

The Songwriter



Stephen William ROWE

Biography

Doctor Stephen William ROWE is a retired industrial research scientist. He is a consultant specialising in the physics of ultra-high voltage electrical arcs and electrical insulation up to several million volts.

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

An accomplished musician, Dr Rowe is also an experienced songwriter and composer, having collaborated with many excellent singers.

Born in the UK, he now lives in the French Alps, near Grenoble.

His novels and compositions can be found on his website.

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This story is a work of fiction.

All the characters involved are products of my imagination, and any resemblance of the characters to actual persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Novels by Stephen William ROWE

Bait

Hate

Agent Vx

Three Men in a Panic Vol 1

Three Men in a Panic Vol 2

The Stone Scenario

The Salat Quartet

The Dordogne Renovation Project

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Chapter 1: The Proposition

The following morning, the deep rumbling of the snowplough woke me. I had slept well, but still felt rough. Two gruelling days spent judging a singing contest with two hundred participants had seriously depleted my reserves of energy. Then, the laborious late-night drive home through a whirling snowstorm had succeeded in emptying them completely.

Home to me is Autrans, a small French village in the Vercors Mountains. An hour's drive from Grenoble, it is a Mecca for cross-country ski enthusiasts, which is why I now live here.

During the night, more than fifty centimetres of snow had fallen and the snowplough was diligently, and throatily, piling this up in the field just beyond my front gate. The thermometer indicated minus twelve degrees, and millions of frost crystals had formed on the smooth, white blanket covering the fields. These were now sparkling and glinting in the rising sunlight like a myriad of diamonds scattered there by an unseen hand.

In the near distance, the heavily laden forest swelled and rose from the valley floor like a white wave. It followed the steep slope of the mountain ridge culminating against a cloudless blue sky at one thousand six-hundred metres.

I sat breakfasting lazily, gazing out through the kitchen windows at this enchanting scene.

As I sat daydreaming, a large dark green car turned off the main road into the cul-de-sac.

A visitor for my neighbour, I assumed.

I wasn't expecting anyone.

A short time later, however, my front doorbell rang.

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Putting down my coffee mug, I walked across the sitting room and pulled open the heavy door.

Standing before me, rubbing his hands vigorously in the cold, was a short, stout man in a thick fawn overcoat. Behind him in the forecourt stood a shining, dark green Porsche Cayenne, and beside it was a tall, powerfully built man. I took him to be the chauffeur.

The man before me smiled. 'You're William Stone, the songwriter?' he asked.

I nodded, 'That's me.'

He held out his hand for me to shake.

My experience with the music industry is that artists' managers are the only members of the profession who earn enough to afford such a vehicle. What's more, this man looked just the type.

'I wondered,' he frowned. 'Because it's written Doctor William Stone on your letter box. Are you a medical man too?'

I smiled and chuckled, 'No. I'm a scientist. A research scientist.'

'Ah!' he nodded. 'Like Doctor Who.'

I laughed. 'Without the Tardis.'

While he was talking, I had been trying to place his accent. I was generally good at this game, but this time I was stumped. The man was clearly from a French-speaking background, as his French was impeccable. But he certainly wasn't French.

He went on, 'And Professor Sally Stone? A scientist, too?' he nodded. 'That's on the letterbox too.'

'No? A professor of history. Oxford University,' I replied.

'Your Sister?'

'My Wife. So, what can I do for you?'

The man nodded, 'I have a proposition for you,' he said. 'Can we come in? It's a bit nippy out here. Minus fifteen up there at the pass...'

I stepped back, and he signalled to his chauffeur.

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The two men came in, and I was impressed by the size of the second man as he passed me.

'Nice place,' said the man, who I guessed was an artist's manager. 'Nice fireplace.'

'Thanks.'

'A scientist, eh!?' he nodded to himself. 'I thought this place looked a bit expensive for a songwriter.'

'Yeh. Warm too,' added the chauffeur, rubbing his hands together and stepping close to the blazing log fire.

He, too, had an unusual accent.

'I might be an exceedingly successful songwriter.' I replied.

'True...,' the agent paused. 'Not many of those around, though.'

'No,' I agreed. 'Not many.'

What I didn't mention is that even my research scientist's income would never have covered the cost of buying and renovating this place either, but that's another story.¹

'Would you like some coffee?' I asked.

The chauffeur's eyes lit up, but before he could speak, his boss shook his head, 'No thanks. A lot to do today, and this place is a little off the beaten track, isn't it?'

'So ...,' I gazed at him. 'This proposition?'

