

# **THE CATACOMBS**



# **THE CATACOMBS**

**A WORLD'S SCARIEST PLACES NOVEL: BOOK TWO**

**JEREMY BATES**

Ghillinnein Books

Copyright © 2015 by Jeremy Bates

FIRST EDITION

The right of Jeremy Bates to be identified as the Author of the Work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Acts 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without the written consent of the publisher.

This is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual people, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

ISBN: 978-0-9937646-7-7

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

The novels in the *World's Scariest Places* series are set in real locations. The following is a Wikipedia “Catacombs of Paris” excerpt:

The **Catacombs of Paris** or **Catacombes de Paris** are underground ossuaries in Paris, France. Located south of the former city gate (the “Barrière d’Enfer” at today’s Place Denfert-Rochereau), the ossuaries hold the remains of about six million people and fill a renovated section of caverns and tunnels that are the remains of historical stone mines, giving it its reputation as “The World’s Largest Grave.” Opened in the late 18th century, the underground cemetery became a tourist attraction on a small scale from the early 19th century, and has been open to the public on a regular basis from 1874.

The Catacombs are one of the 14 City of Paris Museums that have been incorporated since January 1, 2013, in the public institution Paris Musées. The official name for the catacombs is *l’Ossuaire Municipal*. Although this cemetery

covers only a small section of underground tunnels comprising “*les carrières de Paris*” (“the quarries of Paris”), Parisians today often refer to the entire tunnel network as “the catacombs.”







# PROLOGUE

They were dead. All of them. Pascal, Rob, and now Danièle—dead.

I tried not to think about this as I fled down the crumbling and rock-strewn hallway. I kept the torch ahead of me and above my head so the smoke didn't waft back into my face. The flames bounced shadows off the stone walls and filled the air with a sickening tar-like stench. The only sound was my labored breathing and my feet splashing through the puddles that dotted the chalky gray ground.

A passageway opened to my left, a gaping mouth leading away into blackness. I veered into it, hoping to zigzag ever farther through the underground labyrinth, praying it didn't lead to a dead end. If it did, I would be trapped. My pursuers would catch me. Smash my skull into bits like they did to Pascal. Set me on fire like they did to Rob. I couldn't fathom what they did to Danièle, but judging by her screams, I suspect she got it the worse.

I wanted desperately to believe that this wasn't the case, that Danièle wasn't dead, and for a moment I allowed my imagination to run wild with fanciful speculation, because I hadn't actually seen her die...

No—I *heard* her. She was gone, she had to be, and I was next, as doomed as the rest of them.

Still, I kept running, I kept putting one foot in front of the other. I was too afraid to accept the inevitable and give up and die, too hardwired to survive, even though there was nothing left to live for.

I opened my mouth and yelled. I hated the sound of it. It was shrill and broken and full of pain, what might come from a mongrel dog beaten to within inches of its life. My disgust with myself lasted only a moment, however, because seconds after the wretched moan tapered off, a riot of savage cries erupted from behind me.

So goddamn close!

The cries rose in a crescendo of frenzied bloodlust. Terror blasted through me, but I couldn't make my legs move any faster. They were cement blocks. I felt as if I were running in the opposite direction on a moving walkway.

Suddenly the ceiling and walls disappeared and a vast darkness opened around me. While looking up to gauge the size of this new chamber, I stumbled over unreliable ground, lost my footing, and fell upon a mound of rubble. The torch flew from my grip and landed a few feet ahead of me. I stared at the polished rocks illuminated in the smoking flame until I realized they were not rocks but bones. Human bones. Skulls and femurs and tibias and others. I grabbed the torch by the

handle and thrust it into the air.

Bones and bones and more bones, for as far as I could see.

I shoved myself to my feet, took several lurching steps, as if wading through molasses, then sagged to my knees. A centuries-old femur splintered beneath my weight with a snap like deadwood.

The sounds of my pursuers grew louder. I refused to look back over my shoulder. Instead I clutched at the bones before me, my fingers curling around their brittle lengths, pulling myself forward, my legs no longer responding at all.

Finally, beyond exhaustion, I flopped onto my chest and lay panting among the thousands of skeletonized remains as a sleepy darkness rose inside me.

They don't smell, I thought, bones don't smell, funny, always imagined they would.

And then, absently, in a back-of-the-mind way: *I don't want to die like this, not here, not like this, not in a mass grave, I don't want to be just another pile of nameless bones, forgotten by the world.*

That video camera.

That fucking video camera.

# 40 HOURS EARLIER

# CHAPTER 1

I was seated at a pavement terrace in Paris's 3<sup>rd</sup> arrondissement, waiting for my steaming cappuccino to cool down and thinking that I was a long way from home. I was born in Olympia, Washington, but my family moved to Seattle when I was ten because my father was sacked from his job as a camera technician at Canon and decided he could find better work in a bigger city. He ended up selling used cars at a Ford dealership. He was never very good at it, not a natural salesman, and took orders from someone twenty years his junior until he retired. My mother, the head librarian at a private high school in Olympia, found administrative work with the King County Library System in Seattle. Though she took a salary cut in the move, she didn't complain. She'd always been a team player, putting others ahead of herself. This was especially true for family.

A lot of my adolescent friends went to Seattle University or U Dub or one of the smaller colleges in the state. They wanted

to stay close to home so they could live with their parents to save cash. Where's the adventure in that? I'd thought, and relocated across the country in New York City to study journalism at NYU. I wanted the college experience, and for this you had to get away from home. I remember my grade twelve English lit teacher telling the class one day how college was going to be the best three or four years of your life, so you better make the most out of it. In my case he had been right. It wasn't that college had been ridiculously fun—though it did have its moments—it was that things had been pretty shitty for me ever since my younger sister, Maxine, died two years after I graduated.

As I braved a sip of my cooling coffee, I decided the 3<sup>rd</sup> arrondissement reminded me of Manhattan's Soho neighborhood. It had a young vibe, with all the pubs and designer boutiques and vintage shops and brasseries-turned-hipster hangouts. The main difference, I'd say, was that here nobody seemed in any real hurry to get anywhere.

The tables around me had filled up with the after-work crowd, the men in dark suits, some without neckties or blazers, the women in institutional skirts and plain blouses. As seemed to be the fashion in this city, everyone sat facing the street, nonchalantly judging the people walking by.

I returned the white mug to the saucer with a delicate clank of porcelain and judged too. A woman dressed in lipstick colors and high heels held my attention. She was willowy with sharp cheekbones and a hooked nose, not the type of lady you'd approach for directions. A pair of big sunglasses covered much of her face. That was something else here. Everyone had

great eyewear. No cheap prescription Lenscrafters, or pharmacy-rack shades with colored lenses and fluorescent frames. Only high-end designer stuff. I bought myself a pair of Ray Ban Aviators a while back. I also started wearing a lot of neutral tones. Nowadays I stuck mostly to black, and I guessed I looked about as French as you could get.

Just then I spotted Danièle halfway down the block. She was riding toward me on a pink bicycle with fenders the color of pearl and a wicker basket mounted on the front handlebars.

I stood and waved. She pulled next to the table, scissor-stepped off the bike's seat, propped the kickstand, then bent close for a double air kiss—social protocol for both hello and goodbye. I haven't gotten used to this yet, it wasn't me, but whatever. When in Rome, right?

“Sorry I am late, Will,” she said in her French-accented English. “Do you want anything to eat?”

“I'm good,” I said, and retook my seat while she entered the café. I watched her through the large bay window. With her jet-black shag, pixie face, dark mascara, sooty lashes, and pale lips, Danièle reminded me of Joan Jett in the “I Love Rock ‘n’ Roll” days. She wore a butterfly-print summer dress that clung to her thin body as she moved, a silk scarf looped chicly around her neck, and knee-high green suede boots.

How long had I known her now? I wondered. Two months? Two-and-a-half? Something like that. I'd been in Paris for at least a couple weeks then, got tired of pantomiming my way around the city, so decided to give learning French a shot. I placed an ad for a language exchange partner on the France version of Craigslist. The site was used mostly by American

expats. Apparently the French haven't taken to it because of their difficulty pronouncing "Craigslist." Even so, I received several replies. I chose to partner with Danièle because she came across as open and friendly in her initial emails.

