

*'TIS THE DOING,
NOT THE DEED*

SUSAN STEGGALL

E K

BY THE AUTHOR

Biography

Alpine Beach: A Family Adventure, 1999

Sydney-en-Chablais: Aventure d'une famille australienne, 2002

A Most Generous Scholar: Joan Kerr, Art & Architectural Historian, 2012

Fiction

Forget Ne Not, 2006

It Happened Tomorrow, 2013

The Heritage You Leave Behind, 2021

Family History Series

Moonlight and the Man, No.1, 2009

An Invitation, No.2, 2013

Goodnight Son, No.3, 2016

Memoir for My Parents. Phemie Faith Gilmour & Robert Rex Wallis, No.4, 2021

As Editor

ISAA Review, 2010-2015, Journal of the Independent Scholars Association of Australia Inc:

Society of Women Writers NSW Inc:

- *Sharing a Landscape*, 2004

- *A Way with Words*, 2006

- *INK 3. 90th ANNIVERSARY EDITION*, 2016

TIS THE DOING NOT THE DEED

© Susan Steggall 2022

2nd Edition, Éditions Kusatsu (1st edition, Shooting Star Press, 2019)

10/14 Eustace Street

MANLY NSW 2095

Tel: 9977 7627

Mob: 0422 617 677

Email: swal1@bigpond.net.au

<http://steggalls.com>

<http://www.facebook.com/susan.steggall.1>

<https://www.linkedin.com/in/susan-steggall-5b497149/>

Twitter: [Susan Steggall@SSteggall](https://twitter.com/SSteggall)

Goodread.com: Susan Steggall

Instagram: Susan Steggall [@susansteggall](https://www.instagram.com/susansteggall)

The moral right of the author has been asserted.

All rights reserved. Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or scanning), without the prior written permission of both the copyright owner and the publisher of this book.

Edited by Kellie Nissen, Just Right Words

Layout: Susan Steggall

Cover design: BA Printing PL, Brookvale 2100 NSW

2nd Edition: ISBN: 978-0-9874944-3-6



A catalogue record for this work is available from the National Library of Australia

'Tis the motive exalts the action:
'tis the doing, not the deed.

Margaret Junkin Preston, *The Proclamation of Miles Standish* (c.1875), quoted in
The Oxford Dictionary of American Quotations ('Actions and Doings', p.2)
by Hugh Rawson and Margaret Miner

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to my writing colleagues in the Northern Beaches Writers Group who have given encouragement and wise words through various stages in the preparation of the manuscript for *'Tis the Doing Not the Deed*. I would also like to thank Kellie Nissen, whose professionalism made the editorial process such a pleasure.

If such a thing is possible, I would also like to 'thank' the Haute-Savoie region of France. The chance to experience the power and beauty of its alpine landscape, the charm of its old villages and the friendship of its inhabitants who welcomed us into their lives forty years ago, have been privileges I treasure.

PART I

CONSTANCE: 1955

The town was submerged in the most disastrous flood in written memory. Not only was there extensive damage to domestic properties and farms, and much loss of livestock, there were also human deaths. Water and power supplies were cut, as was the telephone. The water rose suddenly, trapping people on unstable roofs, inside stalled cars, even in the signals box at Maitland railway station.

Constance Crookstone refused to leave her cottage. The property had never been inundated before, not even in the big floods of 1893 or 1949, so why would 1955 be any different? Her brother Peter and his wife Muriel implored her to move to their big house on the hill; she refused.

The water rose higher and higher. At first it lapped the front steps, then snaked in mud-brown rivulets into the hallway. In a few minutes water had covered the floor and was filling the rooms. By the time Constance realised it was much worse than she had expected, the flood was claiming her house.

She quickly gathered together her paintings and sketchbooks, opened the trapdoor ladder in the living-room ceiling and began moving everything to safety in the attic. It took many trips but at last it was done. She was about to place a portfolio of sketches on a ledge when an envelope, postmarked London, slipped out of it onto the floor. As she picked it up a sharp pang of recognition swept over her, just as the river was overwhelming her cottage. She stuffed the envelope into her skirt pocket and climbed down the ladder. A log swept into the house by the rushing water, knocked her into the maelstrom. She reached out to cling to the heavy sideboard, but the force of the water wrenched her hand away. The air above her filled with a dark foreboding; for an instant, the noise of the flood receded. Something more powerful than the rushing water enveloped her – not from the living world but from another, absolving her, releasing her. In that moment when time stood still, when Constance could have saved herself, she chose otherwise.

Unresisting she allowed the strong current to carry her out through the open door. A brown wave, higher than the rest, engulfed her. 'Pierre...' she called. 'Pierre...'

Then the cold muddy water closed in.



CHAPTER 1

Footsteps pounded the tiled floor in the corridor outside Apolline's office. She looked up as a tall man with the florid face of a *bon vivant* barged in, followed by the law firm's receptionist. Apoplectic with rage, the man banged on Apolline's desk with one fist and waved the other in her face.

'Monsieur Styming, what can I do for you so late in the afternoon?' she asked politely, although her hazel eyes flashed a steely resolve.

'Act! That's what you can do. Release the paintings from my father's estate immediately so they can go to auction.' He paused to draw breath, allowing the receptionist Monique to throw a worried glance towards Apolline.

'Is everything all right Madame Smith? Should I...?' Behind the man's back she mouthed the words 'Get help?'

'It's fine Monique. Monsieur Styming will be leaving shortly.'

This enraged the man further. 'And another thing,' he bellowed. 'You are to give my foolish sister Marie-Jeanne as little as possible from the estate. Those half siblings in England are details that don't matter either.'

'On the contrary Monsieur Styming,' Apolline said firmly. 'They matter very much. French law recognises them as having the same legal rights as you do. As for the paintings, their provenance must be properly verified and that takes time. As far as we are concerned there is no reason for undue haste unless,' she gave him an enquiring stare, 'you know something we don't. Please leave. If you wish to discuss matters further, make an appointment through proper channels.'

Swearing loudly, Philippe Styming wheeled around, knocked the receptionist against the wall and stormed out of the office. Apolline moved around her desk and put a hand on Monique's shoulder. 'Are you all right?'

Monique nodded. 'Yes, I'm fine.' There was the glimmer of a smile on her face. 'Madame Smith, you were terrific. You stood right up to him.'

Apolline donned her reading glasses. 'I don't like bullies and it would take much worse than Philippe Styming to intimidate me. Let's get back to work.'

Yet her hands were shaking when she turned to shut down the computer. He really is a nasty type. Why is this matter so complicated? She stuffed several files into her briefcase, applied a quick dash of tawny pink lipstick, ran a comb through her thick dark-gold hair and set out for home.



Half an hour later Apolline walked into a warm house smelling of *lapin au moutarde* simmering on the stove and the buttery aroma of caramelised apples in the *tarte au tatin* cooling on the kitchen bench. 'Ah,' she said as she hugged her twin sons Gregory and Pascal and embraced her husband Parry. 'I do appreciate the effort you put into our home life, *tu sais*.'

'Thank you,' he said with a mock bow before beginning to massage his wife's shoulders. She was several years older than Parry and had the small-boned, timeless elegance typical of many French women. The pressure of his fingers became more insistent. He bent to kiss the nape of her neck, his hands straying to the front of her shirt.

‘Later’, she laughed. ‘Not in front of the boys.’



Dinner over and the twins in bed, Apolline and Parry settled in the living room to watch the eight o'clock news.

‘I had a visit from my client, Philippe Styming, today,’ Apolline said, sipping a glass of *côte de Rhône*. ‘He was demanding I release the paintings in his father’s estate for immediate auction.’

‘Auction? That’s a coincidence. I’ve a new assignment from the boss. I’m to verify the provenance of some artworks in the estate of a wealthy businessman before *they* go to auction. Bronsard sent images of the paintings. They are by ... their names are...’ he scratched his head, sending a plume of fine fair hair into the air.

Impatient at his vagueness, Apolline interrupted. ‘I’ve an inventory of the paintings in Louis Styming’s estate. Check if any match what you have.’ She headed for her study, returning with a list, which she plonked on the coffee table in front of Parry.

‘That’s one of them,’ he said, pointing to a painting dated 1921, entitled *After the Storm*. ‘It’s a landscape of dark hills behind paddocks of cereal crops flattened by a downpour. It reminds me of the countryside where I grew up.’

Apolline tapped her fingers on the table. ‘And?’ Parry hurried to get his printouts.

‘It’s thought to be by an artist named Richard Crooks. The painting bears the initials “R C” instead of the full signature that was on his earlier canvasses. My brief is to check that *After the Storm*, was painted by Crooks.’

‘Is that so difficult?’

‘No... but then the boss sent me images of two works by an Australian artist to check before negotiations can begin about reserve pricing, commissions and the like because they are going to the same auction.’

Parry looked at Apolline’s list again. ‘Those ones,’ he said pointing to titles further down Apolline’s list. *Mon jardin extraordinaire* and *Le chemin: paysage alpin*, by Constance Crookstone. Is it the same estate?’

‘Crooks... Crookstone...’ Apolline frowned. ‘Similar names too.’ She leant back in her chair. ‘Do you ever miss Australia?’

‘No Lina, not at all,’ Parry replied. ‘Why do you ask? I’m completely happy here with you, our twins and your teenage daughters and all this.’ He waved his arms around the room as if to embrace it. ‘I love our house here in the old village by the lake with the mountains all around us. It’s close to your office in Annecy and it doesn’t take long to drive to Thomas Bronsard’s office in Geneva.’

Apolline nodded at his sudden burst of enthusiasm. Her expression then became troubled. ‘Oh... *je n’sais pas*... I don’t know. Work... Life... Everything is so predictable. That was why I moved here in the first place. Now I’m as fixed as ever. Sometimes I think I’d like to swap it all for travel and adventure.’

‘I’m sorry you feel that way,’ Parry said shortly, picking up a magazine.

The rest of the evening passed in an uneasy silence.



Sounds of breakfast were rising from the kitchen. Apolline buried her head under the pillow, regretting her thoughtless words of the night before. She’d married Parry because he *was* so predictable; and he’d shouldered the bulk of the household chores to allow her to concentrate on her career. ‘Must do better,’ she muttered as she hurried through her morning routine to join the family downstairs.

Parry looked up as she entered, a quizzical smile on his face. ‘*Bonjour*,’ he said, moving to plant kisses

on either side of her face. *‘Ça va chérie?’*

‘Sorry about last night. Work gets me down sometimes and this Styling matter is one of the most complicated I’ve ever had.’

‘Can you hand it over to someone else?’

‘No, once I’ve started something, I see it through to the end.’

‘I know you do. Don’t get yourself into a tricky situation.’

Apolline reached up to kiss him. ‘You’re right. I won’t.’

Parry looked anything but reassured, as he prepared to take the boys to school.



Apolline was waiting at the school gate.

‘To what do we owe this pleasure?’ Parry asked.

‘Not so busy today and I thought I’d...’ She avoided looking him in the eye, ‘I’d...’ she repeated not sure of her words.

He finished her sentence. ‘You thought it a good idea to spend more time with the boys, eh?’

She was saved from answering by the arrival of their sons.

‘Maman! Papa!’

The twins tugged at their arms in delight. ‘Can we go to the park?’

Parry nodded. Hitching their schoolbags high on his shoulders, he took each boy by the hand and set out, Apolline following close behind. At the park gate, Parry bought roasted chestnuts from a woman sitting behind a smoking brazier. He peeled the hot brown balls and popped chunks of nut-sweet floury flesh into the boys’ mouths. Satisfied, the children headed for the swings, giving their parents time to talk, Parry first.

‘I found a report of an interview given by Richard Crooks. After a disagreement with his father he changed his name from Crookstone to Crooks.’

‘So, there is a possibility they were related. What do you know about the other artist?’

‘I’ll get to her. Crooks mostly painted landscapes of the countryside in eastern Australia and the places in Europe where he’d lived – vast skies, clouds, mountains, that sort of thing. His war record’s interesting. During World War I Crooks enlisted in the 5th Division, Australian Imperial Force. He was wounded at Fromelles in July 1916, repatriated to England and sent to a convalescent hospital. There are no details about the extent of his injuries, nor his degree of recovery. However, as the work executed in 1921 indicates, he must have been able to take up painting again although he disappeared from public life. There’s no record of where or when he died.’

The sun began casting long shadows over the park. Parry called out ‘Time to go’. The children skipped ahead of their parents giving Apolline a chance to ask about the woman artist.

‘Found her too. Constance Crookstone’s work is very different to Crooks’ – more colourful, like the post-impressionists, and some almost cubist with angular figures and fragmented domestic objects.’

‘Richard Crooks – who was a Crookstone. Did you find out if they were related?’

‘Ah, yes I did. They were,’ Parry replied, a note of triumph in his voice. ‘A snippet from an Australian magazine of 1910 reported that with her determined personality, Constance was very different to her mercurial brother, Richard. I also found reports of her death in the 1955 Maitland flood.’

‘Near where your parents live?’

‘Yes, the village where the Crookstones used to live – perhaps still do – is quite close to our place.’



A white cat was waiting on the front steps and came forward to greet them, winding her feathery tail between Apolline's legs. 'Hello Pinky,' she said, bending down to pat the purring animal before opening the door.

Torn between needing to be at her desk and wanting to make amends to Parry for her outburst of the previous night, Apolline prowled restlessly about the house, finally giving up the struggle and announcing she had work to do. 'The Styning estate and that contested will.'

'Do you have to?' Parry asked. 'I thought we might watch a film together, for once.'

'Sorry.'

'Well, if you're busy I'll start checking on the Crooks and Crookstone paintings.' Parry disappeared into his own study.

Apolline had barely settled to her files when he appeared in her doorway.

'What do you make of this?' he asked. 'The numbers – "1955" – tucked under a bright green leaf in the middle of Constance Crookstone's *Mon jardin extraordinaire*.' He pointed to a spot among a tangle of vines. 'The numbers seem out of place. There's no date on the painting, although its documented year of execution is 1943 – over a decade earlier than the date within the picture. If it is a date.'

Apolline looked up from her work. 'Maybe the numbers don't mean anything at all. 1955 – the year the artist died. Perhaps there's a clue in her brother's story.'

'I've downloaded an article that says Richard Crookstone was born in 1885, the eldest child of James Crookstone and his French wife Anne. I'll need to read further.'

A small boy appeared in the doorway.

'What's the matter mate?' Parry asked, folding Pascal into his arms.

'Can't sleep, Papa,' the child replied, burying his face in his father's shoulder. 'There are funny noises outside.'

'It's only the wind blowing through the trees. Nothing to worry about. Let's get you a drink of water,' Parry said as he carried the boy to the kitchen.

'Is everything alright?' asked Apolline, following them out of the room.

'Probably a bad dream.' Parry kissed the top of the boy's head. 'It's okay now.'

Pascal held out a hand to his mother who took it and brushed it against her cheek. '*Ça va mon chéri*,' she murmured against his sleep-scented skin.

'Come on young fella, we'll take you back to bed.'

The boy wrapped his arms around his father's neck as they climbed the stairs.

'I'll leave your Mickey lamp on for a while,' Parry whispered as he gently lowered Pascal into bed and tucked the doona closely around his slight form before caressing the boy's face. 'Goodnight mate.'

'I wonder what was bothering him tonight?' Apolline asked as they went downstairs.

'Nothing serious.' Parry put an arm around his wife's shoulders. 'He's always the one making up stories. Gregory is much more down-to-earth.'

'I suppose so. Gregory can sleep through anything.' Apolline gestured towards Parry's study. 'You said you had some information on Constance Crookstone.'

'Come and sit down and I tell you what I've learnt.'

'I should be getting back to the Stymings...'

Parry seized the moment to lead her to a chair before continuing with the Crookstone story. 'Constance was born in 1887. The birth of another boy in 1894 was complicated and Anne, their mother, took many months to recover. Richard took exception to the interloper whom he saw as displacing him in his mother's affections.'

‘Hard on Richard, to feel abandoned by his mother.’

‘He began throwing tantrums and playing truant from school,’ Parry continued. ‘When he was ten, his father sent him to England to be educated and supervised by an uncle and aunt.’

‘I’d never send a child away,’ Apolline exclaimed. ‘No matter how distressing the situation.’

‘Oh, I don’t know...’ Parry looked thoughtful. ‘Families all together are not always happy. It was probably good for Richard in the long run. He spent holidays with his mother’s sister, Charlotte, who lived near Geneva. She took him to Paris to visit the Louvre and the new art galleries that were showing the work of the Impressionists.’

‘Sounds like he was quite a handful.’

‘I think his sister Constance was a much calmer person. Have you got time to listen to the last section?’

‘Mmm,’ Apolline nodded, remembering their recent awkward moment. ‘Not usually my kind of thing but yes, keep going.’

‘At the age of sixteen Richard returned to Australia. He said he was finished with school and wanted to become an artist. He attended painting classes at the Sydney Technical College. This did not satisfy him and he sailed for London in 1908 where he enrolled at the Calderon Art School. Two years later he went to Paris to study at the Académie Julian. He was accepted into exhibitions at the *Salon de la Société des Artistes Français* – that’s the “Old Salon” – and in Britain at the Royal Academy and the Institute of Painters in Oil-Colours.’

Seeing Apolline’s concentration waning, Parry raised his voice. ‘This next bit’s interesting. Pre-1915, Crooks’ landscapes were full of light but in the years between the wars, they became darker with menacing shadows and harsh colours.’ Parry looked troubled. ‘I don’t see why that should be a problem. We all change. There’s nothing wrong with change – or even not changing. Sticking to the tried and true.’

Apolline ignored Parry’s last comment. ‘Brother and sister... Australians... both artists, both coming to our attention in the same day, with work going to auction. That’s a bit unusual, isn’t it?’

‘It certainly is.’

‘Enough.’ Apolline rose from the chair.

‘I don’t know whether, or how, all this is important,’ Parry said. ‘It’s late. I’ll deal with it tomorrow.’



CONSTANCE: 1952

From the window of the living room in her whitewashed timber cottage Constance gazed over crop fields and pastures to the indigo hills of the Hunter Valley, enjoying the play of light on hillsides and treetops. Reluctantly, she turned to her desk and opened a small notebook in which she intended to record her life.

An artist, not a writer, she found it difficult to begin. While sharpening a pencil, the idea came to her for a self-portrait in which she would depict important details of her life: something for Richard and the war; perhaps something to evoke childhood and the Australian landscape to represent her origins; something – she knew not yet what – to confess her treachery in making those paintings for Gaston Renardier. She hadn't drawn anything for years, let alone undertaken a large canvas. First, she must write. After a moment's hesitation, the words began to flow...

I, Constance Reynolds Crookstone was born in 1887 in Maitland, New South Wales. My father, James Crookstone, ran an agricultural supply company inherited from his father. In the early 1880s James made the grand tour 'home', as sons of well-off Australian families did, not only to England but also to Italy and France where he fell in love with and married my mother, Anne Lavalier.

From a young age, I spent all my free time in the garden, sketching flowers, birds and especially my dog, Kimmy. At high school I was always best at drawing, a dreamer at everything else. One day the art teacher brought into the classroom a book of colour reproductions of the impressionist paintings of Monet and his contemporaries. The book described a series of exhibitions called Les Salons des Indépendents that included women artists: Berthe Morrisot, Mary Cassatt and Eva Gonzalez who created paintings that shimmered with light. I longed to see them for myself. My desire to travel was further fuelled by tales of adventure in letters from the art teacher's sister.

I was determined to become an artist like my older brother, Richard. He was already studying at art school in Sydney. Our parents were reluctant to let me go. They only agreed after Richard intervened saying I had the right to develop my artistic gifts, as he had. He earned my undying gratitude when I was allowed to attend the Sydney Technical College that had recently opened art classes to women. I was obliged to board with an aunt in Strathfield and obey a strict curfew. I did not care; my life was about to start.

The training at the College was geared as much to the instruction of stonemasons and industrial modellers as it was to the fine arts and ambitious students looked to Britain and Europe. By the time I arrived in Sydney Richard had already left for England. Overcoming more parental objection, and with added support from my brother, I joined forces with an older woman artist who agreed to chaperone me. I was accepted into the Royal College of Art in London; once again the courses were designed for craftworkers. I followed Richard to France, to study in Paris at the Académie Julian and the Académie Colarossi.

I developed a palette of bright pastel colours, like those of the women impressionists. Occasionally I ventured into symbolist imagery and also experimented with modernist ideas, flattening the picture plane and adding pattern in the form of striped curtains and chequerboard tablecloths. I moved back to Britain when war clouds gathered and spent World War I in England where I offered my talents to soldiers' rehabilitation programs.

Some Australian nurses returned home soon after the war. I stayed in England although I did not sign up for further rehabilitation work. Then the Influenza Pandemic began to spread throughout

the world, affecting even young robust people. I was lucky; I didn't catch it. Lucky? A funny kind of 'luck'.

Constance stopped writing to turn on the lights. Outside, the last rays of the sun were burnishing the hills; cows were ambling towards the dairy sheds across the river. Lights appeared in the big house where her brother Peter and his family lived. They were holding a party. Constance had been invited but preferred being alone with her memories.



CHAPTER 2

As she walked through the front door Apolline screwed up her nose at the lingering odour of burnt food. 'What happened?' came out more sharply than she would have liked.

'I was boiling eggs,' Parry said, a sheepish expression on his face. 'The saucepan went dry and they exploded. I've done my best to clean it up.'

'I suppose the smell will go away, eventually,' she said, less than civilly, trying to keep the distaste from her voice. 'I've more to worry about than spoiled food. The Styding estate is becoming complicated – arguments over the house and its collection of art and furniture, *and* there are unpaid back taxes to sort out.'

Apolline left Parry to deal with the boys and hurried to her study. Half an hour later she returned to the living room where Parry had settled to watch the news.

'Can I run something past you?' Apolline asked, waving a thick file.

'Not the whole lot, I hope.'

She ignored the barbed reply and plunged in. 'French laws of inheritance go back to the Napoleonic Code and the idea of community – the joint pool of assets and liabilities in a marriage – and sets out what can be included and what can be left to the wife's discretion. The late Louis Reynaud Styding controlled all the family's French holdings. However, his wife, Cassandra, was able to administer property she inherited before their marriage, which is a house left to her by an aunt in Australia.'

'So, what's the problem Lina?' Parry switched off the television set.

'Not a problem. At least not so far,' she replied. 'It's the coincidences. We're both dealing with Australian artists and now there's another Australian connection. A few years ago, Cassandra Styding came to the office to make a will. She wanted to leave the cottage in Australia to her daughter, Marie-Jeanne, and needed to organise her affairs quickly as she wasn't well.'

'And?'

'The daughter has never come forward to claim her inheritance, so the ownership of the house has remained in limbo, until now. Philippe Styding, Marie-Jeanne's brother, wants to contest their mother's will and include the cottage in their father's estate.'

'Sounds tricky.'

'Yes, it is.' Apolline picked up a second document. 'There's another problem with the estate. The number of artworks listed in Louis Styding's will does not match the inventory of those currently hanging in the house. Philippe Styding is constantly talking about money so he might have already sold some although he has no right to do so.'

'You said property in Australia? Who was Cassandra's aunt?' Parry asked.

Apolline checked Louis Styding's will again. 'Cassandra's family name before her marriage was Crookstone. One of our artists is Constance Crookstone. Was *she* Cassandra's aunt?'

'It looks a strong possibility,' said Parry. 'What else have you got?'

Apolline cleared a toy car from an armchair and sat down. 'In Louis' will the art collection includes twenty or so paintings by Constance Crookstone, which Cassandra was supposed to have shipped to Europe in 1955. Philippe Styding can only locate five in the house and is demanding to know where the rest of them are.'

‘Are there any other heirs?’ Parry interrupted.

‘Yes, there are three more claims on the estate: a daughter, H      Williams from Louis’ first marriage, and two sons from a liaison in England: James and Stuart Stymson. We’ve proved that Louis Styming was their father so three-quarters of the estate will be shared between the five offspring, with the fourth quarter being placed in a trust to be administered by us in Annecy.’

Apolline sighed. ‘Philippe Styming was very annoyed when he learnt of the existence of the two extra half-siblings. He insisted they be cut out of his father’s will. He also wanted to disinherit H     .’

‘He doesn’t sound easy to deal with.’

‘Not at all. I’ve already explained to Monsieur Philippe Styming that children, even if born outside marriage, are protected under French law. Once everything is sold, Philippe wants the final quarter of the estate to be deeded to himself in payment for his “upkeep” of the family property. He wants everything cleared up as soon as possible.’

‘Why the rush?’ asked Parry. ‘My boss is also in a hurry to have the paintings belonging to his “wealthy businessman” ready for immediate auction. The two men *have* to be one and the same person.’

Apolline picked up a sheet of paper. ‘This gives some details about the Styming family, notably that Louis Reynaud Styming married his second wife, Cassandra Crookstone, in 1955. After his first wife, Edith Williams, died in 1946 Louis sent their two-year-old daughter to England to be brought up by Edith’s sister although H      occasionally spent school holidays in France with her father and stepmother.’

‘Not exactly “happy families”,’ Parry remarked.

‘It gets more complicated. Louis Reynaud Styming’s father, Louis Roland Styming, died intestate in 1948 in dramatic circumstances.’ Apolline turned the page and gave a gasp of amazement. ‘Listen to this! “At the time of their father’s death in 1948, Louis’ sister Albertine was married to Gaston Renardier”.’

A look of fear flashed across Parry’s face.

Apolline put a comforting hand on his shoulder. ‘It’s all in the past. The Renardier thugs that kidnapped you are all still in gaol. They can’t hurt us now.’

‘I hope you’re right,’ Parry replied, visibly shaken.

‘How about a cup of tea? I’ll put the kettle on. You keep reading.’

According to Apolline’s notes, Louis Reynaud had sidelined his sister with the gift of a chalet – property that had passed to their mother, Jacqueline, after her brother’s death in World War I. Albertine had tried to contest Louis’ actions. However, with a new baby and precarious post-natal health, she had been powerless. Louis Reynaud simply decreed that the house in Bessey-sous-Sal      was rightfully and solely his.

‘What about Marie-Jeanne?’ Parry asked as Apolline re-entered the room with two mugs of tea.

‘Impossible to locate. I have one potential lead – a clause in Louis’ will regarding a gift of 5,000 Swiss francs to a housekeeper who was in the Styming’s service for many years. There’s an address so I’ve written a letter asking for information about Marie-Jeanne. The woman might no longer be alive but it’s worth a try.’

Apolline went to shut down her computer, returning almost immediately to pick up the protesting cat and carry her to the covered porch at the back of the house before following her husband upstairs. They stopped outside one of girls’ bedrooms. ‘Even though they are away at school in Lyon, I still look into their rooms. I miss their energy,’ she said wistfully.

Parry put an arm around his wife. ‘So do I – miss them I mean. They were a bit daunting at first. Eglantine with those fashion photographs and sophistication, and Magali’s gothic look and posters of that terrible heavy metal rock group.’

Sounds of fighting were coming from the twins' room. Apolline pushed open the door to find boys and pillows on the floor, clothes everywhere. 'Stop!' she called in a sharp voice.

Parry grabbed the boys by their pyjama tops and hustled them back to bed. Both parents tucked them in with goodnight kisses. Parry took Apolline's hand as they walked to their own room.

'What's gotten into them tonight? Work... children... everything seems to be getting me down at the moment.'

'You're tired. That's all. You take your work so seriously.'

'I have to,' Apolline snapped. 'Oh. Sorry. I didn't mean to sound *grincheuse*... How do you say it in English?'

'Grumpy?' Parry suggested.

'Maybe some vitamins will help. I'll go to the pharmacy tomorrow.'

'Speaking of tomorrow,' Parry said. 'I have a meeting with the Boss. I'll be back in time to pick up the boys.'

By the time Parry returned from the bathroom Apolline was already in bed. He slipped in beside her and put his arm across her shoulders. She shrugged him off and moved further away, pulling the bedclothes tightly around her body.



Thomas Bronsard's company, International Art Experts, had its offices on the second floor of an eighteenth-century building in the Plainpalais district in central Geneva. Apolline had visited it once and been impressed by its elegant antique furniture and artworks adorning the walls – ranging from French baroque to Picasso's celebrated etchings of the bull-fighting ring. She imagined Parry passing an agreeable hour in those luxurious surroundings, rather than in the tense atmosphere of legal disputes. There was to be a meeting that afternoon and she not only wanted to be fully prepared for the client but also impress her boss with her efficiency. The day progressed smoothly until just after four o'clock when, at a crucial stage in the meeting, the receptionist poked her head around the door.

'Madame Smith,' Monique whispered apologetically, 'you're wanted on the phone. It's the school.'



Parry burst into the kitchen, a pile of books under one arm, a bunch of roses in his free hand. At his tentative 'hello' Apolline straightened up, hands on hips, hazel eyes flashing.

'Where the hell have you been? The school rang me in the middle of an important meeting. I had to leave to pick up the children. It was embarrassing to have to excuse myself. The boys were hungry and upset. We arrived home to find the dishwasher full and the breakfast bowls still in the sink.'

She drew breath, giving Parry a chance to explain.

'I'm truly sorry,' he mumbled before advancing into the room to offer Apolline the flowers, in the process tripping over a toy truck lying on the floor, sending the roses flying.

'Oh... worse and worse. It's hopeless.'

'What *are* you talking about?' Apolline demanded.

'The Boss was running late which meant I got caught in peak hour traffic on the way home. My phone's battery was flat so I couldn't ring you. All the traffic lights were red and there were roadworks on the *route nationale* with vehicles banked up in both directions.'

Apolline caught sight of the wide-eyed expressions on the faces of their sons. She and Parry had had a few disagreements lately. The last thing she wanted was to pick a fight in front of the children. 'Boys, you can have fifteen minutes of TV, then upstairs to bed.' She glanced at Parry. 'We can talk about this

later,' she said, plonking plates of defrosted lasagne on the kitchen bench and two glasses of wine.



When Parry reached their darkened bedroom, Apolline had positioned herself on the edge of the bed. She did not react as he climbed in but the minute he settled to sleep, she sat up, switched on the light and fixed him with an accusing stare. 'I count on you to be here – for me and the children,' she said in a furious whisper.

'For you and the children? What about me?' Parry replied. 'It's all very well for you to have the fancy career and put it above everything else – coming home at any hour, always expecting the children to be bathed, fed and ready for bed. I know it's what we agreed. You don't have to treat me like a *lackey*.'

