

Gaston J.
ALGARD

***DIDIER AND THE
ASTROLOGER***

LE CAHIERS NOIRS 1

Gaston J. Algard

**DIDIER
AND THE
ASTROLOGER**

*Je remercie toujours
ma mère et mon père
qui m'ont donnée ma tête.
Gaston J. Algard*

Novel

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algard@algardproductions.com

skype: gaston.algard

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The Novel

In 1996 I decided it was time for a change, create something new. To move away from the subject matter of earlier writings. Something based on crimes appearing daily in the news. Something with which to shock people. My collection of news clippings increased but inspiration was still a long way in arriving.

A visit to Paris reminded me of a previous visit to the police offices in Quai des Orfèvres. All men at the top. Seated at a bar in the Montmartre area, a glass of pastis in my hand, inspiration came! A woman among all those men. This is how Agnès Didier came into being.

I must admit that my satisfaction of having created Agnès Didier was short-lived. During 1998 watching A2, a French TV channel, I saw the new Director of the Crime Department of Quai des Orfèvres. A woman. Blonde, vivacious and pleasing to the eye, just as I had imagined. A good choice, theirs and mine.

Through the years, the stories written about Agnès Didier increased. Some are still in the making. I must admit that I have always remained attached to Didier.

It is my hope that this will also hold true for the readers.

Gaston J. Algard

“The House of Crimes”™
by Gaston J. Algard

“LES CAHIERS NOIRS”

1997

**DIDIER AND THE ASTROLOGER*
**DIDIER AND THE ANCHORITE*

1998

**DIDIER AND LITTLE BABETTE*

2000

**DIDIER ON HOLIDAY*

2002

**DIDIER AND THE LUGANO GOSSIPS*

2003

**DIDIER AND THE PYGMALION LOVER*

2007

**DIDIER AND THE MONSTER*

2009

*** DIDIER AND THE COUNTESS'S DEBTS*
*** DIDIER AND CORBIER'S HURT*

2010

*** DIDIER AND THE WOMAN DROWNED*
*** DIDIER AT LUGANO, A RETURN*

** published in Italian*

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www.algardproductions.com
info@algardproductions.com

**DIDIER
AND THE
ASTROLOGER**

Pour ma petite Miky

Characters

Agnès Didier	Chief Inspector
Albert Mulé	Inspector
Léandre Demonfort	Inspector
Jules Kolinsky	Inspector
Paul Clément	Assistant Inspector
Marbeille	Director of Forensic
Gaston Moyar	Assistant to Marbeille
Lafayette	Judge
Polengue	Judge
Martinez	Director of Investigations (PJ)
Antoine Refus	Astrologer
Jean Coteau	Husband of Marie
Marie Coteau	Wife of Jean
Juliette	Daughter of Marie and Jean
Armand Poitié	Concierge
Marie Rigolot	Wife of Poitié
Seminóle	Homeless person
Donatien Lambert	Bakery owner
Julien	Baker's apprentice
Martin Le Pont	Banker
Carole	Wife of Le Pont
Eric Corbeau	Driver to Le Pont
Jean-Jacques Juppé	Lawyer

I

Wednesday, morning

The body of the Astrologer, as Antoine Refus was known by all in the neighborhood, lay face down and almost naked at the entrance of the apartment. The undone grey flannel trousers pulled down to below the knees showed the extremely paleness of his buttocks. No underwear visible. A red short-sleeved mesh t-shirt partially covered the back. No shoes, no socks. Head inside a black plastic bag tied at the throat with the dead man's belt.

Chief Inspector Agnès Didier observed the busy men of Forensic. Inspector Albert Mulé, who had driven her to the scene with the service car, observed her, expecting questions or reactions. Having been sent by the Ministry, it was her second day on duty at the criminal police department, as replacement of the Commissioner on sick leave. This woman seemed totally indifferent to the goings-on and the naked body.

The medical examiner approached her, awaiting questions. Didier gestured with her hand as if to defer. After a quick viewing of everything, a young magistrate left without comment.

Didier remained standing in a corner until the work was completed and the body carried away. Only then did she sit on a small bench and begin to study the chalked outlines of where the body had lain, entrance door closed, total chaos. She got up and walked to the dining room.

On the table two cups, clean, and a sugar bowl, the only intact objects. Everything else had been turned upside-down in the apartment, in uncontrolled madness it seemed, just as

at the entrance. Nothing remained in its place, nothing remained intact. The murderer, or murderers, left total chaos.

She glanced through the bedroom and the small bath. In the kitchen, coffee had boiled over and extinguished the gas flame. The police had already turned off the gas main. Yet, the unpleasant smell of gas, even with the windows open, hung in the air.

“When do we get the medical report... ?” Didier inquired.

Mulé awoke from his thoughts, after so many years of service he was quite used to such scenes.

“Tomorrow morning, late. Certainly some preliminary information, then the autopsy report...”

“Anybody heard or saw... ?”

“I don’t think so... The colleagues’ve asked in the entire street, knocked on all doors... But it’s a really shitty neighborhood! Oh, sorry...”

“Let’s return to the office ... I’ve seen enough ...”

Leaving the apartment, they walked down the high, well-worn and uneven steps, guided by the little light coming in from the building’s main entrance. Once outdoors, Didier stopped to look. No concierge, only three doorbells with nameplates on the door. The first, being on the first floor, belonged to Refus. Above that an illegible name, on the third only two initials *M.R.*

The building was old, as were all the surrounding buildings, all three or four floors, tiled roofs. Craftsmen’s shops or warehouses on the ground floor, a street with at least a hundred meters of uneven and worn down cobblestone, three meters wide at maximum and no side streets. The sun rays only reached the top floor of these buildings. One of those ancient streets in the city. Dirty blinds, laundered clothes hanging out of some of the windows, cracked paint on the entrance doors, grimy or badly repaired walls, noise from the various craftsmen’s shops or groceries, people coming and going all talking loudly. Some bicycles, cars being prohibited

in this street. No sidewalk. To reach the car, they walked the length of the street.

Wednesday, late morning

When Didier entered her office, her desk was overflowing with piles of letters and case files. She stared at the piles, then phoned Mulé to come.

“What *is* all this doing on my desk...?”

Mulé, the most senior inspector on the team, entering, replied coolly.

“Given that the Commissioner’s absent since yesterday, it’s all yours. Seems that it’ll be quite a few days before a new, temporary Commissioner arrives, assuming he does arrive... There’s not enough staff. You’ll find the official memorandum among the papers. If you think it necessary, you can move to the boss’s office. It’s bigger than yours.”

Even if he had used a more conciliating tone, inside of himself he was quite happy. He wanted to see how this “Miss university grad of criminology” who wanted to work on the criminal investigations team would handle it, particularly a team of men with more than twenty years of experience than she could ever gather. Other than the pending cases, she now had a fresh murder to deal with and had to substitute the boss. He gave her a week, at most.

Didier stared into the eyes of Mulé, as if reading more into them. She understood that he did not consider her neither capable of doing the job, which for him is for men only, nor in the right place, which is for men only, nor could he digest the fact that she, being younger than anyone on the team, got the job. Without glancing away, she replied:

“Fine, thanks... If I need you, I’ll phone you...”

She remained at her desk until two in the morning, reading everything including the official memorandum from the Director who requested her, in the spirit of teamwork, to be

the *pro-tempore* of the absent Commissioner, and making many excuses that he could not do so personally, given that he was out of his office. When she left her office, the officer on duty inquired if she wished to be taken home with the service car. Surprised by this thought, she replied:

“Thank you, no, that’s kind of you... I’ll walk...”

“As you wish... Good night, Commissioner ...”

She wanted to reply, but did not, that she was only the Chief Inspector. She understood that the news had already spread. Everyone considered her “Mister Commissioner”. But she also understood that all would be looking out of the windows to see how she would take care of herself. This thought made her smile, she did not know if for lack of general awareness or fear.

Thursday, morning

At seven she was in her kitchen preparing coffee and breakfast. She had slept well but not soundly. To awaken completely, she took a hot shower, then a cold one. A long day was ahead and still she did not know where to begin. She had not yet had the time to adjust and none of the men were willing to demean themselves and help her, especially Mulé.

At a quarter to eight the doorbell rang. Calmly she put on her light coat, looked through the spyglass and opened the door. It was Mulé, ready to drive her to work as he had always done for the now absent Commissioner. He would’ve bet a month’s salary that she would’ve not been ready.

“Good morning, Mulé”, she greeted him with a smile while shutting the door, “did you sleep well...?”

“Yes, oh yes... Thank you, Commissioner”, he replied.

Mulé could not hide his embarrassment. He realized that Didier had figured out his intentions and for the first time in many years of service, he felt ashamed.

The morning turned out to be very busy. She was immediately called by the Director to his office.

“You read my memo...?”

“Yes, sir...”

“Don’t feel overwhelmed by this job. I’m certain that you’ll do a good job. It’s only for a short time until a substitute Commissioner is nominated. The same Prefect, giving me his orders, believes that you, with your curriculum and specializations, know what to do.”

“But why me? There are so many other senior inspectors. Someone’s feelings will be hurt...”

“The Prefect received the orders from the Ministry. Maybe they don’t want to give someone false hopes before making a decision... It’ll suffice that you direct these men, all experts and well used to such a tough job. Remember that this isn’t a promotion, you only arrived a few days ago. Rest assured that your present availability will count in the future, reflecting favorably on your career with the Police... Can I depend on you?”

“I’ll do everything possible...”

“I was sure of that... Obviously I’m available for any assistance, given your still limited experience. At times we’re confronted with such cruel situations! Well then, do a good job, Didier...”

She left, shocked. The last words, covered with heaps of whipped cream to make her understand that she is *just* a woman, almost made her laugh. He actually used the words *such cruel situations*. Not crude, atrocious, barbarian, brutal but *cruel*. She knew for a fact that she would succeed even here as she had done in the past elsewhere. Suffice it to find the humorous side in any given situation in order to survive and win.

Right after this interview she took part in two interrogations, previously arranged by the Commissioner.

The murderer confessed to having killed a ten year old girl. He tried to feign madness but failed to convince.

He changed his version at least ten times, his defense lawyer limiting himself to looking up at the ceiling.

Next came the confrontation between a witness and an elderly prostitute who had knifed a young client. The witness, a friend of the client, had gone with his friend and the woman said that he had been close by the entire time. The witness claimed to have heard and seen nothing of them going at it like rabbits; his time being taken up by listening to a radio commentary on a soccer match.

The prostitute screamed that she had been violated in a most unnatural way and never had any of her habitual clients uttered said such extreme obscenities. Didier was forced to detain the witness on the excuse of withholding vital information. A few hours detention would certainly refresh his memory.

Thursday, late morning

Around half past eleven, having read the mail and some documents, she went to the main hall to get herself a cup of coffee from the drinks vending machine. She ran into the lawyer Jean-Jacques Juppé, her professor at university. He had been the one who had tested her on criminology. A man well prepared in law and very shrewd in the penal code of law. He was there for a client accused of fratricide, for whom he was requesting a postponement of the interrogation because his client ended up in hospital due to acute peritonitis.

“Is it for Marcel Dubonnais?” inquired Didier.

“Yes. How did you know...?”

“I run this office at the moment... My superior had to enter hospital for an emergency. A replacement hasn't been

found. With whom did you talk to about the postponement...?”

“I spoke to Inspector Mulé, gave him the doctor’s certificate ... Hasn’t he given it to you...?”

“Not yet. This’s been a busy morning, first with the Director, then with two interrogations...”

“He’ll inform you, I’m certain of it. In any case, given the situation, nothing different could be done. For Dubonnais, I mean...”

“I’m sure. I must to leave you now... good to have run into you... See you soon...”

“As soon as my client is in a condition to reply... Good-bye...”

On her desk she found the preliminary autopsy report on Antoine Refus, the reports of the persons interrogated by the agents and living or working in that same street, the report from Forensic with the photos of the victim’s body. She read all several times, with great attention. When she finally finished studying the reports, the time was nearly two in the afternoon.

She picked up the phone and rang Forensic. She was forced to wait a while before someone answered.

“This is Chief Inspector Didier. I would like to speak with the person who wrote the report on the murdered Antoine Refus.”

“Honestly speaking, I think that we’re all still on our lunch-break, Commissioner. If you wish, I can go see if I can find someone.”

News flies quickly Didier reflected.

“Thank you, I’ll wait. It’s quite urgent.”

She had to wait several minutes, passing the time away, without realizing it, by beating a tune with the pencil between her fingers. Finally someone came to the phone.

“I’m the assistant of Marbeille, Commissioner. If you want, I can give you any required information. Marbeille and

I prepared the report together and I was with him during the visit to the apartment. Don't you remember me? Blond, tall, light colored overcoat..."

"Vaguely. Your name is...?"

"Moyar, Commissioner."

"I note the object wasn't found with which, according to the report, the victim was knocked over the head, before his head was stuck in the plastic bag. The medical report states that Refus didn't die of suffocation. He was already dead."

"Yes, that's true... Nothing was found in the apartment. Nothing, at least, that could've been used for such a purpose."

"Therefore I must assume whoever killed him took the evidence with him."

"Probably. The objects we checked couldn't've been used with such violence. That's what we figured out from the medical report. One direct blow, very violent, using a very hard object like the base of a statue. If I recall, the bag was black, there're no signs on the plastic to indicate a blow from outside the bag. After the medical examiner took off the bag, he informed us. We looked everywhere, with no results. Do you think we should do another search at the place...?"

"The examiner mentioned an extremely heavy object. One direct blow shattered his skull. Refus died instantly. I also read that no fingerprints were found on the bag nor on the belt tied tightly around his throat..."

"Exactly... no fingerprints... We assume that the murderer wore gloves... Only Refus's fingerprints found on all the other objects in the apartment, to tell the truth, very few prints. You'll have read that despite the simple furnishings, everything was perfectly clean. No sign of dust or dirt. Very surprising. This has never happened before..."

"Yes, I saw that... You underlined it in red!"

"Which is why the words were underlined, quite out of the ordinary..."

“Ok, thanks for the moment. If I need more, I’ll phone again...”

“Always at your service, Commissioner... Good-bye.”

Didier concentrated on her thought for a few moments. She needed a clearer idea of Refus’s character. The various interrogations gave no hints at all. Nobody had seen or heard anything. It seemed that there wasn’t one witness who had seen someone go in or out of that building’s door around the time of the crime. Recalling the street, she felt sure that someone lied or the right persons hadn’t been interviewed.

But the interrogation reports numbered sixty-three. It was logical that someone was lying. But which of the interviewees? She decided to reread the reports at the end of the day. She had a hunch. Before acting on it, she phoned the Personnel Office and requested the file on Clément, one of the newest inspectors. She checked his file, pleased with herself. She had remembered correctly.

She dialed his number. She was told that he was out but would return in about half an hour.

Thursday, early afternoon

Even though her office was small, Didier did not want to switch to the absent Commissioner’s office. Her office seemed so tiny when Clément walked in. About a meter ninety tall, the build of a rugby player, dressed in a loose-fitting grey linen suit, twenty-six years old in June. She asked him to sit down. He did his best, trying to squeeze into the only available chair.

“I read in your file that you lived many years in the neighborhood where the murder of Antoine Refus occurred. Do you know about this case?”

“No, but I heard my colleagues talk about it. In any case I remember him, everyone knew him as the Astrologer because they went to him to have their horoscopes done. And

not only the neighbors. Very wealthy people came too. They say that Refus must've been rich. But I left the neighborhood years ago... I didn't return..."

"But you still remember the area...?"

"Of course. I spent my childhood in that area. I know it like the back of my hand... and the people that then lived there. But, obviously..."

"At the moment it seems that you are not working on any particular case..."

Clément was a bit irritated by that statement. He wanted a case of his own but colleagues with more seniority kept him hanging in the air. Only insignificant jobs, almost like an errand boy, and this angered him a lot.

"No, Commissioner..."

"Well... now you have a case all of your own. I'm personally giving it to you. See that you do your best. The information you gather could help solve this murder."

Clément realized that today was turning into an important day for him.

"I'm listening, Commissioner..."

Didier kept Clément for about thirty minutes, explaining what she wanted. She did not even answer the phone when it rang several times.

"Fine, understood ... No one is to know anything in these next days. You report directly and only to me..."

"My colleagues? What do I tell them...?"

"That you are on a case for me and that's that. Understood?"

"Of course, Commissioner. And... thank you."

"Maybe I must thank you, if you succeed. Do your best."

II

Friday, morning

Didier had given orders that at eight-thirty some of the residents or working folk of rue Gulloc must appear. The waiting room was full. Other inspectors had their own cases to deal with. In all there were seven cases between homicide, rapes, armed robbery with victims and so on.

In the late afternoon of the previous day at a brief meeting Didier had informed all that, due to the current workload, each evening the schedules for the next day would be assigned. Unexpected emergencies to be worked in.

She, together with another inspector, was to interrogate four persons about Refus. The other four would be questioned by Mulé and a colleague. All others were to take care of pending cases. Forced by lack of space, some interrogations would have to take place in an inspector's office. There were only two interrogation rooms.

Didier and Inspector Léandre Demonfort sat at a same table. Three chairs were empty. The first to be brought in was Poitié, the only concierge in rue Gulloc. He worked in a building three buildings further from that one of Refus. He was the first to be interrogated because the mailman handed him all the mail and he distributed it to all street residents. A sort of assistant mailman. Thus he would know everything about everyone living or working in that street as well as, Didier supposed, all their habits and possibly their secrets.

“Since when do you have this job...?”

“About ten years now. Ever since I retired from the Ministry. The Foreign Affairs one. To add to my retirement income. My wife has a small apartment in the Astrologer's building, Antoine's. It's on the third floor.”

“The one on the third floor, with the initials MR on the nameplate, you mean ...?”

“Yeah.”

“You and your wife always lived there...?”

“No, just my wife. We married around ten years ago. When I came to Paris. She found this job for me... We got married and I moved in with her.”

“What does your wife do...?”

