyes, recalling one of the key *greffier* entries from the last *instruction*: '*...no other area of flattened or disturbed wheat was discovered other*

than that where the boy was finally found. Due to the risk of exposure of that position, directly beside the lane where cars passed, it has been concluded by the police and attending forensics that the first attack probably took place at some point down the river bank, obscured from the lane.'

Now the two entries would be linked in the jury's mind and would effectively seal his client's fate.

He had started the morning with some optimism, but bit by bit it had evaporated. First the car discrepancies dismissed out of hand, now the image of Levacher standing in clear sight of all present. Levacher could have moved another twenty yards back and still been

visible. The image had burned home strongly. His client was now on record that he was in clear view of where they thought the boy had crossed the river *and* where it was presumed the first attack took place. Any hopes he'd harboured of seeding strong doubts about Machanaud's guilt had gone in that moment. Molet knew now that it would take nothing short of a miracle to save his client from being condemned.

As they made their way back up the river bank and onto the lane, Dominic noticed a figure in the distance towards Brieuille's farm. It took him a moment, squinting against the sting of the strong wind, to recognize that it was Jean-Luc Rosselot. A sad and lonely figure among

the shifting blanket of wheat, watching them play out, like markers on a draught board, the scenes that led to his son's death.

NINETEEN

'What makes you think it's a case for me?'

'Mainly the boy's use of French.'

'How fluent is his French?' asked Calvin.

'I only asked a few questions... I got a bit flustered. When he started talking in French, it caught me completely by surprise. I just asked a few rudimentary questions, went about as far as my pidgin French would take me - then stopped the session. What few answers there were sounded pretty fluent, but I

couldn't be sure. I just didn't ask enough questions.'

Marinella Calvan was flattered that Lambourne had called her. They'd met three years previously at a medical convention in Atlanta, and on average he'd called her three times a year since. But this was the first real professional consultation. The rest had been just minor points of reference, do you know such and such professor, someone who'd usually published a paper Stateside and he thought she might have better knowledge of it than him. Then invariably he'd get around to how she was, how was work, life in general? She had the feeling that if she said on one of the calls, 'I got married the other month

or I just met this great guy,' the calls would suddenly stop. Except when there had been the occasional great guy, she hadn't told him; she obviously didn't want him to stop calling.

At their first meeting, a quick coffee between lectures at the Atlanta convention, they discovered they had a lot in common: he was divorced, she had separated from a common-law husband. She was just coming up to forty, he was forty-four. Light banter, a few quips, some one liners that belonged more to Seinfeld than Freud. Questions and general background, but no hard and fast answers. Two psychiatrists fencing with each other, both knowing that what had partly spoilt their respective

relationships was being too deep, too questioning, not fully switching off when home. Keep it light and simple this time.

They'd snatched a couple more coffees together during the convention, then spent two hours at a cocktail bar on the evening it had closed. But their only real date together had been almost eighteen months later, December 1993. She'd come over to the UK for five days to handle a case in Norfolk and had managed to grab an evening in London. He showed her his office and they went to dinner and the theatre nearby. They'd also been able to find out a lot more about each other, not just personally but professionally: their respective views on psychology. She'd felt guilty at one

point that she seemed to be hogging most of the conversation purely because her background with Past Life Therapy (PLT) was more unconventional; though Lambourne had admitted his fascination and seemed to be egging her on.

In contrast, he'd only had a few cases involving PLT, mostly conventional cures for phobia: regressing a patient initially back to childhood in search of text-book, Freud-induced phobia, discovering nothing, so heading back even further. Patients with inexplicable fears of fire, drowning or enclosed spaces were often found to have had alarming experiences in past lives which explained their phobias. A recent survey showed that twenty-two percent of

American psychiatrists used PLT regularly alongside standard therapy, though she had no idea of figures for the UK and Europe.

'What made you initially regress the boy?' she asked. 'Did you think that part of your problem might lie further back?'

'Yes, but in early childhood - not in a past life. That was totally unexpected.' Lambourne had already explained the main background to the case: the accident, the coma, the dreams with Eyran clinging to non-acceptance of his parents' death through a secondary character who claimed he could find them. Now he explained that much of the secondary character's memory seemed to be buried in the past, it was impossible

to determine if Jojo was a friend from Eyran's infancy who had since faded from conventional memory or a complete invention. 'Jojo also has no specific recall of losing his parents - the main shared experience linking the two characters. He said it was "long ago... from before" - seemed almost to be inviting me to go further back.'

'My son's almost that age now,' she commented thoughtfully. Sebastian would be ten next September. But the children she had regressed over the past years, now well over a hundred cases, would no doubt provide the strongest points of reference; very little of it did she relate to her own life. 'When the boy surfaced again and started speaking in

French, do you know what year it was?'

'Not exactly. I asked him what he saw on the TV, but he said that they didn't have one, just a radio. I was about to change tack, my knowledge of French radio is non-existent, when he said, "but they have one in the local café". So perhaps late fifties, sixties.'

'Or later if they were very poor or extremely religious - thought TV was a bad influence.'

'Possibly. The only thing I managed to find out was where he lived: a place called Taragnon. I looked it up on the map. It's a small village in the south. Provence.'

'Well at least some ground can be gained by verifying his regional accent.'

They were both silent for a second: only the sound of faint crackles on the line between London and Virginia. Why did she feel hesitant? Was it just her current workload, the nightmare of arranging a week away and leaving Sebastian with her father, or a concentrated period of working close to David Lambourne when she wasn't really sure what she felt about him. Then immediately pinched herself for even having the thought, realized she'd fallen into the trap of thinking that all his calls were just excuses to talk with her masked by a thin professional veneer. This was surely different. Though she was one of the main recognized experts, how many cases of true xenoglossy had

she experienced in all her years? Her last paper published claimed twenty-three, but only nine did she count as significant, four of which had been with children. Out of almost three hundred regressive sessions. Xenoglossy: use of a foreign language unknown to the main subject. Parapsychological gold-dust: rare and one of the strongest proofs for real regressions, particularly where children were concerned. She should be grateful Lambourne had called her.

'Tell me something about Eyran's parents and his godparents. Is the current family environment strong. Are they supportive?'

'Yes, very.' Lambourne gave her the background: Eyran's parents living in

California at the time of the accident, the closeness with his Uncle Stuart and memories of England. '...Particularly a past period which features in most of Eyran's dreams and is only a few miles from where they now live'. Upper-middle class. Thirty-something. Advertising executive. Nice house in the country. One child, a daughter, now just seven. Four-wheel drive. Solid.

'Sounds ideal.' Probably no disfunctionality stemming from that quarter, she thought. *But are they going to let us tap dance through Eyran's brain while we explore this past life?* 'The only problem I've got right now David is workload. It sounds exciting and I'd love to jump on the first flight -

but I just don't think I'm going to be able to get out of here for almost a week.'

'If that's the earliest, fine.' But his voice carried a trace of disappointment. 'I don't really want to do any more sessions with you not here, so I'll cancel next week with the boy and hold the week after. Do you think you'll be over by then?'

'Yes, I think so.' She was already thinking ahead to preparation for the first session. 'We're going to need that time anyway. For a start we'll need a French translator, preferably a native Francophile who can also tell us if the regional accent is correct. And some method of transcription between us so that too many voices don't start

interfering with the patient's concentration. There's also a number of things we'll need to know from the boy's godparents. Look - keep the next session date, but use it to counsel the godparents. At this stage, inform them that the secondary voice has spoken in French and your next session will hopefully find out exactly why. But don't tell them or even infer that it might be a voice from the past - after all, we're not even sure of that ourselves.' Only seconds ago the case had started to feel tangible, and already the adrenaline was running: she was afraid of losing it.

'How many sessions should I schedule initially?'

'Try and plan two within five days.'

That at least should get us to the first stage: finding out if the regression and its central character are real.'

From her room, if she looked out the window at an angle, Marinella Calvan could see the University of Virginia Rotunda in the distance, the half scale copy of Rome's Pantheon which, in the spring and summer, attracted a steady stream of tourists. The centrepiece of the seat of learning founded by Thomas Jefferson which at the US Bicentennial was voted 'one of the proudest achievements of American architecture in the past 200 years.' This was old, grass roots America, hallowed learning halls to some of the founding fathers of

the Constitution, and one of the last places you'd expect a department of parapsychology. Yet the University of Virginia had for the past thirty years, largely under the guidance of Dr Emmett Donaldson, been one of the leading centres for the study of parapsychology in America.

Real? Strange term given that nearly all their time was spent bringing some texture and colour to the unreal, the unexplained, not only to convince themselves within the department, but the army of sceptics faced with each case paper published. In the end, so many of their questions mirrored those of the sceptics: Was the regression's central character somebody famous,

somebody with a well documented life? Accessibility of general historical data about the period and area depicted, patient's interest in the same, possible input from relatives or friends? In the case of xenoglossy, because the most startling characteristic was use of a foreign language, most of her questions for Lambourne to pose the Capels revolved around Eyran's prior knowledge of the language: normal school grades in French, school trips to France, any French friends, past family holidays in France, French study books or linguaphone tapes... general dexterity with the language? From hearing Eyran finally speaking as Jojo, hopefully the interpreter would know whether it was

not only fluent but also accurate for the region and period described.

Xenoglossy and conducting sessions under hypnosis had been the main area where her work differed from that of Emmett Donaldson's, her Professor and mentor through the years. Donaldson had built up a reputation as one of America's leading parapsychologists, a fountainhead of knowledge on past life regressions backed by over 1,400 case histories, many of them published, and to date five books. Her contribution paled by comparison: 284 case studies, 178 published, one book. Though one area she had beaten him in already was the talk show stakes, mainly because Donaldson hated personal appearances.

One local radio, and two TV: one local, the other a cable science channel. The Oprah Winfreys and Donahues were but distant dreams.

She had been working with Donaldson on and off since 1979. She'd gained her degree and doctorate at Piedmont college and went into private practice for three years before realizing it didn't suit her and joined Donaldson. She'd admired Donaldson's papers and work with PLR even while at Piedmont. Three years later she'd started living with a local architect, but much to her father's disappointment - except for the compensation that she kept the family name - they never married. After a first miscarriage, Sebastian was finally born

in 1985. Donaldson was particularly understanding, allowing her three years off until Sebastian was at pre-school. But the more intensive period of work when she returned put extra pressure on an already strained relationship and within another two years she was separated.

It was only during that period that she gained her main focus of where she wanted her work to head. Donaldson's work had concentrated almost exclusively on regressions while awake, conventional question and answer sessions. This meant that he could normally only work with children up to seven or eight, beyond that age conventional memory of past lives was

invariably erased. Sometimes the memories faded earlier, particularly in societies where reincarnation was not accepted; all too often past recalls were labelled as merely infantile fantasy. Much of Donaldson's work had therefore taken place in India and Asia where reincarnation was fully accepted, children with recall were not stifled by their parents.

Apart from the restrictions of conducting conventional sessions, did she really just want to follow in Donaldson's footsteps? The answer to both was no, but where to find her own niche? While she was attracted to the broader parameters of age and culture that hypnotic regressions allowed,

Donaldson had pointed out that so many practising regressionists used hypnotism: how would she be different?

Donaldson had also built up one of the most impressive bodies of PLR work ever recorded with children, and she didn't want to totally turn her back on that legacy. In the end she chose what she hoped was the ideal compromise: hypnotic regressions, but with a high quota of children and specific focus on xenoglossy.

Most practitioners of hypnotic regressions had quotas of no more than twelve percent with children, largely due to the difficulties of gaining parental approval for hypnosis. She hoped to raise that quota to at least thirty percent.

The occurrence of xenoglossy also had stronger significance with children: opportunity to learn the language adopted was far less.

In the middle of battling through one of her most difficult cases, Donaldson had commented, 'Just satisfy yourself, Marie. If in doing so you also satisfy the doubters and critics, then so be it. Set out just to please the critics and you'll be lost. They'll sense your vulnerability, know that you're just playing to the gallery, and have you for breakfast. Why do you think I never do live appearances?'

The case had looked ideal at first: nine year old son of a Cincinnati doctor, originally regressed to cure

agoraphobia, fear of wide open spaces. A past life as a Mexican Conquistador was uncovered. He became detached from an expedition due to a lame horse and spent days roaming in the Coahuila desert before dying of heat exhaustion and exposure. The Spanish was convincing, and she was already arranging additional sessions to prove the other areas of authenticity - geography, period events, customs and dialect - when the boy's father phoned. His son's main phobia had been cured, he didn't want to risk his son being disturbed with continuing sessions.

She was destroyed. No Oprahs or Donahues this time either. Donaldson was right: she'd invited the let down,

played too much to the gallery. But it was difficult not to be influenced by the years of scepticism. Seeing Donaldson's pre-dominance of regressions in Asia dismissed by one critic as having 'scant relevance. There is far too much suggestion within the society of re-incarnation. Young children, already with over fertile imaginations, could too easily be led.'

It had been one of her main reasons for avoiding cases from that region. They were less accepted by the gallery. The University would have swallowed any lame excuse: case studies in the US and Europe were less draining on research funds. She knew that one good mainstream case - such as the Cincinnati

boy - would not only boost her career but throw fresh light on the whole profession. PLR for the masses. The kid next door with average grades suddenly speaking fluently in a foreign tongue, with a linguistic expert and historian riding shotgun for authentication. Okay, *now* we believe you!

Marinella Calvan wondered whimsically if Eyran Capel might be her ticket to Oprah. Probably not. She'd become excited before and been disappointed. Too much could go wrong: the boy's godparents could refuse continuing sessions, the boy could suddenly claim to be Marshal Pétain or Maurice Chevalier, his French could turn out to be no better than phrase book

rudimentary, or he could have holidayed or gone on school exchanges regularly in France. It was too early to get excited.

TWENTY

After the reconstruction, Molet's hopes had sunk of being able to clear his client, and the witness *instruction* before Christmas if anything lowered them still further. Madame Véillan was very sure of the time she saw Machanaud coming out of the lane: 'Just after three o'clock.' Marius Caurin was next with the time he found the boy, and then the other people who had seen Machanaud that day: Raulin where he was working that morning and the various barkeepers; Henri from Bar Fontainouille and Leon

who had seen him from three-fifteen onwards. Repeats of the main testimonies which had ripped apart Machanaud's original police statement. Now all officially recorded for full trial.

Molet could imagine the image that would be built up at full trial for the jury. A day in the life of a low-life vagabond: some casual farm labour followed by a few swift eau de vies, then heading out half drunk for some poaching. Only he sees the boy and decides to spice up his lunch hour with a bit of buggery and murder. Then back to the bars again, to what: Celebrate? Drown his regrets, steady his hands again... *or perhaps blot out the horror of the bloodied images still with him?*

Or was it that Leon's at three-fifteen was part of his regular routine and he wanted to make sure everything appeared as normal.

Molet knew that the statistics for people cleared at the final trial, having gone completely through *instruction*, were grim: less than eight percent. The best chances of acquittal were during *instruction* with the examining magistrate; but that now looked unlikely with Machanaud. He would go the full course.

The only way to introduce a lesser charge was if Machanaud admitted the assault, said that he'd only hit the boy to knock him out, there had been no intention to kill; try to get a manslaughter

charge introduced which normally carried a five to eight year sentence. He'd mentioned it one day to Machanaud, tried to make him realize how heavily all the prosecution evidence weighed against him, but again Machanaud protested his innocence, was almost outraged at the suggestion. '*I'd rather that they did hang me or send me to Devil's Island than admit to something I didn't do.*'

In February, the *instruction* hearings started to involve witnesses more as character assessments of Machanaud. Molet watched Machanaud's ex-girlfriend give evidence to his unpredictable and sometimes violent nature, then a succession of townspeople

testifying to his drinking habits and his oddball nature - and Molet was suddenly struck with an idea. Perhaps he'd be able to save his client's neck after all.

Each Christmas Dominic spent with his mother, he wondered if it would be her last. Six months to a year, the doctors had said; already seventeen months had passed. Clinking glasses over the Christmas table, was it just seasonal celebration, or partly because they knew she was cheating death? Another year.

His elder sister Janine, her husband and two children had come down from Paris for the week and for once the house was full. Janine and Guy took the spare room with their daughter Céleste,

while their boy Pascal, now just nine, slept on a mattress in Dominic's room.

When his sister got a moment alone with him, she enquired about the latest round of hospital tests. The message was clear: they could only visit once or, at most, twice a year; was mother still going to be around when they visited in the summer? Dominic didn't know either way. There were times when he counted her time left in weeks, others when it seemed she might soldier on for months.

Dominic's uncle had sent him another package of the latest sounds from the States: 'Sugar Shack', 'Mocking Bird' and two recent hits from a new producer called Phil Spector: 'Then he kissed me' and 'Be my Baby'. Edith Piaf had died

two months previous and his mother, not yet satiated by the many commemorative Piaf hours on the radio, was still playing some of her tracks - so Dominic ended up playing the records for himself and Pascal up in his room.

Innez Fox's 'Mocking Bird' was Dominic's favourite, but Pascal preferred Phil Spector. The boy had never heard such a powerful sound system, and the strong orchestral background and echoing beat were quite awe inspiring. Dominic started warming to the records more as he edged up the volume. As the music suffused the room and he felt its rhythm washing through him, he found himself smiling. God knows what the neighbours would have

thought if they could hear: Phil Spector upstairs and Edith Piaf downstairs. Dominic turned it down a bit.

Seeing young Pascal's excitement over Christmas - opening presents, getting drunk on wine sneaked from his father's glass, and now bouncing up and down on his bed to Phil Spector - brought home even more to Dominic how terrible it must be to lose a child. What Monique must have suffered, must still be going through.

Dominic had seen her only once in the village since the memorial service. Louis mentioned that she'd only started to venture out a month before Christmas, and then only rarely. If she could avoid going out, she would - but she felt guilty

continuing to rely so heavily on the Fiévets. Dominic thought she looked better than at the memorial service, the dark circles beneath her eyes had mostly gone and a faint glimmer of life was back in her eyes. She didn't notice him, and he was careful not to look too long; her beauty he found somehow intimidating, and he didn't want to make her feel awkward.

Village life in Bauriac and Taragnon had settled back, though news from each *instruction* filtered back via the various witnesses called. Dominic started to worry about details of Machanaud's car statement arising again at the *instruction* in January, but it passed without incident.

The *instruction* process was due to finish in late April, but at the last moment Molet introduced a new element which kept it going through May - calling character witnesses *for* Machanaud in the same style that Perrimond had paraded an assortment against. The resultant coup by Molet, probably the main turning point of the case, had Dominic smiling as much as Poullain had been cursing when he brought news of it back to the gendarmerie. Molet was giving Perrimond a run for his money.

The *instruction* process ended in early June and twenty-two days later both Perrimond and Molet received notification from the Palais de Justice

that the case would be presented to full trial at the *Cour d'Assises* in Aix, and the date set: 18th October. By then, fourteen months would have passed since the attack on Christian Rosselot.

'What makes you think I can afford that?'

'Okay, I'll be generous. One half now and the other in two months time, just two weeks before the trial starts.' They'd done the same as before: Chapeau put a call through to the general Limoges office and Duclos went out and called him back minutes later.

It was still 5,000 Francs, thought Duclos. Outrageous! Almost as much as he'd paid Chapeau in the first place. 'I

don't think I can manage more than four. Even splitting it in two parts.' And even that would mean taking a small overdraft from his bank.

Chapeau sniggered. 'You know, I should ask you for six thousand for being so cheeky. I'll accept it this time - but next time you try and bargain, I'll put the figure up.'

'What do you mean - *next* time. If I pay you this now, I don't want to hear from you again.'

Chapeau sighed, his shoulders sagging. 'And just when we were getting on so well. You think I phone you just for the money - has it never occurred to you that I might like to hear the sound of your voice...'

'Oh, fuck off!'

'It's true. Practically no family left except my brother, and he's away at sea most of the time. Apart from killing people every now and then and phoning you, there's few pleasures left in my life. You think I'm going to pass up on that?' Chapeau smiled slyly and let the silence ride a second, let it sink home that he would be calling regularly. Duclos didn't respond. 'Don't worry, I'm sensible enough to realize that I'll have cleared you out for now. I know your salary, everything about you - so I also know when best to phone. You won't hear from me for a while.'

'How long's that?' Duclos asked cynically. 'Six months, a year - two

years?'

'I don't know. It depends how quickly I think you can save - or how well you do. But just think, when you get that pay rise or promotion - I could be the first one calling to congratulate you!'

Duclos didn't rise to the bait this time, sensed the pure joy Chapeau was deriving from his anger. 'Let's just settle the business at hand. When and where?'

Chapeau said that he'd make a small concession by driving in Duclos' direction to Montpellier, but no further. He suggested a roadside bar on the A7 heading north out of town, 'Eau de Hérault'.

'I don't want to do this in a crowded bar,' Duclos protested.

'It's okay - the few times I've been there it's not been that crowded. But if you feel uncomfortable, they have a large car park in front. We can stay there. When you see my car, come over and get in.'

They arranged to meet the following Saturday at 6.15 pm.

The three judges filed in: the presiding judge in a red robe and the two assessing judges in black robes who took up seats each side of him, the 'pots de fleurs'. The nine jurors were then chosen by picking names out of a pot of thirty-five by the presiding judge, Hervé Griervaut and his *greffier*. The nine

selected took their seats flanking the judges.

Molet had advised Machanaud of his right to challenge up to five jurors, but cautioned that often it aggravated and unsettled the rest of the jury. The defence made no challenges, the prosecution made only one: Perrimond singled out an old man in a crumpled suit and beret. Looked like a farm worker out for the day, thought Molet. Perrimond probably feared he might identify too readily with Machanaud. A replacement juror was picked out of the pot.

Machanaud was first on the stand. He was asked by Judge Griervaut to first of all provide an account of his activities on the day in question, then was

questioned by Griervaut on specific points. This was mainly for clarification rather than angled at areas which might cast suspicion. That would come later with Perrimond, thought Molet. For now Griervaut was merely setting the scene for himself and the jury. The only contentious point he raised was Machanaud lying in earlier statements, confirming if Machanaud considered his final statement and later testimony at *instruction* to be correct. Hesitant 'Yes.'

Perrimond was next. He made much of the earlier lies and changes in police statements, sewing a strong opening image in the jury's mind of Machanaud desperately lying to cover up his dark deeds that day. He then focused on

Machanaud's claim of not seeing the boy or seeing or hearing an attack, confronting him with the earlier police *instruction* entry that '*the boy was not seen at any time in the town centre, so must have reached the river by crossing the fields behind.*'

Molet cringed as Perrimond took Machanaud through each stage of the gendarme's position at the reconstruction. Molet tapped his fingers impatiently to each reluctant 'yes' to twenty metres back, forty... *sixty*.

'So you saw absolutely nothing, Mr Machanaud,' Perrimond concluded. 'A boy was attacked and killed not yards away, and you had a clear view of the only point where he could have crossed

the river. And yet you saw nothing?'

Perrimond kept Machanaud on the stand for another thirty minutes, ripping apart his earlier statements, magnifying the inconsistencies, and planting clearly in the jury's mind that not only was Machanaud at the scene of the crime, but it was stretching credulity that anyone else could have possibly been there. Machanaud would have seen them. Perrimond closed with the equipment that Machanaud used when fishing. 'Apart from your rod and bait - you had a bucket with water for the fish, and what else?'

'Some waders if I have to walk into the shallows.'

'Anything else? Any other sort of

plastic protective clothing?'

'Oh yes, a plastic front apron to go over my shirt or overalls.'

'And what is that for?'

'If I have to gut any fish, it stops the blood getting on my clothing.'

Perrimond passed the floor. 'Thank you.'

A more complete legal bombardment Molet had hardly witnessed. Machanaud was clearly rattled, his few weak protests and arguments laying in tatters. But Molet wondered why Perrimond had finished with details of Machanaud's fishing equipment; surely a stronger image to close on would have been Machanaud standing in clear sight of where it was suggested the attack took

place.

'Monsieur Fornier, when you realized that the car description given to Briant was different to the one mentioned to you, were you surprised?'

'I don't know. I didn't really think about it.'

Molet looked down thoughtfully. The first hour after recess had been taken up with police testimony, dominated by Perrimond asking Poullain carefully weighted questions to support his earlier arguments.

Molet had gone over the same points with Poullain for almost twenty minutes without finding a significant flaw to build on - then came to Machanaud's car

statements and the later changes. After a gruelling quick fire session, Poullain finally conceded that it was incorrect of him not to have passed on the changed statement to *instruction*, then added hastily '... But as the investigating officer it is my duty to enter the information that I trust the most and feel is accurate.' All early advantages were lost.

Molet had dismissed him shortly after and called Dominic Fornier. After the first few minutes with Fornier, he had the feeling Fornier was more nervous about the car incident, might be easier to crack than Poullain - *if* he knew anything.

'When Machanaud mentioned changing his car statement to you in the

bar that evening- you apparently showed surprise. Is that correct?'

'Yes.'

'So that was the first time that you had heard about the change in car description?'

'Yes, it was.'

'Quite a few surprises and changes that evening, it seems,' Molet commented cynically. Perrimond looked as if he was about to object, then changed his mind. 'As the assistant investigating officer, would it not be normal for you to be advised of such a change in statement the moment it was made?'

Dominic's hands sweated profusely on the lectern. His chest felt tight, constricted. 'No, not necessarily.'

'So tell me - what would the circumstances be under which you might *not* be informed?'

'As perhaps in this case, where my commanding officer has already determined the information was false.'

'And when did he share this information with you?'

'A day or so later perhaps.'

'Was that the reason for him not entering the change in the file?'

Dominic was sure his face looked flushed as the blood rushed to his head. He glanced across briefly at Machanaud, but his mother's image was stronger... *reaching out to him. Poullain and him being questioned, charged with perjury for their earlier false statements. What*

price for Machanaud's life? He just couldn't lie! But in the end, as the images receded and he saw Molet staring concernedly and about to prompt, he did the next best thing and only told half the truth. 'Yes, it was - from what he told me later.'

Molet looked down at his file and flicked back a page.

If he just asked one more question, thought Dominic: '*Was that the only reason?*' He was sure in that moment he would have told him everything, told him about Duclos and the call from Marcel Vallon relayed through Perrimond, the pressure from Poullain to cover up - the whole sorry mess that would probably ruin his career along

with Poullain's, yet might at least save Machanaud's neck. And he realized then that he was almost willing it, hoping that Molet would look up and ask the question.

But Molet nodded to the bench and resumed his seat while Griervaut dismissed Fornier. Molet was still thoughtful. There had been a glimmer of recognition in Fornier's eye, almost a look of apology as he'd glanced towards Machanaud. But then just as quickly it was gone. What was it that Fornier knew? The thought preyed on his mind for a while afterwards, through the remainder of the police testimony and the start of forensic evidence.

When Perrimond came onto the gap

between the two attacks estimated at forty minutes and Dubrulle pointed out that this had been determined mostly by the hospital medical examiner, not forensics - Perrimond ended the session abruptly.

Molet noted that Perrimond's questioning of Dubrulle, head of the Marseille forensics team, was scant, but put this down to the fact that Griervaut had already covered most of the key points.

Molet took the floor. 'Monsieur Dubrulle. You had the benefit of blood samples for matching supplied by my client, I believe. Is that correct?'

'Yes. We were supplied with samples after he had been detained.'

'And did Monsieur Machanaud's blood match any of that found at the crime scene?'

'No. We found only the victim's blood present. Type B positive. That of Christian Rosselot.'

Molet flinched slightly at the mention of the boy's name and blood together: too vivid an image for the jury. 'Items of clothing were also taken from Monsieur Machanaud's house and tested for any fibre matches and blood deposits from the boy. Is that correct?'

'Yes.'

'Were any fibre deposits found that matched that of my client's, or any blood deposits on his clothing that matched the boy's blood group?'

'No, we found no such matches. But in this case, there were no significant-'

'Is it in fact not the case,' Molet cut in sharply, 'that you found absolutely nothing at the crime scene or after - no deposits left by my client or stains on his clothing - that could have possibly linked him in any way with the crime.'

'No, we found nothing.'

Dubrulle was more subdued. But as Molet concluded expecting Griervaut to dismiss him, Perrimond requested a re-examination. Only the second time he had done so.

'Monsieur Dubrulle. You were about to comment that there were no 'significant' somethings or other, when my colleague interrupted. I wonder if

you'd be so kind to now complete your comment.'

'Well, it was just that we found no significant fibres of any type at the scene of the crime.'

'Any blood or semen deposits or indeed anything at all linking to any individual?'

'No, we found nothing.'

'So the fact that nothing was found linked to Monsieur Machanaud was not particularly significant?'

'No, not particularly.'

'But in one area of blood stains, I understand you did find something significant. An area of stains that was weaker and pinker than other areas. How do you think this occurred?'

Molet tensed, sat forward keenly. He'd known the information would come up at some point. He should have caught on when Perrimond didn't cover it earlier with Dubrulle. Perrimond's earlier tactic of grandstanding the fishing apron suddenly made sense, and now again he'd carefully engineered everything to make it a closing point.

'It looked as if someone had washed down with water, perhaps from the murder implement or their body. Washed away the boy's blood. It was the same group as the boy's, but had been mixed with water.'

'Now, if somebody in normal apparel,' Perrimond ran one hand down inside his suit lapel, 'say standard cotton

shirt and trousers, had tried to swill off bloodstains in this fashion - would the blood have washed off successfully or left stains?'

'Very little of it would have washed off. Most of it would have soaked into the clothing.'

'But if this person was wearing some sort of protective waterproof clothing - say a plastic apron or bib of some type. Would it have washed off in this fashion then?'

'Yes, probably.'

'And such a bib would also have protected their clothing from stains, I presume?'

'Yes, obviously.'

'Thank you.' Perrimond sat down and

Griervaut dismissed Dubrulle from the stand.

Molet's spirit's sank. Scanning the jury, the impact of the point had gone home strongly.

Testimony from attending medics and doctors was next. Looking at his watch, Molet realized that part of it was probably going to spill over to the next morning. Little arose as the day's events drew to a close to raise his spirits again. Now that Perrimond had stolen his thunder over forensics, there were precious few ace cards left to play. Any chance of clearing Machanaud had probably now gone. All that remained was the testimony of an ageing resistance fighter, an army doctor, and

his own closing arguments to be able to save his client's life.

'And how long were you practising at the Military Hospital in Aubagne, Doctor Lanquetin?'

'Over twenty years. Though I'm retired now - just four years ago.'

'During that time, what did you specialize in?'

'In treatment of cranial injuries. I was a practising surgeon who dealt almost exclusively with head injuries incurred by soldiers or legionnaires in active service.'

'I see.' Molet looked down thoughtfully. It was an idea he'd struck

on late in the *instruction* process, seeing the procession of character witnesses from Perrimond testifying to Machanaud's strange and oddball character. One of them had commented, 'I believe he even has a metal plate in his head, from a sabotage operation that went wrong while in the *resistance*.' Machanaud had originally fought the idea, felt that playing on his old injuries was merely supporting the opposition's case that he was mad and had done something strange that afternoon. Molet admitted then that he thought his chances of clearing Machanaud were remote, and this was probably their only hope of getting a lesser manslaughter charge introduced. Reluctantly, Machanaud had

given him the name of the hospital where he was treated.

His old doctor had since died, but Molet managed to find a retired army doctor, Lanquetin, who was an expert in head injuries. He'd introduced him along with an old *resistance* colleague at a later *instruction* and argued strongly that a lesser charge of manslaughter should be introduced. 'Half of the prosecution case rests on the fact that Machanaud is slightly odd. Yet he has never done anything like this before, and in months of talking with my client, if indeed he has done this, he clearly has no memory of it. This is an old *resistance* fighter, one with a metal plate holding his head together. And we are going to argue on

one hand that he is odd and slightly mad, yet on the other claim that he knew exactly what he was doing and condemn him to be hanged. Ridiculous! I move for a lesser charge of manslaughter to be introduced on the grounds of diminished responsibility, and will produce the medical evidence to strongly support it.' Predictably, Perrimond opposed the suggestion. Naugier accepted it reluctantly, but only as an alternative charge. The manslaughter charge would ride alongside that of premeditated murder. It would be up to the jury to decide of which they thought Machanaud was guilty.

'So your knowledge in the area of cranial injuries is quite extensive?'

'Yes.'

'And during this period have you had experience with metal plates and their effects on patients?'

'Yes, I have. Quite a bit.' Molet merely looked at him expectantly. Lanquetin continued. 'The effects can vary, but the plate is no more than a drastic, emergency solution to hold together two parts of the cranium that could possibly shift. As such, they may be affected by cold or hot weather, or even sudden movement. Electrical and chemical imbalances can be sparked off.'

'What would be the affect of such imbalances?'

'It varies enormously. It could be

nothing more than a mild headache, slightly irritable behaviour or anxiety. Or at the other extreme, quite irrational, even violent behaviour.'

'So it is quite conceivable, Doctor Lanquetin, that someone with a metal plate - given the right conditions - could suffer a temporary memory loss. Have absolutely no recall whatsoever.'

'Yes it is.'

Molet produced the X-rays Lanquetin had viewed earlier, and Lanquetin confirmed that it was quite an extensive implant and that indeed, given its proximity to the parietal lobe which controlled both some motor and behavioural functions, given the right conditions there could be adverse

affects.

'Thank you, Doctor Lanquetin.'

Perrimond spent very little time cross-examining Lanquetin, his main thrust was an attempt to discredit Lanquetin's grasp of 'modern medicine' due to the fact that he had now retired. But the ploy partly backfired when Lanquetin reminded him that metal plate implants were not particularly akin to modern surgery, and indeed the practice was fast dying out.

The conclusion of medical testimony and the various incidental and character witnesses had taken up most of the morning. Only one witness was left to call, Machanaud's old colleague from the *resistance*, Vincent Arnaud. Molet

realized that the closing arguments would probably now have to follow after lunch, there wouldn't be time before.

Arnaud's testimony transported them back to another age: 1943. He and Machanaud were both in their late twenties, colleagues in the *resistance* fighting the Germans near Tours. A rag-tag bunch with limited resources doing the best they could. Arnaud described the dynamite set one day so that they could stop and ambush an ammunition truck. But the dynamite was damp, it went off late and the truck veered off the road, striking Machanaud.

'And was it this that caused your colleague Gaston Machanaud to be

hospitalized and have a metal plate inserted?'

'Yes it was. It was days before we even knew whether he'd live or not.'

Whatever was decided later, thought Molet, with Arnaud on the stand it was once again Machanaud's finest hour. Machanaud's eyes welled with emotion. Old colleagues, old memories. And confirmation at last for all his doubters and detractors that his day of glory, the story he had spun over so many bar counters, had not just been drunken ramblings. Perhaps now everyone would believe him.

The first fifteen minutes of Perrimond's

closing arguments were predictable. How Machanaud was the only person present, his extensive lying when first questioned, the re-construction which had proved conclusively that he was within sight of not only where the boy crossed the river but also where the first attack had taken place, and the forensic evidence which had demonstrated that blood had been swilled away with water. 'Who else but Machanaud would have been equipped with not only waders and a plastic apron, but also a bucket of water for such an exercise?'

Perrimond swung around dramatically, surveying each juror in turn. 'Make no mistake, this was a very measured and deliberate act. Machanaud

knew that if the boy was found on the lane and it looked like the assault took place there, then if by chance it was discovered he was down by the river that day - he could claim that it was somebody else that committed this atrocity.' Perrimond looked down thoughtfully, giving the jury due time for consideration. 'And lo and behold, when he is confronted with being by the river that day, this is exactly what he claims.'

Perrimond then started to pre-empt the arguments Molet might propose. 'You will probably hear from the defence that his client was just some poor misfortunate who happened to be in the same place on that dark day. That the first attack might have even taken place

elsewhere and the child was transported to the lane for the second attack. But how?' Perrimond scanned the jury. 'Each car that passed up and down the lane while Machanaud was there was accounted for. One was in a restaurant for over an hour just beforehand with his car in full sight in the car park. A friend visiting spent all his time speaking with Marius Caurin, and Caurin himself when leaving was seen at various places in town.'

Perrimond looked imperiously at the bench. 'This was Taragnon, a small rural village, and it was lunch time. The streets were busy. The police spent painstaking weeks and months questioning, and with only one

conclusion: Christian Rosselot did not pass through the town. Nor did he pass through from the farm behind, it was too far out of his way - and besides Marius Caurin would have seen him. So desperate are the defence, that they would have you believe anything. Anything but the facts.'

Perrimond shrugged and smiled caustically, then quickly became grave again. 'No, the boy crossed at only one point - the small bridge down river fully in sight of where the accused was fishing. It was there that their fatal meeting took place - and it was also there that the accused relentlessly assaulted the boy and left him for dead. A cold, merciless act perpetrated by

only one person, who sits before you now - the accused, Gaston Machanaud.'

Perrimond finished by asking for the harshest possible sentence, that it was ridiculous to consider anything but a guilty verdict on premeditated murder, anything less would not be doing service to themselves, justice, or to the memory of the young boy '...Who can now only beg for justice silently from the grave. And trust that in your hearts and souls you will make the right judgement.'

Perrimond closed his eyes briefly and nodded as he sat down, as if concluding a prayer, and left the floor to Molet.

'No blood. No fibres. No semen. Not a single thing that links my client to the crime scene itself. I just want you to

remember that when you sentence him to be hanged!' Molet surveyed the jury, audibly drawing breath. 'Except the fact that he was there. There at the time fishing, poaching - as he had been so many times in the past. And yes, the prosecution is right - I am going to suggest that someone else came along and committed this crime. Because that is exactly what happened.'

Molet paced to one side. 'A thorough police investigation that discounted all other possibilities? This is the same investigative team that could not even enter a change in car description accurately from one day to the next. That when confronted started clinging to the excuse that my client was drunk to hide

their error. A vital change not even entered at *instruction* - that the examining magistrate openly admonished them over. Yet we are supposed to believe that they conducted a *thorough* investigation. One that eliminated all other possibilities. When they could not even pass a bit of vital evidence from one stage to the next when it was laid on a plate before them!"

'I think the police merely latched onto the first obvious target, my client, and have been constructing a case out of thin air ever since. One built on a single circumstance - that he was there. And not a single fact or piece of concrete evidence to support this circumstance. What are we all doing here? How could

we all have been dragged this far on such a pitiful illusion? A harmless poacher and local drunkard who one day, suddenly, decides to molest and kill a young boy. No history of molesting young boys, no sexual predilections in that area whatsoever - yet we are supposed to believe that this day, this *one* day, all reason and normal instincts were suddenly thrown to the wind. Unbelievable! How did the prosecution even raise the audacity to try and get us to swallow such a ridiculous story.'

'So let us think afresh - what are we left with? Let us strip away all the ridiculous coincidences slotted into place by the police and the prosecution - and see what we are left with. A simple

man with a long history of poaching and *no* history whatsoever of harming young boys. We ask him what he was doing that day? What do you think is the most likely explanation? That, as he claims, he was poaching, or the more ludicrous suggestion that then starts to stretch all precepts of credible thinking - that he suddenly broke with past form and harmed this young boy. Because that, exactly that, is what is being suggested today.'

Molet waved one arm dramatically. 'Even what the prosecution are asking for here today and the evidence they are providing in support are at odds. On one hand, they want you to believe that this was a cold blooded, premeditated

murder. On the other, they would have you believe - from the various witnesses they have produced - that the accused is mad half the time and drunk the rest. A complete oddball and misfit. A village idiot who can hardly premeditate his life from one day to the next. Let alone plan a murder like this - so meticulously in fact that the police and a whole team of forensics could not find a single trace of evidence.' Molet slowly shook his head. 'The two just don't go together. The only honesty you have seen here today was just before lunch: Gaston Machanaud's old *resistance* colleague and the army doctor. That is the real Gaston Machanaud. The *resistance* fighter who fought bravely for his country, suffered

an horrific injury that still plagues him as a consequence, and is now just left with a few fond tales to tell in the local bars. This is the man that the prosecution wants you to hang. Pathetic!"

Molet drew a long and tired breath. 'Yet I had to fight with my client to bring them here today and to the earlier *instruction* - even though it was the only way to bring some honesty to this whole charade. Introduce the charge that, if anything at all, my client should be facing - manslaughter. Manslaughter due to diminished responsibility. It is outrageous that any other charge should have even been discussed today.'

Molet looked down; reluctant dismay. 'But in doing so, I have partly turned my

back on what I believe: that my client is innocent. That only one thing is true about the prosecution's claim - he was there. Nothing more. No blood. No semen. No fibres. No scheming individual who could successfully hide those elements. And no reasonable explanation from the prosecution of what he was doing there that afternoon - except the one he gave himself. That he was there fishing. As he had been so many afternoons before.'

Molet nodded in turn to the jury and the three judges and sat down.

The jury returned after almost two hours. Between the nine jurors and three judges the votes - counted painstakingly by the

greffier and then passed to Griervaut to announce - were 7 to 5 not guilty of premeditated murder, 9 to 3 guilty of manslaughter.

Molet felt a twinge of disappointment at no acquittal, followed quickly by relief: it could have been worse. Much worse. But Machanaud looked destroyed. Molet knew from the earlier *instruction* when he fought with Machanaud over getting the lesser charge introduced, that Machanaud would probably never understand, or accept. Understandable for someone who was probably innocent. Despite his strong closing arguments, Molet knew how strongly the jury had been swayed by much of the prosecution's

presentation and witnesses, and that without the mid-ground of the lesser charge they would probably have found Machanaud guilty of premeditated murder.

Because the charge for manslaughter partly hinged on diminished responsibility, Judge Griervaut raised the subject of medical and psychiatric assessment. Molet argued for private assessment, while Perrimond predictably argued for state assessment. After consultation with his two assessing judges, Griervaut cleared his throat summarily and looked up to pass final sentence: That Machanaud be detained in prison for no less than six years, and that he be treated and assessed twice

each year by a state psychiatrist. 'At the end of that period, if not deemed to be mentally fit, he should be released to the care of a state psychiatric hospital where he would undergo suitable treatment until fit for release.'

At the outside Machanaud would do the full six with maybe another year in an institution, Molet considered. If things went well, he could get parole in four years and be cleared to leave immediately. What Molet hadn't noticed was the look that passed between Perrimond and one of the assessing judges when they were deliberating on the issue of state or private psychiatric assessment. All that struck him as odd was Perrimond's slight smile when the

final judgement was passed down. A strange reaction to what surely must have been considered mostly a defeat by Perrimond.

TWENTY-ONE

Marinella Calvin was still adjusting after the long flight, and the wine had made her feel sleepy. She held one hand up to indicate half a glass more was enough as David Lambourne poured. 'Where did you find Philippe?' she asked.

'London School of Economics, just down the road. He's not an official translator - just a French student on a social sciences course. But his English is almost word perfect and he's all I could find at such short notice with a

south of France background.'

'How old is he?'

'Twenty-four. He's from a small village in the Alpes-Maritimes: Peyroules.'

