

AGENT Vx



Stephen William ROWE

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Web and contact: <https://www.stephen-william-rowe.com>

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Stephen William ROWE

Biography:

Doctor Stephen William ROWE is an industrial research scientist. He specialises in the physics of ultra-high voltage electrical arcs and electrical insulation.

He is a Fellow of both the English IET and the French SEE and is author and co-author of almost a hundred scientific and conference papers.

An accomplished musician, Dr Rowe is also a prolific songwriter.

Born in the UK, he now lives in in the French Alps, not far from Grenoble

The author's two novels, "Bait" and "Hate" describe earlier adventures of Dr William Stone and his friends.

Introductory Note

This story is a work of fiction, inspired by a series of events which really happened to me.

I amused myself by inventing possible consequences of each of these events and by embroidering them with fictional characters.

Apart from these events, everything else is pure fiction. All the characters involved are products of my imagination, and any resemblance of the characters to actual persons, living or dead is entirely coincidental.

The isolated Lac perdu in Quebec, its islands, rivers and main characteristics, exist as described.

Website: <https://www.stephen-William-rowe.com>

Chapter 1

I dropped my laptop and folders onto the aisle seat and swung my suitcase up into the baggage compartment. Easing myself across to the window, I glanced down at the wing. The evening flight from Detroit would get me into Montreal at about ten-thirty.

I had flown in from Knoxville, Tennessee, an hour earlier, where I had attended an international scientific conference.

I was feeling pleased with myself because the presentation of my research work had been well received. Being a consultant, each well-received publication boosts visibility and frequently leads to lucrative contracts.

Admittedly, one distinguished professor had been critical and clearly felt it his duty to point out a shortcoming in my experimental setup. However, I had anticipated this and had a strong defence ready. The man was eventually forced to accept defeat, which he did with a scowl.

I was naturally in an excellent mood and looking forward to a restful Sunday, wandering around the city.

As I opened my computer, a couple of young American women stopped beside me in the aisle.

'Excuse me, sir.' The first and prettiest, leant forward and looked me straight in the eyes. 'I think you're sitting in our places.'

The girl had lovely blue eyes, and I dragged out my ticket, nodded my mistake and slid back out of the seat.

'Sorry.'

'That's fine.'

'Well!' I joked 'You've got the best seats.'

'Really?' She cocked her head on one side.

'Yes. You'll be able to see the wing coming off.'

The blue eyes blinked at me, and she shook her head, 'Wiseguy,' she said, slipping herself into place.

This had not been a good opening move. Assuming that people I like the look of, have the same sense of humour as

myself, has frequently led to a certain coolness in burgeoning relations. However, I never seem to learn.

There was a sudden noise, and the plane jolted. The captain's suave voice then came smoothly over the intercom and announced that a pallet transporter had rammed the fuselage. He was waiting for the damage to be inspected.

'See!' I said, leaning forward and speaking between the seats.

'Wiseguy.' came the reply from the other girl, who didn't have blue eyes, 'Hear that Sandra?' The two exchanged looks and rose eyebrows.

Leaning back, I winced and glanced across the aisle at an impeccably dressed American businessman. The man looked back at me shaking his head sadly with a pitiful expression. I shrugged back, and he pulled a face again from behind his dark glasses.

We had met earlier in the first-class waiting room and had discovered a shared enthusiasm for cross-country running. The man was halfway through growing a beard and perpetually scratching it. Laughing, he explained that he had always had one but had recently shaved it off to please his wife.

'She had never seen me without my beard,' He smiled. 'But once it was gone, she decided I looked much better with it than without it,' he sighed.

We talked about many things, and I told him I presently lived and worked near Grenoble in France. The man had always wanted to visit Paris but had never managed to find the time. Consequently, I did my best to promote the place where I have spent many happy holidays.

Later, over a glass of cold beer, we discussed a good run for my Sunday morning. He insisted on drawing me a detailed map, showing the critical turns, not to miss.

We then discovered a shared enthusiasm for botanical gardens. I was further surprised to learn that the man was

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an administrator of Montreal's famous botanical gardens. I now had a complimentary VIP ticket in my jacket pocket.

Sitting back in my seat, I gazed out over the wing then realised that I had left my folder on the floor beside the seat in front. I leant forward once more.

'Excuse me.'

I heard a sigh, 'Now what?' came the exasperated answer.

'I left my folder on the floor. Sorry. Could you pass it back please?'

The blond leaned forward and retrieved it. On the front of the green folder, I had marked with a black felt tip, Toxic Gases / Nerve Gases. The girl read this and showed it to her friend. 'Nice thing to be reading mister.'

'That's my job. Well, part of it.'

'One hell of a nice job! You English?'

"Ah-ha," I thought to myself, 'this looks like a good opening.'

'Yes.'

'On your way home?'

'Yes.' She handed the folder back between the chairs.

'Good.' She said. And that was that.

Nevertheless, snubbed as I was, I was still full of enthusiasm, so I decided to write up my report, and so leave my Sunday entirely free.

While at Knoxville, I had paid a visit to the world-renowned 'Oak Ridge' research facility. The place is famous for its decisive role in building the nuclear bomb dropped on Hiroshima. I didn't know what went on there today, and I still don't, but I did know that some of the world's best specialists on toxic gasses worked there.

I'll correct that statement slightly because most of what we call nerve gases are not gases at all, but liquids. Mind you that wouldn't make much difference to you if you happened to be on the wrong end of an attack using the stuff.

However, my presence was nothing to do with military conflicts and was entirely above suspicion. At least that's what I thought at the time.

I had been commissioned by an international organisation to write the technical annexes of a new document. The objective was to clarify safety concerns linked to the use of a specific synthetic gas. I was employed as a consultant by a Danish Magnesium foundry that used this gas. As we have all learnt at school, magnesium is extraordinarily flammable and reacts violently with the atmosphere's oxygen. Consequently, molten magnesium processing is carried out under a protecting blanket of inert and dense gas. The best gas for this purpose is Sulphur-Hexafluoride or SF₆ for short. However, trouble started when someone discovered that at high temperatures, SF₆ decomposes and creates highly toxic by-products. These by-products are ten times more toxic than most military nerve gases.

In everyday situations, the danger is minimal. Still, when the press and trade unions got hold of the subject, all hell was let loose.

In situations such as this, the only practical procedure is to publish the truth.

First, however, one must get at the truth, and it was for this reason that I had been asked to visit "Oak Ridge" national laboratory.

While there, I was privileged to see samples of several of the deadliest nerve agents known to man. Sarin, Phosgene and Agent-Vx were prime examples.

I was reassured to find that the security precautions surrounding safeguarding, the storage and handling of these products were truly impressive. Such precautions are not out of place, though when one realises that a single bottle-full would be enough to kill a small town's population.

Having gleaned much useful information, I was now travelling to Montreal, to meet a group of engineers and scientists. In this laboratory, the scientists studied the use

of SF6 gas in the electrical engineering industry. Their research targeted the protection of maintenance staff, which was thus much closer to my brief.

The evening before leaving Knoxville, it was raining, and I took a walk around the dreary town centre before dinner.

I did not do this because there was anything of interest to see, but because I was bored stiff. On the way back, I bumped into one of the other conference participants. He was doing the same thing and for the same reason.

We did not particularly appreciate each other, but boredom is a hell of a handicap when far from home on a Friday night. So, for once, we did not ignore each other. We even agreed to eat together, which shows just how bored we were.

Now, my dinner companion was a well-known American scientist but had several shortcomings in my eyes. Firstly, he had an overly professional approach to everything and took almost every comment I made in its literal sense. Secondly, he did not seem to have any sense of humour at all and finally. He was not very pleasant to look at.

The evening was inevitably long and tedious. Worse still, I somehow managed to leave the man with the conviction that I questioned the religious rules which formed the foundations of his way of life. He misinterpreted my smiles as sneers and my gestures as signs of hostility against his origins and beliefs.

I don't know why it is, but I often seemed to be getting into trouble in this way.

However, compared with the staggering episodes I was about to live through, this incident would soon seem of little importance.

Chapter 2

The following morning, I breakfasted quietly in my hotel on the outskirts of Montreal. I leafed my way lazily through the Sunday newspaper then, after scanning the titles, turned my attention to the street map.

On this, I traced out the 10k training run the businessman had drawn for me.

The town's geometrical layout convinced me that the planned route would be easy to follow and that taking the map along would be unnecessary.

There had been something vaguely familiar about the man. Still, at the time, I didn't attach any significance to it, because one meets so many people when one is a frequent traveller.

I had mentioned that my hotel was on the St Laurent river's left bank, and he had explained that I merely had to cross the Jacques Cartier bridge. After that, everything would be very straightforward.

Had I been a little less confident about things, I would have taken the map along, but I wasn't, so I didn't. I expected the run to take me about forty minutes, so I left all my papers in the suitcase.

The day was lovely, so donning my running shoes, shorts and a sleeveless running top, I set off. By then, it was about ten-o'clock, and I was in no hurry.

The first clue that my plans were wrong somewhere came when it took me longer to reach the beginning of the bridge than I had expected. I then discovered that this famous bridge was far longer than it had looked on the map and later found out that it is a little over three kilometres long.

At this point, I should have realised that the route traced out for me by the other man must be far longer than the ten kilometres he had announced. Had I done so and revised my plans, I would have avoided a great deal of trouble.

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As it was, I kept straight on up the long straight main road towards the inter-city motorway, where I planned to turn left.

By the time I had got about halfway there, the sun was up, and I was perspiring.

Then my shoelace came undone, and I stopped by a bench under the shadow of a large tree to tie it. Having done this, I remained with my foot on the seat a few moments, getting my breath back.

Still gazing in an unfocused way in front of myself, I became aware of the lace curtain in the house's downstairs window in front of me, being carefully drawn aside.

A broad-shouldered body and a close-cropped head came into view and scowled at me.

Now, knowing how easy it is to get into trouble on this continent, I thought it prudent to get away before any misunderstanding arose. I turned and started off up the road and, for some reason, a cold, unreasonable fear crept into me. I accelerated as fast as I could up the gently rising hill.

This was precisely what I should not have done because the inhabitant at once got the wrong end of the stick.

Why fate should have chosen to stop me in front of this house is a further mystery. The owner just happened to be a certain Mister Fortin, of which more later. In any case, I sprinted off, took a left, then a right and a left again then slowed down having covered a good half mile. I was now perspiring hard under the cloudless sky and regretted that I had come out without anything to drink.

I was now off my intended route and being mapless, was more or less lost.

Brilliant!

The most sensible thing to do would have been to ask directions back to the Jacques Cartier bridge and to have called it a day. Why I did not do this is a mystery — remnants perhaps of my ancestor's code-of-honour or more probably pure stubbornness.

The result was that I made a guess at where I must be and headed off following that idea. Luckily for me, I was in excellent physical form. Thanks to my frequent participation in cross-country competitions, I felt only a mild discomfort due to thirst.

Then by some miracle, I found myself directly outside the gateway of a public garden. I sighed with relief because I remembered this from my examination of the map. Above all, I remembered noting that the numerous roads and tracks marked went right across it and came out again close to the waterfront. Once there, it would be simple to follow the river back to the bridge.

I had now been running for about an hour and a half, which was more than my usual amount. I ran under the gateway and followed the main route up the hill, when I suddenly realised that this was not a public garden at all but a vast, impeccably kept cemetery. Most of the people walking here were in their best clothes. Furthermore, they were old and shot me horrified glances as I ran past in shorts and a running vest, my body running with perspiration.

I was naturally embarrassed at my intrusion into their silent grieving, but what alternative had I? This was the only route I remembered. Furthermore, my dehydrated mind was focussed on the single task of getting down to the riverside. Once more, I accelerated hard, knowing that I should soon reach the summit and then speed down and out of the other side.

However, as I came around the road corner at the highest point, I stopped abruptly.

There, straight in front of me, where the road should have dived down the hill, was an eight-foot metal fence barring the way. This unexpected barrier stretched off into the distance on both sides and had not been on the map. I gazed at this in horror for a moment. Then without hesitation, I ran straight up to it. Heedless to the horrified gasps from the people nearby, I clambered up and jumped

down onto the cropped grass beyond. I dashed down and onto a tarmac track lined by closely planted Thuja trees. I continued running in their welcome shadow for a few minutes without seeing anyone. Then, I came to a sharp bend in the road and started to turn but stopped short and leapt into the cover of the bushes.

In the near distance, stood the gateway leading out onto the riverside road. However, standing by it, I saw two uniformed and armed guards.

'Christ,' I thought 'Where the hell am I now?' I peeped out from my hiding place. 'Oh, bloody hell' I whispered to myself, 'now I really am in trouble.'

I assumed that I must have got myself into some sort of military camp. I was wrong in this analysis, but I could think of no other explanation at the time. In any case, this smelled of big trouble, if as a foreigner I was found inside a high-security base, with no papers etc...

Once again, I had difficulty reasoning clearly and took the only option, which seemed plausible.

I waited for the guards to enter the lodge and close the door. I then jogged down behind the trees until I was within twenty yards from the gates.

Scanning the doorway for a few seconds, I spotted the two men's silhouettes moving further into the room. I then left the cover and sprinted down the road and sped past the gatehouse at top speed.

I turned the corner, crossed the road and sprinted off as fast as my legs could carry me. From behind me I just had time to hear a cry of Hey! Before turning another corner.

My heart was thumping like a machine gun inside me, and my temples were throbbing. I sprinted around another corner and looking up, my courage almost failed me.

Straight ahead of me, I saw the bridge, but it was still several miles away. This meant I must have at least five more miles left to run, and the sun was now high in the sky. I was also aware of the unmistakable signs of severe dehydration setting in. I realised that I could not run much further, so

seeing a signpost above the pavement I darted through a doorway into a cool interior.

I found myself in a dark bar, being stared at by a overweigh barman and a single seated customer. In any case, I was out of sight now, so even if the military guards drove this way, they would see no one.

I was perspiring hard, my arms and face running with water. I held up my hand to the barman and leant forward my hands on my knees, trying to get my breath back.

After a few seconds, I stood and addressed the barman. 'I don't suppose I could ask you for a glass of water, could I?'

After exchanging a look with his customer, he turned to me, 'This is a bar, not a public drinking fountain.'

I was too tired to argue. 'Yes, yes, I know I'm sorry.' I wiped the drips from my forehead. 'I'm not from Canada and came out for a run without my wallet or water. I got lost.' The two men exchanged glances and tut-tutted shaking their heads.

'My hotel is over the other side of the Cartier bridge.'

'The Jacques Cartier bridge.' corrected the barman.

'Yes, sorry. If you let me have a glass of water, I promise to come back and buy a round for everyone, this evening.'

'Ah!' smiled the customer sitting up, 'Now he's talking sense, eh!'

The barman shook his head in pity and filled a pint glass with water and handed to me.

I took it and gulped down the lot. 'God! you saved my life.'

He screwed up his face. 'Not sure that's a good thing,' he grunted.

I handed him back the glass. 'Could you see your way to giving me another one?'

He grunted again and handed me the second glass, which I emptied almost as quickly as the first.

'I don't know how to thank you.'

'That's okay,' he said gruffly.

I waved my hand and trotted back out into the blazing sun.

I honestly intended to return that evening and honour my promise. Still, my goal now was to get back to the hotel. In any case, those two men remembered me for reasons which I could not have suspected at the time. I also provided them with a topic for numerous heated debates during the following weeks.

The run along the waterfront route was long and dreary with hardly a view of the river at all. It was distressingly straight and utterly devoid of shadow for as far as I could see.

I was now limping, as my right ankle was hurting.

When I eventually reached the bridge, I was once more disheartened. I could find no way up onto it and therefore had to run another quarter of a mile inland, to get onto it.

Now, it would have been nice if the story ended here, but it certainly did not.

As I struggled on my other ankle started to give me trouble too, something which had never happened to me before. I am an experienced runner but rarely run on tarmac roads, preferring the softer and less damaging cross-country tracks. In any case, I had no choice, so I carried on as well as I could, having now covered between twelve and fifteen miles.

At last, the road levelled out as it crossed the Saint Helene island in mid-river.

In the distance, I spotted a solitary figure walking ahead of me. The person stopped beside a locker, used for storing the repair men's tools, and leaned over the iron girders to look down at the island below.

As I watched, the person put a bag on the locker and took out something I assumed to be a camera. Then, to my amazement, the figure clambered up onto the top of the wooden locker and leaned over the girder.

'Christ,' I thought, 'I'd never take a risk like that for the sake of a damn photo.'

And then suddenly the figure was gone. 'Balls' I cried, 'Must be crazy to get down on the outer structure to get a better view'.

It seemed to take an age before I reached the place where the photographer had left his gear. However, what I discovered was a red leather handbag and a pair of high heeled shoes. I leaned over and looked down, and my mouth fell open.

There on the tarmac, far below me, spread-eagled, was the body of a woman.

If I had been less exhausted by my run, I might have reacted differently, but as it was, I felt strangely detached. I became aware that my mouth was hanging open and I snapped it shut, as a car screeched to a halt below me and people appeared, running from all sides.

I looked on for a few seconds then, jumped back and sprinted off towards my hotel, leaving the bag and shoes where they were.

Chapter 3

I believe that was the fastest five kilometres I have ever run. To have been able to find the energy to do it after such a gruelling morning amazes me to this day.

I dashed into the hotel entrance hall, running with perspiration and limped to the desk.

'Hurt your leg, sir?' asked the man behind the counter.

'On the bridge...' I blurted out, 'A Girl. She just jumped over.'

The man behind the desk looked up and nodded.

'Call the Police quick. I think she's dead.' I said breathlessly.

The man nodded again, apparently unperturbed by my breathless announcement. 'Sunday morning sir.' he said and nodded, 'It's nearly always on Sunday mornings.'

I gasped, 'Don't we need to call the police?'

'Oh, no. Not a good idea. That's asking for trouble, man.'

He leant under the counter and handed me over a newly ironed and folded bathroom towel. 'Here. Dry yourself, and I'll explain. Need a drink?'

I shook my head.

'It's nearly always girls and frequently on Sunday morning. There are a lot of unstable people in Montreal, these days you know.' He shook his head. 'Some of them only want to make a statement. Those climb up the suspension cables to try to get right up there on the summit.'

He smiled and shook his head sadly. 'They nearly always get scared stiff trying to get up there, and the fire brigade has to come and get them down again.' He nodded. 'Others are more determined and want to show someone, or the whole world, that they have gone too far. Those throw themselves off the middle into the river. The shock of the cold water usually brings them to their senses, and they are then rescued or save themselves.'

Then he shook his head sadly. 'Then there are the ones who really feel they have nothing left to live for or are

drugged out of their minds or both. Those walk to the high point above the road and jump. They know that they'll have zero possibility of survival.'

He leant over the counter and put a big hand on my shoulder. 'I'm sorry you should have had to witness one of those, man.'

I sighed a deep sigh and let my arms fall. 'Christ!' was all I could say.

The man shook his head and tutted. 'You'd better get showered and dry before you catch a cold, then come back down and I'll give you a beer, on the house.'

I smiled at him. 'Thanks,' I said and limped to the lift.

After my shower, I dressed and realised that I felt surprisingly detached from what I had witnessed. It was almost as if I had learnt it second hand from a friend of a friend. I limped back down to the lobby, but the man had gone. A young woman of about twenty had taken his place. I had wanted to go over the matter with the man who had seemed friendly and experienced. However, this was out of the question with such a young person. Instead, I asked if they happened to have any cream for sprains in the tiny little general shop they had just inside the main doors.

Amazingly they did. The tiny shop had all sorts of things and more surprisingly still, exactly what I needed.

'Lots of people go running on Sundays from here, so we keep all that sort of thing handy.' she smiled.

The tube cost me next to nothing.

I climbed back up to my bedroom and spread a big dollop of the strong-smelling stuff on each foot, massaging it in with one hand and drinking cold beer from the mini-bar with the other. I then lay back on my bed and allowed the TV news to hypnotise me for half an hour.

When I did get up, I was amazed that neither of my ankles hurt anymore and that I could walk normally. I hadn't expected the stuff to do what it was advertised to do, and since then have never found anything so effective.

I must admit that it smelt powerful, though. I suppose that it was probably so bad for the environment or humans that it has since been withdrawn from the market.

Anyway, feeling much better and almost as if the morning's events had not happened to me but to someone else, I went down to eat.

I had planned to visit the botanical gardens that afternoon, so I checked out the route. The girl at reception told me that it was "miles and miles" and anyhow much too far to walk. Too hot too.' She turned to the phone, 'Best to get a taxi. Want me to call one?'

I decided that this was the best option, so after a short wait, I was whisked back across the ill-fated bridge. However, just before leaving, the girl at reception called out, 'A phone call for you, Doctor Stone.'

'For me?' I was astonished because I couldn't remember telling anyone where I would be staying. Taking the phone, I heard a smooth, professional female voice.

'Doctor Stone, I'm so pleased to have caught you. My director...' and here she mentioned the name of a well-known Canadian politician, 'asked me to do all I could to locate you.'

'Ah!' I said, 'Why was that.'

'Well,' she went on smoothly as if reading a text 'he has heard a lot about what you are trying to do. About straightening out questions concerning toxic by-products.'

'Ah!' I said again.

'He would very much like to see how he can help get things moving over here. As you probably know, this is one of his pet subjects, along with reducing stockpiling of dangerous substances.'

I had never heard about this but was not against discussing the question.

'He has a big meeting this evening.' She continued, 'and would like to invite you so that the two of you can dine afterwards.' She hesitated. 'Would that be possible, Doctor Stone?'

I said it would, and she gave me the address and the time, then rang off.

Well, a free meal, paid by a prominent Canadian politician, was not to be scoffed at, but I was not unduly impressed. All the same, I was astonished that he should have been able to locate me. In any case, I had three or four hours free and intended to enjoy them by seeing what Montreal's botanical gardens had to show. Furthermore, I had a complimentary VIP entrance ticket...

The taxi dropped me off at the main entrance at the gardens' corner.

As botanical gardens go, Montreal boasts a big one, covering several square miles. In summer it's a delightful place to spend an afternoon, looking at the magnificent displays of flowers and shrubs.

The rose gardens are magnificent at the right time of year, as are the various thematic gardens.

Perhaps the main feature is its vast arboretum, containing thousands of trees. However, the disadvantage is that to enable senior citizens to visit the gardens, they run a never-ending series of guided tours on miniature trains. This might have been acceptable had they not felt it necessary to add loudspeakers to the trains. These blared out an incessant commentary amplified to a volume compatible with the age group for which it catered. The noise entirely spoilt the peaceful atmosphere of the gardens for everyone else.

I continued Grumbling to myself about this as I strolled down one of the long shady avenues. Suddenly, however, some of the large quantities of water I had drunk since that morning, needed to be released. Unluckily, I was by then right at the far end of the gardens and a long way from the public conveniences.

Looking about me and finding myself alone, I ducked behind the trunk of a big tree and proceeded to answer the call of nature. However, no sooner had I begun the task with an unsuppressed sigh, then one of those accursed train-loads of tourists swung into view around a corner.

I ducked back out of sight and tried to keep the trunk between myself and the train as I finished the job in hand.

'Now on your left,' bawled out the speaker 'you will be able to see a magnificent example of the genus'

The train slowed, and a hundred faces turned to study my tree. I flattened myself against the rough trunk in an attempt to remain hidden.

However, due to the train's length, it was evident that this would be impossible, so I hurriedly tucked the troublesome appendix back into place.

Twenty or so senior citizens glared at me, wondering what on earth I was up to trying to hide from them behind a tree.

One thing was clear to them all, and this was that I was indeed up to no good. I was undoubtedly one of those horrid drug addicts doing whatever such degenerates do in a public garden.

Disgraceful!

For the second time that day, I felt it better to avoid any trouble. I was convinced that someone would complain, which of course several of them did, and in the strongest possible terms.

With this in mind, and having completed my tour, I walked as rapidly as possible back to the entrance. Sacrificing my planned visit to the garden's shop, I took a relaxed taxi trip back to the hotel.

As I jolted my way back across the city, I reflected with a smile that fate had undoubtedly thrown a good number of unusual events across my path that Sunday.

Had I had an inkling as to the incredibly devious use to which those events were going to be put, I would indeed not have ventured out that evening.

But how on earth could I have imagined that I was on the very eve of the most perilous episode I would ever have to live through.

Chapter 4

The attack was launched that afternoon at precisely five thirty-four.

The conference hall held more than five hundred enthusiastic people by then.

I had slipped out of my seat to get my camera from my coat pocket before the main speaker made his appearance. Annoyingly though, the girl in the cloakroom couldn't find my jacket and fate decreed that I should step around the counter to help her.

I had noticed her hang it somewhere towards the back of the long narrow room, but there must have been four hundred other garments there. While searching, we heard a sharp click, and the fire doors which separated the cloakroom from the hall swung closed.

We exchanged shrugs and went on looking.

The guards from the main lobby quietly slipped into the hall's dark rear. They were waiting with anticipation to hear the outspoken politician's speech. They disagreed with his ideas but knew that his appearances were always well worth witnessing. This would provide them with exciting tidbits to spice up many boring evening meals to come.

Consequently, they didn't hear the bolts on the two sets of doors leading into the hall, slide into place.

The guards outside the building had moved round to the east-facing wall of the building out of the sun. From that position, they had an uninterrupted view of the broad stone steps leading up to the entrance doors and over the paved square below it.

No one would stir now for an hour or so, and they knew that they could smoke and chat quietly together in the shadow until the first of the participants began to leave.

Naturally, they did not hear the click as the two sets of heavy glass doors bolted themselves.

The only person who heard anything at all was a tramp. He was urinating against the fire escape door behind the

building, and the sharp clack as the security bolts slid into place caused him to splash his shaky hand.

When we eventually found my jacket, I fished out my camera and made for the door.

I pushed it, fully expecting it to swing open, but it didn't budge. Turning to the assistant, I shrugged, and she nodded, stepping forward to push the override button beside the door.

Nothing happened.

We exchanged looks, and both tried to push the doors as hard as possible. Even the security bar did not engage.

Through the circular windows set into the two doors, we looked out into the hall, intending to attract one of the participants' attention. However, the main speaker entered, accompanied by cheers and a thunder of applause at that precise moment. I blew out my cheeks in exasperation, while the girl picked up the intercom to call the hall technician to come down from the lodge and let us out.

'Oh,' she exclaimed, 'the line's dead.'

I was about to bang on the door when she touched my arm. 'We'd better wait till he's finished now. Can't go making a row in the middle of his speech.'

I sighed and blew out my cheeks again in exasperation.

'Don't worry,' she said 'he always says the same stuff anyhow. You can read them in any paper tomorrow. At least we can watch, and we'll hear clear enough when he starts to shout. He always gets worked up and shouts. Like one of those crazy preachers.'

We took a window each and settled down to watch.

'Good evening, ladies and gentlemen,' he smiled, 'anyone need me to introduce myself?' A roar of laughter and applause went up.

At the same moment, I spotted a fine mist or smoke, which had started to drift down from the ceiling high above the speaker.

'What's that?' I asked the girl.

'Search me? That new air conditioning system they installed probably. They can add room perfume to it.'

At this moment, the speaker nodded approval for the applause and took a deep breath to begin his first attack. However, he didn't get that far. He clutched his throat and quickly looked across at his bodyguard. He then made a dive for the side door. He crashed into it with all his force, but it didn't open. He looked back wildly as the rest of the assembly started to cough and splutter and look about wildly. The mist continued to float gently down and thicken, and there was suddenly a rush for the doors.

As I watched, the speaker fell to the floor, his limbs twitching, and his face contorting in a horrible uncontrolled manner. In a flash, I knew what was happening.

The hall was being attacked with nerve gas.

The mist, billowing and swirling, was now reaching out its deadly tongues toward our door. Within a few seconds, dozens of the participants reacted identically to the speaker. The floor was soon strewn with a horrible mass of contorted, quivering bodies.

The only substance I knew which could act like that was Agent Vx, and I knew that there is nothing deadlier on the planet.

An eerie silence fell.

With Vx poisoning, screaming rapidly becomes impossible. There remained only the dull thumping noise as hundreds of limbs banged uncontrollably against the obstacles around them.

'Get away from that door. Quick.' I shouted, but the girl remained frozen as if glued to the window. 'Get back, or you'll have no chance.'

Agent Vx acts by interfering with the transmission of signals between nerve cells. It forces the transmission channels into an 'always-on' mode. This overloads the brain with an uninterrupted flow of data from all parts of the body. In most cases, the first organ to overload and stop is the

heart. This can happen within a few minutes if the exposition is high and an antidote not administered rapidly.

'Christ' I gasped.

I realised that the locked doors must be part of the plan to ensure that escape and possible recovery were kept to an absolute minimum. I leapt back from the doors, pulling off my sweatshirt. I then poured the contents of two complimentary bottles of water over it and wrapped it around my mouth and nose. Next, I pushed a table into the farthest end of the long cloakroom and grabbing a full-length raincoat, put it on. Finally, I gathered up a pile of coats, climbed up onto the table and piled the clothes over myself. This made a protective tent over and around me.

I knew that Vx was denser than air and would accumulate in low areas in the absence of a current of air. I also knew that, in vapour form, it could enter the body directly via the respiratory tract, but also through the eyes and the skin. The eyes and skin were slower entrance routes but could lead to death just as well if help was not rapidly forthcoming.

A few seconds later, I heard the girl try to shout and then a thump as she fell, followed by the horrible tell-tale thumping as her entire body started to twitch and jump.

I have never come so close to praying in my life. If that vapour could penetrate my makeshift protection tent, I would die in the same horrible way.

I closed my eyes tight and forced myself to breath slow, shallow breaths, through the layers of water-saturated fabric across my nose.

Soon everything would become silent. The clouds of vapour would continue quietly settling on the inert bodies in the hall, like morning dew, and penetrate the bodies making survival impossible.

It was highly improbable that enough antidote would be available to save so many people and, in any case, it would come far too late.

Stephen William ROWE

Chapter 5

A little less than an hour later, a dusty taxi turned into the square and came to a halt at the bottom of the stone steps. A tall, slim man climbed out dragging a heavy photographer's bag from the back seat.

The two guards pushed themselves erect and moved grudgingly out from the lengthening shadows cast by the wall, to intercept him as he reached the top of the steps. They recognised the man as a local freelance newspaper reporter, who always attended such meetings. He nodded at them. 'I suppose I've missed the best bit, eh? Never mind! Still, time to get a few good shots and take some notes.'

The guards knew his work well because it appeared in their favourite daily paper. He nearly always arrived late, but still managed to convey the impression in his writing that he had witnessed the whole thing from start to finish. They smiled at each other, and the older of the two guards moved to the door to open it. He tugged at the handle, but nothing happened. He applied both hands, but the thing didn't budge.

'Hey! the damn thing's locked itself'.

The group moved to the second set of doors, which were also locked. They peered through the glass to try and attract the attention of the guards inside but found the entrance-hall empty, and the heavy doors leading to the hall closed.

Un-hitching the radio intercom, he called up his colleagues inside but got no answer.

'Damn it,' he said. 'What the hell are they up to?'

'You can bet your salary that they've sneaked in at the back to listen.'

'And turned off the intercom.' added the other.

The two shook their heads, knowing that this was precisely what they would have done themselves had they been on inside-duty this time.

'Hold on. We can get you in through the fire escape around the back. Pity not to get a few photos of that madman for the local paper, eh?'

'Maniac is probably a better term.' nodded the newspaperman, 'but not one to use in public, though.'

'You're telling me!' exclaimed the other guard. 'Seen the muscles on his bodyguards?'

They reached the back, and the guard took out a pass-key and slipped it into the lock. He turned it, but nothing happened. He rattled the door angrily and banged on the metal surface in an attempt to attract the attention of someone within. They eventually gave up the struggle and went back round to the front.

The older of the two guards growled, 'I suppose I had better phone the boss.'

'Christ! Is he going to be mad! Being disturbed on a Sunday afternoon too.'

However, the boss was not mad. As he listened, his hands became cold and damp. He didn't like this at all.

'Don't move.' he ordered, 'I'll get the police round straight away. Keep your eyes open, you two.'

Five minutes later, a police car shot across the square and three men jumped out and ran up the steps. They went through the same movements as the guards then called back to headquarters.

Ten minutes' later, a big van arrived followed by an ambulance. A team of five men carted a crate full of gear up to the doorway.

The chief sized up the doors with an experienced eye then pointed to the heavy bolts which could be seen projecting down into the concrete floor. 'There's no way we'll get those out. The door will have to come out.'

They attached a bulky device to the door handles, connected a pair of wires and retired around the corner behind the cover of the wall.

When sure that everyone was safe, the man nodded to his assistant, who pressed a button.

A mini battering ram leapt forward and shattered the glass on one of the doors.

The men jumped through but found the second set of doors locked too. They repeated the same procedure and finally stepped into the hall.

The medical team observed their progress from the top of the steps, to be called if required.

The police specialist stood still and listened.

Not a sound could be heard.

They exchanged frowns, but the boss put his finger to his lips and drew his revolver. His men behind swung their machine guns around and prepared themselves. They spread out on each side of the entrance to the main hall while the chief crouched and crept across to the junction between the two hall doors. He first applied a slight pressure to one of them then pushed with all his strength. These fire-doors were sealed, and there was no way of seeing through the junction between them. He rose and signalled the technical team behind who came up with another ram.

The team manager turned to his boss and shook his head. The chief nodded, and the man ran outside, returning with a much larger device. They quickly fixed this to the surround of the doors. A pair of claws dug themselves into each side, and they all backed off as far as possible.

The chief signalled to the men to prepare their guns, then nodded to the technician. With a roar, the door flew off its hinges and clattered onto the floor of the short corridor.

Nothing happened, so the chief crept along the sidewall and looked around it. He could see nothing, but suddenly felt a damp mist on his face. He made to turn but suddenly clutched his throat.

He just had time to shout 'get back! Gas...' before the pupils of his eyes suddenly became minute, and he stumbled. The man closest to him grabbed his arm and dragged him across the floor and out through the shattered glass doors.

The ambulance men had followed the event. They were highly experienced men and knew what this reaction meant, and one of them was already halfway down to the ambulance.

'For Christ sake, don't touch him.' the medic shouted. 'And you,' to the man who had dragged him, 'keep your hands away from your face and don't touch anything.'

The first medic came panting back up the steps and threw a big cylinder to his assistant. Slipping on gloves, the man injected a shot of antidote into the stricken man's buttock holding it there for a count of ten.

During this, the other man had brought out a spray canister and was washing down the hands of the man who had dragged him out. He then played the jet over the lying man until his head and hands were running with liquid.

All this took less than thirty seconds. However, during this time, the police called headquarters to alert the authorities that a nerve-gas attack had been made.

'Tell them it looks like Vx.' said the ambulance man. 'Tell them, certainly a hell of a lot of casualties inside.'

Half an hour later, a dozen military vehicles arrived, and fifty or so men jumped from the backs, equipped with full protection suites and autonomous air supplies.

Nearly two hours had now elapsed since the attack had begun. Having a rough idea of this timing, and knowing the horrible power of such products, they were ready for what they discovered when the final door was burst open.

The silence was terrible.

Nothing stirred in the vast conference hall.

Inert bodies lay everywhere, strewn about the place as if they had all been thrown up into the air and had fallen back, littering the hall in every conceivable position. The place smelt an infernal mixture of vomit and excrement.

It took them very little time to ascertain that not a single person in that hall had survived. The head of the emergency team gave the signal to leave the room, but as they turned one of them spotted the cloakroom and pointed to it.

Two men went over, and finding the door locked, squinted through the windows and spotted the girl dead on the floor. They were turning to exit when one of the spotted a movement and called his colleague back. Pointing to the far corner, they spotted the pile of clothes under which I had hidden myself move as I shifted slightly.

'Hey Paul' the man called over his intercom, 'There's someone alive in here.'

Five minutes later I heard a deafening crash as the door was blown off its hinges. Then a voice shouted. 'If you are alive, don't move or even try to call out. OK.'

I froze. I knew that the air must still be full of the deadly vapour and even if it wasn't, the pile of stuff covering me must be dripping with it like beads of poisonous dew on the morning grass.

The voice came back 'Don't move,' it repeated. 'We are going to flush the room out with fresh air to clear the atmosphere. Move your right arm twice if you understand.' I did as I was told, and the voice called. 'OK. I'll tell you what to do when we are ready.' There was a lot of noise. Then I heard the roar of a turbine starting up. I felt nothing under my pile of coats and stayed immobile for what seemed hours but must have been ten minutes or so. I then heard the voice very close to me. 'OK. Still all right? Move your right hand twice.'

I did as they told me.

'Now listen carefully. We are going to take the covering of little by little. We are going to spray with water all the time to wash the stuff off as we go. When we have uncovered you, don't move. We will then spray you clean, and you must keep your mouth and eyes shut. Get that?'

I moved my arm twice as before.

'OK guys. Let's go.' I now felt the pressure of a powerful jet of liquid push down against the coats.

Then suddenly, I felt the last layer peeled off and the cold jet play over my body. They sprayed my head until I was

running with icy water, then gradually I felt someone carefully unwind the sweatshirt from around my face.

I kept my eyes screwed tight and my mouth shut. The turbine was still running, and I felt the cold and shivered as the blast of air played on my soaking clothes.

The voice then spoke close to my ear, 'Keep your eyes closed while we wash your face.'

I then felt a pair of hands lather my face and hair with some foul-smelling stuff, and then the jet was played over me again.

'I'm afraid I have to remove all your clothes before we move you. Keep still while I cut them off, 'OK?'

I nodded.

In a few seconds, I was standing stark naked, being washed down by unseen hands. This completed, I felt a heavy cloak of some plastic material being placed over my shoulders, and a protective helmet slipped on my head. Then suddenly I felt a cool breeze on my face as the helmets' air supply was turned on.

'Wait till I give the order then you can open your eyes.'

Several minutes later, he said 'OK.' I opened my eyes and gazed out through a plastic face mask at the incredible scene of a dozen masked and white protection-suited people staring at me.

'You can breathe normally now, but don't touch anything. Got that?'

I nodded, then added 'YES.' They then helped me into a pair of yellow security boots.

'Now we've got to get you out of here. The place is still full of the gas, so move slowly and don't touch anything. Got that?'

'Yes.'

'And there is a hell of a lot of mess in there. If you can't stand the sight of dead bodies close your eyes and hold onto my arm. Got that?'

'Yes.'

The man led the way slowly out of the cloakroom and up the side aisle. There were bodies everywhere, and after a few seconds, I fixed my eyes on the wall beside me and concentrated on this until we were outside.

They led me down the stone steps, with dozens of flash cameras from all the newspapers who had been able to find someone so late on a Sunday evening.

At the bottom, we were all sprayed down by a series of water jets, and then the men removed their suits and took my helmet off at last.

'Christ in heaven, are you lucky to be alive, man!' said the chief as the cameras filmed and flashed. He then turned to his assistant. 'We can't get the bodies out of that damn place until we've purged the air in there. The place must be saturated with that filthy vapour.' He paused, 'The only way is to flush the place clean.'

His assistant nodded, 'If we set off the fire sprinklers, that will clean the atmosphere. It'll also wash part of the furniture and walls, but no body's going in there until the place is virtually flooded.'

He turned to one of the military men. 'Do you think you could hit that fire alarm button with your rifle from here?'

The soldier shook his head, 'Not me. But Jed over there could. Hey Jed!'

A tall man cradling a precision rifle carefully in his arms came over and nodded when asked. He stabilised the rifle on the roof of a car and took aim.

The bullet smashed into the electronic box on the wall and accompanied by the sparking of the exposed wiring, jets of liquid started to spray down everywhere in the building drenching the place.

Then something entirely unexpected happened.

There was a flash accompanied by an incredible roar as the entire front of the building burst outwards in a sheet of flames.

Fragments of the glass doors followed closely by all sorts of debris flew outwards, towards me as I stood rooted to the ground, staring.

Everyone dived for cover, as the red and yellow flaming blast spread outwards from the main doors.

At the last instant, the tall photographer hurled himself at me. We went down with a crash, as thousands of razor-sharp fragments of glass went flashing past us and embedded themselves into the bodywork of the parked vans.

The entire fire extinction pipework had been purged and refilled with petrol.

Chapter 6

Following my rescue on Sunday evening, I was transported to the world-class Disaster Medicine ward at McGill University hospital.

I was stripped naked, thoroughly washed down again and then carted off into a surgery where the nurse took dozens of samples.

I was observed inside and out for the best part of two hours and then comfortably installed in a private room in one of the upper stories of the building.

To my surprise, I found myself looking down on the cemetery, where part of my morning's adventures had taken place. From where I was, I could see the place where I had scaled the fence and discovered for the first time that I had been utterly wrong in my dehydration clouded deductions.

I had not landed up in a military enclosure but in another vast cemetery. Had I known this, it would have saved me a considerable amount of trouble.

Not long after this discovery, the head surgeon entered. He was an expensively dressed man with a beautifully trimmed salt & pepper beard with hair to match.

He smiled, clapped me smartly on the shoulder, 'Well here sits one of the luckiest men on earth.'

I nodded.

'All the tests are perfect.' He smiled. 'Not a trace of any toxic products anywhere in your body.'

I sighed. I was feeling utterly exhausted now that this incredible episode was entirely over.

He smiled again, 'I don't think anyone else would have taken the protective moves you did, but they certainly saved your life.'

I nodded, feeling more and more tired as time went on. I closed my eyes. 'I had been studying up the subject for the new IEC safety guide.'

'On nerve gas!' he looked surprised.

'No. On decomposition by-products of industrial gases.'

'Ah yes of course. Metal foundry blanket-gases by any chance?'

I looked up at the man with surprise, and he laughed.

'We get all sorts of cases in here. Anything unusual ends up on my desk. Nothing as dangerous as Vx of course.' He hesitated, 'Thank god.'

'My brief was about SF6,' I said, and he nodded.

'Yes. Of course. More fear than any real danger.' He then abruptly changed the subject. 'You'll need a lot of rest after a shock like that, so I'm going to keep you here for a few days just in case. No objections I hope?'

I shook my head.

He hesitated a moment then added with a wry smile, 'Don't worry, No charges. It's all covered by the disaster medicine fund. So relax, and enjoy the rest. OK?'

I nodded again.

'Nurse will be round in a moment with your medicine. You'll probably need something to help you sleep tonight. I'll come around to see you tomorrow lunchtime.'

He gave me a double thumbs-up sign and left.

I had already had to explain the whole series of events to the special-brigade chief and his team earlier and the concentration required by this has drained away most of the remaining energy I had. All I wanted now was to sleep. The police had been particularly interested when I explained that the politician's secretary had phoned and invited me, especially when I told the motive of the invitation to them.

Anyway, I slept long and deep that night, aided no doubt by the sort of sleeping draft, as they used to call it.

Happily, I was allowed a full breakfast with real coffee and plenty of rolls and butter and jam. I decided that if I were ever ill again, I'd come back here, on the simple basis of this breakfast.

A little later, a short round nurse with a lovely friendly smile appeared carrying my suitcase, which had been collected from the hotel.

Agent Vx

'I'll put your clothes in the cupboard, shall I? You won't be needing them for a few days anyway I suppose.' She smiled while plumping up my pillows.

I thanked her and then did something which with hindsight saved my life.

I turned on the TV.

The news was just starting, and as I should have expected, it was a special edition about the previous evening's disaster. The catastrophe was illustrated by photos of the shattered, smoking hall with police and military agents all over the place. This was followed by some horrible images of the burnt bodies being extracted from the ruins.

The newsreader then came. He gave a reminder as to who the main speaker had been, and what his principal political positions had been.

At this, I sat up with surprise. The man had apparently been pro-Jewish, which was a strong point, seeing that Montreal and Canada as a whole, has one of the largest Jewish communities in the world. However, the detail which surprised me most was that he was said to be a strong supporter of developing chemical warfare agents. This position was the complete opposite of what his secretary had told me. The reasons for his belief was that, compared with traditional bombs, they were more effective in dealing with terrorists entrenched in inaccessible regions and above all, the effects were infinitely shorter lasting.

The newsreader added that it was ironical that he should have come to his end due to an attack by the terrible weapons he so advocated.

This discovery was a severe shock to me and showed that something very nasty was afoot.

This introductory part of the news, accompanied with throbbing background music, finished by the voice explaining that of the six hundred participants only one had escaped with his life but that for the moment his identity was unknown. This bit of information was accompanied by a

photo of me, no doubt taken a few instants before I was thrown to the ground by the photographer. I was smiling a slightly sinister smile, while in the background the blast from the explosion had already started billowing towards us.

It was a brilliant piece of photography, used entirely out of context, as usual.

The commentator did not make any remark, but a better photo of a ruthless murderer, observing his horrible machinations succeed to perfection, would have been difficult to find.

'Now!' he said 'Who is this man? And why was he there? And how did he manage to survive when every other human being in there perished?'

'Oh, God!' I thought, 'This smells like trouble.' But it was not finished.

'Yes.' continued the commentator, 'Who is this man?' I sat there riveted to the screen.

'Apparently,' he smiled, 'this person has since informed the police that he was working as a consultant for by a major Magnesium alloy foundry in Denmark.' He smiled a smug journalistic smile which I hated. 'Naturally, not wanting to get our facts wrong, we contacted the company via our Danish correspondent.'

He turned over a piece of A4 paper. 'The company categorically deny ever having heard of the man in question or of having any dealings in the field of research which he states he had been employed to investigate.'

My eyes opened wide as saucers, or at least that is what it felt like.

'Furthermore, the research director, who the man says employed him, does not exist.' He smiled, 'Now, one has to admit that this seems very strange.' he paused.

'Well, in the absence of any concrete proof, we must for the moment accept that a certain misunderstanding must have arisen here.' He turned over the second sheet of paper.

'Our lucky survivor also informed the police that he was working for the international Standards committee. His brief was to clarify the engineering issues of accidental production of toxic by-products, by electrical sparks. A very complicated scientific topic.' He nodded.

'Our correspondent in Brussels questioned the director of the working group involved.' he waited for this to sink in. 'It may surprise viewers, that this well-known scientist has never heard of our mysterious gentleman either.'

'Oh shit!' I sighed.

The man pushed the paper aside, 'Another misunderstanding, no doubt.' He paused, 'Last night,' He went on, 'our channel showed a photo of the rescued man, and it subsequently appeared in the morning papers.'

He was silent for a few moments to give weight to his follow up. 'Strangely enough' he drew towards himself a pile of documents, 'several people have since come forward and declared to the police that they recognise the man.'

'Now what?' I gasped.

'We have naturally taken the liberty of contacting these people.' He looked down at the pile documents. 'Firstly, several couples observed him scaling the fence in the Mont-Royal cemetery yesterday morning.'

He smiled, 'Now that is odd enough in itself, you'll surely admit, but,' And here he raised his finger, 'A short time later anti-Jewish graffiti was discovered on a series of headstones.'

'Oh, fuck!' I exclaimed.

'A short time later he escaped out of the adjacent cemetery by sprinting down the side road.' He turned over the page on his desk. 'The men on duty at the gates, being astonished by this, followed him out but he had disappeared before they could reach the gates they were guarding.'

He paused to let this new piece of information sink in. 'Now, our information is that he was hiding in a nearby bar, pretending, it seems, to be a runner in desperate need of water.'

I sat there transfixed as the story unfolded.

The man slowly turned over a further sheet while keeping his eyes fixed on the camera. 'One might think that this was the end of the story.' He shook his head and almost tutted. 'Less than an hour later, a young and beautiful girl was seen to fall from the Jacques Cartier bridge. She died immediately on striking the tarmac below.' He turned the page.' he took on a sad, tired look. 'The first people to arrive on the scene looked up and who did they see looking down, and then run off?' he paused to let everyone guess. 'Well, the same man.'

'Oh, god!' I gasped.

He turned the page, 'The end of the story?' he asked, looking into the lens. 'No, I'm afraid not. That same afternoon, only a few hours before the horrible attack, a group of senior citizens touring the botanical gardens, spotted someone hiding behind a tree. It was a man, and he was attempting to conceal some instrument from sight.'

At this, the newsreader stopped and smiled. 'The man in question seems to be our mystery man again.'

'Finished?' he asked again but shook his head. 'Not much later that afternoon, the main political speaker's secretary was discovered stabbed to death in the compost heap, not twenty yards from the place the man was observed.'

'Oh, fucking hell,' I thought.'

The man smiled. 'When the police visited his hotel room, they discover two empty black spray-paint canisters. The same as the ones used for the graffiti in the cemetery.'

He paused once more. 'NOW,' And here he leant forward and looked straight into the camera. 'In the absence of any clear motifs, we must naturally assume that this man is innocent of all these horrible crimes.' He frowned. 'We can not infer that he had anything to do with the murder of more than six hundred innocent people either.'

He stopped. 'Unless of course, he was to be proven guilty.'

Agent Vx

There was a long pause. 'One thing is certain though. Someone capable of gassing hundreds of people and then incinerating them is certainly not likely to stop at a murder or two more.' He nodded.

'But what?' he said, 'could motivate such an inhuman crime?'

Before the newscaster had moved onto the next subject, I had dressed. Seconds later, I was out of the window and onto the fire escape. I clattered down this as fast as I could, darted out of the back of the hotel compound and back onto the river-front road. My face was by now on the front pages of almost every newspaper in the country, and no doubt was decorating thousands of Facebook pages, as people shared the news about the latest public enemy N°1.

I needed to go into hiding fast.

Chapter 7

My first thought once outside the hospital grounds was to hide somewhere and think. The Mont-Royal park was directly next to the hospital grounds, and without pausing, I slipped in through the main entrance. Leaving the main path, I threaded my way between the shrubs and up a steep grass-covered slope, under massive trees which had been there for more than a hundred years. Selecting a place from which I could survey any arrivals, I sat down against the trunk of one of the more impressive trees.

It was Monday morning, and at this time of day, the place was populated only by a few of the outcasts of that city. One more or one less made no difference here, and, in any case, none of them was likely to have watched the TV or to have had access to the morning newspapers.

It didn't require much intelligence to realise that I had been framed and well framed. The person behind this framing had planned every detail carefully. Furthermore, he obviously had been in no hurry, had plenty of money and had an excellent brain.

In any case, my own brain told me that with so much evidence now piled up against me, I stood no chance. I would be tried, and without a shadow of a doubt, would be convicted to life imprisonment. Unless, of course, I could prove my innocence somehow.

I couldn't grasp who would want to go to such lengths to arrange an elaborate setup, and why choose me as the scapegoat?

On reflection, I that the only person who could say anything in my favour was the photographer who had taken that damning picture. Had he not thrown me to the ground, I would have been slashed to bits. He must have realised that, had I been guilty, I would have known what was about to happen and would have taken my precautions. No one would expect me to have remained standing in the open in direct line of sight of the building, waiting to watch the show.

I decided that this was my best, and only real lead. I took out my smartphone and searched for the photo copyright credits in the first newspaper website I thought of.

As I expected, the first post which came up was his photo.

There it was at the bottom, 'Copyright Joss Fergusson' with the address of his website. Moving to this, I skipped to the contact page and copied the e-mail address.

I then sent the following message.

'Yesterday you saved my life. Thanks. I've been framed. I did not perpetuate that horrible crime. The evidence has been piled up too cleverly. I don't stand a chance in court. I have escaped before I am arrested. If you believe me, please contact me. I need help immediately.'

I hit the send button.

Less than a minute later, a reply arrived.

'I believe you. Look at this photo.'

The attachment was a zoom of a high definition photo he must have taken in 'Burst-mode' as he leapt at me. Visible, only a few yards from my head, one could see dozens of razor-sharp fragments of glass flying straight at me. Under the photo, he had noted, 'If I hadn't given you a rugby tackle your head would have been severed from your body. The rest of you would have been sliced up like minced meat. You obviously did not expect the explosion. That doesn't make you innocent though.'

I e-mailed back, 'Where can we meet?'

The reply was instant. 'The police are already all over the place. If you are well hidden, don't move.'

Some tramp or other had left a pile of old sacking against the tree behind me, and I dragged this round and considered things.

'Have you got a car?' I messaged.

'Yes' came the reply.

'I'll disguise myself as a tramp or hobo, and I'll be right on the steps of the hospital, where no one will expect me. What car have you?'

'An old mustang painted cherry red, be there in twenty minutes. OK?'

'OK,' I replied.

Of course, he could have been setting me a trap and might just as well have already phoned the police. It was evident that he was in a position to be present and take some excellent exclusive pictures. These would undoubtedly earn him a small fortune when well marketed. However, I had a feeling about it and anyway had few other alternatives.

I spread out the dirty sacking on the ground. I selected the biggest pieces which I slung around my shoulders, completely hiding my clothes. I wrapped another around my waist and tucked it into my trouser belt. Finally, I took a smaller piece and draped it over my head, knotting it at the back to form a sort of cap.

The stuff had been out in the dew all night, so it didn't stink too much. However, the smell it had retained was more than enough to add character to the disguise.

With this rudimentary disguise on, I made my way down the slope and back out through the gates, limping.

Outside the hospital entrance, several police vehicles were now parked, but no officers were visible. I sat on the lower steps and drew my smelly disguise close around me. I was not feeling all that courageous. Nevertheless, I reasoned that only the shrewdest detective would expect a man who had just escaped, to be sitting here beside the police cars.

I sat and waited, observing with a wry smile how everyone arriving at the steps gave me such a wide berth. After only ten minutes or so, an old mustang swung into the entrance, stopped, and the tall photographer jumped out.

'Here!' he shouted at me, 'Where the hell have you been, brainless idiot?'

I shuffled to my feet instinctively playing the part.

'I've been all around the place after you.' he continued. The people going up and down the steps pretended not to take any notice but sighed and shook their heads.

'Get in that damn car quick. Christ almighty!' he shouted. 'You stink like a sewer. Get In, come on. Quick man.'

At this instant, the glass doors of the hospital swung open, and three policemen came running down the steps. The photographer took no notice and continued to shout. 'Come on you damned sewer rat, jump in before I kick you in.'

With this, he yanked open the door and bundled me into the passenger seat. The policemen rushed by, leapt into their car and sped off, the siren going full blast.

Without a glance, the man slammed the car door and tramped back to his side, muttering and shaking his head. He then accelerated and drove off in a cloud of blue smoke. As soon as we were out of sight of the hospital, he turned, 'Christ, you've got guts man, to go and sit right under their noses.'

'My guts are not feeling all that good at the moment.' I returned, 'Especially with this filthy stuff on.'

'Yeh! But keep it on till we're around the corner. I'll take you to my studio. No one ever disturbs me there.'

A moment later, he leant over the seat and dragged out a battered hunting jacket and a fisherman's hat. 'Chuck those sacks and stuff in the back and put this on. The disguise might not be as good, but the smell is infinitely better.'

The studio was only a few minutes away in one of the buildings along the waterfront. But before Joss let me in, he took the stinking sacks and pushed them into a big refuse bin. He then led me down a few half-rotten wooden steps and unbolted an impressively heavy door, closed by four separate locks. 'That's the only way to keep all those hobos and drug peddlers out.'

Inside, the studio was surprisingly big, clearly organised for photo shootings on quite a large scale. The walls were lined with metal fixings from which hung a variety of clothes and disguises. There was everything from leopard skins to

fur coats, military costumes and hats of all types. At the back wall hung a series of back-drops of different scenery and a green-screen.

For furniture, the place sported three long, battered and stained sofas arranged in a 'U' shape around a big coffee table made of three planks sitting on cardboard boxes. The only other furniture was a big old metal desk with a PC on it.

He looked around. 'Nice place, eh? Don't keep my expensive gear here though. Too risky.' He pursed his lips, 'Take a chair, man and let talk, Coffee?'

I nodded and sat, stretching out my legs, as he went to the far corner to put the machine on.

'A beer while you're waiting?' he called.

I nodded, and he returned and handed me the bottle. 'You're in one hell of a mess man,' he said

'Call me, William.'

'OK, you can call me Joss.'

Joss was a tall, thin man with a pleasant sun-tanned face and a mass of salt-and-pepper hair. His eyebrows were dark and bushy and his eyes a dark blue. His nose and mouth seemed almost too small for his face. They were overshadowed by the unruly mop of hair and eyebrows.

'Well, Will.' he went on 'This morning the radio announced that the nerve gas had been traced.'

'That's great,' I said, sitting up.

'Not so great as it seems.'

I frowned.

'It was stolen from Oak Ridge National Lab.'

'Christ!'

'Yes. The team discovered the theft on Friday evening.'

My eyes opened wide, and he continued. 'The day after you visited the lab.' He paused, 'They discovered that too.'

I let myself fall back in the sofa, my mouth hanging open.

'How did you manage it?'

I sat up and shot a quick look at him, but he burst into laughter.

Agent Vx

'You should have seen your face, man!' he chuckled on, 'Christ Will, no one could play-act like that if he was guilty.'

'When did this come out?' I asked

'Last night. As soon as the alarm went up, the authorities there admitted to the theft.'

'Oh, God!'

'Yep, you're in it real deep. Someone has got it in for you, William. Someone with one hell of a brain on him I'd say.' He looked over at the coffee machine, which was now gurgling happily. 'How about explaining things to me up till when we met, starting at the beginning. How did you get into this in the first place?'

I took a drink of the beer, 'Have you got a glass Joss, I just can't get used to drinking beer out of a bottle.'

He rummaged around in a small cupboard and brought me over a well-worn tumbler. 'That's for whisky, but I suppose that'll do.'

I started by explaining that I was a freelance science consultant in the chemical engineering field. I then explained how I had been contacted by the boss of the magnesium manufacturing firm.

'Magnesium is pretty volatile stuff if it gets into contact with oxygen.' I said, 'So they do the processing under a blanket of inert gas.'

'Got it,' said Joss.

'Well, some of these gases produce toxic by-products when they are super-heated. They wanted me to investigate and clarify the risks to their industry if this information was to leak out to the public.'

Joss smiled 'And you think that was part of the set-up?'

'The man who called himself the research director gave me a rendezvous in one of the most expensive hotels in Paris. His clothes were probably worth six months wages, so I assumed he was what he said he was.

He also paid all my travel expenses, first-class, and my hotel fees at the Hilton.... Not much to make one worry there.'

'No.' nodded Joss, 'Not an offer to be rejected lightly.'

'I was coming over to the scientific conference at Knoxville anyway, which he seemed to know already. I suppose he must have found that out from the list of papers to be presented.'

'A man who knows his job.' nodded Joss, 'But what about this report for international standards?'

'Same sort of set-up.' I shook my head in self-pity, 'How on earth was I to know that I was being set up?'

'Clever man, eh?'

'Same sort of scenario, but this time I only ever had him, or his secretary on the phone.'

I sighed, 'The man said that the new study committee was to start near the end of the year. And this incidentally was true, because I checked it.'

'Naturally,' said Joss.

'He asked me if I would like to participate as an independent member. All costs paid.'

Joss smiled, 'Another job that every consultant must be dreaming of, and of course, how could you refuse it.'

'Yes. The first meeting was scheduled for late September, so he asked me to visit the lab here in Montreal, to start getting some background information.'

'Great stuff,' added Joss, 'nicely thought out.'

'And he paid my flight here as well as the hotel.'

'OK.' said Joss 'but what about all this other stuff that happened Sunday.'

I sighed, not without a touch of embarrassment, but explained everything precisely as it had happened, and he looked on incredulously.

'And you did all that? I mean, really?... ' He sat forward and gazed at me. 'Are you sure you are not crazy? No, I suppose not. But Hell!'

I shrugged and sighed, 'Sometimes I think I must be a bit, how can I put it...'

Joss interrupted, 'Different. That's a good term, don't you think. Hold on. The coffee's ready.'

When he returned with two mugs of steaming coffee, he sat and stretched out his long legs, crossing his ankles.

'You must have been shadowed since you set foot here and followed all day. Someone must have set up all these traps afterwards. There is no other explanation. No way it could all have been planned in advance.'

I frowned, and he continued, 'Hell, man. This bloke has got you over a barrel.' Joss smiled at me suddenly. 'Well anyhow, every cloud has its silver lining, as they say.' He sat forward on the sofa and blew on his coffee. 'Do you know, that single photo I took is going to bring me in at least sixty thousand dollars in TV and newspaper rights.' He nodded, 'Might even hit the hundred thousand mark.'

'Christ!'

'Yep, good shot'. Joss smiled again, 'Damn lucky though. I had just the right objective on and hit the button just at the right moment.'

'An accident then really,' I added.

'Yep. The sort of accident I'd like to have every day.'

'What about the one you sent me this morning?' I asked.

'Yep. That was another bit of luck. I must have triggered the camera as I jumped at you.'

'But if you publish it, surely people will see I was innocent.' I had sat forward now.

'There's a chance. But I wouldn't go walking into the police holding it in front of you.'

'You're not going to hold it back?' I stammered.

'Are you mad, Will? No!' He shook his head. 'I'll negotiate that one this afternoon. It'll be worth more than the first. He shook his head. 'Get it out while the subject is still red-hot. That's the only way to make real money.'

He stopped and glanced at me, 'Sorry man. I got talking shop. Forgot the real trouble.'

'No, don't worry. That's your job.'

'You know Will. Those two shots will probably get me nearly a year and a half's salary. And I can tell you that that doesn't happen many times in a photographer's life.'

I sipped my coffee, which was surprisingly good for this side of the Atlantic as he went on.

'Let's get back to your business.' He said, rubbing his clean-shaven, tanned chin. 'Well.' he continued. 'I can see three distinct possibilities.'

'Ah?' I questioned.

'Yep. Either the man behind this wants to get back directly at you for some reason. In that case, the mass murder was his way of achieving that.'

I nodded.

'Or,' he continued, 'the mass murder was the main objective, and you were selected to take the responsibility and shift the suspicion away from the man behind it.'

'Yes.' I nodded again.

'Or.' He finished. 'The person wanted to kill two birds with one stone... You being one of them.'

I thought about this for a moment but wagged my finger in a gesture of disagreement.

'Do you know anyone who might want to do you a lot of harm?' he asked.

I would immediately have suspected Lida Niemela had I not believed her to be dead.

Joss looked across at me as I shook my head.

'No.' He said, 'you don't look like the sort of guy who'd have managed to make that sort of enemy.'

'Thanks.'

'But.' He went on, 'There's one point which I don't get yet.'

I shook my head. 'Better than me, because I don't get anything at all.'

'Surely.' He continued, ignoring this, 'With all the exits locked and barred, he could have incinerated everyone in there with his damn petrol spray trick.'

I sat forward, but he went on,

'Looks like overkill on an incredible scale.' He frowned.

'That's true.' I said, 'Why would one go to all that trouble of stealing the gas from a high-security centre?'

'Exactly.' nodded Joss, 'I don't get it.'

I thought about this and sipped my coffee, 'The only explanation is that the fire and explosion were secondary.'

'Yep.' agreed Joss, 'That bloke must have one hell of a brain on him. Too much to go wasting time on unnecessary tricks.'

'Agreed.' I nodded, 'I guess the gas was used to make certain that no one could survive. With luck, you might escape from a fire if the smoke did not suffocate you, but never from an hour-long exposition to an atmosphere saturated with Vx.'

'You did.' He shot a glance at me.

'Yes. But I happened to spot what was going on and was actively studying that sort of subject. I knew the only way out.'

Joss made a tutting noise, and shook his head, 'And that is where our man made his one big mistake.'

He paused, and I shook my head. 'No. Even if I had spotted the gas, I would not have been able to protect myself for such a long time. I would have eventually got some of the stuff in my lungs or on my skin.'

'Just luck then.' sighed Joss.

'Yes. The closed cloakroom doors must have kept the concentration low enough for my protection to handle.' I hesitated. 'No. Luck was definitely on my side for once.'

Joss swirled his coffee around in his mug and watched it settle again. 'Maybe the explosion was planned to destroy some important evidence inside that place.'

I thought about this. 'He must have been absolutely sure of himself. he must have known for certain that the rescue team would try to rinse the place down before entering.'

Joss nodded, 'He knew his stuff, eh? That makes him an expert himself, which should help us narrow things down.'

I looked up. 'So, you're going to help me then?'

Joss shook his head, 'Obviously man. You can't manage on your own, can you.'

'No.' I agreed. 'But that man doesn't need to be an expert. He needs to be intelligent enough to read up the subject and

patient enough to check and double-check his facts. He could find everything he needed on the internet.'