“Nothing now... She was a widow when we met, still an active woman... She had an accident on the job and now has a lame leg. She’s always at home. The apartment’s on the top floor, and if no one’s there to help her she has trouble going up and down the stairs. She rarely goes out on her own, only with me... A short walk, a glass of wine at a place in the street around the corner and then back home...”

“As far as you know, your wife heard nothing and saw nobody...?”

“Absolutely nothing. She’d’ve told me. Ever since this murder happened, that’s all people talk about...”

“You, what can you tell us about this Refus? Anything you know so that we get a better picture of him. For us he’s still an unknown.”

“Nothing in particular.... He already lived there when I came to live there. He received no mail, just a subscription to a magazine on astrology and some advertising just like the rest of us... No letters, no postcards. Looked as if he had no family, no friends. No one sent him written messages, at least not to his home address.”

“Do you think he received mail elsewhere?”

“Many use a second address... With him, only good day or good evening... A man of few words... Ask anyone. No family or friends visited. Only clients came to see him. But only between eight and nine in the evening. Never at any other time. Everyone knew that...”

Didier sensed that this was important information.

“What can you tell me about his apartment? You ever see it...? Inside, I mean...”

Poitié was taken aback by this question, not expecting it.

“*Well...* did you hear the question...?” Didier repeated in a firmer tone.

Demonfort too, who took care of the recording, noticed some nervousness in the man so self-assured earlier. He replied rather unwillingly, as if his words were being forcefully pulled out of his mouth.

“There never was no reason... I told you that between us only a polite greeting. At times he didn’t even reply when we met. His mind seemed to be elsewhere.”

“Did you see him often?”

“Only when I went home for lunch around noon. He was always at the door cleaning and polishing the door handle worried about it being dirty.”

Didier recalled that the same remark had appeared in the reports she’d read. A maniac for cleanliness, one could say.

“A last question. Do you know what Refus did with his time? Apart from the time spent with his clients...?”

“No... I think he always stayed at home. I’m out at the main door, except when it rains. The entrance area is a bit cold, you know. I’ve never seen him walk by. Except if he went the other way...”

“Thanks, that’s all for now... If we need you again, we’ll contact you.”

The man was nearly out of this chair when Didier asked him,

“If we have to talk to your wife, I suppose we must make a house visit?”

Again, the man seemed irritated by such a question. He replied politely,

“If it’s absolutely necessary... I’d be glad of it. You understand... But it’d be a useless trip. I already told you that she knows nothing.”

As soon as Poitié was out of the door, Didier turned to Demonfort.

“What do you think...? Is he hiding something?”

“About the crime, I think not... About something else, yes. He acted as if we’d find it out.”

“Who knows why he nearly had a fit when we asked him if he’d ever been inside Refus’s place. With nothing to be ashamed of, nobody accused him of anything, don’t you think that...?”

“It’d be good to speak to his wife. She ought to know Refus better. How do we know how she spends her at home...? Behind the curtains spying? Many do that, especially the elderly stuck at home.”

“Good observation. We’d best go immediately. As soon as we’ve finished with the next interrogation. We won’t give Poitié the chance to talk to his wife... What’s the time?” she asked while she checked her Rolex.

“Nine-thirty” replied Demonfort, “and if he goes home before returning to work...?”

“We better go right now... Tell Mulé to question the other three. Or they can wait... We should be back in a couple of hours if nothing interesting turns up...”

“Right away, Commissioner...”, said Demonfort walking to the door. He turned to ask, “Wait for you downstairs with the car at the entrance?”

“Yes, I’ll be there in a minute. I must make a call.”

None of the reports mentioned anything about Refus’s morals. She phoned Vice and asked if they had anything on him. That they give her an answer, even if only a negative one.

They walked through the street to Refus's apartment building. They looked in at the place where Poitié worked but he hadn't returned. They rang the doorbell marked *M.R.* and slowly climbed the worn stairs to the third floor.

Odd. The door was ajar. Didier knocked on the door and in a loud voice inquired,

"Madame Poitié, are you home ...? We're the Police."

A clear voice rang out from a distance,

"Come in, come in, the door's open..."

After the semi-darkness of the staircase, light seemed to flood over them. The apartment, in contrast to the one of Refus, was well furnished, nothing luxurious but in good taste and well maintained. There was even more light. It was the only sunlit floor of the building.

Going through the small hall, they reached a small salon. Madame Poitié seated, a light-weight cover over her legs, near the half-open window. To her left a telephone on a small table. The sun lit up everything. It took them a moment to adjust to the brightness.

"Good day, Madame... I'm Chief Inspector Agnès Didier, this is my colleague Léandre Demonfort. May I ask you some questions...?"

They showed her their IDs.

"Of course, of course ... Sit down near me."

A pleasant, sweet voice. Younger looking than her age, a kind face, as was the entire person. White hair, well kept, away from the face. Didier had not expected such a woman, so different from the husband, a small man and not that good-looking. They sat down on light colored chairs almost in front of her. The whole apartment seemed to radiate light.

"We'd like to inquire about Antoine Refus... You knew him...?"

"Certainly, I knew him. That dirty old man, that pervert... And how! Ever since I came to live here with my first husband... I bought this apartment from him. We bought it to-

gether, with our hard earned money, but it was in his name. Until he left me. A sudden death. My name is Marie Rigolot... Rigolot's my first husband's name. Then I had an accident on the job and here I am, in an armchair. Now I'm married to Poitié..."

Didier interrupted her. She spoke as if the floodgates had burst. If she hadn't been interrupted, she would've described her entire life to them.

"Madame, we don't have much time... We want to know a few things. We've already questioned your husband down at the office... Now we'd like to hear from you. You permit me to ask you questions?"

"You must excuse me... I never see anyone and when I can talk to someone I forget to stop... Please go ahead."

"Why did you call Refus a dirty man, a pervert?"

"Because he was... He slept with men and women..., in particular under-aged boys and girls."

"How do you know?"

"This whole neighborhood knows... And he had a thing about diseases... Said that it was dust that brought them, always locked in the apartment cleaning. But diseases come from filthy habits, not from dust..."

"Yes, hmm, I understand... Then why did none of the questioned persons mention, let us say, his vices...?"

"Because they're all afraid of being accused of the murder. And ashamed of their pasts. Many, when younger, were in his clutches, men and women. Now all are grown and don't want others to know. You know, before, this was a very poor neighborhood. Often the need... nowadays... the times have changed..."

Demonfort took notes, trying to be precise. He had skipped the first part. She had said too many things too quickly. They weren't that important.

"And now? How did he manage, with the times changed?"

“I only know that he received people. They said for their horoscopes. But what about the fact that he made them come during the evening time...?”

“They said he was very rich. If it wasn’t horoscopes, what was it? That is, how did he make money?”

“Because people don’t tell the truth... But I don’t know if I can tell this to you... Very sensitive information...”

At this point the phone started to ring.

“Who is it? Oh, it’s you, Poitié. Yes, I am all right. I expect you for lunch... What...? I don’t understand what you’re trying to say... Yes... The police... is already here. A very courteous woman to whom I’m talking and another person, Demonfort is his name... Please calm down, there’s nothing we are to be ashamed of, don’t worry, fine... till later...”

Didier and Demonfort looked at each other. Poitié had something to hide?

“That was my husband... I call him Poitié ever since...”

Didier interrupted her, returning to the matter of her interest.

“You said that you know the truth. Would you please be a bit more clear? Please rest assured that what you tell us remains between us. It could help us with the investigation...”

Didier used a persuasive tone to convince the woman to reveal her thoughts. But this time she didn’t speak quickly, this time she chose her words carefully.

“You must be told that Antoine lived by lending money. That was his true calling. Everyone said that they went to him for their horoscopes which is why he was called the Astrologer... Instead they went to him to get a loan. Other than the interest, or in exchange for a part of it, he required a peculiar way of repayment, even from the children or the younger brothers or sisters of his clients. Poor souls... That’s how he got rich and never paid for that which he got from them. It was his victims who paid, even with their bodies...”

Like I said, this used to be a very, very poor neighborhood... The times were different..."

Her face turned bright red, seemingly angry with the deceased. Or for those *poor souls*, as she called them. Didier gave her a moment for regain composure before continuing. She felt she had a possible trail.

"You said that the times have changed..."

"Yes. Since his *work* became more difficult, taking into consideration his requirements... I think that in these last years he had someone help him to bring in clients from outside the neighborhood. I think that the murderer or murderers are not from here. They are from outside..."

"Who lives on the floor below...?"

"Nobody... The apartment has been empty for years. I think they moved to Canada."

Didier nodded but prior to leaving her she wanted to ask the customary question.

"Madame Marie, you saw nothing the other day, Tuesday evening? Someone unknown, someone from outside, as you said a moment ago?"

"Exactly what time was he killed?"

"Tuesday evening, between eight and ten o'clock."

"Just before my husband returns at seven thirty, I close and shutter the window... I don't know what happens outdoors from then until the morning about eight when my husband leaves the house... He forbids me to look out the window, not ever to do it. He says it is very wrong. But what am I to do all day, all alone? Looking out of the window distracts me... When it rains I keep the window shut..."

Didier nodded and both rose.

"Thank you so much. You have been of great help."

"Will I be called as a witness...?" she inquired, seemingly worried about such an idea.

"No, Madame Marie. It won't be necessary. What you have told us is highly interesting but no one will contact you

or bother you. Unless, of course, you remember some other details. Here is my card."

"I ask because of my husband... Please don't tell him what I told you. Please..."

A pleading voice, as if she were totally dependent on him. Didier was reminded of her own childhood when as a little girl she begged her mother not to say anything to her father because she didn't want to be yelled at. She thought a great deal of her father's reactions.

"We'll tell your husband that you know nothing and gave us no information which would be of help in the investigation. It will remain a secret between the two of us, actually the three of us..." looking at Demonfort who nodded agreement, "Are you happy with that?"

"Thank you... Such a relief. I'll say the same thing to my husband when he returns. That we had a nice chat but I know nothing. You are so kind, both of you... Thank you!"

They were at the door when Didier turned to her and asked,

"Madame, do I leave the door open?"

"Yes, yes..., I always leave it open. Everyone knows that in this neighborhood. In case I need help. Go on. Thank you."

It was well after twelve when they returned to the office. They ran into Mulé who was a bit nervous.

"Those three are still waiting. We have another two to interrogate. There was an armed robbery with a victim, I had to send out two of ours. What do I do? Do I have them return tomorrow?"

"No, Mulé. Demonfort and I will take care of them. Keep calm. Just give me time to make a call and drink a coffee. Are you coming, Demonfort?"

Didier left Mulé standing in the hall while Demonfort followed her. He turned to Mulé and shrugged.

III

Friday, late morning

Didier walked into her office, cup of coffee in her hand. She went to the phone and requested the front desk of the courthouse. Demonfort followed but remained standing at the door, holding his coffee.

“Sit down, please... I *hate* it when people remain standing in front of me”, in a tone between irritation and facetiousness.

Demonfort obeyed, smiling.

“This is Chief Inspector Agnès Didier. Is the judge who is following the Antoine Refus case still in his office?”

A stupid question from the other end irritated her.

“If I knew his name I would’ve told you, don’t you think? Don’t you have those government paid computers which indicate who handles which case?”

After having repeated the full name a second time, she finally got a reply.

“Good, *now* that we have found it, would you please be so kind as to let me know whether this Judge Lafayette is in his office...? He is...? Please connect me and inform him that Chief Inspector Agnès Didier, at present substituting the on sick leave Commissioner of the Crime department, is on the line. Thank you, I’ll wait.”

Demonfort, sipping his coffee, couldn’t help but grin.

“Good day, Judge... So sorry to disturb you...”

The voice at the other end interrupted her.

“You do not disturb, Commissioner Didier. I appreciate your zeal in phoning me. You have some news for me? You know that I depend on your investigations...”

Didier relaxed a bit and, in accordance to the information available to her, she brought him up to date, letting him

know that a detailed report would be sent to him the next day.

“Do you think that immediate decisions must be made? Tomorrow is Saturday and my wife and I shall be in the country home of the Prefect for the entire weekend...”

Didier began to understand the workings in the world of justice. More proof came within seconds.

“No..., I don't think so, Judge... Not unless something is discovered within the next hours or so, sir...”

“Let's hope not, my dear. It is all right to call you that? You could be one of my nieces... On the other hand, what you've told me makes me think it's a simple case of murder, out of revenge or something like that. No serial killer, that is. No front page public enemy number one. Let the killer enjoy a few more hours freedom, it doesn't look that important... Because I'm sure that you, I mean your office, will solve the case quickly...”

“I do hope so, sir.”

“Thank you again and I look forward to meet you in person. I hear a lot of good things about you. You do know that...? ‘Bye...”

Taken by surprise by his words, it took Didier a moment to reply but then she realized that he had already hung up. She too hung up, slumping in her chair, letting her arms hang, looking up at the ceiling, her legs stretched full length under the desk, mumbling to herself,

“What a crazy world...!”

Demonfort had to bite his tongue so as not to laugh in her face. Didier pulled herself up slowly and looked him in the eyes.

“You're not telling anyone, right?”

“What?” asked Demonfort.

“Don't act so clever, you were going to bust out laughing. Admit it.”

“Is this an interrogation?”

“No. A private talk. Just like the one we had with Madame Marie...” but she could not hold back a laugh and Demonfort joined her.

“Hey, you didn’t hear what I had to listen to... What are you laughing about?”

“I imagined it, Commissioner ... If we don’t tell them anything, the judges harass us. You’ve the gift of promptness and diplomacy. I mean, I’m sure that he didn’t expect you to call him. You’ll get important cases, I guarantee you that, I who am the most senior of all can tell...”

“I admit that I don’t like it... I prefer to be out on a case than stuck kow-towing and doing paperwork. That’s why I made such an effort to be where I am now. I’d like to stay for quite a while, if I can manage it. Ok. Fun and games over. Back to work. We still have an interrogation to do and then prepare the report. As long as nothing totally unexpected happens.

It was one-thirty. The three persons were still in the waiting room. When they walked in, Demonfort holding sandwiches, followed by Didier with coffee and a glass of coke.

“Please excuse us...” Didier began, “but there was some unexpected development in the Refus case. Please, join us for lunch.”

Facing them, a thin woman, looking much older than her actual age, Marie married to Jean Coteau. He was a big man, brawny and hairy. Their daughter Juliette, about twelve, was slightly retarded.

The woman, thanking them, took a sandwich and gave it to the daughter. Didier put the glass of coke in front of her. Coteau grabbed his share, namely two sandwiches which he swallowed almost in one bite, asking if he could have a glass of wine because coffee made him nervous. Demonfort told him no and Coteau frowned, grumbling something about a lost day of work.

“Now coming to you... you live close to where Refus lived, right?” asked Didier.

The woman replied, while her husband mumbled his agreement.

“Yes, Madame, we live at number fifteen, mezzanine, near his door. But we don’t know anything about the murder, we already told that to the police on that day.”

She seemed nervous and afraid. Juliette chewed on the sandwich, the crumbs falling all over her clothes.

“Madame Marie, stay calm... We just have to ask you a few questions. Then you can go. Don’t worry so much...”

Despite Didier’s soothing words, the woman continued to look around, very ill at ease. Didier continued, attempting to use an even sweeter tone of voice.

“Now I’ll explain to you why I requested you to come. Please listen, then give me a clear answer. Have you understood?”

There was no reply, both kept looking around, while their daughter’s eyes followed a fly about the room.

“Last Tuesday evening between eight and ten did you notice someone who’s not from the neighborhood go see Refus? Think about it.”

After looking at her husband, the woman answered.

“I think I saw someone pass by the window. It was just a flash, just a flash. I don’t know who it could’ve been. I’ve already said that.”

“I’ll read to you what the cop wrote down... *to the question if she had seen someone after eight, Madame Coteau Marie replied “I think I saw someone in the street going to the Astrologer’s door. I even told my husband but he did not reply except to tell me to mind my own business.”*

“And you, Mister Coteau?”

“I saw nothing... My wife sees ghosts. Anyhow, I was watching TV, boxing.”

“You, Madame, mentioned it to your husband. Why? Any particular reason?”

“I really don’t know...”

“But a lot of people pass by your window. Even at that hour. There must’ve been a reason for you to mention it to your husband. What was it?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know... Maybe I did see something but I don’t remember. One does a lot of things without knowing why. Doesn’t that ever happen to you?”

The husband interrupted angrily.

“I always told you to mind your own business! See what trouble we’re in now? Why don’t you answer, idiot?”

Saying this, he raised his muscular arm to hit her but he stopped half-way. Didier and Demonfort had been ready to stop him with Didier yelling at him,

“Calm down! Calm down, Mister Coteau! Don’t threaten anyone here! Do you want me to arrest you?”

Coteau looked around, bewildered, and remained silent. Lowering his arm and his head, he returned to his seat, almost absentmindedly.

“Good... Madame, I won’t insist. When you do remember it, you will tell me, yes?”

Saying this, Didier patted the woman’s arm, trying to reassure her. It was obvious that she was too frightened to go on. Of what, that was the question.

“That’s all for now. Your daughter saw nothing, right?”

Upon hearing mention of Juliette, Coteau awoke out of his reverie.

“What’s the little one got to do with all this?” he yelled, “You’re just like that pig of an Antoine. All the same, always picking on the weakest! If you want to know what I think, I’m glad he was killed! He was a pig, only a dirty pig!”

Having finished cursing, he returned to his wool-gathering state, head down.

Demonfort signaled Didier as if to get her to continue with Coteau but Didier shook her head.

“You can go home. If we need you, we’ll let you know.”

Each took Juliette by a hand, leaving in a rush as if they could not wait to be out of there.

“Why didn’t you want to continue with Coteau? He could’ve had a motive to kill... You heard how he talked? And what power in those arms...?”

“Don’t you recall what Poitié’s wife told us? Maybe even Coteau, years ago, suffered. His hatred is old, maybe he remembered something nasty, don’t you think? In any case we’ll see if there could be more recent motives but I doubt it. Of course, with that strength of his, one blow, like the one given to the deceased, would have been enough to kill. Let’s wait, too soon to draw conclusions... I’m going back to my office. You write down today’s interrogations. But remember... Don’t mention the confidential info, only facts, no personal interpretations.”

