

HATE



Stephen William ROWE

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

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Biography:

Doctor Stephen William ROWE has worked for most of his active life as an industrial research scientist. His speciality, 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

Authors Note:

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

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

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

Novels by Stephen William ROWE

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- 2) Three Men in a Panic Vol 2
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- 1) The Salat Quartet
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Chapter 1

Lida Niemela grunted and banged the plate onto her tray. During these first six months of her life term, she had learnt that, however bad the food was, it could always get worse. She wondered idly if this wasn't the primary motivation behind most attempted escapes from the prison.

She down sat on one of the faded yellow plastic chairs and, ignoring her neighbours, picked up her fork.

'God! Christ, this is disgusting,' she snorted.

The guard nearest her turned his head, 'One of Chef's masterpieces again?' he asked ruefully.

'Watch out for your balls, funny boy. You'd be surprised what damage fingernails can inflict.' She illustrated this by mimicking a pincer-like movement with her free hand.

The guard sniffed bravely, but he knew only too well what this ruthless woman was capable of doing. Each morning and afternoon, since her arrival, she trained for at least an hour. The night wardens had even reported that she would do push-ups and knee bends when she couldn't sleep until she was running with perspiration. If anything, she was in better physical form now than when she had arrived, which was saying a lot.

The guard knew that a physically strong and mentally agile life-prisoner spells trouble for prison staff, and Lida was a perfect example of this. When burdened with prisoners of this calibre, many prison governors had secretly regretted the abolition of the death sentence.

Sighing, Lida took another mouthful and swallowed it fast to avoid the taste. God! This time it was disgusting. 'Hey!' she sneered, 'do they have a competition to recruit cooks here or do they just pick up the tramps from under the bridges to give them a home?'

She washed it down with a glass of milk, 'Christ'. Even the milk was foul today.

She sniffed the glass. 'Hey, someone's pissed in my milk.'

The guard turned once more. 'No more than usual.'

'Oh, go and get stuffed you!'

The guard did not answer, knowing only too well where it would lead if he did. He wouldn't be able to have his own lunch until this lot had finished and were out in the exercise yard.

The last thing he wanted was trouble. Why was it that Saturdays were always the worst? Maybe, because the regular weekday kitchen staff were more careful with the cooking. He suspected that the weekend staff had some scam to make money by getting the ingredients cheap. Still, he was not interested enough to investigate.

Eventually, though, the twenty or so "lifers" filed out of the room. The kitchen staff were allowed in to clean up, and the guards could at last eat.

Outside in the exercise court, Lida spat on the earth, 'God! That was terrible. And the milk!'

Five minutes later, a cold sweat broke out all over her, and in five more, she was unconscious.

Two minutes more, and she was in the infirmary. The nurse diagnosed her with food poisoning.

Five minutes later, the nurse called the governor. Lida Niemela was dying.

For an instant, the director relaxed and went as far as sighing (if only they would all die). He shook himself out of this state, 'OK. Call the anti-poison ward at Helsinki and get her over there double fast.'

A prison death was always big trouble for a governor, especially when it concerned an inmate of one of the very few high-security units such as this one at Turku.

If food poisoning were the cause, then he would be directly responsible, whatever the origin. The press would have a field day, questions to the government, etc.

The opposition party and human rights activists would then all jump on the bandwagon. They'd highlight the lack

of ministry investment, the shortcomings of the government decisions, and the general inadequacy or even incompetence of prison staff. If they did their job well, the minister would be forced into action, which inevitably meant firing the prison governor.

At just over sixty, this was not an outcome he was keen on embracing. 'No. I'll call them myself. Get the woman ready and jump to it.'

An emergency ambulance crew arrived, siren wailing, in less than ten minutes, and discovered an inert and grey-skinned young woman unconscious but still breathing. It took them only a short time to diagnose something considerably more potent than common food poisoning.

During the transport, they managed to do a stomach pumping and called ahead for the ward to prepare a full blood transfusion.

The team at Helsinki was a top-notch one, and they saved Lida without too much trouble.

In a few hours, she was out of danger.

That evening the hospital's chief consultant made a discrete call to the prison director. He said that she was alive. However, he added, that Lida had obviously been intentionally poisoned. He concluded that the dose used had been too low to cause rapid death and that she would probably have few side effects, if any at all.

The Prison governor relaxed but asked for her to be kept isolated in the special ward. He would organise for guards to be on duty at the door for the duration of her stay there.

He neglected to inform the Hospital director as to just how dangerous Lida really was. He mused, however, that if she were to escape, or if some other accident was to occur to her, then the blame would fall on the hospital and not him.

In any case, he had already decided to keep quiet about the poisoning. If this point were to leak out, it would mean

no end of trouble, and he would have to prove that he was taking all the safety measures needed.

He would be forced into showing action, which meant setting up an official enquiry and interviewing the entire staff. The newspapers would then hound him, and he would undoubtedly be called in to explain the incident to the minister. 'God, no!' He would not allow that ball to start rolling because stopping it again was almost impossible.

A wilfully poisoned Lida Niamela was almost as inconvenient as a dead one and would in all probability lead to the same results, i.e., getting the sack...

Consequently, the public never heard about the attempted murder of Lida Niemela at Finland's Turku Prison.

Chapter 2

Lida Niemela did eventually learn about the attempt on her life.

However, before this, she had a few extremely rough days. During this period of semi-consciousness, she felt like death, and she looked like it too. Because of this, the staff assumed her to be too ill to pay attention to their discussion. Therefore, they freely exchanged their opinions about the case.

But whatever the state of her body, Lida's brain and hearing worked perfectly, and she learnt much more than she would otherwise have done.

'So,' she mused, 'Someone laced my food, did they? That's interesting.' Thinking back, she guessed that it must have been in the milk.

She knew that getting the small volume of poison which would have been necessary, into the prison must have been an easy and low-risk task. She also saw that the main difficulty would have been to make sure the right person got it. This observation meant it had to be the woman behind the counter — the one who had handed her the glass. In all probability, the same woman had also smuggled the stuff through the security check.

Lida tried to conjure up the image of that woman in her mind but failed.

All the same, a detail was niggling at the back of her mind. Such a poisoning attempt would have needed meticulous planning and timing.

The kitchen staff were all uneducated people and certainly not capable of this. So, Someone outside must be behind this. Someone with brains. It was also plainly evident to Lida that Someone with brains would never have gone to all that trouble and then have got the lethal dose wrong. He, or she, would undoubtedly have put much more than the lethal dose. The person would want

to make sure that she would have some permanently handicapping side effects even if she didn't die.

What was more, to ensure that the poisoning would be a success, an intelligent person would have planned it for the end of the evening meal. After eating their evening meal, he or she would know that the life prisoners were always quickly put back behind their bolted doors. In this case, by the time she was discovered, it would have been too late.

The mid-day meal was the worst possible choice because it was invariably followed by a period in the outdoor exercise enclosure.

She reflected that the explanation could only be one of two things. Either Someone wanted to give her a big fright or wanted to get her outside the prison walls to organise an escape.

The latter seemed the only reasonable one. However, in that case, the escape must be part of some other larger scheme.

In that case, who was likely to be behind this? Someone who wanted her out for a good reason. This pointed to a person who needed a very unpleasant job done, no-questions-asked.

These thoughts and reflections came in a rush during one of the few moments when she didn't feel three-quarters dead. She had been lying prone for several days and had had ample time to take stock and see that she was in a room with barred windows. She had also noted the guard, sitting on a chair against the corridor wall facing her door.

She guessed, therefore, that if an escape were being planned, the organiser would want to make sure that she was out of danger before attempting anything. On the other hand, maybe they were counting on her acting on her own.

Lida decided that the crucial point was to build strength and, above all, to avoid being sent back to the prison too

early. She thus prepared herself to play at being far weaker than she was while keeping an eye open for a signal.

Two days later, Lida received a 'Get well quick' card from; "Your very dearest aunty Hatty". It contained a message saying she hoped to be able to see her very soon.

The guard checked the card before handing it to her. However, he knew nothing about Lida except that she was not to be trifled with, even when seriously ill. The message ended, "Sorry, not near enough to be able to help, but you'll no doubt be able to manage on your own as usual. Love from all of us here at Vaasa."

There was a PS. 'Your brother now lives just around the corner from the hospital, but you know him too well to expect a visit.'

Lida read this with considerable interest and thanked the guard. She then sat the card on her bedside table and smiled to herself.

She hadn't got any aunts, let alone one called Hatty. She didn't have a brother either or any family at all, for that matter. The sender's address printed on the back of the envelope was utterly unknown to her.

Anyhow, this was the signal she had been expecting.

It proved that the whole thing was a setup, as she had guessed. The message also confirmed that she was expected to escape by her own means and go to the address given. The latter must be nearby, just around the corner, no doubt. She reflected that the person behind this did not intend to get his hands dirty.

At this point, one of the nurses pushed open the door and entered carrying a pile of clothes. Lida pushed herself up on her elbow and scowled at the young girl. A little over twenty at the most, she guessed.

'Here are your clothes Miss Niemela. All nicely cleaned and pressed.'

'Thanks. Like that, I'll look my very best in the police car.'

The nurse set the clothes neatly on a shelf in the cupboard and turned to Lida. 'Sister thinks you'll soon be well enough to leave us.'

Lida looked over at her frowning. 'Well, I don't feel like it.' She retorted. 'My guts still feel like they are full of bleach.' The girl smiled over at her, 'Sister says you're lucky to be alive, Miss Niemela.'

Lida glanced back at her and frowned again, 'Does she? I wonder what makes her think that.'

The young nurses' eyes opened wide with surprise at this unexpected reply. Finding herself unable to think of an answer, she turned her back and pretended to be tidying the cupboard.

Lida let herself fall back onto her pillow. 'Has Sister spent much time in prison?' she said.

The girl spun around astonished, 'Of course not. What an idea!'

'I guessed as much,' sneered the prone Lida.

The nurse, grasping for something to say, replied, 'Anyway, sister thinks you're much stronger now, and that's certainly comforting...' her voice trailed off.

'If that comforts Sister,' retorted Lida, 'then that's no doubt good for her morale. I guess that what's good for her morale is good news for the rest of you too.'

The nurse turned back and nodded. 'You're right there, Miss Niemela,' and left the room. She was unsure of how to interpret all that had passed between them in that brief period. In any case, it would be good fun repeating those incredible remarks to her friends that evening at the restaurant.

This young woman had become increasingly popular since people had learnt that she was the nurse to an international criminal and ruthless murderer. She understood perfectly that the many invitations she received did not signify that the people liked her or

particularly appreciated her company. Nevertheless, she was quite happy to enjoy the passing celebrity and the free meals and drinks that went with it. It had also enabled her to meet some very handsome young men. The girlfriends and wives of these men would soon learn that it had been an unfortunate error to have invited her.

In most cases, these wives and girlfriends had not realised quite how much their old school friend's figure had developed since their time together. Figures always tended to prove troublesome where men were involved. Furthermore, some men had a thing about nurses. She, for one, did not intend to try to prove that their fantasies were unjustified.

Once alone, Lida sat up against the pillows and looked around her. She guessed that she would only have a few days left before being sent back to that damn hole unless she could work something out.

However, she knew that the Sister must have carefully compared the daily analysis results with Lida's outward physical behaviour. Undoubtedly, she must have drawn her own conclusions as to the real state of things. Ward sisters in big hospitals were employed in such positions because they were very good at their jobs. Being good at this sort of job included getting patients out quickly to free up the beds as soon as was possible.

Furthermore, rare are the patients who like being shot out of a hospital to fend for themselves. Lida guessed that it was standard practice for patients to try to appear in need of a few more days of peace and quiet than they actually did. She would thus have to act faster than she had planned.

Lida was entirely correct in her analysis. The ward Sister could not understand why Lida still seemed so weak, while all the indicators were improving even faster than she would have expected. She was also starting to ask herself questions.

In particular, she wondered how Someone with enough determination and brains to organise a poisoning inside a high-security state prison would get the dose so far wrong.

Over the years, she had had to deal with quite a few criminal poisoning cases but had never known this to happen before. The aim of the poisoner was always to reduce the chances of survival to a strict minimum.

Being aware of her patient's unpleasant background and ruthless character, she was not surprised that Someone should want to remove her permanently. That person, she reasoned, would make sure to get the dose right. She rejected the idea that this had been a failed suicide attempt. Lida Niemela was far too hard-headed for that.

Following up this line of thought, she began to wonder if this was not a scam or part of a plan to organise an escape.

She thus decided to mention her concerns to the consultant during his visit the following day and see if he thought it wise to talk to the prison governor about it.

That evening when the Sister did her usual evening rounds, Lida noticed her stern countenance and questioning looks. When Sister mentioned that the consultant would come around to have a look at her the following afternoon, Lida cursed silently. She would have to work faster than she had expected. She would have preferred an extra day or two to gather a little more strength, but she would now have no choice.

Now, during her trips, back and forth to the toilets and the shower, Lida had taken pains to check out the floor plan. Above all, she had memorised the details of the fire escapes and other exits. She had spotted that a glass door in the floor-nurses room opened onto a fire escape and thence directly down into the car park at the back.

She had also noticed that it was on these stairs that the nurses smoked. The women must have found some way

of disabling the alarm that such exits always had. This was excellent news for Lida.

She had noted quite early on that this room was almost always empty, and especially so at about ten-thirty, just after the morning coffee break.

So, the next morning, at ten-fifteen, Lida put her plan into action. She first rolled up her newly ironed clothes in the shower towel. Then, holding this in front of her, she hid her trainers under her loose hospital blouse. Calling the guard to follow her, she made her way quickly to the shower-room before any of the nurses could spot her. Once inside, she turned on the shower to create background noise and was fully dressed in less than a minute.

She then triggered phase two of her plan.

She turned off the shower and called the guard. 'Yep!' he called back through the door. She then asked him if rules and safety regulations permitted him to brush her back for her. When this was met with a weak refusal, she added that there were probably other places that needed a good brushing too.

The guard felt a stirring in his groin. He had seen her body while she had been training out in the exercise court, so he knew it was more than worthy of interest. However, he also knew only too well all about her reputation for ruthlessness and violence.

Lida had naturally counted on him refusing. Had he accepted, she would have had to kill him. This would have taken her only a few seconds once he had opened the door, but that would have wasted valuable time.

This risk was just as clear to the guard himself. He much preferred to retain the full use of his testicles and his eyes. Having his head bashed against the tiled wall was not his idea of fun either. 'Sorry, Lida. Against the rules.'

Lida forced a mocking laugh. 'Ah! They don't make guards like they used to. In any case, I suppose you only have a tiny little dick anyway.'

The guard tried to laugh this off, but she went on.

'Instead of standing out there with your dick sticking out, how about getting my clothes for me. They're in the cupboard in the bedroom.' she paused. 'I was planning on making a run for it before they take me back to that dirty hole.' She laughed, 'But not in the nude...'

Now, this was better, and the guard much preferred this sort of behaviour. It was closer to normal, and he knew how to deal with it.

He leaned closer to the door. 'Trouble is, you might just find a gun between you and the exit door.'

'Oh,' said Lida in a silly voice. 'But you wouldn't shoot at an innocent frail woman now, would you?'

'Try, and you'll see. Where's the stuff?'

'Cupboard behind the door.'

'OK. Now be careful not to slip and bash your brains out on the floor.'

'I'll do my best, tiny,' she scoffed, her fingers already on the door handle.

The guard shook his head with amusement and turned away, smiling to himself. He then strolled off slowly, with the unconscious aim of all those who have nothing to do all day, of making each little activity last as long as possible. This strategy helped to stretch the few activities to fill the tedious hours before going home.

As soon as she heard his boots squeaking on the polished lino floor of the corridor, she opened the shower room door. After a glance, she then skipped barefooted and silently across the passage into the nurse's room. Closing the door quietly, she locked it from inside.

A few seconds later, she had laced up her trainers.

From a corner, she grabbed an old carrier bag. Into this, she emptied the contents of five handbags the nurses had left hanging from pegs on the wall. Lida guessed that

there would be something of use in there somewhere. One never knew what the future held...

By the time the guard had reached Lida's room at the end of the corridor, she had finished this and had pushed open the glass emergency door leading onto the fire escape. The nurses had overridden the alarm contact with a lump of now rock-hard chewing gum.

By the time the guard had gone through the cupboards and not found the clothes and was on his leisurely way back, she was down the back of the main building into the car park. The gate attendant didn't even look up from his newspaper as she slipped past into the road.

The shower was still running when the guard returned. When he got no reply from his repeated shouts and had pushed the door open gingerly, his gun was drawn and levelled. At this moment, Lida was showing a bent old Indian woman the address on the get-well card.

By the time the guard phoned the hospital security, she was halfway there. When eventually the day officer sighed and put down his coffee and replied, Lida was safely behind a closed door, staring at a peculiar old woman.

The woman pointed to a chair and, with a heavy accent, said, 'Not feeling too good. No!'

Lida was not. Her breath was laboured, and she felt sick and dizzy. The woman leaned forward and, taking her hand, felt her pulse. She then looked into Lida's eyes and gently pulled down the lower lid.

She then smelt her breath. 'Not so bad, not so bad. You need to rest. I'll get you a drink.'

'No milk, please,' smiled Lida.

The old woman nodded and bought back a glass of orange juice. Lida drank it and leant back in the sticky leather armchair in the small dark room and closed her eyes.

The old woman glanced over her shoulder at her and nodded to herself.

It was half-past five on a devilishly cold Sunday morning. As usual, an unrelenting, icy wind was whipping Russian snow crystals across the border into Finland at the Vaalimma frontier. A dented and dirty van, hauling a market-dealers trailer, pulled up at the customs post. The driver and passenger were typical stocky market stallholders. Their dark glasses were perched on their hair, and their anoraks and shirts were open. This displayed showy imitation gold chains on tanned skin. The driver turned off the motor and waited for the customs official to finish with a similar vehicle in front of him.

Since four-o'clock that morning, the official had already checked twenty or so vans. They were all on their way to the market just outside St Petersburg. This was his regular Sunday morning job.

The driver handed over the papers, and the customs official glanced into the back of the van. A pile of plastic clothes dummies occupied the entire space, their arms and legs locked together in an intricate knot, like a scene from an orgy.

'Market?' asked the customs officer in Russian.

The driver nodded and, drawing the bunch of keys out of the ignition, handed them to the customs official, 'Want to have a look at the caravan?'

The customs man shook his head, 'Have a good day.'

'You too.'

'Thanks.' The driver fitted the keys back in the ignition, started up and drew slowly and carefully away.

Ten minutes later, they drew off the main road and turned in at a dingy road-side café. They backed in between two Finish lorries and jumped out. Unhitching the caravan, they transferred the 'dummies' into it and locked the door.

They then jumped back into the van and drove away, leaving the abandoned caravan hidden between the two lorries.

Back on the main road, they drove southward for an hour then took a smaller one between fields of snow-bound stubble. Their route then entered a forest and, turning down a side track, came out into a small farm's forecourt.

Driving the van around to the back, they parked it inside a rusty, tin-roofed building and closed the door on its complaining hinges.

Only then did they lift the grey mat on the floor at the back of the van to draw out the inert body of Lida Niemela.

Chapter 3

Vladimir Falin rolled over on his camp bed and groaned.

He felt terrible.

He also knew by experience that he was about to discover a blinding headache.

Struggling in the sheets and blankets, which had knotted themselves around him, he turned with difficulty to face away from the skylight. He then tugged and tugged until he got the thick army blanket from under him and up over his head.

Lying there in this pre-hangover phase, he gradually became aware of two unusual things. The first was a strong smell of freshly brewed coffee, and the second was the sound of voices, voices nearby.

This was unusual because it was rare that anyone made an effort to come up to his fifth-floor studio in the morning. Not even his few friends.

But then again, coffee didn't brew itself without some form of outside assistance. Of course, reasoned Vladimir, he might very well have put it on the previous night and forgotten about it. However, in that case, it wouldn't smell so invitingly. It wouldn't explain the voices either, which was decidedly uncommon.

Vladimir was not at the best of his form and rarely ever was until about mid-day, when hangovers had abated a little. However, he struggled, all the same, to twist around and investigate the goings-on in his room.

Continuing stubbornly in the same direction of rotation on his camp bed, he ultimately became entirely knotted up. With one last struggle, he eventually pushed the cocoon-like form into a more or less upright position.

He now resembled a mummy, and, if anything, he looked even less healthy than his Egyptian predecessors. Screwing his eyes up, he scrutinised the direction from which the voices emanated.

In the far corner of the vast studio, which was, in reality, the attic of one of the old places in central Moscow, he saw two broad backs. The owners of these backs carried on with their occupations around the gas stove, apparently oblivious of his presence. They kept up a continual flow of conversation, clearly feeling quite at home, as if they had lived there all their lives.

Vladimir screwed his eyes up even more and tried to think back. It was not unusual for him to have difficulty reconstructing his activities of previous nights. However, it was unusual to have part of them still around, brewing coffee.

From time to time, it must be admitted that he had woken on the cold floorboards to find naked females sleeping in his narrow bed, but never men. The presence of Broad-backed men wearing dark suits and making coffee together was an entirely new experience for him.

He sat up with difficulty in his cocoon of bedclothes and swung the feet end to the floor.

The creaking of the ex-government camp bed alerted the two men, who exchanged glances. Without turning, one of them nodded to the other.

'Looks like our friend is awake at last,' he said in Russian, 'Do you think he'd appreciate a cup of coffee?'

The other smiled. 'He might, and then again, he might not.'

The first poured coffee into a big mug, and the two turned towards him.

Vladimir froze. He was a tall, muscular man himself, priding himself in his fighting abilities. These two men, however, were clearly in another league. These men were professional thugs, their professions written clearly over their faces.

They smiled at him and approached slowly, their massive shoulders blocking out most of the light.

Now, in these parts of Moscow, everyone knew instinctively that when this sort of personage appeared, it

meant trouble for the host. Usually, painful trouble. The biggest one held out the cup to him with a massive hand. The two then pulled up the only clean chairs in the room and sat looking at him from about six feet away.

‘Get some of that down you. It looks as if you need it.’ He smiled. ‘No one can think clearly with a head like you have. Come on. Get it down.’

Vladimir did as they asked while frantically trying to remember what he had done wrong or what he had forgotten to pay.

The bigger of the two leant forward and smiled again, ‘Your art friend, Our Employer, asked us to pop round to see you.’

Vladimir relaxed and sighed. ‘Thank God!’ he thought, ‘it’s just about those damn paintings again.’ He felt that he could deal with this. Had he forgotten to honour some debt or other, however, it would have been quite another matter.

‘You see,’ went on the man, ‘it appears that you are slipping behind with the job. This delay is causing your friend a certain amount of concern, you see.’

Now, this sounded worse, and he recognised it as a typical prelude to getting beaten up. This was never agreeable, even at the best of times. When one was already feeling somewhat under the weather, it was worse.

The second man pulled his chair a little closer and looked Vladimir in the eyes. ‘Our mutual employer has already paid half the sum and is anxious to be able to complete his transaction. He says that this is difficult to do without the finished painting.’

He nodded. ‘So, he asked us to pop round and see what was causing the delay. Perhaps you have run out of paint?’

Vladimir was, in fact, nearly three weeks late, but he could not pin down the reason for this to a single detail.

'No, no.' he hesitated. 'No, I've got all I need, it's just...' his voice trailed off.

The bigger of the two smiled. 'Yes. It's just that you got side-tracked, eh?'

'Well, yes. I suppose so.'

'But our employer has paid you, and he is not very happy about your getting, as you say, side-tracked,' he said.

'So, he asked us to pop around.' added the other man.

'Yes. And give you a pep-talk.'

Vladimir did not like the sound of this at all and sipped his coffee, nodding understanding but completely unable to move, still being twisted up tight in the sheets and blankets.

'But our employer is a nice, understanding man. He explained to us that artists are often a bit like that.'

'Yes,' put in the other. 'Often a little distracted.'

'He also pointed out that to be able to continue their work properly, they needed at all times to retain the full use of their hands and arms,' he smiled, nodding.

The other man nodded. 'Their eyes too,' he added.

'And their brains, of course. That goes without saying,' finished the other.

He then looked down pointedly at the lower part of the cocoon of sheets and blanket. 'But of course, legs and feet and most of the other stuff under the waist are less important for an artist. Don't you agree?'

Vladimir felt terrible. So, that was what was about to happen — fractures to both legs. That would be painful. Perhaps even bruised testicles, which would be even worse.

The biggest one stood up and stepped towards him. 'But that would be inconvenient too, to our employer that is. You would no longer be able to climb up all these stairs, would you?'

Vladimir agreed to this analysis and nodded, sipping coffee at the same time.

‘So... our employer said that we should be very careful and look after you properly. He said he wouldn't like any unfortunate accidents to happen, as they so often do nowadays in Moscow.’

Vladimir nodded understanding.

‘Yes,’ added the other man. ‘Keep an eye on you. That's what he asked us to do.’

‘He said that it would be a pity if you were to trip over and fall all the way down those five stories and end up with all your members smashed and mutilated.’

‘Yes,’ said his companion. ‘And never able to paint or draw again. He said that that would be a great pity.’

‘A loss, I think he said,’ added the other.

‘Yes, that's it. A loss.’

Vladimir didn't know how to reply to this, so he nodded and sipped his coffee.

‘So, he said that we should keep an eye on you while you finished the painting. To make sure that no unfortunate accidents happened to you.’

The other man smiled and stepped forward, placing a massive paw on Vladimir's shoulder. ‘Now that's what I call a considerate man, eh!’

Vladimir agreed with an exaggerated nod.

‘Our employer wondered if you might find it possible to finish the painting by the end of next week.’

Vladimir's eyes opened as wide as saucers at this. That left him with only ten days. He was about to mention the difficulty of the deadline when the bigger of the two stood.

‘Good. That's perfect then. We'll pop in every two days to make sure that you have all the supplies you need.’

‘And that you are in good health,’ added the second.

The other man tapped him in a friendly way on the shoulder. ‘If you weren't able to finish in time, that would put our employer in a very awkward position, you understand.’

The other man hesitated on his way to the sink. ‘In that case, he might even consider that it was our fault and

decide not to pay us for our services, and we wouldn't like that at all.'

'No,' said the other, 'we would have to pop back and discuss the matter with you.'

Vladimir was quite sure that such a discussion would not leave much of him intact and roused himself. 'Ok, ok. Ten days is more than enough. I'll get it done, don't worry.'

'We'll pop back in two days, just to make sure that you're in good health,' said the biggest.

'Our employer has asked us to take the picture to the laboratory directly after you've finished. As you know, these research people are very busy men too,' said the other. 'They don't like being kept waiting either.'

Vladimir tried to stand, but his cocoon would not permit this. 'Yes! Of course, of course. In ten days, it'll be ready.'

'Good,' said the first, 'it's always best to do everything in one's power to avoid accidents.'

'Thanks for the coffee,' said the first, turning away.

The two broad backs moved to the sink, deposited their mugs and walked to the door to take their leave. 'We'll leave you to do the washing up if you don't mind. We have to get to work now.'

Vladimir stared for a few seconds at the closed door then let himself fall back onto the bed.

Chapter 4

The two broad-shouldered men tramped back down the worn un-stained wooden stairs. They were on their way back towards their day-jobs, at the national Tretyakov gallery in Moscow, down near the river.

The larger of the two turned to his companion as they trudged along the ice-covered pavement,

"Did you notice the quality of this latest one?"

The other nodded, "Brilliant," he said. His breath swirled like smoke out into the sub-zero air, "I still think I prefer his landscapes though."

"Yes," said the other, "me too. There is something in them that only the grandmasters could equal. Pure genius I call it."

"Agreed," said the other, "genius, that's the only word for it." Both nodded to themselves and smiled at the thought.

"Good job we don't have to hurt him eh?"

"Christ! Yes. That would be criminal." At this, both chuckled at the pun.

"If you want to get along ok nowadays, it's always better to get scared easily. Saves a lot of trouble."

"Yep. You're right there." Concluded his friend as they crunched on through the sub-zero snow.

These two men had been working at the gallery now for several years but had known each other for more than fifteen years. Neither of them was very bright though. This deficiency had been the reason that their careers as members of a prominent criminal gang had been brought to an early end.

In the modern, rapidly-changing world, the boss needed men capable of taking initiatives. However, these two were old-school. They always needed to be told precisely what to do, but the boss had less and less time to do this. All the same, he was grateful for services rendered and so

had managed to engineer them comfortable employment as guards at the art gallery.

In truth, they were delighted with this. This new job kept the two men relatively warm all day, which had not been the case previously. What is more, here they understood precisely what was expected of them, and were extremely competent in doing it.

Neither of them had had any education at all but were both very enthusiastic about their new jobs. Surprisingly, they lapped up the information handed out by the gallery guides, who took groups of visitors around. They especially enjoyed listening to the younger guides, who were always so full of enthusiasm for art. Some were also very pretty girls, and this significantly added to the pleasure of the experience.

They loved to hear the detailed descriptions of how such-and-such an artist had accomplished a given effect, or why certain odd elements appeared in a particular work.

They also loved to listen to the stories about the history of art and artists, as if they were listening to their mother's bed-time stories.

Over time, they learnt to appreciate the many tiny details which contributed to making a work of art a masterpiece. They also began to understand what artistic genius was and to enjoy it at its real value.

Under this tuition, they learnt how to see the beauty of a piece of sculpture. The men could now fully appreciate how perfectly the sculptor had rendered the soft firm curves of a young girl's buttocks, or the hard, swollen muscle of a gladiator's arms, from a block of solid marble.

They listened to these detailed descriptions day after day with enduring interest until they could recite the speeches from memory almost word perfect.

There were, of course, some guides who were just not up to their exacting standards and these they shunned as

unworthy of their interest and behaved like motionless statues in their presence.

This unexpected passion on behalf of these two impressively muscular guards pleased and surprisingly flattered the guides who took to them at once.

This surprising quality eventually came to the attention of the gallery director, and he was after that, a little less annoyed at having been pressured into taking them onto his payroll.

The two men were soon promoted to guarding the more important rooms. Shortly after this, they were also charged with accompanying all important guests around the gallery to improve the overall impression of security.

It was on just such a visit that their future employer, Monsieur Dubois from France, noticed them.

He had been invited to join a little group accompanying a prominent French businessman and the Russian undersecretary of arts. During this visit, a young, impoverished and hunger-stricken artist, took it into his head to make an obscure political statement. He planned to throw a pot of paint over the minister. However, he only got as far as pulling the pot half out of his bag. Before he knew what was happening, he found himself thrown promptly to the floor and immobilised by the two heavy men. They had moved with deceptive speed and precision and surprised everyone. Their years of training enabled them to spot any unusual behaviour without them even having to watch it directly.

The young painter ended up with several broken ribs and a very painful neck and throat and was then dragged off to receive some more, but this time official, punishment.

The two men were thanked, and during the visit, Monsieur Dubois informed himself about their origins and their remarkable conversion to art. In an aside to the Museum director he had mentioned that, were these two available from time to time, he might be able to put a little

extra work their way. The gallery director was too experienced to ask what this work might entail but requested his secretary to jot down the men's details for Dubois.

A few words about Vladimir Falin would undoubtedly be useful here.

Now the name Vladimir Falin is little known to the general public, which is not at all surprising. However, this lack of celebrity is not justified. It is due mainly to a series of financial incidents which had nothing to do with him. Had this not occurred, the name would no doubt have been a byword in the world of art.

Vladimir was without the slightest doubt, extremely talented. He was probably one of the most gifted painters ever to have gone through the extremely selective Russian art training system. His unusual ability to reproduce on a flat bit of paper, any scene set before him, was immediately noticed as soon as he got into primary school. A local talent scout came around to have a look, and then the state system took him in hand, and that was that.

No matter how difficult the task set, he just sat down and reproduced it. When it came to copying existing paintings, he produced startling reproductions. In his early years, they were marred only by his lack of mastery of the mediums which he was asked to employ. He was capable of making remarkable pencil sketches of still life including flowers, fruit and cut glass vases, of incredible precision, in under an hour.

This talent opened the doors to the prestigious Moscow state art school, where he was considered the star pupil. Consequently, he was put directly under the responsibility of the director.

Now the training technique relied on by this member of the old-school of teaching was to get the student to copy the great masters and to study how they had obtained

such and such an effect. Vladimir excelled in this because he merely reproduced precisely what he saw. He didn't think he was painting a flower or a horse. He was just replicating the same brush strokes that the grand master had made.

Of course, this required mastering the quantity of paint and its level of dilution, the quality and shape of the brush used and the pressure applied to it. However, this rapidly became automatic, because Falin could spot all these minute details almost without thinking. His strong point was to be able to reproduce precisely what his eyes saw and not what his mind felt or his imagination projected.

Due to this remarkable talent, Vladimir was allowed the unique privilege of travelling abroad to the major European capitals to work for weeks on end in the world-class museums.

At twenty-five years old, therefore, he was undoubtedly one of the world's best painters.

Now, it happened that the director of the school did not hold his prestigious position due to his artistic talents alone. He was also an astute businessman and a talented and careful manipulator of the political sphere in which he existed. After enthusiastic praise of each of Falin's new efforts, the director hung the paintings in his office, where his many influential visitors could admire them.

As a consequence, the majority of Vladimir's remarkable reproductions were eventually sold, on behalf of the student. However, the funds somehow never managed to make their way back to the originator of the paintings.

It is true that such positions as school director gave the possessor an enviable social standing. However, it did not supply him with the means of living to the fullest, the life which was expected of such an esteemed personage. So, Vladimir Falin's reproductions assisted the director in honouring the numerous social obligations with which he was saddled.

When Vladimir eventually graduated, with the highest grades ever attained, he was known to a great number of art enthusiasts, and so set himself up as an independent artist.

Then, a financial crisis struck, followed rapidly by a second, then a third. To cap everything, this was followed by a period of political unrest.

Although Vladimir was the best, even so, most collectors felt it prudent to hold on to their money rather than to pay out ten thousand dollars for a painting.

The school director told him privately "To make money in Russia today an excellent painter like you has either to become director of the Academy or to be dead."

Furthermore, after many aborted attempts, it became devastatingly clear that Vladimir had no originality in him at all. He had learnt to absolute world-class perfection, every single facet of the art of painting, but he just had no spark of invention in him. Vladimir could do landscapes and portraits, still-lives or animals, in any style you liked. But he could only paint things he could see. In truth, he was several hundred years out of phase with the world in which he lived.

Regardless of this setback, he managed to derive a decent living by making reproductions of precious paintings, for the major art galleries around the world. These copies were always exhibited in place of the originals when fear of terrorist actions or other catastrophes troubled the sleep of the director having the charge of them.

Then along came the advent of high tech, high definition 3D textured painting reproduction, which was cheap and good enough to destroy this market, more or less overnight.

Luckily, for Vladimir, at about the same time as the total and inevitable collapse of his only remaining market niche, Monsieur Dubois appeared.

The word "appeared" is not justified in this context. Vladimir had never met Monsieur Dubois in flesh and blood. He had talked to him on the phone, in bad English, but otherwise, they had communicated indirectly.

Monsieur Dubois, had various trusted agents and assistants, around the world and it was with these that he invariably dealt. Vladimir did not complain about this because he was paid handsomely for his work and always received a note expressing thanks and well worded and justified praise for each new painting.

The only things that Vladimir knew about Monsieur Dubois were that he was rich, extremely eclectic in his tastes and exceedingly knowledgeable when it came to paintings. He was also exceptionally demanding concerning precision. He had even returned two reproductions, with requests for improvements to some seemingly negligible shortcomings, compared with the originals, or to the techniques employed.

Vladimir never complained about this either, because the request was invariably accompanied by an extra payment to cover the additional costs involved. Monsieur Dubois even went to the trouble of supplying the canvasses and the paints which were to be used and had proved from the very beginnings that he could instantly detect any trickery.

The main difficulty, however, was that Monsieur Dubois was interested exclusively in reproductions of paintings which were no longer available in any o galleries. The latter had either been destroyed, stolen or confiscated during some war or other, by the occupying forces of that war.

Vladimir was thus forced to work from photos or prints. This need often required him to travel to various galleries around the globe to study in detail the technique employed by the artist in question, to apply them to the copy under commission. Even here, Monsieur Dubois

financed the trips and paid all reasonable costs. Falins reputation usually allowed him to obtain the authorisations necessary to study certain paintings in detail, so all in all the team was an excellent one.

Vladimir would have liked to think that Monsieur Dubois was building a magnificent private collection of copies of Lost Masters, but somehow, he couldn't. He had thus long since decided it prudent not to look a gift horse in the mouth. He thus settled down to an enjoyable life of making a good living, doing that which he liked doing most. What more could a young man in modern Russia hope for?

However, this odd situation did have occasional drawbacks and that morning's visit from the two large gentlemen was one of them. He was thus, not quite as much his own master as he would have liked to be. Furthermore, fate had not finished with Vladimir Fakin yet.

Chapter 5

Higher up the slope, between the dark trunks of the pine forest, a small group of men could just be distinguished. They were working their way carefully downhill. The upper boughs had retained the greater part of this first heavy fall of snow so that the needle-strewn ground below was only lightly powdered with white. At the present temperature of minus fifteen centigrade, the snow would remain imprisoned up there for days.

The group had started that morning at five-o'clock. They intended to climb directly to the chalet from which their expedition was to begin. However, the unexpected fall of snow had slowed their progress. Consequently, it was not until six thirty that, sweating heavily, they had attained their goal and breakfasted.

It was now seven thirty, and their initial enthusiasm for the day's activities had diminished considerably. Cold feet and frozen fingers were partly responsible for this change of heart, and the bottle and a half of robust red wine which had accompanied the meal had done the rest. Finally, the night's fall had annoyingly hidden any tracks which might have been left by their quarry.

The men were out for a Sunday hunting outing which had so far been unfruitful. There was nothing unusual about this, and the outing might have been considered perfectly representative of many similar hunting expeditions.

Once under the protective canopy of the forest, the group had stopped and stamped the snow off their shoes and gaiters. The eldest men were well into their sixties, and stood apart from the others, scanning the undergrowth further down the slope. Of the three others, one was middle-aged, and the other two were young beginners in their early twenties. All of them carried their guns loaded. They seemed to consider it a point of honour

to disregard all the safety rules, so painfully penned and printed by the national hunters' association.

Hugues was the oldest of the five. He had reflected that it would have been nice to bag a wild boar before the hunting season closed, but that was life. In any case, he was well covered, warm, and full of wine. The wine helped dull any sense of disappointment which he might otherwise have experienced.

They now fanned out along the steep slope and began to descend slowly, keeping their eyes on the forest floor some fifty yards ahead. After a hundred yards, the slope levelled off abruptly. Here it formed a wide, flat platform before diving down anew.

As they were crossing this space, the middle-aged man stopped abruptly and lifted his arm. All five instinctively dropped onto their knees. The man pointed to his ear and they'd all strained to listen, in the snow-bound silence.

They then glanced at each other with surprise and delight. There could be no mistaking the scuffling and grunting sounds filtering up to them from over the lip of the platform. Only one thing they knew made those noises and that was a wild boar rooting for food in the undergrowth. The oldest man made a sign to the one who had alerted them. This would be his prize.

The older man had an excellent personal reason for wanting to make this man's day, but this will become clear later. The latter slid his rifle noiselessly from his shoulder. Then, crouching, he started to inch carefully towards the edge of the plateau, his gun at the ready. Halfway across he stopped, cocked his head and changed direction slightly. Then, lifting his rifle to his shoulder, he rose slowly to his full height.

From this position, he could then just see over the lip of the platform. However, although the noises were now clearer, he could still see nothing. He took a careful step forward and froze. He saw movement through the branches, at the bottom of a slight dip in the terrain.