The man glanced at me appraisingly, nodding slowly to himself, 'Yes. Got your head screwed on the right way.'

'So, I'm told,' I replied. 'So?'

'I'm looking for a good songwriter to work with Lindsay Blache.'

I frowned and, looking up, was surprised by how closely he was watching me. 'She was at the singing competition I judged yesterday,' I replied.

'Exactly. A very enthusiastic girl,' he said with a slight raising of the eyebrows.

¹ See "Bait" by the same author.

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'Eliminated in the semi-finals,' I added.

'Yes. I know. Her mother told me.' He shook his head sadly, 'That must be one hell of a job. Judging two hundred wildly optimistic singers, then having to explain to the parents why they were eliminated.'

'Yes. Gruelling is the word which comes to mind.'

'Yeh. Gruelling. Challenging too.'

Ah yes! Now I had them. The mother, like a number of other parents, had tried to influence my judgment. That was a waste of time, of course. I remembered a tall and expensively dressed woman, overflowing with curves and smiles.

The man turned to his chauffeur with a broad smile, 'I see by his reaction that Doctor Stone, here, remembers her.'

I nodded, 'I do.'

'And I expect she turned on the old glamour to try and help tilt the scales. That right?' he asked with a wry smile.

I nodded again. When her artistically unbuttoned shirt had "accidentally" fallen open a little too much, I was graced with lingering glimpses of her breasts.

'I'm difficult to influence, though,' I said.

'Yes,' he smiled. 'She mentioned that too,' He chuckled. 'Her performance usually gets the sought-after results, so she was a little annoyed. Probably thinks you're gay up to the eyeballs...'

I glanced at him, frowning, 'Brilliant! So, you're Lindsay's manager.'

The man started, 'Manager!' he cried. 'Heaven Forbid! What an idea!' He turned and gazed at his chauffeur, who pulled a face and shrugged.

The man shook his head sadly, 'She asked you if you'd like to collaborate with Lindsay, but you refused...'

'I didn't refuse,' I bridled. 'I told her that my style of composition didn't correspond to the musical direction her daughter clearly wanted to take,' I replied.

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'Exactly. You refused with subtlety and style,' he smiled. 'A nice professional touch, that.'

I shrugged, 'So what is your relationship with this Lindsay Blache, if you're not her agent?'

'I'm her father.'

'Her father!?' I cried.

'That's it.'

'Ah!' I nodded. 'So, the manipulating mother is thus your wife! You've been misleading me.'

'Manipulating Mother!' he chuckled. 'I like that. But I was only having a little fun. And don't worry, I know all about the tactics my wife employs when she's after something,' he smiled. 'After all, that's how she hooked me in the first place.' He chuckled happily to himself. 'Happy days, eh?'

'And,' I added. 'I suppose she has now packed you off up here in the ice and snow to pressure me into doing what she couldn't do with her...' I paused. 'What she failed to attain using her womanly tactics.'

'Womanly tactics!' he laughed out loud. 'I love that.' He then scowled and glanced at his driver. 'But let me tell you, William... Nobody packs me off anywhere.' His voice took on a surprising hardness as he said this, and I glanced at the driver. The latter pulled a face and shook his head in confirmation of what his Boss had said.

I sighed, 'So how about telling me about this proposition of yours?'

The man relaxed once more and smiled at me, 'I suppose you've got a recording studio here. Why not talk there?'

I shrugged, 'OK. This way.' I paused, 'But it's not one of those impressive things you see on TV. Mine is just for single instruments, such as piano or guitar, and vocals.'

'Got it,' the man said.

'That's called a "Home Studio", Boss,' said the driver.

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'Right,' said the man, following me. 'A Home Studio, eh! You learn something new every day...'

My studio was separated from our two offices because we never took anyone into either of them. Instead, I did my composition work in an entirely separate part of the renovated farmhouse. I had installed my studio in what had once been the ancient food storage cellar. So, crossing the long sitting room, I led the men through a thick, soundproofed door and down a short flight of steps. Gazing around the stone-walled room, the man nodded, 'So this is a "Home Studio" then!?' he said. 'Well, well!'

'Cosy and quiet,' said his driver. 'Bigger than I expected, too.'

'Soundproofed,' I replied. 'That thing over there, like an outsized phone booth, is a vocal cabin. I get perfect vocals with that. Avoids room reverberation.'

The driver pulled open the door and stepped inside. 'Hey! You could shoot someone in there and no one in the house would hear a thing,' he said on exiting.

