
COMMISSAIRE
ADAMSBERG
INVESTIGATES
Fred
Vargas
AN UNCERTAIN
PLACE
THREE TIME WINNER OF THE CWA INTERNATIONAL DAGGER

About the Book

Commissaire Adamsberg leaves Paris for a three-day conference in London. Accompanying him are Estalere, a young sergeant, and *Commandant* Danglard, who is terrified at the idea of travelling beneath the Channel. It is a welcome change of scenery, until a macabre and brutal case comes to the attention of their colleague Radstock from New Scotland Yard.

Just outside the gates of the baroque Highgate Cemetery a pile of shoes is found. Not so strange in itself, but the shoes contain severed feet. As Scotland Yard's investigation begins, Adamsberg and his colleagues return home and are confronted with a massacre in a suburban home. Adamsberg and Danglard are drawn in to a trail of vampires and vampire-hunters that leads them all the way to Serbia, a place where the old certainties no longer apply.

In Fred Vargas's riveting new novel, *Commissaire* Adamsberg finds himself in the line of fire as never before.

About the Author

Fred Vargas was born in Paris in 1957. As well as being a best-selling author in France, she is an historian and archaeologist.

ALSO BY

Fred Vargas

The Chalk Circle Man

Have Mercy on Us All

Seeking Whom He May Devour

The Three Evangelists

Wash This Blood Clean From My Hand

This Night’s Foul Work

Fred Vargas

An Uncertain Place

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I

Commissaire Adamsberg knew how to iron shirts. His mother had shown him how you should flatten the shoulder piece and press down the fabric round the buttons. He unplugged the iron and folded his clothes into his suitcase. Freshly shaved and combed, he was off to London, and there was no way of getting out of it.

He pushed a chair into the patch of sunlight falling on the kitchen floor. Since the room had windows on three sides, he spent his time moving his seat around the circular table, following the light, like a lizard on a rock. He put his bowl of coffee on the east side and sat down with his back to the warmth.

Going to London was fine by him: he would find out whether the Thames smelt of damp washing the way the Seine did, and what kind of sound the seagulls made. Perhaps they had a different call in English. But he would hardly be allowed time for that. Three days of conference, with ten papers per session, six debates, and a reception at the Home Office. There would be a hundred or so top brass, representing police forces from all over Europe, crammed into a big hall; cops from twenty-three countries, seeking to foster closer police links in an expanded Europe and, more precisely, to 'harmonise the management of migratory flows'. That was the subject of the conference.

As chief of the Serious Crimes Squad in Paris, Adamsberg was obliged to turn up, but he wasn't greatly concerned. He would be participating in a virtual, hands-off way: first because of his ingrained hostility to any 'management of flows', and secondly because he had never

been able to remember a word of English. He finished his coffee contentedly, reading a text message from *Commandant* Danglard: '*Rdv 80 mins GdNord eurostar gate. Fckin tnnl. Have smart jkt + tie 4 U*'.

Adamsberg pressed 'delete', wiping away his deputy's anxiety like dust from furniture. Danglard was not cut out for walking or running, still less for travelling. Crossing the Channel by tunnel was as distressing for him as flying over it in a plane. But he would not for all the world have given up his place on the mission to anyone else. For thirty years, the *commandant* had been wedded to the elegance of English clothes, on which he banked to make up for his lack of good looks. And from this vital choice he had extended his gratitude to the rest of the United Kingdom, becoming the typical Anglophile Frenchman, addicted to good manners, tact and discreet humour. Except, of course, when he let himself go – revealing the difference between an Anglophile Frenchman and a true Englishman. So the prospect of a trip to London had overjoyed Danglard, migratory flows or not. He just had to get past the obstacle of the *fckin tnnl*: it would be his first experience of it.

Adamsberg rinsed out his coffee bowl, snatched up his suitcase, and wondered what sort of *jkt + tie* Danglard had chosen for him. His elderly neighbour, Lucio, was knocking loudly on the glass door, his weighty fist making it rattle. Lucio had lost his left arm in the Spanish Civil War when he was nine years old, and it seemed that his right arm had grown so large to compensate that it had the strength of two. Pressing his face to the pane, he was summoning Adamsberg by his imperious expression.