Once started Parry couldn't stop. 'You don't have to act so damn superior all the time. You are not *always* right.' He glanced sideways at Apolline's startled eyes peering at him above the edge of the doona. 'And another thing, you might show some interest in *my* work occasionally.'

'I'm the one bringing in the money so we can have this house.'

'That's a low blow. I'd expect better of you,' Parry said in a cold voice, getting out of bed. 'I'll be in the spare room.'



Apolline rose early. By the time Parry appeared in the kitchen the boys were deep in breakfast, their schoolbags ready.

Parry approached his wife and kissed her as if nothing had happened although his words indicated he was still upset. 'Bronsard was in a terrible mood yesterday. He barely said hello although he kept me waiting almost an hour. He only wanted to know if I'd finished verifying the paintings. You weren't the only person having a bad day.'

'I was angry,' she acknowledged. 'Then I started to worry that something had happened to you on the road.' She gave him a rueful grin.

'When I was stuck in the traffic, I started thinking about Cassandra Styding. She's the link between the Crookstone and Styding families. What was she like?' Parry asked, changing the subject.

'Tall with dark hair and light blue eyes. She seemed gentle. Now I know more about her husband, she was a brave woman.'

'Brave,' Parry repeated the word. 'I think Constance Crookstone was brave.'

'You're talking about her as if she were someone you knew.'

'It's getting to seem that way. I'd like to find out more about her. Your curator cousin, Martine Fischer, at the museum in Lausanne might be of help. If there are Crookstone paintings in the Styding collection, there could be others around. I'll send Martine an email and request a meeting.'

'Good idea,' Apolline said, touching his arm lightly. 'Perhaps we'll both go. I can say it's for the Styding matter.'



Their destination was a building set on the hillside above the city of Lausanne on the edge of Lake Geneva. Across the water, beyond farmlands and foothills, high jagged peaks flanked the sovereign of the alpine realm: Mont Blanc. Parry paused as if transfixed by the scenery. Apolline began walking towards the museum's entrance.

'Before we meet Martine, let's look at the permanent collection,' Parry said, catching up to her. 'The museum has work by artists from the Rhône-Alpes region of France and neighbouring Swiss cantons so

there's a chance we might find something by "our" artists.'

He stopped in front of a wall of landscapes. 'We're in luck,' he said, pointing to two paintings by Constance Crookstone: *Un marché provençal* and *Le chemin: paysage alpin II*. He peered closely at the latter. 'This one looks a lot like that Richard Crooks painting, *After the Storm*, even though it's set in European countryside.'

'Yes, it does,' agreed Apolline. 'But the painting of the village market is consistent with the Crookstone work Bronsard sent you.'

In a second room they found a painting of storm clouds over a lake, dated 1922, signed 'RC'. Parry took photographs of the three paintings just as Martine Fischer, a small plainly dressed woman with a businesslike manner, appeared in the entrance to the gallery. She offered three kisses each to Apolline and Parry in accordance with family etiquette then asked the reason for their visit.

'I'll leave that to Parry,' Apolline said.

Parry looked pleased and stated his case. Martine Fischer nodded understanding and asked if they would like to consult the museum's archives of exhibition catalogues.

'Yes please.' Parry barely had time to add 'if it's not too much trouble,' before Martine moved swiftly into the corridor towards a room at its end, husband and wife following close behind. Inside, Martine walked between rows of metal shelving, stopped in front of a section labelled 'Mid-Twentieth Century: Regional', selected a couple of box files and took them to a table.

'There might be something in these. I'll leave you to look through them. I'll be back in half an hour.'

The first box was a disappointment. In the next one Parry found a catalogue for the 1986 re-creation of an exhibition called *Art Comes to Life*, originally held in 1945 at the now defunct New Wave Gallery in Geneva, with Constance Crookstone as one of the participating artists. Parry was photographing the list of artists and their works when Martine returned to say she needed to close the archives. 'I hope you found information useful to your research.'

'Yes,' Parry replied. 'There might be more. This catalogue is for another show of regional artists.' He picked up a booklet. 'Constance Crookstone and Richard Crooks are both in it.'

'I wonder where she was living at the time?' Apolline asked. 'And Crooks? After World War I he disappeared from public life.'

'It would seem you already know more than I do.' Martine began packing away the archive boxes. Parry was not finished.

'Can we inspect the backs of the paintings by Crookstone and Crooks to see if there are old labels?'

Martine looked as if she would refuse then relented. 'I'll come with you. We'll get the guide on duty to lift them off the wall.'

On the reverse of Constance Crookstone's marketplace scene, a label displayed the artist's name, plus the words *Villa d'Arte* and the date 1940. On the back of Richard Crooks' landscape there was an address in London. The second painting by Crookstone – the one of a laden farm cart making its way along a narrow track through a mountain gorge – also had the remains of a label on the back. 'It looks like the stamp a museum would use to mark works in its collections,' Martine remarked.

'Is that a "G"? ' Apolline asked, pointing to a faint blue outline. 'An address?'

'Yes, possibly. I don't think it's in Switzerland. The numbers 3 and 8 indicate the Isère region in France.'

'Can we take photographs of the labels please?'

'Be quick,' Martine replied.

'Thanks, many thanks. You've been a great help.'

‘Good to see you Apolline,’ Martine replied as she escorted them to the front door. ‘I don’t see much of the French side of the family these days. The museum takes up most of my time.’

She waved as they drove away, a rather lonely figure on the museum’s steps.

‘Why don’t we stop somewhere for lunch?’ Parry asked. ‘We haven’t eaten out without the children for years.’

‘I guess so... before picking up the boys.’

‘Good,’ said Parry. ‘I know just the place.’

He steered the car towards a road that descended to the lake and pulled up in a village on the foreshore. Once settled at their table on the terrace of the Restaurant du Port, Parry ordered a *Kir Royale* for each of them. ‘Here’s to us,’ he said softly.

Apolline lifted her glass. ‘Yes, to us,’ she replied, as softly. She wasn’t good at sentimental language and Parry seemed to be waiting for some kind of declaration. The waitress arrived; Apolline inspected the menu with exaggerated concentration.

Their orders taken for the *menu du jour* plus a carafe of house wine, Apolline sensed it was up to her to make the next move. There was a challenge in Parry’s blue eyes, and a hint of vast ocean expanses and a continent far away.

She reached across the table to take his hand. ‘I can’t manage life without you. You’re so easy-going and optimistic – so different to French men.’

Parry looked as if he were about to say something. At the last minute he turned his head towards the lake.

‘There you go again,’ she exclaimed, ‘hiding’. She squeezed his hand tightly. ‘You can’t get out of telling me what you’re thinking. We went through an ordeal together, you and I, and now we have a life together.’

‘Yes, I know,’ Parry replied. ‘I love you,’ he blurted out. ‘Sometimes you overwhelm me with your drive and determination even though that’s what attracted me to you in the first place. Lately I’ve been worried that I’ll never get over the trauma of that kidnapping. The thought that there are more Renardiers out there...’ He put his hand over hers. ‘Let’s enjoy our meal and we’ll worry about work later.’

Apolline stood up and moved to Parry’s side of the table to plant a kiss on his cheek. He blushed with pleasure and was about to return the embrace when the waitress arrived with their entrées. For the rest of the meal they were content to talk of the children and the antics of the cat, before it was time to make their way back to Annecy.



CHAPTER 3

Parry released the twins from their car seats and let them run ahead of him. Gregory stumbled over a broken branch lying on the path and cried out. While Parry was comforting the boy, he looked around and saw more pieces of torn-off shrubbery.

‘That’s odd,’ he called to Apolline who was gathering up school backpacks. ‘I’m sure that stuff wasn’t there when we left this morning.’

Twigs and leaves littered the doormat. ‘Damn kids,’ he muttered.

Suddenly afraid, Apolline grabbed the twins and hustled them into the car.

‘What’s the matter *Maman*?’ asked Pascal with a sob.

‘Nothing *chéri*,’ she replied, holding him close.

Gregory held his arms out to her. ‘Me too, *Maman*.’

‘It’s okay,’ she said pulling him towards her. ‘Wait here both of you while Papa and I clear away those branches.’

She locked the vehicle then ran to join Parry at the front door.

‘No one’s tried to force it,’ he said as they cautiously stepped inside, ears straining for noises that would indicate the presence of intruders.

‘Doesn’t sound like anyone’s here,’ Parry said.

‘Be careful,’ Apolline whispered hoarsely, her palms sweating.

A cursory glance showed no disturbance in either the entrance hall or the living room. Apolline’s study looked less tidy than usual but nothing remarkable. Kitchen, bathroom and laundry. All fine. Not so fine in Parry’s office. Papers were strewn everywhere. The window frame had been jemmied open and a pane broken. Parry rifled through the disarray on his desk. The copy of the picture-with-the-strange-date was missing. The recent emails from Bronsard with images attached were no longer in his computer’s inbox and the trash had been emptied. Parry cursed his carelessness for not having logged out and shut down his computer before leaving home.

‘At least Bronsard’s emails and images are still on my phone,’ he said. ‘You stay with the boys and ring the police. I’ll check upstairs.’

As soon as Apolline ended the emergency call, her phone rang. It was Parry. ‘Bathroom, nothing. Girls’ rooms okay.’

‘What’s that noise?’

‘It sounds like Pinky. She must be up here somewhere... Ah, found her – under one of the boys’ beds. Took a bit to coax her out but she’s okay.’

‘What about our bedroom?’

A pause and the sound of footsteps. ‘It’s a bit of a mess. It looks as if we’ve been burgled *chérie*. They’ve gone thank goodness. Bring the boys inside.’

Apolline shepherded Gregory and Pascal into the living room, turned on the television set and flicked to a cartoon channel before joining Parry upstairs.

Her wardrobe was open. Clothes were scattered on the floor. Her suede jacket, red blazer and best boots had disappeared. The bedspread and pillows on Apolline’s side of the bed had been disturbed. ‘My nightgown’s missing too. Has anything of yours been taken?’

‘Don’t think so.’

‘Why would anyone want to break into our place? We don’t have anything really valuable. And why my clothes? I hate the thought of other people touching them especially the nightgown.’

While waiting for the police to arrive, Parry searched the room again and found a small book with a blue cover under the bed. He held it up to show Apolline.

‘Didn’t see this before. *The Matisse Stories*... I wonder how it got there.’

‘Maybe one of the burglars dropped it’, Apolline replied. ‘Do you know it?’

‘No. It looks quite interesting,’ Parry grinned. ‘Maybe I’ll read it.’

Apolline was close to tears. ‘It’s not a joke,’ she said, a catch in her throat.

Parry put the book down and gave her a hug. ‘No of course not. None of my clothes have been taken. Curious that the only things I’m missing are the printouts of the paintings and the two emails from Bronsard.’

‘I don’t care about your damned emails. My clothes and the house are more important. I’ll tell the police about the boots and the suede jacket. They were expensive, and our insurance should cover them. Not the nightgown. That’s too personal.’

‘Why would anyone want to steal your clothes? To impersonate you?’ Without waiting for Apolline’s reply Parry burst out. ‘I hope not! At least it is only clothes and not people, like the last time. It isn’t people, is it?’

‘I really don’t know. Apolline raised her hands in a gesture of indecision.

‘That’s not very reassuring,’ Parry replied. ‘I’ll start cooking. The boys must be starving.’

Two policemen arrived and introduced themselves as Constables Baud and Fournier. One took photographs of the broken window and the mess in Parry’s study. The other went through all the rooms making notes. They both chastised Parry for forgetting to log out of his computer. They were kinder to Apolline and promised to search their files for people who stole clothing.

‘No valuables missing? Cameras? Watches?’ Constable Baud asked. ‘It looks as if you were specifically targeted for those emails and the clothes. A weird combination I must say.’

‘Oh, and there’s this.’ Parry handed the book to the officer who put it in a plastic sleeve. ‘I picked it up without thinking.’

‘Your prints would be on everything anyway.’ Constable Baud frowned. ‘You’re sure no one has a grudge against you, even something minor?’

Parry and Apolline shook their heads.

‘I’m a lawyer’, she said, ‘but no... nothing like that.’

Constable Fournier, who had been fiddling with his phone suddenly looked up. ‘Hey, now I’ve got it. I thought I’d seen your photograph somewhere. You were at the centre of that kidnapping and murder case a few years ago, in Provence, were you not? Quite the hero if I remember rightly. It says here that *you* were the person who was to undergo surgery to pass you off as some fancy artist.’

‘Yessss...’ Parry hesitated. ‘That’s all in the past. I lead a very quiet family life now and have no intention of getting involved in anything like that again.’

The gendarme did not look convinced. ‘What’s your line of work? Any problem there?’

‘I work in art evaluation, which can be a bit complicated at times.’

‘Well, don’t go running off on your own again. That got you into all kinds of trouble. *Please* call us if there is anything suspicious. It’s a wonder your neighbours didn’t hear the window glass breaking or notice strangers in the street.’

‘At that time of the day, most people are either at work or picking up children from school,’ Apolline chimed in.

‘And this,’ Constable Baud tapped the book found under the bed, ‘it’s about art and artists, isn’t it? Funny if there’s some connection.’

‘We promise to call you if anything turns up,’ Parry replied. ‘Thank you for coming so quickly,’

‘Only doing our job.’ Baud handed Apolline a piece of paper, ‘Here’s a reference number for the insurance.’

Parry ushered the policemen to the front door; Apolline joined him there. They stood on the steps until the police car had disappeared down the street.

‘What an end to a lovely day,’ Apolline said, taking hold of Parry’s arm. ‘I enjoyed our lunch together, very much.’

‘Me too,’ he replied, kicking at some twigs littering the steps.

A loud ‘crack’ made them jump. It was only a stick snapping, but it left a lingering echo of menace in the cool night air.



Together they did the rounds of the house, checking windows and doors, taking special care in the twins’ bedroom, pausing a moment to listen to their sleeping breathing.

‘In spite of all that’s happened today, I can’t help thinking there’s something else going on,’ Apolline said on their way downstairs. ‘I’m working on the estate of the late Louis Styding. His wife was Cassandra Crookstone, Constance Crookstone’s niece. You are working on paintings by Constance Crookstone and Richard Crooks that have the same titles as works in the Styding art collection. There *must* be a connection.’

A deep frown formed between Apolline’s eyebrows. ‘Where does the owner of the paintings you are working on live?’

‘The Boss was in such a bad mood when I saw him yesterday, he didn’t give me time to ask about anything. Why do you want to know?’

‘It’s too much of a coincidence to have another family in this part of the world holding a collection of Crooks and Crookstone paintings and sending them to auction.’

‘I agree,’ Parry said, putting an arm around her.

Apolline wriggled free of his embrace. ‘Surely we’re not getting involved in another crime? I don’t want to go anywhere near people like the Renardiers. I hope none of *this* is connected to *them*!’

‘Nor do I, but Styding? Bronsard’s client? You know we should call the police again and hand it all over to them.’

‘Yes... not yet. You’d probably lose your job, and my office would lose the legal matter. I’m sure we can handle it for the moment. At least I hope so. It’s different now, isn’t it? The children... we *cannot* let any harm come to them.’

‘Of course not. I’m not convinced we’re free of the Renardiers especially now that we’ve found they have a connection to the Styding family through the marriage of Gaston and Albertine. I’d like to discover the full story behind these brother-and-sister artists if only to make sure there aren’t any Renardiers around.’

‘I understand *chéri*, but you shouldn’t let it become an obsession,’ Apolline replied, finally giving him a hug.

Parry’s mouth was set in a firm line. ‘I don’t care what it takes – obsession or not. I want to be rid of that family once and for all.’

‘I can’t take any more tonight,’ Apolline said. ‘I’m cooked.’

Parry smiled at her literal translation from French. 'I think you mean "all done in" my love. And yes, you look exhausted. Enough for tonight.'



A siren blasted its way through the streets of the village before dawn, waking Apolline. She turned towards Parry who was muttering 'I must be sure,' over and over.

'What are you talking about?' Apolline asked, shaking him.

'I was dreaming of being helpless and trapped again,' Parry replied, a look of distress on his face. 'I'm going to look at the old newspaper reports.'

He got out of bed, pulled on a sweater, pushed his feet into slippers and headed for the stairs. Apolline grabbed a robe and followed him. As he opened the door to the cellar, Pinky appeared from the living room.

'Aha,' Parry said, 'we must have forgotten about you last night. Come on.'

With the cat leaping ahead of them they descended the steep wooden steps. Usually the cellar was a comforting cave filled with the clutter of their lives; now it was an alien space of whispers and ghosts. And spiders. Nobody had been down there for a while and the daddy-long-legs had made the most of the solitude to spread their webs. Apolline walked into a net of sticky threads. She brushed at her face in panic.

'I thought I heard something rustling... a mouse perhaps,' said Parry. 'Must set some traps. I'm glad we have Pinky for company.'

Parry turned on the light, walked to the desk in the corner, wiped the dust off a wooden chair and sat down. He opened the bottom drawer, took out a dark blue folder and picked up the top newspaper cutting inside it. 'Remember? It's from *Le Midi-Matin*.'

Var Police Uncover Serious Art Fraud

With the assistance of four visitors from Haute-Savoie, our local brigade has pulled off a major coup. Following a tip-off, the police lost no time in going to the Villa Machiavelli where they found not one, but two, kidnab victims and arrested several suspects.

Details are sketchy. However, it is known that an Australian man, the first person to be kidnapped, was to undergo plastic surgery to pass him off as the celebrated English artist Hamish Durt. The second person abducted was a Frenchwoman. The names of the visitors are being withheld until the police have completed their investigations. Reliable sources indicate that Professor Germandrée Renardier, who has been working on sensitive research into neuro-electronic devices, is assisting police with their enquiries...

Parry returned the clipping to the file and picked up a second one. 'This one's from *L'Aubade de Provence*.'

Police Make a Grisly Find

When the police searched the home of renowned artist Denis Denarius, they found a fully equipped surgical operating theatre. Although the house was unoccupied, in an outhouse they made a grisly find. Denarius was dead. Had been for some time. Decapitated.

According to one suspect being detained by the police, Denarius had tried to escape and was killed in the confusion that followed his recapture. The police have established a task force and the search is continuing for persons of interest.

Apolline put an arm around Parry and gave him a gentle shake. 'You're safe now. You must stop thinking about that ghastly time. You should be proud of how you resisted your kidnappers; how you almost succeeded in outwitting them.'

Parry leaned his head on her shoulder. 'I know. You're right we are safe from them.'

Covered in dust, the cat emerged from under the twins' long-discarded pram.

'At least I caused them a lot of trouble,' Parry replied as he restored Pinky to an approximate whiteness. He replaced the article in the file and put it back in the drawer. 'It *is* over. I *know* the worst of the Renardiers are in gaol but are there more of them out there?'

'Stop worrying. There's nothing sinister here. Let's go back to bed.'

Parry picked up the cat and turned off the light as they climbed the stairs to the ground floor.



A different policeman arrived the next evening and introduced himself as Detective Favre. He had information about *The Matisse Stories*.

'Apart from your fingerprints, Parry,' he said, 'there are two other sets on it, in particular on the story "Art Work". The first page of that story was marked with a London metro ticket so we're checking with our colleagues in England. I'll keep the book if you don't mind.'

'Not at all,' Parry replied. 'It's not ours anyway, but I am curious as to why it was left here.'

Favre said he was puzzled by the bizarre selection of items taken. He asked Parry and Apolline to go over again the details of how they discovered the break-in and what they did immediately afterwards. 'We'd like to take your computer away to pinpoint the time of the files' deletion. This will help establish the hour of the forced entry.'

'Do you really need to?' Parry asked. 'You seem to be going to a lot of trouble over a fairly minor burglary. It's a big deal for us, but for the police?'

'We like to be thorough,' the enigmatic reply.

'Can I back it up first?'

'All right,' said the gendarme. 'Do it now.'

Parry started the back-up while the detective asked Apolline more questions about her missing clothes. She did not mention their suspicions about the Renardiers.

As soon as Favre had gone Parry opened the file begun by Apolline the night before and added the new information. 'I've been having such strange dreams,' he said. 'In them a woman seems to be calling to me. It's no one we know but she keeps beckoning. As soon as I move towards her, she slips away.'

'Let's have a cup of tea,' Apolline said, squeezing his shoulder.

On the way to the kitchen, she noticed the cellar door ajar and gave it an absent-minded kick shut.

'At least I can do something practical and call a glazier and have the broken glass in my study replaced,' Parry called to her retreating back.



Apolline arrived home in a state of unusually high excitement. Her client, Philippe Styling, had confirmed that his father's sister was Albertine Renardier, Gaston's wife.

'It's good to hear it from someone in the family,' Parry looked suitably impressed.

'He was also unwise enough – or boastful enough – to remark that in family circles there were rumours that Gaston had done more than was ever made public during his trial; far more than allowing the Germans to remove paintings and sculptures from that museum near Grenoble. When I tried to draw Philippe out, he clammed up and was quite rude.'

Apolline wrinkled her nose in distaste. ‘He is a most disagreeable man. Yet he couldn’t help himself. “Funny isn’t it?” Philippe said next, leering at me. “That none of that stuff was ever found”.’

‘And?’

‘What “stuff?”’ I asked. ‘He laughed and said, “Artworks of course”. When I didn’t respond he hinted that some of them might still be in France and he was thinking of making a claim for them too since Gaston’s heirs were all in gaol. What do you make of that?’

‘Well, the younger Renardiers were going to start a museum somewhere near Annecy. Remember? The Savoy Contemporary Art Museum. Its acronym, S C A M, was too good to be legitimate although there was supposed to be some sort of a collection. Should we do a little looking around ourselves?’

‘You must *not* go running off without telling me. Come to think of it, do not go off without me at all. And under no circumstances accept strange drinks. The last time was *disastrous*.’ Apolline banged her fist on the table to reinforce her words.

‘I still remember the headache. I’ve got more than enough to chase up and precious little time to do it in. I’ve already used up one of my days.’

‘We still don’t know why the urgency.’

‘I’ve made some progress. Constance Crookstone stayed at an artists’ community called *Villa d’Arte*, to the west of Annecy until it closed around 1944 and some of her work appeared in regional exhibitions in France in the 1940s. I’m fairly certain she wasn’t in Australia during World War II. Constance’s story gets more interesting by the minute. I wonder if we’ll ever discover the whole of it.’



CONSTANCE: 1952

A woman with a newborn baby in her arms walked along the hospital corridor. Constance closed her eyes, her own arms remembering a similar precious burden. Memories pushed to the far recesses of her brain surged forward: the pain and joy of giving birth; the milky smell of the baby; the jolting train trip to Geneva clutching her two-year-old son; the distress of kissing him good-bye, knowing she had relinquished her right to be his mother, and the searing agony of learning that he had died. No one in her family in Australia knew that Pierre had ever existed.

At a light tap on her shoulder Constance looked up to hear the nurse say her mother was ready to see her. Constance hurried to the ward and approached the bed where the small frail figure of her mother, Anne, was lying and bent to kiss her.

‘Mother, you ‘ve given us such a shock,’ Constance whispered.

‘Why are you whispering dear?’ Anne said in a firm voice. ‘I’m still here. I’m not dead.’

‘I’m so glad.’

‘Sit with me.’

‘Of course. I’ve all the time in the world.’

‘When you were painting, you had very little time for anything else. Your brother will be here soon, so I’d best be quick. I want to know what affected you so badly a few years ago, and why you stopped painting. I know what art meant to you. It must have been something very serious.’

Unable to break the habit of years, Constance said nothing. When Anne became agitated and started muttering about daughters and secrets Constance knew her mother had won. She would have to tell her about Pierre. She didn’t dare look at Anne although she heard her gasp of shock. When, finally, Constance raised her head she was amazed to see love, and acceptance, on her mother’s face.

‘I lost a child once, before I married your father,’ Anne whispered. ‘Different circumstances but I understand. I understand.’ She caressed Constance’s face and closed her eyes.

Constance sat by her mother’s bedside, listening to Anne’s quiet breathing, wondering what she had meant. That she understood her daughter’s grief? Or understood being forced to make a terrible choice? She didn’t know how long her mother had to live; she hoped there was time for them to talk further.

Preferring to walk back to her cottage rather than catch the bus, Constance took a path through market gardens on the edge of town. She stopped to smell jasmine flowers and run her hands along a wall, enjoying the cool smoothness of stone. She lifted her eyes to the landscape, appraising the pastoral green and gold with an artist’s eye.

Once home, she hurried to her studio, pushed aside the curtains and opened wide the window. Picking up a paintbrush, she stroked it against her hand, the urge to paint stronger than ever. Reluctantly she put the brush down. First, she must write...

1951

For now, I will stay with the ordinary facts of my life. The extraordinary events of World War I and the years that followed, I will deal with later.

I returned to New South Wales at the end of 1925 leaving a solid body of work in Europe and settled into my cottage on the Crookstone family estate. People often wondered why I never married. The rumour that a fiancé was killed in the Great War was a convenient if incorrect perception I allowed to flourish. When asked I always said I was ‘married’ to my art. After a while people stopped asking

and accepted my presence in the community. My house was soon crammed with paintings, watercolours and sketches. I had no interest in exhibiting my work.

In 1938, I closed up the house and left for Europe again, giving as my reason a need to become familiar with the artistic developments of the day. I told my parents I was thinking of joining an artists' colony near Annecy in eastern France, although, like everyone else, I was increasingly worried by the disastrous turn international politics were taking.

If I am an unreliable narrator, leaving gaps in this account of my life I ask for understanding. Later, I will fill in the painful details of events about which I cannot yet bear to write.

I returned to Australia just after D Day, worn down by the hardships of wartime: poor food, little firewood, art materials few and far between, the constant threat of harassment by the occupiers and the difficult compromises I had had to make. My brother Peter said he was shocked at the change in me.

Four years later, when my world collapsed, I stopped painting, determined never to pick up a brush again, until now...

Constance selected a canvas primed years before. Opening a box containing tubes of oil paints, she began to block in a background of field and sky. She chose warm hues for the central figure and primary colours for a background inspired by a set of wallpaper panels she had seen in the museum in Macon: romanticised depictions of life in the South Pacific islands. The battles being waged between European naval officers and heavily armed dusky-skinned warriors would stand for the carnage in Europe during the Great War. Constance was pleased with the artifice of these images; she did not want it to look like 'real' battles.

The hardest objects to paint were the toys – a teddy bear, a rabbit, a deer – which she nestled at the feet of the female figure. Constance had always wanted a yellow satin dress and painted one with great care, working over and over the details of the lace and the richness of the colour. Depicting her own face was an unnerving experience and she hoped she'd got the mix of reserve and wryness more or less right.

The high-colour artifice of the panorama, the pastoral landscape beyond the open window, the figure at the centre of the image and the array of Australian fauna milling around her – the composition was as enigmatic as Constance had intended. To represent her distress, she painted a bird with long thin legs, emerging from a bush covered in spidery pink flowers. She gave the bird piercing black-rimmed eyes, pale grey plumage on its back, speckled brown on its breast and dark stripes running down its neck from a white eye streak. It was a curious bird: secretive and sorrowful – the bush stone curlew she used to see when she roamed the hills in those terrible years. 'The Curlew' would do nicely as a title.

Constance stood back to inspect her handiwork, pleased with the mix of realism and fantasy. Now to continue the written record of her life. It was after midnight when she put down her pen. There was more to tell, much of it distressing. Although she was tired, sleep would not come; she had to finish her story.



CHAPTER 4

Apolline received a phone call from Parry at her office to say the police had pinpointed the time the files were deleted from his computer. '4.05. They suggested I come straight home with the boys until the case is cleared up and ask the school principal to look out for any strangers. The detective in charge gave me his phone number, "just in case".'

'In case of what?' Apolline asked. 'What about the girls? Does he think we're all in some sort of danger?'

'No, but he doesn't want us taking any chances. He also asked me where you worked. I gave him one of your business cards.'

'I don't see why he should want to contact me here.'

'Neither do I but I thought it best to go along with him, because of what he said next.'

'What did he say?'

'Favre said that some of the paintings I'm verifying might be quite valuable, and did I know that these paintings are owned by the Styding family; that the grandfather of the current heir was suspected of collaboration with Germany during the two World Wars. What do you make of that?'

'Sounds dramatic,' Apolline exclaimed. 'We don't want to get mixed up in any illegal dealings.'

'Of course not. Favre had one more interesting piece of information,' Parry said. 'He thinks the theft of your belongings and the presence of that blue book point to something else going on. The police have identified one set of fingerprints, those of a woman who's been caught stealing clothes at flea markets in London. He gave me his phone number and insisted we keep in touch. If the police find anything, we'll be the first to know.'

'First to know... Know *what*?'



'Look what I received today,' Apolline said, brandishing a sheet of paper as she entered the kitchen where Parry was supervising the boys' meal.

'Can't possibly guess but it must be important,' he replied, kissing her on both cheeks.

'An email from the son of the Styding's old housekeeper with information about Marie-Jeanne. The man says his mother is willing to talk to me. He's given me her address – a nursing home near Annemassee.'

'That's fantastic Lina. When can you see her?'

'I've arranged to meet mother and son tomorrow afternoon,' she replied, walking around the table to kiss her sons. 'You seem to have everything under control here. I'll get changed.'

Apolline re-appeared as Parry was distributing yoghurts and spoons. The phone rang. It was Parry's sister Mal. He put the phone on speaker so they could both listen. Mal barely gave her brother time to say hello before launching into an account of what she and her family had been doing.

'We arrived in the Hunter Valley last night,' she announced in a breezy tone. 'Parents are both fine although Mum is slowing down a bit. Funnily enough, Dad is now the more assertive of the two.' She stopped to draw breath, giving Apolline a chance to say hello to her sister-in-law.

'Hi Apolline. As soon as we arrived Dad showed me your emails. Terrible about the break-in. Hope there wasn't too much damage. Are the children alright?'

'Yes. No one was home at the time. Sorry not to tell you about the burglary but the situation with these artworks is becoming urgent.'

'We're here for a week,' Mal said in a soothing voice. 'An ex-colleague of mine works at the Maitland Art Gallery. I'll contact her today and when we're in Sydney I'll look up Constance Crookstone in the library catalogues. In the meantime, you can find newspaper files yourself through the online site, *Trove*.'

'Thanks,' replied Parry, 'I'll check. Lina and I are okay although this business is starting to take over our lives. Mal... I'd love to hear more about your adventures. I still have to catch up on emails and I've an early start tomorrow morning.'

'Sure,' Mal replied. 'Take care of yourself and don't get into any dangerous situations. I'd hate to have to rescue you again. Bye.'