We've gotten to know each other fairly well since then. She was born in Germany to a German father and French mother. They divorced when she was six, and she moved to France with her mother and older sister. She graduated from L'Ecole des Mines two years before. It was a prestigious engineering school, the MIT of France. She could have interned at any company she wanted. But, according to her, she wanted to take it easy for a while, so now she spent her days working in a florist shop and her nights exploring the network of catacombs that snaked beneath the city.

We got together twice a week, usually on Mondays and Fridays. She would teach me French one day, I would teach her English the other. Actually, I didn't really "teach" her anything. She was pretty much fluent. English had been a prerequisite for admission into Les Mines, and she'd studied it extensively as an adolescent. She told me she just wanted someone she could speak the language with so it didn't get rusty on her.

She liked me—romantically, I mean. She was fairly obvious about it too. I should have been flattered. She was good looking. I'd thought that the first time I saw her. But I hadn't come to Paris searching for a relationship; I'd come to get away from one—at least the aftermath of one. My ex's name was Bridgette Pottinger. We'd met at NYU. In our senior year we moved into a tiny flat together off the Bowery near China-



town. I got a job as a copy editor for the *Brooklyn Eagle*. She was accepted to the law program at Columbia. I popped the question a year later at the top of the Statue of Liberty. I know, cheesy, but at the time I'd thought it was romantic. The wedding was planned for the following July at a lodge on Lake Placid.

The night before the ceremony my younger sister, Maxine, and my best friend, Brian, died in a boating accident. The wedding, of course, was cancelled. My life was thrown into chaos. My parents blamed me for the death of Max. My friends blamed me for the death of Brian. Bridgette and I began to unravel too, and we decided it would be best to take a break. I had moved on from the paper to a travel writing gig, assisting with the guides for the Mid-Atlantic states. I was close with my boss, both professionally and personally. He knew what I was going through, knew I needed a fresh start. He told me head office was looking for someone to revamp a few of the European editions, and he put my name forward. A month later I was in London, getting the lowdown for a revised Paris guide. The other correspondents in Paris were covering the cafés and restaurants and hotels. My brief was to cover the nightlife scene. They wanted to jazz up the guide to appeal more to the younger crowd.

And so far, so good. My new boss liked the copy I was turning in, and I liked doing what I was doing. I spent my nights checking out different bars and clubs, and my days writing up an opinion of them. There was a lot to do, and the deadlines were tight, but the work kept me occupied, kept me from thinking too much about my old friends, family, and most

of all, Bridgette.

Still, I'd be lying if I said I'd gotten over Bridgette. I hadn't. In the back of my mind I had a plan. After a year or so away, I would return to the States, I'd be a little more worldly, a little more mature, and Bridgette and I could start things anew.

I winced. *Danièle's birthday party*. Christ. How the hell did I get roped into that? Danièle's friends—an eclectic mix of bohemians and young professionals—had been pleasant, the drinks kept coming, and everyone got piss drunk...and then...then everything blurred together.

When I woke in Danièle's bed Saturday morning, I could barely remember how I got there. Filled with guilt, I did the asshole thing and left without waking her. I spent the entire weekend at my laptop whipping my latest bar and club notes into some sort of coherent form. I didn't answer my phone when Danièle called Sunday afternoon, and we didn't communicate again until earlier today when she texted me to confirm that the lesson was still on.

I almost cancelled, but I knew how obvious that would look.

Danièle returned from the café proper with a cappuccino now. She sat across from me, took off her sunglasses—Fendis—and smiled hesitantly. I cleared my throat. I had already decided to act as if this was any other lesson, and I said, “French or English today?”

A flash of surprise crossed her face before she turned her attention to the spoon stirring her coffee. “Friday was French,” she stated. “So today is English, if that is all right.”

“Good with me,” I said. “So...”

She lifted her eyes. “Yes?”

“I’m thinking of a topic to discuss.”

“How about the weekend?” she suggested coyly. “You always ask me about my weekend on Mondays.”

“Did you get up to anything on Sunday?”

“On Sunday?” More surprise, maybe some disappointment. She shrugged. “No, I stayed home all day. What about you, Will? Were you hung over both Saturday and Sunday? Or did you do anything special on Sunday?”

“I made chicken Provençal. Have you tried it?”

“Of course I have. I am French. What else did you do?”

“Nothing really. Work. That’s about it.”

“I see.”

I frowned. “You see?”

“You do not want to talk about Friday night. I see. That is fine with me.”

“I had a fun time.”

“Did you?”

“Yes.”

“*All* night?”

I wondered if I was blushing. “Yeah.”

“You were gone when I woke up. I thought...”

“I know, I— What time did you get up?”

“You are very good at avoiding this topic.”

“What topic?”

“Us.”

“I’m not avoiding it.”

She nodded silently.

I lit a Marlboro Light to give myself something to do. The trio at the table next to us were sharing a bottle of wine and laughing loudly. This made the silence between Danièle and me seem all the more protracted and uncomfortable.

I decided it was stupid to try to ignore what had happened between us, to pretend this was nothing but another lesson.

We had slept together. We were having coffee now.

That made this a date, didn't it?

At least in Danièle's mind it did.

"I liked your friends," I said, segueing back to Friday.

She smiled. "They liked you too."

"Except for one guy. What was his name? Patsy...?"

"Pascal?"

"He had a wool cap."

"Yes, that is Pascal. You do not like him?"

"He's fine, I guess. He just didn't seem like he wanted to talk to me."

"Because he has a crush on me," she stated matter-of-factly.

"A crush?"

"Yes, for many years. We were in the same freshman class at school. He was with me during my initiation."

Danièle was referring to her university initiation. She had told me all about it on numerous occasions. You could enter her favorite stomping ground, the catacombs, any number of ways, including Metro tunnels, utility systems, church crypts, and the basements of homes, hospitals, lycées, and universities (apparently there was even an entrance in the bowels of Tour Montparnasse, one of Paris' first skyscrapers). Like most of the

other buildings in the old Latin Quarter, L'Ecole des Mines had its own secret access points, and it was a tradition for seniors to drop freshmen into the underground maze and have them find their way out again.

I said, "Do you guys still go into the catacombs together?"

"Many times. As a matter of fact—" Her phone rang. "Just a moment, Will," she said, and answered it. The voice on the other end was male. My French was still piss poor, and I was only able to gather that she was meeting this person later in the evening.

"Big date tonight?" I asked when she hung up.

"Would you be jealous if it were?"

"Immensely."

"I do not believe you."

"I would be."

"You know, Will, I thought we had a good time on Friday."

"We did."

"Then why...I have the feeling you...regret it."

I looked at my cigarette. "I don't regret it."

"Then why are you acting so strange?"

I was about to tell her I wasn't acting strange, but I held my tongue. I suppose I was.

I took a final drag on the smoke and stubbed it out in the ashtray. "Look, Danièle. I like you. But we have been friends for a while now. And then...you know, just like that. Boom. I—it's a bit overwhelming."

She considered that, nodded. "Okay, Will. I understand. You just tell me when you are ready."

I studied her. The delivery was so pokerfaced I couldn't

discern if she was being sincere or sarcastic.

“Anyway,” she said, “that was Pascal.”

“Speak of the devil,” I said, happy to change topics. “What did he want?”

“He is confirming our plans tonight.”

“What are you guys doing?”

“We are going into the catacombs.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Seriously?”

“Why is that surprising?”

“Only the two of you?”

“No, someone else is coming as well. You see, tonight, it is very special. I have something I want to show you.”

She moved her chair around the table, so she was sitting beside me, our knees brushing. I could smell her perfume, a light citrus scent. She extracted her laptop from her handbag and set it on the table before us. She opened the lid and pressed the power button.

While we waited for it to boot up I said, “In what world do people use the semi-colon more than the full-stop?”

She frowned. “Huh?”

I nodded at her keyboard. “Don’t you find it a pain you have to press the Shift key every time you want a period?”

“Hmm. I never thought of that. Perhaps you should have brought a computer from your country, Will.”

“It was stolen, remember.”

“Yes, you left it on the table when you went to use the restroom. That was very foolish of you.”

The computer finished loading. Danièle used the trackpad and navigated to a folder filled with thumbnail-sized videos.

She opened the last one in a media player and resized it to fill the screen.

A point of view shot appeared: a video camera light illuminating a grainy corridor the color of slag iron. The ceiling was low, the walls smooth stone. The crunch of footsteps was the only sound.

“That’s the catacombs,” I stated, surprised.

Danièle nodded. “This woman is very far in, very deep.”

“How do you know it’s a woman?”

“You can hear her in the other video clips. She mumbles a few times.”

