



MONASH University

Immigrant Representations in Contemporary European Crime Fiction

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Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the particular and different ways in which immigrants are represented in contemporary European crime fiction. What do these representations look like? Do they tend to be reductive, stereotypical, or are they more complex, multi-dimensional? As Europe's socio-political landscape changes and migrants become more visible, are we seeing a shift in how immigrants are represented in European crime novels?

The questions raised in the exegesis are examined through a close analysis of seven novels in which immigration appears as a central theme. One of these works is my novel *Wasteland*, in which the crimes, the settings and characters all serve a deliberate purpose: to add to and expand on a growing sub-section of the European crime fiction genre that is beginning to question how the Other is represented. The exegesis examines the ways in which the seven novels challenge stereotypes and offer new ways of seeing the Other. It interrogates whether these representations allow for a shifting of perspective and re-balancing of power, where counter-discourses challenge dominant, hegemonic perspectives.

This thesis consists of two separate sections, the exegetical research component and the creative work, *Wasteland*. While they can be considered separately, my research into immigrant representations in European crime fiction informed the fictional component, and what I learned throughout the process of writing the novel helped shape the study's conclusion.

Declaration

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at any university or equivalent institution and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

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IMMIGRANT REPRESENTATIONS IN CONTEMPORARY EUROPEAN CRIME FICTION

Introduction

The core purpose of this creative-based thesis is to interrogate the depiction of the immigrant in contemporary European crime fiction. The overarching question here is this: is there, in contemporary European literatures, a discourse on immigrants that goes beyond the basic, binary opposition between insider and outsider, between ‘us’ and ‘them’?

This project includes a European crime novel titled *Wasteland* — I (the author) am part-French and the story is set in Paris and one of its suburbs — as well as a related thesis that explores a number of questions driving the research and fiction: are there contemporary European crime novels that provide new ways of seeing the Other? To what extent do those novels articulate immigrant constructs that are complex and multi-dimensional rather than stereotypical? How is this achieved? And what is the impact on the relationship between the Self and the Other? In this study, an examination of the role of stereotypes in the selected novels serves a higher purpose: to illustrate a recent shift in the representation of immigrants.

The perceived separation between ‘us’ and ‘them’ relies on a discourse on migration that has a long history. These representations are unreliable and yet they have become entrenched over time. In an article titled “The Discursive Construction of Migrants and Migration,” Walter Pohl and Ruth Wodak argue that many debates on migration explicitly or implicitly rely on historical arguments and on an often derogatory language of migration that began to take shape as far back as classical antiquity (207). Collective acts and events that were at best episodes in the historical process have left a lasting impression on the Western imagination. Names such as Vandals, Huns, and Goths have remained on the agenda long after they disappeared from the political map, only to be used as negative stereotypes.

With particular reference to seven selected novels, including my novel *Wasteland*, I propose that there exist forms of representation of the Other that challenge such stereotypes and thus destabilize existing power relations between the dominant and the subaltern.

The discussion in these chapters helped shape immigrant representations in my novel *Wasteland* by opening up new avenues of writing. The creative project in turn helped build on and influence the direction of my academic research and associated findings.

Context

The innovative nature of my research lies in its scope. There have been many studies on representations of the Other in relation to individual authors, or within a specific national context. To date, analyses of European literature have tended to focus on the national rather than the transnational, or to at best to illuminate aspects of western European fiction and neglect the eastern European countries (Hammond 2). Here, my purpose is to present a more pan-European understanding of the issue. As Stewart King observes in “Crime Fiction as World Literature”, a world literature approach to crime fiction – as opposed to the more traditional national perspectives – provides a space in which to ‘establish a dialogue between writers and texts across national, cultural, linguistic and temporal borders’ (7). More specifically, as King points out, there is an opportunity to counterbalance the monopoly of the Anglo-American canon by investigating cross-cultural references in the genre. Traditionally, studies of non-Anglo-American crime fiction ‘contribute to their own marginalisation in crime fiction criticism by tending to limit their object of analysis to a specific national or regional literary tradition’ (King 2).

In *Unwilling Executioner*, Andrew Pepper interrogates what he refers to as crime fiction’s ‘intrinsic transnationality’ (7). Pepper argues that there are connections between Anglo-American crime fiction and other national crime fiction traditions, especially in

continental Europe, which have been overlooked (8). I have sought here to establish some of the connections between different crime fiction traditions in Europe, by examining a diverse selection of books to address (both in my novel and in my exegesis) a theme that is increasingly not only local but global — immigration. In order to foster this dialogue around the question of immigration, this thesis eschews the traditional nationally-bound focus of many crime fiction studies, instead proposing that a pan-European approach allows for an examination of such themes that encompass different cultures and are not limited to a single nation.

Another reason for a European approach is that there is among European nations a shared history of migration. If one looks specifically, for the purposes of this thesis, at the period between 1945 and the present, there are commonalities in migration patterns. While each country clearly has its distinctive characteristics, there are shared experiences. In the period immediately following the Second World War, the main migratory flows in Europe were initially made up of people who had been displaced by the fighting. Around the same time, countries such as France, Belgium and Germany were embarking on initiatives to recruit foreign workers as a temporary measure to address labour shortages (Ben-David). Initially, the economic boom in these northern European countries attracted immigrants from the then poorer southern nations of Italy, Spain and Portugal. Decolonisation in the 1950s and 1960s brought new waves of migrants from North Africa and the Middle East to Europe (Kaya 20). At first, they were welcomed, but when the 1973 oil crisis led to a global economic downturn and rising unemployment, European governments imposed restrictions on immigration.

Despite these measures, the numbers kept growing. Waves of immigration in the 1990s and 2000s have been triggered by a series of political crises: notably, asylum seeking and ethnic migration following the collapse of communism in eastern Europe, and more

recently the crises in the Middle East (Kaya 19-20). Throughout the writing of this thesis, the world's attention has been centered on the rise of the jihadist group Islamic State and by the civil war in Syria, which has claimed hundreds of thousands of lives and forced millions of people from their homes. More than 4.5 million Syrians have sought asylum in neighbouring countries and one in ten has sought refuge in Europe, inciting political squabbling among member countries over sharing the burden (Rodgers, Gritten et al).

The scale of this migration is something else that European nations have in common. According to a 2015 report by the United Nations' Department of Economic and Social Affairs, the number of international migrants — persons living in a country other than where they were born — reached 244 million in 2015 for the world as a whole, an increase of 71 million, or 41 per cent, compared to 2000. Europe added the second largest number of international migrants between 2000 and 2015 (20 million, or 1.3 million per year). In *Reflections on the Revolution in Europe* (2009), Christopher Caldwell notes: 'There is no precedent for the mass immigration that Europe has seen over the last five decades and may see for years to come' (25).

Globally, immigration is just one aspect of what some have labeled a new world order — an unfamiliar landscape that does little to reassure us. 'The world's traditional order is breaking down,' Victor Chauvet wrote in the *Diplomatic Courier* on 10 February 2017. That order, real or perceived, is upset by recent events such as Brexit, the election of Donald Trump as American president, and the 'biggest immigration flow of the last half-century sparked by the turmoil in Syria.' As Chauvet sees it, Europe has gone from 'a strong partnership' to 'Conservatism and Nationalism.' The suggestion, exemplified by Brexit, is that European nations are turning inwards. At the time of writing, independent candidate Emmanuel Macron has won the French presidency but has had to compete with the National Front's Marine le Pen, who had vowed to withdraw France from the European Union if she

became president. The fact that Le Pen made it through the first round with about 21.5 per cent of the popular vote is a reflection of the shared sense of strangeness that European nations are experiencing. Martin Conway notes that:

We inhabit a present which owes little to “our” past. The twentieth-century history of Europe has come to an end. Everybody can choose their terminus date of preference, be it the reunification of Europe after 1989, the impact of the neo-liberal reforms of the 1990s, or the attacks on the Twin Towers on 9/11 and their subsequent imitators in Europe. But, wherever you choose to stick the frontier post between past and present, it is impossible to ignore the sense that European history has not so much ended as turned into a new configuration.

In his paper on representations of refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants in the United Kingdom, Majid Khosravinik reflects that new major developments such as the rise of terrorism have contributed to the emergence of ‘discourses of urgency in the demarcation of ‘us’ and ‘them’ among many modern European societies’ (3). Increasingly, Europeans are exploring the notion of what it means to be French, British, Swedish, Italian — and testing out the permeability of their national identity and culture. One cannot ask these questions about national identity without also asking what it means to be an immigrant, to be the Other.

There exists a significant body of academic research on the question of the Other as it relates to fiction in general, and to crime fiction in particular. Much of this research over the past few decades has centered on the treatment of the Other in a postcolonial context. This existing research seeks to illuminate the perspectives of non-dominant ethnic groups — *The Postcolonial Detective* (2001), edited by Ed Christian; *Multicultural Detective Fiction: Murder From the Other Side* (1999), edited by Adrienne Johnson Gosselin; *Postcolonial Postmortems: Crime Fiction from a Transcultural Perspective* (2006), edited by Christine Matzke and Susanne Mühleisen; *Detective Fiction in a Postcolonial and Transnational World* (2009) edited by Nels Pearson and Marc Singer — and to examine questions of belonging, difference and hybridity, such as we see in *The Foreign in International Crime Fiction: Transcultural Representations* (2012), edited by Jean Anderson, Carolina Miranda and Barbara Pezzotti.

Given its explosion as a discursive theme in recent decades, it is no surprise that immigration should be acquiring a privileged space in European crime fiction. Fiction has always been a way to explore our fears and uncertainties, to frame the questions we ask ourselves. It gives voice to complex thoughts and emotions we are not always able to articulate, and allows us to look at the world in ways that often elude us as we go about our everyday lives.

As a genre, crime fiction lends itself well to this exploration because its very premise is a questioning of prevailing assumptions. Crime fiction is prone to addressing and discussing contemporary issues (Bergman 52). In this globalised age, crime novels have become a platform where multicultural issues and realities are being explored' and where 'the vexed and complicated relationship between different cultures does not only get illustrated but investigated' (Glesener 15).

When a crime is committed, the residing order is disrupted. The crime and its investigation reveal what until then lay beneath the surface. Hidden motives, masked hatreds, acts of betrayal and deceit must now be unearthed. The search for answers is often part of a broader reflection on human motive and society. There is, in many crime novels and in particular those selected for the purposes of this study, a political commitment at play, what Andrew Pepper refers to as an ambition to reframe experience (11).

This ambition may be what sets crime fiction apart from so-called literary fiction. In an online interview on 17 March 2010, on a blog site called *Crime Watch*, Scottish novelist William McIlvanney expresses a view that literary fiction has become detached from present-day realities — he points to an increase in historical fiction (set in the past rather than in the present) as one factor — and notes that it has thus been left to genre writers to engage with contemporary society ("Crime Fiction as a Window on Society?"). Aside from its preoccupation with current issues, another reason why crime fiction may, as a genre, lend

itself well to social commentary, is that the plot and subsequent investigation in a crime story provide entry into different levels of society, cutting across class and allowing the investigating character — and by extension the reader — access to places one might not normally be able to access. The investigating character is given license to enter any place he pleases, for the purposes of solving the crime. The investigation relies on a great many questions being asked, about people and their environment. As it progresses, readers find out a great deal about the world they've entered, both about the private lives of individuals and about the social landscape they evolve in. In crime fiction, social context is essential to the plot. A pertinent example is Jean-Claude Izzo's Marseilles trilogy, which includes the novels *Total Kheops* (published in English as *Total Chaos*, 2005), *Chourmo* (Chourmo, 2006) and *Soléa* (Solea, 2007). Marseilles' social and political landscape are integral to the plot. The crimes are enmeshed with questions of race, social inequality, corruption, law and order, and political extremism.

As a sub-genre of popular culture, crime fiction also allows for the expression of multiple discourses that run counter to a hegemonic standpoint. And a number of crime novelists are using the genre to address contemporary questions of ethnicity and culture. Jim Collins in his book *Uncommon Cultures* (1989) proposes that 'culture is no longer a unitary, fixed category, but what he calls a decentered, fragmentary assemblage of conflicting voices and institutions' (2). In this book, he is referring specifically to the co-existence of so-called High Art, enjoyed by an elite audience, and of the growing mass culture espoused by the working-class. In the current context, I would argue that this decentering is also true in relation to rising migrant populations. The decentering Collins refers to means there is no longer a privileged mode of representation.

Crime fiction often directs a keen, journalistic eye on the world, tending as it does to situate itself in the here and now. As Cathy Cole puts it in *Private Dicks and Feisty Chicks*, crime writers are shaped by the social world in which they live and work. She observes:

Clues may be drawn from the social and political discourse of the day — racism, youth unemployment, drug addiction or war. Characters are shaped by their environment, and clues may be drawn from their reaction to it. This is what makes crime fiction such a political genre: it actively engages with and responds to the social world around it. (56)

Its immediate relevance is in part what makes the genre so popular with readers. According to Cole, by reading crime fiction, ‘readers test their knowledge, their ethical and political positions and their instincts as they read’ (42).

The relationship between reader and text that Cole identifies is important in crime fiction, as is the process of uncovering what normally remains unseen. P.D. James notes that this process of ‘exposing, disrupting and redefining’ is deeply political and obliges the crime novelist to take position. She writes:

Unlike other authors, who at least have the option of remaining at arm’s length from the society in which they and their characters live, crime writers must actively observe and challenge the social and political establishment. To do this, they need to be partisan. (199)

As ‘partisan’ writers, crime novelists engage with their times. The genre lends itself well to an exploration of society, and of self: arguably, crime fiction tells us who we are, and how we are shaped by our environment. It does this by placing us in a fraught environment — a crime is committed — and often against a backdrop of social change or tension. In *Murder from an Academic Angle*, Heta Pyrhönen argues:

The genre, by dealing with crime — a transgression against the socially and morally permitted — inherently evokes questions about the law, justice and moral choice. The drama of solving a crime always takes place within a social milieu. It is this milieu, disrupted both by crime and by its investigation, which comes under scrutiny, disclosing various ‘truths’ about human conduct and nature. (3)

The crime novel's ability to take on current issues makes it an ideal vehicle for an examination of the way immigrants are represented in contemporary Europe. The questions that revolve around the crimes are part of a broader questioning about the individual, and about our world. Who are we, and what drives us? How do we live, and interact with the world we live in? What does the world look like, through our eyes, through the eyes of the Other? Its constant questioning and interactivity, compounded with its mass appeal, make crime fiction an ideal vehicle for discussions of otherness, as Anderson, Miranda and Pezzotti argue (1).

Foreign characters (and settings) have played an important role in crime fiction since its origins. Edgar Allan Poe's "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841), widely considered to be the first modern crime story, is set on a fictional street in the real *quartier* St Roch in Paris, and his amateur sleuth, C. Auguste Dupin, is a Frenchman. The murder investigation points to foreigners as the culprits. The witnesses all agree that they heard two voices in the middle of the night when the crime was committed: one, a deep Frenchman's voice; and the other, a higher voice of uncertain ethnic origin. Foreigners are the obvious suspects (the real culprit turns out to be a rather different sort of Other — namely, an orangutan). In *Snobbery with Violence* (1971), Colin Watson observes that until the Second World War, foreigners were generally portrayed as cunning and wicked. 'Foreign was synonymous with criminal in nine novels out of ten, and the conclusion is inescapable that most people found this perfectly natural' (123).

With decolonisation, new voices emerged in literary fiction that questioned such reductive approaches. Since the 1950s, authors like Chinua Achebe, V.S. Naipaul and Naguib Mahfouz, among many others, have sought to challenge the dominant, coloniser perspective, both by experimenting with style and by enabling readers to see the colonised in their works. They wrote about characters who struggled with their identities in the wake of colonisation.

In the past few decades, there seems to be a trend towards deconstruction, where the notion of identity becomes more complex and fragmented, and there is no single way of looking at the world. As William Chew puts it:

Recent international developments [...] marked by continued regional conflicts and a global terrorism characterized by apparent ethnic and religious incompatibilities [...] has lent added urgency to the deconstruction of complex stereotypes that seem to obscure and hinder understanding “the other”. (180)

In other words, in an era of complexity and increased polarisation, it is becoming necessary and urgent to reflect on, and better understand, the perceived gap between ‘us’ and ‘them’, between immigrants and non-immigrants. The need to talk about and better understand the impact of immigration is reflected in the major part immigration plays in public and political debate, across western Europe.

Wasteland and the French example

In France, where my novel is set, the issue of immigration has been at the forefront of literary debate for decades. In *Multi-ethnic France*, Hargreaves observes that:

During the 1980s and 1990s, politicians and public opinion were obsessed with what was widely portrayed as a serious threat to French national identity and social cohesion arising from the settlement of immigrant minorities originating in predominantly Islamic countries (3).

This debate has also played out in literature. Writers of Maghrebi origin like Mehdi Charef and Faïza Guène, for example, earned critical recognition through literary novels that document the lives of North African migrants living in suburbs near Paris. French crime novelists, from Jean-Claude Izzo in the 1990s¹ to the contemporary author Jérémie Guez,² have written about these issues, though there still appears to be a dearth of crime fiction by

¹ Immigration is a central theme in Jean-Claude Izzo’s Marseilles trilogy.

² Jérémie Guez’s French novel *Du Vide Plein les Yeux* (2013), published in English as *Eyes Full of Empty* (2015), features Idir, a private investigator and the son of an Algerian immigrant. Idir’s character gives the reader access to different layers of French society, from the upper crust to its criminal underbelly, and to its migrant and non-migrant residents.

immigrant writers.

While Hargreaves describes 'entrenched patterns of discrimination against immigrant minorities originating in former colonies' (1), there are other groups who experience this, specifically the Roma community. According to a 2014 Amnesty International report, nine out of ten Roma people in Europe are living in poverty, and one in five has experienced some form of racially motivated violence. In France, there are an estimated 20,000 Roma, and at least half of them live in the northern suburb of Seine Saint-Denis, an area marked by high crime and unemployment rates. According to Amnesty, the Roma in France typically live in harsh conditions, with little or no access to basic services. They also face a constant risk of eviction. The European Roma Rights Centre notes that, in 2014 alone, France evicted 13,483 Roma people. The ongoing and targeted discrimination against this community, across Europe, forms the subject of Aidan McGarry's book *Romaphobia* (2017), which comes with the sub-heading *The Last Acceptable Form of Racism*.

To give just one example, an ugly incident took place in 2014 that generated a great deal of media interest and political debate. On the 13th of June, a mob of 20 or so balaclava-clad youths dragged a 16 year-old adolescent from a Roma camp in a troubled *banlieue* north of Paris, took him into a car park and beat him. He was found later that night, unconscious in a shopping trolley, on the side of a road, near a housing estate known as the Cité des Poètes. He was known to police and had been detained several times before on suspicion of stealing. The beating was said to be an act of communal revenge by local residents fed up with his alleged crimes. Elements of this attack became the starting-point for my novel *Wasteland*. The novel is set in a housing estate, in a fictional *banlieue* north of Paris, which is loosely modelled on a real *banlieue* in the northern department of Seine Saint-Denis called La Courneuve. La Courneuve is home to an infamous housing estate known as La Cité des 4000, a place marked

by widespread unemployment and a high ratio of young people. In *Urban Outcasts: a Comparative Sociology of Advanced Marginality* (2007), Loïc Wacquant writes:

Ghetto and banlieue are [...] both territories ravaged by deindustrialization, where ethnically marked populations tend to be concentrated, and where households suffering from unemployment and low income accumulate, translating into high rates of poverty and social dislocation. (147)

In some of the *banlieues* surrounding Paris, the divide between 'us' and 'them' becomes so acute that these areas are frequently referred to as 'the Other France' (Packer).

In *Wasteland*, similarly to what can be found in La Courneuve, a majority of the people living on the housing estate are immigrants, and most of these are North African. A Roma community also lives nearby. In the opening chapters, a Roma boy is the victim of an attack similar to the actual event that took place in June 2014. In the novel, he does not survive the beating. Nor is he the only victim: shortly after the Roma boy dies, a boy of Algerian descent is murdered. The killings, and more broadly the novel's settings, characters and plot provided an opportunity to examine the relationships that France has with its migrant populations. Of particular interest for the purposes of this thesis is France's relationship with those North African populations that make up the biggest numbers of foreign arrivals in the country.

Crime fiction's reliance on plot (it stands to reason that a crime story must include a criminal act, as well as some kind of search for resolution) allows crime novelists to introduce readers to social and political issues that they may not otherwise be interested in. Crime writers are able to do this covertly, because it is the plot that occupies centre stage, not the social commentary. It is the plot that draws readers towards these issues. One good example of this is Stieg Larsson's crime novel *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2005), originally published in Swedish as *Män som hatar kvinnor*. The book contains a complex and multi-layered plot, but it is also a feminist manifesto and a novel about political extremism and Sweden's failure to acknowledge its fascist past.

In much contemporary crime fiction the plot gives the social setting its potency. The critical commentary on class, society, and politics, is present, but to be effective it must not didactic. In *Wasteland*, I have given centre stage to my immigrant characters and thus positioned my readers so that they consciously or unconsciously identify with these protagonists. The plot — involving the death of two immigrant characters — is what drives the novel. At the same time, the premise allows me to comment on aspects of belonging and exclusion in French society. The plot-driven structure of my crime novel has allowed me to do this without, hopefully, appearing too heavy-handed in my approach.

Corpus

Alongside *Wasteland*, this exegesis examines the representation of immigrants in contemporary European crime fiction in six titles published in English or in English translation between 1991 and 2015. By European crime fiction, I am referring to fiction bound by geography (where the story is set in a European country) and nationality (written by an author who has citizenship from a European country). But what constitutes Europeanness is more than that: it is the shared experiences of social and political change, as will be illustrated further. It is also not a fixed concept. Europe is a shifting landscape, and much of the shift in recent times is linked to movements of people into European countries. Other factors of change are at play, such as globalisation and the rapid pace of technological advance. In these changing times, it is useful to reflect on what Europe is, and this reflection comes into play through a number of fictional characters in the novels I have selected.

Of the six books by other authors, Henning Mankell's Swedish novel *Mördare utan ansikte* (1991), published in English as *Faceless Killers* (1997), is the earliest and is particularly meaningful for initiating a conversation about immigration in Europe and its consequences. The other texts are Denise Mina's *Still Midnight* (2009); Amira Lakhous' Italian *Scontro di Civiltà per un Ascensore a Piazza Vittorio* (2006), published in English as *Clash of Civilizations over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio* (2008); *Fleshmarket Close* (2004) by Ian Rankin; Arnaldur Indridason's Icelandic novel *Vetrarborgin* (2005), published in English as *Arctic Chill* (2008), published in Icelandic in 2005; and Karim Miské's *Arab Jazz* (2015), originally published in French, in 2012. While these novels make up the corpus of the thesis, other crime novels will also be used to illustrate particular points.

The complex practical and psychological consequences of immigration for a nation and society feature prominently in Henning Mankell's novel *Faceless Killers*, the first to

feature the police inspector Kurt Wallander. *Faceless Killers* revolves around the seemingly random killing of an elderly couple living on a remote farm, which happens to be close to a centre for asylum seekers. The murder story provided Mankell with an opportunity to reflect on the different aspects of immigration in Sweden, at a time when these issues remained largely unspoken.

In light of recent migration trends, the treatment of this topic in *Faceless Killers* seems especially prescient: Sweden has experienced particularly high levels of immigration over recent years. In 2014, its population grew by more than 100,000, mainly because of immigration. There were over 80,000 asylum seekers, with the three largest groups being Syrians, Eritreans, and people with no state or country (stateless). Only Germany received more asylum seekers than Sweden, followed by Italy and France (“Sweden and Migration”).

This large influx created tensions. When Henning Mankell returned to Sweden in 1989 after a year and a half spent in Africa, he found his country much changed, in ways that disturbed him. He turned to crime writing because he saw a need to talk about what was happening in his country. In interviews, he speaks of being immediately struck by what he called a ‘ticking time bomb in Swedish society’ namely the explosion of racism (Cornwell). Concluding that racist actions are criminal and that ‘examining a crime has always been an efficient way to hold a mirror up to the contradictions and stresses in a society’ (Wroe), he decided to address the issue by writing a crime novel. Thus, Geherin notes, Detective Kurt Wallander was born, on the 20th of May 1989 (*The Dragon* 24). The success of Mankell’s Wallander novels comes in part from his own, strong feelings that Swedes seem to share going by the enormous commercial success of this series, namely, a sense of alienation in a changing society no one recognises (28).

Another selected title, Arnaldur Indridason’s novel *Arctic Chill* reflects a relatively recent surge of Icelandic interest in popular fiction, and crime fiction in particular (Neijmann

458). These crime novels tend to deal with contemporary issues, making room for social commentary (Neijmamm 459). *Arctic Chill* tells the story of the murder of a young boy, whose mother is Thai and father is Icelandic. The book was released at a time of change for Iceland, with growing immigrant arrivals. The number of foreign citizens residing in Iceland has grown steadily over the past decade, as is reflected in the number of children with foreign citizenship in Icelandic schools and pre-schools (Ólafsdóttir Kaaber). In 2004, for example, 1,150 non-citizen children attended Icelandic pre-schools and 1,369 attended Icelandic primary schools. In 2014, those numbers had risen to 2,181 and 2,775 — an increase of 52 and 49 percent, respectively. *Arctic Chill* looks at how newcomers are treated — how they are perceived by the locals — but also at how the newcomers themselves perceive their new environment and the changing population they have become a part of. Immigrant representations in *Arctic Chill*, as we shall see in chapter one, end up telling us as much about ourselves as they do about the Other.

The next two authors, Denise Mina and Ian Rankin, hail from Scotland. Denise Mina has so far written and published five novels featuring the policewoman Alex Morrow. *Still Midnight* is the first in the series. In this novel, a family of Asian immigrants from Uganda, living in suburban Glasgow, are terrified by a home intrusion involving three white Scots. The novel plays with a number of stereotypes to challenge the notion of an unbridgeable divide between ‘us’ and ‘them.’ In Ian Rankin’s *Fleshmarket Close*, a Turkish immigrant is found murdered on a housing estate only a few miles from the historic centre of Edinburgh. Both Denise Mina and Ian Rankin have been described as practitioners of the Tartan Noir tradition in their use of genre fiction to comment critically on Scottish society (Clandfield 211). Their books, like those written by Mankell and Indridason, describe how migration impacts on society, and the tensions that lie beneath the surface. Clandfield notes that ‘Scotland is less

obviously multiracial than are parts of England, but it has a substantial population of people who identify as other than “white” (212).

France’s ethnically diverse landscape is eloquently rendered by Karim Miské in his colourful *Arab Jazz*, both as a description of contemporary society and as a commentary on the underlying tensions and complications of living in a multi-ethnic society. The book, which tells the story of a ritualistic murder in a multi-cultural *arrondissement* in Paris, paints a vivid picture of the French capital as a melting pot of cultures, where multi-ethnicity is a fact of contemporary life. But within this great melting pot, nothing is simple and no one can easily be labeled as one thing or another.

Finally, in my novel *Wasteland*, tensions between different cultures are exacerbated by geographical exclusion, where the lines that separate Paris from its *banlieues* are as much physical as they are psychological. *Wasteland* is the third in my series of crime novels featuring Commandant Serge Morel, the first two being *The Lying-Down Room* (2014), and *Death in the Rainy Season* (2015). The first two books were published by Pan Macmillan UK and released in the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand (*Death in the Rainy Season*, which is set in Phnom Penh, was also distributed in Cambodia and Thailand). While the stories in the three books differ greatly, there are commonalities. In all three, I write from the point of view of different characters. In all three, there is an attempt to illuminate the perspectives of characters who are either marginalised or on the ‘outside’ looking in. This is true for example of the suspects in the first book, *The Lying-Down Room*, where I take the reader into the minds of a young and disturbed Russian orphan and his adoptive father, a man who has himself suffered trauma that has isolated him and made it difficult for him to live an ordinary life. In *Death in the Rainy Season*, I alternate between different white expatriate characters, but I also delve into the Cambodian police officer’s character. He is both the outsider looking in — a subordinate in a murder investigation run in his own country by

the French — and the insider, looking out at the expatriate community. Given my interest in these insider/outsider experiences, and given the current socio-political environment in France and more generally in Europe, in *Wasteland* I really wanted to bring to life a community that reflects as much as possible the complexities of contemporary society and of what it means to belong.

Another obvious common element is my lead character. Serge Morel is half-French, half-Khmer. In *Wasteland*, his investigation takes him outside his comfort zone — Morel lives in an *hôtel particulier* in Paris and dresses expensively. His father is a retired diplomat, and Morel grew up in several countries. At the same time, he is better equipped than others might be to engage with people who are different from him because of his own multi-ethnic background and particular sensitivities. This is not to say he is necessarily more capable of empathy, but simply that he has a greater understanding of difference and diversity.

Together, as the subsequent chapters will show, the seven novels provide fertile ground for a fresh examination of immigrant representations. They encourage us to re-assess what we know and assume.

Approach

Post-structuralist theory reminds us that we live and dwell within language and representation, and have no direct access to the real. Stuart Hall's definition of representation is helpful for the purposes of this research. According to Hall, representation is a truth that is contingent, qualified, and perspectival rather than essential and inherent. In "Representation and the Media," a lecture he delivered to students at the Media Education Foundation, Hall defines representation as the way in which meaning is somehow given to the things that are depicted in words or images (6). Culture, according to Hall, is 'a way in which we make sense of or give meaning to things of one sort or another' (9). We have our individual ways of

making sense of the world but there are also shared concepts that allow us to live together, build a social world and communicate. In Hall's words, 'cultures consist of the maps of meaning, the framework of intelligibility' (9).

My argument also draws on the imagologic approach developed by Joep Leerssen that considers representations as constructs, built from different social, cultural, political and ideological identification mechanisms. Imagology is the critical analysis of national stereotyping and identity construction. It looks at how representations work, and how they shift. In his chapter in the collection *Imagology: The Cultural Construction and Literary Representation of National Characters*, Joep Leerssen defines imagology as being concerned with representations as discourse. The aim of imagology is not to understand a society as such, unmediated, but to understand society as we perceive it, through the discourse that mediates it. Leerssen notes that 'imagologists will have particular interest in the dynamics between those images which characterise the Other (hetero-images) and those which characterise one's own, domestic identity (self-images or auto-images)' (28). Imagology takes a deconstructivist approach towards the Other, arguing against the notion that there is a demonstrable essence of national character inherent in the representatives of a nation or people (Chew 181).

While imagology is not a new theory, its purpose — namely the laying bare of the processes through which we encounter and reproduce national stereotypes — remains relevant today. While in a globalised world societies may have come to regard claims of essentialism with greater wariness, the use of national stereotypes has in recent years seen a revival, fueled by recent world events such as increasing polarisation within the Muslim community, terrorism and a related surge of Western, anti-Islamic sentiment.

This study centres on representation, the images formed by the text. But the fact that these are constructs does not mean they do not matter. Our perception is only ever

incomplete. Salman Rushdie notes in *Imaginary Homelands* that ‘we are not gods, but wounded creatures, cracked lenses, capable only of fractured perceptions’ (12). He goes on to state that description is itself a political act. Reality is constantly formed by the text and the fact that fiction offers only representations of the Other does not prevent these from having real effects on the world.

From an imagological perspective, in order to understand a discourse on representation a number of questions must be addressed. What sort of text is it? Which genre conventions are at work? What is the historical context? Leerssen argues that the latter cannot be ignored, writing that ‘literary texts cannot be interpreted in a timeless, aesthetic never-never-land’ (28).

In investigating immigrant representations, this thesis analyses the contexts in which they appear. To interpret the ways in which immigrants are represented, one has to consider the genre — in this case, crime fiction — as well as factors such as history, geography and language.

Theorists and philosophers from Plato to Nietzsche and beyond have long grappled with the concept of truth, its definition and relationship with reality and representation. The purpose of this study is not to enter into a metaphysical debate. What concerns us here is representation, as defined by imagologists: in other words, the construct rather than the ‘essence’ of a person, object or event.

What is a construct? From an imagologist’s perspective, immigrant representations appear in a national, cultural or ideological context. Representation depends first and foremost on the meaning attached to an object, a person or an event. The relationship is symbiotic. Representation, Hall writes, ‘doesn’t occur *after* the event; representation is *constitutive* of the event’ (*Representation* 7-8). Representations are images that trigger responses, and these images trigger strong responses among many of us, some positive and

some not. In the second half of 2015, we were flooded with televised images of Syrian refugees fleeing their war-torn country and attempting to reach Europe. The representations offered by the media are designed to incite certain responses, from pity and sympathy to fear. The image of a dead Syrian child on a beach leads to a surge in sympathy and a public outcry over the treatment of refugees. Conversely, dramatic infrared footage of thousands of Syrian refugees crossing a border at night can incite fear and a sense of loss of control. Amid the ongoing debate about how to solve Europe's refugee crisis, the left-leaning newspaper *The Independent* published a story on how right-wing groups and commentators are using photos and memes to demonise refugees. According to *The Independent*, many of the photos are being faked, twisted, edited or taken out of context to support a number of myths and arguments (Dearden).

Crises involving migrants of Muslim origin, such as the 7th of January 2015 shooting that took place at the Paris headquarters of the French satirical weekly newspaper *Charlie Hebdo*, have made it difficult in many instances to be identified as a Muslim. Furthermore, the media are complicit in building representations to make us think and feel a certain way. And when we refer to images, these are not just visual. Words have the same effect. A 2016 report by the Migration Observatory at the University of Oxford, titled "A Decade of Immigration in the British Press" examined the content addressing migration in 19 popular British newspapers between 2010 and 2012 and found the most common word used in relation to migrants was 'illegal'. Another commonly used word in relation to immigration was 'mass'. Such modifiers help shape public opinion.

Fiction, like journalism, uses similar devices to trigger targeted responses. Such representations serve to illuminate particular viewpoints and discourses about the Other, through what they say and what they do not say. Even the most stereotypical, simplistic representation can tell us a great deal about what generates such a construct, about the

person being represented as well as the one doing the representing. From these representations, we can learn about ourselves and begin to separate and recognise the elements that generate these images. We can examine people, places and events in their individuality. This is the premise upon which the field of imagology is built.

Structure

The first section of this thesis contains the exegesis, followed by my novel *Wasteland*. The exegesis is divided into three chapters. The first chapter examines the function of representation and the ways in which it forces us to adopt new ways of seeing. What purpose do these representations serve? To what extent are immigrants stereotyped in contemporary European crime novels, and what is the purpose of these stereotypical representations? Do these novels reinforce or subvert stereotypes about the Other, and if so, what is the effect of this subversion?

The second chapter examines representation in its geographical context. What is the role of geography in shaping representations of the Other? Dichotomy and schizophrenia are central themes in this chapter. Inclusion and exclusion, us and them. Mankell's *Faceless Killers* illuminates the underlying tensions in Swedish society that result from conflicting pressures. On the surface, Sweden is a country that espouses egalitarianism and tolerance, but beneath the surface lie the realities of class inequality and a rapid increase in the number of foreign arrivals over the 1980s, in an era when jobs could no longer be taken for granted. John Rebus's Edinburgh, too, has a schizophrenic nature. In *Scene of the Crime*, David Geherin quotes Rankin as saying that Edinburgh is the perfect setting for crime writing because of its 'split personality' (129). Through Rebus's eyes, the reader is exposed to the city's dualism. We get to see the hidden city, the one the tourists do not have access to.

The third chapter examines the role of language and point of view in allowing for new ways of seeing the Other in the selected novels. It also interrogates the question of hybridity as it relates to these works. The chapter begins by considering the matter of perspective. Whose point of view are we getting? The detective plays an important part in the discourse on immigration. Investigators like John Rebus and Kurt Wallander give readers access to what would normally remain hidden: not just a city's underbelly, but also the things we prefer to conceal — the ugly side of discrimination, our indifference and hypocrisy. The third chapter also considers the question of language, and the power of words. The works help inform an investigation into the voice of the immigrant. Where is it located? Can opposition, the state in which immigrants find themselves as an inevitable result of the ways in which they are represented, engender empowering acts of creation and self-determination?

My conclusion reflects on whether there is, in contemporary European crime writing, a discourse on immigration that opens up the possibility of a third space, beyond the treatment and representation of the immigrant as Other. My research suggests that this is as yet a new and relatively unexplored field. But at the heart of the novels selected here, there is a willingness to leave behind what is familiar and challenge our thinking by engaging with alternative discourses that challenge dominant perspectives.

To summarise, my aim is to show how the novels selected here, including my novel *Wasteland*, provide new, multi-dimensional ways of seeing the immigrant, reflecting a changing European landscape where immigrants are becoming part of increasingly diverse communities and can no longer easily be labelled as separate, or different. The use and subversion of stereotypes is just one of the ways in which these novels question entrenched assumptions about the Other, alongside other channels such as geography and language.

Chapter 1: Questioning truth: representation and the other in European crime fiction

This chapter is divided into two sections. The first examines the elusiveness of truth and the function of representation as these relate to immigrant constructs in contemporary European crime fiction, specifically their treatment in the works selected for analysis. The second explores the use of stereotypes about immigrants in these novels.

In fiction, hegemonic representations generally serve to repress or blank out minority voices (Stam and Shohat 180). However, I argue that in the selected novels, stereotypes serve a specific purpose. They highlight the apparent schism that exists between ‘us’ — a specific readership — and ‘them’, the immigrants, only to then cast doubt on the reality of that schism. In the same way, in these novels an initial sense of anonymity and alienness when encountering the Other is gradually replaced by a sense of recognition. Just as we, the readers, get closer to finding out who the culprit is, we also get closer to understanding the Other, and ourselves.

The selected novels all have something in common: they challenge the reader to think about the way immigrants are portrayed, about attitudes and behaviours in our increasingly multi-ethnic societies. They urge us, the readers to re-consider what we know and what is familiar. Throughout these novels, there is often a sense of urgency. They are urging us, it would seem, to adopt new ways of seeing.

Scotland’s Rankin and Iceland’s Indridason make use of stereotypes in their treatment of immigrant characters, only to overturn these as the plot unfolds. In Indridason’s *Arctic Chill*, we are shown a changing Icelandic society through the eyes of a Thai mother and her son, as well as through the eyes of Inspector Erlendur Sveinsson, a gloomy and anti-social figure whose inner battles are synonymous with a wider social unease. In *Arctic Chill*, the

point of view of the Thai characters helps illuminate a distancing that has occurred within society — a coldness, which is the ‘chill’ that aptly forms part of the title.

That same distancing is apparent in Rankin’s book *Fleshmarket Close*. The victim, a Turkish immigrant, lived in dismal conditions in a building where no one, not even his immediate neighbours, knew his name. But Rebus’s colleague Siobhan lives alone and does not know her neighbours either. She too experiences loneliness and alienation despite having been born and bred in Scotland. In this mirroring of the experiences of the dead migrant and the policewoman, the seemingly insurmountable distance between them collapses.

Mina’s novel *Still Midnight* plays with a number of stereotypes by subverting them and challenging entrenched assumptions about the Other — it is the white male criminals who are uncouth and uneducated, while the Asian immigrant family, the Anwars, are decent and “respectable.” Yet the reader’s presumptions are shaken again when it becomes clear that certain members of the immigrant family are in fact not as innocent as it might initially appear. Moreover, one of the white intruders, Pat, is not just a common criminal, he is also a sensitive man who falls in love with the Anwar daughter. In *Still Midnight*, Mina makes the point that stereotypes abound on either side of the supposed divide between ‘us’ and ‘them’, and that character representations are necessarily multi-layered. They cannot be one-dimensional.

Algerian-Italian Amara Lakhous’s crime novel *Clash of Civilizations Over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio* raises universal questions about meaning and representation. What is it that defines us? Is there only a single way of looking at the world, and at the Other? Told from multiple points of view, the novel is ostensibly about immigration, but beneath the surface there is, among the native Italians, a broader struggle to come to terms with the pace of change in Italian society and politics. It is to this novel that I turn now to develop the question of representation, meaning and stereotype more fully.

1.1 Amedeo and his representations

This is a crime novel in which one of the residents of an apartment building is found dead in the elevator. At the same time, another tenant, a man known to everyone as Amedeo, goes missing. His inopportune disappearance makes him an obvious suspect, yet he was universally liked and no one can believe he is guilty. Ostensibly, the question concerns the crime. Who killed Lorenzo Manfredini (also known as the Gladiator), a man 'hated by all the residents in the building' (127), and why? But the real mystery concerns the missing man. Who is Amedeo?

The central question at the heart of Lakhous's novel has to do with the truth. Everyone in the book knows Amedeo, or thinks they do. One after the other, they are called upon to provide an account of what they know. In successive chapters, titled 'The Truth According to' followed by the name of a character in the book — the concierge, a neighbour, a café owner, etc — they offer their opinions, presented as monologues to an unnamed listener who could be a detective, or perhaps a curious neighbour. (The 'listener' is never named, only alluded to). The witnesses have a lot to say about Amedeo but also about politics, the treatment of animals, football, the declining birth rate, and the building's elevator, which generates strong opinions among the residents. The witnesses form an eclectic mix, from a Peruvian home health aide who keeps having abortions because she does not want to lose her job or be deported, to an Iranian master chef who can only get dishwashing jobs and even has trouble holding on to those. There are also native Italians, such as the building's Neapolitan concierge and the owner of a local bar.

The characters are all very different from each other — they have strong, conflicting views on most things, including whether people should use the building's elevator or not. And yet, in their observations on Amedeo, they are all the same, with only flattering things to say

about the man. There is, in fact, little to distinguish one complimentary representation from another. It becomes abundantly clear, as the testimonies are shared, that none of these people know Amedeo well. Meanwhile, the reader ends up learning a lot more about the speakers than about the book's main — and absent — character.

Through this story, which is part-comedy, part-tragedy, Lakhous is playing with the notion of truth. The more the various characters talk about Amedeo, the less we know about him. Many of the characters do not know Amedeo is a foreigner, and cannot believe it. The building's concierge is convinced Manfredini was killed by an immigrant, but it never occurs to her that Amedeo might be one. 'I can certainly tell the difference between Italians and foreigners' she asserts (33). To Iqbal Amir Allah, a local Bangladeshi grocer, Amedeo is an ideal customer. 'Signor Amedeo is the only Italian who spares me embarrassing questions about the veil, wine, pork, and so on,' he declares, musing that Amedeo must have 'traveled a lot in Muslim countries' to be so open-minded (47). For Sandro Dandini, the owner of a bar, there is no question Amedeo must be Italian because of his love for 'the three "C"s', cappuccinos, cornettos, and the newspaper *Corriere della Sera*' (94).

In alternating chapters, referred to as 'First Wail,' 'Second Wail,' and so forth, we hear Amedeo's voice. Gradually, we find out that his name is Ahmed, that he came to Italy to escape the violence in Algeria. The past is too painful to contemplate and Ahmed does not like to dwell on it. He does not even talk to his new wife about his life before he met her, preferring to look towards the future and attempt to re-invent himself rather than be defined by what went before.

By remaining silent about what took place, and by fitting in with everyone's comfortable version of the truth, one could say Amedeo (I will continue to refer to him as Amedeo as that is how he presents himself in the book) is, in a sense, complicit in erasing his story and identity. He has even given up his name, and we know this is no small matter as he

quotes Freud at one point, saying: 'A human being's name is a principal component in his person, perhaps a piece of his soul' (55). But later on, he comes across an article in the newspaper, written by a psychologist, who suggests that changing your name every so often 'helps us to a happier life, because it allows the various personalities that live within us to find expression, and it lightens the burden of memory' (99). This blanking out of one's name, then, is not necessarily a way of denying one's self, but can be seen instead as a way of refusing to be categorised by what has come before, to remain an open book where new stories can evolve and shape who we are.

At the end of the novel, we find out that Amedeo is innocent — on the day of the murder, he was involved in an accident while crossing the street and rushed to hospital, where he remains unconscious (the doctors think he may lose his memory). The culprit is instead Elisabetta Fabiani, a dog-loving tenant who hated Manfredini for organising dog fights that ended with the death of one of the animals.

So the murder is solved, but the question of who Amedeo is remains, to a great extent, unanswered. Because of his refusal to be categorised, he remains elusive, even if the reader does eventually learn something about him. The line between reality and representation has become blurred, and despite the 'facts' that characterise his past, there is truth too in the various ways his neighbours see him.

What the novel does, then, is disassemble any notion of an inherent, essential truth. It also plays with the notion of stereotype: there is something comical for example in the fact that the concierge thinks she would have no trouble recognising an immigrant, yet is so charmed by Amedeo that she does not see him as one. Amedeo does things differently from how these people think an immigrant should behave, and therefore he cannot be one. Each of the people summoned to speak about him sees only what he or she chooses to see. Meanwhile

Amedeo is forging a new image for himself: he is a deconstructive figure, who is conscious of the fact that his actions and his words define who he is.

The author, Amara Lakhous, was born in Algiers in 1970 and lives in Italy. Asked about Amedeo in an interview, he said:

'Amed' (sic) is a metaphor for a person seen by other people. There's a saying "The absent are always wrong." I wanted to explain my conception of identity, as something that is never closed. There's this misunderstanding about him, is he Ahmed or 'Amed'? Some people take him for Italian. It was my way of showing that identity is open. If I go to Germany and speak German, a part of me becomes German. (Ruta)

Towards the end of the novel, Amedeo muses: 'I said to myself that the word "truth" must always be accompanied by a question mark or an exclamation point or a parenthesis, or quotation marks, never a period' (130). And another character, speaking of Amedeo, says earlier in the book: 'He wasn't convinced that the truth will make us free. In fact, on the contrary, the truth according to him is a chain that makes us slaves' (77). By eluding categorisation, Amedeo refuses to be enslaved and creates his own destiny.

In the end, the book provides no single, definitive image of Amedeo. While none of the witnesses called to provide an account of his character seems to know who he really is, who is to say there is nothing in the images they have formed of him? Amedeo himself appears to embrace the freedom of not being defined by his past. While some might argue he is lost, that his identity is fractured, there is arguably something liberating in it for him too. There is freedom in his ability to offer up multiple versions of himself. Who can say which is truer than another? If anything, the fact that Amedeo is different things to different people implies a rejection of an essential truth. It makes the point that any representation of the Other is guided by pre-existing, hegemonic discourses. For example, there is the assumption that an immigrant could not possibly read an Italian language newspaper, enjoy a *cornetto* or understand local sport.

In *Clash of Civilisations Over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio*, the truth is at best an

amorphous, elusive concept. Amedeo questions its desirability. Why chain ourselves to such an abstract entity? At the same time, recognising that representations are constructs or images of the 'real' thing does not mean that they carry no weight. As individuals and communities, we invest in these representations. They are our points of difference, allowing for multiple dimensions of meaning and a redress of the prevalent, dominant perspective. While there may be no absolute truth, 'there are still contingent, qualified, perspectival truths in which communities are invested' (Stam and Shohat 179).

If representations can never truly be real, or objective, and are at best only qualified truths, they can thus be interrogated. They offer clues on how we perceive the Other. The use of stereotypes in fiction, for example, can play an important role in overturning our assumptions. In crime fiction, stereotypes can be subverted to make the reader reconsider his or her position. Eva Erdmann notes that crime fiction often plays with national stereotypes that are embroidered upon for the representation of fictional figures. In order to draw readers in and have them engage with the text, crime novelists have recourse to 'cultural stereotypes and clichés that are affirmatively used, ironically used and problematized' (22). This is valid for foreign and non-foreign characters, in other words not restricted to immigrant constructs. There is an intentionality in the way these stereotypes are applied, in order to create a certain atmosphere — a 'Scottish' or 'French' atmosphere, for example — but this deliberate emphasis on stereotype is as much a way of subverting it as it is a way of prompting audiences with a number of easy-to-follow, recognisable signposts.

1.2 Stereotype, anonymity and visibility

The representations of Amedeo in *Clash of Civilizations Over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio* are based on the tenants' assumptions. Bar owner Sandro Dandini, for example, believes that if Amedeo eats breakfast like an Italian, drinks Italian coffee and reads the local paper, then surely he cannot be an immigrant. (It is worth noting that here, the stereotypes are not simply about the Other but also about Italians. What does it mean, after all, to eat breakfast like an Italian? Do all Italians eat cornettos?) Because Amedeo defies stereotypes about his race and religion, he is not seen as what many tenants identify as a 'typical' Arab or Muslim. Amedeo, it seems, manages to evade the narrow representations that other immigrants might endure. He is still stereotyped — being Italian is reduced to certain images, such as the ritual of having a cappuccino or cornetto for breakfast — but in this case the stereotype is of Amedeo's choosing, within his control rather than imposed on him. He plays with image and perception, and what people see is what he wants them to see.

What, then, are stereotypes? Stereotypes are a way of both seeing and not seeing what is before us. According to the reporter and political commentator Walter Lippman, stereotypes derive from the premise that none of us can ever attain first-hand knowledge of the world. All we can access are partial constructs of the Other. In this context, stereotypes have a function. But what we see is a preconceived image of what is before us. In his 1922 book titled *Public Opinion*, Lippmann defines stereotypes in the following manner:

For the most part we do not first see, and then define, we define first and then see [...]. The subtlest and most pervasive of all influences are those which create and maintain the repertory of stereotypes. We are told about the world before we see it. We imagine most things before we experience them. And those preconceptions, unless education has made us acutely aware, govern deeply the whole process of perception. (81)

Lippmann describes stereotypes as distorted pictures or images in a person's mind, which are based not on personal experience, but rather derived culturally. He reasons that the

formation of stereotypes is driven by social, political, and economic motivations. As these stereotypes are passed from one generation to the next, repeated over and over, they become pervasive, entrenched.

Throughout history, there has been a tendency to generalise about groups of people according to a limited number of preconceived notions. Once defined, these images become difficult to erase (Leerssen and Beller 429). These stereotypes tend to depend on a handful of incidental characteristics. According to Beller, quoting Frank K. Stanzel, 'stereotypes combine minimal information with maximum meaning' (8). Julie M. Dahl, in her article titled "Suicidal Spaniards in Moody Portugal and Other Helpful Stereotypes", comments on the resilience of stereotypes:

Once a particular image gains a strong 'ring of familiarity,' it is rarely questioned and becomes amazingly mobile, cutting across what are seemingly disparate areas of daily life and appearing in all manner of cultural discourses. (1)

Over time and through repetition, stereotypes acquire a certain (subjective) authenticity. They play an active part in our mis-representations of the Other. And yet, however ill-informed a stereotype might be, however reductive the image, Dahl's notion of a 'ring of familiarity' is what enables us to see what we would not normally have access to, by providing us with a roadmap, a set of recognisable signposts. We derive comfort, too, from the notion that what is foreign can be easily labeled and compartmentalised. The comfort of stereotypes resides in their rigidity, in the fact that they resist notions of fluidity and ambiguity. Rather, they insist and depend on boundaries. According to Richard Dyer, the role of stereotypes is 'to make visible the invisible, so that there is no danger of it creeping up on us unawares' (16). He observes that:

The degree of rigidity and shrillness of a stereotype indicates the degree to which it is an enforced representation that points to a reality whose invisibility and/or fluidity threatens the received definitions of society promoted by those with the biggest sticks. (16)

Dyer insists on the complexity and contradictoriness of even the most stereotypical examples and on the political importance of understanding them. In his book *The Matter of Images: Essays on Representation*, he examines representations of dominant groups in society — men, whites and heterosexuals — and of non-dominant groups (women, gay men) in film, through a series of essays that deal with the cultural representation of social groupings. Dyer's perspective meets Stuart Hall's notion, outlined in my introduction, of the human need for shared concepts in order to be able to communicate with each other — what Hall refers to as 'maps of meaning' and a 'framework of intelligibility' ("Representation and the Media" 9). Similarly, according to Dyer, representations are 'presentations, always and necessarily entailing the use of codes and conventions of the available cultural forms of presentation' (2).

Our representation of the Other is always frail, incomplete. But the notion that we see reality only through representation does not mean that we do not see reality at all. 'Partial — selective, incomplete, from a point of view — vision of something is not no vision of it whatsoever,' Dyer notes (3). Equally, the fact that stereotypes are built on minimal information does not mean that there is no value in examining their function and purpose. Postcolonial theorists for example have examined why nations need to, in the words of Homi Bhabha, 'anxiously repeat' what is different about the Other (95).

Stereotypes provide a means of accessing the Other. But they also represent an act of negation, by making a judgement based on limited information. Rather than illuminating the particularities of the Other, stereotypes keep us from seeing the world. By attributing a set of characteristics and values to a race, culture or religion, we blank out the individual. Islamophobia is one example. It defines Islam in blanket terms as a religion that is barbaric and supports terrorism. The University of California's Center for Race & Gender defines Islamophobia on its website as 'a contrived fear or prejudice fomented by the existing Eurocentric and Orientalist global power structure.'

Since the attack on the Twin Towers, and in the wake of other terrorist attacks that have happened in Europe these past years, there is a growing tendency to associate Muslims with terrorism and extremism (Bale 315). 'Questions about the nature of European identity and the place of Muslim immigrants within it are now among the most contentious on the Continent,' according to Morley and Robins, cited by Joan Gross, David McMurray and Ted Swedenburg in "Arab Noise and Ramadan Nights" (3). The more labels we attribute to Muslims — terrorism, radicalism, extremism — the further we distance ourselves from seeing and understanding and the more we reject their specificity. As Steffen Köhn notes, 'the prominent visibility migrants receive in the media as stereotypes effectively renders them invisible as individuals' (2).

In Europe, the public's perception of migration has arguably become, on the whole, increasingly negative. European citizens are living through times of strongly felt insecurity. In this climate, the public presentation of immigrants and migration by the media and by politicians is often biased, linking them almost exclusively to security issues (Canoy). Muslim migrants in particular are increasingly viewed with suspicion, a perspective that has been exacerbated by the string of terror acts that have occurred in Europe over the past several years.

The selected novels in this study present situations where immigrants are viewed with suspicion – if not by all members of their communities, then at least by some. For example, some characters in Ian Rankin's *Fleshmarket Close* are almost caricatural in their prejudices, including his colleague DC Charlie Reynolds, as is shown later in this chapter. The book is also notable in that Rankin chooses in this story to broach issues that he does not typically address, as immigration is not a central theme in his other novels. Peter Clandfield argues, for example, that as a general rule Rankin seems to see Scotland as 'largely uniracial' (215). He writes that, 'despite the panoramic scope for which the Rebus books have (understandably)

been praised, they limit non-white Scots largely to roles as nameless minor characters' (216). In *Fleshmarket Close*, however, Rankin appears to take a more engaged look at Scotland's changing environment. Through Rebus's eyes, the reader encounters a new society where immigrants are becoming more visible, creating discomfort and inciting intolerance and prejudice. Rankin also plays with the notion of stereotype throughout the novel, presenting us with familiar, stereotypical images of the Other, only to question the presumption of any kind of authenticity in these constructs.

Fleshmarket Close opens with Rebus's arrival at a crime scene. The murder victim, we eventually find out, is Stef Yurgii, a Turkish Kurd. At first, nothing is known about him. He appears initially as nameless, of indeterminate descent. When his colleague Siobhan asks about the victim, Rebus says: 'Asian-looking, or whatever the politically correct term of the week is [...]. Could have been Mediterranean or Arabic ... I didn't really get that close' (21).

The location of the crime is Knoxland, a housing estate on the outskirts of Edinburgh. Knoxland is not normally Rebus's patch, but the local police are short-handed and his own bosses find it convenient to send the irascible detective out on this mission. One gets the distinct impression that he would rather be elsewhere. Here in Knoxland, Rebus is also in some ways a migrant, outside his usual patch. 'I'm not supposed to be here,' Rebus says somewhat gloomily at the start of the novel (3).

There are several threads to the narrative. Aside from the discovery of a murdered foreigner, another immigration-related strand is the discovery of a pair of skeletons buried under concrete in the basement of a pub. They are dug up, and initially thought to be real, but it turns out they are plastic skeletons used in medical-school classes. As the novel progresses, Rebus learns that they were being used to scare illegal immigrant slave labourers into toeing the line by showing what would happen to them if they failed to do so. But the buried skeletons also resonate with symbolic meaning alongside the immigrant's murder. Together,

the events are used to comment on Scotland's underlying racism and animosity towards unwanted immigrants and asylum seekers (Geherin 132).

While Stef Yurgii's identity is not immediately clear, it is swiftly established that he is a foreigner. Shortly after Rebus arrives at the scene of the crime, Steve Holly, a local reporter for a Glasgow tabloid arrives. Rebus is the first person Holly encounters and he addresses the detective, hoping for information about the murder so he can write a news story. The two men have the following exchange:

'Asian bloke, I heard,' the journalist said at last, blowing smoke and offering the packet to Rebus.

'We don't know yet,' Rebus admitted: his words the price of a cigarette. Holly lit it for him. 'Tan-skinned ... could be from anywhere.'

'Anywhere except Scotland,' Holly said with a smile. 'Race crime though, got to be. Only a matter of time before we had one.' (6)

Holly immediately assumes this must be a hate crime, because the victim is Asian. (There is also an assumption that because he is Asian he is not Scottish). There is a precedent, and Rebus understands what Holly is inferring: not so long ago, an asylum seeker was killed in Glasgow, and now it looks as if it is Edinburgh's turn. Rankin may have based this particular event on the actual 2001 murder of a 22 year-old Turkish Kurd in Glasgow, a crime that was reported in the media at the time as resulting from tensions around immigration (Hill).

The journalist Steve Holly isn't the only character in *Fleshmarket Close* to have preconceived notions about immigrants. The second time Rebus visits the housing estate, DC Charlie Reynolds is there, an ex-rugby player now in his forties whose nickname behind his back is Rat-Arse. From the moment he is introduced, it is abundantly clear where he stands on the subject of immigration. As he speaks, he spouts one cliché after another:

'Bloody waste of time,' he snarled.

'Nobody's talking?' Rebus guessed.

'It's the ones that *are* talking, they're the problem.'

'How so?' Rebus decided to offer Reynolds a cigarette, which the big man accepted without thanks.

'Don't speak bloody English, do they? Fifty-seven bloody varieties up there.' He

gestured towards the tower block.

'And the smell...Christ knows what they're cooking, but I've not noticed many cats in the vicinity.' Reynolds saw the look on Rebus's face. 'Don't get me wrong, John, I'm not a racist. But you do have to wonder...'
(59-60)

The non-immigrant residents of Knoxland are no more subtle than DC Reynolds, and have plenty to say about the foreigners. Rebus, on his second visit to the estate, encounters only spite and intolerance. And yet the criticism and abuse is articulated as a series of generalisations, directed at immigrants as a group. The residents who are complaining about these foreign neighbours do not actually know them. It seems that the housing estate's immigrants are faceless, with no distinctive feature other than their undesirability. Rebus, standing outside the estate while he smokes a cigarette, muses: "I haven't seen any of these people, the people everyone's so angry at." He guessed they were hiding behind closed doors, hiding from the hate as they tried to make their own community' (68).

It is only when Rebus and his colleague Siobhan begin to go through the victim's belongings that the dead man starts to take shape as an individual, with unique characteristics. In the man's flat — a cold, dark and cheerless place (70) — they find the remains of his last meal in the kitchen sink. In the bathroom, shirts and underpants have been left to dry. There is a toothbrush but no toothpaste. These details allow the reader to picture the man and his individual story. And while we are given to understand that it is in part because he is an immigrant that the man lives in such poverty and isolation, we are also encouraged to see the individual in all his specificity. When Rebus picks up the man's sleeping-bag — he does not even have a bed — half a dozen photographs of a woman and two young children tumble from it. The man has a life, a past, and during the investigation his distinctiveness, his individuality and his humanity allow him to emerge from a faceless, misrepresented crowd.

Stereotypes and the active ways in which they limit or close off our understanding of

another's specificity and individuality — these are also central themes in Arnaldur Indridason's *Arctic Chill*. The book opens with the discovery of a dead child on the frozen ground, in the middle of winter in Reykjavík, the Icelandic capital. The three detectives attending the crime scene — Erlendur Sveinsson, Elinborg and Sigurdur Oli — have no idea who the dead child is. Rather than begin their investigation by examining the nature and cause of the victim's injuries, the first thing that comes up is the question of the boy's race. The book opens with the line: 'They were able to guess his age, but had more trouble determining which part of the world he came from' (1). As they gaze at the corpse, wondering what sort of person could do something like this to a child, the three detectives have the following exchange:

Where do you think he's from?' Sigurdur Oli wondered.

'He looks Asian to me,' Elinborg said.

'Could be Thai, Filipino, Vietnamese, Korean, Japanese, Chinese,' Sigurdur Oli reeled off. (4)

Erlendur, the lead investigator, seems to have little patience for this line of deduction: 'Shouldn't we say he's an Icelander until we find otherwise?' (4)

Over the course of the investigation, the reader learns about the victim and his family. It turns out that Erlendur was right to question his colleagues' assumptions. The boy's name was Elías and he was Icelandic. His mother Sunee is Thai, divorced from her Icelandic husband Ódinn, a carpenter who lives in the same town (17). Sunee works at the local chocolate factory. She has another son, 15, called Niran, who is from a previous relationship with a Thai man, and a brother, Virote, who also emigrated to Iceland.

As more details emerge, the ordinariness of this immigrant family's life is what stands out. Despite the cliché of her initial encounter with her husband-to-be (Sunee and Ódinn initially met in a Bangkok nightclub, and the two could barely communicate as Sunee's English was poor), the Thai woman's life in Iceland mirrors that of other working-class

people who struggle to make ends meet while trying to raise a family. Sunee works long hours, doing overtime when she can to earn extra money (18). She tries to keep an eye on her boys as much as she can, but being a single mother and the only breadwinner means she is not always able to do so. Elías plays football, like other children his age (18). Just over ten percent of the pupils at his school are not of Icelandic origin so he is far from being the only immigrant child (105).

Early on in the novel, the stereotypes — a Thai woman marrying a Westerner whom she meets in a nightclub and with whom she can barely communicate, drawn by the prospect of a better life — are overturned when we learn more about Sunee and the boys, and the ordinary lives they lead. At the same time, Elías’s murder shatters this illusion of ordinariness and provides a premise for the author to raise questions around the theme of immigration, and to address the way in which immigrants are represented. The reader gets to hear and see how people in this relatively small and remote community view outsiders, and it becomes clear that there is not just one perspective, and that not everyone is quite sure what to make of the newcomers and their impact on society. Speaking to school staff, and other families in the neighborhood, the detective Erlendur uncovers the contrasting and at times hesitant views on whether immigrants are readily accepted in Icelandic society.

The picture that emerges is more layered and subtle than in *Fleshmarket Close*. When Erlendur speaks with the school principal, the man admits that one of the teachers on his staff has expressed ‘a strong dislike of immigration’ (28). But he goes on to say:

We accept no racial prejudice at this school. [...] We don’t tolerate it. People discuss racial issues here like everywhere else, especially from the perspective of immigrants. There is absolute equality here, neither the teachers nor the pupils would put up with anything else. (29)

A distinctive feature of this novel is the notion of a society that is only just coming to terms with immigration. *Arctic Chill* reflects on recent important changes in Icelandic society, and

their impact on residents. Immigration — particularly when it did not concern nationals from neighbouring countries — meant a dramatic change for a society that had long been culturally homogenous and predominantly white. From 1994, when Iceland became a member of the European Economic Area, it became easier for citizens from other European Union countries to come to Iceland to work. In the 1970s and 1980s, immigrants represented less than 1.5% of the overall population. By early 2008, immigrants made up 8.6% of the population (Ottosdottir). The character Erlendur articulates some of the unease felt by his compatriots. Halfway through the investigation, after having listened to different people's points of view, he makes the following comment: 'This is all so new to us. Immigrants, racial issues ... we know so little about it' (86).

The idea, voiced by some of the Icelandic characters in the novel, that perhaps immigrants cannot successfully integrate into Icelandic society, that some differences cannot be reconciled, is raised by Sunee herself. The boy's mother came to Iceland to make something of herself and give her sons opportunities they might not have back in Thailand, where life was harder. We are told, initially, that Sunee 'really likes it here' (20). But, later on, Sunee reflects that:

I came here in hope of a better life. I thought I'd found it. I knew nothing about Iceland before I came here. I didn't even know it existed. It was the country of my dreams. Then this happens, this horrible thing. Maybe I will go back. Niran and I. Maybe we don't belong here. (160)

While Sunee initially believed she could be happy in Iceland and make this country her new home, it seems that in fact her otherness cannot be forgotten or ignored. She had thought she could belong, until her son was killed. His death shatters the illusion of acceptance.

There is a running theme in the book, which is that of the tensions that can result from a new and sudden influx of migrants who speak a different language and come from another culture. To some, immigrants represent the root of all society's problems, when in fact the

contemporary factors of change are multiple, including increased urbanisation and its effects, globalisation, economic decline, and rising consumerism.

Throughout the book, the coldness of the weather is used in both a literal and a figurative sense. It describes the geographical setting for the book —Iceland, with its harsh winters — but also an emotional void, a lack of feeling, an aloneness. ‘He must have been cold,’ Elinborg notes about the dead boy (1). As we move through the story and get to know the victim’s family, and hear their point of view, the cold comes to represent the feeling of isolation and alienness that can come from living in a country where one does not necessarily belong, and where acceptance does not come easily.

The anonymity of Elfas, the victim, is not just about how immigrants are perceived. It is about a remoteness, a chill in society. Immigrant representations, therefore, are shaped in part by social change and context. In *Arctic Chill*, Indridason describes a population that has perhaps lost touch with its humanity, because the social landscape is no longer familiar. People are more preoccupied with themselves, more inward-looking, and the loss of connectedness evokes a climate of insularity and aloofness. The reader gets a sense of this coldness through Sunee’s eyes, and cannot help feeling that this bare, icy new home is in stark contrast to the lush tropical setting she has left behind:

Sunee had once told her she could hardly believe how desolate and chilly the country was when she took the shuttle from Keflavik airport to Reykjavík. It was rainy and overcast and all she could see through the coach window was flat lava fields and distant blue mountains. There was nothing growing anywhere, no trees and not even a blue sky. When she disembarked from the plane and walked down the gangway she felt the Arctic air hit her, like walking into a cold wall. The temperature was three degrees Celsius. It was the middle of October. It had been thirty degrees Celsius at home when she left. (20)

The chill is in people’s temperaments and attitudes. It contrasts starkly with the society and climate Sunee has left behind in Thailand. When asked to describe what his ex-wife is like, Ódinn notes that Sunee is ‘positive and happy and sincere and fun, always sees the bright side

of everything. Maybe it's the Thai mentality, I don't know' (326).

The novel provides as much of a comment on how immigrants are perceived as it does on the way Icelandic society is evolving. *Arctic Chill* is ostensibly about immigration, the lack of understanding of the Other, but it is above all about the anonymity that has arisen in Icelandic society. It is about the walls that have been put up in modern societies, where change makes people feel lost and alienated from what was familiar.

What the reader is presented with is not just a comment on the Icelanders themselves. Through Erlendur's character, and by giving the reader access to Sunee's feelings, Indridason subverts the stereotypes about the Other that are voiced by some of the Icelandic characters in the story. And from the different opinions voiced, there arises a variety of representations. Some are unsure whether immigrants can truly belong, while others feel they must be made to feel welcome. Some are uncertain, still feeling their way around the issue. Erlendur and his colleague Sigurdur Óli debate the topic. When Erlendur comments that 'I reckon that's still a common attitude: that foreigners ought to be kept behind fences', his colleague responds: 'You can't rule out the possibility that they erect the fences themselves' (175).

It turns out, in the end, that Elias's murder was a random act that had nothing to do with his origins. The two boys who killed him, Hallur and Ágúst, were 'in the mood for trouble' (334):

Perhaps he caught their attention because he was dark-skinned. Perhaps that was irrelevant. Ágúst said during questioning that of course they would have done the same if it had been a white boy. Hallur shrugged and could not answer the same question. He could not really explain what sort of state they were in. They were buzzing, he said. Excited after the shoplifting. Up for anything. They didn't know the boy who caught their eye. [...] They had no score to settle with him. (335)

Henning Mankell also emphasized the immigrant's anonymity in *Faceless Killers*. The anonymity begins with the title itself, which generates a strong image: to be faceless is to be indistinct, to be without any distinguishing features. More than that, it means you are

invisible, without identity.

From the beginning of the story, the text associates the facelessness of the unknown killers with the foreign population in the Swedish town of Ystad, where the story is set. In *Faceless Killers*, an elderly couple, the Lovgrens, are brutally attacked at their isolated farmhouse one winter's night. Mr Lovgren is beaten to death, and his wife is left barely alive. This is a senseless, savage attack that makes Wallander uneasy as soon as he hears about it. This sort of crime does not happen in this quiet town. Things are not as they once were, Wallander muses, suggesting that they are worse than before, and that crime has become more violent. 'Something had happened that shouldn't have, not here,' he thinks (17). And a little further on:

Maybe the times require another kind of policeman, he thought. Policemen who aren't distressed when they're forced to go into a human slaughterhouse in the Swedish countryside early on a January morning. Policemen who don't suffer from my uncertainty and anguish. (19)

Mankell sets the scene early on in the book to evoke the underlying social tensions that exist in this seemingly peaceful community. When the phone rings at his home, Wallander's first thought is that it might be news of a car crash, or trouble with refugees arriving from Poland on the ferry (7). Ystad has a big refugee camp and several smaller ones scattered throughout the district (88).

Before she dies, Mrs Lovgren manages to whisper the word 'foreign' (43), suggesting that the person or people responsible for the attack on her and her husband are non-Swedish. When this information is leaked to the press, there is an arson attack against the refugee centre and later a Somali refugee is shot dead by a couple of right-wing vigilantes. Here, again, Wallander comments on the change in Swedish society, this time by noting the rise of racism and extremism: 'Obviously we've entered a new and more serious phase. They're not just painting slogans any more. They're throwing fire bombs and killing people' (180).

In the end, the Lovgrens' murderers turn out to be two Czech asylum seekers, whose asylum claims may or may not have been genuine (286). They are foreigners, but they are Czech, pale-skinned. Mankell's story has revealed the part that racial prejudice plays in representations of the Other. The refugee, who was killed, was from Somalia and dark-skinned. He was targeted by political extremists whose politics are based on the idea that some races are inferior and unwelcome.

