

FROM THE CURIOSI CASEBOOK

-LOST AND FOUND-

Part One

It had probably been a garret where starving artists and hungry writers lived but now it was just a hotel room on the top floor looking out over the rooftops of Paris. I stared at the long pane of glass that followed the slope of the roof where there had once been a dormer attached. It had been lopped off when the place had been renovated. My eyes followed the street as it sliced through the rooftops until it ended at the row of Plane trees then skipped over the Seine and focused on the stubby towers and stolid flank of The Cathedral of Notre Dame. Its flying buttresses were as useless as a Penguin's wings for levitation but they kept the gothic mass from sinking beneath the mud of the Ile de Cite. I reached for a pack of cigarettes but there was only my passport, my wallet and my cell phone. I had given up smoking two weeks before and it wasn't like I was about to face a firing squad.

I took off the crumpled khakis' and polo shirt I'd worn on the flight over and dropped them on the rumpled bed. I know you're supposed to stay awake after a transatlantic flight until your normal bedtime so your biological clock would be reset to the new time. I'd taken a nap anyway. After all, Paris was timeless. I showered, changed into a clean pair of khakis and a crisp white shirt then put on a navy blue blazer and took the elevator down to the lobby. Since the first floor in Europe is zero not one I'd lost not only six hours coming over but a story as well. When the door opened I faced the front desk and the woman behind it gave me a hearty "Bon Jour". She was middle aged and had an expensive silk, red and blue scarf, wrapped elegantly around her plump neck just the way you'd expect to see on a French woman. "Unfortunately," she said, in a more subdued voice. "The museum's are closed because the workers are on strike."

"Then its fortunate that I have to go to a business meeting and wouldn't be able to go to a museum anyway."

She seemed disappointed in my response, but offered. "Perhaps tomorrow you will have time?"

"Will the strike be over tomorrow?"

She sighed and threw up her hands. "One never knows. Do you need directions to your business meeting?"

"Its not far from here."

“Even so, it is very easy to get lost in Paris.” She reached down and pulled out a map and handed it to me.

No, I repeated to myself, one never knows as I stuffed the map into one of the inside pockets of my blazer.

I didn't have to be at my meeting until after lunch and it was almost noon so I turned left outside the hotel and walked the short distance to the Place Maubert where I picked up the Boulevard St. Germain and followed that until I reached the Jardin du Luxembourg. Inside the gardens I bought a coffee and a ham sandwich at a kiosk and passed up the rickety wooden folding chairs that were scattered under the trees and chose a bench next to the big pond in the middle of the garden. Sitting there I drank the coffee quickly and then slowly ate while I stared at the puffy clouds reflected on the still water. It could have been a Monet painting of lily pads except for the model sail boats that cut back and forth across the pond. The boats reminded me of a scene in the book that I had written and the memory it was based on and that bothered me so I finished off the sandwich and left.

I took the long way back on Boulevard St. Michel to the bridge over the Seine and then turned right on the Quai de Montebello, where I browsed the second hand booksellers with their open air stalls. They are called bouquinistes, which sounds like the name of a terrorist group, only the kind that preserves books rather than burns them. When I reached the intersection with the Pont de L'Archeveche where the Quai de Montebello dissolves into the Quai de la Tournelle, I crossed with the light and then turned left back onto the Rue Maitre Albert. Framed in the window of a bistro were several men resting their elbows on the zinc bar while watching soccer on the television. Between the bistro and the hotel was a long, high wall with brick peeking through the cracks in the plaster and a wooden double door painted green. I rang the bell to the left of the door and just before I was about to ring a second time the door opened. The concierge, an elderly woman dressed in black with a shawl around her shoulders, peered at me from another century then motioned for me to enter the courtyard and shut the door behind me. I followed her across the courtyard to the front door of an eighteenth century town house where she rapped the brass knocker several times and then turned and retraced her steps across the courtyard.

“I am Leonard.” He pronounced it lay-o-nahr, which was the proper way in French although his accent was Dutch. He had a long, thin face, black rectangular glasses and wispy blond hair that could have been spun from gold.

“I'm Henry, Henry Scriviner.”

“Of course you are,” he answered. “I have been expecting you.”