The woman stopped at a side passage and looked inside. It was a small room. She played the camera over the floor. It was scattered with a half dozen different sized bones.

A shiver prickled the back of my neck.

“Those are all human bones,” Danièle told me. “There are rooms everywhere like this one. She has already passed several others.”

The woman continued along the corridor, but stopped again to film an arrow on the ground. It had been formed using three bones. Ten feet later she came to another bone-arrow.

“Who made those?” I asked. “Other explorers?”

“Yes, maybe.” But she didn’t sound convinced.

The woman pressed on. More grainy gray walls and crunching footsteps. She arrived at a T-junction and paused.

“She is confused,” Danièle told me. “She obviously does not know this part of the catacombs well.”

“Why would she go down there by herself?”

“We do not know she went by herself. Perhaps she went

with others and became separated and lost.”

The woman chose left and followed a winding passageway. She stopped for several seconds to examine a wall painting of some sort of stickman. It was at least six feet tall, painted quickly, almost frantically, the limbs spread eagle.

Danièle said, “Watch closely now. She becomes very scared. Maybe it is this painting that scared her. Or maybe she heard something. But, look, she has begun to walk faster.”

Indeed, the woman was now moving at a trot. The footage became jumpy. Her breathing was loud and fast.

Not from exertion, I thought, but fear.

Twice she whirled around, as if to see if anyone was behind her, the camera moving with her.

“She keeps going, faster and faster,” Danièle said in a soft voice, “deeper and deeper, and then...”

All of a sudden the woman dropped the camera. It landed with a bang and kept filming.

“...she just drops it. See! She does not stop to pick it up. You can see her feet disappearing, splashing in the puddles. And then—nothing.”

The footage continued to roll, filming a close-up of pebbles and the ripples in the nearby puddle.

“What happens next?” I asked.

Danièle held up a finger: wait. She used the trackpad to skip a slice of footage and pressed Play. The image was exactly the same.

“What—?”

“Listen.”

A harrowing scream erupted from the tinny speakers. It



sounded distant, coming from deep within the black tunnels. It escalated to a banshee-like fever—

The screen went blank.

“What happened?” I demanded.

Danièle looked at me. “The camera went dead. That is it.”

## CHAPTER 2

“What do you mean, ‘That’s it?’” I said, frowning.

“You saw,” Danièle said. “The battery died.”

“And?”

“And nothing.”

“You don’t know what happened to her?”

“How could I? Nobody has ever seen her again.”

“How do you know that?”

“Well, I do not,” she admitted. “But she left the camera there. She never came back to retrieve it. And you heard her.”

I sat back. My stomach felt unsettled, as if I had just downed a shot of paint thinner. “Is this for real?”

“Of course, Will.”

“How did you get the camera?”

“Pascal found it.”

“Why was he so deep in the catacombs?”

“That is what he does. He explores, even more than me. He has visited the catacombs hundreds of times before.”

I looked at Danièle, then the laptop, then Danièle again.

“So you weren’t with him?” I said.

“No, I was not.”

“Where’s the actual camera?”

“Pascal has it. I copied the files to my computer.”

“Maybe he’s playing a joke on you?”

“Why are you so skeptical, Will?”

“Why? Because this seems like something out of *The Blair Witch Project*.”

“Pascal did not make this up.”

“Then maybe the woman did.”

“Why would she do that? The catacombs are very large. As I told you, the camera was in very deep. The chances of someone finding it were small. Also, there is no footage of her. Not on any of the video clips. Just her voice. The camera could never be traced back to her. She would never have any idea who found it, if someone did. Why would she make a joke like that?”

“She was running, right?” I said. “At the end she was running. She was scared. She thought something was coming after her. But she keeps filming? Would you do that? They only do that, keep the tape rolling, in those found-footage movies.”

“No, Will. She was not filming. She was using the video camera’s LED light to see ahead of her. If she turned the camera off—it is perfectly dark down there.”

I chewed on that. “So what do you think happened? She believed someone was behind her. Did someone run past the camera in pursuit?”

“No.”

“So who made her scream?”

“I have no answer for that.”

I knew Danièle well enough to discern whether she was pulling my leg or not. Looking at her now, I didn’t think she was. Right or wrong, in her mind she was convinced this was genuine footage. A woman had gotten lost in the catacombs, and she had the unfortunate luck to run into someone who had done something terrible to her.

And why not? I thought. Why was I so adamant this wasn’t the case? Bad shit went on in the world every day. A lot of bad shit. Some truly horrible shit. You could pretend it didn’t, but you would only be fooling yourself.

“Have you given a copy to the police?” I asked.

“The police?” Danièle’s eyes widened in surprise. “Of course not.”

“But if this is real, then something happened to that woman. You need to tell the police.”

“And what do you suppose they would do, Will?”

“I thought you told me once that there are police who patrol the catacombs?”

“Catacombs, yes. But they only patrol the popular areas. They make sure no one is breaking things or stealing bones. They do not perform manhunts. They do not go into the unmapped areas. The catacombs are hundreds of kilometers long. There are many levels.”

“I still think you need to tell them.”

“We are doing something better. We are going looking for her.”

“Tonight?” I said. “You’re going looking for this woman

tonight?”

She nodded.

“And you think you’re going to find her?”

“We have no idea. But we are going to try.”

“That camera could be years old.”

“The video was time-stamped only three weeks ago.”

“Aren’t you...I don’t know...scared?”

“You heard her screaming, Will. If we find her, it will probably be just her body. Whoever attacked her, he will be long gone.”

“And if he isn’t?”

“There will be four of us.”

“Four? You said—”

She took my hand. “I want you to come with us.”

I blinked. “You’re kidding?”

“I want you to experience this with me.”

“There’s no way I’m going traipsing around the catacombs, Danièle, looking for some lost woman, and I think you should reconsider going as well.”

“I am not reconsidering.”

“This isn’t a game. For all you know that woman might have been murdered. You don’t want to get involved in this.”

“Then come with me—protect me.”

I tugged my hand free. “Jesus, Danièle. Didn’t you just see the same video I saw? What you’re planning on doing, it’s dangerous and irresponsible.”

“If the woman had been filming aboveground, in an alleyway, and she dropped the camera and screamed, would you refuse to search the alleyway for her?”

“That’s not the same thing.”

“I am perfectly comfortable in the catacombs.”

“Have you been this deep, where Pascal found the camera deep, before?”

“I told you, Pascal—”

“Not him. You.”

“No, I have not.”

I shook my head. “Okay, take the whole crazy killer out of the equation, the killer who might have gone back down there. What if, like that woman, you get lost? What if you can’t find your way out again?”

“Pascal knows—”

“You’re putting a lot of faith in that guy.”

“He is my friend. He is the most experienced cataphile I know. I trust him completely.”

I didn’t say anything.

“So?” she pressed.

“No, Danièle. Absolutely not.”

“It will be fun.”

I stiffened as that statement took me back to the night on Lake Placid. *Let’s do it, dude*, Brian had told me minutes before his death as he tossed me the keys to the Chris-Craft. *It’ll be fun*.

“Is there anything I can say to convince you not to go?” I said.

“Is there anything I can say to convince you to come?” she said.

“Don’t be a goddamn idiot, Danièle!” I snapped, glaring at her.

She stared back, surprised and confused. Then defiant. Ab-

ruptly she closed the laptop, stuffed it in her bag. She withdrew a pen and scribbled an address on a napkin.

“If you change your mind,” she said stiffly, standing, “I will be at this location between eight and nine o’clock tonight.”

She climbed on her bicycle and pedaled away.



My apartment building was located on a quiet street close to the St. Germain district and the Jardin des Plants. St. Germain was lively and full of restaurants and bars, though I often avoided the area because I didn’t know many people in Paris, and I wasn’t the type to dine or drink by myself, at least not outside of work. The botanical gardens were a different story though. I spent a lot of time in the free sections, walking the trails for exercise or reading a book on a patch of grass or on a bench in the shade of a tree.

I climbed the front steps of my building’s stoop and checked my mailbox. It was one of six organized into two vertical columns of three each. A locksmith service advertisement was stuffed inside it. I received several of these a week, from different locksmiths. It made me wonder if Parisians locked themselves out of their homes in disproportional numbers compared to people in other metropolises. Next to the bank of mailboxes was a placard that read: “*2e etage sonnez 2 fois.*” Ring twice for the second floor. I lived on the second floor, but no one had ever buzzed me. Well, except the pizza guy. I ordered from Dominos two or three times a week. The

pies in France were smaller than the ones you got back in the States, and some came with weird cheeses, but they were still good.

