

# RONIN

a novel  
by

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**&**

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## Chapter One

Ever since Sam Ronin had left, disappeared so to speak, Hunter Black was far and away the top field agent within Company ranks. It was not a point considered up for debate. No one could argue this fact: Hunter Black had stepped into Sam Ronin's shoes - and they fit rather nicely.

Hunter had been cultivated by Sam. Been schooled in the finer aspects of invisibility and silent death. Been tutored on every weapon from 203's to Uzis to AK-47s to piano wire to Samurai swords. Learned how to fabricate a field silencer out of oak bark and autumn leaves - and how to keep the damn thing from catching on fire when you squeezed off a round. Hunter'd been run through every martial arts program the Company offered - always with Sam there, watching, hanging over his shoulder, then sparring with him like a friggin' older brother. Teaching him a few things the Company boys didn't know existed. Over beers and cigarettes, back when it was okay to smoke the things, Sam would explain it all:

"You see it's this way, Hunter... you get out there, and I don't care where, Eastern Bloc, Central America, Southeast Asia... Christ, fucking L.A. for that matter, the bastards don't play by anybody's rules. Certainly not yours and mine. *Bushido* is Greek to them. They have no honor. They're armed to the teeth and they're dangerous. So the thing is, you have to be better armed... And a hell of a lot more dangerous. And if I find, one sunny day,

that you're my back up, I want to know that you can park a nine millimeter piece of lead in some schmuck's Crus Cerebri without getting his necktie dirty and long before he has any idea what day of the week it is."

Hunter chuckled to himself. No question about it, he missed Sam. He was one of a kind. Over the years they'd run more two-man shows than anyone in the Company. They'd done that thing in Cambodia. They'd done the thing in Algeria. And when the Company'd left them hung out to dry in Angola, they'd made forty-five South African mercs look like a troop of Boy Scouts with their thumbs up their asses by getting the drop on them, loading their weapons onto a beat-up Huey and flying all the crap back to Pretoria. They were drinking beers on Pennsylvania Avenue before the Company had time to notify next of kin of their untimely deaths.

But that was more than a few years ago.

Hunter stood on the Rue Tardif, dropped his hands into his pockets and shook his head. Across the street the gold-filtered arc-lights were just beginning to illuminate the massive Bayeux Cathedral. Dating to the Eleventh Century, the Cathedral was, without a doubt, one of the most impressive structures in all of Europe. The town of Bayeux was itself a paradox of peace and bloodshed. Now, as Hunter listened to the lilt of the nesting summer birds and the gentle breezes as they worked their way through the rich green leaves of the aging sycamore trees, it was impossible to imagine the death, the enormous doses of human life, that had been expended over the centuries in this small section of Normandy. Starting with the Roman conquerors, who gave way to the Scandinavian conquerors, who gave way to the conqueror, Duke Richard the First, who eventually gave way to William the Conqueror. Then came Henry the First in 1106, peace for a century or two, and the Hundred Years' War, followed by the religious wars of the 16th century. All of this leading up to the Nazis over-running the place and the subsequent D-Day invasion

of 1945 with the Allies landing on the beaches and cliffs five miles to the west. Blood. It was a deep part of the Bayeux soil. The Apple trees blossomed with it each spring, possibly adding to the bloom's rich red color.

On the Rue Tardif Hunter Black thought once more of Sam Ronin. He hadn't heard from him if over five years now. The Company maintained Sam was out, but Hunter knew it wasn't that simple. No one in Sam's operation class got out. They may think they'd retired, lured into believing they could put it all behind them. Get a new identity, a nice house in Pacific Palisades, walk your dog in the canyons and play tennis, but the heart attack would eventually come - usually within a year. Hunter knew that all too well. He'd been called upon to administer three heart attacks personally.

The Company doesn't like loose ends.

Hunter wondered if Sam was still alive. If he'd avoided the inevitable heart attack. The romantic in Hunter told him Sam was good enough to evade anyone's long arm.

But for how long?

And it was at that exact moment, Hunter was marked - standing on the Rue Tardif, studying the subtle evening lighting of the Bayeux Cathedral and fantasizing about how Sam Ronin just might have beaten the system. Hunter may have been the best field agent in the Company, but worldwide he was running a close second to a man who was simply known as Alex. No last name, no middle name, and if push came to shove, the Alex part was most likely bullshit too.

Alex had just stepped off a bus with six other people, two of whom were his back-up. Masquerading as a group of Frenchmen arriving for the evening's concert of string quartet music. Jabbering away in French about Bach or Mahler or some classical nonsense, and moving toward the cathedral's massive wooden doors, all the while keeping Hunter lined up in their periphery.

Hunter paid them no mind. This was expected to be a fairly facile operation: Two identical attaché cases. Hunter's containing Seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars, the other containing a large manila envelope. A simple swap during the concert and both operatives would leave at different times, and by different routes. There was no reason for Hunter to expect this third party. Any potential danger would come from the clown with the Package. A double-cross? It's always possible. It had to be considered, sure. But if that were the case, the bastard would rue the day he'd ever laid eyes on Hunter Black. Even if he had suspected Alex was lurking around, Hunter knew him by sight. Christ, Alex's picture had been circulating for so long at Langley even the secretaries were beginning to believe they'd once dated the guy.

Hunter tapped his knee twice on the attaché case as it dangled in his left hand, thinking after he made the swap, the Package was bound to weigh a hell of a lot less than this seven hundred and fifty grand in twenty dollar bills, then thinking it somewhat ironic that each one of those bills had an etching of the White House on the back, and ultimately that building would be the final destination of the Package. Landing in the Oval Office where it could be properly dealt with.

The hammer of the .25 caliber automatic Hunter carried under his left arm pinched into his biceps as he brought his wrist up to check the time. Five minutes before eight. Time to move. He double-checked the combination locks on the attaché case. Both were set to 007. It was Hunter's way of entertaining himself on these more tedious assignments. He crossed over the Rue Tardif and headed up the half block or so to the cathedral's entrance. The wood and iron of the doors were all original. During World War II, great pains had been taken by the Allies to keep their bombs and naval prep away from France's more historical gems. Dresden didn't fare so well - the difference between winning and losing can be somewhat costly when it comes to war.

Inside, the cathedral was dimly lit. Candles glowed in wall sconces around the perimeter and on the altar, but the electric lighting had been lowered to an orange warmth. The four musicians had set themselves up just behind the communion rail and were in the process of tuning their instruments. Sliding their bows slowly across the strings, tightening and loosening at the neck, checking for pitch a second time, then more fine-tuning.

Close to fifty people has arrived for the concert and they were scattered throughout the pews. It seemed to Hunter they were all locals. No Americans, i.e. no sneakers, sweat-pants, shorts or Mickey Mouse tee shirts. He moved down the center aisle until he reached the eighth row. Seated in the middle of the seventh pew was an older woman, somewhat overweight, wearing what was clearly a died black wig. Hunter moved in and sat directly behind the woman. A line of sweat rolled down the side of her face from under the wig. Below her, beneath the pew, rested a brown leather attaché case, perfectly matching the one Hunter had entered the cathedral with.

Hunter placed his case on the stone floor next to the other. As he leaned forward he whispered, "Fetching outfit you have on tonight, Henri. This frock is quite becoming on you. It must get warm under all that hair."

Henri turned to Hunter, his face showing his surprise more than he'd hoped. "Monsieur Black, I was told it would be another." Sweat continued to flow from under Henri's wig while his hands fumbled with a set of rosary beads.

"Relax, Henri, it's all the same Company. Your locks are set for 627?"

"Oui."

"Well, then I suggest we check one another out and get this show on the road."

Together the two men bent down and slid the other's attaché case from beneath the pew. Each dialed 627 into the combination locks and silently eased the clasps open. Henri made an audible gasp as he glanced down at seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars in

worn twenty-dollar bills. Hunter was a little more subtle. Without changing his facial expression or seeming to look down he was able to determine the Package was authentic and complete. He leaned forward once more.

"I trust you're happy?"

"Oui."

"Good... Now, I don't know what it is, but there's something funny in the air, Do you feel it, Henri? Do you feel the presence of a certain evil in this place?"

"Mais, non."

"Well, I do. Maybe I'm just too damn sensitive. Anyway, because of my sensitivity, there's going to be a slight change of plans. Instead of me leaving first and you staying until the end of the concert... We're going to switch that around. You're leaving first."

Henri spun in his pew. A look of absolute panic had spread across his face. "But, monsieur-"

"-Don't." Hunter laid it out in a pointed whisper that only served to frighten Henri more. "Turn back and face front, Henri. Now."

Henri did as he was told. Hunter brought his right hand up and placed it on Henri's neck. He increased pressure until Henri was to the point of blacking out.

"You have two choices, mon ami. You either pick up your money and walk out of this church before those people start playing Sibelius, or whatever the fuck it is they're going to play, or I put you to sleep and keep it all. Everything. Both attaches. And when I say sleep, Henri, I'm talking the kind of sleep you don't wake up from."

Hunter sensed the Frenchman was about to go down for the count so he released the pressure on his neck, but he continued to push him.

"We're running out of time here, Henri. Lift your left hand and scratch your ear if you don't want to face the music."

Henri brought his sweaty and shaking hand up to his ear and then let it drop into his lap.

"Good choice. Now, get the fuck out of here before I change my mind."

Henri stood. The wig had now become completely matted to the sides of his pudgy face. He grasped the attaché case in his right hand and began to sidestep his way out of the pew. Before he was out of earshot Hunter said, "Henri?"

"Oui?"

"Bon chance, amigo."

Henri turned and scurried from the cathedral without once looking back.

Hunter settled in for the music. He wasn't sure who'd got the better end of the deal. He hated this classical crap. He'd been weaned on Patsy Cline and Hank Williams and it was sheer torture to sit in this wooden pew and listen to four Esa-Pekka types saw away on violins and cellos for two plus hours. The concert couldn't end quick enough for him. It did, however, give him time to figure out how he'd get the hell out of the cathedral. Something was going down. He was sure of it. Henri was far too shaken with the change of plans.

Hunter decided that once he was outside the cathedral, in the narrow streets, in the darkness, he'd be a sitting duck. The best course would be to remain inside. Allow the sexton to lock up and then play it by ear. If he could slide out without setting off any alarms, at two or three AM, when the streets would be empty, he'd go for it. Otherwise he's wait until morning and leave with the new wave of tourists.

After the audience had finished with their applause they began to slowly file out. All spoke in French and all had enjoyed themselves to no end. Four or five ambled up to the communion rail and began chatting with the musicians. Hunter lifted the attaché case and worked his way off to the right and rear of the cathedral. There he found a circular



stairway fashioned out of ancient stones and leading up to the bell tower. He checked his perimeter and quietly ducked up a dozen steps. He went unnoticed, but even if someone had been watching, the illusion would have been that he'd disappeared into thin air.

Hunter took a minute to survey the stairway. It was impossible to determine how high it ultimately climbed. As he turned on each step it only revealed yet another step. "At some point it's got to open up into a room of some sort," Hunter thought. Intuition was telling him to remain somewhere in the middle where he could hear someone approaching from either direction. Hunter eased his way up another fifteen steps. Nearly all light from the cathedral had faded to nothing and only a weak glow from the moon filtered down from above, leaving him now in a state of near pitch-black limbo. Hunter didn't like it. He continued to climb.

After another ten steps he stopped once more. He shifted the attaché case to his right hand and placed his left on the stone column that supported the center of the stairway. He stopped his breathing as all sensitivity became centered in the palm of his left hand.

Someone was coming.

There was virtually no sound, but Hunter could feel the vibration of slow moving footsteps in the ancient rock. The question was; was the person following up from below, or coming down from the top. He switched the attaché case back to his left hand and slid the .25 automatic out from its holster. He listened. Again he brought his own breath down to nothing. No sounds came but Hunter knew he was being stalked. He could feel it throughout his body. Would it come from above or below?

As Hunter attempted to determine an answer, a hideous laugh quietly permeated the stairway, but it failed to resolve the question; up or down? The laugh was followed by, "I'm coming up to get you, Yankee Doodle."

Alex.

Hunter recognized the voice immediately. How could he have missed him? Not seen him? He spun to his left and took one step back down the stairway. Then stopped abruptly, realizing Alex wasn't below him. No way in hell. It may have sounded that way, but this guy would have never given his position away so readily.

Hunter Black was right, but he was right too late. A .32 caliber piece of lead, fired from a silenced semi-automatic pistol slammed into his back on the left side. It passed a quarter of an inch above his heart, collapsed his left lung and exploded through his chest, leaving a gaping hole and sending him face first down another five steps. He came to rest on his back, his left hand still clutching the attaché case, .25 automatic resting loosely in his right, seemingly unconscious.

Alex casually strolled down from his position. He pried the attaché case from Hunter's hand and snapped his fingers sharply. His back-up men stepped down behind him. One furnished him with a pair of handcuffs and Alex proceeded to attach the case to his left wrist. A self-satisfied grin spread across his face as the Bayeux Cathedral bells began to sound the end of another day. Alex looked skyward and proclaimed, "God loves me."

And as Hunter's hand began to strengthen its grip on the .25, Alex glanced down, smiled and said, "But I don't think he's too fond of you." Then placed a muted round squarely between Hunter's eyes.

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## Chapter Two

A few blocks from Place Pigalle, in Paris' Eighteenth Arrondissement, off in the direction of Garde du Nord, on Rue Massé, half way between Rue Pigalle and Rue des Martyrs, sat Omar's. By American standard's Omar's was the classic French dive. No juke box, no dartboard, no shuffleboard, no pinball, no video poker, a tiny piss-ant television that only seemed to serve up soccer matches, and no Budweiser. In fact, there wasn't even an Omar. The place was owned and operated by a six foot four, two hundred thirty pound Turk by the name of Hagop. Hagop didn't think Hagop's had the right ring, so he'd named the joint Omar's. Naturally he spoke French fluently and the place catered mostly to neighborhood types. However Hagop maintained, through his brother in Istanbul, connections that stretched throughout the Middle East, Afghanistan, Northern Africa, and obscure ports on the Black Sea in Bulgaria, Romania, and the Ukraine. Hagop's rent was not paid so much from the sale of Calvados as it was from the exchange of information. And no one was more aware of these facts than Deirdre McLaughlin.

Black Irish, that was Deirdre. Short cropped raven hair, cold ice blue eyes, snow-white complexion, and the ability to stop any man dead in his tracks with only a half-hearted smile. She was a former IRA guerrilla, so she said, with more notches in her gun than Michael Collins. Economics had forced her to cross the channel, toss the IRA

overboard for this more lucrative private commission. And lucrative it was, a virtual pot of gold was sitting at the end of a rainbow... So she said.

The glaring lights of Place Pigalle's garish nightlife seemed to follow Deirdre up Rue Massé as she worked her way toward Omar's tacky neon sign. But she passed the bar without glancing into the open doorway and continued on to the next corner. She then crossed the street and ducked under the shadow of an open phone booth on the opposite side. Deirdre reached up and tugged on a small wire, extinguishing the green glow of the booth's harsh florescent light. The move was casually observed from an apartment window two stories above by a stocky, yet powerfully built man with sandy blonde hair by the name of Seamus Reilly.

Seamus was a watcher, not a doer. A coordinator of sorts, Seamus preferred the shadows. Liked to maintain a certain invisibility. He methodically cleaned his fingernails with a seven-inch switchblade as Deirdre leaned her weight against the aluminum side panel of the phone booth. She checked her watch for the tenth time. One AM. They'd be arriving now. The other two. Bringing the total to five. She wouldn't enter Omar's until they were all accounted for. The last thing she needed was for one of them to come in behind her.

She didn't know their names. She didn't know their faces. Five assassins. Each with a particular skill that made him more perverse than the next. Each with his own special way of dealing death to those less gifted individuals. The less talented. The five would not know each other by sight either. And not by name. Same as Deirdre. But they would recognize each other. They would share a same cold-bloodedness that would make them instant brothers. It was how Deirdre so easily recognized the first three to enter Omar's. These men had been brought together from different corners of the world for one job and one job only. Familiarity was not part of the operation. The less they knew about each

other, or who was running the show, the better. If they remained strangers, remained wary of one another, any chance of a double-cross would be effectively eliminated.

Deirdre glanced down Rue Massé and watched as a large man worked his way toward Omar's. The fourth of five? She wouldn't know until he reached the bar's entrance. He was tall. Probably six-five, and had a good-sized beer gut. His clothes were most definitely American. Cowboy boots and ruddy brown jeans that barely clung to his extended belly. Deirdre truly expected this Ugly American to stumble past Omar's and continue up Rue Massé to a bar with a little more action. A bar with women. The kind of place the Pigalle section of Paris was famous for. But when he was within ten feet of the entrance he stopped. He gave the length of the street a long hard look. And Deirdre could see from the bead in his eye this was a man who could handle himself, despite his size. He was a professional. After a beat he glanced at his watch and stepped into Omar's. Number four was home.

Larry Jones had graduated from T.C.U. on a football scholarship and was drafted by the Philadelphia Eagles. His thought on the matter: "Who the fuck would want to live in Philadelphia? Not a respectable goddamn speedway for six hundred fucking miles." So he chucked football and went on the NASCAR circuit. He had the talent. He was a far better driver than he ever was a ballplayer. The problem; the extra hundred and fifty pounds he carried gave his sprints a little less get-up-and-go than the rest of the field. It wasn't a sterling career, and by the time he'd washed out of the NASCAR circuit he was twenty-seven, too damn old for the NFL. But Larry always had a nose for money, and he now put his automotive and driving finesse to use on more rewarding work - albeit not entirely ethical.

Larry scanned the length of Omar's bar. Three customers, one bartender, and naturally a damn soccer match on a piss-ant TV, half the size of an eight by ten glossy,

with only one customer watching it. He sat at the curved end of the bar, as far from the TV as he could get and waited for Hagop to amble down. The two men were of almost equal size, but Larry had Hagop by a good thirty or forty pounds.

Hagop tried for a smile and said, "Oui, monsieur?"

"Budweiser."

Hagop only shook his head from side to side.

"What? No fucking Budweiser? What is it with these French joints?"

The Turk folded his arms across his chest and gave Larry a lazy look, as if to say, "Try again, mon ami."

"Okay, Christ, give me a French beer. Make it a light one. None of that amber crap."

Hagop reached into the ice bin below the bar, came up with a Kronenborg and poured it for Larry. Then started to move off.

"Hey. Hey. Omar, back up there, pardner. Can't you get anything on that piss-ant TV besides soccer?"

The one man who'd been watching the TV turned slowly and with definite deliberation faced Larry. He was probably thirty-five, clearly French, dark hair and deep-set eyes, and if World War II had still been raging, this guy was the classic image of a Resistance Fighter. There was an overwhelming air of self-confidence as he spoke.

"Monsieur, first of all his name is not Omar, it is Hagop, and second this is not soccer, it is French football." And he turned back to the TV.

"Football? Football? You call this fucking football? This is not football. Football is three hundred pound guys. They move like lightning. They wear helmets made of Kevlar and they use them to spear skinny fucking quarterbacks, guys built like you, through the goddamn chest in hopes that they will die a painful death... Never breathe an ounce of air

again." Larry took a long pull from his beer. "God, this shit sucks... You want to know what football is? Huh? Do you?"

No one responded.

"I'll tell you. It's hitting the other guy as low as you can. Then, when you've got him down, and the ref's not looking, you jam your fist into his balls. And as he winces in pain, you spit in his face and tell him you fucked his mother last night and she wasn't half bad. That's football. It's all things American. And America is A-Number-One. The absolute fucking best. That's football. And what you have on that TV, pardner, ain't football."

Once again the man watching the match turned and squared off against Larry. He stepped off his bar stool and Larry followed suit. They stood facing each other. Neither man accustomed, or willing, to back down from another. After a moment the Frenchman reached over to the bar. He pulled a Gauloise cigarette from its sky blue packet and lit it with a wooden match. He inhaled deeply and tossed the dying match into the triangular shaped porcelain ashtray. He spoke as the smoke slowly drifted from his nose and mouth.

"My friend... Football, that is *American* football... is a game for faggots."

Larry shifted his weight onto one leg and took an almost John Wayne stance. "Not in Texas it ain't, amigo."

"Oh, I believe even more so in Texas. I have seen your Cowboys in action. Always caressing one another's derriere. It looks so much like love to me."

"Derriere?"

"Ass. I'm sure that's a word you can understand."

Hagop and the two other customers at the bar were now very much aware that they were trapped between two men with severe attitude problems. But no one moved. If there was to be a show, they wanted a front row seat. The ball was now in Larry's court and all eyes were on him. Steely glances flew from face to face for nearly thirty seconds. Finally

Larry's mouth began to show signs of a smile. And just as Deirdre had predicted, Larry recognized his new partners. His smile continued to grow until he broke into a resounding belly laugh. Eventually the rest of the men, including Hagop, joined in.

When they'd settled down, Larry said, "Fucking football. You know what I say? Fuck it, what did football ever do for me?"

He then walked over to the Frenchman and extended his right hand.

"Something tells me that we're all here for the same purpose. My name's Larry Jones... American through and through."

The man took Larry's hand and smiled back. "Vincent Leygues... Je suis Français. I believe you are correct. We are here for the same purpose."

Vincent then turned to the two other customers. He gestured toward to nearest. The man stood. He was a good five inches shorter than Larry but wiry like a snake. His eyes squinted an emerald green as he extended his hand. He spoke with a pronounced Eastern European accent, but Larry was unable to attribute the accent to a specific country.

"I am Gregor Novaya," he said, "welcome to the party."

Larry shook his hand, all the time thinking if this guy isn't ex-KGB my old man's a fucking armadillo. He then turned his attention to the second customer. He stood as tall as Larry but was lean and muscular. He had the look of a prizefighter in peak condition. His hair was shockingly blonde, but his face retained a certain blankness. A lack of expression that made it impossible to discern his thoughts. Larry guessed this guy was either dumber than dirt or a sociopath, and if he was dumb, there was no way in hell he'd be in this bar on this night with Vincent and Gregor.

"I'm Hospence Dal. But you will call me Spence... If you care to sleep well at night."

"You got it, Spence."



Larry's belly laugh and the subsequent howl from Omar's had been so loud Deirdre had little trouble hearing it from her phone booth a half a block away. It was the last thing she'd expected to flow from a Bar like Omar's. A place that catered to Russian mobsters, circumspect information peddlers and international assassins. The noise focused her attention so keenly on the bar's narrow entrance that when the telephone rang she instinctively, and with the grace of a tiger, slipped two nine millimeter pistols, equipped with silencers, from under her jacket. Then spun around, and scanned the street. The move was so fast, so fluid, so precise, it could have passed for dance.

"Jesus, woman, settle down. This is only the beginning." Deirdre didn't say it aloud, it was only a thought that passed through her mind as she placed her pistols back under her jacket and answered the phone.

"Yes... Four are in. I'm waiting-" She stopped. A dark shadow had fallen over the dial plate of the phone. It had come from nowhere, without a sound. Deirdre turned cautiously. Behind her stood a man dress entirely in black. His hair was as dark as hers and his eyes seemed to radiate a light that resembled freshly quarried coal or black diamonds. He was lean but at the same time gave off an aura of commanding power. To say Deirdre found him compelling would be an understatement. She returned his gaze and felt an instant recognition pass between them.

"Can I help you?" she asked, wondering if she really wanted to know the answer.

"I thought it might be for me."

"What?"

"The phone."

"The Phone?"

"Yes, the phone. I thought it might be for me."

"Well, it's not."

"Ahh... C'est la vie."

He gave her an almost sly wink, crossed the street and stepped into Omar's Bar.

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### Chapter Three

The four men, Larry, Vincent, Spence and Gregor had moved from the bar and commandeered a round table in a dimly lit corner of Omar's. They watched intently as the stranger in black crossed over to Hagop and asked for a Calvados neat. He took a minute or two to finish the drink, keeping his back to the group for the entire time, but watching them closely in the dingy mirror behind the bar. After he swallowed the last of the Calvados, he set the glass on the bar, turned and approached their table. His English was clearly American. New York to be more precise.

"Sorry I'm late... Jesus, French taxis, what're you gonna do?"

Vincent took a moment to light up another Gauloise. Then through the smoke said, "What makes you think we're here to meet you? You may not be our type."

"And what type might that be?"

"Perhaps we are policemen."

The stranger let out a small laugh and moved his eyes from man to man. "Well, I'll tell you, pal, I know cops..." He glanced over to Hagop and back to Vincent. "...And you're no cop. There's not a cop in this joint."

Vincent seemed to take this as the ultimate compliment. A smile spread across his face. It was quickly picked up by the other three, and the new man advanced closer to their table.

Larry leaned his weight back in his chair until it rested on the wall behind him. The flimsy legs groaned under the increased pressure. He folded his broad arms across his chest and motioned for the new man to take a seat. "Have you got a name there, pardner?"

"Sam."

"Cigarette?" Vincent shook the Gauloise package in Sam's direction until his last smoke poked its way out from the foil. Spence and Gregor remained silent as they drew their own quick evaluations of Sam.

"No thanks. I'd rather not die too young."

"Not to worry," Vincent chuckled, but at the same time feeling put off by Sam's comment. "Only the good die young. Something none of us have to worry about. Do you have a last name, Monsieur Sam?"

"Ronin."

"Ahh... Ronin. Like the masterless Samurai warrior wandering the countryside living a hand to mouth mercenary existence. I've been told a story about the forty-seven. No god, no country... I assume it's assumed... The name, that is. Ronin?"

"In a manner of speaking. My grandfather arrived in New York from Sicily in 1915. Salvatore Ronincecci. It was too much for the pencil pusher on Ellis Island. He shortened it to Ronin."

"They changed his name without his granting permission?" Gregor seemed truly horrified at this concept. The idea of slaughtering a man's wife and children could be all in a day's work... But changing his name without his permission? That was taking things a little too far.

"Well...?" Sam gave Gregor a head cock as if to ask his name.

"Gregor."

"Well, Gregor, it's just another American Tragedy. One of eight million stories. All I can say is, if you should go to New York, watch out for the INS."

Vincent called something out to Hagop in French while keeping an eye on the other four, none of whom seemed to understand what he'd said. Hagop proceeded to remove his apron and give the bar a quick wipe. He then pulled a set of keys from a drawer near the cash register and tossed them across the room to Vincent.

"Merci, mon ami, a bien tôt."

And Hagop stepped out into the Parisian night, closing the door behind him.

Sam eyed Vincent. "Omar trusts you to lock up?"

"His name is Hagop."

"Then who the hell is Omar?"

"There is no Omar."

"Right. Of course not. Why would there be? So, Hagop trusts you to lock up?"

"Let's just say... He knows who I am."

Vincent removed the last Gauloise from the package and crumpled it into a ball. After lighting it, he pulled a fresh pack from his pocket and placed it on the table.

"Anyone? Help yourselves."

No one reached for them and he stuffed the cigarettes back into his shirt.

An uncomfortable silence fell over the five so Sam opted to break the ice. "Well... So... Speaking of knowing who you are... I'm Sam." He looked across the table. "You're Gregor." He looked at the big man on Gregor's right side.

"Larry."

"Great. Gregor, Larry." Sam moved his gaze to Gregor's left.

"People call me Spence."

"Well, hey, I'm people, Nice to meet you, Spence. That just leaves you, Monsieur?"

Vincent smiled. He was warming up to Sam. There was a good dose of charm there.

"Vincent," he said.

"All right, Vincent, the man with the smokes. They may come in handy later, so I'll stay on your good side."

Larry lacked the patience for sitting around and exchanging small talk. It showed in his voice.

"Anybody want to tell me what we're waiting for?"

Vincent looked from Sam to Larry. "It would be my educated guess, that if none of us know *what* we are waiting for, then the question is not *what* at all... But it is *who*."

"That's bitchin'," Larry groaned, "*Who*, then? Who the fuck are we waiting for?"

"Whoever hired us," Gregor said as he slid his chair back and against the wall, keeping himself parallel with Larry and thinking he was better off having all four of these new partners out where he could watch them.

Sam recognized the move for what it was. He shrugged and maintained a casual tone. "Well, I don't know about you fellas, but I got this gig through a contractor. The man in the wheelchair?" Sam looked at the other four. Waiting for a sign of acknowledgement. He got it. "And I think the man in the wheelchair knows less about this than we do. He most definitely had no idea who was doing the hiring, only that the money was big. I certainly have no complaints about the retainer."

He glanced from man to man once more, ending with Vincent. Their expressions acknowledged they'd all been brought into the project in exactly the same fashion. Lots of up-front cash, very little up-front information - Go to Paris, be at Omar's on this night by one AM.

"So," Sam continued, "none of us has any idea who's paying the freight."

It was a statement more than a question. But again he got a silent confirmation from the others.

"Just an anonymous job," he continued. "Take the money and run. Of course, it's a job requiring five, which makes it all the more interesting. Obviously it's not small potatoes."

"Potatoes," Spence repeated, and broke into a small laughing fit. Obviously a private joke.

After he calmed down Sam picked up where he'd left off. And as he spoke he tried to establish if any one of these men knew any more about the operation than he did. He'd hoped their faces would give something up. Not a chance. These guys were as cold as ice.

"Well, here's an interesting thought... For all we know we could be working for different people. Have different objectives."

"How so?" Sam's statement sobered Spence up instantly.

"Five men. Count them. Why five?"

"That is an interesting concept," Gregor said. He looked to the ceiling as if to collect his thoughts. "If there is more than one party involved... If we are really working for different interests, then perhaps some of us have diametrically opposed intentions."

"What?" This came from Larry.

"Your orders might be entirely different than mine."

"What the fuck are you talking about? I don't understand this shit."

Under his breath Spence said, "What a surprise," but loud enough for all to hear.

Larry brought his chair squarely back onto the floor. A .38 caliber Colt Pony automatic pistol seemed to magically appear in his right hand. The small gun looked more like a toy water pistol in Larry's fat palm. He leaned across Gregor and pointed it directly at Spence's right eyeball.

"I got a surprise for you, you blonde fuck."

Spence's face remained expressionless, having the effect of unnerving Larry slightly.

Gregor, caught in the middle, saw his position as an unpleasant one. "Why don't you both shut up?"

Larry moved his pistol to just under Gregor's nose as Spence produced a weapon that vaguely resembled an ice pick and placed it under Gregor's chin. Almost in unison they said, "Fuck you, spook."

"Knock it off." Sam sent this statement across the table like a rocket. Its intensity was so sharp and so pointed, and Sam's stare so piercing, that Larry and Spence retracted their weapons instantaneously, barely aware of what they'd done or why they'd done it. Even Gregor felt the power of the remark. Sam continued to dig his eyes into the three for another five or ten seconds. After he was certain he had them calmed down he glanced at Vincent.

Vincent had a half smile on his face, a smile that served to exchange a mutual respect. He gave his shoulders a slight shrug. "You seem to have the rostrum, Monsieur Sam."

Sam returned the look and moved back to the other three. "The point remains, we could be working for different interests. And that, my friends, makes me very uneasy. There's a chance one of us..." Sam's eyes swept the table. "...Maybe more than one of us, have been fed a little extra." Again Sam measured their faces. Gregor gave Spence a quick glance, but Sam read it as mild paranoia.

"Fed extra for what purpose?"

"A double-cross. Money invested early on, may prove to be a big savings down the road... If four of us don't make it to the final payday, that's a savings of eighty percent for



whoever's doing the hiring. I don't know about you gents, but I like to know who I'm working for. It can help prevent a great deal of... Unpleasantness... Down the road."

Larry tapped the pocket where he'd dropped the Colt Pony. "Anybody tries to *unpleasant* me... He'll find a couple of slugs between his eyes."

"A couple?" Gregor smiled, "I'd like to believe you would only need only one."

"Oh, yeah, one to do the job. The other...? Just to make sure it takes."

Deirdre had watched the better part of this exchange from Omar's narrow doorway, not sure whether she should be pleased with herself for having entered the bar unnoticed, or upset that these five professionals had allowed her to get the drop on them. Nonetheless their squabbling made her chuckle as she approached their table.

"It's good to see you all have such faith in our little undertaking."

"Who the hell are you?" Larry made no attempt to cover his disdain for surprises.

"The name is Deirdre... And I'm running this show."

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## Chapter Four

Sam. Vincent. Larry. Gregor. Spence. Neither one of them seemed overjoyed with Deirdre's proclamation of: "I'm running this show." In general they were all used to giving the orders, not taking them. And on those rare occasions when they'd been forced to take them, it sure as hell wasn't from a woman. Never from a woman. Sam had seen Deirdre pull the Quickdraw-McGraw stunt outside at the phone booth, so he knew she could handle herself. He opted to sit tight and see how things developed. See if she could manage these four. Larry, on the other hand decided to push... In his own subtle way.

"Deirdre, huh? By the accent I'm guessing; Black Irish. You know what my Daddy used to say about the Irish?"

She only shook her head.

"My Daddy used to say that the only thing dumber than a dumb Irishman..." Larry glanced over to Spence. "...Was a smart Swede."

The two were instantly at one another's throats again. Spence and Larry - Face to face. Gregor, taking his life in his hands, stepped between the two giants, placing his hands on their chests. "Business," he barked, "This is business. Conduct yourselves appropriately."

The simplicity of his statement seemed to leave both Spence and Larry somewhat bewildered as to where to move next. After a moment of hard stares they returned to their seats. Gregor then focused his attention on Deirdre.

"So, you are running the show. The question now becomes; who are you? The IRA?"

"Not likely..." Then thinking one of these men may know more about her then she suspected, Deirdre covered herself. "Once. Sure, I'm a Belfast woman, no doubt about that. I fought for the cause. But they're talking peace now. And decommissioning. Tony Blair has Gerry Adams in his back pocket. Anyone can see that. Plus, there's no money in the IRA, and I'm a cash oriented individual, if you take my meaning."

"Decommissioning?"

It was Larry.

Sam answered the question for Deirdre.

"Decommissioning. Disarmament. The Brits want the IRA to turn over their guns."

"Fat fucking chance."

"Well said." Deirdre smiled at Larry. "Anyway, I passed on the IRA and left the bloody country. Now, I'm in the same league as the rest of you... A hired gun, so to speak. I only work for top dollar because I'm good, damn good, and by now I'm sure you're all aware, this is a top dollar job."

Deirdre hefted a large black bag onto the table. It resembled the type of case airline pilots carry their flight instruction in. The main difference being, this one was secured with a combination lock. She spun the lock's dial three or four times and yanked it open. Then lifted the flaps of the case and removed five thick business sized manila envelopes. She tossed one to each man. Spence and Larry tore theirs open immediately and began counting

the cash. Gregor took their cue and did the same. Sam and Vincent sat peacefully, keeping their eyes on Deirdre.

"Francs, I hope?" Sam eventually asked.

"25,000. A little spending money. From here on, if you want something, you pay for it in cash. I don't think any of you would be stupid enough to use a credit card... But don't. I'll say it again, no credit cards, no checks, no bankcards, no phone cards. As for your fees; your numbered accounts are in place. Check with your agents if you like. You've all received your ten percent up front. I assume everyone is happy on that score?" She only waited a second. No one opened their mouth. "Good. Your numbered accounts will be released when the job is done."

Sam and Vincent seemed to be enjoying Deirdre's show. She had it all under control. If she gave an inch, these guys would've rolled her over in a second. She gave nothing.

Deirdre reached into the satchel once again and removed another five envelopes. Eight and a half by elevens this time. These were thinner, seemed to contain only few papers each, at the most. They'd been numbered from one to five with a green marking pen. She looked across the table at Gregor.

"You. What do you do and what should we call you?"

"These days they call me Gregor. Technology. I'm a tech. I handle your electronics. Computer runs. Surveillance. Communications. Eavesdropping. I also wire explosives. Hard line or remote, it makes no difference. But... Don't ever make the mistake of taking me for an alpha-geek. I grew up with a knife in one hand and a pistol in the other. I use both extremely efficiently."

Deirdre fanned her envelopes and slid the one marked with a three across the table to Gregor.

"These are your individual instructions. The papers in that envelope are for your eyes only. After you've read them, destroy them. The less of that information you share with the others, the better off you'll be. That goes for everyone at this table."

She moved on to Sam. He let his coal black eyes play with her deep blues for a few seconds before he spoke. There was again an immediate connection. They both felt it, but no one else seemed to pick up on the energy that passed between them.

"Sam. My name's Sam." He shrugged. "I'm labor. Paladin. This gun for hire. You want it done? I do it."

Deirdre once again fanned the envelopes.

"You were a soldier, were you? My information's correct on that point?"

"Once."

She handed him the envelope marked with the number one.

"One," he chuckled. "Well, hell, I'm impressed."

"Good. You should be... I certainly hope I am," Deirdre retorted in complete deadpan before training her eyes on Larry.

"I drive... Your vehicle breaks down...? I fix it, and I drive some more. You want it to go faster? I take care of that too. No one follows. No one catches up."