Something dark and massive was moving across the floor of the hollow but had suddenly stopped as if listening. Gradually a huge dark form came into sight. Then a tuft of fur appeared as the body had started to turn cautiously towards the hunter. An instant later there was a scuffling and a lightning movement, and two shots rang out in rapid succession. There was a crash, and the animal was projected backwards by the impacts, into the dense undergrowth. Silence then fell.

With a whoop, the other four men leapt to their feet and came running up to join him.

"Got the bastard! Got him..." he'd shouted.

"Brilliant" Hugues clapped him on the shoulder and smiled. "Hey you two lads," he called, "get down there and see what we've got."

The younger of the two leapt over the edge, slithered down the steep needle covered slope on his bottom, and disappeared into the bushes.

Suddenly, however, a cry rent the silence, "Christ, Oh God! Oh, bollocks!" and then they'd heard retching and the sound of someone being violently sick.

The two oldest exchanged amused glances and shook their heads.

"Ah, these kids! No guts nowadays!"

"Probably too many in this case. Guts that is..." had joked the other.

The four slithered down the slope following the sounds, down into the dark depression. They could see a massive dark form in the undergrowth and approaching, stopped abruptly. There was something unusual about the colour and also the texture. Approaching quickly, the shape had come clearly into view. They discovered a thick, fur trimmed, dark leather coat with a blood-spattered hood.

They stood stock still.

It had admittedly been a good piece of marksmanship. Both bullets had gone straight through the head, and little

remained of the face. Lying on its back was the body of a man. The side of the head had been blasted to pieces, and all sorts of bloody mess was dripping back into the hood.

The second young man started vomiting in unison with the first.

The other three stood transfixed, looking down at the mess.

"Oh, Christ!"

The snow powdered ground was spattered with red as far as the eye could see and bits and pieces, blown off the face, were spread across the plateau.

The oldest man turned to the hunter who had fired. "For god's sake man! What in the name of god have you got in that damn rifle?"

The middle-aged man stood transfixed, staring white-faced down at the mutilated head. "Had a few specials left. Pity not to use them, I thought..." His voice trailed off into silence.

"Oh, God!" said Hugues. "It doesn't matter anyhow. He'd be dead now

, whatever bullet you'd used." This was undoubtedly correct, but the old mans' cunning mind was already sizing up the situation. He was, above all, analysing what personal gain he could make out of it. For himself, of course.

Had it not been for the wine, he might have reacted differently. Perhaps much of what follows might not have occurred. However, this was not the case.

The others remained stock-still, petrified with the thought of what had happened. However, Hugues had already decided what to do and how to manage this accident for his own benefit.

"Hey, you lot! Come on! Snap out of it!". They shook themselves and turned to him as if he was the Messiah. "If this comes out, it will be the end to hunting in these parts. You know that?" They all nodded, white-faced.

"This makes two hunting accidents up here. We'll have half the planet down on us like a ton of bricks."

He looked around the group, "This bloke ain't local? Agreed?" They nodded. "OK." He clapped the middle-aged man on the shoulder. "Good shot anyhow," he smiled.

"Right." He continued, "You lot get back down to the bar at Freydières and get some good strong drinks inside you."

They stared at him. "Say the outing was a fiasco, snow etc. etc. and say I got my car stuck and will be back as soon as I've dug it free. And make it convincing. OK?"

They nodded as if they were primary school pupils and him their headmaster. He always used to this sort of approach when dealing with the uneducated people who populated most of his village. In case of problems, tell them forcefully what to do and then get on with the job. One could always blame them for it later.

"Forget what has just happened right... It hasn't happened, right!" He took the middle-aged man by the shoulder. "Got that?"

The man nodded, his mouth still hanging open and his eyes wide.

"Oh, God!" The older man thought and slipping off his rucksack, extracted the remaining half bottle of wine he had hoped to keep for his lunch. "Here drink this.". He removed the cork and pocketed it. "Come on. Get this down you fast. That's what you need. Quick. Come on."

The man abstractedly lifted the bottle and let the strong wine splash into his mouth. After a few gulps, he spluttered and coughed and, with watering eyes shook his head.

The old man recovered the bottle and offered it the three others, who refused the offer.

"Go on then. Get down and forget what you did with those damn "specials" of yours. I'll clean up here. Come on get going."

The four men stumbled away, two of them wiping their mouths with their arms.

As they departed, Hugues stood and surveyed the scene.

The body was not that of a local man. The expensive clothes proved that. In that case, as far as that went, he was no better than a wild boar really, dead that was.

Now here, he decided, was an interesting situation. If well managed, this could turn out to be very useful to him.

Had he guessed the danger he was about to run, he would undoubtedly have acted differently.

Looking down again, Hugues nodded with approval. It had been a very neat piece of marksmanship. Both bullets had gone straight through the head, and little remained of the face at all. Given the bullets used, this was not at all surprising.

He pondered a while how best to deal with the situation.

Shifting the suspicion onto someone else's shoulders would be easy enough if required, but for the present, there were other things to do.

The first thing was to remove the evidence. Hugues smiled to himself. He knew what to do with the body so that it would remain hidden all winter and probably until next June, which was six months away. By that time, it would have partially decomposed. Long before anyone came near it would have stopped stinking and was thus likely to remain hidden for years.

He carefully went through the dead man's pockets and was surprised to find absolutely nothing. No ID papers no wallet no telephone. No car keys, absolutely nothing.

Strange that? He mused

Shrugging to himself, he took a shortcut down through the forest to where he had left his Toyota. He then drove the battered old machine back up through the forest.

Battered as it was, the motor was still just as powerful and the four-wheel drive just as efficient as in its youth twenty years earlier.

Without the slightest scruples, he pulled out the cable from the rear winch looped it through the arms and back in front. Where the face should have been, he attached the hook back over the cable.

He then hacked down a big branch which was trailing from one of the fir trees, dragged it over to the pickup and threw it into the back. He then jumped back into the car and started back up along a steep and rock-strewn track. Only a local man could have located it under the deep snow.

At the place where the firs left off, he changed gears and followed another track in the deep snow, invisible to anyone other than him. Half a mile of slow and cautious driving, accompanied by violent bumping, followed until he finally stopped and turned off the ignition.

The snow here was about a foot and a half deep, but he knew the terrain like the back of his hand. Retrieving a length of stout rope from the back of the car, he unhooked the cable from around the body and tied the rope around the dead man's heavy leather boots. Then, dragging the body behind him, he headed off down a gentle slope. He aimed for a faint dark line in the snow, about a hundred yards off and halfway across the smooth sloping expanse of virgin snow.

With his other hand, he dragged the branch hacked from the fir tree and an old aluminium snow shovel.

The going was unexpectedly easy because the body slid smoothly downward over the thick snow with little or no resistance. The dark line Hugues was headed for, marked a fissure in the surface of the mountainside, known only to the local shepherd and a few of the older hunters. This crack was, in fact, more than a hundred feet deep which he had climbed down into in his youth.

By experience, the old man knew that it would swiftly fill up with snow. What is more, over winter, this snow would settle down and compact into ice at the bottom. In this state, and protected from the sun, it would then remain in place until mid-June.

He dragged the body down a little more. Then, pushing it with his right foot, he helped it over the lip of the crevasse and lowered to the end of the rope. Finally, letting go of the rope, he listened carefully, counting until he heard the noises stop.

Smiling to himself, he knew that the body had reached the narrow bottom and had wedged there.

He next got to work with the shovel, scraping the snow over the lip of the fissure until he was sweating hard. He took his time and carried on until he felt convinced that there must now be at least three feet of snow covering the body. Then, Taking the fir branch, he carefully swished it over the snow surrounding the edge. Working slowly back across the field, he swished the branches back and forth to obliterate the tracks he had made on his way down.

Back in the Toyota, he tied the branch on the cable so that it would drag in the snow behind the truck and weighted it down with his metal tool case, to erase the tyre tracks.

Once back under the canopy of the forest, and using the Toyota's rusted bull-bar, he methodically bumped and shook the trunks of each of the pine and fir trees bordering his track. The vibrations shook the snow free from the upper branches and brought it cascading down, covering the tracks made by the car.

He did this all the way back down to the place where the body had been. He intended to proceed from here onwards, by using the cable and winch shake the trees and so cover the path behind him. However, before starting on this task, he stood for a few moments looking around the flat space.

Something worried him about all this especially the fact that the body was not that of a local man. He was confident of that. It was a pity that he had been up here just at the wrong moment, but Hugues considered that this was just the luck of the draw.

The quality of his clothes pointed to someone with money, but why would a stranger be up here in this isolated spot on a morning like this? This person had been up to something, and the old man could not help wondering once more, whether there was something more he could make out of this.

Looking around, he noticed a large fir branch lying on the ground nearby. He also noted that the ground had been disturbed. It was clear that the man had been using the branch to cover his tracks precisely as he had done himself. But what in Gods' name had he been doing? It was something he wanted to keep secret. That, at least, was clear.

He stood and scanned the area. The only thing of any interest was the abandoned water reservoir, which had once been used to store water from the nearby mineral water spring. The spring had now been piped directly down to a larger tank nearer the village.

The part swept by the dead man led down from this place. "Ah Ha!" Hugues said out loud. "Now what were you up to there, my dead friend?"

Hugues was now convinced that he was on the point of discovering something to his advantage here. He had always had a sixth sense for things like this and was rarely wrong. Following up such hunches had often proved to be highly profitable, and that is what he did now.

He picked his way across the space making sure not to tread on any of the bits blown off the dead man's face. The massive, rusty iron door had no handle, and bending down he scrutinised the keyhole. He was not surprised to find it clear of cobwebs. The usual obstruction that thousands of little insects usually construct in such places

had been carefully cleaned away. Furthermore, the hinges had been kept well-greased. This fact in itself was unusual because the site had been closed and abandoned for the last fifteen years. The keys, if they still existed, must have been in the offices of the water board twenty miles off.

"Interesting," he thought. "Now you were either putting something in there or taking it out." he nodded to himself "In that case, you must have had a key. Now, where is it?" It had not been in his pockets. "So, it must be here somewhere or!" At this, he stood suddenly erect and froze.

"Or there must have been someone else who has taken the key and left this man to cover their tracks". A cold sweat broke out suddenly all over his face.

"Christ!"

He ducked down and quickly jumped behind a tree. "Now, this puts an entirely new angle on the situation." he thought.

Had that other person heard the shots? Had he seen them shoot the man? Above all, had he observed the disposal of the body?

In any of those cases, it would be very bad news. It would make things much more delicate to deal with. Hugues knew well enough that he couldn't do much about that now. All the same, he would have to act faster than he had planned, to obtain that which he was aiming for.

After a short time, he satisfied himself that he was not being watched, and came out from behind the tree. He guessed that the two people must have come up through the forest from the car park below. So, crossing the small plateau, he followed the track, back downwards and almost immediately picked up the tracks they had left.

Here and there were small clearings where the snow lay thick enough for the footprints to be distinguished. Hugues cursed with annoyance. There was no doubt possible. Two sets of footprints going up, but only one

going back down. The downward ones were much deeper and the steps closer together, showing the person was carrying a heavy load.

Now, what was that load? Hugues cursed carried on down to the edge of the car park where the tracks stopped.

There were half a dozen cars there, and the snow-covered surface was crisscrossed with tire tracks.

All the cars were empty. Some had a light covering of snow on them showing that they belonged to "ski-trekking" enthusiasts. These people usually started early, to reach the summit before sunrise. He touched the bonnets of the others and found them to be cold and thus there for several hours.

So, whoever had come back down with the load had now left with it then. Hugues sighed with relief. The lack of an extra set of uphill tracks pointed to the possibility that the second person had not gone back up and had thus not witnessed the shooting. Either, on hearing the shot he had made a run for it, or his departure alone had been planned.

The second man must have been left to remove any traces of their visit to the reservoir.

Turning his back on the small carpark, he climbed back through the trees to the plateau and looked around. The existence of a second person complicated the situation and cast a shadow on the benefits he had hoped to gain from this business. In any case, he reflected, the job had to be finished, so he grabbed the branch the man had been using.

Walking backwards across the ground, he went slowly over the ground swishing a fir branch over the places where blood and bits of human debris were scattered. Here and there he picked up the larger bits up and dropped them into a supermarket plastic bag he had brought from the car. This process did not affect him in the slightest. It was just a body, after all. As he

approached the place where the body had lain, something caught his eye. Projecting nearly vertically, like a short twig in the blood-stained snow stood a big dark key.

“Ah ha! So, there you are.”

He finished the sweeping and then using the cable and the car winch, shook the bigger trees bringing down thick clouds of snow which obliterated all sign of human presence under several centimetres of snow.

Satisfied with this, he skirted the plateau and came down onto the thick concrete roof of the abandoned water reservoir. From here he slid down the slope directly against its wall and approached the door. The key turned smoothly, and the mechanism clicked back with hardly a noise.

As the heavy door swung open, an odd smell met his nostrils. It was not the familiar smell of damp earth and moss, but an oily smell. His eyes gradually became used to the dark, and he could just make out a row of wooden crates stacked against the rear wall. They bordered the dark chasm of the vast concrete basin which had once contained the drinking water for the entire village.

Once he was used to the obscurity, he stepped carefully inside, but the ground was bone dry and not dangerously slippery as he had expected. Approaching the nearest pile of cases, he lifted the lid of the uppermost one.

“Christ almighty!” he gasped. He leant forward and looked closer. The case was full to the brim with boxes of rifle bullets. He let the lid drop and moved quickly to the next and opened it. This one contained hand grenades, and the crate markings appeared to be Russian. Further along, he found several crates of sub-machine guns. And further still, cases with German-made hand-guns, which he recognised from his military service many years ago.

All this was in perfect condition and apparently, brand new. Hugues turned one of the handguns over in his hand and admired the workmanship. On an impulse, he slipped it into his pocket and added a box of bullets from the next

crate. He decided that it would be best to get out of the place fast, and two minutes later was manoeuvring his Toyota back onto the snow-covered carpark.

Someone had converted the abandoned water reservoir into an arms stockpile. One of those people had now been shot and buried. The possible consequences which presented themselves to him were not at all favourable to his peace of mind. The whole thing smelt to high heaven of organised crime and that meant big money, which was interesting. However, it also inevitably meant ruthless criminals, which was far less so.

Photo galleries, maps, and internet links illustrating Freydières and its forest can be found on my website.

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

Chapter 6

At about mid-day, Lida Niemela slowly drifted out of her deep, drugged sleep. She remained comfortably on her side and watched the shadows of leafy branches dancing across the whitewashed wall.

The fact that she was alive was a good sign. She didn't care where she was but guessed that she was in a safe-house somewhere.

Her head felt heavy from the sleeping-draft. It must have been in her orange juice, she thought. However, she felt more relaxed and less sick than the day before. She was far from back to normal, and she knew this perfectly well.

Looking down at her arm, she found that she was wearing a pair of, thick pink flannel pyjamas which didn't belong to her, and was covered by a heavy light-blue woollen blanket.

Lida rolled slowly onto her back and scanned the room. It was small and entirely whitewashed, but the bright flower-print curtains and a blue armchair lent it a pleasant atmosphere. The only other furniture was an unvarnished pine set of drawers, with a mirror perched on it, and a single wooden chair.

She lay comfortably like this for some time listening. The only sound which reached her was the clucking of chickens somewhere below her bedroom window.

She then gradually became aware of an unusual sensation in her neck, and bringing a hand up to touch it, sat up with a start. Bringing her two hands up, she explored her hair. It was no longer long but short and silky.

Pushing back the covers she tentatively swung her legs down to the ground. In a few uncertain steps, she was in front of the mirror

"Christ!" She stared at the reflection. Her long, normally unkempt brown hair had disappeared. It was replaced by short, blond, expertly styled and highlighted stuff. Her

eyebrows were also of the same colour. The haircut was a chic "coupe au carré" with a fringe cleverly masking her marked high forehead.

"Christ. Well, well!" Lida said to herself. "A pretty classy chic. I Like it. I see that someone is doing things properly. Gone to a lot of trouble to keep me from being recognised."

She smiled, turning from side to side to admire her new self. "I wonder what the job is to be." She said to herself.

Stepping over to the window, she looked down onto a snow-covered high-walled field. In this, some healthy looking hens were strutting and grubbing around, wherever a bit of grass showed. A little further away two dappled horses stood as still as statues. Two others, a little further off, were nibbling bits from a bale of hay, which had been placed on a square cleared of snow.

Beyond the wall that bordered the far side of the field, rose an uninterrupted line of a pine forest.

She guessed that must be in a forest keeper's cottage, and this was no doubt a long way from its closest neighbours.

It was quite evident to her now that the reason for getting her out of prison was that someone wanted a highly unpleasant job done. It must be someone who didn't want to dirty his own hands doing it.

Returning to the mirror, she turned her head from side to side scrutinising the new chic Lida.

Lida had no friends at all. Furthermore, none of her few acquaintances had the resources or the intelligence to pull off that escape. So, someone she did not know, wanted to use her as his instrument to do something.

OK, Lida was all for that. As long as she didn't end up dead, that is. Ending up dead, once she had completed the job, however, seemed to her quick mind to be a very distinct possibility. "If I were organising something like that," she thought, "I'd make sure that the suspicion was

thrown on the person doing the job, then I'd eliminate him to stop any leaks."

She was going to have to play her hand very carefully.

Turning back to the bed, she noticed a carefully folded set of clothes. These included a thick black cotton tracksuit and Nike trainers, all perfectly the right size. As she was finishing putting these on, the door opened quietly, and the old lady from Helsinki looked in.

"Ah looking better, I see. And different of course." Lida nodded, not unkindly because this woman had done a good job, "Yeh! Not bad being a blond chic for once."

The old lady smiled, "Yes. A nice job, if I do say so myself." then looked over her shoulder. "The photographer is here, for your ID papers. Shall I call him up?"

Lida nodded and a young man with a roll neck sweater and worn jeans, weighed down with a heavy shoulder bag was ushered in. He nodded to Lida and, placing the case on the bed opened it and extracted a heavy camera and a tripod.

The old lady drew the chair over against the whitewashed wall then held up a powerful lamp, while the young man clicked away. After five minutes, he stood up and smiled, "Got it. Thanks". Without another word, he packed his equipment away and left with another quick nod at Lida.

The old lady opened the door to let him out, "Back in a moment." When she returned, she brought with her a plump middle-aged lady, wheeling a case.

The old lady nodded to Lida. "This lady is a make-up specialist. She'll show you how. Well, she'll explain."

Lida knew better than to ask questions, so just asked, "Shall I sit in front of the mirror?" The plump lady nodded.

An hour or so later, Lida had learned a lot. She now knew how to apply little touches of makeup to mask the most marked characteristics linked to her bone structure. Lida also now knew how to give her face a softer and

more aristocratic look. The specialist left Lida a make-up bag containing the materials she would need for five or six weeks, then said goodbye and disappeared.

Two days later, after restful nights and lazy afternoons, the old lady came into her room and handed her a big envelope. "Your new papers have arrived," she said and left to return downstairs.

Lida emptied the contents of the envelope onto her bed. It contained a beautifully forged and artificially-aged, Russian passport, and driving licence, both sporting the new blond Lida. She discovered that she was now Liliya Galchevich and that she lived in one of the most exclusive sectors of Moscow.

The package also contained a bank card from a Russian bank and several thousand dollars in cash of various currencies. The card was clipped to a bank statement showing the account to contain the equivalent of forty thousand dollars. "Nice!" Lida said out loud. "Thanks."

Finally, from under this pile of papers, she drew one of the latest iPhones, with internet connection activated. "Ha!" she thought, "so you can contact me when needed I see."

On a separate sheet of paper, she found instructions to pay the two men who had brought her here. The payments in cash were contained in two separate envelopes.

The message informed her that these men were Russian pros and had been asked to stay with her until she was in safety. It told her that it was up to her to negotiate any further payments and to decide if they were required to help her with any specific tasks. These last two words were underlined twice.

Lida found this very instructive.

It pointed to the fact that the person who had organised her escape was aware of what she was likely to want to do once free. The conclusion she drew from this was that

he, or she, considered this to be in phase with his own objectives.

Now, what Lida wanted to do was to get even with two people. Could it be that her benefactor also desired to rid himself of one of these people for some reason?

She guessed that this was the case. She could see no other obvious alternative unless, of course, the game was more complicated than she anticipated.

The first of those two people on Lida's to-do list was a judge. The judge who had been instrumental at coaxing a Lukewarm jury into revising their relatively light sentence into an incompressible life term. She had to admit that he had proved himself to be an extremely talented man at his job. She even admired him for his competence and ability in manipulating the jury, but this did not modify her objective.

His name was Erik Vanhanen.

The second was, in fact, a couple. The two had been instrumental in causing the catastrophic failure of Lida's attempt to steal nearly five-hundred million euros in hidden gold. This couple was Doctor William Stone and his red-headed girlfriend, Sally Something-or-other.

She decided that attaining her objectives was going to require some careful thought and clever footwork. She needed to remain master of the game and to do so must keep one step ahead of her benefactor. Above all, she admitted that staying alive afterwards, was an important factor also.

During the remaining days spent rebuilding her strength in this isolated place, the old lady hardly ever spoke except when it was an absolute necessity. To Lida, who was used to silence and to keeping herself to herself, this seemed for the best, as it avoided complications. She thus spent a lot of time lying on her bed. During this, the old lady and the two Russian heavies ate and chatted together in the small downstairs sitting room.

The woman confined herself to checking Lida's temperature and blood pressure at regular intervals, and to administering a series of medicines three times a day. Outside this, she kept herself to herself and Lida didn't press her.

Lida Niemela had had very little education and had managed to escape from the school system, as soon as it could be legally arranged. That being said, she could read and write perfectly in her native Finnish and could communicate fluently in Russian, English and French. Lida could also make herself understood both in German and Spanish. She could count, calculate and above all could reason logically with unexpected speed. With these natural gifts, she was able to travel around the world with little or no difficulty.

If the truth were told, Lida had no real interests in life at all and mostly drifted along from one place to another following her intuition. She rarely watched TV and never read the papers or magazines.

Regardless of this, she was never bored. When she had nothing to do, she was capable of switching her consciousness off and of going into a sort of "meditation" state. In this state, she would observe what was going on around her for hours, without a single thought going through her mind, (like watching little leaves and branches bobbing past on a slowly flowing river). This capacity had made her numerous passages in prison little more than an inconvenience.

By the end of that week, Lida was feeling almost back to normal. She had started walking around the field at the back of the cottage every day, for an hour, but was not up to gymnastics yet, by a long way.

The following day at breakfast the old lady told her that she was now probably strong enough to move on. As long as she got plenty of rest and sleep, and kept taking her medicine for another week, she would soon be back to normal.

She then handed Lida a package which had been delivered the evening before. This package contained a magnificent Dior ensemble and blouse and some expensive looking accessories, gold Rolex, gold neckless and designer dark-glasses. Everything was counterfeit of course, but of such excellent craftsmanship as to be good enough to fool anyone. All this was perfectly in phase with the new identity which had been so carefully prepared for her, and the clothes fitted perfectly. No doubt the old woman had taken her detailed measurements while she had been unconscious and had supplied them. In any case, Lida had made her initial plans and knew exactly where she would head for next.

That evening she talked briefly with the two men, who agreed to accompany her for a hefty fee. The sum wasn't coming out of her pocket anyway, so she doubled what she felt they would have usually accepted.

The two men were officially on holiday from their full-time jobs as guards in one of Moscow's leading museums. They were both in their early fifties and had retired from a well known criminal organisation some years earlier. However, they were still in good physical form and quite capable of dealing with any trouble which might occur. They were also quite happy to chat between themselves and not trouble Lida, which was precisely what she wanted.

With her new phone, she reserved a room for the following night at the Four Seasons hotel in the Admiralty district of Saint Petersburg. This five-star palace, at a little over eight hundred euros a night, seemed perfectly adapted to her new identity. It would not arouse any suspicion. The two Russians, chose a cheap hotel not far off, to save as much of their money as possible.

However, Lida was only too aware that she lacked the natural poise, "education" or training, to enable her to convincingly play the role of a wealthy Russian woman, in such an environment. A slight incoherence of language, or

some small error in the magnificent dining hall, would immediately be spotted by the trained staff. This sort of inconsistency would undoubtedly lead to gossip.

Experience had shown her always to be wary of gossip in Russia because one never knew where it would lead, or rather, one did! She thus decided it prudent to keep out of sight as much as possible and to order her evening meal in her room.

In reality, Lida was quite happy to dine in her magnificent and comfortable room. She didn't need company. To keep up appearances, she ordered only the more expensive plates and selected an expensive bottle of champagne to go with it. This single night here would cost her over a thousand dollars, but she wasn't paying, was she?

The meal finished and the tray duly collected, she sat back with the remains of the bottle in the ice bucket and gazed out across the twinkling city, deep in thought.

She guessed that the person behind her escape was counting on her wanting to revenge herself. The persons probable objective must thus be the judge, Erik Vanhanen. He, or she, must be relying on Lida aiming at murdering him. She also guessed that the judge would be watched so to enable Lida to be immediately captured, once she had completed the task. She decided that in all probability she would be "accidentally" shot and killed during the arrest. This failing, the two Russians, so helpfully supplied, would no doubt have been instructed to finish the job.

"Yes", she thought, "A nice, clean-cut affair with no loose ends."

Now, it always astonished Lida how people inevitably underestimated her powers of reasoning and her intelligence. They assumed that her being an orphan, and thus lacking proper schooling, translated directly into her being innocent and unintelligent. "Mind you," she told herself, "it's nearly always men who make that error in

their judgement and rarely women." Men also erroneously assumed that being an orphan, she was unworldly and inexperienced about the ways of the world, and hence, easily deceived.

From a very early age, she had learnt how to put this to her advantage, and numerous were the men who had regretted their hasty conclusions.

Unfortunately for the person behind all this, firstly, Lida was not unworldly and secondly far from inexperienced. She was also considerably nastier than even he suspected.

Merely killing the judge as revenge, appeared to her as being a far too nice a way of going about things. In such a case, he would only suffer for a very short time, whereas Lida had been supposed to suffer for the rest of her life.

She had had plenty of time to think of how best to make this judge suffer, and the basic ideas of her plan had been quite clear in her mind for some time now. It remained now to decide how best to accomplish the task efficiently while avoiding getting herself killed or captured in the process.

Pouring herself a third glass of the excellent champagne, she used her phone to start scouring the internet for information about the judge, his family and where they lived. Above all, she was hunting for information about someone who might have a big grudge against him.

In any case, she was not in the slightest hurry. She had plenty of money, a new identity, and a big car with paid drivers.

Some moments later, she logged off the internet connection and phoned the two Russians. She told them to bring the car around at six-thirty before the day-staff would come on service. The night staff, still on service at the desk, would by then be sleepy and thus not pay much attention to her unpolished behaviour. She told the men to prepare themselves to move down to Vilnius in Lithuania

Putting as much distance between herself and Finland as quickly as possible was only the first part of her plan. She only supplied the Russians with information about this first step of their trip and certainly not the final destination.

She knew that the information would be relayed back to the person behind this, so she was intent on keeping complete control over the amount of data which was passed on. In any case, the plan that had been crystallising in her mind for some days, required her initially to head for Geneva. She knew only too well that the trip was a four-day drive, but this did not trouble her in the slightest because she was never bored. The passage of time was of absolutely no importance whatever to her, and in this case, it would allow her to perfect her plan-of-action.

She was also counting on the free time to do a detailed internet search on her nice free iPhone, while sitting comfortably in the back of that lovely car, with a pad of paper for notes. The car also had a well-stocked mini bar, so what could be better.

Leaving the bottle of champagne unfinished, she undressed and slipped into the silk pyjamas which had also been supplied in her outfitting parcel.

Had the person who had engineered her escape been capable of imagining the abominable ideas which were currently forming in Lida's mind, he would undoubtedly have shivered with horror.

Anyway, now it was too late, Lida was free.

Chapter 7

Monsieur Dubois smiled to himself.

He was sitting comfortably in his cosy little shop in the "Le Louvre des Antiquaires", just across the Rue de Rivoli from the Louvre, in Paris.

Today had been another excellent morning for him because an Indian industrial company owner had purchased and paid for an obscure but lovely watercolour. This work had cost nearly five thousand dollars. The man had been to the gallery three times during the five days he was spending restructuring his Paris offices. He had finally selected the one Monsieur Dubois had wanted him to pick.

The carefully built protective packaging for this had just been sealed and crated. As usual, Monsieur Dubois would deliver it personally to the man's hotel before mid-day. The customer planned to pick it up on his way to the airport.

Monsieur Dubois' commission on this sale amounted to nearly two thousand dollars, which was, he reflected a good morning's work.

All four and five-star hotel customers invariably benefited from this personal delivery service. For his most important customers, he would go as far as personally transporting the crated works of art directly to the airport by taxi. This little extra service was naturally highly appreciated by such customers. They took it as a mark of respect and were always a little flattered. Although this did take him away from his gallery for some time, it enabled him to maintain his excellent working relationships with the more influential staff members of most of Paris's luxury hotels.

The latter knew him to be highly generous each time they recommended his gallery to a customer, and a sale resulted from it. Monsieur Dubois considered that a five per cent commission, off his gains, was a small price to

pay for such introductions. To the people actively involved, these commissions frequently added up to the equivalent of several extra months' salary every year, which was always more than welcome.

In this way, these little arrangements were highly satisfactory to all involved and resulted in an uninterrupted flow of wealthy customers to his select little gallery.

Most of his colleagues in the galleries were tall, impeccably dressed, and often aristocratic looking men. He, however, was a quiet, small man with thinning hair and tending to the round rather than to the slim. He dressed in expensive but comfortable looking suits, chosen carefully to set off nicely the attire of his visitors.

That week, he had sold three other good paintings for prices between two thousand and seven thousand dollars. This latest sale brought his week's profit to seven thousand three hundred dollars. The week had thus been a good one, and in fact and the month excellent. All the same, it was rare that his monthly profits fell below the fifteen-thousand mark.

There were, of course, slow periods and even slow years, but this was not one of them.

Monsieur Dubois had learnt that, when the media overflowed with tales of falling shares, plummeting profits and soaring company failures, this had little or no effect on the amounts spent in his gallery. His customers were often well-known business-men of some sort or other and from almost every country in the world.

These customers had several notable things in common, they spoke English, they derived pleasure in one way or another from owning beautiful paintings, and they had large quantities of money available. A few of them also had either art loving wives or not infrequently, very up-market mistresses.

Consequently, it was not at all unusual, for the purchaser to ask for the painting to be delivered to an address in some exclusive part of Paris, immediately after

his departure. Monsieur Dubois' excellent reputation as someone who knew how to keep a little secret, was reassuring to them and had proved to be a distinct commercial advantage.

More important to Monsieur Dubois's business transactions, however, was that he was aware that most of these customers knew much less about paintings than they would have liked to. Being an experienced salesman, he knew exactly how to deal with such customers. He took the utmost pains to enable them to air the knowledge they possessed and to nod respectful acknowledgements whenever he felt they needed a little extra encouragement.

One of his most appreciated qualities was that he always avoided airing his own superior knowledge.

He knew that these people wanted to be reassured about the pertinence of their choices. He was thus enthusiastic with them and had made it his philosophy never to try to divert them to some other, more expensive painting. If he did feel a certain hesitation and spot the possibility of selling some other work in place of the elected work, he did this with utmost finesse which did him credit.

Firstly, he would tenderly take down the painting in which the customer was interested and place it on an easel in the daylight near the window, for him to examine it at close quarters. He would then hang up the more expensive painting in the empty place on the wall. However, he would do this with a little more clumsiness and noise than was normal for him. After this, he would quietly retreat to his desk in a far corner and wait for things to develop.

This method had often proved to be highly efficient and had earned him thousands of dollars of extra income. It is true that a few of the more observant and quick-minded customers had spotted the innocent manoeuvre with a wry smile. However, these were few and far apart and

didn't appreciate him any the less, for the subtlety of this little ploy.

So, here he was, a man who knew his market and his customers like the back of his hand, or as the French say, like the inside of his pocket. He was also a man who very much enjoyed his work and derived a comfortable income from it.

This being said, Monsieur Dubois had a second activity of which he was even fonder, not the least because it brought in enormously more money.

Monsieur Dubois was, in fact, one of the best and most successful dealers in forged paintings in the world. Where he came into his own, however, was in his strategy or perhaps it would be best described as his business-plan.

His idea was simple and almost faultless.

Firstly, and one of the fundamental notions was that none of his customers in this parallel activity knew his identity and had never knowingly met him.

Secondly, he concentrated this activity exclusively on a little niche of paintings. These were paintings which were known to have been stolen or to have been "confiscated" by, or forcibly sold to, members of the occupying forces during the last world war.

Over the years, he had accumulated a perfect knowledge of every important painting which had disappeared in one way or another over the last fifty or sixty years. Many of these had been valued at over one hundred and fifty thousand dollars, and it was only works-of-art in this price bracket which interested him.

Consequently, he had patiently built up a database, containing a complete set of files for each of these. He owned copies of every single picture ever taken of each of these works, with high definition prints wherever available.

He had selected this particular niche, based on a single conviction. This conviction was that such stolen paintings must be presently hidden away in private collections around the world and thus in the hands of prominent and

well known wealthy families. Most of these families, he reasoned, had over the years come up in the world in one way or another. They would thus undoubtedly find it highly inconvenient if they discovered to be in possession of paintings with such unsavoury pasts. Such a discovery would inevitably raise questions as to the family's involvement, and this could in some cases have catastrophic repercussions on the family reputation and the careers of its members.

He thus decided that by concentrating as he called it on these "lost" works, he had a ready-made excuse for the discretion of the transaction of forged copies of such works of art.

He assumed, correctly, that those who detained the stolen originals, would never dare to speak out, if ever they heard that the stolen painting, actually in their position, had been unexpectedly found and sold on the open market. In any case, he would make sure that if ever this occurred, the police would be immediately and anonymously informed as to the real resting place of the original. He would then make sure that the affair was leaked to the press and this would inevitably convince any others, who might one day find themselves in a similar situation, to keep very quiet. The present owners, he reasoned were also bound to be intelligent people. These would undoubtedly guess that an art forgery specialist was behind this and would spot the ingenuity of the scam, but they would keep quiet all the same.

On the other hand, those willing to purchase, what they considered incorrectly to be the original stolen paintings, would likewise not want to openly advertise their "interest" in such works of art. They would thus keep them safe in their private collections.

Mr Dubois knew that for the same reasons of confidentiality, the potential purchaser would be reticent to bring in a world-class expert to check its authenticity and to value such a painting.

Based on this logic, he made a practice of supplying a potential customer with a carefully drawn up List. This list always presented the names of the world-class authorities for each painting involved, including full contact details, phone numbers and email addresses. He also provided them with a complete list of the whereabouts of all the other major works by the same artist.

Monsieur Dubois was very pleased with this ingenious strategy and rightly so.

Another indispensable part of the plan had taken several years to bring to fruition. This depended on establishing a cordial and mutually beneficial relationship with the director of an inadequately funded research laboratory in Russia. Monsieur Dubois knew that the activities of the laboratory were no longer considered to be of critical economic importance. This laboratory had built its fully justified international reputation, in the field of the natural ageing processes of materials. Not only had they made some important discoveries in this field but had been able to prove the solidity of their theories by reproducing the observed ageing in the laboratory. However, the equipment required to obtain these proofs had been extremely costly and had required the state authorities to invest close on a million euros.

Unfortunately, following an organisation re-shuffle and consequent changes in the members of the central funding authorities, many of the lab director's friends had been ousted. Things had then changed in phase with the priorities and friends of these new members, which lay elsewhere.

Such things take time of course, but it had eventually been decided that, whereas the laboratories reputation manifestly highlighted the superiority of the Russian expertise in the matter, the actual return on investment was vastly inadequate to merit any further financial outlay. Lab funds were thus cut by thirty-five per cent over-night.

The laboratory director was thus only too happy to put his vast know-how and his world-class technical apparatus and team to good use, especially where this helped maintain laboratory finances. In this way, the state of the art equipment and know-how was shown to be capable of artificially ageing a recently painted work of art in such a way as to make it resemble almost perfectly the original.

The only point which upset a few of the team members was that publication of the scientific results was strictly prohibited. However, at least they kept their jobs and their salaries.

As for the picture frames, Monsieur Dubois always used real period ones, corresponding to the age of the original painting. These came from paintings of little or no real value, which would themselves, support a patently modern frame.

Monsieur Dubois left it up to the director to decide exactly how he felt it best to redistribute the income derived within the laboratory. He explained that it was simpler for him to make the sum over directly to the director himself.

Through the entire period of negotiation and process validation, the laboratory director and Monsieur Dubois, never met. The two men were experienced professionals and consequently understood the motivations of each other completely. Furthermore, Monsieur Dubois' goodwill present of ten-thousand dollars, for expenses, cinched the deal and sealed the unsigned contract they had drawn up between them.

For more than a year after forming the basis of his plan, the only missing link had been that of the master Forger. This is where Vladimir Falin, in a manner of speaking, had come into the picture.

All in all, then each of the members of this little arrangement found the conditions highly satisfactory. None of them was in the slightest troubled about not

knowing the identities of each other. Each person only had to worry about doing the job he was exceptional at, and in respecting the deadlines which had been set mutually.

Monsieur Dubois knew that a good job takes time, but he insisted on perfection. He thus always made sure that each member had adequate time to do a job he would be proud of.

The real key to the success of such an ambitious project was to dispose of detailed knowledge of the principal wealthy art collectors around the world and to have means of contacting them privately. One had to be gifted at the subtle talent of smelling-out those who could be expected to be willing to turn a blind eye about the origins of such a painting.

Monsieur Dubois had not only all this, but he also knew each potential customer's tastes perfectly. He only ever approached people whom he suspected to be interested in improving their private collections with exceptional works of art. Once he had selected a target customer, he would bait his hook with an offer of exactly the painting he felt they would be unable to resist.

At this stage in the process, of course, the forged copy did not exist. Work on it would only be undertaken were the purchaser to prove sufficiently interested for Monsieur Dubois to take the calculated risk of setting Vladimir to work on it.

The Painting itself could take anywhere from a few weeks to several months, depending on the research and travel required to get the forgery perfect.

He always openly admitted to the potential customer that the works of art in question were part of those considered to have "gone missing" under questionable circumstances. In most cases, he would add that he was dealing for people who had it secretly in their possession, handed down from parents or relatives. The reason for the

sale was inevitably given as, unfortunate financial difficulties.

Monsieur Dubois did not mind if the potential customer believed this or not, he merely wanted them to accept that the seller needed money and that the painting could not be sold on the open market. He didn't mind in the slightest if the customer asked around or made his own little investigations. However, the sum asked for the painting was always low compared with the open-market value. The customer was thus usually reluctant to rock the boat too much, in case he might lose the chance of making a bargain.

It was true that there had always been the tiny risk that he would offer a customer a painting he already had secretly in his private collection. In this case, however, the personage playing the part of Monsieur Dubois on this occasion would disappear into thin air.

In the cases when things went forward smoothly, and a sale was agreed, then and only then, was the technical mechanism set into motion and on average this happened about four times a year.

Monsieur Dubois felt that this was a good regime, and left each of the members' time to appreciate the benefits of their little arrangement, without undue stress.

When completed and expertly "aged", he invariably arranged to have the painting exhibited privately for the customer, in a convenient European country. On each occasion, a private salon was rented in one of the best hotels. It was always guarded by the two solid looking guards he had come across at the Russian Tretyakov Gallery. This additional presence created just the right impression.

The potential purchaser was always permitted to remain alone in the guarded room for as long as he wished. He was furthermore encouraged to bring along any other person or expert he wanted to have present. In offering this visible sign of good will, Monsieur Dubois counted on

the purchasers coming unaccompanied and had yet to be proved wrong.

If a purchase were agreed, the painting would be delivered at a later date and by hand by the two Russian gentlemen, as soon as the initial 25% was transferred to a secret account. The next twenty-five per cent were handed over to the "guards" on delivery, and the final fifty per cent within the following two weeks.