In her book on Swedish crime fiction, Kerstin Bergman notes that while there has always been immigration to Sweden, the country's population remained relatively homogenous until the turn of the twentieth century. It was then that 'large numbers of foreign migrants began to enter the country and that xenophobia became an increasing problem in Sweden' (52). She points to Henning Mankell as an author who 'more than anyone else has dedicated his life's work to exploring the Swede's relationship to the Other' (53). In *Faceless Killers*, even more so than in *Arctic Chill*, representations of the Other are intimately associated with a crisis of identity. Wallander's position, and the changing social fabric of Swedish society will be discussed further in the next chapters.

In *Still Midnight*, Denise Mina challenges stereotypes and also shows how the immigrant goes from being anonymous and unseen to being specific, visible. The subversion of stereotypes is a constant theme running through Denise Mina's books. In a 2009 article in *The Scotsman*, which included an interview with Mina, David Robinson cites the author's 'mission to de-cliché crime fiction.' One example is her choice of female characters. Her latest character, the police detective Alex Morrow, is not a lead in the traditional sense. 'She's out for herself, not always approval-seeking. I thought that was the type of character I hadn't read about before, very different from most female protagonists,' Mina told Robinson.

Referring to the Anwars, the main immigrant characters in *Still Midnight*, Mina said: 'One of the reasons I wanted to write about Asians is that I just saw so many parallels

between my generation of Irish Catholics and young Muslims now.' The similarity, she said, lay in the alienation of a large group because of the actions of a 'tiny minority' (Robinson). At the beginning of the novel, Pat and Eddy, two men in army fatigues, break into the Anwar's home (the third accomplice is waiting outside in the van). They are looking for a man named Bob, who they want to get money from. There is no one called Bob in the Anwar home. Pat and Eddy end up abducting Aamin Anwar, the head of the family, but not before Pat finds himself mesmerised by Aamin's daughter.

From the opening pages of *Still Midnight*, Mina challenges assumptions about immigrants when she introduces the three white men watching the Anwar home from a van parked across the road. Malki is 'junkie-thin' while Pat and Eddy are both 'meaty, dressed identically in brand new black camouflage trousers, high lace boots, flack waistcoats and balaclavas rolled up to their foreheads' (1). Around the corner from where the van is parked, Omar Anwar and his friend Mo are sitting in a blue Vauxhall Vectra. 'They were a scant five years younger than the pretend soldiers in the van around the corner but were better fed, better groomed, altogether more shiny and hopeful' (5). The three white men are uneducated and incompetent, while the Anwars are respectable, middle-class and educated. The characters of Aamin and his family are an opportunity for Mina to address issues of identity, assimilation, and racism in modern Scotland (Geherin 139).

Pat's encounter with Aamin Anwar's daughter is revealing. Initially, Pat is described as looking at the 'hostile' who opens the door. Shortly after, there is a moment where this hostile's anonymity is superseded by something like recognition, as the reader becomes acquainted with the details of her T-shirt: "Hello Monkey," said her T-shirt, a green slogan on faded soft grey, the line of the letters cracked and broken from the washing machine' (9). In the next sentence, we learn that the 'hostile' has a name: Aleesha.

This a revelatory moment such as the one Homi Bhabha describes, citing a passage

from Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, in which Charles Marlow, a sailor, comes across a group of Congolese men. At first, they are indistinguishable from one another: 'Black shapes crouched, lay, sat between the trees, leaning against the trunks, clinging to the earth, half coming out, half effaced within the dim light, in all the attitudes of pain, abandonment, and despair' (Conrad 35). Further on, Marlow glances down and notices a particular man, his 'black bones' reclining against a tree. He then notices that the man has tied a bit of white worsted around his neck. Marlow finds himself wondering about this detail:

Why? Where did he get it? Was it a badge — an ornament — a charm — a propitiatory act? Was there any idea at all connected with it? It looked startling around his black neck, this bit of white thread from beyond the seas. (35)

At this point, there is a shift in Marlow's perception, a moment of recognition. When he looks at this man, he sees an individual, not simply a 'black shape' among others. This black man has his own, specific characteristics, symbolized by the bit of white worsted around his neck. It is that detail, that makes Marlow recognise the man as something more than a 'black shape.' Instead, Marlow sees the individual and finds himself wondering about the man's story. In *Still Midnight*, it is the detail on Aleesha's t-shirt, its singularity, that grants her recognition. From being an anonymous 'hostile', she becomes an individual with a name. Meanwhile, the anonymity of the reader's first encounter with Aleesha serves a purpose: to highlight the gap that exists between 'us' and 'them', while raising questions about the presumed unbridgeability of that gap.

This chapter has examined how race and society play a part in immigrant representations. On either side of the perceived divide between 'us' and 'them', there are presumptions about the other that prevent one or other side from recognising the specificity of the individual. Racial stereotypes play an active part in rendering the immigrant anonymous. The selected novels adopt such stereotypes, only to then reveal their lack of dimensionality. In Lakhous's novel,

the joke is on several of those who claim to know Amedeo, because he is not what they think he is. What they see is what he wants them to see.

The following chapter takes the notion of stereotype as it relates to immigrant representations in the selected novels, and examines the particular function of geography, a key factor in these constructs. In examining place as a stereotype, I interrogate how the authors use geography to address the ways in which immigrants are represented. I also investigate geography in relation to immigrant representations in my novel *Wasteland*. Sometimes, the immigrant's otherness is emphasized by the place where he or she lives, which is synonymous with exclusion. As described earlier, in *Still Midnight* Mina overturns stereotypes by making her immigrant family middle-class, living in a suburban neighbourhood. The emphasis is on the contrast between the uncouth, thuggish white attackers and the respectable migrant residents. By setting part of *Fleshmarket Close* in Knoxland, Ian Rankin stresses the violence of exclusion, both in a literal and figurative sense. Indridason casts his story in a cold, remote setting, in part to stress the Other's isolation.

Chapter 2: Examining geography: how place informs immigrant representations

This second chapter centres on the function of place as it relates to immigrant representations. It examines the ways in which place, be it a village or a bustling metropolis, an English country manor or a housing estate, actively informs these constructs. In crime fiction, space provides context and holds special significance. According to Dennis Porter, writers of crime fiction have always tended to 'anchor crime in a specific location and in certain milieus and social strata' (73). While location can vary greatly, the city is frequently a primary site for the genre (Howell 359). Six of the seven novels selected for analysis here are set in cities (I include *Wasteland* which is set both in a *banlieue* right outside Paris, and in the French capital itself). The remaining novel, Henning Mankell's *Faceless Killers*, is set in a small town, but this chapter addresses how this setting comes to represent what is happening not only at a local level, but also nationally and transnationally.

Place is space invested with meaning. It is a term used by human geographers to describe the ways in which humans bring meaning to their environment (Fredette 127). Place tells stories about community, social and economic background, choice and opportunity. In a crime novel, the place where the crime occurs, its significance in relation to the characters all play a meaningful part in the investigative process. The search for the guilty party 'intertwines with an investigation into the environment of both the victims and the potential culprits' (Pezzotti 8). It reflects the balance of power between us and them. As Alistair Rolls notes, space in crime fiction encompasses:

[...] the scene of the crime, self-evidently, but also space in the sense of setting [...] and space in the political sense: land, real estate, who owns it, who has access to it, who controls it, what is done with it (hence the prevalence in contemporary crime novels of sub-themes such as environmental degradation or the gentrification of working class suburbs). (Rolls et al, 136)

Where a person lives gives rise to certain assumptions. In *Wasteland*, for example, space articulates social differences and takes on a political dimension, divided as it is between the geographical centre (a number of Paris's affluent *arrondissements*) and the margins (the dilapidated housing estate where the novel's immigrant characters live). This mirrors the realities of contemporary France, where the bulk of France's North African immigrant population is concentrated in the *banlieues* (Gross et al, 12). Housing has played a key role in the post-1945 history of Muslim immigration to France and is a central element in any public debate on issues relating to place and Muslims in France (Fredette 128). Often, the sense of place associated with the *banlieue* is one of neglect and alienness. George Packer writes in the *New Yorker* that the word has become 'pejorative, meaning slums dominated by immigrants.' And it is not simply outsiders who view the *banlieue* as problematic. Residents too are tainted by the associated imagery. The *banlieue*-based characters in *Wasteland* are acutely aware of the challenges of living in their particular environment, and of the seemingly unbridgeable distance between them and those who live in the city — in this case, Paris. Where they live affects their attitudes and actions, and affects the way others perceive them.

Immigrants are closely tied to place. They are here but come from somewhere else. They may identify with both places, or neither. They may be perceived as alien, even when they have been 'here' for a long time. Geographical exclusion can be a way of marginalising and erasing the Other, of keeping immigrants at a distance. Relegated to the periphery — in a physical sense — immigrants are more likely to be described in stereotypical terms. Location and its associated imagery — for example, a housing estate where crime and unemployment rates are high — trap immigrants in a certain, reductive discourse. When immigrants are relegated to the periphery of major urban centres, they become less visible. It is possible to forget or deny their existence, to refer to them in generalised terms and ignore their specificity. Immigrants are stereotyped and it becomes difficult then for them to bridge the

existing physical and psychological divide, and to deconstruct the images with which they have become associated. They have no control over these constructs. Stam and Shohat refer to this status when they write about “the powerlessness of historically marginalised groups to control their own representation’ (184).

At the same time, communities that are perceived as being on the margins of society can also initiate acts of self-representation. Marginalisation can have an energising effect, spurring acts of self-affirmation that challenge hegemonic perspectives. This is the case in *Wasteland*, where the reader has access to a multi-dimensional depiction of the *banlieue* through the eyes of the main immigrant character Aisha and a secondary character, Alberto. Admittedly, these are fictional rather than real self-representations, articulated by characters I have brought to life. Nonetheless, they are valid to the extent that they enable a discussion on the question of otherness and self-affirmation. As will be demonstrated in this chapter, these fictional characters provide a broader and more nuanced perspective of their *banlieue*, challenging the negative and simplistic images associated with it.

This chapter begins by investigating the notion of geographical exclusion in *Wasteland*. I examine the role of the *banlieue* in the novel, in emphasizing the otherness of the immigrant. The second part of this chapter investigates the dual and multi-faceted nature of place in a number of the selected novels, and its effect on immigrant constructs. Like the *banlieue* depicted in *Wasteland*, Knoxland, the housing estate in *Fleshmarket Close* is presented as a place of exclusion, and Arnaldur Indridason in *Arctic Chill* describes a similar setting. But Ian Rankin, through the eyes of his inspector John Rebus, depicts a city that has two sides — the one tourists see, and a darker side that few — even among the locals — have access to. However marginal and isolated Knoxland might be, it is part of a bigger, ambivalent picture. Geherin notes that Ian Rankin has variously described Edinburgh as ‘schizophrenic,’ ‘invisible,’ and ‘hidden’ (*Scene* 126-127). In *Faceless Killers*, Henning Mankell describes a

community that is cohesive and peaceful on the outside, but beneath this veneer of respectability and tolerance, there are hidden tensions. The community in which *Faceless Killers* is set symbolises the pressures and contradictions of a society that is trying to come to terms with the significant changes that have taken place in Sweden since the 1970s. In *Still Midnight*, Denise Mina overturns stereotypes and highlights the impossibility of reductive labeling in a number of ways, one of which is to place the immigrant family at the centre of the novel in a gentrified, middle-class suburb. In these novels by Ian Rankin, Henning Mankell and Denise Mina, an inability to easily categorise place delivers another message: the immigrant, too, cannot be easily categorised. Similarly, the separation between us and them cannot be easily made. This point leads to the third and final part of this chapter, and an examination of Karim Miské's *Arab Jazz*, which describes a multi-ethnic neighbourhood in the 19th *arrondissement* in Paris. Immigrants are on the 'inside', this time, rather than on the geographical periphery.

By drawing on the given examples, this chapter concludes that the geographies described in the selected novels, while initially eliciting certain stereotypes, also provide the reader with new ways of seeing the Other, of recognising the Other's specificity. Additionally, to acknowledge and recognise the Other's specificity is to also transcend the local, and recognise the universality and interchangeability of what defines us as individuals. We are different and also the same, so to speak. Thus, it becomes possible for a French reader, for example, to read a Swedish crime novel that features immigration, and to feel affected by this story set elsewhere, because there is a familiarity and a commonality to the themes addressed. This story in a different setting allows both national and transnational readers to make sense of the changes taking place on their doorsteps, in their communities.

The geographies described in the selected novels also allow for a greater degree of self-expression by the immigrant characters. Geographical exclusion as it is portrayed in

Wasteland for example allows for the Other to emerge as something more than a one-dimensional construct. Rather than being simply a place of exclusion, the *banlieue* is a place of belonging for those who live there, a place where friendships and alliances are made, where a sense of solidarity can be established. “*Banlieue* writers provide invaluable insights on a dimension of French society that would otherwise remain either invisible or subject to stereotypical representations,” writes Dominic Thomas (201). Similarly, the sense of place brought to life in *Arab Jazz* allows the reader to enter a world that defies categorization, a melting pot of ethnicities and beliefs. It becomes difficult in Karim Miské’s multi-cultural world to conceive of a single, authoritative discourse that could silence the many others.

In summary, this chapter posits that geographical exclusion as it is portrayed in the novels selected for analysis can in fact serve as a catalyst for multiple forms of representation that run counter to the hegemonic discourse imposed by dominant groups. This idea is developed more fully in the third chapter.

2.1 Geographical exclusion: the *banlieue* and *Wasteland*

The principal setting in *Wasteland* is a housing estate on the outskirts of Paris known as *La Cité des Fleurs*. The word *cité* translates as housing estate, and the name of this particular one, literally the estate of flowers, is meant to be ironic. There is nothing pretty about this place. The name of the estate is in fact so ill suited that it is as if a joke has been played on the residents. Commandant Serge Morel’s colleague Lila Markov comments on this: ““The *Cité des Fleurs*,” Lila mused. “The prettier the name, the shittier the place is. Have you noticed that?”” (131).

The purpose of the *banlieue* in *Wasteland* is to demonstrate one of the ways in which place can be incorporated in stereotypical representations of minority groups. Paris presents a great deal of economic and ethnic unevenness and one principal source of disparity is the

gap between the capital and its suburbs. The suburbs in the north of the city, and Seine-Saint-Denis in particular, which the *banlieue* in *Wasteland* is based on, tend to include a great deal of social housing and significant numbers of immigrants (Kaplan 27). At the same time, many ethnically diverse communities exist within the city itself, in a number of neighbourhoods such as the one described in *Arab Jazz*. As is shown later in this chapter, *Wasteland* and *Arab Jazz* describe two different examples of diversity in France. In *Wasteland*, the *périphérique*, the ring road surrounding Paris, marks an artificial border between ‘us’ and ‘them’, between the capital and its *banlieues*. In *Arab Jazz*, as will be discussed later, the *arrondissement* where Ahmed Taroudant lives is a great big melting-pot. There is no clear separation or boundary between different cultures and communities.

From the first pages of *Wasteland*, the setting plays a key role in the story and is an active element in the construction of this novel’s immigrant characters, who live as outsiders. At the beginning, when the police detective Thierry Villot is quizzing the Algerian youth Karim, the reader is offered a description of the dejected hallway of one of the four towers that make up this particular *cité*. The lifts are broken and we are told that this ‘fetid entrance with its peeling walls’ is usually occupied by drug pushers cutting deals (110). Before long, Thierry is so marked by the atmosphere of the place that he cannot wait to get out and leave ‘the housing project and its stench of hopelessness behind’ (112).

This early description is meant to evoke a real sense of neglect, of indifference — these towers are inhabited mostly by immigrants, and therefore the official authorities, from local to central government, are not particularly interested in maintaining or restoring the buildings. But the description also purposefully invokes stereotypes about the *banlieue*. This, the text is saying, is what everyone expects to read about a place like this, and about the people who live there. Crime, vandalism, and failure are the predictable descriptives of such a setting. That is not to say that none of what is written is based on real *banlieues* and their

problems, but that there is a deliberate focus in the novel on those aspects of the *banlieue* that have been frequently evoked in French literature. Specifically, descriptions of the *banlieue* in novels by immigrant authors such as Rachid Djaïdani, Hamid Jemai, Skander Kali, Karim Madani, Mohamed Razane and Thomté Ryam have given rise to a new genre known in French as 'littérature urbaine' or urban literature (Gallix). According to Gallix, this sub-genre is represented by authors who tend to be young and set themselves apart from the literary establishment, and who give voice to the marginalised not just through books but also through music, films and other art forms interspersed with references to pop culture.

One cannot talk about the *banlieue* as a place of geographical exclusion without referring to France's cultural and political attitude towards immigration. One important aspect of this attitude is language. The terms relating to immigration in the English-speaking world differ from those that are commonly used in France. Hargreaves notes that terms that are common in the English speaking world, such as 'ethnic minorities', 'minority ethnic groups' and 'race relations' are taboo in France (*Immigration, 'Race'* 1-2). He writes that there is 'a fear of giving even verbal recognition to the settlement of people seen as enduringly different from the 'indigenous majority' (2). Since the 1980s, France has pursued a policy of integration that relies on the notion that social differentiation is, if not erased, then at the very least in the process of being reduced (Weil 113). This policy informs French legislation: by law, the French government is prohibited from asking about or keeping data on its citizens' race and religion (Kille 1).

This policy of integration is difficult to reconcile with the realities of every day life for immigrants. While they are encouraged to assimilate by adopting French culture and values, their place of origin sets them apart from the non-immigrant population. Race is an issue, and the colour of their skin is often an impediment to belonging. As Keaton, Sharpley-Whiting and Stovall note:

On the one hand, there is an evident constitutional and legal discourse of colorblindness in various spheres of French life whereby race has been rejected as a meaningful category [...]. On the other hand, the lived experience of race [...] belies the colorblind principle enshrined in the universalist-humanist thought upon which the Republic was forged. (2)

However, since the 1990s there has arguably been a gradual shift in the political discourse on immigration. Dominic Thomas remarks that there is now 'general consensus with regards to the ineffectiveness of assimilation, insertion, and integration policies' (110-111). Hargreaves writes about the early 1990s as being a period during which the French authorities began to recognise the legitimacy of cultural difference, a period during which the notion of diversity became fashionable. At the same time, he notes that there remains among segments of the French population a mistrust of multiculturalism as being fundamentally incompatible with France's republican values. (*Multi-Ethnic* 10). France's far-right Front National, like other European far-right movements, taps into this mistrust to draw voters. The party's leader Marine le Pen for example claimed in a March 2017 interview that immigrants are 'rejecting French values and transforming the culture' (Warren).

Notwithstanding this denial of multiculturalism, the *banlieue* remains an appropriate symbol of the French authorities' failed attempt to erase differences, to render the Other's distinctiveness invisible. Over the past few decades, the image of the *banlieue* as a place of negativity, conflict and hopelessness — aspects that are all embodied in the figure of the immigrant — has become so entrenched that there is little room for a different perspective, where one might consider this space in all its complexity and multi-dimensionality. Here, geography and its associated imagery — the *banlieue*, for example, as a place of troubled marginality — serve to blank out the immigrant's specificity, to render that immigrant less visible. The place where you live, the stereotype is saying, has certain connotations. I have sought to exemplify this in *Wasteland*. When news about the death of a Roma boy appears on television, Jean, one of the detectives in Morel's team, comments: 'Here we go again.

Villeneuve makes the news' (130). No one is particularly surprised that something so brutal could happen in a place like the *Cité des Fleurs*. In fact, it is what people expect and the event simply confirms what is already assumed about this *banlieue*.

The *banlieue* has become synonymous with the sameness imposed on the Other, a sameness that blanks out the individual. As Mireille Rosello writes:

French banlieues have become a cultural cliché, a metaphor, a shortcut for a vaguely formulated yet deeply seated malaise. Today, 'banlieues' is often used in the plural, as if all banlieues were the same, and the word has lost most of its semantic territory [...] 'Banlieues' now evokes one single type of urban landscape: dilapidated areas of social housing populated by a fantasized majority of 'foreigners' and especially of 'Arabes.' (240)

Anouk Alquier writes that the *banlieue* has become 'une zone d'étrangeté,' in other words a zone of foreignness, or otherness (453). It is a place of exclusion. Its significance is political, reflecting as it does the balance of power between different factions of society. As Sibley advances, 'power is expressed in the monopolization of space and the relegation of weaker groups in society to less desirable environments' (xix). Immigrants who live in neglected *banlieues* like the *Cité des Fleurs* are made to feel like outsiders whenever they travel outside the geographical spaces to which they have been relegated. 'Banlieue residents joke that going into Paris requires a visa and a vaccination card,' writes Packer (63). In *Wasteland*, when Aisha and Samir visit Paris for the day, they clearly feel like they do not belong, even though the capital is only a brief distance from where they live. They walk for hours, noting how well dressed people are — Samir finds even the dogs seem better clothed than he and Aisha — and the siblings are too shy to enter a café, even when their feet begin to hurt (155).

Another immigrant character in *Wasteland* who experiences similar feelings of exclusion is Alberto Rosales, an elderly Spaniard. In the *cité*, Alberto is known as El Chino, the Chinaman, because he has slanted eyes (124). Alberto and his wife Emilia moved from Spain to France in the 1960s, to escape Francisco Franco's autocratic regime and start a new life.

When Alberto arrived in France, he took a job at the Renault car factory and became a member of the French Communist Party, which found its breeding ground in the Parisian *banlieues* from the 1920s onwards (Stovall 2). Suburbs that were run by local Communist Party members became known as *banlieues rouges*, or red.

In *Wasteland*, Alberto reflects on how much has changed on the estate in the 50 years he has lived there. From his perspective, one of the key differences is that he feels his opinions matter less and that no one is particularly interested in what he might have to say. When he first arrived in France, there was a sense of starting over, a world of possibility. What he said and thought mattered. The rise of the Communist Party allowed that, by giving workers a voice, regardless of whether they were ‘native’ or newly-arrived migrants. Communist ideology rested, in theory at least, on the notion of equality. Back then, Alberto muses, ‘he hadn’t had much, but he’d had a voice’ (129). By losing his voice, he has lost a part of himself: ‘Alberto still had his party card but that was pretty much all that he’d held on to. Nothing much remained of the old ‘Beto’. He hardly knew himself’ (130).

Alberto’s character provides context to the *banlieue*, by providing access to the place’s history and evolution. This was once a place of hope and optimism. This was and remains a place where people of different ethnicities lived together — they are not all North Africans, or Muslim. *Wasteland’s* characters remind us that *banlieues* are complex, multi-dimensional places that hold many individual stories and do not equate to just one, simplistic narrative. The *banlieue* is also a dynamic place that experiences change. Since Alberto’s arrival, the estate has undergone a gradual decline, but it was not always as it is now. By implication, it will not remain static, but will go through further changes as time passes.

Another form of geographical exclusion that is explored in *Wasteland* is the situation of the Roma in France. According to a report jointly produced by the League of Human Rights (LDH) and the European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC) titled “Census of forced evictions in

living areas occupied by Roma (or persons designated as such) in France,” more than six in every ten Roma families living in France faced forced evictions in 2016. In *Wasteland*, a community of Roma lives close to the housing estate. They live on the margins of society and are looked down upon not only by the non-immigrants but also by the immigrants. When riots break out on the estate following the death of the Algerian-born adolescent Samir (the earlier death of a Roma boy does not elicit any sort of uproar), unknown arsonists set fire to the Roma dwellings and they are forced to leave. No one knows (or cares) where they have gone. Throughout the book, they are a mute presence that belongs nowhere in particular. The inclusion of this minority group in the novel is there partly to make the point that not all immigrants are represented in the same manner. Certain negative stereotypes apply to certain groups, and stereotypes operate on a scale where some groups generate more fear, suspicion and overall negativity than others.

The story of the housing estate and of its immigrant population is the story of the changes that France and other European countries experienced through the 1970s and 1980s, and of the political and ideological shifts that took place. This is described in *Wasteland* at the start of chapter six. At the beginning, when the estate was built, the general mood, however misplaced this might have been, was one of optimism:

Families, French and foreign, praised their new neighbourhoods with its spacious apartments and green, open spaces [...]. Neighbours left their doors unlocked and balconies were decked with flowers, making the cité's name seem apt. (144)

But this was short-lived:

Within a few decades, the buildings, built on the cheap, had fallen into disrepair. Drugs, mostly hashish and marijuana, became rife, and unemployment soared. One by one, shop-owners shut down their businesses, sick of being robbed. People started locking their doors and few bothered to adorn their balconies. All that remained was a grim, uniform landscape. (144)

While the Roma perspective, and Alberto's, are important, the main focus in *Wasteland* remains the Muslim immigrant communities, just as the main immigration-related subject of

debate and controversy in France is the question of its Muslim population. While, as I've mentioned previously, France does not record statistics based on ethnicity, a number of estimates have been put forward by different researchers and institutions, ranging from 3.5 million to 5 million. The 2006 Brookings Institution study, *Integrating Islam*, estimated for example that there were five million French residents of Muslim heritage, approximately 7.8% of the country's population of 64.1 million at the time (Laurence and Vaisse 15).

In *Wasteland*, the central Muslim character is seventeen year-old Aisha, whose brother Samir is killed. She, like others on the estate, experiences her foreignness keenly. At the same time, she does not identify with her Algerian mother's cultural values. She has no desire to return to Algeria, which she left as a baby and therefore does not remember. When her mother suggests that they might have to return to Algeria to live, after Samir's death, Aisha is horrified (212). She wishes that her mother would not dress as conservatively as she does, noting that other Muslim women on the estate are more westernised. While she may feel alienated in Paris, and is well aware of the marginalisation she endures, the *banlieue* is home and this carries positive connotations too. It is where she lives, goes to school, meets with her friends. It is familiar. Aisha provides a multi-layered perspective to the *banlieue* and by extension to the status of outsider. She resists categorisation. For example, she fights attempts by the school counselor to analyse her thoughts and behaviours, and she takes the investigation into her brother's murder into her own hands, at great personal risk. As the narrative progresses, she moves from being a passive character to an active one, spurred into action by her brother's death. Her evolution is evoked in the descriptions of her character. Initially, she is introduced in this way: 'Aisha knew she was smart. She was also a coward. She didn't speak up. She didn't fight back. Most of what she thought and felt never got said' (120). But by the end of the novel, she takes charge of her destiny, in defiance of the constructs relating to immigrants in the *Cité des Fleurs*. Agency is what enables Aisha to move beyond

and dissolve the stereotype: more specifically, her ability to act independently of the authorities and make her own decisions relating to the investigation into her brother's death. Refusing to be passive, to be considered a victim, she decides to confront Ali to obtain answers about her brother's death. The dangers of running her own investigation do not deter her. When she arrives at Ali's front door, she runs into Réza, Ali's sidekick. He threatens her and it is only thanks to Alberto that she manages to escape harm (382).

While Ian Rankin's novel *Fleshmarket Close* and Arnaldur Indridason's *Arctic Chill* are examined more closely a little further in this chapter, it is worth noting here that they also address geographical exclusion and associated stereotypes relating to immigrant populations. *Fleshmarket Close* opens in a housing estate not dissimilar to the one described in *Wasteland*. It is a place no one visits unless they have to. The non-white Scots in *Fleshmarket Close* are marginalised. In a single paragraph, Rankin paints a vivid picture of the exclusionary nature of this place. While only three miles from Edinburgh, it is, in Rebus' eyes, 'another culture, another country' (3).

Knoxland had been built in the 1960s, apparently from papier mâché and balsa wood. Walls so thin you could hear the neighbours cutting their toenails and smell their dinner on the stove. Patches of damp bloomed on its grey concrete walls. Graffiti had turned the place into 'Hard Knox'. Other embellishments warned the 'Pakis' to 'Get Out', while a scrawl that was probably only an hour or so old bore the legend 'One Less.' (3)

The estate is home to all sorts of people who live on the margins of society. Recently, this has included migrants. Rankin tells us the estate,

tended to attract only the desperate and those with no choice in the matter. In the past, it had been used as a dumping ground for tenants the council found hard to house elsewhere: addicts and the unhinged. More recently, immigrants had been catapulted into its dankest, least welcoming corners. (5)

So immigrants too are being 'dumped' in this unwelcoming place, without having any say in the matter. As with drug addicts and the mentally ill, the decision of where they should live is made on their behalf. Here again, geographical exclusion is a way of relegating the Other to

the periphery and making them invisible.

Similarly, society's indifference towards and exclusion of immigrants is reflected in Arnaldur Indridason's description of the place where the Thai immigrant family lives. It is run down and neglected:

From the garden, none of the doors appeared to open out onto a balcony from which the boy might have fallen. The windows were all shut. This was a large block of flats by Icelandic standards, six storeys high with four stairwells. It was in a poor state of repair. The iron railings around the balconies were rusty. The paint was faded and in some places it had flaked off the concrete. Two sitting-room windows with a single large crack in each were visible from where Erlendur stood. No one had bothered to replace them. (4)

There is a sense of sameness and repetition in these descriptions of place. Yet, these stereotypical descriptions in the selected novels progress to more ambiguous geographical representations that signal to readers that immigrants too cannot be represented in one-dimensional ways. This applies not simply to marginalised spaces such as housing estates, but equally to the 'centre' — the cities where the lead, investigating characters live and work. Examples of this are particularly evident throughout three of the selected novels — *Fleshmarket Close*, *Faceless Killers*, and *Still Midnight*.

2.2 Multi-faceted representations of place and immigrant constructs

‘This is the most straightforward and common definition of place — a meaningful location,’ writes Tim Cresswell (7). Place holds meaning because of human intervention. We tend to associate certain places with particular traits — danger or desirability, for example. Some places we would rather avoid, others we covet. As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, place is political, reflecting as it does the imbalances between different communities. By investing certain spaces with meanings, we create hierarchies and categorise those who live there in reductive ways that do not properly reflect their complexities and differences. Cresswell refers to this association of spaces with particular images when he writes that place is ‘space invested with meaning in the context of power’ (12). Stereotypical interpretations of place in relation to immigrants belong to hegemonic perspectives that seek to marginalise the Other. Geographical exclusion is one way to reduce the Other’s visibility, to diminish their means of self-expression and representation. Cresswell notes that sometimes:

Seeing the world through the lens of place leads to reactionary and exclusionary xenophobia, racism and bigotry. ‘Our place’ is threatened and others have to be excluded. (11)

In crime fiction, place plays a meaningful part and the places where Ian Rankin, Denise Mina and Henning Mankell have set their novels featuring respectively John Rebus, Alex Morrow and Kurt Wallander are as essential to the stories as are these lead characters who interpret and inject meaning into their surroundings. Ian Rankin and Denise Mina both use place and their lead characters’ familiarity with their urban environment to comment on the changes taking place in Scotland, and immigration is one of the key aspects of change in the country. As mentioned in the introduction, these two authors belong to a generation of authors from Scotland whose style of gritty crime writing has given rise to a sub-genre labeled ‘Tartan Noir’ (Clandfield 211). Authors of Tartan Noir, Clandfield notes, use ‘a popular genre to

address contemporary questions of ethnicity and culture' (213). The term 'Tartan Noir' is understood to have originated in 1977 with William McIlvanney's novel *Laidlaw* and encompasses a range of books set both in rural and urban settings (McDermid 44), but cities are the distinct, principal settings in Mina's and Rankin's novels. One cannot imagine a John Rebus novel that does not take us down the streets of Edinburgh, and Mina's Alex Morrow series provides an intimate portrait of Glasgow, the city where Alex grew up and works. There is a close association between Alex and the city. In the early part of the book, we learn that Alex is an angry woman, holding anger that is 'disproportionate and scattered, leaking from her like water through a sock' (22). She is battling issues at work and at home, and keeps her emotions under check beneath an armour (23). On her website, Mina refers to Morrow's Glasgow as a city 'where the boundaries between the law-abiding and the criminal worlds are very blurred, including in her own family.' Morrow is a detective, on the right side of the law, but she also has a half-brother who is a criminal. She rarely sees him and her feelings about him are complicated. While she is repelled by his 'career' choices — he is a man who breaks legs in the course of his business (120), she also cares about him. They met on their first day of school and are only three months apart (123). They both work hard not to smile when they meet (120). Her complexity as a character, the duality which is addressed more fully in the next chapter, could be said to echo Glasgow's own complexity — a city with both rising touristic appeal and a historic connection with gritty industrialisation (Gerhard et al, 116).

Ian Rankin creates a similar association between place and character. For Rankin, setting is an integral part of the crime story and he went as far as to write an entire book, *Rebus's Scotland*, on the topic of Edinburgh and the Scottish character. The Edinburgh he describes in the Rebus novels is multi-layered. John Rebus's Edinburgh is a darker, gloomier place than most visitors have access to. Yet, while it is not always a cosy and comfortable

place, it is familiar to Rebus who is well used to exploring his city's underbelly as part of his detective work.

In *Fleshmarket Close*, Rebus finds himself in somewhat unfamiliar territory when he has to go to Knoxland to investigate a murder. This is not his usual patch, but his old police station has been reorganised and he and other fellow detectives have been shipped to other stations. Rebus has ended up at Gayfield Square, 'on the periphery of the elegant New Town' (3). Knoxland is only three miles away but it is so different it may as well be in a different country, like Paris for Aisha in my own novel. However, while Knoxland is a new patch for Rebus, what is not new is the position he finds himself in: straddling two very different geographies — an old and elegant part of the city, and a troubled, gloomier one, this housing estate where many immigrants live. Rebus is used to navigating this dichotomy. Moreover, he does not associate crime with a particular kind of geography. In fact, he is more likely to mistrust those who reside in affluent places and whose lives are privileged. 'I've got this theory,' he tells his colleague Ellen Wylie. 'We spend most of our time chasing something called the 'underworld', but it's the *overworld* we should really be keeping an eye on' (142). Through Rebus's character, Rankin challenges stereotypes by making visible what lies beneath the apparent respectability of the 'overworld,' thus signalling to readers that the stereotypical, binary distinction between a shady underworld and a 'decent' overworld is a false one.

In the selected novels, both Ian Rankin and Denise Mina use place and its multifacetedness to comment on immigrant stereotypes. As mentioned in the first chapter of this exegesis, *Fleshmarket Close* opens with a description of the housing estate Knoxland. Through Rebus's eyes, the reader is presented with a dramatic and somewhat simplistic picture of what it is like to live there. Rebus finds himself reflecting on the fact that immigrants, notably refugees and asylum-seekers, have been 'catapulted' into this world

where predators are 'everywhere': 'They carried knives. They roamed at will. They ran the streets. And now they had killed' (6). But the investigation into the murder of a Turkish Kurd provides Rebus with the opportunity to reflect on the question of who these outsiders are who reside on the estate, many of them people who entered the country illegally or have overstayed their visas and permits. He finds there is no simple way of looking at things. 'They were criminals, but it was obvious to Rebus that they were victims, too' (391).

In *Still Midnight*, Denise Mina subverts entrenched notions about place and immigrants by lending the Asian immigrant family at the centre of the novel a respectable, middle-class existence that contrasts starkly with the lives of the three white men who break into their home. The family seem more settled, more successfully integrated in Glasgow than the three Scotsmen who have barged into their lives and operate outside the law. As Clandfield notes, what Denise Mina has done is not so much move the Other from the margin to the centre as infer that the centre itself 'can hold more than traditional models might suggest' (213). The Anwars are an ordinary family living in a quiet suburb, which Morrow happens to know well as it is where she grew up. It is 'so quiet a suburban area that she hadn't been back in decades' and the crimes here tend to be 'burglaries, noisy teenage parties, local stuff' (23). The Anwars live in a bungalow that is tidy and comfortable. The 'quiet, glowing house' is 'well proportioned', and has a 'neat little garden path' (3). There is a sense of order about the place. Even Aamir Anwar, the family patriarch, is tidy, described as having a 'neat little curtain-hanging of a beard' and 'perfectly ironed' pyjamas (9). In Mina's novel, the place where the immigrants live is seemingly one of conventionality and order. In contrast, the place where the three intruders Pat, Eddy and Malki take Aamir Anwar when they kidnap him is marked by squalor. 'The back door was unlocked and opened with a yowl into a kitchen that reeked of mould' and inside the house, Pat and Eddy, dragging Aamir Anwar, walk through a corridor lined with 'stacked bags of weeping rubbish' (73).

And yet, as will be further developed in the next chapter, there is more to the story than meets the eye and in the end it becomes apparent that there is no single way of viewing 'us' or 'them'. In *Still Midnight*, Barry Forshaw writes, 'Mina shakes the tired format of the thriller until all the clichés come out'. Stereotypes about immigrants undergo the same process. While immigrants are not all 'bad,' neither are they all 'good.' They cannot be simplistically categorised as either criminals or victims. In the end, readers discover that one of Aamir Anwar's sons is indeed guilty and was not falsely accused. Which is not to say there is no prejudice against immigrants, as evidenced for example in the way Mo and Omar are treated when they appeal to two police officers for help after their father is abducted (19-20). The fact that the young men look 'particularly clean' (18) and are well spoken, if anything, makes the officers more suspicious. At the same time, as was briefly mentioned in the previous chapter, one of the intruders "Pat" ends up in a romantic relationship with Aleesha, Anwar's daughter, a surprising turn of events given that Pat had shot her hand off (14) and was an intruder in her home. By coming together, the pair symbolise a bridging of the divide between 'us' and 'them', illustrating that the differences between them are not so pronounced after all.

Just as John Rebus and Edinburgh, Alex Morrow and Glasgow are intimately linked, few crime-solving characters are as closely associated with place as Henning Mankell's Kurt Wallander is with Ystad, a small town located in Skåne on the southern tip of Sweden, by the Baltic Sea. All nine Wallander mysteries are set in Skåne, a place with which Mankell was familiar as he kept a farm there, from the early 1980s (Thomson). The town of Ystad, with a population of 29,448 (as of 31 December 2016) is on the surface a quiet, uneventful place. But despite its small size, remoteness, and apparent serenity, there are tensions within the local community (Stenport 5). This is because Ystad and its region are not immune to external influences and events that include a rise in immigration across Europe from the mid-1970s

onwards, as described in the introduction to this study. According to Stenport:

The novel's spatio-temporal present, Skåne in 1991, functions on an immediate level as an emblematic portrait of a nation in turmoil, which is manifested in the perceived problems of porous borders which allow for too-easy immigration of refugees and asylum-seekers [...]. (5)

The geographical specificity of Ystad is deliberate. Skåne encapsulates two opposing views of Swedish immigration — acceptance on the one hand, unease and intolerance on the other. In his interview with Ian Thomson, Henning Mankell says: 'Skåne is the place where Sweden ends — a sort of Baltic Texas.' He goes on to add: 'Border areas have a dynamism all their own: they set off a reflex of unease.' Typically, nothing ever happens in Ystad and its surroundings — and so in *Faceless Killers* Wallander is shocked when an elderly couple is brutally attacked at their farm in the middle of the night, in a village called Lunnar. When the police inspector finds out about the attack, he is frightened. 'Something had happened here that shouldn't have, not here,' he reflects (17).

As a setting, this small Swedish town illustrates the point that local concerns are not simply local, but national (and transnational). In *Faceless Killers*, Ystad is a microcosm of Sweden, which experienced profound social changes in the 1990s (Stenport 1). Sweden saw rising unemployment and increasing ethnic and racial segregation, as it went from being 'a relatively ethnically homogenous society to a multicultural' one (United Nations 3). It is worth noting that *Faceless Killers* was also released five years after the 1986 murder of Sweden's then prime minister, Olof Palme, which according to Henning Mankell created a 'dangerous skepticism' about the Swedish justice system and state institutions generally (Thomson).

The book's timely release, its relevance and resonance were reflected in its reception: it became an immediate success and won the prize for best Swedish crime novel of the year, The Golden Crowbar, awarded by the Swedish Academy of Detection (Bergman 53). Henning

Mankell went on to write eight other Wallander novels. Throughout his crime novels, the 'problematic' relationship to the Other is a recurring theme (Bergman 55). The novel resonated with many Swedes because it articulated the unease many experienced amid change that made their country unfamiliar. What concerned people was not simply the fact that Sweden had a higher percentage of immigrants, but that the presence of these foreigners was inciting hatred and intolerance, and acts of violence. All of a sudden racist groups that were opposed to these new Swedes were more visible, more vocal (Zajda et al, 95). Consequently, racism became of national concern for the first time in the post-war period (Lange et al, 1997). This did not sit comfortably with those Swedes who prided themselves on their country's culture of tolerance and acceptance. Modern Sweden, Christopher Caldwell writes, built its sense of identity on two pillars: its generous welfare state and its status as a moral superpower (*Swedish*, 1). This was all changing.

The resulting tension between these two aspects — tolerance on the one hand, and lack of acceptance on the other — permeates the atmosphere of *Faceless Killers*. It also underlines the complexity of the relationship between the Self and the Other. The interrelation between Skåne's landscape and large scale immigration to Sweden is complex. It sits within a wider context: in Wallander's eyes, this wider context includes increased violence, fueled in part by drug dependency and trafficking. 'Today drugs are everywhere,' Wallander tells the public prosecutor (139). Even though Ystad's police district is relatively spared, the impact on this small town is becoming greater. There are 'no protected zones anymore,' Wallander reflects (58). At the same time, Swedes have become indifferent, less compassionate toward one another. Wallander notes that 'Sweden had turned into a country where people seemed to be afraid of being bothered more than anything else' (98).

The book does not offer a simple answer to the question of whether immigration is a 'good' or 'bad' thing. Wallander himself is ambivalent. Initially, when he finds out about the

murder, he finds himself hoping that the killers are from a nearby refugee camp, thinking that maybe such an outcome will 'put an end to this arbitrary, lax policy that allows anyone at all, for any reason at all, to cross the border into Sweden' (46). Yet he is not insensitive, as this statement seems to suggest. When he drives to the refugee camp, Wallander is critical of the conditions these refugees must endure. He reflects that with a fence around it, it would be a concentration camp (106). Later on, he gets angry with the immigration authorities who suggest the police are not allocating enough resources to the protection of refugees, saying 'maybe there are just too many to cope with' (118).

In immigration terms, the small Swedish town also serves as a local symbol of experiences that are being lived and felt across western Europe. Swedish Chief Inspector Kent Persson, cited by Thomson, remarked that "if they're sometimes a bit exaggerated, it was a stroke of genius to set [the Wallander novels] in Skåne." He explains: "Skåne is closer to Poland than Stockholm, and criminals from the Baltic states have brought in drugs across the sea. The only thing we don't have in Ystad yet is prostitution."

Generally, Mankell is interested in the inevitability of change and its confronting, unsettling nature. 'Change — personal, professional, and societal — is Mankell's overarching theme,' writes Geherin (*Dragon Tattoo* 28). That is certainly the case in *Faceless Killers*, where change and the unease it evokes remain with Wallander until the very end of the novel. The question of how to relate to the Other remains an open one.

We've seen how geographical dichotomies and ambivalence are described by Ian Rankin, Denise Mina and Henning Mankell, and how they inform the discourse on the Other in the selected novels. In *Arab Jazz*, Karim Miské has created a world where the geographical separation between 'us' and 'them' cannot easily be made, where the boundaries becomes blurred, giving rise to notions of hybridity.

2.3 Multiculturalism and self-representation

Karim Miské's *Arab Jazz* is set partly in Paris's 19th *arrondissement*, an area that has been developed by successive waves of immigrants, particularly (but not exclusively) Tunisian Jews, Southeast Asians, and Maghrebi Muslims (Kaplan 32). In Miské's novel, this *quartier* is a cosmopolitan neighbourhood where people of mixed race and religion — Jews, Arabs and Christians — co-exist. Relations and interactions between people of different races and religions are not necessarily harmonious or easy, but in Miské's novel they are a fact of life. The novel's setting is a reminder that this state of affairs is not new, but rather one that the city has always claimed for itself. At least since the late nineteenth century, France has been a destination for immigrants and Paris has welcomed a disproportionate share of these outsiders (Kaplan 23). These immigrants are part of the city's communities.

Like Henning Mankell, Karim Miské is interested in exploring the societal changes that have taken place in his country, France.³ Like Mankell, he has said he feels that crime writing is the best way to put society in front of a mirror.

A crime has been committed. It has to be solved. In the process, the book uncovers the complexity and cruelty of the world which produced the crime. (Lichfield)

In *Arab Jazz*, the city's very fabric, its character derives from its cosmopolitanism. The novel's main character is Ahmed Taroudant, the son of a woman confined to psychiatric hospital and a depressive himself. Other key players in the novel include a non-practising Ashkenazi Jew named Lieutenant Rachel Kupferstein, and Jean Hamelot, a Communist from Brittany, as well as an American Jehovah's witness called Susan. The book's characters are from different places, and hold different religious and political beliefs and affiliations. The book also fuses ethnicities and religions, and musical genres: the novel comes with a playlist (at the very end)

³ Miské was born in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, to a Mauritanian father and French mother. He grew up in Paris and currently lives there.

of the tracks mentioned in the story, and it is an eclectic one, ranging from the American songwriter Patti Smith and the British-Indian record producer Bally Sagoo to the French rapper Booba and the Malian group Les Ambassadeurs Internationaux.

Miské has said *Arab Jazz* is, in great part, a book about evil and the dangers of religious extremism (Lichfield). But what the novel also reflects is the richness and complexity of a diverse environment where there is no single, dominant perspective. This environment is the world in which Ahmed Taroudant lives. At the beginning of the story, Ahmed spends most of his time holed up in his apartment, reading and dreaming the day away amid tottering piles of paperbacks. There are so many books in his flat that he can barely move. Ahmed knows the exact number, or weight: two tonnes and five kilos of paperbacks. He is aiming to stop buying them when he reaches five tonnes (11). This book-filled sanctuary is where he feels most comfortable. All he wants is to 'lose himself by devouring the whole world in a single, uninterrupted story written by others' (7). But when he does venture out of his apartment, to get food supplies or replenish his shelves, with books from a second-hand bookshop that is sandwiched between 'the Lubavitch school complex, the Salafist prayer room and the evangelical church' (7), he is comfortable too with the diversity that surrounds him. The owner of the bookshop is an old Armenian anarchist. The *boulangerie* where Ahmed stops to buy a baguette and croissants is owned by a 'devout Tunisian' who opens his doors after his morning prayer (26). Despite his seclusion and passivity, despite his longed-for detachment (8), Ahmed cannot escape or remain unaware of this reality. Not only that, he is at home here. It is the world he lives in. When he goes running, he chooses the 'trashier' route towards canal Saint-Denis over the more pleasant option of running along canal de l'Ourcq (25). During his run, he passes an embankment 'strewn with bottles of super-strength beer, torn-up Rizla packets, soiled tissues and used condoms, all awash in the acidic stench of urine' (25). In these early pages of the novel, the contrast between Ahmed's inertia and the

grittiness and diversity of his neighbourhood also serves a purpose: it reminds us that change happens regardless of one's desire to remain still.

Ahmed's decision to shut himself off from the world, spurred by a traumatic experience, is challenged when Laura, his upstairs neighbour and 'a girl he might have loved if he still knew how' (8), is killed. Ahmed may be a dreamer, but the discovery that a woman he cared for has been killed stirs him into action. His desire for revenge (14) makes him feel alive again: a 'strange, forgotten feeling' (26). More broadly, Laura's murder signals that, while multi-culturalism may be a fact of modern society, beneath the surface, there are stresses and the potential for violence, as exemplified by Laura's death. When Ahmed Taroudant finds her, he is horrified. 'She is upright, tied fast to the other side of the railing with white electric cable' (13). 'Her underbelly is nothing more than an enormous gash that has now stopped dripping onto Ahmed's balcony' (14). There is an added element that amplifies the horror of the scene, a prop that seems to have been included for Ahmed's benefit, possibly to frame him in Laura's murder: 'An uncooked pork joint sits on a white porcelain platter, bathing in a red liquid, a black-handled kitchen knife stabbed through its middle (13). This forces Ahmed to relive another shocking episode, a crime he witnessed in the past and which traumatised him: a man raping a woman and strangling her to death (136). That act, and the one he is witnessing now, are symbols of the depravity people are capable of, and of the disorder in the world. The initial crime he witnessed made Ahmed retreat from the world, to preserve or recover a sense of order. But Laura's death upsets that balance once more.

The search for resolution, in relation to Laura's death, brings to the fore the complexities of modern French society. Diversity is both enriching and challenging, and immigration can incite acts of intolerance and aggression. In one review, *Arab Jazz* is described as 'a transcontinental identity novel [...] dramatising the painful contradictions and

fertile syntheses of contemporary multicultural life, focusing on racial discrimination in Morocco as well as Paris' (Yassin-Kassab). The novel offers a version of France and introduces characters of different ethnicities who are also French. But there is a sense too that this place with its different minorities and accompanying complexity could be somewhere else. The setting is both specifically Parisian, and transnational. In *Faceless Killers*, *Wasteland*, *Arctic Chill* and *Arab Jazz*, the themes of immigration and change, of the tensions that can result from the mingling of different cultures, are both intimately tied to the places depicted in the novels, and evocative of what is happening elsewhere in Europe.

Like Aisha in *Wasteland*, Ahmed takes charge of his own destiny when he emerges from his passive state to investigate Laura's death. In a conversation with the female detective Rachel Kupferstein, he refers to James Ellroy's *White Jazz*, which is her, and his, favourite book (171). Ahmed tells Rachel that Ellroy meant the title to signify a twisted plan hatched by white guys. By extension, the inference is that 'Arab Jazz' relates to a twisted plan hatched by Arabs. In this way, Miské makes a point about self-representation: in *Arab Jazz*, it is the 'Arab' who gets to decide how the story is told. This allows for a shift in perspective — the fictional Other gets to drive the story. Not only that, what is implied is that a story is just that, one way of telling it, and there are many interpretations depending on who is driving the narrative. The implication comes from the reference to a twisted plan. There is a suggestion of something being concocted that cannot be trusted. This point undermines the reliability of a hegemonic point of view.

In *Faceless Killers*, *Still Midnight* and (to a lesser degree) *Fleshmarket Place*, the complexity or ambivalence of place suggests that the immigrant too cannot be easily categorised. And both *Wasteland* and *Arab Jazz* make the point that self-representation is possible even when hegemonic discourses dominate.

The claim of self-representation may seem dubious here: speaking for myself, I cannot

claim self-representation for the specific experiences of my characters, because I am not they. At the same time, I propose that both my hybrid background and migratory experiences allow me to represent the experiences of multiple immigrant marginalities through various characters in *Wasteland*, including Aisha, Alberto, and my French-Cambodian detective Serge Morel. My status as both insider and outsider come from my experiences as a French citizen — whose mother is part-French, part-Spanish, and whose father is a Malaysian-Indian — who has lived in several countries, gone to French schools and university, been immersed in French culture, yet only lived in France from the age of 17.

Leaving aside my own experiences, the issue of self-representation in fiction raises a number of questions in relation to the author who brings these representations to life. For example, can an author claim to speak for any character, regardless of how removed that character's experience is from his own? Is Ian Rankin better equipped to write as Rebus or as an immigrant character? How 'authentic' is the self-representation of migrants, in a novel written by someone who has no experience of being one? Should one recognise the author's work as a genuine attempt to see through someone else's eyes, or as an act of cultural appropriation? And where does that appropriation begin? Who is guilty of it? All white writers giving voice to non-white characters? What of the writer who has left his homeland, as Salman Rushdie did as an adolescent, and continues to write about it? That writer easily becomes the target of criticism by those who have stayed behind.

The question of cultural appropriation came to the fore on 13 September 2016 when the American novelist Lionel Shriver delivered an address at the Brisbane Writers' Festival that caused a furore. Wearing a sombrero, she spoke of her right as a white writer to appropriate the stories of others, specifically the stories of minority or marginalised groups. Her talk, and particularly its unapologetic tone, outraged a number of people who decried it as arrogant and making light of a sensitive issue. But the content of her speech touches on an

important issue. Should a white, middle-aged female writer only write about white, middle-aged women, and be disallowed from writing about other categories of people?

The sensitivity surrounding this subject has a lot to do with the long-standing hegemony of the colonial West. It is understandable that minority groups such as native Americans might feel that white writers have no business speaking for them, or telling their stories. There are legitimate concerns that such stories might be patronising, inaccurate and one-dimensional. Given the stereotypical image of the Other that has long been present in many forms of fiction — the reductive image of the uncivilised African in *Tintin in the Congo* springs to mind — it is no wonder that there is a great deal of sensitivity around the issue of appropriation. Shriver noted in her speech that by definition, an author of fiction writes fake characters. Therefore, writers should be free to travel where their imagination takes them. And yet, to say fiction is not real is to deny its potency. Through fiction, writers and readers explore what it means to be human.

But is it realistic or even productive to expect writers to shy away from writing about the experiences of people whose lives greatly differ from theirs? Unless an author is writing in an autobiographical capacity, he is always writing as someone else, putting words in characters' mouths. To suggest, for example, that only black writers can write about black experiences, is to suggest that the divide between the self and the Other is unbridgeable. It is to accept the stereotype and give in to the idea of the impossibility of knowing the Other, to deny, in a sense, a shared humanity. Conor Friedersdorf, referring to white people who seek to engage with the question of slavery, writes in *The Atlantic* that 'to call such engagement cultural appropriation implies a racial essentialism that is the enemy of empathy' ("What Does Cultural Appropriation Mean?"). Whereas, by placing us convincingly inside other people's heads, fiction can make us connect with the Other and make them familiar.

Briahna Joy Gray notes in *Current Affairs* that there is no such thing as a 'pure' culture

("The question of cultural appropriation"). She points to 'centuries of cross-pollination' and notes that the concept of appropriation suffers from an inherent difficulty in that it depends on the existence of a clear notion of cultural ownership.

Appropriation suggests theft. But Kenan Malik, writing in the *New York Times* ("In Defense of Cultural Appropriation") prefers to call it 'messy interaction'. He notes that:

Writers and artists necessarily engage with the experiences of others. Nobody owns a culture, but everyone inhabits one, and in inhabiting a culture, one finds the tools for reaching out to other cultures.'

Malik acknowledges the fact that it is not a level playing field and that racism tends to shape the way people imagine others. But he goes on to say that creating gated cultures is not the answer.

Fiction — good fiction — enables empathy. It allows us to connect with others. Writing stories about others is not only a foundation of a novelist's work, it is also necessary in an age of increasing migration and diversity. The more stories, the better. In my view, the discussion should centre on the writing, not who is doing it. Is the writing good? Does it take us somewhere, offer another perspective? Do we connect with these characters who are so different from ourselves? Have we come a little closer to understanding something that previously seemed out of our reach? Is the writing honest? In the words of Hari Kunzru ("Whose Life is it Anyway?"), a good writer treats their own experience of the world as provisional, and does not presume.

In *Wasteland*, I chose to write from the perspective of several immigrant characters, because I wanted to depict as well as I could a complex society where everyone has a unique story to tell, and a unique perspective, but also a shared experience of displacement. At the same time, to let immigrant characters tell their own stories is to illustrate the fact that they do not rely on others to think and act for them. In *Arab Jazz* and *Wasteland*, these characters derive their strength from their immigrant status. In *Wasteland*, the characters draw their

energy from their reduced circumstances. In “Arab Noise and Ramadan Nights”, Joan Gross, David McMurray and Ted Swedenburg refer to the ‘dynamism of marginal existence’ and note that *banlieues* are ‘the true loci of the “immigrant” problem’ (127) as well as the focus of the community’s creative defiance, which takes as one form the creation of a variety of powerful, expressive cultural styles’ (37). This is because place is not static; it has no boundaries and no single identity (Massey 322-323). Cresswell, in his book on place, notes that Massey’s paper pleads for a new conceptualisation of place as ‘open and hybrid’ (13). And the paper concludes with a plea for a global sense of the local, a global sense of place. Additionally, people change their built environment and its associated images simply by virtue of using and being in it (Shortell et al, 68).

This notion of fluidity and how it impacts on immigrant representations is examined more fully in the next chapter, which focuses on point of view and language, as well as concepts of hybridity.

Chapter 3: Language, point of view and hybridity

This chapter examines the ways in which point of view and language in the selected novels allow for new ways of seeing the Other, by bridging the perceived separation between 'us' and 'them'. Just as Doreen Massey pleaded for a new conceptualisation of space as open and hybrid, the multiple perspectives in the selected novels, and the references that these novels make to language, both summon up hybrid spaces that go beyond the physical. In other words, the blurring of boundaries is not just geographical. It is apparent for example in the way language is appropriated by minority groups. It is also illustrated through the points of view of immigrant characters that reveal something about the communities they have moved into, and encourage the native residents of these communities to look at themselves and others in a different light. The image of the Other also contains an image of 'I'. (Pageaux 142)

Representations of what is Other correspond to self-images, complementary ideas of what is familiar and domestic (Syndram 189). The experiences of immigrants portrayed in the selected novels help illuminate aspects of their environment and of those who reside there in ways that might otherwise go unobserved. For a number of the 'native' characters living in these communities, the immigrant characters they encounter act as a kind of mirror, reflecting something about themselves. Furthermore, the crimes in the selected novels provide opportunities for reflections and discussions about the changes that have taken place in the communities where these crimes have occurred. The interviews that form part of a criminal investigation allow for different characters to be heard and their perspectives to be voiced, leading in several instances to a debate about society and the impact of immigration, and to a questioning of prevailing stereotypes and assumptions about the outsider.

The first part of this chapter specifically examines point of view and its influence on immigrant representations. In the selected novels, whose perspective are readers getting?

This section examines the role of the investigating characters in the selected novels in subverting stereotypes about the Other. In several instances, the detective is a mediating character who initiates the reader into 'otherised' communities (Stam and Shohat 205). In these novels, the investigating characters are either of mixed ethnicity or they see themselves to some extent as outsiders. These aspects mean they are sometimes able to better access and relate to the experiences of immigrant characters. Increasingly too in crime fiction, immigrants are taking on investigating roles. These immigrant characters help bridge the distance between insider and outsider, because they have experienced both — the immigrant's outsider status, and social acceptance as representatives of the law.

The second part of this chapter centres on the ways in which immigrants use the language of the countries they settle in, and the extent to which they influence this language. Language is a medium through which the Other can find expression, and begin to challenge hegemonic discourses. In France, for example, French has been heavily influenced by Arabic, and the *banlieue* in particular has given rise to specific forms of French, such as *verlan*, a kind of back slang.

Lastly, this chapter examines the notion of hybridity as it relates to immigrant representations in the selected novels. Changing demographics in France, Britain and elsewhere since the 1970s have led to emerging theories of hybridity. This section of the chapter analyses hybridity as it is portrayed in *Wasteland*, *Clash of Civilizations over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio* and *Arab Jazz*, via these novels' immigrant characters. In *Wasteland*, for example, Aisha notes that 'when it comes down to it, people are the same everywhere' (170). At the same time, she stresses that she wants to choose her own future, and she decides to conduct her own investigation into her brother's death. By taking matters into their own hands, and posing their own questions as part of the criminal investigations that are being carried out, immigrant characters like Aisha Kateb and Ahmed Taroudant are

to some extent wresting back control of their representations, and providing perspectives that run counter to the hegemonic point of view. Their characters, and others in the novels, give rise to questions of hybridity. Varying definitions of hybridity have been put forward by theorists from Homi Bhabha to Laura Moss. This chapter outlines some of these theories as they relate to the selected novels.

This chapter advances that, in the selected novels, there is a questioning of dominant, hegemonic discourses. The question is, how far do these counter-discourses go? How effective are they and what can they achieve? I conclude by proposing that *Wasteland* offers a singular interpretation that comes closest to articulating a state of hybridity as normality: in the relationship between Aisha and Commandant Serge Morel, there is the claim of an aloneness and associated specificity that effaces the immigrant's status of otherness or at least shifts it to propose a marginality we all share, an undefinable, individual consciousness.

3.1 Points of view: I and the Other

There is a scene in *Still Midnight* when the police detective Alex Morrow is at the police station, watching her colleague DS Grant Bannerman interview Omar Anwar in a separate room, via a TV monitor. Omar is telling Bannerman the story of how the police treated him and Mo when they sought the officers' help with his father's kidnapping. While Alex Morrow does not know Omar, she finds herself wholly relating to, and empathising with his story, and she experiences a moment of recognition:

To be treated with suspicion at a moment of grief. She knew the deep stinging cut of that feeling. That was why he looked like that in the road, he and Mo, because they knew they were not among friends, that they were other. (92)

This scene is important because it relates to Pageaux's point, described earlier: the image of the Other also contains an image of Self. As she listens to Omar's description of what happened to him and Mo, Alex finds herself reflected in Omar's eyes. There is, between them, a shared experience of exclusion. The reason Alex can relate so closely to Omar's experience is because she herself feels like an outsider. As I discussed in the second chapter,⁴ Alex knows what it is like to be perceived differently and kept at arm's length. This is partly due to her personality. 'All the niceties of politics, personal or professional' elude her (27). She is not easy to get along with and has trouble managing her anger, something that is being 'remarked upon in her assessments' (22). She has also recently been promoted and that has altered the dynamic between her and her former peers (85).

A similar moment of recognition is described in *Arab Jazz*: Lieutenant Rachel Kupferstein feels a connection with Ahmed Taroudant from the first moment they meet. He is 'an open window which she can see into immediately' (27). This may be due to the fact that, like Ahmed, she does not quite fit in. She has felt alien in her surroundings. At school, she was

⁴ See page 67 of this thesis.

the girl 'who would avoid the company of the overly fair-featured girls in her class, and whose best friends were Marcel and Ibrahim, the neighbourhood go-to guys for soft drugs' (23). During a trip to India, she discovered what it felt like not to be registered, to disappear as if she had ceased to exist (93). Perhaps this is why she connects with Ahmed. When she meets him, he has been living his life as if he wants to disappear, to cease to exist, holed up in his apartment, lost in his books. And yet he is an open window to her.

Alex Morrow and Rachel Kupferstein, like John Rebus and Kurt Wallander, are not leads in the traditional sense. As individuals who experience life as outsiders or at least struggle to 'fit in' nicely with family and colleagues, they are not so removed or dissimilar from the outsiders who have come to live in their cities. They do not have a particular 'side'. While the notion of a detective who is not a team player is a recurring theme in crime fiction, here it plays a particular function, which is to weaken the stereotypical assumption that there are two camps — us and them. If for example Alex Morrow cannot easily be called one of 'us', then how are we to talk about 'us' and 'them' as if the divide was obvious? Rebus in *Fleshmarket Close* also has no particular allegiances. He has a dark side and black moods, and is a troubled man. Geherin notes that 'Rebus is a maverick, never comfortable with the authorities above him' and that his work is everything to him (2012, 125). His loner status means he makes up his own mind about things, following his own dictates and sense of justice (125). In *Fleshmarket Close*, responding to a racist colleague, Rebus tells him: 'He was Polish, by the way, my grandad. We're a bastard nation, Charlie — get used to it' (61). Kurt Wallander in *Faceless Killers* and Serge Morel in *Wasteland* too are solitary, complex characters. Their aloneness is partly a result of their temperament. They have difficult or dysfunctional family relationships. In *Faceless Killers*, the first Kurt Wallander novel, readers find out that his wife has recently left him (28) and that his daughter Linda broke off all contact with him after attempting suicide at the age of 15 (20). Wallander's father is a tyrant

with changeable moods (38), who calls his son every day (21) and continually complains about being lonely (37), but it is a fraught relationship and the two of them argue frequently (36). Meanwhile, since his wife left him, Kurt Wallander is in a pitiful state. Stopping in the men's room on his way to a press conference, he looks in the mirror:

He saw that he needed a haircut [...]. And he ought to lose some weight too. In the three months since his wife had left him, he had put on seven kilos. In his apathetic loneliness, he had eaten nothing but takeaways and pizza, greasy hamburgers and pastries. (28)

Police work is what Wallander is good at, and what he finds order in. It is during a criminal investigation that he can set aside his anxieties about himself and his relationships. This is apparent when, at the beginning of the murder investigation in *Faceless Killers*, Wallander sits down with the other police officers who will be involved in trying to solve it. 'Wallander looked around the room. All of them were his colleagues. None of them was his close friend. And yet they were a team' (23). Kenneth Branagh, who played Kurt Wallander in the BBC television adaptation (2008-2016) has said of the fictional detective: 'There is an open wound quality about him' (Hildred 30). Wallander's sensitivities are best expressed in his work. According to Branagh, again cited by Hildred: 'His gifts for dealing with people seem to be placed entirely at the disposal of his work, rather than with dealing with his own life' (31).

Wasteland's Commandant Serge Morel is somewhat aloof and spends a great deal of time alone when he is not at work. He worries at times that he might have inherited his father's coldness, his inability to connect emotionally with others (134). In his mid-forties, Morel remains single and lives in the family home, in a section that has been converted into a private apartment. His father, who is now suffering from dementia, lives in the main house. The two are not close and spend little time together. In all three Morel novels (*The Lying-Down Room*, *Death in the Rainy Season* and *Wasteland*), the detective turns to origami as a way of relaxing and also focusing on the case at hand. At the end of *Wasteland*, he finds

himself pining for home and solitude, even though he is out with a woman he loves. 'Maybe he would sit up and start on an origami project. All he needed was a little time, a little quiet, in the private, orderly world he'd created for himself' (398). Morel is also part-Cambodian and lived in several countries before settling in Paris at the age of 17, due to his father's diplomatic career. Paris is very familiar to him but at the same time he is repeatedly drawn back to Cambodia, which he associates with his mother, who died when he was a young man. Morel's sensitivity, his dual sense of belonging, the absence left by his dead mother and his meticulous, somewhat introverted nature make him a measured and thoughtful observer of others.

In summary, the investigating characters in the selected novels are complex, have experienced exclusion or a sense of being on the outside looking in. They are at their best when they are working, skilled, observant, and empathetic, even as they struggle to connect with people in their personal lives. Their perspectives cast a particular light on immigrant representations, allowing these constructs to be multi-dimensional rather than stereotypical and simplistic.

The voice or point of view of the investigator is not the only one heard or seen in crime fiction. Crime novels also provide multiple opportunities to hear from a cast of characters who must be interviewed as part of the criminal investigations. This includes the families of victims, bystanders and other witnesses, suspects, as well as members of the investigating team, to name a few. In the selected novels, these interviews allow for a range of characters to voice their feelings about immigration, highlighting the fact that there is no single way of feeling or thinking about the issue. These feelings range from acceptance and tolerance to anxiety and animosity. Each person feels differently, emphasizing the fact that there is no single way of viewing the Other. There is no collective stance on immigrants. The investigative processes in the novels, and the range of opinions being expressed, reveal what

lies beneath people's views on immigrants. In *Clash of Civilisations over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio*, each interview relating to the investigation into the murder of the 'Gladiator' tells us something about the concerns, frustrations and anxieties of those citizens who are being questioned. These interviews all contribute to building a picture of a society in transition (Romano) and highlight the fact that it is change that people find most confronting. Here again, the immigrant is a mirror into the preoccupations of modern society, revealing the individual fears and stresses of the Self. Immigration is the visible face of change. In Lakhous's novel, the characters are all holding on to an idea of a once-orderly and homogeneous society, and this aversion to change — led by migration, globalisation and European integration (McGuire) — explains why they are all very quick to embrace the neat, uncomplicated versions of Amedeo that he presents to them. Change and the accompanying sense of unease that comes with having to adjust to a new, unfamiliar world is one of the principal themes in Lakhous's book, as it is in Henning Mankell's *Faceless Killers*. In *Faceless Killers*, we saw in the second chapter that some Swedes feel that immigration is to blame for the fact that things are not as they used to be. But Wallander's views on this are ambivalent too. He sympathises with some of the arguments against immigration:

Did the government and the Immigration Service have any real control over which individuals sought asylum? Over who was a refugee and who was an opportunist? Was it possible to differentiate at all? How long could the current refugee policy operate without leading to chaos? (268)

Wallander harbours 'the same vague apprehension that so many other people did. Anxiety at the unknown, at the future' (268). The Swedish detective's feelings about migrants and the changing state of his country echo the unease felt by many, an unease that is also expressed, as demonstrated in the first chapter, by various members of the Icelandic community portrayed in *Arctic Chill*. In the first chapter, I described how Sunee, the mother of the murdered child, provides an essential point of view to relate the changes this community has

seen. I noted that, through Sunee's eyes, one gets a sense of the loss of connectedness that has occurred in the community, creating a distinct chill.

To what extent are immigrant characters afforded the opportunity to represent themselves in the selected novels? In *Clash of Civilizations Over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio*, each of the characters in Amedeo's neighbourhood provides a different perspective on this immigrant character who many assume is Italian. The story is told through a series of first-person narratives. Valerie McGuire writes that Amara Lakhous 'displaces the single authored text in order to suggest an authorship that is *plurivoce* and able to overturn the marginalization of migrants' (7). In this novel, it may seem at first as though, by masquerading as an Italian, Amedeo is eclipsing himself. This is intentional as he is seeking to escape the dreadful memories of the past. But it does mean that he is always putting on an act, disappearing into a series of fictional others. As the story is told by the various people in his life, there is an implied notion here that 'Third World and minoritarian characters are incapable of speaking for themselves' (Stam and Shohat 205). The plurality of voices here also illustrates the complexity of representation. It challenges readers by revealing the extent to which our biases shape our images of the Other.

Yet Amedeo does, to some extent, own his representations. What the other characters see is what he chooses for them to see. These characters believe in his carefully constructed image, and jump to easy conclusions, exactly as he intends them to, because of the signs he advertises: his fluency in Italian, his fondness for *cornettos*, his Italian wife.

There is another, wider trend that is empowering immigrant characters in contemporary European crime fiction. Increasingly, police, private eye and other investigators in crime novels are drawn from immigrant communities. Although they do not form part of the central corpus of this thesis, the following examples nevertheless demonstrate this growing phenomenon. One example is Eva Dolan's police partners DI

Dushan Zigic and DS Mel Ferreira of the Hate Crimes Unit, who feature in all three of her novels to date: *Long Way Home* (2014), *Tell no Tales* (2015) and *After You Die* (2016). Set in Peterborough, the first two novels tackle immigration and right-wing extremism and document the hardship endured by many migrant workers. Another example is Anya Lipska's Anglo-Polish duo of police detective Natalie Kershaw and private eye Janusz Kiszka in *Where The Devil Can't Go* (2013) and *Death Can't Take a Joke* (2014). The books move between events that happened in Poland to a gritty east London, populated by Polish immigrants. A similar association — similar in the way it brings two different worlds closer together — can be found in Danish crime writer Jussi Adler-Olsen's pairing off of police inspector Carl Mørck with a Syrian assistant, Assad, in his Department Q series of crime novels. The first was the *Keeper of Lost Causes* (2011), originally published in Danish in 2007, and there have been six others since. In an interview, Adler-Olsen states that Assad is a 'dazzling example of an immigrant who is an equal to any of us.' His energy, humour and intelligence, coupled with his "uncanny" talent as a detective, make him an ideal associate for Carl Mørck (Strainchamps).

