

Chapter One

Laura Lake sat on the bed, staring into space. She did not move. Amy Bender had told her not to. To move, she had said, would compromise the integrity of the piece.

Amy Bender was a British contemporary artist. The piece was an installation named *Call This Art?* It consisted of a dirty mattress on the floor surrounded by rubbish.

The floor on which the mattress lay was in Paris, in an ex-morgue turned exhibition space. Amy had chosen the site because it was Paris Fashion Week. A number of edgy designer shows were taking place at a nearby abattoir. It was the intention of the newly graduated, drivingly ambitious Amy that the fashion crowd leaving the slaughterhouse would be tempted into the morgue. Her career would then be launched.

Laura's own career was some distance from launching. She was currently earning a pittance working for a firm that

rented flats in Paris to rich holidaying Americans. The business was owned by a pugnacious New Yorker called Ulrika Burgwinkle who directed operations from Brooklyn. Laura was the Paris face of the business: meeter-and-greeter, blog-writer, concierge and general dogsbody.

As Ulrika was still building up the business and most clients arrived at night, sometimes right in the middle of it, Laura had little to do during the day. She filled her time writing articles for the rentals company blog, which Ulrika said should cover current trends. ‘There’s always some crazy new fashion in Paris,’ she instructed from New York. ‘Cat-racing, naked restaurants, yadda yadda.’

Laura was yet to come across cat-racing and was not actively seeking naked dining. But yesterday she had found a salon where face-shaving for women was all the rage. Removing the tiny fuzzy hairs gave one a whole new glow, apparently.

Afterwards, Laura had been sitting outside a cafe, rubbing her stinging cheeks and worrying about five o’clock shadow when Amy Bender loomed over her. Laura stared at the strange woman in red patent eighteen-hole Dr Marten boots, black leggings and a Pussy Riot T-shirt. She had musty blonde dreadlocks that sat on her head like a heap of old rope and she was clutching an iPhone with a neon green cover.

‘Are you French?’ Amy Bender demanded in English.

‘Half-French,’ Laura replied. ‘My dad was English and I went to school there. But now I live here with my grandmother.’

‘Well, you look Parisian,’ Amy Bender declared, ‘which is all I care about. You’ve got that whole Jane Birkin thing going on.’

Laura let pass the fact that Jane Birkin was English as well. As for the thing going on, she had hit on her uniform

of ankle boots, skinny black jeans and navy shirts years ago. She had stuck to it because it was cheap, easy and suited her. A big scarf and a trenchcoat were the only variations.

She listened to Amy Bender explain her artistic concept. It sounded silly, but no sillier than the tour of Parisian sewers or the man who kept chickens in his flat that she had recently covered for the blog.

‘There’s a day of rehearsing tomorrow and then the show opens. After that, we’ll see how it goes.’

Amy Bender was not paying much. But any money was welcome. The only potential problem was Ulrika ringing and demanding she rush to the Marais to show some Californians how to use the toilet. Parisian loos had semi-human qualities and required very careful handling. But she’d cross that U-bend when she came to it.

And so she said yes. Unwisely, as she had come to realise. The mattress had a horrid, musty odour which the dirty fast-food cartons surrounding it, smeared with ketchup and congealed *frites*, only made worse. And Laura’s back was killing her. Amy had specified that she sit with her legs twisted to the side, Little Mermaid-style, rather than with her arms round her knees, which might have been more comfortable.

Sensory deprivation was another issue. Beyond the retina-frazzling spotlight, all was as black as the blackest hole. This was deliberate and emphasised the theme of alienation, which was, Amy Bender claimed, central to *Call This Art?* The work’s other alleged themes were life and death, being and nothingness, belief and scepticism, hope and despair, and knowledge and ignorance.

But the main theme, it seemed to Laura, was money. There was obviously plenty behind Amy Bender. Someone

had paid to hire this space in the up-and-coming rue Morgue. Someone had flown Amy over and was bankrolling her stay at La Morticienne, a nearby boutique hotel. Someone was paying for Jamie Dodger, the London-based PR professional coordinating the guest list for the private view of *Call This Art?* tomorrow night. Today was the dress rehearsal.

