

Monday, 11th May

Her feet were wrong.

She was svelte and elegant, without a hint of fragility. Her long legs and fine arms were shaped by tightly packed muscle, a promise of athletic grace were she to rise from her resting place. Despite her plain features and flat chest – barely swelling against her simple black cocktail dress – she could have claimed her place at a fashion shoot as an instance of flawless harmony.

Providing her feet were hidden, which they were not. Kitten-heeled shoes sat neatly aligned in front of an armchair across the room. She had not made it into them.

It was not the size of her feet – they were neither too big nor too small – it was the suffering they had seen. Their soles were thick and calloused. Several patches of skin, including a large area around one heel, bore the dark hue of recent, or repeated, bruising. The contour of the left foot was uneven, hinting at a past fracture. While the rest of her had been painstakingly shaped and groomed, they had been neglected, if not abused.

And then there were the toes. A hardy veteran dominated each foot, stocky and powerful, a survivor of constant attrition. The smaller ones, no less valiant, displayed kinks and bends, memories of the inherent frailty they had fought to cast off.

From the ankles up she told a tale of sculptural purity, but her feet were holding out for a different narrative.

They held Franck's gaze, despite the fact that his attention should have been elsewhere.

Georges Sternberg was quick to point this out.

"You'll have to look at her neck at some point," he said, fitting the lens cap back on his camera, having taken enough pictures of the corpse.

"I already have," said Franck. "Not much to see, though."

Whatever had been used to strangle her, it had been very thin and long enough to go round her neck three times. Pulled taut, it had not quite broken the surface of her skin while compressing her throat and denying her lungs the oxygen they needed, first to keep her conscious and then to keep her

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alive. Her face and throat were dark, purple having seeped in as her life ebbed out.

“The killer didn’t do that to her feet,” observed Sternberg. “They’ve been like that for years.”

Franck nodded.

“Strange, though,” he said. “Workman’s feet on an angel’s body. You’d think she’d have taken as good care of them as the rest of her.”

“Think I should get a close-up of them?” asked Sternberg.

Franck shrugged.

“Like you said, none of the damage there is new. Our killer was too busy at the other end.”

“All the same, a few photos could come in useful. I could show them to Annabelle. Might calm her down a little.”

Sternberg palmed his lens cap, nudged Franck aside and squatted down, angling his camera at the victim’s feet. While he snapped away, Franck searched his memory.

“Annabelle who?” he finally asked.

Sternberg got up, raised an eyebrow at Franck, and walked across the room to where he had left his two kit bags. He unzipped a side pouch and retrieved his wallet from it. Pulling one photo out from the many it contained was a bit tricky with his fingers in loose-fitting disposable plastic gloves, but he eventually managed it. He held it up in front of Franck’s eyes.

It showed a girl, maybe thirteen, in a leotard. Her arms formed a pointed arch over her head while she stood on the tip of her toes in ballet shoes laced to her ankles. Her smile was determined but severe, her attention focused on her own posture rather than on the beholder.

“Ah, that Annabelle,” said Franck. He had never actually met Georges Sternberg’s daughter, but it was a safe bet that her father had mentioned her on countless occasions.

“Ballet-mad,” said Sternberg. “Comes before everything else. A close look at the side-effects might give her back some sense of perspective.”

Franck frowned at him. Clearly Sternberg knew something he didn’t.

“Gracious body. Misshapen feet,” stated Sternberg.

“So?”

“We’re dealing with a swan.”

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“Olivier Blanchard.”

“Who?”

“Lieutenant Olivier Blanchard, formerly attached to the fifteenth arrondissement commissariat. Now working out of rue Chauchat in the ninth.”

“Rings a bell,” said Yves de Chaumont. “Very serious, cuts no corners, a stickler for detail? That’s the one?”

“That’s the one,” confirmed Franck.

“So he’s directing your caseload now? We juges d’instruction are certainly slipping in the hierarchy these days.”

Yves was joking, but not entirely. The juges d’instruction, a time-honoured particularity of the nation’s judicial system, a corps of buccaneering investigative magistrates elevated to elite status by their independence from the rest of the administrative machine, were indeed increasingly under threat. Rumours were rife about a forthcoming reform that would sweep away what influential voices in the current government were now insisting was an anomalous institution.

For the moment, however, Yves’ title still conferred upon him substantial discretionary power. Had he wished to crush a simple lieutenant for presuming to steer an investigation towards a specific pair of hands within the Brigade Criminelle – and a very specific pair of hands at that, given that they did not really belong to the Brigade at all, but to Yves himself, under the conditions of an unwritten agreement with their real owner, the shadowy DCRI – a simple phone call would have sufficed.

But Yves’ umbrage was feigned, as his smile indicated. Initiative was a rare enough occurrence within the sclerotic mechanism of the capital’s police structure. It deserved a little encouragement. Moreover, Franck had nothing substantial on his plate at the moment – just some preparatory work on the Chantreau dossier, and a thief who specialised in second-rate religious

artworks, although a pest Yves had been trying to stamp out for some time, was not quite as much a menace to society as a murderer.

