

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

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

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



## Chapter 1

My boss frowned across the desk at me.

At sixty-three, he still had thick, dark hair and sported a magnificent white smile, the work of a Paris dental specialist.

His secretary entered carrying a green folder and set it down beside him.

'Doctor Stone's file,' she said, giving me a quick smile.

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

'The investment file has to be ready before lunch...' she shrugged.

The boss nodded, and she left us.

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

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

'At thirty-five, after years of study and hard work, Doctor Stone has decided to become a songwriter.'

'Yes,' I sat forward again.

'He has chosen to do this even though the probability of success is less than my getting into the national rugby team.'

I laughed. 'Yes, but...'

He held up his hand again, opened the folder, and scanned the first page.

'I know you've been playing the piano all your life, but honestly! Do you believe you can make a decent living by writing songs?' he paused. 'No. Of course, you don't.' He nodded, 'Otherwise, you wouldn't have asked for five month's unpaid leave.' He paused and looked over at me. 'Well, I'm sorry, William.' He frowned at me. 'Five months' leave is not acceptable.'

I started and stared at him, stunned.

He leaned across the table, gripped my wrist and pinned my hand to the table, still fixing me with his light blue gaze.

'I'll 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 too short to do anything professionally, William. You ought to know that.' He blew out some smoke and called, 'Jacqueline!'

The connecting door opened.

'He'll take it. Got the papers ready?' She nodded.

He stood up. 'I'll keep your job open, William. See you in one year then. 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'.

BAIT

NOTE:

*The early life and experiences of William Stone in the tiny English village of Burpham have no direct bearing on the adventures described here.*

*However, readers who appreciate getting to know the characters better will find this and the origins of his friendships with other characters in the three annexes.*

*These annexes also clarify his beginnings in music and his studies.*

## Chapter 2

The short drive across Grenoble to my flat in Meylan did nothing to dispel the dreamlike state into which I had been precipitated.

For weeks, I had been preparing for long and arduous negotiations. I had painstakingly rehearsed and fine-tuned my arguments to take account of any barriers that might be cast across my path.

Above all, I had expected things to take weeks, not a quarter of an hour!

And now, here I was, thrown into a new phase of my life in France with no transition whatsoever.

I took the lift to my second-floor flat and stepped inside. It is admittedly too big for a single man, having three bedrooms, a large living room, and a spacious kitchen.

However, upon discovering the breathtaking view the terrace commands of the “Belledonne Mountain” range, I purchased the place on the spot.

This uninterrupted view culminates sixty miles to the east in the snowcapped summit of Mont Blanc,

The living room and kitchen windows open on the large terrace, now furnished with rattan armchairs and a low table.

Wandering listlessly into the kitchen, I made some tea and cut a thick slice of fruitcake. I carried this



## BAIT

onto the balcony, let myself down into an armchair, and gazed at the mountains.

The sun was already low in the west, colouring the snow-covered summits pink. It was late spring, and the lower slopes had returned, here to the light green of alpine pastures and there, to the darker hues of mixed forest. As the eye follows the mountain slope upwards, these forests abruptly give way to rocky ridges and eventually to the remaining snow caps. I knew that 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 shook myself out of lethargy and went in search of my phone book.

Strangely enough, although my scientist's brain retains vast amounts of data, I can never remember my parent's phone number. I dialled the UK number, and my mother replied. I explained what I'd done in a few words, and she relayed this across the room to my father.

'Great,' he called back. 'Good move.'

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

My mother then told me to expect a visit from my red-headed childhood friend, Sally Cameron.

She was to be an "invited speaker" at a conference near Lyon and would arrive at Grenoble via train on Friday evening.

'I told her you'd put her up for the weekend,' said my mother.'

Sally was my oldest friend, and we had known each other since I was a small boy. We had grown up together and shared many memories. Since

those early days, we had rarely been separated for any significant length of time until University. Sally picked History at Oxford, while I Chemistry at Southampton.

Neither of us could have guessed that this meeting was to mark the beginning of an astonishing adventure.

*See Annexes - 'Meeting Sally'.*

***Detailed Maps and Photo galleries associated with the events in this story can be found on my website here :***

***[https://stephen-william-rowe.com/1\\_023.htm](https://stephen-william-rowe.com/1_023.htm)***

BAIT

### Chapter 3

I have known France well since my boyhood days. This is because my parent's best friends lived in Paris, and we often spent holidays there.

So when, after completing my degree, the department head suggested that I do a PhD at Grenoble, I jumped at the chance.

The town lies at the intersection of three alpine valleys and is encircled by three mountain ranges: the "Vercors", the "Chartreuse" and the "Belledonne".

The "Belledonne" range is a long string of jagged summits around ten thousand feet high. The "Chartreuse" range is lower and greener, with a more rolling profile. Finally, the "Vercors" range is a vast, high-altitude plateau enclosed within a fringe of steep mountains and cliffs.

These specificities made the "Vercors" a perfect hideout for the French resistance fighters during the last World War.

On arriving in this incredible region, I immediately took up cross-country skiing, trail running, and hiking. These activities fully filled my spare time and also kept me very fit.

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

The following evening, I drove across Grenoble to the train station.

The information panel informed me that the train was, as usual, delayed.

## BAIT

When it eventually arrived, 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. Her fellow passengers instinctively gave her a wide berth as if they were concerned about getting burnt.

We hugged and chatted about all sorts of things, but Sally was obviously dog-tired, so we went to bed as soon as we reached my flat.

I overslept the next day and woke at nine-fifteen. I would no doubt have drifted off again but for the irresistible smell of freshly brewed coffee seeping under my door.

Sally was obviously already up.

I jumped out of bed, washed and shaved, then went in search of her. However, there was no sign of her, but I noticed the coffee machine was still full.

Leaning over the balcony, I spotted her.

She was strolling 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 waved to her, then crossed the flat to set the door ajar.

As I put the finishing touches to the table setting on the balcony, I heard the front door close.

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

While I poured our coffee, Sally spread purchases around us at convenient distances. She then helped herself to a warm croissant and scrunched off the

end. For my part, I broke off a long piece of crisp, baguette and began buttering it.

The mountains stood out sharply against the washed blue morning sky, and we sat, taking in the view as we sipped our coffee in silence.

'Your mum told me you chucked your job,' she commented, burying her nose in her oversized coffee cup.

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

'Intelligent man!'

'Yes, you're probably right.'

'SO?'

'You must have heard it all from mum.'

She smiled, 'Maybe. But I want the real version. The one without maternal embroidery.'

I poured myself some more coffee and explained the project while buttering some more baguette.

'Why not,' she replied. 'Never leave any stones unturned. That's my motto,' she added. 'Doctor Stone's stones, in this case,' she chuckled.

Then, helping herself to a second croissant and biting off the crunchy end, she sighed, 'How on earth did civilisation survive so long without croissants?' she sighed.

'And you, Sally? A full professor now, I hear.'

'Yes, amazing, isn't it?' She brightened at once and sat up.

'You can say that again! And Oxford!'

She wiggled her head and made a silly smile. 'I was in the right place at the right time with the right academic background.'

'Explain,' I said.

## BAIT

'A new Chair was opened by a French industrialist. The company specified a young academic with fresh ideas who was fluent in French and English. As the organisation was putting up the money, the university had little to say.

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

'I don't know, really. Anyhow, that is how it was for me. It's a French finance company, apparently, or something like that.'

'Brilliant!' I commented through a mouthful of croissant.

'The university was enthusiastic too. They don't even pay my salary, you see. The income generated by the endowment covers it and my travel allowance too.'

'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 turn down an offer like that?'

'No.'

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

'Wow!'

'Nice name, eh?'

'What about the field of research.'

'Set by the people paying.'

'Normal,' I said.

'I specialise in how, over time, fortunes have been created, used, stolen, diverted, lost, etc., etc., etc. I study the period between the year one thousand and 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.'

'Exactly. 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.

'The man with the chequebook certainly knows how to look after himself.'

'And after you too. I can see that. What's the man's name?'

'Ah, now there you have me...' She scrunched 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's the French for a customs officer.'

'Since that interview, I have had little to do with him or the company.'

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 ancient European families breathing down my neck now,' she said as I refilled her bowl.

'Oh!'

'Didn't I tell you about that?'

'No.'



BAIT

'Well... You remember my thesis subject?'

Well, I did, in fact. Sally's thesis was about events occurring during the last world war. She investigated the confiscation of property by the occupying army. The main topic was the fate of property belonging to wealthy Jewish families. Reportedly, over forty thousand works of art were confiscated from Jewish owners.

'Professor Edwinston. He was my tutor. Asked me to try and sort out the truth from the rumour. He encouraged me to clarify what became of stolen artworks and other looted stuff.' She sipped her coffee. 'I believe he was convinced that certain well-to-do families in Europe still possess works of art taken from Jews in France, with or without knowing their origins.'

I nodded.

'He feared that some people might even have gone to the extremes of destroying priceless works of art to avoid criminal courts or scandal.'

I nodded and pointed at her with my piece of baguette. 'There's nothing new about looting. Both England and France were pretty good at it in ancient times. The king gets bored, so his entourage invents a reason to go to war. The winners took home everything they could carry.'

'I know. But betrayal, collaboration and profiteering... That unsettled me a great deal.'

'Nothing new about profiteering either,' I chuckled. 'It's a great career-boosting tool for those who lack talent.'

Sally shook her head and got her red hair caught in her croissant. 'I didn't realise how far some people are ready to go for position or money.'

I screwed up my face showing my agreement with her.

'Well, as it turns out,' she continued, 'The task proved far more complicated than expected. Many people are still highly uncomfortable about that murky period.' She separated some strands of hair from the flaky croissant and continued. 'Many people I interviewed were apprehensive that I might turn up some unexpected and unpleasant facts about their parents or grandparents. Such revelations would be catastrophic to them, even after such a long time. Those in responsible or comfortable positions were particularly concerned about that.'

She sipped her coffee and continued. 'Unsurprisingly then, I encountered all sorts of obstructions. Sometimes the one document I needed was missing or had been lent out. On other occasions, the only person having access to certain archives was unavailable. Do you get the picture? Even so, I think I did a good job 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'm glad to be able to steer clear of that horrible period,' she sighed. 'I was not ever actually warned off. I was simply made to feel that my time would be better spent elsewhere. In the end, my tutor decided that I should limit the scope of my study.'

'Perhaps he didn't want his prize student to go unaccountably missing,' I suggested,

She sighed and put down her cup, 'Did you know that the occupying forces went as far as forcing

## BAIT

music copyright organisations like the “ULACE” to withhold payments to Jewish composers?’

I sat up and gazed over at her. ‘I’m a member of “ULACE”.’

‘Yes, I know.’ she said, ‘They were ordered to send out a questionnaire asking members to confirm that they were NOT Jewish.’

‘Really!’ I blew out my cheeks. ‘And the result of this so-called survey?’

‘The number of replies from members saying they were Jewish was... How can I put it?’

‘Limited?’ I suggested.

‘But,’ she continued, ‘Although the Vichy finance department froze their copyright payments, they placed them all in a secret bank account.’

‘Odd,’ I said. ‘I’m surprised corrupt officials didn’t simply steal the money.’

She nodded and continued. ‘It proves that a few well-placed people were dead against the plan.’

‘Agreed,’ I said. ‘And did some fancy footwork in the background.’

Sally brushed some strands of hair out of her eyelashes. ‘Exactly. Highly dangerous, though.’

She hesitated for a moment, then went on. ‘It appears that the “ULACE” went as far as cheating the occupying forces. They helped some of the Jewish composers or their families. That was an extremely dangerous thing to do.’

‘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.' Sally nodded. 'In any case, something in my thesis helped clinch the deal for the "De Gaulle Chair".'

I considered this. 'I don't suppose someone could have been buying you off...'

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

'Perhaps Professor Know-it-all.'

During this discussion, certain facts stuck in my mind of their own accord. Had my well-trained research scientist's memory failed me for once, it would have saved me a stupendous amount of trouble.

BAIT

## Chapter 4

Towards the end of the afternoon, cumulus clouds appeared above the “Belledonne Mountain” peaks. They grew and sprouted at astonishing speed, rising to dizzy heights. At first, they blossomed white but gradually became greyer as the afternoon came to a close. Then the wind started.

This was a standard scenario after a period of hot weather.

‘We’re in for a storm tonight,’ I said.

Sally screwed up her nose, ‘Bad news for our walk tomorrow?’

‘No. It won’t last long.’ I replied. ‘Tomorrow will be as dry as today. Believe me.’

Ten minutes later, the rain came lashing down. Sally and I sat cosily around the kitchen table, peeling the carrots, potatoes and onions, listening to the rain pelting noisily against the glass door.

Once we had finished, we returned to the sitting room while the meal was cooked.

On the way, I took a chilled bottle of Tavel rosé from the fridge for our aperitif and set it on the table, while Sally brought the glasses over.

She leant back in her armchair and stretched out her legs. I would have liked to have been able to write, “She stretched out her long, sun-tanned legs”, but Sally never got past the pink blush phase.

She followed my gaze. ‘Lovely colour, eh?’

‘You could always paint them brown,’ I suggested.

‘Are you going to tell me your new project one day?’ she smiled. ‘I need to know when can I start

name-dropping about my world-famous composer friend?’

‘Not this week, but certainly before the end of the month.’

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.’

‘OK,’ Sally nodded.

‘Then I have to orchestrate them. A few can stay simple, with just piano and vocals.’

Sally nodded, and I continued. ‘When that’s finished, I register them with the copyright authorities.’

‘Ah-ha!’ cried Sally, ‘the dreaded “ULACE” strikes again.’

She suddenly sat up, ‘Oh! That reminds me. 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 also happens to be Jewish.’

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

‘No. It was when I was investigating the music copyright stuff.’

‘Copyright!? What on earth has that got to do with him?’ I asked, confused.

‘Good heavens!’ she cried. ‘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 pretty hot news for you then.’

BAIT

'Well?'

'Well, your father's friend just happens to be president of one of France's biggest... 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 dropped open. 'No!'

'Yes.'

'Christ! Well, I would never have guessed...' I almost spilt my wine as I leant forward to look her in the eyes. 'You're pulling my leg!'

She shook her head, 'Oh no, I'm not. Gospel...'

'Incredible!' I said. '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 the pleasure of scoring 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,' Sally rearranged her shorts, which were cutting into her waist. 'Who knows. The man might be able to point you in the right direction.'

I grimaced, 'I wouldn't dare present my stuff to someone at that level. Especially as I know him so well,' I raised my eyebrows and continued. 'It would be too embarrassing for both of us if he had to tell me that my stuff was no good. Can you imagine it?'

Sally nodded. 'Yes, I can.'

'No. I'd need a lot of positive feedback before I'd dare even mention the project to him.'

'Maybe your 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. 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 too,' she smiled. 'But only because you are a special friend.'

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

Sally shook her head. 'I doubt that would ever happen. Oh! And talking about wealth...' She paused. While I was doing my thesis, I learnt something fascinating. Want to hear?'

I formed a wry smile. 'You know how much I'm interested in money. Go on.'

She sat back, linked her fingers, and stretched her freckled arms above her head, 'Just before the last world war, a certain wealthy Jewish industrialist and art connoisseur met with a close friend and fellow collector.'

'Another jew!' I exclaimed.

Sally frowned at me. 'Quiet, please. Now. This friend happened to be German and close to the powers of decision. He warned his friend that it would be wise to sell up, leave France and transfer his fortune out of Europe,' she sipped her wine.

'Apparently, the man listened to the advice and sold almost all his property except his Paris flat. He



## BAIT

converted most of his fortune into gold bars. Then he hid it all. The total was rumoured to be worth a billion euros.'

I whistled, and she went on.

'As we now know, the warning was well founded. However, why the industrialist stayed in Paris remains a mystery. He was captured, sent to a prison camp, and is assumed to have died there.'

Sally looked over at me. 'Are you following?'

'Of course.'

'Well, here's the interesting bit!'

I leant forward. 'Because the idea of hundreds of millions of euros worth of hidden gold isn't?'

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

I raised my eyebrows, 'Come on, come on.'

'Well. He hid the clues in the lyrics of a set of songs he commissioned by various well-known composers of the day.'

'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" copyright database.'

'Oh! Now that's incredible!' I sat up.

'You see!'

'So?' I asked.

'Well, although he commissioned the songs from top songwriters of the day. Nobody knows which songwriters, which songs, and finally, what form the clues took.'

By this time, I was hooked, 'But how on earth do you know all this.'

‘Because one of the best-known composers of the day mentioned it in his autobiography, written in nineteen ninety. In this, he states that he was offered a substantial sum on one condition: to include a certain phrase and a number somewhere in the lyrics.’ She stopped a few moments to sip her wine. ‘By various deductions, 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 whereabouts of an enormous sum in gold ingots,’ I laughed. ‘That’s incredible!’

‘Agreed. No one knows more than that, but I expect many people have tried to find out.’

I rubbed my chin, which was beginning to feel in need of a razor, ‘Maybe someone has already worked it out and is now living in luxury somewhere. The guy certainly wouldn’t go and talk to the press about it, would he?’

‘Or she,’ added Sally. ‘But 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 Sorbonne University in Paris. She helped me with some information about France’s art market and mentioned it ‘en passant.’

‘And?’

‘Well, I didn’t have much time to go into it because that was when I was called back to Oxford to start the writing-up,’ she shrugged. ‘Even so, I managed to dig up some information about the industrialist. The thing that will interest you most though, is that I discovered he had a summer residence somewhere in this part of France. I

## BAIT

believe it was on the Vercors plateau, for that matter. Anyhow, I don't remember now. I just put all the info in one of the appendices.'

'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 an interesting anecdote, really. I was surprised when my tutor encouraged 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 eat.'

'Let's go,' she replied. 'This wine is delicious!'

'The rain's stopped.' I said. 'It usually stops as suddenly as it starts.'

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

The following day, we were up early and made the hour's drive to the village of Corrençon in the Vercors mountains. The trek was uneventful, and we reached home again at about five o'clock, had our showers and settled down to a late cup of tea, tired but contented with our day.

Sally then spent an hour reviewing the speech she was to deliver the following day. Then she closed herself in her bedroom to 'talk it through' a few times to ensure 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, white linen shorts and a beautiful white linen short-sleeved shirt. The former was less buttoned-up than was her habit and showed more of her than I had seen for many years. I glanced away, not wanting to risk embarrassing someone I had known since I was five.

In bed that night, I reflected on how long I had known Sally. It was oddly disturbing to realise unexpectedly, because of an open shirt front, that she was also now a beautiful woman.

The following day, I shuttled her to the central station, kissed her goodbye, and she was swallowed up by the train.

That evening, my flat felt emptier than usual.

Two glasses of the remainder of the wine served only to make me feel melancholic.

I phoned my parents to give them the latest update, but this only worsened things because my mother signed off by saying, 'Well! When on earth are you two going to get married!?'

## Chapter 5

On Tuesday morning, I received an invitation to an Open-Day tour of the “ULACE” headquarters in Paris.

I usually avoid this sort of event, but I decided it might be worth the trip and reserved a hotel near the Louvre. I planned to visit the “Jardin des Plantes” in the morning preceding the tour to see the roses and the famous iris gardens.

On the appointed day, the weather was stiflingly hot. So, after viewing the flowers, I went to a brasserie near the Gare de Lyon. I ordered a large baguette sandwich and a pint of Belgian beer. However, this choice of drink turned out to be an exceedingly bad idea.

The beer was powerful stuff, and the weather was far too hot. As a result, I dozed off on my chair to wake up ten minutes later with a splitting headache and a stiff neck. To cap it all, the cost was far more than I expected, so I set off for the tour in a lousy mood.

The new “ULACE” headquarters is only a short metro trip from the centre. The building is impressive and even opulent, standing in a plot on the embankment of the Seine.

With uncharacteristic bitterness, it struck me that while most songwriters earned little more than a pittance for their toil, at least the admin was profiting from the income.

This did little to improve my frayed temper.

Given my “beery” bad mood, the entrance hall appeared to have been planned to ensure that run-of-the-mill songwriters were reminded of their sheer insignificance compared to their successful colleagues.

An arrogant young woman checked my invitation at the reception and directed me to the top floor. I think I even scowled at her.

I won't describe the building as it is of little significance except for its unfavourable effect on my temper. My mind was gradually recovering from the effects of alcohol, but my headache remained. As a result, I had to keep my eyes screwed half closed in a frown like someone who had been out partying until dawn.

Our small group was herded into an impressive office with a vast curved window opening onto the Seine. A short, plump, bald man was posing, looking out over the river with his back to us. His hands were artistically clasped behind his back. Clearly, 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 swung around theatrically, and that impression was immediately dispelled by his glasses, which had silly white frames.

He welcomed us as if we were an unavoidable disturbance to his busy day. He was a pompous show-off, and I took an immediate dislike to him. His expensive suit, perfectly laundered linen shirt, and horrible petrol-blue silk tie jarred on me.

‘Well, good afternoon, and welcome to you all,’ he called, smiling across the expanse of the walnut desk.

## BAIT

Then, in the next few seconds, we discovered he had no talent whatsoever as an orator. He proceeded to bore us all stiff with dates and statistics. He seemed to swell increasingly as he showed off his mastery of an impressively wide range of uninteresting and useless facts. One or two of us exchanged bored glances as the man waded on, smiling, through a mass of useless information we didn't want to hear.

After a while, he consented to honour us by waddling around to our side of the desk. He perched himself on its corner with one short, podgy leg dangling. He whipped his glasses off theatrically, a technique no doubt learnt in a recent training course. He then waved these about to underline some of the more salient points of his dreary monologue. What irritated me most was how he continually smoothed down the expensive silk jacket as if to draw our attention to its exquisite quality.

'Oh!' he smiled. 'Please feel free to take photos during your visit as souvenirs.'

My nearest neighbour, a Jamaican rapper, leant over and whispered, 'And feel free to 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, scrutinising me.

I nodded and put my hand on my forehead to avoid talking too much.

'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 more. 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 authority. 'Ah! This gentleman does not seem to agree with our strategy.' He smiled an oily smile. 'Please remember that our members' opinions are extremely valuable to us. We act on them whenever we can.'

'Which means hardly ever,' whispered the Jamaican. 'pompous fool!'

On this particular afternoon, however, for reasons with which the reader is now familiar, I was not in the right mood for time-wasting, pompous, posing fools. Especially as MY future was now 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 representing our president, who has unfortunately been called away.'

'To more important engagements?' I added helpfully.

'Exactly.'

'More important than receiving new members...' I added.

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

The real boss hadn't wanted to mess up his holiday schedule for a mere "open day". He had thus plumped the job onto the lap of one of his gullible sidekicks.



## BAIT

The sidekick had mistakenly taken this to be a mark of respect. He was also swelled with pride at being permitted to sit in the boss's swivel chair in the top floor office for an entire day.

Therefore, the man was clearly very annoyed by having his apparent status reduced to its just value. 'Well?' he asked.

'I've carefully studied the actions in favour of young members.'

'I'm glad to hear that you take your membership seriously,' he retorted, smoothing his jacket again.

'It seems to me, however,' I continued, 'that most of these actions are aimed at assisting singers and groups in forwarding their professional careers as performing artists.'

'If you'd come to the point,' sighed the little man, irritated and trying to convey the impression that I must be very dense indeed.

'So, what happens to the thousands of members who are NOT singers or groups then?'

Silence fell, and our host fumbled with some objects on the desk.

'Well said,' agreed my neighbour.

I continued calmly, being careful not to let the lingering effects of the beer become too evident. 'There are no actions planned for the members who simply write songs. Those who have no intention whatever of becoming performing artists?'

A ripple of assent went through our group.

'Promoting groups and artists is the job of record companies, managers and agents but NOT the "ULACE".'

'Well, I really must object,' he fidgeted with his boss's expensive Mont Blanc pen and frowned, 'If I

am not mistaken, Mr..., You are not of French nationality.'

I bristled. 'As I just told you, the name is Doctor Stone. I am a research scientist.

He puffed, sitting awkwardly on the table's edge. 'It true that understanding the complexities of an age-old institution, such as ours, must be difficult for those who do not master the subtleties of our culture and language.'

This was more than I was ready to accept from such a silly little bag of wind. 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 probably didn't understand the complexities either and paid for their ignorance.'

The group was now thoroughly enjoying this spectacle, which had 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. Experts far more qualified than you, monsieur Stone.'

'Doctor Stone,' I replied impassively.

Thanks to Sally, I knew perfectly well that the "ULACE" was forced into doing this by the occupying forces. I also knew they had done all their power to help these unjustly persecuted composers. However, I 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

## BAIT

collaborators and who consequently died in prison camps.'

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

He was entirely correct, but he had got me angry, which is extremely rare.

'I wonder if some of the lovely paintings hanging on the walls of this "honourable and distinguished institution" once belonged to deceased Jewish "ULACE" members,' I realised I had gone too far this time, but anger spurred me on.

He turned and retreated to safety behind the desk.

'Nonsense, absolute rubbish, pure calumny.'

'I was just wondering,' I said. 'But I bet the cleverest of them saw the trouble coming and hid their valuables before they were pinched by dirty collaborators.' I just managed to stop myself from adding 'like you.' which could have ended me up in prison for slander.

'Really! Now that is more than enough!' he was, of course, perfectly correct.

He was now fiddling nervously with a little dull yellow paperweight with a big white ceramic button on top. The inscription "ULACE - 100 Ans" was engraved 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 certainly for me, he was saved by the entrance of a

tall, large-bosomed woman in a tight-fitting, low-cut red dress.

‘No more questions then?’ He gulped. ‘Good! Mrs Holberg, please show these people around the building. Have a nice visit, and welcome to “ULACE”.’

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 that were not directly visible were doing their best to burn their way out through the thin material of her dress. She was clearly scorching 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 across western Paris.

After an unsurprisingly boring visit, I took the RER back to “Saint Michel” métro station.

## BAIT

I was ashamed of the inexcusable spectacle I had made, 'A brilliant day's work.' I told myself.

However, the bitterness of this memory was tempered by the thought that, at this very moment, the shapely Mrs Holberg was employing her talents to help erase the memory of my insults from the mind of the official representative of "ULACE".

## Chapter 6

I found a place in a brasserie a stone's throw from the Seine and ordered a glass of rosé.

Leaning back against the uncomfortable wooden bench, I took out my brand-new phone and started trying out the various functions. The camera gave me the most trouble because I rarely used my phone for this.

During my experimentation, I took several flash photos of myself while expecting to take the view through the window. I then took the view through the window when trying out the 'selfie' mode. The man at the next table chuckled and leant over, 'Take my advice, pal. Read the instruction manual. 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.

At this moment, an elegantly dressed young woman caught my eye. She was sitting across the room from me, chatting with a short, stocky man. 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 designer T-shirt. Her fingers lacked the usual display of expensive rings, and her wrists, the gold bracelets, which wealthy French women seem to favour.

## BAIT

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 of my embarrassing performance. I don't know what came over me. I never behave like that under normal circumstances. I'm ashamed of myself.'

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

'True. But that's no excuse, though. For being a bully, I mean.'

'I suppose you know there was never 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 got carried away.'

'I noticed that,' she smiled. 'By the way, my name is Sophie. Sophie Lemone. And you, of course, are Doctor Stone.'

I laughed, and she went on.

'In any case, if any newspaper reporters were present, your name will be splashed all over the specialised music press tomorrow morning.'

'Oh, God!' I immediately thought of what would happen if Antoine were to get wind of it.

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

The manoeuvre was smooth and professional, and she observed me to ensure I paid attention to the objects on display.

You have an unusual accent,' I said. 'I can't place it though.'

'That's not surprising,' she laughed lightly, 'I was born and raised in Iceland.'

'Iceland!' I frowned. 'Well, well!'

Once more, I was surprised by how intently she watched my face during her announcement.

'Yes. At least now you know what an Icelandic accent sounds like,' she smiled, her face relaxing. 'But 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 under everyone's noses disguised as paperweights.'

'Ah yes... Well, I made that up on the spur of the moment.'

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

'Yes. I just wanted to annoy the little man.'

'You're an inventive and 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, Doctor Stone.'

'You can call me William.'

'Well, William. At least you know the real size of gold bars?'

I hesitated while she continued to observe me, smiling,

'Why do you say that?'



## BAIT

‘Because people invariably visualise gold in the format of the ingots stored in the gold reserves. In practice, much smaller, one-kilo bars are used for transactions. Those are about the size of a small slab of butter. In other words, 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 that paperweight worth nearly eighty thousand euros... That’s about sixty-seven thousand pounds.’

I leant 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’s a sign that I ought to be 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, ‘You’re not holding some dark secret back are you?’ she smiled. ‘Perhaps you’re a spy.’

She said all this with the pleasant manner of someone genuinely interested in me. The fact that I was clearly not under the spell of her ultra-charming and seductive behaviour appeared to have reinforced her impression that I was hiding something.

‘No,’ I said. ‘But you have excellent powers of deduction,’ I smiled, ‘I’m an industrial research scientist.’

The woman leant back and watched me, nodding her head slowly.

'I knew that you had something up your sleeve. That explains why our pompous host not only didn't impress you but also 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 at all. I work in a consultancy firm. So, my study subjects vary depending on our customer contracts. But it's always based on chemical synthesis. My preferred field is working for the perfume industry, but there's not much interesting work available on that front.'

'Interesting. That's at 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 don't fit in, that's all. So songwriting is just a pastime for you, then?'

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

'I'm afraid I've difficulty 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 forfeited an excellent 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.'

## BAIT

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

'I admit it sounds very odd, but It's true. I decided that if I don't try now, I never will. In that case, I would probably regret it sooner or later.'

Sophie leant forward again, her hands clasped before her mouth, 'You're 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 a business card? Who knows, I might be able to help you someday.'

I searched my wallet and handed her one of my personal ones.

'I'll have to rush now,' she smiled. 'I have a rendez-vous for the opera tonight, and I need to change first.' She held out her hand. 'Well, it was a pleasure meeting you, William. Good luck with your project.' She turned and nodded to her companion, and they left together.

I sat sipping my wine and realised with a start that I had yet to learn what Mrs Sophie Lemone of Iceland did for a living. I prayed that she was not one of those ruthless freelance newspaper writers.

That evening, on the train back to Grenoble, I took out the instruction manual for my phone. I soon got to grips with the main functions. I erased all my initial catastrophic photographic efforts but the last one caught my attention. I had accidentally captured the lovely Sophie Lemone as she was rising to come to my table. The photo also captured Sophie's friend, who seemed to be studying me with peculiar intensity. I kept this one, perhaps because the girl was so

attractive, and renamed the File 'Sophie Lemone and friend, Paris.'

As I had my laptop with me, I transferred it to my main 'image' folder.

Seen in high definition, Madam Sophie appeared even more attractive and, furthermore, highly desirable.

The following day was the annual national live music event, 'La Fete de la Musique.'

I did my duty as a musician and wandered around the town centre, listening to musicians and groups. I eventually gave up the battle when the crowds became too dense.

When I reached home just before midnight, my ears were still ringing. All my neighbours were still out and would not return until one or two in the morning. As a consequence, the block of flats was unusually dark and quiet.

I pushed open my front door but instantly froze with one foot inside.

Even without the light, I noticed that some objects were not in their usual places. Maybe only a few centimetres off, but enough to tell me that they had been moved. 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 slightly out of place. The table lamps were turned differently than how I usually set them. Even the wine glasses in the glass-fronted cabinet were not aligned as per my usual method.

## BAIT

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

Everything seemed to have been moved and carefully replaced. The cupboards had been searched; that was obvious. Their contents had been removed and then replaced, almost exactly as before, but not quite. That evening I had hoovered the kitchen, 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 on the shelves had been moved but returned in the correct order. However, they were pushed back further than I like.

None of my expensive HiFi gear was missing. My music equipment was almost in its usual position, as was my top-of-the-range computer. I sighed with relief because my future music-making project would depend heavily on this and, above all, on the seven thousand euros of music software it contained.

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

Nothing was missing, but my flat had obviously been gone through with a very fine tooth comb.

I plumped myself down in the armchair. Now, what did all this mean? It perplexed me.

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

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

What could I 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. Now, I never leave my computers in 'doze' mode and always wait for them to be completely shut down before closing the lid.

It came alive in my Photo folder, 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 looked through the 'last opened time' of several folders. I 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.

## BAIT

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

It had not been emptied and contained nothing new.

I was convinced that 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. Accordingly, I 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 part of the following morning, but at least I'd be sure everything was clean.

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 highly experienced team to go through my flat so thoroughly in such a short 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 that level operating in the region.

They questioned me about any classified or sensitive work I might have been involved in.

However, nothing could justify such an act, even from one of our customers' competitors.

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

Before going to bed the previous night, I had taken the precaution of changing the ten most essential passwords and logins for various web services 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.



## Chapter 7

Two days later, the whole affair faded into a dreamlike mist.

I still hadn't got down to seriously dealing with my music, so I decided to throw myself into it immediately to get things moving. So, after breakfast, I lowered the striped sunblind and turned on my music computer.

Sitting in front of the big pc screen with my headphones on, I started working through the dozens of songs I had recorded over the years. Some were almost finished, while others were simple sketches of ideas. I listened carefully and made a list, marking each as "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 finally started the job.

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 songs that I felt were worth working on. I spent the rest of the afternoon setting up and checking the recording software and my music arrangement tools. By early evening, everything was working correctly, so I now only had to decide which song to start with.

I left this decision to ripen overnight 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 we have known each other since we were six. She had turned into a gorgeous young woman, not wanting in intelligence, or money, for that matter.

Her father, Antoine, was the man Sally had told me was head of a major record company.

She was on a training course in a small mountain resort called "La Feclaz", not far off. Like Autrans, this is a 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. I thought I'd come and say hello. It's only a forty-minute drive.'

'Great,' I said. 'Like to stay the night and then drive back early tomorrow morning?'

'Thanks, but I prefer to get back for dinner at eight. That way, I can get up late tomorrow and take my time over breakfast.'

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

On arrival the following day, 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

## BAIT

these are what I call pro cans!’

She always surprised me in this way by knowing about things I never expected.

‘Exactly, I picked them up second hand. Even so, 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 of a professional’s daughter when you get back.’

‘Get back?’

‘Get back from doing the shopping, of course. I’ll check my email at the same time.’

How she had guessed that I had been about to go out when she arrived, I don’t know, but there it was. When I returned at half-past eleven, I found her 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 Top Ten hits, though, but they are good. I had no idea you had a talent in that direction, William.’

‘Talent is a big word,’ I said hurriedly.

'Hey, William! You're talking to the daughter of someone who does this sort of thing for a living. 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 as 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, or you would already have shown off to me.'

I laughed heartily, 'Perfectly correct, 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. '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.

'I suppose you ARE a member of ULACE, and your songs are copyright protected.'

'Yes,' 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 side-kick. A real little snob.' I shook my head at the memory

Margaux nodded. 'The ULACE boss is one of Dad's old chums. He has a lovely holiday villa on the edge

## BAIT

of the cliffs at Banyuls Sur Mer, with a private path down to a little 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, 'It's time to start being particularly nice to little Margaux, don't you think?'

I then explained how the person at ULACE had tried to snub. I also described my angry comments about the war and confiscation of Jewish composer's property.

She sat up and frowned at me. 'You should learn to hold your tongue, William. Many older French people are susceptible concerning that subject.'

'Not only old people, apparently.'

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

'Oh, someone at the visit bumped into me at a bistro afterwards and seemed unusually interested. Seemed to think I knew more than I did about that period.'

'Really, who was it?'

'A classy 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. 'Especially not when their owners are out of my class.'

'You found her 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 in one of the photos I took at the bistro. I erased them from my phone, but I think it’s still on the laptop.’ I jumped up and brought it out onto the balcony.

‘And why did you keep the photo, William? Perhaps you are not so “anti-décolleté” as you pretend to be. 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 also talk to the man she’s sitting with?’

‘No. Why?’

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.’ I sent a copy to Margaux’s email address. ‘And the girl? Know her?’

Margaux gazed out towards the Belledonne mountain slopes. ‘Yes. Oddly enough, I do. But she had longer hair when I last met her.’ She hesitated an instant, ‘I can’t remember her name though. Do you?’

‘I wrote it as the file name; there it is, Sophie Lemone.’ I looked up at Margaux, ‘She told me 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.’

## BAIT

She took a sip of her rosé and seemed momentarily lost in thought. 'Strange that. I mean, 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. Unless she has changed enormously, she's the absolute opposite of you in every way I can think of.'

'Yes, I felt that, too.'

'If she turns up again, let me know. But don't mention my name, please.'

'Why?'

Margaux hesitated, 'Well, 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 private address to unknown foreign beauties, 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 a sort of... Now, what would you call it? A sort of finance company, but that was years ago.' She went on. 'From the look of her clothes, it looks as though she has moved several rungs up the ladder 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.

'Married money!?' Oh No. That's 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?'

'Our annual department workshop. Teambuilding and stuff like that,' She grimaced.

I pulled a face, 'But I've no idea what you do nowadays.'

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

'Finance stuff? That's a bit evasive, Margaux. So what do you do really?'

'Ha! Well, evasive is a perfect word to describe my job. I help track down tax evasion.'

'Oh! Really!?'

'My job is 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? Are you mad, William!?' Have you any idea of the extent of tax evasion?'

'No. Not the slightest idea.'

'Well. The latest estimates are that more than 500 billion euros have been illegally placed in banks in Switzerland and other 'friendly' countries.'

'How much!?' I gasped.

'Yes', she nodded, 'Billions. Not Millions.'

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

'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



## BAIT

taxes would be helping finance the economy of this country and not others.'

She explained that present difficulties due to the lack of national funding would be considerably reduced if this money was in its correct place in French banks.

I nodded understanding, 'Perhaps if big fortunes were taxed less, 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. Getting 25% of a huge sum is better 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 shifting large sums of money out of the country. Either that or simply making sure 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.'

'Doesn't it get a bit dangerous occasionally, with so much money floating around?'

'No, not at all. It's just long research and loads of administrative paperwork with no risk involved. When we do come up with solid proof, the special fraud service takes over.'

'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 girlfriend Sally a few years ago during some of my research.'

'Ah!'

'Did you know her thesis was about art confiscation during the last war?'

'Yes. 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 clarify what was and wasn't possible during 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 needed more bits of data. She's a nice girl. I liked her. I can see why you've remained friends so long.'

'We first met when we were five,' 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... My 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

## BAIT

kitchen 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 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. He seemed just as surprised as I was.'

Margaux sat 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 they were disturbed because they hadn't time to do a full shutdown 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 of Iceland chasing after my favourite British songwriter. Now do I?'

I reassured 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 following day, at about ten thirty, I was surprised to get a call from her again. She said 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. She would wait for me inside the main entrance, and 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, wearing sun-bleached 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 a mud-spattered Renault Megane with bucket

## BAIT

seats, which roared off before I had time to attach my seat belt. 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. 'I thought we'd go to a little auberge next to the Lac Fredyere. Know it?'

I nodded, 'Yes. I stopped for a beer there once, on my way down from the Lac Robert.'

'By the way, William. Paul is my boss.' I looked across at him as he negotiated the motorway entrance. He must have been a little under sixty, with a full head of grey-white hair and a close-cropped moustache and beard of the same colour, both impeccably trimmed. His eyebrows were 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?'

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

'No problem.'

After about five minutes, we exited towards the village of Domene. Passing through its central square he took the wrong turn.

'You should have gone straight on,' I said.

'Ah! Really?' he smiled. 'Sorry.'

He accelerated hard and sped down the road to the roundabout, doubled back, then took a winding route through the narrow village roads. A few minutes later we arrived back at the starting point and took the mountain road. Paul turned to me, 'Tighten seat belts, please. Let's see if the old girl can still take the mountain roads 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. He tore up the first slope and round the first sharp bend at breakneck speed. The speedometer reached eighty miles an hour in the next long straight portion. 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 done and then accelerated. There was obviously a bigger motor under the bonnet than one would assume. We then negotiated a series of smooth bends, which he took very fast, but I never once heard the wheel's screech. After another long straight portion at nearly eighty, he slowed down to about twenty through the village of Revel. I noticed him checking the rearview mirror often during this.

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

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

## BAIT

and sped up the remaining three miles along a narrow mountain road through a pine forest. We eventually stopped and parked in the car park by Freydières Lake.

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 out of view behind the Auberge.

When he returned, Paul smiled. 'I'll just put the old girl in the shade to 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 only when he is in that horrible supercharged Meganne.'

'So this is a special occasion then?'

'In a way.' smiled Paul

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

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

The place was old but had little charm and even less character. It was a bit dusty, too. The thing that brightened up the room most was the red and white chequered tablecloths in 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 hornet's 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 things are getting a little warm at present.'



BAIT

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 onto 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 ensure we were not followed,' I suggested.

Paul smiled. 'You were being followed, William.'

\* See Annexe 1 - Meeting Margaux

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

## Chapter 8

'Followed!?' I gasped.

'Yep.' Nodded Paul. 'A guy shadowed you from your flat. Then two others followed us in a car.'

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

'Exactly. Sorry about that.' smiled Paul. 'I shook them off after that roundabout at Domene.'

'But, for heaven's sake! What would anyone want to follow me for?'

At this moment, our plates arrived, and Paul filled our glasses, which had been rendered translucent by decades of scouring. 'Drink up, and all will be made clear, except these glasses, of course,' he joked.

After eating in silence for a few moments, Paul put down his knife and fork and drank some wine.

'Margaux has already explained that our job is to try to recover money that ought to be in French banks.'

I nodded, 'Yes, that part seems clear enough.'

'Well,' he continued. 'We spend most of our time tracking down tax frauds and convincing them to bring their funds back to France.' He took another forkful of food. 'However, getting them to see it our way is not always easy because we often don't have absolute proof. Moreover, we often don't know with precision how much has been hidden away.' He sipped his wine and looked to make sure I was following. 'Sometimes we come to agreements whereby the state waives legal action if the money is replaced in a French bank and kept there.' he smiled. 'We've already brought back more than eighty billion euros in this way.'

I whistled, but he went on.

BAIT

'That sort of always provides excellent publicity for the finance minister. That's why budget reductions are a thing our department never has to worry about.'

I looked up from my plate, 'The return on investment is colossal. Perhaps you could ask for a new car from profits?'

'Even a helicopter would be safer,' scowled Margaux. 'My stomach still hasn't arrived from Grenoble.'

Paul smiled ruefully and continued, 'As it is, up till now, we've only recovered a small fraction of the five hundred billion we would like to get back.' Paul looked up at me. 'Don't imagine that this is something specific to the French economy. All European countries are in the same boat. We estimate that between four and five thousand billion euros is hidden away in tax havens instead of helping our economies.' He paused and looked around the room slowly, taking in each of the occupants for a second time. 'It takes time to get used to the sheer enormity of the sums in question. But I can assure you that this is real. Several overseas tax havens are making colossal profits using OUR funds.'

I had been listening carefully and interrupted Paul before he could take up the thread of his exposé. 'But how do I come into this? I've never had anything to do with finance, high or low.'

'No. of course not. I'll come to that in a moment. But I need to give you the background, or it will all seem absurd.'

'Yes' added Margaux. 'There are some refinements to our research which were not envisaged at the outset. Above all, there have recently been some odd coincidences...'

Paul took up the story again. 'Wealthy people have been hiding money away for hundreds of years. Initially, this was almost entirely in Swiss banks in Geneva and Zurich, but that has changed. In the early twentieth century, standard practice was to keep one's ill-gotten gains in a Swiss bank. Naturally, one kept the location and the quantity a closely guarded secret. But what then happens if they die?' He asked, glancing up at me.

'The money would stay where it was. It would go on creating revenue for the bank, but no one would come along and claim it.'

'Exactly,' Paul clapped. 'I see you've been listening. Hey Margaux! Finish this part while I eat a bit, will you?'

The young woman turned to me, 'In a good number of cases, the original owners of this money and their families have disappeared or died with the clues as to its whereabouts in their heads. In quite a few cases, the remaining family know or suspect that substantial sums of family fortune were put away but don't know where or worse still, they know where it is but have no proof or account details.

Quite often, partial information has been left in the hands of different members of the family who don't realise its importance and are now ageing fast. So there's some urgency here. We estimate that in this way, more than a hundred billion euros of 'owner-less' French money is not sleeping in forgotten numbered Swiss accounts alone.'