Friday, early afternoon

Didier looked at the time, it was already three-thirty. She had a good hour and a half before her appointment. She went to check if any worthwhile news had been left on her desk and not only the usual paperwork.

She could not keep to her schedule. First, she had to talk with two inspectors already waiting outside of her door to discuss two other cases. When they finished, she had only twenty minutes left. She still had time to read through the information from Vice. About fifteen years ago, Refus had been accused of attempted child molestation. Released due to insufficient evidence. It had happened hundreds of kilometers away from rue Gulloc. An absolute blank, Didier thought, leaving the building.

She met Clément at the agreed-upon spot. Everyone assumed he was away, on a case for a few days. He was not to be seen at the office. Often even walls have ears and Didier knew what one false move would mean. She was not impressed by the compliments from upstairs. She was sure that everyone was waiting for one false step. Best to be very careful.

“Tell me all. We can talk without being disturbed.”

She had decided on a quiet corner of the bar at the Gare d’Austerlitz. It’s easy to hide in a crowd.

“I did as you suggested. I work at that big filling station three blocks away from rue Gulloc. I’ve made friends. The neighborhood cars drive by, fill the tanks there, get the cars repaired there, oil changed and the cars washed there. In a short time one gets to know everyone. And if you give a helping hand, they feel more confident, you become their father confessor. Like at the barber’s... Of course things have changed in respect to the past, but the people...”

“True. Remember that with murder the motives are always the same, wherever: money, revenge, sex. I haven’t yet found any other motives in all the cases I have read about or studied for the criminology exams that make one human kill another. We are very different from animals. They kill for survival only, but we no... I really don’t know which are the beasts on this our planet...”

“How true, Commissioner. I never thought about it that way.”

“What do they teach you these days at the police school?”

“Maybe they explain it in a different way... When you say it, it is very clear.”

“Let’s talk about us, Clément, the lessons continue another time. We need to know who had one or more motives to kill Refus. Over and out. The rest can be taken care of by the judges. What have you heard about the murder? Any talk?”

“Everyone is talking about it. It’s the most talked about subject in the neighborhood, more than about joblessness or high cost of living... Everyone has something to say... Some say that Fortune kisses the one who least deserves it. The Astrologer loaned money. A lot of people must have celebrated, not having to repay loans. Some wonder what happened to all the jewellery given to him as collateral for...”

“That could be a motive. But do you recall how Refus was found? Do you recall the pictures I showed you?”

“Yes..., it could seem a sexual crime, given his inclinations...”

“Or maybe a diversion... The place wrecked like that would give the impression someone was desperately looking for something of interest...”

“It could be a diversion. Commissioner, this is becoming a hard case to crack.”

“We have to find the real reason behind this crime. Otherwise we’ll never find the murderer. We don’t have one credible witness.”

“Do you think it was only one person?”

“I haven’t made up my mind, not yet. I have no clues... Returning to what you just told me, the search didn’t mention a thing about his being a loan-shark. No documents and no jewellery... Where are they? Another thing. He never received mail, only a monthly magazine on astrology.”

“A *magazine* ...?” Clément asked, quite surprised.

“Yes. The concierge of the street, Poitié, said that all he received was a subscription to this magazine on astrology. Nothing else. Why are you so surprised?”

“But, Refus didn’t know how to read or write! What’s he doing with a magazine...??”

“How do you know that...?”

“I remember it well... When we were kids, we would stick notes on his door. Insults, very coarse. You know how terrible kids can be, we didn’t think we were really offending

him, we were going to school... We printed the words in big letters. One day he ran after us wanting to know what these meant. We caught on that he couldn't read. So we stopped."

Didier thought that all this had a meaning. It was something no one else knew, only the two of them.

"Fine, Clément, I think we've made some progress. If nothing important happens, we meet again Monday at the same time. If you have any news, phone me even at home, at any time. Do a good job, keep your ears and eyes open. By the way, is the pay good...? Do remember that you're also paid by the government."

Clément smiled. His kind and loyal face, still so innocent, lit up.

"That means, when I return, I'll offer lunch to the whole office..."

"Done. But return a winner, mind you." Saying this, she squeezed his shoulder.

"I'll do my best, Commissioner. See you Monday."

Walking away Didier realized that she had, against her own principles, been informal with a junior colleague. Was it because she was more than pleased with the news he had given her, or was it because she liked him. She decided not to think too much about the second option.

IV

Friday, late evening

Before returning to the office, Didier went home to take a shower, ate a quick meal and fed her cat, *Chico*. She chatted a bit with him, who looked at her questioningly, curled up on a kitchen chair. He didn't understand a word of what she told him, but she was certain the one day *Chico* would answer her. He seemed to pay so much attention to her questions, her doubts, her insecurity.

"I know why you don't answer. You are a philosopher, you must evaluate, evaluate, evaluate. You are true friend who knows how to keep all my secrets. I thank you for your reserve. Here, you deserve a biscuit!"

At just after eight Didier entered the office. Only the night shift on duty. Her head was spinning from all the information, intuition, and theories, since she had left Clément.

She turned on the light and looked around. Office cold and impersonal. Desk full of paper. She closed the door, turned off the light. In the sudden darkness, the city sent a thousand little lights. Many busy lives full of happiness, of suffering, maybe of death. She turned on the light.

The time for day-dreaming over, it was time to return to reality.

She had just taken her seat when the phone rang. It was one of the inspectors on duty.

"Didier" she replied automatically.

"Commissioner, I'm Inspector Jules Kolinsky... Martinez of the PJ phoned. He had to attend a case of attack against one of the residents in rue Gulloc, Madame Coteau. He

wanted to let us know, not sure if it's connected with the murder of Refus. Do we have to go?"

"Is she dead?" she inquired worriedly.

"I don't know... The information was cabled."

"How many are you in the office?"

"Two."

"Come with me... Madame is an important witness."

The car raced through the night traffic. The siren sounded like a cry for help, in the midst of the indifference of the people. Didier used the car's radio to contact the PJ for information. The woman wasn't dead but badly injured. She was at the emergency ward of the nearby hospital.

"You heard...?"

"Yes, Commissioner. We'll go there immediately."

At the emergency front desk Inspector Kolinsky got the information he needed. He took Didier to the reanimation room. Outside of the door a uniformed officer was chatting with a bald, robust man wearing a plaid overcoat. Didier went directly to him.

"Martinez? I'm Chief Inspector Didier, following the Refus case. How is she?"

The man turned his head around slowly and looked at her in silence. A half of a cigar, unlit, hung from his thick lips.

"Good evening Commissioner... Not bad, not good. We're waiting for the doctors to come out. She was hit hard!" he answered without dropping the cigar.

"How did it happen?"

"A neighbor called. She heard screams, then a girl ran out of the main door crying and screaming. A family argument, a bit heated. The husband beat her. A violent person. He's being questioned."

"Why did you connect it to the murder of Refus?"

"One of my men suggested it. He told me that the whole morning the family was held for questioning. I thought there could be a connection. But after the first look, things seem

different. I think I had you come for nothing. Probably family problems.”

“Maybe yes, maybe no...”, Didier commented.

They had to wait three quarters of an hour. Finally a surgeon appeared. Didier did not intervene. She let Martinez do all the questioning. She knew how sensitive the men of the PJ became when someone interfered with their work. The doctor gave a summary.

“Two broken ribs. A very nasty bruise above the left eyebrow. The eye’s fine. There should be no internal injuries but tomorrow morning we’ll check. Deep cuts on the scalp, eight stitches. A general state of shock and confusion. She’s now under sedation. You can talk to her tomorrow morning. She’ll stay in surgery, one floor up, for a few days.”

“What do we do, Commissioner?” Kolinsky asked.

“We leave.”

“Don’t you want to question Coteau?”

“No. We have to talk to her. She knows something which she didn’t want to tell us this morning. Her husband tried to hit her during the interrogation.”

“Nice person he isn’t...”

“It isn’t their fault. It’s their lives forcing them to suffer...”

Didier said good-bye to Martinez. She asked him to send her a report on the questioning of Coteau. She would talk to the wife once she was in a condition to do so. Martinez grunted his agreement and left, telling his man to follow.

Didier found herself back at the office with no other news. She wasn’t sure that Marie knew anything. Maybe Martinez was right. But she had to try. She reread the report from Forensic and the interrogations. Finally she read the interrogations done by Mulé. There were no indications to prove that Refus loaned money. He didn’t even have a telephone at

home. No notes. But this made sense due to what Clément had told her.

Mulé had questioned the butcher. Refus bought meat once a month. But he never went in person, he sent Marie Coteau who, from what the butcher said, also did the laundry once a month. The other two questioned were the shoemaker and the shopkeeper of a wholesale store nearby. She found nothing of interest. Neither had dealt with him. The latter was there since a year and didn't know him. Neither had seen or heard anything that evening because both had closed their respective shops around seven.

She was unhappy. Many tiny signs, no real clue. With a total lack of interest, she re-opened the report from Forensic. Then she re-read the preliminary medical report. Enclosed was a manila envelope: Pictures of Antoine Refus. She had only glanced at them when the report had arrived. Having been at the scene of the crime, she had almost ignored these.

She looked at each one. They weren't so different from others. Maybe less crude than those she'd seen during the criminology course.

In one picture the hands were very visible. The right one was open, the fingers spread as if waving. The left was closed in a fist with the thumb sticking out. A pretty strange position. The doctor had written that he had opened the fist but it had held nothing. She didn't know much about medicine. She thought to talk to the medical examiner. She checked the clock in front of her, eleven on the dot. She closed the file, turned off the lights and going out she asked for a taxi to be sent.

Saturday, morning

Didier wasn't on duty but by substituting the Commissioner she felt she should make an appearance. She also needed to go see Madame Marie and send her report to the

judge. She arrived around ten. She had slept like a log for eight dreamless hours. She spotted only two Inspectors, the third being out on an investigation.

Demonfort's report was lying on her desk. She read it carefully before signing it. She thought Judge Lafayette's weekend wouldn't be ruined. She looked around, the office depressed her. She popped into the next door office, saying that she would be away for an hour or so. She could be reached on her cellphone, if necessary.

The day felt very much like Spring, even if it was only the end of April. She took off her coat, hung it over her shoulders, continuing her walk. She was irritated. She realized that she didn't know what to do with an investigation not going anywhere, with no clues to work with. She was matter-of-fact, this waiting bugged her.

All around everything looked wonderful. People out shopping. Attractive shop windows. She stopped at a boutique window. She saw a dress she liked. She walked in. After a quarter of an hour she walked around with a huge shopping bag. A passerby like any other. She would have liked to go to the seaside to visit her mother, to chat with her, to run along the sandy beach.

Saturday, late morning

She re-entered her office. It was nearly lunch-time. The walk had made her feel better. Leaving her shopping bag, she called for a taxi to take her to the hospital to see Marie. Just then, she spotted the report sent in by Martinez. She read it quickly. Nothing much of interest.

It was quiet on the first floor of the hospital. She knocked on the door but no reply. She opened the door and saw her. Didier's heart nearly stopped. The face all bruised. The head bandaged, the arms looking so thin on the white sheet. She seemed even weaker and more vulnerable than when they

had last spoken. The eyes open, staring at the ceiling. She finally noticed her. Didier smiled and came closer.

“How are you, Madame...? Can I keep you company for a bit...?”

She didn't answer but gave a slight nod. It was obvious she was hurting.

“You feel a bit better this morning...?”

She didn't know how to begin. It was wicked to take advantage of a woman in this state. She replied in a weak voice.

“A bit better, thank you... You don't have to bother... You'll have so many other things to do...”

“Don't you worry about me... You think only of getting well. You'll see that everything will work out. If you need anything, just ask...”

“Juliette... Where is she...?”

“She's in good hands. A social worker's with her, at home. Don't worry.”

Marie seemed relieved.

“And Jean...?”, she inquired immediately.

“Right now he is resting, in a peaceful place. He won't hurt you for a few days.”

“But afterwards...?”

“Everything will work out... I'll guarantee that. I'll let you rest now. I'll visit you each day. You'd like that...?”

The woman remained amazed. She had expected so many other questions.

“I don't want you to take so much the trouble about us. And thank you about Juliette... What a relief.”

After leaving the room Didier spoke with the on-duty doctor. She showed him her ID and explained the situation as well as to why the police was interested in the woman. She added that Judge Lafayette would appreciate all possible care given to her because she was an important witness. That he should inform his colleagues when they came on duty. She

would come every day for news. She gave her card to the doctor. The poor man, having heard the criminal investigation force and the name of the well-known judge mentioned, was highly impressed and guaranteed that they would do everything necessary for the woman.

While in the taxi, returning to the office, she laughed to herself. It was the best she could have done for the woman. At the office she phoned the medical examiner. He was out. He would be back on Monday.

She went home, grabbed *Chico* and put him in his travel cage, then she packed a small bag for herself and called for a taxi. A train was leaving in about twenty minutes. She bought a ticket, some magazines. She would be on a short holiday with her mother. She would run along the seashore.

Saturday, afternoon

It was calm; the sun was nice and warm. Lying on the beach, she heard murmurs seemingly in the distance.

Her mother wasn't at all surprised to see her. Her Agnès was always a bit impulsive, which she repeated to her each and every time. She came and went without a word but she was always happy to see her daughter for a few days.

While her daughter was out in the afternoon sun, she prepared dinner. She would cook fish which she knew she liked to eat. She knew that in town she didn't eat as correctly as when at home, alone and without a husband to keep her company. She never broached the subject. She knew Agnès didn't like it. She would have replied as usual, with a laugh, "*So many live alone and are happy. Aren't you?*"

She would have had to reply in the negative. That she would have preferred for the father to still be alive. That the days seemed so endlessly long and other such things. Invariably she told her daughter she was right so she would

leave serenely. *Chico* wandered about. He knew that he too would enjoy a good holiday, based on fish.

Sunday

In the morning mother and daughter wandered about the town. Didier wanted to greet old friends and make the usual trip down to the port. Almost all worked in the fishing industry. Didier felt as if she were a child again. She showed interest in everything and spoke to everyone, always a kind word and laughing. The family had been living there for many years, everyone knew the father, the administrator of the fishing cooperative. Just as they all knew that the girl who once ran about in jeans and bare feet between the fishing boats was now an important police official in the capital.

The holiday ended quickly, as do all good things. Around nine in the evening Didier was back in her apartment. For a second it didn't seem to be hers. She still had the sunshine in her eyes and the thought of the friendly people she'd left. These walls, though elegant, didn't seem so friendly to her. They reminded her of all the problems that she had left locked behind the closed door the day before.

She was dressed in her usual jeans and shapeless sweater she usually wore at home. She was sitting on the rug in front of the TV waiting for the news, when the phone rang. She stretched out an arm and managed to grab the cordless. She noticed that the time was ten-thirty.

"Yes..., who is it?"

"Did I wake you up, Commissioner?", asked a timid voice at the other end. Didier stood up immediately.

"Clément. Has something happened?"

"You recognized my voice!"

"Why such a worried tone?"

"I didn't know if I should call. It's very late..."

“Not to worry. You’ll have your reasons for doing so. I hope...”

She hadn’t even realized that she had taken on an official tone of voice, as if on duty.

“I’ve information which I think important. I got it an hour ago during dinner with work colleagues. You do know what I mean, yes?”

“Yes, I’ve understood. Tell me!”

“I’m in a public place. We just left the restaurant. It would be better to meet.”

“Do you have a car?”

“Yes.”

“Do you know where I live?”

“No... honestly, I don’t.”

She gave him directions.

“I’ll be there in about twenty minutes... But you’re sure I am not disturbing you...?”

“No. When you get here, buzz me, I’ll open the door. Third floor, number five. Till later.”

She looked around. She never had anyone come to her home. Maybe it was a bit in disorder. She left everything as is. She lived like that. There was no reason to change one’s habits.

“Come in, Clément. Let’s go to the living room.”

It was more than a living room, it was everything. Sofa, TV, bookcases, eating area, writing corner, day-time area, free-time, reading. Warm and welcoming.

“Sit on the sofa. Do you want something to drink? I can offer coke, orange soda, fruit juices. No alcohol. I don’t drink.”

“Thanks no, Commissioner. It’s late, I don’t want to bother you. Maybe tomorrow will be a busy day. I’ll tell it to you quickly.”

Didier turned on the recorder. Clément, after introducing the people with which he had dined, went straight to the facts.

“Marc, the Dutchman, finished telling us a story of extortion in his country a year ago, just before he moved here. Adolphe, sitting next to me, interrupted. That story, he said, sounds like the one of the Astrologer...”

“... And who’s that...?” I asked.

“... You’re not from here... The Astrologer was a loan shark, a certain Antoine, killed a few days ago. They called him that because he supposedly could foretell the future. Not his own, obviously, seeing how he ended ...”

“... But why was he killed...?”, I asked.

“... For the money! He had this obsession that everyone wanted to rob him, he didn’t even trust the banks... So he gave them to a sort of banker, a real rich one, from a better neighborhood. He was sure that the money would be safe with him. Also because he had something on him. Husband of a client, a certain Carole, who came to see him each week on Tuesday evenings for, I think, the last seven or eight years... About after a year that she went to him, a miracle, a boy was born... Total romantic fiction... How easy it is to fool men...!”

“... As soon as he had finished his tale Adolphe started to guffaw. Others with us joined him. They had had one glass too many, you know how it gets...”

“... So I, very innocently, asked if everyone was so appreciative then why was he killed...?”

“... For the money, idiot! He replied, money makes people forget everything, whatever helping hand was given... especially when one is in dire need... And they all continued to laugh...”

“... Well, Commissioner, these are the facts. Not to make them suspicious, I stopped asking questions. It won’t be hard to find out the names. What should I do now...?”

“Return to that job until I tell you to quit. Maybe it’s not the moment to show our cards. You said that this Carole went every Tuesday evening...?”