I entered the foyer and made my way up the squeaky wooden staircase to the second floor. I was halfway down the hall when a door opened and my neighbor, Audrey Gabin, called to me. She was a stooped, frail woman pushing ninety. She wore smart black-rimmed eyeglasses and had luxurious brown hair that had to be a wig. As always, she was impeccably dressed. Today she sported a pumpkin-orange ensemble, a purple brim hat, and a matching purple scarf.

She caught me walking past her unit nearly every day. I had a theory that she had either memorized my routine or she sat near the door, patiently waiting for me to arrive home. I thought of her as a Miss Havisham type. While not a spinster or vengeful, she was lonely and heartbroken, and she hermitted away inside all day. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised to learn she had all her clocks stopped at the exact time her husband died nearly two decades before.

*"Bonjour, Madame Gabin,"* I greeted.

"So beautiful the day, do you think?" she said out of the left side of her mouth. The partial facial paralysis, she'd told me, was the result of a stroke she'd suffered while on a train to Bordeaux to attend her sister's funeral some time back.

"It's lovely," I agreed, a little louder than conversational because her hearing wasn't great. "The perfect temperature."

*"Un moment. I 'ave something for you."*

"No, Madam—"

But she had vanished back inside her flat. She returned a



few moments later carrying a plate of pancakes. She always had some dessert or another for me.

“You must try real French *crêpes*,” she said. “I add little...” She seemed to forget for a moment. “Ah, *oui*. I add *un petit peu de Grand Mariner*.”

I took the plate from her, which had begun to tremble in her hands. “You’re going to make me fat.”

“I ’ope so! You are *très* thin. You must eat.”

The elderly loved to give this advice. My grandparents had told me the same thing every time I saw them while I was growing up. And I had seen them a lot. They had lived a few blocks away from my family in Seattle. Even in my late teens, when my six-four frame had peaked at two-hundred-plus pounds, my one surviving grandmother would give me chocolates whenever I visited her at Bayview Retirement Community, telling me I had to put some fat on my bones.

Madame Gabin, however, had a valid point. I had lost a lot of weight recently and could be described as gaunt for the first time in my adult life. I simply didn’t find myself hungry of late. I didn’t know whether my suppressed appetite was because I had started smoking again, or because I was struggling with the rats of depression. I guess it was a combination of the two.

“I’ll eat everything,” I assured her. “They look delicious.”

“Roland, he loved his *crêpes*. I made them him every mornings.”

Roland Gabin, her long-deceased husband, had flown Spitfires in World War Two, then spent the next forty years as a civil servant until his heart gave out at the age of sixty-four.

I said, “He was a lucky man to have you.”

Madame Gabin nodded, but her eyes had clouded over, as if she had lost herself in the past. Poor woman, I thought. She had nobody. At least I had never seen anyone visit her since I became her neighbor. No children, no grandchildren. If, or more probable, *when* she died inside her apartment, she would likely remain there undiscovered, rotting in her bed or in her chair or wherever until someone—me?—detected a funky smell. It was an undeserving fate for a lady I suspect had been as ravishing and charming as a film star in her prime.

“Well, thanks,” I said, raising the plate.

She blinked. “*Oui. De rien.*”

I started toward my unit, then stopped. Madame Gabin remained standing out front her door, staring at some middle distance.

“Madame Gabin?” I said.

She didn’t reply.

“Audrey?”

She turned her head slowly toward me.

“What are you doing tomorrow evening?”

“Tomorrow?”

“I’ve been practicing my French cooking lately. I think I’m getting the hang of some dishes, but I would love some feedback. Would you like to come by for dinner?”

“Oh, *non merci*. I—I don’t think...”

“I’d like to hear some more stories about your husband.”

“*Vraiment?*” She lit up. “Well...yes, *oui*, if it ees okay?”

“How about seven o’clock?”

“Yes, seven o’clock. I will bring dessert.”

Smiling in her sad-happy way, she hobbled back into her unit while I continued to mine.



My cracker-box studio had a lack of idiosyncrasy so jarring it became an idiosyncrasy all of its own. It was drably furnished with brown wall-to-wall carpet, a swivel-egg armchair older than me, a small wooden desk, and a metal-frame bed so short my feet dangled over the end. A television sat in the corner on a low table. It only got a few channels and I rarely used it. The walls were mustard and pitted with the holes from screws and nails which previous tenants had used to hang pictures. My only additions were an iron and ironing board because the dryers at the Laundromat a block over didn't work sufficiently, leaving my clothes damp and wrinkled.

Nevertheless, I was okay with the place. It wasn't much smaller than the one Bridgette and I had shared off the Bowery. Also, there was an oven, which was great for cooking frozen pizzas when I was too impatient to order one in, and a balcony, which Danièle told me was uncommon in Paris.

I grabbed a beer from the refrigerator, then opened the window that overlooked the small courtyard to let out the foxed-paper smell that permeated the entire building. The air was springtime fresh, and the landlord was edging the garden with a hoe, making some sort of drainage line. I rarely saw any of the tenants down there. In fact, aside from Audrey Gabin, I rarely saw any of the tenants anywhere, anytime.

I sat in the armchair, flipped open my laptop, and accessed the internet. I typed “paris catacombs missing person” into the search engine. The first page of results mostly referenced the section of catacombs beneath Montparnasse’s Place Denfert-Rochereau. This was the tourist attraction open to the public. For a fee you could descend one hundred thirty steps underground and walk along a dimly lit circuit passing macabre alleys and pillars artfully constructed with tibias and femurs and punctuated with vacuous skulls.

I tried a number of different keyword combinations, but didn’t come across anything involving a missing woman or a lost video camera. I had been hoping to find the video Danièle had shown me, or at least a reference to it. This would have proved Pascal was full of shit. It was something he’d downloaded, a hoax, that was all. Unfortunately, the fact there was no mention of the video indicated the guy had likely been telling the truth about finding it on his own.

Still, I kept searching and got sucked into learning about the catacombs’ long and storied history. They began as limestone quarry tunnels dating back two thousand years to the first Roman settlers. They were greatly expanded during the cathedral boom of the late Middle Ages, honeycombing beneath the arrondissements of the Left Bank and the suburbs south of the city proper. In the late eighteenth century, long after the quarrying had stopped, Paris had become a crowded city. It had a burgeoning population clamoring for housing and burial plots. Churches maintained their own graveyards, but they were overcrowded and unsanitary. To free up valuable real estate, and to get rid of the health hazards created by corpses

buried ten deep and literally bursting through the walls of people's cellars, officials ordered the graves dug up—all of them. Over the next several decades the skeletonized remains of six million dead were dumped into the abandoned quarries, forming the largest mass grave on earth.

For safety reasons access to them had been banned since the fifties, most of the entranceways closed off, though this hasn't deterred people such as Danièle and Pascal. They called themselves cataphiles, a colloquial name for underground urban explorers—

My cell phone rang suddenly, breaking the studious trance I had fallen under.

Danièle?

I took my phone from my pocket and glanced at the display. A blocked number. I pressed Talk.

“Hello?”

No reply.

“Hello?”

“Will?”

My heart skipped. “Bridgette?”

“Will, can you hear me?”

“Yeah, can you hear me?”

“I can now. I guess we were lagging.” A pause. “How are you?”

“I'm good,” I said, getting to my feet for some reason. A warm breeze came through the window, smelling of freshly cut grass. The landlord was now mowing the patch of green lawn with a push mower. I glanced at my wristwatch. It was 7:10 p.m. “What time is it there?” I asked.

“I’m on my lunch break.”

Bridgette and I had emailed a few times since I left New York, and I had given her my new phone number, but this was the first time she had called it.

I opened my mouth to reply, but I realized I had nothing to say. I felt how you do with a stranger in an elevator. It jarred me how Bridgette and I could go from being so close, to sharing everything together, to becoming less than friends. And that’s what we were, wasn’t it? Less than friends. Because friends, at least, had things to say to one another.

“Are you enjoying Paris?” she asked.

“It’s a nice city.”

“It’s been...how long now?”

“Nearly three months.”

“And the guide?”

“It’s coming. It’ll probably take me another couple months.”

“And then?”

“I think they want me to revise the Barcelona one.”

“Spain! Very nice. I’m glad you’re happy.”

