

Frédérique Molay

The 7th Woman

Translated from French by Anne Trager

LE FRENCH BOOK 

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This is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Praise for The 7th Woman

Best Crime Fiction Novel of the Year

“Frédérique Molay is the French Michael Connelly.” — Jean Miot, journalist, former editorial director of the French daily *Le Figaro* and former president of Agence France Presse (AFP)

“*The 7th Woman* is a taut and terror-filled thriller. Frédérique Molay navigates French police procedure with a deft touch, creating a lightening quick, sinister plot with twists and turns that kept me reading late and guessing to the very end. Inspector Nico Sirsky is every bit as engaging and dogged as Arkady Renko in *Gorky Park* and is sure to become a favorite with readers in the United States and around the world.” — *New York Times* bestselling author Robert Dugoni

“*The 7th Woman* blends suspense and authentic police procedure with a parallel tale of redemption. Well-drawn characters and ratcheting tension won’t let you put the book down. I read this in one sitting.” — Paris mystery writer Cara Black

“It’s a beautifully written book with everything a mystery reader craves.” — Leigh Neely, CriminalElement.com

“A remarkable plot that races forward and focuses on likeable characters. An unequivocal success.” — *L’Action Française*

“It’s really an excellent book. It’s the kind of suspense that makes you miss your subway stop or turn off your phone once you’ve started it, and we are hoping that Frédérique Molay writes many more like it.” — *RTL*

“An excellent crime novel that you read in one sitting.” — *L’Express/Lire*

“Skillful suspense.” — *Lire*

“You barely have time to catch your breath between turning the pages of this spine-tingling novel.” — *Ciné Télé Revue*

Winner of the 2007 Prix du Quai des Orfèvres

This prestigious French annual crime fiction prize was established in 1946 by Jacques Catineau, a big name in French publishing and advertising, to recognize the best unpublished crime fiction novel written in French. The *directeur de la police judiciaire*—the national police commissioner—presides over the Prix du Quai des Orfèvres, and the jury is made up of people from law enforcement, the court system, entertainment and publishing.

“Trials never show us the face we are expecting.”

—François Mauriac

MONDAY

Marie-Hélène

It felt like lightning had struck him. He couldn't breathe. His mouth was dry, and his throat tight. He was free-falling. She was wildly attractive: about thirty-five, five and half feet tall, slender, with short auburn hair and brown eyes highlighted by plain eyeglasses. Her voice was soft and steady. She had a keen, friendly and reassuring look in her eyes, and a smile illuminated her face—a magnificent smile. He stared at her intensely, like a pimply teenager entranced by a Playboy cover girl.

“So, you're Mr. Sirsky, is that correct?” she asked. She was sitting behind her desk, her fingers absently playing with a pen.

He nodded.

“Nico Sirsky. Is your first name Nico?” she continued in a voice that was so memorable, it would be distinguished from all others from that moment on.

“Yes. It's not a nickname.”

“When were you born?”

“January 11, thirty-eight years ago.”

“What do you do?”

“I'm divorced.”

What a strange answer, but it was the first one that came to mind when he looked at her. He had married too young—when he was twenty-two—and had a child. He was single again and not particularly interested in women, except for an occasional roll in the hay. No woman had ever had this effect on him. He had thought these feelings were the stuff of novels and movies.

“Mr. Sirsky?” the young woman insisted.

He looked at her hands. No wedding ring.

“Mr. Sirsky!”

“What would you like to know?” he asked, suddenly sheepish.

“Your profession would be enough.”

What an ass he was being.

“Chief of police.”

“And more specifically?”

“Head of the Paris Criminal Investigation Division.”

“Would that be the *brigade criminelle* at 36 Quai des Orfèvres?”

“That’s right, *La Crim*’.”

“I suppose it’s a stressful job.”

“True enough. But no more than yours, I guess.”

She smiled. She was incredible.

“So, who sent you to see me—your brother-in-law, Dr. Perrin, right?” she continued.

His sister had insisted. She behaved like his mother.

“What exactly is wrong?”

“Not much.”

“Please, Mr. Sirsky, let *me* be the judge of that.”

“I’ve had a stomachache for about three months.”

“Have you already seen a doctor?”

“Never.”

“What does the pain feel like?”

“Burning,” he said with a sigh. “And some cramps.”

It was out of character for him to admit any kind of weakness.

“Are you more anxious or tired than usual?”

He frowned. His work was weighing on him. He was waking up in the middle of the night, haunted by visions of bloody bodies. It was impossible for him to share the anxiety that assailed him. Who could he confide in? His colleagues? From time to time they did spend an evening together, joking about corpses to chase away the ghosts. But nothing could keep a cop grounded better than going home to a family and reconnecting with day-to-day life. Routine cares allowed you to put priorities in perspective and forget the day’s sordid experiences. That is why he hired married men with children. Eighty percent of his staff met these criteria. They needed this balance to withstand the pressure of the cases they worked at the *brigade criminelle*. He alone did not respect the rule he required the others to follow.

