

Wednesday, 23<sup>rd</sup> January

“Captain, there’s a stain on my dress.”

That’s what she said.

Not, hello.

Not, how are you?

Not, remember me?

It took Franck Guerin no more than a few seconds to place her voice, even though he had not heard it for about six months. He then quickly sifted his options. He could point out that the Brigade Criminelle did not run a dry-cleaning service out of the quai des Orfèvres. He could recommend dabbing – not rubbing – with vinegar or a solution of baking soda. Or he could tell her he had other things on his mind than the state of whatever she happened to be wearing.

But he did not.

In as calm and as pleasant a tone as he could muster on a morning when the coffee machine in the corridor was once more out of order he said, “Good morning, Sonia. That’s a terrible shame.”

“No it’s not,” she countered. “It’s not a terrible shame. It’s a crime.”

“I doubt that,” he objected, albeit diffidently, as she sounded perfectly serious. This was unusual for Sonia Delemazure, a young model – although she would instantly have corrected him with not-so-young, for she was all of twenty-eight – whom Franck had met while investigating the Du Bellay murders. And not heard from since, although it was now clear that she had hung onto his mobile number. “Still, I’m prepared to admit that crimes against fashion aren’t really my speciality,” he continued, wondering how expensive a dress she could be wearing at this time in the morning. Unless, of course, for her the previous night had not yet ended.

“I wouldn’t be so sure of that. I seem to remember you committing them on a regular basis.”

That was more like the Sonia he remembered.

“Point taken,” he conceded. “Tell me about the dress.”

“It’s an *Ephémère* evening dress. Dark-blue with a fantastic cut. Makes me look two metres tall. A real scene-stealer. That’s why I’m supposed to be last down the catwalk. A knockout blow right at the end. Fix their vision of the entire collection.”

“So you’re working?”

“*Ephémère*’s Spring/Summer *haute couture* show. You don’t get much more serious than that.”

“At eleven forty in the morning?” asked Franck, having checked his watch.

“It’s Fashion Week. Shows are on round the clock. Craveri’s got this notion that early is the new late, so she chose a morning slot. Seems to have worked. Everyone’s here, and most of them seem conscious.”

Fashion Week. Four days in the winter cold when the big names in high fashion dictated what would be next summer’s styles and colours for the ultra-rich and thereby, through osmosis, for everyone else. When every journalist and photographer in the world assigned to the fashion beat was to be found in Paris, or back home complaining about not having been allowed to go to Paris. When self-proclaimed fashion-loving celebrities took possession of every luxury suite in the capital and did their tricks for the paparazzi camped outside. When *défilés* were scheduled back-to-back from morning to night and designers measured their power by the minutes or hours they could run late. When improbably tall and impossibly thin young women were rushed from venue to venue to parade unbelievably expensive outfits on elevated platforms to the accompaniment of deafening music. When Paris took fleeting delight in feeling that it was once again the centre of the world.

“So what about this stain?”

“White blotches all over the back of the dress where it trails on the ground. I might get away with walking down the catwalk, but I couldn’t turn around.”

“Maybe they’re not that big. Maybe no one will see them,” he said, trying to sound encouraging.

“These people can see the thread count in a piece of fabric from across a room. They’ll see them.”

“Can’t you get it out?” Still trying to be helpful.

“I think it’s bleach, captain. Bleach doesn’t come out.”

“What makes you think it’s bleach?”

“From the smell.”

A thought struck Franck. Sonia was a tall girl, and surely very supple, but her dress would have to have a very long train indeed for her to be able to crouch down, pull it round and bring it to her nose.

“Does this dress look like something from the eighteenth century?”

“Of course not. This is the Ephémère show. Lacroix was yesterday.”

“You can smell this stuff from a few spots down around your feet?”

“No, I caught the scent from the murdered guy in the corner of the room who stinks of chlorine.”

Franck briefly nurtured the hope that this was just a sarcastic aside. Fifteen seconds of resolute silence from Sonia taught him otherwise.

“I’m on my way. Where are you?”

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She had said she was in the André Citroen park, tucked into the south-western corner of the fifteenth arrondissement where the Seine met the city’s ring road. It took Franck about twenty minutes to get there, siren wailing on the car he had snatched from the Brigade’s pool. He called the incident in as he went, asking for a forensic team and backup from the local uniforms.