I wanted to tell her I wasn’t sure I was happy, but I didn’t.

“How about you?” I said. “Everything okay?”

“There’s something I need to tell you, Will.” She hesitated. It might have only been for a second or two, but it felt to me like an eternity. In that moment I was positive she was going to tell me she wanted to get back together. She said, “I met someone.”

A hot flash zinged through me. I continued to stare out the window, though I was no longer seeing the courtyard. Every-

thing but Bridgette's voice had become ancillary. "You mean a boyfriend?"

"Yes."

I still didn't move. I was numb. Emotionally numb.

Why the fuck was she telling me this?

"A lawyer?" I asked, surprised at the normalcy in my voice.

"He's a police officer."

"A cop?"

"Yes."

"Huh. Well—"

"Will, we just got engaged."

I'd always thought it was melodrama when people tell you to sit before hearing certain good or bad news. Now I believed it to be a justifiable forewarning, because my knees literally gave out and I collapsed into the armchair.

Bridgette said, "I didn't want you to find out on Facebook or whatever..."

"I don't use Facebook."

"You have an account."

"How long have you known this guy for?"

"We met in March."

"Two months? That's it? And you're engaged?"

"We...I'm pregnant," she said. "It wasn't planned," she added quickly. "But...then...I started feeling sick in the mornings, and I took a test. And...and we decided it would be best to get married."

I was listening but not listening. My thoughts were a thousand miles away, fast-forwarding through the years I had spent

with her. How good she had been to me. How she had stuck by me when nobody else had. How much I had loved her. How I would have done anything for her.

How could she be engaged with someone else and pregnant with his child?

She was mine. She had always been mine.

I was back on my feet. Anger churned within me, burning me up from the inside out. My jaw was clenched, my free fist pumped open, closed, open, closed. I wanted to throw the phone as far as I could out the window.

Instead I shut my eyes and tilted my head back. I took a silent breath. What was my problem? Fuck, I had slept with Danièle just the other night. Bridgette had every right to do the same with someone else. She hadn't planned on getting pregnant. It happened. So what did I want her to do? Have an abortion? Stop seeing the guy? What would any of that accomplish? We were done.

*But we weren't. I was going to come back. We were going to start over...*

"Will?" Bridgette said. "Are you there?"

"Yeah, I'm here."

"I know how all this must sound..."

"I understand. And...congratulations. I'm happy for you."

She didn't say anything. The line hissed with long-distance static interference.

Then: "Thank you, Will." Her voice was croaky, and I thought she might be crying. "That means a lot to me."

A chorus of voices sounded in the background.

"I should go," she said.



I didn't protest. There was nothing more to say.

"Will?"

"Yeah?"

"I love you. I always will."

"I love you too."

I didn't hang up immediately. Apparently she didn't either, because the line noise continued for another five seconds.

Then silence, perfect silence.

She was gone.



Sometime later, as the late dusk settled and shadows lengthened outside my window, I started packing a bag.

## CHAPTER 3

The name of the pub Danièle had written on the napkin earlier was La Cave. The façade was nondescript, and I walked straight past the wooden door and small neon sign on my first pass down rue Jean-Pierre Timbaud.

The interior had all the intimacy, intrigue, and secrecy of a speakeasy. Red cone lamps suspended from the barrel-vault ceiling cast butterscotch light over the button-tufted sofas and armchairs and low wood tables. The bar was tucked into one corner. Behind the fumed-oak counter a chalkboard listed a variety of cocktails. In another corner sat a white claw-footed bathtub, filled with ice and green bottles of what looked to be home-made beer. Good-natured old-timers schmoozed next to crowds of younger hipsters, voices and laughter raised in a cacophony of merriment.

I didn't see Danièle anywhere and checked my wristwatch, a six hundred dollar Hamilton that Bridgette had splurged on for my twenty-fourth birthday.

It was a quarter past eight. Danièle had said she would be here between eight and nine. Had she changed her mind and left early?

“Excuse me?” I said to a waiter wiping down a recently vacated table. He was a clean-cut guy with a back-in-fashion mullet, rolled-up cuffs, and a black apron. “Have you seen a woman, short black hair, a lot of mascara?”

“Why don’t you use your eyes and look for her yourself?” he snapped, turning away from me.

I stared at his back, pissed off, but letting it go. People say the French are rude, but I’ve found that stereotype mostly applied to the service class, who could act as hoity-toity as pop stars; they certainly had no regard for the Anglo-Saxon maxim, “He who pays the piper calls the tune.”

I continued searching for Danièle, and after five minutes without success, I was about to give up and leave when I spotted a staircase that descended to a basement level. I went down a set of steep, narrow steps that emerged in an expansive area styled similar to the first floor, only the walls were brick instead of paneled wood and there were no windows. I immediately spotted Danièle and Pascal and a third guy off by themselves, at a corner table.

“Will!” Danièle said, springing to her feet when she saw me approach. We did the air kiss thing, then she turned to the others to make introductions. “You remember Pascal?”

“Hey,” I said, sticking out my hand.

Pascal shook, but didn’t stand. He was a handsome guy, dark-complected, with thick eyebrows, brooding eyes, and long brown hair. He had gone chic-bum with a wrinkled linen T-

shirt and a tweed jacket with brown elbow patches. The tee was wide-necked and showed off too much hairless chest which a loosely knotted scarf failed to conceal. It was the kind of overthought getup you saw aged rock stars don to prove they still had their thumb on the pulse of the times. He was wearing the same black wool-knit cap he had on at Danièle's birthday party.

"And Will," Danièle said, "this is Robert."

"Just Rob, boss," Rob told me, standing and shaking. He was a short bulldog-looking guy whose body was not only compact but tightly muscular, like a college wrestler's. He had a spray of freckles that hadn't faded over time as mothers always promised would, lively gray eyes, and a balding crown shaved close to the scalp. I guessed he was the oldest in our motley crew, maybe thirty.

"You're American?" I said. Pascal's silent greeting had made me feel unwelcome, and it was nice to know I wasn't the only outsider.

"Nah, Canadian, but what the fuck, right?"

"We have just ordered," Danièle told me. "But do not worry. There is enough for you."

"I'm not hungry," I said.

"You should still eat. You will not get another chance until morning."

"I brought some snacks."

"Okay, Will, do not eat, but sit down."

I took a seat beside her, across from Rob and Pascal.

"So Danny says you're a travel writer or something?" Rob said. He had a husky voice, as if his throat were corroded with

rust. “How you like the frogs?”

“Why do you say that, Rob?” Danièle demanded. “We are not frogs. Where did that come from? I never understand that.”

“You eat frog legs, don’t you?”

“Maybe I should call you ‘rosbif?’”

“Ross what?”

“Roast beef?” I offered.

Danièle nodded. “Yes, because you Canadians and Americans eat so much red meat—and you are all so fat, like cows.”

This cracked Rob up. He jumped to his feet and crouched-walked around the table, carrying in his hands an invisible belly, which he began thrusting at Danièle from behind. The action resembled a stubby stripper grinding a pole.

“Get away!” Danièle said, swatting him. “You are so gross. Stop it!”

Still laughing, Rob sat back down. “Fucking French,” he said. “Can’t take a joke. Got assholes so tight they squeak when they fart.”

“Where’re you from?” I asked him.

“Quebec City.”

“The French-speaking part?”

“Quebec’s a province, bro. Quebec City’s a small city in that province. But, yeah, the French-speaking part. Moved to Toronto when I was ten. Actually, moved to Mississauga. But nobody knows where the fuck that is, so I just say Toronto.”

“What are you doing over here?”

“I’m a translator, sort of. I do the subtitles for movies.”

“Hollywood stuff?”

“Other way around. I translate French films to English.

You've probably never seen any of the ones I've done—because French films suck.”

“They do not suck,” Danièle said.

“If you like pretentious art house crap.”

“Pascal, why did you invite Rosbif? He is so annoying sometimes. Did you forget we have to spend nearly ten hours with him?”

Pascal said something in French, paused, then added something more, making a curlicue gesture with his hand. Rob nodded and shot back a reply.

“Do you speak English?” I asked Pascal.

He leveled his gaze at me. “Do you speak French?”

Mr. Mullet appeared with a huge tray of food. We had to clear the condiments from the center of the table so everything could fit: oysters, soufflé, pork belly, garlic sausage, and a platter of cheese.

