

BAIT



Stephen William ROWE

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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 the both 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

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Introductory Note

This story is a work of fiction, inspired by an interesting historical fact I stumbled on when reading the history of music copyright protection in France.

I amused myself by inventing possible consequences of this event and by embroidering them with fictional characters.

Apart from the single central historical 'fact' then, 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.

Conversely though, all villages, buildings, paths, roads, localities and features, really exist.

To help glue everything together however, I have included some true historical events here and there.

Photo galleries and Maps illustrating many of the places described are available on my website.

Maps, photos, illustrations and internet links are also included for those interested in discovering more about the places described.

Website: <http://www.stephen-william-rowe.com>

Chapter 1

My boss leant back in his leather chair and frowned across the desk at me.

I had always liked his office. A few watercolours decorated the walls, and his desk sported several complex technical components, of which he was particularly proud.

At sixty-three, he retained his thick, dark hair and sported a magnificent white smile, which was the work of a famous French dental specialist. In his youth, he had been a rugby player, and this would have been hard to conceal, even if he had wanted to, which he didn't. His face was round and full, sporting a big bumpy nose and an all-year-round suntan. The tan was not unusual here at Grenoble in the French Alps.

The only concession he made to being a successful senior executive, was a slight bulge at the midriff and expensive suits.

"So!" he nodded, but as he leant forward to push the intercom button, the side door opened and his secretary stepped in. She held a green folder in one hand and a tray in the other and set the two down on a big circular rosewood table.

Her name was Jacqueline, and she gave me one of her warm, friendly smiles then looked enquiringly at the boss. She was a beautiful woman, in her late fifties. She was cultivated, well-travelled and easy to talk to.

She was also the boss's mistress.

This situation had lasted for nearly twenty years, and she was as entirely devoted to him as he was to her. The two made up the team, which effectively held the department together, and everyone knew and accepted this.

"I'll serve," he smiled.

"I put out Doctor Stone's' file," she smiled.

We took seats at the table, and as Jaqueline moved toward the door, the boss turned.

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"You can stay and hear what our young friend has to say if you like."

She smiled at me warmly and then at the boss, "I'd better finish the investment papers, or we'll all be in trouble..."

The boss nodded, and the door closed softly.

"So!" he repeated, "Doctor William Stone has decided to turn his back on his international scientific reputation and comfortable career."

I sat forward on my chair ready to spin out my well-rehearsed counterattack, but he held up his hand.

"He has decided to leave behind him years of hard work, to try his hand, with no guarantee of success, as a songwriter..."

"Yes."

"He has taken this decision, knowing that the probability of making any money at all, is about as high as me getting into the national rugby team."

I laughed. "Yes, I know that."

He opened the folder and scanned the first page, but I was sure he knew everything in it by heart.

"I know you've been playing the piano for years, but do you honestly believe you can make a living out of writing songs?" he paused. "No. Of course, you don't." He nodded, "Otherwise, you wouldn't have asked for only five month's unpaid leave." He paused and looked over at me. "Well, I'm sorry William." He frowned at me looking directly into my eyes. "Under the circumstances, five months' leave is not reasonable."

I started and stared at him.

He leaned across the table, gripping my wrist and pinning my hand to the table with rugby-man force, still fixing me with his light blue gaze.

"I'm going to give you a year's sabbatical." He sat back in his chair and pulled out a fat cigar, pleased with the effect of this remark. "Take it or leave it." I stared, but he continued. "Five months is far too short to do anything

professionally William. You ought to know that." He blew out some smoke, and called, "Jacqueline."

The door opened.

"He'll take it. Got the papers ready?" She nodded. "Good." He stood up. "I'll keep your job open. See you in one year, William. Let Jacqueline know how things are going from time to time. She'll keep me up to date." He shook my hand and turned back to his desk. "Go on. Get on with it then," he said gruffly.

I followed Jacqueline into her office, signed on the dotted line, received a warm kiss and found myself outside, a 'Sabbatical Songwriter'.

At that time, I imagined that the songwriter's profession must be a peaceful one. I thought that getting mixed up with ruthless murderers, international spies, billion-dollar tax-evasion or hidden treasure was not part of their everyday lives. However, for 'sabbatical' ones, it apparently is...

NOTE: *The early life and experiences of William Stone have no direct bearing on the adventure described here. Nevertheless, the birth of his friendships with some of the principal characters, his studies and his beginnings in music are included in the annexes and can be read at any time.*

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Chapter 2

I was still feeling stunned when I reached home and climbed out of my car. For once, I took the lift to my top floor flat. I rarely did this because the building only had two stories, but I was not in my usual state of mind.

For several weeks I had been preparing myself for a long and arduous period of negotiation. I had rehearsed, over and over again, my arguments, aimed at countering resistance, obstruction, unpleasantness, ridicule and any number of barriers that the boss might cast across my path.

I had also expected things to take weeks or maybe months.

I had never imagined that things would turn out as they had, and have been concluded in a quarter of an hour.

Now, here I was, precipitated into a new period of my life with no warning or real preparation.

The lift jerked to a stop, and I stood with unfocused eyes for a few seconds, before stepping out and unlocking my front door.

My flat was big for a single man. It had three bedrooms, a large living room and a spacious separate kitchen.

The colour scheme was warm and cosy, with two Bordeaux coloured sofas, a comfortable armchair in the same material, a big round pine dining table and all sorts of odd objects sprinkled around on low coffee tables of various origins.

The kitchen was a long pleasant room, opening out onto a spacious balcony and I often dined in it.

Both the sitting room and my bedroom also opened onto this balcony, where a table and rattan armchairs made for comfortable evenings during the summer months.

I had purchased the place, not only because of the quiet location but mainly for the breath-taking view. The balcony faced southeast, with uninterrupted views of the Belledonne mountain range, stretching thirty miles to the east. On a clear day, the view culminated in the vertiginous

summit of Mont Blanc, nearly sixty miles away. From first light, until nightfall, there was always something to marvel at.

So this anyway, was home to me. I'd been here more than ten years now and couldn't imagine living elsewhere.

I was single and thirty-five years old. I had always had a very healthy appreciation for the opposite sex but somehow hadn't yet found the right person.

In my bedroom, I changed out of my suit and put on shorts and my favourite T-shirt. I then sat on the edge of my double bed to slip on my sandals. Letting myself fall back heavily onto the duvet, I gazed blankly up at the white ceiling. After a few seconds, I pushed myself up again.

Wandering listlessly into the kitchen, I made myself some tea, cut a chunk of fruitcake and opening the door to the balcony, sat down in an armchair facing the mountains.

The sun was already low in the west, colouring the snow-capped summits with pink. It was early summer, and most of the snow had already melted. The lower slopes had returned once more either the light green of alpine pastures or the darker tints of mixed forest. As the eye followed the slope upwards, the forest abruptly gave way to rocky ridges, then eventually to the remaining isolated caps of snow.

Here and there, the lower slopes were slashed with white, where snow remained in the deeper clefts, protected from the sun. Even these signs of winter's reluctance to leave the stage would have gone within a week or two.

"So!" I mused. "Here we are then."

I eventually dragged myself out of lethargy and went in to search for my phone book. I could never remember my parent's phone number in the little village of Burpham in the UK. The phone rang a few times, and my mother's voice came over. In a few words, I explained what I'd done, which she relayed across the room to my dad.

"Great. Good move," he called back from his favourite chair.

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So that was OK then. Parental approval and backing if required.

During the phone chat, my mother told me to expect a call, and a visit from my red-headed childhood friend Sally Cameron*. Sally was to participate in a conference near Lyon and was to arrive via train, on Friday evening.

"I told her you'd put her up for the weekend." My mother said. "You've got two spare bedrooms and don't pretend you've got other plans. I don't believe you."

I promised to look after Sally, but anyway, her presence was always a pleasure. She was, after all, my oldest friend and we had known each other since I was, a small boy. We had more or less grown up together and shared a great number of memories. Since those early days, we had never been separated for any significant length of time until we chose to attend different universities. Sally picked History at Oxford, and I, Chemistry at Southampton.

Neither of us could have guessed that this meeting was to mark the beginning of an astonishing adventure. The events we were to share would change both our lives irreversibly.

* See Annexes - Meeting Sally.

For photos galleries illustrating this chapter see:
<http://www.stephen-william-rowe.com>

Chapter 3

I originally moved to Grenoble to do my PhD*.

I already knew France well, because my parents had friends near Paris and we had spent numerous summer holidays there. Unsurprisingly, then, when, the head of the university chemistry department suggested continuing my studies there, I jumped at the chance.

Anyway, on arrival in the Lab, I settled down straight away. I felt perfectly at ease with the novelty of being a researcher, and of having to find my own solutions to unexpected scientific problems. I won't pretend that I was a brilliant scholar, but I found the work straightforward and easy to do. I also discovered that although problem-solving often required logic, more frequently, it needed creative and innovative thinking to tackle complex questions from a different angle. I enjoyed pitting my wits against science and thinking things out myself.

In this way I worked step by step through my thesis, admitting defeat here and there, but each time building on my failures.

Three years after my arrival, I obtained my thesis and almost simultaneously, landed a job with a big consultancy company, just outside Grenoble. Rather than specialising in one narrow topic, this job required me to work on all sorts of subjects, and this suited my character perfectly.

As I had come to love the region, I was naturally extremely pleased with this bit of luck.

A few words about my new home region will be valuable here because this will clarify the events described in subsequent chapters.

Grenoble sits at the junction of three deep alpine valleys. It thus lies at the bottom of a flat bowl, where the rivers, Drac and Isère meet. The waters then flow north to join the Rhone river and thence to the Mediterranean.

In this way, the town encircled by three separate chains of mountains, the Vercors, the Chartreuse and the

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Belledonne ranges. These play an essential role in my adventures here.

The Belledonne range comprises several jagged summits in the region of ten thousand feet, which makes for some pretty stiff climbs. The Chartreuse range is slightly lower, greener and with a more rolling profile, with summits up to about six thousand feet. Finally, the Vercors range is more a vast, high altitude plateau, enclosed by a fringe of steep mountains and cliffs, like the outer walls and battlements of a medieval fort. These specificities, associated with an uncountable number of tracks, made this region a perfect hideout for the French resistance during the last world war.

So, this remarkable region supplied me with a never-ending range of outdoor activities and sports for every season.

As soon as my bank account permitted it, I purchased a lovely flat, which I still have today. Since my installation here, I had taken up many new activities linked to the nature of my surroundings. Downhill and cross-country skiing were the first on the list, followed by cross-country running, mountain biking and of course hiking. All in all, this new way of life satisfied me perfectly.

So here I was, some years later, sitting on the balcony of my flat, looking at the mountains and nursing a glass of cold Alsace Pinot-Noir rosé.

Just before nine the following evening, I got my car out and drove across Grenoble to the train station.

The information panel, high on the wall, informed me that the TGV was, as usual, delayed.