One of Paris’ largest green spaces, the André Citroen park had colonised land that had once been home to Citroen’s design office and assembly line. It now boasted several

expanses of trees, flowers and grass, all regulated with geometric precision. Standing proudly at its head, much like the chateau looming over the gardens of Versailles, were two imposing glass structures. Easily fifteen metres tall and perched on sloping ground, they oversaw a vast lawn running down to the Seine. One was full – nobody was quite sure why – of Australian flora. The other was nominally home to a collection of fruit trees rooted in individual wooden caissons but had become such a popular venue for corporate events that they spent most of their time huddled together in a heated tent set up outside while lights were hung, hors d'oeuvres served, and speeches delivered in their place.

Today was no exception, although the transformation that had been effected upon the emptied glasshouse was particularly elaborate. All the exterior walls, with the exception of the one that held the entrance, were hung with what appeared to be massive transparent columns filled with water. An incessant stream of bubbles jostled inside the plastic cylinders, generated by small boxy pump units that sat beneath them. The resulting current gave life to the glittering light-blue star shapes and fantastically coloured plastic fish that had been placed inside them. The aquarium theme was echoed by a wide border of blond sand which encircled the glasshouse. It had been sculpted into tiny dunes, except at the entrance, where it respectfully drew itself back from a long ribbon of blue carpet leading up to the main door.

The only people visible outside were two young black men with shaven heads and tight dark suits which clung to their muscles. Everyone else seemed to be inside, behind the glass walls and the colourful tubes of turbulent liquid. Flashing lights bounced off the interior of the glasshouse and a rapidly pounding beat seeped from it. It did not look like a crime scene.

Franck walked swiftly towards the entrance, his parka open and a leather briefcase which had been restitched more than once in its life clutched in one hand. As he neared the

glasshouse the music and lights inside reached a climax, after which silence momentarily intervened, only to be broken by a muffled wave of applause and cheers.

One of the black men extended an arm, palm out, as Franck drew closer.

“Show’s nearly over, sir,” he said, without budging from where he stood. “I’d stand well clear of the door.”

It proved good advice. The door to the glasshouse pushed open and a stream of people shot out, most of them stylishly dressed women clutching hastily snatched coats, bags jammed under one arm and mobiles pressed against their ears. Dowdily dressed photographers sprinted after them like faithful dogs running to heel. There was less than an hour to go before the next *défilé* and the race was on for the best seats. Since the local uniforms had yet to turn up, Franck had no means to hold them at the scene – if that indeed was what it was. Even assuming that fashion reporters were no less blasé than journalists in general, there would surely have been some sign of agitation or trouble had they been privy to a murder.

Franck stepped backwards off the blue carpet, his shoes sinking into the light-coloured sand, and let them pass. He listened as best he could, but caught only snatches of conversation concerning colours, fabric layering, stylistic audacity and something about a deconstructive assault on marine stereotypes that nonetheless respected their mythic foundations.

When the flood had spent itself he moved back towards the entrance.

“I assume you do have an invitation?” asked one of the black guys, managing to be both polite and menacing at the same time.

“Perfect timing, captain!” cried Sonia Delemazure, who had just appeared behind the two security men. Although they had probably received strict instructions to keep their eyes front, both turned to look at her.

She had not been joking. She was a show-stopper.

From her eyelids to her toes, she was a portrait in shades of blue. Her dress clung precariously to the edge of her right shoulder before evolving in a series of folds to a tightly clenched waist. From there the pleats billowed out once more, having changed direction, and descended in a series of overhanging waves before expiring around her left foot. The fabric was a dark, almost bruised, blue, reminiscent of the sea at night, a notion reinforced by a mottled pattern of white and off-white that spread across it as if sprinkled from above, like reflected starlight. The effect was enhanced by a second layer that hovered above the dress itself. A thin screen of muslin, teased to such near-transparency that it seemed on the verge of disintegration, had settled on her otherwise naked left shoulder, veiling a colourful tattoo that stood guard over Sonia's famously sculpted collarbone. The layer of gauze mirrored the diagonal cut of her dress, only in reverse, terminating by her right ankle. When Sonia moved – her feet were perched on tapering stilettos, her toes and heels held in a lattice of delicate light-blue leather straps, ensuring that she was in constant, albeit almost imperceptible, motion in order to maintain her equilibrium – it shifted, as if borne by a night-time breeze, giving the impression that the white speckles beneath were winking in a distant sky.