“Any idea why he chose you?” continued Yves.

“Said he thought of me as soon as he saw the body.”

“I suppose there’s something strangely flattering in that, although I can’t quite put my finger on it.”

“There’s also the fact that I’m probably the only person in the Brigade Criminelle he’s ever had to deal with,” Franck pointed out.

“In which case he’s a fortunate man, although he probably doesn’t know it yet. Anyhow,” Yves laid his hands flat on the unencumbered surface of his desk, leaning forward above them to make an official pronouncement, “I have no objection to you taking on this case. What was her name?”

“Sophie Duval.”

Yves closed his eyes, acknowledging the loss of one more life and paying momentary homage to the victim. He then nodded almost imperceptibly and snapped them open, a gesture Franck knew was not far removed from that of a hunter setting forth in the dawn, intent on returning with his prey.

“What do we know?”

“The victim was found this morning just after ten,” explained Franck. “We have her alarm clock to thank for that. It had been ringing since eight thirty.”

“Loud enough to be heard outside her apartment?”

Franck nodded. “Loud enough – and long enough – for her downstairs neighbour to complain to the concierge. Who had a spare set of keys. When she decided to use them, she discovered that the door was not locked. She found the victim on the floor of the main room of her apartment. That’s when she called the local commissariat. They sent lieutenant Blanchard, who arrived on the premises at ten forty. He phoned me.”

“So Sophie Duval was supposed to get up at eight thirty that morning, but didn’t, having opened the door to the wrong person the night before?”

“Looks like it. She was dressed to go out – somewhere classy, judging by her hair, make-up, and dress. Her shoes were waiting for her to slip into them and her handbag was on a nearby table with her keys inside. Although

she was strangled, there was no sign of a fight, other than the fact that she scraped her own skin trying to get at the cord around her neck. I'd say she was taken by surprise by someone already standing right next to her."

"To let someone get that close, you have to know them well."

"She won't be the first murder victim to have put her trust in the the wrong man."

Yves nodded.

"Sad but true. When was she last seen alive?"

"The concierge saw her around six the previous day. Coming in."

"How hard is it to get into the building?"

"There's a keypad on the outside door. A five digit code. To reach the stairs and the lift from the entrance hall you either have to have a key or use the intercom and be buzzed through."

"Anyone in the building mention anyone strange coming or going after the victim got home?"

"Not so far. The concierge's lodge shuts at seven. If the killer crossed anyone's path after that, no one seems to have taken any notice."

"No smoking guns, then, Franck. Time to start unpicking her life. Who was Sophie Duval?"

"Not a nobody."

"Nobody's a nobody," insisted Yves. "Not as far as this office is concerned."

"Sure, but it turns out that Sophie Duval was definitely not a nobody. I would have thought you might have heard of her."

Yves frowned and propped his chin on the fist of his left hand.

"Apart from Sophie Duval the dancer ..." he murmured.

"I'm afraid so," said Franck. "The one and the same."

Yves sighed.

Yet another case about artistic treasures.

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Few buildings in Paris were as immodest in their intentions as the Opera House. Built for an Emperor, an entire neighbourhood had been ploughed

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under to provide a triumphal avenue over which it could hold sway. Its richly decorated facade announced that poetry, music, dance and song, embodied by vast allegorical statues, had at last found their true home within its walls. Every composer held in high esteem by the nineteenth century – Bach, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, and Rossini amongst them – had been recruited as a tutelary spirit, carved in stone on its facade. Excess was its very essence. The public areas it incorporated – a grandiose stairway feeding a pillared foyer and a series of salons designed to allow thousands to mill around in their finest, seeing and being seen – took up more space than the actual concert hall, which nonetheless boasted five levels of stalls and boxes above a vast semi-circle of velvet-draped seats. Its stage was wider and deeper than any of its European rivals and was equipped to allow the deployment of the most audacious and extravagant scenery that the creative imagination could conceive. Backstage, a warren of workshops, artists’ lodges, offices and changing rooms ensured that the building functioned as a world unto itself.

It took fifteen years to build, in the course of which the Franco-Prussian war had been lost, Napoleon III toppled, the Paris Commune declared and crushed, and the Third Republic established. Throughout it all, its architect, Charles Garnier, calmly pursued his goal of erecting a temple to music and dance whose walls would enclose an enchanted realm, a refuge from whatever sordid acts reality happened to get up to outside.

Franck reckoned he had been inside maybe a dozen times, which was probably about average for the relatively cultivated section of the capital’s population. The true fanatics could cite five, ten, or even more times as many visits. Few, however, could claim to have been waved through the rear entrance, an unassuming archway on boulevard Haussmann topped by two dwarf-like obelisks and a stone lintel, ignored by the hordes of shoppers drawn to the nearby Galeries Lafayette and Printemps. Far more modest than the principal facade which crowned the avenue de l’Opéra, this was nonetheless the most exclusive of the entrances to the building. Money could not get you through it; only talent could.