Laura felt sorry for Jamie. Amy was hardly ever off the phone to him, barking that she didn't just want the fashion crowd who were in Paris for the shows, she wanted the celebrities and artists invited by the designers as well. Her voice bounced off the morgue walls as she strode up and down.

'Have we heard from Will and Kate? Kate Winslet? Ned Rocknroll?'

Her mockney tones mingled strangely with the echoing voiceover which completed the installation's alienating effect. This was a loop tape on which a loud and expressionless male voice endlessly repeated four words with a two-second pause between each.

'There had better be a good crowd!'

'HATE!' went the voiceover.

'Did you ask Damien and Tracey? The Beckhams?'

'BEANS!'

'Have you heard from Anna Wintour yet?'

'FEAR!'

'And Bono?'

'CHEESEBURGER!'

'This tape's doing my crust in,' groaned Caspar, who sat beside Laura on the mattress. He was the other person in the installation, a resting actor from London. He was not especially tall and not especially bright, but made up for this by being extremely handsome. He had floppy dark hair, big melting eyes and huge white teeth.

Caspar, who was two years older than Laura, had been sitting outside Coffin and Son, one of rue Morgue's fashionable craft coffee bars, when Amy Bender swooped.

'She thought I was Parisian because I was wearing a T-shirt that said Paris on it,' he told Laura. His surname was Honeyman and at university he'd been part of a successful double-act called Cheese and Onion. The other half was someone called Orlando Chease.

'I think I've heard of him,' Laura said. 'He's quite famous, isn't he?'

A pained expression crossed Caspar's face. His own acting career was a lot less successful than his erstwhile partner's. Having failed to get in to drama school, he had spent eight months demonstrating toys in Hamleys, working in call centres and re-enacting the Battle of Hastings at English Heritage properties. There was, Caspar said, no fury quite like that of children forced to visit historic buildings at the expense of an afternoon on the Xbox. Especially when they were armed with wooden swords.

Though he was amusing about his lack of acting success, it was obvious Caspar was frustrated at his failure. Laura could see that he had genuine talent; he was, for instance, a surprisingly good ventriloquist. 'But no one wants ventriloquists now,' he lamented. 'If only it was 1912. I'd have gone down a storm at the Hackney Empire between Vesta Tilley and The Dancing Dogs of Dagenham.'

His ability to speak without moving his lips did, however, come in handy on *Call This Art?* It meant that he could still talk despite the Bender embargo on movement or conversation. As could Laura, once Caspar had taught her. It was quite fun, she found, and helped pass the time.

Caspar was impressed with her ability. 'You're a natural,'

he told her, without moving his lips. 'Which is amazing, given how big your mouth is.' He then glanced around to check Amy's whereabouts before moving his face in close and planting it on hers.

'Get off!' Laura gasped, pushing him away. She was shocked at his audacity but even more at the bolt of pleasure he had sent through her.

'Spoilsport.' Caspar pouted from under his long lashes.

'All you ever think about is sex,' accused Laura.

'Your point? I'm sitting on a mattress all day next to a gorgeous bird. What else am I supposed to think about?'

'I'm not interested.'

'Yes you are,' Caspar teased. 'Why resist the irresistible? You're young, free, single and gorgeous. And so am I.'

Caspar was sleeping on a friend's floor in Montparnasse. It sounded as if the friend was getting fed up with the arrangement. He would be going back to London as soon as the Bender installation was over. 'Come with me,' he said, as if it really was as easy as that.

Laura shook her head. 'Thanks, but I can't. I've got to stay here. I've got my grandmother to look after.'

'Can't she look after herself?'

'She's ninety-three,' Laura pointed out.

'Well, mine's eighty and runs every committee in the village. She also plays bridge and gardens like a maniac. Only ever sits down to sentence juvenile delinquents.'