I moped my brow with my serviette with an exaggerated theatrical gesture. 'Christ!'

'Yes,' said Paul, putting down his fork, 'but many people would like to give that orphaned money a new

## BAIT

home. He looked at me. 'Some of these people are not at all to be recommended.'

'Hum,' I said, 'I might be able to help there...'

Paul put down his glass and looked across at me. 'Just imagine what damage a mad religious fanatic would be able to wreck if he had a few billion euros to play with.'

'Where are you leading Paul? I still can't see how I come into this.'

'Naturally,' he continued. 'Well, we are not the only ones who have worked all this out. It has attracted numerous 'treasure hunters' over the past decades. Given the huge sums involved, some people are ready to pay a lot to employ the world's best experts to locate and capture some of it.'

'Yes,' I said, 'I can imagine that.'

'Several teams of experts are known to have been set up, with each person paid a lump sum and the promise of several million euros each if the team makes a big find. However, the task is complicated and, above all, long, requiring years of detailed and painstaking investigation.'

I interrupted Paul, 'So the people funding this must already be rich to even start searching.'

Margaux turned to me, 'Investing a few million to catch a billion or two is a pretty good investment. A profit of a thousand to one. A far better return on investment than playing the stock market'.

Paul took up the threads. 'Yes, but not everyone who has money is recommendable.'

Some very undesirable people and organisations have already invested large sums. Some are extremely dangerous, and their reasons for wanting

the extra cash are worse still.' Paul sipped some wine and carefully dried his lips with his napkin.

'But is that sort of thing legal?' I asked.

Margaux smiled, 'That's not something that seems to trouble them all that much, William.'

'In one particular case, which presently interests us very much,' went on Paul, 'the person behind the project has kept completely out of the public eye. He employs several independent 'managers' who generally don't even know who their big boss is.' he put down his glass, 'This is the case we are most worried about at the moment.' He stopped and looked across the table at me. 'We suspect this is the group you have accidentally become mixed up with.'

I shook my head impatiently, 'But I still don't get it.'

'Well!' Paul stroked his beard again. 'For some reason, it appears that one of the more teams has concluded that you are also searching and that you have uncovered some clues they haven't got.'

'Me!?' I cried.

'There's a lot of money involved, and they seem to want it badly.'

'But I do not know anything about all this.'

'Yes, of course.' He smiled. 'We know that. But they don't. And they won't take any risk of losing their treasure. So, under the circumstances, they are unlikely to trouble themselves too much about how they get the information, as long as they get it.'

Margaux put her hand on my sleeve. 'We think that the situation might become uncomfortably dangerous for you.'

'But how, in the name of God, could they have come to that conclusion?' I cried.

BAIT

'Keep your voice down, William, please. I'll explain in a moment.'

'There's one big mystery worrying several countries, including France. In this case, it landed on my desk directly from the prime minister.'

There is one big organisation that uses identical procedures in several European countries.

For each of their undertakings, they set up a team. Such teams comprise historians, ancestry experts, psychologists, banking specialists, and god knows who else. Above this is a team of finance experts whose job is to find ways of 'recovering' the funds once all the clues and codes have been located. The members of this team then appear to negotiate directly with the presidents of the banks where the funds are held.' He forked some of his food into his mouth and washed it down with wine. 'Generous goodwill presents are then negotiated, but after modification of the owner's details, the funds remain exactly where they were. As you can readily understand, the bank has no reason to complain about this arrangement. The only difference is that the money now has an official owner.' He dried his mouth on his napkin. 'With the assistance of several international collaborations, we've managed to identify several team members in several countries, but there is absolutely nothing we can pin on them. They simply do detailed research.' Paul paused here, and Margaux leaned over

'Behind all this, however, is a single person. Someone we know nothing whatever about him.'

'Sounds much too much like a James Bond novel to be true,' I said.

Margaux smiled, 'I wish you were right.'

Paul nodded and took up the discussion again. 'How the ownership of the funds eventually passes to this person is unknown. Oddly, there never seems to be any of the violence or strong-arm business, which normally accompanies dealings where such huge sums are involved.' I nodded, and he went on. 'Over the last 20 years, this unknown person is estimated to have accumulated a massive. We believe he has about 50 billion euros readily available.' I whistled, and he looked at me with his clear blue eyes. 'Some world powers are very concerned. You see, these funds are not in the form of property, valuable painting or anything which would need to be sold to be converted into cash.'

I nodded, 'Yes, I understand. In that case, finance authorities would spot the transactions. In this case, it's hard cash, sitting somewhere, ready to be mobilised at a moment's notice.' I put down my knife and sat forward. 'And you can't understand how the person remains invisible and what he is planning.'

Paul sat back, fiddled with his fork, and sipped his wine. 'Exactly William.' He sipped his wine. 'The worrying question is why would one accumulate so much if you don't use any of it. The annual interest alone could finance many major terrorist actions. So What has the person been taking all this trouble for, for the last twenty years?'

Margaux dried her lips, 'We want to know why and what is he waiting for?'

'Him or Her,' I suggest.

She ignored this and continued. 'A present, we do not know what it's all about, but we know what could be done with such a fortune. With one billion, an entire



## BAIT

government could be bribed. The man would still have forty-nine billion to 'strike' with.'

I nodded understanding. 'It sounds unbelievable. But I suppose lots of people see this as a major danger.'

'None of the counties involved has turned up the slightest sign of suspicious company activities or any unusual spending sprees,' Said Paul. 'This reinforces our idea that this vast fortune is simply sleeping. What is it going to be used for?'

Margaux took up the discussion. 'So you see, we must find out who is behind all this to analyse the potential danger.'

I nodded. 'Maybe the person is not aiming to use the money but to gain control over the banks.'

'Paul shook his head, 'But why would he do this?'

'Maybe he's mad.' I shrugged.

Paul pulled a face, 'Now that would be absolutely the worst case possible. A madman with infinite financial resources, plenty of time and lots of patience could do a hell of a lot of damage. What if our man has decided that our present civilisation had sinned and should be extinguished!'

I sighed and let my hand drop on my lap. 'Now, perhaps you could explain how I came to be mixed up in all this crazy financial mess.'

Paul nodded to Margaux.

'Well, William,' she said, 'to start with, your lovely Sophie Lemone and her friend just happen to be the head and shoulders of the French branch of this little research team.'

'Oh!' I was startled.

'The detailed search of your flat is exactly the procedure they would use. Their hallmark, in fact. Of

course, they don't do that themselves. They employ the cream of international specialists and pay them handsomely.'

'But,' I tapped the handle of my knife on the table, 'why trouble with me when I've never had anything to do with them or any financial dealings?'

Margaux pulled a face, 'We would like to know that, but we haven't a clue. Something happened when you were in Paris, of which you are unaware. Whatever it was, it convinced them that you know something valuable to them.'

'About what?'

Paul leaned forward, 'Now listen carefully.'

'OK.'

'As Margaux has already explained, there is a lot of ownerless money around. Most of it is in banks, but not all of it. During the years leading up to the last war, wealthy European families were concerned about a German victory. They knew that an occupying power could help itself to anything it desires, especially anything deposited in banks.'

I nodded, 'The conqueror just walks in and empties the safe and bang goes your hard-earned family fortune!'

'Exactly. So you've got to get it out of reach. But where? Which country is safe? That is not at all easy.'

'The USA?' I suggested

'For example... To some people, however, the simplest and most reliable solution is the oldest. In other words, take it out of the banks and hide it. Of course, one forfeits the interest that would have been gained. However, their logic was that losing a few extra per cent profit is better than one's entire fortune.'

'Good solid logic, that,' I commented.

BAIT

'And completely illegal...'

'Hum. I'm not sure I would have worried too much about legality under the circumstances,' I said.

Paul shot a warning glance at Margaux, coughed, and went on, 'Well, just before the war started, a well-known and successful businessman and well-known art collector was forewarned by a friend of what was likely to happen if France and Paris were captured.'

I sat up and frowned, as this was familiar.

'The man was encouraged to leave France immediately, taking his art collection with him.' Paul looked over at me. 'It was also recommended that he move his money out of European banks. However, the man did not believe Paris would fall,' Paul paused. 'But, being careful, he did move a large part of his fortune out of France into various accounts, some of them in the USA. He also sent his favourite pieces of his art collection to a secret storage site outside Europe. He sold the rest to friends worldwide who were only too happy to get their hands on them.'

Margaux smiled and added, 'We estimate that the sale of the several hundred works of art amounted to around five hundred million euros in today's currency. Above all, it was paid for in gold.'

'Oh! A nice sum.' I said.

'We don't know why, but the man did not leave Paris. He sold his house and rented a big apartment on the Avenue Foch.'

I held up my hand, 'Let me finish. The man was then captured, deported and died. But he hid the gold somewhere, and it has never been found. Incredibly, he left clues in the form of song lyrics saved in the ULACE database.'

Margaux and Paul Laughed out loud. 'So you've met up with your friend Sally, I see,' smiled Paul.

'Yes, and if I'm not mistaken, you, Margaux, are the "nice person" who supplied Sally with this information in the first place. I'm right, am I not?'

'Perfectly correct, William.' Margaux picked up her glass and glanced at Paul, who nodded.

'It looks like we will have to come clean and tell you the truth.' he smiled.

'Thanks, that would be helpful,' I said, raising my eyebrows.

'Well, the information about the hidden gold is correct. We knew that the 'treasure hunters' team would be sure to go through the thesis sooner or later and spot the information.'

'But that gave away a valuable clue, and you just said you wanted to catch these people out,' I said.

Paul interrupted, 'No! What we want to do is find out who the boss of this operation is. That's the task we've been set, not to catch him.'

Margaux took over, 'We wanted to use this hoard of gold as a means of forcing this person out into the open. Gold, you see, is convenient for transactions that must remain secret. It would be handy for any organisation to get their hands on this, even if it only amounts to a tiny fraction of what they have available in banks.'

'But why use gold and not diamonds? The few hundred million euros of diamonds would fit into a fit into a small backpack and only weigh a few kilos. That much gold would weigh tons.'

'About ten tons, in fact, and would measure the same as a standard pallet full of merchandise,' Paul cited from memory. 'Diamonds are a good idea, but

## BAIT

getting one's hands on such a substantial number of good stones is a huge problem. You would probably need five or ten thousand cut diamonds - not easy to find, but easy to mislay. We don't think anyone has ever managed to constitute a large hoard of diamonds. But of course, they would be far easier to hide.'

Margaux took over again, 'There are a few big diamonds, valued in the multimillion-euro bracket, but these are rarely put up for sale, and their whereabouts are perfectly well known. That's why gold is the easiest but a much heavier and voluminous alternative.'

'And harder to hide,' I added after finishing my plate and drinking some wine. I then looked over at Paul. 'So you intentionally planted the information on Sally and used her as bait. I call that pretty unpleasant, really, and dangerous.'

'Now don't get angry, William,' said Paul, 'She was never in any danger because our people were always very close at hand. Of course, she never realised this, but we still keep an eye on anyone who approaches her. We allowed them to question her, and as expected, they rapidly realised that she knew no more than she had written.'

Margaux smiled, 'They spent a good deal of time trying to locate the young research worker who supplied Sally with the information. Unsuccessfully, I'm afraid. I've given up wearing blond wigs and green contact lenses and have abandoned my Nike running shoes and tracksuit...'

'Are you sure we are not in a James Bond film?' I joked.

'Well!'

I went on. 'So, they decided to keep a meticulous eye on everything happening around the ULACE related to the pre-war period. And especially people who seemed interested in this.'

Paul smiled. 'Of course, they must have been through every single song written between 1938 and 1940.'

I smiled and broke off a bit of bread. 'And found nothing, I suppose, or we wouldn't be here.'

Paul and Margaux exchanged glances, 'Apparently not,' concluded Paul, pushing the remains of his meal to the edge of his plate.

'Now William,' Paul looked at me seriously. 'Have you any idea what might have put the idea into Madame Sophie's head that you knew something?'

I sighed heavily. I realised I'd have to explain my ridiculous behaviour during the open-day visit once more and my subsequent discussion with the sophisticated Sophie. Paul and Margaux listened carefully, and both looked at me with amusement twinkling in their eyes.

'Well!' said Paul. 'At least we know why they suspect you now. How could you have guessed...'

Margaux punched my shoulder in a friendly way. 'I bet you'll keep off Belgian beer in the future.'

'You bet. I still have a headache,' I joked.

Paul crossed his arms on the tablecloth and leant forward. 'Now, William, we don't think you are in any real physical danger because these people don't seem to operate that way. They use their intelligence rather than their muscles. However, we're talking about a substantial sum in gold, which I believe is a first for them. So...'

## BAIT

I looked up from my plate at his face, 'SO... What is the next step?' I asked.

'If you agreed, we would appreciate it if you would accept to help us.' Paul had leant forward on his elbows and was observing me.

'And what would this 'helping' entail?' I asked warily.

'Simply to keep pretending that you do know something.'

'Why?'

'To try and draw the big boss out into the open.' He hesitated. 'It may not work, of course, then again it might...'

'And I am not going to get shot or tortured or blown up?'

'Normally, not.'

'So?'

'The evidence points to the fact that, if the gold really exists, it is hidden somewhere up on the Vercors plateau. It could be anywhere up there. But, it just happens that our man had a holiday chalet at Autrans.'

I sat up at the mention of this village, which I knew well.

He went on. 'Remember that this choice of location is odd because, in those days, the place was almost unknown. Autrans only came into the limelight in 1968 when France organised the Winter Olympics at Grenoble. The cross-country ski events and part of the ski jumping were organised there. At the time, it was a small, inaccessible village specialising in forestry, with only a few small farms.'

'I get it', I smiled, 'You want me to go up there and pretend to be searching for hidden gold.'

'Exactly.'

'And how do you expect to work it so your mysterious mastermind shows himself. I don't believe that someone who has managed to escape detection for so long will walk into the first little trap you set?' I asked.

'What makes you think that this is our first trap?' Paul smiled.

'Ah! I see...' I nodded.

'We are working out the details now because we only just discovered that you had come into the equation, so to speak.'

Margaux had been steadily working through her meal and carefully set her knife and fork down. 'We thought it would be a good idea for you not to return to your flat for a few days. Just in case. If you were to put up in a hotel at Autrans, without telling anybody, that might send out just the right signal, which would convince them that you are onto something serious.'

I sat up, 'Are you proposing me a free holiday?'

Paul smiled, 'Quick off the mark, eh! Yes, I suppose the department can run to that.'

Obviously, the idea of a paid holiday in my favourite mountain resort was very appealing. 'But how are the bad guys supposed to discover where I am?' I asked.

Paul sipped his wine and smiled, 'I think we should be able to arrange for a clue to be discovered in the next day or so, don't you Margaux?'

'I think that that can be arranged,' she replied.

'And I am not supposed to ask how.'

'We have other things more pressing to discuss now; in any case, we have yet to think that through.'

So we ordered coffee, and Paul outlined the plans he had worked out with Margaux the previous night.



BAIT

All in all, the thing looked like turning into an interesting and amusing game. And it was. Well. At least at the outset...

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

## Chapter 9

The plan that Paul and Margaux outlined was cunning and as complex as a spy film scenario.

First, we drove back down to the valley, and they set me down outside the bakers' shop not far from my flat. I walked home, picked up some clothes, and loaded them into my car. I then drove across Grenoble and took the motorway towards Lyon. During this, I was followed at a reasonable distance by Margaux in a battered white builder's van. Paul insisted on this to ensure I wasn't being followed, or perhaps I was. About halfway down the motorway, I took the exit and the road towards Grenoble Airport at Saint Etienne de Saint Geoirs.

I left my car in the long-stay car park. Margaux drove up beside me in her van and wound down the window.

'If anything goes seriously wrong and there's real danger, you'll be contacted and told what to do.' She smiled, 'We've excellent relations with several people in Autrans, including the people at the hotel. Most old families have been there for five or six generations. They have a long history of resisting interference from outside, ingrained into their genes. We've arranged a sort of code, so listen. If ever someone who always speaks to you in French suddenly and unexpectedly starts talking to you in bad English, this means ASK NO QUESTIONS and GET OUT FAST. Got that?'

'That sounds a bit spooky.'

## BAIT

'I know, but if it happens, clear out fast without being spotted and leave all your stuff where it is.'

'Got it.'

'When you get to the hotel, you'll find it has some features that could be useful in that respect. I recommend you check them out straight away. Remember that if a Frenchman talks to you in excessively bad English...'

I interrupted, 'Means, take to the hills.'

'Right. See you soon, William.' She leant out of the window, plonked a soft, warm kiss on my cheek and left me.

I rented a dark grey Fiat 500 in the Hertz booth as per instructions. When I had signed the contract, the young and eager agent, sporting a perfectly ironed white shirt, read my name.

'Ah, yes, Monsieur Stone, your friend came through early this morning and asked me to give you back the map you leant him. He said you would need it for your hikes.'

I must have shown my surprise because the young man, misinterpreting the reason, laughed, 'Ha ha, I'm always surprised too, when someone returns things I've leant out. Anyway, here it is; the map of the Vercors Plateau. Are you Going up there now, sir?'

I nodded.

'Your friend told me to tell you that he had marked several places you might like to visit in pencil.'

'Oh, that's going to help a lot,' I said, getting the idea.

'The fastest way up is via Saint Marcelin, then Pont de Royans, and up through the 'Du Bourne' canyon. It's a lovely scenic road. A bit slippery in

winter, mind you. Can be good fun if there's no one else on the road.'

He handed me the keys, pointed out the car and wished me a lovely holiday.

I had been instructed to go to the 'Hotel de La Poste', which was smack in the middle of the little mountain village of Autrans. A room had been booked and paid for in advance, in my real name, by my 'friend' who had once more preceded me.

The only instruction Paul had given me was to behave like someone on holiday and to enjoy myself. I was to forget entirely about treasure or anything we had discussed. I was to be William Stone with his usual interests and authentic past. Paul had told me that, in all likelihood, someone from their team would turn up. In this case, I was to do nothing in particular and to wait for developments.

The route first crossed the Isère plain through the plantations of walnut trees and then started to climb. The steep drive took me up through the impressive "Bourne Canyon" via the road blasted out of the side of the mountain in the late eighteen hundreds. At three thousand feet altitude, the canyon abruptly widened onto the Vercors Plateau near the little town of 'Villard de Lans'. Turning off the main road, I headed northwards through the cold 'Meaudret' canyon to the village of Meaudre. This small village marks the southernmost entrance to the alpine-flower-carpeted Autrans plain and is linked to Autrans by a long, straight road.

Autrans and Meaudre remained more or less isolated from the outside world until the advent of what the French called "Climatisme" in the early

## BAIT

nineteen hundreds. This precursor to modern-day holiday camps had become famous for strengthening children's health when tuberculosis began once more to rear its ugly head. One 'took' pure mountain air, lots of sun, good meals and plenty of healthy exercise.

However, the advent of the Winter Olympics in 1968 brought Autrans into the public eye. These were the first Winter Olympics to benefit from television coverage. As a consequence, vast numbers of people suddenly discovered the discipline of cross-country skiing. After that, the sport naturally became associated with Autrans, and the village remains one of the places of choice in Europe for this sport.

I had been roaming the mountains around Grenoble for years, in all seasons, but had always had a soft spot for this region and knew it well. It is one of the few places to have retained the original character of its lively little village centre, with just a few shops and two or three bistros. The main square still nestles under the protective shadow of the church, whose stone bell tower dates back to the eleventh century.

Autrans is also a perfect place for easy hiking in a relaxed alpine environment in summer. Here, one does not have to stumble and perspire up interminable shadeless slopes to earn the right to admire a magnificent view. Cool, shady forests and flower-covered prairies are more the rule than the exception.

I was not unhappy to have been required to take a few weeks forced and paid holiday up in the Vercors.

Lodging in one of the best hotels, boasting an excellent chef, was an added advantage.

So, having arrived at Autrans, I parked my car in the shadow cast by the old town hall and heaved out my suitcase. With my empty rucksack and mud-crusted walking boots in my free hand, I strolled the fifty yards to the village square. The hotel had stood in this same place, in one form or another, ever since the village existed.

Pushing open the entrance doors, I found myself in a smallish entrance hall, only a few yards long and closed off by a second set of automatic glass doors at the further end. This particularity clearly showed that winter here should not be taken lightly.

Having thus been admitted into the hotel proper, I crossed the hall to the reception desk, which had been squeezed in beside the bottom of the stairs.

Their heads close together, the hotel owner and his wife were checking something on a computer screen. A sharp remark from the wife and a typical French gesture made it immediately clear who was in charge of this part of the operations. In his 'chef de cuisine' attire, the owner muttered some retort, to which she shook her head and shrugged impatiently as he turned and left her.

As I reached the desk, she popped up, 'Hello, can I help you?' she asked in French. 'Ah, yes! You must be Doctor Stone.'

'Yes. How did you guess?'

'You have a suitcase, which means you have a reservation, and I only have one customer missing from my list. Simple.'

'Of course.'

## BAIT

'And your friend told me you would arrive between five and six.' She smiled.

She was apparently an efficient 'patronne', and I guessed, one who knew how to keep things and her staff in order.

'I've kept you a nice quiet room right at the top. I'm afraid it doesn't have a balcony, but my husband has just finished refurbishing it. I think he feels he has done a very nice job; anyway, I'm sure you'll like it.'

I nodded, smiled, and took the key she handed me.

'Your friend has paid the two weeks in advance and said you'd look after the cost of any extras yourself. I hope that's OK?'

'Oh yes. That's what we agreed. He owed me a favour,' I lied.

She looked at me sharply, 'Yes, that's what I understood.' She handed me a slip of paper, 'Breakfast is from seven to ten thirty, and dinner is from seven pm until ten thirty. I think you know my husband is the chef. Most of the ingredients are from up here on the plateau or from nearby, except the wine, thank God!' We laughed together. 'You can take the lift there, but I suppose you'd prefer the stairs. The restaurant is straight through that door, and the swimming pool, fitness rooms and sauna are that way down the stairs and along the corridor. If you need a towel or bathing equipment, let me know.' She smiled again. 'Oh, and you can relax in the garden beside the swimming pool whenever you want.'

My room was at the end of the corridor on the top floor and was decorated in an alpine chalet style. It

gave me a view over the gently rising forests to the north, and it was cool, comfortable, clean and bright.

Setting my suitcase down on the carpet, I unpacked, arranging my clothes neatly in the cupboard. After plugging in my laptop to recharge, I went down to the terrace at the front of the hotel and looked around me.

The dappled shadow under the spreading branches of the ancient Plain Tree was inviting. However, I decided to investigate a bit, as suggested by Margaux, before getting a drink. First, I took a peep at the restaurant, then headed for the indoor swimming pool and back gardens. I had already noticed that a narrow road separated the hotel from these amenities. I then discovered a set of stairs beside the reception desk leading to a tunnel under the road. The passage emerged directly inside the pool building. The pool was far bigger than I had expected and opened into a vast, shady garden. Deck chairs and low tables were dotted here and there under the trees, and a few guests lounged here and there. The garden was surrounded by a high dry stone wall, which must have dated back at least a century. The only break in this was a sun-bleached oak gate which opened onto the road. Pushing this open, I found myself only a stone's throw from where my car was parked behind the town hall.

I nodded and smiled at a group of guests who smiled back. Then, after checking out the well-appointed gymnasium and the sauna, I returned for my pre-dinner drink.

The bar was a long, cool room at the front of the hotel. Its panoramic windows overlooked the terrace



## BAIT

and the village square. It thus commanded an excellent view of the village square and the approaches to the hotel. This, too, had been newly decorated by the owners in the same alpine style.

I ordered a glass of beer and, choosing a table near the windows, unfolded my map and spread it out. Smoothing it as flat as possible, I studied the places marked on it by Paul. There were six in all. Three were marked with bold circles, and the other three with squares. Most of them were on the high ground of the surrounding mountain ridges and spaced around the village at distances between five and ten miles.

While studying these places, the waiter came over with my drink. He was a friendly, thin man, neatly dressed, but had apparently lacked a minute or two for this morning's shaving. Once I had got to know him better, I decided that these precious minutes must have been employed in stretching exercises. However, the sport he seemed to be best at was talking. Once started, he seemed capable of going on endlessly, but luckily, there were constant demands on his time. Therefore, I decided that his morning warm-up routine targeted his tongue and vocal cords.

Every evening, however, when he took on his function as head waiter, he was always perfectly shaved.

In my first short discussion with him, I learnt that the hotel had been in the same family for four generations. Before that, it had been the local postal relay. In those days, the present-day restaurant had been the stables, and initially, the place only had two small bedrooms for the post-coach drivers.

The man had a narrow but pleasant face with slightly hollow cheeks and permanently suntanned like all those who lived up here in the mountains. His was not that nut-brown colour of the local farmers and forest workers, but a healthy complexion all the same.

I quickly learnt that he knew much about the village and its history. I also discovered that when he didn't know the answer to a guest's question, he was perfectly capable of inventing a convincing alternative, on the spur of the moment and without even batting an eyelid. He didn't consider this to be lying. It was just his way of keeping the customers happy.

His inventiveness was sometimes quite remarkable, and he often got carried away by his own stories. He would have been perfect at theatrical improvisation if the world had been constructed differently.

His name was Christophe, but I only learnt his family name much later, once the events described in this book were finished. The hotel owner and his wife were a Monsieur and Madame B. In their case, I didn't learn to use either of their Christian names until long after this adventure was finished, but well before it was forgotten.

Christophe placed my glass of beer beside me and scrutinised the map simultaneously. 'Ah!' he said, 'I see your friend managed to give you his map then. He told me he would mark a few places of interest.'

Once again, I was surprised at the preparation that seemed to have been going on behind the scenes.

## BAIT

‘Do you know him then?’

‘Oh!’ he hesitated, ‘Monsieur Douanier often comes to stay with us. He enjoys the quiet and the walking. He’s been a regular customer for years. Ten years or perhaps even more. His parents and grandparents are from Corrençon.’

‘Yes, of course, I’d forgotten that,’ I lied.

Christophe smiled and then pointed to one of the places Paul had marked on my map. ‘If I were you,’ he said, ‘I’d start my excursions by this one, the “Montbrand Pass”.’ He traced the route with his finger. ‘The advantage is that the track is mostly in the forest. You remain out of the sun, even at midday, especially on the uphill bits. It’s a good walk for getting the legs into trim. But that’s probably not a problem in your case.’

I checked the altitude of the pass on the map and decided that this was not a too strenuous climb. I always took this precaution because I had learnt to be extremely cautious about what a local man calls an “easy” walk.

For example, an “easy” walk would generally take two or three hours to make the round trip, and one would be glad to return and shower afterwards.

the level above this is a “nice” walk. These have one perspiring hard most of the time.

Next, come “good” walks, and are another kettle of fish altogether. This is the sort one recommends to acquaintances who show off a little too much.

So, a “good” walk with a few “nice” climbs or containing a “delicate” passage should be avoided at all costs.

The final category is the “interesting” walk, which means utterly exhausting.

Christophe cast an experienced eye over the marked places, stabbing them with a long, thin finger and nodded. 'Yes. He's marked most of the interesting places. Let me know when you've finished all those, and I'll recommend a few more.'

At this point, he was called away on some other professional errand, and I continued to pour over the map and drink my beer.

## Chapter 10

The following morning, I shouldered my rucksack and set off across the dewy flower-covered prairie. The track skirted the closed cross-country ski centre to join the main GR9 trail. This ran roughly northwards along the side of the mountain ridge, climbing gently through the thick pine forest as it went. After half an hour, the track turned and began to climb steeply. Within a short time, I was sweating heavily, and salty drops ran into my eyes, stinging them. Twenty minutes later, patches of blue sky appeared, low down through the trees. Then, after a final rocky ramp, I came abruptly out of the trees on the very summit of the mountain ridge. From here, the track dived down the far side even more steeply. It wound down between house-sized granite blocks, then disappeared into the pine forest.

I had reached the “Pas de Pierre Taillée” (the Cut-Stone Pass) at an altitude of five thousand three hundred feet.

The opening out of the view was sudden, and the eye was immediately drawn far down to the valley floor nearly five thousand feet beneath me. At the very foot of the mountain, the Isere River wound its age-old way across the plain to its union with the Rhone and thence to the Mediterranean.

I didn't intend to go all the way down but rather to stop on a flat alpine prairie about a third of the way. The going was unexpectedly tricky because the ground was still damp from the morning's dew.

Furthermore, the wet rocks underfoot had been smoothed and polished by generations of heavy boots and were slippery and treacherous.

Thirty minutes later, I reached the prairie's edge and set off toward an ancient stone-built storage shed, some way off. On arriving, I selected a comfortable place out of the sun and propped myself against the cool wall to eat lunch.

As I eased myself down, I spotted an old hiker sitting in the shadow of a twisted old tree and just preparing to leave.

He was closing his rucksack and was in the process of slipping in a half-finished bottle of wine when he spotted me.

'Ho there, young man!' he called as he stepped towards me smiling, 'Here! Hand me your cup.'

He must have been over seventy but apparently full of energy or perhaps of wine. 'There's nothing better than a glass of wine on a trek. Give me a good glass of wine and a bit of cheese, and I'll climb the Mont Blanc.'

We both laughed, and he filled my plastic cup to the brim.

'Going back over to Autrans?'

I nodded, taking a sip, 'Wow! This wine is excellent, mmmm!.'

'A good year, 2005.'

He wagged his finger at me. 'Take my advice. Never take cheap rubbish to drink on a walk; that's my motto. Mother nature would take it as a mark of disrespect. One should never play with her feelings; that's my motto. Well, enjoy your meal. Perhaps we'll meet at Autrans. I live there. Where are you staying?'

## BAIT

I told him, and he nodded. 'On your way back, go over and take a look at the old postal track. It takes you all the way down to the Isere plain. The view is remarkable. That's one of the routes resistance fighters used when trying to escape from the Germans during their big attack on the Vercors in 1944. Not many people use it nowadays.'

He smiled down at me.

'Mind you. I wouldn't recommend making a round trip because the uphill part is hellishly steep and long. Anyhow, it's worth checking out. It might come in useful one day to know exactly where it starts. Well, au-revoir.'

And with a wave of his hand, the old man strode away across the prairie.

I took my time over my sandwiches and the excellent wine in this peaceful, isolated place. Eventually, however, I dragged myself to my feet, packed up and set off along the path knee-deep in flower-sprinkled grasses. I followed the marks the old man had left and soon spotted the side track on my right. It bent back and disappeared under the shadow of a high wall of rock. Fifty yards further along, the path dived over a seemingly sheer cliff face down a narrow cleft between the rocks. At the base of this section, it crossed a scree slope, then disappeared into the forest. The path dropped nearly three thousand feet in a little more than two miles and ended up at the small village I could make out far below on the plain. As the old man had intimated, climbing back up that track would be very hard. An excellent example of a "Good" walk, in fact. I reflected that running down it fast, with armed enemy troops at

one's heels, must have required a lot of skill and determination to get down in one piece.

A few days later, I learned the old man's information was incorrect. In fact, the German commander in charge of the fatal nineteen forty-four attack had taken pains to discover the location of all the passages leading down from the Vercors plateau. During the attack, he sent troops up to each of them. The resistance fighters thus found themselves trapped in their own stronghold. German forces were then parachuted onto the plateau from giant gliders. This was a cunning move because the silent gliders deprived the resistance fighters of an audible warning of the attack. Before they knew what was happening, they were surrounded and attacked from the centre. Against nearly fifteen thousand soldiers, the combat was naturally lost. As a consequence, the entire Vercors community paid the price for the years of harassment and attacks on the German units at Grenoble.

Returning to my homeward path, I worked my way back to the prairie, and my little path soon began to climb. I dived into the forest and then got down to the serious business of climbing. A twenty-minute fight against gravity eventually brought me out, perspiring hard on the summit of the mountain ridge again, but this time at the "Monbrand Pass". This pass was a mile or so south of the "Pierre Taillée Pass" and roughly six hundred feet lower in altitude. I pushed on down the rocky track, which kept falling almost all the way back to the hotel terrace. The entire circuit had only been about nine miles. However, it included nearly three thousand feet of uphill trekking, which I



## BAIT

thought was not bad for a first walk. It belonged to the “nice” walk category.

I decided that showering could wait, so I slumped down in a seat under the plane tree and dropped my rucksack on the flagstones beside me. Pushing back the chair, stretched my legs out under the heavy pine table and sighed. From across the terrace, Christophe nodded to signal that he was on his way and finished serving the customer.

The latter, a round man with plump red sunburnt arms and a white bald head, was grumbling as seemed to be his habit. Christophe told me that this person and his fat wife had been here a week and had complained about almost everything that he had done for each of the three meals a day.

‘So you’ll be leaving us tomorrow?’ Christophe was saying. ‘We’ll be truly sorry to see you go.’

‘Humph!’ was all he got for reply.

‘Will you be coming back to Europe?’

‘Not if I can help it,’ answered the round, burnt person. ‘Straight home from Basel airport.’

I noticed a mischievous sparkle appear in Christophe’s eyes.

‘Ah! If you’re driving,’ he said, ‘There’ll be a lot of traffic jams on the road tomorrow, he lied. That’s because of the new laws about lorry transport.’

He glanced my way and winked. ‘You’ve heard about that, I suppose?’

I suspected that his imagination, fired by a week of insults, was about to wreak havoc with this couple’s travel plans.

‘Oh lord no!’ cried his wife, ‘I can’t stand traffic jams.’

'You'll be held up for hours and hours if you take the motorway.'

The round man blew out his already fat cheeks. 'This damn country is worthless.'

Christophe smiled sweetly. 'There's an alternative route, though.'

'Oh, Lord!' I thought. 'Here comes trouble.'

'Oh yeh!' scowled the man. 'Come on then, give me the main towns, and I'll plug them into my GPS.'

Christophe smilingly gave him a list of towns that would take him and his wife across several unpopulated mountain regions. It would take them all day instead of the usual three and a half hours and cure them of France forever.

Christophe finally came over and took my order for a cold beer. He leant forward and, in a low voice, said, 'I always like to be of particular assistance to customers who have shown such marked appreciation for my services.'

I quickly turned my head and coughed loudly to smother a very justified laugh.

## Chapter 11

The next day, I decided to look at the famous pothole known as the “Gouffre Berger”, one of the six places marked on the map. This is one of the deepest networks of underground galleries in the world, going down more than three thousand feet. There would, I thought, be plenty of space down there to hide a few tons of gold.

It was now forbidden to enter the cavern without authorisation, but you could hire a guide to take you down if you dared. However, the round-trip to the bottom and back takes thirty hours of strenuous clambering and slithering around in the slimy dark. This pleasure trip included a night’s bivouac in the belly of the earth, sleeping on a slimy cavern floor amongst all sorts of unknown slithery creatures. No, this was not for me.

Autrans was also home to another famous pothole called the ‘Trou qui Souffle’ (the blowhole). The latter boasted an incredible twenty-eight miles of underground galleries, in which unwary adventurers often got lost. Although this was another excellent hiding place for a pile of gold, groping about underground was decidedly not my cup of tea. I certainly did not intend to tempt the devil on his own ground.

I must admit that when I realised that at least half the ‘places of interest’ marked by Paul were of this underground nature, I was not all that happy.

This morning’s walk up took me to the other side of the Autrans valley, and the track followed the base of

the southern mountain ridge, passing first through the oddly named hamlet of 'Le Truc'. In French slang, a "truc" translates into a 'whatsit' or thingamajig, but I never discovered how the place got this name. At a sort of crossroads in the centre of this tiny place, I rinsed my hands in the longest solid stone water trough I have ever seen. The water was ice-cold even though we were well into summer. This is because it comes from one of the vast underground caverns hidden deep beneath the granite mountains.

From here, the track wound along in the shadow of the mountain at the fringe of the forest. Then, as the previous day, it turned and headed straight up the steep slope. The climb eventually brought me onto a narrow tarmac road, potholed and damaged by the ravages of winter. Crossing this, it continued upwards through the forest and then out onto the very top of a ridge. Suddenly, the whole world lay seemingly at my feet. I had reached the 'Plenhouse' plateau, and the entire Belledonne and Chartreuse mountain ranges stretched off as far the eye could see, culminating in the Mont Blanc, nearly sixty miles away.

The entrance to the cavern was lower down in a flower-filled prairie. When I eventually found it, I was disappointed. It was a nondescript sort of hole. Most importantly, it gave the beholder no indication of being the entrance to such an impressive underground world.

Seating myself on a flat granite block, I gazed at the entrance. Would anyone have been able to transport such a heavy load of gold up here? Moreover, how could one get it down into that horrible dark, damp, slippery underworld?

## BAIT

In those days, the tarmac road didn't exist, nor did powerful four-wheel drive pickups. At least one thing was clear; I was not going down there to hunt for it.

So I sat there eating my sandwiches and considering what to do next. I remembered I had spotted a place called the "La Ture" cavern, on the map. This was just off one of the forest tracks back on the valley floor. As this would only take me a short way off the direct route back to the hotel, I decided to go and have a look. I was soon on the downhill track through the forest. The going was easy and I made good progress. However, about halfway down, I was suddenly overtaken by a cross-country runner. He came bounding past me down the slope with a friendly wave of his hand. As he disappeared into the distance, I had the small consolation of reading 'France' in big white letters on the back of his blue T-shirt.

Reaching the valley, I cut across the road and dived back up the slope into the forest. The cavern was signposted and so impossible to miss.

This pothole had a wide entrance, allowing sunlight to enter it, so I decided to climb down a little way. I did this more to be able to say that I had done it rather than by any natural inclination or pleasure. The roof was high and sloped down at the same angle as the ground, and it must have been sixty feet wide. However, as soon as I had clambered down about fifty feet or so, the ground became humid, and the surfaces of the rocks were slippery and glistening with dampness. I kept going down at an angle of nearly forty-five degrees until it became too dark to see correctly. At this point, I took out my phone and used

the lamp application to investigate, but I could see no end to the slope. I was utterly alone, and I guessed that if I slipped and broke a leg, I would be likely to stay undiscovered for a very long time. The idea of suffering interminably and alone down in this dark, damp hole was enough to speed me upward and out into the welcome sunlight and warmth. As I emerged, there was a crunching of gravel, and the same runner shot past. He still found the energy to smile and wave again.

In the case of this grotto, it would be relatively easy to get a carload of gold here via the various wide tracks. However, it dawned on me that these tracks probably didn't exist before the war. Obviously, I needed a better understanding of what the village and surroundings had been like in nineteen forty. All the same, I guessed that most modern-day tracks had been built, widened or modified since the advent of the cross-country ski boom in nineteen sixty-eight. That made them twenty-eight years too late to be used to transport the hoard of gold. Most of the others would also have gradually fallen into disuse during the last seventy-five years as the woodcutters moved their activities from one sector to another. It seemed inevitable, however, that the foot-tracks to and from the various mountain passes had remained unchanged for centuries.

For example, the road that now passes the entrance to the pothole called the "Trou qui Souffle", had only been widened from a rough track in 1937. In fact, it was during this widening work that the cavern and its forty-eight miles of galleries had been discovered. The first explorations of this network were

## BAIT

not made until 1940 and 1942, two years too late for our wealthy industrialists to know about it.

That evening, chatting with one of Autrans mountain guides over a glass of beer, I discovered that the 'Gouffre Berger' had only been found in 1950, long after the war. I was also a little disappointed to discover that the name did not come from the fact that it had been discovered by a 'Berger' (a Shepherd) during his pastoral duties but less romantically by a speleologist called Joseph Berger.

Gradually, thus, the idea that a vast sum of gold lay hidden in some underground cavern began to seem to me more and more like a fairy tale than anything else.

I also wondered if anyone still alive in the village knew which tracks existed before the war.

The town hall might have maps dating from that period. However, I couldn't see any convincing reason that would enable me to question them about it without provoking suspicion. I had been asked to behave like an ordinary tourist on holiday, so I decided that that is what I must continue to do, regardless of my doubts and suspicions.

## Chapter 12

The following morning, I woke to the sounds of a blackbird's song filtering through the open window. The sun was streaming in through the knot holes in the thick wooden shutters, and I rolled over, gazing lazily at the ceiling. Then, pushing back the sheets, I swung my leg around and dropped them over the edge of the bed.

Pushing wide the shutters, a refreshing breeze laden with the mingled perfumes of forest and prairie filled the room. The cleanness and newness of the morning created an irresistible urge to be part of it rather than a mere observer. I quickly dug out my running shoes and shorts and slipped out via the back garden gate for a short jog around the fields before breakfast. The morning was one of those perfect ones, where the cold mountain air was nicely balanced by the warming rays of the early sun. My running shoes were soon soaked with dew from the short grass, and my legs were covered with seeds from the fronds hanging across the track, which whipped me as I went past. The blues, mauves and violets of wildflowers stood out even more vividly than usual against the dew-beaded greens of the grasses. Turning down a rough track, I jumped across the bubbling trout stream, up the other side of the dip in the land and headed back up towards the village.

As I arrived, the guests were stirring, and most of them had finished their breakfasts before I had taken my shower and dressed. Feeling relaxed and at peace with the world, I found a table under the spreading plane tree on the terrace. I stretched out my legs and settled down to an extended, quiet, lazy



## BAIT

breakfast of croissants, baguette, and hot coffee. I bathed in the relaxed atmosphere of the little village square as it gradually came to life, moving lazily towards the mid-morning when people would start thinking about what to eat for lunch.

However, I suddenly became aware of someone coming towards me. I refocused my vision, and my eyes opened wide with surprise. Impossible to mistake the short blond hair and slim, elegant silhouette. It was astonishingly, Sophie Lemone, the lovely spy from Paris. She waved, smiling and approached me, her beautiful tanned legs brushing smoothly together as she wound her way between some people consulting the hotel menu a few yards away.

She was wearing white linen shorts, which looked as though they were tailor-made and a khaki shirt. The latter was unbuttoned just enough to make it impossible for anyone to doubt that she was female. I stood up to welcome her and glanced over at Christophe, who was also observing her arrival with professional interest.

'So! Doctor Stone,' she said as we shook hands, 'we meet again!'

There was little I could do under the circumstances, so I smiled back, 'Please take a seat.' I waited for her to be seated before resuming my place. At this point, Christophe came over, 'Bonjour mademoiselle. Can I offer you some coffee?'

'Thank you. Yes, that would be lovely.' As he turned away, she smiled at me. 'So, what are you doing up here in the mountains, Dr Stone?' she smiled. She slipped her long, manicured hand through the open

neck of her shirt and carelessly caressed the tanned skin of her collarbone, 'On holiday?' she asked.

'Yes, a week or two of relaxation.'

'Ah! I see. The professional musician you have now become needs quiet, relaxation and a change of surroundings to stimulate creativity. Am I right?'

'You have an excellent memory. Yes, you're perfectly right.' At this moment, Christophe arrived and placed a cup of coffee and a croissant in front of my visitor. 'Thank you,' she smiled, and he matched it with one of his own that he reserved for just such occasions. He came round the table to my side. 'I have a message from the guide about your canyoning outing tomorrow, Dr Stone. He came past earlier while you were out running,' he said and handed me a small, folded sheet of paper. How he had known that I was out running remains a mystery, but I contained my surprise as best as I could. I had planned no such canyoning outing. I unfolded the small sheet and read in English, 'Remember you are simply on holiday, William. Remember, too, that Miss Lemone is simply a highly attractive young lady you once met. Behave as you normally would under the circumstances. Paul.'

I looked up at Christophe's expressionless face, 'Apparently, there's still too much water in the torrent for safety,' he said.

I nodded, refolded the sheet and handed it back to Christophe, 'Thanks, Christophe, never mind. Maybe next week then.'

I turned back to my visitor and immediately put Paul's instructions into action, 'If you are staying in the region, perhaps you would accept an invitation to dine

## BAIT

with me here tonight. That would be possible, wouldn't it, Christophe?'

'Perfectly, sir.'

While I was talking, she leant forward, accidentally displaying her lovely tanned breasts. During this distraction, she slid my map of the Vercors, which was lying open on the table, over to her side and spun it around. Christophe, who had slipped back round behind her, caught my gaze and raised an amused eyebrow as if to say, 'a lovely smooth piece of work that...'

She had already unfolded it and was studying the places marked on it. 'So these are the places you have planned to visit for inspiration, are they? Or perhaps you have already been there?'