'Could be anyone then.'

'No.' I said, replacing my cup on the plank table, 'Not anyone. This person is someone with a lot of intelligence, plenty of time, a lot of money and above all one hell of a big grudge against somebody or something.'

'A madman,' commented Joss.

'There are all sorts of madness.'

Joss smiled, 'I know at least one person who is really mad. Hopping mad that is.'

I looked up at him. 'The girl who fell off the bridge.' He smiled, 'Do you know who she was?'

'No.'

'She just happened to be the girlfriend of the biggest crime boss in the country.'

'Christ!'

'How she comes into the picture, I can't see, but that man is hopping mad...'

'He's after me too?'

'Well... I heard it whispered that he is offering a large sum to anyone who can arrange a little chat with you before the police do.'

'Oh, fuck!'

'Couldn't have put it better myself...'

Joss then told me to stay where I was and left me the key so that I could lock the door behind him. He had some eggs and various other bits and pieces in the small fridge, for when he had a long photo shooting session, so I managed quite comfortably for the rest of the day. At nightfall, once he was confident that we were not being observed he returned. We got into his car, and he took me back to his flat, where I was greeted by his big comfortable and lazy cat.

During the evening, we went over the facts again with little success because I was exhausted, so we turned in early, and I slept soundly until nearly eight.

Agent Vx

We had just finished breakfast when the phone rang.

Joss picked it up and listened carefully. 'OK. Yes, I understand. Yes, I'll go and see the insurance guys. Thanks.'

He replaced the receiver and looked over at me at the breakfast table. 'That was the Gendarmes, as you call them in France. My studio has been ransacked and burnt out last night.'

'Christ!'

'Time we were moving, don't you think,' he said.

'Yes, but where?'

Joss smiled over at me and shook his head mockingly. 'Canada is a huge place, William!' he smiled, 'And I just happen to know exactly where to hide the world's most wanted man.' He smiled to himself. 'Come on, let's get organised.'

PART 2

Chapter 8

Nearly two years before my ill-fated arrival in Montreal, a woman in her early forties pushed through the swing doors leading from the gym's shower room. She was naked and held a heavy white towel carelessly in front of her well-manicured pubic hair. Her breasts were large, perfectly formed and firm, with dark pink nipples.

She was justifiably proud of these.

She was also proud of the rest of her body and intended to keep it in its present state for as long as humanly possible, without the intervention of the scalpel.

Her regular workouts were part of this plan and had over the years, become a routine part of her mornings, on par with breakfast. This nicely filled up her mornings and avoided any sensation of boredom, which seemed to trouble a number of her friends who, like her, did not need to work for a living.

The workouts were invariably carried out in this fitness centre close to her home in the exclusive area of Montreal. The location was convenient, permitting her to join her friends for lunch after her refreshing shower.

Most of her good friends frequented the same fitness centre and were of Israeli origin, as she was herself. They all also shared the common characteristic of being married to successful Jewish husbands. Consequently, they had no need to work for their living either, which had in any case been the objective aimed at and skillfully engineered by their mothers.

This exclusive area boasted several other fitness centres aimed at the wealthy population, but they all preferred this one for two reasons.

Firstly, the owner Lionel, was one of the most respected professionals in Canada and secondly because he was homosexual. The result of this was that, except for the handful of elite athletes he trained, most of the male members were also gay. The women thus felt reassured in

this environment and were never troubled by the ridiculous behaviour of brainless strutting males. In any case, if any of these women needed independent sex, they knew perfectly well where to find it.

Talia Kaufman dried herself slowly and carefully and pulled an expensive white cotton tee-shirt down over her naked breasts. Glancing in the mirror, she nodded at the effect with satisfaction. It was rare that she went without a bra. This, however, was a special occasion, and she would put it back on directly the task completed.

Therefore, pulling up her white linen shorts and tying her perfectly clean silver Nike trainers, she pushed through the swing doors into the entrance hall.

Lionel was behind the welcome counter, working on his computer.

He looked up,

'Finished for today Mrs Kaufman, you look brilliant'.

Talia smiled as she noted his eye slip down. 'As usual,' she added.

Lionel laughed, 'Yes of course, as usual.'

She started to turn towards the entrance, then pretended to remember something and turned back.

'Oh, Lionel!'

'Yes?' he looked up again.

'I heard you were having a little difficulty raising funds for your new investment.'

Lionel looked surprised, 'How did you come to know that?'

Talia smiled, 'I'm the wife of a prominent Jewish businessman. It's my role to know that sort of thing.'

'But how...?'

'Ah! Now that would be telling secrets, Lionel. And you know how we Jews are about secrets.'

Lionel shook his head. 'Naturally, my little secrets are well known to you and your friends I suppose?'

'You suppose correctly, Lionel.'

'Yes then. I can't obtain the funds.' He lifted his hands and let them fall on the desk with a dull thump. Then he went on.

'My equipment is beginning to date, and customers have come to expect the best technology.'

'But they already have the best teacher in Canada.'

'Thank You, Mrs Kaufman. But they also want the latest High-Tech gear to train on.' He sighed. 'If I don't have it, they will start to drift away, and that will be the end of my little affair.'

Talia nodded. 'I do understand your business plan you know. A businessman's wife has a second sense for such things.' She leant over and tapped his hand. 'Keep the number of members low and offer them high-quality personalised services. And keep the prices high to retain an image of being select and keep out undesired types.'

'Well done. You've seen right through me.'

Talia nodded thoughtfully and added, 'More than you can imagine, I believe.'

Lionel frowned at this and was about to question this remark when she went on.

'I might be in a position to help you maintain our little fitness haven. After all, my friends and I feel relaxed and quite at home here. It would be very inconvenient for us, were you to close.'

'Ah!' Lionel looked up. A wealthy Jew was always to be looked upon with respect where money matters were concerned.

'I believe you requested a loan from Wechsler, which was refused.'

'You know everything. If only that were the only refusal, I got...'

'Yes. I do know that of course.'

Lionel shook his head and laughed, 'Of course.'

'Well, it happens that my best friend Sharen Wechsler is the owner's wife.' She nodded and smiled when he shot a glance at her. 'A gorgeous woman, even by my standards.'

'Ah,' said Lionel looking down at his computer keyboard.

'My husband knows Mister Wechsler very well too. If I could be of any help...' She looked over at him with a wry

smile on her face. 'A personal phone call might sway things in your favour. Who knows?'

Lionel stood up quickly, a little flustered, 'I don't know what to say really!'

Talia held up her hand, 'Don't forget my origins, Lionel. I would naturally require a little something in return.' She smiled, 'I'll call from your private office phone. Shall we do it straight away?'

She noted with a small smile how his eyes dropped to her breasts once more and how he swallowed. She shook her head and sighed, 'Men!' she thought, and led the way through the side door into the tiny, cluttered room. As she moved some fitness catalogues to release the phone cord, he coughed.

'Um, Mrs Kaufman... Well please remember how I am...'

She looked around at him with a questioning look.

'You know... How I am about women, I mean.'

Talia shook her head, 'If you mean about being Gay, save me the sad tale, Lionel. We will come to that later.'

She punched in a number and waited. 'Hey! Sharon, Talia here. Yes, great I'm at the gym.'

She turned to Lionel, 'Hello from Sharon, Lionel.'

Lionel smiled,

'Hello, Mrs Wechsler.'

'Hey, Sharon, is the old man available?'

There was a pause,

'Yes, but this IS business,' she added. She pressed her free left hand on her right breast and looked Lionel in the eyes, giving him a thumbs-up sign which he didn't rightly know how to interpret. She turned slightly away to bring her profile into full view from where Lionel stood and nodded to the voice in the earpiece.

'Yes, no more than a minute, I promise. Great.'

After another pause, she continued, 'Hey there, you old Jew!' She laughed, 'I need you.' She snorted, 'No, you're much too old for that sort of thing and anyway Sharon is listening in, aren't you Sharon...' There was another pause,

Agent Vx

'See!' she added. 'Hey, now to business. My friend Lionel at the Fitness centre needs funds to update the equipment. You refused the loan.'

She paused, then went on, 'Both Sharan and I and all our rich friends from the community are members. You didn't know that, did you?'

There was a pause.

'I know as a banker you don't like risks, but he only needs a hundred thousand or so.'

Another pause.

'Don't come that over me, I know exactly how much you earn every day.'

She sighed then continued, 'And don't forget that this is where we get our magnificent bodies from. I believe that you appreciate Sharon's. Quite often, that's right eh Sharon?'

Lionel couldn't help laughing, having had ample time to appreciate the perfection of the other woman's body.

'And of course, as you know, we risk nothing here. You know all about Lionel of course?' She smiled while listening to the reply then winked at Lionel. 'You also know that nearly all the male members here are Gay too?'

She pulled a face at the remark the man had made but went on. 'Now if he had to close down, we would all have to go to one of those downtown gyms full of sweating uneducated male beasts, who would spend all day ogling at our tits and trying to sleep with us. You would not like that much in my opinion.'

She smiled at the reply. 'Yes, yes, I know, drop the financial blurb, please. What If I guarantee the loan personally?'

Lionel grabbed her arm and shook his head whispering; 'No.'

Talia smiled at the phone, 'That won't be necessary? Good. You'll sign the loan form and leave it with Sharon? Perfect.'

She turned and did another thumbs-up, rubbing her left nipple with the thumb as she did so. 'Can you go around just after lunch Lionel?'

He nodded.

'He'll be there at one o'clock. Thank you, old Jew. See you. See you, Sharon. Give him an extra-special tonight, courtesy of me.'

Lionel heard a loud peal of laughter coming from the phone earpiece.

Talia turned, and as she replaced the receiver, Lionel stepped forward and kissed her cheek. 'Thanks, I don't know how to thank you.'

'No? But I do.' And before Lionel had time to react, Talia had grabbed his wrist, lifted her tee shirt and clamped his warm hand onto her firm round breast.

His eyes opened wide, but she kept his hand firmly in place.

'Now Lionel.' She said, 'What do you feel?'

He gulped and looked to where his hand showed under her tee-shirt. 'Excellent, perfect in fact.'

Talia sighed, 'I don't mean there.'

And with a swift, practised movement, slipped her free hand inside his shorts and encircled his penis. Lionel froze and as she squeezed rhythmically, and she smiled as she felt the thing swell and extend rapidly in her hand.

'I meant, what do you feel here?' And she squeezed hard the lengthening penis.

He stood there with his mouth shut, unable to find something to say.

Talia smiled. 'Well well! What an incredible effect I have on a man who declares to only like other men.' She wagged the penis from side to side, gave it a pinch with her long nails and then withdrew her hand. Stepping back, she removed his hand from her breast and looked him straight in the eye.

Lionel looked down at the bulging shorts then up at her.

Talia held up her hand before he could speak, 'Spare me the lies, Lionel. I know perfectly well that you are no more a homosexual than I am.'

'How on earth can you say that.' attempted Lionel.

'Because I have friends all over the place and I happen to be interested in your case. So, I investigated'

She smiled, 'One of my older friends knows your mother quite well Lionel. They had a lovely chat about your girlfriends back home...'

'Christ. What a woman you are!'

'Thank you. Now to work.' She sat down and signalled him to take his official place behind the desk.

'If you don't mind. I'll put my bra back on now that we have finished with the preliminaries.'

She fumbled in her sports bag and deftly attached the exquisitely tailor-made bra. She smiled across at Lionel as she tightened the strap,

'I never go without a bra except when I feel that my husband needs a little reminder about the quality of Home-Grown products'. She pulled down the tee-shirt.

'An excellent precaution,' admitted Lionel, nodding appreciation.

'A wealthy man like my husband, or like Mr Wechsler, is a constant attraction to many younger girls who would appreciate a little slice of the cake.'

She made a wry smile, 'But they always forget that we wives were also their age once, and we know all the tricks. They don't stand a chance really, poor things. But that's life.'

Lionel smiled, 'I wouldn't like to be your enemy'.

Talia's face suddenly hardened, and her eyes flashed with such unexpected violence that Lionel sat back quickly.

'No,' said Talia relaxing, 'That wouldn't be a good idea. Now to business.'

She leant forward, 'Don't worry Lionel, no sex involved. At least not with me.'

'Ah.'

'Is that relief I detect? If so, I might be upset and withdraw my assistance.' She laughed lightly. 'Pretending to be gay was an excellent business strategy Lionel, I must admit that.' She wagged a finger at him. 'But My friend Sharon and I detected the game quite early on, so I only checked with your mother to be certain.'

'We realised that this enabled you to build a quasi-monopoly of the wealthy gay community AND to project a highly reassuring image to well-off women like myself and my friends. You guessed rightly that we were drawn to somewhere where we would not be harassed by sex hungry males from the lower strata of the population.'

'Thanks,' smiled Lionel, 'I was aiming at getting that exactly right for my customers so that they all felt perfectly relaxed and at home when they were here. Like in a little nest, I suppose.'

'Well,' said Talia, 'You got that perfectly right. However, it would be a catastrophe for the scheme, were it to become known that you were not what you pretend to be'.

'Yes, I realise that. It has not always been easy.'

'No, I can imagine that.' she smiled, 'Temptation must be hard to resist sometimes. In a way, you have impressed me, Lionel.'

'So naturally, you want something in return for your help in engineering the loan?'

'And for keeping your secret. Yes. Naturally.'

'And?'

'Oh! It's a small, and not altogether disagreeable task. I want you to seduce a girl.'

Lionel Jumped, 'What?'

'I want you to seduce a girl and get me a compromising photo.'

'What?'

'Lionel!' Talia tapped that table, 'You can understand that, surely.'

'Yes, but you are asking me to risk the single thing you know I must protect. My false identity.'

Agent Vx

'The risk will be negligible. The job is to be undertaken in the USA, at Knoxville to be precise.'

Lionel relaxed, 'Ah!'

'I will pay your first-class plane ticket and a week at the Hilton.'

Lionel nodded.

Talia went on, 'I'll also have to buy you a decent set of clothes. You absolutely can't go dressed like a... Well, you will go to my husband's tailor and have two suits and some shirts made.' She took a little bundle out of her bag and pushed it across the table, 'This will cover that and pay for some decent shoes too.'

She looked up into his eyes, and continued, 'Decent means they cost more than three hundred dollars by the way'.

Lionel picked up the wad of notes, 'There must be several thousand dollars here!' he said with surprise.

'Seven thousand to be exact. Two thousand five hundred for each suit, a thousand for shirts and ties and the rest for shoes and underclothes. You'll have to make do with it.'

Lionel was aware of the cost of expensive clothes but had never had any himself. 'OK.' he said.

'All I want is one good photo with this girl naked with you.' She smiled. 'As to the compromising nature, I'll leave that up to your discretion. However, the more obvious the sexual nature of the relationship the better.' She held up a finger. 'Naked alone on a bed or in a bath is not compromising. You understand the implication of that of course?'

Lionel frowned, 'But that would put me directly in your hands. You could blackmail me after.'

'Be logical Lionel. I can do that now.'

'Yes, I suppose you could.'

'Well, in fact, I am really, aren't I?'

Lionel broke out laughing, 'Ha, yes that's true.'

Talia smiled and laughed lightly in turn. 'Let's call this a simple business arrangement. It sounds so much nicer like that, don't you think?'

'Yes ok, a business arrangement.'

Talia looked down at the table and reflected for a few seconds. 'I'll tell you what I will do. If the photos are very, very explicit, I accept that you mask over your face so that you cannot be recognised. What do you think about that?'

'Yes. That's perfect. But what makes you think I will be able to get this girl into such a compromising situation?'

'Because, Lionel, you won't be working alone.'

'Ah?'

'No. I will be sending a woman along who will prepare the ground for you. She will befriend this girl and get the machine nicely warmed up before you have to make your move.'

Lionel frowned, and Talia sighed. 'You men are so dumb sometimes! After a good pre-treatment with drinks, my emissary will shift the subject to sex to get things warmed up.' She moved her shoulders and readjusted the left bonnet of her bra slightly. 'When you appear, she will point out all the appealing things about you. Especially those which I have just investigated myself.'

Lionel looked down at his still bulging shorts. 'You are certainly very thorough.' Lionel smiled.

'My friends might call that ruthlessness.' Said Talia.

'Of course, I am not to know why you want to do this?'

'Correct. I get a nice sharp, focused photo, and you get a gym-full of high-tech gear and keep a string of faithful customers.'

'Where do I sign?'

'I'll tell you where to be and when. You will be contacted once there, and the girl pointed out to you. The women will fix a way of signalling to you when the time is ripe. Got that?'

'Yes, that's clear.'

'One last thing Lionel.'

'Yes'

'After I leave this office, you will forget this little discussion and treat me exactly, and I mean EXACTLY, as usual.'

'I understand perfectly, Mrs Kaufman.'

Agent Vx

'Perfect.' She nodded. 'Nice to have done business with you Lionel and good luck for the future.'

'Thank you for saving my little world.'

'And mine.'

Talia smiled as she rose, 'Oh, Lionel.'

'Yes.'

'Go and get a cold shower before any of your gay customers spot that.'

Two months later Talia received a magnificent colour photo of the girl in question. She was portrayed stark naked sitting astride a sweating muscle-covered male. Her head was back, her eyes closed in ecstasy, her thick dark hair cascading over her shoulders and sticking to her small breasts. Her tanned body was glistening with sweat, and her hips were lifted as she rode the body beneath her with such abandoned application.

Talia smiled to herself, 'Just what the doctor ordered. Bravo Lionel. And now to work.'

Chapter 9

Talia was pleased with herself.

She was now in possession of all the elements required to enable her to solve the question which had been troubling her.

Her youngest son had allowed himself to become unreasonably attached to a young woman of whom she did not approve. To say that she did not approve, however, would be putting things very lightly.

Luckily no one had been present when she had learnt how far things had gone between the two, young people. Had they been, they would have been at pains to recognise the Talia Kaufman that they knew. She had flown into an extraordinary fury and had rampaged and raged around her private sitting room like a mad beast until exhausted; she fell onto a sofa.

She had shouted and cursed, using language that few but her husband would have imagined could be part of her vocabulary. During this short period of madness, she managed to smash nearly everything that she could lift or move in the room. Even then, she remained white-faced and breathing deeply, until she had downed two tumblers of neat whisky. It took the cleaning ladies all afternoon to put the room back into a reasonable state of repair. Even so, the remains of several thousand dollars' worth of vases and pieces of art had to be gathered up and hidden away in cardboard boxes, until some decision about them was forthcoming. They knew too much about their employer's tantrums than to broach the subject before she mentioned it herself.

However far-reaching the damage, she never excused herself, 'I was angry.' was all she would offer for an explanation. Luckily, the most valuable elements of her husband's collection were kept in the main sitting or his own spacious office.

When he returned home late that afternoon, he passed one of the cleaners on her way back to the servant's quarters, with the remains of a broken lamp.

'Ah!' he frowned, 'My wife seems to have tripped and knocked over the lamp.'

The woman hesitated, 'yes, Sir.'

'Did she trip and break many other objects Martha?'

'Just a few, sir.'

'Do you mean just a few have been broken, or that just a few remain unbroken?'

The woman looked at the carpet searching for inspiration, 'I wouldn't like to say, sir.'

'Ah well, these things happen I suppose,' he said, adding under his breath, 'at least here.'

'Sir?'

'Nothing. Thank you, Martha.'

'Sir.'

She moved off towards the back of the massive old house and disappeared through a heavy door.

Glancing along the corridor towards what he liked to call, his wife's quarters, Mr Kauffman decided it wiser to get a shower and a change of clothes before dealing with this latest domestic crisis.

The two had been married now for twenty-five years and had had five children in rapid succession. Over the years he had become used to these sudden bouts of fury.

Consequently, and very early on in their marriage, he had decided that it would be a wise move to encourage Talia to design and furnish a private sitting room. This room opened out onto the garden at the back of the house. She could thus receive her friends there and above all confine her bouts of fury to a well-defined location.

This precaution had proved to limit the damage to things he valued considerably. Sometimes Talia would tell him about it, but on other occasions, she would announce that she had decided to re-decorate.

He suspected that these were the instances when men were involved, or occasionally when a rival woman had bettered her in public. He used the word men, rather than lovers, but he had long ceased to trouble himself about that side of things as long as she kept quiet about it.

If this latest tantrum were about men, he would hear no more about it. Otherwise, dinner would be less relaxed than was usual and he would have to be on his guard and choose his words with utmost care.

He thus took his time over showering and dressing. Then, pouring himself a long, cool aperitif of chilled Tariquet, white wine, he sat down comfortably in a rattan armchair on the balcony outside his bedroom window.

Along both sides of the extensive garden, his glance was, as usual, attracted to the well-tended flower beds.

At this time of the day, the shadows of the trees gradually crept across them, enhancing the vividness of the colours.

Everybody knew that Mr Kaufman was a very hard working and astute business-man. All the same, he believed that he owed his remarkable success to his habit of reserving a short time every day in which to relax and to think of nothing at all. Now, with several billion dollars in various banks, he allowed himself more relaxation and seemed to have become even more successful, which he took as proof of his theory.

This habit stemmed from the fact that very early on in his career he had decided that he would not allow himself to die from heart attack or any other work induced illness for that matter. He had thus adapted his way of life to ensure this.

Part of this plan also included not allowing himself to be drawn into his wife's conflicts.

During his working days, he only took a customer out to lunch in a restaurant where the chef knew him and served him specially concocted healthy food. These chefs knew that the price tag was not something to concern themselves

with. At home, he employed a chef, who prepared only the evening and weekend meals.

The man had been trained in France and knew precisely how to extract taste from the most ordinary and healthful foodstuffs. Cream and butter, for example, were rarely used, but nobody noticed this as he had many culinary tricks up his sleeve.

Musing on this, Mr Kaufman, one of the prominent members of Montreal's Jewish community, sighed. He then stood and made his way reluctantly down towards the main sitting room for the official aperitif.

His wife was already there rearranging the flowers which had been delivered already perfectly arranged. He reflected on how best to trigger the deluge if one was due.

'You look lovely this evening Talia. Those linen shirts suit you perfectly'.

His wife made a puffing noise, 'There are more important things in life than looks.'

'Ah,' he thought, 'Not a man problem then.'

'Something troubling you Cherie.'

She let go of the flowers and allowed her hand to fall dramatically and noisily onto the polished table.

'It's your son and his damn women again.'

Any of his children were invariably HIS when they did something with which his wife disapproved.

'Ah!' he said, 'What's he been up to this time? Not prostitutes again?'

'Prostitutes are not a problem. It's much worse. He says he is contemplating marriage!'

Mr Kaufman nearly dropped his glass. 'Marriage? Joshua?!!!'

After a hesitation, he continued, 'Ah well! He's twenty-five, so were we when we married.'

'That's not the question. The boy just dropped it into the conversation, as if he were mentioning the results of that stupid baseball team he supports.'

'Ah!' said Mr Kaufman warily. This part needed careful negotiation, to avoid placing himself in an attackable position.

Talia Kaufman took the silence in the spirit intended. 'Yes! I couldn't believe my ears. Surely, we brought him up to behave better than that to his parents.'

'Quite incredible! I agree.' He replied looking into his glass. In other circumstances he might have added, 'But you know how young people are nowadays.' then add something about independence. However, he knew that this would have supplied her with just the right ammunition with which to criticise him.

He was not going to ask who the lucky person was, because his wife obviously disapproved of her, whether she knew who it was or not.

'I had to drag the name out of him.' She shook her head impatiently. 'He just said – Oh you wouldn't know her.' She smiled wryly and shook her head. 'Of course, I told him I know ALL the eligible young women in Montreal.'

Her husband couldn't resist the temptation of adding, 'So if you don't know her, then she is naturally not eligible.'

In her present state, Talia did not for once spot the irony of this remark. 'That's exactly what I told him.'

'And?' prompted her husband.

'He told me it was Julia Thomson!' She paused to let the name sink in. 'Julia Thompson!' she repeated raising her eyebrows, 'I could hardly believe my ears.'

She went back over to the flowers and started messing up the arrangement a little more.

'Ah!' thought Mr Kaufman, 'So that is the source of the problem, is it.'

Julia Thompson was the daughter of a very successful and prosperous businessman. She was well educated, well brought up, intelligent and destined to play a prominent role in the upper strata of the affluent Montreal society.

She was additionally beautiful, and he considered his son's choice an excellent one. However, he would never

admit to this because the young woman had two major drawbacks in his wife's eyes.

Firstly, she was not Jewish, but a practising Catholic.

Secondly and utterly damning in his wife's eyes, she was the daughter of Thomas Thompson.

Thomas Thompson just happened to have been the man who had immediately preceded Mr Kaufman on his wife's long list of men-friends. She had jilted him, like many others before him, but this time to become Mrs Kaufman.

He kept quiet as his wife continued to wreak havoc on the vase of flowers. This was far too risky an instant to attempt saying anything, so he sipped his aperitif, looked out over the garden and waited.

Talia knew he was aware of this particular detail, but she did not suspect that he knew the rest of the story.

Thompson had married less than a year after Talia had jilted him and this had upset her considerably. She had become wildly jealous because she thought that this showed everybody who counted, that she had lost her power over him.

He knew however that, when the man's wife had died, barely three years later, she had tried to coax him back into the position of her lover. The man had rejected the proposition, and Mr Kaufman could still remember the fury of her anger and the damage she had wreaked in the sitting room on that memorable occasion.

It was at this moment that the idea of the private sitting room had emerged.

His wife had now worked herself back up into a suitable state to take up the subject again. 'Can't he see the impropriety of the whole thing. Him a good Jew and her a Catholic. It's unpardonable. How could he dream of dragging the family name through the mud in such a horrible manner?'

Mr Kaufman sighed. 'Would that be Thompson's daughter?' His wife started and stared at him, but he

continued. 'If so, she's headed towards being a very rich Catholic, at least that's something,' he ended.

She bridled, and her eyes flashed, 'Don't mention the name of that disgusting man in my presence. Ever. Do you hear me?'

'Oh yes! I hear you all right Talia.' He smiled at her reassuringly. He had been on the point of saying something about the past being dead and buried, and that the girl should not be made to pay for what her father may or may not have done. However, he held his tongue and turned away to pour her a drink.

His wife never forgot the past and never forgave anyone for what he or she had done, or more precisely, for what she imagined him to have done.

He turned back, stepped over and handed her the glass. 'The boy is independent in the eyes of the law and as you know well enough, is also very stubborn.'

'Your son takes after you in that respect.' snorted Talia

'Ah!' He smiled, 'but I found and married a magnificent beauty, who has continued to improve year after year, like an extremely expensive wine. An excellent investment I think I made there.'

The little flattery worked like clockwork as usual, and Talia allowed herself to be led over to the sofa and permitted him to put his arm around her.

'But she just isn't suitable,' she said with finality.

He shrugged, 'I can't see what we can do about it. If they love each other, I'm afraid the combat is already lost. Catholic or not.'

Talia leant forward and slapped her hand on the coffee table. 'I will not allow it. Never!' Her face was white, and she clenched her hand. 'I'll talk to the girl and tell her it is out of the question.'

Mr Kaufman realised that she was once more on the brink of a bout of fury and was determined to avoid this in the main sitting room.

'Good idea Talia.' he said nodding appreciatively, 'But please take your time to plan exactly how you want to put the thing across. Precipitating things might prove to be counterproductive'.

Talia rocked herself back and forth on the edge of the sofa, 'Yes.' she said in a half whisper, 'I'll make sure what I say will send her away with her tail between her legs.'

Mr Kaufman closed his eyes and sighed. 'Oh, the poor girl.' he thought. He above all wondered what would happen if the boy ever found out.

Mr Kaufman sighed. 'Talia.' He said quietly. 'Please be careful. We don't want the boy chucking up everything and going into the army like Thompsons son did.'

Talia looked round sharply at him, 'Why do you say that?' her eyes searching his face, 'I didn't have anything to do with that fool.'

'No of course not.' he said, 'But no one ever understood why he went off like that and got himself killed in that god-forsaken hole.'

Talia snorted and turned away, 'An idiot just like his father.'

Her husband looked down into his glass and swirled the contents around. 'It was totally out of character, from what I was told.' He said. 'The only reason I could see at the time was that the boy had had some trouble with a girl. You know how young men are. It smelt to me like heartbreak.'

Talia snorted again. 'If he was stupid enough to go off and get himself killed, that's his problem.'

'Was.' corrected her husband, 'Anyway I wouldn't like to have the same thing happen to my son. Would you?'

Talia turned and looked at him with a cold gaze, 'It won't happen. I guarantee that.'

She seemed to be turning this point over in her mind. For a short instant, she had thought that her husband had guessed the responsibility she had had in the affair. However, this was not the case, but he was right in his diagnostic. It was true that there had been a girl behind the

boys' abrupt decision to go and fight for his country and die for it too.

Then a new idea suddenly sprung into Talia's scheming mind, and she nodded slowly to herself, instantly recognising the perfection of the plan.

She turned sideways and slapped her husband on the knee. 'Don't worry, I'm his mother.' she smiled. Then standing up, she smiled as if nothing had happened. 'Come on silly. Dinner will be getting cold. Come on.'

In a flash, she had seen precisely what she should do.

Chapter 10

Thomas Thompson rose as he spotted his two friends enter the Toqué restaurant, in central Montreal. They waved to him and threaded their way across the softly lit room to his table by the window.

The three men had known each other for more than twenty years and had carried on this pleasant weekly ritual, which their wives had initiated almost as many years ago. The men were now all widowers and had been so for many years. Their friendship had outlived their griefs and had been strengthened by their mutual support over the intervening years.

They were also wealthy businessmen, who gained, or lost, infinitely more each day than the bills at any of Montreal's best restaurants could ever compete with. Consequently, they enjoyed eating and drinking the very best and considered that their weekly ritual together merited at least this.

The rotund George rubbed his hands together in boyish expectation, as he sat. 'Well, well, well' He smiled swivelling around on his big bottom and signalling to the waiter, who was already heading their way with the menus, 'I wonder if there's something special on the menu this evening'.

'You and your appetite George.' laughed Frederique, the third member of the party, 'It will be the end of you.'

The head waiter bowed respectfully, greeted the three men and handed round the menus. He knew them very well, having now served them several hundred times over the past ten years or so.

By agreement, the three men always selected the same dishes rather than picking and choosing. The task therefore usually took a little longer than with some customers. The advantage for them, however, was that they were always served at the same, time, and with piping hot dishes.

Tonight, the world-renowned chef had prepared a 'roti de boeuf en croute', and the men nodded agreement to each

other quickly, so the order was passed in record time with hardly any discussion.

The wine would, as usual, be excellent as they had absolute confidence in the wine waiter, who knew them well and, above all, their budget.

Frederic was a tall, thin, aristocratically looking Frenchman, with a big bumpy nose. He came from one of the better families of the Burgundy region. Inevitably then, any detailed discussion about wines was left to him and the wine waiter.

Over the aperitif and the entrée, they chatted about the latest business news of the week and discussed their plans for the upcoming summer holidays. Although each of them had at one time or another considered inviting the two others to spend the summer together, this had never materialised. Somehow each of them felt their weekly meetings to be so fundamentally essential to their mental well-being, that they were reluctant to risk endangering their friendship by an overdose of each other's company.

Whether this was the explanation of their continued mutual friendship, no one can tell. In any case, the three men looked forward to their evenings together and came away from them happy and relaxed.

As they waited for the main course, George sipped his wine and looked over at his friend. 'So, Thomas, what's this I heard about your boy signing up for the army?'

'Exactly what I was wondering too.' commented Frederic, 'Fantastic this wine eh?'

'Dew of the angels. Is what I'd call it' smiled George.

Thomas put down his glass and raised his hand in an unmistakable gesture. 'I'd like to know myself, boys. I really would.'

George sipped his wine. 'I would have said that it was the last thing I would have expected the boy to do.' He sipped again, 'Completely out of character, was what I thought. I thought he was against all that sort of thing.'

'Me too,' said Thomas. 'And I'm his father.'

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'I wonder what bug bit him?' commented George.

'You didn't have a fight or anything like that Thomas?'

'No. he didn't even come back from the campus before he went off. He just phoned and said he was off.'

'Incredible!' commented Frederique.

Thomas lifted his glass and swirled the lovely amber liquid around it before sipping it.

'I wouldn't do that Tom,' said Frederic, 'Swirling it will warm it. Keep it cool, man.'

Thomas nodded and spoke again. 'He said that instead of taking a bridge year, he had decided to do something more constructive. Something of real value for his country.'

'And that was your boy talking?' interrupted George 'Sounds like someone else.'

'That's what I thought.' Thomas shook his head, 'I don't understand at all.'

The three men looked at each other, and Thomas took up the discussion. 'Yes, I know what you are thinking. Why choose the most dangerous spot on earth to do your little bit for the country?' He shook his head and waved his hands, 'Crossing the Antarctic on foot would seem less dangerous'.

'Well I suppose he's signed up in one of the technical corps, so at least he won't be in the front line.' said Frederic, 'It could be a lot worse.'

'No, it couldn't.' Thomas shook his head, 'He went and signed up as a normal soldier.'

'What?' cried the two friends almost simultaneously.

'Yes. He'll be right out there where the bullets are flying, and the bombs are exploding.'

'Where.'

'Syria.'

'Christ almighty!' Said, George.

'And you have no idea what put this scheme into his head, Tom?'

'No.'

'Could there be some girl behind it do you think?'

'He hasn't mentioned any girls to me for ages.'

Frederique smiled. 'If he had gone so crazy about a girl as to go and do that for her sake, I guess he would have talked to the entire planet about it. Wouldn't you?'

Thomas nodded, 'That's what I thought.'

George nursed his wine and looked over at his friend. 'So why did he go and do something so out of character?' He looked at Frederique, 'There must be some good reason.' Frederique lowered his voice and leant forward. 'He couldn't have become homosexual or something like that Tom?'

Thomas reflected on this point. 'There's always that possibility, but I wouldn't have thought it would have sprung on him so suddenly.'

George smiled, 'No, I don't believe that for an instant. I saw him at Christmas at the party Frederic gave and the way he was handling some of the girls did not exactly remind me of a Gay's behaviour.'

'No.' added Frederic, 'He was a quick one with the girls, there's no mistake about that, now that I come to think about it.'

'Must be some reason though.' said George, 'Not religion I suppose?'

The two friends looked at George with pity.

He sighed. 'No of course not. Sorry.'

'In any case,' said Thomas as the waiter appeared with their meal, and the fabulous wine, 'We'll invite him out when he comes home on leave next month. I'll count on you two to drag it out of him.'

'Count on us Tom,' they said in unison, rubbing their hands in delight as the lovely ruby coloured wine poured into their glasses with all the respect due to it.

As it happened, they did not have the time to get the truth out of Thomas's son, because a week later, his jeep went over a land-mine and he was blown into a thousand fragments.

Hardly a week later Thomas and his two friends were standing shoulder to shoulder in the early morning sun, next to a fresh grave in Montreal's Mont Royal cemetery.

There were a great many people at the funeral, and the army had sent a large escort including a general.

The military had managed to recover the principal members of the boy's body and the army specialists had made an excellent job of making the uniform appear to contain the complete body of Thomas's son. He was now laid to earth and rested under six feet of Montreal's expensive soil.

Thomas's two friends embraced him and moved away to allow the crowd of mourners to come and pay their respects. The three had agreed to dine together that evening at Toque's and would mark the occasion with an extra special meal.

George had informed the chef and the staff, and the meal promised to be something to be remembered. The staff had known Thomas's wife well, and several of them had participated both at the wedding feast and the meal celebrating his two children's births.

Tonight, there would be no long faces or whispered condolences. The table would be cheerily decorated with bright flowers and the area around it would be more than usually illuminated. Even the dishes would be cheerful and colourful. The management had come to appreciate these three regular customers and was ready to go out of their way to help in this difficult moment.

Thomas was not a very religious man, but his mother had brought him up in the Catholic faith, and his wife had done the same for their children. So, when the last of the people had left, and the gravediggers had finished their job of tidying the grave, he stepped forward and bent his head. He did not pray or meditate or for that matter, think about anything. He just stood there in silence until instinct told him to go. He would not go home, but straight to work. He would

go on as before, and his staff knew better than to say anything.

His daughter had slipped away and like him, preferred to go straight back to her studies at the university.

What good could come out of wandering about the house with faces as long as doors?

However, as he turned to leave, he noticed a young girl of about his daughter's age, lingering some distance away. She was tall and slim and had red eyes. In her black dress, she looked charming and frail and very out of place in such a situation.

Thomas approached her across the grass, and she started when he spoke. 'I'm sorry, but I don't think we know each other. Are you one of my son's university friends?'

The girl or more precisely, young woman nodded but quickly turned away to hide her face.

Thomas heard her sob. 'I'm sorry. Did you know the boy well?'

She nodded with her back turned and sobbed, her shoulders shaking violently, as she attempted to hide her real emotional state.

'Oh dear,' thought Thomas. 'Would you care to walk with me for a moment? My name's Thomas.'

She nodded again, not trusting her voice and, head bent, followed him along the gravel path.

'More than a simple friendship here,' thought Thomas. 'Were you at Harvard with him?'

The girl nodded. 'And you knew each other well?'

She nodded and sobbed.

'Was he your boyfriend?' He ventured

The girl stopped and let herself slip down onto the grass burying her face in her hands and crying uncontrollably. Thomas squatted down beside her and laid his hand softly on her shoulder. 'Had you know each other long?'

She shook her head and struggled to hold her voice steady. 'We met when I changed options in the last term.'

'Ah!' said Thomas 'I'm very sorry.'

The girl had clasped her hands over her face again and was sobbing sadly.

There was not much Thomas could do or say in such circumstances. Things just can't come right. Death is so definite.

The young woman turned her red face to him. 'Why did he do it?' She sobbed, 'Why did he rush off to that horrible place?' she tried to control herself. 'We were planning to spend the holidays together and to come and see you.' She tried to wipe the tears from her cheeks. 'Then suddenly without any warning, he said he was going off.'

Thomas looked at her. 'Without any warning? Didn't he give any explanation?'

The girl shook her head. 'He just said it was the best thing to do'.

'I just don't understand it,' said Thomas, half to himself.

The girl shook her head sadly, 'At first, I thought he had suddenly met another girl, but he said he still loved me and not to worry.' She sobbed, 'I looked into his eyes, and I knew he was telling the truth. He still did love me.' She picked a strand off wet hair from her cheek and hurried on. 'It was as though he had suddenly become another person because he simply wasn't like that.'

She looked at Thomas. 'You must know that better than I. He wasn't violent, or racist, or anything like a soldier.'

Thomas rubbed her shoulder. 'No. He wasn't like that. I don't understand either.'

The girl sighed deeply, 'he couldn't lie to save his life anyway.'

Thomas smiled to himself, 'Yes, he was never any good at lying. Bad news for a businessman though.' He hesitated, 'After he went, did he give you any indication as to his reasons?'

She shook her small head. 'No. He just chatted on as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened. He even told me that when he came back on leave, he would present me to you.'

Thomas sighed. 'I only got one letter, telling me when to expect him. But didn't he say anything that could help explain?' He paused, 'You see. Now he's gone, I'd like to understand what he wanted to prove.'

The girl broke out crying again, and Thomas waited patiently, softly caressing her small-boned shoulder.

After some time, she calmed down again. 'In his last letter, he said something I thought a bit odd.'

'Ah!' said Thomas, 'What was that?'

She gulped, 'He said that when he came back, my father would be very proud of him.'

'Ah!' said Thomas

'He said we would be able to marry.' At this, she burst into spasms of tears again.

'But what was odd about that?'

'My father has always been opposed to armed conflict. It's common knowledge.'

'Ah yes. That's odd, but probably he didn't know that. By the way, you haven't told me your name yet.'

'Ruth'

'And the family name.'

'Kaufman. I'm Ruth Kaufman'

Thompson started in amazement so much so that the girl glanced at him, concerned. 'Are you all right?'

'Yes, Yes. I.' he hesitated. 'Well I used to know someone with the same name, that's all.' He rubbed his chin, 'And your father's Christian name?' he avoided asking the mother's name deliberately because he had a terrible suspicion.

She gave it.

'Ah yes.' he pretended to remember it. 'Yes, off course and didn't he marry a woman called Tal or something like that?'

The girl brightened, 'Yes. Talia. That's my mother.

Thomas's eyes opened like saucers.

'You knew her?'

He coughed and looked over at the grave, where the men were back again and were sweeping the ally leading to it and checking the water in the flower pots.

'No, but I believe your father once introduced me to her. A long time ago.'

Now, this was a big surprise. Thomas knew only too well how jealous Talia Kaufman was and how devious the methods that she used to get her way could be. If she had got wind of the love affair and had found out who the boy's father was, she would be sure to react.

This discovery opened up a whole new perspective.

'Did your parents know about how things were between you two?' He asked.

'Yes,' said Ruth, gradually gathering up her senses.

'I see...'

'I told my mother and introduced them when she came to the graduation ceremony.'

'OH Fuck!' thought Thomas.

He had met the woman himself at the ceremony, and he sincerely wished he hadn't. 'Could there be some link here?' he wondered. But instead, he asked,

'And did they seem to get on together?'

'Oh yes, mother packed me off so that they could have a nice quiet chat together.'

'Oh God!' thought Thompson.

'But your mother and father didn't accompany you here!'

'Father is in Florida for business and mother said she hates funerals.'

Thompson's face had become hard. 'Did she? Did she really?'

Ruth finally rose to her feet, and Thomas accompanied her down the tree-lined alleys to the cemetery entrance. Here they parted after he had insisted that she come and see him that weekend. Thomas then turned back and walked a little way up a side alley to a quiet spot, where he sat on a green wooden bench.

He and Talia had been lovers many years ago, twenty-five to be exact. She had ditched him to marry her present husband. The man was a Jew, and she had explained that, as he was a Catholic, she could never have married him.

Regardless of her marriage, she had tried to tempt him back into the position of lover several times in the first years, but he had refused. She had been furious and had characteristically flown off the handle and screamed abuse at him.

During their time together, he had become used to her uncontrollable bouts of anger and wondered how her husband handled them.

When, a short time later, he met a lovely woman and married her, she sent him a nasty little sarcastic note, and at the time he wondered how many things she had smashed before writing it.

Very sadly though, his wife had died suddenly five years later, leaving him to bring up his son and daughter alone. A short time after this, Talia had renewed her attempt to seduce him and once again had become furious when he refused.

'That woman must be a bit mad' He had thought frequently, but this reflection hadn't troubled him much at the time. Now, however, it took on a more sinister aspect which did worry him.

At their two children's diploma ceremony, Talia was not accompanied by her husband. Thomas suspected that she had steered him clear of it on purpose. The woman had tracked Thomas down on the first day and had once more had made advances. She had evidently come with the objective of seducing him and getting him back again.

This time Thomas had been much sharper than was his habit. He had told her that he retained absolutely no feelings for her and that becoming a wealthy married woman's lover was not on his agenda at all. She had looked at him with hatred smouldering in her eyes and hissed.

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'Who on earth do you take yourself for Thomas?' then had added almost under her breath 'You will live to regret this, Thomas.'

Following this outburst, she had flounced off in a mist off expensive designer perfume.

Her behaviour had not troubled him in the slightest at the time, because it was the fourth occasion on which she had said more or less the same thing since their separation twenty-five years ago.

However, this time and probably the very next morning, Ruth had announced to her mother that she was in love with his son.'

That evening, Thomas did not mention this detail to his friends, nor did he tell anyone else. He did, however, do a lot of thinking and questioned Ruth closely, when she visited him.

His friends did not notice any change in him, but change, he certainly did.

Chapter 11

Talia had been very pleased with her prompt and efficient handling of the burgeoning love affair between her daughter and the Thomson boy.

She had found the task laughably easy. She had had no trouble convincing the innocent and inexperienced boy that he needed to prove himself a man to be accepted into the family by her husband. Her real objective was to get the boy out of the way long enough to allow her time to throw her daughter into the arms of someone more suitable.

The idea of suggesting that he should enrol in the army and fight for his country had come to her in a flash of inspiration and had worked like a charm.

The part about keeping the reason for his abrupt change of plans a secret from her daughter was her second masterpiece.

She had cunningly hinted that her daughter might be highly upset should she ever learnt that her father was against the match and furthermore that he could be swayed so easily in such a manner.

The boy had swallowed the entire thing, without a question. The death of Thomson's wife, when the boy was still an infant, had deprived him of motherly instruction. Otherwise, he would have been far wiser when privately talked to by an experienced, wealthy woman.

Even when the boy had got himself blown to bits, Talia had not stopped the manipulation of her daughter's life and had managed to eclipse the dead boy's memory satisfactorily rapidly.

The job had cost money, of course, what with parties, holidays and voyages, but in less than six months, she had manoeuvred her daughter nicely into the arms of a wealthy man's son. Additionally, Talia was pleased to have been instrumental in causing Thomas Thompson deep and lasting mental pain.

And now, out of the blue, her son had fallen for that damn man's daughter.

What was it in that bloody man's genes, she mused, which seemed to attract the members of her own family to them.

She had talked firmly to her son about the girl and had pointed out how unsuitable she was. She had done her very best to sway him, but he knew her methods far too well, to be taken in by them. He had been rude to her, and they had had a shouting bout, which had finished in Talia's rampage around her sitting room.

This scene had occurred six weeks earlier, but Talia was now in possession of all the tools she required and felt that it was time to spring the trap.

She had invited the girl to have tea with her that afternoon in her newly refurbished sitting room and was now quietly waiting for her arrival.

The girl, Julia Thomson, was a small and slim young woman, with an abundance of chestnut-coloured hair. Her face was small and exquisitely shaped. She had small rounded breasts and narrow hips and looked perfect in a swimsuit. Finally, her smile was genuine and disarming to anyone on which she turned it, in her innocent pleasure of life. She radiated amiability, and one could hardly resist the temptation to want to protect her.

Everything about her was almost perfect but on a small and delicate scale.

Talia, who had just as much hair, but rather heavy facial features, wide child-bearing hips and ample breasts, looked on the girl as distinctly un-womanly. She could not understand how a real man could appreciate such a lack of substance.

There was a knock on the door, and the maid showed Julia into the room.

'Ah, Julia!' beamed Talia 'Come in, come in.' She got up slowly and went to kiss the girl's cheek. 'Come and sit with me, dear.' She smiled and looked around the room.

'Don't you think the room is lovely?' She nodded, 'I have just had it redecorated. What do you think?'

Julia smiled innocently and looked around, 'Yes. It's lovely. You do have such exquisite taste.'

'Thank you, dear.'

Julia nodded approval. 'I don't know how you do it. Getting things just right, I mean.'

Talia knew precisely where she was going to lead the conversation but was happy to allow this exchange to go on for a little while before she broached the vital topic.

'It's a question of imagination dear.' Talia smiled, 'I just see the thing in my mind's eye and then explain every detail to an architect who draws it.'

'Ah,' remarked Julia.

'Yes. And then it is just a question of hunting out the perfect elements.' She smiled again.

Julia nodded. 'But how do you find each element, it must be a terribly long job, hunting around the shops.'

Talia shook her head. 'That, dear, is the advantage of having a great deal of money. The shops come to me. Not the other way around.' She laughed. 'I just sit here and say yes or no.'

Julia was not sure that she appreciated this woman, but she had no choice, her being her boyfriend mother.

The maid came in with the tea, and Talia poured out the amber liquid into the delicate bone china cups.

'Now dear.' She looked across the low table at Julia sitting there so petit and frail looking, 'My son has talked to me a lot about you.'

Julia flushed and looked down into her cup.

'He is apparently very much taken with you.'

Julia looked up and forced a smile.

Talia made a little play of hesitation and pretended to be somewhat uncomfortable. 'Well dear.' she stopped, 'I am not sure how to approach this.'

Julia sat forward and gazed at Talia. 'Oh, is there something wrong?'

Talia bit her lip theatrically, 'Well you see, it is rather embarrassing for me, and I don't know how best to put this.'

Julia smiled, 'Oh, you don't need to be embarrassed about me.'

Talia looked down and pretended to stir her tea. 'Well you see, dear, there is a difficulty I hadn't expected to have to solve.'

'Can I help?' asked Julia, full of innocence.

'No, I'm afraid you can't, dear.' Talia shook her head

'Oh, I'm sorry.'

'You see it was something that happened many years ago before you were born in fact.'

Julia felt relieved. A problem that old could hardly have any impact on her present situation. 'Ah, I see,' she said.

Talia looked over at her sadly, 'No dear. I don't think you do.'

'Oh!' Julia looked surprised.

Talia let out an exaggerated sigh, 'Oh well.' She sighed again, 'I suppose that it would have come out sooner or later.'

'Yes' smiled Julia, 'As the faithful Sancho Panza quotes, 'Truth, like oil in water, always finishes by coming to the surface.'

Talia looked over at the girl, 'How very cultivated you are dear. Certainly, not your father's doing.'

Julia frowned, but Talia held up her hand and went on. 'You see dear.' She smiled, 'Your father and I have known each other for many years.'

Julia frowned, 'Oh! I didn't know that.'

'That's normal because it was before your birth.'

Julia nodded. She was starting to guess where this was leading.

'Well, you see. We saw a lot of each other before I met my husband twenty-five years ago.'

'You mean you were engaged?'

'No dear, we were just very close friends.'

'Friends?' Julia frowned again.

'Oh well, I suppose it will have to be said sooner or later. Talia nodded at the girl, 'We were lovers.' She went on quickly as Julia's eyebrows shot up, 'There was nothing unusual about that, we were both young then and full of life'.

'Yes, I can imagine that.' Said Julia, 'I must admit that I was not expecting this, but anyway, as you say it was a long time ago.'

She hesitated and moved the handle off her cup around. 'Anyway, I can't see anything wrong with that'.

'Oh no, dear, the problem is not there at all.'

'The problem?'

'Yes, unfortunately, there is a rather big problem, of which nobody is aware, not even my husband.'

Julia, blinked at Talia, trying hard to fathom out where this woman was leading. 'I'm sorry, but I don't see.'

'Julia.' Talia leant forward, 'My son is not my husband's child.'

Julia's mouth dropped. 'Do you mean...?'

Talia shook her head and sighed loudly. 'The boy's father is Thomas Thompson's, your father.'

The colossal lie slipped out smoothly accompanied by a clatter of breaking crockery, Julia, threw her hands up to cover her face,

'Oh my god!'

'I'm so terribly sorry Julia. This has been my closely guarded secret for so long. I'm so, so sorry.'

'Oh no!' sighed Julia, 'Oh no!' she started to sob, and Talia rose and moved round to sit beside her. However, feeling the woman's hand on her arm, she jumped up as though she had been stung,

'No. Don't touch me.' Her eyes flared.

'It was so, so long ago,' said Talia in a low, sad voice, 'I couldn't see how it could be important anymore.'

'Important?' spluttered Julia, 'Important? Don't you see what it means?'

'Yes. My son is your half-brother. A direct blood relation.' She said this with careful attention to detail because this

was the key to her tactics. She sighed heavily and theatrically, observing Julia who continued to cover her face with her hands. 'I'm so, so sorry Julia. I don't think I have to explain the difficulty involved were you ever to have children.'

Julia dropped back down onto the sofa and sobbed. 'Oh, my God!' she leant forward onto her knees. 'I would be marrying my brother. It would be incest. And babies would be abnormal' she burst out into a new series of sobs.

Talia looked on, 'That's exactly what I have always been afraid of. It would be terrible. Inbreeding, yes that's what it would be Inbreeding.' She made sure that this terrible word had had the desired effect. 'Inbreeding can cause such horrible genetic effects. It is too, too horrible to think of.'

'Oh, my God!' this was all that Julia could say through her tears 'Oh my God, what am I to do?'

Talia remained silent, deliberately allowing the young girl to reflect on the situation and to come to her own conclusions.

'We wanted to get engaged.' sobbed Julia

'I guessed as much.' sighed Talia, 'That's why I HAD to uncover my secret to you before it was too late.'

'We wanted to get married and have children and live in the country and...'. Her voice trailed off into sobbing.

'Ah.' thought Talia 'I acted just in time it seems.' Then she said out loud, 'It would have been a catastrophe. I'm so, so sorry Julia.'

'What am I to do?' Julia looked up at Talia, 'What on earth am I to do?'

Talia looked down, intending to force the girl to say the inevitable, herself.

After a brief hesitation, she continued, 'We couldn't marry. It would be madness.'

Talia saw that contraception or adoption had not for an instant entered the girl mind and that was perfect.

'Yes.' sighed Talia 'Having children together would be totally out of the question, even if he was not your brother.'

Once again, she stressed these points allowing the girl to continue to sob.

'Julia.' she said, 'please look at me.'

The girl separated her red, damp hands and gazed up. 'My son must never know this, nor my husband. It would be catastrophic for both of them. They must never know.'

Julia breathed deeply, 'Yes. I see that. But what on earth am I to do. I love him so much...' Her voice trailed off, and she looked down at her teacup, with a far-away gaze.

Talia was utterly heartless and went on, 'And he so much wants to start a family and have children. It is too, too sad.'

'I'll have to go away. Yes. I'll have to go away where he can never find me.' Her face became stern and hard. 'Yes. He must make a new life and have his children and forget me. There's no other way.' She swept the tears from around her eyes and sat erect. 'I'll tell him I have to go away and think about things, and then I shall never come back.'

Talia smiled sadly, 'If I had ever thought that our youthful folly could lead to such boundless sadness.' She allowed her voice to trail off dramatically.

'But how on earth could you have guessed.' Said Julia, 'You brought him up perfectly and have had to bear that terrible secret so long.'

Then suddenly she stopped and looked at Talia, 'My father doesn't know?'

'Thank heavens no!' exclaimed Talia, 'He has had a hard enough life as it is. I wanted him to be able to go his own way unhindered. He was not responsible. We both had hot blood in those days.' She sighed, 'I'm afraid, mine was a little hotter than most other girls, you see. Especially for those times.'

Julia shook her head, 'You are not to blame.' She pushed herself up, 'Fate is to blame.'

Talia sighed, 'Yes, Fate. Fate has absolutely no pity.'

'I'll go now,' said Julia dully.

'But where will you go dear?'

'I don't know yet, somewhere as far as possible from here as I can find.' She Paused, 'I'll go and stay with my aunt in Knoxville first and write to him.'

'Now.' said Talia sternly, 'Don't go and do something stupid like your brother, and go and enrol in the army.' This was a skilfully planted seed, which Talia hoped might take root.

'Ah! I hadn't thought of that. Yes...'

'No dear.' Talia put on an outwardly stern countenance, 'Promise me that you will never do anything so dangerous. I would be heartbroken if anything were to happen to you.'

'What on earth does it matter' Said Julia in a lifeless voice.

'Promise.' insisted Talia.

'Oh, all right.'

'Ah.' sighed Talia, 'Thank you.'

'I'll be going now. Thank you for being so frank and revealing your secret. I'll keep the secret for as long as I live. Goodbye.'

She held out her little hand and shook Talia's.

'Goodbye dear. And good luck.' Said Talia

Julia shook her head and walked quickly to the door, closing it quietly behind her.

As soon as the door had closed, Talia walked over to the window and looked out over the brightly flowered garden. She was smiling. 'Perfect,' she said out loud, 'perfect.' She then walked over to a lovely inlaid cabinet and took out a cut crystal whisky decanter.

Sitting on the sofa, she stretched out her long legs and poured herself a large glassful.

'Perfect.'

The following day, Talia's son received a letter from Julia, posted from the airport. He was heartbroken by the brutal nature of the message. It said that she needed to think things over and reflect about her future life and what she wanted to do with it. She said she was going away, to another continent to be able to look at things from a new angle. She would write.

He said nothing to anyone about this, but his mother spotted the signs she was watching for.

In two days, she would trigger the same strategy of parties, voyages and holidays which had worked so successfully in getting her daughter into the suitable person's arms. However, before this, she had one more important task to fulfil.

Consequently, a few days' later, her son received a letter from the USA.

It contained a short note, 'Here is something you should know. Some people are not quite as they may seem.' The message was unsigned.

Included with the note was the photo of Julia, sitting naked, astride the muscle covered body of an unknown man.

The effects of this revelation, coming directly after Julia's disappearance, were precisely as Talia had hoped for. 'Perfect.' she thought as she extracted the tiny torn bits of the photo from her son's wastepaper bin.

Julia respected her promise and did not enrol in the army. Instead, She became a member of a Red-Cross group operating in one of the numerous famine-stricken countries of the African continent.

She did her best to bury her memories in work and strove to help the hungry and the ill.

Somehow or other she came to specialise in helping isolated tribes, but on one of the expeditions, ten hours' drive from the nearest airport, she was bitten by a poisonous snake.

She died several hours before they got her within flying distance from the nearest hospital.

Talia learnt this from the local newspaper. 'Perfect.' She thought. 'Absolutely perfect.'

Chapter 12

Immediately after her departure with the team to Africa, Julia opened a web blog on which she posted photos and comments about her work on a regular basis. This journal of her daily life in the arid wastelands left little doubt as to the hopeless situation of the people she was striving to help. She sometimes posted photos of herself with her colleagues, but although she was usually smiling at the camera, it somehow seemed forced.

Thomas kept a close eye on this and made sure to send her encouragements as often as seemed suitable

One day, about a month after her departure, she asked her father to send her the email address of a friend. She told him that he would find it noted on the back of a birthday card she kept in the little drawer of the dressing table in her bedroom.

Thomas found the card quickly, but inside the card, he discovered several photos off Julia, arm in arm with a boy he had not seen before. They were both laughing and obviously very happy. The photos were dated and showed that they had been taken shortly before her decision to go away in order to 'Think things out.'

'Ah!' said Thomas to himself, 'maybe this is what was behind everything.' He turned the photos over and recognised, in the background, the redbrick building of the university hall.

'So!' He mused, 'Looks like he is someone from the university.'

He frowned, 'I wonder what went wrong?' Replacing the photos carefully, he sent his daughter the email address. However, just before returning to the sitting room, he took out the pictures once more.

Something in the boy looked familiar, but he could not put his finger on it. In any case, he was a handsome young man. 'Did he drop Julia or was it the other way around?' he mused. Anyway, whoever he was, this seemed to clarify her

reasons for going off, and in a way and Thomas felt better with this knowledge.

If his wife had been alive, she would have spotted trouble long before the storm broke. She would have known how to deal with the situation, but he, he was a man. What he did not suspect, however, was that his wife would have educated Julia to be much warier about what rich boyfriends' mothers might tell her.

Several months elapsed after Julia's death before anything significant occurred.

Thomas was sitting in the garden reading the Sunday paper when the photo of a young man caught his eye. The press release was about the recent graduation of children from prominent local families. The boy who attracted his attention had just graduated with flying colours and was quoted as being set for a brilliant future as a heart surgeon.

Thomas frowned because the face seemed familiar.

It being Sunday, Thomas had plenty of time, so he casually read down the article. He then froze as he read the boy's full name, 'Joshua Kaufman' son of the well-known businessman. This was Talia's son then.

Suddenly, something clicked into place in his mind.

He jumped up, dropping the paper and ran up the stairs to his deceased daughters' room. Pulling open the draw, he extracted the little pile off photos.

'Oh Fuck!'

There could be absolutely no mistake. Thomas' daughter's mysterious boyfriend had been Talia's son. Thomas stiffened, and his jaw worked as his two fists clenched and unclenched. If he had had any doubts before, they vanished now. This could only be that mad, jealous, Talia's doing. How she had done it, he didn't know, but he knew in a flash of inspiration that she had done it.

She must have discovered the relationship and decided to get the girl out of the way. She hadn't personally killed her, but knowing the woman, she had undoubtedly sown the seeds which had brought about Julia's death. In his mind's

eye, he could see her gloating over the cleverness of her scheme. He could also imagine her pleasure in hearing of Julia's death.

'You fucking bastard,' he hissed under his breath.

He was suddenly also sure that she was just as responsible for his son's death too. 'You are going to live to regret this, you fucking bitch.' he screwed up his eyes with hatred.

Back down in the sitting room, he picked up the newspaper. The photo showed the boy with a young girl. The girl had the distinct characteristic features of the boy's religious background. The caption was 'The successful candidate, with his fiancé.' The wedding was to be celebrated in the Jewish temple later that year.

'So,' said Thomas to himself, 'This was the more suitable match, was it?' He shook his head. 'I will make you suffer for this Talia'.

His face then contorted into a horrible grin, 'I'll take my time, but, by all the gods above, you will suffer for this.'

He shook his head slowly. 'You will suffer as no one has ever suffered.'

For some time he sat transfixed, gazing out of the window. During this period, and although he was unaware of it, deep inside his mind, massive and irreversible changes were made and cemented.

It could not be said that he was becoming mad.

Nevertheless, the part of his brain which up until then had helped him differentiate between right and wrong had not resisted the shock of the terrible discovery he had stumbled across.

Naturally, Thomas had been aware that his repeated refusals to be tempted back into her bed had infuriated Talia. Knowing her well, he had guessed that she must have gone on the rampage and probably smashed up everything which had come to hand. However, the horror of discovering just how far the jealous, hot-tempered and unscrupulous woman could go, numbed his senses completely. In

particular, it numbed permanently the part of his brain which had previously categorised Talia as a human being.

No one around him noticed any changes in his character or his behaviour, just because the rest of his mind was strangely unaffected by the shock.

It was at this precise moment that he conceived and devised the terrible vengeance he would wreck.

This was because he understood the woman and her snobbish ways, perfectly. He knew that her entire existence revolved around the prominent position she enjoyed in Montreal's exclusive Jewish community. He also knew that she revelled in the fact that she was always right at the centre of things.

Outside that elite circle, she counted for little or nothing, just another middle-aged woman with money and a desirable body. Even though that body could not remain quite so enviable very much longer, her wealth would adequately compensate for a good number of years to come.

His newly liberated mind argued that if this circle of very wealthy friends and family were to disappear, she would find herself adrift in a world where not a single person knew, respected or even cared about her existence. His troubled mind reasoned that the most effective move would thus be to remove them all from the world of the living.

This line of reasoning led him directly and speedily on to the conclusion that the entire circle should be eliminated with one fell swoop.

His objective after that would be to watch her suffer and to goad her relentlessly so that the memory and the pain never abated.

The rapidity with which this idea had germinated and grown to fruition was remarkable in itself. However, this was just as speedily followed by the emergence of the concept of effecting the murder using a chemical warfare agent of mass destruction.

By the time he shook himself out of his lethargic state, the die was cast. The core of Montreal's exclusive Jewish community was thus condemned to being eliminated using nerve gas. This staggering solution to his problem did not strike him as unjust in any way. He found it merely an efficient and eminently suitable response to Talia's devious behaviour. This decided, Thomas nodded to himself with satisfaction and relaxed. All that remained was to determine how, when and where the thing was to be done.

Happily, the excellent state of his finances ensured that he had vast amounts of money at his disposal. Furthermore, he had all the time in the world, unlimited patience, a brilliant brain and above all an all-consuming motivation. In other words, he had everything required to ensure that his terrible plans would be crowned with success.

Being a highly experienced business strategist, he knew that hurrying things, was the principal threat to any grand plan, and he had no intention of allowing this to lead him astray. Thomas thus approached the preparation of the horrible crime precisely as he had so often done when planning a hostile take-over of a troublesome competitor. He would prepare the ground well in advance, then wait for the optimal moment to strike. He thus allowed the idea to mature slowly in his mind over the following few weeks.

Thomas split the task up into four main categories, each with multiple ramifications.

The first was how to get the nerve gas, the second was how to bring everyone together at a specific place at a well-defined time, the third, how to ensure their complete elimination and the fourth, how to cover his tracks and avoid getting caught.

He then settled down to calmly solve each of these questions. He knew by experience that he would require at least a year and probably two, to prepare things correctly. However, this did not trouble him at all, because Talia was going to suffer for a long, long time and he felt that a year or two more or less, were not significant. Furthermore, when

the blow came, she would have completely forgotten her own crimes concerning his children.

For Thomas, it was evident that the crime must be made to look like an anti-Jew attack. Although it would solve many problems, he eventually ruled out the option of proposing a pact with one of the numerous terrorist groups.

A number of these would certainly appreciate the chance of perpetrating such a crime, but he reasoned that they were unreliable and lacked sufficient finesse to ensure success. He also considered that this option would inevitably bring far too many people into the organisation, over whom he had no power.

The advantage was that they would provide a perfect front, this protecting his identity, but they might also mess the whole thing up.