While everyone ate, and I nibbled, Danièle said, “So this is the plan, Will. We will arrive at the entrance to the catacombs around ten o'clock. We will continued for four hours, then rest for one. Then it is another two hours or so to the spot where the camera was found.” She consulted Pascal. “Is that right?”

He nodded without looking up from his food.

“Which means we finish around 7 a.m.,” she added. “Still enough time to get to work.”

I was surprised. “Work?”

“You must work tomorrow, yes?”

“I figured I'd write the day off.”

“Then you do not need to worry.”

“You're working tomorrow?”

“Of course. But I do not start until nine.”

“Lucky you,” Rob said, sawing a piece of pork. “I start at eight.”

I did Danièle’s math in my head. “If we start at ten, walk for four hours, rest for one, walk for another two, that’s seven hours in total. That will take us to five in the morning. Seven hours back, it won’t be noon until we resurface.”

“No, Will,” Danièle said. “Pascal knows a different exit close to where we will rest. We will leave that way.”

I looked at her, wondering if I had to state the obvious. Apparently I did, and said, “Why don’t we just enter through that exit?”

“Because that is not what we do,” she stated. “The catacombs, it is an experience, every time, even for Pascal and me. It is not something to rush through. You and Robert will see. You will understand.”

# CHAPTER 4

## ROB

Rob Stratton cast another passing glance across the table at Danièle's friend Will, trying to get a read on him. He wasn't your typical American expat, not loud, not wanting to be the center of attention. Not all American expats were like that, of course; they ran the spectrum like expats from any nationality did. But Yanks could be loud. Yanks, then Aussies, then Spaniards—especially the *senoritas*. That's how he'd rank them all on the loud meter. The worst of the lot weren't only loud but didn't adapt. They brought their native country with them wherever they went.

Rob was thinking about a friend of a friend in particular, a Texan in the import-export business who'd made a fortune



selling Chinese junk to the French bourgeoisie. He didn't wear a cowboy hat around, that would have made him the laughing-stock of Paris, but he did wear these fancy-ass pointed-toe cowhide boots. You could hear the Cuban heels click-clack across the cobblestone streets from a block away. And if this fashion faux pas wasn't bad enough, the sad fuck shouted everything he said. "Y'all" this and "I'm fixin' tuh" that. It made you want to smack him one.

Anyway, generalizations aside, Rob wanted to like Will, he was trying to, but it was tough, knowing how much angst—albeit unintentional—his presence was causing poor Pascal, who'd held a flame for Danny for as long as Rob had known him.

If Rob were Pascal, he probably would have popped Will one right in the kisser by now. But Pascal was a lover, a romantic, whatever you called dudes with more heart than testosterone. He didn't have it in him to hurt a fly.

When Pascal rang Rob two days ago, and explained the pathetic situation, he had been trying to act blasé about the whole deal, but it was obvious he was crushed. Initially Rob declined his invitation to come along; he knew Pascal was only asking because he didn't want to be the third wheel at his own party; also, the wife had some work thing, and Rob had promised to watch the girls.

Nevertheless, the little bugger wouldn't let up, even offered to pay for a babysitter, and Rob finally relented. Why not? he'd thought. Pascal and Danny had been going on about the catacombs for years now, and he figured it was about time to find out what all the fuss was about.

## CHAPTER 5

### PASCAL

Pascal Gayet slurped an oyster from the wide end of the shell, doing his best to ignore Danièle and the American Will. He still couldn't believe he'd missed out on his chance to hook up with Danièle yet again. He'd wanted to ask her out ever since they'd first met years earlier at Le Mines. However, he'd been in a relationship then, and by the time he got out of it, she was in one. Ever since, it'd been the same thing: whenever she was single, he wasn't, and vice versa. Eventually she'd gotten serious with a tattoo artist named Marcel, and for the next three years he had to listen to Danièle complain about what an asshole the guy was to her. Pascal told her repeatedly to dump him, but she never listened. Then, a few months ago, he

dumped *her* for a TV actress who had a part in some kid's show about a family trying to run a Bed and Breakfast. Pascal figured this was finally his chance. He and Danièle were both single. He'd give her a couple weeks to get over Marcel, then he'd tell her how he felt about her.

Before he could do this, however, she began going on about this American she was doing language exchange lessons with. She obviously liked him. She didn't shut up about him: *Why doesn't he like me? Do you think he's gay? Do you think he has a girlfriend? Should I ask him out? Do American women do that?* By the time of her birthday party Friday evening Pascal had expected some Fabio-type to stroll through the door with her. To his satisfaction, Will was no Fabio. He had short scruffy black hair, seemed to be in good shape, girls probably found him attractive. But Fabio? Not a chance.

Still, that didn't stop Danièle from fawning over him. At one point she hopped right onto his lap, her arms hooked around his neck, throwing her head back, laughing. Eventually Pascal couldn't stand it anymore and left the pub with Danièle's friend Fanny. She wasn't attractive, he didn't have sex with her, he didn't want to. He just wanted company—that, and he wanted Danièle to find out, though if she did, she never mentioned it.

Across the table Danièle was sitting ramrod straight, her hand out before her, fingers splayed, as she told of the time she had met the Russian ambassador to France at Place de la Bastille. She was up to the point when she had pretended to be Russian to gain access to the VIP room, where all the diplomats were knocking back free champagne during the ballet's

intermission. Obviously she was trying to impress Will, who was listening stoically beside her, staring into the beer he'd ordered.

Pascal slurped a second oyster from the shell and entertained himself for a bit with all the different ways the American could meet a grisly demise in the catacombs tonight.

## CHAPTER 6

Outside the restaurant, rue Jean-Pierre Timbaud was alive with lights and bustle and noise. We walked two blocks, turned down a side street, and walked another half block before arriving at Pascal's ride: an old, beat-up Volkswagen camper-van. Pascal and Rob got in the front while Daniel and I climbed in the back through the sliding side door. We sat next to one another on a bench seat that I suspected folded down into a bed.

Was this Pascal's Lovemobile? I wondered. Did he drive girls to the top of Montmartre, booze them up, then shag them back here?

To my left was a long counter with knobs protruding vertically from the surface. I lifted one, which raised a section of countertop, and discovered a sink beneath.

As Pascal pulled onto the street and made a tight U-turn, Rob swiveled the front passenger seat around so he was facing us and opened a cupboard below the counter, revealing a mini

fridge. He snagged three Belgium beers and tossed one to Danièle and one to me. “To the catacombs fuckers!” he rasped.

We popped the tabs, toasted.

Rob swiveled forward again and turned up Bob Dylan on the stereo.

“So this is fun, right?” Danièle said to me, leaning close to be heard.

“Sure,” I said.

I peeled back the tatty chintz curtain and looked out the window. I had never traveled Paris by car, and as we rattled down a wide avenue lined with chestnuts, I watched the stream of closed shops float past.

Nearly everyone had a similar idealized image of Paris in their heads. A mecca of culture and history populated by beautiful architecture, stylish women clad in Gautier or Givenchy, and mustachioed mimes carrying easels under one arm and baguettes under the other. I guess this was sort of true—aside from the mustachioed mimes—but already the gloss had begun to wear off for me, and it had become just another steel-skied, rambling city.

“What are you looking at?” Danièle asked me.

I dropped the curtain. “I’ve never been this way before.”

“You have not seen much of Paris, have you?”

“Just the bars and clubs, mostly,” I said.

“Why not sightsee more?”

“I haven’t gotten around to it.”

“You know, Will, you are a hermit crab.”

“A hermit crab?”

“You like to be by yourself.”

I thought about tweaking her analogy, but didn't.

A hermit crab. Fuck. I sort of liked it.

I said, "What's wrong with being a hermit crab?"

"What made you change your mind tonight?"

"About coming out?"

"Yes, you were so against this idea."

"I still am."

"Then why are you here?"

*Because the alternative was sitting around my apartment all night thinking about Bridgette and her cop boyfriend and their yet-to-be child...*

"I wanted to hang out with you," I said—and this was true. I hadn't wanted to be alone, and I'd always felt comfortable around Danièle.

She stared at me for a long moment. I waited for a sarcastic zinger. In the front Rob and Pascal were joking back and forth in French. Dylan was warbling about how the times were a-changin'.

Then, suddenly: "Oh, Will, look!" Danièle pointed out my window.

Far in the distance, visible between a break in the buildings, the iron lady rose into the sky, lit up in a twinkling light show.

