

## PRAISE FOR THE WOMAN at la Gare de l'Est

A twisty, thrilling tale of the City of Light. Tuohy offers a thoroughly fun and consistently exciting tale with numerous twists and turns that will keep fans of suspense wondering about the identity of the villain...the narrative is well paced, well researched, and certain to be well loved by readers.

—*Kirkus Reviews*

A high-spirited caper set on the streets of Paris, *The Woman at la Gare de l'Est* is certain to beguile. A divertissement from start to finish, Tuohy has written a tale that will keep you on the edge of your straw seat and make you feel like you've just spent the most delightful interlude with the best company at The Sarah Bernhardt Bistro.

—Nina Solomon, author of *The Love Book and Single Wife*

Three women— an American actress, her newswoman sister with a bright four-year-old, and their Irish friend— find adventure in pre-pandemic Paris. Author Tuohy serves up a comic intrigue spiced with the delights and stresses of everyone's favorite city. Great fun!

—P.M. Carlson, author of *Murder Unrenovated*

A fun read, with fascinating characters, a whirlwind of mystery, romance and excitement in fabulous Paris.

—Kay Williams, author of *The Matryoshka Murders* and *Butcher of Dreams*

You won't want to part with the characters or Tuohy's perfect depiction of Paris after this great mystery is solved.

—Shahrzad Elghanayan, author of *Titan of Tehran*



THE  
WOMAN  
*at la Gare de l'Est*

THEASA TUOHY



*France House Press*

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Theasa Tuohy.

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With many thanks to *editor extraordinaire* Cameron McDonald  
and to all my friends who I have turned into characters.  
And, as always, my writers group.



In those happy days before  
Notre-Dame Cathedral burned and Paris  
streets became thick with electric scooters.





# 1

## THE DIVINE SARAH

The woman stood out. As if a spotlight were on her. It wasn't a quick blurred image through the taxi window rolled up tight against the heat but the only person Sarah saw as her cab pulled up for a red light.

The backdrop was Le Sarah Bernhardt, a bistro Sarah knew well: her namesake and the first place she'd headed after arriving in Paris last week. So she was positive about the exact corner – Boulevard de Sebastopol and Avenue Victoria – where she spotted the woman on the curb. Unruly, white curly hair. Hunched shoulders, listing to the left. She wore a sky-blue blouse, a loose raincoat, Burberry lining, and a straight skirt, perhaps linen, the same beige color as the coat. A conservative look, British. But her body language was chaotic, bewildered. She seemed to want to cross the busy boulevard with its tangle of traffic buzzing around the center island, a major Métro stop, but indecision creased her forehead into the frown of confusion.

“Looks lost, poor woman.” Sarah turned from the window to her sister, who shook her chic black bob in a silent shush. On her cell, as always, with the newsroom.

“I want to see.” Miranda, Vicki’s four-and-a-half-year-old, tucked between them, studiously drawing something that resembled a purple cat, started to crawl onto Sarah’s lap.

“Nope, Kiddo. Too late.” The taxi picked up speed from the traffic light. “But let’s play a game.” She ruffled her niece’s blond curls, so similar to her own strawberry hair. The child looked so much like Sarah it was scary. Not a touch of Vicki’s dark hair and angular shape. “What’ve you got there?”

Miranda held out a slim black leather packet resembling a pencil case she’d been using to balance her drawing. “It won’t open.”

Sarah gave its Velcro clasp a yank, and handed it back. Miranda stuck her chubby fingers into the opening and came out with a piece of graph paper. “I’ll make another picture. What?”

“How about this?” Sarah bent, picking up something from the floor. “It fell out.” She turned it, catching the light. “Some sort of rock, funny markings – pretty shade of blue.”

“No.” Miranda waved it away. “I don’t like it. I could draw an owl. How?”

Sarah laughed, “I’m an actress, not an artist.”

“Grownups are supposed to know things.” The imp twisted away and began another purple cat.

“Whatever,” Sarah said. “You draw, your mom’s on the phone. I’m going to talk to myself memorizing lines. My first rehearsal’s tonight.” She hunkered down, got lost in her stage role. Distraught mother of a dead child, mouthing different readings of “But how can I bear to go on?”

Sarah was still in her reverie, climbing out of their cab at the Gare de l’Est, when she was stunned back to reality. There

was that same strange British-looking woman! Sarah stopped and stared. Vicki had already paid the driver, she and Miranda, dragging their luggage, scurrying ahead into the train station. They, not Sarah, were the ones leaving Paris for a few days.

She shivered in the unusually hot, ninety-degree heat. How can it be the same person? We're at least twenty blocks away and were in a speeding taxi. That woman didn't have time to have gotten a bus. Ten minutes ago, she looked too scared to step off a curb.

Sarah did a slow pivot around the station's approach, almost as if to reassure herself she was where she thought she was, where she was supposed to wait for her sister's friend Mary Laughlin. Typical late-afternoon Parisian street scene, modern glass buildings mixed with ancient chestnut trees unfolded down the boulevard, another turn and there on her left the escalator rose up from the Métro, belching out travelers with their backpacks and rolling suitcases. And finally, the large diagram of the *gare* in front of her still spelled out French battle sites: The hall of Verdun, pictures of World War I soldiers leaving for the front.

Sarah completed her circle of searching her bearings, and the strange woman was still there, hanging into a limo window, arguing with the driver who was gesturing to his backseat. He had a fare, had to move on. An *homme d'affaires* sat uptight in his pinstriped suit, briefcase on his lap. Sarah was too far away to make out what the woman was saying. Was she pleading for help, or did she just not grasp that the car wasn't a taxi and was already engaged?

The woman was wearing white loafers, Sarah noticed with a start. A detail she'd forgotten, but recalled now! Loafers?

And white? Certainly not very French. One more reason why the woman had stood out. Besides, of course, what seemed a pretty obvious dementia.

“This is nuts,” Sarah muttered.

“What is?” sounded in her ear, along with a tap on her shoulder.

“Jesus!” Sarah felt like her heart would stop. She spun around.

“You seem in a state.” It was her sister’s friend, Mary. They’d been pals since Vicki was transferred to Paris by her news agency six years before. Mary had come from Ireland as a student and ended up marrying a French artist. He’d died of cancer several months ago, leaving Mary a young widow. Sarah laid some of what she saw as Mary’s crotchiness to that.

“I told you I’d meet you right here,” Mary said. “That I’d come up from the Métro.”

“It’s the weirdest thing. With all the people in Paris, I’ve just seen the same woman twice.”

“Hmm,” Mary said. “That’s bad, you think?”

“I’m serious, and don’t start making fun of me,” Sarah bristled. “I’ll explain when we catch up to Vicki. It’s time for their train and you’re late.” Surely Vicki had seen the woman. Mary would believe *her*, the journalist, the sensible one. People always did, while saying Sarah had a wild imagination just because she was an actress.

The two women pushed through the tide of humanity rushing to enter or exit Paris. Where were they all going from this so-called East Station? Sarah had been in the city long enough to know there was a North Station, Gare du Nord, just

a few blocks away. Her sister and niece were headed to Prague, which somehow seemed north to Sarah. One took the north station to get to London, which surely must be west. Gallic logic was, to say the least, elusive to the American mind. But no matter which *gare* you were in, you knew you were in Paris because of the vaulting glass ceilings with their intricate metal work arching over the departure areas.

“Look for the *Départs* panel.” Mary interrupted Sarah’s reverie about her difficulties of adjusting; this was certainly nothing like life in Anaheim. “*Quai* means platform.”

“Can’t we just ask someone where’s the train to Prague?”

“It doesn’t work that way,” Mary said with a poorly disguised sigh.

An overly friendly American wearing shorts and a John Deere baseball cap and the bulk of an NFL linebacker stepped in asking if he could help. Sarah cheerfully began to explain that she was looking for her sister, but Mary cut in and brushed the man off. “Train’s about to leave,” she said and headed for the departure board.

Sarah gave the man a smiling shrug but dutifully followed Mary. Unintelligible announcements swirled, and Sarah wasn’t about to get too far from her interpreter, especially since Vicki had warned that Sarah would most likely need Mary’s help while her sister was away because, as usual, several strikes were looming. Sarah could be stuck if the few Métro lines she knew stopped running.

While Mary was studying the departure board and warning there were only four minutes to train time, Sarah caught a flash of Bugs Bunny and a curly blonde head. Just yesterday she’d bought the tiny rolling bag for her niece who,

out of the blue, had insisted she needed her own luggage for mom's working trip to Prague. Dad was off on assignment in Moscow and Sarah had nightly rehearsals, so Miranda could hardly be left at home alone. Bugs had been her decoration of choice. His floppy ears and the "What's Up Doc" stenciled across the canvas cover finally won out over a pink tutu-clad ballerina. Miranda had joyfully thrown all of her favorite toys into the bag this morning, angering her babysitter, Katja, who, in a splutter of French and pidgin English, had insisted that she, an adult, could pack more efficiently and faster. Miranda would have none of it, throwing Katja into a tantrum of Polish shouting. Vicki had said at the time she might have to let her go, if the woman had so little understanding of the obstinacy of four-year-olds.

"There's Miranda," Sarah called to Mary, a few feet away craning to watch the constantly changing and flipping slats of the departure board. "Over here," she shouted to her sister.

Vicki spotted them and turned against the stampede of passengers, causing something akin to a string of rear end collisions on a Los Angeles freeway. She came up to Mary, her voice steady, unrushed. Deadlines her *métier*. "I'm glad you're here, we didn't want to leave without saying goodbye."

"Vicki," Sarah said, "did you notice that woman outside the station? Arguing with a driver? So weird. I'm sure she was the same woman we saw before, just standing on a curb. Tell Mary you saw her too."

"Yeah. Like she was scared to cross the street or something. How did she get here so fast? But we'll talk about it later. Got a trip to take."

“We’re going to Prague,” Miranda announced to the travelers on the platform with the solemn intensity that she clearly felt befit her mission. “And we’re going to stay in a castle.”

“That’s swell.” Mary grinned, ruffling her curls. “Aren’t you lucky now to be escaping this heat. And you know what I have here?” She patted her oversized red-leather handbag. “Katja just phoned me a picture of you packing that grand new valise.”

“No, it’s a suitcase,” Miranda corrected. “He’s Bugs Bunny.”

“Have you the carriage number, now?” Mary asked.

Vicki pulled the ticket from a pocket of her linen jacket just as the American in shorts stepped in again. “Be happy to help you ladies find your car,” he offered, with a move toward his John Deere cap that resembled an old-fashioned tip of the hat.

“We’re fine,” Mary growled. “Even if we didn’t speak French, we can read numbers.”

Miranda gave the stranger a coy smile. “We’re going to live in a castle. And this is my Bugs Bunny suitcase. And Mommy and me are going to watch Pinocchio on Mommy’s computer.”

“Come along, Miranda.” Mary grabbed the child’s hand as Vicki abruptly whirled, saying, “Watch the luggage, I forgot to date-stamp the tickets. They’ll charge me extra.”

Miranda broke loose from Mary and started to run after her mother, but Sarah caught her up around the waist and twirled her playfully in the air. “Mommy will be back in a second. She’s just going down to that little orange box to validate your tickets.”

The stream of passengers was abating as the hands of the huge suspended clock moved within three minutes of departure. “French trains don’t wait around,” Mary called after Vicki, just as a swarthy man in a blindingly white shirt touched her arm.

“*Excusez-moi, madame, mais avez-vous un stylo?*” he asked. He had a day-old growth of beard and was wearing Moroccan sandals.

“What?” asked Sarah.

“He wants a pen,” said Mary.

“Oh yes, I think I have one in my bag.”

“Ignore him,” Mary warned. But Sarah had already set the child down and was reaching into her purse.

“Put your damned bag away,” Mary snapped, then turned to the man. “*Désolé monsieur, we don’t have a pen.*”

Miranda jerked away and darted off, dragging her suitcase behind. “Come back here,” Sarah yelled, slinging her own handbag over her shoulder and rushing after her. Miranda glanced back, let go of her rolling bag, and picked up speed just as a loud hiss bellowed from the airbrakes of the train.

Mary watched this slapstick unfold, bemused at what she’d gotten herself into with her foreign friends and their strange ways. This was more adventure in an hour than a month teaching English to disinterested French students. Vicki was going to end up missing the train, she felt sure. These two American sisters were so alike in their light approach to life. Despite the vast divide in their looks – Vicki with her dark, angled French haircut and slouched, sophisticated air; Sarah with her ditzzy pleasantries, the Madonna face surrounded by strawberry curls – they both wore casualness like a summer



dress. Mary swung her eyes around trying to get a feel for how close departure time was and saw the American in the baseball cap standing in the doorway of the nearest car frowning at the commotion.

She was beginning to not like the feel of this. Too many loitering men paying attention to them. Was it because of an adorable child? A beautiful young blonde? She didn't think so. Parisians leave people alone, don't intrude. She caught her breath, now what? A nod passed between the man in the brilliant white shirt, who had asked for a pen and still stood nearby, and an Ivy League-looking black man in button-down oxford cloth positioned halfway down the platform. The Ivy League type moved toward Miranda's dropped bag and stooped to pick it up. Like a professional ball player, he tossed the case from one big hand to the other, peered intently at its undercarriage then gently placed it back on its rollers. What the devil was he staring at?

Sarah, still chasing Miranda, stopped to take the pulley handle from him. Mary, too far away to really hear, knew Sarah must surely be giggling as she thanked him.

"No problem," he replied in a booming, clear American accent. "Glad to help."

A sense of foreboding crept into Mary's belly as the man casually walked over to the train and got into the same vestibule with the American in shorts and ball cap. And right behind him was a woman wearing white loafers. Americans had such peculiar tastes in dress. Men in shorts? Women in white patent leather?

The train's air brakes whished again. The big white clock with the black Roman numerals registered two minutes to

departure. Mary whirled around to look for Vicki and Miranda and spotted them fighting through a sea of late-arriving Japanese trotting after their leader. Mother and daughter finally reached the orange validation box, Vicki beginning to insert the ticket just as an Asian man with two wide rows of big teeth and two cameras swinging from his neck stepped into Mary's line of view. When he passed, Vicki was holding Miranda up, so the child could stick their ticket into the box to *composter*.

Mary knew what had happened, but shook her head at the nonsense of it. Miranda must've set up a howl to punch the ticket – and now they would surely miss the train to indulge the kid's irritating habit of slapping an adult's hand away in her eagerness to punch elevator buttons or turn the key in a locked door. Mary had known Vicki since before Miranda was born and, with no nieces or nephews, much less children of her own, she had watched in wonder at the antics of the precocious little girl.

But miraculously, here they were, propelled by a wave of boarding passengers, Vicki adjusting her heavy computer bag on her shoulder and tugging at Miranda. "Move it, Bud," she said to the child, who was again dragging her Bugs Bunny bag.

Mary trotted along beside them. "Here's your carriage."

She and Sarah, shoving and pulling, helped hoist the two and their bags up the car steps as conductors all down the line signaled for the train to pull out. It began to move. Mary could see Vicki and Miranda make their way through the car and locate their seats. As Vicki lifted her suitcase to the overhead rack, Sarah pointed, "Isn't that the helpful American? He's

putting up Vicki's bag. I think that's him. I can barely see through the tinted glass."

"Through a glass darkly," Mary said, frowning. "I don't like the look of this." The two waved as the train picked up speed.

"The look of what? He seemed nice. And he's an American."

"Huh, that's not much of a recommendation." Mary peered at Sarah whom she'd begun to think of as the innocent abroad and softened her tone. "But didn't you notice that he moved? He initially got on several cars behind them."

"He probably thinks they're cute. You know, strangers on a train," she said brightly then grimaced. "Oh, dear, not like that. Farley Granger's wife gets strangled."

"What rubbish," Mary said, glaring at her. "You and your constant films."

A tug at her elbow, Mary turned, and her large leather purse was ripped from her shoulder. The white-shirted guy, Moroccan sandals flashing, sprinted away, her bright red bag tucked under his arm, weaving and dodging to avoid those on the quay still waving at the departing train.

"*Au voleur! Au voleur!*" Mary shouted, pushing at one startled person after another as she dashed after the thief. Behind her, she heard Sarah scream, "Where are you going? Don't leave me, don't leave me." Is the woman totally dense, can't she see what's happening? Mary was panting, already out of breath. The thief ran and dodged, his white shirt sparkling. Mary nearly collided with a baby stroller, the mother glaring. She didn't bother to excuse herself, but yelled again, "*Au voleur, Au voleur,*" and kept going, knocking into people as she went. She could never keep up. He made it to the end of

the quay, the crowds were worse now, the scene whizzing by at lightning speed.

She had thought the dazzle of the white shirt would keep him in sight, but at the end of the quay, in the packed crowd, there seemed to be a sea of white. Mary frantically pushed through the throng, heart pounding, clothes sopping wet, the pins that held her long chestnut hair off her neck flying in every direction. She had to retrieve that purse! Everything was in it: cell phone, credit cards, datebook, even a registry of her students and their grades. But she stopped. Head down, panting like a long-distance runner, gasping for breath, she bent to one knee. People and suitcases banging into her from every side. She tugged at the cotton print blouse sticking to her skin. Get a grip. The damned thing was lost, that creep in the Moroccan sandals long gone. She might as well stop and reassure Sarah, whose voice she still heard echoing frantically behind her. Hmp. Mary could always find humor in the darkest moments – that woman certainly has the projection necessary in a fine actress.

Sarah appeared, wide-eyed. “What happened? Why were you running?”

“Can you not hear, or see?”

Sarah’s face clouded over. “Well, yes. I said I saw you running.”

“That weirdo who tried to get a pen from us stole my handbag. I told you it’s not a good plan to be talking to strangers.”

“Oh.” Sarah’s voice was very small.

“Okay.” Mary struggled to her feet. “Let’s move on. We can’t stand here forever. I’ve got to report the theft to the

police. Have you got a pencil, or anything, that I can use to hold my hair back up? It's like a wet blanket in this heat." The two of them moved toward the central area of the station. "I don't suppose you have a cell phone?"

"It's back in California."

"That's a good place for it," Mary groused. "Can you remember anything besides your stage lines?"

"I'm really sorry." Sarah's words came in a tumble. "You must be frantic about your purse. But my old phone's not good for Europe. I've been meaning to buy a French one. So, can we get something to eat before the police thing? I skipped lunch."

"My credit cards are urgent," Mary snapped. "Someone's probably already called the numbers to some drug cartel in South America."

"Of course. I didn't mean to...Gee, look at the crowd!" Sarah said, as they hurried past the tail ends of departing trains. The area of cafes, coffee bars and magazine stalls strung along the end of the quays was jammed. Uniforms were everywhere – police, station security – pushing and herding gawkers.

"Must be another strike," Mary said. "The French can't pass a day without several."

"That's what Vicki says, but why would strikers be gathered in a clump like that? And with all these police, why don't you just report your stolen bag?"

"Endless forms with French bureaucrats. And you must file a police report to collect on anything."

They shoved into the crowd – Mary arguing each time with any cop who blocked their path – but they kept moving to still another spot trying to breach the crush.

“Oh, treacherous villainy,” Sarah gasped as they broke through a back part of the circling gawkers. “I can’t look. It’s horrible.” An unshaven figure was sprawled on his back, his eyes wide and startled in death, his once-white shirt now crimson, blood already beginning to dry on the Moroccan sandals and puddling around him on the marble floor.

Mary’s bright red bag nowhere in sight.

## 2

### LES FLICS

Mary grabbed the nearest policeman by the arm and shouted, “*C’est le mec! C’est lui!*” She was pointing to the dead man in a pool of blood on the floor of the railroad station.

“What, what?” Sarah wailed, throwing her hands to her face in a gesture befitting her idol, Sarah Bernhardt.

“*Calmez-vous, Madame.*” The policeman was not terribly calm himself as he tried to swat Mary’s hand from its grip.

“*Je suis calme, Monsieur l’agent!*” Mary icily drew herself up: “*Cet homme là a volé mon sac. Où est mon sac?*”

The cop’s reply was equally frigid. “We have a murder to elucidate, Madame. For *le* property stolen, go *au commissariat* near this.”

Mary ground her teeth. How she hated it when the bastards heard her accent and looked down their long noses and answered in English. Pointless to retort that what they were coming up with was way worse than her French.

Sarah, hands over her face all this time, finally moved one down, the other still clapped across her cheek, and stared at Mary. “Why are you so angry? What’s happening? What did that cop say?”

“Suck it up and take your hands off your damned face. That’s the creep who stole my purse.”

“*Attention.*” A second policeman stepped in. “*Vous êtes un témoin?*”

“No, I’m not a witness.” Mary spoke in English this time. The hell with their making fun of her accent. Let them work it out. “I didn’t witness anything. This dead man just stole my bag.”

“I’m an American,” Sarah said.

“Good lord, leave that out of it,” Mary snapped. “That will get us exactly nowhere.”

“Your *papiers of identité, s’il vous plaît.*” The cop held out his hand.

“I just told you that I have no purse.”

“I give to you a witness summons.” He took out his notebook. “You go *immédiatement au commissariat.*”

“Not a problem since I have to report a theft.”

She ended by giving him her name, address and the number of her cell without bothering to mention that it wouldn’t be of much use since the mobile was also in the stolen handbag.

“Let’s get out of here,” Mary mumbled. “The dumb bastard didn’t seem to get it that the dead guy stole my bag. Just as well, we’d be stuck here forever. He says I have to report to Louis Blanc.”

“Good grief, who’s that?” Sarah asked.

“The nearest police station, up behind the *gare*, close to the canal. I’ve got to get there, get this over with. And you’re going to be late for your rehearsal.” Hearing her sharpness, Mary drew a deep breath and carefully took the time to give



Sarah detailed instructions on how to get to the theater. Poor thing was going to miss dinner, too. Amazing that she could hold down a job. But she must be good. Vicki bragged that her sister had answered an open-call audition in Los Angeles only last month and been invited to join a London repertoire company for this play in Paris.

“Shall we meet later after rehearsal?” Sarah sounded forlorn. “Before I head back to John’s?”

“No.” Mary took another deep inhale, wondering if the young woman was again doing her actress bit. “I have a grades meeting tomorrow and need a rest from all this chaos. Dead people, stolen credit cards, not my usual day.” At least she could be grateful that Sarah was staying with someone solid; it took responsibility off her. At first, Mary had assumed that Sarah’s old college friend was as ditzy as she, but John’s off-the-wall flamboyance – entertaining guests, as he did, in flowing caftans – did not at all give the measure of the man.

They parted and Mary’s anger and panic built as she galloped along the Rue du Faubourg Saint Martin through the waning day towards the *commissariat*. She was hot, sticky, exhausted and – she realized with a start – starving. Sarah was right. Some kind of food would surely have been in order. But she couldn’t rest until she’d cancelled her bank cards. And the goddamn French didn’t even have a simple way to make a phone call without a mobile – everything hopelessly complicated everywhere anymore – and they replied in English when you asked in French – and that silly Sarah was useless in a crisis.

Vicki much better, would have solved everything in a few minutes with efficient phone calls and laconic but calming

sarcasm – and in spite of shaky French. Why hadn't she thought to borrow cash from Sarah in case she found that rare phone booth? But even if she did, she wouldn't have the phone number on the bank card to cancel the damned thing. Her anger built. Just how much more complicated could this day get?

Her breathing grew shallower and shallower, but she couldn't slow down. She dodged through droves of people heading home from work, collecting hungry and tired kids – the damned French school day was as long as a civil servant's. Harried working women passed doing last-minute shopping from mouth-watering displays at the odd grocery along the street. She must quit thinking about food! But, oh, how she'd love right now a *jambon beurre*, half a crusty baguette with a morsel of ham and slathered with fresh, sweet Normandy butter.

To slow her breathing, she pressed one nostril, breathed in, held her breath for a count of eight, pressed both, held her breath to a count of eight, then released the first one and counted to eight again as she breathed out. She kept doing this until children began to stare.

When she turned into rue Louis Blanc and saw the dull facade of the police station looming ahead, dread moved in.

Still another bureaucratic wrangle was more than she felt she could handle. Endless forms, lines, questions. Dante's Nine Circles of Hell. It was all anyone could do, most of all the French, to tolerate the irritant of their all encompassing – birth to death – bureaucracy.

Paul had been dead four months but nothing was settled. More forms, this one needed to be notarized, that one was out of

date – the imperious hand passing it back as though it smelled. Sorry, a copy won't work, we must have the original. And still another translation of personal documents from Ireland. Trying to keep herself going without having to borrow money from friends, before the never-ending bureaucratic dance of collecting Paul's meager death benefits and settling his "estate" – ha! It consisted of stacks of his unsold paintings and their rundown apartment in their immigrant neighborhood. But she couldn't ignore the paperwork, the long queues in dreary old buildings – the new ones worse, with their rows of plastic chairs – else they'd probably throw her out of the country. For better or for worse, this was where her life was now, husband or not. Such an enchanting city, such a strangle of red tape.

She squared her shoulders, breathed deep, and headed for what she knew would be another maelstrom.

Milling about the painfully ugly modern box – with "Centre de Police 10e" lettered on its front and white, public-bathroom tiles adorning its facade – were the usual stragglers, gearing up for or recovering from the various dramas within.

Inside the huge reception area, Mary's heart sank at the line of people waiting on benches. A short, very firm man in uniform stuffed behind a huge desk empty of all but telephone was obviously responsible for directing human traffic and dealing with emotions.

She told her story, but he couldn't shake his fixed idea that she was a murder witness – he kept using the word *témoin* and *témoignage*, despite Mary correcting him several times that she was not a witness to anything.

"I didn't actually *see* him killed," she insisted. "I need to report the theft of my bag and make an urgent call to the

bank. Someone's probably charging thousands to my account while you dither."

"*Calmez-vous, Madame,*" was his main response. Every time she thought she was getting somewhere, he was interrupted by either the telephone or someone with an errand more harrowing than her own. She worked out that – like many frontline people in French administrative offices – he was out here for punishment or because he was good for nothing other than bloody-minded obstruction. "*Du calme!*" the policeman shouted at a gang of rowdy youths decked out in high-top red basketball shoes and baseball caps turned backwards. They nearly knocked Mary down as they were hustled past by two diminutive cops, one a woman with a ponytail.

"Please, *monsieur l'agent,*" Mary began again, but, once more, the phone interrupted.

So she decided to do a Coco Chanel – her term for behaving like a size 8 Frenchwoman, ruthlessly playing up her gender. She would probably redden up in a very Irish way, yet catching sight of herself in an odd piece of glass she was still very pallid indeed. What an awful fright she was with bits of hair stringing down from the plopped glop anchored on top by the yellow lead pencil Sarah had fished from her purse. She could only hope the desk sergeant would see the behavior and not her disheveled appearance.

In the way of the Cocos of this world, she raised the back of her hand to her forehead. "I feel like I'm about to pass out," she moaned. "I haven't eaten all day and what with the shock of it all..."

Coco worked. He found her a seat by abusing some foreign women on a corner of a bench: "*Bougez-vous de là!*" he said. Move it. With a wave of the hand, he scattered several in full-length skirts and headscarves. No doubt Roma who'd been begging in the *gare*, they eyed Mary with curiosity and didn't bother to hide their interest in her conversation with the stocky cop.

He brought her a cordless telephone and a glass of water. Now she was close to real tears because someone was being nice.

"But I don't know the number!" she cried.

"*Bordel de merde!*" he muttered to himself and went to find a directory.

Mary dialed the bank, but got up from the bench and whispered into the phone. Certainly didn't want that bunch of watching women hearing the details of this discussion.

"*Calmez-vous, Madame!*" the man at the bank said to Mary. "*Donnez-moi votre numéro de carte.*"

She exploded, much to the amusement of the Roma.

"How the hell are people supposed to remember sixteen-digit numbers, and in such conditions?" She was yelling, never mind the attempt at whispering.

The Roma looked like they were trying to memorize it all.

The bank business finally done, she decided to tackle the desk cop again.

"I don't suppose I could go and get something to eat?"

"You are a witness, Madame. I can not let you go."

What a day! Now these Gypsies were probably already sending out coded messages to burgle her.

The detective stood up when she came in, shook her hand, indicated a seat. “Jean-Louis Vidal,” he said. Probably in his thirties, he lay back in his swivel chair, wearing what seemed standard for these guys, a leather jacket and blue jeans. How, Mary wondered, can he manage to look so cool, even in this heat? As soon as she opened her mouth stating her name, she saw the fleeting smirk, and he immediately switched to English to apologize for the long wait. The beat goes on, she thought. And then again – he cocked his head to one side and examined her. Up and down.

Prickles of hair rose on her arm. She hated when French men did this.

“Okay, so I’m no Coco Chanel,” she said curtly.

“*Comment?*” he seemed genuinely puzzled.

“Nothing. Private joke.”

“A person died,” he said sternly. “I see nothing to joke about.”

“No, I didn’t think it was very funny – and I’m not in the habit of looking at dead bodies either. But then perhaps you are.”

“You watch, perhaps, too many French movies,” he said.

“Do they give you cops the script in advance?”

He squinted – a quizzical, disbelieving look.

“Okay, can we just do this,” she replied to the frown. “So I can go home and eat and rest before another day starts? You’re fresh on duty, the rest of us have had a long day.”

She didn't know where this cheek was coming from, but guessed it was due to light-headedness and a gnawing stomach.

He got up and went out without saying a word. Christ, I've screwed it now, she thought. She sat there. In the silence. Looking round the room. Didn't appear to be a personal office. Nothing but a table that passed for a desk, his comfortable chair, and a few straight-backed seats. No plants, no photos of smiling wife and kids. The windows, facing out on the multitude of tracks snaking to the Gare de l'Est, could definitely use a washing. Just a place to interrogate wrong-doers. Is that what they thought she was? She was a victim! Where had he gone, was he never coming back? Should she just get up, walk out of here, go home? Was he punishing her? Instead of washing her smart mouth out with soap, he was giving her the silent treatment – stand in the corner and contemplate your sins.

The door opened behind her, a leather-covered arm placed a cup and a bar of chocolate on the desk in front of her.

“There is sugar in *le café*,” he said.

Her eyes widened, she felt like a bloody, cocky-ass fool. She put her hands to her head trying to restore order to the soggy bun of still-damp hair punctuated by Sarah's pencil.

“Um, thanks,” she said. “Sorry. I've been rude.”

“Is nothing.”

She watched closely, hoping he'd smile. But he didn't.

Instead, he laid out his forms and a pen. “You say *le* deceased stole your handbag?”

“Yes,” she replied, in what sounded like a croak. She stopped, cleared her throat and took a deep breath. “I tried to

chase him, but . . .” Her voice failed her. “I’m sorry,” she finally managed. “It’s been an awful day.”

“Take your time,” he said. “Drink your café.”

She could see why this one was an inspector with rank and the old guy downstairs was still in the thankless job of sorting incoming woes from nonsense.

It was 9 p.m. before she left the *commissariat* and headed for home with the young inspector’s mobile number, scratched on the back of his card, in her pocket. It hadn’t been easy. He’d been insistently curious about the contents of her stolen bag. Exasperated, she’d finally snapped, “It’s doubtful some poor student paid to retrieve my grades book.”

He’d furrowed his brow, made a note, then reversed course before her very eyes. “Right you are.” A sound from the back of his throat was almost a chuckle.

“I see nothing funny in this,” she said.

He just smiled and shook his head in clear amusement.

So, all of the sudden now, he’s relaxed. Isn’t so serious. The interview is over, he’s made up his mind. But he hasn’t told me what he’s decided. Did I steal my own bag? Did I murder the bloke who took it? Give me some answers, fellow. “So what do we do now?” she’d asked.

He shrugged and smiled.

“My purse?”

“Is really an investigation of murder. Someone will call, *bien sûr*, if your bag turns up.”



He'd handed her over to the pony-tailed policewoman so the theft of the bag could be typed up, entered in some ledger or other. She hadn't spent such a block of time with another human being since Paul died – certainly not anyone of the male persuasion – and somehow her emotions were in an uproar. She was fluttery, flustered, angry, exhausted. Then a question from the policewoman almost sent her over the edge. When she gave her address the woman said, “You rent, I hope?”

“No, I bought it.”

The woman's face dissolved into concern.

“Not good,” she said, solemnly shaking her ponytail. “*Vendez. Fuyez.*” Sell and get out. Flee.

Mary had ground her teeth, but restrained from replying. Nothing new in this. She'd come to dread the pitying looks from friends. Left her homeland to end up living like this? A down-at-the-heels building in a frightening neighborhood. But it was HERS. Bought and paid for with labor and love. She and Paul had papered and painted and sanded and scrubbed, even learned how to lay tiles. She'd become president of the building association because she saw that crooked contractors would sign worthless agreements with immigrants who couldn't read French. And, of course, never fix the roof or install new windows, just come by instead to collect a few payments and then disappear. No, she wasn't about to sell it and flee!

### 3

## A LONG WAY HOME

Mary decided to take a route along the Canal Saint-Martin for the long walk home. It should help clear her head of the day's awful events and offer a bit of breeze against the unflinching heat.

She was trying to void her mind of the dead man's vacant eyes – like something out of a nightmare or horror TV. But her head movie continued to roll, moving on to stages of decomposition and worms and worse. Where did such morbidity come from? Obvious, she supposed. Dreams of Paul being lowered into the earth still yanked her awake from time to time. Moving along the canal, she tried to shift her focus to the homicide detective's insistent questioning about the man's grabbing her bag, as though that had something to do with the murder. It was hardly plausible that a thief seeing a thief snatch her purse would murder to get it for himself. What nonsense. At times, she almost felt as if she were a suspect. Was she supposed to have pushed through the crowds to stab the fellow who'd taken her bag only to stand around without it, arguing with police at the scene? Nonsense indeed!

She picked up her stride despite the heat. The idea that the canal might cool the air soothed her weary spirit. Up at the lock, a boat had just been released and water was bursting through the gates. She paused to watch, as she often did. Weepy trees overhung the narrow waterway, the fading light of the summer sun cast impish shadows on kayaks playing about, practicing capsizing. How calming it was, despite the hundreds of strollers escaping their small apartments. Much to her chagrin, tourists were beginning to discover this site that Mary had grown to feel was her own secret place. As she hurried on, she had a fleeting moment of worry about Sarah. She'd promised Vicki that she would guide her kid sister around. Yet, she told herself, it was silly to fret. The young American was going to have to shift on her own. But it had been a hideous day.

She stopped again to watch tramps getting tanked up under the bridge and lovers behaving as if there were no beds in Paris. A sight-seeing boat cruised by, making its way from La Villette to Bastille, belching tourist information in four languages, all of them indecipherable. In the other direction came a small barge of foreigners on holiday "doing" the canal locks, taking it all in. Lately such boats increasingly carried as little as one rich couple, with a servant or two, ensconced in luxuriously appointed surroundings, sipping drinks while gazing at the locals. Almost close enough to touch us, but safe, she thought.

Farther down the canal was the hum of talk. In summer, young people came with food and drink and picnicked together for an entire evening, smoking in peace, chatting, playing guitars, strolling.

She turned eastwards and hesitated at the Hôpital St. Louis, then decided to walk through the passage of its ancient buildings, something she rarely did anymore. Paul had gone from here, and those memories always flooded in. Today, perhaps, she could take comfort from the grounds they had walked together when he was so ill. They'd laughed at the irony of having at least the good luck to have purchased their dilapidated apartment within reach of the best cancer hospital in Paris. She could hear his sly, infectious laughter at the silly spot she was in today – no phone, no keys. The keys! That had slipped her mind in the stress of the day. Surely the concierge would be home with his spare. Thank god, she never carried anything with her address in her purse.

She moved on, into the quarter itself, Belleville: noisy crowded streets, phone shops, immigrants of every shade, Chinese supermarkets reeking of durian, Vietnamese pho canteens, windows displaying lacquered chickens, North African masks, Moroccan sandals. Blue-collar, immigrant Paris, whose heart was the crossroads of four different *arrondissements*. In her mind the circle of real life lapped at the edges of those four enclaves of bourgeois respectability.

She passed under the carriage doors and into the cobbled courtyard of her building. Jurek, the concierge, came out.

“Lot of noise up in your place before,” he said.

She frowned. “I’m just back now.”

“Hmm. Maybe come from Igor’s,” he said. “Always loud there.”

Jurek, eternally grouching about noise on the street and in Igor’s cafe/bar at the property’s entrance. Mostly he complained because residents complained to him, but she’d

seen him numerous times in the bar himself, late at night, when the more respectable denizens had gone to bed and the loonies came out to play.

He hunted out her spare key. It took awhile, he kept them in a locked safe. A lot of the tenants refused to leave theirs, everyone suspicious and afraid of theft. But Mary felt safer being connected to someone in the neighborhood in case she needed help. As she did now. Before beginning the long climb to her third floor flat, she checked, as always, to see if the hall lights were working. Drug dealers were forever knocking them out and breaking latches on the skylight for easy and shadowed egress should cops be in hot pursuit. On the second landing she encountered her neighbor, Katja, Miranda's babysitter. The oversized Pole, apple cheeks aflutter, was effusive in her condolence when Mary began the tale of her stolen bag.

"*Pauvre petite*," she murmured in tones fit for a child while stroking Mary's arm with a forefinger adorned with not one but two flashy rings. Katja had a friend who made jewellery.

Mary found the diminutive usage amusing. Katja had been a babysitter too long.

"So," Mary went on, "the story gets worse. The thief was stabbed before he even made it out of the *gare*. And my bag disappeared with the murderer."

"*Mon Dieu*." Katja placed a hand over her ample bosom and turned deathly pale, her garrulousness gone.

"*Ah, chère madame, au revoir*." And in a flash, she was back in her own apartment. The door slammed shut.

Mary was astonished. What's with the abruptness? Perhaps she's such a superstitious type she's worried vibes from a dead

man can rub off on her. Mary continued the climb to her own apartment. So much for sympathy, she decided. It's the same kind of treatment when you try to convince other tenants that a collection is needed to replace something broken in our entryway by lowlifes doing drug deals.

She reached her apartment. All was quiet.