'Come along,' he said gruffly and peremptorily. 'She can't get them out, I need your help.'

Adamsberg stepped outside and put his suitcase down in the unkempt little garden he shared with the old Spaniard.

'I'm just off to London,' he said. 'I'll give you a hand when I get back, in three days.'

‘Not in thrrrreee days! Now!’ said the old man.

And when Lucio spoke in this tone of voice, rolling his r’s, he produced a great rumbling sound that seemed to Adamsberg as if it was issuing from the very earth. He picked up the suitcase, his mind already on its way to the Eurostar departure lounge at the Gare du Nord.

‘What can’t you get out?’ he said distantly, locking his front door.

‘The cat in the tool shed. You surely knew she was having kittens?’

‘I didn’t even know there was a cat there, and I certainly don’t care.’

‘Well, you know now, *hombre*. And no way will you not care. She’s only managed three so far. One’s dead and two others are still stuck, I can feel their heads. I’ll massage her belly, and you can pull them out. And be careful, gently does it. A kitten, you can break it in half like a biscuit if you’re too clumsy.’

* * *

Anxious and impatient, Lucio was scratching his missing arm by moving his fingers in the air. He had often explained that when he had lost his arm, aged nine, there had been a spider bite on it which he hadn’t finished scratching. And on account of that, the bite was still itching sixty-nine years later, because he hadn’t been able to give it a really good scratch and have done with it. This was the neurological explanation provided by his mother, and it had become Lucio’s philosophy of life: he adapted it to every situation and every feeling. You either finish something, or you don’t start. You have to go through to the bitter end, and that applies in matters of the heart too. When something was intensely important to him, Lucio scratched the interrupted bite.

‘Lucio,’ said Adamsberg clearly, walking across the little garden, ‘my train goes in an hour and a quarter, my deputy is having kittens himself at the Gare du Nord, and I’m not going to be midwife to your wretched cat when a hundred top cops are waiting for me in London. Do it yourself, you can tell me about it on Sunday.’

‘How am I supposed to manage like this?’ cried the old man, waving his stump in the air.

Lucio held Adamsberg back with his powerful right arm, thrusting forward his prognathous jaw, worthy of a Velázquez painting, according to Danglard. The old man couldn’t see well enough these days to shave properly, and his razor always missed a few bristles. White and tough, they glittered in the sunshine in little clumps, like a silvery decoration made of thorns. Every now and then, Lucio caught a bristle between thumb and fingernail and pulled it out, as he might a tick. He never gave up till he got it out, observing the spider-bite philosophy.

‘You’re coming with me.’

‘Let me go, Lucio.’

‘You’ve got no choice, *hombre*,’ said Lucio darkly. ‘It’s crossed your path now. You have to come. Otherwise it’ll scratch you all your life. It’ll only take ten minutes.’

‘My train’s crossing my path too.’

‘Time for that afterwards.’

Adamsberg dropped the suitcase and groaned impotently as he followed Lucio into the shed. A tiny head, sticky with blood, was emerging between the cat’s hind paws. Under the old Spaniard’s instructions, he caught hold of it gently while Lucio pressed the mother cat’s stomach with a professional gesture. She was miaowing piteously.

‘You can do better than that! Pull harder, *hombre*, get hold of it under its shoulders and pull! Go on, don’t be afraid, but be gentle, don’t squash its skull, and with your other hand, stroke the mother’s head, she’s panicking.’

‘Lucio, when I stroke someone’s head, they go to sleep.’

‘*Joder!* Go on, pull!’

Six minutes later, Adamsberg was putting two red and squeaking little rats alongside the others on an old blanket. Lucio cut the cords and placed them one by one at their mother’s teats. He looked anxiously at the mother cat, which was whimpering.

‘What did you mean about your hand? You put people to sleep?’

Adamsberg shook his head.

‘I don’t know how. If I put my hand on their heads they go to sleep. That’s all.’

‘And you do that with your own kid?’

‘Yes. And people go to sleep when I’m talking too. I even have suspects drop off when I’m questioning them.’