This arrangement was designed to increase the buyers level of confidence about handing over several hundred thousand euros.

The final touch to the plan was that the size and visible professionalism of the two "guards" who attended to the presentation and delivery, made it quite clear in the purchaser's mind, what the consequences of not fully honouring the debt might be.

If later, doubts were voiced about authenticity, the purchaser would have great difficulty of making the required enquiries without giving himself away.

This well-oiled mechanism had been running smoothly now for nearly ten years, and it gave Monsieur Dubois considerable satisfaction that his brain-child worked so well. Oddly, he derived far greater pleasure from the faultless technical success of the scam, than from the enormous sums of money it had enabled him to accumulate. Not being a vain man, the entire scheme had remained a complete secret to friends and family alike. The latter attributed his financial ease to his ever-increasing success as a respected Parisian art dealer.

To enable them to play their part, the two Russians took a few days off from their work at the Tretyakov, three or four times a year. They never knew the identity of their employer. However, this didn't trouble them in the slightest, because they were very well paid for the simple job of carrying a painting around and guarding it. Furthermore, the role enabled them to travel widely around the globe and to visit places they would never

have been able to otherwise, all expenses paid. They knew only too well when and when not to ask questions. These two were amongst the Tretyakov director's most valued employees. It is true that He did sometimes wonder about these absences when he signed the chits. However, he too knew when not to ask questions

Chapter 8

In Finland, the Prime Minister holds the useful prerogative of appointing the majority of senior civil servants. This right permits him to ensure that only trusted collaborators hold the key positions. Consequently, he can subtly influence policy in many fields and ensure that he is kept perfectly up to date as to the activities of the various government departments.

Such senior civil service positions are highly lucrative and thus much sought after. Most candidates for these positions are lucid enough to have realised, that they don't possess the presence, charisma and cunning required to ensure success in modern-day politics.

One such person was the judge, who had recently been landed with the prickly and controversial trial of the ruthless murderer, Lida Niemela. His skilful handling of this trial had shown him to be exceedingly shrewd. In particular, his subtle prompting of the jury had considerably impressed the minister of justice. The jury had eventually adhered to the judge's recommendation, and the rarely-used life-sentence was applied.

Now, the Finish public often complain about the inhumane nature of state prisons. Furthermore, they make a hue and cry at the slightest sign of police brutality. However, in this case, the population as a whole felt far happier with a ruthless criminal like Lida safely and permanently under lock and key.

Comfortable conditions and open prisons were acceptable for car thieves, tax frauds and the like. However, Lida Niemela could not even, by the greatest effort of the imagination, be fitted into one of these categories.

Armed with this knowledge, Judge Vanhanen was thus able to navigate smoothly, and with confidence, through the political mine-fields which inevitably surround such

high-profile trials. He had already proved himself astute, insightful and intelligent but this recent success confirmed him to be cabinet material.

The Minister of Justice had discussed the case with the Prime Minister, and they had agreed that the judge should be given a significant promotion during the upcoming reshuffle. The judge was confidentially approached about this opening and had indicated his willingness to accept the proposal.

Although he had never openly admitted it, this had been his secret ambition ever since leaving university. It could not be said that he had been dreaming of this job, but only that it had seemed to him the only reasonable objective to aim for in the long term. The judge Erik Vanhanen was content to leave dreams of power and fame to his more politically enthusiastic colleagues and friends. In truth, the idea of spending his entire existence carefully measuring the impact of each word he uttered, just was not in phase with his concept of life. He enjoyed life and his food far much too much to have to strictly limit himself to one small glass of wine, when in company.

Several of his old university colleagues were poised to take on key posts in government, and one of them was openly aiming for the place of Minister of Education and Culture. This man had already cunningly engineered his way to the position of deputy head of Finnish broadcasting. Unfortunately, for Vanhanen, the man was one of the very few enemies the judge had ever made.

This man, one Kustaa Rinne, had spent years gradually honing his image and bringing it and his opinions, perfectly in line with those expected of one destined to high office. His dress and behaviour closely mimicked those of the men who, his intuition told him, would have the power to influence decisions about his future. His choice of leisure activities, pastimes, and even his choice of cars and holiday resorts were also carefully selected with the same objective in view. With him, it was never a

question of liking something, but of merely getting the picture just right, for when his chance eventually came. He was thus, so ostensibly "one of us" that the choice between several rival candidates for high office, would be obvious.

Very early on, he had decided that, aiming at being different, was a much too dangerous strategy. It required a strong fighting character, and constant application to be able to burn one's own path through the opposition. Such men also needed the gift of projecting the image of being the strong-man of the future.

This hand, he decided, was a far too risky one to play.

The judge did not interest Kustaa Rinne. It would have remained so indefinitely, had it not been for Rinne's irresistible desire to keep himself in the public eye. These two very different men had thus accidentally come head-on in a live TV debate about the future of the legal system in Finland.

The judge, Erik Vanhanen, knew the subject perfectly but Kustaa Rinne did not. However, the temptation of free TV coverage was too great for him to resist. What is more, the unscrupulous interviewer knew this perfectly well, and played his hand cunningly, allowing the quiet judge to score point after point over the other man. He didn't care a hoot about either of these two men or their ideas. However, he did care a great deal about his own future, which he too, was carefully cultivating.

The reporter was well on his way to becoming one of the country's star political interviewers. Even though Rinne was deputy head of broadcasting, the loser of this disastrous debate would not consider it wise to sack him, for obvious reasons.

The judge did not spot the crafty manipulation of the debate, but the more experienced Kustaa Rinne did. As the end of the debate approached, angered by the manipulation he had spotted, he inadvisably attacked the judge about his handling of the Lida Niemela affair.

The outburst was an unfortunate mistake. The reporter pounced on it with barely concealed enthusiasm. He completed his show by firing a final poisoned arrow. He asked Rinne if he would accept to have Lida Niemela in an open prison next door to his home, where his wife and four children presently lived comfortably. Rinne got out of this with a hollow laugh and a smooth political evasive manoeuvre, while the judge looked on with a wry smile. The experienced cameraman made sure that the viewers did not miss either the smile of the one or the angry scowl of the other.

The reporter was justified in feeling satisfied with the show. It earned him the prize of being handed the job of interviewing the Prime Minister a month later, and this led to several highly lucrative offers of employment. Yes, all in all, a successful show and the beginning of an irresistible rise to celebrity as Finland's best interviewer.

Making enemies, he reflected, was part and parcel of the job of being a successful reporter. If one had no enemies, one was a failure. It was as simple as that.

Following this catastrophe, Kustaa Rinne naturally had to take it out on somebody. Politically speaking, the reporter was untouchable and far too dangerous. That damned smarmy judge must thus take the blame for the entire fiasco, and he was, after all, an eminently more accessible target than the reporter.

Stomping angrily back to the studio lounge, fuming with rage, he found his wife chatting enthusiastically with the judge's wife. What was worse still, was that his wife gaily announced that the horrible woman was a former Miss Finland. She was still a ravishing beauty, while his own wife could only be described as being a wholesome and friendly person.

It was to his credit that his years of self-training enabled him to behave perfectly, as becomes a potential candidate to high state positions. Seething as he was, he was

nevertheless polite both to this loathsome ageing pinup and to the oily judge himself when he eventually appeared to take possession of his long-legged bimbo.

By the time the taxi had got him halfway back to his comfortable home, he had forgotten entirely the principal role played by the journalist. The person who was to shoulder the entire responsibility for this evening's failure was the judge, and this person must be made to pay for it. He decided, therefore, to do everything in his power to pull the self-opinionated oaf down from his damned high-horse.

It is of little interest to describe here all the details, but suffice to say that the angered man spent a considerable amount of time investigating the judge and his background. His discussions with other upcoming men in the world of politics eventually uncovered the proposition to place the judge near the head of the Ministry of Justice.

From then on Kustaa Rinne had absolutely no scruples about subtly planting false information in the right circles. This was something he was very good at, and it must be admitted that it gave him considerable pleasure too. He knew precisely who to plant the information on so that it would rapidly make its way back up, and be repeated to the right people. Such second-rate trudgers, as he called them, were always so eager to be able to supply their chiefs with little titbits of news. This was even more so, with what they felt to be staggering revelations.

The task was almost too easy to be believed.

In this way, he managed to suggest the existence of odd sexual deviations and other peculiar activities. Should such information ever come to the public attention, it would cast doubt and discredit on the entire government, were the judge in a position of responsibility.

In this way, and before the month was out, Rinne had torpedoed the judge's chances of promotion.

However, when several months later the promised promotion was not forthcoming, the judge's first reaction

was one of astonishment. His second reaction was that of a trained professional judge, and his brief interview with a distinctly uncomfortable minister suggested that dirty work was at hand. He knew only too well that these things take time and care to correct, and it just happened that taking time was one of his strong points. Consequently, after a few months' subtle questioning, he uncovered the reasons for the change of decision, and a few weeks later discovered the origins. The explanation then fell perfectly into place, and he fully understood the motivations of the cruel manoeuvre.

It was not, however in his character to get unnecessarily angry, especially when he knew that such manoeuvres were merely part of the game. He, therefore, set about quietly putting things straight and getting the real facts known in the right quarters. He also made sure that the fact that someone had maliciously planted false information would finally work in his favour.

In any case, he knew that he would now have to wait for the following year's promotions, but he was in no hurry. He knew exactly how to proceed and did not doubt that he would eventually succeed in obtaining the position he was aiming for.

He then coolly set about planning an adequate and sufficient punishment for the person who had innocently believed that he could so easily destroy plans which had been so well laid. He knew only too well Rinne's devouring passion for power and celebrity. He also knew that his only objective was to become a cabinet minister at the very least. Vanhanen had no doubts whatever that Rinne would trample over anyone to get there. Politics was, after all, his only true interest in life. Everything else about Rinne was merely a backdrop which he had engineered for himself.

However, the judge knew that Rinne did have one real passion. He had a keen love of art and in particular of paintings. Vanhanen had also spotted that the man

seemed to have considerably more money at his disposal than would be expected from the jobs he held. The judge's trained brain naturally worked that way. His subconscious mind was always noting odd bits and pieces of information, which it automatically pieced together into a sort of mental jigsaw puzzle. When, whichever way one turned it, a new bit would not fit, it indicated to him that either other pieces were in the wrong places or that the puzzle had a hidden third dimension.

Thus, the judge knew that this wealth was part of some secondary puzzle about which he had as yet no information.

On his side, Kustaa Rinne had always been cautious to avoid drawing attention to his financial welfare. The judge thus concluded that this extra wealth came from a source which he must consider dangerous to his political objectives.

So, it came about that the judge decided to use the secret wealth on the one hand and the passion for art on the other, to give the man the punishment considered he deserved.

Now, during his many years as a criminal judge, he had come across all sorts of information about art thefts, but one, in particular, seemed to be just right for his purpose in this case.

A French art dealer had been suspected of being mixed up in a scheme to help owners of stolen paintings resell them. Various bits and pieces of information had filtered through to the authorities, but they had no proof.

It was thought that transactions for some paintings, stolen from Jewish families during the war, had passed through this channel. Now if Kustaa Rinne could be coaxed into purchasing an expensive painting of this sort, the revelation to the press of such the transaction would wreak absolute havoc with his political career. Inevitably the question of the origins of the money would also come

up, and even more troublesome, where that money was kept.

Then, the judge thought, we shall see what we shall see.

He did not reject the possibility that the origin of the wealth might be perfectly respectable. It was possible that Rinne simply felt that it constituted an embarrassing encumbrance for one aiming at appearing to be close to the man-in-the-street. However, he suspected that there was something considerably more troublesome about it than that.

The suspected art dealer was a Monsieur Dubois of Paris, who had a little gallery near the Louvre. He had been watched carefully by the police for some time, but that time had been entirely wasted. They had found absolutely nothing to incriminate him.

After having carefully sifted through all the information available in the files, Erik Vanhanen was of the professional opinion that this quiet man was considerably more intelligent than his pursuers were ready to believe. He suspected that the man was merely always several steps ahead of the police.

He was entirely correct in his assumption that Dubois was always ahead of the pursuers. Vanhanen would, however, have been impressed to discover how this was accomplished.

Over the years, Dubois had established a working relationship with a well-placed top executive in the police. This person lived and worked outside Europe. For a generous personal retainer, he was more than happy to oblige. He thus kept the Frenchman informed about any investigations concerning him which came to their attention. The executive was convinced that Dubois was a journalist for the major French trouble-making newspaper, "le Canard Enchaîné".

The retainer completely escaped detection, because Dubois arranged to pay the man's monthly mortgage

repayments on his holiday home. This arrangement had enabled Dubois to side-step many risky situations and also to avoid traps set to uncover his identity.

As a connoisseur of crime and criminals, the judge would undoubtedly have been impressed by the perfection of Monsieur Dubois's network and its faultless mode of action.

From here on, the task of actually setting up the plan was a relatively simple affair for Vanhanen. His first step was to investigate Kustaa Rinne's tastes in painting.

This job was easy enough, and he then selected the period he suspected would be likely to attract him irresistibly. The next step was to plant some information. Once again this was easy.

During a cosy dinner party with friends, he leaked his confidential belief about the role which was played by Monsieur Dubois. He selected the wife of a mutual friend of Erik Vaananen's wife, as the innocent tool of this part of the plan. He knew that this woman loved art also and that she frequented the Parisian art galleries. However, she had far too small an income, to enable her to pay five-figure sums for paintings.

He hinted to her that Dubois seemed to have access to many valuable paintings of the period of interest, and even mentioned a few well-known masters. He added that he suspected that many art lovers had used his services over the years and had paid less than half the real value of the painting.

He then sat back and waited.

As has already been noted, Judge Erik Vanhanen was a very patient man, and he was quite ready to wait a year if necessary or even more. However, only six weeks later, during, a post-concert cocktail, the woman rather too casually brought up the subject again. When she asked him to remind her of the name of the art dealer, he knew that a fish had taken the bait. He hoped that the fish in

question was Rinne, but he was too wary to make direct enquiries.

Taking her a little to one side, he stressed that she was to repeat it to no one and above all, never to mention his name in connexion with it. She nodded because she had never had the intention of admitting that the information was not of her own finding.

That evening, on the way home in his car, he smiled to himself. He knew that his enemy was an obsessive and above all a highly impatient man once he had decided to do something. The desire of owning a masterpiece by one's favourite painter would be almost irresistible to a man of his temperament. Rinne would also spot that this was an excellent way of using some of his secret wealth for his private pleasure, without the extravagance being publicly visible. Yes, he thought, this would be almost irresistible, under the circumstances. Nevertheless, he decided to give the thing a good six months before springing the trap.

So, judge Erik Vanhanen sat back and waited.

Kustaa Rinne did fall into the trap. However, neither he nor Judge Vanhanen would ever have guessed that the paintings in question were fakes painted by Vladimir Falin.

As usual, Monsieur Dubois treated the affair with characteristic professionalism. He carefully researched Rinne's background and financial situation, before setting the wheels of his commerce into movement. For this work, as usual, he employed one of the useful contacts he had built up in New Delhi. This person was always happy to use the skills and tools of his well-equipped state department, to investigate the financial solidity of any of Monsieur Dubois's clients, for a certain fee, paid in cash.

As a matter of consequence then, a month later the extent of Kustaa Rinne's fortune was clarified, as was its location and above all its origin.

Monsieur Dubois allowed himself a little smile. "Yes", "Yes," he said to himself, "an almost perfect customer."

Here was a political aspirant, with a hidden fortune of dubious origin, perfect.

He thus sent his very polite standard reply to Rinne. He regretted that his gallery, unfortunately, had no dealings in the sort of paintings he had been questioned about. He included a short list of colleagues in various capitals around the world but added that he suspected that they would not be able to help him any better. There were so few good quality works on the open market he said. He promised, however, to mention the request, should he meet any other colleagues. He wished Rinne luck and excused himself once more for being unable to help.

As usual, he did contact his colleagues as additional cover. Each of these dealers had at one time or another, made lucrative transactions for customers who were experiencing difficulties in furnishing bonafide credentials for the origin of a given work of art of some nature. However, he knew that the probability of their having access to the sort of painting in question was extremely low. Not zero, of course, but small enough to be of only a minor risk to this transaction.

This being done, he waited a month, during which time he researched his files about stolen paintings of the period in question, and contacted Vladimir Falin about his ability to copy/forged that particular painters' work. That being settled, he set his well-oiled machinery into action.

Rinne was contacted by an Egyptian art dealer, who asked to remain anonymous. A set of high definition photos of three possible paintings next found their way to the address in Finland. The deal was struck, leaving Vladimir Falin with three months to paint the chosen work of art.

In five months, Monsieur Dubois would be two hundred and fifty thousand euros richer, and Kustaa Rinne would be the proud owner of a lovely counterfeit painting, which he would show to no one. Both would be happy, which after all, reflected Monsieur Dubois, is the only thing that

counts. If possessing a great deal of money doesn't make one happy, why keep it? He mused.

Everything went smoothly, and four months later the painting arrived, escorted by two impressive Russian guards. Kustaa Rinne was allowed to view the painting at his leisure, and being completely satisfied, accepted the picture and paid as per Monsieur Dubois standard procedure. He hung it in his private office at home and derived enormous pleasure in contemplating it each time he paused from his long evenings of self-imposed work.

By the end of that same day, all trace of the existence of the fictive Egyptian art dealer who had transacted the deal had disappeared.

As time passed, however, a desire grew within Rinne to have this magnificent property with him for more than just the evenings. He longed to have it looking down at him from the wall in his office in town, where he spent more than ten hours every day. He knew that this would be pure folly if someone were to discover its real value and origins. However, the passion grew and troubled him more and more frequently.

He debated pretending that it was a copy. However, this would be dangerous, considering that several of his regular visitors were, like him, art enthusiasts and knew a great deal about paintings. However, as it always is with strong personalities, he had unconsciously already decided that the painting would be on his office wall. It only remained to find HOW this could be done safely.

The obvious solution came to him shortly after a third glass-full of excellent Bordeaux wine, during one of his rare solitary evening meals. All he needed was an unquestionably and bonafide certificate proving the painting to be a copy. He could then display the document alongside the picture, and that was that.

The best way to get a bonafide certificate was to commission a copy of the original painting, which he could then destroy. The plan seemed water-tight.

Consequently, he consulted the director of the Finnish National gallery who he knew had had copies made of some of their rarest and most valuable paintings. The man eagerly gave him a list of expert copy artists. The best and most expensive of whom was the Russian artist Vladimir Falin.

Fate had it that Rinne chose Falin, the painter of the fake he already owned.

Chapter 9

When he tore open the letter and discovered its contents, Vladimir Falin almost fell off his high stool. He burst out laughing at the joke. "So that's where my painting went." He smiled.

By return post, he sent off a quote for five thousand euros, which was immediately accepted. He then stepped over to a stack of discarded canvases at the end of the room and took out the initial version he had made of the painting.

At the time he had not been satisfied with this. Anyway, he knew that the few small errors would be spotted by Monsieur Dubois, who would reject it. However, his new customer wouldn't be looking as closely as Dubois and probably only really wanted the certificate anyway.

He therefore carefully wrote out a full certificate for the copy, specifying his name, address and date of creation. For the sake of clarity, he added data about the origin of the canvas and the pigments employed. He then put the whole lot in the corner of the studio and waited. When a convincing period had elapsed, he wrote informing the purchaser that the painting was ready.

Falin requested one-third of the total cost with the full order, one third on delivery, and the final third two weeks later. He was therefore surprised to receive the last two thirds directly on delivery. This fact convinced Falin that it was the certificate and not the painting itself, that was important to his customer.

The following day Kustaa Rinne had the certificate framed and carried the two articles to his office where they were hung. He had them positioned on the wall in front of his big desk. In this way, he could gaze at them, past any tiresome visitor who might be seated before him.

He did not destroy the new copy but carefully packed it and stored in a spare room at his home.

What a pleasure it was to be able to contemplate the picture daily. It was also most amusing to observe the astonishment of his visitors at the genius demonstrated by a simple copy artist. Several of his visitors even noted down the coordinates of the artist from the signed certificate of origin.

About a month later his secretary knocked and put her head around the door. "A call from the editor of the Helsinki Times. Will you take it?"

He looked up from his work, "Yes, Yes. Put him through". By experience, Rinne had learnt to be wary of newspaper editors and was already firmly on the defensive as he picked up the call. "Rinne!" he announced, "How can I help you?"

He heard a voice he had frequently heard. It always seemed to him to have a sinister ring to it. "Ah thank you for making yourself available, Mister Rinne."

"Always ready to help the press as you know."

"Yes, of course," there was a pause, "I thought it would be a good idea to have a few words with you. One of our writers has just sent in a little article which mentions you, mister Rinne."

Rinne interrupted, "You did well. How can I help then?"

"Well," went on the metallic voice, "Perhaps it would be easier if I were to read you what he suggests for publication."

"An excellent idea," commented Rinne, preparing for the attack, "Please proceed."

Rinne heard the rustling of paper, "Ah! Here it is." He coughed and cleared his throat. "It has come to our notice..."

Rinne did not like articles which started in this way. They always reserved a nasty sting. "No, I'll have to change that around. Sorry."

"No problem." said Rinne, "Carry on."

"Some interesting information has come to our notice concerning the well-known personality and highly promising politician mister Kustaa Rinne."

"This smells bad," thought Rinne.

"The Helsinki Times has been informed that this public servant, with enviable prospects, appears far more financially comfortable than might be expected."

Rinne froze. Had they got on to his hidden bank accounts some way or other. However, he maintained a certain aloofness.

"Now that's a promising start. Please continue." He interrupted, to give his subconscious time to prepare his line of defence.

"Thank you," said the editor, "I will,"

"This promising public servant is rumoured..."

"Here it comes," thought Rinne.

"This promising public servant is rumoured to possess some highly valuable and exceptional works of art".

"So, that's it," thought Rinne.

"Not only that," continued the editor, "but he blatantly puts them on display on his office walls for all to contemplate."

"Now that's interesting," interrupted Rinne. "But please continue."

"I will," said the editor. Being cut off was only standard practice, he reflected. "Some might wonder if it is acceptable behaviour for one so obviously destined for high office in our country".

"Now I like that," interrupted Rinne, "very well put, and not a little flattering".

The editor continued unperturbed. "...destined for high office in our country, while thousands of Finns are freezing to death simply because they can no longer pay their heating bills".

"Now, that is a very pertinent question," interrupted Rinne.

"Such accusations are serious," went on the editor, "and the general public cannot but question the suitability for high government office, should this prove to be exact."

"Yes," said Rinne smoothly, "such accusations would be serious if published. But that, of course, is your business."

"The rest of the document." continued the editor, "is simply a review of your past. Nicely done, too, if I do say so."

"I am pleased to hear that." laughed Rinne. "I don't suppose you would like to tell me the source of this interesting information."

"You suppose correctly mister Rinne," he paused.

"So?" asked Rinne.

"I feel that the text may need a little rewording." said the editor.

"To avoid costing you too much in reparation," commented Rinne.

"Would you like to have your comments added to the paper, should we decide to publish, mister Rinne? It seems only reasonable that you should have the chance of defending yourself."

"I do not need to defend myself as the allegations are completely unfounded."

"That may very well be so mister Rinne, but as you know..." he was cut off irritably.

"Yes, I know, you have a duty to the public."

"Exactly!"

"And above all to the owners of the newspaper and the shareholders."

"They pay my salary, as you know. Mister Rinne."

"Now here is what I have to say. Off the record of course," said Rinne.

"Of course."

"Firstly, your informant has deceived you, because the painting in question is a copy."

"Ah! "said the editor." so you would not object to having it seen by an expert."

"Do you think that, even if I could afford precious works of art, that I would put something so valuable on view. You know as well as I that many of my visitors are experienced collectors?"

"Everyone makes mistakes." countered the editor, "our informant suggests that you have created a fake certificate of origin."

Rinne laughed, "Now, if I have ever heard absolute rubbish, then this is it."

"Then," repeated the editor, "you would not object to having it checked by an art expert."

Rinne knew he was cornered. There was only one way out, and that was to accept.

"Naturally," He replied, "I suggest you contact the director of the national gallery." He smiled to himself at the thought that retaining the Fakin copy had been a better move than he would have thought. "The man is a world authority on the period in question. I will be glad to receive him at any convenient time."

He paused, "But I would suggest you hold publishing until he has confirmed the work as a copy."

The editor was perfectly used to this sort of bluff. Consequently, the following edition included a photo of Rinne with a very carefully worded few lines mentioning the accusation. His official and his agreement to have the painting checked by an expert was added as a footnote. This sort of article was always excellent for keeping anti-government readers happy. It also boosted sales, whatever the outcome.

Rinne cursed the editor. However, he smiled to himself in the knowledge that when the expert *did* come, he would see the copy, not the original. He would then refute the slanderous accusations.

Rinne would use this to his advantage by forcing the newspaper to publish excuses and a full-length article on him. "Brilliant," he said to himself.

That same afternoon he received a call from the Museum director's secretary. A rendezvous was fixed for the following afternoon, at the end of the afternoon. In preparation for this, the next morning, Rinne dropped the packaged copy, by Fallin, off at his office. He would swap the two pictures over just after lunch, well before the expert's visit.

However, unexpectedly, one of the expert's rendezvous was cancelled. Wanting to help Rinne get his problem cleared up as quickly as possible, he made his way to his office directly after lunch, rather than, at four-o'clock as previously agreed. He phoned Rinne's secretary who promised to pass on the information.

That day, Kustaa Rinne dined very well with the director of a national electrical engineering company and then made his way contentedly back to his office. As he entered his secretary, Miss Ranta, looked up from her work and smiled. She had been working for politicians for thirty years now. She had helped a number of them side-step calumnious statements such as this present one. She was excellent in assisting them to keep the publicly visible parts of their accounts acceptable.

"Good afternoon sir," she said. "The expert has already arrived. I let him in. I hope that's all right?" As the man seemed to hesitate, she went on. "I knew you felt that the sooner the present misunderstanding was cleared up, the better."

Kustaa RINNE's guts turned to ice. However, thanks to years of training, his face showed nothing. "Thank you, Miss Ranta, yes, of course, you did well."

He shot a nervous glance at the packaged copy of the painting leaning against the wall and blew out his cheeks.

"Oh God!" he thought.

He knew this expert well and knew that he was not a

man to accept bribes. Murder was of course always an effective and lasting solution, but that was out of the question too. He would have to brazen it out. He'd request a second opinion and swap over the paintings between times. This would, of course, cause no end of trouble. It would also damage the expert's reputation, a man he respected and appreciated. But that could not be helped now.

He pushed opened the door with a restrained sigh. The expert turned and smiled.

"Oh hello, Mister Rinne." Then hardly without pausing, went on.

"Well my young friend, this is a most exceptional painting, I must say." He nodded to himself happily. "Certainly one of his best, there is absolutely no doubt." He leant forward, pushing his glasses back on his nose. "Absolutely no doubt about its origin either, you can trust me on that point."

A short silence followed as the old man scanned the painting. "Yes, no doubt possible. I know the man's work far too well to make a mistake, oh yes..." He turned his head and gazed at Kustaa over the rim of his reading glasses. "Pretty expensive I suppose? Yes of course, that goes without saying."

Rinne gulped, this was looking worse and worse.

The expert straightened himself up and turned, still smiling. "You probably didn't know, but he always put a secret sign hidden somewhere in the picture. In this way, its origin could be proved in case of doubt."

Kustaa nodded, and he continued, "In practice, only a few of his customers knew about this little trick of course."

"Ah," said Kustaa for lack of anything better to say.

"We set that up together, many years ago, to avoid confusion."

Rinne frowned and his forehead puckered with confusion. "Together? I don't understand".

The expert was still not listening. "Yes, this is certainly

one of Vladimir's finest copies. Yes, a real chez-D'oeuvre I would say." He nodded to himself, "A great painter and without a doubt the best expert copyist in the world by far."

He smiled and nodded to himself, "And expensive of course, but you already discovered that. You can't have the best for nothing eh?"

Rinne's head was in a whirl. He was lost this time. "You mean it's a copy!"

The expert still was not paying attention, "Now look here in the shadow thrown by this rose petal." He pointed to a little mark and handed Rinne a small folding magnifying glass, "Look!"

Rinne bent forward.

"Just in the corner there. You can make out the painter's initials VF, see?"

Rinne's mouth dropped open. "Christ almighty!"

"Oh yes, no doubt about it. This painting is one of Vladimir's finest efforts. It would pass as the original in any museum in the world."

Rinne slumped down into his swivel chair. The only explanation he could see was that his secretary must have spotted something and had swapped the copies.

"One moment please," he interrupted the flow of the expert's speech and jumped rapidly to the door.

Popping his head through the door, he asked, "Did you move the picture, Miss Ranta?"

The woman looked up surprised, "Oh no Mister Rinne, I didn't touch it. Is there anything wrong?"

"And you didn't move the other one I brought this morning?"

The woman looked around at the package against her wall. "No, I just pushed it upright to open the door. Is anything wrong?"

Rinne smiled his automatic smile. "No. Everything's Ok. I just had a doubt." Closing the door and returning to his place, he smiled, "Sorry to have interrupted you, please

continue."

The expert went on. "Falín has done quite a lot of work for us over the years you know. He must have copied five or six of our most valuable paintings." He turned back to the painting. "You probably didn't know, but in times of trouble, or when the police are concerned about terrorism, for example, we switch over to the copies until the alert is off." He smiled at the dumfounded Kustaa Rinne, misinterpreting his look of confused amazement. "Oh yes. Most major art galleries around the world do the same thing. The temptation is too great for some, you see." he nodded. "Terrorists see it as a way at striking at the cultural heritage of their enemies." he frowned, "Things are becoming more and more complicated for us you know." He sighed. "Anyway, Vladimir Falín is always the first on the list, but of course, not always available. So, you were fortunate to get him."

He looked over his shoulder. "We always ask him to add his initials somewhere. That way there can be no chance of mixing up the copies with the originals, you see."

Rinne sat gazing into space, and the expert smiled down at him kindly. "I don't know how much you paid, but even if you paid as much as ten thousand, you could certainly get double for it if you were to offer it to a museum." He smiled again, "That man has pure genius in his fingers. Pity he was born a hundred and fifty years too late though." He nodded to himself. "Mind you," he continued, "he makes a good living out of this copying business. Which is more than merited I think, especially in modern-day Russia." He shook his head sadly, "That's life, I suppose. The artificial ageing of this one is magnificent as usual, but that's his secret recipe. I hope he keeps it to himself. Otherwise, the market would be flooded with fake " grandmasters."

He laughed, "Mind you. Fools and their Money are all too easily parted. So, it would serve them right I suppose."

Kustaa RINNE felt anger spring up in him at this remark.

However, apart from a little reddening of the cheeks, he remained utterly impassive.

"So you are perfectly happy," he said slowly, "that my little painting is an authentic copy and not an authentic original as someone kindly announced to the press?"

"Oh! Absolutely. No doubt possible," he smiled. "I don't know who was behind the attempted scandal, but not someone with any true knowledge of painting."

He turned back to the painting with a dismissive sniff and a sad shake of his head. "Mind you, these things do occasionally happen you know," he nodded. "Someone urgently wants to sell a stolen work of art which has become much too hot to have hanging around. They pretend it's a copy and in that way, get a small amount of money out of the transaction. Above all, however, they recover their peace of mind and sleep well again."

He smiled and shrugged his shoulders. "At least we will be able to clear your character very nicely." He folded away his little magnifying glass and a few other tools he had extracted from his leather briefcase. "I'll phone the editor myself when I get back to the office if you like. I will make the case crystal clear. Is that ok for you?"

Rinne sat with his mouth half open then shook himself out of the dream-like state he had sunken into. "Yes, yes. That would be very kind of you. I don't know how to thank you."

"Oh, no trouble at all. I hate all this sort of nastiness in political circles." He tapped the frame with his glasses. "Nice frame too. A good buy I think. Well, I have to be going."

As Rinne escorted him through his secretary's office, the expert spotted the second canvas, wrapped in brown paper and pointed. "Another Vladimir Fakin?"

Rinne forced a laugh, "No No. The original of course!" The expert burst out laughing, "Ha the original, haha. Well, have a nice afternoon mister Rinne." And he left the office chuckling happily to himself.

Rinne went back into the office and sat down with the second painting propped up against his desk. Going over to the door, he opened it and leant his head through.

"Miss Ranta, I have some urgent work I must concentrate on. Please don't disturb me for an hour."

"Yes, Sir."

He picked up the packet and unwrapped the second painting. Lying it on his desk, he carefully scrutinised the rose petal shadow. Yes! It was there too. VK.

"Christ!" he said out loud and fell back in his chair. "I've been conned twice by the same artist."

His mouth hung open involuntarily. "Christ almighty! I don't believe it!" He whistled. "Two hundred and sixty thousand euros for two bloody copies of the same painting!" He shook his head. "I've been ripped off as nobody has ever been ripped..."

Anger did not surge up in him, as it would have done usually. He was too relieved to have avoided an irretrievable catastrophe to his political career. He sighed with relief and swivelling around on his chair, took out a cut crystal decanter from the small cupboard behind his desk.

This small cabinet contained some the most expensive old port that money could buy. It was Rinne's one extravagance that he allowed being publicly visible. He reserved this port for very special visitors, but at that precise moment, he decidedly needed a glass himself.

The loss of the money was annoying of course, but it only made a small hole in his funds. There remained more than enough left for several lives. In any case, he hadn't had to make any effort in accumulating it, but that was another story.

What troubled him more, was to know how he had been tricked, and who on earth was behind it.

Who had worked the initial scam?

Who had tipped off the press?

Rinne had read about Fallin and his background, and

even about his drunken excesses. However, his intuition told him that such a man could not possibly be the organiser of such a clever scam. He was, Rinne decided simply the supplier.

In a flash of inspiration, he realised that it had just been fate that had dropped the second order onto Fakin's plate. How could the man resist the possibility of making a bit of easy money? The artist might even have already had a working copy or first trial, which he just had to touch up a bit.

Kustaa laughed and shook his head, imagining the grin which must have crossed Vladimir's face when he received the order.

No. Rinne was convinced that Fakin was undoubtedly just an instrument.

Any number of his colleagues might have done the tipping off, but only those who knew about the existence of the picture. This fact narrowed things down a bit but not much. People talked, he mused.

One of them at least must know enough about painting, and about Rinne himself, to guess the scheme of passing-off a real painting as a copy.

No one in his circle of friends and colleagues had the grounding which would be necessary to organise the whole scam from contacting to commission, delivery and secreting the payments. So, whoever he was, this could not be the same man as the one who worked the scam.

He sat nursing his Port and then lent forward and refilled the sparkling crystal glass, admiring the lovely colour of the wine. There was no doubt that he had made the first move himself, by contacting that French agent. He remembered that the initial contact man had passed on the information to several colleagues, who, like the man himself, had not been able to help. Each of these had promised to pass on the request, and somewhere along the line, a master Confidence trickster had picked up the lead and had spun out his web.

He reflected that it could easily have been any of those he had directly contacted and even Dubois himself. That man was, after all, suspected to be involved in this sort of affair. However, Rinne was sharp enough to realise that a man intelligent enough to work such a beautifully organised scam without leaving a trace would be exceedingly difficult to trace.

"The combined forces of several police organisations have failed after years of effort". He mused. "So what are my chances..."

"No. I've been ripped off, and that's that." However, whatever the outcome, Rinne was now determined to use this attempted scandal to boost his chances of obtaining the government position he so longed for. He would think about catching the man behind this another day, but now the time was ripe for political action.

He smiled to himself, picked up the phone and asked his secretary to get him the party leader. "Tell him it's urgent please, Miss Ranta."

Half an hour later, he had explained the attempted scandal. He intimated that this was no doubt an attempt to discredit him, by one of the other people being considered for the position.

Bolstered by the numerous articles in the following day's papers, and TV newscasts about the attempt to discredit him, Rinne's future as Minister of Education and Culture was soon more or less signed and sealed.

At his home that evening the Judge ERIK VANHANEN was sitting in an armchair reading the national papers. Suddenly he let himself drop back and laughed out loud.

His lovely wife to look across at him in surprise.

"God in heaven!" he said to himself. "I just don't believe it."

His entire trap had failed for reasons he would never have guessed, and it had completely backfired. The damned man was now guaranteed to get the job that the judge had so carefully attempted to torpedo.

"The man is as slippery as an eel." He thought. Even though he hated to admit it, Rinne was undoubtedly a perfect candidate for high political office. Such characteristics were necessary skills for this.

But fake, stolen old-masters, being sold off as the real thing, was a brilliant scam. Vanhanen had to admit that the whole thing was as close to perfection as was possible. The person behind it must have been doing this for years, without ever having to dirty his hands by dealing in paintings with unwholesome origins.

The judge thought the whole thing through, and he admired the brain behind the idea very much.

But in the meantime, his trap had failed, and Rinne had once more escaped the punishment he merited. He would have to think of something else, or maybe leave it there.

After all, both of them looked like ending up obtaining the jobs they had independently been aiming at.

Well, he would think about it, some other time.

The only thing that was clear for the moment was that Vladimir Fakin must be a key figure in the scam.

Vanhanen thought that he might be able to find a way of putting the painter out of action. However, in that case, there were other impoverished artists almost as good, who would be ready to take up the job.

Erik Vanhanen sifted methodically through all the little bits of information in his mind and found that they now all fitted together alarmingly well. The conclusion he drew was that in reality there were no occult transactions of stolen works of art going on at all.

There was, however an extraordinarily talented and cautious person making money by selling excellent fakes to people with plenty of money to burn. That money, he suspected was probably not always all that clean. He then wondered if it would be worth spending time and money trying to shut the operation down once and for all. However, it was apparent that none of the purchasers of the fakes could come forward without showing their real

colours. Such an action would show them as willing purchasers of stolen goods with very troubled pasts. No, he thought, everyone would keep damn quiet about it.

At least he had the satisfaction of knowing that Kustaa Rinne had spent a colossal amount of his ill-gained wealth on a forged painting. That at any rate, was a small consolation. After all, he reflected, it had not taken much energy to start the whole ball rolling.

Kustaa Rinne did not care which of his opponents was behind the betrayal because it had backfired on all of them. However, it is always best to know who one's dangerous enemies were.

After a short time, he managed to remember where the initial information had come from. He questioned the friend who had passed on the information. This friend admitted that it had been his wife who had mentioned it to him. When asked, the woman, who by then had forgotten that she had promised not to mention his name, said she seemed to remember that it had been the judge.

"AH," thought Rinne. "Now that's very interesting." This little bit of information started a slow process in his mind. His quick mind immediately noted an inconsistency though. The Judge never talked about his work or about the cases in which he was involved.

That being said, Vanhanen was known to like his wine and to drink much more than Rinne himself could handle. All the same, even after an excellent lunch, it was well known that he could still hold his tongue very well. Numerous newspaper agent had learnt this to their displeasure.

Secondly, the woman who the judge had confided in, was a well-known gossip, and the very last person to share sensitive information with. Except, he reflected, if one's objective was to make sure that the information WAS passed on. It appeared thus, a highly plausible idea that the judge had let this little piece of information out deliberately.

Now, he reflected, what if the judge had somehow discovered who had been behind his aborted promotion to the job he had initially been promised. That would have provided an excellent reason for revenge.

Yes. This kind of thing was precisely the sort of well thought out, long-term plan that the judge might be expected to think out.

Ever since the catastrophic TV debate, Rinne had despised the judge, but this now turned into seething hatred. The bastard had tried to ruin his political career and had almost succeeded.

Already in his angry mind, there was absolutely no doubt. An elaborate trap such as this needed someone as intelligent and patient as the judge. However, one thing was inconsistent, and that was the fact that the painting was a copy.

