

C H A P T E R

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ANNA REGULARLY DREAMED about killing him. About creeping up on him and swiftly running the blade across his throat. That was why, on this particular morning, she didn't sit up in bed with a jolt but calmly blinked as she woke from yet another dream that left a kaleidoscope of violent images on the inside of her eyelids and filled her with excitement.

*Is it over?*

She lay still in the darkness as reality sunk in.

She checked the clock on the tiled floor next to her bed: 5:37 AM. It was the longest she had slept since renting the house.

A dog's barking echoed through the cloisters of the old monastery on the neighboring street. Two barks followed by a short, suppressed howl, then total silence. Anna raised herself up on her elbows and listened. She was about to lie down again when she heard a spluttering car approaching slowly.

She got out of bed and quickly made her way to one of the bedroom's two windows. A wave of unease washed over her. She opened one of the faded green shutters slightly,

sending a ray of morning sun through the room in a narrow beam, and looked down into the street two floors below her. Apart from a cat waving its tail languidly on the wall of the overgrown courtyard garden of the building opposite, Rue des Trois Chapons lay deserted.

Anna scanned the houses.

Her gaze stopped at the ground-floor window of the building across the road. It was wide open. Normally, all the windows in that house were covered with shutters. This was the first time she had seen any sign of life in the run-down property. The dark hole in the wall seemed to zoom in on her like a probing eye.

Her fingers started tingling, and she felt her pulse throb in her ears.

*Is it him? Have they found me?*

She stayed hidden behind the shutters until she'd gotten her breathing back under control. Then she nodded in an effort to reassure herself. There was no one down there. No one was hiding in the shadows.

In fact, very few people frequented Rue des Trois Chapons. The small street ran from the church on the square to the town's high street and was winding and narrow. You could touch the cobblestone houses on both sides by simply extending your arms. At street level, a sweet stench revealed that stray cats sought refuge there at night. They'd lurch and squeal pitifully in their search for company. But Anna rarely saw any people here. Not in this alleyway.

She closed the window and walked naked up the uneven stone steps. On the rooftop terrace she turned on the water hose, and it started wriggling on the tiles. She picked it up and washed herself in the spray. The cold water hurt, her body still warm from sleep, but she didn't flinch.

She brushed off the water and raked her fingers through her wet hair. She let her fingertips sink into her hollow cheeks

and studied her reflection in the window of the terrace door. She had lost weight. Not much, no more than maybe three or four pounds, but her breasts were smaller, her arms lean and her face gaunt. She couldn't decide what she looked like more: an overgrown child or an old woman. Both made her stomach turn.

She put on a jersey dress and a pair of espadrilles and walked downstairs to the kitchen, where she found a lump of baguette and a jar of fig jam. She ate by the open window and listened to the clatter of stalls being assembled on the market square.

Yesterday, she had sent the letter.

She had made the three-hour drive to Cannes, where she'd first picked up the FedEx package at La Poste on Rue de Mimont. Back in the car, she had ripped it open and made sure the money was inside. Then she'd popped the letter into the post box outside the post office and driven back to Rue des Trois Chapons.

In a few days, she would send another letter. And then another.

In the meantime, all she could do was wait. And pray.

She swallowed the last mouthful of baguette and put on a cap, grabbed her backpack and left the house. She walked down the high street to the market in the square, where she stopped between the stalls and shoppers to savor the atmosphere.

A group of children had gathered around a small, rickety table. On the table was a cardboard box, and inside it, a kid goat was being fondled by the children's eager hands. A sturdy man in dirty dungarees pushed his way between a pair of twin boys and stuffed a bottle into the goat's mouth. With the other hand, he held out a plastic basket to the parents who were watching and smiling at their children's excitement. Reluctantly they fished out some coins from their

pockets and tossed them into the basket. The man thanked them mechanically and immediately yanked the bottle from the mouth of the hungry goat, milk spraying all over.

Anna watched the man repeat the performance. She was about to angrily snatch the bottle from his hand when she noticed an elderly couple sitting under a flourishing wisteria at the café across the street.

The man was bald and wearing a bright-yellow polo shirt. His attention was fixed on a croissant. His shirt was what had caught Anna's eye, but it was the small, apple-cheeked woman in the chair next to him that made her stop dead in her tracks.

She didn't have time to register what the woman was wearing or eating. All she saw was the camera she was holding up and the look of disbelief on her face as she stared directly at Anna.

Anna turned and walked with measured steps to the nearest street corner and turned around it.

Then she started to run.