They'd spent just over an hour in Lambourne's office going over the case before retiring to a small bistro close by. They'd already agreed the only French spoken would be between the patient and the translator. One voice with questions. Marinella would tap them out to appear on a computer screen; Philippe would then pose the questions and tap out the answers in English on the same screen. The session for them would be a series of on-screen questions and answers in English. It was the only way

to avoid distraction and confusion.

'Will his knowledge of patois from the fifties and sixties for that region be good enough?'

'It hasn't changed that much according to him. Especially in the inland villages.'

Marinella nodded and sipped her wine. Earlier they'd discussed what Lambourne had discovered through the Capels: Eyran's grades for French were average, there had been one or two holidays to France, but no school exchanges or long stays. Eyran's french was at '*La plume de ma tante*' stage. She'd already gained the main background of the Capels, and now filled the gaps. Some details, such as how long they'd been married,

Lambourne didn't know. The only thing to cause a chink of concern was Lambourne's flippant remark that the area where they lived, East Grinstead, was 'home to more fringe religious groups than any other part of the country.' When pressed, Lambourne assured her that 'they were normal. Lapsed Church of England.'

Still, she asked the obvious. 'Do you think they could have staged all this?' She knew that it was one of the first questions she'd be asked by sceptics. Advertising executive. Vivid imagination. From an area noted for fringe religions. In no time the media would have them taped as weirdoes from some obscure cult which not only

believed in reincarnation, but that we all live concurrent lives in different dimensions.

'No, I don't think so. If anything, they were reluctant to enter Eyran into the sessions. Certainly Stuart Capel at least. He admitted that he should have taken Torrens' advice earlier and entered Eyran into counselling almost straightaway. He delayed hoping that Eyran might improve in his own time.'

'Torrens?' The name struck a faint chord, but Marinella couldn't recall from where.

'The doctor from California who operated on Eyran and treated him during his coma. He made an initial report recommending Eyran should have

psychiatric counselling. Not only due to the loss of his parents, but assessment of impairment after the coma. The boy was under almost three weeks.'

'Have you got a copy of Torrens' report?'

'Yes.'

'Good, good. That will help enormously.' Couldn't be better. Counselling initially recommended by a Stateside doctor.

'Us or the boy?'

Marinella calmed her enthusiasm and bit her lip lightly at Lambourne's frown. 'I'm sorry. That probably sounded a bit callous.' Their aims were at odds, she realized. His was to cure the boy, hers was to prove an authentic regression.

Only where the regression might help the main subject did they coincide. But grandstanding her own aims above his had been insensitive. She smiled. 'You know, Donaldson always warned me about playing to the gallery. That each time it would land me in trouble. But it's unbelievable what we have to put up with when we get things wrong.' She went on to explain how their critics, many of them from within the profession, sat on the sideline like vultures waiting for them to footfault. 'One bad case, one falsehood we fail to uncover before them, and our credibility can be set back years. Suddenly *everything* we're doing is false. Questions at each corner, the threat of departmental budget cuts...

"Why didn't you find that out before... Is your next case going to be like the so and so fiasco?" It's no wonder we become paranoid, lose sight of other objectives. I'm sorry.'

Lambourne nodded. He'd put her at ease earlier about their respective objectives by assuring that he couldn't continue with conventional therapy until a regression uncovered more about Jojo. But there was still a gap. To her this was just another research paper; to him, it was an extension of PLT: Eyran's current problems and obsessions partly stemming from his past as Jojo. But there was no point in underlining that gap, spoiling the mood of their association before it had started. 'If we can each get

only thirty percent of what we initially hoped for out of this - then we'll at least be doing better than my normal sessions. Cheers.'

They spent a while talking about the structure of the next day's session, then the conversation became more general, the mood lighter.

'Anything notable come up since we last met?' he asked.

'You mean, like the conquistador boy?'

Lambourne looked down, toying with his dessert. He knew how frustrating the case had been for her, but why the reference now? Was it a warning shot: *don't cut me short on this one, put me through that again*. 'I was hoping you

might have had something more fruitful.'

'Not really. Lot of conventional regressions, but only two with xenoglossy - both adults. But use of language wasn't exceptional, in both cases it could be argued that the subjects would have been able to learn the language used, especially at that level of proficiency.'

Beneath Lambourne's look of concern, she noticed a half smile. A smile that said: *perhaps tomorrow will change your run of luck*. He was obviously more hopeful than he'd made out. The early signs looked promising, she conceded; but her long years of battling with sceptics had made her fear the worst. Even if the first stages of

authentication were satisfied, would the Capels agree to continuing sessions, and for how long would Lambourne remain convinced that their aims coincided?

Session 6.

'It's dark and warm inside. Outside I can hear the wind through the trees and the birds... or sometimes my father working in the fields nearby.'

The session had been under way forty minutes and already Marinella Calvan was exhausted. The start had been slow, the rhythm staccato, heightened by the gap waiting for Philippe to type the translated answers on screen and then pose Marinella's typed questions in

response. The only words spoken in the room were in French. While the on-screen version in English would provide a useful typescript, they'd decided to run a tape as well; nuances or possible language mis-interpretations could be gone back over later. David Lambourne was at her side.

Parts had been rambling, the boy spending a long time describing a visit to the beach at Le Lavandou, the seagulls overhead, making a sandcastle with a rivulet for the sea to wash in and form a moat. She'd been eager to move on, but Lambourne put a calming hand on her shoulder, felt it might be better to introduce a more relaxing tone and mood. Minutes before, when they'd

asked him about being separated from his parents, his breathing had become rapid and hesitant. He'd mumbled something about a 'bright light... not being able to see...' then laying flat in a wheat field, his face against the sheaves - but by that time his breathing had become too fractured, words little more than spluttered monosyllables in the gaps. She quickly prompted Philippe to interrupt. Whatever had separated him from his parents had obviously been deeply disturbing. They'd return later.

She guided him towards fonder, more relaxed memories.

Recall of the day at the beach had been one, and now describing his favourite hideaway camp in the field at

the back of the family farmhouse, another. In between the rambling, in the moments Marinella had been able to impose some structure to the session, she'd been able to find out the names of both his mother and father and how far the farm was from the local village, Taragnon. Jojo had been a nickname; two or three corrections passed back and forth with Philippe before they had it right: Ji-jo, Gigot, then finally Gigio, after one of his favourite puppet characters. Asking Gigio what he heard on the radio at home, they'd also identified the period: early 1960s.

'... Sometimes I jump up from my hiding place and surprise my father.'

'Does your father spend a lot of time

in the fields?'

'Yes... and in the garage at the side of the house. All his tools are in there.'

'Is it a big farm?'

'Yes. At least forty hectares.'

Just over eight acres, thought Marinella. Small holding. But to a young boy it was probably large. 'And from your hideaway, can you see the house? What does it look like?'

'The field slopes down... and there's a courtyard before the kitchen door. Sometimes when it's getting dark, I can see my mother working in the kitchen and I know then that it's time to come in. I know if my father is in the garage, because he always has the light on – there are no windows.'

'Do you have any other favourite places in the house you like to hide? What about your bedroom - do you like your bedroom?'

'Yes... but I prefer my hideaway. My sister always comes into my bedroom and plays with my toys... She broke one of my toys once, it was a favourite car...'

Marinella watched patiently as the tale unfolded on screen: Gigio describing how upset he was, how the car had been for his birthday just a few weeks before. He'd shouted and she started crying, his mother took his sister's side and made him even more upset. She was about to interrupt with another question, felt that Gigio was starting to ramble again - when he

suddenly became more thoughtful.

'... I shouldn't have become so angry with her, made her cry. I loved her really... I always helped her if I could. I missed her so much later, as I did my parents.'

Marinella's skin bristled. Often with regressions accurate detail could only be gained by taking the person back to a specific time and place - a room, a fond memory, an event that stuck out in their mind. But at others they would jump time frames and generalize periods and feelings. 'Did you become separated from your sister as well - and was it at the same time as your parents?'

'Yes.'

Either Gigio had lost his entire family,

or he had become separated from them. She asked.

Eyran's head lolled, his breathing suddenly more erratic as his eyelids pulsed, struggling with the images. 'It was me - I became lost from them... I remember thinking how worried they would be. And my father... my father... why didn't he come and try to find me. There was a bright light... so bright... I couldn't see anything. And the field... I recognized it... I thought I might see my father there looking for me any minute... when... *when...* *I...* *I'* Eyran's head started shaking, beads of sweat on his brow, the words subsiding into guttural gasps on fragments of breath.

Lambourne put one hand on

Marinella's shoulder, but she mis-read the signal, tapped out. 'Did you blame your father for not finding you - think that it was partly his fault?'

Eyran swallowed, fighting to control his erratic breathing. 'Yes - partly... but it was more me... I blamed myself. I kept thinking how they couldn't face that I'd become lost from them - that I'd somehow let them down... their sorrow. My mother's face, so sad... *so, so sad*... her eyes full of tears, crying... no, it couldn't be real - it couldn't have happened... no, couldn't... *not real*... *No... No!*' Eyran's head started rocking wilder this time, his eyes scrunched tight. His laboured breathing rasped in his throat.

Lambourne reached over frantically to the keyboard, tapped out (*Stop it. Stop it now! Move Gigio on from the incident.*)

Marinella looked up quizzically. They'd arranged a code whereby any message between them should be typed in brackets so that Philippe knew not to translate. She'd pushed for Lambourne's benefit, would have been happy just to ask limp questions about Gigio's background and let him ramble at will, build up her research paper - but Lambourne's objective was to find and exorcize the link of shared loss between Eyran and Gigio. It seemed crazy to give up now, just when they might be on the brink. She was about to tap out (*We're so close to proving the link - just a few*

more questions), when reading the intensity of Lambourne's expression she thought better of it. She typed, 'When you were in your hideaway by the old house - how old were you?' Return Gigio to a calmer, happier period.

They waited over twenty seconds for Eyran to make the leap, for his breathing to settle back and answer. 'I was ten years old then.'

Marinella knew that Gigio was nine at the time of his day out at Le Lavandou, his sister four. 'Do you recall any memories from when you were older - eleven or twelve?' Marinella was aware of Lambourne's slight intake of breath and him staring intently at her as she waited for an answer. If she could have

spoken, she would have explained that general overviews usually posed no danger, didn't get subjects wrapped up as intently as specific recall of incidents.

'No... after the light and the field, there was nothing... I... uh...' Eyran's head tilted, as if he was grappling for images just out of reach. 'Everything grey... grey behind my eyes... then another light - things distant... too far... can't hear... can't...' Some mumbling, words and thoughts trailing off.

Lambourne's nerves tensed. This was the second time that *field* had been mentioned. On impulse, he reached forward and tapped out: 'Was it a wheat field?'

Short pause as Philippe translated and

the answer came. 'Yes... yes, it was.'

Marinella sensed that it was significant by Lambourne's sudden urgency, but he just gave her a wide-eyed shrug. An '*It's interesting, but I'll tell you later*' look. Now that she knew Lambourne wouldn't expect her to push more on the shared loss link between the two boys, she relaxed and returned to general information, filled in gaps from what they'd learned so far: how often Gigio went to the local village, his full name, his school, the name of the street by their farm, and friends and neighbours.

At only one point did Gigio start rambling again, describing stopping off from school at the local boulangerie, and

how the woman there, Madame Arnand, when her husband wasn't in the shop would often give him some free '*pan chocolat*'. They were stale, from one or two days before and would soon be thrown out, but her husband was too mean to give them away, she confided one day. It became their little secret, the husband probably puzzled why this young boy came in his shop so often and browsed without buying anything, and the wife winking at Gigio as soon as her husband's back was turned.

Marinella let Gigio ramble: it was providing some useful extra details to check, and for the first time during the session Eyran had actually smiled. She could feel a stronger bond and trust

developing with the lighter mood. If she built on that rapport, by the next session they might have more success breaking through the barriers Gigio had erected and could start tackling the core grief that linked the two boys.

Marinella was aware of David Lambourne checking his watch and nodding at her. She checked the time: an hour and twelve minutes. More than enough for a first session. She gradually wound things down, let Gigio finish his description of discovering an old car tyre one day on his way home from school with a friend, and how they rolled it back to the farm - then brought Eyran back out of hypnosis.

While Lambourne escorted Eyran out

and she heard him talking with the Capels in the waiting area, she scrolled back on the computer screen. Apart from Lambourne's 'stop it' command, the only other item in brackets was where she'd asked Philippe if the regional French was accurate. She asked him now to elaborate on the basic 'Yes' on screen. 'Was it accurate for the time period as well as the region?'

'Yes, pretty much. As I said to David, it hasn't really changed through the years. Only on the coast has it been corrupted because of the massive influx of visitors and residents from other parts. Thirty miles inland, it's a different world.'

'Is it the sort of patois that would be easy for someone to copy or effect?'

Philippe shrugged. 'Not that easy. Perhaps someone from Paris or Dijon could attempt a reasonable mimicry, but they would still be caught out on some words. But somebody English, already struggling with French as a second language - I don't think so.'

Marinella clicked the print command. The printer was on the second sheet as Lambourne came back in. Marinella asked him about the wheat field. 'I remember you mentioning a wheat field from one of Eyran's earlier dreams. Is that why you thought it might be significant?'

'Yes, that, and Eyran mentioning that when he first moved to the old house in England, the wheat field at the back

seemed somehow familiar.'

'Well, at least the main prognosis seems to have been supported,' Marinella commented. Earlier she speculated that if a real regression was proved, probably some memory of loss or grief in the past life had been sparked off by the accident and Eyran's loss. In the same way that many PLT uncovered phobias lay dormant until awoken by a similar incident. 'I think we'll find that if there was much memory or link between the two before the accident, that it was mostly subliminal - little more than fragments of *déjà vu*.'

'Possibly. But we won't know for sure until we've gone back in more detail through the transcript and compared with

the transcripts from previous sessions.'

Marinella noticed Lambourne glance towards Philippe and picked up on the signal. Either he didn't want to talk openly in front of Philippe, or he wanted more time to consider his prognosis. She too would probably benefit from a few hours to collate her thoughts. 'Of course, we're jumping the gun a bit. The first thing we need to know is if the regression and its main character are real. If not, then we can focus again on the original theory of a secondary character invented by Eyran.' She turned to Philippe. 'How would you like to earn some extra money?'

Philippe smiled slyly. 'The last time an older attractive woman asked me that,

I got into trouble.'

Marinella explained her problem. They had various names and details from the session, all of which would have to be checked. This would involve a number of calls to town hall registrars and clerks in France, and her French was practically non-existent. Marinella circled the names on the transcript. 'The Rosselots. The boy Christian and his parents Monique and Jean-Luc. Sister named Clarisse. From Taragnon. Early nineteen-sixties. Shouldn't be too hard to find - *if* they exist.'

The boy had probably died when he was only ten years old. Everything should therefore start with registration of the death certificate, she explained. Then

perhaps they could begin piecing together the details of his life. 'See if those pieces match his descriptions.'

TWENTY-TWO

Jean-Luc Rosselot sat on the small stone wall and looked down the slope of the field towards the courtyard and the house. It was summer again, eight months after the trial. The scent of the fields reminded him of the day he'd found Christian's bike, of days they'd spent together working on the farm... *of the bleak wheat field with the gendarmes placed like markers.*

Christian's small makeshift camp the far side of the wall he'd dismantled just a few months before. The winter winds

had made it look dishevelled, no longer a pleasant reminder of the days when Christian used it.

The images too were fading. Many times before he'd sat on the wall and looked down, imagined Christian running up towards him, waving, calling his name. Now when he summoned up the image, he could see a figure running, but it was indistinct - it could have been any boy. The features were faded, hazy, little more than a Cézanne impression. He wondered whether it was because his eyes were watering with the pain of the memory, blurring his vision - then would suddenly realize his eyes had slowly closed, the images were playing only in his mind.

The only images that remained clearly, *too clearly*, were those he'd fought to blot out: the young gendarme in the courtyard with Monique collapsed at his feet, the photos of when Christian was found which he and Monique had to view at *instruction*, part of the process of official identification before the almost ludicrous question, 'Is it your wish that charges are proceeded with?' The two days in court, his outrage as the defence tactics became clear, and then the judge's final sentence: six years? Six years for the life of his son: not even a semblance of justice. Diminished responsibility? Metal plates, army doctors and old resistance fighter. The whole thing had been a pathetic sham.

All that he'd clung to all along had been justice. Everything else had already been stripped away. Pride, hope, some reason to explain the ridiculous, the unacceptable that he'd lost Christian. Was that what he'd hoped for that day in court? Some explanation of *why* it had happened to lay the ghosts to rest. In the end, reason had been as lacking as justice. What were they saying in the end: that the man *had* murdered his son, but it was partly excusable because he had a metal plate due to being hit by a Nazi truck twenty years ago?

Jean-Luc shook his head. He felt tired, very tired. The land, the fight to make the farm work, had been sapping him dry the last few years. Christian's death and the

ensuing investigation and court case had taken whatever strength and resolve remained. He felt increasingly awkward in Monique's and Clarisse's company, could hardly look them in the eye, knew that they might see what lay beneath: that he just couldn't love them the way he loved Christian. And ashamed that he'd let them down, failed them. The last two letters from the bank he'd stuffed in a drawer without opening them. He knew already what they would say.

He rose slowly, clearing the welled tears from his eyes as he started down the field towards the courtyard. If he saw Christian now, saw a clear image again waving and calling to him, perhaps that would stop him, make him think

again. But there was nothing, only the empty field. Empty and dry under the summer sun, unyielding. Nothing left to cling to any more, not even the memory. As he got closer to the house, he saw a faint flicker behind the kitchen window. Monique was busy in the kitchen, but she hadn't noticed him and didn't look up as he crossed the courtyard to the garage.

14th December, 1969

Monique Rosselot tried to make out shapes in the room. Everything was misty, as if looking through a sheet of muslin. The figures moving around were indistinct, blurred, except the nurse when she leaned close, asking her again

if she could 'feel anything below her waist?'

'Yes... yes,' she answered between fractured breaths, now slightly indignant at the nurse's doubting tone.

Feel was such a lame word for the terrible pain that gripped her, starting deep in her stomach and spreading like a firestorm through her thighs and lower back. She'd never before experienced such intense pain, didn't know it was possible for any human to endure such agony.

'I don't think the epidural has taken,' she heard a man's voice. 'We might have to give her another shot.'

'I don't think we can at this stage,' came another.

And then the nurse leaning over again.
'Can you feel your body relaxing now?'

'Yes... yes.'

'But can you still feel the pain from lower down?'

Monique exhaled the 'Yes' between clenched teeth, her breathing now little more than short bursts as she tensed against the pain.

Doctor Jouanard contemplated the dilemma. The patient had been given the epidural almost thirty minutes ago. After twenty minutes when it became obvious it hadn't taken because of the patient's continuing pain, the baby was by then engaged in the birth canal. It would be almost impossible for the patient to bend forward to get the right curvature in the

spine for a fresh epidural. And the risks of trying to administer it without full curvature were too high. A half centimetre off target and the patient could be paralyzed. In the end he'd ordered a mild general anaesthetic, something to calm and relax nerves, but leave the patient awake so that there was some response muscle control to push with.

At least that had now taken, but the continuing pain and the fact that the baby didn't seem to have progressed any further in the birth canal, despite concentrated pushes from the patient, began to worry Jouanard. He'd read the patient's history thoroughly: two previous natural births without

complications, her pelvic girth was obviously sufficiently large, why the problems now?

With one hand on the abdomen, he could feel the baby lodged deep in the birth canal; with the other he spread back the vulva to get a clearer view. He thought he saw what looked like the baby's head, and something else - though he couldn't immediately make out what. There was also too much blood, he began to worry that something might have ruptured internally. He felt inside, trying to identify by touch what he thought was the head.

He worked his hand around, moulding to the shape of the smooth damp flesh: it was a shoulder straight ahead that he'd

seen, further down he could feel the thorax and arm, and the head... the head was pushed sharply to one side. And something in between. Jouanard ran his hand around once more to make sure. He looked up sharply.

'Dr Floirat. Administer the patient immediately with full anaesthetic for surgery.'

Floirat started issuing instructions: ECG monitor and oscillatometer to be wheeled forward, doses for the thiopentone.

Jouarnard stepped back, supervising the laying out of instruments with his assistant. The blood loss worried him. Three or four minutes to set up the monitors, another minute for the

thiopentone to take effect. How much more would she have lost by then? He directed a nurse to keep swabbing the flow. He noticed the patient's eyes darting, taking in the renewed activity.

'It's okay... it's okay,' he soothed. 'The epidural hasn't taken fully. We're giving you a general anaesthetic. It will all be over soon. Just relax.'

Stock phrases. Inside he was panicking. Breach birth with part of the umbilical cord wrapped around the baby's neck. Pushing against the obstruction had obviously caused an internal rupture, and the baby might already be strangled. If the placenta had ruptured, the baby would soon be dead, *if* it was still alive. If it was the uterus or

womb, he could lose the patient as well. And he wouldn't even know where the rupture was until he opened up.

The nurses were making the last connections on the monitors. Floirat stepped forward and administered the thiopentone. Jouanard looked at his watch, almost counting down the seconds. The blood loss was heavy. Fresh swabs were being dumped in the dish every ten or fifteen seconds. The patient was still alert, responding to the nurse who was talking to check when she was fully under.

As the questions became totally mundane, Monique began to panic, bringing her anxiety at the renewed activity and the doctors sudden urgent

orders to a peak. She asked the nurse, 'What's happening?', only to receive a trite smile in response.

'Nothing. Don't worry. Just relax.'

Which only made her panic all the more. She reached one hand up. 'I'd like to see my husband. Please... I'd like him here by me. To help me.'

'Yes... don't worry. We'll get him.' The same practised smile from the nurse, knowing that the patient would be fully under any second.

Waves of euphoria started to descend, and suddenly the nurse was right. There was nothing to worry about. Her body felt as if it was floating, drifting away on the echoes and voices around her.

'You see... my husband will know just

what to do,' she offered pathetically, her last words before drifting completely into the darkness.

In the first moments of darkness, she saw Christian's face. He was running through a field, waving and smiling to her. But it wasn't the field by their house, it was one she didn't recognize: a wheat field, the sheaves blowing gently in the wind. And she thought: yes, it would be nice if it was a boy. Another Christian. She'd take care of him this time, love him, keep him close to her side and never let him be harmed. Oh God, please, *please*... just one more chance.

Floirat checked the patient's pupils for responsiveness with a penlight and nodded after a second. Jouanard made

the first incision. He'd already resigned himself to the fact that he'd probably lost the baby. The challenge remaining was to save his patient's life.

28th April, 1974

Dominic Fornier swung the black Citreön through the narrow *Panier* lanes, beeping his horn to move some people aside as he negotiated a tight turn. As he picked up speed, the wind rush reverberated from the buildings close each side. Ahead, he could now see the crowd. Most of them were congregated on the far side. He parked behind two black Citreöns already there. He recognized Lasnel from forensics and

Detective Inspector Bennacer, busy taking notes among the crowd the far side.

Lasnel looked up from examining the body, grabbed his attention first. '*Inspecteur* Fornier. Just in time. Another few minutes and the meat wagon might have taken him away.'

Dominic knelt beside Lasnel. 'Been here long?'

'Four or five minutes. Quite straightforward, though. Looks as if the first blow was made here, a straight lunge, quite deep, almost reaching the trachea, then the blade was run across, severing the jugular.'

'So we know at least it was a knife rather than a razor. That'll narrow it

down.' Dominic smiled and patted Lasnel's shoulder.

The man's body lay face down, the blood from his neck wound spreading out and now a dark maroon, almost brown. He'd been dead now almost an hour. Dominic straightened up and Lasnel too shifted to one side for a moment as a detective moved in and took some photos using flash; though it was afternoon and bright sunshine, the buildings each side heavily shaded the narrow lane. Dominic went over to Bennacer.

'Any witnesses?'

Bennacer shook his head and pointed to a middle aged woman, quite dark, probably Moroccan or Algerian. 'She

was the first to find him, two other men came up quickly afterwards, one of them went to the nearest phone to make the initial emergency call, the other's here.' Bennacer pointed to an old man not far behind the woman. 'But nobody actually saw the attack.'

Dominic clarified with Bennacer that the other man, in his twenties, hadn't appeared again but probably wasn't significant. The victim's wallet was missing, there was no available identification, but Bennacer knew him: a local club owner called Emile Vacheret. The attack had been made to look like a robbery, but Bennacer doubted it. It was probably a *milieu* hit.

Dominic nodded. Now that Bennacer

had mentioned the name, Dominic remembered the file. Their main informant on *milieu* activities, Forterre, had reported moves to set up stronger drug distribution networks using Marseille clubs. Vacharet was one of the club owners in the file. Vacheret had for years used his clubs as fronts for packets of marijuana, but there was pressure for him to start handling heroine as well. Emile Vacheret was against the idea, but his son François, now in his early thirties, was known to be in favour. 'So it looks as if they didn't want to wait the fifteen years for the old man to retire,' Dominic commented sourly. 'Do you think his son might have actually been involved in the hit?'

'No, I don't think so. He might have disagreed with his father, but he wouldn't have gone that far. With Emile out of the way, they'd get what they wanted anyway with François - so no need to implicate him. It also serves as a warning: what better way to make sure the son tows the line.'

The inner politics of the *milieu*, thought Dominic. Essential knowledge for much of his past nine years in Marseille. As the drugs market had burgeoned, with Marseille one of the main distillation and shipment centres for Europe, the incidence of *reglas de compté*, settling of accounts, had increased. As with so many other similar cases, there would be no murder weapon

found, no fingerprints, no witnesses. Just the usual list of suspects bounced between departmental files and computers.

'Are any of his clubs near here?'

'The nearest is at least three blocks away. Nothing in the immediate streets.'

Dominic scanned the street beyond the small crowd. Eleven days? Eleven days before he cleared his desk in Marseille and started his two year posting with Interpol in Paris. The case wouldn't have progressed much in that time, would no doubt end up with his Chief Inspector, Isnard, where it would fester in one of his two usual piles: unsolved cases and internal admin overload. If he wanted some movement on the case, some strong

leg work while he was gone, his best chance lay with Bennacer.

Dominic flicked back through his notepad. Too many loose ends to tie up in just eleven days: cases in progress, reminders before he left, now he was adding more. Any work breaks had been filled with organizing packing and moving and rent contracts for their house in Aubagne and their new house in Corbeil, twenty miles south of Paris.

No doubt there would be a goodbye drink with his department and, if there was time, a last meal at 'Pierre Tête' in Cannes with his wife and son. They'd dined there the night he proposed to her, then again six years back when he received his final exam results and his

move from the Marseille gendarmerie to the National Police became official. The two years at Interpol was voluntary and his current ranking would remain the same, but it would broaden his work experience and help his progress to Chief Inspector: two or three years after he returned at most. Without clinking glasses first at Pierre Tête, the move to Paris would seem somehow incomplete.

Dominic looked up. The ambulance was approaching, forcing the crowds close to the walls each side in the narrow lane. He wrote on a scrap of paper and handed it to Bennacer. 'I'm not sure how much I'll be able to do on this before I leave. But don't just let the case rot on Isnard's desk. Do the leg work

yourself and work your *milieu* contact as best you can. This will be my number in Paris. Call me directly if anything comes up.'

As Dominic closed his notepad, he saw the word *Machanaud*? written on the second to last page. A year after gaining his *Inspectorate* with the National Police, he'd been driving through Taragnon and was reminded of the case. Machanaud should have been released two years before, might have even been paroled earlier. He tried to contact Molet through the Palais de Justice and his old law firm, only to discover that he had moved practice to Nice; four phone calls later, he gave up on tracking down a phone number. He

decided to try finding out what had happened to Machanaud through Perrimond's office. After three calls to Perrimond's secretary and none of them returned, within a week a snowstorm of work had pushed it into the background and it was forgotten.

It sprang to mind again a year ago when he saw a press cutting about Alain Duclos. He'd seen nothing about Duclos in the ten years since the murder. It was a small sidebar talking about the new candidate for the RPR in Limoges, Alain Duclos, and mentioned his position as Chief Prosecutor the past five years and some notable successes against companies for labour contract infringements: mostly sweat shop use of

illegal immigrants, with Duclos quoted that 'it not only imprisoned the immigrant in a cycle of modern day slavery, but also robbed the French people of their workright.' Champion of the People, Dominic thought cynically. Duclos and politics were obviously made for each other.

He'd made a mental note then to try Perrimond again but had forgotten about it. Then just the week before he'd made the entry in his notepad along with the other loose ends of his life he wanted to deal with before leaving. No doubt he was worrying for nothing. Machanaud had probably been paroled after four years and spent at most another year in an institution receiving therapy. He

would try Perrimond again as soon as he got back to his office.

4th February, 1976

Rain pattered against the side window of the car. Duclos looked anxiously at his watch. Chapeau was already five minutes late. Perhaps he was having trouble finding the new meeting place.

The idea had been forming slowly the past year, though subconsciously it had probably been there far longer. Almost three years ago an old uncle of his had died and, together with his cousin, they'd handled the house clearance. Duclos knew a local antiques dealer, but they'd decided to go through the house first to

identify the curios, be sure of their ground for when the dealer arrived. In an old attic trunk together with a uniform, brocade and medals, Duclos found an old service revolver, an SACM 7.6mm.

His uncle had been an army officer during the Vichy government regime, but it wasn't the sort of thing the family would make public, nor did Vichy period army memorabilia have strong re-sale value. The trunk's contents would probably not be passed to the dealer and he doubted that his uncle had even made them known to his family. Yet the gun looked in surprisingly good condition, had obviously been regularly oiled and cleaned, was now tucked away neatly with a box of ammunition at its side.

Duclos looked up and listened for a second - his cousin was still busy downstairs - before pocketing the gun and the shells.

The thought didn't hit him in that moment what he might want it for, but in retrospect he recalled his eagerness to pocket the gun, his worry that his cousin might come up and prevent him being able to take it. Perhaps the intent and purpose had been there subliminally all along.

But it wasn't until almost eighteen months later, with the next demand from Chapeau, that the significance of the gun really struck him. The demands came almost every year, had worn him down bit by bit. Each step up the ladder, each

pay rise or increase in stature, and Chapeau would phone. Congratulations!

He'd come almost to resent his own success, felt physically sick with each press flashbulb and item printed, knowing that Chapeau would read the clipping and the phone would ring. He began even to question his own motives for striving for such heights of ambition, that secretly he wanted Chapeau to call, that only the continuing punishment might somehow rid him of the nightmares that still haunted him periodically - waking up in a cold sweat as he saw the small boy's piercing green eyes staring back, pleading with him... *please don't kill me!*

In the dreams, the car boot and the

final moments of attack had become one and the same, the eyes shining back at him from the boot's darkness just before he swung the rock down. The first dream had come six months after the attack and sometimes he would get quick flashbacks as he opened the boot. He'd sold the car shortly after.

But at other times he'd feel that he'd suffered enough, that the dreams were only still haunting him because each call from Chapeau would remind him, bring the incident alive again. And in those moments he'd want it all ended, the nightmare of the continuing calls and demands, the worry with his career progressing that each year he had more to lose. The price on his head increased.

And he knew then why he'd picked up the gun, knew that there was only...

Duclos' thoughts were broken. Chapeau's car had pulled up to one side. Duclos got out hastily, it was vital they weren't inside his car when he pulled the trigger. He felt light rain spots touch his face, and prayed that Chapeau didn't find it strange that he was standing outside.

Chapeau got out and walked over. New car, Duclos noticed: Citroën CX Pallas. With the money he'd been paying to Chapeau the past years, hardly any wonder he could afford a better car than himself. He put one hand in his coat pocket, touched the cool metal of the gun butt.

'I didn't know you were a country

lover,' Chapeau commented, his breath showing on the cool damp air.

The weather was ideal. He'd purposely delayed the meeting until it turned damp and cool. He could wear a coat without Chapeau being suspicious.

Chapeau's feet crunched on loose shale and stone as he shuffled close. The track ran between a small area of woodland twenty miles north of Montpelier. It led to a picnic area further down which in summer would be busy; at this time of year it was deserted. Duclos had made the excuse of not wanting to meet at the usual restaurant car park: 'a waiter was looking out at intervals during our last meeting.' Chapeau said he hadn't noticed, but had

agreed to the new meeting place.

Chapeau's features had become heavier with the years. His neck had a thick jowl and the bags under his eyes gave him the appearance of a sad, malevolent bulldog. He often wore dark or tinted glasses to hide his bad eye, but today there were none: the weather was too dull.

'It's cold out here,' Chapeau said. 'Has the heater been on inside your car?'

Duclos glanced at the car, thinking quickly before his hesitance gave him away. 'Probably. But I wanted a bit of fresh air. We'll be finished soon.'

Chapeau held his gaze for a second. Duclos hand tensed on the gun butt in his pocket. Was Chapeau suspicious,

wondering why he wanted some fresh air when it was misty and raining?

Chapeau looked down thoughtfully, then to one side. 'No worry of any nosy waiters here. Good choice if you like privacy.' Then his gaze swivelled back until it rested on Duclos.

Duclos felt a faint trembling start to grip his legs. He took the hand hastily out of his pocket.

'You must be quite proud, Minister. I read that recent press clipping. Impressive stuff. If I didn't know you so well, I'd be tempted to vote for you myself. Amazing how your private life can be so different to your public image.'

Through the years, Duclos had become used to reading behind

Chapeau's comments. What he meant was: *Now your public profile has been elevated yet again, is even more polarized from your private life, the threat of downfall has far higher value. I can charge you more.*

'... What a surprise they'd all get if they realized what a prick you really were.' Chapeau laughed. 'No more invites to boy scout or youth club hall openings!'

And always ended on a rebuke, a tease. *Christ*, for that alone it was going to feel good to kill him. Duclos sneaked his hand back on the gun, snaked one finger around until it was on the trigger. No more teasing and mocking. No more having to look into Chapeau's sad fish

eye to see that the only thing to bring some life into it, some mirth, was his own discomfort.

The first thought of killing Chapeau had come as much as five years ago, but getting someone else to do it; then he quickly thought again. That was what had landed him in this cycle of blackmail in the first place. He could end up just replacing one blackmailer with another. Yet in that first moment of discovering his uncle's gun, he never dreamt that years later he would be standing on a damp and desolate lane with his own finger on the trigger.

Each meeting, each rebuke and insult, each payment, the fear of discovery and downfall stronger with each year... had

bit by bit built a patchwork quilt of hatred and resolve. He would *have* to do it himself; there was nobody else.

'Are you okay?' asked Chapeau.

'Yes... yes. Fine.' Duclos stuttered. He could feel his nerves returning as he steeled himself, the trembling was back in his legs. 'Let's get it over with. As you say, it's cold out here.' He passed the envelope to Chapeau.

The gun and ammunition would be untraceable. Nobody had seen him come into the lane, and the location was miles away for both of them. There would be no possible connection. He would have to make the first shot count, hitting the chest or stomach, with two or three in quick succession after. A superficial

wound or a miss and Chapeau would start firing back.

Chapeau was opening the envelope, starting to count the money.

With Vacharet now dead, the last link between the two of them had also gone. The last traces of 1963 would die with Chapeau. He'd got away with it once, he could do it again. He tightened his grip, felt his palm sweating on the gun butt. The best moment was while Chapeau was looking down, distracted with counting the money.

'Thirty thousand, wasn't it?' Chapeau confirmed. But he hardly looked up from counting.

'Yes.' Twelve years focused into a single moment. His legs were trembling

uncontrollably and there was a tight constriction in his chest. He swallowed to try and ease it. He'd thought initially of shooting Chapeau through the coat pocket, but then realized that with the mark and powder burns he'd have to dump the coat; it could be traced. But now he began to worry that in lifting the gun out, Chapeau would see it. A flicker in the corner of his eye while he was counting, making him reach for his own gun.

Chapeau was two-thirds through counting the first bundle. Duclos knew the routine: Chapeau would count the first bundle fully, then would flick quickly through the other bundles and measure them against the first. There

were six bundles in all: 5,000 Francs each made up of 100 Franc notes.

All the months of preparation, and now the moment was upon him, he felt frozen into inaction. He'd even gone out to a deserted field near Limoges one weekend to fire off a few rounds: make sure the ammunition wasn't damp or faulty and get used to the feel of the gun. But what use was that now. This was no longer cardboard targets, but pumping bullets through flesh and bone! His nerves were racing, his whole body starting to shake. Perhaps he should wait until Chapeau had finished counting, started to walk away. Shoot him in the back.

Chapeau was finishing the second

bundle.

But what if Chapeau suddenly looked up and read into his expression that something was wrong? Chapeau would see that he was in a cold sweat with panic, would reach for his gun before he even had the chance. Chapeau was flicking rapidly through the bundles... starting on the fourth. Any second he could look up and the chance would be gone.

With one last silent prayer into the misty air, Duclos started to ease the gun from his pocket.

* * *

End of book 1.

Past Imperfect book 2 is now available on Kindle.

Following are samples (first 3 chapters) of other John Matthews books currently available on Kindle: Ascension Day, The Last Witness, The Shadow Chaser and The Second Amendment.

**First 3 chapters of
Ascension Day:**

Ascension Day

John Matthews

E-Media Books

As well as being a novelist, John Matthews is an experienced journalist, editor and publishing consultant, though after the success of *Past Imperfect*, which became an international bestseller, he has devoted most of his time to writing books. In 2004, *The Times* compiled a list of top ten all-time-best legal thrillers which included *Past Imperfect*. John Matthews lives in Surrey with his wife and son.

Praise for John Matthews.

'A major talent has joined the ranks of thriller writers'.

- *Dublin Evening Herald.*

'A novelist of real accomplishment'.

- *Barry Forshaw, Amazon UK.*

'Matthews certainly knows how to keep the reader hungry for the next revelation'.

- *Kirkus UK.*

Ascension Day.

Ascension Day is like a narcotic, laced with danger, and totally addictive. Impossible to put down. This

is what thrillers are meant to be. Jac McElroy is a character I want to read more of.

- *Jon Jordan. Crime Spree Magazine.*

'If John Grisham ever developed a sense of irony, or Scott Turow ever tried to write from the other side of the prison bars, they might come up with something like John Matthews's *Ascension Day*. This is a book that doesn't sacrifice style for suspense, or character for plot. The legal thriller has needed a jolt of electricity for a few years now and Matthews may just be the man to throw the switch.'

- *Peter Blauner,*

Author of Slipping Into Darkness and

The Intruder.

'Move over Grisham, your reign is over! Reminiscent of vintage Grisham, but Matthews has his own distinctive style. Strong, believable characters and a plot that grips from page one and won't let go, twisting and turning its way towards a nail-biting climax - they don't come much better than this. One of the best and most memorable thrillers I've read in years. A winner all the way.'

- *Bob Burke. Mystery Readers International.*

'ASCENSION DAY is a fast-paced thriller set between New Orleans and an upstate Louisiana prison, and Matthews'

strong descriptive prose brings the darkness at the heart of Libreville penitentiary alive. His chief protagonist, Jac McElroy, is particularly interesting with his Franco-Scottish heritage - and his ever-changing relationship with prisoner Larry Durrant sets the main pulse for this race-against-time thriller... with the stakes and tension ratcheted up throughout the book.'

Luke Croll, Reviewing the Evidence.

"Lock the doors and turn off the phone. Once you start this compelling, thoughtful, edge-of-your-seat thriller, you won't have time for anything else. A riveting read that hits it just right - right on the knife-edge between

psychological and action thriller."

- *Chris Mooney*,

Edgar-nominated author of
'Remembering Sarah'.

1

October, 2004. Libreville, Louisiana.

At first, Larry wasn't sure why the sound had awoken him.

He'd become familiar with all the usual night-time sounds: the clunk of the cell doors and the rattle of keys whenever anyone had to be let in or out unexpectedly after last shut-down; the steady, ominous clump of boots along the steel walkways with the regular cell patrols every hour, punctuated by the impromptu sliding back of two or three

inspection hatches along the line; the mumble of the guards at the end and the occasional peal of laughter; the jibes and taunts of new prisoners or regulars who'd suddenly fallen from grace; the gentle sobbing of some of those same new inmates that might take up to a week to finally abate; and the klaxon blare of the Amtrak from Baton Rouge to Jackson seven miles away across the Bayou plain, a siren call to the prisoners from the world outside, elusive freedom — only one of eight attempted break-outs over the past thirty years had got even that far, and they'd all been rounded up within the week between New Orleans and Baton Rouge.

Over the past eleven long years, these

sounds had been Lawrence Tyler Durrant's nightly companions. But this sound was different.

He could recognize the voices of two of the guards, but they were fighting not to be heard: little more than muted whispers along with the soft sliding back of the bolts on a cell door. Normally, their boot-steps would be heavy and purposeful, cell-door bolts would be slammed back like gunshots, whatever the time of night, and the prisoner's name shouted out, as if by some miracle the clamour of the guards' approach might not have awoken him along with everyone else on the cell-block row.

This time they didn't want anyone to hear them.

Larry kept his breathing low and shallow, trying to pick out more. But suddenly his heart was drumming fast and strong, threatening to drown everything out. And when he finally tuned in beyond his own heartbeat, everything was still and silent, as if they somehow knew he was listening in. Then a sudden flurry of shuffling footsteps from five or six cells along.

‘What?... What the fffmmmm!’

Even from that muffled exclamation, before a hand was clamped across to completely strangle it, Larry clearly recognized the clipped Latino intonation: Rodriguez. ‘Roddy’, who’d managed to make him smile and laugh on even the darkest of days; a rare spark of light and

life in this pit of gloom he'd called home for over a decade, and one of the closest friends he'd ever had, inside or out. He couldn't just close his mind and shut his eyes, as he had to so much over the years.

Maybe he could have turned away if he thought they were just going to give Roddy a beating, but he'd seen that look fired across the canteen earlier by Tally Shavell. It was only a fleeting stare, but in Libreville that was often all you got as warning. The last two on the end of that same look from Tally had both been killed; one with a shiv through the neck in the showers, the other garrotted with a guitar string. There was no reason to believe that with Roddy it would be any

different, especially after the beating Tally had given him five months back. Tally didn't issue second warnings.

Larry looked towards his cell's makeshift altar with its array of photos for inspiration: his mother who'd died after a stroke on year five of his sentence, ten months after his appeal failed; his father who'd died when he was only fourteen, mercifully before he'd started to slip into bad ways; his wife, Francine, who hadn't visited him for the first five years and after that only infrequently, depending on her current-partner-situation, though they still hadn't divorced yet; his son, Joshua, now twelve, who, except for some recent e-mail contact, he'd seen at most half-a-

dozen times over the years – occasional birthdays and at Christmas-time. The only one not represented from his family was his elder sister, who'd disowned him the day of his incarceration, told his mother – as if she didn't already have enough heartbreak that day – that as far as she was concerned 'he no longer exists'.

But swamping his family photos were religious prints: Dali's Christ on the Cross, Michelangelo's Creation of Adam, Da Vinci's Last Supper, Caravaggio's St Francis, Raphael's Madonna and Child.