As Franck observed her, Sonia turned complacently from side to side, beaming at him.

"If I don't make the cover of *Vogue* in this there's no justice in the world," she pronounced. "And since justice is your department, you're the one I'll call to complain to."

"How about we start with this morning's call," suggested Franck. "Where's the corpse?"

The two security men snapped their eyes back to him, perplexed frowns gathering on their foreheads. Apparently it was the first they had heard about a dead body.

"All work and no play," complained Sonia. "First of all, tell me how good I look."

"You look good," he stated. "Now can we get on with it?"

“Good?” came a new voice. “I’m sure your vocabulary runs to a little more than that, captain. I take it this is the captain you told me about?”

Sonia stepped hurriedly aside, clearing the entrance and turning to answer the question. Although he had to be mistaken, Franck had the fleeting impression that she had curtsied.

“This is captain Franck Guerin of the Brigade Criminelle, madame Craveri,” said Sonia.

“Francesca,” corrected the woman who was now the centre of everyone’s attention, the slight Italian accent that been hiding behind her French bursting to the fore as she said her own name. She stepped out of the glasshouse. “Indulge me with Francesca. Madame Craveri just reminds me of how many years separate me from your youth and beauty. You wore the dress magnificently, Sonia. Marco is greatly indebted to you, as am I.”

“It was a privilege to wear it,” insisted Sonia. This time she definitely did curtsy.

Franck had encountered enough top executives in his time to recognise the air of command that Francesca Craveri projected. Probably in her late fifties, she was dressed with restraint in a knee-length skirt, a starched white blouse, and a jacket cut expertly to her size. Her shoulder-length hair was tucked neatly behind her ears, her jewellery was discreet – two rings bearing single gems, a pearl necklace, and tiny gold hoops in her ears – and her heels modest. She showed none of the studied, or slightly desperate, desire to make a sartorial statement that had characterised those who had poured out at the end of the show. Nor of the expensive extravagance embodied by Sonia and some of the other figures Franck could now glimpse moving about behind her in the glasshouse.

“Captain Guerin,” she said, stepping towards him, her right hand held out, palm upwards, at shoulder height. For a brief moment – he could not have said why – Franck momentarily wondered whether he was expected to respectfully capture and

kiss it. However, as he lifted his own hand hers gracefully arced down to shake it.

“I am Francesca Craveri,” she said in a low voice, as if he alone was to be privilege to this information. “I have the good fortune to sit at the head of Ephémère.”

No connoisseur, Franck nonetheless was well aware of Ephémère’s status and activities. Whenever Chanel was mentioned, Ephémère would be named in the same breath. Both laid claim to the title of the country’s, if not the world’s, most emblematic fashion house. Like haughty and envious Arab princes, they jealously groomed and indulged *couture* designers in order to send their collections forth to battle for critical applause. A second front was provided by their relentlessly promoted rival perfumes, Eternal and Numéro Cinq having tussled for the laurels of the world’s top upmarket scent for over eighty years.

“I, of course, know who you are,” continued Craveri. “You sought justice for Laure Sarraute.”

Laure, a young model who had unwittingly precipitated her own death by signing a contract with Ephémère, had been Franck’s first criminal case. Seven months ago, though it seemed a lot longer.

She released his hand, saying, “It is a pity we could not meet in more auspicious circumstances. Today we revealed the result of four months’ ceaseless work by our *haute couture* team. Right now we should be caught up in relief and celebration. But something dark and terrible happened here today and, though we had nothing to do with it, its shadow falls upon us. In any case, I’m indebted to you for not having interfered with the end of the *défilé*.”

“Thank the traffic,” he said, although not ungraciously. “I can’t say I’m entirely happy at having let several hundred potential witnesses rush past me.”

“They saw nothing,” she assured him. “Or, at least, it is most unlikely that they could have seen anything. In any case, we will supply you with all their details. No one gets into a

*défilé* without an invitation. We know who they are and how to reach them.”

“I’ll happily take all you’ve got,” said Franck. “Maybe you can show me whatever it is they could not see?”

