

THE HANGED MAN'S TALE

ALSO BY GERALD JAY

The Paris Directive

GERALD JAY

THE HANGED MAN'S TALE

A NOVEL



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PART ONE

PROLOGUE

He told close friends about his plans. No one believed him. “Watch the TV this Sunday,” he said. “I’m going to be a star.” Of course they didn’t take him seriously. But that’s the way they were, his few close friends. No dreams bigger than banging a Deshi on the Métro or blowing up a kosher deli in the Fourth. To the rest he e-mailed, “Death to Zog (88).” Then he glanced at the calendar on his bedroom wall where the fourteenth of the month was circled in red. Only one more day.

His alarm clock on top of the bureau was set for 5 a.m. At that hour on a Sunday there shouldn’t be any bottlenecks, but tomorrow was a national holiday. And driving to the center of Paris was never a picnic at any hour. His clothes were already laid out and ready to go, neat as a pin. Like Mishima, military style. The tan chinos, a crisp blue shirt, his black windbreaker with its black hood.

Naked he climbed into bed, pulled the sheet over his head, closed his eyes. Dead quiet outside. Known by the locals as wild doings in Courcouronnes, or family high life in the burbs. At least it was good to have the two of them out of the way, the house all to himself. Not to mention the old boy’s big Gibson left behind. And tomorrow—he rolled over, pounding his pillow—was another day.

In the still black room the next morning, the red alarm went off like a dynamite vest. Five on the digital dot. Picking up his sheet from the floor, he tossed it back on the bed. He had urgent plans to attend

THE HANGED MAN'S TALE

to—a marquee future featuring his name in lights. One outstanding success that would redeem a life full of petty failures.

Shaved, showered, dressed, and well caffeinated, with two cups of coffee to the good, he quick-marched across the room to check himself out in the mirror.

“Ready for your close-up, Max?”

Max smiled.

“Okay! Roll ‘em!”

He picked up the brown guitar case with its Gibson USA label, slammed his bedroom door closed, and strode out the front entrance into the cool gray dawn. The big case went into the trunk of his car. Before climbing in, he glanced back at the neat row of two-story buildings. They called their house the white pavilion. He called it their bourgeois dream—a bland, vanilla shoebox. Edging the property, a strip of dark green shrubs. The last thing she said before leaving on vacation was one final castrating order, “Remember, Max. This time don’t forget. Water the plants or they’ll die.”

He’d forgotten, of course, but it made no difference. As a parting gesture, he unzipped his fly and peed all over her hedge. It looked refreshed. The damn thing flourished no matter what he did. Or didn’t.

Once in Paris, everything went like clockwork. He left his car on a side street near the Parc Monceau and, case in hand, walked toward the starting point of the parade on the Champs-Élysées. Less than a stone’s throw from the flag-draped Arc de Triomphe. That was the direction from which the president would make his initial appearance. Max stood behind the low metal police barricade, patiently waiting with the rest of the early birds. He could see everything from there. A perfect position.

Commandant Paul Mazarelle had always enjoyed the Bastille Day parade. The sappers of the French Foreign Legion with their orange leather aprons and shouldered axes. The caped Spahis. The glittering *casque-d’or* cavalry of the Republican Guard. And in the sky above Paris, the blue, white, and red smoke contrails of the roaring

Patrouille de France Alpha Jets. But this year he didn't think he'd have time to savor the color.

They were expecting a large crowd—perhaps one hundred thousand or more. Only two months ago President Chirac had been reelected by a landslide in a contentious runoff with the ultra-right-wing Jean-Marie Le Pen. Parisians, by and large, were glad. They didn't care for extremists. This year they cared for Americans. Ten months earlier al Qaeda terrorists had destroyed New York's Twin Towers. Today, the theme of the Bastille Day 2002 parade was Franco-American friendship. Among the honored guests in the parade reviewing stand on the Place de la Concorde were members of the FDNY. And as a special honor on the two hundredth anniversary of France's military academy, a trim contingent of West Point cadets—white summer pants, gray fitted jackets—had been invited to march beside the flamboyant young Frenchmen from the Saint-Cyr, their red and snowy white plumes fluttering.