When word had first got around that Larry had found religion, one of the other inmates, Sal Peretti, had his aunt,

who still lived in her native Umbria, send a collection of prints and cards, eleven in all, from the gift shop at Perugia Cathedral, to complete the array on his makeshift altar.

Upon sight of the finished display, given a misty, eerie glow from fifteen interspersed candles, Roddy had commented simply, ‘Christ!’

‘*Exactly.*’ Larry smiled back drolly.

Now Larry wasn’t looking just at the altar for inspiration, but beyond – his eyes boring through to the hole they’d dug in the wall behind, along the ventilation shaft, then the twists and dog-legs through three hundred yards of ducting barely enough to squeeze through and two more walls before arriving at

the vents by the boiler room; then the final sixty-foot waste-pipe slide to the Achalaya river. The passage that the five of them – himself, Roddy, BC, Sal Peretti and Theo Mellor – knew every inch of, had consumed every spare minute they could steal away over the past ten months.

That's where they'd be taking Roddy, for sure: the boiler room deep in the prison's bowels, where the clank and hiss of the boilers and pipes and two-foot thick walls would prevent even the loudest screams reaching the cells above.

Larry also knew that if he used their escape passage to get to the boiler room, it would be uncovered, their last hope

gone and four of them condemned to die. Those were the odds at Libreville: twenty per cent reprieved, pardoned or commuted to life imprisonment, eighty per cent executed.

That was the choice right there: Roddy's life saved for four others lost, including his own. And with two or three of them now with Roddy, what chance did he have in any case of being able to save him? Another muted mumble from Roddy, fading quickly with the rapid shuffle of footsteps along the outside walkway, gave him a sharp prompt. He had to decide quickly.

But Larry Durrant stayed staring at his makeshift altar, frozen with indecision. Just when he needed guidance the most,

there was nothing.

‘That’s the original trial preparation file. That’s the trial transcript and notes. Appeal preparation.... and appeal transcript and notes.’ John Langfranc piled each file on the desk before him, some of them four inches thick, with an appropriate pause. ‘Finally, any case notes since.’ The last file was thinnest of all. ‘Though to be honest, not much has happened over the last seven years. Lawrence Durrant has been all but forgotten. Until now.’

‘Now that they’re about to kill him,’ Jac said, though his disdain could equally have been aimed at the mountain of

paperwork he'd have to plough through over the coming days.

Langfranc raised an eyebrow and smiled smugly. 'First thing to get clear, Jac, is that the State of Louisiana never kills anyone. They execute, process, fulfil sentencing, lethally inject, expedite and terminate... but they never *kill*. If you're going to use a word like kill, you'll have to get used to putting *legally* in front. Presumably, that one word differentiates the State's actions from those of the people they're killing. Sorry, *processing*.'

'Why me?' Jac asked.

Fair question, thought Langfranc. He shrugged. 'Time for you to prove yourself, I guess.' No point in

embellishing beyond that, trying to kid Jac that this might be a landmark glory case. They knew each other too well for that now, and with Jac only passing his criminal law bar exams ten months ago, he'd be aware that he was a long way from being handed the firm's prize cases. 'You and I both know that if there was a good angle left in all of this,' Langfranc waved one hand across the files, 'Beaton would have taken it himself.'

Clive Beaton, senior criminal trial lawyer at Payne, Beaton and Sawyer, New Orlean's second largest law firm, at which Langfranc was a junior partner. Strange title, 'junior', for someone fifty-two years old, Jac had always thought.

In a way it further underlined Langfranc's frustration that he should have been made a senior partner earlier. Perhaps one reason why the two of them had bonded so well, the feeling that the firm's main head-pats and accolades had gone to others, often less deserving. Though in Jac's case that was mainly because he'd spent his first years wallowing in corporate and tax law before he'd turned to criminal law. The easy route after his initial years of practice in France; commercial law in Louisiana followed the French Napoleonic code, criminal law didn't. Langfranc looked up as the clatter from the general office drifted in.

'I've re-scheduled Donneley for three-

fifteen,' Penny Vance, his PA who Jac also shared as a secretary, said through the half-open door. 'That will give you a clear hour at Liberty street. Oh, and Jem Payne has called for an update briefing on Borkowski before you head out this afternoon, so you might have to cut lunch short to make the time.'

The information brought a faint slouch, an extra ruffle to Langfranc's appearance. He always wore the best Versace or Missoni suits with slip-on Italian loafers to match, but with his wild, wavy greying hair, to Jac he still looked somehow unkempt; as if there'd been a strong breeze on his way into work, then the rush of the day simply kept him that way.

‘Thanks.’ Langfranc sighed as the door closed; only ten minutes into the day and already everything was at full tilt. He brought his attention back to Jac and Durrant’s files. ‘It’s a no-goer from the outset. Full confession. Every possible angle exhausted at the appeal. No new evidence since. Your only hope is to try and get our good – or bad – Lawrence Durrant pardoned. Throw all on the mercy of our good – or bad – Governor. The illustrious Piers Candaret. And to a lesser extent, the Board of Pardons.’

Jac’s eyes narrowed. ‘Candaret holds the whip hand?’

‘Without a doubt. He nominates the Board to begin with, and while they’re meant to sift through and review

everything on his behalf – when it comes to big cases, he likes to have a hands-on, first look-see. And while he's also meant to accept their recommendations, in many cases he's gone his own way. So, you'll file simultaneously with both of them – but the buck stops with Candaret.'

'And that's all there's left to do – prepare a simple plea letter?'

'Well, there's a tad more to it than that. You're going to have to plough through most of this to get the tone right for the letter. Hit the right notes. Durrant's apparently very religious. Candaret is too, or at least he pushes Christian and family values at every photo opportunity. And by all claims, Durrant has been a

model prisoner. Kept his nose clean. So those are probably good start points. We're talking about quite a long, considered clemency plea. Six or seven pages, maybe more – plus any relevant file attachments. It might only take a day to prepare the letter, but you could spend a good week in preparation.' As Langfranc fought to boost the case's merits, Jac's quizzical eyebrow merely arched higher. 'For God's sake, Jac, this is a big case. For Louisiana murder cases, they don't come bigger. So don't make light of it. And whatever might or might not be involved, also don't lose sight of what's at stake here. Good or bad or rotten to hell's core – a man's life.'

‘I know. I know.’ Jac held up one hand in submission and bowed his head slightly. When Langfranc had first told him he’d be getting the case, he was excited: murder of the wife of Adelay Roche, one of Louisiana’s wealthiest industrialists, the case had occupied more newspaper column inches than any other Louisiana case since the Garrison-JFK investigation. He’d immediately dived into the library on St Charles Street to leaf through clippings. But most of the attention had been at the time of the trial and the appeal. For the past seven years the newspapers, and the world outside, had forgotten about Lawrence Tyler Durrant; though now no doubt there’d be a renewed flurry of

media activity. 'I suppose I'm just disappointed to know that all the main angles have gone, all avenues for appeal already exhausted. All I'm left with is sweeping up the dust of the case.'

'The only shot at appeal was centred around Durrant's accident and his resultant memory lapses at the time. And all hopes on that front died seven years ago.' Langfranc shrugged. 'And as I said, if there were any angles left, Beaton would have taken the case himself. But it's still a big case, Jac. The biggest. Life or death for Larry Durrant and every local TV network and newspaper, and some beyond, covering which way it's going to swing. You might not be Beaton's golden boy, but

the fact that he's even given you a high profile case like this – even if all that's left is a clemency plea – means that he's noticed you. You exist.'

'Therefore I am.'

Langfranc smiled back thinly. Jac McElroy had set his cap on criminal law with a determination that probably was largely lost on old man Beaton. At thirty-one, with six years practice under his belt, he could have just kept coasting along with corporate law, raking in the big bucks. Taken the easy route. But, no, he'd wanted to do criminal law, so that meant going back to square one and taking a fresh set of bar exams alongside a bunch of fresh-faced graduates while still juggling the remainder of his

corporate caseload. So that meant he was either crazy, or it was a real vocation. From Jac's first ten months of criminal case-handling, Langfranc hadn't yet made his mind up which.

Jac was thoughtful for a second. 'What's Candaret's track record on pardons and reprieves?'

'Pardons are rare, and will no doubt now be doubly difficult since the last but one guy pardoned, Aaron Harvey – also African-American, as it happens – killed again just six months back. With commuted to life there's far more chance, I think running somewhere between one in five or six. But that could be one of the first things to check – along with case histories. Get a feel for

what might hit the right note with Candaret.'

'So, slim chances – but not impossible.'
Langfranc held one palm out. 'Better than that buffoon in Texas. Like his predecessor, he sends everyone for the chop. No exceptions. Thinks that's what the public wants, might make him potential White House material. And Florida's not much better. At least with Candaret there's some chance.'

Jac studied the files a second longer, then laid one hand firmly on top of them, exhaling wearily. 'Don't worry. Slim hopes or not, I'll give it my best shot. I won't let Larry Durrant down.'

But belying the brooding look that Jac gave the files, Langfranc caught a

fleeting gleam in his eyes – challenge, defiance – that sounded a faint alarm bell. In Jac McElroy's first year with the firm, Langfranc had often found him sullen and contemplative, which as they'd got to know each other he'd learnt was due to the recent death of Jac's father – a Scotsman who twenty-odd years ago had taken his family to France to pursue his dream of running an artists' retreat. But Langfranc had also discovered that nothing lifted Jac out of that slump like a good challenge. Of only eleven criminal cases that Jac had so far handled solo – the most serious a grand-theft auto and representing a colourful local forger, Morvaun Jaspar – he'd turned four of them into major

productions. ‘And no grandstanding and glory-searching on this one. No screaming the client’s innocence against impossible odds. That’s not what Beaton wants, nor what the case calls for.’

‘Rest easy, I’ll be a good boy.’ Jac stood up and hoisted the files under one arm, firing Langfranc a strained smile as he took on the extra weight. ‘I’ll do what I’m told and just sweep up the dust.’

Just a look.

There’d been a few derisory looks from Tally to Roddy during the first couple of years, but nothing too intense or worrying. Just a sly, conciliatory smile and shrug, ‘Funny guy,’ as the other inmates guffawed and belly-laughed at

Roddy's latest quip.

None of the comments were aimed at Tally, and on occasion when the target was someone he didn't like, he'd join in laughing with everyone else. But gradually resentment grew in Tally at Roddy's constant flow of jokes and jibes, as if, as Roddy's popularity grew as a result, Tally felt that his power base was being threatened; or simply because humour undermined the mood of menace and fear which helped Tally operate more effectively.

But that was exactly why everyone loved Roddy: a rare, bright light in the stifling gloom, he lifted everyone's spirits, made them forget, even if for only part of the day, where they were. For Larry in

particular, Roddy had been a godsend, a lifeline, arriving at Libreville only five months after Larry's mother died and his spirits were at their lowest.

Just a look. The first came when Roddy compared the grunts, snorts and hisses coming from the men in the muscle-yard to the pigs at feeding time in Libreville's farm compound. Tally overheard, and took it as an insult of the muscle-yard men in general, and of him, as their leader, in particular. He warned Roddy that if he was loose with his mouth again, he'd be taught a lesson.

The second came when Peretti complained that his library duties weren't giving him enough time either for farm duty or general exercise. He

was finding it hard to keep in shape.

‘Don’ worry,’ Roddy assured. ‘You got the best end of the deal. Some of those guys on farm duty are worked till they drop. And as for the yard guys, they might be developin’ their pecs and abs – but not much up here.’ Roddy tapped his forehead. ‘The only time they use a fuckin’ tome is as a doorstop or to rest barbells either side o’ their head.’

Roddy had made sure this time that Tally was out of earshot, but one of the other yard-men overheard, and duly reported. Tally beat Roddy to within an inch of his life, using two of his favourite books: *Murder Machine* and *Hollywood Hulk Hogan*.

‘So, we never read tomes, huh?’ he

taunted, misquoting selected lines from the books with each blow: “I don’ min’ killing people, I just don’ like takin’ ‘em to pieces...” “But right there, that’s my damn place and nobody can fuck wit’ me...” ’ The irony lost on Tally that if not his choice of reading, then certainly his quotes, simply supported the claims of illiteracy.

The books were heavier in weight than content or merit, cracking two of Roddy’s ribs, bruising his shoulders and chest to the point of bleeding in three places, and breaking his nose and two finger joints where he’d put one arm up to protect himself. Tally warned that if it happened again, he’d be taken out.

That final look, just two days ago, had

come when Arneck, BC, Peretti and Roddy had been discussing what had originally landed Tally in Libreville.

‘Some scam involving computer clocks adjusting for Y2K, by all accounts,’ Arneck offered. ‘During the overnight downtime to make the switch, the interest on a score of bank and insurance accounts was routed to an outside account.’

‘Not exactly what you’d expect from Tally,’ Peretti said. ‘White collar crime like that.’

BC huffed. ‘ ‘Cept that’s not what landed him here. ‘Sfor cutting his partner’s throat, when he tried to stiff Tally outta part o’ the fuckin’ take.’

‘So, more like red collar crime,’ Roddy

quipped.

Everyone laughed, except Peretti, who was still slightly lost in thought and managed only a meek smile. Peretti shook his head.

‘Still, not the sort of crime you’d expect Tally to get tied up with in the first place – Y2K scam like that.’

Roddy nodded, smiling drolly. ‘Yeah, daresay the closest he’s ever come to that is askin’ Lay-lo whether he wants some KY too?’

The laughs were louder this time, and Peretti joined in as well. Lay-lo was the name given to Maurice Lavine, a soft, doe-eyed Creole African-Mexican drag-review dancer, who, when made up and wearing the right wig, could give J-Lo a

run for her money. Lay-lo had earned a life sentence for poisoning a rival dancer who'd started to steal the limelight, and Tally quickly corralled him as his exclusive love interest.

But it was a touchy subject for Tally – never openly admitted. And for all of their liaisons, Tally had Lay-lo dress up in full regalia – J-Lo, Halle Berry, Beyonce, a different fantasy every time – so that Tally could hide away from the fact that he was having a gay relationship. Not good for his tough guy image. And so Tally also liked to kid himself that it was a closely-guarded secret, even though most of the prison knew yet never dared openly talk about it.

Because of the nature of the conversation, they'd made sure that Tally or any of his goons weren't around – but then Tally walked into the canteen just as Roddy delivered his killer punchline. The guffaws and belly-laughs died as quickly as they'd started under Tally's stony stare.

Just a look, but in that moment everyone present knew that Roddy's days, more than anyone else on Libreville's death row, were numbered.

Larry regretted the decision as soon as he was a few yards into the ventilation shaft. It was pitch black. Peretti always came armed with the penlight for their digging sessions, from his shared library

duty with Larry; with his poor eyesight, he used it for highlighting fine text or picking out titles in the darker corners of the library.

But even if Larry had the penlight now, he wasn't sure he would use it. They never dug at night, and the faint light might be picked out shining through where there were corridor grills. Though the main reason they never dug at night, even if they could dummy up their beds and sidestep lock-up, was due to the noise; the hectic hubbub and clatter of daytime prison activity drowned out their digging and scratching.

Now it was deathly silent, and Larry was aware that his slightest movements

seemed to bounce and echo along the steel shaft and sail free into the prison. He closed his eyes and swallowed hard as he crawled forward another couple of feet. Anyone close to the shaft could surely hear him. They'd done this journey so many times now that he could picture practically every inch of the prison below him as he went. For another five or six yards, the shaft ran along the back of the cells in his row. Then it crossed a corridor, ran along its side for another eight yards, and dog-logged to run along the back of the cells in J-block.

Careful, *eeeassy does it*, he told himself as he crawled the first stretch at the back of the cells; though maybe if one of the

other inmates did hear him, staring wide-eyed at the ceiling and unable to sleep, as he'd done for much of his first year, they wouldn't give him away. *Go on, man. Make it! Make it to freedom! Show some hope for all of us.*

He was doubly careful crossing the stretch running by the corridor, edging forward a few inches at a time. The slightest sound reaching the guards on duty, the alarm would be raised in a heartbeat.

Heartbeat. Pounding rapidly, deafeningly, so that he could hardly tell if his movement was making any noise or not. Unconsciously, he'd been holding his breath, and as he came to the final yard of the corridor stretch, he started to

ease it loose – then suddenly sucked it sharply back up again. And froze.

Footsteps. Boots on steel. Shuffling to a stop almost directly beneath him. Larry wondered if they'd heard him, were at that moment looking up, appraising. Trying to pinpoint exactly where they'd heard sounds coming from.

His chest ached with the effort of keeping his breath held, his heartbeat rapid as if it wanted to burst through. So loud that surely that alone could be heard by the guard below. Larry stayed deathly still.

Another set of footsteps, the muffled sound of voices. Oh Jesus. All he needed. They could be there half the night talking about the latest Saints game

and sorting out the world.

Tally wouldn't waste time; Roddy's throat would be slit within the first minutes of reaching the boiler room.

The seconds dragged in time with the heavy pounding of his heart. Indecision now freezing his mind along with his body, afraid to move, breath held, for what seemed a lifetime – though was probably no more than ninety seconds – before the footsteps finally started moving away, the voices receding.

Larry scrambled hurriedly on, letting out his breath in a burst as soon as he was a couple of yards into the turn behind the cells and felt he was out of earshot of the guards.

Just what was awaiting him in the boiler

room dawned on him. Tally wouldn't do something like this without back-up, never did. Two men, maybe three. Then the couple of guards who'd helped get Roddy out of his cell.

Larry had been good in his day, one of the best, but even then taking out four or five at once would have been a tall order. And unlike Tally and his crew, he didn't spend every day in the muscle yard training up. The hopelessness of what he was attempting weighed heavy on him, telling in the ache in his limbs as he dragged himself through the narrow shaft.

As he came to the junction with the main shaft rising up from the boiler room, the warm air wafting through intensified. He

scrambled forward faster, more desperately, not sure whether it was to get away from the intense heat or to ensure that he got to Roddy in time. He'd given up caring whether he was making a noise or not, the thud of his elbows and knees against steel a repetitive, penetrating echo.

He stopped abruptly as he came to the grill by the upper part of the boiler room, hurriedly unscrewed its bolts, and yanked it aside. Still on his hands and knees he kept still, his breathing shallow, taking stock. No sounds or voices that he could pick out.

Though something else reached him in that moment that made him have doubts again: the soft lap and sway of the

Achalaya river echoing up through the waste pipe a yard to his side, beckoning, taunting. *Elusive freedom*. Yet suddenly so tangible, real, that he felt he could reach out and touch it.

Probably his last and only chance. He'd long ago decided that he couldn't face another day inside, so a commute to life imprisonment held nothing for him. And his chances of a complete reprieve were practically nil – so his only real hope of freedom lay in what he could hear now with the gentle lapping of the Achalaya river. Make the break and find out what was happening with Joshua, hold him in your arms again... stay back and save Roddy... make the break...

Or head back to his cell and they all

make the break together in three weeks when the tide would be right, as they'd all originally planned. He wasn't going to be able to save Roddy in any case. One against four or five, he didn't stand a chance. Maybe he should...

His thoughts were broken. He could hear voices from the far end of the boiler room.

2

Lawrence Tyler Durrant, born May 8th 1962 in Knoxville, Tennessee, the second child (there's an elder sister) of Nathan Joseph and Myrie-Jane Durrant. The family moved to New Orleans when Durrant was eleven.

First arrested 19th August 1992, six months after the offence, made a full confession on his second interview, held without bail in Oakdale Detention Centre until trial, which ran through April and May 1993. Sentenced to death by lethal injection by Judge Thomas S.

Colby on May 26th and bought to Libreville prison.

Jac lifted his head from the files and took a quick sip of coffee, grimacing as it trickled down. It was already cold; he'd been reading longer than he had realized.

Most of the information was in a five-page summary provided at the time of Durrant's appeal, but Jac found himself leafing back through the files each time he hit a key point – parents, siblings, wife and young child, past criminal form – to find out more.

No history of criminality in the family. Nathan Joseph had been a postal sorting worker for most of his life, then later managed a small chain of grocery stores,

while Myrie-Jane worked in a local Ninth Ward café once the kids had grown up. The only other family member with any run-ins with the law, though once removed, was Lawrence's first cousin, Simon: juvenile shoplifting and one count of assault when he was nineteen.

Lawrence was a different matter. After five years of trying to make his name as a light-heavyweight boxer, interspersed with casual jobs, he became a serial house thief – though out of four previous arrests, New Orleans PD had only managed to make one conviction stick.

While his falling from grace as a boxer could have been viewed as the start of his criminality, his police file noted that

there was ‘suspicion of other robberies both before his boxing career and while he was still amateur, albeit that no arrests were made during these periods’. And little pattern of violence connected with the robberies, except on one occasion when he was disturbed and knocked a man unconscious with a couple of pistol-whip blows from behind.

But the NOPD argued that Durrant had simply been lucky enough not to have been seen on any of the past robberies. And on this occasion, Jessica Roche had seen him, and he was desperately afraid of going down for a second time. He’d had a taste of prison, a three-year stretch in Oakdale, and didn’t want to return.

Second offence, he'd have got a minimum of five years.

Jac rubbed the bridge of his nose. With Durrant's later self-educating and finding religion in prison, his life was certainly one of contrasts – boxer, thief, scholar, preacher – few of them sitting that comfortably together.

Jac went back to the beginning of the segment on Durrant's family. Second marriage to Francine Gleason (Durrant's first at the age of nineteen ended in divorce after only fifteen months) just three years before the Roche break-in, no record of other robberies in that period, or at least none that the NOPD had him down as a specific suspect for, and a baby son, Joshua, only three

months old at the time. Not the best timing to re-offend.

But then that had been part of the motive, the prosecution had argued: the financial pressures of the new family and Durrant losing his job as an assistant in a sporting-goods store only six weeks previously. Then his return to heavy drinking and his car accident four months after the murder while out on one of his binges. Larry Durrant's life was a wreck of mishaps and falling from graces. Doing the right thing at the right time was far from his strongest suit.

Then the therapy sessions following the accident to treat his resultant partial amnesia – or ‘selective amnesia’ as the prosecution later termed it, ‘to blank out

the darkness of his actions that night with Jessica Roche' – and his confession coming out when...

Jac jumped at a sudden bang from next door sounding like a pistol-shot, before he realized it was a door slamming. A man's voice, shouting, came straight after.

'I told you. I don't like you working there any more.'

'And how am I meant to take care of Molly and pay for my courses?' The woman's voice higher-pitched, shriller. Defensive.

'I'm workin' again now, I could take care of you. And you got that other money.'

'Yeah, Gerry. And you know what that

other money was for. You know! And how come you're still splashing it around?'

'Come on, babe – gimme some credit. I told you what mine was for, too. But this time, I'm like an assistant bar-manager rather than just a barman... and the tips are big.'

Muted mumbling and rustling, as if he was in close, trying to hug and sweet-talk her. Then, after a moment, rising from the mumbling:

'Give it up, babe... give it up.' The words punctuated by what sounded like gentle kisses. 'For me. Is that too much to...'

'No... no!' Sharper, louder. Annoyance at his intimacy to try and sway her. 'It's

not even open for... *what?* What are you doing? You're hurting me.'

'I just don't like other guys lookin' at you like that. It drives me, well... crazy, thinking about it.'

'Yeah, yeah. *Crazy's* about right. Now let me go.' Brusquer rustling as she wrenched free, and then the slamming of another door.

But his voice followed her, and the argument continued in more muted, indistinct tones behind the closed door.

Jac had heard quite a few arguments coming from next door over the past couple of months. He could hear them clearly when they were in the lounge or kitchen directly adjacent, the bedrooms less so, and the bathroom at the far end

not at all.

He listened out for a moment more, but all that reached him was the low drone of traffic, like a muffled swarm of bees, passing on Highway 90 a few blocks away. These were the main disadvantages of his apartment block. At the low-cost end of housing in the Warehouse District, the minimal partition walls meant that you could hear your neighbours when their voices raised, as well as the traffic on the nearby main arteries heading out of the city.

Jac brought his attention back to the files, opening the police report with due veneration and turning over the photos that earlier he'd flipped firmly face-

down. He hadn't wanted to look at them initially, in case they influenced his judgement of Larry Durrant before he started. He wanted to get a feel for the man first, then the crime. Get the sequence right.

One gun-shot to the stomach from eight to ten feet, according to ballistics, then the final shot to the head from close range, only a few inches. The photos of Jessica Roche's splayed body were painfully raw and would have had a strong impact on even the most hardened juror: one of her legs was crooked behind her at an impossible angle, her blood on the black-and-whites merging with where she'd soiled her dress, and one side of her face collapsed where her

skull had shattered, stark horror in contrast to the beauty of her unblemished side.

Jac rubbed his forehead and reached for his coffee cup, before realizing that it was already empty. He could imagine the first shot being fired by somebody already on edge, suddenly disturbed. But that final shot seemed out of character for someone who'd never killed before, and that thought preyed on Jac's mind as he went through the rest of the police report.

He tried to piece together the sequence of events in his mind from Durrant's confession and the evidence presented at trial.

But still something didn't quite fit, and

the same sequence kept replaying in his thoughts long after he'd given up trying to make conscious sense of it, along with the rest of the police report, and had gone to bed.

In the final re-runs, Jac was playing the role of Durrant, standing over Jessica Roche's sprawled body with the still-smoking gun, begging for clues as to why he'd killed her. 'Please tell me... if you know? Any small sign. *Anything!*'

But then suddenly the body beneath him became the girl from next door, her long auburn hair cascading either side of her naked body, and she was reaching up for him. 'Make love to me... *Fuck me!*'

Jac could feel the heat and sweat of her skin, her hazel eyes piercing straight

through him before slowly closing in abandon. ‘Oh lover, fuck me. Fuck me!’ And her gasps of pleasure seemed *so real*, Jac so wrapped up in it that he didn’t hear Durrant’s footsteps from behind, the shot slamming into the body beneath him changing it abruptly back to Jessica Roche – her blood sticky against his skin, replacing the sweat and passion – and Jac struggled to get away from her clutch as the head-shot came...

Jac awoke with a jolt – suddenly realizing that it was his neighbour’s door slamming again, raised voices following straight after like a tidal wave.

‘No, no... please, Gerry, please!’

‘I ask you one small favour. Just one. But with you... *no*. No movement. No

negotiation.'

'Please, Gerry, I'm begging you. Don't be like this.'

'That's your problem. You never listen to me. Most other people, I tell 'em once – that's it. But you...'

'No, Gerry, please... I'm begging you. If I'm bruised, I won't be able to work for a few days.'

'Maybe that's what I want. In fact, that would probably suit me just fine.'

'No, Gerry.... *No!*' Desperate now, almost a scream. 'You'll wake Molly.' Snorting derision. 'You make me sick. You use that girl like a shield. And your beauty. And your precious fucking work and your college course. And all I feel like doin' is putting a fist right through it,

smashing it all ...’

‘No, Gerry, no!

Jac heard a thud, together with a shriek from her, and was convinced she’d been hit.

He was now bolt upright in bed, his breathing rapid and fractured with the drama unfolding next door, wondering whether he should go and help her.

The sharp pistol-shot came a second later, and with the long silence following, Jac remained uncertain – his pulse galloping almost in time with his breathing – whether this time it *had* been a gunshot.

But after a moment he was relieved to hear from next door the sound of her gently weeping.

This was the heart of Libreville. Heart of darkness.

Its six oil boilers pumped and spewed hot vented air to the cells, corridors and general open areas, and hot water to the showers, kitchens and laundry area, which was adjacent.

Some air-conditioning units had been linked up to the venting eight years ago, but they were insufficient to cool the vast prison, and the temperature rarely dropped more than 5 degrees below the outside temperature, which hovered in the 90°s for much of the summer.

The heat and stench of the prison rose insufferably during those months – but in the boiler room and laundry it was

insufferable at all times of year. A permanent hell.

It was meant to be lit twenty-four hours by rows of emergency lights – but over half of them were out, either blown naturally and not yet replaced, or broken by inmates who'd wanted to make sure that a particular section remained dark so as to mask one activity or another: a sexual liaison, a drugs handover, a beating. A murder.

Despite the heat, Larry felt a cool tingle run down his spine. He couldn't see anybody at first, only hear muffled voices and make out some indistinct, jostling shadows from the far corner. A couple of the shadows became heavier, longer, as they fell under the starker light

from one of the emergency lights still in place there.

The shadows his end, hopefully, were equally as heavy, but he had to ease himself down cautiously from the ventilation shaft ledge to the floor. The slightest sound, and the mumbling voices would suddenly halt and someone would break free from the shadows to head his way.

As his feet touched the ground, the voices were slightly louder; he was able to risk a few brisk steps to behind the nearest pillar. Then froze again, swallowing back against his rapid heartbeat so that he could listen: was Roddy's voice there, or was he already too late?

‘Always such a wise mouth, huh? Always the clown. D’yer think this is a funny place, then? Barrel o’ laughs a day?’ Tally’s voice, rising from the earlier muted tones, gave the answer.

‘Not particularly. But I reckon – why not try an’ brighten the days some. I mean, if I can...’

The rest from Roddy was lost as one of the boilers fired up. Someone had turned on a hot tap or a thermostat had dropped somewhere in Libreville’s labyrinths.

Whatever had been said, Tally didn’t appear to like it. The sudden burst of air from Roddy as he was hit in the stomach almost mirrored the hurrumph from the boiler.

‘B’fore I slit your throat, I’m gonna beat

you like y'never....*known... before.*'

Tally timed his blows to emphasise his last few words, and Larry used the sound-cover to shuffle quickly forward to the next pillar.

'I wantya t'feel this first. Each blow like the rotten, fuckin' jokes yer told... *day in... day out...*'

The sound of the blows landing, accompanying Roddy's guttural groans, was sickening, and his coughing and retching straight after sounded as if it already carried blood.

Larry clenched his jaw as he risked a glimpse past the pillar. There were three of them with Tally: Dennis Marmont, one of the guards in head-guard Glenn Bateson's pocket – he should have

guessed Bateson wouldn't risk being present personally – and Jay-T and Silass, two of Tally's main muscle men. Jay-T worried Larry the most. The only true brother of the group – Tally was a Creole-African mix – at six-five, a full four inches over Larry, he was surprisingly fast for his size, and had good technique for someone who'd never been formally trained.

'What's that? I thought I saw something.'

Larry ducked quickly back into the shadows behind the pillar as Marmont's torch flicked on and shone his way.

A frozen few seconds with only the sound of the group's suppressed breathing before Tally said, 'Only a rat

... or maybe you jus' seein' things among the shadows.'

'Fucking big rat, when I can see its shadow halfway up a pillar,' Marmont retorted, and Larry heard his footsteps start towards him.

But after a moment the steps became uncertain, then stopped completely.

'You check it out' – Larry saw the beam of the torch swing back and then towards him again – 'I'm only meant t'be here as a witness. To ensure fair play.' Faint chuckle from Marmont, but along with his faltering step, it betrayed his nervousness.

Another set of footsteps started forward. Larry stayed deathly still, struggling to make out whose they were beyond his

pounding heart. He looked at the advancing shadow in Marmont's torchlight beam – but exaggerated and elongated, it told him little.

Marmont also started moving forward again, no doubt feeling braver now that someone else was a few steps ahead of him.

Larry held his breath, his whole body rigid as the footsteps approached.

He'd have to make his first punch count and jump Marmont almost in one – otherwise Marmont would have a clear shot with his night-stick or gun, and it would all be over. But if it was Jay-T or Tally, he'd be hard pushed to do much with just one punch. His breath fell fast and shallow, his flank pressed firm

against the pillar shielding him as the footsteps moved closer.

And as the torch-beam came to within a few feet, bathing the area just to his side in light, suddenly he was a fresh-faced twenty-two year old contender again, facing his first big fight in Atlanta's Omni arena – the clapping and stomping of the crowd almost in time with his thudding heartbeat.

His mouth was dry, his skin bathed in sweat – as it had been then – as the adrenalin rush fired up every nerve-end and muscle.

But as the approaching footsteps and the torch-beam's angle passed the point of no return, and Larry lunged fully into its light with his first punch, he wasn't sure

if it was the roar of approval of his first fights, or the groans and shouts of derision of his last – when only four years later he lay on the canvass for the last time.

Glory or demise? Like so much else in his life, the line between them had been slight, almost impossible to discern.

Jac was running late.

He was fifteen minutes later than planned getting into the office because he'd dozed off again for a while after his alarm sounded; he'd slept fitfully after being awoken in the middle of the night by the slamming doors and voices from next door, which, in turn, meant that he didn't have time to get Penny Vance to

type up Langfranc's dictation notes on Libreville – he'd simply grabbed a hand-held cassette before rushing out again, and planned to listen to it on the journey.

He caught his train connection with only a minute to spare and it left on time – but then it was held up for twenty-five minutes while the Santa Fe railroad shunted a never-ending stream of freight trucks past them on a dual-track junction. So now Jac found himself rushing to make up time, pushing his rented Ford Taurus for the most part past sixty on the country roads that made up the last forty-five miles between Baton Rouge and Libreville. Jac anxiously checked his watch as the flatlands and swamps of the

Mississippi Delta flashed by.

‘Haveling runs a tight ship at Libreville. Everything by the book and strict routine. And God help anyone who upsets that routine.’ Faint chuckle from Langfranc on tape. *‘So while you and timekeeping might often not be the best of buddies – try and be on time for all your meetings with him and Durrant. Get everything off on the right foot.’*

Jac edged his foot down. If he pushed it, he might be no more than five minutes late. He’d started playing Langfranc’s dicta-tape on the train – until a man across the aisle started paying him and the tape too much attention. He’d saved the rest for the car journey.

‘But the upside of that is that Haveling will deliver everything you need – reports and recommendations on Durrant – strictly on time. No delays or hassle. And talking of God, Warden Haveling’s even more devout than our dear Governor Candaret. Stories abound of him taking a bible with him into the execution chamber, and, if the condemned is stuck for an apt last passage to be read by the prison Pastor, Haveling will recommend a few. He even offers to hold the condemned’s hand in the final moments – if they should so require.’ Langfranc paused markedly. *‘Which I suppose raises more awkward questions about Haveling’s character and state of mind*

than it should – but at least it supports that pushing Durrant's religious bent as hard as you can is without doubt the main ticket. And in Haveling's defence, he's a lot better than his predecessors. Claims of turning a blind eye to, or even supporting, institutionalized violence hung over most of them. Haveling's immediate predecessor was as straight as they come, but lacked the backbone to push through what he wanted. High levels of violence still continued. A year ago there was a New Orleans magazine piece on Haveling picturing him with a bible in one hand and night-stick in the other, which just about summed him up. "Iron fist, with – he believes – God's backing and

approval”.

‘There are still incidents of violence, but probably no more than most maximum-security penitentiaries. Certainly, things now are a far cry from the dark days of the seventies and eighties when there were regular pitched battles with Cleaver-style radicals and assorted psychos going at each other with machetes sneaked in from the fields. Inmates then regularly slept with steel breastplates to protect them from getting hacked to death in the night.

‘Libreville was in fact originally a slave plantation dating back to the 1830s, and its name came from the West African port where most of the

slaves were shipped from, with the change from plantation to penitentiary coming in the early 1900s when...

Jac's cell-phone rang. He looked at the display: his mother or younger sister. He stopped the tape and answered.

His mother, Catherine, quickly launched into a subject she'd broached at the weekend past when he'd visited.

'Have you given it much thought yet?' she pressed.

'A bit,' he lied. Even without the Durrant case, he wouldn't have given it much consideration. Arranged date; he thought that sort of thing had died out a century ago. 'But I haven't decided yet.'

'Well, let me know when you have. She came by the other day with her father to

Aunt Camille's place, and she seems a very nice girl. And attractive, too.'

Jac sighed. 'Come on, mum. This is more about pleasing Camille than you or, more importantly, me. One more step in her social-climbing ladder.'

'That's true. She's from a very good family, and no doubt that's what Camille saw first. But now having met the girl, it would be easy for you to forget that this is all about Camille. You could get on very well.' Catherine sighed. 'And it has been a while now since Madeleine.'

Madeleine. *Madeleine*. Thirty-seven months, to be precise, just before they'd left France. Perhaps his mum was right: If she was nice and they got on, what harm could it do? But most of all, he

could hear the uncertainty, almost desperation, in his mother's voice. The need to do this to please Camille. And that part of him made him want to rebel, say no.

His mother and sister stayed in one of Camille's houses in Hammond at only half rent, and Camille also paid half of Jean-Marie's college fees. He paid the other half; his was the only family work-visa so far granted, and it was all he could afford while doing criminal law bar exams. Meanwhile his mum and sister lived partly in his aunt's pocket, part of the legacy left by his father's early death and disastrous state of affairs at the time – which his aunt took every opportunity to remind them of: ‘What a

mess Adam left. All of his wild dreaming. So lucky I was there to help all of you.'

Jac's aunt was the exact opposite of his father. Maybe that's why he rebelled and railed so against any of her suggestions: in part, it kept alive his father's spirit.

'Okay, I'll think seriously about it. But if I agree to it, I'm doing it for you or because I feel it's right – not for Camille.'

'That's very noble. But you need to please yourself first and second on this, Jac – not anybody else.'

'I know.' With a promise that he'd let her know that weekend when he came over, he rang off.

After the argument through the wall the

night before, the only girl he'd given any thought to had been his next door neighbour, starting to wonder what she might look like. He'd purposely listened out for her movements as he got ready that morning: she was still moving around inside when he left, but if he timed it right one morning, hopefully he'd get to see her on the corridor.

He shook his head, smiling. Obsessing over a girl just from a few sound-bites through a wall. His mother was right: he *had* been too long without a date.

Jac switched on Langfranc's tape again, and, as he approached Libreville, the details started to mirror what he saw through his car window.

'Spread over 17,000 acres in total, with

the closest towns Libreville, four miles away – which sprung up shortly after the plantation was founded – and St Tereseville, seventeen miles away. The term “plantation” hung on until the mid-sixties, when it was dropped because it smacked too much of the early slave days, and was replaced with ‘ranch’ – possibly due to its sheer size, the fact that they rear their own cattle as well as farm, and have an annual rodeo. The term could easily evoke a l a i d - b a c k High Chaparral-style atmosphere – but don’t be fooled. This is hard-graft, rock-breaking Cool-Hand Luke territory all the way.’

Jac approached the main gate of Libreville. Fourteen foot high, matching

the perimeter fence, with another three-foot of rolled razor wire on top.

After announcing his meeting with Chief Warden Haveling and handing over his card, Jac checked his watch while the guard phoned through for confirmation. Four minutes late; not too bad. But from the sprawl of the place, it looked like it was going to take him another four or five to actually get to Haveling's office. The guard returned, handed him back his card, and pointed along the shale road ahead.

‘Ignore the first three buildings, two one side, one the other – all single storey – and after a lil’ more than a mile, you’ll see the main building. Can’t miss it. Rises up four floors out o’ nowhere.

Visitors' parking on the right.'

'Thanks.'

'...Three thousand eight-hundred inmates – forty per cent increase since the late fifties, which led to three new blocks being built in the grounds. All high risk or death row prisoners are held in the main block, with time allowed out of holding cells for them just two hours a day, unless they have allocated duties or privileges – though that never includes field work. Their work assignments are again all within the main block, which is like a fortress.'

Of the half-dozen or so workers that Jac passed that troubled to look his way, at best they were sullenly curious, at worst

surly and menacing; no smiles. It was difficult for Jac to believe that these were the best of the bunch.

‘Sixty-one per cent African-American inmates, sixteen per cent mixed race, and twenty-three per cent white. And with the guards, that ratio is reversed. Only nineteen per cent are black or mixed race – though a marked improvement on twenty or thirty years ago. Take the clock back to the early sixties, and there wasn’t a single black guard.’

But as Jac entered deeper into the bowels of Libreville’s main block, he began to appreciate the difference. Here, at best the stares were surly, at worst taunting and disturbingly intense; and

there were a few smiles, though invariably leering and slanted, as if fuelled by madness, or challenging, as if viewing him as prey.

Jac felt that the stifling oppression and heat of the block – unless he was imagining it – seemed to be getting more intense as he progressed, pressing heavier on him with each guard check-point and heavy steel gate opened and bolted shut behind him. And as a few sexual taunts were thrown at him as he passed the cells – ‘Like the way you walk, pretty boy’, ‘Sweet ass – I could fuck you right through that Armani’ – he felt his face tingle and burn.

He was probably still flushed, agitated, his shirt sticking to his skin, as he was

ushered into the contrasting coolness of Warden Haveling's wood-panelled office. But he knew immediately – unless Haveling had taken to appearing as surly as his prisoners or was far more upset by his tardiness than he'd envisaged – that something serious was wrong.

It was that time of day.

Leonard Truelle nursed the two fingers of Jim Beam between his hands with due reverence, as if warming his hands through the glass. Then, with a faint gleam of expectation in his eyes, brought it to his lips and felt its warmth and aroma trickle slowly down. He closed his eyes in appreciation. Pure nectar.

With a part sigh, part murmur as he felt its after-burn, he set the glass slowly down.

The hand clamping over his came an inch before the tumbler touched the table, and he flicked his eyes open again, startled.

‘What *the...* oh, *oh...* it’s you.’

‘Now that’s no way to greet a long-lost friend.’

‘You startled me, that’s all. Probably because it *has* been so long.’ Nelson Malley, Nel-M, or just plain Nel. Almost five years now, but it wasn’t a face he was ever likely to forget. There was a tinge of grey now in Malley’s tight-knit curls, and it looked as if his mahogany skin tone was becoming

greyer each time, as if someone had thrown potash in his face which hadn't completely washed off.

‘Anyway, nice to see you again.’ Nel-M gave Truelle’s hand a couple more squeezes – though to Truelle they felt threatening rather than reassuring – and as Nel-M felt the trembling there, he smiled. ‘Is that because of me? I’m touched. Or because you haven’t kicked this stuff yet?’ Nel-M flicked his hand towards the whisky tumbler as he lifted it away.

Truelle didn’t want to let Nel-M inside his head, show weakness either way. ‘Expecting Sharon Stone any minute, and, you know, first dates. Always nervous.’ Truelle forced a weak smile.

‘I might need some Dutch courage to actually get to fuck her.’

Nel-M smiled back, but his charcoal eyes fixed steadily on Truelle showed no hint of warmth; as always, icy and bottomless, as if they were independent monitors searching for weak points to signal what his next move should be. They cut Truelle to the core, ran a shiver up his spine.

This drink now was part of a ritual, every Tuesday and Friday night when he left work. One glass of Jim Beam slowly and reverently sipped – then home. Before when he’d been on the wagon, he’d always felt in danger that if he had just one drink, he wouldn’t be able to stop. And on a couple of occasions, that

was exactly how he'd started again. This was his way of proving that he was in control, could stop at just one drink – but he was damned if he was going to share his innermost secrets with Nelson Malley. He could feel Nel-M's eyes still on him as he looked down thoughtfully at his glass, and shrugged to ease his discomfort.