For a moment, I hesitated, not knowing how to answer the question. She was watching me and must have noted the momentary, vague look in my eyes. She scanned them once more, no doubt to memorise them, folded the map and handed it back to me. 'Ah! I see it's part of an idea for some secret creative project.'

I smiled in a non-committal way and sipped my coffee. 'Well, yes.' She continued, 'Eating here with you tonight would be lovely. I'm off to Villard de Lans today. What time shall we say then?'

We agreed on half past seven for an aperitif, and she then wound her way back across the village square and disappeared around a corner. I wondered how Paul had known about my visitor's imminent arrival. I also wondered if Christophe, Mr., and Mrs. B were in on the game. It was reassuring that this woman was not considered an immediate danger to me. It was also not disagreeable to discover that I was

being encouraged to accept the company of such a desirable woman.

For the rest of the morning, I wandered quietly around the village, visited the old church, and then spent nearly an hour chatting with the owner of one of the sports gear shops while choosing a new and expensive pair of hiking boots. I reflected that as I was not paying for my room, I could afford to invest in some excellent equipment for once.

On returning to the hotel for lunch, Mrs B called me over to the desk.

'Ah, Doctor Stone.' she smiled. 'The young lady here this morning phoned just a few minutes ago. She said her employer had called her and asked her to cut short her holidays.' She made a wry smile. 'Sounded more like an order than a request to me. Anyway, she has to be at Lyon airport this afternoon and won't be able to dine with you this evening. She said to say that she was very sorry.'

I was disappointed because spending a relaxed evening with such an attractive young woman would have been agreeable. Above all, I wondered why she had been called away when I must have been her professional objective. Had she considered that the information gleaned from the map was all she was going to get out of me or perhaps all that she needed? In any case, I was convinced that a pro like her had memorised the map locations and had probably immediately transferred them onto her own map. Perhaps she was going to discuss the next step with her boss. I wondered if she had even had the remotest intention of dining with me. However, the point that gave me the most trouble was why Paul wasn't worried about her having been able to locate

## BAIT

me so quickly. Why did he want me to cultivate the relationship with her when he knew perfectly well that I was no match for a professional of her calibre?

Was this merely part of some clever manoeuvre he had set up, of which I was a small and relatively unimportant component? This conclusion seemed very probable, but at least I was having a free holiday, I reflected, so I decided to continue to make the best of it.

I took a glass of beer out under the shade of the trees in the back garden beyond the swimming pool. I sat nodding with satisfaction while reading the impressive technical data supplied with my new hiking boots. According to this, my walking performance would improve drastically and with no further effort on my behalf. If this was true, the money had been well spent, and I decided to test this out directly after lunch.

Back up in my room, I was just about to sit down to take off these marvels of technology when the room phone rang.

It was the hotel owner, Mr B. 'Very good day, Doctor Stone,' he said in his terrible English accent, which I will not attempt to reproduce phonetically here. 'Two gentlemen are come here to see you. They wait here down in... Sorry please. At reception. Will I send them up to you?'

He continued without waiting for my reply, still in his awful English. 'Good. Good. You will come down? Good. Very Good.' I still hadn't spoken, and he hesitated 'Yes yes. Sorry for my bad English accent, not so good eh! Yes, ah! For dinner, yes, of course, tonight we have the special menu of coquilles Saint Jacques.' He continued in English to explain the menu

and the preparation of each dish in greater detail, with many mistakes, corrections, and hesitations. He then stopped and punctuated the monologue by repeating his excuses about his poor English.

Then, suddenly, the penny dropped.

Mister B. had never before talked to me in English.

So, this was the alarm signal I had been warned to look out for. It meant Danger! Get Out Quick.

'Christ!' the hairs rose on the back of my forearms. Mr B. continued his uninterrupted flow of chat, and I put the phone down on the bed to avoid the tell-tale click of hanging up. I then grabbed my backpack and the map and ran for the door. I opened it very quietly and peeped out. I could hear Mr B's continuous flow of information coming up the stairwell, so I crept down and waited just above the reception desk on the first floor. I took refuge inside the little room used by the staff to do ironing and waited.

At last, he stopped and finished, 'You prefer to meet the gentlemen down here. I show them to the bar, yes? Perfect.'

He must have guessed that I was ready and listening. 'Can I offer you some nice cold beer? Yes? Good, this way, please. On the house, of course.'

This was a signal, so I waited until I could hear his voice coming from the bar, slid from the little room down the carpeted stairs and turned left down the tunnel under the road to the swimming pool. I skirted the pool and the garden behind it and pushed open the wooden gate in the stone wall, closing it quietly behind me.

Looking back along the narrow road towards the hotel, I was surprised to see Christophe looking my way. He looked around him the waved violently his

## BAIT

arm, pointing down the road behind me. I got the message, sprinted that way, and dashed into the square enclosing the small town hall where I had parked my car. Throwing my backpack onto the bonnet, I dragged out my keys, fumbled with the lock and threw open the door. Hooking the rucksack from the bonnet, I dropped it on the passenger seat, started the car and backed out. My papers, phone, and wallet were still in the rucksack since I was shopping, so at least I had money and my ID papers.

There were only two roads out of Autrans, and both were very easy to watch, especially as whoever it was might already know my car model and even have a photo of me. However, there was one other route no one used anymore, so I headed northward at top speed towards Autran's downhill ski slopes at La Sure. As soon as I was out of hearing of the village centre, I accelerated along the narrow road, praying that the local farmers would already be home, digging into their lunches. I didn't want to come face to face with one of their enormous forest tractors around one of the blind bends.

I was lucky and covered the six miles in a remarkably short time. The smell of smoking rubber tyres greeted me as I threw open the door. I didn't attempt to hide the car. However, I stood still for a few moments, holding my breath in the perfect silence of this isolated spot, listening hard for any noise of pursuit.

Hardly anyone came this way in summer, and the route I was aiming at was known only to a few nowadays. Putting on my rucksack and strapping it on, I ran across the road and headed for my destination.

It is little known, but there is a third route down from Autrans to the valley of Grenoble. It was built for the nineteen-sixty-eight Winter Olympics but has been closed for twenty-five years. A five-hundred-yard-long tunnel had been driven under the mountains at the 'Mortier' Pass to join the new road up from Grenoble to the one from Autrans. However, in nineteen-ninety-two, a massive landslide had occurred, and an entire section of the mountainside had subsided, carrying with it the road and the flat portion on which it had been built. The cost of rebuilding, stabilising and protecting this portion of the road was so huge that the idea was abandoned. However, the tunnel is still in perfect condition, and this was where I was headed. Once on the far side, I could either join the abandoned road lower down or cut straight down through the steep forest. It was a long way down to the valley, but once on the other side, I would be sure of not being spotted as long as I kept to the hiking tracks. These would take me right up to the entrance to Grenoble. There are only four or five bridges across the Isere River, but I doubted my pursuers would bother watching these. They would know that I could jump aboard any number of buses or hitch a ride.

The entrance to the tunnel was not hidden but was difficult to spot against the background of the forest, which surrounded and overhung it. From most angles, it looked like a cave opening. When directly in line with it, however, I could just see the tiny spot of light corresponding to the opening at the far end.

I ran over to the entrance and down the tunnel, the surface of which was still in surprisingly good condition. I was astonished to find that the first thirty



## BAIT

feet or so had been painted by street artists who exhibited considerable talent. I wondered who would have taken the trouble to come all the way up here to practice his art in a place where hardly anyone would come to admire it.

The light fell off rapidly as I ran on, and I was soon running in complete and utter darkness. Luckily, being protected from the elements and, above all, from the severe winter weather, the road surface had remained almost perfect, and hardly any rocks had fallen from the roof. Happily, then, I could keep up a good pace. It was an extremely unnerving sensation to be running fast in complete darkness, guided only by a far-off spot of light.

I could not even see my own feet. About halfway along, I just avoided an open drain cover near the side of the tunnel, so I decided to keep to the centre.

Gradually, the spot of light in the distance grew, and I could now see the walls around me, and the arc of the roof started to reappear. However, the ground remained in shadow until I was only about a hundred feet from the far end.

I don't know why I did it, but as I approached the far end, I slowed down and ran as noiselessly as possible, keeping tight up against the left-hand wall in the remaining shadow. The sun shone brightly through the opening, and I squeezed my eyes almost closed to overcome the glare. Reaching the exit, the whole valley of Grenoble suddenly appeared before me, more than three thousand feet lower down, and the boulder-strewn remains of the old road came into view.

Pressed against the wall, I carefully slid my head around the corner and scanned the approaches.

An instant later, I darted back into cover.

Not a hundred yards off, two heavily built men were walking towards the tunnel entrance across the uneven terrain. They were certainly not out for a relaxed hike. One of them was examining something he had taken from his inner pocket. It was a revolver.

'Christ', I whispered to myself almost in a panic.

Without waiting an instant longer, I turned and dashed back from where I had come into the pitch black. I ran as fast as possible without making noise, falling and rolling over heavily several times. Even so, the sound of my footfalls must have been funnelled down the empty tunnel in both directions and have been audible near the exit. I estimated that I should have enough time to reach the other end before they came level with the entrance.

My pursuers had done their homework and were not taking any risks of letting me escape. But the presence of a revolver put another light on the thing altogether. This was no longer any sort of amusement, let alone a game.

If the two men from the hotel had guessed my tactics and had followed me, I would have been trapped in the tunnel, but clearly, they hadn't. However, as I got to my feet, the other two appeared at the other end. I heard a shout echo down the empty tunnel but didn't wait to see what they would do. I ran as fast as the stitch in my side would allow me, covered with sweat and feeling as if my lungs would burst at any moment. With trembling hands, I tore open the car door and managed to jamb the key into the starter. I backed up in a shower of gravel and whipped the car around and up the rough track, which circled around and above the tunnel opening. I

## BAIT

accelerated hard, and the small vehicle went spinning and sliding up in showers of dust and small stones, bouncing over the ruts formed during the last winter.

If they were pursuing me, they hadn't the slightest chance of catching me on foot. Furthermore, they would have no portable telephone signal until they reached my end of the tunnel. This gave me five to ten minutes to get clear, depending on their running speed, which my practised eye told me would not be too good.

I drove at a speed that would have been reckless and dangerous even if I had been an experienced rally driver. As it was, I almost left the winding, narrow, rutted road on several occasions but somehow managed to avoid crashing into any of the trees lining the track, or going over the edge down into one of the precipices.

The road rose rapidly, but I knew I would have to leave the car soon because this track had only one exit: at the "Croix Perrin Pass". My pursuers would have plenty of time to warn others by phone, and they would be waiting. Undoubtedly, they would send another car up from Autrans behind me to make any retreat impossible.

So what could I do?

I would have to play a careful hand to save my skin.

My attempt at getting through the Mortier tunnel would have confirmed to them that I intended to get back down to Grenoble. If I didn't turn up at either end of this road in the car, they would assume that I had headed on foot over the mountain ridge. There were three available tracks, all of which they would find marked on all the maps. However, whichever path I chose to start on, they all sooner or later joined each

other, and my escape route would necessarily be through the little village of "Engins". This village lies on the route between 'Lans en Vercors' and the Grenoble valley floor. Once there, the only practical route down is along the main road. Anyone could easily watch this route from numerous vantage points and cut me off.

There remained the option of following the bed of the wild "Furon" torrent. However, even at the best of times, this is very dangerous without special equipment. It might be possible, but it would mean taking some considerable risks. Breaking a leg in an isolated, inaccessible mountain torrent with no assistance available would have consequences that I didn't want to think of.

I decided the only viable solution was to head in the opposite direction, away from Grenoble, but make them believe my route was as they expected.

I sped down a straight portion of the road and screeched off it into the entrance to the small car park. From here a track led to the "Plenouze plateau", where I had visited the 'Berger' pothole. I bumped around the wooden barrier which blocked the track and drove a few tens of yards up the rock-strewn trail. Turning the car onto the rocky verge, I left it well in view where my pursuers would easily spot it.

Their map would show them this was from where one of the main tracks led back down towards Grenoble. It would also show them exactly where to wait for a fugitive. I jumped out of the car, leaving the keys in their place, and, shouldering my rucksack, dashed back down the track from where I had come.

## BAIT

I headed in the opposite direction to the one I hoped they would take for granted. I crossed the narrow tarmac road and dived across a small flower-covered field down into the forest along a steep pine needle-covered slope. I had got my breath back during the short drive, but now my legs did the suffering as I struggled to slow myself down.

This part of the forest dropped by more than a thousand feet over about the same horizontal distance. Some places were so steep that I just slid down among the pine needles, on my heels or bottom. Further down, I slowed myself by grabbing and hanging onto the flexible fir tree branches wherever I could. I went slithering and sliding each time I had to cross one of the tiny streams and soaked patches of moss. After fifteen minutes, my track ended abruptly at the top of a six-foot drop, and I slid down this on my rear onto a narrow woodcutters' track. This led me about five hundred yards along a more or less flat portion. Then I dived back down another steep place littered with rocks on my right. The leg muscles around my knees were screaming with the effort of permanently breaking, and I went head over heels once, rolling over and crashing my elbow against a rock.

I didn't stop to think about the pain that shot up my arm but rolled to my feet and headed on down again.

I was now nearly back at the level of the road from Autrans to the tunnel. As I was about to exit the forest's lower fringe, a sudden roar of a powerful engine sent me diving behind the nearest pine tree trunk. As I peered from behind it, breathing heavily with the taste of blood in my mouth, two powerful black cars went tearing up the road towards the

Stephen William ROWE

tunnel, where I guessed the other two men were now waiting for them.

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

## Chapter 13

From my hiding place behind the tree, I waited for the cars to disappear around the bend. I then sprinted out from under the cover of the forest and across the flat, open valley floor. I passed through the tiny hamlet of “Les Ronins” and then dived back into the forest, which came right down to the road on its opposite side.

From here on, I was on terrain that I knew well. Many of the cross-country ski tracks I frequented in winter passed through this part of the forest. I also knew that the fastest route would lead me along the path I had taken to visit the ‘Ture’ cavern. However, I also knew that a skilled driver would be able to get a car along this track, and I didn’t intend to take any more chances than necessary.

This involved me striking a straight line through the forest, following little-used tracks too numerous to be watched. The disadvantage of this route was that it implied some very steep climbs, and my legs and my lungs would once more be put to the test.

The Vercors forests are rock-strewn areas where the trees have grown wherever they have managed to find space between the huge rocks and boulders. The paths through this complicated terrain follow the only practicable routes between any two points. Running fast through the forest was, therefore, exceedingly challenging, being a mixture of climbing, stumbling, slithering and tumbling. I kept on as fast and as well as possible under the circumstances, the sweat dripping from my forehead and running into my

eyes.

After ten minutes of this torture, I heard a screeching of tyres in the distance behind me. I guessed that my pursuers had just found my car, high on the opposite side of the valley. If they swallowed the bait I had left, I would be relatively safe now. However, if they were as clever and quick-minded as my lovely visitor that morning, I was not yet out of danger.

I wondered if this was her doing but smiled to myself at the idea of having been able to outwit a beautiful and dangerous international spy.

My new plan was to head over the “Montbrand Pass” and down to the Isere valley on the opposite side of the Vercors from Grenoble. To do this, I had to get down off the low barrier ridge where I now found myself. Above all, I had to cross the forest road, which led up towards le “Bec de L’Orient”.

If my pursuers had guessed my tactics, they might have time to get a car up there and cut off my escape route. In any case, I had no time to reflect further on these possibilities, so I stumbled my way down the steep slope and joined another woodcutter’s track. This one was just as steep, but it had the advantage of being cleared of rocks, allowing me to lengthen my stride without pitching over every few paces. As I approached the bottom, my heart dropped. The deep-throated noise of a powerful engine was approaching, coming up the forest road I must cross.

‘Damn it!’ I cursed.

I couldn’t risk making a dash for it because if they spotted me, I would never have been able to outrun them up the steep climb in my present state? They would be fresh and, above all, armed. I crouched



## BAIT

behind one of the moss-covered granite blocks and waited. What could I do now? I couldn't turn back. If they had guessed my idea, they could soon have all the main passes watched. I would be trapped like the Vercors resistance fighters of old. The roaring came nearer, and then, round the corner, a colossal forest tractor appeared, driven by one of the local farmers. I let out my breath and sank behind the rock, leaning against the damp moss. As it approached, I stood and exchanged nods with the driver as the massive six-foot tyres rolled past, shooting clods of earth in all directions.

Watching the machine roaring slowly away up the road, I climbed up onto the asphalt and made to cross it. Turning slightly, a black car suddenly appeared a hundred yards away, coming up around the bend, the noise of its motor having been drowned by the tractor. Without thinking, I leapt back into the ditch and sprinted up a track that led into the forest on the same side of the road I had been on. This bent around, then up into the forest, out of sight of the way.

I heard the car accelerate and then screech to a halt, followed by the slamming of two doors.

'Damn and blast it!' I cursed. The pursuers had taken more precautions than I had expected and would now know I hadn't gone down to Grenoble via the route I had hoped them to believe.

The deeply rutted track I was on rose slightly, turned a sharp corner, then climbed steeply at about thirty degrees following the bed of a dry torrent.

'Oh, God!' I thought as I spotted this, my heart sinking.

In any case, I had no choice, so I accelerated up this as fast as my lungs would permit, reaching the

top before my followers could spot me. In this, I was disappointed because as I neared the summit, I heard a shout from behind, followed by a gun crack. I flung myself down into the mud and crawled, panic-stricken, over the lip of the rise. Leaping back to my feet, I ran doubled-over until well away from the edge. From here, I accelerated as much as possible down a straight portion of a flat grass-covered track, which fell slightly. At the end of this portion, the path turned to the left and up a steep path, heading directly towards the "Clef Pass". From here, I could head down towards Grenoble or at least lead them to believe that that was my intention.

As I stopped for a second to catch my breath before taking the next hill, someone shot out from behind a tree, grabbed me and dragged me back off the path. I struggled out of the grip and faced my attacker. To my astonishment, the man facing me was the one I had seen with Sophie Lemone in Paris. He held his finger to his lips.

'Quick. Your jacket. Quick, come on.'

Without hesitating, I snatched it off and passed it to him even though it was too small for him. Already moving back towards the track, he put it on and called over his shoulder, 'Get down that way and keep the ridge between you and them.' He pointed back down an almost invisible path. 'I'll lead them off toward the "Brochier Pass" and then give them the slip.'

With this, he sprinted up the hill, my jacket flapping very visibly behind him. He went at a speed which astonished me for a man who had seemed overweight and out of training. I turned and bounded off the narrow track as fast as possible without pitching over. This track must be almost parallel to the

## BAIT

one I had climbed on, except it was on the opposite side of a steep rocky ridge. I dashed down the winding path and was soon at the bottom, not far from the parked car.

Bending double, I carefully worked through the fringe of trees to the edge of the road and crouched at the bottom of the deep ditch below it, listening.

Satisfied that my pursuers were still following Sophie's friend, I scrambled up onto the tarmac and sprinted across the road. I was slightly further up the road and out of sight of the track along which I had initially escaped.

Remaining crouched in the cover of a big clump of green ferns, I listened carefully for signs of the return of the two men recovering as well as I could, my breath.

I wondered momentarily if I should puncture the tyres to slow them down. However, this would show that I must have doubled back and had thus not taken the route down over the "Brochier Pass".

Giving up this idea, and satisfied that for the moment I was free from pursuit, I darted into the forest. I ran as fast as my aching legs would carry me up the steep rock-strewn track. I kept on until the thick forest entirely hid the path and then bent over, gasping for breath, with a terrible stitch in my side.

I now had a six-hundred-foot climb to the pass, but on the relatively easy track, I had used the day before. Holding my fist against the position of the stitch, I set off at an easy trot, stopping occasionally to listen for any sign of pursuit.

In twenty minutes, I reached the pass and was met by a blast of cold air coming up from the valley beyond. Looking down, I blew out my breath in

despair. From here, the view was daunting, showing only too clearly the extent of the route left to cover. Far below, I could see the Isère River winding and sparkling across the valley floor and beyond it, the motorway from Grenoble to Valence. The speck-size of the cars moving on it left no doubt as to the distance and altitude that remained for me to cover. At least the weather was good, and a light covering of high clouds shielded me from the main power of the sun. Nevertheless, I was dreadfully thirsty, and there was absolutely no way of finding water up here.

I blessed the old man of the previous day who had pointed out the way down. Happily, the place where we had met also sported a cattle trough into which a mountain stream had been channelled. I headed for this place first to drink before taking on the treacherous three-thousand-five-hundred-foot descent before me. I started down the slope at an easy jog. This proved more challenging than expected because I was permanently straining against the slope to avoid falling or accelerating too much.

My knees and leg muscles were screaming long before I reached the intermediate plateau. Reaching the water trough, I plunged my hand into the icy liquid and splashed water over my head and shoulders until I was drenched from head to foot. This rinsing down cooled me off rapidly, and I drank as much as possible.

Setting off again at a trot, I found the little sidetrack easily, thanks to the previous day's excursion and started down it. After a few yards, it turned a corner through the narrow gap in the rocks and then over the lip of the cliff down the frighteningly steep scree slope

## BAIT

I had seen the day before. Beyond the scree, and about three hundred feet lower down, I could make out the path starting again. There was nothing to do but to go straight down.

I eased myself down and immediately started sliding and slithering down the steep incline, sometimes on my heels but more often on the seat of my trousers. How I got to the bottom alive, I don't know, but somehow, I did. Then, without pausing for breath, jogged on down the track and into the forest.

This track was as steep as a mountain torrent, so I had little or no rest until I got more than halfway down. The water I had drunk was sloshing about inside me so much that I could hear it. At least it remained where it was. A little further down, the steep track joined a wider and flatter one, which followed a gentler slope down towards the village I could see in the distance.

I knew that I was more or less safe now. The probability that anyone would be able to guess which of the numerous passes I had chosen and where I was headed was far too low for me to worry about any more.

I learnt later that the diversion tactics had worked perfectly. In the heat of the action, my pursuers had not considered for a moment that I was not still heading for Grenoble.

Realising that I was out of danger, I stopped and sat on a pile of felled tree trunks and took out my map. I discovered that the village below me was called 'La Rivière'. It was a tiny place, but knowing French villages well, I knew I would find several bistros there where I could get a drink. I had Margaux's cell phone number written on the back of one of the unused cheques in my chequebook, and I couldn't think of any

better option than to call her. After all, it was her fault that I was in such a mess.

However, when I rose, my legs shook, and the muscles around my knees were twitching and jumping of their own accord. As I wearily trudged the last two miles, I gradually stopped sweating, and my heartbeat returned to normal.

When I reached the village, all was quiet, and no one was in sight. On the village square, I found a phone box outside the post office and called Margaux's number.

I told her where I was and asked her to pick me up. 'I'll explain when I see you.' I knew it would take her about three-quarters of an hour to reach me, so I headed for the bistro, my knees still shaking with fatigue.

I was now on the opposite side of the Vercors range from Grenoble and in a tiny village where even the most astute of pursuers would never have thought of searching for me. I ordered a large glass of beer (a "serieux" as they call it in these parts) and sat by the curtained window, my leg stretched out under the inevitable red and white chequered plastic tablecloth-covered table. I must have run the best part of nine miles, but above all, I had run down from the altitude of four thousand five hundred feet to the valley floor. I was surprised not to feel worse than I did because, except for aching legs, my principal sensation was thirst. I knew from experience, however, that the next morning I would feel extremely stiff, but that it would be the day after, that my legs would feel the worst.

A long downhill run is the worst thing to do when one is not in perfect training. The longer-than-normal strides lengthen the muscles under stress and

## BAIT

damage the fibres, which then have to repair themselves. In any case, even if I was hobbling about like an old man for days, which was highly probable, it was much too late to worry about that. In any case, I was still free, and above all, I had no bullet holes in me.

I finished my drink slowly, allowed myself a second, then paid and selected a vantage point outside the village. I chose a point a little higher up and hidden by a plantation of walnut trees. From where I sat, I would be able to see Margaux's arrival, and check she wasn't being followed. The advantage of this small village was that I could watch all the activity on the two long approach roads. So, that when her car eventually appeared, it was easy for me to confirm that she was not being followed. She parked her car in the village square and waited for me at the top of the broad flight of flagstone steps leading to the church door. Seeing me enter the square, she pointed to the car.

I went straight to it and sat in the passenger seat as she made her way back.

'I'm taking you to 'Saint Antoine L'Abbaye'. It's one of the quietest villages, and we can get you something good to eat at the Auberge and talk.' She drove off, after carefully checking for signs of a follower.

'Don't worry.' I said, 'No one was tailing you. I could see the road for more than a mile, and no one came down it after you.'

'Good.'

And off we went.

Saint Antoine L'Abbaye is a small medieval village with a magnificent but crumbling church and a lovely enclosed flagstone-covered square. It had been built

by monks whose main preoccupation had been curing or caring for those having contracted one or other of the terrible illnesses of the period. I had visited the place once and had come away with a feeling of depression at the degraded state of the monuments. It was only too apparent that the colossal sums required to renovate the village would never be raised.

‘Paul has a friend there with a B and B who will put you up for the night,’ said Margaux

‘Ok, but if you don’t mind, I’ll close my eyes and relax a bit first. We can talk when we arrive.’

We then travelled on in silence and arrived an hour later, just as the darkness was falling. She wound her way through some unlit and extremely narrow stone-paved roads, boarded by tall, terraced medieval buildings. In the middle of one of these passages, she slowed and pointed, ‘That’s where you’ll be staying tonight.’ The information was wasted on me because I would have been unlikely to find the place on my own. We parked near the Auberge, and while I sat studying the menu and sipping an aperitif, she went off to check that everything was for my sleeping arrangements.

When she returned ten minutes later, I was already feeling the relaxing effects of the drink and was ready to eat. She was carrying my rucksack, which she had filled out with crumpled-up newspaper pages to give the impression that I had all my belongings in it.

We ordered a local speciality, “Ravioles de Roman”, which are a sort of miniature, cheese paste filled Ravioli. We accompanied this with a bottle of Côte du Rhone red wine, and while we waited to be served, I explained the day’s adventures.



## BAIT

'Thank god you've always managed to keep yourself fit.' smiled Margaux. 'I, for one, could never have done that and come out alive.'

I laughed. 'It was the idea of staying alive that made it possible, I think. The view of a handgun and the sound of shots helped to keep me going.'

'Those guys certainly were not shooting to hit. Whoever they are, they wanted you alive. The shots were probably to frighten you into giving yourself up.'

'I must say that I didn't have that much time to analyse the situation,' I said.

At this point, the dinner arrived, and I took a sip of my wine, hardly noticing that Margaux had ordered a costly one. She watched me carefully and then said, 'This is all very odd William. Sophie Lemone and her team never act that way, at least not to our knowledge.' I nodded, and she went on. 'They have never been known to use violence or any heavy arm work. The fact that Sophie cancelled your dinner engagement is very odd too, knowing what her objectives were.'

'That's what I thought. But maybe the map indications were enough for her.' I suggested.

'If that were true, why come back and try to capture you. She would certainly have wormed all the information she wanted out of you. She is very experienced at that, you know.'

I smiled, 'Hmm... I could have put up with quite a bit of her worming-out tactics without too much difficulty.'

'William!' she pretended to be shocked, 'What would your friend Sally think if she heard that?'

'Sally!' This name brought me back to reality with a shock.

'Anyway, you are out of harm's way here, and Paul

is already at Autrans trying to find out who is behind this. He'll be meeting us here tomorrow morning, and we'll discuss what to do next.'

I laughed. 'What I want to do next is to get some sleep. I'm half asleep now.'

'Yes, I can see that, let's go.'

She insisted on paying, and then we pushed open the old glass-panelled door and walked out into the warm night air.

It can't have been more than ten o'clock when Margaux led me along a narrow, dark stone-flagged passage and pushed open a tall, heavy oak door. This entrance led up into a small stone courtyard, heavy with the spicy perfume of wisteria, hidden from view in the darkness.

After telling me she would return for breakfast at nine-thirty the following day, she handed me over to a little old lady between seventy and eighty. My bedroom was vast and much in keeping with the medieval village but less crumbling and, above all, warm.

I stripped, took a welcome shower, got into bed, pulled up the heavy eiderdown, and fell asleep.

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

## Chapter 14

Once the door had closed behind the woman, Margaux explained what had happened that morning. Paul nodded, acknowledging the changes that had come to the game.

'Well!' he frowned. 'This is an unexpected development.' He pushed back his chair and wandered about the room in silence for a few moments. Then, returning to his place, he leant his elbows on the back of his chair and looked across at Margaux. 'What do you think, Margaux? Does this affect our plans in any way?'

Margaux turned in her seat and looked up into his pale blue eyes. 'Not all that much, as far as I can see. We still have a hidden treasure to find. Not only that, but someone else wants to get it, too, no holds barred. The people involved and the methods of getting it have changed, but that's all.'

'So,' concluded Paul, 'the plan we made is still applicable.'

'Yes. I think so,' said Margaux.

'And,' Paul smiled as he sat down again, 'we now have some unexpected assistance.'

Sophie nodded.

'Well, it will be a pleasure collaborating with you, Sophie.' He smiled to himself. 'Goodness knows how this will affect the future of our work. Time will no doubt clarify that.' He paused and sipped his coffee. 'However, first I am going to have the slightly embarrassing task of telling the two of you the truth about this, how shall I call it, 'project'.'

Sophie and I exchange glances.

'And, of course, you know all about this, I suppose, Margaux,' I said.

She smiled at me and shrugged in agreement.

'Well, to start with,' said Paul. 'I'd like to assure you both that the gold really does exist. At least we are more or less certain.'

I shook my head, 'Well, at least it's consoling to know that I'm likely to be tortured and killed for a good solid reason.'

'However,' continued Paul, 'while we are pretty sure it is near Autrans, we do not know where.'

'But what about the places you marked on the map you left me,' I said.

'Well.' He hesitated for a moment, looking down and stirring his coffee. 'I'm not worried about that; this new gang might even help us. In any case, we can keep an eye on their doings very easily. Autrans is a small village, as you know.' He smiled at me and went on. 'What is more, we have good reason to believe that the gold is hidden nearer the village than the map might suggest.'

'Well, thanks, everyone,' I said. 'So I went traipsing around looking at these places for nothing?'

'Oh no!' interrupted Paul, 'That was an essential part of the plan. It added credibility to the whole idea.'

'What's more,' added Margaux, 'It helped you to memorise the tracks, and without that, you would not have escaped as you did.'

'That's true,' I admitted.

Paul leant forward and cupped his bowl between his hands. 'Secondly, the rich Jewish industry magnate and his fortune did exist. His history is true, as was his capture, deportation and death in a prison camp. 'Now for the initial objective,' Paul smiled

## BAIT

slightly. 'Our goal was not to find the gold but to try and force your boss out into the open, Sophie.'

Sophie leant back and burst out in laughter, 'Oh no! Now, that's too much. No, you're joking?'

'No, that's absolutely the truth.'

She shook her head, 'Even if you had fooled us all, you would never have drawn her out into the open. Never.'

Paul looked at her sternly. 'You seem very sure of yourself.'

'Oh yes. I am. Very, very sure.'

Paul was slightly disconcerted, 'We had other tricks up our sleeves, you know. Quite a few, in fact.'

'I don't doubt that. Please don't think I'm laughing at you.' She leant forward on her chair. 'Remember that I have never seen her and know nothing about her background. I'm pretty sure that her invisibility is by far the most important element in her game. I'm one hundred per cent convinced she would not sacrifice that for anything.' Sophie smiled and sat back again, picking up her cup. 'When I started working for her, I tried all sorts of tricks to discover her identity, but I failed each time. The only thing I am sure of is that the funds she has and still is accumulating are not destined to be used for any criminal or underhand activities.'

Silence fell for a few moments while we considered this information.

'I'd like to be able to believe that,' said Paul, 'but please excuse me if I don't for the moment.'

I shifted my weight on my chair and slowly and carefully stretched my legs out under the table. 'But why did you choose me to do all this decoy work. I don't see that at all yet.' I said.

Margaux smiled over at me. 'You just turned up at the right place at the right time. A complete accident, really, and we hadn't the slightest intention of doing things this way at the time. It's as if you were the one piece of the puzzle we didn't have but unexpectedly found at the back of a dusty drawer. Then all the others just fell into place.'

Paul took up the strings of the discussion. 'We spotted how Sophie immediately suspected you of being up to something, and we decided to use this. It was too good a chance to be thrown away untried.'

'So,' I continued. 'You just let her go on suspecting and no doubt helped her along the way.'

'Well, yes. But without knowing it, you did a lot of the convincing yourself without our help.'

'Great,' I said.

'To the eyes of any normally constituted human being, your reason for leaving work was highly improbable. Most people would assume that you had some undisclosed motive. Given your reputation, salary and prospects, no one would seriously accept the idea that you were calculating on losing money. An observer would naturally assume that songwriting was just a front,' he paused. 'All that was perfect for our purposes. One has to know a person very well indeed to be able to understand his real motives for doing something. Like your boss, William.'

Sophie, who had been sitting observing the proceedings, sat forward and cupped her hands under her chin. 'Yes, that is exactly how we interpreted the situation,' she smiled. 'I suppose that now we are all working together, I can give you all some information,' she continued.

'Go ahead,' said Paul.

## BAIT

'You remember the little story you invented to annoy our host at the ULACE that day, William?'

'Yes,' I admitted. 'I might have had a little too much to drink at lunch. My head felt like it was splitting open.' I looked down at the table, 'I'm still a bit embarrassed about that scene.'

Sophie pretended not really to have registered the implications and continued. 'You remember that you said that perhaps one of the endangered Jewish songwriters converted his entire fortune into small gold bars.'

'Yes'

'And you went on to annoy him further by saying that he had perhaps made them into paperweights, like the one he was fiddling with?'

'Yes. And you flattered me about that afterwards.'

'You also invented the idea that the man had then placed them at ULACE headquarters, right under the noses of the enemy.'

'Yes. How can I forget?'

'Well, that evening, if you remember, I told you I was going to the opera.'

'Yes, I remember that too.'

'But my rendez vous was, in fact, at the ULACE. For the day's final visit with that pompous little man again.'

'Really! Well, I'm not all that surprised. Now I've got to know you all.'

'With the help of a simple diversion created by my assistant, I borrowed the paperweight from the desk. I also kept my eyes open during the rest of that visit. I spotted a few identical paperweights on the desks of other senior managers and several gathering dust on a bookshelf in the boardroom.' She smiled and went

on. 'We had the borrowed one analysed that night and discovered that you were perfectly right.'

I gasped, 'No!'

'Yes. A one-kilo paperweight worth thirty-two thousand euros. A very nice bevelled and engraved chromium-plated steel plate had been carefully screwed onto the top, cleverly hiding the official gold bar markings.' She smiled again. 'We got the paperweight back on the desk the following day, thanks to a helpful cleaning lady.'

'If it wasn't you, I'd never believe all this,' I said.

'Well, I managed to obtain an interview with the real president a week later. I won't explain how this was worked.' She smiled. 'During our discussions, I complimented him on the paperweight on his desk. He even wanted me to have it as a souvenir?' She laughed. 'He explained that it had been handed down to him from the previous president, who had had it since he started there after the war.'

Paul nodded, 'I see.'

'According to the president, it was part of a commemorative package issued at the beginning of the war.' She paused and looked around at us. 'It seemed unbelievable, but it was true. Someone actually did precisely what you suggested, William.' she shook her head at my astonishment. 'Unknowingly, at the time, every manager had seventy thousand euros of gold holding down trifling internal memos on their desks.'

'Well, I'll be blown,' laughed Paul.

Sophie continued. 'We couldn't identify the person who did this, but he must have been very concerned about losing his fortune. He must also have had easy access to the ULACE building and was either a key



## BAIT

employee or a frequent and well-known visitor.’ She sipped her coffee, but we remained silent, waiting for her to go on. ‘We don’t think that many bars remain in the new building. Some were probably taken home by retiring employees as keepsakes, without realising they had a fortune sitting on the mantelpiece.’ She paused and looked up at me. ‘However, and this is the most terrible bit. It looks like the majority were actually thrown away,’ she smiled. ‘Dumped, or as we now say “recycled”, with all the old furniture when the Ulace moved into the new building.’

My mouth dropped, and my eyebrows rose.

‘Yes. Incredible!’ She nodded. ‘Perhaps the man who won the contract to empty the old buildings and recycle the scrap metal discovered the truth. If he did, he very wisely kept it very much to himself and is no doubt now spending a very comfortable retirement somewhere. In any case, that small part of the treasure is now safely accounted for in one way or another and is no longer any concern of ours.’ Sophie sipped some more of her coffee and went on as we continued to watch her mystified. ‘It seems inevitable that over the last 75 years, from time to time, a few observant, or more probably bored employees, must have accidentally discovered the true nature of the paperweights. We think that when he or she did, the person kept it to himself. He collected as many as he could lay his hands on from adjoining offices and then left the company. Ten alone would keep an average employee in comfort for a number of years.’

Paul smiled, ‘Yes, in those days, you could buy a nice house with that. Not today, though, at least nowhere near Paris’.

I rubbed my smooth chin. 'What about the person who did this? Didn't he turn up?'

'No.' Admitted Sophie. 'That fact seems to imply that he or she was killed during the war. All this points to another deported Jewish songwriter who must have died in a prison camp. Anyway, that is pure guesswork on our part. We estimate that the amount hidden in this ingenious way was over five million euros.'

I shook my head, 'This story is just too fantastic to be true.'

Sophie smiled at me, 'Don't forget it also happens to have been reinvented by you'.

I laughed, 'I never realised I had such a good imagination'.

'Anyway', she went on, 'The only remaining bars are on the desks of a few of the oldest members. These people seem to earn enough to excuse us from neglecting to inform them of the little treasures they fiddle with when bored. In several cases, the value is less than their monthly salaries, so...'

'And in the boardroom,' I added, 'gathering dust as you said.'

She smiled again. 'Naturally, therefore, once we had discovered the truth of your story, we assumed you must be on the track of a far more valuable treasure? And that is how everything started.'

Sophie sat back and smiled her lovely warm smile.

'Well, I'll be damned,' said Paul, 'What an improbable set of coincidences.'

Margaux shook her head. 'To think that several million euros in gold may have ended up as scrap metal defies belief.'

## BAIT

'Yes, but at least it won't end up in the hand of people whose only object in life is to ...' Sophie stopped in mid-sentence and sighed.

'Yes, I understand,' Paul nodded gravely. 'There's still far too much ownerless money floating around for comfort. Am I right?' completed Paul.

'Yes, much too much,' assented Sophie, looking down at her long perfectly manicured fingers.

'Wait a minute.' I frowned. 'So, was it you who broke into my flat and went through everything by any chance.'

Sophie pulled a face.

'I'm sorry about that. But I did give specific instructions to leave things as tidy as they found it.'

'Oh, they did that all right. I see you employ the best in the trade.'

'Oh yes,' she smiled. 'We only deal with the very best,' she added. 'When our people discovered the photo of myself and my assistant on your computer, we were naturally surprised. We came to the conclusion that you were playing a more complex game than we had bargained for and that you probably knew something about us, too.'

I laughed, 'Of course! Yes, that must have got everybody confused. You won't believe me, but I accidentally took that photo while trying out my new phone.'

'Accidentally?'

'Yes,' I laughed, 'completely by accident, but an excellent snap, don't you think.'

Paul glanced at Margaux, 'So that's why you eventually took the bait. '

He nodded understanding.

'At last, I begin to understand how this all began. No real cleverness on our behalf, then. Just a series of accidents and coincidences. Well, I never!' He smiled, sipping his coffee.

I looked from one of the conspirators to the other with a wry smile. 'In any case, when this is all finished,' I said, 'I think I might take on a job as a cleaner at the ULACE. I'll probably be able to make more money in a few days than I'm likely to out of my songs.'

Margaux laughed, 'That remains to be proved, monsieur le doctor-composer.'

'In any case,' interrupted Paul, 'let's get to the end of this game before starting to play another one.'

'But that was one hell of a good idea,' I said. 'It's a pity that the man died before he could recover his savings,' I laughed. 'I'll have to write a song about it someday.'

For some moments, an odd sensation had been tickling at the limit of my conscious mind. Then, all of a sudden, something dropped into place and kicked my memory into action. Paul's name had seemed familiar for some time, and at last, I knew why or thought I did. 'Hey! Wait a minute.' I cried, and everyone stopped talking and looked at me.

'Wait just a minute, Paul. By any chance, would you be the Monsieur Douanier, whose company endowed the De Gaulle Chair at Oxford University?

An uneasy silence fell, and Margaux glanced at her boss, whose face remained expressionless.

Sophie looked at me askance.

'Well?'

'Hum!' Paul rubbed his short beard with his fingertips.

## BAIT

I looked from Paul to Margaux and went on. 'I believe you even set that up as well. To get her out of the way. I'm right, aren't I?'

Paul chewed his lip and sighed, 'You're too clever by far, William. I suppose that's due to your research training.'

'Well?'

'The answer is yes and no,' then he held up his hand to stop my protest. 'Yes, our organisation fully finances the endowment. But no. It was not set up to get your red-headed friend out of the way.' e

'But that seems much too big a coincidence to be true,' I said

'Well, we had already set up the endowment nearly a year before your friend came onto the scene. You can check that out with the university if you wish.'

I made a non-committal noise with my lips.

Sophie was watching the three of us with a furrowed brow. 'What is all this about? 'A red-headed researcher' Mr Douanier? I am starting to feel uneasy that something else is not quite as we thought.'

In my turn, I frowned at her, trying to guess what worried her. However, Paul went on before I could interrupt. 'Our organisation has many interests, one of which is the origins and, above all, the history of the fortunes of previous centuries and what became of them. Over time, huge amounts of riches have been found to disappear without a trace. We are always interested in finding out what became of it. As you both know, we are above all involved with tax evasion.' I nodded.

In some cases, vast fortunes were dissipated merely due to the wild spending of those inheriting it. In others, due to unadvisable overseas investments

or even betting. Finally, in a few cases, angry monarchs were known simply for confiscating the property and riches of nobles unhappily fallen from grace. In other instances, the present-day level of riches can't be explained by our classical reasoning.'

'Ah!' I leant back, 'I start to see the light.'

'Yes?'

'So you spotted a clever young researcher. Unpolluted by traditional thinking.'

'Exactly. We were hunting for someone young, brilliant, determined and hardworking. Your friend just turned up at the right time and place with the right qualities. That's all.'

I laughed. 'Ah-ha, that is exactly what Sally said to me. "In the right place at the right time with the right CV"... Ha!'

'She had proved that she had the right qualities for this chair, even though we knew it would upset some of the older academics in the field. But we had already announced the criterion for employment more than a year before, stressing specifically the requirement of youth. The head of the department was also very helpful in smoothing things through.'

Margaux took up the story. 'There were two other viable candidates, both women also. The first tried to charm the hell out of the head of the department, who was not too keen on that, and then she tried it on with Paul. We concluded that she was too much of a career woman and was also likely to create panic in the quiet academic atmosphere at Oxford. The other was looking for a quiet job so she could have her children and bring up a big family without the stress of work to contend with.'

BAIT

'And so, Sally got the job, with no cheating,' I concluded.

'Absolutely no cheating or favouritism.'

Margaux sat forward on her chair and looked at me. 'I met Sally several times,' she said, 'but she had no idea that each of our meetings was a disguised employment interview. Paul and I planned a whole set of questions for each meeting. In that way, we ensured she was the right person for the chair without her even knowing she was being considered a candidate. As a result, she was naturally perfectly relaxed and honest and clinched the job without ever knowing.'

Paul rubbed his beard again. 'I suppose that now that so many people are in the know, we will have to tell her somehow. But certainly not for the moment.'

'So you are Sally's boss,' I commented.

'Oh no. We have nothing more to do with Sally. Her employer is Oxford University, and they pay her salary. The salary comes directly from the interest generated by our organisation's lump sum donation.'

'You keep talking about our organisation, but what is it then,' I asked.

'Sorry William, I am not authorised to explain that for now.'

Sophie interrupted me before I could continue. 'Mr Douanier, will you please clear up something for me.'

Paul smiled, 'I think I can guess what that is.'

She gave him an odd, cold look out of the corner of her eye. 'Would this red-headed person be a certain Sally Cameron, who was researching at the Sorbonne for her thesis?'