‘Well, do it for this mother cat. *Apúrate!* Make her sleep.’

‘Good grief, Lucio, can’t you get it into your head that I’ve got a train to catch?!’

‘We’ve got to calm the mother down.’

Adamsberg couldn’t have cared less about the cat, but he did care about the black look his old neighbour was giving him. He stroked the – very soft – head of the cat since, it was true, he really had no choice. The animal’s panting gradually subsided as his fingers rolled like marbles from its muzzle to its ears. Lucio nodded his approval.

‘Yes, she’s sleeping, *hombre*.’

Adamsberg gently removed his hand, wiped it on some wet grass and backed away quietly.

As he went up the escalator at the Gare du Nord, he could still feel something sticky drying on his fingers and under his nails. He was twenty minutes later than agreed for the

rdv. Danglard hurried towards him. Danglard's legs always looked as if they had been wrongly assembled, and that they would be dislocated from the knee if he tried to run.

Adamsberg raised a hand to pre-empt his reproaches, and stop him running.

'I know, I know,' he said. 'Something crossed my path and I had to deal with it, or I'd have had to scratch it for the rest of my days.'

Danglard was so used to Adamsberg's incomprehensible sentences that he rarely bothered to ask questions. Like others in the squad, he let it pass, knowing how to separate the interesting from the useful. Puffing, he pointed to the departure gate, and set off back in that direction. As he followed without haste, Adamsberg tried to recall what colour the cat had been. White with grey patches? Ginger patches?

II

‘You get some weird goings-on in France too, don’t you?’ remarked Detective Chief Inspector Radstock, in English, to his Parisian colleagues.

‘What did he say?’ asked Adamsberg.

‘He said we get weird things happening back home as well,’ Danglard translated.

‘Very true,’ said Adamsberg, without taking much interest in the conversation.

What concerned him just now was the possibility of taking a stroll. He was in London, it was a fine evening in June, and he wanted to walk about a bit. The two days of conference he had sat through were beginning to get on his nerves. Staying seated for hours on end was one of the rare experiences that disrupted his habitual calm, and made him undergo the strange state other people called ‘impatience’ or ‘feverishness’, usually foreign to his nature. The previous day he had managed to escape three times, and had explored the surrounding district, after a fashion, committing to memory the brick housefronts, the white columns, the black-and-gold lamp posts. He had taken a few steps into a little street called St John’s Mews, though heaven only knew how you were meant to pronounce ‘Mews’. A flock of seagulls had flown up in the air, calling (mewing indeed) in English. But his absences had been noticed. So today he had had to stay the course, sitting in his place, unresponsive to the speeches of his colleagues and unable to keep up with the rapid translation by a simultaneous interpreter. The hall was crammed full of police officers, all of whom were displaying much ingenuity

in devising a grid intended to ‘harmonise the flow of migrants’, and to cover Europe with a net through whose meshes it would be impossible to slip. Since he had always preferred fluids to solids, the flexible to the rigid, Adamsberg naturally identified with the movements of the ‘flow’ and was inventing ways of outflanking the fortifications which were being perfected under his very eyes.

This colleague from New Scotland Yard, DCI Radstock, seemed to know all about nets, but did not seem to be fanatical about their efficiency. He would be retiring in under a year, and cherished the very British notion of spending his time fishing in some northern loch, according to Danglard, who understood everything and translated everything, including things that Adamsberg had no wish to know. He would have liked to tell his deputy not to bother with these superfluous translations, but Danglard had so few treats and he seemed so happy revelling in the English language, rather like a wild boar wallowing in a favoured spot of mud, that Adamsberg hadn’t the heart to deprive him of the least scrap of enjoyment. At this point, the *commandant* seemed to have attained a state of bliss, almost to have taken wing, his usually shambling body gaining stature, his drooping shoulders squared, displaying a posture which almost made him impressive. Perhaps he was nursing a plan to retire one day with this new-found friend, and go fishing for something or other in the northern loch.