‘Look, if you wanted something, why didn't you come by my office – like most normal people?’

‘Normal people?’ Nel-M raised one eyebrow and smiled slyly. ‘Bit of a contradiction in terms in your line of work, isn't it? I wouldn't want to rob any of your patients of their precious fifty minutes or, God forbid, get seen

walking in and confused with all those crazies. I got a reputation to uphold.’ The smile broadened, then died just as quickly. ‘But you’ve probably guessed the reason I’m here now. No doubt you’ve seen or read the news: Durrant’s execution has been set. Only forty-seven days left now, and counting.’

‘Yeah, I know. I’ve read it.’ Truelle kept his eyes on his tumbler, didn’t want to risk what Malley might see in them.

‘And, well, we just wanted to make sure that you were still cool about everything. No last minute stabs of conscience.’

Truelle smiled drolly. ‘*We* – as in you and Addy Roche?’

‘As in.’

‘Yeah, I’m cool.’ Truelle nodded, still

staring at his glass. ‘Resigned to’ or ‘numbed by’ would probably have been more accurate expressions. He’d shed so many tears of conscience over Durrant that now there was nothing left. ‘I got rid of all my demons years ago.’

Though looking at the tumbler now, he could almost still picture it being refilled time and time again, until he’d stagger from the bar in a daze. If he’d had a problem before Durrant, the aftermath was without doubt the main event. He’d drunk half the state dry before resorting to more AA meetings and colleague’s couches than he dared remember. But the problem was that he could never tell them what lay at the root of what was troubling him. *Never.*

‘You’re sure now that you’re cool about it?’ Nel-M pressed, laying his hand back on Truelle’s. ‘No recriminations?’

Truelle shook his head and looked back at Nel-M. ‘I’m sure. No recriminations. Not any more.’

But Nel-M kept his hand there, squeezing bit by bit harder as he stared into Truelle’s eyes, searching for doubt. He stopped short of a complete crush, and although he couldn’t discern anything from Truelle’s eyes – too lifeless, dulled by the years of drink – he could feel the tell-tale trembling back in his hand.

‘Though nice to know you still have feelings for me,’ Nel-M said, giving the hand one last pat before he lifted his

away and, in the same motion – before Truelle could object – waved towards the barman.

‘And another of the same for my friend here.’

Nel-M slapped some money on the counter and slapped Truelle on the shoulder. ‘Remember – stay cool.’ Then, with one last taunting smile, he headed out.

Truelle hardly acknowledged him, his eyes fixed on the second drink as if it was poison. He could feel the trembling in his hands reverberating now through his entire body. Of all the times he could do with a second drink, it was now. But he was damned if he was going to fall off of the wagon just for Nel-M. And the

fact that Nel-M had bought the drink made it all the worse – it would be like supping with the devil.

He knocked back the last of his first drink, closing his eyes again as he felt it trickle down. In control. *Still in control.* Then, bringing the tumbler down with a firm slam on the bar counter, he walked out.

3

4 days later

‘So, how was our good friend Truelle?’

‘Not bad, not bad,’ Nel-M said. ‘After he got over the shock of seeing me.’

‘So, no signs of him falling apart?’

‘None that I could see, beyond the normal PMT – post-Malley tension.’

Nel-M chuckled briefly. ‘He claims that he exorcised the demons over Durrant years ago. And apparently he’s also kicked the demon drink. Truelle was

reluctant to tell me himself – but I checked back with the barman after he left: it appears he goes in there only twice a week and has just a single Jim Beam each time. And he left the extra drink I bought him.’

‘Impressive. And the gambling?’

‘Unless he’s using a bookie or is into some private games we just don’t know about – looks like he’s clean there too.’

‘Sound almost too good to be true. *Two* vices overcome.’

The voice at the other end was punctuated by laboured breathing from years of emphysema and, as a chortle was attempted, it lapsed into a small coughing fit.

Adelay Roche, Louisiana’s second

richest man, twenty-ninth nationally. He'd earned his main money in petrochemicals and refining, and his detractors claimed that his emphysema was God's punishment for poisoning the lungs of millions of others; whereas his supporters said that it was brought on by the death of his beautiful young wife twelve years ago. As many years ago now as the age-gap between them.

VR, Vader-Raider, he was unaffectionately nick-named, homage to his breathing problems and his fierce reputation for corporate raiding. On occasion, he'd ask people what the VR stood for, and, not wishing to upset him, they'd either claim that they didn't know or, with a tight smile, 'Perhaps "Very

Rich”.’ Roche would nod knowingly. ‘That’s nice.’ He’d long ago heard what the initials stood for, but couldn’t resist watching them shuffle awkwardly around the issue.

‘And what about Raoul Ferrer?’ Roche enquired.

‘I haven’t caught up with him yet. I thought I should speak to you again first.’

‘Yeah, I know. He could be more of a worry. Two money demands now. No knowing when we might get another.’

‘True.’ Nel-M didn’t say any more, just let the steady cadence of Roche’s breathing get there on its own.

‘If that’s going to be an ongoing situation, then we might have to nip it in the bud. Let me know how you read it

once you've met with him.'

'Will do.' As much of a green light as he was going to get from Roche. He might have to nudge that situation along himself.

'Oh, and there's a new lawyer been handed Durrant's final plea at Payne, Beaton & Sawyer. Name of Jac McElroy. Doesn't have too much experience, from what I hear – so looks like end-of-the-line throwing-in-the-towel time. Otherwise they'd have given it to someone with a bit more weight. But warrants watching all the same.'

A small shudder would run through Jac's body at times; a small electrical surge buzzing through him for no reason, often

in the dead of night and just when he was on the verge of sleep, snapping him back awake again.

The same chilling shudder that had run through him when his mother's voice had lifted from her weary, trembling body into the silent, expectant rooms of the sprawling Rochefort farmhouse they'd called home for the past nineteen years, to tell him that his father was dead. That had been daytime, hot and sunny, though the large house had never felt colder when that news, even though half-expected, dreaded for so long, finally came from the hospital.

And he'd felt that same shudder even more in the following months: at his father's funeral, when the bank

foreclosed and the bailiffs came, with his mother's muffled sobbing through walls or half-closed doors, or after his father had appeared in a dream, smiling warmly, telling him everything was okay. *Lived before I died*. Or sometimes for no reason that he could fathom, as if telling him there was something he might have missed. Stay awake for another hour staring at the ceiling and you might just work out what it was. Some magical way of getting your family out of this mess. After all, you're the man of the house now.

The Rochefort artist's retreat had been his father's dream for many a year, long before he finally summoned up the courage to pack in his job at a small

design and print company and transplant his family from a cold, grey Glasgow to the sun-dappled vineyards and wheat-fields of the Saintonge. And now the dream had died along with his father, as his father in his fading years knew all too well it would, many saying the money problems had in fact caused his illness: income dwindling, financial problems mounting and banks pressing in pace with the cancer eating him away; a race as to which would hit the tape first.

But it was difficult for Jac to get angry with his father for the financial fall-out after his death because, as his father's good friend Archie Teale had said, unlike most people he'd actually *lived*

his dream, and Jac's abiding memory of that period was of an almost idyllic childhood: looking over his father's shoulder as he'd bring to life with his paintbrush a patchwork quilt of vines, lavender and sunflower fields spread before them; Jac sitting on the hillside by the L-shaped farmhouse, the sun hot on his back, his father in the courtyard below sweeping one arm towards the same patchwork landscape as he instructed a group of eight by their easels – his father living his dream and the rest of the family happily riding along in the wake of that glow; powder-white sand slipping egg-timer slow through Jac's fingers on an Isle de Rey beach, or chasing small fishes through its

shallows, his father telling him if he ran fast enough and scooped down quick enough with his cupped hands, he might finally catch one. But, of course, he was never able to.

Those had been the overriding images in Jac's mind from those years, rather than remembering his father tired and wasting away, his mother weeping and the court's gavel and bailiffs' knocks that had marked their final days in France.

Jac saw his father as some fallen-through-no-fault-of-his-own hero, rather than the failure that others, particularly his aunt, had labelled him.

And so as the months passed the brief shudders in the dead of night became less frequent, then finally one day

stopped, and Jac was able to sleep easy.

So when that brief shudder hit Jac again, snapping him awake in the dead of night after he'd visited Larry Durrant for the first time, it caught him unawares.

He stared up at the ceiling long and hard, wondering what it could be: that one vital detail or clue he'd missed reading Durrant's trial files? A hint at how to handle this fresh problem with the attempted break-out and the injured guards? But all that lifted from the muted streetlight orange-greys on his ceiling was the last image to hit him before he'd awoken: Durrant in his cell, lonely and afraid, sweat beads massed on his forehead with the crippling fear that he

was about to die – the antithesis of the cool and distant, guarded front he'd shown to Jac – reaching out to say something, but the words never forming in his mouth.

But with the e-mail that was waiting on Jac's computer when he switched it on early the next morning, Jac wondered if it was some kind of strange premonition. Only two lines, his blood ran cold as he read it, a nervous tingle running down his spine.

Looked like he might have a breakthrough with Durrant before he'd hardly started.

End of first three chapters of Ascension Day.

The Last Witness

John Matthews

Reviews:

Distinctively written... all the forceful energy of the best thrillers.

- *Kirkus Reviews*.

Gripping, pulse-racing. A police departments determination to bring down a leading crime family merged with one woman's quest to uncover a secret past.... Brilliant!

- *Evening Herald*.

If you think in terms of the sort of 'woman in jeopardy' mysteries that

Nicci French writes so well, blended with a harder-edged ‘Sopranos’-style thriller, then you’ll have nailed the heart of this story. Strongly sketched characters and emotions make this one stand out from the pack.

- *Murder One.*

PROLOGUE

April 4th, Montreal, Canada.

There are times when all hope seems lost. When every precept and foundation previously held as true seems to have been torn down or to have faded into insignificance, and all that surrounds and lies ahead is grey desolation. And while those feelings may not last long, perhaps only moments, when they hit they are all-consuming, they form a high, impenetrable wall beyond which nothing else can be seen.

Elena Waldren was gripped by such dark contemplation, darker than she'd ever known before, as she sat parked in Montreal's Rue St-Urbain, thousands of miles from her home in Dorset, on probably the most important quest of her forty-five years, her passenger a ten year-old Romanian girl who at one time had been as close as her own daughter, though had become practically a stranger the past two years. She shook her head; that was part of the problem right there. But she couldn't keep them all under her wings forever.

She'd pulled in hurriedly to the side, and the afternoon traffic flowed past, becoming heavier now towards the rush

hour. Rain pattered against her windscreen, slanting slightly with a fresh breeze off the St Lawrence. Elena remained oblivious to everything beyond her own thoughts, her head buried in the crook of her right arm braced against the steering wheel.

How could she have been so wrong about everything? She'd always thought she'd seen so much, lived so many roller-coaster troughs and peaks, that there could be few surprises left; the one advantage of the over-forties. And now in only two days, half of her past had been completely re-written.

'Are you okay?' Lorena asked.

'Yes... I just need a minute. I'll be

fine.' Fine? The police wire had been out for a while now, probably since their trail through France, and no doubt soon her face would be on TV news bulletins. And for what? Her own quest now at a dead-end, and the danger that had led her to take such drastic action and drag young Lorena on this odyssey – as so many people kept telling her all along – was probably imagined. For the first time Elena woke up to just how much she was out of her depth: she was just an aid worker from a backwater Dorset village home shared with her pipe-smoking, unassuming husband and two children; running the gauntlet with police across two continents was far

removed from any past experience she could draw upon.

But at least she now knew his name: Georges Donatiens. Twenty-nine years, and she'd missed him by only days. Never to be seen again. Cruel fate. All she had, or would ever have, was his name on a scrap of paper and the few brief reminiscent stories from the Donatiens.

'Georges. Georges Donatiens.' She whispered the name almost as an incantation, as if that might suddenly bring a clearer image to mind beyond the few stark, smiling photos she'd scanned at the Donatiens'. Something to help fill that twenty-nine year void. She felt nothing now but cold and

empty, and she braced her head firmer into her arm to quell her body's trembling. Tears were close, but she swallowed hard, biting them back. Lorena had been through enough, half of it imagined or not, to see her now so distressed.

She took a fresh breath and sighed it out. It would probably have been just as bad if she had met him, started to sow the first seeds of attachment, only for him then to be taken brutally away. Either way, the pain now would have been the same.

She started to shake off her dark mood, lift her head – but Lorena's muttered 'Ele!...' and her suddenly aware of a figure by the car, made her

look up sharper: brown uniform, one hand by the gun holster, the other reaching out.

The RCMP officer tapped at her window, signalling for her to wind it down.

ONE

February 11th, Montreal, Canada.

‘Two minutes over now. He’s late.’

‘Don’t worry, he’ll show.’ Michel Chenouda sounded confident, but inside it was just one more worry to stack with the mountain of others that had built excruciatingly over the last hour of the set-up.

Four of his RCMP team were with him in the 2nd floor of the warehouse overlooking the St Lawrence dockside, the other three in an unmarked car around the corner, and dead centre in

their night-sight binoculars' frame was their mark Tony Savard, waiting on Roman Lacaille and his men. It was – 7°C that night and Savard's breath showed heavy on the air. Three years tracking in the shadows of the Lacailles, Montreal's leading crime family, and now hopefully, finally, Michel would nail them.

The Lacailles had put up a strong legitimate business front over recent years, but Chenouda was convinced they were secretly behind Eastern Canada's largest drugs supply network. Then eleven months ago with the murder of Eric Leduc, one of the network's key men, he had the confirmation he wanted: Roman Lacaille was responsible for the

murder, had pulled the trigger himself in a fit of rage. They heard it first from the car's driver when pressured over a vice bust; but he refused to officially testify and finger Roman Lacaille, and five months later he was dead. A 'boating' accident. That left only two other witnesses: Tony Savard and Georges Donatiens. But Donatiens was too much 'family' for them to hope he'd testify, so they'd piled on the pressure with Savard: if he didn't come forward, he'd be next to go the same way. Finally Savard cut a deal.

The only problem was that unlike Donatiens – who was in the back of the car when Leduc was shot – Savard was standing outside the car on watch. He

hadn't seen Roman Lacaille actually pull the trigger. There was also the problem of Roman Lacaille's likely plea of self-defence.

The plan now was therefore a meeting with Roman Lacaille to discuss general business, and almost jokingly, by-the-way, Savard would comment about the mess of cleaning up after Leduc. 'Couldn't you have shot him out of the car? We were still finding bits of him there two days later.'

Once Roman Lacaille opened up about the shooting, Savard would then press a bit about the gun on the floor not being Leduc's normal piece to try and break his self-defence story, and they'd get it all on tape. Enough hopefully to...

‘Attends! Something’s happening. Vehicle approaching... fast! But it’s not Lacaille’s Beamer, it’s a black van. Stopping. Back doors opening... two men getting out. Something’s wrong. They’re wearing ski masks!’ Chac, his closest aide in the RCMP, was main look-out. Chac moved quickly aside and let Michel Chenouda look through the binoculars.

Michel watched as a startled Tony Savard was bundled into the back of the van, looking sharply over his shoulder; a silent plea for help. Michel reached for the radio mike.

‘Move now! Two men have just grabbed Savard. Black Chevy Venture. No sign of Lacaille, and we’re not even

sure it's his men. So get close so that you're ready to cut in on them when I say.' Michel had switched to English for the command. The driver, Mark, was only three years up from Ottawa, and Michel liked to use English with those for whom, like him, French was a second language. Now more than ever: he couldn't risk even a split-second delay for the driver to understand.

As the back-up car swung into view, a faint night mist swirling opaque in its beam, the van was already heading off. A gap of maybe eighty yards between them, Michel estimated, but closing quickly with the car having gained momentum. Sixty yards, fifty...

But as they came to the end of the

warehouse block and the first intersection, Michel watched in horror a large double trailer cut suddenly across just after the van had passed. The squad car braked hard and slued to an angle, stopping just yards short.

They beeped, flashed their lights and shouted furiously, but the truck driver simply lifted his palms and shouted back in defensive protest. Only when badges were frantically waved and their cherry siren was put on the roof and fired up, did he start moving; though even then only slowly. The van was long gone.

At that moment, Savard's voice came over clearly on sound. '*Jesus!* What's happening... what's going on?'

Only silence returned. Nobody

answered.

Michel watched the screen-finder dot recede rapidly out of the dockside, continuing straight for a moment before bleeping and flashing at a tangent. 'They've turned off either at Lafontaine or Ontario, heading east,' he hissed into the radio-mike. 'Looks like they're headed downtown. We're going to cut across and back you up.'

Michel grabbed the screen-finder and directed two of his men to come with him, the other to stay with Chac. They took the stairs at a flying run, two and three at a time. Michel's heart pounded hard and heavy, almost in time with the screen dot. His breath rasped short; he was heavier than he'd have liked, and at

moments like this it told.

Michel took the passenger seat, and the youngest of them, a lanky, twenty-nine year old Montreal anglophile named Phil Reeves, drove. His heavier, twelve years older, bulldog-expressioned Quebecois partner, Maury Legault, sat in the back. In age, build and countenance, Michel was practically a hybrid between them. Except that in certain lights and at certain angles, his high cheekbones and the slight almond slope of his dark brown eyes gave away his part Mohawk ancestry. But now as they sped off and he caught his own reflection briefly in the side window, he looked as hangdog as Maury. Defeated. Three years work funnelled now into

only frantic minutes, and it was all fast slipping away.

Michel watched the dot bleep deeper. As they approached Lafontaine, he could tell now that the van was on Ontario, the next cross street. He raised Chac on the radio-phone.

‘Anything on sound?’

‘Nothing significant. Some rustling and movement, traffic sounds in the background, but no voices. Nothing since Savard asked ‘what’s happ—’

Even over the radio mike, Michel heard what had stopped Chac mid-sentence: a faint background crunching and a strangled, guttural ‘*Maird!*’ followed by some indiscernible mumbling from Savard. At that same

instant, the screen-finder dot disappeared.

‘No, *no*... please no.’ Michel closed his eyes for a second as he made the breathless plea. He swallowed hard, fearing the worst with his next question. ‘Have you still got sound, Chac?’

‘Yeah... still there. Heavier rustling now, and Savard’s breathing’s more laboured. Now he’s coughing... or sounds like him. The others wouldn’t come over that clearly.’

Michel slowly let out his breath and opened his eyes again. Thank God at least they still had that. The directional signal had been in Savard’s watch, the wire – because they knew Savard would likely be searched vigorously by

Lacaille – was sewn discreetly into his coat lapel.

‘They’ve obviously only smashed his watch. Let’s just pray they don’t find the sound bug.’ But he knew it was practically worthless unless Savard’s captor’s actually spoke, gave some clue of where they were headed. ‘Link me in directly to the wire, Chac. We’re running blind here. Maybe I’ll be able to pick up something from background traffic and city sounds.’

As soon as the wire feed came over the radio, Michel turned it up. The hiss of static and faint rustling filled the car. Michel immersed himself in it, blotting out completely the surrounding traffic noise as Phil sped along Rue Ontario.

After a moment he could pick out the rise and fall of Tony Savard's breathing. A faint cough, a swallow. Then a few seconds later Tony Savard's voice came over, loud and distorted.

‘Where are we going? I can't see nothing with this hood on?’

Michel clenched a fist tight. Savard was trying to tell them what he could. No answer returned. Michel honed in on background sounds beyond Savard's breathing: traffic drone, a horn beeping, faint distant siren wail. Michel turned the radio down. He couldn't hear the siren himself from outside, which worried him. It meant that they weren't anywhere close to Savard.

Michel patched in to the other car.

‘Mark, can you hear a siren from where you are?’

Moment’s pause, then: ‘No, nothing here.’

‘We’ve lost directional, but we’ve still got wire sound. Any fix on where they’re headed from where you are?’

‘We followed what you last gave us, east on Ontario. But no sign of them. They gained a good half mile when the truck blocked us. They could be anywhere.’

‘Okay. I’ll let you know if we pick up anything useful on the wire.’

Back to Savard’s breathing. The siren had now faded from the background. Then after a moment in gruff Quebecois, the first comment from Savard’s captors.

‘Where’s our drugs money, Tony?’

‘*Quoi?*... What drugs money? I don’t know nothing about that. I was there for a meet with Roman Lacaille.’

‘Don’t know the man personally. Now, again – where’s our money, Tony?’

‘*I don’t know... don’t know what you’re...*’

Chac’s voice crashed in. ‘More action here. Roman Lacaille’s Beamer’s just rolled up. He’s getting out with another man, bold as you like... looking around.’

Michel’s stomach fell. Whatever was going to happen with Savard in the van, Lacaille was distancing himself from it. ‘*I turned up as arranged, but he’d already gone. And half a dozen RCMPs know it couldn’t have been me, because*

they were watching me through binoculars.'

‘Now he’s lifting his arms in a “where is he?” gesture.’

Michel could picture Lacaille gloating as he made the gesture. He closed his eyes and solemnly nodded. ‘Okay. Nothing we can do with him, though. And he knows it. Put me back to the wire.’ Staying with Lacaille wasn’t productive.

‘...last time. Where is it, Tony?’

‘I told you... I don’t even know what you’re talking about.’

A heavy pause, background traffic drone returning, Savard’s breathing laboured, expectant. Then finally: ‘Well... if he’s not going to talk.’

Michel tried to discern what was happening from the next sounds: heavier rustling, movement closer to Savard, then a guttural '*Espece d'encoulé!* What the fu... *uuugh*,' receding quickly into two more grunts and heavier breathing from Savard, now raspier, more nasal. Michel guessed that Savard's mouth had been bound. The rustling and movement receded, then after a second a fresh voice came from the front.

'*Bon*. So, where are we going to do this?'

'I thought Saint Norbert.'

'No, not good. The car park there's only five storeys. He might survive the drop. Could still be alive and talking when he hits the deck.'

Michel's hopes leapt: some fix on where they were headed at last! But at the same time the reason for the binding became clear, and he felt for Savard: they knew he'd start shouting and screaming at their new turn in conversation. Michel could hear Savard hyperventilating with fear, muffled grunts mixed with rapid nasal wheezing.

‘So where would you suggest?’

‘Place Philips car park. Eight floors, straight down. He won't survive that.’

Savard's grunting and wheezing was almost out of control, combined now with some heavy rustling and thudding. He was obviously writhing around in protest, the only movement he was left with.

Michel wished that he could reach out and hug and reassure Savard: *Don't worry. We know where they're headed now. We'll get to them before they can throw you.*

Phil turned and dropped two blocks down to Rene Lévesque to make better time heading into the city centre, and Michel alerted Mark on the radio phone. 'We just got it on the wire that that's where they're headed.'

'Saint Catherine entrance or Philips?'

'We don't know. You take Saint Catherine, we'll take Philips.'

Silence again. Only the sound over the wire of Savard's muffled, laboured breathing as Phil floored it through the night-time streets, touching seventy.

Within the cocoon of darkness of the hood, Savard's terror had reached a peak. He'd found breathing difficult with the restriction of the hood as it was, had felt his own hot breath bouncing back at him; but now with something bound tight around his mouth over the outside, pushing the cloth in, it was practically impossible. With each breath the cloth felt as if it was sucking in, gagging him, and the binding had also pulled the hood tight against his nose. Upon hearing he'd be thrown, he'd writhed and banged about; partly in fear, partly in vain hope of catching the attention of cars or people they passed. But as the blood pounding through his head hit a hot white crescendo and he felt nauseous and

almost blacked out, he stopped. He reminded himself of the wire. They'd handled him roughly bundling him into the van and tying his hands and feet, but he was pretty sure it was still there. Michel had no doubt heard where they were headed.

But with two entrances and five sections to the car park, what were the chances of Michel and his men getting to him in time? They could already be two minutes behind as it was, and could easily lose another couple of minutes finding the right section of car park. It did him little good if Michel caught up with his captors *after* he was thrown.

The night-time streets flashed by Michel's window, with most cars

pulling hurriedly over with the sound of their approaching siren. But half the time Michel kept his eyes closed, immersing himself deeper into the sounds on the wire: Savard's fractured, muffled breathing falling almost in time with his own rapid pulse, feeling himself almost there alongside Savard to will home the message: *we'll be there, don't worry. We'll be there to stop them.*

It took only just over three minutes before they hit the Place Philips entrance and started up. Mark had radioed in twenty seconds before as he entered on Saint Catherine Street, and was now winding furiously up towards the third floor. At Michel's instruction, they'd both killed their sirens for the last few

hundred yards of approach. Michel didn't want Savard's captors suddenly taking fright and shifting him somewhere else.

As Phil swung into the fifth floor, Michel heard over the wire the van stopping, a door opening, closing. Then the van's back doors opening.

‘Okay. Should be good here.’

‘Yeah.’

Savard's breathing again started to become more rapid, frantic. Brief writhing and thudding, and then some rustling and short muffled grunts from Savard. Michel pictured him being lifted out.

Michel clutched tight at the radio mike. Mark should be near the top now.

‘We’ve just heard the van stop – they’re taking Savard out. See anything from where you are?’

‘We’re just coming onto the eight now.’ Brief background squeal of tyres, then: ‘No... nothing on this first stretch.’

Michel drummed the flat of his left hand against the dashboard as they sped along the sixth and swung into the ramp for the seventh. ‘*Come on!...*’

Savard felt himself being carried away from the van, heard his carrier’s short shuffling footsteps, but they were crunching slightly, as if they had crepe soles? Then after a few yards they paused and his back was partly rested on the thighs of the man behind.

‘Okay, one last chance, Tony...’

Savard felt the binding around his mouth being untied and pulled free. His frantic breathing eased a bit without the constriction.

‘...Where’s our money?’

‘I told you, I don’t you... *I don’t know,*’ he gasped. ‘*Please,* you’ve got to believe me.’

Phil squealed up the last part of the ramp to the eighth. Michel’s eyes darted rapidly around as the car straightened and sped along. He couldn’t see anything immediately, no sign of the van or Savard being carried. He pointed. ‘Maybe in the next section.’ Then, into the mike: ‘Anything where you are?’

‘No, nothing. We’ve already checked two sections. One more to go.’

Michel's hand drummed the dashboard more frantically as Phil swung into the next section. From the voices over the wire, he knew there were probably only seconds left.

'We haven't got to believe anything, Tony. Last chance...'

'Fuck's sake, guys... I *really* don't know,' Savard spluttered. 'If I did, don't you think I'd tell you.'

A second's silence, then the other man's voice. 'Let's get him closer to the edge. He's not going to talk.'

Faint rustling and movement, repeated mumbled protests from Savard, then: 'We'll not clear this rail unless we swing him.'

'Yeah...'

Savard lost it then, his protests and shouts of 'No!' hit screaming pitch as Michel imagined him being swung.

Mark's voice came over the radio-phone. 'Nothing here. We've searched every corner.'

'Okay.' Phil had just turned into the last section and Michel's eyes swung wildly around. Savard's screaming filled his head. He had to be somewhere here, *somewhere*... Suddenly his rapid dashboard drumming changed to a sharp slap. 'Stop! Stop the car now! *Stop!*'

Phil screeched to a halt and Michel immediately swung his door open, listening.

'...Two. On the count of three.' The words were all but drowned out by

Savard's raucous screaming.

Michel could hear everything clearly over the wire, but from the surrounding car park sounds there was nothing. Yet Savard was screaming loud enough to be heard two blocks away. He didn't even trouble to check with Mark; he'd have heard it from Mark's section from where he was. Michel's stomach fell, a chill running through him. Savard was nowhere nearby, he'd been taken somewhere else. There was nothing they could do to save him.

'...Three!'

Savard had already pictured clearly in his mind the eight-floor drop, and his final scream as he was swung high for the last time rattled his throat raw. And

then he was sailing free... his mind spinning fast-reel frames within the hood's darkness to match his sensation of falling, his scream echoing down through the floors – praying that mercifully he'd black out halfway down – gaining momentum ever faster, faster, *until*... but the ground hit earlier than he expected. Maybe no more than a few yards. And it felt soft, his fall dampened by a cushioning of snow. His screaming faltered into nervous, staccato exhalations; he hardly dared believe that he was still alive.

‘That’s just a practice run, Tony. If you don’t tell us where the money is, we’re going to do it for real.’

Savard swallowed hard. The terror

was quickly back. He wished now they *had* killed him. He couldn't face going through the knife-edge fear and anticipation a second time.

He was shaking uncontrollably, his voice quavering. 'Jesus, guys... *Jesussss*. I told you, I don't know.'

'No more chances, Tony. This is it...'

Savard felt himself being lifted again. 'No! No!... *No!*'

Michel could hardly bear to listen any more, knowing with certainty that there was nothing they could do to help. But the voices gripped him in almost morbid fascination – though now he was honing in more on background sounds: stillness, virtual silence. No traffic or background city drone. They should have picked up

on that earlier when Savard was lifted from the van! If they had, they might have known they were wasting their time at Place Philips, might have been able to...

‘We haven’t got time to move him somewhere else to do this. I reckon we should finish it here.’

‘I don’t know...’ Brief hesitation from the other man, then resignedly on a faint sigh: ‘*D’accord*. I suppose you’re right. No point in dragging it out. He’s not going to talk.’

Savard felt himself being put back down on the ground. He was confused. Weren’t they at a high building somewhere? But then there wouldn’t be snow on the ground at Place Philips car park – which also explained why Michel

and his men hadn't caught up with him. For the first time Savard also tuned in to the virtual silence around. Where *was* he?

Michel could almost feel Savard's surprise coming across in waves with his screaming having subsided into rapid, fractured breathing. From background sounds, Michel judged they were outside the city by at least a few miles; a deserted field or some wasteland perhaps. Lacaille had duped them at every turn, had probably known about the wire and had set up a cassette in the van with the drone of city traffic to throw them. But then how had they replicated the ramps for Savard not to realize he wasn't winding up through the

levels of a car park?

Michel could picture the guns being taken out, the silencers attached, and he closed his eyes. Of all the moments Savard had protested and screamed in fear, now it would be justified; yet Savard merely continued to breathe heavily, like some confused, trapped animal. It seemed both ironic and unfair that his last moment should end like this.

And as the gun shots finally came, two in quick succession and another seconds later, Michel did Savard's screaming for him. 'No... *Nooo!*' His eyes scrunched tight, his bellowing plea reverberated through the cavernous car park. And as its echo died, all that was left was the sound over the wire of footsteps

crunching on snow, receding quickly away from Savard's body.

TWO

Elena flicked through the report in her lap as Nadine Moore wended through the Dorset lanes. A weak sun threw dappled light through the trees, and at points Nadine glanced across and pointed at the file, prompting.

‘That’s the last interview with the Ryall’s, there. Eleven months ago. Two months later the official adoption order was made, and we were out of the picture.’

‘And no alerts since?’ Elena asked. ‘Nothing to raise concern?’

‘That would normally only come up through Lorena’s school or GP. But no,

nothing.’ Nadine forced a tight smile after a second. ‘But, anyway, it seems you’re the one she first turns to for help.’

‘Seems so.’ Elena nodded and mirrored Nadine’s smile. She looked again at the file, flicking back a page.

The call had come through at almost 1 a.m. Lorena’s voice had been hushed, and Elena got a picture of her sneaking in the call while the rest of the house was asleep. ‘...Sorry to disturb you, Elena. But something troubles me here. And I didn’t know who else to phone.’

Lorena’s English had improved tenfold in the fifteen months since she’d last seen her. ‘It’s no trouble at all. Now tell me – what’s the problem?’

‘It’s Mr Ryall. He comes to my

bedroom late at night, and I... I don't feel comfortable.'

'In what way?'

'I'm not sure. ' A heavy swallow from Lorena, her breath coming short. 'Perhaps I shouldn't have called. I'm sorry.'

Elena reassured her that she'd done the right thing, then pressed if Ryall was actually touching or interfering with her. A long silence, too long, before Lorena's uncertain 'No.' Then: 'I don't know,' and something incoherent in Romanian, Lorena's voice quavering heavily before she finally lapsed into muted sobbing. Seconds later she hung up.

Elena didn't sleep well afterwards,

contemplated phoning back or actually jumping in the car and heading to the Ryalls. But Lorena's obvious fear of disturbing the house and her own concern that breaking procedure could upset progress, *if* anything was happening, held her in check.

She phoned Social Services first thing in the morning. She received the call back from Nadine Moore forty minutes later that Lorena had requested she also be at the interview. 'She says she'll feel more comfortable talking about it with you there.'

Elena had only met Nadine Moore once before, when Nadine first took over Lorena's case halfway through the final adoption assessment year. Nadine was a

bright-eyed twenty-eight year old with crinkly brown hair framing round wire-frame glasses. Strong contrast to her older, more matronly predecessor who often spoke in tired, condescending tones, as if long ago she'd adopted the style to deal with errant parents and found it difficult to switch off. Maybe in another ten years all the verve and optimism would be knocked out of Nadine as well.

Elena herself might at one time have been described as matronly, but her hectic schedule the last five years with the aid agency – jumping aboard last minute flights or supply trucks headed for Bucharest or Bosnia – had rapidly burned off the pounds. Now she looked

more like a trim, mid-forties Jackie-O, the first touches of pepper showing in her dark hair. In looks – though decidedly not in temperament or in her outlook on life – she'd taken more after her Cypriot father than her English mother.

Elena buried herself back in the report. The final assessment findings told her little beyond what she already knew about the Ryalls from when they'd started the whole process in Bucharest. Cameron Thomas Ryall, 52, founder and head of *CTR Micro-Tech*. Married to Nicola Anne Ryall, 44, housewife by occupation, for the past fourteen years, his second marriage. No children of their own, though Mr Ryall has a son,

Michael, now 28, from his first marriage. One previously adopted daughter, Mikaya, originally from Cambodia. Mikaya is now 19 and at University.

Well-established businessman. Comfortable and secure home environment. One-career household (prospective mother always at home). Previous successful history with adoption. Ryall had collected star points at every turn, and perhaps, Elena reflected, he'd known that all along. Lorena's adoption planned with the same skilled precision as his last take-over bid. The only thing which might have gone against Ryall was the high-flying nature of his business. But his

main plant and HQ was only eight miles away, by far the area's largest 'green-field' industrial enterprise and nearby Chelborne's largest employer. Not only had Ryall avoided the absentee father label of so many high-powered executives, he'd also gained the final cream topping of local champion of the people.

'You still feel quite close to her, don't you?' Nadine was looking across with a slightly pained, quizzical expression. She'd purposely side-stepped 'feel responsible for'; it might make it sound like a forced obligation. 'How long did you know her in Bucharest?'

'There was a gap in the middle – but twenty months altogether.' Elena

nodded. ‘And yes, I suppose I do.’ They were all special to her in some way. All 18 children between the three orphanages in Romania, now all settled in new homes, hopefully safe and secure, around Britain. But how to explain that Lorena had stood out, touched an even more poignant chord above the rest? A natural closeness and affinity you feel with a particular child, yet can’t pinpoint exactly why? Or perhaps part of it was due to what Lorena had suffered after the first orphanage closed and her eleven months rough on the streets, one of Bucharest’s ‘sewer children’, before re-emerging. Elena still partly blamed herself for that.

Elena looked up as Nadine swung into

the Ryalls' driveway. An impenetrable rhododendron hedge ten foot high spread out each side of double wrought-iron black gates almost as high.

Local champion of the people. Any move against Ryall wouldn't be popular, *if* anything was happening. But Elena prayed that it was all a false alarm first and foremost for Lorena's benefit. She pushed away the contemplation that it was also partly for herself as abruptly as it had struck. Possible failure with one of the eighteen just wasn't an option.

Nadine got out of the car and buzzed the security intercom by the gate.

Elena felt the walls and barriers go up

as they went deeper into the Ryall house.

They were ushered into a large open entrance hallway, then on through a narrow, walnut-panelled passage by the Ryalls' maid, who – according to Nadine's report – also doubled as a cook and was at the house daytimes four days a week. Cameron Ryall maintained it was important not only that they should have time together privately, as a family, but also that they shouldn't become reliant on a housekeeper to the extent that she might become viewed as a surrogate mother by Lorena. 'She'll have enough trouble adapting to one new mother, without any such confusion.'

Ryall certainly knew how to score the points. Elena bit at her lip. She should

avoid slipping into prior judgement; it wouldn't help her have a clear view now. Ryall might have been being sincere.

Through half-open doors as they went along, Elena got a glimpse of a large oak kitchen and another room with a piano and some books, games and toys stacked to one side. The centrepiece, though, was the room they were led into: a high-ceilinged drawing room some thirty-five foot square. Overlooking was a book-lined gallery, and the walnut-panelled theme had been continued, with a painting centrepiece on each panel. Elena recognized two originals by Thornhill, the Dorset landscape artist, but on the far wall to their left were

more modern works, slightly out of keeping with the Edwardian house: two abstracts Elena didn't recognize, then a Chagall and a Seurat. They weren't close enough for her to tell if they were original or not.

The maid asked if they wanted tea or coffee. They both took coffee: Nadine white, Elena black.

The few minutes with her out of the room preparing – the only sound the remote clink and clatter of china – were tense. They didn't speak. There was only one thing now on their minds, and it wasn't a conversation they could risk being overheard.

Their eyes were naturally drawn to the over-sized picture window at the end of

the room. At least twelve-foot high and asp-shaped, it provided a dramatic view over the pool and the gardens beyond. Flower beds and linking paths flanked one side, and the lawn tabled steadily down so that they could see clearly over the bordering rhododendron hedge towards the sweep of Swanage Bay. The wind was steady, and a succession of distant white-caps were just discernible dancing through the sea haze. Approaching the house from the car, they'd clearly heard the ebb and surge of the sea, but now it was deathly silent: muted through eighteen-inch thick stone walls and double-glazing.

As if on cue, the Ryalls walked in just before the coffees were brought through.

Eager smiles and handshakes all round. Cameron Ryall looked keenly at Elena as he held her hand a second longer.

‘Nice to see you again. Last time we met was —’

‘Cerneit orphanage, Bucharest,’ Elena filled the gap.

‘Yes, yes, of course. Must be almost two years now.’

They sat down. The awkward silence settled again for a second, and as Nadine opened by explaining the reason for her visit now — that Lorena had confided in a school-friend about some worries and concerns at home — the Ryalls’ expressions quickly became solemn.

This had been the final game-plan agreed with Lorena: Lorena hadn’t

wanted it known that she'd phoned directly about any worries. Elena was watching Cameron Ryall's expression closely: no visible flinching, just his eyes darkening a shade. Heavier concern.

‘As explained, we do have to follow these things up.’ Nadine took a quick sip of coffee. ‘So, after speaking to you, I would like ten or fifteen minutes alone with Lorena. If that’s okay?’

‘Yes, of course,’ Cameron Ryall said. He sat forward, forearms rested on his thighs; a picture of eager compliance.

Nicola Ryall nodded her concurrence, eyes quickly downcast. Who would be taking the lead became painfully clear. Standard role positioning between them,

or had she been coached? ‘This could be delicate: leave it to me.’

When Nadine had phoned and made the appointment with Nicola Ryall, Nicola hadn’t made it clear whether Mr Ryall would also be present. The meeting had been arranged for 4 pm, just after Lorena returned from school. Cameron Ryall obviously considered it important enough to leave early and let his global conglomerate run itself for a couple of hours, or perhaps he had deeper reasons for concern? Elena pushed the thought back again.

Cameron Ryall was stocky, his dark-brown hair heavily greying at the sides, and apart from a few extra pounds looked very much the same as when

she'd last seen him. His most startling feature was his dark blue eyes, which in certain lights, depending on their dilation, appeared almost black.

He was dressed casually in dark green rugby shirt and jeans; the soft-edged, caring foster parent. When she'd first met him at the orphanage, he was wearing an oversized parka, as if he was a war-zone journalist. Then later at the Bucharest adoption agency, a dark grey suit and tie. Man for all seasons.

Nicola was a slim, attractive blonde, but her hair was cut short and she was wearing a small-check plaid skirt and plain cream blouse, as if she was trying to appear more prim, reserved and country-setish. Or perhaps this was more

of her husband's stage-management: 'Less glamour will give the impression of less self-interest. You'll come across as more motherly.'

Nadine opened up her folder on her knees, pen poised. She glanced down briefly at some typewritten notes before turning to a blank page and looking back at the Ryalls.

'Now, has Lorena mentioned anything to you recently about something troubling her?'

The Ryalls looked at each other briefly. Cameron Ryall answered with a slight shrug.

'No, not that we can think of.'

'Anything at all?' Nadine pressed. 'However small and irrelevant it might

have seemed at the time?’

Nicola Ryall’s expression lifted, as if a fresh thought had suddenly struck. ‘Well, she did complain not long ago about problems with some school-work. History, I think it was...’

‘Yes, yes,’ Cameron Ryall quickly picked up. ‘Her spoken English is quite good now, but she still has problems with written English. And for history she has to do a fair few essays.’ He forced a weak smile. ‘She finds them something of a struggle.’

Nadine started in on the rest of her check list: Progress with other subjects? Friends at school and how was Lorena settling in generally? Outside friends and interests? Lorena was settling in fairly

well, no problems with other subjects that the Ryalls could think of. A few friends made at school, only one from outside that they knew of. After a moment, Elena partly faded it out. Nadine had pre-warned that with much of it routine questioning, she'd be largely redundant until they talked to Lorena. She was there to comfort and reassure Lorena, nothing more.

Cameron Ryall answered politely and methodically, with his wife providing only sporadic input. Eagerness to satisfy any concern was the general tone; no hint of defensiveness or agitation that Elena could pick up on.

Elena got up and walked towards the picture window. It wasn't so much her

redundancy, but frustration that suddenly settled hard. Left to her, she'd have bulldozed in with a chain of direct, awkward questions and by now had the Ryalls pinned in the corner. But that wasn't, as she knew from past often tedious experience, how the Social Services worked.

Procedure. Questions had to be open, devoid of angle. 'Subjects must have the opportunity to volunteer information without undue prompt or influence.'

Elena looked out over the gardens and pool. With the winter light fast dying and a chill wind, it looked inhospitable. She recalled two photos Lorena had sent with a short note five months back: one of her in the pool with an oversized

beach ball in bright sunshine, the other of her blowing out the candles at her April birthday party with a few friends – probably taken in the breakfast or dining room. Happy days with her new family. Few signs now of a child's joyful activity, thought Elena; the atmosphere in the house was flat and sterile. Pretty much like Nadine's interview technique.

The softly-softly approach might work with some, but Elena doubted it would with Cameron Ryall. She remembered from the first adoption report that he'd been a practising barrister for three years before going into business. With now almost thirty years of hard-edged trading under his belt, he could run rings round the Nadine's of this world.

But then Nadine had told her that probably little would be revealed until they spoke to Lorena directly, and then if anything looked suspicious she would hit the Ryalls with bigger guns at a second interview. Perhaps her attachment to Lorena was making her *too* anxious for a quick solution, which was no doubt why Nadine had reminded her so pointedly to stay in the background with the Ryalls, ‘However angry and indignant you might feel. And after the initial introductions with Lorena and putting her at ease, leave everything to me.’

