



MURDER
AT THE
LANTERNE
ROUGE

An Aimee Leduc Investigation set in PARIS

becca
blacks

National Bestselling author of *Murder in the Marais*

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MURDER AT THE LANterne ROUGE

cara black

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CRIME**

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In memory of Laura Hruska and the women *Résistantes* in the

Marais—Odette Pilpoul, Raymonde Royal and Paulette

Buchmann.



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Three Days Later

Acknowledgments

Murder Below Montparnasse Excerpt

Every bird which flies has the thread of the infinite in its claw.

—VICTOR HUGO

PARIS

JANUARY 1998

TOO SMALL FOR a bomb, Aimée Leduc thought, nudging with her high-heeled toe at the tiny red box on the cold landing outside Leduc Detective's office. No card. Curious, she picked up the red gift-wrapped box, sniffed. Nothing floral. A secret admirer?

The timed hallway light clicked off, plunging the landing into darkness. She shivered, closed the frosted glass door behind her, and hit the light switch. The chandelier's crystal drops caught the light and reflected in the old patinated mirror over the fireplace.

For once the high-ceilinged nineteenth-century office was warm, too warm. The new boiler had gone into overdrive. Her nose ran at the switch from the chill January evening to toasty, warm office. She set down her shopping bags—January was the season of *soldes*, the big sales. She'd blown her budget.

Et alors, yogurt and carrots at her desk for the next week.

She slung her coat over the chair and noticed a chip on her *rouge-noir*-lacquered pinkie. *Zut*. She'd have to spring for a manicure.

The office phone trilled, startling her.

"Tell me you found Meizi's birthday present, Aimée," came the breathless voice of René, her business partner at Leduc Detective. "The damned jeweler screwed up the delivery."

"Small red box? You mean it's not for me?" she joked. She shook the box and heard a rattle. Maybe those jade earrings she'd seen him looking at. "You're serious about Meizi? mean, *that* kind of serious?"

"One day you'll meet your soul mate, too, Aimée."

Soul mate? He'd known Meizi what, two months? But Aimée bit her tongue. So unlike René to rush into something. A surge of protectiveness hit her. She ought to check this girl out, see what she could learn from a quick computer background search. Could be a little ticking bomb, all right.

"Save my life, eh?" René said. "Bring it to the *resto*, Chez Chun."

"But I'm in the middle of a security proposal, René," she answered, hoping he didn't hear the little lie in her voice. She surveyed their bank of computers, which were running security checks, updating client systems she'd programmed before she left. The boring bread and butter of their computer security firm.

"Take a taxi, Aimée," he said, his voice pleading. "Please."

Meizi must have something his previous girlfriends from the dojo didn't. Better to check her out in person. Aimée put the box in one jacket pocket and dug through the other for her cell phone.

"A taxi, with this traffic? Métro's faster, René."

She grabbed her leopard-print coat and locked the office door.

Twenty minutes later she ran up the Métro steps, perspiring and dodging commuters. Frustrated, she found herself at the exit farthest from where she wanted to be, by the Romanesque church that was now the Musée des Arts et Métiers. Harmonic Gregorian chanting wafted in the cold air and drifted into the enveloping night. Petals of snow lodged like nests of white feathers in the bare-branched trees. What a night, the temperature falling, a storm threatening in the clouded sky. The frigid air sliced her lungs, shot up the mini under

her coat.

Great. She hadn't thought her wardrobe through, as usual. René had better appreciate this. Listen to sense and slow things down.

She ran across the boulevard into the medieval quartier, still an ungentrified slice of crumbling *hôtel particuliers*, narrow cobbled streets lined by Chinese wholesale luggage and jewelry shops. Red paper lanterns hanging from storefronts shuddered in the wind. From a half-open door she heard the pebble-like shuffling of mah-jongg tiles. This multi-block warren comprised the oldest and smallest of the four Chinatowns in Paris. Few knew it existed.

She reached Chez Chun, the oldest or second-oldest building in Paris, depending on who you talked to, sagging and timbered beside a darkened hair salon.

Inside Chez Chun a blast of garlic, chilis, and cloying Chinese pop music greeted her. The *resto*, an L-shaped affair, held ten or so filled tables. Roast ducks dangled behind the takeout counter. Not exactly an intimate dining spot.