'Perfectly correct,' said Paul.

She let herself fall back heavily in her chair, 'You lot again. I don't believe it!'

Paul glanced at Margaux, 'Margaux and I have been preparing this for quite some time. We were in no particular hurry. So, each time a good occasion presented itself, we used it as best we could. We had many other tasks, so we couldn't spend much time anyway.'

Sophie shook her head and sighed heavily, 'Don't tell me that all that information that she dug up and put in her thesis was false. Don't tell me you supplied it, please.'

Paul smiled and shrugged. 'Sorry. We tried to help her along as best we could. Nothing was false. The information we supplied was just selected to strengthen the conviction that...' Paul paused. 'Well, we wanted to ensure that inputting the obvious keywords into internet search engines would bring up her thesis and point to the annexe dealing with this topic.'

Sophie seemed astonished. 'So you already knew that a huge amount of gold was hidden away, and also, you knew roughly where it was. And you had decided to use this as bait, which we took of course. But how on earth did you discover its existence?'

Paul nodded. 'Tracking down tax evasion offenders is our everyday job, Sophie, as you know. There are many ways of getting paid secretly for something without it ever appearing in a bank account. However, in this case, the man in question was not trying to hide his transactions but to save his money from an invader. So for once, we spotted the transfers very easily.'



## BAIT

Sophie smiled, 'And all this to catch our boss, who is probably of no danger to you or your financial system anyway. You'll never catch her, you know...'

Paul frowned. 'Well, in any case, for the moment, we have other troubles to deal with from someone else. Someone who is extremely dangerous to a lot of people.'

I passed my closed fist across my brow and asked, 'But did you purposely aim at getting Sally out of the way or out of danger?'

'She was not in any danger,' Said Paul. 'No one we considered dangerous was involved at the time. At least, that is what we thought. Perhaps we were wrong. Perhaps these other people were already hunting, thinking they were letting us do the work.'

Margaux nodded.

I leaned back in my chair and carefully stretched out my legs. 'That makes a hell of a lot of coincidences, in my opinion.'

Margaux and Paul glanced at each other, and then Paul took up the discussion again. 'I promise to clarify everything to you in good time, William, but for the moment, we have a more pressing problem to solve. This involves your safety.'

'Hey, but wait a minute'; I almost jumped off my seat, 'But she could be in danger now. How long would it take these thugs to get onto her tracks?'

Paul grimaced, 'They already have.'

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

## Chapter 15

It came as a shock that the ruthless Finnish murderer had already tracked down Sally. 'Oh, Christ!'

Margaux leant over and clasped my forearm, 'Don't worry, William. She's safe. We've made sure of that. I know she's important to you...'

Surprised by her earnestness, I looked up at her, but Paul had already taken up the conversation.

'We've learnt that Sally is not in the UK and will be difficult to find.' I looked over at him, 'Her head of department has sent her off on a mission. We checked all that out urgently last night. We didn't get much sleep.'

'But surely they can pressure her boss to tell them where she is. An academic could never stand up against that sort of criminal,' I countered.

'Luckily, the man is away at a conference in New Zealand, which for once is very convenient. If asked, his secretary doesn't have Sally's travel plans and will have to contact the professor to get them. This will cause delay, which is also convenient, and we will, of course, be informed before any information is passed on to them.' He paused, 'However, both he and the secretary will tell the truth, which will avoid trouble for them.'

'OK,' I said. 'But what is this truth? Am I allowed to know?'

'Yes, of course. Sally has gone to visit the major European libraries in search of a rare late eighteenth-

## BAIT

century document. This document is thought to contain a detailed list of the estimated riches of seventeenth and eighteenth-century European families. Apparently, this was initially drawn up to levy taxes or army recruits.

She's to visit the Wiblingen Library in Germany, the Saint Gallen Library in Switzerland, and the Austrian National Library. She'll then go on to the Czech Republic and possibly to Portugal. An enjoyable trip.'

'But these criminals just have to follow her and pick her up,' I said.

'Remember William,' smiled Margaux. 'Firstly, they don't have this information, and secondly, she has no fixed program.'

'Ah!' I nodded.

'What's more, is travelling mainly by road.'

I felt relieved, 'But surely it's dangerous all the same.'

'Not at all', said Paul, 'because they won't have the full list of places she intends to visit or the order in which she plans to do it. What's more, she'll be driving in a rented car.'

'And...' added Margaux, 'she has just been joined in her search by an American postgraduate student. The two will be sharing hotel rooms to save funds. So she won't be alone.'

I felt a little relieved, 'But why not simply let her disappear until this trouble is over?'

Sophie had been listening carefully and looked up, shaking her head. 'If the woman is a pro, she would immediately smell trouble. University professors don't suddenly disappear without leaving addresses. That would also put the 'head of department' in danger. The Finn would also assume that he was hiding her

whereabouts. If she did accept that the man didn't know, then she would conclude that Sally knew that trouble was in the wind.'

Paul nodded. 'Exactly. The inference she would make would be that Sally has been warned off. In that case, she would know someone else was in on the game, and the person had contacted her. He smiled over at Sophie, nodding his head. 'Well done, Sophie. That is a very nice piece of reasoning. That is exactly the conclusion we came to as well. Bravo.'

She smiled at him, 'That's what I am paid for too... '

I nodded, 'Well, you haven't left much to chance, I see. You lot seem to have very long arms. I'm impressed, in fact.'

'As Sophie said. Amongst other things, that's what we're paid for too,' he smiled. 'But I must admit that, given the surprisingly vivid colour of her hair, I did suspect that we might have some trouble with her.'

I spluttered with laughter, 'Yes, and you don't even know her...'

We all laughed, and I passed around the coffee jug.

'Luckily, they've no idea that a link might exist between the two of you,' finished Paul.

'But what if they do find her and ask questions?' I asked, still concerned.

'She'll tell them exactly what she knows, in all innocence and will thus be highly convincing.'

'But what if they don't believe and try to force her to talk?'

'Ah! Then they will very much regret it, I'm afraid. In your place, I would worry more about their health than Sally's safety,' Paul finished.

'No, William, you can sleep easily, I assure you,' said Margaux.

## BAIT

'Now William.' Paul put down his bowl and dried his lips with his napkin. 'We need to talk about you and your safety, even if you insist on putting that of your friend before your own.' He pursed his lips as the rest of us waited. 'We must keep you out of sight until the risk can be definitively neutralised.'

I frowned. 'What do you mean, 'neutralised'.'

'We have to use the same tactics which unfortunately failed with Sophie's boss. We must lure the person controlling the operation out into the open and...'

I interrupted, 'And neutralise him?'

'HER,' corrected Margaux.

I screwed up my face and raised my eyebrows, 'Could I know what your definition of neutralisation consists of?'

'That's our job, William, but it doesn't necessarily mean physical elimination.'

'Not necessarily?'

'Permanent elimination would be the more lasting solution,' he chuckled. 'But my superiors consider capture and imprisonment a more politically useful solution. Furthermore, as a captive, the woman can be shown off and used to demoralise her possible successors.'

'Well. I'm sure this Finnish lady would be pleased to hear that elimination is not her allotted fate.'

Margaux interrupted, 'I'm not sure that the dictionary definition of the word "Lady" would fit this woman, William.'

I shook my head a little impatiently, but she frowned at me.

'If ever you have the bad luck of coming into close contact with this person, William, you'll rapidly agree with me. I can absolutely guarantee it.'

'But why don't you simply go and arrest her?' I asked.

Paul shook his head, 'Firstly,' he said, 'because we are not certain that she is the overall boss of this operation. Secondly, while obviously ruthless, she is also very cunning. Finally, we have no solid proof which would stand up in court.'

I screwed up my nose, 'What do you mean by solid Proof.'

'Well! She would have to commit some sort of crime so that we can hold her long enough to pin something politically acceptable on her.'

'Like murdering me or cutting me into little pieces and throwing them down one of the Vercor's pot-holes.'

'Now that would be perfect,' said Paul. 'If we could prove it afterwards, of course. But it would be nice to avoid that, don't you agree?'

'Strange as it might seem.' I said, 'As a matter of fact, I do.'

Sophie spoke up again in her calm voice. 'I assume you've got a plan, monsieur Douanier. What's the next step?'

'I am sorry to disappoint everyone, but we had not calculated the latest turn of events. We need time to construct a reliable plan and carefully prepare its steps. We'll need a few days because I don't want to take risks.'

'Me neither,' I added.

'So?' asked Sophie slowly.

## BAIT

'First, lure her out into the open so we can check that she is the person giving the orders. That will help us in guessing what her next moves might be. With that info, we can elaborate a workable plan.'

'If it includes me getting thrown over a cliff,' I said. 'Count me out. You know, I have a sensation that I'm being used as live bait or, worse still, like cannon fodder.'

'No, No.,' said Paul. 'It is possible you won't have to play any further part. But we must avoid you getting recognised and caught because that would be very inconvenient.'

'Especially to me.' I laughed coldly.

'We would have to move in fast and get you out, giving the game away. The woman would back out fast, and we would have to wait years for another chance.'

'OK. So where do I hide.'

Paul glanced at Margaux, 'You explain.'

'Well, the best place to hide is where she won't expect to find you...'

'Brilliant piece of reasoning, Margaux.' I interrupted with sarcasm.

She ignored this. 'Last night, we thought about this. We'd like to ask you to return to exactly where you were before. The Hotel de la Place at Autrans...'

'But she'll be watching it,' interrupted Sophie.

'Naturally. But the woman has never seen Doctor Stone, has she? So she has no idea what he looks like.'

'Ah!' Sophie nodded.

'What if you arrived as though you were a new guest,' continued Margaux, 'A person ostensibly new to the region and village. In that case, you could sit

there, right under her nose, and watch her for us. She would be on the lookout for someone well known by the hotel staff.' She smiled and went on. 'They know Doctor Stone to be English, of course, but will not expect him to master the language very well.'

Sophie pulled a face again, 'But everyone would have to be perfectly primed not to say anything that could give the game away,' she said.

'That has already been seen to,' said Margaux.

Paul placed his two hands flat on the table. 'Remember that Autrans was a major centre for resistance fighters during the war.'

'Ah, yes!' I said, immediately getting the idea.

He nodded to me and continued. 'Most families have lived in these mountains for four or five generations and sometimes more. Under the circumstances, they are the most reliable allies that we can hope for. When a secret needs to be kept, the entire village will keep it. They did that to protect hidden 'resistance fighters' and quite a few Jewish refugees during the occupation.'

'But they know my name, and that's in the hotel register,' I add.

'Yes,' said Paul. 'And this morning, I made sure that your name was very visible in it. And don't forget that you paid in advance to keep your room available.'

Margaux sat forward. 'You might not remember it, but you left your gear and some compromising documents and objects in your room.' She was visibly pleased with this part of the deception plan.

Paul took up the story. 'These people have already booked rooms. They'll search your room as soon as they can. They'll find your suitcases nearly fully packed as if you were about to leave when her men



## BAIT

arrived,' He smiled. 'In one of them, they'll discover the map that Sophie has already seen and appreciated.'

Sophie shook her head, 'Appreciate. Is just the right word.'

'At the bottom of the other case,' he continued, 'they'll find a well-leaved photocopy of an annexe from Sally Cameron's thesis and some historical notes about Jewish composers of the period. With this, they'll find some plastic 'views' from a ring binder containing French song lyrics from the period between 1938 and 1941.' Here, he paused to sip some coffee. 'They'll find that some of the song words and numbers have been underlined. That won't trouble them because their boss speaks French fluently.'

I let my hands fall noisily on the massive table. 'I don't believe all this. Are you sure this isn't a dream?'

Paul continued, 'To complete the deception, an envelope will arrive tomorrow by the morning post, and they will be bound to 'borrow it' from your pigeonhole. It will contain several copied articles ordered from back numbers of the Herald Tribune, dealing with war thefts and gold hidden during the German occupation period.'

'Naturally,' I sighed, 'I forgot I'd ordered those.' I added ironically, buttering a slice of brioche, 'You are going to a lot of trouble. I know, I know. Don't say it, that's what you're paid for.'

'Exactly,' said Margaux. 'Oh, by the way,' she continued, 'The clothes in your cases belong to a much taller man than you, slightly over six feet, with wide shoulders. He wears glasses most of the time

and also needs strong reading glasses. He left these on the bedside table with a guide to pot-holing in the Vercors ...'

I shrugged.

'Oh! In this book, they will find that certain passages about collapsed underground passages or landslides have been marked with post-its. I rather liked that refinement,' she chuckled. 'Not surprising that you needed those glasses with all the studying you'd been doing.'

'It's not surprising you two didn't get much sleep last night either,' I laughed.

'So,' said Paul, 'When you alight from the taxi in the middle of aperitif time, they will have been given free drinks directly on the terrace in front of the hotel.'

I glanced at him. 'A welcome cup,' I suggested, and Paul nodded.

'They'll observe a middle-height Englishman paying the taxi driver and then come hobbling with difficulty towards the hotel. The hobbling should be easy enough for you.'

'Ha ha! No. I think I can manage that,' I said while trying to stretch out my right leg.

'This person,' went on Paul, 'will not look anything like the person they will be searching for. He will speak excellent French and will be ostensibly a newcomer to the hotel. You must make sure that they overhear you explaining that you have had an operation on your knee, the meniscus, in fact. You're there to take it easy and do some gentle exercise in the pool and on the soft grass tracks. This deception indicates that you could hardly have been dashing up and down tunnels and over mountains. We'll have to find you a walking stick from somewhere, though.'

BAIT

'Thanks,' I said.

Margaux leaned over and slapped my forearm. 'Even if you do feel nervous,' she said, 'you can simply play on it as if you are a little lost in this new environment.'

I had been frowning during this. 'Wait a minute, though. They're bound to check the internet and find a photo of me. Then I've had it.'

This time, Sophie spoke up, having remained calmly listening for some time. 'No. They won't find anything. That's the first thing I did after our meeting in Paris. I found plenty of scientific articles by you but not a single photo.'

Paul shrugged, 'Correct, up to this morning, but by about midday, there will be. You will look very convincing on your new personal website. I think your CV on LinkedIn is excellent.'

'But I haven't got either!'

'You have now. Two of our specialist colleagues started dealing with that early this morning. A few nice photos of you on holiday last year in Germany and a new one posted just last week of you arriving at Grenoble coach station.'

I shook my head in disbelief.

Paul looked at his watch, 'That's standard stuff, William. It only takes a pro web specialist an hour or so to get everything up and running. The 'cut and paste' tool is excellent for quick jobs like that.'

He continued, 'And if he has done the job properly, there might also be a small problem with the internet connection at the hotel, especially in their rooms. The internet connection might also become unstable up there until everything is nice and tidy.'

'Jesus! Are you sure that everyone will play the game properly, though?' I cried.

Paul smiled, 'I have absolute confidence in these people, and you will soon learn to do so too, William.'

'But who on earth are you working for, you two?'

'Later,' smiled Paul. 'No authorisation as yet. Oh, by the way, we had your rental car picked up this morning. I told the rental company that you had broken a leg and sent them a cheque for the payment.'

'From a numbered Swiss account, I hope?' I asked  
'Jersey, actually', laughed Paul.

## Chapter 16

Paul had suggested that the best time to make my appearance at the Hotel de la Post would be at aperitif time that evening. I had thus been able to take plenty of time over my preparations. He had been informed of the infamous Lida Niemela's arrival at Autrans and was helping me into the taxi.

The fact that the woman had signed in at reception using her real name reassured him that she did not suspect anything.

Mrs B had given her a room conveniently situated next to my old one on the top floor.

The woman and her two assistants immediately took advantage of this and thoroughly searched it. Christophe checked afterwards and reported that they had successfully discovered the clues that had been planted for them.

'So far, so good,' nodded Paul, holding the door for me to hobble in. 'Please remember, though, that you are now John Wood. And don't forget that this woman speaks fluent French, English, and several other languages.'

Margaux and I reviewed my new identity during lunch and the early afternoon. She and Paul had made this as simple as possible and as close as possible to my real personality to avoid me getting mixed up. My assumed background was that of a salesman in an outdoor sports shop in Littlehampton, a town and a shop I knew very well. I came for a walking holiday in Grenoble in the Chartreuse mountains, which I also knew perfectly. Unfortunately, I slipped and injured my knee, coming

down the long stone stairway from the Bastille fort, which overlooks the town. I spoke French very well because it was my best subject at school.

Paul stuck his hand through the open window and shook mine, 'Don't forget that you have never been up there before, so you don't know where anything is. You only know what you have seen on the hotel pamphlet and the official Autrans map.' Saying this, he handed me the advertising brochures. 'I advise you to read these and leave them in view.' He signalled to the driver, and we started off through the treacherously narrow roads and out of the village of Saint Antoine L'Abbaye.

At the same moment at Autrans, Lida Niemela came down from her room and stepped into the bar. She looked around the place, taking it all in with an obvious lack of interest. Just another bar in another hotel full of people, all of whom were of absolutely no interest to her.

Having finished preparing for the evening's service, Christophe was now polishing a few glasses. He looked up and smiled, his professional smile reserved for all occasions of this nature. He noticed the hardness of her look and the darkish shadows under her cheekbones. She looked as though she were perpetually scowling or trying to figure out something that was troubling her. He also noted her dark pink lips, contrasting with her pale complexion, and her eyebrows strongly arched near their ends. Finally, he noted her thin hair, which seemed particularly dark for a Finn. He also noted the firm round breasts under her dark grey polo shirt and the slim, compact figure on which there was, clearly, no superfluous fat.

## BAIT

'Good evening, Madam. Can I serve you something?'

'Good evening,' she said in excellent French but with an odd accent, 'Yes, thank you. Tonic water, please.' The accent was strong, but the grammar and pronunciation were excellent.

As he turned his back and bent down to open the fridge, she asked, 'Do you, by any chance, have a Doctor Stone staying with you?'

Christophe didn't bat an eyelid and stood up with a smile, placing the glass before her on a beer mat.

'Yes, he's here for a few weeks. Do you know him?'

'Not personally, but we are presently working on very similar projects. One of his colleagues told me he might be coming here and that we would be able to exchange ideas.'

Christophe played his part to perfection, 'Oh! So you are a scientist too, then?'

'Oh, no!' the Finn frowned into her glass, 'I look after finances, a sort of accountant or more a treasurer, I suppose you would call it.'

'Ah, I see,' laughed Christophe. 'Dr Stone is one of those research people who spend too much, and you are one of the people who have to pay all the bills and try and make ends meet.' He laughed.

'I sincerely hope not,' frowned the women, not spotting the intended humour of the remark.

At this point, Mrs B. drifted in from the kitchen, where her husband had just started preparing the meals for the evening.

'Bonsoir.' smiled Christophe, 'Apparently, Madame Niemela is working on the same subject as Dr Stone. Will he be in this evening?'

'Christophe!' cried the patronne, 'Where is your memory?'

Christophe raised his eyebrows questioningly and shot a look at Lida, who continued to frown.

'Christophe! I told you only this morning when he phoned. He decided to push on down to 'Corrençon'. From there, he'll follow the mountain ridge all the way to the "Col de Rousset". When he gets there, he'll take a bus back here.'

Christophe shrugged, 'Ah! Yes, I remember, of course.'

Mrs B. turned and smiled at the Finn.

'That's near the southern end of the Vercors. It's a long walk, and I don't think he'll be back until tomorrow afternoon.'

Christophe allowed himself a wry smile, 'He didn't say he'd meet up with his Scottish girlfriend by any chance, did he?'

Mrs B. gave him a scornful look, 'No, he did not, Christophe. You should keep your suspicions to yourself.'

Christophe raised his hands as if to protect himself against a blow and winked at the Finn.

The latter pretended to have no interest in all this, then turned away and sat at one of the window tables overlooking the terrace.

Christophe ducked below the surface of the counter and blew out his cheeks. He always had difficulty with customers who lacked a sense of humour; this woman was typical of the type, only worse.

As Paul and Margaux had predicted, the Finn assumed I'd invented the story to justify not returning. She guessed that I wanted more time to



## BAIT

explore for the gold untroubled. She presumed that I was probably not very far away and probably spending the nights in other hotels near Autrans.

Her two henchmen were accordingly dispatched to check the other hotels, but with no success, of course. This development angered the Finn, and this, as usual, made her assistants uneasy. In such cases, her reactions became impossible to predict and were sometimes uncomfortably violent.

Thanks to the clues she had found in my room, she was convinced that I was searching for the hidden gold in the underground caverns in the region. She reasoned that it could not be in one of the well-frequented ones. If it had been, the treasure would already have been found, considering the thousands of people who had visited and explored them since the war's end. She assumed, therefore, that it must either be in a place known only to the gold hider, which seemed improbable, or in one of little or no interest to most people. Either that or perhaps in a gallery deliberately blocked off by 'fallen rocks.'

Lida Niemela realised that she didn't have a good enough idea of the terrain to enable her to make an inspired guess. She thus decided that the only solution was to wait and see what information she could pick up while waiting for Doctor Stone to turn up.

However, my remarkable escape from her men and subsequent disappearance had puzzled her.

This performance reinforced her idea that I was not the innocent treasure hunter she had initially assumed me to be. This, in turn, convinced her that she was on the right track. What troubled her was

that my ease of avoiding her traps and my diversion tactics were unusual for a member of the public. Furthermore, I was also clearly very fit. She was, therefore, looking forward to interviewing me and smiled a rather unpleasant smile to herself while she considered this point.

Christophe, who was now in all appearances rearranging the bottles on the shelf with his back to her, was observing her in the mirror. He saw this sinister half sneer, cross her face, and secretly crossed himself, praying that I would be able to play my part without any hitches. He guessed this woman would not take kindly to being cheated and far less double-crossed.

At the same time, my taxi was turning off the main road coming up from the Gorges du Bourne. It wound through the narrow enclosed valley to Meaudre. Then, it headed across the wider and rapidly darkening valley floor towards Autrans. The driver, in an authentic French taxi driver manner, brought the taxi to a halt directly outside the entrance to the hotel terrace, completely blocking the narrow road. This manoeuvre inevitably created a certain amount of discontent on behalf of the few other local road users.

As any frequent traveller to France will understand, this deliberate manoeuvre was inevitably successful, and we were hooted at with Latin enthusiasm. This traditional behaviour is akin to the preparation for a bullfight, whereby the belligerents warm themselves up for the main confrontation. Seemingly forgetting my presence altogether, the driver jumped out of the car, as did our immediate followers. Arms wind-milled the air

## BAIT

with the traditional and time-proven gestures of the classical French discussion between road users. The result was perfect in attracting the attention of customers on the hotel terrace and the adjoining square. The two contestants managed to stop the vocal combat long enough to allow me to pay my fare. Perhaps due to this interruption, they agreed that the best place to finish the dispute would be the hotel bar.

Therefore, this noisy arrival and my clumsy hobbling approach on bright red aluminium crutches did not go unnoticed. Christophe came rushing out theatrically to help me as I approach the entrance, which passed through the middle of the terrace. He took charge of the bright yellow suitcase that Margaux had chosen for me and wheeled it to the reception desk.

I kept my eyes on the ground before me, as someone intent on avoiding any obstacles, while several pairs of eyes followed my progress.

Christophe didn't show the slightest recognition and immediately returned to his occupation on the terrace after depositing me at the reception desk.

Mme B. behaved similarly, asking my name and repeating it somewhat louder than was necessary. In this way, it could be heard by any pair of inquisitive ears focused on our discussion.

'Monsieur John Wood, yes, I have a five-night reservation. Is that correct? Perfect. Could you confirm the spelling of your family name, please?'

I spelt it out slowly.

'Of course, of course. A wood is like a little forest, isn't it? Thank you, Mr Wood,' She smiled and called loudly across the terrace.'

'Christophe, could you please help Mister Wood with his luggage?'

In this way, my arrival at the hotel and my new name had been noted by everyone who might have been interested.

Christophe excused himself from the complex discussion about trout fishing he was holding at one of the tables and helped me to the lift. Once the lift door had closed, he took my hand, shook it hard and whispered, 'From now on, we have never met, sir. All the hotel staff will completely ignore you. Please forget all our names and behave as if our presence didn't interest you. Try to behave like an English snob, and we will all play up to that.' The lift stopped, 'This way, please, Mister Wood. This is your room. Please call reception if you need anything.'

I sat down gingerly on the hard chair and blew out my cheeks with relief. At least that part had gone well. With some difficulty, I changed into a comfortable and oversized cotton tracksuit. Margaux had chosen this also, in a garish petrol-blue. Before slipping on the trousers, I wrapped several turns of a wide bandage around my knee so that it would bulge out prominently when I sat or walked. This done, I brushed my hair and hobbled back to the lift and down to the restaurant.

Christophe had placed me across the room from the Finn but directly in her line of sight. He noisily relieved me of my red crutches, which he hooked over the edge of the table beside me so I could reach them easily. From her seat, she could study

## BAIT

me and, hopefully, put me down as just another tourist of no interest. However, how could anyone have guessed that our plans would not be entirely successful in this respect?

As dinner slowly progressed, I allowed my eyes to wander around the room as any newcomer would be expected to do. During this exercise, however, I noticed the Finn looking at me furtively several times. This worried me a little, but I reassured myself there was no way she could link me with the Doctor Stone she was searching for.

Once back in my room and before settling down to sleep, I plumped up my pillow. I took out a recent adventure novel I had purchased from the newsagent at Saint Antoine l'Abbaye. It had been the only one available in English. I read the first chapter and was sliding it under my bed when something occurred to me. All of a sudden, I realised something which, ten years ago, I would never have missed. Due to no fault of mine, Lida Niemela was interested in me as a man. I immediately relaxed and let my head fall back against my pillow, 'Of course, that explained the furtive looks.'

I naturally felt relieved but realised I would have to be very careful. I reflected that things might become complicated if the Finn became too insistent. I wondered if she was as ruthless in this field as in her criminal activities.

The following day, on waking, I found my legs to be just as painful and stiff as the previous day. I certainly wouldn't have to do any play-acting and would hobble nicely with natural ease. To improve the overall effect, I did not do the stretching exercises I would usually have done. Furthermore,

once dressed, I deliberately took the stairs down to show off my handicap at its best.

Mrs B was at the desk and helped the little show along. She proclaimed loudly to everyone within earshot that poor Monsieur Wood was obviously in no state to take the stairs.

'You should take the lift if you want to recover properly.' She cried.

Christophe pulled out a chair for me at a table near the windows and, having helped me to get seated, brought me over a tray covered with enough bread croissants to feed a tribe. He then served me a big cup of hot coffee and drifted off to his duties.

As I had no plans for the day, I took my time over breakfast and spread open the local paper on the table beside me. Several of the hotel guests nodded, smiled, and passed the time of day with me on their way out. Then, finally, the Finn and her two assistants got up to leave. On their way past me, the woman slowed and smiled as she passed me, 'Good morning, mister Wood. I hope your leg is a little better today.'

I looked up and smiled back, 'Thank you, madam.' I forced an uncharacteristic formality into my behaviour. 'One mustn't complain. These things take time, I believe.'

For a horrible moment, I thought she would sit down, and I'm sure she was considering it. Luckily, at this moment, Mrs B's professional voice was heard ringing out from the lobby as she shouted into the phone.

'HELLO. YES. DOCTOR STONE? No, the line is terrible.

## BAIT

Yes, that's better. How is your walk going? Ah, yes, I see. No, that's perfectly all right. Yes, I think we can manage that.'

Christophe, who had just moved around behind me, gripped my shoulder, holding me down firmly, while pretending to lean over to refill my cup from the coffee pot, placing himself between the Finns and me.

'Eleven o'clock?' she continued, and there was a brief pause. 'I'm not sure that that will be possible; yes, two o'clock would be better.'

The Finn, instantly forgetting me, moved smoothly and quickly from the room to come closer to the source of information. She then pretended to study the information brochures on the table in the lobby.

'Yes. So where should the driver bring the luggage?' A pause. 'You'll be waiting outside the station then. Perfect. Will we see you again soon...? One moment, I'll just check. Yes, there should be a room free. Call a few days in advance, just in case. Have a nice trip then. Yes, you too.'

The Finn moved over to the reception desk. 'Excuse me. I know it's impolite to listen in to private conversations, but I overheard that Mr Stone will not be returning.

'No. That's correct. He's decided to go straight back to Grenoble, from the "Col de Rousset", without coming back through Autrans. That saves him almost two days walking. We're used to that sort of thing. He paid for his room in advance anyway. Dr Stone is such a friendly and pleasant young man that I don't mind at all.'

The Finn nodded understandingly. 'That's why I was looking forward to meeting him. It's a pity. Has he a mobile phone, by the way.'

'I'm not sure about that. He was calling from a pay phone at Valance station, so perhaps he hasn't got it with him,' She smiled. 'Or maybe it's discharged.'

'Perhaps I could help', the Finn improvised. 'We need to pick up a colleague from Valance station later this afternoon. I could easily take his bags and hand them over for you.'

'Now that's very kind, Mrs Niemela,' Mrs B. smiled, 'But he did give me specific instructions, and you know what these scientists are like. Especially the English ones. Thank you, but I'd prefer not to go against a guest's request. I'm sorry.'

The Finn laughed: 'Oh yes, I understand the type perfectly. By the way, which is the best route down to Valance from here?'

'The quickest is straight out of Autrans along the valley and through Meaudre. From there, you head down to the valley and the motorway via the "Gorges du Bourne". Then, straight to the Valance station. Our local taxi drivers love that route because they can exhibit their driving skills to younger customers. I frequently have to tick them off because they scare my customers.'

The Finn nodded, 'By the way, when will the internet connection be fixed?'

'Tomorrow.' Smiled Madame B. 'I hope that hasn't been too great an inconvenience to you. That's the trouble of living in a little place like this so far from Grenoble.'

'No. No trouble. Good day.'



## BAIT

The Finn turned away and drew her two assistants outside onto the terrace. 'Now, what the hell is that damn man Stone up to?' she asked, mainly to herself.

'Do you think he could have found the stuff?' asked one of the two men.

The Finn hesitated. 'That's possible, so we mustn't let him go into hiding. We need to keep tabs on him. If he has located the hiding place, he'll have to come back to get it, won't he.'

'Can't we just catch him and force the information out of him in the usual way?' proposed the second man.

The Finn shook her head, 'We don't know for sure what he knows yet. No. Let him lead us to the gold if he has found it. If he hasn't, force would be counterproductive.'

'You mean we would scare the brains off him?'

'That's about it. Now go and bring the car around. We'll go down to the station at Valence and follow him from there. We should be there well ahead of the taxi, and then you two can tail him in the car. I'll get a taxi back here.'

## Chapter 17

The drive down to Valence typically takes about an hour and a half. Niemela parked the car in a strategic position near the exit of the station car park. From here, they walked around the station and surrounding area to locate strategic observation points. This done, they purchased sandwiches and took up their positions to wait for the taxi to arrive. An unusually tall man in shorts, boots, and glasses would be easy to spot if he approached the taxi rank.

Time slipped slowly past as they kept up their surveillance, examining each taxi as it arrived and deposited its passengers. On a few occasions, they stiffened at the approach of a taller-than-usual man, but each time, they were disappointed.

The Finn became restless as the station clock ticked its way towards two o'clock. However, she knew from experience the danger of getting restless and leaving one's post at a critical moment.

She soon noticed that all the vehicles approached the taxi rank via the same route. Accordingly, she brought her two men round to the same side of the station. She posted them so they could close in and rapidly block any possible escape routes.

Two o'clock eventually arrived, and they all became more attentive, keeping a close eye on the position of each other and ready to act at a nodded sign from the Finn.

At two fifteen, Lida started to feel uncomfortable and sent one of the men to double-check around the back of the station. At two-thirty, she called them over. 'I don't like it. Barring accidents, the taxi should have

## BAIT

been here by now.' She frowned. 'There's something odd. That guy could not possibly have got wind of trouble. He hasn't got a phone, and nobody knows what we're up to. You two go round the place and report back.' To herself, she whispered, 'Where on earth is that damned taxi?'

At three o'clock, they gave up and took the long drive back to the hotel in silence. Lida stomped from the small car park towards the hotel with a furrowed brow. However, just before reaching the entrance, she sighed deeply and straightened up. She forced a smile and got it to look relatively natural.

Mrs B. was at work on the computer behind the desk and looked up with a smile as the three entered. 'Did you have a nice drive down? The weather was perfect, of course.'

'Yes lovely, we met our colleague and, as we had some time left, waited to see if we could meet Dr Stone when his taxi arrived.'

'Did you manage to have a chat then?' asked Mrs B.

'No. We couldn't see any sign of him or his taxi, for that matter.'

'Now that's odd. The driver delivered the luggage, and Doctor Stone is easy to spot.'

'Well,' added Lida, 'we waited at the top of the steps, and when we couldn't see him, we went around the square to see if he wasn't there.'

'I wonder how you could have missed him. He must be already back at his flat at Grenoble by now.' She hesitated, rose and stepped to the counter, 'But wait. What do you mean when you say you went around the square?'

Lida stiffened, 'The pedestrian square just in front of the station.'

Mrs B lifted her chin and squeezed her eyes closed, thinking, 'But there isn't a square...' She hesitated. 'Ah! I understand. You must have been Valence Central Station, then?'

'Yes, of course, that's what I said.'

'Well, that explains it then.' smiled Mrs B. 'You were in different stations. Dr Stone was at Valence TGV station.'

Lida's eyes open wide, 'Isn't that the same?'

'No, no. That's a frequent error. Taking the high-speed line right through the town centre proved too complicated. So the station was built outside the town, seven miles this side of Valence. They really should have called it by some other name to avoid confusion,' She smiled. 'Anyhow, happily, there's no real harm done; it wasn't as though you missed a train, was it?'

Lida blew out her cheeks, 'Valence TGV station! Well, I'll remember that next time.'

'I'm sorry. I should have made sure that you knew the difference.'

Lida smiled, 'As you say, there's no real harm done.'

'Anyway, if you're disappointed to have missed him, why not call him,' added Mrs B. 'He should be home this evening. If you like, I can give you his phone number.'

'Oh yes, that would be lovely, thank you,' Lida noted the number.

## BAIT

She then sent one of her men off to check out the story with the taxi driver over a beer. Later, when he returned with confirmation, they used the reverse phone book on the hotel PC which was at long last working correctly. They had no difficulty in finding the address corresponding to the number provided.

Lida stretched her legs under the table, 'Right, you two. Get down to Grenoble and check out this address. If he's there, call me, and I'll get a taxi down, and we'll take it from there.'

'Do you want us to detain him?' said the thinner of the two.

'No. I already explained that once. Just don't let the guy out of your sight. I hope your phones are fully charged.'

The two men exchanged looks and quickly dived into their pockets, visibly relaxing as they checked their battery states.

'If he has found something, he'll have to return here sooner or later. If not, perhaps he's just giving up?'

The older man nodded, 'And if he is giving up?'

'I'll think about that later.' The two men exchanged glances, and Lida sighed loudly. 'If this guy gives up after having had all this information in his hands for so long, do you suppose we have a chance? No. It would probably mean that someone else found the stuff years ago, maybe fifty years ago, who knows.'

She looked up at the two disappointed faces, 'But we're not there yet, are we? So get down there and keep out of sight.'

About an hour later, the two men parked their car in the shadow against the side of a big sports centre and made their way around it to the address provided. The block of flats looked new and expensive, and they

wandered past and checked that my name was on one of the bell-pushes.

They exchanged glances and crossed the road to look up at the flat from below.

No lights were showing, but the shutters were up, and the door leading onto the balcony looked as if it were slightly ajar.

'Odd,' said one of the two men. They waited and watched the entrance for some time in silence.

It must have been about half an hour later when they spotted a teenage girl come out of the corridor on the top floor and start skipping and running down the inner glass-panelled central stairs. The older of the two men walked quickly across the road, timing his arrival just as she flung back the entrance and darted out into the darkening street.

The door started to close slowly, but the man was inside well before it clicked shut.

His companion followed him and was admitted with a smile. 'Ah, kids!'

They quickly looked at the letterboxes to check the floor. They were surprised to find it half-full when I was supposed to have returned that afternoon.

'Odd that,' he remarked as they started to climb the stairs. Arriving on the second floor, they hesitated. The flat door was ajar and had been forced. The older man knocked on the door while the other one stood to one side, hidden from view by the wall. There was no reply, so the older man pushed the door and peered into the darkness. 'Hello, Mister Stone? Are you home?' There was no answer. Signalling the other to stay where he was, he stepped inside and waited, listening. He then beckoned his colleague,

## BAIT

and they pushed the door closed behind them, flicking on the light.

The place was in a fantastic mess and had been ransacked, with little left intact. 'Christ!' said the younger man, 'What's up now?'

They quickly visited the other rooms, and it was clear that nothing had been left unturned. On the dining table, they see a computer lying on its side with wires hanging out where the hard disk should have been. All the drawers had been opened and emptied onto the floor, and even the picture frames had been removed from the walls and the backs removed. Photos of a tall man wearing glasses in the company of various people were scattered beside broken frames on the occasional tables, and the older man pocketed one of these.

'OK,' he said, 'let's get out of here. We're too late.' On the way out, he stopped and bent down to pick up a bright yellow ring binder lying on the floor near the entrance.

On the front cover, written with a broad black marker, were the words, 'Pre-War Song Lyrics'. 'Hey!' he said, 'Didn't Lida say something about war-time songs.'

'Yeh.' He flipped it open, but it had been emptied apart from some empty sheet protectors. They then walked back down the stairs and returned to their car.

Sitting in the comfortable leather seats, they exchanged knowing looks, and the older man took out his phone and dialled a number.

He explained to Niemela what they had discovered and waited, holding the phone away from his ear so they could both hear.

'Damn it!' they heard. 'And there's no sign of him?'

'No. I guess he took off as soon as he realised what had happened. Anyway, that's what I would have done.'

'Without shutting your front door behind you?' she said.

'Maybe it wouldn't close after being forced.' suggested the second man.

'No,' said Lida, 'I don't like it. It's not logical. He wouldn't have left it open like that so that anyone could get in and pinch all his stuff.'

'Maybe the guys who did the job carried him off with them,' proposed the older man. 'Dead or alive.'

There was a pause over the phone. 'That's possible, but anyway, there's something I don't understand in all this.' Another pause. 'Well, if there was anything worth finding, someone else has got it now.'

'But the guy didn't empty the letterbox before going up. That's what most people would normally do,' said one of the men.

'Yes,' said Lida. 'It's possible he spotted people up there from down in the road.'

'And got away quick,' said the other man.

Lida laughed, 'Ha! Which might mean that he has not yet given up and has some definite information he wants to keep for himself.'

'You want us to watch the place?'

'Yes. You might as well stay there until tomorrow morning, then get back up here and get some sleep.'

'I don't suppose it could have been that blond girl we warned off and her lot?'



## BAIT

'No.' came the reply, 'No, I'm certain of that. That's not at all her way of going about things. That Sophie Lemone would have left no trace of her search. Her lot is far too careful.' She hesitated. 'No, someone else must have picked up the trail, damn it! Please, God, it's not that damn Mafia guy again.'

The older man fished the photo he had picked up out of his pocket, 'I found a picture of the bloke Lida. I'll bring it up tomorrow.'

'Good thinking, that's brilliant. What does he look like?'

'Tall guy. Middle-aged, thin. Not much hair left, but pretty good-looking, I suppose. He wears glasses.'

'Good. That confirms the sort of portrait we constructed.' There was a long pause, then she finished, 'OK. Good work. Keep me posted if anything happens, and get back here mid-morning.' Lida put down her phone and gazed out at the deepening darkness. 'Where the hell has our mysterious doctor disappeared to now?' She sighed, her brow drawn down in a puzzled frown.

Her two henchmen next spent a long night taking turns surveying the flat with only a packet of biscuits to staunch their hunger. It was thus somewhat unfortunate for them that the address indicated by the reverse phone book and the flat they were now surveying had nothing to do with my actual address. The place was the showroom of this new residential quarter, borrowed for the occasion. A day later, when the two men had given up the surveillance, a rather special cleaning team quietly turned up. They put the original undamaged door back on and tidied up everything in the flat.

Sitting in a similar empty flat across the road, Paul watched and smiled. Doctor William Stone had now officially disappeared and was safely out of the picture for the time being. Lida Niemela would assume that I had discovered that someone desperate was onto me. She would, therefore, not expect me to give any sign of life for some time if I had gone into hiding. On the other hand, the option of my having been captured would encourage her to stay put.

Paul guessed that Lida Niemela would also assume that whoever else was on the trail would soon turn up at Autrans to take up the hunt. He knew that she already had some excellent information in her hands and would wait to see if the others could furnish her with the missing pieces of the puzzle. He reflected that he would certainly not like to be in the shoes of these others because Lida's methods of extracting information were known to be rather uncompromising. Up in the Vercors, a body could easily remain undiscovered until well after all that remained was a pile of weather-beaten bones.

Luckily, then, these others did not exist.

At breakfast the following morning, I noticed the Finn observing me again. This time, she held my gaze for a few seconds. I started to worry that the situation might get awkward if things were to move in the direction I suspected she intended.

On my way back to my room, I whispered my concerns to Christophe. He nodded and moved away. Later that day, while I was relaxing in the pool, a woman I had not seen in the hotel came in wrapped in a big white towel. She spent a few minutes in the Hammam and then slipped into the pool. She had

## BAIT

broad shoulders, and her biceps showed she was into weight training. I guessed that she must have been in her early fifties. However, she displayed none of the flabbiness of many women her age. Her abdominal muscles would have been impressive even on a woman of half her age.

As she turned to me, a pleasant smile illuminated the taut skin of her tanned face. After a nod and a word of greeting, she swam up and down the pool a few times, stopping each length to rub the water from her eyes.

On her last return length, she swam up, gripping the bar close to me and whispered, 'Good day, please look out into the garden over there,' then continued, 'I've been asked to give you a message, Dr Stone.'

I did as I was requested. 'Don't register any reaction because someone might be watching.'

I swam out a few strokes on my back and back again, rubbing the water out of my eyes.

'You must be extremely careful about the lady you mentioned to Christophe this morning. It is most inconvenient, but it seems that she has taken a liking to you. She's an intelligent and dangerous criminal, as you know. If she were to discover that you have no operation scars on your knee, she would immediately smell trouble.' The woman paused and looked around the pool room. 'That woman would never let her emotions get between her and a huge sum of money in gold.' She pushed off from the poolside and swam back again. 'So Paul gives you the choice of either of having your knee actually cut open and sewed up again, OR of doing everything in your power to avoid intimacy with her.' She smiled at me and then turned her head away. 'When I say

intimacy, I think you'll readily understand what I am hinting at.'

She continued to look out of the window towards the garden. 'Please also absolutely avoid coming into the swimming pool again. If she knew you were in the pool, she would immediately put on her smallest bathing costume and follow you here. She is as fit physically as she is mentally and has a reputation of being very persuasive when it comes to men.'

I groaned audibly.

'Yes.' She said. 'I can easily imagine her asking to examine your knee as an excuse to trigger some physical contact. Now that would put you in a very delicate position, don't you think...?'

The woman brushed back the hair from her face with a wet hand and continued, 'If you've understood all that, smile and go over to the Hammam. Then please put that bandage back on your knee quickly before anyone else comes in here.'

I did as she had requested, a little unsettled it must be admitted and sat in the bubbling water for five minutes before returning to my room.

I never knew who this was, but she may have saved my life and would have an important role to play later in my adventure without me ever knowing her name.

That afternoon, I sat quietly in my bedroom for an hour and tried to devise a strategy to keep the Finnish predator at arm's length. The most obvious idea was to somehow let it filter through that I was homosexual. However, I was not confident that this would effectively put a damper on her enthusiasm. I guessed she would have noticed my behaviour towards other women and decided I was not lost beyond repair. The results might be even worse.

Remembering what I had learnt at Sainte Antoine L'Abbaye, I then considered the idea of letting it be thought that I had contracted some horrible disease such as leprosy or Saint Antoine's Fire. The truth was that I was obviously in too good mental and physical health for this excuse to be convincing. These same points ruled out the idea of my having contracted Aids, even at a very early stage. My strong constitution and mental optimism were not in phase with such a condition.

I could, of course, have been a carrier of the Aids virus, but I wasn't sure that I could carry off the acting required to make this convincing. There were, I reflected, always the nasty but curable sexually transmitted illnesses such as Syphilis and Gonorrhoea. Any of these would undoubtedly have the required repulsive effect. However, I wasn't confident about being a sufficiently convincing actor to carry that off.

