

# 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

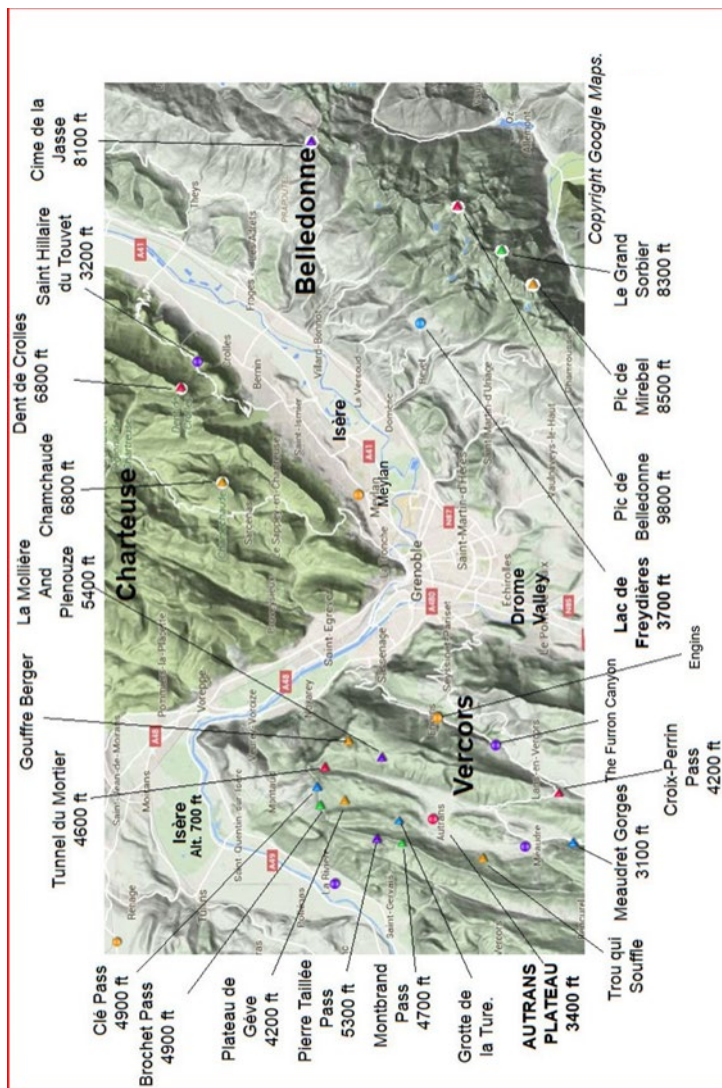
Three Men in a Panic Vol 2

The Stone Scenario

The Salat Quartet

The Dordogne Renovation Project

The Songwriter



# The Songwriter

## Prologue

**D**arkness was falling over the mountains as I turned my car onto the winding road up from Grenoble. The snow deepened significantly as I drove through the hamlet of Engin and entered the icy "Furon Canyon". Massive icicles hung from the towering rock walls of this narrow passage, like the pipes of some crazy cathedral organ. Measuring up to ten metres long, some of these weighed ten tons or more. Prudently giving them a wide berth, I pressed on and shortly after reached the highest point of my route, the "Croix-Perin Pass". Here, my headlights illuminated a dizzying curtain of whirling snowflakes, and I slowed to a prudent crawl. Line upon line of snow-laden pine trees pressed in around me in the dark as I reached the summit. Once over, an immaculate white ribbon of the snow-covered road wound invitingly down to the village of Autrans, where I now live. Even though I could now relax a little, I drove more carefully than usual, being worn out by several days of intense concentration.

For two days, I'd been judging a renowned singing contest, and with 170 participants involved, this was a long and gruelling exercise.

The jury comprises eleven singing instructors and me, William Stone, a songwriter.

Due to this, my advice is often sought out by serious competitors and the wildly optimistic parents of aspiring pop stars. It always saddens me, though, to explain to such hopeful and enthusiastic candidates that singing perfectly

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is simply not enough. The truth is that a singer must bring something new to the market, and ultimately, success hinges on presenting original songs with a distinctive voice.

It's a challenge to find the right words to convey this, knowing that it's the very last thing they want to hear.

The other jury members never mention such disturbing truths. After all, they make their living teaching enthusiastic youngsters, regardless of talent or commercial potential. In this respect, fanatically enthusiastic parents are a boon to them and highly sought-after.

So, as I neared home, I was grumbling to myself about the unjust outcome of the final rounds of voting.

I reached my chalet ten minutes later with the snow coming down thick and fast. The following day would find me snowed in, but I was accustomed to this and was well-equipped to deal with the situation.

The place was empty and silent when I unlocked the heavy triple-glazed front door. My wife had left earlier for Dubai to speak at 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 the converted farmhouse existed.

I set this year's Jury book on the shelf in my office beside those of the nine previous seasons, then returned to the sitting room, sliding the bookcase closed behind me.

In the kitchen, I rummaged through the fridge and threw something together to eat. The light streaming out through the windows lit a wide swath of snow-covered field stretching out into the distance, and I stood for a moment watching the giant snowflakes float by. I sighed resignedly,

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poured myself a glass of white wine, and carried this and my plate back to the fireside.

Dropping down into one of the armchairs, I sat eating and daydreaming in the flickering firelight. Soon after, I climbed the stairs to bed. I was a little depressed, but, above all, dog tired.

**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](https://stephen-william-rowe.com/1_024.htm)

### Author's Note:

**S**ome 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.



## Chapter 1: The Proposition

The rumbling of the snowplough woke me the following morning. More than fifty centimetres of snow had fallen during the night, and the driver was piling this up high in the field just beyond my front gates. 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 by an unseen hand.

I breakfasted lazily, gazing out through the kitchen windows at the enchanting scene.

In the near distance, the heavily laden forest rose from the flat valley floor like a white wave. This followed the steep slope of the mountain ridge up to the “Plateau de la Molière” at one thousand six-hundred metres altitude.

Christmas-card landscapes, a friend had once commented.

For those who've never heard of the place, Autrans is a small village famous for its cross-country ski tracks. However, the unreliable snowfalls of recent years have played havoc with the winter tourist trade. That and COVID have had catastrophic consequences for these fragile economies. Even the best and oldest hotel, situated on the village square, has been forced to convert its rooms into rented holiday flats.

That hotel, “The Hotel de la Poste”, was the site of several incredible adventures for me, and I was deeply saddened when it closed its doors.

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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.

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 of the music industry is that artists' managers are the only members of the profession who earn enough to afford that sort of 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 usually 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?'

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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.

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 purchasing and renovating this place either, but that's another story.<sup>1</sup>

'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.'

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<sup>1</sup> See "Bait" by the same author

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

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

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

'Yes. I know. Her mother told me.'

Ah yes! Now I had them. The mother, like several 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 had been graced with several 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 Linsay 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? So, I'm going to call in a few 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.

'Don't worry, William. Not drugs, arming terrorists or money laundering. Simply bringing the right people together and negotiating a deal that benefits 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?'

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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.'

'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.'



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'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 retain 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.'

'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

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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 required.'

'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 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.'

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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.'

'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 required 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?'

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## Chapter 2: Taking stock.

**T**he powerful car purred away through the snow-muted village, leaving a profound sense of unreality in its wake. 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 had to knock 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.

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

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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 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.

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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 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

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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.

'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.

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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 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.



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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.

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.

# The Songwriter

## Chapter 3 – The Contract

**T**he 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 envelopes, 'Looks like standard Silica Gel desiccant !?' I pulled a face.

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

'Looks like ordinary 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 envelope 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. You 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!'

## Stephen William ROWE

'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's what he said. 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.

## The Songwriter

'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 and I could see absolutely no reason to worry. Even so, that's exactly what I was doing.

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



## Chapter 4: Finland

I caught the early afternoon high-speed train back to Grenoble, by the skin of my teeth.

Once settled in, I sent Lindsay Blache's mother an e-mail explaining the situation and waited for the irate reply. I was therefore pleasantly surprised by the answer, however, "OK. No problem. Lindsay is excited and ready to start tomorrow. Where do we meet? At my house? At yours?"

Now this was where I needed to be careful if I was to avoid complications of a sexual nature.

I knew of a pleasant, warm practice hall owned by a pal, and was lucky to discover it was available.

I booked this, then e-mailed the files of the songs I had selected to Lindsay. Thus, within the first half hour of my three-hour trip, I had finished and was free to relax.

I won't pretend that the following week was the easiest and most agreeable of my life, but somehow, we managed it. By Saturday afternoon, Lindsay had more or less mastered ten songs. Not to perfection, but good enough for my purpose.

In case of trouble or if the girl got blocked by stress, any pro recording engineer would know how to deal with the situation. We could record songs, verse by verse or even line by line, and the guys would stitch the whole lot together convincingly.

I had already sent the studio manager the audio files of my recorded music, both on the piano and the guitar. If we

## The Songwriter

were really pressed for time, they could use these instead of my on-site live performance.

We could also save time by doing videos of me playing in another part of the studio while the girl recorded her vocals.

Whatever happened, they would be able to assemble all the audio and video segments after we had left. The finished product would fool anyone. One just needed to know how to use all the tricks of the trade.

During a mid-week break from rehearsals, Gruber paid the girl and her mother a visit to clarify some details about the contract. He also insisted on taking them shopping and buying the girl an extra warm anorak for her stay in Finland. I winced when she showed it to me. A shiny candy-pink knee-length monstrosity. Warm, no doubt, but finding one showier would be a serious challenge. Unfortunately, this was not the only monstrosity I would have to put up with. Gruber had brought with him what he apparently considered to be the ultimate in stage jewellery. He wanted her photographed wearing these horrors in the studio. They consisted of a pair of outsized pear-shaped red glass earrings and a matching ring. She proudly handed the ring to me.

‘Isn’t it magnificent?’ she sighed.

I turned the thing over in my hand and nodded as I handed it back. It wasn’t even coloured glass, but plastic-coated or varnished. Why not choose solid plastic, which would be just as convincing and, above all, lighter?

Anyway, I’ll leave the reader to imagine the overall effect when she was wearing the candy-pink anorak.

Monday morning found me waiting in the departure lounge, my guitar case on the floor beside me. I winced as it went through the X-ray machine and even more so when they asked me to open the case so that a dog could sniff it.

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The customs official shot me a sidelong look, then lifted out the packets of humidity control crystals. He shook them, then held them out for the dog to sniff.

I frowned as he did this, and the man nodded, 'A classic transport method for drugs.'

'In guitar cases!?' I exclaimed.

'In anything,' He shrugged. 'But drugs don't rattle like this,' he shook the bags, smiled, and replaced them in the case. I sighed in relief when he closed the case. Noticing this, the man looked at the name on it, 'Lowden? Expensive?'

'Eleven thousand plus, and very fragile.'

His eyebrows shot up, 'Wow!' Explains the extra seat.'

I nodded, 'Explains Economy class too. The singer goes First Class.'

The man frowned, 'Singer? Not that girl with the fluorescent pink anorak, by any chance?'

I nodded sadly and pulled a face.

He shrugged, 'That's life, man!' he said, chuckling.

The female officer with him smiled. 'A singer? Doesn't surprise me. I didn't even have to frisk her. Her leggings and top were so tight-fitting, there wasn't any room to hide anything.'

'Oh god!' I groaned. 'She's not wearing that pink outfit too...'

'Fraid so,' smiled the woman. 'Mind you, it'll give the first-class businessmen something to look at while they're waiting for the flight to be called.'

I sighed. 'And I'll have to put up with that all week.'

'You'll survive,' chuckled the woman. 'The older one is the mother, I suppose.'

I nodded.

The woman smiled a knowing smile, 'Choppy weather ahead, I'd guess. Well, good luck.'

I moved on, found myself a seat as far from the duty-free shop as possible, and sat down to wait.

## The Songwriter

Lindsay and her mother were by now in the premium waiting room, no doubt sipping complimentary champagne. Lindsay would very certainly be turning heads in that place. Partly because of the anorak and the horrible jewellery she insisted on wearing all the time, but also because of her pin-up body. We would meet up again in the Helsinki arrivals lounge, where I would, to my distress, be taken as her father.

The only consolation was that she wouldn't be difficult to spot in the crowd.

From Helsinki, we travelled on to the studio in Kuopio, a five-hour drive away. Five hours in summer, that is, and this was winter; Finish winter too...

Luckily, a direct flight exists between Helsinki and Kuopio, partly due to its reputation as a ski resort.

During the hour or so's flight, all that was visible below us were snow-bound forests, frozen lakes and rivers.

Fortunately, the hotel, which was booked and prepaid, boasted four stars. Real stars, too. The reception area was reassuringly warm and comfortable, as were the spacious rooms. The place sat directly on the banks of one of the region's many Pine-forest encircled lakes. Mind you, as half Finland is forest and a quarter more is lakes, this is no huge feat.

What's more, every winter the lake is frozen solid and covered in deep snow, crisscrossed by cross-country ski tracks. On arrival, I learnt from the receptionist that the region boasts a barely believable six hundred kilometres of cross-country ski tracks. Now, I love cross-country skiing, but I doubted I'd have time for any during my stay, which was a pity. For once, all the tracks were uncompromisingly flat.

The region also features a good number of ice-skating tracks on the frozen lakes and a few downhill ski slopes.

Up here, the winter sports season lasts from the end of November to the end of March, thanks to winter

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temperatures fluctuating between minus five and minus twelve degrees. I sighed and reminded myself that I wasn't here for pleasure but for work.

That's life...

The recording studio was only a short drive from the hotel, and a sound engineer was to call for us the next morning after breakfast. This proximity would allow us to get in four full days of work. I was counting on being able to record the six easiest songs in two days, leaving two days for the four more rhythmically challenging ones.

Even if we didn't finish them all, I was convinced that we'd have enough to be going on with.

In any case, the record company would start by releasing a single to see how Lindsay fared in the real world. If this song goes well, they'll either put out another single or an EP before risking publishing a full album.

I explained this standard process over our evening meal. I was relieved to see Lindsay visibly relax as she took it in.

'You see,' said her mother, rubbing the girl's shoulder. 'No stress after all.'

Lindsay sighed and nodded, 'We'll get it all in the box anyway.'

I smiled to myself. The girl had already picked up some pro sayings. Luckily, her head hadn't swelled up too much, at least not for the moment.

I noticed that both women had taken pains dressing for the meal. However, Lindsay's mother had put noticeably less on than her daughter. Inevitably, Lindsay was wearing her "flashy" glass earrings and ring but had donned an unexpectedly chic short tweed jacket over a tight white tee-shirt.

'Did you notice the outdoor sauna in the sun?' smiled her mother across the table at me. 'Lucky, I brought my bikini.'

## The Songwriter

Her daughter started, 'You're surely not thinking of going out there, Mum!' she exclaimed. 'It must be minus ten, or less.'

'Not in the water. It'll be lovely.'

'Your head will get frozen solid. That'll be out of the water.'

'I've got hot blood,' retorted the woman, shooting me a glance.'