The spare key was stiff from lack of use. She leaned in hard with several twists of the lock. The door felt heavy as she pushed at it. The first thing was something to drink and food – of any kind. What a relief it would be to sit down. When the door finally swung open Mary switched on the light and reeled back as if she'd been shot. Her heart seemed to stop.

The apartment was torn apart. The worst mess she had ever seen. With a wave of dizziness she clutched the doorjamb for support. Was someone still inside?

She would have cried, if she hadn't already been cried out for months. Instead, she felt her blood pressure mount in anger and fright. Her heart beating wildly, she floundered through. Every paper and book was on the floor, the curtains she'd hand-sewn, pulled down and in a wad. The old lamp from the local *brocante*, broken. Her album, pictures scattered everywhere, but thanks be, none looked torn. Paul – and oh lord, a photo of her mother at twenty, with laughing friends in the snow, and here, her father setting up their tent on a beach by an old car. The white china cat, with brown ears and a blue neck-ribbon, lay smashed on the floor – a Victorian souvenir of her mother and her mother before her, its twin long since broken when she and Paul moved into this once cheerless apartment on a dreary day in a driving rain. And someone had invaded it. The Gypsies? The stolen purse? Druggies? How

to make sense of it? Gypsies didn't have keys, the thief didn't have the address and druggies look for something saleable. Why would they trash the place? Had Katja heard the noise? Is that why she was so abrupt?

Oh! Oh! Paul's portfolio! Where was it? Had she left it at John's gallery? She stumbled through debris, frantically searching.

And there it was. Resting open on the bed. Its black-ribbon clasp ripped from its moorings, the watercolors rifled, but otherwise undamaged.

Thieves with poor taste in art!

A sound at the door. Her heart bounced. She turned to see her downstairs neighbor, Hossein, squeezing in. He carefully closed the door behind him.

"Problem," he stated, rather than asked, surveying the damage.

"Big," she said. "Can you throw any light on it?"

"Two men. One dark, one blonde. By their clothes, they could have been cops, you know what I mean."

"Jeans and leather jackets?"

"Exactly."

"But still, I doubt it was police. More likely the people who stole my bag from another thief after murdering him."

"I'm impressed," he said. "About time you Irish start showing your true colors."

She knew he was trying to cheer her and that knowledge made her eyes moisten. Hossein, a sixty-year-old immigrant Moroccan with a strong sense of irony, was an extremely unlikely candidate for a shoulder to weep on. She gave him a bare outline of her day.

“That violence back home had to have an effect on you people eventually.”

She managed a weak smile. “So why didn’t you challenge them, get help, call the police? Guy like you could beat them to a pulp, I’m sure. Aren’t you people supposed to be experts with knives?”

Hossein laughed. “They woke me up. Bakers retire early, you know.”

“Hossein, even the dogs in the street know that.”

“I was about to knock and complain. Your door was slightly ajar. I peeked in, saw it wasn’t you with rowdy friends, snuck back into my own place. But they’d been too long for me to get organized. Looked out on the street, couldn’t see anyone for help. These guys were knocking your stuff around. Didn’t want to draw attention, in case they had guns. I did call the cops, just now got off the phone. Kept me dangling out my window, half-whispering, for at least a quarter hour, at mobile rates. I could’ve called my family in Morocco a hundred times.”

“So I owe you one. Anything else?”

“Before the cops would listen properly, the burglars quieted down. I had to be very careful they didn’t hear me.”

He pointed at the counter: “Looks like they took the time to make themselves a cup. I could smell it.”

She glanced at the machine on the counter and saw it had coffee in it. She never left a drop behind when she breakfasted on bags of croissants and cakes supplied by Hossein, all tied up in a fancy box. Normal times.

Then her eye was drawn to the blinking red light on the answerphone, near the coffee maker. A message! Could the police have swung into action? Found her bag already?



Hossein was still talking: “They were speaking like Ljubinka on the top floor – what language is that? – some kind of Slav.”

She thanked Hossein for his help, suggested she might need him for evidence – cops, insurance (he frowned at the first, smiled at the second) — ushered him out, and punched the phone’s button.

The message was from Vicki.

“We’re well past the German border and have been sitting here on the tracks for half an hour. There are all sorts of official types waving flashlights around in the fields outside. Thought you might have heard news on the radio or something.”

Her familiar voice hesitated, emitted the usual “umhs” and “wells” muttered before one collects thoughts for the signoff. Then, “Never mind,” she said, “I’ll call the city desk and see if there’s anything on the wires. Thanks for coming to see us off and for looking after Sarah. She’s a bit ditzy, but you already know that. Bye.”

Mary took the detective’s business card from her pocket and picked up the phone.

## 4

### DRAMATICS

Sarah was wired, jumpy, as she left the theater with her new colleagues headed for a quick drink. Always exhilarated to be back on stage, her excitement with this quirky English/French production was rattled by the bizarreness of the day – a gory murder and then, horror of horrors, one of the actresses fails to show. Missing a first rehearsal? Unheard of!

They started down the cobbled-stone hill of the old rue Du Temple in small groups. Bunched in the lead were the French crew who had suggested this get-to-know-each-other-outing, the British actors were together, followed by Sarah, the lone American. But then surprise, a touch at her elbow and the grin of the cute young crewmember with an atypical sheaf of curly, rust-colored hair. “The way, I show,” he said. “*Je m'appelle Pierre.*”

She responded only with a smile and “Sarah.” She knew a few French words beyond *merci*, but even her pronunciation of that, she’d already learned, was indecipherable to the French.

When the lights of the Hotel de Ville came into view, she smiled again. Finally, she had some idea of where she was. Home, her old college friend John’s apartment, was the next

street over, rue des Archives. She hadn't at all gotten used to this foreign city, and a familiar spot felt like an old friend.

Sarah was delighted they'd chosen the Bernhardt Bistro not far from their small theater. She'd already adopted the café as her own. One quick drink, that might help her come down before heading home. Maybe John would have news from her sister. She must get a cell phone.

They arrived to find the sidewalk tables already jammed with drinkers and lovers searching a whiff of breeze in the sticky night. The eight of them had to settle for cramming into red plastic banquettes strung along an interior wall, Pierre maneuvering Sarah into a seat next to him.

Sarah knew one person in the cast, and that one only slightly. The other four didn't seem to know each other either. Most of the show had been arranged through a booking agent in London. Everyone was on edge. Especially the British director, a short squat man with a Spanish surname and a German accent.

Normally, talk would be of nothing but the play, which was eerie and awful itself. But all anyone had so far discussed was where could that silly actress be who played the psychic and had to be replaced by a standby. Just one more crazy thing about the bizarre day.

Clearly restless trying to follow the English about a missing actor, Pierre switched to the teasing banter the crew had been using with Sarah all through rehearsal. "So, *ma Sarah, expliquez* the dead man. *Une bonne* story, no?"

"Capital idea," Ian Sommes, the actor who played Sarah's husband said. "Anything to get off speculating about that bloody no-show actress."

Sarah directed a dazzling smile at Pierre. “I adore your accent. I’d love to learn to speak that way.”

He responded with a wink. “*Pas de problème*, we arrange, *n’est-ce-pas?*”

That afternoon, Sarah had barely begun her tale of murder when Gomez, the director, cut her off pronouncing her story “not goot before new show, certain not von so sinister as das *ist*.”

“Don’t Look Now,” was a stage version of an old Daphne du Maurier story and film about a woman who foretold a man’s murder in Venice following the death of his child. Sarah felt her day’s weirdness fit right in with that creepy scenario. Everything about this was strange – a play in English performed in a French-speaking country. But people always say Paris tries so hard to be cutting edge that, truly, anything goes. This production would have a bit of everything: atonal sound effects, metallic voiceovers, screen projections of the child at various stages, including dead. It reminded Sarah of the wise words of an elderly actress who’d seen it all: “Everything changes except the avant-garde.”

With Sarah Bernhardt staring down at them from various poses along the café’s umber walls, America’s Sarah tried again to tell her tale. “There was blood everywhere. His dead eyes staring.” She confined her story to the snatched purse that was missing when she and Mary stumbled upon White Shirt. Know your audience, she decided – the director was still agitated over his missing actress, who he snorted derisively had been imposed upon him. Sarah didn’t want to further risk his ire by recounting her sighting of the crazed-looking woman in front of this *very* café. Bernhardt seemed to solemnly agree, looking

down on them from an ancient poster of *Jeanne d'Arc* standing amidst a field of spears, golden spurs on her feet and arrows piercing her body.

In her excitement of retelling, Sarah stood up to dramatize shoving through the crowds to spy the bloody corpse. Stumbling sideways to make her point, she threw the back of her hand against her forehead. A man in a faded blue-checked shirt near the open French doors seemed to be enjoying her performance. She didn't like the look of his smirk. And in that instant, the woman Sarah had spotted on that very curb hours before flashed by the bistro's big front windows. Only her head was visible, it seemed disembodied, almost flickering, but Sarah knew it was her. Knew it! The same unruly, curly white hair. It was her! Sarah sat down abruptly. "I need to go," she said. "It's been a long day." That sighting was truly terrifying. She always ignored friends' comments that she lived too much inside whatever role she was playing. But hallucinating? That had never happened before. Hands shaking, she reached for her handbag and said quick goodbyes to startled faces.

Once outside, she hesitated. She'd come out a side door and was facing the Tour St. Jacques instead of the square at the front with its gold woman sporting wings atop a spiraled column. Her memory of how to navigate her way to John's was based on the two theaters facing each other across the *place*: The Châtelet and the one now called Theatre de la Ville, once named for Bernhardt until the occupying Nazis had changed it because of the actress' Jewish origins. She'd been cautioned by Mary walking home would be easier than trying to navigate the Châtelet Métro with its many intersecting subway lines, but she hated the idea of wandering out through unfamiliar

streets. They'd passed the Hotel de Ville coming here. Surely, she could find her way back to that.

She checked her watch. Nearly midnight. She started to go back into the café to ask her new colleagues what to do – tell them she'd forgotten her map, needed instructions to get home. But how dumb was that? They'd get the idea she was flighty just as Vicki and Mary claimed. But could they be right? *Was* she starting to have hallucinations? She shuddered, that was more like crazy than just scattered.

No, she reassured herself, this awful day was enough to fire up anyone's imagination. Made sense. She'd first seen that woman with the curly hair and white loafers right here in front of the Bernhardt bistro. Maybe it was that old image flashing in her head just now, her memory playing tricks. Silly to think of it as an hallucination. A remembrance. That's all. She might be scattered, but she was sure she wasn't crazy. No, she'd keep going, show them all. She walked the few feet back to Boulevard de Sebastopol to look up at the street signs and get her bearings. Was it only several short hours ago that she and Vicki sped by here so carefree? Now Paris had taken on a sinister air, just like her new play. The blue sign high up on the building that housed both the theater and the bistro declared this the Avenue Victoria. Was that scary or a good omen? The Sarah/Vicki corner. She told herself that she knew her way well enough to turn around and make the two or three blocks to the Hotel de Ville. Once past that she'd easily find John's street.

She must take courage from her namesake – valiantly soldier on like the Bernhardt who turned her Odeon Theater into a field hospital when Paris was occupied during the

Franco-Prussian War. How lucky to have such a role model! She smiled at the memory of Vicki rescuing her from a lifetime of being boring Suzie Donohue, by dubbing her Sarah B. when she was only five. That Halloween Sarah had insisted on a princess costume. The family had teased and laughed as she pranced around in pink tulle with a tiara on her head. But from then on, she had a new name and a career was born. As she'd gotten older and asked why she was christened Suzie, not even Susan, her mom had replied that she thought the name was cute. Cute? To this day, Sarah still felt the indignation rise hot in her chest. How could anyone ever take you seriously? Another actress mentor once told her: "Cute is for Mickey Mouse. One must view oneself seriously." Sarah loved acting. It was such a thrill to be outside herself, the applause. No one thought you "ditzzy" playing Juliette or Ophelia. Bernhardt had actually played Hamlet, unimaginable what that woman could do.

Determined, Sarah moved on past the greenery around the Tour St. Jacques that Mary had said was all that was left of a 16<sup>th</sup>-century church called "Saint James of the Butchery." Goofy name for a church.

The tall, skinny gothic tower was lighted but cast haunting shadows of the grotesque gargoyles at each of its corners. Their open mouths, which Sarah had not even noticed during the day, seemed to be howling into the night. The small park over which they hung was dark and forbidding, black iron spikes of its fence caught and held branches of surrounding bushes. Sarah shook herself. Mary had said something about rue de Rivoli – more people and safer to walk. Parallel to this street, Sarah thought, but which direction? She took a right

and could see distant lights, but not a single one on this short little street. Not a soul on it. Not a lamp in any window on the left side. On the other, she looked up at a huge blank mass of concrete. Of course! The building housed the bistro she had just left and this was the back of the next door theater. It took up the entire block. Nothing but the gigantic rolled up doors of a loading bay. Desolate!

She rushed along, almost running, toward the distant twinkle. Did she hear a footfall behind? She had to stop this dramatic nonsense; she was working herself into a state. When she reached the end of the street, she saw that the beckoning lights were across the water. The road she had reached ran along what surely was the Seine's right bank – across from the island where Notre-Dame stood. Would she never get her bearings in this city? She shuddered at the thought of going back down that dark street, back past the menacing gargoyles. She imagined the dank alleys of Venice in her current show, the man-dwarf pursuing her husband down labyrinthine streets. The eeriness of her role had crept into her bones.

Maybe she could walk along the quay, it seemed a major roadway, and then find the way to Hotel de Ville. With cars running past, not so lonely. After a block or so she slowed her pace and glanced over her shoulder. A man's pant leg moved behind the shelter of a doorway. Her heart raced. But quit being silly! Surely, he'd only stopped to light a cigarette. She rounded a corner and looked up at the notably bland building in a neighborhood of beauties. Prefecture de Police. She laughed out loud as relief flooded through her. This has to be safe territory. And up ahead she saw the welcome sight of the Hotel de Ville, which apparently boiled down to "City



Hall.” It was difficult to get used to the fact that the French seemed to call everything hotels – hospitals, big houses, even actual hotels. Oh well, if that’s all there was to learning their language, she was ahead of the game. She would love to do that, be able to live here, be with her sister and niece. She passed the imposing building with its playing fountains and dormered roof, passed the children’s carousel on its grounds, and moved on to the BHV, a department store that explained on its front that it was the “Bazar” of the Hotel de Ville. She’d been there only yesterday to buy Miranda’s Bugs Bunny suitcase. Rounding the corner of the big store, she recognized the street where she lived!

Home, John’s apartment, her safe haven, no farther than a block or two away. Thank heaven. Familiar territory, familiar cafés packed to their rafters and spilling nothing but men out onto the sidewalk. Ah, the Marais! So many of the bars all but off limits to women, especially at night. Nonetheless, it was great to be back. Almost skipping down the block, she looked up to see lights blazing from the floor-to-ceiling windows of John’s second-floor apartment.

She punched the building code into the metal keypad set in the wall, One-Eight-B-Nine-Five, and heard the welcoming click of the huge door unlocking. She gave a push. Open sesame, like magic, no need for forgetful me to worry about losing a key. Well, not quite, I still need to remember not to lose my key to the apartment. *And* remember the building code. As the outside door closed behind her, she caught a glimpse of a man walking into the bar across the street. He was wearing a blue-checked shirt!

She caught her breath. What now? Was that the same guy who'd been eying her in the bistro? She had to stop doing this. She really was being undone by that creepy play on top of seeing a murder. She'd hallucinated about seeing that crazy woman, now she was imagining being followed. He probably just lives in the neighborhood.

## 5

### BLUE LIGHT AND FAIRY DUST

Mary's hands were shaking so much that she made two false starts dialing Detective Vidal's number.

He wasted no time. "The door it was broken down? Or they utilize your keys?"

Mary let out a groan.

"What?" he demanded.

"How stupid of me. I had trouble with the door, now I realize it was unlocked all along."

"*Les clefs* from your bag! Do not touch anything. Leave. I will arrive now to meet you downstairs."

She went straight to Igor's, ordered a brandy, and watched for Vidal through the café window.

The big Serb wiped down his zinc bar with a soiled looking rag, placed the glass in front of her and poured an extra-large shot of cognac. "Bad day?"

She downed the drink then began. All talking and movement stopped. Everyone in the place was spellbound.

Her story didn't take long, she offered no extra details, no adjectives. Just the facts.

Then the place exploded. “This wretched neighborhood.” “The cops don’t care.” “The druggies will be the downfall of us all.”

As the pleasurable warmth of brandy moved through her system, Mary thought of the chocolate bar, the last food she’d had.

“You wouldn’t have a stale croissant, now would you, Igor?”

She was contentedly devouring a *jambon beurre* when someone yelled “*les flics arrivent.*”

She slapped down a 10 Euro note and, sandwich in hand, headed out to meet Vidal and several uniformed police midway in the courtyard. Vidal nodded when he saw her sandwich. “*Très bien.* You finally get the food.”

“Had a taste of cognac to help wash it down.”

He smiled. “*Ça marche.*”

“Let’s try not to make too much noise,” she said, as they started their climb. “My neighbor’s a baker and has to get up at 4 a.m.”

At her apartment, she pulled out the spare key, but before she could insert it, the uniforms motioned her aside. They powdered the knob then opened the door with gloved hands.

“*Merde,*” Vidal exclaimed taking in the chaos.

“So you were right?” Mary said. “About my purse having something to do with the murdered man? But what in the world could it be?”

Vidal gave quick orders to the officers about how to proceed, then turned to Mary with a grim look. “These people seem to be after you. When is last time you leave *la France?*”

“It’s been ages – I went to Ireland three years ago, when my parents were killed in a car crash.”

“Sorry.” Vidal’s official face took on a soft tone for a moment then returned to work. “But there must to be something. Something in *l’appartement*. Does anyone send to you a package from *l’Irlande*? From anywhere?”

Mary shook her head, a mystified frown. “The purse was snatched in the *gare*.”

“Easy to follow you.”

“But the guy who stole it was the one who was killed.”

“Right,” the detective said.

He took out his mobile and dialed. “Send a locksmith,” he said into the phone, and gave Mary’s address.

“Not to worry,” he told her. “He can make new keys *immédiatement*. I do not want that you staying here alone tonight with *une chaise* propped against the door.”

She smiled weakly then sat wearily down on a nearby chair and ate the last of her sandwich.

“Let’s have these fingerprint fellows to the kitchen first,” Vidal said, “so you can make for yourself a tea.”

“Lovely idea.”

“Another shot of cognac would not harm.” He grinned. “I take one with you, but I do the duty.”

His mobile beeped, his face clouded. “Sorry.”

Mary shuddered. “Someone else murdered?”

“*Oui*,” he said, looking up from his screen.

He assigned one of the uniforms to stay with Mary until the locksmith arrived, “and finishes his work,” Vidal emphasized to the officer.

The detail stayed several hours, sorting through the broken detritus of her life, taking photos, sprinkling fairy dust around, shining blue lights and snapping more pictures. When they finally left, she secured the new lock behind them and crashed into bed.

## 6

### HEARTH

Sarah let herself in at John's to the warm glow of friends gathered around a low table amid the clink of drinks and the soft murmur of jazz. The walls were covered with bright abstract paintings by John's French *copain*, Ben, a well-established artist on the Paris scene. Bisquit, their tiny, spotted terrier wagged his tail and yapped hello as she closed the door.

Wearing a flowing caftan the color of the champagne in his glass, John greeted her with a kiss. "Our Divine Sarah. America's answer to French imperialism. How did your first day go, my sweet?" He wrapped her in a bear hug, nuzzled her with his soft blonde beard. How lucky to have such a welcoming home to return to. John was the perfect host and an absolute dear. He and Ben had insisted she stay as long as she liked in their huge, glorious apartment. John was two years ahead of her at Berkeley but left for France right after graduating. He'd quickly turned his experience painting sets for college productions into a fast-growing art gallery on the Place des Vosges.

He waved her into the more casual of their two living rooms, what the French called a double salon. Enormous

window-doors opened onto intricately-scrolled balconies overlooking the rue des Archives. The third space along this string of rooms was a grand dining room. At the back were three bedrooms, an office for John, and a studio for Ben redone with glass that flooded it with light.

Ben and a man she hadn't met before rose to greet her. "Andy," John said, indicating the stranger. "Another Californian. Knows everything there is to know about Empire furniture. I'm what he calls a source. Now isn't that a giggle?"

"Sarah's our Bernhardt," John said, turning to Andy. "We love her to death.

"So sit down, *ma petite*, I've saved a little cold supper. Tell us all about your day."

"I saw a murder." And with that, Sarah burst into tears. And Bisquit began to bark.

"Good grief." John again engulfed her in a hug, cooed, and guided her to a seat, while Ben jumped up to quiet the dog.

"How horrible. Tell us everything," John said, patting Sarah's hand. "But that maybe explains Vicki's message on our phone. The only thing we could make out was 'there's nothing on the wires.' What was that about?"

"I don't know," Sarah gasped through her tears. "But at least she's all right."

She recounted the day's events, popping up and down from her Louis Quinze chair to act out running child, dropped suitcase, handbag ripped from shoulder. Occasionally she stopped for a breath and another gulp of champagne.

"In the end," she said, winding up her tale, "I was teetering over that bloody body, and could feel the poor man's soul rise



up through the ashen pallor of his draining skin. It was all I could do to keep from fainting.” She didn’t bother mentioning that she’d had the wherewithal to yell at the cop that she was an American.

“Oh, *ma petite*,” John asked, “how did you have the strength to do your play after that?”

“The show must go on.” Sarah drew herself up to an imperious stature that hardly matched her California-girl face.

“Well, yeah, but it was only a rehearsal,” said Andy, with an I’m-not-buying-this look.

“One must always take one’s obligations seriously. Oh, in the excitement, I forgot to tell you the *worst* thing. An actress didn’t even bother to show up. Can you imagine! The director was livid. He said it was lucky he had an excellent standby and simply told her – Georgie is her name. I know her slightly from a London play we did together – that the role is hers from now on.”

## RENDEZVOUS IN PRAGUE

Sarah woke from a dream of herself as “La Dame aux Camélias” draped and dying across a fainting couch à la Bernhardt ensconced from head to toe in white ruffles. John was shaking her: “Phone call. Guy sounds Russian.”

Sarah sat up, groggy. “Don’t know any...”

“You’d better come.” John, in a cerise kimono with vertical purple stripes crisscrossed by yellow, also wore a worried frown. Ben, directly behind him, was in his usual gray wrap Armani bathrobe. Why were they both here? What time was it?

Sarah stumbled down the long hall that separated the bedrooms and Ben’s studio from the three grand rooms strung along the front and turned into the kitchen at the corner of the L-shaped apartment. There she picked up the wall phone and heard a click and the static buzz of a disconnect.

“What was it? What time is it?” She turned, and standing there right behind her were her two friends, arms folded like Punjab guards.

“It’s six a.m. The guy had a thick accent. Said something about a rendezvous at noon with Vicki. He said, ‘tell her the hotel the child calls a castle.’”

Sarah stared at John, slapping her hand against her heart. "Oh, my god! That's what Miranda calls the place they're going. What does it mean?"

John grabbed his mobile and dialed Vicki but was immediately kicked over to answering. "Probably has it turned off, still sleeping."

"I making coffee," Ben said, his thin cheeks and Roman nose aquiver as anxiety fought resolve across his face. "Is too weirdo creepy."

Watching him, Sarah got caught up in the thought that he moved like a dancer, not a painter. He opened a cabinet, reached for the coffee, his movement a fluid adagio. Still, she could see an arm streaking a slash of gray paint, a dollop of white and brown tole splashed back across the canvas of the kitchen then swirled over the black of Espresso machine. Somber colors, a wintry scene, even in the heat of summer. Crazy thoughts, who knows anyway how painters move? "I'm losing it!" she cried. "My niece is being stalked by some mad Russian, and I'm analyzing character types."

"What?" Ben whirled, spilling grains of brown on the otherwise spotless marble counter.

"Nothing," John said in a soothing tone, putting his arm around Sarah. "She always plays out stressful events in theater terms. It's her context. Just as color is for you."

"Ah, *bien sûr* Ben said with a beneficent, knowing smile. "But, of course."

The three took their coffee and day-old croissants into the mahogany-filled dining room, its large table with seating for ten adorned by ornate crystal candelabras. An elaborate and colorful Murano chandelier presided overhead. No time

for the usual run to the *boulangerie* for fresh bread. “Maybe we should call Mary,” Sarah said. “She’ll know what to do.”

“It’s pretty early to wake her,” John said. “Let’s wait and see if we hear from Vicki.”

“Umm,” Sarah was thinking of her lack of cell phone and of Mary’s stolen one. She realized with a start that she didn’t even have a number for Mary. What a dunce. John must know how to reach her. But he was recapping the situation, so Sarah let it slide, and instead reached across the big table to retrieve some sweet butter for her stale pastry.

“He said the hotel the child calls a castle,” John reiterated. “How the hell could that happen? How would anyone know something like that?”

“He perhaps call now, we wait,” Ben said, reaching over to pat John’s hand.

The three sat for a few minutes in silence, the muffled street sounds of an awakening Paris drifting through their enormous windows, an occasional purr from the kitchen as the coffee machine renewed its warmth.

“Let’s go over again the events at the *gare*,” John finally said. “Maybe this caller has something to do with that. Do you think Miranda mentioned the castle while she was there?”

Sarah put her open fingers flat against her mouth, her eyes wide. “She did! I’m sure. I can’t remember exactly to whom. There was so much going on.”

“Think!” John commanded.

Sarah winced, and flashed on the anguish of her role as the mother mourning a dead child – she and her husband arguing during their trip to Venice, where they’d gone to try to ease their pain.

“Cheri?” Ben looked at his lover with a startled expression. “*S'il te plait*. Please do not scare we.”

It was John's turn for hand patting. He reached over to Sarah. “I'm sorry, Baby. I don't mean to frighten you, but this feels serious.”

John had always been able to read her face. Forever best friends, they were even roommates for a short while in college. He was a staunch ally, supported and looked after her when others called her ditzzy. She mustn't blur his reality with the character John, her husband in the play who is killed by the dwarf who looks like a child.

“I'm trying to remember,” Sarah said. “I know Miranda made it a grand pronouncement; it was so cute. She drew herself up in this proud way.” Sarah sat straighter in her mahogany chair. “We're going to live in a castle? I can see her saying it, but I can't fill in the picture of who else was around. The guy in the white shirt, everyone, I guess.”

“Yep,” John said, getting up. “What I was afraid of. Let's see if there's anything on the news about the death in the *Gare*.” He headed for the kitchen and returned with a small radio. As he fiddled with the dials, searching for France Info, Sarah was already groaning. “I won't understand a word.”

“Shush. If I find any news, I'll explain.”

“*Moi, aussi*, I too,” Ben said with a grin. “John's *français* it is not so good.”

With John's last twirl of the dial, both men's faces lighted up. Sarah strained toward the radio. She could catch here and there a word she knew, but it added up to nothing. *Nada, rien*.

“Does he say who the dead man was?” she finally demanded in exasperation, only to be waved to silence.

“Okay,” John finally said, “it’s not much. Still no word on who the guy was. Cops first reported it as heat stroke, can you imagine, with blood all over?”

“*Les flics*,” Ben’s voice was rich with contempt. “French police, zay do it zair own way.”

A snort of laughter escaped from John. “Yeah, well they’ve finally ruled that out and now suspect foul play.” He turned to Ben. “Suspect, that’s what they said, *n’est-ce pas*?”

“*Exactement*,” Ben replied. “Your French becomes improved.”

“Something else.” John turned back to Sarah. “Maybe this is what Vicki was referring to with that message about nothing on the wires. The announcer also said there’d been some unexplained problem yesterday with an afternoon train from Gare de l’Est. An incident near the German border, where maybe a farm animal wandered on the track. But, again, the reporters say cops are evasive.”

“We know Vicki’s all right,” Sarah said with what amounted to defiance, the heck with the French and their ways. “She left a phone message.”

“So, we call again,” Ben said. “We make sure, no?”

“Yeah,” Sarah said. “She’s used to being up early so Miranda can go to something they call mat turn all.”

“*Maternelle*,” John laughed. “Nursery school.”

“Oh.” Sarah blushed. “I wondered.”

“Why didn’t you ask?” John said softly.

“There’s so much new.” Sarah put on her best woebegone face. “I don’t know where to start. I want so much to stay here, to be with Vicki, but ...”

“*Pauvre petite.*” John reached over and tousled her still uncombed hair. Sarah looked down and realized that in her confusion and excitement she’d struggled into a sweatshirt thrown over a chair by her bed, and she had it on backwards.

John put his mobile on speaker and dialed Vicki’s number.

“We’re eating breakfast.” Vicki’s voice was clear and happy. “You’ll never, ever guess where we’re eating: The Sarah Bernhardt restaurant. What a kick, huh? In Prague, no less. AND we’re staying at the Hotel Paris.”

“That’s great,” Sarah said, “but I just saw a murder.”

Vicki gasped. “That gets my attention.” As Sarah launched into her story, Vicki quickly interrupted. “Sarah, babe, are you okay? John, speak up. Tell me?”

“She’s doing fine,” John chimed in. “Not to worry.”

“Stop it, you two,” Sarah said. “I’m not so delicate.”

“Sare, honey,” Vicki’s voice was easy, “that’s scary for anyone. But especially with that play you’re doing. You don’t need any more upsetting things going on.”

“It’s *you*,” Sarah told her. “John got some creepy call. We were worried about *you*.”

John spoke up, explaining the early morning wakeup.

Vicki chuckled. “You’re making too much out of this. There’s nothing for us to be afraid of. After spending the night in a couchette with five American soldiers, we can put up with anything. Miranda wanted to know why they had such big bums. Big feet hanging out over the bunks. But listen, guys, I’ve got an interview at four, and Miranda and I have sightseeing to do. I’m not going to any rendezvous without more info.”

“Of course not,” said John. “You shouldn’t. But the call was worrisome.”

“I’m frightened. How would that man know Miranda called your hotel a castle?” Sarah’s voice, to her own ear, sounded melodramatic, as though she had gone way over the top on a first-sight reading. “But, damn it, I mean it,” she shouted into the phone.

“You’re absolutely right. I don’t like the sound of that.” Vicki’s voice through the speakerphone took on a pensive tone. “There’s a balcony overlooking the lobby. Maybe I’ll hang out there, and see what I can see. I suppose it could be connected to that woman scientist I’m interviewing this afternoon. She was married to a Russian. But I thought she told me he was dead.”

“Be careful,” Sarah warned before the connection was broken.



## 8

### FOOL'S ERRAND

Vicki and Miranda had just been to the zoo and were headed back on the fool's errand of the noon rendezvous. Vicki would suspect that this was one of her sister's usual fantasies except that, according to the phone call from Paris this morning, it was John who had taken the mysterious message from the so-called Russian. The Grand Hotel Pariz, as its facade read, came into view. It was grand, indeed, with its almost wedding cake look and its dormered roof with great standup slabs of spiky frosted whatever. If she knew more about architecture, she'd be able to identify the parts better, but maybe not. Vicki had a feeling that it wasn't a failing on her part – that the building was nothing more than a grand mishmash. But what fun. Miranda was totally enthralled, it looked like a castle to her four-year-old sensibilities. She was skipping as they moved along hand in hand.

“Mommy, we have fun when you're not working.” Vicki winced and tightened her grip on her child's hand. With her long hours and her husband, Bill, continually off to some exotic locale on assignment, Miranda spent an awful lot of time in her preschool *maternelle* or with babysitters. Vicki

had to drop the poor kid off at eight in the morning and the sitter didn't pick her up until six. One had very erratic hours in the news business. Luckily the French school system made accommodations for working mothers by tacking on – for a fee – two extra hours of after-school activities. As they moved through the hotel's revolving door, Katja's tantrum yesterday over who would pack Miranda's suitcase spun into Vicki's head. The kid and the babysitter had almost come to blows. Nothing was ever easy, was it? Now that Miranda finally seemed to have gotten used to Katja, who could be a bit rigid, Vicki had been unnerved to witness a lack of stability she'd never seen before in the big Pole. "She kind of lives from hand-to-mouth," Mary had said, "but she has a big heart."

A hotel doorman doffed his hat, saying hello, "*Dobry den*, Miss Princess," and one of the desk clerks sang out "Here comes, Miranda," as they entered the lobby with its vaulted ceilings, crystal chandeliers, mosaic floors, and golden, life-size statues at every turn. Miranda ran across the lobby, gabbing with bemused residents trying to read their hometown papers. "I'm four and a half and three quarters," she announced, pulling up in front of a non-comprehending, elderly Greek tourist in white spectator pumps. She went on to expound about the black gorillas at the zoo. "They live in a forest, but they've got an outside house made of sticks."

Vicki dragged Miranda away with a weak smile of apology. No sense in explaining, sorry, she's only four and a half, since the woman clearly didn't understand English. They'd had an enormous breakfast in the Bernhardt restaurant earlier and were now planning on coffee and juice in the Cafe de Paris,

with an 's' not a 'z' – it seemed only the facade had the Czech spelling. But first, the fool's errand.

Hand in hand, they mounted the grand staircase (everything, indeed, was grand) with its huge marble columns and banisters of metal fretwork that were very Parisian. After a number of wrong turns and lots of climbing, they finally found their way to the gallery that overlooked the lobby.

Sarah was roused by the ringing phone. She had fallen asleep on the living room couch, still in her backwards sweatshirt, after John left for his shop. Shaking herself out of another vivid Bernhardt dream – this one gory, the actress was having her leg cut off – Sarah stumbled over the sharp edge of a glass and chrome coffee table.

Setting up a howl over her own skinned shin, she dwelt for a moment on the emotion of debilitating pain and wondered just how one could best express it on stage. Somehow less had to be more in that kind of role. Techniques had changed since Bernhardt's day. Camera close-ups, stage actors miked. The insistent ringing of the phone pulled Sarah back, and she groped toward the kitchen, grabbing in passing a paper napkin from the marble counter to dab at the tiny trickle of blood on her leg.

The phone bellowed at her, was she alone here? Why wasn't Ben answering? Oh, he was probably shut up in his studio. No phone in there, no one was allowed to disturb him. If it's the weird Russian caller, she'd have to face him alone.

She put the receiver tentatively to her ear, silently expecting to hear she knew not what. Perhaps a heavy breather?

“Sarah? Are you there?” Her big sister, irritated with her as usual. “What game are you playing now?”

“I’m here,” Sarah said weakly. “I thought you might be the mad Russian.”

“I’m not even going to respond to that,” Vicki said, familiar exasperation in her voice. “Which of you jokers said I had a rendezvous at noon? I’m sitting here on the balcony watching the entire lobby. Miranda’s bored stiff. I can’t see anyone likely at all. I gave the porter a good tip, but he says no one has asked for me. I haven’t even been approached by a pushy tour guide... Hang on a minute...”

There was a momentary pause then Sarah heard an American male voice say, “Excuse me.” Vicki came back on the line. “I take back what I just said. Don’t go away, I’m putting the phone down for a sec.” At a little distance, Sarah could hear her sister say: “What are you doing here?” and Miranda exclaim, “Hi! That baby gorilla was riding on its mother’s back.”

The man’s voice was distinct and hard: “You’re a lovely little girl. I think you and your Mommy would be safer back in Paris.” Vicki cried out, “Miranda, don’t!” There was a crash and the line went dead.

## 9

### FEAR OF FLYING

Sarah, panting and disheveled, shoved open the door of John's gallery along the block of covered arches that form the square around the Place des Vosges. She had run most of the way from his apartment, nearly a mile away, through the labyrinthine back streets of the Marais, having taken time only to rip off the backwards sweatshirt and throw a dress over her head. Thank heaven she'd learned this route when she first arrived. Paris was so confusing.

And there was Mary, amidst the eclectic clutter, looking grim. Sarah had seen through the glass door that she and John were in deep conversation, standing in front of a huge, cheerful oil, all bright splashes of reds and yellows.

"Christ, what now?" Mary said.

"It's Vicki." And Sarah burst into tears.

John rushed to throw his arms around her, nearly toppling a Klee waiting for framing, this one an orange face with glaring red button eyes.

Sarah choked out the story of Vicki's crashing phone call, her two friends staring in stunned silence.

“Things are getting more frightening by the minute,” Mary said finally, almost to herself.

Sarah looked from one to the other.

Grasping her by the shoulders, staring into her eyes, John said carefully, “Mary’s apartment was trashed.”

Mary shifted her weight, her mouth a hard line. “The keys from my stolen handbag.”

A voice in Sarah’s head rasped, *We’re all in danger here*. It was beginning to feel like a bad play. Like one of her dreams about Bernhardt, her lovely, distinctive voice hanging in the air. What would The Divine One have done with a situation like this, thick with melodrama?

Sarah straightened, threw her head back and delivered the line, her voice low and loaded: “We’re all in danger here.”

“Good god,” said Mary. “You really are nuts.”

John had already picked up his phone. “I’m calling Vicki.”

The two women watched as he punched in her number. And grimaced as he shook his head.

“Just a peculiar buzzing.”

“That buzz,” said Mary, “is the tinkle of the brass bell on your door.”

Hardly a French sound, but a keepsake from his mother’s antique shop in San Francisco.

And an elegantly dressed Frenchman walked in.

“Is that Savile Row?” Mary muttered.

“Maybe Huntsman,” John said, sotto voce. “Rich customer, but devious.”

Sarah frowned. She couldn’t bear it, if John was having business troubles. It seemed nothing was safe or upbeat in Paris anymore.

“*Bonjour, Monsieur de la Poche,*” John said in greeting. “*Ça va bien? Excusez-moi, un moment...*”

He turned to Mary, who was near his laptop, which sat atop a grand wood-inlaid desk that dominated the center of the room, and said: “Check my email, would you.” He scribbled numbers. “Here’s the code. See if there’s anything from Vicki.”

“*Et bien, Monsieur de la Poche?*”

The man was caressing an ancient Grecian bowl.