Parry stood motionless, phone still in his hand.

'What's up?' Apolline asked.

'Same old thing. I can never forget what happened. It comes back to me at the strangest times.'

'No more work tonight,' Apolline said, leading him towards the living-room. 'Let's watch a movie. Forget about Crookstones and Stymings for a while.'

'You're right,' he said burying his face in her neck.



Apolline was looking over Parry's shoulder at the print-out of a Crookstone painting when another email from Mal arrived with scans of press clippings about the 1955 Maitland flood, as well as an obituary for Constance Crookstone and an account of her funeral. There was also a small piece about a police enquiry. In the upheaval and disaster of the flood – lootings, insurance claims, repairs and rebuildings, and often-heated discussions about moving the town – not much interest was shown in sixty-eight-year-old Constance Crookstone. 'Death by drowning' the brief verdict.

Mal had also found a reference to Richard Crooks having fought in World War I: 'There's no mention of him returning to Australia. He must have survived, as he was still painting after the war. There was an exhibition of his work in Sydney in 1913 and another in Melbourne in 1927. On neither occasion did he accompany the artworks to Australia. He was represented by a London gallery in the 1920s and 1930s although he appears to have stopped painting about a decade later.'

'What about references to family?' Parry wrote back. 'If you have time that is...'

'"If I have time". Ha! You don't fool me for a second,' came the immediate reply. 'Once you've latched onto something, I *know* you are unlikely to let go until you see it through to the end.'



Parry rang Mal early the next morning. Apolline moved closer to the phone, saying, 'I want to hear too.'

On the speaker function, Mal's voice was loud and excited. 'Wait till you hear this.'

'What?' Parry shouted.

'I visited to Constance Crookstone's place today. It's a lovely cottage although a bit rundown. You can tell someone artistic lived there by the murals on the shed walls. The house was locked but one of the shutters was loose, so I peeped through the window. The artworks I saw inside would now be worth a small fortune.'

'And?' Parry interrupted.

'I'd just taken a photo of the front of the house with its name plaque and was about to leave when a man came up to the gate and asked me what I was doing there. I told him I was a friend of a member of the Crookstone family.'

'Mal!' Apolline exclaimed. 'Would you please get to the point.'

'Okay. The man was the nephew of the postman who used to deliver mail in the villages. He said his uncle remembered Constance Crookstone well; said she was a gracious person but a loner. Then... I'm trying to remember his exact words.'

'Get on with it!'

'One day – he thought it was around 1948 – his uncle the postman had a registered letter for Constance, postmarked London. She took it, thanked him and hurried up the path, tearing the envelope open as she went. As she reached the front door she fainted. When she came to, the postman tried to help her up. She waved him away. "Thank you. I'll be alright," she told him. "There's nothing to be done. Please go".'

'It must have been something dramatic.'

'I guess so because as soon as Constance went inside the postman said he heard a lock turning and saw curtains being pulled. Even if there was no mail for her the postman called around on the following days. He knocked; there was never an answer. It was as if life had left the house, the nephew said. People in the village saw Constance walking in the hills at dusk. Sometimes she was seen crouching near a tree on the edge of a clearing, arms outstretched, hands pressing into the ground, a weird keening sound escaping from her lips. "Weelo, Weelo", someone reported, like the cry of the bush stone-curlew.'

'I wonder what happened to make Constance stop painting and clam up like that?'

'I'll check the local history section of the Maitland Library tomorrow to see if there are any reports of accidents happening that year. We're leaving the day after that so no new curly questions.'

'Great Mal. I do appreciate all you are doing. I'd do the same for you.'

'Watch yourself Parry – Apolline too. Don't get into trouble again.'

Parry was about to respond when his wife signalled that she was leaving for work. 'Got to go Mal. Thanks again.'



Apolline approached *Résidence-les-Rhodos* across a lawn framed by garden beds already prepared for winter, the only splashes of colour the crimson and amber leaves of vines covering the walkway leading to the building.

Inside, a man of about sixty rose from an armchair near the reception desk and came forward to greet her. 'Madame Smith?' he asked, offering a handshake. 'I am Fernand Riachaud. It's my mother you have come to see.'

'Pleased to meet you,' Apolline replied. 'It's very generous of you both to talk to me.'

'No, it is I who should thank you for contacting my mother. She was fond of Marie-Jeanne and was delighted when I gave her your letter.'

'How is your mother?' Apolline asked, as the man led her along a corridor whose walls were animated by lively prints of the colourful fishing villages and azure waters of Provence.

'Quite well. She's nearly ninety, frail but alert. She loves to dress up for visitors and insists on having her hair done regularly. Ah, here we are.' He ushered Apolline towards a small sitting room overlooking the garden where an elderly woman was seated in a wheelchair.

'Fernand,' she said, a smile lighting up her face.

He bent down to kiss his mother on each cheek before introducing Apolline. 'This is Madame Smith. You remember? She wants to ask you about Marie-Jeanne Styding.'

'Of course I remember,' Madame Riachaud replied. 'Please come here my dear.' She reached out to clasp Apolline's hand in a firm grip.

Apolline sat down and took out a notepad and pencil. 'Do you mind if I take some notes?'

'Not at all.' Madame Riachaud closed her eyes for a moment before beginning to speak in a soft clear voice.

'Marie-Jeanne was a bright child, if a little eccentric. She got on well with her mother but Monsieur Styding was harsh with her and cruelly undermined Marie-Jeanne's self-esteem. She grew up a pale, thin young woman with a slight limp due to a fall from her pony.'

Madame Riachaud stopped speaking and closed her eyes again.

'Are you alright Mother?' Fernand asked, concern in his voice as he tucked a mohair rug more snugly around her knees.

'Yes, I'm fine,' she replied, patting her throat. 'A little thirsty.'

At that moment a nurse's aide arrived pushing a trolley of drinks. All three said yes to tea.

'This is a beautiful room,' Apolline said looking around. 'The colours and furnishings are just right and so are the prints on the walls.'

Madame Riachaud gave a slight grimace. 'It's not my home.'

Fernand patted her shoulder. 'We've been through this before Mother. We had no choice.'

Madame acknowledged this with a nod before continuing with her memories of Marie-Jeanne.

'She became estranged from the family and went to live in London. She didn't dare write to her mother in case Louis found the letters. She wrote to me care of a friend in the village. Because she had sworn me to secrecy, I have never told anyone, until now. Especially about the distressing time she saw her father in a bar with a woman.'

Madame Riachaud stared out the window, a faraway look in her eyes. It took a firm shoulder pat from Fernand to bring her back to the present.

'When the couple left the bar Marie-Jeanne followed them to an apartment at a fancy address. Louis' name was listed on the building's directory, so it was easy to slip into the lift with a group of people and reach his apartment's floor. Louis answered Marie-Jeanne's knock. He tried to bar her entry. Marie-Jeanne raced past him, picked up a champagne glass and threw it at the woman in the bed. She stormed to the door, leaving Louis to attend to his mistress's bleeding face and howls of pain.'

Madame Riachaud paused for a moment. 'Then Marie-Jeanne heard him say "I'll get you for this. You're mad. I'll have you locked away"'. She dyed her hair and disappeared into London's netherworld. I didn't hear from her for some time after that.'

Madame Riachaud was close to tears.

'*Ça va Maman, ça va,*' Fernand whispered and stood up to put an arm around his mother's shoulders. 'Don't go on if it's too painful.'

'No, I'm fine. Marie-Jeanne deserved much better than that. Her father's death severed the last of her ties to the house where she grew up and she had no intention of contacting her brother Philippe. She knew she had relations in Australia, so she scraped together enough money and set out to visit them. It was only a few months ago I think.' She closed her eyes, as if gathering her thoughts.

'Marie-Jeanne received a warm welcome from her uncle and his family. She was amazed to learn about her great-aunt's drowning and how Cassandra had restored the cottage. Her uncle arranged for her to stay there. Marie-Jeanne was not good with words, but I enjoyed her description of the cottage. She was very proud of her mother's selection of paintings and prints, Marie-Jeanne being of a generation that

appreciated the work of women artists.’ A shadow passed over Madame Riachaud’s face. ‘I haven’t heard from her since.’

They sat in silence until the six o’clock bell announced the end of visiting hours. Apolline clasped the old lady’s hands. ‘Thank you so much Madame Riachaud, for telling me about Marie-Jeanne.’

‘I hope it helps her,’ the old lady’s soft reply.

A nurse entered the sitting-room with a look on her face that said, ‘time to go’. Apolline kissed the old lady on both cheeks.

Leaving mother and son to say their good-byes in private Apolline retraced her steps along the corridor to the entrance and hurried to her car. Parry would be in the kitchen with the twins, laughing and joking. She wanted to be home, with them.



Walking into their brightly lit house filled Apolline with pleasure. She did not mind stepping over school bags and pieces of train set in the hallway. She relished the fact that the house was alive with youthful noise after the too-calm serenity of the retirement home. ‘Parry, kids’, she called as she entered the kitchen and hugged them all tightly.

‘How did it go? Your talk with Madame Riachaud?’

‘Very well indeed, even though we still don’t know where Marie-Jeanne is. I’ll tell you everything after we’ve eaten.’



Mal contacted them later that night by video call to say she and her family were setting out to drive around the coast of New South Wales and Victoria to Adelaide. ‘To business. Constance Crookstone was a much better artist than she was ever given credit for. A dark horse too. She seems to have deliberately covered her tracks during those years in Europe by giving conflicting accounts of where she lived. It looks like she had two addresses in London, simultaneously. She did not give interviews and was quite abrupt to one young art historian who wanted to write her story. “Let my art speak for itself,” she said.’

‘Funny,’ Parry broke in. ‘Richard Crooks said the same thing in an interview prior to World War I.’

‘A 1920s’ sketchbook by Constance, held by the Library, is truly experimental. She could have been at the forefront of the Australian surrealist movement, but she didn’t pursue that direction, opting instead for a looser expressionistic style. She was a member of an artists’ collective near Annecy. The place became very rundown when the guru in charge fell ill.’

‘Ah yes,’ Parry interrupted. ‘The *Villa d’Arte*.’

‘It closed towards the end of World War II. Constance Crookstone probably returned to England in 1944 and then to Australia. Have the police found anything more about the burglary?’

‘No... I know it sounds ridiculous. Lina and I are worried there might be Renardiers out there plotting some new mischief.’

‘Surely not. At least I hope not. How could they be involved?’

‘No idea but there’s an extraordinary coincidence. Gaston Renardier’s wife, Albertine, was Louis Styning’s sister and so Cassandra Crookstone’s sister-in-law.’

‘You’re kidding!’

‘I wouldn’t joke about something like that.’

‘Neither would I,’ Ma replied. ‘Must go. Good luck and please take care.’



Although not wishing to revisit the past too closely, it was imperative that they find the record of Gaston's trial in the 1960s to see if there were any clues there.

'Where do you think we should start on Gaston Renardier?' Parry asked Apolline. 'First stop might be the Municipal Archives since the Renardier family lived around here for generations. I'd like to have the paintings from the emails analysed scientifically to see if it helps us understand Richard and Constance's working methods. There might be something under the top layers of paint to explain that strange date on Constance's canvas – or at least pinpoint the true age of the painting.'

'I'll work through lunch and visit the Archives when it opens in the afternoon,' Apolline replied. She looked up from her phone to see a worried expression on Parry's face. 'What's the matter?'

'Because of Gaston Renardier's close connection to the Stymings I can't help feeling something is not quite right about their art collection.'

'Maybe... But we are making progress, and Philippe Styming's coming to see me tomorrow.'



CHAPTER 5

It was a short stroll via the water's edge from Apolline's office to Annecy's *Hôtel de Ville* where the Municipal Archives were kept. A brisk northerly breeze had encouraged a small flotilla of yachts onto the lake, their sails fluttering across the teal-coloured water like a swarm of white butterflies. On the grassy foreshore, mothers with young children and a sprinkling of tourists were enjoying the autumn sunshine. Apolline would have liked to linger but there was no such downtime in her workday schedule. She made her way to the Town Hall, pushed open the heavy doors and presented her request at the reception desk. She didn't have long to wait before a young woman and an older man arrived in the lobby.

'Madame Smith?'

Apolline offered her hand for the customary greeting.

The man indicated a staircase to the floor above. 'You are lucky to find us here. We will be closing shortly, and for some time, while the archives are moved to new premises. Today, M'selle Collomb-Richard has been allocated to help you.'

'Merci, Monsieur...?'

'Girard, Michel Girard.'

Apolline explained what she wanted. Mlle Collomb-Richard activated a computer, scrolled down a list of files and clicked on a series of numbers. She got up and went to press a button on one wall of the reading room. A door slid open and she disappeared. Apolline sat down to wait.

Mlle Collomb-Richard soon returned, a puzzled expression on her face. 'There seems to be a problem,' she said. 'I... cannot seem to... I'll re-check the numbers. 1960s you said?'

She sat down at the computer and scrolled through the lists again to verify that the Renardier files were in the index. 'See, the system is working here... but in there...' she gestured to the archives storage area. 'There's nothing on the Renardier family. Quite odd.'

Visibly distressed, she repeated, 'This is *very* odd. The file numbers are here – as you can see yourself. Someone must have borrowed the documents and not returned them. *Bizarre*. It has never happened before. I will talk to M'sieur Girard. Can you come back tomorrow?'

'Yes, I can.'

Apolline stood up, shook hands and returned to the ground floor, questions churning in her head like clothes in a tumble dryer: Why were the Renardier files missing? Who could have taken them? And when?



That evening, Parry sent an email to the court in Lyon requesting the transcript of Gaston Renardier's trial. 'I'll also arrange to have the Crookstone canvasses X-rayed and maybe make an appointment at that high-tech facility in Grenoble. Mal will know the kinds of things I should be looking for.'

He rang his sister's number and pressed the speaker function so Apolline could listen too. 'Last time, I promise.'

There was a note of irritation in Mal's voice. 'You don't give up, do you? Anyway, here's what I know. The basic X-ray process doesn't take long. You should have the results fairly quickly. I think that other test takes a while – or at least the interpretation of the results might. I'd stall for more time if I were you.'

'The Boss wants it all finished as quickly as possible. *And* I still have to get the paintings. One last thing, do you know much about artists' communities?'

'The only place I know is the one Albert Gleizes established in the Ardèche region. Why don't *you* check it out? Sorry, I have to pack up.'

Parry duly searched the Internet for artists' colonies in France. There was plenty of information about largely permanent settlements such that at Moly-Sabata established in 1927 by Albert Gleizes; nothing about the *Villa d'Arte*.



A few minutes later Parry appeared in the doorway of Apolline's study. 'I've received an email from the technician at the research laboratory.'

'Great. When can you go and see him?'

'As soon as I can get the paintings and organise a time.'

'Then what?'

'He recommends I consider the advanced imaging technology carried out at the European Radiation Facility in Grenoble. There's a postscript about the technique being non-destructive and leaving the work of art intact. He also adds that it might be expensive.'

'I think we should go ahead with the tests,' said Apolline. 'We'll worry about the cost later.'

'I don't even know yet if the boss will agree to any kind of scientific examination procedure for the paintings.'

The landline started ringing. 'I'll get it,' Apolline stood up, went to the hallway and brought the handset back to her study. 'It's Detective Favre, asking for more information about where you're employed and what you've been working on recently.' She put her hand over the mouthpiece and whispered, 'Try to fob him off, since you haven't yet told Bronsard about the break-in,' before handing Parry the phone.

'Good evening Detective Favre,' Parry said politely. 'I'll tell you what can. It's a bit delicate since much of my work is confidential.'

Apolline could hear Favre's grating voice through the phone, as if he were right in the room with them.

'Parry, I'll haul you down to the police station for obstructing the investigation unless you cooperate.'

In a reluctant tone, Parry gave the policeman Bronsard's address and a brief summary of what he was working on.

'Keep in touch, won't you?' Favre's parting words were more of a command than a request.

If they were apprehensive about what might happen next, they did not have long to wait. Half an hour later, Parry received an irate summons to his boss's office. 'First thing in the morning.'

Apolline was impatient to hear how Parry's meeting with Bronsard had gone and barely gave him time to hang up his coat.

'Bronsard was very angry, demanding to know why I hadn't told him about the break-in. He wasn't happy about the visit from the Swiss police and kept saying that he ran a reputable company; that art evaluation is a sensitive business.'

Apolline continued to question him about Bronsard's reaction.

'He was calming down when his phone rang. As soon as he saw the incoming number, he waved me out of the office without even asking about authenticating Constance Crookstone's paintings.'

'Sounds odd. I'd have thought that'd be the first thing he'd ask.'

‘Yes, and there’s more. I didn’t have time to request the actual works, so I had to go back to his office.’
‘And?’ Apolline reached for her glass of wine.

‘When I asked for the Crookstone originals to have them X-rayed, he wanted to know if I still had the emails the burglars had deleted. I said, “Of course I have them why wouldn’t I?” He muttered something about “cretins”. Then he clammed up and became agitated again and said he’d ring me tomorrow.’

‘I must say this is becoming complicated,’ Apolline said. ‘Please don’t get yourself into another dangerous situation.’

‘I’ve no intention of doing anything dangerous. At least I wasn’t as foolhardy as you were, confronting the gorillas in their own cage.’

Apolline looked sheepish and changed the subject. ‘Why do you think he asked about the emails?’

‘No idea but there’s more to this than meets the eye – something in the Styning family history, and in the relationship between the two artists Constance and Richard – that seems to be at the heart of the matter. I wish we knew more about Constance’s movements in the 1920s, and why she stopped painting in 1948.’

Apolline poured them each another glass of wine. ‘Richard Crooks? He’s still a mystery.’

Parry patted a cushion on the lounge. ‘Speaking of mysteries. It’s unlike Pinky not to be here with us at night. Usually she never wants to go outside. I wonder where she is?’

‘We can’t do much tonight.’

‘I’ll search the garden and the neighbourhood tomorrow,’ Parry said as he guided her gently towards the stairs.



The phone rang early. Apolline answered. It was Thomas Bronsard.

‘Tell Parry to be here by 10 o’clock. I have two Crookstone paintings and one by Richard Crooks from his later period, after World War I. They’ve been removed from their frames so you must be careful. A security guard will accompany you to the Helvetica Centre for X-Ray Research. Get here on time, collect the paintings and be back as soon as possible.’

‘I’d love to be going with you,’ said Apolline after Bronsard ended the call. ‘Make sure you tell me *everything* tonight.’

‘Promise.’

‘Text me as you go,’ Apolline called as she left for the office.

She hadn’t been long at her desk when an email from Parry arrived.

The Boss gave me three bubble-wrapped packages, jerked his head towards a man waiting in the office whom Bronsard introduced as Bruno and said was going with me to make sure I didn’t try anything. We left in a German-make sedan parked in Bronsard’s spot.

At the X-Ray Centre, a technician was waiting for us. He ushered me into the laboratory, then insisted Bruno remain outside. He started to argue and that’s when I realised he looked a lot like one of the Renardier thugs who kidnapped me.

On one bench there was a large machine next to a vertical glass panel encased in a metal frame. That’s where I unwrapped the canvasses.

The communication ended abruptly much to Apolline’s frustration. She tried to concentrate on the work on her desk, one eye on the computer screen. The next message arrived thirty minutes later, without preamble:

The technician positioned Constance Crookstone’s café scene within the metal frame. I had to stand behind a screen in the corner of the room while he twiddled an array of knobs on a control console

behind another screen. I couldn't see what was happening, although I could hear something scratching across paper, and blips from a machine. When the test was finished the technician called me over and, on the computer, showed me areas of underpainting: figures of two women and a young child dressed in coats and hats – circa 1920s – had been sketched in charcoal against what looked like the entrance to an underground railway – probably London by the roundel logo. P.

'I wondered why Constance abandoned the original composition?' Apolline said aloud.

'Pardon?' Monique walked in with a pile of mail.

'Oh, nothing,' Apolline replied, embarrassed to be caught talking to herself. 'Another puzzle in the Styling matter. Thanks for the mail.'

Had Constance needed a canvas for a commission or a work for an exhibition? Or did she start out with one idea and something happened to make her change her mind, so she covered it up? A 'ping' signaled an email from Parry.

The technician's just examined the other Crookstone painting – the one with the strange vegetation. The numbers under the vine leaf showed up more vividly than the rest of the brushwork. The date, 1943, is consistent with other paints used. The technician thinks the numbers are more recent and by a different hand. The paint used was a synthetic one that was marketed from the 1960s onwards, and only in continental Europe.

He also noted compounds in the painting that didn't match the other pigments. One of the compounds was a chemical used in house paints – a cheap brand sold in France in the 1940s and 1950s.

The X-ray of Richard Crooks' canvas showed little under-painting but the technician said some of the reds and browns, which look the same to the naked eye, were quite different under analysis – a later batch maybe, or from another manufacturer. It looked as if there had been some substitution in paints used from the early stages of the painting to its completion. He asked me if I knew whether Richard Crooks used natural pigments, even to grinding and mixing his own. In his opinion, whoever finished the painting either did not have access to, or wasn't so particular about, natural pigments.

He said he'd be able to help further if I could get hold of more paintings by both artists. I've just collected my 'minder' Bruno and am on my way to the car. I'll call you. P x

Apolline's phone rang. It was Parry, sounding excited. 'Wait till you hear this! When we were about to leave, I noticed a strong smell of alcohol on Bruno's breath, so I insisted on driving. I was supposed to take the paintings straight back to the office, but I wanted to show them to you *and* take them to Grenoble.'

Silence, then a siren.

'What happened next was a bit tricky. Almost at the school. Tell you when I get home.' Parry's phone went dead.

Apolline gritted her teeth in frustration. She tried ringing; Parry wasn't answering. She would have to wait.



As Parry's car pulled into the driveway, Apolline rushed to open the front door. The twins ran into the house. Parry was slower, weighed down by unwieldy packages. 'What's in those?' she asked.

'The paintings I had analysed today.'

'Why have you brought them home?'

'Let me put them down and I'll tell you the whole story.'

Parry stacked the paintings in a corner of the living room before turning to Apolline, a wide grin on his face. 'My minder fell asleep as we were nearing the centre of Geneva. When we were stopped at traffic lights, I shouted at him to wake up because we'd arrived. Disoriented by whatever he'd been drinking, Bruno opened the car door and leapt onto the footpath. I leant across, shut the door and activated the locks. As the lights turned green, I drove off.'

'You did, *what*?'

Parry continued as if he hadn't heard her. 'At Bronsard's office I stowed the three paintings in my Peugeot; threw the keys for the other car into its boot, then drove to the kindergarten to pick up the boys.'

Her frown of disapproval dissolved before his obvious glee. 'What on earth is your boss going to say?'

'I'll worry about that later,' Parry replied. 'It's going to get worse. I want to take the paintings to that research centre in Grenoble.'

'Bronsard'll never agree to that.'

'Maybe not...' Parry looked unconcerned as he fished around in his briefcase. 'Look what the technician at the X-ray centre lent me.'

He brandished a small cylindrical object. 'It's a fluorescent torch that shows up under-painting on canvasses.'

Parry switched on the torch and directed its beam at one of their own Australian landscapes. As he moved the torch across the canvas, undulating charcoal marks emerged through the paint, interspersed with vertical slashes topped by squiggly lines.

'What do you understand from this?' asked Apolline.

'The artist was possibly sketching preparatory ideas for the composition. This section,' Parry pointed to the upper half of the painting, 'looks like hills and those verticals represent trees.'

They stared at it for a few minutes until a howl from the boys' bedroom sent them running. Calm restored, Parry unwrapped the paintings and placed them on chairs for Apolline to inspect.

'Those two,' she said. 'The Crooks landscape and the Crookstone café painting, are easy on the eye. The one with those snaking vines is quite sinister. I wonder what Constance Crookstone was trying to say?'

Parry shook his head. 'We seem to be getting deeper into something, even though we don't know what that "something" is.'

'Like last time. And look where it took us? Into very hot water.'

'I am trying to forget about "last time". How are you getting on with the Styning inheritance?'

'I've made contact with the daughter in England. She sounds quite reasonable from her emails.'

'I've found the name of the ship in which Richard Crooks was repatriated, even the name of the convalescent hospital where he was sent. It's near Hastings, but there is neither a discharge date for him, nor a forwarding address.'

'We could put an ad in British newspapers,' Apolline suggested. 'You know, like those calls for information for a family reunion? Mention Richard's army unit and ask for possible whereabouts of any descendants.'

'Worth a try. What about those genealogical sites for finding people? Or maybe electoral rolls and census data?'

'Excellent idea.'

Parry gave her a hug. 'We are a good team, aren't we?'

Apolline kissed his cheek. 'Yes, we are – if a bit reckless.'

Apolline watched as Parry sent a text message to his boss informing him that the paintings would not be back in the office for a day or so. A minute later Bronsard replied. Curiously, it was not a thunderclap of rage but a relatively mild, even conciliatory message as if he had changed his mind about something.

‘It’s very puzzling,’ Parry said, ‘his acquiescing like that. ‘At least it gives me time.’

They found entries for both Constance Crookstone and Richard Crooks in a 1911 United Kingdom census, at addresses in the Whitechapel district in London. Constance Crookstone was still at the same address in 1921. There was no further reference to Richard Crooks. Constance was not listed in the 1931 census.

‘She was possibly in Australia at that time,’ Parry remarked.

Both Richard and Constance appeared in the 1901 Australian records with the rest of the Crookstone family. There was nothing further until Constance Crookstone appeared on electoral rolls between 1933 and 1954. Nothing for Richard Crooks. Nor was there a death certificate.

‘So, he didn’t return to Australia, at least not under his own name. Could he have changed it again? It’s possible. Why would he do that?’

Apolline patted the thick file in front of her. ‘At least I’m making good progress with the settlement of Louis Styming’s estate. Curiously, Philippe Styming has had a change of heart and told me he will no longer oppose the legality of his English half-brothers’ right to inherit from their father.’

‘Very unlike him,’ Parry remarked.

‘Yes, I was suspicious at first but I can’t find any reason to question his decision.’

Apolline looked at Parry, an enquiring expression on her face. ‘I’ll soon have all the documents finalised and ready for Ms Williams and the Stymson brothers to sign. What do you think? Post the documents and hope they sign them correctly and send them back without delay? Or should I take them to England myself?’

‘I think it’d be a great idea if *you* took the documents to England. I’m sure your partners at the office won’t mind your going. I’m confident I can manage the boys and everything else.’

‘Very well. I’ll make arrangements....’

‘Is there something else?’ Parry asked anxiously.

‘I was just thinking... That convalescent hospital, the one where we think Richard Crooks was sent? Perhaps I could try and find it. Really make my visit to England worthwhile...’

She looked at Parry to see how he was taking her words. ‘I’d ring often and send you everything I find, so we’d both have copies.’

‘Not a bad idea and you’re right,’ he replied. ‘We can’t be too cautious.’

An email from Bronsard arrived granting Parry permission to visit the house of the owner of the paintings, directing him to meet Philippe Styming at the address included in his email at the stated hour.

‘So, the wealthy connoisseur and your deceased businessman are now, officially, one and the same man,’ Parry said with satisfaction. ‘Tomorrow should prove interesting.’



CONSTANCE: 1952

Once again Constance opened her small notebook, this time with anticipation. The further she moved back into her life's story, the easier the memories came and the smoother her pen flowed. The first two paragraphs were a kind of declaration.

1939

I settled at the Villa d'Arte near the hamlet of Lorgny-sous-Fier, west of Annecy, in the summer of 1939. The director of the community was Arthur Vandenberg whose work I held in high regard. The 'Master' was not as well known as Albert Gleizes, but he was an accomplished painter with occasional flashes of brilliance, especially in his use of green and blue. Like Gleizes he was willing to accept an Australian artist into his group.

My work benefited from the interaction with other artists and my paintings sold so well I earned enough money to make day trips to regional cities to visit galleries and museums. Once I even travelled to Saint-Rémy-de-Provence to try my hand at depicting the colourful Mediterranean way of life. I was pleased that my paintings of village markets were so popular.

Occasionally I would take the bus to Annecy; catch the train to Annemasse and then into Switzerland, leaving in a mood of high excitement, returning late at night in a state of exhaustion. When fellow artists asked me what I had been doing, 'admiring the scenery,' was all I would say.

As World War II gained its stranglehold on France's culture and economy, artists began leaving the Villa d'Arte. I stayed even though everything was in short supply. I cut up bed linen for canvasses and scrounged cans of end-of-the-line house paint from the village hardware store – anything that would create line, colour and form.

Sometimes I went into Annecy with a neighbouring farmer and his wife on the days they took their produce to market. The combination of drought and severe winters, labour shortages (many young men were prisoners-of-war) and plagues of insects led to significant reductions in the quantities of grain crops harvested. Although markets were much smaller than in pre-war years, they were nevertheless occasions to meet and swap stories. By the end of 1940, the presence of the occupiers, both Italian and German, dampened spirits, yet everyone made the best of it.

Often, I would stay in the Old Quarter and set up my stool in an out-of-the-way corner to sketch the people and produce in the streets and squares. On other days, I preferred to take an easel to the grass at water's edge to sketch the lake and its encircling mountains.

If their goods had not sold, the farming couple would give me a cabbage or some onions and carrots, very occasionally, eggs. They did not want payment, saying they enjoyed my company. I insisted on a fair exchange and in return drew informal portraits of their children and animals.

When the Master became seriously ill with heart problems he was admitted to a hospice and never returned to the Villa d'Arte. By 1943 I was the only artist left there. It was a lonely and difficult time. I no longer had the heart to paint landscapes. My work might have veered completely into abstraction had not Gaston Renardier arrived with his Faustian bargain.



CHAPTER 6

Apolline rang her boss to inform him of Parry's forthcoming visit to the Styning residence. 'Since the house belongs to Louis Styning's estate, I'd like to suggest I accompany him,' she said boldly.

There was a short silence before Maître Leydener's deep voice came through the phone. 'As long as you make the most of your time.'

'Thank you, Sir.' It was difficult to keep the smile from her voice.



The route from Annecy to their destination passed through a succession of valleys dotted with villages of slate-roofed houses clustered around churches topped with filigree metal spires. Approaching Geneva, the high ridge of Le Salève, a hunched behemoth of ochre and indigo rock striped with dense foliage on the turn to gold and bronze, dominated the skyline. Close to France's border with Switzerland they turned up into the foothills to the village of Bessey-sous-Salève. The Styning residence, a two-storeyed grey-stucco building of bourgeois solidity with a hint of cuckoo-clock frivolity to its white gables, was easy to find.