When the train eventually arrived, even later than announced, I had no trouble spotting Sally in the surging crowd of irritated passengers. Her flaming red hair could be seen easily from the other end of the platform. As usual, her fellow passengers seeming to instinctively give her a wide berth, as though they were concerned about getting

burnt. We hugged each other and chatted non-stop about all sorts of thing, but Sally was dog tired.

I overslept the next day and eventually woke at nine fifteen. I would no doubt have drifted off again, but the irresistible smell of freshly brewed coffee seeped under my closed door and dragged me from sleep. Sally was already up. I jumped up, washed and shaved, and went in search of her. However, she was not in the flat, but the coffee machine was still full.

Leaning over the balcony, I spotted her. She was coming leisurely back along the pavement, her red hair flaming in the early morning sun. Her arms cradled two fresh baguettes and a bag of croissants and pains-au-chocolate.

I crossed the flat and set the door ajar, then loaded a tray with two coffee bowls, plates, butter and all the necessary equipment for an extended breakfast. I was setting the table on the balcony when I heard the door close.

"I guessed that the smell of coffee would get you out of bed", she smiled, "My grandmother always used that trick when I was on holiday with her. Mind you, in those days, the smell of frying bacon worked best on me."

I poured out our coffee while Sally spread out the contents of her brown paper bag at convenient a distance around us. She then helped herself to a warm croissant and scrunched off the end. For my part, I broke off a long piece of crisp warm baguette and buttered it in meditative silence. This contented silence lasted while we took our first sips of coffee.

Over the years, this had become a ritual, and neither of us felt the desire to break the peace until at least two leisurely sips of coffee had passed our lips.

The weather was just right, not yet hot and without a breath of wind. The mountains stood out sharply against the washed blue, cloudless morning sky and, our backs to the open windows, we both sat observing the view.

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"Your mum told me you chucked up your job." She commented, burying her nose in her coffee bowl.

"Not really. I'm on a sabbatical year. The boss refused my proposition for five months."

"Intelligent man!"

"Yes, I think you're right there."

"SO?"

"You must have heard it all from mum."

She smiled, "Maybe. But I want the real version. The one without maternal embroidery." We both laughed and munched and crunched our breakfasts.

Once I'd poured myself some more coffee, I explained my project, while buttering some more of the still warm, crisp bread.

Sally nodded when I finished. "Why not? Never leave any stones unturned. That's my motto." she added, helping herself to a second croissant and biting off the crusty end, with a sigh. "How on earth did civilisation survive so long without croissants?" she sighed.

"And what about you Sally? A full professor now I hear."

"Yes, amazing isn't it?" She brightened immediately and sat up

"You can say that again. And Oxford!"

She wiggled her head and made a silly smile. "I seem simply to have been in the right place at the right time with exactly the right academic background."

"Explain," I said.

"A new Chair was to be opened by some French industrialist or other. He had specified a young academic with fresh ideas and above all fluent in French and English. As his organisation was putting up the money, the university had little, if anything at all to say in the matter."

"Is that how it works nowadays?" I asked.

"Apparently. Anyhow, that's how it was for my case It's a French finance company, apparently."

"You were fortunate," I commented through a mouthful of buttered baguette.

"The university too. They don't even pay my salary. The interest generated by the endowment entirely covers it. I admit that that part doesn't interest me much."

"So, how do I address you nowadays?"

"Sally is still my name as far as I know. I admit I didn't read the small print on the contract so it might be something else now, who knows."

"But a Chair! At your age! It seems impossible."

"I agree, but would you argue about it?"

"No."

"It's called the 'De Gaulle Chair'."

"Wow!"

"Nice name eh?"

"What about the subject matter."

"The field of study was defined by the people paying."

"Normal," I said.

"I have to specialise in how family fortunes have, over time, been created, used, stolen, diverted, lost etc. etc. The period they want me to study runs from the year one thousand up to the beginning of the nineteenth century."

"Before the industrial revolution then," I commented.

"Roughly. The chair brief is to study how such vast fortunes were made and to what good, or bad, end they served throughout history."

"Sounds as though the subject was written especially for you."

"Yes. I couldn't believe my ears at the interview in London. And do you know where the interview was?"

"Well?"

"In a private dining room at the Ritz, The Wimborne room, it's called."

"Oh yes of course. Mind you I haven't been there for weeks!" I joked.

"And lunch was served by the most incredibly magnificent waiter. And the Wine!" She nodded at me. "The man representing the endowment certainly knows how to look after himself."

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"And looks after you too. I can see that. What's his name?"

"Ah, now there you have me..." She crunched her croissant and searched her memory.

"I think it was something odd like a legal term or something like that. I got it, Douanier. I remember now because it was the French for a customs official. Since that interview, I have had nothing more to do with him or his company. The only exception is if my work ever creates some legal or political trouble." She sipped her coffee and broke off a long piece of baguette from the remaining one.

I Looked across at her as she crunched into it, "That sounds unusual. I always thought that. Universities in the UK were bastions of free speech – especially Oxford!"

"Yes I know, but that was one of the conditions, and the Vice-Chancellor initially refused to accept it. Anyhow, I have to be careful what I publish and above all what I say in public when newspapermen are sniffing around."

"Yes, things like, 'during our recent interview The De Gaulle professor at the University of Oxford' stated that ... Yes, I can see that might make a bit of a stir."

"So, that seems to be my only limitation to perfect freedom of action."

"Perfect!"

"Yep."

We continued our breakfast in silence for a few moments. Then I went off to reheat the coffee.

"I'm less likely to stir up any trouble or have established old French families breathing down my neck," she said as I refilled her bowl.

"Oh."

"Didn't I tell you about that?"

"No"

"Well. You remember my thesis subject?"

Well, I did in fact. Sally's thesis studied events which happened during the last world war. She investigated the confiscation of property by the occupying army. The central

subject was the fate of property belonging to wealthy Jewish families. Roughly forty thousand paintings and works of art were stolen or "purchased" under threat, from Jewish owners. Even today, several thousand valuable paintings are still waiting to be reclaimed.

Sally had shown in her thesis that many of the original owners of confiscated property and works of art had died in prison camps and that tracing descendants or relatives worldwide had become and remained to this day a titanic undertaking.

At the end of the war, an enormous stock of gold and works of art was discovered in the Merkers salt mine in Germany. The stash contained Hundreds of tons of gold worth more than eight billion euros at today's rate were found.

"Billions, not millions," she tapped the table with her croissant to make the point clear.

"My tutor, Professor Edwinston, asked me to see if I could sort out the truth from the rumour. He encouraged me to clarify what became of the property and how much was likely to have disappeared from of the country before the end of the war." She sipped her coffee. "He was convinced, that some well-to-do families around Europe possess works of art taken from Jews in France, with or without knowing it. He had absolutely no proof though." I nodded.

"Above all." she continued, "He suspected that to avoid criminal courts or scandal, some might even have gone to the extremes of simply burning priceless works of art."

I nodded and pointed at her with my piece of baguette. "There's nothing new about that sort of thing. Every old nation has done that over the centuries, England and France were pretty good at it."

"Maybe, but that seems cleaner somehow. A few bored old kings, wanting a bit of fun. So off we go to war. The strongest side took home everything they could carry, and that was that."

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"That and a bit of killing and raping on the side of course," I added.

"I know, but the treachery, the collaboration and profiteering from members of the losing side. That's what unsettled me. "

"Of course, I agree. There are always people ready to take advantage of absolutely any chance occasions provided, which might help them obtain things they can't, based on their own merits."

"I suppose I was too innocent. Sally shook her head and got her red hair caught in her croissant. "I didn't realise how far some people would go for position or money. Knowingly condemning your compatriots or neighbours to their certain deaths."

I screwed up my face showing my agreement with her.

"Well as it turns out," she continued, "the task proved much more difficult than my professor or I had expected.

A lot of people are still susceptible about that murky period." She separated some strands of hair from the flaky croissant and continued. "Many of the people I interviewed were clearly worried that I might turn up some unexpected and unpleasant facts about their parents or grandparents. I realised that such revelations would be catastrophic for them, even after such a long time. Some people in responsible or comfortable positions were Wvery concerned about this possibility. "

I nodded, "I suppose very few know what their parents or grandparents got up to at that time."

"Exactly, and the members of a few prosperous families don't know where the wealth originally came from. Such unfounded worries seem to poison the existence of some people."

She sipped her coffee and continued. "Unsurprisingly then, I encountered all sorts of obstructions. Sometimes the one document I needed was missing or lent out. On other occasions, the only person having access to certain files or archives was away on leave, just when I needed to see

them. Do you get the picture? Anyhow, in the end, I think I made quite a good job of clarifying one or two points, which is more than I had expected."

"Good enough to merit your thesis anyhow," I commented.

"Yes, but I had some really unpleasant interviews in the process, so I was glad to be able to steer clear of that horrible period."

"Oh." I said, "But I suppose you must have guessed that that was likely to happen, once you had understood the situation."

"Yes. But that understanding took time in coming. I had to interview loads of people, from bankers to minor politicians and some members of the present-day Jewish community, which was interesting. All the same, I realised that I was treading on dodgy ground. I wasn't ever really warned off, but I was often made to feel that my time would be much better spent elsewhere. I suppose that was inevitable when such colossal sums of money were involved. There seemed to be all sorts of mysteries, and so many institutions mixed up in this business. My prof eventually decided that I should limit the scope of my study. Anyhow after two summers at Paris, I spent the final year writing up my thesis quietly at Oxford."

"Perhaps he didn't want his prize-student to go unaccountably missing." I suggested, "Or discovered some years later in an abandoned salt mine..."

"Anyhow, it was an unhappy, troubled period to study, and I hated the betrayal and the few unscrupulous people involved at the time. I realised that the vast majority of people now sincerely want to turn over a new page completely. They seem to consider that there is more than enough to do in keeping the present world on its rails without spending time raking through the muck of the past". She smiled and went on, "And I agree with them" She took a sip of her coffee and looked over at me. "Thank God, I hadn't decided to become a newspaper reporter. Imagine

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having to spend your entire life rooting out nasty information that all sorts of people wanted to keep hidden indefinitely!" She sighed and put down her cup. "Did you know that during that period, the occupying forces even went as far as forcing the ULACE¹ and the SPACE² to hold back copyright payments to Jewish composers?"

I sat up and gazed over at her.

"Yes." she said, "The ULACE was even ordered by them to send out a questionnaire asking their members to state that they were NOT Jewish. "

"Really!" I blew out my cheeks. "Any link between this and the confiscation of works of art?" I asked frowning.

"No, none at all. The orders came from a completely different section of the occupying forces."

"And the result of this so-called survey?" I asked.

"Not surprisingly" she added, "The number of replies from members stating that they were Jewish, was. How can I put it?"

"Limited?" I suggested.

"In any case." she continued, "The Vichy government finance department froze their copyright payments and placed them all in special bank accounts."