The first was just as well, since Franck was as impecunious as an honest servant of the state should be. As for the second, within the past twelve

months a weighty official report had cast severe doubt upon his professional abilities and judgement. Luckily for him, he had a card up his sleeve – an appointment with Anne-Laure Favennec, Dance Director of the Opera Ballet.

Forty-five minutes later Franck was still waiting, perched on a seat in a corner of a small office. Favennec’s assistant, whose desk took up most of the available space, threw apologetic glances at him whenever the constantly chirping phone on her desk gave her a little respite. Her embarrassment was understandable – she knew why he was there. The ninth arrondissement commissariat had informed the Opera Ballet of Sophie Duval’s death while Franck went back to the quai des Orfèvres to see Yves de Chaumont. He had then phoned from his office to set up an appointment with the Dance Director. Given that a dead ballerina was the reason for his visit, Franck had expected Anne-Laure Favennec to be waiting anxiously for him. Not so. Apparently she had other priorities. The show had to go on, and presumably she was making sure it did so.

It seemed that every incoming call was a supplication to meet or talk with Favennec. Her assistant kept the exchanges brief. Her fingers moved constantly over her keyboard as she nodded sympathetically, a light headset linking her ears and providing her with a microphone into which she uttered countless assurances that Favennec would get back to whoever was on the line. Maybe Franck was more privileged than he thought, given that he had obtained an interview with no more than an hour’s notice. Assuming that it actually came to pass.

He eventually got to his feet.

“Is there a coffee machine handy?” he asked.

“Would you like me to get you one?” asked the assistant, pushing back her chair and reaching up to free herself from her headset.

“No, no,” insisted Franck. “Stay where you are. You’re a lot busier than me.”

“Go right out the door and take the first corridor on your left,” he was told. “Half-way down you’ll find the coffee room. Just follow the noise.”

“Would you like me to get you something?”

“I’m fine,” smiled the assistant.

“I’ll be back,” promised Franck as he turned to leave.

“I hate to say it, but you can probably take your time.”

Franck followed the directions he had been given. If the public half of the Opera building was a series of stately spaces designed to hold multitudes who came seeking pomp and ceremony, its rear quarters were sober and utilitarian, with offices, workshops and rehearsal rooms crammed into whatever space was available. Not that his surroundings could be mistaken for the tired corridors of the capital’s innumerable administrative buildings. After all, two teenagers, a girl in a tutu and a boy in crotch-hugging tights, had just sprinted past him.

He ran into an obstacle just short of his destination. A young girl sat in the middle of the corridor, both legs before her, her left one stretched out on the floor and her right one held up as an offering. She wore a black leotard under an oversized sweatshirt. Her hair was caught in a tight band, keeping it out of her eyes, which were focused on a pair of hands busy looping the ribbons of her ballet shoe around her heel.

“Firm, not tight,” she was told. “You feel the difference?”

The young dancer nodded. The woman from whom she was taking instruction knelt before her in a grey t-shirt with matching slacks. She gathered the ends of the ribbons, knotted them together, tucked them neatly under one of the bands which circled the girl’s ankle, and leant backwards, gently lowering the dancer’s foot to the ground.

“Your turn now,” she said.

The dancer pulled her left leg up towards herself and set to work on the other set of ribbons. She carefully reproduced the cross-hatched pattern borne by her right foot. When she had finished, the woman tugged gently at her handiwork.

“Perfect,” she said. “Never choke your ankles, Claire. They’ve got enough to put up with as it is.”

She shifted her weight from her knees to her feet, straightened her legs and stood up, revealing herself to be as tall as Franck. She extended a hand to the girl, who took it but did not even tug lightly upon it as she too rose to a vertical position.

“Get back to your class,” she was told, although it came out more as a piece of advice than a command. The dancer turned and scampered away, flowing around Franck without altering her pace.

“Sorry if we held you up,” said the woman.

“That’s OK,” said Franck. “I wasn’t in a hurry.”

Her eyes swept over him.

“You wouldn’t be my three o’clock appointment, would you?”

“Captain Franck Guerin,” he said, extending a hand. “Brigade Criminelle.”

“Anne-Laure Favennec,” she offered in return. “Opera Ballet.”

She closed her hand around his, holding it softly.

“I’ve kept you waiting a long time, captain. I strive to be punctual, but I always fail.” She smiled, uncurling her fingers and releasing him. “Actually, to tell the truth, I don’t strive that hard.”

“My time’s not been wasted. I’ve now got a better idea how to tie a ballet shoe.”

“Yes, but could you actually do it? If seeing it done once was enough, I wouldn’t spend so much time running after my girls just to make sure their blood is still circulating.”

With that she glanced down at Franck’s feet. He followed her example, wondering if his own laces were undone.

“Of course, a shoe can be too loose as well as too tight,” she observed.

Franck shrugged.

“I’ve got wide feet. It’s hard to get shoes that fit just right, so I tend to take the next size up.”

“Must slow you down, though. Isn’t that a problem in your line of work?”

“There’s a lot more sitting around than you might think,” said Franck.

“Waiting for people like me, I suppose. Well, you have done so most patiently, Franck – I can call you Franck?”