'You're mad!' gasped the girl. 'I've got work to do here. I don't want to waste half my time bringing flowers to your hospital.'

The women laughed and sipped some wine, glancing at me over the rim of the glass. 'Coming with me, William? I'll give you a good rub down after, if you get cold.'

Lindsay sighed and shook her head sadly. 'You leave William alone, Mum. He's here for work too, not play.'

'Is that so, William?' smiled the woman.

I nodded, 'I hate saunas too. Anyway, I'll have to work half the night preparing the files for tomorrow,' I lied.

The woman nodded, 'Great. That leaves the other half free...'

'Mum!' exclaimed Lindsay. 'For heaven's sake!'

'Only joking, Lindsay.'

'I also have to phone my wife,' I lied. 'She should arrive tomorrow,' I improvised.

'Your wife's coming!? Here!?' The woman gasped, clearly disappointed.

'That's the plan,' I lied. 'She loves cross-country skiing.'

As a second line of defence, I had primed the man on the night reception desk. If the Linseys' mother asked for my room number or tried to call me after ten, he had his instructions. Either I had gone to the airport to collect my wife (whose plane would be unexpectedly cancelled), or I had gone to an urgent meeting with the studio manager. Lastly, the man suggested that I might have decided to go to a nocturnal ski track.

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All in all, I had ensured that I could concentrate on the job at hand.

As it turned out, I didn't need to use any of the diversionary tricks. The next afternoon, the woman announced that she had to return to Grenoble.

Some urgent legal point had arisen concerning the recording contract. The company needed Lindsay's birth certificate before Thursday. If they didn't, the agreement would be cancelled.

So, on Tuesday evening, she was shuttled to the airport, leaving the two of us to get on with the job.

Luckily, Lindsay clearly considered me far too old to be of any interest, and that suited me just fine. However, she insisted on wearing the garish earrings and ring almost all the time, saying that it gave her confidence. I had to hold my tongue to resist telling her that it made her look more like a prostitute than a singer.'

Happily, we made astonishing progress, and thanks to the faultless professionalism of the engineers, by Thursday evening, we had all but completed the task.

I was extremely pleased with the sound of the finished songs. Lindsay's voice came over exceptionally well, especially when the engineers had tweaked out a few weak parts. I knew that if the record company decided to put money behind the project, we had several potential hits. I was particularly impressed by the sound of my new guitar on the recordings. I therefore took pains to note down exactly how the recording engineer had managed this, and which tools and tricks he employed.

Unexpectedly, then, on Friday morning, I was free. Lindsay decided to go into the studio to watch the engineers doing the final mixes. She had become fascinated by all the technical wizardry, and I believe she was also rather taken with one of the young Finnish sound engineers.

Oh well! You're only young once...

## The Songwriter

The weather was perfect, so I decided to take this final opportunity to go cross-country skiing on the lake, just outside the hotel. It was unlikely that I'd have the chance of doing this again, so I rented the gear and headed for the tracks.

The hotel manager gave me a track map and, after having politely ascertained my technical level, suggested a nice circuit. The first leg of a couple of hours skiing took me to where I could get a nice midday meal on the lakeside. The second leg would take me around an island in the middle of the frozen lake and get me back in time for afternoon tea. And all of this on a perfectly flat track.

No puffing up mountainsides, perspiring like a docker, or flashing down semi-vertical slopes between dangerous pine trees. Brilliant.

I spent a marvellous day and promised myself to come back someday with my wife, Sally.

When I got back to the hotel, the man at the reception desk called me over.

'The young lady had to leave by a plane at one o'clock,' he said.

'Oh!?'

He nodded. 'Apparently, she said she has to sign some important papers this evening for the recording contract. In Paris.'

I shrugged. I couldn't imagine what could be so important that it couldn't wait until Monday morning. Anyway, that was not my problem.

I had already prepared my suitcase. So, I decided to shower, change my clothes, and then relax over tea before heading to the airport.

I had laid my guitar case on the bed before leaving.

However, I couldn't resist playing a few notes of my latest song before going down.



## Stephen William ROWE

I hunted out the keys and unlocked the case. As I lifted the instrument out, something caught my eye. The printing on the humidity control sachets looked different. Darker blue. I frowned, lowered the guitar into place and picked up one of the sachets. It was lighter, and above all, it did not rattle when I shook it.

This astonished me.

Then I remembered what the customs man had said about drug smuggling.

I grabbed the second sachet and took the lift down to reception.

'Have you got some scissors?' I asked.

'Scissors!?' said the young man.

'I want to open these. Someone has tampered with them.'

'Here?' he exclaimed. 'In the hotel?'

'No. At least I don't think so. The case is always kept locked.'

He handed me the scissors, and I snipped off the corner of one sachet. I then poured a small amount of the Contents into my palm and gazed at it. It was powder.

'Drugs?' frowned the man. 'Let me taste.'

He wet his finger and dipped it into the powder. Lifting it to his mouth, he licked it. He shot me a look.

'Yep. Drugs. Where did this come from?'

I brushed the remaining power off my palm. 'I've no idea. Someone must have swapped it at the studio. But why?'

The man shook his head sadly. 'So that you would get it through customs for them. That's what I think.'

'Linsay!?' I gasped. 'I don't believe it!'

The man pulled a face and shook his head. 'No, I don't believe that. That girl was not one for drugs.'

I tended to agree with him. Young men, yes. Drugs, no.

## The Songwriter

'So,' said the young man. 'Someone who knows you're leaving today, wants that stuff carried back to Helsinki for them.'

'Or to Paris.' I added.

'Yeh,' he nodded. 'Any idea who it could be?'

I shook my head, 'No. But I do know that they're not getting it.'

'What are you going to do?'

'Phone the police.'

'Are you mad!?' he exclaimed. 'Do you want to miss your flight?'

I thought about this for a few moments. He was right, of course. It would take hours.

I frowned, 'That is a dirty trick.'

The man nodded, 'And any guy with a guitar at an airport is bound to get double checked.'

'I was double checked on the way here. They even checked the sachets. The dog sniffed them too.'

'Clearly not a pro then,' he frowned. 'The guy who slipped you the stuff, I mean.'

'No. You're telling me!'

'Or someone who wants to get you in trouble. Land you up in prison,' he nodded. 'Made any enemies here?'

I laughed, 'No. No enemies.'

'Just some idiot then,' said the man with a shrug. 'Best just get rid of the stuff.'

I nodded. 'I'll phone the studio and tell them. They can make sure that whoever did the trick won't send his pal to pick the stuff up wherever it was headed.'

'Wise precaution,' he smiled. Then he leaned forward. 'I can get rid of this stuff for you if you like.'

I gazed at him, and he continued. 'I know a guy who uses this. It'll avoid him having to sell his mother to buy his next few doses.'

I gazed at him again and nodded slowly. 'I threw it all in the jacuzzi, didn't I?'

## Stephen William ROWE

He smiled, 'Yeah. I remember noticing you doing something weird out that way, just before leaving.'

With this, I handed him the two sachets, then made my way into the bar overlooking the frozen lake, for my tea and to phone the studio manager.'

## CHAPTER 5 – Complications

**T**he small airport at Kuopio was bustling with activity when I arrived with more than an hour to spare before the evening flight to Helsinki.

I checked in my suitcase using the self-service bag-drop machine, then headed for security. As I approached, the official glanced down at my guitar case and frowned. Taking my boarding pass and passport, he made a sign to a colleague. 'Would you mind stepping over here, please, sir?' he smiled. 'Routine security check.'

I nodded and followed him to a stainless-steel table.

'Could you open your guitar case, please, Sir?'

I nodded and took out the key from my shoulder bag.

'You keep it locked, sir?' frowned his colleague.

I glanced up at him, 'It's an eleven-thousand-euro instrument. New too. I'm not taking any risks.'

The official nodded, and his colleague stepped closer as I lifted the lid. He leant forward.

'Could you remove the instrument, please?'

I did so, being very careful to avoid banging it against the surrounding furniture.

The first man opened the little storage compartment and took out the spare set of strings I had brought, just in case. He inspected these and replaced them, then carefully inspected and felt the case padding.

'You can put your guitar back now,' he said.

From a drawer under the table, he took a small inspection mirror on a flexible boom. He inserted this carefully between the strings and into the guitar's sound hole. He spent some time checking out the inner volume.

## Stephen William ROWE

This done, he glanced up at the second man and shook his head.

'Don't you have any humidity control crystals?' he said. 'Isn't that normal for a valuable instrument like this?'

So that's what they were searching for, I thought. Luckily, I was prepared with a credible answer, 'I left them behind in the recording studio. Forgot them in the final rush, unfortunately,' I paused. 'I've been recording some songs with a singer at the Kuopio studio all week,' I smiled.

The man nodded. 'You can close the case now, sir. But I'll need to check your shoulder bag.

I handed it over, and he turned the contents out onto the stainless-steel counter. Once satisfied, he replaced the contents and handed it back. My guitar, jacket, anorak, and bag then went through the X-ray machine, and at last, I was allowed to walk through to the departure lounge.

As I walked on, I forced myself to retain an entirely passive face, aware that I was being keenly observed. However, deep inside, I sighed deeply. If I hadn't spotted the swapped packets, I would definitely be on my way to the police station by now.

I had estimated that together, the two packets must have contained about eighty grams of cocaine.

The price tag for that would be around ten thousand euros. Very soon, someone would be groaning about having lost that. Not worth murdering for, I reassured myself, but all the same...

Had I been caught with that in the guitar case, I would have been in serious trouble.

I had checked my suitcase through to Paris but was annoyed to have to go through the same performance again at Helsinki airport. This time, they also went through my jacket and anorak pockets and got the linings all sniffed by the drug detection dog.

## The Songwriter

When, on arrival at Paris, I was controlled again, I really started to wonder if I was being targeted.  
Had the man at reception at my hotel been right?  
Had someone deliberately tried to set me up?  
This seemed ridiculous, so I put it down to bad luck.  
Bloody drugs!

I spent the night in a hotel just off the Rue de Rivoli, then took the mid-morning train down to Grenoble. There, I picked up my car from the car park and headed homeward up towards Autrans.

It was a lovely sunny day, and the snowplough had cleared the pass during the morning, so I reached home without trouble.

However, as I turned into my cul-de-sac, my neighbour waved me down, a broad smile on his face. I stopped and wound down the window as he approached from his driveway, smiling.

'How are you feeling, William? Better?' he said.

'Better!?' I frowned.

'Nasty, Flu this time. Eh?' he smiled. 'But you can't keep a good man down, as they say?'

'Sorry!?'

'Great to have your cousin on hand, though.'

'My cousin!?' I exclaimed.

'Nice guy. That driver of his, too.'

I blinked several times, opened the car door and jumped out. 'What on earth are you talking about?'

My neighbour frowned, 'Your spate of flu,' he said. 'I thought it was really nice of your cousin to come up and look after you. What with you being in bed and the wife in the states.'

'For heaven's sake.' I exclaimed. 'I haven't had the flu.'

'Well, that's what he said it was. Some similar viruses, then. Just as bad, apparently. He left as soon as your aunt came up to take over.'

'My Aunt!?'

## Stephen William ROWE

'Yes.'

I threw up my hands. Oh Ho! Wait a minute. Wait a mo. What's all this? I gasped. 'I've not been ill. I've been in Finland for the past week. At a recording studio.'

My neighbour frowned, 'Your cousin told me that that had been cancelled, because of your flu.'

'For god's sake. I haven't had the flu. I've just got back from Finland. I pulled the boarding card from my jacket pocket and handed it to him.

The man gaped at me, 'What the hell!'

'Yeh,' I said.

He glanced back at me. 'Wasn't that mad woman who took a pot shot at you a few years ago, from Finland?'

I hadn't thought of this aspect of things. The woman, Lida Niemela, was a notorious Finnish criminal and leader of a dangerous gang. They, too, had been searching for the gold I had eventually located for the tax evasion specialists. She'd come near murdering me and my wife, Sally, for it.

'Wasn't she killed down near Toulon?'

It had been at Sanary-Sur-Mer, but I had never had absolute confirmation that the ruthless woman had been killed and had not simply "disappeared".

I didn't like the feel of all this at all.

We exchanged astonished looks, then gradually an ominous sensation spread through my frame.

'I'll call the police,' I said. 'There's something that smells really bad around here.'

'You're telling me, William!'

'Something's been going on here that I don't understand,' I said. 'And I'm not going into that house without backup.'

'I'll come with you,' He nodded.

I shook my head, 'I mean, official and armed backup from the Gendarmerie.'

## The Songwriter

Within a few minutes, the local police arrived in two cars. The men and their chief, adjudant Mercier, had all been with me at the time of the gold discovery, and they knew all about the sort of trouble I had been through.

I got my neighbour to explain in detail what he had just told me.

One other important fact came out. The men arrived in a big green Porsche.

'Linsay's father!' I exclaimed.

The Adjudant frowned, 'Linsay?'

'Lindsay Blache. The girl I wrote the songs for. The one I went to the recording studio in Finland with.'

'And the father?'

'Some sort of negotiator. Big money...'

The youngest Gendarme nodded, 'Looks like the guy used your place while you were away.'

'What the hell!' I exclaimed. Then frowned. 'Yes. The guy struck me as someone who might do just that sort of thing.'

'Yeh,' smiled the Gendarme. 'A nice quiet place to negotiate in. Neutral territory. That's what he was after?'

'Just that he neglected to ask permission,' I scowled. 'I bet he spotted the "suitability" of my place right from the outset.'

The Adjudant pulled a face, 'I think we had better check the place out. Is Sally still abroad, William?'

I nodded, 'Till next week, or the week after.'

The man nodded, 'Let go then.'

We left the cars parked where they were, blocking the road, and walked down the packed snow-covered road to my front gate.

The tracks of the big car tires were still clearly visible across the forecourt. There were also several other sets.

I had shut the shutters when I left, but they were all now open. As I stretched out my hand to try the front door, the Adjudant grabbed my wrist and held me back.



## Stephen William ROWE

He raised his eyebrows, 'Let's avoid taking risks, shall we?'

I gazed at him, round-eyed, 'Booby trapped?'

He shrugged, 'Who knows?'

One of his men took a long rope that was hanging from the wall of my shed and looped it over the handle.

We then took refuge, and he gave it a sharp tug.

The heavy door flew open, and we held our breath.

After a few seconds, the chief nodded, and we crunched our way across the frozen snow and peeped into my sitting room.

As a final precaution, one of the Gendarmes picked up a log leaning against the wall and lobbed it into the middle of the room.

Nothing happened, and we all sighed.

Autrans is a tranquil village. However, during the period of our treasure hunt, it had been far from such, and the police remembered the events vividly. Then, about a year later, the murderous Finn had escaped from prison back in her homeland and had headed for France seeking revenge. We had had several very narrow squeaks again, especially that my wife, Sally, was pregnant at the time and the Finn knew it... Not a friendly sort of person at all.

Could this Monsieur Blache and his giant henchman be mixed up with her in some way? Somehow, I didn't think so. Blache was a man more used to employing a silver tongue to reach his objectives, rather than a machine gun or a knife.