I shrugged, 'Not much of that sort of thing goes on up here in Autrans,' I laughed. 'It's a very peaceful village, you know.'

'I can believe that,' said Linsay Blache's father. 'Well off the beaten track,' he said, shooting his driver a significant look and nodding. 'Tranquil,' he added.

'You said you had a lot on your plate,' I said. 'So how about that proposition?'

'Yeh. A lot on my plate every day,' he sighed. 'Too much to appreciate being jumped on by my daughter and her mother every time I get home for a bit of rest.'

I nodded. 'I get it. You want her out of your hair. That's it?'

The man nodded, 'Damn right I do!' He blew out his cheeks. 'Not that I have much hair left,' he chuckled at his own little quip.

'I'm a songwriter. Not a nanny,' I replied.

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The man sighed and sat down on one of my swivel chairs in front of my array of computer screens. 'You've got the wrong end of the stick, William,' he said, turning and gazing at me. 'Lindsay has neither the talent nor the originality to attract the attention of a record company. Agreed?'

I nodded, 'A decent voice, though, and a good mover on stage, too.'

'I know that. But that's not enough, is it?'

'No.'

The man gave a brief nod, 'I guess that a new artist must be unique in some way. Ultimately, success hinges on presenting original songs with a distinctive voice.'

'Exactly.' I was astonished that a non-professional understood this so well.

He smiled, 'And I guess it's a challenge finding the words to get this message over when it's the very last thing they want to hear.'

I smiled back, 'You're telling me.'

'The truth's hard to digest,' he said. 'Singing instructors never mention that. After all, they make their living teaching enthusiastic youngsters, regardless of talent or commercial potential.'

'Yes. The truth is depressing.'

The man nodded, 'Yes. I know.' He paused. 'So, I'm going to call in some favours. Engineer her a recording contract.'

'You're going to do what!?' I gasped.

'I'm a businessman, William. I negotiate things for people. That's how I make my money. I negotiate things that require a subtle touch and careful judgment. And I get results where others fail.'

I frowned, beginning to feel a little uneasy. I must have shown this because the man smiled and shot an amused look at his driver.

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'Don't worry, William. Not drugs, arming terrorists, or money laundering. Simply bringing the right people together and negotiating deals which benefit all parties. Including yours truly, of course.'

'Hence the need for a hefty driver who can handle a powerful car in deep snow,' I gave the second man a nod.

'I was a rally driver in the old days,' he smiled. 'Did a lot of competitions.'

'And,' I said, turning to Mr Blache, 'I suppose you happen to have done some of this "negotiation", for record companies too,' I said.

The man smiled. 'There's a lot of money behind music contracts,' he paused. 'Sometimes, top artists start feeling the need for a change of air. Then, when their employers get worried, I sort things out,' he sighed. 'I'm good at that.'

'So why didn't your wife ask you to negotiate with a company directly?'

The man started, 'Great Gods, William!' he gasped. 'You don't imagine I ever told her I knew anyone in the music industry, do you?! I'd never have had a moment's peace,' He shook his head. 'And I happen to need that peace and quiet at present. Some tricky negotiations on the horizon, you see.'

I shook my head to clear my thoughts. 'But surely you don't need me then,' I paused. 'If you can call in favours at that level, I mean.'

'Oh yes, I do.'

'Why?'

'Because I want both my wife and my daughter to believe that you are the one behind obtaining the contract.'

At last, I understood, 'I see! So, they'll fasten their attention on me instead of you!'

'You got it, William.'

'And what do I get out of it? I'm a songwriter, not an artist's manager.'

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'Or a nanny,' added the beefy driver with a smile.

The negotiator swivelled his chair around and gazed mystified at the recording gear on the table, 'You write the songs. I call in some favours and get a contract. Then you go off and record the stuff with top-notch musicians...'

'They're called session musicians, boss,' his driver said.

'Great. So, these session musicians turn the thing into a commercial song in one of those big studios. Then...' He turned to his driver, who finished the list.

'Then the studio does the mix, they release the album, and the copyright money starts flowing in.'

I shook my head, 'Or more probably, it doesn't.'

The short man gazed at me. 'I'm owed a few favours by some guys at the head of national radio stations, too,' he said, smiling. 'Radio play helps things along nicely, I'm told.'

'And if it's one hell of a flop, I'll have done all that for nothing...'

'Oh no,' he replied, 'I'll cover all the costs in advance. And... I'll pay you twenty-five thousand.'

'Twenty-five thousand!'

'Yes. Additionally, you keep all copyright payments, of course, if there are any.