“I’ve told you before,” de la Poche replied, with starched frown, slight formal bow of the head, and a Brit clip to his English, “no need to waste your French on me.” He turned the bowl over to stare at the markings on its bottom before setting it down on a nearby Louis Quinze end table.

“I’ve come to tell you that I’ve decided against buying the porcelain after all.”

John looked extremely annoyed. But his voice was even. “Really? I’m surprised, Monsieur. You have kept it quite a while trying to make up your mind.”

“Well, yes, I’ll get it back to you shortly.”

“You haven’t brought it with you?” John asked, a look of disbelief on his face. “I would like to have it on display for other customers. And the short-term insurance on such a loan has already lapsed.”

“Of course, right you are. *Ciao-ciao.*”

The bell tinkled and de la Poche was out the door.

“That bastard,” John muttered.

Mary and Sarah were focused on the computer screen.

“Cripes. You’ve got a lot of unopened email.” Mary was moving the mouse around on a square of the desk’s richly

polished and lacquered walnut. “Yeah, here’s one from Vicki. Hope it isn’t just old like all the rest.”

John and Sarah peered anxiously over her shoulder.

“Finally, some good news!” Mary exclaimed, reading: *Using hotel computer. Phone broken. We’re OK, but blowing this place. Doing my interview, then outta here. Already booked a flight. Can’t face the train.*”

“What’s good about that?” Sarah wailed. “Vicki hates flying, she must really be scared. Just like we are. Someone’s after all of us.”



## THE PLAY'S THE THING

Mary and Sarah left John's little shop on the Place des Vosges almost running.

"I can't be late," Sarah muttered. "It brings bad luck to the show. And we've got to start earlier, need more time, because of the new actress replacing the one who went AWOL yesterday."

Mary had grumped about going to the rehearsal but here she was trotting along and, in truth, she welcomed the distraction. Sarah was overwrought about Vicki and needed company and Mary, besides being worried about Vicki too, dreaded returning to her own trashed apartment. Still, Sarah was an irritant. She had some irrational fear of the show they were doing. Two old-lady sisters, one a psychic who conjures the dead kid of Sarah's character or something? So what?

Mary glanced over at Sarah and smiled to herself as they passed Carnavalet, the museum of old Paris, on their way to the former temple district with its kosher butchers and corkscrew streets. Yes, come to think of it, Sarah would let her imagination run riot with a play like that. Mary might know little about theater, but she knew enough to have noticed that everyone involved, from costume-making to directing,

was over the top. Dear god, such a scenario in the City of Light, the country that brought the world rationalism, reason, secularism, godlessness, hedonism. You wondered how they'd ever sell a ticket to a play like that here in France – but they would, and this was the beauty of the plan – English-speaking foreigners would be delighted to turn up for a piece in English, and the French snobs would turn up, pretending they could understand it while surreptitiously reading the overtitles. Foreign-language plays had become increasingly popular, while Feydeau farces for French bumpkins and tourists faded into the background, along with the Grands Boulevards and the old-fashioned restaurants that served them special menus, starting at 11 p.m., with onion soup. Traditions were being trodden on here. That thought brightened Mary's mood immediately.

But Sarah? A strange bird. She'd been silent for an unusually long time, seemed to be mumbling to herself. Probably practicing her lines. But how was that going to work? All the characters were supposed to be British, how would Sarah manage with her flat California accent?

So, who cares? An outing, no matter how weird, would be a relief.

Sarah brightened visibly as they snaked down a narrow passage to arrive at the theater, a rather large, squirreled-away space – probably built for horses, behind a storefront with a painted-over sign for rabbinical wear that was now a disco.

“Here we are, Mare!”

Mary hated when Americans shortened her name like that.

“You theater people certainly know how to switch your energy on and off,” she said. “You suddenly look fully rested and ready for action!”

“I come alive.” Sarah’s face lit, her voice took on a strange seductive lilt, an almost magical tone. She suddenly seemed beautiful. Mary, startled, for the first time that day took a good look at the young woman – her fresh-scrubbed face, her blond curls. A blue stone on a pale silk ribbon around her neck lent her a Madonna-like quality.

They entered a side door into the auditorium. Inside, everything was darkish except for the stage, where people were standing and sitting around, some on the boards, drinking coffee or tinned sodas. From where Mary and Sarah stood, they could hear every word people were saying up there. A smell of cigarettes: someone was smoking – probably French. Mary hoped the Brits would object – she remembered a time when you could identify the destination of a plane by the number of smokers in the check-in queue: the biggest smokers were going to France. Even in those days, Americans often objected – she recalled one pretending to have asthma at a literary conference. In the early days, the French had laughed at them. Now everyone objected.

Gomez, the director, a short, dark bloke with a protruding jaw, spotted them. Shading his eyes, he shouted, “Ach, Sarah, ve haff been waiting for you!”

Sarah rolled her eyes to heaven, indicated to Mary a seat half a dozen rows back, and headed up the steps for the stage.

Mary curled into her seat and prepared to forget fretting about whatever it was that seemed to be menacing her and her friends.

It emerged very quickly that Sarah wasn't the last to arrive.

"Georgie! Where the hell is Georgie?" the director kept yelling. "Ve yust engage her to replace dot other actress und now she goes missing, too."

It soon became clear that Georgie was nowhere in the theater. The director launched into an angry speech while the cast and crew stood at attention. The time was the time and there could be no two ways about it. That kind of speech.

Someone was dispatched to get a phone number and try to make contact with Georgie. No one knew where she was staying. Finally, a file was dragged out of a briefcase and calls were made, first to London, then Paris. The director paced. Set and wardrobe people stepped in to take advantage of the pause.

Sarah looked down to where Mary was sitting and spelled out what was already pretty obvious. "The replacement actress, has disappeared. No one has seen her."

Mary shook her head in wonder. If she had the story straight, this Georgie was standing in for another actress who only just yesterday had herself failed to appear.

By now, the director was ranting. "Right. Vhat the hell? Ve're jinxed. First our casting vas done for us by dot damned producer, who claims he sends someone quite fine. Probabably his mozther-in-law. She iz a no-show. Now the standby I haff the foresight to hire is disappeared."

He slammed down his script and stomped off the stage.

The actors just stood there, eyes darting from one to the other, responding with mild shrugs, as if they were French. Then silence. A tableau. No one appeared to move.

No wonder Sarah's so crazy, Mary thought. I wonder if this sort of thing happens frequently? Must do, she decided. They all seem to be playing the role of patiently waiting. It's like a script they'd learned.

The director suddenly reappeared on stage and began speaking calmly, as though there had been no break.

"Right," he said. "We cannot rest pussyfooting. Our schedule it is tight. Ve do ze rehearsal. Now!"

He left the stage again, this time to sit a few rows ahead of Mary. Actors stirred to take their places.

"Pierre," he called to a good-looking, red-haired young man who was moving a table into place. "Can you read so well English to do the blind sister's role to Sarah's Laura?"

Mary seemed to recall Sarah saying she fancied a crewmember with rust-colored hair.

"Hmm," Sarah grinned, "he'll put some life in the old lady."

A titter moved around the room, while Pierre blushed.

"Put scarf on head," the director told him. "Get on vith it."

Mary wished she'd had the sense to bring a takeaway coffee and a chocolate bar or something. On stage there were tables and chairs set like a restaurant. A man and Sarah were seated as a couple to the front, and one old lady sat to the back with the young Pierre, who had a rag on his head tied under his chin like a scarf. A man hovered in the background, a tea towel over his arm.

"Right. Quiet." the director shouted. "Opening scene, restaurant in Venice, Laura and John, dinner."

“Don’t look now,” Sarah-as-Laura says to her husband, “but those two Englishwomen over there have been studying us since we came in.”

John: “Oh for god’s sake, Laura, can we give it a miss, for once?”

Mary was amazed to see Sarah become someone else before her very eyes. The planes of her face seemed to alter; she didn’t look like herself but like this other – Laura – the bereaved mother.

Laura: “I’m afraid you’ll have to admit that this time I’m right. They seem to want to make contact: one of them is on her way over here.”

Pierre, carrying a cane, moves forward on the arm of the elderly actress.

Laura: “No – wait – they’re both coming. The first one is helping the other. She has a stick. Oh, dear – it’s not a walking stick, it’s a white cane! The second lady is blind!”

John: “Please, Laura! I wanted a quiet evening, just the two of us. We’re supposed to be talking to each other, dealing with our loss, not entertaining strangers in restaurants!”

Sarah/Laura registers shock at the word “loss.”

Mary forgot all about thirst and hunger as she got caught up in what was happening on stage. She was transported by this new Sarah who seemed to totally inhabit the Laura character. Mary suddenly grasped it as a strict discipline: control of mind, body, voice, facial expressions to become another person. The California girl had morphed into an upper-class Brit! Amazing.

The director interrupted. “Slower! Do zat again. Change the tempo. Where is dot waiter? Come on man, fuss about,

move chairs and stuff out of zair way – zis is a classy Italian restaurant, not a pizza joint!”

There were giggles at this. He frowned and went on, addressing the players by their character names. “Wendy and Heather, you are old and feeble, you arrive at the table, slowly and vith difficulty. Project! Two slightly overweight English women abroad at a certain epoch: flower cotton dresses, big hats, white skin, white handbags, sensible white sandals. Move zis along. Please.”

While the director was speaking, Pierre’s scarf began to slip. As he grabbed at it with one hand, he thoughtlessly brought up the other holding the cane. His elderly partner had to duck to miss its swing, and with a sheepish grin, he embraced her sending everyone into fits of laughter, including Mary. The director turned in his seat to eyeball her over his spectacles. Mary began to see what Sarah liked in Pierre. But lord how she’d hate being in the thrall of that Gomez.

Things settle down. The English ladies have something urgent to say to the couple.

Pierre/Heather the blind lady tells them: “Ve ave un mes sage pour *vous*. *Vous* must not be sod about the death of you dawwahter, Christine.”

Mary bit her lip, all she could do to restrain a huge guffaw and bring on the ire of that director.

Laura is visibly shocked by the word ‘death.’ She more or less jumps from her seat grasping her napkin as if it were a handkerchief. Again, Mary was gobsmacked by Sarah’s total control of Laura’s depressive persona.

“Your little daughter, Christine, spoke to Heather,” Wendy tells the couple. “Things happen to Heather quite often. She is what one calls a psychic.”

Sarah/Laura looks pained, looks to husband, John, for guidance. John rolls his eyes skyward.

“Ze lit tle girl wears un red mac kin touche,” Pierre/Heather adds. Mary was startled, she remembered the child’s red coat from the movie. Over and over, the floating image of that bright slicker.

At this, Sarah/Laura faints to the floor. The husband leans over her. Sarah doesn’t move.

Mary was surprised to find herself shivering in the heat of a summer afternoon.

The scene was broken, not by the onstage action, but the arrival of someone in the auditorium.

There was a sudden ripple of movement onstage.

“Georgie!” several people cried in unison as a small woman in brown moved down the aisle toward the stage. She seemed to be breathless.

When the director saw who it was, he became very angry indeed.

“Georgie! How dare that you come middle into ze rehearsal?”

Mary suspected he’d have ordered her out the door if she hadn’t already been a replacement. How many of these people could they produce at short notice? The role of the blind Heather was clearly crucial.

“I am profoundly sorry,” the woman said, stepping up toward the stage. Her voice carried well and Mary distinctly heard what she said next.



“I got held up by the police. I’ve been with them for the last two hours.”

“What?” the director snapped. “What have ze police to do with you?”

“Everything, really,” the woman said slowly, projecting that deep voice of hers — she was on the stage by now — “when the actress I’m replacing is dead.”

## 11

### CONFIRMATION

John reversed the sign from *Ouvert* to *Fermé*, pulled the glass door shut, but kept worrying that he was doing the wrong thing. Closing in the late afternoon wasn't a good idea. There were still hundreds of tourists – potential customers – strolling around under the covered arches, going in and out of galleries and shops. And Parisians indulged in window shopping on their way home from work. Down the block, the sidewalk terrace of Le Café Hugo spilled over with people drinking their wines and beers and coffees while enjoying Paris' version of air conditioning, water sprayed in front of whirling outdoor fans. Kids laughed and screamed, playing games in the square of greenery at the center of Place des Vosges, the first seventeenth-century housing complex – and royal too – with its stylish ground-floor encircling arcades, all of which were reclaimed from decrepitude and gentrified in the early sixties.

But John had to walk and think. He felt his quiet, orderly life was flipping upside down. Vicki in some kind of danger in Prague, couldn't reach her by phone. Mary's apartment burgled. And now this creep de la Poche – what was the

collector up to? True, he was one of his best customers, yet John felt in his very bones that the pretentious, impeccably dressed Frenchman was no more than a crook. Indeed, the very way he dressed was yet another alarm bell – too showy for a Frenchman. And he'd kept that porcelain for nearly a month while repeatedly making excuses – his wife couldn't make up her mind, his brother-in-law said he might buy it. Now he shows up to say he doesn't want it but still, he doesn't bring it back. Something was afoot. John wanted to talk this over with his friend, Andy, but not by phone. Couldn't take the chance that either of them might be overheard by a customer.

He decided to walk, no sense in trying to cram into a sticky Métro car even though it was a long way to rue Bonaparte and rue des Saints-Pères, the area of the Fifth *Arrondissement* where Andy's was one of the many art and antiques shops. He headed straight down to the river, and made his way along the quay, breathing in air fresh off the water. How he envied people sunning themselves and picnicking on food they'd bought in little *épiceries fines* on the Île St Louis. This is what Paris should be like, what it had been when he first arrived and fell in love. He took the bridge that cut across the western tip of the Ile, then the pedestrian bridge that headed straight into the rear grounds of Notre-Dame. John never tired of that backside view. Most tourists gathered at the front to gaze at the iconic Rose Window over the portals, but for him it was the graceful arc of the supportive flying buttresses that brought tears to his eyes. The way San Franciscans felt about the sweeping span of the Golden Gate Bridge; when they saw it, they knew they were home. John had long since moved

his allegiance to Paris. He would always be an American, but Paris was his love, the home of his heart.

He thought of Sarah. So California. So deeply a part of his youth. He wondered how she would fare here? Probably fine. She was lighter than air, a mystic spirit, so un-French. Nonetheless, Parisians surely would love her. How could they not with their taste and imagination in everything. They were too smart and too chic to turn their Gallic shrug to someone as rare as Sarah. She desperately wanted to stay in Paris, be with the sister and niece she adored. John hoped this new stage role would get her enough notice to find more theater work here. But could any of this come to pass? Some evil force seemed to be hovering. So unlike Vicki to be without a cell phone. He pulled out his and tried her number again. Still no answer.

He looked around, startled, shaking his head in chagrin, realizing where he was. He had been so engrossed in his thoughts coming off the bridge that he'd walked halfway down rue des Bernardins instead of turning right along the Left Bank quay. Out of habit he was heading straight for Anachuacalli, his favorite Mexican restaurant. Thoughts of Sarah and California and home put him in the mood for a margarita every time. Sarah had been so tickled when he, Ben and Vicki took her to dinner there her first night in town. Pitchers of salty margaritas and wonderful food had blown her away. "I'll always feel at home here now, knowing I can get Mexican food whenever I miss California."

Everyone laughed but Ben, who just looked from one to another with a quizzical expression. That was the first time he had deigned to bring his refined French tastes to

Anachuacalli, and had done so only as a polite gesture toward their houseguest. John smiled, recalling Ben's tentative taste of tortillas: "Unleavened bread of maize? Is, ah, *très étrange*."

John retraced his steps, admonishing himself for letting his mind wander off the subject at hand: how to frame his questions to Andy. Just what was his gut feeling about de la Poche? Sure, the guy had kept the porcelain too long. Inconsiderate. Self-centered. But so what? Most of these big-moneyed art collectors were full of themselves. Yet de la Poche was somehow in a different league.

John glanced over as he reached Pont Neuf, the bridge spanning the river at the end of Île de la Cité. Seeing the back of the buildings that faced onto Place Dauphine made him think of the apartment he almost bought on the charming little triangular spot at the end of the Île. But nothing there was as grand and spacious as his home in the Marais, where Ben could have a studio and many walls to display his paintings. John had meant to talk over with Ben his suspicions about Monsieur de la Poche, but there hadn't been time with all the commotion. His partner knew the Paris art scene in a way that John, a foreigner, never could. And it was Ben who had first introduced him to de la Poche.

John took a left turn away from the river onto rue Bonaparte and thought back on that first meeting with de la Poche a few months ago. It was a showing at the Grand Palais, the night sky illuminated through its immense glass-domed roof. John was standing at a bar feeling well turned out in his Armani tuxedo with red bow tie, champagne glass in hand, when Ben brought him over. What was it about de la Poche? Was he a bit overly eager, making too much of my

being American? With all the art dealers in Paris, why seek out some small potato like me? Maybe figuring I was naive, a foreigner who didn't know the score? No question, it was unconscionable his keeping the porcelain so long, but beyond that, the collector had done nothing you could put your finger on. His checks never bounced. In their several dealings before this last one he had been quite specific, quite decisive about his likes and dislikes.

Andy's place, a large but cramped space jammed with gigantic pieces of mansion-sized furniture, couldn't have been more unlike his own, which he sometimes thought of as a post card shop in a penny arcade. Of course, he had serious buyers, and he dealt in serious paintings and valuable antiques, but so many purchases were on impulse by wealthy Americans and oil-rich Arabs. The people wandering through Place des Vosges, the ancient site of French kings, were just as likely to buy a T-shirt as a painting.

Andy dealt in an unusual mix of very expensive and very large Empire pieces and in ancient objects from the Middle East. John's knowledge of antique furniture was spotty, confined mostly to the Louis XV era he loved, with its gilt and delicate curves. So on the rare occasion that someone offered to sell him a piece of jewelry purported to be Assyrian or a Mesopotamian figurine, he would consult Andy. Given the small space in his own shop, there was no way John would ever need expert consultation on huge Napoleonic era armoires or buffets.

As John stepped into Andy's place with its familiar musty smell of old upholstery, the first thing that caught his eye was a small elaborate gold frame hung on the wall to his right. It

contained an object mounted on black velvet that looked like a tiny, finger-shaped rock strung on a silver thread. What the devil was it, and why did it seem familiar?

“Can I help ...” came out of Andy’s mouth before he realized the person he’d assumed to be a new customer was his old friend. “What are you doing off work so early?”

Despite having stewed during his walk about how to present his questions, John just went straight to the point. “Do you know anything about a man called de la Poche?”

Andy didn’t mince words. “That guy is bad news. Most of the dealers I know think he’s up to his eyeballs in looted art.”

“Looted? You mean stolen?”

“No. Antiquities – taken from gravesites, excavations. Spoils of war, Iraq, Afghanistan.”

“What?” John spouted. “Like the Baghdad Museum, when the U.S. invaded? That was ages ago.”

“Yeah, that made headlines. But it goes on all the time. Plenty of collectors, and museums for that matter, don’t bother to check the provenance, the paper trail, of whether the item is legit.”

“And you think de la Poche is mixed up in that?” John was incredulous. “He’s a very wealthy man, high up in Parisian society. You’ve seen his suits.”

“So?” Andy’s gesture was dismissive. “You need to get your porcelain back, *tout de suite*, and make it cash-and-carry with him from now on. Besides,” he gave John a playful pat on the shoulder, “you should stick to what you know, oil paintings.”

“Damn,” John said. “The guy really did have me pegged as a naive foreigner.”

Andy grinned. “Happens to all of us.”

On his way out, John pointed at the framed necklace. “What’s that? It looks like lapis lazuli? Strange shape, round. Like a piece of chalk.”

He moved closer, peering at it. “Oh! Tiny images cut in the stone.”

“Ah my friend, that’s an Egyptian cylinder seal. Fairly common in the antiquities trade, the ancients used them as a personal signature. No two alike. Rolled them through wax to stamp a document. Some, the Assyrian ones, can pull in as much as a quarter million bucks.”

John leaned over to inspect it again, but his mind wasn’t really registering the intricate carved figures. He was trying to remember back to what Ben had said about how he’d met de la Poche, or even if he had mentioned it at all.



## 12

### CONFRONTATION

Leaving Andy's shop, the unsettling news about de la Poche still ringing in his ears, John hit on a plan that was probably foolish, but the hell with it. He would go to de la Poche's home and demand the porcelain. He had to do something with himself besides just worrying and wondering what the devil was happening to Vicki and Miranda.

He started down rue Bonaparte toward St. Germain des Près. The spires of the church came into view before he had gone a block. He quickly crossed rue Jacob, with its upscale jewelry and decorator shops, but then hesitated at the curb. Should he, or shouldn't he? He couldn't resist. Turning, he recrossed the street and detoured into Ladurée, his favorite store in all of Paris – the best macaroons in the world. Ugh. His adored Paris was killing his waistline. He grinned to himself. At least, though, it gave him an excuse to wear those swishy, outrageous caftans he loved.

Back outside with his purchases – he'd had them put a dozen in a pastry box, around which they'd tied a blue ribbon, and another four in a bag that he could munch on right now – he decided that the better part of wisdom was to phone de la

Poche first. He'd finish off these macaroons then head across the cobblestones and up the boulevard to Café Flore. He turned up his nose as he passed the Deux Magots – what a tourist trap that had turned into. Hemingway might have loved it, but so did Ma and Pa Kettle from wherever. John thought of his first wonderful days in Paris checking out literary haunts he'd read of and dreamed of for years. The Brasserie Lipp, just across boulevard St. Germain, The Dome and The Select perhaps a mile south on Montparnasse. After his mother died, it was a question of whether to run her shop in San Francisco or take the money and run. And here he was: he'd never looked back.

He finished off the last macaroon, stuffed the tissue-thin pastry wrapper in his brief case – no littering in Paris! – and headed into the Flore where he grabbed a favorite bistro table overlooking the sidewalk through the curve of the windows giving onto rue Benoit. This was where he had met Ben, each alone at a single little table. When John, with his American openness, had said, “I love this spot,” Ben had given a French shrug and said, “Is *ma rue*. Name- ed *pour moi*.” “Named for you? I don't understand.” It had taken John a moment to catch the joke. “Oh,” he said, “Is your name Benoit?” Another shrug and an almost imperceptible rolling of the eyes alerted John that he could easily become just another American tourist joke with this guy, if he weren't careful. And he definitely hadn't wanted that to happen. He had found Ben very attractive – still did for that matter, five years and counting.

But back to the task at hand. He ordered a glass of wine and a *salade niçoise* then nervously pulled out his cell to call de la Poche. He dreaded this; making the call was surely foolish, but damn it, he wanted his property back.

To his utter amazement, not only did de la Poche say, “But of course,” he invited John to come right on by and have a drink. There was a small cocktail party in progress, and it would be “good business” for John to meet some of “my influential friends.” *Mon Dieu!* What the devil was this about?

De la Poche gave John detailed instructions how to reach his apartment and the door code to the building. John knew the neighborhood well, as de la Poche lived within a block of Vicki. He gulped his wine, didn't bother to finish his salad, paid the bill and was off. He passed up the St. Germain Métro stop for one farther down the boulevard – Mabillon – that he knew would take him without changing trains to a stop near Vicki's.

He emerged from the Métro where Boulevard des Invalides morphs into Boulevard du Montparnasse and walked the familiar few blocks toward Vicki's apartment, pulling out his phone and dialing her number, hoping her mobile was finally fixed. Still no answer. What was going on? The peculiar phone call early this morning. Calm, laid-back Vicki, so upset she was actually taking a plane. And yesterday at the *gare*, Mary's purse stolen, the thief slaughtered, her apartment trashed, her concerns about the too-friendly men there. Were they eying the child and thinking about kidnapping? He stopped at a park bench across from Vicki's building and again used his phone, this time to search Air France schedules. Just as he feared. She and Miranda should have arrived already. There were three daily flights direct from Prague, and several more that required a change in Lyon. Even taking into account her interview, which couldn't have taken more than an hour, Vicki should be home by now. Once more he tried her cell, then her home phone. Again, no answer. With no brothers or

sisters and only one dopey cousin back in California, Sarah and Vicki were the closest he had to family. Something very odd indeed was going on. Wearily he rose from the bench and headed down the street toward de la Poche's.

At the crossing of avenue du Saxe, he turned and positioned himself to do something Vicki had pointed out to him ages ago: stand on this corner at avenue de Breteuil where you could see at the same time the Eiffel Tower at a distance on your left and l'Hôtel des Invalides at the end of Beteuil on your right. It was gorgeous any time, but at night, magnificent, the lights on the tower twinkling while Invalides, where Napoleon was buried, stood solid in its gold-domed splendor.

He tried Vicki's number again – she particularly loved this spot just down the street from her apartment – then walked across the tree-shaded, vacant concrete of the Tuesday/Saturday market. On market mornings, this patch of ground was cheek by jowl as far as one could see with stalls of produce, meats, cheeses, Arab rugs, kids' flip flops, whatever. By 1 p.m., the stalls were struck, the vans were gone, the guys in their green coveralls had carted off the refuse and hosed down the plaza, and there was no way to tell that any of it had been there. Gone in a flash, just like Vicki and Miranda who seemed to have evaporated.

Across the square, John searched the buildings for de la Poche's address. Wow, he saw the building and realized it contained the one apartment in all of Paris that he had always coveted, just from looking up on market days at its enormous arched dormer window. And de la Poche had said he lived on the top floor. That had to be it! Wow, was right! He surely has the most fab place in town. He must really be rich.

## THE LIFE OF THE PARTY

Just as John lifted the big brass elephant's head to knock, the enormous wood door swung open and de la Poche, drink in hand, greeted him as if they were the greatest of friends.

"*Mon ami.*" He managed to kiss John on both cheeks in the standard Parisian greeting while balancing and not spilling a drop from his oversized Baccarat martini glass. Not a sound emanated from the cavernous room behind. Where is the party, the friends he wanted me to meet? John wondered.

De la Poche stepped aside and with a flourish of his manicured hand ushered John into the room. It was all he could do not to gasp.

The art collector lived in more than a museum. It was a beautifully decorated, huge yet homey space of warm autumnal colors, walls covered but not overburdened with amazing art. Aubusson rugs and fine oriental carpets placed around the highly polished wood floors defined cozy seating arrangements.

"Wow," John expelled a breath in wonderment, at the same time hoping to pick up some information from the elusive Frenchman. "What a fabulous space to display items

to prospective buyers.” A butler, on silent steps, emerged through the double salon with its enormous dining table in the background and extended a silver tray bearing a single flute of champagne.

“Buyers, *mais non*.” De la Poche arched a disdainful eyebrow. “I rarely sell a piece, and then only through a respected dealer like yourself. I’m simply a lover of art who enjoys being surrounded by beautiful things. But I don’t want my home too cluttered, so I rotate pieces from time to time from my storage facility.”

De la Poche indicated the nearest sofa. “*Mon ami*, please, take a seat.”

John sat and sank in. It’s going to be a long haul to struggle up out of here, he mused. The couch’s beige silk upholstery blended beautifully with the Louis Quinze chair de la Poche chose for himself. Wouldn’t want to read too much into this, John thought. But I could mellow out on drink and snuggle-comfort, while this guy commands the scene in his straight-backed throne. He looked about: No empty glasses, no ashtrays that appeared to have been used. Had there really been people here, such a short time as half an hour ago when he’d called? The dude on the silent cat feet was pretty fast, he probably could have already cleaned up. But John didn’t think so. The pillows were plumped, no indentions in any sofa seats. The room felt quite untouched by human commerce.

He took a sip of champagne and studied the art. All seemed to be oils, a couple of which he recognized that de la Poche had purchased from him. But Andy had mentioned antiquities: “That guy is bad news. Most of the dealers I know think he’s up to his eyeballs in stolen art ... looted from

gravesites, excavations. Spoils of war, Iraq, Afghanistan.” Nothing remotely ancient was on display.

“About your stored art,” John said, trying to sound casual. “Could my porcelain have ended up – mistakenly, of course – in storage?”

“Ah, *mon ami*.” De la Poche was quick. “*Non, non*. Just my desultory brother-in-law.”

*Desultory*? It was all John could do to keep from laughing. Where, he wondered, had Mr. Fancy Pants learned his English?

“You mentioned that before,” John retorted. “But you need to get it back to me soon, Monsieur, or I’m afraid I must report it stolen. The short-term insurance period has run out, and I must protect myself.”

“Of course, of course, you are perfectly correct,” de la Poche replied. “And I will wrest it from the scoundrel myself, if my wife cannot control her miscreant brother.”

John marveled again at de la Poche’s antique English, finished his drink, struggled out of his sofa, and took his leave with promises from his host that he would get the porcelain back “*tout de suite*.”

As he crossed the familiar, empty de Saxe square John’s heart skipped a beat, thinking of how many times he had accompanied Vicki and Miranda here for the Saturday morning market – from the time the baby was in a stroller to as recently as a few weeks before Sarah arrived from California. What kind of mess were they all in?

Heading once more toward Vicki’s apartment to see if she had finally arrived home, John hurried past the leafy central green space that ran for several blocks dividing the two sides of avenue de Breteuil. And what was that invitation

from de la Poche all about? He had said there were people there who would be good business contacts. Just a ruse to get John up there? But for what purpose? Perhaps the collector wanted John to see how rich he was and how well he lived so he wouldn't worry about the missing porcelain. And why was he keeping it? To use as collateral on something else? Did he suspect it had some value beyond what John thought it had? Like the Maltese Falcon? Everyone mistakenly believing the black bird was really gold underneath. The whole thing was crazy. John had faith in his own appraisal of the porcelain, that it was no more than a Chinese piece circa 18th century.

He arrived at the familiar outer door of Vicki's building, punched in the code and entered the courtyard. Looking up from there, he despaired at seeing no lights in her windows. Could she have arrived exhausted and already gone to bed in the hour or so since he last tried her home phone? He looked at his watch. After eight. Easily still in route, if she'd had to take a connecting flight. He would hurry home, perhaps she'd left him a message.

He decided to take a taxi instead of the Métro, he was weary with the stress of the day – worrying about Vicki, trying to sort out de la Poche. Was he a pretentious snob, some kind of phony, or a plain ole crook? John didn't want to notify the police and lose a good customer. But if the guy was mixed up in shady dealings as Andy had said, John would be better off not dealing with him. He walked to the corner of Duquesne, knowing there was a taxi station there, and was stepping into a cab when he saw a black chauffeured Mercedes with tinted windows just like the one he had seen parked at the curb in front of his gallery when de la Poche was in the shop.



THE WOMAN at *la Gare de l'Est*

Could that be the collector, and was he headed to his storage warehouse?

John laughed at himself as he was doing it, but he shouted to the taxi driver, "Follow that car!"

## THE RECALCITRANT DOOR

Mary left the chaotic first rehearsal, heading for home. Thank heaven she didn't have to worry about seeing Sarah back to John's. The red-haired French kid had willingly picked up that burden. So Mary struck out on her own, ruminating on the evening. The business of the dead actress was very odd. It was as if they'd all stepped into something they shouldn't.

She decided to chase such thoughts away, think of other things.

Then she realized she'd completely forgotten about the resident's meeting tonight concerning their deteriorating building, the ever-present drug dealers, the elusive hope of gentrifying the quarter and whether it had a viable future. *Tant pis*, she thought. Freud would've explained this: Mary hated those meetings. She couldn't bear the do-gooders' huffing and puffing against those who shouted loudly for zero tolerance, an American phrase that had travelled to Paris. She didn't even enjoy the meal they always had together after meetings, because that bossy Katja insisted on one of those Chinese places Belleville specialized in, where the food was

all laid out and you served yourself as much as you wanted. Katja was obese and everyone could see why: for some reason, maybe relating to her past in the communist east bloc, she had a starvation phobia, and ate enough for three or four hard-working men. Mary had heard Miranda call her Greedy behind her back, though Vicki forbade this. Mary herself had seen Katja, even between meals, demolish a huge bar of chocolate, methodically, piece after piece, or finish a whole cake, because she found it beside her on a table. Katja told stories about sleeping on benches in Paris churches and being fed by priests during martial law at home, wherever exactly home was, when she first arrived in France.

Mary could hear a low hum of talk from cafes on the little square that signaled she was nearing home. In the small ethnic restaurants – Brazilian, African, Portuguese – patrons savored dishes reminiscent of home chattering with the owners. And smoking the odd joint. Mary could smell it.

As she turned into her own street, she was surprised to find no dealers hanging around. Perhaps they'd heard of the meeting and were reluctant to draw attention to themselves. It was quiet. No talk or music came from the open windows.

Eerie. Way too soon for those except very early-risers like Hossein to be in bed.

She went through the carriage arch, surprised to find no one here either. Muted voices from Igor's café at her back. No steam or light emerged from the old laundry that normally operated in the courtyard day and night. She pushed the heavy old door under the porch, its locks and codes broken so often by dealers that the residents had given up repairing it. Rumor had it they stashed some of their produce in the cellar

or under the stairs. Sometimes it seemed to Mary that Paris very badly needed its strict and nosy concierges.

The door was harder than usual to push. Lost in thought, it was a moment before Mary realized something was blocking it. She pushed again. The door gave a little, as though held by a bulky object. Or human? She felt panic rise as it dawned on her that she might have stumbled on an active deal of some kind. This explained why there was no one around. She might be taken for the police or at least a spy and beaten to a pulp.

But she also needed the peace of her own apartment. Besides, she was damned weary of these low-lifes invading her home!

Her heart thumping loudly in the quietness and dark, she pushed the door as hard as she could, but as it gave way a bit, she could make out only blackness beyond. The hall lights had obviously been knocked out yet again – they had been working last night and when she left home this morning. She knew she should go back to the café just inside the arch and get help from Igor or someone at the bar but found herself giving one last mighty shove, opening a space big enough to stick her head through and peer at what was behind.

No one was there. No young man standing with a raised weapon, no one crouching to leap out on her. With that fear receding in tingles back down her spine, she craned to see what was causing the resistance then squeezed the rest of her body through. Something dark huddled on the floor. It was enormous.

Mary hesitated a moment. Then she prodded it with her foot. No groan or sound – a mightily stoned druggie sleeping it off. Damn! This was too much – this constant invasion of

her space. She would call the police! But first she would have to maneuver around the bulk and up the dark staircase. Wait, keep your damned Irish intact. If she made a call, she'd end up spending half the night with more cops. She'd had enough of that. Why not just rouse the bum herself and kick him out and get it done. She shoved past the form into the dark vestibule to position herself for a good swift kick. But hold on, she didn't want to kick some drunk in the head; that would be too awful. Could do brain damage. Another strong nudge was the best plan. With her back to the blackness of the stairs, a streak of moonlight showing through a crack in the door allowed her to see a bit better. She used her foot to push harder at the form. It was clothed, and soft. A drug deal gone bad?

Plop! A very lifeless body part flopped out nearly landing on her foot. An arm, a leg? Heaven help us! What now? Her heart couldn't stand much more. Edging backward, she began her ascent up the dark stairs. Hossein's door, which always remained open when he was available for visits, was firmly shut. She made it to the next floor, heart pounding with the climb and the fear, and glanced around in the dab of light leaking in from a skylight far above.

She was startled to see the door wide open to Katja's apartment, but no light within. Mary called out. What if she was walking in on a burglary? Her voice sounded thin and frail. There was no other sound.

"Katja?" she called. Still no answer.

She stepped inside, stumbled on something on the floor and her heart almost jumped into her throat. She moved her foot to avoid whatever it was and stumbled on another object. This one rattled.

It sounded like keys. But Katja kept all her keys on large rings on a board just inside her door. Mary felt around for the switch, and the light came on.

The place had been trashed, as her own had only a day before. Katja's keys, with their neat name-tags, had been torn off the board and lay scattered across the floor.

Trembling, Mary rushed back down to bang on Hossein's door.

He emerged like a fury.

"This is second and last time tonight I'll allow myself to be disturbed by hoodlums!" he sputtered before realizing who it was.

Mary gasped, "Body – bottom of the stairs – Katja burgled!"

She burst into tears. Hossein took her in, put her sitting on his sofa, which was also his bed. "Have you a torch?" she asked. He found one and headed down the stairs. He came back looking grim and called emergency services.

When he put down the phone, Mary reached into her pocket and pulled out the nice young cop's card. She handed it to Hossein and asked him to call.

"Cops are already on their way," he said reasonably.

"I know, but call him anyway."

Hossein gave her a quizzical look before he picked up the phone again.

After he made the call, he sat beside Mary and patted her hand. "Katja," he said.

"No." The word exploded from her lips. Katja was that huddled bundle at the bottom of the stairs? How could that be? Hossein took Mary's hand and squeezed it. A sense of

foreboding slowly spread through her like a numbing sedative taking hold.

When the first police arrived, Mary couldn't help herself. She had to go down and look, assure herself it was really true. Katja's poor lifeless body, her stringy brown hair matted with blood, lay crumpled on the floor, her sightless eyes wide in fright. A patrolman bent, and gently closed her lids. Mary turned away, gagging, afraid she would be sick.

Katja had been bludgeoned to death here. In her own building. And with what felt like an angry gesture, the assailant had flung her navy wool cloak over her lifeless body on a warm summer's evening.

## 15

### KEYS TO A MYSTERY

Mary was back on Hossein's couch staring into space when the crime squads arrived, charging into the building and causing a stir in the entire area. She was forlornly reviewing what she and Paul had gotten themselves into by buying in this crime-ridden neighborhood, while at the same time nurturing the thought that thieves not bothering to steal his art portfolio were Philistines.

Detective Vidal arrived not five minutes later with another plainclothes colleague. Mary's meandering mind had time to note that the cute cop was wearing the same clothes as the day before, blue jeans and a beige shirt. She could hear uniformed police banging on apartment doors.

Vidal leaned over her, "I am sorry that you saw such a thing."

"It's really Katja." To her own ears, Mary sounded like she was babbling. "I looked. I couldn't believe it. Her hair. Blood all over her head."

Hossein got up. "I'll go make tea."

Vidal sat down beside Mary and touched her arm. "Tell me about Katja."



“She, uh, was a neighbor. She...” Mary’s voice trailed off. Where to begin?

“Tell me each thing, just as it happen.” His voice was calm, reassuring. “Take your time, and make the deep inhales.” He pulled out a notebook.