In spite of all the frills, parade duty was no one's idea of a good time. For Mazarelle, it was a not-so-subtle hint. He might be a commandant in the elite Brigade Criminelle, but his new boss was reminding him that, whatever famous success he'd had in the Dordogne, he wasn't above crowd control in Paris. Four decades after Maigret, no one liked a celebrity detective.

Knocking on the door of the large white PC Police van, Mazarelle pushed it open and tried to step inside, but there was little room for a man his size. The intelligence unit—officers seated in shirtsleeves before their computers, telephones, LED maps, closed-circuit TV screens, shortwave radios, and other electronic gear—was a humming beehive of activity.

One of the officers glancing up recognized him. "Can I help you, chief?"

"You're busy. I'll come back."

"Just a minute." She brushed her blond hair back, picked up her pack of Gauloises, and came out to join him. "I was going for a smoke myself. Have one."

THE HANGED MAN'S TALE

"Sure." Mazarelle liked the steady way she cupped her hands around the offered match. He took a deep drag. *Ech!* It reminded him why he'd given up cigarettes. He'd been so busy that morning when he left his office he'd forgotten to take his pipe. "Thanks," he said, and inhaling once again coughed up the smoke.

She smiled, seemed glad to see him. He didn't know why. They had barely exchanged more than a word or two at the 36 Quai des Orfèvres party.

"So you only visit on holidays?" Her eyes sparkled as she tucked her hair behind her ear. On the inside, Mazarelle was sparkling too. When a woman ran her fingers through her hair, four decades of experience told him it meant one thing.

He'd forgotten what her name was, but he'd find out. She was a woman who wore a Beretta on her hip as if she knew how to use it. Definitely worth keeping an eye on. And probably the right person to ask about threat levels and security.

She nodded. "Raised to twenty-five hundred *policiers* and *gendarmes* as well as the elite units GIGM and RAID. Plus air force reconnaissance planes and fighters above the parade route." She patted him on the arm. "Feel safer?"

"Sounds good—" he started, interrupted by a sudden burst of Lester Young's creamy tenor sax. "Excuse me."

Mazarelle pulled out his mobile, listened for several seconds. It was a member of his team at the Étoile with a heads-up. The parade was about to start. Mazarelle replied in a muted conspiratorial voice that he was on his way.

"Sorry," he turned to apologize, but she was gone.

He found his young aide, Lieutenant Jean Villepin, not far from the Étoile. Plainclothes Jeannot had a rocker's scalp full of long, stringy, dirty-blond hair. He wore a scruffy blue sweatshirt, grimy Nikes, and torn jeans to go with it.

Mazarelle asked, "Where's your police armband?"

"In my office."

"Looking the way you do, you'll need it. Here, take mine. The Champs-Élysées is getting jammed. But we've got a few of our men

sprinkled among all the others along the route from the Arc de Triomphe to the reviewing stand at Concorde. Now get over to the rue Washington. When the president goes by, I want you shadowing the car all the way down the avenue.”

“I’ll handle it,” Jeannot assured him.

“Above all, no matter what happens don’t let him out of your sight. Can you do that?”

“I think so.”

“Good. We’ve got the counter-sniper teams up above. But we need more bodies on the street. Besides, you’ve got the legs. I’ve seen you take the stairs three at a time at 36.” Mazarelle pointed to his beat-up Nikes and winked. “Just do it.”

Max heard the band in the distance. Then, coming out from behind the Arc de Triomphe as if a cloud had lifted and the sun appeared, the open-topped presidential jeep sporting small elegant French flags fluttering front and rear. The jeep moved slowly, decorously along the Champs-Élysées, preceded by a rolling wave of cheers, whistles, laughter, applause. And there he was at last! Reelected for five more years rather than seven, but five too many as far as Max was concerned. The president of France himself standing in the open jeep behind his uniformed drivers like a fuckin’ god in his gleaming chariot, smiling and waving to his adoring subjects.

Max felt that he could practically touch the president as his jeep approached. How could he miss? Pulling his rifle out of the case, he snapped it up to his shoulder. “Time to die, *monsieur le président!*” Max cried. Taking careful aim, he fired. The noise of the crowd and the music of the parade were so loud few heard the shot or knew where it had come from. Those nearby who knew screamed for the police.