He sat back and reflected on this. "No," he told himself. "The judge must think that the paintings really were the original stolen ones. Had that been the case, Rinne's career would have been finished.

This trick had thus not been some little scam to get him to spend money, but a much more sinister plot.

"The Bastard wanted to destroy me politically forever." He seethed more and more and, getting to his feet, stamped back and forth across his room, red in the face with anger. "Fucking Bastard!" was all he was able to say.

After a short time, Rinne was to come to the same conclusion as Vanhanen. They had both been out-played by a master confidence trickster. However, in the same way as the judge, he couldn't help feeling professional respect for a man capable of setting up such a masterly scam.

He realised, however, that it was possible that he and the judge were highly now likely to be at each other's throats for years if nothing were done about it. It became clear to Rinne that he would have to put the judge out of action permanently.

This was undoubtedly the moment when the idea of murder first crossed his mind. The word itself did not trouble him much, nor the fact that it meant killing another human being. It merely presented itself as being the only reasonable solution to the present problem. Otherwise, the man would poison his future for years to come.

No, the only point that troubled Rinne was how it was to be done. With a little smile, he decided that he must use the Judge's own trick against himself.

He must get someone else to do the job for him, without that person knowing that he was being used.

He needed a ruthless murderer, who had his own good reasons for getting even with the judge. The answer to this dilemma was evident as soon as the problem was neatly laid out. That person required for the task was Lida Niemela.

During her trial, she had publicly declared she would get even with him. So, it remained only to work out how to engineer her escape. Even if she did not kill him, the existence of this woman at liberty would poison his peaceful life until she could be captured and put behind bars again.

His line of action had become crystal clear, so he settled down to a third well-deserved glass of port. The key was to get the whole thing so set up that it would be impossible for the crime to be linked with him in any way.

He would need to be able to condemn the ruthless murder publicly with no risk of backlash or bribery. It would take a bit of careful organisation, but there was no hurry. He knew where Lida Niemela was, and he also knew that she was unlikely to run away in the meantime. He smiled as he thought to himself. "You are not the only one with patience, mister Vanhanen".

chapter 10

A luxurious Moscow-registered car containing two bodyguards upfront glided to a stop. The elegantly dressed young lady reclining alone in the back did not raise her head from her book.

Such a combination help create the right impression to ensure a smooth passage through customs and police checks with a minimum of hassle. The inference drawn by customs officers was that, here was the wife, daughter or mistress of a wealthy Russian citizen. The officers on duty knew that such people were sensitive to unnecessary delays. They also knew that, more often than not, they had well-placed friends who could cause no end of trouble to an over-zealous officer.

Knowing this, Lida had chosen the route to Switzerland via Lithuania, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Austria. She was going to spend the nights at the best hotels in Vilnius, Varsovie and Prague, then Geneva. She did not trouble herself unduly about choosing the hotels, simply reserving online the first five-star one she found above the five hundred euros per night bracket.

This was amazingly easy to do when the money wasn't coming out of one's own pocket. Moreover, the hotels were always very easy to locate on arrival, because being the best around, everyone naturally knew them.

A hell of a lot of money for a single night's sleep and a meal, but she wasn't complaining.

The two bodyguards lodged wherever they wanted, and Lida was not interested in their arrangements. She would give them the slip when she was ready, probably at Geneva. And then she would disappear and play her own game.

Once the powerful car left the winding town roads and settled down to the long haul on the motorway, Lida took out her phone. She then logged onto the in-car internet.

However, before doing anything else, she changed the login details and password. Her benefactor didn't need to be able to have access to her research.

This done, and with minimal effort, she discovered that judge Vanhanen was a close friend to numerous political figures. Running through various newspaper articles which came up, she also found that he was headed for a top job in the ministry of justice. She noted with a wry smile that her own name came up frequently in association with his. It amused her to learn that his handling of her trial had been a nice feather in his cap.

One small detail, however, struck her as odd though. Vanhanen did not appear to be in the elite circle surrounding the head of the party. Now, this looked unusual to her, for someone so obviously experienced and competent.

Refining her search to the last few months, she then turned up more recent articles. These hinted that the man had been passed over for a cabinet job because of some alleged odd sexual behaviour.

"Ah!" she said to herself frowning. "That would explain it." However, here again, her sixth sense told her that something was not quite right here.

In her relatively short life, Lida had had frequent dealings with all sort of people with unusual sexual deviances. They often seemed to single her out as an easy target. They all regretted that bitterly afterwards.

Now in the case of this man, she had spent several days staring at him. Vanhanen had returned this compliment and had stared back at her. During this period of mutual observation, she had not seen the slightest sign of such an abnormality in his eyes.

"No," she said to herself, "That man is as straight as a die." Lida's trained eye told her at the time that there were no deviances in his character. Had there been she would have known how to exploit them against him in public,

during the trial. The same sixth sense smelt some sort of underhand manipulation behind these calumnious articles.

"It looks," she thought, "like someone has got it in for the judge." Now, this was precisely the sort of thing that Lida had been searching for.

If this was true, it was possible that this same person was also the one who wanted the judge out of the way definitively. In that case, it would be who had masterminded her escape.

She lay back in the comfort of the leather chairs and thought about this possibility. The procedure smelt precisely like the sort of thing politicians got up to. The kind of plan used to discredit a member of the opposition. But, then again, the Judge was not in politics and was not headed for a role in any party front-line.

It might, therefore, be someone who was after the same job. That might explain the slander, but not an ingenious murder plan.

There must, she decided, be something in the judge's past to explain someone going to such extremes. Furthermore, that person involved must have money, brains and a long arm. Those conditions narrowed things down a lot.

At mid-day, the car negotiated an ice-rutted slip-way and stopped at a steamy lorry driver's café. To maintain appearances, after using the toilets, Lida returned immediately to the comfort of the car. One of the guards then brought her out a thermos flask of strong tea and some surprisingly good sandwiches.

A further five-hour drive remained before reaching their destination, and they set off again as soon as the two men had finished.

Speeding once more along the snow bordered motorway, she continued her web search, concentrating now on the judge's past activities. However, she could find no other references linking him to present members

of the party who might have reason to eliminate him. A candidate then, perhaps, or there was always the possibility of it being a criminal whom he had put away. Somehow, however, this last alternative didn't strike credible. She came to this conclusion because the judge was decidedly a just man. Her own particular case was different because it had become a political affair.

Searching recent newspaper articles, she then discovered a very recent one relaying her escape from prison.

The judge had been openly criticised for not having put her in a higher security prison block. He was reported as replying; "Any criticisms should have been made at the time of the trial and not months later. If the person making the criticism had been so worried, why then did he not speak out earlier?"

The person attacking the judge was Kustaa Rinne. It didn't take Lida long to discover that this man was a very highly thought of candidate for the post of Minister of Education and Cultural Affairs.

"AH! Some friction here." thought Lida and decided that this line of thought merited following up. Her continued search quickly showed Rinne to have just the sort of profile she was searching for. Intelligent, well-placed, reasonably well off and above all an arrogant careerist.

A series of documents treating Rinne's trouble with a stolen painting then caught her attention. However, the work of art had finally turned out to be a copy, or at least the official expert certified it as such.

Now, this piece of information stood out like a sore thumb for Lida. She reasoned that no man of Rinne's background and culture would ever buy and hang a copy of a painting on his wall. Even if he liked it a lot and admired the artist, this went completely against social codes of behaviour of people of his class and aspirations. Far better to buy the original of an unknown and second class artist and pretend to admire it, than a copy, even by the very best copyist.

"No!" he thought "There's something fishy here." If the man had hung this painting for all to see, it was either the original or at least he thought it was.

But then again, she mused, this would have been an exceedingly dangerous thing to do for an upcoming minister. The whole thing seemed out of character with a man who was highly intelligent and cunning.

A man ruthless enough to work his way up to being short-listed for the minister was indeed no idiot. Lida could see only one reasonable explanation. The man must have been confident that any art expert would declare the painting to be a copy if ever asked to expertise it. This point meant that the experts were either in his pay or that he had some hold over them.

"A highly dangerous game all the same." he mused, "but then the world is full of men who think themselves far too clever to be caught."

Lida knew by experience that it never did to underestimate the intelligence of one's enemies. Her own recent experience in the French "Vercors" mountains, was proof enough of this. It culminated in her failed attempt to recover a huge hidden fortune in gold.

She scowled at the little screen. However, those who had tricked her out of that gold were going to pay for their cleverness in soon.

Lida shook herself out of this reverie and returned to the question of Rinne's painting. Clearly, someone had leaked the information about the existence of the painting to the press, and probably for political reasons.

However, why would anyone go to all that trouble if he guessed it was a copy. The only explanation was that the person who had leaked the info must have thought that the painting was genuine. She felt that Rinne must have thought it was genuine too.

For the moment, Lida felt that she lacked a big part of the puzzle. Nevertheless, an idea that was beginning to germinate in her mind. Someone had set a trap for Rinne,

but the man had somehow managed to slip out of it at the last minute.

The person who had engineered the plan had known that there was something politically dangerous about owning that painting. This could have been because it was a stolen war trophy of dubious origin. Alternatively, the aim might have been that Rhine would have to justify the source of the money he had used to purchase it. Either a stolen painting or dirty money, she concluded.

Anyway, being caught with a priceless and stolen war-theft hidden away would put a permanent spanner in the works of any political career. But the interesting thing was that the whole plan had back-fired. The painting had been officially declared to be a copy, or possibly a fake.

The papers said the original would have been worth over four hundred thousand dollars, a considerable sum for someone to have readily available. Even more so, just to hang a picture on one's wall. This fact implied that there must be much more where this sum had come from.

An arrogant, politically ambitious man with a fortune tucked away somewhere out of sight, was precisely what she was looking for.

"I believe I have found you, mister poisoner," she said to herself.

By the time she arrived at this point in her reasoning, they were approaching the outskirts of Vilnius in Lithuania. Lida logged out of her web account and lay back on the cushions, her eyes closed and went into her no-thinking state. She remained like this until the car glided smoothly up in front of the luxurious Kempinski Hotel.

Once more, she dined in her room and slept well in the luxury of the sound-proofed suite.

Next day they were out of the city and onto the Polish motorway by eight-o'clock, and Lida took out her notes and started on her search again.

She did not care a hoot about scenery and didn't once look outside to see where they were. She did notice that

there was more snow here and that the roads were not well cleared, but that was all. In any case, the driver had his instructions, and she would give him the hotel address when they reached the outskirts of Warsaw. It was only a six-hour drive, and she knew that her whereabouts would be relayed back to the man with the money, so the later, the better.

She now had a definite gut-feeling about some link between Judge Erik Vanhanen and Kustaa Rinne. Consequently, she typed in the two names and hit enter. She immediately fell back and laughed aloud. There before her eyes was the link she had been looking for. The headline was "Judge Erik Vanhanen and future minister Kustaa Rinne in TV dispute."

The writer had clearly enjoyed describing the public defeat of the arrogant politician by a quiet and competent professional. The article was accompanied by the photos of the wry smile on the calm face of the one and the angry scowl of the other. Another little photo taken from behind, showed the two men leaving the studio with their wives.

Even from behind the photo said a lot.

Rinne's wife was short and plump and comfortably dressed, but Vanhanen's was a tall, slim creature, with magnificent hair and clothes.

"Ah ha!" thought Lida, "another source of jealousy here, I think." She took a closer look at the tall woman. "No." she nodded, "Having a wife with a body like that on hand, would certainly keep any sexual deviation well at bay."

She read the article through twice and took down some notes. However, there was hardly a doubt in her mind as to the people involved in this affair now.

In all probability, she reasoned, the politician would have been seething with rage after this public defeat. It seemed entirely plausible thus that it had been him who had started the gossip going about pretended sexual deviations. This reaction would be the one to be expected of a maddened and jealous man. He would see it as a

perfect way of getting back at the man who had publicly disgraced him in the debate.

This reasoning led her to the inference that the Judge would have naturally applied all his professional expertise to try to track down the origin of the scandal. She did not doubt that he would very certainly have succeeded.

Thus, had he discovered that Kustaa Rinne was behind the scandal he would naturally feel entirely justified in trying to get his own back.

She had learnt to her own cost that he was a highly intelligent and patient man. He was thus the perfect candidate for setting up a brilliant counter-attack. Once again, however, that trap had back-fired, and the slippery eel of a politician had escaped his just retribution.

Having got this far in her reasoning, she sat back and let the ideas ripen in her subconscious as the final two hundred kilometres flew by.

That evening and night passed peacefully in the same way as the previous one. This time the cost was seven hundred euros this time, not including the evening meal. Lida didn't waste time choosing these meals. She merely selected one at random out of the most expensive, near the top of the room service menu card. This added an extra hundred and fifty euros to the bill, mainly due to the excellent bottle of champagne that Lida had drunk. She found that she slept exceedingly well after drinking one hundred euros' worth of champagne.

The following morning found them once more speeding along the motorway, towards Prague, a seven-hour drive this time. She spent the morning checking and cross-checking her information. She concentrated on linking together the various bits and pieces of information she had gleaned from various newspaper articles. The result of this study was that it was clear that, Rinne and Vanhanen, hated each other and had been at each other's throats for some time.

Everything fitted nicely together.

This meant that in all probability, the man behind her escape had been Kustaa Rinne. He had probably engineered this uniquely in the hope that she, Lida, would immediately rush around and murder the judge.

Although the puzzle now seemed complete, she decided to allow the ideas time to mature. After lunch in another snowbound motorway halt, she turned her attention to the other point that mystified her.

She could not believe that a man like Rinne would purchase a copy and hang it on his wall. It seemed obvious to her that he must have thought it to be an original. But where did it come from?

The vital point was obviously the dubious origin of the thing. The inference was that there was a third person in this affair. This person had outwitted all of them, and no doubt had made a lot of money out of it.

Having an excellent head for confidence swindles, she asked herself how one could make money out of selling fake pictures. First, she reasoned, one needed to know a lot about paintings. Second, one had to have an experienced world-class artist to do the actual painting. After several hours of research on the internet, however, she had found nothing that gave her a decisive lead.

Above all, she found virtually nothing about people having been sold fake grand master paintings. This finding inferred that either there were very few, which she doubted, or that the deception was done in such a way as to ensure that an expert never checked the paintings.

As they rolled into Prague, she decided to leave this investigation for the time being. She would use the last day's journey in preparing the actual business in hand.

So, the next morning, as soon as they hit the smooth straight surface of the motorway through Austria towards Geneva, she went to work. Lida set about organising the more down to earth business of getting even with the judge, without being caught.

The first thing she uncovered was the Facebook page belonging to his wife. From this, she discovered all sorts of interesting and useful things. In particular, she found that they had two small children and that they had just started a skiing holiday in the French Alps. Apart from this the recent period of the Facebook account contained little of any use. However, scrolling well back down through the timeline several years, she noticed that this ski holiday in France seemed to be a regular affair. No real direct information but plenty of photos from about this time of the year. She ended up by spotting a picture showing the judge holding a tiny baby. He was standing outside a restaurant with its name clearly visible, Les Rhodos. Plugging this into google brought up the information she wanted. The restaurant was in the ski station, Avoriaz. Other photos showed Vanhanen on a chalet terrace and a view through the window overlooking a ski slope, so they must rent a chalet, not stay in a hotel.

"Great!" thought Lida. Things were looking better already, and she now knew that she would soon know exactly where they were.

However, one thing was troubling her. The photo she had found of Rinne and Vanhanen leaving the ill-fated TV studio, clearly showed the judge's wife to have the body of a pin-up. Women with such bodies inevitably want to show them off, and their Facebook pages usually overflow with selfies.

In this case, there were none. Not a single photo the woman. Lida found this very unusual. She reflected that the woman might be ugly or have some deformity which she did not want to advertise. However, Lida did not follow up this line of reasoning because the discovery of the location of the holiday party had deflected her attention.

Had she followed up that question, with a few more clicks, she would have discovered things which would

have radically modified her plans, and much suffering might have been avoided.

However, this was not to be the case.

Lida next looked up the names of luxury chalet rental companies at Avoriaz and noted the phone numbers down on her pad. Then, sitting comfortably in the back of the car she started patiently phoning round. She pretended to be a wealthy Russian wanting to rent an expensive chalet. Each time she slipped the judge's name into the conversation. Lida was careful to behave exactly how she imagined a wealthy wife would. She mentioned that the judge Vanhanen had recommended her the one he usually took as being what she was looking for. Lida hit the right spot on her third call.

"Oh Yes, madam, an exceedingly comfortable chalet."

After a pause, the assistant came back online. "I'm sorry, madam, but the chalet is not available. The judge's family are actually there now. My colleague tells me that they rent it every year and all other periods are block booked."

This information was perfect for Lida. She asked about availability for the summer season and noted down the name, and the address of the chalet then rang off.

"Goy you!" she smiled to herself.

She now knew where they would be and that the chalet was extremely expensive. Lida considered, furthermore, that it was far too expensive for a run-of-the-mill judge. Now, where did HIS money come from? The whole thing was becoming extremely interesting.

In the early evening, they rolled smoothly into the outskirts of Geneva and parked in the forecourt of the Hotel d'Angleterre. The guards carried her three suitcases up into the lobby. Two of these contained nothing but crumpled newspaper and a few bottles of mineral water each, to add weight. She told the men that they would make a late start the following day and head for the Airport at Lyons in France. She also asked them to check

that their passports were in order and that she would tell them the final destination during the drive.

By this time, the two Russians were used to her particular brand of secrecy, so this did not trouble them. In any case, they were still being well paid for merely driving a car, so why complain? She fixed the departure for just after lunch the following day at a quarter to two.

As soon as she had checked in, she asked to talk to the hotel manager. Her objective was to now move the money from its present account into a more private one. She felt confident that this would not present a problem in that cosmopolitan city.

She merely asked the hotel manager to recommend her a nice respectable and "quiet" bank. The manager understood and slipped her a card with an address, murmuring, "This is where many of our best customers do their business. I am certain that you will be perfectly satisfied with their service...", which of course she was.

She next went for a short walk downtown, during which she threw the telephone in a bin after smashing the SIM card. She then bought a new one in the closest hi-tech store and also an internet dongle and a laptop.

chapter 11

The following morning, she checked out of the hotel at seven and took a taxi to the central train station. Here, she abandoned the two empty cases in a corner and took a second taxi to the international airport. After making sure that she had not been followed, she took the airport shuttle to Chamonix. At shortly before nine-o'clock Lida had booked in at the Albert Premier hotel, which she had reserved the previous evening.

From now on, this was her own game, to be played as she decided.

The two guards would not discover and report back about Lida's disappearance for another four hours. They would no doubt be given instructions to find her at all costs. The two were old-hands and would know perfectly well that Lida would be unfindable. They would guess that she would carefully cover her tracks. However, she also knew that they would not say so.

For as long as they kept up the pretence of a search, they would continue being paid. They would also retain the use of a very nice car. She guessed that the two men would string the thing out for as long as Rinne's patience would go. She hoped they would be able to visit some very nice places in the process. In any case, she wished them well, after all, one had to accept all the little blessings that life gave one.

That morning she rented a dark grey Audi 6 and parked it in the hotel car park. She guessed that the guards would start their search by checking out the airport at Geneva, before looking further afield, so she decided to undertake her first job the following morning. By that time, they would probably be heading for Lyons airport, knowing well that Lida would not be there.

Avoriaz was a three-hour drive from Chamonix, and she reached the town the next day at just after eleven-o'clock.

From a pay phone on the town square, she phoned up the chalet, posing as the baker's shop, announcing a bogus delivery of a cake from the husband.

She then walked to the baker's and purchased the first cake she noticed and had it wrapped. Next, she changed into a bright pink ski anorak and bonnet with dark glasses and pink moon-boots. Finally, she followed the in-car GPS map to the chalet.

Leaving the car out of sight, a little up the snow-covered track, she retraced her steps and knocked on the door. After a short delay, it was opened by a tall woman of about forty. There was something familiar about her face that reminded Lida of something. "A package for" she pretended to look at the address on a piece of paper, "For Mrs Erik Vanhanen," said Lida. The woman turned and looked over her shoulder.

"Please come in. My sister is in the kitchen." Lida followed the tall woman across a vast sitting room where an enormous wood fire was crackling in an open grate.

In the kitchen, a woman rose as they entered, brushing her long thick hair back from her face.

Lida stopped short and stared. She instantly recognised the woman and was completely unprepared for such a turn of events. She made a step forward but stopped short thinking hard. "Christ"

She remembered the woman as a former Miss Finland, but above all as a woman she had known for many years before that.

Her name had been Adda Takala.

They had been orphans, lodging together with the same family for some time. Adda had been no more educated or cared-for than Lida but had taken a completely different direction.

Lida didn't care about many people, but this woman had always impressed her by her determination and energy. Many of the girls around them had ended up as shop

assistants in backstreets or prostitutes. However, Adda had set her sights incredibly high, right from the start.

In the same way as with Lida, she had nothing to lose and everything to gain. She was very tall and beautifully built with a perfect complexion, lovely features and magnificent hair.

Lida remembered that she started by going in for local beauty competitions and quickly reached regional then national level. She did this because she had a single objective which was to get out of her present condition and stay out of it permanently. To do this she required a wealthy husband and to do that, Adda needed to be seen and met by the potential candidates.

She had been proposed to numerous times on her way to the top but was ruthless enough to wait until the best bargain came her way. When she won the crown of Miss Finland, this brought her into contact with many wealthy people.

Lida had followed the progress of her old companion with interest and had admired her for her tactics and determination. Then for various reasons she had lost sight of her.

Most of the interested males buzzing around Adda were of course already married. They dreamed only of having sex with one of Finland's most beautiful woman, so these she turned down flat and waited. Eventually, and near the end of her year as Miss, Judge Erik Vanhanen came onto the scene. She realised that he was probably the best catch she could hope for. He was nearly ten years older, which had given him the advantage of having had time to make a name for himself and to accumulate a great deal of money. She had done her research on him and discovered that this man was set for greater things. He had more than enough determination to attain them. He also had more than enough work on his plate to leave her in peace for the greater part of the time.

"Perfect." she had thought, and then set about getting him to propose marriage, which had been a straightforward task.

She looked at the still lovely woman, "Oh shit," Lida thought. During this short silence, Adda was watching Lida face with a slight frown.

The pink anorak and the woollen bonnet covered her new blond personality leaving only the face visible. Recognition flashed in the other's eyes. "Lida!" she gasped, and made a small movement as if to move forward and take her in her arms, then abruptly halted.

Lida stood motionless unable to find anything to say. She simply continued staring.

"I heard about your escape," said Adda then turning to her sister, "this is Lida Niemela, you must remember her from the orphanage." The sister turned and stared in turn.

"So," she said slowly, "You've come for Erik, I suppose. Adda told me that that's what you would do."

Lida slowly pulled off her bonnet.

"Ah!" said Adda. "So you're blond now. We wondered how you had slipped through the net."

"Christ!" said Lida, "I had no idea that it was you who had married him. Well done Adda."

"Thanks." The sister came and stood beside her younger sister.

"Erik is not here you know, we're on our own with the children."

During this time Adda and Lida were gazing at each other, then she spoke.

"Lida didn't come for Erik," her sister started, "she came for me."

"Oh, shit!" was all that Lida could find to say.

"I've got two little children now, Lida, would you like to see them?" she said sadly.

Lida followed Adda out of the kitchen, across the warm sitting room overlooking the ski slopes then up a polished granite staircase. At the end of a long corridor, she

stopped before a heavy door and turning, put her finger to her lips.

She pushed open the door, stepped in, and crossing the granite floor, looked down into two cots. Lida followed and peeped over.

There slept two tiny children. "one and two years old," said Adda.

Lida nodded.

"You came to punish Erik by killing his wife I suppose".

Lida continued to gaze down at the children.

"Spare my children Lida, please," She said this without a hint of emotion or fear in her voice.

Lida sighed and turned, then in a flash, kicked Adda's feet from beneath her, sending her back onto the hard floor. Her head hit it with a crack. A second latter, Lida went down on her knees, lifted the now limp head and smashed it back down on the granite as hard as she could four times until the last crack gave no resistance. She then jumped up and grabbed the older baby. She shook it violently back and forth, like a cat killing a rabbit. Its little head flew around like a doll's, with little crackling noises, without uttering a single cry. Dropping the limp body back into the cot, she picked up the second and did the same thing.

She then turned and walked quickly downstairs. Back in the kitchen, she smiled at the sister. "Adda says to open the Cake, and we'll have a chat to see how to sort things out".

"Ah," said the sister relaxing visibly.

"Yes. I had no idea it was Adda. Have you..." she hesitated,

" Got a knife to cut the string?"

The sister rummaged inside a drawer and handed over a small pointed paring knife. Lida hesitated, turning the knife over in her hand and testing the edge. Then shaking her head slightly, she cut the string and placed the knife on the table.

"Hold on. I forgot the second package in the van. Back in a minute". She crossed the room and passed through the front door.

An extra death would be of no use and in any case. In any case, the evidence the sister would provide would fit in perfectly as part of Lida's overall plan.

After a few moments, Adda's sister walked over to the foot of the staircase and called up to her sister. Getting no reply, she repeated the call, then suddenly a horrible shiver went through her entire frame.

She kicked off her high heeled shoes, and dashed up the stair and along the corridor. Throwing open her sister's bedroom door, she came to a halt. There was nobody there, and her sister's children were fast asleep in their cots. She checked the on-suite bathroom then called out again.

Silence.

Puzzled, she walked quickly along to the end of the corridor and quietly opened her own bedroom door. She froze with her hand on the door handle. There on the floor lay the body of her sister, dead. She leapt to the children's cots and immediately fainted.

Adda had sacrificed her sister's children to save her own. Her sister would never suspect such a ruthless and heartless act on behalf of the sister she loved so much.

During those few minutes, Lida slipped back into the house and took the woman's laptop computer. It was sitting on the lounge table. She was careful not to close it or let it go into sleep mode.

Strolling back to the car, she set the laptop down on the passenger seat and drove out of the town. Halfway down to the valley, she stopped in a quiet lay-by. Here she changed back into a leather jacket and a black bonnet and glasses. The other anorak, hat and boots went into a bin bag and this she threw it into a big plastic dustbin by the roadside.

She next drove to Geneva and parked the Audi in the short-stay car park. It would be found after a few days no doubt, but this was part of the plan anyway.

At the airport, she purchased a business class ticket to Helsinki on the direct Finnair flight for the same evening. For this, she used the bank card supplied by Rinne. She also reserved a room for two nights at the five star "Haven" Hotel and paid the eight hundred euros online. This payment left the account more or less empty.

After checking in, she carried the laptop into a quiet corner of the lounge and went to work. First, she typed in a message into Adda's Facebook: "Having a lovely time here in a fabulous chalet at Avoriaz." She then cut and pasted a photo from the agency website, and inserted it onto Facebook adding the comment, "Thank God for wealthy husbands!". The press would be sure to pick that up immediately after the story about the murder came out. It would put them on the track intended by Lida and would cast doubt of corruption on the already bereaved husband.

As a finishing touch, she opened the girl's webmail account and having located the husband's email address, typed in a message, in Finnish and hit the send key. The note read, "Don't forget to thank your friend Kustaa, for the lovely painting. How on earth does he manage to get his hands on such magnificent works of art?"

Now, that would definitely put the cat among the pigeons.

Neither of the men would have any knowledge about the painting mentioned. However, there would be a hell of a lot of explaining to do and a lot of suspicion flying around in all directions.

Finally, she went into the women's toilets and waited for them to be empty. Lida then smashed the PC against the edge of the granite wash basin. The screen split satisfyingly into a spiders-web of fissures, and she snapped it shut. She then removed and pocketed the

battery-pack and tucked the smashed PC right at the bottom of the paper-filled waste bin.

It would be found later, but a smashed laptop without the battery would be discarded even by an underpaid cleaning lady.

The aeroplane got her into Helsinki late, but the taxi got Lida to the Hotel, at well before midnight. Lida knew that it was a question of about twenty-four hours before they traced the blond Lida Niemela back to her homeland. She smiled to herself at the thought of the fear that her arrival back in Helsinki would give both to the judge and Rinne. Rinne would be furious that she had out-played him and paid back the judge in a way he had not planned for. He would also guess, by the fake email, that she had worked out that he was behind her escape.

Rinne would see that his plan had backfired on him and would come to the conclusion that she was now back home to deal with him and the judge. Lida hoped that he would have many very uncomfortable nights before him and smiled at the thought.

However, neither of these two men were on her "to-do" list, but of course, they couldn't know this.

It had been a pity about Adda. The girl had had exceptional qualities but had made a mistake in marrying the judge.

Lida felt a little consoled when she reflected that under that lovely outer coating, Adda was as hard as nails. She would not have hesitated an instant to do the same to her, had their places been reversed.

Next morning after breakfast, she put on her tracksuit and trainers, slung a small runner's rucksack on her back and left the hotel. The manager had previously supplied directions to the best fitness centre which was close by. Lida had no intention of going near the place. She had already disposed of her chic clothes and accessories in various dustbins around the hotel area.

The first thing she did was to enter the closest big supermarket. Here she purchased a change of clothes and shoes and a black Nike "cap" with a long "visor". This being done, she headed for the train station and changed in the toilets, cramming her blond hair well hidden under the hat.

The tracksuit and trainers went into a bin in the station, and in the next one, she threw the bank card.

She bought a ticket for a little town nearby where she owned a flat about which no one knew.

Once there, she extracted a box of hair colour and all the additional equipment required, from her supermarket bag. From her rucksack, she then took out the bag of make-up materials. Finally, from a hiding place deep under the bathtub, she dragged out a forged set of ID papers. These and a driving licence had been made for her two years earlier in the name of Lisa Nurmi.

This name was the one she had used for her new Swiss bank account.

By late afternoon, Lida was once more dark haired. Her careful make-up added extra depth to the hollowness of her cheeks and the sunken nature of her eyes.

She then dressed in jeans and a new white angora jumper. She covered this with a black anorak and took the train to Helsinki airport, a completely different woman. Here she purchased an economy class ticket on the direct afternoon flight to Paris.

Using the airport computer, she reserved a modest hotel in central Paris and by eight-o'clock that evening was sipping a glass of white wine in a bistro just across the road from the entrance to the Louvre, a new woman.

"Try and find me now," she smiled to herself... She leant back and did something she rarely did. Lida laughed.

Chapter 12

The snow had fallen heavily during the previous night, and I was finishing clearing the entrance to the drive. I halted in this part of my early morning labours and straightened myself. I was still stretching my aching back when a familiar, muddy Renault Megane swung gingerly off the narrow mountain road into the entrance.

Keeping our stone flagged courtyard and the eighty feet of drive clear of snow had become one of my winter morning rituals since we had purchased and refurbished the old farm. We had moved up here the previous year, a few months after the "Ulace" business. If the truth were told, I was secretly proud of being out there regularly, battling with the elements in the sub-zero weather. It made me feel more a part of the mountain community in which we now lived.

As part of our wedding presents our friends had given us a small motor driven snow-blower. This machine admittedly eased the job, but one still had to manoeuvre and drag the thing around for over an hour.

As the car came to a halt, I waved to the occupants. Paul Douanier and my childhood friend Margaux climbed out of the car. The searching wind caught them unawares, and they quickly pulled their anoraks closely around their throats to keep it out.

I strode over and hugged and kissed Margaux, then shook Paul's hand, before leading them across the slippery flagstones. As I opened the heavy, triple glazed, front door, a wave of warm, wood-smoke smell embraced us invitingly.

The entrance led directly into our large, wood beamed-sitting room where the big wood fire was burning merrily.

As the door opened, Sally leant around the wing of her armchair to see who was arriving. "Oh! Margaux! Paul!" She jumped to her feet depositing her book on the side table, to greet the visitors.

My wife was now very rounded, and as the eyes of the visitors took this in, they smiled as they advanced.

Margaux took Sally in her arms carefully and kissed her while Paul kissed the other cheek simultaneously.

"Well, Sally" cried Margaux standing back and glancing down, "coming along nicely, I see." Sally skipped across to me, put her arms around my waist and cuddled up to me, her blazing red hair falling over her eyes.

Paul smiled and shook his head as he always did when something affected him. "I wonder what this new addition to the universe is going to turn out like," he laughed.

"In another few weeks, all will be revealed." joked Sally.

"At least you'll be nice and cool up here on the home-straight." smiled Margaux, "Not like being down there in the centre of Grenoble in mid-summer."

"That's why we're here," I said glancing at my wife. "Well," I laughed, "I suppose you two were just up here running through Autrans on your way somewhere or other and decided to pop in."

Sally snuggled closer, "Or perhaps they simply came up here specially to check my circumference."

"Yes. A definite possibility," I smiled, "so how about telling us the news?"

Margaux shot a glance at Paul, who nodded. "We had some news yesterday about your old friend Lida Niemela," she said.

Sally freed herself from me and stood alert. "Ah, what was that?"

"She escaped".

Sally looked at me, "Jesus!"

"Exactly," added Paul. "She was poisoned, and while she was recovering in hospital, she gave the guard the slip and disappeared".

I rubbed my frost-reddened chin, "That's not good news."

"No," Agreed Paul, raising his eyebrows.

"The evidence is that someone set the whole thing up to get her out of prison and into a place easier to escape from."

Margaux stepped over to Sally and put a hand on her shoulder, "The consultant told us that no one ever recovers from a poisoning attempt in prison. So, someone wanted her just ill enough to get her transferred quickly to the hospital."

I went over to the window and looked out at the gently falling snow, "I can't imagine many people who would prefer her out than in." I commented, "Especially after going berserk and shooting down her own henchmen."

"No, " nodded Paul, "So it looks like someone had a special mission for her. At least that's what we think".

Sally grasped Margaux's hand and kissed it, "Any idea where she is now?"

Paul pulled a face, "Not really. But we have a good idea where she has been."

"Ah," I said, "not Grenoble I hope."

"No. Avoriaz." he hesitated, and Margaux took up the story.

"Someone has got rid of her black hair and transformed her into a chic well-dressed blond."

"And supplied false papers and money." Added Paul.

"She then made a bee-line for Avoriaz," said Margaux.

She hesitated again. "Well to be exact, she managed to discover that the judge, the one who put her away for life, was there. Or to be exact his wife and children were."

"Jesus!" cried Sally.

Paul shook his head, "I'm afraid she went straight there and murdered the wife and two babies."

Sally froze "Oh Christ!" I moved quickly and put my arms around my wife and held her close.

Margaux continued. "She made a mistake though. The two babies were not the wife's, but her sister's. They had two each with them, and they were expecting the judge a few days later. Lida got them mixed up."

Margaux interrupted, "That woman must have decided to get even with the judge. She chose the most horrid way she could imagine. A thing to last a lifetime. Like her life sentence."

Paul nodded. "We think that the person who engineered her escape had the same objective in mind. The Finnish police are now trying to find out who was behind it, but it looks like a very well organised job. We think that such a person is unlikely to have left many clues lying around to be picked up."

Margaux brushed her hair out of her eyes and nodded, "Someone with a big grudge against the Judge. Also, someone with enough money and intelligence to get someone else to do the dirty work for him."

"Or her," I added.

"Ha! Yes. That's a possibility which mustn't be neglected," frowned Paul.

I looked at him, "Where is she now?" I asked slowly.

"Well! The blond Lida Niemela took the flight back to Helsinki. That at least we know."

He looked at Margaux, "And then she disappeared..."

I thought about this for a moment. "So, in fact, the woman could now look completely different again, have a new identity and be anywhere."

Paul nodded, "That is almost certain."

He hesitated. "We think that if she was motivated enough to do this murdering, she might very well ..."

I interrupted, "Yes I can guess. She might have decided to get even with all the people responsible for her imprisonment."

"Exactly, William, and you and our red-headed Sally here, would naturally come at the top of her to-do list".

Sally squeezed her arms around me tighter, "I'm not sure I like the word motivated in this context." Then looking up into my face, "She called me a brainless red-

headed whore, remember?" said Sally shivering. "Is she insane?"

Paul shook his head, "Unfortunately not." He looked across at the cosy fireplace, "I have a sneaking suspicion that the man behind this wanted the judge out of the way permanently rather than the wife dead. I also suspect that Niemela guessed this and decided that killing the judge was not nasty enough for her own purposes."

Margaux took up the story again, "The whole thing would seem to have backfired on him".

"Or her," I added.

"Or her." went on Margaux. "And in all probability, the judge, who's a very clever man, will end up by guessing who was behind the whole set-up".

"So," put in Sally, "he'll have the Police, the judge and possibly that mad woman after him. How lovely..."

"I suppose she shot them," she finished.

Paul shook his head, "No, used her bare hands..."

Sally squeezed me even tighter, "That woman is terrifying."

Margaux sighed, "I don't think she sees her enemies as humans at all. Just obstacles to be removed. She has absolutely no feelings at all, I believe."

Paul held up a finger, "Oh yes she does, she has one. Hate".

"Oh, God!" Sally whispered.

I looked around the room, "So what do we do, Paul?"

Margaux stepped forward quickly towards Sally, who had suddenly become very pale. "If that maniac discovers I'm expecting a child, she will come and kill it."

Paul made a clicking noise with his tongue. "That's why we're here Sally."

"She might not even wait for it to be born. Oh, God! In that way, she would get back at William exactly as she did to the judge."

"Yes," said Margaux, "that's what we thought too."

"But she doesn't know where we live." pleaded Sally.

Paul shook his head again, "Unfortunately, she is very determined and clever. She will find out."

"It didn't take her long to locate the judge's wife." Frowned Margaux.

"Oh, Christ!" Sally said for the nth time.

"Can't we have the place watched?" I said.

"To get the wife, she pretended to be a baker's assistant delivering a cake ordered as a surprise by the judge. Once within arm's length, they didn't stand a chance," Paul replied.

"Yes, but we know everybody in the village and the surroundings," I retorted.

Margaux looked over at Sally, "But would you risk your baby?" She shook her head. "She could even shoot you with a long-range rifle from the woods, without even coming near the place," she finished.

Paul tutted, "No. I don't believe she would do that. That's not her method not horrid enough. She would also want to be close enough to check that the job was done."

"I'm going to sit down before I faint," said Sally and she walked to her chair and let herself down into it, gazing into the bright dancing flames in the fireplace.

Paul and Margaux took places in the long Bordeaux coloured sofaMeylan.

"So, Sally has to go home to the UK until we catch the woman again," I said, standing beside Sally's chair.

Sally turned and looked up at me. "Oh NO." she shook her head. "Oh no, I can see the idea forming already. You stay here and play at being the human bait again, exactly as in the "ULACE" affair." I stared at her, "Oh Yes," she thumped the arm of the chair, "That is exactly what these two were thinking about, I'm certain." She glared at Paul, "No. If you stay I stay, this time."

"But," I started.

"I saved you once from that mad woman, and I'll do it again."

"Sally." Paul leant forward and went on soothingly, "No. This woman now knows that both of you are tricky customers. She would never make the same mistake twice.

If she found either of you, she would give you no chance whatever."

Sally let her arms drop.

"No," went on Paul, "we will have to play the game differently this time. Fore-warned is fore-armed, and that is good news."

Margaux smiled, "We will have to get both of you out of danger."

"And put some decoys in our places," I suggested.

"Exactly. Because it is certainly only a question of time before the woman turns up."

"But surely," frowned Sally, "if she is as intelligent and ruthless as you think, she will guess what we are thinking."

"And bide her time until we lower our guard... exactly," concluded Paul.

"In any case," added Margaux, "you can't go to either of your parents' homes in the UK. She will eventually ferret out their whereabouts and go and check out the place. There is far too much information floating about on the internet nowadays."

"But can't you simply erase the lot?" asked Sally.

Paul shook his head, "Adding a bit of fake information is easy enough. Making sure that absolutely every link to your parents is erased, is a bigger task. She has time on her side you see."

Margaux smiled comfortingly, "It is much easier to make two people disappear, especially if their identities have changed."