Hossein made a huge pot of mint tea with lots of sugar, ideal for staying awake and for someone in shock. He coaxed Mary to drink as she told Vidal her story in fits and starts and then carried tiny glasses of his sweet mix to those working and gawking in the hall. Voices of the police, the medics, the photographer echoed up and down the stairwell as they swore crudely about the lack of light, snapping at colleagues to hold their torches straight.

“They’re right. It was totally dark in that hall.” Mary continued in an almost dreamy voice under Vidal’s prodding. “I searched for the switch in Katja’s place. I held my breath. I might be walking in on a robbery. I nearly fell from all those keys, they were everywhere.”

“*Quoi?*” Vidal broke in. “What is this?”

“Katja had many different jobs for many people. She was the babysitter for my friend Vicki’s child. She had lots of keys.”

“Your friends at the *gare*?” Vidal sprang from the couch.

Mary was startled. “Well, yes, but ...”

“But what?” Vidal asked.

“Dear god, they can’t be connected. I’m the one who recommended her to Vicki. They can’t be connected.”

“We make a look,” Vidal said, offering a hand to help Mary up.

Hossein said he’d try to get a bit more sleep despite all the activity, and Mary and the detective went up to Katja’s. The

cops with the blue lights and fairy dust, wearing their thin gloves, were already at work.

“Sir,” one of them stepped up to Vidal, “how should we handle these keys? Bag ‘em together?”

Vidal pulled a pair of gloves from his pocket. “Not yet.”

He bent down, picked up the nearest key ring, turned it over in his hand, frowning, and said to Mary. “I tell to you what’s written, stop me if a thing strikes you.”

“Vissac - dog, Bouysse - school, Lazarevic – cats.

“A Noah’s Ark,” he muttered as he read on: “Birnbaum, Kohl, Czak.” He turned on his haunches and looked up at Mary. “Anything?”

She shook her head.

“The nanny-sitter, she pick up the child at school, no? She must have *une clé*.”

“One would think,” Mary said weakly, fear beginning to knead her stomach.

He searched on, but found no tag with “Vicki” or “Miranda” on it.

“Mother of God,” Mary said, her voice breaking. “They’ve taken it! They must be on their way.”

Vidal asked for Vicki’s home number, let it ring for a long time before hanging up. “*Merde*,” he muttered to himself. “Is serious,” he said to Mary.

Mary was afraid for a moment that she was going to lose her mint tea. She inhaled deeply. “It’s my fault.”

“No time for such now,” Vidal said sternly. “We go there.”

“Bag ‘em,” Vidal ordered the nearest cop, as he and Mary headed out.

Breathless, heading down the stairs, Mary said, "We got an email today that Vicki's cell was smashed."

"So, is best we go straight to the home."

Mary stopped for a moment and took another deep breath to steady herself. "Our friend John. He'll know. Her sister stays at his apartment. They'll still be up. I left Sarah at the theater less than two hours ago."

Once they had picked their way to the end of the still dark stairs, Mary saw that the bulk that once had been Katja was gone. She shuddered at the thought of the things the medico-legal people would do to it.

As they passed through the courtyard, Vidal pulled out his cell phone and said into it: "I'm taking the car, I'll see you later at the precinct."

"My partner," he said to Mary.

## HOME SWEET HOME

Vicki turned the key in the heavy door, smiling ruefully at the sign: *Chien Méchant*. She had put it there when she first moved in. Designed like the standard blue enameled street signs edged in white – *Rue de Rivoli*, *Avenue des Champs Elysées* – that you could buy in any souvenir shop, this one meant “Mean Dog.” She had found it amusing at the time to think of her loving, even-tempered golden retriever as anything but a sweetheart. Stepping into the long, bookcase-lined hall that was the spine of her apartment, she kept expecting Chess to bark, to leap on her, even though she well knew that the dog sitter wasn’t scheduled to bring her home for four more days.

Chess, as greeting party, would have been nice after all they’d been through on this ill-fated trip. What a lovely little vacation they’d planned in Prague. But after the long rail delay near the German border, and the warnings to leave town from that awful American man from the train, she’d decided it was time to get home, even if Bill’s assignment kept him away for another few weeks. Miranda’s stepping on their cell phone had been the final straw. It was annoying to think how right Sarah

was in accusing her of living with a mobile stuck in her ear. She'd had withdrawal all day. And no time in Prague to get the damned thing fixed!

She was exhausted, Miranda cranky and whining, refusing at one point even to drag her beloved Bugs Bunny roly through the Paris airport. The apartment had that closed-up smell, cold and dank despite the persistent outdoor heat. She looked at her watch. Well past ten. It felt like they'd been away forever, but they'd barely been gone a day and a half. Hard to believe it was only yesterday that Katja and Miranda were fussing over who'd do the packing.

As much as Vicki avoided planes, they'd had to take not one but two to get home. By the time she'd finished her interview and gotten to the airport, every direct flight was full. So they'd had to fly to Lyon and hang around there before catching their connection to Paris.

"Bud, let's just crash. Leave our clothes on and fall in bed. Would you like a glass of warm milk first?"

No answer. Miranda had dropped her bag to the floor with a bang, shuffled to her room right off the hall, and was already flopped on her bed. Her blonde curls hadn't even made it to one of the star-scattered Snow White pillowcases.

"Good deal," Vicki said, smiling down at her child in the silent, stuffy room. This place really is an advert for Disney, she thought. Decals of Sleepy and Dopey fought for space on the walls that also held reminders of trips they'd taken around Europe and North Africa. A watercolor from Morocco, a ceramic piece that opened its bright blue Tunisian doors onto a lamp, a doll in Bavarian clothes, and, of course, a cotton scroll with French rhyming numbers: 1, 2, 3, *Un, deux, trois.*

*Allons au bois.* One, two, three, let's go to the woods? Didn't exactly rhyme in English, but what the hey. She was certainly going to end up with a continental kid, but Disney was good. With all this foreign influence, she still wanted her daughter to be American.

She pulled aside the floor-to-ceiling sheers over the door-windows overlooking the interior courtyard below. This was one of the many things that she loved about their sprawling apartment. The huge windows let in plenty of light, yet the rooms were shaded even in this heat by the encircling apartments of the rest of the building. The French didn't seem to know what air conditioning was. She broke the doors open a crack and tied their handles together with a piece of tough, slip-knotted rubber. It had taken a bit of doing to figure out a kid-proof way to open the windows just enough to let in fresh air, but not enough to allow a tiny body to slip through. She and Bill had devised this system with a piece of industrial-strength jar sealer.

The courtyard was empty, not a sound. She bent to give her sleeping daughter a kiss and tuck a light Little Mermaid throw over her. Despite the day's heat, the room was still slightly cool.

Headed for her own room down the hall to get those windows open too, she passed her home phone's blinking red light, but ignored it. Whatever it was could wait. No more work for today, she was still on vacation, such as it'd been.

## FRIC AND FRAC

Vicki could hear Miranda screaming with joy, riding the carousel near John's house, the one at the Hotel de Ville. Miranda was loving it, having a fine time. Vicki could hear her voice go up and down with each pump of the wooden horse with the golden mane. Besides the horses, the merry-go-round had a black motorcycle and a couple of little four-seater airplanes. But Miranda liked the horses best. She insisted they were galloping, even though her father often tried to explain that up and down wasn't exactly what gallop meant. Vicki and Bill had a good laugh the first time they noticed the carousel's red Jeep with "*sécurité*" painted on its side, yet sporting license plates in English reading "military police." What kind of a throwback is that to World War Two, Bill had said.

"Bill?" Vicki sat up in bed.

Someone was in the apartment. "Who's there?"

She shook her head. Her husband was in Moscow, on assignment, he wouldn't be back for several weeks. Chess should have barked, what's going on? She shook her head again and came more awake. The dog was with a sitter. Miranda's screams weren't joy, that was terror. Someone was

in her room! Vicki banged into a suitcase scrambling from bed. She realized she still had her shoes on when her feet hit the floor. She was beginning to remember. She had fallen on her bed exhausted, just as Miranda had done. What time is it? Midnight?

“Who’s there?” she yelled again. “Sarah?” Had she given her sister a key? In the dark, she reached out to steady herself on her desk and her hand hit something hard and metal. She grasped it and kept going toward her child.

She raced past the WC and could hear the toilet running. Everything fed off this long hall: Vicki’s room at one end, kitchen at the other with Miranda’s room across from the double living room. She stumbled over a musical toy that began a slow wind down of “The Farmer in the Dell.”

She heard shuffling noises, but Miranda was no longer screaming. Oh, dear, God, what did that mean? Charging through the big doors of her daughter’s bedroom, she made out a large form outlined against and struggling with the billowing white curtains. Vicki brought up her right arm and struck out with whatever it was that she’d picked up. As the thing left her hand, sailed through the air and clunked against the intruder, she realized it was a stapler. The bastard was holding a squirming, kicking bundle tucked under his right arm. Vicki ran at the dark form, arms flailing, and began beating at it.

“Who are you?” she screamed, pounding on his chest. She landed a sharp kick to his knee. He grabbed one of her arms and bent it back, but he was off balance, his right arm weighted down by what was surely Miranda. Vicki wrenched away, moved behind him screaming her daughter’s name, and



tiny arms reached out and grabbed her around the neck. She pulled at the child, and the intruder let his bundle drop into Vicki's arms, the weight knocking her to her knees. He yanked at the curtain, ripped it from its rod, heaved something out and followed it through the window. A thud echoed up from below. Miranda had thrown her legs around her mother's body like a cub in a koala pouch and was squirming wildly but not making a sound. In the dim light from the courtyard, Vicki saw Miranda's hands flailing at her face. Tape! Her mouth was taped.

"Careful, Babe, careful." Her mouth dry, heart beating wildly, Vicki moved her fingers tentatively across the tape searching for loose spots. "Let's pull it off gently so it won't rip your skin."

As the child continued to kick and pick at her face, Vicki struggled to hold her down and strip off the tape. Miranda was yelling, "Mama, Mama," before it was half off. Vicki tried to rise from her knees with her cub clinging, but couldn't. She finally had to pry away Miranda's legs so she could haul herself up to look out over the wrought-iron balcony. Someone was running through the courtyard, carrying a big bag. With Miranda in her arms, Vicki could see the carriage door to the street being held open. There were at least two of them! A heavy piece of rope dangled just below their third-story window.

Mother and daughter huddled together for a moment, what to do? She should call the police, but really had no idea how that would go. The number to call was 17, but her French was so awful, she'd have a terrible time explaining. Miranda usually did her translating for her, but she wasn't about to put her still shaking daughter through that.

She dialed Bill's cell, and bit the inside of her lip to keep her voice steady. She wanted to yell her head off to wake up her sleepy, absent husband – Moscow was two hours later, must be at least one or two in the morning. But she had to get this moving, and fast, without upsetting Miranda any more than she already was. “Call the Paris police,” she said through clenched teeth. “I’ll give you details later. Miranda and I are both okay. Someone broke into her room, but they’re gone now.”

Miranda grabbed at the phone. “Daddy.”

“Later,” Vicki said.

“I want my Daddy.”

Vicki answered the door, Miranda still in her arms, head cuddled on her shoulder. Vicki's heart sank – two inspectors Clouseaux. They looked like twin dummies out of “The Pink Panther.”

“Policemen?” Miranda asked. “Where are their uniforms?”

“Why?” the police wanted to know before they were barely into the apartment, had Vicki called her husband instead of calling them?

“The kidnappers were gone. You couldn't have caught them. Besides, my child's father needed to know.”

“How know you they wanted kidnap? If perhaps robbery?”

“One of them was holding my daughter like a bundle of laundry. What's the French word for that?” She mustn't take

her anger out on these guys, but they were slugs. She clenched her jaw, she certainly hoped this scare with Miranda would reinforce her contention to her husband that he should be staying home more, not chasing wars and floods all over the world.

The cops rummaged the apartment, inspected the front door for signs of forced entry, hauled up the dangling rope, pondered the jar sealer that Vicki explained was used to tie the French windows together. The heavy rubber obviously had been cut. They looked long and hard at the offending tape, then one of them finally produced a plastic bag and dropped it in. Even in Miranda's bedroom, neither of them bothered to ask the child a single question. Whenever Vicki would say, "Miranda said this, or Miranda said that," the two Clouseaux still seemed to totally ignore her. It made Vicki wonder – were they just not used to kids, or what? They stared out over the courtyard and speculated about the lookout Vicki had spotted. "Why there were two?" one of the cops asked. Vicki just closed her eyes and shook her head. "I don't know. You're the police, what would be your guess?"

She finally moved them to the living room, and offered to make coffee, which they refused. She'd already named them Fric and Frac, in her head. They looked so alike, in the same unchic, ill-fitting dark suits and military haircuts, that it was difficult to tell them apart. They droned on with their questions, which she was answering only half thinking as she fought to keep her voice calm, hoping not to upset her daughter even further. Whatever happened to the old notion of opposites, like Abbott and Costello or Martin and Lewis? How could these two look-alikes use the time-worn, interrogation

technique known as the sweet and sour routine, one cop nice the other mean, to try to worm information from a suspect? They probably drive junk cars. Her mind was wandering, she couldn't remember the last question they asked. Seated on the couch, she looked down at Miranda huddled against her and saw that she was sucking her thumb, something she hadn't done in at least a year. She kissed the little hand and hugged her close.

"And, you testify *que* you not know, was it man or woman?"

"No. Just someone very large."

"Who has keys to *l'appartement*?" Fric, or was it Frac? persisted in the same somewhat hostile tone that they both were using.

"No one," Vicki responded, "except my husband, the babysitter and the dog sitter. Not even my sister, or my friend Mary who had her purse stolen. Perhaps he picked the lock. I saw him running with a bag."

"Oh," Vicki put her hand to her mouth, a startled look on her face.

"Yes?" demanded Frac. "What?"

"Nothing," Vicki said. "Nothing." She wasn't about to tell these cops that Katja, the babysitter, was huge, simply huge, built like a man. Poor Katja, this would be hard enough on her as it was – she had a terror of authorities going back to her escape from wherever she was from. Cops are cops, no matter where they are. They'd get around to questioning Katja soon enough – she 'd told them the babysitter had keys, and had given them her name and address – no reason that it shouldn't be at a reasonable hour instead of in the middle of the night.

The detective shrugged and once again began chattering with his partner in French, despite the fact that Bill had told the police to send English speakers. Maybe, one said to the other, these two were just dreaming.

Miranda, whose French was excellent because she'd been in *maternelle* since age one and a half and was constantly making fun of her mother's pronunciation of the difficult French "r", pulled away from Vicki, jumped off the couch, and approached the cop with indignant hands on her hips.

"I was *not* dreaming," she responded in French, stomping her foot. "That bad man put tape on my face."

There was a moment of dead silence, then Fric bent down, patted her on the head and said: "*Excuses-moi*, young miss. I do not doubt that you are correct."

"*Dis-moi*," Frac stepped in with his fractured Franglais. "You said *un homme*. Sure you are he was man?"

"Yes." Miranda was emphatic.

The detectives offered to finish their report the next day, and asked if there was any place Vicki could spend the rest of the night until she could get the locks changed.

"We will drive you."

Vicki called John, despite the late hour. To cut through his anxious questions of why they were so late getting home, and what had happened in Prague, Vicki said: "Someone tried to kidnap Miranda. We'll be there shortly," and hung up.

"Okay, Kiddo, let's go," she announced, hugging her daughter to her and trying to keep her tone light. "Grab your Bugs Bunny and we're off for another adventure. We're going to see Aunt Sarah and John, you love them."

Miranda lit up at the mention of her aunt. “I’ll show her my pictures of the castle and read her my book about the prince and show her my new doll that wears lipstick.” She ran off to her bedroom, and was back in a flash.

“Bugs Bunny is gone,” she announced.

## AT JOHN'S

Vicki had been looking forward to the warm embrace of John's apartment, but the minute he opened the door, she sensed chaos. Mary was there, her face tear-stained, her hair disheveled, speaking in rapid French to some cute guy in jeans. John was swooping around in still another outrageous caftan, this one a sunburst of yellows and oranges, the tiny Bisquit yapping at his heels. Ben was moving through the melee with a drinks tray, taking orders. Fric and Frac, who had escorted Vicki and Miranda to the door to assure their safety, let out exclamations behind them, apparently in reaction to someone they saw in the room.

Vicki, assuming they were all in an uproar over her telephoned announcement, yelled over the din: "I'll take a beer, Ben. Miranda and I are just fine. She'll have cranberry juice."

Vicki's sister, whom she hadn't even noticed at first, leapt up from a low chair that she was sharing with a fellow with curly red hair, and screamed: "How can you always be so cool about everything? I've endured three dead people in two days!"

“What?” Vicki stood in the doorway stunned by Sarah’s outburst, clutching Miranda’s hand, as their two detectives rushed past toward Mary’s companion.

“*Putain de soirée*, Jean ...” one of them began.

Mary’s companion frowned and shook his head, a signal to cool it.

“Babe,” John came over to put his arms around Vicki, “There’s lots to digest.”

He looked down at the sleepy-eyed Miranda, hanging on to her mother.

“Little tired girl, why doesn’t Uncle John get you a nice spot to lie down. I betcha I can find that *Barbapapa* you like.”

Miranda nodded, Vicki hugged her tight, and John took the sleepy child’s hand and led her through the kitchen and down the hall.

Vicki looked around in wonderment. Her two detectives were in deep conversation across the room with the good-looker in jeans.

“Ben,” she said, frowning. “I’m afraid I’m going to really need that beer.”

“Katja’s dead,” wailed Sarah, “and Christine’s dead in the play, too.”

“Sarah,” snapped Vicki, “your histrionics get tiresome. You’re talking about your daughter in that damned play, right?” Vicki’s voice rose, her control edging away. “Right?” she demanded.

“No. Well yes, it is my daughter in the play.”

Vicki shook her head in exasperation. “How can anyone *ever* figure out what world you’re in?”

“But Katja is Miranda’s babysitter, too.”



“Slow down, Kiddo.” Vicki was back in her accustomed big sister persona. “Take a deep breath.”

“Believe her,” Mary said, coming towards Vicki. “It’s true. That’s a homicide detective I was talking to over there. Do you begin to see the connection here?”

John, returning to the room, moved toward Vicki, arms outstretched, and added his soothing voice to the melee. “Poor Mary has just been a witness to this horrible thing.”

“Dead? Katja’s dead?” Vicki’s mind was somersaulting.

The room went silent. She could hear her own words echoing in her head. No street sounds came through the open windows. Midnight in Paris. And silence.

Vicki abruptly sat down. “Someone tries to kidnap Miranda, and someone kills Katja, and she had a key to my apartment. Oh my god.”

“You three have somehow become *les* victims to a scheme of customs breaking.” Mary’s detective approached, extending his hand in introduction. “Jean-Louis Vidal, Madame. We must . . .”

Vicki stopped him. “Katja packed Miranda’s suitcase. And it’s missing. I think the thieves threw it out the window.”

“*Tiens.*” Fric and Frac had joined them, and the three detectives nodded their heads and said the same word in unison.

John stopped in mid-glide across the room to whirl toward Sarah, “Where did you get that necklace?”

She touched the blue cylinder lying at the indent of her throat. “I put a ribbon on it. I thought it was pretty.”

“What’s that got to do with anything?” Mary snapped. “We’re finally getting someplace with who the hell is trying to kill us.”

“Now don’t be jumping,” Vidal said, touching Mary’s arm. “We don’t know they try to kill...”

“They’ve broken into my apartment and Vicki’s, and killed Katja. I’d say that’s not a wild assumption.”

“Listen, if you’re talking about smuggling,” John cut in, “Andy has a thing that looks like that thing Sarah’s wearing, and he says they can run up to a quarter million dollars.”

“Oh, oh, wow,” Sarah gasped. “I think it came out of Miranda’s suitcase.”

“That’s nuts,” Vicki said.

“Maybe not,” Sarah replied slowly, her face a frown of returning memory. “Miranda was making a drawing.” She paused, frowned again. “It was on a scrap of that funny paper they use here with squares all over it – looks like graph paper – and I think the thing fell out,” she fingered her necklace, clearly savoring the spotlight.

“Fell out?” Vicki could hear her voice skitter into high registers. This was indeed nuts.

“Out of her suitcase, on the way to the *gare*. Anyway, I saw this little stone on the floor of the cab, and asked if I could have it. She said sure.”

For the first time, one of the Fric-Frac detectives spoke up. “The child’s it was?”

“I don’t know. I think she just shrugged, like she didn’t care. She was intent on her drawing.”

“How come I didn’t see any of this?” Vicki demanded.

“Who knows?” Sarah did an eye-blink thing and roll of her head that could only be described as her high-class *hauteur*. The sisters were at it again. “You were probably on the phone talking with your newsroom as usual.”

One of the detectives said: "We go ask to the child."

"Absolutely not!" Vicki could hear herself almost yelling. She jumped out of her chair knocking over the beer Ben was delivering. "She's been through enough. Let her sleep."

"Tomorrow," a cop said.

"No. Tell me what you need to know, I'll ask when I feel the time is right." She took a mean slash at the beer spilled on her slacks with the towel Ben handed her. "I will not have her grilled or frightened anymore."

"But what if there was some kind of clue on the paper?" Mary asked.

"No!" Vicki shouted. "She was grabbed, kicking and screaming. She had her mouth taped. I've got to figure out some way to make her forget this damned thing. Convince her it was a game, or something."

She slowed down and inhaled deep. "Give me a phone number. I'll call when I've had a chance to sort this out."

Her voice rose again, tense and hard, as what had so far been anger and numb shock morphed into an ill-defined galloping fear.

"Now I have to tell her she's getting a new babysitter because Katja's on vacation. I'm sure as hell not going to tell her Katja is dead! And I wish her damned father would get home, so he can help me deal with some of this."

Detective Vidal rolled his eyes and turned to Sarah. "You can recall the paper? How it looks? Words there?"

"Seems like there was writing. Yeah, that sort of loopy way Europeans write."

"*Qu'est-ce que c'est?*" Vidal asked with a bewildered look

“Don’t ask,” John said. “Our penmanship is just different, and we can tell. Anyway, you can take it as fact that the writing wasn’t done by Miranda’s parents, so it probably didn’t come from their house.”

The detective grinned. “Okee, dokey dokay, as you say. Perhaps we put you on the detective squad.”

Vicki noticed that Vidal did all the talking, he obviously had rank on the other two cops. She also noticed that there was some interesting body language between him and Mary. They couldn’t seem to speak to one another without touching the other’s arm. What did that mean? How did Mary even know this guy?

She seemed to have missed a lot being out of town for less than forty-eight hours. “Tell me,” Vicki said, turning to Sarah. “Who was this third death that you claim you’ve had to endure. You told me about the man in the train station.”

“An actress didn’t show for rehearsal; the director was livid. It turned out she’s dead.”

“And, so, Madame,” Vidal said turning to Vicki, “I think you must tell us *tout*, everything, that passed at your trip, the train, *l’hotel à Prague*.”

**THE MORNING AFTER**

Mary cracked open one eye to the bright summer sun streaming through the torn shade in her still disheveled apartment. Her head ached – too much drink at John’s last night – her heart sore – Katja dead, Miranda nearly kidnapped. She groaned and rolled her head into the pillow, away from the light. How to face the day? Her own culpability? It was herself who’d done the suggesting. Grand idea. Give the fat Pole some steady work and provide Vicki the serenity that a responsible adult, not a haphazard student, was caring for Miranda. Ha!

But what now? She had to find answers. Was Katja into some dirty business, and she, Mary, too stupid to have seen the signs? Was Miranda still in danger? With that awful thought, Mary sprang from bed, threw a light dress over her head and slipped her feet into the nearest shoes. Her face unwashed, her teeth unbrushed, she hurried out the door, twisting up her long chestnut hair and pinning it as she started down the stairs.

## A BIKE RIDE

Sarah took Miranda by the hand as the two of them left John's apartment. It was earlier than Sarah was used to being up, but after a night of pondering three murders, then sharing her bed with Vicki and Miranda, she was wired to get moving. Vicki was off to change her apartment's locks before heading for work, and she had appointed Sarah babysitter with strict instructions not to "grill" Miranda about how the mystery stone and the graph paper might have gotten into her Bugs Bunny bag. "Do you hear me?" Vicki had repeated, "I said don't ask her any questions, don't scare her, and don't even *mention* Katja. Do. You. Hear. Me?"

Sarah finally lost her temper. "Don't treat me like I'm an idiot, just because you think that's what I am."

"Sorry, babe." Vicki had immediately been remorseful. "Of course I don't think you're an idiot. You're just flighty sometimes. But this is too important. Miranda's been through enough."

Sarah gripped Miranda's hand to start down the carpeted, circular staircase to the first floor, but Miranda pulled away, insisting they take the elevator and that she be allowed to push

the button to order it up. These Parisian contraptions were just wire cages that moved up and down in the vacant space created by the curved stairs.

“That thing doesn’t look very safe, Miranda. It’s only a short walk down.” Sarah flashed on a scene from “Charade” – Audrey Hepburn in grave danger, an elevator exactly like this one. She strained to recall a grainy old foreign film – what was its title? – in which someone is stabbed through the cage’s open fretwork. There were lots of movies where an elevator arrives with a dead body in it!

Miranda, bedraggled and obviously in the same wrinkled blue summer dress and sandals she’d been wearing since she and her mother left Prague — was it really only yesterday — stood on tiptoes and defiantly stabbed the button. Oh, boy, I’ve got my hands full, Sarah thought. She’d forgotten how headstrong her niece could be.

“Do you hear me?” Vicki’s voice echoed in her head. “I understand,” Sarah had replied, “and I promise I’ll be a good babysitter.” Sarah was thrilled that Vicki was going to let her replace Katja. It was perfect. Her days were free, she generally didn’t have to be at the theater until 6 p.m., and once performances began, it would be even later. Having a job would mean she could stay in Paris when the play’s run was over. Pierre had said he would introduce her to other directors as well as help her pick up crew work, and he was going to help her with French and she him with his English.

Inside the cage, Miranda pushed buttons to get the squawky machine to the ground floor, all the while explaining to her aunt in rather imperious tones the nomenclature for navigating a French building.

“It’s not like America,” she said, drawing on her knowledge from visiting her grandmother in California every Christmas. “When *we* say first floor, we mean the next floor up.” She threw a tiny hand toward the ceiling, and Sarah noticed faded nail polish. “Like where John lives.”

“What’s the ground floor called?” asked Sarah, amused at her niece’s dramatic delivery. And also thinking the last babysitter hadn’t been paying enough attention to the kid’s grooming. Sarah had her work cut out for her. She and Miranda could play dress-up, and the first thing she intended to point out was that red nail polish was age inappropriate, and certainly so when it was chipped!

“*Rez-de-chaussée.*” The child drew herself up to her full three-foot two-inches, delighted with her new teaching role. “You have to practice a lot to say r’s in French. Mommy can’t do it. Pathetic. Daddy thinks so too. His r’s are much better.”

“Thanks for the lesson.” Sarah grinned while thinking, no wonder people got so sick of my showing off when I was a kid. And where did a four-year-old pick up words like “pathetic?” Too much hanging out with adults.

“Now let’s get down to business. We’ve got to figure out how to find John’s cellar locker. That’s where he keeps his bikes. We’re going to have a fun day riding around.”

“We call them a *cave*,” Miranda said. “They’re dark, creepy places.”

They found his storage room in a back courtyard and turned the key in the rusty lock. It was indeed dark and creepy, as well as dank. Sarah switched on the feeble beam of the tiny flashlight attached to the set of keys John had given her.

“Urgh,” she made a face. “I bet there are bugs.”



"Bugs are nothing to be afraid of," Miranda pronounced. "Daddy says so."

"Then *you* find the bike in all this junk," Sarah snapped, before she remembered she was supposed to be the adult here. "You're right," she said, patting Miranda on the top of her head. "Let's get going and have some fun."

They located the pink bike that had a huge basket in front and a little plastic seat on the back that was perfect for Miranda. Ever the thoughtful host, John kept an extra girl's bike for the stream of guests forever arriving from San Francisco.

"Oh, I've been on this *vélo* before," Miranda cried in delighted recognition. "Mommy and I went on a picnic with John. There's a merry-go-round near here. I want to go there."

"Okay, sweetie pie." Sarah brightened at the idea that her niece would relax and forget about the kidnap attempt. "I have to buy a cell phone, and then we'll check out the carousel."

"No! I want to go now!"

Sarah pondered her niece. What to do? If Miranda was to be her day job from now on, one of them was going to have to grow up and be in charge. She supposed it wouldn't hurt to do the plaything first. On the other hand, with all the danger swirling around, she needed a phone. Now! Sarah tried to think of theatrical references to nannies who'd had to be tough with kids. "The Turn of the Screw?" Annie Sullivan with the blind Helen Keller? Oh, perfect, Julie Andrews in "The Sound of Music."

So Sarah burst into song, as she put down the bike's kickstand and lifted Miranda into the backseat: "Do-re-mi, do-re-mi, the first three notes just happen to be, do-re-mi."

Wheeling the bike through the courtyard and out to the street, she asked: “Do you know that song?”

“Of course,” Miranda said, singing: “Tea, I drink with jam and bread. That will bring us back to do ...”

“Good,” Sarah laughed. “We’ll sing all the way down the street. And I need you to translate for me because it’s urgent that I get a cell phone, so we can contact Mommy. But I don’t know all the words. John gave me a list of what I want to buy, but you’ll need to explain what I’m saying to the clerk.”

“Oh,” Miranda said. “The Apple Store? Mommy and I love the Apple Store. Daddy does too.”

Sarah was dumping her purse and her map and French dictionary in the front basket when she glanced across the street at the café that spilled onto the sidewalk. A man in a faded blue checked shirt was watching her over the rim of his coffee cup, a half-eaten croissant and an ashtray with a burning cigarette littered his table. Who was he? She felt a ripple of fear move up her spine. She felt certain he was the man she’d seen in the Bernhard Bistro two nights ago. But wearing the *same* shirt for three days? What a slob. Or did he want her to notice him? He really was stalking her! Now he’d seen Miranda and might threaten her, too. She’d been stupid! She shouldn’t have brought Miranda out! But too late now to turn back. Faster to just move on. Heart thumping, Sarah jumped on the bike, yelled at Miranda to hold on and began pedaling furiously, her niece tightly clutching her as they sped down the street.

At the bottom of the hill, the rue de Rivoli, Sarah stopped and turned. She could barely make out the café table a block and a half away. No one was there! She put her hand to her throat where the blue necklace had been. Could that be what

they were after? She'd been wearing it at rehearsal *and* at the bistro. Sarah had given it to Mary's Detective Vidal last night, thinking none of them had anything more to worry about. But, even more stupid – she hadn't realized that the crooks, whoever they were, wouldn't know the police had it. Damn, she wished she could figure out some sly way to get Miranda to talk about the kidnapping, even if Vicki did say not to. If they were all still in danger, they needed to be prepared, know what to be looking for. Yikes, she also realized she didn't really know what the guy in the checked shirt looked like, other than a slight build and a feeling that he came from a 1950s movie. If he changed clothes, he could stalk her without her even noticing! Lucky they were on the bike, no way for him to follow them today.

But after that? What would Bernhardt have done? Sarah squared her shoulders and peddled harder. If there was a mystery to be solved, The Divine One would have tackled the problem. That's what she would have done!

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### THE LOCAL LOWDOWN

Igor's, with its buttery croissants and excellent coffee, was usually a place to relax on a day off, but today for Mary it was serious business. Igor read and discussed with all who would listen whatever was in the daily *Le Parisien*. Between the paper's news and the eyes and neighborhood noses of the café's clientele, Mary was certain she'd find out something.

Sure enough, this morning's front page was full of Katja's murder, and Igor was reading enthusiastically to an attentive bunch. Mary settled in to watch and listen and sip her coffee. She could see the headline from her habitual perch at the bar: *Une autre victime dans les quartiers populaires*. Worded as though being in the crowded working-class neighborhoods of Paris *Est* was enough to kill you!

Mary looked over at the familiar stand of hard-boiled eggs that Igor kept on the counter to provide a bit of protein for those on a bread and coffee budget, and thought with welling tears of how the café had been a center of warmth and sustenance when she and Paul, broke, had first moved into the neighborhood. How she wished she had her husband's guiding hand to assuage guilt she felt over her role in whatever

malevolent forces were hovering – especially threatening the child. “*Chère, Mary,*” he so often would say, a soothing finger caressing her brow, “you can no be *mère* to the world. Is not always for you to solve.” Then he would laugh and shake his head, knowing, and loving, that that’s just the way she was.

Everyone at Igor’s seemed suddenly to take note that Mary was there and began talking at once. A celebrity in their midst – she was the one who discovered Katja’s body!

## APPLE MANIA

Sarah was pedaling along rue de Rivoli on the pink bike, singing “Frère Jacques” with Miranda after happily recalling the bedtime song from her childhood. Perhaps, finally, she could establish some French credentials with her niece.

Hanging onto her aunt’s waist, the kid waved a tiny hand with its chipped nail polish and yelled out, “There’s the Louvre,” as the grand, sand-colored structure came into view.

She instructed Sarah to turn left, where to find the bike rack and how to queue for the elevator descent into the glass pyramid that to some was a desecration of the ancient museum’s courtyard and to others a modern marvel of architectural integration.

To Sarah’s amazement, there in the underground mall that was the new way into the old building was a replica of glass-and-steel Apple stores the world over. And wonder of wonders: Right next to its entrance was the Inverted Pyramid that Tom Hanks studied in “The Da Vinci Code.” Inside the store were the enthusiastic geek squads in red T-shirts, the Genius Desk, and the familiar rows of sample tables where people played with computers.

Miranda could hardly contain herself. She loved the Apple Store, excitedly rattling off to Sarah the names of the various apps her mother had put on her cell phone just for her. “When we go out to dinner, she lets me play games.”

“Really?” said Sarah. “I’m surprised. I’m not sure I want you playing with my new phone.”

“It keeps me busy,” Miranda confided, “while Mommy drinks with her friends.”

Sarah could barely contain her laughter. “You’re a piece of work, Kiddo.” She ruffled her niece’s curls. “Well, if it keeps you out of my hair, maybe I’ll let you play on my cell, too.”

Looking around for someone to help with buying a mobile, Sarah caught a momentary glimpse of a man in a John Deere baseball cap whom she had a feeling she knew. But that was ridiculous. She didn’t know anyone in Paris except the people she knew.

Aunt and niece soon fell under the spell of a bear of a genius geek named Regis, with masses of black curly hair, who not only spoke English but turned out to be American on his mother’s side.

Regis outfitted Sarah with what she needed and assured her that her iPhone could be tuned to English. As a precaution, he also gave her a list of French prompts that a Parisian landline could squawk out. Miranda would repeat Regis’s translations, each time stepping between him and her aunt, leaning back to look up at the two adults towering above her, double-checking that Sarah understood. Her moves also seemed intended as not-so-subtle reminders that she, Miranda, had been appointed official translator. Sarah breathed a sigh of thanksgiving when the child’s interest waned as she was

forced to skip over several technical terms that were clearly beyond the reach of a four-and-a-half-year-old. As Regis was explaining that “wait for the beep” comes out as “*après le bip sonore*,” a flash of blue on the glass staircase curving to an upper balcony caught Sarah’s eye.

“Where’s Miranda?” she cried out. “Where’s Miranda?” The child wasn’t at her side, and with the thick crowd of gawkers and shoppers, it was impossible to spot someone that little.

“Don’t worry,” Regis patted Sarah’s arm. “We’ll find her. Kids always do that here. I’ll take the upstairs, you search down here.” And he was off.

Sarah couldn’t catch her breath. Her heart thudding, she made a quick spinning circle searching the room, trying to decide in which direction to move. Which section had the game consoles? It was a blur. Blotches of blue everywhere. Was it Miranda’s wrinkled summer dress she had caught sight of, or the man in the checked shirt? She shoved through the throngs of Apple maniacs, heading for one corner of the room and then another, her extravagant imagination running a slide show of torture and depravity. There was actually one frame of Miranda, à la “The Perils of Pauline,” tied kicking and screaming to railroad tracks, an ancient locomotive fast approaching. Sarah also saw her own blonde head in the guillotine, the axe on its way down, with Vicki egging on the grim reaper.



## MARY STOKES UP AT IGOR'S

Mary could see the raised eyebrow over the coffee cup of a guy in workmen's blue coveralls. "You suggested Katja as a babysitter?" As he lowered the cup, disdainful, she saw his teeth were rotten to the core. "Wouldn't want that one near my kid."

The knot that had been in her stomach since she got up this morning rose to her throat. The buttery taste of croissant fought for release. "What do you mean? What don't I know?" She took a too big gulp of hot coffee, burning her mouth.

Igor intervened, chastising the speaker with a shushing wave. "Don't spread that which you do not know." He turned to Mary and patted her trembling hand.

"Please," Mary said. "Igor, you've been a good friend. Tell me."

"Katja works for a lot of people." Igor gave a shrug and swiped down the counter where Mary had spilled coffee in her nervousness. "Maybe sometimes she wasn't too picky."

"She had lots of keys," Mary said plaintively. "People trusted her with their keys."

Igor shrugged again. “For dog walking. Maybe some house cleaning.”

“No babysitting, you’re saying.”

Again, Igor shrugged.

“Was it unsavory people? Give me a clue. I have to find these people. Talk to them,” Mary’s voice was pleading. Despite Detective Vidal’s warning that this was a police matter, to stay out of it, Mary, of course, had no intention of doing so.

## APPLE AND JELLY BEANS

Jean Paul Belmondo, in trench coat with burning cigarette dangling from the side of his mouth, was just lifting his hand to strike Sarah, cowering in the Apple Store and choking on his smoke, when she caught a glimpse of blue!

Suddenly, there was a blonde head, bobbing and weaving, moving from one game display to another. As Sarah shoved through the crowd to reach her, Miranda turned from a screen. “Can I have this jungle game, Aunt Sarah? It has nice tigers. I’m getting tired of Disney.”