"You must come to the Trocadéro with me," she added. "We will go early in the morning, before the tourists come. It feels like you have the Eiffel Tower all to yourself. What do you think?"

"Sure."

I caught Pascal watching us via the rearview mirror. His

eyes met mine, then he looked away.

Rob swiveled his chair around again, opened the mini fridge, and grabbed a second beer. “Anyone?” he said.

Mine was still half full. “No, thanks.”

“I will,” Danièle said cheerfully, and she caught the one he tossed her.

Tabs popped again. Carbonation hissed. Cans foamed over.

“I take it you saw the video?” Rob said to me.

I nodded.

“What do you think?”

“It’s something.”

“What do you think got her?”

I had considered this a fair bit since I decided to come on the excursion. My revised conclusion was not as ominous as the one I had initially jumped to. I said, “I think she snapped.”

“Went crazy?”

I nodded. “If you assume she was lost down there for days without food or water, she would have been weak and dehydrated. She would have been exhausted, mentally and physically. So she snapped.”

“Why’d she start running?”

I shrugged. “When you go crazy, you go crazy. Maybe she was hearing voices and stuff in her head.”

“And the scream?”

“She dropped the camera. She no longer had light to see by. She was lost in absolute blackness. That was the last straw.”

“You know, Will,” Danièle said, touching my knee, “that is a good deduction. Maybe you are right. See—you had nothing



to be scared of to begin with.”

Pascal chortled from up front.

“I was never scared,” I said. “I was concerned—for you.”

“Is that not the same thing?”

“What do you think?” I asked Rob.

“Sounds like you were scared, boss.”

I ignored that. “I mean, what do you think happened to her?”

“What you said makes sense,” he agreed. Then, with a campfire grin, he added, “But on the other hand, maybe there *is* something down there. A mop-wielding Toxic Avenger mutant that stripped her, fucked her, ate her, then tossed her bones to one of those rooms with all the other bones.”

Danièle rolled her eyes at this. Rob winked at us and chugged his beer. The van tooled on through the night with Dylan singing in his campy, folky voice.



Later, somewhere in the southern suburb of Port D’Orléans, Pascal pulled up to the curb twenty feet shy of a dark street corner and killed the engine.

Danièle said, “We are here.”

## CHAPTER 7

On the sidewalk outside the campervan Pascal and Danièle pulled on hip waders. Rob was on his butt, swapping his shoes for a pair of Wellingtons.

“I didn’t know I needed any of this stuff,” I said, feeling suddenly foolish standing there in a black pullover, black jeans, and powder-blue Converse All-Stars.

“There is water in some places,” Danièle told me. “But do not worry, you will be fine. Most important is a helmet.”

“I don’t have that either.”

“Pascal and I have extras. You and Rob choose.”

Rob opened the large navy canvas bag before him, which reminded me of my equipment bag when I played prep football. He withdrew two safety helmets, one red and one white, both with LED headlamps strapped to them. “Red or white, boss?” he said.

“Either.”

He tossed me the red one. I caught it and turned it in my

hands. It was well-used and scuffed. On the back was a fading sticker of a grim reaper flicking off the world with his bony middle finger. Along the brim, written in black marker, was: CHESS. “Who’s Chess?” I asked.

“That is Pascal,” Danièle said. “It is his catacombs name.”

I would rather have used Danièle’s spare helmet than Pascal’s—I didn’t want to feel indebted to the guy—but if I asked Rob to trade I’d probably have to explain the reason for my request. “Catacombs name?” I said.

“Every cataphile has an aboveground name and a catacombs name.”

“Dorks!” Rob said as he plunked on his helmet and rapped it with his knuckles to check its integrity.

“Why the aliases?” I asked.

Danièle shrugged. “In the catacombs, the above world does not exist. We do not speak of it. You are free of your old life, free to reinvent yourself any way you like. With that new identity comes a new name.”

I had to admit, after all the shit I’d been through over the couple years, this sounded rather appealing. “So what’s your catacombs name?” I asked.

“In English it translates to Stork Girl.”

Rob howled.

“What?” Danièle demanded, planting her fists on her hips.

“Danny, that’s the stupidest name I’ve ever heard.”

“You are the stupidest person I have ever met,” she declared. “And, if you must know, I did not make up the name. Pascal did.”

Rob said something in French to Pascal. Pascal said some-

thing back, pantomiming a big head.

“He thinks when I wear a helmet,” Danièle explained to me, “it makes my head look big. This makes my neck appear small and long, like a Stork’s.”

“I like Stork Girl,” I said.

“Thank you, Will.”

And I did. It was cute. Definitely a better moniker than Chess. I imagined Pascal came up with that one on his own too. It was pretentious while masking the pretentiousness. Sort of like saying, “I’m a master manipulator, a strategist, a genius in my own right, checkmate asshole” while at the same time, if asked about its meaning, allowing him to humbly confess he was just a simple guy who enjoyed a game of chess.

“So what’s my dork name?” Rob asked.

“Rosbif,” Danièle said immediately. “And you, Will, I do not know yours. I will think about it.”

A middle-aged man turned the corner at the end of the street and approached us. He was walking a brown dachshund on a leash. Pascal clipped a ragged utility belt around his waist from which dangled a 6D Maglite flashlight and Leatherman hand tools. He retrieved the last two helmets from the bag, handed one to Danièle, then tossed the bag back inside the campervan and locked the door.

Everyone stepped aside so the man and his dog could pass. I expected him to stop and ask us what we were doing. He only nodded politely and continued on his way, tugging the sausage dog along to keep up.

“He doesn’t find us strange?” I said when he was out of earshot. “We look like sewer workers or something.”

Danièle shrugged. “He is aware of what we are doing. Many people dressed like us come and go this way.”

I spotted a covered manhole in the center of the road. “Is that the entrance?”

“No, it is this way. Follow me.”

She started away, her helmet tucked under one arm. I shrugged my backpack over my shoulder and followed. We crossed a vacant lot and came to a crumbling dry-stone fence. It was as high as my chest and thick. I gave Danièle a boost, then heaved myself up, so I was sitting on the capstone next to her. We shoved off together, landed on spongy dead leaves, and scrambled down the slope of a steep, forested ravine. When we burst free of the vegetation, we were standing among a pair of abandoned railway tracks.

“Where are we?” I asked, turning in a circle, seeing only shadowed foliage surrounding us on all sides. The earth was carpeted with more dead leaves and lichen. Everything smelled lush and fresh.

“The Petite Ceinture,” Danièle said. “It was a railway track that used to circle Paris, sort of like a defense, yes? The trains moved the soldiers from one point to the next quickly. It has not been used for a very long time.”

I flicked on my headlamp.

“No, not yet,” Danièle said. “We do not want to attract attention.”

I frowned. “Who’s going to see us here?”

“Not yet,” she repeated.

I turned off the light just as Rob and Pascal joined us. Rob was cupping his left eye with his hand, cursing inventively.

“Pissing branch,” he complained.

Danièle smiled. “You must be more careful, Rosbif.”

“Fuck off, Stork the Dork.”

Still smiling triumphantly, as if she had been the one to poke Rob in the eye, Danièle headed off along the tracks. The rest of us fell into line behind her, single file. The rusted rails and rotted wooden ties were nearly overgrown with weeds. I began playing a game in which I was only allowed to step on the ties. If I missed one, and my foot touched the crushed stone that formed the track ballast, I had to start my count from the beginning. On my third go I was up to one hundred sixteen when Danièle stopped suddenly. I bumped into her from behind and saw several flashlight beams maybe a hundred feet in the distance.

Pascal brushed past me and conversed with Danièle in serious tones.

“Who are they?” I asked.

“Other cataphiles,” Danièle said.

“Oh.” I had thought they were the police. “So what’s the problem?”

“There is no problem. Most cataphiles are friendly, but some...” She shrugged. “What you are on the surface, you are underground.”

“So a tool’s a tool,” Rob said. “Who gives a shit? What are they going to do? Looks like there’s only three of them.”

Danièle said, “I think we should let them enter the catacombs first, then we will follow afterward.”

Rob snorted disapproval. “And what if they don’t move for an hour? We’re on a schedule, right?”

Danièle looked at Pascal. He nodded.

“Okay,” she said. “We will go. But Rosbif, Will, do not speak English.”

“Why not?” I asked.

“Even friendly cataphiles, they do not like foreigners coming and going. The catacombs is their world. They want it to remain secret, as much as it can. If they hear you speak English, they will know you are a foreigner.”