Inside the sitting room, nothing seemed out of place. Everything was tidy, and whatever they had done, they had cleared up after themselves. I glanced into the kitchen. I pulled open the washing-up machine. I had left it empty, but it now contained a good number of plates, wine glasses and cutlery. The machine had already washed these.

## The Songwriter

The Adjutant nodded, 'Nice touch that. No fingerprints or lipstick marks... Careful, guy, your pal.'

The hidden corridor to our offices had not been discovered, and upstairs in the bedrooms all was perfectly in order.

'They don't seem to have slept here,' I said. 'Odd that.'

'Yeh,' said my neighbour. 'They might have stayed in a hotel.'

'I'll check that out,' nodded the Adjutant.

'What about the aunt?' I asked.

'I didn't see her. She arrived by taxi.'

'We'll check up on that too. When?'

'Wednesday.'

The police chief frowned, 'What time?'

'End of the afternoon. The big guy said they'd be leaving on Thursday,' he pulled a face. 'Seemed a really nice, friendly sort of guy.'

The adjutant shrugged, 'God knows what those three were up to, but there doesn't seem to me much more we can do here, William.'

'Agreed.'

'A taxi coming up from Grenoble will be easy to find out about. The hotels, too,' he said. 'I'll need that guy's address and his contact info too,' he added.

'I pulled a face. 'Address same as Linsay Blache and her mum. I haven't a phone number for him.'

'Oh!?'

I sighed and explained the arrangement we had come to about hiding his hand in the matter from his wife.

My neighbour chuckled, 'Yes, he struck me like someone who would appreciate a bit of peace and quiet. Clever move.'

Then something struck me, 'Hold on.'

'Yes.'

'Better check out the shed and garage.'

## Stephen William ROWE

The chief nodded, 'Can you do that, john?' he said, turning to one of his men.

As soon as he had gone, I had another idea, 'Better check the studio too.'

The Adjudant nodded, 'Let's go.'

I led the little group of men across the sitting room and down the stairs.

I pushed open the soundproofed door, and that's when we found her.

The body of Lindsay Blache's mother was propped up in my sound booth.

There was a gunshot hole in her forehead, and the glass windows of the booth were splattered with blood.

### Chapter 6 : The Gendarmerie

Flashes from cameras spasmodically illuminated my small studio. Police specialists were going over the place with a fine-tooth comb. Arriving from HQ at Grenoble, they took numerous photos and samples, then removed the body and cleaned the blood stains from the vocal booth.

During all this activity, I called Paul Douanier and his assistant, my boyhood friend, Margaux. They had both worked with me fending off the notoriously dangerous Lida Niemela. Indeed, they were the ones responsible for my being involved in the affair in the first place. It was Paul who came up with the idea of using me as bait to draw out the covert organisation he was trying to track down. Of course, he couldn't have guessed that things would get quite so out of hand.

Both were members of the French tax fraud squad and were accustomed to dealing with unscrupulous and sometimes ruthless criminals. Paul listened attentively to my explanation and, after hearing my brief outline of the situation, told me that they would be on their way up onto the Vercors plateau from Lyon as soon as possible.

Naturally, my neighbour was extremely shocked upon discovering the body. He was now back home being tended by the local nurse. Him being a seasoned hunter, I had always assumed him to be a tough character. However, discovering a woman shot through the head was clearly another kettle of fish and too much for him. After all, shooting a wild boar with a rifle was not quite the same thing as finding a murdered woman next door.

## Stephen William ROWE

Leaving the special branch men in charge of my house, I drove the short distance across the snow-bound village to the Gendarmerie. I wanted to get my declaration down and signed as soon as possible.

I was reading over the printed-out version when Adjutant Mercier's phone rang.

'Yes, that's me, sir.' He nodded to me. 'The Commandant at HQ,' he whispered, pulling a worried face, his hand covering the mouthpiece.

He listened for a few moments, then replied, 'Yes, sir. He's with me here now. Just signing his declaration.'

'Yes, Sir. A very unusual affair!'

He listened as his superior continued to speak, his brow furrowing more and more as he did. 'Really, Sir!? That's incredible!'

There was a pause. 'Yes, Sir. It puts a different complexion on the whole affair. Yes Sir. Apparently, Paul Douanier is a good friend of Dr. Stone. I know the man myself from the Niemela affair. He's on his way up. Should be here in half an hour.' There was a pause as he listened. 'Yes, Sir. *That*" Paul Douanier. Yes, sir, and his assistant.'

The man pulled a worried face in my direction. 'Yes, sir. I'll make sure of that. I'll send confirmation immediately we've checked.' There was another pause. 'Yes, sir.'

He put down the phone and sighed.

'More trouble?' I asked.

'You're telling me! When did you say the singer Lindsay Blache came back to France?'

'Yesterday afternoon.'

'Did you speak with her at all. I mean, did she have any special plans?'

'No, she spent the morning with the engineers at the studio. Then she unexpectedly had to rush back to Paris to sign her recording contract. She took an earlier flight than planned. Why do you ask?'

## The Songwriter

'Because she didn't get back.'

'She's gone missing? Something to do with this business?'

'Not gone missing, no. She was in the forest near the lake.'

'Why? What was she doing there?'

'Being strangled.'

'Being What!?' I shot out of my seat. 'Strangled!?''

'That's it. In the forest. In fact, not a hundred metres from where you had your mid-day meal...'

'Hells bells and damnation!' I cried.

'I was thinking more or less the same thing, William.'

'What the hell is all this about?'

'Looks like this Monsieur Blache is more than meets the eye.'

It was a blessing that the man knew me well and that we had been through some perilous adventures together. Had this not been the case, he wouldn't have known that he could trust me. I'd have been in deep trouble already. Luckily, too, the name of Paul Douanier had an unexpected aura to it for the Colonel.

At this point, a Gendarme entered and handed his chief a sheet of paper.

The man nodded and handed it to me, 'Can you identify this photo as the girl Linsay Blache.'

I took the page and turned it the right way up. There, sprawled in the snow, lay Linsay Blache. Her shiny, candy-pink anorak was open and spread out around her.

I nodded. 'Yes. That's her. No doubt possible.'

Then I leaned forward, 'Wait a moment.'

'Something wrong?'

'Her jewellery!'

'Jewellery?'

'Yes. She wore horrible, oversized red earrings and a massive ring all the time. They're gone.'

'Valuable, were they?'

## Stephen William ROWE

'Oh no,' I said, shaking my head. 'Cheap stage Jewellery. Painted glass, and obviously worthless to anyone. Even so, she never went out without them.'

'So, someone stole them?'

'Looks like it. But why?'

'Maybe the murderer discovered she was an upcoming singer and assumed they were the real thing and killed her for it.'

'No, I can't believe that. They were just too, too obviously fake.'

The Adjutant frowned. 'Maybe the stuff was taken to make it look like a theft crime then.'

'But for heaven's sake. Who on earth would want to kill an unknown French singer in a forest in Finland?'

Unexpectedly, a new voice came from behind me, 'An unknown singer in Finland and her equally unknown mother in France. Odd that, William.'

I whirled round and jumped to my feet. 'Margaux!' I cried, clasping the elegant young woman in my arms. 'Paul too! Thank heavens you arrived.' I said, clasping his hand.

'We jumped into the old car...'

Margaux butted in, 'And came roaring up here so fast that my innards are still on the outskirts of Lyons.'

Paul chuckled, 'The old girl still has a few tricks up her sleeve.'

Margaux scowled at him, 'He's talking about that damned car, William. You've never driven with him in the snow, have you?'

I shook my head.

'Avoid it at all costs. Your nerves wouldn't stand it.'

Paul shook hands with the Adjutant. They knew each other well from the trouble with Lida Niemela.

'How about explaining, William?' he said.

I sat down again and stretched out my legs under the table. 'Where shall I start? Yes, Yes. I know.'

## The Songwriter

They pulled up a couple of chairs and sat across the room from me, beside the Adjutant.

'Well, it started when I refused to write some songs for one of the participants of the local singing competition...'

I explained my meeting with Monsieur Blache about his proposition and the goodwill presents he sent me.

In all, the story took about fifteen minutes to tell, then I sat back and gazed at the three faces.

Paul nodded and turned to Margaux. 'Did anything strike you as odd?'

'Apart from everything,' she smiled. 'No. Nothing.'

'Yes. Everything...' smiled the man.

'Too good to be true...' she glanced at me. 'I would have thought you'd have been vaccinated against things like that by now.'

'Really?' I sighed. 'You honestly think that? After all, he was as good as his word. I got that Lowden guitar and those two studio microphones, didn't I. And twenty-five thousand euros in my bank account.'

'Yes, you're right. That was no mere promise, I'll admit to that,' she smiled.

Paul nodded, 'No. Anyone would have been convinced by that show of...' he searched for a word.

'Goodwill,' suggested Margaux.

'Yes.'

The Adjutant handed Paul the photo of Lindsay in the snow. He examined it, then passed it to Margaux. 'Her jewellery was taken,' said the Adjutant.

'Zero value stage props, though,' I added.

Margaux shot a look at Paul.

'Have you got any photos of the girl in the studio?' she asked.

'Dressed to kill, you mean?'

'Dressed to be an Instagram singer,' she smiled.



## Stephen William ROWE

'The studio photographer did all the official shots for the album cover and the online publicity. I think I have one or two on my phone, though.'

I scrolled through and found what I was looking for. 'Here,' I said, passing her my phone.

She nodded slowly, then handed it to Paul. Then to the Adjutant she said, 'Can you transfer this to your PC please so we can have a good look?'

The man connected a cable, and after a few clicks, the photo appeared on the large screen.

Margaux winced, 'Instagram queen from head to feet.'

Paul chuckled, 'It would be difficult to get a tighter fitting outfit, unless it was painted on.' He glanced at me, 'I bet she was popular around the studio.'

I nodded.

'Now,' said Margaux, leaning forward and glancing at the young Gendarme, 'Can you zoom in on the girl's head, please? Great.' She shot a glance at Paul, who was leaning forward and peering at the face.

'Now, zoom in on the right ear, please.'

This done, she turned her head and glanced at Paul. 'What do you think? You're as good an expert as I am.'

'Expert!?' I said.

'Jewellery.'

'Ah!'

'Be my guest,' smiled Paul. 'You go on.'

Margaux nodded slowly. 'Can you show me the other ear, please?'

This done, she smiled, 'Now the ring, please.'

This done, she shrugged and smiled at Paul, 'Ten to fifteen carats each, I'd say. If they come from where I guess, she'd be wearing upwards of fifteen million euros of jewellery, possibly twenty to twenty-five million.'

'What!?' I exclaimed.

'Puts quite a different complexion on the case, does it not?' smiled Paul.

## The Songwriter

'I don't believe it!' I exclaimed. 'They were painted glass.'

'More probably painted diamonds,' smiled Margaux. 'Stolen from a certain wealthy Parisian family last summer and no doubt en-route for an equally wealthy purchaser in Russia.'

'Hence the choice of Finland, for your recording job,' smiled Paul. 'Then, easy drive to the frontier and bobs-your-uncle.'

The young Gendarme was following all this with an occasional frown and shake of his head, 'Even if that were the case,' he said. 'Why bother to kill the girl? She'd be easy to overpower and tie up for the sort of guys involved in that sort of stuff over there.'

'Yes. That's a good observation. Why kill her?' said Paul. 'I wonder why that was thought to be necessary.'

'Unnecessary complications in my view,' added the Adjutant.

'Agreed,' said Paul. 'Unless the reason was something else.'

Margaux placed her long, elegant, manicured fingers on my hand and smiled at me. 'And I wouldn't mind betting that you were transporting the middleman's fees for him.'

I frowned, 'Sorry!'

'I'd wager that your revolutionary humidity control crystals were slightly more valuable.'

'Meaning?'

'Meaning that those sachets were filled with small diamonds, destined to pay off the middlemen.'

'Oh, come on!' I shook my head.

'About a million euros worth in all,' she smiled. 'Five per cent commission.'

Paul nodded. 'Sounds about right.'

'What the hell!' I exclaimed, frowning.

## Stephen William ROWE

'With respect to all that, an eleven-thousand-euro guitar and a couple of expensive microphones were mere chicken feed,' said Margaux.

'And,' added Paul, with a chuckle. 'A few thousand more for tickets and hotels... zero-point-one per cent, all said. A bargain.'

'And,' continued Margaux. 'The drugs were probably intended as a way of keeping you out of circulation while the deal went through, and things calmed down.'

'Except that it didn't work?' added Paul.

I blew out my cheeks and shook my head sadly, 'You're implying that the whole thing, the recording contract and all, was an elaborate frame-up?'

Paul frowned, 'Well... Some of it at least. But there are several details which don't line up.'

'A perfect transport strategy, though,' added Margaux.

'Yes,' smiled Paul, 'Cunning and rather daring. A little risky. But daring all the same.'

'The girl was so obviously ignorant of any subterfuge and so grossly out of character that the trick was almost certain to work,' smiled Margaux.

'And the people behind it probably got some highly suspicious-looking characters to proceed her through the customs queue and draw attention away from the girl,' said Paul. 'Classical, but highly effective.'

'We can check the videos from the airports,' said Margaux.

'Yes,' agreed Paul. 'That might provide us with a lead,' he smiled. 'We'll probably find that any highly suspicious types we find are out-of-work actors, hired for the job. We'd best check anyway. You never know.'

'If that's the case, they would have been hired via an agency over the phone. No questions asked,' said Margaux.

The Adjutant nodded. 'I'll get onto it anyway,' Then he frowned. 'But why kill the girl? They only had to knock her

## The Songwriter

out, and everyone would have assumed that some fool did it for a load of worthless stage props.'

Paul nodded. 'Exactly. That's one of the odd things.'

'And then, there's the mother,' added the Adjutant.

'Why kill her too? A man doesn't usually go around killing his wife and daughter. Even for twenty million.'

I frowned, 'If the man really was the husband.'

Paul sighed. 'Adjutant. You'd be surprised what people do for money. Aren't you forgetting the trouble about the hidden gold ingots? That woman, Lida Niemela, was ready to kill anyone to get that.'

The Adjutant shrugged, 'But that was valued at over nine hundred million euros, not a mere twenty million.'

'True,' agreed Paul. 'But twenty million euros go a long way for most of us.'

Margaux looked at me, 'And that woman, Niemela, was from Finland too. Wasn't she?

Paul frowned and scratched his eyebrow, 'Yes. From Finland.

I glanced at him, 'But she's dead.'

Paul avoided looking in my direction and seemed to hesitate for a moment. He quickly changed the subject, 'It's odd the girl being killed so close to where you had your midday meal. At about the same time, too.'

I frowned. 'Less than a thirty second round trip on skis through the forest. If it was only a hundred metres away, that is,' I admitted.

Margaux nodded, 'Another clever attempt to set you up, perhaps, William. Being a murder suspect and a drug trafficker would have kept you out of the way for a significant period, if I'm not wrong.'

'Were there many other diners?' asked Paul.