"Name?"

"Larry... I'm from the States."

Deirdre slid Larry the envelope marked four and concentrated on Vincent.

"Bon soir, mademoiselle, Je suis-"

"Cut it. I don't speak French."

"Ahh... Quelle damage... I am Vincent. And I coordinate."

"Coordinate what?"

Sam was a bit out of line with this question, but he saw a definite pecking order developing. He and Vincent were clearly landing on the top of the heap, however *coordination* seemed to be an item that should lie in the lap of management, not Vincent's. Sam was willing to play second fiddle to Deirdre, but not third. He repeated himself.

"Coordinate what?"

"Parlez vous Français, monsieur?"

Sam sat motionless and Vincent chuckled slightly.

"I didn't believe you did. This is my country, Sam." Vincent looked at the others.

"Does any one of you speak French?"

No one responded.

"Alors. So, this is what I mean by *coordination*. Things. I coordinate things."

"Coordinate all you want, Vincent." Deirdre handed him the envelope marked with a two. "But make sure whatever you coordinate, it comes from me and me only. I don't like surprises. If you surprise me, you may end up paying with your life. Are we in sync on this?" She waited a second or two and repeated, "Vincent?"

"But of course."

Deirdre picked up the envelope marked five. Obviously the only man without his packet was Spence. She tossed it to him and said, "And you?"

"They call me Spence."

"Who's they?"

"Everybody... Why am I only number five?"

"The numbers are random, Spence. Don't take it personally. I know by the contents of your envelope what it is you do, but for the edification of the rest of these gentlemen, why don't you tell us what it is you do best."

"Me?"

"Yes, you, Spence."

"I'm your weapons man."

"Good."

"I also kill."

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## Chapter Five

As far as set-ups went, this one wasn't half bad. Paris. A good-sized bed. Clean sheets and towels. State-of-the-art operations room. A crew that could take care of themselves. Sam had certainly seen a lot worse over his career. Especially with the Company. There was that crap in Cambodia. Sam and Hunter Black. Getting the damn prince out from under Pol Pot's nose. The Khmer Rouge chasing them for eight goddamn days through the highlands. Living off of worms, roots and rats. No ammunition for the last two days. And Panama. Back in '89. Getting Moose out of the Comandancia before the shit hit the fan. Noriega's 7th trying to punch him full of holes. Not a fun night. And Algeria. Hunter Black again. The two of them hiding in camel shit for a day and a half. Waiting to nail some bastard who never showed up because he'd already been dead for a week. Then trying to get out of the country before anyone suspected 'American involvement'. And Angola. Hunter trying to figure out how to fly a twenty year old Huey. Very quick OJT on Hunter's part. Yep, as far as set-ups went, Paris wasn't half bad.

And the money was good. Too good to pass up. And by most standards, the gig was a quickie. One or two days here in Paris. Locate the package. Synchronize an ambush - wherever the hell it was going to be. And do it. Just do it and be done with it. Take the money and run. One, two, three.



Even though the stay in Paris would probably be a short one, Deirdre had set things up very comfortably for her little crew. She'd found, obviously with Vincent's help, an Eighteenth Century town-house on the left bank, not too far from the Monparnasse train station, on Rue de Gergovie. The building was three stories tall, and connected to a small warehouse in the back. Sam guessed it had once been an underground headquarters for the French Resistance during World War II. It had seen quite a bit of renovation over the years. Things that would indicate the past occupants might have been expecting an armed siege at any moment.

The entrances to each of the bedrooms had been fortified with steel panels and sported heavy-duty locks and security chains. Throughout the halls and stairways extra doors had been added. Clearly intended to slow the progress of any unwanted guests. The passage to the street was reinforced with concrete on either side and the door could be secured with two six-foot iron slide bolts. None of these improvements were visible from the outside. On the roof there was a low retaining wall. It looked harmless enough from below, but it was close to three feet thick, strong enough to take a direct hit from an .88, or anything else the Nazis cared to dish out.

The warehouse section in the rear had been soundproofed, equipped with a firing range and a complete second kitchen. And again, more locks and steel than Fort Knox. It had close to thirty electrical outlets scattered along the walls, with conduit pipe leading off to a dozen different sources. A closed-circuit camera set-up kept an eye on all street movement, indicating the location had been upgraded considerably since the war, no doubt renting itself out to the highest bidder. Sam knew, in this day and age, the highest bidders would primarily be cocaine and heroin traffickers making their runs up from Marseille.

Sam stepped out of his new digs and patted the breast pocket of his shirt, thinking a cigarette would go nice right about now. Old habits die hard. He'd quit smoking over five

years ago. In reality, what he'd done was; quit buying the damn things. And over the years the effect had been to reduce his butt-bumming to one a week. Sometimes two. On those rare occasions three. But never four. Four would mean he was back to smoking, and back to buying, which was definitely out of the question.

His room was on the top floor of the town-house. Deirdre across the hall, Gregor and Spence down to the right, Vincent and Larry on the second level. The day had been spent going over details of the impending operation. Each man familiarizing himself with his own specific task. Then learning it by rote. They'd been through it so many times by mid-afternoon the boys were beginning to get testy. Larry and Spence were once again threatening each other with a spectrum of painful deaths and Gregor had fallen into a steely kind of KGB silence that everyone recognized as potentially explosive. Only Sam and Vincent seemed unaffected by the constant repetition. Nonetheless, Deirdre decided to call a cooling off period and sent everyone off to their corners. Sam opted to return to his room and work out a few Jeet Kune Do drills. Jeet had a way of relaxing and focusing Sam. It also served to be somewhat smoother than a semi-automatic pistol when there was a need for silence.

He checked his watch and guessed Deirdre's little group had reassembled by now. He trotted down the two flights of stairs and through the rear passageway that led into the warehouse. Larry was in the process of emptying a clip of ammunition into a paper silhouette target at the firing range. He'd traded his Colt Pony for a nine-millimeter automatic pistol equipped with a three-inch silencer. Spence was sitting at a table off in the corner eating a sandwich and appeared to be reading something. Sam guessed it probably wasn't Milton or Longfellow. Vincent hadn't returned yet, and Deirdre was going over, with Gregor, the additional gizmos he'd requested.

Sam didn't possess Gregor's electronic expertise but he recognized top of the line stuff when he saw it. Gregor's toys weren't the type of things one picked up at Radio Shack. This was private stock and surely had a price tag to match. The cell-phone he'd ordered up from Deirdre contained an encryption chip that would, when linked with the proper software, enable him to communicate with virtually every satellite circling the globe. No matter what the language was beamed back, the phone would translate, and print the information, in the language of Gregor's choice, across the screen of his laptop computer. All of this with complete mobility. He could track any cell-phone and pinpoint its exact location, be it moving or stationary. Sam watched as Gregor stroked this new hardware. Here was a spook in seventh heaven.

Sam crossed over to a folding table. Spence's table. It was three feet wide and little over eight feet long. Spread out was a battery of weapons. A pump shotgun chopped to twenty-two inches. Two Uzis, both outfitted with extended military ammunition clips. Seven CZ-75 semi-automatic nine-millimeter pistols equipped with silencers; the exact type Larry was now juking with at the firing range. Two .337 Rossi revolvers fitted into ankle holsters. A packet of eight 5-star ninja throwing knives. A seven-inch stiletto. A fourteen-inch Bowie knife. A half a dozen fragmentation grenades. Three willie-peter grenades. Another half a dozen high impact grenades. And enough ammunition to sink the battleship New Jersey.

Sam was a professional. And basically he trusted no one, least of all his new partners. He'd gone over all of these weapons with Spence before Deirdre had called the break, but they'd been left unattended for over an hour. So Sam now went through the process of making sure nothing had been tampered with in his absence. It could be a tedious task, but it was the only way to insure longevity in his business, and a good way to find out who you were doing business with. He worked his way down the table. Picking up

each weapon individually as he did. Checking. Chambering rounds and expelling them. His movements were fluid, almost balletic. Within thirty seconds he had worked the entire length of Spence's table. Everything checked. Everything as he'd left it.

When he'd finished, Spence looked up from his magazine and said, "Happy?"

"Happy as a clam at high tide."

Satisfied, Sam crossed over to Larry at the firing range.

Larry had just set up three paper silhouette targets fifty feet down range and returned to the firing table. The targets were cut out forms of a man holding a pistol in his right hand. Larry slammed a fresh ammunition clip into his nine millimeter and turned on the targets. He then proceeded to unload his entire clip, all fifteen shells into the first silhouette. The bullets ripped into the target's mid-section one after another leaving a huge gaping hole where the silhouette's belt would have been. Larry turned back to Sam with a shit-eating grin.

Sam glanced down at the target. Smiled. Said, "You shoot alright. Not great, but alright."

"Gets the job done."

"Yeah, but all in the stomach. I don't know. Your boy down there might live. Which would be a real shame."

"With that many slugs in his gut? He wouldn't live for long."

"Long enough to shoot back."

"Is that right?"

"It's been known to happen."

Larry let out a small laugh. An uneasy one. He wasn't sure where Sam was going with this game. After a beat he handed the pistol to Sam.

"Here," he said, "I've warmed it up for you. Why don't you do me one better."

Sam took the gun from Larry, popped out the empty clip and picked up a full one from the table. But before he slipped it into the automatic he bounced it in his palm twice. Feeling the weight he said, "How many shells did you load this with?"

"Fifteen."

"Don't. Don't do that. Don't listen to Spence."

"What...?"

Sam peeled one shell from the clip and set it on the table. He then slid the clip into the base of the nine-millimeter.

"Fourteen. This is perhaps the finest overall handgun you're ever going to use. But it's delicate. The Czech manufacturer supplies the CZ-75 with an ammunition clip capable of accommodating fifteen rounds. Spence'll tell you to load it up, but under certain weather conditions the fifteenth round effectively over-compresses the clip-spring. When you go to chamber your first shell it'll pop up at a thirty-seven degree angle, leaving you jammed."

"Bullshit."

"Well, Larry, if it's raining when this thing goes down, don't look for me to toss you a fresh piece."

Larry looked back at his target, "Worked fine here."

"You've got climate control here. For all we know this job could be in Normandy or down by the Mediterranean. Even if it's not raining, we'd have increased humidity. I saw one of these jam up in Borneo. The man who was holding it isn't around to give you this advice. Trust me. Only stack fourteen... Now..."

Sam yanked the nine-millimeter's slide back and slammed a round into its chamber. He kept his eyes glued to Larry's as he pointed the pistol down range.

"Gun play is a peripheral thing," he said.

Sam squeezed off a round without seeming to look at the silhouette. It embedded directly between the eyes of the second target.

"Most people think it's point and shoot. Sight down the barrel. Pull the trigger. But you have to think of it in more of a three dimensional concept."

Sam blew three more shell down range, again keeping his eyes fixed on Larry. The right hand of the silhouette severed and dropped to the floor.

"Peripheral, Larry, peripheral. Visualize yourself standing off to the side and absorbing the entire picture."

Sam squeezed off two more. One piercing the target's heart, the other passing through the groin. He then trained the pistol on the third target and unloaded the remaining eight shells, splitting the human form straight down the middle.

Larry stared down range at the shredded targets for nearly a minute. Eventually he said, "Yeah, well, my way works too."

"My way is better."

Sam handed the pistol back to Larry and said, "Fourteen, Larry, always fourteen."

Vincent had slipped into the warehouse during Sam's little marksmanship demonstration and he was now crossing over to the range. He'd had a chat with Deirdre along the way. None of which had gone unnoticed by Sam's extended peripheral vision. Vincent held Gregor's wish-list in his hand and was all business as he approached.

"Let's go for a ride," he said.

"All three of us?" Sam asked.

"Just you and me."

Sam looked at Larry who only shrugged. Then said, "Where to?"

"To see a man about some things."

"Okay, I can do that."

Sam took the nine-millimeter from Larry.

"Mind if I borrow this?"

Larry smiled and picked up a fresh ammunition clip. He removed one round and handed it to Sam.

"Fourteen, Sam, always fourteen."

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## Chapter Six

Sam tucked Larry's nine millimeter into the breakaway holster under his left arm and followed Vincent out of the warehouse's rear door. The street behind the building was the antithesis of the one that faced the Eighteenth Century house. Where the front was charming, narrow and typically Parisian, with trees and a number of sidewalk cafés, this backside was wide and graffiti ridden concrete, brick and plaster. Architecturally - Decaying fifties modern. The Monparnasse train tracks could be seen glowering in the distance. It was impossible to conceive of a neighborhood deteriorating so quickly in the space of one city block. Garbage and trash littered the curbs and clung to the flattened tires of cars that hadn't been moved for months. Many had their windows shattered, with the back seats strewn with empty pizza boxes and KFC tubs. Empty nickel-bags picked up the blood red reflection of the setting sun while discarded condoms and heroin works floated in shallow puddles of urine.

Sam kicked the remains of a crack pipe off to one side and said, "Nice neighborhood, Vincent."

"It serves a purpose. When do you think was the last time a gendarme strolled down this street?"

"I see your point."



"The brown Fiat at the corner is ours. As long as one parks under the street lights, there is a good chance your tires will still be there in the morning."

The two men crossed to the opposite sidewalk and began walking toward the Fiat. When they were abreast of a burned out delivery van four young street thugs stepped out from the side door. In their early twenties or late teens, wearing black leather jackets and black jeans, they spread across the sidewalk, blocking any access to the Fiat.

"Are these boys friends of yours, Vincent?"

Vincent shook his head. As he did, one of the thugs stepped toward him. He was an inch or two taller than both Vincent and Sam. His hair was a reddish blonde greased back into a ponytail. He obviously considered himself the leader of this little group. He spoke to Vincent in French, ignoring Sam, and as he did, two of his partners grouped themselves behind him as back-up, while the third moved toward Sam.

"What's up?" Sam asked, thinking it didn't take a genius to surmise the situation.

"Pretty much what you'd expect."

"That's what I thought," Sam sighed.

"It seems we need permission to park here."

"Permission?"

"He says there is a charge for parking on their block."

"Their block? As in, they own it?"

"I believe that is his misconception, oui."

Mr. Pony Tail again spouted off another short French monologue in Vincent's direction. There was now an increased intensity in his expression and Sam could see he why he'd surfaced as the group's leader. There was a touch of killer in this kid.

"And I now gather this clown wants us to cough up a few francs if we intend to park our car here?"

Vincent stiffened some when Sam said this. "I didn't know that you spoke French?"

"I don't. But I think we're talking a universal language here. It's called asshole 101."

This brought a smile from the clown with the ponytail. Obviously 'asshole' was one of the few English words he'd learned. He turned his attention to Sam.

"That's right, asshole... Fracs, asshole, French francs."

"Well, what do you think, Vincent, you think we ought to *give* these youths something?"

"If you think so, monsieur... We don't seem to have much choice."

With lightning speed Vincent delivered a backhand blow across the face of the leader. His nose cracked sharply making a sound that resembled a small limb breaking from a sapling, and fresh blood streaked across the side of the burned out van. The thug fell a few steps backward where his pals attempted to keep him from falling to the sidewalk. He dropped anyway and brought his hands up to his bleeding nose. But he was a tough kid. The real damage had been done to his pride, not his nose. He was scrambling to his feet in a second.

While this was going on, the fourth kid had pulled a switchblade from his back pocket. He lunged at Sam with the knife. Sam sidestepped him and placed his palm on the kid's wrist and skillfully removed the knife as he passed. He then gave the wrist a quick twist, dislocating the thug's arm at the elbow and sending him ass over collarbone into the sidewalk.

Sam folded the knife and stuck it into his own pocket. He looked down at the kid and said, somewhat sarcastically, "Oh, man, dude, I am sorry about that." He then offered out his hand. "Here, let me help you back up."

The kid began to scramble backwards on the sidewalk, fear sweeping over his face. And as Sam extended his hand farther, he was jumped from behind by another thug.

"Christ, these guys are like flies."

Sam twisted sideways and backed full force into the side of the van, crushing the thug into the rusted metal. He then reached over his shoulder, grabbed a handful of hair, and flipped his attacker over and into the graffitied wall on the far side of the sidewalk.

By this time Mr. Pony Tail was back on his feet and charging Vincent. Sam reached under his jacket, removed the CZ-75 pistol and brought it up to meet the thug's freshly smashed nose.

"All right, all right, let's not everybody get all bruised up here, okay? We've all got better things to do with out time. Why don't you boys go home to your mothers and see what's on TV?"

None of them had the slightest idea what Sam had just said, but the nine-millimeter needed no translation into asshole 101. The four of them scattered in opposite directions. Vincent shouted something in French before they were out of earshot.

"What'd you say?" Sam asked.

"I asked if we could *give* him anything else."

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## Chapter Seven

After dusting off the grime left by the four thugs, Sam and Vincent slid into the Fiat's front seat. The car was about as nondescript as a frog in a swamp. There were probably twenty thousand exactly like all over Paris. As Vincent slipped the key into the ignition he glanced over at Sam and said, "Those were some interesting moves you put on our young friends back there... Judo?"

"Jujitsu," Sam said, trying to look back and recall exactly what *moves* he had put on the thugs. "And a little Chu Fen Do."

"They are all the same thing, aren't they?"

"Not at all. Similar, sure, but not the same."

"What's the difference?"

"One's considerably more painful than the other."

Vincent chuckled and pulled the Fiat onto Rue d'Alesia and headed north.

"Naturally the American has concentrated his talents on the more painful of the martial arts."

"There's a time and a place for everything. And my *talents*, as you call them, are assorted. Varied... If, say, you're being bothered by a drunk in a bar, there's no reason to hurt the schmo if all you're after is to get him to shut the hell up. On the other hand, if

someone comes at you with a switchblade, you'd like to impress upon him that it would not be in his best interests to try it a second time."

Vincent lit a Gauloise and began working the Fiat through a series of narrow streets and alleys. The further he traveled, the more animated the scene outside the car became. The avenues were now crowded with Parisians and tourists. Cafés lined the sidewalks, and Maître d's lurked in restaurant doorways beckoning passersby to enter and try their offerings. The smoke from Vincent's cigarette began to blend with the odor drifting from a Greek falafel joint. It was too much for Sam to take. He pointed to the Gauloise on the dashboard.

"Can I get one of those?"

"But of course... Help yourself."

He grabbed the package and tossed it to Sam. He recognized their little rumble with the street thugs as a bonding situation, but this sharing of cigarettes seemed to put the icing on the cake for Vincent.

"Since when do you start smoking," he said with a self-satisfied smile.

Sam struck a thin wooden match on the side of the box. The smell of sulfur exploded through the car, being a kind release in itself. Sam inhaled the Gauloise deeply and spoke through the smoke.

"I have, I don't know, maybe a cigarette a week."

"A cigarette? As in one? Who smokes like that?"

"I do."

"No Frenchman smokes like that. It would insult his sense of national pride."

"Well, I'm not French."

"This much is clear. Christ, I smoke a pack and a half a day... And not those American cigarettes that taste like bus fumes." He held up the Gauloise pack to emphasize

his point. "This is a real cigarette, my friend." Then almost to himself, "A pack and a half a day... I tell myself it could be worse."

Sam didn't respond, only sucked in more of the smoke. Vincent followed suit and continued, "It's just so damn pleasurable."

Sam began blowing smoke rings.

"It has its moments..."

They were now stopped at a red light. Sam eyed a puddle near the curb and casually flicked the remainder of his Gauloise into it.

"Of course," he said, "you eventually get cancer and die... That's one of the down sides."

"Oui... There is always that."

Vincent sighed and crushed his half smoked cigarette into the Fiat's overflowing ashtray, somewhat annoyed that Sam had ruined the moment for him. He jammed the car into first gear and moved onto the Pont Neuf. Notre Dame Cathedral passed to their right and the Seine passed below as they crossed the Île de la Cité and over to the Right Bank.

"So," Sam said, not enjoying being kept in the dark about this mysterious excursion, "care to be a little more specific as to where we're going? 'To see a man about a thing.' leaves a lot to the imagination."

"He is a Frenchman. He only speaks French. He has some information for sale. I handle my end of this operation. As Deirdre has mentioned, the less you know about my situation, the better off you will be. The better off I will be. But I will tell you this: The man we are meeting will coordinate a software pick-up for us. For Gregor's equipment. Apparently what he's asking for is only available to the French Military and NATO forces. Gregor's connections are strictly Eastern Bloc. It seems his software is not allowing him proper communication in France for some reason."

"So we're picking up a CD-ROM? That's it?"

"We're to be told where we can steal a CD-ROM."

"Fine. Sounds simple enough. But why bring me?"

"A man like the one we are meeting is not to me trusted. Simply put, you're along as a back-up."

"Right, I understand that, but what you're talking about calls for a warm body, and the bigger the body the better."

Vincent lit another cigarette before he answered. "You mean like Spence?"

"Exactly."

"Or perhaps Larry... In that case I wouldn't even have to drive my own car."

"Either one. They're both big boys."

"Let's just say I thought the conversational possibilities were limited with Spence or Larry. Of course I could have brought Gregor... But he's not the right candidate... Not for this."

"If you want to talk about people not to be trusted, Gregor's a good place to start. If you're alone with him, watch your back at all times. Friendly advice from your Uncle Sam; keep him in front of you at all times. He's an ex-spook. My guess would be Stasi, maybe KGB. And don't ever underestimate him. He's very, very smart."

"Along with the woman."

"Deirdre? No question about her smarts. And she's seriously goddamn dangerous, too. Watch her eyes sometime... She'll cut your throat and never think twice about it."

Vincent laughed. "I'll look for her eyes. Next time I see her. Right now I'm having trouble taking my own eyes off of her derriere. I wonder if she truly has left the IRA?"

"I wonder that myself. It must be the accent. Some moronic portion of my brain believes that if she were to leave the IRA, she'd somehow lose the accent at the same time."

"Where is the logic in that?"

"There is none. I said it was idiotic. At any rate... None of this answers my question; why bring me along tonight?"

Vincent pulled the Fiat off to the side of the street and rolled it up onto the sidewalk. Three of four pedestrians scurried to get out of his way, but no one seemed annoyed. Parisian drivers did this sort of thing all the time. Vincent turned the engine off, tossed his Gauloise into the curb and faced Sam.

"I brought you along tonight because I wanted to see who you were."

"Who I was?"

"This is a cutthroat group. You said so yourself. I'd like to live long enough to let these cigarettes kill me. You used an interesting term just after we crossed the Seine. You referred to yourself as Uncle Sam."

"Meaning what? It is my name."

"Meaning, I've only had a few hours to check up on my new partners. You were once a Ranger with the American Special Forces. You helped form the Delta Force. Deirdre's information indicates you were present on a number of the more, how should I say, shifty CIA operations. El Salvador, Cambodia, Laos and Angola to name a few. But you acted in a mercenary capacity. An interesting concept. Hiring yourself out to your own government."

Sam kept his mouth shut. Waiting to see where Vincent was heading.

"So... *Uncle Sam*, now you say you're out. Now you are like the rest of us. A hired gun."

"Not quite."

"Not quite? Then why are you here?"



"Money, sure. But I am out, Vincent. I've been out. Out of it all. I haven't done this kind of work in five years. I've been raising longhorn cattle in Montana. Retired. Living the good life. New name. New face. Hiding away. Just me and the Uni-bomber. Nobody in the world knows where I am. Then something like this comes along. Someone waving so much goddamn money in front of my face... I can't pass it up. I can't let it walk out the door. Somebody's paying through the nose for this. And I like it."

It was an explanation Vincent could easily understand, having made his own decision to give it all up as well. Then the call from the man in the wheelchair. The money had convinced him to take this one more job.

"Money," he mumbled, "ahh, Sam, whatever it is we are going to steal, it must be quite something. Someone is paying a veritable fortune."

"For the best money can buy, it would seem."

"It would seem it was..."

Vincent reached for a fresh cigarette and Sam finished his sentence.

"Priceless."

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## Chapter Eight

Sam and Vincent rode for the next five minutes in silence, each lost in their own thoughts. Vincent pondering what it was they were planning to steal, and where; Sam trying to figure out where the hell Vincent was taking him. Eventually Vincent eased the Fiat onto the wide Avenue Jean Jaurès. He picked up speed for a mile or so then turned right on Boulevard D'Indochine. After a few blocks he stopped opposite a small park beneath the Périphérique, a large freeway that was basically the Parisian version of a beltway. The park seemed an exquisite oasis despite the truck and car noise that filtered down from the Périphérique above. It was perfectly manicured and bursting with the vibrant colors of thousands of summer flowers.

"He's meeting us in the park," Vincent said as he reached up and switched off the dome light. "Let's go."

The two men stepped from the Fiat and crossed over to the small park.

"Quite a nice little spot, don't you think?"

Sam scanned the area. Not a soul in sight. "Jesus," he said, "You'd have to keep something like this under lock and key in New York. Put a twenty-four guard on it, and the scumbags would still find a way to fuck it all up."

Vincent led the way down a narrow gravel path. After a few twists and turns it opened up into a small clearing decorated with five benches. A small fountain trickled

water into a low basin, and three stone chess tables sat off to one side. Seated on the center bench was a man in his thirties. At first Sam assumed he was homeless. His clothing was torn and filthy, his face had a weeks worth of stubble, his hair was matted to his scalp and half of his teeth were missing. But as they approached, the man called out in French.

*"That's good right there, Vincent. No need to come any closer."*

Not seeming to understand, Sam continued to walk toward the man. Vincent grabbed his arm and held him back.

"This is our contact. He wants us to stop here." Vincent then turned his attention to the man and continued. In French.

*"I take it you are François?"*

The man only nodded.

*"Good. Do you have it?"*

François glared at Sam for a moment. He shook his head and said, *"Not so fast, I expected you to come alone. Who's that?"* Then pointed at Sam.

*"He's company."*

*"He's bad company."*

*"And what exactly does that mean, François?"*

François began shaking his pointed finger at Sam, shouting and ranting in a guttural French. *"He's a cop, Vincent. He's a Frenchman. He's undercover. I've seen him before. Shoot him. Kill him now, Vincent, I give you nothing if you don't kill this bastard first."*

Sam could see that François was working himself into a frenzied state. He shook his arm free from Vincent and took a few steps toward François while directing his questions toward Vincent. "What the fuck's going on here, Vincent? What's this scumbag's problem?"

"I just wanted to see something," Vincent said in an even tone.

Sam turned back to him making no attempt to hide his annoyance with the situation.

"What? See what? What the fuck did you want to see?"

Sam locked his eyes with Vincent's, but no answer came.

After a beat François said, in heavily accented English, "He wanted to see how it is you would react when I called you a cop."

Sam spun on François. "You told him I was a goddamn cop?"

"He asked me to say it."

"Vincent asked you? Wait a goddamn minute. What's with the fucking English?"

Sam turned back to Vincent while pointing at François. "You told me this shithead didn't speak any English."

"I must have been mistaken."

"And you told him to say I was a goddamn cop?"

"I needed to know."

"Yeah, well, you need to know a lot of shit, Vincent. You be careful who you fuck with."

*"Vincent, it's getting late,"* François called, switching back into French.

As he passed Sam, on his way over to François, Vincent said, "Time to do business."

François continued the conversation in French as Vincent approached. *"Are you ready?"*

Vincent patted a thick envelope resting in his inside breast pocket. *"I have the amount you requested right here. I'd like to verify the information before I release it though."*

He cracked a thin toothless smile and said, *"There is a slight problem."*

*"What's that?"*

François cocked his head slightly to the left. *"You see the large clump of Rhododendron over my left shoulder? If you look closely I'm sure you will see the reflection of a rifle scope. His name is Alain. He's an unbelievable marksman and his instructions are to place a bullet through your throat if you should utter one more word of English. Do you understand?"*

*"Oui."*

*"My problem is this; the information you would like, the information I possess, is too hot. If I turn it over to you... it will mean certain death for me... A price I am not willing to pay."*

Vincent pondered the situation for a second or two then said, *"However, I take it you still want this money?"*

*"Of course."*

Sam had been through enough of these 'cash for information swaps' with the Company to know they shouldn't take this long. Make the pass and move out. Don't take all day about it. Anyone could be watching. This exchange was taking Vincent far too long and it could only mean one thing: Something had gone wrong. François didn't look like a particularly difficult case to handle but his body language was sending off an entirely different message. He was too damn self-assured. Sam guessed there was a back-up somewhere in the bushes. He watched as Vincent used his left hand to remove a thick envelope from his inside coat pocket. And as he extended it to François, Sam saw him go for the pistol under his left arm with his free hand. They were now speaking a language Sam could understand.

He had his nine-millimeter out and squared off on François' shoulder in a millisecond. In all probability, Vincent had a bead on François' back-up and only needed a

clear shot. Sam squeezed off one round. It pounded into François' right shoulder driving him back four or five feet, opening Vincent up to the clump of rhododendron. The Frenchman crouched slightly and unloaded five rapid-fire rounds into the large bushes. His barrage was answered by three wild shots from what sounded like a .30-06 hunting rifle. After a second the rifle tumbled from the rhododendron, closely followed by its lifeless owner.

François had taken the time to reach behind his belt. He withdrew a Walther .22 automatic and brought it up to meet Vincent's face. Before he could disengage the safety, Sam dropped four more shells into his chest and another through the wrist holding the Walther, sending the pistol flying across the clearing.

Vincent bent down and grabbed the front of François' shirt with his left hand while he jamming his pistol into his lower jaw with his right.

*"Where's my information, you cockroach,"* he hissed.

François brought his hand up weakly, pointed to his head and gave Vincent a contemptuous smile. *"In here..."*

*"Then you had better find it in your heart to tell me, François, because while your death is inevitable... It still isn't decided how painful it's going to be."*

Vincent then pressed his knee into François' side, cracking his ribs and forcing the broken bones to grind into his bullet wounds.

Sam arrived on the scene in time to watch Vincent bend down and whisper something into François' ear in French. François whispered something back and Vincent sent one final round up through François' chin. It exited through the back of his head. Vincent dropped his lifeless body and retrieved the cash envelope and stood. Sam was rubbing his left ear.

"You've got to get a silencer for that thing. My ears are too sensitive for this shit."

Vincent stuffed the envelope back into his coat, said, "Oui, monsieur," and gave Sam a slight salute with his pistol.

"Right. Considering the amount of noise you clowns have just created, I would say now is a very good time to get the hell out of here."

Vincent agreed and the two men took off for the Fiat. Within a minute they were back on Avenue Jean Jaurès heading toward the center of Paris.

The entire scene had not gone unnoticed by Seamus Reilly. After Sam and Vincent had left the clearing, he slipped in by way of a shadowy side trail, quickly obtaining his own personal confirmation that the two Frenchmen were indeed dead. He then left as stealthily as he'd arrived.

In the Fiat, Sam was the first to break the silence.

"You know, what you pulled back there was an absolute bullshit move?"

"I needed to see if you were a cop... I have lived in Paris too long, Sam. I am a very popular man with the police here. In the old days, we all knew each other by first names. That's not to say they were particularly fond of me. They knew what I did, but they never could get any evidence. These new French policemen come in all shapes and sizes, German, Japanese, American, Irish... You name it. It's becoming a melting-pot like America. It's not the Paris of the old days. When the police make their move... Well, recently, they have always tried to do it with an inside man. Some guy on a job who seems more trustworthy than all the others put together. That was my read on you... Someone I could trust. And that's the guy you have to watch out for... I hate cops."

"Well, I'm no cop."

The next silence lasted for another fifteen blocks. Vincent broke it this time.

"How did you know?"

"Know what?"

"That there was a rifle pointed at me from the rhododendron?"

"Is that what it was? A rhododendron? Huh. Looked like a holly to me."

"No. Rhododendron."

"I saw you look off when François cocked his head left. I figured he wasn't pointing out a particularly rare shrub. I mean, hell, it's just a rhododendron, right? The rest was easy."

"But how did you know I would have the presence of mind to pull my weapon when I did."

"Because, monsieur, that's what I would have done."

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## Chapter Nine

It was another twenty minutes before Sam and Vincent arrived back at the townhouse on Rue de Gergovie. Vincent parked in front this time but still opted for a spot under a street lamp not wanting to take a chance on any retribution from the street thugs this late in the game. However, before Sam could step from the Fiat, the Frenchman stopped him.

"Sam, wait."

"What's up?"

"You saved my life back in that park. I know that, and I want you to know-"

"-Forget it."

Vincent reached into his jacket and withdrew the bulky envelope containing François' payment. He handed it to Sam.

"I know this doesn't begin to make it right between us... I owe you a-"

Sam held up his hand, effectively cutting Vincent off. He opened the envelope and fanned through the francs. Then removed the money and let out a small sigh.

"Jesus," he said, dividing the cash into two parts, and returning half to Vincent.

"What I did back there was because we're working together on this thing. I need you as much as you need me. Don't make it into anything other than what it is. It's business and

nothing more." He forced the money into Vincent's palm. "Take it. It's business. We're in this together... We split fifty-fifty. I watch your back... You watch mine."

Once more Sam attempted to leave the Fiat but was called back.

"Sam...?"

"Jesus. What is it, Vincent?"

"I owe you a very heavy debt."

"What are you...? A Hindu all of a sudden?"

"I owe you my life."

"Right. Whatever."

The two men stepped from the car and ambled up to the house. Before they could hit the buzzer, Deirdre opened the door to greet them.

"Well?" she said.

Vincent gave Sam an 'I'll handle this' look and said, "I think it is best we go inside."

She moved off to one side and they all walked into what was once a formal sitting room, but was now decorated more like a cheap hide-out from a forties B-movie. They sat around a small folding table on poorly padded aluminum chairs. Vincent lit a Gauloise, filling the air with thick smoke.

"Let's have it," Deirdre said, a little too pushy for Vincent's liking. She kept her eyes off of Sam for some reason.

Vincent blew a small plume of smoke in her direction. "There is a small spot in the back of my brain that strongly suspects you may have already received some the information you've been looking for."

"If I had, I wouldn't have wasted good time and good men sending you out, would I?"

Vincent smiled slyly. "Alright, we play the game..." He glanced at Sam. "We failed to get you your information."

"What do you mean failed? Failure is unacceptable, Vincent."

"What he's getting at, is this," Sam said, "it was a double-cross plain and simple. François had no information, or should I say, he was unwilling to give up any information, on where to requisition Gregor's request. It seemed he was only after the money. It was a set-up from the start. Whatever information you were looking for was buried in his pea brain, and there's no getting it out now unless you use a spoon."

"What do you mean?"

"He's dead. Him and some clown with a .30-06 and night scope hiding in the bushes. We had to remove them."

Deirdre appeared upset with this bit of bad news, but not as upset as Sam had expected. Her ire seemed a touch put-on. Still, she played it for what it was worth; raising her voice enough to be heard by Larry, Spence and Gregor down the hallway in the kitchen.

"This is unacceptable. Unacceptable. This jeopardizes the entire operation. You call yourselves professionals?"

Vincent stood and looked from Sam to Deirdre then back to Sam, his knowing smile never leaving his face. "It has been a long day and I am tired. I think I will go to bed." He placed his hand on Sam's shoulder. "I think the fox chases the fox tonight. I will see you all in the morning."

Vincent exited the room leaving Sam and Deirdre alone. Once again her deep blue eyes played a kind of dangerous sexual Ping-pong with his.

"What did you do with the money?" she asked.

Sam shrugged. "We kept it. Split it between us."

"Is that right?"

"That's right. Call it hazard pay."

"You two were supposed to go to a simple meet and come back with a simple piece of information, and instead you went to war over it."

"Taken."

"What?"

"Taken. We were taken to war. There's a difference. We didn't go to war, we were taken to war. And we weren't real thrilled about it either. Not after we figured out what was going down."

Again Deirdre worked her eyes on Sam's. Knowing they were alone in the room she allowed a small smile to cross her lips. "Well, my heart bleeds for you two poor sensitive misunderstood men."

"I thought it might... So... As Vincent said... The fox chases the fox tonight. I take it you now have a portion of the information you wanted?"

Her smile faded as she studied Sam for a minute. Finally she said, "Fuck you," and stormed out.

Deirdre marched down the hall and through the back kitchen where she passed Larry, Spence and Gregor.

Larry gave her a grin and said, "So, Deirdre, what's the deal?"

"The deal? The deal, Larry? I'll tell you what the bloody deal is. If we don't get Gregor the information he needs, the party's over and you go home with nothing in your pockets but your hands. That's the deal."

She continued on up the back stairs. After he heard her bedroom door close, Larry said, "Whoa, I'd hate to get out of the wrong side of her bed, Jesus." He then looked at Sam, who had followed her as far as the kitchen. "What'd you do to her?"

"Nothing... Yet. But she had an interesting suggestion."