No, he decided he must do this on his own.

He also decided that he would need a scapegoat to shoulder the responsibility. Once the crime had been successfully committed, this scapegoat would have to be eliminated to ensure the safeguard of his own identity.

Finding the right person and framing him correctly, would take time and careful planning, but, could be done, of that he was sure.

Now over the previous few years, his financial advisors had presented him with a continuous flow of investment opportunities, as a means of optimising tax payment. It happened that a few days after his discovery of Talia's implications, the files concerning two new projects were put the office desk for him to study.

The first proposition concerned taking a controlling interest in one of Montreal's conference centres. The project was to purchase the buildings, to renovate them and then resell at a fat profit. Under his sole ownership, this would supply the ideal place in which to bring together his victims.

He confidentially approached one of the strong candidates for the next elections of the Prime-Minister. These elections were scheduled for a date about two years

and a half in the future. Thomas knew that the man in question was recognised as being competent, reliable and appeared to be headed for victory. Above all, the man in question had strong Pro-Jewish opinions, and his relations with members of the wealthy Canadian Jewish community were excellent.

Thomas met the man for dinner and told him of his plans to branch out into the Conference centre market. He admitted that, once he had renovated the hall he would need to provide it high visibility and with a high-quality reputation. He thus proposed a bargain if the man were to hold all his major meetings in this hall.

The proposition was that on paper, the man would pay the going rate for renting the centre. However, in reality, one of Thomas's overseas communication companies would employ him for the same sum, as a consultant. The subject of the consultancy and the task to be defined later. The result was that the politician would be able to use the conference centre free of charge for all his important meetings.

This proposition met with approval, and the dinner continued smoothly and agreeably. The only condition that Thomas had insisted on was that he should be allowed to invite some prominent people who he said, were potential future customers.

The politician agreed to this and that his secretary should work directly with Thomas to send out the invitations when the time came.

Thomas was determined to find a way of turning the politician's meeting into an event which none of the elite community could afford to miss. It just needed careful thought and preparation.

Thomas now had the perfect bait and the tools with which to draw his prey into the net.

Chapter 13

Several years later, just before I set off on my disastrous run around Montreal, Talia Kaufmann's private phone rang.

It was early in the day for her, and she was still sitting in front of her makeup mirror. She leant across the narrow table and picked up the receiver.

'Hello.'

'Hello, Talia. Thomas here.'

Talia recognised the voice of her old lover and instinctively sat up straighter and pulled in her stomach.

'Thomas!' she exclaimed, raising her eyebrows in surprise, 'How nice to hear from you.'

A vision of his muscular naked body formed itself in her mind, as she remembered their torrid love-affair which now dated by twenty-five years.

'Not disturbing you, am I?'

'No. As usual, I'm taking my time before breakfast.'

'Yes. You always were last at breakfast.'

'Maybe.' She smiled, 'And you were always first in bed.' she laughed.

'Ah yes.' Thomas laughed, 'Getting on though now.'

'Perhaps.' Smiled Talia, 'But one never really forgets how to ride a bicycle, does one?'

Thomas smiled to himself. Everything was going as planned. He betted himself that Talia was now passing her left hand over her right breast to check that it was still suitably firm.

He was perfectly right. 'I am at a bit of a loose end...' he pretended to hesitate.

'Yes?' Talia was thinking fast. Now, this was totally unexpected.

'I don't suppose you are free this afternoon.' He knew perfectly well that she was not. He had overseen the sending of the invitation to the political meeting himself and knew that the acceptance had been returned.

All of her friends and acquaintances had received similar invitations, and almost all had accepted.

'This afternoon?' Talia was thinking quickly.

Here was an occasion not to be wasted. The man had obstinately refused her advances three, no four times since she had married. She no longer desired him, but what she did want to do was to make him pay for those refusals.

'Well...' she pretended to hesitate herself, 'I think we could have a quiet chat alone if you come after four-o'clock.'

'Perfect.' laughed Thomas, 'You're not going to that damn political meeting like half the town then?'

'God no!' exclaimed Talia, 'I wouldn't go if you paid me.'

'And we'll be alone?'

'Oh yes. Quite alone. Why? You're not going to try and seduce me, are you?' she laughed.

'I told you, I'm getting on a bit now, for that sort of thing,' said Thomas.

'Ha!' exclaimed Talia, 'I'll believe that when I see it.'

'When you see what, Talia?' smiled Thomas to himself.

'And how old did you say you were now?' Talia laughed again feeling an exquisite tingling. 'Come at about half-past four Thomas. But you'll have to be gone well before seven.'

'Perfect.' answered Thomas, 'see you then'.

'Bye'

Thomas replaced the phone,

'Perfect.' he smiled, 'Perfect.'

That afternoon, while the crowds at the conference hall were still milling around, and greeting each other before finding a seat, Thomas rung Talia's front doorbell. He was carrying a small briefcase containing a tablet computer. The door was opened by a young Italian girl, who led him to Talia's private sitting room. The girl didn't need anyone to explain what was likely to occur later on, behind the locked door.

Talia had absolutely no inkling as to how well her habits and appetite were known to her house staff. This was because the latter was always careful to place any

discarded underclothes they discovered while cleaning up, to be easily found by their owner while giving the impression that no one else had noticed them. Knowing their employer's fits of anger well, they were only too aware of the fact that retaining their well-paid jobs depended heavily on maintaining such little subterfuges.

Talia was sitting, or more precisely, posing, on the sofa. Her long legs were crossed, and a shoe dangled negligently from the suspended foot. She had put on a tight body-moulding dress in some shiny material, which stopped a short way down her bare legs. Her heavy dark hair was arranged carefully falling over her shoulders while allowing her breasts to be nicely outlined as she sat slightly sideways.

Thomas took all this careful preparation in and smiled at her. 'You look fantastic Talia.'

She smiled and held out her hand. 'Come and sit by me Thomas, it's been such a long time...'

They exchanged glances from a distance, and the look in Thomas's eye convinced her that all was as she hoped. She tapped the sofa beside her. 'Come on. In the old days, you weren't afraid of me.'

Thomas chuckled, 'Times change.'

Talia shook her head. 'Come on and tell me what's on your mind.'

Thomas deliberately looked down at her breasts long enough for her to notice it

'You haven't changed' he lied

'At least what you're looking at hasn't. Thanks to hard work-outs every day. Come on.' She patted the sofa again.

He sat down, and she turned and smiled at him, 'You're still just as handsome Thomas, a little more mature perhaps, but still a very handsome man.'

'A certain stiffness creeping in here and there though.'

He smiled.

'Ah' smiled Talia slyly, 'A certain stiffness in some members can have its advantages, though.'

Thomas shook his head, 'I see that time has not robbed you of your natural crudeness'.

'No,' she laughed, 'I've just learnt to control it more, except when I'm with close friends'.

He leant forward and laid his PC tablet on the coffee table, 'I'll need to use this a little later, just a quick job.'

'A quick job,' said Talia looking him straight in the eyes 'I like quick jobs.'

'Yes, I remember that. This is rather like old times don't you think Talia?'

'Not yet it isn't.' Saying this, she grabbed his hand from his knee and slipped it quickly between her thighs.

'Now it is.' She whispered and leant across to kiss him on the lips. At the same time, her hand shot up and grabbed his penis through his light trousers.

A few seconds later, they down were on the soft carpet, Talia's dress and bra on the sofa and Thomas's trousers and underwear under the table. Talia knew what she wanted, and she also knew that Thomas was, or used to be, perfectly capable of following her lead.

She was not disappointed.

A quarter of an hour later, she was lying back on the carpet, beads of sweat running down her breasts and onto the floor.

'Christ!' She sighed, 'you haven't lost much of the old fire.'

Thomas smiled and pushed himself up onto his knees, 'One likes to keep the old machine in good running order,' he replied with a false upper-class old-English accent.

Talia laughed and lay back looking at the ceiling, triumph shining in her eyes.

'God. I've been waiting for that a long-time Thomas.'

'A quick job,' he smiled, 'As requested.'

He then turned, still on his knees and pressed the boot-button on his Computer tablet.

'Just a few seconds please Talia. Then I'll be back. Stay where you are where I can see that magnificent body.'

Talia stretched her arms behind her head, pulling her breasts up and in and deliberately splayed her legs apart.

Thomas gave her a double thumbs-up, and she laughed as turned to his screen. He looked down at the simultaneous output from four webcams at the conference hall. Everyone was now seated, and he could also see that the guards had abandoned their place in the entrance hall as he had hoped.

The outside camera told him that the front door guards had moved into the shadow, which was also excellent news. Finally, the main camera showed the stage and the chairman running to open the side door to allow the principal speaker to enter.

He kept the sound off.

As soon as he saw the door swing closed behind the speaker, he flipped to a second window showing a diagrammatic of the layout of the building. He touched the little blue tick-boxes beside all the doors and then in the drop-down menu, selected lock-all. The little boxes turned red, and he smiled to himself, he was pleased with this bit of design refinement.

In another drop-down menu, he selected 'Air-conditioning' and in the sub-menu, 'Room perfume'. The schematic diagram appeared, and on it, he touched the blue square beside a box containing the image of a pump. A popup box appeared, and without hesitation, he touched 'lock-on,' and a little wheel started to spin inside the pump box.

He then scrolled back to the webcam page. As soon as he saw the mist start to appear at the extreme top of the room, he selected 'turn off' from the menu and pushed the shutdown button.

He sighed and smiled as he turned back to Talia. 'Voila, a good day's work done. What next Talia? A slow one, for old times' sake?'

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'Mmmm.' murmured Talia spreading her legs further apart. 'Come on. You do the work this time. Start down there'.

Thomas knew what she liked by heart, and did it to the best of his capacities, which were not as reduced by the added years as one might have thought.

Forty minutes later, they were once more dressed and sat together on the sofa drinking whisky.

Talia had started the evening with the clear plan of telling him that she didn't intend to see him again. She had decided to say to him that she had accepted this last act to give him something to remind him of what he had forfeited, three times. However, the previous hour had convinced her that she would be making a grave mistake if she were she to carry this through.

Thomas was still the only man who knew how to do that to her, and that was worth swallowing her pride.

Intelligent, good-looking men who have mastered the art of pleasing Talia, did not grow on trees, she mused.

She leant over and squeezed his thigh, 'We must do this again.'

Thomas smiled, 'Yes, that sounds like a pretty good idea.' He took a sip off his drink and continued, 'I admit, I was not sure I was still up to your exacting standards'.

Talia rubbed his penis through the trousers, 'Oh yes. I can confirm that. Your diploma is still valid'.

'Do you know Talia.' Thomas sat up, 'I find it strange, don't you?'

'What's strange?'

'Well. That we are attracted like this, and that our two children should have been similarly attracted to each other'

Talia froze, her glass halfway to her mouth, 'What?'

'Oh, I know all about that Talia.' He carried on pretending not to have noticed her astonishment, 'Didn't you think it odd?'

'Odd?'

'You did know about it I suppose?'

'Yes, of course.' she stammered, still flustered by this unexpected declaration.

'Do you think that they got as far as this?'

'Thomas! Really! For god's sake, you can't talk about your children, like that.'

'They won't mind. They are both dead, remember.'

'I know, I know, it's too, too sad.' She took a big gulp of whisky and refilled her glass. 'Can't we talk about something else?' she said rubbing his knee.

Thomas smiled, 'Yes of course, but you see, I've got used to their being dead now.'

Talia squeezed his knee, but he went on, 'I hardly think about it now, except on weekends or at Christmas or summer holidays.' He laughed sadly. 'One gets used to people no longer existing, after a little while, that is.'

'Oh, Thomas!'

'It only hurts dreadfully for the first few months.' He smiled. 'You'd realise that if you had suddenly lost someone very dear to you.'

Talia stood up abruptly and banged her empty tumbler on the coffee table, 'Hey! Come on Thomas. You're not going to get the post-coital blues, are you? If you are, I'll not let you come back.'

But Thomas planned to come back and do so often. He intended to see the suffering she would soon have to go through and wanted to make sure that it went on for as long as possible.

Having sex with an internally suffering woman would be an added attraction, not to be sneezed at.

Then, once she had become utterly dependent on him for support and comfort, he would jilt her, then sit back to watch the final decomposition.

Chapter 14

Thomas Thomson pressed the white ceramic bell-push beside the impressively carved oak door.

Waiting at the top of the steps to Talia Kauffman's house he listened to the approaching footsteps on the tiled floor within.

The young Spanish girl with long, thick black hair had clearly been expecting him. 'Mister Thomson? Yes? please come this way.'

She led him to the main dining room.

A week had passed since he had successfully eliminated her entire family and friends. Thomas was now looking forward to observing the devastation that these horrible events had had on the woman who had caused the death of his two children.

However, he was astonished and struck silent with disappointment, when she sprang lightly to her feet and advanced towards him smiling. Seeing him halt in his tracks, she laughed gaily.

'What's the trouble, Thomas? Seen a ghost?'

He couldn't find a word to say as she came up to him.

'I'm no ghost, Tom. See?' and grabbing his hand, pressed it firmly against her breast, which was tightly moulded by her expensive white tee-shirt, 'Nothing wraith-like about that, eh what do you think?'

With her other hand, she made a grab at his trousers, but he involuntarily jumped back.

'Ha!' she laughed, 'Never before lunch. Eh!'

But looking down she nodded, 'Ah! But I see the old primaeval mechanisms are still functioning reliably. Unless of course, it was the house-maid who caused that.'

Thomas shook his head in dismay. He really couldn't help getting aroused by this woman, and it made him furious with himself.

'Christ Talia! You're supposed to be submerged with grief.' He said scornfully.

'Oh!' sneered Talia 'Am I? Am I really?'

She jammed her hands firmly on her prominent hip and looked dangerously defiant. 'Well, I am not.' She frowned at him, 'I was to start with, then I got angry and smashed up my room. No, I'm OK'. Suddenly she smiled again and quickly moved closer pressing her breasts against him and taking the lobe off his ear between her lips, 'If I weren't expecting a visitor, I'd have you on the floor right now.' Before he could move, her hand flashed down and grasped his erect penis through the thin fabric, but at the same instant, there was a knock on the door.

'Pity that...' she moved back squeezing hard and called out.

'Yes?' Then under her breath, she whispered, 'And now Holmes, If I am not mistaken, here is our client now.'

'A mister Fennel for you madam. I think you were expecting him!'

'Yes' replied Talia, 'Show him in please.' She looked at the surprised Thomas 'Don't worry Thomas, this is not to be group sex.'

He sighed at her vulgarity and sat himself down at one end of the white leather sofa, crossing his legs in an attempt to hide his erection.

'You'll have to get up to shake hands, Thomas.'

'You damn...' but she put a finger to her lips to silence him, and moved towards the door as she heard steps approaching. She drew it open before the servant knocked.

'Please come in mister Fennel. Let me introduce you to Thomas Thompson, one off my very oldest and dearest friends'.

The man who had entered must have been in his early sixties. He was of medium height but had the broad shoulders, ruddy complexion and broken nose of an English, rugby player. He was, regardless of his somewhat sporting physique, attired in a perfectly tailored suit of expensive dark silky material.

He advanced, his hand held out and shook Talia's hand.

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He then turned and nodded to Thomas. 'Pleased to meet you, Mr Thompson. Please don't get up. I have of course heard of you.'

Thomas smiled at this little professional flattery.

Talia kept her eye clamped on Mister Fennel's Face.

'Mister Fennel is a detective, Thomas.'

Thomas didn't move a muscle and looked back into Mister Fennel's eyes as this comment was made. The detective nodded back at Thomas and calmly turned his gaze back to his hostess.

Mister Fennel knew by experience that if this new client had wanted that man to be present, there was a reason behind it. There always was. Sometimes it was because the client suspected him. Sometimes because of the need for moral support and sometimes because of something he would learn about later. He could wait. Waiting was part of his job anyway.

Talia smiled, 'Mister Fennel is the best detective on the continent today.'

The detective smiled, 'And the most expensive of course.'

Taking him by the arm and leading him towards an armchair facing the sofa, Talia said. 'That goes without saying.'

Talia sat down on the sofa beside Thomas and leant forward,

'Mister Thompson and I are lovers,' she said looking the detective straight in the eyes to observe his reaction.

Thomas's eyes open wide, and he made a move to rise, but Talia held him back and laughed out loud.

'Ah! Men!' she smiled round at him. 'You would have discovered that soon enough, so I thought it better to save your time and avoid any unnecessary suspicion messing up your investigations.'

The little man nodded. 'A wise action madam Kauffman. I am a very discrete man as you know.'

Talia nodded. 'The press will no doubt root that out sooner or later.' she said, 'But it is of very little importance now that most of my circle have been eliminated.'

She sat forward again, 'This morning I informed my husband's...' she stopped and shook her head. 'My Late husband's lawyers, to sell off all his companies and all the activities in which he was involved.' She looked the little man in the eyes. 'I have given them instructions to sell all the shares he has invested in, in such a way that everything he had, is rapidly converted into hard cash. They are then to transfer it to a select number of perfectly official bank accounts in the various countries I intend to visit.'

The man nodded while Thomas remained silent.

'I have told them that everything must be completely legal and that I in no way wish to avoid the taxes that will need to be paid, even if that means losing half the capital'.

The man nodded again, and Talia went on.

'Even then, I will be amongst the very wealthy women of the planet, I think.' She hesitated a second and continued, 'I have no one to leave anything to.'

'I understand.' said mister Fennel.

'I spent yesterday afternoon with the police.' She said.

The man nodded, 'Yes, I heard about that.'

Talia looked up sharply, 'Well done. Already at work then?'

'Oh yes. As soon as a potential client contacts me, I set my machine into action, even if we do not conclude a contract.'

Talia smiled. 'I told the police that I would be employing you.'

She glanced at him, but clearly, this left him unmoved.

'A wise precaution.' he nodded, 'which will save me having to do it myself,' he remarked.

'I also told them,' She continued, 'that I would be leaving Canada in a week and moving into the villa my husband... late husband had built in the south of France.'

At this Thomas sat up sharply. 'Oh!'

Talia turned to him, 'Sorry Thomas. I ought to have told you earlier, but I decided all this very quickly.'

The detective watched Thomas closely. He saw not the least trace of insincerity in his face. The man had obviously not been aware of this decision.

Talia turned back to the detective. 'No one of any value to me has been left alive after that massacre, so there is nothing to hold me here.'

The detective nodded but said nothing.

'I have some old friends in Europe, especially in France, Italy and Greece,' she continued. 'In such places, a wealthy woman is rarely left alone long, and more important for me, is never allowed to become bored by solitude.' Saying this, she smiled across at the detective who was still observing Thomas. Following his gaze, she turned and put her hand on Thomas's knee, 'Don't worry Tom. I'll invite you as often as you like.'

Thomas was not worried about invitations or anything of the sort. He was appalled at how his incredibly well set out plans for making this devilish woman suffer, were in the process of falling to bits.

The detective, however, misinterpreted the look which had suddenly come into his face, as one of very genuine distress. This error was to lead him very far away from the real culprit.

Talia playfully slapped Thomas on the knee twice then leant over and kissed him on the cheek. 'Now mister Fennel.' she looked him in the eye. 'I know all about the cost of your services. You will have to admit that they are very, very small, compared with what I will soon have at my disposition.'

Once more the man limited his reaction to a nod.

'I believe,' She continued, 'that within a few months I will have nearly five billion dollars available and I do not intend to have it invested.'

At this Thomas rose his eyebrows in amazement, a thing that the detective noted as adding to the proof that the man had been kept out of the secret.

'Therefore, on top of your usual costs, I am thus going to offer you one million dollars if you find the man who destroyed my life.'

The detective jumped. 'A million dollars?'

'You got it.' She smiled and went on, 'One million dollars, on condition that I am the only person you inform about it.'

The man nodded but had already retreated behind his professional facade.

'You will inform me, and I alone will decide what I will do with that information.'

The detective looked at Talia, 'That is what I am paid for. Discretion.'

'Once I have verified the exactitude of your information, I will deposit half of the one million in your bank account.'

'That seems reasonable,' Said the detective

'Exactly. When I have taken the measures I decide on I'll pay you the second half.'

The detective held up his hand. 'I would request you not to inform me in any way as to the measures you might decide to take.' He hesitated, but before he could continue Talia interrupted.

'And of course, I will supply you with a written proof protecting you against any legal troubles.'

'That seems perfectly in order then.' said the detective.

Talia smiled, 'That's what I thought.'

She then stood and walked over to a hidden drinks cabinet and poured out two glasses of whiskey. Turning back, she smiled at the man, 'You don't drink, do you?'

'You also have done your research I see.'

'Yes.'

She turned and handed the glass to Thomas, who looked with surprise at the unusual quantity of liquid in the glasses. The detective noted this too.

'Now down to brass tacks,' said Talia.

'At the time of the murder, I was making love with Thomas down there on the carpet beside your chair.'

Thomas spluttered, and half choked on the whiskey he was sipping.

'Oh, come on Thomas! We aren't school kids anymore, and everyone else of any importance is dead.' She looked hard at the detective who had taken all this in his stride.

'He came half an hour after my husband had left. We made love twice. Then we had a drink and relaxed a bit. He left at about half-past six, about an hour before I was expecting the others back.'

The detective looked up from making notes.

Talia nodded, 'Naturally, he was let in and out by the girl you just saw, and you can question her about it.' She shook her head, 'All the staff know about it of course, but I pretend not to notice that'.

Mister Fennel was used to this sort of thing. A significant proportion of the wealthy women he had acted for, similarly alleviated boredom. They also always pretended not to realise how much the staff knew. It was part of the overall game. As long as the staff pretended not to notice the episodes of clandestine lovemaking, they kept their well-paid jobs. Sometimes a member of staff refused to play by the rules or was indiscreet, and this had led to him being employed to smooth things over.

Sitting there being observed by the well-dressed detective, Thomas realised that Talia had already closed her mind to the horrors of the mass gassing of her friends and family. It shocked him to realise that she was already actually looking forward to building an entirely new life elsewhere. Could it be that the years of suffering and planning and scheming and cold-blooded killing of innocent people had been for absolutely nothing? No. That could not be allowed. Whatever the outcome, the woman could not conceivably be allowed to escape gaily into a new life and leave him behind with his remorse. He looked up straight into the detective's eyes, who was observing him quietly.

'Mrs Kauffman's announcement seems to have shaken you, Mr Thompson.'

Thomas was careful not to try to act his way out of the delicate situation. Above all, he did not laugh. 'Yes. I'm afraid I have to admit that I was not expecting such a rapid and radical reaction.'

Talia rubbed his knee playfully, 'After all these years you still don't understand how women work.' she laughed, 'You master the mechanical bits to perfection.' She smiled a wry smile, 'Yes you got the hang of that now... But not how our brains work.'

'Talia!' he remonstrated.

All she did was to shake her head and smile. She turned back to the detective. 'I am of course a suspect, as is this man. She slapped Thomas's knee. 'Both you and the police will have our complete assistance. Until I leave.'

'Thank You.'

'I do not intend to return for a very long time, if ever. I will, of course, pay any travel costs, should you need to come and see me personally.' Talia smiled 'I will keep both you and the police informed as to my whereabouts at all times until the business has been cleared up.' She smiled, 'I have of course told them about my alibi too.'

The detective nodded as Thomas sighed deeply, shaking his head. It couldn't be easy being the lover of a woman like that, he mused.

She continued, 'I have requested my lawyers to give you any confidential information you might need.'

'Thank you.'

'You will find that, for my entire married life, my husband has allowed me access to an almost unlimited amount of money.' She smiled at the detective. 'That information will no doubt be useful in dispelling certain doubts.'

She rubbed Thomas's knee again. 'Thomas is also a very wealthy man, but much less so than my husband. He will also give you any help he can.'

Thomas nodded approval and sipped his drink.

'To save you more time,' she went on, 'Thomas and I were lovers for several years before I married. So that puts our history in perspective I think.'

'Yes,' said the detective. 'All that will save me a great deal of time. Thank you both.' He looked at his notes, 'Just one point to clear things up.'

'Yes?' said Talia

'The two of you remained together during the entire period you mentioned.'

Talia looked at Thomas. 'OH Yes. He didn't move more than three feet from my...' here she hesitated, 'from my side.'

'Ah. That's good.'

'And anyway,' added Talia, 'There is no way out of the grounds except through the front door, which is guarded by the servants as you noticed.'

'Ah!' said the detective.

'And,' finished Talia, 'there is a twelve-foot wall all around the gardens. It has broken glass on the top and a state-of-the-art alarm system. The control box is in the servant's quarters.' She held out her hands, palms first to the detective, 'See no cuts. Show him your hands, Thomas.'

Thomas shook his head and sighed but held out his hands for examination.

'Nice hands!' Talia took them. 'Lovely and soft.' She winked at the detective, 'And such long, long fingers...'

Mr Fennel considered that in the interests of maintaining peace and harmony amongst Europe's married couples, this woman definitely ought not to be allowed in circulation.

He wondered if all those European friends of hers realised just what looming dangers were about to appear on their doorsteps.

Thomas was still on edge. He knew that if Talia made one of her stupid remarks about him using a computer between two bouts of love-making, it would start the detective thinking. The man was, after all, the best detective in the business at present.

However, at this point, the detective shuffled his papers together and rose.

'Well, I think I can leave you for the present. You have been very helpful, and I'll do my best to find the criminal who was behind all this.'

'Yes, do your best and don't forget the one million. Get there first, and it's yours. Come second, and you get your normal fees'.

The man nodded.

'Naturally.'

'And where will you start, may I ask?'

'I have already started,' he smiled, 'And my next step is to pick up my fishing rods from the airport and go and have coffee and a chat in a little café.'

The two others opened wide their eyes as they rose to bid him farewell. He wondered if they would fling themselves on the floor and make love as soon as the door had closed, but showed nothing on his face.

Talia held out her hand to him. 'No doubt, that is why you are more successful than other investigators.'

He smiled. 'Fishing rods have a way of breaking the ice, where mere words only reinforce it.'

'Clever,' smiled Talia

'Thank you.' He took Talia's hand, shook it and nodded politely to Thomas.

As the door closed behind him, Talia made a grab at Thomas's groin.

'Talia! Keep your hands off, for god sake!' cried Thomas.

Mr Fennel, who just caught this, shook his head and sighed. 'God these women...'

Agent Vx

PART 3

Chapter 15:

On that ill-fated Sunday morning run, there is not a shadow of a doubt that I could easily have chosen a hundred better places to stop and tie my running shoe laces.

The owner of the house in front of which I did this just happened to be a certain René Fortin. As mentioned earlier, this person also happened to be a ruthless and dangerous criminal. The police had recently become very uneasy about him and had been watching him with increased attention for some time. For years they had been trying to catch him for engineering all sorts of drug trafficking and the murders which inevitably seemed to accompany this. However, suddenly he seemed to have disappeared from their 'radar'.

For several months now, he seemed to have entirely ceased his traditional activities and was rarely to be seen in his usual haunts. They inevitably suspected him of preparing something on a larger scale and would have liked to have been able to haul him in before he could do too much harm.

The broad-shouldered person who scowled at me from the window was one of his two bodyguards.

I had decided to get clear before any misunderstanding arose, and started running up the road again. Why a cold, unreasonable fear had crept over me, I don't know, but the result was that I accelerated fast up the gently rising road.

This was the last thing I should have done because the watcher immediately got the wrong end of the stick. Why fate should have chosen to stop me in front of this house remains a mystery, but there it is.

'Hey boss!' the bodyguard called across the room, 'someone's checking out the house.'

René Fortin looked up from his Sunday paper.

'Police?'

'Guy in running gear.'

'Go and check him out.'

'Christ!' said the bodyguard, 'He's off like a rabbit. What the hell's he up to?'

René Fortin jumped up, dropping the newspaper. 'Well get after him then. Fast.'

The heavily built man rushed to the door and clattered clumsily down the wooden steps, but by the time he reached the pavement, I was well off, around the first corner and then round another.

My personal record at the time was a little over thirty minutes for ten kilometres, but more importantly, a little under sixty seconds for the 440 meters. Thus, by the time the man turned back to report, I was the best part of a mile away and still going strong.

'No sign of him, boss.' he grunted, 'Must have had a car waiting.'

Fortin shook his head and tutted.

'What the hell is all this now?' he thumped the arm of his chair. 'Just what we don't need at the moment.'

He let himself fall back into the chair and retrieved the newspaper. 'Look like a cop?' he asked.

'Nope. He looked in pretty good form, to me though. Not heavy, but well trained, if you see what I mean.'

Fortin saw precisely what he meant, and this was bad news. 'Someone's having the house checked out. To see if I'm home to visitors.'

'Looks like it.' said the bodyguard.

The man leant back, 'Smells like trouble and I don't need trouble these days.' He turned his head. 'Hey!' he shouted towards the kitchen door, 'Any news from Sandra?'

The second bodyguard put down his breakfast plate somewhat reluctantly and stuck his head around the door.

'No. Nothing yet boss.'

René Fortin screwed up his nose. 'Where the hell has that girl got to now?' He shook his head and sighed, 'Only back yesterday, then directly out on the tiles all night with that dumb friend of hers.'

'Probably gone back to her mum's place, boss.'

'Yeh.' said the other.

'Ok. Finish your breakfast and get around there in the car and check her mum's.' He looked over the top of his paper, 'Tell her next time to remember I get worried.'

'Will do.' and the two tramped out to do their duty.

'And tell her mum to get the phone put in. Tell her I'll pay.'

Now fate had it that the two girls in question just happened to be the ones I had joked with, on the plane the previous day. This detail was destined to cause me certain entirely unexpected complications.

An hour later René Fortin's phone rang.

'No sign of Sandra here Boss. Her mum hasn't seen her since she came back.'

Fortin cursed. 'Where the hell's she got to now?'

'Want us to nose around a bit?'

'Yeh. Just check that she's Ok.'

'Will do.'

The two bodyguards smiled to each other. This mission meant a quiet day, visiting the various bars and cafés frequented by Sandra. They intended to take their time over it and have a lovely day chatting with their old friends.

However, around midday, they hit on some bad news. Some really bad news. The debate as to which should phone Fortin was decided on by spinning a dollar.

'Hey, boss.'

'Where the hell have you two been? Any news?'

There was a cough. 'Bad news boss.'

There was silence at the far end of the line. 'Come clean.' The dull voice ordered.

'She chucked herself off the Cartier bridge this morning. Stone-dead Boss. Sorry.'

There was a long silence. 'Dead?'

'Stone-dead boss.'

'Christ!'

'Sorry Boss.' The two men knew very well that regardless of his murderous reputation, Fortin had profoundly loved this girl. They had no idea how he would

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take such a shock, which is why they had decided to phone rather than pass on the information personally.

The silence continued. 'Sure it's her?'

'No doubt Boss. We got it from the police.' There was a pause, 'She left all her papers in her bag, nothing was stolen, credit card and cash still there.'

'Christ!'

'Boss?'

'Yeh?'

'A guy was watching from below. Said he saw someone look over directly after.'

'So!'

'Thought she might have been hoisted over.'

'What?'

Now, this was what they had feared.

'Someone chucked my girl off the bridge!' He bawled at the top of his voice. 'Who was the bastard? I'll blow his bloody bollocks right into space. Who was it?'

The bodyguard hesitated. 'It's not sure that it was a murder boss. There's no proof, just the bloke who saw the head appear.'

'Of course, it was murder, you idiots.'

'No proof Boss.'

'Come back here, and I'll show you some proof with my boot on your arse.'

There was silence.

'Hey, Boss?'

'Fuck!'

'What about that guy we saw checking out the house this morning?'

Fortin whistled. 'Bloody hell. That guy was checking we were safe out of the way before doing the job. The bastard.'

'What about her friend Sylvia?'

'Get around there quick and bring her here.'

'OK Boss.'

The two men sighed, the danger was now past, at least for them. Going to get Sylvia, gave their boss a good hour

to calm down, which was all for the best in their opinions. However, finding Sylvia took considerably longer than expected. She had gone swimming with a group of friends to one of the nearby lakes.

They eventually located her at about four-o'clock. When they broke the news to her, she insisted on immediately going to her friend's mother. It was about six-o'clock, and they were all in the woman's tiny sitting room staring at each other in strained silence.

The television was playing on the sideboard, and the guards watched it from the back of the room.

The old woman looked up and saw the boss handling a photo of Sandra.

'You can't have that. Only decent one I've got.'

The boss put it back, while she fumbled about on the sideboard.

'Here.' She held out a business card, 'That's the address of the guy who did the photo shooting or whatever they call it nowadays. He'll have the negatives or the files. You can get a copy, easy.'

René stuffed the card in his pocket without reading it. 'I'll deal with that another day.'

Suddenly the TV program was interrupted by a newflash. They watched without much interest as the film crew showed images of the burning conference hall and police and military rushing everywhere.

Then without warning the photo of the only survivor flashed onto the screen and the bodyguard started. 'Hey, Boss. Look!' He jumped forward, 'That's the Guy!'

'What Guy?' came the flat reply.

'The guy who was checking out the house this morning.'

'What?'

'Yep. That's him all right. No doubt about it.'

'Christ!'

'Hey!' this was from Sylvia.

'I know that guy.'

They all looked at her with amazement.

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'He was trying it on with Sandra in the plane yesterday.' The others stared at her. 'He was reading scientific stuff about nerve gas. he was a bit odd.'

'Christ!' said the Fortin. 'What the hell is all this about? I want that guy quick.' He jumped to his feet and strode to the door, 'Hey you two, get out there and find him double quick before the police drag him in.' He snorted, 'I have got a few questions to ask him.'

The two bodyguards exchanged looks. Asking questions was one of their boss's strong points.

Chapter 16

Sandra Bedard was unemployed and had been so, for almost a year. She had tried her hand at numerous jobs but had never seemed to be able to keep them. The girl had first been a receptionist at a nice Hotel but had argued with the manager. She had been a server, first in a coffee shop, then at a discotheque but each time had argued with the customers.

Her last job had been the receptionist at an exclusive fitness centre. However being regularly snubbed by the rich men's wives who frequented it, was not her cup of tea. She had told one of these where to get off, and the owner, Lionel, had sent her packing immediately.

She hadn't minded the crowd of gay boys who seemed to spend half their lives there, but those wealthy, idle, snobbish Jewish women had been too much for her.

Then, one evening at her favourite nightclub she had met someone very different from her usual types.

He was a massive, tough-looking man, about ten years her senior and he had smiled at her kindly on passing her table with two rough looking friends. A few days later he had said hello and smiled again.

Sandra was not used to this sort of behaviour from men, because either they liked her and she couldn't get rid of them, or they didn't, and they took no notice of her.

She discovered that this was René Fortin, a well-known criminal from the region. A man it was deemed advisable to avoid at all costs.

A week later he smiled at her again, said hello and exchanged a few words about the density of the crowd. That being said, there always seemed to be a table free for him wherever he came.

After a further week, he invited her to his table and was very kind both to her and her friend.

Within a month he had called for her at her mother's and taken her to dinner and a film but hadn't given the slightest indication of wanting to sleep with her.

His two bodyguards proved to be very kind towards her, her mother and her friend also and Sandra rapidly came to like him very much.

Without realising it, it was his meeting of Sandra, which eventually persuaded Monsieur Fortin to make the change he had been contemplating for some time and to move out of the more violent sector of his occupation. He had discovered an area of activity which seemed to combine greater profitability with far reduced risk to his health.

This new activity was to help bring about transactions between people who had highly valuable objects for sale, and others who had lots of money. He would charge between two and five per cent of the sale price and would guarantee delivery anywhere in the world. The fact that the seller and buyer preferred that the objects in question should remain hidden from the public eye was the key to his success in the field.

Over the last few years, he had already made one or two transactions in this way, and now felt that it was high time to make this his speciality. Sometimes it was diamonds, sometimes small paintings, sometimes rare antiques and on one occasion a single priceless postal stamp. The latter had changed hands for five million dollars.

He had earned two hundred and fifty thousand dollars for flying first class to Belgium with an old stamped envelope, stuck in his novel as a bookmark. This was far better than frightening shop-owners, for a thousand a month.

However, the sudden disappearance of René Fortin from the organised crime scene had caused consternation amongst the Montreal police. Consequently, they had had him closely watched but were eventually forced to accept that he had indeed stopped his previous activities. Such behaviour was unprecedented because up to that date it

only ever happened when the criminal was caught or killed by rival factions.

One evening, therefore, one of the oldest and most experienced police investigators in the sector paused when passing René's table at a restaurant. 'Haven't seen you around much lately. Been ill?'

René had looked up at Andrew Farmer and smiled, 'I retired.'

Andrew nodded and smiled back. 'I'll be following you soon. I hope'

René held up his hand to shake the investigators and said warmly, 'You deserve it.'

In the police detective's mind, there could be no doubt that René Fortin had done precisely what he said. However, his boss would not believe it.

Andrew Farmer had been a well-known member of the Montreal police for many years and was on first name terms with all that city's main criminals. He was one of the last 'old-school' investigators and had come within a hair's breadth of catching René Fortin several times. However, each time the man had managed to wriggle out of the net in some way or another.

Andrew would be retiring from active service in a few months, just before Christmas in fact, and was looking forward to a bit of peace and quiet. In consequence, he did not intend to put himself in the front line during his last months, especially when there were mad mass-murderers abroad.

Meanwhile, Sandra was in an awkward position. She had no work, no money, no medical insurance and her mother had broken her wrist and could no longer keep up her cleaning job. Sandra took over from her mother but rapidly realised that this job was not much better than slave work. In fact, up until this moment, she had never realised what her mother had to go through every day of her life, to provide for her and her brother.

How it happened, was never really clear in Sandra's mind, but one morning at six-o'clock, she was offered a far more financially viable solution.

A very well-dressed gentleman stopped her as she was leaving the office-block she had been cleaning. He said he had noticed her application to her job and the excellent quality of her work.

Sandra looked him up and down and, placing her hand on her hips scowled. 'Just because I have to clean floors, don't mean I'm an easy lay. Got it?'

The man smiled, 'Ha!' he laughed, 'you got the wrong end of the stick.'

'Well, you'll get the right end of it if you're not careful.' she countered scowling at him still.

He shook his head, 'I really do have got some paid work available, and there is no funny business involved.'

'Oh yeh? And how come you offer it to someone you never saw before?'

'What makes you think I haven't seen you before?'

Sandra looked at him, 'Been spying on me, have you?'

'Let's say I have been observing.'

'Same thing.'

'Not at all.'

Sandra blew out her cheeks, 'You don't even know who I am.'

'Wrong again, Sandra. I have done my research, or spying if you prefer, before approaching you with my little proposition.'

'And what does this proposition entail mister James Bond?' she mocked.

'All depends if you don't mind travelling a bit and can keep your mouth shut.'

Sandra picked up her hold-all and made a move to leave, 'Thanks. I'm not interested in anything criminal.'

The man held up his hand, 'Nothing criminal at all.'

'Yeh? So why the secrets then?'

The man sighed heavily. 'In business, there are always transactions that have to be made without the competition getting wind of them.' He looked at her over his glasses. 'The information is worth too much for me to be able to trust any of my employees.'

'So, you want a sort of go-between. That it?'

'Exactly. That way nobody will get wind of things until I decide it.'

'Hmm.' Muttered Sandra, 'And then you spotted poor little me cleaning the floor and thought that I looked too dumb to be able to cause you any trouble.'

The man laughed. 'Think what you like Sandra, but the job pays a thousand dollars cash for each mission, and all extra costs covered by me.'

'A thousand?' Sandra looked up.

'Cash.'

'Hum!' Sandra observed the man.

'You would have to fly to New York and a few other places to take documents and put them in a letterbox there.'

'And that's all?' she frowned, 'You won't be tagging along by any chance?'

'Oh no,' he smiled, 'You'll be on your own. I pay the tickets and one night's hotel bill. If you stay on longer, you pay the extra.'

Sandra frowned again, 'How often, these little excursions mister zero-zero-seven?'

'Oh, not that often, don't worry, once a week probably, possibly twice from time to time.'

'Hey! that means at least four thousand a month.'

He nodded, 'Cash.'

'Hum!' Sandra looked around the entrance hall. 'That's big money.'

'For you. Yes.'

'I'll have to think about it.'

'If you do, think about it yourself. If you talk to anyone about it, the offer's off.'

'Got it.' nodded Sandra.

Agent Vx

The man made to turn then stopped. 'Maybe if something special comes up, that needs transporting urgently, then there would be a bonus for the added inconvenience.'

'What the hell does special mean and what sort of bonus.'

'Five thousand is the usual figure for special assignments, and don't worry you would not be carrying diamonds or explosives, or drugs.'

'Five thousand?'

'Cash of course.'

'Christ!'

'Some transactions I won't agree to before sampling the goods.'

'Goods?'

'It's too early to go into that, but it would be all quite legal.'

Sandra smiled, 'But no one in your company must know until the deal is signed.'

The man nodded and smiled at her, 'You got it, Sandra. That's how I make money.'

'Big business?'

'No not big business, lots of medium ones, and they all build up...'

'Got it.' nodded Sandra.

'So, you're on?'

'I'll give it a try, but if you try any funny business, I have friends...'

He smiled, 'A certain gentleman, who would come and have a chat. Yes, I know about your friend Mr Fortin.'

'Hell, you know everything.'

'I did my research. So, you see there's no risk involved. You have your own personal protection service. And a pretty formidable one I believe.'

Sandra smiled, 'Ok, I'm on. When do I start?'

'The day after tomorrow. I have a confidential letter to go to a partner in New York.'

'OK,' said Sandra.

'Come here at eight in the morning and the man at the reception will give you the envelope.'

'And the tickets?'

'They'll be in the envelope with the address for the letter which you'll find inside.'

He hesitated. 'You must not, in any circumstances, go into the building and you must avoid being seen by the people there. Just put the letter in the box and then you're free.'

'And the money?'

'You won't see me again OK.'

'And the money?' she repeated, fixing him with a stare.

'For the first few missions, I'll put the money in the envelope, that will prove my honourable intentions.'

Sandra laughed, 'Honourable! Ha, ha, I love it.'

'After that, I will arrange a place where I will leave the money where you can pick it up as soon as you get back.'

Sandra frowned. 'And what if you accidentally forget to put the money in its place?'

'Then you, drop the job, but you'd still be several thousand dollars richer, wouldn't you?'

Sandra nodded, 'Yep, I suppose I would.'

'So?'

'Ok, I'll give it a try.'

'Great!'

A few days later, Sandra, flew to New York, popped a letter into a letterbox in the lobby off a big apartment block. The letter was addressed to The President, Amalgamated Specialized Oils Inc., and the envelope was stamped personal and confidential, in red. She then spent the night in an excellent hotel and flew back the following evening, after a pleasant day's shopping.

This initial mission was followed by three similar trips carrying letters for various company presidents each of which had something to do with oil or motors, or lubrication.

After the first three trips, a pick-up place was arranged on the Jacques Cartier bridge. The payments were placed in a plastic bag nailed to the back off a workman's tool trunk.

Sandra had only to reach over the railing and pull it up on a string.

The arrangement worked perfectly, and Sandra was perfectly happy to travel business-class to various towns in the USA, and then to then come back and find one thousand dollars waiting for her in cash.

Had she known that the envelopes she posted contained only blank sheets of paper and that the addresses had been chosen at random, she might have felt less comfortable. In any case, this arrangement went on smoothly for several months until she received an unexpected message.

Her employer informed her that his negotiations had advanced as hoped and one of his contacts now wanted to confidentially send him a sample of the revolutionary product under discussion. He asked if she would undertake to pick up the sample from Knoxville Tennessee and bring it back.

To avoid detection, he said that the oil samples would be in two, small Ice-Tea bottles. One of these she should put in her suitcase and the other in her carry-on luggage.

The payment for this special mission would be five thousand dollars, as agreed. He added that she was under no circumstances to open the bottles. Although the oil might smell terrible, it would above all, permanently colour the skin bright yellow, and with it, anything else it came into contact with. On arriving back at Montreal, she was to place the two bottles in a given trash can and then to go and pick up her payment on Sunday morning on the bridge as usual.

This time Sandra decided to take her friend Sylvia Dale along with her for the trip. After all, five thousand dollars for carrying Ice-Tea around left a good bit over for paying her ticket and having some fun.

Chapter 17

René Fortin started his investigations with the obvious. He sent his two bodyguards to the hospital, where they spotted an unusual amount of police activity. The men had very little trouble in extracting the fact that I had escaped from the over-excited receptionist.

Their next stop was the bar where I had cadged a drink of water. The owner knew only too well who these two men were, and gave the information willingly. However, they only learnt that I had a strong English accent, which was of no great help.

At my hotel, they then questioned the receptionist but realised that the only unpublished information they obtained from her was mainly a product of her imagination.

In the meantime, their boss had seen a new closeup photo of me and called them on the phone.

'The photographer and this guy must have talked together afterwards.' Said Fortin, 'If only for the photographer to request permission to publish the photo.'

'You think he might have the guy's contact data?'

'Yeh. Newspapers have to be damn careful about what they publish nowadays. If they're not, they have those legal sharks down on them like a ton of bricks.'

'Any idea who the photographer is boss?'

'The papers have to put the photo credits, so we only have to look at any of the photos. Hold on a moment.'

They heard the rustling of the newspaper come over the line. Then the phone was picked up again. 'The name is Joss Fergusson. Plug that into your smartphone. He must have a studio somewhere downtown.' He paused, 'They all have, for photo shooting.'

Locating the place presented the men with no difficulty, and they drove along to the address down near the riverfront. However, from a distance, they spotted a police car parked outside and as they drove slowly past, saw that the place had been burnt out. Through the blackened hole

where the doors had been, wisps of smoke were still flowing and inside everything seemed to have been burnt.

The men drove off and exchanged looks.

'Looks like a dangerous job nowadays, being a photographer, I mean.' said the driver.

The other man nodded. 'Hell!'

When they told him, René Fortin was not pleased with the news his two men brought home.

'Someone wanted to warn the guy off if you ask me.' grumbled one of his bodyguards.

'Yeh. Maybe, but who?' replied Fortin.

'What about the murderer?'

'Possible. Might have been trying to destroy any other photos.' added his friend.

René shook his head. 'All that stuff is on a PC nowadays, and backed-up on the cloud. No, I don't think it was any evidence that they wanted to destroy.' he chewed his lower lip.

'Maybe they thought the photographer was in there and wanted to kill him.' Suggest the older of the two bodyguards.

'Or smoke him out.' suggested the other.

René nodded, 'More likely.' he paused, 'But in that case, it was a pretty amateur attempt.'

'Yeh, unless the guy was actually in there.'

'Any ambulances?' Asked Fortin.

'No, and the guy in the bar down the road said only the police and the fire brigade had been.'

'Which means they didn't find any bodies,' said Fortin.

'Yeh,' Agreed the bodyguard.

Then their boss had an idea, 'Might have been done to remove fingerprints.'

'Who's?'

'Maybe someone went over the place to find something or other, then burnt the place to conceal the fact.'

'Not the murderer then.' said one of the men, 'Because the police already have his prints.'

'Don't be too certain about that. This looks like a very cunning guy. Wouldn't do to underestimate him.'

The other two men nodded.

During this exchange, Fortin was jingling some keys in his pocket and then abstractedly drew out the card Sandra's mother had given him. Handing it to one of his bodyguards, without even looking at it he said, 'Talking of photographers, have a look on the web and see where this guy lives. We'll go around and see if he's got any photos of Sandra,' he paused. 'for her mum.' He coughed.

The man nodded and, glancing down at the card frowned. 'Wasn't that the name of the guy you told us to check out this morning?'

Fortin swivelled around, 'Check up on the internet. And you,' he said turning to the other man, 'Go and see if you can fish the morning paper out of the trash can.'

A few minutes later a shout came through the door.

'Hey, boss. Come and have a look at this'

Fortin dropped the afternoon newspaper and strode across the floor and into the back room.

'Look. I plugged in the name, and see what came up.'

The screen showed the photo of the 'murderer' and the fiery blast. The headline was 'Photographer of horrible crime scene goes missing.'

'Christ!' whistled Fortin.

At the bottom of the page in large print, they read, 'Police are investigating the possible link between two men.'

'Hell,' said Fortin.

At this moment the second bodyguard returned holding a limp and stained newspaper, 'You were right, boss. Same guy.'

René Fortin looked out through the window into the small, untidy backyard. 'Looks like the guy got the message all right.' he paused, 'I wonder who's after him?'

'Do you think he knows something about the murderer?'

'Must do I suppose.' said Fortin, 'But I can't imagine what that could be.'

The older of his two bodyguards had been frowning for some time. 'Boss?'

'Yeh.'

'We can't get any tabs on that English guy, but the photographer is a local. Must have some family around these parts.'

'Good thinking.' Fortin nodded at him, 'Check it out. Get yourselves some beer and see what you can turn up.'

Later that night, when René Fortin was thinking of turning in for the night, one of the men called him in.

'Found his father boss.'

'Great. Where does he live?'

'Only half a mile off. Near that corner-café where all those fishermen hang out.'

Fortin knew the area well. He especially remembered the owner who had started his career along similar lines to his own. The man had then dropped this preferring a job with less risk of ending up in a prison cell, or with a knife in his back.

'Good work. Get over there tomorrow. We'll work out the line to take in the morning.'

Knocking on the shiny black front door early the next day, the two bodyguards composed their faces in an attempt to look as harmless as possible. This was particularly difficult for men of their profession, but at least they did their best. The door eventually opened, and a tall, tanned man in his sixties gazed out at them.

Neither of the men was very good at finesse or tact, so the older one said, 'Got a photography job for your son. A friend said he lived with you.'

The old man nodded, 'That information's a bit out of date lads. He's been living downtown for the last ten years. What do you need doing, I'll pass on the info.'

'The boss wants to help a girl singer start-out.' Said the bodyguard. 'Needs a set of photos and a video done. Needs something top notch, he said.'

'The boss?' frowned the old man.

'Our boss.'

'Ah!' the man suppressed a smile, 'Maybe I know the girl.'

'Comes from down Toronto way. Her stage name is Kate Furze. Don't know her real name though.' he lied.

'My boy can do that all right, but he's expensive. Has your boss got money to put into this project?'

The bodyguard pulled out a tiny notebook and flipped it open. 'He can put seventy thousand into this part.' Here he paused. 'For the two jobs, that is,' he added.

The man nodded. 'He'll need to put about the same amount into recording the album. I suppose he knows that.'

'Yep.'

'Your boss in a hurry?' he asked, 'because Joss is out of town for the moment. A big pro job.'

'No, but the boss needs the job finished before mid-November.'

'Should be OK then.' It was evident to the old man that these two men had no idea about what this sort of job entailed, so he didn't bother to go further. 'As soon as Joss is back, I'll tell him to get in touch. Leave me the contact info, and I'll pass it on.'

The man with the notebook wrote down a phone number and marked, 'Shooting and video clip Kate Furze. Before mid-November.' He tore it out and gave it to the old man.

During this discussion, the younger of the two men had been carefully looking around the room for clues. He had spotted a series of fishing trophies and some photos and as the discussion seemed to be coming to a close pointed.

'That's one hell of a fish.'

The old man turned and smiled. 'Yep. One of my best catches. Two years back.'

The two men looked at each other and nodded appreciation, 'Wish we could get away from here and relax a bit. Looks like that's down Lake Simon.'

The old man snorted, 'Hell no! No decent fish down there. No that's Lac Perdu.'

'Ah, of course. Nice place?

'One of the best,' agreed the old man. 'Got a friend with a lodge, so I get up there most years. Sometimes twice.'

The bodyguards sighed, 'Nice life.'

'That's what retirement's for lads.' smiled the man replacing the photo on the sideboard. 'Costs me the earth in beer and steaks though.' he laughed.

The two men decided that they had all the information they needed and moved towards the door. 'Tell your boy to contact the boss as soon as possible. seventy thousand is worth having I guess.'

'Will do.' said the man, gently closing the door behind them.

'FOUND HIM!' exclaimed the younger man triumphantly, as soon as they were in the car. 'Gone into hiding in that damn fishing shack at Lac Perdu.'

'I wish it was always as easy as that' exclaimed the older man.

'Yep.' agreed his companion, 'would save a lot of unnecessary unpleasantness'.

His friend laughed and thumped the steering wheel with his fist, 'Love it... Unnecessary Unpleasantness, love it.'

When they arrived back home, Sandra's friend, Sylvia Dale, was talking to René Fortin. The men told the other two about the results of the interview and added that the photographer had gone into hiding. They said that it must be because he had discovered that the murderer was after him. When they told them that he must be hiding in a fishing lodge at Lac Perdu, Sylvia started.

'Lac Perdu!' she exclaimed. 'I know the place well.' Fortin turned to her, and she continued, 'That's the lake just next to the one where I was swimming on Sunday, Lac Clair, down Ottawa way.'

'No that's a Coincidence!' exclaimed Fortin, 'That'll save us time hunting for the place. Where is it?'

Sylvia wagged her head, 'hum! Well, no more than 60 miles. The place is pretty big though.'

The guards smiled. They had both looked at the photo which showed the lodge in the background. It stood on a narrow sandy spit of land which reached out like a finger into a lake. Pine forest ran right down to the water's edge. The spit, running out from the beach formed a sort of natural breakwater.

'Should be pretty easy to find, boss.'

'Yeh,' said Fortin, 'but if the place is as big as all that, not from the land.'

Sylvia nodded, 'Yeh. If it's anything like the others, there will only be a few roads, and the rest is dirt tracks. Easiest and fastest by boat.' She went on, 'Like that it should be easy to spot. The lake is only about a mile or so long. You'll need to trek over from the road, but it's easy, even I can do it.'

'OK.' said Fortin, 'Tomorrow we go and take a look. You Free Sylvia.'

'Yep. If you're paying for lunch.'

The sun was already high when the four people came down the dusty slope to the water's edge. Sylvia knew where they could hire a boat and they were soon on the water. Taking the helm, Fortin headed up the lake.

'You two keep an eye on the bank. We'll go up this side then back on the other.'

He brought the boat in to within fifty yards of the eastern shore and settled down to watch. However, the men were disappointed to see nothing that resembled the place on the photo but decided that the site must be on the opposite bank. As they came slowly down the western bank, they became more and more nervous and when they reached the starting point threw up their arms.

'Nothing like the place on the photo boss, nothing.'

Fortin frowned, 'We'll go back around the opposite way. Maybe, the place is hidden behind the trees.'

The two bodyguards exchanged glances and pulled faces. They were not convinced.

After the second circuit, Fortin pulled into the bank.

'You sure about the name?'

'Yep. No doubt about that. we both heard it.'

'Think he was lying?'

The two men shook their heads. They had had a lot of experience with liars in the past, and they were satisfied that the old man had been telling the truth, which he had been.

Reluctantly the four eventually disembarked and handed the boat back to its owner. René Fortin had an idea and turned to the man as he started unbolting the outboard.

'My dad was always harping on about Lac Perdu,' he said. 'Thought that this must be the place. Ain't though.'

The owner turned and laughed. 'Hell, then if you don't know which one it is, you're in for a hard bit of hunting.'

'Why's that?' asked Fortin.

'Because there must be at least fifteen places called lac Perdu in Quebec region alone.'

Fortin's face dropped, 'Fifteen?'

'Yep. At least.' He laughed, 'Lac Clair, over there.' He pointed, 'Is even worse, must be thirty lakes with that name.' Noticing the dismay on the faces of the four people before him, he nodded,

'Yep, there are Lac Perdus all the way up to the arctic circle. If you don't have any better details, you're in for one hell of a search.'

Had one of the two bodyguards remembered that the old man had said, 'up there', it would have saved them a great deal of trouble. Even so, though, they would have a hard job, seeing that the different Lac Perdus were hundreds of miles apart and frequently across impenetrable forests.

Chapter 18

The four unsuccessful hunters said little on the return trip from the wrong Lac Perdu. When finally, they reached Montreal, they stopped off at Sandra's mother's house. The woman was watching TV, in almost the same position as on the previous day.

As they entered, she turned her head slightly, 'Told her there would be trouble sooner or later.'

'Why's that Ma?' asked Fortin, picking up the portrait of Sandra from the mantelpiece and looking at it sadly.

'Told her that there was something wrong with that courier business.' She coughed.

Sylvia smiled a wry smile, 'A thousand dollars for transporting a letter. Not many people would sniff at that.' She sighed, 'I wouldn't have either.'

Sandra's mother carried on watching the television. 'Money for nothing doesn't exist. That's what I told her. Trouble was bound to arrive sooner or later.'

Sylvia shook her head, 'At least you were right this time.'

'She was always a bit dumb.' grumbled the woman, 'Would have happened anyhow.'

Fortin snarled. 'Not if I been looking after her. Not if I had had a look at this business.'

'That's what we were doing at Knoxville together when that guy tried it on with Sandra on the plane home'.

Fortin frowned, 'How about explaining all about this Sylvia.'

The girl shrugged. She explained everything her friend had told her about how she had met the man and how things had been going on smoothly for months.

'Don't sound all above-board Boss.' commented the older bodyguard.

'Nope.' agreed the other, 'Something Fishy.'

Fortin screwed up his face. 'And why the hell was she on that damn bridge Sunday morning?'

Agent Vx

'Don't know.' Shrugged Sylvia 'She often went off walking that way after a mission'.

'Ah,' said Fortin, 'A pick-up point!'

He mulled this over, nodding to himself.

'That's what I thought.' Agreed Sylvia, 'Or to get instruction or something.'

'And that didn't seem peculiar to you?' asked Fortin, frowning.

'Didn't think about it. You know Sandra. If she wouldn't talk about it, it wasn't worth asking. Tight as a clam.'

'Ever see the guy?' asked Fortin.

'No.'

'Anything special about this last trip?'

'No.' She hesitated, 'Except that she gave me some stuff to carry in an ice-tea bottle.'

'What?'

'Said it was an oil sample or something.'

'Where is it now?'

'Gave it back to her after customs.'

'Oil?' he frowned, 'What sort of Oil?'

Sylvia Dale pouted, 'No idea. Looked a little bit like olive oil.'

'Could have been motor oil.' Put in one of the bodyguards.

'I never saw motor oil,' admitted Sylvia.

The man shrugged, 'Normal!'

Fortin was perplexed.

'Did she ever carry anything like that for her before?'

'Don't think so. Only letters. At least that's what Sandra told me.'

Fortin snarled, 'That smells bad.'

'Why?' asked Sylvia.

'Smells like this last trip was the big job and that they got rid of the evidence after delivery.'

'Evidence?' asked Sylvia.

'Sandra. Sandra was the evidence!'

'Oh god!' She looked up into his eyes, 'If they knew I had helped...' her voice trailed off.

'You bet. Better keep quiet about it or...' He frowned, 'or maybe not...'

'What do you mean,' The girl looked up again, 'You mean they would get me out of the way too.'

The boss shook his head impatiently. 'Naturally. You'd have been dead for ages by now.'

'Oh, Christ!'

'But now you have protection.' He looked over at his two companions, 'Eh lads?'

'Dead right Boss. If anyone comes hunting around...'

The boss smiled, 'But for the moment, no one knows do they?'

Sylvia relaxed, but Fortin went on, 'For the moment, that is.'

'Hey!' she shot him an angry glance, 'I'm not playing any games of hide-and-seek, with any bloody mad killer. Not for all the castles in Spain.'

This remark struck the boss as an odd because as far as his memory went, they didn't have many castles in Spain, but he let it go unchallenged.

'Wouldn't you do it to avenge your best friend?' He asked, but Sylvia Dale frowned and looked down at the brown floorboards

A plan had already formed itself in Fortin's mind. 'If it were to leak out,' he said, 'that the Sandra took a friend with her on her outing to Knoxville, and that the friend might know something about the affair...' He let this sink in.

'The bloke behind the thing would be forced into action.' concluded his bodyguard.

The girl laughed bitterly, 'So, I become the Bait on the hook, right?'

The boss continued, 'The person behind this was certainly a clever and careful man, and I guess he already checked that Sandra had never confided in her mum.'

'Or she wouldn't be here today, right?' Added the bodyguard.

'Exactly. A few phone calls, posing as a friend and asking where she was and what she was up to... It's dead easy to make a lonely and talkative old woman spill the beans.'

Sylvia glanced at Sandra's mother and shook her head in agreement. 'You're telling me...'

Fortin looked down at the photo he was holding. 'This will need careful handling though.'

'Hey!' interrupted Sylvia, 'I never said I was going to help.'

'No. But you will though because Sandra was your best friend since primary school.'

'Yeh. But I want to stay alive too.'

'Don't worry. You will, won't she lads?'

'If we're around, you can damn well bet on it'.

The girl blew out a long deep sigh.

'Oh, fuck it.'

'I Knew you'd agree.'

Sylvia looked alarmed. 'But if you leak something like that, half of Canada will be knocking at the door. The cops, the press and god know who else.'

'That's why I said it needs careful handling.'

The girl shook her head.

René Fortin smiled down at her. 'I never said I would give anyone your name, did I?'

Sylvia frowned. 'If that guy is as clever as all that, he'll get on my track damn quick. He would only have to check out our hotel at Knoxville or the flight register.'

'Clever girl.' smiled the Fortin. 'And then he finds out you live alone, and the job would be done...'

'And the evidence would be eliminated...'

sniffed the girl. 'But the girl, won't be in her flat, will she?'

'NO... you're damn right she won't. She'll be as far away as possible.'

'Not too far.' Smiled Fortin, 'That's why I said it needs a bit of thought.'

Chapter 19

Detective Andrew Farmer's chief had phoned from headquarters to ask him to question René Fortin, and he sighed to himself as he set out from home that evening. As he had hoped, at around ten-o'clock, he found the man at his favourite nightclub and casually stopped as he passed his table. 'Evening Mr Fortin,' he said, and René immediately glanced sharply up at the man.

He knew that this particular police-detective only used his family name when something serious was afoot. They exchanged blank glances, and a nod from Andrew confirmed this. 'Like a beer? Sit, down?' Said Fortin keeping his eyes on the others face.

'Thanks. Things to do. You home tomorrow morning?'

'Maybe?'

'I'll maybe pop around then.'

'Might be out though.'

'Yeh!' nodded Andrew.

There was a slight pause then Andrew continued, 'See much of Sandra's friend Sylvia Dale these days?'

'Not much.'

'Pity. If you do see her, let her know I'd like a quiet chat sometime... You know where to reach me.'

'I'll try to remember.'

'See you then.' smiled Andrew.

'Yeh. Retirement soon then?' Fortin looked up at the detective.

'Another two months to go.'

'Great.'

'Bye.'

René's two bodyguards had been following this exchange with very little interest, but they were brought sharply back to life when the man had gone his way.

Their boss leant over and whispered, 'Get around to Sylvia's place and tell her to be at my place tomorrow morning at eight sharp. OK!'

The two men exchanged surprised glances, and their boss cursed impatiently. 'That guy has been put on Sandra's case. Obvious!' The two men were still in the dark, and he cursed to himself. 'Why the hell would he ask me for an introduction to Sylvia otherwise. The guy doesn't need me for that, right?'

The penny finally dropped. 'So, he wants to talk the thing over with the two of you,' suggested the older of the two.

'Great thinking! Get around there sharp and tell her.' here he hesitated, 'No. tell her you'll pick her up at seven thirty.'

'She won't be home at this time, boss.'

'Well go and find her then, same hang-outs as Sandra.'

'OK boss.' The two bodyguards rose and leaving their glasses half full, headed for the night-life of downtown Montreal.

The following morning at eight-fifteen, Andrew Farmer, knocked on René Fortin's door and was admitted into the sitting room.

René looked over at his bodyguard, 'Turn off the TV,' he ordered shortly, 'Then go and finish your breakfast.'

'Finished it, boss.'

'Well go and finish it again.'

The man got the message, 'OK.' and sidled out after giving Andrew a mock salute after letting him in.

Sylvia Dale was lounging in an uncomfortable looking armchair but didn't bother to move or register the visitor's presence in any way. She didn't like cops and didn't care much about what they thought about her either.

The police investigator took the chair Fortin pointed out to him. 'Been put on the case, Andrew?'

'Yep. The last one I hope.'

René scowled,

'So that we understand each other. If I catch the bastard who killed Sandra before you, there won't be much left to interrogate.'

Andrew nodded, 'I'm getting a bit hard of hearing these days. But don't bother to repeat.'

René nodded his frowning forehead. 'Yeh!' Then he asked, 'Getting anywhere?'