'And all this just to keep your two women contented, and out of your hair.'

'That's it,' he turned to his driver. 'Told you he had his head screwed on right.'

The driver was fiddling with my vocal microphone, 'This any good?' he asked, obviously unimpressed.

'Adequate,' I answered with a resigned shrug.

'And those big ones you see in studios?' asked Mr Blache.

'Neumann U67 mikes. Brilliant, but not at all in the impecunious songwriter's price range,'

'Expensive?' asked the Boss.

'Nearly eight thousand euros.'

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'That's expensive!?' he pulled a face. 'Look. You take on my project, and I'll give you two. A decent guitar, too; that one looks pretty crappy.'

The driver twanged a string, 'Adequate,' he chuckled. 'Only just though. You need a Lowden.'

I gazed at him, 'You seem to know a lot about guitars.'

The man shot a look at his Boss, who frowned back.

'My brother has a music shop in Paris. Pigalle to be exact.'

'Lowden guitars are handmade. Six thousand euros bottom price,' I said. 'I can't justify that sort of expenditure.'

The Boss shook his head, 'For heaven's sake, William! That car out there cost me a hundred and eighty thousand, and I bought another one for the wife.' he gazed at me. 'You take on the project, and you get one of those Lowden things too as a goodwill package.'

I gaped at him, 'These tricky little negotiation projects you mentioned must be pretty lucrative,' I said.

'You said it, William,' he nodded. 'Extremely lucrative...'

I was silent for a few moments, gazing between him and his hefty driver. 'Do you carry a gun?' I asked suddenly.

He pulled a face and glanced at his Boss. 'Yep. Sometimes. I left it in the car, though.'

'Wasn't needed,' I suggested.

'Nope.'

'You're not threatening me, are you?' I asked the singer's father.

Heavens no! I need you, William. You also know that there are plenty of penniless songwriters around who would jump at the job. No threats needed.'

'So why me then?'

'Because you refused my wife, William. You told her the truth, too. You know the job. And above all, the wife will

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be so overjoyed at the idea of having swayed your decision, that she'll never give it a second thought.'

The driver smiled, 'She'll think her "womanly Tactics" did the trick.'

I laughed out loud, and the woman's husband went on.

'And I know all about you creative guys, too. You only work well when you're motivated and enthusiastic. So, you have to be...' he paused, searching for the word.

'Handled with care...' suggested the driver.

'Yep. Handled with care. Otherwise, the creative juices don't flow properly. And when those juices don't flow, you can't create real masterpieces.'

I laughed again, 'Hence leaving the gun in the car.'

'Oh, come on, William! That's just a backup. An insurance policy. It helps calm things down when feelings run high, and tricky negotiations get out of hand.'

I shook my head and smiled a wry smile.

'OK. I'll do it if that gun stays as far away from here as possible.'

The man jumped up and grasped my hand, 'Great! Now, that's one huge weight off my shoulders. You won't regret it.' He turned to his driver. 'I told you this guy was intelligent, didn't I?'

The driver nodded, 'Good songwriter too. I checked out his website. Nice.'

'Right,' continued the man standing. 'I'll transfer the twenty-five thousand into your account this afternoon. No need for a written contract, eh?'

I shrugged. The existence of Blache's driver was just as effective as any signed document.

'As soon as you've got it,' continued Blache, 'Phone up the wife and tell her you changed your mind. But...' and suddenly he gripped my wrist. 'Never mention my name, William. Never. Got that? Don't even hint that I had anything to do with this.'

I nodded, 'I get it. I engineered the entire thing.'

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'Exactly,' the man nodded. 'As far as you know, she doesn't even have a husband or she's a widow, right?'

I nodded, 'Got it. But what about studio fees and hotels and travelling, and things like that?' I asked.

'Send the details to this e-mail,' he said, handing me a card. 'And it will get sorted. The funds needed will be transferred to your account.'

I nodded as the man got to his feet and turned to leave.

'By the way, we won't meet again, William. So good luck.'

'But I don't even know your full name,' I frowned.

He shrugged, 'Normal. We never met, did we?'

Detailed Maps and Photos of the region in which this story takes place are available on the author's website:
https://stephen-william-rowe.com/1_024.htm

Author's Note:

Some readers enjoy learning about the origins of the main characters before delving into the body of the adventure. I have thus included four annexes describing the early lives of the people who play essential roles in this adventure.

These also describe the initial contacts with music and the education of my main character.

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Chapter 2: Taking stock.