“Mr. Sirsky, you haven’t answered my question,” the young woman said, annoyed.

He put on a mulish look that made her understand that she wouldn’t get any more out of him, and she changed the subject.

“Does anything calm the pain?”

“I tried eating, but that doesn’t change a thing.”

“Get undressed, and lie down on the table.”

“Uh, totally undressed?”

“You can keep your underwear on.”

He got up and obeyed. His tall and muscular build, blue eyes and blond hair impressed women, but here he was a little uncomfortable. She approached him and put her hands on his flat stomach to examine him. He shivered. Erotic images raced through his mind.

“Is something wrong?” she asked.

“Medical examiners are the only doctors I know, and you can be sure that they haven’t left me wanting to be treated by any others,” he responded, hoping she would believe him.

“I understand. However, some situations require that you see a specialist without delay. What do you feel when I press here?”

He didn’t take his eyes off her. He wanted to take her in his arms and kiss her. Damn it. What was happening to him?

“Mr. Sirsky, if you don’t help me out here, we won’t get anywhere.”

“Oh, sorry. What were you saying?”

“Where does it hurt?”

He put a finger on the middle of his abdomen, brushing the woman’s hands. She palpated and then had him sit on the edge of the table to take his blood pressure. She returned to her desk when she had finished. He would have preferred that she stay near him.

“Get dressed, Mr. Sirsky. You are going to need some tests.”

“What kind of tests?”

“One of them will be an endoscopy. The doctor will put an optical instrument down your throat to explore your digestive tract. The walls of your stomach and your duodenum will appear on a screen.”

“Is that really necessary?”

“Absolutely. We need to determine the exact causes of your symptoms. It could be an ulcer. We can’t treat you until we have a precise diagnosis. An endoscopic examination is not very pleasant, but it doesn’t last long.”

“Do you think it’s serious?”

“There are several types of digestive ulcers. In your case, I think it is probably a duodenal ulcer, which is generally benign. Although it’s usually caused by bacteria, stress and fatigue can make the symptoms feel worse. But we need to be sure. What do you do other than work?”

He thought for a while.

“Run and play squash. And shoot, of course.”

“You should slow down. Everyone deserves some rest.”

“You sound like my sister.”

“She gives good advice. Here’s a prescription. Once you’ve had the endoscopy, make another appointment with my secretary.”

“You’re not going to do it?”

“A doctor in the department will do it.”

He put his obstinate look on again.

“Is something wrong, Mr. Sirsky?”

“Listen, I’d like you to do it. Would that be possible?”

She looked at him calmly and understood that he would not give up if she did not accept his request.

“OK.”

She took out her appointment book and turned the ink-blackened pages.

“You look overbooked, and I’m adding to it,” he said.

“Don’t worry, we’ll find a time. We have to do it quickly. Wednesday morning at eight. Will that work for you?”

“Of course. I’m not going to push my luck.”

She stood and accompanied him to the door. There, her handshake was both caring and firm. He was sorry to leave. One final time, he read the nameplate affixed to the office door: “Dr. Caroline Dalry, professor of medicine, gastroenterologist, former Paris Hospitals chief resident.”

Once he was outside Saint Antoine Hospital, the sounds of the city enveloped him, and he continued daydreaming about her delicate hands touching his stomach. Then a dull upper-abdominal pain brought him back to reality.

His cell phone vibrated on his hip. It was Commander Kriven, the head of one of the *brigade criminelle*’s twelve squads.

“We’ve got a customer,” he announced in a deep voice. “It’s an unusual murder. You should come.”

“Who’s the victim?”

“Marie-Hélène Jory, thirty-six, white, assistant professor of history at the Sorbonne. Killed in her home, Place de la Contrescarpe in the Latin Quarter. Homicide with sexual overtones. The scene is particularly, well, shocking.”

“Who found her?”

“Someone named Paul Terrade, her partner.”

“He wasn’t working?”

“He was, but the university was worried when she didn’t show up for her class at one this afternoon. A secretary called his office, and he went home to see why she wasn’t at work.”

“Breaking and entering?”

“No signs.”

Nico looked at his watch, which showed four thirty. It had been about two hours since the body was discovered. It was a miracle of sorts. Some evidence might still be intact, unless a lot of people had gone in and out of the apartment.

“I’ll be right there.”

“You don’t really have a choice in the matter.”

Squad commanders were under orders to request his presence or his deputy’s presence whenever they thought the situation was serious enough.

“And ask Dominique Kreiss to join us,” Nico added. “Her input could be interesting.”

