

# I

Paris, November 1995

‘AND WHAT THE HELL ARE *YOU* DOING IN THIS NECK OF THE woods?’

Marthe liked picking quarrels in her old age. That evening, she hadn’t found anyone to argue with, so she’d devoted herself to a crossword, standing up at the counter with the barman. He was a nice enough guy, but exasperating when it came to crosswords. He missed the point, didn’t follow the rules, couldn’t adapt to the number of letters. And yet he ought to have been helpful; he was good at geography, which was odd since he had never left Paris, any more than Marthe had. When the clue was ‘River in Russia, two letters’, he had suggested ‘Yenissei’.

Well, it was better than having no one at all to talk to.

Louis Kehlweiler had come into the cafe at about eleven o’clock. Marthe hadn’t seen him for two months, and she’d actually missed him. Kehlweiler had now put coins into the pinball machine and Marthe was watching the ball bounce around. This crazy game – with its special oubliette for the ball to get lost in, and the uphill slope it took huge efforts to climb, and as soon as you got there the ball tumbled down into the oubliette – had always irritated her. It seemed to her that the machine was designed purely to give people perpetual lessons in morality – and an unfair, austere and depressing morality

at that. If you quite understandably gave it a bang with your fist, it went *Tilt!* and shut down the game. And on top of that, you had to pay! People had tried to explain to her that it was meant to be fun, but she wasn't buying that, it reminded her of catechism classes.

'Well? What the hell are you doing here?'

'I just came to take a look,' Louis replied. 'Vincent has noticed something.'

'Something worth your coming over for?'

Louis broke off the conversation, it was an emergency: the pinball was heading straight for the pit. He caught it and flipped it rattling back up, rather incompetently.

'Pathetic,' Marthe said.

'I know, but you keep talking.'

'Have to, don't I? When you're at catechism class, you don't hear what people are saying. You didn't answer. So. Worth your while?'

'Could be. Have to see.'

'What is it? Politics? Gangland? Bit of both?'

'Don't shout so loud, Marthe. It'll get you into trouble one day. Let's just say it's this far-right politician, who's somewhere we weren't expecting him to be. And that intrigues me.'

'Serious?'

'Yep, Marthe. Authentic, certified, chateau-bottled. But we have to check it out, of course.'

'And where's this? Which bench?'

'Bench 102.'

Louis smiled and flipped another pinball. Marthe stopped to think. She was getting confused these days, having the odd senior moment. She was mixing up bench 102 with benches 107 and 98. Louis had decided the simplest policy was to number the public benches in Paris, which he used as observation posts. Only the interesting ones, of course. It's true that it was more convenient than giving details of their exact location, especially since that's sometimes hard to get quite

accurate. But in twenty years there had been changes, some benches had been retired, new ones had come into play. They'd had to number the trees too, when there weren't any benches at key points in the city. Add in some temporarily used benches for minor cases. The numbers had reached 137, because they never reused an old number, and all this got muddled in her head. But Louis had made it a rule not to have anything written down.

'Is 102 the one by the florist's?' asked Marthe with a frown.

'No, that's 107.'

'Oh shit,' said Marthe. 'At least buy me a drink.'

'Get what you want at the bar. I've got three more goes here.'

At seventy, Marthe could no longer roam around the city, between two clients. And she mixed up the benches too. But, well, she was Marthe. She might not bring in much information any more, but she had some excellent hunches. Though her last important lead went back a good ten years. Still, that one had really made the shit hit the fan, which was both salutary and the whole point of the exercise.

'You're drinking too much, old lady,' said Louis, working the flipper.

'Keep your eye on the ball, Ludwig.'

Marthe called him Ludwig, other people called him Louis. It was up to them, he was used to it. For fifty years, people had been dithering about which name to use. Some even called him Louis-Ludwig. He thought that stupid, nobody's called Louis-Louis.

'Did you bring Bufo?' Marthe asked, as she came back holding a glass.

'You know he gets panicky in cafes.'

'Is he all right? Are you still friends?'

'Love of my life, Marthe.'

There was a silence.