Her husband Gordon, too, had tried to calm her crusading spirit when she’d told him about the meeting with the Ryalls. ‘It may all come to nothing, you

don't know yet. And even if something *is* happening, it's not your problem anymore, it's the Social Service's. You did your bit by caring for those children until they found homes. You can't be expected to stay responsible for them all forever.'

But that was the problem, she *did* still feel responsible for them all. And in that moment, she felt a strong pang of guilt that in twelve years of marriage, she'd never told Gordon why. Perhaps he was right, it would all come to nothing, and she would never have to tell him. It would stay her secret, as it had done already for half her life.

‘No, no. There’s no problems.’

‘Are you sure?’ Nadine let out a slow breath. ‘This is quite important. It’s why we’re here.’

A moment’s hesitation from Lorena, but it was quickly brushed aside. ‘No, really. Everything’s fine. I was worrying for nothing.’

They were in the music and playroom they’d passed earlier. Lorena had been ushered in from her room by the maid, then they’d been left alone, the door closed.

There had been a tense moment towards the end of interviewing the Ryalls when Nadine had asked a similar question: ‘Moving closer to home, is there anything here troubling Lorena that

you can think of?’ Elena had turned from the window and moved a few paces back towards the Ryalls, focusing intensely and staring almost straight through them – not sure whether she was still looking for tell-tale signs or was hoping to unnerve them. Cameron Ryall had answered the same as Lorena, though without any hesitation.

Lorena appeared to have grown almost two inches since Elena had last seen her, was now close to five foot. Her hair was long and straight and somewhere between light-brown and corn, with just a hint of red in certain lights. Her eyes were a large and expressive blue-grey with a sprinkling of pale green flecks. In a few years, she could no doubt pass for

a stunning pre-pubescent cat-walk model, and perhaps that had partly contributed: because she was so pretty, it was easy to believe the worst about Cameron Ryall. Elena tried to detach herself from that thought, but it was difficult.

Lorena's English was near-perfect, though still with a distinct Eastern-European accent, its edges now smoothed by a gentle Dorset lilt. The combination was quite cute and endearing.

They'd hugged enthusiastically on greeting, and Elena felt reluctant to part, clinging on to Lorena's hands a moment longer as Lorena asked if she got the photos, and she in turn commented that

Lorena had grown and asked how she was. But it became quickly, painfully obvious that there were few safe footholds without getting to the business at hand, so Elena made the introductions and offered some encouragement – ‘Nadine’s here to help you. Just tell her everything in your own words, in your own time’ – then let Nadine take over.

Nadine started with the softer ground covered earlier with the Ryalls – friends at school or from outside, how she was settling in generally, problems with her history essays – before zeroing in with questions about problems at home. But it seemed to have served little purpose; Lorena was still edgy, ill at ease.

Nadine was uncertain whether to ease

back and circle slowly in again, or to be more direct. She glanced at Elena, whose frustration and impatience was painfully evident. The risk with a direct blast was that Lorena could clam-up completely; but there was probably little to lose, she certainly wasn't getting anywhere with the soft approach.

‘When you phoned Elena, you mentioned that Mr Ryall was coming to your bedside late at night, and that this disturbed you. Why did this disturb you?’

‘It just did, that’s all.’ Lorena looked down for a second. ‘He used to come to read me bed-time stories, but I told him I was too old for that now.’

‘But has he still continued to come?’

‘Yes, but less now. Now it’s more for when I have the dreams than to read me stories.’

‘The dreams?’

‘Yes, I...’ Lorena glanced towards Elena. ‘I used to have bad dreams that I was underground, trapped... couldn’t breathe.’ She put one hand up dramatically to her throat. ‘They stopped finally, but not long ago, maybe six or seven months, they come back again.’

Elena could see that Nadine was still grappling for a full picture, and cut in. ‘Lorena lived rough on the streets of Bucharest for almost a year after the first orphanage closed. In the winter, to keep warm, this often meant them making their beds and sleeping underground in the

sewers. For a while afterwards at the second orphanage, before she came to England, she was plagued by nightmares about that.'

'I see.' Nadine nodded. 'And when Mr Ryall comes to your bedside over those dreams, does anything else happen? Anything that might disturb you?'

Lorena's brow knitted. 'In what way?'

Nadine swallowed imperceptibly and stayed staring steadily at Lorena. 'Has there ever been any physical contact?'

Lorena blinked slowly, absorbing the weight of the question. 'No, well... only him soothing me, stroking my head, you know, to calm me.'

'Nothing else?'

Lorena shook her head. 'No, nothing.'

Elena remembered many a night soothing Lorena's brow at the Cerneit orphanage, and now Cameron Ryall had taken her place. Elena noticed the dark, fearful shadows return to Lorena's eyes with talk about the dreams, but did something else lay behind those shadows? Natural discomfort of a young woman fast growing-up with a man visiting her bedroom late at night, or was something more worrying going on? Was this a safe and secure, loving home – everything Lorena had always dreamed of and more – or a gilded prison?

Lorena would have grown up quicker than most, Elena reminded herself: she'd have had to think and act like an adult

just to survive on the streets of Bucharest. She'd had so little real childhood. And perhaps, as a result, she just couldn't relate to the Cinderella and pink-ribbons images Cameron Ryall was trying to sell with his bed-time stories. She was keen to embrace adult-hood quicker so that she could blot out her childhood completely; kid herself it never happened. Maybe the only way she felt she could be truly happy. Certainly it would explain a lot.

‘How often do you have these nightmares now?’ Nadine asked.

‘Sometimes I'll have none for two weeks or so. Then two or three might come only days apart.’

‘And is it always Mr Ryall that comes

to see to you, or does Mrs Ryall sometimes come?’

Lorena shook her head. ‘It’s usually him. She usually only comes to me when he’s away somewhere on a trip.’

‘And does Mr Ryall visit your room late for any other reason now apart from the dreams? Does he read you some stories still?’

‘No, no stories anymore. But sometimes he comes to my room just to talk – you know, asking about schoolwork, how I’m getting on. Things like that.’

‘Does that happen often?’

Lorena shrugged. ‘Mainly when he’s been away somewhere and hasn’t seen me for a few days. Apart from that, not

much.'

Nadine asked a few more questions, trying to get it clear just how often Mr Ryall visited her room late at night. One way or another, Ryall managed to visit at least once a week, sometimes twice a week.

'How about when Mr Ryall is around you at other times? Do you feel comfortable then?'

'Yes, it's... it's okay.' A flicker of uncertainty for a second, then Lorena shrugged nonchalantly. 'No problems.'

'And Mrs Ryall? You get on well with her?'

'Yes.'

'You never feel uncomfortable around her at any time?'

‘No.’ Lorena smiled faintly, as if the question was slightly ridiculous.

Elena watched Lorena intently throughout the exchange. The atmosphere in the room became tenser with each question, and Elena’s emotions were seriously divided. A chink of uncertainty in Lorena’s eyes, and she’d feel like screaming: ‘Stop shying away, covering up! If you don’t say something, speak up, we can’t help you. You’ll stay trapped here at Ryall’s mercy.’ But when Lorena appeared sure-footed and confident, it would hit that other part of her that wanted desperately to believe that nothing was happening; though maybe she too was selectively erasing, unwilling to accept any possible horrors

after what Lorena had suffered in Romania.

Nadine took a fresh breath. ‘So, more or less, all of your problems stem from your discomfort with Mr Ryall coming to your bed late at night now that you’re older. Is that about it?’ Nadine tapped her pen on her folder as she waited on Lorena’s answer.

Lorena merely nodded, chewing lightly at her bottom lip.

‘So, if and when you have these bad dreams, if we ask that Mrs Ryall comes to you rather than Mr Ryall – I suppose that would solve your problem.’

‘I suppose it would.’ Lorena fluttered her eyes down in submission for a second before looking up again.

Embarrassment at having wasted their time, or still holding back on something? It was difficult to tell.

‘We’ll see what we can do.’ Though Nadine didn’t know where she’d even start; she could hardly reproach Ryall for showing due care and concern for Lorena. And telling Ryall that he couldn’t tuck his favourite stepdaughter in bed after a few days away would be even more absurd. She pressed one last time, if nothing else to save later criticism from Elena that she might not have been thorough. ‘And are you absolutely sure there’s nothing else troubling you concerning Mr Ryall – either connected with him coming to your room late at night, or otherwise?’

Lorena's eyes flickered, as if she was searching for something that was finally just out of reach. 'No, no... there's nothing. That's it.'

But by the way Lorena looked fleetingly back towards the closed door, as if towards the Ryalls in the drawing room beyond, Elena knew in that instant that something was wrong. Cameron Ryall had coached Lorena, or for some reason she was covering up for him.

Savard's body was found at 5.43 am., only yards from the taxiway of an old abandoned airfield two miles south of Longueuil. An area used by the man who discovered the body for early morning training of his greyhound.

The first police arrived at 6.18 am, and within twenty minutes had been joined by two more squad cars, forensics and a meat-wagon. The call to Michel came through just after 6 am, disturbing him from barely two hours' sleep. He'd spent till 1 am with his team back-tracking and trawling some likely spots for Savard, and sleep had been difficult in coming; Savard's voice on tape and the images that went with it had kept him turning uneasily.

Michel arrived minutes after the meat-wagon. The first dusk light had only just started to break, so Michel took a torch with him. The photos being snapped of Savard's body cut starkly through the near darkness, competing with the

flashing beacon on a nearby squad car. The only other light was from torchlight playing and the headlamps of two vehicles left on, one pulled close to Savard's body.

Three of the police squad and everyone from forensics, Michel knew. One of the homicide Sergeants, Lucien Feutres, looked up as he approached.

‘Michel.’ Brief smile that fell into a shrug and stern grimace. ‘Rough break. I’m sorry.’

‘Yeah. I know.’ Michel nodded dolefully, looking around. ‘Thanks.’

Savard's body was heavily illuminated by the headlamps, blue spray body outline markings already made in the snow – so Michel played his torchlight

mainly to each side.

‘Who found him first?’

Feutres glanced back and pointed with one thumb. ‘Guy over there. He was walking his dog. Want to speak with him?’

Michel looked at the figure at the back of the milling activity, probably finished his questioning a while ago and wishing now he hadn’t found the body and subjected himself to fifty minutes of standing around in the cold. His greyhound looked equally as bored, tongue lolling as it looked to one side.

‘No, no, it’s okay.’ Normally, he would have had a chain of questions, and a hundred more for forensics: How many shots? Time of attack? How did he

get here? But he knew practically everything from the wire tape.

He played his torchlight around again as Feutres went over to tell the man he could go. He picked out quickly the repetitive circles of tyre tracks, but it took a moment more to find the main thing he was looking for: a ramp made up of packed snow thirty yards away; sharp slope one side, gradual, almost imperceptible decline, the other. They hit the sharp side on each loop, and Savard gets the sensation they're rising up through the car park.

His gaze swung back to the main circle of light and Savard's body. It was curled almost in foetal position, a light dusting of snow covering it from a fresh fall

overnight. The hood, pulled back to the crown for photo-identification, was dark blue, and Savard's hands had been tied in front by rope. There were a number of other small things he could have clarified at this point, but he also knew now why he was shying from asking the questions: each answer would bring back Savard's screams too vividly, when already they were still ringing in his ears. He would read the reports later and make a few calls; some distance at least.

An arctic wind whipped across the flat expanse of grass and overgrown taxiways. Michel felt it cut through him like an icy hatchet, taking his breath away. His eyes watered.

Michel took one last lingering look at Savard's body, and slowly closed his eyes. They'd obviously headed due south straight over the Jaques Cartier Bridge rather than downtown. Roman and Jean-Paul Lacaille had played them for mugs at every turn: the finder smashed, the wire left in place and traffic sounds played, the snow ramp. Savard was already practically dead as they'd watched through binoculars him waiting on Roman Lacaille – only they hadn't known it.

You'll be safe. We'll be watching every moment, guarding your back. Weeks of meetings before Savard was finally confident enough to go ahead. 'Don't worry, nothing will happen to

you,' they'd assured. Yet Savard had died like a trussed chicken, his final moments filled with terror.

Michel was now doubly determined to nail the Lacailles, but now only one witness remained: Georges Donatiens. And Donatiens was practically family, engaged to marry Jean-Paul Lacaille's only daughter, Simone, the apple of his eye.

Michel opened his eyes again, taking in the horror of what had happened to Savard in an effort to will himself on; but already he knew it was an almost hopeless quest. They'd have to move mountains to get Georges Donatiens to testify.

THREE

This was Georges Donatiens favourite time of day, that hushed, suspended moment just as the first morning rays broke through; especially given who lay beside him and what they'd been doing.

Simone. He admired her for a moment in the soft first light, the long sweep of her olive-brown back, her wavy black hair slightly in disarray and spilling over one shoulder. He gently traced down her spine with two fingers. The trick, as always, was to touch her so lightly that she wouldn't awaken. He pulled the sheets lower to give his hand freer

range, then continued tracing down, down, until he reached the cleft of her buttocks. He felt a subtle tremor run through her body, her subconscious registering that it liked what he was doing, but hopefully not enough to make her stir. Not yet.

He held his hand motionless and held his breath too, suddenly conscious of his own heartbeat in the lull, until her tremoring subsided. Then he started tracing slowly back up the ridge of her spine. If he was really careful, sometimes he could spin it out for a few minutes. Tracing delicately, as light as spider's feet, up and down, each time being more daring, going lower, deeper between the cleft of her buttocks, feeling

the heat there and her slightly damp from the night before. Or was that just from now? Revelling in her light trembling, almost seeing the goose bumps raise as the first light hit her body, pausing again breathlessly like a frightened schoolboy each time she looked close to...

She groaned throatily and moved one leg. He waited a few seconds beyond the groan dying, but with one leg now pushed wide, he felt drawn to go still lower rather than higher. Her heat and moisture pulled him in like a magnet, and he couldn't resist pushing his luck that extra inch by probing gently with one finger. She groaned again, he froze... and was about to pull his hand away when her leg shifted back again,

trapping him, and the groan became a soft purr.

‘Uuhhhm... *c’est bon.*’ She rolled towards him, bringing her left leg up so that it rested on his thigh. She smiled at him and blinked. ‘Good morning.’

‘Good morning.’ Georges smiled back tightly.

One of her hands traced deftly down his stomach, and she watched his expression closely as she gripped him and started gently stroking.

A short hiss of pleasure, his eyes closed for a second before shaking it quickly off and glancing towards the alarm clock. 7.22 a.m. Georges started mentally totting up the time for coffee, shower, dressing and driving the six

miles to Cartier-Ville.

‘Look, Simone, I don’t have time for this now. I’ve got an eight-thirty breakfast meeting with your father. I won’t make it if we fool around.’

‘If you can’t handle the beast, you shouldn’t wake the beast.’ She pouted challengingly, still stroking.

‘Who said that?’

‘I don’t know.’ She shrugged. ‘Voltaire, maybe Rabelais.’

‘Sounds more like Cousteau to me.’

Another small shrug, then she quickly ducked down and started kissing down his stomach.

He tensed. ‘No, Simone, *no*. It’s nice, too nice... but I really don’t have time now.’

She paid no attention, kept kissing down, and a light shudder ran up from his calves and through his body as he felt her take him into her mouth.

He surrendered to it for a moment before starting to protest again. ‘Pleasssse, Simone, not now... I just don’t–’

The ringing phone startled them both. She broke off, looking at it accusingly. Georges squinted at the call-monitor display.

‘It’s your father!’ He pulled away from her and lunged for the phone. ‘Yes?’

‘Georges... Jean-Paul. Sorry to disturb you. But I forgot to ask when we last spoke – did everything go okay with

the revised plans from the architect?’

‘Yes, they did, and I’ve got them with me.’ The main reason for their urgent meeting now. Georges had been away five days in Puerto Vallarta to oversee Jean-Paul’s new investments there: twenty-seven hole golf course with integral development of two hotels, a casino, and 214 ‘greenside’ bungalows and villas. The rounding-off of Jean-Paul’s Mexican portfolio, which already included three hotels, a marina development, another casino and four clubs between Cancun and Puerto Vallarta. But delays had threatened on this latest project when one of the hotels hit a survey problem.

‘No problems now?’ Jean-Paul

confirmed.

‘No. Everything’s fine now. I... eerrr.’ Georges bit his lip. Simone had reached out and was stroking him again. He shook his head and frowned heavily at her. She smiled back challengingly and continued stroking, moving her mouth so teasingly close that he could feel her hot breath on him. Her tongue snaked out, and he shook his head wilder, silently mouthing, ‘No!’ He hastily cleared his throat. ‘Err... I made sure I was there this time for the survey. There’s nothing now to stop it being passed.’

‘That’s good.’ A second’s silence from Jean-Paul as he absorbed this, or perhaps he was distracted with

something else his end. Then: ‘Are you okay?’

‘Yes, fine... *fine.*’ Beads of sweat popped on his forehead. He watched in horror Simone’s mouth move closer, lips pouting. ‘Touch of bad throat, that’s all.’ Brief wry smile. He spoke in quick bursts, still fearful of what was coming. ‘Probably the sudden change in temperature.’

She held him in limbo a second longer, mouth poised – but finally, at just an inch away, she blew a kiss, smiled lasciviously, and pulled back again.

Simone was enjoying this, he thought. Pretty much a continuation of the rest of their relationship: her fighting for his attention over and above her father. At

times she was impossible; but perhaps, at 23, six years his junior, she was still allowed to be. Being born into one of Montreal's wealthiest families hadn't helped, especially with a father so keen to indulge her; not only to compensate for her losing her mother Clair when she was only eight, but also no doubt for the many unseen horrors being played out behind the scenes while she was growing-up. Jean-Paul Lacaille had made sure that his only daughter's childhood was sugar-coated.

'I'd better go,' Georges said as he watched Simone straddle him, panicking what she might do next while her father was still on the phone. 'Get everything ready for our meeting.'

‘Yeah, okay,’ Jean-Paul mumbled distractedly. Then his voice came back sharply, sudden afterthought. ‘Oh, one more thing. Have you seen this morning’s news yet?’

‘No, not yet.’ *I’ve been too busy in bed with your daughter.* He could feel Simone’s heat pressing hard against him. She reached for him, started stroking again. He could tell from her sly smile what she was about to do. He prayed that Jean-Paul signed off quickly.

‘There was an item on about Tony Savard.’ Jean-Paul sighed heavily. ‘He was killed last night. His body was found in the early hours this morning.’

‘Oh, I see.’ That killed it instantly. Simone wouldn’t be able to do much

with him now, regardless of effort.

‘Now I know this falls outside what I originally brought you in to be concerned with. But given the background with Savard, I think it’s something we should discuss.’

‘I agree.’ Georges felt numb, cold, and found it hard to free either clear thoughts or speech.

Simone rolled off and curled to one side, frowning; but it wasn’t a look of spoilt petulance, more of concern. Warmth, compassion, joie-de-vivre, sharp wit: all the traits that over the sixteen months of their relationship had drawn him more in love with her, when he’d finally dug beneath the preconception – guided as much by his

own staunch work ethic and views about her cosseted life, than reality – that she was spoilt.

But, for a moment, he wished that spoilt Simone was back. He could kid himself that life was still just a playful tug of war between her and her father. He could forget what Jean-Paul had just said about Savard, and could ignore Simone's look of heavy concern, mirroring the panic that must have swept across his own face as he contemplated the chain of nightmare problems that Savard's death could ignite. He just hoped his first assumption was wrong.

The fat man took the first photo as the couple came out of the apartment.

They leaned into each other a few paces from the building, a quick parting kiss, and the girl ran just ahead. He followed their movements with a quick burst on the camera's motor-drive. They were an attractive young couple, the girl with long, wavy, black hair, the man close to six foot and athletic looking with dark-brown hair cut short in a spiky crew-cut, and dressed well in light grey suit and black Crombie. Though the fat man knew, from old photos he'd spied in the man's apartment, that when his hair was longer it also waved slightly, and that the suit – from the many he'd flicked through in his wardrobe – was no doubt Armani or Yves St-Laurent. They say that people are attracted to those with

similar features, and certainly there were some similarities between the two: large brown eyes, his perhaps slightly heavier-hooded than hers, but both with the same olive skin tones, hinting of a Mediterranean or Latin background.

She got into a bright turquoise Fiat sports coupe parked just in front, while he went through a side door towards the garage. The fat man took another few snaps as she looked around and pulled out, then a minute later some of the man as the automatic garage doors opened and his grey Lexus edged out.

Simone Lacaille and Georges Donatiens, Montreal's golden couple, seen at all the right parties and openings – and a few of the wrong ones – and

regularly photographed, his own snapshots aside.

The apartment building was in the fashionable Westmount district, and its penthouses – of which Donatiens' was one – had luxurious split-level atrium living rooms affording breathtaking views over the City and the St Lawrence. After thoroughly searching the apartment eight months back, the fat man had stood for a moment admiring the view, breath misting the atrium glass, contemplating ruefully just how far out of reach such an apartment was on his RCMP policeman's salary.

The fat man by now knew everything about them, their every last move. She stayed over at Donatiens' two or three

times a week, but *always* the first night after he'd been away on a business trip. She would head to Lachaine & Roy on Rue St Jaques, one of Montreal's leading advertising agencies, where she was an accounts manager. Her father didn't have shares in the company – he was careful not to be overt with his influence over her career, she would rebel – but he did have interests in two of its major accounts. Donatiens, first day back, would head downtown to the Lacaille company office on Côte du Beaver Hall, or to the Lacaille residence in Cartier-Ville.

The one and only apartment search all those months back had been at the request of Michel Chenouda, his

immediate boss and closest RCMP confidante. They'd worked together as partners when Michel had first arrived from Toronto, but within the year the fat man left the RCMP after a bungled vice bust led to an attempted hit on one of his key drugs informants, and went into private investigation. Technically, he was still private when he'd let himself into Donatiens' apartment; Michel had already smoothed the way for him rejoining the RCMP, and all the papers were rubber-stamped, but the break-in was ten days before he was handed his badge and gun. No doubt Michel would have loved to have the apartment searched again now, but for the risk: Michel wouldn't involve a badged

officer, and there were no other private gumshoes Michel would trust with something like that.

He'd been a keen amateur photographer in his late teens, and private work had given him the opportunity to hone his skills. The mountain of photos he'd taken of the Lacailles over the past eighteen months, Michel would rigorously scan for tell-tale signs – Simone Lacaille's engagement ring when it first appeared, new contacts of Roman or Jean-Paul Lacaille not recognized from past file photos – and he'd meanwhile be looking at artistic merit: light, angle, composition.

Now, with Michel's wake up call at

6.30 a.m., more photos. ‘They’ve just found Savard’s body. I’m here with forensics. Donatiens is the only one left now – we’ll need to shadow him closer than ever.’ Michel was on his mobile and sounded slightly out of breath.

The fat man was worried that it was becoming an obsession. The reason for the obsession he understood, but still it worried him. A dozen or so more photos to add to a file of hundreds, and probably now enough box files of paperwork to fill a truck.

He let out a heavy exhalation as he started up, checked his mirror, and pulled out. Perhaps it was the familiarity of the routine, or perhaps his preoccupation with getting back to the

station in time to develop the photos before his meeting with Michel – but he didn't notice the man parked fifty yards behind, who had pulled up just as he was taking his second stream of photos.

‘Chac! Chac! Good stuff. Good stuff!’ Michel hailed as he watched the fat man pin five fresh photos from his morning's effort on the corkboard.

The C was soft, so the uninformed often made the mistake that the nickname had an English derivation, from the fact that the man was built like a shack. But it had come from his habit of saying ‘*Chacun son goût*’. He'd originally been known as ‘*Chacun*’, then finally just ‘*Chac*’.

Eighteen photos already covered the corkboard, providing a quick-glance photo profile of the Lacailles and anyone vital connected with them.

Michel stood studying the photos from two yards back, then threw a quick eye over the others and back again, as if measuring how they slotted into the whole picture.

‘So, still very much in love,’ he said.

‘Looks that way.’

Michel leant in closer, studying finer detail in the photos. What had he been hoping for? Some small sign of cracks in their relationship, so it might be easier to get Donatiens to testify against the Lacailles. After all, she was only in her early twenties, impetuous, strong-willed,

and probably wasn't yet settled emotionally. Before Donatiens she'd had a chain of different boyfriends, seemed to change them every other month.

Michel shook his head as he studied the look on Simone's face kissing Donatiens goodbye. Wishful thinking. Their relationship had held solid for sixteen months, and looked stronger now than ever.

But the photo he was finally drawn to most was of Donatiens just as Simone headed away. Perhaps business hadn't gone smoothly in Mexico, but Michel doubted that was it: the expression of concern suddenly gripping Donatiens looked too heavy, severe. Donatiens knew about Savard.

‘When’s the wedding planned?’ Michel asked.

‘Early July – the eighth.’

Michel nodded thoughtfully, still scanning the photos. He already knew the date off by heart, but a changed date might hint of some cooling off. He was getting desperate.

They’d all be there, Michel reflected: slim, dapper Jean-Paul, his mid-brown hair greying heavily in sweeps at each side, but still looking younger than his fifty-one years. His mother Lillian, 74, who now spent more time at the family’s holiday residence in Martinique than in Montreal. Deeply religious, her permanent tan, designer clothes and henna-tinted grey hair at times seemed

vain, superficial affectations at odds with her firm-rooted nature, with all revolving around the church and family; but she looked well, and her age showed only with her slightly matronly bulk and resultantly slowed gait. Simone's younger brother Raphaël, 15, now in 6th Grade at Montreal's top Catholic school, St Francis, where he shone at art and literature; but to his father's concern he was poor at math, showed little future promise for business, and spent his every spare moment rollerblading or, in the winter, snow-boarding. They looked like any other new-moneyed Montreal family, probably more upper-middle than top drawer – until you got to the photos of Roman and the Lacaille

family's key enforcer, Frank Massenat, so often in Roman's shadow. Then the underlying menace of the Lacaille family became evident.

Roman was four years younger than Jean-Paul and, while only two inches smaller at five-eight, looked shorter still due to his broadness and bulk. While Jean-Paul had been on the tennis court or jogging, Roman had been in the gym pumping iron or pummelling a punch-bag until he was ready to drop. He was known as 'The Bull', not just through his build, but because of his habit of keeping his head low and looking up at people, swaying it slightly as he weighed their words; a motion that would become more pronounced if he started to doubt

or didn't like what they were saying. He reminded people of a bull measuring a matador for attack – and there had been many horror stories of Roman striking out swiftly and unpredictably, head first, ending any potential argument or fight by caving in his opponent's face.

Head and shoulders above Roman, Frank Massenat was a giant. Seven years ago, when he first joined the Lacailles, he was at the peak of physical condition, but a diet of salami and pastrami rolls, beer and rich cream-sauce meals had steadily mounted on the pounds, so that now he looked like a big lumbering bear with a beer pot. With his eyes heavily-bagged and jowls, he looked almost ten years older than his thirty-four years.

In contrast, Jon Larsen, the family's Consigliere and adviser for almost twenty years, would fit in well in a family wedding snap. Close to sixty, slim, now mostly bald with only a ring of grey hair, he could easily have passed for a family uncle or perhaps Jean-Paul's older brother.

Michel's gaze swung back to the photos of Jean-Paul. In the end, Jean-Paul always absorbed him most – not only because as the head of the organization that's where his main focus should be – but because he never could quite work him out. At least with Roman and Frank, what you saw, you got.

Michel was a keen modern jazz fan, and he remembered once being surprised

at seeing Jean-Paul Lacaille at the city's main jazz club, 'Biddle's' on Rue Aylmer. He later learnt that, indeed, Jean-Paul was a strong jazz aficionado, particularly of the new Latin jazz. Michel found it hard to separate in his mind this urbane, charming persona, now also presumably with good music tastes, from what he knew to be the cold-hearted, brutal reality. That here was a man who as easily as he smiled and nodded along with his guests in the jazz club, could with the same curt nod signal that a man be brutalised or his life taken. The two just didn't sit comfortably together – though charming, smiling, socialite Jean-Paul was the image being pushed more and more these past few

years, trying to convince everyone that he'd turned his back on crime and had become 'legit'. Michel didn't believe it for a minute.

Three photos Michel had purposely pinned to one side of the main spread. The three main losses of the Lacaille family: Pascal, Jean-Paul and Roman's younger brother, shot dead five years ago at the age of thirty-eight, the tragic end result of a battle with the rival Cacchione family. Their father, Jean-Pierre, dead fourteen months later, many said of a broken rather than failed heart – Pascal had been his favourite. Then just three years ago, Jean-Paul's second wife Stephanie after a long battle with breast cancer. The Lacailles had seen

their fair share of tragedy these past years, reflected Michel; but even that Jean-Paul had sought to turn to advantage. He'd held up Pascal's death like a banner as the main reason behind his decision to move the family away from crime. Jean-Paul was a consummate audience player, would have made a good politician.

Michel rubbed his eyes. 'When do you hope to hear from Arnaiz?'

'Within a few hours. Certainly before lunch.' Chac forced a tight smile. 'Hopefully he might have something interesting this time.'

Michel nodded, but he doubted it. Chac was just trying to lift his spirits after the calamity with Savard. On the

last five trips by Donatiens to Mexico – the trips to Cuba they hadn't monitored – Enrique Arnaiz had turned up nothing. Arnaiz was a private investigator Chac had dug up from his old card file. The Federalis wouldn't get involved unless or until Donatiens was seen with known drug associates or other criminals – so each time Arnaiz would have Donatiens followed and those he met with photographed for comparison with Federali files. Michel wasn't hopeful of anything turning up this time either.

That was the other conundrum. Was Donatiens a clean-cut money-man only dealing with the Lacaille's legitimate enterprises, or one of the sharpest and most efficient money-launderers they'd

ever encountered?

‘What do you think, Chac? Is Donatiens what Jean-Paul keeps selling him as, the golden boy making good on his shiny new leaf as a legitimate businessman – or are his hands dirty along with the rest of them?’

Though the question had been posed before, with Savard gone Chac knew that it was now far more significant. He weighed his answer carefully. ‘On the surface at least he looks clean, however much that goes against the grain with the Lacaille’s past form. But from our point of view, I suppose it’s best if he is clean. If he’s in with the rest of them all the way, we’ll never get him to testify.’

‘That’s true.’ Michel voice was flat,

nonchalant. He took a fresh breath. 'Now all we've got to do is get him to turn his back on the love of his life and betray her entire family.'

'Yeah, that's all,' Chac agreed drolly. Then, after a few seconds uneasy silence: 'One thing we never did work out was what Donatiens was doing in the car the night Leduc was shot. The only time it looked like he might be getting his hands dirty.'

'No, that we never did.' Michel stayed staring contemplatively at the spread of photos ahead, as if they might magically provide the answer, and after a moment Chac left him alone with the Lacaille family and his thoughts.

He worked quickly and efficiently through the penthouse.

He found a ventilation grill in the main en-suite bathroom to take one bug, the hollow base of a table lamp in the dining room, another. Then he paused, hard pushed for good places for the others: a lot of flat, smooth surfaces, minimalist furniture and décor.

In the end he cut a tiny hole in the fabric beneath the main sofa and tucked a bug far to one side with one finger, did the same under the beds in all three bedrooms, then removed and clipped back a kitchen cabinet plinth to conceal the final room bug. The phone bugs, one in the drawing room and one in the bedroom, he put in place last.

Carlo Funicelli stood for a moment in the middle of the apartment, looking from one extremity to the other, contemplating whether he'd left any dead sound areas. The guest bathroom and maybe the first yard of entrance corridor. Hopefully not too many vital, meaningful conversations would take place there.

Funicelli headed out and down the five floors in the elevator. The doorman gave him the same curt, disinterested nod as when he'd walked in; as he did with anyone who had a key and seemed to know where they were going.

From his pre-break-in briefing, the keys had come courtesy of Simone Lacaille. Donatiens was too careful with

his set. But she had a spare set to let herself in for when he was working late of a night she was due to come over; she might start preparing dinner for them or, if he'd been away for a few days, often she'd re-stock the fridge. Love. But she was careless with her set, often left them laying around. She regularly spent weekends at the Lacaille family home, particularly when her father arranged get-togethers, and it had been easy for Roman to grab the keys for a few hours to have them copied.

An hour and a half till the pre-designated time for him to call, Funicelli headed downtown and killed it having coffee and window-browsing in the underground Place Ville-Marie

complex. It was too cold in the city to spend any length of time above ground. He called from a phone booth there rather than on his mobile, as instructed.

‘Yeah. City Desk.’ Roman Lacaille’s voice answering had a slight echo to it. He was leaning on the bar in their Sherbrooke club, a cavernous basement thirty metres square spread before him. The bar staff had all left long before the first twilight, the bar manager, Azy, after helping him go through the night’s till receipts, and the cleaners had just twenty minutes ago shut the door behind them. He was on his own.

‘It’s done. The place is live and kicking,’ Funicelli said.

‘When? When can we listen in?’

Roman's tone was pushy, impatient.

‘Now. It’s already rolling. The receiving monitor’s set up only a few blocks away. Anything more than ten decibels sound and it’ll kick in, the tape will start rolling.

‘Great work. Give the Indian a cigar.’ Roman smiled. His pet names for Chenouda: Sitting Bull or Last of the Mohicans. He knew the last thing Chenouda would be getting right now was a cigar, unless he was bending over to receive it. With the Savard fiasco, maybe he should rename him Sitting Duck. ‘I’d like to go see the set-up some time, listen in. Probably best one evening. More action.’ Roman chuckled.

‘Yeah, sure. When?’

They arranged it for two evening's time when Simone was next due to stay over, and signed off.

Roman looked thoughtfully at the club ahead after hanging up. At night it would be a sea of lithe, writhing naked bodies under wildly rotating crimson and blue penlight spots, heavy male hands eagerly reaching out to slip ten and twenty dollar bills into tangas or garters.

Up-market lap-dancing club, the last bastion of the Lacaille family's past criminal empire. Five year's back, they'd had associations with a chain of downtown and Lavalle clip joints and massage parlours rolling in big bucks. This now was the furthest Jean-Paul had decreed they should go with the flesh

trade. But it was less drastic at least than his moves away from every other area – drugs, racketeering, loan-sharking, fencing; in those, he hadn't even kept a foot in the door.

So after a decade and a half of making sure all of that ran and ran smoothly, this is what he was left with: counting the takings in a pussy club. Oh sure, they were opening another in six months and then there were the two night clubs and the restaurant. But it hardly compensated.

This squeaky-clean crusade might suit Jean-Paul, but little thought had been given to anyone else, especially him. But then Jean-Paul never had given him much thought; a tradition no doubt

passed down from their father, Jean-Pierre. Pascal and Jean-Paul had always been his favourites. Now with Jean-Paul it was always Raphaël, Simone, John Larsen, roughly in that order, or, more recently, Donatiens. The new golden boy.

They all no doubt looked upon him as just a dumb ox, a muscle-headed old-school moustache Pete, and becoming more of a dinosaur by the day with Jean-Paul's new business direction. Redundant.

Most of his life he'd spent in Jean-Paul's shadow, but no more. He had more street-smarts than the lot of them put together, and the time to make his play couldn't be riper. Though

everything with Savard had gone well, half of it had been laid in his lap by the RCMP. The next stage with Donatiens wouldn't be so easy.

The pressure mounted steadily through the day.

Just before lunch, Maury Legault put his head round Michel's door with the news that they'd found the van used with Savard, left abandoned in a Saint Hubert side-street.

Maury was tentative, hesitant, as he passed on the information – even though Michel had made it clear first thing to the entire squad room that it should be the prime focus of their efforts. 'No let up until we see a breakthrough.'

But then interruptions had been few throughout the morning, as if people were apprehensive about entering the inner sanctum of his office with its photo-montage homage to the Lacailles. And when he did venture out, the normal frantic hubbub of the squad room would noticeably subside and a few eyes would avert and look down, suddenly absorbed with desk paperwork. It was as if he'd had a close relative die, not an informant.

‘Was it the original registration?’ he asked Maury.

No, the plates had been switched. ‘The original to match the chassis number was reported stolen in the early hours yesterday morning. We pulled it up just

minutes ago on the bulletin board.'

Pretty much as Michel had expected. Maury informed him that forensics and two mechanics were going over the van with a fine tooth comb, but Michel wasn't holding his breath. One of the Lacailles past enterprises had been an auto-chop shop. They knew how to make sure a vehicle was left clean.

Three hours later Maury came back with the news that it looked like it had been steam and chemically cleaned.

Michel simply nodded and cast his eyes down, numbed more by a pervading lethargy that this would be the pattern at every turn than his lack of surprise. And partly lack of sleep. He hadn't slept well the night before the Savard sting

operation, turning over in his mind all manner of possible scenarios; now only two hours last night. He felt ragged.

Trying desperately to avoid his department head, Chief-Inspector Pelletier, hadn't helped. He already knew what was coming. Pelletier had left him alone the first few hours of the day: respect for Savard or the dead case? But then Pelletier obviously thought sufficient mourning time had passed, so that Michel could explain, clearly and succinctly, how everything could have fallen apart so disastrously.

The calls, one just before lunch and another early afternoon, came from Maggie Laberge, Pelletier's PA, through Christine Hébert, one of two Constables

on the open squad-room message desk. Always protocol and distance with Pelletier.

Michel parried the first call by passing the message through Hébert that he knew what it was about, but he was still busy gaining vital information to be able to give Pelletier the full picture. With the second call, he spoke directly to Laberge and sold her more of the same: 'We're close to breakthrough on a couple of key things. Each extra second I spend close on top of everything right now is vital. Hopefully things should free up in an hour or two.'

Soon after, Chac informed him that yet again Arnaiz in Mexico hadn't turned up anything suspicious on Donatiens; then

Maury came in with the news about the steam-cleaning. Each extra hour he delayed only made the picture worse, not better. Screw-up of the year, and any hope of redemption was fast disappearing with each extra head that appeared at his door or fresh file slapped on his desk.

Early forensic findings had been the biggest body blow. Some blood had been found under the fingernails of Savard's right hand. The hope had been that Savard might have clawed the neck or face of one of his abductors, or even through their clothing as he frantically grappled at their arms when they swung him. But the report concluded that it was Savard's own blood. The first shot had

struck his chest, and he'd put his hand up defensively to the wound before the final two shots came: one to the neck, one to his head. The report made chilling reading, brought Savard's screams back too vividly.

Just before signing off, almost as a by-the-way, Laberge informed him that they had to liaise on time because Pelletier wanted Tom Maitland, Crown Attorney, to also be present at the meeting. Michel knew what that meant. While Pelletier might justifiably reach the conclusion that a potentially prosecutable case now looked out of reach, it would carry more weight with Maitland's legal-eagle viewpoint at his right arm.

Michel knew then why he was

delaying: not so much for a fresh lead to salvage something from last night's disaster – the past track record with the Lacailles had long ago made him cynical – but because he was desperately seeking an angle to convince them, and himself, there was still mileage left in the case. If he presented Donatiens – soon to become part of the Lacaille family – as his only remaining hope, they'd kill the case straightaway.

He took a hasty sip of his sixth coffee of the day, trying to clear his thoughts and focus. But no ready answers came.

The only light relief of the day came when Chac responded gruffly, 'Well, they can suck my dick,' when he'd explained the pending dilemma with

facing Pelletier and Maitland, fearing that they'd now want to hastily close the Lacaille file.

‘Is that because you’ve already asked everyone else and they’ve said no?’

Chac beamed broadly, despite the barb. And Michel realized then how impossibly intense he'd been all morning. The pall hovering over the squad room each time he opened the door was not just in respect of Savard's death, but also for the possibly dead case and his feared reaction. Chac was simply glad to see a chink of his old self re-surface.

But the mood died quickly as Chac reminded him that even if he convinced Pelletier to keep the case open, at best it

would only give him a few months grace. ‘Once Donatiens is married, it’s game over. And Roman Lacaille knows it.’

His desk phone started ringing. He looked through his glass screen towards the squad room. Christine Hébert was looking over at him, pointing to the receiver.

No doubt Laberge chasing for Pelletier again. A film of sweat broke on his forehead. He couldn’t delay any more. What would he say? Maybe bluff for now, say that they had reliable inside information that Donatiens would soon about-turn and testify. That at least might give him a week or two’s grace to either make good on that claim or come up

with something else.

The seed of the idea was still only half-formed as he picked up the receiver at the end of the third ring. ‘Yes?’

‘It’s your wife Sandra,’ Hébert said.

He was caught off guard for a second. ‘Oh... right. Put her through.’ She rarely phoned him. Hébert never termed her ex, despite it now being four years they’d been parted.

Then, with her first words, ‘Michel, you said four O’clock and it’s already four-twenty...’ he pushed back sharply from his chair, suddenly remembering.

‘Oh, Jesus, yeah... I’m right there.’ Basketball championship with a rival school with his son Benjamin, now nine years old.

‘If you couldn’t make it or it was somehow awkward, you should have said so earlier. He’s been looking forward so much to—’

‘I know, I know. I’m there, I tell you. I’ll be with you in under ten.’

‘It’s not often that he has things like this. What happened?’

‘Something came up, that’s all.’ He didn’t want to be specific or shield behind the dramatics of the past eighteen hours: *the biggest case of my career has just gone down in flames*. Besides, she’d heard it all before. The stake-outs that ran hours over, the last minute suspects and late night emergencies. The steady stream of late nights crawling into bed and so little quality time with her

and the children that had finally led to the collapse of their marriage. She'd moved to Montreal so that she could have her mother's help with babysitting while she went back out to work. He followed ten months later so that he could be nearer his children, but history was repeating itself. Chac had always claimed that his absorption with the Lacailles was partly to fill the void from losing his family, and perhaps he was right. He looked thoughtfully at his desk photo of Benjamin and young Angelle, only six, against the overbearing backdrop montage of the Lacailles. Certainly in the last twenty-four hours, his family hadn't got a look-in. 'It's completely my fault, I'm sorry. But I'm

leaving right now.'

He hung up swiftly before Sandra could draw breath to grill him more. He grabbed his coat and was halfway across the squad room as Hébert waved frantically at him.

'It's Maggie Laberge again. Wondering whether—'

He held one hand up. 'I'll call her back from my car. Ten minutes, no more.'

A bit more time to refine what he was going to say. He thought of little else as he sped through the traffic. How would he know if Donatiens was likely to turn turtle and testify? Their only feed from within the Lacaille camp was Azy Ménard, bar manager at their night club on Rue Sherbrooke. Was it likely

Donatiens would confide directly in him? No. He'd have to think of a credible go-between to be able to sell the story.

He tapped his fingers on the wheel as he hit a small tailback of traffic at the first stop light on Saint Catherine. The early rush hour was starting, it was going to take him a little longer. Snow flecked with dark-grey slush was banked over the kerbs each side, and the exhaust outflows of the cars ahead showed heavy in the freezing air.

Chac's words spun back... *a few months?* The same was true for Roman Lacaille. What would he do? Just bide his time, knowing that soon he'd be home dry anyway. Or was he determined

to rid himself of every last witness to that night with Leduc.