She was a criminal psychologist with the Regional Police Department, recently hired for a brand new profiling unit. She wasn't there to take over the investigation, but to provide detectives with her psychological expertise. Considering what Kriven had described, it seemed fitting that she go to the scene. Analyzing sexually related murders was Ms. Kreiss' specialization.

“Can't we call in the old bearded shrink?” Kriven grumbled. “That brunette's cute little ass distracts me!”

“Get your mind out of the gutter, would you, Kriven?”

“Impossible with the body she's got.”

“I'm hanging up now. I don't want to hear any more of that crap. See you in a few.”

The Latin Quarter reminded him of his childhood. His grandparents had a shop on Rue Mouffetard. He recalled the days he spent playing with the kids of other shop owners on the street, not far from the Saint Ménard Church. That kind of neighborhood conviviality was long gone now.

These days, the Place de la Contrescarpe was a tourist haunt because of its cafés. As Nico approached, he saw that the café customers were gawking at the building, where an unmarked police cruiser, its lights flashing, was blocking the entrance. A man was slumped over the Renault's backseat. Two police officers were guarding the car. You could tell by their determined look that they had no intention of letting the guy get away. David Kriven stepped out of the building to meet Sirsky.

“We're lucky, Chief,” he said. “The precinct officer had the good sense to evacuate everyone before he contacted us. It's all clean.”

He meant that no other police units had been able to tread on the crime scene before being told that the case was outside their jurisdiction. Too often, evidence was ruined by the time *La Crim'* was called in. Sometimes the body had already been removed. Those were not easy investigations. Yes, things were improving, but there was still a long way to go. To get the job done right, they really needed an efficient cop, which they had today.

“Where is this prodigious one?” Nico asked.

“On the third floor, standing in front of the apartment door. He's monitoring who's going in and out.”

The two men walked up the stairs slowly. Nico studied the walls and each step to soak up the atmosphere. Then he held out his hand to the young officer, gratifying him with a warm smile.

“I showed up at three. I discovered the body and immediately knew that this wasn't an ordinary case.”

“Why is that?” Nico asked.

“The woman, uh, well, at least what’s been done to her. It’s disgusting. I’ll be honest. I couldn’t even stay near her. It’s enough to upset any man.”

“Don’t be fooled,” Nico said. “We all wind up being affected. Anyone who says otherwise is just showing off.”

The officer nodded and let them through. Nico took the usual precautions. He didn’t touch anything and did nothing that would destroy any evidence. David Kriven did the same, with the same attention.

Each of the division’s squads had six members. The third member—there was an established order based on experience and the role each member played—was the one responsible for the procedural aspects. Pierre Vidal had waited for Chief Sirsky before he started his work of collecting and sealing the evidence. He usually worked alone. For this one, he would do his job under the watchful eyes of Kriven and Sirsky.

The three detectives entered the living room. The victim lay on a thick cream-colored carpet.

“Shit. No,” Nico let slip, despite himself.

He squatted near the body and said nothing more. What could he say? The epitome of horror was spread out in front of him. Did man’s perversity have no limits? He couldn’t hold back a retch. He looked at his colleagues, all of whom were pale.

“See if Dominique Kreiss is here,” he ordered.

David Kriven looked away from the body, and Chief Sirsky told the officers to step out momentarily, perhaps to give them a break

“Go on. Now,” Nico commanded.

Commander Kriven and Captain Vidal left the apartment, relieved.

Chief Sirsky stayed near the young woman without moving and little by little noted the abuse she had been subjected to. The torture had been intense, the kind to make you lose your mind before you die. He thought about the probable unfolding of the murder and the killer’s profile. He presumed that it was a lone man. He felt it. He knew it. Every emotion left him, which always happened at a crime scene. His work required him to stay focused, even in the most gruesome cases. But now his stomach began burning again. He touched his abdomen. He was letting this get to him, and he would have to calm down. How could he not react to this level of atrocity? Suddenly, Dr. Dalry’s face came to him. She was smiling and holding out her hand, so gentle. She touched his cheek. He wanted to kiss her so much. He got nearer and nearer...

The apartment door opened, and steps rang out in the hallway. David Kriven was leading the squad in. The psychologist followed. She was small, thirty-two years old, with bright, mischievous green eyes. Dominique Kreiss squatted next to Chief Sirsky. The professional in her took in the crime scene without blinking. She looked unaffected by the repugnant vision and the smell of death. Dominique Kreiss had a degree in clinical criminology and was a specialist in

sexual assault. She wanted to fit right into the mainly male team of detectives working at 36 Quai des Orfèvres. If for no other reason than that, she never showed any weakness in front of her colleagues.

“Any level-headed person would take off running with one look at this scene,” Nico said to the psychologist.

Their eyes met. Nico had built strong walls, and it was not easy to guess his weaknesses. But for the first time, Dominique Kreiss perceived a slight discomfort in the chief’s eyes.