I followed him as we walked past a sweeping stairway and several large rooms with parquet floors and fireplaces and chandeliers but no furniture until we reached the end of the hall where there was a closed door. He opened the door and ushered me into a room that was almost as large as the one's we had passed, with the same high white ceilings. On the blue walls there were faded rectangles and squares where paintings had once hung. The only furniture was a card table and several folding chairs. Beyond the table were glass doors that opened onto a garden with a fountain in the center. The smell of plants and the sound of trickling water filled the empty room. Leonard, who had not spoken since our exchange at the door, motioned for me to sit down in one of the chairs and he sat in one next to the table. His long fingers tapped on a manila folder that rested on the table as if he were practicing a one handed piece for the piano.

I was beginning to wonder if this was some sort of tactile torture when he stopped tapping and asked if had a good flight to Paris.

“It was good and, even better, it was on time. However, the driver of the taxi I took from De Gaulle had a problem finding the hotel. He thought he knew where the street, Maitre Albert, was but once we got to the Left Bank he couldn't find it and called the hotel on his mobile for directions. Its not easy for a Paris cabbie to get lost.”

He nodded. “It is even more difficult for them to admit that they are lost. But, many people think they know where the Rue Maitre Albert is but then they find that it is not where they thought it was. It is one of those streets that is vaguely familiar.”

“And gets vaguer as you get closer,” I added. “I've spent a lot of time here over the years but I don't recall ever being on this street.”

“You are not alone. Even though it is one of the oldest streets in Paris most people walk past it without noticing that it exists. In the middle ages Erasmus called it a cesspit, which I believe was as much a reference to its residents as to the refuse. It wasn't given a formal name until centuries later when it was named after Master Albert, who was famous teacher at the University of Paris in the thirteenth century. Now, even most people who know the street exists don't know who Maitre Albert was.

“Speaking of knowing, how did you know I'd come over to Paris even though I don't know who you are and what you want me to do?”

“But, as you said, you have spent time here so it seemed natural that you would want to come back at any opportunity.”

“So you know that I’ve been here a lot?”

“You are a published author so your biography is not a secret? I read the novel you wrote that is set in Paris.”

“You were actually able to find a copy?”

“I found it at Shakespeare and Company. I purchased a used copy.”

“I’m surprised”

“That they had your book?”

“That they had a used copy. It means there was at least one person read the book when it first came out.”

“But, you are being unfair. Your descriptive very evocative. It made me feel as if I were there.”

“But you are here.”

“Yes, but there in the Paris you created. It made me see things in a different way. Your writing reminded me a bit of Hemingway.”

“Unlike Hemingway’s first novel it was my only one. Paris may be the city of love but it didn’t help my book because no one loved it.”

“Really, you are too hard on yourself and, besides although Hemingway wrote more novels you are alive while he committed suicide.”

“If you think I’m hard on my novel you should have read what the critics who reviewed the book had to say. Although, at least they read it. In fact, I bet the used copy you bought at Shakespeare and Company belonged to a book reviewer who got it for free and sold it after he read it. Maybe he didn’t even read it – you can never tell with reviewers. In any case, I took up nonfiction. I even do travel writing. ”

“It is your travel writing that caught our attention. I think you are very good at describing the people in the places you write about if that makes you feel any better.”

“At this point just getting paid to write makes me feel better. You mentioned in the email that you wanted me write an article for you but you didn’t say what the publication was?”

“Of course you must be curious.”

“You sent me a round trip first class plane ticket and paid my expenses for a week so, yeah, you could say I’m curious.”

He took his hand off the folder and pressed the tips of his long fingers, the kind that would look good on a concert pianist, together and rested his elbows on his knees and leaned toward me, his blue eyes shining above the black frames of his glasses. “We want to retain your services.”

“I know that much, but who is the we, the publication, you want me to write for?”

“We are the Curiosi.”

“I’ve never heard of the Curiosi. Is it some new travel magazine?”

He smiled. “Although one could say that we are well travelled we are not a magazine. The fact that people haven’t heard about us is exactly what we prefer even though we trace our roots back almost two millennium.”

“If you don’t have any readers why do you need a writer?”

He pulled his elbows off his knees and sat up straight. “The Curiosi are the readers. The journal we want you to write for is only for the members of the Curiosi and I can assure you that all of them read it.”

“If its like Journal of the National Geographic Society I have to warn you I’m not much of a photographer. Also, even though I’m pretty good speaking French, I’m a better writer in English.”