René cornered her at the door. "Took you long enough, Aimée." René, a dwarf, was always a natty dresser. Tonight he wore a new silk tie and a velvet-collared wool overcoat tailored to his four-foot height.

"Work, René," she said. "I'm still running programs."

He raised his hand. "Routine. We're good till Monday."

She'd never seen him like this. For once work took second place.

"Yet look who came out in the cold," she said, wiping the snow from her collar. "Why so nervous?"

"Her parents."

"Use your famous Friant charm," she said under her breath. She pulled the gift from her coat pocket. "But why rush this, René?"

René reached for the box, a small smile playing on his lips. "Time to listen to my heart, Aimée."

At the table, Meizi, her black ponytail bobbing, smiled at them. A warm smile that reached her eyes. "René said you'd be joining us. We ordered, I hope you don't mind." Petite, not much taller than René, she wore jeans and a green sweater as she stood ladling abalone soup into small bowls. "Love your coat, Aimée. Meet my parents."

"*Bonsoir*," Aimée said politely.

The unsmiling Monsieur and Madame Wu stared at her. "My parents speak Wenzhou dialect," said Meizi with an apologetic shrug. "I'll translate."

Aimée grinned, determined to thaw the atmosphere. Her black-stockinged thigh caught on the plastic-covered seat. Under the disapproving stare of Madame Wu, she remembered René's complaints about how Meizi's parents insisted on chaperoning their dates.

René set the present on the table beside the steaming soup. "Happy birthday, Meizi."

Aimée tried not to cringe. Even if it was only earrings, it was too soon. René was nuts, or crazy in love.

Madame Wu turned and spoke to her husband. Aimée heard her sharp intonation, and she could imagine what was being said.

But Meizi's face lit up in happiness as she untied the bow and opened the jewelry box. To Aimée's surprise, it was a ring. A pearl ring, luminous and simple. "How thoughtful, René," Meizi gasped. "I lost my other ring at the dojo."

He winked. "I hope the next one will sparkle more."

Meizi blushed.

Madame Wu pulled the reading glasses down from her short, very black hair—dyed, Aimée could see—and shook her head. Round-faced Monsieur Wu, who was much older, averted his gaze.

Were they criticizing René's gift or objecting to the relationship? Perhaps they didn't want their daughter involved with a dwarf? Despite her own reservations, Aimée felt a pang for René.

"Lovely, *non?*" Aimée said, trying to ease the almost palpable tension.

"Try it on, Meizi," René urged.

Aimée noticed the look René and Meizi shared. Lost in each other. She nudged René. He ignored her.

Madame Wu spoke sharply, and Meizi translated. "My parents say you're too kind, René."

Aimée doubted that. Meizi slipped the ring on her fourth finger. "*Parfait.*" Aimée noticed the bitten nails, the worn calluses on Meizi's fingertips. Meizi set the ring back in the box and passed out the steaming soup bowls. A large serving for René.

Meizi's phone vibrated on the table. She glanced at the number and pushed her chair back. "I'll be right back."

René's hand paused on his soup spoon. "Can't you talk later, Meizi?"

"Won't take a moment," she said. As Meizi went to the door, Aimée noticed her backward glance, her beetled brow, before she stepped outside.

The Wus, not ones for conversation, tucked into the soup. Poor René. Aimée imagined the dinners he'd shared with the humorless Madame and Monsieur Wu. Had she read Meizi, dutiful daughter, all wrong? A young waitress cleared their bowls, leaving Meizi's, and brought a platter of fragrant roasted duck with shaved scallions. At least five more minutes passed.

"Where's Meizi?" René asked, holding off from serving himself.

"Meizi, *oui.*" Madame Wu nodded, her chopsticks working at morsels of duck.

Aimée wished Meizi hadn't left them in this awkward situation. She shot René a look. He flipped his phone open, hit Meizi's number on his speed dial.

A stooped older woman wearing a stained apron entered the *resto*. Madame Wu exchanged an uneasy look with Monsieur Wu as the old woman made her way to their table.

"Who's this, another relative?" Aimée asked.

"The busybody who sells tofu and groceries next to her uncle's place." René frowned. "Meizi's not answering her phone."

Suddenly, the old woman shouted in Chinese. Madame Wu dropped her glasses on the table.

The old woman continued, bellowing, frantic. Loud murmurs and the clattering of chopsticks filled the *resto*. Surprised, Aimée saw diners throw money on their tables, hear chairs screeching back in haste over the linoleum. As if at some mysterious signal, people reached for their coats and fled in a mass exodus.