“Nothing seems to have been moved,” Nico said. “Everything is in order. It was not a burglary. I bet we will not find a single fingerprint. The work is meticulous and organized, and it is not some passing folly. There was no break-in, so the victim either knew the murderer or trusted him and let him in.”

“How high on the risk scale was this for the criminal?” Dominique asked.

“Pretty high. The Place de la Contrescarpe is very busy. Killing someone in her home without attracting attention, taking the time to clean up and leaving as if nothing happened require a lot of control. This bastard works like a professional.”

“The bastard, you say. You’re right that it’s likely to be a lone man. Someone who is sure of himself enough to think that no one would notice him. He is methodical and calculating—the opposite of an impulse killer who would have left evidence everywhere.”

Nico nodded.

“Now, the victim,” he said.

Dominique considered the mutilated, bloody body. Her heart rate quickened.

“There’s a mix of sex and violence. This is all about fantasy. I’d say that sex is not the motive. There is certainly a desire to demonstrate his power, to dominate her to the point of taking her life.”

“Be more specific,” Sirsky ordered.

Marie-Hélène Jory was lying naked on her back, her arms raised and pulled back, her wrists attached to a heavy coffee table.

“The bondage has pornographic overtones,” Dominique said. “The victim was stabbed in the belly, certainly after suffering those lacerations.”

“Jesus,” Nico said. “OK, Dominique, let’s get down to the heart of the matter.”

“Her breasts were amputated, and the criminal probably took them with him.”

“What do you make of that?”

“The person who did that has a problem with his mother. Maybe he was abused or abandoned as a child.”

Nico stood up, followed by the psychologist.

“You can start,” the chief told Kriven and Vidal. “Keep the knot whole when you cut the rope. We’ll test it.”

Vidal took latex gloves out of his field bag and handed pairs around. Then he began a methodical examination of the scene. He took a number of pictures and recorded his comments

on a tape recorder. He tried to uncover every possible piece of evidence, every possible fingerprint, some sort of signature, voluntary or involuntary. In the end, he made a drawing of the room and made sure that everything was noted: the position of the furniture, the objects and the body. In the meantime, Chief Sirsky encouraged David Kriven to search the apartment.

Dominique Kreiss slipped out. For now, there was nothing more that she could do.

The Investigation Begins

They didn't finish until evening. The body was removed and taken to the medical examiner's office at the Paris *Institut Médico-Légal*, the morgue on the Quai de la Rapée. The public prosecutor's office would order an autopsy. Chief Sirsky decided to go back to headquarters to question Paul Terrade. Commander Kriven took off to help the fifth and sixth squad members, who were responsible for canvassing the neighbors. They had already started their rounds in the victim's building and in the cafés on the square. Perhaps they would uncover some leads.

Nico took the Boulevard Saint Michel to the Seine and then followed the river toward the Pont Neuf, which he crossed to reach the Île de la Cité. Dating from 1891, 36 Quai des Orfèvres stood with the *Palais de Justice*, which housed the courts, and was right next to the government administrative offices at the *Préfecture de Police*, the Hôtel Dieu Hospital and Notre Dame Cathedral. It had always served as headquarters for France's elite police forces. Nico Sirsky was a member of the country's top crime fighters, and he was proud of it. What more could he aspire to?

THE deputy police commissioner, *Directeur Adjoint* Michel Cohen, was waiting for him. It was seven thirty in the evening, but the headquarters were bustling as though it were the middle of the day. Crimes and misdemeanors would never adjust to France's thirty-five hour workweek. From the top of his five-feet-four frame, Cohen managed to assert his authority over all of his teams. Subtle and pernicious political games often got the worst of the building's occupants, with controversial appointments followed by transfers. Every kind of partisan grudge and broken career was possible here. Cohen was a top-notch professional who kept his political leanings to himself. He had moved up the ranks at the Quai des Orfèvres, starting his exemplary career in vice. For the last five years, he had held the reins of Paris' central criminal investigation division. Rumor had it that he had the nerve to refuse a national-level position because he wanted to stay out of politics, particularly since recent elections had multiplied changes in the administration.

Cohen had left his third-floor office to join Nico Sirsky in his quarters on the fourth floor. He was small and lean, with bushy black hair, a prominent nose, thick eyebrows and keen eyes. His impatient hands were holding one of the large cigars he regularly smoked. The pungent white smoke immediately attacked Nico's throat, but Cohen took no notice.

"So, my boy," he said with his usual enthusiasm. "Hard at it, as always?"

They had an age difference of thirteen years, and Cohen had always treated him with manly affection. Nico was his protégé, almost like a son. Everyone knew it and sometimes joked about it. But Nico had forged a real reputation for his rigor, his hard work and his abilities as a detective and leader. He had jealous colleagues to spare. He was only thirty-eight and already chief of police. Obviously, tongues wagged.