I banged on the back of the chair, and Sally jumped and turned to me, "But it could take months and months. And what if she lays low for a year. What then?"

"That is a risk of course. However, when Lida Niemela learns that Sally is pregnant, which she will, we suspect that she will decide to act before the child is born."

Paul lifted his arms and opened his palms, "Don't you think so William?"

"Ah," I said, the plan gradually becoming clear., "Yes I see. So, this time it is my pregnant wife who has become the bait. Thanks."

"Neither of you will be at any risk because you will both be far away, comfortable and well looked after." Margaux smiled.

Paul also smiled, "The part of the pregnant Sally will be played by our American friend Jenny, who has already proved her usefulness, as Sally will certainly remember."

For the first time, Sally smiled. "Oh yes," she laughed, "There are two thugs who won't forget her for a long time, I think."

"And your part William will be played by Sophie's associate who helped you during your cross-country running escape. You'll remember him as Joseph Hastings."

I smiled, "I suppose he has been keeping himself in trim."

"You suppose correctly, William," said Paul chuckling.

Sally sat up and smiled, "So as you seem to have organised everything, where are we going to be hidden?"

"Oh," smiled Margaux "not so far. We have borrowed a lovely old place in a charming Mediterranean fishing port."

"In Greece?" asked Sally with enthusiasm.

"Oh no, much closer. We thought it important to have a good French hospital close at hand," said Margaux.

"So?" asked Sally, screwing up her face.

"Sanary-Sur-Mer," answered Margaux.

"Oh!" I started, and everyone looked at me.

"Know it?" asked Paul.

"It's only that my mother was born there. That's all."

Sally frowned around at me "Ah, now you mention it, yes, I seem to remember your mum saying something about her French origins."

"My grandfather was a bit of a "Bohemian". He was a sculptor and apparently, that's how my mum met dad."

Paul nodded, "Well that's a surprise. So, you know the place then?"

I laughed and shook my head, "No, strangely enough, I've never been near the place."

Sally looked up at me, "I always had the feeling that your parents associated the place with some sad memory."

"Possibly." I said, "but I was never told anything about it. I don't even know what became of my grandparents".

"Well, Sally and William," smiled Margaux. "You will fall in love with the place. It's almost perfect. A little port and a nice market. Just right for taking a little gentle exercise..."

"Yes, I know," interrupted Sally, "during the home straight."

"Exactly!"

"And when does all this start?" I asked.

"This afternoon."

"What?" Sally and I cried in unison.

"At about two-o'clock," repeated Paul, "Can't take any risks." We exchanged looks all around.

Paul was laughing at the inevitable result of this announcement. "This afternoon, you will have a rendezvous at the hospital at Grenoble. The return trip will, however, be taken over by Jenny and Joseph."

"But," protested Sally.

I put my hand on her shoulder, "I don't think we are allowed any Buts, this time, little one."

She lent around and gripped my hand, "No, I suppose not. And the bags?"

"You make a pile on the bedroom floor, and we will bring it all down," smiled Margaux.

Sally shook her head with a with a wry smile. "Oh well!". She shot a quick look at me, then turned to Paul, "If someone else is going to take up residence in our place, I suppose we had better show you our secret line of defence." she smiled happily, clearly relaxing now she saw how things were turning.

Margaux and Paul exchanged surprised looks. "That's what we call it." smiled Sally. "When we re-did this old place, we added on two big studies. One each, as we work from here most of the time now. They overlook the valley at the back, and as the extra doors spoiled the look of the room, we hid them." She laughed as our two visitors stood and searched around the room. "Show them, William," she asked patting the back of my hand. I walked over to the long bookshelf and turned.

Sally laughed, "He is very proud of his little trick. All his own work..."

"And thinking," I added. I slipped my hand behind the structure and pushed a hidden latch. With a subdued whirring, the shelves slid sideways on invisible rubber wheels then stopped, revealing a short corridor with two oak doors at the far end. I stepped into the darkened space and pushed open one of the two, and we entered a pitch-black room. I flicked a switch near the door, and the room gradually brightened as a series of shutters covering the entire curving front wall slid upwards. These windows opened onto the pastures, now covered by six feet of snow, with a view of the forest in the near distance.

"The two offices are identical," I said, "and are only visible from the pastures, or the forest."

"A lovely place to work in," commented Paul.

"Or to hide in," added Margaux.

"Exactly," I said, "that's why we called it the last line of defence..."

"Might come in useful," said Paul, "who knows?"

I then took them around the house, room by room and then the garden. Paul and Margaux studied the lay of the

land and marked out carefully from where they would expect Lida Niemela to watch the place from.

"Jenny and Joseph will do all this again of course," said Paul, " but it's good to have a good look ourselves. The info might come in useful later."

So, that afternoon found Sally and me, comfortably seated in the back of a chauffeur driven car, en-route for the small Mediterranean fishing port of Sanary-Sur-Mer.

We had been informed that Sally's mother and retired father had been whisked away from their home and were already waiting for us there. It must be admitted that we were not at all unhappy with the idea of a few months paid holiday in a warmer climate. Sally was also more than happy to have her mother near during the final-straight as she now insisted in calling it.

However, I reflected that the last time I had benefited from a free holiday paid by Paul, things had not gone all that smoothly.

For those new to our history, it is worth pointing out that Sally and I had met Paul about a year ago. I had accidentally got mixed up in a trap he had been painstakingly preparing, to track down an international gang of finance criminals. He was and still is, employed by tax evasion authorities. The gang in question had amassed such a colossal fortune, that governments around the world had become very concerned as to what purpose the funds were intended.

The trap had consisted of allowing information to leak out, about a hoard of more than five hundred billion euros of gold bars hidden by a French industrialist near the outbreak of the second world war. The trap had however badly backfired when the Finnish criminal Lida Niemela had somehow got wind of this.

No one had known where the gold was, but the ruthless Lida was determined to snatch it from under the noses of the competitors. The complete story of this can be found in my account of the affair in "Bait". However, suffice to

say that my wife, Sally and I, played an essential role in trying to trick her out of the treasure.

Unfortunately, Lida Niemela was not the forgiving and forgetting type. As has already been seen, she was capable of the most abominable crimes as a means of paying back people who had crossed her path.

Paul was once more setting a clever trap to catch her, and I had taken the liberty before leaving to warn him not to underestimate the intelligence of his prey. I told him that if by some chance, she managed to turn the tables and catch him, she would stop at absolutely nothing to force the information as to my whereabouts from him. I tried to frighten this into him by saying that the woman had the makings of a medieval torturer. She would, I pointed out, not hesitate to slit open his belly while he was still alive, or to pour acid over his balls.

Paul had merely nodded, "I know that. Thanks, all the same."

Photo galleries, maps, and internet links illustrating the small mountain village of AUTRANS and its forest can be found on my website.

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

Chapter 13

Hugues-Antoine Rey sat looking out through the window across the snow-covered garden. The red and white chequered plastic tablecloth now only held his almost empty glass. The bottle of red wine beside it was still half full. He rarely drank without company. However this afternoon he was worried.

His wife had cleared the table and frowned when he retained the bottle as she reached for it. She had now left to visit her daughter in her rented chalet a hundred yards lower down the hill. Hugues hadn't moved since.

Hugues had been foreman in one of the leading paper mills, until a few years ago. He had now retired.

All such mills nestled close to the bottom of mountain slopes, each where a torrent gushed out over the plain. The rushing water had initially served to operate machines, but with the advent of cheap electricity produced by the Kraft paper process, it was later only used in the chemical processes and for cooling.

Here, on the southern side of the Isère valley near Grenoble, there had been many Pulping plants and paper mills. All these had now closed down, pushed out of service by cheap, poor quality paper, coming from China and also from the USA.

Hugues Rey was not a particularly talented man but had a natural presence, a loud voice, a quick mind, and an enormous amount of self-confidence. In his early years, he had learnt how easy it was to out-talk most other men who had come from similar rural backgrounds as his own. Hugues knew instinctively how to bring other men around to his way of thinking. He never did this by explaining why he was right. Instead, he pointed out, and as publicly as possible, the flaws in the other people's reasoning.

His motto was that lies are merely an alternative way of presenting the truth. He applied this as often as

necessary, and the bigger and bolder the lie, the louder he pronounced it.

The factory managers spotted this talent early on. However, without him ever realising their manipulation, they had used him for years to keep things in the plants running smoothly. The well-educated men around him could spot his artless manoeuvres a mile off and smiled amusedly at them. On the other hand, the men from the mountain villages and hamlets saw nothing.

The village Doctor, the solicitor and the Mayor all knew his methods well. They consequently, found it far more convenient to avoid entering into any discussion with him if they could avoid it.

However, Hugues interpreted this to be a sign of snobbism from these "immigrants", as he termed all those having no real ancestral roots in the village.

But Hugues felt himself to be far superior to the other village inhabitants and was therefore secretly angered at being held at arm's length, outside the little circle of the élite. In reality, however, this circle did not exist outside his mind. Regardless of this, he marked them all down as pretentious, stuck-up snobs.

He felt like a native notable being shut out of the Europeans expats club in some far-off colony a century ago. In reality, his deepest desire was to be recognised as being amongst the important and influential voice of the surrounding villages.

Irritated by his failure in this respect, he used every possible occasion to make subtle allusions about the élite circle, to all the simple country people he met. Over time he had managed to get most of them to believe that these "snobs", looked down on the locals as a bunch of uneducated idiots. In this way, he had been instrumental in building a deep rift between the parishioners on the one hand, and the decision-taking authorities on the other.

Although he derived a certain satisfaction from this, it didn't serve his purposes in the slightest.

Those outside his family circle were of little interest to him, except when their existence could be put to some use. Everyone knew this of course. Thus, whenever he smiled at someone and came over for a chat, that person knew that this was because he wanted something from them. Unsurprisingly, then, he had very few friends.

In truth, his aim in life was simple. Make money for himself and build homes for his children.

He had few interests, and consequently, his recent retirement had begun to spread itself out before him like an infinite sheet of boredom.

Like many families with origins in mountain hamlets, his ancestors had been farmers. Due to this, he processed a good number of bits and pieces of land. However, the value of land as property was decided uniquely in terms of how many, if any, houses one could build on it. Unfortunately, most of his were either too steep, too difficult to access, or too small.

Now, this aspect of things had become Hugues principal preoccupation since he had retired. Obtaining planning permission to build houses for his children on plots that were officially too small, was his present obsession.

He had quickly found that bribery would not work and this annoyed him a great deal. He had difficulty understanding why anyone would refuse free money, for such a little service.

He did not realise that those who he had approached knew that accepting a bribe would put them in this unscrupulous man's power indefinitely. They all knew him much too well to be tempted onto such slippery terrain. What is more, they didn't like him.

The direct approach having failed, he then tried to work his way onto the village council. His objective was to use this position to change the planning commission rules in favour of himself. As usual, however, everyone saw him coming a mile off, and his offer of helping the community was coolly rejected.

This failure convinced him of the existence of a conspiracy between the elitist snobs.

Now, not far from the family homestead, he had three small, and completely flat, plots of land. Annoyingly though, each of them was too small to be eligible for planning permission for a house. The three were separated by a track which linked the main road to two other small fields owned by another local man.

Hugues had long since poured over the maps and worked out that if only he could buy the other two worthless plots, then he would be able to claim the track, which would no longer have a purpose. In this way, if united, the overall surface area would give him enough land to sell as four individual building lots. This arrangement would make the ensemble worth nearly 800 000 dollars. He would then be able to sell one or two plots and use the ready cash to build his children's houses on the others.

Infuriatingly though, the owner refused point-blank to sell, and this made Hugues mad with rage. The more he tried to argue his point, the more the other man knew he was trying to rip him off, and consequently refused even more.

Hugues consulted a solicitor and then went home disappointed.

Had he known that he would merely have had to propose a fifty-fifty deal or even to offer the other man one of the newly segmented plots, then the deal would have gone through years ago. However, the idea of allowing another man to make money out of his own clever schemes, was far too great a hurdle for him to jump.

And so, the affair dragged on and on, with the two men scowling darkly at each other, each time their paths crossed.

That same morning, however, the man had been around and had agreed to sell him the plots for next to

nothing. Today was the day following the hunting accident and the man in question had been the one who responsible for the shooting.

Hugues, of course, was the man who had hidden the body and had taken all the trouble to clear away their tracks and all the evidence of their presence. He had done this instinctively because it immediately presented him with a way of putting pressure on the man to sell the land he wanted.

It had worked out perfectly. It is worth adding that, this was the only reason Hugues had accepted to go on the hunting outing in the first place. He knew that on such occasions, much too much wine was drunk. He also knew that under the influence, a man might let slip some useful snippet of information, which he could use against him.

However, the task completed, Hugues realised the absolute stupid enormity of what he had done.

OK, it had been an accident, but in hiding the body it had now become a crime, and he was the chief instigator. Worse still, too many people were involved and two of them far too young to be reliable. Of course, when the man had come around, Hugues had drawn up a written agreement on the spot and had it signed and witnessed. However, he now doubted that he would ever be able to get the thing through.

Hugues was not frightened or shocked by what had happened, as the others were, but couldn't see a clear way out. He needed to push the purchase of the land through as quickly as he could because he had a feeling that things might rapidly get difficult.

If one of the two kids had too much to drink and let out some information, then it would go around the village and the region like wildfire. That done the police would get onto it and then all hell would be let loose. He called himself all the names under the sun and cursed himself for his insane reaction.

Perhaps, he thought, he should go to the police and admit the crime himself. That would avoid those stupid kids scaring themselves crazy and blabbing to everyone in some bistro.

This procedure seemed the only safe thing to do, but not until the sale of that land had been officially dealt with.

After the man, had left, Hugues had called up the lawyer and tried to convince him to give them a rendezvous urgently to transact the deal. However, the lawyer was a man of patience. He also knew, only too well, all about Hugues and his reputation.

This, he decided as he listened to the request over the phone, was a case for prudence. He then contacted Rey's lawyer, a good friend, who was equally surprised at the unexpected change of position on his customer's behalf. They agreed that under the circumstances it would be wise to allow time for things to mature. This procedure would avoid any unnecessary trouble, for themselves of course.

The entire transaction process was thus about to slow down considerably. The lawyers' secretary, therefore, called Hugues. She politely informed him that the process would necessitate at least a month. The preparation of all the official documents and the confirmation of legal ownership, she explained, was always a highly time-consuming activity.

He cursed and crashed the phone down. Once more, that filthy circle of élite bastards was using their supposed superiority to put him down.

He nearly smashed the phone.

Then he remembered the store of arms in the abandoned water reservoir. He filled his glass with the strong red wine and gulped it down.

He had made a big, big mistake here, there was no doubt about that, but how could he have known all that damn stuff was in there. It could only mean organised crime of some sort. He shuddered, thinking that and

people in that line of work didn't like amateurs interfering with their little business arrangements.

Hugues had read enough crime stories to enable him to guess the sort of treatment that was likely to be reserved for him if ever they traced the trouble back to him.

If the police didn't scare the two kids, that sort of ruthless criminal would, for sure. Of course, both of the lads worked for the forestry commission as lumberjacks and were big strong young men. However strong arms are no match at all for a pro with a knife or more probably a handgun. Such people, he decided, were likely to do a hell of a lot of damage before they could be convinced that that death had indeed been an accident.

Even then, they would have worked out that he, Hugues, now knew what lay hidden behind the locked door. They might decide to move the stuff out, to a new location. But if they didn't, what would be easier than to eliminate the only person who knew of its existence.

He poured himself another tumbler full of wine. Getting beaten up, tortured and then shot, did not appeal to Hugues.

Making a run for it, seemed the best idea. That would get him clear of both the Police and the criminals, but he would have to work fast. Disappearing would undoubtedly slow down the police a lot, but an organised gang of criminals has other tricks up its sleeve. They would have no difficulty in tracking down his children and could then use them as hostages. He had read it time and time again in books.

No, this time he was up to his neck in trouble, and there was no getting away from it. If he went to the police or if they found out about the death, some other way, the whole thing would come out and be in all the papers.

Hunting would almost certainly be prohibited indefinitely in the sector. Such a result would bring the whole of the hunting community down on his shoulders. His reputation in the villages of the entire rural area would be ruined

irreparably. He would become a total outcast, some persona-non-grata.

Secondly, he would be taken to court and charged along with the others, for murder. If they managed to prove the accident, he, Hugues had still committed the serious crime of hiding the proof etc. etc.

Whichever way he looked at it, he would end up in prison for at least a year. Whatever the duration, when he returned he would never be able to hold his head up again in public.

He would have to move somewhere where he was unknown, and at sixty-six, this was the last thing he wanted to do.

Of course, he could still get that land and settle his children on it, but that seemed very futile now.

There remained the option of suicide. Suicide would, of course, solve the problem all around, except that he would then be dead, which was a definite disadvantage.

He needed time.

Time to think

Think about what?

He rubbed his stubbly cheeks between his cupped hands and shook his head in an attempt to bring out some fresh idea.

Then the front doorbell rang.

"Oh fuck!" he gasped, getting up and dragging his way to the entrance.

Standing outside, he found a well-dressed woman with dark hair and a friendly smile. "Monsieur Rey?"

"Yes"

"I have some papers that need signing about the sale of land" her voice trailed off, and she smiled again.

Hugues jumped as if stung, "Ah yes, yes, of course."

"Can I come in?"

"Yes, yes, please. I wasn't expecting anything so soon".

"A lot of work to do, so the sooner we start, the better, don't you think?"

"Yes of course, of course." Hugues was aware that he was going to have to review his recent opinion of the lawyer.

He led the assistant into the sitting room and sat her at the table.

His old hunting dog, which was sleeping by the fire, got up and wandered lazily over to where the woman sat. It looked up at her, and she stretched out a hand to caress it.

Then Hugues sat down and gazed across the table into the eyes of one of the world's most dangerous women, Lida Niemela.

Photo galleries, maps, and internet links illustrating Freydières and its forest can be found on my website.

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

Chapter 14

"Do you mind if I take off my anorak, Mr Rey, it's a little warm in here don't you find?"

Hugues did not mind at all, especially having already taken in her promising profile.

He was not disappointed.

Lida leant forward against the table so that its edge pulled down on her pullover, stretching the material over her breasts and displaying them to their best advantage. Hugues took all this in with undisguised pleasure.

She looked up into his eyes and smiled one of her hard smiles. "I very sorry Monsieur Rey but I have to admit that I have told you a little fib."

Hugues, smiled amusedly, "Never mind, it can't be so bad."

"That's for you to judge," replied Lida. "It just happens that you have something which belongs to me, and I'd like it back."

Hugues frowned, "Is that to do with the papers for the transaction?"

"No," said Lida "this is nothing to do with the transaction, and I have nothing to do with the lawyers. I'm what you might call a freelance agent."

Hugues was completely lost. "I don't understand at all. What are you here for then?"

Lida looked him straight in the eyes, "It's about a Key." Hugues stiffened suddenly.

"Ah!" said Lida, "I see I have put you on the right track."

Hugues pushed back his chair noisily a few inches and scowled. Now, Lida did not appreciate people scowling at her. It inevitably brought out the worst in her, but of course, Hugues couldn't know this.

"No. I don't see what you are talking about. A key? What key? I haven't got any keys, and certainly not one of yours." He had pushed out his chest and taken on the

loud, blustering voice with which he had lied his way through numerous trade union disputes.

Lida shook her head and sighed slowly, "Yesterday morning" she said slowly brushing a non-existent crumb off the stretched fabric covering her left breast, "I was waiting for a friend in the bar at Freydières." She gazed over at him.

"He didn't turn up." She nodded as Hugues stiffened even more. "That was very odd because it was he who fixed the rendezvous to give me something."

Hugues puffed out his cheeks and blew out his breath noisily.

"I saw you and your friends though." She smiled.

"I've got no idea what you're talking about."

"Ah!" said Lida, "that's odd." She leant down and stroked the old dog, which looked up at her with a sort of innocent adoration. "This morning," she continued, lifting the dog onto her lap, "I returned, just in case I got the dates mixed up." Hugues looked distractedly around the room to avoid having to support her hard eyes. "The man didn't come."

Lida slowly pulled off the red silk scarf she had around her neck and passed it around the dog's neck. "Ah! now that looks better." The dog looked up at Lida. She then turned back to Hugues. "But one of your young, strong young friends came in. He didn't look at all well." Hugues felt a cold sweat breaking out on his forehead, and Lida noticed this. "I had a lovely chat with him. The poor boy seemed very upset about something."

"Thick headed, uneducated lumberjacks, you shouldn't believe a thing those idiots make up to make themselves interesting to the first bit of skirt that turns up."

"Perfectly correct monsieur Rey." she smiled. She had stiffened at the "bit-of-skirt" bit, but as usual, retained her full composure. "He made up some incredible story about a hunting accident. Now, what do you think about that?"

Hugues shook his head in disgust, "Ridiculous."

"That's what I thought, but when I pressed him, he seemed to be quite sincere."

What Lida neglected to mention was that the pressing had been accomplished behind a tree in the snow. Furthermore, the pressing part had been done by applying cold, sharp steel against the young man's testicles.

"Yes." she smiled. "The boy was quite convincing, and gave me the name of the unfortunate gentleman who had committed, or should I say had the misfortune to have shot a little too fast..."

Hugues sneered, "Rubbish!"

Lida continued as if she had not heard him. "I popped around and had a chat with this gentleman." she smiled. "A man of your age, and clearly very disturbed. Not one for a "bit-of-skirt" as you call it." She looked down at the dog in her lap. "He was only too glad to be able to talk to someone about his troubles. Once I assured him I had nothing to do with the police, and would not repeat the information he told me the whole story."

"Stupid old fool. I wouldn't believe a word that man said either if I were you."

"Ah but I did, you see." she smiled. "He was far too frightened to be lying." She nodded. "He told me how you had been such a comfort to him in protecting him after the accident." She looked out of the window across the snow-covered garden. A wide track indicated where Hugues had dragged the dried-up Christmas tree, to throw it on the heap behind the barn.

"Your friend explained where the accident had happened, so I went and had a look." She looked across at him. "I must admit that you made a very professional job cleaning up. I congratulate you."

"What nonsense is this? I have never heard such rubbish in all my life!"

"How many years in prison would you expect to get in France, when the truth comes out?"

"Rubbish!"

Lida tutted, "So you see, I guessed that you must have gone through the dead man's pockets before disposing of with the body. I also suppose that you discovered what I came to see you for. That is to say a Key." She lifted her voice a little, putting a sharp edge on it. "I came to this stinking little hole, in these bloody mountains to get something I had ordered. I think you can guess what that must have been." She nodded at him and went on. "You also certainly now have the key with which I can claim my purchase." she looked up at him with cold hard eyes. "Give the key to me now please."

Hugues smiled, which was a bad idea. He then made things even worse by saying slyly, "It looks to me that this key might be worth a good deal, in the right quarters. What's it worth to you madam?" He then smiled again.

Suddenly Lida pushed back her chair and jumped sharply to her feet. At the same moment, grabbing the scarf, she jerked the noose tight around the dog's neck and lifted it into the air, kicking and struggling wildly.

Hugues jumped back and started up. "You crazy fool, you'll strangle the poor animal." He then stopped dead, petrified by the sight of a long shining sheath knife which was now pointing directly at him.

"The key or the dog, monsieur Rey. You choose."

"You're mad!" The dog continued to kick and chocked.

"When the dog is dead, it will be your turn. Make up your mind quickly, because I'll have that key anyway."

"Oh, fucking hell," Said Hugues and knocking over his chair, he rushed over to the sideboard, opened a drawer and threw a big key onto the table.

Lida let go of the scarf, and the dog fell to the floor and scrambled off across the tiled surface to hide behind the sofa coughing hoarsely.

"Thank you very much."

She kept the knife pointed at him. "Now I am going to get my little parcel, and if I were you, I would forget all about that little place in the forest."

"You are really as mad as a hatter," he shouted.

"Perhaps, but I am also armed monsieur Rey," she said.

"Oh! and if by chance this is not the right key..." She waved the knife, "I'll be back."

"It's the right one," snarled Hugues.

"Good." Lida twisted the knife around between her fingers. "I presume that you realised that that little store must belong to someone. "

"I am not that dense." He sneered.

"Well, I'm pleased to hear that. For the moment, the owners might accept the idea of a hunting accident, especially if I explain it." and she forced the word I. "Mind you. If ever you should talk to anybody about our little meeting, I will tell them another version. You would then have the visit from some very unpleasant people." She shook her head sadly. "I for one, would not like to be a member of your family if ever that occurred."

Hugues' legs felt weak and were shaking as he held himself steady with his two hands clenching the back of the heavy oak chair.

As she picked up her anorak and made to leave she turned, "It seems to me that your remarkably gallant gesture, has got you into a rather difficult situation." she smiled. "Now I wonder why a man like you would do something like that. Well, good luck Monsieur Rey."

As the door snapped too, Hugues dropped to the chair, filled a tumbler full of wine and swallowed it in a single gulp.

"Christ!"

Chapter 15

Paul Douanier replaced the handset of his telephone, leant back in his chair and frowned. He then pushed himself to his feet and crossed the office to his secretary's door. "Pauline, could you get me a ticket for the next convenient train to Grenoble".

"The next one you can catch would be the Four-thirty-six" she quoted from memory. Paul nodded. "I'll book your usual hotel, shall I?"

Paul nodded again, "better reserve two nights and then let Margaux know where I've gone, will you!"

"Will do".

Pauline had been with Paul for twelve years now and knew all his habits and above all when not to ask questions, which was quite often. Much of what she didn't ask was frequently clarified while drawing up his monthly expenses. This task was an annoying exercise which, even someone in his position was required to fulfil.

Since being informed of Lida Niemela's escape, he had been keeping a close eye on possible sightings of this ruthless woman. The horrible murders of Judge Erik Vanhanen's wife and the two babies had shown just how easy it was for her to move about undetected. This discovery had come as an unwelcome surprise.

Nevertheless, she had been traced back as far as Finland, and this had reassured Paul. Getting even with the judge in such an "indelible" way was a hallmark of the workings of her pitiless brain.

However, she could not be found in her homeland. Paul had thus asked to be kept informed of any unusual incidents or crimes, in counties near France.

Paul did not like the idea of Lida Niemela lurking about out there somewhere.

The phone call had been from an arms traffic specialist at the Ministry of defence. The communication involved an unusual occurrence in the small alpine village of Revel near Grenoble. He knew the place well. Revel was too close to where Lida Niemela's other sworn enemy, and Paul's friends, William Stone and Sally Cameron now lived.

This information had come to light because of a fatal error that Hugues Rey had made in his reasoning. The three sets of foot-prints he had discovered in the snow, had convinced him that two men had been present in that ill-fated place in the forest. Hugues had concluded that one of them had departed in a car leaving the second to clear up.

This conclusion had been wrong for a straightforward reason. The dead man had been alone. He had made the first trip back to the car, with a heavy load in his rucksack. He had then climbed back, unburdened to enable him to erase his tracks properly.

As Hugues had not found a car on the car park, this had supported his initial conclusions. What he had not guessed, however, was that the man had left his car on a small road lower down the slope. He had then climbed up through the forest to avoid being observed on the carpark. Hugues had not considered this possibility and had thus not checked to see if the footprints started again elsewhere.

Had he drunk a little less wine at breakfast, he might have thought of questioning his initial reasoning. In that case, he would have easily spotted the track, but this was not the case.

The car had thus remained where it was, in an unusual spot and was remarked upon by one of the locals a day later, in the village bistro.

The number plate was Swiss, which was unusual. After several rounds of strong Pastis, the members of the bistro community decided that it probably belonged to another of

those stupid foreign tourists. The man had no doubt got himself lost in the mountains somewhere.

Given the quantity of alcohol ingested, they temporarily forgot their natural hatred for the gendarmes and phoned up to alert the authorities.

Now, during the days following the hunting accident, the weather had swung, and the sun had returned with force. The sun's rays were not strong enough to counter the sub-zero winds and to have any visible effect on the thick layers of snow covering the exposed ground. This was, however, not the case of the snow trapped on the upper branches of the tall forest trees. This snow was melting rapidly under the intense rays and dripping down, onto the ground beneath them.

The light powdering of snow soon disappeared.

During the following two days, the forest clearing which had been the scene of the accident returned once more to its subdued green.

When the cry went up then, the local alpine rescue team was called out. The dogs had no trouble picking up the scent from the car up through the forest. After some hesitation, they found the second set of tracks and were soon barking and whining around the clearing. Observing them, it was clear to the handlers that something unusual had occurred here. However, before they had time to reflect on it, the dogs had picked up the scent again.

The team of three, threshed up through the deep snow, following the scent left by the body Hugues had dragged behind the Toyota and. The dogs discovered the fissure as a matter of course

, and the head of the rescue team phoned back to HQ. The man said that it looked as if the missing person had fallen down the hole and killed himself.

A mountain rescue team were thus immediately sent up to the village.

Late that same evening, with an icy wind whipping the snow particles across the plateau, the mangled body was extracted from the deep black cleft in the mountainside.

The temperature was now minus eleven centigrade, and the police doctor was waiting, impatiently, trudging back and forth across the trampled snow. At the appearance of the body, even this seasoned professional was appalled at its state. He immediately reported back that the fall could not have possibly caused the injuries. The opinion he gave was that the man must have been executed with a large calibre gun and then thrown down the cleft. More police specialists arrived just after midnight and on forcing the car open, discovered the boot full of arms and ammunition.

The car was found to have been rented from Geneva airport, and a few hours later the ID information used to obtain it was confirmed to be forged.

The next morning the information reached Paris HQ, and Paul's contact relayed it to him shortly before midday.

Before leaving his office, Paul made a call to the gendarmerie at Autrans in the Vercors mountains where his friends had taken up their residence. He asked them to keep a discrete but careful lookout for Lida Niemela. He e-mailed the latest pictures he had of her most recent disguises. There was no difficulty in setting this up. This was because many people from Autrans were indebted to him, following the unusual events involved with the "Bait" affair.

That afternoon, thus, Paul sat in the first-class carriage on the TGV train, flashing through the countryside towards Grenoble at two hundred miles an hour. He knew the village of Revel well and above all, the isolated restaurant/bistro which opened onto the now frozen Lake at Freydières. In winter and especially when there was snow, few people ventured up there except for the ski-trekking lovers. They parked here on their way to the Refuge de la Prat, 6700feet higher up in the Belledonne

range. However, when the weather was, and snow was falling, even these people stayed away.

So, what in the name of the devil, he wondered, was a stranger doing up there in the middle of nowhere, with a car-boot full of arms? Paul guessed that this must have been a rendezvous for an arms deal, which had somehow gone wrong.

But why make a transaction in such an unearthly location.

The bistro was always open, no matter the weather, but there were many more accessible and quiet places for such transaction.

Sitting quietly in the train, he concluded that the choice had been made because it was a convenient place.

But why convenient?

There seemed to him to be several possibilities here. The first was that one or other of the persons involved lived nearby or frequented the place regularly. However, if this had been the dead man, then he would have been missed by now, even if it had been someone living alone.

Thus, the dead man was NOT from the region.

If the Killer were from the surrounding region, they would be sure to find him, and Paul would then feel much better. However, he felt in his guts that this was not the case.

Customers for this sort of combat arms were rarely found living in small mountain villages. This fact implied that neither of the two was locals and this conclusion made him even more uncomfortable.

But in this case, why meet here, in the freezing cold snow and wind? The answer was that it was convenient and in other words that the arms must be stored nearby.

Once again, if this were the case, then they would find them quickly, once a search was mounted, as it certainly would be.

But what troubled Paul was that he could not see why the murder had been committed. Someone like Lida

Niemela and there were plenty like her about, might have wanted to keep her/his identity secret. But why go to all the trouble of dragging the body all the way up there and throwing it down a precipice. Naturally, once the person was dead, the customer's identity would remain a secret.

He frowned. There was something wrong here. How on earth would the person even know of the existence of that hiding place for the body, especially under four feet of snow? Only a local would have been able to locate that place in such adverse conditions, so he was back at his starting point again.

Could it be possible that a deadly killer lived in this tranquil hamlet? He doubted this seriously, but there was no getting away from the facts.

No, the whole thing was confusing, like a puzzle missing the corner pieces. In other words, Paul decided, there was more to this than met the eye.

His experience of such transactions was that the man behind the deal always kept his hands clean and stayed well away from the merchandise. However, it was he who negotiated the terms and took the payment. Also, in most cases, such people liked to seal their transactions face-to-face with the customer in some quiet bistro.

What then, had happened up there in the snow?

He decided that the picture that he, and everyone else, was drawing in their minds as to the events having occurred, must be incorrect in some aspect.

He mused that the facts were as follows:

Firstly, a man had been murdered and then thrown down a precipice.

Secondly, the person who had disposed of the body must have known the terrain perfectly.

Thirdly, a car-full of combat arms had been abandoned.

Fourthly, the car had been hired under a false identity at Geneva airport.

The whole thing smelt of organised crime, but the location was entirely out of keeping.

Was the dead man the customer, the gang employee, or someone who had nothing to do with the deal at all?

The only point he wanted to clarify was whether Lida Niemela involved in this? If she was, then big trouble was indeed brewing for his friends at Autrans.

This woman was bent on revenge, and she was perfectly willing to mow down half the village if necessary.

In any case, she knew that many of the villagers had taken a share in her downfall. If thus, they stood between her and her objective, hard luck on them, they deserved punishment anyway.

Again, something was wrong. Why was that car still full of arms and ammunition?

Did it belong to the customer, coming in from Geneva?

In that case, then where the hell was the customer?

Where were the car keys then?

Paul decided that he was not going to get any further following this reasoning, so he got to his feet and walked to the bar to get a drink.

That evening, over dinner in his hotel, he talked through the affair with his contact from the Lyons arms trafficking department. The two men agreed on most points and decided to start their investigation by questioning the owner of the bistro at Freydières.

Paul would not take an active part in this.

Following the meal, Paul returned to his room early. He was beginning to feel very uncomfortable about this whole affair. There was something wrong here, but he couldn't put his finger on it.

Photo galleries, maps, and internet links illustrating Freydières and its forest can be found on my website.

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

Chapter 16

The following morning, the sky had clouded over early and the temperature up by the lake had plummeted to minus fifteen centigrade.

Just before nine O'clock Paul, fully equipped and dressed for a ski trek outing, walked into the bistro and hoisted himself onto one of the time-worn bar stools. The owner reluctantly cut short his political argument with a group of locals and served Paul the glass of white wine he requested.

Leaning forward, Paul asked "I was thinking of attempting to reach, La Pra. What do you think?"

"La Pra? Today?" he raised his voice so that the others could participate fully in this private exchange.

There was a clicking of tongues and a tut-tutting as the owner turned to the others. He flung wide his arms in an unmistakable gesture of disbelief. "No way," came a grumble from the other end of the counter.

"Not unless he has got a rendezvous with his maker." laughed one of the others.

The owner had cleverly handed the subject over to the local specialists-in-everything. This trick was, of course, part of his everyday work.

"Just look at those clouds," added one of the older Pastis drinkers. "Now that's snow and lots of it. That would hit you before you were halfway up."

His friend elbowed him, "Reminds me of old John's cousin." He turned to Paul, "Got caught in the same sort of weather. Couldn't find the way either up or down, what with the wind and the fog and the snow."

The man talking must have been about seventy and nodded sadly. "Had to sit there for nearly ten hours. He was lucky, but then he was a big strong young lad."

This remark was intended to mean, "Not an old block like you."

Paul nodded an understanding, "Hey, as you may have just saved my life, how about a drink everybody?" Everybody agreed, and glasses were refilled with strong Patis, but Paul kept to the less dangerous white wine.

Glasses were chinked together, and Paul continued.

"Well perhaps if that plan is off, what about if I try to run up to the Grand Colon. Now that should be easy enough."

There was a spluttering into glasses and an exchange of gazes, exactly as Paul had hoped.

"Are you mad?" cried several of the old men.

"He does want to meet his maker after all," added another.

"Jesus! That's about the worst place on earth in this weather. The number of deaths on that route is incredible."

The oldest man looked sadly over at Paul, "You've got to cross one of the most dangerous avalanche channels there is around here." He looked around his friends, "Fifteen years ago, an entire research laboratory staff was wiped out, up there. They were out on their annual outing."

His friend took over, "Local people and experienced at that. What got into their heads to take that route, nobody ever understood?" Everyone agreed. "Anyhow," he continued, "the lab had to close down. All the scientists were killed. Only the secretary was left. She was off sick."

The owner leant back against the shelf behind him and nodded. "No. If you can see snow, never go that way."

One of the youngest men piped up, "Yes best to stay warm in here and drink the day away. That way you'll die of liver problems instead."

"Yes," added the owner shaking his head in mock disgust. "But happy, and not all mangled up at least."

"Well," concluded Paul, "have another round on me, and I'll sit over there and plan something less dangerous then."

"Good idea," nodded the entire company, "but ask us before throwing yourself into some other spot of trouble."

Paul agreed. Having succeeded in his little "mise-en-scene", he settled himself at a table in the corner from where he could see the entire room. He then took out his detailed map of the surrounding countryside and became absorbed in studying it.

A quarter of an hour later, the door was pushed open, and two heavy men entered preceded and followed by a gust of snowflake laden wind. Paul glanced up. Here was his police friend of the previous night. Their glances crossed without the slightest sign of recognition passing between them.

"Morning Gentlemen the two nodded. Pastis for me, you Joseph? white wine ok?"

The two men were served, and they immediately got to work. "We're investigating the business about the abandoned car. Was it one of you chaps who found it?"

The owner stepped forward, "That was Remi, but he's at the dentist this morning. Be back after lunch."

"Ah," said the investigator. "Very odd business that." He looked around the room at the expectant faces.

"Know what we found in that car?" saying this he extracted a big photo of the guns filling the car-boot and slid it along the counter.

The customers all gathered around. "Christ!" said one.

"Bloody Kolesnikovs too," added another.

"Blow me down lads," said the older man, "there's enough gear there to arm a revolution."

Paul kept his eyes on the little group. Now that was an idea which had not occurred to him. He observed the faces of the men but saw nothing but innocent astonishment on them.

"Christ!" said one. "Remi is going to get the shock of his life when he sees that lot."

The investigator nodded. "And all of them brand new and ready for use. Odd that."

The customers exchanged glances and pushing back the photo one of them asked. "What the hell was a bloke doing with all that in his car, up here?"

"I'd like to ask him that," he smiled. "We found him though."

All the faces turned expectedly. "But the man can't help us."

The men frowned at the investigator. "He's dead, you see."

This announcement sent a wave of gasps around the room. "Dead?"

Paul noticed a quick movement out of the corner of his eye. A younger man leaning against the far wall stiffened and stood erect. "Ah ha!" he thought.

"Yes. Your friend Remi was right. A foreign tourist. Got lost in the snow and fell down a crevasse."

"Christ!" said one of the men. At this, Paul saw the young man relax and slump back against the wall.

"Yes. But the odd thing is that someone shot half of his head off before."

He paused as he let this sink in. "Odd that."

The young man stood stiffly again, and Paul watched as his face turned pale. The man thrust his two hands deep into his pockets to hide their shaking from view.

The investigator's colleague glanced around the room with a bored sigh allowing his gaze to rest on Paul for a fraction of a second.

With a slight movement of the head, Paul indicated the young man. No more was necessary.

The man made a slight movement to signal that he had got the message then turned back to his superior. The latter had just changed tacks.

"Just to help us along," he rubbed his chin, "have you had any foreign customers this weekend?"

The men all turned to the owner as if waiting for his reactions. reaction

The investigator turned on the owner, "This looks very much like a case of murder. I suppose you all see that."

"Well," said the owner, "there was one. A woman." The others nodded.

Paul froze and listened intently.

"Nice breasts." This remark was from the oldest customer.

"Hey trust you to have noticed that, Jack."

"Hard to forget."

"Ah," said the investigator, "now that's interesting."