The powerful car purred away through the snow-muted village, leaving a profound sense of unreality in its wake.

The chalet suddenly felt empty and silent.

My wife had left early the previous day for Dubai to attend an international history conference. Following this, she was to visit a colleague in New Delhi and would be away for several weeks.

I rekindled the log fire in the cosy alpine-decorated sitting room, then slid back the heavy bookcase concealing the corridor leading to our offices.

We both worked mainly from home, and when that bookcase was in place, no one could guess that part of our converted farmhouse existed.

I took down this year's Jury book from the shelf in my office and checked my notes on Lindsay Blache's performances. This done, I replaced it beside those of the nine previous seasons, then returned to the sitting room, sliding the bookcase closed behind me.

Pulling on my hiking boots and warmest anorak, I stepped out into the crisp mountain air. My snowshoes and poles were hanging on the shed wall, and I knocked off the accumulated snow before unhooking and attaching them. My fingers stuck to the ice-cold metal parts, and I quickly wriggled my hands into my thick gloves as soon as this was done. Then I turned and headed up the sloping field towards the forest.

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The snow was deep and powdery, and the biting wind whipped crystals off the surface and cast them into my face. Bending my head against the onslaught, I trudged across the snowfield towards the protection of the line of trees.

Ahead and above me, a solitary fox was weaving its way through the deep powdery snow. It was following a scent along the edge of the forest. The bitter cold didn't trouble it in the slightest. It paused, turned its head to observe me for a few seconds, then continued its search for food.

It was the silence and calm of the snowbound sanctuary under the trees that I sought. I hoped this would help me process that morning's unusual events.

Up there, the overwhelming sensation of man's frailty never fails to put my petty human concerns into sharp perspective. I find it sobering to think that were I to break a leg and be unable to move, I would be stiff-dead by mid-afternoon.

The thing that was troubling me was the thought that some things are just too good to be true. Even so, I couldn't see anything fundamentally wrong with the bargain I had struck. Even so, I was keenly aware that I wouldn't be the first intelligent person to fall into a cleverly planned confidence trick.

My concern, no doubt, had its roots in the fact that I had never collaborated with someone who earned more than my annual income every day. At least that's the idea I had formed of him, erroneously perhaps. After all, a big Porsche can easily be rented for a morning. What's more, lies cost absolutely nothing.

On the other hand, if Blache was as wealthy as it seemed, then the man wasn't throwing money around. Instead, he was simply purchasing himself a period of peace and quiet. Spending less than a day's income for

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several months of tranquillity certainly struck the man as an excellent investment.

All this was troubling and destabilising.

Reaching the top of the field, I ducked low under the heavy-laden pine boughs and entered the forest. The wind was abruptly cut off, and a muffled silence fell around me like a heavy cloak.

The interlaced upper branches of the close-growing trees retained most of the snowfall, so the ground beneath was only lightly powdered. Pausing a few metres further on, I unfastened my snowshoes and hung them on a dead branch protruding from a tree trunk. From here, I headed uphill, following one of my favourite tracks.

It was from this place that five years earlier, someone had peppered my car with machine-gun fire. Happily, all that was part of another life. Furthermore, those responsible were now either under lock and key or under six feet of earth.

It's true that during our early days at Autrans, my wife, Sally, and I had lived some unimaginable adventures and had come within a hair's breadth of death several times.

However, that tormented period was now over.

At least that's what I thought at the time.

I trudged on, following the meandering forest track up to the wide clearing known as the "Plateau de Geves", where the snow lay very deep. This snow would be compacted down later in the day by the special tractors to prepare the base for the cross-country ski tracks.

From the plateau, my track turned and headed back down through the forest, eventually coming out from under the trees as the village church clock chimed one o'clock. I followed the edge of the forest back to where I had entered, retrieved my snowshoes, and turned for home. My original snowshoe prints had been all but obliterated by the snow and the wind by the time I trudged back down the field towards my gate. Finally, entering my

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forecourt, I hung my snowshoes on the shed wall nail, unlocked the front door and returned to the welcome warmth of the fireplace.

A little later, while I sat eating my meal by the woodfire, my phone pinged. It was an alert from my bank.

I opened my laptop and checked my account.

And there it was... A transfer of twenty-five thousand euros!

So, this was not a dream after all! Or a con trick.

I sat back in my chair and blew out my cheeks, 'Well, I never!' I exclaimed to the crackling logs. 'I'd better check what songs I've got in stock that'll do for the girl.'

