

Thursday, 7<sup>th</sup> June

It made the cover of *Exposé*. Newsstands the city over were plastered with a poster-sized version of it. Sales were high.

Normally *Exposé* – which, depending on whom you asked, was either a scandal sheet or a former pillar of photojournalism fallen with the times – dealt only in colour. This image, though, was in black and white. Somehow it made the photo all the more appealing, hearkening back to a mythical, more glamorous age when goddesses were captured in faultless white, shades of grey, and unfathomable black. An age when stockings and suspenders held an unassailable place in the canon of beauty and seduction. When white lace provided a virginal facade to slumbering sensuality. When generous breasts cradled in a scooped bra could hold a gaze hypnotised for hours. When a body curved on yielding sheets, its profile framed by a languorous arm, was an invitation that could stop the heart.

The other photos aligned on Franck Guerin's desk were in colour. Same pose, different angles – many different angles, as forensic photographers were trained to do. A few could even be said to be flattering, albeit colour was less forgiving with the subject's skin than black and white. Death's discoloration could be seen to be seeping in.

They were hastier too, shot in quick succession under overpowering light which banished shadow and flattened the corpse. Her curves were less in evidence, but the lingerie in which she had been left was caught in all its detail: an intricate pattern of lace surrounding an infinite number of tiny holes, each a window on the flesh beneath. Her nipples played hide-and-seek with the lens. Her pubic hair swelled slightly against the fabric stretched taught across her pelvis. Stockings, white as a bride's, hugged tight thighs that tapered down to form impressively long legs.

The wound, such as it was, figured on none of the photos. A pin-prick on the inside of the right forearm near the elbow, the flesh ever so slightly bruised, as if whoever had held the syringe

had hesitated at the last moment. All this was detailed in the coroner's report, placed squarely on the top-right corner of his desk.

Franck looked back at the magazine's cover. 'Laure Sarraute: a murderer's homage to a flawless beauty'. No one would contest the latter. She had earned her living from her anatomy. Its capacity to show clothes to their best, particularly those designed specifically to frame or slightly veil her considerable charms, had kept her on the right catwalks and in the right magazines for the past three years.

That said, she had never made *Exposé* before, which said something for her discernment and much for the discretion of her private life. In death, she could count on neither. The question of how, why and by whom a young model's life had been cut off at twenty-six would now be the object of frenzied and prurient media interest.

Not to mention a question of professional interest to Franck.

Had the circumstances been different, he might have smiled ruefully. So this was to be his new beat: celebrity crime. After thirteen promising years in national security, it seemed that he too had fallen with the times.

But he wasn't smiling. He was gazing at the black and white image of Laure Sarraute trying to understand what it exacted from him. Not desire – a half-naked young woman lying enticingly on a bed – nor outrage – a murder victim – but something else. Something akin to admiration, or reverence. As if he was looking at a canvas, a timeless masterpiece hung in majesty in the Louvre.

His profession had habituated him to a pretty ugly world: one of shadows and deception, of hatred and cupidity, of plots and traps, of violence and terror. When beauty turned up it often proved venomous and always came with strings attached. Strings tugged upon by unsightly hands. Mistrust had become second nature, an instinct he had been taught to cherish for its power to clear the mind. Whether it hollowed the soul too remained an open question.

This time, though, things ought to be different. For once, he would be on beauty's side. A knight errant, albeit one who had arrived too late. That small detail aside, it was an attractive prospect – providing he was up to the job.

He pushed back from the desk – his desk, at least for the foreseeable future. The chair scraped across the parquet floor, whose once-varnished surface had endured such indignities from generations of uncaring *flics* cooped up in the maze of police buildings in the Ile de la Cité.

Unwittingly, Franck found himself in possession of what many pursued as the Holy Grail: an office within the quai des Orfèvres, the sombre heart of the capital's police force. A dingy cupboard with a single window looking out onto an inner courtyard, lost inside a warren of neglected corridors and noisy stairwells inhabited by fellow officers who – understandably, given the circumstances of his arrival – had not rushed forward to make his acquaintance. It was a far cry from the open-plan workspaces and constant team meetings of the Direction de la Surveillance du Territoire.

But it was better than nothing. Better than being consigned to his apartment, as he had been for the eight weeks following his release from hospital, swallowing pills and taming the pain, taking increasingly long walks through Paris as he felt less fragile.

Franck retrieved a crumpled jacket from a coat stand jammed in a corner behind his chair, slid his arms in and tugged it down at the back to cover the holster carrying his service revolver. He reached out for the large manila envelope he had found in his mail slot two hours before and refilled it with the documents spread out across his desk. A neat inscription on the envelope identified who had sent it: Yves de Chaumont, *juge d'instruction*, office 513.

The copy of *Exposé* was the last item to go in. He slipped it in with care, so as not to wrinkle the cover. Laure Sarraute deserved at least that.