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## Chapter Ten

At around eleven-thirty, after he'd polished off the better part of a loaf of French bread and a decent sized wedge of Brie cheese, Sam headed up to his room. He entered, but stopped short of turning on any lights. He moved over to the window and parted the lace curtains slightly. The same nondescript green Peugeot, that had been sitting there since he and Vincent had returned from the park, was still down the block, tucked away in the deep shadow of an elm tree. Same sandy haired guy in the front seat, still playing with his knife. Sam had a pretty good idea who he was, but saw no point in flushing him out. "Let him make the first move," was Sam's basic attitude.

He dropped the lace curtain to a closed position and hit the room lights. Then proceeded to re-arrange the furniture, pushing everything up against the wall and opening a wide workout space in the center. Sam stripped down to his shorts and slowly floated his way through a ten-minute Tai Chi drill. His movements were graceful and precise. Loosened up, he switched to Taekwando. And although his movements were now just as graceful and precise, the speed at which he performed his series of kicks and punches became blinding. His right foot seeming to lash out well before his left would touch the carpet. Sam then focused on the bedpost. It was nearly five feet tall. Placing an imaginary face at the top of the post he shot his feet out and over it. Right, left, left, right, with a speed that made him look like a constant blur of motion. Through the entire drill he

remained absolutely silent. No sound could be heard and his breathing was completely controlled.

After about the eight or ninth kick, there was a knock at Sam's door. He held his position, left leg extended well above his head, and listened as a key slipped into his door lock. After a second the door swung open, revealing Deirdre, wearing what looked like men's pajamas. But Sam recognized it as a Hapkido uniform.

She looked at Sam with his leg still extended and said, "I feel as if I've wandered onto the set of *Enter the Dragon*. I don't suppose you could teach me anything?"

"I didn't expect to see you again tonight. Where'd you get the key?"

"I have one for every room. That's what I get for paying the rent."

"Then I should consider myself blessed that you're using my key and not Larry's or Spence's?"

"We'll see how blessed you are... The fox chases the fox..." Deirdre closed the door and threw the bolt. "I'd like some answers on that score first."

"That was Vincent's phrase, not mine..."

"You repeated it."

"Okay... He was setting me up tonight. He had some hair-brained notion that I might be a French-speaking cop... He was proven wrong on both counts. At any rate, after it all went down, it didn't take a brain-trust to figure out that *you* wanted to find out if *he* was a French speaking cop. French speaking, yes... Cop, no. Vincent recognized you as a fox chasing another fox... I gather we passed your test."

"You gather correctly. But François did maintain he had access to the CD-ROM Gregor needs. Maybe he was lying... Maybe not. Whatever the case, I've had to make alternative plans."

Sam smiled. "Well, I'm glad you were able to do that. You were pretty pissed about the whole thing downstairs."

"I still am."

"Is that right? You don't look it. You look like you're ready for bed."

"Ohh, I'm still bloody pissed, alright... Why don't we see if you can teach me anything?"

Without warning Deirdre seemed to fly across the room, bombarding him with a flurry of Hapkido moves Sam had only seen once before on an operation deep in North Korea. The Koreans were lethal fighters and masters of silent death. Deirdre had studied them well. Her movements were controlled and surprisingly powerful, but Sam was able to parry each blow as she forced him across the room. The two maintained eye contact through the entire foray, making the exercise appear as sexual as any overly suggestive Tango. When she had Sam backed up against the far wall Deirdre squared off, took a beat, and sent a lightning quick kick into his rib-cage. He caught her foot with his right hand and spun her around, grabbing her waist and pulling her to him, so that her backside was pressed tightly into his groin.

"You don't need to baby me with Judo, chum. I'm not a drunk in a bar," she whispered in a low and sultry voice over her shoulder, "I can take anything you can dish out."

Deirdre then brought her elbows into Sam's ribs. Not a crunching blow, just enough to make him release her, and make him aware she could have done some real damage if she had chosen to. She crossed to the center of the room, turned and squared into a set position. Sam moved to within five feet. He placed the palms of his hands together and bowed slightly. After he straightened, he crouched into a classic Chu Fen Do attitude.

"Kumite?" Sam asked with a smile.



"Kumite."

"To the death? You're sure?"

"Something tells me we won't get that far, but I wouldn't enter into it any other way."

Deirdre eyes narrowed to a slit. Any playfulness had left her expression as she moved in on Sam. Clearly she did not intend to lose this sparring match. She let loose with another rapid-fire onslaught of kicks and jabs, but again Sam defended himself cleanly.

"The ego," he said, "lose the ego. It's yin and yang. Let the action dictate the reaction."

Sam now moved aggressively toward her, but she parried him with perfect precision.

"I guess I didn't have to tell you that, did I?"

Deirdre sent a sharp kick out to her left, then swept it back toward Sam's right side. And for the first time he broke eye contact with her. She used the seeming lack of concentration on his part to deliver her Coup-de-Gras. After planting her left foot firmly on the carpet, she sent her right straight up to meet Sam's lower jaw.

But he'd set her up. He brushed her ankle aside with his left wrist diverting the blow. He then slid his right foot out. The sweep knocked her left leg out from under her. But as she tumbled backward she hooked her own right ankle around his left, causing him to fall on top of her. They ended down on the carpet in the center of the room, in what could be best described as, the missionary position - both sweating and somewhat out of breath.

Sam smiled down at her. "You're good. Very good. I don't usually lose control of my breath like this."

Deirdre pushed her pelvis up and into Sam's extended groin, locking her eyes once more onto his. "You seem to have lost control of more than your breath. And I am good... You have yet to see exactly how good."

With that Deirdre brought her lips up to meet Sam's. The kiss was deep and nothing but raw passion. It lasted for over thirty seconds. Sam was the one to break it off.

"Part of me says I should just look at this as a perk. Something like a bonus. But then I remember that you're... Well, you're who you are. Someone who maintains they used to belong to the IRA. And it occurs to me that deceit and subterfuge come very naturally to you."

"Nobody's saying they don't."

"And when I consider all that, I have to wonder if you don't have some ulterior motive for walking into my room tonight."

"I probably do. But for the time being, I'm willing to forget about it."

"What if I'm not?"

"Well, then you'll have to live a little dangerously, Sam." Once again she ground her hips into his and planted a deep kiss on his lips.

Sam watched her eyes for what seemed like a long time. Eventually he said, "I certainly hope your key is the only one, because I'm ready for bed and I could do without any more interruptions."

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## Chapter Eleven

While Sam and Deirdre were getting to know each other somewhat better, physically that is, Spence and Gregor were taking the night air on the roof garden of the townhouse. The moon was nearly full, but the thick Parisian atmosphere allowed very few stars to appear in the sky. Nonetheless, the glow of the Eiffel Tower far off in the distance made this night in Paris just as romantic as any other. But romance was the farthest thing from the minds of Spence and Gregor. They had come to the roof for one reason - it was the only spot that could guarantee them a touch of privacy. What they had to say was their business and needed to be heard by no one else.

Gregor lit a thin Cuban cigar and sat on the low retaining wall. He glanced out at the Parisian night and let the rich smoke play with his tongue. "I would imagine that the great satisfaction in all of this will be in killing the American."

Spence's expression remained vapid as he said, "Which one?"

"I was thinking more of Sam... I wouldn't dare take the pleasure of killing Larry away from you."

"Understand me, Gregor... I take no pleasure, as you put it, in killing."

"Then I have misread you. I had no idea you were such a sensitive devil."

Spence smiled, coming as close to a laugh as he possibly ever had. "What I'm saying is the exact opposite. Killing doesn't bother me one bit. I have no reaction. None at all. So, you see, I don't get off on it."

"A means to an end, is that it?"

"That's it."

Gregor stood and tapped his cigar ash off and watched it float to the sidewalk below. "Do we need to go through this one more time?"

"I don't think so. Once we know the location of the Package, we can fine-tune our approach. How long will it take to find it?"

"I can't communicate with the NATO Satellite without the proper software. Deirdre maintains she has made alternate plans and will be getting me my CD-ROM tomorrow. Then... I guess we're set."

"There is one other thing..."

"What would that be?"

Spence swiftly wrapped his right arm around Gregor's neck from the rear. He then twisted Gregor's wrist up, wrenching it behind his back, and wrestled him down to the roof. And as his Cuban cigar drifted to the street below, Spence pinned Gregor's arm with his knee and pulled a Glock 19/19. He pressed the pistol to Gregor's temple and increased the tension on his throat, making it almost impossible for Gregor to speak.

"What?" he managed to strain out, "What are you doing?"

Spence pushed the Glock deeper into his face. "Don't cross me, Gregor."

"Nobody's going to do that."

"I don't trust you. Not for a minute."

Gregor twisted his head as best he could in an attempt to relieve some of the pressure on his throat.

"I need you, Spence. I can't do this alone. It requires us both. I can't do it without you."

Spence kept Gregor's face pressed into the rooftop for another thirty seconds. Finally he released his grip and stood, placing the pistol back in his belt. After Gregor got up, he gave him a long hard stare.

"I just wanted to make sure you knew who you were dealing with."

"I do... I do."

Gregor rubbed at his neck, working the circulation back to normal.

"Just remember it then."

Spence then turned and walked through the doorway that led down from the roof.

Gregor walked back over to the low wall still massaging his neck. He looked up and down the sidewalk until he spotted the dying ember of his cigar. Then mumbled, "That was a fifty franc, cigar, you putz."

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## Chapter Twelve

At about an hour before sunrise Deirdre decided it would be as good of a time as any to slip out of Sam's room. Only a hint of light, off to the east, marked the new dawn. Sam seemed still deep into dreamland, obviously exhausted from their heavy workout. She slid her legs out from the bed, sat on the edge and brushed her dark hair from her eyes with her long fingers. She then brought her hands down and ran them across her still taut breasts. A small sigh escaped from her lips as she started to stand, but Sam reached out a warm hand and gently persuaded her to remain seated. He moved up behind her and placed his lips to her ear.

"What? No goodbye?"

"I thought you were asleep."

He kissed the back of her shoulder and she arched up, tilting her head off to one side and exposing the length of her neck to him. He then reached around and cupped her breasts in his hands and worked his kisses up to her ear. A low sensual moan escaped from her mouth. But after a moment she straightened, pushed him softly back and turned to face him.

"We don't have the time."

"I was afraid you were going to say that."

"Sorry."

"Business, huh?"

"Look, Sam, I don't want you to take this the wrong way... But, what we did last night...? It's not going to happen again. It can't."

"Christ, I hope not... You almost took my friggin' head off."

"I'm not talking about the Hapkido and you know it."

"Damn... Then you must be talking about the fucking part, huh?"

She smiled and said, "Right."

"You don't have to explain yourself to me, Deirdre, you really don't"

"I know. And that in itself is part of it - the fact that I *don't* have to explain it to you. It's just that this was the first time... Last night was... It was the first..." Deirdre trailed off and looked up at the ceiling.

"Don't," he said, "I told you. I don't need any explanations."

She chuckled slightly. "That's the bloody thing; I want to. I want you to know me. I don't get it." She then took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "When I was an IRA Patriot... Jesus, *Patriot*... I'd almost forgotten the bloody word. Anyway, I was *The Girl*. It was a given that I'd sleep with any man it was deemed necessary for me to sleep with. You know... Anyone who needed setting up. It would depend on the situation of course. Sometimes we might be working on a blackmail scheme. Get pictures. Then squeeze the mark for information. Some of these Brits would surprise you. They could get kind of kinky."

"Same the world over."

"Sometimes I'd be setting these men up for killing... There were a few I killed myself."

"The function of a Patriot."

"To be sure... Anyway, the IRA isn't exactly an enlightened feminist organization. To most of the men I worked with I was always the *girl*. The bastards would say it to my face, as well. 'Send the *girl* to do it.' Cocking their thumb over their shoulders like I was part of the furniture or not even in the bloody room. 'Tell the *girl* to take care of it.' Stuff like that. 'Have the *girl* fuck him. Let him go out with a smile.'"

Sam took her hand and opened his mouth to speak.

She stopped him. "No. You don't need to say a thing. I could feel you next to me all night. I could feel a connection in our sleep. And I look at you now and I get this feeling you can understand what it is that's in my head. You take me for what I am... No more, no less. And I like you for that."

He smiled and kissed her lightly on the lips. "You're a hired gun, Deirdre... Just like me. There is no cause... We're just professionals."

"Exactly. And last night I wanted to be with someone who was just like me. Someone who might have a bit of understanding in his heart."

Sam watched as Deirdre moved off and began to slip her Hapkido outfit over her naked form. She did it with more grace than anyone he'd ever seen. When she was done she returned to the bed and they engaged in another long and deep kiss. The sound of a muted telephone could be heard droning from her room across the hallway. After a minute they broke the kiss. The phone continued to ring.

"I'd better be getting that," she said.

"Duty calls?"

She gave him another warm look.

"Just business, Sam. I'll see you down stairs."

She then turned and crossed the hall to her own room. When the ringing stopped, Sam slid out of bed and walked over to the window. He parted the lace curtains and looked



down the block to the green Peugeot. The sandy haired man in the front seat had placed his knife on the dashboard. His left arm was resting on the open window and his cell-phone was pressed to his ear.

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### Chapter Thirteen

By noon, tension in the warehouse had peaked once more. Gregor was becoming over-anxious about getting his hands on the NATO CD-ROM and the others were more than ready to get this show on the road. Vincent had been sent to "work out some details" and Larry was beginning to feel like the odd man out with regard to information shared. He'd been supplied with a new Volvo S70 GLT sedan with all the gumdrops and had spent the better part of the morning tweaking the engine for maximum horsepower. But eventually he'd become bored with that, and after running a few clips of ammunition through his nine millimeter he strolled over to Sam who was in the process of field stripping a Springfield SAR-8 automatic rifle.

"What's up," Larry asked as he approached.

Sam shrugged. "Not much. Just like you. Sitting on my ass and waiting."

"I think we need some answers. It's time. This bitch has put us off long enough."

"Well... Let's talk to her about that, shall we?" Sam said, easily sensing Larry's growing irritation with the situation, and knowing the big man didn't possess the tact to handle Deirdre. Sam guessed she wouldn't be at all receptive to the word, bitch.

The two men crossed the wide room and sat down at a round table next to her. Sam motioned for Gregor and Spence to join them.

"Well," she said looking from man to man, but avoiding Sam's gaze, "it seems my mates have something on their minds..."

Sam smiled at her but she resisted it, maintaining a cold and businesslike facade.

"Alright, I'll tell you what I can. Who's first?"

"Who are your principals?" Spence asked.

"That... I don't answer. It's information that doesn't concern any of you. It has no effect on the operation. We pick up the package. You're paid. You're done."

Larry groaned and rolled his eyes slightly, "Jesus... This is going to be an informative session... Alright, how about this one; what the hell are we after? I mean, how big is this damn thing?"

"It was originally being transported in an attaché case. That case has been exchanged for something different." Deirdre reached into a leather folder and removed a four by five photograph and passed it among the men. "This is the new case. It's fairly distinctive. The color is more of a beige. Lighter than it appears in that photo. This information was to be shared with you only at the time we made our move on the target. To prevent leaks I've held this photo back. I'm sure you all understand my desire for secrecy. I can't afford anyone, other than the people in this room, to know what that case looks like."

"Bolt-cutters."

Everyone looked to Sam after he'd said it.

Spence was the only one to open his mouth, saying, "What?"

"Bolt-cutters. There's a good chance whoever's holding, or transporting the Package will have it chained to his wrist. That is, of course, if it's in a case like Deirdre says. Unless one of you wants to hack the target's damn arm off with a sword, I suggest we secure some bolt-cutters before we move out."

Deirdre made a note on a small pad of paper.

"See," Sam said, "Larry was right, this is turning out to be a rather productive meeting after all." He leaned back in his chair and placed his hands behind his head. "Now... Since it's come up, why don't we talk about, where... In specific terms."

"We've gone over each of our three possibilities; urban, sub-urban, and rural. Everyone is familiar with their assignment, whatever the situation may be." She glanced to Gregor. "Explain it to them."

"The idea is to locate the target through the use of a satellite tracking network. Whenever he uses his cell-phone we should be able to determine his exact location. The problem has been this; I had planned to use a Soviet satellite to accomplish this. It would have been much more difficult for law enforcement agencies to keep tabs on us this way. They don't possess the access codes. Unfortunately the Soviet satellite is a piece of shit. It is down. Non-functioning. Broken. Made by the same people who made the damn MIR. We must now reprogram my computer to read a NATO or French satellite. We need new software. It can only be obtained from the French government or military. Vincent is working on it."

"So we wait," Sam said. "How do you know this Package is still in France?"

"We don't. With this delay... It may be anywhere."

"And if it has left the country?"

"It will be too late to retrieve it. We fold our tent... And no one gets paid."

"What's in the case?" Sam asked.

Deirdre let her eyes meet his for the first time since they sat down at the table, but she said nothing.

"Well?" Larry said.

"I don't know."

"You don't know?"

"No... It has its value. That's all that counts."

"Do you know who's holding it?" Spence asked.

"The name's not important." Deirdre removed another photograph from her folder and passed it around. "But that's a recent snapshot. Obviously he can easily shave off the beard or mustache, or both. He's a professional and he's dangerous. That's why you've been selected. You're probably the only ones who can handle him."

Sam smiled at the photograph, not at all surprised at the face he saw. "Oh, I'm sure we can handle this guy... Handling his army may be a different story."

"Army...?" Larry added uneasily.

"I'm just counting bodyguards in my head, and that figure we won't know until we cross his path, right?"

At that moment the door leading into the townhouse opened and Vincent stepped in. He was carrying a long cardboard box like the kind a dozen roses would come in. He walked over to the table and set the box down.

"Well?" Deirdre asked with a certain anxiety in her voice.

Vincent looked around the table without speaking. Eventually he returned to Deirdre.

"You can talk," she said. "They know what you were looking for."

"I have located the CD-ROM. But it can't be stolen this late in our strategy. We are going to have to purchase it from some inside people. Or at least people with connections on the inside. I've set up a meet for tonight at ten."

"No sooner?"

"They don't seem to trust me for some reason. They want to make the trade after it gets dark."

"So it looks like we wait," Sam said.

"Oui... We seem to have no choice."

Sam tapped his finger on the long cardboard box that Vincent had just set on the table.

"What have you got here, Vincent? More toys?"

Vincent opened the box and removed another container the size of a small milk carton. He slid it across the table to Gregor. "For you," he said.

Gregor opened the package and removed a strange looking electronic gizmo with a series of colored lights running along one side.

"I will test it this afternoon."

"What the hell is it?" Larry asked.

"With this we should be able to control any stop light we choose."

Larry laughed. "If we're chasing some bastard, what the hell makes you think he's going to stop at a damn street light?"

"He probably won't," Sam said. "But the car in front of him will. Which should do a nice job of blocking any intersection we choose."

Larry stopped his laugh short and said, "Right... I didn't think of that."

Vincent then removed four packages of firecrackers from his long box and tossed them to Gregor.

"What's this? Chinese New Year?" he asked.

"A little diversion," Sam said. "If you can hook those up to a wireless remote... We drop them into a nearby trashcan... It pulls focus. Can you do it?"

"I can do it."

"Good."

Sam turned back to Vincent.

"Thanks. What else you got there? Flowers for the lady?"

Vincent next lifted what looked like a huge pair of pliers from the box. He handed them to Sam and said, "I thought we may need some bolt-cutters."

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## Chapter Fourteen

Sam glanced at Vincent, who was now sitting next to him on the Volvo's rear seat, frozen like a piece of statuary, and said, "You're ready for this?"

"I'm ready."

"Good. Because I don't know shit about computers. If you screw it up, we're all screwed."

"Gregor explained it to me. It's simple. You put the CD-ROM on this tray," Vincent pointed to the side of the laptop computer he held in his hands, "and slide it in. Once you—"

"—Stop." Sam held up his hand to emphasize his point. "I don't know shit... I don't want to know shit. I touch a computer and it smashes."

"Crashes."

"Whatever."

Spence was sitting in the front seat with Larry who was driving. And as Larry eased the car out onto Boulevard Brune and headed west toward the Seine, he glanced back at Vincent in the rear-view mirror.

"I don't know why she wouldn't let Gregor come and check out this CD-ROM thing."

Vincent lifted the laptop once more and said, "Because she can afford to lose Gregor's back-up computer. She can afford to lose you. She can afford to lose Sam and



Spence. She can afford to lose me. She can't afford to lose Gregor. If she loses Gregor she loses it all."

"I don't trust Gregor," Larry said apprehensively, "I don't like leaving the bastard behind either. There's no telling what he's up to right now."

Sam shrugged, not really concerned about Gregor, "He should be checking out his stoplight gizmo. Everyone has their function, remember, Larry?"

Larry then turned his attention to Vincent. "How well do you know these people we're going to meet?"

"I've never had any dealings with them. I wouldn't know them by sight, but Gregor maintains the information they've faxed to him is genuine. As long as I can cue up the CD-ROM on this computer, it's a go. We make the swap and get out. I know what to look for. It's a simple password link-up."

"There's no reason to suspect any problems with this," Spence threw in. "You are all paranoid because of that business with François last night. We're most likely dealing with computer geeks trying to make a fast buck. What do they gain by not giving us the CD-ROM? It's useless to them."

"Spence is probably right," Sam said. "On the other hand, it's always best to be prepared. You never know... They're turning over highly classified government property... There's no telling what kind of conniptions they went through to get their hands on it in the first place. There's a chance they know nothing about computers, in which case they're going to be no different than anyone who deals in contraband material. They may be under the impression they can sell it to a higher bidder if they can stiff us."

"Which way? The river's coming up." Larry asked looking again at Vincent in the mirror.

"Go to your right just before the bridge and drive down onto the quai."

"Here?"

"Right. Yes. There."

Larry slowly rolled the Volvo down the ramp-way and onto the quai.

"Keep going," Vincent said, "Stop about a hundred feet before that next bridge and turn your lights off."

He did as he was told and the four men sat in silence for three or four minutes. Listening more than anything. The Seine reflecting the city's lights off to their left. Ahead of them sat the next bridge, Pont Mirabeau, and beyond that the brightly illuminated Eiffel Tower well off in the distance. The bridge itself arched over the quai, creating a darkened tunnel effect. The superstructure then stretched out, crossing the river Seine.

Larry said, "The whole thing's a waiting game, isn't it?" in a low whisper.

"What?"

"This. Everything. Your whole life. You just wait. You sit and wait. Then the shit hits the fan. And you die. And go to hell."

Sam and Vincent let out small chuckles. Spence remained stony faced. After a few seconds he said, "Are you going to hell, Larry?"

"We all are, pardner. It's just a matter of who gets there first and picks out a better room."

"There is no hell."

Vincent coughed and raised an eyebrow. "Does that make it easier for you to do what you do, Spence? Believing there is now hell? I, for one, am hoping you are right. Only time will tell."

"...How many lovers have you had? How many heads have you taken?"

Sam had said it quietly, but everyone heard it. They all turned to look at him.

Larry said, "Where the hell did that come from?"

"North Borneo. It's an old Dayak headhunter saying. Obviously the taking of lives and the seducing of women are not actions that condemn a person to eternal damnation in their society. i.e. there is no hell. Of course it kind of eliminates heaven at the same time."

"Yeah, but they're not Christians."

"That's a very good point, Larry. Not at all like you and me," Sam added with a touch of facetiousness.

A few seconds after that had soaked in, Spence said, "There they are."

A black Citro en rolled slowly out onto the quai from within the tunnel. The driver flashed his high-beams twice then turned them off.

"Larry," Vincent said, "return the signal, if you please."

"You got it."

The Citro en pulled within thirty feet and stopped. Sam, Vincent and Spence stepped out of the Volvo.

"Turn it around, Larry," Sam said in a low voice before closing his door, "We may want to leave in a hurry."

"Right."

Without turning to face Vincent, Spence said, "You have the computer?"

"I have it."

"The money?"

"I have that too."

"Good." Spence began to slowly walk toward the Citro en. "Follow my lead. I've done this sort of thing before. Make sure you back me up."

Vincent and Sam exchanged a quizzical look. Sam said, "Well, what do you know? A leader's born every day."

Vincent scanned the area. Looking up to the bridge then to the roadway above the quai. "Why don't you back him up? I'll hold back until he gets the particulars."

Sam stopped in his tracks, scrutinizing the situation. He then looked back at Vincent, eyeing him suspiciously.

Vincent smiled, "What would I have to gain from your death?"

"You'd have the money."

"I already have the money."

"Uh-huh."

"Go ahead, Sam, I'll watch things from back here for a while. We should remain spread out."

When Spence was within fifteen feet of the Citro en, two men stepped out. The bulges under their jacket clearly indicating they were armed - definitely not computer geeks as he'd predicted. Spence continued onto the car.

Sam held back.

Spence stood between the two men and looked from one to the other.

"Does either one of you speak English?"

"Oui."

"Good. Do you have what we came for?"

"Oui. It is what you requested."

The man who'd exited from the Citro en's passenger side reached under his jacket. Spence and Sam instinctively did the same thing and the two Frenchmen laughed as the one removed a plastic CD case from his inside pocket.

"V erifie? Check it if you please."

"I will. I'll do that."

Spence examined the CD case. From the exterior it appeared to be a music CD, a recording of Tammy Wynette's Greatest Hits. Without taking his eyes from the two men, he held the case in the air for Vincent and Sam to see.

Vincent nodded and walked toward the Citroén. As he passed Sam, he handed him the envelope containing the money and said, "Hang onto this. I'll give you a sign if the CD's good."

He continued on to the car and set the laptop on the Citroén's hood. After firing it up, he slid the CD-ROM into the side port and opened the file Gregor had specified. Vincent then took a sheet of paper from his breast pocket and began comparing the information with what appeared on the computer screen. It checked.

"C'est bon. It is what we're looking for."

"Le fric?" the man asked, recognizing Vincent as a fellow countryman.

"What?" Spence asked. "What's going on? Keep it in English."

"He wants his money."

Vincent turned and waived for Sam to approach.

"Non," the man said, "I will go to him. The CD will stay here." He looked at Spence. "You will come with me."

As the two headed toward Sam, the man said, "My boss has a machine in the car to verify the money."

"Verify?"

"To be sure it is not counterfeit."

"Fine. Whatever you want. We are here to do business. Where is your boss?"

"His car is in the tunnel."

When they reached Sam, Spence said, "Give me the money. This guy needs to show it to his boss."

"I need to take it to my boss," the Frenchman repeated. "He has a machine in his car. In the tunnel."

"Give it to me, Sam. Let's get this thing done."

Sam handed the money to Spence. The Frenchman shrugged and said, "Je suis désolé."

"Right. Me too, pal."

The three men walked toward the tunnel. When they reached the Citroén, Sam stopped.

"Wait," he said, "let this clown take the money to his boss. We'll wait out here."

Spence patted his coat pocket containing the money. "I'll take it in. I want to keep it in my sight until this thing is done. What if they exchange it for bad money? Then come back and say we cheated them?"

"You aren't going in there? Are you nuts?"

"I am... And you're coming with me, Sam."

"For what reason?"

"Back-up."

"Back-up? Are you crazy? You can't be serious about walking into that tunnel. What if it's a come-on? We're fish in a barrel. We're hamburger."

Sam looked up into the starry Parisian night and raised his hands.

"Why does he want to go in there? Somebody, anybody, please tell me that."

"You think too much. That is your big problem, Sam."

"Yeah? Tell me something nobody's ever told me before."

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## Chapter Fifteen

"Vite. Vite. My boss cannot wait here all night."

"Just hold on there, fella," Sam said to the Frenchman, "we're having a discussion here."

Spence sighed, "Let's do it. It is a simple exchange."

Sam attempted to fine-tune his night vision. He was starting to make out the form of a black car parked part way down the tunnel. A Mercedes three pointed star beginning to pick up thin rays of light and reflecting them in Sam's direction. However, it was impossible to tell how many men were with the car.

"What?" Vincent asked. "What is it, Sam?"

"I... I just don't like it. We've got everything right here. The money. The CD-ROM. Tell your boss to come to us if he wants his money."

Spence pulled the envelope from his pocket and tapped the Frenchman on the arm with it. "Let's go," he said. Then looked at Sam.

"You coming?"

"No fucking way... Look, Spence, give this clown the money and let's go. If they don't like it, it's their problem. Let them come after us. We're clean. Nobody's cheating nobody here."

Spence didn't turn, just continued on into the tunnel.

"Jesus," Sam groaned in exasperation.

Vincent handed the laptop to Sam and began to follow Spence. Sam called after him.

"What?"

Sam looked at the computer.

"What am I going to do with this thing? Vincent? Vincent? You don't want to go in there... Believe me... Shit."

"I'm getting paid to do this," Vincent called over his shoulder. "It's simple. I speak French, remember? I can clear all of this up very quickly."

"I'm surrounded by idiots here. Jesus. Vincent? Vincent? Hug the left wall. There's cover in the arches. I've got you on the right. If anything happens, get over to the Big Shot in the Benz. Use him for cover."

By this time Larry had come up behind Sam.

"What's up?" he said.

"Some friends of ours are trying to commit suicide." Sam handed the laptop to Larry. "Here. Put this in the Volvo and keep the engine running." He then looked at the Frenchman who had remained behind. "You speak English, pal?"

"Oui."

Sam pulled his nine-millimeter and pressed it to the man's nose.

"Good," he said. "Get down on your face and crawl under the car. Let me know if it's leaking any oil."

"But, monsieur, my suit?"

"You're right. Sorry, I'm not thinking. Take your jacket off first. While you're at it, give me the pop-gun you're hiding underneath it."



The man did as he was told. Sam tossed his gun into the Seine. He then walked halfway back to the Volvo with Larry and turned in an attempt to keep an eye on the larger picture.

As Vincent and Spence approached the Mercedes, two more men stepped out. One called to them in French.

*"Stop right there. My boss says to put the money down. On the ground."*

Spence asked what was going on. Vincent explained it to him as the man repeated himself.

*"Put the money down. On the ground. And back away."*

"Regardez," Vincent said, pointing to the far end of the tunnel. Two lovers were strolling down the quai, arm in arm and laughing. The four men stood motionless as the couple approached, their eyes darting quickly between one another and the couple. After a moment the couple stopped, sensing something was about to happen that they, most likely, wanted no part of.

Vincent took the cue. He started laughing uproariously and pointing toward the men at the Mercedes. *"That's a good one, Marcel,"* he said in French, *"When we get back to police headquarters, I'm going ask you to pass it on to the captain personally. You know he loves your sense of humor."*

The other men were a touch slow on the pick-up, but eventually they all started laughing, and the couple continued on with their evening stroll. When they were well clear of the area, the Boss-man stepped from the Mercedes. He was a short, round, bald man in his late fifties. Immaculately dressed and loaded down with gold jewelry and diamond rings. He repeated his bodyguard's request... But in virtually unaccented English.

*"Put the money down on the ground and back away from it. We won't say it again."*

Spence gave him one of his deadpan looks and said, "The money's good. It is the exact amount you requested. It's all here."

He then started toward the car. Vincent followed, keeping four or five paces back.

"Stop. Move no closer."

Coming up the Seine was a huge glass enclosed party barge. The music hardly audible at first, but growing louder and louder as it neared. People were dancing on the stern and the sound of their voices seemed reverberate throughout the tunnel, their laughter being twisted into grotesque howls as it ricocheted through the stone archways. Huge searchlights were pointed toward the riverbank, illuminating the sights along the shore as the boat worked its way up-stream toward the Eiffel tower. A tour guide barked into a loud speaker in Japanese, trying desperately to raise her volume above the party din.

Sam lowered his pistol to his side as the boat passed. The bright searchlights were now flooding the area under the bridge with light. He watched intently as Spence walked toward the fat man at the Mercedes. Vincent began looking around nervously, keeping a short distance from Spence, but constantly checking on the location of the party barge.

And as the light from the boat intensified, Sam spotted him. A man up in the grid-work of the bridge. Holding an assault rifle. Sam watched as the man dug the gun into his shoulder and took a bead on Spence.

Sam yelled, "Up top. Up top. Above you," and took off for the tunnel. The sniper managed to squeeze off five or six rounds before Sam dropped him. He fell like a sack of potatoes onto the hood of the Mercedes and bounced down to the quai.

Vincent and Spence had their weapons out and were returning fire from the three bodyguards. The driver of the Mercedes quickly flashed his high-beams onto the two of them.

"Shit," Spence growled, shielding his eyes from the intense light. "I can't see. Where are they? Vincent, Where are they?"

Vincent was in the same situation, completely blinded.

Sam leveled his nine-millimeter at the headlamps and blew both out with two quick shots. The boss had opened the rear door and was scrambling to get back into the Mercedes. Sam lowered his gun and dropped a shell into each of the man's ankles before he could drag his legs into the car.

By this time Spence had recovered his vision. He squared himself off against the car and began pumping round after round into the Mercedes' bulletproof windshield. After the seventh, the window sagged and fell onto the driver's lap. Spence gave the man a half smile and placed his eighth round directly between his eyes. He then walked around to the rear of the car and put another bullet in the Boss-man's brain. Vincent, in the meantime had taken down the three bodyguards. But another Mercedes was now racing down the quai toward them.

"Come on. Come on. Out of here," Sam yelled.

Half the people on the party boat had scrambled for cover. The other half stood by the railing, mesmerized by the scene. Three tourists had videotaped the action. The blue/green hue of the searchlights making the entire situation look more like a movie than anything.

Sam looked up to the bridge. Two police cars were now streaming across, their blue lights flashing, and distinctive French sirens wailing through the night air.

"Go. Go. Go. Go," Vincent screamed. "Move. We must go."

Larry had watched the entire thing go down. He banged the Volvo into reverse and pounded his heavy foot on the gas pedal. Gray/black smoke began pouring from his tires as

he raced back to meet Sam, Vincent and Spence. He stopped just short of smashing into the black Citroén. Before the three men jumped in, Sam looked at Spence.

"Can you make some noise? A diversion?" he said,

Spence reached into his coat pocket, retrieved a fragmentation grenade and pulled the pin.

"You want noise... You got noise."

He then let the spoon fly from the grenade and rolled it under the Citroén. The remaining bodyguard scrambled from beneath the car and dove into the Seine while Larry jammed the Volvo into first gear and flew back down the quai. Five seconds later the grenade lifted the Citroén a few feet off the ground. It exploded into a huge orange ball of fire and dropped back to the quai.

Police cars were now streaming over both bridges toward the flaming Citroén.

"Which way? Which way?" Larry called back to Vincent.

"Straight. Go straight. Don't go up. Stay down here. On the quai. Go under the bridge."

Larry pressed his foot down on the accelerator and Vincent continued with his directions.

"Sam, watch out the back. Larry, keep it straight. Under the Périphérique."

"What?"

"The highway. Straight under the highway. At the next bridge make a left back into the city. Don't go over the bridge... Sam?"

"No. No. We're fine. We're okay. The cops are heading for the Citroén."

When Larry arrived at the next bridge, Pont d'Issy, he didn't stop for the light, just hung a sharp left through traffic and took off down Rue Rouget de l'Isle at top speed.

Sam leaned up to the front seat and grabbed Larry's arm.

"Shit, slow it down, Larry. We're clean. We're free. Slow it the fuck down."

He then looked over at Spence. His skin had turned to an ashen color and his breathing seemed erratic.

"Spence...? You all right? You been hit?"

"Ah... I..."

Sam put his hand on Spence's shoulder. He seemed ice cold.

"You hit?"

"We... got the CD-ROM... We kept the money. Job well done."

Spence pulled the envelope from his pocket, tossed it onto the dashboard and dropped his head onto the seat.

Back to Larry, Sam said, "Find a side street. Pull over. I think Spence has been hit."

"No. No. I'm okay. I'm okay. But, yes, find a side street and pull over. I'm going to be sick... It happens every time I... I do it. I do someone. When it's over... I get sick."

Larry eased the Volvo down a narrow alley and pulled over to the curb. Spence stepped out, leaned his head against a brick building and proceeded to empty his stomach onto the sidewalk. As he did Larry looked back at Sam and said, "And he's trying to convince us there is no hell, huh?"

After Spence was done spilling his cookies, the four drove back to the townhouse in relative silence. Each thinking about what Larry had said as much as anything. They were greeted by Deirdre and Gregor at the front door.

"Have you got it?" was her short welcome.

Vincent handed the laptop to Gregor as Sam presented the CD case to Deirdre.

She looked down at it and said, "What the hell is this? Tammy Wynette?"

Sam smiled at her and shrugged.

"Stand by Your Man."

She ignored him and opened the case, inspecting the CD-ROM.

"Vincent, did you check this out?"

"Oui. As best as I could. It has everything Gregor said to look for."

She closed the case and handed it to Gregor who retreated to the warehouse and began installing the CD-ROM onto his computer. The others were right behind him. After five or six minutes Gregor said, "Got it."

"You're sure?" Deirdre said jumping up from her seat.

"We will run a small test. Vincent, pick up that Cell-phone and call someone, anyone."

Vincent did, and Gregor began scrolling gridded map sequences across his computer screen.