Radstock was taking advantage of Danglard’s bonhomie to describe to him what it was like working in Scotland Yard, but he was also regaling him with a string of the kind of ‘spicy’ stories he thought suitable for his French guests. Danglard had listened to him throughout their lunch without any sign of boredom, while making sure to check the quality of the wine. Radstock called him ‘Donglarde’, and the two policemen were matching each other anecdote

for anecdote, drink for drink, leaving Adamsberg far behind. Of all the hundred officers at the conference, Adamsberg was the only one who didn't have even the slightest grasp of the English language. So he was following along in a marginal way, exactly as he had hoped, and few people had gathered quite who he was. At his side was the young junior officer, *brigadier* Estalère, with his wide-open green eyes, which made him look perpetually surprised. Adamsberg had insisted on taking him along on the mission. He maintained that Estalère would wise up one of these days, and from time to time he expended some energy trying to bring this about.

Hands in pockets and for once smartly turned out, Adamsberg was taking full advantage of this long stroll, as Radstock paraded them round the streets to show them the oddities of London by night. Such as a woman sleeping under a canopy of umbrellas sewn together, and clutching in her arms a three-foot-high object described as a 'teddy bear'. 'It's a toy bear,' Danglard had translated. 'Yes, I did gather that,' said Adamsberg.

'And here,' said Radstock, pointing down a long, straight avenue, 'we have Lord Clyde-Fox. He's an example of what you might call an eccentric English aristocrat. Not many left. They don't make 'em like this any more. Quite a young specimen.'

Radstock stopped to allow them time to observe this individual, with the satisfaction of someone showing off a rather unusual phenomenon to his guests. Adamsberg and Danglard obediently observed him. Tall and thin, Lord Clyde-Fox was hopping clumsily about on the spot, first on one foot then on the other, barely avoiding falling over. Another man was smoking a cigar about ten feet away, swaying slightly and contemplating his companion's trouble.

'Er, interesting,' said Danglard politely.

‘He’s quite often around here, but not every evening,’ said Radstock, as if his colleagues were benefiting from a rare sighting. ‘We get on all right. He’s very amiable, always a friendly word. He’s a sort of fixture, a familiar figure of the night. Seeing the time it is, he’s probably had an evening out and is trying to get home.’

‘He’s drunk?’ queried Danglard.

‘Not quite. He makes it a point of honour to see how far he can go, finds his limit, and then hangs on there. He says that if he walks along a ridge, balancing between one slope and another, he may suffer but he will never be bored. Everything all right, sir?’

‘Everything all right with you, Radstock?’ rejoined the man, waving a hand.

‘A joker,’ the chief inspector confided. ‘Well, if he wants to be. When his mother died, two years ago, he tried to eat a whole box of photos of her. His sister barged in to stop him, and it turned nasty. She finished up in hospital and him down at the station. The noble lord was absolutely furious because he had been prevented from eating the photos.’

‘Really, really eating them?’ asked Estalère.

‘Yes, really. But what are a few photos? I think, in Paris one time, some chap tried to eat a wardrobe, didn’t he?’

‘What did he say?’ asked Adamsberg, seeing Radstock’s frown.

‘He says there was some Frenchman once who tried to eat a wardrobe. Actually there was. He managed it over a few months, with the help of some friends.’

‘Weird, eh, Donglarde?’

‘You’re quite right, it was in the early twentieth century.’

‘Ah, that’s normal,’ said Estalère, who often chose exactly the wrong expression. ‘There was this man I heard about, he ate an aeroplane, and it took him a year. Just a year. A small plane.’

Radstock nodded gravely. Adamsberg had noticed that he liked to make solemn pronouncements. He sometimes came out with long sentences which – from their tone – were passing judgement on the whole of humanity and its probable nature, good or bad, angelic or devilish.

'There are some things,' Radstock began – Danglard providing a simultaneous translation – 'that people can't imagine themselves doing until some crazy individual has tried it. But once something's been done for the first time, good or bad, it goes into the inheritance of the human race. It can be used, it can be copied, and people will even try to go one better. The chap who ate the wardrobe made it easier for that other chap to eat the aeroplane. And that's how the vast dark continent of madness opens up, like a map, as people explore unknown regions. We're going forward in the gloom, with nothing but experience to guide us, that's what I tell my men. So Lord Clyde-Fox over there is taking his shoes off, and putting them back on, over and over again. Goodness knows why. When we do know, someone else will be able to do the same thing.'