‘We don’t see your girlfriend around these days,’ Marthe began again, leaning her elbows on the pinball machine.

‘She walked out. Move your arm, I can’t see what I’m doing.’

‘When?’

‘Just move it, for heaven’s sake! This afternoon. She packed her bags while I was out, and she left a note on the bed. Now look, you’ve made me lose the ball.’

‘It was you that was clumsy. Did you have some lunch at least? What kind of note?’

‘Pathetic. Yes, I had some lunch.’

‘Not easy to write a fancy note when you’re walking out on someone.’

‘Why not? And she could have said something, instead of writing.’

Louis smiled at Marthe and hit the side of the machine with the flat of his hand. Yeah, it really had been a pathetic note. OK, Sonia had walked out, she had a perfect right to, no point going over it again, ad infinitum. She’d left, he was sad, end of story. The world was full of horrors and bloodshed, you couldn’t blow your top just because a woman had walked out on you. Although, yes, of course, it was sad.

‘Don’t break your heart over it,’ said Marthe.

‘I have some regrets. And there was that experiment, remember? It failed.’

‘What did you expect? That she’d stick around for your film-star looks? I didn’t say you were ugly, don’t make me say anything I haven’t, mind.’

‘I’m not making you do anything.’

‘But look, Louis, it’s not enough, the flashing green eyes and all that. I used to have them too. And your gammy knee, frankly, that doesn’t help. Some girls don’t like a man who limps. It annoys them, can’t you get that into your head?’

‘Yeah, job done.’

‘Don’t break your heart.’

Louis smiled and patted Marthe’s wrinkled hand.

‘I’m not breaking my heart.’

‘If you say so. Do you want me to go to bench 102?’

‘You do whatever you want, Marthe. I don’t own all the benches in Paris.’

‘Can’t you give some orders, from time to time?’

‘No.’

‘Well, you’re doing yourself no good. Giving orders, that settles a man down. But there it is, you’ve no idea how to obey anyone else, so I don’t see how you can order other people about.’

‘Stands to reason.’

‘Haven’t I told you that plenty of times? In so many words? And it’s good advice, isn’t it?’

‘A hundred times, Marthe.’

‘A good piece of advice never wears out.’

He could have avoided having Sonia walk out on him, of course he could. But he had wanted to try the ridiculous experiment of hoping she’d take him as she found him. As a result, she’d left him after five months. OK, that would do now, he’d been thinking about it quite long enough, he was sufficiently sad, the world was full of horrors and bloodshed, there was work to be done, in small matters of the world as well as big ones, he wasn’t going to go on thinking about Sonia and her pathetic little note for hours and hours, he had better things to do. But the trouble was that up there in the damned Ministry, where he had once spent so long as a free electron – needed, hated, indispensable, and highly paid – they now wanted him out. New faces, new expressions on old idiots (not all of them were idiots actually, that was the trouble), and they no longer wanted the help of a guy who was a little too clued up about everything. They were getting rid of him, they distrusted him: with reason. But their reaction was absurd. Take a fly for instance.

‘Take a fly for instance,’ Louis said.

Louis had finished his game, only a moderate score, these new flippers were really annoying, you had to watch the screen and the ball all at once. But sometimes the balls popped out three or four at a time and it was interesting, never mind what Marthe said. He leaned on the counter while Marthe siphoned up her beer.

When Sonia had shown the first signs that she might leave him, he’d been tempted to tell her: to let her know all his achievements, in several ministries, on the street, in the law courts, in cafes, the countryside and police stations. Twenty-five years of bomb disposal he called it, tracking down men of iron with toxic ideas. Twenty-five years of vigilance, and he’d met too many men with calcified brains, working alone, or in groups, or screaming in hordes, the same rocks inside their heads, and the same murders on their hands. Hell’s bells, Sonia would really have loved him, if she’d known he was into bomb disposal. She might have stayed, even if he did have a knee that was shot to pieces: he’d got that in Antibes, during a showdown in a blazing hotel owned by the mob. That tells you something about a man, doesn’t it? But no, he had held out, he hadn’t told her anything at all. He had hoped the only attraction was his physique and his conversation, just to see. As far as the knee was concerned, Sonia thought he’d fallen down the steps in the metro. That doesn’t tell you anything about a man. Marthe had warned him he’d be disappointed, women were no better than anyone else, you couldn’t expect miracles. Possibly Bufo hadn’t actually helped.