'No. Only three or four.' I paused. 'Ah! Yes, I see. You should easily be able to check up on my movements, then.'

## Stephen William ROWE

Paul turned to the Adjutant, 'Do you think you could get someone to check that out? Someone's certain to ask, sooner or later.'

The man nodded. I still had the restaurant card in my wallet, so I handed it to him. 'You can check at the hotel too,' I said. 'They'll confirm when I left for the ski tour and returned.' I paused. 'And the ski rental place too. They'll have my bank card imprint.'

Margaux was frowning. 'If the location of the murder was not a coincidence, then how did the murderer know William would be there and at that precise time of the day?'

I nodded, 'I mentioned it to the girl in the ski rental shop,' I smiled, and Margaux chuckled.

'Good looking, was she?'

I smiled, 'Let's say, athletic and curvesome.'

'And blond, of course...'

'Naturally. Goes with the snow,' I said.

Paul had taken control of the computer and had pulled up a map of the ski tracks around Kuopio.

'You said that the man on reception at your hotel suggested the ski route you took, didn't he?' he said. 'Show me.'

He waited for me to centre the map on the page. 'Zoom in a bit, can you. That's it. Great.'

I took the mouse and followed the track I had taken across the frozen lake to the restaurant.

Margaux leant forward, 'The receptionist would have known exactly how long it would take you to reach the restaurant.'

'Yes. He told me.'

'Could he have tipped someone off?' asked the Adjutant.

I pulled a face, 'That would make it all a bit too much of a "spur of the moment" affair, wouldn't it?' I frowned. 'No one could have known I would decide to go skiing. And no

## The Songwriter

one could have guessed I would not go into the studio with Lindsay that morning. We decided it over breakfast.'

Paul frowned, 'Agreed. When you're dealing with upwards of twenty million euros of stolen diamonds, one doesn't do things on the spur of the moment, as you say.' He paused. 'No. If we are right about the diamonds, then this was carefully planned in advance.'

I clicked my tongue and shook my head. 'But no one could have known that we would have finished recording on Thursday. We had booked up until Friday evening.'

'An inspired guess?' suggested Margaux.

Paul shrugged. 'I don't believe that any self-respecting international jewel thief would count on inspiration to secure success,' he said, gazing at me. 'No. However, they would naturally take advantage of any lucky events to help things along. Still, the main crime would have been well-planned in advance. We'll get a better idea when the people at the recording studio and the hotel have been questioned.'

A Gendarme with an adequate mastery of English was called and dispatched to contact the Finnish police and politely request that they conduct the necessary checks. He was given the outline of Paul's line of thinking and instructed to ask the local officials to follow up on the ideas.

Margaux had been sitting listening quietly, her lovely, long legs crossed. 'This sounds like a second line of setting up.'

'Or the first,' added Paul.

'Yes,' said Margaux, 'First a murder, then the drug smuggling. You clearly were not expected to get out of Finland before a good long time.'

I screwed up my eyes, 'But why? What was the purpose?'

## Stephen William ROWE

The Adjutant tapped his fingers on the table. 'Maybe that guy Blache wanted to use William's place longer. Needed more time for his negotiations.'

'Not many men would kill their daughters to gain a few days,' said Margaux.

'If she were his daughter?' smiled Paul.

The Adjutant frowned again, 'Perhaps they were trying to get something out of the mother and needed more time to do it,' he said, then nodded to himself as another idea crossed his mind. 'Maybe they killed the girl to make the mother talk.'

Paul shrugged, 'You mean that when they discovered William had escaped their trap and was on the way home, they had to rush things? That it?'

'Yes.' The Adjutant smiled, 'Maybe the woman wasn't his wife, and the girl was not his daughter.'

Paul shrugged again, rubbing his chin. 'This is getting decidedly complicated.'

## The Songwriter

### Chapter 7 Mr Blache and Mr Gruber

**L** Ida Niemela was not dead.  
Paul knew this perfectly well.  
He also knew exactly where she was and what she was doing. He was regularly kept up to date. I had got mixed up with the Finn accidentally and had learnt to regret it.

At the outset, all she wanted was to locate and seize a massive stash of gold ingots hidden away by a wealthy businessman at the outset of the Second World War.

Unfortunately, she was not the only one after it.

Unfortunately, that is, for the others, because Lida Niemela was utterly ruthless and capable of murdering without a second thought.

She was eventually caught at Marseilles and imprisoned in her homeland, Finland. Someone, however, needed her outside badly for his own sordid motives and arranged for her to escape. To arrange this, she was poisoned and had to be transferred to a secure hospital for treatment. From here, escape was a simple matter for the woman. She immediately headed for France to settle old scores, including those with my wife and me. On the way, to satisfy her desire for revenge, she murdered the wife of the judge who imprisoned her. She killed the woman's two babies too. This turned out to be a bad move because it led to another Finn, Mister Seppa, going after her. The man in question was not only a Finn but also a retired but still influential Mafia chief. He eventually caught up with her in Marseilles.



## Stephen William ROWE

Terrifyingly, she came within a hair's breadth of killing my wife Sally's unborn child with a stiletto.

Amazingly, though, for the first time in her tormented life, that day, Lida Niemela held her hand.

I never learnt why.

Sally and I assumed Mister Seppa had killed her and disposed of the body, but Paul never formally confirmed this to be true.

Even so, no one had seen or heard of her since that drama-filled day on the old port at Marseilles.

Having finished our work at the gendarmerie, Paul, Margaux, and I drove back to my house.

I first spent some time rekindling the log fire, then sat with the other in the armchairs facing it. Margaux had made some mint tea, and we sat sipping it in silence, watching the flames lick up and listening to the crackling of the dry birchwood as it burned.

An icy wind had sprung up again. It was lifting the snow crystals from the surface of the field next door and dashing them in gusts at the windows.

In such conditions, I know nothing better than a crackling log fire to turn the tables on winter's attempt at eroding my weakened morale.

Margaux's phone pinged.

She glanced at the message and a smile spread slowly across her lips, 'Ah! Now that's interesting!' she said.

'Yes?' said Paul.

'Yup,' she then turned to me and continued. 'You say this pal of yours, Monsieur Blache, gave you that guitar... And those microphones.'

I sighed and gazed at her. 'Oh no!' I gasped. 'You're going to tell me it was all stolen, and I have to give it back...'

'No, no,' she chuckled. 'That has checked out OK. Purchased and paid for. In cash, of course, leaving no

## The Songwriter

tracks to follow. By a big, tough-looking guy. About nine metres tall, apparently. A bit like a bear, in fact.'

'So?' I frowned.

'Well, all the same, it seems rather unlikely that Monsieur Blache did the purchasing. Or the giving for that matter.'

'Come on, Margaux,' smiled Paul. 'Let's have it.'

'Well, at the time the purchases were made and the gifts furnished, the father of Miss Blache, the singer, was elsewhere.'

'Elsewhere!?' I exclaimed.

'Yes. Absolutely.'

'Can you be certain of that?' asked Paul.

'Oh, yes. Absolutely,' she nodded with a wry smile.

'What's more, he hasn't been anywhere near Autrans in the last few weeks.' She frowned, 'Neither has he been up here in the Vercors mountains for some time.'

'So where was he then?'

'Where he's been for the last year,' she smiled.

'That's helpful!' I exclaimed. 'So? He was...?'

'Just outside Grenoble. At Meylan, in fact.'

'At home?' I asked.

Margaux shook her head, 'Not far from there. In Meylan cemetery. In his grave...'

My mouth dropped, and my eyebrows shot up, 'What!?''

Margaux gave a little satisfied chuckle, 'He died after falling off a ladder in his garden while picking apples. More than a year ago,' she shrugged. 'And under the circumstances, it's unlikely he would be up here, or buying you presents. Is it?'

'Interesting,' agreed Paul. 'The plot thickens.'

'You're telling me!' I frowned and shook my head. 'So, who was the guy passing himself off as the singer's father?'

Margaux smiled again, 'Someone who knew that the real Monsieur Blache wouldn't turn up and spoil the show.'

## Stephen William ROWE

'Which explains why he didn't want me to mention his involvement to the girl and her mother,' I sighed. 'At least that's one thing cleared up.'

'Do you know what I think?' said Margaux.

I looked across at her, sitting and nursing her cup between her long fingers. 'Now what?' I asked.

'Well, I think you might do well to check up on the gentleman from the recording company.'

'Gruber!?' I puffed up my cheeks and blew out my breath.'

'If that's his real name, which I somehow now doubt,' said Paul.

I shook my head. 'The guy was with a huge symphony orchestra in one of Paris' biggest recording studios,' I replied.

Margaux shrugged, 'You sure?'

'Sure of what?'

'That he was with the orchestra.'

'He distinctly gave the impression of knowing the studio staff and the orchestra.'

'If he's as professional as Blache...' shrugged Margaux.

I sighed, 'I'll phone.'

'Good idea.'

I blew out my cheeks again in exasperation, 'I'll get my laptop.'

I found the Paris number of the famous company easily enough and dialled it on my phone. A few moments later, after a brief discussion, I sighed again, put down my phone and gazed from Paul to Margaux, 'Sorry, Sir. We have no one of that name employed by us...' I quoted. 'We have no symphony orchestras recording for us at present either. I'm sorry, Sir. Probably another record company.'

'More and more interesting,' smiled Paul.

Margaux smiled and chuckled, 'So we are minus one Monsieur Blache and minus one Monsieur Gruber.'

## The Songwriter

I blew out my cheeks, 'And worse still, we are minus one recording contract for yours truly.'

Margaux smiled, 'You can still have your original of the fake framed. It would look nice on your studio wall.'

I pulled a face, 'I suppose I'd better call the recording studio in Paris. They might know something.'

'Don't waste your time, William,' said Paul. 'The guy probably spun the lot of them some story or other. He probably passed himself off as a freelance reporter or photographer commissioned by Rolling Stone, or some other international music magazine. Something along those lines, I expect anyway,' he chuckled. 'That's what I'd do.'

I frowned, thinking back to our meeting in Paris, 'Yes. He had a bag full of photographic gear... Hell!'

'Yep,' said Margaux with a wry smile. 'You got yourself well and truly set up, William. I wonder why.'

Paul nodded, 'Yes. Nice... I like it. Highly professional and well thought out too.'

Margaux sipped some mint tea, 'There was quite a lot of money at stake, so it was worth doing the thing properly, I suppose.'

I frowned again, 'But I don't get it.'

'What don't you get?' asked Paul.

'Well. As there are clearly decent brains behind all this. Why go to so much trouble to organise such a cunning setup and then go and kill two people?'

'Yes,' nodded Margaux. 'I was wondering about that. The whole plan worked smoothly, and the merchandise certainly got where it was supposed to get with no hitches.'

I nodded, 'Exactly. So why encourage the police forces of two counties to come after you for two murders?'

Paul gave me a thumbs up, 'That's why I said it was interesting.'

'Out of character,' I said.

## Stephen William ROWE

'Exactly. There is more to this little affair than meets the eye.'

'Someone had a hidden agenda, perhaps,' said Margaux.

'Or someone completely different wanted the two people dead with the arrow pointing at an obvious culprit.'

'The purchaser? The seller?' I mused.

Paul shrugged, 'Or someone completely outside the thing.'

'Or William,' suggested Margaux.

'Me!?'

'Can't be ruled out,' agreed Paul.

'But why?' I gasped.

'Made any enemies lately?' smiled Margaux.

'Not that I know of.'

'And Sally?' asked Paul, 'After all, she did ruffle quite a few feathers when her thesis was published.'

'That was years and years ago,' I replied.

'Old crimes cast long shadows, William,' quoted Paul.

'At least that's what they say.'

'You mean the things she turned up about stolen works of art during the war?' I replied, frowning.

He shrugged, 'let's leave no stones unturned.'

'We'll check out the studio staff in Paris then. I would.'

'It was going to be done,' smiled Paul.

'Don't forget that incredible art scam with counterfeit oil paintings by that Russian painter,' added Margaux.

'Yes. That too.'

'Another Russian,' I said.

'Yes,' nodded Paul

'What happened to the Parisian dealer who was behind all that?' I asked.

'Monsieur Dubois?'

'Yes, that's him.'

'He is too cunning for words, that one,' nodded Paul.

'We keep an eye on him, of course. But he never does

## The Songwriter

anything blatantly unlawful. He never pretends to be selling originals. He always tells his customers that he believes them to be excellent copies, which, of course, they are. He simply allows a purchaser to convince himself that they are, in reality, stolen originals.'

I glanced at him, 'In that instance, it was you who ruffled hair, not me.'

'That's true, but you'll admit that there are a good number of undesirable characters in your cupboards.'

'Thanks to who?' I frowned across at him. 'I do have one lead, though,' I said. 'Something definite too.'

'Ah!'

'Yes. The big guy. The driver. He knew about expensive guitars.'

'Good for him. All the same, I can't see how that helps us,' replied Paul.

'He said his brother had a music shop. Or was manager of one.'

'Where's that?' asked Paul.

'At Paris. Pigalle, in fact.'

'Ah!' smiled Margaux. 'Le Quartier de la Musique. I know it well.'

'He might very well have been making it up,' said Paul. 'Setting up a false lead. They're pros, you know.'

I shook my head. 'No, I don't think so. It came out far too naturally to have been calculated. He also knew the name of a little-known top-of-the-line handmade guitar.'

'So?'

'Very few people have ever heard the name, even amongst guitarists. Moreover, only a select few shops can afford to stock them. I think that the man must have either seen them or heard about them frequently. That should narrow things down.'

Paul nodded, 'Good thinking, William. Yes, that's something we can follow up easily.'

## Stephen William ROWE

'Not only that,' I smiled, rather pleased with myself. 'But I can provide the list of stockists in France from the Lowden website.'

'Brilliant,' smiled Margaux. 'So?'

'So here goes,' I said, pulling my laptop towards me and typing in the company name.'

In thirty seconds flat, I had found the list of French shops selling the instruments. Only a few in Paris, and even fewer elsewhere. I sent these to the printer in my office and then went to retrieve the page.

'There you are,' I said, handing it to Margaux. 'Ladies First.'

She glanced down at the list, 'Lyon, Paris, Bordeaux, Marseilles, Nantes, Strasbourg and Geneva,' she said. 'Since when was Geneva in France, William?'

'It's just over the frontier. It also happens to have one of Europe's top guitar shops. If the guy was lying about the location of the shop, it might be a possibility.'

Paul nodded, 'But the shop might be in the UK too or...' he paused. 'Or anywhere.'

'We'll know more once we know who these people really are,' said Margaux.

'And for that,' nodded Paul, 'We need to get the identikit pictures done. Can you do that tomorrow morning, William?'

I nodded, 'I had thought about popping down to Grenoble to buy some diamond earrings, but I suppose I could put that off.'

'Great,' laughed Paul, 'and we'll get your neighbour to do one of the guys too. With that, we'll soon know who we're dealing with.'

'And' he smiled, there's one consolation.'

'Great,' I said. 'Which is?'

'We have two people who have seen the man posing as Monsieur Blache. You and your neighbour.'