She sounded terrifying, Laura thought. It was impossible to imagine her own grandmother doing anything of the sort – the sentencing in particular. Mimi loved young people, especially naughty ones. She was quite naughty herself, invariably starting the day in the downstairs bar reading the newspapers with a glass of champagne.

‘You’re joking,’ Caspar said when Laura found herself mentioning this.

‘She says the news looks better that way. She thinks everyone should do it.’

Caspar cackled. ‘Sounds like quite a dame. What else does she say?’

Laura grinned. ‘Loads of things. How long have you got?’

Caspar’s dark eyes twinkled in the piercing spotlight. ‘Till the end of this rehearsal, and as long as you like after that.’

‘Okay then, you asked for it. Put tights on with wet hands so you don’t get holes in them.’

‘I’m definitely trying out that one.’

‘Always rub the soles of new shoes with cut potatoes.’

‘Why?’

‘Stops them being slippy. Oh, and be wary of labels. Double Cs, D & G, YSL. You are not a billboard. Letters are for the optician’s chart.’

‘I’m throwing out my Chanel now!’

‘No leather or stretch denim after forty! No furs after fifty! Put perfume behind your knees!’

‘Blimey, how did she think up all this stuff?’

Laura smiled. She wasn’t entirely sure herself and perhaps there wasn’t a straight answer. Mimi’s style philosophy, like the wonderful soups she regularly made, was the product of many different ingredients. It was part natural flair, part *joie de vivre* and part wit, along with an observant eye and a big dollop of experience. Other elements were common sense and the need to economise, all forged in the crucible of wartime Paris.

‘Ever thought of writing all this down?’

Laura had, in fact. ‘Parisienne’ style guides were popular at the moment and a collection of her grandmother’s hints

and tips would be the best of the lot. Mimi, however, had not been keen. 'She thinks writing a style guide would be boring,' Laura told Caspar.

'And I'm guessing boring isn't stylish.'

'Exactly!'

'I can see why you want to look after her. I'd quite like to myself.'

'Hands off!' Laura chuckled. 'But yes, I can't leave her. She's looked after me ever since...' She stopped, her smile fading.

'Ever since what?' Caspar ventriloquised, as Amy Bender came past.

Laura wanted to tell him to mind his own business. Instead she found herself replying, 'Ever since my father died and Odette moved back to France and remarried.'

'Odette's your stepmother?'

'My mother, actually.' Not that it had ever felt like it. 'I'm on my third stepfather now. He's a perma-tanned hairdresser called Leon with teeth you can see from space.'

'Big, you mean?'

'Kind of blindingly white. And he's got huge bouffant hair.' Laura stopped. Caspar's own teeth were of a preternatural brilliance and his hair, while floppy, had a front that was high and full. Thankfully, he seemed not to have made this connection.

This latest wedding had been last winter, in Monaco. Odette's once taut jawline had been buried in the collar of a squashy blonde fur coat. Her pale blonde hair, which had been brown on Laura's rare childhood sightings of it, was set off by a matching fur hat. Leon too was resplendent in furs, along with a bright pink tie that matched his gums. Mimi had not been present, claiming the journey from Paris was

too long. Odette had made no secret of her relief. The two of them had never got on.

Odette had not seemed especially pleased to see Laura either, but there was nothing new in that. ‘Really, Laura. Jeans for a wedding!’

‘And that hair!’ shuddered Leon. ‘Just let me get my hands on it!’

Laura would rather have died. She hated Leon’s gloopy serums, sprays and mousses, all bearing his signature lion logo and encased in his signature pink bottles. Laura did her hair herself at home, chopping the fringe and ends with kitchen scissors whenever it needed it.

‘You’re still wearing that old coat!’ Odette scoffed, adjusting her glossy sables and pursing her thickly lipsticked mouth.