“And?” I said.

“And nothing. But it is better to be safe.”

“Do not be scared,” Pascal told me.

I leveled my gaze at him. He turned promptly, and we continued toward the cataphiles, four abreast. Rob had been right. I counted three flashlight beams, three guys. They stood at the mouth of what appeared to be a train tunnel, speaking loudly and laughing.

When they noticed us they went quiet.

Pascal said, “*Salut!*” and began conversing with one of them.

They were all dressed in boots, blue coveralls, and white gloves. Their ages ranged from twenty-five to forty, give or take. Two oxygen tanks, fins, and an assortment of other diving gear rested beside them.

The guy Pascal was speaking to was the oldest. He had beady eyes and a hangdog face with the loose jowls of an aristocratic banker. Greasy black hair, parted down the center, gave him a Dickensian air. His voice was gruff, atonal, sort of pissed off.

The other two complimented each other only in that they

were opposites. One was short, Rob's height, but much skinnier. He had a bad case of acne, and he seemed nervous, staring fixedly at a spot on the ground in front of him. His buddy, on the other hand, cleared six feet. I couldn't tell if he was as tall as me because he wore his hair in a volcano of dreadlocks, but he would have been a good thirty or forty pounds heavier. Judging by his barrel chest and knotty neck and broad shoulders, he subsisted on a diet of eggs, meat, and protein shakes. His face had that young Arnie look, all thick slabs and bony protrusions. His coveralls were stained with clay, no doubt from previous descents into the catacombs.

He was ogling Danièle in a way I didn't like. He sensed my eyes on him, turned toward me, and said something.

When I didn't reply, he scoffed and reached for my helmet.

I batted his hand away. "Fuck off."

Surprise flashed on his face. Then a toothy, Neanderthal smile.

Pascal and the old guy stopped talking. Everyone's attention turned to Dreadlocks and me.

"You American, huh?" he said, stepping toward me. His size made it feel as though he was crowding my personal space. "You go catacombs?"

Either he was as dumb as he looked, or that was a rhetorical question. I waited for him to continue.

"You take many photographs, huh?"

"I don't have a camera."

"You going to paint your name? Paint a pretty picture?"

"Why would I paint a picture?"

"That's what you *touristes* do. You come here, you paint



pictures.”

“Not today.”

He licked his lips. He had either exhausted his English, or he was thinking of something else to say. He nodded at Danièle. “She your girlfriend, huh?”

“Why do you care?”

He sneered at her. “You *touriste* too?”

She fired off a string of French. He chuckled, though not in a friendly manner, and replied. Their back and forth devolved into a heated argument.

For a moment I was absurdly proud of Danièle for standing her ground.

Pascal was keeping his distance. Rob was grinning amusedly, maybe even manically. His hands were balled into tight fists. I had the feeling he was about to throw himself at the big guy.

I stepped between him and Dreadlocks and said to Danièle, “Let’s go.”

Dreadlocks gripped my shoulder and spun me around. I stepped on one of his boots and shoved him in the chest, removing my foot so I didn’t break his ankle as he dropped, arms pin-wheeling, to the ground.

Sitting on his ass, he appeared momentarily dazed. Then his eyes stormed over. Roaring, he lunged at me, thrusting his meaty hands in my face. Everyone in both parties got into it, yelling and pulling us apart.

Danièle tugged me free. I was panting, not yet done. Dreadlocks continued to hurl curses, towering above his two buddies, who were doing their best to hold him back. Blood

smeared his hammered forehead.

“Will, enough!” Danièle said. “Stop it!”

It took most of my self-restraint, but I reluctantly turned my back to the fight. I snatched my helmet, which had fallen off my head, and drew the heel of my hand across my lips, which were numb from a blow the fucker had landed.

Pascal was already walking away into the tunnel.

Both Danièle and Rob placed a hand on my back, urging me to follow.

I went.



Darkness folded around us like great black wings. Ahead Pascal turned on his headlamp. Rob and Danièle and I did the same.

“What a fucking knob jockey,” Rob said as Dreadlocks’ taunts faded behind us. “Him and his asshat friends too.”

Danièle looked at me. “Why did you speak English?” she demanded. “We told you not to say anything.”

“He tried to grab my helmet,” I said. “What was I supposed to do?”

“You should have ignored him.”

“What was he saying to you?”

She didn’t answer.

“Talking smack,” Rob offered helpfully.

“Yes,” Danièle said, “but Will did not have to push him.”

“He grabbed me,” I reminded her.

“You cannot do that anymore,” she said, and in the bright LED lights of our helmets I saw she wasn’t angry, only concerned. “If something happens when we are deep underground...”

She didn’t have to finish. I understood.

“They had scuba gear,” I said, wanting to change topics. “What was that about?”

“There are some spots, some shafts, in the catacombs that have filled completely with water. They likely want to see whether they lead anywhere.”

We walked on, our headlamps shooting zigzags of light around the cavernous arch. Gusty trails of graffiti covered the walls, curving onto the bricks overhead. The ground was chunked with rocks that glowed pale gray, the color of Paris, the buildings.

A few minutes later Pascal called a halt. He swung his Maglite to the left. Where the graffiti-covered wall met the earth was a hole—or, more accurately, a chiseled craggy break in the rock, no more than two feet wide. Spreading away from it was what I assumed to be cataphile refuse: empty beer cans, juice cartons, candy wrappers, white paste from carbine lanterns. A junked foam chair sat off on its lonesome. I wrinkled my nose; the stench of urine was strong.

“This is the entrance?” I said. I had been thinking it would have been more clandestine. This screamed: “Come on in, we’re open!”

Danièle nodded. “Some cataphiles, they are such slobs.”

“Don’t the police—the catacops—know about this?”

“Of course. This is the main entrance nowadays.”

Rob said, “So why don’t they seal the thing up?”

“They have before,” she continued, “but cataphiles open it again. Also, it is not an easy situation for them. They are scared they may trap inexperienced cataphiles inside. But, you know, I think it would be a good thing if they somehow closed it for good. Because then the people who make the trouble, the vandals and drug-users and tibia-collectors, they will get bored and find other things to do.”

“Yeah,” Rob said in an *uh-duh* way, “but wouldn’t that screw you too?”

“Me?” Danièle seemed insulted. “I am not an amateur. Pascal and I know ten other entrances.”

The ever-silent Pascal got to his knees and ventured first into the hole.

“He doesn’t say much, does he?” I remarked when he was no longer in sight.

“His English is not so good,” Danièle said.

“Fuck me,” Rob said, peering into the fissure. “I can’t see shit.”

“It is okay, Rosbif,” Danièle told him. “You are so small, you will have no problem fitting in there.”

“Bite me,” he said, then lowered himself into the opening. When only his legs were visible, poking out of the rock mouth like a half-eaten meal, he let rip a fart. His laughter floated back as he crawled forward.

“Ugh,” Danièle said, waving her hand back and forth in front of her nose even though the smell had yet to reach us and couldn’t be much worse than the stink of urine. “I really hate that guy, you know?”

“After you,” I said.

“No, you must go next so I can push you in case you get stuck.”

I stared at her. “In case I get stuck?”

She smiled. “You will be fine. Now go. Just watch your hands for glass.”

I waded through the rubbish and stood in front of the main entrance to the catacombs, which was little more than a crack. Cool air sighed out of it.

Setting aside my reservations, I slipped off my backpack, pushed it into the shaft ahead of me, and followed it into the blackness.

## CHAPTER 8

### EXTRACT FROM THE *SUNDAY TELEGRAPH*, JULY 29, 2011

#### **Three British Men Feared Lost in Paris Catacombs**

Paris police headquarters have reported that three British nationals went missing in the Paris catacombs late Monday while exploring with friends.

When they didn't return to the surface, their friends alerted police, who have spent several days searching for the missing men without success.

Gaspard Philipe, of the police unit that monitors the ancient quarry tunnels, said on RTL radio Friday that anyone considering entering the tunnels should understand the dangers.

“It is not only off limits to the public, it is dangerous. You can get lost. There are cave-ins. You don’t know who you might run into. If you want to see the catacombs, there is a section open to the public as a museum for a very reasonable admission fee.”

The network of tunnels beneath the capital is said to extend more than 300 kilometers (186 miles) and reach depths of 30 meters (100 feet), too deep for phone coverage. Some passageways are large enough that ten men can walk abreast and not touch the sides, while others are so small that those who enter them must squirm forward on their bellies.