Mazarelle could hear from the alarm in their voices that it was serious and saw at once where they were. For a big man with a limp, he moved through the crowd with astonishing speed. Before the gunman could get off another shot, the commandant had pounced on him, tearing the rifle out of his hands. It looked like a .22. A funny low-caliber hunting gun all wrong for a serious assassin.

THE HANGED MAN'S TALE

Other cops soon surrounded them. Captain Maurice Kalou of his homicide team materialized at his side to log the rifle for evidence. Jeannot, down on his hands and knees, had already scooped up a shell casing.

By now, two uniformed policemen had the prisoner's hands pinned behind his back and clamped in handcuffs. They each grabbed him by an arm and dragged him to the waiting van with its side door open.

"Wait a minute." Mazarelle covered the prisoner's head with his hood. "That's better. Watch his skull," he warned them. "We don't want him to get hurt." They shoved him into the van and slammed the door. As the hooded Max sat in the dark, alone with his crazy jumbled thoughts and the people outside howling for his head, the police van raced off to the Quai des Orfèvres, siren wailing.

Later that afternoon, the questioning of the suspect took place on the fourth floor of 36 Quai des Orfèvres. Commissaire Bruno Bonfils, chief of the antiterrorism unit, quickly nailed down the prisoner's identity and sent his men twenty miles south of Paris to search Max's home in Courcouronnes. They would return empty-handed.

Jeannot, checking his computer, was more successful. Max had a history of membership in various militant, extreme right, neo-Nazi organizations.

"He's on their chat rooms, their forums, every skinhead group you can think of," Jeannot whispered in Mazarelle's ear. "He threatened to attack the police, even the pope. But looking at what he wrote . . . well . . . he's kind of a loony . . ."

Meanwhile, Max had already begun answering Bonfils's questions.

Yes, he had come to shoot the president. And he was proud of it. Yes, he had come alone. His name was going into the history books.

"Are you sure no one helped you?" demanded Bonfils.

"Yes, yes, I *told* you," Max shouted, annoyed. "It was all my plan. I intended to kill him first. Then myself. But before I could get off another shot, someone knocked the weapon out of my hands."

A smile flicked at the corners of Mazarelle's mouth. Except for that, he sat motionless, a heavy plumb line beside his colleague.

“Tell me, Max,” continued Bonfils, “where did you get the rifle?”

Max laughed and explained that it was hunting gear, that he’d bought it in a sporting goods store. Actually he seemed to enjoy being the center of attention for the handful of *flics* in the warm smoke-filled room. Until he suddenly realized from their demeanor that the president was still alive. He’d failed. Everything he’d planned to do. Everything he’d dreamed of achieving. It was devastating.

Now despondent, Max became increasingly withdrawn and disturbed. Noticing the change, Commissaire Bonfils abruptly signaled a halt to the proceedings and called in two of the commissariat’s officers, two leathery men with their sleeves rolled up. Bonfils told Max that he would remain at 36 in *garde à vue* until they decided what to do with him.

Mazarelle turned to Bonfils and quietly said, “No, I don’t think so.” Pulling Bonfils outside, he shook his head.

“This guy is not part of a terror cell. He’s an angry weirdo with a full basket of emotional problems. He’s a *tireur isolé*, a lone wolf with a grudge.”

“How can you be so sure? I think he knows more than he’s saying. And given the radical organizations he belongs to, it’s reasonable to assume he had help. We don’t need a disaster like the Americans. No! He stays till I’m through with him!”

“Don’t forget about Durn,” Mazarelle insisted. Everyone at 36 knew the story of the Nanterre killer. Brought to the fourth floor for questioning, he had thrown himself out an open dormer window. “Do we need another jumper?” Mazarelle demanded. “Max is guilty as hell . . . but he’s out of his mind. We’re not equipped to handle someone with his emotional problems in *garde à vue*. Send him to Villejuif, the psychiatric hospital. Right?”

Bonfils had had enough. He stalked out the door, head high, and stormed down the hall, sparks shooting from his heels.

Inside the interrogation room, the two remaining cops had tipped Max’s chair backward at a precarious angle. As Max struggled to stay upright, the stocky older cop laughed. The younger cop chimed in and gave Max a swift push.