## The Songwriter

Margaux nodded, 'We ought to be able to get a reliable identikit picture from that.'

'The sooner the better,' I agreed. 'Before the imagination takes over.'

'Exactly what I was thinking,' said Paul. 'They've got all the equipment here at the police station. We'll go over first thing tomorrow.'

'OK,' I said.

'We also have two people who have seen the driver,' added Paul. 'You, William, and the guy at the shop who sold the guitar and microphones. He'll remember well because one doesn't make a sale of twelve thousand euros every day.'

I nodded, 'No. And several people have seen Gruber. The people at the recording studio in Paris, and I.'

Paul pulled a face, 'You said the man Gruber took the girl out and bought her an anorak. We might find someone who remembers something from a sports shop in Grenoble. That sort of garish pink should be easy to remember.'

'He'd have paid cash,' said Margaux.

'Yes. But you never know. It will enable us to double-check the identikit images.'

Margaux leaned over and tapped my shoulder, 'It would be a good idea to check that your neighbour will be available tomorrow morning too.'

'I'll check,' I smiled. 'But it will have to be done by old-fashioned methods.'

'Old-fashioned methods!?' frowned the young woman.

'Well, I don't have his phone number, so I'll have to brave the elements and walk all the way round to his place and ask him. In person,' I smiled. 'And then I'll have to brave the elements once more to carry the precious data acquired all the way back here, without the assistance of copper wires or electrons.'

Margaux laughed, 'You never change, William.'



## Stephen William ROWE

'That's what Sally says,' I said. 'If you like trouble, stick with Doctor Stone.'

Margaux laughed, 'And where is your flaming red-haired wife? Globe-trotting as usual?'

I explained what she was up to in Dubai and New Delhi, and that she might have to go to Oxford University on the way home.

'Have you told her about the recent...' she paused searching for the right word, 'About recent developments?' she asked.

I shook my head, 'Heavens No!' I gasped. 'She knows about the recording contact and the trip to Finland, but that's all. I don't want to run the risk of getting her highland warrior blood boiling. She'd be on the next flight home, sharpening her double-handed broad-sword on a honing stone all the way.'

Paul chuckled, 'Well, that warrior blood enabled her to save your life when that Finn, Lida Niemela, went for you.'

I shook my head at the memory of the incident, 'Hell yes! She really went wild, didn't she? I can still hear that Finn Niemela screaming when Sally smashed her arm.'

'Which explains why the woman went after her once she escaped,' added Paul.

I shivered, 'Yes. I still don't understand what really happened.'

Paul obviously wanted to avoid going into the subject any deeper. He stood up and stretched. 'You'd best get around to your neighbour before he goes to bed, William. I'd like to make sure we can get the data out as soon as possible tomorrow morning.'

I nodded, got up, donned my anorak, and pulled open the front door. I was met by an icy blast and pulled the zip up as far as it would go.

As the door closed behind me, Margaux turned to Paul, 'Where is that woman Niemela, Paul?'

## The Songwriter

'Safe,' He replied, 'let's say that her fangs have been pulled.'

'You didn't answer my question.'

'Correct. The fewer people who know, the better,' he smiled at the young woman. 'Sorry.'

Margaux had been working with Paul for nearly ten years and knew that if he was withholding information from her, it must be for a good reason. She didn't follow up on her question. Instead, she asked, 'What about that old ex-Mafia man Monsieur Seppa? Could he be of any use?'

Paul nodded, 'I wouldn't recommend calling him an old man to his face, Margaux. He's still alert and dangerous and has an exceedingly long arm, even if the muscles in it are not quite as strong as they were. Anyway, I was considering the possibility of dropping him a line. He might be able to help identify someone. Or at least point us in the right direction.'

'Unless one of his business associates is involved,' she countered.

'Seppa wouldn't risk getting involved in that diamond sales business, though,' frowned Paul. 'A Russian with fifteen or twenty million to throw about on earrings and a ring for his wife or mistress would have a lot of powerful friends.'

'And I bet the purchaser will not be at all happy about the Girl who transported them being killed. Buying stolen goods is one thing, but murder is quite another,' I said.

'He won't have been informed as to how the merchandise was to reach him,' said Paul.

'No, but things like that have a way of becoming known rapidly in certain circles. Maybe someone went to pains to bring it to his attention,' Margaux added.

Paul frowned, 'Yes. The girl and her mother being murdered is all wrong. It doesn't fit in. The entire plan worked perfectly.' He hesitated, 'No, as we said earlier, it

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looks like someone highly unscrupulous has a secret agenda.'

'To get at the man we know as Blache, or Gruber or the diamond purchaser?'

'Or something we haven't guessed about yet.'

'Why not send Monsieur Seppa a set of photos and the identikit pictures. He might be able to help.'

'If he wants to,' said Paul.

'It's worth a try.'

Paul nodded, 'Seppa certainly has blood on his hands, but he's a pro and doesn't like innocent people getting murdered for nothing. Especially defenceless girls.'

'If the Russian purchaser gets riled about this, we might have some unexpected trouble too,' said Margaux.

Paul nodded, 'Yes. Especially if the diamonds were a present for a mistress and he wants the wife to remain ignorant of the fact.'

Margaux shook her hand from the wrist in a typical French gesture and pulled a face, 'Oh yessss. Now that would spell big trouble for someone.'

'In that case, perhaps the Russian's mistress is the key to the puzzle,' said Paul.

'You mean someone wants to stir up trouble between man and wife?'

'Divorce might be extremely advantageous to some third party. That's an interesting angle.' Smiled Paul.

'Wow!' grinned Margaux. 'This is getting a bit complicated. Aren't we letting our imaginations get the better of us?'

'I call it, examining all possibilities,' smiled Paul.

At this moment, I pushed open the door and entered, rubbing my hands together, 'It's as cold as hell out there. Minus twelve and windy. Brrrr.' I hung up my anorak and knelt down in front of the log fire to warm my hands.

'Everything OK for tomorrow?' asked Margaux.

## The Songwriter

I nodded, 'He told me something interesting too.'

'Ah!'

'Yep. Apparently, there was quite a bit of coming and going.'

'Meaning?' said Paul.

I continued warming myself by the fire and turned my head to gaze at them, 'He said that on Tuesday, a big dark green Porsche arrived in the morning. That'll be Blache. Then, around 2:00 p.m., two other large cars arrived. Separately.'

'Interesting,' said Paul.

'The first was transporting an Asiatic style man in a suite.

'Chinese? Japanese? Korean?' asked Margaux.

I shrugged, 'even more interesting is that the second one was transporting someone wearing Arabian-style clothes.'

'What!' exclaimed Paul.

'A long, white robe and a coloured headscarf. That's what he said. He assumed that the man was some sort of doctor.'

'A doctor!' exclaimed Margaux. 'What on earth made him think that?'

I shrugged. 'I think it was what happened later that gave him the idea.'

Margaux sighed, 'And what happened later, clever boy?'

I stood up and came back to my armchair, 'Well, the two last cars left again at about four o'clock. The Green Porsche left about an hour later.'

'Well, that doesn't get us far,' sighed Margaux.

Paul shook his head, 'Someone wearing a long, white robe and a coloured headscarf would probably be from one of the Gulf states. That would align with what the man told you about his role in negotiating sensitive deals. There's a lot of money in those places.'

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'Any more, William?' asked Margaux, gazing at me.

'Yes. An hour later, someone knocked at his door. This is when the person told my neighbour that I was down with a bad virus and that a specialist had been called up from Lyons. He said he was my cousin and that he'd been looking after me with his son.'

Margaux frowned, 'Where on earth is all this going?'

I shrugged, 'And this person. Probably Blache, said he couldn't stay and that his wife was coming up to take over from him. She was to arrive via taxi.'

'Got it !' exclaimed Paul. 'Preparing for the arrival of the girl's mother.'

'That's what it looks like.'

'And once arrived, Blache shoots her and leaves, as cool as a cucumber,' gasped Margaux.

I nodded, 'That clears things up a bit.'

Paul shook his head, 'No, it doesn't. Not at all.'

We looked over at him.

'For heaven's sake! First, we have rich Arabs and others negotiating something. Then the negotiator brings the singer's mother back from Finland and shoots her. He shoots her immediately after having completed some clever negotiation contract.'

I gazed at him. 'What makes you assume that he succeeded?'

'Because, William. That sort of thing is prepared well in advance. The men with the funds only come together in person to sign papers and shake hands.'

'Ah.'

'Yes,' continued Paul. 'I suspect that your friend pocketed his well-earned millions.'

'Using my house as neutral ground.'

'Yes. And then the man brings the girl's mother back and shoots her...'

Margaux shook her head, 'No. That's mad. He'd just clear up. Erase all fingerprints and then disappear.'

## The Songwriter

'Right,' said Paul. 'Make your profit and disappear.' He nodded. 'William has got his songs recorded for free in a top studio. He has his twenty-five grand, a top-of-the-range acoustic guitar and two studio microphones as goodwill presents. Also, the singer and her mum are happy. It would take ages before they discovered that the recording contract was fake.' He paused and sipped his tea. He pulled a face and looked into his cup, 'Cold.'

'Even if William discovered that the man had tricked him and used his house for his negotiations,' added Margaux. 'As likely as not, he would have had a good laugh about it.'

I nodded. 'You're right there. I would have smiled and realised that I had been outsmarted. A bit of a laugh, I'd have said.'

Paul shrugged. 'Yes. So why go and spoil the whole thing with two murders?'

## Chapter 8 : Identikit Pictures

**H**ad the Hotel de la Post still existed, Paul and Margaux would have lodged there that night. We would have dined there too and chatted happily with the owners and our friends from the village about past adventures.

We'd have relived together the discovery of the massive stash of gold ingots I had located hidden under the ancient stone water trough. We would also have shivered together when remembering the attack by the murderous Finn, Lida Niemela. The find had saved the precarious local economy in extremis. It also permitted the realisation of several large-scale projects that would otherwise have remained in the realm of daydreams. However, regardless of how many millions of euros one can call on, nature still holds the controlling cards. Thus, the unpredictability of snowfalls in recent years has significantly reduced the winter tourist trade. This, in turn, led to a decline in visibility as a desirable holiday resort. As a result, the summer holiday trade also declined. Add to that mix COVID, and one has a devastating cocktail.

Amongst the most iconic catastrophes caused by this was the forced closure of the Hotel de la Post, the oldest in the village. The place has since been transformed into comfortable holiday flats, but the spirit is undeniably no longer the same.

So that night we dined quietly in my chalet, and I opened an extravagantly expensive bottle of wine to go with our meal.

I felt I deserved a little comforting...

## The Songwriter

I put Paul and Margaux up in the spare bedrooms, and we went to bed early.

Immediately after breakfast the following morning, we headed for the local police station to make the identikit pictures. We chose to walk the short distance and immediately regretted it. Although the sun was out and the sky was cloudless, an icy wind was blowing down the valley from the east, and the temperature was once more well under zero. We pulled our anorak hoods tight around our faces and struggled on, leaning into the blast.

'This is where something like your singer's knee-length Candy-Pink anorak would have been appreciable,' commented Paul.

I had pulled my own anorak collar up over my mouth and nose, so I limited my reply to a brief nod.

At the police station, we met my next-door neighbour, on the point of leaving.

'I came over early to get the job done,' he said. 'I have to go over to Villard de Lans to pick up a new drive belt for my snow blower.'

I nodded, 'Yes. We're not finished with snow yet.'

'You're telling me,' he assented.

He shook hands with Margaux and then Paul and left us.

I had three identikit images to do. One sketch of Mr Blache, another of his driver, and the last of Gruber. The task took me longer than I had expected, because I had to go back over the three several times. Each time, I made some subtle adjustments, but in the end, I was satisfied that the likenesses were reasonably good.

It must have been about eleven o'clock when Paul and Margaux came back into the room with Adjutant Mercier.

The latter smiled at me, 'Can we have a look, William?'

'Let's go,' I nodded. 'You might recognise one of them.'

The two versions of images for the driver, by my neighbour and me, were far from identical. Even so, we



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agreed that together they ought to enable him to be identified.

'Well,' said Paul. 'I've never seen the man before. What about you, Margaux?'

She shook her head, 'No. Clearly not French or English. She paused, 'nor German. Eastern Europe, perhaps.'

Paul nodded. 'Possibly. What about Gruber?'

The Gendarme, whose name was André Arnaud, put my image on the screen. On seeing it again, I was satisfied that the image was as good as I remembered the man.'

'Margaux?' asked Paul.

'No. Never seen him.'

'Nor me.'

The Adjudant Mercier frowned at the Arnaud, who raised his eyebrows.

Paul noticed this, 'Do you know him?'

The Arnaud shook his head. 'No. Interesting though,'

Paul frowned, but the man had already pulled up the image showing my version of Monsieur Blache.

'Ah!' nodded Paul. 'So, this is our mysterious international negotiator, is it?'

I nodded, 'That's him.'

The Gendarme coughed. 'I'll put up your neighbour's version of him beside it, shall I?'

Paul frowned up at the man, 'Yes. Good idea.'

A few seconds later, I blinked.

The two were completely different.

Not only were they different, but my neighbour's image resembled Gruber more than Blache.

'What the hell!?' I said.

Then André Arnaud switched the image showing my rendering of Gruber beside my neighbour's one.

They were virtually identical.

'Great Gods!' I started. 'Gruber!'

## The Songwriter

'I said it was interesting,' smiled the Gendarme.

'What in heaven's name does this mean?' I said, gazing intently at the two pictures.

Margaux nodded slowly, 'It implies, William. That your pal Monsieur Gruber didn't spend the time you were in Finland, in Paris.'

'Hells bells!' I cried. 'What's all this about!?'

'It also means that the last person to be seen here was Gruber and not Blache,' said Paul. 'It also implies that Gruber was the one present when Misses Blache arrived.'

'You mean, it was him, the murderer? The one who carries out the dirty-work part of the mission?' I gasped. 'I just can't believe it. He was just a fat, flabby sort of man with a weak, damp handshake.'

Margaux smiled, 'He didn't give you the impression of being your idea of the type of cold-blooded murderer, then?'

Paul shrugged, 'You don't need strong muscular hands to hold a gun, William. The bullet does all the work too.'

I shook my head in disbelief, 'So they were all in this together. Christ!'

'We still have the question... Why kill the Girl and her mother...', said Paul.

'And' added Margaux, 'Why not kill William too. That would have left no one to identify them at all.'

Paul nodded, 'Exactly. With respect to identification, William was by far the most dangerous. So why just set him up to try and delay his homecoming?'

We exchanged perplexed looks.

Adjudant Mercier had been following our exchange with interest. During the ensuing silence, he leaned forward. 'So that William could be accused of the whole thing,' he said. 'Maybe it's as simple as that. Deflect attention away.'

We gazed at him in silence.

## Stephen William ROWE

Paul nodded, 'They'd know that would only be temporary, though. And anyway, deflect attention away from what?'