The truth is that, like many songwriters, I rarely write specifically for a given singer. Instead, I compose when the inspiration is with me. The result is that at any given time, I have a considerable store of songs available. I then adapt them for the voice of each singer. I sometimes go as far as converting songs in different styles, such as transforming a ballad into a jazz song. Currently, I have over a hundred and fifty songs in various styles and stages of completion. In this case, I estimated that I would be able to present the girl and her mother with about twenty finished songs to choose from.

If things went well, I could run off a few more, especially if a top-notch recording company was in the background to help with the arrangements and the orchestrations.

As I sat completing my list, I heard a noise outside and saw a big van turn into the forecourt.

I walked over to the door and pulled it open.

The anoraked driver was already opening the rear doors.

I recognised the name on the side of the vehicle. A well-known music store.

The driver jumped down and came over to me, carrying a guitar case and two boxes.

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'Mr William Stone?' he asked.

I nodded. 'Sign here, please,' the man held out a sheet of paper. 'Phew! What weather, eh!' he exclaimed. 'The road up through the "Bourne Canyon" is absolutely suicidal with this snow.'

I nodded. The route the man mentioned was one I avoided in winter whenever possible. The man retrieved the signed document and nodded in acknowledgement. 'I'm getting back as quickly as possible. I don't want to get caught on the tricky bit after dark.'

He hardly listened to my reply and was off almost immediately. If the snowplough hadn't yet cleared it, I didn't envy him having to negotiate that winding road in deep snow.

Anyway, sitting on the floor beside me now was another proof that the bargain I had struck was not a dream.

Two big boxes with "Neumann Microphones" stamped on the sides and a guitar case with "Lowden" embossed on the front.

I knelt down on the floor and undid the fastenings. Then, with bated breath, I gently lifted the lid.

Only a musician can fully understand the feeling of awe that struck me when I saw the magnificent instrument lying there. I hardly dared touch it. Only hardly...

My eyes widened. This was not one of the more accessible models by the renowned instrument builder, but rather one of his top-of-the-range models, an absolute beauty. I carefully lifted the eleven-thousand-euro guitar and observed it from all sides, then carried it over to the table and sat down.

I'll avoid further explanations, which would bore non-guitarists to tears.

For simplicity, let's say it was like someone giving you the one thing you have always dreamed of owning, but

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knew you never would. Anything from a magnificent hand-made Dior outfit to an original painting by Claude Monet.

Understandably, I spent the rest of the afternoon playing with my new toys and discovering with awe just what a top-tier acoustic guitar sounds like when recorded through a world-class microphone.

Did my playing or composition deserve this? I don't know. But everything sounded far better... How much of this improvement was due to my imagination, I can't tell. No matter, because my inspiration is inevitably triggered every time I acquire a new instrument or tool. An hour later, a new acoustic song was recorded. Only the outline, of course, and I'd have to refine it, but the basic structure was done. I was, as usual, convinced that this was my best so far. I should add that I now have at least sixty "best" songs.

About six o'clock, I received an email informing me that a suitable recording contract had been successfully negotiated. I chuckled and smiled as I read this. The message went on to request that I travel up to Paris and meet the record company representative. This person would give me the contract. I was to bring this back, get the singer to sign it, then send it back by return post.

The representative would supply me with instructions on the recording studio they had selected, where I was requested to record the vocals. The musical orchestration and session musician "polishing" work would be carried out later in another location.

I called the singer's mother and shared the good news with her.

I fabricated a convincing lie about sending the girl's recordings to a friend. I claimed this had convinced the company to offer her a contract.

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If she could have then and there thrown me on the bed to make her appreciation physically apparent, I'm sure she would have done it.

After she had eventually calmed down, I told her that we would meet to discuss things when I got back from Paris with the contract. I hoped the delay would give her enough time to come off the boil. Even so, I'd make sure the meeting was on neutral and very public territory in a restaurant in Grenoble. That ought to avoid any over-enthusiastic physical demonstration of her thanks.

Chapter 3 – The Contract

The high-speed train trip to Paris was uneventful, and I located the famous recording studio without difficulty. My instructions were to arrive shortly before one o'clock and ask to see a Mr Gruber. He would be working in the main recording room, "Studio A".

I pushed open the entrance door and wandered in, looking for someone to ask. A security guard looked up from his place behind a desk. Apart from him, the place appeared to be deserted.

Once I had told him I had a meeting, he directed me down a corridor. Following this towards a hum of voices, I came to the studio bar, packed with people.