Her mother really didn’t have the first idea, Laura thought. Had Mimi never told her that if a Parisienne could wear just a Burberry trench with nothing underneath, she would be in heaven? Her grandmother’s personal brand of elegance had skipped a generation. A cornerstone of her beauty philosophy was not to be scared of ageing, but that Odette was terrified of it was obvious. Her brow was entirely smooth, her trout pout enormous. Leon, too, was doing his Canute-like best to turn back the tide of time. His eyes were strangely hooded and his brows permanently raised in an expression of surprise that Laura was sure he never felt. Curiosity was not one of her stepfather’s traits.

Caspar was asking her something.

‘What?’

‘You don’t live with them?’ he repeated.

She suppressed a shudder. Her mother and Leon lived in a flat whose view of Monaco harbour was permanently obstructed by superyachts the size of shopping centres. It was

from here that Leon danced attendance on his clientele of thin-haired elderly duchesses and oligarchs' wives of the old school who wanted bouffants of a Kremlin solidity. He was often flown out to their yachts; arriving, in the case of one wife, in the same helicopter as the Fortnum & Mason sausages she was particularly partial to. Laura did not explain all this to Caspar, preferring merely to shake her head. Hopefully he would take the hint and stop the questions.

She had hoped in vain, however. 'What did your father do?' he asked next.

'Journalist,' Laura said shortly. 'A foreign correspondent.'

Caspar's eyes widened. 'Shot in action?'

'Yes, actually.'

There was an awkward pause, then Caspar changed the subject to university. 'I'm guessing Oxford.'

'Never went to any. After A levels I just came here and got a job.'

'Didn't go to uni?' Caspar was so amazed, he forgot to ventriloquise. 'Got a *job*?'

'No talking!' barked Amy Bender, coming past again and using the toe of her boot to adjust the position of a hamburger carton.

'What job?' Caspar hissed, poker-faced, after Amy had stomped off into the darkness. 'Can't be a very good one or you wouldn't be doing this.'

'It isn't. I work for a company called Paradise in Paris.'

'Is that an escort agency?'

Laura couldn't resist teasing him. 'Kind of. I do meet clients late at night. I've got to meet one tonight, in fact.'

Once Amy Bender had gone for lunch, to which they were not invited, Laura switched off the alienating voiceover tape. Blessed silence descended. Caspar lay on his back practising

his Alexander Technique. He sat up immediately when Laura handed him his phone, having called up the Paradise in Paris site.

‘Holiday rentals?’ Caspar sounded pained, which he was. In his eagerness to see he had raised himself too quickly and had pulled a muscle in his back. ‘Thought you were a posh whore.’

The expensive apartments on the Paradise in Paris site were supported by evocative shots of the city. Most were very up close, such as the shot of a macaroon as seen by the macaroon next to it, or the one showing how a rose might appear to a fly about to land.

‘The prices are amazing,’ said Caspar, examining images of snowy bedsheets and roll-top bathtubs. ‘So people let their places when they’re out of Paris for a few weeks?’

‘People let their places out whenever anyone wants them. They just move in to the local Novotel and wait for the rent cheque.’

Caspar was opening the blog tab. He started to laugh. ‘A bloke who keeps chickens in his flat? Why?’

‘He sells the eggs at the trendy farmers’ markets.’

‘He’s called Jacques Oeuf? You’re not serious.’

Laura sighed. Jacques Oeuf had been all too serious. And seemingly without a sense of smell. He lived in unimaginable squalor three floors above the rue de Belleville.

‘You write really well,’ Caspar said. ‘Seriously, you’re wasted on this. Don’t you want to write for a paper? Be a derring-do reporter like Pops?’

Laura shrugged. Of course she did. But she had no intention of admitting as much to Caspar. It was her dearest, wildest and most private dream, though it was hardly likely to happen. She had no connections (her father had been dead

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for fifteen years) or idea how to go about it. She wasn't even in the right country. London was the capital of journalism and here she was in Paris.

Far away in the darkness, a door banged. 'Quick,' she hissed. 'Get into position. Amy's coming back.'