Andrew pulled a face, 'I didn't say this, but no.'

'So why do you want to see Sylvia. The cops have already talked to her.'

'Yeh! but I found out that she was with Sandra in Knoxville the day before.'

Sylvia snorted, 'Can't a couple of friends have a day off now and then? A crime now is it?'

'Stow it, Sylvia.' sighed René.

'The two of you flew back on the same plane as the man accused of the murder.'

'So, what?' sneered Sylvia.

'Stow it, Sylvia. This guy is trying to help me for once.'

'Yeh. Strange that my last case should be trying to help a guy I've been trying to catch half my life,' smiled Andrew.

'Yeh.' Agreed René, 'Odd. That's life, I suppose.'

'I did a bit of checking up and discovered that the girl had taken to travelling a lot, these last six months. Struck me as odd.' muttered Andrew, 'Know anything about that Sylvia?'

'A girl can't stay closeted up all her life. Anyway, what's it to you?'

René sighed 'Say, Sylvia. If this guy is sitting in my house, it's because I trust him. Got it.'

Sylvia pulled a face, and he went on, 'If he can help pull in that bastard, that's OK by me. So, stop playing your damn game, right?'

'I found out,' continued Andrew, 'that her mum was out of work and Sandra just got fired from that expensive sports centre for wealthy wives. Mostly Jewish women by the way.' He added.

'And gay boys.' sneered Sylvia.

'Not many of those women left now,' commented Fortin, 'Pretty bad news for business.'

Andrew nodded. 'Apparently, Sally was rude to some of the wealthiest customers and got the sack.'

Sylvia sneered again. 'A bunch of stuck-up Jewish snobs. That's what Sandra said. Always looking down their noses at her like if she was a servant or a slave. That's what she said.'

Ignoring this outburst of anger, Andrew continued, 'She didn't have any income at all. Then suddenly she starts travelling all over the place by plane. Nice hotels too.'

'Christ.' exclaimed Sylvia, 'You guys go sniffing about and digging about everywhere like a dog. Know what colour her bra was?'

'Shut up.' sighed René.

Andrew continued, 'A lot of odd things happened around Knoxville while you two were down there...'

At this Sylvia made to interrupt again, but René stopped her. 'For god's sake Sylvia! let the man explain.'

Sylvia subsided into her armchair and shook her head in anger as Andrew took up his story. 'Almost a litre of the most dangerous nerve gas on the planet was stolen from the high-security research centre. Then the woman who did the cleaning in that part of the lab was found floating in a lake with her husband.' He paused. 'I've got a strong suspicion that the nerve gas was transported to Montreal about the same time as you two.'

René smiled and sent a knowing glance at Andrew, and said, 'Now if this girl here had a spark of intelligence, she would have seen that if she withheld important information from the police, she would end up in prison.'

Sylvia sat up.

Andrew Farmer was very quick on the uptake and nodded, 'You're right there. Might even amount to a case of obstruction of the justice, and that could get her months in gaol.'

René nodded, 'Maybe a year or more.'

'Depends on the judge, always does. But a long sentence is very probable in a case like this. Especially when a lot of rich people are involved,' added Andrew.

'And if the judge just happened to be a Jew, then she would be really for it...' concluded Fortin.

'Hey!' cried Sylvia, 'I'm not withholding anything, am I.'

'That's good news at least.' smiled Andrew.

'So where did all the money come from all of a sudden?' He asked.

Sylvia looked at René who nodded back. 'She got a job.' She said somewhat annoyed at having to tell a cop the truth.

'Nice Job!'

Sylvia was about to make a scathing retort, but she caught René's eye and continued, 'She did courier work for a big company.' Andrew nodded, and she went on. 'She just had to carry confidential letters for the boss. She picked up the letters and put them in letterboxes. That was all.'

'OK. Nothing illegal about that.' Andrew agreed.

'No. you bet.' She sneered, feeling as if she had scored an important point

'Who employed her?' He asked.

Sylvia blew out her cheeks and made a noise, 'No idea. Sandra said the guy spotted her at a place she was working at and offered her the job.'

'Odd that,' said Andrew.

'Can't be choosy when you're cleaning floors to keep ends together.' sneered Sylvia.

'No.' nodded Andrew. 'Good pay though?'

'Christ! One thousand dollars a trip.' Sylvia's eye opened wide as she remembered this point.

Andrew exchanged a glance with René. 'And this was one of those missions, that you went on together then?'

'Yeh, but this time she had to bring some samples back.'

The investigator was a very experienced man and took this announcement in his stride, without the slightest change of expression, but his brain went whirling forward. 'I suppose that happened from time to time.' he said sympathetically. 'and I suppose she was paid extra when that happened?'

'You bet! Several thousand.'

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'Nice job.'

'You bet.'

'What sort of samples were these. machine parts or something like that,' Andrew asked innocently.

'Hell no.' she laughed, 'Just some Motor oil.'

Andrew stiffened, and René looked sharply at him and asked. 'What's this nerve gas stuff like Andrew?'

The detective pulled a face. 'It's not gas at all.' He paused, 'I don't know why that stuff is always called nerve gas, because in its normal state it's a liquid. Looks very much like motor oil.'

Sylvia sat forward her mouth dropped open. 'Christ!'

'And I bet you were told not to open the stuff,' Andrew said as he leant forward.

Sylvia nodded. 'How did you get it through customs.'

The girl looked down at her feet. 'It was in two Ice tea bottles.'

Andrew sighed. 'So at least, now we know how the stuff was transported,' he said, half to himself.

'And,' added René, 'Why Sandra was killed.'

Andrew nodded. 'She knew what the man looked like, I guess.'

'Bastard!' sneered René.

'The cleaning lady from Oak Ridge labs too, I guess,' concluded Andrew.

'I had no idea...' Sylvia's voice trailed off.

Then René suddenly frowned. 'Hey Sylvia.' she looked up a little startled. 'How long has this courier work been going on? Any idea?'

Sylvia frowned as she concentrated, a thing she didn't do all that often, 'A couple of months I suppose, maybe three.'

René stood up and went to the window. Then he looked over at the detective, 'But that guy that everyone is chasing only got into Montreal on the same flight as you two.' He looked at Andrew, 'He been in Montreal before?'

Andrew shook his head, 'Not during the last five years... Odd that.'

René started to pace up and down, 'In that case, he must have had someone or a whole team working here for ages to set up that bloody murder. No way he could have done that himself. No way

Andrew was frowning too. He realised that nobody had noticed this obvious short-coming in the reasoning.

'Good thinking René.' He nodded

René nodded back in a non-committal way but was secretly flattered by this mark of respect coming from his long-term rival. 'You think he was working with those terrorists?' he asked.

'No idea,' admitted Andrew. 'But there's something even more significant.' The two looked at him questioningly. 'If the guy on the plane was the murderer, and thus her employer, how come Sandra didn't recognise him?'

'Balls!' exclaimed René, 'Of course.'

He turned on Sylvia who was a little frightened at his brusque manner. 'You sure Sandra didn't already know the guy?'

The girl shook her head, 'Christ no. The way she snubbed him, Christ! No, No way.'

'Sure, and certain?' he looked her straight in the eyes.

'You don't talk like that to a guy you work for and who pays you a thousand a trip.' she shook her head, 'No way, No way. She hadn't ever set eyes on the guy before. I would have spotted that a million miles off.'

The two men exchanged glances. 'So how did he work it?' asked René.

'If he did work it.' frowned Andrew.

'Maybe he was in league with those terrorist madmen, after all, or with some other organisation,' suggested René.

'If it wasn't the terrorists, where is that organisation now, I wonder?' said Andrew.

'Dead, with the rest of them, if you want my opinion.' snorted Sylvia.

Andrew frowned. 'If that was the guy behind the killing, he could have easily picked up the stuff just outside the

airport. he could then have given you two a lift home in a car, and that would have been the last we heard of both of you.'

Sylvia groaned. 'Oh, God.'

'And,' added René, 'even if he didn't do that, he would have known that Sandra was not on her own.'

'Right again.' agreed Andrew.

'Oh, Christ!' Sylvia put her palm on her forehead.

'And you Sylvia,' nodded René, 'would have received a friendly visit from someone with an invitation to the bottom of the river.'

'So!' mused Andrew, 'Why go to the trouble of organising that elaborate 'suicide'?'

'Yeh. Something fishy there.' René agreed.

'There's more to this than meets the eye.' Andrew crossed his legs and smiled.

'What do you think about a frame-up job?' This question was directed at René.

The man nodded. 'You mean the guy on the plane might have nothing to do with the killings at all.'

'Don't know. Possible though, when you think about it.'

'Yeh.' nodded René, 'possible.' He then looked over at Sylvia and seemed to be debating something.

Andrew noticed this and did not speak. Fortin then seemed to come to a decision and looked over at the investigator. 'Sylvia already told me about all this courier work and the oil. I guessed that there was some secret behind it and that that's why Sandra was got rid of.'

Andrew nodded. 'We decided to set up a little trap to see what we could catch.'

Andrew sat forward, 'Dangerous.'

Fortin then outlined the idea of leaking the information that Sandra might have talked about everything to a friend.

Andrew nodded, 'Good idea. But dangerous. might be worth trying.'

René nodded in turn, but the other man continued. 'I guess you'd need more men that you could get hold of for a job like that. Maybe we could work it together?'

René looked up in surprise and burst into laughter. 'Christ the bandit René Fortin working hand-in-hand with his worst enemy.'

'What better way to finish my career.' laughed Andrew.

Fortin chewed his lip, 'You know, I was wondering about something else.'

'Ah?' Andrew looked up.

'You know that out of the hundreds of people killed, almost all of them were Jews.' He said.

'Yeh, everybody knows that.' Interrupted Sylvia.

René sighed and gave her a sad look but went on, 'All of those are from prominent and well-known families, and they also happen to be wealthy.'

Andrew watched him and waited for him to get to the point. 'I'd guess that, as a rough estimate, the overall riches of the dead families could amount to over thirty billion dollars, maybe even fifty.'

'Christ!' exclaimed Sylvia.

Andrew had not done this calculation and was a little surprised.

René nodded several times, 'Interesting to wonder where it will all end up, don't you think!'

'What are you thinking about?' asked Andrew, very alert now.

'Well. All these guys leave wills. eh?'

'You bet!'

'And I'll bet that, if there are no survivors in the family, then a good part of the funds will end up back in Israel or Israeli charities.'

'Christ René.' cried Andrew, 'You're not accusing Israel of murdering her own people, are you.'

'They're Canadians, Andrew, not Israelis man. But no, I was wondering who or which institution or charity is soon going to get extremely rich. That's all.'

Andrew pulled a face. 'I don't believe that there's a link for an instant, but I suppose we will have to follow it up.'

René smiled, 'You can bet that the solicitors dealing with their affairs are Israelis too, so the guy doing the questioning is in for a hard time I guess.'

'I'm glad I won't have time to be lumped with that side of things.' Andrew nodded, 'But you're damn right that there must be quite a few people out there who are going to come out of this with amazing sums at their disposal.'

'Mind you,' said René, with a wry smile, 'If there's no will, all the cash ends up in the hands of the Canadian government... So! Who knows? What with the deficit of payments being what it is...'

Andrew shook his head at this cynical remark. 'Well anyhow, I guess we've made some pretty good progress this morning, together.'

He rose. 'Think about my proposition of help, and I'll maybe be passing through the club tonight.'

As he crossed the room to shake René's hand, he said, 'If you don't pick up my offer, make sure at least I know what you're up to. Might avoid my guys getting the wrong end of the stick.'

'Will do,' he said. 'Come on Sylvia, let's get some breakfast.'

'I already had some'

'Well, have some more.'

She shrugged, as the door close behind Andrew and they heard his steps on the wooden steps.

Entering the kitchen, his two men looked up from reading their newspapers.

'Hey, you two I got a mission for you.' They waited. 'I want you to go the rounds of all our business friends.' The men frowned an instant, 'you mean...'

'You got it.' He said. 'I want you to talk to all the boys right. You tell them from me to lay off that guy Farmer. Tell them that that's as a personal favour to me. I want him to be able to get his retirement alive. Got that?'

'OK boss.'

'Tell them I'd be heartbroken if anything were to happen to him.'

'Got it, boss.'

'OK, what you are waiting for then?'

The men went slowly down the outside steps to the car.

'Working with the police now.' Fortin chuckled, 'Whatever next.'

He turned and held out his hand to Sylvia, to help her up out of the armchair, 'Come on, let's get some breakfast.'

She opened her mouth to say something but closed it again and followed him into the back kitchen.

Agent Vx

PART 4

Chapter 20

Dike Fennel and his secretary-come-assistant, Miss Le Mon, sat together in her large office, watching the TV screen on the wall. The newscaster was commenting on the latest information concerning the Montreal Murder and in particular, the videos which the police had just released. The first one was from a surveillance camera at one of the back entrances to the hospital and clearly showed the presumed criminal slipping out and disappearing around the corner of the building. The second, from a camera at the front entrance, showed the photographer arriving in his battered wreck of a car and picking up an old tramp, then driving off in a cloud of blue smoke.

The screen then presented a photo of the photographer alongside one of the supposed criminal.

The commentator droned on, 'The police are now following up two separated lines of investigation. Either, both men participated in the murder, or, for some reason presently unknown, the photographer is helping the murderer.'

Miss Le Mon was a tall, elegant woman, in her mid-thirties, impeccably dressed in an expensive dark blue dress suit. She had been working for the detective for ten years and knew his ways and habits perfectly. The man himself was a confirmed bachelor, and this suited Miss Le Mon perfectly. Initially, she had put his lack of interest for the Female race down to his being Gay. However, she soon discovered this to be a false assumption. She was unmarried and for most of the time had little need for male company.

As always, even when no clients were expected, Mr Fennel was perfectly dressed and impeccably manicured.

Miss Le Mon knew that her employer spent considerable sums on his clothes and she suspected, correctly in fact, that he spent more than she did herself on the upkeep of his outward appearance.

That being said, as the best-paid detective on the North American continent, he could afford it.

If questioned on this point, he was apt to reply that his clients expected this of him and so did not grudge himself the best that money could buy. What is more, Miss Le Mon was well placed to know that he had no scruples whatever about putting all the attendant expenditure down as 'business costs' on his annual tax returns.

Why his parents had decided to christen him Dyke, which was the name of the mythological spirit of Justice and fair Judgement, he never discovered. Nevertheless, it had been premonitory. It had also been a difficult name to live with until he had climbed to the top of the ladder.

In any case, when in good humour, he would remark that although Agatha Christie had had a penchant for Poirot's, wealthy Canadians seemed to prefer Fenouil. Although this little joke never failed to amuse French-speaking Canadians and other Anglo-French bilinguals, it left everyone else completely cold.

On such occasions, he then had to painfully explain that In French, 'Poirot' means the vegetable Leek and that in the same language the vegetable Fenouil translates into Fennel, his Family name. Two famous detectives named after vegetables. By this time, of course, the joke had always fallen entirely flat.

The newscaster continued his monologue. 'The latest information supplied to us by the Judge in charge of the case is that the photographer's studio, on the dock front, was ransacked and burn yesterday.'

A photo of the blackened chaos of the long room flashed on the screen. 'Finally, we have been informed that, after an initial and exhaustive interrogation, the photographer's father has now gone missing.' He looked directly into the camera for dramatic effect. 'The police have contacted both the English and French police services, but as far as we have managed to ascertain, nothing has yet been found linking the three men.' He paused. 'In the meantime,

however, an extremely dangerous mass murderer is wandering free, around our country’.

Mr Fennel shook his head with a sigh of disdain. Then, and with a slow circular motion, he began to massage the index and middle finger off his left hand with his thumb. This involuntary movement was characteristic of the man whenever his subconscious mind had noted a point worth pondering. It was always accompanied by an abstracted gaze and a slight frown.

Miss Le Mon, noted this and cocked her head on one side questioningly. The detective saw this and smiled across her desk at her. ‘Very careless don't you think?’ he said.

His secretary cocked her head again and frowned.

‘The videos?’. Fennel nodded. ‘A very rudimentary error to make for such a keen brain, don't you think?’

Miss Le Mon pondered over this. ‘Unless he wanted to be spotted for some reason.’

‘Yes,’ agreed the detective. ‘If that is, the tramp was the man they seem to think it was.’ He paused. ‘Can't see his face on the video, so there is absolutely no proof.’

‘In that case, why has the photographer gone into hiding?’

The detective smiled. ‘Maybe he hasn't. He might have been killed too.’

The secretary nodded, ‘In that case, it was the criminal.’ She said, ‘In both cases in fact.’

‘Or perhaps the two videos are not connected at all,’ added Fennel.

‘That's true.’

‘The photographer might also be on the murderer's tracks himself.’ At this, he halted and resumed his circular finger massaging. Noticing this, his secretary held her tongue and waited. ‘A story like that, with a few good photos would be worth a fortune if you could get it exclusively...’

‘Yes,’ his secretary agreed ‘But a bit dangerous though, don't you think?’

Mr Fennel smiled and looked up, 'And what if the tramp was, in reality, the photographer's father!'

Miss Le Mon loved it when her boss started to get his teeth into a new case. She always found it fascinating to observe how new possibilities would spring so smoothly out of his fertile mind and gradually form themselves into an entirely new line of investigation. Sometimes he would have four, five or even more possible explanations running at the same time before he narrowed things down.

'That would explain where he disappeared to.' She agreed, 'But it would be a bit dangerous trying to get close to a murderer of that class'.

'Very dangerous!' agreed Fennel, 'unless, of course, he was also part of the team.'

Miss Le Mon opened a draw on her desk and brought out a staple gun which she abstractedly refilled from a little box. 'Maybe he did know the tramp.'

Dyke Fennel nodded, 'Of course, that's possible, and given the state of his wreck of a car, it would not be absolutely out of character.'

'I can almost smell the stench of the tramp from here.' joked Le Mon.

'But there is something which does not ring true.' mused the detective. 'The whole scene is almost unreal don't you think.' the cocked head of his secretary incited him to clarify this remark. 'The police and their cars parked right there behind him; The old shambling tramp; The smoking wreck of a car and the photographer cursing!'

'Yes, like a scene from a film.'

'Exactly!' The detective jumped, 'Exactly, that's it... just like a film.' He shook his head with exasperation, 'But why did the man get out of the car and hold the passenger door open?' he smiled as he watched miss Le Mon nod understanding.

'Of Course,' she said, 'If he knew the tramp as well as he appears to, he would just have shouted out of the window for him to hop in.'

'Yes, unless,' smiled Fennel, 'Holding the door open was the unconscious mark of respect due to some unknown person.'

Le Mon smiled, 'Which would mean the photographer knew who the other man was.'

'Exactly, Miss Le Mon, Exactly. So, who was this real or false tramp then?'

'Our murderer?' Proposed Le Mon.

'But if that's true, and the police are correct in their assumption, there is still something very wrong.'

'Oh?'

'When you have just managed to wipe out hundreds of people in cold blood, surely you would also have planned a better getaway.'

'I would.' agreed his secretary putting the refilled stapler away again. 'Unless, as we said, you wanted to be spotted and somehow to put the police on a false track.'

'A red herring?' Nodded Fennel.

'Possibly.' She agreed,

'And what if the Tramp is a paid actor and the whole thing is set up to give the murderer time to disappear quietly.' He continued.

'Yes, but the two of them will certainly be found sooner or later.' She added

'I don't agree, especially if they are no longer alive.' Smiled the detective, 'and anyway, Canada is a huge place.' He looked over at the wall chart of North America, 'and those northern forests are immense. The perfect place to hide if you know how to go about it.'

'Yes'

'On the other hand,' the detective went on, 'what if we assume that the tramp IS our man...'

'Then he was playing a perilous game.' Interrupted miss Le Mon.

'Either that or he was being uncharacteristically stupid'.

'Why do you say that?'

'Because...' And here he paused to marshal his thoughts, 'Is someone, who has already proved himself capable of planning a mass murder with such a mass of complex details, likely to neglect the existence of video surveillance cameras?'

'I see what you mean.'

The detective took up the circular finger massaging with his left thumb. 'If the man behind these murders is as clever as I suspect, then this smells distinctly fishy.'

'So did the tramp probably.' Smiled Miss Le Mon.

'I wonder?' replied the detective, missing the intended joke.

Miss Le Mon leant forward on her desk, 'So if the tramp was the murderer, he must have deliberately allowed himself to be filmed for some reason.' She paused, 'And if he wasn't then he is not a very good criminal...'

Fennel smiled, 'Or he was scared to hell and just ran for it.' He hesitated, 'Might have just seen the TV news.'

'In any case, why did the photographer's father disappear.' Said Miss Le Mon.

The detective looked up at her over his glasses, 'yes...' he nodded. 'Now that's interesting.'

Miss Le Mon closed her drawer, 'Apparently, the police interrogated him thoroughly in the early afternoon, but he seems to have evaporated almost immediately afterwards.'

'That could mean any number of things.' Fennel then shook his head sadly, 'Above all. It means that the police were very sloppy about their work.' He paused, 'why on earth wasn't he immediately kept under surveillance?'

A wry smile lit up Miss Le Mon's face, 'They probably wagged their finger at him, scolded him and told him not to leave the county and felt that that was sufficiently intimidating.' Miss Le Mon's humour nearly always fell on barren ground, when directed at her employer, but at least it amused her.

'I wonder if he decided to go into hiding for some other reason?' frowned Fennel.

'You don't think that he could have been something to do with the murders, do you?'

'Everything is possible...' Fennel massaged his fingers again, 'Could also have been got out of the way permanently.'

His secretary frowned at him, 'But all this is based on pure guesswork Mr Fennel. Surely?'

'Exactly.' Said her boss brightening, 'Which is why we have a chance of solving the problem first. I'm good at guessing.' He smiled over at the woman he had come to depend on so much and stood up. 'What time did you say my meeting was with Mrs Kauffman?'

'Ten a.m. Your plane tickets are in this envelope, and I booked a room at your usual hotel in Montreal.' She stood and handed him the envelope, then turned and picked up a thin folder. 'I prepared a file about the Kauffman family and their background. I also researched the husband's business affairs which are very varied, but not unusual for such men.'

'How much is he, sorry, was he worth?'

'A rough estimate would be between six and seven billion dollars.'

'Ah not bad! in the top hundred then.'

'Rated about number eighty I suppose.'

'Leaves a wealthy widow then?'

'Yes, but some of the others killed in the attack were worth twice that.' She said scanning a file open on her desk.

'Maybe, but their wives perished too.'

'That's true.' She frowned and continued, 'But do wealthy wives often murder their husbands?'

The detective smiled, 'No, not often, especially not in Jewish families, at least as far as my experience goes.'

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Mr Fennel turned to the door straightening his tie. 'Well, I suppose I had better be on my way. I'll be in touch.'

Miss Le Mon smiled and nodded.

'Thanks for the file.'

'My pleasure.'

Chapter 21

Mr Fennel stepped out of the lift and handed his room keys over the desk of the Montreal Sofitel. That morning, he looked very different from the elegantly dressed businessman who had arrived the previous evening.

The detective was now dressed in sun-bleached and liberally stained, fishing trousers and jacket. Over his right shoulder hung his rod-bag and a bulky, tackle and reel case sat waiting on the floor beside him. The ensemble was completed by a battered wide-brimmed fishing hat, with the flies hooked around its crown.

He had done a good deal of fishing in his time and had learnt that for a man of his age and shape, this was an excellent disguise. It rarely, if ever, failed to inspire confidence and sympathy and was thus a fool-proof way to initiating a conversation with unknown people.

'Morning Mr Fennel,' smiled the manager through the open door of his office. He rose and stepped out to shake hands. 'Off for a spot of fishing I see.'

The detective turned and smiled back, extending his hand. He had known the manager for years and had watched him gradually climb the ladder from his beginnings in the humblest employment, to the very top.

The manager, for his part, knew this customer's profession well and had become used to such surprising changes of attire.

From time to time over the years, the door attendant had notified him that the entrance was being watched. In such cases, it was his habit to suggested to Mr Fennel that he might find it more convenient to use the staff door at the back. Consequently, Mr Fennel never neglected to thank the attendant appropriately.

'Yes, I've been invited out for the day. Business, of course,' he nodded. 'But one should never refuse to mix the agreeable with the useful.'

The manager nodded, 'Agreed. Have a nice day then, Mr Fennel.'

'Will do.' Came the reply. 'Back quite late I think.'

The manger nodded and left the detective, careful not to allow any sign of curiosity show on his face.

After dinner the preceding evening, Mr Fennel had studied the city map and had located the house belonging to the photographer's father. Miss Le Mon had had minimal difficulty in finding the address and had e-mailed it to him during his outward flight the previous afternoon.

Even in this modern era, Fennel much preferred to use a standard paper map for this exercise, as it enabled him to get a far better visual idea of the lie of the land. All the same, he had used the internet and had been pleased to discover a big coffee shop on the street corner, hardly a hundred yards from the house.

It was to this location that he was now headed. As he approached the hotel doors, the attendant pulled them open and with a smile, took the heavy tackle bag from him.

The man stowed it, and the rods in the waiting taxi then held open the door for Mr Fennel to enter. 'Have a nice day sir.' he smiled.

The taxi carried him to the Avis office, where he picked up his car. Once alone in it, he called his office.

'Good morning Mr Fennel.' She did not add. I trust you had a good night because she knew he considered that sort of remark, time-wasting.

'Morning Miss Le Mon, any news?'

'Yes. The girl who was thrown off the bridge was René Fortin's girlfriend. You know. The boss of one of the Montreal criminal outfits.'

'Ah? Interesting!'

'Yes.'

'Taken a contract out?'

'Doesn't look like it so far. At least as far as my information goes.'

'That may complicate things a bit.' mused Fennel.

'Would you like me to put out some feelers. Do you want the man to know you're on the job?'

'Hum!' The detective hesitated, 'No. Not for the moment.'

'I suppose you prefer to find out if Fortin has any leads first.' said his secretary.

'Exactly. If he does, I will have to think about it.' He wondered if he should withhold the information about the extra premium that his customer had offered him, but decided honesty was easier to deal with when it came to Miss Le Mon. 'The woman has offered us a substantial bonus if we find the murderer.'

'Ah!'

'Yes. One that would be very well worth struggling a little for.' He added, avoiding quoting a figure.

'Well, I suppose the woman now has an almost unlimited budget.' By experience, she knew that when her employer neglected to mention a sum, this meant that it was well over the hundred-thousand mark. As a matter of course, she had already evaluated the widow's present fortune, and she guessed that one million would be a figure which would be likely to come readily to such a woman's mind.

As often, her analysis was spot-on.

'Exactly,' said Mr Fennel and he related the conditions, but not the sum.

'No question about helping others get there before you then.'

'No, especially when some of them are equipped with strong-arm men and guns.'

'I hear that Mr Fortin seems to have dropped out of that sort of trade,' commented Miss Le Mon.

'Ah! Now that's interesting. I wonder if the events are linked?'

'That seems to be what the police are considering. In any case, they seem to have been very uncomfortable for some time about Fortin's change of activity.'

'Which is?' asked Fennel.

'That's why they're nervous. They don't know.'

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'I wonder if he is mixed up in the murders. Any links?'

Miss Le Mon shuffled some papers on her desk and coughed. 'The police are following up the idea of a possible contract for a political murder. But I don't believe that for a moment'.

Mr Fennel knew that he could trust his secretary's intuition.

'Why is that?'

'It would be out of character. It's true that the man has been involved in all sorts of unlawful activities and people have occasionally been killed. But the dead have always been linked with some competing gang or other.' She hesitated, 'No. Rackets and ransom, yes, but outright murder, definitely no.'

'Do you suspect the man to be reorganising his activities?'

'Yes. I suspect that Fortin has found some more lucrative and less dangerous activity.'

'Not going to open a coffee shop,' Laughed Fennel.

Miss Le Mon laughed too. 'No. Not quite as settled as that, but who knows.'

'A casino then.'

'No. Fortin wouldn't have the funds for anything on that scale.'

'Anyhow,' said the detective, 'He must be hopping mad, and a hopping mad criminal of his calibre is not something one wants hanging onto one's coattails.'

'You'd need to have a dress suit for that.' quipped Miss Le Mon.

'Sorry?'

'Oh, nothing.' Then she went on. 'The police have no idea where the photographer's father has gone, but they're looking hard.'

'I bet.' laughed Fennel. 'But I bet they're also looking hard in the wrong direction.'

'You don't think that the three men are in this together?'

Fennel paused, and his secretary waited calmly for his reply. 'You know Miss Le Mon. There is something odd

about the whole thing.' The woman waited, and he went on. 'The organisation of this mass-murder was very complicated and must have taken a long time to organise.'

'Agreed.' said miss Le Mon.

'And then, during the very last twenty-four hours, after months or years of careful preparation, he allows himself to be spotted and recognised several times.'

'Yes.' agreed his secretary

'After killing the politician's secretary in the botanical gardens, after desecrating the tombs-stones, after taking refuge in a dock-side bar and finally after throwing the girl off the bridge.'

'Yes, Odd.' agreed Le Mon.

'And then he allows himself to be filmed by the world press, just after the murder.'

'Hmmm!' this from Miss Le Mon.

'So many mistakes in such a short time.' He concluded.

Miss Le Mon reshuffled her papers, 'Maybe he wanted the world to know that he was the man who engineered the thing.' She hesitated, 'Vanity perhaps.'

'In that case, he would not try to escape. He would stay put and bask in the celebrity.' returned Fennel.

'So why take the risk of being caught and then disappearing?' Miss Le Mon continued, 'Maybe he couldn't work the murder without being on the inside of the building.'

'Yes, that's possible.' mused Fennel.

'In which case, his own life would depend on him being de-contaminated and receiving medical treatment by military specialists.' Le Mon said.

'That's true, but what an enormous risk to take after such painstaking planning.'

'If he is mad,' interrupted Le Mon, 'he wouldn't see it like that though.'

'True again.' Fennel frowned to himself and took up the conversation again. 'But for a brain that planed that job, there must surely have been some way of avoiding being recognised.'

Miss Le-Mon continued following her line of reasoning and said. 'He could easily have paid someone to do the job. He could have told the person that as long as he stayed outside the hall, there was no risk.' She warmed to her theory. 'The man would have died with the others and Voila, the perfect crime.'

'Exactly.' agreed Fennel. 'However,' he continued, 'if one considers the difficulty of actually organising the theft of some of the deadliest nerve gas on the planet, from the highest security lab in the country, you get an idea of the intelligence of man behind it.'

'He spotted a weak point.' Suggested his secretary.

'Yes. But how long did it take to discover it?'

'I see what you mean.'

Mr Fennel made a little popping noise with his tongue. 'I wonder if he recruited his helpers who were already well placed and above suspicion, or if he recruited them then engineered their entrance into the place...'

His secretary hummed. 'If he had approached the wrong person, or offered too little, the person might have let the cat out of the bag. A man like that would not want to take a risk like that.'

'Right again.' he agreed. 'Which means he started planning two or three years ago and waited to find the ideal candidate.'

'A man with a big, big grudge then,' commented Le Mon.

'And a big, big brain.' Fennel tutted, 'And then he goes and openly visits the lab just before the theft... Odd don't you think?'

'Yes.'

'He would have known that the authorities would have gone through the recent visitors with a fine-tooth comb.'

Miss Le Mon clicked her tongue. 'obviously.'

'And do you know what the chief of Police here told me?'

'Ah! You saw him then?'

'Yes. He told me confidentially that our Doctor Stone was seen in the entrance hall at the Knoxville labs, talking to a cleaning lady on the morning of the theft.'

'Is that significant?' Asked Le Mon.

'She was the one in charge of cleaning the high-security labs.'

'Ah!'

'And,' continued Fennel, 'It just happens that the same woman found floating in a lake the next morning, with her husband.'

'Yes, I saw that.' agreed Le Mon, 'Apparently she mentioned to the guards that her son had known the man.' she hesitated, 'The papers have dug up the information that the woman's son was killed by a nerve gas attack while serving in the army.' Le Mon paused for thought, 'And now the whole planet knows what the man looks like.' She concluded.

'What he looked like.' put in the detective, then continued, 'If one has the funds to set that sort of murder up, one has vastly more than would be required to change identity.'

'Risky and complicated to keep it quiet,' added Le Mon.

'Not in some countries, Miss Le Mon.'

'That sounds a bit far-fetched, don't you think?'

'No, not when one considers the time, the money and the thought which must have gone into preparing the murders.'

'Naturally.' Said Miss Le Mon, 'Do you think the man is already out of the country and possibly has already had surgery to take on a new identity?'

'That's possible, but I have an odd feeling that somehow the reasoning that we are presently making might also have been carefully plotted out for us all.'

'You mean that someone is sending us on a wild-goose chase.'

'Exactly, thank you Miss Le Mon, that was exactly what was tickling at the back of my mind. I just could put it into words.' He nodded to himself. 'Yes, we must be cautious Miss Le Mon.' He paused before continuing, 'This may very

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well be part of a script already written for us. And for the police also of course.'

'Ah!'

'The mind behind this is probably already several moves ahead of us.'

'Do you think that those apparent mistakes, made before the murder were deliberate then?' asked Le Mon.

The detective shook his head slowly in his car. 'Do you know Miss Le Mon. I think you are right. It might all be part of the carefully laid out plan.'

'But why?' cried his secretary.

'Ah... That is what we must discover.' He nodded to himself. 'If we are to gain our little bonus, of course,' he concluded

Then Miss Le Mon said something which would have saved the detective a great deal of trouble, had it caught his attention at the time. 'I wonder what the murderer would do if he heard about that bonus?'

Chapter 22

Having reached the outskirts of the city, Dyke Fennel turned off the main road and stopped his car. Miss Le Mon had found and texted him the address of the photographer's fathers' home, and he now typed this into the onboard GPS.

She had confirmed that the police and the press had already have been there, but this didn't deter the detective in the slightest. However, experience had frequently shown him that it was often the small bits of information which others neglected to pick up, which enabled him to keep ahead of them.

After a good deal of twisting and turning, the guidance system brought him to a quiet tree-lined road. It was bordered by closely spaced, detached houses, each with a neat well-tended front garden.

Driving slowly down this road, Fennel kept his eyes on the way ahead of him but took in all the details get a good idea of the lie of the land. He noticed a large new car parked a good fifty yards up the road from the house. It contained two men who, to his experienced eye, were watchers.

At the end of the road, he turned right and parked in the entrance to a veterinary surgeon's clinic. He stayed here for about ten minutes, then turned the car around and drove slowly back the way he had come. As he approached the waiting vehicle, he pretended to be searching for an address and stopped and alighted once to look at the name on a letterbox. Then, affecting to be phoning, he drove very slowly past the watchers, keeping his head turned away from them. His phone was in video recorder mode, and he gently swept up and down as he drove to make sure that he missed nothing of importance.

At the correct address, he stopped and made a good deal of fuss about extracting his fishing rods from the car with one hand, while phoning Miss Le Mon with the other.

'I'm sending you a video in a few moments.'

'OK.'

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'I want you to see if you can find out who the two men in the car are.'

'Any leads?'

'No, but too heavy for Police and I suspect, that they are not Americans.'

'I'll see what I can do Mr Fennel.'

'I think I got the car number. Ok, so you can check that out too.'

Miss Le Mon replied, 'Probably a rental car and if they are foreign and that must have come from the airport.'

'You've got contacts there?'

'Naturally.' She replied, 'I'll ask our rental company to keep quiet about your identity.'

'Exactly what I was going to suggest. In any case, if these guys are from the police, they will get the info anyhow.' He pretended to be searching for something in his pocket and pulled out a folded piece of paper, as if an accessory for his play acting. 'Get back to me as soon as you have any information.'

'Will do.' she hesitated, then added, 'Mightn't it be some of Mr Fortin's strong-arm men?'

'That's a possibility, but if they came in by plane, that would eliminate that possibility.'

'I'll check all that out and get back.' She said.

The detective rang off and lugged his tackle box out.

As he turned, out of the corner of his eye, he caught a very slight movement of the curtain in an upstairs window. 'Now that is extremely odd.' he mused under his breath. He made his way, stumbling up the steps, to the front door.

The latter was painted jet black with remarkably shiny paint and sported a big old-fashioned polished brass knocker, which he lifted and dropped. He was not expecting any reply but played the part as naturally as he could. After a short space of time, he leaned the fishing rods against the white painted panelling and lifted and dropped the knocker once more. After what he considered to be the right amount of time, he then pretended to phone, and simulating

impatience, turned around and gazed down the road, away from the watchers. He then descended the steps and tried to look through the curtained windows. Finally, returning to the front door, he worked the knocker once more, then, gathering up his rods and tackle-case and returned to his car.

On the far corner of the road, he had spotted the large coffee shop-cum bistro, and he headed for this, parking well in view. As he was lifting his rods carefully from the back seats, the phone rang.

'Got the information, Mr Fennel.'

'Good work.'

'The car was rented from Hertz at the Montreal international airport.'

'That lets Fortin out then.' interjected the detective.

'Yes. The Hertz girl was not too hot about giving me names, so I tried my friend Lizzy at Avis. She popped over and with a bit of lying, found out that the two men came in on the flight from Tel-Aviv and that the driver had an Israeli passport.'

'Ah ha!' nodded Fennel, 'Now what does this tell us?'

'I would guess,' suggested miss Le Mon, 'that the Israeli police have sent over some people to investigate the terrorist angle.'

'Maybe. The Israelis would be unlikely to remain inactive for long. Not after so many Jews have been murdered.' He hesitated, 'More likely to be the Mossad.'

'Not quite the same thing,' said Le Mon.

'No. Exactly. All depends on what their brief is though.'

'Could they be working with the Canadian police, do you think?'

'Highly probable. International relations are too important to go messing about with these days.'

'So, they will have the same information as our police?'

'Yes, but they will have many fewer scruples as to how to deal with anyone they find.'

'Ah! Yes, I see what you mean.' Le Mon said.

'They know only too well that if the locals get there first, then our methods of trials will be applied. That would slow things down incredibly for them and would mean that a good deal of the truth might remain undiscovered.'

Miss Le Mon coughed, 'And of course, if they get there first, they might be tempted to use more efficient and less humane methods of getting at the truth.'

'Exactly.' The detective laughed, 'I wonder if our clever murderer thought of the possibility of having guys like that on his tail.' He looked across the road and through the plate glass fronting of the café. 'I'm going to pay a little visit to the local café and see what I can pick up.' He squinted at the window, 'Looks like a lot of retired men in there, and I'd be surprised if none of them had anything useful for me. I call back later?'

He rang off and got out of the car, noticing with satisfaction that a good number of the customers had turned and were examining his progress. 'Perfect,' he said to himself.

For the second time that day he went through the pantomime of clumsily extracting his fishing rods from the rear of the car. Then standing upright he stretched and looked lazily about him, before crossing the road and pushing open the cafe door.

Behind the long bar, stood a tall, well-built and healthy-looking man, who from his body language was quite obviously the owner. He had the robust and suntanned face, broad shoulders and muscular arms which are generally associated with an outdoor job than an indoor one.

Above and behind him on the wall, several glass cabinets containing impressive specimens of stuffed fish and the stuffed head of a nasty looking wild boar glared down.

He nodded to the man and pointed to the glass cabinets, 'Yours?'

The man turned his massive shoulders and gazed with pleasure upwards, then turned back. 'Sure thing.'

The detective nodded respectful acknowledgement, 'Impressive. Where did they come from?'

From across the room, one of a group of older customers interrupted. 'From the fish market down the road.'

The rest of the customers burst into loud laughter.

'Shut up, you lot.'

However, this was too good an occasion to be missed for the regulars, who were apparently always ready for a spot of sparing with the owner.

An older man put in. 'I got a lovely one like that from the auction hall last week. Bigger though. Nearly killed me bringing her in. Broke two lines.'

Another added. 'You know as well as me that you should have worked her more, Mat. You should have tired her out completely before attempting to get her across the parking lot.'

'I know, I know, but you don't hook a fish like that every day, and when the fever gets me, I just don't know what I'm doing.'

The other nodded, 'Ah, you young'uns have no experience.'

'Yep.' added another, 'Never go fishing before getting a drop or two of strong alcohol into the system. It calms the machine down just right.'

The man behind the bar shook his head and smiled.

'That's enough from you lot, or I'll put all the prices up.'

'He would too.' added an old woman sitting in the corner. 'Just his type. Been like that since he was at high-school. Any excuse is good for him to rip his customers off a bit more.'

While this cross-talk was in progress, Mr Fennel, propped his rods up against the coat-stand under the careful observation of the barman.

'Nice rods.'

'Yep. The best I know.'

The man nodded. 'I can see that. Lovely them.'

The detective nodded. 'No way I'm going to leave them in the car for someone to steal.'

'You're right there, mister. Even right out there in view. By the time you saw what was happening, them rods would be half a mile away.' he hesitated, 'Carbon fibre?'

Fennel nodded. This remark set off a series of reminiscences from the customers about, incredible thefts they had witnessed and about how it didn't ever pay to take risks, especially with a good set of rods.

The discussion was heading in precisely the direction the detective would have planned, and he was happy to let things swing along as they wanted.

'Hope the reels are not in view.' Commented one of several of the older men who had now drifted from their table towards the bar. It was clear that they smelt the prospect of a free drink. The men had a seventh sense for such things.

Dyke Fennel knew this sort of behaviour perfectly but wanted to play these fish a bit more before reeling them in.

'So!' he said, 'Looks like I fell into a fishermen's den.'

A general laugh went around. 'You're right there, man. Eh, boys?' There was a general agreement that he was entirely correct.

Dyke Fennel knew this sort of group of men too well to allow them too much space in the conversation. If he did, he would have no chance to get a word in edgeways, once their reminiscing started, so he quickly added. 'So! These were your catches then?' pointing to the cabinets.

'Yep.' Said the barman, sneering at the customers, 'Hooked them up north two years ago.'

'Where's that? Not at Lake Saint-Jean?' he asked taking a name at random.

'Christ no!' The owner laughed, exchanging amused glances with the other men. 'No fish like that up there. Shows you're not a local man.' He smiled, 'No. Much further north, where the waters are colder.' Here he hesitated and glanced across the room at the others, 'Near Lac Double.'

One of the customers added, 'Not the best place for really big fish, but some pretty impressive ones all the same.'

Another man leant over and tapped Fennel's shoulder, 'For god sake don't ask him how he got it, or we'll all die of thirst before he's finished.'

The detective spotted that now was the optimal moment for him to do his bit of acting. He laughed loudly. 'I suppose I had better buy a round of drinks then, before it's too late. What'll it be?'

More men appeared at the counter, and a dozen glasses of beer were handed out accompanied by loud, jocular thanks. 'So where are you off to then mister...'

'Fennel, Dyke Fennel.' he nodded using his real name, which avoided making slips later on.

'Going north?'

The detective smiled. Well now gents,' he smiled, 'believe it or not, I have no idea.'

The men exchanged astonished glances. 'You mean you haven't made up your mind yet?'

'No. I'm going with a friend, he's made all the plans for us. I only just got back over from Paris for a holiday,' He lied.

'Ah! Got you. Anyone from around these parts?' asked the barman.

One of the others added, 'Because any fisherman around here is necessarily a full member of this watering-hole.'

'Drinking trough, I'd call it' laughed another.

'Stow it!' growled the owner.

Fennel smiled internally. This was perfect. 'Yes. Lives just up the road from here. Just been up there, but he's out. Thought I'd wait for him here.'

'Worse places to wait.' agreed one of the men.

'And much better.' added another.

'Stow it, you lot' growled the owner again.

The detective waited.

'And who would that be then, Mister Fennel?'

'Joseph Fergusson. Known him since we were kids.' He noticed the majority of the men start and exchange glances, but he pretended not to notice. 'He invited me up to his chalet for a week, somewhere up north. No idea where it is though.' He continued looking down at his glass to avoid questioning looks which were flying back and forth between the men. 'Quite a way though, four hundred miles or so. Can't remember the name of the lake though.'

'Lake Perdu.' one of the men said automatically.

The owner leaned over, and a concerned look came into his eyes. 'You been out of the country a long time?'

'Yep. Three years. About.'

He exchanged risen eyebrows with the group of now silent men. 'haven't been following the news then?'

'Nope. Why?'

The man leaned forward, 'didn't you hear about that mass murder downtown the other day?'

'No, just got in this morning on the direct flight. What happened?'

'Only about five hundred people gassed at a political meeting in downtown Montreal, that's all.'

'Christ.' nodded Fennel.

'Problem is though,' continued the man, 'Seems like your pal Joseph's son was mixed up in it somehow...'

'What!' ejaculated Fennel, 'Young Joss?'

'That's it, man.'

'Impossible!' cried Fennel, looking from man to man.

Each of them nodded, 'That's what we said. Impossible.'

This point was taken up by his neighbour. 'But he was seen picking up the murderer when the guy escaped from the hospital, and now they've both disappeared.'

The owner stood up straight and stretched his wide shoulder backward. 'We had better explain the story if this gentleman has not had the information.'

The entire bar-full of customers now crowded around with the pleasure of being able to exchange the whole story with a newcomer.

Dyke Fennel leant back and allowed the well-known story to be told to him, with an incredible number of embellishments and additions which would have done credit to the best of mystery story writers. When, after the second round of drinks, the flow of information and informed comments eventually dried up the owner added. 'The police have been round to see Joseph several times, and the newspaper men have had a field day.'

'And now,' butted in another man, 'He's disappeared too.'

'Into thin air' added the owner, 'Came in one evening for a drink and a chat then next morning he was gone.'

'And now.' added the old woman, 'The cops are hounding us all. Seem to think that we are all in the murder together. Typical! Bloody cops!'

She subsided into muttering.

'Christ!' said the detective, 'Well bang goes my fishing then. Any idea where he went?'

The owner smiled. 'No idea. Certainly not his chalet anyhow. Jo's too clever for that.'

'Anyhow.' added another, 'even if we had given them the name of the place, they'd have had a devil time finding the right one.'

The men all laughed together as if at some private joke. These men were clearly anti-police, which was also good news.

'Why's that?' asked the detective.

The men shook their heads,

'Because,' smiled the owner, 'there are at least twenty different lakes with the same name. Try putting Lac Perdu, in your GPS. You'll get a different destination each time.'

'And.' added another man, 'We are certainly not going to help the cops.'

'No.' Said another, 'Jo is as clean as snow. There's no way that he or his kid could have got mixed up in something like that.'

'No.' Said the owner, 'We all know the two like they were our family. This whole thing smells of dead rat.'

'More like dead fish. That would be a better description.' added the oldest of the men.

The detective screwed up his face. 'You mean it was a set-up job?'

'Dead right that's what we think. Told the cops so too, but they never listen to people like us.'

'Yep,' concluded the owner, 'they always think the normal citizen is so dumb that anyone can fool him. Even someone we've known for years.'

'Agreed.' said Fennel, 'not always the brightest brains in the USA eh.'

'Damn right.' continued the owner. 'So, we never said anything about the fishing lodge.'

The older man smiled, 'We also neglected to tell them that in any case, his place is always rented out in summer.'

They all laughed, and the detective joined in. He noticed a quick exchange of looks between one of the men and the owner. The latter shook his head almost imperceptibly and frowned.

'Ah!' thought the detective, 'There's a bit of information they are not going to share with me. After all, even though I'm a friend of the man, I remain a stranger.' he thought.

It was clear that these people, who knew the man and his son well, did not believe for an instant that either of them could be mixed up in this horrible murder.

'You never saw the murderer up here then?'

'No. You bet.' said the owner. 'If he had ever been in here, I would have recognised him straight away.'

'You bet!' exclaimed the older man, 'That boy's got an eye like an eagle, especially for anyone who owes him for a drink.'

'Hmm...' The owner allowed his glance to drift around the group.

'Ok, ok.' said the man, 'I'll take that back.'

The owner nodded. 'So, what are you going to do now?' Suddenly, however, he jumped and with surprising agility for such a big man and was around the counter and out of

the door in a split second. 'Hey, you!' he bawled across the road, 'Clear off sharp if you don't want your faces rearranged.' He made as to run across the road, but before he had time, the two men who had been looking through the window of my car, ran, jumped into a big car which had been left running, and drove off in a cloud of smoke.

He came back smiling and rubbing his hands together. 'See what I mean man?' he smiled, 'After your damn reels I'll bet.'

Dyke Fennel thanked the man, profusely.

'Oh,' he said, 'I have a seventh sense for anything like that. I don't even have to be looking. I suppose it's my subconscious that spots things which aren't quite normal and then triggers me off. Odd really.'

'Odd perhaps, but very rather useful though.' added Fennel, 'Thanks.'

'My pleasure.'

In the short time of this interchange, he had noticed that the visitors to his car had been the two Israelis. 'Interesting that they should have already got interested in my presence here,' he mused, 'Obviously not amateurs...'

Picking up the threads of the discussion he went on, 'After coming all the way over from Paris with all my rods and tackle, I'm certainly not going to spend three weeks mooning about downtown with all those hippies and drug-addicts.'

The men all nodded agreement.

'I'll go and see one of those holiday agents. I'm sure they have fishing tours or something like that already organised.' Then he nodded.

'Yeh!' said his nearest neighbour, 'Pretty popular these days.'

Fennel looked around the group, 'I Don't suppose any of you have a fishing lodge to rent or something like that?'

The sharp exchange of glances which followed this request, before shaking their heads, proved to the detective that at least one of them had exactly this. It was also clear

to Fennel that this was the information which was being withheld and the detective reasoned that this was precisely where the photographer's father and probably the other two men, were hiding.

The owner made as if to be polishing the counter, 'Your best bet would be Farmers and Co downtown. They specialise in that sort of thing,' he said.

Fennel smiled, 'Thanks. I'll check them out, or maybe I'll just run about a bit on my own.' None of the men was to be drawn by this simple deception, so he went on, 'I suppose I ought to go and talk to the police.'

'Christ No!' went up a general cry.

'That would be asking for trouble man.' said the owner. The other men nodded agreement, and one placed a weather-beaten hand on my shoulder, 'If you want to have a quiet holiday, keep well away from them idiots.'

'Yeh!' contributed another, 'Otherwise they'll be pestering you to blazes, and that'll be the end of your quiet holiday.'

'They might even order you to stay in town.' concluded the first.

'Ok.' accepted the detective, 'But what if they find out I'm here and have sneaked off.' He looked around at the men's faces, 'They might get it into their heads that I was mixed up in the murder too.'

'They aren't mixed up in it, man.' said my neighbour, 'A set-up job, that's what it was.'

'In any case,' said the owner smiling around the bar, 'we never set eyes on mister Fennel, did we?'

'Never heard of him.' concurred the oldest man.

'OK. it's fishing then.' laughed the detective, then thanked everyone and amid hand shaking left the bar.

Chapter 23

Once he had left the bar, Mr Fennel crossed the road and opened the car. He was conscient of the scrutiny of watchers from the bar as he stowed his rods carefully inside but avoided looking that way. 'I wonder what they're saying about me?' He mused.

He started the car and drove carefully around the corner. The Israelis were nowhere to be seen. If they were who it seemed, and had decided to keep an eye on his activities, they would certainly not lose his scent that easily.

A little under half a mile further on, he drew into the roadside and, pulling his phone from his pocket, dialled a number.

'Miss Le Mon.'

'Oh, hello Mr Fennel. Every going well?'

'Making progress, I think. Yes, definitely making progress.'

'Good.'

'Miss Le Mon, your father is a bit of a hunter, if I remember correctly...'

'A bit! would be putting it lightly.'

'Do you think he would appreciate a bit of winter hunting around the northern lakes.'

Miss Le Mon knew her employer well enough to know that he needed an alibi for something or other. 'I'm sure that he would be delighted at the chance of a spot of fishing or shooting. That's doubly true because he will be retiring in early January.'

'Perfect. Then if I were to pay his travel expenses, and yours of course to Montreal...'

He went on to explain the information gleaned from his latest investigations and where and how the two were to play the part of father and daughter looking for an isolated lodge. They were to make it clear that it would not be for this

year but probably the early spring. Her father was to be kept ignorant as to the real objective, and Fennel promised that he would pay the rent for the week or two, and considerably longer if they succeeded in getting their man and their bonus of course.

He guessed that the fugitives might have planned to stay well-hidden until the first snows came, after which they could remain undetected for months. The undisguised reactions of the group of people in the bar had been far too affirmative to be neglected. It was evident that none of them had the slightest doubt that this Father and son had nothing whatever to do with such a horrible crime. A set-up job, they had called it. However, they all seemed to take it for granted that the father and son had gone into hiding, and had probably taken the suspected criminal with them.

Fennel guessed that they had selected a hide-out somewhere that they could reach without being observed and without causing suspicion. He was also almost sure that several of the people in the bar knew exactly where they were and that they would not be induced to supply that information, especially to the police.

Thus, two days later, Miss Le Mons, in jeans and a white tee-shirt, followed her stocky, round-faced father into the same bar that Fennel had visited. They sat at a big table and almost immediately unfolded a detailed map of the north of Quebec.

The owner of the bar came over and glanced down, 'What'll it be?'

'Dad?'

'A nice cold beer for me.'

'Two beers then please.' she pretended not to notice his interest in the map.

From the bar, he watched them as they pointed at various places and it was clear to him were having a highly animated discussion.

As he served their drinks, he leaned over, 'Going up north then?'

Miss Le Mon smiled up. 'No, not yet, we are planning our spring holiday.'

'A nice bit of hunting next spring, around the lakes.' Added her dad. Turning in his chair, he caught sight of the fish trophies. His surprise and delight in seeing them was too spontaneous to be doubted by anyone, and Miss Le Mon smiled and shook her head.

'Good heavens! Those yours?'

'You bet.'

There followed a lengthy exchange between the two enthusiastic hunters.'

Little by little, other men strolled over and joined in the discussion, which began to move in precisely the direction sketched out for her by Mr Fennel. She smiled and let things develop naturally, sitting back and sipping her beer.

Her father exchanged hunting stories with the men and listened with a respectful nodding of his head to those of the other men.

Eventually, one of the men pointed to the map, 'Planning to do some fishing now I see.'

The owner interrupted, 'No. He's planning for the spring season.'

Everyone nodded.

'Might even be just when the ice starts melting.' Said her dad.

'Ah. Need a good warm place then. No camping out.' commented a tall, thin man.

'Christ no!' exclaimed another, 'freeze the balls off an oyster, it would'

'An oyster!' exclaimed the owner and everyone laughed.

'Oh, Sorry madam.'

'No harm done,' smiled Le Mon.

At this point, she discreetly slipped her phone out and turned on the voice recorder. 'We were just having a little...' she hesitated, then went on, 'having a little debate about where best to aim for.'

The owner glanced at the other men and winked, 'Yes, I guessed as much. Not an easy choice, eh lads?'

There was a chorus of agreement.

'Anyhow,' said Le Mon's dad, 'You guys must know all the good spots, any ideas?' The older man came over and sat down looking at the map, 'Fishing would that be?' Le Mon's father nodded, so the man continued. 'There'll still be a hell of a lot of snow up there. Too much for a car even a big four-wheel drive truck.'

'Damn right there.' Said another, 'I once tried to get to my place ten years ago in February.' He laughed and continued, 'Got about one mile from the main road, with seven to go. I Had to leave the truck stuck in the damned mud and foot it back.'

His friend laughed, 'I remember, a few years back though.'

'Still the same nowadays. Had to wait an hour for someone to come past and give me a lift back to town.'

The other men chuckled with the memory of this failure. 'Had to wait until a really cold snap came so that the track was solid enough for a recovery truck to get down and drag my truck out. Cost me a small fortune, that little adventure.' He shook he head in self-pity.

Le Mon's dad asked, 'where was that then?'

The man mentioned the name of a lake and pointed to a small blue spot on the map, 'Looks small but that lake is three miles long and half a mile across. Some damn good fish there too, what with the cold water.'

Miss Le Mon leant forward nodding, but, in fact, taking a photo of the man's stubby finger on the map.

The man's comment led to more reminiscences of near disasters. Close escapes and several other lakes were mentioned and were pointed out. Each man defended the advantages of his own territory for such and such a fish or bird species.

Miss Le Mon realised that five or six of these men must own either rudimentary shacks, small hunting lodges or

even chalets at various places scattered about the southern part of the vast lake spattered region.

'Mind you,' Said the older man after a short silence, if it's bigger game you're after, you would want to go further north.'

'Any ideas?' asked Le Mon's dad.

'Not really.' said the owner, 'None of us has any real experience of, what you'd call the far north. You'd need to go to one of the specialist hunting-companies if you really wanted to do that.'

Le Mon concluded that this pleasant chat had supplied her with about all the information she needed. She leant forward, 'Can't you get into any of these places by Float-plane?'

The oldest man shook his head and made a clicking noise with his tongue, 'Before the ice breaks yes, and after it's all melted yes, but not halfway through.' He smiled, 'far too dangerous. In any case, none of the transport companies would risk damaging their gear.'

Another man leant forward, 'Remember when Jos had the floater ripped right off the undercarriage when he tried to land on lake Plétibi in late Feb?'

'Yep, a Close thing that. They'd have frozen to death if they'd gone under.'

Miss Le Mon allowed the discussion to drift on like this until evening started to fall. She then waited for a pause in the reminiscences and asked, 'So if we decide to come up near the beginning of February, where would you recommend us to go to try to find a place to rent?'

The group of men suggested three companies in downtown Montreal, and the ease with which they gave the addresses, convinced her that these were the ones who dealt with their hunting lodges when they didn't need them.

The discussion eventually broke up and amid encouragements to return, the father and daughter left the bar.

The following day, Miss le Mon and her father did the rounds of the companies and. Amidst the numerous BEST places, Miss Le Mon carefully guided the employees to supply her with the available lodges around the lakes which the men had mentioned. There were two or three available in proximity to each of these lakes, none of which could be reached, except on foot, once the first big snows had fallen.

Accordingly, by the end of the morning, she had a list of places, ninety per cent of which would go straight in the bin. What was more important was that amongst the ones she would hand on to Mr Fennel, were the ones belonging to the men from the bar. Like Mr Fennel, she guessed that the man they were searching for was hiding in one of these.

Early the next morning she went to meet Mr Fennel in the breakfast room at his hotel. The Manager was at the desk when she entered and recognised her,

‘Good morning Miss Le Mon, you are looking very well this morning.’

His face coloured a little while saying this and Miss Le Mon noted it with unexpected pleasure.

‘Mr Fennel is just through there, finishing his coffee. Would you like me to order you a cup?’ he finished, a little flustered.

‘Yes. Thank you, that would be lovely.’ She smiled back warmly.

The manager had always had a soft spot for this woman, and was heartened when she did not correct his use of the term ‘miss’. It seemed inevitable that one day, sooner or later, he would have to make a move. However, for all his easy outward manner, he was highly nervous about approaching this woman. It was probable that he loved her, but he had never really allowed this fact to enter his conscious mind.

Miss Le Mon followed the directions he had given, aware of a pleasant warm feeling inside her. The Manager was charming, really charming. It was a pity, she reflected, that this was Montreal, while her hometown was New York.

Observing her enter the room, Mr Fennel rose as his secretary approached and shook her warmly by the hand, 'Lovely morning, don't you think. Slept well I hope, good. And your father? Good.'

Miss Le Mon handed him a set of neatly labelled folders, each one bearing the name of a lake and containing detailed pages describing each of the rentable lodges. Attached to each file was a large-scale map of the lake on which she had marked the main access route and the type of transport needed.

The manager then appeared and came across, carrying a tray with a silver coffee jug and a selection of patisseries and slices of bread and jams. Miss Le Mon smiled up at him and coloured slightly, as he fumbled with his words.

'Oh, thank you.' she exclaimed, 'that's too, too kind of you.'

Mr Fennel quickly glanced up at the two people's faces and smiled to himself, 'well I never!' he thought, 'now that is very interesting.' To cover her slight embarrassment, she quickly shuffled her files together and made some futile comments, which Mr Fennel took for what they really were.

It took them more than an hour to go over the set of files and for Miss Le Mon to explain the data she had been able to obtain about each of the locations. 'I think that it'll take four or five days to visit all these places, Mr Fennel,' She commented. 'The distances between them are several hundred miles, and the roads are certainly far from good. For some of them, you'll need a big four-wheel-drive truck, and there'll be a good deal of walking too.'

Mr Fennel nodded. 'I don't think they'll be moving for the moment, so even if it takes me all week, it's not too important.'

'I think I found the one belonging to the photographer's father though.' Said Le Mon.

'Ah! that's interesting.'

'That was easy. The agency had three lodges to rent near Lac Perdu. The one belonging to him has been rented out

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to a group of Norwegian women, who are over here for a month's hiking and a bit of sailing.' She smiled at her employer, 'They rented some rifles too.'

'You're certain that there really are Norwegian women in that place?'

'Oh yes. Certain.' She confirmed. 'I asked him to check the availability for the spring, and when he opened the file, I saw the ID card data files. Five women in fact.' She finished.

'And I see that two of the other places on that same lake belong to regulars of the same café!' said Fennel.

'Apparently. An interesting coincidence, I thought.'

The detective drew over the folder and had a closer look at the lake and the position of the various chalets on it. 'Looks very much like a group of old friends. Do you know which one belongs to our man?'

'Yes, this one.' she placed her finger on the map.

'And that lodge must be visible from this one, on the other side of the lake,' he said, pointing in turn.

'Yes. But not the main one though.' added Le Mon, '

The two exchanged glances.

'Interesting, miss Le Mon!'

'That's what I thought too.'

'Do you know miss Le Mon, I may very well start with Lac Perdu then.' He smiled.

'Rien de perdu.' Joked Le Mon.

'Very funny Miss Le Mon.'

'Oh, by the way' she continued, 'I did some checking up on the accused man.'

'Ah! Anything interesting?'

'Yes.' She waited for the waiter to clear away her bosses' plates. 'Apart from being a quite well-known young scientist and now a consultant, I turned up some interesting information.'

'What was his research topic?'

'He was a chemist and a specialist. In perfume synthesis. But apparently, over the years he has done several other things too.'

'Let's have the rest then.' Said the detective.

'Well he's, in fact, English as we know already, but he has been living in France for a good number of years.'

'Does that help us?' asked Fennel.

'Well, yes, because over the last few years he seems to have done some odd things and above all, has been mixed up in several extraordinary affairs, which have got into the press.'

'Odd things?'

'Well to start with he took a sabbatical year from a very lucrative job with a company at Grenoble.'

'Ah! And with what objective?'

'To become a songwriter.'

Mr Fennel blinked with surprise,

'To become a songwriter! Chuck up a well-paid job to earn next to nothing writing songs.'

'He didn't chuck it up. He took a sabbatical year. But after that year he decided to become a consultant rather than going back to a day job.'

Fennel shook his head,

'No real money in that either, at least not unless you're absolutely top-notch, which he couldn't be, being so young.'

Miss Le Mon smiled,

'The interesting part is that he seems to have got mixed up with some very dangerous people during that year.'

'Dangerous songwriters! That's a new one for me.' smiled Fennel.

'Not songwriters. He got mixed up with the tax-evasion specialists and helped them recover several hundred million dollars' worth of Gold bars.'

'What? Good heavens!' The detective's eyes opened wide.

'Nearly half a billion.'

'Tax evasion?' asked Fennel.

'No. It seems that it was a treasure hidden away by an industrialist at the beginning of the last world war. Apparently to keep it out of Nazi hands.'

'OK. I see. But how did he get mixed up in that?'

'I don't know. That wasn't in the press. But it's of note that the man who hid the gold was a prominent Jew.'

'Any link with our present case?'

'None that I could dig out.' She paused. 'But in the process of recovering the gold, it seems that our man was almost murdered several times by the gang belonging to a nasty, dangerous woman from Finland.'

'That wouldn't be that woman who murdered all sorts of people in France, including two babies?'

'That's her,' Nodded his secretary. 'An extremely dangerous and ruthless woman, Lida Niemela.'

'Yes, I remember.' He paused, 'The Mafia tracked her down and killed her if my memory is correct.'

'Exactly.'

'There was some political intrigue too. Some would-be minister, organised her escape from prison so that she could eliminate his rival for him.'

'Yes. Nice guy!' Said Le Mon. 'The rival just happened to be the judge who put her away for life.'

'Rare that, at least in Finland.'

'Yes. Then the Fin went after our man again, to get even with him too.'

'But he got away?' Asked Fennel.