In summary, the points of view of the investigating characters actively erode the notion of a divide between the Self and the Other, because the detective or police officer too does not necessarily identify as an 'insider' and has experienced a sense of not belonging, or not fitting in easily. These experiences, in some instances, lead to moments of recognition, where the Other's experience becomes familiar. The investigators in the selected novels – John Rebus, Alex Morrow, Kurt Wallander or Serge Morel – can play a mediating role because they do not identify with particular groups and they have no particular allegiances. At the same time, the investigative process gives readers access to the wide-ranging views and opinions of a large cross-section of society. The reader realises that there are multiple and contrasting views on immigrants, and multiple representations. Finally, there is a growing

trend towards immigrant characters playing investigative roles in contemporary European crime fiction, and this means a shift in perspective — what we are getting is not simply the point of view of the dominant culture, but increasingly — within the narrative itself — the perspective of minority groups too.

I have shown how the use of geography and point of view in the selected novels both challenge the notion of two separate and opposing worlds — us and them. In the next section of this chapter, I examine the role of language in further challenging this perceived separation.

3.2 Language and representation

In Viet Thanh Nguyen's 2015 novel *The Sympathizer*, the narrator, a Vietnamese army captain living in America, is asked to critique a Hollywood script about the Vietnam War, which has just ended. He tells the author that one major flaw in his script is that it displays a distinct lack of speaking parts for Vietnamese people. Given the film is meant to be set in Vietnam, he suggests that this approach could be deemed culturally insensitive. He tells the script's author:

Do you not think it would be a little more believable, a little more realistic, a little more authentic, for a movie set in a certain country for the people in that country to have something to say, instead of having your screenplay direct, as it does now, *Cut to villagers speaking in their own language?* Do you think it might not be decent to let them actually say something instead of simply acknowledging that there is some kind of sound coming from their mouths? (173)

In this particular example, the choice of English as the film's dominant language reflects the balance of power between the film's American producers and the film's subjects — the Vietnamese people. By choosing to silence the Vietnamese villagers, the makers of the film

take control of the narrative. They are telling the story of the Vietnam War as they see it, from an American perspective, with complete disregard for the point of view of the Vietnamese.

What role does language play in the representation of the Other? The American, Bengali-born author Jhumpa Lahiri writes that language is 'the mirror, the principal metaphor' (87). More than words, language is who we are. It is what allows us to communicate with one another. Without it, we lack the necessary, collective signals to share and exchange information with each other, to communicate meaning. According to Stuart Hall, language '*externalizes*' [...] it makes available and accessible [...] the meanings that we are making of the world and of events' (*Representation* 11).

Lahiri herself is Bengali-born, but moved to America as a young child. Her book *In Other Words* is the result of a year spent in Italy to perfect her mastery of Italian, and she wrote the book in Italian, which is neither her mother tongue — Bengali — nor the language she learned growing up in America. As a young child and new migrant to America, where she attended English-speaking schools, language for Lahiri was associated with guilt because she was turning her back on her mother tongue. What Italian offers her is freedom — a means of communication that is free of associations. The choice of a particular language has implications. Just as representations evolve from meaning assigned to images, so there are associations between language and discourse, and meanings (Mennel 1).

Language can be used to label and silence. The language used in the media and by politicians, as it relates to immigration, speaks eloquently about people's attitudes towards immigrants. Dominic Thomas cites Alain Badiou as having noted that French insecurity on the new global landscape is 'increasingly expressed in a vocabulary of fear, one that includes a 'fear of foreigners, workers, of the people, of banlieues youth, Muslims, blacks from Africa' (114). One of the most noteworthy characteristics of immigration discourses is the naturalisation of concepts such as illegality, which is tied to the circulation of stereotypes

about the migration status of different ethno-racial groups. Specifically, assessments of illegality are often associated with unreliable signs of one's migration status, such as language, religion, and physical appearance (Rosa). During the 2013 Australian federal election, Tony Abbott made immigration a cornerstone of his campaign, and stopping the boats became a campaign slogan. A month after the election, the media reported that Abbott's Immigration Minister Scott Morrison had instructed departmental and detention centre staff to publicly refer to asylum seekers as 'illegal' arrivals and as 'detainees', rather than as clients (B. Hall). Morrison's instructions included directing staff to replace the phrase 'asylum seeker' with 'illegal maritime arrival', and to replace 'client' with 'detainee' (onshore) or 'transferee' depending on whether they were onshore or offshore (Clark). This shift in language has the effect of demonising immigrants by suggesting they are criminals. Similarly, during his election campaign, the now US President Donald Trump repeatedly evoked immigration as a national security concern and pledged to build a wall between the United States and Mexico to keep out Mexicans whom he referred to as criminals and rapists (Reilly). Shortly after taking office, he signed an executive order allowing him to build this wall. Linguist Anna Szilágyi writes that, by assigning the role of villain to various groups, including Muslims and Mexicans, Trump is able to present himself as the savior, equipped with exclusionary rhetoric and policies.

Immigrants are not simply the passive subjects of such rhetoric. They also play an active role in the being and becoming of the languages they adopt in their countries of adoption. Languages are porous, absorbing external influences and illustrating in this way the interlinkages between different communities. The way *banlieue* residents use French, for example, goes some way towards illustrating the notion of linguistic hybridity as described by Mikhail Bakhtin. In the *Dialogic Imagination*, Bakhtin noted that 'language and languages change historically primarily by hybridization, by means of a mixing of various 'languages' co-

existing within the boundaries of a single dialect, a single national language' (358). Bakhtin wrote about the way language can be double-voiced. According to Robert J.C. Young, this double-voiced discourse 'serves a purpose, whereby each voice can unmask the Other' (19). To put it simply, hybridity as described by Bakhtin means an intermingling of languages, where there is no distinct separation between us and them.

For the immigrants in the selected novels, learning the language of their country of adoption is necessary — hardly a matter of choice — but it can also be a powerful tool of self-representation. There is a passage in *Wasteland* where the teachers at the school Aisha attends become engaged in a heated debate about language as it relates to their immigrant pupils. Luc Clément, Aisha's philosophy teacher, finds himself reflecting on its importance:

[...] language mattered. Not just the language of their forefathers, and of their parents, many of whom didn't speak French fluently, but also the language of their country of adoption. Without it, they would remain on the margins of society. Language was power. It was no surprise, Luc reflected, that France had made French a cornerstone of their colonial expansion. Without language, how could you articulate your needs and desires? How could you earn respect? Be seen, and heard? (186)

By learning to speak French, these immigrant students have a better chance to assert themselves. As Stam and Shohat note, language is a tool of resistance. 'People do not enter simply into language as a master code; they participate in it as socially constituted subjects whose linguistic exchange is shaped by power relations' (193). For minority groups, language can help create a certain unity and counter the dominant culture by subverting the dominant language, which is no longer the possession of its original owners (192). Martin Luther King understood this when he appropriated the American rhetoric of freedom to argue for black rights. In doing so, he highlighted its glaring contradictions and omissions. Freedom and the preservation of civil liberties for all, as proclaimed by successive U.S. presidents, was in reality not for everyone.

Historically, France has maintained strict rules limiting the use of foreign words in

areas like advertising, packaging and radio programmes. In 2013, language inspectors investigated 8,475 cases of linguistic rule-breaking (“Arabesque”). The *Académie Française*, which regulates the French language by determining standards of acceptable grammar and vocabulary, has long resisted the introduction of English words into French dictionaries. Yet recently some English words have been introduced, and Arabic ones too, that were already in use, if not formally accepted as part of the French language.

French *banlieues*, like the one portrayed in *Wasteland*, illustrate the creative ways in which immigrant communities influence and reshape the language of their country of adoption. Naoki Sakai, cited by Birgit Mennel, notes that these *banlieues* are characterised by a richness of articulations and ‘languages,’ or ways of speaking (Mennel 4). *Verlan*, mentioned earlier, is one example. A type of slang that spread in the *banlieues* in the 1970s and 1980s, it inverts syllables. For example, *femme* (woman) becomes *meuf* (Stille).

In “The Language of the Banlieues,” Birgit Mennel and Stefan Novotny describe a series of visits to Aubervilliers, a French commune in the north-eastern suburbs of Paris, over a period of two months in 2011. The purpose of these visits was to explore the relations between language and translation as an expression of social conditions in the *banlieues*. The place they arrived at in Aubervilliers was Quatre-Chemins (Four Pathways). It is the name of a station on the Paris Metro Line 7 that links the center of Paris with Aubervilliers, as well as the name of a large intersection and the area surrounding it, near the border separating the *banlieue* from the city. They describe Quatre-Chemins as

a vibrating force field where the most diverse socialities, economies, attitudes, colors, and sounds (or more precisely nuances of color and of sound), as well as “languages” (or more precisely ways of speaking) are intertwined. (2)

The authors describe a state of ‘heterolinguality’, where languages exist in a state of fluidity and permeability, absorbing external influences.

French rap is one example of how language is appropriated by minority groups to

counter hegemonic discourses. Rappers provide a 'highly visible counterhegemonic cultural space for the banlieusards who form the majority audience' and the appropriation of rap by the youth of the banlieues is 'subversive and oppositional in the sense that it dehomogenises the French cultural core' (Gross et al, 30). Thus, plurality and hybridity are constant themes relating to French immigration and to the *banlieue*.

In some of the selected novels, language is used to illustrate that plurality and to subvert the notion of a single discourse. Immigrant characters may speak the language of their country of adoption fluently or poorly, but either way they influence it, bringing new words, cadences and intonations into everyday speech.

Amara Lakhous's *Clash of Civilisations over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio* illustrates that there is no single dominant language, but rather a plurality of languages, or voices. According to Valerie McGuire, Lakhous's book is an exploration of 'the power of language to activate new voices and ideas about identity' (3). The 'choral' nature of the book 'displaces the single authored text in order to suggest an authorship that is *plurivoce* and able to overturn the marginalization of migrants' (7). We saw in the first chapter how diverse the book's cast is. It includes foreign characters like the Dutch filmmaker and the Peruvian housemaid, but also several Italian characters, some of whom, like the Neapolitan concierge and the Milanese professor, identify more with their region than with Italy as a nation. The immigrants have their own way of speaking. This is exemplified by Amedeo's ululations in alternating chapters (each of these chapters bears the titles *The First Wail* *The Second Wail*, etc, until the eleventh and '*Final Wail, or Before the Rooster Crows*') and by the character Parviz Mansoor Samadi, who initiates a speech strike and sews his lips closed. Amedeo says it is Parviz's way of speaking for himself: 'Parviz spoke his truth with his mouth sewed up: he spoke with his silence' (30).

In *Still Midnight*, Denise Mina offers a depiction of Scotland where there is no obvious distinction between who is foreign and who is not, when it comes to language. There is a scene where Alex Morrow visits the Anwar home to interview the family about the earlier break-in and kidnapping. From his enunciation, Alex Morrow guesses that Billal, one of the sons, must have attended St Al's, the expensive, highly academic and private Catholic school in the city centre (42). But she notes that Meeshra, Billal's wife, is common. She 'used swear words without a thought, had bad grammar, reported speech as if she was telling another girl on a street corner about a fight at school (42). Here, Denise Mina is emphasizing the fact that linguistic differences exist among all Scots and are not related solely to their immigrant status but also to factors like class, education and regional provenance.

With *Wasteland*, I have chosen English as the language for a story set in France. Like Anne Korkeakivi, who writes about her choice of words in a 12 March 2012 *Wall Street Journal* article titled "Learning to Speak in Tongues", my expatriate background (which I described on page 75) means I tend to write stories set in many parts of the world. Other factors guide my choice of language, including my multi-ethnic background and bilingual status. I grew up speaking English and French. French was my mother tongue but nowadays English is the stronger of my two languages. Therefore, it made sense to me to combine the two: to write the novel in English, while writing about France, a place that is part of my heritage. I also deliberately chose to use words in French and in *verlan* throughout the text. These linguistic choices allow me to challenge the notion of insider-outsider status. As the author, I am neither entirely one thing nor another, neither entirely French or entirely 'migrant', just as my characters cannot be confined to one culture or manner of speech or another. Serge Morel is Parisian, but he is also part-Khmer and grew up outside France until the age of 17. Alberto Rosales is Spanish and although he has lived in France for decades, he still reverts at times to Spanish words. At one point, he refers to himself as an 'imbécil' (201).

The seeming inconsistencies in some of my word choices — for example, I use both *flic* and *keuf*, which are both slang terms for a police officer — are meant to highlight the ways in which our associations with language are multiple and subjective. With increased global migration, the permeability of languages — their ability to absorb external influences — will surely only increase.

I've touched on the ways in which notions of plurality are expressed in the selected novels to subvert the notion of a single, dominant perspective. In the next section, I examine the concept of hybridity as it relates to these novels, and the extent to which the immigrant characters represent themselves. I also interrogate the nature of this hybridity. Some of the examples given above refer to an oppositional relationship between us and them. Bakhtin's notion of what he calls 'intentional' hybridity — and French rap for example would fall into this category — is a hybridity that sets different points of view against each other. It is one where 'two points of view are not mixed, but set against each other dialogically' (360). The purpose here is to stand up to, confront and oppose. This next section examines the nature of hybridity as it relates to immigrant representations in the selected novels, and interrogates its nature: what does hybridity look like in these novels? Does it equate to a fusion of cultures? Or is it characterised by a state of conflict and opposition? Is it static or in a state of flux? In an increasingly globalised world, is hybridity the new normal?

3.3 Hybridity, representation and discourse

At its most basic level, hybridity describes a cross between two species (Young 8). It has been used in relation to various categories such as culture, biology and language. The eighth chapter in Charles Darwin's *Origin of the Species* (1859) for example is titled 'Hybridity' and examines the crossing of species. Hybridity has become one of the buzz words of our time, from its theoretical interpretations by postcolonial theorists like Homi Bhabha and Stuart Hall to the multi-racial communities portrayed by contemporary authors like Zadie Smith, Mohsin Hamid and Haneif Kureishi.

Why, in the context of this study, does hybridity matter? Its importance lies in the fact that, as Jan Nederveen Pieterse notes, it 'problematizes' boundaries. It questions their relevance and by doing so opens up new ways of seeing the Other. He writes:

Recognition and difference are a function of the existing identities and boundaries that are available on the social and cultural maps. [...] Hybridity is a journey into the riddles of recognition. (220)

For Homi Bhabha, the notion of hybridity is closely associated with colonialism. He defines his concept of hybridity to describe the construction of culture and identity within conditions of colonial antagonism. According to Bhabha, the process of cultural hybridity gives rise to a new era of negotiation of meaning and representation. He defines hybridity as existing in an in-between space, an articulation of the necessarily ambivalent interaction between colonial authority and the colonial subject (Bhabha 96).

More recently, changing demographics in France, Britain and elsewhere has led to emerging theories of hybridity. Pieterse remarks that 'new hybrid forms are significant indicators of profound changes that are taking place as a consequence of mobility, migration and multiculturalism' (221). We've seen in this study that the perceived boundaries between insider and outsider are becoming blurred, that we live in an increasingly multi-dimensional

world where migration and cosmopolitanism are giving rise to counter-discourses that challenge dominant perspectives. In today's world, hybridity relates to the mixing and merging of different cultures, and the resulting new spaces of interaction between 'us' and 'them', spaces that do not necessarily result from an antagonistic exchange.

The main question posed here is, what does hybridity look like in some of the selected novels? Does hybridity provide a way out of binary thinking? By the same token, does a multiplicity of representations equate to a distancing from hegemonic discourses? I've shown in the previous chapters that the selected novels all describe environments where immigrants have become highly visible and play an active role in the communities they have joined. As described earlier, immigrants are the visible face of change, which is why they are the focus of so much of the anxiety that people feel about the new, unfamiliar world they live in. These novels seek to make the separation between the insider and the outsider unclear. There is a blurring of perceived boundaries that occurs through point of view, language and geography. According to Anjali Prabhu, this is a state of hybridity that can provide a way out of binary thinking, allow the inscription of agency of the subaltern, and even permit a restructuring of power (1). In nationalist discourse, the immigrant represents the Other and is both different and subordinate. That idea of difference and separation becomes much harder to maintain in a globalised world. Hybridity suggests new exchanges within spaces that allow for previously existing and ignored positions to be introduced into the main discourse and to challenge entrenched perspectives.

Laura Moss posits that hybridity, in cultural terms, is neither an appropriation of one culture by another, nor the acculturation of one and another. Instead, it is the third element produced by the interaction of cultures, communities, or individuals. It is not exceptional. Rather, in an increasingly globalised world, hybridity becomes increasingly ordinary. She writes:

I want to go beyond seeing hybridity as an in-between space or as the articulation of the necessarily ambivalent interaction between colonial authority and the colonial subject as Bhabha does, and explore it instead as an increasingly ordinary locus in changing postcolonial contexts. (12)

Moss's theory supports the idea of a hybrid figure that is not in an in-between space, but simply is. This is a hybrid figure that does not exist in a state of tension or opposition to a dominant culture, and whose expression does not stem only from anger or antagonism. Rather, it arises from the collapsing of differences between the Self and the Other — a collapsing that occurs through the blurring of boundaries described earlier. This hybrid 'normality' is visible in *Still Midnight*, where Denise Mina moves well beyond binarism by introducing ethnic characters who are integrated in Scottish society and speak as Scots, even if they are not always treated as such. Doreen Alvarez Saar has noted that Denise Mina is one of a younger generation of Tartan Noir writers who 'integrate ethnic characters into their novels while avoiding the authorial pitfalls of idealization of the other.' And Thomas Christie refers to Denise Mina as a 'staunch realist' (169) who is well aware of Scotland's changing social composition due to emigration, immigration and assimilation.

I have sought to exemplify hybridity in *Wasteland*. There is at the heart of the novel an acceptance of the ordinariness of the hybrid subject in the society it describes. Like in *Arab Jazz*, many of the characters are immigrants who have settled in France, more or less successfully. They exemplify the reality of contemporary France, where, as of 2016, 12.3 per cent of the population was born outside the country (Connor and Krogstad). Although this hybrid condition defines a number of characters in *Wasteland*, I've centred it on Commandant Serge Morel and Aisha Kateb, both of whom share an aloneness that defies the categorisation of people into opposing groups, by emphasizing the singularity of the human condition. Morel, as we have seen, is a solitary character, who derives comfort from his solitude even as he acknowledges the loneliness it brings. Aisha's aloneness derives from the fact that she has

lost her brother, has little in common with her traditional mother, has been abandoned by her father, is very aware of the exclusion associated with living in the *banlieue*, and has no one she can rely on, except maybe Morel. It is Morel, towards the end of the novel, who helps lessen her solitude by telling her she can look to Karim as a friend (396). Karim is in fact the only person Aisha has called on, to help her with her lone crusade into her brother's death. Even then, she is not certain she can trust him (216).

The discussion of alternative discourses on migrants raises a question concerning whether said discourses automatically imply a challenge to hegemonic discourses and structures. The novels selected for analysis do enable the reader to see the Other differently. But these representations to a great extent continue to exist within dominant regimes of representation reinforcing class, ethnic and gender structures. In *Wasteland*, while the *banlieue* characters are diverse and present different perspectives, they continue to be stigmatized because of where they come from and where they reside. In *Arctic Chill*, *Fleshmarket Close* and *Faceless Killers*, interviews with local community members reveal the range of emotions — and prejudices — that people hold towards immigrants. In *Clash of Civilisations over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio*, Amedeo becomes an actor, playing several parts for the benefit of his audience. In all these novels, immigrants are constantly having to renegotiate their place at the table, so to speak, to overcome suspicion, stereotype and exclusion.

At the same time, these immigrant characters play an increasingly active part in these narratives, both as central and secondary characters. In the novels selected here, and in other new European crime fiction, the distance between the Self and the Other is less apparent than ever and the new 'normal' is a state of hybridity, where there is no single way of telling a story, no single discourse.

Conclusion

My overarching purpose in this exegesis has been to offer a pan-European perspective on how the Other is represented in contemporary crime fiction. While the novels selected here are set in different European countries, and in varied settings — the small and isolated community described in Mankell's *Faceless Killers* has seemingly little in common with the bustling cities of Rome and Paris described respectively in Lakhous's and Miské's books — there are commonalities in the experiences of both the migrant and non-migrant characters. Many of the migrant characters in these novels, at some point or another, experience what it means to be Other and to be kept at arm's length, no matter how long, or settled they have been in their countries of adoption. In several instances, these immigrant characters are unable to shed their outsider status. The way they look is enough to raise suspicion. This is the case for Omar Anwar, when he appeals to the police for help. All the officers see is a Muslim man.

At the same time, for these characters, the place where they now live is the closest thing they have to home and there is no going back to the past. This is certainly the case for Aisha in *Wasteland* — she is horrified at the notion of moving to Algeria — and for the Anwar family in Glasgow. For some of these characters, the notion of going back to where they came from is not an option. In *Clash of Civilizations over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio*, this is Amedeo's situation. He cannot go back to Algeria, where he experienced trauma. For Sunee in *Arctic Chill*, the notion of home is complex. She came to Iceland looking for a better life, and her second son was born there. But her son's murder illuminates the hardship of her situation, and the realization that things did not work out for her in Iceland. Despite her efforts, Iceland remains a cold place, where she has struggled to build a home. Across the

selected novels, the immigrant experiences are complex and multi-layered. There is no easy, formulaic way to sum up these characters.

Similarly, the non-migrant characters in these novels provide a many-layered commentary on how the Other is perceived. As the criminal investigations unfold, they bring to the surface the tensions and uncertainties, the breadth of emotions and anxieties felt by the members of the communities where the crimes have occurred. Several of these novels comment on how communities across Europe have reacted and adapted to change in the past few decades. This is revealed through the non-migrant characters: in the fraught context of a murder investigation, their 'true' feelings come to the surface.

In these novels, the examination of a crime leads to a dissection of the community in which it occurs, and this encompasses individual experiences —Sunee's experience, for example — and shared experiences. In *Wasteland*, for example, Aisha and Alberto have similar ambivalent feelings. They both know what it is like to feel irrelevant and alone, and as though they cannot play a determining role in their own destinies. At the same time, they are invested in their communities.

The selected crime novels reflect the genre's ability to comment on a specific setting while addressing themes with wider geographical implications. They provide opportunities to reconcile the individual with the global, by tackling a theme — immigration — that is not only local but transnational.

In an increasingly globalised world, so is our reading of crime fiction becoming international. The explosion of Scandinavian crime fiction over the past two decades, most significantly since the publication and international success of Stieg Larsson's *Millennium Trilogy*, is evidence of the universal appeal of books that may be set in a specific place, but resonate with an international audience. Similarly, the books selected in this study are set in

Scotland, France, Italy, Sweden and Iceland, but the themes that are addressed in the stories — the pace of change in modern societies, the rapid rise of immigration — are transnational.

This ability to be both specific and wordly makes crime fiction an ideal genre to address issues that are of local significance, impacting local communities — while at the same time resonating in similar ways across borders. Increased migration and its socio-political impact on communities is one such issue, as is the unease caused by phenomena such as globalisation and the polarisation of the Muslim world. In different ways, the novels selected for the purposes of this study all deal with change. Henning Mankell set *Faceless Killers* in a small town that is affected by social changes, but these changes are affecting other Europeans too. World crime fiction is a prime vehicle for discussions of otherness.

Throughout the writing and research process of this study, I have sought to analyse and describe the treatment of the Other in selected novels that bring to life specific immigrant experiences, within a European context. As part of this study, I have situated *Wasteland* as a contemporary novel that is contributing to a growing sub-section of the European crime fiction genre that is beginning to question how the Other is represented. Drawing on specific examples, I have interrogated the use of stereotypes in the selected novels. Here, they are used to highlight the reductive ways in which immigrants are portrayed, only to then be subverted. Through the criminal investigations in these novels, the immigrant goes from being a one-dimensional, little-known and little-understood character to someone who is not so different after all. Gradually, as these investigations progress, the notion of an unbridgeable gap between 'us' and 'them' begins to fade. This study also examined the function of point of view, geography and language in shaping immigrant representations in the selected novels. All of these factors help paint a picture of the Other that is multi-dimensional.

These stories are all set in communities where immigrants are more present and more visible than they were before the economic crisis of the 1970s, where they have become a permanent part of the local landscape even if they are not always accepted as such. In some instances, as in the Parisian *arrondissement* depicted in Karim Miské's novel, it becomes difficult to distinguish between the dominant and subaltern groups. When everyone has a specific experience and background, and has come from somewhere else, when people from different regions and countries hold different political and religious beliefs, whether for example it is Communism or Islam, then there is no dominant perspective, only a multiplicity of discourses. Increasingly, European society is multi-ethnic and multi-lingual, and there is no single way of viewing and interpreting these communities.

In 2009, the Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie spoke in a TED talk about the dangers of a single story — in other words, the risks associated with stories that address just one aspect of a person, race or culture, and lead to misguided perceptions of the Other. In a chapter titled "Migration, Narration and the Second Generation", Sarah Eilingsfeld notes that the dangers of a single story are visible in the hegemonic discourse on the Other, in the way specific characteristics and attributes are ascribed to immigrants and their children, setting them apart from mainstream society.

There is across the novels selected for this study a rejection of a single story, a single way of seeing the world and the Other. The multiple perspectives, the use of language and geography go some way towards challenging hegemonic discourses. In *Wasteland*, I have sought to create characters and communities that are perceived as being on the margins of society, yet able to initiate acts of self-representation.

Europe is changing and perhaps it is the migrant, as both insider and outsider, who is best positioned to represent and articulate this shifting landscape. Andrew Hammond writes that 'the idea of Europe is inseparable from the binaristic practice of defining the self against

the other and the centre against periphery' (19). With increased migration, this practice is gradually changing. Immigrants are posing a challenge to entrenched European hierarchies. In *Arab Jazz*, Karim Miské depicts Paris as a diverse city that immigrants call home, and the reader experiences the city through the eyes of immigrant and non-immigrant characters, all of whom have complex backgrounds. In *Wasteland*, the experiences of the immigrant characters, from Aisha to Alberto, are as much a commentary on contemporary France as is Serge Morel's point of view. Increasingly, these multiple perspectives from hybrid characters who cannot be easily compartmentalised present themselves as the new normal.

While these representations do continue to a great extent to exist within dominant regimes of representation reinforcing class, ethnic and gender structures, they also enable the reader to see immigrants differently and to recognise the Other's humanity. And with the recent increase in the number of immigrant characters in contemporary European crime novels, we are likely to see new and varied interpretations of the multi-dimensional Other, and perhaps a greater normalisation of this hybrid world where hegemonic discourses can no longer claim sovereignty, given the multiplicity of voices that surround them. In *Wasteland*, it is Aisha's voice that resonates as she goes from being a timorous young woman, fearful of the bullies in her class, to a person who takes risks to solve her brother's murder, and who stirs those around her — Alberto, Karim and Morel — into action. Her brother's death and the reactions of those around her make her realize that this is a diverse and vibrant community of people who are able to come together as one, take action and speak up. 'The rioters had painted Samir's name on the *cit * walls and chanted his name,' she reflects. 'Surely, that meant something' (377).

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WASTELAND

BOOK ONE
SAMIR AND GEORGHE

One

'What the hell do you want?'

Thierry did a quick check. His eyes darted around the foyer and the dank stairwell leading up to the upper floors. Anticipating trouble. But there was only Karim. Sounding unhappy.

'Well?' Karim said.

'You know why I'm here.'

The boy shrugged. Not the brightest button in the box. Liked to dress sharp, though. Oversized grey hoodie, designer jeans and a pair of brand-new Nikes. Slouched, like he wouldn't know any other way to hold himself. Halfway through a joint at ten in the morning. He was pacing back and forth in the area outside the lifts, which right now seemed to be out of order. Some humorous individual had stuck a sheet of A4 paper across one of them, with the words Take the Stairs, Arsehole scrawled across it.

This fetid entrance with its peeling walls was where they cut their deals. Thierry knew he could come back in two, five, eight hours time, and one or several of them would be here, in this exact same spot; working the mobile phones, shooting the breeze. Some might call it a pointless existence; others might look at the money and think it wasn't such a bad way to earn a living. The last big shipment Thierry's team had intercepted, a single carload from Spain, had contained 200 kilograms of cannabis. And last he'd heard, ten grams could fetch fifty euros.

A woman came through the door, pulling a shopping bag on wheels. She walked past the row of letterboxes without checking her mail. She didn't make eye contact with either of them. They heard her go up the stairs, the wheels banging on each step.

'How long have the lifts not been working?'

Karim shrugged again. An eloquent sort of guy. Thierry knew him better than the boy's mother did. He was two months short of his sixteenth birthday and the fuzz on his cheeks didn't amount to much.

'Karim –'

'Don't fucking call me that. It's Kevin, asshole.'

'Kevin! Since when?' Thierry couldn't help himself. He laughed. 'Give me a break.'

Alone, the kid wasn't a threat, not really.

'OK, Kevin, whatever –'

'Who the fuck said you could call me Karim?'

'It's the name your mother gave you, isn't it?' Thierry said, suddenly impatient.

'Don't talk about my mother.'

'Just shut up, will you? Listen.'

'What do you want from me? If they see me talking to you...'

His face contorted with anger but it was fear Thierry saw.

'Well they won't. I'll be gone by then. Look, I just want to talk.'

'What about?' He was jittery and Thierry wondered now whether maybe he was on something more than weed. Or maybe he had a guilty conscience. It happened, once in a blue moon but still.

'Maybe you need to unburden yourself.'

'What, you're a priest now? Dear Father, forgive me please, for I have sinned,' Karim mocked.

'I need to find Samir,' Thierry said. He was tired of the banter and he wanted to be in his car, leaving the housing project and its stench of hopelessness behind.

'What's that got to do with me?'

'Relax, I'm not after you about anything, OK? I'm just looking for Samir. I know you two hang out.'

'I don't hang out with that loser.'

It was such a lie there was no point disputing it.

'That's the best you can do, is it? For Samir?' Thierry said wearily. That seemed to strike a chord. The boy looked unhappy.

'All I know is he was down at the station,' Karim muttered.

'And then?'

'Don't come near me.'

'I'm -'

'Don't - come - near - me.'

Thierry stepped back, even though he hadn't gone anywhere near the boy to begin with. Karim's paranoia was palpable, like a slippery presence between them.

I'm a complete idiot, Thierry thought. If his colleagues could see him now, they'd question his sanity. None of them ever came onto the estate alone. Preferably, there'd be half a dozen of them. One in the car, waiting with the engine running. He knew how stupid this was, but thirty years of doing this job and going around in circles could make you feel like you had to do things differently. Which wasn't to say he felt good. He could feel his heart hammering against his ribcage so hard it hurt.

'OK, relax. Karim. Kevin, fuck, I mean Kevin, OK? Tell me. Right now. Where the hell is Samir?'

'Ask your friend down at the station, man.'

'What friend?'

'Your *friend*. He took him to the station and scared the shit out of him.'

'Are you sure you haven't seen him since?'

They heard it at the same time. Laughter. The sound of footsteps approaching. Coming down the stairs. It was time to go, his car was parked right outside. He looked at Karim one last time. He was surprised to see the boy laughing, silently. There was no warmth in it.

Karim straightened his shoulders. Jabbed a finger in Thierry's face.

'Just wait,' he said. 'When they see you here, they'll skin you alive.'

Two

He was being smothered, he couldn't breathe.

Morel woke fighting for air, his hands held up before him, as if to ward off an attacker. But when he opened his eyes there was no one there. Nothing, except a disquieting stillness. Something you had to wade through. He took deep breaths and waited for his dreams to dissipate.

His body was covered in sweat and he was shivering. He took the thermometer from his bedside table and slid it under his tongue. Kept it there as he got up and peeped through the curtains. For a moment, he was blind. Gradually, familiar shapes emerged from the whiteness. The stark outline of trees. A pattern of prints on the ground. The tyres of his old, trusty Volvo. It was all that stood out.

Snow! More snow than he'd seen in years. When was the last time it had been like this in Paris? Morel couldn't remember. Briefly, through a feverish fog, he saw a boy, chasing his squealing sisters across a frozen landscape, hands burning from the snow packed tightly in each palm. Where? He couldn't remember. It could have been Brussels, where he'd lived as a child. Or Russia, with its majestic winters.

He took the thermometer out of his mouth and peered at the result. Could be worse. He was relieved to think he would be going to work. Lucid enough to realize he wanted to escape the situation at home – he wasn't proud of it. Far easier to be Commandant Serge Morel of the *brigade criminelle* than to put up with his father's forgetfulness, and worse, the old man's intermittent awareness that he was losing his memory.

He turned his mind to the days ahead. *In 48 hours, I'll be seeing Mathilde again*, he thought. He felt dizzy with anticipation, or maybe it was just the fever.

A flash of colour outside Morel's window startled him, followed by the sound of barking. And his father's voice, indignant.

'What are you doing here? Stay out! Go home!'

Reluctantly, Morel stood up, slipped on a dressing-gown and a thick pair of socks before opening the door that led from his flat directly into the main house. He found his father standing at the front door, shivering in a pair of blue pajamas, his bare feet as painfully white as the surrounding snow. Descartes, their Bernese mountain dog, stood in the middle of the courtyard, casting baleful looks in their direction. Eager to get back inside, but disconcerted by Morel senior's tone.

'Papa, it's OK. Leave the dog alone.'

'But what is he *doing* here?'

'He's your dog, remember? Adèle got him for you months ago. Descartes, inside. Now.'

The dog looked as confused as its owner. But it opted for comfort and trotted in.

Morel's head was pounding. He steered his father towards the stairs. 'Let's get you dressed,' he said. He could never get used to this, he reflected. Babying his father. Philippe Morel followed his son up the stairs, looking like he'd already forgotten what he'd come down for.

'That's better,' Morel said, once his father was dressed more warmly. He'd noticed some time back that the old, familiar shrewdness in his father's eyes was gone. But he seemed uneasy at times, as if a small part of him still sensed that things were not as they should be.

'Now, come back down and I'll make us both some coffee.'

'Don't speak to me as though I were a child,' his father told him.

'Sorry.' Morel took a deep breath and allowed Philippe to walk down the stairs ahead of him. Hostility radiated from the old man's body. Morel's head was pounding. It would take more than coffee to get him through the day, he thought. He left his father briefly to look for

Nurofen in the bathroom cabinet. When he looked up, his face in the mirror was flushed, his eyes too bright.

Outside, the snow fell in gentle flakes and settled into something hard and unyielding.

*

'The Whites hate the Arabs, the Arabs hate us Blacks. Meanwhile, *we* are just trying to get on with things. Minding our own business, know what I'm sayin'?'

'Yeah, right,' Lila replied vaguely. She took the plastic cup from Alphonse and handed him the money for it. MC Solaar was rapping furiously about something or other. She had once been impressed by his verbal dexterity, now he bored her. It was always the same thing. Social injustice, racism. Not that she didn't care, but you could get tired of the discourse.

Alphonse, on the other hand, never tired of it. Lila took a careful sip of her drink. Takeaway coffee. That was one American import she was grateful for. She looked at Alphonse. His face was stiff from the cold despite the beanie and scarf. He was serving a man in a tracksuit who looked like he'd been running. At least he had earned his coffee. I should have gone to the pool this morning, Lila thought. Maybe then I wouldn't feel so bloody awful.

She couldn't go on like this. Since Akil had moved out, this time for good, she'd turned into a slob. The most exercise she got was her ten-minute commute past Alphonse's hole-in-the-wall coffee shop to and from the Metro station. She watched too much television and ate rubbish. Clogging up her arteries. She looked into the future and saw herself sitting in her GP's room, listening to the woman tell her she had type 2 diabetes.

'Don't you think?' Alphonse said, and Lila realized she had no idea what he'd been going on about.

'We've forgotten how to be civilized,' he said, shaking his head slowly.

'When were we ever civilized?'

'I don't know. It just seems like everyone's pissed off at someone else,' he said.

'Except you and your fellow Africans, who are just trying to get on with things,' she said, earning a laugh.

She found she wasn't in a huge rush to get to work. Three days earlier, the body of a thirty-five year old male had been fished out of the Seine. The family had been notified. It turned out the man was a professional tennis player and his wife one of those plastic models favoured, in Lila's view, by men with small brains and big incomes. The man, Grégory Simic, had been drinking. At first, it had looked like a straight accident; Simic had slipped and drowned. But in the meantime, the man's laptop, seized by Lila mainly to annoy the bimbo wife, had revealed him to be some kind of sex addict. Now the superintendent wanted her to make sure that tennis man hadn't got involved in anything too kinky that might have got him killed.

She tested the coffee; it was OK to drink. A car moved slowly down the lane, its window-wipers moving to clear the windscreen. There was still a thick layer of snow on the ground. It looked like it wouldn't melt anytime soon. Lila shook her head.

'What's with all this snow, Alphonse?'

'Ever heard of climate change?' he said, turning the music up.

'Sure. But this doesn't look like global warming to me.'

'It's warming and cooling and everything upside down. Exponential chaos, that's what it is,' he said. 'Know what I'm sayin?'

'You sure do talk a lot of rubbish,' Lila said, before heading off with a half-wave. Halfway down the street she could still hear him laughing.

*

Outside police headquarters, the snow had turned to sludge. Lila entered the building and climbed the stairs to the fourth floor. It was quieter than usual. Early January was always like

this. Crime was slow. People were probably still recovering from the holiday festivities. Too hungover to get into trouble.

Well, at least Christmas was over and done with, she thought. They said it was a tough time for people who lived on their own, disconnected from their families. As far as Lila was concerned, they were the lucky ones. Three hours with her family on Christmas Day and she felt like she'd been flattened by a bulldozer.

It didn't help that Akil had decided to come along. Even though they were fighting all the time. She should never have agreed. Being with Akil at her parents' was like being in a fishbowl. Her parents kept staring at them and there was nowhere to hide. The conversation was a nightmare. It was as though a bunch of bad actors had decided to get together for a film shoot, and everyone had forgotten their lines. Her mother was the worst.

'So...Where are you from, Akil?' she'd said brightly.

'Same place as you. Born and raised right here. In Paris, France.'

There was probably no need for the *banlieusard* accent, which made him sound like he'd grown up on a housing estate in the northern suburbs on the other side of the *périph'*, rather than in a three-bedroom apartment in Montmartre.

'What your mother *means*,' he'd told Lila later, as they sat side by side on the bed, not touching, 'is what the fuck do you think you're doing sleeping with my daughter, you Arab scum?'

'No, I think you're wrong. It's more like, What the fuck do you think you're doing sleeping with my daughter, you Arab piece of shit?'

They'd had a good laugh over that, and moved closer together.

Lila entered the office she shared with Morel and her two other colleagues, and dropped her coat and scarf on her chair. Jean and Vincent were in. Only Morel was absent.

'Morning, all.'

'Good morning.'

'How was everyone's weekend?'

'Good,' Jean and Vincent said in unison without looking up from their screens.

Lila dropped her bag on her desk and sat down.

'Mine was crap, thanks for asking.'

'You mean like last weekend?' Jean asked, looking up.

'And the one before that,' Vincent said. The two men exchanged a meaningful look.

Lila glared at them. 'What are you trying to say?'

'Nothing,' they replied in unison.

Lila turned her computer on. It annoyed her that everyone in the team knew about her relationship with Akil. Every time they broke up, or got together again, they seemed to guess. At least there would be nothing left to gossip about now. Though she had something new to worry about.

While her computer booted up, an infuriatingly long process, she lifted a black banana from the papers strewn across the desk's surface.

'Any sign of Morel?'

'He's on his way,' Jean said.

'Good.' She threw the banana into the bin.

She glanced at the empty desk facing hers – Marco had sat there, before Morel had shifted him to a different unit. It had been tough on the detective, he'd wanted so badly to stay – but Lila knew Morel was right. Marco didn't have what it took.

She knew Morel had a replacement in mind. Knew who it was. But still she hoped she was wrong.

Three

Being seventeen was tough. For a girl, it was hell on earth.

Aisha knew she was smart. She was also a coward. She didn't speak up. She didn't fight back. Most of what she thought and felt never got said. 'You're a bit of a mystery,' Monsieur Clément liked to say. He made her sound a lot more interesting than she was. But he was right about one thing: there *was* a lot going in her head.

When the bell rang, she didn't leave school as she normally would, straight after class. If she was late, her mother worried. Maman often said Samir and Aisha were all she had to live for, which was why they had to make sure nothing happened to them. She said the *cité* wasn't safe, not even during the day. *That's what you get for raising us in a suburb that has the highest crime rates in the country*, Samir told her. Aisha said nothing. The council estate wasn't so bad, as long as you stayed out of trouble. Maman's reply was always the same. *I had no choice*. She was so passive, so accepting, and Aisha could see it made her brother even angrier; it was like she was saying Aisha and Samir couldn't choose either. Typically, her mother and Samir would carry on bickering in this familiar way and she'd be quiet but all the while she'd be thinking that, actually, it wasn't the dealers and the gangs she was worried about. It was the girls.

Generally, she started walking home the minute school was over. Even if she knew what was coming. But today she couldn't face it. When she saw Katarina and the others at the gate, waiting for her as they always did, she nearly screamed. It was strange because it was like every other day. Except the day before Samir had been there, and she'd been able to bear it, and today he wasn't, even though he'd said he'd wait for her. Maybe she'd just reached her limit.

Katarina was looking around the snow-covered yard, really eagerly, like she was waiting for a friend. Aisha hid behind a wall before the girls could see she was there, and waited. She waited two hours. It was freezing. She did not pray to Allah; that was the sort of thing her mother would do. She tried to keep her mind busy. She thought of home and her side of the room she shared with Maman, with the Stromae poster from the concert she'd been to a couple of years back, the best night of her life, and she thought of Samir's scowling face at the dinner table, and of Antoine who wasn't really their uncle but she and Samir were supposed to call him that because he was the closest thing they had to a relative here and Samir needed a man in his life, Maman said. Aisha figured her mother was lonely and Antoine wasn't good-looking or anything but he was a ready listener and Maman needed someone she could talk to. When she looked sad or worried Aisha urged her mother to confide in her, but Maman said it was parents who were supposed to look after their children, not the other way around. *Be a good girl, stay out of trouble, that's all I ask of you.*

The hyenas – it's how she'd come to think of those girls because they were just like a pack of dirty dogs, they always looked like they could do with a bath; and their high-pitched laughter was like the strange sounds hyenas made, on those nature shows on TV. Katarina was scarier than those hyenas. She was the worst of them all with her acned face and long, greasy hair. She was from one of those eastern countries that joined the European Union, and now everyone said they too were invading France and taking people's jobs away. Antoine who had a sociology degree liked to say it used to be the blacks and the Arabs who copped all the flack and now it was also the pasty-faced people from the east. Maybe that explained why Katarina was so unforgiving. She didn't want anyone to think that the two of them might have something in common. She called Aisha *bougnoule* and Aisha didn't think she even knew what it meant except she knew it was bad. All the way home, Katarina and the others walked behind her and called her names. In their shoes, Aisha would be ashamed. The worst was

when they took her schoolbag. When she got it back the next day it was usually full of rotting food and other really disgusting stuff. Once there was even a used tampon at the bottom of the bag.

What was the use of praying to Allah then? Even if she believed, what sort of conversation would that be? Maybe she could ask for advice. *Please God, what should I do?* She wanted to kill them. Didn't it say somewhere in the Koran that it was okay to strike at your enemy?

The day before, Samir had waited at the gate, the way he sometimes did. Looking bored, and restless, like he had somewhere else to be. She never asked why he agreed to do this, in case he decided to stop. It didn't matter why, or whether he resented being there. The important thing was that he showed up.

She was so relieved, so grateful then. They didn't hurt her if he was there. They were too busy trying to get him to notice them, which he did, of course, but not in the way they wanted him to. Yesterday he'd looked different, Aisha wasn't sure why. He was dressed the same as always, with the puffer jacket and scarf Antoine had given him for his last birthday. His bag was slung over his shoulder, as usual, and he was smoking. Maman hated it. He was also letting his hair grow. Aisha wished he would stop doing things just to upset their mother.

Samir was eighteen months younger than her, but most people wouldn't know it. He was a head taller. And handsome. He seriously looked like Tahar Rahim in *A Prophet*. He'd inherited the best from their parents. Aisha had her father's big nose – she'd seen the photos – and her mother's bad eyesight. When she took the glasses off, she was blind.

The hyenas, especially Katarina, became so excited when they saw Samir; She wanted to shout, wait a minute, you know he's a *bougnoule* too, right? But of course she kept quiet.

'Where's your girlfriend, Samir?' Katarina said. 'Have you got a girlfriend? Why not? A guy like you could have anyone.'

'Don't even look at them,' Samir hissed, and Aisha glanced at him. His face was dark with anger, his jaw tightly clenched. He felt humiliated, she could tell. She knew he despised these girls. Katarina was right: Samir could have anyone he wanted. The funny thing was, he didn't seem interested. She'd never seen him with a girl. And she was pretty sure it wasn't because he was into boys or anything like that.

'Fuck off,' he said to Katarina. 'Crawl back into the hole you came from.' The way she reacted, you'd think he'd paid her a compliment. Howls of high-pitched laughter. Aisha knew better. She knew she would pay for this, next time.

After a while, the girls drifted off, one by one. You could tell they just wanted to get out of the cold. Then it was just Samir and her, the rest of the way home. They didn't talk, not until they reached the estate. He was angry with himself and with her, she thought, for losing control.

'I don't know why you let them treat you like that,' he said in a low voice, once they were in the building. His voice was filled with disdain. He stopped to light another cigarette, and just stood there, drawing deeply from it.

'What am I supposed to do?'

He shrugged his shoulders and didn't answer. Aisha waited. When he was done, he stubbed out the cigarette with his shoe and headed for the stairs. The lifts weren't working. They hadn't been working for weeks.

'I won't always be there, you know,' he said, without turning around.

Now, while she waited for him and he didn't show up, she thought about that. *Yes, she thought. I am a coward. He has every right to despise me. I despise myself.*

*

From the living-room window in El Chino's apartment, Samir could see the other three tower blocks and down below the concrete skateboard rink where he and his friends rode their

bikes. The rink was deserted now, and covered in snow. Two men stood close together, smoking, near the entrance to one of the towers. A woman in a *djellaba* passed them, pushing a pram. The light was beginning to fade.

The blocks were collectively known as the Cité des Fleurs. Samir had lived here since his third birthday. He couldn't remember anything before then. This was all he knew. The estate. The two-bedroom unit he shared with his mother and sister, on the eleventh floor. Same block as where he was now, only four floors up.

For a couple of years now there'd been talk that they would be pulling the buildings down and replacing them with new ones. Fifteen months ago, after the Senegalese kid in Block B had been killed by a stray bullet, Sarko himself had visited the towers and made a speech all about how he intended to clean up the neighbourhood. Someone – a cousin of the kid's dad – had called the French president names he probably wasn't used to hearing up close and the police had dragged him away.

Down below, Samir heard the sound of glass smashing, followed by shouting.

The Cité des Fleurs. What a fucking joke.

'Samir?'

He turned to find El Chino staring at him. Was the old man going to start asking questions?

'I'm going to the shops. You'll have something to eat?' he said instead. His real name was Alberto, but in the *cit * he was known as El Chino on account of his slanted eyes. The Chinaman. His slit-eyed gaze was directed at Samir now. His hand was in his pocket, jingling coins. As he spoke, he buttoned up his jacket.

'I've put the heater on.' He hesitated. 'And I've left some clothes for you in the bathroom. Yours are wet, you should take them off. I won't be long. You wait here. OK?' Fifty

years in France and he still rolled his Rs. Samir nodded quickly, to show he understood. He was still shaking and he couldn't trust himself to speak.

Once he was alone, Samir washed his hands in the kitchen sink. Only then did he get undressed, dry himself off and take the old man's clothes. He wandered through the flat, looking in cupboards and drawers. He found a twenty Euro note in the bedside drawer and pocketed it. A half-empty bottle of wine stood on the kitchen counter. He drank straight from it, quick gulps that sent shivers through his body. The drink steadied him.

It was warm in the flat. And spacious. More space than at home. Aisha, his mother, Yasmina – they all knew how to make a mess. He didn't mind Yasmina so much, but his mother and sister – that was a different story. Shit everywhere. Hairbrushes with long strands of hair sticking out of them. Crumpled tissues. Stockings and bras hanging to dry in the bathroom, where his mother washed them by hand. In the evenings he came home to find Aisha and his mother watching reality shows and TV dramas together, sticky sweet wrappers piling up between them. They'd be crying together over a kid with a terminal disease or a woman whose husband had left her for someone younger and better-looking.

'What's the matter with you?' Samir asked his sister. It was one thing for his Mum to fill up on sugar and watch rubbish on TV. He couldn't stand to see Aisha do it. To think that maybe thirty, forty years down the track this would be her.

'Maman likes it. It makes her happy when we do these things together. You should try it.'

'Try what?'

'To make someone other than yourself happy.'

Right now, Aisha would be doing her homework. Listening to Stromae on her headphones. Anyone would think the man was a god, the way Aisha carried on. Their mother would be cooking dinner. The TV would be on in the background because his mother couldn't

cope with silence. They wouldn't be worried yet. They were used to Samir coming in late. Only Aisha might be angry with him for not walking her home.

Samir's head was spinning. It was like the first time he'd tried marijuana. He'd felt panicky. Sweaty palms, racing heart. It didn't help that the others were all having a good time with it. Laughing at him like he was a big kid riding a bike for the first time. He took several deep breaths now. He knew he was avoiding thinking about where he'd just been.

He looked at himself in the mirror. On any other day, he might have laughed at his reflection. He was wearing the Spaniard's baggy corduroys and ratty cardigan. He'd lent him socks too; Samir's were soaked through.

'Stay as long as you need,' El Chino said. His voice was gruff but that didn't mean he was angry.

He never asked why Samir came. Why he'd turned up now, wild-eyed and shivering. At the door, Samir had kept his hands in his pockets, where the old man couldn't see them.

'I'll get you a hot drink. Some clothes. Here, put these on.'

No questions asked.

He was starving. He found bread on the counter and cheese in the fridge. Ate his sandwich standing in the kitchen. The wine was making him sleepy. There was coffee left in the pot and he finished that too. It was lukewarm and bitter. He wished he had a cigarette, but the Spaniard didn't smoke. Maybe he should have asked him to buy a pack while he was at the shops.

He pulled a chair up to the kitchen table with his back to the window. He was very still. Trying to identify every sound in the building. When his mobile rang he checked to see who it was. Karim again. He ignored it.

He didn't need to turn around to know what was down there, on the streets and in the spaces between the concrete blocks. In the wasteland behind the towers. Nothing but

people's rubbish and kids looking for privacy. He knew every square inch, every corner where you could hide. Nothing shocked him.

Until today.

He tried not to think about it but that made it worse. How could a person's body look like that, like it wasn't made of bone and muscle and ligaments? The angle was all wrong. The sounds in the building receded and now Samir heard, all over again, the slow, shuddering breaths coming from the fragile torso beneath the jumper. The ragged sound escaping from those lips, like the sound of wet paper ripping. Snowflakes softly falling. Blood dripping on the ground. Still alive, but not for long. Surely not for long.

Samir wrapped his arms around his body, pulling the cardigan close. The light was gone now. He wondered when someone would find him. The boy in the shopping trolley.

Four

Alberto Rosales woke up in a cold room and checked the time. It was just past 7 a.m. He crossed into the living-room to turn the central heating on. Samir was fast asleep, curled up under the blanket the old man had covered him with before going to bed.

Samir, Alberto said quietly. Then, a bit louder. *Samir*. He needed the lad to wake up and call his mother. She would be worried sick. He should have let her know last night. Only Samir had seemed so distressed, though he'd done his best to hide it. He just needs a bit of time to recover from whatever it is that's upset him, then he'll go home, Alberto had thought. Now he felt like he'd made a mistake.

When the boy didn't stir, Alberto left him. In the kitchen, he made coffee and poured milk and cereal into a bowl. The bench was littered with crumbs and he wiped it clean.

'Morning.' Samir appeared, rubbing his eyes. 'Thanks for letting me stay.'

Alberto stared at him, momentarily confused. He'd forgotten that he'd lent his clothes to the boy. He looked comical in them, like a child playing at being a grown-up.

'You need to call your mother. She will be wondering where you are. We should have called her yesterday.'

'It's OK. I'll head home in a minute.'

'You're welcome to stay longer if you need, I'm not saying you have to go... just that you should tell her where you are.'

'Like I said, I'll just go home once I've had my coffee.'

'How do you like it?'

'Black, two sugars. Thanks.'

The boy hovered and Alberto spooned sugar into his cup, wondering whether he should say anything about the night before.

How did you talk to a teenage boy? Alberto had no clue. He and Emilia had never had children. That was just the way things had turned out. And he didn't think his own childhood was anything to go by. He'd been the eldest of thirteen. His parents' helper.

'Are you OK?' he finally asked. The boy was holding the cup with both hands. His face was drawn and his eyes red, as though he'd been weeping.

'I'm fine. Just wanted space, you know? Sometimes you need to get away from things.'

'I know,' Alberto said, though he didn't really. Away from things was where he stood most of the time. But Samir had been visiting him for years now. Finding something here that he couldn't get elsewhere. Ever since that first time when Alberto had found him sitting on the stairs. Seven years ago now. He didn't give much away. But still. A good kid.

Alberto told Samir to help himself to bread or cereal, and went to his room to give him space. Out of habit, he made his bed. Folded his pajamas and slipped them under his pillow.

Five years on, it was still strange to sleep alone in this bed, he thought. He and Emilia had been together throughout their adult lives. The first time he'd seen her dancing the muñeira on the village square, during the traditional mid-August festivities, he'd known she was the one.

Back in Spain, he'd been Beto to his friends and family. Here too, for a while. But for years now he'd been El Chino. He didn't mind the name. What he minded was the way things had changed on the estate. When he and Emilia had come here, it had been mostly working-class people. Spaniards like him, sick of struggling and sick of Franco, in search of new beginnings. Italians and Portuguese too. Alberto had found a job at the Renault factory and joined the Communist Party. He and Emilia, their friends and colleagues: they'd *believed* in something. He hadn't had much, but he'd had a voice.

Not long after that, things had started to change. The Arab-Israeli War of 1973 had driven oil prices up and people started worrying about the economy and about jobs; and all of

a sudden France didn't want migrants anymore. But they kept coming. Different people moved into the *cit *. Most of them North African. Alberto still had his party card but that was pretty much all that he'd held on to. Nothing much remained of the old 'Beto'. He hardly knew himself.

Down below Alberto heard the sound of sirens and he stopped, clutching a pillow in his hand. The sirens were getting louder. He moved to the window and saw the flashing lights turn into the space between the tower blocks. Two police cars and an ambulance. Men in uniform got out of their vehicles and disappeared behind the buildings. The police remained but the paramedics returned to the ambulance after a while, and drove away.

What *now*? Alberto thought. He didn't like the fact that the paramedics had left empty-handed. No one to administer first aid to, in the ambulance, or to take to hospital. That's what happened normally when someone was hurt. This, what was happening now below, could be worse.

He finished what he was doing and went to check on Samir. But when he returned to the living-room, the boy was gone.

*

It was all over the news. Morel and his team watched in silence.

'Here we go again. Villeneuve makes the news. Poor kid,' Jean said once Morel had turned the TV off.

The boy had been beaten and dumped in a shopping trolley, outside a housing estate in Villeneuve. He'd died out there on his own. The trolley had been left on waste ground behind the high-rise council buildings. Someone had alerted police early in the morning. An anonymous caller. The camera zoomed in on the area. The height of the tower blocks made it a shadowy place. The snow had melted, revealing dirt. The camera then showed where the

boy had lived. A shantytown built from cardboard and corrugated iron, half a kilometre from the towers. A broken-down caravan, surrounded by litter. Blank faces behind the dirty panes.

'Gypsies,' Lila said.

'What about them?' Jean said.

'Nothing. Just that no one likes them.'

'Is that a fact?'

'Yes, it is. This isn't about what I think. Even the *Beurs* don't want them there.'

'Do you really -' Jean began, but Morel cut him off.

'Don't. Let's get back to work.'

Jean wasn't easily offended. He searched Morel's face.

'You look like you should be in bed.'

'I'm OK.'

'The Cité des Fleurs,' Lila mused. 'The prettier the name, the shittier the place is. Have you noticed that?'

No one bothered to answer.

Morel returned to his desk. He kept himself apart from his team thanks to a Song-era, Chinese screen he and his ex-wife Eva had received for their wedding. When they'd separated, he'd taken the gift. Luckily, she hadn't known its value.

He knew the heater was on but he was still cold. His headache had returned. He took a couple of Nurofens and flushed them down with a glass of water.

When he looked up, Lila stood before him. She looked like she was gearing herself for a fight.

'What is it?' He realized now he was too sick to be here. A confrontation with Lila was the last thing he needed.

'I need to talk to you.'

'What about? Any luck with our missing man?'

He knew it wasn't that. Inwardly, he was bracing himself for a storm.

'Nothing so far. That's not what I want to talk about. You're thinking of taking Akil on.'

'I am. He's a good detective.'

'You should know that he and I have split up.'

'I'm sorry to hear that. But it doesn't change the fact that he'd be a great addition to the team.'

'If he joins us, it will make things very difficult for me.'

He looked at her and saw the turmoil he'd caused. Instead of softening him, it had the opposite effect. 'When it comes to the job,' he said coldly, 'I expect you both to behave professionally. Regardless of what's been happening in your private lives. I don't want you bringing your personal issues in here, compromising the team.'

Lila looked at him with disbelief. 'I can't decide whether you really are so devoted to this job that you can't or won't see the human consequences of your actions, or whether you're just an insensitive, cold-hearted prick.'

'Be careful, Lila.'

'I'm going with the former,' she continued, 'but I still don't like what it says about you. Tell me, when was the last time you invested yourself in a relationship? My guess is you don't even know what I'm talking about.'

'Lila -'

'Maybe the latter is right,' she said. 'Maybe you are a prick.'

She turned and left before he had a chance to say anything.

*

By the end of the day, the death of the Rom boy was the number one news item. For a long time now, Villeneuve had boasted the highest crime rate in the country, but it didn't make the

news any less shocking. Over and over again, the different news channels replayed scenes from the streets in the zone where he'd been found. People came down from the tower blocks to hear what was being said. Few were willing to talk, though one elderly woman had plenty to say.

'What do you expect?' she said loudly. 'Have you seen the state of this place? The squalor? If you let people live like animals, they'll behave like animals.'

Morel didn't leave the office till five. He drove carefully. It seemed to take forever to get home. He turned the heater up high but as usual the car wasn't having any of it. He listened to the radio to stay alert. Already the 'experts' were commenting on the event, what it meant, who was to blame. Politicians were vying for air-time, taking the opportunity to pontificate in abstract terms about justice, dignity, integration. Marine Le Pen, it had to be said, did not waste time on such philosophical abstractions, even if she too had a flair for sidestepping questions. *This is what happens when you avoid a real debate on the question of immigration, when you sweep the issue under the table.* People were invited to call in. The general public, regardless of their political affiliation, tended to agree on one thing: the government was responsible.

By the time Morel reached Neuilly, the affluent suburb where he lived with his father, shops were closing. Only the Monoprix was still busy. At the lights, Morel watched a mother and three young children come out, loaded with bags. All four were blonde, and tanned, despite the time of year. They must have gone skiing over Christmas, Morel thought.

He turned into his street and drove into the courtyard. His hands on the steering wheel were numb and he was shivering. Augustine was putting her coat on when he walked in.

'Bonsoir, Augustine. Where is my father?'

'Watching television. He's had his dinner. Yours just needs heating up.'

‘Thank you.’

‘My pleasure. You look like you should be in bed. See you in the morning.’

After she’d left, he warmed up his dinner – Augustine had made a *boeuf bourguignon* – and took his plate to the living-room. He picked at his food, thinking that he wasn’t that hungry after all. Despite his exhaustion, he forced himself to speak.

‘Did you have a good day, Papa?’

‘It was alright,’ the old man answered. His eyes were glued to the screen. This was a man who’d never watched anything but the evening news on television. He’d despised every other TV programme, as a matter of principle.

‘What are you watching?’ Morel asked.

‘I’m not sure. Looks like rubbish,’ his father said.

Morel looked at the screen. It was a reality show whose name he’d forgotten.

‘I think you’re right,’ he said. ‘It’s complete rubbish.’

The old man didn’t respond, but Morel thought he caught a hint of a smile.

Later, in bed, he thought about his conversation with Lila. It bothered him. She’d crossed a line, but it wasn’t that. What bothered him was the way he’d spoken to her and also the way he’d felt. As if, during his exchange with Lila, he’d been an observer rather than a participant, watching the scene from a long distance away.

It came to him, all at once. *Just like my father*. Cold. Unfeeling. Was he really becoming like the old man?

But Lila had crossed a line.

It isn’t just me. She doesn’t make things easy either, he thought.

He slipped under the covers and looked for a comfortable position. His limbs ached and his head still throbbed. Morel looked at the origami snowflakes strung across the window. He’d amused himself by making each one different and unique, but it wasn’t taxing

work, more like the sort of challenge a clever and somewhat dexterous child might choose to meet. It was a long time since he'd made something that mattered.

Still, the flakes were pretty, strung across the window. He reached out and gave each a twirl, creating the illusion of falling snow. In his fuzzy state, the illusion seemed real. His fingers brushed against the pane. The glass was cold. He pulled the covers up to his chin and closed his eyes.

*

Aisha lay in bed trying to sleep. She could hear her mother in the next room. Watching TV. Waiting.

Where the hell was Samir? She was trying to hold on to her anger in order to avoid thinking the worst. *Please*, she said out loud. *Please come home. Or call. Or text. We're worried.*

Her mother had turned up at school. They'd walked back together. Aisha had felt ashamed, then guilty for feeling that way about her mother. But why did she insist on covering her head and wearing a *djellaba* outside the home, and when people came around? Why couldn't she see what it did to Aisha? There were women who dressed like that in their community, of course, but they were generally older. Maybe her mother wouldn't dress that way if she knew what it cost her daughter. Out of the corner of her eye, Aisha had spotted Katarina and her friends, sniggering and muttering things under their breath. Her mother hadn't noticed; she'd been too upset about Samir.

We need to go to the police, she'd said. They'd caught the bus to the Villeneuve police station and filed a report. 'How old is Samir?' the desk officer had asked. When Aisha said sixteen, he looked like he wasn't all that interested anymore.

'He's probably with his friends. Or girlfriend. Does he have a girlfriend?'

She'd wanted to explain about her brother – that he would never stay away overnight, because he would never put their mother through so much worry and suffering, even if he

could be unfeeling sometimes. However trying he could be, he would never go that far. But there was no point. She could see this man didn't care about Samir.

'Where do you live?' the officer asked. When she gave the address, he livened up a bit.

'That's where the boy was found this morning,' he said. She didn't know what he was talking about. But she saw the way the policeman looked at her. Like he was noticing her for the first time.

Now she heard a beep and sat up in bed. She reached for her phone and looked at the screen.

Didn't get a chance to talk to you today. How are you?

She hesitated before typing.

Samir has disappeared.

What do you mean, disappeared?

He didn't come home last night.

She waited for a reply. Nothing came. She typed,

I'm scared.

The reply came immediately.

You know I'm here for you. AS A FRIEND.

She looked at the last three words. After a while, she deleted the whole exchange.

Five

The next morning, Morel was finishing his breakfast when the doorbell rang. He went to the entrance, his father following close behind.

‘Quiet, Descartes,’ Morel said. The dog ignored him and continued to bark joyfully.

Morel opened the door and stood back in surprise. He hadn’t seen her in a decade or more, but he had no trouble recognising her.

‘Virginie! What are you doing here?’

‘Good morning, Serge.’ His sister Maly’s old school friend stood at the door. ‘You look terrible. Like you’re coming down with something. Friendly dog?’ she asked, pointing at Descartes who was trying to squeeze past Morel to get to her.

Morel nodded.

‘Embarrassingly so.’

‘He seems friendly. But with a dog that size it’s best to ask, don’t you think?’ She reached over and stroked Descartes head, earning a big lick across her wrist. ‘I know it’s very early but I need to talk to you.’ With characteristic straightforwardness, even after all these years, she stepped closer and placed her palm flat against his forehead.

‘You’re very warm.’

Before he could say anything, she looked past him and spotted his father.

‘Good morning, Monsieur Morel. Now *you* look well. This snow is unbelievable, no?’

*

‘I can’t remember the last time it was like this. I could barely find my car this morning; then it took me half an hour to start it. Were you intending to drive to work? Because I don’t think yours is going anywhere this morning.’

Still a chatterbox, Morel thought. And the same, bright red curls. Though she must be doing something to keep her hair that way nowadays. Morel’s was not as black as it had once

been – it seemed that, with each passing week, he was finding more white hairs - and Virginie was a couple of years older than him.

Things were coming back to him. Late nights at his sister Maly's house, sitting uncomfortably around the table having fiery exchanges about love and politics. Virginie was always there, along with Maly's other university friends. They all interrupted each other and smoked as though their lives depended on it. Listening to them, you'd think no one had come up with a single original idea before. Even as a student, he'd never belonged in that *milieu*.

Morel handed Virginie a cup of coffee. He'd quickly got showered and dressed, while Virginie kept his father company. It didn't take her long to figure it out. 'How long has he been unwell?' she asked him quietly when he returned.

'A while now.' They both looked at Philippe Morel, who was staring into his cup as if to make sure it didn't contain poison.

'I'm sorry.' Virginie propped herself up on a kitchen stool, opposite Morel and his father. 'You're wondering why I've turned up here all of a sudden. Let me explain. You won't know this, but I work as a school counselor. At a school in Villeneuve. It wasn't by choice, initially, but now - ' She didn't finish her sentence, and went on. 'There's a girl I've been working with. Aisha. She's seventeen, nearly eighteen. Extremely bright. I'm fond of her. She's preparing her *baccalauréat* this year. Wants to be a journalist, she says.' Virginie smiled. 'She writes poems too, and they're surprisingly good.'

'Why are you seeing her?'

Virginie hesitated. 'Since the beginning of this school year, Aisha's behaviour has been different. She's been withdrawn. At times, she's rude and aggressive, which isn't like her. And her results aren't as good as they have been in previous years. Some of the teachers are worried she might be depressed. I spoke with her maths teacher, who's been observing her for some time. She seems convinced Aisha will try to harm herself.'

'It's a tricky age, isn't it? I would have thought that for an adolescent to be rude and withdrawn isn't so unusual.'

'These things aren't always easy to measure,' Virginie admitted. 'And I have to say not everyone's worried about Aisha's state of mind. Her French and philosophy teacher Luc Clément says she's engaged, taking an interest in her work. I think I'd rather err on the side of caution, though, so when there are concerns I tend to take them seriously. Another girl in the class tried to kill herself, halfway through the year. She nearly succeeded. You've got to be watchful with kids that age.'

'So what do you think is wrong? Is she suicidal?' Morel asked. He wondered where Virginie was going with this. What did any of this have to do with him?

'Suicidal? No, I don't think so. But I think something must have happened for her to be acting so differently. It's out of character. She's usually attentive and engaged in all her classes, and well-mannered. So, I've been spending a bit of time with her. Trying to draw her out. She's a bright, sensitive girl. But given the circumstances.... you can imagine what a place like Villeneuve is like. The local schools don't receive enough funding; they don't have the staff and experience to cope with the challenges they face. Local youth unemployment is somewhere around forty percent. It's a tough environment.'

Morel considered this. 'Has something happened to her? Is that why you're here?'

'No.' She shook her head. 'It's her brother. Samir. He left for school the day before yesterday and hasn't been home since. When his mother called the school they told her he hadn't come in at all. The poor woman is frantic.'

'How old is Samir?' Morel asked, before she could continue.

'Sixteen. Going on twenty-five.' She said it with an uneasy laugh.

'Has his mother called the police?'

‘Yes. They didn’t seem to take it too seriously. They asked whether he might be staying with friends.’

‘And you don’t think he’s playing up,’ Morel said.

‘Do you think I’d be here if I thought he was playing up?’ She put her cup down. ‘Serge, I know this boy. I’m not saying he’s a saint or anything. His mother’s had a tough time with him lately. The family lives in one of our most troubled *cités*. The boy, predictably, spends more time with his friends than he does at home. He might be hanging out with the wrong crowd. I don’t know. But this – this disappearing act – now that’s not the sort of thing he’d do. He isn’t always easy on his mother but he wouldn’t leave her to worry like this.’

‘Where’s the father?’

‘He went missing in Algeria before the family moved here. A local journalist. Just vanished one day. The kids were young, they don’t remember him. Loubna moved her children here shortly afterwards, with the help of an elder brother who was already living here. That brother passed away several years ago.’

Morel nodded.

‘I don’t know how I can help,’ he said. ‘This isn’t my jurisdiction, for a start.’

‘If you could just come with me, to see Samir’s mother,’ Virginie said. ‘And Aisha. You’ll see straight away that something’s wrong.’

Go with Virginie to Villeneuve? The idea was absurd and he would tell her that. Morel looked past her at the snow outside his window. Lila and the others in his team were investigating a drowning. It was the sort of case that should have gone to the local police, in the 4th *arrondissement* where the victim had lived. But Superintendent Olivier Perrin, Morel’s boss, had assigned the investigation to his team. This time of year it happened that you got landed with cases like this because people were still away on holiday. Plus, the man was a

well-known professional tennis player. The story was in the papers and Morel's team had spent the past days fielding phone calls from journalists desperate for a story.

No one, on the other hand, was going to lose any sleep over a missing kid from the projects. Except his mother and sister, of course. *But it's not my problem. Let the local police take care of it.* Morel rationalized it all in his head. He was annoyed with Virginie for putting him on the spot.