‘Shall we have another, Ludwig?’

‘You’ve had enough to drink. I’ll walk you home.’

Not that Marthe was running much of a risk, since she carried no money, and she’d seen it all, done it all, but when she’d had a drop too many, and it was a rainy night, she had a tendency to fall over.

‘What’s that about a fly?’ Marthe asked as she left the bar, holding a plastic bag over her head. ‘You said something about a fly?’

‘You’ve got a thing about rain now?’

‘It’s my hair dye. If it runs, what’ll I look like?’

‘An old hooker.’

‘Which I am.’

‘Which you are.’

Marthe laughed. Her laugh had been well known in this *quartier* for half a century. A man turned round and gave her a little wave.

‘See that guy?’ Marthe said. ‘Should have seen him thirty years ago. I won’t tell you his name, I don’t do that.’

‘I know who he is,’ Louis said, with a smile.

‘Hey, Ludwig, I hope you haven’t been poking your nose into my address book. You know I respect professional secrecy.’

‘And I hope you’re just *saying* that, but you don’t mean it.’

‘No, I don’t mean it.’

‘All the same, Marthe, your address book could be very interesting for someone less scrupulous than me. You ought to destroy it, I’ve told you that a hundred times.’

‘Too many memories. All the high and mighty who used to come knocking at my door. Just think –’

‘Destroy it, I’m telling you. It’s dangerous.’

‘Get along with you! All those famous names, they’re old now. Who’d be interested in a lot of has-beens?’

‘Plenty of people. And it isn’t just a list of names, is it, Marthe, you have your little comments, don’t you?’

‘And you don’t have some little comments written down somewhere yourself, Ludwig?’

‘Marthe, keep your voice down, we’re not out in the country.’ Marthe had always spoken too loudly.

‘Eh? Little notebooks? Reports? Souvenirs of cases? You’ve thrown them out, have you, since you got the sack? You *did* get the sack, didn’t you, is that official?’

‘Apparently. But I’ve kept a few contacts. They’ll have a job to get me out entirely. See, take a fly for instance.’

‘If you like, but look, I’m dead beat. Can you just tell me, what’s that damn river in Russia, keeps coming up in crosswords, two letters, know what that is?’

‘The Ob, Marthe, I’ve told you that a hundred times too.’

Kehlweiler dropped Marthe off at her place, listened as she climbed the stairs, and then went into a cafe on the avenue. It was almost one in the morning, and there weren’t many customers. A few nighthawks like himself. He knew them all. He had a thirsty memory for names and faces, perpetually unsatisfied and eager for more. Which had been a cause of some anxiety in the Ministry.

Just a beer, and then he wouldn’t worry his head any more about Sonia. He could have told her about his grand army too, about the hundred or so men and women on whom he could count, a representative in every *département* of France and a score in Paris, you can’t do everything yourself in the bomb disposal business. Sonia might have stayed then, perhaps. Oh, let it go.

Anyway, back to the fly. This fly comes into the house and it’s irritating everyone. Beating its wings, hundreds of times per second. A persistent little creature, a fly, but really annoying. It buzzes everywhere, walks on the ceiling, no special equipment needed, goes places it shouldn’t, and in particular it zooms in on every single spot of honey lying around. Public enemy number one. Exactly like him. He used to find honey in places people thought they’d cleaned up so well no trace would remain. Honey – or shit, of course, because to a fly it’s all the same. And what’s the dumb reaction? Shoo the fly outside. Big mistake. Because what’ll the fly do, once it’s outside?

Louis Kehlweiler paid for his beer, said goodnight to everyone and left the bar. He didn’t want to go home. He’d go and sit on bench 102. When he’d started this, he’d had four benches, and now there were 137, plus sixty-four trees. What with the benches and the chestnut trees, he’d picked up masses of stuff. He could have told her about that too; he’d resisted. And now it was pouring with rain.