"Odd." I said "I wonder why the Vichy officials didn't simply take the money and use it themselves. Seems odd really, considering everything else that was reportedly happening at the time."

She nodded and continued. "I'd say that that proved in fact that a few well-placed people with influence were dead against the plan. Or at least clever enough to outplay the few who would have liked to get their hands on the funds."

"Agreed," I said.

Sally brushed some strands of hair out of her eyelashes. "Don't forget that even in those days you didn't get to the top of organisations like the ULACE, or the state financial

¹ : Union des Librettists, des Auteurs, des Compositeurs et des Editeurs.

² SPACE : Société des Poètes, des Auteurs, des Compositeurs et des Editeurs

departments unless you were considerably above standard ability, technically and politically speaking”.

"Ah, I see what you mean. Some fancy footwork in the background."

"Exactly, some subtle putting of spanners in the works. Dangerous though"

"But what happened to the Jewish composers?" I asked.

"There can't have been all that many of them after all".

"I'm not too sure about that. A few were captured and died in captivity, and I suppose the majority escaped to the unoccupied parts of France and overseas."

"So what happened to the payments due to those who died?" I asked.

"No idea. That wasn't part of my brief. I just happened to come across the info during my researches."

She hesitated for a moment, then went on. "Anyway, it appears that the ULACE went as far as cheating the occupying forces. They financially helped some of the Jewish composers or their families. Now that was a very, very risky thing to do at the time. You would have been immediately executed for it, or worse."

"Anyway." I tapped her on the knee, "At least now you won't have anyone breathing down your neck or any shadowy strangers waiting down dark alleys for you."

"No. But it was still fascinating. Even though the contact with so much dishonesty and greed made me feel dirty and uneasy somehow. " Sally threw up her hands and smiled. "In any case, something in my thesis helped clinch the deal for the De Gaulle Chair."

I considered this. "I don't suppose that someone rich and influential could have been buying you off, do you."

"Now you've been watching too many spy films Doctor Curly Stone."

"Perhaps Professor Know-it-all"

As a research scientist, it's an enormous advantage to be able to memorise tiny bits of information without realising it. During this discussion with Sally, one small

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detail stuck in my mind. I wish that my memory had failed me for once because this was the cause of a tremendous amount of trouble.

For photos galleries and maps illustrating this chapter see:
<http://www.stephen-william-rowe.com>

Chapter 4

Towards the end of the afternoon, cumulus clouds started to appear above the Belledonne mountains. They grew and sprouted at remarkable speed, rising quickly to vertiginous heights. At first blossoming white, they became gradually greyer as the afternoon came to a close and then the wind started.

This was a frequent scenario which followed a period of hot weather.

"We're in for a storm tonight," I said.

Sally screwed up her nose, "What about our walk tomorrow?"

"It won't last long. Tomorrow will be as dry as today. Believe me."

About an hour later, the rain came lashing down with typical summer violence. The surface of the road outside the flat became momentarily invisible as the huge raindrops exploded onto it splashing back and mixing with the down-coming followers.

Sally and I sat in the kitchen peeling the carrots, potatoes and a few onions as the rain pelted noisily against the glass door leading out onto the balcony. I put everything into my large pressure cooker with the "roti de porc" sitting on top of the vegetables. This being done, we returned to the sitting room and sat down while the meal cooked.

I took with me a chilled bottle of Tavel rosé for our aperitif, leaving a second bottle in the fridge to accompany our meal if required. Sally leaned back in her armchair and stretched out her legs. I would have liked to have been able to write, her long, slim, tanned legs, but Sally hardly ever got past the pink blush phase. This didn't trouble her much, and I had got used to her never tanning, from our earliest games together in the river at Burpham. Red hair is often associated with pale skin or as she liked to put it, easy-burn skin.

She followed my gaze. "Lovely colour eh?"

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"You could always paint them brown," I suggested.

"How about telling me about your new project." She smiled. "When will I be able to start name-dropping about my world famous composer friend?"

"Not this week, but certainly before the end of the month at the latest."

Sally laughed. "What are the plans then?"

"The first step is to run through all the songs I've more or less finished over the years to see if any are good enough. I need about ten to start with."

"OK," Sally nodded.

"Then I have to orchestrate them if possible. A few of them can remain simple, with just piano and vocals, but some will benefit from the addition of drums, bass and a few strings." Sally nodded, and I continued. "When that's finished I've got to register the finished songs with one of the French copyright authorities."

"Ah ha!" cried Sally, "the dreaded ULACE strikes again..."

"Yep, the omnipresent power. I'm already a member you know."

"Good for you. Was it difficult getting accepted? I'm impressed."

"Ha! No, you pay your entrance fee and voila."

"Oh! I'm disappointed. I thought one had to be elected by a board of notables or something."

"No, Just money. Sorry for the deception caused."

Sally sat up. "Oh! While I remember it, I met your parents' Parisian friend, Antoine, during my thesis."

"Really. Why? I didn't know you'd even heard of him."

"Well he is quite a well-known businessman, and he happens to be Jewish."

"I know that. But why did you meet him? Something about war thefts?"

"No. It was when I was researching about the copyright problems."

"But what has he got to do with that?" I asked somewhat confused.

"Don't you know what he does for a living?"

"No. I don't, strange as it seems."

"Well my little friend, I have some really hot news for you then."

"Well?"

"Your friend Antoine is the president of one of the biggest French, now wait for it..." She taunted.

"Come on, come on."

"He just happens to be president of the French branch of one of the world's biggest record companies."

My mouth fell open. Literally. "No!"

"Yes."

"Christ! Well, I would never have guessed." I almost spilt my wine as I leant forward to look her in the eyes. "Which company then?"

Sally mentioned a name, so well known that it seemed absurd that I could have remained ignorant of the fact for so many years. She laughed, and her green eyes sparkled with pleasure at having scored such a strong point over me.

"Yes, you see, Auntie Sally knows everything."

"Well, I'm damned!"

"For the moment you are not. But even that could be arranged, for a certain fee of course."

"Paid into your Swiss account of course."

"Naturally."

"Or perhaps stored in an abandoned salt mine."

"Even better. Thanks." Sally rearranged her shorts, which were cutting into her waist. "Who, knows, he might be able to point you in the right direction."

I hesitated and grimaced. "I wouldn't dare present my stuff to someone at that level. Even, or especially because I know him so well." I raised my eyebrows and continued. "It would be just too embarrassing for both of us if he had to tell me that I was no good at composing for today's market. Can you imagine it?"

Sally nodded. "Yes, I can."

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"No. I'd need a lot of positive feedback on my work before I'd dare even mention my project to him."

"Maybe you mum has already done so."

I hadn't thought of that. "No. I couldn't do it. Not until I've at least a minimum of confidence in myself."

"I agree. In any case, you've got a full year before you. So there's no hurry." Sally said.

"Right again." I agreed.

Sally put one sandaled foot up on the coffee table and sighed.

"Well, I'll be damned" I repeated.

"I'll see if I can organise that." She smiled, "Only because you are a special friend... For the moment, that is".

"I might become extremely wealthy of course." I joked, "And that would probably go to my head."

Sally shook her head. "I don't think that would happen. Oh!" She paused, "Talking about really big money. While I was doing my thesis, I learnt something particularly interesting. Want to hear?"

I made a wry smile "You know how much I'm interested in cash. Go on."

She sat back, linked her fingers together and stretched her thin, freckled arms above her head, "Just before the last world war, a wealthy Jewish industrialist and art connoisseur met with a close friend and fellow collector. The friend happened to be German and to be close to the powers of decision. He tipped the industrialist off that it would be wise to move abroad and take all his worldly property with him."

"Apparently, the industrialist converted all his property except his very favourite pieces of art and his Paris flat, into gold. He then proceeded to hide his treasure, and it was rumoured that the total amount approached a billion euros in today's currency."

I whistled, and she went on.

"Of course, the warning proved to be a valuable one. However, for reasons I didn't discover, the industrialist

stayed in Paris. He was eventually captured, sent to a prison camp and is assumed to have died there." Sally looked over at me. "Still following?"

"Of course."

"Well, there is no absolute proof of his death. But no one has ever claimed the property confiscated from him which was recovered at the end of the war."

I nodded, "There seem to have been all sorts of horrible cases like that."

"Yes," she continued, "But here's the interesting bit!"

I leant forward. "I think that the idea of hundreds of millions of euros in a hidden hoard of gold bars is already quite interesting enough for me."

She shook her head, "Yes. But apparently, he took the precaution of leaving clues as to its whereabouts. And do you know where? No, of course, you don't."

I rose my eyebrows, "Come on, come on."

"Well, he hid the clues in the lyrics of songs which were specially written for our man by various well-known composers of the period."

"No! Really?" I sat forward.

"Yes." Sally leant over and placed her hand on my knee. "The song lyrics were then deposited in the ULACE database."

"Oh! now that's incredible!" I sat up.

"You see!"

"So?" I asked.

"Well, the chap apparently paid for a series of songs from ten or so songwriters of the period over about a year. But of course, nobody knows which songwriters and above all, which songs and finally what form the clues took."

By this time, I was extremely interested. "But how do you know all this."

"Because one of the well-known Jewish composers of the time, mentioned in his autobiography having been commissioned by a wealthy fellow Jew. He says that he was paid a large sum and fixed only one condition, to

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include a certain phrase and a number somewhere in the lyrics." She stopped a few moments to sip her wine. "By various deductions, the identity of the man has been proved to be our industrialist."

I shook my head in disbelief, "So somewhere in the ULACE database lie the clues to the location of an enormous sum in gold." I laughed. "That's incredible."

"Agreed. No one knows any more than that, but I guess that a lot of people have tried to find out."

I rubbed my chin, which was already beginning to feel in need of a razor. "Maybe someone has already worked it out and is now living in luxury. In his place, I certainly wouldn't go and talk to the newspapers about it, would you?"

"No, that's also a possibility, of course."

"How on earth did you uncover that."

"Oh by accident, in fact. I was chatting with a girl I met in the café at the library at the Sorbonne University Paris, about my work. She managed to help me out about the art market in France, and she mentioned it "en passant."

"And?"

"Well, I didn't have much time to go into it because that was when I was called, or perhaps I should say Ordered back to Oxford to start the writing-up. I did find some info on the person and discovered he had a summer residence somewhere down this way. Might even have been in the Vercors for that matter. Anyhow, I don't remember now. I just put all the info down in one of the appendices, for general interest of the sort of things people got up to during that period."

"Pity you couldn't have found out what happened to the gold though."

"The subject was not directly connected to art confiscation, which was my subject. It was just a good anecdote, really. I admit I was a little surprised when my tutor told me to keep it as it added colour to the period. Good stuff for treasure-hunters though."

I tapped my watch in Sally's direction, "Time to get the mushrooms cooking."

"Let's go," she replied.

We spent a relaxing evening eating and drinking until all that could be seen of the mountains were the little groups of lights here and there marking the position of small hamlets on the lower slopes. The rest was just a poorly defined band of darkness between the villages and the place where the stars began.