Madame and Monsieur Wu stood in unison. Without a word they left the table and went out the door of the *resto* without their coats. Not only rude, but unnerving.

The ring in the red velvet box sat by the teapot, forgotten. Like Meizi's coat on the back of

her chair.

“But what’s happening?” René said, bewilderment on his face.

Aimée rubbed her sleeve on the fogged-up window to see outside. A red glow reflected the ice veining the cobble cracks. Firemen, an ambulance, the police?

The young waitress by the door turned down the pop music.

“What’s the matter?” Aimée asked her.

“Trouble.”

“Trouble as in a robbery?” Jewelry stores abounded in the quartier, which had once been the diamond-cutting district.

“The old lady said murder.”

“Murder? But who?”

The waitress shrugged. Her fingers worried a tattered menu. “Behind the luggage shop.”

Aimée sat up. “The luggage shop around the corner?”

The waitress nodded.

Meizi’s parents’ shop. A terrible feeling hit her. Meizi?

René had pulled on his coat and was already halfway to the door. Aimée scooped the jewelry box into her pocket, left a wad of francs on the table, and took off behind him.

• • •

FILLED WITH DREAD, Aimée hurried down the street, following René past the dimly lit Le Tango, dance club emitting a reverberating drumbeat. No one stood outside. It was too cold for the usual drunken brawls. A horn blared streets away.

A flash of red disappeared around the corner. Madame Wu.

Aimée glimpsed a few Chinese people crowding the short walkway behind the luggage shop. The dark walkway between the buildings was crowded with garbage bins, wooden palettes, old cart wheels, the view ending in a dim red lantern shining on back stairs. Not a hundred yards from the *resto*. Her shoulders tightened.

“Meizi lives here above the shop.” René panted, his breath frosting in the cold. The windows he pointed to were dark. Where were the Wus?

Aimée fought a rising panic, picking her way through Chinese people of all ages, mumbling and scraping their feet on the ice.

“Has someone been ...?” Aimée’s question was interrupted by a woman’s piercing scream. People jostled her shoulder as they ran away, their footsteps thudding on the snow. Shivering in the cold and full of misgivings, Aimée crossed the now deserted walkway.

Not Meizi, *non* ... don’t let it be Meizi.

A rat, fat and brown, its tail the length of its long, wet, furred body, scurried down the steps over the new-fallen snow. It left a trail of red in its wake.

At the foot of the crumbling stone stairs by Meizi’s door, a man’s snow-dusted trouser-cla leg sprawled from a wooden palette. She gasped. Bits of gnawed, bloody flesh, orange peel and black wool threads trailed in the snow. Good God. Her stomach lurched. The rat.

Aimée couldn’t peel her horrified gaze from the corpse, which was half wrapped in clear plastic, the kind used to secure merchandise to palettes. The man’s matted red hair, prominent nose, and cheekbones all melded, smooth and tight, under the clear plastic. Her gaze traveled to his wide, terrified eyes, then to his mouth, frozen open in a snowflake.

dusted scream.

She stumbled and caught herself on the ice-glazed wall. Who was he? He hadn't been here long, judging by the light coating of snow. Where was Meizi?

"*Mon Dieu*," René said, stepping back. He took a few steps and pounded on Meizi's back door.

No answer.

Aimée gathered up her long leopard-print coat and stepped with care around the dirtied snow, avoiding the overturned garbage bin's contents.

Her insides churned. She shouldn't have looked at the eyes.

A pair of black-framed glasses lay in the snow beside his gnawed calf. Crinkled papers, half-open wallet. Using a dirty plastic bag to cover her hands, she picked the wallet up. No cash or credit cards. Cleaned out.

"Come on, Aimée," René said. "The *flics* will handle this. We have to find Meizi."

Wedged deep in the wallet's fold she found a creased Conservatoire des Arts et Métiers library card with an address and the name Pascal Samour. The photo showed a younger version of the pale face in plastic before her.

She turned the card over.

"Put that down, Aimée," René said.

Stuck to the other side of the library card by gummy adhesive was a smudged photo of a Chinese girl with a glossy ponytail. Meizi. "But look, René."

He gasped, and his face fell. He stepped back, shaking his head. "I don't understand."

She caught her breath. "He knew Meizi, René. What if she ..."

"You think she's involved?" he sputtered. "Impossible."

