EVERY SILENT THING

Alan Brenham

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DEDICATION

To my awesome wife and best friend, Lillian. You never cease to amaze me with your solutions to my writer's block and for creating the title for this novel. To my niece, Jessica Trumble, for her knowledge of and experience in Paris, France, and other cities in northern Europe.

CHAPTER ONE

Saturday, May 7th

It wasn't every day Claire Deveraux saw a man enter the women's restroom. She shivered at the thought. She'd watched him panning the crowd before he pushed through the door marked Dames. Keeping the door in view she lifted her camera to Diana of Versailles, her favorite lady in the Louvre. Either this guy made a mistake and would hurry out all red-faced, or the woman who'd entered just before him was his wife.

A few minutes later, he came out. His face was flushed but he seemed calm, as if emerging from the lady's restroom was an everyday thing for him. He locked eyes with Claire before she looked away, startled and uneasy. He turned and melted into the crowd.

Claire let a few minutes pass, noting that the woman still hadn't come out. Curious, she went in and found a woman lying on the tiled floor. A puddle of blood blossomed from under her shoulder.

She saw the woman's fear when her eyes met Claire's. She reached her arm up, so Claire squatted next to her. She had what appeared to be a gunshot wound to her chest. Claire grabbed

towels from the nearby dispenser, pressing them to the woman's chest. It didn't do much. Blood saturated the towels.

The woman's eyelids fluttered as her mouth formed a word Claire lipread as, "*L'homme."* She grabbed the corner of Claire's jacket, then drew a labored breath. Her lips formed a second word followed by a third, which Claire understood to be "champagne" and "*Trois*." She exhaled, then her arm fell to the floor. Her eyes stayed partly open, fixed on a spot far away. Claire pressed her fingers to the woman's neck, but there was no pulse.

She rushed out of the bathroom, searching for a police officer or a security guard. And there was the man glaring at her. She wanted to run, but then she spotted two guards standing by a wall on the other side.

Claire said, "Woman dead!" She pointed in the direction of the restroom. The guards looked at her blankly.

She typed out a message on her smartphone. While the guards read it, she looked for the man, but he'd disappeared. The guards sprinted to the bathroom while talking into their shoulder-mounted microphones. Minutes later, chaos hit the room as French police flooded the area.

Time passed in a blur. Finally Claire found herself in an office facing a man in a brown tweed coat and a walnut-colored tie. He handed Claire a paper towel and pointed at her hands. She wiped the woman's blood off as he set a notebook on the desk. He introduced himself as Inspector Gagne of the *Brigade*

criminelle, better known at the embassy as *La Crim.* She didn't even try to speak, choosing to type him a short message on her phone. *My name is Claire Deveraux, and I am deaf*. She always tried to avoid talking. People looked at her funny or grinned when she did.

His eyes dropped to the desk in front of him as he scratched the back of his neck. His hand moved around to massage his chin. She'd learned a long time before to be patient, so she waited while he considered whatever options crossed his mind. Maybe he was trying to think of any cop close by who knew sign language. Or he was silently cursing his luck to have to communicate with a deaf person.

She tapped the screen on her cell phone. *I can lipread*. *I write down what I saw*.

He pushed his large notepad to her. When she finished her account, she signed it and pushed the notepad back to him.

He read her statement and then wrote her a question on her pad. "Was *l'homme champagne Trois* all she said to you?"

Claire nodded.

He pointed at her camera. "Did you take a picture of him?"

Claire opened the viewer on the camera and examined the shot. Yep, there he was—but it was only a partial view. He had angled himself, so the picture only caught part of his face and the side of his head.

Gagne told her he had to borrow her camera. He said she'd get it back the next day when she came in to give a formal statement.

So much for what was supposed to be a lovely day taking pictures. Claire left, still shaking over the episode. In all her life, she'd only seen dead animals on Texas roads. Never a human being. She passed by the inverted pyramid as she made her way to the Carrousel du Louvre exit, wishing she could've snapped a shot of it. Even if she had her camera, her heart wasn't in it. She'd had enough for one day.

Her brain kept replaying the image of that poor woman lying there, like a scene repeating from a horror movie.

She picked up the pace to make it to the exit. Then she saw the killer step out from behind a corner, between her and the door.

Claire wondered if he was going to shoot her, too. Wanting to avoid a fight, she held her hands up, palms out, and tilted herself back. It was sign language telling him to back away. It was the only peaceful solution available.

He broke into a broad smile, like Wile E. Coyote did when he thought he had the Road Runner cornered. That's when Claire knew their encounter was not going to end well. She started to back up, but he grabbed her arm and yanked her towards him. It wasn't difficult to do, as she was only a hundred and five pounds when soaking wet.

Claire twisted her arm free, then hit him in the face with the heel of her hand. His head snapped back. She quickly followed up with two rapid strikes to his chest.