The optimal solution for my safety would be to disappear immediately. For example, I could get myself diagnosed with a post-op infection and have to go into a clinic, but for some reason, Paul wanted me to stay here.

The only other thing that came to my mind was to get a girlfriend, a wife or a mistress quick. The question would be how to find someone ready to play the game. Then again, would I be convincing in this role? The woman would have to sleep in my room, too, except if she were to play the part of a secret mistress. However, the Finn would undoubtedly be ready to play dirty in that case. This outcome was

highly likely in the case of a mistress but less so in the other two cases. A girlfriend or a fiancée seemed the safer bet because I didn't feel up to acting a married man's role.

Feeling that I might have solved the dilemma, I got up and went down to the bar to get a cup of tea. Luckily, apart from a retired couple, their two grandchildren, and an old farmer, I was alone with Christophe. Nevertheless, I was careful with what I said,

After a slight pause, I leant over and said, 'I was wondering if it would be possible to invite my Fiancée up here to spend a few days with me.'

The man glanced up at me from his work and held my gaze for a few moments, expressionless. 'Ah, yes.' he smiled. 'Yes. It would be nice for you to have a bit of company. It would certainly make things easier for you.'

'Ah, yes.' I repeated his words, 'It would certainly make things easier for me.'

He nodded, 'I'll ask Mrs B to see if that's OK, shall I?'

'Yes, please.'

'My pleasure, Monsieur Wood.'

The old, sun and snow-weathered farmer set down his second or third glass of white wine and turned his head. 'First time I ever heard of a woman making things easier.' He made a snuffling noise, which I guessed was his laugh.

'That's enough from you, old devil,' scolded Christophe, then turning to me, 'He's got a wife, five daughters and seven granddaughters.'

BAIT

The old man drained his glass, 'Allez, back to the hen house, bye all,' he said over his shoulder as he headed home.

## Chapter 18

That night, after dinner, Lida Niemela led her two assistants out of the restaurant for a short walk around the village before bed. The men were not enthusiastic but had learnt from experience that where their boss was concerned, it was always easier to accept than to try and find a convincing excuse. Exchanging glances, they followed her down the track leading between the tennis courts and then up behind the darkened mass of the gymnasium. At the top of the path, they joined the forest track that took them past the “Petit Bois” at the summit of the hillock overlooking Autrans. On the opposite side of the village, the artificial ski-jump practice slope was still dazzlingly illuminated. They watched as the last few members of the local team came flying down and sailed through the air. Then, with no warning, all the lights were suddenly extinguished.

Darkness came plummeting down on them from above as if a black wave had suddenly washed over the mountain. The effect was astonishing, and a million stars burst into life as if they had suddenly all been lit up by the flick of a switch. The darkened dome of the sky seemed to shoot away from them like the inside of a rapidly expanding black balloon. Then utter silence settled around the three figures. They stood still for a moment gazing up at the millions upon millions of stars shining in the crystal clear night one only ever finds at high altitudes far from towns.

The older of her companions bent forward and pointed. ‘See that? That’s the Big Dipper. It’s part of



## BAIT

the Big Bear constellation. The Grande Ourse, they call it here in France, strange that!’

The other two followed his directions and the second man added, ‘Doesn’t look much like a bear to me, or a dipper, whatever that is.’

The first shook his head. ‘Look!’ he pointed again. ‘See that bright one over there?’

The two nodded, ‘Well, imagine a line joining that one to the other bright one over there, OK? Now join that end with a straight line through those three stars there, and then down to that tiny one over there. Got it, now use your imagination in joining them all together and filling in the missing bits, and there you are. I can’t remember which ones you join to get the whole bear shape, but the long bit with the three stars, is its tail, and that one just there,’ He pointed, ‘is its eye. Those three, almost in a line, are part of its front leg, and that little group there is its paw.’

Lida nodded, ‘Ah yes, of course. Everyone’s seen the dipper, I expect, but the rest is a bit more complicated. How come you know all that sort of thing.’

It was rare for Lida to show any interest in those around her and even more so to question them about themselves.

The man hesitated. ‘Well, my aunt explained the constellations to me. She used to go in for fortune-telling. She made it all up on the spur of the moment, though. Never a single item of truth in it. It helped her feed the kids, and as she always tried to invent something positive for everyone, the customers never complained. She’s still doing it as far as I know.’

He turned slightly to the left. ‘That one over there is Little Dipper, or “Petite Ourse” (almost the same

shape), and if you follow across there,' he traced a line in the air with his finger, 'That's the Pole Star.'

'Your Bear looks more like a frying pan to me', commented the other man.

'That's how most people find it,' said the other, smiling in the dark.

Lida shivered, and they started back down across the already dewy grass, aiming at the illuminated church spire.

Back in her room, Lida stood at the window and gazed up at the stars, trying with some difficulty to construct the full image of the Big Bear. 'Once you get the tail, the eye, the front leg and the paw fixed,' she told herself, 'the rest ought to be straightforward.' However, this wasn't the case. After a while, her gaze involuntarily refocused on the reflection of her room on the windowpane. She noticed the map with its markings, which was still spread out on her bed, and frowned. She looked away again at the starry sky, then stopped short and wheeled around.

'Stars!' she exclaimed out loud 'Yes, of course, I knew something was gnawing at the back of my mind about those map markings, three squares and three triangles.'

She left her room quickly and banged on the door of the next room, calling in her two assistants, 'Bring a pen and something to work as a ruler, quick, I've got an idea. Come on quick.' The men tramped back to her room, and she picked up the map, folded it in half and spread it out on the surface of the table.

With the blue felt tip pen provided and the back of a racing sports magazine, she joined the three circles together with straight lines. The figure created represented a triangle with the uppermost summit

## BAIT

pointing southward. She then joined the three squares together, which defined a second triangle, overlaying and intersecting the first, but with the summit pointing north.

'Ah ha!' she cried, 'I should have guessed. What do you see now?'

The thinner of the two squinted, 'Looks like a star.'

'Yes, exactly. But not just any star.' She looked at them with triumph.

'This,' she said, 'is a star the Star of David. The only one which has six branches.'

'Ah!' The two men bent forward to get a better look but saw nothing unusual.

'For your information, the star of David is the symbol at the centre of the Israeli Flag.'

'Ah.' They still don't see anything of interest.

'And we are looking for gold hidden by...'

The two men exchanged doubtful glances.

'By a Jewish composer, you idiots, who were naturally an Israeli.'

'Wow!' They look from one to another, 'Brilliant!'

'Yes.' She let herself down onto the bed 'Clever. And I found that thanks to your aunt and her astrology.' She smiled. 'This proves that there is a definite link, but what can this mean, and how does it help us?' She stood and wandered around the room while the two men pretended to be absorbed in the map. They were just wondering when they would be allowed to get back to bed.

The thin one took up the discussion, 'What if the treasure was hidden right at the centre of the star?'

She stopped short and shot him a surprised look.

'Wow,' she cried, 'you two are surprising me tonight'. She nodded. 'Give me the pen.'

She rapidly drew in lines joining the opposing summits together, and to the amazement of all three, they found that they intersected at a single point in the centre. They all looked at each other.

'NOW we are getting somewhere at last,' smiled Lida

'Get me a magnifying glass, and let's see exactly where this point is...'

'La Grotte de la Ture.' She said. 'Thanks, Aunty. Well, well! And the place is near the village, and easy to get to. The gold must be hidden down in this cave somewhere.'

The older man rubbed his massive hands together, 'Now this is what I call having a bit of fun.'

'So.' continued Lida, 'All the other places are false leads to keep people way away from the real hiding place. Very clever, really very clever.' Lida shook her head with an amused smile. 'And to think that everyone else must have been spending days or months exploring each of the other places when the gold was nowhere near them.'

She smiled ruefully, 'In a way, I feel almost sorry for them, but only in a way. Ha.' She clapped her hands. 'Tomorrow we go potholing then...'

The older of the assistants screwed up his forehead, 'Mind you, Lida. That was about seventy-five years ago.'

Lida turned her head, 'I know that.'

'No. What I mean is, the present track leading up there might not even have existed in those days?'

'Ah! I see what you mean. But that may be good news rather than bad. Anyhow, try and check that out with the hotel manager. Their family has been here for generations and generations.'

## BAIT

The younger assistant stood up, 'Anyhow, once he had the gold stored up here somewhere, he wouldn't have been in so much of a hurry. He could have taken it up little by little in a rucksack. That would have been less suspicious to the locals than his having to rent a horse and cart from a farmer.'

Lida nodded, 'Yes. You're right there. That's what I'd have done. In that way, he could start in different directions each time and then double back.' She nodded approval. 'No. Don't bother about checking about the track. It's probably not important.' She sat down in the only armchair in the bedroom, leant back with her hands clasped behind her head, stretched her long legs out and smiled at the ceiling. 'Now that was very clever, Mister Jew. Well done.'

She then sat up again on the edge of her bed and, leaning forward, hugged her legs. 'That Doctor Stone man must have somehow worked out the positions of the places he marked on his map, from the clues in the song lyrics probably. God knows how he did it because I can't make head or tail out of them.' She stood up and went over to the window. 'But what he didn't realise was that the places themselves had got absolutely nothing to do with the actual hiding place.' She shook her head from side to side, a small smile playing across her pale lips, 'Clever little devil.' She laughed, 'It would have taken so much time to explore each of those places that everyone must have given up. Everybody except ME.'

The older of the two men was about to mention that it was possible that I had worked out this also and decided to let things cool off before coming back. However, he guessed that this might start Lida off

again, and he was keen to get back to bed, so he held his tongue.

Lida closed her eyes and smiled to herself. 'OK, good work everyone. Get to bed now you two. Breakfast at seven thirty and we'll be off straight after. Remember to bring a torch and put your boots on. It's going to be wet and slippery down there. On second thoughts go and buy TWO of the biggest torches you can find at the sports shop and don't forget the batteries.'

She sat for a while gazing out at the stars, frowning again. There was still the question of the references to the song lyrics to fathom out. In the face of the latest discovery she had just made, she was tempted however to suspect that these had also been another part of an elaborate scheme to put people off the scent. She had gone over and over again the lyrics and had got nowhere. It was true that each contained a mention of places and other information, which might be some map reference. However, she had been unable to see any link with the map markings.

Why go to so much trouble?

Perhaps, she thought, he had guessed that he was unlikely to survive and was leaving coded information for someone else who he knew would outlive him? In this case, it would have been for someone who knew him intimately enough to recognise the clues immediately. She wondered if the songs were initially dedicated to that person, but the lyric sheets she had discovered were simply computer print-outs of the text, so that didn't help. That person must have been someone who would have spotted the David Star hidden on the map markings, a Jew then or maybe a religious scholar?

## BAIT

She wondered if this person still living, or had he or she passed on the information to some distant relation? Was this person already on the trail? Perhaps that relation was Doctor Stone himself?

Lida asked herself if this was how that Lemone woman had got onto it? Maybe, she was even the Jew's granddaughter or something like that? In either of those cases, the clues might be references to a series of family outings. Yes, that seemed likely. Perhaps the deliberate omission of the real hiding place was linked to some highly cherished memory. In that case, it would have stuck out like a sore thumb.

Yes, maybe! Maybe. In any case, for the moment Lida remained firmly convinced that all this pointed to the fact that the key was to be found somewhere down the 'Grotte de la Ture'.

She suspected that the songs and their lyrics might also contain a sort of backup method. It might be there to guide the person for whom the treasure had been intended, in case he did not directly spot the key from the map indications.

Lida wondered if she ought to re-read the lyrics to see if she could now spot any hidden indications.

Thoughts like these went whizzing round in Lida's head until she shook it violently, stood up, stripped and got into the shower.

'No,' she told herself, 'Let's have a look down that grotto first.'

Stepping glistening out of the shower, a moment later Lida paused in front of the mirror to observe her slim, glistening body. Her long legs, small firm buttocks and flat stomach, were completed by a perfect pair of rounded breasts. 'A very desirable

body,' she reflected placing her foot on the chair and rubbing it delicately to dry herself.

Looking at herself in the mirror, she slid her hands over her breasts and caressed the nipples with a smooth circular movement, smiling. She then slid her hand down across her taut stomach and ran the fingers down through the thick dark pubic hair and on down between her slightly parted legs. 'Mmm!' she closed her eyes and allowed herself another smile.

But Lida Niemala had an almost inhuman capacity of being able to turn on and off her desire at will. The sexual arousal that had begun to tingle pleasantly in her groin at the thought of what she would have done if Mr Wood was with her was abruptly switched off.

'Time for sleep,' she told herself.



## Chapter 19

The following morning was wet and cold, and the sky had lost its crystal clearness of the previous night. Lida Niemela was nevertheless in excellent spirits that morning. On her way out of the breakfast room, she stopped at my table and smiled down at me.

'How is your leg today Mister Wood? Improving, I hope.'

I smiled back, 'Yes. Much better. It seems to be healing faster than I would have expected.'

'Well, that's good news.' she smiled.

'It should be easier too for me.' I said about to play my next card, 'because my Fiancée is trying to find a way of coming to join me for a few days.'

The woman's smile froze, and a cold, stony look transfigured her face. I avoided her look, pretending to stir my coffee. 'Oops,' I thought, 'that hurt I think.' I was sorry for her, regardless of everything.

She seemed to shake herself internally and managed to force out a weak smile.

'Oh!' she paused for longer than was comfortable for the two of us. 'That will be very nice for you. Good day.'

'To you too.'

She forced another smile and strode off rapidly across the terrace to the car her companions had brought round to the entrance. I didn't like to have had to do that, even though I knew what a dangerous and ruthless person she was. All the same, I wondered where she was off to in such good humour.

'I wonder if you're on to something. Sorry to have put a damper on your enthusiasm though Mrs Niemela.'

That morning I was not the only one to have noticed this modification of behaviour. As Paul had said, Autrans is a small place, and an expensive car doesn't go unnoticed by the locals. Its departure had been observed, and the direction it took was noted with interest.

The big car took the narrow road through the hamlet of 'Le Bourge de Dessus' and turned left at the chalet owned by the retired Autrans cheesemaker. This chalet had become a local landmark, because the flowers and shrubs he now grew, were planted in the huge copper basins in which he previously made his famous Vercors cheeses.

From here, the single-track road wound up into the forest for a mile, passing the isolated restaurant, the 'Banc de l'Ourse', 'the Bears Bench'. It then continued to climb through the pine trees until reaching the place called 'Font Scellier', the car turned off the road. This secondary track led eastwards, and a few hundred yards along it the vehicle came to a halt under the overhanging branches of some tall pine trees.

The three passengers clambered out, walked up a short steep slope and stood looking down into the low, wide arc of blackness which marked the entrance to the 'Grotte de la Ture'. There was nothing particularly impressive about this opening. I had noted this myself some days earlier, and it gave one the impression of being a place hardly worth visiting.

Nevertheless, returning to the car, they opened the boot, and the older man handed one of the big handheld torches to each of the other two. He then

## BAIT

sat on the dry pine needle-covered ground to put on his thick-soled boots. The others followed suit then they tramped back to the grotto entrance, turned on the torches and started to climb down.

The going was very easy, to begin with, as the ground was dry here. However, the three went slowly, even though the wide beams from the powerful torches lit the place up perfectly.

'You two keep to the sides, and I'll go down the middle.' Said Lida. 'Look out for anything that looks odd and especially any openings that look as though they might have been intentionally blocked off.' As they started clambering carefully down the steep incline, however, the full difficulty of the task came home to her with its full force.

Gazing at the dripping, moss-covered walls, It also struck her that over the past 75 years, nature could easily have transformed the geometry of the cavern. Did it still look the same as it had been when the gold was initially hidden there? Lida didn't mention these doubts to the two men who had quickly discovered several niche-like crevices. These contained nothing or were too narrow to enter at all, but proved that the sort of hiding place she was searching for, did exist here. Lida, spent a lot of time carefully exploring around the base of all the more massive boulders. Using her big sheath-knife, she prised out any loose rocks, just in case they might hide the entrance to a cavity. She concentrated on the down-slope side, assuming that this is where she would have buried a treasure herself, out of view of anyone looking down from above.

There was a cry from one side, as one of the men slipped and fell. The beam of light went whizzing

around the cavern, but luckily for them, the torches used LEDs and could take this sort of treatment without damage. Lida didn't bother to ask if he was OK, because his swearing proved this beyond doubt.

They ignored the sloping roof of the cavern because it was too high. A man working alone would be incapable of reaching it without some sort of scaffolding, and that would have given the game away.

After about half an hour of this slow, slippery progress, they came to what seemed to be the bottom of the cavern. They joined forces here and went over the walls and ground slowly. They shifted piles of stones, which had accumulated over time but found no sign of any hidden cavity.

The younger of the two men was working up along the wall to the left and suddenly called out. 'Hey, Lida! I've found something, a sort of hidden entrance.'

The other two thrilled with excitement and clambered quickly over to where he was standing.

Hidden behind a great jutting rock, they found a narrow slit, just wide enough for a man to squeeze through.

'Here, let me through,' said Lida, 'I'm slimmer than you two.'

Saying this, she slid herself on her stomach and squeezed into the gap, 'Hey. Light the passage you two.'

Her feet disappeared, and a few moments later, they saw her torch flash on again.

'Christ!' they heard her say, 'Get through here you two.'

## BAIT

The younger of the two put his hand on his companion's arm, 'I can't go in there, I can't do it. I'm already shaking like a leaf, and sweating.'

'God! You must be claustrophobic or something.' said his companion. The turning an approaching his head to the passage called, 'Hey Lida, I'm coming through alone, Oskar has come out in a sweat. Claustrophobia I think.'

They heard her swear, 'OK. Get in here then.'

The man squeezed his way through and stood by his boss. In the light of their torches, a second and much bigger cavern appeared, sloping away into the darkness below them.

'Christ. What a place. How far does this go down?'

'God knows,' said Lida. 'Let's go.'

They clambered and slipped downwards for another half an hour, calling back to their colleague from time to time. Both of them were soon covered with yellow-green mud and slime, and the going was becoming more and more delicate. All of a sudden, Lida stepped on a smooth rounded bolder, and her foot shot from under her as if the surface had been covered with ice. She fell heavily on her shoulder, and her torch flew into the air, landed on a rock and flew apart splitting the casing and shooting the components down the cavern in a shower.

'Damn it!'

'You OK?'

'Damn it! Just a bruised shoulder I think. Hey, stop a minute.' She sat upright and massaged her shoulder.

'If ever we break the other torch, we'll be in really big trouble. We had better get back up.'

'Agreed.' said her assistant. 'You know, I was thinking. If I was over sixty, can you imagine how difficult it would be for me to get several tons of gold down here? You know how heavy that stuff is.'

Silence fell while Lida took this in. 'No... No. You're probably right. This place would be too difficult by far. Let's get back and have a closer look at the outer cavern. Leave the other torch where it is, come on.'

She led the way back up the slippery cavern, and they squeezed back through the crevice into the upper cavity again.

The other man had moved back up into the daylight and was now visibly calmed.

'You OK to come down this far?' called up Lida.

'Yep. I think so.' He came down rapidly, most of the time sliding on his bottom to avoid falling. They then started the slow progress back up together, checking out all the places already visited, but this time from below. However, this detailed investigation didn't turn up a single place that could conceal anything bigger than a lunchbox.

As they finally approached the entrance once more, cold wet and disappointed, the most unexpected thing happened.

Above the rim of the entrance, ten or twenty orange-clad children suddenly appeared. They must have all been about ten years old and gazed down at the three adults with curiosity. One of them turned and called out,

'Joseph, Joseph. There are already some people down here, come and look'.

A tall figure, also clad in Orange overalls, appeared silhouetted by the light. 'Hello there. Just coming up? Great. Anyone else down there?'

## BAIT

Lida and her companions exchanged astonished glances. 'No, no one else.'

'Great. Ok, kids get your headlights on and give me the rope. Hey Jo,' he turned, 'Bring up the torches.'

Lida and the other two clambered out of the entrance and stood there looking at the little group of children, in stunned silence. The children had already forgotten their existence in the excitement of preparing themselves, chattering on together.

Lida went over to the tall man, who was examining the frontal lamps of each child. 'Are you taking these kids down there?'

'Yes, this is their first pot-holing outing,' He smiled. 'We always use this place for initial training. It's as safe as houses. This your first time then?'

Lida turned and looked back down the cavern, 'Yes, but my friend seems to be claustrophobic, so we came back up.'

'Oh, bad luck you,' he said.

'Do you come here often?' asked Lida.

'Oh yes,' he said fiddling with one of the torches. 'Several times a week in summer. We never take anyone down the real potholes before testing them out here.'

'Always a wise precaution,' added the other orange-clad man. 'As you seem just to have discovered in the case of your friend.'

'So the place is well known then,' asked Lida.

The two men laughed happily, 'God yes. I think it was discovered back in nineteen hundred, or just before.'

'Oh really.' Lida was secretly disappointed.

'But,' The man went on, 'no one made a plan of the place until after the war, nineteen fifty I think. You remember who did it, Jo?'

Jo, who was now coiling up some ropes turned and frowned. 'No, but the detailed one we always use was drawn up by Michel Etienne. That one must have been made around nineteen ninety I guess.'

'Nineteen eighty-eight, to be exact,' said his friend. 'It's printed on the guide.'

Lida was crestfallen. 'Oh I had no idea, it was so well known.'

'Oh yes, every nook and cranny has been mapped out.' Said the first guide. 'Several generations of children have had to copy it out as a school exercise. Eh Jo?'

Jo shook his head, 'God yes. I even had to re-do the measurements for my teacher, you remember?'

His friend nodded.

'Did you have to go down into the second cavern then?'

Lida nodded as she sat down to unlace her boots. 'Oh yes, quite interesting.' She then frowned at an idea that had presented itself to her. 'So what became of these people who did the plans. I hope at least they got some money for their troubles.'

Joseph hesitated 'God No. No money. They did it for the fun of it, like us. In those days, you couldn't make a living out of this, like we can today.' He smiled 'It's true that they did manage to get a grant and they made a bit of money by giving conferences and the like.'

'Ha.' Lida smiled 'none of them struck rich by discovering hidden treasure then.'



## BAIT

Joseph laughed, 'No. No that would have been brilliant though.'

He turned to his little group, 'All ready. Tie up your boots, better than that John.'

Then he turned back to Lida, 'We'll have to be getting on, nice to have met you.' Then turning he called, 'Come on everyone, over here. July, you keep just behind me right.' And the little chattering group disappeared over the lip of the cavern.

The three disappointed adults walked back to the car and drove in silence back to the hotel wet, cold, filthy and depressed.

Had Lida made a simple approximation, she might have been slightly less enthusiastic that morning and might have saved herself the days outing.

For example, had she assumed a rucksack load of twenty-five kilos each trip, she would have found that the number of round trips required would have been at least three hundred and possibly even six hundred. Such a performance would have been an exploit for a sedentary man well into his sixties. Even if the man had been capable of this, there remained another difficulty. To avoid alerting the local people, the man would have had to limit his trips to two or three per day. Had Lida have calculated, she would have realised that the transport alone would have required at least three months' work. She would thus have recognised that something was wrong with her reasoning.

It was, of course, possible that the Jew might have passed himself off as a fossil hunter and thus have easily justified the use of a horse and cart to bring back some big? Specimens from his explorations, but this didn't occur to her either.

However, what was now crystal clear to her was that there was no hidden gold down that grotto. The question troubling Lida was to know if at one time there had been something there, or not.

Then she said out loud, 'I wish I knew if this was one more false lead, left by that damn Jew, or a necessary stepping stone, from which to jump?'

'Maybe it was just coincidence that the lines crossed where the grotto was,' proposed the older man.

Lida shook her head. 'No, first the perfect shape of David's star, then the cave exactly at its centre. No that's not just luck, that was intentional. No. All this means something.' She frowned, 'Oh Christ,' she sighed.

'Agreed,' answered the older man.

At the hotel, the three of them showered and then met at the window table of the bar.

Lida ordered three double whiskies, and three pints of beer and they sat in silence for some time, watching the comings and goings of people on the village square.

The two men knew better than to break the silence.

Eventually, Lida sighed again. 'Everything pointed to that place. It's too strange. That place must be important, otherwise why go to so much trouble to divert everyone's attention away from it.'

She downed her whisky in a gulp and took up her beer. 'There must be another clue somewhere. I wonder if it's somewhere in those damn song lyrics. Something that our friend doctor Stone missed. Something that would not make any sense if one hadn't already spotted the David star and the cave.'

## BAIT

The older of the two men turned his head, 'But aren't they in French.'

Lida snorted. 'If I weren't fluent in French we wouldn't be here? Christ.' She continued. She tutted impatiently. 'I'll have to sit down and go through those damn stupid lyric sheets one by one and see if something attracts my attention.'

The younger of the two men put down his glass. 'But what if we don't have all the songs? What if the clues are in the others which were taken from his flat. Maybe Stone didn't think they were important.'

Lida looked at him with her mouth slightly open. 'Christ! I hope not, but that's a definite possibility.'

The younger man was pleased with himself but contented himself by taking a long pull of his beer.

Lida sighed again. 'If there were not so much money involved, I'd drop the whole project right now.' She paused and looked into the distance. 'And why did that bloke Stone go and disappear so suddenly for?'

The older man looked up from his glass, 'Maybe he gave up too.'

His friend looked up, 'What if the guy is being clever again. Maybe he is hiding and watching us and letting us do the work for him.'

Lida pulled a tired face, 'Maybe. Maybe not, but I'd like to get my hands on him.'

'Me too,' said her companion.

## Chapter 20

At the same time that Lida Niemela was unravelling the mystery of the David Star, the heavy doors of the Klementinum Library in Prague were swinging ponderously closed behind Sally and her companion, Jenny.

Today was the second day of her research, and although she had turned up some interesting documents, there was no sign of the list for which she was searching.

Sally's choice in starting here in Prague, had been dictated exclusively by the hotel rates available. She had obtained a last-minute reduction of nearly fifty per cent on a double room at the lovely Savic Hotel. This bargain brought four-star luxury into her university travel budget. The hotel was also only a short walk from the library and was above all very quiet.

The Klementinum itself was breath-taking. It was so magnificent that Sally initially lost sight of the objectives of her coming here.

Outside London, Oxford and Paris, she had never had the occasion of visiting any other major libraries around Europe and was thus utterly unprepared for what she discovered.

Thanks to her university research authorisation, she and her companion were allowed into the unexpectedly beautiful, Baroque Room, with its astonishing painted ceilings and its' strange assortment of globes and clocks. The upper gallery,

## BAIT

which ran all around the room some nine feet above the floor, was supported by massive wooden columns, each capped by a golden crown and giving the whole place a regal aspect.

Had it been possible, Sally would have stayed in this room all day, but the major part of the documents of interest to her was in one of the more modern and utilitarian sections of the library. To her, entering this remarkable room was like jumping back three hundred years in a single step. Sadly, though, she was not allowed to handle any of the rare books and was accompanied by a member of the staff to direct her to the documents which might be of help. Even then, she was supplied with a pair of white silk gloves and asked only to handle the documents with these on.

Almost at the outset, Sally realised that it would take weeks to go through the full set of documents that might contain the list she was looking for. However, she knew that her budget wouldn't allow this.

With this in mind, she limited her search to the most promising period and tried not to think too much about all the other possibilities.

She and her companion had decided to move down to the National Library in Austria the following day and took a last melancholic look around the superb baroque room as they left. They had planned to leave around ten thirty, the next morning because the drive would only take them four hours. Sally had once more found an incredible deal at the Sacher Hotel and had fixed their check-in time for after five o'clock.

Their way back to their hotel in Prague's, passed directly in front of the Irish Times Bar, just across the

road from the library. They halted here and slumped down at a table on the terrace for some welcome refreshment after a long day of fruitless searching. The early evening was warm and quiet, and they spent the best part of an hour chatting and idly watching the people around them on the square. They also observed with interest the food that was already being served and decided to return to eat there once they had washed and changed. On the short walk back, Jenny uncharacteristically insisted on stopping at several shop windows, and the streetlights were already coming on before they had reached the hotel lobby.

Sally washed and changed rapidly, but her friend was already waiting sitting on the terrace when she came down the stairs. They made their way back to the Irish Bar, stopping only twice this time at what Sally considered uninteresting shop windows and took a table on the corner of the covered terrace. For once Sally broke her habit of eating local and ordered a plate of Irish Sausages and some draft cider while Jenny, ordered a burger and Guinness, which Sally considered to be a typically horrible American mixture. While they were waiting for the order to arrive Jenny amused herself by observing the other dinners and making funny remarks to Sally. But when the plates came, she leant over to Sally, and whispered, 'In a minute, have a look at the two men at the table near the door and see if you recognise them.'

Sally waited a few seconds and then did as asked. She saw two broad-shouldered men in their early forties, both wearing dark glasses, apparently absorbed in their meal. She noticed that they were

## BAIT

both drinking water, which seemed out of place in such a restaurant.

'Ever seen those two before?' asked Jenny.

Sally shook her head, 'No, not that I can remember, why?'

'I recognise them from the Library café, and I think they must be at the same hotel as us.'

Sally smiled and laughed gaily, 'Maybe they're following us.'

Jenny nodded noncommittally and changed the subject.

It must have been just before eleven when the two girls paid and started to make their way back to the hotel. Just after they turned the corner into the narrow street, leading to the hotel terrace, her companion slowed abruptly. A few seconds later the two men Sally had seen at the bar appeared walking fast. Sally felt her arm grabbed by her friend and urged on.

'Excuse me,' the words came from behind.

Turning in her tracks, Jenny replied, 'Get lost.'

'Now Miss, we'd just like a word with your friend there.'

The two were much larger and heavier than they had seemed hunched over their plates and had a menacing light in their eyes.

'Nothing doing guys,' said Jenny barring their path, 'beat it.'

'I'm afraid I must insist,' said the thinner of the two and he took a step further.

At least, that is what he intended to do, but as he lifted his right foot, Jenny took a rapid step towards him and with lightning speed, her foot lashed up between his legs.

'Oh, Christ!' he cried and fell forward onto the cobbles.

At the same time, the other man cried out, 'Hey!' and his hand shot out to catch her. With remarkable agility, she sidestepped grabbed his outreached hand, spun around, wrenching his hand and wrist in a circle and sent him flying through the air. Putting all her small weight behind the throw, she crashed him into the cobbles beside his partner.

There was a groan followed by a clatter as a heavy revolver jumped out of his inner pocket and skidded away across the road. Jenny still had his hand held prisoner and bending it backwards struck the back of the elbow with the open palm of her left hand. There was a crack, and she let go the arm at the same time as a cry of pain emitted from the terraced man. She immediately jumped back, and in a fraction of a second, she stepped in and landed a vicious kick at the ribs of the second man who was groaning beside him.

Once again, there was a crack followed by a desperate cry. Without hesitation, Jenny knelt and pinned the man to the ground with her knee on his spine and leaning over tore aside his light jacket, slipped her hand in the inside pocket and drew out a revolver.

Leaping lightly over the two men she snatched up the second-hand gun and dragged the wide-eyed Sally off toward the hotel.

As they ran past a big dustbin, she halted, dropped out the chargers and threw the two handguns into it, then shook it violently so that they would mix down. Turning the corner, they passed another bin



## BAIT

belonging to their hotel and opening it, she tossed in the two chargers and shook this one similarly.

Just before reaching the hotel terrace, she stopped and took Sally by the hand.

'Look. I'll explain everything later, but for the moment, we need to get out of this place quick. Get your things extra quick and pick up my bag. It's already under the bed. I'll check us out now. I'll pay. Get going and leave anything you don't need.'

Sally went dashing up the stairs, while Jenny, already her normal cool, collected and smiling self, was explaining that they had been called to Paris urgently and must leave straight away.'

Not ten minutes later, they were in the car heading through the darkened outskirts of Prague in the direction of the motorway.

Jenny drove rapidly keeping her eye on the rear-view mirror to check that they were not being followed and after five minutes' silence they turned off the city ring road and onto the motorway.

Sally broke the silence at last. 'Who the hell were those thugs and why have we got to run like convicts? Where are we going and just for my information, who are you? Some sort of spy?'

Jenny kept her eyes on the road driving fast but precisely at the speed limit. 'To start with my name really is Jenny. I am American, and I am a historian. However, that's not my full-time job. At the moment my task is looking after you, or protecting you if you prefer.'

'Protect me?' Sally watched Jenny's face closely, 'from whom?'

'From people like those two.'

'But why are you protecting me and what did they want?'

'They want something that you haven't got.'

'What! Don't be stupid.'

'If I tell you the truth you won't believe me.'

'Try me.' Sneered Sally

'Well, they are looking for a stock of gold hidden by a Jewish industrialist at the beginning of the last world war. Does that ring a bell by any chance?'

Sally's eyes opened wide, 'But I don't know anything about that. That was ages ago. When I was preparing my thesis.'

'Yes, I know that. I have been given all the information.'

'By whom?'

Jenny ignored the question and continued, 'They think you know where the gold is, and they want it very badly.'

'But I don't.'

'Yes but they think you do, and they are ready to do anything to make you remember.'

'But I can't tell them anything else that isn't in my thesis, for god's sake.'

'And that is why I'm here so that they don't get their hands on you. And for your information, we are going back to Paris where you will be made safe.'

'By road?'

'No that is much too exposed. By plane.'

'But they will just have to watch the airport and catch us.'

'They'll watch Prague airport of course and the other closest airport, which at Dresden, just under two hours' drive. But they will not watch Nuremberg, which

## BAIT

is a three-hour drive. And that is where we are headed.'

'But who are you working for?' asked Sally.

'Well basically the tax evasion department of the French government, I suppose.'

'I didn't know they got mixed up in this sort of cloak and dagger stuff,' said Sally.

'No, nobody does. But where huge sums of money are involved, it is not always just clever businessmen who are involved.'

'Yes. I can imagine that. But am I really in danger just because I wrote a few lines in my thesis?'

'I'm afraid so Sally. These people are completely ruthless.'

Sally looked out at the dark, night sky then turned to Jenny. 'But how do I know that you are really who you say, and not just as bad as the others?'

Jenny smiled to herself, 'You don't.'

'Ah!'

'But to set your mind at rest, open my bag and open the zip on the left.'

Sally did as instructed.

'Oh! 'Sally was gazing at the bottom of the bag, where a small, slim handgun shone dully, 'You've got a gun!'

'Well, it might have come in useful earlier. Now the zip.'

Sally extracted a small leather pouch.

'Open it and read what it says,' said Jenny.

Sally opened the folded document and nodded at the very official looking contents.

'Could just as easily be forged.' She commented.

'Yes, that's true too, but it isn't.'

'So it's just your word then?'

'That's it.' nodded jenny, keeping her eye on the road.

'But if I were on the wrong side, I certainly wouldn't have let you near my gun. Also, I could easily have dealt with you quietly any night in our room, couldn't I?'

Sally considered this, 'Yes that's true. I suppose I have to believe all this stuff then.'

Jenny smiled, 'Well I'm pleased we got that clear. If you feel safer Sally, you can take my gun and look after it. But please be careful it's loaded and works perfectly.'

Sally looked at the thing lying there and shook her head, 'No it's better where it is.'

'If I were you, Sally. I would try and get some sleep because this is going to be a long night.'

'What would those two men have done, if you hadn't been there?'

'They would have taken you off somewhere quiet and questioned you. They would not have been satisfied by the truth you told them and would very probably have tried to force more from you.'

'Do you mean by torture?' Sally gaped.

'I'm afraid that is their usual method. After that, all depends on what their boss decided.'

'What do you mean?' Sally asked.

'Well either the boss would decide to interrogate you personally, which would be very bad news for you, or they would be told to remove any evidence against themselves by shooting you.'

'Oh my god. I think I'm going to be sick. Can't you stop?'

'Sorry, open the window and lean out.'

## BAIT

The white-faced Sally opened the window and the rush of cold night air immediately pulled her up. She let it blow in her face until the cold started to be too much for her.

'Now don't worry. You are going into hiding until this lot are all behind bars. So try and get some sleep.'

Sally pulled her red hair over her shoulder and looked across at Jenny. 'But how on earth did those men find us? Nobody knew where we were headed for first.'

Jenny glanced at Sally and shook her head. 'Have you ever looked at yourself in a mirror.' She smiled. 'A young woman with masses of bright red hair, known to be visiting European libraries.' She shook her head. 'They probably asked a few old pals to sit in the various cafés and wait till you turned up.'

Sally nodded 'Is this the Mafia or something?'

'No.' nothing to do with that side of things at all. No try and get some sleep, and hold my bag if it comforts you.'

They eventually arrived at the long-stay car park at Nuremberg airport at about 3h30 in the morning. After taking the empty shuttle; they trundled their suitcases into the terminal just before 4h00.

The earliest direct Air France flight to Paris was at 6h30 and Jenny managed to get two business class tickets.

They went immediately through customs, to get themselves out of reach, and found some quiet seats in a secluded corner.

Jenny then went off, and came back with coffee and some sandwiches, and sat down beside Sally who had just fished out her phone from her bag.

Jenny put her hand on Sally's. 'Whatever you do don't phone anyone you know. They may have your number tapped. It's unlikely but wise to keep quiet till we get to safety. No texts either please.'

Sally glanced at her, 'OK, I can surf the internet though?'

'Yep. No trouble there, YouTube etc. is OK.'

The night drew on, and the sky was gradually becoming lighter when they boarded the plane and found their seats right at the front of the cabin.

Sally seemed delighted at this, 'First off, that's perfect. If you don't mind, I'll try and get some sleep. Tell them not to bother about breakfast for me.'

Jenny nodded as Sally took out some fluorescent yellow silicon earplugs, put a black silk sleeping mask over her eyes and snuggled into the corner of her seat against the window.

The plane had a favourable wind, and they arrived nearly ten minutes before schedule and for once were authorised to land early.

Sally hurried out smiling at Jenny. 'I feel better for a bit of sleep and being back in France, let's get going as fast as possible. Where are we headed for?'

Jenny was carefully scanning the people the other side of the glass observation windows and said distractedly, 'I'll explain in the taxi.'

They were the first of their group into the baggage claim area, but the place was already full of people arriving from various long distance flights.

Sally put her hand on Jenny's shoulder. 'I need to go to the loo, or I'll burst. I'll catch you at the carousel.'

'OK but make it fast either we'll have a hell of a job getting a taxi, with all this lot.' She turned and strolled

## BAIT

towards the carousel, which hadn't even started turning yet.

Sally immediately dived behind a noisy group of Americans and, tying up her blazing red hair up into a bun, brought out a white Panama hat and jammed on her head hiding it altogether.

Before the carousel had started to revolve, she had gone through customs with her handbag as her only luggage.

When the first cases started slowly to emerge, she was through passport control and was dashing down the long passage towards the high-speed train terminal.

By the time Jenny had lugged their two suitcases off the carousel and was looking around for her, Sally was already boarding the TGV train to Lyons. She had shown the inspector the internet ticket she had purchased from Nuremberg airport on her smart-phone screen.

Finally, when Jenny finally realised that something was up, the 8h31 TGV had drawn out of the station and was already gathering speed towards its destination.

Jenny went round the toilets calling but had already more or less guessed that Sally had made a run for it. She cursed herself for being so innocent and unprofessional. She tore off and discarded the nametag from Sally's suitcase and hauled the two through customs.

The officers said that they had not seen any travellers with bright red hair and the passport controller hadn't either.

Outside she joined the queue for taxis and sat down on her case, 'Well I badly underestimated you

miss Sally,' she said to herself. Then taking out her phone sent a text message which went as follows - Nearly caught - now back at Paris - S has given me the slip - instructions, please.

An hour and a half latter Sally left the train at Lyon and caught the slow one for Grenoble.

At just before twelve-thirty, she took a taxi from Grenoble station and half an hour later was letting herself into my flat, with the spare set of keys I had left her during her last visit.

Once safely in my flat, she allowed herself to collapse onto the sofa and covered her face with her hands, letting out a long deep sigh. Struggling to a sitting position, she, at last, lifted the white Panama hat from her head and shook out her hair in a blaze of red.

Between the airport and the flat, no one would remember seeing a red-headed girl, that at least was certain.

She next fished out her telephone and looked up my number in her contacts.

Jenny's warning convinced her not to use her phone even if she had guessed that this could have been merely a manoeuvre to avoid her contacting anyone who might warn her. She went over to the wall phone and dialled my cell phone number, letting it ring until it switched over to the answering machine. She tried four times and then left the room and made herself an omelette and some coffee.

At about half-past one, when I went up to my room I saw my home number on my phone and frowning, immediately called it.

Sally answered. 'Is that you William? Thank God!'



BAIT

My mouth went dry, and I swallowed hard. 'Are you all right Sally? What the hell are you doing in my flat? I thought you were in Germany or somewhere.'

'And how in god's name did you know that?'

'It's a long story, but are you all right.'

Sally laughed a tired hard laugh. 'Only just.'

'No. Come on Sally, are you all right?' I asked urgently.

'Two thugs tried to murder me in Prague yesterday evening then I was more or less kidnapped by an American agent and flown back to Paris in the middle of the night. I escaped from her, and now I'm waiting for you at your flat. Please come home now William. I need you.'

Something very peculiar stirred and moved inside me, and I felt weak and happy and scared stiff all at the same time.

'Will you come now, William? Please.'

'Oh God,' was all I could find to say.

'William!'

'Look Sally I just can't come. We are both mixed up in the same mess, and I have to stay hidden where I am.'

'What. Are the same guys trying to catch you too? Why?'

'Look, I'll get my friends to send someone to look after you straight away, but for heaven's sake don't move.'

'Do you mean that all this about the hidden treasure and crazy criminals is true?'

'Yes, I'm afraid it is. And it seems that they are pretty unpleasant. AND they are convinced that both you and I, know where this damn treasure is hidden when neither of us has the slightest idea.'

'This is mad,' cried Sally.

'Yes, but don't worry you're safe where you are. I'll get someone to you as soon as possible. In an hour or two. Is that OK?'

Sally hesitated, 'All right, but where are you?'

'Not far away, but I can explain everything later.'

'But are you safe William?' I could hear the concern in her voice, and this caused an involuntary tear to come to my eye.

'Oh Yes. I'm quite safe.' I said, 'You'll see that later.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yes don't worry, but don't go out please, till I send someone.'

'All right.'

I hung up and ran down to the bar taking Christophe to one side. He had immediately spotted the animation in my manner.

'Trouble?'

I explained rapidly, and he nodded.

'I'll call Mr Douanier immediately,' and he disappeared around the back of the counter to the private room at the back.

A few seconds later, he returned.

'Monsieur Douanier is sending mademoiselle Sophie immediately. He asks you not to use the phone for the moment and to wait in the hotel for his reply.'

It took some time for Paul to reach Sophie and it took nearly two hours after my call before Sally heard the intercom ring in my flat.

'Hello?'

'Hello, my name's Sophie Lemone, and I've been asked to come and see you on behalf of Mr Stone. I'll step back to the side of the road so that you can see

## BAIT

me from the balcony.' She retired, and Sally peeped out of the window. She saw a slim, attractive, well-dressed blond, who didn't look dangerous.

She waved, and Sophie walked back as the door latch opened to admit her.

Sally was waiting with the door ajar as she came out of the lift and closed the door behind her, looking her over with care.

'So you are Williams's girlfriend then?'

The question was so unexpected that Sophie burst out laughing. 'Oh no,' she laughed, 'nothing like that I'm afraid.'

Sally frowned. 'But you know him well?'

'No, not all that well, but we have been working together recently.'

'Ah. I see.'

'I don't suppose you do, but we all seem to have got strangely mixed up together somehow.'

Sally found this girl altogether much too good looking and charming to feel happy about her being 'mixed up' in any way, with her best friend.

Sophie sat in the armchair and put her handbag down beside it, carefully observed by Sally.

'Let's sit on the balcony, we'll be better there,' she said and led the way, sliding open the glass door.

Leaning over the balcony, she asked, 'Did you come by car?'

Sophie smiled, 'Yes I parked just over there. The blue Polo.'

Sally nodded and sat down with Sophie.

She reflected for an instant, 'Would you like some coffee?'

'Yes, thanks. Then I'll explain what is going on.'