He punched numbers on his cell phone. "She's still not answering. She's in trouble."

At that moment, wide flashlight beams blinded Aimée. She stumbled, dropped the wallet. Static and voices barked from a walkie-talkie: "First responders, truck thirteen. Alert medic backup we're in the walkway."

"Someone reported this incident," the *pompier* medic shouted, his blue anorak crunching with snow. "Was that you?"

Aimée shook her head.

His colleague brushed past her with his resuscitator equipment. He pulled on latex gloves, took out clippers and snipped the plastic away, revealing that the man's wrists were bound behind him. The medic felt the man's carotid artery. A formality. He shook his head.

A shout erupted. A bedraggled figure came down a side staircase shaking his fist. He wore a matted fur coat, a sleep mask on his forehead, and orange slippers. "I'm trying to sleep."

Aimée hadn't noticed the crumbling stairs, the bricked-up windows. Or the *Permis de Demolir* sign on the building. Condemned.

"How many times have we told you to stay in the shelter, Clodo?" said the second medic.

"They took my wine," the homeless man said in a rasping voice.

She wondered why the rats hadn't chewed him, too. "Did you hear anything? Or see the man attacked, Clodo?"

"Every night I hear the angels sing. Then the devils come. Like you." A loud burp.

"*Clochards*." The medic shrugged. "Guess this is one for the *flics*." His partner packed away the resuscitator.

“You’re going to leave him like that?” René shivered beside her in the footprinted snow. Aimée scanned the ground, but the wallet with Meizi’s picture had disappeared.

“*Alors*, it’s not like he’s going to spoil in the heat.” The words came from an arriving blue uniformed *flic* with a roll of crime-scene tape. “What’s this kid doing here?”

René blinked. His snowflaked eyelashes quivered. He hated being mistaken for a child.

“Need your eyes checked?” Aimée glared at the *flic*.

The *flic* gestured to his partner, who was approaching from the street. Behind him she saw the blue van. The crime-scene unit piled out.

“You two,” said the *flic*, “in the van for questioning.”

AT THE REAR counter in nearby Café des Arts et Métiers, Aimée squeezed René’s arm. On edge she tapped her stiletto boot heel on the mosaic tile. She wanted to discover where the he Meizi had disappeared to. And get René home.

Still, if they had to be questioned, the café beat the frigid police van. They’d allowed her to clean up in the café’s WC. Two blocks from the scene of the murder, in the warm café by the Métro station, felt like another world.

Several *flics* and plainclothes hunched over espresso at the counter. Their wet coats dripped on the floor. Little pools formed at their feet among scattered sugar wrappers and cigarette butts. Odd, so many *flics* here at this hour.

A clearing throat interrupted her thoughts. “Mademoiselle Leduc, you were saying ...”

“My partner’s in shock.” Aimée turned to Prévost, the *chef de groupe* of the Police Judiciaire. Late thirties, stocky and sallow-faced, a permanent downturn to his thin lips. He stood ramrod straight, his close-set eyes not unlike those of the rat that had gnawed the corpse.

“This is a formality, you said,” she reminded him. “My partner’s got nothing to hide.”

Prévost tilted his head and leaned in. She could feel his hot breath on her face. “Do you?”

She slammed her hand on the counter, and Prévost flew back. “Just the run in my stocking,” she said.

“Witnesses need to cooperate, Mademoiselle.”

Her taxes paid his salary and she didn’t care for his attitude. “Witnesses? Talk to whoever called this in. There was a whole crowd in the walkway before we got there.”

“Like usual in Chinatown, everyone’s disappeared.”

Disappeared?

Aimée had an uneasy feeling Prévost had defaulted to them as suspects. Meizi’s photo and Samour’s wallet didn’t make her feel any better. Best to go to the head honcho. “I want to speak with le Proc.” She straightened, crossing her arms.

Le Proc, *Procureur de la République*, the investigating magistrate, attended crime scenes and referred the investigations either to the local Police Judiciaire or Brigade Criminelle, the elite homicide branch. Murder usually went to *la Crim*. But before it got shoved on someone’s desk tomorrow, Aimée would prefer to explain her presence at the scene of the crime to *le Proc*.

“We go by chain of command,” Prévost said, managing to look bored and tired at the same time.

“I know,” she said. “My father was a *flic*. He worked at the *commissariat* at Place Baudoyer.”