'I don't really have time for this, I'm sorry,' he said, and he stood up, hoping she would take the hint and leave. His father stood up too, but as he did so, he knocked his coffee cup off the table with his elbow, spilling its contents across the counter. Virginie immediately grabbed a cloth from the kitchen sink and used it to clean the spill.

'It's okay, it's nothing,' she said, touching the old man's shoulder. Morel saw confusion on his father's face, and something else. Distress. He watched Virginie lean towards Philippe and say a few words to reassure him that it was a tiny incident, anyone could have spilled the drink. His father's body went slack and he let Virginie lead him out of the kitchen and into the living-room. Morel could hear her talking as if she was chatting to an old friend. *What's wrong with me?* He thought. *I feel nothing.*

After a couple of minutes, Virginie returned. 'Poor man,' she said. 'It must be hard for him.'

She clutched her car keys, and buttoned her jacket. 'I'd better get going.'

He made his mind up quickly. 'Wait. I'll do it. I'll come with you and meet the family.'

'Really?' She seemed astonished. When he nodded, she came around the kitchen counter and gave him a quick, awkward hug.

'But I really can't stay long,' he added.

'Let's go in my car, yours might take a while to start,' she said 'It won't take long at all and I'll drop you off at work afterwards.'

Philippe Morel was back in the kitchen, gazing at Descartes lying on the floor. They all heard the key in the front door and moments later Augustine appeared. Philippe frowned at her. She gave the old man a wide grin.

‘Bonjour, Monsieur Morel. You’ve had breakfast, then? How about getting dressed, and we’ll go for a stroll once I’m done cleaning the dishes? You wouldn’t believe the amount of snow out there.’

Morel’s father ignored her. Instead, he turned to his son and pointed to Virginie. ‘Who is this woman?’ he asked. ‘And why did you let her bring that dog inside?’

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‘I’ll get it.’ Aisha looked through the peephole to see who it was. She stepped back and took the safety latch off.

‘Monsieur Rosales. How are you?’

‘Very well, thank you. I’m sorry to disturb you. I was wondering if Samir was here?’

‘Why do you ask?’

It wasn’t the response he’d been expecting and he looked down at his feet.

‘I simply wanted to make sure he was OK.’

Aisha glanced back towards the flat before stepping into the hallway.

‘I don’t know if he’s OK. We haven’t seen Samir since yesterday morning,’ she said.

The news seemed to distress the old man considerably.

‘What – what do you mean?’

‘What’s happened, Monsieur Rosales?’ Aisha asked. She reminded herself not to cry. Her mother was inside, Aisha had to hold it together for her sake.

‘It’s just that he came to me the night before last.’

‘To your place?’

‘Yes. He was – upset, I guess. I let him stay the night. I should have told your mother, I know now that I should have. But I thought Samir needed space.’

Aisha digested his words. She couldn’t believe what she was hearing. ‘My mother’s worried sick.’

‘I’m sorry, I should have – anyway, yesterday morning he said he would go home and I needn’t worry. I thought he would come straight here. Why wouldn’t he? After all he *said* he would.’

‘He didn’t come home.’ All that worry and suddenly she couldn’t hold it in any longer. ‘Maybe he would be home with us now if you had told us about his visit, if you had called straight away when he decided to stay so late at your place.’

There was nothing he could say to that. He was guilty. ‘Where could he be?’ he asked, a quaver in his voice. Such a dumb question, Aisha thought. She resisted the urge to slam the door in his face.

‘Have you tried his friends?’ Alberto asked.

‘What do you think?’

‘Is there anything at all I can do?’ He looked pitiful. Just then her mother came to the door.

‘What is it, Monsieur Rosales?’

‘Samir spent the night at his place the night before last,’ Aisha said coldly.

‘I should have said...’ his voice trailed off. Aisha’s mother took a step forward.

‘Will you please tell him to come home?’ she said.

‘He’s not *there* anymore, *Maman*.’ Aisha turned to Alberto.

‘I –’ he began.

‘Leave us alone,’ Aisha said.

In the 1950s, with foreign workers streaming in to the country and Paris bursting at the seams, urban planners and architects looked to the regions beyond the *boulevards périphériques* – the motorways that marked the symbolic divide between Paris and its suburbs – as a means of resolving the housing crisis. In no time at all, Villeneuve turned into a vast construction site. Everywhere you looked, tower blocks and large council estates were going up. In the news, the Cité des Fleurs, erected on the old beet fields, was held up as a success. Families, French and foreign, praised their new neighbourhood with its spacious apartments and green, open spaces. In private, officials and architects congratulated themselves for what they saw as a prime example of successful social engineering. The architects had designed open spaces where people could meet and where children could play. Neighbours left their doors unlocked and balconies were decked with flowers, making the *cité's* name seem apt.

Within a few decades, the buildings, built on the cheap, had fallen into disrepair. Drugs, mostly hashish and marijuana, became rife, and unemployment soared. One by one, shop-owners shut down their businesses, sick of being robbed. People started locking their doors and few bothered to adorn their balconies. All that remained was a grim, uniform landscape.

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Looking at it now, it was hard to believe the Cité des Fleurs had started out as a utopian vision, Morel reflected as he and Virginie got out of her car and headed towards one of the tower blocks; a vision based on the belief that, somehow, architecture could shape social outcomes.

'The lift stopped working months ago. It looks like they still haven't done anything about it,' Virginie said as they pushed the door open and entered a dank hallway. Cigarette

butts everywhere. A greasy, scrunched up McDonald's bag. The air smelt of stale cigarette smoke and piss.

'What floor?' Morel asked.

'Eleventh. You don't exactly blend in here,' Virginie said. He was dressed in a dark grey Hugo Boss suit, a Cucinelli cashmere sweater and a Pucci tie with a pink and gray design.

'I have a meeting today,' he said. 'I wasn't expecting to be here this morning.'

'Quite frankly, you'd be less conspicuous if you were naked.'

They walked up the stairs in silence. Morel's head was spinning. He had to stop on the fourth floor, and again on the seventh floor landing to catch his breath.

The woman who opened the door wore a black kaftan and house slippers. She was in her thirties, Morel guessed. Her kohl-rimmed eyes were filled with worry as she stepped aside to usher them in. Behind her, a teenage girl appeared in the dark hallway. Aisha, no doubt. The short hair gave her a boyish look. She gave him a frank stare.

'So you're the hot shot detective?'

'I don't know about that,' Morel said. The girl's eyes behind her glasses were striking, like her mother's.

Virginie turned to the mother. 'Loubna, this is my friend Serge Morel. He is a senior police detective. I asked him to come here because I know how worried you are about Samir.'

'Very worried. I think something must have happened to my boy. Why else would he not be here with us?' She seemed unsteady on her legs, and Virginie stepped forward. 'Perhaps we should all sit down?' she said. She steered Loubna towards the living area, a dark, single room with a sofa, a TV and a formica dining table with four chairs.

'Have you called the police yet?' Morel asked. It was Aisha who replied.

'We didn't just call. We actually *went* to the police station yesterday to file a report. They won't do anything,' she said, disgusted. They were all standing, except for Loubna who sat at the table, very still, her worry like a swarm of bees beneath the stillness.

'When exactly did either of you last see Samir?' Morel asked.

'The day before yesterday, at breakfast,' Aisha said. 'I didn't notice him at school but then I don't always. And Monsieur Rosales on the seventh floor says Samir stayed with him the first night he didn't come home.'

'Hold on. I thought you said he'd been missing for two nights,' Morel said, turning to Virginie. 'He hasn't, really, not if you know where he spent the first night.'

'I didn't know this,' Virginie said apologetically. 'Who is this Monsieur Rosales, Aisha?'

'El Chino,' the girl said. 'That's what everyone calls him. Alberto Rosales is his real name. His wife died five years ago,' she added apropos of nothing.

'What's the connection with Samir?' Morel asked tetchily. He was thinking that he'd wasted his time coming here.

'For years now, Samir has been visiting him,' Aisha shrugged. 'He likes going there. I don't know why.'

'Could you tell us where his flat is exactly?' Morel said. He would be thorough, at least.

'Sure.' Aisha gave him the unit number. 'Are you planning on speaking to him?'

'No. I'll leave it with the local police. But I'll talk to them personally and make sure they follow up.'

'Samir would never do this unless he was in some kind of trouble. Why won't any of you take this seriously?' Aisha said shrilly. At the sound of her daughter's voice, Loubna came alive.

'Aisha,' her mother scolded. 'Don't be rude.'

Virginie stood up and turned to the girl's mother. 'Shall we have some tea? I'll help you make it.'

'I'm sorry, my manners...'

'Not at all. You're worried about your son. The last thing you need to be thinking about is your manners,' Virginie said briskly. With a meaningful look at Morel, she steered Loubna towards the kitchen. He could hear the clatter of dishes, the woman's high-pitched, hurried chatter, full of worry, and Virginie's voice, measured and calm.

Morel took in his surroundings. There wasn't much to look at. The cheap furniture; a shabby, mustard-coloured rug. A dozen postcards, tacked to the wall.

He turned to Aisha, who was looking towards the hallway, clearly wondering how she could leave the room without seeming rude.

'You're not going to school today?' he asked.

'I don't think so. I went yesterday. I didn't want to but Maman insisted. A couple of times I almost fell asleep in class. Neither of us has been sleeping properly.'

'I remember. Dozing in class, I mean. That used to happen to me when I was your age,' he said. 'I used to find it hard to concentrate. Still do, sometimes.'

Her eyes found his. 'Mostly it happens to me in physics. I hate it. I don't *get* any of it.'

He nodded. 'Tell me about the last time you saw Samir.'

'We were getting ready for school. Samir always takes forever. I left before he did. Sometimes we walk together.'

'You go to the same school?'

'For now. Though Samir will probably end up doing a technical degree. You know, a BEP. His teachers think he should. Train to be a mechanic or something. Which means next year he won't be at school anymore.'

'And he was supposed to wait for you after school? The day before yesterday?'

'He told me before I left home that he'd be at the school gate in the afternoon.'

'What for? Is it because your mother prefers it if you walk with him?'

'It's just so we can walk home together.'

'And he didn't show up.'

Aisha didn't reply. Instead, she seemed to close up.

'Does he usually walk you home?' Morel asked. There was something there. Aisha wouldn't look at him.

'Not usually. Sometimes though.'

'And you prefer it when he does?' Morel wasn't sure why he was asking. But he'd struck a chord. When the girl looked up, her eyes were filled with tears.

Before he could speak again, Loubna and Virginie re-entered the room. Aisha quickly looked down and Morel turned to the two women, aware that the girl did not want them to notice she was upset.

'It would help if you could draw up a list of Samir's friends,' Morel said. 'Have you called around to make sure he isn't with one of them?'

'He has nice friends,' the mother said in a tremulous voice. 'They are good boys.'

'That's not what he's asking, Maman,' Aisha said, exasperated. She turned to Morel. 'We've called everyone we know.'

'Any after school activities?'

'No. Sometimes he and his friends play soccer near the school. But Samir always gets home by six. Otherwise Maman gets worried.'

Morel thought about what he'd heard. Wondered what else there was to say.

'Is there anything in particular you're worried about? Anything that could help the police find Samir?' He addressed the question to both Aisha and her mother.

'Have you noticed where we live?' Aisha said. 'There is plenty to worry about.'

The mother nodded.

'I would like my children to grow up somewhere better than this,' she said. 'But it's not possible.'

They heard the front door open and shut, and steps down the hallway. Moments later, a diminutive, bald man entered the room. He'd let himself in to the flat, Morel noted. He stopped when he saw the visitors, but Morel had the distinct impression that he'd known they would be there.

'Antoine,' the man said, stretching out his hand.

'Last name?' Morel said.

'Carrère.'

'You're a friend of the family?'

'Yes.' He turned to Loubna, who had risen to greet him. She seemed animated suddenly, out of embarrassment or relief it was hard to tell.

'Any news?'

'No.'

'Let me drive you to work,' Antoine told Loubna. He glanced at Morel. 'After the policeman is done.'

'I'm done,' Morel said. He stood up. 'I'll drop in on the Villeneuve police station before I head back to Paris and talk to my colleagues here. In the meantime if you think of anything else they should know, do get in touch. I'll make sure it's passed on.'

He noticed that all three women were looking at him now, with beseeching eyes. 'Is there really nothing more *you* can do for us?' Aisha said.

'There is a process that needs to be followed. There are rules,' he said, aware of how ineffectual that sounded.

Seven

For the first time since he'd left home, Samir was feeling good. He lay on his back and watched as Yasmina stood up from the bed and started to get dressed.

'You can't stay,' she said.

'I know.' He acted as though he didn't mind but inside he felt a pang of anxiety. He'd ended up spending his second night away from home in the cellar, in one of the box-like, storage rooms beneath the tower block where he lived. Wrapped in a pile of dirty blankets someone had dumped there. Generally speaking, it was safe to assume that anyone who used these rooms was up to no good. It was cold and dark down there and he'd spent a nightmarish night worrying that whoever had left the blankets might suddenly turn up and stick a knife in him.

He'd knocked on Yasmina's door at 10 a.m., when he was certain her brother would be gone. Convinced her not to go to work. She seemed to take pity on him. Fed him breakfast and run him a bath. He'd slept like a baby for an hour. Then woken up to find her naked beside him.

Now he wished he could remain here a while longer.

'What time does your brother get back?' he asked.

'Not for a couple of hours. But I've got to pick Leila up.'

'She's with the old lady?'

Yasmina nodded. She was a pretty, Moroccan girl, with curly black hair and long lashes. At twenty-one, she lived with her brother and her two-year old daughter, a child she'd had with a man whose name no one knew: Yasmina had never told anyone. Three days a week, Yasmina's grandmother took care of the girl, while Yasmina worked. She held a job at a discount supermarket, and each month handed her wages over to her brother.

'One day I'll stop doing it. It's my money,' she often said. But Samir knew these were empty words. She was still paying for the shame of getting pregnant.

'I must be crazy. Sleeping with a sixteen year old,' she said now, looking at Samir stretched out on her bed.

'There are worse things.'

'Like what?' she teased, but she saw he was serious.

'What's the matter?'

He turned away so she wouldn't see his face.

'Nothing.'

She finished getting dressed and leaned over to give him a kiss. 'Time to get up, pretty boy.' He gripped her hand tightly, but she pulled away from him, laughing.

*

Virginie took Morel to the police station, a five-minute drive from the Cité des Fleurs. The circular, two-storey building was at least forty years old, Morel guessed. An ugly relic from the 1970s.

'I'll wait in the car,' Virginie said.

Inside the building, there were boxes everywhere. 'You're moving?' Morel asked the desk officer. He nodded. 'It's about time. The building's infested with rats. The plumbing's faulty. The power keeps tripping. You name a maintenance issue, this building's got it.'

The detective who came out to meet Morel introduced himself as Romain Marchal. There was an edginess about him, something sharp and watchful that made Morel choose his words carefully. 'Commandant Serge Morel,' the man said, making a show of being impressed. 'All the way from the Quai des Orfèvres. It's not often we have such illustrious visitors. I'm sorry the place is such a mess. If you'd come just a week later, we'd be able to welcome you in the new building. It's bright and shiny, at least for now. Things tend not to stay that way for

long around here.’ His handshake was brisk. They were more or less the same age, Morel guessed. ‘To what do we owe this pleasure, then, Commandant Morel?’

‘This is about a missing boy,’ Morel replied, hoping the other man would stop rolling out his name and title to make some sort of point. He hesitated. ‘I know his family. I’m interested in his welfare.’

‘Is this the same boy whose sister and mother came in yesterday to file a report?’ the desk officer piped up.

‘That’s right.’

‘We’ve got the details already. Boy’s a teenager. The family’s Moroccan or something, right?’

‘They’re originally from Algeria. Look, I’m worried he may be in some kind of trouble,’ Morel insisted. He was tired and feverish and he should probably let it go. After all, the boy had been seen the previous morning. But he remembered what Aisha had said about her visit to the station. *They won’t do anything*. ‘Samir spent the night before last at a neighbour’s flat. He didn’t come home yesterday either and no one knows where he’s been since the neighbour saw him yesterday morning. It’s not the sort of thing he would do.’

‘So he’s only been missing for twenty-four hours?’ Marchal sighed. He said ‘missing’ as though he didn’t really believe it. ‘Look, we’ve got our hands full at the moment. No doubt you’ve heard about the Roma boy.’

‘I saw. It’s all over the news.’

‘It’s a major headache, that’s what it is. As if there wasn’t enough going on.’ Marchal turned to the desk officer. ‘Let’s see the report about the missing kid.’ The officer handed it over. Marchal skimmed it and frowned. ‘The Cité des Fleurs. That’s where we found the Roma boy yesterday morning. Behind the towers.’

'I know. I said the same thing to the girl when she came to file the report about her missing brother.' The young officer looked pleased with himself, until he saw how Marchal was looking at him.

'You did, did you? And you didn't think it worthwhile to let any of us know about it? Given we're investigating a murder. A murder which, coincidentally, happened in the same area as where this kid lives who's now missing.'

The officer looked abashed. 'You think there's a link?'

'What I *think* is that you should have passed it on.'

Morel stepped in. 'So you'll follow up on this.' More a statement than a question.

Marchal looked like he couldn't decide whether to be annoyed or amused. 'We'll keep an eye on it. Maybe you can let me know if the kid – what's his name again?' His eyes skimmed over the paper in his hand. 'Ah yes. *Samir Kateb*. Let me know if he doesn't show up at home tonight.'

'I will.'

*

'Where to now?' Virginie asked. 'Home, or work?' She gave Morel a quick appraisal. 'Thank you for coming out today and meeting the family.' She looked apologetic. 'I feel a bit bad, given how sick you are.'

Morel was mulling over Marchal's words. Thinking about an adolescent who'd left home two days ago, something he never did – and, aside from his family's concern, the general indifference towards his fate.

'I didn't do much for them,' he said.

'You listened to them. That means something.'

*

Aisha's mother had left for work, with Antoine. He would drop her off and continue on to Clichy, where he taught at a university. Aisha's mother didn't dare take time off, she told her daughter. As it was, she'd left work early the day before to pick Aisha up from school. She was afraid of her manager. Aisha was glad to be alone, in a way. It was hard, having to pretend to be OK for her mother's sake.

On her bed, she pulled her knees up to her chest and rested her forehead on the window. It had stopped snowing but the sun had decided not to show up this morning. There was nothing to look at except grey skies and grey concrete.

Nothing on the horizon. Aisha couldn't see her future. Just these tower blocks, this empty sky. Graffiti-sprayed walls. *Welcome to Baghdad. Kamikaze. Fuck Police.* Burnt-out cars. Everything broken. The swing in the tiny playground, five minutes away. Even as a child, she'd seldom used it. Only the gangs did; the younger kids who were recruited as lookouts hung out there during the day, and the older kids sometimes used it at night, though for anything secretive – whether the intention was to make out or get high - the wasteland was best. There were no eyes on the wasteland, whereas the playground was smack in the middle of the estate, visible to anyone who cared to poke their head out their window to see what was going on. Within the community, news travelled fast. At night, sometimes from the eleventh floor you could hear the older kids, making a point of riling the residents. Day or night, the little kids who just wanted to play rarely found it a welcoming place. Some came anyway, because where else could they go from here? Mahmoud, a boy in her class, lived in the towers, and Aisha knew that his Dad had fixed the swing the first couple of times it broke. For some reason, the dad had got really worked up about the broken swing. Mahmoud had a little brother, who was three. By the fourth time, the Dad had given up. Aisha felt for him. Why bother fixing anything, if it only got vandalized again?

Aisha sighed. She felt a longing to be elsewhere, some place where the colours were bright, fluorescent even, and the streets teeming with well-dressed people. People with a clear sense of purpose, all going to work or maybe to nice cafés where waiters brought you drinks on trays and you could sit for as long as you liked, watching passers-by.

From the top of her building, where she sometimes went with Samir when he wanted to light up – their mother wouldn't let him smoke inside - you could see the Eiffel tower. A year ago now, she and Samir had taken the RER into Paris. Half an hour later and they were walking down the Champs-Élysées where the trees were strung with lights and sprayed with fake snow – it hadn't snowed at all, then, not like this year. Couples walked past them, holding hands. An old lady strolled along the footpath, leading a poodle. Samir had joked that the poodle had better gear than they did. They had walked until their feet hurt, too shy to enter a café and order drinks, though neither would admit it. Aisha smiled, remembering. It had been a nice trip: just the two of them, in Paris.

She stretched out on the bed and closed her eyes. *If I count slowly to thirty, without breathing, Samir will appear.* She did, but nothing happened. *If I count to sixty without breathing, slowly, without cheating, Samir will come. He'll turn up and roll his eyes at us when we tell him how worried we've been.*

By the fourth try, she felt sick. She breathed deeply a couple of times. Then she turned her CD player on. Stromae's voice filled the room. Singing about absent fathers.

*

Lila took a deep breath and gave the tennis player's widow a smile, even though what she really wanted to do was throttle her.

'Madame Simic. We really need to talk about what I found on your husband's laptop.'

Valérie Simic did a good impression of looking bewildered. 'Yes, you mentioned that when you got here, and then we got sidetracked, didn't we? But I really don't understand why you're so interested in his laptop.'

Sidetracked? Lila had been with Simic's wife for twenty minutes now, twenty long minutes during which the other woman had talked incessantly, manically about the couple's life (tennis tournaments, social functions, holidays, more tennis). At Lila's request, she'd made a list of their friends, and of Simic's tennis partners, some of whom he had disliked and who had disliked him. And all the while Lila felt she was being bombarded with information that didn't matter, that only served to distract her from what actually did.

Every extra minute she had to spend in the couple's meringue-coloured living-room was making her feel more aggrieved. Why couldn't Vincent, Akil or Jean have done the job? Or Morel, for that matter. Looking at the pretty blonde woman before her, she reflected that any of her male colleagues would have got more out of their time with Madame Simic. She decided to speed things up.

'Valérie. I'm going to be straight with you here. I feel you're being evasive, and that's a real problem for me. I don't like wasting my time. That's at a personal level. More generally, I should warn you that by being coy, by holding back on anything you know that might shed some light on how your husband died, you're actually creating difficulties for yourself. It's called obstructing the course of justice.'

'What on earth are you talking about? What could I possibly be hiding? He was drunk when he fell into the water. It was a horrible, stupid *accident*.'

'That's something we have yet to confirm. The autopsy will hopefully tell us more,' Lila said. She went on before the widow could say anything. 'We have your husband's laptop, as you know. Yesterday, I spent some time looking at his correspondence. His e-mails. I found them, shall we say, quite informative. There is, for example, a long and rather graphic

exchange with someone who calls herself Bijou. Quite a bit of back and forth banter going on there with this woman, which I won't go into now. Does the name Bijou ring a bell?

'I can't say that it does,' Valérie said. She patted her hair and played with the pearls around her neck where the skin had turned red all of a sudden, as if from an allergic reaction.

'I think you do,' Lila said quietly. For a moment she almost felt sorry for Madame Simic. Despite appearances, she didn't strike Lila as a fool. Whatever games she and her husband had indulged in by mutual consent- Lila hoped it had been that, at least - it was becoming clear Simic had played a few without his wife's knowledge.

'It would be good if we skipped the part where you claim to have no idea what your husband was up to. It would make things a lot easier for us.' *For me especially*, Lila added inwardly. 'Going by your husband's search history, and the e-mails he's been getting, I'm guessing you two are regular swingers. And possibly into some pretty serious sado-masochistic stuff. Am I right?'

The widow crossed her stockinged legs and sat up a little.

'What of it?'

'I'm no expert on this, but I wonder what sort of people you come across at these sorts of places. S&M sex clubs. Plenty of perfectly nice people I'm sure, but some unsavoury types too I would imagine.'

'I'm not sure I like your tone, detective.'

'We're investigating your husband's death, Valérie. I'm told your husband had high levels of alcohol in his blood. If someone pushed him in to the water, he might have drowned. Too much to drink, and it was very cold too. His reflexes would have been slow. On the other hand, it may have been an accident. He may have tripped.'

'Who would want to kill Grégory?' his wife asked. For the first time, Lila detected a foreign accent; it was in the way Valérie had pronounced her husband's name.

'I don't know. But if you could bring yourself to answer my questions truthfully, then maybe we can get to the bottom of this.'

*

Morel refused Virginie's offer of a lift and got her to drop him at an RER station. He took the train back to Paris and then changed to the Pont de Neuilly Métro line that would take him home. On the way there, he called his boss, Superintendent Olivier Perrin, and told him he would not be coming in. He also called Jean to let him know.

Both his father and Augustine were out when he got home. He left a note for her on the kitchen counter, asking not to be disturbed. In his flat, he stripped off his jacket, shoes and tie. He took another two Nurofens with a glass of water and went to bed, where he fell asleep almost straight away.

When he woke up it was three in the afternoon. He had no memory of the time at which he'd arrived home. Only knew that he felt much better. He propped himself up in bed and called Virginie.

'Any news?'

'No. Nothing.'

He had a missed call from his older sister Maly. When he dialed her number, she answered straight away.

'Everything OK?' she asked, sounding anxious. Sometimes she seemed to have a sixth sense when it came to his wellbeing.

'I've been ill, but it's nothing. A temperature. I'm at home, taking it easy.'

'That's not like you,' she said. A pause. 'Virginie called me earlier. She says you two have been getting re-acquainted.'

'She wants my help with something.' He told her about Samir and Aisha, and about the visit to Villeneuve. Realized as he was telling her that it was preying on his mind. He'd been

uneasy all the way home. He'd blamed it on his run-down state and on the sobering effect of his visit to the tower blocks. But it was more than that. He was worried about Samir.

'You sound tired,' Maly said. 'Why don't I come over this evening? I can pick a quiche up on the way there. I'll prepare a salad. We can have a family dinner, with Papa. We haven't sat together and talked for ages.'

Morel thought about the evening ahead. He and his father in front of the TV set, or eating in silence at the kitchen counter.

'That would be nice. What about Noémie?'

Maly laughed. 'Karl can look after his daughter for a while. It'll do him good. And besides, I really need a baby-free night.'

Augustine was in the kitchen and Philippe Morel upstairs, resting. Morel sent her home and suggested to his father that they watch an old Francois Truffaut film. Watching films together wasn't something they'd done before the illness. Mostly they'd kept out of each other's way. Morel turned the heater on high and wrapped himself in a blanket. His father had insisted on changing into pajamas and a dressing-gown though it was still early. 'Look at us,' Morel said, once they were seated comfortably and the film was about to start.

'What?'

'Never mind.' Halfway through the film, his father turned to him and stared, as if aware of him for the first time. 'What's the matter with you? Why aren't you at work?'

'I'm not well. I haven't felt this sick in years, come to think of it.'

'You work too hard,' was all his father said. Nothing after that. A shutter had been raised and shut just as swiftly.

Maly arrived at six, carrying a quiche from Lenôtre and a Leclerc bag with the ingredients she'd bought to make a salad. 'Early dinner,' she said. 'I'm already hungry. Ever since Noémie was born I've been permanently hungry.'

'You're looking good,' Morel said.

'Fat is what you mean.'

'Don't be silly.' He meant what he said. Marriage and motherhood seemed to agree with Maly. She'd always been curvaceous and her figure was more rounded now. But she looked healthy; voluptuous, not overweight. And content, he thought. The three of them ate in the kitchen. Philippe Morel seemed livelier in his daughter's presence. He said little but seemed to be paying attention to what she said.

'How are things with Papa?' she asked when their father was back in front of the TV. It was just the two of them in the kitchen, sharing a bottle of wine. 'And how is it with the dog?'

'It's OK,' Morel said. 'I don't really know what else to say, except thank God for Augustine. I'm worried it may soon prove to be too much for her. It will, you know. One day, he's going to need proper care.'

Neither of them spoke for a while.

'As for Descartes –' Morel continued, glancing at the dog sleeping at his feet – 'he's thriving I'd say. I try to walk him when I can. Augustine does most of it.'

'Poor Serge,' she said. There was tenderness in her voice.

'Well I'm certainly in no position to go anywhere, now, am I.'

'Do you? Want to move out?'

Morel turned to the living-room. The volume on the TV was on high. Morel senior was losing his hearing as well as his memory. 'I don't really know. But I don't like the feeling of being stuck.'

'Perhaps it isn't just about Papa. Or the dog.' She smiled, then grew serious again. 'You create your own circumstances, Serge.' She hesitated. 'Any news of Mathilde?'

'We're meeting for a coffee. We finally managed to settle on a date.' He didn't tell her that it had taken him months to get back to the woman who had been his first love, more than

two decades ago now. Just as his obsession with her had started to lessen, she'd tried to get in touch with him. Nearly four months ago. He'd been in Cambodia at the time, working on a case. Now he was about to see her again he didn't know how he felt about it.

He saw that his sister was observing him closely. She looked like she might be about to say more, but he cut her short.

'Shall we go and sit with Papa for a while?'

*

Before Maly went home, Morel received a call from Virginie to say there was still no sign of Samir. She told him that Marchal had visited the family and taken statements. He'd also visited Alberto Rosales, the old Spaniard. It was now sixty-two hours since the boy had disappeared.

'The police seemed more interested in the Roma boy's death and whether Samir might be involved than anything else,' she said.

After Maly left and his father had gone to bed, Morel called his ex-lover Solange. She and her husband Henri were about to head off to Aix-en-Provence, where they owned a house. After he'd hung up, he lay on his back for a while, staring at the wall. A familiar, not-altogether uncomfortable feeling took hold of him. He recognised it for what it was. Loneliness. *You create your own circumstances.* Maly's words.

After his nap, Morel found it hard to get to sleep. It was midnight when he heard his father in the kitchen, and he wondered whether to get up and check on him. But his limbs were heavy and it seemed like too much of an effort to get out of bed.

Around one, the snow started to fall. Morel closed his eyes and drifted into oblivion.

It was just past four in the morning when the ringing woke him up. As he reached for the phone, he realized he was sweating again. He should check his temperature. He had no

idea what time it was, or how long he'd been asleep. It took a while to figure out who was on the line.

It was Virginie, calling to say that Samir was dead.

Eight

'Where do you think you're going?' Karim's mother grabbed him by his shirt collar and he quickly reached out for the edge of the table to avoid losing his balance. He managed to free himself, and backed away, though there wasn't much space. 'Where else? School, of course. Where did you *think* I was going?' Trying to sound annoyed. He hoped it was convincing. He hadn't gone back to school for nearly a week now, not since the last time they'd called him in to the head teacher's office. Asking questions. First the school, then that crazy *keuf*. All because of Samir. If it wasn't for Samir, Karim thought, no one would be after him for answers. He wouldn't be feeling as panicky as he did now.

At the table, his sister Mouna was drawing. Focusing on her picture like she was some kind of genius artist waiting to be discovered. She was rubbish at it. She kept her head down, looking all saintly and acting as though she wasn't listening, but Karim could tell she was enjoying this: her brother getting an earful. His mother pointed at him, then at the kitchen table. 'Come here. Clear up, and wash the dishes. Then you can walk your sister to school.'

Karim rolled his eyes. 'Why? Why me, today? And why can't she just get on the bus? You know I'll be late to class if I have to walk her.'

'You want to let your nine-year old sister travel alone on the bus? Are you that irresponsible?' She took a step towards him and he tried not to flinch. His mother was a big woman. Not big as in jolly; Karim's aunt, who lived six floors down with her husband and three kids, had said once the accumulated weight represented all the grief his Mum had had to put up with over the years. Every disappointment; every obstacle. 'This wasn't what she had in mind when your Dad brought her over from Algeria,' his aunt often said, shaking her head woefully. What had his Mum expected, Karim wondered. Paradise on earth? Meanwhile, his Dad was becoming more invisible by the day, slipping out at every opportunity so he

didn't have to hear his wife nag him about how useless he was. Unemployed, and with qualifications that were of no use to anyone now, not with the car factories all moving to China where people worked for peanuts. Karim would have felt sorry for his Dad if he wasn't such a coward. All he did was hide. Where was he this morning? Probably still asleep. He could feel his anger rise and didn't notice his mother till she was standing right behind him, a large, oppressive presence.

'Hurry. I want you out of the house in five minutes. Five. Not a minute more,' she said.

'What about the dishes?' he asked. 'Five minutes doesn't leave me much time.'

'Don't talk back. You're not so old I can't smack you.'

'OK, I get it.' He sighed. He waited till she'd left the room before checking his phone. Nothing. Where was that bastard Samir? There weren't too many dishes and he did them quickly, making as much noise as he could. Just in case the old man was still asleep. Recovering from his night with that skanky redhead. Karim had seen them together twice. The second time, his father had seen him and looked so ashamed it had made Karim want to kick his teeth out. Useless, and a cheat.

As he pulled the soapy dishes from the water, he thought about the detective's visit. That Thierry had balls, or else he was a nutcase, turning up alone like that in the *cit *. What Karim couldn't figure out was what the guy wanted. He wished he hadn't told the *keuf* about seeing Samir with the other police officers. What if this Thierry went and told his colleagues what Karim had said? The first thing they'd do is come back and find him, right? Why hadn't he kept his mouth shut?

It wasn't just the police he needed to worry about. The police weren't such a big concern. Not compared to what would happen if Ali and the others discovered he'd been talking to the police. Just thinking about the conversation he'd had with Thierry in the building made him feel sick. How would Karim explain himself if it came out that he'd been

chatting to the detective, right under his friends' noses? He'd have a hard time convincing them that it wasn't planned. It was over, for now. But Karim knew Thierry would be back. Asking questions that he, Karim, wasn't in a position to answer.

He rinsed the last plate and quickly wiped his hands. He'd walk as far as the bus stop with Mouna, and meet the others afterwards. No sense going to school now. Too much going on, and besides, what difference did it make? In his mind's eye, he could see the maths teacher, a smug bastard that one, smiling as though he found Karim mildly amusing. One of these days, he'd knock that smile off his face. Who the hell did he think he was, talking to Karim like that? 'Please, don't strain yourself, Monsieur Bensoussan.' His friends found it hilarious, while he feigned indifference. He knew what everyone thought, that he was an idiot. No one had ever thought that about Samir. Someday, he'd prove them all wrong. He'd prove Samir's sister wrong too.

The thought of Aisha stirred something within him. 'Hurry up,' he told Mouna. She yawned and swung her legs under the kitchen table. She was making a point of taking her time, doing everything in slow motion. Their mother glared at her. One good thing: she wasn't charmed by Mouna's antics anymore than she was by his.

'Get going. *Now*, Mouna. Or I swear -'

Outside the building, he zipped up his jacket and pulled the hood over his head. Kids with backpacks were heading for the bus stop. It was still dark. A man in a grubby overcoat stopped to inspect a wine bottle left on a bench. Lifted it, to see whether it contained anything, then dropped it to the ground and kept walking. Karim peered down the road to see if the bus was coming. Maybe he could convince Mouna to ride it alone. His sister caught him looking and immediately guessed what he was thinking.

'If you leave me, I'll tell Maman.'

'What a baby you are.'

‘And you’re a retard.’

There was no sign of the bus. No surprise there. If it did show up sometime this week, it would be packed. Without a word, Karim started walking. All along the path, the snow was turning to sludge. Preoccupied with his own thoughts, he ignored his sister. He walked fast and she kept up with him, sensing that he wouldn’t wait if she lagged behind. ‘I’m tired,’ she complained. By the time they reached the school, they were both puffed. The sweat running down his back made his skin itch. His sister threw him a reproachful look.

‘See you later,’ was all he said. He turned and walked away, hands buried deep in his pockets.

Nearing the estate, he slowed down, wanting to make sure his mother wouldn’t see him. She’d be leaving for her morning shift. He stopped at the *superette* to buy cigarettes, with the cash he’d found in his Dad’s trouser pocket the night before. Even if his father knew he’d taken it, he’d keep his mouth shut. Karim’s hands were cold and he fumbled with the change while the cashier waited. She looked like she might be his age, with pale blue eyes, bleached hair and green-painted nails. He could feel her eyes on him but when he handed over the change, her gaze was elsewhere, uninterested.

Outside, he stopped to light up. From a distance, the four towers built side by side rose before him, stark and unwelcoming. Inside, it got worse. Rubbish in the stairwells, broken panes, slogans scrawled across the walls. ‘And they call themselves graffiti *artists*,’ Samir had said once, laughing. He only said that sort of thing when it was just the two of them.

Karim inhaled deeply and felt the tobacco tear at his lungs. He finished his cigarette and walked towards the towers. His was the one furthest from Samir’s, but identical. As he drew nearer, something at the foot of Samir’s building caught his eye. Before he could make out what it was, he saw Ali and Réza heading towards him. His immediate reflex was to run, or hide, just as long as he didn’t have to engage with them, but luckily he held himself

together. Ali was busy talking and hadn't noticed him yet. But Réza had clocked him, Karim could tell. The expression on his face was insincere; every gesture deliberate. He was leaning towards Ali, nodding and smiling as though the two of them couldn't be tighter. When they drew near, Réza made a show of noticing Karim for the first time and raised his hand, the ubiquitous greeting sliding from his mouth like butter.

'What's up, *cousin*? What are you doing here?'

'Nothing much.'

'Got a spare cigarette?' Without waiting for an answer, Ali took Karim's packet and helped himself. Réza did the same, except he took two. 'One for now, one for later.' Karim didn't say a word. He ignored Réza and looked at Ali, who was lighting up, one meaty hand thoughtfully cupping the flame though there was no trace of wind.

Ali. No one called him that to his face. At six foot two, with bulging muscles, he was known on the estate as the Boxer. Karim thought the Hulk would have been more appropriate. Managing his temper was not his strongest suit. Everyone knew what he could be like on a bad day, how quickly his mood could change. And when he got into a fight, he tended to win, while the other guy generally remained out of action for days, sometimes weeks. Now The Boxer rolled his shoulders, his face screwed up like he was getting rid of an ache.

'Kevin,' he said. 'What's up?' Karim, a.k.a. Kevin, took the hand that Ali proffered and endured a painful squeeze.

'We were looking for you,' Réza said.

'Oh yeah? What for?' Karim asked, doing his utmost to sound relaxed. He hated Réza, and trusted him much the same way he'd trust a fox with rabies, but the last thing he wanted to do was antagonize him. Karim attempted a smile, pretending not to notice the way Réza was looking at his leather jacket and smirking.

'What for?' Karim asked again.

'You in a hurry or something?'

'I'll tell him,' Ali said. The Boxer lay a hand on his shoulder. It felt heavy as a boulder. Karim looked away from Réza and turned to Ali. His face was a blank page. There was never much expression there. No clues, to anticipate what he was about to say. At the same time, as he waited for Ali to speak again, Karim found himself looking again at the building where Samir lived. He saw now what it was. A police cordon at the foot of the tower block. He couldn't see any police. A handful of residents stood close to the area that was taped off, talking to each other. No doubt gossiping about what had happened. Karim turned back to Ali, who was staring at him in silence, about to speak. Karim suddenly realized he didn't want to hear it. Ali was hesitating, and Karim had never known him to hold back. He tried to speak before Ali did, as if that might change anything, but Ali spoke first.

'They've gone and killed Samir,' he said, and he took a drag from his cigarette, looking at the ground and slowly shuffling from side to side as if he needed to warm up.

'Can you believe it,' Réza said, before spitting on the ground. Karim thought he had never hated the slimy bastard as much as he did then. Then Ali looked at him as if something had just occurred to him. 'You're not doing anything important this morning, right? It's just that it would be good, you know, to have a bit of a chat.'

'About what?' Karim asked. He didn't want to spend another minute with them. He needed to think about Samir.

'You busy all of a sudden?' Réza took a step forward, but Ali placed a hand on his arm, letting him know to back off. 'It's business, Kevin,' he explained. 'That's all. Now that Samir's gone, we need to work a few things out. There might be a few changes.'

'Business,' Réza echoed. 'But also, the guys who did this,' he added. 'They need to pay.'

'Sure,' Karim said. What choice did he have? He was also confused. Even as he took the words in, absorbed their bitter truth, Karim had time to puzzle over what Réza had said.

They?

*

Aisha opened the door and got in. Luc Clément started the car. Neither of them said a word until they were well away from the estate. She looked through the rear window at the receding tower blocks before turning to face the road ahead. The heater was on and the warm air blew on her legs and made her feet tingle. They drove past the Roma camp, looking dirty and neglected and cold with snow everywhere and the makeshift dwellings exposed to the elements. Each home had been built from scratch with whatever was available and there were gaps where the freezing air would enter. Outside, a woman was throwing rubbish into a metal drum to keep a fire going. A snotty-faced kid stood by her side, watching the flames. His arms in a faded yellow t-shirt were bare. Aisha wondered which of these homes the dead Roma boy had come from and whether he too had a sister who was missing him now.

She looked away and tried to think about something else. She had discovered, some time back, that if you told yourself that you were doing something for the last time, then that moment could take on a special quality. Say you told yourself you had a terminal disease. Here you were, living your last moments. Things looked better that way, when you didn't take them for granted. When she looked up, she saw that the sky was the colour of tarnished silver. A flock of white birds – the non-migrating kind, she supposed – flew over the power lines, forming a shimmery pattern in the sky. Beauty was unexpected. So was tragedy. Samir was dead. Had he had time to realize what was happening to him? He must have. Aisha watched the birds' fluid escape. Right now, her mother was tearing her hair out. Mad with grief. Surrounded by well-meaning people, except for her own daughter who'd gone and left her. Slipped out while no one was looking. *I must be a cold-hearted bitch*, Aisha thought.

How long had they been driving? She didn't want to ask her teacher. All she knew was that they weren't in Villeneuve anymore. Strange, that you could be in the *cit * one minute and the next you were in a suburb so tidy, even the trees looked like they had spent time getting ready in the morning. They were planted at exact distances from each other, just as if someone had measured the in-between spaces with a ruler. Somewhere, she imagined, some *fonctionnaire* had a cushy job just making sure the trees were properly lined up.

Monsieur Cl ment turned into a residential street and found a space to park. He pulled the handbrake and left the engine running. She stole a quick glance at him. He sat still and looked straight ahead, as if waiting for something to happen. Somewhere close by, a train rumbled past. A man in a brown coat that floated about his ankles hurried across the footpath, carrying a briefcase. A jogger overtook him, a pair of oversized headphones stuck over his ears.

'Aisha.' The concern in his voice made her turn to face him again. 'I'm so sorry.' She felt herself shrinking from the look in his eyes, from the tenderness with which he spoke. Instead, she made a show of examining her surroundings, looking carefully as if she were making a decision about whether or not to move into the neighbourhood. Definitely not, she decided. It wasn't that flash but you could tell people would be stuck up and even if they didn't know you, they wouldn't want you living right next door. They'd dislike you just for being different. A bit darker, louder, or poorer than they were. Maybe they'd even want to hurt you, or hope bad luck would come your way. Then again, there were plenty of people who would hurt you right where you lived, worked, or went to school, she reflected, thinking of Katarina. *When it comes down to it, people are the same everywhere.* Except for Samir. No one was like him. In her mind, at least. It occurred to her now that she had always, always needed to see him as something special, different from everyone else. He was her brother, and by extension his special-ness made her special too. On her own, she wasn't enough.

'I don't know what to do,' she managed to say. *This* was the only certainty, right now. This conviction that she could not cope, that what had happened was too big, too painful to carry. Monsieur Clément didn't speak. Even without looking at him, she could feel the intensity of her teacher's gaze. For a brief moment, she was angry with him. What was wrong with him? Did he not have any friends of his own age? What kind of adult wanted to hang around a teenage girl? What sort of idiot would compromise himself like this, with a pupil? The white teacher with his favourite *bougnoule* student, she thought angrily, picturing Katarina's ugly sneer. Could it get any worse? If anyone saw them, sitting in his car like this outside of school hours, he'd probably get the sack and she'd become a social pariah. Even more so than now.

She turned to him, ready to say something hurtful, and was shocked to find him in tears. He cried without making any noise, which seemed somehow worse. Quickly, he seemed to realize he was making her uncomfortable and he took a deep breath, wiping his face with one hand and lifting the other as if to say he was sorry.

'One step at a time,' he said, as if to himself. 'I know that sounds like useless advice, but really all you can do is take it slowly. Don't think you have to be *mature* or that you have to be in control. Don't be afraid to feel. I know how frightening, how painful this must be.'

She snorted, her anger flaring again. 'You should be a psychoanalyst, not a philosophy teacher,' she said, and immediately regretted being flippant. A minute ago, she had found him stupid for crying, yet now all she wanted was to cry, for them to cry together, and for him to hold her. Nothing funny, just a warm, reassuring embrace. But he made no move to touch her. 'I know what you're going through,' he said. 'I've been there.'

She looked at him. He was funny-looking, with his tiny blue eyes and pink complexion. A bit on the pudgy side. Yet to her, he was a large, solid presence, exuding warmth. Not that she'd ever tell anyone that. And the way he laughed sometimes, the way he got really

emotional about things like songs and books was really embarrassing, but it made you smile even when there was nothing to smile about. He wasn't tough on the students but he managed somehow to hold their attention, which was an achievement given some of the hard cases she had in her year.

'I'm scared,' she said. And angry, she wanted to add. But she couldn't explain the anger, and it frightened her. It felt like something she needed to hold close, like a rabid dog on a leash.

'I'm here for you, Aisha,' he told her, just as he'd done before, and he made that same gesture of wiping his face. Now he just seemed really tired. She could see he really meant what he'd said, and for the first time she was grateful.

She started crying then, thinking about Samir. Not caring what Luc Clément thought. After a while, she realized he'd turned the radio on. Or no, it wasn't the radio, it was a CD they'd listened to together before, in his car. Leo Ferré, reciting Rimbaud's "Drunken Boat". Her favourite poem. The one that had made her start to appreciate words and how powerful they could be. She wanted someday to be able to express herself like that, using her own words.

The first time she'd heard it, they'd been like this together. Sitting in his car, listening in silence. At first she'd laughed because Ferré was so earnest, so dramatic. It had all seemed so old-fashioned and ridiculous, sitting there listening to an old man with untidy white hair recite poetry like it was something cool you could perform on stage. She'd never seen or heard that before. By the end, though, it had given her goose bumps. Now, it pissed her off that he should think this was appropriate, given what had happened. Samir was dead and Luc Clément wanted to listen to poetry? But she found herself listening all the same, leaning back and surrendering to it. Just like the first time, the poem calmed her down. It took her somewhere foreign, away from the world she knew, away from the nightmare that was

Samir's death. She saw that Luc had his eyes closed. He seemed to have forgotten she was there. She closed hers too and turned her back to him, her legs curled up beneath her, and let the words wash over her like medicine.

Morel didn't go back to sleep after Virginie's call. Instead, he lay in bed for another hour with a splitting headache before getting up. His body seemed to resist, to want to be left alone. He felt like an old and very grumpy man. Not so different, then, from the one sleeping in the upstairs bedroom, he reflected. He let Descartes out into the courtyard and made coffee for himself and for his father, who wasn't up yet. In the bathroom, he rummaged around for more painkillers. He washed the two last Nurofens down with a glass of water, thinking he would need to get more during the day. There was no point checking his temperature. Whatever the thermometer told him, he would go to work.

'What do you think of all this snow, Descartes?' he asked. He stood on the doorstep and drank his coffee. The dog was standing in the middle of the courtyard, looking morose. At the sound of Morel's voice, he lifted his head. There was none of the ebullience he'd shown the previous day, as though he too had been affected by the tragic news. Two young boys, dead within 48 hours of each other, Morel reflected. Was there a link? It was hard to think of the two as unrelated. When he tried to picture what might happen next, he felt uneasy. Georghe's death was one thing, but Samir's murder would further provoke a community that already had its share of grievances, a generation of kids Samir's age who were already marginalised, no matter what people like Morel's father said. How many times had Morel seethed in silence when his father stated that it was *their* fault if things weren't looking 'that great' for them? *They don't want to assimilate. It's unfortunate, but there it is.* Phillippe Morel's words, back in the days when his mind was still sharp, if deluded.

The divide between Paris and its *banlieue* was not just geographical, it was psychological too, Morel thought. If you were a North African migrant living in a dump like the Cité des Fleurs, chances were that Paris would seem as distant as Timbuktu. The

alienation was real and complex, its sources multiple. Whatever the reasons, in places like Villeneuve, the rage and frustration were always there, latent. Something like the death of a young Algerian boy could be disastrous. The events of 2005 were still fresh in Morel's mind: the accidental death of two adolescents running from the police had sparked protests in a northern Parisian suburb not far from Villeneuve. Riots had followed, swiftly spreading across some of the country's most disaffected regions. Would the same thing happen again? He felt certain it would. Maybe he was being dramatic, but Morel had the distinct feeling that the events of these past days would summon an avalanche that no one was really prepared for.

Morel watched Descartes amble back in and sag into a discontented heap at his feet. He scratched the dog's head and was rewarded with a limp thump of its shaggy tail. He finished his coffee and placed the cup on the kitchen bench. The silence made him restless. Even his father's muddled presence would be preferable to this emptiness. He went back inside and turned the lights and the radio on. When the news came on at 5.30, Morel listened carefully. There was nothing new about Georghe, and nothing at all about Samir. But he expected it wouldn't take long.

At six, he decided he could no longer sit around waiting for Augustine to come and he sent her a text, asking if she would make an exception and arrive earlier today. He needed to get to work. Augustine replied straight away. *Absolutely, be right there.* She arrived twenty-five minutes later, looking flushed. The thought of her running over at such an early hour made him feel guilty but he was also relieved. She would sit with his father while he had his breakfast and later they would go for a stroll around the neighbourhood.

Maybe Maly was right, Morel thought as he walked through deserted streets towards the Pont de Neuilly Metro station. He would need to find another solution. He couldn't ask

poor Augustine to be there at the crack of dawn every time he wanted an early start. But neither could he be his father's keeper and still continue to do his job properly.

He took the metro but by the time he got to Concorde, he found he needed to get off the train. The air was stale underground, and his headache showed no signs of diminishing. He walked through the Tuileries, past the large round basin and the green metal chairs that were always occupied in summer, with only the bare trees for company. It was too early for the Roma girls with their fake petition forms, who normally prowled the park for gullible tourists. When he reached the Pont des Arts, its sidings sagging under the weight of thousands of love locks, he pulled his collar up. A cold wind blew across the river, stirring the dark waters. On the Quai des Orfèvres, Morel stepped past the snow-topped line of police vehicles parked outside his building. He was about to enter when he noticed a woman on the quay, across the road from him. She was gazing at the water, her face turned to the wind. There was something familiar about her and when she turned, he recognised Virginie. She looked subdued, quite different to the last time he'd seen her. Her cheek when he kissed it was cold, lifeless.

'I should have called,' she said dully.

'Not at all. But you're lucky I came in early,' he said, rubbing his hands together. 'It's freezing out here.' He recognised one of his colleagues, who was entering the building, and responded to the man's wave by raising his own hand. 'How long have you been waiting?' he asked Virginie.

She shrugged her shoulders. Her face was pale, drawn. 'Come upstairs,' Morel urged. 'I can offer you a coffee, as long as you don't expect it to taste good.' She didn't respond and instead went ahead of him across the road, and into the building. They took the stairs. When they reached the fourth floor, she asked for directions to the bathroom and he pointed her in the right direction.

In the office, there was only Lila. She was looking at something on her computer with headphones on and didn't notice Morel until he was standing by her side. He pointed at the screen, where a couple posed in their underwear, doing their best to look seductive. 'A bit early for this sort of thing, don't you think?'

'It's research,' she commented. 'Swingers' website.'

'Is there a soundtrack?' he said, trying to draw her out. She raised her eyebrows and he gestured towards the headphones. Lila held them away from her ears and Morel heard what sounded like the desperate squawks of a wounded seagull. Whatever she was listening to, it wasn't restful.

'I should come in early more often, for your witty comments,' Lila remarked after he repeated his question. 'The music is mine. The website is one of Grégory Simic's favourites. His and his lovely wife's. Turns out they met up on a regular basis with other couples. Through this site, but also at a couple of clubs in town.'

She pushed her chair from the desk and rubbed her eyes. Morel searched her face, looking for some indication of her mood. He wanted to ask how she was but then Virginie entered the room. Morel introduced the two women to each other.

'Take a seat,' he told Virginie. 'I'll be right back, with the coffee.' He gestured for Lila to follow him. 'It's not like you to be here so early,' he said as they headed down the empty hallway.

'I can be unpredictable like that.' She wouldn't look at him. They would have to talk again, about Akil, Morel told himself. A part of him felt annoyed. *I can be stubborn too*, he thought.

'What's your friend doing here?' she asked. Morel explained about Samir. 'Virginie will be able to tell us more.' There was coffee left in the pot from the day before and he poured it into three cups, then warmed them up individually in the microwave.

'Are we investigating the two Villeneuve deaths?' Lila asked, puzzled. She added sugar to her cup and stirred. Her nails, Morel saw, were bitten to the quick.

'No, we're not.'

'Okay,' Lila said, looking skeptical, and Morel could tell what she was thinking: if you're not involved, why is this woman here, first thing in the morning?

Virginie was sitting at Lila's desk and quickly stood up when they returned. Morel handed her a cup and drew another chair up. 'Take a seat. Tell us what happened last night. When and how did you find out about Samir?'

'One of the residents found him. Around three a.m. this morning. Someone who lives in the same building. He was out, walking his dog - '

'At three in the morning?' Lila interjected.

'He says he suffers from insomnia. He thought it might help to get some fresh air.'

Morel wondered what sort of person would wander out in the middle of a cold winter's night, in a place like the Cité des Fleurs, but didn't say anything.

'On his way back into the building he found Samir. It was lucky he saw him, in the dark...' her voice faltered and she looked at Morel with haunted eyes. 'He stopped to light a cigarette and that was when he realized there was a body... it would have been a shock.'

'He called the police?' Lila said.

Virginie nodded. 'Yes. They knocked on a few doors before they were able to identify him... Loubna, Samir's mother, called me. I went straight over there.'

Morel had more questions but he kept them to himself, saying simply, 'It must have been very difficult.' There was a long silence, then Lila spoke.

'No doubt it'll be in the news today. Especially after what happened to the Roma boy. Georghe. Do you think the two are related?'

'I'm sure our Villeneuve colleagues will be looking at that,' Morel said.

'I wish it were you, leading the investigation. I don't know how much faith I have in the Villeneuve police. They seemed indifferent to Samir's fate,' Virginie said.

'That was before he died. Now things are different.'

The words, unconvincing, hung in the air for a moment. Then Lila stood up. 'I'll make more coffee,' she said. While she was gone, Morel kept silent. He told himself there was nothing he could do. Virginie was silent too, as if she knew there was no point wasting her breath. In any case, Morel thought, looking at her, that she had run out of energy. She looked like she was about to collapse.

*

Once he'd walked Virginie to the metro station, Morel turned to the Simic case. When Jean and Vincent arrived, Lila briefed the team on what she knew.

'So you think he was killed because he and his wife like to get their kit off in sex clubs?' Jean asked.

'And swap partners,' Vincent added. He shook his head. 'I'm trying to picture the sort of life those two had.'

'Not your idea of an ideal partnership then?' Lila asked. There was an awkward silence, while everyone remembered Vincent's wife who had died of cancer a couple of years earlier. As far as they knew, he wasn't seeing anyone else, too busy with work and raising his children single-handedly. But Vincent smiled and said, 'To each their own, I guess.'

Morel turned to Lila. 'What does Richard Martin say?' Martin was the pathologist they worked with most closely. Morel respected his skills, knowing he was better at his job than anyone else in Paris. But the man had his faults. He was better equipped to handle dead bodies than live ones. His male colleagues tended to find him arrogant and his female colleagues found him, at best, offensive. A couple of women had filed sexual harassment suits against him and lost.

'He called me last night,' said Lila, who'd turned down her fair share of date requests from Martin. 'He said either Simic bounced off a few walls before he fell into the water or someone gave him a good beating, then threw him into the river. Given his alcohol levels, and the state of his injuries before he hit the water, Martin says Simic didn't have a hope in hell of saving himself.'

'So what's next?' Morel asked.

'I want to check out this club that Simic and his wife liked to visit often. They were there every week. The night Simic died, his wife claims she was at home in bed, with a migraine, and that he'd told her he was going for a walk.'

'Maybe he went for a walk and took a little detour,' Jean said.

'A big detour, going by the level of alcohol in his blood.' Lila crossed her arms. 'And the club is within walking distance from where Simic's body was found in the water. I know that where he fell in isn't where he ended up exactly, with the current being what it is – but still

Morel looked at Vincent. 'I'd like you to give Lila a hand with this. Find out if Simic was at any of the clubs he and his wife visited that night; starting with the one closest to where he was found. Location might not mean much, given he was fished out of the water. So let's check them all out. And get a list of regulars and also the names of everyone who was at these places on the night he was killed.'

'Sure.' Vincent was writing everything down.

'Lila? Anything else?' Morel said.

'Yes. There's someone I need to track down. A friend of Simic's. A nice young lady called Bijou.'

'Her name is *Bijou*?' Jean smiled. 'I like her already.'

*

The superintendent showed up after lunch, preceded by the distinctive smell of his aftershave, a headache-inducing blend of patchouli and cinnamon. As Perrin entered the room, the scent became overwhelming and Morel felt his eyes water.

‘Christ, can you believe the shit that’s happening over in Villeneuve?’ the superintendent said, not bothering to greet anyone first. ‘First the gipsy in the supermarket trolley. Then the Beur kid. Did you watch the one o’clock news? Poor kid was stabbed repeatedly and bled to death outside his home. There’s a bit of a ruckus in the neighbourhood. This morning, one of our Villeneuve colleagues working at the crime scene got hit on the head with a bottle. Thrown from a balcony. They had to take him to hospital. Thirty stitches. Fucking animals. Makes me grateful I don’t work anywhere near that shithole.’ He placed his hands on his hips and looked around the room.

‘What’s going on here? You all look like you’re still asleep. Any progress on Simic? Come on people, it’s wake up time.’

After he’d left, Lila turned to Morel.

‘Is it true that he might be moving on? A promotion, or something?’

‘I certainly hope so.’

At that, she smiled. Morel smiled back.

*

Akil came in midway through the afternoon. Lila was out, getting help from the technical team to examine the contents of the dead tennis player’s laptop, make sure they didn’t miss anything that could be relevant in what was now officially a murder investigation. The Moroccan-born detective walked through the door with an air of studied nonchalance that was probably for Lila’s benefit. His attitude changed the minute he realized she wasn’t there.

‘Welcome,’ Morel said. ‘Make yourself at home.’ He gestured towards Marco’s old desk. ‘That’s yours now.’ Akil looked at the empty desk and at the one across from it and gave a tense smile.

‘What has she said about this?’ he asked, gesturing towards Lila’s desk.

‘She’s not very happy,’ Morel replied, then added, ‘I hope you two can behave professionally towards one another.’

Akil nodded, suddenly grave. ‘I certainly intend to. Behave professionally, I mean. I have a lot of respect for her, the way she does her job...’ he trailed off awkwardly. Morel added, emphatically, ‘She’s the best. I couldn’t manage without her.’

They both had their backs to the door and didn’t hear Lila enter the room. She stepped up to her desk and set Simic’s laptop there, among the empty coffee cups, hair clips and discarded chewing gum wrappers. They both looked at her expectantly. ‘So you’re the new guy,’ she said, looking at Akil. He looked confused, before realizing she was trying to be funny. ‘That’s me,’ he responded with a grin. She didn’t return his smile. ‘Just so you know. No one touches my stuff. And I don’t do idle chatter.’

‘I kind of know that about you,’ Akil replied.

Jean and Vincent walked in together. They greeted Akil warmly.

‘Drinks tonight, I think,’ Jean declared, clapping a hand on the younger man’s shoulder. Morel stole a glance at Lila. She kept her head down. She unwrapped a piece of gum and stuck it in her mouth, her jaw working furiously.

Man is a wolf to man. Luc Clément wrote the words on the blackboard and turned to his students, trying his best to look engaged even though he was desperate to get away. Only this class to go before he could get out of here. Normally, he managed to stay focused, and there were even days when he enjoyed his job. But today was different. He'd spent his lunch break looking at his phone, wondering whether Aisha was okay and whether he should call or text. Before driving to school he'd dropped her somewhere near the estate. She was needed at home, she said. He pictured her there, surrounded by grieving relatives and friends, trying to comfort her mother. But who was comforting her?

'Did anyone bother to read the Hobbes text I assigned last week?' he asked angrily. A few in the classroom seemed to sit up and pay a bit more attention than, unused to that tone from their soft-spoken, head-in-the-clouds philosophy teacher. Luc scanned the room. Most of his students were distracted. Fidgeting in their chairs, chatting, rummaging in their bags for food and I-pods and cigarettes. Already preparing for recess. A couple of the kids had headphones on and one was fast asleep. Kenan Tanzir, one of Luc's favourites, snorted loudly at something his neighbour was telling him. Luc sighed. He still had high hopes for Tanzir, an introverted kid whose writing was thoughtful, imaginative. But the odds were against the boy. He was easily swayed, and his friends were not of the same calibre.

'Hobbes, Monsieur?' This, from Félix Orlan, a nineteen year-old deadweight who seemed in no hurry to get anywhere in life. Luc knew he wouldn't finish high school and probably wouldn't go to technical college either. God only knew what he'd do.

'Thomas Hobbes. English thinker. Ring a bell? I mentioned his name four days ago, when I handed out a text of his for you all to read and reflect upon at home. No?'

‘Monsieur, why an English thinker? Why can’t we have a French thinker?’ Moussa Keita asked. Luc had met his parents several times at parent-teacher meeting. They were from Mali and didn’t speak French. Moussa’s older brother had stepped in as translator.

‘I must admit I didn’t see that question coming. Why does it matter?’ Luc asked.

‘Well, we *are* in France...’

‘Since when do you care?’ Félix interrupted. He was leaning so far back, his chair was dangerously close to tipping. Luc half hoped it would. He ignored Félix’s comment and addressed Moussa. ‘So are you saying we should only focus on French things? French history and geography, French authors, French language...’

Moussa rolled his eyes. ‘That’s not what I mean. But...’ He shrugged his shoulders and sat back, slipping his hood over his head and crossing his arms. ‘Hoods off in class,’ Luc said, gesturing for the boy to pull it back. Moussa rolled his eyes again, but did as he was told.

‘So,’ Luc continued. ‘*Hobbes*. Man is a wolf to man. What that saying is intended to illustrate is the brutish, anarchic and violent nature of man in his primal state, before civilization kicks in. A notion that other thinkers have challenged, though we won’t go there yet. No point unless you’ve read this text. I have to say I’m disappointed, guys. I would have thought this was something that would grab many of you. What is our primal nature? Is good innate? Or is there only mutual distrust, driven by an instinctive need for survival?’

‘Mutual distrust, no doubt about it,’ Félix offered, earning a few laughs. The rest of them were silent. Luc searched the faces before him for a flicker of interest. Normally, he could get the kids involved. But today all he saw was apathy. Perhaps they sensed that his heart wasn’t in it. His eyes flittered across Aisha’s empty desk. She would have read the text and had something to say about it.

‘Monsieur? Are you still awake?’ This from Moussa, followed by laughter, which suggested to Luc that he’d been day-dreaming. How long had he been standing there, gazing

at the blackboard with a piece of chalk in his hand? He turned and faced the class. He could see that, today, he'd lost the battle. Thirty-two kids, most of them with the attention span of puppies. He always had to work hard to hold their attention. Today, he didn't have the energy.

'Mehdi?' he called, choosing a student at random. 'Did you read the text?' The boy looked at him blankly. Someone sniggered.

Luc shook his head and scanned the room. '*Anyone?*' Laetitia, the girl who sat beside Aisha, shook her head. 'There wasn't enough time,' she replied lamely. 'My Mum's sick. I have to take care of her.'

'Sick of you, for sure,' someone in the back row sniggered, and Laetitia turned to him sharply. 'Shut up, moron.'

'Enough.' Luc pointed at Kenan. 'Maybe you could read the text for us now. That way we can all hear it.' Kenan glanced at his neighbour before shaking his head.

'No thank you, Sir.'

'I wasn't asking, Kenan. Just read the text.' A couple of the girls giggled, including Marianne, a large, big-bosomed girl, attractive in a fleeting sort of way. Nothing like Aisha, he thought. In one corner, Katarina and her little posse of followers were sniggering about something. He couldn't be bothered, right now, engaging with any of them. He didn't like Katarina, and took great pains not to show it.

Luc looked at Félix's sprawling figure behind the desk, at the blank faces before him, and sighed. 'Never mind, Kenan.' He picked one of the students in the front row, a big girl with braided hair and fiery red nails called Mélodie.

'Mélodie, would you read the text out loud?'

'What, all of it?'

'All of it. From the beginning, to the end. For those of us who haven't had a chance to read it ... I want you all to pay close attention. Because afterwards, I'll be asking questions.'

Groans and laughter. A clamour of insults, most of them good-natured. Nothing he hadn't heard before. Chairs were scraped back. Luc raised his voice in order to be heard through the noise and agitation.

'Mélodie, would you begin, please?'

'Fine, whatever.' As she began to read, haltingly, he looked out the window, at the stark courtyard and the high walls that surrounded the school. Not so much to keep people out, he reflected, but to keep the students in. Not that it made any difference. If a kid didn't want to be at school, there was only so much you could do. Warnings and threats of expulsion might work with some, but not all. And what use was it talking to the parents when half the time their French was too limited to hold a proper conversation? Luc remembered a recent lunch break in the staff room. As was often the case when it came to discussing the students and the education system, there had been heated exchanges. Some said it was up to the school to improve communication with the students and with their families. Others thought responsibility lay mostly with the parents and older siblings. *It starts with language*, the chemistry teacher had said. A sallow-faced man with a short fuse. *They need to become fluent themselves, and help develop the younger children's fluency.* Someone, Luc couldn't remember who, had butted in. *And what about our own capacity for reaching out and embracing the diversity? Making sure kids are not alienated from their culture of origin? Bollocks to that*, Matthew had said. His response had caused such an uproar that Corinne Tellier, the head teacher, had come in, asking if they could keep their voices down. Privately, Luc tended to agree with the majority but he agreed with Matthew too. Many of these kids came from families whose sense of belonging began elsewhere, not here in this neglected Parisian suburb. It was important to acknowledge and cultivate this. At the same time, language mattered. Not just the language of their forefathers, and of their parents, many of whom didn't speak French fluently, but also the language of their country of adoption. Without it,

they would remain on the margins of society. Language was power. It was no surprise, Luc reflected, that France had made French a cornerstone of their colonial expansion. Without language, how could you articulate your needs and desires? How could you earn respect? Be seen, and heard?

Luc glanced again at the empty desk. His mind was full of her. *Aisha*. Fretting, wanting to reach out to her and offer comfort, friendship. What would happen now? Samir's death had shaken him, no doubt about it. Even after six years of teaching at this *lycée*, he wasn't immune to the violence he encountered, the messy background many of these kids shared. Still, he refused to think of his students as victims of the system. How did that help them? And he certainly never saw Aisha as one. But it seemed horribly unfair, that this tragedy should touch her and not someone else. She was top of the class, and he expected her to do well at her baccalauréat, in the subjects he taught, French and philosophy. How would she be able to focus on her studies now?

Mélodie was still reading. Heads turned and Luc saw that the classroom door had opened and someone was poking their head in. It was Marie, from the school office. 'Monsieur Clément, could you come for a moment?'

'What - now?'

'If you would,' Marie replied. Luc stepped out of the class and closed the door, hearing the noise erupt as soon as he'd shut it. There would be mayhem, but he didn't care. What did the head teacher want him for? Of course, the school would know about Samir by now. Could it be that Corinne wanted to question him about Aisha's dead brother, that somehow they thought he might be able to contribute something meaningful? Had anyone seen him with Aisha earlier, in the car? They had been careful, but it wouldn't take much for someone to notice. One of the kids, or a teacher, on their way to school. For the first time, he felt uneasy.

When he reached the end of the hallway, he found Corinne waiting for him. She led him into her office, where a man was sitting in the visitor's chair. He stood up when they walked in, and held out his hand.

'Monsieur Clément? Romain Marchal. I'm a detective with the Villeneuve police.'

'Has something happened?' Luc said. Marchal was short, no more than 1m65, Luc guessed. But there was something vaguely intimidating about the way he assessed Luc, coolly and in silence.

'Take a seat, please,' Corinne said. Luc did as he was told, aware that the policeman was looking at him still. The last time Luc had been in Corinne's office, just a few days before, had been with one of his students, who'd addressed him as 'tu' rather than 'vous' before going on a rant about the uselessness of getting an education in a dump like Villeneuve. A familiar refrain. Luc had brought him in to see Corinne. He'd been fuming too, hating his job, his life, and every one of his students in that moment. But he remembered it as being far more comfortable a situation than the one he was in now.

'Luc, I'm afraid something's happened. Something tragic. Is Aisha in today?' The head teacher's voice sounded strained. Instead of her usual pose, which was to sit on the edge of a desk with her legs crossed, surveying the room and everyone in it, she was standing.

'She's absent.' He was careful to keep his voice neutral, to conceal his agitation. He had no choice but to lie, and pretend he didn't already know about Aisha's brother. It was either that or let the detective and Corinne know that he'd seen Aisha before school. Picked her up from the estate and parked in a quiet spot where they could be alone. He swallowed and made himself look at the police officer.

'What is it? What's happened?'

'The girl's brother was found dead during the night. Stabbed to death.'

'How? Where?'

'At the foot of the building where he lived,' the police officer said. He was still looking at Luc like he hadn't made up his mind about something. 'You probably know a Roma boy died from his injuries too, after taking a severe beating. That's two deaths in a very short time.'

'That's dreadful.'

'We've talked to his teachers, of course,' Marchal continued. 'But we thought others might know something. You have the boy's sister in your class. Maybe you can tell us something about the family.'

'I don't know much about them, beyond my interaction at school with Aisha and the parent teacher meetings. There is no father, I believe he died some time ago. I've met with the mother a few times.'

'Any problems in the home?'

'What sort of problems?'

'Drugs. Abuse. Maybe the Mum's found herself a man and the boy clashed with him. Maybe the boy was selling drugs, getting in the way of other sellers on the estate. Any thoughts?'

Luc pretended to mull the question over.

'I really can't say.'

The detective looked at his watch.

'So Aisha is a student of yours?'