He laughed. It was much deeper than I would have imagined. “The only resemblance between us and the National Geographic Society is that we both have members. Unlike them it is our members who are the contributors to the knowledge that is shared through our journal. We need a writer who can write fluently in English because it is the only language our members have in common. Although your fluency in French is essential for gathering the information for this assignment it is not for the writing.”

“I guess it’s a good thing for me that you don’t communicate using some secret language or signs.”

He shook his head with an amused smile but didn’t repeat the laugh this time. “We don’t even have a secret handshake.”

“Afraid you’ll leave fingerprints? No, really, how do people apply for membership if no one knows you exist?”

“Ah, well.” He seemed intrigued by the question. “One doesn’t apply to be a member of the Curiosi. One is asked to be a member. In any case, since we don’t have large meeting of the members such as a convention the primary way we share what we are doing with each other is through written reports or papers that are circulated among the members.”

“Not that I want to talk myself out of a job, but why don’t your members do the writing instead of hiring someone like me, an outsider?”

Leonard nodded. “We could but even for our members who have the requisite literary or journalistic skill find it difficult to write about an activity in which they are actively engaged and there is also the bias that would enter into it since one would be imposing one’s own point of view in some way. That’s why we hire writers such as yourself.”

“Sounds like you want a ghost writer.”

“No, no at all.” Leonard shook his head vigorously. “We very much want a flesh and blood writer and not an apparition. In fact, everyone knows that the reports are not

written by Curiosi and you will be recognized as the author. We want you to tell the story however you wish; there will be no editing. The last thing we want is something academic and dry. However, your work cannot be shared with anyone other than the Curiosi. In fact, you cannot keep a copy for yourself and no one must know that you even worked for us.”

“I’ve heard of limited editions but this is a bit extreme isn’t it?”

“Limited, yes, but you will find that the compensation is quite generous.” He took an envelope from the folder and handed it to me. I opened it and looked at the sheet of paper. Half of your fee will be placed in your bank account once you sign the agreement. The remainder plus any expenses in addition to your hotel and airfare, which we have paid for directly, will be wired to you once you have submitted your report. You only have to sign the agreement that is enclosed.”

I looked at the one page agreement that simply said whatever I wrote belonged to the Curiosi and I was not allowed to show or tell anyone. “What if you don’t like what I’ve written?”

“We select our writers very carefully so we have rarely had a problem. You must be free to write the way you see it. The truth as you said.”

“It’s nice to be trusted,” I said as I signed the confidentiality agreement and handed it to him. Although, I thought, if they did change it how would I know for sure since I wasn’t a Curiosi. “When do I start?”

Leonard handed me a small card with an address. “You have an appointment at this address in thirty minutes.”

The Rue Descartes was another ancient, narrow street but most people recognized the name of the person whose name was on the street sign and unlike the Rue Maitre Albert there were lots of restaurants and cafes, their tables thrust onto the sidewalk creating a gourmet gauntlet. Its philosophy seemed to be that as long as you can eat and drink you don’t care if you exist. The address that Leonard had given me was almost invisible and it took me a few minutes to find the doorway tucked between an Algerian and a Vietnamese restaurant. As I approached the door it opened.

“Welcome to the Institute for Lost Things, Mr. Scriviner,” said the man who opened the door.

Somewhat startled, I answered. “This is a hard place to find: the address not the street.”

“Yes, the street is busy but we are hidden in plain sight. In fact, we have no sign with our name or even a door bell, as you can see.”

“How do you know if someone is waiting outside?”

“Because all of our visitors are here by appointment we always have someone wait for them at the door, just like I did for you. There is a very small peephole so we can see our visitors when they approach.”

“And if they’re late?”

He shrugged. “We wait longer.”

After I entered he closed the door and told me his name was Gerard. He didn’t give his last name. He limped slightly, swaying gently, as he led me down a hall. Since he was shorter than me I could look down on the bald spot on the top of his head where the strands of hair he’d combed over had slipped, revealing the shiny skull beneath. All of the doors we passed were closed except one that was slightly ajar and I caught a glimpse of an arm with a hand cradling a pipe. The arm was in a tweed sleeve with a brown leather patch at the elbow and there was Cavendish in the smoke that drifted into the hallway. At the end of the corridor we entered a large room. There were filing cabinets against the walls and a sturdy library desk with six wooden, spindle back chairs. Gerard motioned for me to have a seat and asked if I wanted a cup of coffee or tea.