As Sally made her way back to the kitchen, she gently kicked Sophie's bag across the floor in front of her and lifting it onto the work surface opened it, keeping a careful eye on the back of Sophie's head.

She found and pocketed the car keys then quickly checked the name on the ID papers, which corresponded to the one she had given.

She sent her hand down into the depths of the bag and touched something cold and metallic.

She withdrew her hand holding an elegant flat silver handgun!

She frowned and placing the bag back on the floor kicked it back to its place dropping the gun into her own bag as she passed it.

'I'm sorry, do you like your coffee strong or not.'

'The stronger, the better for me.'

'OK. I'll get the coffee then you will perhaps explain what's going on. Where is William by the way?'

'Oh not far away. At the Hotel de la Place, at Autrans. I'll explain all that.'

'Great. I'll slide the door closed otherwise all the doors will bang.'

Sally clicked the door back into place.

A few seconds later, there was a bang, and Sophie stood up quickly.

The noise was the front door banging closed.

She ran to the sliding door and tugged. It was locked.

She ran along the balcony and checked the kitchen entrance and my bedroom door and found them locked also.

'Damn it,' she said under her breath.

## BAIT

There was another bang as the outer door swung closed and looking over the balcony, she saw Sally dash across the street towards her car.

Sally opened the car door and looked back at the flat.

She smiled up, and from her bag, drew the little handgun, dropped it back, waved, got into the car and drove off at high speed.

Sophie let herself drop onto the rattan sofa flung her head back and laughed out loud.

'Well, what an extraordinary, unpredictable girlfriend you've found yourself, William.'

She leant forward and eased her smart-phone from her tight back pocket and dialled Pauls number.

## Chapter 21

At about the same time as Sally was stealing Sophie's car, Lida was lying on her back on her bed, trying to think what to do next, when the phone rang. It was one of the two agents who had encountered Jenny the previous night. He had just got out of the hospital with a fractured arm, now in plaster, a broken nose and very tender ribs. His companion was slightly luckier but had bruised and very painful testicles, which were intact however sore they might feel. He also had two broken ribs.

Lida listened with an angry scowl.

The two men had been several x-rayed and had only been able to recover their phones on being discharged.

'How were we to guess she had a body-guard? An American, and a bloody hot one at that.'

Lida laughed a dry cold laugh, 'That's what you're paid for you dunces — beaten up by a woman! Well done! So where are they now?'

There was a silence.

'I said where are they now?'

'We checked the Hotel, and they checked out last night.'

'Oh really!' she said with heavy sarcasm, 'Surprise, surprise! And?'

'They've disappeared.'

## BAIT

'Really! Now remind me just how much I pay you, two idiots...' The tension in Lida's voice cut through the ensuing silence.

'They left by car on the motorway.'

'Now that is a useful piece of information. Thank you.'

'Hey, Lida. We were both out for the count. The ambulance only picked us up half an hour later.'

'They should have left you to bleed to death or at least to suffer all night, you brainless nuts. Those women could be anywhere by now.'

There was another silence.

'We checked up at the airport, and no one had seen any redheads. Do you want us to check up at Delft airport?'

'If they're as hot as they seem to be, do you think she would have gone wandering about the place with all that red hair visible? They might just as well have carried a Flag?' She produced a long, loud sigh. 'No. The two could have gone in any direction, by car, by train or by air. No drop it and get back here, they will have gone into hiding by now. Thanks to you dunces, we have probably just lost her for good.'

She banged the phone down and thumped her hand down on the table making everything jump into the air. 'Bloody hell. I underestimated that red-headed tart. If ever I get my hands on her...' All the same, she allowed herself a small laugh at the idea of her two hardened henchmen being put out of action by a woman single-handed and unarmed. She wondered who could be behind that bit of work. However, the detail that intrigued her most was who was protecting the redhead and why. This fact could only mean that the woman knew something, and because of this, had

been supplied with a top class bodyguard. This last point was very confusing. Who was protecting her and from whom?

At least, she thought, it was not the damn mafia, and that was a weight of Lida's mind. The thing that troubled her most was the coincidence that both of the key people in this affair had very recently disappeared. There was no doubt in her mind that this was no coincidence. There must be a hidden link between these two people, which she had not suspected?

She wondered if they knew that her team was after them, or were they both being protected from someone else?

But by who and why?

No run of the mill bodyguard would have been able to deal so effectively with two heavyweight and highly experienced men. Therefore this pointed to a well-planned professional action.

An American girl too, and that smelt of the CIA, but why on earth would the CIA want to get involved over here? Lida could see no way that her plans could have leaked out and even if they had, they wouldn't be likely to interest the Americans.

Lida lay back on her bed, her hands clasped behind her head. She had an uncomfortable feeling that something was going on in the background that she hadn't yet grasped.

But what was it? She felt confident that William Stone was the key to unravelling the mystery, but where the hell was he?

As the afternoon slipped lazily into the evening, most of the hotel guests drifted down onto the terrace for an aperitif, in last warm rays of the sun. Most of



## BAIT

these families had got into the habit of eating early, so around seven-o'clock everybody started moving into the restaurant.

I had taken a table near the main entrance with my back to the reception desk, looking out across the room. At the opposite side of the room, Christophe had seated Lida who was scowling angrily at the menu with her two assistants.

I noticed with surprise that the woman I had met in the swimming pool was there also, seated with a tough looking husband at a table near the wall on my left. She ignored me completely, and I supposed that I had better follow her lead. All the other tables were taken up by the other guest I now recognised well.

I sat with my legs stretched out comfortably under the table wondering when I would get news from Paul concerning Sally, and where Sophie had taken her. Paris I guessed. My legs were much better, so I had to be very careful not to forget to hobble and to keep my crutches with me.

Christophe had come over to take my order and was telling me which speciality the Chef had added as a 'plat du jour', when looking up he suddenly stiffened. He looked across the room towards the table where the woman from the pool was observing him. She caught my eye momentarily then touched her companion who straightened.

Suddenly, from the reception desk, I heard a familiar voice talking to Mr B.

I turned in my chair and immediately jumped to my feet.

Lida Sneered, as she watched me 'Enter the famous Fiancée,' she hissed.

But the older man had already gripped her wrist, 'The Hair Lida, look at the Hair.'

At this moment, Sally heard the movement and wheeled round to face me 'William!' she cried. And the entire room-full looked up at us as I darted towards her, forgetting to hobble and knocking the crutches to the ground.

She threw her arms around me and held on as tight as was humanly possible.

The three criminals look at each other, 'WILLIAM!'

'Christ, what's all this?' Lida cast a quick look across the terrace. A host of little details suddenly dropped into place in her mind, and the implications stood out like a sore thumb. Sall forward and stared at the two men, then pushed rapidly back her chair.

In a flash, Christophe had reappeared pushing a heavy metal trolley which now bared the path between them and where I stood holding onto Sally.

At the same time, the woman from the pool and her man, slipped near us blocking any possible approach. Lida's mind registered all this instantly and without turning, whispered, 'Let's get out of here fast, Go!' she stood and ran across the terrace and into the road followed closely by her two men.

People on the terrace looked on in surprise at the sudden excitement. Sally was still holding on to me when I heard the sliding doors open behind me.

Sally raised her head and jumped back. 'Christ!' she cried, 'Her again!' she was petrified.

I grabbed her arm 'Here. Come on.' And we dashed down the stairs towards the pool. In a fraction of a second, Christophe had slid the heavy trolley between our escape route and the newcomer and the

## BAIT

woman and her husband had moved in rapidly to block the path.

Almost unconsciously, the newcomer registered all this and sprang back between the sliding door, which was already closing again. She dashed through the outer doors and disappeared at a sprint across the village square.

I led Sally, running hard down the tunnel under the road and dashed up the other side and pushed over the big metal storage cabinet to block the door.

We rushed around the pool, across the garden and crashed back the gate, racing down the road towards the car park.

Turning into the shadow of the big plane tree under which I had parked my car we run smack into Lida and her men.

Before we had time to register what was happening, we found ourselves facing three handguns.

‘Get in there fast,’ shouted Lida. ‘Any trouble and the girl gets it. Right?’

I glanced at her ashen face and had no difficulty in believing she'd do it without hesitation.

The two men crammed us into the back beside the younger man, and the big car flashed off along the back roads of the little village in the direction of Meaudre.

Lida Niemela sat in the front pointing her small handgun, directly into my face, her finger trembling dangerously on the trigger-guard and her face a stony grey. Her cheeks seemed to have sunken inwards, and her eyes were now narrow slits through which undiluted hatred now seemed to be pouring. The small man had his handgun jammed into Sally's' ribs

while she continues gasp with fear, her head hidden on my chest, my arms holding her as tightly as I could...

Lida gave directions to the driver without moving her head, and in less than ten minutes, we turned off the narrow road on the outskirts of Meandre up a rough track and into the forecourt of a renovated farmhouse.

'Open the barn door and get the car inside,' shouted Lida and the driver jumped out and pulled open the tall, heavy doors. He drove inside and leaving the headlights on dragged them closed behind us with a bang.

'Get out slowly you two. Any tricks and I shoot. Got that?'

The men pushed us, stumbling across the beaten earth floor, to the far end of the barn where straw had been piled high against the stone wall.

Lida stood with her back to the car, silhouetted by the headlights. 'So what has happened to your bad knee Mr WOOD? It seems to have got miraculously better.' She laughed a hard metallic voice, hardly recognisable. 'Or should I call you William now? 'She shouted 'Or Dr STONE?' she finished in a half scream.

The two men stared. 'Oh yes, He's been very clever.' She had become very white in the face, and her lips worked strangely. 'Oh yes very clever indeed.'

The two men instinctively moved away from this dangerous manifestation and kept very quiet.

'Show me that bloody knee. NOW!'

'SHOW ME', she screamed.

## BAIT

I drew up my track suite leg, which showed no injury at all.

'You Bastard. You tricked me you sod. You never had anything wrong with it. Well, now you will have.'

'Hey Lida,' her man stepped forward 'No!'

'Shut up.' She lowered her revolver, aimed at my knee and fixing me in the eyes with a cruel smile pulled the trigger.

There was a roar, and I flew, spiralling backwards and fell onto my face in the hay, stunned.

Sally screamed

Lida Screamed, 'YOU SOD, you bloody SOD', and started to advance on me with her revolver.

'Hey, Lida! That's enough' said the older man drawing her back.

'I'm going to blow your balls right off you, you bastard,' she continued.

The two men grabbed her by the arms. 'Lida. We need him alive remember. For Christ sake leave him alone. You can deal with him properly when he's squeaked.'

She narrowed her eyes into slits, and her jawbone seemed to jut out abnormally as her face transformed into a horrible masklike grin. 'Yes,' She sneered. 'I'll deal with you later.' She allowed herself to be led over and seated on a bale of straw, still shaking with rage and white-faced.

'Now what in hell are we going to do?' said the older man.

Lida passed her hand over her face and seemed to shake herself back out of the seething rage. 'Now these two are going to tell us exactly where that bloody gold is. And after that, I'm going to blow them both to pieces.'

'But what the hell is going on Lida? I don't get it. Who the hell are these two?'

She turned to the two men, 'Shut up. I'll explain later. Now, you go and get the ropes out of the boot, and you, go and get two chairs from the house.' She fumbled in her bag 'Here, take the front door key, and make sure no-one sees you. Got that?'

The man walked rapidly past me and out through a wooden plank door just behind me.

I lay on my face in the straw with Sally crying over me.

'Sally,' I whispered. 'Listen.' She bent her head close to me. 'I don't understand. My knee is OK. I've felt it. There nothing wrong with it. It's not even bleeding.' I paused. 'Someone must have put blank cartridges in her gun. For god sake keep up the acting though.'

The older man went off, and LIDA pushed herself to her feet came slowly towards me her arms dangling beside her and the handgun held loosely in her hand pointing at the ground.

Sally brought her mouth near my ear. 'I've got a gun in my bag.'

I involuntarily started, and Lida spotted this immediately and stepped up raising the gun towards Sally, who backed away dragging her bag. 'Now what have we got here, hiding something in that bag, are you? Give it to me. Now she snarled.'

Sally kicked the bag towards her.

'Oh God,' I thought.

Kneeling, but keeping her eye on us and the gun pointed at Sally, she went through the bag with her left hand.

## BAIT

'Ah!' she suddenly smiled as her hand found what she was searching for, 'Now what do we have here?' She got to her feet with Sophie's elegant little silver gun in her hand.

'Very nice and lady-like. It's Loaded too. Well, well, well! Now what could an innocent little university professor be doing with a loaded gun in her bag, I wonder!' She hesitated 'Well you'll explain that in a moment,' she laughed unpleasantly. 'Might come in useful sometime,' and turning she tossed it into her bag on the floor nearby.

I relaxed a little now that the live gun was out of the game for the moment.

## Chapter 22

I had drawn my knees up to my chest, hiding the supposedly smashed one and had turned slightly on my side so that it could not be seen but that I could see her approach.

She drew from her bag the map and let it fall open, unfolding itself.

She stopped about a foot away from my two feet looking down at me and smiled her sardonic smile. 'I hope your knee is not too painful. But then again as you're a doctor too, you'll be able to cure it, haha?'

'Do you know, Doctor?'

She smiled brightly, 'In a moment, you are going to tell me exactly where the gold is hidden, whether you want to or not.'

Her face was as grey and hard as granite.

'You are going to explain to me all about this.'

She jabbed with her gun barrel the star which she had drawn in felt-tip on my map, tracing the crossing lines and the thick circle round the cave.

I stared hard at it, not having seen these markings before and she laughed.

'Ha! You see you are not the only clever one around, my dear doctor.' She sneered.

'I may not have a single smelly diploma, but I do have brains as you can see for yourself.'

The older man looked up from the car boot, recognising the threatening tone of her voice.

'Hey, Lida. Slowly now.'

'Shut up you,' she snapped.



## BAIT

He looked worried and hastened to sort out the ropes.

'Now, depending on what state you two are in after you've explained everything, I may kill you, or I might decide to let you bleed to death. It makes no difference to me, none at all.'

She was now standing rigidly upright with her two feet together, the heels almost touching on the age-smoothed oak floorboards.

'You seem to be bearing the pain very well Mr Doctor. Much too British for my liking, I much prefer my customers to be more demonstrative. Makes my work so much more agreeable.'

Saying this she lifted her right foot to aim a kick at the sole of the shoe on my damaged leg.

Sally cried out 'Oh leave him alone. Please.'

'Oh shut up that snivelling for Christ's sake!' She suddenly turned her head slightly and snapped at Sally 'Stop that bloody snivelling you brainless red-headed whore.'

Sally's eyes opened as wide as saucers with astonishment at this verbal onslaught and this amused Lida and held her gaze for just that extra fraction of a second I needed.

I lashed out with both legs simultaneously smashing with all my strength into the ankle of her supporting leg. The leg flew backwards from under her, and before she even had time to cry out, she came crashing face down, with all her weight, onto the floor beside me, her arms still immobile at her sides.

There was a sharp crack as her forehead hit the heavy wood planking and she lay motionless.

Leaping to my feet, I dragged Sally up and after me towards the half-open door behind us.

'Hey,' the man at the car had dashed out but was instantly snapped back to a sudden halt by the coil of rope he had half got over his shoulder.

This event gave us the few seconds we needed to get out of the barn.

However, as we dived out into the night air, the door of the house across the courtyard opened, and the other man appeared.

He immediately dropped the chairs he was carrying and moved his hand to his breast pocket for his revolver.

The hand didn't even get halfway there before a slim figure darted from behind a pile of wood and crashed a log down on his head and he went down with a crash, rolling over the chairs he had just dropped, and onto the flagstone forecourt.

'Go,' she cried, 'that way.' We dashed up the track, behind the barn, just as the other man reached the door.

Hearing our feet pounding on the earth, he drew his handgun and was lifting it to shoot when, with a crash, a bullet came flying across the open space, splintering the wooden plank just above his head.

He threw himself back into the barn, as a second bullet, ricocheted off the iron drainpipe in front of him.

On hands and knees, he retreated into the barn, to take cover behind the wall.

## BAIT

At the unexpected noise, Sally turned involuntarily to look behind her, tripped on a root and went sprawling head first onto the rutted ground. Turning to help her up, I realised that we were in a direct line of sight of the man in the barn.

I dived down. 'Stay down, for gods' sake and crawl. Follow me'.

On all fours, we clambered down off the track into the bracken and behind a big granite block. This rock shielded us from the barn, so I pulled Sally to her feet, and we ran off as fast as was possible, picking our way between the fallen branches and rocks which covered the ground.

I guessed that we were now out of bullet range, but I kept on as hard as I expected Sally to be able to go. After a few minutes of this, we came out onto a narrow path through the forest and accelerated our pace. Sally was faster than I had expected, so we went stumbling on through the dark at break-neck speed until she eventually gasped, 'Stop, my lungs are going to explode.'

She bent double to try and get her breath back and wheezed, 'Christ! That was her again.'

'Who?'

'Jenny, the American woman from the Hotel. God! I don't get any of this'

'Well she seemed to be on our side, come on.' I said, 'Let's get as far away from here as possible. You can explain later.'

We started off running along the pine needle covered track.

Luckily for us, there was a bright moon, and as our eyes became gradually accustomed to the darkness, the track was reasonably visible. Once Sally tripped

on a tree root and just saved herself from falling, but I managed to slip on a smooth rock and went down, headfirst rolling across the path on my shoulder and ending up against a sharp rock hidden under some ferns.

I leapt to my feet and hurried on, regardless of the pain.

Crouched behind the house, Jenny had observed our retreat with professional attention. When she decided that we were out of immediate danger, she carefully aimed a final bullet, hitting the metal door handle with a crack then backed rapidly away from where the first man was now starting to groan and shift.

Once she had got the house between herself and the barn, she broke into a sprint and disappeared into the darkness following the lower fringe of the forest in the same direction that we had taken.

Sally and I eventually came in sight of the old stone church spire and cut across the fields, coming out just behind the tennis courts. In two minutes, we dived across the road and into the hotel entrance.

No one was around, and we ducked into the bar and moved quickly to the counter, where Christophe appeared as if from nowhere. He looked relieved.

'You're safe then?' He sighed, 'That was a bit on the close side.'

He looked over my shoulder and nodded to someone.

'Well' came a female voice, 'That's twice I've saved your life, Sally.'

BAIT

We spun around and found ourselves face to face with Jenny.

'And I suppose this is the famous Dr Stone.'

'Jenny!'

Christophe smiled

'Miss Jenny is working with Mister Douanier,' he said, 'We have only just met though.'

'Was that you who shot at the men at the farm?' I asked.

Jenny nodded.

'You're lucky I followed you two. That woman is as mad as a hatter I think. And she's furious. I wonder why?'

This last remark was aimed at me.

At this point, Paul entered the Bar.

'Mr Douanier' cried Sally, her eyes opening as wide. She sat down limply in the nearest chair.

'Serve the young lady a gin and tonic please Christophe a large one. On second thoughts serve us all one or perhaps whiskey, and one for yourself, you deserve it just as much as we do.'

Sally looked around us and at the same instant Margaux, and Sophie came in.

'You!' She gaped, 'What in the name of God is all this about' She grasped my wrist. 'I must be dreaming, pinch me, William.'

'No dream Sally,' I said, 'A bit of a nightmare though I admit that.'

'Come on drink up everyone, and then we'll explain things to the newest member of the team.'

'But Margaux? And you?' She looked at Sophie.

Paul allowed himself a wry smile,

'Well mademoiselle, it looks as though you've done a comprehensive job so far of escaping from everyone who was trying to protect you.' He laughed, 'And done it very professionally as well.'

'Oh God!' was all that Sally could say.

'Drink some of that stuff, and I'll explain.'

'But what's William got to do with all this?'

'Drink up,' I said, and she did so.

Paul looked up at Christophe. 'Could you keep an eye out of the window Christophe, please. It would be advisable to avoid any more unexpected guests.'

Christophe took up the position at the window table sipping his drink as he surveyed the square.

'Well firstly,' started Paul, 'you know who I am and who Margaux is but I need to clarify who we work for and how you and William have come to be mixed up in this.'

He paused and nodded towards Jenny, who had now drawn up a chair.

'Jenny is exactly what she told you she was. It was a pity that you didn't believe her, but that was always on the cards. She is temporarily assisting us on behalf of our American colleagues.'

Jenny smiled down at Sally, 'Told you so!'

Paul went on.

'Sophie here is working for an independent company.' Here he exchanged an amused glance with her.

Sophie smiled across at Sally, whose red hair now looked more tangled bush than anything else.

'We are only working together temporarily,' She said.

'By the way' she continued, 'can I have my car keys back. And the other little object you borrowed.'

## BAIT

Sally rummaged in her bag and handed over the keys. 'Sorry about the gun, the mad women took it.'

Paul glanced at Christophe. 'Damn, that's bad news.'

I rapidly explained what had happened and the blank-bullet mystery.

'Thank god you managed to pull that off Christophe.'

Christophe whistled and shook his hands in a typically French gesture. 'That was a close one. Too close for comfort.'

'Yes' mused Paul, 'We'll have to keep that second gun in mind now. It's loaded I suppose.'

'Yes,' said Sophie.

Sally was still sipping her drink. 'Christ!' she exclaimed, 'She would have blown his knee to pieces.'

Paul frowned, 'Unfortunately, our Miss Lida Niemela is one of the most ruthless and dangerous criminals I know. Even the toughest men steer clear of her because of her rather unpredictable behaviour.'

He signalled to Christophe to refill our glasses and then said, 'Come and listen, Christophe. I'll fill you in on the bits you haven't heard yet. There's no reason for secrets between us now.'

He then leant down and put his hand on Sally's shoulder.

'First things first. You can have absolute confidence in everyone you see here. You can also have confidence in the rest of the hotel staff, but they prefer to remain in the background.'

He then sat down, took a sip from his glass, and proceeded to explain the whole story, starting from

their early meetings and her employment as a professor.

As I expected, she bridled, and her eyes flared at the thought that the job might have been engineered for her unfairly. Luckily, however, Paul and Margaux managed to dispel her misgivings before moving on to the more complicated part of the story.

She was very amused on hearing how I had inadvertently got mixed up in the affair.

'You need looking after William. I always warned you against foreign beer and foreign women.'

'I prefer not to think about that, if you don't mind,' I grumbled.

'Ah. I won't let you forget that in a hurry, don't you worry about that.'

She had clearly begun to get back to her normal state of mind.

When Paul had finished, Sally looked around us and shook her hair free from around her shoulders.

'Seems to me to be a dangerous game you are playing. It also seems that William has got the worst of it so far. So what comes next?'

Paul stood up again and wandered over to the window.

'We'll everything depends on what miss Niemela does next.' He sighed.

Jenny interrupted, 'The next thing she'll do is get one hell of a headache, thanks to William'.

We all laughed, and Margaux added, 'And then she'll get extremely angry. I guess her two friends are in for an unpleasant hour or two.'

Paul nodded and took up his analysis.

'She will now know that there is some sort of conspiracy going on. I guess that she'll assume that



## BAIT

William, and you Sally, are still after the gold and are working together. She'll have decided from the presence of Sophie's gun and the shooting incident at the farm, that you are not simple, innocent bystanders and have a team of pros working with you.'

'Ok,' I said, 'But what is she likely to do?'

'If I'm correct in my reasoning, she will certainly not give up and drop the question. There is far too much gold that she very much wants. She is also never afraid of confronting another criminal group, armed or not.'

'In other words,' Sally pulled a face 'she'll be back.'

Paul nodded; 'Let's say, she won't give up. But she won't come near the hotel now. She'll have worked out that this is your base camp and that it will now be doubly guarded.'

Margaux leant forward, 'Not the best time to take Sally out to show her the sights.'

I nodded.

'In the meantime, we go on searching for the gold and stay grouped.'

Paul finished his drink and put down the glass on the counter.

'All my information now points to a hiding place close to the village.'

I frowned, 'but what about the map markings and all that?'

He exchanged glances with Margaux and hesitated.

'I think I'll be able to clarify all that very soon, but certainly not tonight, if you don't mind.'

'Well, everyone', he stood, 'I'm now going to get some sleep. Mme B thought you'd feel safer, Sally, if

she put you in one of the two-bedroom suites. You can choose between Sophie, Margaux or Jenny as roommates.'

Sally smiled and stood, 'In fact, I'd prefer William. If no one objects.'

'Have I got any choice?' I asked.

'No. You haven't, William. Like that, I'll be able to keep an eye on your midnight drinking sprees.'

We all laughed.

'But naturally, you'll have to let me have the first turn in the shower. I'm a lady, you see.'

Everyone laughed again.

'Don't worry,' I smiled at the others. 'It's always like this when she comes to stay with me. It shows she's back to her normal self again. Unfortunately.'

Jenny smiled across at her, 'I'd appreciate it if you'd avoid any more escaping for the moment, Sally. Sophie and I would like to get some rest too, you know.'

'OK. I promise no escaping, at least not tonight.'

With this, we climbed the stairs to our rooms while Christophe went around the hotel, checking that all the doors were firmly locked.

## Chapter 23

The next morning, after a late breakfast, sat on the terrace to talk things over.

Paul had discovered from Mr B's father that the only person at Autrans who could have met the Jewish industrialist was Marthe Thermier. This woman was now 87 years old and lived in an old stone farmhouse a hundred yards or so from the hotel. Before her, several generations of her family had lived and worked in the same building.

Paul and I decided to walk around and visit her.

'Won't that be a bit risky?' I asked Paul, 'with that Finn still at large.'

He shook his head, 'She won't show herself for the moment and anyway...', he patted his jacket pocket, 'I have taken basic precautions.'

'What if she's hiding up in the forest and keeping an eye on our movements,' I said.

. 'That's a definite possibility,' Paul scanned the horizon and frowned. 'Mind you, William, we don't even know if she's still alive.'

'What?'

'Well. The woman could easily have done herself a lot of damage by bashing her head directly on the floor as you described.'

'I hadn't thought about that,' I admitted.

'What is certain though is that two of them must have bad headaches this morning. In any case, the car left Meaudre last night at about three o'clock and headed down towards Valence.'

I relaxed a little. 'So they're not the Vercors plateau any more. That's a consolation I suppose.' 'No,' interrupted Paul, 'They left the plateau. But they could easily have come back up again.'

We walked on in silence and, finding the farmhouse soon afterwards, crossed the wide, stone-flagged courtyard. The front door was wide open to let in the morning sun, held in place by a large rock placed the broad stone steps.

Paul knocked on the heavy weather-bleached oak door.

From behind us, we heard a grating noise and turning saw an old lady step out of the hen coup on the opposite side of the courtyard. She was surprisingly small and had a round, smiling face and gnarled red fingers. Although very lively, she leant on her walking stick as she crossed the courtyard towards us. The ancient flagstones were far from level, so she kept her eyes on these as she approached.

The woman greeted us with a surprisingly firm handshake, then chivvied the two of us into the cool of her old farmhouse, as if we had been her children coming home from school. We sat down at an age-worn pine table, scrubbed clean, but she insisted on serving us some of her home brewed stuff before seating herself. 'This will put hairs on your chest young man.' She smiled before we had even had time to announce the reason for our visit.

Paul didn't waste time beating about the bush and explained the story about the Jew and hidden gold. Madame Thermier sat back clearly finding all this very entertaining.

## BAIT

'Well now. There's one thing that's certain.' she chuckled. 'No one around here ever found it.'

'How do you know that?' Paul asked.

She shook her head. 'Up here, everyone knows exactly how much everyone else earns. The whole village would instantly have spotted the slightest change in spending habits of any family.' She smiled. 'Even if someone bought two Sunday papers instead of one, or a bottle of wine a little more expensive than usual, it would have been around the village in no time.' She smiled and rubbed her red knuckles. 'No that's certain. If your gold ever really existed, it is still where it was originally put.'

She then hesitated. 'Except of course, if the Germans found it during the war. But even then someone would have noticed something going on. I'm certain of that. Especially at that time.' Mrs Thermier paused, and then went on. 'It was not a good thing to be seen hanging around, but that didn't stop us keeping our eyes and ears open, even if we did keep our mouths shut.'

Paul questioned her in depth about the pre-war years.

The task was not difficult, because she obviously enjoyed the idea of going back over these old memories. She explained that several years before the war, the 'Old Jew', as she called him, had purchased an abandoned farm about a ten-minute walk from the village centre.

'We kids used played about there before he came. What better than an abandoned ruin for a playground and for courting too...'

She went on to describe how the purchaser had had it renovated by local workmen and had replaced

the old thatched roof with a more modern flagstone one with 'sauts de moineaux' and a 'devils seat.'

He had even had running water installed from a large reservoir he had constructed higher up the slope at the edge of the forest.

The old lady smiled at these memories. 'Most of the year he was away in Paris, but he was a nice old man. He showed us children around the place when it was finished. It was really nice and very modern, for the time of course. We were allowed to play in the garden and the barn when he wasn't there, as long as we promised not to damage anything.' She signalled to us to drink up and went on. 'Life carried on more or less as before really, except that we no longer had access to the inside. He didn't mind us messing about in the old stone drinking trough as long as we didn't make too much noise or mess. It was, and still is, the biggest on the Vercors plateau, I think. Nine feet long at least and weighs tons.'

Paul asked her if she could show us where the place was.

'I haven't been up there for years. But yes, of course. But my legs are not as good as they were you know.'

'We could drive you up if you have a few moments to spare,' suggested Paul.

Madame Thermier, smiled, 'I'll have to check my agenda, first,' she laughed. 'I'm a very busy woman, you know.'

Paul left me with her and returned with Margaux and the car ten minutes' minutes later.

After looking Margaux up and down, the woman seemed satisfied and eventually eased herself into

## BAIT

the passenger seat beside Paul and gave us directions.

It only took a minute or two until she stopped us in the adjoining hamlet of Le Truc, at a wide junction where three narrow roads met.

'There it is,' she pointed.

The three of us looked through the car windows at the house in the mid-distance.

'Looks very new to me,' says Paul.

'Oh no! Not that place. The field there. That's where it used to be.'

'Used to be?' we all gaped.

'Of course. The Germans burnt it to the ground in July 1944.'

We gasped in disappointment.

'They were searching for resistance fighters at the time but discovered that the house belonged to a Jew. That was enough for them, so the place was fired. Thank god he was not in it at the time.'

Paul glanced at me but said nothing to upset the old lady. 'But there's absolutely no trace. No stones, nothing!'

'Well, waste not, want not...', she chuckled. 'When no one returned for years and years after the war, we all guessed that he had been killed.' She shook her head sadly, 'That's a war for you,' she frowned. 'Anyway, little by little when, a few well-shaped building stones were needed to repair a wall or a barn or even a house, they were borrowed... ' She smiled at us. 'Over 70 years, a mountain village requires a lot of repairs you know. What's more, a field like that, so near the village, makes good grazing. She smiled, 'I used to have some cow in it ten years ago. Go and

have a look if you like, but you'll find no gold there I'm afraid.'

We got out and wandered dejectedly around the field while Mrs Thermier sat on the time-smoothed edge of the massive water trough, surveying our progress.

When we returned she smiled at us. 'The local second-hand dealers have all been over the entire surface searching for souvenirs. One even borrowed a sophisticated metal detector, but they only discovered a few bits and pieces of rusted farm machinery. No gold there I'm afraid.'

We were disappointed and sat beside her on the impressive drinking trough.

'What about up in the forest?' asked Paul, 'You told us about a water reservoir up there.'

The old lady shook her head. 'No, that was the very first place people looked. In the old days, families always kept valuables well away from the main house. Because of the risk of fire, you see. There were all sorts of tricks, but of course, the local people knew them all. So that was the first thing that was checked out, ' she nodded. 'Sorry' She sighed. 'Mind you. He might still have hidden his gold further up the slope.'

'Or under the foundations' I added.

Paul shook his head. 'That's always possible, but they would have to be at least six feet down, or the metal detector would have detected them.'

Margaux hesitated, 'Six feet is not all that much you know Paul, as long as there's not too much water around,' she said. 'He could easily have had a deep hole dug and then filled it in himself after hiding the gold and before laying the floor.'



## BAIT

'Yes' agreed Paul, 'Might be worth going over the place with a modern military metal detector.'

Marthe Thermier smiled at us. 'And this,' she tapped the granite with the metal spike on the end of her walking stick, 'is the famous Jew's drinking trough.'

'What a peculiar name,' Margaux remarked.

'Oh, that's just what we children used to call it. Not very respectful I admit, but we didn't mean it offensively, we were just kids.'

It was a remarkable piece of stonework, more than nine feet long and hewn out of a single block of granite. It was so huge that I couldn't help wondering how they had managed to transport the thing from the stone works.

Madame Thermier pointed with her stick. 'It had sunk so much into the ground that end that we could walk into it directly from the track. I suppose the water from the overflow kept the ground so wet this end that it gradually sank over the years. That and the freezing and thawing of it of course.'

'How on earth did they get it back up?' I asked. 'It must weigh several tons.'

'Oh Yes,' her eyes shone as she thought back over the years. 'Now, that was a real adventure for us kids. I must have spent days and days here watching them at work.' She smiled down at the ground. 'Of course the place was very different in those days. Well, at least these roads were only rough tracks, no tarmac at the time.'

She looked around the wide junction as re-visualising it as it had been so many years before. 'They first dug a wide trench all the way around it, deeper than a grave. That left it sitting up in the air on a sort of pedestal of dry earth. Then they half filled it

with Portland cement, except for the opposite end there, where the overflow is. When it was dry, then they drove loads of iron girders under the trough so that it was resting on them. After that, they dug out all the earth from under it.

That took them ages because they kept hitting big rocks and had to dig around them lying on their stomach's under the trough. They then poured nearly three feet of concrete over the bottom leaving enough room for a man to get under the trough, for repairs, but it has never needed them.'

We all watched her as she re-lived the episode, her eyes partially closed. 'When that was finished, they brought along two long iron girders and took them down into under the trough and bolted them to the others. Then they went down underneath with car jacks and levered that end up until it was perfectly level. They finished by filling all the gaps with cement so that it would remain in place when the jacks were removed.

She nodded to herself. 'It took ages to dry before they dared let the water back in and you can see how well they did the job. Almost perfect, I'd say, and it hasn't moved a fraction in nearly 75 years.

'Wow!' I said. 'It's not likely to sink again then. Sitting on a raft of concrete.'

The old woman smiled, 'No not a raft, that would have used up too much concrete. They just filled the surround. The concrete goes all around the edges and holds the iron girders in place. Look you can see one of them here.' She parted one of the grass tufts with her stick and tapped the visible part of a six-inch length of a massive iron girder. 'It's hollow underneath.' She laughed to herself. 'Before they

## BAIT

filled in the hole at the overflow end, we used to dare each other to crawl under it. That was incredibly frightening when you're only a child. Some courting couples even put it to other uses...' She laughed gaily, 'Ah! Those were the days,' she nodded. 'Then they closed it off with that big flagstone you can see there, so we had to find somewhere else to play.' Her eyes twinkled while she shook her head from side to side, 'That didn't take us long though.'

We all laughed,

But suddenly Margaux gripped my shoulder, 'It's hollow then!'

'Yes, I got that.'

'No!' She insisted. 'There's a nine or ten-foot-long hole under there surrounded by concrete, like a church 'crypt', don't you see?'

The old lady tapped her stick angrily. 'Of course, young lady,' she said with exasperation 'Of course, why else would he have bothered to spend good money in sealing it off? Mind you. It stood open for nearly a year. That flagstone was positioned, ready to be levered into place, but the hole wasn't refilled for ages.' She laughed with glee.

'That's where your gold is sure and certain. As certain as the devil's got horns and a tail. If there ever was any gold, of course.'

Paul jumped to his feet, 'Yes, of course, a metal detector would have picked up the iron girders, and no-one would have looked further. Yes, that's a real possibility.' He laughed out loud, 'Yes of course.'

The old lady surveyed us with an experienced eye and added, 'You'll be needing a little help though, to get down there I mean.'

Paul smiled, 'You mean the help of Real Men. Is that it?'

She laughed, 'Don't take it badly, young man. The local lads spend all year working in the forest. I wouldn't be surprised if they don't lift more in a single day than you do in a year.'

Paul put his hand on her shoulder, 'In a whole lifetime in my case... So what do you suggest, Mrs Thermier?'

She turned and called over to one of the children who had followed us, and they were now drifting about in the background, building fantastic stories to tell those who had been so unfortunate as not to have been present.

'July. Go and call your dad and tell him to get up here with his gear fast.'

The little dark-haired July dashed off, bright-eyed with excitement, dragging her friend with her, by the hand.

'What happened to the 'Old Jew'?' she inquired, 'Killed during the war?'

'Captured and sent to a German prison camp. We haven't absolute proof, but it's probable that he was killed there.'

The old lady shook her head. 'Ah, how thin is the veneer of civilisation.' She hesitated and went on, 'A single tiny fissure in its beautiful polished surface, and we all go crashing back a thousand years in time. Hatred, jealousy, ignorance, religious ambition, madness and above all boredom.'

She looked up at Paul, 'Thank god for a strong police force.'

A quarter of an hour later deep roar was heard. Over the summit of the adjoining field, one of the

## BAIT

enormous forestry tractors appeared. Its four huge independent wheels danced about madly as it approached over the uneven terrain. At each roar of the powerful engine, a jet of dark smoke shot vertically into the air from the pipe above the drivers' cabin. The tractor came diagonally across the deep ditch without slowing, each wheel, in turn, suspended in mid-air for a few seconds as it crossed.

With a final deep-throated roar, the driver came to a halt in the middle of the road, and a tanned giant jumped down from the cabin.

Outside being a member of the French rugby team, I can't imagine what else a man of his proportions could be expected to do for a living. He plumped a big kiss on the old lady's cheek and held out a massive rough hand to us.

'Need some help grandma?' He said in a surprisingly soft voice.

'Less of the Grandma from you John,' she scolded. He smiled easily.

Like many strong men of his upbringing, he was not used to the company newcomers and was not at ease. To hide this, he fumbled about in his overall and brought out a crumpled packet of Gauloises, offered them round and lit one.

'These people are from the government,' she said. 'We think that the old Jew might have hidden something important under this.' She pointed.

'That ain't moved for as long as I remember,' the giant murmured.

'And just how old are you John?' the old lady taunted.

'Thirty-two.'

'And your dad?'

'Sixty.'

'And the war was when?'

The giant went red under his dark suntan. 'Thirty-nine, forty-five,' he said triumphantly.

'Well done, John. So that was fifteen years before your father was born that he hid the stuff. Not surprising that you didn't see him do it. What do you think John?'

She slapped him hard on one of his broad shoulders.

'Ok, ok. So what do you want me to do?'

Paul approached, 'Mrs Thermmier says that there is a cavity under the trough and that the entrance is under this metal grill.'

The giant stepped over and, passing his fingers through the massive iron grill, lifted it off as though it weighed next to nothing. Letting it drop with a dull thud onto the grass, he went down on his knees and felt down below the surface of the icy water.

Paul looked down at him. 'What do you think?'

'This here is just a stone receiver basin. I can feel the drain outlet pipe at the bottom, feels like lead. It probably runs directly under the road into the ditch over there somewhere,' John pointed to where his huge tractor stood.

'That's an expensive precaution. I suppose the man added it to make sure that the overflow water didn't seep into the earth here. That would keep the trough support, bone dry. It wouldn't be likely to subside again.' He nodded approval. 'Nice job.'

The old lady looked down at him on his knees and prodded him with the metallic end of her stick. 'We were not so stupid as that in the old days, my boy. We could have taught you children a few things I think.'

## BAIT

He got to his feet, shaking his head with amusement, then strode across the road followed by our little troop, and with a thought, jumped down with a splash into the muddy ditch. It only took him a few seconds to find the outlet and smiled with contentment.

'Well, at least I've learnt something today. Right.' He then abruptly became a man with a special job to do and no longer embarrassed in our presence. 'First let's get the water directed away from the basin.'

Going round to the back of his tractor he dragged out a length of battered galvanised steel guttering, several lengths of rope and a very worn spade.

Striding back to the water trough, he lashed the guttering to the trough overflow pipe, which sent the icy waters spilling out across the road. Immediately finding its path, it ran in a wide sparkling sheet across the macadam and cascaded down into the ditch, probably following the same path it had taken before the trough had been repaired.

As the reception basin gradually emptied itself, the man got to work with the spade and rapidly dug a narrow trench down around the three exposed sides. Going down on his hands and knees in the mud, he then worked a length of stout rope under the end of the stone receiver basin.

'We'll lift this with the tractor,' he said and went over and roared the tractor around. The independent steering of the front and rear axles allowed him to turn in a surprisingly small circle.

We pulled up the rope, and he jumped down and fixed it solidly to the lifting hook at the front, using an odd knot, I hadn't seen before.

Jumping back up into the cabin again, he very delicately lifted the hook.

The basin rose a few inches, and he then stopped it at this position, jumping down again.

With my help, we then fed a second rope under the opposite end of the basin.

Letting the hook down again, he brought the four ends together and made them fast.

Climbing back up again the engine roared, and he slowly lifted the stone basin clear of the ground then advanced the tractor to deposit it in the long grass in the field.

We all gathered around the hole left, and gazed in as he jumped down into the three-foot-deep opening.

Just below the surface of the ground, we discovered a huge flat flagstone fitted tightly against the end of the trough. It must have been nearly five inches thick, and at least three feet deep by two feet wide.

'Ah!' cried the old lady, 'I remember that well. I see it as if it was yesterday. He kept it leaning upright against the edge so that he simply needed to dig down under it little by little for it to slide gradually down into place. That's how he must have managed to do it single-handed before the workmen came back to fit the overflow basin and the drain.'

'The Giant John smiled 'How old were you, in those days?'

'About the same age as your little July I suppose,' she smiled to herself. 'Well! Get on with it then, John. If there's nothing inside, we still have to put it all back in place before dark. Come on.'

By this time, and before the basin was out, the story of its removal had gone around the village a good



## BAIT

number of the retired members and children had gathered around to watch the proceedings. Paul looked around at the growing crowd knowing that the reasons for his presence were no longer a secret.

John returned to the tractor and came back with a long heavy iron bar with a pointed end. Standing straddling the trough, he lowered the bar and gently worked the pointed end between the trough and the flagstone.

He worked slowly to avoid cracking the end of the trough and started to lever the block back and unseal the opening.

I jumped down into the hole and used the spade to widen the trench to free the two sides so it could move back unhindered. As soon as I reached its base, the effort applied by the crowbar opened the gap suddenly a couple of inches.

Suddenly and without warning, a cloud of wasps came flying out, whirling towards us.

John let the rod drop and jumped back while I scrambled out of the hole and retreated into the field as fast as I could. Followed by clapping from the onlookers, we retreated rapidly to a safe distance.

The flag-stone fell back into place with a dull thud. 'Hold on,' John said as if this was simply part of a normal day's work, which it was. 'I've got some spray in the cabin.'

Striding off, he jumped up onto the running board and, rummaging about in a compartment under the cabin seat, brought out a tall gas canister, with a skull and crossbones image printed on it. 'We have to deal with wasp's nests all the time in the forest,' he looked around our little group and nodded in my direction. 'Right. Now you get the crowbar in the slit there and

when I say 'go', you heave it open. Whatever you do don't breathe the gas. You'll have to hold your breath. As soon as I stop the gas, you let it drop back. OK?'

I nodded.

He plodded forward and knelt directly above the flagstone, the canister held in one hand and his other hand, on its tap. He aimed it down and called 'GO!'

I pulled back with all my force and opened a gap of about five centimetres. An enormous multi-tiered wasps' nest came into sight, and seemingly thousands of wasps appeared, but before they could decide which way to attack, they were met by a strong blast of gas from the canister. He played it across the surface of the opening for about three seconds and then shouted, 'drop' and jumped back with the ease and speed of a mountain goat.

I followed suit as fast as I could, and we joined the others on the opposite side of the road junction.

'Give them five minutes, and we'll be OK.' He smiled, taking out his pack of Gauloises and offering them around, before lighting up.

After he had finished his cigarette, we went back and levered the block outwards, blocking it in place by wedging some big stones in the gap. We then tied one of the ropes around the top of the block and attached it to the hook on the tractor.

John then reversed carefully away and as the rope became taught the gap opened slowly until the block, tilting backwards, fell slowly over, landing with a thud on the wet earth at the bottom of the trench we had dug.