'She's one of my best.'

'Smart, then?'

'Very.'

'Close to her brother?'

'I don't know. Sorry.'

'That's fine.' Marchal made a show of looking at his notes, but it was obvious he'd come prepared.

'The family are Algerian,' he said as a statement.

'They're French. Aisha was a couple of years old when she moved here.'

'Is that right?' the detective said. He gazed at Luc with interest.

'You think this is about race?' Luc asked. He hadn't meant to sound angry but it came out that way.

'I have no clue,' Marchal said, smiling. He might have been discussing the weather forecast for the following day. 'What do you think?'

'I'd be reluctant to make those sorts of assumptions. This is the sort of thing that can only cause trouble. Any mention of racism, discrimination, and I can guarantee you'll have your hands full trying to contain things around here, let alone trying to solve a murder.'

'The detective is only asking whether race might be a factor here,' the head teacher intercepted.

'How would I know?' Luc asked.

'You knew the boy Samir?' Marchal asked.

Luc managed to look blank. 'Not really. I've never taught him, but I know who he is.' He added, 'I've been working here for six years, so of course I know the kids a little.'

'Is there anything you might be able to tell us about him? Anything that might help us understand why he was killed?'

Luc shook his head. 'Like I said, I know who he is – but I'm afraid that's about it.'

'No gossip? As a teacher you must get to hear all sorts of stuff.'

'I'm one of those teachers who doesn't pay any attention to that sort of thing. I'm sorry to disappoint.' And Marchal did seem disappointed, like he'd expected a great deal more.

After Marchal left, Corinne asked Luc to stay. In his mind, he was going over the exchange he'd had with the detective. Was it his imagination or had Marchal looked at him as if he didn't believe a word he said? Was it okay to lie, when the truth was complicated? None of what was happening was his fault. He had to keep reminding himself of that.

Luc took a deep breath and willed himself to relax. The man had no reason to suspect him of anything. When he looked up, he found Corinne looking at him. 'What do we do now?' she said.

'What do you mean?' She looked at him as if he was stupid. 'Luc, you said it yourself. You know this isn't going to end here. This is just the beginning.'

Eleven

Alberto looked out his bedroom window and found the world much as he'd left it an hour earlier, before he'd decided to lie down and rest. It had stopped snowing, but still he felt strange, as if a white mass, something blinding and immovable, prevented him from leaving his flat. There was a tightness around his chest and a numbness in his left arm that made him wonder, briefly, whether he was having a stroke or a heart attack, and whether he should call someone. He had a fear of dying alone.

That morning, when Samir had left after breakfast, Alberto had hoped that he might return. Even after his disastrous exchange with Samir's sister, he'd gone to his flat and waited, thinking that maybe the boy had simply changed his mind about going home and decided he needed more quiet time. Maybe he would return to Alberto's place once he realized there was nowhere else he could comfortably be. Alberto realized now that he had been waiting all this time. Waiting, that is, until he'd heard the dreadful news from the police, snuffing out all hope. They'd knocked on his door just as he was about to head out to the shops. Afterwards, he'd forgotten what it was he wanted to get.

It was nearly two. Out of habit, he turned to the kitchen. There wasn't much in the pantry. Coffee and a tin of stale biscuits. That would do for lunch. He'd lost his appetite, in any case. He couldn't shake the feeling that he'd let the boy down. That morning, when Samir had said he was going home, he should have checked, made sure he was safe. Or made him stay longer instead of insisting he call his mother.

He could hear Emilia chiding him. You can't be responsible for someone else's child. A child, who is nearly a man, at that. No one would think this was your fault. But Samir's sister Aisha did blame him. If only he'd insisted, gently, perhaps the boy would have confided in him. He'd clearly been in some sort of trouble. And he, Alberto, had pretended not to see.

Imbécil, a voice inside his head said. What difference would it have made, if he'd said something then? When had Samir ever opened up to him, about anything? Alberto bit into a biscuit and pulled a face. It was like eating dirt.

Seven years, he'd known the kid. Since that first time he and Emilia had passed him on the stairs, knowing better than to take the lifts. Already then, the residents had figured out that the construction was shoddy. How quickly the buildings had run into disrepair. '*Qué haces, nino?* What are you doing?' The boy had been sitting halfway down the steps, puffing on a cigarette. Alberto had taken it from him. 'You're too young for this. If you really want to smoke, at least wait till you're a man.'

'What does it matter?'

'It matters.'

The boy had ignored him and Alberto had decided to let it go, continuing down the stairs with his wife. He'd looked back to find the child staring at him through a cloud of smoke, with an expression on his brooding face that could not have been clearer. *Fuck off.*

A week later, when he'd completely forgotten about the kid, Samir had shown up on his doorstep. 'No one's home and I'm stuck outside,' he'd said. 'Can I sit here and watch TV?' Alberto couldn't even remember why he'd agreed to let him in. Emilia had been suspicious, at first. But, gradually she'd grown fond of Samir too. After her death, Samir had come more often. Always alone, and never for long. There had been a spate of robberies in the neighbourhood and businesses were closing. A friend of Alberto's had been mugged outside the building, in the middle of the day. People were locking their doors. With everything he had known falling apart around him, it had felt good to know that trust still existed. For some reason, Samir had trusted him, Alberto. And Alberto had felt he could trust the boy too.

'I think he just felt comfortable here,' Alberto had told the detectives. They'd knocked on his door first thing this morning and asked, in a dozen different ways, why Samir would

stay the night at his. He'd tried to explain, though it wasn't easy to describe the relationship, if it could be called that. He could see the police were skeptical. Why would an adolescent like Samir be hanging around with an old geezer like him? He could see them contemplating the worst, because that's what you did when you were a police officer, wasn't it? He imagined their thoughts and felt defiled, revolted.

He plumped the sofa back into shape and picked up the cardigan he had lent the boy. He must have left without it. Stupid kid, he thought. What had he done to keep warm? He reached for the top and checked the pockets, out of habit, before storing it away. In one of them, there was a bloody tissue. When he went to throw it in the bin, something fell that had been contained in its folds, and after a moment's hesitation he picked that up too. He stared at it, his hand shaking slightly.

Mierda, he muttered to himself.

It was a tooth. To Alberto, it looked like it must have belonged to a child.

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Morel was on his way to the Cité des Fleurs, with Lila. Romain Marchal, the detective overseeing the investigation into the boys' deaths, had called him and asked if he could come by the station in Villeneuve. 'I know you're a busy man, but given what's happened, and given your connection with Samir Ketab's family, I'd like to have a word.'

Morel was tempted to say they could talk on the phone, that he was too busy to drive all the way to Villeneuve. But he might get closer to the investigation by being there. It was none of his business, of course. And Perrin would have a fit if he knew. But there was Virginie, and there was Aisha. He felt, obscurely, that he owed them something.

'Well, it's as lovely as its name suggested. I was right about that,' Lila said as they drove around the housing estate. Before going to see Marchal, Morel wanted to show her where Samir had lived. The four tower blocks that made up the Cité des Fleurs loomed over

everything. Morel looked up. Many of the windows were shut. Some were boarded up. On the streets, there was rubbish everywhere. Either the collectors were on strike or they didn't bother coming here anymore.

'Can the city council just do that? Ignore an entire section of their district, and let it go to ruin?' Lila asked, echoing his thoughts.

'It looks that way, doesn't it,' Morel replied.

'You know what the problem is?' she reflected. 'It's that there's no through-traffic. No one needs to come through here. There's no reason to stop, no shops or anything. The only people you see are the ones who live here. There's no link with the outside world.'

She had a point. As far as Morel could tell, there was only one shop in the vicinity, a Leader Price supermarket. And he guessed that the nearest RER station was a twenty-minute walk away. They'd driven past it on their way here.

How long, he wondered, till they tore the tower blocks down? At what point would the authorities decide that a place was no longer fit to be lived in? Other housing estates like this one outside Paris had been replaced with new buildings, though often there was a price to pay: not everyone got a place in the new order. Putting new buildings in place with fewer available units was a way of weeding out the worst elements, by kicking them out on the street.

'Remind me: why are we here, anyway?' Lila asked as they drew outside the Villeneuve police station. Morel didn't bother replying. He'd already told her.

'Tonight I'm going to do the rounds of these clubs Simic and his wife liked so much,' she said. 'Shall I take Vincent with me?'

'Aren't we having drinks? To welcome Akil?' Morel asked, as he pushed the door open.

'Exactly,' she said, striding past him into the building.

Romain Marchal came out to greet them and Morel introduced Lila to him. They followed him to his desk. 'So what do you think of our new premises? How do they compare to the Quai des Orfevres?'

'I'd say this is a lot more modern than where we are,' Morel replied.

Marchal's laugh was unconvincing. He invited Morel and Lila to sit down. 'Thanks for coming.'

'Not at all,' Morel said. 'How is it all going?'

Marchal scratched his head and pulled a face. 'It's always tough. No one wants to share information. That includes the Roma community. They're afraid of reprisals.'

'From those who attacked the boy?'

'That, of course. And being illegals, for the most part, they're afraid they'll be deported. We've been talking to people in the tower blocks about Samir, too. Either they're telling us nothing, or they're making up stories. It's like wading through pig shit, to be honest.'

Lila snorted. 'I know that feeling.'

'You asked me to come down...,' Morel began.

'You came here, the day before Samir was found. How well do you know the family?'

'I don't. I was asked to come by a friend of mine. She's a school counselor and has been seeing Samir's sister Aisha.'

'Her name?' Morel hesitated slightly, then gave Marchal Virginie's details. 'I'm not sure she can help you with any of this. She hardly knew the boy.'

'Why did she ask you to get involved?'

Morel shrugged. 'I guess because we've known each other a long time. She knows what I do for a living.'

'Can you take me through the conversations you had, when you visited the Ketabs?'

'There isn't much to tell.' Morel took him through his meeting with Aisha and her mother.

'Have you visited the family since this happened?' Morel shook his head. 'Good. I'd like to ask that you don't. It might complicate things.'

'If you're worried that I'll interfere in your investigation, don't be. I have no intention of getting involved.'

'Thanks. I appreciate it,' Marchal said. He stood up.

'Is that it?' Morel asked, somewhat surprised. It seemed like a long way to come for such a brief exchange.

'Thanks for coming,' Marchal said again. 'Truly, I appreciate it. Come, I'll walk you out.' Without ceremony, he steered them out of the building, as if he had other urgent matters to attend.

'So have you figured out whether there is a link between the two deaths?' Lila asked him as they were heading out.

Marchal hesitated. 'We've had the Roma boy in here before, for breaking into a couple of flats in the tower blocks. My guess is some of the residents had had enough and decided to take matters in their own hands.'

'What about the link between the two boys?' Lila insisted.

'Like I said,' Marchal replied dismissively. 'We haven't got anywhere yet. There isn't anything I can tell you beyond what I've already said.'

Which is nothing, Morel thought. He was seething.

The silence was ominous as he and Lila got in the car. He knew she was feeling much the same as he was. Outraged, that Marchal should have summoned them here, essentially to tell them to stay away. As they backed out of their parking spot, someone rapped on Morel's window, startling him. He stopped the car and wound down his window. The man standing

outside the car was familiar. Morel had seen him in the police station just now, when he'd been talking to Marchal.

'I'm sorry for coming up to you like this. Thierry Villot,' he said, sticking his hand through the open window.

'You work with Marchal?'

'Marchal and I go way back. We started here around the same time. I've had quite a bit to do with the Cité des Fleurs. It's shocking what happened to the Roma kid but I'm not that surprised. He'd been causing trouble, breaking repeatedly into people's homes. The sort of people who don't sit back and wait for the police to solve a problem for them...and there's a great deal of animosity against the Roma people here, and everywhere ... I'm not telling you anything you don't know. But I knew Samir personally. It's terrible what happened to him.'

'How did you know Samir?' Morel asked, taken aback by the other man's chattiness. What was Thierry Romain doing here, talking to them? And why did everyone keep referring to Georghe as the Roma boy? Didn't he at least deserve a name? Morel glanced in his rearview mirror, wondering if Marchal was watching.

'I'm well acquainted with the boys Samir hung out with. That whole gang, I've known them for years. Some of them are down at the station all the time. They don't care. They know we can't keep them inside forever. They just sit tight and wait till we have no choice but to release them. Then a few months later they're back in the cells again.'

'What for?'

Thierry glanced back at the building.

'Drugs?' Morel pressed.

'Yes and no. Boys like Samir, at that age, they're still on the periphery. They get sucked in to the business, but they don't make any of the decisions. From my perspective, they're just

pawns. Working for the dealers, running errands for them, acting as lookouts. That kind of thing.'

'It's not what I'd refer to as the periphery.' Lila's comment went unanswered. Thierry was looking at Morel, ignoring her.

'What about Samir?' Morel asked.

Thierry shook his head.

'I don't know, exactly. At least I'm not sure. But I did notice he seemed to have a bit of money all of a sudden. Not a great deal, but enough to make me wonder.'

'So you kept an eye on him?'

'I didn't need to. I'd see him at the station, every few months or so. Marchal hauled him in three, four times. For questioning. Mostly to see if he'd give us anything on the guy Marchal thought he was working for.'

'Marchal never mentioned that,' Morel said, glancing at Lila. 'He never said he knew Samir. In fact, when I first came by the station and mentioned Samir was missing, he acted like he'd never heard the name before. Why is that?'

'I don't know,' Thierry said, looking uncomfortable.

'Why are you telling us all this?' Lila asked.

'I don't really know. Maybe I just wanted to communicate the fact that he wasn't a bad kid,' Thierry said. 'It's frustrating, for me, to see these boys fuck up their lives. Even if there isn't much we can do about it. Some of these kids I've known since before they could walk. I know their families, their siblings ... after a while, it wears you down.'

Morel looked at the unhappy man before him. Everything he said seemed heartfelt and genuine, but there was something else too. He thought Thierry was lying. Or maybe not lying so much as holding back. That wasn't what he'd come here to say. He thought back to his

earlier comment about Samir, how he'd been hauled in by Marchal and interrogated. Hauled in. Interesting choice of words.

They'd been here for a while now, and Morel felt it was time to stop. Obscurely, he worried he might be getting Thierry into trouble.

'Are you working on the investigation into the two deaths?' he asked.

'No.' Thierry hesitated. 'But I hope they find who did this.' He seemed in a hurry now to end the conversation. 'Nice to meet you,' he said, and turned away before Morel could respond. He and Lila watched the man walk back into the building without turning back.

'What the fuck was *that* about?' Lila said.

'I have no idea.' Morel watched the man disappear into the building. 'But I have a feeling he and Marchal may not be close. Even though they go "way back."'

'In that case, I like him already,' Lila said. 'That Marchal. What a tosser. Making you come all this way so he could tell you, in the nicest possible way, to butt out?'

'I'm not feeling that great about it either,' Morel said, leaving the new police building behind. He thought about the man they'd just met. He felt certain they'd meet again.

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'What's going on?' Marchal asked Thierry when he returned to the office. 'What did you want with Morel?'

'Just curious. I thought I'd say hi,' Thierry said, doing his best to appear nonchalant despite Marchal's intense gaze. His scalp itched, as it always did in times of stress. He resisted the urge to scratch his head.

'Thinking of working for him? Maybe you're getting tired of Villeneuve?' Marchal looked amused.

'You're joking, right? Can you imagine what it's like, working with that bunch of snobs? Besides, how could one possibly get tired of Villeneuve.' Thierry saw Marchal relax and grin before walking away.

Thierry watched him go. Noted the swagger in Marchal's walk, and the way everyone in the room responded to him.

Careful, Thierry, he told himself. His heart was beating as wildly as it had on that day in the building entrance, talking to Karim.

*

'Can we stop at that supermarket we saw on the way in? I need a drink. I'm parched. Must be all those hours of conversation we had back there with Marchal.'

Morel turned into the Leader Price car park and Lila got out. He watched her stride towards the shop with the air of a woman who had no time to waste. Morel watched her go, wondering what it was that had made it impossible for her and Akil to stay together. Part of the attraction with her, he knew, was the way she seemed to take on the world without hesitation, never caring what people might think. But it was also what made her intractable. Was that what had led to the final break-up - the absence of malleability? In Lila's dictionary, compromise wasn't give and take; it was a word that meant someone caught with their pants down.

While she was gone, he watched people entering and leaving. A man in a coat that looked like he'd borrowed it from someone twice as big as him was leaning against the wall, talking loudly. His face was deeply flushed, and he used his hands eloquently to demonstrate something to an invisible companion. Nearby, a group of teenagers stood in a circle, smoking, obviously skipping school. Morel was debating whether to get a drink too when Lila came back with two bottles of Orangina. She handed one over. 'You know,' she said as she slid into her seat, taking up the conversation where they'd left it, 'I didn't think this was any of our

business. I told you as much when your friend Virginie dropped into the office. Marchal is right. It's nothing to do with us.' She took a sip of her drink. 'At the same time, it really pisses me off when someone tells me what's my business and what isn't.'

'I didn't enjoy that either,' Morel commented. They sat in silence for a moment before Morel backed the car out of the parking lot.

'We could drive past the Roma camp on our way back? Just, you know, to take a look?' Lila suggested.

'Lila, you know that's a bad idea.'

'What can I say?' She finished her drink and grinned. 'I'm full of bad ideas.'

The Roma camp was easy to find. Less than 500 metres from the towers, it was a sprawling vista of improvised dwellings. Morel wound his window down to get a better look. The place looked like a giant dumping ground. There were shopping trolleys, stray dogs, burning fires. Lengths of copper cable, and rubbish everywhere. The Roma earned a living with scrap metal and garbage. A kilo of copper could go for five euros, Jean had told Morel. That's if you could find a buyer willing to do business with a seller who didn't have a French ID card.

A garage stood next to the camp. A man in dirty overalls leaned into a car with its bonnet open. As they watched, he stopped whatever he was doing to stare at them.

'Do you think he's worried we might rob him?'

'I think it's more likely he's worried we'll talk to him,' Morel mused. 'It'd be interesting to find out how much he knows about his neighbours. Whether he knew Georghe's family.'

'Shall we have a chat then? Drop in on some of the friendly locals while we're at it?' Lila asked. The man lit a cigarette without taking his eyes off them. His shirtsleeves were rolled up and there were tattoos on both arms. From where Morel and Lila sat, it was hard to know what they depicted.

'I think it's best we leave it,' Morel said. 'If Marchal finds out we stopped here on our way out, he'll be unimpressed. Plus, I can't see us getting a warm welcome.'

'Well, not in that get-up,' Lila said, looking pointedly at Morel.

Self-consciously, Morel adjusted his tie and the cuffs of his jacket. 'Virginie said the same thing. Everyone's very concerned about the way I dress all of a sudden.'

'That's because, when you dress like that in an area like this, it's like waving a big red flag at a grumpy bull,' Lila said.

'Really?' But inwardly Morel was thinking about his visit to the Cité des Fleurs with Virginie. She had said to him, as they were leaving, 'do you want to get killed? Is that it? Because coming in here dressed like that, you're begging for a beating. At the very least.'

Twelve

'Thanks for being here, Aisha,' Virginia said. Aisha was not supposed to call her Virginia, it was too familiar, but sometimes she did, when the woman was getting on her nerves. 'I know you didn't want to come today.'

Aisha knew it was rude, but she couldn't stop looking at Virginia's hair. Why did she dye it, when the colour was so obviously fake – too bright for a woman her age? It made her look cheap and vain. Surely her hair should be starting to turn white by now? Why were people always trying to cover up who they really were? It was the sort of thing Karim would probably do when he was older, colour his hair to look young.

She wished she hadn't come. She had nothing to say.

'You're right,' she said, looking down at her hands. 'I didn't want to come. I don't really feel like talking about anything.'

'That's fine. You don't have to talk.'

Aisha thought that was funny. What was the point of being here if all she was going to do was sit and say nothing?

Virginia put her notebook and pen away and crossed her legs. She had rubbish taste in clothes but you could tell she spent a lot of time choosing what she wore. Not so that men would notice her, that wasn't it at all; but so people would look at her and think she was strong and independent and didn't care what other people thought was cool or trendy. Today, Virginia was wearing purple stockings and a red skirt, and a short, rust-coloured leather jacket. Her earrings were little orange foxes that peeked out of her hair when she moved, then disappeared again, as if they were alive.

To Aisha, there was something sad about Virginia, like she was trying very hard to project a particular image, to make people believe something about her that she knew was

bullshit. *Maybe we all do it*, she thought. *Me, Virginie, Monsieur Clément. Maybe Samir did it too.*

She leaned forward and Aisha could see Virginie was waiting for her to say something meaningful. Instead, Aisha was focusing on not staring at the woman's cleavage. It was too much for a woman her age. Too much for any woman. Aisha didn't believe women should cover up but neither did she believe that it was necessarily freeing to reveal so much. When people talked about the hijab they said women had no choice and it was the men who dictated how they should dress. But when a woman showed half her breasts or wore clothes so tight, heels so high she could barely walk normally, who dictated that? Was that really a choice?

'You seem very far away, Aisha,' Virginie murmured. Aisha knew for a fact that Katarina, that hyena, had regular appointments with the school counsellor too. She wasn't *supposed* to know. These meetings were supposed to be confidential. But Virginie had let it slip once when they were talking. Very unprofessional. Aisha would have paid to know what they talked about. She couldn't imagine what problems Katarina might have, though she liked to think that her issues were all related to the fact that even she had trouble liking herself.

'Aisha, you came today and I'm glad you did. If you don't want to say anything, if you just want to sit here for a while, that's fine. The important thing for you to remember is that, in this room, there is no judgement, no expectation. There's no rule about what you have to say or do when you're in here. It's completely up to you.'

'That's not true.'

'What isn't?'

'That it's up to me. Nothing's up to me. Everything that happens is beyond my control.'

Virginie nodded. 'I can see why you'd think that. After what's happened to Samir. But we do have some say in what goes on in our lives. A great deal, in fact.'

'You would say that.'

'Why?'

'Because you're an analyst. You have to believe that people have some control over their thoughts and actions. It's the basis of your work.'

'You're very perceptive. That's true. I do have to believe it. And I do. Maybe it's the reason I chose this profession.' Virginie cocked her head and looked at her. Aisha knew that look. It meant the psychologist found her *interesting*. She looked away so she didn't have to meet Virginie's gaze, and let hers wander around the room. How much longer before the session was over? She couldn't risk looking at her watch. Virginie never took her eyes off her. And there was very little to look at in here. It was more of a closet than a room, really. Right now it felt particularly cramped. The walls seemed thin, made of paper. She pictured someone ripping them open, leaning their head in. Next door, the head teacher must be eavesdropping. In her shoes, Aisha would definitely be listening in. Just to escape the boredom of sitting in an office all day, running this school. The walls were bare and the only window looked out onto the fenced area where the school kids spent their free time. There were two basketball hoops, and benches on either side of the quadrangle. Someone had left their jacket on one of them. It would be soaked by the time they got it back. It had warmed up a bit since the morning but the snow was still everywhere. You could see the footprints left by school kids and teachers earlier, and there were areas where the grey surface showed.

All of a sudden she felt really tired. She looked back at Virginie. 'You talked about choice. What choices did I make that affected Samir? What did I choose that makes him dead?' she asked.

'Do you feel responsible for his death?' Virginie responded.

'You're missing the point. I'm saying I had no influence on what happened to him.'

'And I'm trying to tell you that you can influence the shape of your own existence.'

‘Do you think I actually care about that at the moment? The shape of my existence?’

‘What *do* you care about?’

For the first time, the psychologist sounded impatient. Aisha felt a bit bad. She must be getting fed up; this exchange was going nowhere. She took a pen from the notebook where it rested, on her lap, and started playing with it.

‘How is it going at home?’ she asked.

‘How do you think? My Mum’s not coping.’

‘I wouldn’t expect her to be coping. She’s grieving, and that’s only natural.’

‘Your policeman friend. The one from Paris. Is he going to do anything, now that my brother’s dead?’

‘The police here in Villeneuve...’

‘Spare me.’ Aisha stood up. She was never this rude, but she couldn’t help it. Something big was swelling inside her, making her lips move and articulate words that didn’t belong to her. *I have to get out of here, before I say something I’ll really regret*, she thought. ‘Look, I’ve got to go.’

‘Aisha – ‘

‘I’m fine.’

‘Have you got anyone you can talk to?’

She couldn’t help thinking about Luc Clément but of course she didn’t mention him. Virginie would go straight to the head teacher, probably, even though everything that happened in this room was supposed to be confidential. Besides, he wasn’t a friend. A friend was someone your own age. Aisha could see Virginie wasn’t satisfied with the way things had gone, but she stood up anyway. The foxes were caught up in her hair and Aisha pictured her extricating them later, looking in the mirror with that same impatient look she had earlier.

'You have my number,' Virginie said. She sounded a bit desperate. 'Please call me anytime. I mean it. Day or night. If you want to talk.'

'Sure, I'll do that,' Aisha said. If there was one thing she knew, it was that she would never call.

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What a relief it was, to be out of there. It was all she could do to walk and not break into a run on her way to the bus stop. Occasionally, she looked over her shoulder to make sure she was lengthening the distance between herself and that poky little room full of secrets. The things people didn't want to share eventually being dragged out of them. As far as she could tell, it was to do with all the things you didn't like about yourself. When you told your secrets, did it actually make you feel any better?

If someone saw her, they'd think she was being chased. She wanted to get as far away from the school as she could, but it was hard to walk fast. Her feet hurt. If it hadn't been so cold, she would have taken her shoes off. All morning they'd been killing her. The new boots looked good but they were a size too small. Half the original price. That was something at least. She'd bought them and a bottle of black nail varnish with the money she'd earned from babysitting. She'd also bought perfume for her mother, who'd told her it was frivolous to waste money on stuff like that, but later when they'd been getting ready for bed, Aisha had smelled it on her. Aisha and Samir had been together that day. They'd taken the train together, to the nearest suburb that had decent shops. Three stops on the RER, heading towards Paris. She remembered it well because it had been Samir's idea to go out together after lunch on a Saturday, but then when they'd got there he'd said he had something to do and would she mind walking around for a bit on her own until he came back? Of course she'd told him she didn't. He'd disappeared for an hour and returned in a really good mood. Where had he spent that time? Who had he met with? She was beginning to realize there was a lot

she didn't know. And now he was dead she had so many questions. Who would answer them for her?

While she waited for the bus to show up, she undid her laces and loosened them so she could wiggle her toes. Her nose was dripping and she searched her pockets for tissues, but she didn't have any so she had to keep sniffing. It was something Antoine, who was kind of her mother's partner and kind of just a friend, and always around, did constantly when he got a cold, and she had to bite her tongue then not to show how irritating she found it. She sniffed again, and used her sleeves to wipe her eyes. She tried to imagine Samir showing up, frowning at her when he saw her at the bus stop with her shoes undone and her face a mess. How she wished he would show up and she wouldn't care if he was in a bad mood or said something to make her feel bad.

Her phone beeped. It was a message from Eloise, saying that there was no need for her to babysit her daughter tonight; that she should be with her mother and look after herself. And that she was sorry. Everyone was sorry. Aisha wondered who had told Eloise, though it could have been anyone. News travelled fast on the estate. She texted back to say she was happy to babysit. No one seemed to realize that she would much rather be busy than sitting around thinking about what happened to Samir. Thinking about how he'd looked when she'd seen his body, her mother reaching out for her too late to prevent her from seeing. The way her mother had collapsed when she'd realized what she was looking at. They'd stood outside in the cold and her mother had started screaming and the lights had gone on in the tower block so fast, almost as if one person had turned them all on at once. When something bad happened, everyone wanted to know.

Another text came from Eloise. *Honestly, there's no need. Stay with your mother.* They went back and forth like this a couple more times and in the end Aisha gave up, because the whole exchange was going nowhere. She couldn't stop shivering and when she finally caught

sight of the bus she felt a surge of relief. She scrolled down her contacts to find Karim's number, and sent him a message. *Meet me outside the supermarket in an hour.* He didn't send a reply but she knew he would come.

On the bus, she recognised some of the older boys from the estate. They were around Ali's age, and she guessed they didn't have jobs because they tended to hang around the tower blocks during the day, watching people and making smart-ass comments. She knew their faces, but not their names, though one of them was related to someone in her class. They sat at the back of the bus, and one of them had headphones on, though the music was so loud everyone on the bus would be able to hear it. The seats were all taken, so Aisha stood by the door in the middle section and put her own headphones on, mainly to block out the crap that was playing. She hadn't started playing music yet when one of the boys came up and tapped her on the shoulder.

'Can't you see I'm busy?' she snapped, and immediately regretted it. What was she doing? She normally tried to keep a low profile and stay out of trouble. And here she was, being rude to a guy twice her size, while his friends watched.

'What is it?' she said, softening her tone. The bus stopped and more people got on. The boy looked like he wasn't sure what to do or say next. She stared at his face, waiting for him to get angry or at the very least to start telling her to learn some respect.

'We're all really sorry about what happened to your brother,' he said. It sounded practiced. Empty words. She kept her expression soft but inside she felt like spitting in his face. She glanced over at the others. They were all pretending not to notice. She turned back to him. It wasn't his fault if he had to stand there like an idiot pretending he was sorry. She guessed the others had sent him because he was the one with the least courage.

'Thanks.' She was about to pop her headphones back on but he wasn't finished.

'He didn't deserve it. Let's hope they find the sons-of-bitches who did this to him.' He raised his voice as if he wanted to make sure his friends and everyone on the bus would hear, and she felt her face go red. 'Too many of our brothers are getting killed. This shit needs to stop.' She nodded quickly so he would go away and he did, at last, but now people were looking at her as if somehow she was to blame for the boy's stupid comments, and she could see in their minds they'd lumped her in with him, just another troublemaker they hoped would get off the bus really soon. Her eyes darted around the bus, hoping to see one friendly face, and that was when she spotted one of Katarina's friends. She was sitting behind the driver, but she'd turned so she was looking straight at her. An anorexic blonde in skinny jeans and a white puffer jacket with fake fur around the collar. She was smirking and Aisha's heart caught in her throat, because she knew the girl would be on the phone to Katarina the second she got off the bus.

Aisha got off at her stop and checked her phone. Nothing. She tied her laces and started walking towards the supermarket, thinking about what had just happened on the bus. She wished she'd caught a different one, or just walked. She could still see Katarina's friend watching her, that air of mild triumph and impatient excitement. She'd looked like a kid with a story she couldn't wait to share with someone. Aisha told herself she shouldn't care, but what the boy had said was so dumb. She was ashamed for him, ashamed for herself. What *brothers* was he talking about? Where had he learned his lines? In some action movie? On one of the news channels the night before, someone had referred to the Roma boy and Samir as victims of the system. What did that mean? Samir's killer wasn't some abstract concept. It wasn't the system that had killed him, it was a real person, someone evil who had hurt him and left him to die. Just like someone had hurt the Roma boy and ended his life.

As she walked, the snow began to fall, and it grew dark. Other people were on the street. An old woman hurried past her, looking at the sky. Aisha's mother would be waiting

for her. She should probably call and let her know she would be a bit late. Aisha knew her mother wouldn't take it well, would insist she come straight home; but right now she really needed to stay away. The thought of another night at home was unbearable. It was easier when Antoine was around, looking after her mother like he always did, but he'd been acting weird these past days. One minute he was there and the next he was making excuses not to stay, and it was obvious he was lying. Maybe he too was finding it hard to hang around, given the atmosphere. Last night, Aisha had had to listen to her cry for hours. That was what you got for sharing a room with your mother. There was nowhere to go to escape another person's grief, or to give in to your own. At some point, when Aisha thought her mother must have fallen asleep, she'd started talking. She said the two of them would have to move back to Algeria now. That there was no point staying in France.

'What are you talking about? And what would we do there?' Aisha said, horrified.

'There's nothing for us here now. Nothing,' her mother wailed. Well, Aisha thought, there's me, for a start, and maybe I'm not ready yet to be considered dead, to be buried alongside my brother. I know what returning to Algeria means. I've seen a few families do it. As a girl, everything I do, everyone I see would be scrutinized. I want to choose my own future. And even if it's hard here in Villeneuve, it's what I know and where I belong.

Karim was waiting where she'd asked him to. 'Thanks for coming,' she said. They kissed on both cheeks. 'Where to?' he asked.

She had to think. It was privacy she wanted, and suddenly it was clear to her where they needed to go. The wasteland, behind the tower blocks. 'We'll make it quick,' she said.

'You're crazy. No way.' Karim would never admit it but she knew what he was feeling. Since they'd found the Roma kid there, the place freaked him out.

'Yes. It'll be fine. We won't be there for long.'

The wasteland was where people went who had something to hide. It seemed fitting. Aisha didn't want anyone to know what her intentions were. Not now, in any case. She was scared too but she'd try to hide it. And she couldn't stop shaking, but it was only because she wasn't suitably dressed. Karim was wearing his leather jacket that looked warm. He caught her looking at it and after a moment's hesitation took it off and handed it to her.

'Here.'

'No. Keep it.' He shrugged his shoulders and put it back on.

They reached the wasteland quickly, walking fast. There was no one there except the two of them. She dug her hands into her pockets and bounced up and down to try to warm up and to hide the fact that she was nervous. Karim seemed on edge too, but then again he had every reason to be. Samir was dead. Karim was the closest person to him, so maybe he was worried about himself. He kept looking around, as if he thought maybe someone might turn up. His clothes looked brand new and like they would have cost a lot of money. How had he paid for them? Aisha thought she knew. She'd always had some idea of what he and Samir were up to, but she'd never known for sure. Samir had never bought fancy clothes - so what had he done with the money?

She'd always wondered what her brother saw in Karim. It was obvious the two of them got on. She didn't really get it. It wasn't that she didn't like Karim, she just didn't think there was much to him.

Maybe in every friendship there was one person who was stronger than the other. That was just the way things went. One strong, one weak. Just like Samir had been stronger than her. When she looked at Karim, in some ways it was like looking at herself. The part that she despised, that would never stand up for itself. Even now, she could see that both she and Karim felt the same. Helpless. Sad. So sad, it hurt, like that time she'd had the flu and all her joints had ached, and there hadn't been any position she could sit or lie in that would make

her forget the pain. The difference was that she wasn't going to give in to the helplessness. For her brother's sake, she would be brave.

'Let's keep this short,' Aisha said. This was her first time in the wasteland. She'd never had any reason to come here before. She'd never been late going home either, not without calling her mother. So much had changed in a very short time.

She'd brought a notebook and a pen, and when she pulled them out, Karim looked worried.

'What's that for?'

'Taking notes.'

'What fucking notes?' He saw the look on her face and shut up. The fact was that she wanted to write everything down. She wanted to do this properly. And it helped, to be methodical. The feel of the pen in her hand steadied her.

'Question number one. What was Samir doing on the first day he didn't come home?' Karim shook his head. 'What, the two of you weren't together?'

'No.'

'Was he even at school?'

'I wasn't there, but I hear he didn't show up.'

'Why wouldn't he go to school?' It wasn't really a question, she was thinking out loud. 'Was he in trouble? Tell me.'

'Honest to God, I don't know. I'd tell you. I would,' Karim said. But Aisha could tell he was lying. Why else would he look away? She'd have to come back to that, but there were other things she wanted to know. Like, was her brother seeing anyone? A girl?

'Maybe,' Karim said reluctantly.

'You mean yes. Who was it?'

'I don't know,' Karim said, and his face turned red. 'But I think he had someone. He kind of hinted at it, but he didn't want to say.'

'Why not? Why would he keep it secret?'

'How would I know?'

Aisha thought about this. Karim went on.

'Maybe the girl was married or something. Maybe she was cheating on her boyfriend, or on her husband.' Aisha knew about Karim's Dad cheating on his Mum, from something her mother had said once, but she'd never told him she knew. She nodded. Karim had a point.

'Maybe you're right. How are we going to find out who it was, then?'

'Why do you want to know?'

'I want to know everything,' Aisha said fiercely. 'How else are we going to figure it out?'

He looked scared again, and she wanted to kick him. 'What about Ali?' she said, and that seemed to freak him out more. Still, he replied: 'It was Ali who told me about Samir. He said they'd gone and killed him. I don't know what he meant by they. That's what he said.'

Aisha knew Ali. Everyone did.

'What have you and Samir been doing for Ali?' she asked. If Samir were still alive, she would never have asked. She would never have interfered in her brother's business. But he wasn't around to get mad at her. Karim, though, looked like he'd seen a ghost. He shook his head.

'You're going too far. You're going to get me into a shitload of trouble.'

'You promised,' she said, but he just kept shaking his head. She wanted to tell him that now Samir was gone, they needed to be strong. But she quickly realized there wasn't any point, not now. This was as far as he would go for the time being. She needed him to be her

friend. Who else was there that could help her resolve this? Karim had always liked her, probably because of who her brother was.

‘This is what you’ll do,’ she said, even though he was still shaking his head, and refusing to look at her. ‘*Listen*. One: find out who Samir was dating. Two: find out where he was sleeping the night before...’ she swallowed, and stumbled over the next words. ‘Before he died.’

‘And you? What are you going to do?’

She stared at him till he lowered his eyes. ‘Don’t worry about what I’m doing.’ She felt she had to be honest with him. ‘The thing is, Karim. I don’t know yet whether I can trust you. Maybe I can. We’ll just have to see.’

Thirteen

'I don't know about you guys, but I'm thirsty. I could use that drink now. Are we ready to go?' Jean pulled on his leather jacket and wrapped a scarf around his neck. The scarf looked like it had seen better days but the jacket looked pretty good for something that had been worn almost daily for three or so decades. Every scuff mark, every cigarette burn told a story. Morel had heard them all over the years.

'Ready,' he said. He waited for Akil and Vincent to get their jackets. Vincent hesitated.

'I could come with you,' Vincent told Lila for the umpteenth time.

'What for? It's just a swingers' club. I hear single women are always welcomed with open arms. I'll be more popular if I turn up unaccompanied.'

'It could wait,' Morel said. 'You could do this later. At this hour, there'll be no one there anyway.'

'All the same.'

'Suit yourself. Okay, let's go everyone.' He couldn't keep the annoyance out of his voice.

'I might catch up with you later,' Lila called out. But they all knew she had no intention of joining them.

*

Morel was right about one thing. It didn't look like much was happening at the club. It was too early for that. Lila pushed open the door of the first place on her list – the one closest to the river and to the spot where a passing jogger had seen Simic's body in the water and alerted the police. She found herself in a reception area manned by a kid who couldn't have been more than 20 years old. His eyes were glued to an Ipad screen and he barely looked up when she walked in. It was just the two of them.

'Hi,' she began. 'What's your name?'

He looked up from his screen and gaped at her. 'Ludovic.'

'Looks like a quiet night, Ludovic. Is anyone around?'

The boy gave her an uneasy look.

'I haven't seen you here before.'

'No, you haven't. Is the boss in? The manager?'

'She is,' he offered reluctantly.

'In that case I'll go in and find her, if you don't mind.'

Ludovic clearly did mind, but lacked the courage to confront Lila. While he considered his reply, she looked at his screen to see what he was watching. It was an animated film. An astronaut and a cowboy were in a tiny car, chasing a truck.

'Any good?' she asked him, nodding towards his screen.

'I -'

'See you in a little while, Ludovic.'

Before he had a chance to answer, she had turned her back to him and was making for the door that led further in to the club.

'Can I help you?' Before Lila stood a woman squeezed into a black dress two sizes too small for her, with a mass of black hair swept into a chignon and the sort of cleavage that made it hard to look elsewhere. She was no longer young but she clearly devoted a generous amount of time, money and effort to holding back the years.

'This is a private venue,' the woman said. She stood in the doorway, effectively preventing Lila from going any further. Behind her, a woman wearing nothing but a vest was leaning over a pool table, preparing her shot. The sight of her dimpled buttocks was so unexpected that Lila forgot for a moment what she'd meant to say. Over in the far-right corner, a TV screen projected a different sort of movie from the one Ludovic was enjoying out in reception.

'I'm a police officer,' Lila said. 'I want to ask you about one of your members. Gregory Simic. My understanding is he and his wife were regulars here. Gregory may have been here five nights ago. I'd like you to check your records and see if he was. Also, I'll need your name.'

The woman gave Lila a look of intense dislike.

'My name I have no problem giving to you. It's Béatrice de la Motte. But I'm not in the habit of giving out information about our guests. A place like ours wouldn't last very long if I did that, would it?'

'You might find that business slows down a bit once people find out that one of your guests was killed on his way out of here, just last week.' Lila had spoken loud enough for the woman playing pool to hear. There was a crash as she dropped the cue on the ground.

'Killed?' The club's manager seemed genuinely horrified. 'My God.'

'Gregory is dead?' The pool player had come over and she stood before Lila now wearing nothing from the waist down, with an air of utter devastation. 'How?' She started to sob, and the manager drew her close.

'It's okay, Bijou. There now, calm yourself.'

Lila took a closer look at the sobbing woman. She was a softer, plumper version of Valérie Simic. She seemed genuinely distressed. Well, that was easy, Lila thought.

'So you're Bijou. You and Gregory were close, weren't you? I'm sorry.'

'She did this,' Bijou wailed.

'Who did this?'

'His *wife*. It must be. She knew he didn't love her anymore. It was only a matter of time before he left her. She couldn't stand the idea.'

The words were delivered so spitefully, Lila felt a wave of sympathy for Simic's wife. Béatrice de la Motte was making a show of comforting the other woman. There were people arriving, Lila could hear them talking to Ludovic. Glancing at the TV screen, she saw that more

people had joined in that action too. For a moment, she was distracted. What would Akil say if he were here? How would they talk about it later? They would either laugh or get frisky. Or a bit of both.

It only took three seconds to remember that would never happen, and to realize where she was. Not in some fantasy world with Akil, but in this sad venue on her own, doing her job.

‘Bijou. I’ll need you to put some clothes on,’ she said quietly. ‘Then Béatrice here is going to find us a room where we can talk about all this. I’ve got questions for both of you. For a start, Bijou, I’m going to need your real name.’

*

The bar Morel took his team to was a ten-minute walk away. There was a closer one, but it was where you’d find many of the detectives from the Crim’, as the *brigade criminelle* was known, and Morel didn’t want to have to spend his evening trapped in idle chatter with other colleagues. Or worse, with the superintendent, who liked to stop for a drink on his way home and was always on the lookout for company. Most people went out of their way to avoid drinking with Olivier Perrin.

The bar was doing a brisk trade, with a crowd that included locals who seemed to be on a first name basis with the bartenders, and tourists taking a rest from their sightseeing activities. Morel watched a man and a woman at a nearby table scroll through their photos on an Ipad and reflected there must be thousands of the same ones being taken in Paris at any given moment. The Eiffel tower (captured from a distance, from its base, or going up the elevator), Notre Dame, the bridges over the Seine and the Louvre pyramid. And no picture was complete without a pose. You couldn’t walk out without seeing someone taking a photo of themselves, armed with one of those ridiculous selfie sticks people carried with them nowadays. A fitting symbol, it seemed to him, of the narcissistic age they were living in.

'When you're ready,' Jean said, sounding mildly tetchy. 'A few of us are getting seriously parched.' Morel realized he'd been miles away. He ordered and paid for the drinks, and the four of them stood around, waiting for their order. When the drinks came, Morel handed Akil his glass before raising his own.

'Bienvenu dans l'équipe. I'm very pleased you've joined us.'

Bienvenu, the others echoed, and raised their glasses. Akil looked like a child on Christmas morning. *'Merci. I won't disappoint you, I hope.'*

'How long ago is it now, dear Akil, since you first came into our lives?' Jean mused. One drink – the first one generally went down fast - and already he was becoming sentimental. His face was flushed and Morel wondered whether it really was just one drink or whether Jean had sneaked a couple in earlier.

'Two years, right?' Akil replied.

'Two years.' Morel remembered his first encounter with the young Moroccan officer well. A sweltering day in August; a dead woman's flat, not far from where Morel lived. It had been a strange and unsettling case. The sort of case where, even after it was solved, a sense of unease remained. It had taken Morel months to get rid of that feeling, though he wasn't normally one to brood on old investigations. You did your best, you covered all the bases, and then you moved on. The victims had been particularly vulnerable. Elderly, frightened, alone. Akil, a Neuilly police officer at the time, had been the first on the scene of the first murder and soon he'd joined the team in its investigation, impressing Morel with his diligence.

'And now you've bloody done it, joined this ship of fools, and your life is about to get a hell of a lot more complicated,' Jean said.

'Let's drink to that, to complication,' Morel said, and raised his glass again.

Jean and Vincent left the bar after an hour, Vincent promising to drop Jean home ('as long as he doesn't tell me that excruciating story again of how he could have been a musician – I

swear I'll throw him out of the car then, and he can walk home.')

Morel was in no hurry and he stayed with Akil, ordering a cognac for himself and a beer for the young man. The crowd was thinning. The tourists were long gone and the others were heading off for dinner. 'Any dinner plans?' Morel asked. Akil shook his head.

'Let's get something to eat, then. Are you hungry?' Akil started to say something but Morel's phone rang and he stopped, gesturing for Morel to take the call. Morel checked to see who it was. He didn't recognise the number and was about to ignore it, but changed his mind, thinking that maybe it was his younger sister Adèle, who was with their father this evening, calling from the landline at home. Instead, it was Lila's voice he heard.

'You should turn your TV on,' she said. 'They're setting cars alight in Villeneuve.'

'I'm having a drink, with Akil. You should join us. Whose number are you calling from anyway?'

She said something but it was noisy in the bar and he didn't hear what it was. 'You're not still in the office, are you?' he asked, but it seemed she had hung up.

He turned back to the bar and found Akil, who was on his way back from the bathroom. 'Things are heating up in Villeneuve.' He told the younger man what he knew about Samir, and he told him about the incident with Thierry Villot, who had approached him and Lila outside the Villeneuve station following his meeting with Romain Marchal.

'It sounds like you're pretty involved,' Akil said. 'Why?'

'I don't know if they can handle something like this,' Morel said. It was the first time he'd said it out loud and he realized he'd been thinking it ever since he'd first heard about Georghe's death. That, on its own, was serious enough. Samir's murder made things a great deal more complicated.

He ordered another round of drinks for the two of them, then tried Lila's number. The call went straight to voicemail and he left a message asking her to call back. 'It would be good to have you here,' he added.

There was no need for it. It wasn't like there was anything urgent to discuss, either about Simic or about the events in Villeneuve. Nothing that couldn't wait till the next day. But he hoped she would come.

Morel finished his drink and together with Akil they left the bar. They parted ways outside, Morel striding quickly towards the Metro station, thinking about what Lila had told him. He tried to picture it. The burning fires, the wailing of car alarms going off, people from the housing estate out on the cold streets, venting their rage.

Everything he'd feared. It had begun.

BOOK TWO

AISHA

One

No one quite knew when it started or how it went from a handful of bored and unruly teenagers tagging walls to a mob lighting fires across the housing estate and screaming death threats at the police. It was only much later that people started putting the pieces together and making sense of them.

The sequence of events in the early part of the evening, cobbled together with the help of a handful of eye witnesses who were willing to talk, was as follows: sometime after nightfall, around six p.m., six young men aged between 15 and 20 met by the skateboard park at the foot of the tower blocks. It wasn't unusual to see kids there. They messed around in the snow, drank and passed a joint around, but quickly grew bored. It was the wrong night to be out, the coldest in three weeks, but no one felt like going home. One of them suggested walking over to the Roma encampment, and they all agreed, though none of them quite knew what the point of that was.

When they got there, frozen to the bone, they shouted insults and threats, expecting someone would hear them and get mad. But no one came out, or responded, and after a while that became boring too. They headed back the way they'd come, feeling cheated. Setting fire to a brand-new Renault Clio parked outside the tower blocks seemed like a good idea. They smashed a window, doused the interior with lighter fluid, and tossed a match in. Then they lit another joint and passed it around while the Clio burned. The fire set off car alarms along the street and brought residents in the tower blocks to their windows. When, ten minutes later, the owner came bursting out of Tower A, the youths scattered rapidly, laughing as they ran. The leader of the group, easily the swiftest, stood a foot taller than the rest of them. He looked

like someone who spent time lifting weights. He was wearing a grey tracksuit and hoodie and he'd covered his face, though no one had any trouble recognising him. He had the lighter fluid, which seemed to indicate some forethought. The others seemed to look up to him and they followed his instructions. All through the night's events, he remained calm.

The police showed up shortly after 7 p.m. Their numbers grew over the following hours. The evening news at 8.30 showed dozens of protesters facing off against riot officers armed with shields. The youths threw rocks and flares at the officers. They flipped cars and set them alight. They sprayed every wall they could find. The tags were the generic sort. *Fuck the state. Fascist pig.* As the violence spread, faster than anyone could have imagined, the messages became more specific; the language shifted. Sometime around midnight, the words *R.I.P. Samir* appeared along the walls of the first tower block. There was no mention of Georghe, the 12 year-old boy whose body had been found in a shopping trolley in the wasteland behind the tower blocks. Word on the street was that he'd had it coming to him. Samir's name though was on everyone's lips. Shortly after midnight, it became a chant.

The riot police were trained to be disciplined and not to over-react, but many had no experience of the level of anger directed at them here. To withstand the hatred, without charging or retreating, simply to stand their ground, was barely possible. When the first policeman was injured, and fell to his knees, the man standing next to him, a 23 year-old officer who had scored well in all his tests, lost his cool and fired teargas into the mob.

All hell broke loose.

Two

The way she saw it, they were setting the *cit * alight because two people were dead and one of them was Samir. Aisha had no idea why anyone would want to hurt her brother, or that boy Georghe. Some people were saying there was a link between the two. Some were even saying Samir had killed the Roma boy, which was crazy. She wished she could stand up for Samir and tell them all how wrong they were about him. She was useless at this, just as useless as she was at defending herself against Katarina. That crazy girl, at least, had left her alone these past days. Could it be she felt sorry for Aisha? Either that or she was planning something terrible, worse than anything she'd done before. Since her brother's death, Aisha found it hard not to feel paranoid. Over the past few days, Katarina had appeared alongside Samir in her dreams. She and her brother would be talking about something, and often she didn't get what he was saying. It was as if he spoke a foreign language, or he mumbled and she couldn't hear properly. Then Katarina appeared in the background, walking down a street towards them or looking out a window. Spying. Sometimes Aisha didn't see her but she knew Katarina was there. In the dreams, Katarina never spoke, but Aisha sensed she wanted to hurt her. Aisha always woke up before anything happened, but each time it was crystal clear somehow that whatever was going to happen next would be bad. The worst thing about these dreams was that she never knew what was coming.

She took her empty plate to the kitchen – tonight, after meeting with Karim, she'd cooked for herself and for her mother - and finished her glass of water. It was the first time she'd sat down and had a proper meal since Samir's death and she'd made the effort for their mother's sake. But her mother was so far away Aisha didn't think she would notice if her daughter went on a hunger strike. It was lonely at home without Samir or Antoine. She washed the dishes with the radio on, listening to someone telling her about what was

happening right where she lived. The way they described it, Aisha thought they were describing a place on a different planet. There was nothing familiar in the words.

Washing. Drying. Putting things away where they belonged. Glasses, cutlery, plates. Given what was happening in the *cité* tonight, it seemed strange to be carrying out such mundane tasks. Though, going by her mother's reaction, you would have thought this was an ordinary day and nothing unusual was going on. She'd turned the TV on to her favourite soap opera and now sat still as a statue, her eyes trained onto the screen. Aisha had liked it better when the apartment was filled with wailing women. They'd got in the way and insisted on making tea and bringing food, and watching Aisha and her mother eat and drink. Aisha had prayed they would leave the two of them alone to grieve in peace and it had been a relief when, at the end of the second day, her mother had sent them all away. Now Aisha missed the noise.

A part of her wanted to shake her mother, wipe that blank look from her face. Another part was frightened to be anywhere near her. Her lack of responsiveness was chilling. And the apartment didn't feel like home anymore. It was so stifling and she couldn't breathe easily. She needed to get out. Tonight, she was supposed to be at Eloise's babysitting, so she had a good excuse to go. But she couldn't leave Maman like this. Where was Antoine? He should be here. Only then did she realize Antoine would never make it to the tower blocks and to their apartment, not with what was happening in the street.

Aisha crossed into the living-room. Her mother was still staring at the TV screen, her eyes unseeing. Aisha knelt beside her mother and reached for her hand. Stroked it for comfort.

'What pills did you take, Maman?'

'Samir...'

'No, the pills. Where are they?'

'His pills.'

‘Antoine? What did he give you?’ Her mother gave her a helpless look, and Aisha sighed. Antoine had said the medicine would help her relax, but this was too much. Aisha needed her mother back. The one who checked on her and nagged her whenever she thought Aisha wasn’t paying attention. The one who noticed everything.

‘You know, I’ve just thought of something,’ she said. ‘Antoine isn’t going to come, I think. He might find it impossible. Given what’s happening.’

‘What’s happening?’ her mother asked. Aisha turned away. There was no point trying to have a conversation. She dialed Antoine’s number but he wasn’t answering, so she left a message warning him, in case he didn’t already know, that it could be dangerous coming through the estate tonight.

Once she’d finished tidying up, she went to the bedroom and looked out the window at the street below. It was hard to understand what was going on, to make any sense of it. She could hear shouting, and people below were running. She heard the police sirens in the distance, drawing near. They reminded her of the police cars outside the building, after Samir’s body had been found in the bushes. So many flashing lights. Someone’s hand had been on her shoulder the entire time but she had no idea whose. Two or three people had huddled around the place where Samir lay, unnaturally still, while the man who’d found him stood to the side, blubbering like a baby. Too afraid to look again at Samir’s body, too scared to go back to his flat. Some things she remembered so well and others she didn’t, like the person who’d kept their hand on her shoulder the entire time.

It was frightening, what was happening below, but in a strange way it made her feel good too, like the anger she was holding on to was being expressed out there. Maybe Samir was right. If you grew up in a place like Villeneuve, where you knew there was a pretty high chance you wouldn’t get a job when you left school, where it was hard to stay on a straight path and achieve anything, the only way to be heard was to get really pissed off, and loud, and

break things. Otherwise, no one heard. No one was listening. When Samir had said that to her, she hadn't known what he meant, but she understood it now. I don't ever see you do that, she'd told him. Get angry. Lose control. I have my own way of getting back at them, he'd replied. She'd never asked him what he meant. He wouldn't have told her, in any case. She wished her brother were here to see what was happening now. She could tell him that she understood. Torching cars was probably not the best way to start a conversation, but it sure got people's attention. She almost wished she could go down and run in the street too, and release some of the anger inside her, that was making her sick and keeping her awake at night. But she couldn't leave her mother on her own. So instead she sat beside her and put a hand on hers, and tried not to think about how miserable she felt. 'It's alright, Maman,' she said, patting her hand.

Her mother fell asleep. Aisha dozed off like that, holding on to her mother's hand. She was halfway through a strange and complicated dream, when the door opened, jerking her awake. 'Loubna?' It was Antoine, sounding squeaky and breathless. Aisha hurried to the door and raised a finger to her lips. Antoine looked really stressed. There was a hole in his woolen jumper, right in the middle where you couldn't ignore it. For some reason this made her like him more. 'I got your message but I was on my way. I had to come. I couldn't leave you two alone,' he said. 'My God, Aisha. It's hell out there. I think someone's been badly injured.'

'Who?' she asked, while he struggled with the buttons on his coat, his fingers useless, his eyes wide and unfocused, still caught up in what he'd seen. 'Not a resident. A police officer, I think. I mean, I'm sure. He was in uniform. There was an ambulance and they had him on a stretcher. He wasn't moving. My God.' He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his brow.

'Thank you for being here,' Aisha said. It would have taken a lot of courage for Antoine to come. She was so relieved she wanted to hug him. But he would definitely find that strange.

Not that they didn't get on, but hugging wasn't the kind of thing they did. 'She's been sitting on the couch. Just sitting there, and now she's asleep,' Aisha said, and she wondered why she was whispering when they were nowhere near the living-room. Her mother's strange behaviour was rubbing off on her. Antoine gave her a weak smile. 'That's fine, I'll just take a minute here and then I'll go to her. You don't have to worry.'

When they went into the living-room, a few minutes later, Aisha was surprised to find her mother wide awake and standing by the window, looking down. 'Loubna, get away from the window, please,' Antoine told her. Aisha had noticed even he'd started talking to her like she was sick, or a kid. Firmly, patiently. He moved nearer to steer her towards the sofa. 'Let's watch a movie instead. What's happening down there is nothing to do with us.'

Aisha couldn't help herself. 'That isn't true,' she said. 'They're down there because of Samir.'

Antoine stared at her in disbelief. 'Is that what you think? This is just an excuse for violence.' Meanwhile, her mother seemed to have suddenly realized that something was different. She was staring out the window, wringing her hands.

'Inch'Allah, it will all return to normal,' she kept saying.

What sort of normal? That's what Aisha wanted to know.

*

Yasmina reached for her hairbrush and ran it slowly through her hair. Every night, one hundred times. It was a ritual – no, more like a superstition – that comforted her. Always one hundred strokes, that exact number, after her shower, sitting cross-legged on her bed in her pajamas. Always alone, once her daughter was asleep. She took pleasure in this, observing her reflection in the mirror, knowing how desirable she was. Samir had been so transparent. Many times she'd teased him about it, but in truth she'd been flattered. He'd been so passionate, so easy to please. Poor Samir.

There was a loud knock, someone at the door, and she started in surprise. Who else could it be at this time but her brother, coming home? But then why didn't he open the door himself? He had his own key. The knocking grew more insistent and she stopped what she was doing – fifty-seven strokes, she would have to come back and finish what she'd started. She opened the door and took a step back. Swiftly, she adjusted her expression, trying hard not to let her distaste show.

'Réza. What are you doing here?'

He smiled and she raised a hand to her chest. Whenever she saw him, which thankfully wasn't often, he made her feel unclean.

'Your brother home?'

'No. But he will be soon.'

'Then you won't mind if I come in.'

She did mind, but what choice did she have? She opened the door wide and he stepped past her, towards the living-room.

'Can I get you something to drink?' she asked. 'I've prepared some tea, I'll bring you a cup if you like.' It was what she was expected to do, make him comfortable, but mostly she wanted to get away from him. Should she text her brother and tell him Réza was here?

'Is he expecting you?' she asked, when she returned with the tea. Strong, no milk, two sugars. He took the cup from her without replying and looked her up and down.

'I don't need an invitation to visit your brother. What have you been up to, anyway?'

'Working. Looking after my little girl. Nothing much apart from that.'

He sipped his tea. 'That's not what I've been hearing.'

Before she had time to ask what he meant, she heard the key in the front door and the sound of her brother's voice, calling for her.

'Yasmina, I need to talk to you.' Not angry so much as urgent. Quickly, she moved to the hallway. He was taking off his coat. Lately he'd started growing a beard and it gave him a forbidding look. He was strict, but he wasn't a bad person. Whereas Réza, well, that was a different story. 'He's here,' she said in a low voice. 'Who?' 'Réza. Were you expecting him?' Her brother's face changed, became guarded, and then Réza was in the hallway with the brother and sister, stepping into the shadowy space between them.

'Greetings, cousin. Ali sent me. He wants to ask, has your whorish sister told you yet what she's been doing in her spare time, while you're busy earning a living to keep her and her snotty kid fed and clothed?'

*

'Stop. You're hurting me.' Yasmina gripped her brother's hands, tried to get him to release his grip, to prevent him from crushing her skull, which was what it felt like. But it made no difference. He was twice her size. Réza had stepped past them to get into the kitchen, feigning discretion, and come back with a toothpick in his mouth. Her brother's hands moved back and now he was pulling at her hair, so hard she felt like screaming. 'Please, Mehdi.'

'You fucking bitch,' he spat. 'Do you realize what you've done?'

'Let go.'

'You've dishonoured me. You're a whore. Unfit to be a mother.' The pain was unbearable. She started screaming, not caring that Réza was there, not caring if anyone heard. Mehdi clamped his hand against her mouth and shouted at her to shut up.

'Mummy?' Yasmina felt her brother release his hold and she turned quickly to find her daughter staring at her in terror. Before she could reach for the child, Réza appeared in the doorway and pulled her away, before shutting the door in Yasmina's face.

'You're going to let him do that? You're going to leave her in there with him? *Him?*'
Yasmina said, looking at her brother. His face was unrecognizable. She wanted to throw up and when she looked at him, she saw that he felt sick too, but his eyes were also full of hate.

'From now on,' he articulated slowly, as if she were deaf, 'you do exactly as I tell you.'

Three

Eloise looked like she'd seen a ghost.

'I can't believe you came. I told you there was no need.' She looked shaken, and Aisha wondered if that was just because of her turning up or if there was something else that was bothering her. 'You should be with your Mum, Aisha. Especially with everything that's going on.'

'I'd rather be here.' Eloise's hand was still on the door handle. For a moment, Aisha was worried she would send her home. But instead she put her arm around her and guided her inside.

'So I can babysit for you tonight? You've got plans, right?' she said. No matter what, she didn't want to be at home.

'Jesus, Aisha. Have you seen what things are like out there? I definitely don't need a babysitter tonight. But you could just come in for a coffee and cake. How does that sound?'

Aisha wanted to cry. She didn't want food. She wanted Samir. Eloise's voice was so kind. She took a step towards Aisha and gave her a hug.

They moved into the kitchen and that was when Aisha realized there was someone else there. She stared at the girl sitting at the table. She'd never seen her before but her presence triggered something. A memory or a realization, it was hard to tell.

'Yasmina, this is Aisha, who lives in the building and babysits Lola once in a while. Aisha, this is my friend Yasmina.'

Aisha knew it was rude to stare but really, Yasmina looked terrible. There were bruises around her neck and on her arms, and black streaks down her cheeks where her make-up has run. She looked really shaken. Aisha wondered who had done this to her and why.

'Hello,' she said. 'I'm Aisha.' She felt as though she'd interrupted something. A part of her was embarrassed and wanted to leave, but the other was glad to be here, away from the claustrophobic hell of home.

'Sorry, I don't normally look like this,' Yasmina said, attempting a smile. Eloise touched her arm. 'Take a seat, Aisha. Can I get you something to drink?'

'I'm not thirsty. Is Lola asleep?'

'She's asleep. But seriously, Aisha. I'm worried about you. You're not planning to go outside at any point tonight, right? It's not safe.'

'They're out there because of Samir,' Aisha said. Eloise nodded, but Aisha could see she wasn't convinced. Like Antoine, she probably thought this was just the usual trouble-makers looking for an excuse to break things. Aisha got it. There was plenty of that around here. But this felt different.

'I'm going to make tea. Mint tea,' Eloise said, with a pleased look. 'Yasmina taught me how to make it. You've got to try it, Aisha.'

'I've had mint tea before,' Aisha replied, slightly offended. Has Eloise seriously forgotten where her family came from? She may have been here almost her entire life, but that didn't mean she knew nothing about her roots. Eloise looked uncomfortable.

'Of course you have, Aisha. Take a seat. It won't take a minute.'

Aisha complied. Her heart was so full and she wished the two of them were alone so she could unburden herself. She wished so many things. She wished with all her heart she could go back in time and change the course of Samir's destiny.

She became aware that Yasmina was watching her. 'Don't you think you should call the police?' Aisha asked. Yasmina laughed at that, and Aisha blushed. Even with all the bruises she was really pretty and right now Aisha felt about five years old, clumsy and stupid and unattractive.

‘And what good will that do, exactly?’ Yasmina said, looking like she felt sorry for her.

‘I don’t know. But it’s better than doing nothing.’

Aisha braced herself for another laugh but Yasmina was silent and when Aisha looked up she saw the other girl’s expression was sad.

‘I’m sorry about your brother,’ she said, surprising Aisha. How did Yasmina know who she was?

‘Did you know him?’

She nodded, her eyes beseeching, like she wanted to tell Aisha something but couldn’t bring herself to say it. She didn’t need to. Aisha got it.

‘You’re Samir’s girlfriend.’

Yasmina laughed again, and Aisha realized it wasn’t laughter so much as an expression of pain.

‘I guess I am. Was. I probably shouldn’t have. Clearly, I shouldn’t...’ She completely fell apart then and Eloise immediately responded, leaning over to give her a hug. Aisha really didn’t know what to say. She felt like crying too but she didn’t want to do it here. Eloise was telling Yasmina to try and control herself, that things would be okay. You could tell Eloise was a Mum. She was only 25 but she’d always seemed older than her age to Aisha. Eloise finally let go of Yasmina and looked at the two of them.

‘Girls,’ she said. ‘Forget the fucking tea. I’d say what we all really, really need now is a proper drink.’

*

‘Believe me, there’s nothing good about being pretty and having guys notice you,’ Yasmina said. The bottle on the table was their second one. Aisha had only had two glasses but that was a lot for her. This was only the second time in her life she’d had alcohol. If Samir or her mother knew, they’d kill her. Well, in the past at least. Now Samir was gone and her mother

was a zombie, sleeping and staring into space when she was awake. Aisha was feeling sick and so exhausted she had to prop her head up with both hands or she'd have to rest it on the table, close her eyes and go to sleep.

'That's easy for you to say.'

'I'm serious. You have no idea what I have to put up with. If any guy around here sees me walking around and I'm not covered from head to toe, then I'm a slut because it's my fault they like what they see. They tell you to be respectable, have some self-respect. Where's their self-respect? Where's their respect for women?'

'There's no harm in being respectable,' Aisha said, surprising herself. She had no idea where that had come from.

'Well, well. Will you look at that. What a little puritan you are. Are you implying I'm not respectable? And what makes you so superior?'

'You slept with a sixteen year-old boy,' Aisha told her. Yasmina narrowed her eyes.

'You have no business judging me,' she said. Aisha held her gaze.

'You're wrong,' she said. 'I have every right. This is my brother we're talking about.'

Eloise leaned towards them. She was looking thinner and paler than usual, and Aisha felt ashamed suddenly, for the things she was saying in the woman's home. But Eloise didn't look angry, just sad. 'You both cared about him. Please don't fight,' she pleaded.

There was a real commotion below, but no one moved from the table to see what was happening. Aisha sneaked a peek at Yasmina. She was crying a little, but trying not to let it show. Aisha realized she was a bit jealous of her. She'd never known Samir like this girl had. With Aisha, Samir had rarely seemed relaxed, and she knew she'd often got on his nerves.

'It's good you could make him happy,' she told Yasmina grudgingly.

Aisha could feel her relax. The girl wasn't so mad at her now. She laughed a little through her tears. 'Oh Aisha. It wasn't like that at all.'

'What do you mean?'

'It wasn't anything serious. Just a bit of fun, you know?'

Aisha didn't know, but she nodded as if she understood.

'When did you see Samir last?' Aisha asked. 'Was he with you when he, you know, went missing from home?'

Yasmina sniffed and looked at Eloise. 'He came on the morning before he died. To my place. My brother wasn't home.'

'You live with your brother?'

She nodded. 'And my baby girl. It's just the three of us,' she added, before Aisha could ask who the dad was.

'What did Samir say?'

'Not much.' A giggle escaped her, and she quickly stifled it. 'We didn't do much talking. Sorry if that sounds bad, but we didn't.'

'Right.' Aisha considered what to say next. She had so many questions, like how long had Samir stayed? Why hadn't Yasmina asked him how he was? Had he seemed upset? Where had he gone? Why hadn't Yasmina kept him close, instead of letting him go and be on his own, when it wasn't safe?

'It's getting late, don't you think?' Eloise said pointedly. She pretended to yawn. Aisha ignored her.

'So, who did that to you?' she asked Yasmina, pointing at the bruises. The girl pulled a face and shrank away. Aisha was beginning to realize that, even though she was being friendly now, Yasmina didn't really like her much. That was fine, Aisha didn't like her much either. She was pretty but kind of superficial. Aisha wondered how much she'd cared about Samir, and why he'd never mentioned her. But of course she knew the answer to that. It was a

secret, because Yasmina lived with her brother and if he was anything like the other Arab men here on the estate, he wouldn't be happy to hear she was carrying on.

'Was it your brother? Did he beat you?' Aisha asked.

'He didn't mean to.' *Right*, Aisha thought. 'It's true!' Yasmina said, guessing her thoughts. 'He would never do anything like this. But he had to show he was angry.'

'Show who?'

This time Yasmina looked scared, and Aisha felt a bit sorry for her. Her life didn't sound simple either and maybe Aisha was being too hard on her. She felt like a bully, sitting here questioning her when she was looking so rough.

'It's Réza's fault.'

'Réza?' Aisha knew Réza. He was the slimiest person she'd ever met. Aisha wouldn't have asked him for help if she was drowning and he was the last person on earth who could save her. Yasmina nodded.

'Réza came over and told my brother about Samir. Then he waited to see what my brother would do. He had no choice...'

'You don't think he would have beaten you anyway if he knew?' Aisha asked. She couldn't help sounding scornful. Yasmina's eyes flashed with anger.

'I'm really sick of sitting here answering your questions. You think you can judge me? Preach to me? You're like a man, Aisha. Just as bad.' She stood up. 'Sorry, Eloise, I have to go.'

'Go where?' Eloise asked, looking horrified. 'Surely you can't go home now, not after what happened.'

'It'll be okay, don't worry ...' Eloise shot Aisha an angry look, like she was to blame. At the door, Yasmina turned around.

'My brother wouldn't have beaten me if he had a choice. You know how I know? Because he knew about Samir before Réza told him. Before he raised his hand to me, I saw it

on his face. All that time he knew and never said. Never lifted a finger against me until Réza showed up and forced him to act.'

'You're his sister,' Aisha said with disbelief. 'And he beat you up. Shouldn't he be protecting you instead?'

'He was protecting me. From Réza. If he hadn't done anything, Réza would have taken the matter into his own hands and done much worse. Or Ali.'

'Ali? Surely he wouldn't do that. Beat a girl up.'

Yasmina looked Aisha up and down like she was born yesterday. 'My God, you're so naïve. Who do you think is in charge in the cité? The gangs, the dealers. And Ali is up there with the best of them. Do you think he got there by being nice?'

Aisha needed a quiet moment to process what she was saying. Ali was courteous. He'd always treated her well, with respect. She knew he could be dangerous. But she couldn't picture his involvement in this.

More importantly, Yasmina's brother had known, and said nothing. He'd been angry with Yasmina and with Samir. As she returned to the table where Eloise was sitting, pale and reproachful, Aisha tried her best not to let her see how agitated she was. She couldn't figure out why someone would want to kill Samir, but now she knew of one person at least who might have had a motive.