'Greetings, sir,' said the chief inspector now, going closer. 'Is there a problem?'

'Greetings, Radstock,' said Clyde-Fox mildly.

The two men made signs of recognition to each other, two nightbirds, familiars who had no secrets. Clyde-Fox put one stockinged foot on the pavement, holding his shoe in his hand and looking intently inside it.

'A problem?' Radstock repeated.

'I should say so. Perhaps you should go and take a look – if you've the stomach for it.'

'Where?'

'At the entrance to Highgate Cemetery.'

'It's not a good idea to go poking around in a place like that,' said Radstock in disapproving tones. 'What were you doing there?'

‘Beating the bounds with a few chosen friends,’ the noble lord explained, gesturing with his thumb towards his cigar-smoking companion. ‘The boundary between fear and common sense. Well, I know the place like the back of my hand, but he wanted to take a look. Be careful, chief inspector,’ said Clyde-Fox lowering his voice. ‘My pal over there’s as tight as a tick, and he’s as fast as lightning. He’s already taken out a couple of fellers in the pub. Teaches Cuban dance. Highly strung. Not from here.’

Lord Clyde-Fox shook his shoe in the air again, put it back on and took off the other.

‘Right, sir. But your shoes – is there something inside them?’

‘No, Radstock, I’m just checking them.’

The Cuban said something in Spanish which seemed to indicate that he had had enough and that he was off. The lord gave him a casual wave of the hand.

‘In your view, officer,’ Clyde-Fox said, ‘what should there be inside a shoe?’

‘A foot,’ Estalère intervened to say.

‘Exactly so,’ said Clyde-Fox, nodding approvingly at the young Frenchman. ‘And it’s just as well to check that the feet in your shoes are your own, eh? Radstock, if you had such a thing as a torch, you might help me clear this up.’

‘What do you want me to do?’

‘See if there’s anything inside these.’

As Clyde-Fox held up both shoes, Radstock methodically looked inside them. Adamsberg, completely forgotten, was pacing around slowly. He was thinking about the man who had chewed up his wardrobe, month after month, splinter after splinter. He wondered which he would prefer to eat, a wardrobe or an aeroplane – or photos of his mother. Or anything else – was there some other exploit that might reveal a new section of the dark continent of madness that DCI Radstock had referred to?

‘Nothing there,’ concluded Radstock.

‘You’re quite sure?’

‘Absolutely.’

‘That’s good,’ said Clyde-Fox, putting the shoes back on. ‘Nasty business. Go on Radstock, old chap, it’s your department. Go and look. Just at the gates. A load of old shoes on the pavement. But steel yourself. About twenty of ’em, you can’t miss ’em.’

‘That sort of thing’s *not* my department, Your Lordship.’

‘Oh yes it is. They’re lined up carefully, all the toes pointing to the cemetery as if they wanted to walk in. I’m talking about the old main gate now.’

‘But the old cemetery has nightwatchmen. It’s closed to the public after dark, and it’s closed to their shoes too.’

‘Well, the shoes want to go in all the same, and their whole attitude is most unpleasant. Go on, go and look, do your job.’

‘I’m afraid, sir, that I have better things to do than inspect a load of old shoes.’

‘Wrong, Radstock! Wrong! Because there are feet inside them.’

There was a sudden silence, a ghastly shock wave. A small whimper came from Estalère’s throat. Danglard tensed his arms. Adamsberg stopped pacing and looked up.

‘Bloody hell,’ whispered Danglard.

‘What did he say?’ Adamsberg asked.

‘He says there are some old shoes, looking as though they want to walk into the cemetery, and he says Radstock is wrong not to go and take a look, because they’ve got feet inside them.’

‘Take no notice, Donglarde,’ Radstock interrupted. ‘He’s had too much to drink. You’ve had a drop too much, sir, you ought to go home.’

