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Stephen William ROWE ¹

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- 3) Agent Vx
- 4) The Songwriter

The Stone Scenario

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- 2) Three Men in a Panic Vol 2

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

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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.

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'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'.

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

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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.

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

<https://stephen-william-rowe.com>

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.

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

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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 outsized 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.

'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.'

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'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.'

‘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.’

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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

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.’

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'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.