“That’s what Adolphe said. A weird coincidence, don’t you think...?”

“Looks like it. We’d have to know her better to know if she did it. Whoever hit him so violently to kill him at once must have been extremely strong, maybe full of hate... All that chaos, all those things destroyed... I’ve another impression of the murderer... The truth is rarely what it seems. It could’ve been the husband, unknown to her... Let’s wait and see...”

Clément felt a bit sad. He thought he’d found an important clue and here was Didier expounding her doubts. With reason, if you thought about it enough.

Monday, morning

Didier had just entered her office when she was called by the Director who wanted to talk to the heads of all divisions. She let Mulé question the two thieves he had just arrested and went upstairs.

“I want fast updated reports of the situation. In one hour I have to meet with the Prefect and he’ll want to know about the more important investigations. Therefore, limit yourselves to those...”

All gave their reports, speaking in order of seniority. Didier was last.

“The jewellery store robbery, with one death among the customers in the store, was solved personally and brilliantly by Inspector Mulé. This morning around 5 he discovered and arrested the thieves in a basement where they’d been hiding all this time. When you called me in, we were just starting the interrogation. They’ve a clean record, unfortunately. Only twenty-five and twenty years old. The new generation...”

“Are you feeling sorry for them..., Didier?”

For a moment she wasn’t sure if the question was intentionally sarcastic.

“No..., I’m only saying that it is a sign of the emerging crime among the young jobless ones...”

“Yes, yes, of course... but save us your theories on faults in society, please... anything else...?”

“We’re continuing on the Refus case, the man killed in rue Gulloc. A difficult case in difficult surroundings.”

“Why difficult...?”

“Because in that street, even if everyone knows each other for years, it’s hard to make headway. Many testimonies but

also contradictory or incomplete. We have check a series of clues...”

“So you need more time...”

“Maybe not...”

The Director wanted to reply, not at all happy with her evasive answers, but the lack of time didn’t allow him to do so. He ended the meeting and dismissed them.

Didier was just on her way out when he called her back. It could be that he didn’t like that *Maybe not*.

“What do I have to tell the Prefect about Refus, something definite...? Do you think you’ll solve it or not?”

Didier looked him straight in the eyes, keeping a straight face.

“Maybe yes...”

When she left she made sure that she didn’t slam the door. Walking downstairs she imagined the Director and Prefect asking each other why they had given her the job. Neither of the them would have openly admitted to each other that *after all she’s only a woman*, but each would’ve surely thought it. This thought put her in a good mood.

She went to the interrogation room. The two young men had confessed. Mulé filled her in, in a low voice. Didier listened silently. Before going out she asked the younger of the two, who seemed more vulnerable and hadn’t yet truly realized why he had killed a young mother.

“Why did you do it...?”

“I just don’t know... I don’t know...”, he burst into tears.

She walked out, not at her ease, even if this was the profession she had chosen. She would have liked to have next to her one of those politicians who daily proclaimed one must give work and a future to the youth. She would have wanted... well, she didn’t really know what.

She closed her office door. She thought that to fight crime was to confront reality daily but it was something entirely different. One feels unarmed against life.

Kolinsky, who had knocked on the door several times without getting an answer, walked in and interrupted her train of thoughts. She looked surprised but regained her composure.

“Commissioner, maybe we got an eye witness in the Refus case!”

She wanted to laugh. Even Kolinsky used the word *maybe*. But this information made her sit up.

“Who would that be...?”

“Seminóle.”

“WHO ...?”

“That’s what he’s called, or better that’s what everyone calls him. He’s a homeless, a PWKA, person without a known address, as we classify them.”

“I know, Kolinsky, don’t repeat the handbook to me... But he does have a real name, no?”

“No. He won’t tell and we’ve got nothing on file. We’ll just have to call him by that name. We can’t use torture to find out...”

“Ok, then tell me why he’s called that.”

“Because he claims to have stayed a long time in the United States, living among the redskins... with the *Seminóles*.”

“Fine. Let’s see this almost redskin...”

“He isn’t here now.”

“What! You have a witness and let him go free, to go who knows where? You do know that we haven’t got a single clue...”

She tried to calm down. She realized she had exaggerated.

“My apologies, Kolinsky, but this morning even the Director put in his two words...”

“You’ll get used to it. If you stay here with us...”

“Thanks for the advice... and for the best wishes...”

“Don’t misunderstand me. Everyone here thinks highly of you. Maybe in the beginning we were a bit cold, suspicious, but I believe everyone thinks differently now... Do you realize that whatever you do or say is immediately repeated in all offices...?”

“Ah, so they have nothing better to do... So sorry, I understand... I know I am under observation but not to such an extent...”

“Maybe you forget that here you’re the boss. Who gives the orders, so it’s normal... It would be the same in any workplace.... Agreed?”

“You’re right... Let’s return to our redskin. Where is he now? Why didn’t you bring him here...?”

“He was involved in a street accident. He’s in the emergency ward.”

“Oh no..., him too...! There must be a curse on this case!”

“Nothing serious, Commissioner... Last night he drank too much and walked into a truck, near the gas station in the neighborhood where Refus died. Maybe he doesn’t even know him. He isn’t badly hurt. Tomorrow morning he gets out.”

Didier looked relieved.

“Then can we go question him.”

“Of course. The car’s outside.”

During the ride she asked him how he got this information.

“This morning I got a call from the cop on duty at the hospital. He was questioning him about the accident – for the report – also requested by the trucker who needed to drive to Germany and was worried about the insurance... Still under the effect of drink from last night, he mumbled about Refus. The copper caught on that there could be clues about the murder so he contacted Martinez of the area’s criminal in-

vestigation department who told him to let us know. One less headache for him, obviously... I took the call and spoke at length with the cop... It would seem that we have something to go on..."

They arrived at the same hospital where Marie was recovered. On the ground floor in a hallway they located Seminóle's bed. Long hair in two braids, of undefined color. A many colored band around his forehead. Clean shaved, tanned, about sixty. Of solid build. The hospital's pastel nightshirt in total contrast with rough aspect, dark muscular arms, strong hands. Observant eyes, an eagle beak nose, sparse eyebrows. Near the bed a used military hold-all under a sleeveless leather jacket. Didier imagined him wearing feathers on his head. Mistaking him for a redskin wasn't so hard.

The cop sat next to the bed. He greeted Didier.

"This is Seminóle, Commissioner... He has something to say about the killing of Refus..."

He turned to the old man, asking him to repeat what he had already told him.

"*That's* not the sheriff! Women do the job now...?", he grumbled.

The cop was ready to put him in his place when Didier gestured with her hand.

"Hello, I am Calamity Jane's sister. You know her, right...? I am a sheriff, believe it or not."

The old man stared at her, with disgust. He wasn't stupid but he played along.

"Ok. I'll talk... But I want a bottle of fire water instead of that water to drink which hurts my guts. Deal..?"

"You'll get your fire water... But first tell me what you saw. You'll have to earn your fire water."

"I always sleep outdoors, possibly near a source of warmth. Tuesday evening I was near the Lambert's bakery, the one just around the corner from rue Gulloc. It was around

eight-thirty. I know that because I heard the music ending the news on TV from nearby houses... I was getting ready to go to sleep, near the porch and trapdoor where they throw in the wood, when I heard a noise. I saw the bakery door open and Julien, the apprentice, walk out with a bike... The bakery ovens start to work only around three in the morning, before that time there's nobody around... There was a basket on the bike, like the ones for deliveries and it was full..."

"... I'm nosy. All Red Indians are. Then I thought I could go on a hunt for a nice loaf of bread... I hadn't eaten, had only half a bottle on me. I let him turn the corner, then I followed him... I wear moccasins, no sound. The ones under this bed... Real buckskin, sheriff, that can't be found so easily."

"... In brief, he's at the entrance door to Refus's building. I was hiding behind a crate at the storage place near there. I saw he rang the doorbell. I saw it well because it's the third night of the waning moon and a clear sky. The door opens and there's the Astrologer. No one else around at that time. The Astrologer glanced around and told him – *come on in so I can pay you and you carry that heavy bread* – but Julien did not want to come in. The Astrologer told him – *don't be afraid, tonight I won't want anything from you* – then he came in with the basket and the door shut. I saw a light go on in a room on the first floor where the Astrologer lives. Then I saw moving shadows but I heard nothing, no screams or no other sounds..."

"... After about half an hour the lights go out, the main door opens and out comes Julien, alone, with the empty basket and in distress. He puts the empty basket on the bike and pedals away fast. He didn't go to the bakery which is on the other side. That's it, that's all I saw... I returned, rather pissed off, on an empty stomach to my sleeping bag. No bread, I think, only fire water. I emptied the bottle and fell asleep. End of hunt."

Didier remained silent for a few minutes. Kolinsky turned off the portable tape recorder.

"How old is Julien...?" Didier asked.

"About eighteen but looks younger. Short and frail. He's always inside that bakery except when he makes deliveries... Not like me who's always outdoors", Seminóle said proudly.

"Are you sure it was Tuesday...?"

"I lived among the redskins, not in a nuthouse. Of course I'm sure! The next day everyone was talking about it. So it was the previous evening, ok...?"

"If we need you, where can we find you?"

"Tomorrow they're letting me out of this jail. If they keep me any longer, I'll suffocate, no air here... I'll be in the neighborhood. I've camped around there for more than ten years, ever since I came back to live among the palefaces. Now can I have my fire water...?"

"Tomorrow, Seminóle, tomorrow when you get out... Kolinsky will bring it to you..."

"I knew it, I knew you'd trick me... All palefaces speak with forked tongue!"

Didier asked Kolinsky to wait for her. She wanted to check up on Madame Marie on the next floor. She knew now what to ask her. She knocked lightly on the door, first having seen the doctor on duty, who, although not the one from the day before, knew about it all and assured her that the woman was recovering and that the staff was taking good care of her.

Marie was dozing, but when she saw her enter she turned to her with a smile.

"How is our patient today...?" asked Didier, acting as innocently as possible.

"Hello. I feel a bit better. My chest hurts a lot. Everyone is so kind to me..."

"You see how things can change?"

"I wonder how alone Juliette feels. Poor dear, without her mom... If only we had a phone at home, I could call her..."

“I’m sure she is fine. I’ll contact the P.J. office as soon as I return to mine. They’ll know. Now, just think about getting well...”

As if by intuition, Didier decided not to begin the conversation she wanted to have with her. Maybe the woman would not have spoken alone to her. She noticed that she showed more trust in her.

Monday, late morning

They were back at the office around eleven. Didier told Kolinsky to copy in writing all that had been taped, without comments.

“What about talking to that boy?”, he asked.

“You worried he’ll run away...?”

“No.”

“First I want to reread the testimony of that redskin or what the heck his name is. His story was so exact that it seemed he was right there.”

“Yeah. Not very talkative but very accurate... Almost like a tale out of the Far West. Do you think we can believe him...?”

“He had no reason to lie... We only found out by chance. And what he’s told us coincides with my idea of the case.”

“Then, you know more than we do...”

“No. But I’ve an idea... All I need now is definite proof, useful to the magistrate.”

“I see that you have understood the brass tacks of the job...”

“I’m trying, Kolinsky, I’m trying... There’s no guarantee I’ll succeed.”

“You’ll get there, Commissioner. You’re very sharp and even patient. The only two requirements of a perfect investigator, believe you me... A job well done.”

Kolinsky's compliments made her feel good. In all truth, no one could reproach her for was her patience. She never let appearances guide her, she always wanted to better understand the situation at hand. If someone would have asked her what was behind this crime, well, this time she would disappoint. She still had nothing, even if, as Kolinsky said, unwittingly, that she knew a bit more about Refus than the others working on the case.

Monday, early afternoon

Didier did not have to meet with Clément except for emergencies. Thus, she had all the time to study the case. She called Mulé. He was out. She left instructions that she wanted to see him at five, together with Demonfort and Kolinsky, for an update on the Refus case.

She called Martinez. She found out that the girl was fine, just totally nuts he said, in his delicate way. She arranged to meet the medical examiner the next morning.

Now she had to dedicate herself to the mystery behind of the married couple, clients of Refus. How to know their names? She would have to wait till the next day, if Clément didn't succeed. She could have called in the three gas station attendants. But then she would risk that someone would tell the two supposed suspects. If it hadn't been for them she would have made more waves, upsetting the Director. She had to find another way.

While out to lunch at a place near the office, an old man in a wheelchair came in, accompanied by a younger man. The sight reminded her of Madame Marie Rigolot. But she could not ask her, because she said she closed all windows at seven in the evening due to her being afraid of her husband. Maybe Poitié. Even he returned home around that time. Maybe if he did know something? She didn't find him talkative, considering his being a concierge. She decided to wait.

Monday, mid-afternoon

At five, in the Commissioner's office, Didier had with her Mulé, Demonfort and Kolinsky. Her office wouldn't have accommodated all. She went over the case. She requested them to give their opinions, but based only on facts, not on unproven theories.

Mulé moved uneasily in his seat, mumbling.

"Would you like to be first...?" asked Didier.

"I don't agree with you... We all have the right to state our theories that can be checked afterwards. We aren't book-keepers..."

"Oh, I agree with you, Mulé. You do realize that each one of us could have at least five or six theories which, notwithstanding, could be proven? Then what do we do? Spend a few days, using all our men, to get verification? I suggest that we keep to what we know without using too much imagination. Who wants to speak first?"

Didier did not know what the past procedure had been to discuss difficult cases. She understood that her inspectors were used to teamwork. Or at least that was her impression.

"Nobody...? No one's being examined, it's permitted to make mistakes..."

Demonfort decided to risk it. He knew how things went when one was in front of the boss. Although younger than Mulé, he did have more seniority. He had two more years to go before retirement.

"To note that I'm speaking only for myself... I've been inspector in this division for twelve years now. Never before has my superior asked me what I thought of his decision about a murder case, even less if I had a personal opinion about it. Basically, I was told to solve a case and that was it... You, Commissioner, ask us to discuss it with you. I like teamwork, I would have liked it to be like that in the past.

But I'm not used to it nor do I have any notion how. Here, whoever solves a case is rewarded, the others go empty-handed. Draw your own conclusions..."

"... Concerning Refus, my opinion is as follows. They killed him for money, everything else is a planned diversion. But where is the money? The murderer was alone and one of his clients. I have no idea whether it's someone from rue Gulloc or an outsider."

"Thank you, Demonfort. I've taken note of your first comments. I want you all to know that I believe in brainstorming, each of you has a brain. For the rest of your comments, I agree, in accordance to the facts we have."

These words by Didier loosened the tongues of the other two. They agreed with what Demonfort had said and with the theory of how the murder was committed. They remained a few hours to discuss how to proceed. Basically, it was necessary to locate the money and the jewellery or how, if not found in the apartment, the murderer got hold of them. They concluded that it was certainly a premeditated crime, the goal being theft.

VI

Tuesday, morning

Didier met with the medical examiner at her office. She had some questions needing answers. She didn't think they amounted to much but she needed to try. He brought with him the autopsy report.

"What did you want to ask, Commissioner? I mean, in particular. I assume that is why you had me come here..."

Didier read it quickly, then asked,

"Look at the pictures... I had this particular enlarged, the two hands. Don't you think that the left hand's trying to indicate something?"

The doctor studied at the enlargement.

"I don't think so... Death came immediately. The blow took the victim by surprise, who was definitely undressed after his fall face down. I don't think the body was moved from that original position... It could be a post mortem spasm. Not everyone reacts the same. I don't think I can be of help..."

"My knowledge of legal medicine isn't at your level... I thought the hand could be hinting, I don't know what..."

"The only sure thing is that death came between eight-thirty and nine-thirty. Instant. There are no other signs of violence, not even sexual nor bruises or other."

"So you think that the difference in finger positions in both hands is purely coincidence..."

"Absolutely, which I myself noticed while doing the first examination there."

In spite of the medical examiner's reassurances, Didier still had doubts but she didn't let him know.

During this meeting, the other three inspectors were going over the declarations of the residents or working folk of rue

Gulloc the cops had gathered the previous Wednesday. They were looking for a clue, a contradiction. Any irregularity.

Julien, the baker's apprentice, was picked up at work by a plainclothes cop and now seated in the waiting room. With him, a social worker. He was a minor. As a matter of fact, he wasn't even sixteen. It was Lambert the baker who had declared him to be eighteen, so he would not be accused of exploiting a minor. He had been very clever in forging the documents which he had presented to the employment agency. Didier gave orders that the visit of the boy to be justified as a check by the employment agency. As soon as Julien went off, Lambert felt very ill during the rest of that morning. Around ten Didier and Kolinsky questioned Julien, in the presence of the social worker. It was painful but Didier had to go through with it, using great care. Seminóle's statement had to be verified.

As soon as they saw the boy, they knew he could not have killed Refus. Julien was one of the many victims of the murdered man's sexual inclinations. He was given some money which he took home for his mother, a widow, and for his two younger brothers. A squalid story of ordinary poverty. Julien confirmed all, between many tears and sobbing. They assured him that no one would know about the interrogation. All under complete confidentiality. He left less frightened than when he had come in, but certainly not much happier.

Returning to her office, Didier found Mulé waiting for her.

"The lawyer Juppé is waiting for you... He needs to tell you something very confidential... He wants to see only you... I wasn't able to make him talk. I told him that today was a heavy day and you had a lot on your hands... But he insisted. He's been back twice."

"He represents Dubonnais, right?"

“Yes, but I don’t think it’s about that case... That’s not that confidential, is it? He killed a sibling, end of story.”

“That’s right. I have to make some important calls. He’ll have to wait”, adding to herself, *this prince of the law courts*.

As soon as Mulé left, she phoned Forensic. She wanted to know whether the investigation team had returned from their visit to Refus’s apartment, as she had requested the previous day.

“Not yet, Commissioner...”

“When they’re back, would you please ask Mister Moyar to see me? As long as he has no other urgent things to do. If I’m not in my office, page me. Ask for Mulé or Demonfort. Have you understood...?”

“It’ll be done, Commissioner.”