‘There. Are. Feet. Inside. Them,’ enunciated Lord Clyde-Fox, clearly and calmly, to indicate that he was walking with perfect assurance along the ridge. ‘Cut off at the ankles. And the feet are trying to get into the cemetery.’

‘As you say, sir, and they’re, er, trying to get in, are they?’

Lord Clyde-Fox was carefully combing his hair, a sign that his departure was imminent. Now that he had the problem off his chest, he seemed to have returned to normal.

‘Pretty ancient shoes,’ he added, ‘about fifteen or twenty years old, I’d say. Men’s and women’s, both.’

‘But the feet?’ asked Danglard discreetly. ‘Are the feet just bones now?’

‘Leave it, Donglarde, he’s been seeing things.’

‘No,’ said Clyde-Fox, tucking away his comb and ignoring Radstock. ‘The feet are almost intact.’

‘And they’re trying to get into the cemetery?’

‘Precisely, old man.’

III

DCI Radstock was uttering a constant stream of growls and grumbles, and gripping the wheel tightly, as he drove fast up to the old cemetery in north London. Of all things, they had had to bump into Clyde-Fox. First this nutter wanted them to check whether someone else's foot had got into his shoes. And now they were on their way to Highgate because His Lordship had fallen off his ridge and had a vision. There wouldn't be any shoes in front of the cemetery, any more than there were strange feet in Clyde-Fox's own footwear.

But Radstock certainly didn't want to go up there alone. Not when he was a few months from retirement. He had had some difficulty persuading the amiable 'Donglarde' to go with him: it was as if the Frenchman was reluctant to embark on this particular expedition. But how would a Frenchman know anything about Highgate, anyway? On the other hand, he had had no trouble with Adamsberg, who was perfectly willing to agree to a detour. This French *commissaire* seemed to go around in a peaceful and conciliatory state of being only half awake. One wondered whether even his profession engaged his attention. Their young colleague, however, was the exact opposite: his wide eyes were glued to the window, as he goggled at the sights of London. In Radstock's view, this Estalère fellow was a halfwit: it was a wonder they had let him come to the conference at all.

'Couldn't you have sent a couple of your men?' asked Danglard, who was still looking vexed.

‘I can’t send a team off just because Clyde-Fox has started seeing things, Donglarde. After all, he’s a man who tried to eat pictures of his mother. But we do have to go and check, don’t we?’

No, Danglard didn’t think they were obliged to do any such thing. He was happy to be in London, happy to be dressed like an Englishman, and especially happy that a woman had been paying him attention, from the first day of the conference. He had given up expecting such a miracle years ago, and having fatalistically accepted that he would never have any more dealings with women, had not made the first approach himself. She had come up to him, had smiled at him, and found excuses to meet up with him at the conference. If he was not much mistaken, that is. Danglard was wondering how such a thing could be possible, torturing himself with questions. He found himself endlessly going over the tiniest signs that could confirm or invalidate his hopes. He classified them, estimated them, manipulated them to see how reliable they were, as one tries the ice gingerly before venturing on to it. He was examining them for consistency, for possible meaning and trying to decide whether they were encouraging, yes or no. So much so that the signs were becoming more insubstantial the more he worried away at them. He needed some further clues. And at this very moment, the woman in question was no doubt in the hotel bar with the other people from the conference. Now that he had been whisked off on Radstock’s expedition, he would miss her.

‘Why do we need to check? Your Lord Clyde-Fox was indeed as drunk as a lord,’ said Danglard, proud of his command of English idiom.

‘Because it’s Highgate,’ said the chief inspector through gritted teeth.

Danglard gave a start, feeling cross with himself. His intense speculation about the woman at the conference had prevented him reacting to the name ‘Highgate’. He looked

up as if to reply, but Radstock cut him off with a wave of the hand.

‘No, Donglarde, you wouldn’t understand,’ he said in the sad, bitter and resigned tones of an old soldier, who can’t expect other people to share his war memories. ‘You weren’t at Highgate. I was.’

‘But I do understand. Both why you didn’t want to go there, and why you’re going there all the same.’

‘With respect, Donglarde, that would very much surprise me.’

‘I know what happened at Highgate Cemetery.’