The question was, what could she do with that information?

Four

That night in Villeneuve, no one slept. That, at least, was Alberto's impression. He sat in the dark, in his living room, in a faded pair of pajamas and fleece dressing gown, and watched the fires spread below, as car after car was set alight. From this distance, it almost looked like a festive occasion. Normally, at night, it was quiet and dark in the streets, not many lamplights and no pedestrian traffic to make you feel safe if you did have to walk home. No businesses open for customers. Those had left a long time ago. Now the entire neighbourhood was ablaze with light. He saw the vans pull up and riot police pile out of them with all their gear. Helmets, shields. Flash-balls. He'd attended a few demonstrations in his day but these weapons were new. Despite their gear and their numbers, the police looked hesitant and disorganized, but many of the hooded figures seemed unsure too and at the first sign of confrontation, they scurried away. From up here, they looked like insects. *Cucarachas*, Alberto thought, fleeing across the snow.

Cockroaches, the lot of them. There was no other word for the hoodlums running wild down there. No direction, no objective other than causing havoc and polluting the environment. This wasn't about the gipsy boy. No one was spilling any tears over the poor kid. Was this about Samir then? Or was this a bunch of youngsters letting off steam because they felt they weren't being heard? You want to fight the system, fine, Alberto reflected out loud, pulling his dressing gown closer to his chest. But when you started destroying the property of working people - that was vandalism, pure and simple. He sat and watched and muttered to himself, growing angrier all the while, until he could no longer sit and he started pacing, wondering how long it would go on and whether any of the police were going to do their job and allow the decent people of this neighbourhood - there were still many he could think of, despite everything - a chance to get back to sleep.

He got back into bed and picked up the newspaper he'd bought that morning – he still read what Emilia had referred to as that Communist rag. She hadn't minded that much but he knew she found his attitude to politics sentimental. How often she'd told him. *There's no sense remaining loyal to something simply out of nostalgia, because it's part of your history. Your beliefs have to be relevant now, and it's hard to see how they can be, given how much things have changed.* Alberto disagreed. For him, history was everything. It had made him the man he was now. Now that he thought about it, his party card wasn't the only thing he'd held on to. He still believed in equality, freedom and brotherhood. Why wouldn't he remain loyal to the old ideals? Had anyone come up with anything better since? Fine, he could hear Emilia say. But do something, in that case. Don't just sit there.

He didn't want to dwell on this, or to think about Emilia right now. Instead, he turned his attention to a newspaper article about psychology. Something about how the brain worked. Just the sort of thing to help him get to sleep. But the commotion outside was too distracting and he found himself staring at the words without taking them in. Someone shouted, startling him. He folded the newspaper and went to the window again. The cry had sounded like a warning. As Alberto watched, the mood below appeared to change gradually. The hooded figures seemed less hesitant now. Before Alberto's eyes, they scattered and regrouped, again and again, until suddenly their movement seemed more cohesive and purposeful. Before he knew it, there was a mass of people surging towards the police line, which held fast, even when the mob started hurling things at their raised shields. It was too dark to see what they were throwing. In the light of the flames, Alberto saw the police line shift under the assault. Not as steady as it was before.

Things moved quickly after that. It was impossible to know what happened, but one moment the police line was there and the next it wasn't. It was as if the centre had collapsed, and the sides had lost all sense of what they were supposed to do. Then a cloud of smoke

went up. There were people on their knees on the ground. Shrieks of rage, or fear, he couldn't tell. And where had the smoke come from? More fires? He couldn't see any flames. He felt a powerful urge to be closer, to understand what was happening. Before he knew it, he had grabbed his keys and left the flat. He walked down, shivering all the way. It was cold and the building was strangely quiet. Get back home now, you foolish old man, he heard Emilia say. She was right, of course. Fear gripped his chest. But his feet propelled him forward.

In the lobby, he paused to catch his breath. How foolish indeed he must look, in his old gown and pajamas, with slippers on his naked feet. He shuffled towards the exit and peered outside. Tentatively, he opened the door.

He had no idea what hit him. His eyes filled up and he staggered back, blindly looking for something to hold on to. Next thing he knew, he was on his back, fingers pressing against his eyelids. Tears streamed down his face. The acrid stench was in his nostrils, he could taste it. He couldn't breathe, at least not without pain and effort. Was this it, then? The end? Would this be what it amounted to? A cold, undignified death, flat on his back in the middle of the building's entrance, in his shabby night clothes. What an idiot he was. He heard the sound of smashing glass and a single, high-pitched scream, and there was nothing he could do except lie there like a cripple. Never in his life had he felt such terror, such humiliation.

'What the fuck ...' He didn't know the voice, not at first, but through weeping eyes he saw a figure tower over him. Big. Then a hand gripped his arm and he was pulled to his feet. As if he weighed nothing.

'What are you doing here, old man?' The voice was familiar but he couldn't place it. He found himself shrinking away, afraid. He was still blind, and with every breath his chest heaved so that he wondered how he would manage the next.

'Who are you?' The sound of his own voice shamed him.

'It's Ali. You know. Your neighbour.' *Ali*. The big guy who lived across the hallway from him. Not a kid anymore but he appeared to be a magnet for the younger boys on the estate. Often you'd see a gaggle of them trailing behind him. If you didn't know any better, you might think he was some kind of benevolent uncle. Alberto had seen him once, handing out sweets. He wouldn't have remembered the name if Ali hadn't said it, but his bulk was recognizable. 'So. This is what it's come to. We live next to a drug dealer,' Emilia had said. 'He keeps to himself,' Alberto had replied. 'And that makes it okay?' Emilia had looked at him with something like disappointment in her eyes. 'There was a time you would have said it was important to care, to be involved.' Her words had stung and he'd said something dismissive in return, but she'd been right, of course.

Alone in the empty lobby with Ali, he felt exposed, but relieved too. He remembered that they knew each other, that this man had always been civil to him. For now, this was enough.

'You need help getting back to your place?' Ali asked. Alberto heard him curse, and retch. His eyes had cleared a bit and he saw that Ali's were streaming. 'Yeah, I took a direct hit,' Ali said, half-grinning. He was clearly in pain, but he seemed genuinely to be getting some enjoyment out of it all. It helped Alberto pull himself together. Now all he wanted was to get back to his flat, but first he had to know what was going on. 'Is anyone hurt?' he asked. It was a strange question. As if they knew the same people. But Ali seemed to find it completely normal.

'It's tear gas. That's what's making you feel like you're dying right now. I have no fucking clue what's going on, whether anyone's dead or hurt or what. All I know is there are bodies on the ground. I counted four before they fired that shit. But we've shown them who we are,' he added obscurely.

'Good.' The word left Alberto's lips before he knew what he was saying. It astonished him. Back in his flat, looking down at the street, he had despised the lot of them, in their hooded tops, scarves tied around the lower halves of their faces so no one would recognise them, running amok. Now he was – what – showing solidarity? Ali seemed mildly amused.

'I'm going back to my place,' Alberto said, and without another word he shuffled back up the stairs, moving slowly. He was still shaky and didn't want to trip. He'd embarrassed himself enough.

'Wait.' Ali's voice was urgent. Alberto stopped and turned, noting that his sight had cleared, though not completely. 'Word on the street is that Samir was with you. Before he died.'

'Is that right?'

'Yeah. People are saying, "he was with El Chino". It's what I'm hearing.'

Alberto frowned. 'So?' He leaned against the wall.

'What did he say? Anything?' Alberto studied the younger man's face. He thought about what he'd found in the pocket of his cardigan. A child's tooth. Tiny, and insignificant. But the discovery had given him goosebumps. It sat in his bedside drawer now. He had no clue why he was keeping it or what to do with the information.

'Nothing.'

'I just wondered ...'

'I'm sorry but I really need to get home. I'm not well,' Alberto interrupted. Ali nodded and watched him go. He seemed to know better than to offer to help the older man up the stairs.

In the flat, Alberto made straight for the bathroom. For a long time, he stood over the sink, splashing water in his eyes. His legs were still wobbly. He went to the kitchen with his face still wet and poured himself a much-needed drink. A *pastis*, at three in the morning!

Emilia would have had a fit. Or maybe she'd have joined him, given the circumstances. Two boys were dead. Killed. What was the world coming to? You could say they'd been up to no good. Maybe they had, but they were just kids, with mothers who'd no doubt done their best to raise and protect them. Alberto thought of his own childhood. It hadn't been easy, exactly, but compared to the sort of environment Samir and Georghe had grown up in, the place he'd known at their age was a treat. The most that had ever happened in his village was two boys drinking the sacramental wine when no one was looking. One of the two had thrown up on the altar steps. The villagers had talked about the incident for months afterwards.

When the riot had erupted, earlier in the evening, he'd wanted the police to react, but not like this. This seemed brutal, and unnecessary. He finished his drink and stood for a while, leaning against the counter, wondering what to do. If only Emilia were here, he could think out loud and she would listen and say something sensible in return. With no one to talk to, his thoughts went around in circles.

'How have we let things get this far? And what can I do, after all. I'm an old man, of no use to anyone,' he said out loud, forgetting that she wasn't in the room. It was nearly five when he finally dozed off in the chair. He awoke two hours later, in pain. He was too old to sleep in a chair and not pay the price. Every limb cried out as he rose to his feet and made it to the kitchen. He made the coffee extra strong, and drank the first cup with one hand gripping the windowsill, looking for signs of life below. Hard to believe so much had happened overnight. There was nothing to see. Except for a couple of burnt-out cars that stood out in all the snow. He'd turn the TV on and watch the news. And then he'd go down there to get a better idea of where things stood. He wondered whether it was over now or whether there would be more. A part of him hoped for the latter. As if he too had things to say, things he'd bottled up these past years. He found that the events of the previous night had given him a sense of purpose.

'It's not so different to what we knew, Emilia, when we first joined the Party,' he said, knowing that wasn't quite the truth, but it would do. This was his community now.

He finished his coffee, realizing that, despite his strangely upbeat mood, physically he wasn't feeling so great. His body was aching in a dozen different ways. In his mind, Emilia was looking at him in despair. When will you ever act your age? He heard her say. Never, he answered her with a ghost of a smile. I intend to die a young man.

Five

The sun rose over the gargoyles of Notre-Dame, over the old insomniac feeding pigeons in the park and the homeless woman cloaked in her own filth, who'd managed, miraculously, to survive the night. Two men stepped out of a houseboat, holding hands as they made their way from the quay up to the road, careful not to slip. Snow everywhere, still. On the radio, they were saying this was the most snowfall Paris had seen in sixteen years. They were saying Villeneuve was a zone of devastation this morning and that there was more to come. The local imam had been seen going in to the mayor's office at dawn, and there was talk of a press conference in Paris later today, with the interior minister. Morel watched a woman walking a pair of Alsatians stop to light a cigarette, take a deep drag and look around her as she slowly exhaled. Like her, he took a minute to commune with his city. Even in its wintry strangeness, it remained *his* – a place so familiar that often he took it for granted.

He was feeling better, clear-headed. Earlier, he'd tried to start his treasured red Volvo, but despite his best efforts – cursing and shivering in the dark – the old thing refused to go anywhere this morning. So he'd caught the train. Before going into work, he stopped to pick up the day's papers from the nearest newsagent. Villeneuve had made the front page, and not in a pretty way.

Good, Morel thought. Things would move quickly now that the story was front-page news. Today, he would pay a discreet call on the Villeneuve prosecutor who was overseeing the two murder investigations and inquire, as diplomatically as possible, about the handling of the case. His guess was that, after the night's events, and with the media attention, there would be pressure from local government for the criminal brigade in Paris to take over. He wanted to make sure that meant his team.

Everyone except Lila had arrived. Jean, Vincent and Akil looked as though they'd been waiting for him. He greeted them and took the coffee that Vincent had set aside for him. It was still warm. A large oil heater gave off a fuggy heat and there were puddles on the floor where the others had stepped earlier in snow-encrusted shoes. Jean, still holding his motorbike helmet in one hand, handed a thick manila envelope over to Morel with the other.

'What is it?'

'Someone dropped it off,' Jean said by way of explanation. 'I didn't see who it was, but must be something important for them to come by so early.' Morel opened the envelope and scanned its contents.

'Now this is unexpected,' he said, sitting down.

'What? A love letter from someone special?' Lila said, entering the room. Her dark hair was sprinkled with snow. She tugged her jacket off and unwrapped her scarf. Her face was flushed. 'Everyone's very punctual today.'

'You been running?' Jean asked.

'Managed a few laps at the pool this morning. Why? Do I look funny?'

'Absolutely not,' Jean said. 'I wouldn't dare suggest that. No. Quite the opposite, in fact. Glowing. Healthy.'

'Right.' She threw her jacket on her desk. It slid across hers and ended up on Akil's. He was staring at his screen like what he saw there was fascinating.

'These are notes relating to both autopsies. Georghe's, and Samir's,' Morel said, looking through the documents. Jean gave a low whistle.

'Who sent them?' Lila asked, surprised.

'We don't know,' Jean said. 'Someone dropped it off downstairs. I picked the envelope up on my way in. It had Serge's name on it.'

'More to the point, why did anyone think of sending it to you?' Vincent asked.

‘Thierry Villot?’ Lila wondered. When Jean looked at her blankly, she added, ‘You know, the Villeneuve detective Morel and I talked to in the car park. Villot seemed keen to let us know what was going on, in his own oblique way.’ She took the reports from Morel and started reading through the first one. ‘He seemed uneasy. Maybe there’s something in here...’

‘Are we in charge of this investigation now? When did this happen?’ Jean asked. His hair was plastered to his head from wearing his helmet, his beard in serious need of a trim and his eyes bloodshot, as they often were on a Monday morning. Morel thought that perhaps he was drinking more than usual these days. He seemed to have put a bit of weight on too. As he tugged his dark blue roll-neck jumper off, Morel caught a glimpse of his not-so-trim belly before the t-shirt was back in place. Six weeks ago, when Jean had started wearing that jumper, Lila had taken to calling him Haddock, after the character in the Tintin comics, and the name had stuck, much to his annoyance.

‘Well?’ Jean insisted. Morel smiled. ‘I’ll tell you what. If we end up being in charge, you’ll be the first to know.’ Jean raised his eyes to the ceiling and shook his head. ‘I can see where this is going.’

Morel took his jacket off and hung it carefully on the clothes stand, which they shared. ‘Did you see what happened in Villeneuve last night?’ he told Jean. ‘You know how this works. The press is all over this story. Which means our Villeneuve friends aren’t going to remain in charge of this for too much longer. I want to make sure it’s ours.’

‘How are you going to wangle that?’ Vincent asked.

‘I’ll ask for it. Nicely.’

Vincent raised an eyebrow. Ever since his wife’s death of cancer a couple of years ago, he’d become quieter, more distant, though he remained his good-natured self. Morel knew he was still struggling. He had two young girls to raise, and no one to help him except for his in-laws. In an unguarded moment, he’d told Morel he could no longer stand to be around his

wife's parents. They lived under a dark cloud, enraged still by their daughter's death, as if fate had somehow singled them out. Vincent's own parents were long since dead. He refused to meet anyone new, out of a sense of loyalty to his dead wife and to his daughters. It was two years now since her death. Morel had told himself, on many occasions, that he should take Vincent aside and talk to him about how he was doing.

Now Vincent was placing croissants onto a plate – he was always the one to buy croissants, or a bottle of wine, or remember birthdays - and the plate was being passed around. Everyone took one, except for Jean, who helped himself to two.

'It's going to be an interesting one, that's for sure,' Vincent said with his mouth full. Morel raised a hand.

'It's not ours yet. Let's take a look at these reports first.'

'Why do you want this? You know it's going to be messy,' Lila asked, adding, before Morel could respond, 'actually, don't tell me. I know the answer.'

'It's because it's going to be messy that I think we should handle it.'

'Yep, I knew you'd say that.'

'Are you planning to tell the superintendent?' Akil asked.

'Not yet,' Morel replied. 'No point raising his blood pressure before we know where we stand. Look, the fact is that, with the way it's going, it's going to end up here. I want to know we have some control over what happens next.'

*

Taking the autopsy notes he'd been sent anonymously, Morel retreated to his desk. He picked up the ones on Georghe first. The autopsies had been carried out in a hurry, clearly a matter of priority. The reports had yet to be written up though and Morel wondered who had decided it was urgent for him to see what had been written so far.

Whoever had sent these had taken a big risk. If it was someone at the Villeneuve station – Villot seemed the most likely – then that person stood to lose their job. The pages had been photocopied. Morel tried to picture Villot at the station, furtively using the photocopier after hours. Or else getting the reports out of the office and sneaking them back in once he'd copied them. Under Marchal's nose. It seemed so unlikely. How could he have done it without being caught? And more to the point, what would be his motive for doing this?

Morel spread the crime scene photographs of the dead Roma boy on his desk. It chilled him, to look at them. It was a terrible way for anyone, but particularly a child, to die, alone and frightened. The boy's eyes were closed and his knees raised against his chest. He had his arms wrapped around his body, as if he'd tried to keep warm. A pointless gesture, given the conditions and the extent of the boy's injuries. According to the pathologist who'd performed the autopsy, the boy had died of hypothermia, not because of any injuries he'd sustained. But the damage to his body would have accelerated the freezing process. In a weakened state, a person's chances of survival in sub-zero conditions diminished significantly. 'The cause of death was acute hypothermia, as evidenced by the pattern of erosions across the stomach lining. There was discoloration around the elbow and knee joints, which, taken in conjunction with the state of the stomach lining, seemed disassociated from any bruising sustained during the attack, and which I interpreted as further evidence of cause of death.'

Morel made a few notes and wrote down several questions he hoped he might be able to ask if he had the opportunity to speak with the pathologist, then set the notes aside. He then began reading the one on Samir. Multiple stab wounds to the chest and abdomen had resulted in extensive blood loss and organ failure. The weapon, according to the pathologist's description, could be a kitchen knife, the sort you'd find in most households. Ordinary, and difficult to trace, in Morel's experience. No weapon had been found at the crime scene. Unlike

Georghe, Samir's body had been cold, but not stiff, when they'd found him, which indicated he had not been outside as long as the Roma boy, though it was difficult to provide an estimate. In both sets of notes, there were question marks and the pathologist's frustration was evident. Freezing conditions did not make her job any easier.

Morel looked at the photos of Samir. He thought of the girl he'd met. Aisha, the boy's sister. How much did she know about her brother? What had the boy been doing out in the middle of the night, in freezing temperatures? Where had he been sleeping, and staying? And why? Maybe he'd been running from something. Maybe he knew something about the Roma boy's death. That would explain the fact that the day he'd failed to come home was the same day Georghe had died.

Morel finished reading and rubbed his eyes. He looked up and found Lila hovering impatiently.

'Shall I update you on Simic?'

'Go ahead.'

She told him about her visit to the club and about Bijou. 'She says Valérie Simic plotted to have her husband killed. That he was going to leave her.'

'You think she's telling the truth?'

'It's hard to say. I find it very difficult to picture Valérie doing something like this. She's nothing like the emotional wreck Bijou described. Plus I doubt she'd be capable of it.'

'She didn't need to be, if someone did the dirty work for her.'

'Perhaps.' Lila pointed to the papers on Morel's desk.

'What about these autopsy reports? Who do you think sent them?'

'I don't know.' He stood up. 'I'm going to Villeneuve to have a word with the prosecutor who's involved in the boys' deaths.'

'Now? Want me to tag along?'

‘No. I think it’s best I meet him on my own.’

He buttoned up his coat. ‘But if we end up with this case, I’ll want everyone involved. You, Jean, Akil. Vincent can follow up on Simic. Villeneuve is going to be a lot of work. It has to be a team effort,’ he stressed, with the emphasis on team, and she nodded, her eyes avoiding his.

*

Villeneuve was desolate. Morel drove past a shattered bus stop, shards of glass glinting in the snow; past several burnt-out cars. The fire trucks had been busy. There were things on the street that had been lost, or left in a hurry. A red woollen scarf. Lighters, and a baseball bat. Tear gas canisters, and cans of spray paint, ditched along the walls. A bicycle lay on the side of the road, mangled beyond repair.

He found the courthouse and parked. Outside, the temperature caught him by surprise. The wind was a fine, cold blade, flicking rubbish off the ground. He strode towards the building, his breath a cloudy trail in the wintry air.

Morel had expected more people. He’d expected police, patrolling the streets. An African woman in bright, traditional clothes and a black coat watched him from the courthouse steps, her expression distant. She seemed to be waiting for someone. As Morel drew nearer, her eyes glazed over and she looked right through him, as if he didn’t exist.

The prosecutor’s secretary, thin and unsmiling, greeted him and led him into the man’s office. Like the rest of the building, it was plain, functional. The prosecutor stood up and the two of them shook hands. He gestured for Morel to sit.

‘Come in.’ He seemed preoccupied. ‘I won’t be a minute.’ He was writing something on a piece of paper, slowly, in writing so even and tidy it reminded Morel of *maternelle*, those early years of schooling when you learned to draw letters following a trail of dots. There was

a photo on his desk. Presumably his wife, and two children, who were clones of their father if the photo was anything to go by.

The prosecutor finally looked up from his desk and gave Morel a bloodless smile.

'You can appreciate that we have a lot on our plate, after last night's events.'

'Of course. Last night's events are why I'm here,' Morel said.

The man lowered his glasses to examine him. His voice was reedy and so quiet you had to pay close attention. Morel found himself leaning forward, all ears.

Watching the man's lips, Morel wondered whether the way he spoke, so quietly, was intentional, some kind of power play. Not for the first time, he thought how glad he was that he'd chosen to become a policeman. Of all the *fonctionnaire* positions he could have aspired to, this was the only one he could see himself taking on. And if you kept your head down, you could leave the politics to others, Morel thought, though even as he formulated this in his head he could hear his father's mocking tone. If this isn't politics – you, in this man's office, smiling falsely, requesting favours behind your superintendent's back – then what the hell is it?

Now the prosecutor was speaking. 'I'm not sure this is very ethical – you turning up here, requesting a case be transferred out of what appears to be personal interest,' the man said. His lips were chapped and he pulled, unconsciously, at his lower one, where the skin was peeling off. His hair was prematurely white and he had a semblance of a moustache, a wispy, uneven hedge that looked like it had grown as much as it ever would.

'It has nothing to do with personal interest,' Morel said. 'Two young boys have died in the space of 48 hours. In an area, where already there is a history of social and racial conflict. The media are having a field day...'

'I'm fully aware of the situation, Commandant Morel. I don't need a lecture from you.'

'My apologies.'

The man continued to tug at his lip. 'You say it isn't personal, but my understanding is that you knew Samir's family even before his body was found.'

Morel froze. *Marchal*, he thought. Marchal, who was in charge of the investigation, must have told the prosecutor about Morel. Well, Morel fumed inwardly, maybe in turn he could tell the prosecutor that Marchal had pretended not to know Samir, when all the while he'd known him well, having 'hauled' him in for questioning on a number of occasions. But it wasn't the right time. *If I get this case, the first thing I'll do is bring Marchal in to the Quai des Orfèvres. See how he likes being summoned.*

He gave the prosecutor a mildly enquiring look, all the while wondering what Marchal's report had said about him exactly. About his involvement with Samir's family. It seemed to him that Marchal had been thinking ahead, covering his bases, making sure the case would remain with him.

The prosecutor was waiting for him to speak. Morel chose his words carefully. 'Sir,' he said, 'I have a very loose connection with the family. To say I know them well would be stretching the truth. The situation is this: I have a friend who has been counseling the victim's sister for some time. I met the family once at her request, when the boy went missing. That's the extent of the connection. My main – my only concern is that the investigation be carefully handled. With your help.'

'I know why you're here Morel, I don't need you to paint me a picture. I'll give it some serious thought, and when I've made my decision, I'll let the relevant people know. I'm sure you're resourceful enough to learn the outcome without my having to inform you. Am I right in assuming you know the way these things work?'

'I think so,' Morel said, resisting the urge to react to the man's sarcasm. 'When do you think -?'

'When I'm ready. This is not something as straightforward as choosing the right tie to wear.'

Morel felt like saying that making the right choice could be tricky when it came to ties, but knew better than to be flippant. 'Of course.'

It seemed the meeting was over. Morel stood up, while the prosecutor remained seated.

'Goodbye, Commandant.'

'Monsieur le Procureur, thank you for your time.'

*

Back in his car, Morel called the Villeneuve police station and asked to speak with Thierry Villot. But the receptionist who answered the call told Morel that Villot had called in sick. Morel considered whether to pay him a home visit, but decided it could wait until he knew whether the case was his.

It was time to get back to Paris. He had a date with Mathilde.

Mathilde was early. There was no one else at the school gates apart from her and a couple of mothers whose faces she knew, but whose names escaped her. It was a bad habit, to repeatedly forget people's names. They always seemed to remember hers.

She looked at her watch. She and Serge had agreed to meet not far from here, in a café they both knew, though it wasn't one they had ever been to together, in the years they'd dated.

She took a book out of her bag and tried to read. Karim Miské's *Arab Jazz*. Crime novels were all she read. She had no time for the sort of pretentious books her friend Odile tried to get her to read, books full of wordplay and pseudo-intellectual musings on life. This book was great, but she was only reading now to avoid having to engage with the other mothers. They were arriving in twos and threes, and the conversations started, in polished tones, the women impeccably dressed – matching Agnès B. cardigans and perfectly highlighted hair. Mathilde stared at a page and tried not to roll her eyes. When they weren't exchanging notes on ski resorts – Mégève, Courchevel – the women were comparing their children's accomplishments, in ways that suggested it was their own that had got their children there.

Mathilde, you are a complete snob and you judge people too quickly, she chided herself. Not too convincingly. She was fine with being a snob, in her own way, just as these women were too. But she could only blame herself for not having friends here at the *lycée*. The only people who seemed to tolerate her were her colleagues and Javier. And Emilio too, but you couldn't count your own son. Children loved you no matter what.

And yet, she felt she had tried to be involved with the other mothers. Until it had become intolerable. She didn't belong, she got easily bored and it showed.

At first, there had been invitations to dinner. She and Javier had gone, and done their best to be pleasant. As the evenings wore on, and it became increasingly obvious to them just how little they had in common with their hosts, and with the other guests, they had found themselves drinking a little too much and saying the wrong things. Occasionally, they were invited again, but never more than twice. Never mind. Mathilde couldn't stand it. The ostentatious display of wealth, the insular attitudes she encountered in this wealthy *arrondissement*. Most of the children were prats. Not her Emilio, though.

The sky was clear, the trees brooding and spectacular in their winter coats. Mathilde wore a russet-coloured turtleneck, and sunglasses against the glare. She hadn't wanted to dress up for Serge, though she had taken care with her hair. It was hard to remember Serge and not remember the way he had buried his head in it, gripped it with his hands, nearly – but not quite - hurting her. Sometimes, pain and pleasure were two sides of the same coin. He had known her limits, always. Her hair was still as long as ever, though nowadays she tended to tie it back. In the mirror, she could not yet detect any white strands. A small act of vanity, this examination of herself. Generally, she wasn't the self-indulgent type. Serge had asked her once, long ago, whether her running was a punishment. For what? She'd asked. What on earth do I have to punish myself for? But there was something in it. She didn't really care to figure it out.

The bell rang, and moments later the doors opened and the kids came tumbling out, all talking at once in high, urgent voices. When she saw Emilio's gangly form, the way he slipped on his duffle coat as his eyes sought her out, she felt a wave of love so fierce she had to contain it, mask it with an attempt at humour which made him roll his eyes and scratch awkwardly at his hair where it curled at the base of his neck, something he'd started doing shortly after his 12th birthday. He had his father's dark curls and complexion, his mother's bony frame and unblinking blue gaze.

'You know I could just as easily take the metro home on Wednesdays. I take it every other day of the week,' he said.

'I know. It's one day a week. Let me do it.' They walked away from the school and headed towards the café. Emilio remained silent. 'Everything ok?' she said lightly. Pretending not to notice his preoccupied look.

She had never cared what others might think of her. The tight, insular group standing by the school gate. But now there was Emilio, and seeing him trying to find his place, looking to these boys who were not deserving of his affections, she realized how fragile she had become. With Emilio, she was exposed, susceptible to every slight. She suffered for him and with him. Every letdown, every disappointment became hers as well.

'Where are we going?' he asked, ignoring her question. 'This isn't the way home.'

'We're just catching up with an old friend of mine. One coffee, and then we'll go home.'

'What's his name?'

'Serge. Serge Morel. He's a policeman.' Emilio glanced at her. He was taller than her now. 'You've never mentioned him before.'

'I didn't see any need to. He's a friend from a very long time ago.'

'Why do I need to be there?' Emilio complained. 'Why can't I just go home and see you there?'

'I want to spend this time with you too,' she answered. She did always treasure their time together. But in this particular instance, she knew her answer wasn't the truth.

*

Within minutes of sitting down, she began peeling layers off. The padded jacket, the russet coloured jumper, and the red scarf, bought from Promod the day before on her lunch break, because the wind had been cutting. Initially, she resisted the urge to tie her hair up, knowing he preferred it loose. But then, her vanity irritated her, and she pulled it back into a knot. No

makeup, no tricks. She was a married woman, for Christ's sake. And she hadn't spent these past twenty years pining for him, so why play these games now?

She sat with her back to the door, making Emilio tell her about his day though he was uncommunicative, preferring to play with his phone. She knew Serge had arrived from the way her son suddenly looked up, with a flicker of interest, before she felt a hand on her shoulder. When she stood up, the table moved and some of her coffee spilled into her saucer.

'I'll get you another one,' he said.

'Don't be silly.' She sounded abrupt. 'There's no need for that.'

He looked older. It was just a couple of years since she had seen him last, when she'd driven to his home one night to tell him she wanted to be left alone. He had been following her, watching her come and go, like some creep. Who would have thought he was capable of that sort of behaviour? She'd stormed in to his kitchen from the pouring rain and all she remembered now was the look of dismay on his face.

She stole another look at him. Older, but also the same. So familiar, like someone she might have caught up with every other day for the past twenty years.

'I won't be able to stay long,' he said.

'That's absolutely fine,' she said, rushing her words. 'We have to go in a minute as well.'

'What for? We've got nothing on.' This from Emilio, who only a moment ago had complained he wanted to be home. He had an uncanny gift for knowing exactly what would embarrass her. She shot him a furious look.

'This is Emilio, my son.'

'So you're a policeman?' The boy sounded skeptical.

'A detective. With the criminal brigade.'

Emilio nodded slowly. 'Cool.'

Serge ordered two coffees, one for himself and another for her, despite her protests, and then sat so that he was facing her. She was glad then that she had brought her son. Because she could see, immediately, that she and Serge could not easily manage a conversation.

'Your parents are well?' he asked, and leaned forward as if the answer really mattered to him. She could see now that some things had changed. The expression in his eyes, for one. It was prudent, as though he were assessing the situation.

They stumbled their way over a range of neutral topics – her family and his, their work, the way things were going now that Sarkozy was gone and Hollande was prime minister.

'You've been following the events in Villeneuve? Those poor boys. It's dreadfully sad.'

'I'm worried things will spin out of control,' Morel said. He told her about the investigation, that it might end up with him.

'That's a heavy load,' she said. 'Are you sure you want it?'

'I don't want it messed up.'

'You're the best man for the job, is that it?' she said, with a quick laugh.

Emilio had been listening, looking bored. His phone rang and when he saw who it was, he blushed slightly and hurried away from the table.

'A girl, presumably,' Morel said. Mathilde followed his gaze to where her son stood, outside the café, shuffling his feet and grinning.

'It looks that way, doesn't it?' she said.

When she turned back to Serge he was smiling at her, in a way that was – what? Apologetic? Happy? It was a smile she recognised. And in that moment, it was as if the past two decades had never happened. Before she knew it, she had reached for his hand. She felt him grasp hers, his eyes never leaving her face.

'It's good to see you, Serge.'

*

The phone rang while he was on the train. It was the prosecutor in Villeneuve, informing him that the dossier was being transferred.

'You should be hearing from your superintendent this afternoon but I thought I would let you know personally.'

'Thank you, I really appreciate it,' Morel said, surprised.

'I don't need to tell you, do I, just how delicate the situation is here. I expect to be closely involved. As closely as if we were working in the same building. On the same floor. I don't ever want to have to find something out about the case from a third party, something that you've withheld. I hope I've made myself clear.'

'You have my word, Monsieur le Procureur.' Morel hesitated. The other man seemed to want to say something more.

'You know, Commandant, I knew your father well when he worked at the Quai D'Orsay.'

'I didn't realize that. You didn't mention it when we met.'

'I didn't want you to assume it would get you anywhere. I'm not in the habit of handing out favours. But I thought I'd mention it now. He and I shared similar taste in music. How is he these days? I trust he's enjoying his retirement?'

'He is.' There was no point talking about his father's illness.

'I had a great deal of respect for him,' the prosecutor mused. 'He was a man of integrity. And I guess that had some influence on my decision today. I feel I'm a good judge of character and I see some of your father in you.'

‘Thank you,’ Morel replied, thinking, *he’s wrong, I am nothing like my father*. Did his father have integrity? Yes, he probably did. But you could have integrity without empathy. You could still be emotionally inept.

Morel walked quickly from the Metro station to his building, enjoying the sun on his face and the memory of Mathilde, her bright, restless presence. It had felt normal, sitting with her. And that was a better feeling than the one that had, some time back, threatened to consume him. He felt happy, until he ran into Perrin at the top of the stairs. The superintendent was on his way down.

‘Were you looking for me?’ Morel asked.

‘Yes. I need a word.’ Perrin looked flushed, a sure sign that he was annoyed. He gestured towards the stairs. Morel followed him one floor down, to his office. ‘You’ve seen what’s happening in Villeneuve?’ Perrin said, gesturing for Morel to take a seat.

‘I have.’

‘I had a call, ten minutes ago.’ Morel kept a straight face. Perrin eyed him suspiciously. ‘Can you guess what it was about?’

‘I can’t, sorry.’

‘It was the prosecutor in Villeneuve. Sounds like the case is being handed over.’

‘To whom?’

Perrin pointed at him. ‘Us. He specifically requested that you be involved. Said he’d heard good things about your team.’

The boss sat back and crossed his legs. He looked at Morel like he was wishing he could get into his head and sift through its contents. ‘Tell me. Did you know about this?’

Morel did his best to look astonished. ‘I’m as surprised as you are.’

Perrin sighed. ‘Jesus, what a mess they’ve handed over to us. A big, runny one. They’re saying on the radio that they expect more of the same tonight. It seems that people will be

coming in from some of the other *banlieues*. As a gesture of *solidarity*.' His voice dripped with sarcasm.

'Solidarity,' he repeated, in case Morel hadn't heard him properly.

When Morel didn't say anything, Perrin waved a hand at him.

'Go on, then. You've got plenty to get on with.'

Seven

Once the imam had taken his leave – the mayor stood by her office window and watched him go, impeccably turned out in his white robe and long grey coat - she unplugged her landline, turned her mobile phone to silent, and locked her door. For a minute or two, she stood on the other side of it, breathing deeply and trying not to give in to panic. A part of her wanted to flee. She'd been up during most of the night. Now it was a quarter to six and she hadn't even had a coffee yet. There was none in the kitchen, and she made a mental note to find out who was responsible. At this very minute, she would have sold one of her children in exchange for a double espresso.

The night before, she'd decided to stay late at work and watched things fall apart on the TV screen in her office, in the company of her press attaché, a former journalist whose left-wing politics she'd decided to tolerate when he'd applied for the position years earlier, because he really was good at his job. They got on surprisingly well, both knowing what they wanted and understanding that they could serve each other well. Roland had stayed with her into the early hours of the morning and she'd been grateful for that. He'd remained level-headed while she wondered how the hell they would deal with the situation. By the time she'd thought about going home it seemed like it was too late. Neither she nor Roland fancied driving through Villeneuve on a night like this. She'd taken a nap on a sofa (Roland presumably had found somewhere else in the building to crash), and been woken up at four by a call from the chief of police, telling her that the rioters had finally dispersed and it was over for now. But there were casualties. A police officer had been critically injured in the night's clashes. He'd been knifed and the doctors were saying that the attack had damaged his spine.

'How bad is it?' she asked.

‘We don’t know yet. But it’s not looking good.’

It was possible he would not be able to walk again.

I’ll be in touch again as soon as I have more news, Madame le Maire. She’d struggled to sound composed. Please do call again as soon as you have more information, she’d replied, feeling something close to despair. Why, apart from Roland, was there no one in the office yet, she’d wondered? Surely one of her staff had to come soon who she could send out again to buy some coffee. Useless, the lot of them. In the meantime, she was left with the grueling task of having to call the man’s wife and tell her how sorry she was. He was a Villeneuve officer, not turned 30 yet. He and his wife were expecting their first child. She should probably also visit the man in hospital, but thankfully that would have to wait a little. Other things required her attention first.

‘Is someone going to be with this woman? The officer’s wife? I’m presuming she has relatives.’ The police chief had assured the mayor that yes, she did. The wife’s parents were with her now.

Such tragedy if the man were really paralysed. By then her assistant had arrived in the office and was beginning to take her jacket off but the mayor gestured for her not to. With the phone against her ear, she scribbled on a piece of paper, *coffee’s run out, please could you get some, thanks*, sending her on her way. While she waited for her to get back, she had to take an infuriating call from the Interior Minister, asking her what she was doing to make sure the ‘hooligans’ – his words – would not ‘carry on’ again tonight. It isn’t in my power to prevent them from protesting, she’d said. There’s a lot of anger and emotion out there. He’d been unmoved. He had no clue, no clue at all. And now he wanted an extensive briefing from her on the night’s events before his afternoon press conference. ‘Right now I want you to sit tight, see what happens over the next twelve hours. I don’t want you out there making any grand statements.’

'Grand statements?' she asked, truly puzzled.

'This is a social issue, not a political one. The last thing I need is for someone to start talking about Muslims being at war against the state and some such bollocks.'

'And that someone would be me?' she couldn't resist saying.

She yawned loudly and tasted bile. God, she felt like shit. She turned from the door and went to the sofa. Kicked off her shoes, lay back and closed her eyes. That bloody imam, she thought. Where had he learned to speak French like that? He'd made her feel inept.

*

The prosecutor was carefully unwrapping his lunch, wondering what his wife had prepared this time, when the phone rang. He answered straight away.

'I thought it might be you,' he said in a not-altogether-friendly tone, looking at his watch. It was mid-afternoon but it felt like evening. He'd got home late the night before and managed just a few hours' sleep. And today would be just as bad. He felt a surge of irritation, which he did his best to conceal.

'I'm not catching you at a bad time am I?' the mayor asked. 'I know you must have your hands full too.'

'It's fine, I'm happy to talk,' he lied. 'I should have called you earlier.'

'It's been so hectic. But we do need to touch base.'

'Of course.'

'Did you know we've got one police officer in hospital? Spinal injury.'

'I heard.'

'So you know how bad it is. That he might not walk again.'

'I know.' The prosecutor sat down. He stared at his sandwich. His appetite was gone. Given the circumstances, he guessed it would be near impossible to find witnesses, let alone

suspects in the attack against the policeman. Wonderful. As if there wasn't enough pressure on him already, with the deaths of the two boys.

'What with all the commotion last night, I imagine that finding the guy who stabbed him is going to be like trying to find the Holy Grail,' the mayor was saying.

'It's not going to be easy,' the prosecutor said, thinking that had to be the understatement of the year. 'I know we took a dozen guys in last night. Held on to a few. Released them too in the end. Unless we've got evidence, witnesses...'

'What a nightmare.' She sighed loudly. 'Just a minute.' He heard someone in the background, talking to her. Her reply was an impatient murmur. After a while, she came back on the line. 'Are you still there? Fuck, sometimes I hate this job.'

He didn't respond to that, knowing that most of the time she thrived on her job and the power that went along with it. So maybe at the moment she wasn't feeling so confident. But that would pass.

'I had the imam in here at the crack of dawn. Half past six and he breezes in, fresh as a daisy. Luckily I was at my desk. Don't want him to think we're not taking this seriously. He was looking rather smug, I have to say. Didn't go so far as to say "I told you so" but it was written all over his face.'

'If he can have a positive influence on Villeneuve's Muslim community, help calm things down, then I say it's well worth your while to build a rapport,' the prosecutor said, knowing he sounded pompous. 'So what's next?' he asked, wanting this conversation to end so he could get on with his day.

'What do you mean? We've got CRS reinforcements. We've probably got more cops in Villeneuve today than in the entire Ile-de-Seine department. Our officers aren't going to take any crap, not after what happened to their colleague. Not that we want them to misbehave.'

'I'm not talking about the police. I'm talking about containment.'

‘What is it you’re worried about, exactly?’ she asked testily.

‘My priority is to make sure the cases are solved as quickly as possible. The sooner they are, the sooner we can deal with the riots. And deal with the media.’ He paused. ‘I had a visit from Commandant Serge Morel earlier today.’

‘Did you say Morel? Someone called Morel left a message at my office,’ she said. ‘Who is he and what does he want?’

‘Senior cop at the criminal brigade. I knew his father. But I’d heard about him. Did some digging up as well. Impressive record, from what I gather. He asked to take over the investigation.’

‘He actually asked for it?’

‘Not in so many words. Well...more or less. Yes. He was being coy about it but it was pretty obvious.’

‘And?’

‘And I think it’s probably a good idea to let Paris handle this. I’m not entirely comfortable with the people in charge now.’

‘Why? Something I should know about?’

He chose his words carefully. ‘Nothing in particular. But it can’t hurt to have some distance,’ he said vaguely. ‘Someone who isn’t compromised.’

‘Compromised?’

‘That’s the wrong word,’ he said hurriedly. ‘It’s not what I meant. I meant, someone who has no history with the *cit *. Someone who isn’t going to get people’s backs up the minute they start asking questions.’

‘I doubt a Parisian cop is going to be popular. And surely the local police will know who to talk to better than someone who doesn’t live around here.’

‘That’s part of the problem I guess. Look, it’s complicated,’ he said before she could ask more questions he didn’t feel like answering. ‘For your sake, I’d say this is a better thing. This way if things go wrong you can blame Paris. It’s out of your hands to some extent.’

‘Shall I meet with him then? This Morel?’ she said, and he realized that she hadn’t been paying attention. She was too busy thinking about what she should do next. It dawned on him that this was why she had called, to get his advice. That gave him some satisfaction.

‘I think you should. Today if you can. The sooner Paris takes over the investigation, the better in my view.’

‘You’re right,’ she said wearily. ‘This is too big for us to handle on our own. We’ll have enough on our hands as it is. How is everything else with you?’

‘Why are you asking?’ The two of them had had an affair and the prosecutor now felt it had been a big mistake. ‘Look, I’ve got to go,’ he said. Now she had admitted to being vulnerable, he felt inclined to be dismissive. ‘I’ll see you soon no doubt. Save the small talk for then.’

Once he’d hung up, he dialed another number on his phone. The person he was calling answered straight away.

‘Marchal? We need to talk. Can you come by the office, say in an hour’s time?’

*

They started knocking on doors at 3.30 p.m. while it was still light. Morel, Lila, Jean and Akil. But they weren’t alone. There were police patrols in the *cité* now, making themselves visible, keeping an eye out for projectiles from the tower blocks and trying their best not to look worried. Marchal had also sent four of his men as personal escorts to Morel’s team, on his own initiative. Morel had found the gesture presumptuous, and thought about sending them away, but given the events of the previous night, he felt perhaps it wasn’t a bad idea to have

some back-up. They were big, burly men, who joked among themselves and seemed disinclined to get to know their Parisian colleagues.

“I don’t know that these four meatheads are going to make much of a difference if we run into trouble on the estate,” Jean said.

Earlier, they’d sat down together in the office to figure out how they would proceed.

“We’ll start with Tower A, where Samir lived,” Morel told them. “Lila, you’re with me. Jean, Akil, you stay together. I want to stick to the specifics, keep things moving so we don’t waste time. Remember we want to be out of there before things heat up. If they heat up. So. Let’s focus on Samir for now.”

Lila’s head shot up. “Why? What about the other kid?”

“Because I think we can’t do everything at once, not effectively, and I also think Samir is the key. My feeling is that the more we find out about Samir, the more we’ll know about Georghe.”

“What if there’s no link?”

“Then there’s no link. Look,” he said, making an effort to be patient even though he felt their time was short, and he wanted to get going, “what happened last night, the rioting on the estate, happened because Samir was killed. I have no favourites. I want to solve both murders. But we’re not going to get very far if the *cité* is under siege. So let’s take things one step at a time. Let’s find Samir’s killer. Get things under control. We won’t forget Georghe. Okay?”

Lila nodded, and Morel turned to the others. “So. Questions for the residents. Did they know Samir, did they know his family, when was the last time they saw him, any idea why someone might have wanted to hurt him. Did anyone notice anything unusual over the past days and weeks?”

“Serge. Where do I fit in in all of this,” Vincent asked.

'I'll get to that in a minute,' Morel said. 'Lila and I will work our way up, from the first floor; We'll talk to the man who found Samir's body. We'll drop in on Samir's family too. Jean, Akil, you start at the top and work your way down, and hopefully we manage to make some headway over the next couple of hours.'

'You're sure you want to do this now? You don't want to wait until things are a bit calmer over there?' Jean asked.

'I've thought about it. But I'm concerned that if we wait we might lose crucial information. You know how it is. The sooner, the better. People's memories fade, as we all know. Details are forgotten. I don't want to wait.'

'Marchal would have spoken to most of the residents when he was still in charge?' Akil asked. 'Have you got his notes?'

Morel nodded. 'I have the notes. I know it's tedious but I want to hear it first-hand. Remember too that Marchal lied. The first time I met him, he acted like he didn't know Samir. I intend to find out why.'

'You're going to bring him in for questioning?' Jean asked.

'I've certainly got some questions for him. I want to know what he's hiding. I want to talk to Thierry Villot, away from the station. Find out if he sent us those autopsy notes. And why he was so keen to talk to Lila and me that day in the car park. Jean, I want you to get the full reports on the two bodies. See if you can get Marchal on the phone tonight. We also need to establish whether there is a drug connection and maybe the report on Samir will give us something. I also want to talk to Antoine Carrère, the man who seems to spend a lot of time with Aisha and Loubna Kateb. The teachers at school, Samir's friend Karim, the Spaniard who saw him two nights before he was killed. The one the boy stayed with.'

'Sounds like we need three teams working together, not one.' Lila raised a finger. 'Just coming back to those tower blocks. There are four of them. Are we going to talk to *everyone*? How long is that going to take?'

'My guess is no one will want to say much and we'll be done in a couple of hours,' Jean commented.

'Like I said. Let's focus for now on the building where Samir lived,' Morel responded.

Morel turned to Vincent, who sat very still, looking out the window. 'Vincent. I need you to follow up on Simic. I'd like you to go back to Valérie Simic with what Lila got at the club. See how she reacts. It would be a good idea to find out more about this woman Bijou. Who she is, whether there's a boyfriend or husband, and anything else that might help us. Let's find out if she's telling the truth. Can you do that? I'm keen to close this one quickly if we can.'

Vincent looked put out. 'Okay. But wouldn't it be best for Lila to do that? Given she's already met with Valérie.'

'I'd like you to do it,' Morel said. He stood up and grabbed his coat.

'We need to go.'

Eight

Aisha opened the door quietly in case her mother was asleep. No doubt Antoine would be awake, waiting for her to come home, making sure she was okay. That was the sort of thing he did. She'd promised him she wouldn't leave the building tonight but he'd still looked worried when she'd left.

The door was unlocked, which was unusual, and she could hear voices. Not Antoine's. Someone else.

'Aisha.' In the narrow hallway, he looked big, his shadow huge on the wall, blocking out the light. Her first thought was that she was glad there was someone else there, aside from Antoine and her mother. Her second thought was that something must have happened.

'Commandant Morel, right?' she said, remembering her manners. Antoine was in the hallway, holding a tea towel and smiling tensely. Aisha started to feel sick. Why were they here? Had something happened to her mother? She started to move down the hallway, looking for her. Commandant Morel seemed to read her mind.

'Don't worry, she's fine. She's asleep.'

Aisha stopped. What an idiot she was. Of course, they must be here because of Samir.

'Is there some news? Did they find out who killed him?'

'Not yet, I'm afraid. The main reason I'm here is to let you know I've taken over the investigation.'

From the kitchen, a woman stepped into the hallway. She had long dark hair tied into a ponytail. Her eyes were bright and curious and trained on Aisha.

'This is my colleague, Lila Markov,' the commandant said. The woman nodded once but didn't move.

'Do you mind if we sit down?' Morel asked Antoine.

'Please. Can we get you something? Coffee, tea? Aisha's mother is resting but I'll get her if you like.'

'There's no need to trouble her right now. And yes, a coffee would be nice. Thank you.'

'Why don't I give you a hand?' Lila suggested. She followed Antoine into the kitchen, leaving Morel with Aisha.

'Is that your partner?' Aisha asked.

'She's part of my team, yes.' Morel remained standing, sensing that Aisha felt more at ease that way. 'How have you been? I hope you're staying safe, with everything that's happening out there at the moment.'

'I am. Are you any closer to finding who did this to Samir? And to that other boy?'

'I'm doing my best.' Morel walked over to the wall with the postcards he'd thought might be from Algeria. With his back to Aisha, he said, 'I really will do everything I can. But if you think you can help me, if there is anything *you* know that you think would be good for *me* to know, then please -' He turned back to face her, and smiled. 'Please share it with me.'

'I will,' she said, and she meant it. She sat down, and Morel moved across the room to be nearer. 'I met a girl just now, who Samir was seeing.'

Morel nodded. 'Go on.'

'It's messy. Her brother beat her up. But he only did it because Réza was there. And Ali and my brother, they were hanging out, which means Samir was up to no good. I never thought about it, it wasn't my business before. But now it is. And -'

'Aisha. Stop for a moment, and take a deep breath.' He watched as she did as he asked, and calmed herself down.

'I want you to tell me all of that again, slowly and in detail, but I also have some questions of my own. Would you mind if I asked you those first?'

'Go ahead.'

'Who was the police officer who talked to you after Samir's death?'

'That was a Capitaine Marchal. I remember. He was rude.'

'Did he come alone or with a partner?'

'Alone. Why?'

'Do you know about Samir's arrests?'

'Arrests? No.' Her attempts to look puzzled didn't fool Morel.

'Your brother was detained on several occasions. The police suspected him of drug-dealing, of doing Ali's dirty work for him.'

Aisha threw him an angry look. 'Well, maybe they were right. I had no clue what my brother was up to. If he was up to anything dodgy, he sure wasn't confiding in me. He never came to me with any of his secrets or worries or any of the important stuff that was going on in his life.'

'You're angry with Samir.' It was a statement, but Aisha took it as a question.

'I'm *really* angry. How could he have been so stupid when he was supposed to be the smart one?'

'Is that what people thought? That he was smart?'

'Sure. Maybe. Well, not everyone. The girls liked him. Maman wasn't always happy about the things he did but she worshipped him. And in this house, he ruled. Even Antoine knew that,' she commented, as if the thought had only just come to her.

'And what about you?'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean where do you fit in in all of this?'

She laughed, as if it was a funny question. 'It doesn't matter where I fit in. What has that got to do with anything? What matters is Samir.'

'You've been so honest with me. But now you're not telling the truth,' Morel said, shaking his head.

'I don't understand.'

'You're telling me you don't care where you fit in. But it's a lie. You care very much.'

'You're saying I'm deceiving you?' Aisha said, looking offended.

'You're deceiving yourself, Aisha. Acting like you don't care that your mother worshipped your brother, or that he ruled the roost, or that he was detained several times for drug-related offences. Or that he's no longer there to walk you home from school. To look out for you.'

Aisha stared at him in shock. He waited for her to say something, but she kept quiet.

'Coffee's ready,' Lila said, entering the room.

'Aisha,' Morel said. 'Why don't you start by telling us about Ali.'

*

It was three-quarters of an hour before they left the Kateb home, and headed back down the stairs. Towards the end of their visit, Antoine had fetched Aisha's mother. She'd sat with them, groggy and mostly unresponsive.

'We should have let her stay in bed. Poor woman,' Lila remarked as they made their way down to see the man who'd found Samir's body. He lived on the second floor.

'What do you make of that guy Antoine?' she asked. 'He's a nervous fellow, isn't he?'

'He gave me that impression the first time I met him. I wouldn't say he was nervous. Timid, maybe. Not that comfortable around people.'

'I'll do a bit of digging. What about him and Loubna? Are they sleeping together?'

'It's hard to imagine,' Morel responded, thinking of the small, fidgety man he'd seen at Aisha's, hovering ineffectively and fretting over the two women he clearly felt responsible for.

'He seems genuinely attached to Loubna and her daughter. My impression is that the mother

depends on him, and Aisha seems to tolerate his presence. He strikes me as a lonely sort of man. Maybe this is the closest thing he has to family. I don't know. Let's talk to him again tomorrow. Right now I'd like to get moving.'

He buttoned up his coat and rubbed his hands to warm them up. He'd sent Marchal's musclemen on their way, quickly realizing that they weren't helping in any way. If anything, they drew unwelcome attention to Morel's team, when he really wanted to keep a low profile. 'I'd like to talk to this Yasmina – the woman Aisha says was seeing Samir. And we need to check out Aisha's story about the brother beating her up, and this guy Réza. Let's pay Yasmina and her brother a visit tomorrow, and while we're at it find Réza. There's not enough time tonight.'

Lila paused two steps ahead of him, and turned.

'So where do we need to be? Which of these beautiful flats does our man live in?'

'Joao Figueras. He lives on the second floor,' Morel said, reading from the case notes he'd brought with him. 'And he lives alone.'

*

It became clear within five minutes of conversation with Figueras that he lived in a fantasy world, though he was perfectly pleasant to deal with. Like most people who lived alone, he couldn't stop talking. It took Morel a while to find an opening.

'You know I was an Olympic athlete,' Figueras said apropos of nothing as he ushered them into a dark, cold apartment that smelled of cat urine. 'Representing my country, Portugal. Middleweight boxing. That was my thing.'

Figueras might lack human companionship but not the animal sort, Morel mused. There were cats everywhere. Morel counted five before taking the seat he was being offered. Lila pulled a face. He knew she was allergic to them. It was, Morel reflected, like being in a poorly kept zoo. A pair of budgies rattled about in a suspended cage, leaving a scattering of

feathers, droppings and seeds on the carpet below. On the sofa, a black terrier with a doleful expression woke up and rolled over to blink at the visitors, but otherwise showed little interest.

‘These are my friends,’ the man said, and Morel wasn’t sure if he was introducing them to the animals or the other way around. While Lila sneezed, Figueras rattled through his list of achievements at breakneck speed, as if he was afraid of being interrupted. He’d apparently climbed Everest, swum the English Channel and written a French-Portuguese dictionary. All while training intensely as an athlete. Morel found himself losing concentration, though he tried his best to look engaged. He felt feverish again. One minute he was listening attentively and the next he found himself thinking about Mathilde, his father, and the dead boys, his thoughts going in circles until everything seemed tied together, painted in the same, melancholy hue. He snapped to attention, chiding himself internally for his lack of professionalism, and looked for an opportunity to interrupt, but Figueras hardly paused for breath. Lila was struggling too. When Figueras got up to look for the dictionary, she leaned towards Morel and gave him an eye-rolling, I-can’t-take-this-anymore kind of look. She whispered, ‘he’s clearly a nutcase, how are we supposed to believe anything he says?’ Figueras returned empty-handed and seemed surprised to find them sitting at his table.

‘Are you here about the songwriting contest?’ he asked. ‘Did I win?’

‘I’m afraid we’re not here about the songwriting contest,’ Morel said, while Lila stared fixedly at an ugly stain on the carpet. Seemingly suppressing a silent scream. ‘This is about the boy who was found dead at the foot of the building. Two nights ago. You were the one who found him.’

‘Ah yes. The boy. The one with the red sweater and corduroy trousers. He lived in this building,’ the man said. He spoke the last sentence in a half-whisper, leaning forward in case someone else might hear.

'Samir,' Lila said.

Figueras didn't answer.

'Is that who you mean? Samir?' Morel asked.

'I hadn't seen him for a while. He lived in this building then he went away. Boys will get into trouble, won't they?' Figueras smiled.

'Could you tell us about the night you found Samir?' Morel asked. If he could get Figueras to focus, even for a few minutes, he might get somewhere.

Figueras' smile vanished.

'I was out walking Dakar,' he began. Lila interrupted. 'Sorry for asking what might seem obvious. Dakar is the dog?'

'Yes. Because she's black, see? Like most people around here. Wasn't like that when I first moved into this *cit *.' He shook his head regretfully.

'Right.' Lila gave Morel a look.

'She has a weak bladder, poor thing,' the man went on, oblivious. 'Sometimes she wakes me at night. I have to take her outside. She gets agitated if I don't. So I took her.' Figueras stopped, looking as if he'd forgotten where he'd put his house keys.

'You were going to tell us about Samir,' Morel urged.

'Ah yes. I went around the block. Quickly, you understand. It was too cold to be out for long. And it was dark. I didn't want to linger. So then I came back to the entrance to go inside, and that's when I saw him.' An air of distress crossed Figueras's face and he reached for the dog, patting its head for comfort.

'Where?'

'Just lying in the bushes outside the building.'

'What did you see exactly?'

'I didn't at first. It was Dakar who went sniffing and when I went to pull him back I saw him. He was wearing the corduroy trousers. Red sweater, corduroy trousers, that's him.'

Morel looked at Lila, shook his head. 'Monsieur Figueras, Samir was wearing jeans when his body was found. Who is this person you're referring to?'

Figueras looked puzzled. 'Jeans, yes. Dead, and blood everywhere. That's how I knew. That's the boy who lives in this building, I said to myself.'

'And that's when you raised the alarm.'

'Yes, yes.'

Figueras smiled vaguely. He seemed to be drifting. He clasped his hands, and continued in an urgent tone. 'The year I turned 12, I got a sailboat for my birthday. I don't know why I got such a nice present. It didn't matter. I was just happy to have it. One weekend, my mother and brother and I went all the way to Paris. We took the RER and got on the Metro and went to the Luxembourg Gardens. All three of us. My brother, me, and my mother. And I sailed my boat in the fountain, like the other kids.'

Lila opened her mouth to say something. She wanted to get Figueras back on track, but Morel gestured at her to wait.

'What happened?'

'My brother hated me for that boat. That day when he saw the boat sail away, he started screaming. Not loudly. I thought we were friends, but it turns out I was wrong. He felt threatened. So he destroyed it.'

'What was he like, your brother?' Morel asked, and Lila shook her head, as if to say he was wasting precious time.

'I don't know. Does it matter? He lived in this building. Then he went away. No one knew where, or why.'

'Can we get back to what we were talking about? Samir's death?' said Lila, exasperated.

'Of course.' Figueras reached over and patted her knee. 'You're a nice person, you are. I can tell. My guess is you don't know much about what it means to be a boy. Boys can play rough, sometimes. It's what we do. And sometimes, when we do, people get hurt.'

*

'I felt like telling him that sometimes girls like to play rough too, particularly when someone a little, shall we say, delusional, is droning on about stuff that never happened,' Lila commented after they'd taken their leave. Morel stood in the stairwell, wondering whether to try talking to Figueras again, though they'd spent the past half hour trying to get more from him, without making progress.

'Let's come back to him in a little while, and try again,' he told Lila now.

'Why?'

'Because it's important. What he's trying to tell us. We're missing something important.'

'Let's run through it again, then,' Lila said. They hadn't moved and were still just a few steps from Figueras' door. It seemed eerily quiet. When Lila blew her nose, it came as an explosion in the silent stairwell. Morel wondered where Jean and Akil had got to. He had a vague, ominous sense of time slipping away, of not being in control. But he couldn't escape the feeling that he'd failed, just now, to grasp something major.

'He mentioned the boy who went away. Twice.'

'That would be Samir disappearing,' Lila offered.

'But how would he have known that Samir didn't come home for two nights?'

'Aisha and her mother asked around, didn't they? I'm sure news travels fast.'

'Maybe.' Morel started walking up the stairs. Lila blew her nose again. 'He mixes up his tenses, his stories,' Morel said. 'All the while I felt there was another person there, in his memory. Not just Samir. Maybe someone else he saw that night, when he walked the dog. Only he can't access that particular memory, even though it was only a few days ago.'

Lila wiped her nose, sighed. 'He was also talking about his brother and a sailboat...you don't think he got things a bit mixed up?'

'I think it's just possible Figueras saw something that night. He saw Samir get hurt. He saw two people. Samir and this other person.'

'Or he saw something else. Samir was already dead. He remembers seeing him in the bushes,' Lila reminded him.

'He saw something,' Morel repeated, running Figueras's words over in his mind. They continued slowly up the stairs. Occasionally, they could hear people behind closed doors, conversations, a television. A dog barked and a woman shouted at it to shut the fuck up. 'What I can't believe is that he's living on his own,' Lila said in a wheezy voice.

'He's not alone. He's got the cats and the dog and the birds.'

'Those bloody cats,' she said, shaking her head. 'So, what now?'

'We'll have to get the story from someone else. After Figueras found Samir's body, he raised the alarm. There were other witnesses, who should be able to tell us what they saw. What Figueras was doing. And at some point I really want to try talking to Figueras again. Maybe we'll get lucky. In the meantime, let's go and talk to Alberto Rosales.'

'Let's,' Lila said. 'I hope that was our only mountain-climbing, song-writing Olympic champion for today. Seriously, how *does* he manage on his own?'

'He probably doesn't have much choice,' Morel replied. He thought about his father. It was clear to him that without Augustine's loyal support, his father would be just as neglected as this old man was. The fact was that the only person actively invested in his father's life was

an old woman who cleaned and cooked for him. Here, in this cold stairwell, in the stark lighting afforded by a naked bulb, his failings seemed abundantly clear. *Never mind what the old man is like. Has been like his entire life. He isn't going to change, not now. I need to change. It can't go on like this.*

Alberto Rosales's place was tidy, scrupulously so. Pet-free, too. It was a nice change from Figueras's apartment. Morel explained that he had taken over the investigation into the deaths of Georghe and Samir.

'I'm glad to hear it,' Alberto said. 'The man who spoke to me – the other policeman...I didn't like him.'

'Why is that?' Lila asked.

'It was just a feeling. He struck me as dishonest. He didn't look me in the eye, not once. I like a man who looks you in the eye when you talk to him.'

In the dining-room, the table was set for one, neatly, as though for a guest rather than the occupant. There was music playing. Morel thought he recognised the Spanish guitarist Carlos Segovia, whom he admired. Alberto went to the stereo and turned the volume down, then invited them to sit at the table. He seemed preoccupied.

'It's a horrible business, isn't it? I can't fathom it.' He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and, with a shaky hand, wiped his brow. 'I hope they fix those lifts soon. I had to go to the shops and walking back up those stairs with shopping bags feels like quite an effort these days.'

'Would you like me to fetch you a glass of water?' Morel asked.

'I'm quite capable still of fetching myself a glass of water,' Alberto replied, then seemed to realize he'd been abrupt. 'Besides, I try not to touch the stuff,' he said with a smile. He pointed to a cabinet. 'There's a bottle of Xeres in there. Much more invigorating. I expect there's no point offering you two any since you're on the job.'

'I'm afraid so.'

'In that case, carry on.'

'I understand Samir was with you the night before he was killed. What can you tell us about the last time you saw him?' Morel asked.

'Not much,' Alberto said. He had a smoker's gravelly tone; an accent so thick one might think he'd just stepped off the plane from Barcelona. He stood up, took the bottle from the cabinet and poured himself a drink.

'Sure you won't join me?'

'No thanks,' Morel said, and Lila shook her head. She'd stopped sneezing but continued to blow her nose intermittently, her eyes red and itchy, her face a picture of misery.

'That was quite a night,' Alberto said. 'Didn't sleep much. I expect there'll be more trouble tonight. Even though things settled down during the day. I thought maybe the cold weather would be too much for people but it didn't stop them last night.'

'You would have seen it all I guess. From up here,' Morel said.

Alberto nodded. 'It was frightening. You know, back in the days when I still believed in Communism, I was involved in a few demonstrations that turned ugly. But nothing like what I saw last night. I have to admit I was scared. Since Emilia – my late wife – and I came to the *cit *, so much has changed. I don't share much with these people. I'm not saying there's no sense of community here. But there are challenges. Sometimes I can clearly see myself standing on the outside, looking in. Sometimes I feel threatened. But the truth is that no one here has ever bothered me. And I do understand the anger.'

He finished his drink and set the glass on the table.

'You asked about Samir. He turned up here without warning, but then that isn't unusual. When he showed up, he was cold and wet. He must have been out in the snow for some time. Poor kid, he was chilled to the bone. I lent him some clothes. I had to go to the shops and while I was gone, he got changed. We had dinner together and he slept on the

couch. In the morning he had coffee here. I told him he should let his mother know where he was. He told me he was going home straight after that.'

'Why would he lie?'

'I've thought about that. I think maybe he said it so I wouldn't call his mother and let her know where he was. He didn't want that. Don't ask me why.'

'How did he seem? I know you've spoken with my Villeneuve colleagues but I'd be grateful if you could tell me again.'

'He seemed upset.'

'How? Angry? Scared?'

'Scared. Definitely scared.'

'Did he say anything?'

Alberto shook his head. 'I've known Samir for some time. He would come over here every once in a while, spend an hour or two. I think he felt comfortable in this flat. He could watch TV or take a nap without being bothered. But we didn't really talk much. I know that sounds strange,' Alberto added.

'Not strange at all,' Morel replied. 'He felt safe with you.'

Alberto nodded. He'd been expecting the usual reaction. The other detective had looked at him sideways. There'd been a bit of a smirk. But Morel's expression was open, accepting. He seemed to understand.

'Any idea if Samir was dealing drugs?' Lila asked.

'No.' Alberto seemed surprised. 'But there is one thing...when the riots broke out, I went downstairs. I wanted to see what was going on. Not very sensible, I expect. But curiosity got the better of me. Anyway, I ran into my neighbour. He must have been outside and he came in while I was downstairs. His name's Ali. He asked me about Samir.'

'Who's Ali?' Lila asked.

'He's a young guy who lives next door. Big. Muscly. If you run into him you'll know straight away.'

'What does Ali do? Is he a friend of Samir's?' Lila pressed.

'I don't exactly know what Ali does. I see him hanging around the estate, there's always a gang of kids trailing after him. I've seen Samir with him. I think Ali's dealing drugs, but I couldn't say for sure. I've never seen him do anything like that and my exchanges with him have always been civil. He has manners, which is something I appreciate.'

'What did he ask about Samir, exactly?' Morel asked.

'He asked me if Samir had said anything while he was at my flat.'

'Is that how he phrased it?'

'Yes. "Did he say anything?" was what Ali asked. I don't know what he meant. Either way, I had nothing to tell him. Like I told you, Samir wasn't talkative. If he had any secrets, he didn't share them with me.'

Morel stood up to leave. Lila was still sitting, deep in thought.

'There's something else. The thing I wanted to show you.' The old man disappeared in his bedroom and returned with something in his hand. He opened it and Morel saw what he was holding. A tooth.

'This was in the pocket of a cardigan I'd lent Samir. The boy was wearing it before he left my place. He had it wrapped in a tissue.'

'It looks small.'

'That's what I thought,' Alberto told Morel. 'Samir was 16. It's unlikely he'd still have baby teeth. Either way, this is small.' Morel reached for it.

'We'll take this with us, Monsieur Rosales, if you don't mind.'

'Why would I mind?' Alberto said. 'I'm glad to be rid of it. I can't think why Samir would have had this.'

'Why didn't you give it to the other police officer when he came to see you?' Lila asked.

Alberto shrugged.

'Like I said, I didn't like him. Didn't like the way he spoke about Samir either.'

'How, exactly?'

'Like Samir was nothing. The kid had a mother and a sister. He was going to finish school if they let him. He was more than capable of finishing school and maybe even going to university. Why not? It seems to me the teachers around here give up on these kids too easily.' Alberto's voice was strained.

'Aisha tells me Samir was going to leave school and take up a technical course. Learn a trade.'

'He never said anything about that. That might have been good for him too. That's what I did, after all, and it served me well enough.'

Morel and Lila turned their attention to the tooth.

'What can you tell us about Georghe?' Morel asked.

'You mean the other boy who died? I didn't know him personally. From what I hear he'd been breaking into people's flats. Stealing from them. Those gypsy kids have a bit of a reputation. It was just a matter of time before one of them paid the price.'

'A high price to pay, don't you think?'

'I'm not condoning the violence, if that's what you're implying. I'm just saying it doesn't surprise or shock me as it once did. But I see how things have changed. The kids become hardened at an early age. They lose their way. You can see why. There's nothing for them to do around here. Nowhere to go, no money. Mostly they're bored out of their fucking minds.' He said it with a smile on his face but Morel detected something else, a steely quality to the old man.

Lila wrapped the tooth in the tissue and slid it into her pocket. 'You were obviously very fond of Samir, Monsieur Rosales. It's nice that he had someone like you, looking out for him.' The old man gripped the armrest with both hands, his eyes sliding away from the two detectives.

'I didn't look out for him enough. I should have been more vigilant.'

*

Morel was about to respond, but a cry shattered the silence, followed by the sound of breaking glass. He went to the window and looked down. All he could make out was a couple of figures running across the street. Far away he heard the sound of sirens. Perrin had called earlier to say the neighbourhood would be patrolled all evening. The CRS, the riot police, were on standby.

His phone rang and he picked it up. It was Akil.

'*Chef*, I just heard from Vincent. He says Thierry Villot called the office. He's worried things are going to get messy in a while. Looks like gangs from the estate and also troublemakers coming in from the other suburbs. Maybe we need to wrap up for tonight.'

'Thierry Villot called? Why him? Why not Marchal?'

'Maybe Villot was doing the decent thing, warning us, so we don't run into any trouble. Maybe Marchal couldn't care less what happens to us,' Akil suggested.

'When? Did he say when?'

'No. Just said later tonight.'

'Where are you?' Morel asked, thinking that he hadn't been paying attention to what was happening outside. He looked at the time and realized it was later than he thought.

'Jean and I are on the fifteenth floor.'