He recoiled, taking a step back. He shook it off and came at her again. Using his forward motion, Claire grabbed his arm, pulling him forward. She rammed her knee into his groin.

He folded over.

She struck him with a hammer fist to the back of his neck, dropping him to his knees.

She knew she should've returned to Gagne and the officers, but she didn't. Instead, she ran for the exit, sprinted across the street. Feeling nauseous, she hunched over a curb and threw up her breakfast. Wiping her mouth on her sleeve, she looked at the Louvre exit she had just raced out of. No sign of him.

She couldn't stop shaking even after she made it to the nearest metro station. She knew he would come hunting for her. She knew he wouldn't make the mistake of grabbing her. He'd shoot her. After several minutes and a couple of long, deep breaths, she managed to calm herself enough to cope with boarding a crowded train. On the ride home, she kept seeing his image and that of the dead woman.

Once inside her apartment, Claire deadbolted her front door then collapsed on the sofa. Why did that man have to kill that woman? Why did it have to happen in the Louvre, of all places?

What did her last words mean? For sure, she'd said *l'homme*. No mistake there. Claire repeated each word. "*L'homme. Champagne. Trois*."

One question nagged her. Could she have missed lip-reading a word when her eyes cut away to the woman's chest wound and the soaked towels? It was only a quick second.

CHAPTER TWO

Saturday, May 7th, late afternoon

"I put a round in her chest but couldn't find the flash drive," Martin said, sipping from a bottle of water.

"Shit!" said the male voice on the other end. "You checked her thoroughly?"

"Her bra. Her panties. Her pockets and her purse."

"Did you check her hair? Up her sleeves if she had any?"

"I checked the main spots a woman hides stuff. It wasn't like I could spend all day looking. It was the women's restroom. I'm lucky another woman didn't walk in on me."

"Tsk. Okay, I understand. But don't give up. Remember I paid you to recover that flash drive and the link words. Can you go back to the restroom and search for it?"

"I'll try, but there was a major complication. A young woman saw me coming out of the bathroom. She went in, came out, and went straight to a guard. It wasn't long after that the place was crawling with the cops."

"Well," his employer replied. "Do you think she saw enough to give your description to security?"

"If she wasn't able to give a description, she may have taken my picture. She was there photographing artwork.

"She was a photographer?"

"Yeah. She may have taken a picture of me going into the bathroom. I don't know. I would've yanked her camera away but didn't want to attract any more attention."

"A picture. What specifically can you tell me about her? Age? Height? Hair style and length? What was she wearing? Glasses, no glasses?"

"She's in her early to mid-twenties. Five-foot-two to five-foot-four. No glasses."

"What about hair color and style? Was she skinny? Fat? What?"

"Short blonde hair. Slim."

Martin rubbed his sore elbow, the result of the butt-whipping she gave him. A few had tried, but no one had ever beaten him before. Her quickness in subduing him impressed and pissed him off. There was no way he was going to admit to cornering her then getting his ass whipped.

"Okay, how long was Roche in the restroom before you went in?"

"Guessing, I'd say two or three minutes."

"That's enough time to hide the flash drive. Were you able to search the restroom at all?

"Not as much as I wanted to. But I didn't have much time. I didn't want to be there when another woman or two came in and saw my face."

"Maybe Roche dumped it before she got to the bathroom? That's possible, isn't it?"

"Anything's possible. I'll check that bathroom soon as things cool down. Meanwhile, I'll backtrack her all the way to her apartment."

"Leave no stone unturned. If anyone were to open the file on the device, my whole gig would go up in smoke."

"Right now, the entire Louvre is crawling with cops and it'll stay that way for a couple of days. Hell, they may have shut the place down. The cops are likely checking her camera for a picture. If there wasn't a good one, they probably have that photographer sitting with an artist drawing a composite of me."

"Okay. You need to find it. I don't care how. Just don't get caught."

"I'll do what I can. No promises."

"Whatever you need to do. If it'd help, go ahead, and take a chance. There's too much at risk."

"How the hell did Roche get her hands on it?"

"She was my secretary."

"How much is at risk?" *There's no point in risking my ass for anything less than a good payday*, Martin told himself.

"More than you can imagine. Listen, from her description, I think that photographer is a regular at the Louvre. I'll reach out to someone who might know her. Call me when you find the flash drive."

Martin headed back to the Louvre entrance where Roche had entered. Although going into the museum now was totally out of the question, he'd begin backtracking from there to all the places Roche had visited. If Roche wasn't dead when the photographer went into the restroom, Roche may have told her where it was hidden. If that photographer had the device, she may have handed it over to the cops. While he was heading for Roche's next-to-last stop, he wondered about the photographer. Was she a freelancer like his employer thought, an employee of some travel magazine, or just a plain tourist? If she was a tourist, he'd have better luck finding the proverbial needle in a haystack than a photographer in Paris.