So, what'll the fly do, once it's outside? It bombs around for a few minutes, naturally, then it copulates. Then it lays eggs. Now there are thousands of little flies growing up, bombing about and copulating in turn. So there's nothing more illogical than getting rid of a fly by shooing it out of doors. It just multiplies the fly, to the power of x. You should let it stay inside, doing its fly-type things, and have patience, until age catches up with it and it gets tired. Whereas a fly outside is dangerous, a real menace. And those cretins had shooed him outdoors. As if, once he was there, he'd give up. But no. It would be worse. And obviously they couldn't swat him with a tea cloth like you can a fly.

The rain was torrential as Kehlweiler came within sight of bench 102. It was a good lookout post, opposite the home of the nephew of a notably discreet politician. Kehlweiler knew how to look like a tramp, it came naturally to him, and people weren't suspicious of a large man, if he was lolling on a bench. Not even when the large man slowly started to shadow someone.

He stopped and pulled a face. A dog had made a mess on his territory. Right there, on the metal grid round the base of a plane tree, alongside the bench. Louis Kehlweiler didn't like his lookout posts to be fouled up. He almost turned on his heel. But the world was full of horrors and bloodshed, he wasn't going to give up just because some passing dog had dumped its wretched excrement there.

At midday, everything had been OK, he had eaten his lunch sitting on this selfsame bench: the surroundings were perfectly clean. And tonight, a woman had walked out on him, a pathetic note had been left on the bed, he'd only managed a moderate score on the pinball machine, and his territory had been crapped on, a vague despair was setting in.

Too much beer this evening, perhaps that was true, he wasn't going to claim the contrary. And there was nobody on the streets, with this drenching rain coming down, which would at least wash the

pavements, the metal grid and lookout post 102. It might wash his troubles out of his head as well. If Vincent had been correct, the politician's nephew had been receiving at his house an obscure person who interested Louis. He wanted to take a look. But this evening, there was no light in the windows, no sign of life.

He sheltered himself with his jacket, and wrote a few lines in his notebook. Marthe really ought to get rid of *her* book. It would be doing her a favour to take it away from her by force. Marthe, although you wouldn't think it now, had once been the most beautiful taxi girl on the Left Bank, according to what he'd been told. Kehlweiler glanced at the grid again. He wanted to go home. Not that he was giving up, but this was enough for tonight. He was sleepy. Of course, he *could* say he'd be there tomorrow morning at dawn. People were always telling him how beautiful the dawn was, but Kehlweiler liked his sleep. And when he was sleepy, there were very few pressures that could prevail against it. Sometimes, even if the world was full of horrors and bloodshed, he was still sleepy. That was how it was, he was neither proud nor ashamed of it, although, well, that wasn't quite true, he couldn't help it, indeed it had got him into quite a lot of trouble, and even some massive failures. He had paid a price for his beauty sleep. The future belongs to those who get up early, he'd been told. Stupid, because the future is also watched over by those who get up late. He could be back here by eleven in the morning.

## II

*KILLING LIKE THAT, NOT MANY PEOPLE COULD HAVE DONE IT. WATCH out, though. Now's the time when it's important to be clever, precise, excellent indeed, for the next stage of the operation. The secret is to be discreet while being excellent. You wouldn't believe how pathetic people can be. Georges is a good example, well, I say Georges, there are others. Still, what a waste of space!*

*But as I say, just an example.*

*Careful, don't smile more than usual, practise, pay attention to detail. The method worked fine before, all you have to do is apply it strictly. Relax the jaw, let your cheeks go slack, eyes blank. Perfect detachment from ordinary life, under cover of being normal but a bit tired. Not so easy when you're feeling pleased with yourself. And last night, it was more than feeling pleased, it was close to ecstasy – and quite right too. Pity not to be able to enjoy it, don't get that many chances. But no, absolutely not, not that stupid. When some halfwit's in love, you can tell at once, and when a murderer is satisfied, you can see it from their body language. Next day the police notice, and it's all over. To kill, you've got to be the opposite of a halfwit, that's the secret. Training, attention to detail, discipline, and people won't notice a thing. You'll get the right to celebrate, take advantage of it later, but a year from now, and discreetly.*