He nodded. He had expected the woman in charge of one of the world’s major ballet companies to prove a little more formal, but she could call him anything she liked.

“Because you must call me Anne-Laure,” she continued. “Everyone does.”

He had also expected her to be a little more sombre.

“What do you need to know about Sophie Duval?” she asked, once they were seated in her office.

Although substantially larger than that of her assistant, it still seemed cramped. With a table hemmed in by six chairs, a three-seater sofa and a large desk whose surface held several piles of papers, there was little room to manoeuvre. They sat at the table at an angle to each other. Her eyebrows were slightly raised, signalling that her attention was all his. Although Franck wasn't averse to avoiding the spectacle of another's grief, he was thrown by her businesslike air.

“Did you know her well?” he asked.

Anne-Laure gasped, and she stared at Franck, her mouth agape.

“Did I know her well?” she repeated, incredulously.

“Well, you must have, what, over a hundred dancers?”

“A hundred and fifty-four. At least until yesterday. But I know them all, captain. They are my charges – I watch over, I encourage, I perfect, I train, I push, I counsel, I groom, and I console each and every one of them. But even were that not true, your question would still be absurd. Sophie was an étoile. You are aware of what that signifies?”

“Like a starlet?” offered Franck.

Anne-Laure snorted contemptuously. “It doesn't take much to be a starlet. The right figure, the right director, the right publicist – sometimes even the right parents are enough. To become an étoile in the Opera Ballet takes exceptional talent, unstinting dedication, and a lifetime of work.”

“A lifetime?” repeated Franck. Sophie Duval had been twenty-nine when she died. In the Middle Ages that might have counted as a lifetime, but by contemporary standards she had been robbed of two-thirds of her allotted span.

“A lifetime,” insisted Anne-Laure. “Most of our étoiles come from our own ballet school. We take pupils from the age of eight. From that moment on they live and breathe ballet every day for the rest of their childhood. And

adolescence. They won't actually join the corps de ballet – assuming they make it – until they're seventeen. So by the time you become a quadrille, you've spent more of your life in the Ballet than out of it. And even then, you've only got a precarious grip on the lowest rung of the ladder. You'll spend at least a year there before we let you near the coryphées.”

“The what?” Franck had let quadrille go, as it at least sounded French.

“Coryphée. I believe it has its origins in Greek tragedy – one of the ranking members of the choir. Don't forget, ours is a very old institution – true, we don't quite stretch back to Athens and Socrates, but we can claim Louis XIV as our founder – so our vocabulary is a little specific. The coryphées form the second rank in the corps de ballet, or the fourth in the Ballet as a whole.”

“OK.” This was a little more detail than he had counted on. He had already grasped the point of their exchange – Sophie Duval's dance career had lasted something like twenty-one years before she was killed. Not far short of a lifetime after all. Still, he could sense that Anne-Laure had not finished with her explanations. “So I'm eighteen and I'm a coryphée. What next?”

“If your technical prowess is unquestionable and your sense of artistry blossoming, two or three years later you may be named a sujet. If you have given your soul to your art and you deserve to be counted amongst the best in the world, at twenty-four or twenty-five you may be called to the rank of première danseuse. But you become an étoile only if the gods of ballet throw their mantle upon you, revealing you to be one of their chosen few.”

“How few?”

“As of this afternoon, there are seventeen étoiles in the company.” She sounded like a general surveying the ranks after a battle, not so much counting casualties as evaluating the remaining strength of his forces. “I know every one of my dancers, but my knowledge of my étoiles goes beyond that – it's intimate. With very few exceptions, I made them. I saw their potential and allowed them to realise it. Had I moulded Sophie Duval out of clay and breathed life into her, I couldn't have known her better.”

“In which case,” said Franck, slowly, “her death must have been a terrible shock.”

Anne-Laure shot him a sideways glance. One of irritation. “I must disappoint you, captain. I am insufficiently grief-stricken. Is that what you’re thinking? A young woman I have carefully tended for years is dead and I offer you not a single tear to prove the depth of my attachment to her.”

“You describe your dancers as your family, the étoiles as your most gifted children, ...”

“No.” Anne-Laure cut across him. “I did not say they were my family. I said they were my charges. My flock. My disciples. In all, nearly three hundred people work for the Opera Ballet – dancers, ballet masters, teachers, musicians, physical therapists, seamstresses, support staff – and they all look to me for guidance. Things go wrong every day – dancers are injured, costumes are lost, budgets are overspent, choreographers fail to deliver, critics are cruel, dreams are shattered, tempers flare, individuals lose heart, but through it all we put on a hundred and seventy performances, year in, year out. And not just any old performance. The best ballet in the world – the most beautiful, the most flawlessly executed, the most heartfelt, the most musical, the most breathtaking. Bar none. You think that would be possible without an iron grip on the helm? It is not my job to weep, captain. It is my job to lead. Don’t presume to know my heart.”

Franck raised both hands in apology.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to offend.” It was time to start again, with the only question that really mattered. “What can you tell me about Sophie Duval?”