Out of breath, her heart still thudding, Sarah just looked at her niece, shaking her head in wonder. What a lesson! You can’t trust the attention span of a four-year-old, nor can you trust them to stay by your side no matter how many times you tell them.

Sarah finally gasped out, “What would your mother say?”

“Say please,” Miranda replied.

Sarah grabbed her niece in a huge hug. “You can have whatever you want!”

Miranda looked up at her aunt and said: “That bad man smelled like jelly beans.”

“What? What man?” Had someone approached Miranda during the few moments Sarah lost sight of her?

“You know. The one who tried to throw me out the window.”

“Last night? At your house, you mean?”

“Yes. He smelled like jelly beans.”

“Ah...” Sarah’s heart fluttered. Did she dare leap on this?

“Mommy said not to think about it, or talk about it. But I’ll tell *you*, if you want to know.”

“Well, of, of course,” Sarah stuttered. “But we don’t want to make Mommy mad.”

“It’ll be our secret, then,” Miranda said imperiously. “Someone should know, so they can catch the bad man.”

“What else?” Sarah ventured cautiously. Vicki would kill her if she upset Miranda, but Sarah could envision herself in trench coat and slouch hat, cigarette dangling, a gat in her right hand, shoving her chin out and growling at this two-bit, candy-eating wimp who threatened children.

“He was fat, and had lots of hair, and smelled like jelly beans. I didn’t like him.”

“Did he hurt you?” Better not have. Take that, you pedophile. A karate chop. Sarah’s slouch was tough, her tone tougher. She tugged at her fedora, to get it just at the right angle.

“No. He put tape on my mouth, and told me shut up, kid.”

“What a creep!” Sarah squared her jaw, hunched her shoulders. She had a bead on this rat now. She’d run him to ground and make him wish he’d never been born! “In French or English?”

“Hmmp. Terrible French. *Ferme ta gueule, mioche.*’ His r’s were worse than Mommy’s.”

Regis walked up, grinning. “Glad you found each other. Happens all the time around here.” He looked at the package in Sarah’s hand. “So, we’re getting a new game out of it, huh, Miranda?”

Sarah looked at him, startled. “Is that the way it works?”

“Yep. As I said, it happens all the time.”

Sarah asked for a few last-minute phone instructions and Regis said, “It’s easy, don’t sweat it. But just in case, I’m putting my number at the top of your favorites list: AppleRegis, so no one can get ahead of me alphabetically, unless you have a boyfriend named Aaron or Adam. Call me if you need help.”

## THE SWEATSHOP

Mary picked her way along the uneven stones of a narrow street, searching the faded lettering on long-shuttered shops. A wooden storefront, its paint peeled beyond recognition of color, brick facades turned black from the grime of ages. It was an uphill climb in this hilly section of Ménilmontant, and, of course, no visible street numbers. But Igor had given her specific landmarks. First the squat building with a barely visible sign, ‘Bois et Charbons,’ no surprise there, burning coal for household heat had ceased long ago. Next two workmen’s bars, one on the left, then another a few paces up on the right, a shuttered *boulangerie*. From there on, everything looked abandoned. But this was the stretch she was searching for – clandestine factories and workshops. She’d found it.

“Ask for Nikodje,” Igor had said. “He’ll be able to help you.”

The workshop door was open. Mary went in and found herself in a large, dim room with a low roof.

“Anyone there?” she called out in French.

It was very hot. A strong smell of something chemical tainted the air. The street was full of so-called workshops that

existed on what amounted to slave labor. She had frequently glimpsed, through barred windows and open doors, the people sweating away inside, dealing with clothes: sewing, folding, hanging, ironing what looked like cheap pieces, the kind sold to young people for small sums. She had never heard happy chatter from the workers, never met any of them in the local shops, never known anyone who had any contact with them, except Katja. However, she had heard oncologists at the Hôpital St. Louis, where her husband died, talk of the increasing problem of clandestine workers turning up with lung tumors, probably due to substances in the fabrics they worked on. Many of these sweatshops were now Chinese, but the Serbs were still here in force.

Today, no people visible anywhere.

“Hallo! Anyone in?” she called again.

She could hear talk in a room at the back. Something Slavic. She moved forward – this was no doubt foolhardy, but her need to know propelled her.

Minuscule pieces of clothing hung all around her on endless mobile hangers, grouped by colors. There was black and white tartan, pink and red tartan. This was obviously a tartan week. Were they skirts? Could even anorexic teenagers get away with wearing anything so small?

The talk stopped. She heard a flurry of movement. She advanced toward the rear.

“Mr. Nikodje?”

A brute with a neck as thick as his head appeared in the doorway of the back room.

“Whadda ya wan’?” he asked in bad, heavily accented French.

“I am a friend of Katja,” she said, putting out her hand - which felt suddenly damp - to shake his. She couldn’t bear the idea of saying “was.”

He looked at her hand. He didn’t move.

“What friend?” he said. “She never talk about no friend.”

“I’m a neighbor,” Mary said. Her voice sounded friendlier than she felt. “We live in the same building. You get to know your neighbors.”

Feck, that probably wasn’t the best thing to say to a man like this. It might be interpreted as a threat. What a dunce she was to have come here!

“Oh yeah?” He looked interested now. “You come back here drink a coffee.” Somehow, not a welcoming gesture.

He preceded her into the back room. It was much smaller and contained an old desk, a large box of offcuts, some dirty-looking files and a makeshift kitchen. A trapdoor opened on wooden stairs leading down to what must be a cellar. Sun beat in through another door that opened onto a yard behind. A slight, hot breeze made its way slowly through from the yard to the street. Mary thought there might be access to the outside space from another street, for loading and unloading. She decided the other people she’d heard were either in the cellar or had gone out through the yard. She could hear nothing. Why would they be afraid of her?

“I’m not from any French administration,” she said. “I’m Irish. *Irlandaise*.”

He fiddled with coffee and water, his back to her.

“You drink Serb coffee,” he said. “Very good.”

“I’m trying to find out what happened to Katja,” she said quickly, anxious to get out of here and away from this man,



who had all the appearance of a bouncer. She should never have come. Stupid.

“She got killed, didn’t you hear?”

Mary noticed that his French had improved considerably.

“Yes, but I’m trying to find out why.” She reached for the coffee. It tasted bitter.

He pushed the sugar towards her. “Drink. Needs a lot of sugar, Serb coffee. You helping the police now?” He laughed.

“Of course not!” Not bothering to add that she’d been instructed by cops to keep her nosiness at home.

“Maybe Katja was bad girl,” the bouncer said finally, fiddling with a large bunch of keys.

Mary tried to collect her thoughts. Keys? Katja had lots of keys. She took another mouthful of the bitter coffee, as if it would help her.

“Bad girl?” she managed. She had some difficulty getting the words out. She felt tired and weary. It was holiday-time. She needed a holiday. If she were lying on a beach she would sleep for a week. The sun beat into the yard. It was so hot.

The bouncer watched her carefully.

“Katja was no saint,” he said.

“Who is?” Mary said wearily, stifling a yawn.

The bouncer slapped his thigh and laughed heartily.

## ANOTHER VISION

Sarah and Miranda pedaled off happily from the Apple Store. They took the quay along the river, hoping to catch a better breeze. They passed a beautiful bridge on the right, its semicircular arches stretching across the tip end of Ile de la Cité to the left bank. Up ahead on the island, Sarah could see what she knew to be the Palace of Justice. Oh, good, she suddenly had an idea of where she was. Yes, the upcoming bridge was just across from Place du Châtelet and the Sarah Bernhardt Bistro.

On their way to the Louvre, they had gone straight down rue de Rivoli. She still didn't know her way around enough to understand how the trip back beside the river had brought them to her favorite spot, but the Bistro was *her* place.

"Let's stop and buy a crepe from the cafe's outdoor window." She laughed. "The Paris equivalent of an old-fashioned Southern California drive-in." She pulled up and parked the pink bike across the street at the little square around the Tour St. Jacques, finding it hard to believe that this tranquil spot had been so frightening two nights before. She saw now what a wrong turn she'd made when she took a right

toward the river. In daylight she could easily see the route straight on to the Hotel de Ville just another long block away.

"I want to go inside," Miranda said, tugging at Sarah to bypass the outdoor counter and the sidewalk tables and chairs overhung by red umbrellas.

Sarah thought with a shudder of the guy in the blue shirt who'd been lurking at a corner table after that first rehearsal. "Outside is better, I think."

"No." Her niece was quite emphatic. She all but stomped a little foot. "I want a *jus d'airelles*, that's what I always order in a bar."

Sarah squinted at her. She couldn't decide if the kid was precocious or just a smart aleck. She was going to need a Mary Poppins magic parasol for this babysitting job! But until she could figure out the trick, she decided to avoid possible tantrums.

The café was jammed, as always. Waiters in long black aprons and white shirts careened through the crowd dispensing coffees and beers and *croque-monsieurs*. Bernhardt, in her various poses, kept watch from the walls. A round-faced server who spoke some English recognized Sarah and, with a curt nod, indicated that she and Miranda squeeze into a single small banquette table along a low interior wall in the middle of the room, the same place Sarah and the cast had sat two nights before.

Miranda got her drink, which turned out to be some kind of berry juice, but was stumped when she couldn't provide its English word for her aunt. In apparent frustration over her linguistic lack, she tackled her chocolate crepe with a gusto that left a good portion of it on her hands and face and on

that pathetic limp and soiled blue dress. Sarah *had* to get the kid some clothes. She handed her niece a wad of paper napkins, but was waved away as Miranda drained her glass with loud sucking sounds through a bent straw. She seemed to be focused on something behind Sarah's back. Perhaps out the open windows to the street?

"Miranda, what are you staring at?"

"I'm watching for *foot*."

"What?"

"You say soccer." Miranda's dismissive tone fully expressed her feelings about her aunt's lack of French. "When a car stops, I can see a game in the car window."

Sarah turned in her chair. There was nothing special to see as she looked out past the sidewalk tables to the Châtelet square, the gold winged statue still firmly in its usual spot. Yipes, she thought, I assumed the kid had inherited her mother's practical mind, not my so-called flighty imagination.

"Miranda," she said sharply, turning back to her niece, but stopped from saying more when she noticed that there was, indeed, a soccer match being broadcast on the huge flat-screen TV hanging in the middle of the room behind the child's seat.

"You have to be patient," Miranda said.

Sarah turned, and waited, her mind skipping back to her hallucinatory image from this very bistro table of the frantic grey-haired woman perched on the curb.

A car stopped. It must have been the very traffic light that halted their taxi on the way to the *gare* the day before yesterday. Reflected in its passenger window was a fleeting glimpse of a player in a green jersey head-butting a ball! What

did that mean? Had she not seen the strange woman stepping off the curb in front of this very restaurant? Of course she had. But it also meant she hadn't imagined seeing the woman again, for an instant, as a reflection, later that same night when she was with the other actors from the theater. She had been seated, just as Miranda was now, facing out. Had the woman's face been on the TV screen? Who was she? Was she dead? Sarah suddenly had a weird premonition. The missing actress! Could that have been who she saw here, then again at the train station? Had the woman simply been coming out of the Bernhardt Bistro, trying to hail a cab, that frantic look on her face, worried she would miss her train? It made sense. Someone new in town wouldn't have learned yet, as Sarah had only a few days ago, that there was a taxi station right across the street. Difficult hailing cabs here, the way you can in other large cities. The original actress was presumably from London. No wait a minute, don't be stupid Sarah, no professional would be leaving town, catching a train, the night of a first rehearsal!

Still ... "Let's go, Miranda."

"What's up, Doc?"

Sarah shook her head, grinning. "You're too fresh for your own good. Move it. We're going to the theater to look at glossies."

"Huh? What's that?"

"Publicity photos of actors. You know, like Anne Baxter in 'All About Eve.'"

## UP AND AT 'EM

Mary woke in semi-darkness with a rocking dizziness, her heart thudding – was she on a slave ship? Despite the rising panic, she dared not move until she worked out where she was. A hospital, having a heart attack? What had happened?

The only light seemed to be bleeding in through a foot-high window high up in the wall. When her eyes grew accustomed to the gloom, she identified rows of industrial sewing machines lined up in the middle of the room. Around the walls were narrow shelves. From time to time a vague shape on a shelf sighed, and Mary realized they all contained sleepers. It had been early morning when she arrived here. Was it now night, or did the sweatshop run around the clock and the workers sleep in shifts? Or were they just taking well-deserved naps after exhausting hours bent over machines? She was relieved not to be alone. A shape rose from a bunk, made its way into a box-like structure at the end of the room, switched on a light and closed the door. After a while she heard a toilet flush and the door open again. By shifting her eyes, while trying not to turn her head, afraid of drawing attention

to herself, she could make out the wooden stairs in the corner. She must be in the cellar, which meant that the little window was probably on the ground of either the yard or the street. It occurred to her that they might all be prisoners, of the same people – the people who had killed Katja.

She tried to lift herself off the bunk, but didn't have the strength.

“You wake now.”

He was standing over her with another cup of coffee. Light flowed down from the wooden stairs in the corner. So it was still daytime! Hopefully, she hadn't been out very long. She looked around the room. All the bunks were empty. The sewing machines stood idle. The toilet door stood open, exuding a vague smell of urine.

“I'm not drinking any more coffee from you, thank you,” Mary said heatedly.

“You drink, you don't drink, is same to me.” He put the cup down on the floor beside her.

She reached for it cautiously, swinging her legs off the bunk, her head reeling, and took the ceramic mug in both hands. It was hot, warm and inviting to the touch.

With huge effort she raised the cup towards her lips. Then with all her might she threw the steaming brew, catching his shirt sleeve, and ran towards the staircase. She could hear him roaring behind her, alerting anyone who might be on the floor above. Her heart beat violently as she climbed, clawing her way up, the rough wood tearing at her hands.

There was no one in the little office room. She heard the brute breathing heavily at the bottom of the cellar stairs, a big foot planting itself firmly on the first step. She glanced through the building, then towards the yard. Which way was safest? Someone was bound to be in the sweatshop, it was broad daylight. She could hear the distant noise of traffic. The brute roared again and started his climb. Opting for the yard, she bolted through the door and found herself in a T-shaped space onto which other workshops opened. She made it to the bottom of the long end of the T but found herself blocked by a grilled gate. When she pulled, it rattled wildly but wouldn't give. She was aware of people in doorways watching her. She put one foot on an iron rung, hand up, then another, and scrambled over. The brute was already in the yard and approaching fast.

As Mary, out of shape, temples pounding, ran off, she heard him roar with laughter.



## A NEW ALLY?

Mary staggered back to Igor's with a blinding headache and a load of questions about why he'd set her up. "*Qu'est que tu fais?*" the barman demanded.

"What the hell hit me?" Mary retorted. "I'll tell you. Your hotshot friend, Nikodje. What kind of tip did you give me? I've never been so terrified in my life."

"Ah, Mary, my friend," Igor managed sympathy and a suppressed grin at the same time, as he poured her a coffee. "You can't go off on your own like that. You should have given me a chance to call the Serb, to let him know you were coming."

"Yeah, so?" Her hands were trembling as she raised the coffee cup. "Why would a goon like that expect a formal invitation?"

"He called me after you left, and said he was just trying to scare you into leaving him out of Katja's death. They're a suspicious lot, those Serbs."

"Well, damn, I'm certainly going to report to the police that the big thug assaulted me."

Igor shook his head, the folds of flesh in his big face settling into a forlorn look. “Ah, Mary, don’t do that. It makes grief for us all.”

“Maybe you’re right,” Mary said slowly, thinking it over. In her panic, she hadn’t quite taken in that the brute seemed to be laughing a lot. Perhaps she could beat him at his own game. Go back and boldly tell him that she would report his assault to the police unless he tells her what he knows about poor Katja’s murder.

## THE MERRY-GO-ROUND

Sarah and Miranda hopped on the pink bike parked across from the Bernhardt Bistro and headed straight up the street where they could see the Hotel de Ville a little over a block away. Sarah felt certain she could find her way to the theater from there. Oops. This route took them right past the merry-go-round, and Miranda set up her howl again.

“Okay, Okay,” Sarah said. “One ride.”

Miranda demanded the galloping horse, which Sarah tried to point out just went up and down, but her niece not only insisted on the golden horse with the flying mane at the interior of the wheel, but also insisted that he galloped.

“Up you go, Kiddo.” Sarah wound her way back past a giraffe and a black Renault touring car and stepped to the ground as calliope music began. She watched with amusement as her niece waved to her and yelled “giddy up” to the horse. Miranda was laughing and waving the first time the wheel came around. The second time around, she was kicking at a skinny slob in a blue checked shirt who was trying to pull her off the horse. Sarah leaped on the wheel, this time bumping her way past a lion and a two-seater airplane with a yellow

steering wheel, screaming for help as she went. A number of tiny heads turned in her direction, but who the hell was around who could do something? A few mothers stood on the sidelines, smiling benevolently at the cleverness of their children able to ride a lion or turn a steering wheel.

Sarah reached Miranda, and finally got a good look at the man's face. Hawk nose, blond oily hair. He had a missing tooth, and a grim look. Furious, actually. Because of the horse's going up and down, he couldn't get a real purchase on Miranda, and she was doing a fairly good job on each of the horse's upswings kicking his face with her little white sandals. Sarah was pounding him with her purse as the horse moved downward, but the guy was finally able to yank Miranda off. Sarah grabbed at him and got a handful of shirt. He swung his arm violently knocking her to the floor where she landed on her right elbow and an electric shock shot up her arm. Dizzy from the fall, the repetitive music and spinning of the wheel, she managed to reach again, got her arms around one of his legs, and was dragged along as he tried to get off the wheel, Miranda clutched like a bundle of laundry under his right arm, his hand over her mouth to stop her screaming. "Bite the bastard," Sarah yelled. Frantically searching her mind for how to get help, she began yelling over and over, "*au secours, au secours,*" startled to hear the words coming from her mouth. Endless hours of studying Truffaut and Godard films had paid off.

As the man tried to step off the wheel, Sarah bumping along the boards behind holding his leg, the merry-go-round came to an abrupt halt. Scratched and skinned from the rough wood, Sarah peered through his legs and saw an army of

mothers greeting him, arms folded across their chests. And suddenly he was assaulted by a fusillade of every manner of purse and shopping bag imaginable. A carrot flew by. As Sarah gingerly lifted up her bruised body, she had to duck a flailing Louis Vuitton satchel with a brown and beige Hermes scarf fluttering from its long shoulder strap. Miranda fell beside her.

"Baby, are you hurt?" Sarah grabbed her. "I'm so, so, sorry. Let me look at you. Are you all right?"

"Yes. But I'm getting tired of all these bad men coming after me."

Miranda looked up at a woman bending over her and Sarah. "Call the police," she said in French.

"*C'est fait,*" it's done, the woman replied. "*Pauvre petite.*" She gave Miranda a hug, brushing hair from her face.

Several women were sitting on the would-be kidnapper when the carousel operator got to them and took his turn at punching and manhandling the prisoner. "*La police arrive,*" he said to the crowd. And sure enough, several cars pulled up, sirens wailing, spilling out running police swinging billy clubs.

When Miranda told them that this wasn't the first bad man who had come after her, a policewoman who spoke a bit of English stepped forward and questioned Sarah. It was soon decided that Detective Vidal should be notified. Sarah at least knew enough to be able to tell the officers that he could be located at the Louis Blanc police station.

Blue shirt was hauled off in handcuffs, and it was then decided that Sarah and Miranda would be driven home while other officers remained to take statements and get the names and addresses of witnesses.

As they climbed into the white car with its red and blue markings, Sarah punched in the first and *only* number in her new phone, AppleRegis. “Call my sister,” she pleaded, breathless and trying to keep rising hysteria out of her voice after she realized that she didn’t know the number. “Calm down,” Regis said. “Take it slow. Ask Miranda.”

The child delivered the digits in a sing-songy rote that clearly indicated she had Mommy’s number tattooed on her brain.

“Tell her,” Sarah said to Regis, “we’re going to John’s.”

On the way there, Miranda announced to the officers that this was the second time she’d been in a police car in two days.

Only as they pulled up in front of the building did Sarah realize she had forgotten the pink bicycle. “Now John’s going to kill me, too. But he’ll have to wait in line. Vicki will probably skin me alive.”

## THE TOWN CRIER

Regis had gone into high gear rounding up the principals. Vicki, immediately dashing off to be with Miranda, gave him Mary's number on the run. Mary, who was by now at home nursing her headache from the Serb's concoction, gave him Jean Vidal's number on the theory that the detective might be tied up with some other police work and, still with no cell phone, she didn't want to hang around her apartment waiting to get through to him. She gave Regis John's cell number to prepare him for the onslaught of people who would come storming into his place. John, who was reached at the corner fish monger's, loaded down with two full shopping bags in preparation for making a huge stew for his house guests, asked Regis to be a good fellow and alert Ben. As a quick afterthought, John suggested getting Ben to look up Pierre's number, thinking if anyone could cheer up Sarah after her near calamity, the red-headed Frenchman could.

"Oh, and," he said, "I hate to impose, but you probably should call Andy, too. He's an expert on those ancient seals. The cops last night seemed to think something like that was involved." He bit his tongue, and thought better of including

that crook, de la Poche, as another resident art expert. Finally, Regis invited himself along, finding all this drama too exciting to resist. He waylaid a fellow worker who was just getting off, and asked him to take over the rest of his shift.

By the time they'd gone the short distance to John's, Miranda had filled in her escorts on details of her adventures of the night before, and the police, in turn, had phoned into headquarters for more information. The detectives, better known as Fric and Frac, were on their way.

Many of them converged at once on the sidewalk in front of his apartment, so John had to ask one of the patrolmen escorting Miranda to hold his shopping bag of fish while he searched his pockets for keys.



## SQUABBLES

John dumped the fresh fish in the kitchen sink and closed his eyes for a quick flash to gain some composure against the sounds of chaos coming from his living room. Everyone seemed to be talking – or even yelling – at once. He opened his eyes, looked along the counter, and saw that several mounds of cheese were already being aired to room temperature. Thank heaven he had thought to tell the mystery caller, whoever that was, to alert Ben that a horde was on its way. His dear sweet love was already out there in the salon passing glasses, water or wine, to the assembling multitude. John knew he had to find a moment soon to gently probe Ben on just what he knew about that awful de la Poche. But their lives had been so upside down the past few days, there had hardly been time for anything.

John grabbed up the morning *Le Monde*, tried to wrap the big blue fish in a single section, but found he needed another bunch of newspaper for the protruding, floppy tail. Finally, he manhandled his cargo out the service door and left it on the landing where the handyman normally picked up the garbage. Hopefully, neither he nor John's landing neighbors would scoop up the lovely fish and dispose of it.

As he washed his hands and prepared to join his so-called guests, John glanced out the window at the quiet scene of Paris shutters and pots of geraniums and wondered where his serenity had gone. He sighed. The main thing, of course, was that the child was all right. And he'd known that instantly when they entered his lobby and Miranda, reaching up on tiptoes, demanded that *she* be allowed to punch the buttons to summon the elevator.

The doorbell rang for the third time. John sighed again and went into his salon to begin introducing himself. The first guy he encountered was a bear of a young man with a huge mop of shaggy black hair sporting a red Apple T-shirt. "Hi, I'm Regis," the kid said. "Did a good job of rounding 'em up, no?"

"Quite" John said, frowning, trying to place the fellow. Had Sarah already acquired another boyfriend? Perhaps it hadn't been such a good idea to invite Pierre.

The doorbell rang yet again, and the two lookalike cops in black undertaker suits came in. John grinned recalling how Vicki had dubbed them Fric and Frac.

He scanned the room. All three cops were here now, including the jeans-clad one they'd begun referring to as Mary's detective. Most everyone was here except Vic...

The door burst open and in she flew without bothering to ring. Bisquit leaped up at her, barking. Everyone had now answered the summons except Andy. Just as well, he'd have hated this commotion and John could fill him in later.

"Miranda's fine. Miranda's fine." John used his most soothing tone, still strong enough to be heard over the hubbub, extending his arms to Vicki. She pushed past him and, as she wildly looked around, he was unsure whether she

was going to hug her daughter or pummel her sister. Miranda ran to her, which clearly decided the issue, and John breathed another sigh, this one of relief. Sarah clearly was relieved as well. She had looked as though she couldn't decide which way to swoon. Pierre was on one arm and the kid who'd identified himself as Regis on the other.

Things simmered down, but only after Vicki and Miranda retired to a back room to play a game. Detective Vidal had suggested it, saying he wanted to explain some things, and that perhaps John could fill in Vicki later. John expedited the move by taking Miranda to search the fridge for ice cream. She settled on raspberry with chocolate chips, and as she and her mother headed down the hall, bowls in hand, he glanced at his kitchen sink and wondered what the hell he was going to do with that fish in the service hall. He also noted that someone was going to have to go out and buy the kid a clean dress, or better yet, if they spent another night here, he would give her a T-shirt of his to wear to bed and dump her clothes in the washer.

As he reentered the salon, Detective Vidal was reassuring Mary and Sarah that they had nothing more to worry about now that the police had the necklace and the would-be kidnapper was in jail.

"It is best that you not to be unquiet. The necklace of Sarah is given to other authorities, and they investigate another matter."

Mary didn't bother to hide her impatience. "What do you mean, another matter? Katja is dead. She was the child's babysitter. She was my neighbor, and both our apartments were ransacked."

“Ah, *oui, mais...*”

“No buts, detective,” Mary snapped. “I want to know what happened to Katja. I’m the one who put her and the child together. I did this awful thing, and I need to understand it.”

“Mary, is matter for police.” His voice was hard, stern. Yet, strangely, he used her given name, not “Madame,” the way John had heard him address her before.

John noted the set look on both their faces and wondered, if there was an attraction between the two, just how long it would last.

## SOMETHING'S FISHY

John was back at the kitchen sink, chopping vegetables for his stew. First thing he had done after the cops left was cut up the fish. Cutting and chopping was great for relieving stress.

Mary, Vicki and Ben were sitting at the counter island sipping red wine. John turned to glance at them, peering over the rim of the reading glasses perched on his nose, and noticed that Vicki was more than sipping. Her lips were already stained Merlot red and she had been out the service door countless times to smoke, not permitted in the house. She finally seemed to be mellowing out a bit now that Miranda was down for her nap. Sarah, on her way to an afternoon rehearsal, had escaped her sister's wrath early on, exiting with both Pierre and Regis.

"As nearly as I can conjure from what Vidal was not telling us," Mary bit down hard on the negative, "is it's some international team."

"*Oui*," Ben agreed. "Is, how you say in English, wasp."

John turned again from the sink and smiled, setting the soup pot on the stove. "The word is sting, my dear."

"Sting," Ben repeated. "So, they are many *la police. Italienne, Anglaise, Inter-pol.*"

“If it’s international art theft,” Mary perked up with a gleeful laugh, “wouldn’t it be perfect if we could implicate that jerk de la Poche. He has all but stolen your porcelain.”

“Who?” Vicki and Ben both asked at once.

John joined the others, poured himself a glass of wine, and explained his problems with the unreturned statue. He decided not to mention his trip to the collector’s posh apartment. Instead, he said casually to Ben, “Does any of this fit with what you know about him?”

“*Non.*” Ben gave that French shrug. “I know him little. We see at a charity where I give a painting. I want you to meet because I think he will be *un bon client*. He is rich, *oui*. But *nouveau, bien sûr.*” Ben finished with a sniff at the old idea that new money is tainted.

“Let’s get back to the main issue, here,” Vicki said, a frown of concentration creasing her forehead.

“Just what is it?” John retorted. “Since I seem to be right in the middle of this, I’d like to know. A shame Andy didn’t show up. He’s an expert on ancient art. If this is international, maybe he could help.”

“Well,” Vicki said slowly, “it makes sense that if – as Sarah claims – the necklace came out of Miranda’s suitcase, then Katja was the one who put it there. I told you, she and Miranda had a big row over who would pack it.”

“Damn,” said Mary. “You know what. When we were in the *gare*, I mentioned Katja. I told Miranda I had a cell-phone picture in my purse of her packing.”

John grimaced. “Those strange men you mentioned, they must have overheard.”

“Yeah,” Mary agreed. “One of them picked up Miranda’s suitcase. And another pinched my purse.”

“That’s not the half of it,” Vicki interjected. “I told you the way my cell got smashed was Miranda grabbing at it. What I never got around to telling was that one of those same men from the *gare* was being quite threatening at the time. He said something like ‘you and your kid would be safer back in Paris.’ That’s why we hopped a plane to come home.”

John shot up from his bar stool in his excitement. “Sarah said she had heard someone say that, but I just assumed she’d probably imagined it.”

“Even Sarah couldn’t have conjured up anything worse.” Vicki downed what was left in her glass, and banged it to the counter with a vengeance. “That train ride to Prague was the trip from hell. We were stopped for hours at the German border and they kept telling us they were clearing an animal from the tracks. I think that’s hooley. I asked around the newsroom today, and the police reporters think it may have been human.”

Mary leaped up. “I’ll call that jerk Vidal right now and tell him we know who those people are. He can stuff his secrecy.”

“So, with the kidnapper caught and the necklace found, we don’t have to worry,” Vicki said, pouring herself yet another Merlot. “And with my scatty sister safe, I don’t have to look for a new babysitter.”

## STILL MORE KEYS

Mary trudged through the dark night steaming outside and in with the still oppressive heat and the blast furnace of Detective Vidal's instruction to stay out of it. "A matter for police," he'd said once again when she phoned from John's with Vicki's information about the men in the *gare*. He might as well have said, your place is in the kitchen, not solving crimes. Her dear, dead husband would never have talked down to her like that. And, with added effrontery, Vidal had familiarly called her Mary. She'd felt like shouting, "I'm Madame to you, a widow of four months." Well, she'd show that damned cop.

But how? She kicked at loose pebbles on the sidewalk like a kid. A tall black man in African dress glared as he sidestepped a stone that sailed right at him. She managed a weak, rueful smile of apology as they passed before sinking back into her fretting. Of course she wasn't trying to be a cop and solve a crime, but damn it, she simply *had* to know what was going on. She must find out if her judgment was so off. Sure, Katja was maybe a little tricky, cut some corners, as most immigrants had to do, but it was horrifying to think that she



might have been into some shady dealings that put Miranda at risk.

Mary quickened her pace heading home, rushing past closed-up pho eateries and shuttered shops. The keys were surely the place to start. Just whose did Katja have? Vidal scooped them up from her floor the night she was killed when they'd noticed that the one to Vicki's apartment was missing – but something kept tickling at the back of Mary's mind. At some point, hadn't the Pole made an opaque reference to duplicates in case she should be robbed? Mary strained to recall exactly what it was she had said. Something like those druggie bums will never cause me to lose a job. What was the context, where were they at the time? It was my place. Not hers. Yes, I'm sure of it, Mary decided, but what object there had triggered Katja's comment? Something – a laundry hamper, a breadbox? Couldn't have been a toaster or a microwave, Katja had neither. Mary almost smiled in her ruminating – Katja didn't have a breadbox, either. But she *did* have one of those tall wicker baskets for fresh baguettes. A memory was tickling. She and Katja had discussed the *panier*, it was coming back now, but that was at Katja's in her kitchen, not at my place. Mary had laughingly said you surely don't eat enough bread to have need of that. No, Katja had said, but it was cheap. *I bought it long time ago at dépôt vente for a franc.*

The *panier* was probably not the hiding place, too obvious, Mary decided. But she quickened her pace wondering how she could get through the yellow police tape strung across the entrance to Katja's apartment. It was still in place when Mary left home that afternoon, but no cop had seemed to be guarding the site. One could probably just steam it off, like

the clandestine opening of a letter. As she rounded the corner and her building came in view, Mary was wondering how to transport steam down a flight of stairs. A steam iron or an electric kettle were the only instruments that came to mind. Was there an outlet in the hall?

Mary had just dumped the contents of the tall wicker *panier* on the scarred and chipped tiles of Katja's floor to find only breadcrumbs amidst dirty underwear when she heard a key turn in the apartment door.

Heaven help me, the returning crooks. Or cops. Not sure which would be worse. Probably *les flics*, they'd haul me straight to jail, might be able to reason with gangsters. She frantically looked around for a place to hide. A limp, paisley curtain hung over what she knew were the shelves of a sparsely stocked larder. Could she squeeze in with a few rusted tins of beans?

Mary moved the paisley and ducked behind, grateful for the few inches of what she'd once thought of as wasted space. Katja had been inexact in measuring the ceiling rod's distance from the wall. At the time, Mary had thought how silly to lose even those few inches in such a small apartment, but it meant the curtain hung out over the set-in shelves, so she had no trouble fitting in. Nothing to do about her feet. The paisley stopped short at least two inches off the floor. She tried turning sideways. The door creaked open. By the time it had slammed shut, she knew she'd never be able to hold that heel to toe posture and gave up and let her feet stick

out. Lucky, she thought, that I'm wearing me scuffed brogans. Maybe someone just glancing will think they're Katja's old work shoes.

The footsteps, loud and heavy, abruptly halted. How could one sense in the stopping of a sound that something was wrong? She couldn't hear his breathing, yet she knew it had altered. He's seen my shoes! He's probably drawing his gun! What to do? Her reaction was quick, without thought. "Don't shoot," she yelled, tripping and tangling up in the curtain as she scrambled her way out. Cans banged to the floor behind her as a kitchen chair whizzed past her ear and crashed into the paisley. The throbbing behind her eyes made it difficult to see. She threw her hands in the air, faced toward the doorway, something huge blocking the light from the table lamp she'd switched on as she entered the dark little sitting room.

"*Je suis une amie, je suis une amie,*" she babbled, hoping to convince whoever it was that she was a friend, a neighbor.

A large man, scraggly hair, badly dressed, advanced. His hand was out in a soothing gesture, as though approaching a rabid dog. He was emitting unintelligible sounds. It certainly wasn't French.

Mary put her hands down, and peered more closely. Without a gun or a chair, he was probably safe enough. Looked pathetic, actually. A serge suit jacket, shiny from wear, whose better days had been the long-ago time before this jowly fellow outgrew it by fifty pounds.

The gobbledegook language continued. Russian, perhaps Eastern European: "*brozer kryzia. brozer.*"

Mary squinted at him. "*Sprechen sie Deutsch?*" she asked. "*Brozer, brozer,*" came back.

“English!” Mary slapped her forehead. “Brother, you’re saying brother?”

“Tak.” He smiled and nodded.

There was a resemblance. Katja was obese and dark. This guy was simply overweight and a former dirty blond. But there was something similar in the forehead, kind of flat where it should have been rounded.

“You’re Katja’s brother?” Mary still found it hard to believe. But of course, the family had to have been notified.

## BACK ON THE TRAIL

Sarah and Miranda set off once again on the pink bike – Luckily Pierre and Regis had wheeled it back from the merry-go-round last night. And, happily, Miranda was sparkling in her old blue dress, thanks to John’s intervention with his washing machine.

Pedaling along through a clean fresh breeze, the first in a week of this stifling summer, Miranda’s pudgy arms circling her waist, Sarah was in a glorious mood. Here she was in Paris, with a wonderful part in an exciting play, her family around her, and now this babysitting job that meant she could stay as long as she liked. She wasn’t too worried about Vicki having insisted they stay inside and play games. The theater was nearby and the director had assured Sarah at last night’s rehearsal there would be someone in the office this morning who could show them glossies. She could look over the photos quickly, pedal back to John’s, and her sister would be none the wiser.

Miranda would never tell. They had their secrets now about the man who smelled like jellybeans. They had talked this morning about playing a game of trying to find him and

keeping it their secret. Sarah was in the mood to play detective. That's what Bernhardt would have done. Anyone who'd go on stage, as the Divine One had, without a leg, or a proper prosthetic in those old days, would not easily give up. Sarah had searched her memory for role models of lady detectives, but nothing very exciting came to mind. She could hardly see herself looking like Angela Lansbury as Jessica Fletcher. Bore...ing. And Miss Marple, forget it. Myrna Loy was lovely as Nora Charles, but basically she let Nick do all the sleuthing. What the world obviously needed was a female Sam Spade or Philip Marlowe, someone to rival Bogart or Mitchum. Actually, now that she was in a French frame of mind, she could see herself best as Belmondo, the hat, the cigarette.

She pedaled on happily. She'd been careful, when asking last night, not to explain why she wanted to see cast pictures. No good detective would reveal just what she was searching for. There were still no answers about the missing actress. Her replacement, Georgie reported that the cops only had questions but wouldn't tell her anything. Gomez had been livid – which seemed his natural state – over the lack of information. Yet he finally muttered “za hell vith it.” And that was that.

But Sarah had a hunch. She knew Bernhardt would have followed through, and so would she! She'd simply told Gomez that she wanted to make sure her own publicity photo was current. No way was she going to try to explain that she'd seen a frantic woman twice, then what appeared to be a ghost, and finally a soccer player headbutting a ball in a TV reflection. That sounded pretty crazy and implausible. But somehow, somehow, Sarah felt that the explanation was there. A London-

based actress had mysteriously gone missing and the woman Sarah kept seeing was British-looking.

At least she had one plausible answer for herself: If the woman was dead and her picture had been on TV, then it could have been that reflection Sarah saw in the window of a car passing the bistro yesterday, just as Miranda had seen the soccer game.

In a cramped, slightly dusty office piled high with old playbills, bits and bobs of stage furniture and the odd Napoleonic tri-cornered hat, Sarah was flipping through a large binder of publicity photos. Miranda, beside her, stood on a chair for a better view. The office secretary hovered, not bothering to hide her displeasure with what she considered an unorthodox procedure.

They'd gotten off to a rough start because the French, even when they spoke English, as this woman did with some arrogance, seemed to call a spade a spade. In other words, a glossy was known as a *photographie de publicité*. Miranda, in her usual role of self-important translator, got off on the wrong foot by translating "glossy" as "*brillante*." And things went downhill from there.

But here they were now, Sarah busily flipping, while Miranda and the secretary scrutinized her every move.