*You've just got to cultivate detachment, hide the pleasure. Killing someone like that, on the rocks, quick as a flash, no witnesses, how many people could have done that? The old woman never knew what hit her. Excellent in its simplicity. People will tell you murderers want everyone to know that it's them. 'They can't help making themselves known, that's how they get their kicks.' And it's supposed to make them feel worse, if someone else gets arrested instead of them, an old trick to tempt them out of their hole. 'They can't bear anyone else to steal the credit for their murder.' That's what people say! Bollocks! Maybe there are some pathetic losers like that. But not this one, oh no, not that stupid. You could arrest twenty other people, and it wouldn't make this one lift an eyebrow. That's the secret. But they won't arrest anybody, they won't even think it was a murder!*

*Feel the need to smile, enjoy the benefit? Yes, quite legitimate. But no, stop, absolutely not! Be clever. Relax the jaw, look calm. That's the long and short of it. Think about the sea, for instance. One wave, another wave, tide comes in, goes out, and so on. Very soothing the sea, very regular. Much better than counting sheep to relax, that's just for morons without a thought in their heads. Sheep number one, OK, jumps the gate and goes off to the left of your head. And where does the stupid creature go? Just hides in the left of your head, above your ear. And by the time the second sheep comes along, the game's spoilt because there's less room for it. You soon get the sheep piling up on the left of the gate, the later ones can't jump it at all and the whole herd crashes, bleating away, might as well slaughter the lot to start with. The sea's much better. In and out, never stops and all for nothing. Bloody stupid, the sea, actually. In the end, the sea's irritating too, because it's huge but useless. Pulled in and out by the moon, can't even make its own mind up. Best of all would be to think about the murder. Just going back over it again in your head makes you laugh, and laughing's good for everything. But no, not so stupid, big effort to forget, don't think about the murder.*

*Work it out. They'll start looking for the old woman tomorrow. By the time they find her body on the rocks, where nobody goes in November, that will probably give another day, perhaps two. By then they won't be able to fix the time of death with any certainty. What with the wind, the rain, the tide coming in, not to mention the seagulls: perfect. Still smiling? Just don't! And stop your hands clenching and unclenching, always that way after a murder. Murder's got to come out through the fingers for, oh, about five or six weeks. So relax the hands too, as well as the jaw, no detail uncontrolled, discipline in all things. All those pathetic half-witted killers who give themselves away by nerves, tics, looking too pleased with themselves, being exhibitionist or too nonchalant, just weaklings, not even capable of self-control. Not so stupid. When they tell you about it, seem interested, even concerned. Let your arms swing naturally when you walk, act calmly. Let's work it out. The gendarmes will start looking tomorrow, and volunteers will help them. Join the volunteers. No, not so stupid. Murderers join the volunteers all too often! Everyone knows that, even the most bone-headed gendarme knows that, they make lists of the volunteers.*

*Work hard at being excellent. Work as normal, smile as normal, keep your hands relaxed and ask what's the news, that's all. Correct that clenching of the fingers, it's no time to get uncontrolled spasms, no, no, no, and anyway not your style, certainly not. Keep a watch on lips and hands, that's the secret. Hands in pockets, or fold your arms, loosely. But not more than normal.*

*Watch what's going on, watch other people, but look normal, not like those murderers who imagine every little thing is about them. But pay attention to little things all the same. Every precaution was taken, but there are always nosy parkers to reckon with. Always. Be aware that some damn nosy parker might have noticed something. Be prepared, that's the secret. If someone takes it into their head to*

*poke their nose into this business, they've had it. The fewer pathetic losers there are on this earth, the better it would be. Finito. Like the others. Think about that now.*

### III

LOUIS KEHLWEILER SAT DOWN ON BENCH 102 AT ELEVEN IN the morning.

Vincent was already there, leafing through a newspaper.

‘Nothing better to do today?’ Louis asked him.

‘Couple of articles on the way. If anything happens in *there*,’ Vincent said, without looking up at the building opposite, ‘can you let me report on it?’