Anne-Laure waved Franck’s contrition aside. Before she could speak the door into her office opened slightly, allowing her assistant to angle her head around it.

“Van Roon on the phone,” she said. “Very insistent.”

Anne-Laure shook her head. Her assistant withdrew.

“Where to start? Like any étoile, Sophie’s entire life revolved around her art and this company. She joined the Ballet school as soon as she was eligible. When I became Director she was a sujet, and a precocious one at that. It didn’t take me long to work out that she would be an étoile one day, and it fell to me to hand her that honour at the end of our last season.”

“Which was?”

“July last year.”

“So she was at her peak, professionally?”

“The first peak, yes. The ultimate summit comes a few years later, when a dancer has taken possession of the repertoire and made it her own.”

“Was this a busy time for her?”

“If it’s not August, it’s a busy time in the Opera Ballet. Particularly for an étoile. Sophie is currently dancing Myrtha in Giselle. She was due on tonight. She was also the female lead in a new ballet we are to première at the end of this month.”

“Was she having any problems?”

“Myrtha is a delight to dance. As for Diana and Acteon, ...”

Franck raised an enquiring finger. She had lost him. Giselle he had heard of, but not this Diana thing.

“Diana and Acteon is the new ballet. It’s a special commission from a – what can I say? – somewhat challenging choreographer. It’s been hard for everyone involved, and particularly so for Sophie, but it’s probably the most important contemporary project underway in the ballet world, so that’s only to be expected.”

“What about her personal life?”

“What personal life? Being an étoile is not a nine-to-five job, it’s a passion, a whirlwind affair that absorbs you entirely. You give it every minute of your existence because you know it won’t last forever. Retirement comes early to dancers. After that, you seek what solace you can. Only then do you really have time for what you would call a personal life, captain.”

“She was single? No steady relationship? No known lovers?”

“Lovers? No doubt. Who exactly, I could only hazard a guess. There are things I choose not to know – that I have no right and no need to know. But no steady relationship – that would have come to my attention.”

They were interrupted again.

“Ministry of Culture,” said Favenec’s assistant. “Permanent Secretary.”

All she got in return was another curt shake of the head. She closed the door as quietly as she had opened it.

“Was she here yesterday?” asked Franck.

“Yes. She was working on Diana and Acteon for most of the afternoon. We were expecting to see her in the evening too.”

“She was to dance?”

“No. The house was dark yesterday. But we were hosting an evening for the American Friends. Sophie was supposed to be there.”

“The American friends?” echoed Franck.

“The North American Friends of the Paris Opera House. American Friends for short. Most of them are simply opera buffs, but there’s an active minority of ballet fanatics and we cultivate them assiduously. Once or twice a year a group of them come over – thirty or forty at a time – and spend four or five days in the city. They’re very well looked after – the most coveted seats in the house, backstage visits, encounters with our best and brightest. Last night there was a reception in their honour in the Grand Foyer of the Opera and we – the Ballet – were doing the honours. I’d arranged for eight étoiles to be there.”

“And Sophie Duval never turned up?”

“No.”

“What time was this event?”

“It started at seven, with dinner at nine. I knew Sophie might be late, but I expected her to be there by the time the food was served.”

“The rehearsal hadn’t just run over?”

“No, they finished just before six. The étoile who partners her in Diana got to the reception on time.”

“There was no word from her?”

“Nothing. I told several people to phone her, but none of them got through.”

“You could have sent someone round to her place,” suggested Franck. “It’s not that far away.”

Duval had been found in her apartment on rue Notre-Dame de Lorette. It was less than ten minutes from the Opera House.

“I could have,” admitted Anne-Laure, “but I didn’t. I assumed that if Sophie wasn’t there, she had a very good reason. She knows how important the Americans are to our funding. She wouldn’t have stood them up lightly.”

“So as far as you were concerned, all was normal in Sophie Duval’s life?”

“I’m not quite sure the notion of ‘normal’ applies to a world-class ballerina. She had her challenges, her crises, her highs and lows, but there was nothing unusual in that. As far as I’m aware, the past few days or weeks in her life were no different from the months which preceded them.”

Franck tried another tack.

“What does her death mean?”

“What does it mean? It’s a great loss for the world of ballet. It’s a source of shock and sorrow for all the members of the company. It’s thrown the program for the end of the season into upheaval. It threatens the quality of what we do. It’s a challenge we have to rise to and overcome ...”

They were once more interrupted, but this time it was not Favenne’s assistant who popped a head in.

“Sorry for the intrusion. Piet’s on his way. On the warpath.”

And then the head was gone. An appealing face with a strong chin, stately nose, and serene blue eyes. A man somewhere in his forties with short-cut but vigorous greying hair.

“Serge!” said Anne-Laure, summoning him back.

This time he stepped fully into her office.

“I’m very sorry,” he said, addressing himself to Franck. “I’m not usually this ill-mannered.”

“Serge, this is captain Franck Guerin,” explained Anne-Laure. “He’s from the Brigade Criminelle. He’s investigating Sophie’s death.”