"I talked to our shrink, Kreiss," the deputy commissioner went on. "I see two possibilities. Either the crime scene is a trap, orchestrated by someone close to the victim and designed to make us think it's the work of a psychopath, or the murderer really is a nutcase who has nothing to do with the victim and won't stop there. In any case, it's not an incidental crime by a prowler. It was organized down to the tiniest details."

Nico agreed. Cohen liked to summarize the information brought to him and, above all, to show that he was one step ahead of everyone else. He was the boss, and no one could say otherwise.

"Apparently it was not a pretty sight," he concluded, as if he wanted to make sure his colleague had gotten over it.

"The girl went through a rough time," Nico responded. "I just hope she died quickly."

"This case is a priority. Professor Vilars is on it. We'll have her report tonight."

Professor Armelle Vilars ran the medical examiner's office. She was a seasoned professional who left nothing to chance. Nico was glad to know that she was handling the case personally, and Cohen certainly shared that feeling.

"The boyfriend, Paul Terrade, is in the building," Nico said. "I'm going to question him. Kriven's team is out in the field piecing together the victim's last day, starting from when she got out of bed this morning, what she did, where she went and whom she met. We have to start by answering those questions."

"Good," said Cohen. "Follow that for the time being. This homicide is unusual, to say the least, so keep me in the loop. The public prosecutor wants you to call him tonight."

"Of course. Consider it done," Nico answered in a voice that he hoped sounded calm.

His boss was testing him. He could feel it. Would he be able to solve such an atypical crime quickly? It was quite a challenge for the person Cohen considered a worthy successor. Politics didn't affect him much, but he didn't have a simple relationship with the justice system. French magistrates, including the *procureur*, or public prosecutor, tried to wield authority over criminal investigators. Not so long ago, a police commissioner had been dismissed because he had kept his men out of an operation ordered by a magistrate who hadn't explained his reasons. Power struggles sometimes countered efforts to be efficient.

Cohen slapped Nico on the back—with a force he was used to—and returned to his office. Nico called the prosecutor and described the sordid details of the crime scene, and the latter ordered an investigation. In a few days, the state would designate a special magistrate who would lead the investigation, a *jugé d'instruction*. In the meantime, the prosecutor wanted to be kept informed. The procedure was complex but designed to make sure that all the rules were followed, and the rights of the accused were protected.

When Nico hung up, he asked his staff to bring Paul Terrade in. It was rare for him to question a witness himself. Usually the squad leader heading the investigation did it. But this was no ordinary case, and he had to be more involved. His troops wouldn't expect any less of him.

The victim's companion was five foot nine and nearing forty. His face was pale and his eyes red. He sat down in front of Chief Sirsky. Nico immediately saw that the man's hands were shaking. Usually, one detective did the questioning, and if he couldn't get the person to talk, he'd bring in another detective and leave the room. Sometimes two of them would be in the room, but never more, and they never used physical force, even with the worst criminals. He had heard of that rule being broken only once—when Guy Georges, the infamous Beast of the Bastille serial killer, was hit when he was arrested in 1998, after he had raped and killed at least seven women. No handcuffs were used at the headquarters either, a policy widely criticized after a suspect committed suicide. The suspect, Richard Durn, had carried out the Nanterre massacre in March 2002, opening fire at a city council meeting. Even though the no-handcuffs policy had been kept in place after the suicide, bars had been added to the windows.

“What happened?” Paul Terrade was sobbing. “Why was she killed? Why did they hurt her?”

His questions seemed really naive, Nico thought, but this naiveté was no guarantee of innocence.

“I have every intention of finding out,” the chief responded. “You have just experienced a terrible trauma. I suggest that you see a doctor. If you want, we can give you something in the meantime. Perhaps there is some family to inform?”

“Yes. Marie-Hélène's parents are in Paris, and she has two brothers who live outside the city. She's got her grandmother, too. And there's my family.”

“We will help you contact them after our talk, OK?”

Paul Terrade, clearly distressed, nodded.

“Do you have a place to sleep? You will not be able to go home immediately. Your apartment has been sealed off until further order. Do you understand?”

“My sister lives close by. She'll put me up.”

“Perfect. I don't want you to be alone,” Nico said. “Do you have any idea of how this could have happened?”

Paul Terrade started sobbing, and tears ran down his sunken cheeks. He managed to get out a barely perceptible “no.”

“Did your partner have any enemies? Or do you?”

“Not at all.”

“Were you having an affair?”

“No!” Paul Terrade responded sharply, evidently shocked.

“And Ms. Jory?”

“Absolutely not! We had been living together for four years. Everything was going well. We wanted to start a family. She is a good teacher. Very conscientious. She never missed a class, that’s why they called me.”

Paul Terrade didn’t know whether to talk about her in present or past tense. That was nearly always the case. Relatives needed time to comprehend this kind of loss.

