



BOOK EXTRACT

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The first corpse was that of Alice Sanderson. She had been an eighteen-year-old tourist travelling alone. Her body was found near the railway track on the Paris-Lyon line on 16 July of the previous year. She was five feet six, with long blonde hair. The second victim was Tania Brockwitz, a Polish student studying French in Paris. She was visiting friends in Lyon and had failed to show. Her body had just been found that June - eleven months later - near the same stretch of track, some thirty kilometres north of the exact spot where Alice Sanderson had been discovered. Also eighteen, and also with long blonde hair, at five feet five inches she was just one inch shorter than Sanderson. It signalled a potentially irksome summer for Inspector Henri Lamot of the Sûreté.

Lamot scratched at his tiny, Hitler-style moustache and gazed languidly down upon the victim. He was aware that the white-overalled forensic team were hovering to move in. The body was naked from the waist down, though a blue T-shirt - sporting the name of some boy band - was still on the body and intact. Her neck was swollen and bruised. Lamot knew automatically that the marks were those that formed following strangulation.

What Lamot had found curious about the unsolved Sanderson case of the previous summer was that though she, too, had been found naked from the waist down, she had not been raped. He pondered that thought as he made way for the eager forensic outfit.

Confirmation that Brockwitz had also not been raped came through later that afternoon; also, that she, too, had died from strangulation.

Seated in a small office at a Lyon police station, Lamot lit his third cigar of the day. His recurring thought revolved around the method of the killer. While the perpetrator clearly knew the chosen victims were young and blonde and of average height, had he also known they were both exactly eighteen? That would have taken a little ingenuity on the killer's part when choosing his victims. He would have had to have talked to the girls - or seen their papers or passports. With only two bodies, it was impossible to guess what exactly was going on in this killer's mind. And why did he half-strip his victims but then not molest them?

Theorising was useful, but Lamot knew he had to work on what few facts he had, and work fast.

Lamot was tired. It had been a long winter and now the summer was going to be spent chasing an unknown killer - unless he was remarkably fortunate and could bring the matter to a successful conclusion in the very near future. If not, his whole domestic life would have to go on hold, and his wife would not be happy about that. The children, Benoit and Alain, wouldn't object, as they were in that late teenage period when parents were nothing more than a convenience: automatons who offered a place to sleep, eat and, at a push, somewhere to take the girlfriends.

"The car is ready, Inspector," said a young policeman, entering the room.

And so Lamot began his journey back to Paris in an unmarked vehicle.

It was warm for May, and he wondered if it meant that they would have a poor summer. The birds were singing and everything was blossoming - except for Alice Sanderson and Tania Brockwitz. Don't get personally involved, he reminded himself - not that he needed much reminding after twenty years of police work. The sadness was understandable and automatic, yet he knew he wouldn't deviate from his crime-hardened attitude: the bodies of the girls were mere conduits to the eventual apprehension of a killer. That was the sum total of his "emotional" involvement.

The driver didn't speak unless spoken to, and Lamot was frugal in his speech. He liked facts, not pleasantries. If the driver had been able to tell him how many trees lined the roads between Lyon and the beginning of the autoroute, he would have perked up and conversed. Such was the way his mind operated.

A couple of hours later, the car swung down the Avenue des Champs Elysées, finally connecting with the rue de Rivoli - the heart of Paris and his second home: police headquarters.

Before the car came to rest in a reserved parking bay, Lamot had already decided he was going to tackle the laborious task of categorising all the young women planning to use the Paris-Lyon rail during the forthcoming months. Any well-formed blonde female of twenty years of age or less would be monitored. It would be difficult, but how many could there be? Clearly not very many or, if he were right, the killer would have struck more than twice during the last eleven months.