He closed the distance between himself and Franck, took his hand and squeezed it firmly, looking intently into his eyes.

“Help us understand what happened, captain,” he said. “You can’t imagine what Sophie meant to us. We’re all walking about numb out there. It’s as if our hearts have stopped beating.”

“This is Serge Morin,” explained Anne-Laure. “Serge is one of the rocks on which this company rests. He may be of more use to you than I can, Franck.”

“Anything. Anything at all I can do to help, I will,” declared Morin.

Franck got to his feet. If he had understood correctly, Anne-Laure had just dismissed him, passing him on to another. He would go with the flow. There did not seem to be much else he could gain from the Dance Director.

“Maybe we can talk in your office?” he suggested.

Serge shook his head with good humour. “I look like I have an office?”

He was dressed in khaki trousers with a red shirt unbuttoned at the collar. He had scuffed espadrilles on his feet.

“Serge will be dancing Albrecht in tonight’s production,” said Anne-Laure. “He’s our longest-serving étoile.”

Franck bit his lip. “Sorry. I don’t know that much about ...”

“Never mind, captain,” said Serge, smiling broadly to put Franck at ease. “I don’t know much about the police.”

Serge offered to take Franck to his lodge, but they found a small empty meeting room some distance down the corridor – a slightly unsteady table, five chairs, and a paperboard covered with indecipherable scrawling and figures. Serge made sure Franck was seated before he took his place beside him.

“You’ve been to the scene?” he asked, hesitatingly. “Sophie’s apartment, I mean. You saw her?”

Franck nodded, waiting to see what Morin would ask. Morbid curiosity was not a characteristic he appreciated.

“It must be hard. Even when it’s your job. I don’t think I’d have the strength, captain.”

He laid a hand on Franck’s shoulder, commiserating with him, and then sat back.

“Thanks for your concern,” said Franck, hesitatingly. “But, like you say, it’s my job.” He was about to say that he had seen worse – because he had seen worse, much worse – but he restrained himself. Strangling might be a relatively clean way to kill, but it could not be said to provide a pretty death. Indeed, there was probably no such thing as a pretty death, with the possible exception of old age’s exhausted surrender to slumber.

“Anne-Laure Favennec implied that you knew Sophie Duval well,” Franck prompted, changing the subject.

“How could I not? I’ve been here longer than anyone, at least as far as the performing half of the company is concerned. I was already an étoile when Sophie joined the corps de ballet. As she came up through the ranks, we began to dance together. We did a pas de deux in *La Bayadère* the evening she was named an étoile. We were supposed to take to the stage together tonight.”

“So you saw her frequently?”

“Sure. Particularly over the past months, because of van Roon’s new piece.”

“That’s the ballet she was rehearsing yesterday?”

“I wouldn’t call it a ballet – not quite yet. It’s a new piece we’ve commissioned – or, more accurately, a private sponsor has helped us to commission, since van Roon doesn’t come cheap. Let’s say it’s a work in progress – most of it is there, but we’re still working out the details and some crucial passages are still missing.”

“You’re directly involved?”

Serge inclined his upper body forward, bowing slightly even though he was sitting down. “I don’t have my bow and I left my dogs at home, but I am nonetheless Acteon. Sophie is – was – Diana. Van Roon never works out his choreography on his own. He does it directly with his performers. He has a reputation as a slave-driver. It’s wholly merited, believe me.”

“In which case, you may be one of the last ones to have seen her alive,” stated Franck. “Can you run me through the time you spent together yesterday?”

“We started at three, finished at half five or thereabouts. We had all drifted away by six. She was supposed to come back that evening. There was a reception for ...”

“Yes,” Franck cut in. “I know about that. Did you see Sophie leave? Was she alone?”

“I walked with her to the rear entrance, had a chat, then she went off on her own.”

“On foot?”

“Yes. She doesn’t live far.”

“Rue Notre-Dame de Lorette.”

“That’s right. She was going to clean up, rest a little, and then come back to the Opera.”

“Had anything particular happened during the rehearsal? How was her mood? Did she seem worried? Was she in any way apprehensive about going home?”

“If anything,” said Serge, “she was probably looking forward to a bath and some time on her own. Van Roon had been treating us like shit – which is what he usually does. Demanding the impossible and screaming at us for not being able to supply it. She was certainly tired, probably a bit dispirited, but that’s how we’ve all felt since we started on Diana.”

“It’s not going well?” demanded Franck.

“Oh, it’s going well. It’ll be an astonishing piece when it’s finished. It’s a van Roon, after all. But it’s a punishing process – although we knew from the outset that’s how it was going to be.”

“But the pair of you volunteered anyway.”

Serge shook his head, momentarily drumming his fingers on the tabletop.

“This is the Opera Ballet, captain. We have hundreds of years of discipline and rigour behind us. We don’t volunteer – we do what we’re told.”

“By whom?”

“By Anne-Laure. The Dance Director does just that – she directs the dancers. In every way. This is an autocratic institution.”

“Napoleon III would have been pleased,” commented Franck. “So Sophie was tired, maybe stressed, but nothing out of the ordinary?”