Mercier smiled back, 'Yes. But consider for a moment. First, smuggling diamonds, second, fake recording contracts, and third, drug smuggling. Furthermore, he is in possession of an extremely expensive guitar, but he has no proof of purchase. Ditto for two expensive studio microphones. And last but not least, thousands of euros have been transferred to his bank account from an untraceable source.' He nodded. 'Just the type to murder innocent women, wouldn't you say?'

I gasped, 'Hell!' then glanced at him, 'What makes you think the bank transfer is untraceable?'

The man shrugged, 'Stands to reason...'

Paul sighed, 'He's right. That money will have left no footprints in the sand, as they say.'

'Who says that?' I frowned.

'I do,' he smiled. 'Or footprints in the flowerbed beneath the window, if you prefer.'

'I think a few four-letter swearwords would be in order here,' I sighed.

'Yes,' smiled Margaux. 'And this is one of the rare occasions on which I might accept this of you, William. I'd turn a blind ear.'

'Damn and blast it,' I cried. 'I'm being manipulated as well as being set up.'

'That's not a swear word, William,' smiled Margaux. 'Surely you can do better than that.'

I sighed, 'I don't feel like swearing.'

She stepped over and gave me a hug and kissed me warmly on the cheek, 'As Sally said, if you're looking for trouble. Stick close to Doctor William Stone.'

I couldn't help but laugh. 'Too true. Too true. What is it about me that attracts disasters like this?'

## The Songwriter

She shrugged and smiled, 'It seems that you have an unusual talent in that direction.'

At this moment, Paul's telephone rang. He glanced down at the screen and pulled an astonished face, shooting a wide-eyed look at Margaux. 'N+2!' he sighed. 'Now what!?' He walked towards the door. 'Can I use your office?'

The Adjudant nodded, and Paul disappeared.

'N+2!?' I frowned at Margaux.

'His boss's boss.'

'Well, well, well!' I exclaimed. 'I wouldn't have known that.'

Margaux shook her head in exasperation, 'His N+2 happens to be the "Minister Chargé du Budget".'

The Adjudant almost saluted in astonishment. 'Really?' 'Really.' Then she turned to me. 'The Minister Chargé du Bujet, is the equivalent of the English "Chancellor of the Exchequer".'

'Great Gods!' I exclaimed. 'That makes him your N+3!'

'Brilliant, William.' She smiled. 'He's not much to write home about, I'm afraid, though.'

'Sorry?'

'That sort of person doesn't impress me much just because they're powerful. A title to me, little more,' she shrugged a little smile.

'I suppose you know him well,' I goaded her.

She nodded, 'He's one of my father's boyhood friends. These people stand together through thick and thin. But I happen to have seen him drunk several times at home when we had to get his chauffeur to help him back into his car. As I said. His type doesn't impress me. Good at his job, excellent connections, but...'

'A bit of a dragger of beautiful young women, too, perhaps?' I suggested with a wry smile.

Margaux shot me a look, 'William. You know my mother.'

## Stephen William ROWE

I grimaced.

'Can you imagine anyone sane trying that sort of thing on, under her roof?'

I certainly could not, Minister or not.

'And what's more,' she smiled, 'His wife accompanies him everywhere. She likes to make sure he doesn't compromise her extremely generous monthly pocket money, for a mere bit of skirt.'

'A mere bit of skirt!' I cried. 'I would never have dared put you in such a loathsome category, Margaux.'

She laughed, 'Oh my dear William. I wasn't talking about myself. Heaven forbid.' She chuckled, 'Me, a bit of skirt... Oh! Mum will love that!'

'So,' I chuckled. 'Why has the guy phoned Paul? I mean, phoned him directly, rather than passing a message via his boss?'

'Because, William.' She smiled. 'There must be trouble in the wind.' Here she paused. 'Government size trouble, I expect.'

'Chancellor of the Exchequer sized trouble,' added the Adjudant, exchanging looks with his Gendarme. 'As your wife says, William. "Never a dull moment when Dr. William Stone is around.'

When Paul returned some time later, he was frowning.

'Trouble?' asked Margaux, watching his face.

The man nodded, 'Yes. Trouble. Rather troubling trouble to be exact.'

'Troubling trouble!?' I said, turning to him.

Paul nodded, 'There's definitely something going on behind all this that we haven't got wind of.'

'What did he want?' asked Margaux.

'He wanted to issue an order.'

'An order. Has he the right to do that? I asked.

Paul gave a curt nod, 'He does. He could have my boss out within the hour if he wanted to. Me Too.'

Margaux gazed at him, 'And this order?'

## The Songwriter

'Back off,' he sighed. 'Back off the Blache-Gruber angle.'

'What!?' the four of us exclaimed together.

Paul nodded again, 'As I said. There is more to this than meets the eye.'

'But how on earth could he know we were even ON the affair?' frowned Margaux. 'Did you tell your boss?'

'No,' replied Paul. 'I intended to do that this afternoon when I sent the photos.'

'So, someone tipped him off then,' said the Adjutant.

'Paul nodded, 'Yes. Odd that,'

Paul's phone rang again, 'Oh no!' he sighed. 'The Boss now. This is where I get an earful for not having kept him informed.'

The Adjutant pulled open the door, 'My office is at your disposal.'

Paul disappeared again.

I turned to Margaux, 'You didn't mention anything to your parents, did you?'

She shook her head, 'No. Even if I had, they would never mention it to a man like that. With politicians, never give more than your name, grade and number. That's what my dad says.'

The Adjutant shrugged, 'The information about the murder up here, and the link to the one of the singer in Finland, would have gone through any number of police hands,' he frowned, 'The murder of a French national in a foreign country would have high priority. It would immediately be brought to the attention of the Ministre des Affaires Etrangères. He would have to inform the Prime Minister and the President.'

'The President!?' I exclaimed.

'In France, the President is directly responsible for foreign military affairs and the like,' added the young Gendarme. 'If there's a hint of terrorism or organised crime, the thing goes through the system like wildfire.'

## Stephen William ROWE

'Someone must have recognised one of your names,' said the Gendarme.

The Adjudant shook his head. 'Or someone plugged William's name into the database, and the whole history shook them a bit. First the Lida Niemela affair and the gold, then all that trouble with fake paintings, vengeful Finnish politicians, child murders, and God knows what else...'

'And I bet someone checked at Lyons,' sighed Margaux, 'and discovered that we are up here in Autrans, then put two and two together,'.

A wry smile spread across the Adjudant's face, 'Then the President called the Prime Minister, who got it in the ear for not having informed him. Then the Prime Minister called several ministers, who each received an earful for the same reason. Finally, the Chancellor of the Exchequer phoned Paul to pass on the buck, as you say.'

I nodded, 'That sounds about right. But why call you off?'

We heard the banging of a door as Paul left the office.

'We may find out now,' said the Gendarme.

Paul reappeared, scowling now.

'Tell us the worst,' I said.

Paul looked around the room, then concentrated his gaze on me. 'My memory might be playing me tricks again, William, but didn't you say you had to go urgently to Geneva. Something about having to have some adjustments made to your new guitar?'

I frowned, 'No. Where on earth did you get that idea from?'

He nodded, 'And after that, I believe you said you would visit some friends at their chalet in the mountains. I can't remember where, or their names.'

I gazed at him in amazement. 'I never said anything of the sort! Are you feeling all right?'

Margaux was nodding slowly, 'Ah!'

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Paul nodded back.

The Gendarme exchanged a look with his superior, 'I seem to remember something like that to sir, don't you?'

The Adjutant nodded, 'That's right. Leaving almost immediately, I think.'

I gazed around the room, 'What the hell!?''

Paul sat down. First, he confirmed our understanding of the sequence of events unfolding at the ministerial level. He also confirmed that something was going on, which he apparently was not required to know about. 'But,' he added, 'there's more. Worse, in fact.'

'Not more murders?' I groaned. 'One more, yes,' he said. 'But you can't be blamed for that. You were back here by then.'

'Who,' I asked wide-eyed. 'Not the studio engineer or the hotel receptionist?'

'No,' said Paul. 'The local police have been called in, though.'

'And the worst part?' asked Margaux.

'Sorry about this, William, but you'll soon understand why I mentioned your trip to Geneva.'

'Great. I'd appreciate understanding something for once.'

'Well, the French head of police has been contacted by his Finnish counterpart. They have filed an official request for your extradition.'

'My what!?' I shot out of my seat.

The Finnish police have interrogated the server in the restaurant where you ate by the lake. The woman declares that you left the room for almost half an hour, in the middle of your meal. She also declares that she saw you take your skis from the rack.'

I almost shouted, 'That's a damn lie, I didn't once get up from the table during the meal. I came directly in from



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the terrace where I left my skis and went directly back out after paying and straight onto the lake.'

Paul sighed, 'That's not all.'

'Not all!?'

'They say that the receptionist almost died of a drug overdose,' he said.

'Oh God! No.'

'I'm afraid so. Apparently, the man says you gave it to him, as a gift.'

'Oh hell!' I cried. 'He said it was for his pal.'

'He was saved in extremis, and the police found a fortune's worth of the stuff in a tin on the kitchen shelf at his flat. Apparently, he could not supply a convincing explanation of why you gave him such a huge amount of the drugs. All he says is that someone gave it to you and that you didn't want it, so you gave it to him.'

'Great Gods!' I cried; 'I told him to say I'd thrown it in the jacuzzi.'

Margaux frowned, 'What on earth is behind all this, Paul?' she said. 'It looks like someone badly wants William out of France and back in Finland. In jail.'

'Exactly,' nodded Paul.

'But Why?' I cried.

'And what, even more interesting, why have we been called off?' added Margaux.

The Adjudant shrugged, 'The most obvious reason would be because you both know William very well.'

The Gendarme nodded, 'And perhaps also because you have a reputation of getting to the bottom of extremely complicated affairs.'

Paul looked from the Gendarme to the Adjudant, 'Do you know?' he said. 'I do believe that you're not far from the truth in saying that.'

'Yes,' said Margaux. 'That would explain a lot.'

'But in the name of God, why?' I groaned.

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Paul shook himself, 'First things first. I don't think it would be a good idea if William were transferred back to Finland, where we would not be able to communicate with him at all. And in the next hour or so, you, Adjutant, will certainly be requested to locate and arrest William. They'll ask you to keep him safe while they send up a team from Grenoble or Lyon.'

The Adjutant nodded, 'Yep. That's what will happen.'

Then Paul turned to me, 'So now you understand why we so distinctly remember you telling us about leaving here with your precious guitar to see the expert at Geneva.'

I rolled my eyes, 'Bloody Hell!'

'Where you actually go is neither here nor there,' he said. 'You simply have to be gone when the police arrive at your chalet. We need to be able to communicate freely.'

The Adjutant smiled, 'The police are already here.'

Paul chuckled, 'Yes. But all your team know perfectly that William would never commit the crimes that someone is trying to pin on him.'

'Yeh!' said the Gendarme. 'After all we've been through together. I think we can trust each other. We five, at least.'

Paul nodded, and Margaux turned to him.

'You mentioned another murder.'

'Yes. That's confused things a bit, apparently.'

'And?' I asked, a little irritated.

'A man was found shot in the forest ten kilometres from your hotel, William.'

'You said I wasn't implicated.'

'No. However, this individual is, or was, a well-known thug. He has been accused of numerous armed thefts. He is thought to have been involved in a certain number of unexplained disappearances and deaths. He's thought to favour strangulation.'

'Could he have been the one who killed Linsay?' I asked.

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'If it hadn't been for the serving woman's declaration, that's what they would have decided,' he said.

'But that woman must have been paid to tell that ridiculous story,' I said.

'Or scared into doing what she was told to do,' suggested Margaux.

I sighed, 'But the other people in the restaurant... Surely they would have noticed if I had left or not.'

Paul shrugged. 'All of them were foreign tourists who have since returned home to various countries.'

Apparently, they're being sought out for questioning.'

'That'll take time,' commented the Adjudant. 'Let's hope they didn't all pay their bills with cash.'

'Hell!' I gasped.

'Exactly,' agreed Paul.

'So now what?' asked Margaux.

Paul gazed around at the members of the room, 'Simple.' He said. 'William Disappears.'

## Chapter 9 Commandant Follet

Commandant Jean Follet, head of the police team sent up from Lyon, sat gazing at Adjudant André Mercier across the office desk. He was not happy. Not happy at all. It was nearing the end of the afternoon, and the light was fading fast. A few hours earlier, clouds had appeared from the west and had rapidly massed above the Autrans-Méaudre plateau. The advantage of this was that the temperature had ceased to plummet and the wind had dropped off almost completely.

Those of us who have lived up here for any time recognise such signs. Snow was on its way. Clearly another heavy fall...

The man now sitting in front of the Adjudant, with his back to the window, was, however, unaware of this.

Follet was irate about having been ordered to make the tricky trip up the narrow winding road through the "Bourne Canyon" to the plateau at an altitude of one thousand metres. He had been counting on leaving the office a little earlier than usual. But the order had come from so high up that there was little or nothing he could do about it. He had momentarily toyed with the idea of delegating the mission to his assistant, **Lieutenant Marcel Ouisseau**, but didn't dare take the risk. Ouisseau was an excellent man, but if anything went wrong, his having delegated the job would become known in uncomfortably high places. This would undoubtedly seriously damage his prospects of promotion.

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He knew that promotion to the enviable grade of Colonel of the Gendarmerie National was on the slate at long last. The salary that this brought with it would ensure him an extremely comfortable transition towards retirement in about ten years, followed by a very healthy pension. The salary rise would enable him to complete the renovation of his holiday home in the Dordogne region. The old stone house, shielded from the sun by tall umbrella pines, was a stone's throw from Sarla, and he looked forward to spending his retirement there. It was, in fact, located only a few kilometres from where all the trouble about the missing Duprès millions had been played out.<sup>2</sup>

Commandant Follet was thus even more irate on discovering that the bird had flown. He cursed to himself. He knew that, regardless of the reason for the disappearance of the prime suspect, he would be blamed for it. Even as he glared angrily across the desk at Mércier, his fertile mind was searching for self-preservation tactics. Attempting to shift the blame onto someone else's shoulders was always counterproductive. The men who had issued the orders from much higher up would spot the manoeuvre instantly. What counted for them was that he had failed to satisfactorily complete the task that they had asked him to undertake. He therefore needed to supply them with something which would placate them. Some information about the affair that they would consider to be essential and valuable. But what?

The Adjudant glanced through the window behind the man and smiled to himself as the first giant snowflakes floated sedately past. Great fluffy flakes. Twenty centimetres of snow on the road within the hour, he estimated.

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<sup>2</sup> See « The Sarlat Quartete » by the same author

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The commandant would be considerably more than irate when he realised that he was going to have to negotiate that winding canyon passage in a dark, moonless night and above all in deep snow.

Adjutant Mércier nodded at the window, 'Your car got snow tires, sir?'

The man swivelled around in his chair, 'Oh Balls!' he groaned.

'I'll take that for a No,' said the Adjutant, repressing a satisfied smile.

The chief had not been pleasant to deal with. Difficult would describe the situation better.