"Of course," Gregor said in an almost professorial tone, "this will be easy. We know where Vincent is. But to show you how it works... Here. This is a map of Europe. You see?" He pointed to the screen.

Deirdre watched intently. Sam rolled his eyes and Larry jerked his fist in the air a few times indicating he felt Gregor might be indulging himself in a little mental masturbation.

"Watch closely. You see, France is high-lighted." Gregor tapped on the computer's keyboard a few times. "Okay, we have the France grid now. We see the call is coming from Paris. I bring up the Paris grid. I zoom down to the cursor, and there we are. Rue du Gergovie. Number forty-six."

"Who is he calling?" Spence asked, getting into it more.

"The who, is the easy part."

Gregor typed a command onto the screen and a phone number printed into a box.

"There is the who." He typed in another command. "The telephone is listed under the name of Michelle Sorbier. It is not a cellular phone, it is stationary, so the address is printed here as well... Which takes some of the fun out of it. But, just to double-check our satellite..." Gregor fiddled with his toy some more. "Yes. Both addresses are the same. Fourteen Rue la Bruyère... Am I correct, Vincent?"

Vincent bid Michelle goodnight and switched off the cell-phone.

"Very good Gregor."

"So what now?" Larry asked. "We sit around and wait for the target to make a goddamn phone call?"

"We have his number... We call him."

Gregor scribbled a number on a piece of paper and handed it to Vincent. "Make believe you're the phone company checking the service range."

"It's almost midnight, Gregor," Deirdre interjected. "Nobody's phone company works that late."

"Really? They do in Russia. Constant interruptions, any time of day... What do you suggest?"

"How much time do you need to make an identification?"

"It's a pinpoint transmission. It depends where the phone is. If he's tucked away in a valley somewhere I may need a full minute to locate him. If he's on a boat in the ocean... Only a second. There would be no obstructions."

"Give me the phone," Sam said. He picked it up and turned it on. "You ready, Gregor?"

He nodded.

Sam dialed the number into the phone.

"This is a French number... You know if he's left France... This number goes nowhere. Nobody answers. It's dead meat."

Gregor nodded again.

Sam held up a finger as the phone was answered on the other end.

"Yeah, Harry, Jesus, those were some broads. Man, I'm telling ya, mine took me to town, I swear to Christ. How was yours? Or is she still there, you old coon-dog...? Wait... Hold on... What'd I do? Get the wrong fucking number here...? Hold on, pal. These French phones fuck me up every time. Let me read it back to you. Wait, hold on, let me ask you this..."

Sam ruffled some papers near the phone.

"Okay... First off; this one-two-seven shit? Is that a hotel? Because I thought I was callin' Harry in a hotel. Okay, so I'm right there, no hotel. Shit, I don't know where I fucked up. I am callin' Rouen, right...? No...? Shit, let me read this number back to you, okay...? No, wait, don't hang up, man, give me a chance to apologize, for Christ's sake. I mean, shit, what time is it, anyway... Must be damn near midnight..."

Sam jerked the phone from his ear and turned it off.

"Shit. He hung up. You get anything Gregor?"

"It's rural. No street numbers. But I have it. It is ten kilometers outside of Nice. On the Riviera."

Deirdre smiled for the first time since they'd returned.

"I suggest you all get some sleep. We have a bit of traveling to do tomorrow."

She then gathered up her leather case and headed through the doorway to the townhouse.



Sam ambled up to his room about ten minutes later. And as he slid his key into the lock, he could hear Deirdre's muffled voice seeping through her door. He took a step closer, barely making out the tail-end of her phone conversation.

"...I'll contact you from Nice tomorrow. Good night, Seamus."

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## Chapter Sixteen

For the amount of money being expended on this little expedition Sam had expected they'd be jetting down to Nice first-class, or at least chartering a chopper. No such luck. Too high profile for Deirdre. Clandestine IRA behavior seemed to die hard with her. Additionally, there was really no way she could've set up something like that so quickly. They'd drive it. Being a gentleman, he'd offered the front seat to Deirdre. But the concept of six hundred miles wedged into the back seat of Vincent's Fiat didn't appeal to Sam, so he alternated with Vincent on the driving duties.

Larry, on the other, hand had been pleased as punch with the idea of driving. His new turbo-charged Volvo sedan was performing to perfection. And he seemed to take enormous pleasure out of keeping Spence and Gregor on the edge of their seats by never letting the speedometer drop below a hundred and forty-five miles per hour for the entire trip. The effect was to put the three of them in Nice a good two hours earlier than the others. Which was fine. They had their work to do. Work that needed to be done before Deirdre arrived. Before leaving Paris she'd given them a long list of objectives, with specific orders. The most forceful order being, "Make sure it's right."

Their first stop was the Euro-Dollar rent-a-car counter on Rue Trachel just behind the Nice train station, where they picked up a nondescript brown van with black tinted windows. Gregor paid for it in cash, offering up a phony driver's license and passport as

identification. He drove the van, with Spence riding shotgun and Larry close behind in the Volvo, to a secluded wooded area just past the Nice airport on the way to Antibes. There they ditched the van's middle seat, removed Gregor's surveillance and computer gear from the Volvo's trunk, and fashioned a workstation for him in the rear of the van. They then drove back into Nice and cruised the entire length of the fashionable Promenade des Anglais. With trendy restaurants to their left and the narrow beach to their right they found themselves becoming anxious to be done with the job and joining the holiday throng. Beyond the beach, which was littered with hundreds of bare-breasted women, stretched the dazzlingly blue Bay of Angels, and beyond that, the endless Mediterranean.

Their rendezvous was a small outdoor restaurant, Café Jules, on a semi-private beach due east of Nice in Cap Ferrat. Deirdre's plan was to remain as inconspicuous as possible until the next morning when it would be time to make their move - at which point they would be anything but inconspicuous. Sam and Vincent seemed capable of blending in with a crowd just fine. The same could not be said for Larry, Spence and Gregor.

Larry parked the Volvo directly in front of Café Jules, stepped out, scanned the length of the beach and then brought his gaze back to the restaurant's patio. Even though it was the lunch hour there were very few customers; mostly older women, none of whom were wearing the tops to their two-piece suits. There seemed to be as many waiters as patrons. The waiters all were extremely well built, had deep tans, and also wore no shirts. Gregor parked the van directly behind the Volvo.

"Damn," Larry said, pointing down the beach at a woman wearing only the bottom half of a thong bathing suit and leisurely walking a toy poodle. "Would you look at the hooters on that broad. This beats the hell out of any Galveston beach."

Spence had stepped up next to him.

"Yes. You should feel right at home in Nice. It's where all the right-wing French crackpots and racists live. Wait until you see how they treat the Africans in Nice. Like dirt. That woman's dog has a better life than the Africans. At least no one spits on him. Le Pen. The National Front... All the assholes live in Nice."

"Fuck you blondie."

Spence gave Larry one of his empty stares and said, "If you fuck me..." He shrugged. "If you fuck me, Larry, you will never go back to sheep."

Gregor once again was forced to step between them.

"Enough."

And when he was certain he had their full attention he added, "Low profile. We must maintain a low profile. We've come to do a job, and too far for you two to screw everything up now."

The three entered the restaurant and selected a table well away from the other customers. By the time they were joined by Deirdre, Sam and Vincent, Larry was on his second meal.

"Hey, what happened, Vincent," he said through a mouthful of sponge-cake soaked in rum, "Fiat break down?"

"We took the scenic route."

"That right? Scenery's right out there, pardner." He pointed to the beach. "I don't mean to be crude, Deirdre, but this here's titty-city."

Deirdre had selected this beachfront and restaurant for its isolation and privacy. She had also looked forward to removing her blouse and warming in the Riviera sun. Larry's comment seemed to put a damper on that notion. She motioned for one of the waiters. He trotted over and they ordered a round of drinks. Everyone selected something nonalcoholic.

Time to concentrate, and a hard air of professionalism was now beginning to settle over the table. It was time to get down to business.

"Alright," Deirdre said after the waiter had dropped off the drinks, "let's run through this one more time, shall we? Gregor...? You first."

A steely look found its way to Gregor's eyes. He glanced around the table at the others, his natural paranoia making him resentful with this *you first* thing. "I'm all set. I've checked out my equipment. I'm ready. Everything we discussed this morning in Paris has been taken care of."

Deirdre matched his look one-on-one. "We go through it again step by step. Let me hear it."

He held her stare for a long beat, but ultimately acquiesced. It was her show... For now. "I've double checked the target's cell-phone number and we've secured his present location. Your research was correct. He is in Villa Berteaux. It's a fortress. There is no way to obtain the Package, unless he decides to move with it. Comes out in the open."

Gregor then opted to digress once more.

"Spence and I were talking it over again... We believe we should be apprised of who this target is. His name. His organization... If he has one. It is only right that we should know who... or what, we are up against."

"That information is on a need-to-know basis and you don't get it. No one does. He's a single. You've seen his photo. He's acting alone... That's all you need." She took a small pause. "And there's this; He may have more bodyguards than initially anticipated. He knows he's holding something very hot, he knows people are after it, and he knows he has to move it through a public place."

Deirdre scanned the table for any reaction from the others. No one moved. They were waiting on her, so she pressed on.

"Nothing you can't handle though." She then focused back on Gregor. "None of this is your concern. Your function is to keep the target pinpointed, maintain communication and work the stoplight. The others will worry about firepower."

"My work has been done. The van is set. My computer has made clear satellite contact. This close to the sea there are no physical obstructions. No mountains to worry about. No tall buildings. Wherever he travels, the satellite will be able to track him. Then the information will be relayed to my computer and analyzed. At which point I keep you apprised of his exact location. Is that what you want to hear?"

"Yes."

Deirdre gave him a cold stare to re-establish her position before moving on.

After she felt him back off, she said, "Have you found a location to work from? One you're comfortable with?"

"I will be parked on the Promenade des Anglais near the Rent-a-Car Système. They rent vans also and a number are usually parked on the street. Our van will not look out of place and I will be very close to the attack point."

"I know this isn't my concern," Vincent interjected, "But if the target fails to use his cell-phone from the car, when he moves, how do you maintain a read on him?"

Gregor glanced to Deirdre who gave him only the slightest head movement. It was enough to let him know how he should answer Vincent.

"Whenever he is in the car, he will be using the cell-phone. You are right... It is not your concern."

"Moving on," she said, "Larry? What have you found for us?"

"Well, since it took y'all a damn eternity to get down here, I've had plenty of time to get to know Nice. Nice town Nice. Your maps are dead on, Deirdre. I've color-coded the one-way streets to avoid any fuck-ups. The last thing we need to do is attract any traffic

cops. Last night was bad enough. I've also inked out the streets that seem prone to the kind of traffic that would screw things up for us. Meaning commercial stuff. We have to keep away from trucks. They'll afford the target too much cover. And in the long run, they'd cut out any precision on our part. Obviously the timing on this thing is critical."

"Where's the best attack point, then?"

Larry pulled his map out and spread it onto the table. He then placed one of his large fingers on the wide boulevard that stretched the length of Nice's fashionable downtown beach, the Promenade des Anglais. "Right here," he said, "where Rue du Congrès meets the boulevard."

Spence shook his head.

"You're nuts."

"Nope. Right in front of the fucking American Express office."

Larry flipped his map over to show a larger and less detailed map of the coastline. He traced his finger through Nice and continued.

"First of all, it's the only route the target can take in order to go from his little fortress on the hill to the airport."

Larry looked up from his map to Deirdre.

"You're sure that's where he's meeting his man?"

"It's solid. The charter flight gets in at eleven-thirty tomorrow. My sources have confirmed that."

"Well, then he's got to go through the city... And on the Promenade des Anglais he's going to feel the safest. His bodyguards will be the least prepared. All those tourists? All those quiet cafés? The topless babes? Who would make a move there?"

Larry glanced around the table to be sure they were with him before he moved on.

"Okay... I'm taking you guys on your word you're as good as you say you are. I've seen Sam in action, and I know he can shoot the balls off a tick at five hundred yards. Spence, I'm hoping you and Vincent are just as good."

"Didn't last night prove anything to you?" Vincent said in a rather nonplussed fashion.

"You're still breathing, pardner, that's all I know. I didn't see it go down. This thing tomorrow's gonna be calling for some very clean work."

"My work is clean," Spence added.

"Good. I'm glad to hear it. Okay... Tomorrow... These bodyguards are going to be ogling at all the tits and ass when they roll through town. I mean, who wouldn't, right? So, I'm hoping we can catch these bastards with their pants down."

Larry took a beat to review what he'd just said and laughed.

"Shit... Maybe literally. Anyway, my point is this, there's no way in hell these guys are as good as we are. They're pros, sure, but not in our league. They'll be checking their field of fire when the shit hits the fan. They'll be thinking twice before they risk wasting some Madonna look-a-like sipping espresso or some kid crossing the street with his Mickey Mouse Duck."

Spence, somewhat confused said, "Mickey Mouse Duck?"

"Hell, I don't know. A beach toy. Some kid with a blow-up beach toy."

"It has to be either a mouse or a duck. It can't be both at the same time."

"Fuck you, blondie."

"Knock it off." It was the first thing Sam had said since sitting at the table. Its intensity easily brought everyone's focus back to the work at hand.

Without looking at him, Deirdre said, "Thank you," and concentrated on Spence.



"Let's not worry about beach toys, okay? We go with Larry's attack point. He's right; the bodyguards will most likely be looking at all the women. I'm hoping you're all good enough to pull this off without killing any kids, but make no mistake about it, if kids get in the way... They're expendable. The mission is about the Package and nothing else.... Spence? You're set?"

"I ride with the fat-boy."

"Eat shit, bark at the moon, and die slowly," Larry said with a laugh. "When this is over? Don't ever be stupid enough show your sorry ass in Texas. You'll get to see your hell first hand."

Spence made like he hadn't heard Larry and kept his empty gaze on Deirdre as he spoke.

"After we freeze the target's car I get out with the heavy artillery. I remove the windows, take out the driver and any bodyguards."

"I'll have the lead car covered with the grenade launcher," Larry added.

"You better have it more than covered. You better evaporate it," Vincent interjected. "I don't want any surprises coming my way from that vehicle."

"Okay, I blast the fucking thing to oblivion, how's that?"

"Much better."

Vincent looked over to Deirdre who gave him a nod and asked, "You're clear on your assignment?"

"I'm not convinced this location Larry has selected is the best, but on the other hand I see no alternatives. I believe we can pull it off... So... While Larry and Spence handle the lead vehicles, the three of us, you, Sam and I, will take out any follow up cars."

"Very good... Spence?"

"After the area is secured, I step into the target's car, and get the Package."

"Right." Deirdre brought her frigid stare over to Sam. The instant their eyes locked, all coldness disappeared. The others didn't seem to notice it, but Sam could easily feel her warm up. "Sam..." she said.

"I'm here."

"You're Spence's back-up at this point. The Package is paramount. You're the man into that limo if somebody takes Spence down."

"Nobody's taking me anywhere."

"I'm glad to hear it, Spence." She looked to her left. "That puts the ball back in your court, Larry. You and Spence will split with the Package. This is going to create a lot of noise and the Gendarmes will be on your asses in no time. Use this evening to work out escape routes. Have a couple, just in case. Walk them if you need to. It won't hurt to have some contingency ideas. Sam, Vincent and I will hold back and clean up whatever's left to be cleaned up. Larry, I'd also like you to draw up a few potential routes for the Fiat. We won't have the Volvo's speed so get us some good one-way streets to slither through. We'll meet back at this rendezvous forty-five minutes after the Package is secured. Any questions?"

The men shook their heads.

"Good. Now all we have to do is live long enough to get bloody paid."

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## Chapter Seventeen

Deirdre had booked six rooms in the Negresco. The hotel sat directly on the Promenade des Anglais, only a few blocks west of the American Express office. Each room had a sweeping view of the beach and the Mediterranean beyond, and the hotel's proximity to the attack point afforded her crew an opportunity to get a good feel for the area. They had split up, each taking the late afternoon and evening to walk the route they'd be following the next day; giving full concentration to their individual assignments.

By nine PM, Sam had found a quiet café on the Promenade a few blocks east of the attack point. He sat at one of the open-air sidewalk tables, and ordered a glass of red wine from a white-aproned waiter. After about five minutes he looked up from the menu and spotted Deirdre strolling by, carrying a camera and looking more like a tourist than the tourists. He called out to her.

"Had any dinner yet?"

She stopped and turned in his direction. Like the others, she'd been checking out the attack point and Sam's voice had caught her completely off guard. Tourist or no, her steely blue eyes still possessed the cold concentration of a professional. She entered the restaurant and crossed to Sam's table. Her eyes warmed considerably as she approached.

"Dinner sounds fine. You don't think the others would become suspicious if they saw us together?" she asked.

Sam stood and pulled a chair out for her.

"I wouldn't worry about that. They have more important things on their minds."

Deirdre sat, the waiter came over, and she ordered some wine as well.

"Nervous?" he said. "...About tomorrow?"

"Nothing I haven't been through before."

"That right? With the boys from Belfast, no doubt? I'm not so sure tomorrow's going to be quite the same. This won't be like putting a bullet in the back of some poor Protestant bastard's brain after he'd had too much to drink in the local pub one night."

Deirdre stood to leave and Sam placed his hand on her arm.

"Sorry," he said, "That was a cheap shot."

She sat back down.

"You'll never find yourself back in my bed with talk like that. If you think Billy Wright and his beloved LVF are any more saintly than the IRA, you've got another think coming. He killed more Catholic boys... Hell, killed more Catholic women and children, than anyone in the country. It was a glorious day for all of Ireland when they put Billy Wright's skinny bones six feet under, I can tell you that."

Sam smiled and said, "The Patriot returns."

"You think because you've fought with a regular and uniformed army you're something special?"

"I'm only thinking about tomorrow. I've fought face to face. I've fought hand to hand. I've seen Spence and Vincent in action and I believe Larry can uphold his end of the bargain with no problems. That leaves only you and Gregor unproven. I'd like to know you have what it takes. The IRA's known for their little ambushes, but it's all hit and run. Tomorrow'll be all out war. Two armies squared off."

"And you're a warrior, isn't that right, Mister Ronin?"

"All I'm saying is; I've been there. If you have any apprehension... About what can happen when you have to look a man in the eye and take him out. Talk to me. You can't have any second thoughts, or you lose."

Deirdre seemed to look through Sam's eyes and into his brain, her gaze was that intense. But all she said was, "I'm set."

"Good. That's what I wanted to hear. I wanted to see it in your eyes. I have a feeling about tomorrow, and it's not a good one. The odds are too damn high to allow all of us to walk away in one piece... But if we have to lose anyone... Well, what I'm getting at here, is... I rather it wasn't you."

"Thanks."

"I mean it."

"I know you do."

They exchanged a warm smile. Sam faked an Irish accent and said, "So, Deirdre McLaughlin, how'd you get started in this business?"

"A wealthy scoundrel seduced and betrayed me. Hardly something I could let him get away with."

"Huh... Same with me."

"Is that a fact? Mine was an old English gentleman with white hair and a funny mustache... How about yours?"

"That's for me to know and you to find out. But I'll give you a hint... There's more than one of them and they live in Washington D.C."

Sam turned his attention to the street. His eyes squinted and he sat straight up in his chair.

"Well, well, well. Somebody's out for the evening."

Deirdre turned in her seat and let her gaze follow Sam's. Off to her left, just a short way down the Promenade, four medium sized Mercedes limousines were angling up to the Méridien Hotel.

"Ten'll get you twenty our boy's going to walk out of that hotel any minute now."

"Why would he be in town, and not out at Villa Berteaux?"

"Better food... Better women..." He looked Deirdre over seductively and added, "No matter how you slice it, he's probably here to get something to eat."

Sam threw some bills on the table and grabbed her arm.

"Come on, let's see how good these guys are."

He began to pull Deirdre down the sidewalk.

"Loosen up. Loosen up. You're my wife. This is a vacation. Put a smile on your face, will ya? We're having a good time remember?"

"What are you up to?"

"We're going to the Méridien. We're going to get some pictures of these guys. You got film in that thing?"

"Fresh roll."

"Good."

When they reached the hotel they turned and headed for the entrance. Once inside, Sam scanned the lobby.

"How's the light in here?"

"Fine," she said, "It's a very fast film."

"Good. No flashes."

Sam looked to his right just as the elevator doors began to open. Three men stepped out followed by the Target. As Sam had suspected, had actually hoped, it was Alex. The beige leather case was chained to his wrist with a pair of military style handcuffs.

Sam knew Alex would recognize him in a second, so he quickly turned his back on him and faced Deirdre.

"Is that him?" he whispered. "The guy at the elevator. It looks like he's shaved the beard and mustache but he's got the case. What do you think? Same guy?"

Deirdre looked past Sam to the elevator.

"It's him. For sure."

"Back up. Keep him behind me and start taking pictures. Don't let him get in front of me. Get shots of all of them."

She raised her voice a bit and brought the camera to her face.

"Oh, honey, this is great... Move over there by the palm tree... I want to get it in the shot as well."

Deirdre began running through her roll of film as Alex and his bodyguards worked their way across the lobby. Angling Sam around as they passed. Shooting over his shoulder. Getting close-ups of each of them.

"...That's it, dear... Mother's going to be so jealous when we get back to Belfast and show these snaps to her. I just know we should have brought her with us... I don't think she's ever seen a palm tree..."

Sam raised his hand and walked up to her. He leaned in and kissed her on the ear and said, "I'm going to tackle that porter with the luggage cart over there. Make a little distraction. A little noise. Watch them. Watch the bodyguards. See how they react."

He kissed her again and began to back-peddle toward the reception desk.

"Let's try one over here, dear."

Sam gathered speed as he crossed the lobby. And although the porter saw him coming there was no way for him to get out of the way. Sam stepped on the edge of the luggage cart and flailed his arms out. He then reached up and grabbed onto the clothing

rack and scooted the entire thing into a large glass standing lamp. When it all hit the marble floor the noise was deafening. Everyone in the lobby spun to see what had happened. Sam had effectively left himself spread-eagled on the floor, face down, and covered with three or four formidable suitcases.

Deirdre had taken the time to position herself in a large lounge chair facing the front entrance. She blocked her face with a copy of *Mirabella* and watched the situation develop over the top edge of the magazine.

When the glass lamp smashed into the marble floor, Alex turned back quickly. A startled look covering his face. Instinctively one of the bodyguards stepped in front of him, protecting the beige leather case as much as anything. The other two guards immediately drew their pistols. When they realized what had happened they returned the guns to their holsters as swiftly and as surreptitiously as they had drawn them. The move was noticed by no one except Deirdre. She also spotted four other men, who seemed to appear from nowhere. Their suits were similar to the other three bodyguards, and although they didn't pull any weapons, it was clear from the bulges in their jackets, they were armed to the teeth. These four hastily joined Alex and the other guards and the entire group disappeared through the hotel's exit.

After he was sure Alex had left, Sam stood and brushed himself off.

"Damn," he said, "sorry about that. I didn't even see you there, pal. Here, let me help you up."

Sam offered a hand to the porter and then walked over to Deirdre. He took her into the small bar off the lobby and asked the bartender for two glasses of Calvados. After they were served he looked at her.

"I counted seven."

"Me too."



"Well... They're good, no question about that. The one guy goes for the case... The others, protecting the Target. Nobody panics. Guns out, guns back. Very smooth. Yep, they're good, alright."

"So what did we learn? Nothing we didn't already know."

"...Plus they've got four drivers out there, and god knows how many guys back at the ranch... We should have two more men."

"We don't have two more men."

"So, call your handler."

"There is no handler."

Sam gave her a small chuckle. "What's the number? I'll call him."

"There is no handler. There's only me."

Sam let out a long sigh and looked to the ceiling.

"Look. Look. Listen to me. You want this thing? The case? We're going to need some help. We have twelve hours. The extra men can be locals. They don't need to know shit. Just someone to draw a little fire so all the heat isn't coming down on us. If we lose some locals, we lose them. It's no big deal."

"There is no more help. No one else comes in on this... Are you afraid? The warrior? Afraid?"

"Of course I'm afraid... You think I'm getting reluctant because I'm happy here?"

Deirdre finished her Calvados and stood.

"There are no more men."

"You're leaving? What about dinner?"

"Tomorrow. We'll save it for tomorrow."

"...And later on this evening...Huh? What about it?"

"Sam?"

"What?"

"Get some sleep."

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## Chapter Eighteen

At eight AM sharp, an acne-faced teenager plodded up to the "Monsieur Quickie" One-hour Photo Shop and unlocked the door. Deirdre was there to meet him. She dropped off her roll of film and stepped back onto the sidewalk and the glaringly bright Mediterranean sun, where she found Sam, leaning against a parking meter.

"I thought I might find you here," he said.

"Good morning. How was your night?"

"Now that you ask... Lonely. When are the pictures due?"

"Twenty-five minutes. We're his first order."

Sam pointed toward the wide four-lane expanse of Promenade des Anglais and the Rent-a-Car Système where Gregor's van was parked along side three other vans.

"The Alpha-Geek's in place. He thought he'd have trouble getting a parking spot. He's been there since five-thirty."

"I told him to get there that early. I don't want to take any chances. We're too close."

"You think we should take him some coffee and a croissant? You know he loves that computer stuff too much to let it out of his sight it for a second."

"Go ahead. I'm going to wait here for the snaps. I want everyone to know exactly what the target looks like without his beard and mustache. I want them to mark the

bodyguards as well. They'll shoot cleaner if they're familiar with the faces. When you see Gregor, get the communication devices so I don't have to go to him myself. The less people going back and forth to that van, the better."

"Fine."

Sam strolled over to a nearby pastry shop. He picked up two pan-au-chocolat and a container of black coffee, then ambled on to Gregor's van. Gregor was in the front seat, half dozing. Sam was forced to tap on the window to get his attention. After Gregor unlocked the passenger's side door and Sam slid in.

"Thought you might want something to eat."

"Thank you."

"So... You're all set?"

"Yes. Fortunately the Target has been on the telephone early today. He's been calling Bermuda." He pointed to the screen on his laptop. "It is noon there. He's been speaking with someone in the Princess Hotel."

"Yes, but what room number?"

The joke went over Gregor's head. "My feeling is, it must be a room high up. The signal is very clean. My guess would be, the Target is speaking with the person he expects to deal the Package to."

"Any chance we can listen in?"

"I need different equipment for that. Deirdre didn't feel it would be necessary." He finally smiled. "She is not happy with the amount of money I have cost her already."

"Look at the bright side, maybe you'll get to keep it?"

Gregor stiffened some. He diverted his eyes from Sam's and his voice seemed to crack.

"We will see. I haven't established what will happen when we meet back at the rendezvous point."

Sam watched him for a moment. Gregor seemed to be hiding something, but Sam couldn't put his finger on it. After a long silence, he said, "Did you set up the firecracker thing?"

"Er... Yes. I did."

Gregor stepped into the rear of the van and Sam followed. He handed Sam a package of firecrackers. Attached to it was a nine-volt battery and small radio receiver. He then handed Sam the controller. It was the size of a matchbox.

"It's very simple, actually. You slide that switch on the controller, the message is instantly received, and the battery connected. That heats this small coil, which in turn ignites the fuse."

"Looks good. What do you figure the delay is? After I push the slide, how long before I get my phony gunshots?"

"I ran a test on some fusing. It was consistently lighting up within four seconds."

"Great."

Sam placed the firecrackers in one pocket and the controller in another.

"Deirdre also wanted me to get the communicators from you."

Gregor opened up a small box and removed four devices that were no bigger than tiny hearing aids.

"These are for you, Spence, Vincent and Larry. You won't need to do any talking... Only listening. Deirdre's is more elaborate. I will be passing information to all of you, but she's giving the orders. This one is for her."

Gregor handed Sam another communicator. It was accompanied by a silver pen.

"She speaks into that pen. Be sure she takes this earpiece and not one of the others. It is designed to eliminate any feedback caused by the microphone." Gregor continued, "She knows how to use it. We've tested it together."

"At a distance?"

"Five miles is no problem."

At that moment Gregor's laptop computer began making a quiet beeping sound, similar to a pager, but not nearly as loud. He tapped on the return key three times and said, "Shit."

"What is it?" Sam asked as he moved behind Gregor, in order to watch the screen.

"He's moving."

"What?"

"He's left Villa Berteaux."

"Is he coming this way? What the hell's going on? That plane doesn't get in for three more hours."

Gregor continued to punch the keys of his computer.

"He's talking to the airport. Shit, Sam, I believe he is making his move. Do you think the plane is in early?"

"The plane doesn't make any goddamn difference. Either it's here or it isn't. If he's moving we've got to go for it. How long before he reaches the attack point?"

Gregor was zooming map grids around his computer too quickly for Sam to follow. After a few seconds he said, "This time of day, with so little traffic, he could easily be here in twenty minutes."

"Shit."

Sam wedged one on the communicators in his left ear.

"Talk to me, Gregor. Give me a test."

Gregor lifted his left hand and spoke into his watch.

"Test. Test. Ten. Nine. Eight-"

"-I've got you... Keep me posted on the Target's progress. I'm going to rally the troops."

Sam jumped out of the van and briskly walked a block and a half east, toward Vieux Nice. On the corner of Rue Halévy he found a metal newspaper vending machine. He pushed two five-franc coins into the slot, opened it, and placed the firecrackers beneath the stack of papers. He then swiftly retraced his steps. As he passed Gregor's van his earpiece jumped to life.

"Sam...? He's in La Turbie. He's coming in, I'm sure of it."

Sam moved into a light jog until he reached "Monsieur Quickie" One-hour Photo. Deirdre was still waiting outside.

"Here," he said as he handed her the ear-piece and silver pen, "Fuck the pictures, the Target's moving."

"What? What do you mean?"

"He's moving. He's coming in. It's show time."

"He's not due for three hours."

"Well, he's moving. We have to get the others. It's going down... Now."

Sam grabbed Deirdre's arm and they headed back toward the Hôtel Negresco. As they walked she slipped the communicator into her ear and brought the pen inconspicuously to within a few inches of her mouth.

"Gregor...? Gregor...? Do you read?"

"I am here."

"You're sure about this?"

"Yes, he's leaving La Turbie now. It is how you said it would be... He is constant contact with someone at the airport... He just happens to be three hours early."

"Shit."

Sam handed Deirdre two more earpieces.

"Relax," he said, "We have time. As long as we can get a hold of the others, we can pull this off. Nothing changes. Stay with the plan. No changes."

Deirdre took a deep breath and allowed it to slowly escape her lungs.

"You're right. We should have time."

"When we get to the hotel, we'll go to the house-phones. I'll locate Vincent. He and I will set up with the Fiat as planned. You find Spence and Larry. Get them wired up. Don't let them panic. We have enough time, here, we do. But emphasize... No changes. We can do it. It'll work. But no goddamn changes."

Larry wasn't hard to find. He was crossing the lobby, on his way to attack the buffet breakfast table when they walked in. Deirdre handed him an earpiece and quickly explained the situation to him while Sam headed for the house-phones.

Larry's no-sweat response to the change in timetable was, "Hell, you mean I'm going to have to do this thing on an empty stomach?"

"Where's Spence?" Deirdre asked.

"Damned if I know."

Sam returned from the bank of phones.

"I got Vincent. He was already on his way down. Spence didn't pick up on his line."

The two men focused on Deirdre. After a beat, Sam said, "It's your call, Deirdre. We either go without him... Or we don't go at all."

"I can't call it off. I can't. I've come too far. But if I have a mutiny on my hands... There's nothing I can do. If you want out... Go. I'll work something else."



She glanced from Larry to Sam. Both smiled and shrugged. They were with her. Vincent walked up a minute later.

"Where is Spence?"

"That, my friend, is the question of the hour." Sam said.

Larry followed it with, "A-W-O-L."

"...La guerre... Alors," Vincent looked at Deirdre, "I presume we go without him?"

"That's easy for you to say," Larry interjected, "He was supposed to be covering my ass, not yours."

"But you're still in?" Deirdre wanted to hear Larry say it aloud now.

"Hell, yeah, I'm in."

"Wait in the lobby. Maybe Spence will show," she added. "Gregor will tell you when the Target's vehicle is on Avenue Gallieni. At which point you'll have to move with the Volvo... With or without Spence."

Deirdre then lifted the silver pen to her mouth.

"Gregor?"

"I'm here."

"How much time do we have?"

"I can't say."

"How much, Gregor?"

"... Ten minutes... Maybe less."

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## Chapter Nineteen

Gregor lifted his watch up to his ruddy face and said, "Deirdre...?"

"Yes, Gregor, I'm here."

"The Target has reached Avenue Gallieni."

"Check... Larry that's your cue. Spence or no Spence, position the Volvo."

Larry had opted not to waste time while waiting for Spence to show up back at the hotel. He'd moved to the breakfast buffet and was eating pastries directly from a serving cart when Deirdre's call came in. He shook his head, "Damn," and walked into the lobby. He gave the room one last perusal for the Swede, and mumbled, "Fucking Spence, what a dumb shit." He then left the hotel.

Deirdre had found herself a table at an outdoor café sixty feet from the attack point. She'd ordered coffee and a croissant and appeared to be writing postcards with the silver pen. She watched as Larry, in the Volvo, and without Spence, headed east on Promenade des Anglais. Deirdre then directed her gaze in the opposite direction and picked up Sam and Vincent, in the Fiat, heading west on the Promenade. She brought the pen to her mouth and appeared lost in thought.

"Checking communications," she said, "Nod of you're getting me loud and clear."

As the Fiat and Volvo crisscrossed in front of her table, all three men looked at her and delivered an affirmative headshake. The Fiat continued west until it reached the public

showers where it made a u-turn and parked facing back toward the attack point. The Volvo duplicated the move, only in the opposite direction. Larry was now in front of the opera house facing the attack point from the east.

"The target has reached the bus station," Gregor announced.

Deirdre gave the street one final check and said, "We're set. Everyone's in position. We should have a visual on the target in less than a minute. When it goes down, keep your ears open. I will be watching your backs, so hear what I have to say. And remember about the fireworks. No one shows a weapon until they blow the news-box."

True to her prediction, within a minute the lead Mercedes limousine rounded the corner and headed west on Promenade des Anglais. It was followed closely by the Target's limo and two back-up cars. Larry eased the Volvo into traffic and remained ten or twelve car-lengths behind the convoy. Deirdre passed the information on.

"We have a visual, Vincent. Get your car in position."

As Vincent moved the Fiat from the curb, Sam smiled at him and said, "It's show time."

"Bon chance, mon ami."

"Et vous."

"So... You do speak French?"

"Wouldn't you like to know."

Vincent slowly maneuvered the Fiat east on the inside lane of the Promenade, and as he approached the American Express office, Deirdre came on the radio once more.

"Go, Gregor. Hit the stoplight."

The light immediately turned to red making the Fiat the first car at the crosswalk. Across the intersection, on the outside lane, sat an orange Renault. Behind it - four

Mercedes-Benz limousines. Larry had positioned the Volvo on the inside lane a few car-lengths behind, waiting to make his move.

Everyone sat quietly, waiting for the light to turn green.

Nothing.

Nothing happened.

Thirty seconds passed.

Nothing.

Another thirty seconds and the horn sounded on the Target car.

The driver of the orange Renault put his car into first gear and began to inch forward. Vincent lifted a gold French detective's badge from the Fiat's dashboard, flashed it at the driver and shook his head.

The Renault stopped.

Ten seconds later the Target car began to pull into the inside lane, in an attempt to pass the Renault. Larry gunned the Volvo and darted down the street, clipping the limousine's left front fender and pinning it in place. He then stepped from the car, threw his arms in the air and said, "What the hell's wrong with you, you stupid bastard?"

A bodyguard came out from the limousine's passenger side and gave Larry a headshake, indicating he should get back in his car and move on - if he knew what was good for him.

Vincent took the time to roll the Fiat through the red light. He and Sam then stepped from the car, Vincent holding the detective's badge high enough for all to see.

"C'est une problème?" he asked.

"Yeah," Larry said, "There's a problem alright. This stupid bastard pulled out in front of me."

"Ah... So you are and American?"

"Yeah... What of it?"

"Well, exchange your papers quickly and move on. Try not to hold up traffic."

"Right..." Larry reached into the Volvo and removed the keys, adding, "All that shit's in the trunk. I'll have to dig it out."

He walked around to the trunk and gave Sam a small nod. And as Sam pushed the switch on his remote, Larry counted silently to himself.

"One, two, three, four."

Larry then threw the trunk open. Down the street the firecrackers were just beginning to explode inside the newspaper vending box, sounding exactly like automatic weapons fire. The doors on all four limousines flew open. Larry reached into the Volvo's trunk and came up with a small grenade launcher. He aimed it at the lead car, pulled the trigger and dove behind the Volvo. Before anyone could get out of the lead limousine it detonated into a huge ball of orange/red flames.