“That’s right.”

“And over the past days and weeks – nothing strange, nothing new, nothing that now seems significant?”

Serge thought for a moment and then shook his head. “The season’s in full swing. It’s been full steam ahead, as ever. Sophie was dancing as well as she always does. Did.”

“Can you tell me anything about her personal life?”

“I’m not a gossip, captain.”

“And I’m not a columnist. I’m a captain with the Brigade Criminelle and I have a murder victim on my hands.”

Serge held up a hand, conceding the point.

“OK. Sorry. But there’s not much to say about Sophie. She had her friends, she had her relationships, but what she had most of all was this place.”

“Was she in a relationship at the moment?”

“Not that I’m aware of.”

“Would you have known?”

“Not necessarily. Sophie was pretty discreet.”

“Who would know?”

“Her best friend, I imagine.”

“You know who that was? How I can get in touch with her?”

“I’ll take you to her, if you like.”

He was lucky to have a guide, as he would never have found her on his own.

Franck followed Serge Morin back along the corridor, past the Director’s office, up a narrow circular stairwell, down another corridor, along a passage which overlooked a complex network of steel ropes and suspended walkways in the vast, cavernous space high above the Opera stage, along yet another corridor which offered occasional glimpses out over the city, and finally up a short flight of stairs.

“Where are we?” asked Franck, who was under the impression that they must have traversed the entire Opera building.

He was not far wrong.

“This is the entrance to the Chauviré studio,” explained Serge. “It’s the uppermost level of the Subscribers’ Rotunda, right inside the dome.”

The Opera House originally boasted three separate entrances. The one currently in use – the imposing pillared entrance that rose above avenue de l’Opéra – was originally the least prestigious as it was the only one destined for those who arrived on foot. About a third of the way down each side of the building stood rotundas accessible by horse-drawn carriage. The one on the eastern side was reserved for those holding subscriptions, who could descend from their vehicles directly underneath it, safe from the wind and rain, and enter the Opera through a sculpted grotto overseen by a huge

bronze representing a priestess of Apollo. The one on the western side was intended for the Emperor and his court, complete with a horseshoe ramp which allowed them to be deposited directly at the level of the salons reserved for them – thereby putting the subscribers in their place, as reaching the auditorium from their special entrance meant climbing more, rather than less, stairs than the general public.

Franck and Serge were on the third level of the Subscribers' Rotunda, which had been converted into a rehearsal studio.

“This is where I leave you.”

Serge opened the door before them and ushered Franck through. He did not follow him.

The studio turned out to be anything but ornate. The walls were white, as were the curving iron beams which supported them, leaning inwards to meet under the now-invisible dome, which was hidden by a false ceiling with polystyrene tiles and strip-lighting reminiscent of the vast workspaces of modern office buildings. The floor, covered in a form of black vinyl marked with countless scuff marks, albeit not a single tear, cut across the bottom of the cupola's eight oval windows. It was a far cry from the rich splendour of the building's public rooms.

A solitary figure stood in the centre of the room, side-on, her arms raised and twisted so that her palms faced behind her. She wore a leotard over which a short diaphanous skirt had been slipped. Her knees were slightly bent, alerting Franck to the fact that she was not frozen in place but was evolving at a glacial pace through a series of movements. She descended slowly towards the floor, one leg tucking itself behind the other as they folded beneath her. Her arms descended at the same time, her palms turning. They then rose in front of her until each hand clutched its opposite shoulder. She now had one knee on the floor while her other leg formed a sharp angle before her, towards which she bowed her head, trusting her brow to its unwavering support.

The movement stopped. She was still.

Franck waited for her to raise her head and acknowledge his presence. She must have glimpsed him as he entered. Unless her eyes were closed. Or elsewhere, contemplating an irretrievable absence.

He soon had his answer. She took a deep breath, released it slowly, and pulled her head up. Even from across the room, Franck could see that her eyes were red and swollen, her cheeks moist, and her face drained. Here at least Sophie Duval was being mourned as she no doubt deserved.

“Lisa Roux?” asked Franck. That was the name Serge Morin had uttered to him before ushering him, alone, into the rehearsal room.

For a while she looked at him blankly, as if unable to believe that anyone had dared to disturb her, to violate her sanctuary. She then rose in a single movement, simultaneously straightening the leg she had bent before her and unfolding the other. She pivoted on the ball of her left foot and fixed him with a stare.

“I’m captain Franck Guerin from the Brigade Criminelle. I’m sorry to have disturbed you. If you’d like me to come back when you’ve finished practising, I will.”

“I wasn’t practising, captain,” she said. Her voice was steady but hoarse, as if parched. “I was thinking about Sophie. You’re here for Sophie, correct?”

“Yes. I’m told you were close.”

Franck had not moved from the doorway, nor had Lisa relinquished the dead centre of the room.

She looked down at her hands, which she held in a heart shape at the level of her lower abdomen.

“My little sister,” she stated.