'No. The finish Mafia got there before.'

'Why?'

Miss Le Mon shrugged, 'The press seems very vague about that.'

'The detective frowned, 'But they must have had a good reason.' he whistled a bit of a tune before going on. 'Any other Jews in this?'

'No. None that I could find.'

Fennel rubbed his chin and looked over at his secretary. 'Could anyone else have found that information?'

Miss Le Mon smiled, 'I really ought to say no, to stay up in your esteem,' she smiled, 'but the truth is that anyone could have found it.'

Fennel drank a little coffee, then wiped his lips on the napkin. 'So! We have a well-known research chemist, who has been very publicly mixed up with recovering hidden treasure belonging to a Jew.' he sighed. 'And then.' he continued, 'he comes over to Montreal and gasses hundreds of prominent Jews to death.'

'Exactly.' said his secretary

'So, everyone says, ah ha, he was after that gold for himself.'

'That's what seems to have happened.' nodded Le Mon.

'Not very convincing though. Clutching at straws, really.'

'But then there was that Graffiti on the Jewish tombstones.' reminded his secretary, 'And his apparently hostile posture concerning age-old Jewish customs. At least if we believe the colleague at Knoxville.'

'Yes.' admitted Fennel, 'Pretty damning.'

'But you're not convinced?'

'Like hell I am.' cursed Fennel, 'Oh! I'm sorry.'

'That's all right Sir.'

'No, I'm not convinced. As you pointed out at the beginning, too many last-minute mistakes.'

'In any case, the Police must have dug out the same information and anyone else interested in the affair too.'

Then an idea came into Fennel's mind,

'He married, this chemist.'

'Yes. One small child too. The wife was also hunted down by the Fin and escaped several times.'

'Where does she live?'

'In France.'

'Now that is very interesting, don't you think.' he smiled and placed his two hands palm down on the impeccably ironed white tablecloth, which he patted delicately. 'Strange that our employer, Mrs Talia Kauffman, has suddenly taken

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it into her head to precipitate her installation on the south coast of that lovely country.'

Miss Le Mon glanced up at her employer. 'You think she has gone after the wife?'

'That seems a very distinct possibility.' he frowned, 'But why?'

'To make her a hostage to draw out the husband?' Fennel nodded, 'Or,' He continued, 'to get first-hand information about the man.'

Miss Le Mon, frowned, 'If what I read about the man's wife is true, I suspect that Mrs Kauffman will have more on her hands than she might be counting on.'

'A tough nut?'

'Yes apparently, and a red-head.'

Fennel looked up, and she nodded, 'Very, very red indeed.'

Chapter 24

The two terrorists parked their ageing car in the only space they could find and wound up the windows. They didn't look very much like terrorists, and one might have been excused in considering this to constitute a substantial practical advantage. However, neither of them was very bright, and this had considerably hindered them in the pursuance of their chosen mission in life. They only ever did anything correctly if they were given full and detailed instructions. Even then, the head of operations had to walk them through the procedure, several times, before he felt comfortable about trusting them with a mission.

When the two had unexpectedly taken the initiative of informing the local press that their organisation had been responsible for the Conference-hall massacre, their boss had almost had a heart attack. He knew that none of the special services men would believe that it had been their doing. The crime had been out of line with their usual procedure and above all, had been far too complicated for the infrastructure they were known to possess.

The two men were still smarting from the dressing-down they had received. Furthermore, the men-at-the-top were furious, and as they were known to be exceedingly dangerous and ruthless men, this made things even worse. Such men did not hesitate a moment to have people mutilated as an example to others.

The head of operations informed them that he had received orders to find and eliminate the real murderer before the organisation's declaration could be proven false. The two men realised that they had two alternatives. Either, they should disappear immediately and for good, or they had to succeed in finding the man and killing him. They had both seen photos of what the 'top men' were capable of doing, and the memory of this generated a great deal of motivation.

Consequently, and like several other groups of people, they followed up the track of the photographer's father. They discovered his house after everyone else, of course. However, as the place was now deserted, they had gone through it and had removed some objects they thought might help. The head of operations kept one, a photo of the man and his son holding a big fish.

'All those fishing guys have a favourite lake.' He commented. 'And when they get to this guy's age, they always go back. If they've made some money, they buy a lodge there.'

The two terrorists nodded but didn't see why this might be interesting. 'And you can bet your bum, that that's where they are now. Gone into hiding.'

The two men exchanged knowing glances. 'Yeh!'

The head of operations went on, 'but where is this place?' 'No idea.'

'Of course, you've no idea,' snapped the man, 'there must be a couple of hundred thousand fishing lakes, with trees around them like that.'

'Yeh.' agreed one of the terrorists.

'So, you're going to find out where this one is, then go and get that guy. Ok!'

'Ok.' Said one of the two.

'How?' asked the other.

The head of operations sighed. 'You're going to go around the fishing tackle shops and ask the guys if they recognise the place.'

'And if they don't?'

'Then you'll go and hang out in the bars and cafés near where the guy lives and ask the people who are roughly the right age and type.' The two men frowned, and the head of operations sighed. 'Oldish guys, who look like fishing enthusiasts. That clear enough?'

'They'd recognise the guy on the photo though.'

'And that's why I'm going to modify it and change the faces. Easy with good software.'

The two men were impressed.

After a day spent combing the water sports, hunting and fishing equipment shops with no success, they were now headed for the cafe, near Joss's fathers' home. As they pushed open the door, the owner looked up from behind the bar and smiled. He spotted immediately that, these were not two men who had just dropped in for a beer. They didn't look very healthy and none too bright either, but he smiled his professional smile and stood up.

'Afternoon gents... What'll it be?'

'Couple of Buds.'

'Coming up.'

During this brief exchange, one of the men glanced around the café and catching sight of the stuffed fish above the counter nudged his friend and indicated the fish with a movement of the head, which the owner had no difficulty of spotting.

'Nice fish.' said one of the men.

'Fish?' asked the owner pretending not to understand.

'Up there. Those trophies or something?'

The owner turned and gazed up as if this was the first time he had noticed the things. 'Oh, those!' He exclaimed. 'Trophies? Don't know about that. Fish, yes.'

The two men missed the irony in the man's voice, but the older members, sitting at a big table across the room, didn't and chuckled together.

The two terrorists shot each other a glance which seemed to say; Finesse is what is required here. So they both nodded understanding. 'We're thinking about getting some fishing trophies.' Said one of the two.

'Yep.' added the other, 'Nice things to have on the wall.'

'You said it!' Smiled the owner, looking over at his customers, who were following the discussion with keen interest.

'Now where would you have to go to get fish like that?' asked the first.

His friend glanced at him, 'What about that place that guy told us about?'

'Oh Yeh!' said the other, 'Forgot about that. Nice place that. Now, what was it called...'

The owner started to have doubts, as did a few of the other men, who shot him meaning looks from across the room. The first terrorist rubbed his chin and made an effort to look as though he was thinking. 'Can't remember for the life of me. Haven't you got that photo the guy gave you.'

'Yeh. But he didn't write the name of the lake on it.'

Then the first terrorist pretended to have a brilliant idea and slapped his friend on the shoulder. 'Just have to show it to these guys.' he smiled. 'I bet they'll recognise the place. Probably spent half their lives there. Come on get it out.'

The owner had already guessed the manoeuvre and nodded to his customers, who had also spotted the clumsy tactics.

The man drew out and unfolded the photo. The modifications had admittedly been made with professional attention to detail, and the faces which smiled out around the big trout were unrecognisable. However, the owner immediately recognised it.

All his fishing customers shared their best photos with the regulars of the café, and this one had caused a great deal of comment in its time. He shot a glance over at the men at the table and frowned, then taking the photo and holding it up to the light, shook his head. 'Sorry lads. I've Never seen the place.' He then turned to the room and tapped loudly on the counter, 'Hey you guys, these men have a photo. Want to know if someone recognises the lake.' He winked, 'I don't think any of you will have any idea of where it is but there's no harm trying.'

The men exchanged glances as they knew by his manner that the owner felt something was wrong. 'Take it over to them.' he smiled, 'They're mostly too old to walk.' he joked. 'Or too drunk.' As the terrorist turned, he wagged his finger indicating that they did not know. A man sitting in the corner

table, who had just emerged from behind his newspaper, noticed this and picked up his cell phone.

The old men duly handed the photo around and shook their head. 'No never seen the place. Maybe up north somewhere.' lied one.

'Maybe south though, seeing those trees.' nodded his neighbour.

'And the colour of the water' contributed another, 'but I'm not certain though.'

'No. me neither,' said the first.

The photo went all around the café, but no one admitted knowing the place, even though half of them recognised the picture.

At this moment, however, the oldest member of the regulars pushed open the door and hearing the end of the discussion came and leant over. 'You guys blind!' he laughed, 'That's Lake Perdu, man. Obvious, up lake Manoucane way.'

The other men rose their eyebrows, and the owner scowled at him and clenched his fist, unseen to the two terrorists. 'Christ!' He cried, 'You need your eyes seeing to, man. That never is Lac Perdu.'

'Yeh!' put in another 'You're off your head man.'

The two terrorists were too close at hand for any of the regulars to make a sign to the talker, so he went on, happily aware of having scored over the other men for once. 'Look at that spit of sandy beach and those trees coming right down to the water's edge. No. No doubt about it. Lac Perdu.' he paused. 'Up lake Manoucane way.' he repeated.

The entire group did their best to distract the man, but he had now become angry at the others, for doubting his memory.

Eventually, the two men took their leave, and the entire place went into an uproar as they all simultaneously tried to explain things to the man.

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The terrorists were quite sure that the old man had told them the truth and went away happily. However, they did not intend to rush nearly a thousand miles on a false track.

So, that evening, they followed the old man home and made sure of the solidity of the information and of the directions of how to get to Lac Perdu.

The old man was missed at the café the next day. His body was found in his home later in the week, strangled with one of his old silk ties

PART 5

Chapter 25

Talia Kaufmann arrived in France via Charles de Gaulle airport and transferred almost immediately to the flight from Paris to Nice. Her destination was a magnificent clifftop property situated twelve minutes from Cannes. The house had a private landing stage on one of the rare quiet spots left on the rocky Mediterranean coast. It also boasted a private stone staircase carved out of the cliff face, which led down to a beach in a tiny cove, bathed by crystal clear waters. The number of bedrooms surpassed what they had ever expected to require when they had purchased it, but money had not been a problem at the time, and the exceptional site tipped the balance in its favour.

Ten years earlier, the purchase had been strongly advised by her husband's local financial advisor, as a neat way of avoiding certain taxes linked with his European affairs. It had cost twenty-five million dollars at the time. However, the upkeep of the place, including permanent staff for the house, the outbuildings and the vast gardens, had since then, served as a highly convenient finance over-flow valve.

This was where Talia had decided to take up permanent residence, placed conveniently between Saint Tropez and Cannes, where the majority of her acquaintances lived. Her luggage had been sent ahead, consisting mainly of her favourite clothes and a single case containing mementoes. She had given instructions for the house in Montreal to be sold fully furnished, and she didn't care a damn what the owners did with the things they didn't like. That was the past.

The manager of the French company dealing with the upkeep of luxury villas in the region had been informed and had put the staff on full alert. He had also employed an extremely competent Chef and entire kitchen staff, who up to then had only been temporary employees. He had had experience of Mrs Kaufmann in the past and knew better than to employ any but the best and most discrete. That

same morning, he had interviewed them all to make sure that they all knew how they should behave in her presence, and precisely what to expect if they caused her any displeasure.

When Talia eventually arrived in the mid-afternoon, the manager was there to welcome her. He introduced her to the staff and made quite sure that she knew who was in charge of each section of the housekeeping arrangements.

The managers master-stroke, however, was the man who would be responsible for the smooth running of the household as a whole. He had been extremely fortunate to be able to employ a highly experienced English butler, who had previously been in the employment of numerous titled families.

Talia was delighted with these arrangements and noticed him relax when she congratulated him on his choices. She also noted with a smile that he had taken the very wise precaution of avoiding employing any good-looking young men, either in the house or the gardens.

'Always a potential source of trouble,' He had thought to himself.

Once the manager had left, Talia made a relaxed tour of inspection with the butler by way of getting to know him a little. What she discovered she liked immensely. The man was just what she needed. Discrete and highly competent. His name was Johnathon Branstone,

'I'll call you John unless you have an objection.'

The butler almost winced but recovered himself without the twitch of a muscle, 'Well madam Kauffman, the normally accepted custom is to use my surname, and I must admit that I would much prefer that.'

She nodded. 'All right, Branstone, be it.' She then continued 'I will be leaving for Paris in two days Branstone,' she announced.

'Very good, Mrs Kauffman.'

'I'm not sure how long I'll be away. Possibly a week.'

The butler drew from his pocket a beautifully engraved business card and handed it respectfully to his employer.

'This gives all the contact details you may require in the future madam.'

'Perfect.' she slipped the card into her purse.

'Please feel free to contact me at any time, and for any reason where you feel I may be of help.' He added. 'In the past, my employers have been very frequent travellers, and I have been used to assisting them, wherever they might be.'

'Perfect' smiled Talia.

'I have an assistant who will organise all your travelling arrangements. Once we have your preferences, we will do the rest.'

Talia nodded.

'I have worked with the woman before, and international travel is one of her specialities. She is highly competent and can be relied on to remove absolutely all stress from your travels.'

'That's perfect.' smiled Talia, 'Once I return from Paris, Branstone, I will be organising a long series of dinner parties and weekend gatherings.'

'That will be most agreeable madam.'

Talia shot him a glance. It was going to take her some time to get used to 'butler talk', as she now dubbed it. 'I want to renew my acquaintances, with a large number of people I haven't seen for many years.'

'An excellent idea madam.' Branstone nodded, 'would you like me to suggest menus and special arrangements, or would you prefer to deal with that personally?'

'I believe you're capable of doing that far better than I.'

'I strive to give satisfaction madam. I have no little experience in organising such occasions, from small receptions to parties with several hundred guests.'

'I'll leave everything in your hands then.' Talia smiled, 'When I return, we'll spend a day or two drawing up a list of

events, but I warn you Branstone, the house will rarely be empty and that, for quite a long time.'

'Nothing would give me greater pleasure madam, and the staff too. There is nothing more depressing than an empty house, I find.'

Talia felt a twinge of sadness at this remark, which she hoped she had successfully hidden. However, Branstone was a highly experienced professional and observing his employer's slightest reactions was something he prided himself on. 'Oh, I am very sorry madam! I should not have said that. Please accept my excuses.'

'No that's all right Branstone, these things take time.'

'If there is anything I can do...'

'How about a cup of tea on the cliff terrace.' she smiled.

'I'll deal with it personally madam.' and he turned to stride off in the direction of the kitchens at the far end of the house.

'Oh, Branstone!'

'Yes, madam Kaufmann.'

'I think I would like fireworks for my first dinner party. Can that sort of thing be arranged here in France?'

'An excellent idea, if I may say so madam.' he bowed slightly, 'What better way to mark the beginning of your residence here. I will make the arrangements.'

Talia strolled up the broad stone steps to the long tree-shadowed terrace, with its uninterrupted views out across the Mediterranean, and smiled. Life here was going to be even more agreeable than she had thought. That butler was without a doubt one of the best investments she could ever have considered of making. What's more, she quite liked him already. The man hadn't once mentioned the cost of anything, Perfect.

The following Thursday, Talia travelled to Paris on the TGV, arriving in the early afternoon. Branstone had informed her that there was nothing to be gained by chartering a plane unless she wanted absolute privacy. Mid-day, mid-week train trips in first class were, he informed her, inevitably quiet.

She had left her smartphone in Branstone's keeping, not wishing to be troubled by anyone, and he had sent his assistant for a new one, which was now nestling in her handbag. Taking a taxi from the Gare de Lyon, she gave the driver an address in the more exclusive part of Rueil-Malmaison. One of her husband's oldest friends lived here with his wife, Anne-Laure and his daughter Margaux. He too was a Jew and had sent a most comforting letter following the terrible murder of her family and friends.

However, the reason for this visit was not social. Talia had discovered that the three of them had known the accused murderer, since childhood. She had also learned that their daughter and I had been mixed up in some very odd affairs over the last few years. These events seemed to be even more damning for the fugitive, but she had a strange feeling that she wanted to check it out.

Anne-Laure was waiting for her in the garden, under the dappled shadow of three ancient weeping willows, between which I had played so often in my younger days.

She stood and extended her arms to embrace Talia, and they kissed. Then holding her at a slight distance Anne-Laure looked her up and down. 'Well, Talia! What a wonderful body you have. You have certainly been keeping yourself in better form than I have.'

Coming from the exquisite Anne-Laure with her masses of auburn hair and magnificent figure, this was indeed a compliment, and to her distress, Talia even blushed slightly. She ran her hands caressingly down over the curves her body, 'Daily workouts and simple food. All my own work,' she laughed, 'And quite a bit of sweating.'

Anne-Laure smiled, 'I'm one of the lucky few who doesn't seem to take on weight.' She winked at Talia. 'But of course I do quite a bit of sport, but I keep it to myself. It makes the other girls jealous.' The two women laughed, and Anne-Laure led Talia over to the deck chairs in the shadow. 'Antoine will be back shortly then we can have an aperitif. Would you like anything to drink while we wait?'

Talia shook her head, 'No thanks. How is Antoine, I haven't seen him for ages.' She added, then continued, 'The last four or five times he was over our way, he didn't even stay the night, business, always business.'

Anne-Laure smiled. 'He's fine. The music business seems to suit him down to the ground.'

'I bet he isn't doing too much sport these days.'

'He never did. Oh, by the way, Talia.' and here she leant forward and directed her clear gaze directly into Talia's, 'If your appetite for sex is like it used to be, remember that Antoine is a no-trespassers area.'

Talia smiled and laughed, 'I'm afraid to say that the appetite is intact, but I do solemnly promise to make an exception in Antoine's case.' Both girls laughed, but the message was clearly understood.

The two women had known each other from their youth and Talia knew by experience that this impeccably dressed woman was not one to be trifled with. She respected her as an equal.

At this moment Antoine appeared through the French windows, as always impeccably dressed in a Taylor-made suit. 'Well Talia, this is nice. You look in great health.' He gazed with approval and winked at his wife, 'I suppose that like Anne-Laure, you never go anywhere near a gym, from one year to the next.'

The woman laughed, 'No naturally. Nice suite Antoine.'

'Yes.' He smoothed the silky fabric of his jacket front, 'A Camps de Luca suit tends to help interviews and negotiations with arrogant singer's managers, run more smoothly than they would if I were in jeans and tee-shirt.'

They chatted on happily for a time and then, taking off his jacket and hanging it carefully on the back of one of the empty chairs, he went into the house and came back with a frosted bottle of Tariquet white wine and glasses.

While he served the two women, Talia asked, 'And how is your lovely daughter Margaux?'

Anne-Laure smiled, 'Lovelier and lovelier but not a single husband on the horizon.' Talia frowned, and Ann-Laure went on, 'Oh, she's not THAT way, Talia. Plenty of boyfriends, but she seems more interested in her work for the moment.'

Antoine took a sip of his wine, 'She is certainly very enthusiastic about it, and I must admit that it is fascinating work, but I don't believe that she's become one of those career women though.'

'Simply, not found the right shoe for her foot yet, I'd guess' smiled Talia, 'plenty of time though.'

'Yes, plenty of time.' agreed Anne-Laure. She then turned in her chair and directed a curious look at Talia, 'You said that there was something you wanted our opinion on Talia.'

Talia frowned and shook her head. 'Yes, it's about this terrible crime and the man they seem to suspect.'

At this Anne-Laure shot a look at her husband, who remained expressionless. 'We know him very well, as I told you on the phone.'

'Yes.' Talia covered her lips with the fingers of her two perfectly manicured hands, 'There is something I don't like about the whole thing. Something that doesn't ring right if you see what I mean...'

Antoine filled his glass and looked over at Talia seriously. 'There is not a single thing that rings right, Talia.' He blew out his breath loudly, but his wife interrupted.

'If you had known William and his lovely parents for as long as we have, and had seen him grow up, you would know that he could never have done such a horrible thing.'

'No.' added Antoine, 'He simply wasn't built like that. As a small boy, he was a dreamer, and he grew into a thinker, a scientist and a very good one too.'

Anne-Laure took up the conversation. 'There have been so many conversations between us, under these same trees over the last twenty years, that if there had ever been

the slightest tendency to abnormal behaviour or beliefs, we would have spotted it.'

'Exactly.' continued Antoine, 'He was never capable of hiding his true thoughts, which caused him some embarrassment with girls and crippled him as a potential businessman.'

'Antoine!' exclaimed Ann-Laure, 'Really!'

He shook his head, 'You can't get on in business if you are unable to say one thing while you think the opposite.'

Talia laughed, 'That's what Joseph always said.' She swallowed hard and coloured.

'I'm sorry Talia.' Anne-Laure leant forward and placed her hand over Talia's, while Antoine looked earnestly into her face.

She shook her head, 'So, you think he is innocent then?'

Antoine jumped to his feet, 'Of course he's innocent.' He thumped the back of his deck chair, 'Of course he is. It's a set-up job if ever I saw one. Why can't those damn idiots of Canadian police see that?'

'Because they don't know him like we do, Antoine.' smiled Anne-Laure.

Talia took a sip of the cold wine, 'But I discovered all sorts of odd things about him when I did an internet search on him.' The couple exchanged glances, but she went on. 'What was all that stuff about hidden Jewish gold and murderers and political intrigue.'

Anne-Laure leant forward and looked at her husband. 'It's true that without knowing the background that does look peculiar.'

Antoine sat down again and poured himself some more wine,

'Hey!' said his wife, 'aren't you forgetting us?'

'Oh! Sorry. I was distracted. I'll get another bottle.'

When he returned with it, he sat forward. 'Margaux was mixed up in that affair too. In fact, many people were mixed up in it.' He paused, 'If it hadn't been for the Jewish angle no one would have picked it up.'

Anne-Laure took up the story, 'You see, Margaux works for the French state finance department. Her job is to track down large-scale tax evasion criminals.'

'People like my late husband.' smiled Talia.

'No,' said Antoine, 'Your husband did tax-optimisation, like many of us, which is quite legal, although it probably won't be for much longer.'

'Well.' Went on Anne-Laure, 'At the time she was striving to recover several hundred billion euros, which were illegally stashed away in secret accounts.'

Talia nodded, 'A sum worth striving for.'

'Anyway, she discovered that over time, the owners of a good number of these accounts had died without legitimate heirs.'

Talia nodded, 'Nice for the banks that.'

'Yes.' added Antoine, 'But she and her boss also discovered that a secret organisation was somehow or other transferring ownership of those orphaned account to themselves. By the time they realised this, the affair had been going on for at least ten years, maybe even twenty.'

'Ah! And who was behind this?' asked Talia, now very interested.

'That's the crux of the matter, no one had the slightest idea, but Margaux estimated that they had recovered hundreds of billions of Euros,' added Antoine.

Ann-Laure nodded. 'The USA, the UK and France were extremely worried about the idea of so much money getting into the wrong hands.'

'Yes, I can understand that very well,' said Talia ruefully.

'With unlimited funds, you have the potential of wreaking unlimited havoc. Especially if you have the time and the brains required, which hey obviously had.' Added Antoine.

'And that's where our poor innocent Doctor William Stone comes along and puts his foot right in the middle of a huge hornet's nest.' smiled Anne-Laure, shaking her head, 'Poor William.'

Antoine sighed loudly, 'Well apparently, at the beginning of the last world war, a very prudent businessman from our homelands, predicted the German success in France and took the precaution of converting the major part of his fortune into gold and then carefully hiding it in the mountains.'

Talia smiled, 'Do those things really happen outside books?'

'Yes, they do.'

'How much?'

'Several hundred million euros, nearly half a billion.'

'That must have weighed a ton.'

'About ten tons. Anyway, several groups of people, including our unknown organisation were after it,' said Antoine. 'And also, an utterly ruthless female killer from Finland called Lida Niemela.'

'And your 'poor' William Stone got himself mixed up in this! how come?'

'Pure accident,' said Antoine. 'As I said, he can't disguise his thoughts and this time put his thoughts into regrettable words during a visit to the songwriters Guild at Paris.'

'What have songwriters go to do with this, Antoine? This is all getting a bit complicated.'

'Please allow me to skip the explanation for the moment.' he smiled, 'Anyhow, he said something disparaging against the guilds' anti-Jew posture during the war and said something stupid about Jewish gold.' he paused. 'Luck had it.' he went on, 'that he was overheard by several people who took his comments to imply that he had got wind of the hidden gold and possibly knew where it was.'

Talia nodded and said, 'And those people naturally went after him intending to drag the information out of him. Yes,' she nodded again 'as you say, poor William!'

'Then Margaux's boss came up with the brilliant idea of using this false belief to draw the occult organisation out into the open.'

Anne-Laure leant forward. 'William accepted to play the game but immediately found himself hunted by some of the most ruthless criminals I have ever heard of.'

'Wow!' said Talia, 'Playing at being bait to a Finnish murderer, now that boy is pretty brave, Anne-Laure.' *

The woman sighed. 'The trouble was, that they also went after his lovely girlfriend, now his wife.'

'Naturally.' said Talia, 'Did they catch her?'

Antoine laughed out loud, 'Heavens no! And that Finn will remember their final encounter for many years, but that's another story.'

Anne-Laure took up the story. 'If ever you saw a girl with as red hair as Sally has, even you would steer well clear. She is probably the loveliest girl I ever met, but when she gets angry... Well! ' she rose her eyebrows, 'Luckily it doesn't happen too often.'

'A quick temper?' Talia asked, thinking about herself.

'No. Usually, she is as mild as a kitten. But touch the trigger, and you get a big, big surprise.'

Antoine laughed, 'Like a smashed elbow joint and your face crushed into the tarmac.'

'That's what the Finn got?' Talia asked. 'Well, I'll keep that in mind if ever I meet her. Clearly, her husband is absolutely a no-trespassing area.'

At this, the two women burst out laughing, and Antoine looked on somewhat mystified. 'Just a girl's joke dear.' Said Ann-Laure, holding out her glass for a refill. 'Anyway, they both had several very narrow escapes and some incredible hair-raising experiences.'

'And the Gold?'

'Oh! They found it in the end and nearly got killed in the process.'

** This adventure is described in BAIT, by the same author.*

Anne-Laure smiled, 'Both William and Sally were awarded a large 'recompense' for their assistance, and they

then decided to stay together. They used their little windfall to buy and convert an old farmhouse in a little mountain village near Grenoble.'

Talia smiled and nodded, 'Ah yes! I read about that place. Autrans isn't it? The place where the gold was found.'

'Exactly,' Nodded Anne-Laure.

'So, as you see our Doctor William Stone is a hero, as is his wife. He has not a drop of anti-Jew blood in his veins,' concluded Antoine.

Anne-Laure shook her head. 'In that case, he might have had the decency of marrying our Margaux then.'

'Don't be silly dear.' said her husband, 'William and Margaux have always been far too different in their outlook on life. Whereas Sally was obviously made for him.'

'Yes, you're right of course. But I do hope that Margaux finds someone soon.'

Talia sipped her wine and pursed her lips. 'So, if what you believe is true, then who is behind the murder, and why the devil choose your William for the set-up?'

Antoine shrugged and let his hand fall heavily onto the coffee table before him.

Talia looked up again. 'But what was all this stuff about him having falsified his role as a toxic gas expert then?'

Antoine shook his head. 'I have no idea. Of course, he is an experienced research chemist. But I never heard of any work on toxic substances. He would have been bound to mention it during one of his visits here because he always liked to talk to me about his work.'

'And you enjoyed listening' Added Anne-Laure

'Sally would certainly know more about that side of things if you are determined to do some sleuth work. Anyhow, I thought you said you had put the American Sherlock Holmes on the job for you?'

'More like the Canadian Hercules Poirot really.' laughed Talia, 'But no, I don't think I'll go troubling Mr Stone's wife. She must have enough on her plate as it is.'

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That evening the three dined together in the cool, under the three willow trees and Talia slept more peacefully than she had done for several weeks. At last, the trail was becoming a little clearer for her, and she knew exactly what her next steps would be.

She had told Anne-Laure not to trouble Sally with questions and that she would not seek an interview with the young woman for the moment. This, however, was a lie.

Chapter 26

The next day Talia took the high-speed train down to Grenoble and thence up to the mountain village of Autrans. Rather than take a taxi, she boarded the regular shuttle, which set her down an hour later on the sunny little village square.

She had reserved the best suite at the Hotel de la Post and was warmly welcomed by the owner's wife, Mrs Arnaud. An English language student, who was spending a year here to perfect her French, then helped her to her room. After her midday meal, Talia set out to get the lie of the land and to try to discover the few missing details she needed for her plan. These tasks being completed, she returned to the hotel for dinner and was early in bed.

Before sunrise the next day, she donned her running clothes and headed for the narrow forest foot track she had inspected the previous day. This track climbed steeply up from the flat valley floor into the forest then flattened out before diving down to join a wider cart track below. At this turning, she stopped and waited, watching a big converted farm on the valley floor carefully.

At a little after eight-o'clock the front door opened, and a young woman came out and started jogging up towards the forest. She took the lower track which would bring her beneath where Talia was waiting. At just the right moment Talia started down her track and came out onto the lower one a little ahead of the woman.

Turning, she smiled and slowed down. The other woman was already sweating after the short uphill portion, showing Talia that she was less in training than herself. 'Hello. Lovely morning.' She smiled.

The women looked surprised to hear English spoken. 'Yes, lovely.' The woman took in Talia's well-trained body.

'You're Sally Stone, aren't you?' said Talia.

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Sally looked sharply across at Talia. 'Yes, that's right. Have we met before?'

'No, someone pointed you out to me yesterday,' said Talia truthfully.

'Ah! Staying at Autrans?'

'Yes. At the Hotel de la Post.'

'My favourite.'

'It was recommended to me by a friend I think you know well.' She paused, 'Well you know her daughter, Margaux. My Friends are Anne-Laure and Antoine.'

Sally turned and smiled, 'Well now that's a coincidence, are you from Paris?'

'No.' laughed Talia, 'From Montreal.'

'Another coincidence, because my husband is in Montreal now.' she frowned.

Talia continued running and turned to look at Sally, 'There's another coincidence too.'

Sally smiled, 'Another?'

'Yes. Your husband is accused of killing my husband and children...'

This was no sooner out of her lips than Sally, without warning, swerved off the track and accelerated straight down through the thick undergrowth. Talia smiled to herself and turning, ran off in the opposite direction.

'There's no way I'm going dashing down through those brambles and tearing both my clothes and above all my skin. No way.' She accelerated along the path, knowing well that Sally would have to make a long circuit, while she would take the short route and reach the farmhouse well in advance. 'Training has a certain number of advantages.' She thought happily.

When Sally arrived, breathless, and covered with sweat, she dived in through the front door, closed it and turned the key.

** The hotel, the village and the surrounding countryside are described in detail in the first novel of this series of three, BAIT.*

Breathing hard, she went over to the kitchen sink and taking a towel, ran the tap over it, then cleaned off the blood from the scratches made by the thorns she had run through. As she turned back to the long sitting room, she froze in her steps.

On the arm of one of the comfortable armchairs, with their back to her, she saw a suntanned arm resting. She then heard her name pronounced,

'Back at last Sally? Why not come over and sit down. I have some questions to ask you.'

Sally started to move then froze again. On the low table beside the armchair, she could see a small handgun. 'Ah!' said the voice, 'As you see, I had a gun with me. There it is on the table.' A silence followed this announcement. 'Naturally, had I wanted to, I could have shot you up there in the forest. Nobody would have seen. Before anyone had thought about looking for you, I would have already been halfway back to Canada.'

'Ah!'

'So, you see I'm not here for revenge.' At this, she leant forward and, picking up the gun and removed the charger. 'Margaux's father told me all about your adventures with that mad Finnish woman, and how you dealt with her, so I felt that I had better bring along a little insurance policy if you see what I mean...'

Sally smiled, 'Ah! But I was angry you see, and she was about to shoot William...' Saying this, she slowly approached Talia's side. Then suddenly, without warning, she snatched up Talia's wrist and grabbing the elbow with her other hand, dragged her up and out of the armchair then pushed down. Talia cried out in pain as she was forced face down onto the floorboards. Once down, she was pinned down with Sally's knee between her shoulder blades, her wrist wrenched painfully backwards, and her elbow pushed down to near breaking point. She screamed with pain.

'And that,' breathed Sally, 'Is exactly how I did it. Except that I then smashed my right hand onto this elbow here, and

broke it.' She paused. 'Lida Niemela found it extremely painful, and she was a very, very tough customer.' She paused again.

Talia cried out again, 'For God's sake no. Stop it. Please.'

'I suspect that you would find it a lot more painful than her though. Not having got used to pain as she had.'

'For god's sake stop.' breathed Talia through the pain. 'I've got nothing against you or your husband.'

'Oh no?' Smiled Sally blowing a strand of flaming red hair away from her eyes. 'I bet!'

'Honestly.' Talia gritted her teeth.

'What better way of getting at William then by capturing his wife.' she sneered, 'Do you think I'm that stupid?'

'No, you don't understand.'

'Oh yes, I do. That mad Finn Niemela tried to do the same thing. You don't believe I am going to swallow that sort of thing, twice do you?'

'No, I assure you. I don't believe your husband is the criminal.'

'Of course, you don't.' sneered Sally pushing down a little harder on the elbow until Talia screamed, 'Hurts eh?'

Sally tutted, 'You criminals are a bit simple-minded. Can't you ever realise that other people have brains too? Now, what shall I do with you while I'm phoning the police.' She paused, 'You know, I'm sorry, but as I don't have three arms, it looks like I'm going to be obliged to break your elbow. No hard feelings...'

Talia screamed, 'For Christ's sake don't. I'm an old friend of your friend Margaux's parents, Antoine and Anne-Laure. I was with them last night.'

Sally was surprised but tightened rather than loosened her hold. 'Oh yes? So why didn't she phone to tell me you were coming.'

Talia cried out at the increased pressure, 'Because I lied to her. I said I wouldn't come.'

'Interesting!' said Sally, looking down and seeing the sweat which had broken out on the back of Talia's tanned neck. 'Painful?'

'Yes.'

'So here we have a woman who doesn't wish me any harm, then lies to my friends and eventually turns up armed with a gun.' She sniffed. 'My old friend Lida Niemela had guns too, but also some pretty nasty knives. Where do you keep your knives?' At this, she increased the pressure on the arm and Talia cried out.

'For god's sake, I don't have any other weapons.'

'Then perhaps to help you remember I should smash your lovely nose against the floor. Now that would be a pity and would spoil your luck with the men, don't you think.'

Talia froze, 'Oh god no,' she quavered, 'Don't do that.'

'Ah!' smiled Sally, 'I see we have found the right grounds for negotiation.'

'Please!' I honestly don't believe that your husband had anything to do with the murder. I agree with Anne-Laure and Antoine. It was a set-up. I agree with them that your husband was a scapegoat.'

Sally relaxed the pressure a little, and Talia relaxed a little. 'So why did you come and why did you lie?'

'I wanted to observe you without your being aware of it. I wanted to understand who you were and if I could have confidence.' She tried to turn her head to look at Sally but the knee in her back pinned her too hard. 'If you had been warned, I thought you might not react normally.'

'So why come?'

'I need to know how he got mixed up in the toxic gas business. The investigator I have got on the job thinks we might find a clue there.'

With surprising rapidity, Sally let go of the arm and jumped to her feet, but before Talia knew what was happening, she felt Sally's trainer-clad foot press down on her neck. 'Don't budge or I'll break your neck. Got it?'

'Yes.'

With her free hands, Sally swept the revolver and charger off the table, loaded it and clicked off the safety catch. She then jumped back and aiming the gun at the pile of fire-wood kept ready by the fireplace, fired. There was a crash, and Talia screamed, clasping her head with terror.

Sally laughed. 'Well, the gun seems to work nicely. Always best to check the ammunition is live. My experience with Lida Niemela taught me that.'

She sat down on the armchair and pointed the gun at the prostrate shape of Talia. 'Get up and sit in the armchair behind you. If you try anything, I'll shoot you in the guts. Apparently, that is very painful. I could shoot your nose off, but I might miss. A stomach is bigger, and even your abdominal muscles won't stop a bullet.' She paused, 'Come on, get up. I didn't break anything.'

Talia pushed herself onto her knees and looked over at the flaming haired young woman before her. 'Christ! My arm.' She rubbed her elbow.

'Yep, that hurts, doesn't it? Get up and sit there.' she gestured with the gun.

Talia rose and stretched her neck.

'As you see,' smiled Sally, 'I too, keep myself in fairly good trim. One never knows when it might come in helpful.' Saying this and keeping her eye and the gun on Talia, she reached over and picked up the phone. 'I'm going to dial a number. If I spot any movement, I will shoot immediately and without hesitation. So please do not sneeze, or even cough or we will have to say au-revoir. She punched in the number than returned her gaze to Talia. 'Hello Anne-Laure, this is Sally. Yes fine. I have in front of me a woman who claims to be a good friend of yours.' There was a pause, 'She calls herself Talia Kauffman do you know her?' There as a short pause. 'Good, can you describe her to me?'

'Ok, that sounds good. No, I can't pass you over, she had a small accident.' there was a slight pause, 'Yes, the same accident as the mad Finn.' another pause, 'No, don't worry I didn't break anything this time, but she seems a little sore

for the moment.' There was another long pause as Anne-Laure talked and Sally smiled ruefully. 'I'll explain that later. Let's say that I felt that life-preserving reactions were necessary.' There was another pause. 'She said that she was with you last night and that you discussed my William's troubles.' She paused, 'Is that true?' She looked over at Talia. 'Good and what was your opinion, can I trust her, or do I shoot her, or hand her over to the police. Please don't move,' This was to Talia. 'No, I don't know why she lied to you. She spun me some story, but I'm not convinced of that yet.' Sally listened and nodded. 'Yes, I know her husband and children and friends were killed, but what better way of getting at William then by capturing his wife.'

There was another pause. 'You see,' She said, 'you have the same doubts as I, she could easily be a clever woman out for revenge. That would only be natural really.'

'I told you not to move.' this was to Talia again. 'Anne-Laure? Is Margaux still down in Lyon with Paul?' the answer seemed to reassure Sally. 'Good. I'll call them up, and we will interview your friend between us. '

'No don't worry, I won't shoot her,' she paused, ' unless she tries something. I'll lock her in the office until they arrive? There's no way out except through the door.' Sally laughed. 'No. The windows are bulletproof for reasons you will no doubt remember, and they don't open.'

'Yes of course. I'll explain everything tonight.' She paused, 'if it's cleared up by then of course.'

Replacing the handpiece, she motioned Talia with the gun to stand up and then pointed to a door half-hidden between two bookcases. 'Push the bookcase to the left and open the door.' they moved off, 'One of my husband's little security measures. A hideout actually. Go in there and sit down.'

Talia walked up and sliding the bookcase to one side, opened the door but turning her head found the gun levelled at her. 'You'll have to wait. Maybe an hour maybe more, but

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I am not going to talk to you until I have my trusted friends with me.'

Without a word, Talia entered the office. Inside she discovered wide windows which ran most of the way across the long front wall, opening out onto the plain of Autrans. Half a mile away, the waving cereals on the valley floor abruptly gave way to a thick pine forest which rose rapidly, following the steep slope of the mountain ridge.

A good part of Sally and William's first desperate adventures had taken place and had terminated in that part of the little village of Autrans, but Talia was naturally unaware of that. She leant forward and tapped the glass pane with her knuckle. Sally had not lied, this was very thick bullet-proof glass, and the windows had no opening parts. Sighing heavily, she looked around then sat in a large leather swivel-chair and gazed out over the flat valley floor. 'That man Stone has one hell of a wife,' she thought, rubbing her elbow, 'Anne-Laure was right, never underestimate a woman with such an incredible supply of hair as red as that.'

Regardless of the pain she still felt, she smiled to herself as she remembered a phrase out of one of P.G. Wodehouse's stories, 'Miss Wickham', Jeeves once said to me, 'Lacks seriousness. She is Volatile and frivolous. I would always hesitate to recommend as a life partner, a lady with such a vivid shade of red hair.'

'For once,' she mused, 'Jeeves was wrong...' Then a thought struck her, and she smiled to herself. 'Anyway, now I have my very own Jeeves.'

Talia laughed to herself and leant back in the chair to wait.

Chapter 27

Somewhat over an hour and a half Later, Margaux and her chief, Paul Douanier arrived at the Farmhouse. Paul turned his battered Renault Meganne in the forecourt and parked it in the shadow of the neighbouring barn.

Margaux, still in her early twenties, swept in through the front door, her masses of glossy chestnut hair swirling around her. She was closely followed by the tanned and fit looking Paul Douanier, now a little over sixty with grey-white hair and eyebrows of the same colour.

The three knew each other extremely well and had had numerous adventures together over the last few years. *

After exchanging warm greetings, Paul turned towards the office. 'Well Sally, shall we have a look at your prisoner?'

Margaux took Sally's arm as they moved across the room, 'Is your little boy still over in Burpham with William's parents?'

'Yes. Thank god,' said Sally shaking her head.

Paul frowned but said nothing, he too, was relieved at this.

Sally opened the door. 'You can come out now, Mrs Kaufmann. Don't try anything though. Remember I still have your little insurance policy.' She waved the little gun.

Talia had had more than enough time to rearrange herself and had carefully brushed her hair, and rearranged her running clothes.

Paul took her in quickly and recognised the type. The assurance with which she carried herself tended to make one overlook the fact that she was dressed only in running tights and a tight tee-shirt. The haircut, her tan and the subtly applied waterproof makeup told him a lot too, as did the way she returned his gaze.

* Described in *BAIT and HATE*, by the same author.

Her eyes flicked to the girl by his side, and she caught her breath. If her friend Anne-Laure was undoubtedly lovely, her daughter was magnificent.

'Margaux!' She cried, 'What a magnificent young woman you've grown into.' she frowned. 'Oh, I suppose you don't remember me? No, the last time we met at Cannes, you were only ten or eleven I suppose.'

'My mother told me all about you,' said Margaux. 'I phoned her on the way up here.'

'Yes.' said Paul, 'We've heard all the story. You'll understand that a certain amount of prudence is only normal for us, under the circumstances.'

'If your prudence is going to be as violent as this young woman's,' said Talia, 'I hope it won't last too long.'

She then tried out one of her best radiant smiles, which rarely failed to break the ice, but this time it fell flat.

Paul nodded to an armchair. 'We'll leave smiling till later if you don't mind. Sit down please.'

Talia began to feel uneasy about this cross-examination.

'Look,' She started while taking her place, 'I know I was stupid in coming here without announcing myself, but I did explain my intentions to this young lady.'

'But now she knows that you lied to Margaux's mother. She also knows about your position concerning her husband. So, how can you expect her to believe anything you now say.' said Paul.

Talia frowned. For once she realised that she had made a colossal mistake, 'Yes I understand. I don't know what to say to convince you all.'

Margaux and Sally had sat close together on the long sofa their masses of soft hair mixed in a multi-coloured firework-like mass, which Talia could not help admiring. This observation brought home to her the fact that, here in Europe she would be up against some very stiff competition, looks-wise. There was, she mused, at least one consolation though, in that at least these two, were not in the same

generation as hers — two so lovely young women and at the moment her enemies.

Paul stood near the empty fireplace and looked down at Talia. His practised eye took in her firm abdominals and thin, strong arms and leg. Here apparently was a woman who looked after her body well and was undoubtedly very fit. He reflected that a woman like her must have been absolutely astounded and probably genuinely shocked, by the unexpected thunderbolt of violence which she had unwittingly triggered. Furthermore, she was no doubt unused to that sort of pain. He reflected that Sally had probably been a good deal closer to breaking her arm and wrist than had been absolutely necessary.

But then again, one doesn't reason with a maddened red-head like Sally. 'Perhaps you could explain things to us, Mrs Kauffman, beginning with why you are in France,' asked Paul.

Talia nodded and made a small sigh. 'After the horrible murder, the only people remaining, who I know and like, all live either here in Cannes or Saint Tropez.' Paul nodded understanding. 'My husband had already purchased a lovely villa on the cliffs at Théoule Sur Mér some years back.'

Margaux whistled, 'Wow. That must have cost him a small fortune'.

Talia nodded, 'About thirty million Euros.'

Paul rose his eyebrows, and she looked straight at him. 'I think it's important for you to understand that being the only remaining member of the family, I now find myself with of fortune of several billion US dollars.'

Paul nodded but remained outwardly unimpressed. He was used to dealing with extremely wealthy people in his work. These were the ones who hid the most away in illegal accounts, and they almost always seemed to think that telling him just how much they were worth, would frighten him off.

Talia smiled, 'I know that you and Margaux deal with Tax evasion. If you check up on me, you'll find that all my money has now been placed in two respected banks. One here in France and one in Canada.' She mentioned the names and Paul made a note, 'I will have to check that if you don't mind.'

'I don't need to evade taxes.' She smiled somewhat sadly, 'The interest alone is more than enough to live on extremely comfortably.' She drew herself up, with the involuntary movement of one used to keep an eye on her posture. 'Whatever happens I have decided to avoid having clever finance specialists forever pestering me with sophisticated ways of making more and more money that I don't even need.' She leant back. 'I don't want more money. I want zero stress...'

Paul nodded, 'A good strategy, Mrs Kauffman.'

She smiled, 'I don't think that even I could spend all the money I've got, even if I tried.'

Paul had been carefully observing Talia during this, 'No,' he said, 'I think you're right. I also think I believe you.'

'But you will check up all the same.' Said Talia.

'Professional prudence, I'm afraid.'

Talia went on to explain how she was selling, all the companies and property owned by her husband, and would keep nothing except the villa in France. 'Everything else will be converted into hard cash.'

'And be placed in your two banks,' said Paul.

'Exactly.'

'We phoned some of our official contacts at Paris on the way up here.' said Paul, still watching her closely, 'They tell me that you have employed one of the best detectives in America.'

'THE best.' Talia interrupted.

'OK. The best detective in the US. Why?' he asked, 'Don't you trust the police?'

'No,' said Talia.

'Why?' asked Paul.

'Because the crime was too sophisticated and too well planned, and then afterwards there were too many last-minute errors found.'

'Agreed,' said Paul.

'And.' continued Talia, 'If my detective finds the culprit before the police, then I will be the first person to interrogate him.'

'You don't intend to kill him yourself to avenge his crime?' asked Margaux.

Talia hesitated. 'No. I'm not certain what I'll do.' she hesitated again. 'No, I don't think I'll kill the man.'

'Or woman.' put in Sally. 'Women can do some pretty horrible things you know, can't they Paul?' she added.

'They certainly can. At least, some can.'

Talia frowned, 'Yes, of course. A woman, I hadn't thought of that.' she nodded slowly, while Paul continued to watch her closely. 'Yes, a woman might do something like that.' she shook her head, 'but why?'

Keeping his eyes on Talia's face, Paul rubbed his upper lip, which until a few days ago had sported a neatly trimmed moustache. 'Did you know that the Mossad had sent a team over to investigate?' He said.

Talia looked up, 'Ah! No, I didn't know that. I'm not surprised though. I hope my man gets there before those guys though.'

'Why's that?'

'Because the Mossad use more radical methods of catching and interrogating, than you guys.'

'We are not the police,' noted Margaux.

'You know what I mean. Anyhow, if they do catch the man, he is likely to disappear, and I would like to have a little chat first.'

Paul changed tack, 'You said too many errors...'

'Wake up guys.' cried Talia heatedly, 'spending all that time setting up that show and then allowing yourself to be spotted by half Montreal. No, I don't believe that for an instant.'

Agent Vx

‘But the police seem to.’ this was Paul.

Talia sneered and blew out her breath loudly. ‘Hence my detective.’

‘And?’ prompted Paul.

‘And hence my visit to Margaux’s parents and hence my visit here and hence my getting my arm smashed up by that wild Red-Head.’

Sally jumped up, but Margaux caught her wrist and pulled her back down. ‘You can have some more of the wild red-head if you like...’ Her cheeks flushed, and her eyes flashed, ‘And if you go anywhere near my husband, you’ll have to spend your lovely billions on a wheelchair and a hell of a lot of facial surgery.’

Talia sat back and blinked, clearly frightened by this sudden onslaught of violence.

Paul looked sternly at Sally and extended his hand, ‘Give me that gun please Sally. I’d feel safer with it a little further away from your hand. Wild Red-heads should not play with firearms.’

Sally burst into laughter as did Margaux, while Talia looked on with concern, only relaxing a little when the gun was unloaded and pocketed by Paul.

‘What did you want to know about our Doctor William Stone, Mrs Kauffman?’ asked Paul.

Talia sighed and rocked herself gently back and forth, before answering. ‘I have a sneaking suspicion that the thing is more complex than it appears.’ She paused, ‘My detective phoned me the other day to tell me he feels the same way.’

‘That would be the famous Dike Fennel, I believe?’ commented Paul.

‘Your information is correct, mister...’

‘Paul Douanier.’

‘Well Mr Paul Douanier, my intuition tells me that the Canadian police and now the entire Canadian news-addicted public, are following a false trail.’

‘Do you?’ nodded Paul.

He let her continue unimpeded, as she was obviously angry, and he knew by experience that angry people sometimes made little slips or incoherence's, which he would spot.

'You bet I do.' Said Talia with annoyance. 'Would you allow yourself to make stupid mistakes just before committing a crime which took you years to prepare.' She sneered, 'No way!' She sniffed. 'Would you do graffiti on a tombstone and then climb over a cemetery fence in front of dozens of people.' She shook her head. 'No way!'

Then Talia said something that absolutely no one had spotted. 'And where the hell were the paint spray cans then? He didn't have a backpack or anything. How come they turned up back in his hotel room. Odd that no? Did it with a drone I suppose.' She sneered, 'Ha!'

Margaux exchanged a sharp look with Paul at this remark. Now, this was highly significant. No one had thought about the spray-paint cans. All the people interrogated after the incident in the cemetery had clearly stated that the runner they had seen had nothing but a sleeveless T-shirt. Furthermore, the barman who had served him water had confirmed that he did not even have a drinks belt.

Talia went on, getting more and more animated, 'And then,' She gulped in her excitement, 'And then he goes and throws an organised-crime bosses' girlfriend off the Jack Cartier Bridge...' She shook her head. 'His so-called assistant, who just happened to be there at the time.' She laughed. 'What a fantastic bit of timing that was. Come on!' She was now thumping the armchair wings with both hands. 'Come on come on. And then, to cap it all he rushes off, murders a politician's secretary, carries her secretly to the compost heap in the botanical gardens and then tries to hide behind a nearby tree, just as a load of old age pensioners go by.' She shook her head angrily. 'For god sakes, no one could believe that. But they damn well do, all of them. incredible...'

She made to jump up. 'Please stay sitting Mrs Kauffman,' said Paul stepping forward and holding out his hand.

She subsided into her chair.

'Yes, I agree.' This remark was from Sally who had been following the raging woman's speech, her eyes riveted on the other woman's face. 'William is always doing silly, or odd things and getting into the most terrible situations because of it.' She went on. 'I can perfectly well believe that he did something as silly as climbing that fence. Probably got lost and it must have seemed the best idea at the time.'

Talia looked at her sharply, 'Like that was he? Impulsive.'

'Exactly. I can also imagine William having drunk too much water and having been obliged to hide and relieve his bladder behind a tree. That would be William down to a tee. I also heard that he had been accused of chatting up girls in a plane and knowing William, he was always too ready to joke and try to wisecrack anyone. But in the States, they don't understand his sense of humour.'

Margaux laughed, 'No, I confirm that he does say some odd things sometimes.'

Talia leant forward and looked at Sally, 'So, you see, there are some very odd things going on.' She leant back. 'If this is not a set-up job, then I never saw one.' She nodded decisively.

Paul nodded, 'So, you came over to find out for yourself what the man was like?'

'Right. Do you believe me now?'

Paul looked across at Sally, 'Sally?'

'Yes, I believe her.'

'Margaux?'

'Yes'.

He smiled, 'So that makes three.'

Talia sighed deeply, 'Can I get up now?'

Paul waved a gesture with his arm, 'Please.'

Sally jumped up too and went to up close to the woman, 'I'm so sorry about earlier. I wasn't ready to take any more

risks you see, so I just went into auto-pilot. I hope it didn't hurt too much.'

Talia rubbed her elbow and wriggled her wrist round and round. 'Well, I will have to think about the words TOO MUCH, before replying. I haven't got much to compare it with you see.'

'Well,' said Paul, 'If all of us, including your parents Margaux, and certainly everyone who knows William, consider him incapable of committing such a murder, what do we do now?' He didn't wait for a reply, 'Naturally those who consider him guilty must somehow have convinced themselves that the trouble surrounding the Jews hidden gold, was proof enough of a solid motive. Goodness knows how they arrived at that conclusion but, that's how I see it.'

Talia turned, 'Jewish Gold, is rather a discriminatory way of putting it Mr Douanier, but I'll let it go for the sake of clarity.' She frowned. 'What I think is that they have swallowed the bait that the true murderer left dangling in front of them for them to grab,' she added.

'I think she may be right,' said Sally.

Then Margaux turned to Sally, 'But how on earth did William get mixed up in all this toxic gas stuff? Surely that wasn't his line at all.'

'And that,' interrupted Talia, 'Is what I came down here to find out too.'

'Well he IS a research chemist,' said Sally.

'BUT.' Margaux frowned, 'Surely he specialised in perfume synthesis.'

Sally smiled, 'Yes, in the beginning, but he's done all sorts of things since.' She paused, 'Anyway, when you're a self-employed consultant, you accept almost any contract that comes along, as long as it brings home a good income.'

'Natural enough,' commented Paul.

'Are you assuming that the set-up started at that level, Margaux?' asked Paul.

'I think that that is where I would start. If I were a world-famous detective like Mr Fennel, of course.' She smiled at Talia.

'What does he say?' She asked Talia.

'He doesn't say anything.' smiled back Talia, 'I suppose I ought to have mentioned that I passed a special contract with him. If he manages to find the culprit before anyone else, he earns himself a bonus of one million dollars.'

Paul whistled. 'Pretty good employee incentive program you have there, Mrs Kaufmann.'

She laughed, 'N'est Pas.'

'So,' mused Paul, 'We have two main possibilities.' He paused, 'Either we assume that the person who employed him was the murderer and that employing him was the preliminary step, or we assume that the true employer was innocent but was influenced, manipulated or tricked into employing William by the murderer?'

'Yes' nodded Talia, 'That was what I was wondering myself.' She looked keenly over at Paul, 'You have a very quick mind Mr Douanier.'

Paul took the compliment in his stride. He considered flattery of any kind, as a potential manipulation and consequently, always ignored such remarks. 'Maybe we should start by looking at his email exchanges with the two organisations,' suggested Margaux. 'We ought to be able to get some information that way.'

Sally smiled, 'Oh! That seemed perfectly harmless.'

'You saw them then, Sally,' asked Paul.

'Well at least, the initial ones. William was so pleased with the new opening that he showed me everything.' She laughed. 'The conditions were excellent and the two propositions coming at the same time was perfect.' she ran her fingers through her masses of red hair, lifting them and allowing them to fall heavily back onto her shoulder. 'Christ!' thought Talia, 'If only I had hair like that...'

'So,' said Paul, 'shall we have a look at William's correspondence then?'

'Ah!' this was from Sally.

'What?' asked Paul.

'His PC has a password.'

'Which of course you don't know...'

Sally spread her hands in a gesture of impotence and grimaced.

This setback did not seem to worry Paul, 'I'll get my specialist onto that tomorrow. It might take time, but he has all the best hi-tech equipment available. But what can we do today?'

'Does William use the same email server as you Sally?' asked Margaux.

'Yes. We both use Orange.'

'So, if we could guess his email login, we could do it from your PC.'

'Yes. But I have no idea what the password could be.'

'Paul smiled, 'We can crack that too. Or I might even be able to get authorisation from the minister to put pressure on Orange to supply us with the login details. If we can't find anything, I'll deal with that tomorrow morning.'

Sally sat musing on the sofa. She rocked back against the cushions. 'William has a bad memory, and I know that when he travels, he sometimes jots the passwords down, in case he needs access while aboard.'

Talia smiled, 'But he is abroad now and will have the jotted notes with him.'

'William must be in hiding somewhere,' said Sally smiling to herself, 'and must be searching for the truth like us. He certainly won't risk coming out into the open until he can prove something.'

Paul nodded, 'And he will have guessed that all telephone or email correspondence will be under surveillance, so he won't risk anything as obvious as connecting to his email account or phoning home. The police would track that almost immediately.'

Sally jumped up suddenly, 'A few weeks ago, he was in Paris, and I know for certain that he jotted several

passwords on the back of his business card because I was sitting drinking my tea beside him while he packed.'

'So?' said Talia doubtfully.

'So, he just happened not to take the same suitcase and not to wear the same suit.'

Paul laughed, 'Good thinking Sally. And where are these elements now?'

Sally led the three others up some stairs and pushed open the door to her bedroom. The room was vast, occupying as it did, the same surface area as the two offices directly below it. It too, commanded uninterrupted views across the plain and the forest covered mountain ridge beyond.

She slid open one of the large fitted cupboards and pulled out a small carry-on suitcase. 'You have a look through this Margaux, and I'll go through his suit pockets.'

The other three gathered around the suitcase opened on the bed as its numerous pockets and pouches were explored, with no success.

Then Sally cried out, 'Ah ha! Got it' and jumped back out of the cupboard smiling like a child who has found a hidden Christmas present. She waved a business card at them. 'I told you.' She flipped it over and showed them some pencilled words written on the Back. 'You see, Or: 23-BemywifeSally, that's certainly his Orange e-mail password.' She smiled, 'silly William!' She looked back at the card, 'The others must be logins to other things. No idea what they could be. '\$podenflasp01 and \$€£Vosp34.' she shrugged, no idea...'

Paul put out his hand, 'Good work again Sally. Shall we try that on your computer?'

'OK come on. At least now we are getting somewhere.' laughed Sally, tripping lightly down the stairs.

She pushed open the door next to William's office, and led the way into an identically organised room, but much more femininely decorated. 'Welcome to my lair,' She said to Talia. 'This is where I work.'

'And what is your work?'

Paul interrupted, 'Can we leave that till later? Let's get on with the work in hand first. pleasure later.' The two women exchanges glance and pulled faces.

Margaux wandered around the large room then turned to Sally. 'Do you mind if I look around Williams office while you are opening the account.'

Sally nodded agreement, and the girl slipped into the adjoining room. Sally's computer whirred into life, and she first logged into her e-mail account, then clicked, 'switch to another account'. The email address, she naturally knew by heart and then taking the card, carefully typed in the password. The login failed. She held the card up to the light to make sure of text and tried again. This failed once more.

Paul leant forward, 'Try the other passwords, you never know.' These failed too.

'That's odd.' frowned Sally That must have been the right one. He must have changed it.'

'Did he often do that Sally?' Asked Paul.

'No. That's why I thought it was odd. I usually have to force William to do it. Otherwise, he goes on using the same one for years.'

Talia frowned, 'That's odd. Do you think he suspected something?'

Paul interrupted. 'What Mrs Kaufmann is trying to say is, do you think he wanted to hide something from you, Sally?' Talia nodded, and Sally looked aghast. 'What on earth could he want to hide from me?'

Talia thought, 'A woman perhaps.' but kept it to herself, because she feared the reaction. This thought showed how little she knew about men like William.

While they were puzzling over the passwords and trying other combinations of numerals, Margaux's voice floated in from next door. 'What was the name of the company he got that contract with? Wasn't that some Magnesium Foundry in Denmark or something like that?'

'Yes.' called back Sally, 'Denmark or Sweden, not Finland because I would have remembered that, for obvious reasons.' Following this, the three continued their tests with other permutations of the passwords, but a few seconds later Margaux's voice came back. 'And the organisation dealing with safety measure, would that be the IEC or something like that?'

'Yes. I think that was it.'

'Well. said Margaux reappearing in the doorway, it's a good job William didn't get the bright idea of adding password protection on his filing cabinet.' She laughed and banged down two folders onto Sally's table. 'All nicely arranged and labelled, exactly where one would expect a scientist to keep any vital documents. Good old, paper print-outs of all his communications, in a good old-fashioned grey metal filing cabinet.'

The other three gazed her in astonishment then all four broke out into laughter.

Paul shook his head, 'Sometimes I forget why I employed Margaux, but she is always reminding me in ways like this.' He tapped her on the shoulder, 'Good work.'

'Let's start with the magnesium Foundry,' suggested Margaux, as they gathered around Sally's chair.

But as soon as they opened the folder, they realised their error. These were not print-outs of email exchanges.

Every single leaf was a type-written letter on expensive, headed paper.

Between them were Williams reply letters, printed out from his PC.

Paul shook his head, 'Naturally.' he gave a short laugh. 'So much easier to remain hidden behind a fake postal address and a PO box too.' He shook his head. 'Nothing easier to do and almost impossible to trace the things back, if the job has been done properly.'

'To start with,' started Margaux, 'we already know that the company did not employ him, so the man behind these letters must be the organiser.'

Suddenly Sally swivelled around in her chair and immediately Talia to jumped back to avoid some new unannounced violence on her persona. 'Great gods!' she exclaimed, 'Don't you see what this means?' she gazed around at the three faces looking down at her. 'It means.' She hesitated, 'I mean it proves that William is innocent. He WAS employed by someone, and also to do exactly what he did.'

Paul nodded, 'Of course, Yes of course.'

The others nodded, and Talia smiled ruefully,

'So, I was right. There was more than just a smell of fish.'

'I told you it couldn't be possible, I told you.' cried Sally jumping to her feet, 'I told you.'

'Let's go through all this. There can't be more than a dozen letters.' proposed Paul.

'We'll do that downstairs, and I'll get some coffee brewing' suggested Sally.

Chapter 28

Downstairs in the comfortable sitting room, they spread themselves out among the sofas and armchairs and went through the communications one by one.

Paul started, then handed each letter on to Sally who passed it on the Margaux and thus to Talia. This task took them the best part of an hour and then the four sat in silence for a few moments looking at each other.

'Well!' said Paul, 'What do you think. Margaux?'

'Very convincing.'

'Yes.' added Talia, 'Very convincing.'

Sally frowned, a little on the defensive, 'How could William have refused such an offer?'

Talia smiled, 'Yes, with so many flattering compliments about his work thrown in.'

Paul, however, seemed troubled. 'The person behind these letters went to a great deal of trouble to dig out so much information about William's past,' He frowned, 'and that proves that it was no unreasoned or hasty choice.' He shook his head. 'No, we are certainly not dealing with a beginner, and that is not going to make our job any easier.'

Margaux suddenly stiffened. She had been following her own line of thought. 'Oh god!' she exclaimed.

'What!' this came from an alarmed Sally.

'William was to take on the job of scape-goat.'

Talia shook her head and looked disappointed, 'We already know that.'

Margaux looked troubled, and Paul held up his hand to stop Talia who was about to make some further retort. Margaux continued, 'I think that William was supposed to die in that attack, with all the others.'

Sally's mouth dropped open, 'Of course. Oh god, of course. But he escaped somehow. How on earth did he manage?'

Margaux moved over and put her arm around her. 'But now he is safe.'

She then looked over at Paul who asked, 'But that's not all, is it?'

'No' Margaux leant forward. 'The only remaining proof that he might be innocent...'

She paused as Paul suddenly jumped up and thumped his fist into the palm of his other hand. 'Are these damn letters.' He murmured.

Margaux looked around at the others, 'And now also, the four of us, who have read them.'

Talia's eyes opened wide. 'Hell! so now we're likely to get hunted like animals.'

Sally's face suddenly lost its colour which made her hair seem even redder than it was. 'Oh god! It's not all going to start over again?'

Paul slipped across the room, opened the door and stood just outside carefully and slowly scanning the forest slope nearby. He then moved just inside the door, and looked back at the three women, 'The house is being watched.' The three women exchanged looks as he continued, 'From the forest, almost exactly from the same place that Lida Niemela chose for her attack.' he cursed. 'Perhaps a little higher.' He waited to let this sink in.

'What do you mean?' Asked Talia, clearly shaken by this discovery.

'It means that someone has come to get those letters back,' Sally said.