Bodyguards were now streaming from the two follow-up cars, guns drawn. Several headed toward the newspaper box, but most began directing their weapons toward the Volvo. Sam and Vincent took up positions behind the Fiat and returned fire while Larry remained pinned down, waiting for an opening.

The bodyguard from the Target car wasted no time. He worked his way around the burnt-out hulk of the lead car and approached the Volvo from the other side. Within a matter of seconds he was behind Larry, his .32 automatic pressed to Larry's head.

He said, "This isn't your lucky day, is it, fat man?" as he increased his pressure on the trigger.

When the shot came, Larry was as surprised as anyone not to see his brains splattered across the asphalt. And as the bodyguard dropped dead along side the Volvo's rear tire, Larry heard Spence say, "What does he know about lucky days?"

"Welcome to the party, Spence, where the hell have you been?"

"I had some business to look into."

"Great..." Larry stood. "The timing's changed, but other than that, the plan's still the same." He moved to the Volvo's trunk, pulled out the Springfield SAR-8 and tossed it to Spence.

"Get to work."

Spence yanked the slide on the SAR-8, crossed around to the front of the Target's limo and began spraying the bulletproof windshield with .30 caliber bullets. After finishing a twenty-round magazine, he retreated to the Volvo's trunk for another.

Larry had joined Sam and Vincent as they battled with the bodyguards and drivers of the two follow-up cars. Clearly they'd underestimated the number of men they'd be facing... And how good they'd be. The bodyguards were working as a precision combat team. They were fully coordinated with radios of their own. And as they would finish with an ammunition clip, they took no time to re-load. They would simply toss the gun aside and produce another from under their suit jackets.

Realizing her men were in trouble, Deirdre left her spot at the café table. She pulled her two pistols and began approaching the scene from the rear, silver pen dangling from her mouth like a Clint Eastwood cigar. Her eyes appeared to be hardened blue crystals as she took out the two guards who had retreated to check on the noise from the news-box. She spoke into the pen while attacking the remaining guards from their blind side.

"I'm coming at them from my position. Watch for me. Keep your aiming clean."

Sam tapped Vincent on the arm. "I'm going for the case. Cover me."

Sam ducked behind the Fiat and emerged on the other side just as Alex was opening the rear door of the Target car, in an attempt to make a run for it. The case was cuffed to his left wrist. In his right hand he held a Beretta Tomcat. He raised the pistol to

Sam's face. Sam crouched and Alex sent a .32 caliber bullet over his left shoulder. Sam then placed a round through Alex's arm, dislodging the Beretta. He charged the limousine and Alex swung at him with the leather case. Sam ducked and shoved him back into the car.

Spence had finally smashed the limo's windshield with the SAR-8 and disposed of the driver.

Sam yelled out, "Get the bolt-cutters, Spence" and stepped into the rear seat with Alex. He pushed his pistol into Alex's heart and said, "End of the road, my friend."

"Sam... Ronin," Alex said with an uneasy smile, "They told me you were dead."

"Looks like they told you wrong."

Sweat began to form on Alex's brow and his speech started to fall into a halting pattern.

"We could... Probably... Cut a deal... On this."

He lifted the case slightly.

"I don't see where you're in much of a bargaining position here, Alex."

"No... I guess not. How about... For old times sake?"

Sam let out a small laugh and shook his head.

"Did you honestly think you could disappear Hunter Black, and never expect to see Sam Ronin show up on your doorstep? I would have found you, with or without this case."

"Well, like I said, they told me you were dead... You're still with the Company, then?"

"I work for myself, Alex... I always have. I always will."

From outside the car Sam heard the unmistakable sound of a round being chambered into a semi-automatic pistol. He pushed his own gun deeper into Alex's chest and turned to see Spence standing in the doorway, a Glock 32 dangling in his right hand.

Spence brought the weapon up. He leveled it toward Sam's face, said, "Time to turn this thing around," and pulled the trigger.

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## Chapter Twenty

The bullet from Spence's Glock 32 passed within a quarter of an inch of Sam's right ear, entering Alex's head just above his nose. It passed through his brain, exited the back of his skull and embedded itself deep into the Mercedes tan leather upholstery.

"There's still some mopping up to do out there," Spence said as he pushed past Sam with the bolt-cutters. "I'll handle the case. That was the plan, remember?"

"Right." Sam rubbed his left ear. "Get a silencer for that thing, will you?"

Sam stepped from the car in time to see Deirdre drop what appeared to be the last of the bodyguards. Vincent then raced to the Fiat, jumped in the driver's seat and moved the car another fifty feet down the Promenade des Anglais in preparation for their escape. Deirdre met him and slid into the back seat. Sam turned back to the limousine and watched Spence emerge with the beige case. He waived it triumphantly in the air.

"Got it."

Sam gave him a thumbs-up and took off for the Fiat, Larry close on his heels.

After they'd taken ten or fifteen steps, two quick shots rang out, followed by a third a split-second later. Sam spun around, trying desperately to piece together the picture that had unfolded in his wake. There seemed to be no sense to it.

Larry was down on his knees, his right pant leg already saturated with blood. Spence had only traveled eight feet from the limousine. He was now lying face down on

the asphalt, the back half of his head completely blown away. Standing above him, cradling the leather case in one hand and a still smoking pistol in the other, stood Gregor.

Sam ran back to help Larry to his feet and called out to Gregor, "What the hell happened? Why'd you leave the van?"

"The driver," Gregor yelled. "He was still alive. He pulled a gun. He got Spence."

It didn't make sense, but the sound of fast approaching police cars was now beginning to penetrate the air. And as they grew louder and louder, Sam motioned to Gregor.

"Alright, alright. Bring the case. Fuck the van. Leave it. We can all fit in the Fiat."

Sam draped Larry's arm over his shoulder and began to help him toward the Fiat. Vincent had thrown it into reverse and was heading back to meet them. But before they could reach each other, one last shot rang out. Sam and Larry turned back once more. Gregor was down. There was no sign of blood, but he was attempting to rise. A move that seemed tremendously difficult for him. Gregor held the case under his left arm like a football and stumbled back onto his feet. He then tossed the case to Sam.

"Go. Go. Get out of here... I'm not going to make it."

He then dropped down onto the pavement.

"Here," Sam said as he handed the case to Larry, and took a step toward Gregor. But he stopped. The police were almost on top of them. Sam turned back to Larry and said, "Let's get out of here."

Vincent had arrived with the Fiat. Sam helped Larry into the rear seat then circled around the car and jumped in the passenger's side.

"Move it, Vincent. We've got cops coming... And I know how much you hate cops."

Vincent slammed the Fiat into first gear and took off toward Vieux Nice. He shot down Quai des États Unis. The horrendous noise of the gun battle had completely cleared the area of pedestrians, which enabled him to outdistance the police easily, most of them stopping to survey the carnage they'd left behind at the American Express office. After he'd traveled six or seven blocks, Vincent brought the Fiat down to a normal speed.

"Have you got a smoke?" Sam asked after the car had slowed down.

Vincent smiled and shook a couple Gauloise from his pack.

"Help yourself... Light one for me while you are at it."

He then glanced over at Sam.

"Jesus, Sam, what the hell is that?"

"What?"

"That crap all over your shirt?"

Sam looked down at his chest. It was covered with splotches of flaking beige paint. He shook his shirt loose from his trousers and the paint chips drifted down to the floor-mats. He glanced at his hands. More beige paint was stuck to his palms. Sam began rubbing his hands together in an attempt to loosen the flakes.

"How's the leg, Larry?" he said without looking back.

"Fine. I'll live. The bullet passed straight through... Nothing a few stitches won't help."

"I can take care of that."

Sam turned to face him. Larry had set the case on the seat next to him and was applying pressure to his leg wound. His shirt and hands were covered with the same flecks of beige paint that had showed up on Sam's shirt. Sam then looked at the case. Black leather was now emerging through the beige where the paint had been rubbed off. Deirdre swiped her hand across the top of the case. More beige paint loosened.

"What the bloody hell?" she said.

"Pull over, Vincent," Sam ordered.

"What?"

"Pull the goddamn car over... Here... Now."

Vincent jerked the wheel to the right and pounced on the brakes. Sam leaned into the back seat. He grabbed the case and jumped from the car. He skipped over the low wall, darted across the narrow beach and tossed the case as far out into the sea as he could. Sam then scanned the beach. Not a soul in sight. He dropped his hands into his pockets and ambled back to the Fiat.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" Deirdre barked as he eased his way into the front seat.

Vincent sat with the Fiat at an idle. Both he and Larry seemed in a state of shock.

"One more time, Deirdre," Sam said, "What's in the case?"

"Are you crazy. It's sinking."

"That's exactly my point... What's in it?"

"I don't know, for Christ's sake. What point? What are you talking about? Have you lost your bloody mind?"

Sam turned in the seat and gave her a long hard stare. He then said, "Okay, maybe you don't know, but I'm banking whatever's in there... It's not heavy enough to take that case to the bottom. It's information, not product. Information is paper... And the case floats."

All four turned and watched as the case disappeared below the surface of the Mediterranean.

Sam shrugged, "It's not the right case... We've been double-crossed... Who's calling the shots on this gig, Deirdre?"

She sat tight, returning his intense stare.

"Listen," he said, "It's over. You're not in charge any more. We're all in this together, and the only way for us to salvage anything is to get the right case."

Vincent laughed and said, "The IRA."

"Is that right? Is that who set this thing up?" Sam added.

"Yes."

"I thought you said you were out?" Larry blurted in disbelief.

"Jesus, Larry, I lied. All right?"

"What's in the case?"

"I don't know," she screamed. "I swear to you, I don't know."

Larry then brought his attention to Sam.

"How do you know it was the wrong case? I mean, who's left to crossed us?"

"Gregor."

"What?"

"Gregor... He wasn't hit. There was no blood. He was playing possum."

"I don't get it."

"Alright. Why'd he leave the van...? He and Spence had this thing set together. It's the only answer. Look back at it... Larry, you and I are running to the Fiat. We have our backs to the limousine. Gregor leaves the van and swaps cases with Spence. Spence is supposed to take a few steps, get mysteriously hit and toss the phony case to us. But Gregor's greedy. What's he need Spence for? He doesn't. Not at this point. And why would he trust him? So he blows his brains out and takes his place. He hands us the painted case and disappears with the real one after we drive off."

"I don't get the paint," Deirdre said, starting to grasp pieces Sam's theory.

"None of us knew what the case looked like until you showed us the picture of it the night before we left Paris. The rest of us drove off to pick up the CD-ROM. It was Gregor's only time alone... Did you go with him to check out the stoplight thing-a-ma-jig?"

"... No."

"So, no one has any idea what he did two nights ago... But he has one problem... The case is distinctive. Who knows what its original purpose was. Gregor searches Paris, he can't find a beige one, but he finds a black one... He has to paint it."

"It's possible..."

"Deirdre, I'm right." Sam pointed out to the water. "That case was too heavy. Think back to last night. In the lobby of the Méridien. The case Alex was carrying weighed close to nothing, you could tell by the way he swung it in his arm."

She gave Sam one of her half smiles and said, "How did you know his name was Alex?"

"Cops," Vincent interjected, looking into the rear-view mirror.

"What?"

"Some police cars are coming this way. We should move. We shouldn't be parked here. They'll question us."

He eased the Fiat into first gear and slowly pulled out into the traffic lane, then headed off toward the old boat basin.

When the beige case was about ten inches from the sandy bottom of the Mediterranean Sea, Gregor's timer hit zero, igniting the eight sticks of dynamite and sending a huge water geyser thirty feet into the air.

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## Chapter Twenty-one

The olive-green Range-Rover Gregor had rented was still precisely where he'd left it the night before - across from the Anglican Church on Rue de la Buffa, only three short blocks from the attack point. He'd actually let Spence pick the thing out, in an attempt to ease the Swede's paranoia and fear of any potential double-cross. And it'd worked like a charm. Spence suspected nothing when Gregor stepped up behind him and dropped a bullet into his brain. But there had been a certain apprehension, on Gregor's part, about leaving the Range-Rover unattended all night. It was beautiful vehicle by Russian standards. One wouldn't dare leave something as magnificent as a Range-Rover on the streets of Moscow without paying an alley-snitch handsomely to keep an eye on it for you.

Gregor stroked the mammoth metal grillwork that adorned the front of the car as he passed. Clearly he would have no trouble from rhinos as he traveled through the south of France. He stood by the driver's side door and waited for three speeding police cars to fly pass before opening it. Once inside he slid the beige leather case under the passenger's seat and opened the moon-window above his head. The bright Mediterranean sun flooded in from the east, illuminating the dashboard. Gregor smiled and fondled the burlled walnut trim, and caressed the leather seat next to him. He then pulled Deirdre's cell-phone from his pocket and dialed a memorized number.

"I have it," he said after hearing the familiar voice on the other end. "Just like old times, isn't it Yiri?"

"Yes, Gregor... Different employers, but the same old game; goods for cash."

"Where do we meet?"

"You are early."

"Three hours early to be exact. I'm afraid a situation came up that was beyond my control."

Yiri paused for a moment, then said, "Arles. I will be in Arles in four hours. Can you make that?"

"I don't see why not. Where?"

"There is a café on Quai Max Dormay. It looks out over the Rhône. The café is called Le Méjan... It's quite... Charming. Why don't I meet you there?"

"Do you have the money?"

"But of course, Gregor, that was our deal."

"I will see you in four hours, then... And Yiri?"

"Yes?"

"Be sure that you are alone."

Yiri chuckled and said, "Without a doubt."

Gregor switched the cell-phone off and started the Range-Rover. Police cars were still streaming toward the Promenade des Anglais, lights flashing, sirens blaring. He wondered how far the Fiat would get before the dynamite detonated, and then wondered if Vincent would drive the others so far away that Gregor wouldn't be able to hear the blast. The thought discouraged him somewhat, but as he angled the Range-rover onto the Autoroute he heard a muffled explosion. He smiled and said, "So much for the competition."



Traffic on the A-8 was heavier than Gregor had hoped and the Range-Rover handled more like a truck than he'd anticipated. He found himself wishing Spence had selected something a little sportier. Something that was more fun to drive than this overblown tank that sucked up gas like a thirsty hippopotamus. Nonetheless, he pulled up in front of Le Méjan shortly before one PM.

Yiri was seated at a window table inside the restaurant. Gregor strolled up to the window and tapped on it, motioning for Yiri to join him in the Range-Rover. Yiri tossed a few bills onto the table, hefted a good-sized canvas bag over his shoulder and walked out to meet Gregor. He was tall and lean with shockingly red hair. And with his two thousand dollar Italian suit he looked more like a male model than a bagman for the Russian Mob.

He strolled over to the Range-Rover and offered Gregor a handshake.

"You're looking somewhat disheveled, Gregor. Capitalism must not agree with you."

Gregor only said, "Get in," and moved over to the driver's side. When they were both seated, he started the car and made an immediate u-turn, then a quick left, and another sharp left.

"You seem to know your way around Arles very well," Yiri said with another smile. "Where are we off to?"

"I have something I'd like to show you."

"I see... So, Gregor, who are you working for now that the government jobs have dried up? I hope you're not going hungry."

"I've become an independent... This way I know who I can trust."

Yiri laughed.

"You should consider working for Mikhi," he said, "Look at you... You're nervous. Sweaty. Your clothes are a mess. Nothing fits you properly. Mikhi has set everything up

very nicely. Plus... There is a certain safety that comes with working for the mob. As long as you keep your nose clean, you can live very well."

Gregor brought the Range-Rover to a stop in Boulevard Combes and pointed to the cemetery across the street and the century's old moss covered markers.

"This seems a good place to start, Yiri. Any funny business, and you will join those hapless ones under the stone crosses."

"Always a flair for the dramatic, eh?"

Gregor pulled his CZ-75; the silencer being almost as long as the gun itself. He pointed it at Yiri and motioned for him to raise his arms. Yiri did as he was told. Gregor then produced a small hand-held metal detector and ran it over Yiri from head to toe. When he reached Yiri's belt on the left side the detector began to energize, making a quick and steady beeping sound. Gregor reached over and removed a nine-millimeter Uzi Eagle.

"Still shopping with the Israelis, I see. And I was expecting this to be a social occasion."

Yiri watched as Gregor tossed his gun into the back seat of the Range-Rover.

"Good weapons are hard to come by. And... Life is... Uncertain."

"Indeed it is, Yiri, indeed it is."

"But we have so much history together, I was sure you wouldn't mind my desire to protect myself. Besides the world these days is so... so..."

"Unsafe?"

"Exactly."

"Let me show you how unsafe the world really is."

Gregor dropped the metal detector onto the floor and eased the Range-Rover into first gear, all the while keeping his pistol aimed at Yiri's chest. He drove down to the next intersection and made a right onto Boulevard des Lices. After a few hundred yards he

stopped in front of the Jardin d'Été. A small group of children were playing under the shade of an ancient oak tree. Another group had just purchased balloons from a vendor and were skipping down one of the manicured gravel paths.

"Lower your window, Yiri."

He did.

"Now," Gregor continued, "Do you see the young girl with the yellow balloon? Walking with the little boy?"

Yiri turned to look out of the window.

"Yes. Do you know them?"

"Not hardly."

Gregor raised the CZ-75 and pointed it directly at the girl. Yiri watched as Gregor increased his pressure on the trigger. A horrified look swept across Yiri's face. He quickly brought his hand up and knocked the automatic to the ceiling of the Range-Rover, but he was unable to prevent Gregor from squeezing off a round. The pistol made a sound similar to that of a Malay blowgun. Only a short shot of hot air could be heard. Yiri turned to watch the bullet explode through the orange balloon, making far more noise than the automatic pistol. The loud pop brought on a flood of tears from the little boy.

"Have you lost your mind," Yiri hissed at Gregor. "Why would you do something like that?"

"To make a point."

"What possible point?"

"I don't know that girl... But I was prepared to splatter her brains all over the pathway... Actually this pistol has accomplished that exact task once today already."

Yiri only stared at him in horror.

"Relax, Yiri, it wasn't a child, it was a man. And he deserved it. But my point is this; I don't particularly like you, so imagine what I'll do if you try anything funny. Now... Let's move on to business. Why don't you let me have a look at the money?"

Yiri slid his shoulder-bag onto the Range-Rover's center console.

"It's all there," he said, "Count it if you like."

It was an offer Gregor couldn't resist. He placed his pistol on his lap and yanked the zipper across the canvas bag. Inside there were bundles upon bundles of American hundred dollar bills. He let out an audible gasp as he ogled the money. Gregor then removed a felt-tipped pen from his pocket. It was designed to detect counterfeit money. He began selecting bundles at random and checking the bills to determine if they were genuine.

Yiri used his time wisely. He reached into his jacket and removed what appeared to be a small stylized key holder. He slipped a finger through the ring and aimed the device at Gregor.

"You know something, Gregor? I never like you either."

"What do you call that?" Gregor asked looking at the three-inch long gadget in Yiri's hand.

"For lack of a better word, I call it a gun. It's a wonderful little device actually. The Bulgarians make them. Hardened plastic. Plastic bullet as well. .32 caliber. It will pass through any metal detector in the world. You can pick them up on the street for twenty dollars American in Budapest. Only one shot... But at this distance, very effective."

"I should have made you strip."

"Now... Where do you have my package?"

"It's under your seat."

Without taking his eyes off Gregor, Yiri moved his foot toward the seat and began feeling around beneath it with his shoe. When he located the case he smiled. He then

reached down and grabbed the handle with his right hand, keeping his plastic gun in his left, and trained on Gregor's face.

As Yiri bent over, Gregor popped the clutch on the Range-Rover. Still in gear, it lurched forward with three or four hard jolts and stalled. It was enough of a distraction to enable Gregor to grab Yiri's wrist and pry the small gun away. Then, tired of playing games, he lifted the CZ-75, pointed it at Yiri's forehead and blew his brains halfway across the park. He then pulled all identification and paperwork out of Yiri's pockets, opened the passenger's side door and kicked his body out onto the gravel.

It took Gregor a moment to re-start the Range-Rover, but eventually he got the damn thing rolling. He angled north and crossed over the Rhône. After fifteen minutes he spotted a turn-off marked as a *scenic overlook*. He pulled in and began shuffling through the paperwork he'd taken from Yiri. On the back of a business card, originating from a Parisian ice-skating rink, he found what he was looking for. Mikhi's name and a cell-phone number. Gregor picked up his own phone and dialed. Mikhi answered on the first ring.

"Yiri? Is it done? Do we have the package?"

Gregor laughed sadistically into the phone.

"Yes, Mikhi, it's done."

There was a long silence. Gregor opted to be the one to end it.

"Are you still there, Mikhi?"

"Gregor...? Is that you?"

"Much to your disappointment, no doubt." Gregor flipped the business card through his fingers. "Still sleeping with the skinny ice-skater I see. I would have thought she would have bored with you by now."

"... Listen, Gregor, it was a mistake. It shouldn't have happened this way. It was Yiri's idea. I always maintained we should deal with you straight up. A bargain is a bargain. You must know that is how I work."

"If it happens again I will turn around and deal this package to its rightful owners. I still have my connections, and I'm sure they are willing to pay."

"Don't. Don't do that."

"Then don't force me to. Now... My price for the package has just gone up... Five hundred percent."

"Gregor... Gregor... I don't have that kind of money. That's more than we are going to pay everyone involved. It's more than the entire cost of the operation."

Gregor only laughed.

"All right. All right. I want that package... I need it. What do I have to do to get it?"

"Wait."

"How long?"

"I will call you. I am going to find a place where I can tilt the field in my favor. When I'm ready I'll call you."

"How long?"

"You're sounding like a broken record, Mikhi."

Gregor switched his phone off and tossed it into the Range-Rover.

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## Chapter Twenty-two

As she handed him his change, Vincent smiled at the elderly woman tucked behind her stainless steel counter and said, "Merci bien, madame." He then picked up his paper bag and strolled out of the apothecary on Rue Mari in Vieux Nice. He circled around the block and came up on the backside of the tiny Hôtel Meublé Genevois. He checked the narrow alley in both directions. Happy no one was looking, he leapt up onto the fire-escape and climbed to the third floor, where he ducked into an open window and was greeted by Sam, Deirdre and Larry.

"Did you get everything?" Sam asked.

"Oui."

Sam took the paper bag from him and removed a bottle of rubbing alcohol, surgical thread and needle, cotton swabs, and sterilized gauze dressings. He crossed to the small bed. Larry was still applying pressure to his leg wound.

"This won't hurt more than that razor nick." Sam said.

He then swabbed out the wound with an alcohol soaked gauze pad.

Larry winced in pain.

Sam smiled and said, "Sensitive bastard, aren't you? How're doing?"

"I'm fine."

"Yeah... Nothing not getting shot in the first place won't cure."

Sam threaded the surgical needle and glanced at Vincent.

"How's everything out on the street?"

"Hot. There's a lot of heat out there, Sam. The police are everywhere. They have picked up Gregor's van."

"What about the Volvo?" Larry asked as Sam worked the needle through the skin on his upper thigh. "Ahhhyeee... Shit."

"Three stitches. I'll make it quick. Grin and bear it. You're a big boy."

"The Volvo they have only moved off to the side of the street," Vincent said as he lit a cigarette. "It looks to me like they believe it belonged to a tourist who panicked. Possibly expecting him to return later."

"I could be a trap," Deirdre threw in.

"Trap or not, they will want to question whoever tries to pick it up."

They all froze as there was a light tapping on the door. And after a few seconds; the sound of someone sliding a key into the lock. Vincent stood quickly and braced his foot against the door, allowing it to open only a few inches.

"Oui?" he said.

It was the chambermaid. They spoke entirely in French.

"*Excuse me...*," she said, somewhat surprised to find someone behind the door.

"*They told me this room was unoccupied.*"

Vincent gave her a sly smile.

"*Well, you know... It was available.*"

"*But it is marked here.*" She pointed at her clipboard. "*No one has it booked until tomorrow.*"



*"Yes, I'm sure... You see I am in another room with my wife... and well, I met a woman... On the street..."* Vincent motioned behind the door to Deirdre. Being quick to pick up her cue, she and let out a girlish giggle.

*"Here,"* Vincent said handing the maid a twenty franc note, *"We will be out of here quickly."*

She took the money, said, *"Yes, I understand. I am sorry I bothered you,"* and pulled the door shut.

After he was sure she'd moved down the hall, Vincent said, "We have to get out of here."

Sam had just finished securing the bandage on Larry's leg.

"Vincent's right, we've gotta move. Stand up, Larry, give it a try."

Larry stood and winced with pain once more.

"Good as new," he said, "At least it's not my clutch leg. I'll have to start calling you Doc. Where'd you learn to do this shit?"

"OJT... Southeast Asia. It's more fun if you can clean the wound with leaches. But, hey, you use what you've got, right?"

Vincent repeated himself, "Sam, we have got to get out of here."

"I couldn't agree more.. But which way do we go...? Deirdre?"

"What?"

"Who's Gregor going to deal this Package to?"

She waited, but the three sets of eyes that were now digging into her, made it difficult to wait long.

"... The Russians."

"What Russians?"

"I don't know. Maybe the government... Maybe the mob."

Larry said, "Why not just deal it back to the IRA?"

"He knows we've blown our wad. We don't have access to the kind of money he's going to ask for."

"That means he's dealing with the mob," Sam said, "The Russian government has less money than the damn IRA... Alright, Deirdre, time to call your handler, and I mean it. We're going to need his help."

"He won't show until he knows we have the Package. That's the truth. He won't get dirty. That's how he is."

"Well, at least we're getting somewhere... She now admits she has a handler."

Deirdre dug her eyes into Sam and said, "Fuck you."

"We tried that, remember? It didn't get us anywhere."

The other two were having trouble figuring out what was going on between Deirdre and Sam. Vincent decided to get back to business.

"All right," he said, as he lit another cigarette, "How do we find Gregor? That's the issue here."

Sam gave Deirdre an indifferent look.

"How did you find him?"

"Same way I found you... The cripple."

"The man in the wheelchair fed you Gregor?" Sam seemed truly surprised by this bit of news.

"Yes."

"Well, if that's the case, forget him. He won't give anything up; no matter what he knows. I've worked with him for too long... He doesn't give up information easily."

"The cell-phone," Vincent smiled.

"What about it?"

"Think of Gregor. He's a former spook. He had nothing like that back in the old Eastern Bloc. He was in love with that thing. Didn't you watch him?"

"So?"

"So, he is not going to let it go. He's going to use it. He's not going to trade it for some piece of junk."

"You're right," Sam admitted, "We have to get the equipment."

"The police have it, Sam. They have the entire van. There's no way for us to get it back."

Sam sucked in a huge breath of air and let it out slowly. "Vincent?" he said.

"Yes?"

"Can I get a cigarette from you?"

"Oui."

"I have an idea. I'm not sure it will work... But it's worth a try."

"Does it involve getting the Volvo back?"

"Fraid not, Larry."

"Vincent, are we okay using the front door, here? I don't think Larry's can handle the fire-escape."

"Yes... But we should leave one at a time."

"Right."

Larry limped out first followed by Vincent. When they were gone Deirdre turned to Sam. A small sigh passed through her lips.

"I'm edgy, Okay?"

"Excuse me... Was that an apology?"

"Yes."

"I thought it might be... Don't worry about it."

"I'm not likely to... How did you know his name was Alex?"

"Jesus, you've got a memory like a friggin' elephant."

"Well?"

"The damn driver called him Alex."

She smiled at him and turned for the door. He said, "Meet me in the same café you were at this morning. In a half an hour."

"Right."

Sam left when Deirdre did, but he opted for the fire-escape. When he reached the alley, Vincent was waiting for him.

"Something you don't like about front doors?" he asked.

"I was hoping to keep an eye on her."

"I have already asked Larry to do that."

"You're a smart man, Vincent."

"That was a bad bit of business today."

"I was... It makes you wonder if the prize is worth the cost."

"A lot of people died, Sam."

"It's not the first time... I've seen a lot of people die before."

"I haven't... Not like today."

"I can't say they deserved it, Vincent, but... They *were* the bag guys."

"And we are the good guys...?"

Sam shrugged.

"How do you get used to it?"

"Is that a rhetorical question?"

"No."

"I was afraid it wasn't... What is it with you French people...?"

"So what's your answer?"

"I don't know... You just learn to live with it, that's all. You come up with bullshit ways to justify everything. Then go on with your life."

"I won't lie... There have been other times when I have had to do it, times when the only way to get out alive was to see that another man didn't."

"We live in a singular would, my friend."

"I never thought I was a part of the world you move is. I'm a hood... A thief... Big time in a small time kind of way. To the local police I'm a prize... To the local hoods I'm a legend. But to a man like you I'm just another two-bit hired gun."

"A hired gun maybe, Vincent, But not two-bit. What went down this morning wasn't easy for any of us. Don't let anyone tell you any different."

"Well, it will be a long time before I feel comfortable with any justification. For now, I'll spend my time trying to stay alive."

"Vincent, Vincent, Vincent... You know what your problem is?"

"What?"

"You read too much goddamn Camus."

Sam tapped him on the shoulder.

"Come on," he said, "I've got to see a man about a phone."

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### Chapter Twenty-three

Deirdre had selected a table near the rear of the café's outdoor patio. Police were still patrolling the Promenade des Anglais and there was no telling if they'd been supplied with descriptions of the four. Detectives had cleaned up the area fairly quickly. On the one hand, trying not to disturb the constant flow of tourists, and on the other, hoping to avoid any unflattering publicity. The last thing they needed was for prospective visitors to hear that someone had died in Nice - let alone fifteen in one four-minute period. The Volvo was still parked about twenty-five feet away, under the watchful eye of a plainclothes cop who sat on the low wall across the street, seeming to read a newspaper through and through.

When Sam approached Deirdre's table he was wearing a tan baseball cap embroidered with *Nice is Nice* in red stitching across the front.

"Good choice in tables," he said as he sat, "They're still looking, but not in full force. I guess they've figured we'd have to be pretty damn stupid to come back to this street any time soon."

"Well, let's hope we're not that stupid... Why are we here?"

"To find Gregor, of course... Let me have his cell-phone number."

Deirdre scratched the number on a paper napkin and handed it to him. Another one of her half smiles lingered on her face.

"You know... Larry's not much of a tail. A two hundred and seventy pound American limping along behind you isn't real hard to pick up."

Sam laughed, "That wasn't my idea. I had nothing to do with it. Vincent's a bit paranoid. And after Gregor's stunt this morning I can't blame him."

He scanned the street as if he were looking for something. He then added, "Order me an espresso. I'll be back."

Sam walked out of the café and headed west. He passed the Volvo doing his best to ignore it. He continued down the sidewalk, and after another hundred feet he noticed a man in a dark business suit unlocking his car. Sam jogged up to him.

"Excuse me... Excuse me, could you tell me where the post office is?"

The man turned to Sam and said, "Do I know you?"

"No... Not really... I don't think so. You shouldn't."

"Well, then how did you know I spoke English?"

"The Herald..."

"What?"

"The Herald Tribune... You're carrying an English language newspaper."

The man pulled the paper out from under his arm and looked it over. After a beat he began to laugh.

"I'm sorry," he said, "I beg your pardon. Of course... The paper. Now... What do you need the post office for? Because they use it for different things here. If all you want is stamps-"

"-I need your help, Lucas," Sam interrupted in a deadly serious tone. He took a step closer to emphasize the point.

The man tossed the newspaper into his car. He then removed his dark glasses, set them on the dashboard and gave Sam a long hard look. Finally he said, "I though you left?"

"I did leave."

"You did leave...? Past tense? Are you in? Are you out? Did you leave or not?"

Sam didn't answer quick enough for the Lucas' liking.

"You're out."

"I'm out... You're right. I'm out..."

Sam looked past the man to the Mediterranean.

"Can you help me?" he finally asked.

"I... Don't... Know."

"I need your help, Lucas. Timing is critical. My resources are dry."

"Are you in or out?"

"Oh, Christ, do we have to go into this now?"

"The Company likes guarantees."

"I'll make it up... In the end."

"The end may be too late."

"That's all I can offer. Take it or leave it."

"One more time... Are you in or out?"

Sam didn't answer and Lucas gave him a noncommittal cock of his head.

"What do you want? I don't know if I *can* help."

Sam handed him the napkin Deirdre had scratched the phone number on.

"I have a phone. I need to know where it is."

The man looked down at the paper.

"This is a cell-phone number. How do you know that it will stay where it is? How do you know it will stay in one place?"

"I'll have to take my chances."



Sam turned and walked back to the café. Ten minutes later Vincent joined Sam and Deirdre at the table.

"Well?" Sam said.

"He sat in the car for five minutes. Then he made a telephone call. We'll keep our fingers crossed."

"A friend of yours?" Deirdre wanted to know.

"Who? Lucas? Yeah... We went to high-school together... It's a small town, Nice."

The three remained at the table for another fifteen minutes. Eventually they ordered a second round of espresso.

"How long do we wait?" Vincent asked.

Sam shook his head from side to side and let small groan out of the corner of his mouth, but didn't answer.

Vincent smiled and added, "Everyone is your friend until the rent comes due."

"Pardon, monsieur?"

It was the waiter. He was speaking to Sam.

"Il y a un appel, puor vous."

Sam looked at Vincent for a translation.

"You have a phone call."

"Me...?"

"Oui, monsieur."

Sam walked over to the Maître d's station and picked up the phone. He returned two minutes later.

"Deirdre, where's Larry," he asked.

"He's on Rue Rossetti with the Fiat."

"Okay, let's go."

"Where is he?"

"Gregor?"

"Yes."

"He's in Arles."

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## Chapter Twenty-four

Julius Caesar himself had given the tiny hamlet of Arles his stamp of approval around 49-BC after having obliterated Marseille for making the colossal mistake of throwing its support to Pompey. The result being that Arles flourished as one of Europe's prime links to the ancient Mediterranean shipping. So much so, that by the First Century, there was a need for Les Arènes.

Les Arènes was an amphitheater situated a few hundred meters from the banks of the river Rhône. It could easily accommodate twenty-five thousand bloodthirsty fans in the Roman times. The good people coming to see everything from chariot races, to gladiator bouts to the death, to wild animal brawls, to executions. Over the years the place fell into a certain amount of disrepair, having been used as a fort, and later a rather unusual housing complex at the turn of the Twentieth Century.

But these days, after being restored to close to its former glory, Les Arènes tended to cater to musical concerts, opera, rock and classical, and the occasional bullfight. Seating had also been reduced to twelve thousand. And if no concerts had been scheduled on a particular day, the only visitors would come from the sporadic tour bus. This is why Gregor believed it to be the perfect spot to exchange goods for cash.

Mikhi was sending two goons down from Paris, with the money, via helicopter. At least that was what he'd told Gregor. Gregor wasn't stupid enough to believe about the cash, but he did think the goons would at least arrive with a portion of the money.

Which, at this point, was all right with Gregor. He tired of the game. He'd decided that whatever they showed up with, he would take. He'd already secured plenty from Deirdre, as well as Yiri, and almost anything Mikhi offered would just be icing on the cake at this point. He'd take it, tell the goons how to retrieve the case, and disappear into the woodwork. Be done with the entire mess. Retire to south Jersey with the rest of his clan.

After surveying Les Arènes one last time, Gregor strolled down Rue Voltaire and found a chair in an outdoor café called Chez Pépin. The seating area was deeply shaded by a dozen leafy trees, and he selected a table far away from the narrow street. The late afternoon sun was lowering in the sky across the Rhône to the west, which served to make Gregor virtually unnoticeable from the sidewalk. He ordered a café au lait, and a hard roll and scribbled a few words on a small piece of paper. About ten minutes later two large men in poorly fitting suits wandered down Rue Voltaire from the north. They stopped in front of a shoe repair shop across from Chez Pépin. They appeared to be lost.

Three tables away from Gregor sat a couple in their middle to late teens. Their hair had been died to a jet-black. Their skin was pale white. They both sported black/brown lipstick and heavy eye make-up. They wore torn black mesh clothing. Tattoos covered the boy's arms and the girl had a spiked collar tattooed around her neck. They were just paying their check when Gregor approached them.

"Excuse me," he said, "do you speak English?"

"Yes," the boy answered.

"On your way out, I was wondering if you could do me a small favor?"

"What?"

Gregor pointed to the two men on the street.

"The man in the brown suit by the shoe shop is my brother and I'm trying to surprise him... It's his birthday. Could you hand him this note for me?"

The kid took the note and looked at it.

"It's in Russian."

"That's because we are Russians, my brother and I."

"Yeah... Right... Makes sense... What's it worth to you?"

Gregor picked up their lunch check and said, "This will be on me."

"Great... Consider it a done deal."

"Oh... Please don't tell him I'm in the café here. It would ruin the surprise."

"No problem."