Attached to the now upper side, and now plainly visible, was one of the biggest wasps nest I have ever seen. It was nearly three feet long and two wide? With

## BAIT

hundreds of drugged wasps falling about and half flying.

John stepped forward with the spade and with a rapid movement scooped the nest off and threw it into the field. He followed it and stamped it into oblivion with his great black boots.

With true countryman's respect for nature, he then took the gas canister and gave the remains a prolonged blast of the highly poisonous gas.

## Chapter 24

We all gathered around the dark opening and peered down. All we could see was a dangling curtain of anaemic white roots behind which loomed a dark mass of spiders' webs. The bottom of the entrance was filled by an ant's nest and numerous species of wiggling, and squirming insects seemed to have taken up residence in lightless haven.

John jumped down, and like all men who spend their existences in the company of nature, didn't hesitate to plunge his hand into this tangled mass and to scoop it all out.

All of a sudden he froze. 'Jesus Christ almighty.' He dropped to his knees, 'Shit!' He turned his face to us, his eye wide with astonishment.

Paul leapt down beside him and played his torch into the cavity. He let out a long whistle, then looked up at us. 'Good heavens!' he whistled again.

'What?' Cried, Sally. 'Come on. Tell us.'

'Come and see for yourselves.' He and John clambered out, and I helped Margaux down.

We found ourselves gazing at a wall of little gold bricks about two feet wide and two high.

There must have been well over a hundred of the little gold bars facing us, end on.

I turned to Margaux, 'Do you think that the entire length of the trough is packed, like this?'

Paul, who had taken out his phone, looked down. 'Yes. If I'm right, there must be ten thousand, in all.'

## BAIT

I gapped, 'Ten thousand!' I did a mental calculation. 'If those are one-kilo bars, that adds up to ten tons of gold. Ten ton!'

From above I heard my words repeated and echoed above among the growing crowd of onlookers.

Paul had walked a little away from us and was talking rapidly on the phone.

'Come on William. Let us all have a look,' called Sophie, so I jumped up, dragged Margaux out and helped Sally and Sophie down. Paul looked over from the other side of the road. 'Don't touch a thing.' He said sternly 'That's an official order.' He turned to the onlookers, 'And that goes for every, Right?'

Sally and Sophie crouched and whistled in turn. They exchanged glances.

'Do you realise Sally, that there must be several hundred million euros' of gold in front of us... Can you imagine the damage that could do if it fell into the wrong hands?'

For the next fifteen minutes, the numerous onlookers were permitted to go down to observe the incredible sight. During this, they were very, very, closely watched by Margaux, Sophie and Paul.

The words 'Don't touch' had to be repeated many times as hands stretched automatically forwards the treasure.

Mrs Th ermier was one of the last to go down and remained only a short while. 'Funny,' she said. 'I didn't imagine gold bars to be so small. It reminds me of something, now what was it?'

Sophie smiled at her, 'That's because everyone always imagines gold in the form of the standard 400-

ounce bar, which is much bigger and weighs more than eleven kilos.

'Yes, yes. I understand that, but these little ones remind me of something.

'Hey, Jenny!' called Sally, 'Come and have a look.'

Jenny, who was standing in the shadow of the tractor, observing the surrounding countryside called back. 'I'll have a look later.'

Paul glanced over at her quickly, holding her gaze for a fraction of a second. Then, with an almost imperceptible nod, he pivoted slowly on his heel, scanning around the horizon as he did.

The water trough was at the bottom of a shallow dip in the land where the three narrow roads ran down and joined, forming a wide elliptical bowl. It was thus lower than most of the surrounding fields and this no doubt explained why it never lacked water, even in the longest and driest of summers.

Paul came over to me, where I sat on the thick edge of the trough. 'I've called in the military police to protect this lot until they can send up a heavy transport vehicle to carry it off. The trouble is that they can't be here before an hour and a half at best. Until then we have to protect this place alone, which is not good news.' He glanced up the nearest road. 'Lots of people would kill for this, especially our madam Niemela who is unfortunately still out there somewhere.' He looked around the horizon again, 'This would not be a good place to be caught in.'

He walked over to the group of villagers and suggested that they should get home, and come back in about two hours, or as soon as they saw the military men arrive. They tramped off taking the old lady with them and leaving us to guard the place.

## BAIT

John had hopped back up onto the tractor and was sitting in the cabin smoking with his feet on the dashboard. Paul called up, 'You can get home if you like, John, but we'll probably need your help later.'

John leant out and flicked his cigarette into the ditch with practised precision, 'I'm Ok here. I don't mind waiting, and I can just as well have my siesta here than anywhere.' Putting his feet back up on the dashboard, he went on to prove that this was in fact perfectly possible.

I knew that Paul had a gun in his pocket and that Jenny was also armed. I wondered if Margaux or Sophie had weapons, but on observing Sophie's thin T-shirt, and tight jeans, I ruled her out.

So here we were, a handful of people protecting nearly half a billions worth of gold in an open road, with two handguns.

I walked back to where Paul was standing. 'Wouldn't it be safer to block off the other two roads with cars ... Just in case?'

He looked at me quickly and nodded, 'Good thinking. Nothing can get past the tractor that way, so that's one blessing.' He hesitated, looking around the little group. 'Hey Sally!' he called. 'Can you run down to the village and bring up a couple of cars or vans to block off the access of these two roads?'

'OK,' she smiled. 'I prefer to be doing something than standing around waiting,' And off she went at an easy jog.

The only other person remaining was the little girl July. She was messing about with sticks in the muddy ditch. I went over and looked down. She smiled up at me with rapture and explained, excitedly that she was

building a trap to catch a water rat she had spotted earlier.

I told her that everyone else had gone home and that she had better go too, but she smiled and said that no one would see her down there.

It's never easy to force a child to do something it doesn't want to do so I resolved to tell her that, if she heard a noise, to keep her head down. 'All right,' she smiled and took up her trap building. I wished her luck and left her to it.

Going back across the road, I sat on the edge of the trough between Margaux and Sophie, while Paul walked back and forth across the road.

Jenny stayed where she was in the shadow of the tractor and John dozed comfortably in his cabin.

I suppose about half an hour slipped past in this way, when suddenly Paul stiffened. He turned his head to one side and listened, looking up the road to the right of the water trough. I glanced over and saw Jenny stiffen too, and step back into the cover of the tractor, her hand moving towards her jacket pocket. A few seconds later, a big black car came flashing over the brim of the bowl followed by a second and almost immediately another came speeding down the other road behind Paul.

The first car skidded to a halt, the doors flew open and Lida Niemela, a submachine gun in her hand, jumped out and pointed it straight at Paul, who found himself trapped in the middle of the road.

In less than three seconds, six men had followed her and were now covering us with their handguns.



## BAIT

'Well, well, well! So we meet again Monsieur Douanier,' smiled Lida. 'Get over there with the others.' She scowled in our direction. 'Ah, so here we are then Dr Stone, the lovely Sophie Lemone and you must be the famous Margaux.' She scanned the place. 'Not got that damned American cop with you. Pity for you,' She laughed.

'I had a small matter to discuss with her. Or your brainless red-headed girlfriend.' She sneered at me.

I avoided returning her gaze and kept my face as expressionless as I could.

She limped as she approached us.

'As you see Doctor, your kind attentions of yesterday, have left me with a little reminder of our friendly little get-together.'

As she came closer, her eyes full of hatred, I noticed a big round bruise on her forehead.

'We will have to discuss that point later if of course, you will be so good as to spare me the time.' She mocked.

Neither Jenny nor John was visible.

John, having come out of his siesta instantly at the noise of the cars, had dropped out of sight onto the tractor cabin floor.

From where I was sitting, I could just see under the tractor, the little head of July peeping out of the ditch. I glared in her direction and frowned disapproval, and she dived back down into her hiding place. I prayed that she would stay put because I was sure that Lida Niemela would not feel any compassion for little children.

'Get over there you,' she shouted at Paul, then continued. 'Try anything, and I'll mow the lot of you down.'

To prove her point, she let off a burst and sprayed the macadam beside us with bullets. 'And so this is where the treasure was all the time. Thank you very much for finding it for me.'

Two of the men laughed, and she gave them a sharp glance, which silenced them immediately.

'So,' she smiled. 'My turn to have a look, if I'm not mistaken.'

She moved towards the hole, keeping her gun trained on us.

'Keep them covered while I get down there you lot. And shoot to kill if they do anything else than breath. Got that?'

With six guns trained on the four of us, we didn't consider any other options than remaining stock still.

Lida jumped lightly down, taking her machine gun with her. 'Christ almighty!' She cried out, but not one of her men took their eyes off us. She appeared a second later with a dusty gold bar in one hand and the gun in the other.

'We've hit the jackpot this time, guys. There must be millions down there.'

Without moving, Paul said, 'About **three hundred and fifty** (seven hundred) million if my estimates are correct.'

'How much?' cried Lida.

'Christ!' said the older of the men we had already had dealings with.

'The trouble is,' Paul smiled, 'that you can't take it with you.'

Lida jumped out and faced Paul with her gun pressed on his chest. 'And who is going to stop me monsieur? You?'

## BAIT

Paul remained motionless. 'There are nearly ten tons of gold bars.'

'So?' smirked Lida stepping back.

The older man called over. 'We can't carry much more than three hundred kilos per car Lida.'

'Shit.' She stamped impatiently, 'I never thought of that. Fuck it!' She snarled at us, 'Ok you lot, get down there and hand up the bars.' She waved her gun at us, and we did as requested. 'And you guys. Bring over the cars and reverse them up', she shouted, 'We'll put some in the boot and some on the back seats.' The men exchanged glances, and she shouted at them, 'You four will have to leg it, down the 'Mortier' Tunnel and we'll pick you up this evening. OK?'

This was not a question, and the look in her eyes showed the men that resistance to the plan would not be tolerated. A submachine gun also gives considerable weight to any propositions the holder might put forward.

The first car was backed up, and I went down on my knees and passed the cobweb-covered bars out to Paul one at a time. Lida and her two principal assistants kept us covered while the other four formed a chain to transfer the bars to the car boot. We could hear the car shock absorbers creaking as the load increased and when they had covered the floor of the boot with about a hundred or so bars they opened the back door and put the same amount on the back seat. The older man stepped over and jumped up onto the boot to test the shock absorbers.

'I think she'll take another hundred Lida. On the back seat though.'

‘OK. Hey you!’ Lida looked at me, ‘change roles with him.’

We swapped over, and Paul went down on his knees.

The first car was soon full, and they drove the now heavily laden machine across the road and parked it parallel to the ditch, ready to drive off down the road.

As they backed up the second, the younger of the two assistants turned to Lida. ‘That makes about seven hundred and fifty kilos in all.’

‘Bravo!’ sneered Lida, ‘So you can calculate too.’

‘I mean that that works out at nearly twenty-five million euros,’ he smiled.

‘Christ!’ Lida scowled, ‘Is that all?’

The six men exchanges astonished glances.

‘You stupid idiots, don’t you understand?’

They looked at each other uncomprehendingly.

‘It means we have to leave three hundred million euros of gold behind us. Three hundred million. Christ,’

Paul glanced up, but seeing the white face and the furious flashing eyes above, decided against adding, ‘Told you so.’

‘What can I do with only Twenty-Five Million?’ She stamped angrily. ‘Hey you lot, get on with it come on,’ and she suddenly sprayed the field with a burst of bullets from her submachine gun to help us get the idea.’

I had a sickening feeling that once we had finished, the final burst would be for the four of us trapped down in this ready dug grave.

We carried on the seemingly endless task, when, raising my head just above road level for the six

## BAIT

hundredth time, through the gap under the first parked car, I spotted something moving stealthily.

I kept my eyes down and when I came up the next time I saw that the far side door was now open. The next time I rose, there was a roar, and the car went skidding along the road in a cloud of smoke and a shower of gravel, which enveloped us all.

'What the hell?' cried Lida but her gun never left its mark on us.

'My Gold! Who the fuck was that bastard? Who stole my bloody gold. Bastard! Bastard!' she screamed after the departing car.

She was mad with rage, and her face was even whiter that, it had been. She blasted the road with another burst of bullets, 'Faster you idiots; come on. I'll catch that bloody bastard if it's the last thing I do.'

The six men were uneasy, no doubt knowing only too well of what she was capable when inflamed to such a point. We got down again and rapidly filled the second car, which was kept just beside us.

As we started the third car, Lida raised her head, 'Silence you, idiots,' she screamed.

Suddenly a terrific roar was heard, and two enormous forestry tractors bounded into sight down the two unblocked roads.

The men exchanged glances as they immediately realised they were trapped.

Running behind the tractors, we could see groups of burly men each with a hunting rifle.

Not needing any further explanation, four of the six men dropped the gold bars they were carrying, jumped across into the field and sprinted away as fast as they could.

'Come back here you cowardly bastards,' screamed Lida. Then turning jumped the ditch into the field, aimed and emptied the charger at their receding backs. She mowed across the field, bringing all four down with screams of pain.

She then wheeled around and came running back in our direction, fumbling to get the charger out and a new one in.

The two assistants seemed rooted to the ground, having seen their friends shot down in cold blood. They both instinctively moved back to get the car between their maddened boss and themselves.

'Go!' shouted Paul and we leapt from the hole and dashed in four different directions across the road.

The new charger clicked into place but as she lifted it to mow us down there was a flash, and a bang from behind the tractor and Lida screamed. The machine gun fell from her bloody hand. Jenny stepped out of the shadow and quickly altering her stance, aimed at the two men who were directly in front of her. Before she could fire, there was a roar, and a flash from above her and the older of the two men shot over backwards as a heavy bullet from John's hunting rifle flew through the half-open tractor cabin window and blasted a hole through his shoulder. Jenny aimed again and put a shot through the forearm of the remaining criminal.

During this exchange, we had all thrown ourselves flat on the ground on an order shouted by Paul.

Spotting me, Lida made a dash for me with a horrible mad glint in her eyes. 'William!' cried Paul, 'attention.' She had drawn her little gun and ran and repeatedly shot straight at me at the same time. Suddenly and regardless of her fury, she realised

## BAIT

from the absence of normal recoil, that the bullets were blanks. This discovery seemed to inflame her more, and she hurled the gun away from her. To my horror, her hand flashed behind her, and she pulled Sophie's little gun and still running clicked off the safety catch.

Then seemingly from nowhere, there was a flash of red and Sally flung herself at Lida's legs bringing her down face first onto the macadam. Recovering herself Sally stumbled up. Paul shouted, 'Gun Sally!' as Lida's bloody arm appeared from under her holding the gun.

Sally was on her in a flash, and without thinking reproduced precisely what she had seen Jenny do. Grabbing the wrist, she wrenched the arm backwards and smashed her open hand onto Lida's elbow with all her weight. There was a cracking noise, and a scream from Lida as Sally fell forward over her, following the blow through. The little silver gun went spinning over the macadam, and then there was silence.

Sally knelt back and looked down, 'Courtesy of the Brainless red-headed Whore.'

The two tractors had now stopped, and twenty or so hefty men moved forward, their guns at the ready.

Paul sprinted over to the two remaining cars, picking up the revolver as he went.

'Is everyone OK?'

We all called out, 'Yes.'

Then aiming down, he put a bullet through the tyres of both cars. 'I'm not losing any more of this.' Then he turned, 'Come on quick,' he continued. 'Get those men out of the field now and bring them all here.' He looked around the crowd of men who had now

approached. 'Is the doctor there? Good over here please doc?'

The four men were carried back, by the team of forest workers. One of them was stone dead, two bullets straight through his heart. The other three had been lucky and had been shot in the legs or buttocks.

Jenny had moved silently over and was covering Lida with her handgun. She signalled to John to come over and as he covered her with the rifle. Jenny lifted her with her foot and rolled her on her back.

Blood was running from a gash on her eyebrow where she had hit the road, and a stream of blood ran from the hole in her hand. 'Here Doc. Start with this one. We definitely want this woman alive.'

The village doctor was used to dealing with nasty accidents, what with all the forestry work going on around Autrans. Crushed members due to falling trees and chain saw gashes on legs or cut off toes were frequent. Also, the numerous fractures caused by the winter sports kept him in practice. He was a pro and didn't waste time.

'You lot. Get the trousers of those three and tell me what the bleeding's like. You there! Call up the rescue service immediately, then pass me the phone when you've got them online.

He looked around, 'Hey You! The redhead. Yes, you. Come and lend a hand. If I'm not mistaken, you had a hand in damaging this one.'

Paul appeared by her side and knelt, observing the profile of her face, 'That was top class action Sally, well done.'

'I learn fast,' Sally's replied. 'And it wasn't a good idea to have called me.'

'Yes, I heard,' he smiled, 'A brainless red-headed...'



## BAIT

'It was the word Brainless I objected to most.'

Paul smiled and got to his feet, thinking, 'And it was an even worse idea to try to attack William.'

Sally looked up at him quickly, then turned back to her work with the doctor.

While we were tending the damage, the local police arrived, and handcuffed those that could be, and put the cuffs around the ankles of the others.

By precaution, Lida had her ankles bound together, although it didn't look as though she would be going anywhere for some time.

It must have taken us the best part of an hour to get all the wounds bound. As we were finishing, with a roar, the big army lorries appeared over the brim of the road, closely followed by the flashing blue lights of the ambulances.

The forest tractors were run over the ditch to make room for them, and the proceedings were rapidly taken out of our hands by the commander of the fifty or so soldiers and the military hospital staff who had now arrived.

Paul exchanged words with the commander in chief, who, after a wide-eyed glance into the gold filled cavern, called over his men, and they set about transferring the bars into the two waiting lorries.

Paul walked back over to where we were waiting.

'I don't know about you lot, But I could do with a beer.'

'I'm with you,' answered Jenny.

'Me too.' We all chimed in, and we tramped back down the dusty road toward the hotel.'

## Chapter 25

As we approached the hotel, the little girl, July, ran out of the courtyard of one of the old houses and skipped up to Sally, who whisked her off her feet.

'Well, here's our little hero everybody.'

July squirmed and let out a tinkling little laugh, as Sally tickled her.

'A bit cleaner and drier now, I see.'

'Yes.'

'This young lady saw what was happening from under the tractor and came all the way down here, on her hands and knees in the mud at the bottom of the ditch.'

Paul came over and tickled her, himself. 'Well now, that was very, very brave. Weren't you afraid?'

'Oh no! I was going to tell Uncle George, and I knew he would get out his gun and chase them all away. Uncle George is very big and the strongest man in the world I think.'

We all laughed.

'So what did you do then?'

'I saw that nasty lady with her gun, so I left my trap and, oh it was terrific fun... I kept almost under the water, in the weeds and all that squishy stuff in the mud. And when I saw her.' She pointed at Sally, 'I jumped out of the ditch and told her.'

'I don't think I ever saw anything so dirty in my life,' exclaimed Sally, 'Not even when we used to play together in the river William.'

## BAIT

I shook my head, 'Wow now that must have been a fearful sight.'

The little July burst out laughing again, 'Granny said I smelt like a blocked drain. She said she is going to throw all my clothes in the bin.'

'So?'

'So I took her,' she pointed up at Sally, 'to see uncle George and he phoned up his friends, and they all came home, then they all went running up the hill.' She paused for breath. 'Did he shoot her? Is she dead?'

Paul hugged her and put her down, 'No not dead, but we caught her, and the police have now taken her and are going to put her in prison.'

'For ever?'

Paul considered this, 'Well. Yes, I think they will.'

'Good. Goodbye, I'm going to tell my friends about it.' And with this, she skipped happily off around the corner.

Margaux smiled after her, 'I believe that the thing she enjoyed most was having a good excuse for grovelling in the mud and weeds and getting utterly filthy.'

We all agreed, feeling that we would all have felt the same at her age. When we reached the Hotel, the bar was noisy and overflowing with the forestry men who had carried the news back and had felt it their absolute duty to celebrate the affair.

Our entrance was greeted by a thunder of cheers and clapping of massive lumberjack's hands. We were immediately surrounded and herded up to the bar where glasses of beer immediately appeared before us.

Noise filled the room once more as twenty loud conversations started at the same time while we were buffeted from place to place.

For some time, Paul was wedged at the bar, explaining over and over again the scene. He downed his glass in one go and slapped it down, with a bang, then turned and leaning on the counter smiled. 'Now,' he lifted his voice and silence fell, 'I think that this exceptional occasion calls for something better than beer don't you? Christophe, you have champagne I think. All right then, Champagne all round. On me then.' A loud cheer went up as the first three bottles appeared from under the bar.

Fifteen bottles later, the majority of the men had gone off to spread the happy news around the village, and we managed to work our way out of the gradually subsiding noise to a table on the terrace. We collapsed onto chairs under the plain tree with Paul, now nursing the last bottle of champagne, which we had managed to rescue.

We sat in silence for some time, having had to shout the story to the congregation at least ten times each. Looking at each other we exchanged rather faint smiles.

However, just at this moment, two men in suits turned in from the village square and made for us.

'Oh God!' said Paul, 'The Mayor.'

'And legal assistant if I'm not mistaken,' added Margaux.

The mayor was a tall, suntanned, broad-shouldered man and the main difference with the forest workers was the presence of a nice, round stomach. One couldn't call him fat, but he soon would be if he stayed Mayor much longer. This, however,

## BAIT

happened to be his ambition. He was from a local family and did his job well.

In itself, this was quite a feat. His primary objective was to maintain the character of the place. He was aware that this was what had made it so popular, in the first place. However, most families owned parcels of agricultural land, and each had secret dreams of having his particular plot become constructible land, and thus very valuable. This desire often made the mayors job, more complicated than it should have been.

Paul rose. 'Monsieur le Maire. Please sit with us and have some champagne. Two extra glasses please Christophe,' He said to Christophe, who was standing with his hand on the back of my chair.

The Mayor nodded. 'Business should no doubt come first, but I think we can stretch a point for once.'

Paul smiled, 'I presume you have a question concerning the ownership of the treasure we have just located.'

The Mayor looked at his companion, who coughed.

'If my interpretation of the law is correct,' the man started. 'This treasure, which you have located, is the property of the village of Autrans. I cannot see what right you have of carrying it away.'

For an answer, Paul brought out of his inside pocket his wallet and extracting from it a thick leather cardholder, handed it to the Mayor.

The mayor flipped it open and quickly glanced up at Paul, then handed it to his assistant, who studied it more carefully. Then coughing flipped it closed, and gave it back to Paul.

'Ah yes! Well, that seems to be in order then, but the fact of ownership remains.' He hesitated to allow himself to swallow hard before proceeding.

'The French law concerning treasure trove stipulates that...'

Paul held up his hand to stop the flow of legal jargon.

'I know perfectly what the law says.' he looked markedly into the speaker's eye.

'Yes, I supposed you would.'

'We can, therefore, agree then,' Paul continued, 'that this treasure, or at least part of it, belongs without question to Autrans town council.'

The Mayor relaxed visibly, having prepared himself for a difficult battle.

'Yes, yes. That's what we thought. Yes, at least part of it.'

'However,' Said Paul. 'While the details of ownership are officially established, it must be placed in a safe place. Our friend Mrs Niemela and her band are, by far, not the only unscrupulous criminals who would like to get their hand on such an enormous treasure.' He smiled over at the Mayor, 'Under the circumstances, are you sure you would want to keep several hundred million euros in gold bars, in your town hall. Especially now that the word has got out as to its discovery?'

The mayor rubbed his chin, and Paul continued.

'With that sort of prize in view,' went on Paul, 'the cost of employing the best, most ruthless, lawless and expensive mercenaries available to help fetch it would amount only to a minute fraction of the whole.'

## BAIT

'Well, I agree that I'd certainly have a little difficulty sleeping, once this is known about,' finished the mayor.

Paul laughed, 'Knowing your villagers. I'd guess that the entire Vercors plateau region is already buzzing with the news. I'm even surprised the newspaper men from Grenoble haven't already arrived, but they will, and fast. Believe me.'

This point clarified the mayor accepted his glass of champagne. He then coughed and asked his most important question. 'How much do you estimate our part of the treasure would come to?'

'Well,' said Paul. 'I'd guess it comes to about a hundred years of the Autrans' annual budget.'

The Mayor and his assistant fell back in their chairs their mouths open. 'Good God!'

'Yes. But we can talk about it in detail tomorrow, if you're available, of course,' said Paul.

'Yes, yes. Naturally, I'll make sure I'm available. No one will complain if I put off any rendezvous, you can be sure of that.'

He stood, shook our hands in a vigorous, manly, Mayor-like way and strode over to the village square where curious villagers immediately surrounded him. From the audible exclamations, they were being informed of the sums involved.

Paul brought out another bottle of champagne which he popped open and refilled our glasses.

'Now,' he said. 'I think it's time I explained a few points and particularly about the map markings. What do you think Margaux?'

We all looked at him with interest.

Margaux smiled. 'Yes, it's about time to straighten that out, even if it didn't work out as we had hoped.'

'Well,' Paul drank down some of his champagne.

'Keeping it simple,' he hesitated. 'The markings on the maps were all completely false.'

'Oh!' This was uttered by three of us.

'In truth, I invented the whole story myself, with the help of Margaux.'

We gaped at him.

'The idea was to keep everyone as far off the real track as possible for as long as possible. We guessed that exploring these places would take years and we had hoped to find the real hiding place during that lapse, which proved wrong.'

'What?' I spluttered and the bubbly liquid shot up my nose making my eyes water.

'We guessed that sooner or later Sophie here or at least her team would get onto it, and we helped that along as you now know. We also guessed that they would try to get any available information or clues from you - either by force, which proved happily to be false or simply by watching you.' He nodded. 'So we planted the false indications to make sure that they would direct their researches as far away as possible, from where our real clues seemed to be leading.'

'Clever!... Nice work Mr Douanier,' smiled Sophie. 'That would have taken a long time to spot.'

'Yes, and while you were hunting, we would have had time to follow up our leads quietly.'

'Nice work.'

'But then Mrs Niemela turned up and made things take an unpredictable direction,' continued Paul. 'She was very clever and even spotted my second line of defence.'

He smiled to himself, 'Yes I was pleased with that part. I managed to place the points marking the



## BAIT

various potholes and other plausible hiding places, in such a way so that if you joined up the points up with lines, you would end up with David's cross.' He smiled. 'The centre of that cross coincided exactly with the 'Grotto de la Ture.'

I laughed out loud more with amazement than anything else. 'And the Finn spotted that?' I said.

Paul nodded 'And she spotted it.'

'A very quick woman,' Said Jenny. 'A pity she is also so utterly ruthless and probably mad.'

paul nodded, 'She and her friends had a nice day visiting that grotto and got back very dirty and extremely angry.'

'But what about the business with the ULACE and those song lyrics,' asked Sophie.

'All that was fake as well. It was a pity it didn't work better than it did though. The idea of clues hidden in the lyric of songs was pure invention, but we used real information from autobiographies of various wartime composers, which could be shown to be solid.'

Sophie frowned, 'But the songs existed.'

'Sorry, Sophie. We planted them all in the ULACE database, with the official assistance of the management team.'

Sophie laughed and shook her head amusedly.

'Nice work again. Very professional, I must say.'

I laughed, 'And all that trouble for a measly three hundred and fifty million. Hardly worth the trouble.' I raised my glass, 'Here's to treasure hunting' and we all clinked our glasses together.

At this moment, Mr and Mrs B. appeared and shook us all by the hand with kisses for the ladies and a hearty bravo.

Mrs B. smiled

'We have decided to make a little celebration tonight, now that everything is finished at last.'

Mr B. took over, 'The Mayor suggested a barbecue on the square. The entire village has been invited.'

Paul stood, 'that's going to do us all good. But the drinks are on me though, well when I say me...'

'Yes,' said Christophe 'We know...'

'Hey everybody.' This was Margaux who had jumped to her feet, 'I'm for a shower and a change of clothes, what about you?'

We all agreed and dispersed to our rooms.

As I was passing Mrs B, she drew Sally aside.

'I'll prepare a room for you Miss Sally if you would like your own tonight or...'

Sally smiled, 'I think I still prefer to stay where I am, but only if William continues to give me first turn in the shower.'

I shook my head in mock pity, 'My life is hard Mrs B.'

She laughed, 'As I see.'

By the time we had all finished cleaning up and dressing, the village square was utterly transformed.

The council employees had mounted dozens of Trestle tables and benches, and three huge barbecues were already glowing and smoking nicely.

The local butchers had been raided by mister B, in his capacity of the chef, and piles of sausages and pork chops were standing at the ready.

A bar had been installed at the far end of the square, backing up against the windows of the sports shop, and several tall piles of cases of wine indicated that Paul's contribution was not going to be a small one.

## BAIT

I couldn't help thinking, with relief, that my bedroom was at the back of the hotel and not this side, because I suspected that things would go on until the next day.

The bakers had also been raided, and two old women were already cutting up the huge round loaves, while another was placing piles of bread at regular intervals along each of the tables.

Finally, the Vercors Plateau Cheesemaker had been put to contribution, and an impressive pile of whole cheeses of all sorts were stacked at the end of the last table.

The Mayor himself was now placing paper plates and cups and plastic cutlery on the trestle tables, and someone else was stringing up the fairy lights, which were usually only brought out at Christmas time.

About half the village was helping get things ready, with the enthusiasm and application of those who are about to partake of an enjoyable evening.

The other half of the village was either getting themselves dressed up, or milling around getting in everyone's way.

The older men had gathered around the drinks table and were exchanging enthusiastic remarks about the choice of beverages Paul had made.

Finally, at about seven thirty, the mayor climbed up onto the stone steps leading to the baker's shop and clapped his hands producing a noise whose volume is only possible for a mayor. I have long suspected that this is one of the laws of natural selection for jobs of municipal responsibility. He made a short mayor-like speech, using all the favourite catch-phrases. I wonder if even De Gaulle would have been able to do a better job in warming up his public. Mind you. De Gaulle rarely had the advantage of being the speaker

opening a big free dinner, with unlimited free wine. So he had the crowd unconditionally with him I suppose.

The rest of the evening until well after midnight was one long, noisy, boisterous, happy meal with continual backslapping and shoulder-hugging from massive lumberjack to strong-armed farm wives.

The noise got steadily louder as the evening advanced and the pile of cases of wine diminished. It amazed me to see just how much wine a forest worker, or his wife for that matter, can down, without seeming in the least affected by it. It is as though the alcohol came straight back out through special alcohol pores situated no doubt on their massive biceps. While everyone was getting stuck into the cheese, Mr B. and his father disappeared into their kitchen. They reappeared half an hour latter pushing a trolley laden with bowls of chocolate mousse, which were distributed around the tables to shouts of bravo, bravo.

The main café on the square then made its contribution of supplying a continual stream of cups of strong espresso coffee. At the same time dozens of bottles of clear but highly potent home-brewed cordial, appeared from their hiding places under the tables.

Things carried on in this manner until my eyes started to close involuntarily, and looking around the tables I noticed that, apart from Jenny, who seemed in full form, all my companions seemed to be in the same state as me. We were apparently not true lumberjack material.

I nodded to Paul, and we all drifted off, leaving the village to finish the celebration between themselves.

BAIT

## Chapter 26

The next morning when I woke, I could hear the deep slow breathing of Sally coming from the adjoining bedroom. I quietly pushed her door closed, shaved and dressed and went down to breakfast.

Surprisingly, the village square had already been cleared of all the previous night's equipment. I suspect that they must merely have tidied everything away, with their usual enthusiasm, before going home to sleep. The only remaining sign that something unusual had occurred were the fairy lights, which were just being dismantled.

As I sat down on the terrace, the Mayor, as fresh as a young boy, came striding over. 'Well, had some sleep? Good. A pity you missed the race though.'

'Race?'

'Yes. We decided to have a little race up to the ski jump and back. It must have been about four-o'clock I suppose. We old ones didn't have much of a chance, of course, the young ones from the ski team, beat us hollow. Anyway, it revived our appetites for some onion soup, before cleaning up. A good party eh?' He slapped me on the back and went striding off about his mayor's functions, shouting loud greetings right, left and centre.

Christophe came over with coffee, looking a little more worse for wear than the mayor, but then he wasn't a forestry worker, was he. He told me that the council employees had already been up to the water

## BAIT

trough and had lifted and replaced the flagstone and refilled the trench we had dug.

Everything was almost back to usual in the little village of Autrans, except that nearly half a billion euros' worth of gold had been discovered and moved into safety.

Christophe said that Mr and Mrs B had already gone off to purchase replacements for all the food and wine, which had been unexpectedly consumed the night before.

While I was finishing my breakfast, Paul appeared, coming across the square with Margaux. 'Hello there William. We've found the missing car, want to come with us.'

'Yes. Coming.' I finished my coffee, jumped up and followed them over to Margaux's car.

'John found it this morning when he went up to start cutting some trees up by the Tunnel du Mortier.'

'Already at work?' I gasped. 'How do these men do it? Do they ever have to sleep?'

We found the car lodged halfway over the barrier of earth and rocks which had been erected twenty years ago to stop people attempting to drive through the abandoned tunnel. A couple of chainsaws were at work some little distance up the forest slope, and I could see John at work. The Lumberjacks worked on, heedless to the fact that they had left a car containing a small fortune in gold unguarded.

At last, noticing our arrival, he downed tools and clambered down the steep slope to join us with his companions. The fact that they had been up partying until five in the morning didn't seem to have affected them at all.

Paul surveyed at the scene. 'A bit odd that there are no signs of emergency braking.'

The five men looked innocently from one to another, blowing out their cheeks in a typically French way, signifying that they were unable to help with this.

'Probably didn't spot it till too late,' suggested one of them.

'Or he was looking in the rearview mirror to check he wasn't being followed,' said another.

'Could have been a woman though, couldn't it,' suggested a third.

'Ah,' said John 'that's also a definite possibility.'

'We would have smelt the perfume if it had been, wouldn't we,' contributed John.

The men nodded at this clever bit of reasoning.

Paul glanced over at them with a wry smile, then walked over to the back of the car. He opened the boot, and we all sighed. All the gold was there. A carpet of gold bricks covered the floor of the large boot. We then opened the back door and there, covering the entire surface, was another layer of gold bars. I hesitated and frowned down at this for some time then shot a sideways look at Paul. I remembered that there had been almost a full second layer on the back seat. If that were true, then that missing layer must have contained fifty or even a hundred bars.

I looked around the wall of rugged and above all very innocent faces, then smiling to myself, shook my head. I exchanged glances with Margaux and Paul, but Paul simply raised his eyebrows slightly, nodded and smiled.

'Well that's a relief,' he said. 'Mind you, the rest recovered is worth more than three hundred million euros, so this is just a drop in the ocean.'



## BAIT

The lumberjacks nodded in agreement, 'Yeh. Just a drop,' said John. 'A valuable drop though.'

Paul then turned slightly to look down into the black tunnel. 'I wonder why they didn't take it and hide it somewhere?'

The four forest workers exchanged glances.

'Got the wind up probably,' proposed John.

'Probably,' agreed Paul.

'I called up the Police and the Mayor,' he finished, but at that very moment, they arrived together in the gendarme's car, so we left them to deal with things...

In the car on the way back down to the hotel, I mentioned my thoughts to Paul and Margaux.

I estimated that the missing bars represented about three bars per Autrans family amounting to about a hundred thousand euros each.

Paul kept his eyes fixed on the winding road, 'My memory is a little vague on that point, perhaps you're right, what about you Margaux?'

'A little vague also,' she replied.

I laughed out loud, 'Well no doubt you are both right. Memory is such an odd thing, what with all the excitement.'

As we drove on in silence, I reflected that at least some of this hidden treasure would be rapidly reinvested into the rural economy. I could imagine repaired roofs, new tractors, university education and a host of other good uses to which the non-existent missing layer of gold bricks could be put to.

Not too much really, for a community who had safely guarded this immense treasure for seventy-five years, albeit, without knowing it.

When we arrived back at the Hotel, we found the old lady, Marthe Thermier waiting for us on the terrace.

She seemed less calm and collected than usual. 'Excuse me for disturbing you all, but I wonder if you and this gentleman could pop round to see me later. I've something I'd like to show you.'

'I'll come now if you like,' I said getting up and when Paul glanced at her quickly he rose too.

She led us off around the corner of the hotel in the direction of her cottage and as soon as we are out of earshot, she confided. 'You see, when I saw those tiny little gold bars yesterday, I had a surprise. I always thought they were much bigger than that, you see.'

'I know,' I said, 'I thought that too, and that's how I managed to get mixed up in all this, in the first place.'

She seemed not to have heard and went on. 'You know, when the Germans burnt the farm down, we kids all tried to recover bits and pieces out of the ruins. That was illegal of course, but as kids, we didn't realise that. We just saved things from the rubble.'

'I'm not sure that's of much importance after all this time,' I said reassuringly. 'Eh Paul?'

'No, No,' he admitted. 'Not now.'

She continued. 'It's not the legality of the thing that's troubling me. Amongst the things I saved was an old lamp standard, which I had spotted when the owner showed us around.' She stopped walking for an instant and felt in her pocket for something which wasn't there and shrugged. 'I brought it back with the other bits, and pieces in granddads wheelbarrow and Mum fitted a new shade on it. And do you know, she kept it and so did I. I want you to have a look at it.'

## BAIT

Paul and I exchanged looks and continued following her. We entered the cool, thick-walled cottage and she led us straight to the sitting room.

'There it is, in the corner.'

It didn't look anything special except perhaps not in very good taste.

'You see it is made up of little bits, the same shape as those you dug up yesterday.'

It was an ugly thing, nearly six feet high, assembled out of a vertical arrangement of thin white painted wood slabs. Each slab was placed at right angle to the one beneath, the whole being held in place by four white wooden rods at the junctions. On the top, a white painted metal disk held the much more recent bulb holder and lampshade.

She nodded at us, 'Get down on your knees and look closely.'

I did as instructed and immediately shot up again, 'God in heaven!'

'You see what I mean.'

Paul knelt and taking out his penknife scratched away the paint.

'Well, well!' He stood up.

'That column is made of painted gold bars, no wonder it was so heavy. My God. How many are there Mrs Thermier?'

'Twenty. I counted them.'

'My God!' I was astounded. 'You've been sitting with a fortune beside you for 70 years.'

Twenty! That means it's worth ...'

'Six hundred and fifty thousand euros. I calculated that too,' she smiled.

'Well I'll be damned,' I flopped down in the armchair.

'So!' she looked at Paul. 'What do you think I should do?'

'You didn't intend to give it up then?' smiled Paul.

'Now, young man!' she scolded, 'what do you take me for? A complete idiot?'

'You could always leave it where it is,' I mused.

'What!' She ejaculated. 'Now that everyone in the village knows what a gold bar looks like. It would be just a question of time before someone noted the resemblance. Or, that someone's memory did a trick of bringing it out. No, we have to get rid of it somehow.'

'Get rid of it?' I gasped, then frowned, 'We?'

'I mean, put it in a safe place. Ah yes, that's urgent I think.'

We sat in silence for a few moments. Then Paul stood.

'How many children have you got Mrs Termier?'

'Five, No I thought of that. That would mean giving them four bars each. That's just as bad because it just shifts the danger onto them.'

Paul smiled, 'As you have called me in we have to do things officially now I'm afraid.'

'Oh, Paul!' I gasped. 'You're not going to confiscate it are you?'

He smiled, 'No. I meant we are going to have to go through the correct process. It's not easy to convert a lot of gold into cash without getting one's fingers burnt you know.'

The old lady observed Paul with a wry smile. 'Now, I think you have some idea up your sleeve. Am I right?'

Paul smiled. 'First. Who does this lamp standard belong to? Certainly not the original owner. He

## BAIT

apparently had no family or offspring. I suppose that it might have been considered theft and trespass at the time, but as the landowner had ceased to exist, that's not obvious. The French rules of treasure trove are that if something of value is discovered 'accidentally' and I stress the word, 'accidentally' on a piece of land, then half goes to the discoverer and half to the owner.' He paused, 'But in this case, he was dead. Once the land had been officially declared ownerless, it became the property of the local council. In that case, half the treasure would belong to them.' He smiled to himself. 'Yes a fascinating case really, especially 70 years after the fact.'

The old lady smiled at him. 'So whatever happens, I officially own at least half the value of this gold?'

Paul sat down again. 'Yes, that's absolutely certain.'

He seemed to be lost in thought, so I added. 'But when the young miss Thermier accidentally discovered it, the land was not yet communal property, was it?'

'Exactly,' said Paul. 'So the land still officially belonged to the deceased owner.'

I continued, 'And the local council are already going to make several million every year, it seems a pity...'

'Yes. A pity,' said Paul.

The old lady pushed herself up out of her armchair and opened the old dark wood sideboard. She extracted a bottle of some clear white liquid and three small glasses. Pouring a glassful for each of us she said, 'My best home-brewed raspberry liquor. This will help you think.'

We sipped the liquid, and we both gasped. She smiled and laughed. NO. Not supermarket rubbish this. 68 per cent proof.

'God!' I gasped.

'Nice eh!' She smiled. 'If you want to become a forestry worker, start by learning how to drink this.'

Paul stood and wandered to the object of our discussion sipping his liquor. 'I think we will be able to sort this out quite easily, but you'll need to leave me a few months to get everything officially tied up. We wouldn't like your offspring to have trouble, later on, would we?' He then relaxed. 'Yes. I believe this will work out very nicely after all. And,' He smiled, 'all perfectly legal and above board.'

He looked down at the old lady, and she nodded up at him.

'If I were you though,' he finished. 'I would keep all this completely to yourself for the moment. But this year you can count on giving your children Christmas presents that they will remember for a long, long time.'

The old lady smiled up at him. 'Yes, that was what I was thinking myself.' Then frowning, added, 'but would you be so kind as to look after this thing for me in the meantime. I wouldn't get any sleep if it stayed in the house.'

So, off we went carrying the hideous thing between us. At the hotel, we announced that Marthe Thermier had made a present of the obj to Paul, so it stood in perfect safety in his bedroom for several days until he arranged things on a more permanent basis.

## Epilogue

As was to be expected, the French treasure trove laws, came in for a lot of discussion at Autrans.

This was because the land no longer had an official owner. Furthermore, the drinking trough was at the very extremity of the original garden. So. Depending on how one interpreted the pre-war maps, either it was in the garden, or on the old communal track, which bordered it. In French law, any ownerless land automatically becomes the property of the town council or the state after 30 years has expired. So in reality, however one considered the question, the treasure had been found on communal land. However, even though this might have been an obvious conclusion, it had to be officially proved before things could move forward.

Importantly though, the official French rules also dictate that half the value of a treasure found goes to the person that finds it, and the other half to the owner of the land.

If the finder was defined as Paul, representing the French government, then the thing seemed to me to be a clear-cut affair. However, he pointed out himself that, that Martha Thermier might consider that she was instrumental in its finding. He remarked that Margaux had no claim as she was under contract to the government and that this was her job. He went on to say that, as they had no proof that they, the government agents, had planted the information, included in Sally's' thesis, she also could insist on her

cut. Finally, he concluded by saying that, as I had never been under contract with his team, I might be eligible to a share as well.

It's true that this information had been a big surprise and knowing the huge sum involved, I must say I liked the idea of even a very small cut.

So, with a sum of money in play, corresponding to about 70 years of the town council's annual expenditure, I suspected that the battle would be a long and difficult one, but I felt sure that Autrans would fight this out to the bitter end.

Surprisingly, however, after only about six months of negotiations, an agreement proposed by Paul was accepted and signed by the government finance ministry. Under the terms of the agreement, a little less than half the sum recovered was invested, with a major French bank. From the interest of this sum, Autrans local council was to receive an annual payment, which doubled the present income of the village.

Naturally, the state did not come out of the arrangement empty-handed, which was to be expected of course.

In this way, many of the Autrans council projects which had always seemed utopic came into the realm of the possible. The times of having to manage everything on the cheap, at last, came to an end. A new period opened before them, in which they would be able to concentrate on making the place better to live in, without compromising its history and traditions.

The whole affair was inevitably taken, up by the press and spawned a renewed wave of passion for treasure hunting.



## BAIT

For once, during the ordinarily slack autumn season, hotels across the Vercors plateau were reserved right up to the beginning of the ski season and were already full for much of the following summer season. The Alpine guides were overbooked with requests for guided treks and Pot-holing expeditions. This unexpected publicity brought the region back into the public eye almost as much as during the 1968 winter Olympics.