He had interrogated separately Paul, Margaux, the Gendarme and the Adjutant. However, long before he arrived, the four had their stories off pat. They had been careful and decided on having different, partial versions of the story. To each version, they had added well-thought-out inconsistencies. They knew that the experienced policeman would piece them together and come up with precisely the story they wanted him to build for himself.

As a direct consequence, by tomorrow morning, the Swiss police would be visiting the more exclusive music shops and instrument makers in Geneva. They would have men stationed at the locations for the next few days.

At the same time, the French police would be scouring the database concerning British-speaking families living in the town of Courchevel in the French Alps.

Adjutant Mércier wished them the very best of luck.

He assured the captain that he would immediately alert him if ever Doctor Stone were to return to Autrans or if he phoned anyone.

A few hours later, after dark had fallen, the Mércier had the considerable pleasure of being phoned by the

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commandant. The worn summer-weather tires had skidded in the deep snow, and their car had ended up in a deep ditch in the "Bourne Canyon". As the Adjudant knew all too well, the accident occurred in an area where the telephone signal was non-existent. The man had to trudge more than a kilometre up the snow-covered road to find a place where he would have enough signal to call HQ. Then he had to trudge back down again through the whirling snowstorm. He was presently sitting huddled up and wet in the car with his two assistants, waiting for the lorry to come and pull the vehicle clear. He was also troubled by the fact that Paul Douanier and his assistant were mixed up in the affair. Why was this, he wondered. The trouble was that Paul Douanier's boss was several grades above him and extremely close to the Minister's ear. The possibility had occurred to him that Douanier had got himself involved at his boss's request. If so, he would have to tread carefully. If Follet stepped on his toes, Douanier's boss could easily slip a few words in the ears of people who counted for his promotion, and that would never do. Whatever the case, it indicated that there was more to this case than met the eye. What could that be? He wondered.

The lorry would take a good hour to reach them, if, that is, no one else had skidded and blocked the road lower down, which would not be surprising.

Had the commandant been polite, pleasant and respectful, the Adjudant might have warned him about the approaching snowstorm and the risk of taking that route in such unfavourable weather. He might also have suggested he take the longer but far wider road down via Grenoble, which is infinitely safer in such conditions. However, the man had treated them disdainfully, clearly putting the fact of the missing William down to the total incompetence of the locals.

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He quite obviously considered that this proved them to be barely as proficient as local farmers or, worse still, lumberjacks. This was a bad move for which he was now paying the price.

Huddled in the car listening to the news on the radio and to his driver chatting with Lieutenant Ouiseau, he had seen the best way to proceed. He would spend the night drafting an exceptionally well-written report of the state of events. Commandant Mercier was a past master at preparing such documents for harassed superiors with too much on their plates. He'd give credit where credit was due, but in a way that made his own clarification stand out.

Still, he mused, one had to make a few assumptions. One of those was that the man, who would be his boss if he were promoted, the "Général de Division", actually wanted the case solved. He could not be sure of this, though.

Commandant Mercier knew that the general's orders came from the "Minister des Armées" and that the Minister's came from the President. It was Follet's skill at navigating through such political minefields which had made Mercier such a strong candidate for promotion to the top of the Gendarmerie National.

Sitting there in silence, he was now wondering why the man he had heard so much about in the past was involved again. Doctor William Stone was a British subject, and that made everything more complicated.

What's more, the fact that Stone had already had dealings with a murderer from Finland worried him a good deal.

Not only that, but the whole affair had come to a head in the very same village, Autrans.

No, clearly, something very odd was afoot.

He smiled to himself. That report would be an excellent read for his N+2, N+3, and possibly the President as well.



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At last, he relaxed. Yes. That report might take him all night to write, but it would get his name heard, right to the very top.

Ah! He thought. Every cloud has a silver lining.

He chuckled to himself.

Whether or not the crime was solved, he would make absolutely sure he came out on top.

Commandant Follet snuggled into his thick coat and prepared for the long wait.

### Chapter 10 Called Off

**M**y disappearance was not at all complicated to arrange. I had all sorts of options. To start with, I still had my flat at Meylan, a few kilometres east of Grenoble. The place was usually rented out, but was currently empty, awaiting a complete redecoration project I had planned.

Then there was my parents' home in the tiny village of Burpham in the UK. However, we decided that this would be the first place anyone would look for me, once I was no longer located in Geneva or Courchevel. It would undoubtedly be watched for some time.

I could have stayed with Margaux's parents, in their huge place in Rueil-Malmaison. No one knew we were acquainted, and it would thus not be under scrutiny. However, I was loath to put their well-earned tranquillity at risk.

So, the best choice seemed to be not to move at all, or at least not much.

At Autrans, I knew nearly everybody and was confident that a good number of them would be more than happy to help me out. The spirit of the World War II resistance fighters still lived on in numerous families. It was ingrained in their genes, as had been proved during the business with the trigger-happy Lida Niemela and her ruthless gang. The villagers would also appreciate a bit of adventure, too, to spice up this dead part of the season. In a little over a month, tourists would start appearing, and things would liven up again. There would be numerous broken legs, getting lost in the

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forest, falling down ravines, having car accidents and the like.

However, that fun was still weeks away.

As it was, the option that appealed to me most was to lodge in my old room at the Hotel de La Poste, or what is now known as the "Maison Marie Barnier".

I knew that, were things to become complicated and/or dangerous, I could count on the villagers to lend a helping hand, or on occasion, a helping rifle.

As already mentioned, the hotel rooms have been modified or combined to create various-sized, self-contained holiday flats for. Happily, we were still far from the holiday season, so I had no trouble securing my favourite room. This was located on the second floor, featuring a wide balcony that opened onto the village square. During the renovation, this room had been connected to the adjoining room and now sported a kitchen, a sitting room and a bathroom. Perfect. What's more, being located smack in the centre of Autrans, it gave me a direct view of all the comings and goings.

My next-door neighbour had recovered from the shock of discovering the dead woman and agreed to keep a close eye on my chalet. He would let me know if anyone came sniffing around, which was what we expected would happen.

The only fly in the ointment was that Paul and Margaux had been officially "called off" by the Minister. This was a "First" for Paul, and the fact that this had happened at all was the object of a good deal of debate. The Minister had declared that this investigation was a matter for the police. However, Paul thought that there might also be some internal friction between various services going on in the background.

Paul's boss was already at the very top of his profession, so his unconditional acceptance of the Minister's

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instructions could not be due to fears about endangering promotion prospects. The next step for a person at his level would be into the political arena, but Paul was adamant that the man would never make such a move.

No. Something was clearly afoot.

The man had just phoned Paul, which was rare, and he had stepped out onto the balcony to take the call.

'Paul, are you alone?' asked the man.

'Yes, sir.'

'Good. I'm sorry the Minister has intervened directly. But he insisted on dealing with the question personally.'

'That's very unusual, Sir,' replied Paul.

'Yes. Unusual is the word.'

'Have you any idea why he should have wanted to act in that way, Sir?'

'Not yet, Paul. But, as you can guess, I didn't reach my present position without knowing when one can resist and when it's wisest to toe the line.'

'I understand that, Sir. But Doctor Stone is my friend after all.'

'I am aware of that, Paul. But the Minister is the boss. I had to agree even if I know you can handle the affair perfectly well on your own.'

'But you must admit that there *is* something odd about the whole business, Sir.'

'Officially, it is not my place to have an opinion at all. Unofficially, I agree.'

'And sir, your own experience of Doctor Stone...' Paul paused.

'An excellent man and thoroughly dependable. His wife, too. But our opinions of the man's character don't count. This is officially no longer our case.'

'I believe he is being set up, Sir.'

'Unofficially once more, that looks like a distinct possibility, Paul.' He paused. 'Any ideas why that might be?'

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'No, Sir.'

More than meets the eye. Is that what you're implying?'

'Much more, I'd say, Sir.'

'I'm sorry, Paul, but you've had it from the top. Officially, you are not to dabble in this case.'

'I Know, Sir.'

'And if you were to disobey a direct order from the Minister,' He paused. 'If you disobeyed those orders and it was to become known...'

'Then I'd be in deep waters,'

'It might have a detrimental effect on your future, and that of your assistant too.'

'My future, sir!?'

'I won't be here forever, Paul. I'm sixty-two and the Minister is already putting out feelers, although he doesn't think that I've noticed. Politicians nearly always make the mistake of thinking that they are far too subtle in their dealings for other humans to detect. They forget that people like me are actually paid to notice things that no one else spots. It almost makes me laugh sometimes.'

'I hope you don't think I'm angling for promotion in any way, Sir. Certainly not for your job,' said Paul, a little distressed.

'I know that perfectly well, Paul. And that's what makes you a good candidate, in my eyes.' He chuckled.

'Anyway, it's not my eyes which count. It's also possible that the Prime Minister or the President may have a friend they would like to appoint. Having control over the team dealing with tax evasion might prove useful to someone.'

'Sir.'

'Yes.'

'Being taken off the case, before it has even really started, is extremely annoying. Especially as I don't like the way things are shaping up at all.'

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'No, I'm not surprised, Paul. Perhaps you should take a few days' holiday. A complete break from the stress of the job would do you good. Your assistant, too. Relax a bit.'

'Sir!?' You wouldn't be warning us off, too, would you?'

'Heavens no, Paul!' he said. 'You ought to know me better than that by now. We both know that we already have our marching orders from the Minister.'

'Sorry, Sir.'

'You see, Paul. I have also been glancing through the holiday roster, and I'm a little concerned with what I discovered.'

'Sir?'

'Yes. I noticed that you and your assistant have accumulated a considerable backlog of holidays. Two months to be exact. That's too much.'

'We have had a lot of work on during the past three years...'

'I know. I know. And you both enjoy your work. It's hardly work at all for you two, is it?'

'We both enjoy what we do, Sir.'

'But you understand, Paul,' the man continued. 'I can't go on indefinitely putting these holidays over from year to year. You'll end up with a full year's holidays to take.'

'I'm sorry about that, Sir,' Paul was frowning. He didn't understand why his boss had brought up this subject.

'Now, Paul, I know you're upset about having been very officially taken off this case,' he paused. 'But you understand that it would be extremely bad politics, were you to disobey the orders given you, both for your future and possibly my annual bonus. You understand what I'm saying.'

'Yes, of course,' said Paul, having more and more difficulty seeing where all this was leading.

'Now,' continued his chief, 'As we have nothing terribly pressing at the moment that can not be dealt with by

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others, I'd greatly appreciate you taking this occasion to soak up a little of that backlog of holidays. It would do you both good.'

'But Sir!'

'Sorry, Paul. No buts this time,' he said. 'As of tomorrow morning, I've put you both on indefinite leave.'

'But Sir!' exclaimed Paul.

'And remember, Paul, whatever you do with your free time is of no concern to me or to the department. Is that clear?'

At last, the penny dropped.

'Ah! Yes, of course, Sir. Crystal clear.'

'And of course if ever you were to be contacted by your friend Doctor Stone, who has unexplainably gone missing, it would be your duty to immediately inform the officer now in charge of the investigation.'

'Naturally, Sir. I met him earlier.'

'Commandant Follet?'

'Yes, Sir.'

'Yes. A man on his way up the ladder.'

'I might have guessed, Sir. Not an easy man to work with either, I'd guess.'

'You'd be guessing right, Paul. So, all in all, it's a blessing that you will be having absolutely nothing more to do with this case, isn't it?'

'Indeed, it is, Sir.'

'It would not do to upset Follet. The man needs all the successes he can get to make sure his promotion goes through smoothly. He's slated for Colonel grade.'

'I see, Sir. Not a good time for publicly visible failures.'

'Exactly, Paul.'

'If you'll permit, Sir. Captain Follet didn't strike me as General Grade material.'

'No, Paul. Coming to the top of his ladder, in fact.

Comfortable enough salary though.' The man paused.

'Well, make the best of your holidays, Paul.' There was

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a pause, and the man continued. 'I believe that the place you used to stay at, at Autrans, has been converted into flats. Why not try that? It's nice and quiet at this time of year, I expect. You'd be able to relax... And think about the future.'

'An excellent idea, Sir. I'll certainly think about it.'

'Well, keep me informed of where you are, Paul. Just in case I need to contact you urgently. Especially if you decide to go on a foreign trip. I believe it's a good period to witness the northern lights.'

'Is that so, Sir?'

'So I'm told, Paul.'

With this, the phone went dead. It would have been a pay-as-you-go phone and would already have been ground to bits.

And so, here the three of us were, Paul, Margaux, and I, sitting around the table in the sitting room of the apartment. Two off-work holidaymakers and a dangerous criminal, sipping iced wine while Commandant Follet sent his men scurrying to and fro, searching for me.

My new guitar was propped safely against the sofa, and my laptop was open on the table near the wall. I had brought a bottle of chilled Tariquet from home, and we were sipping it as we discussed what we would cook ourselves to eat.

While Paul was talking with his boss, I went down to see the owner's wife, Mrs Barnier, and had secured two comfortable flats for my friends.

The woman gazed at me, smiling and shook her head, 'More trouble!?' She cried. 'More murders and people chasing you with guns all over again!?' She grinned, 'You really ought to give all that sort of thing up, William.'

'I'll do my best.'



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'Just avoid attracting murderers into my establishment if you can,' she chuckled.

'I'll do my best,' I repeated.

When I returned, Margaux glanced over at the guitar case. 'You'll have to let me listen to the recordings you made in Finland, William,' she said, smiling. 'I'd like to hear how they turned out. Dad might be interested,' She frowned. 'Interested in the songs, not the singer, of course. That contract you signed was certainly bogus, so you're now free to deal with competitors.'

I nodded, 'OK. But it will be a very odd and sad thing to listen to someone who was so violently murdered just after recording them.'

'If that troubles you, William,' she said, leaning over and rubbing my arm. 'It can wait. No hurry. I'm just curious.'

Then something came back to me, 'Oh!'

'Yes,' said Paul.

'I just remembered. That driver guy. He picked up my old guitar and strummed it.'

'Brilliant. He was good, was he?'

I shook my head, 'No. Well, I put it back in its case when I left for Finland.'

Margaux nodded. 'Got it,' she said, smiling. 'So, the police wouldn't have checked it for fingerprints.'

I nodded.

'I'll tell the Gendarmerie,' said Paul, taking out his phone.

'André Mercier will no doubt find a convincing explanation as to why he suddenly remembered you telling him about that detail.'

'Before I disappeared into thin air,' I smiled.

Paul smiled, 'Exactly.'

'If we have both fingerprints and the identikit picture, it'll be strange if we don't turn something up,' added Margaux. 'Oh! By the way, William. You ought to warn Sally about your disappearance,' she smiled. 'She has

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a way of barging in at the wrong moment and creating unprecedented mix-ups.'

## Chapter 11 About Diamonds

**M**argaux left us temporarily the following morning. She declared that if they were to be holed up here for any length of time, she needed warmer winter clothes. She said that she would also need a suitcase in case they had to go anywhere unexpectedly.

When I frowned, she shook her head sadly. 'William! For goodness' sake! We've known each other since we were six or seven years old. Haven't you realised yet that I am a woman?