The two teenagers picked up their leather bags and worked their way through the small café tables to the street. Gregor watched as they crossed over to the two men and handed the note to the man in the brown suit. He appeared to ask the boy a few questions but the kid only gave him an "I don't know" kind of shrug and walked off toward the amphitheater. Gregor then picked up the cell-phone and dialed a number. A few seconds later the pay-phone to the left of the shoe shop began to ring. The man in the brown suit stepped over and answered it.

"Da."

"I suggest you speak in either French or English if you care to blend in with the locals a little better."

"I don't speak French."

"Well, that narrows your choices somewhat, doesn't it?"

"Is this Gregor."

"Indeed. Now... let's not waste time. I want you to go Les Arènes... The amphitheater, and purchase yourselves two tickets for the six PM tour. You won't be allowed in without a ticket. Don't try anything stupid or they will be sure to call the guards. After you enter the amphitheater you will fall back from the group. Circle around and up to the next level. Find section 'C'. It will be on the left side of the stage. It is well marked. I will locate you. Is that all clear?"

"Da."

Gregor switched off his phone and waited for the two men to walk toward the amphitheater. He paid the teenager's check and his own and left Chez Pépin by way of a small alley in the back. Gregor then circled around and purchased a ticket for the five-thirty tour and entered Les Arènes with a large group of American tourists.

Once inside he dropped back from the group and scurried up to section 'C'. This upper level was a maze of narrow tunnels, all interconnected. Many of the tunnels opened into the arena's seating area, and the blinding contrast of the setting sun as it shone back through the depths of the darkened walkways stung Gregor's eyes. But no matter; he would use this feature to his advantage.

Gregor set himself in one of section 'C's' entry tunnels and waited for his guests. They arrived a half an hour later almost to the minute. But there were now three goons, not two.

Gregor studied the third man as they walked into view.

"Sergi?" he asked, "Is that you?"

The men turned and looked toward Gregor. The setting sun illuminating them as if they were on the stage. Gregor clung to the wall, a barely visible silhouette, but it was clear he held his silenced pistol in his right hand. The men brought their arms up to their faces in an attempt to shield their eyes from the stinging sun.

"Yes, Gregor. It is me, Sergi."

"Does no one work for the KGB anymore? I fear they are becoming understaffed."

Sergi chuckled. "One must go where the money is. We are now Venture-Capitalist, are we not?"

"Well, I'm touched, I really am. To think that Mikhi would send someone of your stature. It is somewhat refreshing to know that he didn't dare to make the mistake of underestimating me a second time."

"Yes... That was a mistake... Sending Yiri. Mikhi did it without consulting me."

"Ahh... He's turned rogue and can't be controlled. Is that the thing?"

"He's not much of a listener. I'm sure you, of all people, must know that."

"Yes, he never has been. So it was Mikhi's idea, then, and not yours? This double-cross approach seemed to come more from the old school way of doing things."

"Whatever. It is not important anymore. Now it's water under the bridge."

Gregor pressed himself closer to the wall and raised his pistol to Sergi's face.

"Did you bring the money?"

"The figure you quoted was impossible for us to raise on such short notice. I'm sure you can understand that. I have only brought double your original asking price."

"So we are bargaining...?"

"I'm afraid you have left Mikhi in a take-it-or-leave-it position."

"Well, it so happens I am in a good mood today, Sergi. I will accept that as a deal... For old time's sake. Let me see it."

"Do you have the material?"

"Once I see the money."

"This sun is burning my eyes, Gregor. I can't see the case. If you have it hold it up for me."

"Show me the money."

"Not until I'm convinced you actually have-"

"-Are you two going to bicker about this shit all fucking day?" Sam said as stepped behind Gregor, pressing his nine-millimeter into his ribs and twisting Gregor's gun from his hands. "You might be the best tech-spook in the world, Gregor, but you wouldn't last a week in the field."

Sergi strained his eyes against the blaring sun.

"Gregor," he called, "Are you all right?"

"He's just fine and dandy," Deirdre said, leveling both of her automatics at him.

Sergi's two henchmen began to reach under their jackets for their pistols, but stopped short when they heard Vincent say, "Don't even think of it, mes amis."

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## Chapter Twenty-five

Sam raised his pistol to Gregor's temple and pulled the hammer back. The gun made a small click, but to all present, a very familiar one.

"Don't talk to me, Gregor, unless you're going to tell me something I want to hear. You're out of choices here, so don't even think about winning... Think about staying alive. I want the Package. I want it now, and if you don't give it to me I'm going to kill you. It's that simple... you have exactly five seconds to give it up."

"I thought you were dead."

"Why does everyone keep thinking that...? Where's the fucking package, Gregor?"

He pushed the gun deeper into the soft spot above Gregor's ear.

"I... I..."

Sweat began to flow from Gregor's face and his voice cracked with panic.

"I... Don't have it."

"Bullshit. That's not what I want to hear, and you know it."

Sam placed his silencer on the bridge of Gregor's nose and pulled the trigger. The bullet slammed into the ancient wall and ricocheted off to the other side of the corridor.

"I swear to God," Gregor cried. "I don't have it."

"There is no God, Gregor. You should know that better than anyone... Where's the Package?"

"Paris."

"What?"

"I sent it to myself in Paris."

"Where?"

"A post office box I hired in the Ninth Arrondissement."

"I don't believe that for a second."

"I swear, Sam... Listen to me, these men have tried to kill me once already. I couldn't trust them a second time. I had to protect myself."

"And in this corridor," the tour guide stopped to clear his throat, "Excuse me. In this corridor coming up on my left... Now, if you will, I'd like everyone to stop and take a good look at the wall... you'll see an excellent example of some very old Roman graffiti."

Sam looked out into the sunny arena. The American tour group was coming up on them like a long link of over-stuffed sausages. He pushed Gregor down the walkway toward the three Russians.

"Move it," he growled at Gregor.

When they were within ten feet of Sergi they stepped out of the sunlight and into the shadows. The tour group had advanced and were now huddled in the opening where Sam and Gregor once stood, searching for the ancient Roman wall scrawlings. Sam glanced at Sergi. A fireball of instant recognition passed between them.

"I know you," Sergi said. He pointed at Sam but focused on Gregor. "He's with the Central Intelligence Agency... He's an active agent with the CIA."

"What?" Deirdre said, bewilderment sweeping across her face.

"I saw him in Travnik last year," Sergi continued, "He speaks Slavic like a native."

The Russian in the brown suit decided, with all the confusion, now would be a good time to go for his gun. He slipped his right hand into his jacket and removed a semi-

automatic. Sam swung his pistol over and placed a nine-millimeter piece of lead through the man's forearm. But Gregor sensed an opportunity, and he took it. He slammed his elbow into Sam's ribs and ducked under his extended arm. He then ran in the direction of the tour group.

Sergi had pulled his own gun by this time. He lowered it toward Gregor as he ran off, but Vincent, realizing Sergi would probably end up killing tourists, lunged at him, knocking his hand in the air. Sergi's bullet sailed over the crowd and into the open arena.

The noise from Sergi's gun was deafening.

The tour reacted as any group would have after being shot at. Some ran for cover. Some froze in one place and screamed. Some did the ostrich thing; fell face down on the stone and covered their heads with their hands. While some actually walked toward the gunshot out of mindless curiosity. Gregor pushed through all of them and ran down the stone steps and onto the arena floor. He crossed over the open area and headed for the exits on the opposite side. Deirdre pushed past Sam and took after him, while Vincent stood fast and dug his eyes into Sam.

"You're a cop?" he asked.

"Jesus, Vincent, he's trying to shark you, can't you see that?"

The other Russian goon now had his gun out and the brown suited one was in the process of retrieving his weapon from the ground with his left hand. Vincent seemed the only one who hadn't drawn his pistol. He turned and grabbed the arm of the non-wounded Russian and drove his shoulder into him, driving him across the darkened passageway and into the far wall. Sam brought his pistol around the man in the brown suit and dropped three slugs into his chest, but not before he was able to send three of his own rounds in Sam's direction. All three shots missed, but they ricocheted around the entryway and eventually exited into the arena. The tourists continued to scream and scatter.

Sergi then panicked. He turned and fired two wild shots at Vincent as he wrestled with the other Russian in the darkened tunnel. Sam attempted to grab his arm but Sergi twisted away and took off down the corridor. Sam crossed to Vincent.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

Vincent didn't answer. He stood, gave Sam a contemptuous look and ran down the passageway after Sergi.

The other Russian swung his pistol around and pointed it at Vincent's back as he ran off. Sam's left foot shot out with lightning speed. It cut into the man's wrist with such force it snapped the bone in two places. And as the Russian howled in pain, Sam pounded his pistol into his face until he slumped onto the cold stones unconscious. Sam then trotted off in the darkness after Vincent.

All of these gunshots were easily heard by Larry as he waited in the Fiat on the south side of Les Arènes on Rue Diderot. He'd kept the motor running anticipating a hasty getaway but the sound of gunfire made him overly anxious. He stepped from the car and surveyed the area wondering how long it would take the police to show up. He heard no sirens yet, but the lack of law enforcement couldn't last forever. He closed the Fiat's door and leaned against it, constantly turning his head from side to side in an attempt to keep and eye on the entire street. It was unusually vacant. The few people who had been strolling the sidewalks seemed to have all disappeared into the late afternoon shadows. Only one ruddy faced, sandy haired man in a tweed jacket remained. He was now walking in Larry's direction.

Larry had obviously never met or seen Seamus Reilly in his life, so when the burly Irishman approached, he saw no reason to be overly suspicious.

"Excuse me," Seamus said, "I was looking for Van Gogh's house. But then I was told it was torn down years ago. You don't happen to know where it might be, do you?"

"Beat it fella."

"Tisk, tisk, tisk... Ever the ugly American..."

"What'd you say, you fucking Mick? What'd you call me?"

"An ugly, fat American."

Seamus' moves were instantaneous, like that of a striking cobra. With amazing grace and speed he slipped his switchblade from the rear pocket of his trousers. He then quickly brought it up and into Larry's chest, where it perforated the right ventricle of his large heart. He withdrew the blade with equal agility and slashed it across Larry's throat for good measure. Larry made no sounds at all. His eyes simply glassed over and after a second or two he slumped down over Seamus' left shoulder. Seamus held him erect, and with a tremendous effort he dragged Larry's heavy body around the Fiat and drop him between the car and the curb in a heap. He then crossed back to the driver's side, sat behind the wheel and waited.

Sam, in the mean while, had lost Sergi and Vincent in the darkness of Les Arènes' maze of interior walkways. He walked slowly down corridor after corridor, listening. Listening and trying to adjust his vision to the poor lighting. After a few minutes Sam came to a juncture in the walkway. Off to his left, a long portal that opened up to the arena. To his right; another passage leading into darkness. He listened for a second and heard the distinct sound of movement.

"Vincent," he called in a harsh wispiest, "forget the Russian. We've got to catch up with Gregor. Remember the Package. This guy means nothing to us."

He got no answer, so he moved down the narrow tunnel toward the noise. His eyes were adjusting quickly now. He passed a number of small alcoves. At the fourth one, Vincent stepped out behind him and placed his pistol to the back of Sam's head.

"What makes you think I am after the Russian," he said. "You're the CIA... You're a fucking cop... There is no difference. I should kill you right now."

Sam turned to face him.

"We're wasting time here, Vincent. You're not going to kill me. You owe me a *great debt*, remember? We've got to find Gregor. Let's move it."

Sam began to walk off toward the passageway that led into the open arena. After about fifteen feet he turned back to Vincent, who hadn't moved, and said, "Well?"

Vincent shrugged and placed his pistol back into its holster. He took three steps toward Sam and Sergi leapt out behind him from the opposite alcove. He grabbed Vincent around the neck with his left arm and pushed his automatic into his temple. He then called down to Sam.

"Drop your gun. Now. I will shoot him if you don't."

"Shoot him?" Sam laughed. "That's what you're going to do, shoot him? Go ahead, shoot the bastard. What makes you think I give a shit?"

Sam then moved as if to turn away in disinterest. About halfway into the turn he spun back toward Sergi, crouched slightly and fired one clean round from his CZ-75. The bullet passed directly between Vincent's left earlobe and the muzzle of Sergi's pistol, embedding in the Russian's brain just above his right eye. He dropped like wet towel at Vincent's heels. But as his gun hand hit the hard stone it forced his now limp finger to press down on the trigger. The bullet exploded from the pistol. It ricocheted off of two walls and came to rest in Sam's right side, directly between his third and fourth rib.

"Ahhh. Shit," he said as he grabbed at the wound and doubled slightly at the waist. Sam then held his hand to the light. It was already covered with blood.

"Son of a bitch."

Vincent ran up to him.

"Sam? Are you all right?"

"Much to your dissatisfaction I will probably live. But I appear to be leaking. Can we now go find Gregor before I run out of fuel?"

Gregor had left the Range-Rover parked on Rue Balze across from the Hôtel de Ville, a good distance from Les Arènes. It seemed an inconspicuous spot. But now with Deirdre on his tail, he was second-guessing the wisdom of parking so far away. He left the arena by way of the southern exit and began running at top speed down Rue Diderot. In his panic he never noticed Vincent's brown Fiat parked on the narrow street a half a block away. And as he reached the car's left front fender, Seamus flipped open the driver's side door. Gregor hit it like a brick wall.

Seamus stepped out of the car and approached Gregor, who was sprawled out on the street. He placed his switchblade to Gregor's throat.

"Where's the case, Gregor?"

"Who...? Who are you?"

"Get up. Get in the car."

"Who are you?"

"I work with Deirdre. Deirdre answers to me. If you want to live, you'll do exactly as I tell you."

Seamus opened the Fiat's rear door and shoved Gregor in. He then eased himself into the front seat and asked his question once again.

"Where's the case?"

By this time Deirdre had arrived. She stepped over Larry and slid into the passenger's seat.

"Did you have to kill him, then? You couldn't have just cold-cocked the poor son of a bitch?"

Seamus ignored her and continued on his one track.

"Where's the case?"

"Paris," she said. "Our friend Gregor here has mailed it to himself." She pointed her gun at him. "I assume you were telling the truth back there."

"Yes."

"Well, why don't you just tell us which post office we should pick it up from?"

"It has to be me who signs for it. I can take you. There will be no trouble... I'm done with this game."

"We have to get out of here," Seamus said. "We have to move." He slammed the Fiat into first gear, added, "We'll return to Paris," and sped off up the street.

Sam and Vincent exited the arena in time to see the Fiat disappear around a corner three blocks away. They stood and looked at one another for a moment. Both of them seemed to be thinking, "Now what?" when a policeman called something out in French. They both turned to face him.

"What did he say?" Sam whispered to Vincent.

"Pretty much what you would expect: 'Don't move or I'll blow your goddamn brains out.'"

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## Chapter Twenty-six

For the policeman, who was now pointing his service revolver at Vincent and Sam, "Don't move or I'll blow your brains out," was most likely something he had heard in an old Alain Delon movie. He didn't really give it a very convincing reading. And his gun hand began to shake visibly as he glanced from Sam's bloody side to the two mammoth CZ-75s equipped with silencers the two men held in their hands. The cop tried valiantly to meet the hardened stares of Vincent and Sam, but it was a losing battle. Sort of like a Christian going up against a pack of hungry lions in the old days. After about thirty seconds the policeman simply placed his revolver on the street, turned and walked away.

Vincent then draped Sam's left arm over his shoulder and said, "We have to disappear."

"Find a car somewhere. I can hot-wire it."

"Any special kind of car? Is one easier than another?"

"Anything."

They stepped off the curb and were nearly run over by a burgundy colored Citroén. The driver had to literally jump on his breaks to stop in time. He then flew out of the car and began screaming obscenities at the two men in French.

Vincent calmly turned to Sam and said, "Will a Citroén do?"

"A Citroén will do just fine."

They then raised their pistols together and pointed them at the driver. The man began to back up. Vincent called to him in French.

*"Wait," he said, "Before you run off, I'd like to talk to you."*

He stopped and said, "Yes?" in a very wobbly voice.

*"If you report this car stolen within the next three days, I will have my men come here and kill you. It will be a very painful death."* Vincent waived his pistol for effect. *"Is that clear?"*

*"Yes."*

*"Good. You can leave now. And remember what I told you."*

The man turned and ran down the street.

"What was that all about?" Sam asked.

"I extended our lease."

Vincent helped Sam into the Citro en and crossed back over to the driver's side. Police sirens could be heard in the distance, but not close enough for any real concern. Vincent eased the Citro en into first gear and worked his way down Rue Diderot. The same way his Fiat had left town. After five minutes they had crossed the Rh one and were off in the direction of N imes.

"Before we get too far into the woods," Sam said, "I'm going to have to take care of this." He lifted his hand and perused the fresh blood in the setting sunlight.

Vincent didn't seem to hear what Sam had said. His eyes appeared a little glassy as he stared through the windshield. After a moment he said, "This make twice now that you have saved my life."

"Oh, Christ..." Sam shook his head. "Not that crap again... Look, I didn't save your life back there. I might have put it at tremendous risk... But I didn't save shit."

"You see it your way, I'll see it mine... The girl sold us out, you know."

"It would seem that way."

"In France, we would call her a bitch."

"I think a New Yorker might use the same term."

"You need a doctor."

"I was thinking the same thing. Do you know one around here? A safe one? One you can trust?"

"No... See if there is a map in the glove-compartment. The hospitals will be marked in blue on it."

"No. No hospitals. We'll find a doctors office... Or a veterinarian's office. They'll be closed by now. I'll tell you what to steal and I'll fix this myself."

"Fix it yourself? Are you crazy?"

"I did just fine with Larry. This isn't much worse."

Vincent sighed and lit a cigarette. He handed it to Sam and then lit one for himself.

"Why are you doing this?" Vincent asked through a plume of blue/gray smoke.

"You have no need to run. You are a cop."

"Not exactly."

"You are with the CIA... That fits my definition of a cop."

"If I was a cop... A real cop, I would have busted all of you a long time ago. This isn't about you, or Deirdre, or Gregor... It's about a job I have to do."

"And what job is that?"

"My job, Vincent... A job you don't need to know anything about. I can't go to the local cops. I can't even go to Interpol. The Package is too hot. They can't be brought in on this. It's me or nobody at this point."

"So you know what this Package is?"

"Yes. That's how I knew the fake one had a bomb in it. It was too damn heavy."

Vincent seemed to think this over for a long time. Eventually he said, "I had forgotten about the bomb. So... That makes *three* time you have saved my life."

"Jesus, would you stop with this shit."

"Are you going to tell me what's in the case?"

"No. It's my show. The information will only make your life miserable, believe me."

"Well, it looks to me like our troops are dwindling. We are the only ones left of our little group."

"We? There is no more *we* at this point. You're out, Vincent. It's just me. I get myself fixed up and back to Paris. I know the city. I'll find the Package alone."

"I'm going with you."

"This doesn't involve you any more. Can't you understand that? I can't even guarantee you any money out of this."

"This is not about money for me... Not any more."

"I don't think I want to hear this."

"You have saved my life. I owe you-"

"-Yeah, yeah, I know, you owe me a *great debt*. You don't have to do this."

"Yes I do."

"Okay. Fine. I'm not going to argue with you because I'm leaking like a sieve here. What's the plan?"

"I have a friend who can help us. He can be trusted. He has a farmhouse outside of Auxerre. It is on the way to Paris. Can you hold out?"

"Yes."

"We can find a doctor's office in Nîmes."

Nîmes was only nineteen kilometers up the road from Arles and they were there in no time. They arrived from the southeast and Vincent located a phone booth at the bus station. He found a doctor's office near one of the museums, just off the Rue de la Cité; an area he believed would be the quietest this time of the evening. He then called the doctor. The phone was picked up by an answering machine that said the office closed at five PM. It went on to offer an emergency number. Vincent jogged back to the Citroën and they located the office a few minutes later. He parked a half a block away and turned to Sam.

"What do you need?"

Sam looked down at his still bleeding right side thinking a visual image would insure that he didn't forget anything.

"Okay... I'm going to need a lot of sterile gauze pads. Enough so that I can change them a few times until we reach your pal at Auxerre, and then more for the final dressing. Adhesive tape. Forceps. Clamps - five or six. Rubber gloves, if he has them - two or three pairs. Make sure all this stuff is in sealed bags. Alcohol - a couple of bottles. Surgical thread and needle. Surgical sponges - a couple."

He looked out at the street trying to think if he'd forgotten anything.

"I guess that's it," he said after a minute. "Do you want me to repeat the list?"

"No. I've got it... No morphine?"

Sam glanced down at his still seeping wound and said, "No. No morphine."

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## Chapter Twenty-seven

The apartment Seamus had leased on Paris' Rue de Glaçon was a far cry from the Hôtel George Cinq. It was up three flights of dingy, dark creaking wooden stairs. It was in the back of the building on the north side of the street and the two paltry token windows never received a spot direct sunlight. The paint in the hallway was a peeling putrid green. The floor was littered with trash and discarded drug paraphernalia, and prostitutes lounged in several of the open doorways.

Inside the apartment the paint was no better. There were two small rooms. The only furnishings in the first of these was a table with two aluminum stools, a rotting couch and a torn and over stuffed chair. A hot-plate and small refrigerator sat by a minuscule sink in one corner. The other room had only a dresser and a double bed. And a chamber no bigger than a closet held a cracked porcelain toilet with an overhead water tank and pull-chain.

The drive from Arles had been a long and tiring ordeal for Seamus and Deirdre - not to mention Gregor, who'd been handcuffed in the back seat the entire way. The idea had been to keep the spook awake for the length of the ride. Wear him down. Force him to give up the case. The problem was, neither Deirdre nor Seamus were able to get any rest either. And in the long run, Gregor continued to maintain that no one, other than himself, could retrieve it from the post office.

When they arrived at the apartment it was close to dawn. They were completely exhausted.

Seamus dragged Gregor up the three flights of stairs by the front of his shirt. Deirdre followed. It was the kind of building where the sight of a man being dragged, with his hands cuffed behind his back, didn't draw much attention. No one stuck their noses into anyone else's business in this place.

After he'd unlocked the door, Seamus threw Gregor through the first room and into the bedroom. He then grabbed him by the neck and pushed him into the tiny bathroom. Gregor tripped and fell head first into the toilet. A small gash was opened above his left eye and blood began to trickle down the side of his face. Seamus bent down and slapped Gregor's face several times with a tremendous force, causing blood to also flow from the corner of his mouth.

"What...?" Gregor coughed and spat blood into the toilet. "Are you planning to kill me?"

Seamus gave him a sadistic smile.

"No, I believe I'll wait until you get us our goods."

He then slammed the door on Gregor's legs and walked back into the front room where he found Deirdre slumped on the couch with her face buried in the palms of her hands.

"When we're done with all of this," she said through her fingers, "I want to do Gregor myself."

Seamus laughed.

"Now there's the Deirdre I've always known."

"And what's that supposed to mean?"

"I mean I was worried that all the time you spent away from the fold might have affected you. Might have turned up a soft spot in your heart."

"Well, I was never that far away from the *fold*. And not for very long."

"Aye, but you've been living this life of a hired gun. A well paid hired gun, I might add."

Deirdre's ice-blue eyes squinted into an angry stare.

"And you've been thinking that maybe I'd grown attached to this charade I've been playing? Is that what you're thinking? That now I'm stuck on the money?"

Seamus shrugged noncommittally. "It's been known to happen."

"Not to me. You know me better than that, Seamus Reilly."

"Yeah. Well... I *thought* I did."

Deirdre leapt up from the couch, her automatic already drawn, and pointed it to Seamus' forehead.

"I guess you don't know me then, do you? If you think I wouldn't kill you, or the likes of anyone else, for an insult like that. I may walk away from you for many reasons... But money isn't going to be one of them."

He let out a small chuckle and pushed the pistol away from his face.

"Just testing you, lassie. Forgive me but I had to do it. Some of the events of the past few days have given me cause to wonder."

Deirdre stiffened at his use of the word lassie, but she let it pass and pressed him on the other issue.

"Just what *events* might you be thinking of?"

"You tell me."

"What do you want? You want to hear me say I bollixed it? It that it?"

"You hired Gregor, not me."



Deirdre gritted her teeth and spat her words through them.

"Right. As if the decision didn't have to meet with your approval? You're the one who killed the Yank... Probably the only one of the bunch we *could* trust. What was that all about, anyway?"

"I should have waited in Arles and killed the other one as well. He'll be after us for sure, if he gets his bleedin' stopped."

He watched for a reaction from Deirdre, but none seemed to come.

"Well, we'll save him for you. How will that be...? You know, you used to like it. Do you remember...? Remember how you liked it?"

"I did what I had to do, nothing more."

"Sure. There was a cause, then? Is that what you're trying to tell me? There was a belief? There was a glory in it, then? For the Mother Country?"

She turned her back on him.

"I'm tired, Seamus. Get Gregor out of there. I need to get some rest."

Seamus grabbed her arm and forced her to face him.

"Maybe it is about belief. Maybe that can be your justification. But under it... Wasn't there something else? Could I have seen that in your eyes? A liking for it? Setting the ambush... The surprise of it? And the betrayal? Yes... Most of all the betrayal."

She attempted to extricate herself from his grasp, but he held her tight.

"That's what you liked about it back in Ireland, isn't it, lassie? The betrayal. And that feeling of power that came with it. That's why you needed it back then. That moment when it all came so sweet. Here it's all too black and white for you. Is that it?"

She jerked her arm once more.

"Don't, girlie."

Seamus increased his pressure on her arm and another sadistic smile swept across his face.

"You're a good Catholic girlie, Deirdre. Always were... Isn't that a double cross you're wearing...? Aye, I thought so... So don't you forget it. Don't forget where you came from."

"It may well be the double cross, Seamus, but make no mistake... The girlie part is gone. And you'd be an old fool if you think you can get her back."

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## Chapter Twenty-eight

Vincent was pleased with the Citro en. It had a far more comfortable ride than his Fiat and nearly twice the horsepower. The result being, they arrived at his old friend Jean-Pierre's farmhouse in Auxerre and hour earlier than he'd hoped. Which in itself was a blessing. Another hour wasted and Sam just might have bled to death.

Jean-Pierre was a large man. Almost as big as Larry, but he was dark-haired and probably over sixty years old. He had a graying mustache, two gold teeth, a punched in nose, and an infectious laugh. He was standing in his doorway when Vincent and Sam arrived. He'd been expecting them. He spoke to Vincent in French.

*"You are early, my friend. It's good to see you. You've lost weight, no?"*

The two men shook hands and exchanged an affectionate French style bear hug.

*"No. No weight, Jean-Pierre... He's in the car. He's weak... I think I'm going to need your help in getting him into the house."*

They walked to the Citro en and helped Sam from the car. Vincent made the quick introductions. Sam draped an arm over each man and they retreated to the farmhouse.

The house was immaculately clean and decorated with typical French country antiques. Throughout the living room were ten or twelve dioramas containing miniature lead soldiers; each scene depicting a famous battle in world history. They were so accurate and so meticulously done, they appeared completely lifelike. In the large kitchen Jean-

Pierre had already cleared his long dining table in preparation for their arrival. He'd covered it first with a plastic drop-cloth, then placed two clean sheets down for Sam.

"Okay," Sam said as he removed his shirt, "someone's going to cut... Someone's going to assist. Do you want to flip a coin?"

Jean-Pierre shook his head and took a step backward.

"Okay, Vincent, I guess that means you cut."

Sam laid down and rolled onto his left side. He raised his right arm exposing his wound.

"Jean-Pierre, we're going to need some more light and a mirror. Vincent, wash your hands and throw on a pair of rubber gloves. The sooner we get started the better."

Each man did as he was told. Sam removed his travel bandage and dropped it into a trash can Jean-Pierre had placed alongside the table. He craned his neck in an attempt to get a better look at the wound, but it was more to the rear of his rib-cage and the angle made it next to impossible to see. After a moment Jean-Pierre returned with a tall standing lamp. He plugged it into the wall and adjusted the light over Sam. He also had come up with an eight by ten walnut framed mirror.

"Great," Sam said. "Hold the mirror over the wound so I can get a better look at the proceedings... Okay, Vincent, take one of the sponges... Swab the wound and the surrounding area out with the alcohol."

Vincent did as he was told. And Sam winced noticeably.

"Speaking of alcohol," Jean-Pierre said, "perhaps you should have a drink before we start?"

"No. No booze. Pain is a mind thing. There is no bone damage here... I'm hoping I can control the pain."

"So am I," Vincent threw in.

Sam looked into the mirror and began to direct Vincent.

"Okay, take three clamps from their packages. Clamp one to that flap of skin dangling towards my butt and allow the weight of the clamp to hold it for you... Good. Take the other two and pull the rest of the skin up and drop the clamps over my chest... That should open everything up... Mop up some of that blood, will you? I can't see shit anymore."

Vincent did as he was told. After he'd finished, he said, "It's right here. I can see the bullet. About twenty-five millimeters in."

"Good... Yeah, I see it too."

"Are you sure you want to do this?"

"Hey, are you kidding me? I once removed a guy's appendix with a grapefruit spoon... Let's do it."

Vincent and Jean-Pierre looked at each other and shook their heads.

"Give it another blast of alcohol with the sponge," Sam said. "Get the fresh blood out of there... Ayeeee, I'm beginning to get into this alcohol shit... Wow..."

Sam stared at the ceiling for five seconds, then squeezed his eyes shut, and shook his head from side to side.

"Oh, Jesus." He re-opened his eyes. "Okay. I'm back... Jean-Pierre, cock the mirror a little more to the left. Perfect-o-mundo... Now, Vincent, take the forceps, and remember, what you're doing here is routine field surgery. I've done this myself a bunch of times and no one died. There are no vital organs where you're working. No major muscles. No arteries. You couldn't kill me even if you wanted to. Just make sure you've got a good grasp on the bullet before you try to pull it out."

Vincent held the forceps in his right hand and the bloody sponge in his left. He began to dig into Sam's wound. After about ten seconds he withdrew, dabbed out the area

with the sponge, and went back for a second try. But again he had the same problem; too much blood.

"I'm sorry, Sam, It's the bleeding. It is making the bullet slipperier than La Grenouille."

Jean-Pierre interjected an interpretation, "A frog."

"I didn't think the French appreciated that word."

"As long as it comes from the mouth of a Frenchman..."

"Right. Back to work. Give it another try, Vincent."

Vincent dug into the wound once more.

"Try to go a little deeper and get the forceps around the damn thing. I'll let you know if you're getting into trouble."

Vincent pushed the forceps further.

"It's the blood. I've lost sight again," he sighed.

"Fuck it. You've got to go for it on this try. Can you still feel it? You're right on the damn thing."

"Yes."

"Then do it by touch. Don't pull out. We're almost home here... Go down another millimeter or two... Do you feel it? Do you feel it? You've got it. Clamp down on that fucker."

"I have it."

"Okay. Don't lose it... Go slow. Clamp down tight, but go slow... Cone out slow... That's it... slow."

"I have it, Sam. We're out. Here..."

Vincent dropped the bullet into the palm of Sam's hand.

"A souvenir of France."

"I would have preferred a dirty postcard."

Sam examined the bullet and let out a small laugh.

"France? Shit, this is a souvenir of Russia. And this Sergi bastard sprayed his bullets with Teflon. I guess he likes to stamp people paid in full. It's a good thing it bounced off a few walls before it got to me."

Sam tossed the bullet in the trash can and looked from Vincent to Jean-Pierre

"This isn't a no smoking household, is it?"

Jean-Pierre shook his head and lit a Gauloise for him. Sam took two long drags and said, "Vincent, how's your sewing? Do you think you can close this up without my kibitzing?"

"Oui."

"Then if you don't mind... I think I'm going to pass out."

Sam's face then turned an ashen white. His head fell down to the wooden table with a solid thump. He was out like a light.

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## Chapter Twenty-nine

When Sam passed out, his Gauloise slipped from his fingers and dropped onto Jean-Pierre's polished hardwood floor. The Frenchman picked it up and handed it to Vincent, who let it dangle from the corner of his mouth as he began to stitch Sam's wound. He held his head off to one side, careful not to let any ashes drop onto his work and keeping the smoke from drifting into his weary eyes. The two men returned to speaking in French.

*"He's a tough bastard, this American,"* Jean-Pierre remarked as he lit a cigarette of his own.

*"Yes,"* was all Vincent seemed to have the energy to say.

*"He reminds me of some of my comrades at Dien Bien Phu in '54. They didn't know when it was time to stop. When to pack their bags and go home."*

*"I wouldn't surprise me to know that you both have walked the same ground. Like you, Jean-Pierre, Sam has the markings of a man who has fought many battles."*

Jean-Pierre gave Vincent an overly long stare. Then said, *"Who is he?"*

*"That's not important."*

*"Does he work for the CIA?"*

*"Sometimes your perception astounds me, my friend... Yes, it seems he has worked for the CIA."*



*"That much is clear... But not now?"*

*"These answers have not been easy to come by, Jean-Pierre... He is not a talker."*

*"Well we both saw what he has just done... I did the same thing in Southeast Asia, but never to myself. To others, yes, but never did I dig into my own flash like that... And this is why I backed away tonight. I no longer have the strength to return to Vietnam in my mind. This kind of blood... The vision of the field hospital... Men dying for a useless cause. Boys, really. Most no older than nineteen... The pain is too extreme. The memories... But this man... Why would he butcher himself, as he did...? If he was still with the CIA...? All he would have to do it make one telephone call, and they would come running. We are not in the highlands of Indochine. We are in France."*

Vincent shrugged. *"I don't have any answers..."*

*"Then tell me this; why are you still with him?"*

Vincent ignored Jean-Pierre and picked up a fresh surgical sponge. He doused it with alcohol and cleaned up his handy-work. He then began to apply a fresh bandage to Sam's freshly stitched side. When Vincent was finished, Jean-Pierre let out a small knowing laugh.

*"I get no answer to my question, it is like you are fourteen again,"* Jean-Pierre chuckled. *"So this man has saved your life, that much is also obvious."*

Vincent laughed as well.

*"You are still able to read me like a book, you old dog... I'm tired. I have to get some sleep. We can talk about all of this in the morning."*

He removed the rubber gloves, tossed them into the trashcan, crossed to the sink and began washing up. Jean-Pierre followed.

*"You're right, it's late. But there is one more thing..."*

*"What's that?"*

*"If you must follow him... That is your business. Unfortunately, yes, I can understand it all. But, for my sake, don't let this man get you killed. You are the only son I have."*

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## Chapter Thirty

When Sam awoke it was close to Nine AM. It was the smell of coffee that had done it. It was good coffee. Strong Coffee. French coffee. He rubbed at his eyes and attempted to get his bearings. Vincent had covered him with a thick blanket and left him sleeping on the kitchen table. The coffee pot was a mere eight feet away.

Sam rolled to a sitting position and again winced with pain. He lifted his right arm and checked out his bandages. There was a strong temptation to remove them and look over his new stitches - or at least count the damn things. But he opted to leave well enough alone. He then draped the blanket over his shoulders and began opening cabinets until he found a coffee mug. He filled it to the brim and ambled into the living room. Jean-Pierre was using the forceps that had removed Sam's bullet to place a freshly painted figure into one of his military dioramas.

"I'm glad you've found a good use for those. I hope you washed them," Sam smiled. "Good morning. Bonjour. Thanks for your help last night. I could see you were uneasy about getting involved... I appreciated it."

Jean-Pierre glanced up from his miniaturization and removed his reading glasses.

"You are feeling better, then?" he asked.

"I don't have much choice. I've got work to do... But to answer your question... Yes, actually, I am feeling better." Sam looked down at Jean-Pierre's diorama and added, "They're Japanese, huh?"

Jean-Pierre cocked his head to one side and said, "It's a hobby. One gets older, he looks for a hobby, something to occupy the abundance spare time."

"Yeah... A lot of fellas... Friends of mine that is, all they wanted to do is move to Montana and run a string of longhorn cattle..."

Jean-Pierre brought his overly sincere look back to Sam. They seemed to exchange a tremendous amount of information in the space of ten seconds. Finally the Frenchman said, "And if they had lived... They probably would have done it... Well," he took his attention back to the diorama, "they were spared their disillusion."

"...Right."

"And who were these people, these friends of yours?"

"Friends."

"Alright, then let me try this; who are you?"

"Fella just like you, trying to make it to retirement."

"Vincent was right, you are not a man who is filled with answers. Do you know this scene?" Jean-Pierre said, sweeping the forceps over the diorama. "You should. You share their name. They are the forty-seven Ronin."

"Never heard of them."

"I somehow doubt that, but if you would like to play it that way... You will be forced to listen to my narration... Please let me know if I miss anything... The Forty-seven Samurai whose master was betrayed and killed by another warlord. They became Ronin, masterless Samurai disgraced by another man's treachery. For three years they plotted, pretending to be thieves, mercenaries, even madmen. And then one night they struck, slipping into the castle of their lord's betrayer."

"And..."

"They killed him, of course."

"... Sounds like my kind if job."

"There is more."

"I'm sure there is."

Jean-Pierre looked up from the diorama once again.