“*Et voilà*, you know procedure. And I know your relationship with Commissaire Morbier. wrote it all down,” he said with a little yawn, a hooded look behind his eyes. “Le Proc’s com and gone.”

Great. Time to get René home. Chilled and pale, he slumped on a high stool.

She reached for her bag.

“I’m afraid there’s a few more things to clear up.” Prévost consulted his notebook. “Convenient, *non*, Monsieur Friant, parking your car near where the body was found? How do you explain that?”

Aimée leaned forward. “*Alors*, ever tried to park here at night?”

“Where’s the receipt for your meal at Chez Chun?”

She’d paid cash and run like everyone else. But she felt in her damp coat pocket. The jewelry box.

Prévost’s mouth turned down. “You do have a receipt, don’t you?”

“*Phfft*. I paid cash.”

René averted his eyes.

Prévost balled a sugar wrapper and downed his espresso.

Aimée shoved her empty demitasse across the counter. “Why are you treating us like suspects? Like we told you—”

“Dining with Madame and Monsieur Wu, a nice meal, Monsieur Friant,” Prévost interrupted. “Know them well, do you?”

EGGING René on, Aimée thought. Pursuing the wrong link, while he should be trying to find the murderer. Typical.

René shook his head.

Prévost jerked his chin toward Aimée. “And you, Mademoiselle?”

“I met them once. Tonight.”

“But I’m disappointed.” Prévost’s brows furrowed. “Weren’t you going to tell me about the birthday celebration for Meizi Wu?”

Aimée stiffened. They’d questioned the waitress in the *resto*. How much did Prévost know?

“We’d like to talk with her,” Prévost said.

Did he regard Meizi as a suspect? She squeezed René’s thigh under the counter. René caught her look.

“So would I,” René said, his lips compressed. “*Alors*, during the soup course Meizi took a phone call and left.”

“So you know this man, the victim?” Prévost was quick.

René’s large green eyes widened. “But I never saw that poor man before.”

“Didn’t Meizi talk about him? His mistress, lover?”

Aimée’s hands trembled. The *flics* had found the wallet and alerted Prévost. Or he was fishing for information.

“What?” René glared. “A man wrapped in plastic doesn’t point to an affair of the heart. René’s eyes filled with pain, and something else.

“But who’s the victim?” Aimée asked. His library card had told her his name and that he lived in the quartier. She wanted more from Prévost.

Prévost ignored her question. “Where did the Wus go, Monsieur Friant?”

René shook his head. “Like I told you, I don’t know.”

“Shouldn’t you question the woman from the tofu shop, the people in apartment overlooking the area, the shop owners?” Aimée shook her head. “Someone noticed. Called in.”

A long-suffering look filled Prévost’s eyes. “We’re talking to all persons of interest.” Wasting time, more like it.

“A man’s been murdered,” René snapped. “But you’re grilling us?”

Outside the clear circle in the steamed-up window, Aimée saw a police truck idling on rue Beaubourg. Moments later it cleared the way for the van from the morgue. A lone passerby watched. A sad end.

“More than one way to peel the onion in Chinatown,” Prévost said. “That’s what it’s about here.”

Meaning what, she wondered. “Did you find a weapon?”

“My job’s to ask the questions. Not you.” Prévost stared at René.

An unmarked van pulled up outside on the street, and three men emerged wearing sweaters, no coats. One yawned, stretched, and climbed back inside.

Her shoulders tightened. Now it fit together. “You’re conducting police surveillance in this area, *n’est-ce pas*? The murder’s connected?”

“Not for me to say,” Prévost said.

His gaze flicked over the men hunched at the counter and darkened. His thin lips tightened. He glared at her—a warning to shut up? One of the *mecs* at the counter half turned as if he were listening.

Turf issues? she wondered. Bad blood between competing forces? Had they stepped in the middle of a rat’s nest?

Aimée noticed René’s short legs dangling from the stool, his dripping handmade Loeb shoes. She caught the wince as he shifted. The damp exacerbated his hip dysplasia.

“Different rules apply here,” Prévost said. “Gangs, protection. The quartier’s infested with gangs and protection rackets. These Chinese glom together like sticky rice.”

His thinly veiled racism didn’t inspire much confidence. Probably a member of the right-wing France for the French party.

“Quite a generalization, Prévost,” she said. He spilled too much for a *flic*. Or he was warning them of the score. Why?