“Of course,” said Craveri. “Perhaps we should wait for your colleagues?”

Her eyes switched to a point in the distance behind him.

Franck turned to see two technicians from the forensic squad coming towards them, each carrying two large black holdalls. He recognised one as Georges Sternberg, with whom he’d worked before. The other was so young he assumed she was a trainee.

Franck raised a hand and motioned them on.

“Let’s go. They’ll catch up.”

“Perhaps you gentlemen could help them with their bags,” suggested Craveri, addressing the two doorkeepers before she extended a hand to Franck, inviting him to cross the entrance.

“After you, madame,” he insisted.

She smiled at him.

“In a public space you would be quite right, but not here. This is my domain. I am the one who should stand aside and invite you in. Please, proceed.”

He bowed to her superior knowledge of the rules of courtesy and stepped into the glasshouse. Sonia was ushered in after him, and Craveri brought up the rear. Outside the security men sprinted towards the technicians, who ignored their offer of help and hung stubbornly onto the bags containing their equipment.

“This way,” said Craveri, guiding Franck through the debris of the *défilé*.

There were several hundred seats that, although displaced in the recent rush for the exit, had clearly once been arranged in neat rows on either side of a catwalk which ran from a distant stage down most of the length of the building. Spotlights hung heavily from steel rods suspended on chains from the ceiling. Banks of speakers that could have handled a small rock concert

were piled on either side of the stage. Figures milled about. Young men dressed in black t-shirts and canvas trousers were hauling cables, clutching clipboards or beginning to pile up the seats. Long-legged models in flimsy dresses which probably cost more than their weight in gold were lounging around or talking excitedly to their agents and minders. A man in his late thirties, barefoot in worn jeans and an open-necked shirt, sat on the catwalk with his knees drawn up to his chin, his hair tousled and his eyes bloodshot.

“That’s Marco Chiriotti, the designer,” whispered Sonia. “Hasn’t slept for three days.”

He raised a weary hand as they swept past, everyone stepping smartly out of Francesca Craveri’s way.

Craveri broke her pace momentarily to call out to the designer, “It was a triumph Marco. They loved everything. Time to stop worrying and celebrate. You can rest afterwards.”

He mouthed a silent *grazia* and blew her a kiss.

They continued round the edge of the stage and through a door behind it set into one of the lateral glass walls. This led into a temporary structure which had been erected outside the glasshouse for the *défilé*. A corridor ran ahead of them. To the left were three sets of double doors, all of which opened onto the same space – a vast room packed with dressing tables, full-sized mirrors and clothes rails under oppressively bright industrial lighting. To the right were three evenly spaced doors, all shut. One was marked ‘Toilets’, one ‘Technical’, and the furthest away ‘Catering’. At the end was a fire escape which, despite the outside temperature, was propped open.

A young man who appeared to have been cloned from the two sentinels at the main entrance stood in front of the door marked ‘Catering’. He moved aside as Craveri advanced towards him, opening the door inwards but staying in the corridor.

“It’s all yours, captain,” said Craveri. “You’ll be the first person in since Sonia here came rushing out.”

“Screaming?” asked Franck.

“Quiet and determined would be a better description. Would that be fair, Sonia?”

Sonia blushed slightly, delighting in the compliment.

A hand tapped on Franck’s shoulder. It was Georges Sternberg, who handed him a pair of elasticated plastic bags to go over his shoes. As Franck slipped them on Sternberg did the same. He then handed over a pair of disposable gloves.

“Got my own,” said Franck, tapping his briefcase.

“Mine are better,” declared Sternberg. “They’ve come straight from the box, rather than lying about in your grubby briefcase for weeks.”

Franck pulled on Sternberg’s gloves.

“Me first?”

“You’re the one with the gun.”

“Ever known a corpse to start shooting?”

“We’ll know it’s a corpse when I say it is.”

Franck went through the entrance and stepped to one side of the door. The room was surprisingly large, some fifteen metres long. Overall, the temporary structure erected for the *défilé* probably had as large a footprint as the glasshouse itself. Long tables piled with glasses, bottles of water and juice, platters of fruit, and largely untouched baskets of *viennoiseries* lined the walls on both sides. At the midpoint of each series of tables were three coffee machines surrounded by hundreds of empty capsules and countless abandoned espresso cups. The centre of the floor was occupied by high-perched round tables and accompanying bar stools. A few metres short of the end wall a screen with a single opening had been drawn across the room.