"All forty-seven of them committed Seppuku... Ritual suicide. They did it in the courtyard of the castle."

"Huh... I think I would've given that part a miss."

"But you understand it."

"Don't count on it."

"The warrior code, the delight of the battle... You understand that much of it. And the code of honor."

Sam didn't answer. He only turned and appeared to be looking at the other dioramas.

"They are all from different wars," Jean-Pierre said, "but the theme is universal."

"Actually I was looking for a cigarette."

Jean-Pierre removed a pack of Gauloise from his shirt, offered one to Sam and took one for himself. After they were lit he continued with his thought-line.

"You do understand, Sam. I man has something outside himself that needs to be served. And when that need is gone, when the belief has died, what are you? A man without a master."

"Right now I'm a man without a paycheck."

"The Ronin I talk about could have hired themselves to new masters. They could have fought for themselves... But they chose their own path... They chose honor."

"They chose wrong."

Jean-Pierre only shook his head.

"You see, it's this way," Sam added, "We're all pimps, prostitutes and johns. A guy only needs to recognize what category he... Or she, falls into, and he'll survive just fine. Just fine."

Jean-Pierre pointed to his diorama.

"Your categories leave no room for honor. Is there none?"

Sam didn't answer.

"What category do these Ronin fall into?" Jean-Pierre pressed.

"...Prostitutes...? Or was that a rhetorical question?"

"Don't fool yourself, Sam. You are what is left of these Samurai. I have spent my life around extraordinary men. I'm not sure I have met one that could have done what you did last night. You didn't do that for a paycheck... You have a debt of honor... A code."

"The Samurai have a code, too. They have their Bushido. Maybe you're right, Jean-Pierre. Maybe we're not all pimps, prostitutes and johns. Maybe your Samurai have their own category... I couldn't tell you. I've never met one."

Jean-Pierre laughed at Sam and said, "My friend, I would have expected you to be a better liar than that."

Vincent entered, somewhat bleary-eyed with a cup of coffee dangling in his left hand. He set it on a small side-table and said, "Bonjour, bonjour, what have you two been discussing so early in the morning... Before a second cup of coffee?" He looked at Sam's nearly full mug. "Jesus, before a first cup. How can you even speak?"

Sam said, "We're discussing why fathers let their sons march off to war. Especially when they've been there themselves and know what it's like."

Both Vincent and Jean-Pierre stiffened noticeably at the comment.

"Ahh..." Sam added, "Now, there's a real conversation stopper."

He then glanced at his watch.

"I hate to bleed-and-run, here, but I'm going to have to get what's left of my ass back to Paris." He looked at Vincent. "Do you think the postal system could get that Package to Paris in one day?"

"They are very efficient. And if Gregor over-nighted it... It most definitely will be in by this afternoon."

"The problem is, what post office will it be coming to?"

"I think it is going to be easier to locate the Irishman than it will be to find the correct post office. But you're right, we should leave for Paris soon."

"We?"

"We."

Sam looked at Jean-Pierre who sighed and said, "He is his own man. Could your father ever tell you what to do? I do not think so."

Ignoring them, Vincent said, "I know a man in Paris who will be able to locate the Irishman for us. I'm sure of it. Besides, Sam... I owe you-"

"-Stop." Sam help up his hands. "Stop with this shit. Please, stop with the Bushido crap." He then walked over to Jean-Pierre, shook his hand and said, "Thank you."

"Seppuku."

"What?"

"Seppuku... Disembowelment." Jean-Pierre pointed to his lower chest and gave Sam a broad smile. "When you are ready... The sword goes in right about here."

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### Chapter Thirty-one

The rain had started at about nine-thirty. It was a light rain, but hard enough to force the Parisians to bring out their summer umbrellas. And after ten minutes of it, the streets were wet and slick, the asphalt glistening like black diamonds. It was the kind of day where even the most inept tourist would be able to create a master's photograph with his point-and-shoot Nikon. The shadows were muddy and the shades of gray had become a spectrum of provocative light that could only be found in Paris. These were Deirdre's thoughts, as she watched Seamus and Gregor disappear into the post office just off Rue le Peletier. It rained in Ireland, for sure, but this was French rain. It tended to make the mind wander.

The Fiat didn't possess the best of wipers, and she found she needed to position her head slightly to the right of the steering wheel in order to keep the main door of the post office in view. Seamus had removed Gregor's handcuffs to avoid looking overly suspicious, but he kept his silenced pistol pressed to Gregor's back. He'd covered the gun with a folded, and now wet, overcoat, but Deirdre believed it didn't look any less suspicious than the damn handcuffs.

She glanced at her watch. If they remained inside for over ten minutes, it would be obvious something had gone wrong. She'd have to enter the post office and act as a back-up for Seamus. Deirdre double-checked her own pistol. She chambered a round, left the



hammer cocked, and engaged the safety. She then placed the gun on the seat next to her. She watched as the rainwater rolled down the glass and let her neck fall back onto the headrest.

She began to think of Sam.

It was supposed to be a legitimate operation. There was to be no betrayal this time. She'd looked forward to that - no betrayal, especially after she'd spent the night with him. It was to be a simple exchange of money for goods. Everyone gets paid, and be done with it. Walk away.

But Gregor ended all that. Then Seamus came out into the open. He trusted no one. There was no need to kill Larry. No need to double-cross Sam and Vincent. Sam. "Jesus," she thought, "what is it with him? What's happened to me? How could I have let him move in on me like this?"

Deirdre shook her head to clear it. She wondered if Sergi's claim was correct. Was Sam in the CIA? Was the Package really that hot? And could he be that good. He played everyone so well.

She was just thinking, "Had he played me, too?" when Seamus and Gregor exited the post office. The case was nowhere in sight. Seamus kept his pistol pressed to Gregor's back as they approached the Fiat. He opened the rear door and shoved Gregor in, then slid into the passenger's seat.

"Let's move it, Deirdre. Get out of here. Rue de Glaçon, before we attract any unwanted guests."

"Where's the case?" she asked in disbelief.

"Just drive."

"Where the hell's the bloody case?"

"There... Is... A problem," Gregor stuttered from the back of the Fiat.

"Problem my ass," Seamus exploded. He turned in his seat and jammed his pistol into Gregor's forehead. It opened a small cut above Gregor's left eye as his head rocked back on his shoulders like a dashboard doll.

"Are you lying to me, Gregor? Because if you are, you're a dead man sooner than you think, you know that don't you? I have no propensity for playing games."

"What the hell is going on?" Deirdre demanded once again.

"Nothing," Seamus said as he turned back and lit a cigarette. "That's what's going on - nothing. Get the car moving, will you? Nothing bloody happened."

"The Package didn't come," Gregor whined. "In Arles, they said it would be over-night, I swear."

Seamus spun back to Gregor. He grabbed him by the shirt-front and pulled him forward. Then pushed the glowing tip of his cigarette to within an inch of Gregor's left eye.

"You know what they say, Gregor? They say that in the land of the blind, the man with one eye is king. Would you like to be a king, Gregor? Would you?"

Gregor was straining to keep his eye closed and as far from Seamus' cigarette as he possibly could.

"There is an afternoon delivery," he stammered, "You heard the clerk, *après-midi*, *après-midi*, that's what he was saying. That's what it means. This afternoon. We can come back... It will be here, I swear."

Seamus seemed to regain his composure as quickly as he'd lost it. He patted Gregor lightly on the cheek three or four times and then gave him another one of his sadistic smiles.

"Well, let's just hope it does... For everyone's sake."

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## Chapter Thirty-two

Eugene's Video Rental sat square in the middle of the Saint Germain Des Prés section of Paris on Rue Jacob not too far from the Delacroix Museum. Eugene was American by birth, African by his ancestral slave heritage, and had found his way to Paris in 1969 after being railroaded into the Marine Corps by a slick recruiter in the South Bronx. He did his duty, served his thirteen months in Vietnam, picked up a couple of Purple Hearts, then walked from San Francisco to Newark, caught a Delta flight to Paris, and never looked back. But by the Mid-eighties he'd fallen on hard times. The woman he'd been living with had contracted cancer of the stomach, and when she died, two years later, Eugene was left penniless.

That's when he met Vincent.

The two men had hit it off immediately. They seemed to have been cut from the same mold. And it was Vincent's money that had set Eugene up in the video rental business. The shop had proved to be a gold mine. One of the first in all of Paris, it now carried over ten thousand titles in twenty different languages. If you wanted the *Magnificent Seven* in Pakistani, you went to see Eugene.

And Eugene had made it a point to re-pay Vincent. Not so much in the financial sense, Vincent would never hear of that; no, Vincent was paid back in information. Anybody who was anybody knew Eugene... And he knew them one step better. If anything

went down in Paris, Eugene was either aware of it, or could find out about it... Damn quick. Eugene was Vincent's main source.

When Vincent and Sam entered Eugene's Video Rental, Eugene was discussing the subtle differences between two Bruce Lee classics with a customer. There was no trace of an American accent in his French.

*"These are both great films. You can't go wrong with either one. That one you have in your hand is more of a character study, but this one here," he pointed, "is basically straight up action. Both filmed by the same director, which shows you what a class act this guy is. Versatility up the ass."*

Eugene turned and noticed Vincent and Sam standing off in the opposite corner. He called across the store as he moved in their direction.

"My man, Vincent, what brings you into the depths of the Sixth Arrondissement?"

"I came in for a movie, what else?"

Eugene looked at Sam and said, "Who's the Gringo?"

Sam glanced down at himself and mumbled, "Is it that obvious?"

"It's the shirt, dude. Not what you'd call a exemplary Parisian fit."

Sam cocked his thumb to Vincent and said, "It's his. It's a loaner. I intend to give it back as soon as they open a Brooks Brothers here."

"My, my, my... You boys must be close." He winked at Vincent. "He's not wearing your skivvies too, is he?" He followed it with a laugh and dropped an arm over Vincent.

"So, how's it hanging, my man? Haven't seen you, face-to-face that is, in a dog's age. Whatcha been up to?"

"Nothing much... You know... The usual."

Again Eugene looked at Sam.

"No introductions?"

"Of course. I'm sorry. This is Sam Ronin."

Eugene stepped back in mock surprise.

"Ronin? Ronin?" he said, "Le Samurai? But where is the carefully adjusted Alain Delon chapeau?"

Vincent retained a serious expression. Eugene swiftly realized Vincent was there for business and his smile evaporated just as quickly.

"So...? What can I do for you?"

"I was telling Sam about how you always have the latest tapes. If it's just out on video, one must come to Eugene."

"Right..." Eugene looked over his shoulder to his two customers and said, "Why don't we step into my office." He then walked to the opposite side of his counter and opened a large loose-leaf notebook containing thousands of video titles and descriptions of the films.

"So what kind of movie are you fellas looking for today?"

"I was wondering if you had anything that was particularly new? Possibly something that has just come out in the last few days?"

Eugene leaned on the counter and said, "You know now that you mention it, there's a flick I've been hearing about... I haven't seen it. But from what I've heard it's fairly hep."

"What's the plot line?"

"It's kind of an international thing. Several different peoples involved... Hand picked criminals from all over. Experts, you might say, brought here to do one job. But maybe the most interesting thing about it is that preeminent in the plot we find the Russian mob going up against the IRA."

"This sounds like the video I've been looking for. You don't happen to have the complete tape, do you?"

"No," Eugene said as he flipped through the notebook. "All I have is a trailer. More like pre-views, if you know what I mean. Just a few short clips. What do you want, the Russian or the Gaelic version?"

"Why don't we try the Gaelic language version," Sam threw in.

Eugene smiled. "The Russian would be easier."

"Why's that?"

"The star is a little more high profile. A flashier production company."

"Why don't we start out with the Gaelic version. If we get the gist of the plot, we won't have to watch the Russian translation. Sometimes they're a little dry."

Eugene said, "Alright, Irish it is... From what I understand there's a pretty damn brutal scene in this film. A couple of former IRA regulars dragging some dude in handcuffs up the steps of a seedy apartment building, right here in Paris."

"Former IRA?"

"That's what I have."

"Who's the star?" Vincent asked.

"There's no telling who the leads are. But the Irish company has a rep here. I believe his name is Seamus Reilly."

"Good old Seamus," Sam said.

"You know him?" Vincent asked.

"Oh, yeah... I believe the production company has supplied him with a brown Fiat just like the one you used to own."

"Ohh," Vincent chuckled, "that Seamus Reilly."

"Yeah, the dude's a serious Irish Auteur, from what I've been hearing," Eugene tossed in. "A real firebrand. Thinks his more moderate film making brethren have turned to making movies about peace and love."

"I don't suppose you have any idea where they shot that scene?" Vincent said. "You know, the one with the guy in the handcuffs?"

Again Eugene flipped through the large notebook.

"Sometimes they list these things in the production notes... Yeah here it is... 35 Rue de Glaçon." He looked up from the book with a befuddled expression.

"Where the hell is that?"

"I believe I could find it... If anyone actually gives a shit," Vincent shrugged.

"Certainly not me," Sam added.

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### Chapter Thirty-three

"It should be just around the next corner... Perhaps half way up the block," Vincent said as he tossed what was left of his Gauloise into the gutter. He eased the Citroén into gear and inched forward. "Maybe we will be able to find a parking spot that is closer. Where we can see the front of the building more clearly."

"35 Rue de Glaçon." Sam read it from a small slip of paper. "You trust Eugene to be right on this?"

"He has yet to fail me."

Vincent made a left onto Rue de Glaçon. They passed number thirty-five in the middle of the block. It was on the right side of the narrow street. At the end of the block Vincent located a parking place and backed the Citroén into it.

"Pretty shitty building, old number thirty-five," Sam said, "I would have expected Seamus to come up with something comfier. I hope Eugene's information's on the money."

"It is... My Fiat is parked across the street."

Sam looked back over his shoulder at the brown Fiat on the opposite side.

"You're sure it's yours? I saw three hundred just like it on the way over here."

"It's mine."

Sam turned to the front as Vincent adjusted his door mirror onto the Fiat.

"Cigarette?" Vincent asked.



"No thanks... I'm trying to quit."

"Well, as Larry once said... Fat fucking chance."

Sam shook his head, laughed, and said, "No, I'm serious this time. No more for me. This is it."

"Suit yourself."

Vincent lit up and slouched slightly in the seat.

"On the quai," he said, after a moment of silence, "by the Seine the other night... How did you know it was going to be an ambush?"

"When there is doubt... Any doubt at all... Then there's *no* doubt. That's the first thing they teach you."

"And who is they?"

"... I don't remember..." Sam looked at Vincent and smiled. "That's the second thing they teach you."

"So," Vincent said as he inhaled deeply, "Why do you do this?"

"Do what?"

"Continue on with this game we are playing? There is no money... We are now pitted against the very people who were supposed to pay us. Why not find that ranch in Montana with your long nosed cattle?"

"Horned."

"What?"

"Horned. Long *horned* cattle, not nosed."

"Ahh..."

"I see you like to listen in on other people's conversations."

Vincent shrugged, "Either way... Jean-Pierre shares everything with me. There is no need for me to keep an ear to his doors... At any rate, why do you continue when it would be so much easier to give up?"

"... It's my goddamn job," Sam said with a certain amount of fading conviction and enthusiasm.

"So... We hear it aloud for the first time. Confirmed. You are with the CIA. You are a cop."

"Not totally, but in a way, yes. I do dark ops, wet work. But it's all freelance now. There's no trace of me in any of the agency's files. If I get picked up... They don't know who I am. Never heard of me."

"The ugly stuff."

"That it is, my friend. It's very ugly."

"... And not so very Zen. Not so much the modern Samurai."

"I never made that claim."

Vincent straightened in his seat and reached for the rear view mirror.

"Here they come. Don't turn around. I have them in the mirror. Gregor is still alive."

"All things come to he who waits... Well, if Gregor's still walkin' 'n' talkin' that can only mean one thing."

"They haven't picked up the Package yet."

"Bingo. I think our friends might be going to the P.O. What do you think?"

Sam lifted a newspaper up to his face as Vincent slid down below the window frame. About seven or eight car lengths behind them, Deirdre unlocked the Fiat and dropped in behind the wheel. Seamus shoved Gregor into the rear seat, then jumped in the

passenger's side. They drove to the end of Rue de Glaçon and made a sharp left. Vincent pulled himself up, started the Citroën and followed.

Clearly Vincent knew Paris much better than Deirdre. It enabled him to remain a good distance behind the Fiat. He also knew the location of every major post office in the city, and as she worked the Fiat past the old opera house, he felt confident he knew exactly which post office she was headed for. He allowed her to take her own route and scooted down Boulevard Houssmann. Vincent then made a quick left onto Rue Drouot, another left onto Rue Richer, and parked forty feet from the Rue le Peletier post office. A minute later Deirdre arrived and parked on the opposite side of the street.

"Nicely done, Vincent," Sam said.

"I would hope you could have done the same thing if we were in New York."

"Not without running over a few dozen pedestrians."

They watched as Seamus opened the Fiat's rear door for Gregor. Gregor stepped out and Seamus kept a pistol pressed into his back, again, covered with the overcoat. They crossed the street and entered through the building's large oak doorway while Deirdre sat in the Fiat with the motor running.

Sam pulled a five-franc coin from his pocket, flipped it in the air and said, "Call it."

"Heads."

"Heads it is. Do you want to take the boys or the girl? We can't let them make it back to the car."

"I'll take the men. How do you want to play it?"

Sam looked from the post office to the Fiat and back again.

"Okay," he said, "I'll take care of Deirdre and the car. When Seamus and Gregor exit, you intercept. Seamus is a real scumbag. Don't worry about wasting him. Get the Package. Make it clean. We'll meet back here."

Sam eased out of the Citroén and crossed the street. Vincent stayed behind the wheel, waiting for the men to come out of the post office. After he squeezed through two parked cars, Sam walked up to a flower-shop window. He could easily see Deirdre's reflection as she concentrated on the post office doors across the street. Her pistol rested on the passenger's seat in clear view. Sam turned and walked up to the Fiat. Deirdre's window was down.

"How've you been?" he asked as he leaned toward her.

Deirdre immediately grabbed for her gun but Sam was quicker. He reached into the window and met her hand as she swung gun across her chest. He twisted her wrist so that it was pointed directly at her nose.

"You have two options as I see it; pull the trigger or give the damn thing to me."

Deirdre released her grip on the gun. Sam moved the weapon behind his back and stuffed it into his belt.

"Good choice."

She looked up at him for the first time, and once again an instant communication passed between them. They both had trouble shaking it.

"Why?" he asked.

"Why? You ask me why? You're with the CIA for Christ's sake."

"Don't ever listen to a Russian."

"What the hell was I supposed to do...? To think...?" She took a breath and turned back to the post office. "Besides, it's Seamus' show. I follow orders."

"That's what I mean by, why? Orders? Jesus. The goddamn peace process is in the works. If Seamus gets this Package it flushes the whole thing down the toilet. Look at the vote. Your people want some fucking peace in their lives. They're tired... They're tired of it all. Can't you see that?"

"Peace? What the hell do you know about peace?"

Sam didn't answer her.

"It's only the money, Sam. Seamus knows he can barter it for cash. It's not political. It's the bloody money."

"Yeah... But what does he do with money once he gets it?"

Across the street Seamus and Gregor were emerging from the post office. Seamus was carrying the case under his left arm. It had been wrapped in brown paper, but its distinctive shape could easily be seen through the thick wrapping. He kept his weapon jammed into the small of Gregor's back as they moved into the street.

Vincent stepped from the Citro en and placed a canvas bank bag over his pistol to disguise it. He then began to work his way through the traffic toward the two men.

Sam reached for the Fiat's door handle and unlatched it.

"Get out of the car," he ordered Deirdre.

"No, I don't think I will."

Sam retrieved her pistol from his belt and pressed it to her temple.

"Get out of the car or I'll blow your brains out. I mean it, Deirdre. I'm sorry to say, but this is bigger than you."

She brought her cool blue eyes back to his and said, "I don't think you can do it. But either way... I have no tomorrow. You don't either, Sam... Go ahead... Pull the trigger. I'll see you in hell."

Deirdre then drove her leg into the Fiat's door. It swung out and smashed into Sam's right side six inches above his new stitches. As he dropped down to his knees in pain, she slammed the Fiat into gear and swerved across the moving traffic, angling for Vincent on the other side. Several cars swerved wildly to avoid her, the drivers pounding their horn and screaming obscenities. The squeal of her tires easily drew Vincent's attention and his

only course of action, to avoid being run over, was to jump onto the hood of a parked Saab. Deirdre then raced the car forward and met Seamus in front of the post office.

Vincent rolled over the Saab to the sidewalk and took aim at Seamus as he pushed Gregor into the rear of the Fiat. Vincent squeezed off a round. The bullet missed Seamus by a half an inch and imbedded into the car's roof. Seamus jumped into the front seat while Vincent placed three more slugs through the back window. The glass shattered and flew across Rue Richer like a wave of glittering rhinestones.

By this time Sam had made it back to the Citro en and driven it into the traffic lane. He pulled up to Vincent and beeped the horn twice. Vincent leapt over the Saab and jumped into the passenger's side. The Fiat had already sped through the stoplight at the corner.

"What the hell happened?" Vincent yelled.

"Put your seatbelt on."

After he did, Sam stomped on the gas and raced through the red light. Vincent repeated himself.

"What happened back there?"

"... I don't know."

"You don't know? You don't know? You had her right there. Why didn't you shoot her, for God's sake?"

Sam wheeled the Citro en around a corner and down a narrow side street. The Fiat was nowhere in sight.

"Shit. Where the hell did they go?"

"Turn right... Okay, right after the hardware store. Left."

"Left or right?"

"Left... Left."

The Fiat passed in front of them a half a block up.

"There," Vincent pointed. "Ahead of us... Why didn't you kill this bitch when you had the chance...?"

"I didn't... So just drop it, all right, Vincent?"

Vincent watched the Fiat weave through traffic ahead of them. He then slowly turned to Sam. Something seemed to click in his head.

"Son of a bitch... You slept with her, didn't you?"

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### Chapter Thirty-four

"Why didn't you kill this bastard when you had the chance...?"

"I didn't... So just drop it, all right, Seamus?"

Seamus watched the Citroén weave through traffic behind them. He then slowly turned to Deirdre. Something seemed to click in his head.

"Son of a bitch... You slept with him, didn't you?"

"Just drop it, for Christ's sake, will you? Keep an eye on them. How close are they."

Seamus twisted his head to the rear once more.

"They're moving up. Find a highway. I'll be able to get a clear shot if we can force them to cruise up next to us."

Seamus then lifted the case and concentrated on Gregor who was huddled on the back seat.

"This better be the genuine article or I'll put you through a death that would stretch the limits of your feeble Eastern European imagination."

"It is, I swear," Gregor mumbled as he tried to crouch further into the rear seat, fearing a barrage of bullets was due from the Citroén at any moment.

"Well, at this point, it makes very little difference. The games are over. If it turns out the contents of this case are not genuine, you're a dead man... But you know what, Gregor? Even if it is genuine article... I'm going to take a tremendous amount of pleasure in



handing you over to Deirdre here. Because I believe you have a wee bit of explaining to do to her."

"Shit," Deirdre shouted as a large truck pulled into the intersection ahead of her, completely blocking all cross traffic. The Citroén was about fifteen cars back, and in the mirror she could see Sam and Vincent step out from the car and begin to run toward them.

"They're coming at us."

Seamus jumped from the Fiat and aimed his automatic at Vincent who was now charging between the stagnated traffic. But an old man slid out from his car and blocked Seamus' shot. The old man began to swear at the truck-driver and shake his fist. But when he saw Seamus' pistol pointed directly at his face he dove back into his car with amazing agility. Seamus squeezed off three rounds. They flew past Vincent's right ear and he crouched behind one of the stalled cars. Sam kept moving toward Deirdre on the other side. When he was ten feet from her, the truck moved out of the intersection and Deirdre called out to Seamus.

"Get in, we're moving. Hurry up."

Seamus jumped into the Fiat and she sped through the green light.

"Son of a bitch," Sam bellowed. He ran back to the Citroén. "Vincent... They're off again. Let's move it."

Vincent joined Sam at the car and they darted through the stoplight a second before it turned red. Sam laid on the horn in an attempt to get the other cars offer up some room, but no one made the slightest attempt to get out of his way.

"Can you see them, Vincent? I've lost them. Where the hell are they? Shit."

"There. There," Vincent pointed. "Right ahead. They're turning... Make a left."

"Here?"

"Yes, there, go left. No, left. Over there. Left. Left. Jesus Christ, turn left, will you?"

Sam swung the wheel hard to his left and the rear-end of Citroén spun around and slammed into a parked car. Sam downshifted into first gear and raced after the Fiat.

"I see them. They're up ahead. Where the fuck can they go? They've got no place to hide."

"I don't know," Vincent barked over the engine's whine. "They have no safe-house left, but they're heading back to the Île de la Cité. It is nothing but congestion this time of day."

The Citroén crossed over a dip in the street at about forty miles an hour. Both men flew up in their seats and bashed their heads into the ceiling as the car lifted off the ground and smashed back down into the asphalt. They continued to race along in an attempt to catch up. They watched as Deirdre tore through the moving traffic like a formula one racer, weaving in and out of the oncoming cars, cutting half of them off, and forcing the drivers to slam on their brakes. After a minute or two Sam swerved the Citroén onto Quai des Célestins. He'd lost her again.

"Try the tunnels," Vincent said. "Where else could they be?"

He pointed to the tubes that bypassed traffic, burrowing under the quais of the First Arrondissement. Sam laid a twenty-foot patch of rubber and headed for the tunnel entrance.

"Shit," he said as he approached, doing close to seventy miles an hour, "Which one? Vincent, which one? Right or left?"

Vincent squinted in an attempt to spot the Fiat in the darkened tube.

"I can't see... I can't see anything. Try the left."

Sam pressed the accelerator to the floor and headed for the left hand tube. When he was nearly on top of it Vincent was able to spot the Fiat in the distance... On the right side.

"No," he bellowed, "The right. The right. Take the right tube."

Sam jerked the wheel to the right, missing the concrete divider post by only six inches. The Citroën fishtailed once more and slammed into the far wall, but Sam was able to maintain control as he accelerated into the tunnel, all the while laying on the horn.

"Why are you driving?" Vincent screamed as Sam darted between the slower moving cars, cutting off more than a few. "You're not even French. You don't live here. Why are you driving? You don't know where the hell you're going. You don't know where we are. You're going to get us killed." He grabbed the dashboard and braced himself for his impending death. His knuckles began to turn white as Sam pushed the Citroën up to ninety miles an hour.

"Vincent?"

"What?"

"Shut the hell up and light me a cigarette."

"You want a cigarette? Now?"

"Yeah."

"I thought you quit?"

"I changed my mind. I'll quit tomorrow."

Vincent lit a Gauloise and stuffed it into Sam's mouth as they skyrocketed out of the tunnel.

"Right. Right, here," Vincent called out after he lit his own cigarette. "There they are. Heading toward the Arc de Triomphe. Do you see them?"

"Got 'em."

After ten more blocks, the Fiat sped into the wide plaza that surrounded the huge arch. Deirdre circled the arch in a counterclockwise direction. The Citroén was gaining, having less cargo and a bigger engine. On the opposite side of the arch, the Fiat angled off onto the Avenue de la Grande Armée and raced toward Porte Maillot and the Bois de Boulogne. Pedestrian dove from the crosswalks as the two cars approached.

After another ten blocks, Deirdre passed over the Périphérique, the beltway that surrounded Paris. She then took a sharp left and headed down the entrance ramp. Within fifteen seconds, Sam made the exact same move, following her onto the Périphérique.

"Got you now," Sam grinned as he downshifted the Citroén and raced up along side of the Fiat on the right.

Seamus looked at him and returned the smile. He then swung his automatic out of the window and unloaded seven rounds into the Citroén. Sam ducked and pounced on the brakes, but not before all the windows on the driver's side of the car exploded in a wave of broken glass.

"Son of a bitch, they're shooting at us."

Vincent raised an eyebrow and said, "Brilliant observation, mon ami."

"Are you alright?"

"Mais, oui."

Vincent lowered his window and leaned out, a pistol poised in his right hand.

"Get closer," he called, "I can get their tires."

"Forget it. At this speed they'll kill everyone on this road. Including you and me."

Deirdre kept her foot pressed down on the accelerator and eventually the Fiat reached its top speed of nearly ninety miles and hour. Sam kept the Citroén forty feet behind her. Traffic had become somewhat heavier, but she was doing an excellent job of

weaving in and out. After a quarter of a mile the roadway dipped into another tunnel. Sam started to inch up on her.

"See if you can get a decent shot at Seamus," he said. "If we can get him out of the picture, maybe we can turn this thing around. I can talk to her."

Vincent leaned once more out of the Citro en and tried to follow the Fiat with his pistol.

"Get me closer," he yelled.

As Sam moved up on the Fiat, Seamus unhooked his seatbelt, turned, and fired off another wild clip of ammunition in their direction. The bullets scattered; two of them hitting drivers of other cars. The cars then spun out of control, smashing into the tunnel walls and creating a massive pile-up in their wake. Sam continued to crawl up on the Fiat.

"I can't get a clean shot, Sam. Back off. You're going to get us killed."

Vincent pulled his pistol back through the window. A flashing road sign was illuminated at the far end of the tunnel indicating the exit to the A13 freeway had been temporarily closed for repairs. It was blocked off with a row of orange rubber highway cones. They watched as Deirdre plowed her way through the rubber cones and headed up the closed off ramp.

"Shit," Vincent said, "It's been closed for a week. A fuel truck exploded below it. There is no way she can get through. The entire over-pass was melted. It's been removed. The roadway drops off thirty feet."

Deirdre took the exit turn at about sixty-five miles an hour. Any faster and the Fiat would have been up on two wheels. And at that speed, the concrete roadblocks seemed to pop up out of nowhere. She jumped on the brakes with both feet and struggled to keep the car from spinning out of control and tumbling off the side of the ramp. Gregor rolled onto the floor in the back, covering his head with his hands. Time seemed to pass in slow

motion as the Fiat screeched its way toward the barriers. Deirdre attempted to steer the car toward a three-foot break in the concrete roadblocks in hopes it would soften the impact.

And it did.

But only a little. The Fiat slammed into the two barriers with such force it moved them apart. It continued on for another three or four feet, which left it hanging over the edge of the ramp, front tires dangling into the open space that had been created when a section of roadway had been removed for repairs. And since Seamus had unfastened his seatbelt, the sudden impact sent him flying face first into the windshield. The safety glass cracked and buckled under the collision, but held. Seamus' nose was pushed back into his face with a tremendous force. And after all came to rest, he flopped back into the passenger's seat completely unconscious, and bleeding heavily from several places around his eyes, nose, ears, and mouth.

Sam didn't take the curve any more cautiously than Deirdre, and as he approached the roadblock he reacted in much the same way; he jumped on the brakes. The Citroén's braking system was far better than the Fiat's, and Sam almost made it to a complete stop.

Almost, but not quite.

When he plowed into the rear of the Fiat, he was probably going no more than five miles an hour, but it was enough to give the car the push it needed to tumble off the rampway and fall the thirty feet down to the construction site below.

Vincent and Sam ran from the Citroén to the edge of the ramp. The Fiat had ended up on its roof. However, it wasn't completely crushed. Obviously it had hit nose first and flipped over. Flames were beginning to shoot from the front of the car. The two men watched as Gregor slithered his way out of the open space that was once the rear window. He carried the case in his left hand. He glanced up at Sam and Vincent for a second, gave them a look that reeked of anxiety, and took off through the construction site.

"Shit," Sam roared as he began to look for ways to climb down to the Fiat. The faint sound of police cars could be heard approaching from north.

Vincent grabbed Sam's arm and said, "We have to go. There is no way down there. We don't have time."

They stood and watched for another minute. Deirdre was the next to crawl from the car as flames now engulfed the entire engine compartment. She took a few steps toward Gregor and stopped. She then turned and watched as the flames grew. After a second or two, Deirdre ran to the passenger's side of the Fiat. She dropped to her knees, reached in for Seamus and dragged him from the wreckage an instant before the entire thing exploded in a huge blaze of red/orange fire.

"Sam... We have to go."

"Seamus..." Sam mumbled, as he shook his head from side to side. "Look at him. The son of a bitch is still alive."

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### Chapter Thirty-five

"Why don't you drive?" Sam said as he trotted over to the right side of the Citroén.

"I intend to."

Vincent slammed the car into reverse and glided back down the freeway ramp. The roadway was completely empty; the long stream of vehicles having been jammed at the pile-up in the tunnel. He drove along at the speed limit for another four exits, and eventually entering cars and trucks served to return the traffic to normal congestion, the drivers oblivious to the chaos behind them. After another few exits, Vincent worked the Citroén into the right lane and veered off into a truck-stop.

"I need to sit and have a coffee," he explained. "I need to sit and catch my breath... This road only goes in a one big circle and I'm beginning to feel that there is some metaphor in that."

"Right."

The truck-stop was arranged more like a cafeteria. Vincent and Sam both picked up trays out of habit and slid them along the stainless steel counter like zombies until they reached the coffee machine. They each took a double serving of espresso, paid for it and retreated to a small table overlooking the Périphérique. Vincent dropped into the fiberglass



seat and let out an elongated sigh. Sam slid into the chair on the other side and began drumming his fingers on the table.

"Everyone is running out of time," Sam said. "Gregor... Seamus... Deirdre... Me..."

"So, where does he go?"

"Gregor...? I don't know. Hell, it's your city, you tell me. The IRA's looking for him. The Russians are looking for him. I'm looking for him."

"I say, he goes to the Russians. To make a deal. He has the case again. Why not...? Who can he trust at this point? Not the Irish. They tried to kill him."

"So did the Russians."

Sam looked out the window lost in thought. He continued to drum his fingers on the table. After a minute he brought two fingers up to his lips indicating he'd like another cigarette. Vincent pulled his Gauloise from his pocket, shook out the last two smokes, and they lit up. Vincent then crumpled the package and tossed it next to the ashtray.

"Thanks," Sam said, "I'll buy the next pack."

"I won't hold my breath."

"Okay... I think you're right on this. Gregor has to deal the case to the Russians. Any cash he might have had is now long gone. It's been lost in the shuffle. He has no choice but to deal."

Sam took a long drag from his cigarette before he continued.

"... But he's not going to come in until he can work out some sort of safe exchange. And that means a public place. They'd rather kill him to get the case than pay him for it, that much is clear. Gregor's going to want some animation before he meets anyone."

"Well, he had better work this out soon... Before the Irish catch up with him."

"I don't think the Irish are moving with a great deal of alacrity at this point, but you're right, he can't wait for ever."

"So... Where does he go? And where does he set up his meet?"

"You go to what you know."

"An old safe-house...? I don't think so," Vincent said shaking his head slightly.

"No," Sam agreed, "They're blown. Whoever these Russians are, they know those locations better than Gregor. Ten'll get you twenty they have them all staked out by now."

"So... Where?"

Sam placed his cigarette in the ashtray, then leaned his elbows on the table and rubbed his eyes.

"Alright," he sighed, "We're missing something here. We're not looking at this from the right angle."

He glanced up at Vincent, who now seemed to be looking past him, at something on the other side of the seating area.

"What?" Sam asked as he turned to follow Vincent's gaze across the room.

"Nothing. I was just looking at that family over there." He pointed. "Father, mother, two daughters... What do they know...? Their lives travel on... Oblivious to the machinations of the netherworld. The girls with their little red suitcases... Afraid to leave their treasured possessions in an unattended automobile for more than a minute. The whole family having their mini vacation... Eating shitty food in a lousy truck stop and loving every minute of it because they are one... I think we have missed something in our lives, Sam... You and me."

"Thank you so much, Marcel Proust," Sam said as he turned back to face Vincent. "Can we now move on with the problem at hand?"

"Oui..." Vincent shrugged. "So... You are on the run. You are Russian. The city is French. Where do you go?"

Sam picked his cigarette up again. But before he put it in his mouth he turned back to the family.

"What?" Vincent asked.

Sam shook his head and returned to Vincent.

"I don't know... Nothing. There's something there."

He took a drag from the Gauloise before moving on.

"Okay... It's where has he *been*? Where has Gregor *been*? That's the question."

"The only time he was alone... That we don't know about, was when we were getting the CD-ROM for him. Which is when we think he obtained the fake case."

"Right... So where did he have the fake case made?"

Vincent waived his cigarette at Sam and said, "No, no, no, he could not have had it made. There was no time for that."

"Okay, fine, so he bought one like it and painted it, or dyed it, or whatever."

"Where did he get the dye?"

"No. Where did he get the case?"

Sam turned once more to the family; now staring at the girls' suitcases. Vincent followed Sam's lead.

Sam said, "It's the same damn case. The girl's cases are exactly the same."

"They are red, the real one is beige. Gregor could only find a black one and he dyed it. You're right, the girls have the same cases."