The following day, we were up early and had made the hour's drive to the village of Corrençon in the Vercors mountains. The walk went precisely as planned so I won't waste time describing it here. We finally reached home again at about five o'clock, had our showers and settled down to a late cup of tea, tired and contented with our day.

Sally then spent an hour going over the speech she was to deliver the following day and then closed herself in her bedroom to "talk it through" a few times to make sure she could do it without her notes.

At about seven, I got out the raclette machine, installed it on the balcony table and started it heating so that it would be ready when she had finished.

Ten minutes later, she appeared in white sandals her favourite white linen shorts and a beautiful white linen short-sleeved shirt. The former was open more at the neck than was her habit and showed more of her than I had seen for many years. I glanced away though, not wanting to run the risk of embarrassing someone I had known for thirty years.

In bed that night, I reflected that Sally had been my friend for so long, that it was disturbing to realise unexpectedly, because of an open shirt front, that she was also now a beautiful woman.

Next morning, I shuttled Sally to the central station and kissed her goodbye. She let me hold her close, longer than was usual with us, before being swallowed up by the train.

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That evening, my flat felt emptier than I had found it for a long time, and two glasses of my excellent white wine made me feel even more melancholic. I phoned my parents to give them the latest update, but this only made things worse because my mother signed off by saying, "Well, when on earth are you two going to get married then?"

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Chapter 5

When I woke on Tuesday morning, I wandered along to the baker for some baguettes. The green and white blinds were already extended across the pavement, and this seemed to concentrate, the delicious smells leaking from the door. The baker's youngest daughter was on school holiday and as was usual on such occasions earned her keep by serving the customers. At thirteen, she had already perfect mastery of dealing with the customers and adapting her behaviour to each newcomer. She knew everyone by name, and I've frequently reflected that this ability must be imprinted in the genes of shopkeepers.

On my return, I emptied my letterbox and found some letters delivered the day before.

One of these was from the personnel department of my company. It contained a cheque covering the amount corresponding to the years' annual holidays, which I would not be taking. The sum amounted to nearly two months salary and as welcome as it was unexpected.

I also found a letter with the ULACE crest, and I assumed that it must have something to do with my registration fees.

On opening it after a lazy breakfast on the balcony, I found that it enclosed a personal message for the president of ULACE. All newly registered members were invited to an exclusive VIP visit of the headquarters at Paris, during the upcoming annual open day at Paris.

As I've always loved Paris, this was an excellent excuse to spend a few days roaming around, so I sent off my acceptance, via email the same morning.

This open-day was always organised a day or two before the French national music-day celebrations, which take place each year on the 21st of June.

I could have easily have stayed with my parent's friends, Antoine and Anne-Laure, but I decided to stay in a hotel in the centre of Paris. The truth was that, now that I knew that Antoine was president of a major recorded music company,

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I felt uncomfortable and a little embarrassed. I knew that he would naturally question me about what I was up to and I was not yet ready to share my plans. He was a pro and had many of France's a best singers and songwriters on his books. I was painfully aware of my innocence and ignorance about how this very closed world functioned, and I lacked confidence in myself.

What if, as Sally had suggested, my mother had phoned Anne-Laure to keep her informed? He would almost certainly feel obliged to ask to hear my work, and I felt that none of it was sufficiently advanced to be presented to such an expert. Had I known that an expert like Antoine was capable of recognising a potential hit within seconds, even if it was only hummed to a strummed guitar backing, I might have acted differently. As it was, I did not want to put myself to such a harrowing test, so early in my brand new project, so I kept away.

I chose the small hotel I had always used for my professional trips, which was close to the Louvre and the Seine. It was quiet and convenient, although a bit expensive, especially as it had no restaurant. In any case, I knew the place well, so there was no stress involved and no risk of landing in an uncomfortable or noisy area. I had long since got used to the fact that it changed owners every year or two, so one was never sure who one would find behind the reception desk, or which nationality the new team would be.

So, the evening before the visit, I took the high-speed TGV train to Paris, Gare de Lyon, then the metro to Chatelet and walked the short remaining distance to the hotel. The evening was warm and calm, so I dined facing the Fontaine des Innocents, then wandered around the Louvre until it closed.

The following morning, after breakfast, I decided to have a look at the roses and the famous iris gardens in the Jardin des Plantes. I also intended to wander through the tropical greenhouses, but the heat and humidity put me off this

idea, especially as I wouldn't have had time to change or shower before the ULACE visit that afternoon.

Crossing the Seine on the Pont d'Austerlitz, I sat in a noisy brasserie near the Gare de Lyon. I ordered a large baguette sandwich and a pint of Belgian beer. However, this turned out to be an exceedingly bad idea.

The beer was nearly as strong as wine and the weather far too hot. As a result, I dozed off on my chair to awake with a start, ten minutes later with a splitting headache and a stiff neck. The cost was more than seemed reasonable, and so I set off for the visit in a lousy mood. I also had a throbbing head and still under the influence of the high alcohol beer.

Had I been less thirsty and had chosen a small glass of rosé, I would certainly have avoided some painful experiences.

As it was, that pint of strong Belgian beer triggered a barely credible sequence of events which I will attempt to describe in future chapters.

The new ULACE headquarters is on the direct RER metro line from the Gare d'Austerlitz. Even so, I had to struggle to keep my eyes from closing, or I would have overshot the stop and missed the visit. The building was impressive and even opulent, standing in a vast plot on the embankment of the Seine. It was thus just a few minutes' away from the Microsoft campus buildings.

The ULACE board of directors had had the place built directly across the river and almost facing their rival SPACE's building. This choice was a characteristically French way of annoying their competitor a little every day.

I thought, with uncharacteristic bitterness, that while the vast majority of songwriters earned little more than a pittance for their toil and sweat, at least the admin was profiting from the income...

As to the entrance hall, well it seemed to have been planned especially to ensure that run-of-the-mill songwriters were aware their sheer insignificance in

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comparison to their successful colleagues.

"How," it seemed to ask one, its nose in the air, "is it that you have made such an insignificant contribution to our well-being. Do you feel qualified to call yourself a songwriter?"

At the reception, an arrogant young woman checked my invitation and directed me to the correct floor and office.

I won't describe the building as it is of little importance except for the unfavourable effect it had on my beery temper. My mind was slowly clearing from the effects of alcohol, but my headache remained. As a result, I had to keep my eyes screwed half closed and my nose wrinkled up. I must have looked like someone who had been out partying in nightclubs until dawn and had just been able to fit in an hour or two of sleep before coming.

Our small group was herded into an impressive office, with a vast curved expanse of window, opening onto the Seine. A short, plump, bald man was standing, or rather posing, with his back to us looking out over the river, his hands clasped behind his back. The impression aimed at was that of a monarch resting from his toilsome tasks, looking out over his kingdom and finding everything eminently satisfactory. He turned, and the impression was immediately dispelled by his glasses, which had silly white frames and made one want to laugh.

He welcomed us as if we were an unannounced disturbance to his busy day's work. He was a show-off, and I took an immediate and unreasonable dislike to him. His expensive suit and his perfectly laundered linen shirt and garish petrol blue silk tie with little ivory coloured crosses on it annoyed me.

"Well good afternoon, to you all," he called, smiling across the expanse of the walnut desk.

In the first few seconds, we discovered that he had absolutely no talent whatever as an orator. He proceeded to bore us all stiff with dates and statistics. He seemed to swell more and more as he displayed his mastery of such

a wide range of totally uninteresting facts. One or two of us exchanged bored glances as the man waded on, smiling, through a mass of useless information we didn't care about.

After a while, he consented to honour us by coming sedately round to our side of the desk. He perched himself on its corner with one short, podgy leg dangling. Then theatrically whipping off his glasses, a technique no doubt learnt in a recent training course, he used them to point at us to underline some of the more salient points of his dreary monologue. He couldn't seem to resist continually smoothing down the expensive silk jacket as if to draw our attention to it.

"Oh," he said, "Naturally you may take photos during your visit as souvenirs. We have nothing to hide here, as you will no doubt already have guessed."

My nearest neighbour, clearly a Jamaican rapper, leant over and whispered, "And please take one of me in my nice new suit. Don't I look great in it?"

I smiled at him and nodded.

"Out on the tiles last night, man?" he added looking at me closely.

To avoid having to talk too much, I just nodded and put my hand to my forehead.

"Me too man."

The pompous little man was now expanding on how good the ULACE was at helping young songwriters succeed in their careers.

At that precise moment, however, the sun started glinting off the smooth brown water of the Seine, and I screwed up my eyes to limit the pain in my head. The little man was looking in my direction as I did this. He seemed pleased to be able to pounce on someone to assert his new-found ephemeral authority. "Ah! This gentleman does not seem to agree with our strategy."

He seemed to puff himself up a bit and, placed his two hands flat beside him on the desk, to add emphasis to the reply. Unfortunately, rather than giving him a more

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distinguished and important look, this position caused his round stomach to stick out, pushing apart the impeccable "flaps" of his jacket. He looked from one of us to another, to show he considered each of us to be worthy of his attention, at least for a second or two. "I'd like to take this occasion to point out that one of our key watchwords here is to always, I repeat, always listen to the opinions of our members and to act on them. This characteristic is why the ULACE has become so influential in the world of music." He said all this in such a silly pompous manner that several of the visitors have to turn aside to hide their smiles.

In most large industrial companies, this sort of pompous bag of wind, are weeded out and discarded. I had come across them in some government departments, but I could excuse them there because that was where the type was initially created.

On this particular afternoon, however, for reasons with which the reader is now familiar, I was not exactly in the right mood for time wasting, pompous posing fools, especially when MY future was involved.

"Well thank you for this opportunity to air my views, Monsieur le President."

He held up his hand, "No, no I'm afraid you must have misunderstood, mister ...?"

"Doctor Stone."

"Ah yes, Mister Stone."

I bristled at this, but he went on.

"No, I am simply representing our president, who has unfortunately been called away."

"To more important engagements?" I added helpfully

"Exactly."

There was a small round of chuckling from the other members of our group. My senses had not failed me, and I nodded to myself.

The real boss had decided that he was indeed not going to mess up his holiday schedule, for this waste-of-time open-day. He had thus plumped the job onto the lap of one

of his gullible sidekicks.

The sidekick had taken this as a huge mark of respect and was swelling with pride at being able to sit in the swivel chair in the top floor office, all day.

He got on my nerves, without making any effort. Our "guide" was therefore understandably and visibly very annoyed by having his apparent status reduced to its just value. "Well?" he asked.

"I've have had a meticulous look at the actions you mention."

"I'm glad to hear that you take your membership with the ULACE seriously," he retorted smoothing his jacket again as I continued. "It seems to me, however, that every one of these actions is aimed at assisting upcoming singers and groups to forward their professional careers."

"That is precisely what I said." sighed the little man, irritated and trying to convey the impression that I must be very dense indeed.