She dialed another number, always getting a busy ring tone. She called Mulé and asked him to bring in the lawyer as soon as he arrived. A while later, someone knocked on her door, it was Juppé.

“May I speak to you for a moment...?”

“Please, come in, have a seat.”

Juppé didn’t have his usual self-assured air, he seemed ill at ease.

“I’m here on behalf of a client. He came to my studio yesterday evening...”

“Who would that be...?”

“I may as well tell you his name. It’s the banker Le Pont. Martin Le Pont. You’ve probably heard of him...”

“Indirectly, but then I don’t follow high finance... I have no funds to invest...”

“Yes, I understand... I’m in an embarrassing situation. I know what I am going to tell you will surprise you, but hear me out to the end and you’ll see that the matter is less serious than it looks... My client is very worried about the likely negative effect on his business. I request you, if possible, to

keep our conversation confidential. If you don't find it that, it's obvious I cannot insist..."

"What's it all about...?"

"The murder of Refus."

Didier's stomach lurched. This happened when she was under stress and a problem cleared up suddenly. She thought of the information from Clément and the dirty laughter of his work colleagues. She did her best to remain neutral.

"I'm listening and I'll try not to interrupt you before the end, as you requested."

Juppé seemed slightly relieved.

"My client told me a strange story... I'll tell it to you as it was told to me. He told me that for reasons now unimportant, years ago his wife Carole met Refus. She went to see him, first more out of curiosity than anything else... She had heard that he was extremely good in foretelling the future. Le Pont told me that for years he and his wife were unhappy because they had no children. They did all what they could... Carole, against his wishes, wanted to see Refus. The meeting was arranged through an acquaintance of Carole. He gave me no name. I'll shorten the story which is too long."

"Excuse the interruption, Juppé. What do you mean by a story which is too long...?"

"The fact that these meetings of the wife with Refus lasted seven or eight years. I don't find that relevant. She went to see him every Tuesday evening, around nine."

"For all that time...?"

"It seems so... Getting to the point, Le Pont told me that Refus hypnotized her, assuring her that in the end the problem would be solved. Obviously, for each of these, shall we say, sittings, Refus was well recompensed. She did not argue about the price and paid... The fact is that after four or five years, I don't remember exactly, she was with child. She didn't visit him during the entire pregnancy, having to remain in bed most of the time. To show her gratitude, as soon

as she received the confirmation of the pregnancy..., she thanked him with quite a large gift.”

“... A child was born, I don’t recall if a boy or a girl, an unimportant detail. A few months after the birth of the child, she received a message, I assume through the same person who introduced her to Refus, that other visits were necessary if she wanted the child to remain in good health. She accepted. Her husband disagreed. It was his opinion that she was dependent on this man. From what Le Pont said, there seem to have been quite a few family discussions concerning her return to Refus...”

“... Thus the visits began again. Le Pont wanted to attend one. He wanted to meet this man. I have the feeling that even Le Pont was attracted to his personality because, as he told me, he changed his mind about Refus. He had a positive impression of him. Which is, for Le Pont, the best he can say about anyone...”

“... Refus was very kind to them. He asked Le Pont to accompany the wife at times, but not every time, just once every two months. Refus started to ask Le Pont advice on how to invest his money. In the end Le Pont became his trusted banker. When his wife returned home, she would have a satchel full of millions which Le Pont then invested on behalf of Refus. Whenever Le Pont was given permission to accompany his wife, he informed Refus about the situation of his investments. The last time he was seen there was a month before the death. He would have returned next month...”

“... The problem created for my client is to whom should he refer regarding the accumulated wealth. Refus has no relatives and he never said what to do in such a case. And if this story is publicized, well... Le Pont is scared stiff that he’d be involved in a scandal.”

“Or a murder...”, added Didier.

“I asked him that... But that’s not the case. On the evening of the crime, he was at a business meeting from five to about eleven. With a lot of people, about two hundred kilometers from here...”

“While the wife visited Refus?”

“That yes... But Madame Carole had no motive to kill Refus. She was grateful to him, remember...?”

Didier leaned back on her chair. This absurd story would have thrilled the readers of any scandal magazine.

“Do you understand now why I needed to talk to you in private? My client’s situation is very sensitive. Such a scandal would ruin him. Think of the press! He would be the classic first page monster. Even when the matter quiets down, proving his innocence and that of his wife, he would be ruined!”

Didier didn’t immediately come to a conclusion. She thought, unkindly, of Juppé’s legal fee. He could ask any amount, he would have been paid it just to save the man’s skin. She began to see the criminal lawyers as vultures looking for the vulnerable. She came back down to earth.

“What exactly do you want from me, as a lawyer...? After what you just told me, I shall have to question the wife, seeing that the husband was far away. Don’t you think so?”

“I asked myself the same question and asked Le Pont. I am convinced that he told me the truth. Le Pont is too wealthy and influential to have committed such a stupid act. Likewise the wife...”

“No matter, I will have to question her...”, Didier insisted, waiting for the proposal which Juppé intended to make.

“How do you intend to proceed, Commissioner?”

“What do you suggest, Juppé...?”

“If the questioning is done at the home, without too much fuss...?”

“A possibility... But how can she prove she is innocent...?”

“She swore that when she left, Refus was alive and didn’t accompany her to the main door. Just like all the other Tuesdays.”

“Are there any witnesses...?”

“No. The driver waited for her about two streets away. Nobody saw her leave...”

“So...?”

“But there’s no motive...”, Juppé insisted.

“No motive, as we know it”, Didier corrected him.

“I beg you, Commissioner. Don’t play cat and mouse with me.”

Didier sat up and looked at him reproachfully.

“I, when on duty, never play games...”

Juppé understood that he had exaggerated. He knew her character. Never banter about a serious matter.

“I apologize... I didn’t want to offend you... I find myself at a disadvantage... It’s the first time I represent a client in such a strange but at the same time so sensitive story. I’m thinking of Le Pont... Ever since he read the news in the papers, he’s been unable to sleep...”

“Fine ..., we’ll leave things as they are for the moment. Your clients aren’t the kind to escape, I hope. Let’s reflect a bit. It’s not my intention to persecute the innocent, if they really are innocent... I’ll contact you at your studio. I’ll let you know...”

Saying this, she stood making Juppé understand that the conversation was over.

“Thank you. I expect to hear from you.”

He exited almost like a dog with its tail between its legs, slowly pulling shut the door.

Mulé walked in, as if waiting right outside the door.

“May I...?”

“Come in... I have to tell this story to someone...!”

“3J looked crushed... What did you do to him?”

“WHAT did you call him...?”

“We call him 3J... because of the same three initials....
Didn't you know...?”

“No.”

While repeating the story, Didier's mind was elsewhere. She was debating whether or not to have Clément return. She had the names now.

“What do you think...?”

“I think it's a murder full of mysteries... It seems that Refus's place was a bit crowded the evening of the murder...”

“Yeah...! We've two persons there almost at the same time. First Julien, now Madame Carole... You'll see that even if the woman wasn't the killer a third one will show up. Maybe the right one...”

“You're that sure it couldn't have been her...?”

“I don't know what to make of it... There are no motives. At least not until we've spoken to her. She doesn't fit in with our ideas of the murderer...”

“If things are really like that, then it's got to have been someone...! Is it possible that no one saw her? But who, dammit!”

“Yeah, but who...?”

Didier got up suddenly.

“Where are you going, Commissioner?”

“I need to clear up a hunch. Are you busy...?”

“Yes and no...”

“Come with me... I want to see Madame Marie at the hospital. Bring the tape recorder...”

It took more time than usual to get there. The traffic jam was incredible owing to a strike in the public transport sector.

“Wait outside... If I need you, I'll call you in.”

When she entered the room, Marie smiled at her.

“I was waiting for you, Madame... What news of my Juliette?”

“She’s fine... She’s in good hands... You look much better today...”

“Yes.... If only that pain in my chest...”

“You’ll have to be a bit patient... Even that will go away...”

Marie looked at her as she had understood something, then she made up her mind. In a quiet tone, she asked,

“Have you found the murderer...?”

“Not yet, it’s a question of a day or so. We’ discovered a lot of things ever since you went into hospital. If you’d only talked sooner, but...”, she replied in a kind but reproachful tone.

Marie started to cry, almost without a sound. The tears rolled down her pinched face. The sobs made her whimper due to the pain in her ribs.

“It wasn’t him... If you really want to know that..., Didier finally said.

“You already knew...? He’s innocent...?”

“Yes... The police, sooner or later, always finds out everything, but it wasn’t him... even if you saw him from the window... Please relax.”

Only then did Marie find the strength to say the name.

“Poor Julien... Poor boy... I thought it was him. All that misery, all that humiliation... Such a weak boy, so helpless. Like my Juliette... I swear I would have never betrayed him. That’s why I always said I saw a shadow. But I did see him... And I thought he wanted to take revenge...”

“And you assumed wrongly... It wasn’t him! And if you really want to know, no one knows we took him in for questioning. Someone else, aside from you, spotted him going in that door. But it wasn’t him! Happy?”

Marie’s face lit up in a big smile. Didier handed her a paper tissue.

“Away with those tears... I hope your worries are over now...”

While drying her tears, she thanked her for everything she had done and for having forgiven her.

“I’m sorry I lied... I couldn’t sleep. I dreamed of him locked in a cell, alone and desperate...”

“Now, would you like to tell me the truth...? That way no one blames you...?”

“Yes...”

Didier asked Mulé to come in.

“While I talk to the doctors, would you please record Madame Marie’s testimony? She remembered the face of the person she’d seen walk past the window at the time of the crime... We won’t come bother her anymore and she can concentrate on getting well... I’ll be right back”.

Didier winked at Mulé who understood. He sat next to the bed and turned on the portable tape recorder.

Returning to the office, Mulé, who was a bit touched by Marie’s distress, asked her in a timid voice,

“How did you get her to talk...?”

“With patience and kindness... I was dead sure that sooner or later she wanted to get rid of that weight in her heart. She’s a woman who has suffered a lot. She wouldn’t have permitted another to suffer, weak and helpless as she, even if guilty...”

“Chapeau, Commissioner... You’re born to do this job. You understand people... “ After a moment’s hesitation, he managed to say, “I think I’ve changed my mind about you...”

Didier leaned forward, as if to look him in the face while he was driving. With a smile on her face, she said,

“Thanks, Mulé... In all sincerity, I too about you...”

VII

Tuesday, late morning

Back at the office, Didier made up her mind to send Mulé and Demonfort to see Madame Carole, Juppé present. She preferred not to have a confrontation with him at this time. She knew what he was capable of when protecting a client, especially a well paying one. After having read the report of the interview, she would make up her mind whether or not to see the woman in person. If what Juppé had already told was true, then this trip would have been a waste of time. She contacted the lawyer. They arranged for the meeting to take place that same evening at eight. Juppé thanked her for this courtesy. Didier told the inspectors to be resolute but considerate; that is, if they did not smell something rotten.

Alone, she phoned to another number.

“Please, could you get Clément to the phone?”

She heard a voice at the other end yell, “*Hey, Paul! There’s a dame with a pretty good voice who wants like crazy to talk to you...*” Clément was on the line almost immediately.

“Hello? Is that you...?” asked Clément.

“It’s me...” Didier answered.

“Sorry... the boy... Everyone here likes to joke around, when they hear a woman’s voice...”

“Don’t worry, I’m not offended... I got the names of those persons... Your work is over... Were you able to get the names of those three who know about...?”

“Yes.”

“Then find a good excuse and quit your job... We need you here...”

“I’ll talk to the boss here and tell him I have to leave or something like that... I’ll quit the job tonight. I’ll be there tomorrow morning.”

“Ok. Till tomorrow...”

Tuesday, mid-afternoon

Didier looked for Kolinsky. He appeared about two hours later. He’d returned from a investigation at the jeweller’s with the robbery.

“Why did you go back there...?”

“Mulé had doubts about how it was actually done... I had the entire scene re-enacted by getting everyone, who had been present, to return.”

“The result?”

“Maybe the youth didn’t shoot out of fear, taking into consideration that he’s a bad shot... the jeweller had taken out a gun but didn’t use it, putting it back in the drawer right after the shooting... He told the cops that he hadn’t had the time to grab the gun, but he lied... Two customers confirmed to having seen him pull out the gun. Except the youth shot a customer instead of him... After the killing and the confusion, no one thought much about it anymore...”

“It may not be self defense but it could be claimed as extenuating circumstances for that juvenile...”

“I’m not too sure, right now the judges are being less forgiving... There’ve been too many robberies. They want to make an example...”

“Yeah, an example... As if it helped solve...”

“That’s how the ball bounces... What was it you called me in for?”

“You know most of the fences in town... I know you took care of a lot of such cases in the past...”

“Yeah... but it is a rather difficult business... We arrest one, more come out of the woodworks. No area is left unattended.”

“Let’s discuss Refus... It seems that the money has been found. I think it’s the full amount. Whoever has this money doesn’t seem to be the killer. Mulé will tell us. No traces of the jewellery given as collateral. Someone therefore must have them and that someone could be the killer. And if he has them, he’ll have to sell them, right? Jewellery is not easy to spend as is money...”

“That rings true... So you think he’d turn to a fence?”

“Probably... But if he isn’t one himself then...? He might not know any names...”

“He might try to sell elsewhere... In another city...”

“That’s true too...”

Didier stopped to consider.

“Let’s assume that the killer isn’t a fence but lives or works in rue Gulloc, just for the sake of a theory... We could check since when or for how long he’s been working or living there...”

“Why...?”

“Because that’s exactly what you just said... He could sell them in a different town. But which one? Where he’d lived before, for example... Where he knows more people, where he feels more or less at home and isn’t noticed...”

“Sounds like a good theory to me... As long as it’s as you say...”

“It’s something we have to try... As you can see, once in a while even I go in for some imagination. I do think we have some reasonably sound theories to go on. What do you think...?”

“I think it’s good. Problem is we don’t know what was pawned... The description of the goods, I mean...”

“Going back to rue Gulloc and surroundings, it’s logical to assume that the pawned objects are of gold. Honest folk

don't have diamonds or similar jewellery of value. Could be gold of little value... In all these years I doubt Refus received anything of greater value from his clients. Maybe it is the quantity we have to consider. A large number of gold trinkets of little value."

"Always based on one of your theories..."

"Follow my train of thought and don't be a spoilsport. You'll have to analyze one by one, at the registry office, where they came from, also those working in rue Gulloc or in the nearby streets. Let's check how many came here from other towns, say, in the last ten years. There shouldn't be many. Then we decide how to continue... Of course, keeping an eye on the fences here, one never knows... Do a good job."

Didier dedicated her time to the paperwork. With all that she had to do, these simply piled up on her desk. Thus, another day was coming to an end.

Wednesday, morning

Didier received a call from the Director. She went straight upstairs. He would want to know the latest about the Astrologer. A week had gone by since the day of the actual crime...

"Good day, Didier. How are you...?"

"One keeps busy..."

"Always to the point, our Didier... Sit down, please. Relax."

What little she knew of him, he seemed particularly polite this morning. She wasn't wrong.

"Yesterday I spoke with Judge Lafayette. He's most enthusiastic about you. Do you know he'll be our new head of the public prosecutor's office? His appointment is almost definite."

Didier thought about the Judge's weekend. It was during those meetings that men's futures were decided.

"No, I didn't know... And, if I may ask, why is the Judge most enthusiastic about me, as you say...? I've spoken to him once and that was by phone..."

"Please don't be self-effacing, not with me... After having read your last report, he was surprised by your circumspection in the investigations you are doing on the Refus murder..."

"My circumspection...?"

"Yes, that's what he told me... I mean, your caution about arresting the wrong person... This does you a lot of good, believe me..."

"I'm of the opinion that one must be careful about blaming an innocent person, robbing him of his freedom... Don't you agree...?"

"I agree completely... For example, I know that there have been unexpected developments during the investigations... Often important and influential persons, who fleetingly know a criminal, could have serious problems if their name becomes public... I am sure that this will not be the case with you. You are too circumspect in your job... And this is a reason why Judge Lafayette thinks so highly of you"

Hearing the words *important and influential persons*, in her mind these connected with the banker Le Pont, Didier understood quite well. Maybe Le Pont too had spent the weekend at the Prefect's. She had now understood the honeyed words of the Director. Naturally she didn't want to mention it. She got the picture that everyone was holding their breath, waiting for her next moves. Would or would not this very important name be mentioned?

The Director did not keep her any longer. The message had been delivered. However, he kindly added a suggestion,

"If you think you need more time to solve the case, take it... Even the Prefect, the other day, mentioned to me that it

was only a case of a low key murder... You'll find the murderer... Surely among such seedy people he spent his time with. I'll expect your news... Do a good job."

This time, too, Didier used the stairs and not the lift to return to her office. Walking down allowed her to get rid of some steam which was starting to boil over. She remembered Kolinsky's compliments and Demonfort's words. Maybe she would be able survive, even if it were sheer utopia in trying to change it.

Wednesday, mid-morning

Mulé and Demonfort briefed her on the meeting with Madame Carole. They said she could be innocent except for one small detail.

"What detail...?"

"We don't really understand the actual position of her driver..."

"Is that in your report?"

"No... The report contains questions and answers only, even from the driver. The questioning was taped, we wrote out word for word what was said and that's all... You told us to tread lightly..."

"So, these are your impressions...", Didier said while the two men looked at each other.

Demonfort cleared his throat.

"Well... a bit more than just impressions..."

"The fact is...", interrupted Mulé, "that we spoke to the gardener before going into the house... for years he's been the guard, a man doing his best and so on, but officially the gardener... We had to wait outside at the villa's park gate for half an hour because 3J hadn't arrived... And Madame would only see us in his presence."

"One word leads to another..."

“Exactly... We didn’t let this chance go by... I don’t think we did any harm...”

“Slow down... You did your duty. Exactly as I would have done... But why are you so reluctant to tell me what happened...?”

Demonfort interrupted.