“It was the first time the school ever contacted me. I was worried and went home to check on her. She was there. I saw her right away. She... she...”

“I can imagine what a shock it was. She died an atrocious death. Only a monster could have committed such an act. Perhaps it was someone you know.”

“Impossible. We’re just ordinary people.”

“No money problems?”

“None. We both earn a decent living.”

“And the family? Any particular concerns?”

“No. None. Really. I don’t know what I can tell you.”

“Often things are very simple. It could be someone you know who maimed the victim to cover up the crime.”

“I can’t believe that. Marie-Hélène was so nice. She was generous. She always thought about others. Everyone loved her.”

His voice was choked. The man seemed sincere. Nico’s first instinct was to trust him, but he knew from experience that he needed to be suspicious and keep up his guard. A murderer who was so sadistic could be capable of fooling anyone.

“You can help us,” Sirsky said.

Terrade gave him a hopeful look.

“By giving us a detailed list of all family members, friends and colleagues.”

“Of course, I’ll do that.”

“There is nothing else you can do for the time being. Give us the address where you will be staying and a phone number, and I’ll need to see you again. For now, my staff will contact your sister and ask her to come and get you. I am really very sorry about your companion.”

Paul Terrade slouched under the weight of his pain. Then the two men stood up and said goodbye.

Marie-Hélène Jory didn't have any classes in the morning and had taken her time getting dressed. Paul had left home around eight thirty and had gone directly to his office. Witnesses confirmed that he was at his desk at nine. He needed thirty minutes to get to work by car. Commander Kriven checked it personally, with a stopwatch in hand. Around ten, Miss Jory went out to buy a paper and some bread. She had made the usual small talk with the shop owners. One of her neighbors, an elderly lady, crossed paths with her a little later, as she was re-entering the building. It was impossible to find out anything about what happened from that moment on. Had she met someone in the stairwell? Had she opened the door for a visitor? There were still unanswered questions. In any case, nobody had forced the door. A team of investigators continued to question the neighbors. Perhaps someone had seen her through a window. Kriven shared his boss's feeling that they wouldn't get any serious information from canvassing the area. He decided to return to headquarters and write up the victim's schedule, a document that was needed for the case file.



The *brigade criminelle* was organized like a pyramid. Twelve squads served under four section chiefs, who were either deputy chiefs or operational commanders. They took orders from the division chief and his deputy chief. These hundred or so civil servants, including about fifteen women, were the life force of the famous *Crim'*. The deputy commissioner supervised this division—as well as the gang, juvenile protection, vice, organized crime and narcotics divisions—and above him was the *directeur*, or commissioner. Two people were higher up: the police prefect and the interior minister, who was at the top of the pyramid.

At nine p.m., Commander Kriven reported to Nico Sirsky's office with his superior, Deputy Chief Jean-Marie Rost.

"Were you able to put together Marie-Hélène Jory's schedule?" Nico asked.

"Yes, but there's nothing in it," Kriven said angrily as he handed over his report. He was always irritable when an investigation wasn't making progress. "Nobody saw or heard anything. It's useless. It's swarming with people there in the afternoon—people who live there, visitors, the curious, tourists, but nobody gives a shit about anything! Anybody could do anything and not get any notice."

"That's to be expected, David," Jean-Marie Rost said. "Our men have started to question the victim's family, friends and colleagues, and her boyfriend's. Tomorrow, I'll contact their bank and their doctors."

"What about forensics?" Nico asked. "What do our specialists have to say about the rope and the knot?"

"Nothing yet," Rost answered. "They are overwhelmed. Tomorrow is another day."

“Eight o’clock. My office. Shaved and ready to go back to work,” Nico said sharply. “I want to keep a close eye on this case.”

When the two men had left, the telephone in the chief’s large office rang out. The deputy public prosecutor was on the line.

“You have an appointment tomorrow morning at eleven with the state prosecutor,” a female voice announced. “An investigating magistrate will be appointed later.”

Perfect. That would give Rost the time to put together the investigation report specifying how the body was found, along with what the witnesses and neighbors had said, the specifics of where the crime occurred, the weapons found on the premises and any special evidence. They would have to add the full autopsy report and the photos of the victim that Professor Vilars would take.

The phone rang again. Speak of the devil.

“Nico? It’s Armelle. Apparently you want to be there for Marie-Hélène Jory’s autopsy. I just got the court order. I will be able to start in half an hour, just the time it will take you to get here. I should have been home hours ago to play model wife and mother. The bodies are piling up, and I’m not allowed to hire additional staff. Anyway, I didn’t call you to complain about my hours. Are you on your way or not?”

Professor Armelle Vilars was a fiery redhead with a sharp wit. Nico appreciated her professionalism and attention to detail.

“I’ll be right there.”

The division dispatched an officer to attend every autopsy and report the medical examiner’s analysis. Professor Vilars then sent her conclusions to the state prosecutor.