Unfortunately, this fired my sense of indignation further. I drew myself up and prepared to engage in combat. "But, this is where I have a small problem," I continued.

"Problem?" he looked around the group to see how many of them were as confused as he was with my senseless gibbering.

"ULACE stands for Union des Libretistes des Auteurs, Compositeurs et Éditeurs de Musique, I believe."

He sighed and cast his eyes skywards,

"Naturally."

"Which means its aim should be helping upcoming authors and songwriters, not singers and groups."

The man sighed again, louder this time, which was another bad move.

"So, what happens to the thousands of Composers and songwriters who are NOT singers or groups then?"

Silence fell, and our host fumbled with some objects on

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the desk.

"Well said." agreed my neighbour.

I continued calmly, being careful not to let the lingering effects of the beer become too evident. "It seems to me that there are absolutely no actions planned for the vast majority of members who are simply songwriters and have no intention whatever of becoming performing artists. And that applies even more to lyrics writers, don't you think?"

A ripple of assent went through our group.

"It seems to me," I continued, "that promoting groups and artists is the job of record companies, managers and agents but NOT the ULACE."

"Well, I really must object" he fidgeted around with various objects and dropped his boss's expensive Mont Blanc pen on the thick carpet and frowned.

I butted in before he could think of how to counter my statement. "In my opinion", I continued, "Hundreds of potential hit songs are written in France every year, but never get heard. This is because these writers are NOT, upcoming performing artists."

Our little round host eventually got hold of himself. "If I am not mistaken, Mr..., you are not of French nationality."

I bristled almost visibly. The fight was on then. "As I just told you the name, is Doctor Stone. I am a research scientist, but of course in France, you don't like using full titles, do you."

"Quite normal too," he puffed sitting awkwardly on the edge of the table. "The complexities of an age-old institution, such as ours must be difficult to apprehend for one who cannot entirely master the subtleties of our culture and language."

Now, this was more than I was ready to accept, even from a silly little bag of wind. At this attack, unfortunately, the alcohol took a little too much edge off my normal inhibition and anger took over.

"Like the hundreds of Jews whose money you withheld during the last world war. They clearly didn't understand the

complexities either, and paid for their ignorance."

The group was now thoroughly enjoying this spectacle, which has suddenly become far more entertaining.

"What on earth are you talking about? How dare you drag up such sordid and painful subjects. They have been more than adequately clarified, by experts far more qualified than you, monsieur Stone."

"Doctor Stone," I replied impassively.

Thanks to Sally, I knew perfectly that the ULACE was forced into doing this by the occupying forces. I also knew that they had done all in their power to help these unjustly persecuted composers, but I really couldn't resist the temptation of getting at this pompous little snob in some way or other... "So if everything has now been clarified, tell us all what happened to the copyright revenue owed to the Jewish composers who were betrayed by collaborators and who consequently died in prison camps."

He spluttered with anger. "This is completely unprecedented behaviour on behalf of a new member of such an honourable and distinguished institution."

He was of course entirely correct, but he had got me angry, which is very rare.

"I wonder if some of the nice oil painting on the walls of this office and perhaps on yours once belonged to deceased Jewish ULACE members." This time I realised I had gone a step too far, but anger spurred me on.

He turned and retreated to safety behind the desk.

"Nonsense, absolute rubbish, pure calumny."

"I was just wondering. But at least I'm certain that the cleverer of them, saw the trouble coming and hid away their valuables before any dirty collaborators could pinch them." I just managed to stop myself adding "like you." which could very well have ended me in prison for slander.

"Really! Now that is more than enough!" and he was of course right.

He was now passing from hand to hand a heavy little

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yellowish coloured paperweight with a big white ceramic button he had picked up from the desk. I could read the inscription "ULACE - 100 Ans" on the chromium top plate.

"Now where could all those millions be now? Any clues? Perhaps it was all transformed into commemorative gold paperweights."

The little man got redder and redder and more and more flustered and smacked the paperweight down as though it might burn him. Luckily for him and very certainly for me, he was saved by the entrance of a tall, top-heavy female in a tight-fitting, low-cut red dress. The garment had probably been carefully chosen for this specific occasion for guiding us around the building.

"No more questions then?" He gulped. "Good! Mrs Holberg, please show these people around the building. Have a nice visit."

Mrs Holberg looked across the room at him with a smouldering look, which was impossible to misunderstand unless one was a complete fool, which he probably was. The parts of her body not directly visible, seemed to be doing their best to burn their way out through the thin material of her dress. She was clearly very hot stuff, and whether our little man realised it or not, he had apparently been singled out today for special treatment.

"I'll come back when I've finished, shall I?" She asked with a smile.

We all looked abruptly over at him, with amazement. Miss Holberg didn't actually say, "My hero" but the rest of her body did that for her.

I'm not sure he gulped, but I certainly would have, in his place. My anger faded and was replaced as rapidly by pity as he squirmed awkwardly under the woman's gaze. I suspect that the memory of my ridiculous outburst must have been instantly erased from his mind as he realised what was likely to be expected of him when she returned.

Just before leaving the room, I took out my new phone and took an image of the place. It showed the pompous

little man in front of the massive desk, his fingers resting on the small commemorative paperweight and his eyes scanning the blue horizon far out across western Paris.

On the way down the first of many carpeted corridors, one of the other visitors, a young man in his thirties with dirty baggy trousers which might once have been beige, came over and explained that what was needed was a new revolution.

"You know how much these asses earn?" He didn't wait for a reply, "At least seventy thousand a year and all out of our copyright. Christ. It makes me sick." He shook his head. "That's precisely the sort of pompous, incompetent bastard who would have jumped at the chance of collaborating." he continued. "He would have seen it as a perfectly justifiable method of gaining access to higher the responsibilities that had been unjustly denied him. I know the type, rotten to the core. When the revolution comes, we will eliminate them all, once and for all."

I nodded in a non-committal way, to avoid having to reply because my angry outburst had brought back my headache with renewed vigour.

Anyway, we were herded out of the opulent office, and the rest of the visit went as boringly as could be expected.

For many of us, the only souvenir we retain of that visit is the vision of the magnificent buttocks of Mrs Holberg held tightly in that thin red dress, preceding us along the corridors.

After the visit she guided us back to the entrance hall, but just as I was about to leave she put her hand on my arm and held me back.

"Just a word Doctor Stone." She smiled, "In the future, I would strongly advise you to turn your tongue three times in your mouth before speaking-out as you did earlier. It might avoid unnecessary trouble."

I was immediately aware of a far higher intelligence in her gaze than I had expected. No doubt because my attention had been taken up by other parts of her physical

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framework up until then.

"Thanks. I had too much to drink at lunch no doubt."

"That's what I guessed. A real Frenchman has alcohol resistance burnt into his genetic stock."

I smiled, "I suppose I ought to go back and excuse myself. There was nothing personal." I frowned, "But I my comments about the way funds are used remain valid. Anyhow, I expect he will have forgotten all that by tomorrow."

She laughed. "Don't worry, I'll pass on your excuses." She smiled. "I will 'smooth his furrowed brow', as you English put it."

I glanced at her, "Ah!" and she nodded with a wry smile.

"Yes. At least, I'll do my best." She said, "He is a widower you see, and has no one to look after him."

"I suppose I ought to pretend not to understand that," I said glancing at her good-humouredly.

"Well. We all have our little weaknesses I suppose. Don't you agree Doctor Stone?"

"Yes." I laughed, "But some are less of a trial than others, Goodbye."

"Goodbye then Doctor Stone."

Miss Holberg turned and walked away. I couldn't help watching her lovely figure as she move across the hall, but after a few steps, she turned her head to look at me across her shoulder. Her face lit up with a mischievous smile and she disappeared through the swing doors.

After this epilogue to the visit, I took the RER back to "Saint Michel" métro station.

I was ashamed with myself for the ridiculous spectacle, I had made, especially because this had never happened to me before. I would have liked to have returned to apologise to the poor little man who I had attacked so unfairly.

"A brilliant days' work." I told myself.

However, the bitterness of this was tempered by the thought that , at this very moment, the shapely Mrs Holberg

Stephen William ROWE

was, helping erase the memory of my insults from the mind of the official representative of the ULACE.

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Chapter 6

I sat in a brasserie a stone's throw from the Seine and ordered a glass of rosé. It was expensive but certainly less potent than my midday beer.

Leaning back against the worn wooden bench, I took out my new mobile phone and started messing about with the new functions. The camera gave me the most trouble, but this was because I rarely used my phone for this.

In the course of my experimentation, I managed to take several flash photos of myself while expecting to take the view through the window. I then took even more of the view outside when trying out the "selfie" mode. I eventually gave up playing, after having taken a minute-long video of myself looking directly into the objective.

The man sitting at the next table laughed and leant over, "I bought the same one, friend. Take my advice, take it home and read the instruction manual. Believe me; it'll save you a lot of cursing."

I laughed with him. "Yes, you're right. I must be getting old," I put it back in my pocket as he got up and left.

As I watched him pass past the windows, an elegantly dressed blond caught my eye. She was sitting just across the room from me, beside a short, stocky man in a tweed jacket. The woman smiled across at me and nodded pleasantly. Her features were small and delicate as were her smooth tanned shoulders. She carefully drew my attention to these by slowly moving her long manicured fingers to adjust the bootlace thin strap of her low-cut black designer T-shirt. Her fingers lacked the usual display of expensive rings and her wrists, the traditional heavy gold bracelets, which wealthy French women seem to favour.

Noting this, I remembered a discussion between myself and Margaux's mother in Paris. 'A plain woman,' she said 'can wear jewellery because it distracts attention from her plainness. However, a good-looking woman should avoid it.' This was precisely the case here.

To my astonishment, she leant forward, said a word to her friend, then rose and came over to my table.

"I was at the ULACE visit with you," she said in a low voice.

I groaned.

"Can I sit down?"

"Yes. With pleasure, but please don't remind me about my embarrassing performance. I don't know what came over me. I never behave like that under normal circumstance. I am ashamed of myself."

She looked me searchingly in the eyes and nodded. "Yes, I believe you. But he was a proud little man, wasn't he?"

"True. But that's not a very good excuse though. For being a bully, I mean."

"I suppose you know that there was never really any doubt about ULACE activity during the war?" She watched me closely, her eyes flicking between mine and my lips."

"Yes I know that, but I couldn't help myself. I just got carried away."

"I noticed that." She smiled. "In any case, your initial comments were very pertinent. They could easily afford to invest several hundred thousand euros in helping their struggling members who write good songs but have horrible singing voices."

"Exactly what I think." I brightened, "They rake off more than a hundred million per year from songwriter's incomes, so even one million euros would be easy to justify."

"That would help hundreds of upcoming composers." She agreed.

"Exactly." I nodded. "I don't understand why it hasn't already been done. There's something odd about the setup that I haven't yet grasped."

She smiled. "So. The man was right then. It must be a question of our strange French culture." However, with a start, she glanced up at me. There was something resembling alarm in her look, which I did not understand.