Sternberg followed Franck’s example, taking up position on the opposite side of the door.

“Sonia,” said Franck. “Talk me through what happened.”

“I’d been made up and dressed for ages. Unlike everyone else, I was only to go on once. A new face for the last dress in the show, just to heighten the effect. Problem was, I was starving. I arrived a little late this morning, and didn’t get a chance to grab anything before they started on my hair. Then

straight on with the make-up. Then the dress. I was done long before the *défilé* even started, because Marco wanted to make sure I was perfect. But once you're dressed, you're not allowed to eat or drink anything. House rules, in case something gets spilled. And once the *défilé* starts, absolutely nobody's allowed into Catering – not the make-up girls, not the hairdressers, not the seamstresses, not the technical crew. There's too much chaos backstage, something's bound to get knocked over."

"But you were starving," prompted Franck.

"So I slipped off my shoes – to move quicker – and snuck in here to get a banana. Then I figured I might as well have a coffee, so I made an espresso and took it over to one of the tables to drink it. I was just standing there dreamily when I looked down and noticed a white patch on the bottom of my dress near my right foot. I checked more closely and found there were several of them. You don't want to know what I said then, but I was not happy. I'd been so careful! I'd avoided everything that was flaky or could have left the odd crumb. I'd treated the coffee machine like it was an explosive device. It was so unfair! So I looked at the floor and noticed a trail of clear drops that ran from the bin underneath the three coffee machines over there to the screen back there." Her arm extended over Franck's shoulder to point to the right-hand side and the far end of the room. "So I hitched up my dress and followed it. Do the same and look to your left."

Franck motioned to Sternberg, who slipped a digital SLR from his shoulder and moved over to the coffee machines, crouching down to photograph the bin beneath them and the surrounding floor area.

Franck gave him a wide berth and walked through the clumps of tables and stools towards the far end of the room.

"Definite bleach smell from here," he observed, even before reaching the opening in the screen.

He stepped delicately through it, keeping his feet off any trace of liquid on the floor. To his right shrink-wrapped packs of bottled water were stacked up, alongside large boxes marked

‘Nespresso’ and others containing glassware. To his left two cleaner’s trolleys were parked against the wall, each with brushes, mops, a frame to hold a large bin bag and a deep tray containing all sorts of cleaning products.

Beyond them a man lay on his back, his legs extended towards Franck, both slightly bent at the knee. He wore what had once been a midnight-blue wool suit with a thin pinstripe, black shoes, a navy-blue tie, and a white shirt with folded-back cuffs. Understated elegance and impeccable tailoring, although the effect was somewhat spoiled by the large and irregular red patch that discoloured his shirt just above his trouser belt. The bullet hole in his forehead did not help either. Nor the fact that his suit exhibited slowly spreading patches of colour loss. The final indignity was provided by the fact that he lay, his hair soaking, in a clear puddle that stank of chlorine.

Franck stood stock-still, taking in every detail.

Sternberg came round the screen behind him, looked over his shoulder, and made his pronouncement. “OK. It’s a corpse.”

“I’m glad you cleared that up,” said Franck. “It’s all yours.”

He stepped back outside the screen while Sternberg took a series of photos before summoning his assistant over and delving into one of their bags of tricks.

“Did you recognise him?” Franck’s question was for Sonia, who remained outside the door.

“No,” she replied. “Nicely cut suit. Not so keen on the new colour scheme, though. Didn’t work as well as on my dress. Too heavy-handed with the bleach, I suspect.”

“Can I borrow that?” Franck asked Sternberg’s assistant, who had been handed the SLR camera.

She nodded and passed it over. Franck walked back to the corridor. He held the camera up so that the screen on the back was at eye level for Francesca Craveri. Sonia hung back, looking chastised. Franck felt sure he had missed some observation by Craveri about Sonia’s flippant remarks.

“Can you identify him?”

Craveri took the camera from him without hesitation and flicked back through several images.

“Alain Perrin,” she said.

“As in Perrin Industries?” asked Franck.

“The very same.”

An arms manufacturer shot in the forehead. All the bleach in the world could not stop this from getting messy.