As Parry pulled up, a man whom Apolline recognised as Philippe Styning, got out of an expensive black car parked near the front door and introduced himself to Parry. He threw Apolline a hostile look. 'I didn't know *you* were coming too.'

'As your attorney, I thought it entirely appropriate that I verify in person the items in your father's estate,' she said lightly.

Without further comment Philippe ushered them into a wide entrance hall decorated with bronze statuary, hunting trophies and dark furniture.

'Can't wait to get rid of this mausoleum,' Philippe said, kicking aside old newspapers. 'Pity it's taking so long. Damn the old man for leading such a complicated life.'

Apolline and Parry followed him up the stairs, both pausing on the landing to admire a large portrait in oils of a woman of stately bearing. Seated in an elaborate armchair against a backdrop that looked like a stage set, she was dressed in an evening gown of old-gold satin and surrounded by a curious collection of objects: artist's tools-of-trade, children's toys, military regalia and a rifle complete with bayonet. Adding to the strangeness of the composition, a large window in the painting's upper left quadrant opened out onto a distinctly Australian landscape of a grassy plain with rolling indigo hills behind and framed by eucalyptus saplings.

'Hurry up,' Philippe called to Apolline and Parry who were still standing in front of the painting.

'Coming,' they replied in unison and hurried up the stairs to follow their host into a suite of rooms furnished in art deco style – very different to the heavy décor of the ground floor. The graceful lines of the cabinets and chairs, and the glowing colours of lampshades and mirror frames gave out a feeling of elegance.

'These were my mother's quarters,' Philippe said. 'Can't say I cared much for Cassandra's taste. Nor did my father.'

‘On the contrary,’ Parry said, looking around. ‘I think it’s beautiful.’ He pointed to a bronze statuette of a lithe young woman in a dancing pose, an expression of joy on her face, a work at once sensual and restrained. ‘That’s very good.’

‘My mother’s work,’ Philippe replied, dismissing it with a wave of his hand.

Parry moved towards a desk made of precious timbers and ran his hands across its lustrous surface. ‘May I?’ At Philippe’s nod Parry opened the top drawer.

‘What are you looking for?’ Philippe asked, a wary expression on his face.

‘Information about Constance Crookstone basically, *and* to see her paintings.’

‘There aren’t many and there are none in here. That weird painting on the landing is one of hers. The rest are in a room with other artworks. I keep it locked. I’ll need to get the key from my car,’ Philippe said in a surly tone.

‘In the meantime, can we look at the things in your mother’s desk?’

Philippe hesitated. ‘I never thought much of the way my mother went about her life, so why not?’ Yet he did not leave the room immediately. A softer look came over his face as his gaze roamed over his mother’s possessions, as if there remained in this hard man a trace of childhood memories.

Apolline approached the desk, as curious as her husband to investigate its contents. She picked up a photograph in an antique silver frame, inspected the image then turned it over. On the back, a caption indicated it was a photo of the wedding party of Albertine Styning and Gaston Renardier.

‘That’s her brother, my father, in the photo too.’ Philippe pointed to a tall autocratic looking man standing next to the bride. ‘Everybody thought she had made a good match. It didn’t turn out that way. Gaston was a fool to get caught.’

‘What do you mean? I... we... know a little of the story of his trial...’

‘He didn’t know what he was getting into. The family tried to protect him. Nevertheless, he confessed to having handed artworks over to the Nazis. Very few of them were ever found you know.’

Philippe stopped abruptly. ‘That’s enough of the family’s dirty laundry. Why don’t you hurry up and look around so we can leave as soon as possible? As I said before this house gives me the creeps. I’ll open that other room.’

He headed for the stairs, leaving Apolline and Parry alone with the mementos of Cassandra’s life.

Parry picked up the wedding photo, fixing his gaze on Gaston Renardier. ‘He’s the one who started the whole sorry business. I’ll take a photograph of it, and also one of the caption on the back. We’d better hurry.’

Apolline extracted a packet of envelopes with Australian postmarks from the open drawer and untied the ribbon holding them together. The letters were from Cassandra’s parents and brother, mostly about the doings of country life in New South Wales, much of it a parallel of Parry’s own family’s history: tales of drought and flood, stories of picnics on the banks of the region’s many fast-flowing rivers, and descriptions of family gatherings, miners’ strikes and local cricket matches.

In another drawer Parry found press clippings of art exhibitions and correspondence between Cassandra and her London agent, plus lists of her sculptures. ‘The asking prices are impressive,’ he said. ‘She was a much more successful artist than I’d realised.’

‘Perhaps that’s because she was such a shadowy presence in this strong-willed family,’ Apolline replied.

She found an album of photographs: family groupings, informal shots of Philippe and his sister Marie-Jeanne as children, and one of Cassandra with her aunt Constance, taken in 1947 according to the caption on the back. The two women were standing, arms entwined in front of a white weatherboard cottage. Although she would have been about sixty when the photograph was taken, Constance Crookstone carried herself well. She had a wide mouth, a firm chin and a gleam in her eyes. Cassandra resembled her

aunt although her features were more delicate. Constance appeared determined and resolute, Cassandra a quiet dreamer.

It was the first time Parry had seen a photo of Constance Crookstone. 'She looks familiar,' he said. 'From where?' He took shots of the framed photograph.

Apolline replaced the album and was closing the drawer when Philippe rushed in.

'Got a call from my office. We'll have to leave, now. Hope you've found what you wanted.'

Apolline took one last look around the room. 'What about Constance Crookstone's paintings?'

Philippe was already rushing down the stairs. Apolline and Parry also started to descend, stopping to look again at the large portrait on the landing.

'Come on,' Philippe called impatiently over his shoulder. 'We need to go.'

Parry only had time for a couple of hasty point-and-shoot photographs before following their host to the ground floor. Philippe was waiting on the front steps.

'I know who *she* is,' Philippe said, jerking his head towards Apolline. He looked suspiciously at Parry, 'I still don't know exactly who *you* are and what you want.'

Parry was about to explain when Philippe's phone buzzed and all chance of further conversation receded.

'Follow me,' Philippe said with authority. 'On second thoughts I'll follow you, to make sure you leave.'

They climbed into their respective cars and drove away from the house.



That night, mealtime was a cheerful affair, the little boys relishing the full attention of both parents. It was not until quite late in the evening that Parry had time to download the photographs taken that day and show them to his wife.

'Gaston Renardier and Louis Styning,' Apolline said, pointing to the two men in the wedding group photo. 'They look so ordinary, so normal. You'd never think they were such crooks.'

'Maybe not,' Parry replied. 'How do you tell? It's not written across their faces... seldom is. That's often the problem.'

He scrolled through the rest of his images. 'Damn. Most of them are too blurry to make anything out clearly.'

'Which ones?'

'The photos of that huge painting on the landing. Philippe Styning said it was by Constance Crookstone. He was in such a hurry to leave I didn't have time to line it up for a good shot.'

Apolline peered at the photo. 'The plaque set into the frame is reasonably clear: "The Curlew". The painting's title? How peculiar.'

'Another layer to the mystery. Why do we keep getting into complicated situations?'

'Don't know. Make sure you print everything as an added precaution.' Apolline gestured to the files on his desk. 'I've made some progress – an email response to our newspaper advertisement in England, from the daughter of a woman who worked as a volunteer nursing aid in a convalescent home near Hastings. She says she remembers her mother speaking about an Australian patient who'd lost the use of his left arm and often talked about life not being worth living. The daughter says her mother didn't know what happened to him. She's given me her phone number. I'll call her when – if – I go to London.'

'I've had some success too,' said Parry. 'A letter this time. It's unsigned and there's no return address. It gives details of a war grave in southern England for someone answering Richard's circumstances. The

year “1917” could be a possibility – although that would conflict with his paintings of later date. The name Richard matches, but “Lavalier”?

‘Is it a name somewhere in the Crookstone or Styding families? Maybe Cassandra can tell us.’

Parry turned back to the day’s file of photographs. ‘No. There’s nothing except a short note about her sister-in-law, Albertine. Want me to read it out?’

At Apolline’s nod, Parry began:

Louis and Jacqueline Styding’s first child – a son, also called Louis – was born in 1915. Albertine was born a year later. At the age of twenty-four, she met Gaston Renardier at a soirée for the cultural and intellectual elite of Geneva. He was an up-and-coming art curator for whom great things were predicted. Albertine liked the idea of a man who was knowledgeable about art. Her parents were not keen but being a headstrong girl, they acquiesced to the union. The marriage took place in the grounds of the family home in September 1941. It was a sumptuous affair given the time and circumstances...

‘That’s all? I wonder if Cassandra had been intending to write more family history?’ Apolline rested her head on Parry’s shoulder wanting to hold onto the feeling of success the day had brought them. ‘What about a nightcap?’

Parry went to the kitchen to pour two small glasses of *poire William* liqueur. As he re-entered the living room, he handed Apolline her glass and switched on the radio. A sad and strangely beautiful piece of music flowed out. They sat in silence until the last haunting strains died away. The presenter announced the first three songs of Welsh composer Peter Warlock’s song cycle *The Curlew*.

‘*The Curlew*... The title of Constance’s painting,’ Apolline said softly.

‘Do you think she had a lover? Someone killed in the war?’

‘Possibly. Something tragic must have happened.’

‘I agree,’ Parry replied. ‘I’m going to look up that music. See if there are any clues in the lyrics.’

‘I’ll be upstairs. By the way, have you seen the cat? She wasn’t at the front door when we arrived home.’

‘No, now you mention it. Ah, before you go, here’s what I’m looking for. Warlock’s songs are based on poems by W B Yeats, and were written in the 1920s for a singer and an ensemble of wind instruments. The songs are about lost love and mourning, and of reproving the curlew for something he or she has done. One song is about crying when the moon murmurs to the birds, another about wandering by the edge of a desolate lake.’

‘Would Constance base a painting with Australian landscape in it on some Irish poetry, sad as it is?’ Apolline asked.

‘I don’t think so,’ Parry replied. ‘It must be something else. Indigenous Australians have legends about birds and animals. We can check tomorrow.’



Apolline closed her eyes but her brain refused to shut down. Over the years, she’d thought very little about Parry’s home country, Australia, and even less of its first people. She knew nothing of their legends. She hated being so ignorant and got out of bed to fetch the tablet computer and search for stories that might involve a curlew. She found several – tragic tales of transgression and loss. She touched Parry lightly on the arm. ‘Are you awake?’

‘Difficult not to be with you roaming around.’

‘You started it when you mentioned Indigenous legends, so I went looking for stories about the

curlew. Do you want to hear what I've found?

Parry turned towards her. 'Might as well. I'll not get any peace until you've told me.'

Apolline threw him a sheepish look before giving him a summary of the story. 'It's about a woman who left her baby son under a tree while she followed her lover into the bush. When they returned some hours later, the baby was lying dead in the blazing sun.'

Apolline stopped, a look of distress on her face. 'How awful. She must have felt so guilty. I could never imagine leaving my children or putting them in danger.'

'Nor could I. Keep going.'

'The boy's father became extremely angry and challenged the other man. They fought for hours until both were exhausted. Then the father picked up his son's body, walked into the sea and drowned. The mother was changed into a curlew to roam the forest at night, wailing with remorse and sorrow over the loss of her son.'

'How tragic, losing a child.' Apolline shivered. 'I would not even try to imagine such a thing.' She put her arms around Parry's neck, holding him tight.

'Neither could I,' he replied, moving closer into Apolline's embrace.

'The story doesn't quite fit with what we know of Constance's circumstances,' Apolline said, brushing a hand lightly across Parry's face. 'Did she have a child?'

'There's no evidence she married, in fact quite to the contrary. There must be something; it's too much of a coincidence,' Parry said as he turned out the light.



CONSTANCE: 1952

It was several weeks before Constance had the courage to open memory's door again:

1923

My son was born in June 1923. I named him Pierre, after the artist Pierre Bonnard whose sense of colour I admired very much. Pierre's father was Louis Roland Styming, a wealthy French businessman who was also something of an art connoisseur.

I understand now that our first meeting was not the accident I thought it had been. Louis already knew about my art. He had also heard of Richard Crooks and was intrigued by that artist's hermit-like existence after World War I. On learning that we were both Australian and, given the similarities in our surnames, he wondered if there was a connection between us. Louis made a point of seeking me out on a trip he made to London in 1922. I did not realise that he was hoping to find some scandal surrounding the mysterious Richard Crooks with a view to obtaining his work at low prices.

Shy, not used to the ways of the world and still grieving for my brother, I fell for Louis' charms. He invited me to the theatre; promised a trip to Paris – 'with separate rooms, of course' – at a grand hotel. We spent a wonderful week in the French capital, visiting all the famous museums, eating at the best restaurants. Louis kept asking me about Richard. Although determined to keep my secret, under his relentless pressure I finally said I knew Richard as a cousin from a distant branch of the family that had changed its name. That was all.

On our last night in Paris, after a particularly sumptuous dinner with excellent champagne, I lowered my guard, went with Louis to his room and spent the night with him. I surprised myself. The night was an experience in passion I would never forget. I was becoming besotted with Louis and wanted to know more about him. In the morning when he went to the bathroom, I looked in the bedside table drawer. There I found a wedding ring in a box and a photograph in his wallet of a woman, a boy and a girl: clearly his wife and children. What a fool I had been! Before Louis returned to the bed I dressed quickly, gathered up my things, slipped out of the room and left the hotel. I caught a train to Calais and the boat to Dover. My plan to leave Britain and return to Australia had to change when I found I was pregnant. In spite of my distress, I could not countenance an abortion: there had been so much loss of life in the Great War that I would not contribute more.

I settled in a village close to Richard's convalescent hospital where I helped teach handicrafts to the men who were still there: men who had lost their minds or who were so maimed they were unable to look after themselves. I also helped with art and craft classes at local schools to earn money to support myself and continue paying the rent on Richard's studio although I relinquished the lease on my own. Seven months later when the pains began, I called on the woman who had been one of Richard's nurses. She helped me through the labour to give birth to a baby boy.

I was afraid Louis would return to England and track me down. I knew also that to protect my baby from his far-reaching influence, I would have to hide him, somehow. It was fairly easy in Pierre's first year of life. Once he was walking and wanting to play outside, it became more and more difficult to conceal his existence. I wrote to my aunt Charlotte to ask if she could look after the boy. She said she would consider my request, so I left Pierre in the care of the English nurse while I visited Charlotte in Switzerland to make arrangements. When I explained the circumstances, my aunt agreed. Three weeks later it was with the heaviest of hearts that I travelled to the market garden suburb of Troinex-Dessus on the outskirts of Geneva to leave my son in her care, aided by her young

housekeeper, Mathilde, the daughter of a family from the village of Bessey-sous-Salève, across the border in France.

Although it distressed me greatly to leave Pierre behind, I could not take him with me when I returned to Australia to visit my parents. They were getting on in years and were increasingly frail and the shame of an illegitimate grandson would have been too much for them. I also needed to return home for Richard's sake. To keep his name alive in the art world in Australia I wanted to organise another exhibition of his work.

Charlotte sent me regular news of Pierre's progress. When she died Mathilde became the boy's guardian and continued to correspond. Charlotte made provision in her will for Mathilde to look after the boy in her home until 1948 when he would reach the age of twenty-five. Mathilde was then instructed to give Pierre a letter from Charlotte's lawyer, which would not only name him Charlotte's heir but also reveal the names of his parents.

Mathilde was only too happy to comply. Charlotte's house was far more comfortable than anything her own family could ever afford. She had a suitor and although she would not marry him (worried it might compromise the terms of Charlotte's will) she lived with him as his wife and they had four children. Pierre became one of a large family and grew up as a carefree village child.

It all seemed so safe and comfortable until 1948, when Pierre was given the letter explaining his heritage.



CHAPTER 7

Last to breakfast, Apolline ruffled her sons' fair heads before kissing Parry on each cheek, Savoyard fashion and plunging into the business of the day.

'Bonjour chère. An email's arrived from the senior partner. He liked the idea of my going to England and suggested in two days' time. What do you think?'

'That's sudden. We'll manage. Before you leave...' Parry hesitated. 'I've organised a session at that centre in Grenoble tomorrow – 7.30 am. It might mean a long day...?'

Apolline laughed. 'It's a deal. I'll pick the boys up to give you plenty of time. Then you'll have something to work on while I'm away,' she said brightly.

'Thank you very much.' Parry grinned and kissed her ear before turning to the coffee machine. Cup in hand he wandered into his study to check overnight emails.

'How about this for news?' he said, returning to the kitchen. 'It's another response to our newspaper advertisement; this time from the grandson of one of the nurses who worked at that convalescent home during World War I. He says his grandmother often talked to him about the war when he was a child. She remembered one soldier who might fit the description of Richard Crooks – an artist who was in a bad way.'

'We *know* he was seriously injured.' Apolline was impatient to leave.

'There's more. The grandmother-nurse used to talk about a woman who visited that soldier. Once she brought art materials – paper, pastels and charcoal, that sort of thing – so the man could draw sketches of the wards and grounds of the Home. He became frustrated and threw them in the waste bin. The visitor retrieved the drawings and the grandmother-nurse asked if she could have one as a keepsake. The woman gave her a view out over the fields with tall trees along one side. Guess what? The grandson still has it.'

'That *is* interesting. P'raps I can pay this man a visit and see the drawing for myself?' Apolline was now giving Parry her full attention. 'Where does he live? I hope he's given you an address.'

'There's even more,' Parry replied. 'The grandmother-nurse thought the two might be related. After the woman left, she checked the visitors' book. The woman's name was Constance Crookstone.'

'That is progress,' exclaimed Apolline, now as excited as Parry. 'I've found something you might appreciate. Remember the name "Lavalier" on that war grave in southern England? We must've missed a detail somewhere so I reread Cassandra Crookstone's file. Her grandmother was Anne Lavalier, who would have been Richard and Constance's mother. "Richard Lavalier" *has* to be Richard Crooks.'

'This adds a whole new chapter to the story, doesn't it? Of course, we should go to the police.'

A small silence stretched to a long one. Apolline finally broke it. 'We don't know if this has anything to do with the burglary. It might just be a family's sad, private story. I'd hate to stir up old tragedies for no good reason. Can we keep it to ourselves for a while?'

'That's what I was thinking,' Parry replied. 'Let's take each step as it presents itself. My first task is to sort out which artist created those paintings. Actually...' shouts and sounds of scuffles were coming from the living room, 'my very first task is to get those two terrors to school.'

'Still haven't seen Pinky. Have you?' Apolline called after him.

At that moment Parry's phone rang. 'Grenoble,' he relayed to his wife. 'The head of investigative research has emailed me some forms to fill in.'

'Speaking of forms, I'm to check at the Archives again today.'



For a second time Mlle Collomb-Richard was apologetic, to the point of allowing Apolline into the storage area to show her the empty space where the Renardier files were supposed to be.

'Could someone've put them elsewhere?' Apolline asked.

The younger woman shook her head. 'The public is not allowed in here, only authorised personnel. Someone must have...' she stopped, unwilling, Apolline suspected, to blame her colleagues. They both stared at the shelves willing the Renardier files to materialise.

'I wonder if anything else is missing?'

Mlle Collomb-Richard did not reply as she escorted Apolline to the downstairs foyer without further comment.

Restless after this frustrating second visit to the Archives Apolline walked towards Annecy's Municipal Library in the Bonlieu Centre, to browse the section on Nazi art theft in the hope of finding evidence of Gaston Renardier's complicity. The library's catalogue contained hundreds of entries; Apolline's enthusiasm flagged. She had to be in the office soon; perhaps it would be better to leave her search for a later date.

Monique greeted her with relief in her voice. 'I'm glad you're back early. The boss was becoming annoyed that you weren't here even though I explained that you'd worked through the meal break. Can you go and see him straightaway, please?'

Apolline headed towards the senior partner's office at the end of the hallway. A gruff '*Entre*' greeted her knock. A veritable inquisition ensued as to why it had been so important to absent herself during office hours. Even an explanation that she was following up leads in the Styning estate did not satisfy Maître Leydener who reminded her she was a lawyer, not a detective, and should confine herself to legal matters.

Chastened Apolline hurried to her own office, closed the door and breathed a sigh of relief. She would have to be more careful – and more ingenious – if she were to clear up the mysteries that were disrupting their lives.



Apolline sent an email to the boys' school to book them into after-class care and passed the day finalising several difficult matters. She had barely arrived home with the children when Parry rang.

'I'm driving so the phone's on speaker. It's been a fascinating day and I've lots to tell you about the analysis of the paintings. During my visit to the art museum in Grenoble I found more potential twists to the tale. I sent a text message to the boss telling him I'd take the paintings back first thing tomorrow. However...' the phone signal faded for a few seconds.

'What did you say? I missed the last bit.'

'Went through a tunnel. Bronsard has demanded I return the paintings to his office tonight. I'll have to detour via Geneva and so be home later than expected. I'll ring you when I'm leaving the city.'

The phone cut out again. Apolline did not try to return the call and turned her attention to the boys and their meal. Yet someone other than her husband was missing from the family gathering.

'Have either of you seen Pinky?' she asked the twins.

Pascal, always the more anxious of the two, wanted to know if something had happened to her. Apolline made light of the animal's absence but she was worried and made a mental note to check the house thoroughly after the boys were in bed. As she was clearing away the plates, her phone rang. It was Parry again. 'Hi. I thought I'd ring to keep myself awake.'

Apolline could hear the car radio on in the background. 'What's that?'

'*Suisse Romande*. It's a strange piece of music – like chant or plainsong.' They sat quietly, listening to the polyphony of voices.

The music faded away. There was a pause before the announcement of its name: *Curlew River* by Benjamin Britten.

'There it is again, the curlew. Another story of a mother's grief. What *is* its connection to Constance Crookstone?'

'Haven't the faintest idea. It's weird driving to the company's office at night when the streets of Geneva are deserted. About to park. The lights are on in Bronsard's office.' Parry's voice became fearful. 'I wonder if he's alone. I hope that minder man, Bruno, isn't there. Lina, I don't want to do this tonight.'

'You have no choice *chéri*,' Apolline said in a soothing voice. 'You must return the paintings to Bronsard.'

'At least I've got photos *and* done all research possible. I've also made a useful connection with the curator in Grenoble who's going to pursue the origins of some paintings in his museum's collection. I guess there's nothing more to be gained by holding on to the three canvasses.'

The phone went silent. 'Parry, are you still there?' Apolline asked.

'Yes, just getting the paintings out of the car. At least I can't be "disappeared" again without a trace – like last time,' he continued in a slightly strangled voice. 'I've a record of where I've been all day and you've got the records of our phone conversations telling you where I'd be. Must go.'



Apolline suggested a bedtime story. Her mind was only partly on what she was reading, her ears alert for the ringtone that would herald a call from Parry. Once the boys were asleep, she searched the house in vain for the cat. In the garage she found only a shadowy emptiness. Apolline's phone rang; she hurried inside to take the call.

'All done.' The relief in Parry's voice was palpable. 'It was a strange experience though. As soon as I arrived, Bronsard grabbed the paintings and handed them to a man who was standing in the corner of the office.'

'Did you recognise him? What did he look like?'

'No, I've never seen him before. He was dressed in a well-tailored suit and expensive-looking overcoat and wore a British "old school" tie. Bronsard didn't introduce us and the man disappeared with the paintings into Bronsard's private quarters. I asked the boss if he'd like to see the results of the analyses. That seemed to upset him, and he carried on about the tests having been an unnecessary waste of time since the paintings were exactly what they appeared to be and would be going to auction with the rest of the S... and then he stopped.'

'S... Sounds as if he were going to say "Styming".'

'That's what I thought. Bronsard was quite rude. I'd had a long day and I wasn't very polite myself. Said I just wanted to go home. He said he'd see me tomorrow and that there were things to discuss. As I left the building, I looked up to see the office already in darkness. I'm on my way, see you soon.'



At the sound of Parry's car, Apolline rushed to the front door. As soon as he'd taken off his coat and put down his briefcase, she hugged him tightly then led him to the kitchen.

'You must be starving.' She poured them both a glass of wine and reheated the food she had put aside for him. 'Tell me about your day.'

'There's a lot,' he replied. 'Where to start?'

'How about at the beginning?'

'Yes ma'am.' Parry playfully punched her arm. 'The ERF Centre's on the edge of the Isère River. It's a complex of buildings surrounding an enormous circular structure. I wasn't sure where to go but lights came on in what looked like a reception building so with the three paintings I headed in that direction. After I'd shown my visitor's permit and identity card the guard issued me with a site badge.'

'I don't need *all* the details,' said Apolline wryly.

Parry looked nonplussed. 'I thought you said *everything*.'

'Keep going then.'

'A woman came out, ushered me inside and introduced me to members of the Safety Group who were dressed in pale blue overalls. They took me to a room where I was kitted out in a similar garment before being guided towards a waiting minibus that took us to a block of laboratories and offices connected by a footbridge to the hall that contained the 844-metre circumference ring.' Parry scratched his head. 'I don't think I can describe exactly how the huge machine works – very complicated.'

'Doesn't matter. I probably wouldn't understand it anyway. Give me the overall picture.'

'The man who accompanied me told me they'd be examining the paintings on the X-ray Fluorescence Microscopy beamline. It identifies the presence of different elements by bombarding the surface with X-rays.'

Apolline refilled their glasses.

Parry resumed his tale. 'In an insulated room called a hutch the material being examined was secured to a mechanical stage. Before the scan began, all personnel exited the hutch before it was locked. The process was then monitored by remote cameras. I was told it would take a few hours. I had to wait in the staff room. I was able to get a fairly decent cup of coffee. The chairs weren't very comfortable.'

Apolline smiled, picturing Parry trying to fold his long lean frame into an office chair.

'When the technicians reappeared, they simply handed the three paintings to me to rewrap and left. The woman in charge escorted me back to the reception area where she gave me a folder of technical results and a summary in lay terms. Then she said something strange but probably true. "I do hope we have been able to answer some of your questions, although, I suspect, not all. Science cannot solve every problem. Especially not those involving human relations, which in this case, might be too strong for the rationality of machines however sophisticated". She shook my hand and wished me good luck.'

'What did you do then?' Apolline asked.

'I went back to the car to look over the results.' Parry patted the thick folder on the chair next to him. 'There are lots of tables, graphs and pie charts and the summary at the front indicates more or less the same findings as those in Geneva, only with more specificity regarding the composition of pigments in the paint layers.'

'What about estimates of when the works were painted?' Apolline interrupted.

'I'm getting to that. Although it was not possible to give a precise year, the analysis confirmed that the Crooks canvas was painted in the 1920s. From the manner of applying paint to the style of the working sketches underneath, the conclusion was that the same person created all three canvasses.'

'If that person were Constance Crookstone, why was she passing off paintings as her brother's work?'

'That of course, is one of our central mysteries,' Parry replied.

‘What did you do after that?’

‘It was only mid afternoon so I thought I’d visit the art museum in Grenoble to see if there were any works there by Constance and Richard. I felt confident I’d recognise their work.’

It had been a long day and Apolline was losing concentration. ‘I’ll get coffee.’

Apolline soon returned with the coffee plus a plate containing cheese and a baguette.

Parry resumed his story. ‘As luck would have it the museum was holding an exhibition of works by regional artists to mark the sesqui-centenary of the birth of a local artist-son. The paintings weren’t particularly memorable artistically, although they were fascinating social documents of a way of life that has virtually disappeared.’

‘How disappointing,’ interrupted Apolline, sure he’d been going to reveal something exciting.

‘Not finished.’ Parry reached for a chunk of bread and a slice of tomme cheese. ‘The gallery next to the exhibition was displaying works from the permanent collection, from the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries. One painting of a village market, whose plaque indicated ‘artist unknown’, had the same brushstrokes, colours and quirky figures as in Constance Crookstone’s Provençal paintings. Other works – ‘artist unknown’ – looked very much like her forays into a post-impressionist style. The museum’s curator was in the building and had time to speak to me. His name’s Delacroix – Arthur. I showed him the photos of Constance Crookstone’s paintings, explaining that she was an Australian artist who painted in a style very similar to those in his gallery and that during World War II she lived at an artists’ commune to the west of Annecy.’

‘Had he heard of the *Villa d’Arte*?’

‘Yes, but knew nothing about it. I mentioned I’d had three paintings analysed at the ERF Centre, the results of which has led to some confusion as to the actual creator of at least one of them.’

‘What was his reaction?’ Apolline asked, her interest rekindled.

‘He said he’d always been curious about the works described as “in the style of” and why there was no documentation for them. Recently he’d unearthed a box of old catalogues that had been badly damaged in the fire in 1944. He hoped to be able to read them once they’d been stabilised.’

‘Fire?’

‘Yes, a fire destroyed sections of the museum including the main exhibition spaces although almost all their treasures were saved due to a tip-off telephone call to the assistant-curator at the time. The administration wing was the first to go up in flames and many of the registers of works were either badly burnt, water damaged or lost completely. The fact that items in the original collections did not quite match the records that had been saved was put down to the confusion of the fire and the upheavals of war and occupation. He then dropped a bombshell: that curator’s name was Gaston Renardier.’

‘Gaston Renardier worked *there*?’

‘It was Renardier who oversaw the construction of the new museum before he was appointed head curator at a museum in Geneva, in 1948.’

‘Did Delacroix say anything else about old catalogues?’

‘They do not mention the paintings I was interested in, but they do list about a dozen works by two regional artists who were highly regarded in the 1920s and 1930s and whose works have disappeared from the museum. I showed him my three canvasses. The similarity in technique between the works on his walls and my paintings was quite striking. Delacroix said he’d arrange to have the museum’s canvasses analysed as soon as possible. His phone rang and he had to leave. And that’s it.’ Parry yawned.

‘Enough for tonight – for both of us.’

Upstairs, Apolline’s bag was ready for her trip to London. When she reached their bedroom, Parry was asleep. She climbed into bed and leant over to kiss him before turning off the light.

CHAPTER 8

'It feels odd to be going away like this.' Apolline hugged Parry at the passport control gates at Geneva airport. 'A guilty pleasure?'

'Not at all. You deserve a break. We'll be fine.'

'Oh, so I'm expendable, am I?'

'Of course not. That tongue of yours. Enjoy yourself. Do some sightseeing. Now go!'