'Okay. Let's continue a little longer, then wrap it up,' Morel said.

There was a pause. 'Okay.'

‘Stay close to your phones.’

*

They’d been in Villeneuve for over two hours. It was getting darker and the snow, which had stopped for a while, had resumed in earnest. He should have been rounding up his team, leaving this place before the streets became unsafe. Thierry Villot was a seasoned local cop, and even he seemed worried. But instead Morel pressed on. He wasn’t himself, caught in a strange state, a combination of daydream and nervy alertness that was clouding his judgment. He touched his forehead but couldn’t tell whether he was warm or cold. ‘Are you okay?’ Lila asked at one point. He told her he was, but in reality he had lost track of time and it felt to him as though he’d been here forever, knocking on doors and making little headway.

At some point, he left Lila on her own, talking to a family from Mali – five people crammed in a two-bedroom unit, getting ready to sit down to dinner when the detectives turned up - to get a breath of fresh air. He stood in the entrance to Tower A, watching commuters arriving home by car, bus or on foot from the train station. After a while, he became aware that people were hurrying past. Hurrying home before whatever was going to happen tonight happened, he realized. No one looked at him, even when they had to step past him to get inside. The cold air snapped him out of his earlier state. It was time to get going.

Just as he was about to turn and re-enter the building, he noticed a car coming his way, slowly, as if the driver was unsure about where to go. Morel found himself caught in the headlights. The car stopped, then backed into an empty park. A man got out, hesitated for a moment before approaching him. With a start, Morel recognised Vincent.

‘What are you doing here? Has there been a new development in the Simic case? You could have called instead of driving.’ Morel’s voice was unsteady and he was shivering, with cold and tiredness and perhaps a recurrence of the fever he’d done his best to ignore these past days.

'I've come to say something. Look, you can send me back to the office to sift through porn sites and talk to a bunch of middle-aged swingers about whether they shoved Simic in the water because he wasn't a good screw, or because he was too good in bed. Or I can help catch a child murderer. Up to you,' Vincent said. This was a prepared speech. He must have been thinking about what he wanted to say on his way here.

'Simic is dead,' Morel said quietly. 'Solving that case is as important as what we're doing here. You know that.'

'Fine. Then get someone else to focus on Simic. The truth is you've been putting me on the backburner for a while. And I'm tired of it.'

'Lila's been working the Simic case too.'

'But she's here with you now.'

Vincent was the easiest member of his team. Good-natured, but no pushover. Morel could see that he would leave and never come back if he was turned away now. And what would the team be like without Vincent? They needed him.

There was only one thing to do. Morel grabbed Vincent's shoulder, as much to steady himself in his febrile state as to let him know he'd been heard.

'Okay. Forget about Simic for now. Stay with us. But it's late and we need to get going soon. Villot called to warn us things might get ugly.'

'So we're done?' Vincent asked.

'This is not our patch. And in this situation there's no sense going out there and acting like cowboys. We'll return in the morning.'

Ignoring Vincent's silent opposition, he called Akil and Lila and told them to wrap up and meet him downstairs.

'Are we leaving?' Jean said, when he and Akil reached the lobby. Morel heard the relief in his voice. At the same time, he became aware of someone shouting. Several voices joined in,

drawing nearer to the building. Morel recognised the word, a two-syllable chant. *Sa-mir, Sa-mir, Sa-mir*. The tone was angry, each syllable a roar. He opened the door and looked out. A hundred metres from where he stood, the battle lines were being drawn. The police were piling out of the dark blue vans they'd arrived in. The locals were threatening, but they weren't the only ones to worry about. To Morel, there was nothing reassuring about the uniforms.

The rioters stopped fifty metres from the police line. For a moment, no one did anything. There was something about the mood that made Morel step back into the building and urge his team to do the same. Just as the door swung shut, one of the masked youths stepped forward and lobbed a petrol bomb at the police line. Casually, as if he was just passing a ball.

'Fuck,' said Lila who was standing nearest the exit.

She stepped back into the hallway as the flare went up. The next petrol bomb hit a car, not far from the building.

'Your car's nearby, right?' Morel asked Vincent.

'Right outside. You saw where I parked it. Let's go.' Vincent took a step towards the exit but Morel stopped him. 'Wait.'

'Wait for what?' Akil said uncharacteristically. It wasn't like him to disagree with Morel. 'Let's get into Vincent's car while it's still intact and drive to where we parked the other one. The longer we wait, the more difficult it'll be.'

'Wait.' No one moved. They were waiting for Morel to take the lead. He knew he should say or do something, but he had no idea what they were dealing with out there. He wanted to get his team safely out of here, and he wanted to stay and do his job, but even he knew the five of them were in no position to deal with what was happening. He was shaking, he realized. Shaking and sweating. He was still sick. Maybe that explained why he was being so

indecisive and why he'd let things get to this point. Lila looked worried. She stepped towards him and touched his arm.

'Chef?'

Before Morel could respond, Vincent was on the move. 'I'm going to get the car,' he said, and stepped past them into the fray.

Virginie saw the flames before she reached the estate. She pressed on. As she looked for a place to park, somewhere quiet, she counted at least three burning cars. She was driving slowly but still she didn't see the running boys when they suddenly appeared before her on the road, frightening her out of her wits. How old were they? Fifteen, sixteen? The same age as Samir. They came out of nowhere and ran across the road without bothering to check for cars, and she braked hard to avoid hitting them. One of the boys gave her the finger while she clutched her steering wheel and waited for her heartbeat to return to normal.

Kids. Giving her the finger. In the distance she heard the sound of gunshot. Or maybe it was something else. She shouldn't get dramatic. Still, maybe she should turn back now. It was obvious things were getting out of hand. But she wanted to see Aisha. To make sure she was okay. The girl wasn't answering her phone and she'd missed her last session. Virginie had nightmare visions of her hiding away in a room, contemplating suicide. Just like the other girl at the school whom she'd treated for six months. Virginie had thought she was making progress. And then the girl had slit her wrists.

Virginie blamed herself. Then, and now. She'd failed to make a connection and she'd watched Aisha withdraw, little by little, till there was nothing between them. The last couple of times, they'd sat together like two strangers in a waiting-room. And now it was probably too late to rebuild that trust, but Virginie would try anyway.

She parked in a narrow street, a couple of hundred metres from the tower blocks, thinking she would circle the area where the clashes were happening to get to the buildings. With everything that was going on, she reasoned, no one would single her out. Many of the streetlamps were smashed and it was dark. It would have been nearly pitch-black without the fires. There were fires burning too, she saw, down where the Roma encampment was.

She walked quickly, keeping her head down. Despite what she told people, that their fears were exaggerated, she'd always felt unsafe on the estate. The police were here, only a short distance away, she told herself. Nothing would happen. As she moved towards the *cité*, she saw a mob in the distance. Fire trucks, police vans. People running. It wasn't clear what was happening, only that tensions were running high. She'd heard on the morning news that a policeman was critically injured. Were the riot police capable of restraint? As a student, she'd held them in contempt; she'd sided with the underdog. Protest was necessary. You had to contest authority. That was the norm. Now she told herself the officers were the good guys, knowing at the same time how grossly simplistic that was. At some point, she had morphed into the sort of person she despised.

How could she be of any help to Aisha, she thought, when secretly, without quite admitting it to herself, she feared everything in the girl's background? When she attached such ridiculous and offensive labels to people? Good guys, bad guys. Insider, outsider.

She heard a sound behind her and turned quickly, certain that she was being followed. But there was no one there. The wind was relentless, blowing over the deserted street. She decided she would go around the back of the tower blocks to avoid the rioters. It meant entering the wasteland, an area that gave her the shivers because it was isolated and because it had something of a reputation as a place you went to for the sort of things you didn't do in public. That poor Roma boy had died there. The people who'd done that to him were no better than animals.

She picked up her pace. As she neared the buildings from the side, she heard someone whistle and turned to find a couple of boys trailing her. The same ones, maybe, who had run across the road earlier. She'd been right about their age. Close up they really were just kids.

'You lost, lady?' One of them said. She couldn't tell which one it was, whether he was the boy who'd been rude to her earlier.

'I'm fine, thank you. Just visiting a friend.'

'A friend! You mean, like, a boyfriend?'

'No.' A wave of irritation swept over her, but she managed to conceal it. 'You should probably go home. It's not safe out here.'

'We *are* home. It's you who shouldn't be here.'

She noticed then how nervy the boy was. He seemed unable to stand still. What had he taken? She felt the first flutter of fear. Keep calm, she told herself. Don't let them know you're afraid.

'What's your name?' she asked the boy who'd kept silent so far. The other boy snorted, and leered at her.

'Hey. Mourad. I think the slag likes you. What do you say?' Virginie looked at the other boy, hoping to see shame, discomfort, but instead she encountered a face so blank it chilled her. He spoke slowly, staring at her without blinking.

'Nah. Too ugly man.'

'Better than nothing.'

'Nice tits, I guess,' the quiet boy said, eliciting a roar of delight from his friend. 'How about we take her around the back. Into the wasteland. Show her something she's never seen.'

They moved towards her, slowly at first, and she backed away from them, towards the estate. Without thinking, she turned and ran. They seemed to hesitate at first, which gave her an advantage, but then the two of them started running too, calling her names as they got closer. Names she'd never been called before and that terrified her because they came from the lips of two young boys who spoke them as though they were everyday words. One of her shoes came undone and she nearly tripped, but she caught herself just in time and kept on,

knowing that it was only a matter of time before they caught up with her. They were younger, faster, spurred on and excited by whatever it was they'd taken.

She had just about given up, her lungs screaming for air, when she realized she was at the tower blocks. All of a sudden there were people everywhere and the noise was deafening. Someone screeched in her ear, but it wasn't for her benefit, he was hurling insults at a policeman who was handcuffing him. The two boys, Mourad and the other, seemed to be gone, but she couldn't be sure. In this crowd, she would stand out. They would find her.

She quickly realized she couldn't expect any help from the police; they had their hands full and would probably just tell her to go home. There was nothing for her to do but get into the block in which Aisha lived. Once she found her, it would be alright.

She started running again. and slammed into a man coming out of the building fast, who caught her as she lost her balance. She was still terrified and thought the boys had finally caught up with her.

'Let me go!'

'It's okay. Calm down. Stop hitting me. Calm down.'

When she looked up, she saw a man she didn't recognise. She broke free and looked around wildly for someone who might be able to help her. The man she'd collided with stepped aside and now she noticed his companion. She stared at him in disbelief.

'Serge?' She wanted to throw herself in his arms. A part of her also felt ashamed and wanted to hide.

'Virginie. Why are you here? What happened?' Morel gripped her arm. 'Come with us now. Quickly. We need to leave.'

She did as she was told. She was vaguely aware of getting into a car, of Morel taking the wheel. Everything else receded, there was only the tension in the car and a resounding silence that sat heavier than words. There were more people in the car than the number of

available seats. No one spoke. The car started and stopped minutes later to let two people out. They climbed into another car. She stayed put. They were on the move again. No one spoke. In the rearview mirror, the towers blocked out the horizon. It seemed to take forever to reach a point in the road where she finally lost sight of them.

BOOK THREE

HOMELAND

One

'What were you thinking, Virginie?'

'I wanted to see Aisha.'

She turned her face to his, without making eye contact. They were in Morel's home, or rather the main house - his father's home, as he thought of it now. For years, his mother's shadow had lingered, and everywhere he'd looked, he'd seen only her.

'Your timing was lamentable, You could have been hurt,' he told Virginie. After she had collided with Vincent in the *cit *, Morel had initially intended to drop her home, but she'd been so shaken he'd brought her here instead. His younger sister Ad le, who had come over earlier in the evening to check on Morel senior, had let them in.

Now Morel and Virginie reclined on opposite ends of the same sofa, exhausted and mildly drunk. The cognac he'd poured - the third in a series of single shots - was gone.

'Why? I mean, why then? At night, in the middle of a riot, for God's sake? What was so urgent that it couldn't wait?'

'I don't know why. Same reason maybe that compels you to walk around one of France's most dangerous housing estates dressed in an Armani suit and wearing a Jaeger-Lecoultre watch.' He began to smile but stopped when he saw she was serious. When he didn't say anything, she continued, in a quiet voice. 'I've been thinking about things. I don't think I've been much help to these girls.'

'What girls are you talking about?'

'The schoolgirls I counsel, in Villeneuve. I've had a few referred to me, or who come to me of their own accord. Aisha is the sixth girl I've worked with at the school.' Virginie sat up a

little, adjusted the cushion behind her back. 'Each time, it's the same scenario. At first they really want to be there. They have things to say. I listen. I try to empathize, to form a bond. After a while, they lose heart. Eventually, they stop coming. And I think I know why. To do this job well you have to be able to connect with your patients. You need empathy.'

'I'm sure that's something you're good at.'

She smiled, acknowledging his comment. 'When I was working in Paris, I managed to connect with the kids. And it wasn't that I could identify with their problems. A lot of these girls were harming themselves. Or dealing with eating disorders. But somehow it was easier to form relationships and to help them work through issues.'

'Are you saying these were lesser problems? Easier to work with?'

'Not at all, that's not what I'm saying. They live in different worlds. And the truth is that, if you've grown up in a lavish apartment in the Rue des Franc-Bourgeois, you might have all sorts of anxieties but you might also have a grounded sense of self-entitlement, something you don't worry about or question.'

'I'm not sure that always works in people's favour.'

'Sure. It doesn't. But what I'm trying to say is that in Villeneuve, I've failed. Again and again. And you know why? Deep down I think I have the same prejudices as anyone else. In my head, I'd written these girls' stories before they'd even told me about themselves. I thought I was listening to Aisha, when in fact I'd already made up my mind that she was a victim of the system and deserved better. No wonder she turned from me. What did I have to offer?' She touched his arm. 'You're a police officer. Maybe you get this. I feel like someone who's committed a crime. What I imagine that must feel like. Uneasy conscience. A sense of being tainted, you know? It's getting worse.'

Morel rubbed his eyes. He felt faint with hunger and tiredness but didn't have the energy to get up. 'I don't know what to say to that, Virginie. To some extent, we're all tainted,

aren't we? We all have our notions, some of them ugly. We do the best we can. That's all there is to it. You can't beat yourself up for just being human.'

'Maybe.' She seemed unconvinced.

'You must be exhausted, apart from anything else. So much has happened.' He'd offered her Maly's old room. The nicest in the house, according to Adèle who had spent a major part of her childhood and adolescence taunting her older sister and accusing their parents of favouritism.

Tonight, Adèle was sleeping in her old room – the lesser room, as she'd always seen it. She had got to the door before Morel had a chance to use his key. Which meant she'd sat up waiting for him. She must have seen the headlights. She was pissed off, he could tell. He'd expected a lecture for not calling and letting her know how late he would be. But Virginie's presence had stopped her from speaking her mind. Now the house was quiet, his younger sister resentfully asleep in her childhood bed and Philippe Morel lost in his dreams, just as he tended to be lost these days in his waking hours.

'You should go to bed and at least try to rest,' Morel said gently.

Virginie nodded but stayed put. The lights were turned off and the curtains pulled back, and the snow lit up the room so that Morel could see her quite clearly.

'I can't quite face bed. The adrenalin maybe ... do you think I could just stay here, for a little while?'

'Sure. Whatever is most comfortable.' He fetched several blankets from the laundry cupboard and handed them to her.

'Thank you. Tell me: are you any closer to finding who killed Samir?'

'Not really,' he admitted. 'But it takes time. The riots make our job difficult, obviously. And you mustn't forget that we're investigating Georghé's death too. Two deaths, that may or may not be related.'

'Oh God. What happened to that boy was dreadful too.' In the grey light, Morel saw fear in her eyes. 'There's always been an enormous amount of tension between that Roma community and the *cit * residents.'

'The dealers look down on the thieves. Both sides play by their own rules and neither one has any respect for authority.'

'Exactly. And it seems to me that it must be impossible to police.'

'Not an easy place to police, certainly.'

'Are you sure you're not taking too much on? Two murder cases?'

'How can I not take both on? When there's a likelihood – a chance, anyway – that the two are linked?'

'Have you had a chance to talk to the detective who was investigating the homicides before you took over?'

'I have.'

'And?'

Morel thought about the first time he'd met Marchal. The man had been on his guard from the start. In the morning he would find Villot and get him to explain why he'd approached Morel in the car park. Ask him too whether he was responsible for the autopsy notes that had landed on Morel's desk. Then Morel would summon Marchal to Paris. The detective had some explaining to do.

*

It was still dark, and unbearably cold when Ali and Karim walked through empty streets to the Roma encampment. Karim would have preferred to be in bed, but Ali had insisted. He liked to have company.

After what had happened earlier, it was strange to encounter no one. Everyone had left, including residents, police and those who had taken the trains in from some of the

neighbouring *banlieues*, as a gesture of solidarity or simply to cause trouble. Sometime during the night, Ali had found Karim and suggested they stick together till things calmed down. Karim felt no need to tell Ali that he'd kept at a safe distance from the violence all evening, watching as others got knocked around, shoved or abused. He didn't like the outsiders, they didn't play by the same rules and were unpredictable. At some stage, and despite his best efforts to remain unharmed, he'd got caught up in a scuffle, and the sleeve on his leather jacket had got ripped. It was stupid to get upset over something like that, yet it had made him cry. Silent tears, which he'd swiftly concealed. His prize possession, irretrievably damaged. He'd spent a month's earnings on it.

When they got to the encampment, Karim stared at what he saw, shocked into silence. He couldn't believe it. Just a few hours earlier there'd been about five hundred people living here, managing somehow to survive in conditions that made the tower blocks seem lavish in comparison. Living with no power or running water. They walked some distance to fill buckets at the sinks near the sports ground. Lugged them back to the camp. Kept to themselves, and put up with constant abuse. Karim had seen Réza once, spitting at a young girl emerging from behind a tree where she'd clearly been doing her business. No toilets either at the camp. How could you live like that?

And now there was nothing left. No sign of life, not even the dogs you often saw wandering around the camp, searching for scraps. The fires had consumed everything. Karim wondered how the gypsies had packed up and vanished so fast. It almost felt as if they'd never been here. Had any of them had time to gather any of their belongings before they were reduced to ashes?

'They'll have to find somewhere else to live now,' he said after a while.

Ali spat on the ground. 'Good riddance,' he said. 'They didn't belong. Thieves, the lot of them. They don't follow our rules, they don't want to be part of the community.'

Karim dug his hands in his pockets. He didn't want Ali to see how upset he was, but it was hard not to. Not that he liked the gypsies. He didn't. He'd despised them too. Had hated the way they pissed and shat everywhere, like animals. There were places you couldn't go anymore because of them. But that kid Georghe, the way things had turned out for him, well, that was different. Karim didn't have the stomach for that sort of violence, the kind you administered yourself and that got your hands dirty. When he thought of that kid, wide-eyed and skinny and scared, it was all he could manage not to throw up.

'Hey! Kevin. Cheer up! You look like someone rammed a hot poker up your arse.' Ali stuck his tongue out, a gesture which seemed strange to Karim until he realized Ali was catching snowflakes in his mouth, happy as a little kid.

As he watched Ali, and waited till he was done goofing around, a single thought went around and around in his head. Aisha. He had made a promise to help find Samir's murderer, knowing full well he could never keep it. He thought that maybe she already knew he wouldn't be much use and that she planned to do some digging on her own. The sort of digging that could get her into serious trouble.

He had to prevent that from happening.

Two

'The lab results are back. The tooth that Alberto found in Samir's pocket. That was Georghe's,' Lila declared happily.

'When did you find out? It's only half past seven. Too early for Richard Martin to be in touch.' The pathologist was not an early riser.

'Come on. You know that sleazebag has a soft spot for me. He called. From memory he said something cute like, "There's no such thing as off the clock when it comes to you, *ma belle Lila*." One of these days someone will get tired of the banter and cut his dick off. But in the meantime, it's good news, no? It proves the two boys were together at some point before they died. There's the connection you were looking for.'

'It does establish a connection,' Morel admitted. He'd woken up after two hours' sleep to find Adèle and Virginie murmuring together in the kitchen while his father hid in his bedroom, as reluctant to join in the female chatter, Morel guessed, as he was. Now he was on his way to Villot's place, and he had Lila on speakerphone.

'How are you feeling?' she'd asked at the start of the call.

'Sleep-deprived and with a long day ahead.' That was when she'd sprung the news about the tooth, expecting it would cheer him up.

'At least now we definitely know he was with Georghe at some point,' she said. 'And the question is, why? That's what we need to be thinking about. And why take the tooth?'

'Maybe he saw what happened. Maybe he was there when the kid was beaten up. Or he found the boy after it happened.'

'And didn't call the police? Or an ambulance?'

'A kid like that isn't going to look to the authorities for help. His experiences have taught him to avoid anything official. No. It's more likely he would have freaked out and run from the scene.'

'But why keep the tooth?'

'As proof, maybe? So he could tell someone what had happened? What he'd seen? I don't know.'

'Hmmm.'

'What?'

'Funny how you won't contemplate the possibility that maybe he did it to Georghe. Beat the shit out of him. Kept the tooth as some sort of trophy.'

'If so, how did he do it? He didn't use his fists then, because we'd know. Nothing came from the autopsy to suggest he did.'

'Maybe he was wearing gloves?' she suggested, half-serious. 'Either way, he could still be guilty. If he watched it happen and did nothing.' When Morel didn't reply, she asked, 'Why are you so uncomfortable with the idea that Samir might be implicated?'

'I'm not uncomfortable with it. But I don't want us jumping to conclusions when we've got no evidence.'

'He had one of Georghe's teeth. In his pocket.' She said it slowly, as if he might have misheard the first time. 'He was there. He's guilty of something.'

*

'How are things with you, anyway? I hardly hear from you these days. I guess you're busy. Still, an occasional phone call to your mother isn't too much to expect, I would have thought.'

'It isn't and I'm sorry,' Luc Clément said, looking in despair at the assignment one of his students had handed in. Half a page of nonsense, riddled with spelling mistakes that even a five year-old shouldn't make. And the other essays that had been handed in weren't much

better. Hobbes must be turning in his grave. Meanwhile his mother carried on in that passive-aggressive way she had, though the passive part seemed to be fading fast as the years went by.

‘I’ve been preoccupied,’ he said. ‘A boy was killed. Someone from the school. You probably saw it on the news.’

‘The gipsy? He was from the school?’

‘No, not the Roma boy,’ he said, flinching at her use of the word gipsy. At least he’d veered the subject away from himself. ‘A boy named Samir.’

‘Ah yes. I did see that on the news. Well it isn’t all that surprising, is it? Given the neighbourhood and the way we fail to manage immigration.’ His mother, who had dismissed Jean-Marie le Pen as common and uncouth, admired the daughter. In Luc’s mind, Marine was more dangerous than her father, but of course there was no point in saying it. Or was there? His mother sniffed and Luc emptied his glass in one gulp. Disgusted with her, and by extension, with himself.

‘I was thinking I might visit at Easter if that’s convenient,’ he offered, praying she would get off the subject of foreigners. No such luck.

‘We insist on letting people come here without considering how well they’ll assimilate, without taking into account the fact that they come from such alien backgrounds.’

‘And with such foreign habits,’ Luc said, but the sarcasm – only mild, admittedly - was lost on her. No wonder his father had left her. Had left them, after Luc’s sister had died. He’d doted on his little girl, whereas Luc’s mother had always had a soft spot for their son.

The two of them, mother and son; same genes, same blood. You didn’t get to choose your parents, nor did you get to decide, really, how much influence they had on you.

‘It’s all so ... depressing.’ She was looking for sympathy. Wanting to show she too was a person with feelings. He knew it was an act but a part of him wanted to believe. He found

himself softening a little. She had left messages, which he'd ignored. That was tough. No wonder she took it personally. 'These past months have been ...' Luc searched for the right word '...trying. A few teachers have resigned and we're having trouble recruiting new staff. I've had to take on more classes.'

His mother was silent on the phone.

'I don't think you're telling me the truth, Luc.'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean I think you're not telling me why you're preoccupied. Is this about that student? Aisha?'

'What are you talking about?' He hadn't meant to sound tetchy but the question had shocked him. When had he mentioned Aisha and what had he said, exactly? His mother had a habit of probing and of finding the tenderest spot, and then pressing gently down on it until she made him squirm. There were times he forgot to be cautious, and talked too much, because she was his mother and seemed genuinely interested in his life. Now he tried frantically to remember how much he'd told her, and whether it mattered.

'The last time we talked, you said you were concerned about one of your students. That Aisha. You've mentioned her a few times.'

'I like all my students,' Luc lied. 'She's my best one. I want her to do well.'

His mother said nothing.

'You don't understand what it's like, teaching in an area like this. It can be so demoralizing,' he continued, knowing he sounded defensive. 'But if I can make a difference to the students who want to work and want to make something of themselves, then it's worth all the hardship, the crap wages, the abuse I get, the thankless hours. I wish you had a sense of it.'

'I do understand, you think I don't but I do.'

'But?'

'Never mind.' It was her turn to sound cautious.

'Tell me.'

'I don't know. You just seem, how shall I put it, a little obsessed with that one girl.'

'You make it sound like something it isn't.'

'Don't be silly; I'm not implying any such thing,' she said. 'I just worry about you. I know why you might feel – I mean, your sister...'

'Don't.' He didn't want to hear it. 'I'm fine. There's nothing to worry about.'

'And now this murder. Two murders. And riots! Surely it isn't safe to return to the school. I'm sure they'd understand if you stayed home while all this is sorted.'

Sorted? 'I have no intention of staying home. I intend to go to work as usual.' He didn't tell her that the boy who'd died was Aisha's brother. It would only make things worse.

'I have to get ready for work,' he said, after listening to her for a while, telling him about what she'd been up to and about his siblings, who he never saw. Not for the first time, he felt disconnected from the things and the people that made up his world. Villeneuve had done that. Aisha too. Split him apart. He wished it were otherwise.

'Will you promise to keep in touch more often?'

'I promise.'

'And please be careful.'

'I will.'

He got dressed and ate his breakfast standing in the kitchen. It was a quiet neighbourhood. Most of the people living in his building were older. At this hour, no one was up.

None of his students, not even Aisha, had any clue who he was or where he came from. A privileged background that had included annual trips to a second residence in Aix-en-Provence. The apartment he owned now was a gift from his father, bestowed on his 18th

birthday. If his students knew, they would judge him for it and he'd lose all credibility. But sometimes he wondered if he was pretending to be something he wasn't. Playing a part.

He sent Aisha a text.

Everything okay?

Yes.

Any news about the investigation? Have they found out anything?

Nothing.

The night before, he'd been out for dinner with friends, trying a new place in the Trocadéro, when one of his colleagues who lived near Villeneuve had texted about the riots. *It's happening again*, she'd written. *I can actually see the fires from my window*. Without thinking, he'd excused himself to go to the bathroom, where he'd called Aisha, asking if she was safe and urging her to stay home. She had seemed flustered by the call, hanging up as quickly as she could. Stupid move. He should know better than to contact her when she was at home, and place her in an awkward situation.

On the way back from the restaurant, he'd been so preoccupied that he'd had a near miss with another car, veering away at the last minute. The other driver had been livid. Without thinking, Luc had started driving towards Villeneuve. At night, the *périphérique* looked almost pretty, the road painted white with glittering snow. Not long before, the trucks had come through here and sprayed salt across the slippery ground.

Halfway to Villeneuve, he'd changed his mind and turned back. He was tired, a little drunk, and too caught up in what was happening to drive anywhere safely. The last thing he needed was to do something stupid like crash the car and kill himself. What use would that be to Aisha?

He made coffee and toast and ate in front of the TV. The first item on the news was Villeneuve. He wondered how many of the kids would turn up to class today. It didn't occur to him not to go to work. It was important to carry on as if things were normal.

He'd made little progress with the kids over Hobbes. A familiar frustration rose within him, which he tried to ignore. He finished his breakfast and took his plate to the kitchen. His phone went off, signaling two new text messages. On the way back, he checked. One from his mother, telling him she loved him and to please not be annoyed at her, and another from a Commandant Morel. Luc dialed the mobile number he'd been given. Morel replied and asked if Luc would be at the school this morning.

'Definitely.'

'I'll see you there. Later this morning, I expect.'

'I spoke with the other detective, Marchal, when he came to the school. Do you know him personally?'

'We've met. Look, Monsieur Clément, I have to go. I'll see you in a little while.'

Luc took a quick shower and tidied up a little, conscious all of a sudden of the mess. He rinsed his cup and plate and left both in the sink. For nearly a year, he'd shared the apartment with one of his cousins, a bit of a dope but nice enough. Thinking that it would be good to have company and that in any case the place was too big for one person. It hadn't taken long to figure out he didn't like having someone else around.

Books, satchel. A packed lunch, including an apple which one of his students had given him, with a lewd and inaccurate reference to the Garden of Eden. His reply: I would suggest you go back and read the text. Properly this time. A line he used so often, the students had learned to pre-empt him and turned it into something of a joke.

He turned the heater and the lights off and left the flat. Twice, he had to retrace his steps because he'd forgotten something he'd need for class. He wondered what questions the

police would ask. Why did they want to speak to him when he wasn't even one of Samir's teachers? It was possible that Corinne Tellier, the head teacher, had told this Morel that he knew the family. He made a mental list of the sort of questions he might have to answer, then forced himself to stop. *I have nothing to feel guilty about, I haven't done anything*, he reminded himself.

In the car, despite his earlier decision not to bother her anymore, he texted Aisha.

Is there anything I can do?

It took her several minutes to reply. It wasn't the answer he'd hoped for.

Nothing.

He waited a while longer with the engine running. Watched the night fade and make way for a frosty grey morning. What should he do? It took him an eternity to decide. His fingers shook when he sent the text.

Will you meet me before school? There is something I haven't told you. It's important.

A pause.

I don't think I can. What's so important anyway?

He was shaking so much he made several mistakes as he typed.

It's about Samir.

Three

Villot lived in a *pavillon*, a modest, two-bedroom house on the edge of Villeneuve. Newly-built, in a street where every house looked the same. It was the sort of place a Villeneuve *flic* might live in. Affordable and unassuming. But the interior took Morel by surprise. It was practically bare. Two chairs, a TV set on the floor. The bedroom door was ajar and he saw a single mattress on the ground, a half-empty coffee cup, and a lamp beside it, still lit.

'Have you only moved in recently?'

'Looks that way, doesn't it?' Villot looked around the room. 'No. My wife left me. Took everything. After fifteen years of marriage, she figured I owed her.'

'I'm sorry to hear that.'

'Don't be. The only thing I regret is the fact we waited so long. We could have avoided a lot of the unpleasantness. We might even have been able to remain friends. Or maybe not. Who knows.' Villot sat down. 'Anyway, I still have a couple of chairs, one or two forks in the cutlery drawer and a bottle of whisky in the pantry.'

'It could be worse, then.'

'My thoughts exactly.'

'How are you finding it, being alone?' Morel asked. The question seemed perfectly natural. He settled on one of the chairs and Thierry took the other. 'I'm sorry if that seems too personal.'

'Not at all. To be honest it's a relief. It was rough in the end. We were always at each other's throats.'

He glanced at Morel. 'You married?'

'No. Though I was once. A very long time ago. It was a mistake.'

'Do you still see her? The ex-wife?'

'No. There's no reason to. We had very little in common, from the start.'

Villot nodded as though he understood. He lit a cigarette and crossed his legs. 'I can smoke inside now. One of the perks of celibacy. Anyway, enough about that. You're running the investigation now. Both investigations. Have you got anywhere?'

'Not far,' Morel admitted. 'But we have evidence that indicates Samir was with Georghe at some point, either during or after the beating. He knew something.'

Villot didn't say anything, just watched Morel through a cloud of smoke.

'I'm here to ask about Samir. That day in the car park, outside the police station. When my colleague Lila Markov and I came to see Marchal. You approached me. I've been wondering why. I think something's troubling you. I think you know a lot more about the boy than you've said. I'd like to hear it.'

Villot drew deeply on his cigarette. Morel pressed on.

'I also think Marchal is lying and I want to know why. He knew who Samir was and yet he pretended not to when the name first came up. Why?'

'Do you know what Marchal said when he heard your team had taken over the investigation?' Villot gazed at the ceiling, as if he saw something there that warranted a closer look. 'He said you'd be lucky to get out of this in one piece.'

'I'm touched by his concern,' Morel said. He watched Villot enjoy the cigarette, and resisted the urge to ask for one. 'What made you come up to me in the car park? I'm also guessing you sent me the autopsy notes for both Georghe and Samir. Am I right?'

Villot nodded.

'That was risky. Why did you do it?' Morel asked.

'I don't know for sure whether there's anything going on that should concern any of us,' Villot began slowly. 'But I'd be making a mistake if I sat back and said nothing. Only it isn't easy doing this. I'm not particularly fond of Marchal but then again I'm not a snitch.'

Morel waited for more.

'This is how it is. About seven, or maybe eight months ago, we organized a drug raid at the Cité des Poètes. It started out as these things tend to do. A big operation – we had about twenty officers and we were targeting some of the dealers we knew were operating out of the *cité*. We went in early, thinking we'd get them while they were still in their beds. But someone must have alerted them.' He shook his head. 'These guys, they just get cockier by the day. They waited till we got there and saw them, watched us from a distance, then took off. There wasn't the slightest hint of concern. They didn't even run.'

'What happened?'

'We were left chasing the younger kids around the estate. Slippery as eels, but we managed to catch a few.'

'Younger kids?'

'Like I told you the first time,' Thierry said impatiently. 'The younger ones do the legwork – they act as errand boys, or lookouts. We knew it was a waste of time talking to them – even when they give us names they always end up retracting, and without the proof in any case it's a loser's game - but we took them in anyway. It was better than going back to the station empty-handed. Or so we pretended.'

'One of them was Samir.'

'Yes. Marchal was in charge of the raid. Normally we do our interviews at our desks. Same as what you guys do, I imagine. But Marchal, he took the boys into an unoccupied room we use for storage. He took them one by one and did his best to intimidate them. Wear them down. A couple of them wet their pants. One or two gave us something to work with.'

'And Samir?'

'Nothing.'

Morel guessed what came next. 'So Marchal got pissed off. He had it in for Samir. Because he couldn't squeeze anything out of him.'

Villot sighed. 'Samir was a smart kid but he was also proud. Angry. It was a mistake to taunt Marchal. Something in him snapped that day. Not that there was anything unusual about that particular scenario. It's not like it hasn't unfolded many times before. We go in, someone raises the alarm, we leave empty-handed. But I think that day Marchal reached his limit.'

'He's a police officer,' Morel said. 'Restraint is one of the things we're trained for.'

'I know.' Villot flicked the stub on the ground and squashed it with his foot. 'You don't think I know how a police officer should behave? I know everything you're thinking. I'm just saying we're human too. And whatever you think you've dealt with in your neck of the woods, there are things we face here every day that you cannot comprehend.'

Morel stood up. 'When was the last time you saw Samir? You or Marchal?'

Villot hesitated. 'That's the thing. It's been a while since I saw him at the station. That last time, he was in for less than an hour. We had to release him, there was no reason to keep him any longer, even Marchal knew it. But a couple of days before Samir was killed, I was in the *cit *. Talking to a kid named Karim.'

'I understand he was Samir's best friend.'

'That's right. The two of them were tight. Karim told me the last time he'd seen Samir was with the police. He was implying that the experience had scared the shit out of Samir. That something had happened that might have made him want to disappear.'

'You trust this Karim? Could he be right? That Samir was at the station more recently? Could it have happened without you knowing?'

'Sure. I'm not always in. And I've been unwell, I've had to take time off work. So maybe. As for Karim, it's hard to say how trustworthy he is. Instinctively, I'd say he's making it up as

he goes. But given what Marchal's been like with Samir...' He raised his hands in a gesture of helplessness. 'I don't know what to think.'

Morel got up and made for the door, then stopped as something occurred to him.

'Why did you go see Karim?'

'What do you mean? I wanted to know if he'd seen Samir.'

'Why though? Why would you be worried about Samir?'

'Like I said. Marchal had been giving the kid a hard time. I was concerned.'

Villot opened the door, clearly signaling for Morel to go, and reached for another cigarette.

'But you said the last time you'd seen Samir was a month earlier. So why did you choose that particular moment to check up on him?'

'No particular reason.'

'You were alone?'

'Yes I was alone.' Villot looked put out. 'Why so many questions? I thought you wanted to know about Marchal.'

'I do.' Morel buttoned up his jacket. 'Thank you,' he said, shaking Villot's hand. 'I appreciate how frank you've been.'

'Happy to help.' He leaned against the doorframe, sucking on his cigarette. This time, it seemed to give him no pleasure. Morel thought he looked deeply unhappy, and that everything he'd said about enjoying his new celibate status was a lie.

'You were saying you've been unwell.' It was a statement rather than a question.

'This job can really get to you, don't you find?' Villot said in a hollow voice. 'There's no end to the shit you have to deal with. You deal with one thing and immediately something else comes along. Those kids. I've known some of them since they could barely walk. I've watched them change. So many become immunized to the violence. They pretend not to care

until one day they stop pretending because that's what they've become: adolescents with no capacity for empathy. It's something I can never get used to. Strange thing for a cop to say, right?'

Morel studied the other man's face. It was an unhealthy shade of grey, creased with fatigue.

'Not strange at all,' he said. 'The day you get used to it is the day you stop being a police officer.'

'Right,' Villot said, as if he'd heard it all before. He walked Morel out.

'Marchal's been in this job for a long time. I guess he doesn't believe an outsider can come in and do the job. No one will talk to you in the *cit *. Tell you the truth about anything, I mean. They'll say whatever it takes to make you go away.'

'I don't think they've been particularly forthcoming with Marchal either. Talking to some of the residents, I didn't get the impression they liked him much. I imagine you're better at establishing some form of rapport with the locals,' Morel added. It was just a guess, but he saw from Villot's face that he'd been right, or that it was the right thing to say, at least.

Villot flicked his cigarette onto the ground, tucked his hands in his pockets and looked away from Morel, towards the street. 'Here's something no one knows about me at work. I grew up in that *cit *. My parents still live there. Forty years in the same apartment. My father worked for the SNCF his entire life, and my mother was a cleaner. She claimed she liked the work because it was straightforward and she didn't need to think. It never entered their minds that there could be more out there. Makes you want to weep, doesn't it?'

'I don't know about that. If they managed to be content with what they had, to keep at it, I'd say that's something to admire.'

‘Admire?’ Villot turned to face Morel again. ‘By the way, whatever I’ve told you, I’ll deny ever saying if someone asks, understand? In my job, it’s impossible to survive alone. I’m fucked if my colleagues turn on me. I have to be able to trust you on this.’

‘You have my word.’

*

Morel started the car, backed out of his spot and waved to Villot, who waved back before heading back into the house. Slowly, he drove to the end of the street and turned left into another. There, where there was no chance of Villot seeing him from his place, he parked the car again and left the engine running while he thought about the conversation he’d just had, and what to do next.

One thing seemed obvious to him. Something was not right with Villot.

He found the number for the police station in Villeneuve and dialed it. When the receptionist answered, he asked to be put through to Marchal.

‘Commandant Morel.’ The tone wasn’t unfriendly, but it was obvious Marchal wasn’t thrilled to hear from him. ‘I was wondering when you’d call.’

‘Marchal. I hope you’re not too busy this morning. I need you to come to the Quai des Orfèvres.’

‘Will this be a formal interview?’

‘A discussion. I’d like to talk to you about Samir.’

‘What time?’ Morel named a time that would allow him to meet with the schoolteacher Luc Clément before heading back to Paris.

‘Before you hang up, Marchal: what can you tell me about Thierry Villot? Why has he been off work?’

‘Why don’t you ask him yourself?’

‘I’m asking you.’

'The man has never taken a break. Ever. The job is his life. So maybe he's reached the point where he needs one.'

'Do you think it has something to do with his wife?'

'What?'

'I understand his wife left him recently.'

'Well if nine years counts as recently, then yes, she did.'

Nine years?

'Maybe something else is bothering him. About the job, for example,' Morel said, thinking about what Villot had told him about the way Marchal had treated Samir. Had Villot stood up to Marchal, made it clear that he wasn't happy with the way Marchal operated? Maybe Villot was being ostracized, or bullied, for not playing along.

But there was Villot's lie to consider as well. Or was it a lie? All he'd said was that his wife had left him, and taken everything. He hadn't said when.

Still. Nine years. That was a long time to live in an empty house, sleeping on a mattress on the floor.

Marchal was saying something, but Morel cut him off.

'I have to go, but I'll see you at my office,' he said, before hanging up.

He got out of the car and walked back towards Villot's house, thinking it might pay to probe the detective further about Marchal. When he got to the front door, he hesitated. How would he approach this? While he framed the questions in his head, he peered through the blinds and saw Villot. He was sitting on one of his two remaining chairs with his hands in his lap, staring into space. He remained like that for a long time, and Morel continued to watch him, until he became aware of what he must look like, spying through the window.

Thierry Villot, visibly, wasn't going anywhere. There would be time to quiz him again later, after talking to Marchal.

Four

The pool was nearly empty. The only people who showed up this early were the dedicated swimmers; the ones who got up when it was still dark, got dressed, then undressed again in the echoing changing rooms before subjecting themselves to mindless laps in the pale, chlorinated water. Lila sat on the edge of the pool and adjusted her bathing cap. In the next lane, a guy built like a fridge was motoring back and forth as though a shark was chasing him. She watched as his face came up at regular intervals, his mouth, shaped like an o. A humourless sort of guy, she decided. But maybe the same could be said for her. She was here, after all, and in a second she would look just like him, minus the build.

She hesitated for a fraction of a second, then slid into the water. It was surprisingly easy. Not as cold as she'd feared. She swam the first lap at a leisurely pace, enjoying the feel of her body stretching, limbs loosening up, before picking up her pace. She hadn't been here often lately but it wasn't as bad as she'd feared. Her muscles were in good working order, and soon she was matching Aquaman's pace. He knew she was racing him - she could tell by the tension in his back, the direction of his face when he came up for air - and still he couldn't overtake her. She couldn't help feeling a bit smug. He was twice her size and yet no better. She might have neglected herself a little these past weeks, but she was still in good shape. Mentally, she was a rock. Physical strength isn't everything, mister, she thought happily. When they both reached the end of the lane, he stopped and raised his goggles to look at her. He gave her a half-smile. *So he noticed*, was her first thought. Her second was that, without the goggles, he was actually kind of cute.

She was about to say something, when she became aware of a pair of familiar shoes, level with her head. Someone was standing over her, at the edge of the pool. 'Hey. The boss wants us.'

'What the fuck, Akil?' she said, pulling her cap off. It was the longest sentence she'd spoken to him in days. 'You couldn't send me a text?'

'This is more fun, surprising you like this,' he said, but he didn't look happy. As Lila pulled herself out of the water, Akil glanced at the man who, just a moment ago had been checking Lila out and was now thrashing the water in the neighbouring lane. Akil cursed him quietly. A sizable part of him hoped the guy would run out of breath, develop a major cramp and drown.

Lila stomped off to the changing rooms. The buoyancy was gone. She found she could barely open her locker, her hand was shaking so much.

A rock? You poor, deluded cow.

*

Antoine's view – delivered several times at the dinner table - was that when you looked at what was going on over there - the bombings, the ambushes and kidnappings, and all the talk of terrorism - you could say that Algeria had created its own mess. But you could just as easily look at the way France exploited its territory for decades while treating the locals as second-class citizens, and conclude that maybe the French held a large chunk of responsibility for the way things turned out.

This was Antoine's view, and Aisha's mother subscribed to it. Aisha wasn't sure it had anything to do with her, but she listened with interest all the same.

One minute, Antoine said, the French were practically begging Algerians to come work in their factories. This was after the Second World War, and later around the time of Algeria's independence, when labour was hard to come by. Next minute, when there wasn't so much work around anymore, the French weren't so keen on their Algerian workers. By then, these men wanted to keep their jobs and were in no hurry to leave. Not only that but they wanted their wives and children to join them, even if the rooms they shacked up in were unsuitable

for families. Antoine said the French government had tried its best to stop this from happening, and failed. It turned out it was against the law to prevent the workers from reuniting with their families, right here in France.

It was, in Antoine's words, a first-class victory for the underdog.

Antoine talked a lot about the underdog, until one day Samir told him to stop insulting migrants by comparing them to animals.

'Who are you calling an underdog?' he said. Aisha's brother had a way of asking a question quietly, like he was being reasonable, that could make you uncomfortable.

'It's just a term, Samir,' Antoine explained. He was genuinely shocked, and apologetic, that Samir felt insulted. 'It's used to signify a person who is expected to lose.'

'So Algerians were losers.'

'That is not what I'm saying at all, and you know it.' Antoine could be forceful, to a degree, when he needed to be. 'The term says more about the point of view of those who think they are in charge and will win. They are the ones who expect the underdog to lose.'

It didn't sound convincing to Aisha but it seemed to appease Samir. Antoine always talked about how special Algeria was. He said his father had been a teacher in Algiers, before he was married. It made total sense to Aisha that Antoine's dad should have been a teacher. Antoine himself talked like he had a roomful of students listening, and a blackboard behind him covered in neat writing, each line perfectly straight and informative.

'It's sometimes easy to forget that Algeria was once France's most prized possession. Just as India was the jewel in the crown of the British Empire, so Algeria was the jewel of French colonies. A territory so rich, Paris claimed it as an integral part of France. Did you know that Algerians fought alongside the French during the Second World War? That there were around 200,000 Algerians in the French army?'

And then Antoine would go on as if talking to himself, and it wasn't always clear what he meant, not to Aisha at least.

'It's sometimes easy to stop thinking for yourself. It's hard to think about what's happening in the world in a rational, intelligent kind of way, because of how Islam is demonized now and how politics and society and the media work. Look at how information is delivered nowadays. And the world has become increasingly polarized on the issue of Muslims and their faith. It's become difficult to hold any position without stating which side you're on. You have to be for or against a thing. That's the world we live in today. But that doesn't mean we should all walk around with blinkers. It's important to remember what's real.'

And so on. Sometimes Antoine just talked about his father and about Algeria. Observing Samir's face in those moments was like watching a child listen to a lullaby. Aisha wondered why it mattered so much. Going by Samir's reaction, you would think he was being praised personally when Antoine spoke of Algeria that way. Whereas to Aisha, Algeria was just a place on the map. Like Russia, or Spain. When she tried to picture it, she saw desert. Infinite sand, and heat. An empty horizon.

There was nothing for her there.

*

As she got ready for school, Aisha thought about Antoine's words and their effect on her brother. Samir hadn't minded Antoine, though the two of them couldn't have been more different. And now she understood why they'd managed to get on despite being so different. Antoine had given Samir self-respect. A sense of belonging.

*

In the kitchen, Antoine was making the coffee. Measuring it, leveling each spoonful to make sure he got the exact amount he wanted. She came into the room and watched him. Antoine

made the place a bit less lonely, and a bit less frightening now Samir was gone, but how long was he going to be around? And what was he supposed to be to her? She hadn't figured out yet what sort of relationship he and her mother had, but it wasn't like with other couples who ate and slept and talked and fought together. When Antoine came over, he slept on the couch. However many nights he stayed, he never brought too many things with him and he never left anything behind. It was like he didn't want to take up space or leave any trace of his presence.

'What do you think happened?' Her question made Antoine jump. 'Sorry, I thought you knew I was here.'

'I didn't. How did you come in here and make so little noise? Would you like coffee?'

'No thanks.'

'What were you saying?'

'I was asking what you think happened to Samir.'

Antoine's hands became still. He looked at the kitchen counter as if he expected to find answers there. 'I don't know,' he said slowly.

It's okay. Forget I asked.'

'No. It's right to ask. We're all wondering, aren't we? And I don't know, but I wonder if he fell in with the wrong people. If he got hurt because of it.'

'You mean Ali and that?' Seeing Antoine's look of consternation, she added, 'I want to talk about it. I need to find answers.'

'It frightens me to hear you talk about Ali. Your mother wouldn't want you to have anything to do with someone like that. Let the police do their job.'

'How do you know they're doing their job?'

'And why do you assume they're not? You said yourself that Morel seems competent, and trustworthy.'

'Yeah well. I haven't seen any proof yet. Meanwhile I can't sit around waiting for things to happen. I miss my brother.'

'I know you do.'

'I want – I need to know what happened. I can't just sit around and do nothing. And so far I've actually found out things that might lead me somewhere. I know he was seeing that girl Yasmina and Yasmina's brother was angry with her and probably with Samir too. He knew they were together all along. I also think Samir was dealing drugs, or something. Why else would he hang out with Ali so much?'

'You've *found out* things? What have you been up to, Aisha? Do you want to get hurt as well? Is that it? And leave your mother all alone? Hasn't she gone through enough?' Aisha stared at him, stunned by the outburst. She'd never seen Antoine like this. So angry for a moment she thought he might hit her.

It didn't last. He sighed, and went over to Aisha. She was surprised to feel his arm around her shoulder.

'I get it, I really do. It's been dreadful...but I want you to stay away from Ali and those guys. The idea of you wandering around the estate questioning people about Samir's death, well, frankly, it scares me.'

She didn't say anything, and eventually Antoine moved away from her and reached for the coffee cups.

'I'd better get going,' she said.

'Where?'

'School, where else?'

'Aisha, I doubt many people will be at school today. You're better off staying home.'

'I'm going to school. So are all my friends.'

Antoine looked skeptical. 'Which of your friends is staying home?'

She wanted to tell him to mind his own business, that he wasn't her father. He had no authority in this house. Her mother came into the kitchen and sat down. Antoine handed her a cup, which she took from him in silence. Her eyes were like two black holes and her clothes were the same things she'd been wearing for three days now. Aisha wanted to ask when she'd had a shower last but she couldn't talk to her mother, not when she was like this.

'Loubna would probably prefer it if you stayed home.'

'I seriously doubt that.' Aisha pulled up a chair and poured milk into a glass.

'Maman?' She asked casually. 'You don't mind me going to school do you?' Her mother stared blankly and Aisha raised her hands. 'See? She doesn't mind.'

Antoine shook his head. 'Let me drive you at least.'

'You're joking, right?'

'No. Have you been paying attention? Riots. People getting hurt. A policeman's a cripple now because of what's happened. So much violence. It's not safe on the street.'

'And you're going to protect me? Is that it?'

'There's no need to get angry. I care about you and your mother and I want you to be safe. I do what I can.'

Aisha lowered her eyes. 'Sorry.'

Aisha went to get her jacket. Antoine followed her into the hallway and put his hand on her arm. 'Just indulge me. Your mother's lost Samir. She couldn't cope with losing you as well.'

'Okay. But I need to leave in the next five minutes. I have a meeting with my philosophy teacher before class.'

'What for?'

'School project. I just need to talk to him about it.'

'Oh.' While Antoine got ready, Aisha texted Luc Clément.

Being dropped off at the school by family friend. Can't meet elsewhere.

Fine. Will find you when you get here.

She didn't want to meet him before class, it was too near the school and someone was bound to see them talking. But he knew something about Samir. Despite her best intentions, and everything she had told Karim, she had no clue how to proceed. Where did you start, and how did you ask the right questions so that people might give you the truth?

Five

'What is it? What did you want to tell me?'

They were too close to the school, but there was no time to go anywhere else. Luc Clément wished he'd never asked her to meet him. Now she was here he found he couldn't say what he wanted. Aisha stood with her arms wrapped around her shoulders, tense and unhappy. She was close, physically, but so inaccessible she might as well have been in a different country.

'How are you feeling?' he asked. A foolish question, but at least it made her look at him.

'I don't want to stand around here for too long. If someone sees us ...'

'Right, of course. Look, I don't know whether it's relevant, and I don't intend to say anything to the police when I talk to them today ...'

'You're talking to the police? Why?'

'They called. A Commandant Morel. He's coming to the school today. He wants to talk to me. I expect he's talking to Samir's teachers too.'

Aisha relaxed her stance a little. 'I know him.' She frowned. 'What does he want with you?'

Luc Clément stumbled over his words. 'I'm not sure. Maybe – my guess is they're talking to a lot of different people.'

'Why you, though?' Aisha insisted. 'You didn't even know Samir.'

'That's what I want to talk to you about. I've been meaning – I saw something, a couple of days before your brother was killed. Someone was talking to him...'

'Who? Was this at school?' She was listening but she was also distracted, on the lookout for people who might know them.

'Maybe we should talk another time,' he suggested. Her nervousness was beginning to rub off on him.

'Just say what you came to say.'

'Okay. A few days before your brother died, I saw him with the police. It was early, I was on my way in and it was dark. I was looking for a place to park and drove past them.'

'I don't understand. The *keufs* were talking to Samir? I know he'd been in trouble with them...'

'This was different. Samir and this policeman, they were sitting in the car – not a police car. The policeman was sitting in the driver's seat and Samir was in the passenger seat. I remember finding it strange. The two of them sitting there, smoking together. Relaxed, like two friends.'

'There's no way Samir was friends with a *keuf*. I don't understand. Why are you telling me this?'

'Because they're going to ask me if I knew Samir and if I know anything that might help the investigation, and I'll have to say –'

'Why?' The suddenness of Aisha's anger surprised them both. 'Why do you have to tell them anything? Why does that story matter?' She looked at him with something close to despair.

'I'm really sorry, Aisha. I'm not trying to make your life any more trying than it is now. Believe me, I wish I hadn't seen anything. I've spent a lot of time wondering what to do with this information. Until now, I've mostly been worried about you. How you're coping with all this.'

Aisha wasn't listening. Her mind was on what he'd seen. 'Wait. How do you know the other man was police? If it wasn't a police car.'

‘Didn’t I say? It was that detective. Marchal. The one from Villeneuve who was in charge of the investigation, before Morel took over.’

*

Vincent dropped his girls off at school and drove to the address Lila had passed on for Manon Volkoff, or Bijou, as she preferred to be called. The apartment was on Avenue Mozart, in the 16th *arrondissement*. He parked outside her building and looked up to see if there was any sign of life. According to Lila, Bijou lived on the third floor. Vincent turned the car heater up, delaying the moment when he would have to get out and face the cold. This morning, the girls had woken up earlier than usual and rushed out in their dressing-gowns to play in the snow. He’d been harsh with them, ordering them back inside to get dressed and eat their breakfast.

He wished now that he’d let them have their fun instead of being so uptight.

The building Bijou lived in was a grand affair. Her apartment would be worth millions, Vincent guessed. He didn’t like this area. It was dull and exclusive, a *quartier* of little old ladies walking their expensive dogs and nannies shepherding children dressed in Bonpoint and Cacharel. At night, it was dead. Vincent thought about his two-bedroom flat in Rue Lepic, where the bustle and noise were incessant. Many of the *commerçants* had lived and worked there for years. The Arab grocer, the Armenian florist, the Breton, who ran the bar downstairs and was emphysemic, but encouraged his customers to smoke, given he no longer could. They all knew Vincent by name. And he knew that this was what had kept him going, in the dark months following his wife’s death. To be connected to life, whether you liked it or not. It was all around you, pulling you back from the abyss. He wouldn’t swap his messy, chaotic pocket of the city for anything.

It was time to visit Bijou. Before getting out of the car, Vincent texted Morel to let him know where he was and that he would head into work straight after. A man walked past the

car, carrying a briefcase. Outside Bijou's building, he punched in a four-digit code and pushed the *porte cochère*. Vincent hurried after him, reaching the door just before it closed again.

He waited in the stairwell, listening to the other man's steps on the stone tiles.

He made his way up, waiting for the sound of a door opening. Eventually, he heard it. The man had entered a flat on the third floor. Could it be Bijou's place? There were only two apartments on each floor. Vincent reached the landing and paused again, outside the flat he knew was hers. Apartment 6. He could hear voices inside. The woman's, shrill, and the man's, low at first, then rising until hers was drowned out. Vincent knocked, and the voices immediately stopped. No one came, so he knocked again. The door opened this time and Bijou appeared, teary and disheveled.

'Good morning, my name is Vincent Laborde, I'm with the *brigade criminelle*. You've met my colleague Lila. I wondered if I could come in?'

'Why? I've already told your colleague all I know.'

'What do you want?' The man had appeared behind her, and he looked like he was ready to slam the door shut. Vincent moved into the doorway to prevent that from happening.

'Your name, Monsieur?' he asked.

'Why should I tell you?'

'He's with the police,' Bijou said, looking anxiously from one to the other.

'If you're a friend, perhaps you'd like to accompany Madame down to the station,' Vincent told the man. 'We'd like to ask her a few questions, as part of a murder investigation.'

'A *friend*? I'm her husband.'

The man took a step forward. Vincent tensed. The two of them were unnaturally close to each other now. Was he going to have to get into a fight? What happened next took him by surprise. The other man shoved him onto the landing and stepped back into the apartment.

'Piss off,' he said, and slammed the door.

Vincent stared at the door in disbelief. He wanted to laugh, and also to pound at the door. 'I guess I'll be back with a locksmith,' he said loudly. 'And you'll be paying. Unless you open up right now. Either way, we're having a talk, you and I.'

Morel's meeting with Luc Clément, shortly after the start of the school day, was brief and illuminating. Now, he was impatient to get back to the *Crim'* and quiz Marchal. He had considered speaking with Marchal here in Villeneuve to save himself the trouble of driving back to Paris, but he felt it was important to talk to the other detective outside his territory. Here, Marchal was far too confident.

What the schoolteacher had told him cast a new light on the investigation. If what he described was true – Marchal and Samir together in an unmarked car, chatting and seemingly at ease with each other – then the relationship was not what Marchal had led Morel to believe it was. Neither was it how Thierry Villot had described it.

It wasn't confrontational. It was an alliance.

*

'Take a seat.'

Marchal smiled. 'That sounds serious. Should I be worried?'

'It depends.' In his mind, Morel was ticking off a long list of people he still needed to talk to. Karim Bensoussan. Ali and Réza. Yasmina, the girl Samir had been seeing. He'd tasked Akil and Jean with searching for the Roma who had left the camp. He had a feeling they would get nowhere and was cursing himself for not approaching Georghe's family earlier.

'Romain, I'm not in the best of moods,' he told Marchal. The detective didn't seem to like being addressed by his first name. Morel decided to keep it up. 'I've got a big day ahead of me, Romain. I'd like this interview to be productive.'

'Fine with me.' Lila stuck her head around the corner of the Chinese screen, which Morel used to separate his desk from the others in the room. Her hair was still wet from the pool and she was flushed. Morel suspected it had something to do with Akil. 'I got your

message,' she said. 'Nice of you to send someone, but you could have just texted.' The tone was lost on Marchal, whose attention was focused on Morel.

'I hear the mayor's visiting the *cit * today.' Marchal cocked his head, amused. 'I hope she's not expecting flowers. She's not very popular around there.'

'It's probably good for her show her face. Part of the job description,' Morel replied. It annoyed him that Marchal knew about the mayoral visit and he didn't.

Marchal leaned back in his chair, crossed his legs, and examined his surroundings. 'You weren't kidding when you said this building needed work. Looks much better from the outside. But it's the Quai des Orf vres, after all. Who cares if it's a bit shabby.' No one bothered to comment. Marchal seemed untroubled. He pointed to the window. 'The view's a bit more uplifting from where you sit, than back in Villeneuve. Mind if I smoke?' He pulled a packet of cigarettes from his jacket.

'Yes, we do mind,' Lila retorted. 'You can't smoke in the building. I'm pretty sure it must be the same in your building. All buildings.'

Marchal slid the cigarettes back in his pocket 'The rules are a bit different in Villeneuve. A lot of things are. Different, I mean.'

'Yeah, I know. People get killed more often.' Marchal and Lila held each other's gaze until Morel spoke.

'Romain. That day I came into the station and reported Samir was missing, why didn't you say you knew him?'

'Should I have? Why?'

'You deliberately pretended not to know who he was.'

'I didn't see how it was relevant, or any of your business at the time.'

'It's my business now.'

'Good for you. And good luck. You'll need it.'

‘When did you last see Samir?’

Marchal stretched his legs and sighed. ‘I don’t remember. Some weeks ago. Yes, it must be three, four weeks ago.’

‘Where was it?’

‘What do you mean? At the station. I needed information. Samir worked for one of the dealers on the estate, someone we’ve had our eye on.’

‘Who?’ Ali?’ Morel asked. Marchal raised an eyebrow. ‘So you’ve met Ali.’

‘Not yet. What exactly did Samir do for Ali?’

‘Let’s just say he was one of Ali’s minions,’ Marchal explained, doing his best to look bored. ‘It’s a rite of passage. The younger ones have to earn Ali’s trust by running his errands, keeping a look-out when transactions are taking place. That sort of thing. I expect Samir was on a couple of hundred a day – my guess is he wasn’t smart or ambitious enough to ask for more – but I’ve seen kids as young as 12 earning twice as much as that, doing the same sort of work. Earning in a week what I’d earn in a month. Easy money, right?’

‘So easy he’s now dead,’ Lila interjected.

Marchal’s expression darkened. ‘It’s a shame. But I’m not going to cry over a boy who was helping to sell drugs to his school mates.’ He was trying too hard to sound like he didn’t care, Morel thought.

‘Tell us about the last time you saw him.’

‘I’m happy to do that, but to be frank with you the last time I saw Samir was like so many other times he ended up with us at the station that I’m going to struggle to remember that particular encounter.’

‘How about I help jog your memory,’ Morel offered. ‘I think the last time you saw the boy was when the two of you met up outside the station. This was about a week ago. You sat together in a car, not far from the school. What did you talk about?’

Marchal's expression didn't change. 'You seem to know a lot about it already. Why don't you tell me what we talked about.'

'Okay. I'll tell you what I think, Romain. Samir was there to deliver information. Willingly, of course. You two had an arrangement. What went on at the station – the way you treated him – was just for show. To make sure no one knew he was your informant.'

Marchal gave an impatient sigh. 'You've got it all wrong, Morel. I was doing the boy a favour. There were complaints about some of the boys on the estate slashing tyres, overturning bins. Keeping residents awake. I thought I'd have a quiet word with Samir. Bringing him in didn't seem to do much good. I thought I'd try something different. So I drove around to the estate and picked him up as he was heading to school.'

Morel considered this. It made no sense to him. 'Why would you do Samir any favours?' he asked.

Marchal shrugged. 'This is my job, Morel. I have to try to keep these kids out of trouble.' Seeing the look on Morel's face, he added, 'Look, I'll admit I also hoped to win him over. To get closer to Ali. But there was no arrangement between us.'

'Who filed the complaints?'

'We got a call. Many of the locals just want a peaceful existence. They get fed up with these kids. Some of them would probably like to take justice into their own hands. We try to discourage them.'

'So this particular time...' Morel prompted.

'I got an anonymous call. This guy, saying he would deal with these bastards himself if no one came and got them. His words, not mine. So I went to the estate and found Samir. We went for a drive.'

'Who initiated the acts of vandalism?' Morel asked.

'Who do you think? Samir. It wasn't the first time.'

'So let me get this straight.' Morel thought about what the schoolteacher had said and tried to reconcile it with this. 'The last time you saw Samir, you two had a nice chat. You tried to convince him to mend his ways, and to get him to talk to you about Ali. How did he respond?'

'As expected. I didn't get very far. And I wouldn't call it a nice chat, exactly. He wasn't a *nice* kid.'

'In what way?'

Marchal looked at his watch. 'In what way? Let me see. He was smug. Uncooperative. He seemed to think he was invincible. Above the law. He acted like nothing and no one mattered. Like the world had done him wrong and owed him, somehow.'

'It can't have been easy for him, living without a father. Growing up in that *cité*,' Lila said.

'He had a mother and sister who doted on him. A decent home. That fellow who's there a lot – what's his name? Carrère, right? Antoine Carrère. He took care of Samir too. Tried to be his friend. No, I won't feel sorry for the boy. He was a cocky little bastard.'

'Good riddance, then, I guess.'

Marchal remained unmoved. 'I told you. It's a shame. But trust me, that kid had trouble written all over him. You could see it.'

'What did you tell Samir, exactly?' Morel asked. 'That you could help him, if he helped you?'

'All I did was tell him he was making the wrong choices.' He looked from Morel to Lila, shaking his head. 'You're wasting your time talking to me. I've got nothing to do with what happened to the kid.'

Morel ignored Marchal's comment, 'Earlier today, I asked you about your colleague Thierry Villot. How would you describe your relationship with Villot?'

'How would I describe it? Well, I'd say we trust each other. You have to, in that environment. Have each other's back, I mean.' Marchal clapped his hands on his knees, as if to say the interview was over. 'Look, I need to get going. We're done, right?'

'Sure, you can go,' Morel said. Lila looked surprised. 'Oh, and one more thing: I'd like it if you emailed me any interview notes relating to Samir. Going back to the first time you detained him. When was that?'

'God knows. I'd say about a year, a year and a half ago,' Marchal replied. 'That's a big ask.'

'As soon as you can. I'd appreciate it.'

'Sure. It's your investigation now. And to be frank, I'm glad to be rid of it. Whatever you manage to find, no one's going to thank you for it.'

As soon as they'd seen him off, Lila exploded. 'Why the hell did we let him go? He didn't tell us a thing.'

'I didn't expect him to,' Morel said. 'And I don't think it would help to keep him here any longer. He isn't going to be more forthcoming. But it did help to give me a better sense of things. I think Marchal was fixated on Samir, like Villot said. Trying to break him, by cajoling him one minute and bullying him the next. What I don't know is whether Samir talked. That's quite important. It gives us motive. If this dealer Ali thought Samir was talking to the police...'

'He'd hurt him.'

Morel sighed. 'Blatant lies, and half-truths,' he said quietly. 'That's all we've been getting.' He glanced at Lila. 'Marchal, Villot. They're lying through their teeth. Aisha and her family don't want to know or don't want to say what Samir was really about. No one in their building wants to reveal anything they might know. My guess is we probably won't have much luck with the Roma either.'

He grabbed his coat. 'Where are you going?' Lila asked.

'There's one person who hasn't deliberately evaded us. I'm going to see if I can get some answers.' Frustrated, she watched him leave.

'Well, are you coming?' he called out. He was already halfway down the stairs. Hurriedly, she threw her jacket on and followed him out the door.

Seven

Akil and Jean walked through the Roma encampment, looking for signs of life even though it was clear everyone had left. Jean peered into one of the homes. 'Jesus, take a look at this, Akil.' The younger detective stepped past Jean into a room – that's all it was, a single room, boarded up against the cold – that looked like it had been used as a rubbish tip. Nothing useful had been left behind. Daily necessities – clothes, kitchen utensils, linen – the Roma had taken it all with them.

'They sure know how to pack quickly.'

'They've had lots of practice. How's things with Lila?'

Akil grinned. 'I was wondering when that would come up. Let's just say things are ... uneasy.'

'That's okay then. That's the sort of relationship she has with most people. You still keen on her?'

Akil laughed.

'Sorry, none of my business.'

'No it's not that. Just that it isn't as simple as all that, you know?'

'I do.' Jean took a tobacco pouch from his pocket and began rolling a cigarette. 'Believe me, I do.'

They walked over to the garage that stood next to the encampment. The fire trucks must have got here in time: somehow, the building had been spared.

Inside, a man was tidying up, filling a cardboard box with tools. Jean noticed that the place looked half empty.

'You're closing shop?'

'Without customers, there is no shop,' the man scratched at his stubble, seemingly unfazed by the appearance of two detectives in his garage.

'Everyone left pretty quickly,' Akil stated.

The garage owner looked at him carefully. 'When there is a big fire on your property, it is best to leave fast, no?'

'True. I can't argue with that. Do you know where they all went?'

'I don't know. You are the police, you can find.' When he spoke to Akil, his attitude became hostile. Jean stepped in.

'The people that lived in the camp, they were your customers?'

'Some. I am from Romania, they are also. We speak the same language. This is good for business.'

To Jean, it didn't look like business had ever been particularly good, but he kept quiet about it. 'I'm sure it helps,' he said instead. 'Why didn't you follow them?'

'They're leaving so quickly. One minute here, the next –' he made a sound to indicate they'd vanished into thin air. 'They are my customers. Not my family. Understand?'

'Without your customers, how do you plan to survive? Or is this home?'

The Romanian looked at Jean as if he'd said something strange. 'Home? I am leaving too now. What else can I do here?'

'Did you know the family of the boy who died? Georghe?'

'Yes. Of course. I know everyone in this place. Georghe's family too.'

'Any idea who hurt him?'

The man smiled, bearing a row of tobacco-stained teeth.

'What's funny?' Akil asked.

'This question. Is funny. Everyone knows who did this.'

'Why didn't anyone tell the police, if they knew?' Akil asked.

The man snorted, and turned to Jean. 'Your colleague, he is new? Or comedian, maybe. Maybe he is thinking we *gigans* can go to police station and everyone there is welcoming us with open arms and listening to our problems. Maybe giving us big hugs and thanking us for coming.'

'I understand what you're saying,' Jean replied, not giving Akil a chance to respond. 'But we are here to listen and we'll believe what you tell us. So tell us now, if you know. Who did this to Georghe?'

'Why? What benefit to me?'

'You're leaving, right? Don't you want to help put Georghe's killer in jail? No one will know you talked to us. And we'll make sure that person doesn't get away with beating a 12 year-old boy to within an inch of his life, then leaving him to die in the freezing cold.'

It was the right choice of words. The man didn't hesitate for long. He made a sign to indicate something big, then flexed the muscle of his left arm.

'Big black man. I seen him before around here. He and his friends like to come and make trouble. He is telling the others what to do and they listen. He drives the car to come here and call Georghe out of his home. The friends watch this. They drag him into car and leave.'

'What kind of car?'

'I don't know. I was not there. My friend, he see everything.'

'Where's your friend?' Jean asked, knowing the answer. The Romanian made a gesture to indicate the man had vanished, along with the other Roma.

'That was the last time someone saw Georghe. Until the next time, when he is dead.'

'Any idea why they took him?'

'They call Georghe a thief. Say he take some stuff from them.'

'What stuff?'

'You think I know? I don't ask. I only know what I tell you.'

'If we bring you a photo, can you identify this man for us? The one who was the leader of the group?'

'Photo?' The man laughed. 'What for? I think you already know this man. No need for photo. Everyone on the estate knows him.'

'His name?'

'Big, black man,' the mechanic repeated, as if that were enough. As if a name was more than this person deserved. 'African. Drug dealer. Big, black bully. In my country, I and my friends, we take this man to an alley and we beat the shit out of him.'