“Commissioner... Let’s talk straight... Everyone knows that Le Pont has political and financial connections. And we’ve already heard that he’s put on pressure to keep the entire matter quiet. Therefore you understand that...”

Didier interrupted him.

“If it’s of any use, even I was urged, how can I say, to be very careful with the investigations... Go ahead and tell me. I’ll decide what to do. I’m responsible for the team, until proven otherwise...”

She had wanted to add that *upstairs someone is very nervous* but didn’t have the courage. But she was so resolute about assuming all responsibility that Mulé told her all of it.

“Domestics always know everything about their masters... Please note that there must be some bad feelings between the gardener and the driver, but that doesn’t matter much... The driver has been Madame’s lover for several years... Madame’s son would be his and not Le Pont’s... Also, the driver was not exactly happy with Madame’s visits to Refus... He knew for sure that that one, making use of his powers of hypnosis, took advantage of Madame during these visits... The gardener heard them on more than one occasion talk loudly. Once he saw the driver slap her. You are free to draw your own conclusions “

“You therefore suspect he killed Refus.”

“Exactly... The man’s strong enough to have been able to kill Refus with one blow to the head... He knows the area well because for years he drove Madame there... He has been a certain amount of freedom to come and go quickly... The weapon could’ve been a monkey wrench or another tool

which he took with him... He wears gloves while on duty... He's quite short-tempered, even if he hides it well... Pre-meditated, for quite some time... Out of jealousy or revenge... Take your pick. All ingredients are there..."

"Then all our theories can be considered full of holes...?"

"If he did it, then yes..."

Didier started to drum the pencil she held on her desktop. Like she did whenever she needed to concentrate. The inspectors waited respectfully.

"But, how do you think you can prove it...? Besides the fact that Le Pont and his dear family will be involved...?"

"That's the problem...", said Mulé. "He lives alone in a house separate from the villa, near the garage... About fifty meters from the other staff members and about three hundred meters distant from the villa... The villa's park is about six acres. To top it off, his house has a separate exit, also for the cars, to the street... But please tell me how we can prove he did it... We only have clues... He'll get out of it and all of us will be in the doghouse..."

The phone rang. It was Moyar.

"Commissioner, we're back... We didn't find a hiding place in the apartment... Absolutely no place where the jewellery you're looking for could be hidden... Do you still want me to come to your office...? I have a rather urgent report to prepare..."

"No, Moyar... Thank you for your conscientiousness. Have a good day."

"Same to you, Commissioner."

Didier told Demonfort and Mulé. Even if the theory, that it was the driver, was the most rational one, there remained the problem of where the jewellery, which Refus was supposed to have had, ended up.

"Let's summarize... We found Refus's money... Le Pont managed the funds. But the jewellery...? Where the devil could it be...? No hiding place in the apartment..."

She briefed them on the research she'd asked Kolinsky to do. She'd hoped that that would be the most logical trace to follow, but now she felt she'd wasted time.

"Excuse me, Commissioner...", interrupted Demonfort, "if we have to accuse the driver, we'll need time to gather substantial evidence, even if we haven't the faintest idea where to start... In the meantime we can also chase after the jewellery, further surprises to be expected... This case is becoming more and more complicated. But Fortune helps the audacious."

"Thanks for your kind words, Demonfort. But I think we are in a cul-de-sac. Let's just hope we won't burn our fingers, as Mulé says."

She stoop up quickly, as she did each time she wanted a discussion to be over.

"Look, why don't we go out to eat...? I'm feeling peckish, it's well past noon..."

Wednesday, early afternoon

They were seated at a table in a small restaurant not usually frequented over lunchtime by other colleagues. Demonfort, using the excuse that he was the most senior of the three, declared that he would pay for lunch and thus ordered for all three. They had a good time during the hour together, getting to know each other better. Didier spoke of her love for the sea. Demonfort of his projects when he went into retirement. He would have dedicated his time by driving around the countryside in a camper. Mulé of his dream to run a tourist campground in the mountains, as soon as he had the chance.

Inevitably, their discussion returned to the problem of the present case.

"If we could only bug the driver's phone", said Mulé, "then maybe we'd learn a bit more..."

“The public prosecutor wouldn’t authorize it...”, replied Didier. “Remember that those persons are under protection, we’d have to state their names, give out the information we have on hand, hint at the unverified evidence... I don’t believe it’s advisable...”

“It’s not always the case...”, Mulé mumbled.

“What’s on your mind, Mulé...? You won’t do something rash, I hope...”

“I have no intention of doing so, believe me... I was thinking out loud... At times the course of justice requires a helping hand...”

All three laughed self-consciously. They knew the environment well enough not to believe that someone would take a risk to help bring about justice, with a capital J.

“To bug the phone, we need an authorization, but to know what the driver does, not...”

“Tail him...?” inquired Didier.

“Hmm, yes... But we don’t have enough men... He knows us two... We can’t ask the others because we would have tell what we know... Even if we don’t tell them, they’ll find out that we’re watching the Le Ponts and that’s absolutely not what we want... We need someone new, young, who wouldn’t be noticed...”

“What would he have to do...?” asked Didier.

“Near the gate of the driver there is a taxi-stand... He could be a taxi driver... That way he could follow him, without arousing suspicion...”

Didier laughed to herself. Poor Clément. She was about to give him another job...

“Maybe there’s someone who could do this for us...”

“Who...?” both asked at the same time.

Didier told them about the job Clément was doing. Of the results, of his dedication to his work, of his reserve. He was a beginner, but he would have followed orders. He already

knew about the more important facts. They agreed on the details mentioned.

Didier had Clément called and explained the matter. He would have to leave immediately on a special assignment. As before, they would meet at the usual place. But no phone calls, not even on the cellphone. Someone could be listening. Before he left, Didier called in Demonfort and Mulé who gave him more information on the places and the Le Pont family members.

Even though Didier had told him that it was a sensitive matter, they too insisted on telling him of the serious repercussions to all if he were found out. Clément realized that now, more than just someone in the office, he was trusted. He finally felt like a real police inspector.

Wednesday, late afternoon

Kolinsky phoned.

“I’ve finished that job... It was a bit more complicated than expected, but I had help from a computer. I downloaded the information... If you only knew how often our fellow citizens move around...! They never stay put.”

“Something interesting...?”

“We’d have to check together... Do you want me to come now?”

“It’s already five... Yes, come now... If we have to check, then we might as well do it now.”

He arrived after half an hour. She asked Demonfort to join. Mulé was out on a case.

“The Didier clan almost complete...”, said Demonfort after he had shut the office door.

Didier looked at him questioningly

“Sorry, Commissioner, but word gets around... Everyone calls us that, outside of this door. The others have noticed that we’ve been closeted together too many times...”

“I don’t want to create misunderstandings and petty jealousies... For me all men in this department are the same...”

“Don’t take it so, let them talk... The results are important. Their time will come. We’re not at a loss for difficult cases or blood baths to solve...”

VIII

Wednesday, evening

Kolinsky had done a good job. Gathering information from various data banks, registry offices, the local chambers of commerce and employment offices, he had listed all the present residents in rue Gulloc as well as in the neighboring streets, those with a business in the same streets, those who were only employees.

Then he printed out another table stating their past addresses, choosing only those who had come from outside Paris but eliminating those who already lived there for more than ten years. Thirteen all told. Seven women and six men. Next to each name, all personal information, present address, profession or trade and place of origin.

“A very good job, Kolinsky, well done. My compliments...”, said Didier, after she had listened to his explanations.

“Oh, but it’s not all my work, honestly... I found someone who’s a computer freak... I told him what I needed and he started searching... He’s a wizard on the keyboard...”

Demonfort was amazed.

“A couple of years ago we would’ve had at least ten men work for a month. These computers are mind-boggling...!”

“Ok, let’s get to work. We’re interested in these thirteen persons. We have seven women and six men. Let’s see who they are...”

“We won’t exclude the women right away? According to our theory it should be a man, or maybe not...?”

“Could be, Demonfort... We’re assuming it’s premeditated murder with the scope of theft, but we’re not sure. We have the names, let’s check them out. Not many... To do a

precise job I'd suggest we prepare a index card on each of the thirteen. We could add our own remarks about each..."

"You sound like an registry office employee, Commissioner...", commented Kolinsky.

"It's necessary to do a logical sequence... Each of you take some names to check. Maybe we have to go out of town. Everyone will have something to do. Even those outside of the clan. Kolinsky, find some index cards or lined sheets of paper, please..."

While Kolinsky was out, Demonfort smiled.

"You've found a way to make new friends..."

"Don't be funny... We need a quick comparison. If this theory doesn't hold, we have to dump it immediately, without losing too much time."

"Right. I apologize, Commissioner..."

Each held the data of one person. They evaluated each individually. Didier requested Demonfort to read out loud the origins of each one. First the women, then the men, indicating who had already been interrogated.

"These two women have been questioned. Their testimonies are from those of the first day. One came from Evreux, the other from Poissy. This one from Melun has not been questioned. This one from Laval, that's a long trip. Not questioned. The one from Nantes not questioned. The one from Elbeuf already questioned. End of women listed."

"He's been questioned... The shopkeeper who said he didn't know Refus... He has a wholesale store quite close to the main door, comes from Reims. Now we have the super. Nine years ago he came from Rouen. Questioned. Then there's the baker, from Argenton-Châteaux, another long trip. Questioned. This one is a laborer, comes from Saint-Cirq-Lapopie, pretty distant, was not questioned. Another who wasn't questioned, comes from nearby Malesherbes. Finally there's one from Dinan, not questioned. But he's an old man of seventy. End of the men listed."

“In conclusion...”, said Didier, “we have four women and three men still to question. You, Demonfort, send out any available men. I want this done by tonight. They should be found by nine. I want the reports on my desk tomorrow morning. No later than nine. Before handing out the sheets, make photocopies, one for me and one for Kolinsky... You, Kolinsky, go tomorrow morning to the Criminal Records Office and get all information on all of them... If you find other information, even better. I expect you at noon. Gentlemen, thank you. Meeting closed, till tomorrow...”

Alone, Didier, as was her habit, took care of the paperwork. She got through it quickly. Her mind was on other things, she didn't want to be distracted. She grabbed the newspaper and read through the page on current performances. There was a concert of classical music. She decided to go. Returning home, she played with *Chico* and filled his dish with fresh liver that the concierge had bought in that morning. She showered and changed.

When the taxi arrived, he found a lovely, elegant woman waiting at the main door. It was Didier in private. Attractive but alone.

Thursday, morning

Didier was already in the office by eight. The mail arrived shortly thereafter. She went through it in half an hour. She told herself to be patient, but when she was under pressure, she couldn't remain inactive.

She checked the two interrogation rooms. Empty. The offices were quiet. It felt as if nothing was happening. She went to the coffee machine and got a cappuccino without sugar. She drank it slowly. She had to make the time go by.

She decided to go out. She informed the officer on duty that she'd be gone for fifteen minutes. Outside it was the usual daily routine. Lines of cars trying to get to work, people rushing on foot to work. She decided to go back in.

Mulé was the first to knock on her door.

“Good day, Commissioner. Demonfort told me all. Let's hope that this morning will bring new news.”

“Who're you telling...! I feel like a caged lion.”

“And your patience...?”

She laughed, amused, raising her arms. Her patience...

“Have you read the paper...?”

“What's so interesting?”

“Yesterday Judge Lafayette was nominated head of the public prosecution office. He starts his job this morning.”

“Such haste! Then we'll have another judge, for the Refus case. Who will it be...?”

“We'll find out soon enough. Let's hope it's not one of those youngsters. You know, those who think they know it all better than we do...”

“We'll see... Let's hope he's not too keen. Right now I have no idea what to tell him. Let's wait till he calls us...”

Mulé was already at the door when the phone rang.

“Didier...”

“I'm Judge Polengue, for the Refus case. Yesterday evening President Lafayette personally sent me the file, who as you know is now head of the public prosecution office...”

Didier signaled Mulé to stay.

“Pleased to make your acquaintance, even by phone, Judge... What may I do for you...?”

“I just wanted to let you know of my appointment. I read through the documents. I realized that, in spite of your excellent work done, there are difficulties in finding the guilty party. I too am of the opinion, which the same president informed me about, given the character of the victim, it will

take some time to sound out all his particular relationships... It seems that the killer is one of them..."

"We are investigating in that milieu..."

"Good, good, Commissioner... Then, I can wish you a job well done... If you need me, I am available... Good day."

"Good day Judge. And thank you for the call..."

"Only doing my duty, wouldn't you say...? Again, have a good day."

As soon as she had hung up, Didier repeated the conversation. It was worth a good laugh. Someone upstairs was very nervous.

Demonfort walked in, finding them in a good mood. He had with him the interrogation reports done the other evening.

"I see the morning started out well... It's a good sign..."

Didier let him in on their little secret.

"Better that way, Commissioner... That means they'll let us work in peace... They're not interested in Refus's murder. Important is that it's not one of their friends..."

"Nothing interesting found...?", Didier asked pointing to the testimonials.

"No. I couldn't say... I decided to add a question to the ones we had agreed on. And all thirteen were asked the same question... I hope that's fine with you."

"What...?"

"Whether they returned to the city they had lived in before moving and why."

"What answers were given?"

"Nothing of importance... Those who return, have relatives there. Those who never return, gave no valid reason. Answers like that..."

"Maybe another setback. And the fences...? Kolinsky told me that he would have someone to help, to keep an eye on them."

“We’re working, be patient...”

“Thanks. Today two of you already reminded me.”

“But if the judge isn’t in a hurry, why should we...? The killer won’t run away, we’ll get him, you’ll see.”

“Maybe I’ve become too involved in this case. I think it will always be like that. Part of my character...”

“Patience, Commissioner, patience... Didn’t I tell you that that’s your strong point...? Where did it go...?, interrupted Mulé.

“Out and go to work, you lazy bones...!”, she said with a smile, “let me read these papers...!”

She come across nothing to help her with the investigation. Demonfort was right. Poitié had declared that he didn’t return to Rouen because he knew no one there. He had been transferred there for a short time, when he worked for the ministry. The laborer didn’t return to his place of origin, because all his relatives had died. The others were all similar in their answers. Only Lambert went back once a year, at Christmas time, because it was too far away. The shopkeeper with the shop near Refus returned two or three times a year, because of his widowed sister.

Around eleven-thirty Kolinsky came in, smiling.

“Good day, Commissioner...”

“I see that we’re all in a good mood today...”

“Guess what I brought you...!”

Kolinsky, do you think this is the time to play guessing games?” she asked, reproachfully.

“Sorry, but I wanted to... I thought you’d be pleased... After all those compliments the other evening...?”

Kolinsky became serious, opened the briefcase and put two files on the desk. Copies of criminal trials.

On one was written: *Refus Antoine*; on the other *Lambert Donatien*.

The one on Refus was dated fifteen years ago. In Toulouse he had been tried for attempted molestation of a minor.

Acquitted for insufficient proof. But this Didier already knew, because she had read the report on him from Vice. She closed the file and turned to the next one.

Sixteen years ago Lambert was tried for mistreatment of and immoral acts with a minor. He too acquitted for insufficient proof. He too at Toulouse. She looked at Kolinsky, questioningly.

“Did you see...?”, Kolinsky inquired.

“What...?”, she demanded of him.

“The name of the judge!” Kolinsky replied.

Didier opened one file after another, searching for the copy of the verdict. The name of the judge was: Poitié Armand.

“How’s this possible...? It must be mistaken identity... Poitié worked for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs!”

Like a magician on stage, Kolinsky pulled out another file and put it on the desk. It was a photocopy of a document from the Ministry of Justice. On the cover: *Disciplinary actions against Judge Poitié Armand of Toulouse*. It was twelve years old. Didier checked all personal data on him and compared it to the data at hand. It was him. Born 12 January 1932 in Brive-le-Gaillarde. The disciplinary investigation mentioned irregularities in some proceedings, headed by Poitié, in which it was suspected that the judge, against a fee, got the accused acquitted by presenting a doubtful decision. On the list of verdicts issued, there were the cases against Refus and Lambert.

The decision ended with: “... *not having found documented evidence and other proof against Judge Poitié Armand and, taking into consideration that he has requested to be released from his duties and to be transferred to another Ministry, and this his request having been accepted, this committee has decided not to continue with the inquiry, which is considered closed...*”

“One less scandal, I suppose”, concluded Didier, looking up from the file.

“That’s what makes the world goes round...”

“So he lied to us! It’s not true that he didn’t know Refus... What a shithead! Only a greeting when they met, he told us... And he even knew that Lambert! But all this means nothing for the moment... We can’t accuse him of killing Refus, there is no proof!”

“Proof, maybe not, Commissioner... But now we know there’s a close link between the three. A link dating back years and one that can be based on blackmail. Now we can look for something. And I think we’ll find it.”

Didier started to drum the pencil on the desktop. She had to decide to move, this time without haste, as everyone said to her. Then she changed her tactics.

“Kolinsky! HOW did you get this documentation...? Certainly not officially!”

She stared into his eyes with such intensity that he was afraid to answer.

“Well...?”

“Don’t ask... It’s better not to... Anyhow, we won’t have to use it. It serves only as a fact unknown to us until now. I know how to keep a secret...”

“Kolinsky! Take it away, immediately! I don’t want to see it! As a matter of fact, I’ve never seen it! You and I never even saw each other!”

Kolinsky put it back in the briefcase, worried that he had exaggerated in the line of duty. Expecting another furious reaction by Didier, he turned, head down, and crept slowly to the door.

“Kolinsky!”, Didier exclaimed.

“Yes...?”, he replied without turning around.

“Thank you! But get out of my sight! For at least ten minutes...!”

Thursday, afternoon

Time flew by. Didier was never without work. After lunch a homicide in the upper classes. In the suburbs armed robbery with a seriously hurt victim. A young female student committed suicide by gas at one of the lodgings for female students.

After having gone out several times on the first case, Didier noticed that it was almost time to meet Clément at five. She felt pleased. This time, too, she did not ask herself if it were due to forgetting work for a bit or because she liked him or why she went to meet him. As always, she did not consider in depth the second option.