Radstock shot him a look of astonishment.

‘Danglard knows everything,’ Estalère explained contentedly from the back of the car.

Sitting next to his young colleague on the back seat, Adamsberg was listening to the conversation, picking up the odd word. It was clear that Danglard knew quantities of things about this ‘Highgate’, of which he, Adamsberg, was quite ignorant. That was normal, as long as you regarded the prodigious extent of Danglard’s knowledge as normal. *Commandant* Danglard was very different from what might be called a ‘normal educated man’. He was a man of phenomenal erudition, controlling a complex network of infinite and encyclopedic knowledge which, in Adamsberg’s opinion, had ended up by taking over his entire being, replacing each of his organs one by one, so that you wondered how Danglard managed to move around like an ordinary mortal. Perhaps that was why he did find it hard to walk, and never strolled. On the other hand, he was sure to be able to tell you the name of the man who had eaten his wardrobe. Adamsberg looked at Danglard’s imprecise profile, at that moment subject to a kind of trembling which indicated the ongoing process of knowledge retrieval. No

doubt about it, the *commandant* was quickly passing in review his compendious collection of facts about Highgate. At the same time he was desperately preoccupied by something else: the woman at the conference of course, on account of whom his mind was dealing with a whirlwind of questions. Adamsberg turned towards the British colleague whose name he could never remember. Something Stock. *He* was not thinking about a woman, nor scanning his mind for information. Stock was quite simply scared.

'Danglard,' said Adamsberg, tapping him on the shoulder, 'Stock doesn't want to go and see these shoes.'

'I've already told you that he can pick up bits of French. Speak in code please.'

Adamsberg obeyed. In order not to be understood by Radstock, Danglard had advised him to speak very fast and in an even tone, slurring his syllables, but this kind of exercise was impossible for Adamsberg, who pronounced his words as slowly as he placed his feet when pacing about.

'No, he doesn't want to go at all,' said Danglard in this same fastspeak. 'He has certain memories of the place and he wants nothing to do with it.'

'What do you mean, "the place"?'

'One of the most romantic and baroque cemeteries in the Western world, absolutely over the top, an artistic and macabre fantasy. It's full of Gothic tombs, burial vaults, Egyptian sculptures, excommunicated people and murderers. All tangled together in one of those rambling English gardens. It's unique, a bit too unique, a place where madness lurks.'

'OK, I get it, Danglard. But what happened in this tangled garden?'

'Ghastly events, and yet nothing much. But it's the kind of "nothing much" that can traumatise anyone who witnesses it. That's why they put watchmen on it at night. That's why our colleague doesn't want to go there on his

own, that's why we're in this car, instead of having a nice quiet drink in our hotel.'

'A nice quiet drink. Who with, Danglard?'

Danglard pulled a face. The complex threads of other people's lives did not escape the notice of Adamsberg, even if those threads were whispers, minute sensations, puffs of air. The *commissaire* had spotted the woman at the conference. And while Danglard had been going over every little incident obsessively, so much so as to blank them out, Adamsberg must already have formed a firm impression.

'With her,' said Adamsberg into the silence. 'The woman who chews the arms of her red spectacles, the woman who keeps looking at you. It says "Abstract" on her badge. Is that her first name?'

Danglard smiled. If the only woman who had ever made eyes at him in ten years was called 'Abstract', that would have been painfully appropriate.

'No, it's her job. She's supposed to collect and distribute summaries of the papers. They call them "abstracts".'

'Ah, I see. So what *is* her name?'

'I haven't asked.'

'But you need to know her name before anything else.'

'No, before anything else I want to know what's going on inside her head.'

'Because you don't know?' asked Adamsberg, genuinely surprised.

'How would I know? I'd have to ask her. And I'd have to know *whether* I could ask her. And I wonder how I would know that.'

Adamsberg sighed, giving up the struggle when faced with Danglard's intellectual ramblings.

'Well, she certainly has something serious going on inside her head,' he began again. 'And one drink more or less at the hotel bar won't change that.'

'What woman are you talking about?' asked Radstock in French, exasperated by the other two excluding him from