**** End of first three chapter sample
of The Last Witness ****

The Shadow Chaser

John Matthews

Reviews:

A thumping great read and a terrific tale, terrifically told.

- *Ireland on Sunday*.

Bold and different. A rollercoaster thrill ride against a backdrop of genetics research straight out of today's headlines. Should appeal to fans of Michael Crichton and Robin Cook.

- *Metro*.

A novelist of real accomplishment.

Amazon.co.uk.

Matthews certainly knows how to keep

the reader hungry for the next revelation.
- *Kirkus UK*.

André Lemoine took a deep breath as he surveyed the panorama before him: a thick carpet of dark green tree-top foliage spreading for miles, faint mist rising as the heat of the rising sun burnt off last night's torrential rain.

From his vantage point, a rocky outcrop with few trees, he could catch glimpses of some of his team in the first ten yards, then they were swallowed under the dense green blanket: the tree tops stretched flat for almost ten miles, until the first foothills of the Dorsale Camerounaise, the long ridge of mountains that ran along Cameroon's

north-west border. But any clear definition of the mountains was robbed by the film of mist above the tree tops; they were like the hazy backdrop in a Chinese landscape painting.

There was a suspended stillness to that time of morning: only a faint unified clicking from the crickets and cicadas and the occasional bird call, as if they were waiting, along with the myriad of other jungle animals, for the sun to rise higher before their main crescendo of sound; or better still, late at night when André's camp would be trying to sleep. André could hear the faint rustling and swish of sticks of his team through the undergrowth almost in time with the gentle insect thrum from the jungle.

‘Ega! Here! Over here!’

Then suddenly everything was in motion, the stillness broken.

‘Lecu! Quick! Five or six, maybe more.’

More voices rapidly joined the first, calling out in Yemba, the rustling changing to a wild thrashing as they started running. And above it all, the sudden excitable shrieking of monkeys calling out to each other, warning.

André scrambled down hastily from the rock ledge, jumping the last five feet. David Copell’s sweat-streaked face greeted him as his feet hit the ground.

‘They’ve found some! A group of five or six, maybe more.’ David was excited, slightly breathless, having run back from

their team of trackers to alert André.

They started running, David leading the way, flailing their way through the thick undergrowth and tree branches, trying frantically to catch up with the main body of trackers following the mounting shrieks of the fleeing monkeys.

Fronds and branches sprung back in André's face as they sped through, the voices ahead now closer, more animated, excited. As they burst through a last tangled clump of palm and bamboo, they could see the trackers standing in a ragged semi-circle in a clearing ahead. Two of them were pointing up.

'*Ege!* There! They've gone up this one.' The leader of the trackers, Kalume,

looked back towards André and David with beaming excitement.

They could see the legs of one of Kalume's men just disappearing out of view as he shinned hurriedly up the tree. They moved closer and joined Kalume in looking up.

Darkness, made denser still by the contrast with the shafts of light that pierced through the tree canopy gaps and hit André's eyes as he squinted up. He couldn't make out much beyond the tracker reaching out his arm to help him up.

'You go now! You go now!' Kalume urged. 'I follow.'

'Yes. Right.' André gripped onto the hand and scrambled up into the first

branches. They'd had a mix-up just the day before when they'd corralled a group of grey mangabeys, very similar to the silver-tailed mangabeys André sought. One of the monkeys' legs was injured in disentangling it from the nets; this time they wanted André there to make identification sure before the final closing in of the nets.

André climbed up through two sets of branches with Kalume now following, and peered up. It was a tall tree, cavernous, the darkness within it almost impenetrable: a tangled mass of fig vines, epiphytes and moss around most of its branches; an ecosystem within an ecosystem. Still André couldn't make out anything clearly above: brief flashes

of dull, indistinct shapes darting rapidly, the increasingly wild flurrying of branches, and pencil thin shards of sunlight bursting intermittently through fleeting gaps. And the shrieking of the monkeys now filled the air, drowned out everything else. Five or six, David had said, but it sounded like a dozen or more.

André knew that two or three of Kalume's helpers would be near the top of the tree by the nets. With the three of them now moving up, the mangabeys would be trapped in between.

They grappled their way steadily up the branches, and as André looked up he thought he caught a silvery glint in the last few inches of tail of a monkey

above. Then as quickly it was gone as it darted through the higher branches; it might easily have been just a reflection from some sunlight filtering through. The small silver tail marking was all that differentiated it from the grey mangabey; that and the elusive R gene which had brought André and David three thousand miles to track it down. They needed to get closer to make sure.

André was sweating heavily from the exertion and stifling heat as they clambered their way up, his attention alternating between his hand and foot holds and the activity above: he didn't notice the snake at his side until almost a third of it appeared from around the thick branch he was on. It had been

nestled between some fig vine and the branch; obviously his movement had disturbed it.

André froze, not daring to move, watching transfixed as it slithered out only inches from his waist. Red with green diamond patches, it appeared to be around four-foot long, its tongue gently probing the air as it moved. Then, as it sensed him, it coiled back, ready to strike.

André held his breath, tried to control his trembling by gripping tighter to the branch. André eyes were bleary and stinging with the sweat running into them, and he watched as two droplets slowly fell from his forehead onto the branch.

‘Don’t move!’ Kalume’s voice came sharply, redundantly, from below. Then, as Kalume angled himself for a better look. ‘No, no. It’s okay. I think it’s only a garter snake.’

Think? André kept his breath held as he watched the snake slither over the back of one calf and ankle, and then – seeming like a lifetime – slowly away. It wasn’t until it was a full yard away and slithering onto another branch that he finally eased out his breath.

‘It’s okay. It’s gone now,’ Kalume said.

But André stayed transfixed, clinging to the branch, something else suddenly assaulting his senses as he watched the snake slither away: how high up they

were!

He watched as a sweat droplet cleared the branch and sailed downward, the yawning chasm of the forty-foot drop hitting his synapses; he felt suddenly dizzy, unsteady, as if he might fall despite his tight grip on the branch.

Voices now from above, the screeching of the monkeys even more frantic, deafening.

André clung tight, closing his eyes, trying to shut out all the noise and activity and the drop below as he felt everything start to sway and spin around him, as if the whole tree was suddenly tilting.

‘Look! They’ve got one!’ Kalume

called out excitedly. 'You can see it clearly now, see the silver marking.'

But still André clung on, afraid to move. Three thousand miles to try and save mankind, and now he couldn't lift his head a few inches to see if the prize was within his grasp or not.

'Look! They're holding one now for you to look at!' Kalume called out louder, perplexed that André hadn't looked up; or perhaps thinking that he hadn't heard the first time above the cacophony of shrieking from the monkeys.

André was unable to move. He opened his eyes for a second, but the ground appeared to sway and tilt sickeningly below him. He closed them

quickly again. He was trembling hard, his sweat feeling suddenly cold against his skin, and still everything seemed to sway and spin around him in his self-imposed darkness.

Oh God. One way in which he wished he were more like his brother, Eric. Eric would have had no problem, would have laughed in the face of a drop four times as high; it was what much of his career had depended on.

Eric Lemoine levered himself up the last few inches onto the narrow ledge and, as he straightened, took his bearings for a moment. One more floor up and he'd edge back along the way he'd come twenty minutes ago; a short hop to the

adjoining roof, then he'd scamper across and shin down the drainpipe on the far side.

It was harder going making his way back, his back-pack was now full. His breath vapours showed heavy on the night air. Through a gap in the buildings opposite, the Pont Neuf and part of the floodlit flank of the Louvre were visible; and, to the left, above the buildings, the top half of the Eiffel tower. But Eric paid little attention to the night-time vista; it was a view he'd seen many times before, from many different angles, as he'd plundered the wealthier inhabitants of this fair city over the years.

He started edging his way along the

narrow ledge. Two more metres to the window balcony and its rail to be able to clamber up. He paused for a second as he heard a distant police siren, trying to gauge its direction. It sounded as if it was speeding along the embankment or maybe along St Germain, heading his way. But he'd been careful to bypass the alarm, and he was sure that there were none he'd overlooked that might connect directly to the police or a security firm. As he heard the siren pass and fade into the distance again, he relaxed and continued his way along.

On taller buildings or more difficult climbs, he'd have come equipped with ropes and grapples and a safety-harness. But this was a cakewalk. Six-storey

turn-of-the-Century building, target on the third floor, approach from the roof: variations on a theme he'd enacted so many times before, on many similar buildings, that he could have practically done it blindfolded.

The only small problem was that the light was now on in the room behind the balcony. It had come on shortly after he'd stepped from the balcony rails on his way down, and for a moment he'd worried that his movement had made a small sound to alert the people inside. But as he'd stayed stock still with his face pressed against the building, the shutters hadn't opened. They were still shut now. Yet with the light now on — one of only two visible in the building at

this hour, 2.48 a.m. – the people in the room were probably awake and therefore could more easily pick up any movement outside.

He edged more cautiously as he got closer to the balcony, only a couple of inches at a time, keeping his breath shallow and being careful not to make any sound. After a second he could discern faint orchestral music from inside, violins building to a crescendo; then as they faded and louder voices superimposed, he realized that it was a television film. It would help mask any smaller movements, but still he'd have to be careful.

He reached out for the railings, levered deftly up and crouched on top of

them. Listening again for any movement inside the room – *nothing* – he eased slowly up until he was standing.

The next part was going to be trickier. The ledge above was three inches beyond his grasp. Dropping down had been easy, and making the jump up wasn't too much of a feat: the question was, could he do it without making any noise?

He crouched down again, ready for the spring up. He'd have to get a solid grip with both hands on the ledge to be sure of holding his weight. What Eric didn't notice – his attention was fixed on the ledge – was that one of the wall screws securing the railings was missing and the other was loose and hanging by

its last bit of thread. He waited expectantly a second more, breath held – still the sound of the television, nobody approaching or moving around inside the room – then leapt up.

As the full thrust of his jump hit the rail, the screw ripped loose from the wall and the railings jolted away. The railings didn't break off completely and fall, they hung at a forty-five degree angle away from the balcony. But the affect on Eric's jump was disastrous; its impetus was killed and he was only able to get a few fingers' grip with one hand on the ledge.

Eric felt the strain in his arm instantly, tearing at the tendons. He couldn't keep hold much longer; he'd have to swing up

and grip on to the ledge with his other hand. But his body was angled away from his free hand, and the building was old, the plaster loose where he clutched on. As he started to swing, he could feel it crumbling beneath his fingers, white flakes and dust falling onto his face and shoulders. And now footsteps from inside the room. Heading towards the balcony!

The pain from his stretched tendons was excruciating, a searing white-heat screaming up and through his shoulder blade. He couldn't hang on longer! Footsteps now closer, the balcony windows being opened behind the shutters. With one last desperate lunge, Eric swung again and reached out with

his free hand. But only an inch from making contact the plaster crumbled and gave way beneath his other hand, and he fell.

Only a short fall – he connected with the loose railings a few feet beneath and splayed them flat, level with the balcony floor. But he was winded and in shock; it took him a second to realize where he was. Sound of the shutters' latch opening, the right shutter swinging slowly towards him. And something else in that second that froze his heart: the concrete mushrooming up suddenly around the last stanchion holding the railings! He scrambled desperately forward to get his weight off of the railings and for a moment he thought

he'd made it; he managed to get one hand and forearm on the balcony floor just before the stanchion gave way.

The base of the railings jolted his arm away as abruptly as it had made contact, then both he and the railings were sailing free into the night air. He caught a quick glimpse of a small brick wall and some dustbins four floors below, and had started to instinctively curl into a ball as he hit them and everything went black.

2

The rain pattered against the roof of André's tent. Single, heavy droplets at first, a full seconds' gap between each one; and then, with only a faint crack of thunder in the distance as warning, suddenly there was a deluge.

The monkeys in their cages started shrieking louder. André waved towards them and David Copell, then put his hand over one ear. He raised his voice on the mobile he was speaking into.

'Yes, yes. That's right. Four of them. Two of them got away before we could net them.' On the other end of the line

was Marc Goffinet in Paris.

‘Marielle’s here with me,’ Marc commented. At his end he repeated a précis of what André had told him. ‘She’s smiling and jumping up and down.’

‘But she always does that. Isn’t she excited?’ André heard his own chuckle echoed at the other end. Equally, he could have chosen to speak first to Marielle Barbier, his other main assistant at the ISG, *Institut de St Germain*; but he knew that to Goffinet, now HIV positive for the past three years, the news would have more poignant significance.

The ice-packed samples they’d been working on for the past two months had

provided them with the first glimmer of a breakthrough. But they desperately needed to have live samples to go to the next stage. André glanced across at David Copell trying unsuccessfully to calm the shrieking monkeys as the thunderstorm rumbled. It was either them or chimpanzees – the only other primate to carry SIV, the monkey form of HIV, with the same R gene present as in humans. But then SIV was found in monkeys in the wild, not in Paris primate houses, and chimpanzees in the wild were a protected species. Also, André had noticed something else about the mangabeys' immunity.

‘When will you be back?’ Marc asked.

‘A couple of days, I suppose, by the time we’ve arranged the paperwork and transport.’ Listening to the torrent outside, the mud track back to Yoko would no doubt be a quagmire by morning, the going heavy. It would probably take them five hours just to make that leg.

‘Maybe we’ll be able to do something now for Eban,’ Marc said.

‘Let’s hope so.’ André swallowed back the lump in his throat. They could get carried away with thoughts about healing mankind, but that suddenly brought things down to earth, sharpened focus. Eban, the young Rwandan boy with AIDS they’d been treating, who, having lost his entire family to the

disease, André had taken in as part of his family. That had been one of the main catalysts for this rush trip now: André knew that Eban probably didn't have much time left.

They were silent for a second. The thunderstorm was intensifying, a couple of heavy lightening cracks suddenly sounding close, added portent to what they might be on the edge of: life or death for Eban and countless millions more.

David was trying to calm the monkeys by offering them nuts through the wire of the cage as André signed off. 'I'll phone you again just before we catch our flight.'

André went over to David. Only one

of the monkeys seemed to be tempted; the other three looked on suspiciously from the back of the cage, still shrieking.

‘I wonder if those are the three females,’ David commented. ‘Sometimes I have that effect on women.’

André smiled limply. ‘We’ll have to give them names and pick out some identifying markings to know which is which.’

‘Well, that one’s got a silver bit at the end of its tail. And that one, and...’ David’s voice trailed off and he straightened up, giving up the ghost on trying to feed them. ‘Have you phoned Charlotte yet?’

‘Only the once when we first arrived.’

A subconscious prompt for David, the sound of shrieking female monkeys? His wife Charlotte's' erratic behaviour was little secret back at their Paris lab, and their separation sixteen months ago had done little to stem the flow of her frequent panic calls, to his home or work. When the problems hit, invariably storms-in-teacups or imagined, she phoned. 'But I was planning to speak later to Joël and Eban, so I'll speak to her again then. Tell her we're on our way back.'

Their seven-year-old son Joël stayed with Charlotte for most of the week, Eban, two years older, except for a couple hours after school and when he was away, with him; and their daughter

Veruschka, 14, spent her time equally between them.

André picked up a couple of nuts from the table to see if he'd have more luck in tempting them. The same monkey came forward to take a nut and started nibbling, but the other three stayed obstinately at the back of the cage, looking at him curiously for a second before resuming their screeching.

‘Hard to believe that finally we could be so close,’ David commented, studying the monkeys.

‘Yes, I suppose it is.’ Two years of intense, labouring research before the breakthrough with the first mangabey samples and everything suddenly picking up steam. But probably months more

work still lay ahead. And right now, with them having trouble getting the monkeys to even take food from them, the prospects seemed somehow all the more distant.

Sweat beads were heavy on André's forehead and he could see the hairs now damp on his arm as he held out the nuts by the cage. The humidity had risen probably twenty percent just in the last ten minutes of thunderstorm. Or perhaps it was residual nerves from his ordeal in the tree; it had taken Kalume and two of his men to prise him from the branch and help him down. Or the daunting challenge that now lay ahead of him: the time pressure to try and save Eban and the wider implications for legions of

AIDS sufferers.

His arm reaching out became slightly blurred with sweat running into one eye, and he pictured it suddenly as the bridge he recalled from his childhood, the tombstones below it spreading into the distance. *Standing on the hillside in northern Rwanda, looking over the wasted remnants of Eban's old village, tears seared dry with the heat as he watched the few surviving elders and their children hobbling pitifully on stick-thin limbs.* And each time he'd had the same memory, usually in fragmented dreams that'd awake him abruptly in the night, sweating heavily like now, the line of tombstones stretching into the distance was longer, melting into misty white

infinity. *No, no... too many, too many! I can't help them all.* And sometimes he'd awake to hear those words echoing from the dark corners of the room and he'd wonder whether he'd shouted them out loud or they were just echoing in his mind.

He shook off a faint shiver. David was right. It seemed unreal that finally a cure might be so close within their grasp.

‘Can you hear me?... We’ve called for an ambulance.’

‘It should be here soon... but meanwhile you shouldn’t try and move. Can you hear us?’

Two different voices, a man and a

woman. The mumble of some fainter voices in the background.

Everything slowly faded into focus for Eric: an elderly couple leaning over him, their expressions concerned, and a group of three people behind them.

Eric's eyes darted from one face to another, as if ensuring that they were real, before the realization fully hit him: he was still alive!

Then a wave of pain hit him a second later, took the edge of his elation. An ache in his right thigh as if he'd been dead-legged, but a far stronger, more searing pain higher up, in his right hip and the soft flesh just above: it felt as if he'd been stabbed with a jagged knife and it was still in him. He reached down

with his right hand, but he couldn't feel anything there except dampness from his own blood. He peered down – his vision blurring for a second as he verged dangerously close to blackout again – but as it cleared he could make out the spreading pool of blood tapering into a trickle by his right ankle, and two yards away the dustbin on its side with a heavy gout splattered around its rim.

‘Looks like he’s conscious, at least,’ the woman said.

The old man at her side scratched at his sparse grey beard. He leant closer to Eric. ‘The ambulance should be here soon. Just try and stay calm and don’t move.’

Eric smiled weakly at the slightly

hazy face of the old man. As if moving was even an option. Then suddenly what they were saying hit him like a thunderbolt: *ambulance!* Registration, his ID number taken, blood tests, questions about how he fell, did he live in the building? Someone might even look in his backpack. Even if he was lucky to get through all that without raising any alarm bells, how long before the people he'd just robbed woke up to that fact and contacted the police? He'd probably hear two sets of sirens approaching, the police car following only seconds behind the ambulance!

‘I... I’ve got to go.’ He propped up on one elbow, struggling to raise the rest of his body.

‘No, no... you shouldn’t move.’
Unease now in the old man’s voice.

‘I... I must... I... I’m okay now.’ He managed to scramble up on to one leg, but the pain from even that small movement was excruciating. He took a tentative step, and the pain shot up like a lance from his hip to his skull. He had to get clear of here, and fast. Yet it felt as if he’d struggle to make even five yards.

The old man put one hand on his shoulder; not holding him back, but not helping him along either. ‘You shouldn’t... you could hurt yourself worse.’

Eric hobbled another step and forced a smile beyond the pain. ‘My brother’s a doctor, he’ll... he’ll see to me.’ The old

man's hand left his shoulder, but still his face was grave with worry. Another step, another pained smile. 'Afraid of hospitals, you see. Just can't face them.'

The sound of a siren now in the distance, moving closer.

'Are you sure?' The old man held out the same hand imploringly. 'It sounds like the ambulance is here now.'

Eric just nodded, biting back against the pain as he shuffled away a few more steps, trying to pick up pace. He had to get away! Only one siren, but even if the police arrived hours later it wouldn't take them long to piece it all together. They'd probably walk in the hospital while he was still in the emergency room.

The siren was moving nearer, fast. Faster, it seemed, than he was able to shuffle away. In his jolting vision his eyes fixed desperately on the next street corner where he could turn and get out of view.

Slightly raised voices from behind, the woman now berating the old man, presumably her husband, while he defended what else was he supposed to do to stop him from going?

Eric tried to shuffle faster. Forty yards still till the nearest turning and him being able to disappear from view of the people behind. The siren was moving closer, sounded as if it was only a couple of streets away.

He gritted his teeth hard against the

pain as he hobbled. The numbness of his right leg helped him pick up pace, but each step felt like a white-hot knife thrust in his right hip and abdomen; and there was a strange liquid sensation in his stomach, as if his guts were drifting looser as he walked.

As everything swam in his vision, blurring and distorting for a second, he feared that he was going to black out before he even reached the turn-off. He'd collapse in a heap ten or twenty yards short of it for the people behind to point to.

The siren was now deafeningly loud as it cut through the stillness of the night. Eric looked hastily over his shoulder, saw it turning into the start of the road.

He hobbled faster, fifteen yards, *ten*, the siren spinning in his head and the buildings around tilting as he fought to straighten himself, shaking off another blackout.

But just before the turning, he saw something else that froze his heart: a man rushing out of the building and talking frantically to the group of people outside. Two of them raised their hands and pointed in his direction.

Eric darted into the turning, his heart in his throat as he shuffled hurriedly along, listening out for running footsteps from the street behind. It was difficult to pick up anything beyond the deafening wailing of the siren, which sounded still now; the ambulance had probably pulled

up in front of the building. But would they too come after him? He listened out for both footsteps and the sound of the siren advancing.

The siren stayed where it was, but after a second he could pick out the rapid patter of someone running. His eyes darted frantically. He had to find somewhere to hide. The street was long: he'd still be clearly in view as the man cleared the corner! It was then that he noticed the small street on the right just ahead. He shuffled hurriedly across and into it.

But still his eyes shifted from side to side in search of a hiding place. The man behind would gain on him rapidly, he'd probably still be visible in the side

street as the man came level with it.

A sweet, acrid smell hit his nose, stabbed his brain like raw ammonia. The buildings around started to tilt again, but this time everything was grey.

He staggered and held one arm out blindly, felt his hand connect roughly with the wall to one side as he half toppled. He leant his shoulder against the wall and took deep breaths, trying to claw back from getting dragged completely under. The sudden, urgent patter of footsteps in the street behind snapped him awake again. And something else now in the distance: the sound of another two sirens! The man had probably called the police before bolting downstairs from his apartment.

His eyes scanned desperately for a quick hiding place, and came to rest on a large street-bin eight yards along on the other side of the road, half of it tucked in where the building recessed back two feet, the other half sticking out into the pavement. It wasn't ideal, but it was all there was.

Eric shuffled across, the footsteps in the street behind pressing ever nearer, the sound of the sirens growing. He lunged the last few feet to get behind it, not sure if he'd completely gone from view before the man came level with the street.

He heard the feet shuffle to a stop, the man pausing, looking down the street. Eric held his breath. Seven full seconds

with the man stood there – though for Eric it felt far longer – then he ran on. Eric's breath fell unevenly from exertion and panic as he eased it out again. He knew that his relief could be short-lived. How long before the man realized that he hadn't run on and headed back? And the police sirens were close now, very little separated their sound from that of the ambulance. They'd be able to scour all the neighbouring streets with ease. His own car was four blocks away, he'd never be able to make it that far without being caught.

Eric watched a small trickle of his blood run under the rubbish bin as he crouched, and his stomach sank. He wasn't going to get away! He'd be stuck

there for the man or the police to find – if he didn't die meanwhile.

Then he noticed the wooden door inset in a large garage door further along the street. He scrambled towards it. The police sirens were now static, seemed to be falling almost in unison with the ambulance siren. Obviously they'd already arrived at the building, were probably right now being told in which direction he'd run! He yanked off his backpack as he got in front of the door, fumbling in one of its side pockets for his lock picks.

Like André's building and so many others in Paris, the garage door probably led into a parking courtyard for the neighbouring buildings. At this time in

the morning it should be quiet, nobody around.

Eric's hand trembled on the picks as he probed the door lock. The police sirens were moving again, heading his way! He'd always prided himself on being able to pick almost any lock, and this should be a simple tumbler variety – but could he do it with his focus swimming and the sound of sirens filling the night, drowning out the delicate clicking of the tumblers he needed to listen for? Or before those sirens closed in on him? Or the man running, he reminded himself, as he heard the patter of rapid footsteps returning. Probably he'd reached the end of the street and decided to head back. One of the cars,

from the sound of its siren, had turned into the adjoining road, was almost upon him.

He felt the last couple of tumblers slip back, and with one last frantic turn of the pick he opened the door and leapt inside just as the police car passed. He prayed that they hadn't seen him, but then a few yards past the turning they stopped. Either they had, or they'd met up with the man running back. Eric counted off the wait almost in time with his heavy, ponderous heartbeat and his laboured breathing against the back of the door – then came the sound of the car reversing and turning into the street.

His heartbeat pounded heavier as the car approached. As it came to within a

few yards, he held his breath, his every nerve on a tripwire as he listened out for it slowing or stopping.

But it slowly, ever so slowly, drifted past – though he didn't let out his breath again until it was almost at the end of the street.

Oh God. He closed his eyes as he leant back against the wall behind. At thirty-seven, he was getting too old for this: scurrying around the streets like a hunted rat, the night air filled with sirens. And he'd still need help to get clear: they'd probably trawl the neighbourhood for a good hour or more before giving up.

He took out his mobile and dialled André's number. It went into a recorded

message:

‘I’m away now until the twenty-sixth of March. Leave a message after the tone, or if you wish contact my secretary on –’

Eric dialled straight out to Hervé, his eldest brother. It answered after the fourth ring.

‘Oui. Hello.’ Hervé’s voice was tentative, groggy.

‘Hervé! It’s Eric. I’m... I’m in a spot of trouble.’ He kept his voice hushed but urgent. Even then it seemed to echo slightly in the confines of the small courtyard. He glanced anxiously along the short driveway to the ring of parked cars and the buildings behind. He should be safe here for a little while – unless

somebody heard him.

‘What sort of trouble?’ More alert now.

No *Zut alors!* or expletives for the late hour he was calling, just instant, unreserved concern. But then that, his profession aside, was so often Hervé’s nature.

‘Well, it’s... it’s a long story.’ Eric glanced down at the blood droplets dripping rapidly from his thigh and hitting the ground. ‘I... I’ve had an accident. A bad accident... and I can’t drive. I need someone to pick me up.’ Eric pressed his other hand into his stomach; his guts felt loose and awash, as though if he moved the hand they might fall away.

‘Yes... okay. But shouldn’t you be calling for an ambulance and seeing a doctor?’

Eric smiled to himself at the thought of trying to explain that he’d spent the last frantic minutes avoiding an ambulance. ‘That’s another long story. I really need someone I know and can trust to pick me up. That’s why I’ve called you, Hervé.’

‘Yes, yes... of course. Where are you?’

Eric’s nerves bristled. He could hear one of the sirens moving closer towards him. The second police car, or the first heading back for a second look?

‘Ah...’ Eric only remembered the street where he’d done the robbery. ‘A

block over from Rue Linoille on the West Bank.’

The sound of paper rustling at Hervé’s end as he wrote. ‘Okay.’

The siren was moving closer, practically at the end of the street. But suddenly everything was tilting again, the grey film behind his eyes washing in. The siren echoed and spun in his head and the sweet ammonia smell stung his sinuses, making his eyes water.

‘Phone my mobile when you get to Rue Linoille. And hurry, Hervé, I’m losing blood quickly. I... I don’t know how much—’

But at that moment the grey verged to black and the floor rushed up to meet him.

Hervé shouted ‘Hello!’ a couple of times into the silent phone before jumping up for his clothes.

He was going to throw on just jeans and a sweater, but then his hand moved across and reached for his priest’s robes. He had a feeling they might come in useful on this journey.

3

They'd had to stop twice on their way back to Douala. The first stop was just to shift a small tree that had fallen over the narrow mud road and they lost little time. But on the second stop the last in their convoy of four Land Rovers got stuck in a foot-deep mud quagmire, and the more they revved its engine and spun its wheels, the deeper entrenched it became. This time they found themselves putting small branches and loose twigs back on the road, packing the mud to be able to get some traction on its wheels, and they lost almost forty minutes.

The sun was quite strong by the time they got clear of the jungle, most of the rising mist vapours had burnt off, and the panorama beyond – Cameroon Highlands scrub with a random patchwork of farm fields – seemed to stretch endlessly. But just before 7 p.m. that night, another heavy thunderstorm hit. It rattled and banged in the background while André was on the phone at Douala airport to Charlotte, and at one point he had to repeat himself.

‘I said... did they both get off to school okay?’

‘Yes, yes... of course. Why?’

‘Well, when we spoke earlier, you were in a bit of a rush.’ André avoided the first word that came to mind: panic.

‘You were worried whether you’d get them ready on time. And you said you’d also had a bit of trouble with the car the other day.’

‘Oh, yes... yes. It started okay in the end. On the button.’

But when he asked if she managed finally to sort out a shirt, and she said ‘What shirt?’ he quit while he was ahead, settled for one out of two of the problems she’d voiced when they’d last spoken. If he pressed she’d only get anxious again, worried that she wasn’t coping. That had been his worry – leaving Eban with her when often she had trouble coping just with Joël – but no point in voicing it, adding pressure. And though she had Veruschka to help,

that often created problems of its own. Her and her mother were seeing less eye to eye as the years progressed. He lowered his voice a note. 'How has Eban been?'

'Didn't you speak to him earlier?'

'Yes, but only briefly. He said he's been okay. But how has he *really* been?'

'Well...' She mulled the question over for a second. 'He picked at his meal a couple of nights ago, didn't really eat that much, and he looked tired. But he's been okay since, has eat better and been more lively.' She let out a tired breath. 'Sometimes it's hard to believe that he's so ill.'

'I know. I know. He's very brave.'

'Sometimes *I* probably seem a lot

sicker.’ She forced a weak chuckle.

André made sure not to respond to that. He glanced over towards David at the far end of the room, whose voice had raised as he jabbed one finger at some papers and stressed a point with a couple of customs officials. They thought they’d get all the paperwork sorted out with hours to spare before their flight – now he was beginning to wonder. ‘Looks like David needs my help. I’ll phone you again as soon as we’ve landed in Paris: early tomorrow morning, your time – as long as it’s not delayed.’

He signed off, and they managed to get the paperwork concluded just twelve minutes before their flight, by which

time André was exhausted. Though it was over an hour into the flight before André's nerves finally wound down from all the rush and panic and he managed to sleep.

In the last forty minutes of André sorting out the paperwork, David had gone across to tend to the mangabeys. He pointed to one of them and looked worried as André joined him by their cage.

‘Little Anouk is still not taking food.’

They'd decided to name them after Sixties film stars – Brigitte, Catherine, Anouk and Alain. Anouk was the smallest and youngest female, probably only two or three years old. Another two had started to take some nuts and fruit

during the last leg of their drive to Douala, but Anouk had stayed obstinately at the back of the cage. All of them had got past the frantic, shrieking stage, had started to accept their cage and their surroundings. Though still they looked on with suspicion and caution, even more so when they took food, except for Anouk; she avoided anything but brief eye contact, and looked sullen, morose, her eyes weary.

André started to fear for her health with no food or liquid taken for so many hours, and so they decided to give her a liquid glucose feed through a pipette.

It was difficult to get her to take it, and she fired a few weak shrieks before André finally got the pipette in her

mouth. She looked up at André with weak, pleading eyes as she started to suckle, and at one point she reached up and grabbed at André's ponytail.

‘I told you to get rid of that thing,’ David remarked with a smile.

‘Just when do I ever get a chance to go to the hairdressers?’ Seven years ago when he'd first adopted the style, it was considered chic and stylish; but now at forty-three with the first tinges of grey in his light-brown hair, he risked looking like an ageing hippie. He could have added: When do I get a chance to buy new clothes? Or get a builder in to see to all the small things that had been wrong with his new apartment since he'd moved in sixteen months ago? Or

devote some time to try and bridge the widening gap between him and Charlotte? Outside of his research and Eban, Joël and Veruschka, he had little time for anything or anyone else, least of all himself. But the rest of it, unsaid, just hung in the silence between them as Anouk continued suckling on the pipette.

He was still worried about Anouk as they rushed for their flight – he'd have liked her to have taken more glucose feed before such a long journey – and part of that replayed in his dream as he slept on the plane: her large, pleading eyes staring up at him as she suckled and tugged at his ponytail. Then it became Eban reaching out to him: *'Help me... help me! Please don't let me die.'* A

sudden flash of lightning and a shriek and the image was yanked back to the monkey, now screaming in terror, its eyes wide as the thunderstorm flashed and rumbled around them.

André pleaded with it, *'Please take the food... please take it.'* But the monkey kept its head turned obstinately from the pipette, its eyes seeming to grow wider in terror as they fixed on something to his side. It shrieked excitedly and yanked harder on his ponytail.

André turned to his side to see the snake, but this time it held its raised striking position, staring transfixed at him and the monkey. The monkey's shrieking became wilder, its teeth and

gums bared in a rictus, ghostly in the next lightning flash. But with the monkey's incessant yanking on his ponytail, André became suddenly afraid of losing his grip on the branch, and his vision was drawn to the drop below. It tilted and swayed sickeningly below him, and he pleaded with the monkey to stop pulling. *'Please... please stop! Otherwise I'll fall.'*

But it continued to pull, so hard now that he could feel the hair starting to tear from his scalp, its shrieking deafening: a kaleidoscope blur of the monkey, the snake and the drop below lit starkly by lightning, spun in his head. He struggled to cling on to the branch, but with one final yank and shriek he felt the last of

his grip wrenched free, and he was falling... *falling*...

He woke up with a jolt just before he hit the ground, his mouth dry as he swallowed. He rubbed at his eyes and saw distant lightning as he looked out of the plane window.

‘Storm over the Atlas Mountains,’ David at his side commented. ‘We should be through it in about ten minutes, the pilot said.’

André just nodded, his throat too tight and parched to speak. The jumbo pitched and yawed as he took a few gulps from the bottled water he’d tucked in the seat-back.

He thought the dream was merely a product of the madness and rush of the

last few days. But when he landed in Paris and Charlotte told him about Hervé's frantic call in the middle of the night and he phoned Hervé and heard the full horror of the story, he began to wonder.

The New York conference hall was packed to capacity. As the presenter finished his introductory speech and stepped aside with one arm held out, the large screen behind him came to life.

Warren Gifford's image filled it. A trim figure in his mid fifties with close-cropped stone grey hair and blue-grey eyes twinkling out of a lean and angular tanned face. He was sat by an ornate white wrought iron table with a pool and

tabled lawn as a backdrop, Roman statues and topiary hedges flanking a path that ran through it into the distance.

It was like one of those live Hollywood telecasts from an actor who unfortunately couldn't be at the Oscar or Tony awards that night; someone who regularly played tennis and had a private fitness instructor in order to remain lean and trim in their advancing years. Except that when the camera moved in close, the faint grey-yellow tinge to the whites of Gifford's eyes could be picked up and his skin appeared slightly loose and creased, his leanness the result of muscle waste and rapid weight loss. And everyone in the conference hall knew that Warren Gifford had died some

eight months before, this speech recorded probably only weeks before his death. The image and voice on screen were from the grave.

‘I’m glad you could all make it. But then, as I know all too well, money can be a powerful draw.’ A well-timed glance to one side, an expression of regret. He must have gone over this speech a hundred times before finally putting it on video. ‘Though as I was soon to discover, it couldn’t buy everything. It couldn’t buy what was most important to me: my life. Not even, in the end, a bit more time.’ He looked back directly at the camera. ‘God wouldn’t be bargained with.’

Even in death, Gifford was a

consummate audience player, had the hushed auditorium hanging on his every word. But then, awaiting the announcement of the largest medical awards ever known, Gifford had expected no less.

He talked about his long fight against cancer. Two years, three years maximum he'd been given; in the end he'd lasted nine years. He talked about the brave team of doctors who'd fought bravely to try and save him, and acknowledged them now by lifting one hand. '... Particularly Larry Bernstein, Jeff Warrell and Vicky Kramer.'

Two-thirds of the way back and to the right, Larry Bernstein tamely lifted one hand in response while Warrell and

Kramer just smiled as a number of heads in the audience turned towards them, a light murmur rising.

Two rows from the front, Dr Julius Chisholm turned to his colleagues, Murray Kalpenski, Russ Hebbard and Danielle Stolk, with a wry smile. ‘He certainly knows how to play us all, the old dog.’

On screen, uncannily, Gifford’s gaze went directly to where Bernstein waved back at him. The seat positions and camera angles had obviously been set up in advance.

The seating was arranged more or less in order of importance, with the leading cancer research institutes taking up the front rows. As much as Bernstein

and his team had been important personally to Gifford, they were cancer treatment specialists and surgeons – the last back-stop in trying to stop the disease's progress.

As Treasurer and one of five main board members of the Spheros Institute in Philadelphia, a trailblazer in cancer research for the past decade, Dr Julius Chisholm had earned his place among the front rows. Murray Kalpenski had headed up the Spheros's cancer research division for the past three years, and Hebbard and Stolk were two of his leading proteges.

At thirty-six, Stolk was the youngest of the group, with two years on Hebbard, sixteen on Kalpenski and

twenty on Chisholm. Attractive, vivacious even in their normally dull lab environment, she had dark hair and bright, dark eyes, though her features were somewhat angular, pinched: the only warning of the harsher, sterner mettle that Chisholm knew lurked beneath. Hebbard too, with tight-knit brown curls and a ruddy face as if he was permanently angry or excited, Chisholm had earmarked as showing strong ambition and promise, though in a different way. They probably thought they'd been asked along today purely because they were Kalpenski's rising stars. But Chisholm had requested their presence because he had plans for them; plans that went far beyond the tight

confines of Kalpenski's purely academic grasp. Particularly given how he expected everything to rapidly change after Gifford's announcement. What he hadn't decided yet was which one of them he was going to put in the frame: Stolk or Hebbard?

The murmur of the auditorium died as Gifford's voice came over again.

'You will probably all remember the press interviews years ago when I first discovered I had cancer, and I vowed that I was going to "beat it".'

If indeed anyone in the auditorium had forgotten, that bold statement had been revived and rammed posthumously down Gifford's throat in the press before his body was barely cold: '*Cancer finally*

beats Gifford... ‘*One battle Gifford couldn’t win*’.

A second-generation oil magnate and for almost two decades America’s richest man before the new wave of computer and Internet billionaires dropped his ranking to third, Gifford’s death – as had much of his life – dominated the news.

A sly smile crossed Gifford’s face. ‘Never one to openly lie or mislead, or to be proven wrong – what I didn’t say is whether or not I’d beat it within my own lifetime.’ A pause for effect as Gifford’s expression became serious again, his jaw jutting determinedly. ‘But beat it, I will – that you can be sure of. Whether it takes ten years, or twenty, or

a hundred!’ Gifford fixed his gaze unflinchingly towards the camera, but his eyes held a slightly distant look, as if they were focused on something slightly beyond his audience’s grasp. ‘Which brings us all together now. More cancer specialists in one room than probably at any time before, all wondering what the future of cancer research might hold.’

As Gifford came to the meat of what his audience had been waiting for, a muted rustling ran through the auditorium: a slight shifting of nervous expectancy, or perhaps the medical journalists starting to take notes.

‘...The first will be the Gifford Associate Researcher Award, given annually in the amount of three million

dollars. To be adjusted for inflation every four years by a nominated accounting firm.’ Gifford’s eyes did a slow pan of the audience and his mouth curled into an enigmatic smile, clearly relishing these purposeful pauses, the thrall of expectancy in which he knew he held his audience at that moment. ‘And the main prize, granted every four years, will be the Gifford Founding Researcher Award...’ Another slight pause as he gently moistened his lips. ‘In the amount of twelve million dollars – once again inflation adjusted every four years. I know... I know.’ Gifford held up one hand, as if anticipating the hubbub that arose around the auditorium. ‘But that’s not all. In addition, the winner will also

receive ongoing research funding of another one million dollars a year for the following seven years.'

The hubbub became more excitable, rising to a clamour as the first ripples of applause broke out.

'Much larger than we expected,' Kalpinski commented.

'Yes, much larger.' Chisholm agreed. The medical community had speculated between three and six million dollars, but nothing on this scale.

But looking into Gifford's keen eyes on screen, now twinkling with a slight moistness as he kept the same hand raised in acknowledgement of the rising applause, a Pontiff calming his throng, Chisholm was sure that Gifford knew the

game all too well: that at this level of cancer research, it was as much about big money and power-jostling as it was about bright, inventive minds. And that his money would be just the tip of the iceberg. Twenty-times larger than any Nobel award, other investment funding would follow like mice to the piper, as would no doubt a flood of stock investments. The winner of the Gifford would sweep the board on all fronts, and the rest of the research establishment would be left swimming in its wake.

And Gifford had probably drawn a strange delight from all the wrangling that he knew would follow, Chisholm surmised. Having spent the last nine years with his life juggled in the hands

of doctors and specialists probing and testing and pumping him with one drug after another while his body and self-esteem withered to a wrinkled shell, Gifford had no doubt relished that reversal of manipulation. Turning the tables on those who had the power over life or death by now making them dance to his tune: from now on, the future of every cancer researcher worth his salt rested in Gifford's hands. In death, he'd been able to do what he'd ultimately discovered he'd been unable to in life: play God.

‘One thing's for sure,’ Chisholm commented as he joined in with the applause of the auditorium audience, many of whom were now standing up.

‘The future of cancer research is never going to be the same again.’

David Copell read the news about the Gifford Awards on page four of the International Herald Tribune as their cab headed into the city from Orly airport.

‘Just the sort of funding boost we could do with for AIDS research,’ he commented to André.

‘Yes... yes, it is.’ André was slightly lost in his own thoughts, staring blankly out of the side window as they turned off of the Rue Periphique.

‘It made page seven in Le Mondé,’ David added, trying to spark some interest from André.

André glanced back briefly at the

newspaper laid between them in the back of the taxi. ‘Sorry... Yes. I’ll read it later. Lot on my mind right now. Already planning ahead so that everything runs smoothly when the mangabeys arrive, and I’m concerned also about how little Anouk might have fared with the long journey.’

‘And about Eban?’

‘Yes, that too. That too.’ André went back to staring out through the taxi window, his expression taut. The lie that he’d told David just after signing off from Charlotte and hearing about Herve’s call: *‘Eban’s apparently not very well. Got a high fever. Hopefully it’s just Charlotte panicking more than she should.’* He’d then excused himself

saying he had to go to the washroom for a moment, then made the return call to Hervé from a payphone as soon as he was out of sight of David.

David picked up *Le Mondé* and studied the article again, his eyes rapidly scanning. ‘Lot of column inches, at least.’ Two years now he’d been in Paris from his native Baltimore with his wife, Pamela; his spoken French was passable, but he was still some way from being able to follow lengthy written passages in French.