“Whaa—!” yelled a startled Max, as he toppled over backward, crashing to the floor.

THE HANGED MAN'S TALE

The older cop picked Max up and, with a violent shove, slammed him into the wall.

Max reeled backward, dazed.

The second officer put his arm around Max, letting him in on a secret.

"See that." He chuckled. "We call it 'walling.'"

The first one nodded. "Doesn't leave a mark."

The door swung open, and Mazarelle strode in. "Enough! *Ça suffit!* What kind of cops are you? Take him to Villejuif." He crossed his arms.

"All right, all right." Grabbing Max by the shackles, the young officer yanked him forward. "*Viens*, my little friend. We have a place for you."

They dragged Max out the door of the interrogation room and into the hallway. Downstairs, they pushed him through the outer doors to the courtyard, where the ambulance waited to take him to the psychiatric ward.

He would never make it there.

July 20 dawned brilliant and sunny in Paris. On the Quai d'Orsay, a tiny clutch of tourists was boarding the *Belle de Jour*, a small dingy canal boat under the command of Captain Marc André, whose grizzled chin and creased white officer's cap cocked over one eye were the only visible signs of his office. André was about to leave for his first trip of the day. A short journey up the Canal Saint-Martin. The canal, built by Napoleon in the nineteenth century, was designed to bring food and fresh water into the heart of the city. Now it mostly brought tourists.

Traveling east down the Seine into the blinding morning sun, the Paris Canal boat was pursued excitedly by gulls, beating their wings and screeching like hangers scraping on metal racks. The captain loved the way their white wings dazzled the air on a day like this. Circling the Île Saint-Louis, he headed north. The canal soon ran underground, disappearing below street level for some two miles, as it headed for the passage locals called "the Locks of the Dead."

The sun faded out as they descended from daylight through the entrance into the underworld. The sound of the boat's engine was magnified to a frightening roar by the tunnel's low rough-hewn stone arch and bleak shadowy darkness, the only illumination coming from the manhole-size skylights set into its roof and projected onto the water. And in the first circle of light—hard to believe it was not noticed by any of the tourists on the boat—the strange sight of a body hanging upside down.

Captain André was stunned by the suddenness of the apparition and its airborne appearance out of nowhere. He knew the Saint-

THE HANGED MAN'S TALE

Martin well, having worked for the Paris Canal company for almost a dozen years, and had fished more than his share of homeless floaters out of the drink. Dead drunk, and usually suicides, accident sufferers, or hapless victims of violence. But never upside-down dangles like this one tethered by a rope around one ankle. If he stopped his boat now in the tunnel and was caught, he'd lose his license. André couldn't stop. But the man was clearly dead . . . and it looked like murder. He'd only a brief glimpse of the victim's face to convince him, but that was enough. Because whoever killed him had turned the dead man's face into a gargoyle of agony.

Minutes later, out of the tunnel, the shaken captain called his boss on his mobile and explained why he had to stop his boat, call the police.

"Don't you realize you've got passengers?" his boss warned him.

André knew, but he had no choice. He had to call the police at once, instantly, and report what he'd seen. It was terrifying.

2

The call, when it came, found Mazarelle shopping at the Marché Bastille, the open-air street market near his home. Once a week, the market spread out along the Boulevard Richard Lenoir, over a hundred stalls offering up stacks of local cheeses, organic meats, African prints, and cheap jewelry. And once a week, he would get up early and wander over to do some shopping before the streets filled up with bargain hunters—the foodies and the housewives with their canvas bags, fingering the cucumbers and the lettuce.

Today, he'd gotten a late start. Pushing through the crowds in front of the long green tables, he was looking for peaches, nectarines—

the best stone fruit of the season. He could see the clafoutis already, bursting with sweetness, just out of the oven. Brownd that little bit on the edges. His mother's favorite recipe.

Mazarelle stood beneath the chalkboard and watched the fruit vendor writing prices on the board with a flourish, like a proud student with the winning answer.

"A bargain," the vendor said, turning toward the young mother with the stroller in front of him. "You picked the perfect time."