It was not hard to believe. They shared the same physical type – sparely built, strong and supple, elongated faces, modest breasts and thin waists. Lisa was probably a year or so older, her hair auburn rather than black, and a good deal longer. Her face bespoke more character, with a prominent nose and cheekbones and vivid brown eyes, although the latter were currently the worse for wear. Overall, Franck would have judged her the more striking of the two. But the comparison was unfair. He had never seen her little sister alive.

“Not genetically, of course,” she continued, “but here, inside the Ballet, we had grown together. Intertwined. I led the way and made sure it was safe for Sophie to follow.”

“Then you’re the person I need to talk to. Can I ask you some questions? Here? Now?”

Lisa took a deep breath.

“Of course,” she said, uprooting herself and coming over to him, extending a hand for him to shake. “It’s too late now, but I’ll still do what I can for her.”

A cotton jumper was draped over the wooden bar that ran all the way round the studio. She picked it up and slipped it over her head. She then retrieved a water bottle that had been sitting underneath it, took a long draught, and lowered herself to the floor with her back against the wall. She patted the floor alongside her, inviting Franck to do the same.

He did so, but with far less grace.

“The rumour is that she was strangled,” she said, looking straight ahead. “Is that true?”

“Yes.”

Lisa’s hand brushed against her throat, apparently of its own volition.

“Who could have done such a thing?” she asked, her voice quavering. “Sophie never harmed anyone in her life. All she lived for was to dance.”

“That’s what I’m trying to find out,” said Franck very quietly, deliberately not turning his face towards her. “Everything suggests Sophie died quickly and unexpectedly.”

Lisa swallowed, clutched her hands tightly together and pressed them against her mouth. Franck was close enough to have put his arm around her. He did not. It was not his place. It would have felt like an intrusion.

It took her a few minutes to speak again. When she did so it was to repeat something he had said.

“Unexpectedly.”

“Yes,” confirmed Franck. “She was taken by surprise. She was at home. She was getting ready to come to a reception here.”

Lisa nodded. “The American Friends. I know.”

“Were you there?”

“Yes, but only to keep Sophie company. She was the one who really had to be there, since she was working with van Roon – everyone wanted to hear about the new ballet.”

She stopped.

“Unexpectedly?” prompted Franck, fearing she was about to lapse back into silence. They were still not looking at each other. “You think it wasn’t?”

“Something was different about Sophie this past week,” she eventually said, albeit tentatively.

“How?”

“She seemed anxious. Or troubled.”

“Frightened?”

Lisa thought about it, then shook her head. She finally turned to face Franck.

“No, not frightened. More like she had something on her conscience. Something to confess.”

“Something she’d done? Something someone had done to her?”

“How can I say? She didn’t say anything specific to me. But from time to time I got the feeling she was on the verge of telling me something, only to pull back.”

“You said this past week. This was definitely a recent thing?”

“Yes. Normally we don’t hide things from each other.” Franck did not correct her tense. “Well, not for long, anyway.”

“How often did you see her over the past seven days?”

“Every day. It’s not as big as it seems, the Opera House. When both of us are here, we always run into each other.”

“And outside? Like over the weekend?”

Lisa allowed herself a brief smile. “Weekends don’t always exist for us, not during the performing season. And certainly not for Sophie, given she was working on Diana.”

“The new ballet?”

“Yes.”

“You’re sure that wasn’t what was making her anxious?” asked Franck.

“It made her other things, but not anxious. Sophie could do anything van Roon could come up with. And if she couldn’t, then nobody could.”

“What other things, then, if she wasn’t anxious?”

“Tired, of course. Unhappy, for sure. And a little self-pity, perhaps, since she found herself trapped in a situation she hadn’t expected.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Van Roon didn’t want Sophie, but Anne-Laure forced him to take her. He got everything else he wanted – the money, the time, the freedom to what he liked, the rehearsal space – but not even he could take a casting decision out of Anne-Laure’s hands. Famous as he is, in the end of the day he’s only a choreographer. Even he had to bow to the Opera Ballet’s traditions.”

“So Sophie dragged her feet to rehearsals?”

Lisa frowned at him. “Of course not. Van Roon didn’t want Sophie, but she wanted the role. She gave her all, as she always did. But van Roon gave her hell in return. He criticised her. He belittled her. He constantly reminded her she had been imposed upon him. But,” – she pointed a proud, triumphant finger in the air – “he couldn’t break her. Not Sophie. And she had Serge. He tried to protect her.”

“Serge Morin?”

“Yes. The last of the true gentlemen. Serge is dancing Acteon. Apparently he took van Roon to task several times. I doubt it did any good, but at least that way Sophie felt she wasn’t all alone.”

“I’ve talked with Serge Morin. He didn’t say they were close.”

Lisa nodded, unsurprised. “Who’s not close to Serge? You know how long he’s been an étoile? Twenty years. I said Sophie and I were like sisters. Well, Serge is everybody’s favourite uncle. The aging, unmarried uncle – the loveable rake with an unending series of girlfriends who never quite realise that he gave his heart away a long time ago.”

“To whom?”

Sophie swept her hand in the air – an effortless gesture for her, but a hypnotic one for Franck.

“To all this.”