She had to wait for more than half an hour at the usual bar at the station before he arrived, rather out of breath.

“I’m sorry, traffic’s impossible at this time of the day. Maybe we should change our meeting place...”

“It may not be necessary...”

“News...?”

“Unexpected for developments... But first tell me...”

“I was in place all day. I tailed them, because each time he went out with Madame. Shopping, beauty salon. They returned home. Then they left again, right after lunch, always together. This time they stopped at a *résidence*. A couple of hours. You can imagine what they were up to...”

“I can imagine...”

“When she got back into the car, however, she was crying... He seemed quite angry... He talked and talked... I couldn’t hear the words, I was too far away. They went back home. I’ll have to go back now to see if they’ll be going out or one goes out somewhere alone.”

“You’ll have to spend the night in the taxi...”

“Don’t worry about me... I’ll have to get used to it, seeing that this is my job...”

“But do you like it...?”

“I think I always wanted to be a... Certainly not to spend the night in a car... But to follow investigations, discover small secrets that help solve a case... I understand that it’ll take time to...”

Didier looked at him in silence. She remembered when she was young and then at university. She had had the same enthusiasm, having already decided to join the police after graduation. But now, how different real life was from the dreams in her youth...

“Commissioner, are you listening to me...?”

“What...?”

“You seemed distracted, maybe a bit tired...”

“You can say that again... This job, even if one likes it a lot, can tire one mentally...”

“I’ll go now... We’ll see each other tomorrow...”

“Yes. Till tomorrow... Do a good job...”

She checked the time. It was six-thirty. Taking out her cellphone, she called the office to see if there were any developments. They connected her to Mulé.

“Commissioner, will you return to the office?”

“Something important?”

“I think so... A police patrol just phoned... Madame Carole killed herself. Ten minutes ago the precinct Commissioner received the news from the husband. I was just leaving... Do you want to come along...?”

“No thanks... I’ll leave that pleasure to you. I feel sorry for her, but I don’t like people who commit suicide. By the way, let Clément know so he can get away immediately, I don’t want them to understand that he was tailing them. He gave me his report ten minutes ago... He won’t have arrived yet, there’s a lot of traffic.”

“Not to worry... It’s the first thing I did... I called him on his cellphone... He’s on his way back...”

“And our friend will end up in the news, even without us...”

“My exact thoughts...”

“What’s that you always say...? That’s what makes the world go round.”

“That’s what makes the world go round... Bye, Commissioner, till tomorrow...”

Friday, morning

As soon as Didier was in her office, she phoned Kolinsky.

“News about the fences...?”

“I’m waiting for something from the informers this morning.”

“You have to do a rush job... Contact the courts and the police of Toulouse. Check if Poitié sat as judge on cases against fences... This time, however, you’ll work in the open. This is an official request... Go... I want the information by noon.”

She opened the papers Mulé had left on her desk. Almost all printed on the front page the news of the death of Le Pont’s wife. Some with more details.

Le Parisienne, headlined *Suicide of the wife of the banker Le Pont*, summarized as *Found dying in the bedroom by the husband*. *Le Figaro*, *Suicide in high finance*, summarized as *The wife of the banker Le Pont shot herself*. *Le Quotidien*, with the headline *Mourning in the world of finance*, summarized as *The wife of the banker Le Pont committed suicide*. *Le Télégramme*, headlined *Le Pont family in mourning* with the subtitle *Suicide of the wife of a famous banker*, summarized as *Cause of suicide unknown. The police is investigating*. Oddly, *Le Monde* had it on the second page, showing little interest. One column, *The banker Le Pont in*

mourning. *L'Humanité* did not even print the news. She called Mulé in.

“Did you find out how it happened...?”

“I doubt it was a suicide... The husband’s testimony does not convince... After what Clément told me, even less so...”

“You think it was...?”

“I’m sure it was the driver. Le Pont will do anything so that the truth is never known, because of the subsequent scandal. Suicide is one thing, even if unpleasant. Another is to confess that the lover killed her... He would be forced to admit their relationship. This would damage him beyond repair. He’s far too influential not to find witnesses to confirm she was depressed or something like that... That way he’ll become a victim of circumstances, a husband destroyed by the painful loss of...”

“And we know that we can’t say anything about what Clément saw, right...?”

“Right, we can’t...”

“That’s what makes the world go round, Mulé...?”

“Yes, that’s what makes the world go round, Commissioner...”

“Back to Refus. Do you know about the developments yesterday evening...?”

“Demonfort told me.”

“There’s something else... I happen to, and don’t ask me how and keep it to yourself, that Refus, Lambert the baker and Poitié the concierge know each other for over fifteen years... They were together, let me put it this way, in a very dirty activity. Poitié was in the position to blackmail the other two. I don’t have the actual proof that he did it, but I know that for the sake of money he dirtied his hands often... Quite a money hungry person. What do you think...?”

“Maybe we have the real reason, now. If he did and Refus didn’t want to pay, then we’d have the perfect grounds...”

“Conceivable. We have to find traces of these payments. However, I received a confirmation that Refus had no bank accounts, considering that he didn’t trust them. Remember...? Our argumentation is that all his money was managed by Le Pont.”

“Yeah...”

“So, always assuming he was blackmailed, what did he receive in return if the money was in the hands of Le Pont...?”

Mulé rolled his eyes. He suddenly realized what Didier was hinting at.

“The jewellery!”

“Maybe...”

“Why maybe...”

“There’s another theory... Right now I want to work on that other one. What do you suggest...?”

“Find where Poitié hides the jewellery, of course... Taking into consideration that he hasn’t gotten rid of them.”

“From what I think of him, I don’t think he’s done that yet and I don’t think he’s that stupid to keep them at home... I thought about doing a search but it wouldn’t had results. It would have been a means to frighten him into making a wrong move... Fear, as you know, is a bad adviser and I prefer that he doesn’t know he’s a suspect...”

“Let’s get on Lambert... He too was a victim of Poitié, from what you tell me.”

“That’s exactly what we’ll do... We’ll call him in for interrogation about the Julien’s work papers presented to the employment agency.”

Mulé left and gave orders for a policeman to pick up Lambert at the bakery. He explained to him, making sure that by listening everyone knew, that he was being brought in for irregularities in assuming Julien. Then he returned to Didier.

“I gave orders that he be brought here.”

“Send Clément to tail Poitié with discretion. Find a disguise for him. He’s used to it... I don’t want him to slip through our hands now...”

“Wouldn’t it be a good idea to bug Poitié’s phone...? Maybe he has one where he works as the superintendent...”

“Yes... Obtain the authorization immediately. You’ll see that everyone will be pleased to learn that our investigations are leading away from Le Pont... Even if...”

Mulé smiled and walked out. An hour later Clément phoned.

“Commissioner....! Poitié isn’t there. He left unexpectedly on Wednesday late evening, after our men had gone to question him. No one knows where he went. What do you want me to do? Do I ask the wife...?”

“No... Leave that poor woman alone. I’m sure that she knows nothing about what her husband does... Don’t let anyone see you. I think we’re on the right track. Keep your eyes open and keep me informed...”

Friday, late morning

Mulé walked in. Lambert had arrived.

“Do you want to be there too...?”

“I wouldn’t lose this opportunity for all the gold in the world...”

Lambert Donatien didn’t seem to be worried, even if he walked up and down in the room. He was calm. His accountant had assured him that he would get with the irregularity about Julien, maybe with a somewhat heavy fine. But he was stingy. He hadn’t considered to ask for legal advice in order to know whether he risked being incriminated for falsification of documents. About sixty years old, solid, a meter eighty, balding, a tower of health.

“I’m Chief Inspector Agnès Didier and this is Inspector Albert Mulé...”, said Didier as soon as they came into the room, “sit down.”

“I don’t understand why I’m here. The accountant told me it was only a question concerning the employment office... I’d only have to pay a fine... Why’s the police involved...?”

Didier left Mulé do the talking. Each would have a turn. He would have been the tough and she would have been the kind one. Like in the films. A person, not being a habitual offender, unused to such tactics would fall for the ploy.

“Don’t act like you don’t know...!”, snapped Mulé, in an aggressive tone. “You want to hear the list of your offences...?”

Lambert immediately changed behavior, he became frightened.

“But I... really...”

“Answer only when you’re questioned! Understand?”

“Yes, ok...”

“Yes, ok, Inspector! This isn’t the local tavern! And answer only yes or no to my questions! Understand?”

“Yes, Inspector...”

“Is it true that you falsified documents to give work to a minor?”

“Yes, Inspector.”

“Is it true that Julien is a minor?”

“Yes, Inspector.”

“Is it true that you paid him only half a regular salary?”

“Yes, Inspector.”

“Fine... You answered yes three times. You’ve just confessed to at least seven criminal offences for which you will be accused. Six years jail, more or less, if you’re lucky...”

Lambert slumped down in the chair. He was shocked. Didier intervened. Her voice was sweet and kind.

“Mr. Lambert, do you understand the trouble you are in...? Don't you want to be helped...?”

“Yes... Yes... Help me. Chief Inspector, please... I can't go to jail... I'll be ruined...”

“Are you that afraid of jail...?”

“Yes... Being in jail is not good. I...”, he stopped talking.

“Are you saying that you almost went to jail for a much more serious offence...? Such as for mistreatment of and immoral acts with a minor? In Toulouse, if I recall correctly...”

“Slander! I was acquitted!”

“Yes! By Judge Poitié, it seems to me... The one who was under inquest for this same case and that one of Antoine Refus, because it appears that the accused paid him well...”

Mulé caught on fast that Didier had acquired other information, because of her decision to investigate both. That woman knows more than she lets on.

Lambert was nearly crushed. They decided to give one more twist of the knife to get him to collapse completely. He was already at the point to cooperate on the murder of Refus. Mulé roared at him again.

“Is it true that you abused Julien sexually...? Confess!”

“Noooo, nooo... It's not true. Me, never...! It was Antoine, only Antoine, curse him... They forced me, he and that pig of an Armand... The first is already in hell, I'll send the second one there... My troubles began after I met those two...”

He bawled like a calf. Didier and Mulé looked at each other, pleased. The first real step done.

“Calm down, Mr. Lambert...”, said Didier in a kindly voice, “Calm down... We know you were forced to... But do help us... If you tell us all... but really all, then we'd be able to help you...”

“I’ll tell you everything! But you’ll have to protect me from that pig... He’s capable of anything just for money... Of anything. You must believe me... He’s the one who made me move here. He wanted me close by. To protect me, he said, curse him! He made me do horrible things! If you only knew...”

“Tell us everything. That way we can protect you... Mulé, call in an inspector and together get his testimony.” She got up, walking to the door, then added with a kind smile, “Be nice to him... Don’t you see he wants to cooperate...?”

While Lambert confessed, Didier went to get a strong coffee, but outside of the office. Her stomach hurt. She needed some fresh air. She had had to control herself so as not to punch that ass Lambert. When she returned to her office, Mulé was still with Lambert. The sins to confess must be many. After a while someone knocked on her door.

“Come in...”

It was Kolinsky. After the *gaffe* of the day before, he was more cautious with Didier.

“I think we’ve got it...”, he said and put a paper on the desk.

Didier read quickly. Poitié had presided over three cases against fences. One had been sentenced and dead. Two others had been declared not guilty. Both from Toulouse.

“Have you inquired if both are still active...?”

“Of course! Both in good health... But they were never able to frame them...”

Didier told him what she had been told by Clément. If Poitié had disappeared, most likely he was on his way to one of them. Even just to get rid of hot evidence.

“What do we do, Commissioner...? Do we have both arrested...?”

“Not yet... As soon as Clément informs us that Poitié has returned... Only then can we be sure that one of them has the

jewellery. It would be a good idea, however, to contact the police in Toulouse at once. Explain the situation to them, that they are ready... We'll inform them, as when to do the searches and make arrests. They'll have to act without any delays... I wouldn't want the goods to take wing..."

Kolinsky returned shortly thereafter.

"I spoke personally to the division Commissioner. He was as happy as an Easter egg... If one of those two are arrested with the evidence, fence connected to a murder, they'll lose a few years freedom... He sends his regards..."

"We must cross our fingers, Kolinsky... The murder case of Refus is so full of surprises..."

Friday, early afternoon

Waiting for definite news in order to act, Didier went through the usual stack of paperwork. Among these the report by Mulé on the suicide of Carole. She thought that, even if she'd recommended him to be careful with his words, some sentences hinted at doubts concerning the truth behind the suicide. She had nothing to add to the report and, signing the accompanying message for the judge, she put it in an envelope for sending off.

Mulé came in with the report on Lambert.

"May I interrupt...? I see you're busy."

Didier indicated that he should sit down.

"Tell it to me briefly... I don't feel like reading such filth..."

"That's true, this report should be forbidden to minors and women... A brief sequel of the filth... procurement of minors of both sexes, to send to Refus... send him those poor ones desperate for a loan... Things like that... Lambert, however, swears that he knows nothing of the jewellery Refus had... He thinks it was Poitié who killed Refus, but he can't swear it..."

At that point the phone rang. Didier switched on the loudspeaker.

“Clément?”

“It’s me... You can also predict, by chance...? Poitié is back. He seems calm. Right now he’s at work at the main door.”

“Keep an eye on him... We’re on our way. If he notices you and tries to run away, arrest him.”

“As ordered, Commissioner.”

“Let’s go get that bastard...”, she said while getting up but also taking her gun out of the drawer. On her way out she called to Kolinsky.

“Call Toulouse... That they should start immediately. We’re going to get Poitié. Keep us informed via cellphone... Hurry!”

The car, driven by a policemen and with the siren on, raced to Poitié. Didier in front, Mulé in the back.

After a few daring maneuvers, they arrived at the beginning of rue Gulloc. People turned to look at the car with the siren still on. All three got out and approached the door where Poitié worked. People moved aside, asking themselves what was going on. They saw Clément running to them shouting.

“He heard the siren! He ran away and is at home!”

From the open window on the top floor, they heard a woman screaming. It was Madame Marie.

“Drop that gun! What’re you doing, are you crazy...?”

A couple of shots hit the pavement. The four kept close to the walls and pulled out their weapons. People started to run in all directions, shouting: “It’s the Astrologer’s murderer! It’s him! Up there!”

Clément got in to the main door, weapon ready, yelling:

“Poitié, give up! You can’t get away!”

Other two shots rang out down the staircase. Clément could avoid them. Climbing up, he kept telling him to give

himself up. Madame Marie's screams got louder and louder. The policeman followed Clément. Didier and Mulé had just entered the main door when they heard a shot and Madame Marie's voice became a moan.

Didier ran like a fury past Mulé, ran in front of the policeman and got behind Clément who was at the last step of the third floor. It was dim. Poitié appeared in the door frame, screaming:

“Damned Commissioner!”

He shot twice at Didier but Clément got between them, throwing himself on Poitié who fell to the floor cursing.

Didier, shocked, gun in hand, leaned against the wall. The policeman threw himself on Poitié, who was trying to get away, and disarmed him. Out of breath, Mulé arrived. He punched Poitié hard, stunned him enough that he let himself be handcuffed. It was all over.

Didier recovered. She used her cellphone to call for an ambulance. Clément was on the floor, but he did not complain. One shot had hit him in the thigh, the other in the shoulder. Didier undid her scarf and made a tourniquet just above the bleeding leg wound.

The policeman pushed Poitié, kicking him down the stairs. Mulé had gone into the apartment. Didier went in after the paramedics had arrived.

Madame Marie was dead. A small hole on the left temple and blood running down her cheek. Her head resting on the back of the armchair, eyes open, she seemed to be looking at the last sunrays coming through the window.

Didier started to cry, quietly, without a sob. The tears rolled down her face. Mulé moved closer to her. Instinctively he wanted to put an arm around her shoulders, to give her courage, but she stepped quickly out of his way. She didn't want anyone's pity.

“Why is it that the weak always lose...? Why, Mulé...?”, she asked get hold of herself.

“I don’t know, Commissioner... I really don’t know...”

He put a handkerchief in her hand. She dried her eyes whispering: “Thank you...”

They walked down slowly, meeting to policemen running up the stairs. In silence they pushed through the bystanders outside the main door and along the entire street who were loudly commenting what had happened. A police car waited for them at the end of the street. It raced away with the siren on.

Friday, late afternoon

Kolinsky met them in the hall.

“We did it! Toulouse just phoned... One of the two fences confessed immediately when he was told that the jewellery was connected to a murder... He named Poitié and the goods have been recovered. About six hundred pieces. The Commissioner is very happy, he sends you his compliments...”

Mulé signaled him to stop talking and he was quiet. Didier walked into her office, followed by Mulé who shut the door.

A young colleague of Kolinsky seemed a bit surprised and asked him:

“What’s gotten into the Commissioner... She should be happy with the results... The murderer has been arrested and the stolen goods recovered...”

“Mind your own business...! Get back to work...!”

He turned on his heels, shrugging his shoulders.

Once inside her office, Didier let herself fall into her chairs as if her legs were weak. At that moment she became aware of what had happened. Mulé waited quietly. Didier finally looked at him, her face strained, an absent look in her eyes.

“Pretty good opinion you now have of your boss...”,
Didier said in a low voice.

“Happens to everyone the first time... You’ve never been involved in a shooting... You arrived a short while ago... There’s a first time for everyone, you’ll get used to it. Even if you think it difficult, you’ll even get used to this...”

“If you say so...”

An hour and a half later Demonfort knocked on the door. He had with him the testimony of Poitié. Mulé opened the door.

“Come on in...”

“Did he confess...?”, asked Didier in her usual tone.

“Almost to everything, Commissioner...”

“Sit down... repeat the facts, just the important ones, please...”

“We already know the prelude. He and Lambert obtained the boys and girls, even from outside the neighborhood, for Refus. Poitié insisted that Refus pay him for this service, in gold. Refus gave him the jewellery he received a collateral for the loans. Lambert got something too but not much. Poitié forced him to help, without protesting...”

“That bastard of a Lambert said he knew nothing about the jewellery...!”, interrupted Mulé.

Demonfort continued.