‘Of course. But keep me posted.’

‘Of course.’

Kehlweiler took a book and some paper from a plastic carrier bag. The weather hadn’t been warm this autumn, and it was hard to find a comfortable position to work on the bench, still damp from the overnight rain.

‘What are you translating?’ Vincent asked.

‘Book on the Third Reich.’

‘Which way?’

‘German to French.’

‘That pay well?’

‘Not too bad. Will it bother you if I put Bufo on the bench?’

‘No, go ahead,’ said Vincent.

‘But don’t disturb him, he’s asleep.’

‘I’m not daft enough to start a conversation with a toad.’

‘People say that and then they do.’

‘You talk to him much yourself?’

‘All the time. Bufo knows everything, he’s a safe-deposit box, a living scandal. Tell me, have you seen anyone come to this bench this morning?’

‘Are you talking to me or your toad?’

‘My toad wasn’t here before me. So I’m talking to you.’

‘Right. No, haven’t seen anyone round here at all. Well, not since seven thirty. Except old Marthe, we exchanged a word or two, and she went off again.’

Vincent had taken out a small pair of scissors and was cutting articles out of his pile of newspapers.

‘You doing like I do now? Collecting press cuttings?’

‘The pupil has to copy the master till the master gets fed up and boots him out, and that’s the sign that the pupil’s ready to become a master in turn, yeah? Am I bothering you?’

‘Not at all. But you’re not paying enough attention to the provinces,’ said Kehlweiler, shuffling through the pile of newspapers Vincent had collected. ‘This stuff’s too Parisian.’

‘Haven’t got time. I’m not like you, I don’t have people sending me their discoveries from all over France, I’m not a veteran chief. One day, I’ll have my own secret squad. So who are the people in your grand army?’

‘Guys like you, or women like you, journalists, activists, the unemployed, troublemakers, whistle-blowers, judges, cafe owners, philosophers, cops, newspaper vendors, chestnut sellers, er . . .’

‘OK, I get the picture,’ said Vincent.

Kehlweiler looked quickly at the iron grid round the foot of the tree, then at Vincent, then around them.

‘Have you lost something?’ Vincent asked.

‘In a way. And what I’ve lost on the one hand I get the feeling I’ve



found on the other. You're sure nobody else has been sitting here this morning? You haven't nodded off to sleep over the stuff you're reading?'

'After seven in the morning, I never go back to sleep.'

'Good for you.'

'The provincial press,' Vincent went on obstinately, 'is full of common or garden crime, going nowhere, just small-town incidents, time after time, and it doesn't interest me.'

'And you're wrong. A premeditated crime, a private slander, an arbitrary denunciation, they all go somewhere, to a big dunghill where bigger things are fermenting, large-scale crime, collective operations. Better look at it all, without weeding it. I'm a generalist.'

Vincent muttered something, while Kehlweiler got up to go and stare at the flat metal grid round the base of the tree. Vincent knew Kehlweiler's theories by heart, including the story of the left hand and the right hand. The left hand, Louis would announce, lifting his arms and spreading his fingers, is imperfect, clumsy and hesitant, and therefore a salutary source of muddle and doubt. The right hand, firm, assured, competent, is the driver of human genius. Mastery, method and logic all proceed from it. But look out now, Vincent, this is where you have to follow me carefully: lean just a little too far to the right, a couple of steps further, and you see discipline and certainty looming up, yes? Go further still, three steps, say, and it's the tragic plunge into perfectionism, the impeccable, then the infallible and the pitiless. Then you're only half a man walking, leaning over to your extreme right, unheeding the great value of muddle, a cruel imbecile closed to the virtues of doubt: it can creep up on you more sneakily than you imagine, you think you're safe, but you have to watch it, you have two hands, we're not like dogs. Vincent smiled and flexed his hands. He had learned to watch out for men who walked leaning one way, but he

wanted to concern himself entirely with politics, whereas Louis always wanted to have a finger in every pie. But now, Louis was still standing with his back against the tree, looking down at the grid.