The big surprise for me was that both Sally and I were voted a 'goodwill' package, following a suggestion from Paul. The head of finance had signed without hesitation when Paul suggested the seemingly negligible amount of zero point one per cent.

This, however, translated into nearly three hundred and fifty thousand euros each.

I found it amusing to think that, in the form of gold bars, this sum would have fitted inside a one-kilo box of sugar.

Lida Niemala was sentenced to life imprisonment for murder and a long string of other crimes. The various members of her team got between two and ten years.

I was immensely relieved on hearing this. I would certainly not have felt at ease, living with the idea that the woman might think that revenge was called for.

We never learnt any more about Sophie's boss, who remained as enigmatic and secret as ever.

Paul informed us, however, that the French finance minister had received information from his British

counterpart, which had put everyone at ease. The information was relayed to the other interested governments, and as a result, the subject was unanimously and definitively dropped.

When the affair was finally finished, I went back to my flat at Meylan and Sally accompanied me. She intended to stay a week before returning to Oxford. However, it was a few days before we had to accept the fact that we were very reluctant to be parted.

To cut a long story short, we were married in the little church at Autrans just before Christmas. Furthermore, in the new year, we purchased a rambling old farmhouse within easy walking distance from the Autrans village square as our new home. This purchase, the re-roofing and the extensive renovation to modern standards were covered by our unexpected windfall, as was the decoration and furnishing.

I kept the flat at Meylan and rented it out at an outrageous price, which entirely covered its initial mortgage.

Sally gave up her professor's job at Oxford. She did this because she was offered employment in France, to do more or less the same historical research consultancy for Paul's finance department. This work enabled her to continue her participation in international conferences and above all to work from our new home together.

With the help of Margaux's father, I managed to place a few of my better songs with an upcoming French singer who required a few in English. The

## BAIT

début album was successful, and even though my songs were not the strong point, I made a very nice sum from the job.

I did not return to my original job but set myself up as an independent consultant. This employment brought in a little money, but certainly not enough to live comfortably off.

However, from time to time, I was asked to assist Paul and sometimes even Sophie, and this also brought in a small income.

We settled quietly down to a pleasant life devoid of stress, in a place we both loved in all seasons.

For our wedding, Paul, Margaux, Sophie, Jenny and our parents, gave us a mini snowplough, which looked like a big motorised lawn mower. This tool proved an essential part of our home equipment for the winter months.

Today our home is rarely empty, what with summer walking visitors and winter skiing visitors.

Paul comes to see us from time to time, as do Margaux and Sophie.

Jenny is always promising to do so but never seems to be able to.

Margaux carried on as before with her interesting and varied job and seemed to be quite satisfied with her lot.

As for Sophie, one of the first things she did on her return to her Paris office, was to pay a courtesy visit to the ULACE headquarters.

Stephen William ROWE

On behalf of Paul, she thanked several high placed people for their assistance in this very odd affair.

During this confidential meeting in the boardroom, she was as usual particularly convincing, enthusiastic and disarmingly charming. As a result, each of us now possesses a souvenir of our adventures together, in the form of small heavy paperweights bearing the inscription,

ULACE - 100 Ans...

## **ANNEXES**

The following four annexes describe William Stone's early life and his meeting with both Sally and Margaux.

They also describe his early contacts with music and his studies.

They clarify the characters of these three people.

They initially came at the beginning of the story.

I moved them after readers commented on how this slowed the action down too much.

### **Annexe 1 : Meeting Margaux**

When I became old enough to realise what was going on around me, my father was an established studio potter, and my mother was a sort of interior decorator, but mainly my mum. My dad made the plates, bowls, vases, cups, jugs and pots while my mum made them look what the day's fashion demanded.

I had no idea as to how they came to be doing this, and I assumed that most other parents did more or less the same thing.

A friend at primary school told me that his dad made bridges. When I asked where he kept them all and if I could go and see them, he said to me that he only drew them.

This had impressed me considerably more than building them because I'd been building bridges myself for ages. I knew from experience how easy this was once you'd got the hang of it. On the other hand, I had never been able to draw one correctly.

We lived in what I now realise was most people's idea of an idyllic location. It was the sort of place and way of life that is generally assumed no longer to exist. To me, this was a completely normal existence, and I naturally believed that all the inhabitants of the world lived in very similar surroundings

In our case, 'home' was just over the river from Arundel Castle in West Sussex, in the south of England, and the village is called Burpham.

For me, it consisted of 'The George' pub, the Saxon Church of 'Saint Mary', the vicarage and a few flower-flooded village cottages of which ours was one of the average sized ones.

Finally, there were also the famous cricket grounds.

I had only to skirt the cricket pitch to reach the edge of the fast flowing Arun river. From Burpham, the river continued on its last wandering five miles down to the sea at Littlehampton.

I remember once working out that a stick thrown into the centre would reach the sea in about an hour. My father warned me that it would take me more than three times that to walk to the same point along the riverbank.

Nearly ten years later I tested this announcement out in practice and thanked God that the far end boasted several well-stocked pubs.

From the edge of the river, one had a magnificent view of the impressive grey mass of Arundel Castle, a mile away across the Arun floodplains.

## BAIT

Up until seventeen fifty, Arundel had been a fully-fledged seaport. Today, this seems so unlikely, that I didn't believe it, until years later my best friend, a history expert, explained the history of the region to me.

You will meet this person in a short time, so I'll save description for the moment.

I went to school in Arundel. In the early days when weather, current, flooding and above all parents permitted, I used our little rowing boat to cross the Arun every morning. From the other side, I rode my bike to school over the marshes via Offham. On my solitary way home, I frequently stopped off to watch the swans and their fluffy little cygnets on Swanbourne Lake. Getting chased by furious males and sometimes a leg snapped at by powerful beaks, was a not an infrequent conclusion to such visits.

At all other times, I biked the long way round, which served to provide me with sturdy legs and lungs and a healthy suntan at all times.

In the wet season, I'd sometimes bike-it up to Ambly Wild Brooks at weekends to check out the extent of the flooding. I would then rush back home to recount the fantastic story breathlessly to my father, as he worked quietly at the pottery wheel.

The George, and admittedly the adjoining cricket grounds, always attracted a never-ending flux of visitors to this out-of-the-way rural site.

To me, this implied a never-ending succession of pretty well-dressed girls. These girls, once bored by the adult's presence, tended to wander about the village looking for things to do. Their parents loved the place because assisted by excellent meals and good

beer, they felt that no harm could possibly come to their offspring in such a tranquil hamlet. Of course, very few of them realised that the Arun river flowed but a few hundred yards from where they sat. However, nobody ever was drowned there, and no dramas ever came to mar the reputation of the place.

Our cottage had a large garden, mainly taken up by long vegetable patches at the back. Almost every day during the summer months, I was allotted some task or other there, either tending, gathering or soil turning. The front garden, however, was my mother's domain, and woe betides it if I was observed loitering around here, 'with intent...' It was some fifteen or twenty feet deep and crisscrossed by narrow flagstone paths between high walls of scented flowers. My favourites were the sweet peas, and there always seemed to be millions of them to my young eyes.

In my early years, I was allowed to play for hours on end, invisible, in this high jungle of flowers, as long as I promised not to touch anything with a flower or a bud on it.

We had several cats of various colours and characters, but none of them took much notice of me, preferring the quasi-infinite expanses of the countryside that surrounded us. These members of the family produced litters of kittens almost yearly which was always a novelty occupying the months until they were adopted. The furniture naturally took the toll of the repeated onslaughts of razor-sharp young claws and teeth. Consequently, all the table and chair legs were prematurely 'aged'. My mother had long since given up the unequal battle of scolding them away, so now the sofas and armchairs were covered with shawls which we changed as they



## BAIT

became too raged even to passed off as being artistically shabby, or even 'rustic'.

It was at this time in my life and in this garden that I unexpectedly started to fall in love with France. One lovely summer morning as I lay hidden, as usual, driving an articulated lorry along a dusty track, I heard an unusual musical accent coming from the narrow road running outside our fence.

'Ah! Que c'est beau, que c'est beau! Mais regarde-moi cela! C'est simplement magnifique, et le parfum, la perfection'

'Antoine! Regarde là.'

I shot up like a jack-in-the-box and found myself staring at something so astonishing, that my mouth hung open.

'Bonjour Jeune homme.'

I stood riveted to the ground, unable to say anything.

I had never seen anything so remarkable.

A tall, slim woman stood smiling at me. She was dressed in a way I'd never seen before, like a queen from a picture book. She had masses of magnificent chestnut hair which cascaded over her tanned shoulders, shining stuff looking soft and smooth. Her hair shone with a strange depth, just like the polished chestnut I always carried in my pocket as a good-luck charm, God only knows why.

'Look, Margaux isn't this beautiful.'

The accent of the English word was inexpressibly fascinating.

Then suddenly, a girl with the same lovely hair, features and tan, popped into sight and observed me. She was about the same age as me.

'Yes,' she said. 'He is beau.'

'Non! Pas le garçon, la maison, les fleurs.'

« Ah, oui !» she seemed less enthusiastic and kept staring at me.

Naturally, I blushed red. At least I felt like it.

All of a sudden, I heard a light laugh from behind me, and my mother stepped with springing strides towards the gate.

'Bonjour, madame.' said my mother.

I turned and gaped at her, and she burst out laughing.

'Eh oui! mother speaks French too.' She held out her hand to the vision, 'Madeleine Stone,' she smiled.

The woman took her hand, 'Anne-Laure,' she said. 'And this is my husband Antoine and my daughter Margaux.'

The two chatted on in French animatedly for what seemed to be hours, my mother gesticulating and the other gesturing with even greater enthusiasm as if they had known each other all their lives. During this, I stood riveted to the ground, unable to do anything with such an unexpected scene going on around me.

'Entrez. Entrez donc. Come in please.'

And then this vision and her 'Antoine' were in the garden, washed along by my mother's enthusiasm.

'Mais! Madeleine, is a French name, n'est pas?'

'Yes. My parents spent many years in the south of France. I was born there At Sanary Sur Mer, to be precise.'

This was another piece of new information for me.

They stopped to admire the perfume of some of my mother's favourite sweet peas. 'Oh! absolument magnifique!' exclaimed Anne-Laure.

## BAIT

However, Antoine butted in, 'Sanary was a port, especially in those days. What did your father do there?'

'Antoine!' exclaimed his wife. 'Don't be so nose-y. Really! I'm sorry madam. I'm afraid he has no manners. His work has distorted his appreciation as to what is and is not done outside the boardroom, or barracks, as I sometimes feel it should be called.'

Antoine shook his head with a wry twisted smile.

'Please call me Madeleine,' said my mother, and don't worry. I like people to be direct. It saves so much time, don't you think?'

'I do!' exclaimed Antoine, shooting a victorious look at his wife.

'My father was a sculptor.'

More news for me.

'Ah! I might have guessed it.' chuckled Antoine with his incredible French accent.

'I would have been astonished if you had told us that he'd been a fisherman.'

'He managed to scrape a reasonably good living at it. My mother was a nurse.'

The daughter, Margaux, dragged behind them, swivelled her head to scrutinise me, still riveted to the spot. They then all disappeared around the side of the cottage, towards the rose gardens at the back, and cries of astonishment floated back to me punctuated by all sorts of French exclamations.

As soon as they had disappeared, I sat down on the rough stone doorstep. I then crept carefully to the corner of the wall and peeped round it. My father was just emerging from the pottery, wiping his hands on his potters' apron, but above all, he was talking fluently in the same strange language. He led them

across the garden to our monumental stone table in the shade, and my mother went off to make tea. This stone table was, in fact, quite famous. It was built from the ancient grinding wheel of a long-abandoned local flour mill. It had reportedly taken eight strong men to lift it onto its resting place on an old oak tree trunk. Some forty years' later it is still there, and will undoubtedly remain there long after the house has eventually fallen into ruin and crumbled away, us with it.

This sort of tea-time assembly was a little too much for me, so I crept out of the garden and took refuge in my favourite hideout in the adjoining woods until I heard my name called. Drawn by a keen curiosity, I made my way hesitatingly back, to find them gathered around the gate exchanging goodbyes.

Then the most amazing thing happened. The French lady bent down and kissed me on my cheek, and I froze like a little bronze statue. Before I had time to catch a breath, or even to become red, another warm pair of lips was squeezed on my cheeks, those of the little Margaux.

Then they were gone.

Some French word came floating back to me through the flowers, 'Enfin, c'est vrai maman, il est vraiment beau, ce garçon.'

My father broke into laughter and hugged my mother.

Later at dinner when I asked my mother to explain, I turned crimson with embarrassment, and my parents exchanged smiles and pretended not to notice.

The following summer, we went to Paris for two weeks and stayed with the French couple. The

## BAIT

daughter, Margaux, was away on the Mediterranean coast at Banyuls-Sur-Mer, with an aunt. This suited me perfectly because I was not yet used to the company of girls.

Their house was a big rambling old place in Rueil Malmaison, with towering trees, extensive lawns but far too few flowers for my tastes. Nevertheless, I spent hours exploring the extensive gardens and discovering hidden secrets in the numerous dark cellars and outhouses. In one of these underground caverns, I even came across a mushroom 'plantation' which I found almost magical and full of unknown mysterious presences. At one of the dark sides of the house, I discovered a wire-mesh enclosed machine, humming with a dozen or so whirling fans. This fascinating discovery turned out to be an air conditioning system, explaining why the house and especially the bedrooms always seemed fresh and comfortable even in the hottest of summers.

During this first stay, I gradually got used to being kissed and even being kissed by men, which, after a while, came to seem normal behaviour. We visited all sorts of marvellous places, so numerous that I lost track after the first two days. We visited Gardens, museums, art galleries, monuments, restaurants, bistros but what I preferred were the old steep sloping paths and narrow roads of the older parts of Paris.

My mother and father seemed quite at home here and to be familiar with much of it. I never asked how this was, but it all seemed quite reasonable and sited normal to me.

This was, in fact, my first ever, real holiday and I did not even reflect on the fact that I was in another country. I knew we had taken the ferry and crossed a

lot of water, but that was all. The people there seemed permanently happy and smiling. All the women seemed beautiful, the men were splendid and friendly, and the girls mainly dressed like little princesses. Luckily, at the time, however, I couldn't understand what these little girls said, to each other. Otherwise, I would undoubtedly have been unhappy and have felt frequently snubbed. So in this, I was lucky to be allowed to remain in happy ignorance, untouched by the snobbism and conceit of the little French upper-class demoiselles.

Here in France, my mother dressed very differently to her usual cottage attire and spent hours with her new friend trying on magnificent clothes in lovely perfumed shops. I became unconditionally proud of my mother in her beautiful dresses and of her elegant poise.

Thinking back, there is little doubt in my mind that the two kisses at Burpham and those two dreamy weeks in Paris, sealed my future for me.

I believe that everything that happened in later years and many of the important the decisions I took, were influenced by the seeds sown at this time.

After this first holiday, we went to France almost every year, frequently spending time with my parent's friends in Paris. I rarely met Margaux, who always seemed to be away somewhere in the south of France. I did, however, see photos of her, which became more and more magnificent as the years past.

Consequently, by the age of fifteen, I was fluent in spoken French, read it easily and wrote it acceptably well. Strangely though, I never really thought about it other than it being my holiday language.

## BAIT

I had no idea what the husband, Antoine, or his wife did when we were not there or where their apparent financial ease came from. I do remember my father saying once that he came from Israel, but I had no idea where this was and didn't much care if the truth is told.

As it turned out many years later, this was to play an unexpected part in one of the most remarkable periods of my entire life.

## **Annexe 2 : Meeting Sally**

Hardly a month after my meeting with Margaux and her parents, I met Sally Cameron.

That summer was warm and as usual, seemed infinitely long. But in those days they always seemed neverending. Every morning, once my gardening chores were completed, I hurried around the cricket pitch and through the band of trees down to the river. I was always on my own because all the boys that I knew lived miles away. I didn't ever have any real friends to play with. However, this didn't trouble me, because I was never bored. Nature supplied me with more things to do than would fit into any single day.

As usual, I threw my clothes onto the dry earth and waded naked into the cold water. Keeping close to the bank under the overhanging trees, where there was hardly any current, I started to play with the numerous floating objects around me. I was soon lost in one of the adventure stories I was always inventing for myself. I had just turned towards the other bank, to check that no angry swans were bearing down on me when I was hailed from behind.

'Hello.'

I turned to see a girl of my age, looking down at me from the top of the bank. She had masses of bright red hair and hundreds of freckles.

'Hello,' I stood up and smiled, my hands dripping with mud.

'Oh! You haven't got any clothes on,' she said.

'No, they'd have got wet.'



## BAIT

We stood and looked at each other. 'You're all white in the middle,' she commented.

I looked down, having never thought about this before, 'I wear shorts most of the time I suppose.'

'And your willy too! Isn't it a funny thing!'

I looked, but couldn't see anything especially funny about it, except that it was white too, like the rest.

'I suppose that's like hair. Some people have straight hair and some curly.'

She spluttered, 'You haven't got a curly willy though,' and broke into a laugh.

The little girl had an irresistible laugh, and I followed her cue.

'A curly Willy! ha ha ha.'

'Like a pigs tail!' I exploded.

We shook with laughter, and I slipped on the mud and fell down swallowing water as I did. I came up spluttering, and the little girl laughed, even louder, holding her sides.

When we eventually calmed down, I said, 'Why don't you come in? the water's just right.'

'I haven't got a costume.'

'Neither have I, have I?'

'Oh all right.'

She slipped out of her dress and underclothes and skipped into the water.

'Oh! It's cold.'

'Only at first.'

'What's your name?'

'William.'

'And yours.'

'Sally.'

'But I think I prefer to call you Curly, though,' She said. At this, we both flailed about with mirth, both

swallowing enough water to fill a fishbowl. After a while, in one of the lapses, I said, 'You've got loads and loads of hair.'

'I know.'

'And it's very red.'

'Yes. Like my mum.'

It seemed hours before a melodious voice reached us from above, 'Sally?'

'Over here, mummy.'

Then a tall figure with an even more fantastic display of red hair appeared through the undergrowth. The flaming apparition stood, with hands on hips, and observed the two of us sitting, muddy, in the shallow water.

'Well! Now what have we got here?' she laughed. The same musical laugh as her daughter.

We both stood up and walked towards her.

'Well, well!' she exclaimed looking us both up and down.

'Look, mummy. Isn't he white in the middle?'

'It's because of my shorts,' I added.

We stood before her stark naked.

'Well,' she smiled, 'you're all wet now.'

'That's all right. I live just over there.'

I picked up my cotton T-shirt.

'Here. You can dry yourself with this. I can just run home and get dried there. We've got towels there, you know.'

'Oh really?' Sally's mother smiled. 'That must be nice.' Then she looked down at me. 'You had better put your shorts back on first though,' she said as she bent to dry her daughter. 'Beware of stinging nettles!'

Sally and I burst into laughter.

## BAIT

'Come on Sally. Time to be going. Goodbye young gentleman.'

'His name is William.' said sally, looking up at her mother, who nodded.

'Goodbye William.' And they disappeared back through the trees toward The George.

'Goodbye Curly,' Sally called over her shoulder.

'Bye Sally.'

And that is how I met Sally, who twenty years' latter would save my life.

From that time on, we met almost every other week.

Weeks then turned into months and then into years, and our friendship never really altered, from that day to this.

When we got a little older, our parents imposed bathing clothes, but other than this, little changed in our innocent and uncomplicated relationship. As we grew, we started taking walks then longer and longer walks, so that I could show her my favourite spots and discoveries. We once walked all the way round Arundel castle via the woods, and I taught her how to sneak in by the back way, without paying.

Her parents quickly gave up trying to dress her up for their outings to the The George, and gave way to more practical jeans and T-shirts. Our parents met from time to time for a beer at the pub or tea in our garden, but we never concerned ourselves with them. I don't think they were ever very close, but apparently, my relationship with Sally made for a special bond between them.

Casting my mind back, I don't think I ever really thought of Sally as a girl, or later as a young woman, and I suspect that she felt the same about me. How

this came to be, I don't know, because I soon had every reason to think about females in other terms.

Sally became more and more beautiful as the years passed. Her hair grew longer and thicker and if that is possible, redder. Wherever we went together, heads would turn to observe the boy with the redheaded girl.

Regardless of the passage of time, the nickname 'Curly' stuck though. However, when she was displeased with me in some way, she called me William. If, however, she was just in an ironical mood, Willy was the name she used.

In any case, when I eventually went to university, we were still on the same excellent terms and remained so, through all sorts of strange and unexpected events.

When I eventually moved to Grenoble, Sally frequently came and spent holidays with me, and I think we must have walked over half the Alps together.

I used to joke by saying that we were unlikely ever to get lost because her red hair acted like a beacon and must be visible at a range of at least 10km, and probably even from orbital satellites.

As I said earlier, the warm days and evenings provided a never-ending supply of pretty, well-dressed and bored girls. The boys seemed to keep away, for some reason, which I never grasped. This was probably because the draw of the river was far greater than any other emotion.

Anyway, at six years old, these girls proved quite entertaining playmates, albeit somewhat bossy, when it came to choosing games. I don't think that I was particularly good looking and certainly not well

## BAIT

dressed, but I suppose that most often I merely happened to be the only boy around.

As I grew older, our games became less varied and from twelve onwards, they were invariably connected with physical exploration.

The girls remained bossy, but this meant that in a short space of time I learnt a great deal about, how girls work and above all, what they liked boys to do. By fifteen, I had extensive experience and knowledge of what I was expected to do with the various tools at my disposition. I had also learnt that it was a far better plan and usually more entertaining, to plead ignorance, and sometimes even innocence.

So, when I attained the venerable age of seventeen, there were not many tricks I didn't know about.

Thinking back then, it seems amazing that I avoided becoming arrogant about this. Mind you, that may be simply because I had no close enough friends to share this with, or to show off to.

### **Annexe 3 : My Studies and Music**

In the long sitting room at Burpham, we had a very good, albeit shabby, upright piano. Apart from my aunt during her visits, nobody ever played.

My aunt was a mixed personality, who laughed and joked all day, drank surprising quantities of wine, and became instantly melancholic as soon as she opened the piano lid. The sadder the tune, the better she seemed to like it and the more often she played it.

My mother sometimes remonstrated with her about this, encouraging her to play something lively and gay. While she did occasionally accept to take up this challenge, she would start, full of energy, but inevitably, melancholy would slip back into her interpretation even when the pieces were composed in a major key.

She could make even the brightest movements of Handel's Water music, sound like an elegy for the death of some forgotten medieval queen.

My Aunt was the elder of my mother's sisters and seemed extremely old to me in those days. She usually came to stay at Christmas and Easter and sometimes during the summer. Her choice of music and style of interpretation inevitably had a profound influence on my musical tastes in later years. I remember to this very day, the time when she brought home a boxed set of the Messiah in the version by Christopher Hogwood and the Academy of Ancient Music. I had never thought that anything could be so magnificent. I couldn't imagine how someone could

## BAIT

have conjured up out of thin air, such musical perfection. It was as though it had always existed, like the huge Cullinan Diamond, lying hidden away in the bowels of the earth, waiting patiently for someone to discover it and bring out to be admired.

My aunt's favourite occupation was sitting quietly, watching other people work. She did this very conscientiously never neglecting to include each of us in her daily round. She would sit in the garden for hours watching my mother tend the flowers, watch her while she prepared our meals, would sit by my father while he did what studio potters do, 'potter' I suppose, and watch me playing when she could locate me.

This behaviour didn't trouble me while I was playing in the garden or splashing about in the river, but she would have been less welcome when girls were involved.

We got on very well together, and she seemed to get on well with Sally and above all never made the embarrassing comments some adults feel it is their duty to make. She was simply content to tag on to whatever was happening, without the slightest desire to criticise constructively or otherwise. She always gladly lent a helping hand whenever asked and after all, was no trouble to the family at all. This characteristic is doubtlessly why my parents always made her welcome.

I am not sure where she lived during my youth, but I seem to remember being told that she had a big flat in one of the nice parts of London. As I never went to visit her, I don't know much about her life away from Burpham.

My introduction to playing music occurred completely unexpectedly when I was about eleven years old.

One peaceful July evening I was playing in the front garden, when one of my dad's oldest friends turned up in his battered old van and, with my father, heaved an electric piano out of the back. I was informed that this was for me, and it was accordingly humped up to my room, installed, plugged in, tested and that was that. This instrument had been on the road with a group for years and was a genuine Fender-Rhodes. It was as battered and damaged as the van in which it had been delivered and was decorated by innumerable beer-glass stains. There were also so many cigarette burns along the front lip of the lid that it looked like some medieval carving work.

Even today, it smells of cigarettes and stale beer, which might explain why when I was old enough, I preferred draft cider or wine and never took to smoking.

The fact that this was a legendary brand of instrument, meant nothing at all to me, but I managed to smile and appear suitably impressed and grateful. The only problem with the keyboard was that both the top five and the lower three notes didn't work. I guessed that this had never been a problem for the group because they only seemed to use the middle three octaves anyway.

Once the testing was finished, my father and his pal went off to the George for a glass of beer and to reminisce about the good old days. For my part, I sat on the stool and gazed at the new addition to the room's furniture, not knowing what to think about it.



## BAIT

The best thing about this instrument was that I could plug in a pair of headphones. This possibility meant that nobody ever knew how poorly I played and how long I stumbled through tunes before they become recognisable as music. I only ever unplugged them when I was confident that I had got enough of the chords perfect and the timing roughly right.

I suppose that over the years I must have spent thousands of hours messing about in my bedroom with this instrument. It's still there today, more than 30 years later and still works perfectly, minus the same eight notes.

Unfortunately, though, my aunt insisted straight away on my having proper lessons. However, and luckily for me, the task of coaxing a teacher out to our isolated village on a regular basis proved a difficult one. Consequently, I was eventually permitted to teach myself, or, as my aunt put it, mess about.

I suppose I must have started writing songs when I was sixteen. I certainly have a few pages of sheet music dated just before my seventeenth birthday. I am still surprised that the lyrics were quite good, given my age and knowledge of the outside world. I seemed to have a talent of extrapolating from my very limited universe into a much wider one. It may have been some other manifestation of this same talent, which attracted me to scientific research, many years later.

So, music and especially songwriting gradually became my companions during my period of serious studies, and certainly helped me keep stress at bay during the more difficult passages.

My A-levels exams didn't cause me much trouble or even much stress. I guess that this was because,

at the time, I didn't take any of this very seriously. My parents never put me under any pressure and didn't seem to pay much attention. This, of course, was incorrect, and I now know that my progress was followed very carefully and covert discussions were held with my various masters.

When one day my mother mentioned further studies, university and choice of subject, I simply said: 'Ok, chemistry.'

'Chemistry?' said my dad.

'Yes, I'd like to design perfumes.' I was sitting on the garden bench between my parents who were sipping a chilled Provence rosé wine, in tall, dew-beaded glasses.

They smiled at each other across, me.

'OK.' said my dad, 'Where?'

'Southampton looks nice,' I commented.

'Not Oxford or Cambridge?'

'Southampton seems just as good technically, and it's much closer home. I could easily get home at weekends.'

My mother turned and studied me, 'Don't you want to enjoy university life and have a bit of fun?'

'Getting blind drunk, or playing at being an intellectual isn't my idea of fun. It's quiet here, and I have my piano and the garden and the river and walking.'

'But please remember, William,' interrupted my dad, 'your mother is a snob, so Oxford would certainly be a good move. Politically speaking.'

'Really!' exclaimed my mum. 'But are you sure? Not Oxford?'

'No. Southampton suits me. I can always stay over there for weekends if ever it looks like being worth it.'

## BAIT

As it turned out, I found that it was very rarely worth it.

So I'll skim over this period also because I took the studies in my stride. I won't pretend that I found it all easy, but I just got down and worked at it when required. I also found as it had been during my early experience with girls, the tactics of admitting a lack of understanding produced just as good results with my professors. Asking for help and then demonstrating application, inevitably provided me with the reputation of an enthusiastic and hardworking student. I was thus on quite good terms with most of my university teachers who I respected in turn.

The years slipped by, in the same easy way as the rest of my life had been, and without seeing it come, the finals were on me and just as quickly over. After the results, I was approached by one of my favourite teachers and asked if I had thought about postgraduate studies.

I said I hadn't.

Would I be interested?

'Yes, I would.'

Would I be interested in studying abroad?

'Yes, I would.'

Did I speak and foreign language?

'French fluently.'

Was I still interested in the perfume industry?

'Yes.'

'Ever heard about Bio-Active molecular synthesis?'

'No, sounds interesting though.'

'It is.'

'Anything against Grenoble?'

'No.'

'I'll sort out a grant then.'

And that's how the rest of my life started, I suppose.

This decision also triggered a chain of apparently unconnected events which led to some unexpected events for which I was unprepared.

During this time my friend Sally had been studying history at Oxford.

This subject had been her passion since she was about sixteen. Like me, she had always been a hard worker and sailed through her studies with little real trouble. Like all passionate people, she never considered study as being work, so she didn't count the hours passed in clarifying a given event, its origins and its consequences.

Our frequent treks together were often punctuated by her historical digressions. These could sometimes last for an hour or more, if we failed to reach our destination, or if the pub aimed at proved to be closed.

When we did reach one of these halts, even when crowded, a little clearing usually seemed to form around us. Either we smelt strongly of the road, or Sally's flaming red hair and passionate discussion, scared people away. While she chatted on, she was often actually putting into words and testing out, ideas and theories that had formed themselves of their own accord in some corner of her subconscious mind. Sometimes she would suddenly break off in mid-discussion when unexpectedly coming up against a defect in her reasoning. We would then walk on in silence for some time, while she would mull this over.

Generally, with a little laugh, or sometimes a sigh, and a slight shake of her mane of hair, she would admit defeat.

BAIT

‘Wrong again... more thought required there, don’t you think your honour.’

The truth is that we were never bored together. One of us always had something to say or some thoughts to share.

It is true that our fields of study were worlds apart, and this is undoubtedly one of the reasons for which we rarely disagreed.

She too had been offered a PhD and seemed poised to accept it. I admit that at the time, I couldn’t imagine what a thesis in history could include, where it would lead her, or even what use it could be to society. I would undoubtedly have criticised this as a waste of time and money if it had been anyone else then Sally.

Anyway, the subject she had been offered was to address the case of ‘art confiscation and related ‘troubles’ during the last war period’.

This thesis was to be a joint one, with the Modern and Contemporary History Department of the famous Sorbonne University, in Paris.

Although neither of us mentioned this, I think that this coincidence of locations influenced our decisions to accept our propositions.

However, there were unsuspected consequences of her choice of topic, which neither of us could have predicted at the time.

## **Annexe 4 : Moving to France**

My last summer before leaving for France was as timeless and unending as usual. I spent the long warm, humming days, wandering around the peaceful countryside. Some afternoons I spent dozing in the shifting dappled shadows under a twisted oak, listening to the wind swishing amongst the leaves high above. On other occasions, with legs stretched lazily out under weather-aged inn tables, I spent peaceful hours with a pint or two of draft cider and a ploughman's lunch.

Some morning, when the sun came shining through my bedroom windows, I occupied filled the time happily composing slow melancholy melodies with heart-rending lyrics. The peaceful tiredness of my solitary homeward tramps through tall green ferns in the gathering dusk was inseparable from this period. Each day's end was punctuated by the quiet, dreamy evenings in the garden, amongst the perfumes of sweet peas, roses and peonies.

The only notable event that summer was the unexpected replacement of the cottage's original windows with top quality double glazed ones. A contractor friend of my father did this almost free of charge, using 'leftovers' he had accumulated over the years, from his housing estate contracts. The main consequence of this was that nearly every window was different, either in style or in colour. This modification gave the cottage a curious cock-eyed look, which turned out to be entirely in keeping with the place, so my parents didn't bother about it.

## BAIT

Some of the windows were even soundproofed, lending an uncanny quietness to the rooms where they were installed. My bedroom was one so equipped, and I often ended up leaving the window ajar, to be able to hear the birds in the garden. In any case, this made the place much cosier during the colder periods of the year and cut the heating bill drastically. This advantage is not to be sniffed at when you count on selling handmade pottery for a living.

Strangely though, my parents never seemed to have money problems or even to talk about it.

I knew that the cottage had come from my great grandmother on my mother's side who had purchased it as a summer retreat, but that's all I knew really. So, I thought, at some period there had been money in the family, but I never troubled myself with what produced it.

The weekend before leaving for France, Sally and I set off for a trek, heading north to Amberly, then east across the downs to Washington, south to Findon and then back west across the downs to home. All the fields had by now been harvested, and the golden stubble of the remaining stalks seemed to make the land appear much more arid than it was. Our path wound on along a chalk-scattered path over the top of Springhead hill, with views all the way down to the sea

'You ought to put a hat on Sally.' I smiled

'Why's that?'

'You're likely to set the whole place on fire.'

She glanced at me askance.

I ruffled my hair and pointed to hers.

'Funny boy.' she laughed, walking on.

This arid scenery inevitably reinforced the sensation of thirst, resulting in an unplanned detour

from our main track to a popular pub along the way. The extra miles this added to our walk and also necessitated longer than planned-for rests.

We had initially intended to push on as far as Chanctonbury Ring, to see if we could spot any sign of the devil or his recent work. Unfortunately, however, a Ploughman's Lunch accompanied by a couple of pints of draft cider put an end to that part of the project.

So, by the time we eventually skirted Harrow hill, dragged wearily back along Perry ridge and down into Burpham, it was already late on Saturday evening.

My parents were used to my very approximate notion of the passing of time and had waited for us before eating. Even then, they sent us off to shower, before allowing us to sit down to dinner. It was therefore after nine when we reassembled in the garden around the grinding-stone table, where we managed to do the honours to a bottle and a half of cold French rosé.

On occasions like this, Sally usually stayed the night, was put up in the spare bedroom and always overslept the following Sunday morning. My mother seemed to know instinctively when Sally would appear and would be seen setting out her coffee cup, bread butter homemade jam, a short time before the red hair appeared around the kitchen door. If I were already off somewhere, my mother would take the tray out to the stone table, and they would sit chatting together until I returned.

On this last evening, after our peaceful dinner, my mother was lying back in an armchair reading 'Jeeves in the Offing.' She had every single book by



## BAIT

Wodehouse, and they were all well worn. My mother would choose at random amongst the hundreds and hundreds of paperbacks the two of them had accumulated over the years. Many were second hand with faded covers and a musty smell, but my mother defended herself by saying that the words inside the covers meant the same, however much you paid. There were so many to choose from that an entire wall was lined with bookshelves from floor to ceiling. Those searching for a serious book to study would, however, have been disappointed because no intellectual authors found a permanent abour in our home, except for a few travel books and technical stuff about pottery or plant care.

At this moment, I was reading a book describing the mountain treks around Grenoble, Sally was engrossed in a history magazine, and my father was sipping some of his best Armagnac, sitting on the stone bench outside the kitchen door watching the evening shadows.

My mother was chuckling to herself over her book, then stood up, came over to where I sat and pointed to a phrase on the page she was reading.

I read, 'Miss Wickham, Jeeves once said to me. Lacks seriousness. She is volatile and frivolous. I would always hesitate to recommend as a life partner, a lady with such a vivid shade of red hair.' My mother placed her free hand on my shoulder, 'absolute rot, don't you think?'

I shot a rapid glance up at her face then over at Sally, whose burnished red hair shone under the warm light of the reading lamp. My mother smiled to herself and went back to her chair, without waiting for, or expecting an answer.

So these were the memories of that last summer, that I carried away with me when embarking on a new phase of my life.

Before taking up my residence at Grenoble, I had promised to spend a few days with my parent's friends in Paris. I was always given a comfortable bedroom when visiting them in their sprawling house, and I invariably slept, eat and drank excellently.

Paris is a place where I've found it nigh on impossible to become bored, so the few days of this stay passed all too fast. For once I had the pleasure of meeting Margaux, again. I had often seen her photos, so I was aware that she had grown into a lovely young woman. However, the pictures hardly did justice to the girl herself. She had become a magnificent example of the young Parisienne, on whom much money and time had been spent. Her gorgeous chestnut hair was just as I remembered, except that there seemed somehow to be more of it now and it seemed to shine as if each strand had been individually polished.

Margaux was slightly shorter than her mother, but I suppose just over five feet six, which was perfect for me. I prefer not to talk about her profile and better still, not to think about it, because it belonged to the stuff of dreams. Her face was a lovely oval shape, and her skin was flawless, smooth and soft looking. However, the thing that drew the attention was her eyes, which were startling. Their colour was darkish brown, and they had golden filaments running outwards like an image of the sun when the core has been masked with smoked glass. Her nose was in perfect proportion to her other features and neither long and

## BAIT

straight like her mother's nor large and curved, like her father's. Her smile was a magnificent and disarming thing, filled with seemingly thousands of little white teeth. She was simply but elegantly dressed in white linen shorts and shirt and a soft black jacket. The sleeves of the jacket were rolled up with expert precision, and the shirt was carefully opened showing just the correct amount of tanned skin. Her hands and her tanned arms were thin and elegant and her fingers perfectly manicured. Her legs were long well-proportioned and also perfectly tanned while on her feet she wore white, high heeled leather sandals.

Her mother stepped quietly into the room from the garden, carrying a bunch of some leafy stuff, which looked like a smaller version of rhubarb.

She glanced at me knowingly, 'Yes, I have to agree with you, William. I do think I've done a very fair job with this one,' She smiled. 'I might perhaps have made the lips slightly thicker, but the smile takes up too much space as it is.'

'Maman! Really! Stop it!'

Margaux took me by the arm, 'Viens, come with me before she succeeds in embarrassing one of us.'

Her mother smiled, 'That would be almost impossible in your case Chérie.'

'Stop it, Maman!' Margaux led me through the kitchen and out into the garden at the back of the house, under the light shadow of a group of three ancient weeping willows.

A swing had been fixed to one of the higher branches, and kicking off her expensive sandals, she slid on it and pushed-off backwards with her long legs. I pulled one of the deck chairs across the lawn, from

where they had been assembled in a neat circle, and eased myself down into it.

'So what have you been doing with yourself?' she asked. 'I've already got most of the basic stuff from Maman. But certainly not all the important bits.' On the return swing, she looked down on me. 'For example, why go to dirty Grenoble, when you could stay in your lovely cottage at Arundel?'

'Burpham,' I corrected.

'Same thing, seen from here.' As she waited for my reply, swinging back and forth, her hair fell back behind her, then waved forwards completely masking her face.

'Isn't all that stuff heavy to carry around with you all the time?' I nodded.

'Don't try and change the subject. Anyway, over the generations, the family genetic stock has evolved to provide us with powerful neck muscles. What interests you so much about my hair.'

'I suppose I must still be under the spell of the kiss on the cheek you gave me when we first met.'

'Ah, I thought so! So you've been in love with me ever since. Eh bien, c'est la vie.'

She smiled wryly. 'Yes, that's life, I suppose.'

'I'm doing that all the time you know. It's most unfortunate. It frequently causes me the most dreadful spasms of remorse. But I can't help it. I'm made like that, I suppose.'

'Yes, it must be inconvenient to have been landed with such a troublesome gift.'

'Yes. But I struggle along somehow.'

'Luckily you have your mother to support you when the going gets too hard for you.'

BAIT

Margaux abruptly stopped the swing and observed me with flaring eyes. 'The going never gets too hard for me.'

This unexpected reaction startled me, but some years later she was to more than amply prove the truth of it.

She pushed off again and started to swing slowly, some of the softness returning to her eyes, and added.

'So?'

'OK, so why a PhD, and why in France? Is that the question?'

'That's it. I'm all ears.'

'Well, firstly I just like learning new things.'

'You like challenges?' she suggested, stopping swinging again for a few seconds.

'No. It's the understanding of new things I like.'

Margaux nodded and kept on swinging while I tried to adjust my position in the deck chair. She had that peculiar gift, of looking at one with a small smile and a specific tilt of the head which gave one the impression that she had attached her entire attention to what one was saying.

'But I'd never really thought about research before. When my professor asked, I accepted before I even thought about what it meant. Then when I had thought about it, I was above all amazed that anyone had even thought of proposing it to me. It doesn't mean learning things that people have known for centuries, but trying to explain things nobody understands yet.' I struggled out of my chair and started wandering back and forth in front of Margaux just out of reach of her outreached legs as they swung outwards. 'I don't

know if I'll be any good at it,' I continued, 'but once I understood that that was what a PhD was about, how could I resist?'

She made a typically French exclamatory noise, which is impossible to describe without it looking silly in words. 'No, I can imagine that.'

'I've never heard of the subject he proposed before but, well...'

'You just jumped at it, like a little boy at an unexpected present...'

'Ha! Yes. You're probably right.'

'Don't explain the subject, please! It's too hot. But why Grenoble?'

'That's where the lab is. My prof collaborates with the national labs there, the CNRS, and that's a pretty simple explanation too. I just said Yes once, and all the rest just ran on from there.'

'You're a bit of an adventurer really,' she hesitated.

'No,' I said.? 'More like a little boy running after butterflies and not paying any attention to where he's going.'

'What a lovely metaphor!' She jumped off the swing in mid-air, landing lightly on her feet, and looked me straight in the eyes again. 'Let's go in and see when dinner will be ready. Come on.' She put her arm through mine as we walked. 'Yes. A little boy with a big heart...hum...! I'll have to keep an eye on you, or you'll be getting into all sorts of trouble all alone own there at Grenoble.'

Well, she kept her promise, but in spite of that, I did manage to get into some pretty tight spots all the same.

## BAIT

At about seven, we assembled under the trees for an aperitif. Margaux and her mother were dressed in simple (for them) comfortable clothes, worth several months of my grant each, I guessed. I suspect that the idea that clothes could be made out of anything else than natural fibres had probably never occurred to either of these two women.

Antoine arrived home from work at that precise moment and was bending down to kiss his wife, still in his suit, as I crossed the grass to join them. He smiled and tapped the arm of the deck chair beside him. He slipped off his jacket, hanging it with practised care, over the back of one of one of the unused chairs in the perfect circle I had broken up earlier. As usual, he kept his tie on rather than dragging it off as a sign of the end of a day's work, but this didn't seem to trouble him even given the mid-summer heat.

I don't think I ever saw him sweat. It was as if the temperature was just right for him, rather than sweltering hot. Perhaps he had been born directly in a three-piece suit and that from time to time, he merely moulted into a new one. At the time, he must have been about fifty and almost ten years older than his wife. He had heavy features, but his bronzed face was more lined by smiling and laughter than by frowns or worries or hatred. Time had by this time, robbed him of almost all his hair and all that remained was a narrow silver band on each side of his head.

He was shortish and round without being fat, and his tailor-made cotton shirts minimised this even more. I assumed that he worked as director or president of one or other of the large international groups who have their headquarters in the expensive western suburbs of Paris. I was right in this respect,

but it was only years later that I got to know his real line of work, which was to come as a surprise to me and turned out to be useful in the end.

He was the sort of person who asked questions but also somehow gave the impression that one should not take the liberty of asking him any. As his wife and daughter, he was extremely good at making one feel at ease and that whatever one had to contribute to a discussion was a valuable addition. Luckily, they were all so at ease in their expensive clothes that I didn't ever feel out of place in my rather cheap English ones.

Anne-Laure suddenly leant over to her daughter and pushed back the girl's hair. 'I'm not sure that those earrings are not just a little too showy Chérie.'

'They are gold you know.'

'Naturally dear. But they are just a fraction too big, don't you think?'

'I think they are perfect. William. What do you think?'

'Ho, Ho! leave the poor boy out of your fights, girls.' Her father interrupted.

'Too big!'

'A little bigger than that and they would be almost common!'

'Common? Papa!'

Antoine smiled. 'On anyone else, they might just be considered too big, but on you, they are perfect. Don't you agree, William?'

'That's certainly what your mother meant, Margaux' I improvised.

Anne-Laure shook her head with a wry little smile and sighed deliberately loudly.

'Men!'



BAIT

## **The End.**

If you have enjoyed this book, please share the download link with your friends and via social networks to help me get my writing recognised.

## **Post Scriptum**

Sadly, since writing this novel, the 'Hotel de la Poste' at Autrans, in which many of the events took place, has closed. The owners have converted the rooms into a number of highly comfortable holiday flats. I wish them luck with this new project.