"Yes, but that was Monday. The day after we reported the car."

Someone else piped up. "And apart from having nice breasts, she had a strong accent. Russian I would say, or something like that."

Paul stiffened at his table. Lovely breasts and a Russian accent. This woman was Lida Niemela. Hardly any doubt about that. "Oh, Christ. What was that demon up to here?" he thought.

The young man in the corner was looking more and more nervous.

Then suddenly the oldest man swung around in his direction and leered at him. "Now over there." He pointed at the young man, "is someone who saw those breasts from closer quarters, eh Michel?"

The young man turned from white to red and stuttered, "Shut up you old fool!"

"So, what, may I ask, did you chat about behind the barn then? The weather?" The group all flew into gusts of laughter. A few lewd comments were added to make the situation as clear as possible.

The young man did not know how to deal with this situation, but Paul did, and he seized his chance?

"Hey" he shouted, getting to his feet as he did. "Leave the poor kid alone." He smiled reassuringly at the boy. "Can't blame young blood from being attracted to a

mysterious foreign lady, can you? Are you sure you're not all a little jealous?". He smiled, "I am."

The little community laughed at this, and the investigator quickly and expertly changed the subject.

Paul glanced over at the young Michel and motioned with a smile and a movement of the head that he should come over to his table.

He then motioned to the owner who brought over some more drinks. Talking in a low voice, Paul said that he thought he might have met the same woman. He described her in detail and the young man, although very surprised at the coincidence agreed that the description fitted perfectly.

"Knowing her," Paul smiled, "I bet your little discussion behind the barn didn't go quite as well as you had hoped."

The young man's colour changed, and he looked down at the red and white chequered tablecloth.

"As I suspected," said Paul. "You might be interested to know that you are fortunate to be alive." There was a short pause. "That woman's name is Lida Niemela. She's just about the most dangerous woman in the world."

The man remained silent. "Come outside. We need to speak."

The young man followed meekly. Almost immediately the investigator and his colleague wrapped up their questioning and followed him.

The four of them sat in Pauls' car for a short time.

The truth came out almost immediately, and all the unexplainable details fell into place.

The two investigators then took the young man off to officially make his declaration. At the same time, a second team were sent to pick up the man who had been at the origin of the accident.

Paul took it on himself to close the circle by a visit to Hugues Rey, and a police team were dispatched to wait outside for the formal arrest once he had finished.

By the time Paul knocked on Hughes's door, the latter had worked himself into such a terrible state that he had broken down almost immediately.

These naive people poisoned the existence of generation after generation, with their petty quarrels and intrigues. But in the little world that was theirs, none of them had ever come up against the cold devilish evil that existed on the darker fringes outside the realms of law and order. They just were not armed to deal with it.

Pacing back and forth across the tiled sitting room, he rushed his way breathlessly through a detailed description of the accident. He described his part and the petty reasons behind it.

Paul was not surprised, because, in the course of his various cases, he had often had to extract information from inhabitants of small hamlets. He had learnt that they were capable of some most amazingly unreasonable acts. The latter seemed to them to be incredibly ingenious means of forwarding their petty plans. Getting information from such people was usually harder than opening an oyster shell. Unless that is, they were scared stiff.

Thus, after a little more coaxing, Hugues finally admitted that Lida Niemela had visited him. He also explained all about the hoard of guns and finally about the key, which Lida had taken. "For Christ sake!" and his hand shook as he spoke, on the verge of tears. "If that woman learns that I've told on her, she'll come back and murder me."

"Now don't worry Monsieur Rey," Paul looked him straight in the eyes. "We will make sure she can't get at you."

Hugues sat down slowly and abstractedly poured himself a glass of red wine, apparently not even conscious that he was doing it. "Are you certain of that?"

"Oh yes, Quite certain. Don't trouble yourself about that anymore."

Paul was quite confident of this statement because as soon as he left Hugues, the police would move in and he would almost immediately be imprisoned, for a good spell.

Furthermore, he knew by experience that Lida would never return to the scene of a crime. She had merely been putting the fear of God into him. She wanted to frighten him into keeping quiet for as long as possible — standard practice of course.

Paul now knew enough. However, he still felt it necessary to personally check out the arms store and make sure that none of this could fall into any other hands.

However, he was now sure that Lida was in the area and was undoubtedly now heavily armed. There was no question about her objective. Her targets were William and Sally.

Immediately he had left the house, he signalled to the waiting police car. He then sent instructions to make sure that his two friends were kept safe. The two roads into their village were being guarded, but Paul knew too much about the woman to relax.

That afternoon he set a rendezvous with the arms trafficking service from Lyon. They would meet him with a lock specialist at the bistro at Freydières.

By this time, the story of the arrest had gone around the village with characteristic speed. The local community was now buzzing with it.

None of the people present in the bar linked Paul with the affair, and he remained a tourist in their eyes, albeit a generous one. He was duly ignored because of the far greater interest of this scandal?

Paul spotted the unmarked van as it arrived and joined a small group of men on the snow-covered car park just out of view of the bistro windows. There were five of them including a tall, thin man in his thirties who introduced himself as the lock specialist.

The little group of men set off up the now well-trampled track.

The specialist chatted eagerly, as they climbed in single file, under the overhanging fir branches. He announced with undisguised pride that he had brought along his newest and most sophisticated technical toy to try out in-situ. "Oh, I admit it's not a new invention. I suppose it's just a modern version of a stethoscope." He paused to push aside a snow-laden branch. "Mind you. It uses several of the best contact microphones around today. A thousand dollars each, and there are three of them." He paused to let this impressive bit of data sink in. "But really," he continued, "it's the new software and state-of-the-art signal processing software which make the difference." He ducked under another branch. "Of course, the new in-ear isolation headphones are fantastic. They cut out all the external sound so that I can only hear the processed audio data coming from the laptop."

He was like a little boy out to try his new bicycle. Paul smiled to himself listening to the overflowing enthusiasm of the young specialist. The man would never believe that anyone could not be interested in such a masterpiece of technology.

They eventually reached the clearing, hot and sweating after the climb, but the lock specialist almost rushed to the metal door.

"OH...!" he exclaimed. He turned with obvious disappointment to the others. "You call that a lock?" he was clearly disappointed. "You could have opened that with a branch off that tree over there." He sighed, "Oh well! I was hoping to put my equipment to the test. Never mind"

He then frowned and pushed out his lips, "Might as well try it out all the same." Saying this, he opened his carry case and fixed the three microphones to the door with double-sided tape and then connected them via a blue metal box to the laptop, which he booted up.

Paul left him to his work and started to investigate the concrete bunker-like structure. It was built directly into the slope of the forest so that only the front wall was visible.

Standing back, he noticed that even part of the roof was covered by the ground above, but that a large aeration pipe extended above it.

"I'll try and get a look inside from up there," he told the group of men standing idly by waiting for the specialist to open the door. Paul scrambled up the steep, needle covered slope and climbed onto the visible part of the concrete roof. The chimney was old and rusty, surmounted by a conical hat-like cover held in place by a wire mesh. The latter was probably there to stop birds from getting inside to build their nests.

All this was old and rusty but still solid.

Paul tried to pull the cover off but it was bolted on, so he pushed it back and forth in an attempt to loosen it so that he could get a look down the pipe. After ten or so strong pushes one of the three supporting legs snapped. He was then able to push the entire cover back far enough to peer down the long narrow pipe.

At first, all was black, and he could see just a little light patch on the floor directly below him. However, as his eyes became accustomed to the darkness, shapes started to form themselves out of the shadows. A few seconds later, he could make out the contours of numerous cases stacked along the wall closest to him.

He called down to the men below, "Looks like there's a hell of a lot of stuff in there. Looks like a real armoury." Then he stiffened "Hey!" He had half seen something in the dark that was unusual. He cupped his two gloved hands around the pipe to cut out the light and waited for his eyes to adapt.

A second later he leapt to his feet. "Christ," he cried, "the place is booby trapped. Get away from that door quick!"

In less than three seconds, the group of men had dived over the lip of the slope and taken cover behind the nearest tree trunks.

The Lock specialist straightened and smiled. "There you are. Lovely piece of kit this."

"For Christ sake." Shouted Paul, "don't touch the bloody door. Get out quick!"

But the lock specialist was still wearing his in-ear monitors. He heard none of this shouting, as so leant forward and yanked open the door.

Paul sprang up the slope with all the speed he could gather screaming, "Get away quick, dive for cover!" and took cover behind the trunk of an ancient oak tree.

There was a small amount of resistance when the four wires stretched, followed by a series of pings as they drew the rings out of the grenades buried inside four boxes of them.

The lock specialist bent down and picked up his laptop oblivious to any trouble and turned to the open door happily, just as the first of them went off.

With an incredible roar, several hundred kilos of ammunition exploded.

A blinding white sheet of flame, accompanied by thousands of projectiles and shrapnel lifted him off his feet and shredded him into a thousand bits before he had even had time to blink.

The shock-wave sent this bloody fragmented mess flying through the forest, closely followed by the door and hundreds of fragments of the walls.

The massive reinforced concrete roof rose lazily in a single piece. It lifted six feet into the air then fell crushing the remaining contents below it.

The blast burned off the branches of the trees above and sent the tons of snow imprisoned by the upper limbs, plummeting down on the scene.

The detonations lasted little more than ten seconds, and by the time the echoes had faded, the snow had settled

down carpeting the clearing as though nothing had occurred at all, except for the black smoke billowing from the gutted building.

Most of the detonated bullets embedded themselves in the thick trees trunks and branches and the smashed blocks of concrete bounced off the branches and fell to the ground nearby.

However, a few grenades were hurled outward, falling to ground behind the group of men, further down the slope. Lida had passed a wire through a number of them and fixed to a wall grating, with precisely this in mind. None of the men guessed at this danger, and they were beginning to rise when one of them detonated. The lethal range of a hand grenade is only a few yards, but the fragments can provoke a hell of a lot of damage, out to twenty or more. How then, any of the men trapped between the two lines of fire, survived is a mystery.

From behind his tree, Paul had pulled his fingers from his ears and hearing the renewed detonations from further off, guessed the reason.

"Oh Fuck". Leaning slightly outwards he shouted.,

"Don't move anyone!" Then added, "Is everyone OK? Call out and check."

The voices went around. One of the men had got shrapnel in his buttock and another in his leg and was bleeding badly.

"Jules is missing." this was the lock specialist.

Paul called back "I'm afraid he has had it..." Then added, "keep flat and wait ten seconds, then crawl down fifty yards or so before standing, Ok?"

Back at the cars, the injured men were bandaged and then sped off to the Hospital on the outskirts of Grenoble.

Within twenty minutes the police arrived and cordoned off the entire sector. The only information given to the locals was that there had been an explosion. They had, of course, all heard it and had seen the billowing smoke.

Paul kept well out of the limelight and once more took up his position as a tourist. The bistro had miraculously filled to overflowing, and he listened with interest to the numerous explanations that were being presented.

He was not shocked, as the vast majority would be, being quite used to unexpected and violent incidents. However, he could not understand why the booby-trap had been set. He knew that Lida Niemela was perfectly capable of such an act and he was convinced that this was her handiwork. But why did she do it and who was the trap intended for?

Could it have been set for him? Paul doubted this but felt uneasy all the same. Perhaps she had thought that Hugues Rey would return to try and make a profit out of his discovery. She knew that he no longer had the key and would, therefore, have to force the door open.

All the same, this didn't seem to fit in with her character. Above all, wasting time was certainly not one of her failings.

So why the hell had she done it?

That evening, the man whose stock had been blown to bits, learnt about the affair on the TV newscast. People getting shot by accident was not a frequent occurrence in his line of business, and he did not believe it for an instant.

This outrage was all that mad Finn's work, of that he was sure and he cursed having ever heard of her.

The stock had been worth several hundred thousand dollars, but he was not going to risk the lives of any of his better assistants in getting even with her. In any case, he hadn't paid for the stock. It had stolen it from his predecessor. This person had not been heard of for some time.

When Lida Niemela eventually read about the explosion in the local paper, she smiled to herself.

"Nice one," she thought.

Chapter 17

Judge Erik Vanhanen sat looking across his desk at the Head of Finish Police.

The two had known each other for eleven years.

Vanhanen sat in silence for a long time not seeing or hearing anything.

The other man sat and waited. He would not intrude in his terrible silence.

For Vanhanen, it was like having had an accident and suddenly becoming aware that one's leg had gone. Realising that it has gone for good and that nothing can bring it back, One sits and gazes at where it had been, in a sort of dizzy vacuum. A thing which has always been there had been suddenly removed, and nothing that anyone can do can bring it back.

He did not think about the children. They were still alive., so they ceased to exist in this horrible silent limbo.

He just sat there gazing into space and seeing nothing.

The other man didn't move a muscle. He waited until his friend came back from the terrible voyage on which the announcement had sent him.

Vanhanen straightened himself. He looked around himself and then his gaze went blank again as he fixed his phone with unseeing eyes.

Suddenly he looked up, "she's dead?"

"Yes."

"I see."

He started shifting things about on his desk mechanically, checking his cell phone, placing his pen in its usual place and shuffling some documents together. He looked up and forced a smile at the man across the desk. Just as quickly, though, his eyes went blank again, and he looked down at his hands.

"And the babies are all right?"

"Yes. They're being looked after."

"Good." He turned his left hand looking at the simple wedding ring. Then, his palms resting on the table, he lightly tapped its surface several times in succession. He then glanced up into the other's eyes again and let his hands fall to the table, gently tapping it again.

The other man remained silent and watched as Vanhanen's eyes travelled around the room, looking at nothing. Lifting his two arms, Vanhanen cupped his two palms under his chin and caressed his nose absently.

He then closed his eyes and let out a long deep sigh. His mind was a complete blank. Nature had temporarily turned his consciousness off until his subconscious had decided how best to deal with the situation. This was the way the mind protected itself and its host.

A doctor had accompanied the head of police and was waiting quietly in the next room in case he was needed.

Both men had been through this sort of situation before, at second hand, and Vanhanen's friend looked on with relief as he observed how he was reacting.

Vanhanen looked up and focused his eyes, "Nothing to be done then?"

"No," came the answer.

Then silence fell again.

"And the children are OK?"

"Yes."

Vanhanen stiffened, and a frightened look came into his eyes and the other man quickly spoke. "Your mother has been to collect them. They are already on their way home."

Judge Vanhanen relaxed and nodded his head up and down, making little clicking noises with his lips and scratching his forehead. "Good, she'll look after them."

Then suddenly he pushed his chair back, and his friend made ready to call the doctor in quickly. "I need a drink." He spun on his chair and opened a concealed drinks cabinet just behind him. He filled his glass with port and

sat where he was, gazing out across the rooftops below, rocking very slightly to and for.

For a long time, he sat thus without sipping the drink. He closed his eyes again and sighed deeply.

His friend waited patiently for him to speak.

Then Vanhanen put the glass down on the shelf untasted and twisted back towards his visitor. "What about her body?" he said quietly.

"The ceremony's is tomorrow morning."

Vanhanen nodded, "So soon? Ah well!" He added, "I don't think I'll go."

"OK," said his friend who had not expected this.

"It's finished," said Vanhanen, then folding his arm on the desk, sighed again.

"I don't have to go?"

His friend was relieved, now that Vanhanen was talking again. "No. No obligations."

"Good."

The judge's friend considered that it would often be an advantage to forgo funerals altogether. However, some people needed them, or at least their relatives did.

"Would you like a drink?"

The man shook his head.

"I think I'll have one." He turned back and seemed surprised to find the glass full waiting. Picking it up again, he looked back out across the roofs again in silence. This time he sipped the port while caressing the arm of his chair with the open palm of his free hand.

"Don't think I'll go home tonight."

"No," said his friend, "I'll book a hotel for the two of us."

Vanhanen swivelled back and looked at his friend.

"Thanks."

The other smiled back at him. He would book one for the doctor as well, to have him on hand.

In the morning, he would send someone round to clear up Vanhanen's house, to avoid too many memories hitting

him at once, when he did return. His mother would also be there by then which was important.

Shadows were now beginning to climb up between the building below and evening would soon be on them. The two men continued to sit in silence.

The head of police had been through this before and knew that the night would be a long one. This man was a friend, and that made things different.

He would somehow manage to get some food inside him and get him to have a good drink. That would ease him up and allow him to talk, all night if necessary.

The doctor would stay at hand, because one never knew, even though he suspected that the critical moment had passed.

Sadness and infinite emptiness were horrible emotions to have to endure, but not so dangerous, if one was not left alone with them. However, even in the case of a well-known friend, one could not predict the reaction to such a shock.

He already knew that Vanhanen would not go to pieces, but some minds were like slow-burning fuses, so one had to be very careful.

Once back home, the babies would hold him together, and his mother would keep him permanently occupied once out of his office.

"Hungry?" he said;

"Don't know," said Vanhanen

"Let's go and see then, shall we?" He stood and nodded towards the door, "Come come on!"

Vanhanen rose a little unsteadily, but his friend didn't move to help. He allowed Vanhanen to put on his coat and then walked to the door and opened it.

The doctor stood as the two men came out of the office and Vanhanen recognised him at once and smiled.

"Thanks for coming, that was kind. I think I'm all right though."

The doctor nodded. "That's good Erik. Good night then. I'll pop around tomorrow." He nodded but did not hold out his hand.

As they passed, the doctor gave the Police chief a little nod of mutual understanding. He knew what was expected of him and he too, liked Erik Vanhanen very much.

At roughly the same time, Erik Vanhanen's brother in law was going through more or less the same phases.

However, his wife was alive.

Her own sister's murder had been eclipsed by the discovery of her two dead children. So much so that when she had gathered enough of her wits together to call the Police, she didn't even mention it. She was so close to losing her mind that the doctor rapidly administered a strong tranquilising jab.

Only those who have ever had to support the unexpected and violent death of someone very close to them can have an inkling of what that woman went through.

Here was something far far worse than a blind terrorist attack and Geneva's top mental trauma expert, was rushed to the spot, by a police helicopter.

Two hours later Adda's sister was sleeping in a private clinic in central Geneva. By this time her husband was on the direct Helsinki to Geneva flight.

The head of the police did not tell Vanhanen about the murder of the other woman's children. That could wait until his own two were safely back home and that he had been able to see them.

That evening after a strong aperitif, they were served big, delicious steaks. The wine waiter poured them big glasses of an excellent 2000 Saint Emilion Bordeaux.

Vanhanen looked over his glass at his friend. "This is the work of Lida Niemela," he said slowly, "there's no doubt in my mind." He shook his head, "She said she

would revenge herself." He looked up again. "She's not mad you know, that's why I pressed for a life sentence."

His friend nodded, "No, not mad. I agree."

"That made her so much more dangerous. I couldn't leave her wandering about, could I?"

"No that would have been insane."

Vanhanen frowned, "But why didn't she kill the babies too?"

The other man did not look up from his plate, where he was methodically cutting his steak into small pieces.

"She must have wanted to punish me in a lasting way, so why did she leave the babies?" went on Vanhanen. He took a drink and placed the glass on the table to take up his knife and fork.

"So, we'll go and catch her and put her away in the same place until she escapes again." He laughed. "What a waste of time and money. Eh?"

His friend nodded. He too thought that in a few specific cases the death sentence was not such a bad thing. However, in the modern world, the responsibility it would pile onto the shoulders of a judge would be hard to bear.

Vanhanen sipped some more wine. "Now she's finished with me, who is she going after? Any ideas?"

This turn of the conversation was a good sign to his friend, and he used it to shift the focus subtly. "My French colleagues seem to think that she has got it in for a young English couple. The man acted as a decoy and tricked her, and the women broke her arm when she went for him."

Vanhanen nodded, "I heard about that."

His friend sipped his wine then looked up, "They are married now. Settled in France," he hesitated a moment, then went on "and expecting a baby soon."

Vanhanen closed his eyes, "Oh God!"

"That's what the French think too." He sighed, "They've got their best people on it."

Vanhanen became animated, "You tell them to get the two out of there fast. That woman will out-wit them. She won't care how many others die in the process." He shook his head sadly. "If they don't hide them, she'll get them. Tell them that fast." He leant forward and enveloped his friend's wrist in a vice-like grip. "Do it for me will you. Now." There were no tears in his eyes, only a sad pleading.

His friend nodded and smiled, then did the only thing that seemed acceptable under the circumstances. He pulled out his phone and dialled a French number.

Sitting sipping his wine, Vanhanen listened and nodded agreement. He had already made this call two hours earlier. However, when he told Paul Douanier who he was with, the man understood the reasons for the repeated appeal and said nothing.

Both these men already suspected what had happened in that chalet, but neither of them intended to mention that terrible possibility openly.

"One death is enough," concluded Vanhanen as his friend pocketed his phone once more. He shook his head, "If I could have guessed where my damn profession would lead..." He gulped and blew out his cheeks.

"Come on man, eat up. It's getting cold."

"Yes yes, ok. Wine's excellent. Any more where this came from?"

As he descended the stone steps into the dark cellar once more, the wine-waiter rose his eyebrows. Not many people ordered two bottles at that price.

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Chapter 18

When Lida eventually learnt from the papers that she had been tricked into killing the wrong two babies, she only smiled to herself. "Clever girl," she said out loud. "Why the hell did you have to go and make the mistake of marrying that damn Judge?"

She had liked the woman. She also knew how hard life was when one hadn't got a mother, which was now the case of the two babies.

"Ah well!" she sighed. "That's Life." She then shook her head angrily, "Fuck!"

By the time the evening editions of the national papers came out, the more alert journalists had found Vanhanen's wife's Facebook page. They had then started asking questions.

How was it, they wrote, that a simple judge was able to offer his family several weeks' holidays in such an expensive chalet.

Everyone close to the family knew his wife would never have publicly posted such a comment.

Vanhanen himself knew that this had been more of Lida's horrible plan to discredit him. What was more, his comfortable financial situation was well known to his friends, and its origins were above question.

Nevertheless, this sort of affair inevitably casts doubt on the honesty of a public servant. It damages reputations whatever the outcome.

The selling-power of such scandal was however far too strong for the daily press to ignore. Consequently, the papers decided to drag the juicy rumourmongering out for days. This was, of course, Lida's objective.

However, for once her well-laid plan failed. Vanhanen's brother in law had excellent lawyers and recognising the manoeuvre for what it was, stepped promptly in. His lawyers killed the scandal before it could develop. They

declared to the press that it was their client and not Vanhanen who invariably footed the bill. This was a lie. However, their client was a well-known and wealthy business-man, and the lie went through like a letter in the post.

Lida cursed them all.

On the other hand, the fake email she had sent was much more successful in triggering the effects she had desired.

Vanhanen, naturally guessed that this had been more of Lida's handiwork. But he could not fathom how on earth she had got onto the story of the Forged paintings. This woman, he mused, was not only diabolical but also exceedingly bright. The thought shook him, and he called back his friend at the police headquarters. He wanted to make sure that the young English couple were being adequately protected.

It was evident to the judge that this message was a roundabout way of saying that Kustaa Rinne was mixed up in this in some way. However, he found it highly unusual and somewhat out of character for the woman to be so subtle in her approach.

This observation troubled him considerably. Could there be yet another diabolical trap hidden in this somewhere?

All the same, he guessed that Lida Niemela was hinting that Rinne had been behind this murder. This seemed to indicate that it was something to do with the scandal over the Forged pictures.

It was true that at the time he had been amazed that the scam he had organised had failed. The fact that the picture he had tricked Rinne into buying had turned out to be a fake and not the real thing, also astonished him.

Vanhanen was more or less sure that that Frenchman Dubois was behind all that. However, he had never imagined that the whole set up was quite so refined. He had to admit, regardless of his present grief, that this was a true masterpiece of crime.

It did not take him long to see that, somehow or other, Rinne had guessed his part in the scam and had been wild with anger.

If this was true, then Rinne had probably used his considerable fortune to finance the escape of Lida Niemela. He also concluded that If Lida had sent the email, this was because it was part of some plan of her own to get back at Rinne.

Why she wanted him punished was not clear at present and especially, why she hadn't already done that herself. She must have discovered the hatred which existed between him and Rinne. She probably thought that inflamed by the murder of his wife, Vanhanen would do her dirty work for her.

He decided that this was most probably part of her crazy plan. With a flash Vanhanen suddenly saw the objective of it. The apparent aim was to incite him to murder Rinne. She would then only need to leak information, and that would lead to his own arrest and imprisonment.

However, diabolical this plan was, the woman had made a bad mistake in her reasoning. The judge was not a killer, like her.

This was her second error.

That being so, there was still something that was troubling him. Rinne had perhaps set her free and arranged things so that she could and had, obtained her revenge. But why then bite the hand that feeds?

There was still something which he didn't understand. By experience, he knew that this was because he lacked some critical information.

That evening, he discussed this reasoning with his brother in law, who was not a killer either. Theirs's was a deep shared painful grief, not maddened hatred as Lida had wrongly assumed. The two men came to a conclusion. If the judge's assumptions were correct, then Rinne must be brought to justice and publicly punished for his crime.

However, how could the fact be proved? Above all, how could it be done without the petty squabbling between the two grown men coming out in the press?

In this respect, Vanhanen's brother-in-law had a somewhat useful card hidden up his sleeve. He knew something that the family had always kept a guarded secret from the judge.

His name was Jos Linna. Although now a highly successful businessman, he had come from a poor background.

His father had worked as a lorry driver while his mother, Fani had worked as a cook to one of the wealthier families in the town. This part of the family history was well known to the judge.

However, the detail he did not know of was that the family for whom the mother catered, was that of a certain Mister Seppa. The profession of this gentleman was not quite as respectable as the judges'.

He had been, in fact, the head of the regional branch of Mafia. The mother and everybody else knew this very well. They were all lucky in being far too poor to be of any interest to this organisation, and in any case, the employer had always been kind and generous. Mr.Seppa had even employed her husband on a few occasions when they found themselves a driver too few, no questions asked, of course.

The gentleman in question was now seventy-five and had retired from active service when his branch had been dissolved due to changes in the overall organisation. However, here was someone who was not quite so hampered by legality, as were the two victims of Lida's mad revenge.

To Jos, it was also evident that Lida had been helped to escape, by someone who knew what she would want to do once free. He had thus decided that Rinne must be made to suffer. In consequence, that evening Jos

discussed the question with his parents, who were as broken down with grief as he was.

The result was that the very same evening, his mother popped around to pay her respects to the family of her previous employer.

The old man had invited her in with a good deal of fuss. "Well, now this is a very nice surprise Fani, I hope you and your husband are keeping well." He smiled. "I won't ask about little Jos, because we are always reading about his successes in the paper."

He had noticed her red eyes and smiled and nodded over at his wife, "What do you say to a little glass of something, for old times' sake?" The woman disappeared and returned with an unlabelled bottle of some clear liquid, with which she filled three small glasses.

"Come on Fani," said the old man "get that down and then tell me what the trouble is." Fani immediately broke into tears and was consoled by the man's wife, who had been expecting this since she had entered the house.

The story came out in bursts, but the man sat unmoved. His life had been filled with deaths and murders, a good number of which had been of his own doing.

When she had finished, he nodded, "Mad Lida. Yes, I've heard all about her." He scowled, "The young generation, ha!" He snorted. "That woman who was killed. Wasn't she Miss Finland? A lovely woman."

"An orphan like me," added his wife with undisguised anger. "Your Jos's wife was too, I think.

Fani nodded and broke into tears again, "sisters." she sobbed.

The old man waited patiently for Fani to calm down then said. "You'd better tell me the rest of the story. There's more, or you wouldn't be here."

Fani explained the reasoning presented to her by her son and added that Judge Vanhanen was of precisely the same opinion.

"That man, Rinne, must have one hell of a big grievance against the judge. Do you know what that is?"

Fani shook her head.

"Hum!" the old man frowned, "I'll find that out."

He then sipped his glass and smiled, "Lovely drop this. Best contraband, direct from Moscow." He laughed at this.

"Now Fani, what do you want?"

Fani looked at the carpet.

"Ah! I see. You want him punished. That's it eh?" He looked over at her. "And you would like that woman Niemela dealt with?"

Fani looked up at him, "She murdered my two grandchildren in cold blood. She broke their little necks like they were chickens."

"Not a pleasant woman," he nodded, "but devilishly efficient. A real pro." He hesitated, "could have used a woman like that in the old days." He then looked up. "No," he continued, "A woman like that won't be easy to catch, and it would take a brave man to try it."

Fani looked down again sadly, expecting a refusal from the old man. He looked so much older than he had in her memory. "Now Fani," he said, and she looked up hopefully, "I'm not as young as I was, you know." At this, he broke off and laughed heartily. "But I do still have a good number of friends. Especially some younger men who owe me a few favours for the nice positions they now have in the profession."

He held his glass out for a refill, but his wife shook her head. He tut-tutted and waggled the glass again, and she reluctantly half-filled it. "Now, Fani. You leave this with me. I'll think about it and see what can be done. Something lasting would be in order, I think."

Fani nodded, "YES something very painful."

"The man is married, Yes? Children? Hmm..."

Fani brightened "eye-for-eye and tooth-for-tooth."

"Exactly. But we will have to be careful. Both Jos and the judge must have watertight alibies."

He smiled, "As judges go, Vanhanen is a good man. And he's as good as a member of your family."

Fani looked up and was about to speak, but he interrupted her, "And of course he must know nothing whatsoever about it."

She nodded.

He sipped his glass and smiled, "Well this is going to be just like old days. It will liven up things a bit, well well well."

As Fani rose to leave, he added, "We must make sure that that man is quite aware that whatever happens was not an accident eh. We want him to suffer eh. For a long time. Yes?"

Fani nodded.

When Fani had gone, the man's wife came back into the room and went over to him. "Do you think that Niemela's is mad?"

The old man shook his head and took his wife's hand, "No, not mad. I know the type, and happily, there are very few around with brains like hers."

"An orphan again," said his wife sadly.

"Yes, one who had life almost beaten out of her when she was a kid no doubt." he sighed.

His wife frowned, "You're not going after her?"

"Oh Christ no! She would make mincemeat out of me. No, she has got half the European police on her track. Let them do the job. Might take some time, but they'll end up catching her."

He sat back and smiled, rubbing his hands together, gleefully. "No, I think I will reserve my initial attention to this political gentleman Rinne."

"I agree," nodded his wife, "Fani is almost one of the family."

"Exactly, and it will be nice to have a chat with the boys after so long. Yes, I am going to enjoy this."

His wife shook her head and smiled, "A chat AND a glass or two."

"Or three," concluded the old man.

The following morning, he called an old friend in Moscow whose name is still known and respected to most police forces around the world.

This friend set a few of his assistants to work and by evening phoned back Seppa. This call supplied him with the names of the two men who had accompanied Lida down as far as Geneva.

However, when questioned by their previous employer, it was clear that they honestly did not know who had employed them. But checking this was child's play for Seppa. He then asked the two men to do him a little favour. The request was that they report back to their employer saying that they had traced Lida to the small village of Revel in France and ask for his instructions.

The trick was to call him a very inconvenient time and directly to start by saying, "We've located Niemela, Mister Rinne." and then to continue with the description.

The men did this and, due to the advanced state of nervousness in which he had been living for some time, Rinne didn't spot the incoherence and fell into the trap.

"Yes yes." he had replied, "Come on. Quick. What have you got...?"

Rinne was then told the story that they gleaned from the French newspapers. He told them to keep their eyes open and to avoid phoning after midnight next time.

And so, it came about that over the following weeks Kostaa Rinne began to receive threatening letters.

The envelopes bore postmarks from Russia, Austria, France and even from Portugal.

These well-worded missals were signed, L.N.

They charged him with having tried to use her to do his dirty work for him and then to have her eliminated. They said that his day was coming and that she would get even with him, one way or another.

Mister Seppa enjoyed composing these letters with the assistance of his wife. She had perhaps a little more subtlety than her husband and above all, a far broader vocabulary. Together they ensured that the man's peace of mind would be poisoned permanently.

Their masterpiece was a text portending to be extracted from the local newspaper, on a future date. The fake article reported with much lurid detail that a terrible accident had occurred. His, Kostaa Rinne's, wife and children had had a car crash on the motorway. It went on to explain that when their bodies were eventually extracted from the ruins, it was discovered that all three had been shot.

It finished with the mention, "Date to be announced".

The writing team were justly proud of this little piece of refinement.

Fany was kept informed, and she passed the information on to her son. They were both happy with the plan.

The old man explained that this was phase one of the plan for punishment.

Phase two would come a little later. It would be somewhat more radical.

Chapter 19

Lida Niemela had already gone over the various aspects of the situation several times.

She had first done this quietly under the calming influences of the warm shower and then under the stimulating influences of two-thirds of a bottle of champagne. She was now going back over it again after a pleasant lunch.

Looking out through the restaurant windows, at the people crossing Grenoble's Place-Grenette, she was still hesitating.

The one certainty in her mind was that she was going to get even with that louse Stone, Doctor William Stone. She intended to make him pay for his part in tricking her out of a fortune in gold bars.

She would also get even with his red-headed whore, Sally something or other.

The question was not about the how part, because she had plenty of options open, but about the when part. Lida guessed that news of her escape would have travelled fast. The link with the murder of the judge's wife and children would probably by now also be established. She was more or less certain that the information would have been speedily transferred to all the people who had been connected with her initial arrest, via the "normal channels" as it was always put.

That Frenchman Douanier had undoubtedly been informed, and he would have immediately notified Stone so that he would be on his guard. The French police would probably bring in someone to guard him and keep an eye open for her.

This precaution was inevitable and it was merely standard professional practice to Lida. She felt no hostility for the Frenchman Douanier or his assistants because they had just been doing their jobs. But that Stone man had made a complete fool out of her.

She could never pardon being made a fool of, and even now flushed red and struck the table in anger at the thought of it. This reaction brought the waiter bustling across, but she waved him impatiently away.

The question was thus, what was the best time to set the wheels of punishment in action. Should she lay quiet for a few months, then strike when the protective screen was removed? Or act now, when nobody expected her to? Lida knew that the Police would be thinking exactly along the same lines.

However, they were French, and Lida was a Finn. Furthermore, they were mainly men, while she was a woman. And finally, they were cultivated human beings while she was an uneducated and ruthless killer.

Lida knew that the longer she waited, the more impatient she would get and the more she would dwell on the subject. This was always bad and might conceivably lead to precipitation and errors which could be fatal, to her of course. So, she reasoned, a lack of patience and an unhealthy brewing of anger was the main danger to the perfect execution of her plan.

She then shook her head as if to dispel the doubts which had been plaguing her and decided, "twere well It were done quickly."

Lida paid her bill and made her way gingerly across the slippery ice covered cobbles of the square. Passing the icebound fountain and through the short covered way, she emerged into sunlit public gardens.

Even in mid-winter, several of the bistros in the Jardin de Ville remained open. They sported covered and above all heated terraces. Lida selected the second one and sitting at the window, near one of the heaters, ordered a cup of coffee.

The soaring plain trees with their dappled flaking bark, made the gardens place a calm haven in mid-summer.

However, the thing which attracted the eyes at this leafless season was the large circular band-stand in the centre of the park. On it, a small group of adolescents were seated, working hard at being young and happy. They were also doing their best to pretend not to notice the freezing wind which swept around them.

Lida shook her head, "Intellectual Idiots," she thought.

When the coffee came, she paid immediately and gave herself up to thought.

Now, where was that damn Doctor Stone? He could be anywhere in France, but she had a feeling that he was nearby. She had discovered that the man had lived near Grenoble for years, and she knew that he loved the mountains. She reasoned that there was no particular reason that he should have moved away. He knew that she had been imprisoned for life, so he would not have felt it necessary to take any special measures to cover his tracks.

During their earlier encounter, Lida had noted how well he seemed to know the tracks and mountains around Autrans. She had also learnt that he was a very keen cross country skier.

The village of Autrans was thus the best place to start her investigations. Unfortunately, though, during the disastrous "Bait" affair, a number of the locals had seen her frequently at close quarters. They would thus be in a position to recognise her.

Knowing the type, she suspected that a good number of the villagers would have kept the newspaper cuttings with her photo, possibly even still stuck on the fridge. That being said, the present cold winter weather was a distinct advantage. It permitted the wearing of shapeless, garishly coloured anoraks, woolly bonnets and cumbersome gloves, without seeming out of place. Add to this, a pair of sunglasses, and an inexpertly applied coating of that horrible white lip protection cream and she would be unrecognisable.

All the same, she intended to give the Hotel de la Poste a wide berth, because the staff had seen much too much of her for comfort.

The next day then, suitably attired, Lida picked up her rented car. As soon as the sun had risen above the Belledonne mountains, she drove across Grenoble to Sassenage. From here she took the road up towards the Vercors mountain plateau.

The going was unusually arduous that sunny morning. The main part of the previous nights' fall of snow had been cleared from the winding road, but several inches of slippery compacted ice remained.

She inevitably got stuck behind a local bus with about fifteen other cars. This caravan consequently made the ascent at an average of only 40 Km/h. On such a road and in such conditions, it was suicidal to attempt overtaking. Already that same morning, a few impatient drivers had tried, and their cars could be seen here and there, in the snow-filled ditches, with two or more tyres in the air. So Lida sat back and waited.

At the village of Lans en Vercors, the bus took the route on towards Villard de Lans, leaving the road to Autrans unencumbered. Except for two carloads of cross-country ski enthusiasts, she was alone. However, crossing the final pass slowed them down once more because up here the snow lay deeper and was being blown into drifts by the icy wind.

Finally, the road dropped down through the snowbound forest towards Autrans and the broad white plain. The snow-covered forest which climbed the steep mountain ridges surrounding it, came suddenly into view, magnificent in the bright sunlight. However, Lida never wasted time on views. She had a job here, that was all.

Now, the cross-country ski centre was only a stone's throw from the village square, but Lida avoided this.

Driving around the outskirts, she parked as near as possible to it.

The route took her past the huge stone water-trough, beside which she had been captured almost a year ago. Involuntarily she ground her teeth as she remembered the savage and decisive attack of that brainless Red-head, which had sealed her downfall.

That woman would pay for that dearly when the time came.

Meanwhile, she put her simple plan into action. Zipping up her reversible black anorak to hide the white inside, she pulled her thick black woollen ski bonnet down over her eyebrows and slipped on the dark glasses. Thus attired, she strode into the warmth of the large chalet which served as ski rental shop and ski pass counter.

There were few customers at this hour, so she went straight to the ski-pass counter. The woman sitting behind the desk looked up and gazed into Lida's dark glasses.

"Can I help?"

"Well, of course, you can help stupid," thought Lida, why else would I be here?"

"Yes," said Lida smiling, but keeping her glasses on.

"Yesterday I found a ski-pass someone dropped on the tracks near the Plateau."

The woman nodded, "Yes they do come off sometimes if you're not careful."

"I've got it at the hotel and thought I could post it on if you had the address," she smiled. "It's a full year-pass, so the person will probably need it still. Must live around her I suppose."

The woman nodded again, "Yes. Certainly someone from the region, otherwise it would be a day or a week Pass."

"That's what I thought," smiled Lida.

The woman smiled up at her, "We only have the full addresses of those who purchase via the internet. Otherwise, we've almost no way of tracing the owner."

Lida let her continue because she knew exactly how she was going to deal with the situation. She smiled, "It's probably easiest if I bring it over then we can check." Then she pretended to hesitate. "Wait a minute I seem to remember the name." She rubbed her white smeared lips with a gloved hand, "Yes that's it Rock... No Stone. Yes, Monsieur Stone. It struck me as English which seemed odd."

The woman looked up. "Oh!" she screwed up her eyes. "Yes, and I think it was also an English Christian name too."

"Not William, by any chance?"

Lida tapped the counter with her glove, "Yes, that's it William Stone. Very English."

"Doctor William Stone, to be exact," said the woman. "Yes we know him very well, he lives just up the road at the Bourg de Dessus, Hamlet."