‘What the heck are you doing?’ asked Vincent.

‘That little white thing on the grid round the tree – see it?’

‘Sort of.’

‘I’d like it if you could pick it up for me. With my knee, I can’t crouch down.’

Vincent got up with a sigh. He had never challenged any suggestion by Kehlweiler, the high priest of muddle, and he wasn’t about to start now.

‘Use a handkerchief, I think it’ll be smelly.’

Vincent shook his head, and handed Kehlweiler the small object in a piece of newspaper because he didn’t have a handkerchief. He sat back down on the bench, picked up his scissors and seemingly paid no further attention to Kehlweiler: there are limits to one’s tolerance. But out of the corner of his eye, he observed him looking at the little object from every angle, in the piece of newspaper.

‘Vincent?’

‘Yes.’

‘It didn’t rain early this morning?’

‘No, not since two in the morning.’

Vincent had started doing the weather report for a local paper and he kept an eye on it every day. He knew a lot about the reasons why water sometimes falls from the sky and sometimes stays up there.

‘And this morning, nobody’s been here? You’re sure? Not even someone walking their dog and letting it piss against the tree?’

‘You keep making me say the same thing ten times over. The only human being who came near was Marthe. Did you notice anything about Marthe, by the way?’ Vincent added, bending over the paper,

and cleaning his nails with the tip of the scissors. ‘Seems you saw her yesterday.’

‘Yes, I went to catechism class in the cafe.’

‘And you saw her home?’

‘Yes,’ said Kehlweiler, sitting down again and still contemplating the small object wrapped in newspaper.

‘And you didn’t notice anything?’ asked Vincent with an edge of aggression.

‘Well. Let’s say she wasn’t on top form.’

‘And that’s all?’

‘Yes.’

‘That’s all!’ cried Vincent brusquely. ‘You spout lectures about the planetary importance of small-town murders, you look after your toad, you spend a quarter of an hour fiddling with some bit of rubbish from under the tree, but about Marthe, whom you’ve known for twenty years, you didn’t notice anything. Bravo, Louis, bravo, well done!’

Kehlweiler looked at him sharply. Too late, said Vincent to himself, and anyway, what the hell. Kehlweiler’s eyes, green with long dark lashes that looked as if he was wearing too much mascara, could move from dreamy vagueness to painfully incisive intensity. His lips became a straight line, all his habitual mildness disappeared like a flock of sparrows. Kehlweiler’s face looked then like those majestic profiles carved on to cold medals, no fun at all. Vincent shook his head as if chasing away a wasp.

‘Tell,’ said Kehlweiler simply.

‘Well, Marthe has been on the streets for a week now. They took over all those attics to make them into fancy apartments. The new landlord has chucked everyone out.’

‘Why didn’t she tell me? They must have been given notice ahead of time. Stop that, you’ll hurt yourself with those scissors.’

‘The tenants campaigned to keep their lodgings, and they were all chucked out.’

‘But why didn’t she tell me?’ repeated Louis, louder.

‘Because she’s proud, because she’s ashamed, because she’s frightened of you.’

‘The bloody idiot! And what about you? Couldn’t you have told me? For God’s sake, stop it with the scissors, your nails are quite clean enough, aren’t they?!’

‘I only found out the day before yesterday. And no one knew where you were.’

Kehlweiler stared again at the object wrapped in newspaper. Vincent gave him a sidelong glance. Louis was good-looking, except when he was irritated like this, with his hawklike nose and jutting chin. Irritation didn’t improve anyone’s looks, but with Louis it was worse: his three-day stubble and his staring eyes with their heavy lashes could be scary. Vincent waited.

‘Know what this is?’ Kehlweiler asked finally, passing him the bit of newspaper.

Louis’s face was getting back to normal, emotion was returning under his brows and life to his lips. Vincent examined the object. He couldn’t concentrate. He had just shouted at Louis and that didn’t often happen.

‘I’ve no idea what this piece of shit is,’ he said.

‘Getting warm. Carry on.’

‘It’s unrecognisable, funny shape . . . oh hell, Louis, I couldn’t give a toss what it is . . .’