Apolline hitched her bag higher on her shoulder, gave Parry a kiss and disappeared into the airport world of bright lights and loud announcements. She settled into her seat on the plane to London and took out the Styling file. She'd read the documents so many times she almost knew them by heart. More intriguing was the blurry photograph of the portrait by Constance Crookstone that was hanging in the Styling house. *The Curlew*... a title that did not appear to have anything to do with the woman in the painting. What to make of the background with its depictions of murder and mayhem and the landscape through the open window behind the figure? Parry thought it looked like the countryside of the Hunter Valley. Apolline had been there, once, although the holiday had been occupied with their babies and his parents. Constance's cottage? She would like to visit it and get Mal to teach her something about Australian art. Their boys were half Australian; it was their birthright after all. She'd never given much thought to the implications of this shared heritage. What would it be like to live in Australia? Spend a year travelling the country, as Mal and Ludo were doing?

The sounds of an approaching food trolley interrupted her reverie. She ate the snack absentmindedly, still thinking about belonging – and travelling.



At Heathrow Airport Apolline caught the express train to Paddington Station, made her way via the underground rail system to the hotel where she had booked a room. She checked in, dumped her overnight bag on the bed and left almost immediately, carrying the briefcase containing the Styling documents. In London's streets the English voices and accents from everywhere were very different to Parry's Australian drawl and for a second she hesitated, unsure of where to go.

Catching sight of herself in a shop window, Apolline squared her shoulders. 'This is *my* adventure and I am determined to make the most of it,' she said to her reflection.

The nearby Whitechapel district with its colourful stalls and exotic bazaars was a world away from the sedate village markets in Haute-Savoie that sold cheeses smelling of alpine pastures, seasonal fruit and vegetables and displays of gardening and snow-clearing equipment.

She had over an hour to spare before her appointment at the solicitor's office. As she passed the Whitechapel Gallery, on a whim she went inside. A display of posters from previous exhibitions filled the entrance foyer. Apolline was surprised to see one for a show of Australian art with Constance Crookstone listed as a participating artist. From 1913 to the mid-1920s Constance's name appeared in several exhibitions mounted by a London art club at the Whitechapel premises. Richard Crooks was listed in the same club's exhibition of September 1920.

From 1922-1924 Constance Crookstone participated in exhibitions of Modern British Art with landscapes, still life and post-impressionist works. She was also listed in an art club's show for 1938. A

May 1939 exhibition of Contemporary French Painting had included two works by Richard Crooks. Apolline also found Cassandra Crookstone's name next to a number of bronze pieces in shows of British sculpture in the early 1950s.

In the gallery café she ordered a coffee and telephoned the solicitor in whose office the signing was to take place. Apolline also rang the woman whose mother had been a volunteer nursing aid at the convalescent home in East Sussex during World War I. Although the woman was willing to talk generally about the Voluntary Aid Detachments, she was reluctant to reveal any personal information.

'The Voluntary Aid Detachments – that's the VADs – were formed in 1915 as a branch of the Red Cross, when everyone realised the scale of the effort required to support the war,' she said. 'At first public opinion dismissed the organisation as "just another society fad" but the VADs soon became an essential auxiliary workforce, mobilising thousands of women to assist in the care of returned soldiers.' Her tone became cooler.

'The end the war did not bring great rejoicing. Everyone was exhausted and too many lives had been destroyed. Then the Influenza Pandemic began and VADs were working harder than ever, some battling the flu themselves. My mother was lucky... she survived. There's nothing I can tell you about the soldier "Richard" except that he might be buried in the Hastings Cemetery. It contains around two hundred graves of Commonwealth soldiers from World War I.'

'That's very interesting, thank you. Can you think of anything else?'

'My mother had some souvenirs and a diary. We lost most of our belongings in The Blitz in World War II. I have only one photograph of my grandparents, and none of my father. He was killed in North Africa, so you'll understand, I don't like talking about the past much.'

'You've been very helpful. You have my phone number. If you remember anything else, please ring me.'

'Yes. I don't expect there will be,' the woman replied before ending the call.



Apolline spent a scant half hour in the Whitechapel's exhibition of avant-garde video installations. She was having trouble not only in understanding the art but also in finding the concentration necessary to bring about that understanding. Her mind was on the meeting to come. She checked her appearance in a mirror near the exit, pleased with the combination of black skirt, cream shirt and honey-gold jacket enhanced by an agate necklace and earrings, and set out to meet the Styling heirs.

The firm of solicitors had its premises near London's famous legal courts. The building's façade was what Apolline expected: old, dignified and solid. Inside all was shiny and modern with a receptionist to match. No sooner had Apolline given her details than a grey-suited man arrived, introduced himself as the liaising solicitor and ushered her down a corridor and into a room dominated by a massive black granite table.

Two people were already seated: a woman with an electronic notepad in front of her and a man fiddling with his mobile phone. They rose as Apolline entered. The solicitor introduced them as Hélène Williams and Stuart Stymson. Hélène was dressed in the kind of clothes Apolline imagined an artist might wear: a loose-fitting silk shirt in a bold geometric pattern, and black satin trousers under a deep violet velvet jacket braided in the same richly-coloured geometry as her shirt. The man, perhaps a decade younger, was conventionally dressed in a navy suit and a disapproving expression.

Confident in her native French environment, Apolline was ill at ease in this unfamiliar British one. She moved towards Hélène and offered her hand to shake with what she hoped was an air of authority. She hesitated over the verbal greeting to the man, unsure in English if she had the correct level of address

for the occasion. Her solicitor colleague came to the rescue and asked everyone to sit down. Apolline began to explain the procedures required under French law when the door burst open and a man in a gabardine overcoat rushed in full of apologies.

‘Terribly sorry, delayed, couldn’t find the place,’ he gasped. ‘James Stymson. How do you do. Hello brother. Who else do we have here?’

Apolline suppressed a smile. In spite of this chaotic introduction, she quite liked the look of Mr James Stymson. He was much friendlier than his stern brother. She opened the folder in front of her, took out the documents and explained their significance. She told the siblings that their half sister, Marie-Jeanne, was also required to sign them and that her whereabouts were currently unknown. Although concentrating on the task in hand, Apolline sensed a curious tension in the air. Once the signing was complete, Hélène and James visibly relaxed. Stuart’s expression remained troubled.

He started to speak in a hesitant voice about his mother’s difficult life, glancing occasionally at his brother. Ignoring the English lawyer, he directed his question to Apolline. ‘Did you ever meet my father?’

The other two leant forward, again tension in the air.

‘No, I didn’t. I have only met his son, Philippe, your half-brother and...’ Apolline was going to say, ‘he is quite an unpleasant type, and probably very like his father’. She thought better of it and finished with ‘Your father was a successful businessman and such people can be quite difficult.’

‘Ahh...’ James and Stuart replied in unison with rueful smiles.

‘I did meet your father’s second wife, Cassandra. She came to see me...’ Apolline paused, remembering that Cassandra had wanted advice about leaving the cottage in Australia to her daughter. Unsure of how the people in front of her would respond to that piece of information, Apolline made a show of re-arranging her documents to gain time.

The silence extended to a point where it became oppressive. The English solicitor cleared his throat, gathered up his notes and began farewell formalities.

Apolline raised her hand. ‘Wait. There is something more. It is a little difficult so I hope you will understand when I tell you.’

The solicitor looked at his watch. ‘I am truly sorry. I have another appointment.’

Hélène’s expression was encouraging. ‘Do we need to discuss it here? We could go and have something to eat?’

‘Yes, perhaps...’ Apolline hesitated; the two men readily agreed.

With a last nod to the assembled company the solicitor left the room. Apolline and the three Styming siblings followed him to the reception area before walking out into the thin sunlight of a late-autumn day and towards an inviting looking pub.

There was an awkward moment when paying for the drinks and food. James saved the occasion by dropping his change and knocking over a glass of beer on the counter. By the time the mess had been cleaned up even Stuart had begun to relax.

They settled into their seats at a table with a view of the busy street outside.

Hélène spoke first. ‘This is quite a novel experience I must say, meeting two brothers. I was an only child and after my mother’s death I was sent to live with an aunt. I never saw my father again. You both,’ she looked at the two men, ‘you at least saw him occasionally when you were young.’

‘Never for long, and it was never very satisfactory,’ said James. ‘Even though he always had money for our mother and presents for us, all we wanted was a real father. What about you Stuart?’

Stuart nodded. ‘It doesn’t matter now. Still... family... And,’ he looked at Apolline, ‘there’s not only the half-brother Philippe, there’s this Marie-Jeanne as well.’

‘Yes,’ replied Apolline. ‘She is what I want to talk to you about. Marie-Jeanne was left a cottage in Australia by her mother. It belonged to Cassandra’s aunt, the artist Constance Crookstone.’

Apolline thought it odd that there was no reaction from the others but continued with her explanation. ‘That was before Cassandra’s marriage to Louis Styding so the cottage was hers to dispose of how she pleased. Louis did not mention it in his will, although he did include the Constance Crookstone paintings that Cassandra brought back to Europe in 1955.’

Hélène’s gaze was fixed on something outside the building.

Stuart looked at his brother. ‘James? What do you think?’

‘By the sound of things, Marie-Jeanne doesn’t get many lucky breaks. Anyway, it’s a bit too far to go on weekends.’ James gave an uneasy laugh. He too gazed out the window as if to avoid eye contact with anyone at the table. Or so it seemed to Apolline.

‘This family is getting more interesting by the minute,’ said Hélène wryly. ‘Artist you say?’

‘Constance Crookstone was a painter; her brother Richard Crooks was too.’ Apolline hesitated again, searching for the right words. ‘There are works by both these artists in your father’s collection and we are in the process of verifying their provenance.’

‘Who’s “we”?’ James broke in.

‘Myself, through the law firm in Annecy that is dealing with the estate and my husband Parry through his work with an art auction company in Geneva.’

‘What do you know about these two artists?’ asked Stuart.

‘Not a lot although Constance’s movements are better known than Richard’s. He was injured at the battle of Fromelles in 1916, then repatriated to England, possibly to a convalescent home in East Sussex.’

‘Do you know which home?’ asked Hélène. ‘I know that part of England well. I own a cottage near Beckley.’

‘We have reports from descendants of nursing staff who worked in the home he might have been in,’ said Apolline. ‘Because of the disappearance of Marie-Jeanne the paperwork is going to take some time to finalise. I hope none of you is in a hurry for your share of your father’s inheritance. Philippe is...’

‘Philippe is, what?’ demanded Stuart.

‘This is a little awkward...’ again Apolline hesitated. ‘Philippe, as I have said, can be difficult.’

‘Like Louis, our father,’ James replied. ‘None of my memories of him are particularly happy.’

They finished their food and drinks in silence. Stuart looked at his watch. ‘Must go. Coming James?’

‘Nice to meet you Ms Smith.’ James proffered his hand for Apolline to shake then turned to embrace Hélène lightly before leaving with his brother.

‘I trust you, I think,’ Hélène said. ‘Would you like to stay with me in Beckley for a few days? We could look for this mysterious Richard Crooks. I don’t know what kind of art he and Constance made. I’m a conceptual artist myself – wear my art, like Sonia Delaunay.’

‘I can see that. I’ve been admiring your coat. Yes, I would like to accept your offer.’

Apolline chose her words carefully. ‘Since I am the legal representative for the whole family, I cannot show favoritism. I think I can accompany you.’

They swapped phone numbers and shook hands. Hélène walked out of the pub without a backward glance. Apolline lingered over a second cup of coffee, thinking through the events of the past hour, puzzled by the exchanges she had just witnessed – in particular, James being quite familiar with Hélène. I was under the impression they’d never met each other before, Apolline thought, a feeling of unease taking hold.

She telephoned her boss with the news that the signing with the Styding heirs had gone smoothly, almost too smoothly. ‘They seemed very civilised about it I must say, especially the bit about leaving the

Australian cottage and its contents to Marie-Jeanne. I was expecting more resistance.'

'One never knows does one? Still we'll make sure the documents are watertight,' Maître Leydener replied. When are you coming back?'

'In a day or so. I want to check material that might throw light on the provenance of some of the artworks in the estate.'

She was about to say 'Oh, and one more thing, I thought Hélène hadn't met the Stymson brothers before. Yet Hélène and James seemed to know each other quite well,' but her boss had ended the call, leaving this puzzling thought hanging in the air.



Tired from the flight and the tensions of the meeting, Apolline wanted only to close her eyes and put up her feet but on the way back to her hotel she could not resist making an attempt to find the whereabouts of Constance's studio. She found the street easily enough. Disappointingly the actual address was now an office block, no trace of anything as modest as an artist's workplace.

At that moment, her phone rang. She was delighted to hear her husband's cheerful 'hello and how's your day been?' and said so. 'Excellent. Productive. The legal side of things went smoothly.'

'What were they like? The Styming siblings I mean.'

'Hélène seemed nice. She was wearing unusual clothes in beautiful colours. James Stymson was very charming, friendly and untidy looking. Stuart was much more reserved and very correctly dressed – what you'd call "old school tie". He relaxed a little after we'd finished signing the papers. I had a meal with them after we left the solicitor's office. We parted on friendly terms.'

'Lina, was that wise? I mean, socialising with clients while you're in the middle of such a complicated matter.'

'I thought of that. It seemed right for the occasion. Hélène was the friendliest. She...'

Parry interrupted. 'And you haven't even asked me how the children are.'

Apolline felt herself blushing. 'Oh, it's not that...'

'Only teasing,' Parry laughed. 'It sounds as if you've had a good day and that's the main thing. What's next?'

'Tomorrow I'm going to look for art supply places. Hélène owns a house in the south, near Hastings, and has invited me to stay for a couple of days. She said she'd help me look for the convalescent home where Richard Crooks was sent. So, I might need to stay a day longer. Would you mind?'

'Take whatever time you need *chérie*. I can hear from your voice the break is doing you good. The boys and I can't wait to have you back though. We all miss you.'

Apolline covered her pleasure in this by changing the subject and asking Parry how he was getting along with his investigations.

'Slowly,' he replied. 'I've got more results of the tests on those paintings. Quite promising but too complicated to describe over the phone. It'll be interesting to see how the analyses stack up against what you might find out about the kinds of art materials Constance and Richard were using. There's still no sign of Pinky. I'll get the boys to make up notices and ask the neighbours.'

'Good idea. Anything else?'

'I'd like to have a better look at that large painting on the landing at the Styming place. After I take the boys to school tomorrow, I'll drive to Bessey-sous-Salève and see if I can get into the house. Surely there's a caretaker.'

'Don't do any damage,' replied Apolline. 'It'd make you no better than the people who broke into our place.'

‘If I did find something that linked Constance to the Renardiers, it would be worth the effort, wouldn’t it?’

‘Mmm,’ Apolline’s noncommittal reply. ‘Oh, and one more *tiny* thing...’ She was about to repeat the observation about the unexpected familiarity between Hélène and James when there was a childish shout somewhere behind Parry. ‘

‘Must go. Love you.’

Again no one was listening.



CHAPTER 9

Although Apolline didn't really expect to find artists' materials shops that were still in existence in the Whitechapel area from the 1910s and 1920s, she searched anyway. She tried several establishments and was on the point of giving up when a woman at Art & Co Supplies rushed up to her.

'I overheard you talking to Paul. We've been here since 1910. The company always kept duplicates of the ledgers off site, "just in case." And it *was* a case of "in case" as the building was partly destroyed in World War II bombing raids.' She looked closely at Apolline.

'I could let you look through the order books in the back office. What, exactly, are you after?'

'I'm looking for traces of two Australian artists who were living in London, possibly in this area, in the first half of the twentieth century. Anything at all would be of great assistance.'

The woman beckoned to follow her. 'My name's Margaret,' she said, as she searched through an untidy pile of leather-bound registers. Selecting one she ran a finger down the alphabetical list of names in the front then turned the foolscap pages until she found what she was looking for and marked it with a slip of paper. She repeated the process several times. 'I'm sorry, I've quite forgotten your name.'

'Apolline... Apolline Smith'. I'm a lawyer from Annecy in south-eastern France.'

Margaret looked puzzled, 'Smith? That's not very French.'

'No,' Apolline laughed. 'My husband is Australian.'

'Is that why you want to find out about these Australian artists?'

Apolline hesitated, not wanting to divulge more information than was necessary. 'Yes, partly. My sister-in-law is an art historian and she's doing a project on women artists.' Apolline was quite warming to her story. While Margaret looked interested, sounds from the shop indicated a busy morning.

'I've found two orders for Constance Crookstone,' Margaret said. 'A purchase in 1914 of fairly standard paints and brushes plus half a dozen unprimed canvasses. Early in 1917, there was another order for Constance. A long and very specific list of natural pigments, some of them in block form that would need grinding and mixing with linseed oil. The order also included some expensive brushes, medium-sized boards and a couple of sketchbooks.'

'Boards?'

'A hard surface suitable for painting on directly, rather than a canvas that needs preparation. This is interesting,' Margaret said as she turned the page. 'There are orders for Richard Crooks, starting in 1910, for exactly the same materials as in that 1917 one for Constance Crookstone – paints and brushes, linseed oil and beeswax. His orders stopped in 1915, probably when he enlisted. Do you know when he joined the army?'

'Yes. October of that year.'

'After the last order in 1915 there's nothing further under the name of "Richard Crooks". I thought you said he continued to paint into the 1920s and 1930s.'

'Yes, that's correct – or at least that is what exhibition records show,' Apolline replied. 'Constance stayed in England until 1925, according to my sister-in-law's information.'

'There's probably a simple explanation for these overlapping purchases...' Margaret's voice trailed off. 'I don't mean anything illegal, just irregular. Why would Constance be ordering Richard's materials for him?'

A buzzer rang and Margaret closed the register. 'I'm wanted at the front counter. Here's my card, let me know if there's anything else I can assist you with.'

'Thanks. You've been a great help. Would it be possible to have copies of those entries in the sales book?'

'That's somewhat outside our normal business practice. You are a lawyer – trustworthy I hope – so I'll leave you here for a few minutes. The photocopying machine's over there.' She pointed to the opposite corner. 'A few sheets won't ruin the company. Be quick though.'

Apolline made copies of all the relevant pages. She also took photos of them on her phone, glad Parry had suggested she get the new model before leaving Annecy. Curiosity got the better of her and she checked for herself the names at the front of the sales book. There was another order for S and R Crookstone, a large one, in 1925. The quantity of paints to be supplied was far more than those of the previous orders and all were consistent with the materials Richard himself had ordered. A glance at the register for the late 1930s – a period when Constance was known to have been in England – showed there were additional, similar, orders for S & R Crookstone. The address given looked to be a hotel or a boarding house.

She had finished photographing the pages when Margaret returned. 'Got what you wanted?' Her impatient tone indicated Apolline should be leaving.

'All done,' Apolline said. 'I cannot thank you enough. This search through the old ledger has been most productive.'

The two women shook hands. Margaret returned to the shop. Apolline walked in the direction of a pub to eat an early lunch and gather her thoughts before contacting Hélène. She emailed all the photographs to Parry and Mal with an explanation of where she had been, plus an email to her boss about what she had been doing.

A reply text from Parry arrived almost immediately. He didn't mind that she would be away longer than planned. A rush of love came over her as she thought of their life in Annecy, so idyllic... At least it had been, before the burglary. She was brought back to the present by the melodic ringtone of her new phone.

It was Hélène, sounding curt. Disconcerted, Apolline found conversational English deserting her and she replied with a formal: 'Hello, how are you? Thank you for ringing. I am pleased to talk to you again.'

The other woman's tone reset to 'friendly' as she repeated her invitation to take Apolline south to visit the convalescent home.

'We can leave this afternoon. I'll pick you up from your hotel at three o'clock. We won't be able to do much today. We'll have plenty of time tomorrow.'

'Thank you,' said Apolline. 'I'm staying at the...' For an unaccountable reason, she gave the name of a hotel she had seen around the corner from the one where she was actually staying. 'I'll be waiting out the front.'

'Good', replied Hélène, ending the conversation.

Apolline hurried back to her room at *The Artist and His Model* to pack an overnight bag. Before locking all her documents plus the photocopies in the wardrobe safe, she sent an email to Parry detailing her plans, adding her earlier observation about Hélène and James seeming to know each other well.

On the ground floor, she left the lobby via the hotel's terrace café and walked across the road to *The Painters' Arms* hotel. After making a reservation for three nights, she hurried to her allocated room, dropped a magazine on the bed, locked a folder of art brochures in the safe and turned on the bathroom light. Five minutes to the hour she was standing, composed, on *The Arms'* front steps. Hélène pulled up in a sporty sedan as the chimes of three o'clock pealed out from a nearby church.

'Be quick. I can't stop long in this traffic.'

'Thanks,' gasped Apolline, not quite liking the sound of Hélène's voice, nor the expression on her face, which was a lot less pleasant than it had been the day before. Apolline dumped her bag in the space at the back and climbed into the passenger seat. Her attempts at small talk met with little response so she settled back to enjoy the sights.

Once out of the city, they travelled in a south-easterly direction. The names of towns meant little to Apolline but she made a mental note of them and the distances, even though they were in unfamiliar 'miles'. Her phone rang. It was Parry; she didn't respond.

'Aren't you going to answer it?' Hélène asked.

'It's my husband. Probably something to do with the children.'

'You have children?'

'Yes, four. Two teenage girls and five-year-old twin boys. Parry's my second husband; he's the father of the boys.' She was about to add: 'He's a wonderful father'. She stopped. In the circumstances, it might not be the right thing to say.



They travelled through undulating green pastureland and over dark forested ridges. As the early winter dusk was falling, Hélène turned off the motorway. 'Not far now,' she said as she drove along roads flanked by high hedges and through villages that were little more than rows of houses and an occasional pub before turning into the driveway of a rundown two-storey house.

'I thought you had a cottage,' Apolline said, slightly daunted by the general air of gloom, accentuated by the ancient black trees surrounding the building.

Tall windows barred by ornate grillwork, weathered red-brick walls with eroded stone corners – nothing was welcoming about the place. There was, or had been, a verandah at one side of the house but it had collapsed in a pile of masonry and timber debris.

'It belonged to my aunt, my mother's sister, the one who brought me up,' Hélène said. 'As you can see, I could do with my share of Louis Styding's estate. I don't have the money for renovations. I live in the caretaker's quarters. I'll show you around tomorrow.'

Apolline grabbed her bag and followed her hostess along a flagstone path that led to a neat thatched cottage. Hélène unlocked the door and switched on a light. A warm yellow glow flooded the house.

'What a lovely room,' Apolline exclaimed as she stepped inside. 'Your taste is exquisite.' Her eyes travelled around the richly upholstered furniture clustered in front of a delicately carved mantelpiece. Paintings on the walls glowed in jewel-like colours and small free-form sculptures on plinths and coffee tables danced a graceful choreography. 'You have a flair for design.'

Hélène looked pleased; her voice was warm as she glanced at her companion. 'Thank-you. I'm glad you like it. It's my haven from the world... when the world gets too much.'

'You don't look like the kind of person whom the world overwhelms.'

'You'd be surprised,' Hélène replied, her brusque tone returning. 'Let's eat.'

'I brought you these.' Apolline took a cake box and a bottle of wine out of a carry bag. Hélène indicated the whereabouts of the bathroom. When Apolline returned to the kitchen a few minutes later, Hélène was staring out the window, tugging at her hair. She seemed nervous and brushed away Apolline's enquiry.

They sat at the kitchen table for a simple meal of bread, cheese and salad, together with the wine Apolline had brought plus the apple flan. The phone in the hallway rang. Hélène jumped up to answer it. From the sound of her raised voice there seemed to be a problem but when she returned, she looked

calm enough.

‘Everything alright?’ asked Apolline.

‘Oh yes,’ Hélène replied, a grin on her face. ‘Very all right as a matter of fact. Let’s have some more wine.’

Not sure what to make of this remark, Apolline held out her glass.

Hélène drained hers quickly. ‘We’ll need to make an early start tomorrow if we’re to get everything done,’ she said. ‘I’ll show you to your room. I’m turning in.’

Apolline picked up her overnight bag and followed her hostess upstairs and into the guest bedroom furnished in the same colourful elegance as the ground floor. After half an hour of trying to sleep, Apolline got up and went to the window. She was enjoying the magic of the garden bathed in moonlight when she saw a dark shadow slip across the lawn to the back door of the cottage. Whoever it was, had no trouble entering as the door opened immediately.

Someone downstairs was speaking although not distinctly enough to make out actual words. There was a sound of something heavy being dropped and loud angry voices. Then footsteps rang out on the stairs. Although longing to look out the window again to see if that dark shape was leaving Apolline did not want to be caught spying and climbed back into bed. The footsteps in the hall slowed outside her door, as if someone were listening. Silence. Nothing. The steps receded, the light went out and the house settled into the night.

Yet sleep did not come easily. Apolline’s mind would not calm. She kept thinking of what Parry would have been doing after they’d said good-bye the previous morning. She pictured him approaching the house in Bessey-sous-Salève, wondering what he might find.



CONSTANCE: 1952

It was thirty-five years since her brother Richard had died. Constance was now sixty-five years old. Concerned that his story would die, untold, with her, she poured out her heart in the notebook:

1915-1917

I have not always acted honourably, especially that low moment in 1943 when Gaston Renardier arrived at the Villa d'Arte. It was not the most ethical way to use my talents as an artist but in those dire circumstances.

I have paid for my sins with the worst that can happen. Like the mother curlew, I have cried out in the night, many nights, for my child. And like the mother curlew of legend, I find solace in the thought that he is there, in the heavens, a bright star, with my brother. This is Richard's story, as I remember it. I begin on the afternoon before his army unit was to leave for Dover.

It was October 1915. Richard arrived unexpectedly at my studio with a couple of paintings under his arm. I had not seen him in a while, so it was a nice surprise.

'Hello, I hope I'm not disturbing you,' he said as he thrust the canvasses at me. 'I'd like to leave these with you. If the Germans... There is talk of invasion you know.'

'Of course I'll look after your paintings,' I replied. 'I don't like seeing you go, although I suppose you must.'

'Yes. Britain is our "mother country" after all.'

'I'm not so sure anymore,' I shook my head. 'Come in and have a cup of tea – or something stronger if you like, I've got some brandy.'

Richard entered the studio and looked over an almost-finished canvas on the easel with a professional eye. 'This is good. There are some very modern ideas here,' he said. 'I like this.' He pointed to the foreground of a wide street bathed in moonlight, familiar and not familiar, part Australian country town, part ancient ruins.

'I'm trying to work out who I am, as an artist. Do I belong here or is my true home Australia? Let's have that drink.'

We talked of our shared love of art and it was only when Richard noticed the sun's rays slanting low on my worktable that he looked at his watch. He also saw there was no sign of anything to eat in the studio.

'Why don't we have a meal together?' he suggested. 'I've got my pay. I'll shout you.'

We walked to a restaurant a few blocks away. The waiter apologised for the limited menu. We didn't care. Richard kept the mood light. I tried to match it although the thought of what was to happen the next day weighed heavily on my mind.

As he was paying the bill, Richard said, 'I hope you don't take this the wrong way, I'd like to say good-bye tonight. I'd rather you didn't come to the station tomorrow.'

At my puzzled look, he continued. 'Oh, it's not that I wouldn't want to see you. I'd rather keep the happy memory of tonight.'

'All right,' I replied. 'I'm not sure I wouldn't make a fool of myself.'

'I didn't want anyone to think of me, in case. And now... there is you, my sister,' he ended softly.

'You'll always have me,' I whispered. 'You stood up for me when Father wanted to stop me going to art school. I've never repaid you for that. Please come back.'

We left the restaurant in silence, our good mood dampened by the enormity of events over which we had no control. At my front door, Richard hugged me tightly, whispering 'good-bye and until... take care of yourself.' Then he began walking down the street. At the corner he stopped, turned and saluted, the smile on his face just visible in the lamplight.

I waved until he disappeared into the night. I don't remember how long I stayed on the step, watching the space where my brother had been. Eventually the coolness of the evening sent me inside. I sat in the darkness, trying to remember everything Richard had said, every gesture, every expression. I turned on the light, took up a pad and a stick of charcoal and made sketches of him, to fix his face in my mind.

In the weeks that followed, I scanned the newspapers for news of Richard's battalion. By 1916 the trickle of injured men returning to Britain had become a flood. Many were unfit for their former occupations and needed to bridge the gap between convalescence and normal life – if there were ever to be 'normal life'. Artists answered the call. 'We don't pretend to teach a trade,' one of the women told me at the rehabilitation centre, 'we give the men a chance to employ their time profitably until they are ready to go back to their pre-war jobs or take up new ones.'

I volunteered to help with woodcrafts. We showed the men how to paint the toys they were making under the tuition of a sculptor. I became friendly with an English nurse who came to visit her brother. 'I was a country girl, used to working on a farm and wasn't bothered by blood and mess,' she told me. 'It seemed right to become a nurse since I couldn't join the army. At first authorities were reluctant to send us into clearing stations in war zones. Then they were forced to, in view of the devastating casualty rates on the Western Front.'

She spoke with admiration about the ingenuity, resilience and courage of Australian nurses. 'I was over there from the end of 1915 for eight months and saw some terrible battles, but the Australian women were almost casual about the dangers around them. A bit like your soldiers. They're not like that now, are they?' she said, looking across the room at the men in the workshop.

Without waiting for an answer, she continued as if the floodgates of memory had opened. 'At first the thought of air raids made me feel very anxious; it's amazing how you change. Fritz was flying over so often by day and night that I became accustomed to it. I even learnt to sleep while they were hovering around.'

She clasped her arms to her chest. 'I don't think I'd do it again; go back I mean. I don't know how the men do it. And anyway, there's so much to do here.'

I showed her a press clipping sent by my mother, about a Sydney artists' group that was calling for contributions to an art exhibition with the proceeds of sales going to a fund for injured servicemen in Australia.

'I decided to participate,' I told her, 'and selected one of my most "cheerful" paintings – a lively café scene – plus two charcoal sketches of men boarding the trains on their way to France. I sent them by first-class mail even though it was very expensive. In such dangerous times there was no certainty of them arriving at their destination. I did not care. Anything to help the Empire's soldiers was, in a way, keeping faith with my brother Richard.'

The nurse nodded agreement. 'I'd do anything for my own brother to help him recover,' she said softly.

I was torn between wanting to be in Australia and staying in England, closer to Richard when he returned from the War. I even considered applying to go to France. 'Perhaps once it is all over. If it is ever over.'

Constance put down her pencil, thinking of Paris and her carefree student life there before the war. The magnificent buildings, the grand avenues, the shops and cafés – the idea of them being destroyed was more than she could bear. She banished the thought and continued with her brother's story.