'But,' Talia tried to be hopeful, 'But now we all know about them...' The others gazed at her, and suddenly the penny dropped, 'Oh god!' she cried

'Exactly Mrs Kauffman. If the watchers guess that, then all our lives are in danger.'

Sally dropped her head and held it in her long-fingered hands. 'Oh no! Not again.'

Margaux squeezed her in her arms. 'You don't suppose that this could be The Niemela woman again Paul? We don't know what happened to her, do we?'

Sally jumped, 'I thought she was dead. You told me, Paul.'

'No Sally, I said she had been caught up with by the Finnish mafia, who had dealt with her.'

'But they killed her.'

'I have no proof of that.' admitted Paul, 'But the person who caught her is a man whose word can be trusted.' Paul cast his mind back in an effort to bring back the memory of the unexpected meeting. 'I met him just after the little trouble in your hotel at Marseilles, Sally. He told me that he had dealt with her himself and that she would no longer be a menace to the population.' He paused, 'All the time we talked, the man had me covered with a shotgun disguised as a walking stick.' He paused again. 'In any case, I have every reason to believe him implicitly. He gave me his word, and I can assure you that the word of a man such as this, can be trusted.'

He looked down at Sally, 'I don't know what happened to that woman or where she might be today if she is still alive.' He smiled. 'But this I do know; If ever she steps out of line then, she will be killed immediately.'

'So,' cried Sally, 'You *do* think she is still alive.'

Paul nodded sadly, 'I'm afraid to admit that I do. BUT,' and here he looked sternly at the girl, 'But somehow or other, the Finnish Mafia have drawn her fangs. I don't know how, but they have. Of that I am certain.'

'So that's not her up there watching?' said Margaux.

Paul shook his head. 'No, there are two people, both men.'

Sally sat forward, 'If they are after the letters, why did they wait so long.'

'Exactly.' nodded Paul, 'If the murderer had known the address, the wise thing would have been to destroy them and his PC as soon as William was Safely on the flight to the States.'

'But, even if they did that,' frowned Margaux, 'they would have to make sure that no one else knew...'

'Oh Hell!' cried Sally, 'they would try to catch me and wring the truth out of me.'

Paul frowned, 'I'm sorry Sally, but I don't think they'd waste valuable time.'

'You mean, they'd shoot me?'

'I guess that's why they are here.'

Sally shook her head and pulled a face, 'Hadn't I better go and hide in my office. They would never find me if I closed the bookcase in front of the door.'

Paul shook his head again. 'I think they would simply burn the place down. That would clear out any evidence wherever it was hidden.' he sighed, 'Including you, trapped nicely in that sealed room.'

Margaux picked up the folder and scanned the first reply from William, then leafed through the others. 'Look. William always uses his pro address at the consultancy agency in Paris. But they are closed for several weeks at the moment.'

'Which explains why they could not get his home address.' added Sally, 'AND... our number is not in the phone directory.'

'So how did they find the place?' Asked Talia.

Paul looked over at her. 'I wonder if they didn't follow you, Mrs Kaufmann.'

Talia's eyes opened wide, 'I hadn't the slightest notion...' her voice trailed off.

'If that is true.' added Margaux, 'Then it means that someone knew that you were on William's trail.'

'And wanted to catch him too,' concluded Sally.

'It also implies that the person knew that you ought to have been among the dead,' added Paul.

'It looks like someone has been keeping a very close eye on the list of participants then.' proposed Margaux.

'Which suggests that the people invited were not just a random selection.' said Paul, 'And it probably explains why the secretary was murdered.'

'Because she knew who drew up the list of names,' added Margaux.

'Exactly.' Paul looked over at Talia. 'I don't suppose that anyone wanted to kill you, Mrs Kauffman?'

'Oh Christ!' cried Talia. 'What on earth are we to do?'

Sally looked across at her, 'My expert opinion is that for the moment the best thing to do is to keep away from those windows.' she pointed, 'those aren't bulletproof.'

Paul stepped up against the doorpost and studied the lie of the land. 'Do you think that you could have been followed, Mrs Kaufmann? Did you notice anyone or anything odd?'

Talia shook her head. 'No.'

'In any case.' he continued, 'We are nicely caught in a trap.' He looked across the stone cobbled courtyard to where his car stood. 'We might get to the car, but if they're well-armed, they'll mow us down when we slow down to turn into the road.'

Talia blanched, 'Would they do that? Here in France!'

Sally leant back and let out a peal of nervous laughter. 'Oh god, Talia! That sort of thing happens all the time in mountain villages like Autrans?'

Paul called out, 'Margaux come and keep an eye out for me, please. Look up there, see?' The woman nodded and took his place as he moved across the room to the phone in the far corner.

Just as he was moving past the window, however, there was a crash, and something heavy smashed through the window and bounced across the floor. In an instant, Paul bounded to it gathered it up and sprinting to the doorway, hurled the object out. He dragged Margaux back and down onto the floor, as the projectile bumped over the lip and down into the deep ditch by the road. Then suddenly, there was a roar, and a huge spout of earth and flame shot upwards.

'Damn it!' cried Paul, 'Incendiary Grenades. This is worse than I expected.'

Chapter 29

Getting to his feet, Paul shook his head and muttered something to himself. Stepping to the door drew a gun from under his jacket and fired off four shots in the direction of the watchers. 'That'll give them something to think about for a few minutes.' He then darted back to the phone and dialled a number. He talked animatedly for some time, and half smiled as he returned. 'I called up our old friend the Mayor of Autrans Sally. He's going to organise one of his little diversions. I think that it should have suitable results.' He then moved to the door to keep an eye on any further movement and pursed his lips. 'Those guys up there must have been given clear instructions,' he muttered half to himself. 'That incendiary grenade was aimed to force us all out into the open, where they could mow us down with machine guns from up there.'

'Christ!' this came from Talia.

'Even if we had survived, the house would have gone up in flames, and our evidence would have been destroyed.'

Talia looked at him expectedly, and he went on. 'The problem now is that the failure to retrieve the documents will be a serious drawback in his well-laid plans.'

'Or Her plans,' corrected Sally. 'It could just as well be a woman.'

'Ok, Or Her plans,' conceded Paul.

'But,' Talia butted in, 'They haven't failed yet.'

Paul smiled down at her, 'Don't worry. They need time now to decide on their next step.' He paused glancing back up at the forest, 'But they won't be allowed that.'

'Ah ha!' grinned Sally, 'because the famous Autrans cavalry is on their way.'

'Yes, but a lot can still happen in a few minutes,' said Paul keeping his gun at the ready and his eye on the forest.

Talia was confused. 'What do you mean, cavalry?'

Sally, grinned again, 'You'll see.'

Margaux took her arm from around Sally's shoulder and commented, 'Once the information of the failed attempt has got back to its planner, he'll know that there is now a risk that the watertight case against his.' she paused and smiled at Sally, 'or her, scapegoat, is likely to spring to a leak.'

'What will he do next then?' asked Sally.

'First and foremost, he will still try to eliminate the evidence.'

'You mean, kill William,' Sally said sadly.

'Yes, I'm afraid so. Sorry, Sally.'

Margaux put her arm back around her friend, 'But he is hiding somewhere, and I doubt that he will show himself.'

'That's what I think too.' agreed Paul.

During this exchange, he had been carefully reloading his gun. He now lifted it. 'Attention ladies. I'm just going to give them a reminder.' He aimed up the slope and fired another four shots, rapidly, one after the other, then immediately reloaded.

Sally leant forward, 'But William met the man at a Hotel in Paris. So, he knows what he looks like.'

'If,' said Margaux, 'the man he met was not a go-between.'

'Yes.' cursed Paul, 'That's a possibility. And in that case, I'd guess that his body has been floating in the Seine for several days.'

'Back at square one then,' said Talia.

Paul shook his head. 'Do you know, I don't think our murderer would have used a go-between. Sooner or later he would have had to make certain that William was up to the job.'

Talia nodded, 'Wanted to check him our personally'

'Exactly.'

Sally frowned with concentration, 'Their meeting was in the Hotel Cambon, near the Place de la Concorde.' She said.

Paul looked over at her, 'But there was nothing in the letters about that.'

'No.' replied Sally, 'The man called William on his phone when he was on the way up, in the train.'

Paul nodded, 'Good precaution, but he forgot that young married couples couldn't keep off the phone to each other for five minutes.'

'We call it love.' smiled Sally.

'Anyhow, I'll get someone to go around with William's photo. Who knows? Someone might remember a face. They're pretty good at that, at expensive hotels like the Cambon.'

At this, Sally leant forward as if about to get up.

'Stay down please Sally.' called Paul, 'You're out of the line of fire there, so stay put, please. Same for you too Mrs. Kauffman.'

Sally leant back again, 'So, in any case, William would be able to recognise him easily.'

'Maybe.' put in Talia, 'But for the moment he can't have the slightest idea of who the man could be. Even if he has access to a computer, it would be like looking for a needle in a haystack.'

'But haven't you got an idea Talia?' asked Sally.

'To start with, I don't believe the terrorist angle.' replied the woman, 'the whole thing was far too complex for the guys who are trying to take credit for it, at least in my opinion.'

'I agree with that,' said Paul.

'And I know absolutely nothing about that political guy or his team or his past, nothing!'

Sally turned to look over at Talia, 'Couldn't this be some sort vendetta against someone in the audience or a family feud.'

Talia sighed, 'Everything's possible, but I have never come across any really serious hatred between families or members of our community.' she looked around, 'We are quite close-knit really. And we all know each other very well.' She smiled, 'There is inevitably a bit of friction, now and then, especially between us women.' She made a face,

'Wealthy men's wives tend to get a bit bored sometimes, then trouble starts.'

'I've never been a wealthy man's wife.' laughed Sally.

'Nor me.' agreed Margaux, 'And anyhow, working with Paul leaves no time for boredom.'

'Go on, Mrs Kauffman.' smiled Paul, 'Don't take any notice of these young women.'

Sally butted in again, 'What if it was someone outside the community who wanted to get in, but had been snubbed once too often, or humiliated in public, or in the press?' she suggested.

'In that case, that person must have been wild with anger, though, to kill so many people, but that's always a possibility.' agreed Talia.

'Do you know anyone who was in a situation like that Talia?' asked Sally.

Talia made a face, 'That has happened in the past, but the last time was more than ten years ago.'

'A woman, of course,' commented Paul.

'Naturally.' smiled Talia, 'I admit that we do tend to be a bit selective and I'm afraid to say, snobbish.'

'But that was so long ago!' exclaimed Margaux.

'The sort of person who has been dreaming and perhaps scheming for ages to become a member of some elite community or other, never forget being snubbed,' added Paul.

'Or maybe the person was crazy,' suggested Sally.

'Yes, mad perhaps.' Agreed Talia, 'But someone who managed to keep his madness extremely well-hidden for a hell of a long time.'

'Maybe he, or she, wasn't mad at the beginning,' commented Margaux.

'Hmm.' Paul shook his head, 'none of this gets us much further.'

'Can you try and remember the name of that person, Mrs Kauffman. I'll try and find something out about her.'

'In any case.' said Talia angrily, 'there's no community left for her to be part of now.'

During the embarrassed pause which followed this remark, they heard a deep rumbling sound coming from the field behind the house.

'Ah!' smiled Paul, 'And here comes the Cavalry, if I'm not mistaken.'

Then from behind the house, three mammoth-sized forestry tractors appeared, belching black smoke. They bounced across the road and the ditch on their huge tires and headed straight up the steep slope directly towards the position where the watchers had been spotted. Immediately behind them, came a line of six men holding hunting rifles.

'That's the Autrans cavalry.' Grinned Sally.

The roar of the powerful engines was extremely impressive even at this distance above all when they accelerated. Before they were even halfway up the slope, a great deal of animation could be visible higher up. Then, two figures were seen darting upwards through the trees.

The armed men aimed and sent a volley of shots well over their head, sending splinters flying off the bark of the trees onto the fleeing men's heads. The procession continued until it reached the fringe of the forest, where the tractors stopped.

Then without warning the three machines blew their deafening horns together, causing a cloud of birds to shoot skywards from the treetops all around.

Paul smiled, 'I think that will have put them off a little, at least for the moment.'

The armed lumberjacks continued to march slowly up the ridge through the forest of which they knew every tree. They kept on plodding upwards until they had run the two men over the crest. One of the tractors then turned left and followed the line of the trees northwards while a second did the same thing following the forest south-east.

Paul nodded as he looked on. 'They're going to drive those men up through the forest. Our fugitives have no choice but to take the track up to the Clé Pass.'

Sally nodded, 'But they'll be able to escape down to Grenoble.'

'One hell of a long walk though,' laughed Paul, 'and no busses.' he paused. ' Anyway, we don't need to catch them. They won't know who is employing them. So the idea is just to chase them off. They won't come back. believe me.'

At this point, from out of sight, someone called out.

'Hey there Paul, it's me Gérard.'

'Ah, here's Monsieur le Maire, the commander in chief of the Autrans cavalry.'

He stepped out onto the forecourt,

'It's all clear, come around.'

A few seconds later the mayor of Autrans made his appearance, through the door which Paul held open.

'The captain of the cavalry,' announced Paul smiling.

The man entered and smiled, 'In trouble again, Sally. Never a dull moment around here since you settled in the village.' The Mayor was a tall, sun-tanned, broad-shouldered man and the only visible difference between him and the forest workers was the presence of a slightly rounded stomach. One couldn't call him overweight, but the truth is that he soon would be, were he to stay Mayor much longer. Unfortunately for his weight, this just happened to be his secret intention.

He was from a local family and did his job well. However, he had rapidly discovered that doing his job of mayor well, turned out to be far more difficult than he had expected.

However, since the discovery of the hidden gold by Pauls' team, assisted by Sally and her husband William, all that had changed. In French law, half of any treasure found legally belongs to the town in which it is discovered.

The village was now well off, and he was able to push forward the plans he had dreamt.

He was a very well-educated man and surprisingly, a full professor of history at Grenoble University. This employment allowed him very considerable liberty in organising his time as he wished, and he took full advantage of this. Furthermore, having many years' experience teaching the same, unchanging subjects, it was rare that he needed to spend much time altering or preparing his lectures.

He smiled around the room at everyone, but when his gaze met Talia's he stopped.

Paul came to the rescue, 'Ah! Gerard, this is Mrs Kauffman, from Montreal. Mrs Kauffman, Gerard, the mayor of this lovely village.' Talia nodded and smiled, muttering something embarrassingly 'banal'.

Sally and Margaux exchanged a meaningful glance when they observed Talia colour very slightly and glanced away.

Sally leant over close to Margaux's ear and whispered, 'Ah ha! Now, what have we here?'

In truth, Talia was agreeably surprised by Gérard. In Canada, a mayor is above all a politician. He is suave, expensively and perfectly dressed, and especially always on his guard. He is never, ever, a broad-shouldered, sun-tanned friendly looking man, in imperfectly ironed Bermuda shorts and Lacoste tee-shirt. Talia felt oddly ashamed of herself, but the truth is that this man struck a strange and unknown chord inside the very urban Mrs Kauffman.

Paul noticed Gérard's surprised look resting on Talia and also the woman's unexpected reaction, and immediately came to the rescue. 'I don't know how to thank your Gérard.'

The Mayor shook himself out of the semi-trance and replied. 'So, our Sally is in deadly trouble again!'

'Not my fault this time.' protested Sally.

'I suppose I had better explain.' sighed Paul...

The explanation only took a few minutes, during which Sally constantly interrupted with her own comments, which confused rather than clarified the Mayor's understanding of the problem. Eventually, having more or less assimilated

the fact his reaction was immediate. 'Let's get these letters into the press at once. Like that, you will all be off the hook.' He looked for a sign of agreement at Paul, who nodded. 'Except,' he continued, 'that the murderer still knows that our William is the only person who can recognise him.'

Paul shook his head. 'He certainly already knows that.'

The mayor shot him a glance, which Sally intercepted. 'Don't worry Gérard. I understand the situation you know.'

Paul took up the conversation, 'William's a very sharp man and must have worked all that out already. He won't come out of hiding until he is certain that it's safe to do so.'

'You mean that even after the information about the letters is out?'

'Yes. The murderer could be absolutely anyone.'

'Even a member of the police,' added Sally.

'Exactly.'

'What about that woman you told us about Mrs Kauffman?' asked Paul.

'Oh no.' she sighed, 'she was one of those creative sorts. something to do with special sorts of leather for haute-couture.'

'And her husband.'

'Oh.' said Talia, 'Quite well of course. Something to do with organising big pop concerts. Not a real businessman, if you see what I mean.'

Paul saw perfectly what she meant. There are various ways of making a great deal of money, but all are not considered equal. At least by Talia's little elite community. No doubt the men would have thought differently, had they been asked, which was indeed not the case.

Paul then outlined to Gérard what he thought ought to be done. He suggested that the men who had been chased off must have hidden their car not far off and that it would be wise to have it found and removed. He asked Gérard to make sure nobody interfered with fingerprints, and that he would ask someone to be sent up from Grenoble to go over it.

'Get those letters in the press double quick though,' repeated Gérard, before kissing Margaux and Sally goodbye. Then turning to Talia added, 'Well it has been a pleasure to help my friends again' he smiled, 'And a great pleasure to make your acquaintance Mrs Kauffman. I hope we will have the occasion of meeting again before you leave our little village.' He held out his hand and warmly shook Talia's, who for the second time became uncharacteristically flustered.

When he had left, Paul turned to Talia who was now sipping some hot coffee that Sally had just made as the colour subsided from her cheeks. 'What a charming man you have for a mayor Sally.' She said, 'Educated too, I would say.'

'Oh Yes. A full professor at the university' replied Sally, 'we are fortunate. He seemed to like you.'

'Please!' Talia pretended to be offended, but her slight blushes told a very different story. Abruptly she changed the subject. 'What if those letters were fakes?' she looked around the room, and the others frowned. 'I mean, what if William faked the whole series of letters to lead us up a blind alley.'

Paul frowned in turn, 'Which would mean that we are back at square one. With William in the role of murderer. In that case, where is the motive?'

'Perhaps he's got a big gambling debt and has taken on the murder as a mercenary job to pay them off.'

Sally burst out laughing, 'Oh, come on Talia, that doesn't happen over here, except in films.' She shook her head, 'And if you are thinking about him having a double life with mysterious women blackmailing him, I'm afraid to have to tell you that that is absolutely not on.'

Paul took up the story. 'No Mrs Kauffman, William is as white as snow, all of us know that as do all his friends. No, you can forget that tack altogether.'

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Margaux leant forward and placed her chin on her cupped hand, 'And if he was the murderer, why would he send these tough guys here to eliminate us all?'

Talia sighed, 'Yes. I see. OK. We'll leave your husband off the list.'

Paul took up his reasoning again, 'If we assume that you were followed, Mrs Kauffman, that may at least lead us somewhere,' he said.

'OK,' accepted Talia.

'Who knew you were coming to France,'

'Quite a few people. The police to start with and that means a good number. Then there is my detective and his secretary of course.' Paul shook his head at this last possibility, and she paused to collect her thoughts, 'Next, comes the managers of my banks and my lawyers, and that means a good number of people too. Then in France, there's the owner of the company looking after my villa. And finally, a good number of my friends in Europe, especially those living in France, including Margaux's parents.'

'A lot of people then, and any of them might have passed on the information without even knowing,' remarked Paul.

'What about your house-keeper in Montreal.'

Talia shook her head. 'I didn't say where I was going. I didn't even say I would leave the country.'

'But you could easily have been followed,' said Sally.

'That's true,' admitted Talia.

'Was there anything about your leaving Canada, in the papers?' asked Margaux.

'No.'

'Did anyone know you were going up to Paris?' she continued.

'No.' frowned Talia. 'Only my Butler. But he certainly doesn't seem the sort of person to share his employer's private information with anyone especially the lower staff.'

Paul looked over from where he was standing near the doorway. 'A new man of course. Good references?'

'Oh goodness me!' cried Talia, 'The very best references I ever saw, and all checked carefully by my manager. The perfect English butler.'

'Do you remember his name by any chance, Mrs Kauffman?'

For reply, Talia opened her handbag and extracted the card he had given her. She handed it to Paul. 'Ah! Well, that's extremely interesting.' He laughed and Handed it to Margaux who smiled and nodded, before giving it back.

Sally looked from one to the other. 'And what's so interesting about this butler then, another con man?'

'Oh no.' smiled Paul. 'I think that you can feel quite safe once you get back to Théoule sur MÉR, Mrs Kauffman. If that man is looking after you, you are certain to be in security. '

'Better than a bodyguard. I'd say,' added Margaux smiling at a personal memory.

Talia looked at the two and frowned. 'Come on you two. Spill the beans...'

'Well, Mr Branston and I, Margaux too, have met several times. You see he has worked for a good number of the wealthiest families in Europe over the last twenty-five years.' He sat down and crossed his legs. 'In the course of our investigations, as the saying goes, we have had dealings with a number of his employers. As butlers go, this one is as tight as a deaf clam, concerning the private affairs of those who pay his salary.'

'That's good news. So, it's certainly not Branston who gave my plans away.'

'Oh no, but that man has some talents which the vast majority of butler's lack. He might look slow and sedate and harmless, but when necessary he can act with surprising speed.'

Talia frowned. 'You mean he knows how to use his fists? That it?'

Paul smiled at Margaux, 'You might say that. Yes. He certainly is a useful man to have around in times of trouble.'

Margaux looked over at Talia, 'He is also one of the finest shots in England, both with a rifle and a handgun.'

'Christ!' exclaimed Talia.

'Yes, and an excellent investment, if I might say so.' added Paul, 'A useful man in a crisis.'

'Such as this?' asked Talia.

'Yes.'

'But he's not here.'

'No, but I think we had better get you back home and under his protection as quickly as possible.'

'I'm all for that.' agreed Talia.

Paul walked over to the doorway and scanned the top of the ridge. From where he stood, he could make out the silhouettes of one of the hunters who had remained there on guard. 'Do you know,' he said turning, 'I wonder if it wouldn't be safer to have both of you down there under Mr Bradstone's wing.'

'Yes.' agreed Margaux, 'Now that would be an excellent idea.'

Talia smiled, 'If what you tell me about my butler is true, then I am certain that Sally and he will get along like a house on fire. They'll be able to exchange self-defence tricks.'

Sally laughed, 'I always liked English butlers, but only in films. In real life, at least in my youth, I remember that the ones I met always looked down their noses at me with such disdain. I always felt like a big greasy finger mark on the master's silver fish knife, that the negligent kitchen maid had neglected to wipe off.'

'Yes, he takes getting used to, I suppose, even for me,' admitted Talia. 'We will try to tame him together.'

Paul smiled, 'Do you mind if I call him Mrs Kauffman?'

'No, go ahead.'

In the corner of the room, Paul talked on the phone for some time. At one point he frowned and replied, 'Ah! Now that is interesting.' and shot a glance across in the direction of Talia. When he returned, he nodded to the three women. 'That's all arranged then. I have put him in the picture, and

you can count on him to throw up a protective barrier around the two of you which will be nigh on impossible to penetrate.'

He sat down and seemed to relax for the first time for the last hour. 'Sounds like a nice place you have down there Mrs Kauffman. Your 'Man', as the English call him, will be putting Sally in the Blue suite. The one with a view over the bay.'

Talia laughed, 'I didn't even know we HAD a Blue Suite.'

'I suspect,' suggested Sally, 'that apart from being a nice room...'

'Suite' corrected Margaux, 'Not quite the same thing.'

'OK. Apart from being a nice suite. It must be built like an impenetrable castle.'

Talia's eyes opened wide, 'Oh yes! of course. I know the room. Yes, an excellent choice. But I'm sure you could get in by helicopter...'

They all laughed.

'That too would be dangerous with your butler on full alert,' joked Paul. He took a sip of his coffee. 'I asked him if he had spotted anyone or anything unusual in the vicinity. Apparently, nothing of any importance.'

'Maybe he didn't notice,' commented Talia.

'You must get used to the fact that that butler of yours notices everything, Mrs Kauffman. That's why he has had such an exceptional roster of employers.' He paused, 'Anyway,' he continued, 'the only thing which he felt worth mentioning was that an old friend of yours phoned up from Canada.'

Talia looked at him sharply, 'An old friend?'

'Someone who was coming over to Italy and thought that he might pass through and see you.'

She frowned, 'Who on earth could that be?'

'He said it was a man called Thomas Thompson.'

'Oh!' Talia looked away 'Thomas!'

'An old friend?' Paul watched her closely.

'Oh yes, very old...' here she paused, and Paul nodded to himself.

'He knew you were coming?'

'Yes. Thomas was the first to know. I told him at the same time as Mr Fennel. We were all together.'

'How did he know how to contact you?' asked Paul.

'I left my old cell phone with Branstone. Thomas had the number.'

'You don't seem too pleased to hear he might be coming over.'

'It's a bit early days, yet.'

'For picking up old threads,' suggested Paul.

'Yes. exactly.'

'Ok. but in the meantime, we must make sure that the existence of those letters is brought to the attention of the authorities,' said Paul.

'There is also that remarkable observation of Mrs Kauffman here,' said Margaux, 'about those paint canisters.'

Talia seemed a little uncomfortable, 'I ought to have kept that to myself.' She murmured. 'The truth is that it was Mr Fennel, who spotted that.'

'Credit where credit's due,' said Paul.

'Yes, in any case.' he continued, 'I haven't forgotten that your objective remains to get the man before the police.'

'Or the woman.' smiled Sally.

Talia nodded. 'But if we disclose the letters, that's surely enough to get Doctor Stone off the hook, and get those dumb police looking for the real murderer?'

'Yes. I think you're right Mrs Kauffman.' agreed Paul.

Margaux took out her phone. 'I'll photograph them with my phone, and then we can send them by e-mail. That at least will be a weight off our shoulders.'

'Agreed.' Said Talia, 'One worry less. I'll do the same thing so that I can send them to Branstone.'

'Not to Mr Fennel?' asked Paul.

'I left my old phone at Théoule Sur Mér, with Branstone.' Paul frowned, and she smiled back at him with a little embarrassment. 'I didn't want to be troubled.'

'By the past?' Paul suggested.
'Exactly.'

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PART 6

Chapter 30

That morning, the morning newspapers published some interesting new facts. The police had disclosed that the girl who had been thrown of the Jacques Cartier bridge, had only just flown back home from Knoxville, from where the nerve gas had been stolen. It had also come to light that the girl had not been alone. The papers duly reported that her best friend had accompanied her and that this friend had now strangely disappeared. This information naturally set everyone conjecturing anew, which was excellent news for the newspapers and TV.

At half past eight, the Dike Fennel received a call from his assistant. 'Morning Miss Le Mon.' He said and without waiting added. 'I saw the morning papers. Any news?'

'Morning Mr Fennel. Yes, I've already checked up with my friends at the airport. A girl, Sylvia Dale accompanied Sandra Bedard. They sat together on both planes.'

'And now she has disappeared?'

'That's what was announced, but I haven't any confirmation of the truth of that yet. I've got the girl's address though.'

'Hum! ' said Dyke Fennel, 'Dead too, do you think?'

'Possibly Mr Fennel.' She hesitated, 'A bit odd though that the information took so long to come out...'

'Agreed.' said Fennel, 'An intentional leak, you think?'

'Might be.' She paused, 'Of course we have no proof that they were friends either.'

'Ah!' said Fennel, 'I see what you mean. Possibly a trick to draw the murderer out.'

'Exactly.' she admitted, 'It's been done before.'

'Yes, but do you think it likely that our murderer will take the bait, Miss Le Mon?'

'I doubt it.'

'Me too.' he agreed, 'A guy clever enough to organise that crime is no fool.'

Miss Le Mon smiled at her telephone, 'A clever man rarely is.'

'What?'

'A fool.' chuckled the woman.

'Ah yes. Of course.'

'Which he certainly is not,' added Miss Le Mon.

'I guess he'll smell the trap a mile off and won't go near the place.'

'That's what I think too.' agreed Le Mon.

'So,' mused Fennel, 'we can leave that little game to the police.'

'That was what I was going to suggest. Mr Fennel.'

The detective smiled to himself, 'I wonder what sort of fish they will hook.'

'One of your competitors perhaps.' joked Le Mon.

'Ha ha!' laughed Fennel, 'Yes that would be very amusing.' He thanked Miss Le Mon and put his phone back in his pocket.

An hour earlier than this discussion, and during his breakfast, Thomas Thompson had come to the same conclusion as Miss Le Mon.

It was true that he had not considered that the girl he noticed chatting to his courier in the plane might have been a friend. He had assumed that she had been one of those chance meetings between like-minded people, which occur from time to time in airport lounges. Thomas, however, was an unusually intelligent and successful businessman and such people do not automatically assume that everything that is said or written is the truth. He considered it more probable that, if Sandra had told this girl anything compromising, then the CIA would already have moved, and the press would have been full of it. He reasoned, therefore, that if the girl Sylvia Dale was indeed Sandra's friend, then she couldn't have gleaned any critical information. This pointed to this new information as being a trap to lure him out. Of course, it was also possible that the

girl had not been Sandra's friend at all, but even so, the objective must be the same.

Naturally, the girl's home would be under surveillance as would be her place of work and any other places where she spent time. No, whatever the truth, Thomas Thompson was not a man to be fooled by such a simple device. He smiled and poured himself some more coffee. 'No' he nodded, 'They are all still completely in the dark.'

It was true however that he had been very concerned when I had miraculously managed to survive. He had, however, realised that the mass of proof which he had prepared against me was playing into his hands and had relaxed again. The only point which caused him concern was that the detective that Talia Kauffman had chosen was Dyke Fennel.

Fennel was the best money could buy.

He knew that I had probably kept the letters we had exchanged, and this had also troubled him a little. If they turned up, it might open up a new avenue of thought for the police. Thomas had initially counted on my death and had been banking on the letters being assumed to be fake. He hoped that the investigators would take them as an attempt to clear my name, for my wife's sake. Given the mass of evidence against me, he thought that the police would be unlikely to look further.

But now that I had escaped, I might be in a position to recover them and use them in my defence. The police would then have no choice but to follow up alternative reasoning. Even so, working back as far as him, seemed highly improbable. However, Thomas did not like taking unnecessary risks. After all, I had seen him and was the only participant of the crime, who could still recognise him. All the others had been promptly eliminated as soon as they had completed their part in the project. Thomas had thus commissioned a highly reliable team, to visit France and remove that possibility. If they could find the letters quickly, all the better, if not they had been instructed to burn down

the house to eliminate everything it contained. If the wife died in the fire, all for the better.

He was expecting news of the success of this mission that same afternoon.

The day before the press release, René Fortin had agreed to leave the 'Sylvia Dale operation' entirely in the hands of the police. Andrew Farmer had pointed out that the association between them might provoke all sorts of misunderstandings, both inside police circles and in the criminal world. René had thus agreed but had insisted on Sylvia being removed from the scene of operations, and it had been mutually agreed that she should 'disappear'.

Unfortunately, it somehow slipped René's mind, to mention that he had concealed a webcam in Sylvia's flat.

Inspector Andrew Farmer and a large team of men then spent several long days watching Sylvia's fourth-floor flat from vans, from cafés and street corners.

No one suspicious came anywhere near the place.

After the first two days, Andrew left the job to one of his assistants and more or less gave up the thing as a bad job.

The only person he had noticed at all out of the ordinary, had been the telecom's engineer and his assistant, who had been working their way slowly along the road, from the far end. The engineer had been listening intently to a detector, with a pair of headphones on his ears. Without raising his eyes from the road surface, he regularly made a sign to his assistant who had then sprayed yellow markings onto the tarmac surface.

Once they had covered the full hundred and fifty yards of the road, they then tramped back up the way they had come spray-painting yellow lines towards each of five apartment buildings and had then visited the places one after the other. On each occasion the assistant followed the engineer, humping two large tool boxes with him.

During the fourth visit, Sylvia's Flat had been visited and ransacked. The police only discovered this, the following

day when someone from the top flat noticed the door open when on his way out to work.

The day before this happened, a short and slightly overweight middle-aged man sitting in the furthest corner of the fishermen's' café, lifted his eyes over his newspaper and took out his telephone. He raised it and seemed to be making a text message. He was, in reality, taking a series of pictures of the two men who had just entered.

He had now five other sets of photos.

Once more picking up his newspaper, he continued to read the classified advertisements for jobs, ringing one with red felt-tip from time to time. He was, however, listening carefully to what was being said at the other side of the room. He heard the men talk about fishing and lakes, and his concentration increased when the two men started to question the owner about a lake on a photo they had produced. Looking up briefly, he spotted the menacing look the owner shot at other customers when he asked for their contribution. He above all noted his exasperation when one of the oldest regulars suddenly came in and leant over.

'You guys blind.' he had laughed, 'that's Lake Perdu. Obvious. Up lake Manoucane way.'

He noticed how the other men had risen their eyebrows and how the owner scowled at him and clenched his fist, unseen to the two visitors.

'Christ.' cried the owner, 'You need your eyes seeing to. That never is lac Perdu.'

He noted all these names down on his notepad and went on with his newspaper.

The following evening, the same man could have been seen entering René Fortin's House, not far from the Jacques Cartier bridge. At the time, the latter had been debating whether to share the video of the men ransacking Sylvia's flat, with the police or not. When the short man from the café shared his photos, and they discovered that the men were the same, he decided to keep the information to himself.

'Lac Manoucane is already a long way into the middle of nowhere, and this lac Perdu must be even more lost than its name suggests,' muttered René Fortin when he listened to the audio file.

The little man nodded. 'Yep, a long way too. But anyhow, I don't know who the two guys are, but they are after the same man as you are.'

'Right there.'

'Pretty obvious too that the men in that café know or have guessed where your man is hiding.' Continued the little man. 'I guess you'll have no difficulty in convincing them to share that knowledge with you.'

However, it was quite clear to René that this unpleasantness could be dispensed with for once because they had already supplied him with the address.

That evening René sent his two men out with a printout showing the two men. About one-o'clock they returned with the news that the men were part of a well-known, but rather unsuccessful terrorist organisation.

'So that settles it,' he smiled. 'The terrorist declaration was a fake.' His two men looked at him and waited. 'If they can't get the guy out of the way soon, then the truth will come out, and their movement will be discredited.'

'They lose face. you mean.' suggested one of the bodyguards.

'Dead right.' said his friend.

'So,' Their boss sat down and crossed his knees, 'We had better get up there first. René Fortin thought for a moment then turned his head, 'Get out the maps and bring some beer. Tomorrow we head north.'

As the two turned to hunt out the maps and beer, he added, 'Any objections to a trip in the lakes?'

'No.'

'Get on then!'

Chapter 31

Wearing some of her most expensive clothes, Miss Le Mon, pushed open the heavy door and stepped into the spotlessly clean fitness Centre. The previous day Mr Fennel had heard that a number of the women who had died in the massacre, had been customers of this gym. It was exclusive and costly, and he had also discovered that Talia Kauffman was a member. Fennel had thus asked his assistant to go and have a look at the place and see if she could pick up any interesting information.

Lionel looked up from behind the counter, and seeing an apparently wealthy customer, rose with a smile to greet her.

Le Mon saw a handsome man of about thirty or perhaps a little more, with an impeccable white tee-shirt shirt designed to show off his well-sculptured body. She was not attracted by this sort of male herself but could not help but admire the perfection of this specimen.

‘Good morning.’ she smiled.

‘Good morning madam, can I help you.’

‘I’m looking for a place to do a little training, and my friends suggested yours.’

‘Are they already members?’ asked Lionel.

‘No. They had just heard of the reputation.’

Lionel did not mention fees, because he could see that they would not be a problem for this woman.

‘Perhaps you would like me to show you around before deciding.’

‘I was going to suggest the same thing.’

‘Perfect.’ laughed Lionel.

He led the way through a double set of swinging doors which isolated the lady’s part of the establishment from the rest of the place. He showed her the comfortable changing room, with its armchairs, its low tables with bowls of fresh flowers and the line of mirrors and make-up tables, each with its hair drier. Everything was spotlessly clean. She

nodded with pleasure. It was a pity that Mr Fenell had not said that he would pay her subscription here.

They next visited the large shower room with ten large frosted glass cubicles.

On the way back through the changing room, she scanned the names on the unusually large lockers. She was looking for one in particular and spotted it halfway down the wall.

'Oh!' she exclaimed, 'Is Talia Kaufmann and member?'

'Yes. One of my very best and oldest members.' smiled Lionel, 'Do you know her.'

'We were at school together, but I haven't seen her for a few years. I moved to New York, you see.'

'And now you've returned.'

'Well! Let's say I am preparing the terrain.'

'So, you're not aiming at becoming a member just now?' Lionel was disappointed.

'It may be quite soon though.' Miss Le Mon surprised herself by realising that this possibility had been gradually taking form in her mind over the last few days. Her recent meeting with the luxury Hotel manager had brought back feelings about him that she had carefully put away. She had also noted that he had been relieved on discovering that she was still not married. Maybe, she reflected, it would be an error to put things off a second time.

'Yes.' she repeated, 'I may be moving much sooner than I had initially expected.'

An unexpected warm feeling swept through her body, and she gave a little sigh.

Lionel liked the woman. She was easy to talk to and not a snob, for once.

'Talia has moved to France,' said Le Mon. 'To Theoule sur Mer, to be exact.'

Lionel nodded, 'Yes, she told me.'

'She has a magnificent villa, overlooking the sea,' added Le Mon.

'Yes.' said Lionel, 'Not far from Cannes, I believe.'

'That's it. Too expensive for me though.' laughed Le Mon, 'I didn't marry a rich businessman. My error...'

Lionel laughed with her. 'Would you like a cup of coffee Madam...'

'Miss. Miss Le Mon.' she smiled, 'Yes, that would be nice.'

'Nice is a big word. It's machine coffee, but more or less drinkable.'

The machine groaned and filled her cup which she sipped. 'Not that bad.'

Lionel took up the conversation, 'Mrs Kauffman came here almost every morning. She kept herself in excellent form.'

'Yes.' said Le Mon, 'An envious body and determined to keep it that way.'

Lionel smiled knowing that that was precisely what Talia had told him herself. He remembered her telling him the importance of what she called 'home-grown products' for keeping rich husbands in hand.

'You smile?' said Le Mon, observing him with her head cocked to one side.

'She's a charming woman and has been very kind to me'. He said.

'I see,' said Le Mon. But she did not see at all.

'Yes, her and her friends liked the environment. I think they all felt comfortable and secure here.'

'Yes?' said Le Mon.

'And of course, they weren't ever troubled by the men, like in other places?' he smiled.

'Because all the men here are homosexuals I suppose,' said Le Mon without batting an eyelid.

Lionel looked up sharply but seeing no sign of animosity on Le Mon's face, nodded. 'Yes. It was part of my business plan you see,' He admitted

'And Talia must have spotted that I suppose.'

'Oh yes.' Lionel laughed, 'She saw right through me. Straight away apparently. So did her friends.' His face clouded as he said this.

'Yes.' Said Le Mon, understanding the reason for this change on his face. 'That was horrible but let's not talk about that.' She then went on, 'you said that she was very kind to you.' She paused and frowned. 'That doesn't' sound much like the wife of a wealthy businessman, to me. But maybe Talia has changed more than I expected.'

Lionel laughed, but Le Mon saw that she had touched a sensitive topic. 'Well, you see,' said Lionel, 'she helped me get a loan so that I could renew all the equipment. We'll go and have a look at the various rooms after the coffee.'

'You mean, she put pressure on one of her friend's banking husbands. I can imagine her doing that easily.'

Lionel nodded smiling, 'Exactly. That's exactly what Mrs Kauffman did. She phoned from here. She turned the guy around her little finger. Very impressive.'

'Which is why you're so well equipped?'

'Yes. Thanks to Mrs Kaufmann.'

Miss Le Mon then turned and looked directly at him. 'And what did she ask for in return?'

Lionel blushed and stammered, 'Euh! Well. I don't know...'

'I never knew Talia to do someone a little service, for free. At least, not in the old days.' continued Le Mon.

'Well, I don't know...' Lionel was embarrassed.

Miss Le Mons saw had hit the right point, 'At least she didn't ask you to sleep with her. That's clear at least.'

Lionel looked up quickly, realising that the woman had not yet understood that he was not Gay. 'No. Well, she just needed a bit of help. A small service really.'

'And a bit confidential.' helped Le Mon.

'Yes, a bit confidential.' he agreed

'And crossing my friend Talia, would certainly not be good for your little business.'

Lionel nodded vigorously, 'You bet. Certainly not a woman to be crossed.'

Now, wondered Miss Le Mon, I wonder what that little service was. A woman like Mrs Kauffman would never bother to bend a friend's arm, especially when money was concerned if she did not have something important to gain from it. She guessed that nothing serious in the way of crime had been involved. This man just was not the right sort for that.

She then added with a wry smile. 'I understand. I certainly wouldn't like to make an enemy of Talia. So you can keep her secret, by all means.'

If Le Mon had discovered that this 'little service' had amounted to seducing a girl that Lionel didn't know, to obtain a compromising photo, it would not have helped Miss Le Mon much. At least, not at this stage of the investigation.

Lionel felt relaxed with this woman and confided, 'Mrs Kaufmann suggested that I could set up an identical fitness centre in Cannes.'

'Oh! Now there's a good idea.' nodded Miss Le Mon.

'I don't know.' Lionel seemed unsure of himself. 'It's a long way, and I don't know how things work over there.'

Miss Le Mon understood the reason for Talia's suggestion. She just wanted to reproduce her ideal environment in her new place of residence. 'So why don't you go?' She asked.

'A bit risky don't you think?'

'Not at all. An excellent opportunity'. Le Mon continued, 'She is now a wealthy woman... Amongst the richest around I would say.'

'Yes, but...'

'And as she is a very well-known and an extremely wealthy lady, you can bet that any fitness centre that she went to, would immediately attract all the other rich women, and men in the area...'

This idea seemed to appeal to Lionel, 'Hum. Yes, that is probably true.'

'So, your clientele would flock in without advertisement, which would be perfect for your image.' She warmed to her subject. 'why not do it?'

'Hum, yes. I do like the idea. But what about this place?'

'Get someone in to manage the gym and go over to France?' She said. And then suddenly a startling idea struck her, which made her blink with the audacity of the thing.

Lionel was nodding enthusiastically, 'Yes. yes, that's a great idea.' He put down his coffee cup and rubbed his chin. 'Yes, I like it. But I'll need someone who I can count on to keep the place running, and it needs a lot of careful organising.' He shook his head. 'You can't imagine how difficult it is to keep the gym teachers up to spec. A reputation is a long time in the building.'

'Yes, I know' interrupted Le Mon, 'and takes but a few seconds to destroy.'

He nodded. 'Not easy,' he concluded.

Miss Le Mon smiled, 'But I think I know exactly the right person for the job, you know.'

Lionel looked at her with surpassed excitement. 'You do?'

'Yes. Me.'

Later on, when she called back Mr Fennel, she did not mention, her proposition to Lionel. She told him that he had rendered some service to Talia in exchange for her obtaining him a loan. She said that the money involved was far too small to have engendered anything serious in the way of crime. She told him that in her opinion the man could not possibly be mixed up in anything nasty. Fennel had accepted that this had been a dead end. For Miss Le Mon, however, it had been certainly not that.

'OK. Thanks, you for all that Miss Le Mon.' had concluded the detective. 'Could I ask you to try and find out about the company which owned the conference hall.'

'Will do,' said Le Mon, secretly already building a new life here in Montreal.

That evening she would dine in the hotel restaurant and intended to do everything she could, to draw out the manager. She did not mean to let things drift on much longer. Once Miss Le Mon had decided to do something, she did not spare time or energy in doing it.

Chapter 32

That evening, Miss Le Mon dined in the cosy comfort of the Hotel's restaurant. The manager seated her at a single table in the most pleasant part of the room. It was his favourite one, next to the bow windows and partially cut off from the rest of the room by two huge vases of fresh cut flowers. The other employees of the establishment exchanged knowing glances as they observed his careful attention to the details of the arrangements. Even the most unperceptive member of the team had to agree that love seemed to have come at last to their manager. The manager, however, was oblivious to the fact that he was behaving in any way differently to normal.

Miss Le Mon noticed all the little attention and a pleasant warm feeling spread through her body. Before the meal was finished, she had subtly manoeuvred the manager into inviting her to see Carmen at the Montreal Opera the following evening. This concert was to be followed by dinner in a quiet restaurant, far from the hotel.

That night she went to bed happy, and with the distinct impression that she was on the eve of great changes. Her life had unexpectedly taken a turning that she had not seen coming, and she smiled contentedly as she undressed.

Waking the next morning, she went about her work, with an entirely new sensation inside her. She now knew that this would be her last job for Dyke Fennel. All the same, Miss Le Mon was conscientious, and firmly put aside the turmoil of renewed enthusiasm until later. She was to meet with the fitness centre owner during the lunch hour, and they were to go into details about the future. In the meantime, she had work to do.

Her first task was to check up on the conference centre which she discovered was owned by a relatively new company Plaf Media.

She had called Fennel. 'Plaf Media?' he said, 'Never heard of them. Got any data?'

'Yes, Mr Fennel. Plaf is a small satellite company belonging to the Sony Music group. It's so far from the main branch that it took me ages to work back to the mother company.'

'All legal and above board?' questioned Fennel.

'Looks like it. I checked the directors, and they all have perfectly convincing backgrounds.'

'Any links with the Jewish community, or that crazy politician or anti-war stuff?'

'No. I went through the whole lot, Mr Fennel. Not the smallest link anywhere. There's even a Jew on the board of directors.'

Fennel laughed, 'There's a prominent Jew on the board of almost every reasonably sized company in America Miss.'

'Yes, of course.' Miss Le Mon was the little annoyed by this remark.

Fennel continued, 'The police have searched that concert hall with a fine-tooth comb. they were looking for some sort of bomb or at least some gas canisters.'

'I see,' said Le Mon.

'They didn't find anything though, and that seems to have come as a surprise.' He said.

'Ah!'

'They can't understand how the stuff was so efficiently distributed.' He hesitated, 'Normally you would need an explosion to propel and disperse the liquid.'

'It could have been in some sort of plastic container,' said Le Mon, 'and that would have burnt with the furniture.'

'Plastic container?'

'Yes. Like a bottle of ice tea for example?' said Le Mon, oblivious of the importance of the remark.

'How was it propelled then?'

'Ah!' admitted Le Mon, 'there you have me. Maybe it evaporates when it gets hot.'

'Yes.' agreed Fennel, 'I wonder if you could mix the stuff with petrol then set the whole thing off.'

Miss Le Mon made a face at the phone, 'No idea.' then added, 'What if it was put inside one of those carnival bombs. You know, the one they use to throw sweets or toys up into the air at parties. Do you see what I mean? I mean they are made out of cardboard.' she contributed.

'Yes. Use the thing like a piston to spray the stuff into the air. Yes.' He smiled, 'that would work I think.'

Miss Le Mon had another idea.

'Or use a Spray like for perfume.'

'Yes.' said fennel, 'That would work too.'

'You know.' She paused, 'some new cinemas have smell distribution systems. They can add perfumes to add extra what the call spectator immersion, or something like that.'

'Ah, now that's an interesting idea. someone puts the stuff in the system, then activates it from outside the room.' mused Fennel. 'But in that case, it would have been controlled from some technical annexe around the back, and those places always have a rear entrance.' he mused, 'Yes, the guy would have ample time to set off the system and then leg it out the back without anyone seeing him.'

'But an old tramp was sleeping against the back door.' she countered. 'For once he wasn't drunk, and the police say he swears no one passed him.'

'All the doors were bolted from the inside too.' she continued.

'Bad news for that English guy though,' said Fennel.

'Yes. But it would explain why nothing was found.'

'But surely he would still have had time to slip out through the front entrance.' He paused, 'He would have had to pass in front of the security guys out front, but it could be done.'

'Unless he used the carnival-bomb trick .' She said.

'Right again.' He nodded, 'But someone would have had to light the fuse, and they are short. Only a few seconds.'

'He Could have lit it in the cloakroom, thrown it into the conference hall and then slammed the doors.'

'In that case, how did he manage lock all the doors at the same time then?' asked the detective

'They didn't find anyone dead in the technical annexes?' asked Le Mon.

'Apparently not.'

'What about a remote control system? A bomb up in the projection room or something like that,' she suggested

'Triggered by a phone? Possible, but what about the locked doors then, closed from inside...' Then Fennel smiled, 'What about the systems they have in public toilets, that spray you with some foul-smelling stuff when you open the door?'

'Yes, but it would have to be delayed somehow.'

'Or be fitted on the stage door for when the speaker entered.'

'Yes, but his bodyguards must have been in and out of those doors dozens of times before he came on stage'. said Le Mon.

'Right,' admitted Fennel.

'Anyway, I can try and see if they had that sort of equipment installed.' proposed Le Mon.

'Yes, good idea. I'll have a word with the police expert about the carnival bomb idea. You never know.'

Miss Le Mon then remembered something. 'When I think about it, someone told me that the place was completely renovated a few years back. Just before Plaf Media purchased it.'

'Oh!'

'Yes. The place was stripped right down. It was closed for more than six months.'

It had been the hotel manager who had mentioned this to her while they had chatted about the opera, but she didn't intend to say this to her employer.

Fennel frowned into the receiver, 'Odd that. Strip the place down spend a fortune in renovation then sell.'

'That's how people make money, Mr Fennel,' said Le Mon.

'Yes maybe, but can you check all that out and see what you can dig up.' Then he frowned, 'who were the owners? The ones who did the renovation.'

'I'm working on that. Jude Co. but the set-up looks even more complicated than the Sony organisation chart. I found the original owners though, so I might be able to work back that way. It was only about three years ago that the family sold out.'

Fennel made a characteristic clicking noise with his tongue.

'Try through the solicitors.'

Miss Le Mon didn't need her boss to tell her something as obvious as that. 'Will do,' she said and rang off.

Within the next hour, she discovered that Jude Co. had been liquidated immediately after the sale, and the track led off through a labyrinth of offshore companies until one wondered if the company had ever really belonged to anyone at all.

She decided to drop the subject for the while and to have a quick look at companies dealing with Spectator-Immersion perfume systems, as they seemed to be called.

This market niche is often a subsidiary activity of air conditioning companies, but only a few of these are equipped to deal with large-scale installations. It therefore only took Miss Le Mon an hour of hard and imaginative lying to find the company who had dealt with the conference hall renovation. The person she talked with, told her that they had installed their highest tech system available. It had been perhaps the most sophisticated in Canada and one of only three in North America. The person invited her to go and visit a similar installation to see if this was what she was looking for her invented project in Dubai.

Miss Le Mon was excited by this discovery as it opened up an entirely new way of looking at the crime.

She informed the company representant that cost was not a significant issue because the system would only count for a tiny part of the overall budget. This announcement had

the desired effect, and the technical manager asked her some technical questions to which she replied to with the offhand manner of one who left that sort of thing to others.

However, she did say that the project as a whole, included a two thousand place conference and concert auditorium with an outside temperature in the 45°C range.

The man had renewed the offer of a meeting, which she accepted under the name of Miss Delia Fennel, supplying a false email address.

The technical manager then explained that for the Montreal project they had employed their most up-to-date control system, which could be remotely controlled via the internet. They had also supplied an extra security set up, which allowed their engineers to survey the entire installation via the internet and correct errors without any human intervention in Dubai. He then, having been handed the Montreal file, said that they had even been requested to write a one-off, software bridge which linked their system with the fire exit control.

‘So,’ asked Le Mon, ‘our engineer could trigger any of the air conditioning or perfume functions or open the fire escapes, even if he was in his car in a traffic jam.’

The technical manager laughed at this.

‘Yes, he could even do it from the airport, especially if he had forgotten to lock the doors before leaving.’

Miss Le Mon smiled to herself, ‘Remote control So that was how it was done.’ she shook her head. ‘I was right all along.’

‘Clever. Really clever,’ she said out loud.

‘Yes. We are quite proud of the system as a whole.’

‘Oh! By the way. Who did you do the work for at Montreal? I mean who commissioned you, I know it was Jude Co..’

The man did not have this information in the files but could get it. Miss Le Mon, then gave him an e-mail address and he promised to send the information as soon as

Agent Vx

possible. Miss Le Mon hung up the phone and blew out her breath. 'Wow!' she said to herself, 'What a game'.

She immediately called her employer and gave him the update.

'Hell!' he said, 'Right again, Miss Le Mon. Bravo.' then after a little hesitation he added, 'Your part of our little commission just got doubled.'

'Thank you, Mr Fennel. That will come in very useful.' She then closed down her computer and left the hotel for her meeting with Lionel.

One of the points that neither Miss Le Mon nor her employer could figure out at that time was how the murderer got hold of the Agent Vx.

In fact, two years before Thomas Thomson expected to require her services, he employed an out of work Portuguese woman and her husband. He then engineered them both jobs in the company who held the contract for the cleaning of the Oak Ridge laboratory.

This had been easy because Thomas Thompson had a solid financial hold over the owner of this company. The man could thus not afford to refuse Thomas' request of a small favour.

Thomas had chosen this couple of Portuguese because he discovered that they had lost one of their sons to nerve gas poisoning in the army. Playing on this unhappy drama, he pretended that he too had lost a son in the same way. He told them that he would not rest until he had found some way of stopping the use of such terrible products, once and for all. The couple had agreed to help him in this task.

Thomas paid the two an extra salary, which more than doubled their income from the cleaning company, on the condition that they kept quiet, and kept their eyes open. Above all, he told them to make themselves faultless employees and to take any occasion to get transferred to the department dealing with these products.

Six months after their initial employment Thomas forced the company owner to give the woman a promotion. After a

further six months, he imposed another one, knowing perfectly well that the man could not just increase her salary because the unions would go up in arms. This higher level of wages was only available to those working in the high-security sector.

The woman was duly transferred, and Thomas told her to watch carefully to see how and when the Vx was taken out, where it was kept and how it was manipulated.

A short time later she informed him that whenever an important visit was being organised, the research workers took out samples of the most dangerous products as a 'mise-en-scene'. These samples were always placed in the glass-fronted ventilated cabinet. Once all this was ready, the head researcher and his assistants then locked up and went to collect the VIP visitors. No one was allowed to remain during this short absence. This suited Thomas perfectly, and he settled down to wait.

Over the following years, the guards got used to seeing the cleaning woman bring in her meals, always accompanied by two thermos flasks. Both of these sported bright colours so that they were noticed and thus to became part of the belongings they saw every day.

When Thomas eventually told her the day of my visit, he also asked her to waylay me in the entrance hall. He asked her to make sure that she did this in full view of the guards and to make a lot of fuss about chatting with me. She was then to go quickly to the lab and hide in the women's toilets. When the research team had left to pick up the visitors, she slipped out and into the lab. Using thick rubber gloves and mask she emptied the contents of the VX canister into her red thermos flask and refilled the now empty canister, with motor oil which has the same colour and consistency, from the other thermos.

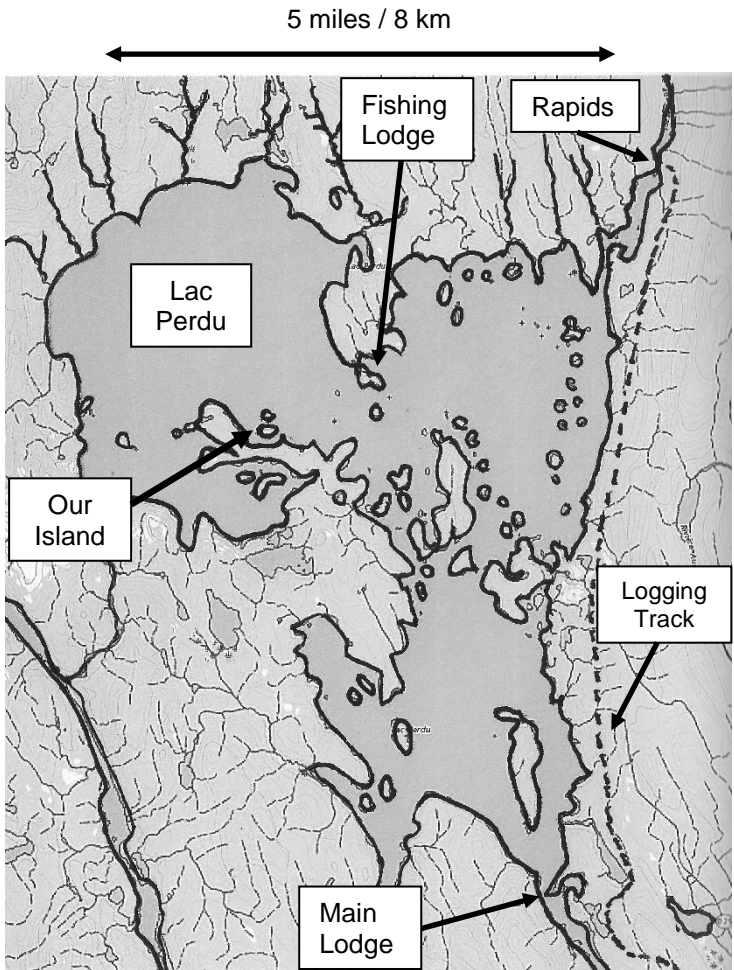
After this she hid again and waited until the visit was well under way then went about her work, starting by cleaning the Ladies washroom. Once she arrived back home, the woman's husband transferred the Vx to two ice tea bottles.

Agent Vx

The handover of the 'oil samples' was arranged with Sandra at her hotel, after which the couple went to meet Thomas to collect their bonus. From here they planned to fly from Nashville to Montreal. From there they intended to travel back to their hometown in southern Portugal aboard a container-vessel headed for Lisbon. However, on Saturday morning after the theft, the bodies of the couple were found floating in a quiet backwater of the Centre-Hill Lake.

Consequently, a few days later, none of the people involved in the steeling and transporting of the Vx remained alive. Finally, the owner of the cleaning company who employed the couple, mysteriously went missing. He was never heard of again.

PART 7



Chapter 33

When Joss Fergusson's photo studio was ransacked, and half burnt down, we agreed that things were getting a bit too hot for comfort. Luckily for both of us though, Joss never used his home address for his business contacts, and even his best customers had no idea where he lived. To the world at large, Joss Fergusson lived down by the river.

'We'll have to make a move fast, William.' he frowned over his coffee, 'anyone clever enough to have framed you like that will have no trouble in finding us.' He paused and sipped some coffee, 'He could get the insurance company name from the cops, then this address from them.' He shook his head. 'There are any number of tricks to manage that if you don't mind telling a few lies.' He smiled, 'God knows, I've done it often enough myself.'

'Surely they'd not give out information as easily as that!' I said.

'Tell the guys that you're a news writer from a national paper and say that you'll naturally cite the company name in the article, and you're already more than halfway home. He smiled wryly. 'Nearly always works. Free advertising in a national paper can move mountains.' He laughed and sipped his coffee. 'No, we'll have to leave this morning Will, before mid-day.' He got to his feet. 'And I think it would be best for you to get out of here right now, just in case.'

Consequently, half an hour later, I made my way down the shaky fire escape at the back of his block of flats. I was wearing some of his father's old clothes, which although baggy, fitted reasonably well. A sun-bleached hard-rock café cap pulled down over my eyes and an old pair of scratched Ray Bans, completed the disguise.

Joss had taken the extra precaution of using his photo-shooting make-up talents, to hollow out my cheeks slightly out and to narrow the bridge of my nose. 'Not something I usually do to my photographic models, although on

reflexion, some of them might benefit from the treatment.' He laughed.

He asked me to take the bus down to Brossard and then to spend as much time as possible, browsing around the new mega-sports store. Joss said he would pick me up there as soon as he had loaded the truck with stores.

I had only a short wait because he appeared beside me in the fishing tackle sector at about eleven o'clock. 'I Had to leave earlier than planned.' he said, 'When I went back with the Chevy, someone was already watching the place. Spotted him as soon as I turned the corner of the road. Didn't stop, just came straight here.'

'Wow!' I exclaimed. 'Someone is working fast quick.'

'Yeh! Someone who knows all the tricks. A pro, of course.'

'Could be anyone though. Even a newspaper writer.' I said.

'Maybe, but might be the murderer or a hit-man.' he shook his head, 'Not worth taking risks, man.'

He led me to the furthest end of the car park and opened the door of an enormous dented and dusty pickup.

Jumping up, he leant over and pushed open the passenger door. 'Dad drove it into a tree five years back, and the door won't open properly since.'

I heaved myself up into the spacious cabin and nodded with surprise.

'Pretty big eh?' said Joss noticing my impressed looks. 'You get used to it after a while. Nothing like it though, for rough country and that's where we're headed for.'

He hit the ignition, and the engine roared into life with an impressive growling. He then turned to me with a childlike pleasure at my surprised look. '5.3 litres, V8 engine, man. Nothing to beat it.' He rubbed his hands together happily like a child with a favourite toy. He then grasped the steering wheel, '270 horsepower, four-wheel drive. I love it.' He shot a quick look over his shoulder, and we moved off, 'A bit thirsty on the juice though, but you can't have everything.'

Joss negotiated the seemingly huge machine out of the car park and wound his way down some roads, which appeared far too narrow for this machine, then suddenly we were on the Jacques-Cartier bridge.

'Hey!' I cried pointing, 'look. That's where the girl went over the bridge.'

Joss slowed down and peered between the criss-cross of steel beams to the place I was indicating. 'You mean by that trunk?'

'Exactly. The girl got up onto the trunk and then went straight over.'

Joss accelerated with a roar. 'Notice anything odd, with hindsight, I mean?' he asked.

'No.'

'Nothing?'

'No. The girl knelt on it and leant over,' I said.

Joss frowned. 'How could she fall over or jump over from a kneeling position?'

I frowned in turn. 'Ah!... hum.' I forced my mind back to try and visualise the scene. 'I was pretty tired out, after that run, so I wasn't seeing things as clearly as usual.'

'Yeh, Of course. But nothing else? No one else near?'

'No. But once she was kneeling up on the trunk, I saw her lean upon the metal girder then.' I tried to bring back the image which had formed in my mind's eye. 'Yes.' I hesitated, 'and then she leant out and suddenly pushed herself up and went flying over the edge.'

'Pushed herself up from her knees?' He frowned. 'That's physically impossible Will. Think about it.'

I frowned too and tried to remember. 'I remember that as she went over, the lid of the trunk lifted and then banged down again. She Must have got her shoe caught in it as she jumped.'

Joss screwed up his face. 'The other day you said she hadn't her shoes on.'

'I forgot, yes you're right. must have unbalanced the thing I suppose.'

Joss shook his head, 'The hinges of trunks are at the back. You can't unbalance them. And...' he turned and looked at me, 'I repeat that it's impossible to jump up from a kneeling position. You must have got that wrong.'

I shook my head. 'No. I'm certain that she was kneeling. If she had been standing up on the trunk, her head would have been three feet higher than the edge, and it wasn't.'

Joss looked across the wide leather seat, 'Hey, wait a minute Will!' He paused, 'It was Sunday morning, right?'

'Yes.'

'No one works on Sunday. And those trunks are shut and bolted. You would need a jemmy to open that thing if you didn't have a key.' I looked over at him with surprise, and he continued. 'Nobody would ever leave a thing like that unlocked. It would be emptied within ten minutes and all the tools sold in the hour.'

'How come it opened then?' I asked.

'You sure it did man? Think carefully. Might be important.'

I closed my eyes as the pickup left the far end of the bridge and headed up the slight incline toward the Interstate 40. 'No.' I said, 'I'm certain. The lid lifted and banged down again. When I got up onto it to look over, I didn't see any padlock or anything like that. It didn't move either when I got up. As solid as a rock.'

Joss frowned. 'I wonder,' he said.

'What?'

'I wonder if you weren't pretty close to joining the girl down below.' He shot me a glance.

'What?'

'Those things don't come unlocked on their own, come on! Someone must have unlocked it.'

'Who?'

Joss ignored this, 'You say that when you got up, the thing seemed stable, right?'

'Yes, rock solid.'

'And you leant right over to see down?'

'Yes.'

'And you didn't feel the lid move?'

'No.'

'So why did it jump right up when she went over then?'

I made a face. 'I've no idea.'

'Well,' he nodded to himself, 'I have.' I stared at him, and he nodded back. 'Yeh. I think there was someone inside that trunk, who gave the girl a little hand in getting over the rail...'

'Christ!'