Immediately, a young woman extracted herself from the crowd and came over. After frowning a little at my question, she dived back into the crowd to ask someone else. A moment later, she returned, 'Apparently, Mr Gruber is taking photos in studio A. Down there,' she pointed. 'Follow the signs, you can't miss it, he's expecting you.'

I followed her directions and soon found myself outside a door labelled "Studio A". Pushing open the heavy soundproofed door, I stopped short. The room was vast enough to house an entire symphony orchestra and still have room to spare. In fact, that's what it was doing at the present time. The place resembled a dense forest of intertwined chairs, music stands, microphones and instrument cases. Furthest from me, near the far wall, several cellos stood on stands, and several others lay in their open cases. In the middle of the room, three double

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basses lay on their sides on the thick carpet just behind the mass of chairs for the first and second violins, and the altos.

Behind these flutes, oboes, clarinets, and bassoons stood on their stands just in front of the trumpets and trombones. Above all this apparent confusion, several overhead microphones hung in strategic positions to capture the room acoustics.

I counted seats for roughly sixty musicians and more than half that number of microphones. Recording, Mixing, and mastering all those signals would require the services of a highly experienced sound engineer. A man not only with exceptional technical mastery, but also equipped with an excellent ear.

A day in a place like this must cost several thousand euros. Clearly, not a place for impecunious songwriters like me.

At this point in my dreaming, I noticed a man beckoning me from behind a wide glass window.

I passed through another soundproofed door and entered the control room, which featured an impressive mixing desk. I knew this to be one of the famous 32-track analogue “Neve” setups. Perfect, but horribly expensive.

Mr Gruber was a short, fat, balding man wearing a suit that he most certainly wouldn't be able to button up.

He put the camera he was holding on the end of the mixing desk and extended a chubby pink hand in my direction. He gave me a weak handshake and nodded in response.

'Not much time, I'm afraid, Mr Stone. A lot on today,' he sighed, gazing out across the recording room.

I nodded understandingly.

He didn't bother to ask me if my trip had been good or bad, and it was clear that he wasn't one for indulging in small talk.

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'Great,' he smiled, 'Let's go and discuss this in the Bistrot down the road. I could do with a bit of peace and quiet. This lot is a bit rowdy, especially the violins.'

I smiled, 'I noticed. They're in the bar.'

He shook his head, 'That's only a part of the Orchestra. Most of them are at the restaurant. Shall we go?'

He packed the camera away in the case, grabbed his coat, and I followed him out.

'I'll just have a quick word.' He smiled. 'I'll meet you outside.'

The little man dived into the bar and disappeared into the crowd. A few seconds later, he reappeared. 'That's sorted,' he said, smiling. 'They don't need me this afternoon anyway,' he chuckled, 'They don't need me at all, in fact. Just need my signature on the contract. Anyway, I usually show up to keep them on their toes.'

He then led me to a Bistrot on the corner of the street and selected a table outside.

He nodded to the waiter, then, opening his camera bag, extracted a folder and handed it to me. 'You can read that lot on the train on the way home,' he smiled. 'Nothing special, just standard contacts. One for you as the songwriter and one for the girl,' he paused. 'Linsay Blache. That's it?'

I nodded.

'Tell her to pop around to the local office of the SACEM copyright people, if she needs a second opinion before signing.' He shrugged. 'They're used to our contracts and will be able to put her mind at rest.'

I opened the folder and scanned the Crested and embossed top page. It sported the famous record company name emblazoned across the top in gold lettering.

He smiled, then seemed to suddenly remember something, 'Ah, yes! I nearly forgot. Blache senior asked me to give this to you. Comes via his assistant's music

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shop brother. The guy says that these things are the new "must-have" accessories for expensive guitars like yours. He paused and handed me a thick envelope. 'Don't ask me,' he smiled. 'I don't know anything about that sort of thing. Anyway, I gather this stuff automatically controls the level of humidity inside the instrument cases.'

I opened the envelope and shook out two small packets, 'Desiccant!' I pulled a face.

'No. Apparently far more sophisticated than that,' he replied. 'Some sort of new magic crystals.'

'Looks like standard packets of Silica Gel though,' I replied, shaking the little envelopes and listening to the characteristic rattling of the crystals inside. The packets were labelled with the usual "Do Not Eat" warning.

'The guy told me that you must first soak the packet in warm water for two hours. After that, they maintain the right level of humidity in the case for a month. That's all I know. The guy said to put one inside the instrument's sound hole and one in the case. They use this stuff in multi-million-euro Stradivarius violin cases and things like that, so it must be good.'