“*Et alors*? I’ve worked this quartier five years,” he said, his tone changing. “My wife’s from Shanghai; she says the same thing.” He thumbed the pages in his notebook. Wrote something. A professional demeanor now. He slid two business cards over the table.

“What avenues are you looking into?” Aimée asked.

“Too early in the investigation to say.” He stood and put his notebook in his coat pocket. “Tomorrow we’ll talk at the *commissariat*.”

She sensed something else. Something she couldn’t put her finger on. What was this surveillance?

The men at the counter smelled of RG, *Renseignements Généraux*, the hydra-headed intelligence branch on Île de la Cité. Not known to cozy up with uniforms at the counter. But if they worked surveillance in Chinatown, had the murder muddied their surveillance? Or was it all connected?

• • •

OUT ON THE dimly lit street, she pondered Prévost's insinuations. Was the murder retribution for a Chinese gang for stepping into the wrong territory? Or for a debt? A woman?

Meizi.

"Zut, René, the area reeks of surveillance. We don't know what's going on."

"We're going to find out, Aimée."

"Us?" For once René, Mr. Play-it-safe, wanted to investigate something criminal? Talk about the shoe on the other foot. "You did notice the *mecs* at the counter, René."

"No answer at the dojo," he said. "It's closed."

"You think Meizi would go there?" she asked.

René's green eyes blazed. "Meizi's parents hide in the back of their shop if a customer comes in."

"They don't speak French."

"*Exactement*. Few Chinese here do. Fewer have papers."

René's words were filled with implications she didn't like to think about. "The Wus operate an illegal business?"

René shook his head. "Like we've talked about that during the little time I've had with Meizi and her parents?" He waved his short arm. "This street's full of sweatshops. Heard that?" In the dark street, she heard a low thrum. "Buildings tremble at night, Meizi told me from machines in basements and attics. Sweatshops full of illegals working in secret. The last thing anyone wants to do is draw attention. Didn't you see how everyone ran away? They're scared."

Or guilty. Aimée's boot heel caught in a drain. She couldn't let it go. "Yet someone tipped off the *flics*," she said. "Ask yourself who, if no one wants to draw attention. The word got out, the old woman gave the warning in the *resto*. If Meizi already knew, or—"

"Somebody wanted the body found, Aimée," René interrupted.

She kicked an iced cobble, regretted it right away. "After she opens your present, serves the soup, Meizi takes a phone call. Disappears."

René ran his fingers through his hair, then knotted his scarf around his neck. "I know she's in trouble."

"An understatement, René. Her ... friend was murdered behind her family's shop."

"Meizi's my soul mate. She never talked about anyone else," René said. "Zut, you met her parents. Strict and traditional. Something's happened, don't you see?"

Why couldn't he get it? "René, the victim carried her photo in his wallet." She wanted to sit him down in the snow, make him understand. "Prévost regards her as a suspect."

He shook his head. Denial. "*Bon*, I don't need your help to find Meizi. Not that you offered, Aimée."

He took off down the iced cobbles, favoring his right leg. He usually tried to hide his slight limp.

Her heart ached. She didn't want René hurt. Her mind raced with scenarios—Meizi, illegal maybe owing a debt, finding René, a dwarf, thinking him an easy mark. A vulnerable man due to his stature. What if Meizi had been playing cat and mouse, giving and withholding? Using her parents as a chaperone tactic to ensnare René into marriage for residence papers?

She caught up with him at the corner. Took his arm and stared at him. "I could have told Prévost. I didn't, did I?"

He shrugged her off.

“*Mais*, you’re my best friend, René,” she said. “I’m in this with you.”

Aimée followed his gaze to the Wus’ shuttered luggage storefront, the scattered wet plastic bags in the gutter. He flipped open his phone and hit Meizi’s number. He shook his head, his brow creased. “Her phone’s off.”

A light flickered on in a floor window above the shop. Had the Wus returned? The back walkway was blocked by orange-and-white-striped crime-scene tape labeled *Police Zone Interdite*. But on rue Volta, she saw a side door to the building, grillwork with a lion’s face in its center.

Too bad she’d left her lock pick set at the office. She took out her mint dental floss.

“Flossing your teeth?” René quirked an ironic eyebrow at her.

“Stand in front of me.”

“Why?”

“Just do it, René.”