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However, I laughed. "I suppose that it's probably lack of imagination, or more seriously, a lack of vision about what the long-term objectives should be."

"And resistance to change." She nodded "By the way, my name is Sophie. Sophie Lemone. And you, of course, are Monsieur Stone." She smiled "Or, I suppose I should say Doctor Stone?" I laughed, and she went on. "In any case, if any newspaper reporters were present, your name will be all over the specialised music press tomorrow morning."

"Oh, God!" I immediately thought of what would happen if Antoine were to get wind of all this.

She leant slightly forward on one smooth tanned elbow, bringing into view her small gold Rolex watch and above all her delightful "décolleté" and expensive underwear.

The manoeuvre was smooth and professional, and she observed me, to make sure that noticed the objects put on display.

You have a charming accent," I said, "I can't place it though."

"That's not surprising," she laughed lightly, "I was born and raised in Iceland." At this announcement, I was a bit taken aback by how attentively she was observing my face.

"Iceland!" I shook my head, "who knows what an Iceland accent is like?"

"Now at least you do," she smiled, her face relaxing. "Now wouldn't it be funny," she placed her other elbow on the table and observed me, her chin resting in her hand, "if your story was true!"

"My story?"

"About hiding gold right under the enemy noses, disguised as paperweights."

"Ah yes... Well, I just made it up on the spur of the moment."

"Really?" her eyes didn't leave mine.

"Yes. I just wanted to annoy the man. God knows why."

"Are you such an impulsive man?"

I pulled a face, "Apparently..."

She nodded, keeping her eyes on mine without a trace of embarrassment. "Well I must say, you have a rapid and imaginative mind, Monsieur Stone."

"You can call me William."

"Well William, you know the real size of gold bars in any case?"

I hesitated while she continued to observe me, smiling, "Why do you say that?"

"Because people invariably visualise gold in the form of the twelve-point-four-kilo Ingots stored in the gold reserves. In practice, one-kilo bars are used for transactions, and such bars measure the size of a small slab of butter. In other words, exactly the size of that paperweight."

"Really?" I was surprised. "Well my imagination did a good job there, I must say."

"That's what I thought," she smiled encouragingly. "That would make the paperweight worth about thirty-two thousand euros...That's about twenty-four thousand pounds."

I sat back in my chair, "Wow! Yes, of course, gold has one of the highest densities, double that of lead."

"So you see, your imagination, or perhaps your subconscious, seems to have been working overtime."

"Perhaps that is a sign that I ought to start writing stories, rather than songs."

"But surely, songwriting is not your full-time job?" she frowned, "you just don't seem to fit in with the normal image I have of the profession." The woman kept her eyes on my face. "Are you sure you're not holding something back?"

She said all this with the pleasant manner of someone genuinely interested in me.

The fact that I was not yet wholly submerged by her ultra-charming and seductive behaviour seemed to have reinforced her impression that I was holding something back.

"No," I said. "But you have excellent powers of

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deduction," I smiled, "I'm an industrial research scientist."

Sophie leant back and watched me, nodding her head slowly.

"I knew that you had something up your sleeve. So that explains why our pompous host not only didn't impress you but set your teeth on edge."

"Excellent deduction Watson," I joked.

"And what is your field of research William, or perhaps you would prefer me to use your full title?" she joked. "Unless it's ultra-confidential, of course."

I shook my head. "No. Not confidential. I work in a consultancy firm. So my subjects vary as a function of our customer contracts. But It's always based on chemical synthesis. My preferred field is working for the perfume industry, but there's not that much work around on that front."

"Interesting. That's at completely the other end of the density scale from metals, such as gold then?" Sophie said, apparently teasing me.

"But why didn't you think I was not a pro songwriter?"

"You didn't fit in, that's all. So songwriting is just a pastime for you then?"

"Well, I'm afraid that for once I can prove you wrong. I AM a pro songwriter."

"I'm afraid I've difficulty in believing that," she said shaking her head slightly.

"Well. To be perfectly exact, I've just started. I've taken a sabbatical year to see if I can make a success of my music."

"You've stopped your research work and forfeit a good salary, to spend a year earning next to nothing!"

"Well, I suppose that putting it as bluntly as that is as close to the truth as I could go," I say nodding. "Madness. I suppose."

"You surprise me William" She frowned, "I find the idea difficult to come to terms with."

"I admit it sounds very odd when stated coldly, but It's

true. If I don't try now, I never will, and I would certainly regret it one day."

Sophie leant forward again, her hands clasped in front of her mouth, "You are a fascinating person Doctor Stone." Regardless of myself, I blushed, and she smiled. She then pushed back her chair, which scraped across the wooden floorboard, in preparation for leaving. "Have you got a card, who knows, I might be able to help you someday." I searched in my wallet and handed one of my personal ones over.

"I'll have to rush now." She smiled. "I have a rendezvous for the opera tonight, and I absolutely must change first." She held out her hand. "Well, it was a pleasure meeting you William and good luck with your project." She turned, waved to her companion and they left together.

I sat sipping my wine and realised with a start that I had no idea of what Mrs Sophie Lemone of Iceland did for a living. I prayed that she was not one of those ruthless freelance newspaper writers.

On the way back down to Grenoble on the train, I got out the instruction manual for my phone. I soon, I more or less got to grips with the main functions. In the photo folder, I erased all my initial catastrophic efforts. However, The last one arrested my attention though. I had accidentally captured the lovely Sophie Lemone as she was rising to come to my table.

The image quality was remarkable. The photo also captured Sophie's friend who seemed to be studying me with peculiar intensity. I did not erase this one, perhaps because the girl was so attractive, but renamed the File "Sophie Lemone and friend, Paris."

As I had my laptop with me, I tried out the file exchange function and used this same file name, transferring it to my main "image" folder.

Seen in HD, Madam Sophie appeared even more attractive and highly desirable.

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Two days later was the annual national live music day "La Fete de la Musique."

I was back at Grenoble, and it had been a hot sunny day with temperatures just under thirty-five centigrade. The buildings and the roads had accumulated so much heat that even at eleven that night, in the town centre it was still much too hot for comfort. I had taken the precaution of wearing open sandals, but even so, the heat from the pavements was too much. The whole town centre was swarming with crowds of people moving listlessly from one stage or street artist to another.

Every park and square had its official stage, each dedicated to a different style of music. Apart from this, every well-appointed street corner or bistro terrace was occupied by groups which had not been selected for the official stages. In most cases, this exclusion from official limelight was well justified. However, the groups in question seemed to feel that they could still sway public opinion. They did this by producing prodigious quantities of noise.

By eleven o'clock, the heat and the crowds outweighed my interest for new-talent spotting, so I settled down on a reasonably quiet terrace and ordered a large glass of cold beer. This particular bistro had allowed an acoustic jazz band to set up nearby, but even these excellent musicians had eventually given up the fight against the competition of blaring music coming from all sides.

My experience with numerous 'Fete de la Musique' had taught me that, trouble nearly always started just before midnight. I had also learnt that single males, were a favourite target of the groups of drunks looking for some fun, so I paid my bill, picked up my car from the car park, and drove carefully home.

As I walked from the car park to my flat, the silence seemed to fall out of the sky.

All my neighbours were still out, and most would not return before one or two in the morning, so the block of flats seemed unusually dark and deserted.

I pushed open the door but instantly froze with one foot inside and one out.

Without even putting on the light, I saw that some objects were not in their usual places. Maybe only a few centimetres off, but that was enough to tell me that someone had moved things. I took a deep breath to control my breathing and flicked on the lights.

I stood motionless waiting and listening.

Nothing happened, and I let my gaze sweep around the room.

Everything seemed to be a little out of place. The lamps on the tables were not turned exactly as I always set them. Even the wine glasses in the glass-fronted cabinet were not aligned as per my ordinary method.

After a few seconds, I moved cautiously into the room, leaving the door wide open behind me, in case a rapid retreat was necessary. I switched on all the lights and then moved around the flat checking for uninvited visitors. The front door had not been forced and showed no sign of damage whatever. I checked the windows, which were all still closed against the hot night air.

I went carefully around the flat. Everything had been moved and carefully replaced without damaging anything. All the cupboards had been opened, and it seemed to me that their contents had been removed then replaced, almost exactly as before, but not quite. I had carefully hoovered the kitchen that very evening, so the few breadcrumbs on the floor proved that someone had emptied the cupboard where I kept my reserve of bread.

In the bedroom, the drawers had been removed and gone through; even one of my pairs of socks was no longer folded as my mother had taught me

All the books and CDs in the shelves had been moved, but put back in the correct order. However, they were pushed back a little further than I like.

None of my expensive HiFi gear was missing. My music equipment was almost in its normal position, as was my

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MacPro computer. I sighed heavily because my future music making activity was to depend very heavily on this and above all, on the seven thousand euros of music software it contained.

Even my portable computer was there on the low table where I left it.

Nothing at all was missing, but my flat had been gone through with a very fine toothcomb.

I plumped myself down in my favourite armchair. Now, what did all this mean? All this perplexed me.

Had I been an international spy, this would probably have been an entirely normal occurrence, and I would no doubt have smiled a wry spy-like smile. Had I been the strategy director of a multinational arms group, I would probably have taken it as a standard business practice.

But I was an insignificant member of a small consultancy company, now working as a songwriter.

What could I possibly possess that could merit such a careful search? And why put everything back in place, with such attention to detail?

I sat forward and opened my computer to search for the local police station number.

I sat up with a start because as I opened the lid, it came directly into life. I never left my computers in "doze" mode and always waited for them to be completely shut down before closing the lid.

It came alive in the Photo folder of the explorer, which seemed odd. The visitor must have turned it on and just pushed the cover down when he had finished. However, to do this, they must have cracked the password first.

But then I remembered my "image" login. The image I had chosen was a Clown with a red nose. I just had to click the red nose three times, and you were in!

I cursed myself for such a stupid error. Anyone would try that first.

I then quickly looked through the "last opened time" of several documents and spotted several which had been

consulted after my departure that evening. What was more interesting was that my mouse wire had been disconnected. Someone had plugged something else into the connector, and I could only guess that thing to have been an external hard drive.

Someone had searched for something on my PC and had probably copied some files. I checked the "Bin."

It had not been emptied and did not contain anything new, so no data had been destroyed. There was absolutely nothing that could be worth such trouble on any of my computers OR anywhere in my flat.

None of my scientific project files from work was stored on either of my hard drives. I had always kept such information only on my company laptop, which I had now returned. So what on earth were they looking for?

Perhaps the visitors had installed spyware on my PCs, who knows, so I decided to reset both computers using the auto backup, which I had set to run automatically with my Wi-Fi connected backup disk. I set this to reset the entire systems of my two computers back to the state they were in that afternoon. This process would take all night and most of the next morning, but at least I'd be sure that everything was clean.

At the time it didn't occur to me that my visitors might have installed an extra hardware element inside my PC, programmed to send any new data directly to a host via the standard phone line. As it happens, this was not the case.