As she started to gather up the peaches, Mazarelle held up a cautionary finger. "Madame," he said. "Allow me." He leaned across the boxes of fruit and raised his large, black, dubious eyebrows.

"Where are the ripe ones?"

The fruit vendor looked up angrily, puffing out his cheeks. "They're all ripe," he asserted.

Mazarelle leaned forward and sniffed.

"Ripe? These are bricks." He looked in at the baby in the stroller. "You want better fruit than that, don't you?" The baby gripped his index finger and gurgled.

He thought it was the little guy making the buzzing sound at first. Reclaiming his finger, he patted down his pockets. It took him a minute or two to locate his mobile. As it got louder, it sounded as if his shorts were exploding. He pulled out the phone.

"Allô!"

"Mazarelle—"

It was Daniel Coudert, the head of the Brigade Criminelle. Since the success of the Reiner case, Mazarelle had been staffed to his division. The *Crim*. The elite. The top one hundred detectives in France. But Coudert wasn't sure Mazarelle was such a good fit.

"Mazarelle!" Coudert seemed to be yelling out the window of his office. "Where are you?"

Mazarelle said, "In the Marché Bastille."

"What the hell are you doing there?"

"One minute, *patron*. Hold on . . ."

The fruit vendor was back, more aggressive than ever. "These peaches *are* ripe. Here, feel them."

Mazarelle sniffed again. "I don't have to feel. I can see the color. I can smell." Mazarelle waved the vendor off.

THE HANGED MAN'S TALE

"Peaches?! Mazarelle . . ." shouted the voice in his ear.

"Just a minute, boss."

Mazarelle held the fruit up to the peach man's nose. "You picked the whole tree at the same time, didn't you? Too early. Smell them."

The vendor took a sniff, puzzled. "What's wrong with that? There's no smell at all."

"Exactly!" He flashed a wide-open smile at the mother and her baby. "Try the stand down the street."

Turning away, Mazarelle strode down the aisle between the stalls and answered Coudert.

"Sorry, boss, what's going on?"

Though still relatively new to *la Crim*, Mazarelle could read the storm clouds in his *patron's* voice like a barometer. Coudert was summoning him in. He was about to be called on the carpet. Coudert had heard about the argument with Commissaire Bonfils after the parade.

Mazarelle crossed the bridge onto the Île de la Cité, heading toward the monumental building that stretched along the river Seine, its gray-white stone a throwback to the palaces of an earlier time. His destination, 36 Quai des Orfèvres, was a palace of a different kind—of racketeering, organized crime, homicide. The home of the Police Judiciaire for nearly a century.

Climbing the stairs to the office, Mazarelle stuffed his pipe into his jacket pocket. A soothing bowl to ease the stress. The black linoleum on the staircase leading to bureau 315 creaked with each step. On the third floor the plaque on the wall announced La Brigade Criminelle with its thistle emblem and motto: "*Qui s'y frotte s'y pique.*" Meaning, as they say, "If you play with fire, you might get burned." A warning . . . and on days like today, Mazarelle thought, one pointed directly at him.

Outside the *patron's* office, it was as quiet as if his small staff had suddenly been called away. No one left behind guarding the throne room. Nothing but the smell of stale cigarette smoke and burned coffee. Mazarelle glanced down at the worn floor in front of Coudert's closed door. It was littered with old cigarette butts of petitioners

who'd been waiting to see him. Pulling out his pipe, Mazarelle went from pocket to pocket searching for his tobacco.

"*Bordel de merde!*" he simmered. Shoving his pipe back into his jacket, he straightened his shoulders, clenched his fist, and knocked.

"*Entrez! Entrez!*"

Coudert was on the phone, listening intently. With his custom-made navy jacket off and in his blue shirtsleeves and suspenders, his shirt collar unbuttoned, Mazarelle's usually dapper boss was looking a little wrinkled, as if he'd already put in a tough morning. He motioned for Mazarelle to sit down. Mazarelle still didn't know the name of the Impressionist artist who'd done the original of the reproduction on the wall behind Coudert, but he liked it. A rower wearing a straw hat, a clay pipe in his mouth. Once again Mazarelle searched his pockets and had the same sorry results.

Coudert hung up the phone and sat back in his chair as if considering how to begin. He leaned forward.