Richard sent me regular cheery postcards with descriptions of visits to towns well away from the front. After the battle of Fromelles, the postcards stopped. I was frantic; I had to find out what had happened to him. I scoured war offices and studied Red Cross bulletins and discovered that many of the troops wounded at Fromelles were soon to arrive in England, to be sent to the south-east. I made a list of hospitals and convalescent homes and covered many miles, mostly on foot, sometimes by bus. After weeks of searching I tracked Richard down to a place in East Sussex.

He was in a terrible state when I arrived at Uplands Lodge – pale, emaciated, barely alive. My first visit did not go well. Richard told me to go away. He said he did not want any visitors. I stood my ground. When he saw me watching him with love and concern, his tears began to flow, the first, he said, since being wounded in that terrible battle.

'I am... pleased... to see you after all,' he said in a low voice, each word an effort. 'I'm alive, I suppose, only just.'

A look of anguish came over his face. 'I... know I won't paint again... ever...'

I gripped his hand tightly. 'You will, you will. You'll see. I'll help you. I want to help you.' My words ended in a sob as I too was overcome by the realisation that Richard might be right.

I found a room in a boarding house nearby and spent many hours at the hospital, only leaving when I was forced to. Weather permitting, I would wheel Richard out of the ward. We held long conversations on the verandah overlooking a lawn punctuated by huge old trees. We talked of the future in optimistic terms, knowing that it was probably not to be. We even planned a studio together – 'after the war' – but there were not many happy endings in that terrible conflict. The wound to Richard's left elbow turned septic (although he had had rudimentary surgery in France, and further work in England to clean out the fragments of shattered bone, it had been too late) and he began to lose feeling in his hand. In the end the doctors had to amputate. I tried to cheer him up, saying it had happened to artists and musicians before; that he could learn to paint with his right hand. Richard was not convinced; the happy-go-lucky fellow had gone, in his place a sombre wraith.

One day, when he seemed a little better, I took out of my bag the sketching materials I always carried with me. 'I thought... maybe...'

His slight smile gave me heart. I did not want to force him, so I waited patiently while he fingered a pencil. Although he eventually shook his head I was encouraged by this small positive response. I returned to London, went to his studio, gathered up what I could and hurried back to the station to catch the first train south.

At the hospital Richard's eyes brightened when I showed him what I had brought. He selected a stick of charcoal. Slowly, on the sketchbook I held in front of him, he began to draw the view from the window with his right hand. The lines were confident and the shading subtle. He began a second drawing. After a few minutes fell back in his pillows exhausted. 'I can't do it,' he said in a hopeless voice.

'You must... Art is your life.' I tried to force a pencil into his fingers.

'No... It's over,' he shouted with the little strength left to him. 'My life... is over.' He shut his eyes. 'No more paintings by Richard Crooks.'

I remember backing away and staring into space, a heavy silence between us. I closed my eyes the better to wrestle with my thoughts. Then I said: 'I'll paint for you. As you. You'll see...'

Richard waved me away. 'It's hopeless. It's no use.'

'No, it's not hopeless!' I opened a notebook and wrote down the names and numbers on his brushes, the grades of charcoal and sketching paper, and the references on the paint tubes I had brought from his studio. 'Tell me what colours you prefer. What are...?'

'Wait,' he said, interrupting my urgent questions, a strange expression on his face. 'Mountains, the Alps. They're very dark now, no sunshine left. You must make them dark.'

A nurse entered the ward and asked me to leave. I was reluctant to break the mood, but she insisted. I gripped Richard's good right hand.

'I have to go now. I'll be back and you'll see. This is going to work. We're going to do it together.'

I kissed his face gently between the bandages.

He gave me a faint smile. 'Good-bye, Constance my faithful sister. Thank you... for all you have done.... Tell... Father... Mother... Tell them...'

I leant over to catch the words, but he had fallen asleep. Looking at the wasted figure, an uneasy premonition shivered over me. I hesitated, unwilling to leave him; the nurse put her hand under my elbow and guided me firmly to the door.

'I'm sorry, you must leave now. The doctors are doing their rounds.'

Lost for words I hurried out of the ward, out of the building.



CHAPTER 10

PARRY

After saying goodbye to Apolline at Geneva airport, Parry set out for Bessey-sous-Salève. New information from Mal had confirmed his guess that the curious background in Constance Crookstone's painting had been copied from another source: *Les Sauvages de la Mer Pacifique*. This series of twenty panoramic wallpaper panels had been commissioned by one Joseph Dufour and created by Jean-Gabriel Charvet to depict the voyages of Captain James Cook. The wallpaper was originally shown in Paris at the *Exposition des produits de l'industrie française* in 1806. Sets were held in museums in Lyon and Macon in France so Constance might have seen it in either of those cities.

One series had been purchased in 1989 by the Art Gallery of NSW and Mal had included a link to a website. Parry was impressed with the high colour of the scenery and the intricacy of the neoclassical composition. Of particular interest were the scenarios unfolding across three of the panels. In number nine, an imposing Islander chief was watching Cook's death in the Sandwich Islands. In panel ten Maori Chief Kaoora, who killed a detachment of Captain Furneaux's crew, was seated on a rock under tropical trees. A New Zealand woman and child were walking with warriors on a trail in panel eleven. It was a world far removed from the Europe in which Parry lived, but the personal dramas of the family whose house he was intending to visit seemed not so very different from those violent confrontations in the Pacific.

He parked in the village square and set out on foot to the Styming residence. For the first time in the day Parry hesitated, pangs of anxiety about being caught in the house turning his legs to jelly. Yet a curious feeling that he had a duty to Constance Crookstone drove him on. He knocked on the front door and waited; there was no response. At the back of the house the rusty hinges of the laundry door gave way with loud groans. Parry waited. Again, no response.

Inside the house a rank smell of old plumbing almost made him turn and flee, the memory of his kidnapping and incarceration in such a place in the south of France rushing in, threatening to suffocate him. 'It's not the same. It's different. I came here of my own free will. I know where I am. I am not tied up and those Renardiers are safely in gaol where they belong,' Parry said aloud to reassure himself.

He walked quickly through the kitchen into the hallway and straight up to the landing and Constance Crookstone's painting. He removed his shoes, dragged over a nearby chair and climbed onto it to inspect the work. The 'tropical island' background certainly resembled an amalgamation of panels nine, ten and eleven from *Les Sauvages*. Parry passed the special torch slowly over the entire work, grid fashion. The preparation of the canvas and the application of pigments appeared relatively straightforward, no hesitation in the composition. Parry took photographs of the whole work and close-ups of sections of the canvas, the frame and the plaque bearing the title. Stepping down off the chair, he grasped the painting firmly at each side and lifted it off its support. Surprised at its weight and the depth of the frame he almost dropped it. He strengthened his grip and averted disaster.

He turned it around to inspect the back. There was neither label nor gallery mark, just 'C C' in black paint next to the date '1952'. He was about to pack up and leave, thinking he had pushed his luck far enough when he noticed two slits at right angles to each other, forming a rectangle about fifteen centimetres high and eight wide in the bottom right hand corner of the backing board. Parry slipped the

thinnest blade of his Opinel penknife into the widest part of the slit and slowly levered the panel out of its resting place. Underneath, in the space between canvas and frame, wedged between the struts of the stretcher, was a small brown leather book.

Parry removed the book, slipped it into a plastic sleeve and put it in his coat pocket. He would worry about the ethics of his action later. He replaced the wooden rectangle taking care it fitted exactly as before. He hung the painting back on its hook, repositioned the chair, put on his shoes, gathered together his implements and tiptoed down the stairs, foregoing a repeat visit to Cassandra's rooms, tempting though it was.

Outside, all was quiet except for the mournful cries of crows. As Parry left the premises an old man in a garden across the laneway looked up and asked if he needed directions. Startled Parry managed 'No, thanks. I'm enjoying your beautiful village.'

The man grunted, 'Ça va' through lips stained by decades of smoking.



The landline was ringing when Parry and the boys arrived home. He hurried inside to answer it.

A man's voice growled, 'Watch yourself Parry. Stop poking your nose into Styming business that doesn't concern you and give up all this nonsense about Australian artists.'

'Who's this?' Parry asked in a loud whisper. 'Are you threatening me?'

'No,' said the voice. 'Just warning you – for now.'

The line went dead, leaving Parry mystified and worried, all thoughts of inspecting the book hidden in Constance's painting vanishing in his need to protect his family. He decided to contact Detective Favre before ringing Apolline to tell her about the mysterious phone call, not wanting to spoil her time in England.

Favre answered immediately. 'Have you any idea who it might have been?'

'No,' Parry replied, concern in his voice. 'It must be either something to do with my work for Thomas Bronsard or Apolline's involvement in the Styming estate – or both.'

Favre was taking his time to answer. Parry needed immediate action.

'I think I should take the boys to their grandparents in the mountains for a few days.'

'A good idea to get the boys out of Annecy,' came Favre's voice. 'I've put you on speaker as we might need to order some surveillance. Where do the grandparents live? I'll get the gendarmes there to keep an eye on them. What about Apolline's daughters?'

'They're staying with their father, in Lyon.'

'They should be fine.' Parry heard footsteps approach the phone and Favre issuing instructions. It was a minute or so before he spoke again to Parry. 'That's organised. By the way, I spoke to Madame Lévrier, the headmistress at the boys' school, a couple of days ago about keeping an eye out for loiterers around the premises. She'll be discreet. I urge you to do likewise.'

'Err... yes... thank you,' was all Parry had time to say before Favre ended the call.

Next Parry called Apolline's parents, Giselle and Martial. They would be delighted to have the twins. 'I'll tell Gregory and Pascal it's a surprise holiday with you both while their mother is away,' he said.

'We'll be looking forward to seeing them,' Giselle replied. 'What about you Parry? Please take care yourself.'

'I will. I do. Thank-you. We'll see you in the morning.'

Satisfied he had done all he could to ensure his family's safety, Parry spirits brightened. He busied himself with packing a bag for the twins and overseeing their efforts to write a 'missing cat' notice for Pinky to put in neighbours' letterboxes before they set out for Le Maignier.



After a wakeful night, alert to every sound, Parry was ready long before the boys were up. As they left the house, he checked the street. There were no vehicles parked on either side of the road, no pedestrians on the footpaths. In his current state of mind, he could even interpret the emptiness as some kind of omen.

‘Don’t be ridiculous,’ he muttered as he shepherded the boys into the car.

‘What’s ridiculous?’ asked Pascal.

‘Why aren’t we going to school?’ asked Gregory.

‘You’re going to have a holiday, with Mémé and Pépé while Maman is away,’ Parry replied in a reassuring tone.

Excited at this unexpected treat the boys kept up a stream of chatter while Parry drove towards the village of Le Maignier, situated in a shallow mountain pass midway between the rivers Arve and Giffre in the eastern part of Haute-Savoie.

Their route took them through valleys of sloping pastures dotted with farmhouses and hamlets nestled below dark fir forests striped with sinuous grassy expanses that would become winter’s ski runs. Forty minutes later, Parry pulled up in front of an old farmhouse on the edge of the village. Two people came out to greet them. The man, thin and leaning on a stick, walked slowly along a path between rows of autumn vegetables. The woman moved quickly to enfold both boys in an ample hug.

‘*Mes petits,*’ she cried, giving each a brace of kisses. The boys responded with equal fervour, clearly delighted to see their grandmother.

They greeted their grandfather in slightly less boisterous fashion. Parry waited until the excitement had died down before embracing Martial and Giselle. ‘Thank you,’ he said, gripping each by the arm. ‘I know you’ll understand how much this means to us.’

‘Don’t mention it,’ replied Giselle. Together they followed Pascal and Gregory into the kitchen where the boys were staking claims to their favourite stools near the huge old fireplace.

As he stooped under the low stone lintel at the entrance, Parry’s mood began to lighten. It was a pleasure to be in the company of such dependable people, in the most welcoming house he knew. The massive oak table scrubbed almost white from decades of use, the red curtains at every window, the colourful handmade rugs on the terracotta tiled floor – all created not only a feeling of warmth but also of safety against the elements. And not only the weather, Parry thought. That’s easy to fend off. It’s these new elements of menace and fear for our family’s safety, that are harder to overcome.

Giselle set out hot chocolate for the boys, coffee for the adults, cake and biscuits for all.

‘You have time for a cup Parry?’ she asked.

‘Yes of course,’ he replied. While the boys were occupied with their snack, he spoke with Giselle and Martial.

‘I hope it’s only for a few days until the police clear up the matter of our break-in and I sort out problems with the paintings I’m working on. I had no idea my work might endanger the children. It’s probably nothing at all.’ He shook his head. ‘I can’t help remembering what happened a few years ago. I’ve tried to put it all behind me. I just hope...’

Giselle patted his arm. ‘The boys will be safe with us. My nephew and his family live next door and everybody in the village knows everyone else. We’d soon be alerted if any suspicious strangers arrived.’ She turned the conversation to the affairs of the community and preparations for the coming winter before asking Parry what he intended to do next.

'I want to check on some wallpaper panels that I think might be held in the Musée des Beaux Arts in Lyon and I'd like to find out what is holding up my application for the dossier on Gaston Renardier.'

At the mention of the Renardier name, Martial frowned. 'Be careful my boy. Please don't go stirring up that nest of wasps.'

'No I certainly will not,' Parry replied with a glimmer of a smile. 'Surely they can no longer have influence in official circles.'

'Who knows?' Martial's enigmatic reply.

Parry embraced his sons with admonitions to obey their grandparents. The boys hugged him back with noisy childish assurances. As he drove away Parry looked in the rear vision mirror. All four were on the front step, the grandparents waving, the boys jumping around. Satisfied, he turned to the tasks ahead of him.



Once clear of the Alps, Parry re-joined the expressway for the drive to Lyon. Although the countryside through which he passed was a picture-perfect panorama of centuries-old villages nestling in valleys flanked by dark pine forests and high mountain ranges, Parry noticed none of it. His emotions were ricocheting between the anticipation of finding something that would help solve the mysteries surrounding Constance Crookstone and Richard Crooks, and apprehension that some unknown individual wished his family harm.

From the périphérique he took the route to the centre of Lyon, which lay between the two mighty rivers, Le Rhône and La Saône, his destination the Place des Terreaux and the Palais Saint-Pierre, home of the Musée des Beaux Arts. At the information desk Parry asked about the wallpaper panels and was directed to the second floor where the collections of craft objects (arts décoratifs) were housed.

On the landing at the top of a wide staircase a large triptych by Albert Gleizes filled one wall. In spite of the gravitas of its subject – the crucifixion and transfiguration of Christ – it was easy to appreciate the bright colours and dynamism of Gleizes' semi abstract forms. In a glass cabinet nearby, a large ceramic pot of avant-garde design by Australian Anne Dangar reminded him of the reason for his visit.

He continued along a corridor lined with display cases containing oriental pottery to an exhibition space filled with a travelling exhibition of anagama-fired Japanese tea bowls and translucent screens covered with birds and butterflies. There was no sign of *Les Sauvages de la Mer Pacifique*.

Parry asked the guide on duty and was directed towards an information desk. The young man sitting there was happy to check the graphic arts catalogues.

'Here it is,' he said. 'The panels are now quite fragile and are only brought from off-site storage when we have exhibitions relating to Oceania. We have more detailed information about the series than is on the website, if you care to read for yourself.'

'Thank you,' Parry replied. He got out his phone and scrolled to the photos of Constance's portrait. 'I believe the artist who painted this work was influenced by these panels although we have no idea where she might have seen them. Perhaps here?'

'Quite possible,' the young man replied. 'The series was very popular.'

'Yes,' Parry said, almost to himself. 'It looks as if Constance did use these images to paint the turmoil and tragedy of her own life.'

'I beg your pardon?' the attendant asked. 'Is something the matter?'

'No,' Parry replied. 'Seeing good reproductions of these panels confirms that I've found another piece in a puzzle I'm working on.'

'Would you like a printout of the whole file?'

‘Yes please – and thank you. If I can’t see the originals that would be the next best thing.’

Ten minutes later Parry picked up his now bulky folder of documentation, shook the attendant’s hand, made his way down the curving stone staircase and left the museum. A clock chiming midday reminded him not only that he was hungry but also that any other institution he might wish to visit would probably be closed until at least two o’clock. He crossed the square to an inviting looking café and gave himself up to an hour of good food, a glass of wine and the daily, *Le Dauphiné libéré*.



The response to his email enquiry had directed him to apply for the transcript at the Palais de Justice, located on the west bank of the Saône. It was an easy matter to catch a bus. Once there nothing was easy. The person at the information desk looked at him blankly when he showed her the email he had received. None of her colleagues offered any useful information either. He was about to leave when a man in a uniform approached him.

‘May I?’ he asked, taking the email from Parry and reading it carefully. ‘Ah, I see what the problem is. Material as old as that would now be in the Archives. You need to go here,’ he finished, taking a map from a stand on the counter and pointing to an address not far from the Lyon-Perrache railway station. Parry thanked the man and went out into the street.

Another bus ride and a short walk found him in front of the new building in which the Archives of Lyon were housed. Inside he produced the email at the reception desk and was asked to wait. It was not long before one of the staff called him back to the desk.

‘I’ve checked with my colleagues in Records and I’m afraid there’s been some confusion,’ the woman said. ‘Your request for documents must have gone to the wrong department. That is possibly why you have had no response.’

‘I did have a response,’ said Parry, stabbing the document with his finger. ‘You have it right there.’

The woman handed the email back to him. ‘As I said, there has been some confusion and whoever sent you the email was not in full possession of the facts.’

‘What facts?’ Parry asked. ‘I am trying to find the facts of Gaston Renardier’s trial.’

‘Unfortunately,’ the woman replied, ‘you will have to re-submit your application.’ She gave him a sheet containing a long list of departments and details. ‘And you will need to apply online. I cannot help you here, today.’

There was nothing more to do other than return to his car, pay the parking fee and head home. A surprise call from Apolline’s boss, concerned about her safety because of information he’d received about the Stymings in England, and the impossibility of reaching Marie-Jeanne, added to the day’s problems.

First, he dialled Apolline’s number from a service station to tell her about taking the boys to stay with Giselle and Martial. She wasn’t answering and he didn’t want to tell her the news in a text message. Next, he rang Detective Favre to advise him of the arrangements for the boys.

‘I see you have been in Lyon today,’ Favre said.

‘Yes,’ Parry replied a little disconcerted that the police were tracking his movements. Did they have someone following him, via his phone? If the police could do it, might others do the same? He wouldn’t ask, at least not yet and replied calmly. ‘I took the opportunity to do some research, in person.’

‘Successful?’ the detective asked.

‘Yes and no,’ Parry replied. ‘More or less the story of my life at the moment.’



It was dark when he reached their village and because of a malfunctioning streetlight, darker still in front of their own house. Inside was cold and empty without his family's vital presence. He dumped his briefcase in the hall and went to the kitchen. After the copious meal at midday he settled for bread, cheese and a glass of wine. He telephoned his parents-in-law to let them know he was home, enjoyed a few minutes' banter with Gregory and Pascal, listened to a longwinded explanation of a problem with the tractor from Martial before gently disengaging and slumping in front of the television set.

He flicked through the TV channels. In his restless state of too much to do in general and nothing to be done in the moment, he had no patience to sit through a film. Constance Crookstone on his mind, he went to his study and took out the small brown leather book to leaf through its pages, but the writing was too small and cramped for his tired brain. Parry closed the book and walked slowly up the stairs to bed. His last thoughts before falling into a troubled sleep were of his wife.



CHAPTER 11

A car revved its engine before accelerating away. Apolline got out of bed and went to the window. There was nothing to see except a set of tyre marks scarring the lawn.

Without knocking, Hélène appeared in the doorway dressed in a satin peignoir of oriental motif. She pushed a tray towards Apolline. 'I've brought you some toast and tea.'

'Thanks,' said Apolline, taking the tray. 'I thought I heard voices during the night. Did you have visitors?'

'No. No one came during the night.' Hélène's tone was brusque. 'You must have been imagining it. A dream, or possibly an animal. There are deer around here.'

'An early visitor this morning perhaps?'

Hélène waved away the question and left the room.

Apolline sent a text to Parry with the address of the house and the day's plans. She finished the light breakfast, dressed quickly and went downstairs where Hélène was waiting.

'Have you got a coat? Rain's forecast.'

Apolline made to return to her room. Hélène put a hand on her arm. 'Have this one,' she said, taking an overcoat off the rack in the hall and heading outside. 'First, we'll have a look at the old house.'

She selected an old-fashioned key from a metal ring and opened the front door. Even though the paintwork was peeling, mouldy patches had discoloured the walls and a once-elegant chandelier hung lopsidedly from the ceiling, it was easy to appreciate the former grandeur of the entry hall.

'In here,' Hélène said, pushing open a set of heavy doors on the left. 'This is the ballroom. In World War I it was a ward for officers.'

'Has the house always belonged to the one family?'

'Yes, but not mine,' Hélène said with a bitter laugh. 'It was owned by the people my family worked for. Their two sons were killed in World War I and there were no daughters. My aunt looked after the parents who left her the house and the cottage. It all passed to me after she went.' Another bitter laugh. 'The irony was that they didn't leave any money to look after it. What was left of that family's fortune went to a nephew in Scotland. To pay the upkeep I rented it out but that was not successful. In the end I left it vacant.'

Although the room was empty Apolline could almost hear the voices of the doctors; see the nurses in their long skirts, starched aprons and caps as they moved between the rows of beds in which young men lay. She stopped, absorbed in her daydream, imagining Richard Crooks among them. Glancing at her image in a floor-to-ceiling mirror, it was not herself in the brown coat she saw, rather the figure of Constance Crookstone.

'Come on,' called Hélène, breaking the spell, 'if you want to see more of the house. Then we've about an hour's drive to get to the place you'd like to visit. And there's that man you want to meet.'

They moved through rooms in varying stages of disrepair. In one, faded brocade curtains were hanging in tatters, in another the remains of a table and several broken chairs huddled in a corner. The kitchen fittings would have been at home in a museum.

'What's up there?' Apolline asked, pointing to a marble staircase.

'Nothing much. There are floorboards missing so it's quite dangerous. I never venture beyond these

rooms.'

'It's like a time warp,' Apolline said, shivering in the damp cold. 'Let's go.'



As Hélène steered the car out of the driveway Apolline looked back at the house. A wisp of white curtain fluttered at a window on the upper floor. A shadow moved across the pane.

'I thought you said the house hadn't been lived in for years.'

'That's correct,' Hélène replied tersely. 'Nobody. No one. And never again.'

Had she invented a figure at that window? Was it her imagination overheating? That dark shape on the lawn last night? Apolline was feeling increasingly uneasy. Was she embroiled in something altogether different to the seemingly innocent endeavour of looking for traces of Constance Crookstone and Richard Crooks? It was too late to turn back since Hélène's car was already approaching the hills behind Hastings. Apolline breathed deeply to calm herself.

'Are you alright?' Hélène asked, hearing Apolline's intake of breath.

'Yes, I'm fine. A bit of a snuffle that's all. Why did you say, "never again"?' Apolline asked boldly.

'It's certainly done my family no good.' Hélène pointed to a large building ahead. 'There's the place you're looking for, *Uplands Lodge*.'

The two-storey redbrick mansion had also seen better days, although the garden was well kept and the high iron fence in good condition. Too good; the gates were firmly locked. They walked around the property through clumps of trees and arrived back in front of the house with its view of the English Channel. The tide was out and beyond a wide strip of colourless sand, pale jade water faded into a barely visible horizon below a pastel sky. Between *Uplands Lodge* and the coast lay the suburbs of Hastings where grey was the predominant colour. To Apolline's Savoyard sensibilities, it looked desolate and alienating. Perhaps it's the sea, she thought. I know nothing about the sea...

'Penny for them?' Hélène asked, a look of exasperation on her face. 'You were miles away. There's not much we can do here. Let's have lunch and find that fellow who wrote to you.'

It was a short drive down the winding road from the old mansion and they were soon surrounded by lacklustre apartment blocks and garish commercial buildings. The sense of neglect increased as they drove towards the old town in search of a meal.

'Hastings suffered greatly in the bombings in World War II. There was extensive damage to buildings in the town's centre. Hospitals too,' Hélène said in a grim tone. 'The sea front was altered forever with barbed wire, gun emplacements and tank traps. Hastings paid as heavy a price as any British town.'

She parked the car near the beach and they walked into the narrow streets of the fishing village of yesteryear. The pub lunch of fish and chips was freshly cooked and delicious. Apolline said so, pleased to have something positive to say.

'Glad you like it,' Hélène replied. 'Food does not have to be elaborate and expensive to be good.'

Clearly a dig at France's sense of gastronomic superiority. Apolline bowed her head to the next mouthful.

As their plates were cleared away, Hélène looked at her watch. 'We should be moving along.'

Apolline picked up the bill and paid. They walked back to the car in silence and set out in search of the man who, she hoped, would have information about Richard Crooks.



Fifteen minutes later, Hélène pulled up in front of a brick cottage in the village of Mill Green. The man they were to meet must have been waiting at the window as he appeared on the front porch before she

had switched off the ignition.

'Very pleased to meet you. The name's Donald Millhouse. You are Madame Smith?' The question hung in the air until the two women were out of the car.

'My name is Apolline Smith. I and my husband put the advertisement in the newspaper,' Apolline said, offering to shake hands. 'This is Hélène Williams, a... a friend. I'm very glad to meet you and thank you very much for giving us some of your time.'

'You're not English, are you, although Smith...?' Apolline suppressed a sigh. For what seemed like the thousandth time she explained that her husband was Australian.

'Like these artists you're looking for,' Donald replied. 'I've done a bit of checking, although I've found very little. I don't suppose Australian artists make much impression in the art markets of Britain and Europe.'

'You'd be surprised,' Apolline said rather tartly. 'Can we see what you described in your letter?'

Donald looked nonplussed at this poor start to the visit and without further conversation, ushered them into the dining room where a long table was covered in files. He pushed some of the clutter aside to clear a space and moved more off the chairs before inviting the two women to sit down.

'I live by myself, so I don't bother too much with tidiness. I'm a bit of an amateur historian.' He gestured to an unstable stack of books. 'I was close to my grandmother Mary and have kept all her things.' He rummaged in the pile, emerging with a leather-bound diary. 'This'll be what you are after,' he said. Without waiting for the women to settle, he opened it at a page marked with a scrap of paper and started reading:

The wounded soldiers were given grey-blue flannel suits and red ties, and tins of tobacco sent by the Americans. When the war was over, the hospital had a Peace Tea and because I worked at The Lodge my family was invited. It was the first time I had ever eaten trifle with sherry in it.

'Could you tell us about the convalescent hospital – "The Lodge" as you call it?' Hélène cut in. 'We went there this morning. It was all closed up.'

'No one goes there now,' Donald replied. '*Uplands Lodge* was an important country estate.' He handed Hélène a photograph of a painting. 'This is what it was like in its heyday. It was owned by a major and his titled wife and was famous for its gardens. Today it's known for its collection of medical case notes relating to shellshock victims from World War I. These are especially important since an estimated sixty percent of British military records were destroyed in the Blitz of World War II.'

Without waiting for a response, Donald opened a flat cardboard box, took out a sheet of paper and placed it in front of an expectant Apolline. On it was a rudimentary charcoal sketch of a hospital bed, a chair and a shadowy figure in the background.

'Oh,' she said, disappointed. 'It's... From your letter I expected more.'

'Ah, there is! That is merely the *entrée*.' With a flourish, he took out a second, more resolved work in pencil. 'Here is the main course.'

The second drawing was of two women: one in a nurse's uniform carrying a tray, the second in street clothes clutching an artist's palette to her chest. A row of beds and a trolley of medical equipment indicated they were in a hospital ward.

'Did your grandmother leave any indication as to the identity of these women?' Apolline asked.

Donald was looking very pleased with his little *mise-en scène*. 'The one in uniform is my grandmother, Mary. The other woman is the one who brought the injured man the art materials.'

Hélène picked up the drawing and moved to the window.

'What do you think?' Apolline asked.

'Quite good,' Hélène replied. 'Especially the fluid lines of the woman's skirt and the curtains. The

artist has caught the starchiness of the nurse's clothes too. That takes a sure touch. The composition is a little clumsy here, and here.' She pointed to two areas in the front of the picture plane that appeared to have been rubbed out and redrawn. 'And the strange landscape; it doesn't look English.'

Apolline joined Hélène at the window and stared at the sketch. She focused on a tree in the middle distance. 'That's an Australian eucalypt and those river flats and hills are, I think, the landscape of the district in New South Wales where the Crookstone family lived – possibly still does.'

Hélène and Donald were looking at her in surprise. 'What do you think the artist was trying to say? Was he homesick?' Apolline's voice trailed away. She inspected the sketch again, holding it up to the light. 'There's no proper signature but this curl might be an "R", which might even be better proof than I'd hoped for. I think we – I – can be almost certain this was done by Richard Crooks.' She took the sketch back to the table. 'May I take a photograph of both drawings please?'

At Donald's somewhat distracted nod – he was now busy searching for something in his grandmother's diary – Apolline took out her phone, lined up each drawing then sent the images to Parry. 'Are there any more references to the injured soldier?'

Donald re-opened Mary's book. Hélène remained on the other side of the room, concentrating on her phone.

The first entry he chose described Mary's daily schedule: washing the injured men; helping to the bathroom those who could walk; redoing their dressings, assisting them with their meals. It was a matter-of-fact account of a nurse's busy day with few personal details about the men and nothing of her own feelings except for one occasion – the day the soldier Richard died:

We couldn't save him. Like so many others, we couldn't save him. So I helped him go. I never told a soul about what I did. Certainly not his sister. She was heartbroken enough trying to keep him alive. Sometimes this job is too hard. Life must continue. I hope now she will be able to pick up her own life. She was worn out trying to live his.

'What did she mean "helped him go"?' Apolline put a hand to her mouth in dismay, not wanting to confront the implication contained in these words.

'What's the matter?' asked Hélène.

'Nothing...' Apolline shook her head. 'Nothing,' and turned back to Mary's diary. 'Look, there's a second entry for the same day.'

His sister came in full of hope and it pained the doctor and I greatly to tell her he'd passed away. Just before he died, he said she was to put only his dates and his name 'Richard, Artist,' on a headstone if she could afford one. He was to be buried in the Commonwealth section of Hastings Cemetery, up on The Ridge.

There was nothing more about Richard Crooks in Mary's diary. She returned to the day-to-day account of her duties until 1918 when she wrote that she was about to be married and was looking forward to getting away from all the sadness and despair.