There was a silence, during which the two detectives reflected on the Romanian's choice of words. The man, meanwhile, was looking at Akil as if he embodied all the problems of a multicultural world.

'Where will you go now?' Jean asked, keen to wrap things up.

'Somewhere.' The Romanian shrugged. 'Anywhere. Makes no difference.'

*

It took several minutes for Joao Figueras to open the door. Morel had expected him not to remember them, but he gave a big smile and gestured for them to enter.

'Nice to see you again,' he said. The television was on. Figueras went to turn it off. He sat down, expectant.

'What can I help you with?'

'Last time we were here,' Morel began, 'you mentioned someone who was there the night Samir died. It can't have been Samir because he was wearing jeans. You said it was someone wearing corduroy trousers and a red sweater...'

'I did?' Figueras seemed disconcerted. 'Who was it?'

‘Well that’s what I hoped we might be able to clear up today,’ Morel said patiently, while Lila stared into the distance, looking like she was willing herself not to breathe. A single breath, and she was bound to start sneezing again.

‘You said,’ Morel continued, ‘that this person lived in this building and now they were gone. What exactly –’ He stopped suddenly, and swore.

‘What?’ Lila asked. ‘*What?*’

‘Let’s go,’ Morel told her. He thanked Figueras, who asked whether they were here because of the songwriting contest. ‘I’m afraid we’re not. But you’ve been incredibly helpful. More than you know.’ Morel shook his hand and steered Lila towards the door.

‘Are you going to tell me what’s going on?’ she asked once they were back on the landing.

He started down the stairs and she followed. ‘Well?’

‘I think I know who was with Samir the night he died,’ he said, keeping his voice low. ‘The man Figueras saw when he was out walking his dog. Figueras didn’t know him, not well. Not as the adult he is now. But his long-term memory is still sharp and when he saw the man, something jogged his memory and he remembered the child, who *once lived in this building*. Remember, he told us this was someone who lived here and then went away. That distant memory stayed with him somehow. When he was trying to tell us about Samir and the person he saw, he became confused and merged the present with the past, telling us about his brother. What confused him among other things, was that this person did belong in his past.’

‘Who are you talking about?’ Lila asked, exasperated. By then they were in the hallway, on the ground floor.

‘Thierry Villot,’ Morel said. ‘Thierry, who grew up right here, in the *cit *. That’s who Figueras saw with Samir that night.’

*

The mayor stepped gingerly across the slippery surface in shoes that were wholly unsuited to the circumstances and to the weather conditions, followed by her press attaché and a bevy of reporters.

‘You’re sure this is a good idea?’ Roland asked. He was like a faithful old dog, keeping close to her side. Always ready to listen, and offer advice, if she wanted it. He also knew how to keep quiet. It was comforting, in a sense, though she sometimes got the disagreeable impression that he stuck to her like this because he had nowhere else to be.

She hadn’t intended to come here initially. When she’d decided, she’d told Roland to call the press. ‘Last minute, I know. Do your best.’ He knew her well enough not to question it. Besides, she wasn’t in the mood for careful considerations. The time for all the usual bullshit – a communications plan, a risk analysis, some key messages and media prepping before going – had long since past. ‘I have to be there. I’m the mayor, for fuck’s sake.’ She would not sit in her office doing nothing. The interior minister, the prosecutor, the reporters with their snarky questions. They all wanted something specific from her. Well they could all go to hell. This was her *cité*.

‘Okay, so I’m here now,’ she told the people gathered around her, who’d left the warmth of their homes to hear her speak. Mostly these were the older residents, though she detected some of the younger people, keeping their distance, a few of them laughing at the sight of her and her entourage. But they were curious, or they wouldn’t be here. There was no way of telling how they’d react to her and she felt some trepidation. She hadn’t thought this through. For a start, she should have picked a more subtle shade of lipstick, and more sensible shoes.

Two nights of rioting. That’s all it was so far, but it felt like a lifetime. In total, 87 cars set alight, and the nearest welfare centre, three kilometres from the tower blocks, torched as well. A smashed ATM machine outside a BNP Paribas branch, around the corner from the

police station. She hadn't slept much over the past 48 hours and as a result her surroundings took on a vaguely nightmarish quality, like one of those places you ended up in a dream, searching for a way out.

The Roma camp, reduced to ashes. They had left ahead of the flames. That was the one piece of good news. No casualties in that camp, and she couldn't help thinking that now Villeneuve was freed of one problem at least. Let another suburb deal with them.

'They're waiting to hear something from you.' said Roland, leaning towards her so that for a frightful second she thought he might be about to kiss her. But she realized what he was saying. There was silence. She needed to seize the moment. She cleared her throat. 'I have no agenda. I'm not going to bore you with the same words and speeches you've heard a hundred times. What would be the point of that? When was the last time a politician dropped by to hear what you had to say? No, I'm not interested in making speeches. Instead, I'm going to listen.' The heckling started, but there were expectant faces too, waiting to see what might happen next.

Eight

The bell rang, announcing the end of the lunch break, and Aisha headed for her classroom, not making eye contact. It was easier to be here today, with so many people away. The hallways were unusually quiet. Many of the kids had seized the opportunity – two consecutive nights of rioting - to stay away. Aisha much preferred being here than at home with Antoine and her mother. But she was acutely conscious of being alone. She had only ever had a handful of good friends, but ever since Samir's death, even they seemed to be going out of their way to avoid her. As if death was contagious.

On her way to class, she ran into Karim. The look on his face when he realized it was her spoke volumes: he would rather be anywhere else right now than here with her.

'Karim! Why the hell aren't you responding to my texts? We need to talk. Have you found out anything?'

'Not yet.' He seemed nervous, his eyes darting about the corridor.

'What's going on?'

'Have you been talking to anyone?' he asked.

'I told you I was going to investigate. And guess what? I know who Samir was seeing,' she replied triumphantly. 'I've even met her.'

'Really?' For a moment, he seemed to forget how nervous he was. He looked impressed. 'Who is it?'

'A girl called Yasmina. She lives with her kid, and her brother, who knew she was seeing Samir. He beat her up for it. And he knew the whole time they were seeing each other. Imagine how angry he must have been with Samir.' Aisha hesitated, then dropped her voice to a whisper. 'I told the Paris detective. So he could check it out.'

'You're talking to the police?'

'Why wouldn't I? They're looking for the person who killed Samir. I have to talk to them don't I? And another thing. Guess who else was there when Yasmina's brother beat her up?'

Karim looked like he didn't want to guess, or know, but Aisha pressed on.

'It was Réza,' she said, her voice dropping to a whisper. 'Réza was there. He wanted her punished for what she'd done.'

Before she knew what was happening, Karim had grabbed her arm and pulled her close, until his lips were right up against her ear.

'Are you out of your fucking mind? Do you want to end up like Samir, is that it?'

She wanted to reply, to tell him not to worry, but there was no time. A teacher opened a classroom door, spotted them, and gestured for them both to step closer. 'Monsieur Bensoussan, I'm sure you and Mademoiselle Kateb are having a delightful exchange but if you could grace us with your presence in the classroom, I'd be infinitely grateful. Now.'

'I'll catch you later,' Karim told Aisha.

She found her own classroom and sat at her desk, aware that heads had turned as soon as she walked in. Towards the back of the classroom where she sat, Katarina muttered something to her friends and they giggled in unison, casting glances her way, just to make sure she knew who they were talking about. There was no sign yet of Luc Clément. She concentrated on her textbook and thought about what he had told her outside the school earlier. She couldn't make any sense of it. What did it mean that her brother had sat in a car with that Marchal, talking like they were friends? If it was true, and she still found it hard to believe, then there could be nothing good about it. Maybe Luc Clément had misread the situation. Wasn't it more likely that the policeman had been trying to put pressure on her brother? Yes. That had to be it. But then what had Samir done, and said under pressure? She thought about Ali. Somehow, he was a part of all this. She needed to talk to him. Without Réza

around. The thought of confronting Ali was frightening enough without adding Réza to the mix.

‘Sorry I’m late.’ Luc Clément dropped his satchel on his desk and grabbed a piece of chalk. He wrote “man is wolf to man” in large letters, then turned to face the classroom. He looked at everyone in turn, and when his gaze fell on Aisha, something passed between them. It was crystal clear, like the loudest of conversations, and Aisha felt the impact of it through her veins. Warmth, friendship. Love. She was thankful that no one seemed to notice.

‘We are,’ he articulated slowly and with a sweeping gesture across the room, ‘primitive beings. We are selfish creatures, driven by emotion. Each and everyone of us is capable of violence.’ Aisha thought about her brother and about the person who had planted a knife in his body, over and over again, and felt sick. ‘But,’ Luc Clément continued, ‘we are also rational beings. With the ability to think and to learn. The ability to adapt. We have long understood the need for, and importance of, a social contract. This contract is what makes it possible for us to live together. It protects us, to some extent but not entirely, from misery. This is why laws are so important. When you break the contract, there is no order. Only chaos, fear, and isolation.’

The class listened. No one interrupted or dozed or looked elsewhere. It seemed that today, the teacher had everyone’s attention.

Throughout Luc Clément’s talk, he didn’t once look at Aisha. But she had no doubt he was speaking to her. About Samir. She thought about the look he’d given her moments earlier. There had been nothing in it but kindness.

But all she could focus on right now was the impact of his words.

When you break the contract, there is no order. Only chaos, fear, and isolation.

*

The morning went by quickly. At recess, Aisha hung out in the courtyard with Mélodie, who had been distant lately but now was looking for someone to boast to about a guy she liked, who had invited her to stay with him in Paris for the weekend.

‘He lives in the Opéra area, you know what I mean? Like, if you come out of the metro station and go down the boulevard, then take the second left. That’s what he said. You should see his place, he showed me photos. From the balcony you can see the Galeries Lafayette. And he drives a Mercedes and runs his own business. Last year he went to the Maldives on holiday. He says he might take me there someday.’

Aisha’s mind was on other things but she began listening, suddenly worried about what she was hearing. ‘It sounds dodgy, Mélodie. How did you meet this guy? What’s this business of his? At this, Mélodie started to look shifty. ‘None of *your* business,’ she said.

Aisha felt like reminding Mélodie about the girl from school whom they’d both known by name, even if they’d never spoken to her. She’d been sixteen years old and popular with the boys, but never interested in any of them. Then she’d gone with some guy from Paris who had a nice car and next thing everyone knew, she’d disappeared. Months later, someone had spotted her near the périph’ at Porte de Clignancourt, standing on the side of the road all tarted up in high heels and a mini-skirt. Aisha had since spoken with her sister, who was a couple of years younger. She’d told Aisha once that her parents no longer talked about their eldest daughter. They acted as though she’d died.

At lunchtime, Aisha sat on her own. She kept hearing her name, spoken in whispers, and catching people looking her way, but maybe they weren’t, maybe she was being paranoid. Halfway through the lunch break, Virginie, the counsellor, came looking for her. ‘I thought we were catching up today?’ she said. Aisha replied that she would rather meet another time and Virginie smiled as if to say it was okay, but her face told a different story. Aisha hated the way she did that, managed to make you feel guilty while pretending to be stoic about it.

She'd done her best to avoid Katarina but when it was time to head home, the hyenas were right there, keeping pace with Aisha on the other side of the road like they normally did.

'Hey, *bougnoule*,' Katarina called out. 'What's with the modern clothes? Shouldn't you be wearing that thing, you know, the potato sack thing your Mum wears? Those are some flattering clothes. I bet you look real nice wearing a potato sack.' The other girls burst out laughing at that.

Seriously? Even knowing Katarina was a bitch, Aisha couldn't believe she was doing this, so soon after Samir's death.

'Knock yourself out, Katarina,' she said. 'Do your worst. I really don't care.'

'You think I care?' Katarina replied feebly.

'I think you care more than I do. I'm not the one following you around. That's you. Tagging after me. You're pretty persistent, for someone who doesn't care.'

Aisha thought she heard the hyenas collectively draw in their breath, shocked at her boldness. She found herself smiling. For the first time, she wasn't afraid. What could Katarina possibly do to hurt her more than she was already? She'd lost her brother. There was nothing that girl could take from her now that mattered.

For a while, there were no more taunts. Katarina and her friends continued walking across the road, keeping pace with Aisha. After a few moments, the abuse started again, and the stupid giggling from the other girls. The gang crossed the road and ended up in front of her, walking backwards so they were facing her. Aisha kept her eyes firmly on the ground. No matter what, she told herself, she wouldn't ever give Katarina the satisfaction again of thinking she had the advantage.

They were close to the estate when Katarina moved closer, forcing her to stop.

'Aisha,' she said. Her voice was soft and quiet, as if she was about to tell Aisha something nice or secret, something just for her. 'I've been meaning to say this. I mean, he was your brother and all that. I wouldn't have picked it.'

Such cold, blue eyes. Aisha found she couldn't look away. 'I mean, he was so persistent it was kind of annoying. He sure didn't get what "no" meant. In the end I had to give in.'

It felt like everything had gone quiet all of a sudden. Where were Katarina's friends? Was anyone laughing? What were they doing? All Aisha knew was Katarina's face, so close she could see every detail. The pimples, the cold sore on her lip, the studs in her ears. Her cold blue stare. She didn't believe what she was hearing for a second, and yet the strange part was that, at the same time, she did. There was no contradiction there. She didn't believe it, but she knew. Had known for a long time, somehow, but refused to make it real by ever saying it.

The anger was like a wave of nausea. It churned inside her, rising fast, and she couldn't do anything to hold it down. The blood was pounding in her head and when she opened her mouth to speak it was as though all the saliva had gone from her mouth. It was an effort to get the words out.

'What did you say?'

'Your brother. Samir. He didn't take no for an answer. So in the end I had to give in. Turns out he was worth it. With those lips, I should have known he'd be the best kisser in the school.'

'You're a fucking liar,' Aisha said, and without a moment's thought she threw herself at Katarina and was tearing at her hair, and Katarina was shouting abuse at her, trying to shove her off and get away. But Aisha knew that nothing on earth would make her let go and she kept tearing, and punching, with every ounce of strength in her body. Katarina flailed and kicked and eventually managed to free one hand. She pinched her arm so hard Aisha cried out. With her hand in Katarina's hair, Aisha pulled the other girl's head close to hers and sank

her teeth into her cheek. She tasted blood and heard someone scream, a high-pitched sound that didn't sound quite human, before a pair of strong arms grabbed her from behind and pulled her away.

Morel and Lila drove to Thierry Villot's house. They knocked and looked through the windows to see if he was home. There was no sign of life. Morel tried Villot's mobile number. The call went straight to voicemail. He called the Villeneuve police station. The receptionist told him Villot had called in sick again.

'What now? Any idea where he might be?' Lila asked.

'Maybe he's just stepped out for a while.'

Morel's mobile rang. It was Jean, calling to let him know about the Roma camp and what the garage owner had said. 'Sounds like Ali is our guy. He killed Georghe.'

'Well done. We've had a bit of a breakthrough as well,' Morel said. He briefed Jean on Thierry Villot. 'I think he was there when Samir died.'

'You think he killed him?'

'If he did, I don't yet know why. All I know is that we need to find him. Quickly.'

Morel tried to think where he might look for Villot. Maybe he'd gone out for groceries and would be back home soon. Or maybe he'd gone away. It was hard to make sense of any of this. If Villot was the killer, what was his motive?

'Shall we bring Ali in?' Jean asked.

'Yes, but we'll have to do this together. It isn't going to be easy.' He suggested that the four of them meet up outside the tower blocks. 'We'll head there now.'

*

Vincent had persuaded Bijou's husband to open the door – it was either that or letting a police officer bang on your door until every one in the building knew your business – and he was sitting in their living-room now, drinking a cup of bitter coffee that the man had offered in a chastened manner, as if he realized now how inappropriate his behaviour had been.

He had calmed right down and was eager to clear things up, he said.

He'd introduced himself as Gérard. Sitting close to his wife, with his arm around her waist, he explained that he was just back from an overseas trip to Singapore.

'These past months have been hell,' he said. 'That bastard Simic. He's been harassing Bijou with calls and texts, begging to see her. He's out of his mind.'

'You and Bijou met Simic and his wife at the club?'

Gérard nodded. 'It was all just a bit of fun. We met three or four times. Valérie is an amazing woman. She was completely wasted on that guy.'

'Right.' Vincent glanced at Bijou. What was she thinking? She was staring at him with pleading eyes, and Vincent realized she was only worried that she'd be found out. Clearly, Gérard had no idea that Bijou and Simic had been secretly involved with each other, that she had fallen in love with the tennis player and that he – if one were to believe Bijou – was planning to leave his wife for her. Vincent gave her a reassuring look. There was nothing to be gained from telling Gérard.

'Gérard, can you tell me where you were on the night of December 28th?' Vincent asked.

'Absolutely. I was in Singapore.' He planted a kiss on Bijou's cheek. 'Missing my wife. Thinking about what I had to look forward to, when I returned.'

Vincent left the couple half an hour later, got back into his car and looked up Valérie Simic's address. As he started the engine, he thought to himself that his conversation with the widow would be a lot more difficult than the one he'd just had.

*

It wasn't difficult to find Ali. Alberto Rosales had already pointed Morel in his direction. Rosales and Ali were neighbours. Morel, Jean, Akil and Lila climbed the stairs, Jean and Lila complaining most of the way about the lifts not working. As they got closer to Ali's flat, the

sound of pounding rap music grew louder. They knocked and waited for what seemed like a very long time. When he finally opened the door, Lila stepped past him without waiting to be let in.

‘Might be a good idea to turn that down a notch or two,’ she said.

Ali gave a slow, exaggerated nod, as if he was pondering her comment. ‘But then it wouldn’t be as enjoyable.’ He was wearing grey trackpants, a black hoodie with the words New York City written across it, and a pair of red Nike trainers. He opened the door wide. ‘Come on in. The rest of you, I mean. I was on my way out, but I can spare a minute.’

Morel led the way, and was relieved to see that there was no one else. Ali fell back on a large leather sofa and lit a cigarette. The music, deafening now, came from two enormous speakers positioned at opposing ends of the room. The windows were shut, making the room stuffy. The air reeked of stale cigarettes, and something else. Marijuana, Morel guessed.

‘Your neighbour likes rap music?’ Lila asked, moving across to the monster hi-fi system and turning the volume down.

‘I guess so. I never asked.’

‘I figured you hadn’t.’

Ali grinned. ‘This is seriously good music. All I’m doing is giving El Chino some musical education.’ He cocked his head. ‘I heard Villeneuve *keufs* aren’t investigating this anymore. What happened? Too crooked, I bet.’

‘Why would you say that?’ Morel asked.

‘No reason. Just messing with you. The truth is they’re too incompetent, right? This is too big for them.’

‘It’s just the way these things work out sometimes,’ Morel replied. There was a great deal of hostility in the room, though Ali was trying his best to appear relaxed and amiable. ‘They’ve got a lot on their hands as it is.’

Ali turned to Lila and grinned. 'One thing's for sure, I didn't know they hired chicks like you in the police force. There's no one as pretty as you working in our sector, I can tell you that.'

Morel cut in before things got messy. 'You know why we're here?'

'Yeah. You're here about Samir. Poor kid. He was smart, the girls liked him. He had potential, know what I'm saying? You found who did this to him yet?'

'And Georghe.'

'Who?'

'The Roma kid you beat up.'

'I have no idea what you're talking about.'

'That's funny, because we heard something different. Word is you're the king of the estate. You know everything that happens here.'

'That's right,' Ali replied smugly. 'I know everyone's story. Everyone that's from here. Information is gold. I guess in your line of work you know that.'

'I couldn't agree more,' Morel went over to the stereo and turned the power off. 'Ali Kalonga, I am placing you under arrest for the attack on Georghe Laieshi that led to his death. All going well, you'll be charged and tried for manslaughter.'

Ali burst out laughing. 'You're kidding, right? This is bullshit. You're arresting me?'

'Get up.'

'Fuck you.'

Jean and Akil moved to grab him, but Ali pushed them away and stood up, glaring at Morel.

'You're making a mistake.'

Akil moved fast, throwing Ali against the sofa, his foot knocking the table over. He was smaller and lighter than their suspect but quick, ducking in time when Ali tried to punch him,

and kneeling him in the groin. Ali roared and lunged at the detective, and they both landed on the table, this time shattering the glass. It took the three men – Jean, Akil and Morel, to finally pin Ali down. He lay on the ground, his head turned sideways to avoid the broken glass spread across the carpet, his face purple with anger.

Akil stood up, panting. Blood poured from his cheek, where the glass had cut it.

'Here,' Lila said, handing him a packet of tissues from her pocket. 'You okay?' He nodded, and she gave him a tense smile.

'You think you're going to walk out of this building with me and people are just going to let you go? You're fucking nuts. You're -' Lila leaned over and cuffed him.

'Shut the fuck up.'

*

'So tell me about Georghe,' Morel asked Ali. They had taken him to the Quai des Orfèvres, after a rapid departure from Villeneuve. Lila had gone to start the car and driven it right up to the tower block, and the three men had shoved Ali in, while he kicked up a fuss. They'd sped away with a dozen youths sprinting in their direction, shouting obscenities and threatening to kill them.

'What did you and your friends have against the Roma kid, Ali?' Morel's tone was calm, focused, but he was distracted. What was it Ali had said? *I know everyone's story. Everyone that's from here. Information is gold.* How well, Morel wondered, did Ali know Thierry Villot? If he could just talk to Villot, it would make things easier. He had sent Akil and Jean out to look for him. Perhaps they'd found him at home and were bringing him in now.

'I've been hearing things,' Morel told Ali. 'I heard Georghe was a thief. He would come into the *cit * regularly, and break into people's homes when he knew they were out. I guess that's how he ended up breaking into your place,' Morel said. He was making a wild guess, hoping he was right. 'Georghe probably waited to make sure you were out, then broke in and

helped himself to what he wanted. Poor kid probably didn't realize who you were and bit off more than he could chew. Have I got this right? Yes, I have. I can see it in your eyes.' Morel stood up, apparently deep in thought. The only other person there was Lila, and she was keeping quiet. 'What I'm wondering, Ali, is what he took from you? It must have been something very valuable, for you to get so upset about it.'

Ali didn't respond, just sat back with one hand spread on Morel's desk. The other was handcuffed to the chair. Morel wasn't taking any chances.

'It must have been something very valuable,' Morel repeated. 'For you to get so worked up. For you to lose control, and all of you to gang up like that on someone half your size. Surely a big, important guy like you wouldn't pick on someone so insignificant, so weak. I mean, it would belittle you, wouldn't it? It would be demeaning. I expect that's not normally your style.'

'Exactly. You got that right. It's not my style.'

'Well, that's why I'm wondering what set you off. What made you behave like that? You dragged a 12 year-old kid from his home, in plain sight of his family, his community – and then you took him away with your friends and all took turns beating the shit out of him. And then, to top it all off, you dumped him in a shopping trolley –' Morel paused, imagining the scene – and left him to die. Think what he went through. A twelve year-old kid. Alone, hurting, terrified. Slowly freezing to death. In that wasteland.'

'You've got no proof.'

'We'll get there, Ali,' Morel said mildly. 'Which takes us to Samir. I've been trying to figure it out. Why Samir was killed. And you know what I think? I think he had proof. He was there all that time you were giving Georghe a thrashing. Maybe he couldn't stomach what he saw. Did you worry he might tell someone about it? Is that why you killed him too?'

'What? You're accusing me of that too? That's funny.'

They watched him laugh, his eyes burning with anger. After a while, he stopped, and leaned forward.

'I'll tell you something.' Spit flew from his mouth when he spoke, and his eyes were full of hate. 'You talk about those gypsies like they're ordinary people. You talk about family, community. None of that means anything to them. They're scum. They have no values.'

'Are you done with your little speech?' Lila asked.

'Oh I'm done alright. I'm not saying another word. Get me a lawyer. Now.'

It was Antoine who fetched Aisha from the street. Katarina's father arrived around the same time, a big, angry man who shouted abuse at Aisha until Luc Clément told him he needed to pull himself together and drive his daughter to the hospital, so she could get her face seen to.

'She's going to need stitches. Her face will never be the same,' the man wailed.

'It can't get any uglier than it was before,' Aisha murmured, as Katarina's father took her away. Luc Clément told her to stop. 'Enough. It's gone too far already,' he said quietly.

'She said she and Samir got together. That he fancied her. She's lying, he could never like a girl like that.'

'Aisha. He was a 16 year-old boy. At that age, most boys aren't too picky.'

'Samir wasn't most boys.' Aisha dropped her head in her hands. 'You have no idea what she's done to me over these past months.' Luc Clément reached out and placed his arm around her shoulder.

'What? What has that girl done to you? What's going on?' Antoine asked. He looked completely lost.

'You need to get Aisha home,' Luc Clément told him. To her, he said, 'Go, get some rest. We'll talk about this in the morning, at school.'

'Am I in trouble?'

'You shouldn't have attacked her like that. You saw the state her father was in. But I don't want you to worry about it for now. We'll deal with it tomorrow.'

She turned to him, as if something had just occurred to her.

'What were you doing here anyway? Were you following me?'

He looked mildly embarrassed.

'I was worried about you,' he said.

*

'I had no idea what you put up with. I'm sorry.' Antoine perched on the edge of her bed, cradling a cup of coffee.

'Is that for me?' she asked. Only then did Antoine seem to realize he was holding it, and he handed it over, pleased to be doing something for her.

'Two sugars, the way you like it.'

'Thanks, Antoine.'

She sipped her coffee while he waited, neither of them knowing what to say. Her mother had fallen asleep on the couch again, watching one of her shows.

She'd come in here to try to calm down, to think about what Katarina had said. Though he was being kind, she didn't really want Antoine sitting there, looking to connect with her.

'I need to take a nap, I think,' she said, hoping he'd take the hint.

'I want to help.'

'How do you think you're going to help?' She couldn't help herself. 'To be honest, it makes things worse, having you take me to school and hang around. It's hard enough, being Samir's sister, without drawing even more attention to myself by having you shadow me.'

'I'm not trying to make things worse. I only want to help. What you and your mother are going through, I can't imagine. And you know I cared about Samir.'

'I know.'

Antoine stood up. He looked fretful. 'It's not right, the way those girls bully you.'

'It's not *right*? Oh well I guess we should just tell them that then.'

She could see she'd offended him but she wanted him to leave her alone.

'It's not right,' he repeated. 'Particularly since she was a friend of Samir's.'

'Why would you say that?'

Antoine looked surprised. 'I've seen that girl with your brother, once or twice. No? Maybe I'm mistaken,' he said, clearly regretting saying anything.

'Sorry Aisha, I must be confused.' He'd seen the look on her face and was backpedalling now, realizing he should have kept his mouth shut. 'I might have just seen her around here. Sorry.'

Stop saying sorry, she thought. Sorry doesn't change a thing.

*

Karim took the RER to Châtelet station and changed trains. He got out at Cité and walked the rest of the way, checking the map on his phone to make sure he was going in the right direction. As he neared the Quai des Orfèvres, it began to rain and he pulled his leather jacket up around his ears. The snow had melted over the past 24 hours. But the rain trickled down his back and got into his shoes – good, expensive shoes, but the soles were worn – and he was frozen to the bone. The street was busy and he felt people's eyes on him. His arm hung at an awkward angle, hiding the spot where the jacket was torn.

Outside the building, he hesitated, awed by its size and by the number of police vans parked outside. His first instinct was to turn around and get away, but the thought of Aisha spurred him on. He crossed the road and went inside. An officious-looking man stood behind a desk. He looked at Karim with a blank expression on his face.

'Can I help you?' He was clean-shaven, courteous, and Karim felt ashamed without quite knowing why.

'I'm here to see someone,' he said. Without thinking, he'd changed the accent, trying to distance himself from his *banlieue* origins. 'Commandant Serge Morel.'

'Is he expecting you?' the officer asked.

'No. But tell him Samir's friend is here,' Karim said, straightening his shoulders. 'He'll want to see me, I'm sure.'

*

'Your name's Karim Bensoussan?' Akil checked him out quietly. He was a pretty sort of boy. Dark eyes, long lashes. Designer clothes. That jacket must have cost a lot of money. Vain, by the looks of it. Scared, too. Akil noted the rip in the jacket, the water-logged shoes and felt a wave of pity for the young man. 'You're here to tell us something about Samir?'

'It's Commandant Serge Morel I've come to see.'

'He'll be here shortly. Take a seat.'

Karim examined his surroundings – Akil had invited him to sit in Lila's chair – but remained standing. 'Relax, man. Take a seat.'

'Will he be long?'

'It depends.' Akil crossed his arms. 'He's been talking to one of your friends. Ali.'

'Ali's here?'

'We arrested him a little while ago. He put up quite a fight.'

'I'm not surprised,' Karim said, forgetting himself. He couldn't believe they'd managed to bring Ali in. He also didn't want to run into him. 'Where is Ali? He can't know that I'm here.'

'He won't.'

It was Karim's turn to check Akil out now. He narrowed his eyes. 'You're Arab?'

Akil nodded. 'Moroccan.'

'And you're a *keuf*.'

'I am.'

'How did that happen?'

'You think Arabs can't be cops?'

'Not where I come from. There aren't any Arab police in Villeneuve.'

'Maybe you could train to become one. Be the first Arab policeman in your neighbourhood.'

Karim burst out laughing, and Akil joined in. 'Good one,' Karim said.

'What is it you want to talk to Morel about? Is it about your friend Ali?'

'He's not my friend.'

'What is he then? Your boss?'

Karim's face became surly, closed.

'I heard Samir was a good friend. You must be pretty upset.' Akil looked towards the door. 'Here's Morel.'

*

It was getting late, and Karim was still talking. Jean and Vincent had left. Morel, Lila and Akil listened. No one moved, except Akil once, to turn on the lights.

'Ali. He made us stay and watch. I didn't touch the kid, I swear. But I was there. Me and Samir and Réza.'

'What did he have against the boy?' Morel asked.

'He sneaked into Ali's place and took a bag of dope. A delivery Ali had been waiting on, for two weeks. Worth thousands.' Karim shivered. 'He said he was going to bash the boy up. He really went for it. And I didn't have the guts to do anything about it, or even to walk away. Mainly because of Réza. He would never have let me go.'

'Réza. Ali's right-hand man. Right?' Morel turned to Karim for confirmation.

Karim nodded, and ran his hand through his hair, looking like he'd just signed his life away.

'Was Samir there?' Akil asked.

'He was there, at first. He couldn't take it. Ali got angry with him but Samir walked away all the same.'

'Did Ali kill him too?' Akil asked.

'I don't know, I swear I don't.' Karim gave Morel a pleading look.

'Do you think he did it?'

'No. I don't know. Maybe.'

Akil drew his chair closer to Karim.

'Why are you telling us all of this? I don't get it. Snitching on your friends. Why now?'

'I'm not a snitch,' Karim said angrily.

'What do you call this, then? Sorry,' Akil said, seeing the look on Morel's face. 'But I don't get it. Why is he here? What's his agenda?'

'Karim?' At the sound of Morel's voice, Karim let out a big sigh that sent a tremor through his body.

'You need to look after Aisha. She's not safe.'

'Why?'

'She told me she would find out herself who'd killed Samir. I think she's going to get herself hurt.'

'Is that why you're here? Because you're worried about her?' Karim nodded. 'So where is she now?'

'I don't know. She could be at home. I think maybe she went to look for Ali.'

'Ali's in custody.'

'It's not just him that can hurt her. Réza...'

Karim didn't finish his sentence.

'What do you think?' Lila asked Morel. 'Should we go see Aisha?'

'Let's try calling her.' Morel turned to Karim. 'Thierry Villot, the Villeneuve *flic*. He came to see you not long before Samir was killed. What for?'

'He was looking for Samir. He was worried about him.'

'Why was he worried?'

'He thought the other *keuf* – Marchal, you know the guy I mean? The guy who was running the investigation before you took over – he thought Marchal was giving Samir a hard time.'

'I see.' Morel thought about what Karim was telling him. What was he missing?

'Does Ali know Thierry Villot?' he asked. Karim looked puzzled. Before he could reply, Morel's phone rang and he stepped away to take the call. They all waited in silence for him to finish. When he returned, Lila was the first to notice the change.

'What is it?' she asked.

'Something's happened. I have to go.'

'Are you coming back?'

'I don't know.'

Lila had never seen him so uncertain. 'We can do this without you,' she said.

'Okay.' He considered what should happen next. 'The first thing is to find Réza and bring him in. Find Aisha and get her home if she isn't already there. Make sure you and Akil keep in touch. And be careful. I don't know what it'll be like in Villeneuve tonight. I want you both to stay safe. I'll be there as soon as I can.' To Karim, he said, 'is there anyone you need to call, to let them know you're here? Your mother?'

'What the hell am I supposed to tell her?'

'Tell her the truth.'

'You're joking, right? She'll kill me. Chop me up into little pieces.'

'Karim, look at me.' The boy looked up, reluctantly. 'What that child Georghe went through was terrible. You did something right, by coming to tell us. But you were still there. It's not going away just because you decided to tell us the truth. Do you understand?'

Eleven

The traffic was slow but not as bad as it would have been in the earlier part of the evening, when commuters were heading home. By now, most people would be sitting down to dinner. Morel reached Neuilly in record time and parked behind his sisters' cars. There was hardly any snow left on the ground, and it was raining again, a light, cold drizzle that inched into his collar as he strode across the courtyard towards the well-lit house.

It was the first time in over a year that the three siblings had been in the same room together. Adèle and Maly interrupted their conversation the moment Morel entered the living-room. He sensed they'd been arguing and that he was the reason for it.

'About bloody time,' Adèle said.

'Please, Adèle...' Maly turned to her brother. 'Thanks for getting here so quickly.'

'How long has he been gone?'

'Augustine noticed an hour ago. She called all of us -'

'And Maly and I got here straight away but of course you weren't answering the phone,' Adèle cut in. 'More important things to do, I guess.' Morel had noticed the missed calls when he'd answered her call earlier. 'I'm sorry,' he said now.

Augustine came in from the kitchen, crying. Morel went over and put his arm around her. 'It's not your fault.'

'I was getting dinner ready. I thought he was upstairs, resting.' She spoke in a rush. 'Earlier, your father tried to run a bath and left the water running till it overflowed. He flooded the bathroom. I told him it wasn't a big deal but he was a bit upset I think. He told me then that he needed a rest. He must have slipped out quietly. He was in his pajamas when he went to bed. What if he didn't put anything else on before he went out? It's freezing out there.'

'Where's Descartes?'

'That's the thing. He must have taken the dog with him. The leash is gone. It was hanging on the hook, near the front door, where I usually leave it.'

'Well that's probably a good thing. It's hard to miss an old man wandering the streets in his pajamas, with a giant dog. We'll find him in no time,' Morel said, trying his best to sound reassuring.

'What are you going to do?' Maly asked, and he realized they were all relying on him, waiting for him to come up with a plan.

'I'll put a call in to the Neuilly police station. And I'm going to look for him. I don't think he can be very far.'

'Maybe we could make a list of places he's likely to remember,' Maly suggested. 'We can split up the search between the three of us. Augustine, you should stay here, in case he gets home on his own.'

*

It was Morel who found his father half an hour later, sitting in a bar on the Avenue de Neuilly. A couple of hundred metres from home. Morel had spotted Descartes outside, looking stoic. He wasn't tied up and there was no sign of a leash. He just sat with his eyes trained towards the bar where Philippe was. The dog had clearly decided to stay put until the old man decided it was time to go home.

'Good boy,' Morel said, stroking Descartes' head.

He called Maly, letting her know where he was, then went inside. When he drew nearer, his father turned and saw him. There was no hesitation in his greeting, and Morel felt hugely relieved, because he'd wondered whether his father would recognise him. His father had wandered out of the house like this only once before, and that was a few years ago now. It still seemed untypical of him to wander off like this – though there was no sense in looking for typical anymore – and Morel had braced himself for the worst when he'd walked in.

'We've been looking for you,' he told his father with a smile.

'You have? Why? Has something happened?'

'No, nothing at all. But I'm glad I found you.'

'I was taking a stroll,' Morel senior said. 'And then I came here.' His expression as he looked at Morel was uncertain.

Morel stole a glance at his father's outfit. Philippe Morel looked just like any other customer, except for the fact that beneath his coat he was wearing pajamas and slippers. At least he'd thought to put the coat on.

'Can I get you something?' The waiter surveyed the pair of them, but didn't blink, as if he'd seen it all before, even here in Neuilly. Perhaps in a suburb like this one, where so many were elderly, this wasn't such an unusual sight.

Morel ordered a glass of wine to keep his father company. When the waiter was gone, he picked up a napkin lying on the table and started folding it, just so he had something to do with his hands. You couldn't make anything with it, of course. But Morel couldn't think of what to say. He pictured the snowflakes hanging from his window, the last thing he'd made several months ago, and now found himself yearning for a few hours' solitude, his desk and a stack of foldable paper.

'What are you doing with that napkin?' his father asked, and Morel shook his head.

'Nothing.' He dropped it back on the table.

'You're still making those things? With the paper? What's it called, again? There is a name for it,' Philippe Morel said irritably.

'Origami. I am, generally speaking, but it's been a little while. Lately I haven't felt like it. I'm not sure why that is. I haven't felt like it and yet I miss it.' Morel was rambling. His father had never asked or commented before about the origami.

'You've always had a knack for it.' His father's smile was hollow, inward-looking. He was busy remembering a distant time that was sharper in his mind right now than anything that had happened to him in the past hour.

'I bought you an origami book. When you were a kid. You should have seen your face. I've never seen a child so happy. After that we could barely get a word out of you. For weeks.' He sat back, looking pleased with himself.

'I remember it well. It was in Brittany. I loved that book. It was the best present I ever got,' Morel offered.

His father looked away. 'It was your mother's idea. You know how she was. Always thoughtful when it came to gifts.'

Morel waited for more. His father's hand crept across the table, until it found the paper napkin. He scrunched it up and threw it on the ground, then looked around the room, clearly confused.

'Let's go home, Papa.'

'Okay.'

Morel paid for the wine and they headed out together, into the cold night. Outside the bar, his father paused, unsure where to go. Morel slid his arm through his father's.

'Let's walk back together.'

'There's no need, I can find my own way,' Philippe replied testily.

'It's fine. I'm heading home too. We live together, remember?'

His father seemed puzzled, then vaguely pleased. 'In that case... so this means you'll be staying a while?'

Morel thought about Akil and Lila, on their way to Villeneuve. He thought about Aisha Ketab. She wasn't answering her phone. Where was she? He hoped she was safe. If she was

hurt in any way, he would blame himself. He texted Lila. *Let me know as soon as you have news.*

What should he do? Drop his father at home and leave straight away? He needed to find Thierry Villot. The man owed him some answers. And if he could just have a couple more hours with Karim, Ali, Thierry Villot, and Réza, once they tracked him down, he'd figure it all out. Morel was sure of it. Absently, he reached for his father's arm, and was surprised when the old man gripped his hand. As if he were afraid Morel would take his away.

Philippe's grip was surprisingly strong. Morel thought of the past months and all the time he'd spent avoiding his father. It was painfully clear to him that he'd refused to see what was happening before his eyes, because it meant altering the way things had always been between the two of them.

'Yes. I'll stay a while.'

A look of relief washed over his father's face. 'Good. That's good.'

*

Lila and Akil bickered for several minutes about who should drive and in the end Akil won. He drove fast, with both hands on the wheel, hunched forwards. Lila had often joked he sat in the driver's seat like an old man, his nose practically against the windscreen.

'That Aisha,' Lila said. 'She's an interesting girl. Too smart for her own good, I reckon.'

'Let's hope she hasn't got herself into trouble.'

'She's a fool for wandering around the estate running her own murder investigation.'

Akil stared out the windscreen at the périphérique. It was starting to snow. He turned the window-wipers on, and the radio.

'If it's anything like last night in Villeneuve...' he said, without finishing his sentence.

They sat quietly for a while, waiting for the news. Akil turned to observe Lila. She continued to stare straight ahead, acutely aware of his gaze. It was a relief when he turned away.

'Poor kid,' Akil said after a while.

'Aisha? Yeah. Losing her brother like that. Must be tough.'

'I was thinking of Karim.'

'Why? He watched the Roma boy get beaten up. I don't feel so sorry for him. Why are you saying that?'

'Because he's in love with a girl who probably doesn't feel the same way about him.'

'Aisha?'

'Yeah.'

After that, neither one of them said another word.

Twelve

Aisha had to make sure everyone was asleep before she could do what she wanted. Her mother had just gone to bed, and hugged her daughter on the way, making Aisha's eyes water. Antoine, wrapped in Samir's duvet on the living-room couch, was fighting to stay awake. Tonight, he seemed scared. So did Eloise. Aisha had called her earlier, to hear a friendly voice.

'I haven't left the house for two days, because of what's been happening at night,' Eloise said, a note of hysteria in her voice. 'I know it might be okay during the day, but I don't feel safe. Not even then. I'm not sleeping. I can't take this anymore. How long is it going to last?'

Like everyone else, she was worried because of what had happened to the policeman. They were saying on TV that he was lucky to be alive. But it was also clear now that he was going to be in a wheelchair for life. Paralysed from the neck down. It didn't sound that lucky to Aisha.

'If they can't find the guy who did this to him, they'll take it out on all of us,' Eloise said. She'd spent the day on the phone, talking to friends. 'Everyone talked about Samir. How sad it was,' she told Aisha.

While she waited to make sure Antoine was properly asleep, Aisha thought about what Eloise had said. It was true there'd been a lot of support for Samir, from the community. All those people on the street, protesting these past nights. On TV, they were saying the riots were an excuse for violence, or they were a consequence of the way people in the banlieue had been marginalised for so long. Depending on who spoke on TV, it was either a social issue or a race issue. Maybe, Aisha thought. But she saw something else. The rioters had painted Samir's name on the *cit * walls and chanted his name. Surely, that meant something.

And it wasn't just the other Arabs who cared. It had nothing to do with that. Eloise had cried when she first heard. She'd dropped by with a cooked meal and sat with Aisha's mother. El Chino was clearly heartbroken. No matter how angry she was with him, Aisha knew the Spaniard had loved her brother.

Even Ali had dropped by to offer his condolences. Though what that meant, she didn't know.

At the thought of Ali, Aisha tensed. Tonight, she would get some answers.

Outside, there were shouts, isolated flares. Nothing more. The police were outside the tower blocks, waiting. Same scenario as the night before.

Antoine was snoring. Aisha got up quietly and slipped into Samir's room. Everything was in the same place. It was hard to think that he wouldn't just show up any minute now, and ask her what the hell she was doing in his room. For a moment, she thought she wasn't up to it. She couldn't go through his things. But she knew she had to.

She started with the desk. Morel and the female detective he'd come with had looked in here too. There were school textbooks he'd never opened, and pens. A packet of Marlboros, with five cigarettes in it. Nothing else. She'd never seen Samir sitting there, doing homework. Her brother was going to technical college, because his grades were low and he seemed indifferent to the subjects he was being taught in school, his teachers said. At least this way he would get a skill. 'No job, but a skill,' he said once. He didn't think there was much point, but he went along with it. At least he seemed to.

She started searching the cupboard, emptying it so she could get a better look. It was a complete mess. She didn't expect to find anything. Still, she searched, hoping maybe they'd missed something. All she found was shoes and dirty laundry and clean clothes all thrown in there together. A stinky towel, which he'd probably dumped in his closet after a shower. Nothing interesting, but Aisha knew there had to be something. Samir would have been

confident that no one would invade his privacy. She guessed he wouldn't have tried too hard to conceal things.

She searched pockets and felt around his clothes. Nothing. There was nothing under his mattress or under his bed either. She stood up, frustrated. Had she been wrong about Samir? Maybe he did have a hiding-place. If he'd been working for Ali, selling drugs, then maybe he had learned to keep secrets.

She looked up at the ceiling, thinking hard. And suddenly it came to her, just as if someone had whispered it in her ear.

She turned around and left, and went to the room she shared with her mother. Softly, slowly, she went through the chest of drawers, running her hands along the back of each one. Her mother turned and pulled the covers up, sighing in her sleep. Aisha opened the cupboard, and searched carefully. Once or twice, she had found Samir coming out of this room and asked what he was doing. He'd said he was looking for her, or for their mother. She hadn't thought anything of it then.

On the bottom shelf, where her mother kept documents and old photographs that she never looked at, Aisha found something. Wedged at the back, behind a stack of albums, was Samir's backpack. Aisha pulled it out and returned to Samir's room to check its contents. She sat on the edge of his bed, her heart beating hard.

In the front pocket, in an envelope, she found a stack of notes, held together with a rubber band. She counted it.

There was 6,000 Euros in total.

She sat still for a while, stunned, wondering how Samir had got the money, whether it was his and if so what he'd done to earn it. The more she thought about it, the angrier she felt. He'd been the one to tell her she should sharpen up, use her head, have some courage, or else she would get hurt.

But I wasn't the one who got killed, was I? At least I'm still alive.

She wiped the tears from her face and stood up. What should she do with the money? She decided the best thing was to put it back where she'd found it, at least until she'd figured out what to do with it. She should probably give it to Commandant Morel. It made her nervous just holding that amount of cash in her hand. She wondered whether to tell Karim. But how could she be sure he wouldn't take the money for himself? One thing was obvious: he sure liked to spend it.

She looked in the bag to see what else it contained and found another envelope, unsealed, and a letter in it that looked like it had been folded and unfolded many times before. She opened it and began to read.

Dear son, it said. Absently, she looked at the date. The letter was less than a year old.

Her eyes blurred, as if they'd suddenly stopped working. This can't be what I think it is, she thought. She was wearing her glasses, her eyes were just fine. Still, she had to stare hard to read the words.

Dear son,

I am writing to explain why it is that you and I cannot have the sort of relationship you should expect to have with a father. Your mother will tell you I'm dead. But I'm alive and well.

She read the letter until the end. Her father only mentioned her once. *Look after your mother and sister,* he'd written. Nothing more.

She put the letter back where she'd found it, and the money too. Then she fled the room.

*

Aisha took the stairs two at a time. She wanted to be outside, breathing the cold night air. More than anything, she wanted to be far from the flat and to lose herself in the crowd below. She came bursting out of the building, making the door swing violently, but no one seemed to

care or notice. There were lots of people. Too many to count. Familiar faces. Not just the gangs or the troublemakers - their families too. Old men and small kids with sleepy faces, bundled up against the cold. She thought she recognised Mahmoud's Dad, the one who had become obsessed with fixing the playground swing. Most of all she noticed the mothers. Out on the streets, Aisha guessed, because they worried about what the police would do to their sons after what happened to that police officer. Everyone here was expecting the worst. Aisha figured her family wasn't so concerned. For her and her mother, the worst has already happened.

She moved through the crowd, grateful for the numbers and for the familiar faces. A couple of people recognised her and offered words of sympathy. They asked how her mother was doing. The atmosphere was peaceful enough, but the police were out in force and Aisha wondered how little or how much it would take before someone on either side of the divide lost their cool and things descended into chaos.

Here, among her neighbours and the other residents of the *cité*, she managed to calm down a little. The letter and its contents were all she could think about, but as long as she kept moving she could deal with it and with the questions that flooded her mind. How was it possible her father was still alive? Why had he written to Samir, and not to her? Had Samir written back? Why hadn't her brother told her? How much did her mother know, and why had she made her children believe that their father was dead?

Aisha stayed a while, talking to people she knew, then found her way back inside her building. With so many people on the street, it seemed deserted. She climbed to the eleventh floor and knocked on Ali's door. There was no sound coming from inside. She knocked again and waited, feeling nervous but determined.

'What are you doing here?' Réza's voice made her jump and turn quickly. His face, unsmiling, was inches from hers. She'd never seem him this close up. There was no softness

in it, nothing malleable. Involuntarily, she took a step back and found herself against Ali's door. The thought of confronting Ali had been frightening, but now she found herself praying that he would turn up.

'I'm looking for Ali,' she said.

'Why?'

'I just am.'

'Anything you tell Ali, you can tell me.'

His breath was sour and his face close up marked by scars that looked like tiny craters. He'd got chicken pox on his 20th birthday and spent the next couple of weeks nearly scratching his face off, Samir had told her once. The only time he'd ever spoken about Réza.

The thought of Samir made her brave. 'Leave me alone,' she said, keeping her voice steady.

Réza gripped her arm. She flinched, and tried to move away, but she was trapped between his body and the door. Réza, meanwhile, seemed to enjoy the closeness.

'Why are you snooping around, huh? I've seen you. Talking to Karim. Watching everyone. Being a little busybody. Why don't you mind your own fucking business?'

Across the hallway, a door opened and someone stuck their head around the frame. With a wave of relief, Aisha recognised El Chino. She had been so focused on what she was doing, she'd forgotten that he and Ali lived on the same floor. He held a mobile phone in his hand.

'How about you leave the girl alone.'

'Fuck off, old man.'

'A man who threatens a woman is hardly a man at all,' Alberto said, looking at Réza with contempt.

'Why don't you go lie down for a while? Take a nap? Before you get hurt?'

'I think you should leave,' Alberto said. 'The Parisian detective is arriving now. He's on his way up. You don't want him to find you here.'

Réza looked like he didn't know whether to believe him, but there was panic in his eyes. He didn't know where Ali was and that made him less certain. He pointed a finger at Alberto. 'I'll be back to teach you a lesson. You have my word. As for you,' he said, turning to Aisha, 'you'll pay for what your brother did.'

Aisha watched him sprint down the stairs. 'What did Samir do?' she called out, but by then Réza was gone and couldn't hear her.

'Aisha.' El Chino's hand was on her shoulder, coaxing her away from Ali's door. 'It's good to see you. Come in for a while.'

He gestured for her to follow him, but she held back, wanting answers. 'What did he mean, I'll pay for what Samir did?'

'I don't know. But they came and arrested Ali earlier. He put up quite a fight.'

'Who came?'

'Commandant Morel and three others.'

'And is it true he's on his way here?'

'I don't know. I just said that.' She saw him for what he was then. An old man, who'd suddenly run out of energy and needed to sit down.

'Thank you,' she said. 'If you hadn't turned up, I don't know what Réza would have done.'

They entered his flat. Alberto shut the door behind Aisha and they stood still for a while, looking at each other. He was reminded of the moment when Samir had stood there, shivering. The memory was painful, reminding him of his incompetence.

'I'm sorry I couldn't protect Samir,' he told her.

'It wasn't your fault. Samir always did what he wanted. You couldn't have stopped him.'

Alberto nodded, unconvinced. 'I should call the police,' he said. 'In case Réza decides to come back.' He found the number that Morel had left and dialed it. 'There's no answer. I'll leave a message.' He gave Aisha what he hoped was a reassuring look. 'It'll be fine, you'll see.'

She wasn't looking at him and he wasn't sure she'd heard. 'I've been so unhappy,' she said unexpectedly.

What could he tell her? 'It's terrible, losing your brother like that. Simply terrible.'

'It is. But I've been unhappy for much longer than that. So often, I've felt like I can't breathe. There's no space to think. I don't have anywhere to go, anyone to talk to who'll understand.'

He nodded. He wanted her to know he was listening.

'I feel so alone,' she said. At this, he reached out and squeezed her shoulder.

'You're not alone, Aisha.'

Thirteen

Adèle and Augustine had left – Adèle was still angry, even after he'd found their father and brought him home, and promised to stay with him. There was just Maly now. She came upstairs with him and together they kissed their father goodnight. Descartes lay at the foot of the bed and made no move to follow them out.

'He's looking out for Papa. That seems like a recent thing,' Maly remarked.

'It is. He's smarter than I gave him credit for.' Morel smiled but his mind was elsewhere. He was wondering where Thierry Villot was, and how long it would take to get Ali to talk. At least now they had Karim's testimony.

'I can stay,' Maly said.

'What's that?'

'You need to get back to work. I can see that. Go ahead, I'll stay.'

'I can't ask you to do that. You have a family to go home to.'

'And I will. But first, you need to go back to work and wrap up your investigation.'

He hesitated, but she was steering him towards the front door.

'I'm sorry,' he said.

'What for?'

I haven't been thinking of him at all. I haven't wanted to. For so long, we've struggled to talk to each other, he and I. So what am I supposed to do now, to help him?

'It isn't easy, Serge. For any of us.'

'When I found him just now, the way he was sitting in that bar – he looked so lonely. And when I said I'd walk him home, he asked if I would stay a while.'

'I know you two haven't been close,' she said. 'But in reality, you're more similar than you think.'

She leaned in and kissed his cheek.

'When this case is closed –' he began, but she stopped him. 'We can talk about all that later. Just go. I'll look after him.'

*

On his way out of the house, Morel checked his phone. There was a message from Alberto Rosales. As soon as he heard it, he called Lila to let her know where Aisha was.

'What do you want us to do?' she asked.

'Maybe check on Aisha, get her home safely. Then find Réza.'

As Morel headed towards Villeneuve, the snow began to fall in earnest. On the passenger seat, he had the notes from Marchal's interviews with Samir, which Marchal had emailed earlier. Morel had skimmed through them before printing them out. At first glance, the exchanges between the two had been so confrontational, it was hard not to think it had all been an act, to mask the fact that Samir was Marchal's informant.

On the way to the *cité*, Morel went past Thierry Villot's house and knocked on the door, but no one came. There was no sign of life, inside or on the street.

He didn't know where to look for the detective, but the *cité* seemed like a good place to start. It was where Villot had started out. A young boy, looking to escape the world he'd been brought up in and the airless sameness of his parents' lives. He'd despised them for not wanting more. Morel wondered whether Villot looked back on his police career as something to be proud of, or whether he felt that he too hadn't wanted enough, had settled for less than he'd hoped for. He had got out of the *cité*, but hadn't made it very far.

It was snowing heavily when Morel arrived at the housing estate. He was exhausted from the drive – the road had been slippery and twice he'd lost control of the car. Luckily the *périphérique* had been deserted.

There were a lot of people out on the street, but this was nothing like the antagonistic crowd of the past two days. Morel parked and stepped out of the car. He was wearing a warm coat but his head was bare and his feet sank into the wet ground. Within seconds, his hair, shoes and socks were soaked. He stopped and looked up at the tower blocks. Most of the residents appeared to be gathered outside tonight. He cursed out loud. What was he doing here? What did he hope to find? He had no idea where to look next. He thought about what Virginie and Lila had told him, about not drawing attention to himself on the estate, but he wasn't worried and besides, no one seemed to be paying him any attention.

He stood under a streetlamp, watching the snow land at his feet and wondering if he had a fever again, because nothing looked remotely familiar. After some hesitation, he stepped out of the light and trudged towards the empty place behind the tower blocks. This was where Ali had beaten Georghe up, while Réza, Karim and Samir watched. What a dreadful place to slowly die, Morel thought. He made his way to the front of the building where Samir had lived and found the spot where Figueras had discovered the boy's body. Samir had been repeatedly stabbed. It was hard to believe Villot could be the killer he was looking for, but Morel knew he was right. The only question was why.

He got back into the car and turned the heater on high. What did he know about Villot? That he had grown up on the estate. That he had always been a *flic*. That he was alone and unwell.

The job was his life.

Morel headed towards Villeneuve police station.

*

There was no one there apart from the duty officer, who told Morel he hadn't seen Thierry Villot come in since he'd started his shift at eight. Two police officers had clocked in but they were out patrolling the neighbourhood, the officer said. They would be back soon.

'You won't mind if I take a look around? Or you could call Capitaine Marchal to check that it's okay.'

The officer didn't seem to find either option appealing, but he didn't try to stop Morel.

There was no sign of Villot anywhere, but Morel kept looking, hoping his instinct was right. He looked at Villot's desk. It was tidy and mostly bare. Morel sat down for a minute. He was so tired he could easily have rested his head on the desktop and gone to sleep. It was an effort to stand up and get going again. Walking down the hallway, his legs felt heavy. He reached the men's toilets and went in, thinking he would splash his face with cold water.

Thierry Villot was in there, leaning over the hand basin. At the sound of Morel's footsteps, he looked up, into the mirror. Their eyes met and Morel was shocked by Villot's appearance. He looked like a dying man.

'I've been looking for you,' Morel said. Villot didn't respond. He turned the tap on and washed his hands carefully, as if a great deal depended on it.

Morel moved towards him and turned the tap off. 'Where have you been?'

'In here.'

'For how long?'

Villot stared at his hands. 'For some time. Hours and hours. I don't mean just today. I mean hours and hours over the past months. Just sitting in a cubicle, reflecting on things. And slowly losing my mind.'

'You're not well.'

'I'm not well,' Villot parroted. 'I know.' He looked into the mirror again. 'I can fucking see myself, can't I? And if I ever forget, there's always someone around to remind me of what I've become. Old and grey and used up. Useless.'

Morel didn't speak. Villot went on, talking to his reflection.

'I know. It's a bit pathetic. All this whining. I guess I've been feeling sorry for myself. Not a particularly noble sentiment. But just think about it. Look at me. What have I got? No one to come home to. No friends to speak of. My ex-wife hates me with a passion and blames me for everything that's gone wrong in her life. And the job ... ' At this point, the expression on Villot's face went from calm to anguished. 'I invested absolutely everything in my work. I know that *cit * like the back of my hand. I've watched the kids grow up. Watched over them. I know their families and their weaknesses, the things that are likely to trip them up. I've done my best to keep them out of trouble. It isn't always possible, of course, but I've tried. I have given this job my all.'

'No one would deny that,' Morel said, thinking about Marchal's words.

Now Villot had his back to the mirror and was facing Morel, but was doing his best not to look at him. 'The trouble is, all the effort amounts to nothing. Recently I realized I've done nothing but go around in circles. Nothing changes. If anything, it gets worse. The kids are younger, harder than before. To talk about repeat offenders is laughable. When the same person does the same thing 12, 15, 20 times, before they've even reached adulthood, that isn't repeat offending. That's a free fall.'

'What happened, Villot?' Morel asked quietly. 'What happened with Samir?'

'Over the past year, I've thought a lot about getting out,' Villot continued, as if he hadn't heard. 'I thought maybe I'd do something else with my life. But then it dawned on me: who the hell is going to hire a 55 year-old *flic*? I should have got out ten years ago while I still had the chance.'

'*Thierry*'. This time, Villot reacted by falling silent. 'I want you to take me through what happened with Samir. Help me understand.'

'There's nothing to understand, I'm afraid.' Villot leaned back against the sink and stared in the distance, reliving the scene. 'Ten days ago, I was at the station. Marchal had

brought Samir and Karim in, presumably to grill them about Ali. He's obsessed with nailing Ali. We keep trying and he keeps slipping through our fingers. It's driving Marchal crazy. Anyway, I don't know what happened, I wasn't there when Marchal talked to the boys. He must have let them go. I found Karim, he was on his way home, visibly upset. He didn't want to talk to me. And he didn't know where Samir was.'

Villot lit a cigarette. Morel didn't stop him.

'Then Marchal brought Samir in again, the day before he went missing. I was tired of it. The way he treated the boy, it was too much. I decided I'd go looking for him. He was hard to find. Karim couldn't tell me anything. When I finally found Samir, it was very late. I'd been looking for him for hours. He'd come up from the basement. He was upset.'

'This was the day after he watched Ali beat Georghe up,' Morel said.

'It must have been. I knew nothing about it then. I thought he was crying because of Marchal. I told him I would make sure it didn't continue. I expected he would be relieved, or grateful. Instead, he gave me this pitying look. He said:

"You think I need your help?' You think Marchal is trying to cause me grief? You're clueless, man. Marchal is my ticket out of here. So fuck off. I don't need your pity."

'I couldn't believe it. Samir was saying he and Marchal were talking to each other, but Marchal hadn't told me anything. If it was true – and I know now that it is,' Villot said, looking at Morel ' - then it means everything Marchal did was for show. He was playing a game, trying to look like he was harassing Samir when all the time he was using him to get to Ali.'

'What did you do?' Morel asked.

'I wasn't thinking straight. I was angry. I decided I would tell Ali that Samir had been disloyal. Effectively, I'd be signing his death warrant. But then I changed my mind. I thought I'd go back to Samir and try to talk.'

'Did you?'

'I did. I found him. He was agitated, full of hate. He said things to me that weren't right. Things I couldn't listen to. He knew all about me. How I'd grown up in the *cité*, who my parents were. My guess is Ali told him. He knew. I felt dirty.'

'He wasn't himself,' Morel said, thinking of Samir. 'After Georghe's beating.'

'I couldn't take it. The hatred, the contempt. I hit him. He came straight back at me, with a knife. I overpowered him easily. He thought he was tough, but really, he was just a kid.'

Morel watched Villot struggle with his emotions. Self-pity and anger, but also horror and a sadness that was eating him alive.

'You sent me the autopsy notes so that I would take an interest in the investigation,' Morel said. 'When the riots started to turn ugly, you called to let my colleagues and me know that it wasn't safe to remain in the *cité*. From the beginning, you wanted me to get involved. You wanted to be found out, didn't you? But you didn't make it easy for us either.'

'I knew it was just a matter of time. I watched, and waited. I wanted it to be over.' Villot hung his head.

'Thierry Villot, I'm arresting you for the murder of Samir Kateb.'

'Do what you need to do. I'm not going anywhere.'

They walked out together, Villot leading the way. As they passed his desk, they ran into Marchal, looking wild-eyed and disheveled.

'So it's true,' he said. 'The duty officer called me to say you were here, Morel, looking for Thierry. I was asleep.' He stared at Villot in disbelief. 'All these years of working together. Did you not think that maybe you could confide in me, tell me you were going off the rails? Instead of which, you screw up this entire department. Do you have any idea what this is going to do to us? How people are going to react, when they realise a *flic* killed the boy?'

'You have a share of responsibility in this,' Morel said. 'I suggest you keep quiet for now.' He cuffed Thierry Villot and called Lila.

'We've got Réza,' she told him.

'Well done. Can you and Akil meet me at the Villeneuve station?'

'We're on our way.'

Fourteen

They sat by the river, watching a group of tourists board a Batobus. A family with three kids, a woman in a velours tracksuit and black running shoes. An elderly man and his daughter, or maybe she was his wife, judging by the way she held and stroked his hand. Some were thinking about what seats they might get on board if they were lucky, edging forward, pretending not to be pushy. Others hung back, talking to each other, enjoying the moment. Further along the quay, a boy was chasing his sister. The mother called out to them sharply, worried no doubt that they would fall into the freezing water. Morel wished he had a square sheet of paper in his pocket, to fold and shape. It was so long since he'd made anything that he'd stopped carrying the paper around, as was his habit.

'You did a good job wrapping up the Simic case,' Morel told Vincent. 'I heard from Lila that it took some convincing on your part, before Simic's lover and her husband would speak to you. And that Valérie Simic confessed readily to having plotted her husband's murder.'

'It wasn't that difficult. She *wanted* to tell me. I saw it in her eyes. The relief of admitting what she'd done. It's one thing to seek revenge, but quite another to live with the consequences.'

Vincent hugged himself and leaned forward, watching the woman who'd now caught up with her two children. 'It's absolutely tragic, isn't it? What's happened to these families.'

'Who are you talking about? Georghe? Samir Kateb? Or Simic?'

'All of them. And I don't mean just the victims. Aisha, her mother. Valérie Simic. They're alive. But they've all lost so much. Even Valérie. None of them can ever go back to who they were before.'

Briefly, Morel reflected on the separate cases they'd just solved, replaying recent events in his mind. 'Individuals are destroyed. Families are torn apart. You're right. There's

no denying the damage that's done.' He nudged Vincent with his elbow. 'At the same time, 'it is possible to move forward. Life goes on.'

'Yes, I suppose it does.' Vincent lowered his gaze.

Morel stood up. 'We should probably head back into the office,' he said. 'I have to go to Villeneuve and tell Loubna and Aisha Kateb what we know.'

'Wait.' Vincent straightened himself. 'First, I need to say something. I was angry with you. For treating me differently to the others. For making me feel like I was underperforming.'

'This is just now,' Morel said. 'Generally, you're very good at your job, Vincent. You don't need me to tell you that.'

Vincent attempted a smile. 'Perhaps I do.'

'I'm just worried about you.'

'I get that. And what I want to say is that I'm trying. I'm trying my best.'

'I know.' Morel waited for Vincent to stand up, but he remained where he was.

'What do you want me to say, Vincent?'

'I want you to promise you won't give up on me just yet.'

Morel shook his head. 'Don't be daft. Of course I won't give up on you. I need you.'

He held out his hand, and Vincent took it. 'Now come on. Let's go.'

*

Outside the tower blocks, a dozen school children were waiting for the bus, wearing their coats and backpacks. Nearby, a group of women were talking, exchanging news. The night's vigil had ended peacefully. There were still piles of rubbish on the streets. But on this grey, cloudy morning, life seemed pretty normal in Villeneuve.

'It's nice of you to drop by.' Aisha led Morel in to the flat. 'Maman's in the kitchen.'

'Is she better?'

Aisha smiled. 'She's up, at least.'

'I heard about what happened with the girl in your class.'

'Her father wants to press charges,' Aisha said. 'But the head teacher is talking to him. She's saying that in the context of Samir's death, and given how Katarina's been bullying me all these months, no one will take the charges seriously. She thinks they'll change their minds.'

'I'm guessing Luc Clément's been busy defending you,' Morel said.

Aisha nodded, embarrassed. 'You'd think he was my brother or father, the way he behaves ... still, I shouldn't have done it. Attacked Katarina. That person – that wasn't me.'

'Where's your mother?'

'She's at the shops. It's the first time in days that she's left the house. And Antoine has a job interview this morning. I hope he gets it. He hasn't had a job in two years. I didn't know that till yesterday. All this time he's been too ashamed to tell us.'

'That's quite a secret to keep.'

'Everyone's been keeping secrets.'

'I wanted to tell you in person that we found who killed Samir. And Georghe.' Morel told her about Ali, and about Thierry. He'd wondered whether it was the right thing to do and decided he would hold nothing back from her. 'I'd appreciate it if you and your family kept this to yourself, until we're ready to release the information. It's going to be messy. There's going to be a lot of anger when people find out a police officer was involved.' Morel looked at her. 'Will you be okay?'

'I think so. I don't know.' Aisha reached into her pocket and drew out an envelope. 'Yesterday, I was looking through Samir's things. I found his backpack in the bedroom my mother and I sleep in. Inside it, there was this money and a letter from my father, who's

supposed to be dead. You should probably take the money. I think my brother earned it by doing things for Ali.'

'The letter from your father. Was it to Samir?' Morel asked.

'Yes.' She clasped and unclasped her hands. 'I'm going to have to talk to my mother about this. But now's not the right time.' She glanced at Morel. 'What's going to happen to Karim?'

'Nothing much, I expect. He's a minor. He didn't touch Georghe. But he was there. That's something he's going to have to live with.'

'Karim isn't a bad person. He just doesn't have anything that drives him. Nothing meaningful.'

'He has you,' Morel remarked. 'He seems to care about you. Those feelings made him come to us and give Ali up. He did it so you wouldn't get hurt.'

'Really?'

'Really. That took some courage, coming to us.'

'I guess so.'

'I was a little tough on you when we met last. I'm sorry for that. What I was trying to say is that you seem to undermine yourself. And that you shouldn't. I was trying to be helpful, in a clumsy sort of way.'

'That's cool. I did get it.'

Morel took her hand. 'Good luck, Aisha.'

'Same to you, Monsieur Morel.'

As he was coming out of the building, Morel's phone rang. It was Mathilde.

'I'm meeting friends for dinner this evening. Not far from your office. How about a drink? I don't have to be at dinner till eight.'

'I'd love one.'

*

Morel spent the afternoon buried in paperwork and interviewing both Ali and Réza. Ali wasn't talking, but Morel wasn't troubled. He had Karim's testimony, and it looked like it was only a matter of time before Réza confessed, in the hope of saving himself.

Around 5 p.m., Superintendent Olivier Perrin came in to the office and Morel briefed him. He then called Virginie to let her know what had happened. She told him she was taking a month's leave. 'I need some time to figure out what I want to do with my life,' she said. 'It might be time for a change.'

By a quarter to six, he was on his way out of the building, heading towards the Monoprix on boulevard St Michel where he'd agreed to meet Mathilde. She was waiting outside. She was wearing a short, blue-knit dress and a dark red coat, and her hair was loose, the way he liked it. He kissed her cheek and smelled her perfume.

'Do you mind if we go in for a minute?' she asked. 'I'd like to take a bottle to dinner tonight.'

'Of course.'

He followed her around the aisles, light-headed with exhaustion, and hovered nearby while she chose the wine. After the events of the past week – the murders, the riots, his father's escapade - this moment with Mathilde seemed like a gift. He would worry later about Villeneuve and whether the violence would flare up again; he would worry later about the reporters: the media would have a field day with this case. It was hard not to think about the damage this would do to the police.

'What will you do with the rest of the evening? Should I be concerned about you?' Mathilde asked, half-amused, but he thought he detected a trace of pity in her voice. He bought a bottle of wine and some cheese to take home so he wasn't simply tagging along.

Outside, she looked at her watch. It was dark, and the temperature had dropped further since they'd gone in to the supermarket. He thought she was about to tell him she had to go, that she'd changed her mind about having a drink together, but instead she named a café and suggested they walk there. They wandered towards the river, until they came to the Pont des Arts. Mathilde buttoned up her coat and leaned against the parapet.

'Look. It's beautiful.'

Morel followed her gaze. Against the night sky and the river's dark presence, everything – the classical facades along the quays, the Institut de France, the Louvre, Notre-Dame, and the next bridge across the water – was lit up, and the overall effect was magical.

'I've stood in this exact spot so often. Yet I never tire of the view,' Mathilde said.

Together, they stepped back and examined the thousands of lovelocks attached to the railing. Recently, parts of the Pont des Arts had caved in under their weight, and now entire sections of the bridge were boarded with plywood.

Mathilde shivered. 'It's freezing,' she said. 'Shall we keep going?'

As Morel walked beside her, he pictured the hours ahead. He was looking forward to this drink. He would head back to Neuilly afterwards. If his father was awake, he would sit with him for a while. He thought with pleasure of his flat. Maybe he would sit up and start on an origami project. All he needed was a little time, a little quiet, in the private, orderly world he'd created for himself.

Walking alongside Mathilde, it dawned on him that right now, what he looked forward to most was the place that he'd be returning to alone, after their time together.

Home.