André knew that even with the preoccupations he’d voiced to David, he still should have shown more interest in the article. It had been one of his pet beefs for so long: AIDS put way down

the list when it came to research funding. First there'd been the homophobes and moral purists who said that it only effected sexual deviants and drug addicts, so there wasn't much to worry about for 'normal' people; then came the religious zealots who claimed that it was a disease cast down from God to rid the earth of the sodomites and the impure. It wasn't until AIDS started to spread to the heterosexual community and college girls contracted it from visits to their dentist and infants from blood transfusions, that the public at large and politicians finally sat up and took notice and research funding raised above its previous pathetic trickle.

Those sectors worst affected – the

arts, fashion and music – had rallied round strongly, raising funds through benefit concerts and dinners and showing documentaries about how the disease had ravaged countless millions across Africa. But it was still a case of ‘It’s over there – not here.’ If people were dropping like flies in downtown Chicago, London or Paris, it might have been different. But as things stood, mainstream funding for AIDS research paled in comparison to cancer research, and now, with the Gifford Awards, that gap was even wider.

But it was difficult to focus on the broader picture when he was besieged by so many crises close to home: Eban, Charlotte, a famished infant mangabey

called Anouk, and now Eric.

He'd planned to have an evening in with Eban and Verushcka and had promised to have Joël over too: a respite for Charlotte, plus she had some fashion dinner planned. A chance to hug them all and then a quiet moment alone with Eban, smiling encouragingly as he ruffled the boy's hair and told him than now, finally, there was some hope in sight. A successful gene therapy treatment was still probably some six to eight months away – depending how their lab work went – but it was something at least to help ease the shadows from the boy's eyes.

'Please hurry! I've bandaged Eric as best I can – but he's lost a lot of blood.'

I don't know how much longer he can last. ' The urgency of the words was bad enough, but it was the undertone in the voice and thinking about Hervé's usual nature that now sent a shiver of unease up his spine. Hervé was usually the calming voice of the family, the one to soothe and play down the panics and gloom.

André had protested that he wasn't that kind of doctor and besides, from the sound of it, Eric urgently needed to be in a hospital, and Hervé had thrown at him Eric's fear that the police would have alerted hospitals because they knew he was injured. *'I argued exactly the same with him, but he said that he'd rather run the risk than face prison. You know*

what he's like – he can be very obstinate.'

A horn blared ahead and their taxi lurched to a halt as it hit a tail back of cars on Avenue Wagram. Andé glanced at his watch.

'Six O'clock they said for the mangabeys arriving. I'll see how I go with Eban when I get him back to my place. But if he's as bad as Charlotte makes out and I can't get away later – can you sort everything out?' The second part of his cover-up lie: Eban being ill allowed him to steal some time away. 'Maybe get Marc or Marielle to go out there with you?'

'Sure, sure – no problem.'

'And if I can't make it, keep a special

eye on Anouk for me, will you? If she still won't take food, perhaps put her on a drip back at the lab.'

'Yeah, will do.' David folded the two newspapers back on the seat between them. 'Maybe more glucose too as soon as she's out of the crate. We might be a while with Customs.'

André nodded and lightly clasped David's arm in thanks. He knew already that he wouldn't make it back in time. He'd pick up his car and head straight out to see Hervé and Eric in Nemours, the small village forty miles south of Paris where their mother still lived and Hervé had been priest for the last four years. The village where André had spent most of his childhood and held so

many memories; and now perhaps a few more dark memories to add to the pile, André thought.

He felt his hand start to tremble as he lifted it from David's arm. Despite having slept on the flight, he still felt tired, his nerves jaded. He wasn't sure he was ready to face whatever horrors awaited him at Nemours.

**** End of first three chapter sample
of The Shadow Chaser ****

The SECOND
AMENDMENT #1

John Matthews

The Second Amendment:

*A well regulated Militia,
being necessary to the
security of a free State, the
right of the people to keep
and bear Arms, shall not be
infringed.*

Reviews:

If Vince Flynn and John Grisham got together to tackle probably the most controversial issue of the past two decades - Gun Control - this is what they might come up with. Hair-trigger suspense all the way. Electrifying.

- *Crime Ink*.

The FBI and Capitol Hill go head-on against the far-right and self-appointed militias in this no-holds-barred thriller. Amongst all the bullets and mayhem, the thorny issue of gun control is also handled sensitively – but don't expect much time to draw breath between the two. A 'loaded' issue in more ways than

one.

- *Books, etc.*

A novelist of real accomplishment.

- *Amazon co.uk.*

John Matthews is a leading British thriller writer. His books span genres of crime, action, mystery and legal-thriller and include: Basikasingo, Crescents of the Moon, Past Imperfect, The Last Witness, The Second

Amendment (#1 and #2), Ascension Day, The Shadow Chaser and The Prophet. They have been translated into 12 languages with total sales of 1.2 million. In 2007, Past Imperfect was included in a top ten all-time best legal thrillers list in The Times. He was one of only two British authors in the list.

The Second Amendment #1 is 76,000 words.

The Second Amendment #2
is 95,000 words.

PROLOGUE

November, 2006.

This was the hardest part. Connecting the C4 fuse wires without killing yourself.

Blake Koenitz had done it without incident countless times before, but still the moment raised the hairs on the back of his arms, brought a bead of sweat to his forehead. He held his breath as he slotted the wires in position: eight decoy wires, three of which were red, connecting to four micro switches. Then the two wires which would actually carry the ignition charge: one blue, one green.

Koenitz didn't expect the bomb to be discovered, but he'd become used to setting elaborate challenges for BD experts. He'd trained enough of them in the army. He made quick work of the decoy wires, then with a steadier hand and tighter concentration started on the final two wires. One slip – touching virtually any wiring beyond the bridge circuit – and the bomb would be activated. He'd set only a five second delay once the bridge circuit was completed; he would barely make it to the far corner of the warehouse. He'd still be caught in its blast.

This time they'd planned well. After Oklahoma, it was important to send a more precise message to the ATF and

Capitol Hill. It was now almost ten months since they'd infiltrated a computer supply and maintenance company which supplied to the Treasury and ATF. At first, it had just been an intelligence operation: copying over anything left on hard disk when computers came in for repair. But there had been little of interest. Either they'd been unlucky enough only to get the more mundane, day to day treasury files, or anything sensitive had already been wiped.

Three weeks back they'd finally decided on the bombing. They were getting virtually nothing from the files; little would be lost by the action, and there would be precious few other

opportunities to make such an incisive inside strike.

Koenitz met with their contact, a young computer engineer called Peter Nyman, told him he wanted to plant a bug inside one of the computers. It took a heavier bribe of \$20,000, and predictably Nyman had been nervous about planting it himself. Koenitz had placated that he didn't need to. Just tell them which computer was being shipped back into the ATF offices next and how to avoid the alarms, leave the rest to them.

There was a day care nursery on the ground floor, but the bomb would take out only the ATF ninth floor offices and perhaps part of the floors each side.

Unlike Oklahoma, the message this time would be clear: this was no longer a rag-tag brigade, they could strike anytime and anyplace. And take out only those they chose. Something to give the President pause over breakfast.

The only windows to the warehouse – a high strip eight foot by one foot just below ceiling height – had a circuit alarm which Koenitz had bridged with a wire. The next obstacle had been the alarm which picked up any movement, but Nyman had told him about a blind spot in the far left corner of the warehouse. As long as he kept low, he would be out of its range. He'd practically crawled along the ground, ducking quickly behind the second work

bench row. As arranged, Nyman had placed the computer on a shelf below the bench. Koenitz could reach it without tripping the motion alarm.

Still, he had to be careful not to raise his head above the work bench height, and crouched low as he made the connections. Three or four minutes more and he'd be finished, could head off for the meeting with Nyman. The blue was connected, now the...

Koenitz froze. He could hear a car approaching. The only sounds to reach him so far had been the background drone of traffic and occasional distant barge horns breaking the mist on the Potomac. This was a factory and warehouse estate, usually deserted at

night – who could possibly be driving around? He could hear the thrum of its engine, the slow spin of its wheels. It seemed to have slowed down to only five or ten miles an hour as it approached. Possibly the estate's security service, Koenitz thought.

He stayed motionless, every nerve end jarred tight as the car lights hit the side of the building. He felt a tickling on his forehead from some beads of sweat forming. He couldn't risk letting go of the wires to wipe it off, so tilted his head in closer to his body – and after a second, watched a droplet slowly fall onto his arm. That too he had heard of among the horror stories over the years: sweat droplets falling on delicate circuits,

making the connection.

The glare of the lights shone starkly through the high strip windows. Koenitz' pulse pounded as they panned slowly down the side of the building, his eyes fixed on the open window at the end and the wire still in position – silently praying that the lights wouldn't pick it up.

'Come on, Daniel, *come on*. Hurry. We'll be late.'

Josette Horvath knocked back the last of her coffee, looking on impatiently as her three year old son struggled with the last of his cornflakes. There couldn't be more than four or five spoonfuls left in the bowl, but suddenly he'd gone into

slow motion.

Another spoonful and his big eyes looked up. 'Full, mommy. Full up now.' His voice was squeaky and pleading.

She looked between the bowl and Daniel. That wide-eyed look and he could get away with anything. And he knew it. She felt guilty because the morning rush was invariably her fault: shower, make-up, getting Daniel's clothes ready, making coffee, breakfast on the table. There never seemed enough time to get everything ready and leave when they should. The joys of single motherhood. She kept telling herself to get Daniel's clothes ready the night before, but she was nearly always too tired after work. In the end, a

compromise. She ruffled his hair and smiled. 'Look, just one more spoonful – then we gotta go. Okay.'

Daniel returned the smile dolefully as he took the last mouthful. Josette grabbed keys, bag, hers and Daniel's jacket – her eyes darting around for anything she might have forgotten: stove off, iron, coffee percolator, lights.

She turned quickly to the hall mirror, pulling her hair back and through a maroon cloth band. It was still dry and crinkled from being washed the day before, but at least she could grow it just over shoulder length before it became too frizzed; the one legacy from her Italian mother. In most of the rest of her face, her father's negro features

predominated: wide nose, but large eyes and generous mouth that became the focal points, compensated. Beyond her reflection, she could see Daniel scampering down from his chair.

She crouched down and smiled as she put his coat on. 'Hokay, big boy. Let's move.'

Halfway to the front door, Daniel suddenly wheeled around. 'Girry, Girry! I forgot him.' He darted back as she looked on helplessly.

Josette opened the front door and was halfway down the porch steps when Daniel re-appeared seconds later with the toy giraffe. Gerry the giraffe. Daniel had happily agreed her choice of name, but still pronounced it Girry. The most

recent present from his absent father. Sent from Mombassa or Addis Ababa or whatever was the current resort stop-over for photo journalists in war-torn Somalia or Rwanda. All she had was the number of the news agency and the last Holiday Inn he'd bothered to phone from.

Josette's breath showed on the chill November air as she got in the car. They hadn't divorced yet – the same excuse which had largely led to their break up: no time with his hectic globe-trotting work schedule. But they'd been separated now for almost a year, and it looked permanent. She resolved to bring the subject up again and get some papers into motion next time they were in the same hemisphere.

Daniel jumped in the back and she dumped her shoulder bag on the passenger seat. She started up and headed off. Ford Taurus, standard FBI issue. Twelve minutes later she hit the normal jam approaching the New Hampshire Avenue junction. She tapped her fingers on the steering wheel, anxious that she might be late dropping Daniel off with Louise.

Bzzzzzzzzzz-click..... bzzzzzzzzzz-click.
In the back, Daniel played with Girry. In her rear view mirror, Josette could see the giraffe's motorized neck snake to one side then, as it clicked in position, its large lidded eyes would blink twice; another press on the blue button at its side and the neck would snake back to

the other side: click, two more blinks. Josette found it annoying. Daniel had played with it almost incessantly since the package arrived from Africa two weeks back. Eight thousand miles away and Sammy still managed to irritate her.

The traffic started moving ahead. In the end, she was only three minutes over the arranged 8.10am drop-off time. A quick peck to Daniel's cheek, a 'Thanks' to Louise – 'I'll pick him up from your place later' – and she headed off. Louise ushered Daniel and her own son Jordan, only a few months younger, into a battered Civic Shuttle. The Civic followed behind for almost a mile, and the last receding image in Josette's mirror was it turning into Irving Street.

Josette kept straight on Georgia Avenue a hundred yards more, then pulled over, took the gun and holster out of her bag and looped it onto her belt. The same routine each morning. She was always careful to keep the gun out of Daniel's sight. The current fashion within the agency was men's suit jackets for concealment, but she preferred long, loose dress shirts with waistcoats or bolero tops. More stylish, but the individualism was more important to her; it was easy enough to feel like a feeble clone without following bureau fashion trends.

She re-joined the traffic, picked up speed. The city flashed by her window, the decay gradually receding. As if the

massive cultural dose at the Capital's core, like a benevolent mushroom cloud, could only spread so far. The tenements, chipped paint houses and boarded shops gradually gave way to more solid brownstones, townhouses and office buildings. Architectural staging towards the city's cold, monolithic heart.

Her cell-phone started ringing. She waited for the upcoming junction lights before fumbling in her bag: filofax, business card folder, make-up bag. She got it on the fourth ring. 'Yeah.'

'Are you heading out on a case or coming in this morning?' Tony Anderson, her section head.

'Coming in. I should be there soon.' The urgency in Anderson's voice made

Josette alert. 'Why?'

'We've got news coming in from New Orleans. They're pretty sure now it *was* a bomb.'

A truck rumbled across the intersection in front of her. The lights changed, but she was slow moving off. A horn beeped from behind. Six days since the plane had gone down, and the wait meanwhile had been tense, especially with the intense media speculation: an accident? A bomb? Arab terrorism? Home grown? The Scribe? The last Josette found hard to swallow. To date, the Scribe had been responsible for only one fatality, why would he suddenly down a planeload? 'Any tell-tale signs as to who?'

'Nothing concrete yet. We won't get a full report till sometime tomorrow when they get the final lab analysis – but I'll be speaking to Gaskin later. That's why I called. Can you bring me your past files when you get here. I want to start running some comparisons.'

'Sure. With you soon.' Ringing off, Josette's thoughts churned with the news. There was precious little in her files apart from the World Trade Center bombing and the Scribe: Unabomber successor and now the prime target of FBI counter terrorist units nationwide. Often she wondered about Tony Anderson's main motive for putting her on the Scribe: something to mark her thirtieth birthday, the fact that she would

be the only female agent in his section working it, or her ethnic heritage? Ultra-right bombers tagged as little more than modern day Ku-Klux-Klanners. For any true blooded African-American, surely the grand prize.

But it had come at probably the worst time for her home life. Supported a continuing argument with Sammy about her absorption with work. With Daniel's birth, she'd suggested that Sammy take more home assignments; he'd responded that she give up the FBI and stay at home. As if it was some sort of trade off. She'd protested that their situations were different. Her work was a few blocks away, his took him halfway across the world.

Sammy opted for home assignments for almost a year, but was restless, moody. He missed the buzz and excitement of covering foreign hot spots. Then when she started with the 'The Scribe', Sammy took a long term foreign assignment within the month. Payback. Only two brief home visits over the next six months, and they both decided to make the separation official rather than just continue drifting. Sammy wasn't settled at home, and never would be.

She swung into 9th Street. The bright and pastel shades of shop signs and doors zipping by gave way to more sombre tones. Last remnants of boarded shops. Remnants of her marriage.

But she couldn't help feeling partly

to blame for the break-up. Had that been the choice? The Scribe and her career or Daniel and her marriage? And she'd chosen the Scribe.

Though she knew deep down that if Daniel looked up at her with those big eyes and asked her to stay at home with him, he didn't want to go to the nursery any more — she'd give it all up tomorrow. She wondered what his days were like there. She'd only been inside a couple of times; once when she'd first made the arrangement and once when she'd left early and picked up Daniel herself. Daniel and Louise's son Jordan apparently played well together, and Louise worked in a government manpower division on the third floor.

The only other part of the building Josette had visited – while gaining background information on 'The Scribe' a few months back – were the ATF offices on the ninth floor.

'So. What do you think?'

Tony Anderson had been on and off the phone to Gaskin heading up the crash investigation for much of the morning before finally calling Josette back into his office. Anderson smiled; Viva Zapata moustache with a wry twist. 'I think you should catch the first flight to New Orleans and come back with a full report as soon as possible.'

'But what do the early signs point to?' Josette pressed. As always, Josette

found the smile both endearing and infuriating. As if Anderson was saying: *'Really, I'm a nice guy. But if I show it too much, you'll take advantage.'*

'That's the problem - it's *too* early. They're not sure yet.' From what Gaskin had told him on the phone, all the signs were there; but a rush reaction from Josette would serve no purpose. Besides, Gaskin might be wrong.

Not sure? Josette eyed Anderson keenly. 'Gaskin's found something, hasn't he?'

Anderson sighed. The phone started ringing at his side. 'He *has*, but he doesn't want to speculate. Neither do I. That's the whole point of sending you. Now just grab a travel docket and let's

get the show rolling.' Anderson picked up the phone.

The background hustle and clatter of the adjoining general office drifted in beyond his phone conversation. Average 'trench' morning: six or seven clerks at their computers, handful of agents milling around. She stood up to leave. Anderson wasn't going to give anything away. As she was by the door, Anderson broke off with one hand over the mouthpiece.

'Phone me from New Orleans as soon as you know something. Let me know when we're past the speculation stage.'

'Is Dave going down there with me?' Dave Haffner was her usual partner and had the strongest knowledge of

explosives in their team.

'No, he's in Wisconsin today: Sheboygan. Burrige case. This is just straightforward note and file stuff with Gaskin. You'll be okay alone.'

'Thanks, Tony. You're such an open-hearted, warm guy.' She blew a kiss and patted her butt with the same hand.

Anderson smiled and resumed his phone conversation.

Halfway to Washington National Airport, Josette hands-free-phoned her mother's house in Annapolis. She'd tried twice just before leaving with no luck. This time it answered. Josette asked if her mother could pick up Daniel at the nursery and baby-sit that night. 'You can

stay over at my place.'

'Yes... I think I can.' Flicking of paper, a diary or calendar being checked, then: 'Yes, that's fine.'

An arrangement they'd made many times before and Josette practically knew her mother's schedule off by heart: English lit tuition three mornings a week and theatre groups two evenings. Three years of hardly venturing out after their father's death, and now for the past fifteen months, entering her sixties, her mother had discovered a new lease of life. Her diary was busy again. 'Thanks, mom. Can you get there just before four-thirty, otherwise Louise will head off with him. She doesn't know you're coming to fetch him.'

'No problem. I'll be there. They working you too hard again?'

'Something urgent come up in New Orleans. I might make a late flight back. But if I stop over, I'll phone later to let you know.'

'I warned you about these government jobs. Your father had a bellyful.'

Josette chuckled. Different league. Her father's spare evenings had been swallowed up with ambassadorial receptions in Rome or Caracas, or wherever he was stationed, family duly in tow. Not poring over chunks of plane wreckage in some dank New Orleans warehouse.

They discussed briefly what was in

the fridge for Daniel to eat, what time he should be put to bed, and with a 'Thanks again, mom,' Josette rang off.

Traffic was heavy approaching the airport and Josette was late checking in. 2.16 pm. Just over forty minutes to boarding. Waiting, the shriek of a young girl playing close by made her look up momentarily from Gaskin's last report, and a faint shiver inexplicably ran through her. Something she'd forgotten in the rush? Guilt perhaps at spending another night away? No, Daniel loved spending time with his grandmother; he was in good hands.

Though as her boarding announcement came and she joined the gate passage flow, it struck her what

might be disturbing her. Anderson knew something, but wasn't telling. Yet there were only two reasons for her being involved: Arab fundamentalists, due to her research work on 911, and the Scribe.

Initially, Arab fundamentalism had been by far the biggest concern, but the Scribe was fast catching up, had planted eighteen bombs in the past three years. So far they'd aimed at maximum damage without loss of life, all meticulously planned with little trace. He'd be as hard to track down as the Unabomber, *if* they ever found him.

But what if he'd suddenly changed tack and started aiming for body counts? Josette shuddered, the stark black and

white photos of the New Orleans wreckage flashing briefly through her mind... then suddenly the smiling face of a stewardess was before her, welcoming her on board.

The face was stark white, a few inches below the surface of the dark river. Then suddenly the eyes opened wide. Fear, bewilderment. The mouth opened to say something, a silent plea marked only by rising air bubbles. The body started thrashing slightly, causing ripples, hips and thighs struggling against the ropes binding them and tying the hands behind the back. The only movement remaining. Eyes wider now. Pitiful. Receding slowly into the

darkness as the body sank.

Blake Koenitz stirred the sweetex into his coffee, and the last remnants of the image swirled and faded with it.

Everything had gone well the night before. The car had passed without stopping, and it took him only minutes to finish up and head off for the meeting with Nyman. He'd managed to distract Nyman as planned, claiming he heard some movement in the nearby bushes – then had floored Nyman with a brisk pistol whip to the back of the head. It had taken only a minute more to tie Nyman with rope, legs bound and linked in turn to his hands behind his back. The last part of the rope looped through three fifty-pound barbell weights Koenitz had

in his holdall. It was vital the body wasn't discovered for a while, if at all.

He'd dragged the body the few yards to the edge of the river, then rolled it in. Perfect. Except for Nyman's eyes popping open at the last moment. Nothing left to do but smile and wave. *Bye.*

Such a dummy. Nyman had even asked him what was in the bag and he'd answered semi-honestly: 'Some weights. I've just come from training.'

'They look heavy.'

'Heavy enough.' Wry smile.

Almost as amusing and ironic as when Nyman had complained about the riverside meeting in Anacostia. 'I know it's quiet and deserted here. But it's such

a dangerous area. We could get mugged or killed.'

'Don't worry, you're with me,' Koenitz had assured, patting his windbreaker. 'And I always carry.' If a local crack dealer or tramp had happened by while he'd roped Nyman's body, he'd have happily popped them at the same time.

'You wanna' donut with that?'

The voice broke into Koenitz's thoughts. He looked up at the florid black face across the counter, tight curls greying each side. Unlike the mid-West, Washington was full of them. Koenitz glanced at the indicated donut: on a platter alongside a Danish left over from the morning's trade. 'You trying to shift

that because it's the last one left, or because you think I really need it?'

The waiter had taken the measure of the man as he'd perched up on the counter stool. Not too tall, five-eight, five-nine, but broad and stocky. Almost as wide as he was tall. A Stormin' Norman type. Yet trying to look casual with a Pringle poloneck beneath his windbreaker. The eyes unsettled him, an imperceptible colour somewhere between green and pale grey, staring straight through him. But this was *his* serving counter, he ruled the roost here. 'I jus' thought you look like a growin' boy. You could do with the nutrition. But if you don' want it, no problem.'

Koenitz concealed his inner flinch

at the 'boy' behind a stone-cool glare. Some cheek. Some of them were now even infiltrating Capitol Hill and close to getting their hands on the reigns of power. At least this one was where he should be: behind a counter, serving. And Koenitz didn't want anyone recalling him unduly.

'Yeah. Only problem is, I'm growing out this way.' He smiled, holding one hand out by his stomach. 'But you're right. Coffee don't seem quite right without it.'

The waiter put the donut on a plate with some tongs and slid it across. Koenitz dipped it in his coffee and glanced at the wall clock as he took a bite: 3.19 pm. Fourteen minutes to go.

He'd chosen the diner because of its position: at two blocks away, close enough on 14th St to hear the explosion, but not so close as to be caught in any resultant police cordon or questioning.

Koenitz could visualize the scene: the boom and the rattle of the diner's window from the air rush. Perhaps one or two windows shattered in direct line further up the street. Then people would start spilling onto the sidewalk, looking towards the source of the explosion.

He could have sat at home and watched the newscasts, but he wanted to know straightaway if the op was successful. The night before he'd kept turning over the many things that could go wrong: the C4 discovered by a last

minute check, the computer not shipped on time, or it going to the wrong floor or even another building. It could turn up in practically any Treasury office on the same supply and maintenance rota. How reliable was Nyman's docket information?

Koenitz nibbled a bit more donut, sipped some more coffee. His hand was steady on the cup – long years of setting fuses under pressure – but inside his stomach was churning. He should have felt boosted after the success of the plane strike six days ago. But that had been a covert operation aimed to appear as an accident. This was different. An open strike which said 'we're here'. And after Oklahoma, we've learned our

lessons well.

Koenitz smiled inwardly that the people around him were oblivious to what would soon happen, in particular its affect on American society at large. The street diner with its burger, fries, shakes and short-order counter; a slice of American life virtually unchanged in thirty years.

Yet Koenitz knew that in the wake of the bomb there would be a cold wind of change. The second stage of America's innocence would be lost. Oklahoma had been the first, had opened the nation's eyes to terrorism from within. Then had come 911 and Iraq and that threat had been all-but forgotten. It was time for a reminder.

Josh Lorimer was on file fifty-three. An hour after the Pentium D had come back in, he'd transferred files from the slower Pentium 3 he'd been working on pro temp and continued his search. 3.31 pm. Two and a half hours before lunch and now almost as long after, and he still hadn't found what he was looking for. Excise duty discrepancies between a liquor distributor and a store chain with outlets across the Carolinas, Virginia and part of Kentucky. 79 files in total. 26 more to go. Most were only a page or two long, columns of figures with brief summary comments, but some ran for five or six pages and took time.

Pretty much a standard day. File

and search. Compile, file again. Report. Brief annotations where required, and on average five cases a month which would get passed on for fuller investigation. Of those, perhaps one in forty might leap out from the pack and result in a search and seizure raid. Lorimer had activated only two the past year, and his department total was eighteen. Nothing dramatic. No resistance, no guns fired in retaliation. Nobody hurt. Most of the ATF's work these days was plodding and paperwork, reflected by the employee complement on the 9th floor: five agents supported by twelve researchers and clerks, of which Lorimer was one.

But Lorimer knew he wasn't

missing anything. The glory days of prohibition were long gone, and attempts to re-kindle the limelight by taking a strong stance against the growing rash of right-wing militias had only resulted in fiascos like Waco. Back room files were far safer ground.

Lorimer finished scrolling down the columns in file fifty-three. Nothing there either. He double-clicked on fifty-four.

Flash of white screen, a split-second sight of text. And then the white again, bursting out suddenly – a blinding, searing light that cut straight through him.

Five others within twenty feet were killed instantly by the immediate blast, their shattered bodies carried on the

relentless outward wave of the explosion. A wave that shattered desks, computers and glass, and ripped plaster and concrete chunks from the floor and ceiling – a maelstrom of debris scything mercilessly through all in its path.

The arc of that outward blast reached over a hundred and fifty feet, taking out all the windows on the ninth floor and over half of those on other floors and in buildings directly across the street and adjoining. Some windows were shattered up to two blocks away. Only four people on Lorimer's floor survived the outward spread of debris, though two others on the floor above were killed by the upward blast and three on the floor below, mostly from

falling debris. A gaping eighteen foot hole had been blown through the floors each side.

But within that eighteen foot was something Koenitz had not considered: two of the building's main column supports on the east facing side. Both were severely damaged, concrete stripped bare and more than half the steel strands within sheered through. They were holding, but barely.

Yet the space around them was at that moment a vacuum created by the blast, and the full weight and stress would only be brought to bear once the vacuum was again filled. A mass of debris that a second ago had been spewed out was relentlessly sucked

back in to balance the laws of physics.

Bzzzzzzzzzz-click..... bzzzzzzzzzz-click.

In the ground floor nursery, Daniel was drawing a house. It was larger than the one they lived in, with a garden and a giraffe with its head reaching up to an upstairs bedroom window. The last time he'd drawn a giraffe, the teacher had asked if it was a dinosaur. He was being careful this time to keep the head small.

The second time the sound came, Daniel turned and looked across the nursery. A group of eight around him drawing and painting, and another five or six in the center of the room running around and playing noisily. It took him a second to spot Steven playing with Girry

at the far end of the room.

He remembered his mother's words, anxious at him taking Girry to the nursery for the first time a few days back: 'Be careful with him. Other children might play with him and he could get broken. Are you sure you want to take him?' He said that he wanted to show his teacher so that she knew the difference between a giraffe and a dinosaur. He'd taken it every day since.

But now he was worried that Steven might break it. He leapt up and ran across the room. He stood before Steven defiantly and held out one hand. 'My mom said that I mustn't let anyone else play with it. It could get broken.'

One more buzz-click and Steven

handed it back. But he looked hurt.

Daniel started to turn with Girry, but then Steven's expression gave him second thoughts. Perhaps a moment more wouldn't harm. He held it out again. 'Well – just a few minutes more. Then let me have it back.'

At that second, the flash and boom came from nine floors above.

Both children looked up and around, startled. Two girls playing at the room's center screamed.

Above, as the air-rush vacuum was filled, four tons of debris from the surrounding floors and walls came to bear on the already weakened ninth floor. The remaining steel strands in the two severed support columns strained

and creaked under the additional weight. A suspended moment, and then they finally buckled and gave way.

The five floors above on that east-facing side collapsed like an imploding concertina. They ploughed easily though the ninth floor, then paused on the eight where support columns were still intact. But finally the combined weight was too much and the floor there too was breached.

Daniel had pulled back Girry slightly, as if protecting him from the sudden bang, and both boys looked up questioningly. The only warning was a low ominous rumble as the mounting tons of rubble crashed through successive floors, crumpling them like a

falling deck of cards, the deluge gaining momentum as it hurtled towards the ground floor and the nursery.

1

The first news broadcast of the bombing came fifty minutes into Josette's flight.

She had a row of three to herself and hadn't switched on her seatback screen, deciding to leaf through a *Newsweek* from the section rack. Two screens were on directly across the aisle – the bomb newscast and a daytime soap – but Josette was heavily engrossed in an article about the President: *Weimann, eighteen months after re-election*. Backdrop of scandal. Health care. Welfare reform. Gun control. Tough battles with Congress. Economic turn-

around. The same buzz words which had marked Weimann's first term of office except, the article suggested, Weimann's first year back in office had been so strongly dogged with fighting past scandals '*...that only in the past few months has Weimann started to get fully to get to grips with the forefront issues of his re-election campaign. Tindall is at last primed and ready for battle.* Mark Tindall, Josette recalled, was the new Attorney General appointed by Lawrence Weimann for his second term in office, in expectation of tougher battles with Congress.

Tindall was a tough Texan DA who had been recommended by Vice-President Andrew Landry. Weimann had

been an Akron, Ohio Senator and Landry had travelled a similar White House route from Monterey, California. *Weimann expects the strongest opposition to the next stage of the Cullen Bill on gun control now before Congress to come from America's open-range States - Montana, Texas and Wyoming. Putting one of their own in the front line of attack is seen by many as a ploy to deflect claims of the initiative coming only from liberal, bleeding-heart States. But does Tindall have the necessary to take on Congress and shape a Bill which will see an easy passage?*

Josette scanned a few other items before her attention waned. She'd been

eager to scan through Gaskin's earlier file before boarding – but picking through photos of wreckage with neighbouring passengers looking over her shoulder hadn't seemed such a good idea. Little of it was probably now relevant. Gaskin's earlier report pointed to it being an accident, and now Anderson was saying it was a bomb.

Was that creating her unease now, being on a plane? Or was it what flying had come to represent in her life: dislocation, change.

Each time she'd flown as a child had been when her father had taken on a new embassy posting: Venezuela, Denmark, Switzerland, Italy, finally Jordan. Just when she was finally settled

in at school and established some friends would come the upheaval. For her father it was a new challenge and often a promotion as well. But for her and Bernard, it merely meant disruption: new school, new friends, new neighbourhood. She'd cried when they left Rome. Eighteen at the time, they'd been there since she was thirteen. She'd had her first date there, survived the transition from adolescence to adulthood and learned to drive. Still it held her fondest memories, and it had also been her mother's favourite posting. An almost 'coming home' a generation after her own parents had left Italy.

Eleven year's younger, her brother Bernard's memories of Italy were more

vague. The only benefit of all that travelling and disruption had been languages. Both her and Bernard had fluent Italian and Arabic, and she also had passable Spanish and French. Her Arabic had secured her first job in the same embassy as her father: backroom researcher reading the local journals from Jordan and neighbouring Syria and Palestine. Returning to the US, it had also gained her an easy passage into the FBI's Counter-Intelligence division and in turn Counter-Terrorism. Though up until the Scribe assignment, she'd practically been stuck in the same niche: the FBI's backroom expert on the threat of Arab-fundamentalist terrorism within the US.

Bernard had used his languages to further his education. Two languages tagged to a study course of International Politics and Law suddenly made him a good 'all-rounder.' The main criteria, along with strong grades, for Rhodes selection. Her mother couldn't have been prouder. Bernard was one of only four African-Americans accepted that year on the scholarship, and to the same university, Queen's, where twenty-nine years ago Lawrence Weimann had taken a two year post graduate course after Harvard.

Often it seemed strange to Josette thinking of Bernard now at Oxford, priming himself for a career following in her father's footsteps or with the State

Department's foreign affairs. The image that stuck most was of Bernard as a toddler and her as a teenager baby-sitting while their parents attended another embassy reception. Happy days.

'Coffee?'

Josette looked up. 'Yes, thanks. Cream, no sugar.'

The stewardess poured the coffee and handed over two creamers. As she moved to attend the row behind, the newscast images across the aisle played directly in front of Josette's vision. But it was a close up shot of a fire-chief being interviewed, with only a partial view of the background: the back of another fireman, two medics with a stretcher, the side of an ambulance. It could have been

a fire or emergency situation anywhere in America. Nothing of any significance registered.

Fire Chief McLoughlin studied the building and the activity around it.

Fifty yards each side had been cordoned off on 14th St. An assortment of ambulances, fire trucks, emergency vehicles, black and whites and unmarked cars – mostly FBI and ATF – a bomb disposal truck, and a small excavator brought in an hour ago to help shift the avalanche of rubble which had spilled across half the street.

The succession of vehicles had changed in the two hours since his arrival. The first there had been black

and whites before the feebies and ATF started arriving. And the bomb disposal truck still there must be someone's idea of a joke. *'Checking in case there's another bomb,'* according to one of his men.

'Presumably to knock down the rest of the fucking building,' he'd muttered under his breath.

McLoughlin was angry. Forty-seven dead and still rising, and he felt more like a ringmaster at a circus than in control of the bedlam around him. Beyond the cordon, the crowd gathered, network vans jostling for position, and cameras clicked and whirred. Four units had been let through for an interview just over an hour ago, then pushed back

again. Next interview in another hour, if he so decided. The cordon was the only thing over which he had control. Within, it was Hades' chaos and he was the Devil's chief registrar. Nothing left to do but to count the bodies as they were picked from the rubble.

He noticed a stretcher approaching with a girl in her twenties. A medic was holding an oxygen mask to her face. A beacon of light among the endless procession of body bags.

'How many's that now found alive?' asked McLoughlin. 'Eleven or twelve?'

'Eleven. But we lost two on the way to the hospital, and we might lose as many again over the next few hours. They're in pretty bad shape.'

McLoughlin nodded solemnly and looked up at the building. Fourteen stories high, the ninth floor had been almost completely blown out, was just a shell of concrete supports. But most of the fatalities had come from the collapse of the building's east wing. The November light was fading fast, the stark remains of the building a ghostly silhouette in the twilight.

The rubble from the collapsed east side had slued like a ski slope away from the building, sixteen foot high at its apex. A team of at least twelve picked among the mountain of rubble, throwing the debris clear, and the first helmet lights had now been switched on. The excavator only moved around the

shallow base of the mountain where the fresh debris was thrown and they could be sure there were no bodies.

Damn. Where was Incoccia? He'd been in the building over ten minutes now. Their first safety survey had been to check that chunks of what remained of the building wouldn't suddenly start peeling off to fall on the emergency teams below. Fifteen minutes later Incoccia had emerged with his team and given the thumbs up. The twelve had gone to work on the ski slope of rubble.

The second survey was to judge the likelihood of any air spaces or trapped chambers beneath the mountain of rubble. Driven mainly by drastic hope. On the ground floor of the east wing had

been a day-care nursery with sixteen children inside. Four small bodies had already been taken from amongst the rubble, with another two children found barely clinging to life. Incoccia finally emerged. He looked thoughtful as he approached, half turning as he pointed back at the building.

'Until we get to where the first floor joins the main columns, it's going to be difficult to tell if it gave way or stayed in one piece on that far side.'

McLoughlin nodded. The only hope of any possible internal trapped chambers. 'How long before we might know?'

'An hour, two maybe. There's still almost five foot of rubble before we get

to that point. But hopefully the ground radar might pick something up beforehand.'

They'd been regularly running ground radar sweeps, but the confusion of rubble and steel support strands allowed no more than a few feet clear reference.

'And if the first floor has been breached cleanly, what are the chances then?'

Incoccia shrugged. 'Any section of the first floor which might have sheered off unbroken, got jammed on rubble beneath and created a gap. But we've got another problem then.'

'What's that?'

'Time. Any gap would probably

only be a few foot high at most. At this rate it could take anything from nine to twelve hours to reach it. Unlikely there'd be enough air to sustain anyone that long.'

McLoughlin's hands clasped tight. He'd never forgive himself if they found a clutch of small bodies trapped and unmarked in a gap at the bottom, only to discover that they'd starved of oxygen just an hour beforehand. The last body had been cleared from the ninth floor over forty minutes ago; they should be finished their floor by floor search by now. He took out his walkie-talkie and made contact with Hockham, the team leader. Hockham crackled back that they were almost finished on the third floor.

'Wrap it up as soon as you can,' urged McLoughlin. 'We need more help on the ground.'

At least the thermal sensors might now give more accurate readings. At first they'd also shown the dead as well, the sensors picking up residual body heat. Now the dead would be cold and the sensors would hopefully pick up only those still alive.

McLoughlin's breath showed on the night air. With the last daylight fading, a chill pall of desolation washed over him. It looked like it was going to be a long and cold night, with only body bags to mark the time. McLoughlin focused in on the mound of rubble and the helmet lights flickering across it, as if his

mind's eye might sear beyond and give him a fleeting snapshot image of what lay at its core. But no image came. Nothing to ease his sense of desolation. Could anyone really still be alive beneath there?

The blue lights pulsed across Maria Tanner's face three rows back from the police cordon.

She'd lost her place at the front of the cordon five times now: twice to visit the makeshift incident room set up, a consumers and regulatory office sixty yards away, and the three phone calls to Josette. No answer yet on her cell-phone. *We are unable to connect your call at this moment. Please try again*

later.

How long before Josette was free from her meeting in New Orleans? But another part of her had felt strangely relieved at getting no answer. Her hands had been shaking on the handset each time she'd dialled out. What was she going to say? How would she even start to break such news? That there had been a bomb, and her beloved Daniel was one of the children still buried beneath the rubble. Or perhaps she'd embellish the truth, say that a number of children had been found alive and she was heading to the hospital that minute – hopefully Daniel would be one of them. Provide a glimmer of hope so that she didn't have to hear her daughter break down, wail

and protest as she herself had with the first stark details of what had happened.

As they'd been delivered by a policeman who had already no doubt done the same with a succession of distraught mothers and relatives – the bomb, the collapsed building, yes, unfortunately it has mainly affected the side with the nursery '...We're doing absolutely everything we can' – she'd clung to disbelief. Daniel couldn't be among them. He'd gone out to the corridor to the washroom, had left the nursery for some reason for a moment. He'd appear at any minute, unharmed.

But the long minutes then hours of waiting had bit by bit broken through her numbness, her disbelief. Only two found

alive so far, they'd said. She'd been asked if she had a photo of Daniel, and fished one out of her wallet with trembling hands. Daniel at his third birthday party. A quick consultation with a female officer and a medic with a register behind. 'No, your grandson's not one of those found alive, I'm afraid.' Tight smile of re-assurance. 'But he's not one of those found dead either, so there's still hope. Check back with us here every hour or so, or if you wish you can wait in a seat over there. There's some hot coffee and chocolate being served.'

She'd decided to go back to the cordon. She could see each time they found a fresh body. The raking through

rubble would halt, others would look over to the point of discovery and then quickly group to start helping remove the remaining rubble. Medics would be called and beckoned over, and then the body would be loaded onto a stretcher and carried away. As it came closer to the ambulances, she could tell if the body was small or not.

Jack would have known what to do. Would have barked orders and taken control and had the Police Commissioner himself digging with his bare hands, if necessary. Her, she just felt washed along with the tide. Her only grandson buried under tons of rubble and probably dead, and she was just another powerless, concerned face among the

crowd.

As the tears streamed down her cheeks, she pushed forward to regain her position at the front of the cordon.

Silence. Tony Anderson found it unsettling.

Only four other people in the central control room, that was probably why. Normally the room was filled with activity and bustle. Now most of his team was four blocks away, picking through a half bombed-out building.

The control room, known as 'the trench', was thirty foot square and flanked on three sides by the small cubicle offices of nine of the agents working directly under him, and his own

office: two cubicles wide and the only one with a window looking out onto the control room. Six researchers and clerks worked in the central control area, though the agents also often used the facilities: five spare desks, each with PCs and dumb terminals linked to the central mainframe on the ground floor.

Beyond was the maze of the 'puzzle palace' – the in-house nickname for FBI headquarters on Pennsylvania Avenue. Its endless corridors and doors had reminded Anderson of the introduction to the 60s TV series, 'Get Smart'. He'd got lost repeatedly his first month out of training from Quantico.

Most of the building was research and admin, but in departments handling

‘sensitive’ information, agents often visited directly or travelled to liaise with local field offices. Counter-Terrorism, CT, was one of those departments, and at any one time anything from twenty to forty percent of his agents would be out on assignment. Now with the bomb activity so close, almost every cubicle was empty.

‘Do you want me to try Josette's number again?’

Anderson looked over at Betty Meineck, one of the control room clerks. She'd tried Josette's cell-phone an hour before with no success. Josette would probably by now be deep into her meeting with Gaskin.

‘No, it's okay. Leave it till later.’ He

was more anxious now to hear news from his team on 14th Street. On the last call twenty minutes ago, they'd still been waiting for the all-clear from the fire and safety team to get up to the ninth floor – now confirmed as the source of the explosion.

The plane bombing six days ago had been bad enough, but this was different. This was on their own doorstep, less than half a mile away. If his office had been at the front of the building, he'd have probably heard the blast directly.

They'd already gone on red alert. All the puzzle-palace tourist excursions that day had been cancelled, and probably would be for most of the next week. Until they got to the bottom of just

how someone had planted an *inside* bomb.

When he spoke to Josette, no doubt he'd get the benefit of her intuitive insight. Two years back he'd hardly noticed her, and now she was one of his main confidantes. Her work on the Scribe had been outstanding. Often she was first to decipher his veiled poetic or literary messages in the personals: always the *Washington Post* or *New York Times*. But then would self-effacingly claim it was more her mother. '*She's an English literature tutor and her knowledge of poetry is far stronger than mine. We work it out together.*'

Anderson smiled. Five people in his immediate department, another

twenty or so in various CT and CI departments answering upstairs to Frank Weaver, dozens of researchers and clerks, countless hours of computer time – and Josette and her mother nearing pension age often came up with the answer first.