"Oh," said Lida, an English man living at Autrans well that's a surprise."

"Yes. A charming young man. Why don't you bring the Pass over and I will give it to him as soon as he comes around?"

"Well, that's perfect then." Smiled Lida, "I'll bring it over directly after lunch."

"Perfect, and it is very kind of you to take the trouble. Most people wouldn't bother. They throw it in the bin. Saves trouble." She shook her head.

"Oh! It's nothing. I'll see you later then, goodbye."

Leaving the Ski Chalet, she jumped back into the car, "Perfect Dr William Stone lives in the Bourg de Dessus, Hamlet. Now for the address."

Driving around the outside of the village, she then parked in front of the Post Office. The person behind the counter was a young man, so as she waited for her turn,

she unzipped the anorak. Under this, she was wearing a thin, body-moulding white jumper which showed off her breasts very well.

This little ploy ensured that the young man was extremely attentive and helpful. She told the same story about the ski pass. However, she added this time she knew that Monsieur Stone lived in "Bourg de Dessus" hamlet. She said that she seemed to remember that it was in on the Route de Geve, but couldn't remember the number.

The man behind the counter shook his head, "No, not the Route de Gève, l'impasse de l'Ours, The old farm."

"Yes, of course," cried Lida "I remember now."

"Then he dropped his voice and added confidentially, "His wife is expecting, you know, baby due quite soon I believe."

"Oh, how very lovely!" Lida clapped her gloved hands together, "How nice for him!"

The man smiled and took another look at her breasts. "Yes, that's what we all feel after all the two of them did for the village."

Lida did not want to hear any more about his exploits of which she knew too much already, from first-hand.

"Good. Well, I have to be going."

The man nodded, "If you drop it in, I'll get it sent round with the post tomorrow."

"That sounds perfect," said Lida. "And what time does the round start?"

"That's always the afternoon round. so you can drop it in any time before twelve." Then he added as if to himself as an afterthought, "There's no house number anyway, never was. There are only two places in the close, and they both belonged to the same Farm at the time." He nodded again and was about to expand on this and no doubt show off his knowledge of the village history.

Lida flashed a smile and stretched, showing off her breasts even more, and this stopped him just in time. "That's perfect then," she said. "I'll bring it around

tomorrow. I'm not staying at Autrans, you see, I'm at the Hotel de Paris, in Villard de Lans; thanks again, Goodbye". And that was that.

Lida turned the car back towards the village and purchased a village street map, and another indicating the dozens of cross-country ski tracks. She then headed back down to Grenoble.

"An excellent day's work", she mused. "I'll have a nice late lunch. Then I'll plan the next step".

Her two new maps and her detailed ordnance survey map would supply all the remaining information she needed.

"So," she said to herself. "If Stone is now married, it's certainly to that red-headed idiot. Better still, she is pregnant. Perfect." she sneered, "How you are going to regret ever having heard my name." Lida's face distorted into a horrible grin, "My God, how I'm going to make those two bastards suffer."

On her arrival back at Grenoble, and after the comforting meal she had promised herself, Lida returned to her favourite bar in the "Jardin de Ville". She selected a large table by the window, ordered some coffee and spread out her maps.

On the village street map, she quickly found the short close in which the Stones' farm stood. Its position pleased her. There was nothing between it and the edge of the forest, a mere fifty yards away. An easy shooting distance and from the cover of the trees.

Furthermore, the road leading from the farm, curved left and then ran parallel to the steep forest-covered ridge. Fifty yards further along, it sloped back down towards the village centre. No other house seemed to be closer than fifty yards or so.

She could easily survey the comings and goings from the protection of the forest without being detected.

Her white reversible anorak and bonnet would make her blend perfectly in with the snow-covered backdrop. The

thick layer of snow piled up at the forest edge made this even better.

Pulling over the cross-country ski track map, she smiled to herself. One of the loops of the red-track, followed the forest edge some distance higher up the slope, affording easy access and escape routes.

She knew this sort of terrain well and was confident that there would be little snow under the canopy of the closely planted fir trees.

Lida leant back in her chair and sipped the hot coffee which had just arrived.

"Perfect," she thought.

From her previous experience, she knew that the village of Autrans is only accessible via two roads. Both of which were partially snow-covered at this time of the year.

In case of necessity, a fast escape by car, on either of these, was out of the question unless one was an experienced rally driver, which she didn't pretend to be.

Also, it was much too easy for the two roads to be watched and blocked if the alarm went up.

Now Lida knew that the alarm would undoubtedly go up quickly and she didn't want to get trapped in this hole when it did.

However, when the man she was after had attempted to escape from her, during their previous encounter, he had used a third and very confidential route out of Autrans.

This route was via the Tunnel du Mortier. The road and the tunnel had been abandoned for years now, following a massive avalanche. However the old approach road was still practicable up to about half a mile from the tunnel entrance, and the rest could be managed on foot. There would be a difficult passage of about three hundred yards, on foot and no doubt in deep snow. However, beyond this, the two-hundred-yard tunnel opened almost directly on to the upper limits of the cross-country ski range.

From there on, it was a fast, downhill run through the forest, on well-maintained ski tracks.

This was how Lida planned to reach Autrans undetected. It was also the escape route she would take back out of the region.

She was not a top-class cross-country skier, but good enough to enable her to manage adequately. Also, she was in perfect physical condition, having put the many months of confinement in the high-security prison, to a useful purpose.

Lida was actually looking forward to this as if it was a sort of sporting adventure, in which she was to pit her wits against nature.

So, having got all the main details sorted out, she ordered a large glass of excellent beer and sat back. She gazed abstractedly out at the huge plane trees which had shaded the place for several hundred years.

Observing her sitting there quietly, no one could imagine the horrible plan she was turning over in her mind.

Photo galleries, maps, and internet links illustrating the village of AUTRANS and its forest can be found on my website,

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Chapter 20

Later that evening, back in her favourite bistro in the park, Lida watched the weather forecast on the TV above the counter. The sound was off, but the images showed that the following day would be windy. Furthermore, heavy falls of snow were expected during the night.

Tomorrow was off then, and the following day seemed compromised too. The weekend looked promising though and should be cold but sunny. This news was perfect for Lida, as it gave her time to prepare.

Her first action the following morning was to swap her rented car for a big four-wheel drive one, with four good snow tires. She also insisted on having a set of chains added.

She then purchased a comfortable backpack and two big thermos flasks. She did not intend to freeze to death while watching from that snow-bound forest.

From what she smilingly remembered as the “Freydières Gun Shop”, she had brought back a lovely Heckler & Koch MP5 submachine gun and four extra chargers. The weapon had a range of nearly two hundred yards, about three times what she required for this job. All this equipment fitted nicely into the backpack. She would also take a small handgun in her anorak pocket, just in case.

After lunch, she took the new car and made a trial run up the narrow road in the direction of the Tunnel.

This outing showed her that the access and return route would be slower than she expected from the map. It also indicated that she would need a pair of snowshoes to reach the tunnel. Due to this, she would have to attach the cross-country skis to her backpack for the half-mile up-hill track. Only then could she change into her cross-country ski shoes — another unplanned delay.

To start with, one had to climb down into the deep rift left by the 1992 landslide, and then back up the other side. The slide had carried a large section of the road

away, and there was no way around this obstacle. The deep snow rendered the passage more difficult, but there was no particular problem about this except that it meant adding a good half an hour to her initial timing.

There was, another way from the approach road up to the Autrans plateau, and that was to climb through the forest and over the "Pas de la clef" pass. This path led directly to the very top of the cross-country ski tracks. While this was convenient, the route included a nine-hundred-foot climb culminating in a passage through a steep, narrow cleft in the cliff face. Even in summer, this upper part was delicate, but in winter it was a death trap, especially on the way down. In such weather, the lower path was the only safe choice.

So, just before ten-o'clock on a lovely sunny Saturday morning, Lida Niemela set off to complete the last phase of the job she had set herself. By that same evening, she hoped to have paid back the remaining people who had been instrumental in putting her in prison.

After that, she intended to disappear for some time. She would head for the south of Portugal for this rest period. Perhaps after summer, she would look around for things to do. She might look into the art forgery business she had recently discovered. "Might be something interesting to do in that direction." she thought.

Lida turned these ideas over in her mind as she drove the big car prudently up the narrow, winding mountain road through a gradually deepening covering of virgin snow.

For the last five miles, after passing through the tiny hamlet of "Le Coing", the going became much slower. The road was now almost invisible, except for a slight depression to her right marking the position of the ditch. The other side was marked very clearly by the steep slope, falling abruptly down through the thick forest. Lida kept as close as possible to the lip of this slope which provided her with a clear guide.

The heavy car was perfect on this un-compacted snow and never once slipped or skidded. All one had to do was to keep an eye out for unexpected obstacles under the snow.

Eventually, she reached the place where the road had been carried away, carefully turned the car around and parked it facing back down the road ready for her escape.

The gun, thermos flasks and ski shoes were already in the rucksack. Lida slipped this over her anorak, then attached her boots onto her snowshoes. Slinging the skis in their transport bag over her shoulder she closed the car door closed and pocketed the keys.

The sun was now shining, and by the time she had scrambled and slithered down into the cleft and back up the opposite side she was sweating hard.

The remaining half mile through the deep snow was slow going, but being fresh and light not unduly tiring. The return passage would be much easier because it would be done on skis, following the tracks she was now making. It would also be downhill.

At the dark entrance to the abandoned tunnel, she stepped under the protection of the roof onto the still intact tarmac.

In the black distance, she could make out the small spot of light marking the far end. She slipped off the snowshoes, propped them against the wall and set off down the dark tunnel.

The light gradually faded as she advanced. The middle third of the distance was in complete darkness. Here, she couldn't even see her own feet. The only way of proceeding was to keep her eyes fixed firmly on the centre of the bright light in the distance. Finally reaching the far end, she changed into her ski shoes, removed the skis from the bag and carrying them, walked the remaining fifty yards to the place where although the snow was still **thick**, she could ski. A short distance brought her to the downhill ski centre which she skirted. She then

picked up the cross-country ski tracks which would lead her down to the village. Although it was a four-mile run, it was all downhill. Furthermore, the ski tracks were newly prepared each morning and were in perfect condition at this early time.

Consequently, half an hour, she reached the place where she needed to branch off to reach the vantage point above the farm. This part involved following a portion of the yellow training track, in the wrong direction. During this, two skiers pointed out this error, but she pretended that she had dropped her ski pass and they nodded understanding and went their way.

She found the spot she was searching for and skied off the track into the forest across the deep, undisturbed snow. From here on, the thickly planted trees protected the ground from the snow. Removing her skies, she stood them against a tree, to serve as a landmark to head for, during her retreat.

She then carefully made her way down the rest of the pine needle-strewn slope, coming to the edge of the forest just to the left of the Stones' Farmhouse. Lida pulled the hood of her white anorak up over her thick woollen hat and exchanged her thin ski gloves for a thick pair. She finally zipped the anorak up and settled down to wait.

The loaded submachine gun was zipped inside her anorak to keep it from freezing.

The place she had found, although hidden from view, was in the sun and so, with regular assistance from her two thermoses, she managed to fend off the cold.

And so, started her vigil.

Surprisingly though, not a quarter of an hour later, things started happening. The front door of the farm, sixty yards away opened and a man stepped out.

He was carrying a bulging A4 manila envelope, held dangling from his un-gloved hand. As he turned, Lida was surprised. This person was not her target, William Stone, but a man, both shorter and stouter. He walked quickly

along the short drive to the gateway and fumbling in his pocket, extracted a key and opened the letterbox. He then did something which astonished Lida. He put the envelope in the box and relocked it, before returning to the house.

"Oh!" exclaimed Lida to herself, "what's all this?"

Without knowing it yet, she had already uncovered the weak link in Paul Douaniers' scheme.

Lida's mind was trained to detect things which were not entirely as they should be and her subconscious immediately told her that there was something important behind this. It sent out a warning message almost immediately which plainly said, "Danger, Trap."

She slid out of sight and frowned. "Now, why would a stranger want to put something IN the letterbox?" she mused. The answer came almost as fast, "because he was posting something."

"Ha!" she thought "Doctor William is not in that house and someone is forwarding his letters." She was right. "SO!" she said to herself, "I've been set a little trap. But little Lida is not so stupid," she smiled. "They want me to believe that he is still there, and to catch me when I try to get at the two of them."

She smiled, "Nice try."

Now she had found the weak point; it gave her the means of discovering the whereabouts of her target. "But," she reflected, "those guys must not discover that I have found this out, or they will move him again."

At about this time she heard the noise of a car in the distance, and saw the post-office van, coming slowly up the road stopping at each house. "Brilliant," she told herself, "just on time."

She took the machine gun from under her anorak and slipped it back into the rucksack. Then picking her way along the slope under cover of the trees, she waited for the van to pass her on the road below. She then dropped down onto the road behind it, watching carefully.

The postman jumped out, undid the box, extracted the envelope and replaced it with a few others. He then tossed the bulging envelope onto the driver's seat and turned the van back.

As he came towards Lida, she waved him to stop, carefully making sure she was on the passenger side. She had unzipped her anorak to show the thin jumper tightly moulding her rounded breasts.

The driver stopped, rolled down the window and gazed straight at this not disagreeable display exactly as Lida intended.

"Can I help?" he asked, incapable of dragging his eyes from her breasts.

"One of the oldest tricks in the book", thought Lida "and it never fails when a girl wants to distract the attention of a man."

Lida bent slowly, bringing her smiling face into view. "Yes. I'm afraid I got a bit lost, are you going toward the village by any chance?" She put on her best smile and her strongest accent to help things along.

"Yes, Yes. Jump in".

Before he had time to move she had opened the door and deftly lifted the envelope, replacing it on her knees, address upward, as she sat.

Chatting away pleasantly about getting mixed up, what with all this snow and being late etc. etc., she carefully took in the address, in case he should want to move it. However, as he seemed content to gaze sideways at her breasts, which she kept pushed well out, he forgot about the letter. Lida quickly extracted her phone, and pretending to look for a number, took a photo of the envelope to help her memory. A couple of hundred yards further on, she pointed and laughed, "Ah ha look! That's my husband just over there, the big tall man. What luck!" The driver stopped, and she jumped out thanking him profusely.

As the postman drove off, Lida smiled to herself once more. "So, that's where you are Doctor William. See you soon."

Lida now started to make her way back up into the forest and once under the canopy, worked her way back along the ridge to the place from which she had started.

She took out the thermos and took a big mug of hot chocolate.

"Now what?" she wondered, "Should she head back straight away and drive to the address on the envelope?"

It was important that everybody should assume that Lida believed that the Stone Couple were still holed-up here at Autrans. She must thus play their game.

"No trouble there," she thought. So, when, an hour later the same man came out again she was ready.

She noticed how carefully he scanned the fringe of the forest before opening the car door. However, she was confident that she was completely hidden in her white clothes, crouching behind a big bow of a fir tree.

The car came carefully up the drive, and just as it emerged onto the road, Lida aimed and let go a blast from the submachine gun puncturing both front tires. She kept her aim low deliberately avoiding the window, The car slid across the road on the snow, and as it did so, the driver's door opened, and the man leapt out into the snow-filled ditch with professional ease. Lida smiled and rose the gun letting the bullets puncture the bonnet and smash the windscreen into a shower of glass. Satisfied with this, and before the echoing ceased, she turned and scampered up the slope under cover of the thick down-falling branches.

The shower of snow which was now cascading down from all the trees along the forest edge, covered her retreat perfectly like a white curtain. As she ran, she replaced the gun in the rucksack and slung it on her shoulder. Reaching her skis, she had them on in no time and stepping onto the track, skied off rapidly, in the correct direction this time.

Before the man below felt it safe to emerge from the shelter of the ditch, she was already well away and already mingling with the other afternoon skiers.

Lida now had a five-mile uphill trek to make, but she was in perfect physical form. Furthermore, she had now reversed both her anorak and her bonnet and was indistinguishable from the dozens of other people on the tracks, so there was not that much of a hurry.

It took her over an hour to reach the entrance to the tunnel, but even then, she did not rest.

Shooting-up a car with a machine gun in a little place like Autrans would have already have sent out shock waves at the speed of light. The roads out of the village would have been blocked by now, and she wanted to be as far away as possible before someone thought of keeping an eye on other and less likely routes. She un-hitched her skis and jogged down the dark tunnel, a ski in each hand. Reaching the far end, she put them back on and pushed off along the tracks she had made earlier.

When she reached the cleft in the road, she took them off again and ran down the slope and up the other side. Opening the car, she threw them in the back and leapt into the driver's seat, keeping the ski shoes.

The big car purred off downwards, but regardless of her impatience, she drove slowly, carefully following the tracks the wheels had made on the way up. Then suddenly, she spotted something moving on a loop of the road lower down. It was a car.

"Shit!" exclaimed Lida, "all I needed!" She kept going but turning a hairpin bend, she saw a police car coming towards her, a hundred yards away.

"Oh Shit," she cried, "are they are already onto me? Who worked that out so damned fast?"

The car had stopped in mid-road as Lida's big machine came into sight. There was no way of passing it on the road in this condition, but Lida had the much bigger and more powerful engine. The thought flashed through her

mind of ramming the car. But they would be armed and would have plenty of time to aim at her. At that moment, the doors opened, and two men got out and, looking up the road, unbuttoned their gun holster.

"Shit" thought Lida. She grabbed her backpack, pushed open the door, and without hesitation jumped over the lip of the road and slid down into the snowbound forest.

"Hey!" she heard the cry coming up to her. Lida kept going, slithering down, and eventually came to a flat portion which looked like a track. As she turned to follow this, she heard voices above.

"He's gone down there. I'll go after him, you get back and call HQ."

The other voice interrupted, "Are you mad? If he's armed, you'll have no chance alone. Come on let's go!" She heard a muffled cry, and a crash as the first of them discovered the slope to be more slippery than expected.

She ran along the snow-covered ledge as fast as she could safely, heading in the direction of the police car fifty yards above her. However, the track suddenly turned and abruptly came to an end.

"Damn it!" breathed Lida. Behind her, an old fir tree leant outwards over the steep slope. Some of its roots hung out and bent down almost to the level of the track, forming a dark, cavelike structure.

At this point, a large boulder had come to rest by the edge of the track. With an effort, Lida kicked and kicked at it until it slowly shifted. With a final kick, she sent it tumbling over the edge, and it bounded down the slope crashing and slithering out of sight. She then turned and, wormed her way on all fours deep under the overhanging roots.

She squeezed herself back as far as she could, under an outcrop of ragged overhanging rock. Icy water started to drip onto her head from some wet moss on the rear wall, and she moved slightly to avoid this. Then, through the strands of dangling faded lichen, two pairs legs came

suddenly into view and stopped in front of her hiding place.

They halted and stood gazing down the slope, following the track left by the boulder. Snow was still cascading down where it had collided with the bows of trees on its way down. She could see the bottom of their dark blue jackets as they leant out over the ledge of the narrow track which separated her hiding place from the 30-foot drop.

She could hear the low grumbling of their talk. "Christ. The guy's gone straight down there. He must be crazy."

"Well," said the other, "I'm certainly not going to get myself killed, trying that sort of acrobatics. What do you say, back to the car?"

One of the two men stamped his heavy boots on the snow. "Wait a moment let's just see if we can hear anything, he might just have broken a leg, then we'd get him easy."

"Not if he's got a gun, come on!" A boot stamped on the ground again, and then the movement of the legs froze, and suddenly the first man bent and stared straight into Lida's hideout. His dark glasses and the deep shadow made it impossible for him to see, so he moved his hand to remove them.

Lida hardly had time to register this but immediately grabbed the backpack and swung it with all her strength hitting him with the butt of the machine gun with a thud on the side of his head. Such was the power and speed of the blow, that before he could even utter a sound, he had toppled over the lip of the path. He plummeted down the slope, rolling in a confused ball and coming to rest more than a hundred yards further down. The sheer surprise of this stunned the remaining man who had seen nothing of the cause of the fall.

He jumped forward, "Christ", was the only word uttered as he peered after his colleague. "Hey, John! Hey!" That was as far as he got. As he leant out to see if he could

spot his colleague, Lida swung the butt of the gun which swept savagely across the path meeting his knees with a horrible cracking noise accompanied by a scream. The butt receded and shot out again meeting the falling body as it neared the ground. Crunching into his rib cage, it sent him rolling sideways over the lip of the path followed by cries as his body followed the first one.

Lida scrambled out and peered over the ledge. She got to her knees and surveyed carefully all around. Then, without a word, she turned and started to scramble up the slope to where she could see the police van.

The doors were both open, and the motor was off. Without hesitation, Lida released the handbrake and allowed the van to move backwards until it stuck in a small drift of snow.

She then ran up to her car and drove carefully down until the "bull-bar" met the front of the van. Accelerating smoothly, she felt the police car shift and then start to move. Lida then gradually nudged it sideways toward the forest. Suddenly it gathered speed and glided over the edge, followed by a series of crashes. A great flurry of snow rose into the air as it bashed against the laden firs. Lida didn't stop to survey her handiwork but carried on carefully down the road. She guessed she now had about half an hour before the cry went up and a second car was sent to find out what was up. Lida cursed because she hadn't wanted the additional trouble of having the police after her for yet another offence.

However, by the time the cry did go up, and a second car had been dispatched, Lida had parked in the extended stay carpark near Grenoble train station.

Having removed her anorak, bonnet and glasses, she made herself as conspicuous as possible at the main counter in her tight cream coloured jumper. She forced her accent as much as possible and purchased a first-class ticket to Paris. Lida did not intend to use this.

By the time the wreck of the car had been discovered, She was comfortably seated on a coach, clad in a black anorak and ski hat. She was on the motorway, already halfway to Valance. On arrival there, she walked to the train station and purchased a ticket.

By the time foul-play was invoked, and the two bodies had been found, she had boarded the train to Marseilles attired in a white anorak and bonnet.

In two hours, she would reach Marseilles and in a further hour would be at Sanary-Sur-Mer.

"Watch out Doctor Sone," she said to herself. "Here I come."

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Chapter 21

Paul's old Renault Megane, skidded on the ice as he slowed it in front of William and Sally's converted farm at Autrans. He hopped out and walked over to observe the state of the bullet-riddled car.

During the night, it had snowed again and aided by the wind, several feet of snow had blown in through the shattered windscreen and side windows. In any case, the car was now headed for the scrap merchant.

The bonnet, calendar, radiator and both right-hand doors were irreparable, and the two leather front seats were riddled with bullet holes.

Joseph stepped out of the front door to greet him, and they gazed at the wreck together for a few moments.

"You're lucky to be alive, man," said Paul, "where did she shoot from?"

Joseph led him carefully up the icy drive and pointed out a big pine tree at the edge of the forest. "A small submachine gun, I should say."

Paul frowned, "About what time was that?"

Joseph screwed up his eyes against the blinding light reflected from the snow. "Not long after the postman came, that would make it about two-o'clock, I suppose." He turned back to Paul, and the two men walked across the forecourt to the front door. "Her hiding place was easy to find. She didn't waste time erasing her footprints." He concluded as they brushed the snow off their coats once inside.

"So?" asked Paul.

"She came down through the forest from the ski tracks above. Probably went back the same way. Came in on cross-country skis." He said. "The tracks came down from the red track."

"Yes, that's what I thought." He sat down in an armchair by the fire. "And no doubt came up via the Tunnel de Mortier, which explains the trouble down there."

Joseph nodded, "I guessed that. There were two other sets of tracks which need explaining though."

"Ah?"

"Yes. One down from the hiding place to the road, and another back up at the end of the road, by the turning."

Paul looked over at him. "What do you think?"

"I wouldn't have expected her to miss me at that range." He hesitated. "Not with a submachine gun, that is."

"Agreed," said Paul

"And if she thought she hadn't, I would have expected her to check."

"Agreed again," said Paul.

"So, she was deliberately shooting to miss." finished Joseph, "Or I wouldn't be here today."

"Yes." Agreed Paul.

"But why do that, when her objective is certainly to wreak her revenge?"

The two men exchanged glances.

"I'm afraid she must have spotted our trap, Paul." Said Joseph, rising to throw a fresh log into the fire.

"And in that case," took up Paul, "the shooting was possibly to trick us into thinking she hadn't."

Paul stood up and went over to look out of the window across the snow-covered fields.

"Do you know what I think Paul?" Joseph was pushing the logs about in the grate with a pair of long metal tongs. "I think she has discovered where they are."

Paul turned quickly, "But How?" He screwed up his eyes and rubbed his hand over his forehead then dropped his hand in exasperation, "The bloody postman...! Of course!"

The probable scenario flashed through the two men's minds almost simultaneously. "The other sets of prints, of course."

Within seconds, Paul was on the phone to alert William at Sanary-sur-Mer.

Sally's father answered the call. The couple, he informed Paul, had gone on an excursion to Marseille with his wife to visit a big baby-goods shop there.

"Call them immediately and tell them to stay there and get a hotel. I'm paying. But whatever they do, they must not return to Sanary until I give the OK." Sally's dad understood this perfectly. "And whatever you do." he finished, "Don't open the door to anyone until the police arrive. Got that?"

He got the message perfectly. He did not need any clarification as to the possible consequences of coming face to face with Lida Niemela.

Chapter 22

On arriving at Marseilles central train station, Lida took a shuttle to Sanary-sur-Mer and booked into a little hotel opening onto the small fishing port. At this time of the year, it was perfectly calm, and one could sit and watch the little boats bobbing up and down, undisturbed by human presence.

At breakfast the following morning, she looked up the phone number and called the house which the couple had taken. She pretended to be the local florist with a bouquet for Sally from her friend Margaux, Paul's assistant. A man answered and informed Lida that the couple were away for a few days and asked if the flowers keep until they returned. Lida said that this was possible because the bouquet had not been composed yet.

They agreed that Sally would call the florist once she got back.

"Ah," thought Lida, "so they have got you away already. Quick work."

The address Lida had noted, took her to a no-through road leading to a headland. The house itself opened directly onto the cliff above the sea, a minute's walk from Portisol bay.

Portisol was the best beach in Sanary and was always swarming with tourists during the summer months.

In winter, however, it was deserted.

For Lida this was perfect. She could take up a comfortable position on a sheltered bench, and watch the few vehicles which passed.

Consequently, wrapped up snugly in her thick mountain anorak, she pulled the "capuche" up and tightened the drawstrings to enclose her head in a warm sphere.

Lida then settled herself down to wait. She had sandwiches and would wait all day if necessary.

Her rented car was parked with a few others at the head of the beach, where a few retired couples were strolling on the deserted sands.

It was nearly an hour before anything occurred.

First, a police transit van drove past and did not return. "Ah ha!" thought Lida, "bodyguards." After a further half hour, she stiffened as she heard the noise of a powerful car approaching. As it sped past, she recognised both the car and the driver.

"So, you've arrived, have you mister Douanier?" she smiled. "Now we shall see what we shall see."

Lida stood and stretched, then left her comfortable place and walked back to her car.

She knew that the couple had been moved elsewhere and that Paul must be aware of that. If he was here, then it was to collect something or to give the police instructions. She knew that there was a risk of the person mentioning the phone call from the florists. If this happened, Douanier would check up, and this would put the team on their guard. They would guess that she was now watching the place and that would mess up Lida's plan.

However, fate dictated that this was not to be the case.

Lida's plan was to find out where he Paul Douanier was going next. She guessed that his objective would be to go and see the couple to make sure that all was ok and give them instructions.

Thus Lida started her car and drove away from the beach towards the village. She thought it probable that the couple had been moved out of Sanary and probably into a hotel. The most obvious choice would be Marseilles, but there were plenty other places possible.

However, she knew that the decision had had to be made very quickly at a distance and the name Marseilles would have been the first to occur to anyone in a great hurry. She decided to trust her intuition and act on the

assumption that they were in a hotel somewhere in the big city.

She had come into Sanary the evening before via the principal route. There were other shorter ways, but this was the one that someone unfamiliar with the region would take.

She drove slowly along the portion of the road which wound up from the sea out of Sanary until she found a suitably sheltered parking place. From this vantage point, she could see all the way down the long sloping road which fell to the seaport. She would be able to spot the car almost two hundred yards away as soon as it turned out of the side road. She would thus be able to turn out, well in front of him and so, precede him.

Half an hour later she spotted the car turn out at the bottom of the climb. Lida drove out of the car park and started to drive leisurely towards Marseilles.

Paul's car gradually gained on her and eventually overtook on a long straight portion.

"Got you," said Lida to herself, and settled down to tail him a reasonable distance.

Paul had naturally checked that he hadn't been tailed from the house but, no doubt due to his preoccupied state and to Lida's subterfuge, did not spot her. Once inside Marseille, it was child's play for Lida because the traffic was dense and Paul had to pay too much attention to his directions. He thus did not detect the continued presence of a single car.

When he eventually parked on the Old Port. She parked nearby and watched. He jumped out and looked around scanning the buildings.

"Ah!" thought Lida, "the Hotel must be here on the Old Port then." She got out of her car and leaning on the car roof, stood watching. From this position, she could follow his movements easily, without having to move.

Lida saw Paul walk along the far end of the port and then halt. He looked about him and then entered a portico.

"So, that's where you are. Thanks, mister Douanier."

Lida closed the car and sauntered over to a café, not fifty yards from the hotel entrance. Taking a seat inside by the window, she settled herself to see what would happen.

The wait was a long one, but as has previously been stated, time had no particular value for Lida. She just sat and waited, from time to time ordering things she didn't want, to keep the waiters from troubling her.

It must have been nearly eleven o'clock before Paul reappeared, this time in the company of an elderly woman. The two of them passed the café, got in the car and departed.

"Some relative," she decided, "no doubt going off to bring back clothes or something from Sanary." She knew that this would take them the best part of an hour and a half, but that man Stone was still there.

However, half an hour later, out through the door came Doctor William Stone, in his running gear. He stood for a moment at the door and then ran off around the port passing within a few yards of Lida's hiding place.

Lida jumped to her feet and quickly paid her bill. She guessed she had between half an hour and an hour at the most.

At a florist's shop, she had noticed, Lida purchased a large and garish bouquet of highly questionable taste and headed for the hotel. Pushing back the heavy door, she walked with assurance to the reception desk and hailed the receptionist with a warm smile.

"I've come to visit Sally Stone. I believe she's staying with you for a few days." She smiled, "My name is Sophie Lemone." The receptionist nodded.

"I've brought her some flowers," Lida continued, brandishing the brightly coloured bouquet, which the girl thought was gorgeous. "Could you announce me please?"

The young girl was all smiles, "Oh yes. What a lovely bouquet!"

She called the room and put down the phone.

"Please go up. Mises Stone seems delighted to see you. Fifth-floor room 516. The lift's over there."

Lida smiled back, "Is her husband in? I haven't seen him for such a long time!"

"I'm so sorry," she said. "He has just gone out for a run. If it's like yesterday, he'll be back in about an hour."

Lida smiled, "Ah! these men!"

Sophie Lemone was one of those damn women who had befriended Sally during the "Bait" affair at Autrans. However, the receptionist could not know she was a blond.

"Mrs Stone says to go straight up, Mrs Lemone."

Reaching the room, Lida knocked three times like a sort of secret code door.

"Come in, come in Sophie!" Sally was lying on the big bed in her nightdress, her huge belly bulging out grotesquely. Lida was not expecting this and halted; the flowers held high hiding most of her face.

"Yes," said Sally, "impressive is it not?" Lida hesitated for an instant gazing at the unexpectedly large bulge. At the same moment, Sally started, realisation and fear springing into her eyes.

"You?" She started to swing her legs off the bed, but with lightning speed, Lida was beside her and pushed her violently back onto the bedspread. Her right hand flashed out from behind the bouquet, and she jammed a wad of chloroformed cotton over Sally's mouth and nose, pinning her down with her other strong arm.

Chapter 23

Lida disposed of the chloroformed cloth, then stepped back over to the bed. Grabbing hold of the lower hem of the white night-dress, she flipped it up above Sally's swollen breasts.

"Christ!" Lida halted in her movement. Sally carried her baby right out-front. Her taut belly bulged outward, seeming entirely out of proportion with the rest of her slim body.

Her masses of carrot-red hair had spread itself out around her head on the white duvet and legs were splayed out and wide apart.

"Christ!" she repeated, "How the hell is all that supposed to get out through that microscopic hole?"

Lida felt a peculiar aching and shivering sensation run through her crutch, and she shuddered and shook herself.

"God. That must hurt like hell!"

Lida had never seen a very pregnant woman at such close quarters. Her own vagina contracted and pulsed in a peculiarly disagreeable way.

Her hands suddenly became cold and damp, and she wiped them hastily on the white bedspread.

She had known pain in her own vagina a few times when a man had been permitted to penetrate her. However, a penis she mused was a tiny thing compared to the huge swelling she was now contemplating.

"Yuck!" she said. Then shaking herself back into action she stepped forward drawing a long thin stiletto from inside her anorak.

The weapon was as thin as a knitting needle and as sharp as a hypodermic.

A few well-placed jabs should do the job. This would leave the woman alive and in perfect health, ready for a lifetime of grief and suffering.

She leant forward and placed her left hand firmly on the swollen belly to stabilise herself ready for the initial thrust.

There would, of course, be no resistance. The needle was far too thin and the body in there hardly formed at all.

Lida was repelled and startled to find the skin of Sally's belly as taught as elastic and burning hot. Involuntarily, she retracted her hand and stepped back a little, looking down at the mass of taut pink skin with aversion. Something strange twisted and wrung itself in the depths of her steel-hard conscience, but she shook herself once more and forced her hand back down slowly on the swollen surface.

This time the entire surface started to quiver and move, under her hand as the tiny near-human turned-over and shifted position.

Lida's eyes opened wide while a weird sensation coursed through her lower abdomen and she gulped involuntarily.

Then, unexpectedly she received the shock of her life when the little thing kicked out and hit her hand three times in rapid succession. She snatched back her hand and glanced around her as if searching for support to help her through the ordeal she had to fulfil. Her eyes were as wide as saucers.

A feeling she had never experienced before, rose up inside her and tightened her throat.

For once in her life, Lida hesitated. However, she knew only too well that in the life that she had chosen, hesitation was death.

At this very moment, Sally groaned, as the Chloroform's effect started to wear off. Lida tutted and shook herself back into action, and a few seconds later, the door banged behind her, leaving the inert swollen body lying, spread-eagled on the bed.

Ten seconds later, she was outside, walking fast towards the far side of the Old Port, her face as white as plaster. Here it was quieter, and she dropped heavily down onto an isolated bench. She slipped the stiletto out of her

pocket and with a violent gesture, threw it far out across the greasy waters of the port.

It disappeared with a plop.

Then, leaning forward she covered her face with her hands. Lida's shoulders worked, "Oh Christ!" she said and then her voice suddenly broke into a shaking series of sobs. She did something she had not done in twenty years.

Lida Niemela broke down and cried until her face was streaming with hot tears.

"Oh god! Oh, god," was all she could repeat, as if she actually believed in such a mysterious notion. Her entire frame shook uncontrollably as she sat there alone on that time-worn old bench. The oily waters sucked back and forth against the flaking paintwork of the old boats but took no notice of Lida at all.

How long this lasted was impossible to say, maybe five minutes, maybe half an hour, she couldn't tell. But between two sobs she was brought to her senses by the sound of a voice.

"Well now! what have we here?"

Lida glanced up sharply to see an elderly gentleman wearing a thick, full-length Dunn coloured woollen coat. He was holding himself steady on a beautiful walking stick topped with a solid gold "pommel".

The man smiled kindly down at her, something that no one had done to Lida for many years, "Has the world come to an end for you, petite?" He asked.

She gazed up at him and broke into uncontrollable sobbing anew. Something had snapped inside Lida when she had felt the tiny thing shift and kick under her hand. An irresistible wave of hopelessness had surged up from some hidden place inside her and had submerged her with infinite sadness. The sudden and unexpected confrontation with the spark of new life and above all the aura of happiness and love in which it was bathed had crumbled into dust the walls Lida had so painstakingly

built up around herself and humanity. She had never known real happiness, and above all had never experienced motherly love or hardly any sort of affection any at all, outside desire. A vision of the infinite emptiness of her existence suddenly struck her with the shock of a revelation from heaven. She had nothing, and had nothing to look forward to, just an unending space of loneliness, stretching out before her in a never-ending ocean of sadness. Never in her life had such thoughts assailed Lida Niemela. Her entire existence had been irrevocably turned upside down by a single little kick from an unborn child just an instant before it was to die.

The elderly man waited for Lida to stop sobbing. "Do you mind if I sit down?" he asked.

Lida didn't move, her head on her knees and her two hands clasped behind her head. "Go away please," she said.

The old man shifted himself and settled his stick across his lap. "No. I don't think I shall if you don't mind." She swivelled her red tear-marked face sideways and scowled at him. "No" he repeated, "I believe I shall stay. You need me you see."

"I don't need anyone," she sobbed, "and you should go. You don't know who you're talking to."

"And you, young lady, do not know who's listening, do you?"

Lida swivelled her head back on her knees. "Are you looking for trouble?" she said, but it came out without much conviction.

"No more than you, young lady."

Lida shook her head sadly. These old men were such damn trouble always thinking they could understand and solve the problems of the younger generation.

The gentleman went on quietly ignoring Lida's attempt to snob him. "Now how old would you be now? 35 perhaps."

"36" snapped Lida.

"And an orphan of course."

Lida started up and turned abruptly to face him. "How the hell do you know that?" and her hand made an involuntary movement towards her jacket. However, she froze midway as she gazed at the walking stick which was now pointing straight at her chest.

"No" The man smiled, "not quite an ordinary walking stick as you can see from your end." He smiled. "It's no doubt best for you to replace your hand on your lap, don't you think?"

She did so, "A lovely piece of work I admit." He went on. "Made for me by one of the world's best gunsmiths.";

He stroked the polished stick. "It encloses a very clever self-loading short barrelled shotgun. Unfortunately, it does give a hell of a kick. On the other hand, It does an enormous amount of damage the other end, so I suppose one mustn't complain." he paused. "At my age, I can no longer rely on strength and agility alone, you see, Lida."

Lida did not notice the use of her Christian name. "Oh, what the hell, if you're going to kill me get on with it. I'm finished."

"You didn't keep the stiletto then? It was a very nice one I noticed."

Lida covered her face with her hands again. "Who the hell are you?"

The man mentioned his name, Vaito Seppa which Lida remembered well. "I suppose that damn judge has taken out a contract on me, which you picked up. Couldn't he get anyone younger to do the job?"

"Tut tut, Lida," he said, not moving the stick. Then he went on, "You are fortunate you know."

Lida snorted, "To be killed by someone as famous as you. I don't care anyway. What have I to care for?"

"Exactly as I said, young lady. You, Lida, have been lucky in reaching this point at only thirty-five."

"Six" corrected Lida, "And what point?"

"You know exactly what I mean Lida. You've hit the wall. That happens to many of us but nearly always much later in life, when our energy starts to fail us."

Lida propped herself on her knees and looked over the unhealthy waters of the port to the porch of the hotel which was almost exactly opposite.

"You see," He added. "You have more than half your life left."

Lida laughed, "If you hadn't turned up."

"Ah!" laughed the man, "Now that's rather funny." He sighed. "It is true that you made the mistake of murdering those children. The women were close to our little family."

Lida sighed, "why can't you get on with it? You old blokes always gas on so."

"Tut tut Lida. You underestimate me."

"How was I to know that she had gone and married that damn judge, I happened to like the woman, both of them, in fact."

"Yes, I know that. But of course, business is business..." He hesitated, "And there was also the question of a certain man called Rinne."

Lida sighed.

"Now," he continued, "I promised the family that I would make sure that you, at least would never harm a mouse again."

"Well get on with it then, or do I have to do it myself?"

He smiled. "But I did not say that I would kill you."