At this moment, the waiter came over and the man turned to me, 'I'll have to rush off, so I'll just have a coffee. You can eat if you like.'

'Just a coffee for me too, then,' I replied. 'I'll eat on the train home.'

The waiter disappeared, and a few seconds later, he returned with our coffee.

'Well,' said Gruber. 'I listened to your songs, and this is what I propose. Blache wants this to go quickly, which is somewhat problematic because all the top-notch recording studios are booked months in advance. You can't get one for love or money,' here he chuckled. 'Even though there seems to be no lack of either in this case.'

I nodded and smiled back.

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'So,' he continued, 'one of our partner companies has got some free time next week. Are you available?'

'Short notice!' I exclaimed.

He shrugged 'You're a pro. You know your music by heart. Do a guitar/voice version and I'll get the rest done by session musicians later.'

'The girl will have to learn fast, though,' I frowned. 'That may be a problem.'

The man shrugged. 'If she wants to go pro, she'll have to learn fast. She'll have to get used to the fact that this is no longer about posting crap on Instagram.'

'What if...?' I started.

'What if she gets bogged down? Well, you stay until she gets un-bogged. Blache is paying anyway.' Gruber shrugged again, 'Singers usually get into a bit of a panic when they realise that singing is work and not play,' he laughed. 'Especially when they discover that they also have an impatient boss breathing down their necks, and waving the contract in their faces,' he laughed again. 'Does them a hell of a lot of good.'

I gazed at him while trying to imagine what would happen when I started the girl on the more complicated songs, 'I think I prefer to do most of the songs with the piano. Is that a problem?'

Gruber pulled a face, 'Apparently, Blache senior specifically wants you to use your new guitar on some of the songs. He also wants photos and publicity for the guy who supplied it.'

'Ah!' I nodded, 'He called in a favour to get it for me, I presume... OK. no problem.'

'So, you're free next week?'

I nodded.

'Great,' he paused. 'The only complication is that our partner studio is in Finland. Is that a problem for you?'

I started, 'Finland!? In mid-winter!? Hell!'

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'No summer distractions to influence the girl's concentration, though,' he chuckled. 'And my experience is that that's a huge advantage.'

I shook my head sadly, 'Finland! But honestly! Nothing closer to home? London? Paris? Geneva?'

He shook his head, 'Moscow, Montreal or Finland. Finland is closest,' he nodded. 'Cheapest too.'

I sighed, 'Hell! Oh, all right, I can do it.'

'Great,' said the man, rubbing his chubby hands together.

'Transporting the guitar is going to be a problem, though,' I said.

Gruber shook his head, 'No, it won't.'

I frowned, 'Putting an eleven-thousand-euro guitar in the baggage hold is a bit risky.'

Gruber chuckled, 'Blache says he'll pay for an extra seat beside you in the plane for it. Economy rate though.'

I made an exasperated gesture with my hands, 'OK.'

'Great,' cried Gruber, getting to his feet. 'I must fly,' he said, extending his hand. 'Get the contract signed, but above all, get the girl to work double quick. That'll give her six days to practice before you leave.'

I pulled a face, 'This is going to be one hell of a challenge.'

Gruber shrugged, 'If the Girl wants to be a pro, she'll have to start working like one, and fast.'

'Great!' I frowned. 'Brilliant!'

'And don't forget your magic humidity control sachets.'

'I suppose Mr Blach will want photos of those, too,' I smiled.

Gruber nodded, 'That wouldn't surprise me. He'll send you the tickets tomorrow. He's already booked the hotel, so all you have to do is fill your suitcase, grab a thick anorak and head for the airport next Monday. The studio opens at seven thirty in the morning.'

'Unless they have two metres of snow,' I joked.

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'They're used to that over there. Good luck then.'

With this, he shook my hand again and left.

I sat staring at my coffee cup. This was all far too incredible to be true. First, twenty-five thousand euros had been deposited into my bank account; then, I'd been given a gift of a priceless guitar and two studio microphones; and now, I had a bona fide recording contract with a legendary company in my hand. I shook my head, but the trouble was, it *was* true.

It *had* actually happened.

I called the waiter and ordered a glass of vintage Armagnac. I needed something strong to help steady my nerves.

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The full book can be found on Amazon.
Find it by searching for “Stephen William ROWE”

Or here:

https://www.amazon.co.uk/stores/Stephen-William-ROWE/author/B07P2SNQT2?ref=sr_ntt_srch_lnk_1&qid=1761132752&sr=8-1&isDramIntegrated=true&shoppingPortalEnabled=true