Sam turned back and stuffed his cigarette into the ashtray.

"They look French to me, Vincent. Go find out where they got the damn cases."

"They look French? What do French people look like?"

"Like those people over there. Go ask them."

Vincent stood and Sam said, "Give me fifty francs."

"What for?"

"Gauloise."

Vincent handed Sam the money and the two men headed off in different directions.

When Sam returned with the cigarettes, Vincent was already back at the table.

"Well?" he said.

"Ice-skates."

"What?"

"They are cases for ice-skates."

"Ice-skates? Ice-skates? Gregor wouldn't know an ice-skate case from a hole in the ground."

"I think maybe we have misjudged him. Obviously he knew it was an ice-skate case the moment Deirdre showed us the photograph. He just didn't have time to locate the right color... So, where does one buy ice-skate cases?"

"No... We're going at this bass-ackwards," Sam said, rubbing his eyes once again. "Forget the case. Forget the case. There has to be a million places that sell the damn things. If we're so convinced Gregor's going to deal this to the Russians... We find the Russians. The Russians will take us to Gregor."

Vincent stood, looked at his watch, jammed the Gauloise into his shirt pocket and said, "Let's go... Eugene closes in twenty-five minutes."

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### Chapter Thirty-six

Eugene was just locking up his video shop when Vincent and Sam approached. He smiled at them and said, "Let me guess... You fellas are looking for that new Russian language action flick?"

"Are we too late?" Vincent asked. "Are you going home? We can make a quick selection, I'm sure."

Eugene unlocked the security gates and slid them open again.

"For an old and valued customer... Eugene's is always open."

He hit the light switch as he walked in and added, "Step into my office."

"Do we still talk movies?" Sam asked.

Eugene and Vincent both nodded.

"Did you ever see a Francis Ford Coppola film called *The Conversation*?" Eugene asked. "It's one of my favorites. It's the story of an electronic eavesdropper who's driven to near madness by his own bugging devices."

He pointed to various locations around his shop and tapped his ear a few times, indicating he felt the place had been wired by the police.

"Never saw it," Sam said, "Is it any good?"

"Excellent. You're missing something great. Gene Hackman, Robert Duvall, Allen Garfield, Frederic Forrest, and Harrison Ford in a walk-on."

"I'll try to catch it sometime."

"You should... By the end, the Hackman character has some serious doubts about the life he's chosen. He begins to question the morality of it all."

"Well, hell, that certainly rings a bell... Maybe I have seen it."

"I have it in four languages. So... Anytime you want it, just let me know."

"As much as I'd like to see Hackman blithering away in Farsi, we're in the mood for a Russian movie tonight."

Eugene walked back behind his counter and opened his loose-leaf notebook.

"Okay. My guess is, we start by looking for the film I was trying to rent you gentlemen earlier."

"The one where the star is a little more high profile? The flashier production company?"

"That's the one."

Eugene flipped through the book and said, "If I remember correctly this one starts out at the Hôtel George Cinq. Like I said, he's a high-roller. I can't recall the actor's name off hand... Mikhi something, I think. Anyway, he plays a Russian mobster in this film... Sound like the flick you've been looking for?"

"Yeah, I think it is," Sam said. "I guess he's got a bunch of bodyguards if he's a mobster, huh?"

"Let me look at the cast list."

Eugene ran his finger over the page as if he were looking for the performers.

"Yep... It looks like six actors are listed as bodyguards here. Of course they're all Russians, so I doubt if you'd recognize any of their names. Apparently four of them go to the South of France at one point in the film... And don't come back."

"So by the end of the movie, you're saying there are only two left?"

"Possibly, but I'd hate to ruin it for you."

"Well, tell me this, are there any other scenes that take place here in Paris? I'd really like to see some local color, if you know what I mean? Specifically some scenes in public places. Places where there might be a lot of people. Lots of extras. I've always been into crowd scenes."

"I don't think so. The mobster in this flick is flashy, but he tends to show up in quiet, out of the way places. You know, the dark intimate joints."

"Okay... Speaking of intimate... Any love interest in this thing? There's nothing like a tastefully photographed sex scene, I always say."

"Oh, yeah, man, this has sex. A tiny little girl, too. Played by Nastasia Kirilova."

Sam looked at Vincent and then said, "Nastasia Kirilova? Nastasia Kirilova? Why do I know that name?"

"She's a skater. An ice-skater," Vincent said.

"Yeah, the ice-skater," Eugene added as he pointed to the poster in his shop window. "As a matter of fact, she's in town tonight with the Bulgari Ice Show. At the Palais Omnisports. All the details are on that poster out there."

Sam walked back to the doorway. He leaned out and perused the poster, then returned to the counter.

"You know what, Vincent? I think I'd rather go to the Ice Show than watch a damn movie."

Vincent looked at Eugene and said, "Thank you for your time, my friend. I'm sorry we are not taking a film, but what can I do...? He's a tourist. I try to make him happy."

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### **Chapter Thirty-seven**

The Omnisports was only a ten-minute drive from Eugene's Video Rental. Built in 1983, it was a modern glass structure that sat on the Right Bank of the Seine about two kilometers southeast of the Île de la Cité. The interior could be rearranged to accommodate any occasion, from opera to bicycle racing to ping pong tournaments. Vincent parked the Citroén a few blocks away near the Gare de Lyon, opting to avoid the flood of cars now angling toward the arena's large parking area. The place could seat close to seventeen thousand, depending on the event, and the Bulgari Ice Show appeared to be a near sell-out.

Sam and Vincent approached the Omnisports on the Seine side. Vincent pulled his detective's badge from his pocket and flashed it at Sam.

"This should get us in with no trouble."

"Have you got any money left?"

"Yes."



"Why don't we try to buy a ticket? The longer we can remain anonymous, the better. Gregor is the only person in the arena that can recognize us. As long as we avoid him, we're just a couple of guys here for the ice show."

Sam watched as cars continued to pour into the parking area, while Vincent moved off to the ticket booth. After a ten-minute wait, Vincent returned and they entered through the arena's south gate.

"Let's first find out what this Mikhi bastard looks like," Sam said. "Hopefully he's running late."

The two men crossed over to the escalators and headed down two more levels until they saw a large group of teen-aged fans, mostly girls, gathered at a roped off area. Television monitors hung from the ceiling at twenty-foot intervals, showing the action on the ice, which at this point was nil. Sam and Vincent walked over to the group of fans and stood behind them under one of the monitors. On the other side of the of the group, three security guards chatted with one another, and beyond them, a tunnel led to a private section of the parking lot. Within five minutes a white stretched Mercedes-Benz limousine pulled up to the opening. The driver raced out, opened the rear door and Nastasia Kirilova gracefully stepped from the car.

Upon spotting her, the fans erupted in spontaneous cheers, screams and enthusiastic applause. Several tossed flowers in her direction. She returned their adulation with a beaming smile and a few short waves from her delicate hand, then proceeded to stroll past them and down the corridor toward the dressing rooms. She was closely followed by three men. One was wearing a two thousand dollar Italian suit. He had a red carnation in his lapel and carried a thin Mark Cross attaché case. The other two had on cheaper suits, cut to afford them a little more room under the arms to accommodate a weapon of choice.

Sam leaned into Vincent and whispered, "Mister Carnation's our man."

"I believe you're right - Straight out of a cheap television show. It looks as though Eugene's information regarding the number of bodyguards was also correct."

Sam glanced at his watch and said, "Seven-thirty... Half hour to show time. Let's go back upstairs, see if we can figure out how Gregor's going to pull this stunt off."

As they stepped back onto the escalator Vincent said, "What makes you so certain it's tonight?"

"It's tonight."

"How do you know?"

"It's tonight."

"Yes, but how do you know?"

"No one brings an attaché case on a date to a friggin' ice show. The pay-off's in that case; bet on it. Didn't you see the way he was hanging onto the thing? What do you think he's got in there, his lunch?"

After they reached the top level they walked out into the arena. The place was already nearly three-quarters full. Vendors were hawking lavishly colored programs and small flashlights, and every face of every person was covered with a smile in anticipation of the show to come. Vincent pointed to an area at rink-side on the opposite end of the arena.

"If he watches the show he'll be sitting in that section over there. It's where all the high-rollers park their butts."

"Well, what do you think? Does he come out to watch the show, or does he sit in the dressing room and watch it on T.V.?"

Vincent seemed to scan the arena without answering Sam. After a moment he said, "Wait here. I'll find out."

He worked his way around the arena's concrete walk until he was nearly on top of the VIP seating. A security guard was standing at the entrance of a tunnel that led off to the press boxes. Vincent chatted with him for three or four minutes and returned to Sam.

"What's up?" Sam asked.

"It seems that our friend with the red carnation has been here for every show this week. He comes out to the luxury seats when the opening lights dim and stays until Nastasia finishes her second routine, after the intermission."

"He sits through the intermission?"

"Apparently he's addicted to the clowns."

"Figures. He looks like the type. How did you get all this?"

Vincent cocked his thumb toward the security guard and said, "I went to high school with him."

"Right."

Vincent then handed Sam a three-inch square laminated card, and kept one for himself.

"Here," he said. "It's a press pass. It may come in handy."

"I'm impressed," Sam said, looking down at the pass. Flipping it over to the photo side, he added, "I'm not so sure I can pass for African, though."

Vincent laughed, "These were the only two he had. The reporters turned them back yesterday after the show... Don't worry, nobody looks at them that closely."

"Let's see how close we can get to the dressing rooms."

Sam checked his watch once more.

"Ten minutes," he said.

"What if Gregor's already made the swap?"

"Then we deal with Mikhi."

They walked back into the concession area, headed for the escalator, and rode it to the basement. There they worked their way down a long tunnel until they reached the spot where the limousine had dropped off Mikhi and Nastasia. They quickly flashed their press passes to the security guards and strolled down another tunnel until they reached a large red velvet curtain that obviously opened onto the skating rink. Three clowns were doing their physical warm-up exercises in preparation for the show.

Thick rubber padding had been laid down over the concrete walkways to protect their skate blades from any damage from the rough surface. The rubber padding stretched down another long tunnel. On the left side sat four blue doors adorned with gold glittered five-pointed stars and the names of the featured skaters. Nastasia's suite was the first.

On the right side of the corridor was the chorus dressing room. There were three doors but all opened into the same space. Twenty skaters, male and female, lounged around in various stages of undress, applying make-up, tightening skate laces and slithering into sequined costumes.

Sam and Vincent found a spot near two photographers at the rink's entrance and waited. After another five minutes, Mikhi stepped out of Nastasia's suite, still carrying his thin attaché case. He stuck his head into the chorus dressing room and whistled for his two bodyguards, who quickly joined him in the hallway. They passed within four feet of Sam and Vincent and strolled back down the tunnel toward the escalators.

"Must be show time," Sam said. "Let's find some seats... I'd hate to miss any of the action."

They gave Mikhi a minute to clear and moved off, working their way back up to the second tier of seats. It placed them one level above the VIP section with an excellent view of the three seats that remained empty.

After a minute the house lights began to dim. A mellifluous French voice came out of the darkness and persuaded all the children to turn on their flashlights and wave them in the air. Laser lights began to shoot down from the ceiling in a spectrum of color, while a tight spotlight swept throughout the crowd. Then the orchestra began with an all too familiar Prokofiev piece and the lights popped up to full force, revealing three clowns mimicking a Spanish bullfight, and taking colossal pratfalls onto the ice. Nearly every child in the audience was doubled over in laughter at the sight.

In the darkness Mikhi and his bodyguards had slipped into the three empty seats in the VIP section. And as Sam and Vincent glanced over, Mikhi was also doubled over in laughter at the clowns, while his goons rolled their eyes at him behind his back.

"He seems to be enjoying the show," Vincent said facetiously.

"Uh-huh," Sam said in a distracted tone, as he scanned the crowd, looking for Gregor.

After the clown routine, a couple appeared dressed as Romeo and Juliet and began an ice-dancing duet, again to the music from the Prokofiev ballet. Three more acts followed, all performed to easily recognizable music by Tchaikovsky, Prokofiev, and Shostakovich, with a little Stravinsky and Rachmaninoff thrown in for good measure.

Sam again glanced at his watch, and as he did the house lights dipped into darkness once more. A single spotlight focused on the large red velvet curtain and the announcer's well-toned French voice returned to the loudspeaker.

*"And now, ladies and gentlemen, with great pleasure and pride, Bulgari is pleased to present its star attraction: former Olympic gold-medalist and three-time world champion, Nastasia Kirilova."*

The Omnisports arena exploded with a huge round of applause as Nastasia skated to center rink, followed the entire way by her spotlight. She performed a series of balletic

bows, acknowledging all four sides of the audience. The house lights were then raised to a level that resembled a bright moonlit evening as she glided into the beginning of her routine.

Sam watched her fluid movements with one eye while keeping his peripheral vision glued to Mikhi. Nastasia seemed to literally float on the surface of the ice. Her routine took her to every corner of the rink, enabling her to get as close to all of her adoring fans as possible. About a minute and a half into the performance, Vincent tapped Sam on the arm and pointed in Mikhi's direction.

"He has company," Vincent murmured.

Sam brought his full attention to the dimly lit VIP section. An usher was working his way past the other High-Rollers toward Mikhi. When he reached him, he bent down and whispered something into Mikhi's ear. A confused expression swept across Mikhi's face. He looked from one bodyguard to the other as the usher moved off. Mikhi then rose, his look of confusion quickly changing to annoyance. The bodyguards stood as well. Mikhi grabbed his attaché case and the three of them pushed their way out of the VIP section and headed down the ramp toward the concession area.

"Son of a bitch," Sam growled, "it's going down now. Let's move it."

They ran into the tunnel, down one flight of stairs and raced to the entrance of the VIP section. Mikhi was nowhere in sight.

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### Chapter Thirty-eight

Gregor had been waiting for Mikhi at the far end of the VIP ramp near the concession stand. Mikhi was so annoyed at having been taken away from Nastasia's performance, he nearly walk by Gregor without noticing him. As it was, Gregor was forced to call out to him.

"Hello, Mikhi... Long time, no see."

Mikhi spun on Gregor and spat out, "What is this? The meet was not until later tonight."

"No... The meet is now."

"I'm missing the show. This can all be taken care of later... As agreed. It's too late for changes."

"I wouldn't want you to miss the show, Mikhi. No, no, not tonight. Why don't we step into the skater's lounge? There are TV monitors there. You're right; this evening's show promises to be a special one. I'd hate for you to miss a single second of the action."

Gregor turned and stepped into the skater's lounge. Mikhi and his two goons followed. There were no performers in the room, all having left to prepare for the closing number of the first act.

"They call this the green room," Gregor smiled. "It seems an appropriate place to conduct a financial transaction."

He pointed at the two monitors, one on either end of the room.

"Sit where you like, Mikhi. You can see the show from any angle."

"I'll stand."

"Suit yourself... You have the money, I assume?"

Mikhi didn't answer for a moment, judging Gregor as much as anything. Finally he said, "Well, you know, I was going to go back and get it during the second act. While Nastasia had her break. It's a tremendous amount of cash. Not something I'd like to walk around with. Who knows what could happen?"

Gregor laughed. "I don't think so... Not the way you're hugging onto that attaché. You have the money. We will take care of everything right here."

Mikhi shrugged. "Alright, I might have the money, yes. So... Where is the case?"

Gregor looked up at one of the TV monitors. His lips pinched into a sadistic smile.

"I dramatically beautiful woman, your Nastasia," he said. "Mikhi, you are a very lucky man. I hope you plan to take care of her... I know I would... In a special way."

"Where is the case, Gregor?"

Gregor didn't answer, just watched Nastasia glide around the rink.



"Gregor?" Mikhi repeated. "I have the money. It's in this attaché. Let's conclude our business here and now... And we part as friends... Just like the old days."

Mikhi then placed the attaché case on a small table, pushing two ashtrays aside. He opened it and removed a large envelope and handed it to Gregor.

"These are negotiable securities in the amount you requested. You will have no trouble exchanging them for cash anywhere in the world. That is my end of the bargain, now hold up your end. Where is the beige case?"

"The case is here. Not to worry."

After inspecting the securities, Gregor smiled, crossed the room and groped around behind an overstuffed green leather couch. He pulled the beige ice-skate case from its hiding place and set it on a glass topped coffee table. When he eventually looked back at Mikhi, he was staring down the barrel of an automatic pistol.

"You're a bigger fool than I thought, Gregor."

"Possibly... But before you get too hasty with that weapon, I suggest you listen to some precautions I have taken to insure my own safety."

Gregor seemed a little too relaxed for Mikhi's liking, so he opted to hear him out.

"Alright," he said, "What is it? What are your precautions? But make it fast, because the show is much better in person than it is on these cheap TV monitors."

"Exactly. Here is how this scenario will be played out... I will leave now, and take my fee." He placed the securities under his left arm, removed his cell-phone from his coat pocket and dialed a number. When it was answered he said, "Two minutes," and switched it off.

"What is all this, Gregor?" Mikhi said impatiently. "What do you have in mind?"

"I have a man in the arena. He has a rifle equipped with a laser sighting mechanism. He will be expecting me to call him again as soon as I leave this room..." Gregor glanced at

his watch. "...Which I must do within the next ninety seconds. He is then expecting a second call in ten minutes, where I will notify him that I have left the arena, and am completely safe. If he fails to receive either one of these telephone calls... He will assassinate your lovely Nastasia."

Mikhi took a step backward and rubbed his eyes. He then said, "No, no, Gregor, I need some more time to think your proposal over. This is not something you can spring on someone at the last minute."

"Time is the one thing you don't have, Mikhi." Once again Gregor let out an overly sadistic laugh.

The two bodyguards began to step from the door but Mikhi waved for them to stay put.

"This is a bluff," he said. "Where could you have found a marksman with abilities like that in Paris on such short notice?"

Gregor only looked at his watch and said, "Forty seconds."

Mikhi turned his attention to the TV monitor. Nastasia had been joined by three male skaters. They flew down the rink, weaving in and out of one another with exquisite precision. He then glanced at his bodyguards, who were anxiously awaiting his decision.

"Twenty seconds, Mikhi."

Mikhi shook his head, sighed and said, "Gregor, Gregor, Gregor."

He then raised his pistol and fired four rounds in quick succession, all of them passing through Gregor's brain long before his body dropped onto the carpet. He looked back to his bodyguards, shrugged, and said, "It's the principal of the thing."

He crossed over to the coffee table and placed the securities back into his attaché case. He then looked up to the TV monitor only a second before the sniper's shot rang out, the noise barely audible within the skater's lounge. Nastasia fell to the ice in mid leap like a

sack of flour. The three male skaters quickly huddled around her, while the entire audience sprang to its feet in horror.

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### **Chapter Thirty-nine**

Sam and Vincent had spent the past ten minutes sprinting from one dead-end to another, deep within the concrete bowels of the Omnisports, futilely searching for Gregor and Mikhi. Each turn they'd taken had turned up nothing but a darkened alcove or empty room. They were just returning to the dressing room area for a second look when the sniper's bullet ripped into the Nastasia's chest.

From their location, the rifle shot sounded more like the crack of a small whip than anything more, but it was enough to make them stop and look at each other. Sam then glanced up at a TV monitor that hung above Vincent's head.

"Shit," he said. "Let's go."

The two then ran up one flight of stairs and out onto the lower level of the arena. People were already beginning to panic, and Sam and Vincent had to force their way

through the exiting masses in order to get close enough to see the rink first-hand. And by the time they broke through the crowd, Nastasia was lying motionless on the ice, surrounded by a thick pool of blood, already beginning to solidify on the cold surface. The three male skaters had moved off to one side, while her trainers and manager worked feverishly in an attempt to save her life. After a moment they stood and covered her body with her bloodied sequined cape, indicating they had lost their battle. The entire scene was already ringed with Omnisports security officers.

"It's a diversion," Vincent said.

"Yeah, and a sick one, if you ask me. Right up Gregor's alley."

"I couldn't agree more, but at this point we've got to find the bastard. The scene here is over."

"No."

"No?"

"The limo," Sam said as if a light bulb had suddenly exploded in his head.

"What?"

"The limo. Go back to the beginning. We don't need Gregor, we need Mikhi. That's who's leaving this place with the Package, not Gregor. We have to get to the limo before Mikhi does. It's his ride out of here."

Sam began pushing through the exiting fans, none of which were overly willing to get out of his way. Finally Vincent shoved in front of Sam, holding his phony detective's badge over his head. He began shouting in French.

*"Coming through, coming through. Police. Please stand aside. Police. We have an emergency."*

Sam was surprised at how many people listened to him and actually moved out of their way. Something that wouldn't have happened in New York.

"Follow me," Vincent said, "I know where the limousines park. And with all this hysteria, they won't be able to get to the stage tunnel very quickly. Possibly we can intercept Mikhi's car before it arrives backstage."

They ran down three flights of stairs, circled around to the other side of the arena and exited into the parking area. Extra Police had already arrived on the scene and were beginning to direct traffic, stopping all cars whose drivers appeared in any way suspicious. Most of the cars contained children and were waved through with little or no fuss, but cars having only adults were detained for questioning, turning the lot into one huge traffic jam of blaring horns and bellicose motorists.

"Over there," Vincent pointed. "The limos are over there. In the other section."

They trotted past two empty charter busses, but pulled up short of the limousine staging area. The drivers were being questioned by the police as well, and a line of seven or eight limos had formed behind the checkpoint. Three of them were white stretched Mercedes-Benzes exactly like Mikhi's.

"What do you think?" Sam asked. "Which one's Mikhi's? I can't tell one from the other. They all look the same."

"I think I'd recognize his driver. He was tall and bald with a large mustache."

"All the windows are smoked. I can't see shit. We'll have to wait until they lower them at the checkpoint to yack with the police. Give me a cigarette, will you? This is a pain in the ass."

They both lit up and strolled over to a charter bus and leaned against the door, hoping to look like drivers waiting for their group to exit the Omnisports. The position gave them a direct view of each and every limo driver as he worked his vehicle out of the staging area. And as the driver of the second white Mercedes to exit lowered his window, Vincent said, "That's him. What do you want to do?"

"After he pulls out, we'll follow him around. He'll have to keep it at a snail's pace to get through this mob. On the other side of the arena, when we've lost the police, we'll make a move."

Vincent looked out to the street and said, "More police are coming by the minute. Over there." He pointed, as a group of six or seven police cars pulled up to the curb.

They brought their attention back to the stretched Mercedes and watched as it moved away from the parking area and slowly worked its way through the panicky fans. Sam picked up a position behind the car and followed in its wake, while Vincent trotted ahead. Once the car reached a spot about a hundred yards from Mikhi's pick-up point, Vincent approached the driver and flashed his detective's badge.

The driver lowered his window, leaned out and said, "Oui, monsieur?"

Sam slammed his elbow into the man's face, knocking him back into the limo. He then opened the door, pushed the man over and jumped in behind the wheel. Vincent crossed in front of the car and hopped in the passenger's side. He pulled his pistol and jammed it into the groggy driver's ribs.

*"Don't try anything stupid,"* Vincent said in French. *"This has nothing to do with you."*

*"Monsieur, I am only a driver. I work for the car company. You are right; I have nothing to do with these Russian hoods. Believe me."*

*"Then you'll be just fine... Don't panic."*

Sam began to ease the big Mercedes through the throng of frightened fans toward the tunnel that opened onto the backstage pick-up area. A stocky, powerfully built security guard with sandy blonde hair was attempting to keep the entrance clear of people. His hat seemed too large for his head and the brim kept his face in a darkened shadow. Sam kept one foot on the brake and the other on the gas as the car crawled forward by inches.

"There he is," Vincent said and nodded his head toward the tunnel.

Mikhi and his two guards had just stepped out into the bright lights of the pick-up area. He spotted the white Mercedes limousine and waved with the attaché, indicating he wanted them to move a little faster. The beige ice-skate case dangled in his other hand.

They watched Mikhi through the windshield as Sam continued to inch the limo toward him. But after a minute Mikhi became impatient with the car's progress and started to walk in their direction. His two bodyguards followed.

"Here he comes," Sam whispered. "Get ready."

It happened very swiftly. So swiftly that neither Sam nor Vincent was aware of what was going on until it was terminated. And none of the panicky fans, who were pushing their way along side Mikhi, even realized anything was suspicious until it was over and done; that's how fast Seamus had ditched his security guard's hat, and made his move. His knife had slashed out with such speed, that when it did pick up reflections of light from overhead, the allusion was that of small sparks flying and nothing else.

He'd first gone after Mikhi's bodyguards, driving his knife into one's heart and slicing the other's throat in what seemed like a singular motion. And as Mikhi turned to see his two men drop, Seamus buried his blade into his navel and pulled it straight up until it met Mikhi's heart and lungs. He crumpled to the ground in a heap, unable to utter a word. Seamus then grabbed the beige case and darted back down the tunnel toward the dressing rooms.

"Son of a bitch," Sam howled. "The bastard's still with us."

"Why don't you sound disappointed?" Vincent asked

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## Chapter Forty

Sam and Vincent leapt from the limousine and took off toward the backstage tunnel. People were still streaming from the Omnisports in waves, and as they approached the bodies of the three Russians, their panic turned into genuine hysteria. Sam and Vincent were nearly trampled by the onslaught. Vincent held his detective's badge high in the air, but it was ignored by everyone; their only thoughts now focused on escaping with their lives.

After a minute Sam and Vincent broke through the crowd to the backstage tunnel and raced into the arena. Paramedics had placed Nastasia's body onto a gurney and were wheeling it off on the far side of the rink, leaving a huge pool of crimson blood behind them, coagulating on the bright white surface of the ice.

"Do you see him?" Sam said as he turned and studied the now nearly empty



Omnisports.

"Our only hope is the parking lot. He must have come here by car. And I would bet your friend Deirdre is there. With the motor running."

"I think our *friendship* might be on the outs at this point."

The two men sprinted across the ice to the opposite side of the rink as best they could, the leather soles of their shoes offering virtually no traction on the slippery surface. When they reached the other side they jumped over the low wall, ran through the southern section of the arena and exited onto the outdoor plaza. They quickly crossed the plaza but slowed their pace to a leisurely stroll as they approached the parking lot and the security gate.

"Let's split up," Sam said. "We can cover more ground, and look a hell of a lot less suspicious... And, I wouldn't pull that badge anymore... This place is crawling with cops... Real ones."

"Right."

"And, Vincent?"

"Oui?"

"... This is a take-no-prisoners situation."

"I assumed it always has been, my friend."

They walked through the parking lot entrance together, sliding by a policeman and looking like a couple of patrons off to get their car, the police more concerned about people leaving than entering. But before they had an opportunity to split up, Vincent nudged Sam and said, "There he is... Over there." He cocked his head off to his right and added, "He just stepped behind that mini-van. The blue one."

Sam glanced over to where Vincent was looking just as Seamus emerged from behind the blue van. He was obviously looking for a car; a car that was no longer parked

where he'd left it.

"Follow him," Sam said, "I'll come at him from the other side."

Vincent began to work his way toward Seamus, keeping his face turned in the opposite direction, as if he were looking for his own automobile. Sam strolled off, angling for a second exit gate on the far side of the parking area, all the time checking the drivers of the various cars as he passed, hoping to recognize someone. After a minute he came up to a black Renault and eased his way into the passenger's seat.

At the sound of the door opening Deirdre had instinctively removed her pistol from her coat, so that it was pointing directly at Sam's chest when he spoke.

"Would you do me a favor?" he said.

"What?"

"Well... Actually two favors."

"Yes?"

"The first one is; don't shoot me. The second is; get out of here."

Deirdre didn't answer. She just looked him over with her deep blue eyes. Seeming confused as much as anything.

"Get out of here," he repeated. "It's over. I have back-up."

"What back-up? Vincent?" she smiled.

"More than that. I have real back-up. Company back-up. It's over for you. Drive out of that gate there." He pointed. "They won't stop you... A woman alone, you'll cause no suspicion."

She remained quiet, but no longer directed her gun at him. After a few seconds she placed it on the seat next to her and let out a small sigh.

"Better yet," he said, "get out of the car and walk away." He pointed at the damaged ignition. "Anyone can see the damn thing's been hot-wired. Leave the gun behind... They

won't stop you. They may search you, but they won't hold you up."

Again she let her eyes look him over, eventually saying, "I will if you will... If you come with me... I'll walk away."

Sam gritted his teeth and placed his hands on the dashboard.

"Why?" he asked, "Why did you save that bastard back at the freeway ramp? Why didn't you let him burn? Everything would have been so much simpler with Seamus dead."

Deirdre pondered her answer for a while, eventually saying, "I don't know, Sam, I really don't... I've known him too long, I guess. He still believes in the cause. He's still working for something."

"Fuck the cause, goddamn it. What has the cause ever done for you?"

"It's not that easy. We've been at it for too many years... Jesus, I don't know where I stand any more... And I mean that. I don't know which way to turn."

"Christ."

"Do you think you're any more lost than I am? Do you?"

He didn't answer, only stared out the window.

"I'll walk away, Sam, I really will, but I want you to come with me. Forget the case."

Sam started to speak but stopped short. Through the windshield he spotted Seamus working his way around the jammed traffic toward the Renault. Sam reached for the door handle. Deirdre stopped him.

"Don't, Sam, he'll kill you, I know he will. I can feel it... Forget the bloody case. Come with me. We can make a go of it."

He turned to her and shook his head.

"You don't get it do you...? I need the case, yes, but it's not all about the case, it never has been..."

"What do you mean?"

"It's Seamus."

"What?"

"He's in the way. He's in the way of the peace process. He has to go, it's the only alternative. Too many people want to see this all work out. And I'm not just talking about England and Ireland. Some people in America want it as well. Enough to make sure Seamus doesn't fuck it all up."

Deirdre jaw seemed to go completely slack.

"Seamus?" she whispered.

"That's my job," Sam said. "That's what I do. I do removals. You're not in my picture, only Seamus... So just leave. Walk away."

He stepped from the car, taking her pistol with him. He then leaned back through the window and said, "Get the hell out of here, Deirdre. If not for your sake, then for mine."

Sam straightened and looked off to his right. Seamus was about sixty feet away and moving toward the Renault. It was the first good look Sam had of Seamus' rearranged face. The freeway accident had left it sliced and bruised to an almost purple shade. He'd tried patch it himself with a series of small bandages, but they did very little to hide the extensive damage. He looked like someone had worked him over with a meat tenderizer.

Sam waited until he was certain he had eye contact with Seamus. He then crossed to the driver's side of the Renault, reached in through the window, past Deirdre, and grabbed onto the car's ignition wires. He ripped them from the steering column and the Renault's engine went silent. He held the wires in the air for Seamus to see. The Irishman stopped dead in his tracks. Sam then tossed the wires on the hood of the car and took off after him.

Seamus spun around in a complete circle, searching for an escape route. The police had every exit cordoned off, still checking the exiting motorists. He turned to his right and ran back toward the Omnisports, but only traveled twenty feet before he ran into Vincent. Vincent reached for his pistol, but the sight of Seamus' grotesque face had caught him somewhat off guard, serving to slow his reaction time. Seamus swung the beige case out wide and brought it into the side of Vincent's head at ear level. It knocked him sideways into a yellow BMW, where his head smashed through the rear door window, opening up a large cut on his right cheek. Vincent then dropped to the ground completely unconscious. Seamus stepped over him and continued on toward the arena.

Sam arrived at Vincent a few seconds later. He bent down and checked his pulse. He was still alive, just out cold. He looked up at the driver of the BMW and said, "Wave some air on him with your program. He'll be okay. He'll come to in a few minutes. Don't worry, we'll see that you get your window fixed."

"Je suis désolé, monsieur. Je ne parle pas anglais."

"Never mind."

Sam stood and ran off after Seamus. Seamus had slowed his pace and was trying to pass through the police checkpoint unnoticed. But they stopped him. They wanted to look inside the beige case. Seamus placed the case on the hood of a waiting car and opened it. The policeman removed a large manila envelope, looked around inside the case and tossed the envelope back in. He then handed the case to Seamus, who strolled off toward the Omnisports. Sam opted to try something different.

He continued to trot at medium speed toward the checkpoint, all the while patting his pockets as if he'd lost something. When he reached the policeman, he said, "I lost my car keys. I just want to run back before they close the place up. I'm sure I know where I dropped them."

"Je suis désolé, monsieur. Je ne parle pas anglais."

"Great."

The policeman waved to another cop.

"Jean Claude, Jean Claude... américain."

Jean Claude ambled over, looked Sam up and down and said, "Yes, monsieur?"

"Yeah, I lost my car keys. I just wanted to run back to my seat and see if I can find them."

"Which automobile is your, monsieur?"

Sam turned and pointed to Deirdre's Renault.

"It's the black Renault over there. See it? The one that's not moving anywhere?"

The cop stood up on his toes and spotted the empty car. He then shook his head from side to side and said, "Go. Try to make it quick. You are holding everyone up."

"Thank you, officer."

Sam took off at a run across the plaza toward the arena. Seamus was just entering the Omnisports' south gate and clearly wasn't expecting Sam to break into a full sprint straight from the police checkpoint. Sam entered the south gate only fifteen seconds after him.

The place was almost completely empty. Seamus ran to his right and Sam followed, now only thirty feet behind, and gaining. And as Seamus looked back over his shoulder to check on Sam's position, an ice cream vendor stepped out from her booth to drop the gates down on her counter. Seamus stumbled into her at top speed. They rolled over one another and ended in a heap on the floor, both somewhat shaken from the encounter. Seamus pushed her off to one side and pulled a pistol from under his jacket. But realizing Sam was nearly on top of him, he scrambled over to the woman, grabbed her around the neck and placed his gun to her head. Sam pulled his own pistol, but stopped when he was within ten

feet. Seamus wasn't going to be quite as stupid as Sergi had been back in Arles; he kept his entire body hidden behind the large woman. It was impossible for Sam to get a clean shot.

He smiled at Seamus and said, "So, a Mexican stand-off, is that it?"

"I'll shoot the woman."

"And where does that get you? You lose your shield."

"I swear to you. You drop your weapon, or I kill this woman."

"Seamus... You've been following me for four or five days now. Have you been keeping count? Of the bodies, I mean? Do you think one more's going to make any goddamn difference at this point?"

Seamus' hand began to tremble somewhat, as he pondered what Sam had said. The woman squirmed slightly.

Sam thought he saw an opening. He almost went for it, but it disappeared as quickly as it had opened up. He made a clicking sound with his cheek and tongue and said, "Damn, almost had it... Well, I've got an idea here, Seamus, old man. How about I just kill the woman, get her out of the way, and then paste you? Blow your goddamn brains right down this walkway. That looks like how things are going to end up anyway."

Seamus seemed to think about it for a second or two. He then pulled the pistol away from the woman's head and said, "You're right. It's useless. I know when I'm beaten."

He lowered the gun another two inches and pulled the trigger. The bullet sailed through Sam's left side about an inch from his lung. He dropped his own gun and fell to his knees, grabbing at his new wound. A pained expression swept across his face. Seamus scrambled to his feet and kicked Sam's pistol ten feet down the concrete passageway and brought his own gun around to meet Sam's forehead.

"You're a dumb shit, you know that, Ronin?"

"Yeah, Seamus, actually I did know that. But it's always good to get a second

opinion."

"You're too soft to live. I would have killed that fat bitch and not thought twice about it."

"Call me a gentleman, what can I say."

"I'm going to enjoy this."

"I'll bet."

"You know, once in Belfast-"

When the shot rang out, the ice cream vendor screamed so loud Sam wanted to cover his ears. He didn't. He just glanced up and watched Seamus' lifeless form drop to the concrete walkway in front of him. A thin line of blood seeping from a small hole just above his right ear. Sam then looked to his left. Halfway down the tunnel that lead back to the ice rink, he spotted Deirdre, Vincent's pistol dangling in her right hand. She was closely followed by a man in a dark business suit. They walked up to Sam. Deirdre spoke first.

"You know, he's not much of a back-up, this back-up of yours... He doesn't seem to want to get his hands dirty."

Sam looked at the man in the business suit and said, "Hello, Lucas."

"Sam."

Deirdre helped Sam to his feet and glanced at his side.

"How is it?"

"I'm beginning to feel like a piece of Swiss Cheese."

Lucas walked over and picked up the beige ice-skate case, checked the contents, and walked back down the tunnel toward the rink.

"Nope... Not much of a back-up, and a man of few words," Sam said. "Good to see you again... How ya been?"

"Vincent got the Renault running again, no thanks to you. Your friend Lucas



managed to slap a police sticker on it. We won't be stopped at the checkpoint. How are you holding up? That wound looks pretty bad... Can you make it?"

Sam gave her a long and penetrating look. It seemed to cut into her soul.

He said, "Are you in... Or are you out?"

"What do you think?"

"What I think doesn't matter... What you say, does."

"Well then, I guess I'm out."

"Well then, I guess I can make it."

end