Missing, Sarah mumbled, as she turned pages. "Missing." Who was missing, in that Costa-Gavras film? Was it an actress, too? Sissy Spacek? No, of course not. It was her husband who'd disappeared. Sarah kept on flipping then suddenly stopped. She

slammed her hand against the book, her heart thudding. “That’s her. That’s her. The missing actress. That’s the woman I saw!”

Miranda jumped down from the wooden office chair and in one quick move, shoved her aunt aside and began turning pages. She was barely as tall as the desk on which the photo binder rested and had to rise on tiptoe to peer at the pictures.

The secretary emitted a reproachful “*mon dieu.*”

Sarah tried to pull Miranda away, but she dug in her heels and hit at her aunt with her elbows as she continued to turn pages.

“Miranda!” Sarah all but screeched, still trying to dislodge her. “I need to keep the book at that page.” Sarah tried to control her anger. “It’s important, can’t you tell that?”

“No,” Miranda said, slapping at her aunt’s hand. “*I’m* looking. It’s important.”

“*Qu’est-ce que tu fais?*” What are you doing? The secretary erupted in indignation, grabbing for Miranda, who kicked at her.

Sarah shifted her body in the narrow aisle of stacked artifacts to block the tight-lipped functionary from Miranda.

“You must leave,” the woman hissed as she righted the fallen chair.

“Give us a moment, please,” Sarah pleaded.

With a great eye roll, the woman turned and began picking up then putting down items as though she were restoring order to the cluttered office.

“Miranda, what *are* you looking for?” Sarah demanded.

“Katja, I want to find a picture of Katja.”

“Katja?” Sarah, stunned, shook her head in disbelief.

“Mother says she’s gone. And I want to find her.”



Cripes. What to do now. We can't tell the child she's dead.  
"She won't be there. She's not an actress."

"Yes, she is. Daddy said so."

"Miranda, that's nuts."

"Daddy said so. When she was scolding me, Daddy laughed and said 'what an actress.'"

"Miranda, that was just a figure of speech."

"Yes, Daddy said it, I heard him. I want to find Katja, I miss her."

"Oh," the word came out of Sarah like a slowly expelled breath. What to do now? The kid was truly upset, still frantically turning pages of posing, smiling, seductive women. This calls for psychology, "The Turn of the Screw" still wouldn't work. Should she bring back Mary Poppins, so she wouldn't scare her niece? She needed to make it a game.

"I miss Katja, too," Sarah said. "Let's be comrades on this. I'll help you look for her."

"Oh, goodie. Mommy won't. She just keeps saying she's gone away. I want her to come back."

Sarah tried not to feel hurt. "You and I have fun, too, don't we?"

"Oh, sure. You're lots more fun than her. But I don't like her gone."

Sarah grabbed up her niece in a bear hug, almost knocking the breath from both of them. "You had me worried there for a minute, Kiddo. But if I'm still your best pal, then everything's copacetic."

"What's copa what?"

Sarah laughed. "I don't know. It's just something people say."

“Grownups always say dumb things like that. It’s hard to know what they’re talking about.”

Sarah suppressed a laugh. “We’d better get back to John’s. You *know* we don’t want mommy to *know* we were gone.”

“I don’t like for people to be gone. Everybody’s gone – Daddy’s gone to Moscow, mommy’s gone to work. Now Katja’s gone and won’t come back. I want to find her!”

## AT THE MORGUE

Mary, too, was sleuthing that morning. She watched a grey van-like vehicle drive up briskly and reverse itself towards the loading ramp at the back entrance of the police morgue. Two men in black suits jumped out and strode purposefully up the steps and through the swing doors.

Those few people who waited outside straightened themselves, adjusted their clothing. The place had an oddly serene quality despite being encircled by city traffic and freeways. Two old chestnuts shaded the asphalt where the vans and hearses arrived, a lawn meandered down toward the riverside highway across from the Austerlitz station. Mary knew that Gare de Lyon was a couple of blocks off to the left, but the only visible intrusions of commerce were a freeway off-ramp feeding to this spot and a large green highway sign high overhead indicating the way to Reims. A crossroads of what? Life and death – luck and happenstance? Just happenstance, perhaps.

Mary shifted from one foot to the other, impatiently waiting for Edek on this raised walkway of the loading platform. He had given her near heart-stoppage the night

before, coming sleuthing as he had done, letting himself into his sister's apartment with his own key after making the journey from Poland by coach. Mary had resisted his pleas to accompany him as he went inside to identify Katja's body. She knew full well who it was. She was the one who'd had the misfortune of finding the poor woman wrapped in her own cloak at the bottom of the stairs.

She had been intrigued, nonetheless, to see this place of death because of reading about the old Paris morgue in Emil Zola. Before it was moved from directly behind Notre-Dame to here beside the Seine in 1914, viewing unidentified bodies through a large, glass window was an afternoon's pastime for the 19<sup>th</sup> century public. Bodies were displayed on twelve black marble tables for inspection in the Greek temple-like structure located directly behind the Cathedral.

While she waited, she kept trying to picture the interior, was it grim now, or as sprightly as in the old days? Women with their bustles and parasols parading through for a look-see at the dead? What morbid curiosity, she admonished herself. She couldn't bear the idea of looking at the dead Katja, didn't want to see *anyone's* corpse. But the history of people and their changing tastes fascinated her.

She watched the others here on the ledge of the red-brick Institut Médico-légal, so named, she supposed, in an attempt to erase its odious circus atmosphere in the past. There were three youngish men in blue jeans and leather jackets, smoking, holding their cigarettes in the hollow of their hands, like those used to the outdoors, to wind, to difficult places. They could be either cops or criminals, little to choose among them in appearance. They didn't speak to each other, didn't

catch anyone's eye. Then there was a small group of women, obviously former colleagues and neighbors of Katja, huddled together to the side, sharing cigarettes and whispering. One, who was wearing a cleaner's overalls, kept checking her watch – taking an hour from work or just using her lunch time.

Mary felt a pang of remorse for Katja's former employers represented by those batches of keys who hadn't turned up to pay their respects. This included Vicki, who was at work. Off to the side, she spotted the super's wife, Sonya, but quickly glanced away. No point in having to enter an inane chat with that one. What was she doing here? Being nosey, no doubt.

The men in jeans tossed their cigarettes, passed a knowing look among themselves, seemed to stiffen their necks, and headed through an open door.

Shortly thereafter, a functionary appeared and gave a high sign to a group of mourners who'd been standing off to themselves, sniffing and whispering.

On an impulse that took her by surprise, Mary added herself to the end of that group and tagged along. They entered a long hall with windows along the right side looking out on a garden, on the left she could see open doors to a number of small spaces. Good heavens, they were viewing rooms! A stained-glass window in the first one they passed streamed light over mourners bunched around a casket. Her group went in at the next room, and Mary, mortified by her own voyeurism, moved quickly on down the hall planning to return back as soon as she respectably could.

Just before she was to make her turn, she glanced into the next room along and was stunned to see not only the young men of the leather jackets from outside, but a big fellow she

was sure was the linebacker who'd approached them in the *gare*. She moved on a few feet, stopped and took a deep breath. Why in the world would an American tourist be in the Paris morgue? Why indeed?

She did a slow about-face, her mind racing. She had to make sure. She'd already suspected out on the platform that the young men were gangsters. She must appear purposeful when she walked past, yet give herself time for a good look. The interior shot of the room moved by too fast, another bier, the stained-glass glow, but it was the same man, without his John Deere ball cap. The same man!

Mary resumed her spot on the platform, unnerved. Wishing she smoked. Really wishing for a strong shot of Jameson's.

"Is her?" Edek materialized, looking as shaken as Mary felt. His face betrayed the grief of his loss, as well as the ravages of the bottle of vodka he'd thoughtfully brought from Poland – the brand with a bison on the label and some plant floating in it. They two had put it away the night before after the fright of confronting each other in his sister's tiny, dreary kitchen.

The police, Edek informed Mary, would not say when they would release Katja's body. Those few who had come to pay their respects were told there would be no viewing today.

## A GLORIOUS DAY

Mary bid Edek goodbye and headed for John, who seemed to be the one steady voice in this storm brewing around them. Edek was off to see a Polish priest about how to make burial arrangements with, as yet, no body. He didn't have the funds to stay in Paris much longer.

It was a glorious day – the weather heedless of morgue visits – the heat wave finally broken. A blue sky and white cloud puffs made her want to absorb some sun and walk off the angst of the last few days. She was set to meander along the river, but changed her mind at the difficult pedestrian crossing that trifurcated the Gare Austerlitz bridge with Boulevard de la Bastille and Ledru Rollin. Instead, she impulsively took a right at the Arsenal boat basin. She'd always been curious about how this connected to the Canal St. Martin, farther north, along which she so often walked.

To her surprise, here deep in the heart of the city, docked pleasure boats stretched on each side of the waterway as far as she could see. The scene was framed by trees overhanging the walled pathway with tall apartment buildings strung along towering bluffs.

She strolled along her eyes on the water, her mind on the business at hand. How to sort out the spare keys she and Edek finally found after their drunken search of Katja's apartment? And what was going on with that American at the morgue? Was he there to view the body of the guy who grabbed her purse? He couldn't have been a witness to the murder at the *gare*, he was on the departing train when it occurred. She had no idea, of course, if the thief *was* the corpse. But if he were, that American must have been a friend, or else a friend of whoever *was* in that coffin. What kind of coincidence was this? He had seemed like a tourist, wearing those shorts as he had been.

Deep in her thoughts, Mary abruptly found herself at the busy, treacherous Bastille intersection with its myriad of crisscrossing streets. Everyone and everything seeming to go in circles. Dodging cars, buses, bicycles, pedestrians, and prams she made her way past Brassiere Bofinger and into the serene arches of the Place des Vosges.

When she opened John's shop door, its little brass bell tinkled, but an eerie stuffy silence suffused the shop. "Hello," she called. How unlike John. He was usually out of the back like a shot at the first movement of the door. Her heart fluttered. What now? She looked around. The shop seemed in good order – the huge oil of bright, cheerful colors, the Louis Quinze end table. "Hello?" Why did the space feel different? Ah, for one thing there were no vapid piano concertos faintly tinkling in the background.

How could it feel so closed up and open at the same time?

Mary moved into the backroom – always a workshop, cans of varnish, paint brushes, neatly arranged tools. Never



this kind of disorder! The door to the microwave stood open, the rack of clothes John used when he needed a quick change was upside down, his red laptop was lying on its side on the floor. Of course! That's what she'd felt but not noticed when she entered the shop, the computer always sat on the wood-inlaid desk in the center of that room. There was that sound again – the one that had briefly broken the first eerie silence. That was it! No street noises. The window in the back wall that John always kept open was shut tight. “Way too stuffy, musky, these ancient walls,” he'd say. Had something happened to John? There again that sound – like an injured dog. Nothing more threatening than that, she hoped. In her frazzled state, she could hardly deal with rats or some other vermin.

The sound again. It was coming from behind the door that closed off the corner where an ancient pull-chain toilet had resided since indoor plumbing first came to Paris. She should call for help. Vidal, she'd call him. But that jerk. He'd just tell her to quit sleuthing, stay out of police business. She couldn't dare let him find out that she'd broken through the police tape at Katja's and almost been hit by Edek's flying chair. She'd go find someone in the street ... ah, the hell with it. She marched over, put her hand on the door handle, then lost her nerve. The sound again. Please, Lord, don't let a bat come flying out and land in my hair. She yanked, heard the noise again, and realized she'd shut her eyes in fear. Dammit – she opened her eyes, and there was John, sitting on the toilet! She slammed the door, her face flushing so bright red, it stung. As the door left her hand, the sound came again, and she realized that something had been over his mouth. She yanked

at the door, and there he sat, eyes pleading. Now she saw that his arms were stretched back as though they were tied behind him.

## PUTTING IT TOGETHER

Mary stood in the toilet doorway squinting, trying to read John's facial instructions. What to do? He was gurgling. The something across his mouth was a Hermes tie! It was stretched so tight that it made his nose wiggle every time he tried to move his lips. He was shaking his head sideways, to the right. Of course. Untie the gag. It must be at the back of his neck. As she leaned over him, trying to undo the knot of silk, he kept gurgling. Was he giving instructions, or just raging? The more she pulled at the knot, the more high-pitched the gurgling became. Damn, she was choking him. She stopped abruptly and drew back to face him.

"Where can I find some shears?" She felt panicky. But Mother of God, so must he. Now he was moving his head forward, stretching his neck out. Of course, on the workbench.

Getting him untied and cut loose wasn't easy. But once his mouth was freed, they were able to work as a team. He told her where to find a proper cutting utensil, then fumed. "The bastards. They rifled drawers of my furniture, took my computer's backup drive."

She had to take a scissors to the classy Façonnable shirt the intruders had put on him backwards, like a straightjacket. She thought of the gorgeous Gatsby-like array of pastel and striped shirts displayed back home in his apartment in an antique lawyer's bookcase, its glass doors that lifted out and rolled in. Happier days, when his friends had no more worries than to tease him about hiring someone just to iron all those shirts!

"You can find something to cut the rope at the bottom left side of the table there." He was trussed up like an animal. His torso rope-bound to the ancient water tank pipes of the flush apparatus high overhead.

In the end, Mary wasn't sure what upset him more, the affront to his dignity or having gagged on several hundred dollars' worth of Hermes silk.

As soon as his legs were freed, the first thing he did was rush to the front door and reverse the sign from *Ouvert* to *Fermé*.

Mary had already put the kettle on the single burner in the little workroom when he returned, out of breath, and still rubbing his wrists to get the circulation going.

"It's not that those bastards weren't enough," he panted, "but I kept worrying that all sorts of tourists would just amble in and steal me really blind when they found no one around."

He sat down hard at one of the benches of the rough work table. "Okay. Now, we've got to call the police."

"Absolutely, and it's logical that it should be Vidal, but ..."

John interrupted before Mary could finish. "Have you got his number? I'm not going to ask what the problem is between you two until I've made the call."

The call made, with the briefest description of the robbery to the French detective, John turned to Mary.

"I'm not sure yet, but from a quick glance around when I was locking the door, nothing is obviously missing except that Grecian bowl de la Poche inspected last time he was here."

Mary exhaled a slow breath. "Wow. That fancy Dan again?"

"Yep. And my customer list is on that backup drive."

"Ah, John," Mary squeezed his arm. "That's serious. I'm so sorry."

"Hardly the work of common thieves." John's tone was grim. "I wonder if that bastard Poche is thinking of opening a shop? Going after my clients? The S.O.B!"

"What in the world happened?"

"There were three of them. I knew they were trouble the minute they walked in the door."

"Menacing?"

"They didn't belong." John shook his head, searching for words to pin down elusive images. "From another era. A bit of a jumble, but one had a pompadour, for god's sake. There was a narrow black tie. Pointy shoes. You just don't see people like that in the Place des Vosges."

"Not a lot of pompadours in Belleville either." Mary's usual sardonic tone.

"Exactly. They seemed like Slavs, but from the '50s. Although two had on black T-shirts, like they were trying to appear *branchés*, as the French say, but they hardly looked trendy. One was huge, the other two normal size." John laughed a little. "One had something that he probably thought

was spiked hair, but that didn't make the grade either. More like a little Vaseline and forgetting to comb when he woke up.

"I'm pretty sure I'd recognize them. But it all happened so fast, it's kind of a blur." John's face clouded. "The big guy grabbed me from behind and they were all over me."

Mary frowned and shook her head. "Terrifying. But it's hard to think of Poche hiring stickup men. An art collector like that. Where would he find them?"

"Who knows. He's got a chauffeur. I've never seen him, waits out in the car. Maybe he's got friends, or something."

John heaved a big sigh, Mary poured boiling water in their cups and sat. They studied their tea bags for a time, as though there were answers, or solace, there. Hot cups warming their still trembling hands, they tried to relax, get back their senses of humor, and figure out just what evil force was directing their lives. A slight breeze came through the window John had reopened. on the back courtyard.

Finally, he spoke. "Too much happening to all of us. What the hell is going on? And, I might ask, because it's probably connected, what's going on with you and the cop?"

For what felt like the first time all day, Mary laughed. "Tall order all the way around. And, *I* might ask, why are you so sure this is the work of Poche?"

So, John told her briefly about his trip to the collector's apartment and following his car afterwards. "He was driven only a few blocks to a residential building, then the car disappeared into its garage. Why drive such a short distance? He could have just walked."

"Maybe he had something heavy in the trunk," Mary suggested.

“Or something he didn’t want seen,” John countered.

They pondered that for a bit, then Mary began to explain how she and Edek had searched Katja’s apartment for keys, but she veered off again about the French detective.

“That damned Vidal ordered me to stay out of it. But I feel too guilty about Katja and introducing her to Vicki. That must be related to the attempts on Miranda. And after talking to Katja’s brother, I feel even worse. I used to think of her as this greedy, avaricious person. But now I realize she had an extended family back home to support, and had known hunger herself a lot. She had a ton of duplicate keys. She was really hustling, working for so many people.”

“Yeah,” John said slowly, sipping his tea before saying more. “Yeah. It’s all connected, for sure. But how?” He gave her a hard look over the rim of his cup. “So, what about you and Vidal? Anything I need to know before he gets here? Must be, or you wouldn’t be reacting so vehemently.”

“I know.” Mary shook her head, talking as if to herself in unfinished sentences. “My anger over Paul’s death. My feelings so frozen. Never thought this could happen.” She gave John a perplexed look. “But the man offered me a piece of chocolate when the rest of the cops were giving me a hard time reporting my stolen purse. Impossible to explain.”

John smiled. “You don’t have to explain anything to a confirmed romantic like me. But you’ve always had the sharp riposte for everyone, including your adored Paul. What’s different here?”

“Don’t know.” A frown wrinkled across Mary’s forehead. “Perhaps the grand idea of a protector. Someone being gentle in all this chaos.” Her face softened. “He helped me pick up

the pieces of my trashed apartment. Came when I called when we found Katja dead.” The frown came back. “But now he’s bossing me around.”

“Mary,” John’s tone had a slight edge. “No cop’s going to want so-called civilians trying to step in and solve their crimes.”

He abruptly stopped and stared at her. “He’s not married, is he?”

“No pictures of wife and kiddies in his office.”

Someone banged on the locked door at the front of the shop and John shot off to let in Vidal and two uniformed policemen.

“Well, you certainly brought a herd,” Mary said sharply, coming in from the back room.

Vidal looked startled, a pained expression slowly taking over. “I am homicide detective, Mary. John has said it was robbery. I came only as courtesy.”

The two other officers stepped in, listened politely and took notes as Mary and John each told their version of what had happened and walked the cops through the place, pointing out details.

“We must to go while they work,” Vidal said to John and Mary as the robbery detail began combing the shop. “*Un café*, perhaps?” he asked with a questioning smile.



## ROMANTIC VIBES

The three of them moved in silence along the arcade to the cafe on the corner. Since John was a regular, he was able to persuade the waiter to let them scoot a sidewalk table a few feet away from the other patrons. “We need to talk,” he told him.

They were barely seated, their coffees ordered, when Mary plunged in. “So, Detective Vidal,” she started out, “have the police made any progress identifying the man who tried to yank Miranda off that carousel?”

Her tone was way too cantankerous to suit John. As wound-up as he was over the robbery, his romantic antenna was aquiver for vibes between Mary and the detective. He immediately began trying to signal her with blinking eyes and ever-so-slight shakes of his head.

“I have told before,” Vidal replied evenly, “another unit works with it. Is art thieves, and now they steal with John, *non?*”

“But what about the man who tried to pull Miranda from the carousel?” Mary persisted.

“He is arrested. In jail.”

The waiter brought their coffee, and Vidal turned rapt attention to choosing and opening a sugar packet.

“But what about him?” Mary said, her voice rising. “What do you know?”

Classic French shrug. “Is in jail.” The detective studied the swirl in his tiny cup of oil-black brew as he stirred.

“Detective, you can read the report, for Christ’s sake. Why was he after Miranda?” Mary was all but shouting.

“Is police business, Mary.”

“It’s our business, too. What’s wrong with you?”

John stepped in. “Surely, detective, you can give us some idea of what we’re up against.”

“The child is safe. Your lives can go back to normal.”

“Normal, are you kidding? I’ve just been tied up and robbed.” John was getting exasperated now.

Vidal finally lifted his eyes from his coffee and countered that he knew Mary had been at the morgue that morning with Katja’s brother. “Is against the law to interfere with police business. Mary must stay out of it. Such people are *dangereux*.”

Mary’s reaction was explosive. “How dare you? How dare you,” she screamed at Vidal. “Snooping into my life when I’m only paying respects to a dead friend.”

“Mary!” John’s reproach was sharp.

She turned crimson. “I’m sorry, that was awful. I don’t know what’s wrong with me.”

Vidal studied her with a wry smile. “Is no problem. You have many bad days now.”

Hmm, John’s mind was ticking. I see what she means. He’s indulgent, understanding and still, rather unprofessionally, calling her Mary, not Madame. But not revealing a thing.

No point in telling him about my troubles with Poche. He won't be a damned bit of help. Probably just get me snarled in police bureaucracy. John found himself wondering if it was really true that another squad was involved, and if so, whether Vidal was asking questions of those other cops just to keep possessive tabs on Mary, or whether it was a sign of his caring. Typical question for John – always wanting to get right to the romantic core of an issue. He was someone who thrived on love, companionship, a togetherness that Mary seemed to want to avoid now Paul was gone. The idea of such a love being eternal struck a chord with John's heart, but he always needed to move on to the next togetherness once he broke up with someone. Hard to imagine staying alone or celibate for long.

“Detective,” John said quietly, “it might be wise to give us some idea of what's going on. Unless you can lock us up, you're not going to stop us from being curious about what's happening in our own lives.”

Vidal closed his eyes for a moment, took a deep breath and said: “I have told to you that you stumble on international theft. I know little more than that. I am homicide detective working for Paris police. My jurisdiction goes not beyond the city's frontier.”

## THE REPORT

When they got back to John's gallery, a uniformed patrolman greeted the three of them saying the Greek vase had been found wrapped in newspaper on a table in the back shop.

"The one you claim was stolen," the cop said, looking hard at John.

"Is my French failing me?" John replied, looking confused and upset. "What are you saying?"

"That's ridiculous." Mary was fuming. These cops couldn't do anything right. What nonsense for her to think Vidal was on her side.

"Maybe you tried to hide it," one of the cops said, squaring his jaw, protruding it out in the Police version of the French shrug. "Collect insurance."

Vidal stepped in, putting a hand on the policeman's arm. "Oiseau, what's this you say? My friend John is to be trusted. You considered, of course, that perhaps the thieves moved it?"

"Of course," Oiseau replied, looking startled, stopping for a moment, then clearing his throat, the Adam's apple in his long neck bobbing. "That seems very possible."

“Good,” Vidal said, smiling and patting the officer’s shoulder. “Let’s look at the report again. So, now, what is missing? If not much, then it must just be kids.”

“Kids, yes,” Oiseau said. “That’s what Charles and I were saying. Must be kids. They took the backup drive and no art. Just kids.”

“Perhaps Monsieur John,” the other uniform, now identified as Charles, spoke up, “will call us again, if he finds something valuable missing. He said they rummaged his drawers.”

He looked at Vidal. “We should file the report, or just say a false alarm?”

John stepped in, excited. “Certainly, file a report. I was bound and gagged. They stole my backup drive. It was a criminal incident, kids or not!”

“Of course, of course,” Vidal said. “And mention the vase. Just say that the American gentleman in his excitement had forgotten he had moved it from the front of the store to the back.”

“For god’s sake,” Mary could stand it no longer. “He has described his assailants and they didn’t sound like juveniles to me.”

The uniformed cops turned to Vidal, waiting for instructions.

Vidal gave them a hard look. “Of course, you file the report with the exact details that monsieur and madam provided. Simply say that the Grecian bowl turned up in an unexpected place. We know, don’t we, officers, that there could be a clue in that.”

“Of course, of course.” They tipped their caps and were gone.

“Well,” John said, as the door closed behind the officers, “I owe you some thanks, detective. They could have made a report that would open me up to a fraud charge.”

“John,” Vidal said rather sternly as he switched to English, “do you know some thing that might regard this? About Grecian art that I should know?”

“In what sense, detective?”

Vidal’s tone was sharp. “You did not wrap your own bowl in *Le Monde* and then forget about it.”

“Of course not,” John’s voice was equally sharp, razored with indignation.

“Then if you did not, *les* thieves did, *non?*”

John frowned, comprehension slowly moving across his face. “Yes... I see what you mean.” He shook his head. “Of course. How stupid of me.”

“Good grief,” Mary said.

“As I told before, you and *votre amis* fall into *une ruse* of international art. I must solve murder of Katja. And streets keep leading back to you and your friends.”

Mary piped in. “But when we ask you for information, you don’t tell us anything.”

“Believe me, *écoutez*, I am frustrated as you. International teams coordinating means not they cooperate with a poor Paris cop. They demand me many questions about Katja, but give no answers. And the detectives who now try to investigate the stabbing at *la gare* – they are assaulted by many more Katja questions than me. That is for why I say you to stay out of it.

Too many chefs in the pot, as you say. Who they are, I do not know. Forgive to me Mary, but I have no way to protect you.”

“It’s very nice that you want to protect me, Monsieur Vidal, but I’m quite capable of looking after myself.” The nerve of the jerk.

“Mary!” Vidal’s tone was sharp, and his voice exasperated. “Why do you not to comprehend? They ask why is Mary to see two murders?”

“What do you mean, see?” Mary was just about at the boiling point with all these *flics*. “I didn’t see anything!”

Vidal visibly took a deep breath. “Okay, the wrong word of English. You are *témoin*, how you say, witness, in not one, but two investigations of murder. For police, this is suspicious.”

“Are you crazy? You know I didn’t see anything. I didn’t witness anything.”

“Is no matter. You must behave, or I can do no more.”

“Behave?” Mary’s voice was all but a screech.

John stepped in. “For heaven sake. Can’t you see that the detective is trying to help you? He certainly just helped me about the report on the bowl. His hands are tied. Other investigators are keeping him out of the loop.”

“*Mais, oui.*” Vidal nodded in agreement, with a look of gratitude and relief.

“*Merde,*” Mary said. Indeed, a shitty spot to be in. Her shoulders slumped.

John gave Mary a questioning look. “Shouldn’t we tell him?”

She shrugged. “Go ahead.”

“Tell him what?” Vidal shot back.

“The reason I noticed the Grecian bowl,” John began slowly, “was because of a customer whom I have grown to mistrust. His name is de la Poche.”

Vidal pulled a slim notebook from a back pocket of his jeans and began to write.



**SWEET BABY GIRL**

Sarah was smiling, pedaling along happily with Miranda holding on behind. Despite that French witch secretary, she had a fabulous clue, knew what to do next. This was better than “The Third Man.” She was going to search for what happened to the missing actress just like Joseph Cotton had gone sleuthing in Vienna for Orson Welles. Of course, Harry Lime wasn’t exactly missing, he was more like dead, but it turned out he wasn’t dead.

Sarah began to whistle the Third Man Theme as she pedaled up to John’s apartment.

She was not so caught up in her zither-music film fantasy, however, that she didn’t glance nervously at the cafe table across the street where she’d seen the man in the blue shirt yesterday morning. She then laughed at herself. Not to worry. That guy was arrested, in jail.

Miranda insisted on punching in John’s door code, one-eight-B-nine-five, and they wheeled the bike through the entryway and into the back cave.

As they climbed the flight of stairs to the apartment, Sarah turned to Miranda and said: “I never knew the old Vienna before the war. . .”

Miranda squinted at her. “What are you talking about?”

She caught herself and laughed. “Oh, just the opening line of a wonderful movie.”

“A movie! Mommy said you’re always doing silly things like that. You don’t know if you’re on stage or in the world.”

“So what? I have more fun than your mother does.”

Miranda turned from impatient to solemn. “Yes. You’re lots more fun than mommy. She always tells me what I can’t do.”

Sarah turned her key in the lock of the huge wooden door and Bisquit leaped at them, in a fit of tail wagging.

Miranda bent down to pet the squirmy little dog, but complained. “Our big Chess at home is better, she’s not so jumpy. Chess just licks your face and lets you pet her. I miss Chess, I wish we could go home. When are we going home?”

Sarah picked up her niece and gave her a hug. “Soon, sweet baby girl. This is almost over.”

Miranda wriggled free and stamped her foot, her face drawn into a hard, indignant line. “I’m not a baby!”

“Of course not,” Sarah replied, suppressing a grin. “That’s just an expression my mother used to use.”

“Your mother is my grandmother,” Miranda said, with the same know-it-all tone she used in translating French for her aunt.

“That’s right. Your grandmother called me sweet baby girl when I was your age, and I’m your aunt calling you the same thing.” She ruffled Miranda’s hair. “Now let’s get some ice cream, then I can get to work on clues. I bet John’s got some of that vanilla-raspberry-caramel in his fridge.”

Miranda ran to the gleaming steel behemoth and pulled open the door. Bisquit bounding after, skidded along the floor, his nails clicking on the ceramic tiles. She yanked open the frozen food drawer and pawed through its many ice cream containers until finally turning to her aunt with a woeful look. "You better do the reading, I can only tell by the pictures. And some of them don't say."

Suppressing a grin, Sarah pointed. "I bet that's the one you want." Miranda snatched it, clutched it tight to her body, and insisted on doing the scooping.

"Get Bisquit's bowl, if you want him to have some," Sarah said. "We've got to get this show on the road."

"What road?" Miranda asked, struggling to spoon out the ice cream, which was way too frozen for her to manage.

"I have to make a call to London, if I can find my phone," Sarah said, digging around in the small backpack she had snatched up before they'd pedaled off that morning.

"London?" Miranda gave up her struggle trying to dig at the frozen stuff.

"Yes. I have some information I want to run down," Sarah explained. "Before that witch French secretary tried to pull you away from the glossies, I saw the agent's name on that actress's photo."

Miranda looked pleased with herself. "I kicked her good."

Sarah laughed with delight at her pugnacious niece, no shrinking violet this sweet baby girl. "You sure did. You're a swell detective. All I have to do now is call the agent. Luckily, she's someone I dealt with once. We'll find out what's happened."

“First you have to give us ice cream,” Miranda said, pointing to herself and the dog.

Kid and Bisquit finally settled, Sarah went for her phone, but couldn't find it. She searched through her bag then went down the long hall to her bedroom. Not there. Wouldn't be anyway, she hadn't gone back there since they'd arrived. Must have left it in the theater office when the secretary started battling with Miranda. They would have to bike back to get it. But first, that call. She picked up John's home phone, Bisquit wagging his tail, licking and shoving his bowl around the kitchen floor, Miranda happily slurping and spilling ice cream on her dress. Next time, I must remember to drape her in a dishtowel, even if she protests, Sarah was thinking as she dialed. Now the blue dress needs to hit the washer again. Thank heaven Vicki is picking up the new keys today, so they can get home and get a change of clothes.

Miranda lifted her head from her ice cream to insist on hearing what the agent said, so Sarah turned on the speakerphone.

“Felicity, hi, Sarah Donohue. You placed me once in a show at the Almeida, I played Lady Macbeth. I'm calling from Paris, I'm in 'Don't Look Now.'”

“Gracious, what is going on over there? Is that show falling apart?” her nasal, upper-class voice came out in a boom resounding around the kitchen. “I keep getting calls from investigators.”

“The Paris police?”

“No. I rather judge it's the Home Office.”

“Home office? Are you redecorating?”

“No, no. Spies. That sort of thing, you know. Perhaps it’s MI6, the Foreign Office. It’s rather difficult to tell.”

“Wow. Why were they calling you?”

“A client, Blane Gowan.”

“Of course.” Sarah was gleeful. She’d confirmed the name without even having to ask. This detective work was a piece of cake. Great fun. “She was supposed to be in our show.”

“Yes, I placed her because I got an unusual call from the producer’s office saying they had been told she would be ‘perfect for the assignment.’ But one had the impression they weren’t talking about the role of the blind old lady in ‘Don’t Look Now.’”

“What could they have meant?”

“That, my dear, is the mystery.” Felicity’s sharp tone turned pensive. “I often got unusual requests like that for Blane. Excellent actress, but hard to pin down, keep track of.”

“She wasn’t very professional.” Sarah made no attempt to hide her indignation. “She didn’t show up the very first night of rehearsal. Have you placed her in another show?”

“Hardly. Apparently she’s dead.”

“Oh. Oh, dear.” The poor woman! Sarah was excited and upset at the same time. Her hunch had paid off, she was right. But a poor dead fellow actor – hard to take in. Was it really true? Felt like a punch in the stomach. But remembering her charge and her sister’s demand that Miranda be spared any more grimness, she looked over and saw with relief that even though Felicity’s voice was coming through crisp and clear, her niece had lost interest and was playing with Bisquit. Sarah quickly switched off the speaker and began almost mouthing her words into the phone in a hoarse whisper, à la Bogart’s Sam Spade, even though she knew Miranda not only wasn’t

listening but wouldn't be able to piece together a one-sided conversation.

"These British officials from whatever office, did they say how she died?" Sarah was still shaken and more than fearful of hearing the answer. She imagined – in vivid, gripping detail – death by drowning, just as happens to her child in the play. She struggled to bring herself back to John's kitchen. "I'm sure now that I saw her face on TV."

"Oh, how awful," Sarah said to Felicity's reply. Again, she felt as though she'd been punched in the stomach.

When she hung up, she asked Miranda for Vicki's number, called it, and left a message. "I can't find my cell, so you're going to get a picture from London on your phone soon."

## THE SEARCH

Mary turned to John, as soon as the brass bell tinkled, signaling that Vidal had followed his robbery detail buddies back to the station house. “The nerve of that guy. Suggesting I could be some kind of suspect.” The two were sitting at the table in the back shop, where they’d been an hour ago before the police arrived.

“Don’t police always have to suspect everyone in the vicinity?” John was picking his words carefully.

“Baloney, what vicinity was I in? At the back of the *gare* when some purse snatcher is stabbed. At rehearsal with Sarah when Katja gets herself killed. So I try to open my own door, and there she is.” Mary was gathering steam the more worked up she got. “The guy’s a slime to even hint I’m a suspect, no matter how bad his English. He’s a bleeping chauvinist. Telling me to stay home and mind my knitting.”

“It is a police investigation.”

“Don’t care.” Mary’s voice was as defiant as John’s was measured. “Your livelihood is at stake, not to mention our lives. What do the cops care!”

“I gotta say, Mary, that Vidal seems genuinely interested in you. You can’t afford to toss that off lightly.”

“Ah, I don’t know about that.” Mary felt her cheeks flush, but plowed ahead. “So what? Vidal says Poche has nothing to do with this. Too much coincidence. The bowl didn’t move itself. He still hasn’t returned the porcelain. I was broken into, you were robbed, Katja is dead, Miranda nearly kidnapped. Twice.”

“What do you propose we do?” John’s voice was almost plaintive.

“Don’t know. But something!”

A tea-drinker no matter what the circumstance, Mary reached for the stone-cold brew she had abandoned when Vidal and the robbery detail arrived.

She slugged down what was left in her cup. “Nothing like cold tea to whip up the brain. Say,” she narrowed her eyes at John as she banged her empty cup down on the table, “did you ever dwell on the coincidence that Poche lives in the same neighborhood as Vicki?”

John lifted his brows, startled. “Can’t say that I did. What in the world would you make of that?”

“Worth thinking about.”

“That’s nuts.” John squinted in disbelief. “What should we sit here and think?”

“You’re right, no sense in sitting.” Mary jumped up from the table. “Let’s go look.”

“At what?”

“How about that house where you said Poche garaged his car?”

“Ah, Mary.” John’s eyes rolled with exasperation.



“Come on,” she said, pulling at his arm. “Nothing better to do.”

“Are you kidding? I’d like to stick around and maybe make a sale. Hardly an incentive for prospects to come in with cops roaming the premises.”

At that point, as though on command, the brass bell tinkled and John rushed out front.

Mary barely had time to ponder his remarks about Vidal caring for her before John was back.

“You’re probably right, let’s go. A jinxed day. Just a tourist wanting directions to the Eiffel Tower.”

Mary laughed. “Good heavens, they’re way off track.”

“Yeah, that’s what I told ‘em. ‘Get a map.’ They’ll go back to Iowa with still more tales about how grumpy Parisians are.”

“Ah, ha,” Mary said, “lumping yourself in with the natives!”

Mary and John got off at the Duroc Métro stop and started down Boulevard des Invalides headed for the Duquesne corner where he’d picked up the taxi to follow de la Poche.

“It was dark, difficult enough to retrace the path the limo took,” he said. “It’ll be easier to work it out from where I started. Bright sunshine makes it all look different. Hard to believe it was only night before last. “

“Yeah,” Mary said. “So much has happened.”

They started off from the designated taxi pickup point, crossed over the narrow strip of park that divided the two sides of avenue de Breteuil, and passed behind the rather

nondescript St. Francis Xavier church, now bathed in sunlight. “It’s right around here someplace, it was a very short ride,” John said. “We may have to walk up and down a couple of streets, but I’m sure I’ll recognize the building. It was very distinctive.”

“You realize,” Mary said, a smug look on her face, “we’re right behind Miranda’s school.”

“Point taken,” John replied. “Someone certainly could have seen her and Katja in the park together. And stretching it, I suppose that certain someone could have been their neighbor, Poche. But really, Mary, how farfetched. The guy steals my porcelain because he wants to kidnap Miranda? Come on.”

“Come on, yourself. It’s got to be more complicated than that. But you’ve got to admit, the coincidence is intriguing.”

They walked up and down the tree-lined streets of the posh 7th *Arrondissement* in the shadow of the golden-domed Hôtel des Invalides searching for the building that John was sure he would recognize.

## THE FORSYTHE SAGA

John stopped abruptly in front of a modernish apartment house set back off the tree-lined street. A black iron fence, punctuated by wide gates painted with gold fleurs-de-lis, ran the length of the property. “I think this is it,” he said.