When Nico arrived at Quai de la Rapée, he was led to the room where the specialist was waiting. She stood there, ready to start, next to a coworker who was dressed as she was, in a white top, a mask and surgical gloves. Armelle Vilars winked at him and began working without any preamble.

Nico was used to this kind of scene. Nothing disturbed him—not the medical examiner’s procedures, the exposed organs, the blood or the smell of the ravaged body. Was he insensitive? Certainly, by force of circumstance. But the images did haunt him. It was impossible to erase them. He had to live with them.

Professor Vilars recorded her observations as she proceeded with the autopsy.

“The general appearance of the victim is that of a healthy woman who seems to have exercised regularly. She has little body fat. Body height is five feet six inches. Blood is being sampled for typing and DNA testing. Her hair is being combed for trace evidence. Nothing. There are thirty similar blunt-force wounds on the torso that I am measuring. Molds will also be taken to determine if they were made by the same weapon, more specifically, a whip, and, above all, if the same person inflicted the wounds. We will compare strips of skin to analyze impact and angles. There is a penetrating wound near the navel. The blade is deep, damaging vital organs. I am removing the knife and sending it to forensics as evidence. I am

photographing all the wounds. Now for Miss Jory's hands: Nail clippings are being taken and will be examined. Maybe she had some contact with her attacker, but I'm not hopeful. Now I'm taking ultraviolet shots that could reveal any invisible bruising on the body. Lasers will show any saliva, sperm or fingerprints on the skin. Are you OK, Nico?"

He jumped. He was so focused, it felt as though he had been holding his breath since the beginning of the autopsy. He felt fatigue gaining on him.

"Nico?" the medical examiner said again.

"Yes. I'm OK."

"Fine. I'll continue. The breasts were amputated with a scalpel. The technique was sophisticated. The thorax and abdomen are being opened, using a vertical incision from the xiphoid process to the pubis. I'm removing the organs one after the other, from top to bottom. There is no water in her lungs. I'll analyze her stomach and intestinal contents later, which should give me her time of death. I'm reaching the pelvic zone. I will examine bladder content later. Now the genitalia. Her uterus has increased volume. The victim was pregnant. No doubt about it."

"Pregnant?" Nico said. "How far along?"

"About a month," she said. "There's a rough placenta and amniotic cavity. Forensics can do a paternity test with DNA identification."

Nico felt himself shiver.

"We'll examine the head next," Professor Vilars continued. "I'm opening the eyes. The corneas are cloudy, but I can still make out her brown eye color. There are traces of ether around her mouth, so he started by knocking her out. I see traces of duct tape adhesive on her lips and skull. She couldn't scream. Now you know how the victim was neutralized. There are no contusions under the hair. The skull is being opened, first by cutting the skin from one ear to the other, and the brain is being inspected for blood clots."

Armelle Vilars finished her job.

"I'm seeing the public prosecutor at eleven," Nico said.

"The autopsy report will be on his desk. I'll send you a copy by email, with details about the wounds, tox and blood results, stage of pregnancy, my conclusions and impressions about the time of death and the nature of the weapon."

He had nothing to add. He left feeling as though he was in a waking nightmare. Marie-Hélène Jory was expecting a child. He imagined his son, Dimitri, a strong fourteen year old, a joy. He sighed and made a face when a dull pain in his upper abdomen brought him back. His thoughts shifted to Dr. Dalry. He suddenly wanted to see her. She would know how to distract him and take him far away from these sordid stories.

His cell phone rang again. It was Tanya.

Personal Business

“It’s nearly midnight, Nico,” his sister said, sounding worried. “Are you still working?”

“It’s been a hard day. I’ll be going home soon.”

“You could have let me know what the doctor said.”

Her maternal tone amused him. Tanya was two years younger than he was, yet she had a protective attitude toward him. What would he do without her?

“I’m really sorry, but I didn’t have time.”

“In any case, I know exactly what she said. Alexis talked to Dr. Dalry.”

Dr. Alexis Perrin was his brother-in-law, first of all, and on rare occasions, his general practitioner.

“What about doctor-patient privilege?” he asked, trying to get her angry.

“You can complain all you want to Mom,” she said in a teasing voice.

Their mother, Anya Sirsky, was Russian. Her parents had fled their homeland in 1917, and she took pride in her roots. Still, she had married a Sirsky, who was Polish, even though he had lived in France for quite some time. Her Russian ancestors must have turned over in their tombs when she married a Pole! She was tall and thin, with long blond, nearly white hair, a strong personality and acting skills in the purest Slavic tradition. She could shift from laughter to tears in seconds. Anya loved Griboyedov, Pouchkine, Lermontov and Gogol and could recite entire passages written by her favorite authors. All his life, Nico had listened to her do so in the slightly gravelly voice that was distinctly her own. Nico smiled affectionately at this mention of their colorful mother. She could have been a character in a novel.