“Coffee.”

He went through a door and came back with the coffee in a mug that had Rodin’s *The Thinker* on it. It was only when I held it in my hand that I saw the Thinker had Mickey Mouse ears on his head. As I sipped the coffee a slim woman with long dark hair flecked with gray that was pulled back over her shoulders entered. She was dressed in black. Her face was pale and there were small lines that radiated from the corners of her mouth and her brown eyes. Gerard left the room, closing the door behind him.

We shook hands and introduced ourselves. She had long fingers without rings. Her name was Adriana Bellini and she was Italian. “I am from Turin,” she added. “But I

have lived in France for many years now. My accent is still not as it should be but in Paris it is impossible to speak without an accent unless you were born here, and your parents as well. At least, that is what the Parisians say and since I am not a Parisian it doesn't bother me." She sat down in a chair at the end of the table.

"But your children have no problems with their accents, I imagine."

"Yes, children pick up a language and accents and if I had children I am sure they would not have any problems. However, I am not married; not that being married is a requirement for children," she added and then changed the subject. "You speak French quite well."

"I spent a several years here after I graduated from college and have been back quite often. I guess I've spent more time in Paris than I have anywhere. My family moved around a lot when I was growing up and I've been moving around ever sense."

"Then you are no stranger to Paris."

"No, but I never knew this institute of yours existed."

"You are not alone and we prefer it that way."

"Are there other places like this?"

"As far as we know we are the only one. Although France is not the only country that loses things it might be the one that is the most romantic about what it has lost. Or maybe the most obsessive."

"They aren't mutually exclusive."

She gave me a long look then rose from her chair and walked over to one of the filing cabinets. "These files contain just some of the records of the things that we have found."

"And where are the things?"

“They are kept in another place that has much more room. As you can imagine, there are all kinds, shapes and sizes of things. There are objects both big and small and even places, which obviously have to remain where they are found. In a few rare cases they are living things, although if they are humans we have to return them promptly and without generating any publicity.”

The door opened and Gerard stuck his head inside. “They have just arrived. You told me to tell you; even interrupt you.”

“Yes, you were right to interrupt.” She turned to me. “You will want to observe. It has to do with the case you are reporting on. We told them to come now because we wanted you to be here.”

I followed them out of the room through the door and down another narrow hallway. Gerard was limping faster to stay in front of Adriana. She asked him if the visitors were carrying anything? He wasn't sure. He didn't get a good look but they might be carrying something. What did she think they would be bringing? She didn't answer Gerard as he opened a door. There were book cases and a still life with apples and bananas in a bowl that looked like a copy of a Cezanne and two men sitting in black leather chairs in front of a desk. There was a lamp on the desk and some books and papers stacked neatly on one side of it. The lamp was off but there was plenty of light streaming through a tall window behind the desk and it lit their faces as they turned. There was stained glass in the upper part of the window so half of their faces were tinged with scarlet and a bit of blue.

“Madame Professor,” one of the men said as they both rose. He was the shorter of the two.

“You can call me doctor,” she answered, coolly. “I have a PhD but I am not a professor. I'm not married either,” she added so you don't need to call me Madame either.”

“I'm sorry,” the other, taller, man apologized.

“I'm not,” She answered and told them to be seated. After introducing me as her assistant, she seated herself behind the desk. Gerard left and I sat in a chair against the wall. It was hard to see Adriana well because of the light. She asked. “Can we get in?”

The taller man answered. “Yes. Tomorrow it will be possible. No problem.”

“But maybe the strike will be over tomorrow?” Adriana said.

“No,” the shorter man said. “It will not be over. We know this for a fact. Trust us.” He leaned over the top of the desk as he spoke. The other man leaned with him but not as far. Adriana nodded and they both stood up straight.

“What time should we be there?”

“Early would be better.” The taller man answered.

“Yes, early would be best.” The other one added. “Maybe 10 o’clock?”

“Yes, and where?” Adriana asked. “Where do we meet?”

“Here,” The taller man leaned forward and stabbed with his index finger at a sheet of paper he had laid out on the top of the desk.

Adriana looked at the paper. “Fine, okay. Then we meet there at 10:30.”

The taller man looked at the other one, nervously, and then said. “You understand that while we have been asked to give you access to the Museum we are required to make sure that none of the works of art are damaged or removed.”

End of Part One