“The jewellery was kept hidden at his workplace... On Wednesday, as we know, when the police came to search, he lost his head. He was terrified of being accused of murdering Refus. He left for Toulouse and sold the jewellery to one of the fences he had acquitted. He didn’t want the money then because he wanted to wait until things had calmed down. As soon as the murderer of Refus was arrested...”

Didier did not react to this news.

Instead Mulé complained: “*Merde!* He still insists he didn’t kill him...?” Then he turned to Didier, adding: “I’m sorry, Commissioner...”

“No need to apologize... Poitié isn’t dumb and we don’t have any proof, he knows this. The facts are these. We thought he killed for money. But it was Le Pont who had the money and he told us... We thought he killed for the jewelery but Poitié had some of it and some of it, for an entirely different reason... The theory of murder for money doesn’t hold up... And, in conclusion, we don’t even have a witness... If we charge him, it will be a case based on circumstantial evidence... A good lawyer would get him free quickly...”

“Maybe... getting away with that... But not for the other offences, killing his wife...”, said Mulé.

“Poitié will be convicted in any case. With all that on file... If the guillotine still existed, he would have been sentenced to death... We’ll have to be content with a life sentence... But not for the murder of Refus, that’s for sure...”

“But then! Who the devil did it...?”, Mulé and Demonfort asked almost together.

X

Friday, evening

It had been a tough week and not very satisfactory for Didier. Arresting petty criminals did not make her day. The face of Madame Marie looking at the sun remained in her memory.

Nearly everyone had greeted her when leaving. Mulé would be back the next day, all others on leave. Mulé, before leaving, asked if she wanted to be driven home with the service car, seeing that she never used one. Didier thanked him. She took a taxi.

Putting into order, unwillingly, the papers on her desk, she spotted the interrogation Mulé had done. The spontaneous declarations by Le Pont and by Madame Carole, in the presence of the lawyer Juppé. She read through it quickly. Nothing she didn't already know. She closed the file, got up, turned off the lights and left.

As soon as she walked in the door, *Chico* arrived miaowing. Purring loudly, he walked between her legs. She picked him up in her arms, greeting him affectionately. She showered and changed.

They dined together in the kitchen, as every evening, chatting about each other's business. Then they went into the living room. *Chico* on the sofa, she sitting on the rug. She turned on the TV to hear the news.

Politics, daily news, white, black, pink, finances...

"... The latest news we've just received. We'll read it out. Inspectors of the Finance Department have just finished a report on the activities of the banker Le Pont, under surveillance for assumed illicit dealings. Through indiscretions, the

report shows that the economic situation of the company, headed by him and being the major shareholder, quoted on the stock market, has serious losses. Not to be excluded are falsified accounting, incorrect company declarations and fraud. Should the information be confirmed, then the banker Le Pont risks a long-term sentence...

Didier remained lost in her thoughts. The news reminded her of something. She sensed that she had already heard or read it. But she was too tired to think straight.

Saturday, morning

Didier arrived at the office around nine. She greeted Mulé, asking for news about Clément.

“Like I told you yesterday evening, he’ll make it... That tourniquet you bound around his leg helped a lot. He didn’t lose too much blood. But then, he’s young...”

“Are you referring to us two...?”

“I wouldn’t dare, Commissioner...” he answered, smiling.

“Any news...?”

“You’ll heard about Le Pont. He was afraid to end up in the newspapers... he’s really unlucky... This is the second time in a week!”

She shut the door. The morning hours were the best for her. She needed to clarify all the doubts of the previous evening.

She got hold of the file on Refus. It was so full of papers that she had trouble going through it. She wanted the information given by Clément about the dinner with work colleagues from the filling station. She’d taped them at home, when he’d made the report, and then transcribed them.

She found the statement she was interested in:

“(Clément) “So I, very innocently, asked if everyone was so appreciative then why was he killed?” (Adolphe) “For the money, idiot! He replied, Money makes people forget everything, whatever helping hand was given... especially when one is in dire need...” (Clément) “And they all continued to laugh...”

She looked for Mulé’s report on Madame Carole’s suicide. Her personal maid had declared:

“... since a few months the relations with the husband were very strained, they fought continuously and Madame was quite upset and cried all the time. Each day going by, he became more and more nervous and short-tempered. When one day I spoke to Madame about it all, she told me not to pay attention to it. Businessmen also have bad moments in business. It was a bad moment for her husband. I think she meant for economic reasons...”

She then reread the report, again by Mulé, the one she’d read the previous evening. The one with the spontaneous declarations by Le Pont and by Madame Carole, in the presence of the lawyer Juppé. Le Pont had said:

“... at the moment I have an amount of about one million francs, money earned from investments done on behalf of Refus. I don’t know to whom to give this amount, because I have done some research, but Refus has no heirs and he never gave me any orders what to do in case something happened to him...”

Finally, she took out one of the tapes and inserted in the recorder. It was the interview she’d done in her office with Juppé, taping without his knowledge. She rewound it several times until she found what she wanted. Juppé was saying:

“... In the end Le Pont became his trusted banker. When his wife returned home, she would have a satchel full of millions which Le Pont then invested on behalf of Refus. Whenever Le Pont was given permission to accompany his wife, he informed Refus about the situation of his investments. The

last time he was seen there was a month before the death. He would have returned next month."

To be sure of what she had in mind, she went to the next room to photocopy those texts which interested her. An inspector started at her, mouth open. Back at the office, she wrote out by hand the piece of the declaration by Juppé she'd just listened to. Then she cleared off all else from her desk and put the four papers side by side. She reread them several times.

She phoned for Mulé. As soon as he came in, she indicated he should sit down.

"Listen carefully..."

She read out loud the texts of the four papers.

As Didier kept on reading, Mulé started to slowly shut his eyes as if this would help him concentrate. In the end he asked:

"May I reread them, now?"

"Help yourself..." she replied, turning the papers in the same order to face him. She waited quietly. The answer came quickly.

"The real reason to kill Refus. Did I make a mistake?"

"Exactly...! Do you want to bet your pension? I am going to arrest Le Pont and the driver... Do you feel like coming with me?"

"We're arresting both...?"

"Yes. Both... It may not exactly have been Le Pont, but he certainly gave the orders. But if he took part, then he certainly didn't go by taxi... The driver is the perfect accomplice, other than the killer, don't you think?"

"I understand... You mean to say if Le Pont's name doesn't get in the paper, ours will!"

He followed her, laughing to himself.

Saturday, late morning

They reached the villa after eleven. A group of reporters were waiting at the main gate. It was not a good idea to be noticed by them. Didier told Mulé to go to the driver's house.

They rang. After a few moments they saw him arrive. He recognized Mulé and opened the gate.

"Good day. Chief Inspector Didier would like to talk to Mr. Le Pont. It's highly confidential .we don't want the reporters to see us..."

He didn't reply, closing the gate after having let them in.

"Would you please accompany us...?" Didier asked, smiling.

They had to walk along two long and shady avenues to get to the villa. They waited in one of the downstairs salons. After a few minutes Le Pont walked in. medium height, dark double-breasted jacket, white shirt, striped tie. About fifty, peppered hair, tanned face. He recognized Mulé.

"May I introduce Chief Inspector Didier?" Mulé asked in a pretentious tone of voice.

Le Pont came forward, took her hand and breathed a kiss over the back of it. Impeccable, thought Didier.

"Do sit down, please... How may I be of help?"

The salon was classy, as surely was the rest of the house. They sat down on red velvet chairs.

"Would you grant me a request...?" asked Didier.

"Go you..."

"Would please have the driver come...?"

Le Pont seemed a bit embarrassed but tried to control himself. He got up, went to a table and rang a bell. The butler appeared at the door.

"Have Eric come here."

"Immediately, sir."

They waited, in silence, for several minutes. Le Pont observed Didier, trying to figure out what she wanted from

him. His thoughts were interrupted by Eric who entered, after having knocked on the door.

“They want to ask you some questions, Eric...”

“Have him sit with us, Mr. Le Pont, please...” said Didier, still smiling.

“Sit down, Eric.”

Eric sat down near Mulé. Before speaking, Didier looked at him for a moment. He was a good looking man, well-built, black hair, about thirty-eight or forty years old. His face, however, showed a hard frown, as if he bore a grudge.

“Before beginning, I would like to inform you both that this is not an official interview... The questions I will ask should not upset you... They are only necessary in order to close a solved case.. The murder of Refus. You’ve heard about it, no?”

Lightning in broad daylight could not have been more effective. Le Pont became uneasy in his chair. Eric’s hands crushed the velvet armrests as if tearing at them, breaking into a cold sweat.

“All I want to know is where you both were between eight and ten o’clock on the evening of Tuesday a week ago. Someone has told us that you were seen near the home of Refus... I don’t understand why...”

“I already stated that I was hundreds of kilometers away at a meeting... I couldn’t have been here! What are you thinking...?” replied Le Pont irritably, then he grabbed hold of himself. “I’m sorry... but it’s a difficult time for me...”

“I know, Mr. Le Pont, I’m sorry but I need answers. And you, Eric...? Eric what, please? And where did you live before?”

“Eric Corbeau... I always lived in Nantes before coming to work for Mr. Le Pont...” he replied almost with a sneer.

“I know, I know... The police knows everything... So, where were you...?”

Before replying, Eric was unable not to look at Le Pont, who stiffened.

“At home... Here at the villa...”

“Of course you live alone, no witnesses and we have to believe you...”

Eric couldn't stand it any longer. He jumped up and yelled: “Mr. Le Pont, you answer, help me...! Don't sit there like a rock!”

Le Pont started to sweat. Eric had embarrassed him in front of strangers and he had not reacted. He looked humiliated. Didier knew she was on the right track.

“What does Mr. Le Pont have to tell us, Eric...? That he was with you that evening and not away from Paris, as he keeps saying...?”

Suddenly Le Pont jumped out of his chair, as if to run away. Eric grabbed him by the lapels and started to slap him, yelling:

“Dirty bastard, you see where we've both ended up...? In the shit... But if I go under, then you go with me!”

Mulé got between the two, but Eric's backhand, not meant for him, got him in the face but he remained standing. Mulé answered with the punch to Eric's stomach who let go of Le Pont's lapels. Feeling he was free, Le Pont ran to the door, chased by Didier. He ran through the hall to his office. Didier yelled for him to stop, unable to reach him, before he locked the door. Didier banged loudly on the door, ordering him to come out.

Mulé arrived, dragging behind him Eric in handcuffs.

“What's that idiot trying to prove...?”, he immediately asked.

“He locked himself in... Open, Le Pont! What are you doing?”, yelled Didier.

She hadn't finished the sentence when they heard a shot. Mulé punch Eric who fell to the floor in a faint. The butler and a maid arrived, having heard the yelling and the shot.

“We’ll knock down the door!”, yelled Mulé, turning to the butler. “Help me, by God! Don’t stand there like a statue!”

Both rushed at the door with their shoulders which yielded and opened. Le Pont was lying on the floor, near a small desk, with the pistol still between his hands. Didier bent over him.

“He’s still alive... Call an ambulance!”, she yelled to the butler.

Saturday, afternoon

The crime department offices were invaded by reporters. The news of the ambulance and the arrests had made the rounds in the city.

Didier was with the Director who, by sheer chance, had not left the city. Someone had informed him and he had rushed to his office. He’d already read a brief report, with the attached confession of Eric Corbeau. He was Refus’s murderer, well paid by Le Pont, who had created a water-tight alibi for himself. Eric’s hatred of Refus had done the rest. All that to allow Le Pont, who desperately needed even that money, to get hold of about seventeen million francs belonging to Refus. This was the difference between the million declared by Le Pont and the actual amount he managed on behalf of Refus.

“What can I say, Didier...? My compliments, my compliments... In your first case, you jailed four criminals... One of which with a well known name... Or better said, up until a few days ago it was...”

“It’s not all my doing, Director... The whole team worked well...”

“I know, I know... But you knew how to direct, show, give them that momentum that helped the success of the case...”

“Do you know how Mr. Le Pont is doing, Director...?”

“He’ll make it... Only a burn... Maybe it was luck that he didn’t die.. But why are you worried about him...?”

“I’ve never liked to see people die...”

“For that, either can I, but that’s what makes the world go round, Didier... Don’t’ you think so too...?”

“Yes... that’s what makes the world go round...!”

Gaston J. Algard

A writer with an adventurous life

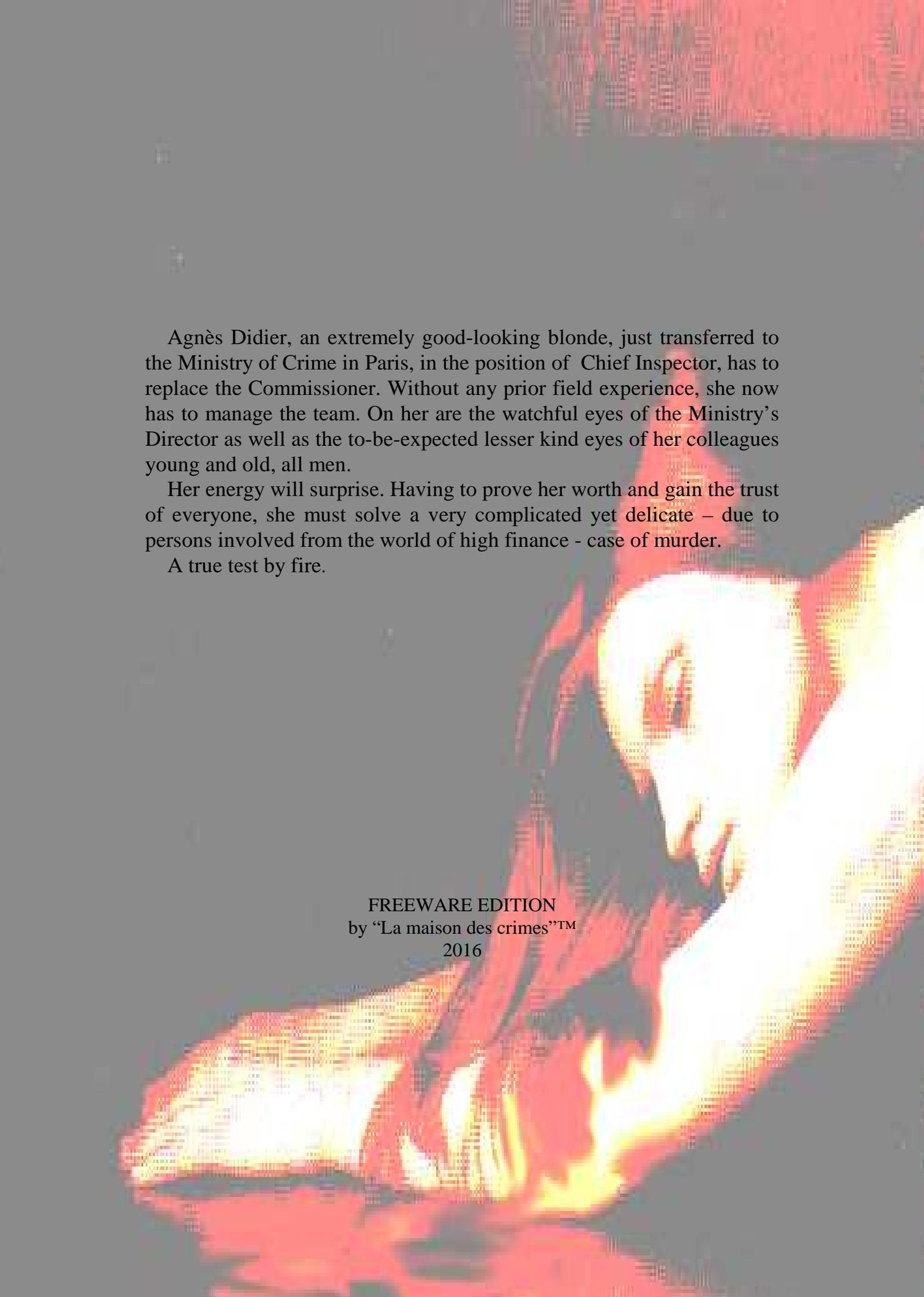


Gaston Javier Algard, son of a British citizen and a Philippine woman, was born in a village in the northern Philippines during World War II, shortly before the Japanese invasion. However, due to the unpredictable events in life, after his birth he always lived in Europe. The father, Her Majesty Official, had to leave so as not to be taken prisoner, taking with him his son to protect his wife and son from retaliation by the Japanese. The father, in view of the dangers inherent his activities and being unable to personally care for his son, entrusted him to an Italian cousin in Milan. In order to protect the boy, the cousin registered him at the Town Hall as his own and his wife's son. Both real parents having died during the war, Algard grew up with a new Italian identity. He graduated with a Law degree in criminology. He worked for years as a consultant for European companies, engaging in sensitive investigations of judges. After leaving the profession returning to the Philippines, while retaining the name and Italian citizenship, Algard re-acquired his original name and nationality. A short time later he also obtained the British nationality of the father. The Author normally writes their stories in Italian because this language allows greater flexibility in the narrative, he says. Since 1993 he has completed more than 30 novels. He continues to write.

Algard the novelist

The Author seems to have a special knowledge of the criminal mentality, because crime and wickedness often hide where not apparent. His stories are not the classic thriller or polar, the French-style thriller. One can certainly talk of investigations but in the style of Algard. Sometimes, with subtle irony, he brings out the humorous side of seemingly serious events, not neglecting to highlight serious social problems. All of the above without taking away any emotional suspense from the reader, who finds himself forced to turn the page to learn more of the story.

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Agnès Didier, an extremely good-looking blonde, just transferred to the Ministry of Crime in Paris, in the position of Chief Inspector, has to replace the Commissioner. Without any prior field experience, she now has to manage the team. On her are the watchful eyes of the Ministry's Director as well as the to-be-expected lesser kind eyes of her colleagues young and old, all men.

Her energy will surprise. Having to prove her worth and gain the trust of everyone, she must solve a very complicated yet delicate – due to persons involved from the world of high finance - case of murder.

A true test by fire.

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