'Yeh. Now that would explain a hell of a lot, wouldn't it?' Joss's mind went steaming ahead. 'Yeh. I don't know why she was leaning over that damn bridge, but I have a feeling it wasn't to throw herself over.'

We were halfway up the main road, and I pointed, 'And that's where I got chased from.'

Joss looked across, and as we passed, a stocky man was getting out of his car followed by two heavily build men. 'Christ Will!' exclaimed Joss, 'You pick your spots well don't you!'

'Why.'

'Because that guy there happens to be one of the biggest gangsters in Montreal, René Fortin.'

'Ah!'

'And, my little William.' he smiled, and half turned to look at me, 'He also happens to be that dead girl's boyfriend, and is now after you.'

'Oh my god!'

'Yep.' smiled Joss, 'Nice job you did there. Well, at least things are becoming a little clearer.' He chuckled, 'Not better, but at least clearer.'

'Are you saying that someone hiding in that trunk murdered the girl.'

'I can't see why the girl who had a nice job and who was protected by one of the best bodyguards in Canada, would want to kill herself.' He shook his head. 'No, I really can't see that at all.'

I looked at Joss, 'So, you think that someone wanted to get her out of the way. But why would she go and lean over the damn bridge on a Sunday morning.'

Joss nodded and thumped the steering wheel. 'I got it. Because someone put something there for her to collect.'

'A trap!' I gasped.

'Yeh. A trap.'

'Drugs?'

Joss shook his head in despair, 'Christ Will, there are easier ways of getting drugs than that. No. money maybe.'

'Money?'

'Might have been a pick-up. You know where the payment for some illegal work is left.' I pulled a face. 'Wouldn't be the first time Will,' he said and went on. 'Anyhow, I guess that girl came along to pick up payment for something she did but got shoved over and killed instead. Probably a regular pick-up point so she didn't suspect anything.' He nodded. 'A nice clean, professional job. Well thought out and perfectly organised.'

'But what's that got to do with me?' I asked.

'Maybe nothing, but you seem to have a curious way of getting yourself mixed up in the most unexpected ways.'

I shook my head in despair, 'Oh Hell.'

'Well.' said Joss, 'Let's at least assume that this little bit of the mystery is solved.'

He glanced up at the signposts and moved the car over to the near lane. 'Yeh. Sandra Bedard, that gangster René Fortin's girlfriend, was murdered. What she did to merit this, we will no doubt learn later. But our friend René firmly believes that you killed her.'

'Great.' I sighed.

At this point, Joss manoeuvred the Chevrolet onto the highway 40, towards Three-Rivers, and we settled back. Joss seemed happy and relaxed as the huge engine accelerated with ease. 'A 1999 Chevrolet Silverado 1500. Don't make em like this nowadays.'

'Do they come with all these dents and scratches, or are those options?' I jested.

'The more dented they are, the better they run. Like the dents on a golf-ball.' And to prove this, he put his foot on the accelerator and the machine bounded ahead. He immediately slowed though, 'No need to have the cops on our tail eh?' He grimaced, 'I was forgetting. We'll have to play at being old agers.'

After a short silence, I turned in my seat. 'So where are we headed for?'

'Ah! Well, we're going to the middle of nowhere...'

'Great. Nice place?'

'The place is called Lac Perdu, and that's exactly what it is.'

'Lost Lake.' I translated, 'Sounds just the place. Where is it? Not on the moon I hope.'

Well, it turned out that we had just started on a nine-hour drive north, to Lac Perdu. The first five hours took us, via Highway 155, up to the vast lake Saint-Jean. Here we took on stores of more or less everything imaginable for a month's stay in the middle of nowhere. From here we circled the lake and for the next four hours, first took the so-called logging-route, northwards for nearly 300km and then wound our way through narrower and narrower tracks towards our destination.

At each halt, for petrol or food, I remained hidden under a tarpaulin at the back, so that Joss appeared to be travelling alone. At intervals, Joss handed me the driving wheel, and during these hours, he slept like a log.

However, as we approached the end of the logging road, he asked me to remain hidden, and I think that this must have been easily the most uncomfortable hour or so that I ever spent in my entire life. Jolted back and forth and up and down on the hard metal floor at the back of the pickup, with various articles falling on me at regular intervals gave me a fair impression of the state of the road we were now

travelling. After what seemed ages Joss slowed and crunched to a halt.

An unexpected silence fell. This silence almost throbbed in my ears after the jolting hour or so, but I remained frozen until I heard Joss call.

'OK Will. You can come back now.' His voice sounded muffled and distant, 'There's not a single human being between here and the lake.'

I extracted my tender body from under the tarpaulin sheet and swung myself over the side of the pickup.

The pickup was parked in the middle of a straight gravel track, hemmed in by tall pine trees which ran down to the very sides of the track. The smell of pine resin and needles was intense, and the silence was now even more pronounced.

Pastel-green lichen dangled motionless, in curtains from the lower branches, and darker lush green moss carpeted the rocks and boulders in the undergrowth below them.

But above all, there was the silence.

I looked around me and frowned as my eyes searched the forest for some movement and my ears for a sound.

'You'll get used to it.' smiled Joss, 'Nature is supposed to be like this you know.' he smiled. 'Up here, noise only occurs when something is fighting for its life or searching for a mate. Otherwise, energy is used in more useful ways.'

I nodded, but my mind went on searching for some sound to cling on to.

'Come on.' Smiled Joss, 'You drive from here. Carefully though.'

I drove on for what seemed ages, following a granite gravel track and leaving clouds of dust behind the pickup. The trunks of age-old pines were the only things which were visible, except for a narrow band of washed blue sky high above. Nothing stirred.

'Round here,' said Joss. 'Everything is either a pine-coated hill or a lake.' He looked around, 'A lot of this forest has been here for centuries, but around here it's only a

hundred years old or so. We call it burn-recovery, after big forest fires.' I nodded. 'The more ancient parts are virtually impenetrable, except for the black bears of course.'

'Black bears?' I echoed.

'Yep. Big ones. They can swim faster than a man as well.' I opened my eyes wide.

'Don't worry Will. Those guys don't like our company any more than we do theirs. What's more, they hear us coming long before we can see them, and they head in the opposite direction.'

At this point, Joss took over the driving, 'The main track carries on a bit further then ends altogether near the rapids.' He announced. 'The logging tracks are usually erased after the cut is finished. A law I think.'

We turned off the track and wound our way down a slight incline between the trees. Here and there a momentary glint of blue-grey, indicated the presence of water some way ahead, then suddenly to our left an expanse of water appeared.

'This it?' I asked.

Joss snorted with laughter, 'That, ha!' he shook his head. 'That's no more than a puddle Will.'

The 'puddle' in question, was about a quarter of a mile wide, but I held my tongue.

Perhaps a quarter of an hour of jolting later, Joss manoeuvred the pickup, to the left and we abruptly left the cover of the forest and found ourselves on a thin flat spit of ground which jutted out into the water.

'Now,' smiled Joss, 'Welcome to Lac Perdu.' and he waved his hand in a broad, expansive gesture.

'Wow.' I was impressed. The flat expanse of blue-grey water spread out before us, stretching three or four miles into the distance. The forest ran right down to the edge of the lake except here and there, where thin bands of sandy beach showed. Beyond this, the coast rose in a small forest covered ridge, and in the far distance, a forest covered mountain rose high above everything else.

Joss jumped down and stood there, hand on hips, taking in the scene. I climbed down and came around to stand beside him.

'This is the smaller end of the lake. The rest is hidden behind that hill — a peninsula. That's where we are headed for.' he stopped. 'At least as soon as we've had some food.' He pointed, 'See those mountains? That's the Otish range. About three thousand three hundred feet high, about a thousand meters to you.'

I looked about me. 'But how big is this lake? Looks enormous.'

'Enormous! No. This is a pretty small lake as they go up here. It's only about sixty square miles or maybe seventy. There must be twenty or thirty thousand lakes bigger than that in Quebec.'

I must have shown my surprise at this announcement because Joss laughed and clapped me on the shoulder. 'I told you that Canada is a big place, Will. There must be at least three hundred thousand lakes in the Quebec region alone, and probably two thousand rivers.' He smiled. 'Up here.' He continued, 'people say that, if it isn't a hill, it's a lake.'

'I can believe that.' I laughed.

'And if you don't have a boat, you can't do anything,' he added. 'The forest is too thick, and where it isn't, it's because there's a peat bog, deep enough to sink a truck in and leave nothing visible...'

'And of course, we don't have a boat...' I commented.

'We DO have a boat. Several in fact' smiled Joss, 'Come on. Hop in, and we'll go and see dad.'

'Dad?'

'And Dave of course.' finished Joss, 'He owns the place.' He turned and smiled at my surprise, 'The lake and the forest too.'

The pickup turned, and suddenly a series of shacks came into view, straddling the spit of land. The spit of sandy land

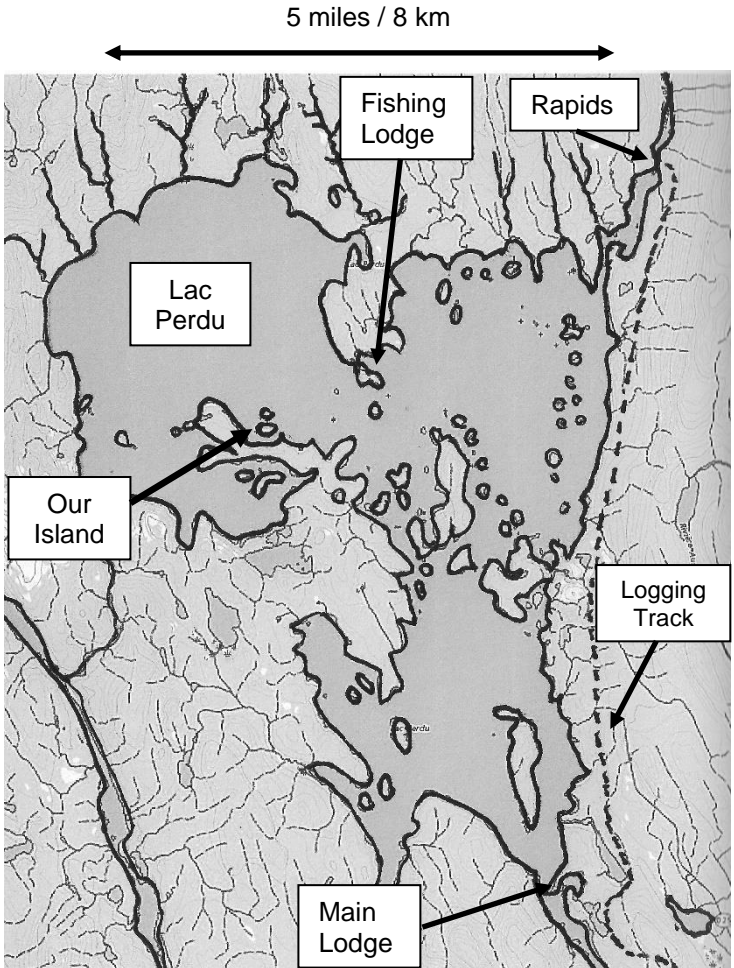
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seemed to reach out like a slender finger into the waters of the lake.

Two men in working clothes then appeared coming out of a wood framed building.

‘That’s the saw-mill.’ nodded Joss.

Chapter 34



Lac Perdu is a lake shaped roughly like the map of Africa and is small by Canadian standards. Slightly over eight miles long and four wide, the northern part contains two peninsulas' jutting out towards each other. The bigger of the two is about a mile long, growing out from the western shore and reaching to within about half a mile of the other one, which extends downwards from the northeast.

The lake is officially crown property, but many years ago it was leased out to Dave for an indefinite period, as private property. Consequently, no one but the owner can fish the lake or hunt the forests surrounding it. Dave built the main lodge which we were now approaching, on a spit of land only a meter or so higher than the level of the transparent, cold blue-grey water.

The view from this point was majestic and awe-inspiring to a newcomer unused to the expanses of northern Canada. For as far as the eye could reach, nothing but water and pine trees was visible.

For the last thirty years, the place had been used uniquely as a family retreat. However, Dave had recently decided to rent out it during the summer to groups of fishermen. This arrangement had the advantage of covering the costs of the winter caretaking and paid for the upkeep of the infrastructure. For this purpose, Dave had built two small hunting lodges, a few miles up the lake. They face each other across a mile of water, and both provided direct access to the northern and the most substantial part of the lake. This position also gave direct access to the two rivers which fed it. The biggest of the two lodges stood on the very tip of the north-eastern peninsula.

A rough logging track stretched up the western coast of the lake but stopped at the rapids on the 'Pekans' river, leaving a tough cross-country trek of five miles (8km) to reach it. Because of this trek through the forest, boat transport up from the main lodge was the best option.

The second lodge had been built on a small oblong island, two hundred yards off the coast of the western peninsula.

This island was only about three hundred yards long by a hundred and fifty wide and was of course reached by boat.

Both lodges were sometimes let out to people who appreciated complete isolation and total silence. Even the whining of the saw-mill didn't reach that far.

Catches of forty-pound trout were by no means a rarity in that deep part of the lake. The cold, pure river water flowing into it maintained a permanently low temperature that the fish seemed to thrive in.

It was to the second and most isolated of these two lodges that we were headed.

As the dust-covered Chevrolet negotiated the narrow track along the spit, the two men stretched themselves. They then made a great show of brushing off the wood shavings and saw-dust, which seemed to coat them from head to foot. Both wore thick, sun-bleached chequered shirts, thick boots and shapeless trousers which looked as though they had been handmade out of old sail-cloth. The two men also wore dust covered glasses through which it seemed unlikely that they could see much.

When we stopped, Joss jumped down quickly. 'Hi, Dad. Hi Dave. Meet the world's most wanted criminal, William.' He smiled, 'Will, this is Dave and my Dad.'

Two suntanned and muscular arms were extended towards me, and I stepped up to have my hand crushed.

'You can call me Sam,' said Joss's dad. 'Well, he doesn't look that dangerous to me. What do you think Dave?'

Dave shook his head. 'A bit disappointing. I hoped for something a little more...' He hesitated, searching for the right word.

'Deadly?' suggested Joss.

'Or threatening?' proposed Samuel.

'Shifty. That's the word I was looking for.'

'Oh well,' smiled Joss. 'He is working on it. He's only a beginner, you see.'

'Yeh,' Joked Dave. 'You need more than just a few hundred murders under your belt before you can call yourself a killer, these days.'

Samuel was surprisingly like his son, only older and perhaps fitter. Dave, however, was shorter, broad-shouldered and more muscular. I guessed that he could not be all that far off seventy years old, but he was still as strong as an ox. One could imagine him felling a couple of pine trees by axe, before breakfast, just to keep his hand in.

'Come on you two,' he called, 'let's get a beer or two before eating. 'Steak ok for you William?'

I nodded, and he led the way down the spit, past several aluminium boats, drawn up on the sand and equipped with outboards. In front of the log-built cabin, built with the massive trunks of red cedars, he turned and pointed down the lake.

'Look down there, William. Look between those two islands. You can just about see to the other end of the lake. nearly eight miles in a straight line.' I shielded my eyes. 'You're going just behind that headland that juts out from the left.'

'How far is it?' I asked.

Dave pursed his lips,

'Between four and Five miles.' frowned, and he continued, 'About seven kilometres for you Europeans.'

'Same distance though,' added Dave with a wry smile.

Joss looked up at the sky. 'We'll have to start well before dark.' he said, 'The boat's going to be pretty heavily loaded, so it'll take us the best part of an hour, I guess.'

'More like an hour and a half, maybe two. You're going to be low on the water Joss, remember that.'

'It'll take even longer if you get lost.' laughed Samuel as he followed Dave up the slight incline and into the log cabin.

'Anyhow,' he continued. 'We've had the wood stove burning for the last two days to drive out the damp.'

'And,' said Samuel, 'We took up a good stock of decent beer and petrol for the generator.'

'And a few other essentials,' added Dave. 'We checked the CB. It works perfectly. Channel 12 as usual, and in French.'

Joss nodded, 'Keeps things confidential from foreigners.'

Foreigners, I learnt, were those who didn't speak French. Frenchmen were thus not classified as Foreign, which seemed odd considering that the head of state is the Queen of England. But then Canada is unique in many respects.

Once seated in the surprisingly comfortable cabin, and after a few sips of the cold beer, Joss went over the whole affair for the benefit of the two men. Neither of them seemed particularly affected by the business but nodded their understanding as the tale gradually unravelled. They had naturally followed the affair on the radio and had already been primed by Joss.

I learnt that they had both served in one or other of America's bloody conflicts and had witnessed deaths and killings a close quarter, many times... Neither of the men passed any comment as to my implication in the murders, almost as if this sort of thing was happening all the time.

A little later we sat down to a meal of thick steaks, washed down with some surprisingly good Californian white wine.

During a lull in the conversation, Joss turned to me. 'This isn't the first time that I have had to go into hiding, Will.' I looked up as he carried on. 'A photographer sometimes takes photos just at the moment when certain people would prefer to have been elsewhere,' he smiled. 'In such cases, I've found it preferable to send in my copy from the comfort of a location which cannot be traced.'

Samuel smiled across at me. 'We've got a nice little satellite transmission-dish up there. Joss sends his photos and articles via an un-traceable Dropbox account.'

Joss nodded. 'Then I sit here fishing, and wait for the waves to settle down, before returning to civilisation.'

'Seem a bit of a risky way of earning a living,' I said.

'Yeh.' Joss agreed, 'That's the trouble about being good at this sort of job. It's about pressing the button at exactly the wrong moment...'

With one hand Dave pushed over the steaming dish of potatoes for me to serve myself and with the other, he refilled my glass. 'By the way.' he smiled, 'We let the other lodge out to a party of Norwegians.'

Joss looked up, 'Again.'

'Yep. The same ones.'

'Ah!' he turned to me. 'Five Norwegian girls. Interested Will?'

Dave shook his head. 'They're more like lumberjacks than women William. And the lack of men doesn't seem to worry them that much. Eh, Joss?'

Joss, shook his head. 'Ok Ok don't harp on about it.'

There seemed to be some mystery here, but I let it go.

'Oh, by the way.' Said Samuel, 'There's a big black bear with her cubs up around the Pekans River rapids. Just below the crossing.'

Joss looked up. 'Oh?'

'There are a hell of a lot of hazelnuts up that way this year. I suppose that's why she's there. And she seems to be teaching them to fish, just where we did all that fly-fishing last year.' He looked over at Joss. 'I wouldn't go nosing around those parts if I were you. She might get nervous about those cubs.'

'Got it.' nodded Joss.

Samuel then turned to me. 'Those bears are pretty harmless most of the time, except when the cubs start wandering a little too far from their mothers' side. The mothers don't ask questions if they feel their cubs are menaced, and quite a few hunters we know have regretted getting between cubs and their mums.' he added, 'The ones that survived to regret, that is.'

Joss leant forward. 'They'll be starting to hibernate before the end of next month, Will. So they are feeding-up full-time

at the moment. Otherwise, they won't survive the winter. That makes them even more nervous.'

'Nice place,' I commented.

Once we had cleared the table, we all went down and dragged one of the long aluminium boats down into the water. Joss and I loaded it, from the pickup while his father checked the engine and refilled it with petrol.

The sun had set, and twilight was already settling upon us as we powered up the outboard and set off across the silent expanse of water. Joss pointed ahead to a thin column of white smoke rising vertically in the windless evening. 'That's the Norwegians in the other lodge. Dinner time obviously.' he paused. 'We head straight for that, as long as we can see it. There'll be light enough for navigation until about ten-o'clock.'

We motored slowly northwards in the gathering darkness, for what seemed hours. Then, slipping between several small islands, we found ourselves on a level with the column of smoke. It was about half a mile to our right or rather to starboard, I should say. Joss then turned the nose towards the west and headed directly towards a small tree-covered island. 'There it is,' he said. We Landed on a thin band of sandy beach with the last real light of day, and Joss led me up the gentle slope to a small log cabin. The place looked out across the water at the column of smoke rising about a mile away.

'Dave bought these two lodges in kit form. We had to bring this one across from over there, bit by bit.' He smiled at the memory of that epic feat. 'Two hundred trips or more.'

The chimney was still smoking slightly, and we entered a warm, smoke perfumed room, more extensive than I had expected. There was a small kitchen at one end in front of a window which looked out onto the beach. The dining area next to this sported a hand-made table, built by Dave out of thick pine planks. The room was completed by relaxing area, furnished with two old leather sofas which had seen better days.

'I contributed these.' Joss thumped the back of one of them. 'They were in my studio before I got the new ones.'

In the corner, a door, once more made of rough planks, led into a small bedroom, with a window looking up the slope into the forest. 'Two single beds I'm afraid, Will. I hope you don't mind sleeping alone.' He laughed.

'Same as if I was in prison.' I replied, 'I'll make do...'

He pulled back the yellowing lace curtain and pointed. 'There's my satellite dish. Nicely hidden from the beach.' he tapped his nose meaningfully.

At this moment there was a crackling noise from the main room, and Joss strode back. The sound emanated from a new and impressive CB base station, and Joss nodded to me as he snatched up the microphone.

'Nice bit of kit! My contribution too.' He nodded.

He flicked a switch and checked a dial. 'Hey, Dave!'

'Got you.'

'Just arrived. Thanks for the beer.'

'You're welcome.'

'Goodnight all.'

'Night.'

There was a click, and Joss flicked the switch again. 'Never say more than necessary.' he looked at me, 'And never say anything about our surroundings. Don't even mention water or fish or trees.' I frowned. 'Almost anyone with a CB can listen-in.'

The unloading of the boat took us a good half hour then we went straight to bed, between slightly damp sheets but in absolute silence.

I was woken the next morning by a roar and the sound of an engine starting.

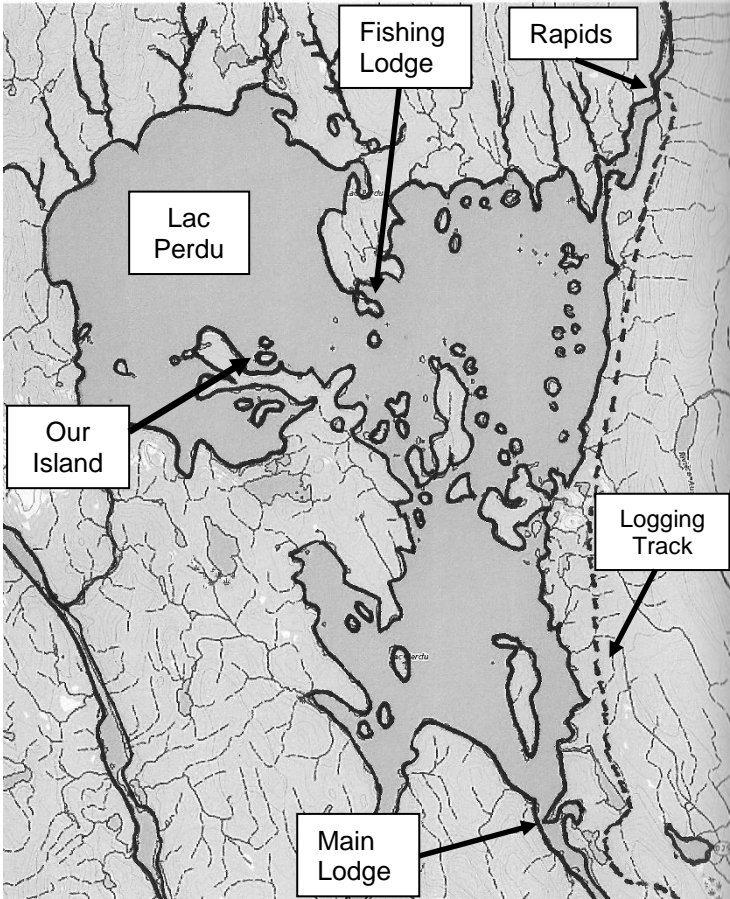
Making my way across the main room, I stood gazing out through the doorway across the expanse of still blue water. In the distance, the sun was colouring the rounded summit of the Otish mountain orange, and the air was still cold. The engine stopped as abruptly as it had started, and Joss appeared around the corner of the cabin.

'The generator works OK,' he nodded, 'and we've plenty of petrol, so we're OK for electricity if we need it.' He kicked off his shoes. 'I've got battery storage for the CB and the PC. Twelve-volt LED lighting too, and that works directly off the batteries.' He reached up and prodded a bulb, which looked exactly like a normal mains voltage one. 'I only run up the generator if I need to transmit via the satellite, saves all that noise and noise carries a hell of a long way up here.'

'What about fires though. We spotted the other one, miles off.'

'Ah! But they are not hiding are they.' He then looked over at me. 'Any good at fishing Will?' I pulled a face. 'Well, you'll soon learn, if you want a bit of fresh food that is.' Then turning, 'Talking about food, let's get some breakfast.'

And thus, started my memorable stay on one of Canada's remote and very secret lakes.



Chapter 35

The two terrorists had no idea that they were being followed. As has already been mentioned, neither of the two were very bright. Consequently, They were both still oddly amazed by the fact that they had discovered the hiding place of the criminal they sought, all by themselves.

The head of operations had even been complimentary, something that had never happened before. He had said that It was a pity they had had to kill the old man, but they consoled themselves with the idea that, being old, he would have died soon anyway.

Up to this point, it hadn't occurred to them that finding an isolated hunting lodge, hidden somewhere in a forest stretching around a hundred miles of trackless coastline, might pose a problem. Neither had they considered the more important point, that the criminal might not be with the photographer and the latter, not with his father at the lodge. So, for the moment they were quite happy in their innocent enthusiasm and misplaced confidence.

Had they not been quite so full of themselves for having been able at last to prove their real value, they might have noticed a pickup tailing them in the distance. During the numerous hours of the trip, it was sometimes behind them and sometimes ahead of them and sometimes not in sight at all. When they halted for petrol or to urinate, the other car carried on and then waited patiently, ten miles further on, for them to pass. The fact that the pickup tailing them had a white cab and a black rear was not something that occurred to them. As it was, therefore, they spent a most agreeable day driving up toward the forests and lakes of Quebec.

After the Saint-Jean Lake, the granite dust rising in clouds from the compacted logging road helped to obscure the followers and made following easy as there were no other vehicles in the up-lane at that time. When this wide route eventually gave way to narrower and less frequented roads, the followers fell behind but closely followed their

progress on a large scale topo map. In any case, there was always a little dust in the air, to guide them when in doubt.

'What does the GPS say' asked one of the terrorists.

'Straight on.'

'You sure?'

'Yep. Straight on. The lake must be another ten miles up this way.'

Suddenly a new idea came to the first. 'No one following us I suppose?' he frowned.

The other swivelled around and surveyed the cloud of dust rising behind them. 'No. Anyhow, no one could follow us through all that dust.'

'Ha!' laughed the other, 'Right there...'

In any case, the other car had pulled over. The co-pilot had spotted on the map that the road was a dead-end. There was no possibility of them losing their prey now. They would allow ten minutes then drive up slowly.

The two Mossad agents consulted the map and exchanged glances. 'Lac Perdu.' read the older of the two.

'So that's where they are!'

'Nice and quiet.' smiled the other, 'Perfect.'

The other man nodded and un-hitched his handgun which was taped to the underside of his seat. They then jumped down from the Ford pickup and extracted a rifle case which was lying in full sight on the back seats. These, they loaded and then painstakingly checked the sights. After completing this task, they remounted and drove slowly on, up the logging track.

Several miles ahead of them, the terrorists had stopped. The main track ended here, but an extension of the logging route continued northward.

'Let's get down by the lake-side and see what we can see.'

Threading their way down the slope under some pines, they eventually came out onto a narrow sandy beach. A series of islands blocked the view of the major part of the lake, but luck was with the two men.

'Hey man, look!' exclaimed the older of the two, pointing almost due north.

'Ah ha!' said his friend following the direction. A thin straight column of white smoke rose unwavering into the sky.

'Our friends seem to be at home.' smiled the first, 'No need of the GPS now. Come on.' They climbed back to the track and started off again along the dusty track.

Following them several miles off, the Mossad agents spotted the smoke too and exchanged glances.

'These guys are not bad at all. When all is said and done.'

'Yes. They can't be as dumb as they look.'

'You're right. Or maybe damn lucky.'

The other frowned, 'That's one hell of a lot of luck.'

'Right,' said the other, not entirely sure of what he agreed with.

'The track doesn't go all the way.'

'Ah?'

'No there's a river and no bridge. The map shows some rapids too.'

'A long way after that?'

The other man scrutinised the map and using his thumb, measured off the distance from the rapids to the point they had observed the smoke. 'Looks like about five miles, through the forest, longer if you follow the coast.'

'Plenty of time to catch them before they get there then.'

'You bet.' agreed the other.

The two knew that they must avoid using the guns at all costs. This would be the easiest way to dispose of the two men but would alert the people in the cabin.

They parked their Ford out of sight, behind a huge pile of trunks by the track, and shouldering their backpacks to which they had securely strapped their rifles, started jogging easily up the track. Consulting the map at intervals, they then climbed uphill into the forest and followed the track from higher up. Eventually, they came to a point above the rapids and spotted the two other men heaving their gear out

of the pick-up. They then turned the vehicle, ready for the return trip.

The Mossad men crept, with practised ease down through the forest to within a hundred yards of the parked pickup. When the two terrorists shouldered their gear and headed for the rapids, they slipped behind the vehicle and watched.

The two terrorists waded out into the rapids and picked their way carefully across the vast expanse of water. They kept close together and eventually made the opposite side. Then, after checking the map, they set off up the opposite slope and disappeared over the first rise.

The Mossad agents waited a few minutes then followed. For once, however, they had made an error. They had underestimated their opponents. For once also, the terrorists did their job correctly. As soon as they were over the ridge, they ducked down, waited thirty seconds, then scrambled back to the top on hands and knees. Looking over the edge and down through the tree trunks, they spotted the two Mossad agents enter the water. They exchanged glances and brought up their rifles.

'Who the hell are those guys?' asked the older man.

'Look like pros to me. What do you think they're after?'

'The same thing as us, I guess. Must have followed us.'

'I kept an eye open and didn't spot anyone.'

'Pros then. Strong guys too.'

The younger one's better eyesight showed him that the two men looked stronger and in better condition than they were themselves.

'Do we take them out now?'

His friend cursed. 'The shots will be heard at the cabin, and that'll put them on red-alert, damn it.' He made an exasperated clicking noise with his tongue. 'Suppose we've no choice.'

However, as he positioned his rifle and started to adjust the sights, suddenly the younger man gripped his friend's arm and pointed. 'Look!'

On their side of the rapids but hidden from the two men by some rocks, two bear cubs were playing in the shallows, trying unsuccessfully to catch river trout.

'How did we miss those?'

'We were higher up.'

'Christ!' exclaimed the other, 'Where's the mother?'

The two exchange glances and smiled. 'Yes, come on mum. Come and deal with these guys for us.'

From where they stood hidden, they could see the two men scanning their side of the rapids as they approached the shallow water. They chose what seemed to be the easiest route, and unknowingly headed straight towards the playing cubs. The terrorists scanned the forest slopes across the river and once more the younger man's eyes were quickest. He pointed behind the men and slightly up the slope. A big black mass was visible, a little way up, between the bushes. Taking out his binoculars, the man said, 'Christ! One hell of a big black bear. Feeding on the nuts.' He handed the glasses to his friend. 'If that bear sees those two approaching her cub, there's going to be some sport.'

As if having heard this remark, the bear froze and turned. She raised herself on her hind legs to get a better view and suddenly caught sight of the men heading straight at her cubs. With a roar, she bounded off down the slope at a remarkable pace, unseen and unheard by the men, because of the noise of the water. She came out onto the riverside and without hesitation bounded towards the retreating backs of the men. In a few strides, she was on them. She raised a massive paw and brought it down on the first man's shoulder with such force that he was cast violently sideways onto the rocks. His head smashed directly onto a sharp granite spike and rolled unconscious into the foaming waters. The bear pounced on his body and lashed downward with her paw, slashing open his stomach.

The other man, a little ahead remained utterly oblivious to any danger, as he placed his feet with care to avoid

slipping. However, taking a step further he caught a movement out of the corner of his eye and suddenly spotted the two cubs at play. He froze and quickly turned his head to check behind him. With horror, he saw the bear and half turned, but with another bound the bear was on him. She raised her paw and brought it down in a flash, and the claws caught the rifle and ripped it off the back-back, and he fell sideward. Scrambling forward, he grabbed out his revolver, rolled over in the water and shot. The bullet went straight through the bears' paw, but she came on, furious, her jaws open and her fangs bared. Her massive body hunched up, dripping with water as she prepared to attack. The man knew the revolver bullets were powerless to stop the animal, so he rose to run. The second lunge from the bear came, and the claws ripped open his turned side, down to the ribs, and one of the claws slit open his arm from shoulder to elbow. He fell forward onto the rocks and as he did the bear leapt onto him and brought down her paw with a circular swing, which ripped his shirt and gashed open his stomach. The water foamed up red as his blood spurted from his severed limbs. The bear stepped back and rose herself on her back legs and roared.

Neither of the Mossad agents heard it, as their bodies were carried over the rapids into the slow-moving waters lower down.

They would sink in that mile-long stretch of calm, long before reaching the lake. What is more, the bodies would probably never float back to the surface, because the deep gashes in their bodies would permit the gases produced by decomposition to leak away as they formed.

Only the abandoned pickup would remain as an enigma.

The two cubs came bounding up at their mothers call, and the three disappeared back up the slope from where the mother had arrived.

The two terrorists, watching turned and rolled over onto their backs.

'Christ!'

'You said it.'

'We're going to have to be doubly careful if there are more like that around.'

'You're telling me.'

The younger held out his hand. It was trembling. 'I never guessed those things could move fast like that. Those guys hadn't a chance, even if they had seen it coming.'

'No.' agreed his friend, 'You'd need a hell of a lot of courage to stand and aim right.'

'You think the rifles would deal with a bear like that?'

The other pulled a face, 'Only if you put the bullet right through the brain. Otherwise, she would tear you to bits, even if she was badly wounded.'

'We'll have to be careful then.'

'Yeh. Double careful.'

'You think anyone heard the shot?'

'Don't know. The forest is between us and the smoke. Might have muffled it completely. Might not.'

Then the younger man had an idea. 'I suppose the smoke couldn't be a decoy, to draw us away from the real camp?'

The other frowned. 'Hadn't thought of that. Everything's possible though, seeing the pains the guy went to in organising those murders.' He frowned. 'Anyhow, we're forewarned, so we can make a wide detour and check it out.'

'There's no hurry, anyhow' added the other man.

'Yep. Pity about that shot though.'

By this time, the sun had set, and the twilight had begun.

'I don't much fancy crossing that forest in the night. Not with wild bears like that roaming around.'

'You're telling me.' exclaimed his friend.

'We'll sleep up here and set off at daylight. OK?'

The other agreed without hesitation.

After eating the few sandwiches they had purchased earlier, they settled down for an uncomfortable and cold night.

Agent Vx

PART 8

Chapter 36

When the two terrorists woke, at dawn the following day, the incident with the bears was still fresh in their memories. All the same, it had been mosquitos rather than bears which had troubled their sleep. The two men had taken the precaution of tucking their thick trousers into their socks and had pulled their shirt sleeves down over their hands. This had succeeded in preserving them from the mosquitos except for their faces which had been a non-stop battleground. All in all, however, they had slept relatively well, and after consuming the remains of their sandwiches and having drunk some lake water, they set off.

Following the map, they headed south-west through the forest. The going was harder than the men had expected, however, because these were far from the well-manicured woods they were used to. One could not say that they were impenetrable, but certainly far from a leisurely Sunday stroll. There seemed to them to be streams to jump, or to ford, every few tens of yards and fallen branches everywhere when it wasn't entire trees across their path. Within half an hour they were both covered with sweat and were more than relieved to find their path leading them back down to the lake edge and to be able to drink.

Neither of the men had any experience of trekking, and they had not thought of bringing along water bottles. This shortcoming eventually decided them to stay close to the lake edge rather than to cut across the forest. They knew that this would increase the distance, but they reflected that they were in no particular hurry and above all this plan would reduce the chances of coming face to face with another bear.

They estimated the distance at about five miles and thought that they would be able to reach at the lodge before mid-day. Once there, they intended to creep up and shoot the man they were hunting.

Their plan was then to sink the body out in the lake.

That being done, they intended to eat any food he had in the place and then to use the fishing boat he probably had, to get back to the pickup.

As they advanced through the forest, they debated about what to do with the other men's pickup but eventually decided to leave it where it was. That was nothing to do with them anyway. With a bit of luck, those guys would get the blame for the other man's death, if it was discovered and then everything would be perfect.

In their minds, this would be a perfect end to a perfect crime. They would then return to Montreal and become by far the most esteemed members of the Canadian group.

However, as the morning drew on, their enthusiasm waned as their struggle with nature continued. They became hotter and hotter and more and more scratched and covered with the dust which stuck to their exposed skin like a coat of inexpertly applied theatrical makeup. Apart from this, they were pleased with their progress, and above all, utterly oblivious of the fact that their progress was being carefully monitored from one of the islands just off the coast.

The Norwegian girls had naturally heard the shot and had recognised that it had not emanated from a rifle.

Being experienced with guns, they had decided it had been a pistol of some sort. This conclusion, added to the fact that no one ever came to that part of the forest, especially just where the bear had been spotted, had put them on their guard.

There were five of them, four of whom were strong and used to hard outdoor life. They were also used to looking after themselves and dealing with the unwanted attention of males. It must be said that they were much more interested in the tracking of whoever was coming their way as a bit of sport, than anything else. Neither were they in any way frightened, as they could handle a rifle as well as any man and furthermore, knew how to deal with men a close-quarters.

So, two of them had taken the smaller of the boats up behind one of the islands, out of sight of land and had been monitoring their progress since morning light. They had walkies talkies and sent back progress reports as the morning advanced. They spotted that they carried rifles and had handguns under their perspiration-soaked jackets. They also noted that the two men were not in very good physical condition and seemed to be finding the trek very trying.

This observation reassured them and although they had no idea why the two men were coming, they felt that it could not be for any good. From time to time, flocks of birds flew up in a panic from the tall trees, and on these occasions, the girls shook their heads in pity. In the old days, the Indians would have been on them in the first half hour.

As soon as the two men had got around the last bay, and had headed up through the forest, the girls took their boat and headed back to the lodge.

Half an hour later, the tired and dirty men tramped down the slope out of the forest onto a narrow neck of sandy ground. The lake spread out on both sides, and this part formed a sandy bridge separating the very tip of the peninsula from the body of it. The position was extremely exposed, so before crossing, they carefully scanned the surroundings. Even so, they failed to spot two rifle barrels aimed at them from the forest.

Walking as rapidly as their tired legs would allow, they crossed the sand bridge then made their way up through the forest. Reaching the top of the hill, they then started down toward the tip of the peninsula where the lodge should be. They did not see or hear the two girls tailing them, and did not see the other two concealed on each side of the lodge behind the aluminium boats pulled up on the beach.

As soon as the lodge came into sight below them, they flattened themselves against the pine needle covered ground and carefully scanned the surroundings, listening for any sound. Reassured by the absence of any movement,

they crept stealthily down behind the lodge and taking out their handguns started to edge around the side walls, one on each side. As they did, they looked in through the windows and seeing no one inside, moved carefully to the front, where they abruptly stopped.

There, further down the beach, with his back to them, sat a man in a red chequered shirt with his long blond hair tied up behind with a bit of rope. They took a step forward, and at this moment the figure stood and turned.

It was a girl.

The men gasped and exchanged looks.

'Please don't move gentlemen.' She said with a gentle, lilting accent. 'There are four rifles trained on you at the moment, and if you do move, I'm afraid my friends will have to shoot.'

At this, from behind the boats, two tall women rose, their rifles pointed directly at the men. At the same time, two others stepped forwards from the forest on each side.

The four then moved slowly towards them.

'If you would be good enough to throw your guns on the sand over here, I would appreciate it.' said the girl gently.

The men exchanged looks and did as they were requested.

'Now if you don't mind.' she added, 'Please slip off your back-packs and let them fall on the ground behind you.'

She smiled as they did this. 'Thank you.' There was a pause as she looked around at the other girls. 'Now please come towards me and stop by that tree trunk. Sit on it and take your boots off. And your socks.'

Still without a word the men did as they were instructed.

'Now throw the stuff down by the water... Thank you.'

The girl by the boat then picked up the boots and threw them one by one into the forest, each on in a different direction. Another had collected the guns and had put them in the cabin.

'Now, I very sorry but I must ask you to take off your jackets, right and now your trousers. Perfect. Throw them over there. Thank you.'

The two terrorists now sat there in shirts and boxer-shorts looking very pitiful.

'And now we can talk. Come on girls.'

The four tall girls gathered around their friend keeping their rifles trained on the men. 'Now.' said the gentle-voiced girl, who was also small and a delicate-boned, 'Pray, inform us,' and here she raised her voice to a sharp shout, 'what the fucking hell you're doing here with those guns.' She moved a step forward, and they could see the suppressed anger on her sunburnt face. 'otherwise we'll blow your bloody balls off. Got it'

The two men nodded.

'OK. Come on. Out with it.'

There was nothing else to do but tell the truth. 'We came after a guy. We thought he was hiding up here.'

'Are you saying that we look like men?' said the small woman, taking a step forward with a snarl.

'No. No. We saw the smoke and thought it was our man.'

'Who were you shooting at yesterday.'

'That wasn't us. Two other guys were trailing us. They got caught by a big black bear. She killed them both. One guy tried to shoot her.'

The girls exchanged amused looks, 'with a handgun, like yours!' They smiled and shook their blond heads. 'And now, gentlemen.' she said with her strange lyrical accent, 'You are going to tell us why you wanted to catch this man. And kill him I suppose.'

The older of the two men sighed and shook his head. He had no choice. These five could kill them and hide the bodies, and no one would ever know what had happened. So, he had no choice and told the story exactly as it had happened. At the end of this, the five girls exchanged astonished looks.

'What a bloody mess you guys have made. You're a couple of bungling idiots. Christ!' Laughed the smallest woman, who seemed to be the one in charge, regardless of her size. 'And you're supposed to be terrorists?' She laughed. 'Well,' she continued, 'I suppose the world can relax a bit if all the others are anything like as competent as you two.' She then turned to her friends. 'So, what are we going to do with these guys, girls? Do we shoot them here?' The other women seemed not to consider this a good idea. 'OK. Well, we'll think about it. Don't go away.'

At this, the five retreated to the water's edge and sat on one of the boats, keeping their four rifles trained on the terrorists. After a while, the girl nodded, and maintaining a safe distance from the men dived into the lodge. They heard her talking on the CB but could not make out the word. She then came back out. 'Right. You two are going down to the other end of the lake. The owner lives there, and he has called the cops. They are flying up and will take care of you.' She looked at her friends who seemed happy to let her do all the talking. 'You can try and escape if you want, but you're not likely to survive long with no boots and no food and hungry bears roaming about.' The other girls laughed. 'And while you're on your way, we are going over to shoot out the tires on the two pickups.'

The girl then pointed out precisely the track to take and marked it down on a sheet of paper. 'I think it would probably be better for the world if you did try to escape. That would get rid of you in an environmentally friendly way, a nice natural way in fact.' She smiled. 'You might have noticed on your way up that there is a hell of a lot of forest and lakes around these parts, but no humans for maybe fifty miles... You choose.'

With this, the men were escorted into the boat and pushed off.

'Remember. We'll be watching, and we have ten rifles in all now. Have a nice trip.'

Stephen William ROWE

As the boat moved off down the lake, the oldest of the two men shook his head. 'What a cock up! Fucking Hell!'

Chapter 37

The day after the two pickups had taken the logging track up towards the rapids, Dike Fennel was standing with Dave and the Photographers father, Samuel, looking out over the lake.

It was just before mid-day, and the men had just finished their meal. On Miss Le Mon's recommendation, Fennel had chosen Lake Perdu as his first visit.

Her intuition had been well founded. The maps that she had prepared for her employer, with her customary precision, had shown clearly the position of the three lodges and above in which of them the owner resided.

Fennel had met the two men who were of his age and had come straight to the point. It is true that in this case 'coming to the point', had been somewhat facilitated by the fact that Dave had had a hunting rifle trained on his chest from the moment he had knocked on his cabin door.

By this time, the detective had received an update from Talia Kauffman, via her butler and was aware of the existence of the letters and their possible signification. On his arrival the previous night he had therefore shared this information with the two men. He did this partly to convince them of his real objective and partly to minimise the probability of getting shot. He had also shared the fact that I could not have done the anti-Jew graffiti. He explained that I was carrying nothing during my run and was certainly not running with a paint canister in each hand. He had gone on to tell them that, as the paint canisters had then been found at the hotel, he was sure that at least that part was a frame-up.

'I see no reason,' he had finished, 'Why all the rest was not part of a very elaborate plan to incriminate Dr Stone.'

Dave had agreed, 'The boy was probably supposed to die with the rest of the people and then that would have clinched everything.'

'Exactly,' agreed Samuel. 'And the attempt to retrieve or destroy the letters is absolute proof if you ask me.'

Dike Fennel had nodded. 'But if someone manages to kill the boy, then he won't be able to clear his name.'

'Someone must have guessed that this Kauffman woman was likely to try and track down the man's wife,' said Dave.

'A clever man who was not intending to leave any stones unturned.' Said his friend.

'I wouldn't like to be in those French guy's shoes though,' commented Dave.

'Why?'

'Because I guess that if they happen to know who was paying them to recover those letters, then their lives are very much in danger.'

Mr Fennel nodded, 'Exactly, but I expect that he has covered his tracks, with characteristic attention to detail.'

The other two nodded agreement.

Fennel then explained to them what Miss Le Mon had turned up about the conference hall.

'Remote control!' exclaimed Dave, 'In that case, the guy could have been anywhere.'

'And if the English man had died, the whole thing would have been watertight,' said Samuel.

'Yeh! That boy certainly had luck on his side that afternoon.'

'You're telling me. Christ!'

'So, blowing up the building, was a trick to make it impossible to spot the extra perfume injection system?' said Dave.

'Yes,' agreed Fennel. 'Just another network of blackened pipes. All the electronics and control panels would have been in plastic and would have melted into a huge mess. No one would have thought about that.'

'Clever guy.' Said Dave.

'He must have had one hell of a chip on his shoulder.' said his friend.

'Or be Mad...'

'Or both,' suggested Fennel.

On the radio the previous night, the three men had heard that the girl on service at my hotel had been interviewed. She had admitted that I had come down from my room limping and had asked for some anti-sprain cream. She had commented that I didn't look much as if I'd been out running. In particular, she had added that I had made what had seemed to her to be a miraculous recovery because an hour later, I had gone off to the Botanical gardens without the slightest sign of a limp. 'Faking it', had been her conclusion. She had also, very helpfully, of course, mentioned that I had spent a long time pouring over the detailed plan of the gardens, making strange markings with a black felt tip pen. She was reported to have thought this to be particularly sinister.

Dave laughed, 'A sinister foreigner, faking a limp. Pity he wasn't wearing an eye patch or had had a mutilated hand. That would have made him perfect.'

The three men had laughed at this but had agreed that the initial frame-up was being vastly improved on every day, by the imaginative and ingenious interpretations made by various incompetent observers.

Dave was now pushing out one of the smaller boats into the water, and once it was afloat, he started the outboard. 'I guess you're used to handling these things, Mr Fennel.'

Dyke Fennel Nodded.

Then pointing out across the lake, he said, 'Now, the easiest way is to follow that big island there, up along its east coast.' The detective nodded again and looked down at the map the man had lent him. 'Then you follow the eastern coast up and cross this inlet here.' he prodded the map. 'And then slip between the headland and this island. Got that?'

'Got it' nodded Fennel.

'Right. Then you follow this big island and stay between it and this series of little chaps here.' He indicated a chaplet

of islets. 'When you get right to the tip of the island, you head almost dead west, and you'll virtually run into the island.'

'Seems easy enough.' commented the detective.

'I'll call up Joss, and he'll keep an eye open.'

'Right.'

'Keep your eyes open though. The bears sometimes cross the lake between those islands.' He smiled, 'Be a pity to run into one.'

The detective laughed, 'I'll do my best.' And getting into the boat waved goodbye and powered up the outboard.

Dave turned to his friend. 'I guess if anyone can solve this mess, that's the guy to do it.'

'You bet.' agreed his friend, 'How about some beer?'

'Good idea.'

On the island, our late breakfast had been finished for some time ago. Joss had gathered an armful of fishing gear from the store-shed beside the cabin and had led the way down to the lake edge. 'Before we try to do anything from the boat, I'll teach you about fly fishing from firm ground.' he smiled happily. 'Saves a lot of falling out of boats into wet water.'

'Great.' I said, 'The water is particularly wet up here, I find.'

'Hey!' he gripped my shoulder, 'look' and he pointed south-eastwards toward a small island.

'See that?' I could make out a black form moving smoothly across the water toward the island. 'Black Bear.' nodded Joss then ran up to the cabin and came back carefully carrying a pair of Zeiss binoculars. He peered through them then handed them to me. 'A big male.' he nodded. The image was startlingly clear, and I could see the beast perfectly, as it surged effortlessly through the water, towards the Island.

'Told you they swim well,' he said. 'Must be something interesting on that island.' he frowned, 'Wonder what it is. Much too late in the year for mating of course.'

'Well, I'm not going over to ask him,' I said.

'Me neither, Will. Come on get that rod up.'

I handed back the binoculars, 'Careful Will. That's two thousand bucks-worth of gear.' I rose my eyebrows, 'My little Christmas present to myself.' he smiled.

There next followed one of the most frustrating mornings of my life, during which I gradually learnt everything one should not do when fly fishing.

During the last two days, I had had virtually no time to think about my present plight. I even felt more relaxed here than I had done for many weeks.

At the end of the lesson, we had a good meal of lake trout which Joss had somehow caught then he sat back.

'We'll go out in the boat this afternoon, and we can do a bit of thinking.'

'OK.' I agreed, 'At least while I'm not in the water.'

We then spent a good hour out on the lake debating the questions which had occurred to us. We especially wondered who on earth would want to kill so many people and then not take the credit for it. Like many people, we agreed that the terrorist theory didn't hold water. We also decided that the main speaker could not have been the primary objective, because there would have been so many easier ways of killing him especially for someone who had a gift for organising highly complex crimes. We initially agreed that it might be an attack against his ideas and all those who adhered to them, or even against the Jewish community. However, we decided to reject this option because in that case the murderer would have wanted his reasons to be known. This would be essential for the gesture to have a significant political impact. The absence of any declaration which could be taken seriously seemed to us proof that this was not the case. We then decided that the murderer could not have been inside the building. If this had been the case, it would have pointed to someone ready to become a martyr to a given cause. There again he would

have left a testament, which was not the case. So, the man hadn't wanted to die and had wanted me to take the blame.

I was to have died, that was certain, and that would have made the crime, water-tight. But why blow up the building once everyone was already dead.

'He must have wanted to destroy something or some evidence.' proposed Joss.

'Yes. And if the guy wasn't inside, he must have set up everything with a time switch or a programmer.'

'Perhaps that was what he wanted to destroy with the fire,' I suggested.

'Maybe you're right.'

'Could have been triggered by a cell phone. That's pretty easy nowadays.'

'Yeh! Remote control. That's possible. Easy too if you have plenty of money.'

'You don't need much money to do that nowadays Joss.' I said and paused, 'Do you know, that option sounds almost too easy for a guy like this.'

'In that case, the guy could have been anywhere,' Mused Joss. Then he looked up a little surprised by his idea. 'He could even be out of the country, man. Hell! He flicked out his fly with practised ease. 'The perfect alibi... I was in India at the time or Europe...'

Without realising we had come quite close to the truth but of course had no idea of this.

'But how did the guy manage to get all those people in the place just at the right time,' asked Joss. 'There's a mystery there.'

'No.' I shook my head, 'That must have been the politician's secretary who did all the invitations.'

'And of course, that's why you killed her.'

'Yes, I was wondering why I did that.' I joked, 'It must have slipped my mind.'

'These things happen Will.'

'Anyway, she knew the murderer then.'

'Yep. Looks like it.'

At this moment we heard a motor in the distance and Joss took out his carefully protected binoculars.

'That's some of those Norwegians headed down to see Dave. Too far to make them out, but that's where the boat is headed anyhow.'

'Run out of matches I suppose.' I joked.

'Joss scanned the surface of the lake. 'Our visitor should be with us soon. Mind you Dave sent him up the long way around.'

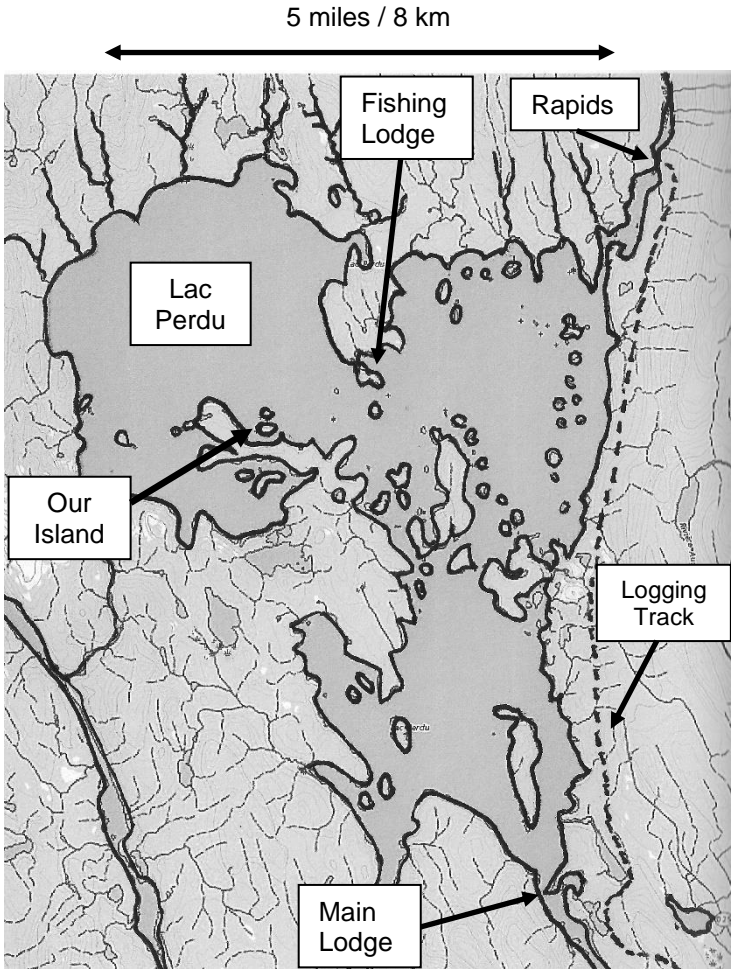
We continued our debate, and fifteen minutes or so later, Joss pointed eastwards. 'There he is, coming straight towards us. That guy knows how to read a map.'

'And drive a boat,' I added.

'Drive?' laughed Joss

'Well you don't sail it or row it, do you.' I defended myself.

'Ok. Drive, if you like,' Laughed Joss.



Chapter 38

The detective slowed his boat as he approached and swung her around broadside, coming into contact with ours with a gentle bump. Joss grabbed the gunwale with his left hand to hold her in position and held out his hand.

'Pleased to meet you.' The little man smiled over at us and shook hands. 'You must be Joss, and this, of course, is public enemy number one, Doctor William Stone if I am not mistaken.'

We nodded, 'And you are?'

'Private detective Dyke Fennel, at your service. Presently in the employment of Mrs Talia Kaufmann, whose family and friends were killed, as we all know.' He looked across at us, 'I have convinced your father and Dave that I believe that this man here is innocent. I've made a bit of progress in my investigations, but we need to work together if we are to find out who committed the murder.'

Dave nodded, 'Before he gets at us.'

'Exactly.' agreed Fennel.

'OK. Follow us, and we'll chat on dry land.'

Once they had pulled the boats up onto the sand, they made for the cabin and Joss served some beer. Sitting back in one of the armchairs, the detective looked around himself. 'Nice hiding place you have up here.'

'Has come in handy in the past.'

'I noticed the satellite dish out the back. Handy to get your copy in, when things get a little hot, I guess.'

'You don't miss much, Mr Fennel.'

'That's why I'm good at my job.'

'And expensive.'

'That too.' Then he took a sip of his beer, 'I'll start by putting you two in the picture, shall I?' He started by describing the reasoning about the false terrorist declaration, with which we agreed heartily. He then told us about the graffiti and the unexplained appearance of the paint canisters in my room. From here, he went on to

describe the fact that the series of letters I had exchanged with my employers had been recovered. They seemed to prove that at least I had been indeed commissioned. He admitted that as there was, no proof that I had not written them myself, the police were not yet convinced.

I agreed that this was a possibility.

'A possibility which the police are taking seriously, seeing the complexity of the overall crime,' he added.

'Yes, I can understand that of course.' I accepted. 'They might also be part of my plan, aimed at clearing my name.'

Fennel neglected to mention the attempt on my wife's life and the near burning down of my home. 'Your friend Paul Douanier, of whom I have already heard a good deal of praise in the past, and his assistant, are now looking after your wife.'

'That'll be Margaux,' I added

'The assistant?' asked Joss.

'Yes. A childhood friend too.'

The detective filed this new bit of information away for future use and continued, 'She has been taken to a very safe place until this affair has been settled.'

I frowned at this, remembering the so-called safe places in which we had been placed during our earlier adventures and that had proven slightly less secure than assumed...*

Finally, he described his latest findings concerning the conference hall, the perfume delivery system and above all, the sophisticated remote-control system.

Joss and I exchanged triumphant smiles.

'We were right then.' laughed Joss. 'We came to exactly that conclusion out there on the lake this morning. Except for the perfuming system that is.'

'Lac Perdu air is obviously excellent for the little grey cells, as Hercules Poirot, would have no doubt said.' laughed the detective.

* See *Bait and Hate*, by the same author.

'Then.' suggested Joss, 'The man behind this really could have been anywhere at all in the world when the attack was triggered.'

'Hardly,' said Fennel. 'I guess he had to deal with the secretary personally the same morning.'

'Ah!' I said.

'I don't think he would have taken the risk of bringing someone else into that part.' he hesitated. 'I also assume, that if he did this, then he probably dealt personally with the rest of the morning's events.'

Joss leant forward, 'When we were crossing the Jacques Cartier bridge, Will here, showed me the place the girl was killed.'

Fennel looked at him, 'Yes?'

'He pointed out a workman's trunk, she had got up on to look over.' he went on.

'Yes, I went and had a look at that,' said Fennel.

'But Will saw the lid tip up when she went over the side.' He went on.

'Ah!' nodded Fennel interested by this information.

'But on weekends, the lids are kept padlocked.'

'Then you think someone was inside it.' nodded Fennel smiling, 'Yes, I see. Someone was waiting for her to come to a rendezvous and then jumped up like a Jack-in-the-box, and over she went.'

Joss gapped at him, 'Hell! You're damn fast on the uptake, Mr Fennel.'

'Naturally. That place must have been a pick-up spot, payment for something he didn't want anyone to know about.' mused Fennel, 'Now what could that be.'

'Maybe something to do with incriminating me,' I suggested. 'Maybe our chance meeting on the plane was not such a chance meeting as that.'

Fennel shook his head, 'No that doesn't sound convincing.'

'You don't suppose that she was the one who carried the nerve gas stuff back from Knoxville.' frowned Joss.

Fennel lifted his two hands and spared his fingers for silence.

'Now that.' he paused, 'Now that, is an excellent idea. Yes.' he got to his feet and walked to the window, 'Now that would fit in very nicely.'

We remained silent and exchanged glances as he frowned out of the window.

'I wonder how they got the stuff through customs.' He turned to me and asked,

'It's a liquid, isn't it? this Vx stuff.'

'Yes. A bit yellowish, like motor oil?'

'Not like coca cola or something like that?' he asked.

'More the colour of ice tea, I should say,' I said.

'And I bet that is how they got it through, In ice tea bottles.' Joss jumped up.

'That is a distinct possibility, and would explain why she had to be eliminated,' he said, returning to his chair. 'She must have met him and thus knew exactly what he looked like.'

'And,' added Joss, 'It was just a question of time before some newscaster mentioned that the nerve gas was not gas, but a liquid, and she would have started thinking.'

'Exactly, better to remove the risk as early as possible.' Commented the detective. 'But there is also the question of her friend,' he added.

We had not heard this part, so he explained what had been released in the press. 'Not surprising that the girl has gone missing. Let's hope she isn't dead too,' said Joss.

'I'm afraid that's a very definite possibility though,' admitted Fennel. Then the detective turned to me. 'There is one thing that I would like to get cleared up, Mr Stone.' He paused, 'Why did you choose that particular track for you run on Sunday?'

I scratched my head and then explained how I had met the fellow running enthusiast in the First-Class waiting room at the airport.

'How did he know you liked running?' asked Fennel.

I frowned, 'I can't remember.'

'It's obvious that he already knew all about your running and certainly your level of enthusiasm. Maybe even your performance level.' He turned his phone in his hand. 'I expect you use one of those GPS tracking applications and share the results on the website.'

I glanced up at him quickly, 'Christ! You know everything.'
He smiled. 'Well?'

'Yes. I've used all sorts, even the Nike one.'

'So now we know how he knew your performance and why he chose the tactics he used to get you out on Sunday morning.'

'Hell!' I cried,

'But why did you go out without a map or your drink belt or even a hat?' he asked.

'He told me that the run was short and easy.'

'I see. But surely your experience would have alerted you that something was wrong, as soon as the timing seemed off?'

I thought about this. 'Yes, normally I would have.'

'But the runners' sacred honour was in question. You had said you would do it and, damn me? You would.' laughed Joss. 'Did he, by any chance say that he would be running the same route and would meet you?'

I nodded.

Joss shook his head, 'The guy knew that that would be certain to keep you going. As I said the sacred runners code-of-honour...'

'Ok, ok,' I admitted, 'I guess you're right. I now doubt didn't want to admit defeat.' I sat forward, 'He told me that he always did that run of Sundays. Said he did it in the opposite direction, so we would probably meet somewhere on the track.'

'And that he would stand you a drink...'

'Yep.' I was a little ashamed of myself.

'The runners code-of-honour and the call of a free beer. And so, you ran straight into the trap he had set for you. Brilliant!'

I blew out my cheeks and shook my head in self-pity. 'Christ!'

'What sort of guy? Businessman obviously,' asked Joss

'He would be unlikely to be in the First-class waiting room otherwise.' said the detective, 'Remember his name?'

I tried to think back and visualise the moment. 'I remember. He was wearing an expensive suit and a gold Rolex.' I started

'And the name?'

'Don't think he told me. You know how it is. You get chatting, just to pass the time.'

'And he was in the same plane as you, coming up.'

'Yes.'

The detective frowned, 'So he was probably keeping an eye on his courier and his precious nerve gas and at the same time putting the finishing touches to his plan.' He paused, 'Yes, a cautious and extremely thorough man.'

'He must have been planning the thing for years,' said Joss.

'Yes, that's very probable. I wonder why though.'

Joss looked over at me, 'Sounds like one of those old-time family feuds.'

The detective made a gesture with his hand, 'That's always a possibility but let's think this through a bit more.'

'To see if we can work out how the various bits fit together?' I asked.

'Exactly. Firstly, in any case, it seems that he must have been following you on Sunday morning, that's certain, at least in my mind.'

'Agreed.' said Joss, 'Too much left to chance otherwise.'

'Yes. The guy could have been on foot, another runner for example,' suggested Fennel. 'In that case, he simply had to keep well behind, and you wouldn't have noticed.' he paused. 'He knew the ground well too, so it would have

been easy for him to find you when you accelerated around the corners.'

Joss leant forward, 'Might just as easily have been in a car.'

The detective nodded. 'Yes. that would have made things easier if he was not as well trained as William.'

'Yes.' I said, 'and in any case, he wouldn't have gone out without equipment because he knew where he had sent me.'

The detective thought about this for a moment then added, 'No. after all, I think Joss's idea is best, simply because he still had a lot of things to do that day. He wouldn't have taken the risk of getting overtired and compromising all his plans.'

'OK.' said Joss, 'So William was followed by the man in a car.'

'The man must have left it to follow me through the cemetery though.'

'Maybe. But I don't think the man followed you over the fence. He knew perfectly where it came out,' commented Fennel.