They crossed the street for a better view of the building. A gravel drive leading to enormous garage doors gave it the appearance of listing to the right. “Looks like a couple of apartments on the left, but not very resident friendly – only entrance a driveway gate,” Mary said. “Kiddy stuff, though.” A small side yard at the far-right contained a doghouse painted yellow, a tiny swing set and a small boxed-in sand pile.

“Gotta be it,” John said. “We’ve been up and down these streets, and nothing else fits. But it hardly resembles that gorgeous Haussmann building he lives in a few blocks away.”

They studied the three-story building with its protruding slabs of concrete balconies affixed – randomly, it seemed – to several facade windows. They were not the typical elegant, tall window-doors of Paris, but small and square. “Looks like something out of suburban L.A.,” John quipped. “The only things missing are Venetian blinds.”

Mary grabbed his arm and pointed at a slight, hurrying figure almost two streets away crossing in front of the church. "Isn't that Vicki? It's mid-afternoon. Why would she be heading home?"

"That's her, I'm sure," John said. "Something must be wrong." He'd already started toward the almost-running woman on the next block, yelling her name, Mary rushing after.

"Vicki, Vicki," John finally got the attention of the scurrying figure. Mary drew up just as Vicki stopped and turned at their calling.

"What are you doing here?" John cried, closing in.

"Going home to search for Sarah and Miranda." She was out of breath, nearly panting. "I phoned your place, got no answer, went there, now I'm hoping to heaven they're home."

"But they were there when I left this morning." John took out his cell phone and punched a button. "I'll call, are you sure you called the right number?"

"Of course I am," Vicki snapped. "I told you, I went over there. And found no one but Bisquit yapping and wagging his tail."

"Sarah?" John's voice into his phone was sharp with relief. "Your sister wants to talk to you." He handed his mobile to Vicki. "Sarah says it's fine now, she has her cell phone back."

"I was worried to death." Vicki was visibly shaking as she yelled at her sister. "We are in some kind of deep mess. Our police reporter checked for me, and said that picture you sent of the so-called actress is a woman who was shoved from the train when Miranda and I were on our way to Prague."

“Do you understand?” Vicki was still shouting at her sister, causing a passing, well-dressed woman pulling a cloth-encased shopping cart to turn and stare. “It wasn’t an animal that was hit. It was that woman. And the name you said, Blane Gowan, is maybe a stage name, but her real name is Jane Forsythe. Damn it, Sarah, you have got to quit running around with Miranda and stay in the house like I told you. That’s the reason we’re not moving back into my apartment – so Miranda’s there with a couple of men in the house, especially at night. Now, I don’t know what to do. I wish her damned father would get home. I can’t handle all this alone.” She stopped for breath and finally took in John and Mary who were wide-eyed at the news she’d delivered into the phone. “I’ll ask Mary if she thinks that detective boyfriend of hers could arrange a police guard. And I’ll deal with you later. I’ve got to get back to work.”

Mary and John looked at each other, shaking their heads. What next?

“This is all too peculiar about the actress,” Mary said. “You left that message on my answerphone about the train being stopped for a long time near the German border. But get something straight, Vidal is not my boyfriend.”

“Whatever,” Vicki said. “I’ve got to get back to work. But, hey, what are you doing here, just standing in the middle of the block? Hardly your nabe.”

“Pretty complicated. But basically, John got robbed today, and he suspects a customer who he saw driving into a building over there.” She pointed.

“Robbed? Are you okay? They didn’t hurt you?” As John wagged his head no, Vicki went on, still breathless and riled

up. “What have we gotten into? That police reporter said there was an Interpol connection, and the dead woman might have been a British agent. I’m getting seriously scared. Boyfriend or not, can he get some kind of round-the-clock protection for Miranda? My going through the police bureaucracy could take weeks.”

“I’ll take a taxi home right now,” John said.

“I’ll call Vidal as soon as I get to my apartment,” Mary replied. “It’s two Métro changes, but even so, I’ll get home by train quicker than a cab.”

“Thanks,” Vicki said. “You’re lifesavers.” She turned to leave, then stopped. “But what did you say about that building? Ninon, a playmate of Miranda’s lives there.”

Before they could reply, she was off again, then abruptly did an about-face with one last thing, asking John if it would be all right for the dog sitter to bring Chess by his place for a visit. “Do you think Bisquit could put up with it for an hour? Miranda, poor kid, is missing everything and everyone – her toys, her father, her old baby sitter, and probably most of all, her dog.”

## DO THE KEYS MATCH?

Mary and John parted ways at the entrance to the Duroc station. He hailed a taxi home for the relatively short ride across the Seine, she to Métro on to Belleville farther north.

Mary was eager to get home and check through those spare keys she and Edek had found. There was something familiar about the building she'd just seen. She had no idea what it was but felt certain she'd find something that somehow corresponded to that address. John had, of course, poooh-pooohed her "intuition."

She bounded down the Métro stairs, excited by her quest. Close to rush hour, and plenty of people indeed rushing past. She swiped her monthly travel pass and pushed through the turnstile. As she did, a man with a greasy dark pompadour caught her eye and smiled.

She nervously looked around to orient herself. Which way to find the train headed north? Unfamiliar station, no reason to come to this posh residential district on the other side of the city except to visit Vicki. Boulogne Pont St-Cloud on the left, that surely wasn't it. She turned quickly to her right. As she

rushed down the steps, the pompadoured man followed close behind. Halfway down, a train coming in. Its doors pop open. Only two people step onto the train. It will pull out before she can get there! She nearly trips on the last step in her rush. Her large handbag bangs against her leg as she gulps for air to finish her sprint for the closing doors. She sticks her hand through the opening and feels the heavy rubber of the doors' lining closing in. A youth with spiked hair smiles. "Please," she says. He smiles again. Then he reaches out and helps her spring the doors back open.

"Thanks," she gasps, out of breath and trembling. She pulls down a jump stool attached to the back of a seat near the door and collapses on it.



**NOW YOU SEE HIM, NOW YOU DON'T**

The train took its time rattling the four stops to Odeon. Mary spent those minutes trying to be rational. No sign of the pompadour in her vicinity, but so what. Twisting around on her jump seat, all she could see were those jammed up against her in the packed train. Okay, the guy'd looked odd, but this was a big city with odd people in it. Then why had he been smiling at her? It had to mean something. That's where Paul would have stopped her right away: "You can no hope to make meaning in everything," he would say. "It must to be an Irish thing."

At each stop, she would try to scan the carriage, but the few people exiting were always replaced by still more. Suddenly, John's words about the guys who had trussed him up popped into her head – "one had a pompadour, for god's sake." Could they have been hanging around after the police left his burgled shop then followed Mary and John to Duroc? Didn't seem plausible, the crooks would have taken off fast, not hung around to risk being seen.

To calm herself she rehearsed what she knew about Duroc, information mostly from works she had taught or translated.

Duroc, Duke of Friuli, one of Napoleon Bonaparte's generals. The station was near an old toll gate built as part of a wall built around Paris in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

At Odeon she was one of the first out of the carriage, bounding off towards Line 4 going towards Porte de Clignancourt – a number of people scurrying along with her, too difficult to look back to see if pompadour was following. Halfway down another long flight of stairs with the crowd on her heels, seeing a train approaching, she sped up and dashed to slip in again between closing doors. No seat this time, so she was better able to look around, but saw no sign of anyone with a pompadour. Surely no one could manage to keep following her or anyone else in this start-and-stop business of rush-hour train changing. She was probably imagining the whole thing anyway. Too much drama these last few days had her frazzled brain working double time. She took in a deep breath of relief and during the three stops to Châtelet continued her calming strategies, like recalling that Duroc was also a breed of American pig.

Mary dreaded, as did everyone, the upcoming Châtelet with its endless electronic walkways and miles of transfer tunnels snaking back and forth to its raft of intersecting Métro lines plus the suburban RER trains. An underground circus – cigarette venders, shawl stalls, everything for sale from parasols to oranges. Any fast food you could name.

And here she was in the middle of it, hurrying and dodging, searching for the passageway for Line 11, direction Porte des Lilas. Someone bumped her from behind, and she emitted a small scream. Embarrassed the moment she did it, she whirled, but no one rushing past seemed to have noticed

or cared. Gad her nerves were shot, imagine if everyone yelled out every time someone knocked against them in the Métro! But damn it, she was going to take a stance, stop and find out if pompadour really was after her. She arranged herself in front of a flower stall, touched a rose, bent to smell it, then carefully peered around. The view was the same as ever: weary workers in a headlong push for home and thousands of young people off the RER in from the suburbs, meeting and hanging out, and, as always, that vague something of menace in the air like the possibility of having your pocket picked or a mini riot. The huge subterranean station gave her the feeling of being exposed, open to the eyes of the universe. She quit her sleuthing and moved on, clearly this was the kind of thing you had to be trained to do.

As she waited for the Mairie des Lilas train, she looked up and down the platform and there, way at the end, was pompadour thumping a machine dispensing chocolate. Her heart banged louder than the dispenser. If he was following her, and after two changes it certainly looked that way, he wasn't afraid to make himself noticed. Was she the next one to be trussed up like John? Or was this about menacing? Sarah said the guy who followed her seemed to want her to notice. But what possible reason for targeting *them*? Shaking, but determined to keep her head about her, Mary took the opportunity to study the man. He looked like something left over from the seventies, what had John quipped about his robbers – hardly *branchés*? This guy's black T-shirt was way too tight, his shoes scuffed.

## BELLEVILLE

Mary climbed the steps at her Belleville stop, out of breath and spent. Never had she been so happy to see the bawdy, tawdry streets of her *quartier*. She swiveled quickly, taking in the headless chickens hanging outside a Chinese grocery, a woman in Muslim headscarf selling secondhand T-shirts, a dusty storefront displaying African art. She peered back down the staircase to see if she could spot the jerk with the pompadour. No sign of him. She knew he was there, or had been, but she didn't linger. Getting safely home was her goal, not frightening herself any more than she already was.

She must get away for a while. But first she had to satisfy herself about just what Katja had to do with the mess they all were in. Then she would visit friends in the south or perhaps go home for a spell to Ireland. She had not done that since Paul died and needed some time to think about what to do with the rest of her life. She wasn't French, maybe she should consider leaving this country that held so many memories of her lost love. And above all, some time to wash away the dreadful events of the past four days – a man stabbed to death at the *gare*, finding Katja's body, Vicki saying she'd been on a

train that ran over that actress who was missing from Sarah's cast. And now this, a sleazy looking creep stalking her. Bizarre. Too improbable to believe. Was this just life in the big city, everyone touched by tragedy? No. There was – there had to be – some strange and awful connection. And why did she think that Katja's keys might hold the answer? She almost smiled, but not quite, at that notion. Bizarre, indeed.

She hurried into a favorite spot, the triangular Vietnamese pho shop that had a narrow front on the street, but had spread its tentacles behind into a warren of small rooms.

Over the years, she'd watched it grow through interconnected, narrow pass-throughs lined with glasses, cups and utensils grabbed up and slung on jammed Formica tables served by harried waiters. In a laughable bow to French culture, tattered and torn short lace curtains hung slightly askew across the restaurant's broad plate glass window. Mary sat down hard at a table for two, still out of breath, and dragged her replacement cell phone from her purse. A server slapped down a napkin and glass of water with the greeting "you want?" For the first time, it hit her that part of her weakness and shakiness was hunger. She hadn't eaten since breakfast. She had to quit doing this to herself, forgetting to eat.

"Please," Mary looked up at him with a weak smile, "just a bowl of pho." She punched in the mobile number Edek gave her before they parted at the morgue. Heaven help us, how long ago was that. Just this morning and it seemed like a lifetime.

She prayed he would answer, even a more fervent hope that the Polish gadget he had – whatever it was – would connect with calls in France. When he came on the line, she

nearly cried with relief. Now to make him understand with his limited English what her problem was and how he could find his way to come and fetch her. She certainly didn't want her stalker to find out where she lived, and surely he would be scared off when such a hulk showed up. If Edek failed, her backup plan was to call Igor and plead with him to send one of his strapping, out-of-work Serb customers to come and escort her home.

"Edek, please, can you come to the Métro stop?" He immediately launched into information about the cost of the coffin that had been proposed for his sister. "Please, Edek, I need help. Someone is following me." She finally made him understand that he should walk toward the Métro then phone, and she would guide him toward the restaurant. No way, would he comprehend Pho Shop. Besides, a good many of the eating spots around had signs offering the nutritious and inviting hot Vietnamese soup.

The waiter brought her steaming brew, slapped down the thin strip of paper that represented her check and moved on without a word.

Halfway through the soup, she got up from her table near the door and peered over the limp, hanging lace to see if she could spot the pompadoured man. The street was teeming with every color and hairdo of man, woman and child known to the planet. She couldn't spot the guy, but that didn't mean he wasn't out there.

She ate quickly and paid, anticipating that she would need to move fast when, and if, she finally heard back from Edek.

## JOHN BACK HOME

John turned the key in his massive front door. As he pushed it open, Bisquit was barking and jumping excitedly. Reaching down to pet him, John was horrified to see the dog's muzzle matted with what looked like dried blood. Without stopping to scoop him up, John tore into the apartment in full panic. Skidding into the kitchen, he found Miranda sitting on a high stool, covered in something dark red as well – face, hands, the bedraggled blue dress. She was licking a bowl that had once contained ice cream. The cassis, raspberry swirl that Ben loved so much. He clutched the counter. Bisquit's bloody muzzle!

“That dress was clean this morning.” Out of his mouth before thought. He knew his snappishness was a release of tension, but who could ever get used to kids? Now her big golden retriever was coming to visit, what a houseful he had. Would this crisis never end? He loved Vicki and Miranda and adored Sarah, his best friend since college, but it would be wonderful to have his own quiet life with Ben back for a while.

“Where's your aunt?”

“She said rehearsing,” Miranda replied.

“Where?” It was all John could do to keep from shouting.

The child shrugged.

The kid sure has picked up French ways along with their language, John thought. A shrug, the national response to any and every situation. Sarah must be in the house, she wouldn't have gone off and left Miranda alone. Bisquit was shoving a bowl around the floor. "I'm glad you didn't exclude Bisquit from your party."

"What's *exclude*?"

"It means to leave somebody out. Not give them ice cream. Now *where* is your aunt?"

Just then voices echoed down the hall, and he burst out laughing. It was Sarah having a conversation with herself in two different voices.

"Sarah Bernhardt, I'm home," he yelled. "Make your presence felt."

"What's presence?" Miranda set down her bowl, now as clean as if it had been through the dishwasher.

"It means your babysitter is going to get in here and explain herself."

"Katja is my babysitter," Miranda said emphatically.

Uh-oh, John thought. He'd always heard that kids don't like change, and here was living proof. How would you explain dead, much less murdered, to a four-year-old. And he could hardly tell her in good conscience that her replacement was a wonderful, responsible caregiver. Sarah might be totally irrepressible and charming, but it was doubtful childcare would ever be her starring role.

And here she came down the hall sporting a cloche hat with cutoff jeans and carrying the script for "Don't Look Now"



along with a patent leather purse. She was frowning, a look of anguish on her face.

"I've just found out that my husband is dead. Stabbed by a dwarf. And, oh, dear sweet John, his name was John, too. So, I'm worried about you."

"Vicki's right," John snapped. "You've got to start paying attention to real life. This situation you're in is a lot more to worry about than what happens in a damned play."

He felt wretched, speaking so harshly. In all the years they'd been friends he'd never been cross with her. But he couldn't stop himself. "I've been trussed up and robbed, and you're running around putting Miranda in danger."

"I had to retrieve my cell phone." Hers was the angel face of innocence.

"How did you lose it in the first place?" John demanded then immediately answered his own question. "By going out when you weren't supposed to. Well don't waste your time worrying on my account. Whoever is after me doesn't seem to be a dwarf. Appears to be full size."

"What's dwarf?" Miranda piped in.

"A little person," Sarah replied.

"Like me?"

"No, sweet baby girl, not like you." Sarah grabbed up her niece in a hug.

"Bisquit, stop shoving that bowl around." John picked it up, put it in the sink, and filled it with soap and hot water. The dog followed him and began whining. "Sarah, he's got his own. He shouldn't be eating out of household dishes."

Sarah put down her script and seemed to enter their time zone. “Is someone *really* after you John?” She peered at him, frowning. “Is that what’s making you so crabby?”

“We’ll talk about it later,” John replied, tipping his head slightly, indicating Miranda.

“That’s what mommy always says to daddy when she doesn’t want me to hear.”

The two adults gave her startled looks, then rolled their eyes at each other. The dog’s whine ramped up to a low growl as he continued to point his nose at the sink. “Bisquit, stop that noise,” John commanded.

“Tell him we’re detectives,” Miranda directed her aunt.

“What’s this?” John asked. The kid was incorrigible.

Sarah quickly explained that she and Miranda had seen the glossies and knew the name of the woman from the *gare*, and that it wasn’t Sarah’s imagination when she later saw her reflection at the Bernhardt Bistro.

“Vicki told us some of that,” John replied. “And it seems, the woman was acting under an assumed name.”

“You’re kidding,” Sarah said. “Are you sure? Her name was Blane Gowan.”

“Vicki said the police ID’d her as Jane Forsythe.”

“Wow!” Sarah said in a torrent of tumbling words. “This does call for detective work. Felicity, that was the agent’s name, said she’d always thought that woman would come to no good. Turned down too many jobs for someone legit. And then suddenly gets this call that Blane Gowan **MUST** be placed in this play in Paris. Had to send off her resume and glossies across town quickly by courier.”

Bisquit began barking, standing on his hind legs, paws up against the sink.

“What’s an assumed name?” Miranda asked.

**EDEK COMES TO FETCH MARY**

Mary was up and down from her chair peering out of the pho shop searching for Edek to come walk her home. On one of her forays, she was sure that she spotted the pompadoured man right across the street peering into the window of a secondhand furniture store with an old armoire on display. She could make out part of his features reflected in its mirror. If she could see him, she knew he could see her the same way, standing as she was, only half-hidden by the curtains strung across the plate glass.

The waiter cleared her table and again asked, “You want?” She ordered another cup of tea to get him off her back and was pondering the frightening turn her life had taken, when her mobile beeped. She snatched it up, thinking it would be Edek, but seeing the name realized that with his antiquated phone he probably couldn’t send a text, and grimaced at the thought of what it would look like anyhow in his garbled English.

Instead, it was police-report information forwarded by Vicki on the identity of the man who’d grabbed Miranda at the carousel.

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TRAFFICKING STOLEN ANTIQUITIES.

Vicki had added: I'M TERRIFIED! Trying to get police guard for Miranda at this end, did u ask, can Vidal do quicker?

Mary was torn. She'd promised Vicki, but she didn't dare tie up her mobile. She held out hope of hearing from Edek, despite his sketchy comprehension of both English and directions never mind his outdated so-called phone. Besides, Miranda and Sarah were safe with John, barricaded behind massive oak doors in a secure building. Mary was the one in danger right now.

Her cell sounded. It was Edek in his usual confused state, but he was right outside. Mary jumped up to go meet him. The man with the pompadour and pointy shoes was still across the street staring at his own reflection in the armoire mirror.

Edek jabbered away about the price of coffins and what the priest had told him as he followed Mary down Boulevard de Belleville. He didn't show the slightest spark of curiosity in why she needed an escort for the few blocks home. When she kept looking behind to see if pompadour was following, then tried to explain, Edek just nodded and smiled, saying "tak, tak."

A block away, Mary looked back once more. Now, no one was in front of the furniture store. And no pompadours anywhere in sight. Had she imagined the stalking? Certainly

not the man, he was too distinctive to mistake. Or, she wondered again, was he just trying to scare her? But scare her into what? One would think that the whole point of menacing was to let one know what it was one was supposed to do or not do. After turning and checking several more times, it was clear the man was nowhere around.

They hurried on, she eager to shower off the upsetting events of the day and check on her suspicion about Katja's keys. But first she wanted to stop at Igor's and have him set her up for another meeting with Nikodje. She needed to find out just what the sweatshop owner knew about Katja. But Mary was not about to barge in again on the Serb without Igor first alerting him she was coming. She wasn't making that mistake twice, ending up with drugged coffee. She hadn't reported him for assault, so the jerk definitely owed her one.

Edek talked on, but Mary's mind was hardly on the details of Katja's funeral. She had been very sympathetic, at one point, about the plight of the Polish sibling but, feeling her own life in danger, it was hard to focus on his problems. Katja was gone, nothing to be done there, it seemed much more critical now to get information about her killer. The French cops didn't seem to give a damn. If Vidal was to be believed, some international team was working on it so *les flics* had wiped their hands

Thinking of the French detective, though, was upsetting. Vicki was right, they needed to get police protection for Miranda. Yet Mary dreaded calling Vidal. She would never admit it to anyone, but just hearing his voice made her hyperventilate. She'd thought that part of her life was dead, buried with Paul, but those dumb, clichéd weak-in-the-

knees palpitations described in women's magazines seemed to hit her whenever Vidal was around. Just another roving-eyed Frenchman, and she had to keep herself in check. So, yeah, okay fine, she still needed to call about Miranda. And she could hardly expect to get any favors, if she kept being so hostile to him.

When they arrived at Igor's café, the usuals were there. The Serb who diligently showed up each early morning at the street corner where day laborers waited in hopes of the occasional job, but rarely got one; the kid who had lost a finger working for the local butcher and hadn't had a job since; the young father who hadn't had work since Mary had known him and was really in the soup now that his wife was too heavy with child to keep her off-the-books job scrubbing floors.

Igor greeted Mary asking for news about Katja's murder, and Edek immediately launched into the tale in Polish of his troubles with his sister's funeral. He was an instant star with the locals, who lived off neighborhood gossip. Mary decided to take this break to contact Vidal.

Stepping outside, she dug the new phone from her purse and pulled the detective's number from the pocket of her long, voile skirt. The business card was already dog-eared, she had called on him so often for help – when her apartment was broken into, the two attempts on Miranda, when John was robbed. How could she be so annoyed and rude with him, when she was the one who had phoned him each time she was panicked? She stood there taking in her familiar surroundings, the arched carriage entrance opening into her cobbled courtyard, steam billowing from the windows of the

commercial laundry on the ground floor. The battered and beaten old door to her building, broken down so many times by druggies and their sellers. Igor's always welcoming bar-café at her back. Tears welled in her eyes, she ached for Paul. So why did her fingers tremble holding the card of a man she barely knew? Someone with whom her only intimacy had been talking about crimes against herself and those she loved.

The hell with trying to figure it out. She shook her head to clear it and punched in his number.

Vidal picked up on the first ring sounding happy to hear her voice. His enthusiasm seemed to wane a bit when she started out by saying that she needed a favor – a police guard for Miranda. She explained that Vicki had found out that their train to Prague had hit and killed a woman who was not only Sarah's missing actress, but who was thought to have been a British undercover agent of some sort. She reminded him that the men at the *gare* had surrounded them, snatched Mary's purse, grabbed up and inspected the bottom of Miranda's suitcase, then later someone had stolen it.

"You know the rest, Detective. The sacking of my apartment, Katja's murder, the attack on John. Each time I've called, you've been unbelievably generous with your time. I wouldn't ask again, Detective, but we fear the child is in danger, is somehow a target of these criminals. They've tried to snatch her twice." It had come out in such a rush, she had to gulp for air. Her face was burning, her heart seemed to be galloping up her throat.

"Mary," Vidal replied softly, "my name is Jean, not detective. And please, calm yourself. You have been through much these many days. I will speak *immédiatement* for *placer*



the guard on Miranda's house. Is Seventh *quartier, oui?* Will to arrive soon?"

"Thank you so much. Vicki has been staying at John's, but I'll tell her it is now safe to go home. She's had new keys made, I think." Vidal was being so nice that Mary toyed with the idea of telling him she was frightened because she'd been followed. Would he harangue about it? She didn't need that right now.

"Now I hope," Vidal said, "that you will keep yourself safe. Stay home. Be careful. Do not be demanding questions of these ruffians." It was all she could do to hold her temper.

"Jean, I appreciate your concern. But this is my life we're talking about. The police don't seem concerned that my purse was stolen. And you are ignoring this man, *de la Poche*, as a suspect in John's robbery. I think that he had some sort of connection to Katja."

The super's wife, Sonya, walked by, and gave Mary an odd look. She must have been reacting to hearing Katja's name. Mary flashed on seeing her at the morgue, along with the young men in jeans and leather jackets that she had assumed were either cops or crooks. Reflecting on it now, Mary felt sure they were cops. All of the low-lives that she and John had run into recently were wearing out-of-date, run-down clothes and run-over shoes. Mary nodded hello, but pointed to her phone so Mrs. Nosey would realize she was engaged in a conversation. She didn't want to have to talk to that gossip.

"Mary, please," Vidal was saying in almost a plea. "*Je comprends* that you are very independent woman, but you must take care. Tell me when you have *des information* and I will sure that it comes to proper authorities."

“Thank you, Jean,” Mary said rather stiffly. “The guard for Miranda is what’s important now.”

Jean’s tone was placating, almost hurt-sounding. “We could meet for *un café*, perhaps even a meal, and talk about these things.”

Was he asking her for a date? Mary’s heart skipped a beat, but she gave no answer.

Once she stepped back inside, the denizens of Igor’s, long tired of Edek’s emphasis on funeral costs and his lack of information on murder suspects, eagerly greeted Mary.

Igor shook his head in disbelief when she asked him to set up another rendezvous with Nikodje.

“You had a little headache last time you left there,” he said, wiping the bar with his stained rag and pouring a *café*. “Want more spiked Serb special, eh?”

“You said he was leery because you hadn’t alerted him that I was okay, not a cop.”

“True. But the guy’s no good, Mary.”

“He’s a sadistic bastard, assaulting someone with drugged coffee just for asking a few questions. And the scary thing is, thinking he could get away with it.”

Igor shrugged. “You’re smart, didn’t press charges. Most wouldn’t. He’s such a thug, it gives him protection. Whadda you want with him?”

“I think he knows something about Katja’s death.” At that she heard cups and glasses hit tinny zinc as everyone in the place turned toward her. “Let me rephrase that,” she quickly said. “The guy knew Katja, and they inhabited the same demi-world. Spoke the same language, if you will. I think she may have worked for him from time to time. He probably knows

something that he doesn't even realize is a clue to her killer. And you know, he'd never talk to *les flics*."

"So? It's not your problem. She's dead." Igor stopped wiping the bar, looking startled at his own harshness, then added, "God rest," and crossed himself.

"Call him, Igor. Please," Mary said.

## SWEATSHOP REDUX

The narrow streets and abandoned buildings of this hilly section of Ménilmontant were more familiar to Mary now. Past the faded sign on the old *boulangerie*, she saw Nikodje's sweatshop. If she hadn't known better, its shuttered look would make her think it was empty like most everything else around. But Igor had called ahead and the Serb was expecting her.

And there indeed was Nikodje. Standing at the door, a big smile on his face. "Igor said I should say welcome."

As she crossed the threshold, Mary had such a sense of *déjà vu*, that for a moment she thought she'd throw up. The same dizziness she'd felt when first awakening from the debilitating, so-called Serbian coffee made her grab the doorframe for support. Vidal was right. She was crazy to be injecting herself into something she didn't understand.

The large room with the low roof was hot. The same strong smell of something chemical. Except for the uncharacteristic smile, the brute looked the same: everything squared off, neck as thick as his head.

“Whadda you wan?” he asked in his bad, heavily accented French. Same question as before, but jolly this time.

“It’s still about Katja,” Mary replied, not even trying to return the smile. The direct approach was probably better with this guy. “As I told you before, she was a neighbor. I befriended her, and need to know why she died. I think you might have at least a guess.”

His smile faded. “I don’t know anything. Why would I know?”

Mary remembered from before that this fellow’s French could be in the gutter, but seemed to vastly improve when the conversation switched to Katja. Why was that? Probably wanted to weigh and parse his words with care.

“She worked for you. She had duplicate keys for each employer, and she had a set of yours.” Mary was lying here, she couldn’t decipher most of the symbols on the keys she and Edek had found, but she wasn’t about to let Nikodje know that. She was really here to find out what he knew about the house with the garage and fleur de lys fence. Just as she’d thought, she’d checked the keys again after she’d left Igor’s, and found that Katja did, indeed, have a ring of several keys, all sporting that same design.

“So,” Nikodje made a gesture of indifference, “she clean my floors from time to time. I don’t know nothing.”

“She worked for someone in a posh house, over in the Seventh. She must have bragged about her rich client.”

Nikodje gave a hearty laugh. “Yeah, Mr. Rich Guy. He was suspicious, that character. Always the same with those nose-in-the-air Frenchmen.”

“Suspicious?” Mary’s heart raced. She had guessed right. Nikodje did know something.

“Mr. Bigshot, with the fancy, phony wine cave that wasn’t.” Nikodje’s face twisted in a sneer.

“His wine cellar?” Mary was mystified. “It’s not unusual for wealthy French to take pride in having a stock of vintage years.”

“That’s all I know. Katja would say: ‘You’d be surprised what’s in there. No red wine in that *cave*.’”

Mary left the sweatshop through the door, not over the back fence as she had done before. As soon as she got to the street, she called Vidal to report what she’d learned.

“I verified that Katja worked for de la Poche, or at least at a house where John saw him drive to at night. Don’t forget, she was Miranda’s babysitter.”

When he asked how she’d gotten the information, she replied, “You wouldn’t approve.”

She heard an audible sigh then he thanked her for the tip, asked for the address of the house in question, said a police guard would be posted within the hour at Vicki’s apartment, and hung up.

Mary called Vicki next to let her know the guard had been arranged.

Vicki was delighted, and said she’d call Sarah immediately. As an afterthought, she said she would call the dog sitter to bring Chess as well, so Miranda would have a real homecoming.

## HOMECOMING

Miranda began skipping and twirling around as soon as she and Sarah pushed open the big door with the brass lion's head and walked into the courtyard of her building.

"Look, see, that's my bedroom," she said, pointing to a window overlooking the open area.

"Happy to be home, huh?"

"I love Uncle John, but he gets cranky. Always washing my dress and not letting Bisquit eat out of a bowl."

Sarah rolled her eyes inwardly, glancing at the offending blue dress, still spotted with raspberry ice cream. "We'll find you something special as soon as we get upstairs. I bet you're awfully tired of that one."

"I don't care," Miranda replied with her best devil-may-care delivery. "Unless I'm going to a party or a castle."

They arrived at the apartment door with the blue and white sign that proclaimed there was a "bad dog" within. Miranda, of course, had insisted she be allowed to push elevator button number two, as she explained once again to her aunt, "for *le deuxième étage*. The French don't count the first floor, like Americans do."

“Sorry,” Sarah mumbled, “I keep forgetting.”

Once inside, Miranda raced up and down the long, shelf-lined hall, snatching toys and knocking down by accident a few of her parents’ books. Along with a volume of Tolstoy and an illustrated guide to the Netherlands, out came a small tractor, several dolls, each of which got a brief hug, then it was on to the next. “Here’s my piano keyboard,” she said, lifting it up to show her aunt. “Santa brought it for Christmas. Oh! Here’s my doll that wears lipstick,” she cried triumphantly.

After strewing several more favorites around the floor, she headed for her bedroom off the hall.

“You don’t need to bother going to Euro Disney,” Sarah said, looking around with a wry laugh, “you’ve got it all right here. Cinderella, Snow White, even the Little Mermaid.”

“I miss Bugs Bunny,” Miranda said.

“Bugs Bu? ... Oh,” said Sarah, “your suitcase.”

“Mary called it a val eese.”

“Valise. That’s what the Irish call it.”

“Why does she talk so funny?”

“The Irish speak English sort of like the British do.”

“Is that English she talks?”

“Of course, what else could it be?”

Miranda frowned, seemed to ponder for a moment then shrugged.

“Without a suitcase, I won’t be able to go see the castle.”

“What castle?”

“When those big men scared Mommy at the hotel, we had to come home and didn’t get to see the castle.”

“In Prague, you mean?”

“I saw one of them in the Apple Store.”



“What? Are you talking about yesterday, when you got lost?” Sarah’s heart did a flip-flop. “What did he say?”

“He asked about Bugs Bunny and I told him some bad man took it.”

“But you told me then about the Jelly Bean man who had tried to kidnap you. Was that who talked to you in the Apple Store?”

“No. A man from the train. Mommy didn’t like them, but I did. We played games before she got scared.”

“Oh dear, wearing a John Deere baseball cap?” Sarah suddenly remembered in panic the big American at the train station who’d been so friendly. She’d caught a glimpse of him at the Apple Store and thought he looked familiar, but foolishly had dismissed it.

“A cap. I don’t know what it said.”

“Why didn’t you tell me at the time?” Damn. John and Vicki were right, she had to quit daydreaming. Someone really was menacing this child.

“Because. You were about to buy me a new game.”

“Oh, boy,” said Sarah. The kid pays a lot more attention to what she thinks is important than I do. I’ve got to quit being like frivolous Nora Charles and start being more serious. But every time I do, Jessica Fletcher comes to mind, thick ankles and all.

“When’s Chess coming home? Mommy said she’d be here soon.”

“I’m sure she will.” Sarah checked her watch. “We haven’t been here long.”

“Goody. We can take her to the park.”

Uh-oh, here we go, thought Sarah. Another struggle loomed. Vicki told me to stay inside. But there is a police guard now. "Let's play Fish. Do you have a deck of cards? We can sit right here on the bed."

Miranda ran to her trunk of toys and began pawing through, shooting things out, littering them around on the floor. She produced the game, but began to whine when she couldn't find the scoring pad.

"That's okay," Sarah said, "we don't need to keep track."

"Yes we do." Miranda, stamped her foot. "I want to win."

"Hey, little Kiddo," Sarah reached out for her niece, "you've had a hard day. Let's take a nap."

But Miranda jerked away. "No! I want to play."

"Then let's find another piece of paper." Sarah's voice was soothing. She could play this role as well as any other. "We can write on anything." She pointed. "There's a piece of notepaper lying right on your little desk."

Miranda ran and grabbed it up along with a pink drawing pencil. "I made a picture on it, but we can write at the bottom." She handed them both to her aunt. "You write the numbers, I'm not too good at them yet."

Sarah turned the paper over. There was handwriting on the back. "Oh, this is that note that fell out of your suitcase. It's in French. What does it say?"

Miranda took it and studied it, frowning. "I can only read things that are in my picture books that Mommy told me what they say." She handed it back. "It's grownup words. You read it."

Sarah looked at it again. "It's that squiggly writing. We should give it to Mary's detective. Remember, he was asking us about it that night Bugs Bunny was stolen."

"I wasn't there. I went to bed."

"Oh, right. Well, anyway, he was curious about it. But we can keep score on the side with your picture. Let's play our game."

## A WALK IN THE PARK

The doorbell rang, then the door rattled. Sarah popped up in the bed. She and Miranda had fallen asleep on the Snow White pillowcases.

Sarah was swinging her legs off when she heard the front door open and then close. Was she dreaming, how could anyone get in? Those same men must be coming again for Miranda. For a moment, Sarah thought she smelled jellybeans. This time she must conjure Jessica Fletcher. Her idol Bernhardt could hardly provide inspiration. Nora Charles would do nothing but scream and turn to Nick for help.

Light footsteps were moving down the hall. Were they tiptoeing? Something was being dragged. It clanked. A chain? Miranda's bedroom door was slightly ajar, it slowly nudged open. A black snout-like thing protruded at knee level. A dwarf with a machine gun. Sarah watched in terror, eyes darting around for some sort of weapon. She grabbed for a lamp shaped like a leaping dolphin, yanked it cord and all from its socket. The Thing was working its way through the slowly widening gap in the door. Suddenly it burst open and

something yellow hurtled in. Chess leaped on the bed just as Sarah hurled the lamp, sending it crashing into the wall.

Miranda sat up with a babble of welcoming cries, hugging and wrestling on the bed with her dog. The big golden retriever was wagging her tail and licking Miranda's face with as much apparent joy as her mistress.

When dog and kid calmed down, Miranda informed her aunt they must take Chess for a walk.

"Not so sure about that," Sarah replied. "We probably ought to stay home until your mother gets here."

Miranda instructed her aunt that dogs need to be walked often, "or they pee pee in the house."

Sarah made a goofy face at her niece. "Graphic language for such a proper, sweet baby girl." But, she thought, why not go out? She'd let her imagination run riot when she heard the dog sitter open the door to let Chess in dragging her leash down the hall. She was going to be embarrassed enough explaining the broken lamp. Her big sister always thought she was an idiot. She didn't want to have to explain away dog poop as well.

"Okay. Take a bath and put on a clean dress." That should buy some time. Maybe the kid would forget the promised walk. "Don't want anyone seeing you dirty, they'll think I'm a bad babysitter."

"Katja's my babysitter," Miranda corrected. "You're my aunt."

"Glad I have some kind of role in your eyes." Sarah was getting a wee bit tired of hearing this same old refrain. She felt like humming, "It Seems I've Heard That Song Before."

"I like aunts better," Miranda stated as a matter of fact, seeming to sense Sarah's hurt. "But kids need a babysitter, too."

“Perhaps you’re right. I probably should look for a day job in a bookstore.”

Sarah was overcome by a rare introspective moment, and worse, a pout sprouted on her face. Even the kid sees me as not much competent at anything. I’m tired of everyone thinking I’m scatterbrained, just because most of the time my work is on my mind, just like everyone else. Vicki’s phone was forever in her ear, checking news, keeping up with what’s going on – always dashing off to work. We never even see Ben, he’s locked in his studio painting. And John is ever the decorator, the art dealer, putting things together properly, getting it right, keeping order, as Miranda calls it: fussing over bowls and dresses. But it’s somehow wrong, a joke, when I’m thinking about *my* role, *my* craft and its history. I have got to stop their making fun of me, but I can’t figure out how. I can’t stop being who I am, can’t help that all my references in life relate to what I’ve always studied, made my life’s work. Sarah stomped off to run Miranda’s bathwater.

Bathed, blonde curls washed, in a fresh dress, with even the offending chipped nail polish removed, Miranda was a tiny picture of loveliness. She seemed to think so as she primped one way, then another, admiring herself in a tall, hall mirror.