It was then Mazarelle noticed his tie. Covered with the colorful red, white, black, and blue pattern of the Brigade Criminelle seal. He himself hated ties. In fact never wore one if he could avoid it.

"Nice tie," he said.

Coudert looked down and seemed surprised by what he was wearing. "My wife. A birthday present. She likes it."

"She has good taste."

The boss was clearly tired of chitchat. "I've news for you."

Mazarelle thought, Uh-oh. Here it comes.

"You and your men did a good job last weekend at the parade."

"Thanks." He wasn't expecting that. "Anything else?"

"Yes. A new case. A hanger . . . A body found an hour ago in one of the tunnels on the Canal Saint-Martin."

"A suicide?" asked Mazarelle.

"Oh no, this is murder. He was hanging upside down."

He took in Mazarelle's expression, and nodded.

"*Mais oui*, it's strange. And the press is on it already. The mayor has been calling. It's upsetting tourists. First the attack on the president, then this. It looks political. It's bad for the city, and bad for everyone."

"Some kind of terror thing?"

THE HANGED MAN'S TALE

"That's what we're worried about. No one knows. No one seems to have any leads at all." Coudert gave Mazarelle an uneasy glance. "You're supposed to be good at this kind of thing. The unusual. The twisted."

He waved off Mazarelle's sputtered response.

"You're the one with the reputation. So . . . we need an answer on this. And fast. I'm tired of hearing from the mayor already. You can check in with the Commissariat Central in the Fourth. You'll be taking over from them. Since that's where you used to work, I wanted you and your team to handle it. Fabriani was your old commissaire there, wasn't he?"

"Yes, of course." Mazarelle was a bit surprised by the assignment.

"That should make for a smooth transition."

"The body upside down?"

"Odd, *n'est-ce pas*? Well, he's all yours. Call Fabriani. He'll fill you in on the details. Then pull your team together and get started. And don't forget. Keep me posted on developments."

Mazarelle hesitated. "Anything else?"

"Oh yes, one thing more. I heard about what happened between you and Bonfils. According to the psychiatrists you may have been right about not keeping the prisoner in *garde à vue* given his frail mental state—"

"Exactly—look what happened when he tried to escape."

"Yes—but Bonfils was the superior officer on the scene. It was his call. Mazarelle, I know your men think you're a supercop, but do me a favor. You're new here. Try to make an effort to get along with your brother officers. And your old boss Fabriani as well."

"What about him?"

"What I mean is I want you to focus solely on *your* murder case. Nothing else."

Mazarelle shot him a quizzical glance.

"Look." Coudert paused and sighed. "There's a rumor that Internal Affairs is checking into something going on in a few commissariats in the city." Coudert rubbed his chin, irritated.

"You know them," he went on. "Always on the hunt for something. They need to justify their existence. All I ask is stay out of the way. Leave it alone, okay?"

"D'accord."

"We're all getting a lot of heat on this. We need to make it go away. Remember, Mazarelle, Fabriani is in charge over there. It's his shop. So do me a big favor and don't trample on any toes. Clear?"

"I'm on my way."

3

The sun was rising higher over the Quai d'Orsay, when Mazarelle and his team headed down toward the Seine. The river shimmered in the late morning light.

Waiting for them on the stone embankment were Captain André, who'd discovered the hanged man, plus members of the Brigade Fluviale. Everyone climbed aboard *la fluv*'s high-speed patrol boat, and in a matter of minutes, they were headed upstream.

Leaning back in this seat, Mazarelle glanced around at his team. The shaggy young Jeannot. The earnest Maurice. The men other commandants might not want to work with. But Mazarelle counted himself lucky.

Even here on the boat, Maurice Kalou, their *procédurier*, or detail man, was already busy making notes for his records. He might grumble, but he was perfect for his role on the team. He'd been a police desk man ever since his arrival in Paris from the Ivory Coast. Meticulous, formal, conscientious to a fault, he had worked twice as hard to get where he was and in time would probably rise to the top at the BC—if the bureaucrats didn't hold his dark brown skin against him. Mazarelle admired him and hoped he might one day succeed. He knew that Maurice had the sort of personality that would refuse to give up anything without a struggle.