Anderson sensed that half of the Scribe's pleasure came from throwing FBI departments used to stats and hard science into a netherworld of rhyme and romanticism. Complete anathema. Degrees in literature and knowledge of poetry were one of their last hiring criteria. But the Scribe would have laughed even louder if he knew how most of his clues were being solved.

Once when describing her to a

friend – *'Beyonce with a dash of Terri Hatcher. And she's got this wild hair, flowing yet crinkly'* – the friend had commented: 'Sounds like you've got a bit of a thing for her?'

'Nah. She's just a pleasant break in the landscape of stay-pressed shirts, sweat and beer pots around here.' But he wasn't sure he'd sounded convincing, even to himself.

When he'd heard about her separation, he'd sympathized and shared his experience from his own divorce four years ago. But as he sensed their relationship might verge into something else, he'd stepped sharply back. It would be a bad career move; one of them would end up having to be shifted

to another department. Besides, he was almost ten years older and probably wasn't her type anyway.

Anderson looked across. Meineck was waving frantically. His pulse leapt. No doubt Jefford and the rest of the team had got clearance from fire and safety to go up to the ninth.

'It's Josette's mother – Maria.'

Anderson was puzzled. She'd never before phoned to speak to him directly. Perhaps some update message on one of the deciphers from the Scribe. He reached for the phone.

Koenitz hit Washington National Airport at 5.14 pm, fifty-two minutes to boarding for his flight to Tampa. After

checking in, he headed for the washroom to freshen up.

Predictably, his cell-phone had rung only minutes after the first news announcements. Steve Rowe: subdued, flat tone: 'Obviously we've got to meet. Things didn't go quite as we planned.' Insecure phone line, Rowe was careful not to give anything away. They arranged a time and Rowe rang off.

Had he read an undertone of smugness in Rowe's voice? Rowe, the ex-FBI man and planner, priming him for what was to come. Rowe would no doubt sit thoughtfully in the background while Cagill delivered his dressing down.

How should he play it? Sit as the fall guy while Rowe tried to score

brownie points with Cagill, or deflect: stick to his guns that the charge set had been right to take out only the ninth floor. The building must have had some structural problem, and since Rowe had provided the main building plans, that was more down to him.

Koenitz finished washing his hands and splashed some water on his face. His eyes in the mirror ahead looked startled, the pupils dilated. Anger more than guilt in his eyes, but still it could be read wrong. He should try and calm himself more before the meeting with Rowe and Cagill.

Josette wondered why she felt cold. An hour after sunset and the Gulf Coast

temperature was probably still close to 16° or 17°C, practically a heatwave after Washington. But still she felt cold. Perhaps the damp.

It was raining heavily when she took the taxi from New Orleans airport, subsiding to drizzle by the time she reached the stretch of bayou beyond Lafitte. The taxi driver would have had difficulty finding the deserted warehouse set up for the crash investigation – the closest large covered building – if the site hadn't already become something of a local landmark. The crash had dominated national and local news the past days, and on the weekend past crowds of sightseers had descended to watch the NTSB and FBI trudge and

trawl through the mud and shallow swampland for bodies and wreckage.

Most of the bodies had been retrieved within the first twenty-four hours. But the deeper swampland had been harder to trawl and search, and still the occasional body was found days later. Gaskin related the activities of the past few days as they paced the cavernous warehouse.

Dampness. Dampness and mist permeated everything looking from the taxi window: dripping from tree branches and catkin tendrils, damp mist rising from the swampland, moss like laden sponge carpeting tree trunks and rocks. And in the warehouse, long deserted, it showed in dark spore spots

on the walls, some of them now a rich green mould. Where the roof had rotted through or suffered storm damage – at least five places that Josette could see – water dripped down onto the plane wreckage being identified and sorted twenty foot below. Josette felt the dampness permeating through to her very bones. She shivered.

'A team of twenty or more has been working virtually around the clock,' said Gaskin. 'Eight or nine NTSB, four in my team, and an assortment of local police and state troopers – mostly those with some diving experience. It's been hard going because almost half the wreckage was under water or buried in mud.' Gaskin grimaced. 'We're still missing

twenty percent of it, and I doubt at the end of the day we'll find it all. Never do. There's always a few bits we can't find.'

One of the FBI's leading explosives experts, Gaskin was invariably called in to work alongside the NTSB with any plane crash where a bomb was suspected. In his early fifties with thinning sandy-brown hair, he wore a light brown raincoat over traditional feeble black suit, dark tie, white shirt. Darker brown spots showed on the raincoat from the leaking roof.

Josette followed Gaskin's gaze along the fragmented line of debris, the first stage of the skeletal re-construction of the aircraft. 'How long before they finish?'

‘Four or five weeks. If there's a lot of pieces missing, possibly longer. We'll have to work round the gaps.’ Gaskin was lost in thought for a second. Six large floodlamps on makeshift gantries lit the area, and two diesel generators hummed each side. Most of the workers busy sorting had kept on raincoats or oilskins because of the steadily leaking roof.

‘But this time we were lucky,’ Gaskin remarked. ‘We didn't have to wait long into the re-construction to strike gold.’ Gaskin paced to the far side of the warehouse. Josette followed.

Gaskin pointed to a large curved metal sheet with an assortment of smaller pieces around. ‘This is what

initially made us believe it was an accident. Outward bending and fragmentation on these pieces, inward on those immediately facing or adjoining. We thought we'd found the cause straightaway. Exploding fuel tank. Rare, but it can happen with an almost empty tank and a build up of vapours. There've been some problems with 747s and vapours in empty tanks igniting, but not so much with 737s. That's why we kept looking.'

Gaskin went over to two similar pieces of metal and held them up. 'And finally discovered this: burn marks and discolouration on the outside of this bit of tank.' Gaskin joined the two pieces together, and the burn wisps knitted

perfectly. 'This proved that the burn marks occurred *before* the explosion, not after. So we knew that a fire outside set the tank off, but still we didn't have its source.' Gaskin paced over to a black plastic groundsheet with three lengths of metal pipe.

Josette could see Gaskin's excitement mounting. This is what he lived for: the chase for clues and solutions. All Josette could think of, looking at the scattered wreckage, was the horror. The stark photos flashed again through her mind. The bodies had already been removed, but still some ghostly reminders were evident in the background: a handbag, an item of clothing, a child's doll. Josette shuddered.

Her eye had picked out the background detail, in the same way that Gaskin looked beyond for his clues. Except each of them had seen something different. Josette focused on the small length of pipe Gaskin held up.

'Quite ingenuous,' Gaskin remarked. He ran a finger around the jagged edge of the pipe. 'This is part of the fuel line between the engine and tank. This break indicates that it blew before the tank, so I sent the other end to match this for analysis. The results came back confirming what I suspected: small trace of nitro.'

'So it was nitro that downed the plane?'

'Not exactly. The nitro was just to

break through the fuel line and ignite the fuel. The resultant fire than finally blew the tank. Whoever planted this didn't expect it to be discovered. It was probably just a minute ampoule of nitro taped to the fuel pipe. An inch long at most.'

'What about a timer or radio-link detonator?'

Gaskin smiled. 'This is where our bomber got clever. Nitro-glycerine has a freezing point of thirteen-point-three centigrade. Below that it's stable. So he pulls it down below that and tapes it in place in its frozen, crystallized form. The plane's flying from St Paul, Minnesota. At this time of year, rarely above five centigrade. Flying at altitude,

the temperatures are again low, the nitro stays frozen. But as it starts its descent into the Gulf Coast, it's mid-afternoon and temperatures are close to twenty-one centigrade. It would have hit thirteen-point-three at about four or five thousand feet. The nitro becomes liquid, the molecules start rubbing together – and *boom!*" Gaskin studied Josette's reaction for a second, then: 'Remind you of anyone?'

So this was meant to be the significance: why Anderson had been so secretive and insisted on her personally visiting the crash site. 'You mean the Scribe?'

'Can you think of anyone else who relies so strongly on natural elements to

set off his devices?"

But the theory didn't sit comfortably with her. 'His only victim so far has been from a heart attack due to one of his explosions. And suddenly he decides to kill a hundred and forty. I don't buy it.'

'It was your department that analyzed his last newspaper clue, not me.'

Errors? There have been far greater errors of vermilion breathlessness, like shapeless smoke. Their shapes are torn across the paper sky. Hope no more than a blinding skyward light. But could it have signified an exploding plane? Only part was from the original verse: James Kirkup's Ghosts, Fire, Water, inspired

by the Hiroshima panels. The additions were the Scribe's, the whole suddenly seamless, the Scribe for a day giving himself immortality alongside the grand masters of verse. Shared glory.

Josette shook her head. 'The skyward reference could have meant anything. And as far as I remember from your reports, the Scribe has never used nitro.'

'No. But he's used everything else: MEKP, mercury fulminate and lead stoffinate. And I'm damn sure he'd have used nitro if it fitted the bill. Only it hasn't – until now. The common thread is that he's a master at combining common elements and unstable substance reactions. No timers, no radio or micro-switches. Just raw nature. The

Unabomber kept railing against technology taking over, yet every bomb was set with a timer or micro-switch detonator. Sort of hypocritical, wouldn't you say? Anti-technology bomber using technology to make his point.' Gaskin smiled wryly. 'In comparison, the Scribe's a class act. No crude and clumsy parcel bombs for him, and not a wire or bit of mechanism in sight. Just the elements outside – and those within.'

Much of Josette's crash course in explosives terminology had been courtesy of Gaskin's reports the past months: *Ingenious. The acetone evaporated between 48 and 96 hours, leaving the MEKP dry and unstable. The logo on the letter was a porous*

mastic mix – once it dried out, the mercury fulmonate beneath ignited. The scenarios were invariably the same: a letter impregnated with a solution that would become unstable within four days. Nearly all of them had ignited while filed away. Eight fires had been small with damage only to the immediate cabinet, four moderate and three extensive – the most serious gutting three entire floors of a Treasury office. Only one life lost so far. Until now.

Josette bit her lip. She found Gaskin's perverse admiration hard to reconcile with the destruction around her. 'If it wasn't for the loss of life, I might buy it. But that part just doesn't fit.'

Gaskin held one hand up. 'You're

the guys who do the psychological profiles. I just thought with his last newspaper reference – and certainly if we're looking at a profile purely from the explosives view – we have a match. The rest is up to you.'

But having resisted, Josette began to wonder: the people sifting through the wreckage, the water dripping from the roof, Gaskin shrugging, the stark photos of the crash – all of it seemed to press in on her, and suddenly her mind leapt beyond: to the flash in the sky, to a young boy she recalled from one of the Hiroshima panels looking up in stark surprise, his face reflecting the harsh reds and whites of the explosion... and then the bodies and debris falling.

Drifting through the mist into the swamp-land below. Gaskin's cell-phone ringing broke her thoughts.

He answered it and spoke for a second, then held it out to her. 'It's your mother.'

It felt somehow surreal, part of her previous reverie, and why not to her own phone? Then she recalled that she'd switched it off for the flight; obviously she'd forgotten to put it back on.

As she reached for the phone, she felt uneasy. Probably nothing: just the chill damp of the warehouse and her own brief dark contemplation. But her initial gut reaction that something was wrong for her mother to call her like this overrode. Her hand was trembling even

before she heard her mother's first words.

2

Vice-President Andrew Landry busily sorted the day's e-mail. First his own, then he came onto the President's: 46 items! Almost twice his own e-mails, and that was just the President's direct, personal messages. The President's secretary would probably have received twice as many again.

Landry started through the files. It was a system Landry had helped devise: e-mail number for general correspondence, separate e-mail for direct and personal messages or those with a high security classification. The direct e-mail number was held by no

more than fifteen Senators and a handful of State Governors, and stature and importance both within the White House and beyond was often delineated by who received the direct number. Most first world heads of state had the number, third world invariably went to his secretary, unless it was a current political hot spot.

When the President was away, the messages would be re-routed to Landry, who would then sort accordingly: immediate attention by himself or other, appropriate Chiefs of Staff; to await President's return or be re-routed to the President's personal communicator; non-sensitive, to be passed to the President's secretary – in which case Landry would

immediately re-direct the e-mail and delete from his own PC. Invariably seventy percent would be passed on and deleted. Today was no different.

Most were condolence or support messages in the wake of the bombing. The President certainly chose his moments to be away, Landry brooded. The past two hours had been a deluge of calls: Secretary of State, National Security Advisers, Press and PR aides.

When the first calls had come through, Landry had brought the President's schedule up on screen, scanning quickly down: *London, Chequers, Oxford Union address... Bonn, Berlin... then Rome for the G7 conference.* Six day tour. He could see

that at that moment the President would be on Air Force One bound for Bonn. Landry had spoken to him briefly early that morning, and Weimann had been more excited about being able to sneak a drink with his old Oxford soulmate Terry Kenyon than meeting the Queen and the usual round of state receptions.

Mark Tindall wasn't available immediately, so Landry had set up a conference call with himself, Secretary of State William Mankiewicz, National Security Adviser Henry Calder, and the President on Air Force One. Twenty minutes of updates, opinions and delineation of duties, and the conclusion was drawn that the President would have to make an announcement. The

sooner the better.

Weimann established that he would only take calls for the next half hour with updates. Then he was going to be busy with press aides and speech writers to knock something into shape. ‘That is, after the problem of commandeering a back room at the Bonn Parliament and getting it to look like the back parlour at the White House.’

All messages after that half hour to be e-mailed to the AF1 computer. When Weimann left AF1, it would route automatically through to his personal laptop. He would check it regularly for messages.

Landry looked up as his phone buzzed and flashed: line 3, his PA

Jennifer. He picked up.

'Mark Tindall on the line,' she announced.

'Okay, put him through. Then hold everything for the next forty minutes, unless it's the President, Mankiewicz or Calder. I've got more files to sort through than I expected.'

The Attorney General came on the line. Soft drawl, somewhere between Albuquerque and Maine. 'Terrible business this, terrible. You start to wonder just how far these hotheads will go.'

In a year of heated reference to right wing militias, never rednecks, Landry noted. Tindall had spent much of his life – at university and serving in

office – outside of his native Texas, but perhaps that might bring it too close to home.

As Tindall continued with his diatribe – 'Only the ninth floor was the plan apparently... but it went wrong. Can't do even that right. That's the problem with having two right feet.' – Landry half switched off. He'd heard little more for the past two hours. He continued opening and scanning the President's e-mail as he 'ummed and yeah'd' at the right moments.

'... At least there'll be one compensation.'

Landry paused momentarily on the keyboard. Unfamiliar line and angle. 'What's that?'

'Terrible that it should come from something like this – but it's going to help us Thursday week in Congress.'

Trust Tindall to find a bright light from the disaster, thought Landry. The latest extension of the Cullen Bill on gun control, by far the toughest so far presented, would hit the House of Representatives floor for votes in two weeks, having spent the past months fighting through Hearings and Rules. Support had been rallied in every quarter possible, but Tindall still feared it might go marginally against them. Though Tindall was probably right: even the most ardent hard-liners would be softened by the sight of a stream of small bodies carried from the rubble. Grand

strategy politics: what tears for eighty-four dead when the lives of thousands might be saved by the Bill at stake? But with the blood so freshly spilled, Landry couldn't bring himself to share Tindall's enthusiasm; especially since the bombing had probably been in retaliation to the proposed Bill extension. All he could muster was, 'I suppose so.'

'Yes, well.' Tindall's tone faltered, perhaps picking up on Landry's apathy. 'It would be nice if at least some purpose and good came out of all of this for those poor souls and their relatives, never mind the rest of us. Some rhyme and reason beyond the senseless loss of life.'

'Certainly, it would be nice to think that.' Only Tindall would be able to convert sacrificial lambs to martyrs to the cause in the same sentence. Tindall's ability to make legal terminology almost lyrical was legion. Hopefully it would work similar magic with Congress next week.

'At least this first stage should hopefully see an easy passage.'

'Yes.' The main underlying concern: though the voting in the House of Representatives might be aided, the final Senate vote – in which a higher majority of three-fifths was required – would be months away. Would the incident have waned by then, political opinion's hardened again? 'Even before

this incident, I'm sure we had enough support to ensure walking *both* floor votes. Sit back, Mark, stop worrying. The Bill's sound, it's passed through the committees with minimal modification, the support's there.' Landry continued opening, scrolling and sorting e-mails: *Japanese Prime Minister, sympathy and support. Ohio State Governor, condolence.* Both for the President's Secretary. *Washington Police Commissioner, latest on manpower deployment on the bombing, core investigative and search areas:* re-direct to Bonn.

'The NRA are throwing everything they have at this. We know the more obvious areas of support they've rallied.

But it could be just the tip of the iceberg.'

'Sure, the ride will be rough, we knew that from the outset. But you've done your bit. From hereon in—' Landry's voice trailed off as the next item came up on screen. From Clifford Druille, FBI Director, announcing the uncovering of evidence that the Gulf Coast airlines crash *was* a bomb. '*...We had planned initially to make an official press statement tomorrow morning. But we fear there may have already been a leak to the Press – possibly the NTSB staff on site –*'

'...We could see filibustering and amendment calls of all manner arising.' With the silence from Landry's end,

Tindall prompted. 'Are you okay, Andy?'

'Yes, yes... fine.' '—so announcements or speculation could come earlier. Signs have also been found of a possible link with the Scribe, which again might have been passed onto the press. In the circumstances, I thought you should be advised promptly.' Landry felt sweat beading on his forehead. If the item had leaked, it could be on the evening news. And then the President would come on immediately afterwards, uplinked from Bonn, and would talk at length about the scourge of terrorism at home and abroad, and the shock, horror and atrociousness felt by every true American at that afternoon's bombing.

The 147 dead only six days ago wouldn't get a mention. It would be a PR disaster. Open season for the press and opinion polls for months ahead. 'Look – Mark. I've got to go. Something urgent's come up. I've got an incoming from the President in Bonn on the other line... catch you later.'

Landry checked his watch as he hung up: 5.23 pm. 11.23 pm in Bonn. AF1 would have landed over an hour and a half ago. If Weimann hadn't already started the announcement, he would at that moment probably be busy with cameramen, make-up and final props. Even if he caught him, would there be time for speech writers and PR aids to work it in? Landry bit at his lip

as he made the e-mail transfer.

Queen's College, Oxford

'So what is the latest extension to the Cullen Bill?'

'Calling for a statutory five year sentence for felons apprehended carrying firearms.'

'And what were the previous extensions?'

'Banning felons from carrying firearms, then getting it upgraded from a misdemeanour to a felony.'

'What else?'

'Banning of assault weapons such as fully automatics, and outlawing of cop-killer bullets: bullets which can pierce body armour and bullet-proof jackets.'

Bernard Tanner watched the debate swirl around him, with answers winging from various parts of the room. Most of the ground had already been covered by their lecturer, Terence Kenyon, during past PPE tutorials. This was now one of Kenyon's famous animated seminars. If the group had grasped the subject well, Kenyon felt that they should not only know its every nuance and angle, but have started to form their own opinions – be able to argue vehemently from that angle if need be.

Seminars were Kenyon's preferred arena to allow the right level of interactive debate: tutorials were too personal, lectures too remote. On average, Kenyon held eight or nine

seminars a month.

'And which lobby group will present the strongest opposition to this latest extension?'

'The National Rifle Association.'

Kenyon had previously brought home to them the sheer ludicrousness of the NRA's lobbying power, with a higher PAC* spend than the National Education Association or the Association of American Trial Lawyers. *'...If you are left with any doubt as to the importance of the gun in American society, then just remind yourselves that the NRA lobby spends more than the main lobby representation of the entire education or legal establishments. Certainly in lobby terms at least, guns are more*

important than education or law!'

'Who else will throw up opposition?' Kenyon asked.

'Gun Owners of America. The Committee of Seventy-Seventy-Six. Citizens Committee for the Right to Bear Arms... various right-wing militia groups.'

'And the list goes on.' Kenyon waved one arm dramatically. 'American Firearms Association - an offshoot hardline faction of the NRA. Citizens Against Legal Loopholes... Preservation of Firearms Ownership. All of them more reactionary and right wing than the NRA, but thankfully with far less lobby funding or muscle. Their opposition is mainly visible through blogs and

messages on the Web and demonstrations.'

Kenyon was in full flow. Wild and wavy red-blond hair and beard, now heavily tinged with grey. Of all Bernard's PPE studies, International Politics with Kenyon was his favourite. American domestic or international politics were every three lessons: Constitutional Law, Congress, Supreme Court and current reform debates: health care, inner city rejuvenation, welfare, abortion, now gun-control.

Kenyon paced more deliberately as the debate started to gain momentum. 'Okay – who'll be spokesman for the more liberal American viewpoint?' A few hands went up, but Kenyon ignored

them, fixing on Bernard. ‘Tanner – you look like a liberal American to me. And representing America's good ol' apple pie right wing... Howell, you look like you'd make a good mad dog militia member.’

Chuckles from most of the room. Jeremy Howell couldn't have been further from that image. Howell was slim, asthmatic, studious, wore wire frame glasses and spent most of his time on his dorm computer. But Bernard could quickly see why Kenyon had made that choice: despite his mild manner Howell could be outspoken, was invariably one of the most outraged by abuses of civil liberties and, because he spent an inordinate time on the Internet,

had more exposure to America's right-wing hate bombardment: church fires, pipe bombs, UN conspiracies, advise on how to kill ATF investigators... *'only head shots, to avoid their bullet-proof jackets.'* Jeremy Howell had become one of Bernard's closest friends during his two years at Oxford.

The American view? Bernard was one of only two Americans in the room of fourteen, but still he felt uneasy when lecturers honed in on him. He'd spent only four years in America before Oxford, the rest of his life spent embassy hopping with his family.

'Let's start with the liberal viewpoint in support of the motion,' Kenyon said.

Bernard got to his feet so that his voice would carry. 'This extension was long overdue. Before we had a weak-kneed situation whereby felons had been outlawed from applying for or carrying firearms – but few teeth to back up that threat.' He levered on his hands rested on the desk top as he surveyed the class. 'What was one more crime to a felon already with a string of convictions. Only those on parole would have felt its affect. And at the outset, when it was just a misdemeanour, it was hardly better than a parking ticket. Every criminal sector escaped unscathed. But even this now, I fear, is only a halfway house to what we should see – a *total* ban on handguns across America.'

Howell rose to the bait, was quickly on his feet. '*Ridiculous!* My colleague shows a complete lack of knowledge or respect for the history of American civil liberties. Something which many Presidents – and this one in particular – have ignored to their cost.' Howell cited other classic civil liberties infringements, counting them off on his fingers: internment of Japanese Americans after Pearl Harbour, McCarthyism, black segregation in the sixties. 'And if we go further back – trying to stop the negroes from voting. It's a never ending catalogue of disasters.'

The last raised muted boos and mumbling from the class. Right wing

militias were historically anti-Communist and anti-black, but had taken recently to muddying civil liberties issues in an attempt to clean their image and gain ethnic support. A JFPO – Jews for the Preservation of Firearms Ownership – had even recently been launched on the net. Howell suppressed a smile. He was having fun; highlighting the ridiculousness of America's right wing by throwing up their more extreme arguments.

'Isn't a fundamental civil liberties issue *life* itself,' Bernard countered. 'How can my colleague even dare utter the term when we have scores of young men, women and children gunned down every day. Almost twelve thousand

killed each year in America due to handguns. And in Great Britain as in the rest of Europe – that handgun death toll is no more than twenty-five annually.' The statistics were courtesy of Kenyon's past lessons: 22 last year in the UK, 68 in Canada, 87 in Japan, and a staggering 11,719 in the U.S. Kenyon had catapulted from recent fiery gun control debates in the UK and New Zealand into direct comparisons with the USA. A catalogue of mass murders, drive-by shootings, gang shoot-outs and neighbourhood arguments ended with Saturday night specials – unparalleled anywhere in the Western world. America was under siege.

Yet as Kenyon soberly pointed out

– the gun was so strongly embroidered in American society and history, underwritten in the Constitution, the trusty companion of every true-blooded pioneer who'd fought back the early frontier barriers, and endorsed by every American hero from Davy Crockett to John Wayne. *'...That even if America could shake itself loose of its Constitutional legal shackles, those representative images would still remain. For many Americans, you might just as well try and take away their cars. Progress will be slow and difficult.'*

Bernard took part of those stats to nail his point home: 'If my colleague would really have us believe that this

abnormally high homicide rate has little or nothing to do with the proliferation of guns in America – then what are we left with: that Americans have far poorer social conditions or are naturally more violent and unbalanced than their European counterparts? Ridiculous! They can't have it both ways – it just doesn't wash. I know my colleague would strongly argue the first – but the second's more difficult when you're such a prime example.' Bernard waved one hand theatrically towards Howell. 'No doubt violent if provoked and *certainly* unbalanced.'

Mild cheering from the back. Howell smiled wryly as Kenyon held one hand up. 'Let's try and keep it within

the confines of normal political debate. Valid point – but perhaps stronger without the closing personal barb.'

Howell threw back more statistics, pointing out that States introducing tough handgun restrictions had in large taken them out of the hands of law-abiding citizens. 'The criminals have kept their guns and have had freer range to run havoc, knowing that levels of protection have diminished. A recent University of Chicago study shows that without these recent restrictions, since 1993 as many as eighteen hundred murders and three thousand rapes would have been avoided.'

'Then how do you explain that States with the highest rates of violence

also have the laxest gun control laws,' Bernard countered. 'In Texas or Louisiana we have the ridiculous situation where gun deaths now exceed automobile fatalities, yet in places like Vermont with low guns per capita, we find low murder rates to suit. And then take Vancouver and Seattle, two cities similar both culturally and geographically – with one big exception: the stricter Canadian attitude to handguns. Which might explain why the gun murder rate is ten times higher in Seattle.'

As they hurled statistics at each other, Kenyon paced and gesticulated like an excitable referee. 'Good, good. This is exactly the sort of thing brought

into play by both sides.'

Bernard brought up the 100,000 convicted felons prevented from having handguns by the Cullen Bill; Howell countered with the fact that gun ownership was levelling out naturally, 'Without government interference.' Trying to bring things back to a civil liberties infringement issue.

Bernard pointed out that some people needed their civil liberties protected by others, 'Particularly children', and raised the effectiveness of gun-free zones around schools.

Howell argued that yet again this was another strong civil liberties inequality. 'Many people within that half mile radius have little or nothing to do

with school activities. Their rights are being infringed.'

It became a game of tennis, and Kenyon was loving every minute. This is what he lived for: not just pumping students with information, as many a lecturer would settle for, but firing them up with enthusiasm and setting debates in motion which would hopefully emulate the floor motions and wrangling in Congress or Parliament. What better preparation for a future in real-life politics?

Although he knew that less than eight percent of his class would ever make that transition — a gulf poignantly underlined for Kenyon each time he saw his old classmate, Lawrence Weimann,

on newscasts. They'd both studied under Professor Aitchison, one of the leading international politics lecturers of that time, when Weimann was on a post-graduate Phd course from Harvard. Kenyon had gone on to emulate Aitchison, Weimann had joined the real world.

Kenyon was the only one Weimann had maintained contact with from his Oxford days and, watching Kenyon's enthusiasm now with the debate, Bernard couldn't help wondering if he was more fired up than normal after Weimann's recent visit. Word on campus was that after the Oxford Union address and dinner, Weimann and Kenyon had sneaked off with half a dozen secret

service agents and commandeered their old local pub, *'The Crown'*, for an after-hours drink.

Bernard's and Howell's arguments started finally to lose steam, and Kenyon interceded. 'Okay. What are the main points demonstrated by this debate?'

Comments started winging in; Kenyon honed in on one. 'Yes, the desperation of the far right. That's why they've now gone to the Supreme Court to try and dilute the sweeping federal powers of the Cullen Bill. But remember: Supreme Court. This is the end of the line for them on everything already passed through Congress. They can't go anywhere else. And if they lose – which I think they will – the same path

with future Cullen Bill extensions is going to be definitely muddled.'

Kenyon fenced a few further minor points before someone raised what he was looking for. He clenched his fist for emphasis, pulling the point from the air.

'Exactly!' What should have come out strongest from the arguments is not just the strong gulf between the liberals and the right – but how both look at the very same facts and interpret them differently. And thus the strong underlying message: this is a debate on which there will be no meeting ground!' Kenyon started pacing. 'But far more worrying is while you might think it easy to discount the more extreme, right-wing views – confident that in the end the liberal

viewpoint will hold sway because its a stronger representation of mainstream America – think again.'

Kenyon stopped and looked long and hard at the class. 'In states such as Texas, Wyoming, Montana, Arizona, Louisiana – the gun is as much a part of everyday life as the pick-up truck. So while we might wish the President and his office all the best next week with Congress – don't forget that the battle will be long and hard, with progress measured in inches rather than miles. And even if successful, next week's extension might be the last seen for some while: perhaps the furthest that this administration feels it can go in curbing guns in America. I'll be taking this same

class in three years time with a fresh set of faces and political hopefuls, and probably still talking about eleven or twelve thousand gun deaths that year in America.' Kenyon smiled tightly. 'Nothing too much will change.'

The shapes glowed pinky red with pale green tinges among the grey background on the small screen: three in that one area. The operator shifted across. And another one there! He called out excitedly. 'Mike, I think I've found something.'

Wratten left off from his own scanning and came across. Of the two Fire department heat sensor operators, Mike Wratten had the stronger

experience.

Wratten studied the single shape, then went back to the others. 'I don't know, that one on the left certainly looks too large to be a body, and that one too small. The other two, maybe.'

With the calling out and activity, McLoughlin was attracted. He looked over Wratten's shoulder at the scanner. 'So two maybes. And the others – what do you think they are?'

'At the center of the explosion, chunks of rubble and metal cabinets and desks would have become superheated. Then they're buried amongst a pile of rubble and plaster, packed in tight. The heat's retained.' Wratten moved his hands as if smoothing the top of a

bowling ball. 'Pretty much the same principle as an Hawaiian mud-bake.'

McLoughlin nodded and grimaced. Graphic description, but with them sifting bodies from rubble in near zero temperatures, probably the last image they wanted was Wratten's luau bake out from his last summer holiday. 'So, what would you recommend?'

'More concentrated digging towards the two shapes that could be bodies. But monitor them closely throughout. If the pink areas reduce in size, then they're also simply chunks of superheated rubble or metal. We're looking for pinky-red epicentres which remain constant to be sure that they're bodies.'

'How far down are they?'

'Six foot, maybe seven.'

McLoughlin stared hard at the two pink glows on screen. In the past hour, they'd dragged out nothing but bodies, and a girl of four so badly injured that he heard she'd died on the way to the hospital. McLoughlin's spirits had sunk deeper with each black bag zipped. Two pink glows. Two glimmers of hope in a night of desolation. He wondered.

'Of course, there is something else that would indicate they're bodies,' Wratten said. 'If they move. Rubble and Hawaiian mud bakes don't move.'

3

'Andy. Thanks for the message. You've saved the day. I've got a couple of speech writers working on it right now.' President Weimann nodded sombrely as Landry at the other end of the line in Washington ran through some of the condolence messages which had come in.

'What time's the broadcast?' Landry enquired.

'We're aiming to run everything in thirty, forty minutes. Hopefully we'll get it in one take. But if not there's twenty minutes or so spare for re-takes and edit. As long as we hit the evening news at

home.' President Weimann sat in a large ante-room to the office where the broadcast would be made. Around him spun the activity of camera crew, technicians, make-up, his speech writers and aids. He sat to one side of the room, cut off from the activity, a resolute and lonely figure. If nothing else in his five years in office, he'd learned that when disaster struck, the advice came thick and fast – but in the end the decision was his. When the cacophony of voices built, he never felt more alone.

He'd finished make-up ten minutes ago, the pale earthy tones contrasting with his stone grey hair. The past years of office had taken him from salt and pepper to almost totally grey, though he

was sure that the news of the past hours had added a few grey hairs, an extra worry line. He'd felt the same after 911, had got used to dealing with terror and atrocities regularly in the international arena. But now, like Oklahoma, knowing that it was also a threat from within – that factions of his own people were so strongly divided that they'd take hundreds of lives to make their point – left a sourer taste in his mouth. And with this latest news now from Landry, possibly twice in only days. What in God's name was happening out there?

'I had Mark Tindall also on earlier,' commented Landry. 'Saying how at least this should help us with Congress next week.'

Weimann snorted. 'Sad reflection that it takes something like this to shake people up – but he's right. Even the old hardliners are going to be afraid to go up against such tough public opinion. The main thing all of this has shown us is that we're not going nearly far enough with this latest extension.' The thought had sparked shortly after his meeting with Kenyon. He might as well share it with Landry now than let him be hit with a fait accompli after the broadcast. 'I think we've been handed the opportunity to make a stand now that might not arise in quite the same way again.'

'In what way?'

'Well – some of this stems from my recent visit with Kenyon.' He explained

how Kenyon had reminded him about one of their first trips to London from Oxford as students: how alert, agitated he himself had been as they walked through Hyde Park, often looking over his shoulder. When Kenyon had asked why, he'd defended that he'd got used to it from trips to Chicago and New York. Just normal vigilance while in a big city. 'Kenyon reminded me that London was a totally different ball-game, with a murder rate of only ten to twenty percent of most American cities. But you know, it took me more than a year to relax in England, to realize that guns and violence play such a small part of everyday life that it hardly matters. And in my final days at Oxford, I felt safe.

Really safe. Of course, I'm the President now, so I don't feel safe *anywhere.*' Weimann chuckled briefly. 'But over a beer the other night, Kenyon reminded me of those days and commented: wouldn't it be nice if I could make America that safe? Few people would forget my term of office. I countered with what had been done with the Cullen Bill, which he applauded – but felt didn't go nearly far enough. And finally he got to the point of the Constitution and right-wing militias. The ludicrous situation that the right to bear arms they quote at every opportunity is drawn from an amendment drafted originally to help preserve national security. The very same security now being threatened in

their bid to keep their precious weapons.'

'What would you propose to do?' Landry couldn't see how this ideological debate with Kenyon, however cleverly it had spotlighted this anomaly, would play a part in a Presidential announcement.

'I think we've got to make a stand now, while public opinion is fired up against them. Make right wing militias aware that by their very actions they could lose their arms. In the same way that the second amendment states the right to bear arms is "necessary to the security of a free state" – those threatening national security may *lose* that right. The exact wording hasn't been worked out yet, the speech writers are

still busy with it – but right wing militias could find themselves suddenly categorized as no better than felons on future extensions of the Cullen Bill.'

Speech-writers playing with words of the Constitution? Landry felt a twinge of apprehension. 'Wouldn't it be best to spin it by Mark Tindall first? Put it to the acid test from a legal standpoint.'

'You and I both know Mark. He'd mull over it for days, and even then wouldn't give a firm indication either way. Would leave the final decision to someone else – probably me. And we don't have the time. We need to make our mark now while the whole thing is hot in the minds and consciousness of America. But it won't be an absolute.

There'll be plenty of time for Mark to tweak wording before this gets anywhere near Congress. We're just laying a pipe for now, a hint of what's to come as a warning shot across the bows for militias.'

Landry still felt uncertain. Concern for some constitutional blunder made in haste, or fear: over two hundred dead the past week. What would they do if heavily challenged – kill more? But no administration ever admitted to fear of terrorism, and so for Landry in that moment it translated into fear of the unknown. 'I'm just concerned that such an action might be hasty. We don't yet fully know who or what we're dealing with with these bombings; a few more days

might help establish that. And give Mark Tindall and others time to iron out any potentially problematical wording. As usual, not just a question of who'll you'll please – but who you might upset.'

Landry's caution. The main difference in their political styles, Weimann reflected. His own background had been purely political: Harvard and Oxford political degree and doctorate, then various positions within the Ohio State legislature, mostly chairing divisional committees, before becoming Ohio State Governor. Then finally head of the Democratic party's DLC before running for President. Landry, a year younger at fifty-four, had been in the Navy after Yale and a short spell with a

computer company. Later he'd joined Naval Intelligence and was heavily involved in code breaking and cy-ops. His political career didn't start until he gained a seat in the House of Representatives and served almost two terms before returning to a security role as Executive Secretary of the National Security Council.

Weimann felt that his own grasp of how to please a broad electorate was therefore stronger, whereas Landry's security background invariably shone through with how fringe groups react: lobbying, demonstrations, media manipulation; or now, with recent events, something more extreme. They usually proved a good foil for each

other, but at this moment Weimann was convinced the broader view had to hold sway.

'I think most stateside broadcasts tonight will already be making some pretty strong assumptions,' Weimann said. 'ATF offices *and* rumours about the Scribe. Speculation will be rife. If I get on national TV straight after without even a mention of right-wing militias, I'm going to look pretty foolish. But point taken: the words will be carefully chosen, we'll put the escape routes in the speech first in case we have to backtrack later.' To one side, Weimann could see one of the speech-writers looking over and lifting a hand. 'Got to go now, Andy. Looks like it's showtime.'

Terence Kenyon poured himself a half tumblerful of scotch from his study drinks cabinet and made his way down to the 'information' room. Converted ten years ago from a study room adjoining the library, students used it regularly for research from journals on disk, microfiche or the Internet.

But it was the satellite and cable linked TV in the corner which drew Kenyon's attention. He switched on, settled back into a chair, swirled his scotch and flicked the channel selector to CNN.

Weimann had phoned him from Germany just over an hour before. '... *Enjoyed our talk the other night. You*

might recognize part of it if you tune in to CNN tonight. The first broadcast is set for 9pm eastern seaboard time, so 2 am in England.'

It had been nice to see Weimann again and catch up. Their last meeting had been four years ago, a half-hour grabbed in the Red room when Kenyon had taken an afternoon off from a Washington promotional tour for his book, *THE GREAT DIVIDE - 'Changing Presidential/Congressional power in the post Watergate era.'* Weimann had just finished his first frustrating and largely ineffectual year in office, and fittingly the book focused on how three decades of Presidents had been increasingly thwarted by Congress.

The broadcast came on. Short introduction from the CNN studio, then it shifted to the President. American flag in the background one side, Emanuel Gotlieb Leutze's *Westward the course of Empire taking its way (Westward Ho!)*, the other. Early pioneering spirit.

The opening of the speech was predictable: atrociousness of the bombing, a dark and sad day for the nation. '.... *The hearts and souls of every American I'm sure is with those who have lost loved ones in the bombing...*'

Then only ten months after that Washington meeting with Weimann, his wife of eighteen years left him – taking custody of their only daughter, twelve at

the time – and he was thrown into the largest crisis of confidence of his life. She blamed his work, his books, the drink, the after lecture debates which invariably too ended up in the pub and so became an extension of all three; his family had been put last. And she was probably right, though it took him most of the year after to admit it. At the depths of his depression, he started to see himself as a sad Mr Chips figure, condemned to bachelorhood forever, his devotion to his work and his student's admiration the only remaining twilight years beacons.

' ...And then earlier today there was strong speculation that the recent Gulf Coast plane crash was also

caused by a bomb.'

Kenyon sat forward. Something new, not mentioned in last night's conversation – but was that why Weimann had asked him to watch?

Finally, fifteen months after the break up, he'd snapped himself out of his gloom and brightened his image with some new clothes and a sports car, a Jaguar XK8. Suddenly he discovered that some of the young students found him attractive. Eighteen months and three relationships later, despite the rejuvenation and boost to his confidence, he didn't feel either fulfilled or that he was being honest – to himself or his fleeting partners. Then he met Barbara, a classics lecturer at Oriel, at thirty-four

still far younger, but at least not young enough to be his daughter. Soul mates both intellectually and in their general views of life, gone was the uneasy feeling that his predominant appeal was as a guiding mentor, a father figure.

Kenyon swirled the scotch, took a quick slug. Weimann was hitting his stride.

'... Upon my return, I will be meeting with security advisors. And if it transpires that this wave of bombings is once again the responsibility of home bred militias, then I will be personally calling for the strongest possible resolutions against them. In particular it comes to my attention that these groups continually cite our

nation's Constitutional Second Amendment that, and I quote ..."a well regulated militia, being necessary to the security of a free state, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed."

'This was an amendment drafted by this nation's founders to preserve and protect the security of the State – not see it threatened from within by the sort of atrocities we've seen this week past. And I intend to see to it that this amendment is adhered to as our founding forefathers intended: that those protecting the security of this nation shall preserve the right to bear arms, but equally those attacking our nation's security shall forfeit that right.

Any group which supports or incites violence among its members against the State, its recognized agencies, the ATF, FBI or any arm of the police or military, or indeed against the public at large – we will seek to ban from carrying firearms in future extensions of the Cullen Bill. If by the actions of this week it has been the aim of militia groups to try and preserve their right to bear arms – then perhaps it's suitably ironic that it will end up having exactly the opposite affect.'

Kenyon noted Weimann's expression as the broadcast closed: hidden, enigmatic smile, perfect blend of irony and gravity. He took another slug of scotch and raised his glass in

salutation to the screen: *You did it at last. You made a stand!*

Aside from Barbara, what had helped shake away his past crisis of confidence had been all the bright hopefuls tutored through the years who might one day aspire to political greatness, practice what he'd preached. In one way at least, he had a foot in the real world.

But this was different league: the seed of an idea planted one day, regurgitated on national TV the next! The normal cause and effect which would take years through his students suddenly condensed to twenty-four hours. For the first time he got a jolt of what it was like to actually have a finger on the pulse of

the world outside: from a small back study room in Oxford, in his own small way he'd actually reached out and influenced a key event! Though perversely it also made him brood: is that what had been missing all these years?

As the President's broadcast finished on Josette's seat-back screen, she closed her eyes briefly. Strong words. Strong stuff. Just a shame it hadn't come earlier, *before...*

Josette bit her lip. The tears were close again. But she didn't want to cry now on a busy plane, surrounded by people she didn't know.

She'd held back her tears when

parting hurriedly from Gaskin. But then they'd hit after only minutes in the back of the taxi to the airport. Tears running unashamedly down her cheeks almost in time with the rain trickling down the side window, the grey mist outside matching her mood. She knew now how the relatives of the airline crash must have felt – before shaking the thought quickly away. *No. Daniel would be found alive.*

And in clinging to that hope, guilt had become the strongest emotion. Guilt that she hadn't been there – her mother had been the first to face the horror, hear the news. Josette had tried Sammy's number in Africa from the airport, but it went into message. She didn't leave one,

didn't have the first clue how to break the news: *our son's buried under tons of rubble. I'm heading there right now.*

And if she couldn't raise Sammy soon, she'd end up having to phone his parents. Leonard and Mitsy Horvath from Wellsboro, Pennsylvania. Now both in their seventies. Salt of the earth. And that would be as bad, if not worse. They doted on Daniel.

Josette noticed a young boy about Daniel's age two seats ahead across the aisle with his parents. And as the boy sensed her eyes on him and turned, she got a sudden image of Daniel emerging from the rubble and reaching out for her — only she wasn't there. She looked away as the tears stung her eyes. Even

when she got an image of hope to cling to, her own guilt was center-stage. She should have been there.

**** End of first three chapter sample
of The Second Amendment ****

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