But her own reflection didn’t hold her interest for long. “Okay, it’s time to walk Chess.”

Once outside, Chess, eager to get around to her favorite sniffing spots, was straining at her leash, tugging Miranda along at a healthy clip.

“Is the dog too strong for you?” Sarah was breathing hard and almost running to keep up.

“No,” Miranda said, “Mommy taught me how. She’ll slow down when she gets her sniffing done.”

She and Chess frolicked through the green space that divided the street in front of their building, rolling in the grass and playing in the dirt. The crisp pink dress soon looked like a cousin of the disreputable blue one that had been discarded less than an hour before.

They moved across the street and past the church. Miranda pointed ahead, down a tree-shaded block, to an out-of-place looking building at the end.

“Ninon lives there, my friend from school. Daddy calls it ‘play school,’” she confided, “but he does that to tease me. He says we make mud pies. ‘How’d your day go?’ he says, ‘Play in a sand box over there?’ But it’s a real school,” Miranda stated emphatically. “It’s called *Maternelle*, and we go in the same building as the big kids. Sometimes they make fun of us and say we’re rug rats.”

“Well,” said Sarah, “that’s all good to know, since I’ll be picking you up from school each day.”

“Katja does that.” Miranda gave her aunt an expectant look. Was it almost fearful, Sarah wondered? The kid’s known world really was being turned upside down. Should she try to tackle the Katja issue again, or just ignore it?

“Hmm, well, why don’t we go by and look at the school, and you can show me where I’m supposed to meet you when you come out.”

Miranda studied her for a moment, then sighed. “Okay. But let’s go play with Ninon first. I haven’t seen her for a long

time. She doesn't go to summer school like me. She's kind of a little kid." Miranda almost sniffed at this next observation. "Look, there she is playing in the sand box in front of her building. But she's nice enough."

As they approached where a small, dark-haired child with Dutch boy bangs was, indeed, shoveling sand from the box into a pail, Miranda again confided in a very theatrical aside to Sarah: "The building's guardian is crabbier than John. We can't go here, we can't play there, it's an imposition."

"Imposition?" Sarah asked laughing, thinking that her niece could well end up following in her own footsteps to a stage career. Her delivery was letter perfect. "Where do you get such big words?"

"I hear grownups say them." Once again, the confidential aside. "But I usually have to ask what they mean first."

"So, what does imposition mean?"

"Like to bother someone, or not let them play."

"*Allo, Ninon.*" Miranda waved to her friend. "*J'oublie le code.*"

She turned to her aunt. "I don't remember the code to open this gate."

The beautiful, fragile-looking child wearing shorts and a T-shirt came running to push the button that swung open the big gates in the black iron fence with its scattering of gold fleur de lys. A woman in a flowing floral skirt, seated watching the child, nodded at Miranda, who responded, "*Bonjour, Madame Boisseau.*"

The girls moved to the play area to the right of the driveway and began chattering in French. Sarah caught the words "*ma tante,*" but nothing much else besides "T-shirt."



“I told her,” Miranda said, “that you’re the one who made me wear this dress.”

Yep, thought Sarah, the one phrase she remembered from high school French: *la plume de ma tante*. That’s how silly it had seemed at the time – who in the world would ever be conversing about the quill pen of one’s aunt.

The only French in which she’d ever had any real interest were the lines she memorized for her role as Princess Katherine in “Henry V.” The Shakespearean performance was part of her master’s degree. Now here she was, wishing she’d paid a bit more attention to irregular verbs. Who knew what these kids were plotting next.

One thing was clear: Miranda was expressing her contempt for the once-clean pink dress. Sarah settled herself into a swing set to watch the kids. Its seat was so close to the ground, she had to extend her long legs out far, but at least that gave her enough leverage not to rock back and forth. Chess plunged herself down at the edge of the sandbox, head on stretched-out paws, within nose length of Miranda.

Sarah relaxed, she took off her light jacket, warming herself in the sun, enjoying the blessed relief from the heat wave, which Miranda had identified as *une canicule*. The quiet was suddenly disturbed by an electronic beeping, then the wide gates leading to the building’s garage swung open and a big truck pulled in. It rested in the driveway until the gates had clanged shut. Then another beep, and the garage doors opened long enough for the truck to disappear inside. Some security system, Sarah thought, like getting into a bank vault, one locked door at a time.

She looked over at the children who were chattering away as they built little castles in the sand. Chess lifted her head at the beeps, but then settled it back on her paws.

Miranda called over to Sarah. “Ninon says those men come and move things all the time.”

“That’s odd,” Sarah replied. “This looks like a residential building. Ninon lives here, right?”

The woman who had been seated in the doorway came over and addressed Sarah in a fast-moving string of French. Miranda intervened, “*Ma tante ne parle pas française.*”

“Ah,” the woman said to Sarah, “*Pardon, I no anglais.*”

She grumbled “*va et viens, va et viens,*” under her breath, and walked back to her chair.

Sarah struggled up off the swing seat and headed for the sandbox. “What’s the problem?” she asked Miranda.

“That’s Ninon’s mother, she complains all the time, they come and go, come and go, too much noise. Ninon always says her parents want to move, but can’t find another place near our school.”

“Oh, what a shame.”

“Yeah,” Miranda nodded. “Ninon says her father doesn’t suspect drugs, the trucks are too big.”

“Oh, my god,” Sarah said. “I think we better go. I’m putting on Chess’s leash. We’re leaving NOW, Kiddo.”

The garage door beeped open, and the big truck rolled out, hood first.

“That must be some big garage in there,” Sarah said, startled. “It turned around.”

She snatched Miranda’s hand, grabbed Chess’s leash and jumped to the side of the driveway as the big truck pulled up, waiting for the doors behind to close before the gates to the

street could beep open. A burly driver leapt down from the cab and went to secure the garage.

As he passed by them, Sarah saw a deep frown pass over Miranda's face. When he came back, Miranda stepped into his path, hands on her hips and said, "*Vous sentez comme jellybeans.*"

"It's him, he smells," she announced to Sarah, hands still on hips.

## THE GATES OF HELL

Miranda took a hefty swing with her right leg and kicked the burly truck driver in the shin. The tiny white sandal hit its mark, but the David vs. Goliath blow could hardly have been described as even glancing. Sarah leaped for Miranda and grabbed her arm to pull her away. The guy let out a hearty roar of a laugh then dug in his pocket and pulled out – instead of the gat Sarah had anticipated – a fist full of jellybeans, holding them out as an offering.

Miranda slapped his hand away, yelling, “*Vous avez volé Bugs Bunny.*”

The accused clamped a ham fist on the slapping hand, and all hell broke loose. Sarah grabbed at the guy but got only a tag end of shirt, Chess took a snarling, flying leap at him, and Ninon’s mother came running.

“*Merde,*” yelled the jellybean man as he tried to fend off Chess, whose bared white fangs were a much bigger threat than Sarah pummeling his arm. As the back door of the truck swung open and an oily-looking fellow with a pompadour jumped out, Sarah heard the passenger door slam.

A blond kid with spiked hair came round the back of the truck, yanked Sarah by her ponytail away from the driver and put a hand over her mouth to stifle her cries. The greasy guy pulled the barking, snarling Chess from the jellybean man and began beating the dog with its leash. The garage door beeped open and a man in a blue coverall emerged, grabbed Madame Boisseau and dragged her yelling, “*au secours, au secours,*” back into the dark inner space.

Ninon, who hadn't said a word during this entire mess, ran yelling “*Monsieur le Gardien, Monsieur le Gardien*” at the man who had snatched her mother. “*Prenez pas ma maman, ne la prenez pas.*”

Sarah looked over and saw Miranda kicking and scratching at her captor as he lifted her to the rear of the truck. A cloth was yanked tight across Sarah's mouth and tied, she flailing all the while, tugging at her gag and kicking backwards at her captor. He obviously couldn't figure out how to both tie her hands and shut her mouth. Miranda was shoved into the back of the truck, and the door slammed shut. The jellybean man then turned to Sarah with a leer, “*Maintenant pour vous, ma belle.*”

Dear god, Sarah thought, one didn't need to understand French to translate that leer. But surely they won't assault me right here in front of the children. She flashed on Sophia Loren in the rape scene in “Two Women.”

One man now held Sarah, while the other secured a dirty rag from his back pocket around her wrists. They were jabbering at each other in some guttural language, arguing – about her, Sarah feared. Chess, still snapping and snarling, was being backed into the garage by Pompadour beating the

ground in front of her with the leash. Ninon, helplessly staring into the darkness of the garage, kept whimpering, “*maman, maman.*” Sarah was scooped up by Jelly Bean, Ninon by the blond kid, and both tossed unceremoniously into the truck. The door slammed shut. The dark-haired child, quietly weeping, was neither bound nor gagged.

Sarah hit the rough flooring with a thud, landing on the still sore elbow she’d hurt when she was dragged across the carousel yesterday by the would-be kidnapper. Other than that, she was okay, and Ninon was seemingly fine beyond her silent tears of terror. Miranda, hands free, had already gained her footing and pulled off her gag.

There was only a small square of space for the three of them because the truck was loaded with a neatly stacked and rope-secured mélange of crates and boxes, similar only that all were marked “fragile” and “this end up” in one language or another: *haut, nicht stürzen, Vorsicht, Glas*. Miranda leaned over Sarah, “I’ll take the thing away from your mouth,” she said, giving a yank. “And look, we can see out that window.”

Sarah heard more arguing outside, but three voices this time. Of course, where would the third man ride? She and the children were taking up his space. Finally, the beep of garage doors being secured on the imprisoned Madame Boisseau and the still-barking Chess. Ninon continued to whimper until Miranda spoke to her in rapid French. Ninon then scampered up from the floor and the two little girls moved to untie Sarah’s hands. “What did you say?” Sarah asked. “That was like magic.”

“I told her don’t be scared. We’ll get a ride in a police car at the end,” Miranda said, struggling with her aunt’s loose bonds.

Hands free and managing to get to her feet, Sarah sprang to the doors, frantically searching by feel in the dark for handles to open them. There were none! She ran her hands back and forth across the smooth steel, no indentations, nothing protruding that could be openers. Like the KGB! She had seen a movie where they transported prisoners in vehicles with no interior clasps. And no way to call for help. Her phone was back on the swing set where she’d tossed her jacket. But Miranda was right, there was a small clear panel between the truck’s body and the cab providing the only light into the closed interior. Sarah could manage a partial view past the crates through to the cab and out the front windshield. How to escape? No way to break that thick glass, even a strong man couldn’t do it with a hammer. It didn’t look like there were any tools in here, no door handles. No phone! No exit!

Sarah heard the cab doors on each side of the truck open, more chattering of two men’s voices as they climbed in. The third, she supposed was being left behind. The doors slammed shut, and Sarah’s heart echoed the finality of that sound. What was to become of them? She now had the lives of two children in her hands, and she could think of no one from whom to draw inspiration. She had to do something. But what? She couldn’t let this happen. They had passed few people on the street in this quiet, residential neighborhood, no one to hear if she banged and yelled – just Jelly Bean who would likely stop and viciously kill them before proceeding on with his

dirty business, whatever that was. She had failed miserably as a caretaker.

The truck's engine roared to life, there was a clashing of gears, Sarah turned and propped herself on a crate so she had a view through the cab window. The black iron gates with their gold fleur de lys loomed – she dreaded their beep. Once those gates swung open, the three of them would be driven off, lost forever into an uncertain future. She had to keep the children from being tortured.

She took a deep meditative breath to gather her strength. She must be strong. Then she opened her eyes and studied the crates – different sizes, the small ones didn't look too heavy. All were secured by some kind of web strapping attached to hooks along the walls. Could she and the girls unhook and move them around, form a barricade to hide behind, then shove the boxes out on the men when they opened the doors? That certainly would take them by surprise, create enough noise and commotion to attract the attention of anyone nearby.

She felt like Jean Valjean. But this was, after all, France.

“Girls,” she yelled, “to the barricades!”



## CONTRABAND

The beep sounded, Sarah picked up the smallest container and watched the gates begin to swing slowly out, then turned and handed the box to Miranda. “Here’s the first stone for our wall. We have to move fast.”

The truck seemed to leap forward, as if the driver had heard Sarah’s instruction and was in as much hurry to leave that evil house as Sarah was to wish she had never come. Rocking and swaying, the three braced themselves against the crates in the cramped space and began their laborious work. The children were quick and amazingly resourceful as they tackled the job, pushing with shoulders and little feet while Sarah grunted and lifted.

A screech of tires sounded on the road, and they were slammed against crates, the stack they had unhooked teetering with nowhere to crash. Oops. Sarah hadn’t considered that a rough ride would put them in danger of cascading boxes. She raised hands to hold them steady. A sharp report rang out. The captives were slammed again. The truck lurched, its left back seeming to drag on the ground, Sarah frantically holding back the swaying boxes. Those were shots! Sarah had seen enough

cops-and-robbers movies to recognize gunfire when she heard it. Her back braced against the teetering tower, she wrapped an arm around each child, and the three huddled together behind the two small boxes they'd managed to move to the doors.

The truck was careening to the left, then to the right. The driver gunned the motor and the truck lurched forward again with a grind of metal. Of course, a tire had been shot out, they were running on a wheel rim. Sarah imagined sparks flying like July Fourth fireworks with each spin of the grinding wheel as the truck chattered over what she knew were smoothly paved streets. Her teeth took each bump like the assault of a dentist's drill. A small box flew off the top of its stack and over their heads, crashing against the truck's back doors like another crack of a rifle.

An abrupt halt threw the three prisoners hard against the crates behind them. Sarah heard the cab doors open, more shots. Could a shot come through the truck walls? The boxes, she hoped would protect them. Turning to look through the cab window she could make out two cars blocking the truck. More cars arrived, spilling out Ninja action figures all in black. How could that be? It was like an animated movie she'd seen as a child. Or was it a video game? One gang of "Scarface" mobsters attacking another.

The figures came nearer. It looked like they were wearing thick vests, bullet-proof covers, maybe? She hugged the kids closer, but Miranda struggled away and crawled up onto a crate to watch.

"See, there are the police. They always come to get me."

"Of course," Sarah said, craning her neck. "Police. It says so, in English. Isn't that helpful?"

"It's the same word," Miranda said. Impatient as usual with her aunt's lack of sophistication.

More shouting. More shots. "Get off there, duck," Sarah screamed at Miranda. "That's gunfire."

"They're yelling, hands up," Miranda said. "Ninon understands." Sarah looked down at the child who had seemed so frightened before, and she, too, was smiling.

The back door swung open and, much to Sarah's horror, there was the American man from the *gare* still wearing that John Deere baseball cap. The man who had frightened Vicki in Prague, telling her she wasn't safe there. Sarah gave a mighty shove that sent one of the barricade boxes flying out at him and grabbed the children. "Leave us alone," she shouted.

Miranda shrugged away her aunt's arm. "He's a good guy," she said. "He played video games with me on the train while mommy was sleeping."

"Don't be ridiculous. He was the one stalking us at the *gare* and then at the Apple Store."

"He only wants to help find Bugs Bunny." Miranda pushed again at her aunt, all but hitting her. "And I want to find Bugs, too."

"Miranda!" Sarah felt like shaking the child, she had to teach this kid some manners. But the middle of a shoot-out was hardly the appropriate moment.

"We've been tryin' to steer you ladies away from trouble for a long time now," the man in the baseball cap said with a grin. "Let me help you down." He offered his hand.

"No." Sarah pulled away, and again put an arm around each child. "Who are you?"

“American Military Intelligence, ma’am,” he said. “We been trackin’ these smugglers for a long time. I think you and the young ladies here are in a truck loaded with contraband. I’d say they were ripping off the fancy French fat-cat who stored his stuff in this house.”

“What’s contraband?” Miranda asked.

## DEAD GOLDFISH

Armed police of all stripes swarmed over the grounds, the garage, into the house, spilled out onto and blocked off the quiet street. There were cops with helmets, cops with riot shields, and a few like Major Jones in his ball cap decked out like tourists. He didn't have a drawn gun, but seemed to be the only one around who didn't.

"Get Chess," was Miranda's first order. Sarah's first move was to retrieve her phone from her jacket and call her sister, then sigh with relief when she got a message prompt, meaning she didn't have to face Vicki's wrath, at least for the moment.

The dog came bounding out of her garage imprisonment and nearly knocked Miranda over, the two of them then falling to the ground, gleefully tussling and rolling in the dirt. Chess, her big tail whisking back and forth stirring a breeze like a giant brush, whimpered and licked Miranda's face. Ninon, lifted down from the opened truck, ran to embrace her mother and they cried in each others' arms.

Sarah pulled Miranda to her feet, brushed off the pink dress, and then, clutching her niece's hand so tight the kid yelped, retrieved the leash and inspected Chess to make sure

there were no wounds from her beating at the hands of the greasy guy.

The three thugs, along with the guardian in his blue workman's jumpsuit, were handcuffed and herded toward a black and white police van, the big jellybean man twisting and resisting until a uniformed officer gave him a blow that knocked him off his feet.

"We're going to need statements," Major Jones said. "I suggest we go to Miranda's home, where you'll be more comfortable." City police in their short-sleeved pale blue summer shirts with pants bloused into their boots were already stringing yellow tape around the grounds. "No need for us to hang around for the mopping-up operation. Soon enough they'll want to come and talk to our young witness."

Miranda's "no" was emphatic. "I want to see the bad guys get what they deserve. Just like TV. Look there's Jelly Bean climbing into the *panier de salade*."

"What in the world?" Sarah said.

"A salad basket," Miranda told her. "That's what the cops on TV call their vans."

"Ah," the major suppressed a grin. "I think the best way to get these crooks punished is for the police to hear your important testimony, young lady. You have a lot to tell them, don't you?"

Miranda drew herself up to her full 3 feet 2 and replied, "Of course."

"And," the major added with a wink, "you and I need to talk about Bugs Bunny."

When Sarah opened the apartment door for the three of them, she was embarrassed to see that the long hall was still strewn with the toys Miranda had joyously pulled out in her excitement to be home. Sarah quickly began to cram things back onto shelves, but Miranda was even faster grabbing others to show to her new pal, Major Jones.

Chess nosed around, still dragging her leash, giving a playful push to each new item.

“This is my magic blackboard.” Miranda swiped her finger across, making black squiggles, then with a flourish lifted the clear screen, demonstrating that the writing had disappeared. “Santa brought it for Christmas. And here’s Jasmine, my doll that makes pee pee.”

“Should I put on some coffee?” Sarah asked the major. “I don’t know what to do. I feel like Sarah, the Salvation Army lady in “Guys and Dolls.” There were all those gamblers and gangsters, and she wasn’t used to that.” When he gave her a startled look, she realized that in her nervousness, she’d spoken thoughts she usually kept to herself. She was well aware that only her family and close friends were clued into what they called Sarah’s peculiar referencing system. “Sorry,” she said, “I was just thinking out loud.”

The doorbell rang. “Coffee would be nice,” the major said.

“I’m sure my sister will be here soon,” Sarah replied, still picking up fallen toys.

“Yes,” the major said. “The police sent a patrol car for her.”

Chess barked, the door opened and Vicki came flying in with John right behind. “I rang several times,” he said, looking around at the mess on the floor, at Sarah. “Maybe I’ll go make coffee.”

Vicki was so intent on scooping up Miranda that she ignored Sarah in the melee, other than to say, "I'll deal with you later."

The bell rang again, and John, on his way down the hall to the kitchen, opened the door to more police, including the plainclothes officer who had been assigned by Detective Vidal to guard Miranda. He was the one who alerted city patrols that the child had been snatched, and Vidal, recognizing the address of the de la Poche house Mary had given him, alerted the sting operatives of the art squad.

Miranda in her arms, Vicki turned to the major with venom in her voice. "You're the man who frightened me into leaving Prague. Now I learn that you were supposed to be protecting us. What kind of protection is that? The Paris art squad and MI6, even American military intelligence, all involved? And no one doing anything to keep my daughter safe!"

The bell sounded and a police officer opened the door to Mary.

"Ma'am... " the major began.

"How dare you," Vicki said. "The United States government using a four-year-old in a sting? It's outrageous." Miranda leaned forward in rapt attention.

"We lost two operatives," the major responded, "one at the station – stabbed – and one thrown from the train. We were there, especially the woman, because we were *concerned* that a child was involved. We had reconnaissance that she was being used as a mule."

"A mule?" Vicki's voice rose. Miranda's shoulders straightened in self-satisfaction.



“Carrying contraband.”

“I know what it means.” Vicki’s voice up another octave. “Are you telling me my daughter was carrying drugs? And you let that go on?”

Mary and Sarah stood by, wide-eyed, taking it all in. Mary’s frown to Sarah clearly asked have you ever seen the cool one like this before? Sarah shook her head, just thanking whatever gods there be that the wrath wasn’t directed at her. Several police officers had gathered observing the exchange.

“Just an expression we use, Mrs. Harris. It wasn’t drugs. Our intel suggested that something important was about to be sent to Prague.”

“Why didn’t you stop it immediately?”

“We checked the undercarriage of your daughter’s suitcase at the station but nothing was there. Because computers and cell phones are easily hacked, this cartel has gone to great lengths to set up a system for transporting theft-on-demand purchase orders for major pieces of ancient art. Rich collectors and, unfortunately, even museums, will say I’d like a such-and-such, and the cartel will either find it on the black market, steal it, or send someone to go out and dig it up.”

“Good grief.” Vicki’s eyes widened. “You’re talking about the kind of stuff that was looted from the Baghdad museum during the Iraq war?”

“Precisely, but you don’t have to go back that far. It’s a huge business today. In Italy, in France, all over the Middle East. This bunch of crooks concocted an elaborate supply line for orders or for very small items – such as the signature seal that your sister found – by attaching a Velcro pouch between the rolling wheels of an unsuspecting traveler’s suitcase.

Then hotel employees, in Prague for example, would be paid a pittance to remove the pouch from an arriving traveler's luggage and pass it along."

"I can't for the life of me understand why my child was chosen."

"That, I'm afraid, is beyond my pay grade," the major replied. "I have no idea."

Mary piped in. "It seems simple enough to me that Poche could have seen Katja and Miranda together. Katja did some kind of work for him, probably cleaning, had access to his house just across the way." Mary gestured out toward the courtyard that faced onto the grassy space in front of the building. "When I searched Katja's apartment, I found a set of keys with fleur de lys just like the ones on that big fence around his place." She dared not mention she'd confirmed that with the awful Serb, Nikodje. She would incur his wrath and Vidal's as well.

"That's the very place where they grabbed us," Sarah injected. "Why didn't you tell us?"

"Who knew you'd be out prancing around when you were in danger," Mary snapped.

Vicki frowned. "Hard to take in that this all fits together. You scared me into leaving Prague," she said to the major, "after Sarah got a call in Paris from a so-called Russian telling me to meet at the hotel Miranda called a castle." She squinted at him, clearly running something over in her head. "But Miranda didn't call the hotel a castle. She may have said something like that at the train station because we planned to visit Hradcany, the presidential palace, but our trip was cut short, thanks to you. She was devastated. She had packed her

Cinderella costume so she would look like a princess when she went to the castle. I thought that's why she and Katja fought. 'Silly notion,' Katja had said about the dress. Miranda even stuck in a wand and a tiara."

John arrived just then with a tray of cups and coffee. "What's wrong?" he asked taking in the glum faces.

No one responded.

"I'm truly sorry about the castle," Major Jones finally said.

John looked from one to the other, mystified. "I guess someone will explain this later," he said. Then passed out coffee and handed Miranda a glass of apple juice. "I'm a mule," she told him.

Vicki's voice was still hot with emotion as she demanded of the major, "Did you make that Russian call, as well?"

"Afraid so." He affected an uneasy grin. "We knew where Sarah was staying and hoped to scare you back to Paris where we could keep a better eye on you."

Sarah spoke up. "My mystery woman was an actress. I talked to her agent in London. I saw her at the station. And she missed her very first rehearsal."

The major turned his attention to her. "You're possibly speaking of Jane Forsythe. She was an MI6 operative assigned to a role in your play to try to keep track of when the child and her mother might be taking a trip."

"Wow," Sarah said. "You mean acting was her cover job? How thrilling, you could be a spy and act at being one, all at the same time."

The major blinked with a startled expression, before he broke into a smile. "You might be a perfect candidate for the job. In any event, when word came down the contraband

was on the move, Agent Forsythe went to the Bernhardt Bistro specifically to look for you, hoping to track the child through your movements. When she couldn't find you, she was instructed to move on and called for a driver to get her to the station."

"This is all too bizarre," Vicki said, still holding Miranda, who had begun to suck her thumb. She took the child's hand from her mouth and kissed it. "Sweet babe, I think you need a nap."

Miranda shook her head no, and gave the major an impish smile.

His tone immediately softened. "I have one just about her age at home, ma'am. We tried our best – kept our eyes on you on the train, and once you got to Prague, wanted you back in Paris fast."

"The train?" Vicki snapped. "Nothing but a bunch of rowdy soldiers in the sleeping car."

"We are *Military* Intelligence, Mrs. Harris."

"Right," Vicki grinned for the first time that day.

"These people are unscrupulous." The major's mission was in the tightness of his voice. "They killed one of our agents at the station just to get your friend's purse, and threw the woman operative off the train. As I said, one of our agents checked your child's suitcase at the station, and there was no pouch. Yet we knew from informants that she was slated to be carrying something vital, which meant the bag had not been packed in the usual way."

"Miranda did it. She wouldn't let Katja pac..." Vicki stopped, startled. "You mean to tell me that my babysitter put my daughter in harm's way?"

Miranda suddenly squirmed down from her mother's arms and planted her feet on the floor. "Katja's my babysitter," she said, looking up at the major. Hands on her hips.

"Ah, Babe," Vicki bent to her daughter. "Why don't you go in your room and look through your toy box. I bet you've got something new in there that everyone would like to see."

"No, I want to hear."

"I'll explain it all when we have more time." Vicki's voice was easy, but left no doubt there was no wiggle room. "I'm home from work for the day. We'll watch a movie and make some popcorn. The major and I need to talk for a minute. Now scoot."

"Katja's my babysitter," Miranda repeated as she stomped off to her room.

Vicki turned back to the major. "So, Katja?"

"Afraid so. But it cost her life. Apparently, she wouldn't give up your keys – that's where she drew the line – and was killed for them. Your apartment was entered and the child's suitcase stolen shortly after the estimated time of Katja's death."

Sarah flashed on Jean-Paul Belmondo in "Breathless" as he lay dying in a Paris street, with Jean Seberg looking on. But that didn't fit, she decided, Seberg had ratted him out.

Sarah frowned. "Wow. It wasn't like that with Katja. She wasn't a stoolie like Seberg."

"Sorry?" said the major.

"Just some movie," Vicki told him.

"I still feel deeply at fault for putting you together with Katja," Mary said, close to tears. "But at least relieved that she

did the right thing in the end. I knew she could sometimes be a bit dodgy, yet I always thought she had a good heart.”

“She fought off the guys who were after the keys.” The major turned to Mary. “Apparently the same ones who trashed your apartment because you had a picture on your cell phone of Katja packing. Someone besides my team overheard you talking about the picture and must have assumed, just as we did, there was a clue in that. Possibly that the two of you were involved and would keep the items yourselves, with the idea to sell them. Or use them for blackmail.”

“Mother of God! So that’s why your operative went for my purse. Ah, for the brother, now, at least I can say that Katja died a hero. That should give him some solace.”

The door to Miranda’s bedroom inched open and Sarah stepped over and picked her up. “Hey, there, good buddy. Did you find a toy?”

“No,” she replied, “I was listening.”

She squirmed down from her aunt’s arms and marched over to her mother and the major.

“I know what you’re talking about. It’s like our goldfish.”

“Goldfish?” The major frowned.

“It floated on the water and didn’t swim anymore. Then it was gone. Katja’s gone, and Aunt Sarah is my new babysitter.”

“Oh,” Sarah gasped. Her hand flew to her mouth, tears moistened her eyes.

Miranda handed the major a scrap of paper.

He looked at the purple cat. “That’s a lovely drawing, young lady. Very impressive.”

“It’s got French writing on the back,” Miranda said. “But I can only read picture books.”

THE WOMAN at *la Gare de l'Est*

“Aunt Sarah and I found it when we were playing a game. We’re a detective team. She found the glossies and I found the paper.”

**BUGS BUNNY**

John was at the sink staring out at Paris rooftops as he washed and scraped veggies for an hors d'oeuvres dish. Ben was putting out glasses and carrying drinks to set up a bar in their dining room.

John was so eager to get his life back that he had agreed to host this one last gathering for what some would call tying up loose ends and those into psychobabble would refer to as closure. It was startling to realize that Vicki and Miranda had left on their aborted trip to Prague only five days ago.

It seemed everyone was invited. Thank heaven he had such a huge apartment. He should have hired a caterer, but he did like cooking and being in his wonderful, sunny kitchen. He was wearing his gold lamé caftan to remind himself that this was a celebratory occasion. Soon, soon, he hoped, his life could go back to normal.

He had made a list of invitees, those he referred to as the usual suspects, which of course included Vicki, Miranda, Mary, Sarah and her two new conquests, Regis of the Apple Store and the red-headed stagehand, Pierre. Miranda's father was still on assignment in Moscow, so that was one less mouth



to feed. It was still a question about Chess. John felt a big dog would definitely be one too many, but the now acclaimed kid detective was adamant that the canine who had taken a leash-lashing in defense of her life should be included in the festivities. So, Bisquit, John decided, would just have to be a man and suck it up.

On the cop side of the ledger there was, of course, Detective Jean Vidal, who might or might not be the new love of Mary's life. She had an upcoming dinner date with him but had pronounced it too early even to guess just what might come of that. There were Fric and Frac, who had responded to the first kidnap attempt, and who were called plainclothes officers. A better definition of their dreadful attire could not possibly be found as far as John was concerned. He was still mourning the Hermes tie sacrificed when he was robbed and trussed up with it during the invasion of his shop. He drew the line at inviting the cops from robbery detail who had tried to accuse him of faking the loss of his Greek bowl. It turned out the robbers had, indeed, swiped the bowl, but immediately returned it wrapped in newspaper under de la Poche's instructions because the collector had realized its loss could point to him as a suspect. John couldn't wait to find out how that fancy-dressing, uppity French aristocrat was involved in all this. But more importantly, when was he going to get his porcelain back?

The guy from the *gare* with the John Deere cap – finally identified as Major Mark Jones of American Military Intelligence – had been invited to give everyone an explanation of how the ladies and the child he was now referring to as “girl detective” had been caught up in an international sting

to bring down a ring of thieves of ancient art. The major had come by a couple of hours earlier to drop off a package and assure John that even though Interpol, and police art squads from both France and Italy, were also involved, Jones would bring to the party only the MI6 Brits and American Military Intelligence operatives who had been at the *gare*.

The doorbell rang. John took a deep breath, dried his hands, sighed, squared his shoulders, took a quick, reassuring peek into the storage hall then headed for the front door.

The joint was jumping, Ben was moving around the two large rooms of the salon with his silver tray of drinks, John had purposely put a quiet Mantovani on the tape deck so as not to add to the clatter. Mary and Vidal were *tête-à-tête* in a corner behind the big dining table. Miranda, in a clean and freshly ironed yellow pinafore with a matching ribbon in her hair, was prancing around. The cops, or “operatives” as the major referred to them, all were clustered in groups according to their service. Sarah, as she always was at these little “crisis soirees,” as John had come to call them, was holding court between Regis and Pierre. John marveled at how she was able to hold them both in sway and at bay at the same time. But no real surprise there. He, too, adored her freshness and innocence of spirit.

Vicki appeared to still be haranguing Major Jones as they sat on low, fat living room chairs facing each other. Tiny Vicki had no trouble being so close to the floor, but the big-framed major seemed to have his knees in his face and kept sort of

sliding off every time he leaned in Vicki's direction to defend whatever point he was trying to make. John was tickled at the sight. Usually, when a big man like himself employed one of those chairs, he sat far back to avoid that problem.

Now he tinkled a silver spoon against a crystal glass. "I feel silly doing this," he said, after everyone quieted down. "But, I for one, would like to hear some precise explanation of what in the devil it was that disrupted all our lives. I'd like to call on Major Jones, here, who seems to be the chief of this sting thing."

The major struggled up from his low chair, as most of the guests gathered around. The cluster of his so-called operatives didn't bother to leave their seats. He lifted his glass in the direction of Sarah and Mary who stood behind Vicki's chair.

"Thanks to these three ladies and that beautiful little girl over there flirting with Sam Browne of MI6, we have been able to shut down one arm of a ring of crooks who have been grave robbing and pillaging ancient Middle Eastern artifacts for a very long time."

Hearing her name, Miranda sashayed over to gaze up at the major, as he continued. "Italian and French art detectives have been working on this for years, but our American military joined their efforts when it grew clear that some of our own servicemen were being used in the transport from points of origin of these ancient treasures. Some of them unknowing, some of them for greed. It's an old business and an ugly one, but we have to keep fighting against it.

"This French art collector, Poche, seems to have slipped into it almost by accident. A little under the table deal here, a little sale there and, before he knew it, he was trapped

by blackmail into doing the bidding of a gang of ruthless thieves for whom he was no match. He apparently bought and renovated that residential building in his neighborhood to provide the massive underground garage for storage of artifacts coming in from the Middle East until they were sold to collectors and museums all over Europe. Not satisfied with the immense profits they were already enjoying, the cartel decided to branch out into fakes. So Poche would pick up a piece here, a piece there for copying, as he did with John, and the cartel would mass-produce reproductions.”

“Surely you’re kidding,” John interrupted. “You mean he copied my porcelain?”

Jones gave a wry laugh. “Made thousands. That’s what was in the truck that those gangsters used to kidnap Miranda and her aunt yesterday. I’ve been talking to French authorities about who should have title to those reproductions. I know you deal in fine art, but you possibly could make some money for your trouble by selling those fakes as tourist bobbles. Although quite a few were broken when the lady detectives shoved them out of the truck.”

John’s face lit up. “My selling them would be some sort of poetic justice, I suppose. But the thing I love most is that you call him plain ole Poche. Very American, dropping the...” John raised his hand and circled his wrist, “*la te da, de la*. I would love to have seen the bastard’s face when you arrested him.”

The major chuckled, and laughter broke out around the room. “We cuffed him and did what we in the U.S call the ‘perp walk.’ The French officers were horrified at what they called an invasion of privacy, but the press was snapping away. His picture should be in all the gossip magazines.”

“By the way,” John added, “for your further amusement, the English translation of Poche is pocket.”

The major laughed out loud this time. “Well, Le Pocket’s final downfall was trusting Katja, his sometimes-cleaning lady, with the task of transporting a shopping list from very well-known collectors who’d placed orders for ancient items at very fancy prices. Theft by order. The list was incendiary. Wealthy, prominent people from all over Europe.

“Miranda put a kink in Katja’s plan to attach the pouch to the bottom of her suitcase, so at the last minute she had to just stick it in a side pocket, where Miranda found it.

“They were looking for the list everywhere, that’s why they robbed your shop, that’s why they were tailing the women in a menacing manner. They figured whoever had it would be frightened into giving it up.”

Following all this with rapt attention, the kid now seemed literally to fill up with air. Watching, John expected her to take flight like a balloon in the Macy’s parade.

“How could they blame Katja that Miranda wouldn’t let her pack her suitcase?” Mary demanded.

“When something goes wrong, they’ll blame whoever they want. But I’m sure the thinking was that someone who really understood the importance of that list would have made sure it was attached in the usual fashion. Meanwhile, our budding artist, the Eloise of four-year-old detectives, had drawn a purple cat on the back of their multimillion-dollar shopping list then kept it on her little desk. In any event, the cartel was in the process of robbing Poche yesterday afternoon, to put him out of the picture.”

The look on Miranda's face made John fear that she might actually take hold of the sides of her starched pinafore and give a curtsy. Lord, the kid was an adorable showoff.

"So what about Bugs Bunny? You promised," she demanded of the major.

"Hmm, I'm not sure," he replied with a twinkle. "Maybe your friend John knows something about that."

"John?" Miranda frowned. "He ...," she looked over at her Aunt Sarah, who shook her head almost imperceptibly. "He didn't want Chess to come tonight," she said almost with a pout, then clearly reconsidered, "but then he said yes. He can be a good guy."

Damn, John thought. The kid is incorrigible. Well, I'll just let her dangle. "Me?" he said to Miranda. "What about it?"

She walked over to him, took his hand, looking up sweetly. "Please, Uncle John, I'll be good, I promise. Do you know where is Bugs Bunny?"

"Where Bugs Bunny is," he corrected.

She tugged at his hand. "Where?"

"Not sure," he replied. "But the major left something here this afternoon. Why don't we take a look at the storage hall?"

Miranda dropped his hand and headed top-speed for the kitchen, John trotting after. She was tugging at the locked door when he puffed up behind her, the entire guest list in pursuit and crowding into the large, shiny appliances-filled room.

Once he disengaged the lock, Miranda sprang into the hall trying to hug Bugs Bunny by throwing her tiny arms around, but not quite encompassing, the small circumference of the suitcase. She returned triumphantly, pulling her beloved, but battered and scratched, Bugs.

The rest of the evening was spent wheeling it among the drinking guests, crying “beep, beep, out of my way, coming through,” as she ran over toes and bumped shins.

All the while Bisquit was nipping at her heels, yapping, while Chess lay quietly, head resting on outstretched legs, watching to make sure no one assaulted her mistress.

And they all lived happily ever after, at least until opening night of “Don’t Look Now.”

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



*Photo by Terri Taylor*

**T**heasa Tuohy, novelist, journalist and playwright, has worked for five daily newspapers and the Associated Press. She is the author of two novels featuring female reporters, *The Five O'clock Follies*, set in Vietnam during the war, and *Flying Jenny*, set in 1929 about a debutante stunt pilot and a tabloid journalist. She co-wrote the book of “Censored: The Musical,” an award-winning show about the life of D.H. Lawrence, and has written a memoir about renovating her home in France. A graduate of the University of California at Berkeley, she lives in Manhattan.