He stood in the snow caked in the doorway as she knotted the floss and slipped her fingers inside the ornate, rusted grillwork. The knot caught on the brass handle, which she knew came standard in these seventeenth-century doors. She tugged, heard a click, and pushed the creaking door open.

“Hurry, René.”

AIMÉE HIT THE light switch, illuminating a narrow staircase winding upward like a corkscrew. The timed light clicked in eerie counterpoint to their footsteps on the cracked, upturned linoleum. Fried garlic and sesame oil odors clung in the shadowy corners.

No answer when René knocked on the shop door.

Aimée studied the ancient gas fixtures poking from the hallway ceiling, the metal spigot dripping into a pail. Just like many an old tenement. She imagined more than a hundred people living in this building, one sink per apartment and a communal WC between the floors.

A hum grew louder as they ascended the stairs, like cicadas in Provence at summer twilight. But in this decrepit hallway, cut by sharp drafts, the hum issued from something else.

“What’s the noise?”

“Sewing machines,” René said, his voice low.

Sweatshops.

On the first-floor landing, René pointed to an unpainted door. “This one’s above the shop.”

He knocked. Footsteps sounded behind the door, then muffled Chinese.

“Meizi, it’s René.”

Aimée’s fingers clenched. Now they’d get an explanation, maybe not the one René wanted.

The door opened halfway. A young Chinese man in an undershirt peered from behind. Smells of sleep, of too many bodies and kerosene from a heater wafted out. Behind him she caught a glimpse of a room lined by rough wooden platforms where ten or so men slept. A bared slit of a window, flaking stucco walls. Like a narrow cell. Alarm bells went off in her head.

“I’m looking for the Wus and Meizi,” René said.

The young Chinese man shook his head. With an abrupt movement, he waved his hands as if shooing them away. "*Cuò wù!*"

Shaken, René stepped back.

"We mean from the shop downstairs," Aimée said, pointing below. "The Wu family?"

He shook his head again. Fear in his eyes. "Wu, *non*." He shut the door. She heard the boot slip from inside.

Aimée's stomach sank. She realized this was the only room above the shop. "I don't like this, René."

Heads peered over the banister, figures above them watching.

"*Excusez-moi*," she said, looking up, trying one more time, "we're looking for Monsieur and Madame Wu. Meizi Wu."

Suspicion and fear emanated from the darting shadows; the figures began stepping back and closing doors. She sensed quiet despair in the lives crammed on each floor. Door latches bolted.

An eerie quiet filled the hallway. The Wus didn't live here. She doubted they ever had. "Let's go."

Out in the icy street, René put his gloved hands in his pockets. They walked the block toward René's car. His mouth was tight, holding something back.

"Talk to me, René."

"Those men do the jobs no one else will, work like slaves."

Another side of René, whom she thought she knew so well. The fighter for the underdog. But wasn't he one himself?

He shook his head. "Meizi's in danger."

"What if she's staying with a friend from the dojo?" Aimée said.

René's eyes pooled in anguish. "Already left messages. No one's returned my calls. Suddenly he snorted in disgust. "Look at that!"

His snow-dusted Citroën DS sat wedged, bumper to bumper, between a Renault and a dented blue camionette. A too common occurrence these days, with tight parking in medieval streets.

After a twelve-hour day, all she wanted was to get warm and sleep. "Skin tight," she said. "Start the engine. I'll push."

She put on her leather gloves, hitched up her coat in the cold. René started the engine and hit the windshield wipers, sending sprays of snow. Aimée tried to push the parked camionette so René could pull out.

No luck.

Standing in the street, she guided René centimeter by centimeter as he edged forward, then reversed.

This would take hours. Cold, her legs numb, she spied a jogger coming down the pavement, his breath puffing.

In this weather?

"Monsieur, mind helping a moment?"

Together, they shoved the camionette's bumper back a tad. Then again. Every shove gave a centimeter. Aimée caught her breath, perspiring under her coat. She noticed two figures huddled on the corner. She was about to enlist their aid when she did a double take. She

recognized that pink wool cap. *Her cap.* The one René borrowed for Meizi last week.

The darkness shrouded the pair of faces, but she could see the man shove the woman and then shake her. Clanking metal echoed off the stone. He'd thrust a bag into her arms.

Meizi?

Aimée's heart thumped.

Had René noticed?