She turned to him sharply and with horror. "For Christ's sake, you're not intending to blind me or amputate my hands. No, I prefer having a hole blown through me please."

The old man chuckled happily, "No, no my little Lida. I have a much better plan."

She looked at him with growing fear. "I do believe you are even worse than I am."

He smiled, "No my dear, I don't think that's possible." He glanced over his shoulder, keeping the stick directed at Lida.

He then briefly lifted the gold pommel of his stick high in the air and was silent. A few seconds later with the subdued purr of an extremely exclusive car, a door opened behind them, and a homely rounded, but impeccably dressed woman appeared next to the bench.

"Ah, there you are my dear.," She took his extended hand. "So this is the young lady we were talking about. I believe she will be accompanying us on our little trip."

The woman was roughly the same age as the man and smiled down at Lida. "Come on dear."

The woman held out her hand and Lida, for once in her life, took it and allowed herself to be lifted from the bench, led away and seated in deep comfortable seats in the back of the car.

Linda Seppa smiled again, "My husband will join us a little later, he has one or two small things to deal with before we leave."

Lida closed her eyes. Lida had never felt so exhausted. "Where are we going?" she asked without opening them.

"First to Geneva".

"Oh," said Lida groggily and fell asleep on the spot.

"Poor Child" muttered the old woman, and it was undoubtedly the first time anyone had ever pitied Lida Niemela.

But then again, Linda Seppa had been an orphan too.

Chapter 24

Half an hour later, Paul Douanier received a phone call inviting him to have coffee in a café on the Old Port. The person had not given his name but had mentioned that he had some information concerning Lida Niemela.

As he pushed open the door, Paul was nodded to by the same elderly man who had been talking to Lida earlier. "Welcome Monsieur Douanier," he said, waving Paul to a seat beside him in a quiet corner of the noisy, warm room. "You probably don't know me, because I retired before you got your present job." He noted Paul's frown, "Oh yes but I know all about you. I try to keep myself, up to date." He smiled ruefully, "Some people have a passion for sports and follow the players in all teams including the adversaries. In my case, it is crime."

"And I am on the competitor's team."

"Naturally."

"You wanted to talk to me about Lida Niemela. That's correct?"

Vaito Seppa nodded. "I had a little discussion with her this morning."

Paul started, "You know where she is?"

The man smiled, "I know where she was."

Paul frowned at him, "That's rather enigmatic, isn't it?"

Seppa shrugged. "No doubt a professional failing."

"So you know what she was up to this morning then?"

Vaito Seppa moved his walking stick to lay it on the chair beside him. "Oh yes. I know all about that, Poor girl!"

Paul noticed the displacement of the stick and after a glance looked into the old man's eye. "I don't think you'll be needing that for the moment."

"No, just an automatic precaution, please excuse me. Take it and have a look. You'll appreciate it I think."

Paul picked up the stick and turned over in his hands. "Hmm. A lovely piece of work. I can't think of many people capable of turning out such a beautiful piece as that,

these days. Must have cost you a fortune. Gold of course," he tapped the knob.

"Yes, gold. But It was only finished last month. So, as you see, there are still a few people who know how to work properly. Eh?" He smiled.

Paul nodded approval. "Of course, the address is confidential?"

"For you? Yes, I'm afraid so."

The old man put the stick back across his knees. "Now, young man. About the woman Niemela. I happen to know the family of the deceased children very well. "

Paul nodded but said nothing. "The grandmother was naturally distraught and asked for my assistance."

Paul leant forward, "But I still don't know who you are."

The man shook his head, "who I WAS," he smiled. "I promised her that I would look into the question."

"But how on earth did you find her?"

"Ah! We old professionals stick together in many ways you know. In that way, I probably have a better network of information than many of you boys do. Can't tell you any more than that I afraid." He stretched his back and straightened himself. "I promised I would see to it that the woman would not harm anyone more and when I give my promise, I keep it."

Paul leant forward, "And you have honoured that promise already?"

Vaito Seppa nodded, "Yes, poor child. It had to happen sooner or later."

Paul leant back in his chair, "So that's that then."

"Yes. I believe so."

Paul made a move to leave, but the man shot out his hand and gripped his wrist in a surprisingly firm vice-like grip. "That's not what I invited you for."

Paul re-seated himself, "There's more?"

The elderly gentleman took a sip from his cup of coffee. "None of this would ever have happened if Niemela had not escaped. You agree with that of course?"

"Yes." Paul frowned, "Don't tell me you know how that was done!"

Vaito Seppa laughed, "As I said. We retired men stick together."

Paul laughed with him, "I see I have a formidable adversary out there."

"Thank you, young man. Now the person who engineered her escape did it for a specific purpose, and that was to do precisely what she did." He twisted the gold ring on his finger. "That was a very clever bit of work. Get your dirty work done for you without getting your hands dirty." He scowled.

"But that is not my way of going about things and not quite in line with my code of conduct". He smiled as Paul frowned at this odd statement. "That girl was used to do someone else's work. Someone who didn't have the guts to do it himself."

Paul shifted in his seat wondering where this was leading.

"It took me a few days to trace everything back of course. A lot of camouflage and plenty of clever tricks, but we were not at the top of our professions for nothing you know."

Paul leant forward again, "And you know who worked it."

The old man nodded. "Oh yes. And that is the man I want you to deal with. In a completely official and very public way."

"Ah" questioned Paul, "and why is that?"

For an answer, the man picked up a thick manila envelope from the seat beside him and handed it to Paul. "You will find the complete details of how it was worked, and all the steps involved. I have suppressed the names of the men and women he employed." He said, "They don't count."

"Now." He looked at Paul in the eyes, "If for any reason, political or otherwise, this man is not brought publicly to justice, I will take the case into my own hands. "

Paul unsealed the envelope and withdrew a thick sheaf of papers.

"You understand what I mean I think."

Paul's eyebrows rose as he read the name on the top of the first page and shot a questioning glance across the table.

"This is all true I suppose."

"That is for you to judge mister Douanier." He nodded. "You will find everything laid out precisely. My wife did the typing, and I think we did an excellent job of it together. My spelling and English grammar are not all that good you see."

Paul shook his head, "He will never admit to this you know."

The old man signalled the waiter for the bill and turned, "I think you will find him less formidable than you would expect, for such a seasoned politician."

Paul frowned. "It seems that he has been the object of some very unpleasant poison-pen letters over the last weeks." He nodded. "I believe this may have unsettled him a little. You see." He added. "My information is that he now believes that miss Niemela is onto his tracks and that she intends to punish him in the same way as she did the judge".

Paul looked up over his reading glasses, "Now I wonder what gave him that idea?"

Vaito Seppa screwed up his face, "These things are sometimes beyond understanding. Perhaps he has a sixth sense."

"Yes." Agreed Paul. "That must be it."

The old man leant forward and stubbed some sugar crystals with his fingers. "I believe that the woman had worked out his part in it. Furthermore, I am convinced that

he was the next on her list, or rather his wife and children were."

Paul glanced at him. "That would not surprise me at all." he said, "But that risk is now non-existent?"

The man caressed his stick. "That risk? Yes."

Paul cast his eyes down the first page. "This is a very nice piece of work, pity you are not on our side."

The man smiled. "It seems to me that I am, at least for the moment, don't you think?"

"Yes, that's true," agreed Paul.

Vaito Seppa rose a finger, went on. "I would recommend your having a quiet word with the Director of the hospital at Helsinki." He pointed to a name near the bottom of page one, "A very nice man. He looked after my wife when she had a little health trouble some years back and is almost one of the family now." He smiled. "He promised to tell you some interesting things about certain recent poisoning cases."

Paul nodded, "But what about Lida Niemela?"

The old man rose and leant heavily on Paul's shoulder in place of his stick, "I think you can now usefully forget about her existence. I can guarantee that, as I said, I kept the promise I made to make sure that her reign of terror was finished once and for all."

Paul shook his head and looked up at the man frowning, "Your choice of wording is most interesting. A little enigmatic though."

"Well, Paul," the old man smiled and tapped his shoulder with the gold pommel of his stick, "Take it or leave it."

At about the time that Lida had met Vaito Seppa, Sally managed to beat back the painful drugged sleep. Immediately her hand went to her swollen belly, and she relaxed as she felt the gradual movement below its surface.

Pushing herself up on her elbow, she scanned the room. The mad Finn had gone, and she was alive, and so was the baby.

For Christ sake, what had happened? Beside her on the bed lay the tasteless bunch of flowers and on the bedside table the card which had accompanied it.

Involuntarily, she picked it up. In a heavy childish hand was written.

“Best Regards LN.”

Chapter 25

In the big comfortable car, speeding along the motorway towards Geneva, Lida rolled her head slightly to one side and partly opened her eyes. She took in the elderly woman sitting beside her and remembered. Lida felt incredibly tired. More exhausted than she had ever felt before.

The woman noticed the movement and turned to her, "Awake at last dear?" she asked in Lida's native Finnish. She smiled again, "You've been asleep more than four hours. We're not far from Geneva now."

"Ah yes," she remembered, "Geneva."

From the far side of the woman, an equally elderly man leant into sight. "What about making a halt here?" he said. "You must be famished after all that emotion. I know I am."

He chuckled, "At my age, I get hungry fast, especially when I miss lunch."

Lida tried to smile, but couldn't and contented herself to return somewhat vaguely his gaze.

The woman turned to her husband. "This poor thing is too tired. We'll get something at the hotel. Your stomach will have to wait, Vaito. Suck another sweet to keep you going."

Lida remembered the old man. He had told her that she was finished, and she was ready to accept that now. She allowed her eyes to close again and the car sped on.

An hour later she was assisted to her room by the strong, broad-shouldered chauffeur. The elderly woman then helped the lethargic Lida off with her clothes, put her into her bed and tucked her in.

Lida gazed lazily up, out of her half-closed eyes at her. No one had ever done this for her before, and she found it a novel experience. She snuggled up into a ball and fell to

sleep again. For the moment, she was still alive and apart from that fact, her mind refused to go further.

The woman left a card propped up on the bedside table with the message, "We are next door. Room 712." She then went down to dine with her husband. She privately wondered if the girl would still be there the following morning. Her husband, on the other hand, didn't seem in the slightest concerned on this point, or at least he didn't show it.

Lida didn't wake until nearly ten O'clock the following morning, totalling almost eighteen hours of uninterrupted sleep. She stretched lazily and turned away from the window closing her eyes once more. However, hearing some noises coming from the bathroom, she pushed herself up onto her elbow to look across the room. The elderly woman was, arranging things, but Lida said nothing.

After a few seconds, the woman looked up and saw Lida reflected in the mirror. The Lida Niemela waking this morning was not quite the same one as had done so the previous day. There was something hard gone from her eyes. Her forehead was less taught and puckered by frowns, and her jaw appeared less set. One could not have gone as far as calling this a new softness, but at least a more relaxed and certainly less stern face.

"Well, well!" the woman turned and smiled. "Awake at last. Now that was what I call a good sleep." She stepped out of the bathroom. "You'd prefer breakfast up here no doubt eh? Coffee?" she nodded. "I'll order a bit of everything, shall I?"

When she had phoned down the order, she turned to Lida, "I'll leave you to it." and left the room. A few minutes later, a big tray was carried into the room, and she was then left alone to eat her breakfast quietly.

Lida sat at the little round table by the wide windows. Slowly buttering her toast and sipping her delicious coffee she was only partially conscious of what she was doing.

In front of the window, the wintery lake stretched off into the misty morning distance. As she ate, Lida followed the progress of a pair of swans feeding out on the grey waters.

The previous day's exhaustion had now partially left her, to be replaced by an extremely odd sensation.

Lida was passing through a sort of limbo, and surprisingly, she did not find it disagreeable. It was an odd, cosy vacuum, which seemed to have thrown itself between the past and the future. There was no hope there, just a calm, sad silence. Her mind seemed to have shut down all the unnecessary functions to concentrate on restoring the full integrity of its worn-out and over-used tools. This was her body's way of gradually adapting, and preparing itself for what is to come.

She had nothing to think about, nowhere to go and nothing to do. She did, however, wonder why she had not been killed yet. That would no doubt come in due course, and the reason for the delay would no doubt be explained.

Lida didn't care as long as the suffering was kept to a minimum. She no longer had the energy or the motivation to make a run for it. In any case, she knew that a man of such an illustrious past would have taken precautions against such an eventuality.

She assumed that she was to be punished in some way which would satisfy the families of those two sisters.

Death or prison, she didn't care anymore.

Half an hour later, mister Seppa's wife was back. After tut-tutting about her clothes, she surprised Lida by adding, "We'll be staying here a few days, and we can't have you wandering about a hotel dressed like this now, can we?"

Lida was not used to being talked to like this, but it was done so kindly that she didn't mind. In any case, she didn't want to resist, or to react in any way, which was something entirely new to her.

The woman walked over to the bathroom and mechanically turned off the lights. "Oh bring your papers

with your dear, one never knows, does one? I put them in the little drawer over there."

Lida pulled it open and found, in a little pile, all her false papers and her bank card. She frowned as she pocketed them. The woman smiled to herself as she observed the surprised expression cross Lida's face.

When the two women stepped out of the lift a little later, the chauffeur was waiting in the lobby. He drove them off on a shopping spree, which took in some of the more exclusive addresses in Geneva. Lida followed obediently, offering little resistance when she was required to strip and dress and strip again. The morning's adventure duly completed, they returned to the hotel.

The woman then selected the attire she felt best adapted to the midday meal. "Now," she said leaving the room. "you have a lie down for an hour, and I'll come and pick you up at lunchtime."

Up to this point, Lida hadn't learnt the woman's name, but this did not seem to trouble her host. However, a little later, on the way down in the lift, she leant closer to Lida and whispered, "You can call me Linda, my dear. I'd like that."

Lida nodded and smiled. "My husband's Christian name is Vaito."

They crossed the vast hotel lobby and entered the lovely dining room. Vaito Seppa stood up at his table by the big window, and they wound their way towards him. The meal was delicious, and the two chattered on to her quite happily, as if they had known her for a long time. They didn't seem in the least put off by her dreamlike half presence. Over the coffee, Vaito told her that they would be visiting some old friends that afternoon. He would consider it an honour if she accompanied them. Lida continued to drift along and accepted with no resistance. This was for the best because she didn't have any choice in this particular case.

And so, just before two o'clock, the chauffeur manoeuvred the big car into the entrance of a high-walled property in one of the old quarters of Geneva. The vast rambling, many-windowed house, stood in grounds which would nowadays have contained several high-rise blocks of flats. Ancient spreading oak trees and well-tended lawns led up to the front of the place, and the ends of several large greenhouses were visible, peeping around the corner of the building.

At this time of year, the long flower beds and borders were empty, but it was evident to anyone that they were exceptionally well cared for.

Quite a lot of snow remained, in the long shadows cast by the north facing walls, and the air had a crisp dry feel to it as they stepped out onto the raked gravel drive.

"Well Lida?" smiled mister Seppa. "What do you think of the little place? Not bad eh?" He looked around himself with pleasure, "Only fifteen minutes from the lake, on foot." This remark struck Lida as odd, but she said nothing.

Linda slipped her arm through Lida's and led her along towards the entrance. "My husband and a few of his old cronies took over this place two years ago," She smiled and nodded. "The place had become too much for the small finances that were available to keep it up." Lida frowned down at the little woman, as she continued. "To tell the truth the other men's wives and I decided that they should do some good, for once in their lives, so we joined forces, so that was that."

Lida was still entirely at sea as they climbed the wide curved stone steps leading to a massive double oak door. Mister Seppa pushed the little porcelain bell button, and a musical ring could be heard from somewhere inside. They then heard the clatter of quick steps coming toward them, and the door was thrown open.

Lida immediately stiffened and would have stepped back if Linda had not rapidly tightened her hold on her arm.

Sister Julia beamed at them from beneath her coif, "Oh how lovely Mr and Mrs Seppa!" and then beaming at Lida, "and this must be your niece you told me about."

Linda Squeezed Lida arm warningly. "Yes Sister, this is little Lisa."

"Oh! How lovely! Well, do come in." Lida shot a glance down at Linda, and the latter smiled back encouragingly.

Sister Julia stood aside, and the three of them stepped into a marble tiled entrance hall of impressive proportions. Linda squeezed Lida's arm, "I'll explain later dear."

The man, smiled at his wife, "I have a few things I need to discuss with the mother superior. Perhaps you could show the two ladies around sister. If you have the time that is."

The sister said she had, and they set off to visit the place. Sister Julia was a happy, active as a little woman. Not unlike a sparrow hopping from branch to branch and twittering gaily. "The orphanage was in a terrible state." She smiled. "Before Mr Seppa and his friends came to lend a helping hand." She paused for breath, "We just didn't know where to turn." Saying this, she opened a heavy carved oak door displaying a magnificent dining room. It contained ten or fifteen big round white table-clothed tables, impeccably laid out. Two massive crystal chandeliers lit the place from the high ceiling.

Lida caught her breath and involuntarily stepped forward to get a better view. Linda released her arm and observed her with interest.

"What a lovely room!"

This remark was the first positive comment Linda had heard her make since they had hustled her into the car in Marseilles.

"Yes, isn't it?" said sister Julia. "The girls love it. They're sometimes a little noisy, but that can't be helped I suppose."

"Girls?" said Lida.

"Well" added Sister Julia, "I suppose some of them would be annoyed at me calling them that." She brushed a wisp of hair from her face, "but well. To me you stay a girl until at least seventeen or eighteen, don't you agree?"

Lida was at a loss here, and Linda came to her rescue.

"The sisters look after young ladies, shall we call them. From the age of a few years old until they find themselves a profession and can support themselves."

Sister Julia smiled, "Or occasionally a husband, which is more or less the same thing." At this little joke, she chuckled happily, "But don't tell the mother superior I said that."

The sister then led them along the wide, bright carpeted corridor and then lifted her finger to her lips, as they approached a door of more reasonable proportions.

Pushing open the door, they entered a good-sized room, painted pink and primrose yellow. Around its walls stood about a dozen small beds, most of which contained a sleeping infant. At the far end of the room, two other sisters were doing something in a little glass-enclosed office and waved beaming, to them as they entered.

Linda stepped inside and stopped, but Lida walked in a dreamlike way over to the nearest bed and stood gazing down at the quiet rhythmical breathing of the little flax-haired girl.

Linda shot a glance at Sister Julia, and the latter took Lida by the hand and drew her towards the door.

"Let me introduce you to the middle class, five to ten years old.

Lida's face had turned pale, but as the next door opened, a gust of girlish laughter came washing over them. There must have been ten or more little girls of various ages giggling and playing in this toy and doll-filled room. Two other sisters were sitting cross-legged on the carpet, and the entire scene was one of relaxed happiness.

Linda tugged Lida and guided her into the room, where the two much younger sisters jumped to their feet and came forwards smiling. "Quiet girls. really!"

They were introduced to Linda's niece and shook her hand in a friendly French manner.

"How do you like our little home? Lovely don't you think?"

"Yes lovely," replied Lida.

"Well let's carry on our visit," smiled Sister Julia.

They walked on round to the back of the vast building and looking out through a long glass-walled corridor. Sister Julia pointed out the tennis courts and a surprisingly large swimming pool. "Some of the girls are very keen on swimming, so we have an instructor in as soon as weather permits. Thanks to Mr Seppa we had the heating repaired, at last. Now we can use it almost all year around." She smiled. "Mind you, when the March wind is blowing, they have to run very fast to get back into the dressing room." she chuckled again. "Does them good though. A healthy mind in a healthy body, don't you agree?"

"Do you like sports Lisa?" sister Julia asked Lida.

Lida hesitated, "Yes. I think I do."

"Lovely."

They carried on around the glass-walled corridor. This enclosed passage had been added along the outside of three of the walls. They passed the impressive greenhouses, in which an older sister could be seen working, well wrapped up. "We grow all our own fruit and vegetables. There's so much space available you see. It would be criminal not to." She smiled again. " Mind you. You would be amazed at how many potatoes the girls get through."

Linda smiled and added, "There's also a huge basement under the house. The sisters keep a lot of their produce, all winter. It's pitch black, and It never falls below ten

degrees. Mind you it never goes above fifteen centigrade in summer either."

"Of course," sister Julia chattered on happily, "when the apples start to get all wrinkled and soft, the girls turn their little noses up at them?" She laughed, "So we boil them up, and they don't realise they are eating the same things at all. I always find that very amusing."

They next stopped outside a set of double doors. "This is where the older girls study and do their homework. It's a lovely room, just a bit smaller than the dining room but even nicer I think," she nodded. "We won't disturb them because they have a lecture today about modern art, by someone from the museum."

Eventually, the three women came to the foot of a wide staircase which led up to the next floor. Linda turned to the sister, "I don't think we'll visit the bedrooms, I think my husband must be waiting now." Turning to Lida, she added, "The little ones are in dormitories, but from twelve on, each girl has her own room." She nodded, "The sisters are very strict otherwise the place would be unworkable".

Having completed the circuit of the lower floor, they turned the final corner to find Mister Seppa in conversation with an impressive woman. This woman could not conceivably be anyone else then than Mother Superior.

"Ah!" she said in a deep voice, "so here is your little niece, Lisa." The woman looked Lida straight in the eyes as few had ever dared to do, "Not as little as that though eh?" she smiled, "And looks in fine form too." She held out her hand and shook Lida's firmly. "Well. nice to have met you, Lisa." Then turning back to mister Seppa, "I'll get the provisional costs worked out for the end of the week and send them straight to you".

"Perfect," he said, then turning to the two ladies, "Shall we be going then?"

Chapter 26

That evening at dinner, with calm piano music playing from the corner of the restaurant and the lights flickering out over the lake, Mister Seppa and his wife explained their proposition to Lida.

"I honestly think," he said smiling over at his wife, "that once you have considered our plan in detail, you will find that it corresponds exactly to what you're looking for." He nodded, more to himself than to her. "No I don't believe you've reached the "looking for" phase, but anyway it is definitely what you need."

They had champagne for their aperitif and heavenly white wine with the rest of the meal, and warm contentment gradually crept over Lida. The lines of her face softened, and she felt as if she was slowly sinking into the comfortable chair on which she sat.

Mister Seppa glanced over at her, "I'm not all that good at telling stories, but I'll do my best. Now, where shall I start?"

"How about the beginning?" laughed his wife. "The beginning of the project, not your life. Lida wouldn't be interested in that."

"Well, the idea was my wife's." said mister Seppa. "She more or less forced me into putting up the money with a few pals." His wife shook her head, but he continued, "To avoid the promotors buying-up that old place and closing that orphanage down."

He sipped his wine.

"Put that glass down and get on with the story Vaito.

"Well you see," he continued, "like yourself, my wife and some of my friend's wives were both orphans." He leant over and squeezed Linda's hand. "They both had tough times as young girls. But then, you know all about that yourself so we won't discuss that,"

He chuckled. "But Linda had a stroke of good luck and found me when she was eighteen. Same thing for my

friend." He frowned, put his hand out for his glass but withdrew it quickly, at the sound of a cough from his wife.

"But as you know, most people are not lucky. In those cases, life is a very long sad affair." Here the man hesitated

"I have also to admit that in my line of work, I have been responsible for creating a few other orphans. So, this project seemed to my friends and me, a way of repairing a little of the unfortunate secondary-effects of our profession."

Lida was starting to feel very peculiar listening to all this, and wondering where it was leading. This must have shown on her face, because Linda laid her warm hand over hers, but said nothing.

"The clan of wives got together and drew up our marching orders, and they were very precise. First of all. Pay off the debts the Orphanage had worked up, and there was a hell of a pile, and then set up a foundation."

"Come on Vaito Seppa, that hardly scratched the surface of any of your bank accounts."

"No. I admit that. We each put in a nice sum of money into the foundation. The income now generated by that now covers the running costs of the place AND pays the heating and other bills." He shook his head.

Linda shook her head sadly, "How that mother superior managed before; I can't imagine. She is one hell of a woman and a genius in getting people to do things for nothing."

"So." said Mister Seppa, "all that remains, is to pay for improvements and above all the tuition and various fees for the girls."

His wife smiled, " Their clothes and outings and holidays and concerts and theatre and."

"But." and here he glanced at his wife, "I cannot buy love for them nor affection. According to the band-of-wives, that is what they need most of all."

Lida looked down at her hands a feeling of emptiness spreading over her.

"The sisters do a lot in that direction. I'm sure you felt that, during the visit. However, they don't know what real life, in the outside world is really like." said mister Seppa.

"Also", added his wife. "They don't know about first-loves, or about heartbreaks. They have no idea what desires do to a young girl, about crushes and that sort of things. They don't know about hatred and spitefulness and jealousy or any of the other things that play havoc with the young mind when left to fend for itself." She shook her head sadly. "You see. The girls would never dream of consulting one of the sisters on any of these matters." The woman rested her hand on Lida's.

Lida understood all this only too well. Se knew what it did to a young defenceless girl. She looked up at Linda, who continued. "They need permanent guidance in all these things and in choosing the direction to take with their studies and what profession to aim at." She paused and looked into Lida's eyes. "Do you think the sisters would have the courage to tell them honestly if they didn't have what it takes to realise their dreams? she frowned. "Could they tell if they haven't got what it takes to become a champion athlete or a scientist or an accountant or anything else?"

Vaito Seppa sat back and took an appreciative sip of his wine.

"And this, Miss Lida Niemela, is where you come in." He said

Lida started and shook her head, "Me?"

"Yes," said Linda, "we want you to take on the most difficult job anyone could ever dream of." She took her hand off Lida's and looked her straight in the eyes. "My husband never actually promised to kill you."

Lida started.

"No." butted in Mister Seppa. "I promised that I would personally see to it that you would never hurt a single soul again. Nuance!"

Lida frowned. She had heard of the horrible things that some people of his profession had done in the past and visibly shuddered, "But what are you going to do to me?"

Linda Seppa smiled. "We want you to go and live with these girls. We want you to make sure that none of them ever lacks the love and encouragement that will keep them from sliding down the route that you were forced to take."

Lida gulped and brought her two hands up to cover her eyes, "Oh no! I can't. I haven't an idea of how to. No, the responsibility is far too great. No, I just can't." She shook herself and taking her hands from her face nervously brushed her hair from her eyes.

"No, I'm sorry." she blurted out hesitantly. "I just can't."

Mister Seppa smiled at Lida, "Oh yes you can young lady. You are the perfect candidate."

She looked at him appealingly, "Please? No. Please?"

"Of course, if you were to refuse," said Linda, "it would put me in a very inconvenient position." She looked over at her husband, "You see I refuse to allow him to go back to his old ways."

Her husband smiled and took up the discussion. "Of course, you would naturally receive a comfortable monthly salary and clothing allowance," he added.

"But!"

"You won't be abandoned, not like you were dear," said Linda, "we will be nearby, and of course..."

At this point, her husband pushed back his chair and stood smiling over Lida's shoulder.

A deep female voice cut in, "And of course I shall always be at hand, my dear." And the impressive form of Mother Superior came into view and sat down in the place vacated by Mr Seppa.

Lida stared at the woman. She was now dressed in an evening dress of dark blue wool and smiled across the table at the young woman. "Well," she said, "perhaps you two would like to take your after-dinner coffee at the bar. Lisa and I have many points to discuss."

Epilogue

The Downfall of Kostaa Rinne

Two days after his discussion in the café at Marseilles, Paul had a long talk with the director and the ward sister at Helsinki central hospital.

Following this, he met with several Finnish police officials and handed over a copy of the file dealing with Lida Niemela's escape. He relayed the message that the search for the woman could now be stopped. If Rinne was not dealt with officially, others had informed him that they would take the affair into their own hands.

He did not state that Lida was dead, because he was not convinced of that point. However, he had recognised the type of the elderly gentleman he had met and had no doubt that his word was worth its weight in gold.

The man had made a promise, and his ingrained sense of honour meant that he would keep it. The woman would no longer be of any trouble.

Paul had no idea how it would be arranged, or where, or by whom. However, he was quite sure that it would be done and that she would not be heard of again.

Paul was also confident that Rinne would be finished in one way or another. He hoped that the politics involved would ensure that it would be the less violent of the two methods.

Mister Seppa had it in his power to wreak revenge on the man immediately. However, he seemed to consider that the worst sort of revenge and the more lasting one would not be death. Perhaps he had also felt that there had already been more than enough deaths in this affair.

The Finish minister of the interior was alerted and realised the danger to his own fragile position immediately.

He understood that if he were to save his own skin, he would have to act fast and be exemplary in his actions. Above all, he would have to do it before the press got on to the affair. The man had a seventh sense about such cases and knew that such potent information had a way of quickly leaking out to the press.

That same afternoon then, Kostaa Rinne was picked up at his office and invited to an impromptu meeting at police headquarters.

He was given the file to read and asked to comment on it. They left him alone with the documents for an hour, then returned and asked what his position was.

Rinne put up a brave front and asked to see his solicitor and surprisingly, also his wife. The man knew that he needed a solid alibi and assumed his wife would provide him with one.

An hour later the Solicitor, accompanied by the wife, entered the room in which Rinne was being detained. As they did, Rinne turned without rising from and smiled as she moved towards his wife.

However, he froze as soon as he saw her hard-set face. Before he knew what had happened, she had stepped forward and brought her gloved hand down with a smack across his face, which sent him spinning off the swivel chair and onto the hard floor.

The policeman stepped quickly between them as she lifted her booted foot to crush down on his chest.

"You filthy, stinking, squirming rat," she spat out, "you great pile of smelly shit."

Rinne's eyes widened. He had never heard such language from his wife and had never seen such cold fury and hatred in her eyes.

No one else moved or spoke.

"You bastard." She continued. "you killed that woman and those tiny children. You used that mad woman as if she was a knife in your own hand, you bastard!" She gulped and shook her clenched gloved hand in his face

struggling against the policeman who held her firmly. "That girl was the most magnificent woman I ever met, and I loved her like a sister, you fucking sod!"

Rinne's wife had rapidly made friends with the ex Miss-Finland, and they had appreciated each other straight away, on their first meeting on that ill-fated evening in the TV studio. The woman had been tall and slim and perfect, while misses Rinne was short and plump. However, the woman had not snubbed her, as such beautiful women often did, accepting her as her equal. Rinne's wife had few real friends, and this friendship had rapidly blossomed, beyond all expectations.

If the police officer had not been a big man with quick reactions, Rinne would have been grievously injured.

He cringed and writhed his way back across the floor to the wall, where he rose, keeping his eyes on his maddened wife. He knew that if the police agent stepped aside, he would not be able to contain the mad fury into which his wife had been transformed.

"I wish that mad woman had come back to get even with you. And I bet she will get you, sooner or later."

This statement had a devastating effect on Rinne, coming after the series of threatening letters. "Oh Christ!" he cried covering his face with his two trembling hands.

His wife screamed, "Don't you DARE, call on Jesus to help you. You rotten scum. If she doesn't get you, I will. Mark my words. I'll never forget, never."

She was gently but forcefully led back out of the room, and the solicitor and the police officials exchanged glances across the table.

"Do you admit the facts, mister Rinne?"

Rinne kept his trembling hand over his face, "Yes, yes..." his voice trailed off.

The officials nodded to each other. "I'll prepare the declaration for your client to sign. Would you need to be present for the signature?"

The solicitor shook his head, "No, under the circumstances I don't think that's necessary. The gentleman's wife has instructed me to draw up divorce papers immediately, and I feel it should be done quickly."

The men shook hands and left the room, leaving Rinne still standing trembling against the wall.

The legal corps could not charge Rinne with murder. They had to make do with a charge of being an "accessary before the fact."

Rinne was thus given a sentence of three years. Six months of this was in a closed prison, six months on partial parole and the rest in an open jail doing work for the community as is often the case in Finland. He thus spent the long years clearing up rubbish from Helsinki's parks and gardens and scooping up dog excrement from the paths.

His days of comfort and his dreams of political success were far behind him and had been destroyed forever.

When he had eventually served his time, he transferred the remained of his fortune abroad and disappeared.

The divorce went through with extreme speed and to her enormous surprise, within the month, Rinne's wife found that she was now a wealthy woman. She had had no idea that her husband had had such an enormous fortune hidden away.

The authorities found it all quickly because he had taken no precautions to hide the account details, feeling in no way menaced. The government, however, took the liberty of heavily taxing the funds they recovered from several tax-havens. However, they took this payment, only from the half which officially belonged to the husband following the divorce.

Mrs Rinne took to using a great deal of this money to look after her looks, her attire and her general well-being. It was her way of honouring the memory of her late friend.

By the time Rinne had finished his term, she had met several charming gentlemen and had good prospects of remarrying shortly.

William and Sally return to Autrans.

As to Doctor William Stone and his pregnant wife Sally, things moved fast.

Once the initial shock of the encounter with Lida Niemela had calmed, they moved straight back to their home at Autrans. Paul had phoned ahead, and the bullet-riddled wreck of their car had been removed and replaced with a rental one. Joseph said that it was being repaired after a skid on the snow and a bit of a bump. When it was eventually returned, there was not a great deal of it that hadn't been changed, apart from the back seats and the boot.

Paul and Joseph had thought it better to keep this little part of the story quiet for a few days so that Sally could settle back down.

Both her friends Margaux and Sophie came and stayed at Autrans for a few days, and as the atmosphere cleared, Sally relaxed and became her happy self once more. The spectre of mad Lida Niemela and her thirst for revenge had disappeared at last.

Paul let them believe that she had met with an untimely end. To do this, he employed the same tactics and deception that the elderly gentleman at Marseilles had used. As they all wanted to believe this, no one questioned him further about it.

Before the week was out Sally was whisked off to the hospital at Villard de Vercors and gave birth to a lovely little girl.

There was no possibility of getting the child mixed up with the others in the ward. The tiny little thing already had an abundance of the same carrot-red hair her that mother sported.

When they saw this, the visitors exchanged an amused glance and Paul commented, "Here comes trouble!" And they all laughed merrily.

Monsieur Dubois, Vladimir Falin and the Guards.

Had Kustaa Rinne and Erik Vanhanen discussed the subject of forged paintings, part of Monsieur Dubois's organisation might have been discovered. However, even if they had decided that Vladimir Falin was the man behind the brushes, it would have got them no further.

Falin would never have talked, unless non-European style interrogation methods were used, which was highly unlikely. Even then he would only have been able to provide a rough description of the two guards. In any case, he would no doubt have considered it far less dangerous to lie, than to risk having a little business visit from those two men. The first case might prove painful, but the second case much more so, especially as the two men knew all about artists.

It was true that the two guards knew both Falin and the laboratory which did the accelerated ageing. However, men like these two were quite a handful even for experienced pros. Furthermore, they tended to evaporate into space, at the least smell of trouble.

As has become clear then, no one knew the identity of the man behind the scam.

In the case of trouble, Monsieur Dubois simply had to lie low and avoid being drawn into any clever traps which might be laid for him. As it was, however, the hatred between the two men who had each a part of the puzzle, grew, and was magnified a hundred-fold, by the murder of Vanhanen's wife.

When Rinne was arrested, and charged with having master-minded the release of Lida Niemela, this only confirmed Vanhanen's deductions and fuelled his hatred even more.

The pieces of the puzzle were thus never fitted together, and Monsieur Dubois was able to carry on his little activity untroubled.

Fools and their money continued to be parted, and the earth continued to turn on its axis undisturbed.

As for Vladimir Falin, he continued to live the same life as before. Sometimes he painted backup copies for museums and sometimes forgeries for Monsieur Dubois. Surprising though it may seem, he managed to put a little of his income away in a bank and gradually amassed quite a nice sum. The rest of his money went in drinking and eating and women, none of which came cheap in modern Russia. Considering his drinking excesses, how he ever managed to retain a steady hand, enabling him to produce his magnificent paintings remains a mystery. Perhaps he had an unusual gene sequence, who knows?

The two bodyguards also continued as before, except that they became more and more knowledgeable about the works of art contained in the museum.

They were capable now of quietly prompting the younger guides if they ever found himself out of their depth. The kindness of these two massive guards was always a matter of surprise to the museum director. He would have been quite happy to promote the two of them to assistant guides, but he knew only too well that the Trade Union would fly into a tantrum if he tried it.

He thus made sure that they knew how pleased he was with them and concretised this by regular salary increases.

He also made sure that when a particularly pleasant task came along, it was these two who were asked to deal with it.

So, all in all, both of them had been extremely lucky to have been forcibly retired from the organised crime sector.

Looking after a few paintings and scowling at anyone taking a step too close to them, was, they agree, far less stressful than having to go and beat up some poor shop-keeper.

Erik Vanhanen

Had Erik Vanhanen not known that the murderer of his wife had been captured, in all probability he would have taken things into his own hands. He would have found a way of destroying the man in the eyes of everyone who had at one time or another thought good of him.

But, when he received an anonymous copy of the document describing Rinne's crime and saw the wheels of justice begin to move, he knew the thing was done and that Rinne was finished forever.

He knew that the man's driving ambition would be smashed and his lifetime hopes would be irretrievably dashed to the ground. He would never be able to return to politics and would become an outcast in his own country.

The thing that saved Vanhanen, and somehow carried him through the most difficult and emptiest period, was the unexpected movement of solidarity which sprang up around him. His parents were naturally omnipresent, but also his sister-in-law, even though she had lost her own two children. The latter's family also came to the rescue and what surprised him most, friends of theirs of whom he had never heard.

His mother made sure that there was always something to do when he came home. He was forced to watch TV

quizzes and such like, almost every evening and when the TV was not on, then the radio would be on.

She made up all sorts of errands for him to do and at weekends she would have a program planned out for him. She also made him take over carting the babies to the doctor when required, and in one way or another, left him little time to dwell on the past.

His father made sure that plenty of good wine was always on hand at meals and decided that one should never forgo the pre-dinner cocktail or the digestive.

His mother made sure that he ate much more than was his habit and insisted that he had dessert and cheese at every meal. In this way, one week slipped into the following and the first month into the second and life without his wife gradually became a reality rather than a terrifying desolation.

However, the thing which eventually enabled him to straighten himself, lift his head and look ahead rather than to fall back into dull sadness, was a summons from the Minister of Justice.

The minister offered him the post of Permanent Secretary of the ministry of justice and employment. This came about because, during Rinne's interrogations, it had become clear how the latter had broadcast the rumours which had resulted in Vanhanen being ousted from his earlier promotion.

Such an important position, brings with it a great deal of work, especially when one has not yet mastered the ropes. Vanhanen was thus submerged in work, and this saved him.

Judge Vanhanen went on to become one of the most appreciated cogs in Finland's administration machine. What is more, his fairly neutral political opinions, ensured that he stayed so for a very long time.

THE END.

POSTSCRIPT.

This book was inspired by an event which happened to me some years ago.

One Saturday morning in the late autumn, I went for a run up a steep mountain path near my home in France.

It was a very cold and frosty, with the sun still low and hidden behind the mountain. The following morning at the same time, two young men took the same path, on a hike up to the "Refuge de la Prat".

A group of hunters were also working their way down through the forest, and one of them mistook the hikers for mountain goats. He shot one of them twice through the chest, and the young man died almost immediately.

How an experienced hunter made the mistake, I have not learnt. Was his eyesight impaired? Was he drunk?

This might have come out in his trial. I don't know.

Anyway, a strong, good-looking young man of 25 was now dead, and his parents were one child less.

Above all, this could quite easily have been me.

I now wear only bright red or fluorescent orange running clothes.

The region has since been partly transformed into a "no-hunt" zone. However, the hunters consider that it is the general public that should be banned.

The thought of what might have happened if the person killed turned out not to be an ordinary hiker out for a day in the mountains, stimulated me to write this story.

Author's Note:

If you've enjoyed this second book in the series, you'll find the follow-up adventures in "Agent Vx" and "The Songwriter".

You might also enjoy the two "Three men in a Panic" books which describe the amusing adventures of the three retired friends.

Let me if you've enjoyed my books:

swr-music@orange.fr

or via Facebook "stephenwilliam.rowe".