‘Go on, try harder.’

‘If I make a big effort, it might remind me of what was left on my plate after my gran cooked pigs’ trotters for me. I hated them, she thought it was my favourite food. Grans are funny sometimes.’

‘Wouldn’t know,’ commented Kehlweiler, ‘never knew my grandmother.’

He bundled his book and papers back into the plastic bag, pocketed

the object still wrapped in newspaper, and slid the toad into the opposite pocket.

‘You’re keeping the pig’s trotter?’ asked Vincent.

‘Why not? Now, where can I find Marthe?’

‘The last few days she’s been sheltering under the awning by tree 16,’ Vincent muttered.

‘I’m off. Try to get a shot of our target.’

Vincent nodded and watched Kehlweiler disappear with his slow steady steps, leaning a little to one side because of the knee that had been demolished in a fire. He took a sheet of paper and wrote: ‘Didn’t know his grandmother. Check if same for grandfather.’ He made notes of everything. He had picked up from Kehlweiler his mania for wanting to record everything except domestic crime. It was difficult to find out anything about the man though. He didn’t give much away. You might know he came from central France, but that didn’t get you very far.

Vincent didn’t even hear old Marthe, as she dropped down on to the bench.

‘Any luck?’ she said.

‘Christ Almighty, Marthe, you frightened me. Don’t talk so loud.’

‘So, any luck? The fascist?’

‘No, not yet. I’m patient. I’m almost certain I recognised him, but people’s faces get older.’

‘You ought to take notes, my boy, plenty of notes.’

‘I realise that. Know something? Louis never knew his grandmother?’

Marthe shrugged her ignorance.

‘So what?’ she muttered. ‘Louis can buy himself as many ancestors as he wants, so . . . If you listen to him, he’s got millions of them. Sometimes it’s this fellow Talleyrand, he talks a lot about him, or that other one, what’s-his-name . . . well, millions anyway. Even the Rhine, he says that’s his ancestor. He’s got to be kidding.’

Vincent smiled.

‘But his real ancestors,’ he insisted, ‘not a whisper, we don’t know anything.’

‘Well, don’t mention it, you shouldn’t embarrass people. You’re just a shit-stirrer, aren’t you, my little lad?’

‘I think you know a lot of things.’

‘Just shut up,’ said Marthe sharply. ‘This Talleyrand’s his granddad, OK? Got that? Satisfied?’

‘Marthe, don’t tell me you believe that. You don’t even know who Talleyrand is. He’s been dead 150 years.’

‘Well, I don’t give a toss who he is, or who he was, OK? If this Talleyrand slept with the Rhine and they came up with Ludwig, then they had good reasons for it, and that’s their own business. Couldn’t care less about anything else. I’m feeling pretty fed up today, so tell me what it is you’re watching for.’

‘Oh my God, Marthe, here he comes,’ whispered Vincent suddenly, clutching her arm. ‘The one I’m after. The sleazy fascist. Just look like an old hooker and I’ll be a drunk, we’ll get him.’

‘Don’t worry, I know your methods.’

Vincent slumped drunkenly on to Marthe’s shoulder and pulled a corner of her scarf over him. The man was coming out of the building opposite, they had to be quick. Under cover of the scarf, Vincent focused his camera and took several pictures through the gaps in the damp knitted fabric. Then the man vanished from sight.

‘Got him, have you?’ asked Marthe. ‘He’s in the can, is he?’

‘I think so. See you, Marthe. I’m going after him.’

Vincent went off, still looking wild-eyed. Marthe smiled. He was good at acting like a drunk. At twenty, when Ludwig had picked him up in a bar and rescued him, he was in a bad way, a long story behind him. Nice guy, Vincent, and good at crosswords too. But it would be just as well if he stopped trying to nose about into Ludwig’s life. Affection can become a bit intrusive sometimes. Marthe shivered. She

was cold. She didn't want to admit it, but she was really cold. The shopkeepers had expelled her from under the awning that morning. Where on earth was she going to go? Come on, old girl, get up, start walking, don't freeze your backside off on 102, get walking. Marthe was talking to herself, which was not unusual.