Apolline closed the diary. No one spoke, not even the garrulous Donald, although he was finally the one to break the silence. 'Tea anyone? It's ready except for boiling the water.'

Hélène looked as if she were about to say no. Apolline stopped her with a 'Yes please, if it's not too much trouble', unwilling to cut this slender connection to the two artists she so much wanted to understand.

Delighted to have a sympathetic audience, Donald regaled them with anecdotes of life in the Sussex region, particularly the early decades of the nineteenth century when there was so much change in the air: electoral reforms; the mechanisation of farms and fencing in of the commons, and the drought that sent so many families to Australia.

convalescent hospital. We also have another crucial fact.'

'What's that?'

'After 1917, all canvasses signed "Richard Crooks" had to be painted by Constance Crookstone. Strictly speaking that's fraud. What would be the repercussions if this became publicly known? I don't think Constance was doing it simply for commercial gain. Even if her motives were noble, her actions could be construed as questionable to say the least.'

Parry waited until she drew breath before saying how equally delighted he was to hear her voice. 'Especially as there have been a few developments here too.' He told her about the threatening phone call. 'Please don't worry, the boys are safe with Giselle and Martial.'

'I hope you aren't in any danger. Have you contacted Bronsard?'

'Not yet. *Your* boss rang to say that even though your meeting with the Styming offspring was successful, there is the ongoing problem of locating Marie-Jeanne.'

'Yes, I know. I was hoping she had been found. I've a feeling there's something not quite right here either,' Apolline said, remembering those fluttering curtains.

'You're with Hélène?'

'Yes. I'm staying at her place near Beckley. I sent you the address.'

'Be careful that's all. I've got to go. Finish the text. We'll talk later.'

Hélène was walking towards her. Apolline ended the text and on a whim put Mal's phone number into the recipient box as well.

'Ready?' Hélène asked brusquely. 'I'd like to return to the cottage – *if* you don't mind.'

'No, of course I don't mind,' Apolline replied in a neutral tone although she was feeling anything but calm. As they walked, she found her earlier messages to Parry – the ones with the images attached – and forwarded them to Mal.

'Always on your phone,' Hélène observed. 'Can't you put it away for a while? I find them a damn nuisance sometimes.'

'Sorry,' Apolline said meekly, pleased her information was now safe, although she did not want to ask herself: *Safe, from what?* She followed Hélène to the car for the drive back to Beckley.



CONSTANCE: 1952

With tears in her eyes Constance started writing again:

1917

I returned to Richard's studio in London early the next morning and inspected some canvasses stacked against a wall. I placed one that had already been coated with a pale grey wash on his easel, opened a large sketchpad and selected a drawing of a lake framed by mountains. With a thick stick of charcoal, I made tentative sweeps on the canvas. Gaining confidence, I pressed more firmly and soon had the beginnings of a landscape. It was a good start. Encouraged I mixed a stronger blue-grey wash and blocked in the masses of escarpment and lake.

It wasn't until daylight had faded that I stepped back to survey my handiwork. Pleased with what I had achieved so far, I recorded in my notebook everything I had learned about Richard's way of working and the materials he had been using before leaving for France. I also made a page with columns to record the date and theme of each 'Richard' painting. I would ask him to give them titles.

Keen to have several canvasses for Richard to inspect, I did not visit him for a few days. I painted rapidly, wasting precious time only to sleep on the old couch in the corner. Although I was careless about my own wellbeing I was meticulous about Richard's materials, especially the colours he preferred.

When I arrived at the hospital again in a fever of anticipation, Richard was not in his usual chair on the verandah. I hurried to the ward, a fearful foreboding overtaking me. A nurse and a doctor were at Richard's bedside. They turned at the sound of my footsteps. The doctor moved towards me. 'Oh, Miss Crookstone... This morning... I'm so sorry... I'm afraid... He's gone.'

The nurse put her arm around my shoulders. 'It's for the best,' she said gently.

'No! No! No!' I shrieked. 'He's my brother. It's not for the best at all.'

Jerking the nurse's arm away, I hurried over to the bed. Through tears I saw my brother's still white face. I bent over and kissed his forehead.

'Can I be alone with him, please, for a minute,' I whispered. 'Please.'

'I can allow you a short time. There are formalities Miss Crookstone. We will need to fill out the necessary forms and... we must move Lieutenant Crooks. The others in the ward will be returning from their exercise session soon. Could you identify your brother, officially? So often we have no relatives, no one to give a man a proper farewell.'

'Yes,' I whispered between sobs. 'If you wish.'

'Take a seat. I won't be long,' the nurse said.

Orderlies arrived to lift Richard's body onto a trolley, cover it with a green sheet and wheel him out of the ward. The nurse re-appeared to take me to the mortuary. As we entered that cold room my courage almost failed me. I clutched the nurse's hand.

'Over here,' the nurse indicated the same high metal trolley with the outline of a body under a heavy cover. She pulled back the material to expose Richard's face and upper body; his good right arm was folded across his chest.

I studied my brother's face, touched the terrible scar above his left eye. 'At least he looks at peace,' I said. 'What is the official cause of death?'

The nurse moved to a desk and opened a file. 'It says "organ failure possibly as a result of septic shock". As I said earlier, it was probably for the best. He was suffering you know, not just the pain of his wounds but also the loss of everything that had meaning in his life. He wanted to go.'

I was not listening to her last words; I was concentrating on the words 'organ failure'. Richard had always been as strong as an ox and he was only thirty-two years old. I looked at my brother again. It was then I noticed bruises on his neck that I was sure had not been there on my previous visit to him, when he was alive.

'What are those marks?' I asked the nurse. 'They look like something or someone has grabbed him.'

'Oh nothing,' the nurse replied quickly. 'Patients often have those marks. Sometimes in their distress they harm themselves.'

'With only one hand?' I was not wholly convinced but there was nothing I could do in the face of my own grief and the imperviousness of medical officialdom.

'Thank you. Whom do I see to arrange for his burial?'

The nurse looked relieved. 'I'll take you to the office. It would be wonderful to have you involved.'

Many things raced through my mind that day. Most important was an instinctive need to keep my brother's death a secret. As Richard requested, I would arrange to have only his Christian name on the tombstone but, an impulsive thought, I would add our mother's family name as well.

Two days later, a simple ceremony in front of a small gathering of staff from the hospital was held in Hastings Cemetery. It was a sunny day, unseasonably warm. At first, I was angry that the earth was not weeping with me but then, I thought, perhaps nature was welcoming back one of its own. An Anglican priest was present at the graveside to read prayers. I placed a pink rose on Richard's coffin as it was lowered into the ground and sprinkled a handful of earth in the grave. The minister recited the Lord's Prayer. And that was that.

As I moved away from the small sad gathering, my eyes blinded by tears, I did not see the low-hanging branch and walked into it, stumbled and fell. Brushing the dirt and leaves from my clothes I looked around to see if anyone had noticed. No one. I was alone. The fall shook me back to a semblance of normality. As I set out towards Hastings to catch the train, I felt a sense of purpose growing.

By the time I reached London, I had made up my mind. I would paint for Richard, for his name and reputation. I went to his studio to collect more of his materials to take back to my own place. The building's caretaker greeted me as I was leaving to ask about Richard's convalescence. I was about to blurt out the truth when I thought better of it and offered reassuring platitudes instead. I should have made arrangements to terminate Richard's lease on the studio but did not, deciding I would pay for it to keep up the pretence that he was alive.

I painted until I had used up all Richard's materials and had to tear myself away to buy more, careful to purchase exactly the same. One day I ran out of a particular brown and a rare red that were his favourites. Not wanting to break my momentum, I used some of my own paints. I also, somewhat absentmindedly, picked up one of my brushes to finish the canvas. I made a mental note to be more careful next time.

I neglected my health; my own art was almost forgotten. One day I sat for many minutes on the old sofa, sipping a cup of tea, trying to summon the energy to solve a problem of light and shade in the background of a half-finished canvas. A strange noise outside startled me back to the present. It was only a branch scratching against the window of my studio from the unkempt jungle that my neighbours called a garden.

When I suffered fainting attacks through lack of food and sleep, I realised I would be of no use to myself, or Richard, if I were too ill to paint. I became 'Constance Crookstone' again and completed some canvasses, which I sold at the art club's annual exhibition.

I wrote regularly to our parents, careful in every letter to make brief references to Richard. They often asked me why, after all this time, he did not write or contact them.

'That disagreement we had, about some of his activities in London,' Mother once wrote. 'They weren't serious, were they? I have forgotten them. Why can't he?'

'He was badly wounded,' I replied. 'He is well enough... now.' To rationalise the necessity of lies I chose my words with care. 'He was severely shell-shocked and does not go about much, preferring to stay indoors. He is painting. All in good time. Give him time.'

I never did bring myself to tell them about Richard's death. Our parents went to their graves thinking he was alive, somewhere. Lack of an official confirmation meant 'living' to them. I kept him 'alive' through his art by allowing paintings to appear sporadically on the market: mountain landscapes in sombre tones, a few scenes of the Australian bush.

Richard had sent paintings to Australia in 1913 for an exhibition in Sydney, with considerable success. I arranged a small exhibition of his work in Melbourne after I returned to Australia in 1925. This time the critics were divided about what they saw as significant changes in his style. It was after... when... that is... The critics thought his creativity had been compromised in some manner.

I wasn't going mad. It wasn't as if I thought I had become my brother although sometimes I could feel his spirit in me. If the 1920s was a wonderfully creative time after the hardships of the war years, it was a tumultuous decade for me.

Constance closed the brown book and ran her fingers across its surface... Like human skin that showed the wear and tear of a lifetime... My lifetime, she thought. The front cover was thin, no decorative embossing; the back was thicker, with a concealed pouch in it. This gave her an idea for writing about the most wonderful and most distressing part of her life. She would put it in the pocket so that it would remain hidden from all but the most determined searcher, hopefully to be found long after she had gone. Constance selected a sheet of the onionskin that she had used for letters to her mother and began to write.



CHAPTER 12

The night was well advanced when the two women reached the cottage. They had to feel their way to the entrance, Hélène not having thought to turn the outside light on – or at least that was how it appeared to Apolline. She began to set out the remains of the previous night's food for a snack when she realised that Hélène had not followed her inside. Apolline went to the front door. In the darkness all she could see were the even blacker silhouettes of trees and... She swung her head in the direction of Hélène's car where she heard two voices in conversation.

'Is everything alright?' she called out boldly.

There was the sound of a door shutting and footsteps hurrying away as Hélène appeared.

'Yes fine... It was... the gardener. He came to talk about some work that needs doing.'

'A bit late in the day?'

'Not at all.' Hélène gave Apolline a hostile look. 'He's been with me for years. Quite devoted to the place.'

'Couldn't do much at night,' Apolline observed. Receiving no response, she turned to the food. 'Come and eat something. Would you like a drink?'

'Yes, wine. Nothing to eat. It's been a long day and I'm tired.'

'Thank you for driving me to Hastings and sitting through the session with Donald Millhouse even though it did not concern you.'

'Oh, you'd be surprised,' Hélène said with a strange expression of... Apolline was finding the other woman's mood swings difficult to read. Mostly Hélène was charming, occasionally quite hostile. At other times? Nervous, apprehensive, expectant. *About what?*

Hélène drained her glass and stood up. 'I'm off to bed. We can clear up in the morning. Goodnight. Sleep well. As well as you can, under the circumstances.'

Apolline was about to ask, 'What circumstances?' but Hélène had already disappeared.

Since she had just started on the food, Apolline remained in the kitchen and poured herself the last of the wine. She typed her interpretation of the day's events into the note function on her phone and sent the information to both Parry and Mal, including her misgivings that something odd was going on. She was sending a version of her text, minus the personal bits, to her boss when her phone rang. It was Parry.

'Can you speak at the moment?'

'Yes, be quick. Hélène's gone upstairs. I'd rather she didn't hear us talking.'

'What's the matter?'

'Nothing I can put my finger on. It's... there's something going on here but I've no idea what it is.'

'Now I'm worried about you.'

'I'm sure I'm imagining things. Houses are not *really* haunted. Are they?' Apolline gave a light laugh. 'It'll be fine in the morning.'

'If you say so. *Please* be careful. Briefly, the boys are fine with their grandparents. I had an interesting day in Lyon. I'll tell you about it tomorrow when we can talk more freely.'



With only the illumination of a feeble moon to guide her, Apolline made her way upstairs. A creaky floorboard and a door stuttering in the wind did nothing to reassure her about the non-existence of ghosts. She was surprised to find a nightgown on her pillow. It wasn't the one she'd brought with her, yet it was familiar. She picked it up for a closer look and flopped down on the bed as if winded by a punch to her midriff. It was the garment that had been taken from their bedroom in Annecy. Gingerly she held it up to the light and turned it inside out. Written on its washing instruction tag were the words: 'I'm sorry. Forgive me. PLEASE HELP, MATISSE.'

Forgive what? And help whom? Why Matisse?

A shiver of fear ran through her. Here she was, in a strange house with a woman who was acting more and more bizarrely and now the nightgown. She was about to abandon herself to the jitters when an image of Parry floated into her mind. Not the calm loving man to whom she was married, but the white-faced, injured Parry she had found in that house in Provence when she woke up from the jab of anaesthetic.

'I am not going to be caught like that again!' Her resolve strengthened with each syllable expelled in a forceful whisper. 'I'm going straight back to London, by train or bus. I'll hitchhike if I have to.'

She sent a text to Parry telling him what she had found and ended the message with 'love you and wish I was with you and the children' before gathering up her clothes and stuffing them in her overnight bag along with toiletries and files. On an impulse, she turned her phone off and wrapped it in underwear at the bottom of the bag in case she was intercepted and searched. *Searched?*

She turned out the light, hitched her handbag high on her shoulder, picked up her luggage and, shoes in hand, tiptoed to the door. As she opened it the world went black.



Slowly consciousness returned: a redness behind her eyelids, a bitter taste in her mouth, an odour of dust and decay in her nose, an ache in her head. Apolline tried to raise her arm to touch the throbbing above her left ear but she was unable to move. She forced her eyes open. Thin grey light filtering through flimsy curtains was enough to discover that she was lying on an iron bedstead and strapped into some kind of harness with her arms tightly bound at her sides; another piece of fabric had been used as a gag. She tried unsuccessfully to wriggle free. A spasm of fear passed through her entrails like a ripple of ebbing tide.

What's happening? Where am I? Why am I tied up like this? Last night... At least she thought it was last night. She remembered packing her belongings and wanting to get away from the cottage. That was all, and here she was, caught up in another frightening situation at the mercy and menace of person, or persons, unknown. Hélène? Her behaviour had certainly been erratic, veering from friendly to bad-tempered and mysterious. Could Donald Millhouse bear her a grudge? The Stymson brothers? Was there someone else? Apolline shook her head. The movement started up the pounding in her head again, so she closed her eyes.

It was a few minutes before she felt able to open them and inspect her surroundings. A wardrobe, a mirror, a chest of drawers plus two iron bedsteads in addition to the one on which she was lying indicated a bedroom. It was impossible to tell if the room's former occupant had been a woman or a man – or perhaps children, given the number of beds.

Children... Her children! Nothing must happen to them. And Parry? What would she give to see Parry walk through the door? On second thoughts, she wouldn't want him here at all.

Her children: the two laughing boys tumbling around the garden and her daughters barging into the house after school and running to the kitchen for snacks. What if she were never to see them again? What if something terrible happened to any of her family? She would become the curlew mother wailing to the

darkness. With the remnants of her courage she willed herself to quell mounting panic. Apart from her sore head, she did not seem to be injured although her mouth was unpleasantly dry behind the gag.

After what seemed like hours the door opened and a stout woman entered, carrying a tray and accompanied by a familiar-looking man. He approached the bed. 'You're awake? That's good. We can get down to business. I'll take off the gag and release your arms so you can have something to drink. We need you to sign some papers.'

The gag removed, Apolline breathed deeply, which brought on a coughing fit that required a full glass of water to quell. She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand before inspecting her captors. The woman she had never seen before, the man most certainly.

'James Stymson,' she croaked in a raspy voice. 'What are you doing here? Why are you holding me like this? I finished my business with you two days ago.'

'That's what you think,' James replied with a sly grin. 'Our business is far from finished. I, that is the Styming heirs – three of us to be precise – have other ideas for the cottage in Australia that's been left to our dim-witted sister Marie-Jeanne. *She's* been causing us nothing but trouble. I'm glad my other sister was able to "convince" her to come here too. Hélène did an excellent job with you.'

'Marie-Jeanne is not dim-witted. What sort of ideas? Do you think holding me here like this is going to work in your favour?'

'Oh yes, we can certainly deal with you,' said Hélène coming into the room. 'Good morning Apolline. I hope you slept well. "Out like a light", I'd say. Or perhaps you dreamt about your family? Kids? Nasty little horrors. Glad I didn't have any.'

Apolline tried to sit up. Hélène pushed her back against the pillow and gave a sneering laugh. 'You didn't think we'd let go that cottage and its contents so easily, did you? I took a short holiday in Australia and was amazed to find out how valuable some of the artworks in Cassandra's cottage have become. Icing on the cake, several pieces of furniture were crafted by a renowned cabinetmaker. It should all bring a tidy sum.'

Hélène gave a smile of satisfaction. 'Once I told Philippe about the value of the cottage, he realised he'd need my help if we were to get our hands on it. I also told him we'd have to deal with Stuart and James. Stuart was willing to leave the cottage to Marie-Jeanne, as you know. It had been done legally, he said. He felt sorry for her.'

She screwed her face into a look of contempt. 'Stuart's a bore. Says he has his reputation as a businessman to uphold and has cut off further contact with us. A nuisance really because we'll have to make sure he doesn't go running to the authorities. Stuart's relationship with his brother here,' she patted James' shoulder, 'has always been complicated.'

Apolline was about to interrupt when Hélène shook a fist in her face. 'James has very sensibly joined forces with Philippe and me to relieve Marie-Jeanne of this unfair inheritance. I've included a full list of the valuables in the cottage in the new documents *we* have signed and *you* are going to witness.'

'No, I am not,' said Apolline in her strongest tone. 'This is illegal in terms of Cassandra's will. I'm not having anything to do with your scheme.'

'Oh yes you are,' James chimed in. 'You've a lovely home near Annecy, haven't you? Our friends enjoyed their visit. You could have made them welcome. That front door was much too secure. By the way you have some very nice clothes.'

'What do you mean your "friends" visited my house? It was you who broke into our place? *You!*'

'Well not exactly,' James said. 'I – we – wouldn't get our hands as dirty as that.'

'Who were the burglars then?' Apolline demanded, a cold fury overtaking her. 'I'll go straight to the police.'

'No, you won't. The police might be watching your house. So are we. Your two little boys lead such carefree lives, don't they? Always going to the park with their father. I'd hate to see anything happen to them.'

'Are you threatening my family?' Apolline asked, terrified for her children's safety. 'You will not get away with it. You cannot...' her voice trailed off. Suddenly afraid for her husband, she demanded, 'And Parry? Are you threatening him too?'

'Not at all,' said James with an urbane smile. 'We pointed out to Parry the wisdom of not interfering in *your* professional work and to stick to *his own* business. Actually, he's being a bit too enthusiastic about verifying the provenance of those paintings in the house in Bessey-sous-Salève.' James looked towards Hélène. 'Should we tell her?'

'You and Parry have been so busy searching for information in Australia and France and carrying out all sorts of fancy tests that you haven't been taking any notice of developments here in England.'

'What *are* you talking about?' demanded Apolline.

'On second thoughts, you can find out yourself,' James chimed in. 'We'd like your husband to stop all this nonsense about analysing Richard Crooks' canvasses. And you can stop saying he died in 1917. As far as we're concerned, he was still working in the 1940s and we have – or we will have – documents to prove it.' He rubbed his hands together, looking pleased with himself. 'That's why I was late to our meeting the other day. I was organising matters with an art dealer. I've friends in high places, especially in the press, and they could do a lot of damage to your reputation.'

'Once all the paintings and the house in Bessey are sold we'll be sitting pretty,' Hélène said with a triumphant grin. 'There'll be plenty of money to go around. We might even give Marie-Jeanne some, if only to keep her off the streets.'

'I'm broke,' chipped in James. 'The banks are about to foreclose on my business. I want to up anchor and head for a tropical island.'

'I'd like to come with you. I could do with some warm weather,' said Hélène. 'Marie-Jeanne's had a pretty rough time through no fault of her own. We had a monster for a father. I don't care a jot about his will.'

'I do,' said Apolline. 'It's legal and the law must stand. Is Philippe in on all this?'

'Who do you think started it?' asked James with another sneer. 'Philippe contacted us about six months ago and...'

'You bastards!' Apolline shouted. 'The other day in the solicitor's office in London you pretended you didn't know each other. Hélène, you asked me about Louis, Cassandra and Philippe as if you knew nothing about them. James, you said you had had very few, and only bad, dealings with your father.'

'At least that bit's true,' said Hélène, looking at James. 'Well we'd better get on with it. Have you got those documents? We can't release you until this is all over. Dolly over there,' she gestured to the woman standing at the window. 'Dolly will be looking after you for a few days. Don't do anything stupid. She's a karate black belt and a crack shot. When we give her the word to release you, go and get on with your life. I'd advise you to tell that naïve husband of yours to do the same.'

'He's not naïve, just a good man. You'd be surprised at how resourceful he is.'

Hélène and James looked at each other, a glimmer of doubt on their faces. James moved over to the bed and thrust several sheets of paper under Apolline's nose.

'Here, sign these, and be quick about it. They've been retyped from my copy.'

'Not before I read them. I am a lawyer you know.'

In spite of her headache, Apolline studied the documents closely, trying to visualise the originals that she hoped were still in the safe in her hotel room in London. The first page looked in order. Halfway

down the second page there was something not right. Her first reaction was to point this out to James, but she stopped. Even if I put some sort of signature on it, the document will be worthless, she thought. I'll then be able to take the correct documents back to France. If I can get back to France! She also thought better of telling them that quite a few paintings listed in the document were missing.

She looked at next sheet of paper, the one in which Marie-Jeanne renounced ownership of the Australian cottage. It too was incomplete. 'How did you get Marie-Jeanne to sign this?' she asked.

'Never you mind,' said James. 'That's our business.'

'You forged her signature.'

James repeated 'Never you mind' and came closer to Apolline. 'All done? There aren't many to sign and it's not that complicated – if you know what you are doing.'

'Oh yes,' Apolline replied. 'I most certainly know what I am doing – better than you think.'

Hélène was looking increasingly nervous. 'Come on James, let's get going. I've had enough of this place. We have to meet Philippe and hold that auction as soon as possible.'

She went over to the window, pulled back the curtain and looked across to the cottage. 'Still, I'll miss my little house.'

She dropped the curtain and came back to the bed. 'Nice meeting you Apolline. I enjoyed our day yesterday, even if it was all in vain as far as you and your puny investigations are concerned.'

'Not so puny,' Apolline said softly. 'You know the saying? "Never trust a lawyer".'

'What do you mean?' asked James as he gathered up the papers and tucked them into his briefcase.

Apolline deflected the question. 'What are you going to do with the documents now? I need to take them back to France. The Trustees will want to see them if they are to wind up the Styning estate.'

'Don't worry, we've thought of that. We'll make copies and send the new originals directly to your office, saying you've decided to take extended leave. Without telling your boss? With any luck you won't even have a job by the time you get back to Annecy.'

'Please go away. For the moment you've outsmarted me. I'm not done, you'll see', Apolline said, hoping she sounded more confident than she felt.

Hélène and James disappeared out the door, accompanied by Dolly. Apolline heard them hurrying down the stairs and a few minutes later, the sounds of two cars driving away. As the late afternoon silence descended on the old house, a feeling of helplessness surged through Apolline's limbs. Her head fell back on the pillow.



CHAPTER 13

Apolline heard footsteps approaching in the hall. She opened her eyes. Her head was aching and her vision so blurry that when a woman appeared in the doorway it was several seconds before she realised it was Dolly.

‘They knocked you out good and proper last night,’ Dolly said with a grim smile. ‘I had to help carry you here from the cottage. I didn’t like doing it, but I have to look after someone for a few weeks and didn’t want to jeopardise that job. I might think about letting you go in a day or so. You mean nothing to me; nor do I care about any of Madam Hélène’s doings. Right proper cow she’s been.’

‘Please, I need to go to the bathroom,’ was all Apolline could say in reply.

‘I’m coming with you.’ Dolly handcuffed Apolline to her wrist and undid the harness pinning Apolline to the bed. On unsteady legs she walked towards the door, hauling her gaoler with her. Although it was embarrassing to share such an intimate moment, she didn’t care.

‘Where’s my luggage, my handbag and my shoes?’ she demanded as they made their way back to the bedroom, some of her old self-assurance returning.

‘Somewhere in the house. Not my worry.’ Dolly selected a key from the bunch on a large ring, undid the handcuff from her own arm and was about to attach Apolline to the iron bedstead. With her free hand, Apolline wrenched the key ring from Dolly’s grasp and swung it towards the other woman striking her across the face. The blow didn’t have much force, but its element of surprise caused Dolly to reel backwards clutching her nose. Apolline moved as swiftly as she could out of the room, slamming the door as she went. She grabbed a wooden chair from the corridor, jammed it under the handle and hurried towards the stairs. As she reached the top step, a pale thin woman appeared in another doorway.

‘What’s happening? Who are you? Where are those other people? Ohhhh.’ Her voice ended in a wail and she looked as if she were about to collapse.

Apolline hauled her back inside the room and locked the door. ‘Who are *you*?’ she demanded. The woman began to sob incoherently.

‘Oh, never mind. I don’t have time to waste with blubbering. I have to find my clothes, and my phone, call the police and get out of here.’

‘Here’ was a bedroom cluttered with shabby furniture.

The woman slumped in a chair. ‘My things are in that cupboard over there, I think. Yours might be there too.’

To Apolline’s surprise and joy they were although her handbag had been upended and its contents mixed with her clothes in an untidy heap at the bottom of the wardrobe. She rifled through the mess. Her phone? A frantic search of the few items remaining in her valise brought it from its hiding place. ‘Wasn’t such a stupid idea, was it?’ she said to her companion who was now watching her with some alertness. Relief turned to fear when she switched on the phone and read Parry’s last text:

‘Get out of there, FAST!’

Although she wouldn’t have known what it meant at the time the message was sent, she certainly knew now.

Apolline dialed 999 to explain her whereabouts and predicament. ‘There are two of us here and,’ hearing swearing and banging on the other side of the door, ‘we need help quickly. One of our kidnappers

is trying to break down the door of the bedroom we're sheltering in.'

'We'll be there as soon as we can M'am. Meanwhile try to stay calm.'

'Calm!' Apolline shouted. 'How do I stay calm?' The thumping on the door renewed its relentless beat. She took a deep breath. 'Calm. *D'accord*,' and ended the call.

'Come on, help me with this,' Apolline said to the thin woman as she began to push a bulky lounge in the direction of the door. They rammed it hard up against the handle and piled an armchair on top of it. Apolline sent a quick message to Parry with brief details about what had been happening, ending with 'love you. The police are on their way.'

For the first time since their meeting the other woman looked less frantic.

'Now,' said Apolline, 'can you please tell me your name? Did *you* have anything to do with the return of my nightgown? And the reference to Matisse? That blue book in our bedroom? The burglary?' Apolline waited. The other woman seemed to be having trouble responding.

'I'm supposed to be called "Madge", my real name is Marie-Jeanne,' she said in little more than a whisper.

'Styming?' Apolline exclaimed. At Marie-Jeanne's nod, she continued. 'I know who you are – and quite a lot about you actually. How long have you been here?'

A helpless look came over Marie-Jeanne's face again. 'I... don't know. Oh...'

'That "white flutter" at the upstairs window on the morning Hélène and I drove to Hastings,' Apolline patted the other woman's arm. 'You've been here for a couple of days at least. I don't want to upset you further, but I must ask. What do you know about the break-in at my house? How did you get that nightgown? Why were my clothes stolen?'

Marie-Jeanne winced at the hostility in Apolline's voice. 'I feel so ashamed now. I know you won't understand. I wasn't very well you see.'

'Try me,' said Apolline grimly.

'I met a man called Max in a bar in London. He was younger than me but seemed interested in my art. I sort of took up with him. I guess we made an odd couple but I was happy.' A look of anguish came over her face.

'What happened then?' Apolline shouted above the din in the corridor.

'One day I got a phone call from Neesha – she's the person I've been sharing a studio with although I only met her a little while ago.'

The hinges of the door were loosening under the barrage of blows from Dolly. At least Apolline thought it was Dolly. She hoped Hélène and James had not returned. She still had the handcuffs dangling from her wrist. She'd need a better weapon. A nearby coffee table would have to do.

Seemingly oblivious to the demolition happening in the hallway, Marie-Jeanne continued in a dreamy voice. 'Anyway, Neesha rang me to say there'd been a telephone call from Max, asking me to go to France with him because he had a job to do. He owed a friend a favour, a man called Renardier...' She stopped at Apolline's sudden intake of breath.

'Do you know him?' Marie-Jeanne asked.

'P'raps not that particular Renardier. I've encountered other members of the family. Keep going,' Apolline replied, putting her weight against the barricade as the banging from the other side of the door increased its intensity. Dolly must have found something sharp, as there was the sound of wood splintering.

'I knew Max was going to break into someone's house – your house as it turns out. I was in Australia at the time, so I told Neesha to go in my place. It was something to do with files on computers.' Another pause and a sob.

'I'm a conceptual artist. I use old clothes and things from second-hand markets to make installations – life stories I call them, my life's story. I asked Neesha to keep an eye out for some interesting clothes, especially nightwear for the piece I've been working on. It's to be called "Deadly Nightshade". I gave her my copy of the *Matisse Stories* to get an idea of what I wanted. No one understands my art. I keep on doing it, hoping that one day it'll all make sense.'

Apolline sighed. 'I'm not sure I understand it – or believe your story. At the moment I'm more concerned about our present situation. Why are you being held like this?' Apolline corrected herself. 'Actually, I can answer the second question myself. I'm a French lawyer and I came to England to have your half-sister and two half-brothers sign documents in connection with your father's will. Unfortunately, they have been a little too enthusiastic about wanting to keep everything for themselves.'

At the mention of her siblings, a look of fear came over Marie-Jeanne's face. Apolline relented. 'Don't worry, they've gone. At least I think they've gone. They're trying to cheat you out of your inheritance from your mother.'