Anyway, I called in the police, who only came the following morning, due to traditional "Fete de la music" occupations.

They were of no help at all. The only point upon which we agreed was that there must have been a team of highly experienced people to be able to go through my flat so thoroughly in such a small amount of time. The fact that there were no signs of damage to the door also pointed to a professional outfit, and there were no known thieves of

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that level operating in the region.

They questioned me about any classified or sensitive work that I might have been involved in. However, there was nothing which could justify such an act, even for one of our customer's competitors.

They questioned me about my political beliefs and whether I've been abroad in any sensitive counties and a hundred other things, but we found absolutely nothing that could explain the search.

They finally left but did eventually decide to put someone on guard for a few nights, just in case.

Before going to bed the previous night, I had taken the precaution of changing the ten most essential passwords and logins, for various web service I used. I also deleted the ridiculous image login.

I was not concerned about my emails, because I kept the account on a secure web server. All the same, I changed the login and password details.

After doing all this, I eventually got to bed at three in the morning.

I wondered what on earth a team of professionals could have been looking for amongst my belongings. Had I been more conceited, I would have suspected someone of wanting to steal my songs. However, they had been looking for something I did not have. Yet...

Chapter 7

Two days later the police officer who was keeping an eye on the block of flats, disappeared and the whole affair began to fade into a dreamlike mist. I still hadn't got down to seriously dealing with my music, so I decided that I must throw myself into it immediately if I was to get things moving. After breakfast then, I lowered the striped sunblind and turned on my music computer. Sitting in front of the big screen, with my headphones on, I started working through the dozens of songs I had recorded over the years. Some were more or less finished, while others were simple sketches of ideas. I listened carefully and made a list, marking each one either Good, Possible, doubtful or rubbish. By the end of the morning, I had finished this task and settled down to lunch, with the impression of having started the job at last.

As soon as I had finished eating, I took my coffee over and re-listened to the songs in the "Good" and "Possible" columns. I moved one or two and removed one altogether, but even so, the finished list contained fifteen projects that I felt were worth investing time on. I employed the rest of the afternoon setting up and checking the recording software and my music arrangement tools. By six, everything seemed to be working correctly, so I now only had to decide which song to start with.

I decided to leave this decision to ripen until the following morning and had just settled down on the balcony with a well-earned cup of tea when the phone rang.

It was Margaux.

Margaux was the daughter of my parent's French friends. They lived near Paris in a huge house, and I had known her since we were six years old. She had turned into a gorgeous young woman, and not wanting in intelligence, or money, for that matter.

She told me that she was on a training course not far from Grenoble at a small mountain resort call "La Feclaz."

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Like Autrans, this is an excellent cross-country ski resort. The place counted some challenging tracks, but strangely enough, its reputation has never really penetrated outside the region. This situation suited me because it was rarely crowded.

"I've got a day off tomorrow. Thought I might come and see you, It's only a forty-minute drive."

"Great, that would be super. Like to stay the night and then drive back early tomorrow morning?" I proposed.

"Thanks, but I prefer to get back for dinner at eight. It's only selfish really because that way I can get up late and take my time over breakfast."

I laughed. "OK. I usually do the same thing."

On arrival the next morning, I showed her around my flat, which she appreciated. As we returned to the sitting room, she ran her fingers along the top of my synthesiser keyboard and picked up the sheet music of the song I had decided to start with.

"Oh! Still playing, and composing then I see. Am I allowed to hear some of your stuff?"

"It's mainly old stuff, you know. Not good enough to show off with, so I usually keep quiet about it."

I turned on the computer, showed her where the folders were and passed her the monitoring headphones.

"Hey!" She turned them over in her hand, "Now these are what I call pro cans!"

She always surprised me in this way by knowing about things I never expect. "Exactly, I picked them second hand. Even then they cost me nearly a thousand euros, so please don't drop them. But these files are just song ideas you know Margaux." I added a little uneasily. "I'm only just starting to decide which are worth working on. I would have started today..."

"If Margaux hadn't turned up unexpectedly." she completed.

"They are just ideas, sketches, you know, they're not supposed to be finished songs."

"Yes, I understand, don't worry I won't snigger, I'm used to this you know."

"Used to it, how come? Oh yes, of course, your dad."

"I'll give you the honest opinion a professional's daughter when you get back."

"Get back?"

"Get back from doing the shopping, of course."

"Do you mind if I check my email at the same time?"

How she had guessed that I had been about to go when she arrived, I don't know, but there it was. When I got back at half-past eleven, she was sitting quietly on the balcony with a glass of rosé.

"I helped myself. Hope you don't mind. Your glass is there." I sat down, and she filled my glass. "I listened to all your songs, even the basic ideas."

"Oh!"

"There are some good tunes there, not all number one hits though, but good. I had no idea you had a talent in that direction."

"Talent is a big word," I said hurriedly.

"Hey, William! You're talking to the daughter of a man who does this sort of thing every day of his life. He's endlessly bringing home demo stuff, to see how the "general public" reacts to new talent. I now know a good song when I hear it."

"I never had anyone's opinion on my music before," I said, feeling embarrassed as a little boy.

"Well, you have got talent." I blushed, and she laughed to see me embarrassed in this way. "The songs need a better voice than yours, but you know that already, otherwise, you would already have shown off to me."

I laughed heartily, "Exactly right Margaux, exactly."

"Would you like me to get dad to listen to some of your stuff. You never know, he might know someone who needs a few songs?"

"Oh no, please!" I fumbled with my glass avoiding her gaze.

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"It's far too early yet. I'd be too embarrassed to show stuff in this early state to anyone, let alone a pro."

"As you wish William." she smiled. However, in my absence, she had already sent copies of her favourites to her dad's home email. She asked him not to say anything to me, but to let her give me any feedback at a later date."

I went on to explain how I worked, how I added instruments and orchestrations, vocal harmonies etc. etc.

I admit to being disappointed about how little this impressed her and also how she seems to understand so easily. Like her father, she let me do all the talking.

After I'd more or less dried up, she leant forward and served me some more rosé.

"I suppose you ARE a member of the SPACE or the ULACE and that your songs are copyright protected."

"Yes, everything is protected correctly." I said, "I even went to the ULACE open day."

"Interesting?" she asked.

"No. The boss didn't even bother to turn out. We had to make do with some assistant. A real little snob." I shook my head at the memory. "I suspect that they earn much too much for the little work that they do, whatever that might be."

Margaux smiled over at me. "Ah yes. The ULACE boss is one of dad's old chums. He has a fantastic holiday villa, right on the edge of the cliffs at Banyuls Sur Mer, with a private path down to a lovely sandy cove. I've spent several summer holidays down there with his daughter."

I looked at her and shook my head. "I would never have guessed that you were so well connected."

"Ah!" she smiled, "You'd better start being very nice to little Margaux, don't you think?"

I went on to explain how the person had tried to snub me for being a foreigner. I also described my angry counter-attack about the war and confiscation of Jewish composers property.

She sat up. "You know that you should learn to hold your tongue William," she frowned at me seriously. "Many older French people are susceptible about that sort of subject."

"Not only old people also apparently."

"Ah!" she looks sideways at me, "why do you say that."

"Oh, firstly a sexy red-dressed secretary ticked me off. Then someone who was at the visit with me bumped into me at a bistro after and seemed unusually interested. Seemed to think I knew more than I did about that period."

"Really, who was it?"

"A classy little blond with an expensive Rolex and an impressive décolleté," I smiled. "Far too elegant and sexy for me though."

Margaux sat forward, obviously interested, "I'm glad to hear that you are not a glutton for décolletés."

I laughed. "Well, not when the owners are clearly out of my class."

"Too hot for your tastes then."

"No. Not 'hot'. But too obviously someone who felt that she was slumming a bit."

"Ah, yes! I see, a little too much condescension for our sensitive doctor Stone."

"Wait a minute. I caught her on one of the photos I took at the bistro. It's not on my phone now, but I transferred it to the PC. I think I can find it easily." I got up and brought my laptop over to the balcony.

"And why did you keep the photo, William? Perhaps you are not so anti-décolleté as you pretend. Naughty boy..."

I opened the image file and selected the folder. "There she is."

"OH!" She swivelled the Screen towards her and studied the photo carefully.

"Well, well!" she nodded, "Now that's extremely interesting."

"Oh. Why?"

"Did you talk to that man she's sitting with as well?"

"No, why?"

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Avoiding my eyes, she says, "An old acquaintance of my father, not at all on good terms though." She paused. "Do you mind transferring me a copy to show dad?"

"No problem, here we go." and I sent a copy to Margaux's email address. "And the girl? Know her?"

Margaux looked out towards the Belledonne mountain slopes. "Yes, I do in fact, but she had long hair at the time." She hesitated an instant, "I can't remember her name though. Do you remember?"

"I wrote it as the file name, look, there it is Sophie Lemone." I looked up at Margaux, "She told me that she comes from Iceland, which explained her peculiar accent."

"Sophie Lemone from Iceland. Ha! Now that's rare." Margaux smiled to herself.

"That's what I thought at the time."

She took a sip of her rosé and seemed momentarily lost in thought. "Strange, you bumping into them like that and at the ULACE too."

"Oh, the man wasn't there, at least I didn't spot him in our group."

"Anyhow," Margaux tapped my knee, "if she is like she used to be, she is not your type at all."

"In what way?"

"In every way William. I think she must still be the absolute opposite to you in every way I can think of."

"Yes, I felt that."

"If ever she turns up again, let me know, but don't say we know each other."

"Why?"

"My father and her friend are far from being on friendly terms."

"Well she did say she might look me up someday, and I gave her my card."

"Oh?" Margaux looked up in surprise, "so you give your address to unknown foreign beauties now do you. And what if she were a ruthless international spy with a golden revolver in her handbag?"

"OK, OK, but what does she do? I hope she's not a newspaper writer or something like that."

Margaux looked away from me, "Oh no." She hesitated, "she used to work for some finance company, but that was years ago." She went on. "From the look of her clothes, I'd say she has moved up considerably since then. That Rolex is an oyster perpetual. Gold, of course, like mums. Worth thirty thousand."

"Or Maybe she married someone with a lot of money." I contributed.

"No. That is certainly not the woman's method. At least it wasn't. In any case, you are far too young to have accumulated the quantities of money that she might be interested in."

"Well. To change the subject," I said, "what are you up to at Le Feclaz?"

"It's our annual department workshop."

I pull a face, "But I've no idea what you do."

"Oh, it's not very interesting, you know. I work for..." She hesitated, "Well, it's financing stuff."

"Finance stuff? That sounds a bit evasive Margaux. So what do you do really?"

"Ha! Evasive is a perfect word to describe my job. I help track down tax evasion."

"Oh!"

"My job is to try to avoid too much money being sneaked out of France into various tax havens."

"Is it worth the trouble."