'Down near the waterfront, and the way back to the bridge would have been obvious to him.' nodded Joss.

The detective smiled, 'And now we come to the Graffiti.'

'He would have had to work damn fast, and there must already have been people about. Risky,' said Joss doubtfully.

'Unless that was not at all part of the original plan.' nodded Fennel. 'Do you know what I think? I think that he had a bit of luck. I think that those graffiti were done during the night and he just stumbled on them when tailing William.'

'Yes, of course!' smiled Joss, he gathered up the empty cans and made sure they found their way back to his hotel.'

The three of us exchanged contented looks. 'But now we come to the critical part.' frowned Fennel. 'How did he work the part about the girl being thrown off the bridge.' He

pursed his lips, and half smiled. 'Do you know. I believe that this was the main reason for the run.' He paused and looked across the room. 'Somehow he wanted to make certain that William would reach the bridge at just the right time.'

I chewed my lip then added, 'Or rather that the girl would arrive at the pickup place when I was approaching. That would have been easier surely.'

The detective agreed, 'Yes. He could have stationed himself somewhere to be able to see you approaching...'

Joss jumped up, 'I've got it!' he exclaimed, 'He must have told her to wait nearby, saying that he would text message her when the coast was clear.' He tapped the table with his fingers as he concentrated. 'And then sent her a message just at the right time.'

The detective looked up at Joss with admiration. 'Well done. Good thinking. BUT...'

'So, there's a but!'

'Yes. In that case, the guy must have had an accomplice inside that workman's trunk. Otherwise, he would not have been able to survey William's arrival.'

'And the guy inside had instructions as exactly what to do,' said Joss.

'I expect that the payment was taped to the outside of the bridge girders. It just required a small hole in the back of the trunk, so that as soon as the guy inside saw the girl's hand stretching down, he could push up the cover, and over she went.'

'You impress me Mr Fennel.' smiled Joss, 'You seem to see it inside your head like watching a film.'

'Thank you. But remember these are simply suppositions for the moment.'

I looked over at Joss, 'And when I arrived, the guy held the lid down tight.'

'I wonder what happened to the guy.' frowned Joss.

'I don't.' Fennel shook his head. 'He knew much too much to be left alive. I wouldn't be surprised if a man's body were found floating down the river a bit later on.'

We looked at each other, and the detective sat back and took a long draught of his cold beer.

'So that whole arrangement was to get me blamed for the girl's death, then,' I said.

'Yes,' said Fennel. 'After that, even if someone discovered the way in which the nerve gas was transported, you would be the principal suspect.' He nodded and continued. 'You were at the Oak Ridge Labs, where you were seen chatting to the woman, suspected of stealing the gas and who was later found dead. Then you were seen talking to the girl on the plane, and finally, you were seen at the scene of her death.' He nodded. 'Any normally constituted jury would condemn you without a moment's hesitation, seeing what came after.' he finished.

'For Life,' added Joss.

'Yes 25 years incompressible, no doubt about that.'

Joss looked over at me and shook his head, 'And to cap it all, you just had to stop and tie your shoes right in front of the girls, boyfriends house.'

'And be spotted...' added Fennel.

'Yes, that was just perfect Will. Well done.'

'Yes, difficult to do better, I think.' smiled Fennel.

Suddenly I sat forward, 'Oh hell!'

Joss frowned at me.

'That man at the airport,' I said.

'Yes?'

'He gave me something else too.'

'Ah? What was that?'

'He gave me a free entrance ticket for the Botanical gardens.'

Joss whistled, 'Christ!'

'Oh fuck!' I gasped, 'So that was how that part was worked!'

Joss brought both hands up and covered his face with them. 'Oh hell.' He shook his head. 'Christ almighty, who the hell are we up against?'

The detective rocked himself back and forth, 'This man impresses me more and more.'

'Doesn't seem to have left much to chance.' frowned Joss.

'No. Not much and the guy seems to have been quick-witted enough to take profit of every single little incident that luck put in his way.'

'What a guy!'

'So, the secretary's death was planned in advance, and I was playing out a part which he had composed for me. In itself, that's pretty frightening.'

'You're telling me!' sighed Joss.

The detective rose to his feet and went back to look out of the window again. 'We seem to have clarified how the Sunday morning bit was worked.' He paused, 'And if our information is correct, we know how the people in the conference hall were killed.' He looked up at the sky. 'But for the moment we have no idea of why...' he paused again. 'If we only knew that, we might start looking for the man behind it.'

Joss smiled at him, 'We do know a bit about him though. He has an intelligence way above the norm. That eliminates the majority of people in Montreal.' He said this last comment with a wry smile. 'We also know he has access to a lot of money.' he hesitated.

'Go on.' prompted Fennel, looking at him with interest.

'He is good with technical things, or he would not have been capable of imagining such a complex set-up. And.' here he held up his hand, 'And he was not at the conference hall with the others.'

'Yes.' agreed Fennel, 'Well done. A good portrait.'

'And.' I added, 'He has a huge axe to grind.'

The detective frowned, 'If only we had a bit of network coverage up here, I would ask my assistant to check the names of everyone on those two planes up from Knoxville to Montreal.' He tutted, 'We just need to know which

passengers took the same flights as William and the two girls.'

'I recognised quite a few,' I said. 'Our initial flight was delayed so I had more time than usual to kill and to watch people.'

Fennel smiled, 'And with Joss's portrait of the killer, that would narrow things down a lot.'

'Yes,' said Joss. 'I think Dave has a satellite phone.'

I looked over and frowned at Joss, 'but can't you use your satellite system and send an e-mail.'

'Yes, but I'm certain the police or any other clever guys, would be able to trace the thing back and geo-localise us.'

The detective shrugged, 'You know guys. If I managed to find you without high tech, I guess that others could do it too. It might take them longer, but I suspect that we have only a limited time before the cavalry arrives.'

'Or the bad guys,' added Joss.

'Exactly.'

Joss then changed the subject. 'What about that woman who employed you. Wasn't she supposed to die with the rest of them? Couldn't it have been her?'

Fennel smiled, 'Yes, that's a possibility I already considered. I can find absolutely no motive though.'

'And her alibi?' I asked.

Fennel hesitated, 'She was making love with an old boyfriend.'

'Oh!' exclaimed Joss, 'Any proof.'

'The servants knew about it. And the maid just happened to be passing the door and heard the unmistakable sounds which accompany that particular sport.'

'Could have been a recording,' suggest Joss.

'No. The man was brought in and escorted to the door by the maid. No one can leave the property without the servants knowing. No, they were both there at the time of the murder. And I don't doubt for an instant that they were doing anything else than that which the woman admitted to.'

'They could have engineered the thing together' I suggested.

'Of course. But the woman has absolutely nothing to gain from it. She had as much money as she needed, and her husband certainly turned a blind eye to her escapades with men.'

'And she lost all her friends and her children.'

'And the guy?' I asked.

'I can't find any motive whatsoever. He might fit the portrait Joss drew us, but then so would a large number of other businessmen. My assistant checked but found nothing against Jews or other competitors. No crimes no drugs nothing. No political positions, nothing against arms or wars. Nothing against religion.' Fennel rubbed his chin and continued, 'His only religion seems to be good food, good wine and hard work. He has only a few friends with whom he regularly dines in Montreal's best restaurant.'

'In any case,' said Joss, 'if the woman wanted to get rid of her husband there are far easier ways of doing it.' He then added. 'I wish I had an assistant as good as yours.'

'Ah, but you wouldn't want to pay her what I do. Everything has a price.'

I laughed, 'The most expensive assistant for the most expensive detective.'

Fennel smiled. 'Exactly, William. and she is probably worth more than I pay, but don't tell her please....'

Joss went over to the laptop and turned it on. 'We can have a look at the two using my own special news-writers' tools.' He smiled, 'We journalists have access to certain databases which are not public. You never know?' He brought the laptop over and sat down at the table beside the detective. 'We have our special ways about finding information, so I'll lead, shall I?'

Fennel nodded, 'My pleasure, I might learn a new technique which could prove useful in the future.'

'Who knows.'

Joss logged into a special database account and then typed in some keywords including Thomas Thompson's name. This action brought up several pages of information, including his photo. 'That's him,' said Fennel, but from where I was sitting on the opposite side of the table facing them, I didn't see the picture.

Joss scanned down the page. 'Wealthy, but you already told us that. Has all sorts of manufacturing companies but especially manufacturing plastic parts for the automobile and aerospace companies.' He continued to read, 'Also, a foundry company specialising in high-tech parts for aerospace.'

Had I been listening carefully rather than thinking about how to cast a fly properly, I would have picked this up. I would have remembered that moulded parts for aerospace were invariably in magnesium, a metal which is usually moulded under a blanket of SF₆, the gas I had been commissioned to study.

'That ring a bell Will?' asked Joss.

'No,' I replied abstractedly.

'Born and educated in Montreal, where he has always lived. Lost his wife when his kids were Five and brought them up alone.' Joss read down a little further, 'The son died in Syria, blown to pieces by a land mine. His daughter died on voluntary service at twenty-five from a snake bite. Christ!'

'I didn't know that.' mused Fennel

I came out of my thoughts, 'surprising he managed to remain sane after all that.'

The detective gave me a sharp, curious look and frowned down at his hands. 'Yes.' he mused.

'The writer hints that the deaths of his children may have triggered this desire to look in new directions and he was thought to be planning to start building a new hotel chain. No proof though.' He jumped to the next page. 'It says he was also rumoured to have branched out into the management of big stadiums and concert halls.' Joss read

down the page, 'apparently he pulled out of that after only a year and a half. No explanation of why, though.'

The detective sat up at this and read the text. He frowned to himself but held his tongue. My chance remark and this last information set him thinking along a new line of thought. Things were beginning to slip into place.

Joss scrolled down to the bottom of the page, 'Nothing more, apart from figures and profit margins. Shall we have a look at the woman?'

He typed Talia Kauffman's name, without noticing that he had not erased Thompson's name. Several pages came up. 'Hey, now that's interesting.' The detective sat forward, 'I didn't know that either.'

They found an oldish article, announcing the probable marriage between Talia Kauffman's Son and Thomas Thomson's daughter.

Joss and the detective exchanged glances. 'Must have been just before the girl's death, according to the dates.' Said Fennel.

'Yes.'

'Can we have a look at what the society press had to say at the time?' asked the detective.

Joss opened an extra window and typed in another password. There they found a few nasty little articles about Catholics and Jews not mixing well and various other useless bits of chatter, but near the end, they found a report stating that the engagement had not been confirmed and that the girl had left the country. A month later the girl died from a snake bit.

Fennel nodded, 'So that's why she went off to do voluntary service then?'

'Sounds probable.' agreed Joss.

I nodded and returned to my thoughts.

'Hey! Now that's even more interesting.' Joss pointed to the screen

This time the society news declared the imminent engagement between Kauffman's Daughter and Thomson's son. 'Now that is one hell of a coincidence!' said Joss.

Fennel leant close to the screen and seemed lost in thought. The article went on to describe the son's tragic death and the daughter's grief. The text liberally illustrated with photos of the girl's drawn, tear-marked face at the funeral.

Joss sat back, 'That Woman and her Lover seem to be earmarked by the devil. They're surrounded by death. I wouldn't like to one of their relations.'

The detective frowned again, 'and then they just happen to meet up again and take up their love affair after twenty years, exactly at the moment where the rest of the woman's family are being eliminated.'

'What does she look like?' Joss asked while typing in the word photo. 'Wow!' At this, I jumped up and came around the table.

The photo showed Talia Kauffman in a body moulding evening dress on her husband's arm.

Joss added the keyword 'figure', and up came a photo of her in the Fitness centre. 'Christ! Now that is one hell of a body, man.'

Fennel smiled, 'Better still in real life Joss. But far too expensive for the likes of mere mortals, like us...'

We laughed. 'I can imagine why the guy wanted to take up where they left off.' I contributed.

The detective shook his head, 'Well, I don't.'

We both looked at him.

Joss sent the pages he had been consulting to the printer and turned back.

'What are you thinking Mr Fennel.'

'I met that woman. I discovered someone utterly self-centred and undoubtedly ruthless, with a clear idea of her own importance. My assistant confirmed this. She is known to go into flights of wild fury and smash up her rooms when

things don't go as she wishes. She is also an extremely jealous woman.'

Joss made a face, 'A highly volatile cocktail.'

'Exactly,' agreed Fennel. 'And then her lover goes and marries someone else...'

'Oops,' said Joss.

'And years later the woman's two children fall in love with those of the man who deserted her...'

We began to see where he was leading. 'But the woman wouldn't kill her own children.' I objected, 'And her friends.'

'You're not with me yet.' He smiled. 'But would she look on the marriage of her children with those of this man who deserted her, with pleasure?'

'I see what you mean,' said Joss.

'Do you? I wonder.' he smiled. 'No, I can easily see that sort of woman, making certain that those marriages did not take place. It was a question of personal honour I suspect.'

We nodded but couldn't quite see where all this was leading.

'I can see her doing everything in her power to stop them.' He smiled to himself, 'And I can imagine that she was capable of doing a large number of very unpleasant things.' He rocked himself slowly in his chair. 'That would explain why the man's two children went off and did most uncharacteristic things for children of their upbringing. That is what made me start wondering. It was out of character.'

'Unless they had both suffered a profound shock due to the breaking off of their love affairs,' I suggested.

'Yes.'

'Nice employer you have there,' commented Joss.

'But I don't see still,' I admitted.

'But what if our highly intelligent, man Mr Thompson, managed to find out somehow about the woman's involvement. Might this not just tip the balance between sanity and insanity.'

'You mean Thomson was the murderer?' I gaped, 'The lover?'

'Don't you think that, if we make those assumptions, then a lot of things seem to slip into place.' he smiled, 'Of course there are many assumptions, but my instinct tells me that this man is our best chance.'

'But why kill so many people?'

Fennel shook his head. 'To make her suffer as he has suffered. To remove all those little pleasures which made up her life so that she would never again be happy. Exactly like him.'

'But she is leaving for Europe.' remarked Joss 'To start a new life.'

At this, the detective threw back his head and laughed.

'Of course.' he thumped the armchair with both hands. 'Of course, that's what it meant.'

We stared at him.

'The woman told him of her plans to start anew in Europe.' he nodded, 'In my presence.' He nodded again, 'The man was astounded. Something I took at the time to be a concern at losing his lover. But I believe I was wrong.' He pursed his lips, 'The women then said something extremely significant.' He paused as his remembered the scene. 'She tapped the man on the knee playfully and said, 'After all these years you still don't understand how women work.' she laughed at this then added, 'You master the mechanical bits to perfection... But not how our brains work.'

'You mean she didn't care about all those deaths and those of her family. I can't believe that.'

'No, I don't mean that,' he said. 'But the woman was a very selfish animal. She had allowed herself a week of suffering and had then decided that that was enough.'

'So she had a new life to construct and the sooner she started, the better.' proposed Joss.

'And that is exactly in phase with the character for a ruthless woman like her. She would, of course, accept her suffering from time to time, but there was also life to get on with. Especially when you have a huge fortune to deal with.'

'So, the guy's plan failed, and hundreds of people died for nothing?'

'Looks like it,' agreed the detective. 'If these assumptions prove correct.'

I glanced at the print out about Thomson's activities, but the photo was on the following page. 'Hey! This guy deals with alloy parts for aerospace. That uses Magnesium.' I was shocked.

'So?' this was Joss.

'Because the guy who employed me said he had a factory making those parts. Hence the need of the heavy blanket-gas SF₆, and hence my commission to study that gas's decomposition and hence my going to Knoxville.'

I turned the page and stood staring down at the face of the well-dressed man I had met me at Paris. The man who had sent me over to Canada to be killed.

'And here's the man I met at Paris. That's him. There's absolutely no doubt.'

'Got him!' exclaimed Joss.

But the detective frowned. 'Unless he gets William first'.

Chapter 39

When the two terrorists grounded their boat in front of the main hunting lodge, they were greeted by two rifles. The men behind these rifles, Dave and Samuel, were in their sixties, but both held the guns with the unmistakable ease of men who were used to such things.

Dave signalled to them with the end of his rifle to disembark. Being shoeless, they stepped out carefully avoiding the numerous twigs which had been washed up onto the beach. Dave measured them up with a quick appraising glance. They didn't look like fanatic terrorists, but then again, they didn't look like a couple of friendly buddies either. His practised eye told him that they wouldn't last more than two or three days out in the wilds.

'The cops will be here by floatplane in an hour.' He said, 'You're going to have to wait.' He stepped back and pointed to the sawmill. 'You're going to wait in there, Come on.' He wagged his rifle barrel, and the two men stepped gingerly up the beech.

He indicated a small plank door, which had been let into one of the two big barn doors and they entered the shadowy building. 'Make yourselves at home.' He said from the doorway. 'This is the only way out, except if you cut a hole in the walls...'

The men looked around the sawdust-filled building, which at least was easier underfoot than outside. 'We'll be just outside.' He slammed the heavy rough-hewn plank door and locked it.

Inside the two men looked at each other. 'The cops haven't got anything on us.' snarled the oldest of the two men. 'They'll end up by having to let us go.'

'Unless they can get us for that old guy's death in Montreal.'

'Didn't leave any clues, did we.' snarled the first.

'The guys in the café might remember us though.'

'Yeh. But there's no proof we went to see him after.'

'No. Maybe your right.'

The older man was frowning. 'But if they carry us off, we'll never be able to find that guy, and you know what that means.'

'Trouble.' said the other.

'You bet. The head men over there are half mad. They'll want to make an example of us.'

'A bloody one too.' agreed his friend.

'Yeh. I'm not too keen on having my guts spread over the ground, so either we eliminate that guy, or we disappear fast.'

'You bet.' agreed his friend.

'I don't care what those girls said. I've still got a feeling that that guy must be around here somewhere.'

'Why.'

'They kept shooting looks out across the lake like they were looking for someone.'

'You think they knew the guy was out there somewhere?'

'Yeh. Maybe staying with them. Maybe they sent him out in a boat to get him out of the way when they saw us coming.'

'I wouldn't like to try those girls a second time though. That small one looks tough. She'd put a bullet through us before talking.'

'Yeh. A tough babe, that one.'

'You think they're lesbians?'

The older man gave him a pitying look. 'What the hell do we care what they are. Just women who will probably shot our balls off if they catch us again.'

'Is that guy Norwegian too than?'

'No English.'

Outside, Dave and Samuel had taken up position not far from the door, under the shade of an ancient pine.

By putting their ears to the wide cracks in the plank walls, the terrorists could hear some of the discussion, at least when the wind carried the sound their way. Although they

could not follow the conversation, on several occasions, they distinctly heard the name William mentioned.

'That's the name of the guy.' said the older man, ' Doctor William something or other. He's up here then, sure and certain.' He looked around. 'We've got to get out of here some way or other.' He walked around the large building, looking at the thick plank walled building. There was no way of getting out without making a hell of a noise. Then he spotted a thick electric cable running across the floor to a set of woodworking machines at the end of the building. This cable was connected to the electrical socket on the wall beside the main door. Following this with his eye and an idea jumped to his mind.

The cable was already half hidden under sawdust and chippings. The terrorist carefully unplugged the cable and then knotted it around a thick post driven into the floor by the door.

'OK.' he looked at the other man. 'I'll call him in. When I give the sign, you pull like hell on the other end of the cable. Got that?'

'Yeh. Trip him up.'

'Yeh, then we both jump him and get his gun. Right?'

'Ok. Got it.'

The man moved to the door and shouted. 'Hey out there. We're dying of thirst. Got some water?'

There was a moment of silence, then Dave answered. 'OK you guys get right back away from the door, and I'll see what I can do.'

A few minutes later they heard him approaching. They saw his eyes peering through the gap between the planks. Noting that they were both a long way from the door, he turned the key in the door. 'You stay right back there where you are. My friend will keep me covered.'

He pushed open the door which swung wide on well-greased hinges, and the terrorists could see Samuel, his rifle at the ready, a few steps behind Dave.

As Dave stepped into the room and over the cable, the oldest man cried, 'Pull.'

Dave felt his feet whipped from under him and he went flying backwards throwing the tray and the jug of water and glasses behind him. Samuel had to leap aside to avoid the jug, and the two terrorists were on Dave before he hit the ground. The rifle Dave was supporting the tray with, was recovered in a flash. Dave was rolled on his face in the sawdust, and his arm was wrenched behind him before he knew what had hit him. Samuel, who had stumbled back found himself looking back up into the barrel of a rifle.

'Drop it.' ordered the terrorist. And he had no choice but to do as instructed. 'Now move back. You try to touch that gun, and you're a dead man. Got It?'

Samuel nodded, and Dave was dragged roughly to his feet and pushed outside. The second terrorist had recovered the other rifle which he handed to his friend.

'Right!' commanded the older of the two. 'We need to talk to that William guy, and you two know where he is.' Dave and Samuel said nothing. The man's eyes then settled on the larger of the boats drawn up onto the beach. 'We know that guy's up there somewhere, and you're taking us up there for a chat.' At this, he aimed at Dave and sent a bullet into the sand less than an inch from his foot. 'I can shoot too. See,' he said. 'Go and deal with that CB in there,' he commanded the other. 'And you two, get that boat into the water. Quick.'

From the direction of the main cabin, there was a loud crack as the terrorist shot his rifle at the CB base station.'

When he returned, the two terrorists boarded the boat and ordered Dave to get in. 'If you want to get a little older, don't try to trick us. If you take us to that guy, you can go free. Otherwise, you're a dead man.' He leant out of the boat and smashed the butt of his rifle into the side of Samuel's head. The man fell back onto the sand senseless.

'Come on. Get that engine running.' Dave had no choice in the matter, but he did have a good half hour to think things out.

The boat was already fifty yards off when, Samuel moved on the sand, groaned and sat up. His head was throbbing, and his vision was blurred. 'Christ!' he muttered. He could vaguely see a misty image of a boat in the distance, but he closed his eyes immediately again to ease the pain. He guessed that those men would not have any pity for his son and would undoubtedly kill him as well as William. It was also apparent to him that they would dispose of Dave as soon as he served no further purpose. However, at present, he could do nothing more than nurse his head.

The CB was now dead, and he couldn't alert them of the imminent arrival of the armed men. There were three of them, counting the detective but he knew that the two boys would be no match for those two terrorists. The detective might have a few tricks up his sleeve, he thought, but that would not help much if they were surprised. Then his eyes gradually focused at last, and he found himself staring at a big wooden trunk on the beach.

Suddenly, an earlier discussion with Dave came back to him. Inside that box was an old hand-cranked fire siren, dating back to the pre-CB days. When Joss had started having to go into hiding, they had worked out a special signal code. As the siren could be heard almost ten miles away, they had decided to use it in case some unwelcome guest should come searching for him. By opening and shutting the heavy plank box, one could make a sort of Morse code signal. If the siren sounded at all, it meant danger. If the signal was a series of short bursts of sound, it meant the danger was coming across the water. If the bursts were long, it meant across land.

Samuel stood shakily to his feet. He knew that it would take the boat at least half an hour to get up to the cabin especially if Dave managed to trick them and take a long route. However, the more prepared they were, the better.

He levered open the heavy wooden case and propped it open with an iron bar left for that purpose.

Then grabbing hold of the handle, he pulled.

Nothing happened.

Leaning all his weight on it, he tried again, but the thing would not budge. On closer inspection the whole mechanism seemed to be coated with rust, so he ran up to the shed behind the lodge and rummaged about in the draws in search of some oil or anti-rust liquid.

However, search as he did, he found nothing. Had he only looked behind him, above the door, he would have seen a shelf-full of cans with everything one could require. He then ran unsteadily to the sawmill, but once more drew a blank. Eventually, he made for the house and grabbed the only thing he could think of, a big can of vegetable oil.

This unfruitful searching had wasted nearly ten minutes, and he knew that time was running out for the three men up there. Without troubling about precision, he upturned the can and flooded the entire mechanism with the yellow oil.

He knew it would need a few moments to sink in, so ran back to the shed and returned with a six-foot iron bar which he jammed between the spokes of the driving wheel. He worked this gently back and forth, millimetre by millimetre, not forcing too much to avoid damaging the cogs.

Little by little, He felt the parts begin to shift, slightly more with each pull, but time was slipping by. He estimated that he only had ten minutes left.

Suddenly and unexpectedly the wheel broke free and spun freely, sending him sprawling onto the ground. He fell straight on top of the can of oil, which took him directly in the stomach, forcing the wind out of him. Rolling over painfully onto his back, unable to breathe he cursed his luck. Somehow, however, he dragged himself to his hands and knees and crawled back to the siren.

Using his last strength, he dragged himself to his feet and leant his weight on the handle. The thing gradually began to move, and a low rumbling sound started. Slowly he

managed to get the wheel rotating faster and faster, and the wail eventually increased in pitch and volume. However, it was still far too feeble to reach as far as the island.

Breathing hard, he redoubled his efforts and started spinning the wheel with the remaining strength he had left. The siren gradually began to wail louder and louder until it was almost painful to the man beside the spinning wheel.

He spun it even faster, then letting go of the handle, jumped to the front and kicked the metal rod holding the lid open. The sound ceased immediately, but he quickly lifted the heavy box again, and a new blast of sound shot out across the silent lake and forests. He spun the wheel two or three time more and repeated the process of dropping and opening the lid. Using the final resources of his body, he repeated the actions twice more and then subsided onto the sand beside the now-closed box.

Covered with sweat and sand, his ears ringing from the proximity to the front of the siren, he rolled over onto his back and gazed up at the clear blue sky.

A series of short bursts of sound had rung out over the forest, and wild animals had stopped in their tracks more than fifteen miles upland.

Above all, Dave from his position by the outboard smiled to himself. 'Well done man' he whispered under his breath.

'Hey! What's that?' shouted the older of the terrorists.

Dave blew out his cheeks and shrugged. 'No Idea. Probably a forest fire down by the logging camp.'

'How far is that.'

'Fifteen miles, maybe more.'

The man scanned the horizon. 'Can't see any smoke.'

'Might be someone's fallen in the rapids down that way then,' suggested Dave.

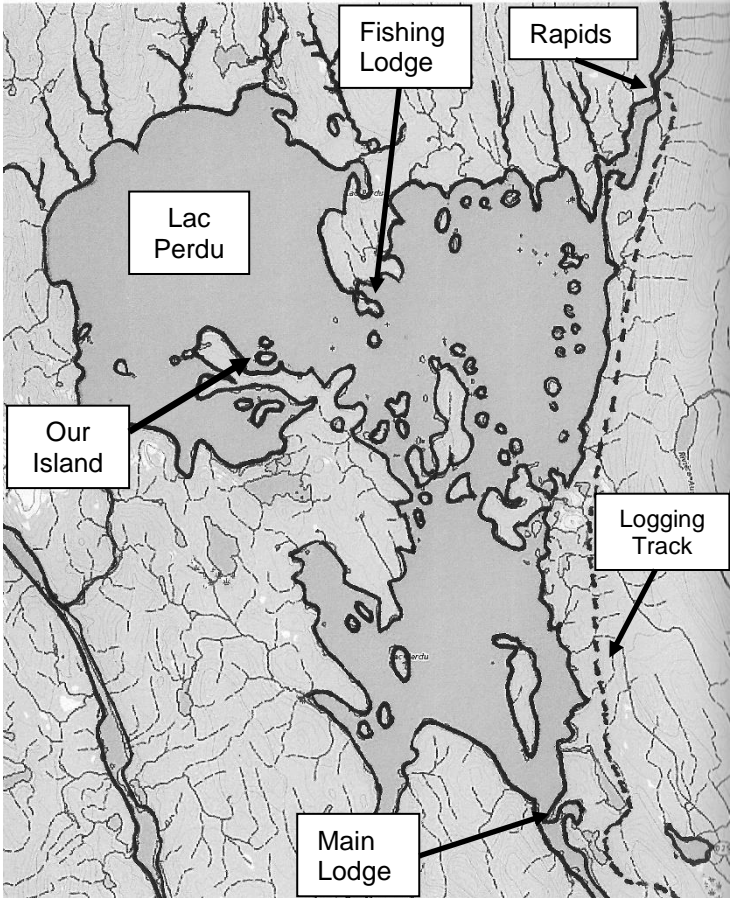
The two terrorists exchanged glances. They had seen enough rapids for the moment. 'Like the one up to the north of the track?' the older one asked.

'Hell no! Those are just little ones. Down south they drop nearly a hundred yards. Real dangerous. Not many people

survive down there.' He nodded. 'Even if they get you out alive, chances are you'd die before they could get a doctor up to you. Smashed to bits.'

The two men accepted this explanation, which was of course pure invention on Dave's behalf. At this moment, Dave swung the boat around, taking a wide path, to bring the boat in toward the island, directly in line with the Cabin window.

'Ah!' said the terrorist, 'So that's where he's hiding.' At this, the two men prepared their rifles and peered forward at the cabin, about half a mile ahead. In a few minutes escape would be impossible.



Chapter 40

We had only just begun to appreciate the importance of our discovery when Joss grabbed my arm. 'Listen.' He ran over to the door and put his head outside. We all distinctly heard the series of short blasts, from something which sounded like a fire siren. 'Someone is on his way up here.' He called, 'That's our danger signal. Some danger is approaching across the lake. That's what the short blasts mean.' He rummaged in a drawer and took out his binoculars, with which he swept the lake. 'Christ!' he cried, 'They're already just out there. Two guys with rifles and they've got Dave driving the fast boat.' He looked rapidly around the room as if searching for inspiration. 'That boat's too fast for us. If we try to make a run for it in our boat, we haven't a chance.' He looked around the room, 'We'll have to escape by swimming over to the headland to the south. Come on.'

The detective held up his hand. 'Sorry lads. I can't swim.' Joss froze and gazed at the little man. Slipping his hand under his jacket, however, Fennel drew out a small revolver. 'You guys get going, and I'll make a diversion.' then he smiled. 'I've got it! I'll take the boat? They'll be forced to follow me, in case you two are hidden in it.'

We gazed incredulously at the courageous little man.

'Christ, Mr Fennel. You're one hell of a detective.'

'Come on,' cried Fennel, 'get out through the back window. I'll go for the boat before they're too close.' And with this, he dived out of the front, fired up the outboard and headed east following the coast.

At the back of the lodge, Joss snatched up two red floaters he used for marking anchoring points. 'One each.' he threw one to me, 'Never go swimming in a lake without some buoyancy aid, Will. Cramp always hits without warning.' Then he glanced around at me, 'I suppose you can swim.'

I nodded, 'I'm better at running, but I can swim OK.'

'One hundred maybe one hundred and fifty meters. can you manage that Will?'

'Not fast. But I can manage.'

Joss frowned but said nothing, and I had a distinct premonition that things were about to get difficult. 'Follow me.' He called and ran off up through the forest, keeping the lodge between us and the oncoming boat. When we reached the top of the little hill, we looked back just at the instant when the terrorists spotted our decoy boat creeping along the coastline. They abruptly changed direction,

'Fantastic that detective,' whispered Joss as we dived over the summit and down the pine needle covered incline beyond. Twenty seconds later, we came out onto a narrow sandy beach.

My heart sank. I hadn't realised quite how far one hundred and fifty meters was when it was laid out in a straight line. It seemed so much shorter when done in twenty-five-meter swimming-pools lengths.

Joss clapped me on the shoulder, 'Can you do it?' I nodded. 'OK tie the floater rope around your waist. If you get a cramp or if you need to rest, pull it in. Right?' He nodded encouragement. 'When we get there, we've got some running to do, and then I'll be the one struggling. Come on let's go.'

We waded in without removing our trainers and struck off. We started off using breaststroke, and Joss looked over at me. 'We'll alternate bits of breaststroke and crawl. Any good at backstroke?'

I nodded. 'In calm water like this, no problem. A bit slow though.'

'OK. We'll do some of that too then. Uses different sets of muscles and avoids too much fatigue.'

I concentrated on the far bank and worked hard at using all the tips that my swimming friends had always been keen to give me. Our shoes were immediately waterlogged and heavy, but I was pleased that I seemed to manage to slide

smoothly through the water. All the same, Joss seemed to glide along as though he were using no energy at all.

'Are you OK Will?' He came in close and peered into my face to observe my physical condition. He nodded with satisfaction, 'OK, let's try a bit of backstroke? That relaxes the arms a bit. If you don't pull too hard, that is.'

At this moment we heard the noise of an engine and spotted our little boat piloted by Fennel, heading out across the lake eastwards. Not more than two hundred yards behind him came the other boat gaining rapidly. By this time, we were within fifty yards of the opposite beach when suddenly something unexpected happened. 'Damn it.' spluttered Joss, 'They've spotted up.'

We pulled in our floaters and looked. The big boat swerved and headed straight at us. 'Crawl, Will. And as fast as you can. If you've had it, tell me, and I'll pull you.'

We bust into activity, and I set my teeth as I concentrated on my technique. This was not the moment to waste energy in splashing uselessly about.

How we did it I don't know, but we were floundering up the beach and into the trees, water spurting from our squelching trainers before the boat was within a hundred yards. We stumbled on up the slope and turning as we reached the top, saw that the boat had stopped. Then the men in the boat seemed to come to a decision and turned back.

By this time the detective had altered direction and was now headed directly towards the Norwegian's camp on the opposite side. The terrorists were obviously not sure who was who. They must have realised that we would quickly lose them in the forest. But they did not know if the man they were looking for one of us or if he was in the boat they had started following? Under the circumstances, they had opted for following the boat and apparently wanted to prevent the man in it, reaching the security of those five women.

Dave had, convinced them with subtle allusions, to take this course, which would carry them well away from the

direct route and thus give Joss and I time to head for the lodge and safety.

Joss led me off jogging down the slope, 'We're now on the mainland on the west coast of the lake, Will, but we have to cross back over, lower down.' I nodded understanding. 'We've got about a mile and a half to run then another swim.'

'OK,' I said, squelching along beside him.

'We have to do what Dave calls, Island-hopping. We swim the shortest bits between the islands, and eventually land up on the opposite side of the lake.' once again he watched my face for reactions. 'Then we'll have about a two-mile run on the flat.' He looked over at me as we ran, 'You OK Will?'

I nodded, 'No trouble for the moment.'

The going was easy, and the ground softened by a thick carpet of pine needles. We occasionally had to jump small brooks and streams, but Joss kept well clear of the numerous sandy beaches, which we followed higher up through the forest. He was sweating, and I turned to him. 'You OK Joss?'

'Yep. I prefer swimming though. Usually do this bit walking, not running.' We suddenly came down a slight incline and found ourselves beside a small lake, about a hundred yards in diameter. 'Let's get a drink. Drink before you're thirsty and eat before you're hungry as the maxim goes, Will. The water's perfect here, but the mosquitos are a bit of a pain.'

We were almost immediately off again and covered the ground rapidly when all of a sudden Joss turned down the slope, and we burst out of the forest onto a lovely sandy beach. However, my heart fell as I saw the next island.

'A hundred and fifty yards again, Will.' he glanced at me, 'OK?'

I nodded and stepped into the water quickly to avoid him seeing the concern on my face. We started with breaststroke and after fifty yards turned to crawl then to backstroke, which was particularly easy on such smooth,

unruffled water. When we turned over again to go back into breaststroke, I was relieved to find the beach closer at hand than I had expected and we were soon on it.

'We'll walk this one,' said Joss setting off almost immediately. He led me up through the trees, to where the ground was firmer. However, I was now aware of the extreme tiredness of my leg muscles. They were not used to working in this way and didn't seem to appreciate it. We walked rapidly about five hundred yards through the forest, then came back down onto yet another narrow sandy beach, facing yet another island.

'Last long swim Will,' Joss observed me. 'Can you manage it OK.'

'No choice.' I replied, 'let's go.'

'We'll rest halfway across.' He said, 'We need to keep some strength for the run down to the lodge.' We swam slowly out into the channel, alternating strokes more frequently this time and a little over halfway across Joss stopped and pulled in his floater. 'Rest a few minutes Will. We're out of sight from the main channel here.'

Suddenly we heard the sharp crack of a revolver shot coming from the north. 'That must be that little guy.' said Joss, 'Hope he's not overplaying the decoy game. I wouldn't like him to get a bullet for our account.'

However, the detective was playing his own little game, unanticipated by us. He had kept low in his boat to disguise his size and shape from the followers and had headed straight towards the Norwegians lodge. The terrorists were gaining on him fast, but Dave who was forced at gunpoint to pilot the boat guessed the detective's tactics. When only about a hundred yards separated the two boats, he aimed his gun and shot three times in the direction of the approaching lodge.

The result was not long in coming. The door shot open, and three of the girls came running down to the lake edge. They scanned the lake with their binoculars and ran back, returning with their rifles. The two remaining girls appeared

running out of the forest with their guns and lined up along the front. Then with a word from the smallest they all fired simultaneously over the heads of the terrorist's boat.

Joss and I heard the extraordinary blast, and Joss smiled. 'That was a volley from at least four guns simultaneously. That little guy has brought the Norwegians into the game. Quick thinking.' He laughed. 'That guy has got one hell of a head on him. Come on. Our detective will be OK now, but those two in the boat are going to have to make a run for it, and they have to head down this way.'

We swam on and were soon on the small island, which was only slightly bigger than our one.

By this time the Terrorists had spotted the trap and Dave was ordered to head back to the main lodge. The girls already had their two boats in the water and were heading straight for them. They soon came level with Mr Fennel, and one of the boats slowed, but he waved them on. 'You keep after them I'll follow. The guy they're after is swimming the lake, lower down.'

'You OK?' called the smaller girl with her lovely musical accent.

'Yep. But if those guys catch them in the water, they're dead men.'

The girls nodded understanding and accelerated to catch up the other boat-load of armed Norwegians. The smaller one picked up a walkie-talkie and shouted in Norwegian. She then turned in her seat as the boat headed off and gave a thumbs up, meaning that her friends had got the message.

They soon drew away from Fennel, who leant back against the gunwale and blew out his breath in a loud sigh.

'Christ! I'm getting a bit old for this sort of thing.' But he allowed himself a short chuckle. He then sat up shook his head and opened the throttle to follow the girls.

Joss and I had only about four hundred yards to run across the small island and came rapidly down onto the beach. The mainland land was about a hundred yards away roughly to the south.

'The last swim Will. How are the legs?'

'Complaining but OK so far. Swimming with shoes on is pretty hard though.'

'Yeh. I know. That's the mainland there on the other side,' He said encouragingly, 'Then about a two-mile run.'

We waded in and stuck-out for the last time across the water. All went well until about halfway across I suddenly felt a cramp seize my left calf. I called out to Joss who was a little ahead and pulled in my floater. The pain was horrible, and I tried everything I could, to stretch it out. Just then, however, we heard a noise and saw the big boat turning into our channel from out in the lake.

'Oh hell!' Joss cried. He came over and handed me his floater. 'Grab hold, I'll pull, or they'll shoot us like sitting ducks.' He set out with all his strength, and I realised just how powerful a swimmer he was. I did all I could, with my one free arm, and the other leg, but our progress was far too slow.

Dave had taken the boat over to the far side of the channel and was following the eastern coast closely. 'What are you doing?' shouted the older of the terrorists.

'Rocks out in the middle.' He lied, 'I'm not going to drown us all, for you guys.'

The man seemed to accept this and turning to his friend they suddenly spotted us. 'There they are. Straight ahead. We've got them. They can't escape this time.' They prepared their rifles, and both stood erect to be ready to take aim and fire. In the stern, however, Dave had spotted the girl's boat approaching, but he knew that they would be too late if he couldn't slow the pace down. So, as the terrorists were now oblivious to his presence, he leant over and unplugged the fuel supply pipe. He then gradually approached the beach, and then without warning, abruptly swung the boat around, directing it out into the channel. The two men tumbled over, and at the same moment Dave dived into the water and with three strokes was on the beach. By the time the men had recovered and had fished their guns

out of the ropes on the floor, Dave was running headlong for the trees.

'Fuck it!' shouted the older man. Get the outboard and head for those guys. We can deal with that guy later.' he snarled, and the boat turned and headed straight at us again.

I did what I could, but we had still thirty yards to go. Even though my cramp had abated, it was clear to me that we must be caught.

Suddenly a silence fell. The outboard stopped.

Joss shouted. 'Dave must have turned off the fuel. Come on. We can make it.'

We had covered almost the entire distance, but the current was driving the boat down towards us. Then the younger terrorist checked the tank and finding it almost full, felt around the back of the motor, and found the disconnected pipe. He plugged this back in, and with two or three pulls the engine powered up again, and they shot towards us. We reached the beach and started to run, but we were now in a direct line of fire from the boat. Joss pulled me down just as the rifle cracked and a bullet shot over our heads and buried itself in a pine trunk, a few yards ahead. We started to crawl on all fours as fast as we could up towards the trees, but several other bullets hit the sand close to us. There remained a short steep slope separating the beach from the forest, but on that, we would be an easy shot for anyone out on the lake. Joss turned and started to crawl along the beach.

The terrorists were now approaching the beach when something unexpected happened.

From behind them, there was a series of rifle shots, and the two men swivelled round. The first boat full of girls was heading straight at them, and two of the girls were lying on their stomachs in the bottom of the boat with their rifles stabilised on the gunwales. Then suddenly from the other end of the channel, two further shots flashed into the water beside the men.

The second boat had taken a shortcut behind the big islands and had come up directly in front of the terrorists.

They were now trapped. At this instant, Joss jumped up and ran up into the forest, and I followed. Before the terrorist could see what was happening, we were out of sight, running hard.

'You OK Will?' panted Joss.

'OK and you?'

'Not quite as used to running as you, he panted. At least it's flat.'

In ten minutes, we reached the logging track and ran as fast as Joss's legs would allow. We were soon both sweating heavily and were covered with dust from the granite rock used for the track. We had to stop several times to enable joss to get his breath, but I admit that, for all my training, that swimming had given my legs a severe trial. We eventually came out onto the spit of sand leading to the lodge and, checking that there was no sign of any of the boats, we headed for the cabin door.

Joss dived into it, and I followed.

Three men rose, and we found ourselves looking into the barrels of two guns.

The gang boss, René Fortin looked up from the table and smiled.

'Welcome home gentlemen,' he said.

Chapter 41

Joss dropped to his knees. Then we heard a sharp voice.

'Down with those guns, you two. Otherwise, your boss gets it.'

I turned and saw Samuel, sitting on the other side of the table. He had a twelve bore rifle pointed straight at René Fortin's chest. The gang leader seemed unperturbed.

'Sit down you two.' he said calmly, 'And put those guns away where they belong.'

The two bodyguards returned their guns to their holsters and sat glaring at us.

Joss and I looked from one to the other of the men, but René talked first. 'You guys look like you could do with a drink.'

Samuel got up and leant his rifle against the sink, while he drew us each a pint glass of cold water. He handed these to us and stepped to the window.

'Dave escaped into the forest' panted Joss as soon as he could speak. 'Dyke decoyed those guys and brought the Norwegians out in their boats.'

'The Norwegians?' started René.

'I'll explain later,' said Samuel.

'We had to make a swim for it.'

'Island hopping?' asked his dad.

'Yeh. Nearly didn't make it though.' He then explained the escape from our island and the track we had taken. He finished by describing the arrival of the girls on the scene.

René Fortin got up and went over to Joss and laid a big hand on his shoulder. 'I've had some narrow escapes in my time but, hell! you guys have had one hell of an adventure here.' He turned to Samuel. 'Your boy is one hell of an adventurer. I'm dead glad he never took up my line of business.' He smiled, 'I wouldn't have stood a chance.'

We all laughed.

'But I thought you were after my skin,' I said.

'I was. But this guy has put me straight.' Suddenly he stopped and called out.

'Someone's coming. No, two guys.'

Joss jumped over and looked out of the window.

'It's Dave and the detective.'

'The detective?' asked Fortin. 'Isn't this getting a bit complicated.'

The door opened, and Dave followed by Fennel stepped in and came face to face with René.

The detective took all this in quickly and moved around to face René. 'Pleased to meet you, Mr Fortin. It's been a long time.' He held out his hand.

Fortin smiled, 'Mr Fennel, now this is a surprise.' he shook the man by the hand. 'When this guy said a detective,' He smiled, 'he should have said THE detective, then I would have understood.'

'Let's have some beer.' Said Dave and dragged out a crate-full of bottles from the cold storage cupboard.

'What happened to those terrorists Joss,' asked Dave.

'The Norwegians got them.' sighed Joss.

'Great. So, they'll be along soon.'

As if to order, one of the bodyguards who was keeping an eye out called.

'Three boats coming.'

Dave picked up a rifle and Samuel did likewise, 'Let's go and welcome them.'

We all tramped down to the lakeside and surveyed the arrival of the boats. The two men had little chance of resistance, what with their rifles now at the bottom of the lake and three from the boats and our two pointed at them.

The Five Norwegian girls jumped out and the eyebrows of both the bodyguards rose.

'Ok you two,' laughed René Fortin, 'Never seen girls before?'

The truth was that neither of them had seen girls like that before. Tall, robust, blond and shapely Norwegians came as a pleasant surprise to them both.

There was a good deal of exchanging of information between the members of the various groups, and Dave was obliged to go and drag out another crate of beer. The little detective then summarised our discovery and clarified to everyone the role played by Thomas Thompson. The terrorists were flabbergasted,

'Christ!' was all they could find to say.

'Yes' frowned Fennel. 'You were doing precisely what the murderer wanted. If you had managed to kill William, the real murderer would have got away with his crime.'

'And.' added Dave, 'you two would still have your bosses after your blood.'

At this moment, we heard the drone of an aeroplane, and the police float plane came over our heads, landed expertly on the lake and taxied into the beach. More explanations went on between Dave, Fennel and the police and eventually the terrorists were handcuffed and transferred, still shoeless and trouser-less into the plane.

We all sat down on the beach, and before long the girls took their leave amid a lot of thanks and exchanges of handshakes and even kisses. They preferred their own company, and that's why they were here on Lac Perdu.

Fennel supplied a full voice recorded report of our discoveries to the police. He then used the main PC to send an urgent message to his secretary, to inform Talia Kauffman of the fact that her lover was the murderer. She was told to send a copy immediately to Kauffman's solicitors as well.

It is true that, in this instance, he was thinking more of his bonus than anything else.

Miss Le Mon replied immediately. She had checked up and reported that Thomas Thomson had left the country for Europe.

Once we had digested this, René Fortin rose from his seat on a tree trunk. 'Can't do any more here, we'll be getting back. I'll stop off at Lake Saint-Jean for the night.' He shook all our hands, 'Well done you guys good job. It's

nice to meet some courageous men for once. Too rare nowadays.' Then he turned to Fennel and clasped his hand and held it, 'You're pretty hot stuff, Mr Fennel. Pretty hot stuff.' He smiled, then added, 'It's a good job I'm getting out of the business, or you'd have got me sooner or later.' He smiled again, 'Well goodbye all,' and the three men trudged up the beach towards their big Ford pickup parked on the logging road.

As the big machine bumped slowly along the initial part of the logging road, Fortin reached under the seat and brought out a satellite phone.

He dialled in a number. 'That you Andrew? René Fortin here. Listen. Got a notebook, Good.' He explained the situation rapidly, then added, 'Get that information to your bosses quick and make sure everyone knows it came from you right!' He concluded. He listened for a few moments. 'No. No possible doubt, that detective Dyke Fennel was onto him too. He's up here.'

Fortin switched off the phone and settled back behind the two bodyguards, 'That should get the guy a good big bonus for his retirement package. Deserves it too.'

'Yep' agreed the older bodyguard, 'One of the only straight ones left. Old school.'

'Yeh.' agreed Fortin, 'Old School? like us.'

During the recent upheaval, I had remained relatively silent and was gradually relaxing under the influence of my third beer. 'Do you think that that Thompson guy has gone after Mrs Kauffman?'

The detective nodded. 'I guess so.' He said. 'Somehow or other he must have got wind of how things were shaping.'

'Maybe, he's simply gone into hiding' suggested Dave.

Fennel shook his head. 'No. I think Thomson knows that the game will soon be up, and will try and get the woman now,' He hesitated then said something unexpected, 'I hope so because otherwise, we are in more trouble.'

'Why?' I exclaimed.

'Because If he has prepared for this, he will also have prepared to change identity. He has enough money to have top-notch facial surgery in any private clinic where the surgeon is prepared to turn a blind eye for an extra big bonus.' He nodded at me. 'You pay a top price, and you get the top specialists, and we would never find him, after that.' He frowned, 'New ID papers and a good pile of cash in a few secret accounts around the world.' he paused. 'No. Let's hope that his mind is a bit shaken and that he decided to act first and deal with his new identity afterwards.'

'Yes.' Agreed Dave, 'Let's pray for that.'

'Can't you get a message to her. to warn her.'

'My assistant has tried, but the phone number she left is dead. Maybe the solicitors may have another number, otherwise.' he paused, and Dave took up.

'Otherwise we have to pray.'

I stood up, 'But surely you must know where she is or at least in which town.'

'Yes. Got that ok.'

'Then I can call some friends. I have a friend in the French special services. He'll be able to do something.' I smiled at the memory of his activities. 'He'll be able to protect her.'

'What's his name?' this was Fennel.

'Douanier. Paul Douanier.'

Fennel nodded. 'Ah yes. Douanier. I've heard of that guy. Something to do with international tax evasion, no?'

'Christ man!' exclaimed Dave, 'Do you know everyone in the world?'

Fennel smiled. 'Just a few of the people who count.'

'Let's get an e-mail off double quick then,' I said and one to my wife to let her know I'm all right, she must have gone half mad by now.'

I sent the email off to Paul and copied it to Margaux. I also sent a copy to several other of my accomplices on previous adventures asking them to get in touch with one of them by any means they had. Not more than ten minutes later, we received a message from Miss Le Mon. Thompson

had left from Montreal on the direct flight to Paris. He had also booked on the plane down to Marseilles.

'By this time.' Fennel passed the room, 'He'll already be down there. Damn it!' he said. 'If he gets there before we can warn her, she won't stand a chance.' He blew out his breath, in exasperation. 'He could still kill her and disappear, have his face redone, and we'd never find the guy... Ever.'

Chapter 42.

Talia Kauffman was leaning on the three-foot-wide stone wall which reached all the way along the cliff-side edge of her vast property.

It had been beautifully built by the best stonemasons in the south of France at precisely the right height for comfortable leaning.

She was watching a large luxury yacht listlessly, as it slid westwards across the Mediterranean, towards Cannes. She turned to Sally, who was sitting up on the wall beside her, 'Perhaps I ought to have one of those.'

Sally pulled a face, 'Too much hassle Talia.' She said 'Hassle?'

'Having one of those is worse than keeping up a castle. There're always things going wrong and problems with staff and papers and visas, and god knows what. That sort of hassle.' She jumped down from her sitting place and rubbed her bottom. 'Hard those rocks.' Then she continued, 'If you want a quiet life, find some friends who have got a big one and then cadge a stay when you want.'

'You seem very knowledgeable about such things.'

'Margaux's dad has got one. He's going to sell it. Too small for you though. Only ten cabins...'

At this moment, a movement in the far corner of the garden caught her eye. 'Someone to see you.'

Talia looked surprised. 'How did he get past Jonathon?' And turning, her mouth opened with surprise. 'Thomas!' she cried, 'How on earth did you get in.'

When he approached, Sally slipped off, 'I'll leave you.' As she passed the man, she noticed how haggard his face looked. His clothes were impeccable, his silk tie was impeccably knotted, but he seemed tired, and his tall frame was bent forward. He nodded almost reluctantly in response to her smile, and Sally decided that she didn't like the man.

She was headed for her bedroom overlooking the sea, to read a little.

'How on earth did you get in?' repeated Talia, 'My butler has instructions...'

'I Didn't see a butler. I came in through the garage at the side.'

Talia frowned, the garage had been one of the weak security points of the building. However, she had personally surveyed the builders when they had bricked up the doors opening from them into the garden. The job had only been completed two days previously. 'Oh, through the garage!'

'Yes. I left the car around there.'

She had not heard a car arrive, and they were only standing fifty yards from the place. The entire perimeter was surrounded by a solid nine-foot fence, with an alarm system on it. So how had he got into the garden?

As he approached, she looked hard at him. 'Thomas!' she exclaimed, 'You look terrible. What on earth have you been up to?'

Then she froze as she caught his look. She took a step back and gaped at him. 'What's the matter? What's wrong?'

Something stirred inside her, and a cold fear made her shiver. He continued to advance rapidly then stopped abruptly, a few yards from her. The colour had faded from his face as he gazed about him. 'This is much too much Talia. Much too nice for you. Yes, too nice for you.' She noticed his hand shaking and his eyes were hardly focused at all.

'What's wrong, Thomas, what on earth are you talking about? Are you ill?'

'Am I ill?' He repeated, 'Am I ill? Christ, what does it matter if I'm ill.'

'What are you going on about?'

Talia tried to edge along the stone parapet.

'What does it matter, when you've got nothing to live for.'

For an instant, she thought this might be the reaction of an abandoned lover, and she made to step forward.

Almost immediately, she jumped back with a look of terror as Thomas whipped a large sheath knife from his pocket.

'For Christ sake Talia, you don't think I'm pining for you do you.' he laughed loudly throwing his head back, 'I don't give a damn for you, you ridiculous spoiled slut.'

Talia gapped at him. 'What on earth are you going on about. Put that damn thing away.'

He ignored her remark. 'You killed my son.'

She stared at him, her mouth open. 'I...' she stuttered, 'I didn't...'

'You arranged it for him to die because he wasn't damn good enough for your snobbish family.'

'I didn't.'

'Shut up!' He waved the knife at her. 'Then you killed my daughter.'

'Oh god!' cried Talia, 'I didn't. I didn't.'

'She wasn't the right sort for your bloody son. So, you got rid of her.'

'I didn't. I didn't....' Talia was near panic. She was alone on the cliff edge with an armed madman. 'Come on, Thomas, you know that's all lies,' She nerved herself to face him. 'Someone has been telling you the most incredible lies. I had nothing to do with it. Nothing. Believe me.'

'Shut up Talia. I discovered everything. Don't forget; I'm an intelligent man. And having nobody to look after any more, I had plenty of time on my hands.' He snarled, 'Plenty of time. Like you have now.' At this point, he smiled a horrible, slanting smile. 'How does it feel to have no one left Talia? Enjoying the sensation?'

'Thomas!' She shouted, shut up. He smiled again. 'It was You! You...' She blinked at the amazing discovery she had made. 'You murdered all those people. To punish me?'

Thomas nodded, 'Precisely my little Talia. To punish you for destroying the most precious things I had.' He took a step further toward her, and she leant back harder against the stone wall. 'And then you simply decided you didn't even care about all those friends and family.' His face contorted,

'You didn't give a fuck. So, you came over here to start anew.' He moved closer, fingering the glinting knife. 'To start a bloody new life as if the old one had never existed. You didn't care. You didn't bloody care...'

'Thomas!' She wailed, 'I do care. I do, you must know that. I care for you, I do, really.'

'Oh, shut up.' His face was twitching now. 'But this...' he paused, 'this is far too nice. You cannot be allowed to enjoy life. Not like this...'

She tried to edge away, but he jumped forward and grabbed her arm. 'No. You cannot be allowed to enjoy anything anymore. Ever.' He drew his arm back in preparation for stabbing her stomach. 'I'm going to kill you myself, here and now as you deserve.'

She screwed up her face, waiting for the blow.

'But before you die, let me tell you that It was while I was making love to you, that I remote controlled the death of your little set of dirty snobbish friends...'

'Thomas!' she screamed, 'No.'

'Yes. And I enjoyed it...' He smirked. 'Between fucks...'

At this instant, there was a crash, and blood suddenly sprayed from Thomas's shoulder over her white tee-shirt. He screamed with anger and pain as he fell back, dropping the knife. 'You will not enjoy all this ever. I will never allow that.' His face was white, and his eyes were starting. He grabbed her wrist in a vice-like hold and dragged her against the parapet. Jumping up, he glared down at her, 'let's go swimming together, like in the good old days.' he sneered, 'down there.'

At this, he leaned back over the cliff, pulling her towards him, but Talia braced herself with her knees as he leaned over, levering her gradually up into the air. Her feet left the ground, and as Thomas started to fall, she knew that she must inevitably be pulled over. Suddenly there was another crash, and a bullet smashed into Thomas's elbow. With a cry, his hand released her wrist, and she fell back heavily

onto the flagstones, hitting her head sharply as Thomas disappeared over the wall.

Talia did not hear the sound of running feet or see her butler arriving, a gun in his hand. She did not see Paul Douanier appearing from the opposite direction either. She did, however, hear Sally as she knelt beside her.

'Talia!'

Paul and the Butler stepped rapidly to the parapet and looked over. Far below the body of Thomas Thomson had hit the jagged granite rocks. The lifeless body rocked back and forth under the onslaught of the incessant waves, while the white foam gradually coloured first pink then red.

Paul Douanier replaced his un-used gun in its holster.

'Good shot, Branstone.'

'Thank you, sir.'

'A moving target too!'

'I have a very steady hand, sir.'

'And a good eye.' Paul nodded, 'good work. I knew I could count on you.'

'I endeavour to give uniform satisfaction sir,' he said with a wry, somewhat un-butler-like, smile.

Paul replied with a discreet laugh and nodded, smiling.

'I'll call the police, sir.' said Jonathon, then looked at Sally

'If you would tend to madam for a moment. I believe that she will be herself in a short time.' He smiled and moved off.

'What the hell was that?' cried, Sally.

She jumped up and glanced over the parapet. Her eyebrows rose. 'Oh, hell !'

'That.' said Paul, 'was the end of our present troubles.'

Chapter 43

The press release supplied by the Montreal police was very carefully worded. Several important people vetted it before it was sent out. It explained how Dike Fennel had discovered the true identity of the murderer. It went on to describe how the terrorists had unsuccessfully attempted to take credit for the crime. The release went on to illustrate how Thomas Thomson had employed me under false pretences to shoulder the responsibility for the murders. The cunning manner by which so much evidence pointed to me was clarified. However, it explained that my understanding of this sort of gas saved me from death, and thus upset his carefully thought out plans.

The press release also explained how he had ruthlessly eliminated all the people who had helped set up the crime. It concluded in saying that, feeling the net close around him, he had fled the country. With the assistance of the French police, he was traced to the Mediterranean coast of France.

The text described how, in a final attempt to escape capture, he had thrown himself off the cliffs and had perished. The release concluded by saying that the man's true motives were not clear.

It was thought that the death of his wife and then his two children, seemed to have unhinged his mind.

No mention was made of Talia Kauffman.

Dyke Fennel was contacted only two days after the death of Thomas Thomson, by Talia Kauffman's solicitors.

Talia had instructed them to pay him his bonus immediately. She accepted that it had been entirely her own fault that he was unable to warn her of the imminent danger.

Following the excitement of this case, Dyke Fennel decided to take the extended holiday in the UK. He had put

this off for nearly twenty years. At the announcement, he was bombarded with invitations from people who he had helped during his long career.

He was now playing with the idea of retirement. However, he was not quite ready to accept that this would perhaps be an excellent time to take such a step.

Miss Le Mon was amazed when Dyke Fennel presented her with a bonus of two hundred and fifty thousand dollars.

The departure of her employer made taking over the management of the Montreal Fitness centre from Lionel, much easier than she had expected. She felt obliged to tell Lionel about the little deception she had employed. She told him that she had never set eyes on Talia Kauffman. However, this proved to be more a source of amusement to Lionel than anything else.

Miss le Mon found no difficulty of attracting a select community of wealthy Canadian women to fill the place. These women appreciated the fitness centre, for precisely the same reasons as Talia and her friends had. Consequently, and to ensure that the atmosphere remained unchanged, she only employed gay men as instructors, and this worked perfectly.

Her second objective was to catch her man. She was determined that the manager of the best hotel in Montreal would not slip through her fingers this time. She consequently employed all her intelligence to make sure of this.

It must be admitted that the gentleman in question was quite happy to fall in with these plans.

Joss Fergusson was authorised to publish his account of our adventures and produced an extremely well-received book. He illustrated his account of our experiences with photos he had taken, and the book became almost immediately a best seller. Naturally enough, many of his photographs were also published in major newspapers and

magazines around the world. This brought him in an unexpectedly large sum of money and also made his reputation almost overnight. All this enabled him to open a comfortable studio in downtown Montreal, and this marked the beginning of a new and prosperous era for him.

René Fortin dropped out of the Montreal crime scene altogether. He moved his base-camp to Paris and took his two bodyguards with him. They all spoke both French and English so had little trouble getting on. He had found more lucrative employment with a far lower risk attached to it.

He had been invited by an old friend to build the French branch of a worldwide network dealing in stolen gemstones and other easily transported objects of high value.

His cut was five per cent of the value of the transported merchandise. This seemed more than adequate to the man. He knew that his original activities were more and more closely watched, and he much preferred not to spend his old age in a prison cell.

The two terrorists eventually came clean. They told the entire story of their bungled attempt to take credit for the crime. They described the attack by the bear on the Mossad agents but neglected to mention the killing of the old man at Montreal. After some searching, the police recovered two bodies from the lake. As there was no sign of foul play or other evidence against them, they were released. The following morning, their two bodies were found floating in the river.

Talia Kauffman settled down in her magnificent cliff-top residence. In her case, settling down included hosting dinners and parties two or three times a week. The remaining evenings were taken up by invitations from friends.

The dramatic end to the story was kept secret, and the press soon stopped badgering the local police and turned their attention to other matters.

However, Talia had been strangely and profoundly affected by her meeting with the Maire of Autrans. The two people were from radically different backgrounds and cultures. However, this was perhaps why she had for once been able to see a man solely as a human being. Talia did not desire him but realised that she liked being near him. However, she understood that he would not be tempted away from his job in his home village. He would certainly not drop this and his professorship, to follow her into a wealthy woman's world. This realisation caused her unexpected pain.

Unlike Sally and I, Talia knew herself too well to believe that she could live for any length of time in a tiny isolated mountain village, with or without the 'man of her dreams'.

Her solution to the problem was to invite herself to our home frequently and to become enthusiastic about mountain hiking and above all cross-country skiing and Biathlon.

She spent several hundred thousand dollars in having a roller-ski training track built around the limits of her property. The track was precisely one kilometre long, and she trained almost every day on this and rapidly became competent.

Her butler was happy to serve as an instructor for the rifle shooting part of the biathlon activity and frequently accompanied her to the Vercors to train with the recently retired French Olympic biathlon champion, Marie Dorin and her husband.

Jonathon Bradston had long since realised that his employers, and especially those from outside England, inevitably associated Butlers with the halcyon days of the early nineteenth century. Consequently, and in exchange for the handsome salary he requested, he was perfectly

happy to act the part, and to supply them with precisely the sort of atmosphere they felt comfortable with.

It must be admitted that it amused him sometimes to play the haughty British butler.

Talia loved it and unexpectedly became more and more careful with the choice of her vocabulary both in English and in French.

As to myself and my wife Sally, well, we went back to our comfortable converted farm at Autrans and took up life where we had left it. Our young son was brought back from the UK by my parents, and within a few days, we had more or less got back to our previous existence.

Margaux and Paul came and spent a few lazy days with us, in September, but then went off on some new tax evasion mission.

This had been the third incredible adventure which we had gone through together in as many years. We thus agreed that a few years without having to fight for our lives would be nice.

The only significant change we noticed on returning home was that the Lumberjacks had cut a wide swath through the forest on the slopes leading up from our house.

This modification opened up the horizon considerably and brought much more light into the rooms facing that way.

The mayor smiled when we mentioned this. 'No cover for guys with rifles either.'

'An advantage not to be sneered at.' laughed Sally.

Authors Concluding Note.

Most of the events preceding the ill-fated political meeting, I invented, actually happened to me as described.

I had been attending an international scientific conference in the USA to present my research work, and while there, visited the world-renowned 'Oak Ridge' National Research Laboratory. Following this, I travelled to Montreal to exchange ideas with scientists at the Hydro-Quebec research institute.

Although seemingly improbable, the Sunday morning run and the visit to the botanical gardens, happened exactly as described. Happily, however, the consequences of these real-life incidents, are all figments of my imagination.

Lac Perdu, in Quebec region, exists as described at the following location: (Lat:50° 44', Long: 70° 15').

While finishing this novel, I discovered, to my surprise, that this magnificent private lake was up for sale.