One of the door hinges had worked loose and a gap was opening up. Apolline heard Dolly breathing heavily. 'Tell me the rest of your story later. If the police don't come soon, we'll have to work out what to do next.' She went to the window, opened it and, leaning out, scanned the driveway in the fading light. 'It doesn't look too much of a drop. Maybe we can make a rope of sorts out of the curtains.'

Marie-Jeanne started to wail again. The door was looking more and more vulnerable, Dolly's cursing even louder, when they heard vehicles arriving in the courtyard at great speed, sirens blaring.

'*Enfin*,' Apolline yelled. 'At last.' She ran back to the window and waved frantically. 'First floor. Please hurry!'

Marie-Jeanne appeared not to hear. 'It's all Philippe's fault. My brother, do you know him?'

'Oh yes,' replied Apolline. 'I do know him. I didn't think he'd go as far as to have you kidnapped. I'd love to hear your version. Right now, we have more important things to worry about.'

Apolline bundled her belongings into her travel case, scooped up the contents of her handbag and put on her shoes. In a split second she realised two things: the banging had stopped and there were loud footsteps on the stairs. 'We're in here,' she yelled.

She dragged Marie-Jeanne across the room to help her remove the furniture before opening what was left of the door.

'Are we pleased to see you!' she said to three men and one woman, dressed in riot gear.

'Are you Apolline Smith?' the first one into the room asked, flashing a badge.

'Yes, I am Madame Smith,' she said. 'I'm fine.' She gestured to Marie-Jeanne. 'Although she probably needs help.'

The police looked around the room. 'We'll check for fingerprints. First, let's get you both out of here.'

'I was held in the next bedroom,' Apolline said, picking up her belongings and moving into the corridor. 'That one there.' She pointed to the open door, the flimsy chair she had jammed under its handle lying broken on the parquet floor. 'Have you found the woman who was guarding us?' Apolline asked. Apart from the noise they were making the house seemed eerily quiet.

'What woman?' asked one policeman.

'That's odd. She was here – the woman, Dolly, who worked for Hélène Williams. She said she was employed to keep an eye on Marie-Jeanne.'

'We'll send out a call to start searching for Dolly and the other two. Meanwhile, we have to get back to the station to wait for the detectives from the Met to arrive. They want to talk to both of you.'

With a policewoman and Apolline each holding one of Marie-Jeanne's arms, they descended the staircase and set out across the marble floor of the entry hall.

‘Not much wrong with those floorboards up there,’ Apolline remarked, looking upstairs. ‘Another one of Hélène’s concoctions.’

The policewoman looked puzzled but merely asked Apolline if there was anything she needed from the house.

‘I’d like to check the cottage to make sure none of my belongings were left there.’

Before anyone could stop her, Apolline went to the front of the smaller dwelling, through the unlocked door and up the stairs, no thought that Dolly might be hiding somewhere. Nothing appeared to have been left behind in the bedroom. She paused at the window. Although it was almost dark outside, something among the trees caught her eye – an arm waving, as if in farewell. She blinked to sharpen her vision; whatever had been there was gone. She descended to the waiting police escort.

‘Ready?’

‘Yes. *On y va*. Let’s go. I’d like to contact my husband, Parry, but my phone’s out of battery.’

‘We’ve already alerted the Annecy police that you’re safe. They will contact your husband.’

The cavalcade moved slowly down the drive and turned towards the police station.

‘It’s all of them,’ Marie-Jeanne took up her story again. ‘Not just Philippe; it’s James and Hélène too, although there’s another one isn’t there? I haven’t seen him so maybe he’s not in on it.’ She glanced at Apolline. Receiving no response, Marie-Jeanne continued.

‘I sold some art and travelled to Australia to visit my mother’s family and spend time in Constance’s cottage. It was so peaceful and the artworks in it so inspiring. Everything started to go wrong when I was met at Sydney airport by a man who said he’d been asked to accompany me back to England because I was to receive an art prize. Oh dear, I was so stupid when I was young. I wish... I wish...’ Marie-Jeanne started to cry again.

‘Okay, *d’accord*,’ Apolline shifted impatiently in her seat.

‘What’s going to happen to me now?’ Huddled in the corner of the car, Marie-Jeanne had the appearance of a trapped animal.

‘Well,’ Apolline thought for a moment, ‘If I can get back to Annecy before they make the bogus will official, you’ll be fine – especially if you go to Australia and live in the cottage. You’ll be able to sell some of the paintings, for good prices too I gather. Then you can invest the money, live on the interest and concentrate on your art.’

This set Marie-Jeanne off. ‘My art? My art? My art!’ The decibel level rose with each wail.

Apolline was pleased to see the lights of the police station and have a break from Marie-Jeanne’s torment.

A police car with London number plates was already parked outside. Two plainclothes men were waiting and moved forward as soon as the vehicles came to a halt.

‘This is where we part company,’ said the policewoman from the local contingent. ‘You’re to leave straightaway. Pleased to have been of assistance.’

The other policemen who had rescued them also came up to say good-bye.

‘You’re in safe hands now. It won’t be long before you are both back in London.’



‘I still don’t understand why the three Stymings acted as they did,’ Apolline said to the detective in the passenger seat of the police car. ‘There’s plenty for all of them. Greed I suppose. Do you know where Marie-Jeanne’s been?’

‘I can’t say much other than that the Gendarmerie in Annecy contacted London police after your husband’s call to them yesterday,’ he replied. ‘They’ve confirmed, via customs and immigration, that

Marie-Jeanne left Sydney by plane several weeks ago. Records show she arrived in England a day later. After that there was no trace of her, and she wasn't answering her phone.'

'I tried to locate Marie-Jeanne,' Apolline said. 'I wish now I'd tried harder.'

'You weren't to know what was happening. When *you* weren't answering *your* phone, your husband rang the police again, around eight o'clock this morning to give them the address of Hélène William's cottage.'

Apolline nodded a non-committal 'Hmmm'.

The detective had a look on his face that said, 'What *else*?'

'It's Hélène Williams and James Stymson you should be looking for.'

'We're onto them,' the detective replied.

Exhausted, Apolline fell silent. Busy with her own thoughts she didn't notice the distance pass and was surprised when she saw they were already in London.

The detective asked Marie-Jeanne for the address of the studio she shared with Neesha. In a short time, the car pulled up in front of a row of shabby Victorian terrace houses. Another police vehicle arrived a minute later. As Marie-Jeanne began to get out of the car, one of the detectives put a restraining hand on her arm. 'Our men will go in first.'

Two policemen approached the door, knocked and waited. They knocked again, louder this time, but again no response. One man put his shoulder to the flimsy woodwork. It gave way almost immediately. The men stepped inside and turned on the light.

'What is it?' Marie-Jeanne called out.

Ignoring her one of the men addressed their superior. 'Boss, it looks like someone's been here before us and they haven't been too careful. There's stuff all over the place.'

Hearing this Marie-Jeanne broke free and ran inside closely followed by the rest of the group. She gave a wail of despair. 'Who's done this? I'm not very tidy but this is a real mess. My work!'

She began searching frantically among the disorder. 'Where did I put it? I hope they haven't found it.' She stopped and nodded, almost to herself. 'Ah... Now I remember where it is.'

Hurrying over to a corner of the studio, she cleared away the clutter, got down on her hands and knees and took up a loose floorboard. From the space underneath it she lifted out an envelope.

'My materials aren't valuable; I can always find more at flea markets. It was this I was worried about. It's from someone called Mathilde, about my mother, Cassandra. She had something to tell me and was going to ring me from a house in a village near where we lived. My mother died before we could arrange a time.'

Marie-Jeanne clutched the letter to her chest. She began speaking again, as if to herself. 'I was looking forward to coming home and starting work again, until that man came along. He was charming at first. By the time we reached London he'd turned nasty. He took me to an apartment somewhere and wouldn't let me out of his sight.'

Apolline knelt down beside Marie-Jeanne. 'Then what happened?'

'One day a man and a woman, Hélène and James as I now know, came to the apartment with papers for me to sign. I was surprised to learn I had a sister and another brother apart from Philippe. They seemed to know all about me. The documents were to do with Father's will. They didn't look right and I said I wouldn't cooperate in their scheme. They started forcing pills down my throat, and some horrible tasting liquid. Then I passed out. That other woman was there too. Is she a nurse?'

'We don't know who she really is. The car and the voices on my first evening at Hélène's cottage must have been James Stymson arriving with you.'

'Yes, I managed to evade them for a few minutes to put the nightgown that Neesha gave me on the

bed in the hope that someone would find it. They caught me and locked me up again.’ She looked at Apolline with a rueful air. ‘I was a bit naïve, wasn’t I?’ Not waiting for an answer, she continued. ‘Too trusting by half. I should have been suspicious. All the things that have happened to me since leaving Sydney. Nightmare.’ She sank back on her heels and closed her eyes.

‘Right,’ said one of the detectives. ‘So there’s more to this than meets the eye. First, we’ll take some photographs and get a team over here to check for fingerprints other than yours, Ms Styming. Have a good look around to see if anything is missing then I’ll need you both to come to headquarters to give statements. What about the person you share this... studio with? Name please.’

‘Neesha. I don’t know her second name. A couple of weeks before I left England, I answered an ad about sharing a place. The rent was low and there were no other expenses to pay. It seemed almost too good to be true. Come to think of it, that probably wasn’t an accident either.’

Marie-Jeanne made a final inspection of the studio. ‘I can’t see anything missing, just messed up. I do feel a fool.’



CHAPTER 14

Apolline put an arm around Marie-Jeanne's thin shoulders as they exited into the night-dark street. 'I've also been foolish,' she said. 'Hélène was charming, and helpful. I was so eager to solve the mysteries surrounding Constance Crookstone and Richard Crooks that I disregarded the discrepancies in Hélène's story. I should've checked up on the Stymings' backgrounds much more thoroughly.'

Apolline squeezed Marie-Jeanne's arm. 'Would you trust me with the information about your mother? I'll take good care of it and it might help us find another piece in the puzzle surrounding your great-aunt.'

Marie-Jeanne nodded and handed the envelope to Apolline.



After interviews at another police station Apolline had more questions for the detective in charge.

'I am, in theory, Marie-Jeanne's lawyer so I'd like to be kept informed of developments. Hélène and James must have moved Marie-Jeanne to the old manor house during the night, put her in that bedroom and drugged her again. They couldn't keep her locked up forever so, short of killing her, how were they to keep her from talking?'

'I don't think they would've gone that far,' he replied. 'There are other ways to silence a person, especially someone like Marie-Jeanne.'

'Such as?'

'Years ago, Marie-Jeanne saw her father in a London bar with a young mistress. She followed them to their hotel, confronted Louis in his room and seriously injured the woman. Louis reported the incident but did not press charges. Philippe recently contacted the woman concerned in the affair and they are now threatening to open the case again and sue Marie-Jeanne for psychological damage with financial compensation if she doesn't stay quiet about the will.'

Just talking about the incident set off Marie-Jeanne's sobbing again.

Apolline had had enough. 'I am tired, very tired. I want to go home. I have work to do, including the preparation of new documents for Marie-Jeanne to sign.'

The detective-in-charge suggested he drive her back to *The Artist and His Model* hotel.

'May I ask what is going to happen to her?' Apolline asked, gesturing towards Marie-Jeanne who was sitting with her head in her hands.

'We offered to arrange some safe accommodation for her for tonight. She insisted she'd stay with a friend.'

'I understand those three wanting to get hold of Constance's cottage but why the fuss over Richard Crooks' paintings? You know there are several in the Styming estate and that I am handing the matter?' Apolline asked the detective as they drove to the hotel.

'In that case I can give you a few details. We've had our art fraud section take a look at both Crooks and Crookstone,' he replied, 'and they've come up with some interesting facts. There was an exhibition in London last year, of work by artists who fought in the Great War, Richard Crooks among them. The prices of Crooks' paintings have risen nicely, which means the ones in the Styming estate are now quite valuable – even those painted in his name. Those by Constance Crookstone on the other hand, have not increased in value.'

The car stopped outside Apolline's hotel. 'Here we are,' said the detective. 'I'll accompany you to your room.'

'Do you think that's necessary?'

'Can't be too careful.'

While she was checking the documents from the safe the detective turned on the television set.

'Come and look at this,' he said. On the screen was an image of the entrance to *The Painters' Arms*. 'It's a report about two people attempting to break into one of that hotel's rooms earlier today.'

'Oh, then it was a good idea,' replied Apolline.

'What was a "good idea"? What do you know about this? Perhaps you have been more cautious than we thought.'

'Yes. I was already worried about some puzzling aspects of my meeting with Hélène and James and pretended I was staying at *The Painters' Arms*, although I locked all my documents in the safe here. There's something else too. Those documents they forced me to sign won't be of much use anyway.'

The detective looked puzzled, so Apolline explained. 'The first page looked in order. Halfway down the second page something was missing: the words *'Lu et approuvé'*, and the accompanying phrase, *'Reçue en main propre'* followed by the date – an acknowledgement that a signature was genuine, and that the signee had read and understood the terms and conditions of the document. This is mandatory for legalising documents in France.'

The detective looked mildly impressed as he checked the messages on his phone. 'Ah, this will interest you. We've received a report that Hélène Williams and James Stymson have been picked up near the Channel Tunnel on their way to France, we assume to join forces with Philippe Styming.'

'What about Stuart Styming?' Surely he's not a complete innocent. Surely he knew something of his brother's affairs.'

'Yes perhaps, from a very different perspective. You could say he has been "helping us with our enquiries".'

What that enigmatic remark might mean was beyond Apolline. 'Enough. I would like to go home.'

She attached her phone to its charger to ring Parry. At the sound of his voice she burst into tears. 'I know it's the middle of the night. I couldn't wait to talk to you! Can't wait to see you all. I will *not* go anywhere again without you. I know I've been a bit difficult lately, but you have no idea how much I care about you. The children? Are they safe? Oh Parry!'

Parry's voice was unsteady as he gave her the news from France. 'The girls arrived home today. I collected the boys from your parents' place this evening. Philippe Styming is being held by the French police with a view to his extradition to England. Thomas Bronsard was interviewed by their Swiss counterparts. So far, they have nothing concrete, so he's been released. He won't be very happy. I suspect I'll be looking for a new job.'

'Perhaps start your own business, now that you've acquired all this new experience,' Apolline said, a brighter note to her voice.

'We'll talk about it when you get home.'

'Home! I'll be on a flight first thing tomorrow. I'll send you the details. Love you.'

The detective, who had been inspecting the view from the hotel window during this exchange, began walking towards the door. 'We'll keep you informed of any new developments...'

Apolline finished his sentence for him. 'I suspect you were going to say we should stick to our own affairs and contact the police straightaway if something like this occurs in the future. I can assure you we will not be getting involved in anything like this, ever again.'

As soon as the detective had gone, Apolline lay down on the bed, all energy and fight drained from

her body. It was some time before she roused to book a seat on the first flight to Geneva.

As she was getting into bed her phone pinged. It was a message from Marie-Jeanne saying she was sorry to have caused so much trouble. 'I have had enough,' she wrote. 'My spirit needs peace. I gave the police a false address because I just want to return to my life as an artist. I don't care if I'm successful or not. Thank you for everything. Have a safe flight home.'



Approaching from the east, the plane began its descent into Geneva airport. From the window, Apolline could see the lake below and to the south, through scattered clouds, the jagged silhouettes of peaks flanking the snow-covered dome of Mont-Blanc. Below this grey-and-white world, Haute-Savoie's forests folded around valleys bisected by the snaking watercourses of alpine rivers that flowed into Lake Geneva. Her country... She shut her eyes for a moment, picturing the high slate roof and weather-bleached timbers of her parents' farmhouse set among fruit trees so gnarled and mossy it was almost impossible to imagine the bounty of apples and pears they bore each summer.

With a roar and a settling of its wings the plane touched down and taxi-ed towards the terminal. Inside, Apolline walked swiftly past the luggage carousels, through the *Rien à Déclarer* customs doors and out to the Arrivals Hall. At the sound of a childish shout she wheeled around to be enveloped in a huge hug from Parry and four children, everyone at once.

Apolline smiled through tears. 'Oh... Parry, I don't know what to say.'

'Nothing to say my love.'

Apolline continued to hug the children as if she never wanted to let them go.

'You have your arms full, Lina. Give me your bag.'

With a boy hanging off each arm Apolline made her way out of the terminal.

'We haven't told you the best bit *Maman*,' Pascal said in an excited voice.

'After you coming back, that is,' Gregory added quickly.

Then together, 'We found Pinky!'

'It wasn't anything sinister at all,' Parry said. 'We must've left the cellar door open and she'd climbed down without anybody noticing and was locked in. The boys found her this morning when they went to get their ice skates. They heard Pinky meowing and traced her to a box of old clothes. She was dirty and thin but otherwise fine.'

'Goodness,' exclaimed Apolline hugging the boys again. 'There's been enough drama in this family over the past few weeks to last a lifetime.'

'I'll remind you of that next time you complain about our quiet existence,' Parry laughed.

'*Touché*.' Apolline conceded.



It was impossible to speak of anything serious during the drive home so excited and curious were the children who bombarded their mother with questions.

'Were you really kidnapped?'

'Did the baddies have guns?'

'Now that you've solved a mystery are you *really* a detective?'

'Or a private eye?'

'Maybe a spy?'

'No! Stop!' cried Apolline. 'I was only doing my job as a lawyer,' she finished, not daring to look at her husband.

Detective Favre was waiting for them at the front gate. 'I know you've only just arrived, but I thought you'd like some information about the people who carried out the burglary.'

'Yes please,' Parry and Apolline said in unison.

'The man is a Renardier cousin of Philippe Styding's. He'd been instructed to break into your house to search computers for details of Louis Styding's will. Meanwhile the woman, Neesha, went to the bedrooms upstairs. We still don't know why she stole Apolline's clothes.'

'I'd like to know why she was there at all,' Parry interrupted.

Apolline touched his arm. 'I can explain later. It's a weird ritual dreamed up by Marie-Jeanne Styding as part of her art practice. Most things to do with that woman are weird.'

'Let's get back to the business in hand, shall we?' Favre demanded.

At nods from both Parry and Apolline he continued. 'The male intruder found two computers. Since Apolline's was shut down with a solid password he went to Parry's, which, as we know, was not locked. Frustrated at not finding what he was looking for he scrolled through your inbox and saw emails that involved paintings. He also saw the printouts lying on your desk. He deleted the files and messed up all your papers before the two of them left in a van parked down the street.'

Parry and Apolline shook their heads in amazement.

'So,' Favre resumed his story, 'the disappearance of the files from Parry's computer was simply collateral damage that set in train the whole sequence of events. If it hadn't been for those petty crims, you might never have ventured so far into what has turned out to be quite a fascinating chapter in the history of art.'

'And I might not have got myself into such hot water either,' replied Apolline. 'Can you charge them with anything?'

Parry was also interested in retribution. 'Yes, what *is* going to happen to our two uninvited guests?'

'They didn't steal anything of real value – except of course Madame Smith's clothing and that has not been found. We can charge them with breaking and entering. Since neither of them has a police record they'll be on probation. Let's hope the incident gave them a good scare.'

'I don't know,' said Parry thoughtfully. 'They're Renardiers. You don't know the Renardiers. They're capable of anything.'

'We'll do what we can,' Favre replied. 'I must be going. Nice meeting you although one could wish for better circumstances.'

'You can say that again,' said Parry. 'We'll be fine. We just need to settle back into our ordinary routines after all the excitement.'



They watched until Favre's car had disappeared down the road.

'Ah... Routine...' said Apolline, taking Parry's hand. 'Not so bad after all, *n'est-ce pas?*'

'No,' said Parry with a wry grin. 'Not bad at all.'

A loud 'crack' made Apolline jump. 'What was that? It sounded like gunshot.'

'The kids and I thought this reunion called for a celebration,' Parry said, leading her into the living room where Eglantine and Magali, with dubious assistance from the twins, were setting out an array of *patisseries* and pouring champagne for their parents and *sirop de grenadine* for themselves.

'All my own work', said Parry pointing to the *petits fours* and *cake aux fruits*.

'You have been busy.' For the first time in many days, Apolline laughed.

After she had finished telling her story for the third time the children wandered back to their own affairs leaving Apolline to sort out hers when Parry burst into her study.

'I've just received an email from Bronsard's office. The Trustees have pulled all the paintings belonging to the Styning estate from auction and put them in storage.'

'That's excellent news,' replied Apolline, noticing Parry's puzzled expression. 'What else?'

'I'm still not satisfied about Bronsard's role in this. When I took the paintings back to him after my trip to Grenoble there was another man in the office that night. I remember thinking he looked English – at least in the way he was dressed. Tell me again what Stuart Stymson looked like?'

'Dark haired, good looking in a conservative kind of way. Why do you ask?'

'When you described him to me over the phone you said something about "old school tie". I wonder if he was the man in Bronsard's office that night. And what he's *really* been doing all this time?'

'I tried to ask the London police about Stuart. They were evasive and would only say he was "helping" them. I hope this doesn't mean more trouble.'

'So do I my love,' Parry replied. 'Oh, I almost forgot.' He brandished a second sheet of paper. 'Here's another interesting development. The curator at the museum in Grenoble has had paintings of the *Dauphinoise* School analysed and discovered that the paints used, the type of canvas and the frames all date from the 1940s rather than earlier decades. Yet there's still one mystery. None of the results give an indication of how the numbers "1955" came to be on Constance Crookstone's painting of the vines.'

'We'll have to leave that for the moment, although it would be fascinating to find out who did it and why.'

'Clearly scientific analysis by itself is not enough.'

'Speaking of mysteries, have you heard back from the courts about Gaston Renardier's trial?'

'No... On my visit to Lyon I was told my application had gone astray and that I had to resubmit it. Which I've done. I haven't even had a response to say they've received my email.'

The boys in bed and the girls holed up in Magali's room playing music, Parry and Apolline relaxed over a glass of Côte de Rhône to talk over the events of the past week, Apolline first.

'There are still so many questions to answer. Might never be answered. The true identity of that woman who was supposed to be working for Hélène Williams, for example. I'm not satisfied with the explanation given. We still don't know the whereabouts of Constance Crookstone's missing paintings – or even when they disappeared. They must have been in the Styning residence at one time for Louis to have included them in his will.'

Parry showed her the small brown leather book. 'You need to read this.'

Apolline opened the book...



CONSTANCE: 1952

Mathilde wrote Constance a letter, in French, in which she described the circumstances of Pierre's death, gleaned from the stories she had heard in the village and from her uncle, the butler in the Styling household. Constance made a record of the sad events in English in her notebook and destroyed Mathilde's original, not wanting to bring trouble to Mathilde and her family.

1943-1948

On his 25th birthday Mathilde handed Pierre the letter from Aunt Charlotte's lawyer informing him of the identity of his parents. There were few details about me, and those given – merely that I was an Australian artist – would not have meant much to a young man living in Switzerland. He probably felt, rightly, that his mother had abandoned him. I digress for a moment to note that I thought of my son every day. During those years at the Villa d'Arte in the 1940s, I would get up early, take the bus to Annecy, then the train to Annemasse and across the Swiss border to the village where Mathilde lived, to see my son. I watched Pierre from afar, never daring to let him see me. It was enough that he was happy and healthy.

When the Germans occupied France, travel became difficult. Although the train line between Annecy and Annemasse was often sabotaged, there was usually a service of sorts. At first no one took any notice of a shabbily dressed woman. Once the Vichy government was established the French police stopped and questioned everyone. I had one bad experience at the end of 1943, not long before I was able to leave France. Enough of me.

Pierre's father was a man of importance and not a little infamy in the world of international affairs. As a pacifist, Pierre was horrified by what he learnt. Although he was not supposed to make contact with a father who did not even know of his existence, Pierre ignored this injunction and went looking for Louis Styling.

He banged on the front door of the house in Bessey-sous-Salève and demanded to see Louis. Pierre started shouting, confronting him with the information of his birth. Louis came out to see what the fuss was about. Louis hauled Pierre inside the house, into his study, and closed the door. Pierre became increasingly angry, hurling insults about Styling's role in transporting steel to Germany in wartime. Louis too became angry. (On hearing the shouting, Mathilde's uncle had crept to the study door to peer through the keyhole.) Louis took up a stiletto letter-opener in one hand and a cane from a rack behind his desk in the other.

'I'll teach you to insult me young man,' the butler heard Louis shout. He saw Louis swish both weapons angrily at Pierre who rushed towards him. Pierre snatched the cane and belted his father across the face with it, causing Louis to knock his head heavily against the corner of the desk and crumple to the floor. As he was falling, he clutched at the younger man. Unable to free himself from the iron grip Pierre also fell. The knife that was locked in Louis' grasp pierced his chest. Pierre slumped onto the body on the floor.

The butler rushed into the study to find the two men in what, at first glance, looked like an embrace. It took only a second for him to see the pool of blood spreading out from under the stranger and the deathly pale face of his employer to realise it was far more serious.

While waiting for the police to arrive the butler checked the young man's clothing for identity papers. He found a wallet and was about to open it when he noticed a letter still clutched in Pierre's hand.

The butler prised the stiffening fingers apart and took the missive. It was in English so would need to be studied in private. There might be something in it for him.

He put the wallet back where he had found it and went to the front door as the police vehicle arrived. The three officers asked the butler many questions, but he said he did not see what had happened; nor did he know who the young man was and that he was too distressed over the death of Monsieur Styling to think clearly.

‘Same dark hair and low brow; same nose... surely they were related?’

‘No,’ insisted the butler. ‘It is not possible. There is only Louis Reynaud and his sister Albertine. I have never seen this person before.’

When the investigation was finished, and the doctor had written his report, an ambulance arrived to take the bodies away. From the young man’s wallet, the police discovered a name – Pierre Lavalier – and an address. They contacted their Swiss counterparts who went to the house in Troinex-Dessus. Mathilde opened the door and received the sad news. Although devastated she managed to answer the policemen’s questions, telling them only what she had always told Pierre: that Charlotte had adopted him. Then Mathilde burst into tears, wailing at the loss of her poor boy, calling on the saints to look after him. The frustrated policemen soon left.

Once they had gone, she sat still for many minutes, needing to pluck up courage to send a telegram to Charlotte’s old solicitor as well as to my lawyer in London before the newspapers got hold of the story, which they surely would, Louis Roland Styling being such a prominent person. The police never did find the true connection between Louis Styling and Pierre Lavalier. Mathilde was not saying and I, far away in Australia in my grief, told no one. As far as the police were concerned it was just another robbery gone wrong.

Pierre was buried in a small ceremony in the graveyard beside the village church. Mathilde sent me a photograph of the headstone, taken by a nephew with his new camera. The butler kept the solicitor’s letter safely hidden. Shortly after he retired, he went to see Mathilde. He said he’d been hoping to blackmail the Stydings but the occasion never arose. ‘You are all the family I have left,’ he said to Mathilde.

He thrust the envelope into his niece’s hand and left. Mathilde put the letter in a carved wooden box inherited from her mother.

I did not remember much of the months following the arrival of the postman with the terrible news of Pierre’s death. I lived from day to day, dreading the nights. Walking to exhaustion was my only relief. I could no longer paint; my mind was blanketed in sorrow. My world had ended. I put all traces of my art away so as not to remind me of life before Pierre’s death.

My major regret was agreeing to the command from Monsieur Gaston Renardier in 1943. He arrived at the Villa D’Arte with promises of cash and safe passage out of France. Under his arm he had a large black leather folder, which he placed on the dining table, opened it and extracted a couple of paintings. I studied them for many minutes.

‘What do you want me to do?’ I asked.

‘Paint. Like this,’ replied Gaston Renardier, pointing to one of the brightly coloured canvasses.

The shame of my actions is with me still. Now I have written it all down. If my words are clumsy, I am an artist. My portrait will tell my story best.



CHAPTER 15

Apolline closed the diary, tears in her eyes. 'I've no words to describe how I feel after reading this.'

'Me either, but we mustn't identify too closely with Constance. There's more work to do – find those canvasses she did for Gaston Renardier for example, and the whereabouts of the rest of her own paintings.' Parry picked up the printout of the vine painting and pointed to a patch of dappled brown where the vines pulsed upwards from the earth.

'While you were away, I discovered bush stone-curlews in a couple of Constance's works.' He pointed to a pale grey long-legged bird concealed in the vegetation. It had sharp speckles and dark stripes running down its neck. Next to it was a smaller pale form with three black stripes running from a white eye streak along its body: a curlew chick.

'It's such a sad story,' Parry said softly. 'Sad too that it has remained hidden for so long. Yet Constance left many clues in that self-portrait: the landscape of her Australian heritage; the children's toys in memory of her son; guns and warring tribes for her brother's story and the curlew for her grief.'

He picked up the print-out of Constance's portrait, his fingers brushing the brown and white striped feathers of the bird's slender form. 'Those clues were not easy to decipher.'

'However,' Apolline said, curling her legs into the armchair, 'there is something that's difficult to explain. We know Constance Crookstone held her brother in high regard. We know she felt she owed him a debt of gratitude when he stood up for her against their parents, about attending art school. She seemed so *droit*, so honest, yet she executed many paintings in her brother's name. Surely that's illegal. I still don't understand why an artist of integrity would do such a thing. It did not appear to be for the money or fame.'

Parry was slow to respond. He was looking at an email. 'This has just arrived from Mal. 'Perhaps she has found the answer.' He handed his phone to Apolline. 'Read this. It's about Australian artist Elizabeth Durack who painted as an Indigenous man called Eddy Burrup. She didn't do it for money but to show her respect for Indigenous culture.'

'So you think Constance did it as a way of paying her brother his due?' asked Apolline.

'Perhaps she felt she had no choice. There was so much death and grief around her she did what she knew best, and that was to paint. Later, when she gave up her son, her own existence had little meaning. It was a long time ago. It's not for us to judge people who lived through difficult times.'

'Maybe you're right. Perhaps we should leave Constance in peace. I admire her passion though,' Apolline said, a wistful smile on her face. 'Perhaps I should rekindle some of my own.'

She rose from her chair and moved to where Parry was sitting, climbed onto his lap and put her arms around his neck. The copy of Constance's portrait fluttered to the floor and slid under the chair, leaving visible only the curlew with its pale honey-coloured eyes.



SOURCES

- *The Dreamtime: Australian Aboriginal Myths in Paintings by Ainslie Roberts*, with text by Charles P. Mountford, Rigby Limited, Australia, first published in 1965, followed by four reprints. A revised edition in full colour was published in 1970 and reprinted seven times before the reprint of January 1978.