But now they'd gone. Aimée took off, wishing to God her heeled boots would gain traction on the ice. Snow fell faster now, little flurries whipping off the stone walls. She skidded, threw out her arms to break her fall. A sickening feeling seized her in the long moment before she hit the wall.

Jolted, she took a moment to stand up. At the corner she looked both ways. No one. Had she imagined it? But in the yellow streetlight she made out mashed footprints in the piled snow.

It had all happened so fast, she thought, hurrying back to René's car. Did Meizi have another boyfriend? Or was she in trouble?

"Running off, Aimée? But you need to push again," René said, twisting the wheels. Ice chunks spit and frosted her calves.

Two more shoves of the camionette's bumper and René's Citroën broke free of the logjam.

"*Merci, monsieur,*" she called after the jogger, who had already headed off into the shadows.

In the passenger seat, Aimée pushed a wet blonde lock from her mouth and hit the heater. She longed for the leather seats to warm up. "Take a right at the corner."

He paused mid-shift, stepped on the clutch. "Did you see something?"

She hesitated. Should she tell René? Reveal that Meizi had been two-timing him and stringing him along? But she didn't know that. Didn't even know if that was Meizi. Yet.

"My wool hat you lent Meizi—I think I saw a woman wearing it. Up there."

René ground into first and shot down the street.

For forty minutes they cruised the narrow, winding streets, back and forth, up one end of the quartier, down the other. No woman with Aimée's cap, no answer from Meizi's phone.

René pulled up on Quai d'Anjou in front of Aimée's seventeenth-century apartment on Île Saint-Louis.

Before she opened her door, she asked, "Why would she lie to you about where she lives?"

"I know what you're thinking, Aimée," René said, his voice tight. "You're thinking she's involved. But she's not. She's a country girl, innocent. I need to find and protect her."

Not before Aimée found her. She wondered who needed to be protected from whom.

"But we don't know what happened, René."

"Caring for a person means trusting her." René turned on the ignition. "You should try sometime."

DAWN, LIKE A silver pencil, outlined Aimée's mansard bedroom window frame. Light slanted over Melac's crumpled jeans on the wood floor and glittered off the Manurhin revolver poking from his back pocket.

Aimée felt his warm breath in her ear. His tongue on her neck. His musk scent on her skin.

Delicious. The white feather duvet bunched around her shoulders as she ran her toe along his warm ankle. She grinned to see his eyes were half hooded with sleep.

Trilling came from the phone console on her *escritoire*. "Room service?" She nibbled her ear. "How thoughtful."

He shook his head and flicked his tongue over her neck. "Remind me to dump that in the river."

The phone clicked and went to the answering machine.

"Aimée?" René's voice, as tense as a taut bowstring. "Meizi's phone's disconnected. I've been out looking for her all night." Pause. "Call me."

The red light blinked on her answering machine. Her throat caught. She imagined René driving in the ice, the cold. Alone. While here she lay, entwined with Melac in her warm bed.

She reached for Melac's cell phone on the Louis Quinze bedstand. Melac's hand shot out to stop her. "Let René handle this. It's our weekend, remember?"

As a Brigade Criminelle inspector in the elite homicide squad, his hours varied according to his cases. He'd come over after his shift the previous night. Tired, she'd hesitated before giving him a brief account over a glass of wine. She figured *le Proc* would have referred the investigation to the Brigade Criminelle. When she'd asked him why he hadn't been assigned the case, he shook his head. "Work's over, we'll talk later." He'd pulled her sleeve and they ended up under the duvet.

"René's upset, I'm calling him," she said, sitting up in bed.

"You agreed with me, remember?" He traced his finger over her lips. "Our first weekend in a month."

"But René's important. And it's still our weekend," she said, rolling over.

Melac messaged her neck. "Leave it, Aimée."

She hesitated, pulled in two directions. But leave René stranded? "He sounds frantic." The cell phone ringing in her hand interrupted her. A number she didn't know. She showed him the screen.

Melac bolted upright and took his phone from her hand.

"*Zut!* Some double standard going on here, Melac?"

"*Oui?*" he said into the phone.

His soon-to-be-ex, Nathalie? She stifled a groan. Or his eleven-year-old daughter, Sandrine? Melac, a devoted part-time father, spent every other weekend in Brittany. This could take forever.

Melac leaned forward, his warm arm slipping away. A chill settled on her skin where it had been. He cleared his throat. "A car in ten minutes?"

Aimée felt a sinking in her stomach. Unfair.

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