Margaux looked over at me and raised her eyebrows. "Worth it? Have you any idea of the extent of tax evasion?"

"No. Not the slightest idea."

"Well. For your information, the latest estimates are that more than 500 billion euros have been illegally placed in banks in Switzerland and other "friendly" countries." I gaped. "Yes", she nodded, "Billions. Not Millions."

"Oh!" I whistled "Milliards in French."

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"Yes. It might sound incredible, but unhappily it's perfectly true." Margaux frowned. "This money should have been kept in French banks. In that case, the taxes would be helping finance the economy of this country and not others."

She went on to explain that concerns due to the lack of national funding would not exist, were this money in its correct place in banks in France. Furthermore, vital services, such as schools, hospitals, retirement pensions, or unemployment benefits, would not be suffering from budget restrictions. Moreover, the state would be able to invest vast sums in helping new innovative industries and thus keep ahead of the emerging economies.

I nodded understanding. "Perhaps if fortunes were taxed less, then people would keep their money in France. In any case, I would never have imagined that tax evasion was on such an enormous scale."

"No. Few people do." She nodded. "Drastically reducing taxes would ensure that the cash would remain in our banks. It's better to get 25% of a huge sum of money, than 75% of nothing."

"Naturally," I agreed, "so why isn't it done?"

"It would need a lot of political courage on behalf of a president to take a decision like that. He would have all the working classes against him for favouritism, and the opposition would wipe the floor with him."

"Ah, politics again!" I said.

"For decades, big companies and their top employees have been quietly shifting large sums of money out of the country. Either that or simply making sure that it never comes in," She frowned. "The world's best financial brains spend their time working out cleverer and cleverer ways of shifting the funds without being caught. My job is to try and work out countermeasures."

"I would have thought that it might get a bit dangerous from time to time, with so much money floating around."

"No, not at all, it's just long research and loads of administrative paperwork with no risk involved. If we do come up with any solid proof, then the special fraud service takes over from us."

"So you are not with the police or the customs then?" I asked.

"No. Oh by the way, do you know that I met your old friend Sally a few years ago during some of my research."

"Ah? No." I am surprised.

"Well. I suppose you know that her thesis was about art confiscation during the last war?"

"Yes of course. We talked about it just the other day. She was at a conference at Lyon."

"She contacted my boss because she was searching for information about how people managed to convert their property into gold. I managed to help her understand what was and wasn't possible at the time of the war, without being caught of course."

"Maybe she was using you to get information to help her convert her student grant into gold bars," I joked.

"Surprisingly, she had uncovered some interesting facts, which helped me tidy up some loose ends. We managed to help her finish one of her chapters, which lacked a few bits of data. A nice girl, I liked her. I can see why you've remained friends so long."

"We first met when we were five years old," I said.

Margaux sat forward. "But has her hair always been quite so red?"

I laughed. "Oh Yes! But there was less of it in those days."

We sat in silence for a moment gazing out across the treetops.

"Oh!" I sat forward abruptly. "Do you know Margaux. The flat was burgled the other day."

"Really?"

"Come on. I'll explain it all while I'm making lunch."

We walked along the balcony and in through the kitchen

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door. I took some eggs from the fridge and started making a big cheese omelette. "They did it when I, and all my neighbours, were out at the Fete de la Music."

"No? Did they steal much?" She seemed suddenly very alert.

"No. That's what was strange about it. Nothing was stolen at all." I explained how every single drawer and shelf had been emptied and refilled. "The police said it looked like a top-class professional job. They said that they must have been looking for something particular."

Margaux observed me as I went on. "The police thought that the thieves must have thought that I had been working on some confidential research project for a sensitive country."

"And had you?" Margaux asked.

"No. Of course not. I even called my old boss to let him know, just in case. He seemed just as surprised as I was."

Margaux sat down in one of the kitchen chairs and seemed lost in thought. "And you noticed nothing odd or unusual?"

"Except that they had been through the files on my laptop after cracking the login. I think that they were disturbed because they hadn't time to do a full shut down, but just closed the lid."

"Any idea what they were looking at?"

"Well, the computer came back on with the explorer in the image folder."

Margaux sipped her glass and looked out of the window. "Was that the same folder where you just showed me the photo of your Icelandic beauty?"

"Yes it was, but she is not MY Iceland beauty. You wouldn't be a bit jealous would you?"

Margaux laughed this off with characteristic ease. "Yes probably. I don't want all Iceland chasing after my favourite British songwriter, now do I?"

I went on to reassure her that I had changed all the passwords and that emails were safe.

"Well" she concluded, "Don't start writing songs about secret atomic weapons or anything like that, or they might come back. Strange though, I admit. Had the lock changed?"

"Oh yes. A top quality system now."

She nodded but didn't seem all that impressed when I showed her.

Soon after lunch, she made an excuse that she had to meet her boss but that she would try to come back again before returning to Paris.

However, the very next morning at about ten thirty, I was surprised to get a call from her again. She said that the programme had been changed and she and her friend were at Grenoble for the day.

"How about eating with us?" She asked. "We can pick you up from the supermarket car park, Is that OK?"

We agreed on eleven-o'clock, and that she would be waiting just inside the main entrance and that her friend would drive us. It didn't occur to me to ask why she couldn't just pick me up from outside the flat.

Margaux was waiting exactly where she said. She was leaning against the side wall, dressed in thick blue hiking shorts, a grey T-shirt and dusty boots. This struck me as unusual for her, almost slumming in a way. She took me by the arm and threaded me rapidly through the crowd of shoppers and out by the side door. She opened the front door of mud-spattered Renault Meganne, with bucket seats, which roared off before I had time to get my seat belt attached. We stopped at the traffic light at the entrance to the motorway and Margaux leant forward from behind. "This is Paul, William"

"Hi," said Paul. "We're going to a little auberge next to the Lac Fredyere. Know it?"

"I stopped for a beer once, on my way down from the Lac Robert."

"By the way William, Paul is my boss." I look across at him as he negotiated the motorway entrance. He must

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have been a little under sixty, I guessed, with a full head of grey-white hair and a close-cropped moustache and beard of the same colour, both impeccably trimmed. His eyebrows are also of the same colour, and his dark blue eyes were surrounded with little wrinkles from much laughing perhaps.

He had a pleasant, smiling mouth and suntanned skin, obviously not gained by sitting in an office all day. His faded black tennis shirt was open at the neck, and some thick cotton shorts of faded beige completed the lower end. I couldn't see his feet.

Paul drove quite slowly and carefully down the straight portion of the motorway, regularly checking in the rear-view mirror.

He suddenly glanced over at me, "Well William. Do my looks meet with your satisfaction?"

I laughed, "Yes, yes, perfectly, sorry."

"No problem."

After about five minutes we took the exit to Domene, through the central square and then onto the mountain road. Paul turned to Margaux, "Tighten seat belts, please. Let's see if the old girl can still take the mountains properly."

I hear a click as Margaux refastened her belt.

"Hold on to your hats ladies and gentlemen." He laughed. Then the car suddenly seemed to take off. The quiet, careful driver of the motorway disappeared, to be replaced by a rally driver. He went tearing up the first slope and round the first sharp bend at nearly sixty miles an hour, changing gear every few seconds. In the next long straight portion, the speedometer reached eighty miles an hour. I gripped the armrest and shot a sideways glance at the driver. We reached a tight uphill hairpin bend, which he took at twice the speed I would have thought possible and then accelerated away, with surprising speed. There seemed to a bigger motor under the bonnet than one would assume to be there. We then negotiated a series of smooth bends which he took very fast but I never once heard the

wheel's screech. Another long straight portion at nearly eighty again and then he slowed down completely to about twenty on the narrow road through the village of Revel.

He took his eye off the road and looked around at me, "You OK William? I'm not going too fast for you?"

I relaxed my grip on the handle and glanced at him smiling. "At least you seem to be enjoying yourself... No, I can take it, if you don't go any faster."

From the back seat, Margot added, "Yes no faster Please."

A minute later, we left the outskirts of the village and sped up the remaining three miles along a narrow mountain road, through a thick pine forest and eventually stopped on a roughly cleared space, which served as a car park.

Paul switched off and jumped out to open the door for Margaux.

She gave him a nasty look as she alighted, "That's the last time I allow you to drive me anywhere."

"Oh come on Margaux, not bad for an old car and an older driver. What do you say, William?" He hurried me across the road and into the dark coolness of the Auberge.

"A table for three, please. That one by the window will be perfect. Sit down, please. I just forgot something in the car."

I watched him walk quickly back over the road to the car. He stood for a moment gazing back down the road, cocking his head as if listening. Then he jumped into the car and drove it into the shadow behind the Auberge.

When he returned, Paul smiled. "Just put the old girl in the cool. She isn't as young as she was? Still goes nicely though."

"We noticed." Scowled Margaux.

"Does your boss always drive that fast?" I asked.

"No, just on special occasions and then only when he is in his horrible supercharged Meganne."

"So this is a special occasion then?"

"In a way." smiled Paul

"Let me introduce myself properly. I'm Paul Douanier.

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There are Douaniers all over the place."

Margaux leant forward, "I suppose you get the joke William, A Douanier is a customs official."

"I know."

Paul beckoned over the young women on service, "Have you still your Assiettes de Cruditiés? Yes! Good, then three please if that suits you two? Yes? Good and a jug of your red house wine."

He sat back in the old wooden chair and gazed out through the slightly dusty window".

Apart from a small group of hikers sitting on the other side of the long room and two old men drinking Pastis at the bar, we were alone in the place.

Paul turned in his chair and slowly scanned the room, taking in and carefully observing each of the occupants.

The place was old but with no charming character at all, a bit dusty too. The only thing that brightened up the room was the red and white chequered tablecloths in the standard French plastic. As usual, the latter were slightly sticky to the touch.

"Well William, Margaux told me the fascinating story you told her yesterday. We both agreed that we should meet."

"Why's that?" I frowned at him.

Because I am more or less certain that you might have unwittingly put your foot right in the middle of a rather nasty hornets' nest."

"Sorry! I must be too slow to follow you."

"That's normal." He rubbed his trimmed beard and smiled again. "I think Margaux explained to you some of what she does, am I right?"

"Yes."

Margaux turned to me, "You remember you said that sometimes it must be a bit dangerous?"

"Yes."

"Well usually it isn't, but it just happens that at present, things are getting a little warm."

I looked from one to the other, "And I'm mixed up in it

somehow. Is that it?"

Paul smiled and let his two hands drop on to the thick plank table. "I'm afraid so William. Without knowing it, you've dropped yourself smack in the middle of things."

"So you organised this little rally driving outing to make sure that we were not followed," I suggested.

"Which explains the break-neck driving," Margaux added sighing loudly.

"Exactly, sorry about that." smiled Paul.

* See Annexe 1 - Meeting Margaux

For photos galleries illustrating this chapter see: <http://www.stephen-william-rowe.com>

If you have enjoyed these chapters, the full e-book can be purchased online in the AMAZON bookshop.