“At least call me on Wednesday, when you have the results of the endoscopy. Don’t forget that I’m your sister, and it is normal that I worry about you. Who else would bother?”

Tanya never missed a chance to hassle him about his bachelorhood.

“Do you know Dr. Dalry?” he dared to ask, trying to sound detached.

“She went to medical school with Alexis, and they’ve stayed in touch. Why?”

“No reason.”

“No reason? I doubt that. First of all, I know you, and you generally don’t waste your time asking meaningless questions. Second, you are my brother, and I am still waiting for you to show some serious interest in a woman.”

“Tanya, your imagination is way too active. I just wanted to make sure I was in good hands.”

“The best. You know Alexis. For that matter, are you free for dinner on Thursday?”

“Sure. But please spare me the latest young woman you’ve found for me to meet.”

His sister let out an exaggerated sigh.

“Promise,” she said, adding a hint of defeat. “Now get home and go to bed. And call me on Wednesday.”

Nico returned to his home on the Rue Oudinot in Paris’ seventh arrondissement. He opened the blue porte cochère between the French Overseas Territories Ministry and the Saint-Jean Clinic. A garden in the middle of the city opened before him. A few ivy-covered homes with flowers lined a small private alley. In the distance, you could see the Montparnasse Tower all lit up. Here, he was in the very heart of the capital, and yet there was no noise. He would never have had the means to pay for this without the inheritance from his father. By means of hard work, intuition and certainly a bit of luck, his family had made a fortune in trading, and he had often lent a hand. This had allowed him to do the police work he loved without any financial constraints. The day he could no longer put up with the intense demands of his job, he could leave the police and live comfortably.

He unlocked the front door and immediately felt a presence. One of the three windows on the first floor was open. He pulled out his weapon, which he carried in a holster on his right side. He crept in the shadows. A small hallway opened onto the dining room and the kitchen. He decided to take the stairs to the second floor, which had a comfortable living room, his bedroom and an adjacent bathroom. He slipped out of his shoes before climbing the first step. He heard a vague breathing. He was sure someone was there. When he reached the top of the stairs, he let out a sigh of relief. His son was sleeping in his pajamas on the black sofa. He holstered his pistol and quietly approached the teenager. His son looked so much like him, he could have been a younger clone. He had a long, muscular body, refined features, deep blue eyes and blond hair that could have used a cut. The boy had a room and a bathroom on the third floor, next to the office. Nico decided not to wake him up, grabbed a plaid throw and covered him up. He climbed up a flight and saw that his son’s things were scattered across the floor, and his book bag was emptied on the bed. Nico and his ex-wife shared custody of Dimitri, and this was not his week. He was ready to bet that once again mother and son had fought. Sylvie held it against Dimitri that he looked so much like his father. She couldn’t help it. She resented her son’s affection for his father. She wanted her son’s exclusive love. What else could Nico do but try to smooth things out between the two of them? He knew that it was important that they get along. He even discouraged Dimitri from moving in with him permanently. Not that he didn’t want him to, but because Sylvie couldn’t handle it. He decided to call his ex-wife.

“Nico?” he heard her say.

“Yes, it’s me,” he responded. “He’s here. Don’t worry. I would have called you earlier, but I just got back. He fell asleep on the couch.”

There was silence on the other end of the phone.

“Sylvie, are you there?”

“Yes. You know, I don’t know what to do with him,” she said, distraught.

Her trembling voice announced a storm. Sylvie broke down easily.

“It’s not the first time this has happened. Step back a little. Give him some slack. You’ll see. Things will go better.”

“I’m not so sure about that. You’re everything to him.”

“Don’t start that again. We’ve talked about this a thousand times. It’s true that he and I are close, but you’re his mother. He loves you, and he needs you.”

“I don’t know. I just don’t know anymore.”

She was crying. He had to stay calm to keep things from getting any worse.

“This shared custody thing...”

“Listen, Sylvie, I won’t ever question that. I promised you. So stop pummeling yourself with those stupidities. Take a vacation with Dimitri, and talk things over. In any case, I’ll send him back to you tomorrow. It’s your week. In the meantime, go to bed. I’m doing the same.”

“OK,” she said in a whiny voice.

He hung up and returned to look at his son sleeping peacefully. He leaned over and kissed him on the forehead. Then he went to his room, removed his holster from his belt and put his gun in the safe. He took a good shower and climbed under the sheets. It was nearly one in the morning. As soon as he closed his eyes, he saw Marie-Hélène Jory’s body. First it was in her apartment, in the middle of the living room. Then it was in the refrigerated morgue. The medical examiner’s incisions were superimposed over the attacker’s wounds. A dangerous psychopath. A criminal who took pleasure in his victim’s terror. He was sure there would be more murders.

He fell asleep with this anxiety-ridden certainty.

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