I shrugged, 'Now that you mention it...'

'Well, William, Women don't go around wearing the same dirty jeans and tee-shirts day in day out until they fall to pieces. We like to change. We like to be clean, to smell nice and to be agreeable to the eye. And don't bother to say that what's important is what's inside one's head.

What's outside is important to women too.'

I laughed, 'You were not a woman when we first met. You were a lanky foreign girl.'

'A lanky foreigner who made you blush red,' she laughed.

'At six years old, I wasn't used to being kissed by unknown French women without even giving my authorisation.'

'You got over that soon enough, if my memory is right.'

Our first encounter was in the front garden of my mother's flower-choked cottage in Burpham, near Arundel.

How her mother, the magnificent Anne-Laure and father, the impressive Joseph, ended up in our tiny out-of-the-

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way village, I never found out. Anyway, they became friends with my parents. This was when I discovered, to my astonishment, that not only did my parents speak fluent French, but that my mother had been born in Sanary-sur-Mer, on the Mediterranean coast of France. Since those days, Margaux had grown into a stunning young woman whom I was proud to know. However, it was the little red-headed Sally who had captured my heart when I was six, although I didn't realise it at the time.

As a consequence of my parents' friendship, I had spent many holidays at their Paris home in Maison Lafitte, one of the expensive western suburbs. Here I was introduced to the daunting circle of elite French families and had been taught by Margaux and her mother how to behave. I also rapidly learned how to avoid being snubbed by the snobbish little daughters and sons of wealthy families.

Margaux took the early coach from Autrans down to the train station at Grenoble. She chose this method of transport because it was unlikely to attract the attention of any watchers. From there, she took the eight-twenty high-speed train to Paris, arriving just after midday. She sent me a text message: "Arrived OK, Mum sends her love."

Hardly an hour later, Paul's phone rang. He glanced over the table at me, 'Margaux!' he nodded.

'Hello, Margaux. Everything OK?'

He listened and frowned, 'Oh! That's interesting.' There was another pause, 'Yes, it is odd. What do you propose to do?'

Another pause.

'Yes. A good idea. Your mother is excellent at that sort of thing. Make sure no one suspects what you're really up to, though.'

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He pulled a face, 'Sorry. Yes, of course, I know you know how to be subtle. You'll have to stay over tonight, then, I suppose.' He listened for some time. 'OK. See you tomorrow, about midday then.'

He laid his phone down on the table and looked at me with a wry smile, 'Margaux has turned up something rather interesting.'

'Ah!'

'She's been chatting about jewellery with her mother,' he said.

I frowned, 'Her mother rarely wears jewellery,' I said.

Then I smiled, remembering one of the impromptu etiquette lessons she gave me regularly about dress codes and behaviour. I must have been about sixteen at the time, but I've never forgotten any of these instructive glimpses into the workings of her mind.

"William," she said, "A plain woman can wear as much jewellery as she pleases, because it draws attention away from her plainness. A very wealthy woman often wears a lot of jewellery to indicate her status, especially if she also happens to be unattractive. But William, a beautiful woman, wears only the bare minimum of jewellery as it might draw attention away from her beauty. And that would be counterproductive, wouldn't it?"

Margaux rarely wore jewellery either, for the same reason as her mother.

I mentioned this to Paul, who smiled, 'During their discussion, Margaux mentioned the earrings and ring that were stolen from the family in Paris,' he said. 'She did not mention their role in the present case but simply hinted that there was something odd going on.'

I frowned, 'And Anne-Laure knew something?'

Paul nodded, 'She knows the people. Not intimately, but she has met them a good number of times. She doesn't like them much, it seems.'

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I smiled. This happened often because Anne-Laure was a highly accomplished but basically spontaneous woman. That doesn't mean she would blurt out exactly what she thought, but she did tend to say more of what she felt than other women of her class.

Paul went on, 'Margaux showed her mother the photos of the stolen earrings and ring and apparently her mother had never seen the owner wearing them.'

I shrugged, 'Is there anything odd about that?'

'Apparently enough to set Anne-Laure thinking.'

'Why?'

'Because, according to her, the woman in question is a terrible snob. Anne-Laure is adamant that if the woman had jewellery of that value, all of Paris would know about it. She would have worn it on every occasion possible.'

'Ah,' I smiled, 'So she must have been both wealthy and very ugly.'

Paul chuckled, 'That's what I gathered to be Anne-Laure's opinion.'

'So?' I asked.

'Both Margaux and her mother find this extremely out of character. The only explanation that comes to mind is that the stuff was stolen very shortly after it was purchased and before she had time to show off with it in public.'

'So, where's the problem?' I asked.

'Well, William. During the investigation, the husband told the police that the jewellery had been in the family for many years.'

'Ah! I see. Yes, Odd.'

'And, William. Margaux just pointed out that that sort of loss usually causes quite a stir amongst the specialist insurance companies.'

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I nodded, 'Yes. That must have been extremely painful to one of those bloodsuckers,' I smiled. 'They can afford to pay out a bit from time to time.'

'Well, William. We heard nothing from that sector. As though they had not claimed insurance payments.'

'Possibly they were not insured,' I suggested.

'Not insure jewels worth twenty million euros. That's not very likely.'

'Not wearing them in public might explain that' I said.

'Then why buy them in the first place?'

'Investment, perhaps,' I said.

Paul shook his head, 'Out of character, says Margaux.'

I frowned, 'Now that is odd. Perhaps they bought them cheap and intended to sell them for a big profit,' I said.

'The family in question are well off,' said Paul. Their finances are in excellent health, too. That was checked. They're in no need of money.'

'Odder still.' I said.

'That's what Margaux thinks. She has a suspicion that there is something unusual about the whole affair. And as it links into your part in the affair, she'd like to find out where those diamonds came from.'

'Does she suspect that in truth they didn't belong to the woman who claims that they were stolen from her?' I asked.

'Yes, that's one possibility, and there are others.'

'And what can she do about it?' I asked.

Paul chuckled, 'Her mother is very well known and knows all the places where jewellery of that quality can be purchased in Paris. They intend to "do the rounds" this afternoon with the photos. They'll pretend to be interested in purchasing something similar.'

I shook my head and chuckled, 'And find out if the articles were purchased here. I presume that the better Parisian jewellers keep a careful eye on what the competitors have on offer. Someone is certain to have

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seen or heard of them if they have been on the market in Paris.'

Paul nodded, 'Exactly, William. Those people are professionals and will also know if the jewels have been marketed by any of their European colleagues.'

'And so,' I said. 'Anne-Laure and Margaux will know before tonight where those earrings came from.'

Paul nodded. 'And that might lead us somewhere. Who knows. In any case, it will clear up one small element of the case.'

'Yep.' I said, 'Good old Anne-Laure.'

Well, at about six o'clock that evening, Margaux phoned again.

They had visited all the major jewellers and some specialised antique dealers too.

They had found absolutely no trace of the diamonds.

None of the specialists had ever seen those earrings or the diamond ring.

Margaux said that this was extremely odd because jewellery of that value did not appear out of thin air.

They had come to the conclusion that the articles were either purchased from an unknown and possibly illegal source, which seemed out of character, or had been passed on to them with the specific objective of having them stolen again.

Paul thought about this idea for a moment, then shrugged.

'William,' he said, 'Think about this for a moment.'

'I'll do my best,' I replied.

'First, think about wealth. Take Margaux's father, for example. He's very well off, isn't he?'

I shrugged, 'Seems to be.'

'Yes. But what exactly does "wealthy" mean, William?' I pulled a face, and Paul smiled. 'That's part of our job, you see. Now, what does a man like Joseph earn?'

'A lot, I guess.'



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'And what is a lot?' he paused. 'You probably know that the CEO of a successful big company can earn in the region of one million euros a year and that can climb to five million or even more in some cases.'

I shrugged, 'That seems reasonable.'

'A great deal of money for most of us,' He nodded. 'Now, assuming then that this person manages to remain at the top for ten to fifteen years, he might manage to put away thirty or forty million. A huge sum for you and me.'

'Yes,' I agreed, not quite seeing what he wanted to prove with his explanation.

'Then would you think that a man with that amount in the bank would go and spend half of his hard-earned savings on jewels. That's what the earrings and ring were worth. Probably more.'

'No. Probably not.' I got the gist of what he was thinking about.

'Now.' Continued Paul, 'If the man was not an employee but the owner of a prosperous international company, he might be worth a hundred times that. Several Millard's in French or Billions in English.'

I nodded.

'Now that sort of man would be more likely to be tempted by the idea of buying his wife jewels in the ten million euros range.' He paused. 'That wouldn't make much of a hole in his savings.'

I shrugged, 'Or bullied by the wife into a bit of extravagance.'

Paul nodded again. 'So, we need to know in which category the family were. And where the jewels came from. That will help us, I think.'

'But we can't do that directly because you're officially on holiday,' I said. 'And off the case.'

'No, but my boss can set someone on it. For the moment, no one else has guessed that those diamonds have

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anything to do with the case. Only Margaux and I and my Boss know that they weren't stage jewellery.' 'Great,' I said. 'So, you think that possibly the diamonds are the key?'

He shrugged, 'There are rather a lot of coincidences.' 'I agree. So, this Parisian family might be involved in some way.'

'Exactly,' he frowned. 'But involved in what?'

By the time Margaux got back from Paris the following day, we already had the information we were looking for.

Margaux stopped off at the little supermarket on the village square before coming up to my flat, and Paul had taken it on himself to cook our meal. A delicious aroma of grilling onions was wafting from the kitchen, and I had already set the table and uncorked a bottle of "everyday" Côte du Rhône.

Paul's boss had contacted the service involved with investigating the Jewel theft. As the head of the French tax evasion service, he had no trouble obtaining full cooperation from his counterpart. He had sent Paul a copy of the official invoice that had been presented as proof of purchase of the Diamonds. They had been bought from a dealer in Geneva. The police also sent a transcript of the interview the Swiss police had had with the dealers. The owner admitted to having sold the diamonds to the family and showed the photos from their catalogue as proof that they had actually held them. They would not, however, say from whom the jewels had been originally purchased. The Swiss police believed that the dealer was merely acting as a go-between, pocketing ten per cent for his trouble, of course. However, they were unable to prove this.

'That at least proves that the jewels were not illegally purchased,' said Paul.

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I called out to him through the kitchen door, 'Did your boss check up on the finances of that family?'

'He did,' came the reply. 'As I suspected, their finances are more than healthy. They are very well off.'

'Ah!' frowned Margaux. 'That doesn't surprise me, seeing the clothes the wife wears.' She paused. 'As mum says, they distract from her exceptional ugliness.'

I laughed out loud. 'Women!'

'But' continued Paul, ignoring this, 'Once again, they do not belong to the category which might be expected to fork out such a huge sum on jewels. It would constitute a significant chunk of their savings. I can easily imagine them spending that amount on a luxury villa on the Mediterranean coast in which to spend their later years, but not on diamond earrings for madam to show off with.'

'Interesting,' smiled Margaux. 'That will please mum to know.'

'Don't tell her for the moment, Margaux,' said Paul, sticking his head out of the kitchen.

'Naturally,' smiled the young woman.

'The Plot thickens,' I sighed.

Margaux nods, 'Yes. There's definitely something odd going on behind the scenes.' She stood and walked to the window that opened onto the balcony and gazed out. 'At least this place is not being watched,' she said.

Paul appeared carrying a tray. He dished out thick slices of veal and piles of crispy vegetables to each of us. I poured out some wine for each of us, and we settled down to eat.

After a few mouthfuls, I glanced up. 'This is delicious, Paul.'

'My Grandmother's recipe,' he smiled.

Margaux and I nodded and continued eating.

'Paul?' I asked after a slight pause.

'Yes,'

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'No one apart from us and your boss has any idea that Lyndsay Blache was carrying priceless diamonds, then.'

'No.'

'Or that I was transporting bags full of the same.'

'No.'

'Or that the girl's recording contract was fake.'

'No.'

'All they know is that I was with her the morning before she was killed, and that her mother was killed in my house, while I was still in Finland.'

'That's it.'

'So, this should be treated as a murder investigation.'

'Yes.'

'So why does the prime minister and probably the president too, intervene?'

'Exactly, William,' said Paul.

'So, the obvious explanation is that there must be a good reason for you two, who are known to know me well, being called off.'

Margaux nodded, 'To leave you to fend for yourself.'

'And get stuck in a Finnish jail and accused of double murder and drug trafficking,' I frowned.

'That's about the size of it,' said Paul, putting down his fork and picking up his glass.

Margaux sipped some of her wine and pulled a face, 'Not quite the same quality as yesterday, William.'

'No, I reserve vintage for special occasions.'

'But there's a significant difference between vintage and...' she paused for effect, 'Between vintage and this liquid.'

I laughed, 'You buy for tonight then.'

'Good idea,' nodded Paul, raising his eyebrows.

I glanced across the table, 'It looks like someone wants me out of the way for a certain time and also wants to avoid you two helping me to defend myself.'

'Agreed, William. My analysis coincides with yours.'

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'You've been set up,' adds Margaux. 'And someone wants that to remain unknown.'

'For a certain time,' says Paul. 'The duration of which we do not know.'

Margaux sipped some more wine and pulled a face again, 'How much did you pay for this, William?'

'Can't remember. I just picked up the first bottle which came to hand as I passed the wine in the supermarket. The salesman told me that this is what most of the lumberjacks take with them,' I smiled.

'Very funny,' she shook her head. 'I'm not drinking this.' At this, she jumped up, put on her coat, and disappeared through the door.'

Paul shrugged, 'There goes an impetuous young lady who has been brought up on non-lumberjack lubricant.'

Not five minutes later, she was back, 'This one cost at least ten times more than whatever you served up.' She handed it to me. 'Open this, please.' She handed me the bottle and grabbed the other. 'And this goes down the sink.'

I opened my eyes wide but did what I was told.

Some women know how to get what they want.

'The wine won't be the right temperature, you know,' I said.

She shot me a rather haughty look, 'Even with ice cubes in it, it will be infinitely better than your Lumberjack juice.'

We all laughed, and I poured some wine for the three of us.

'Ah! Now that's better,' she sighed, taking a sip from her glass.

'Now, William,' said Paul. 'We need to make sure you are not found. We need to set up a false trail.'

I smiled, 'and how does one go about that?' I asked.

'Do you, by any chance, have an American Express card for when you travel?'

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'Yes.'

'Is it on a separate account?'

'It is.'

'And I presume there's money in the account.'

'Not a fortune but enough for hotel fees and restaurants and so forth.'

'Great. Can you lend it to me?' he said.

'Lend it!'

'I'll get one of my pals to use it in a certain number of towns, to create a false path. The man knows how to do that, without leaving any traces. I'll ask him to organise things so that it looks as though you really have been to Courchevel, but are now heading across the Alps into Italy and thence to Greece. I'll leave the details up to him. I'll tell him I'm giving him a week's holiday. He'll enjoy that. Greece at this time of year is very pleasant.' Paul smiled and chuckled. 'I think we ought to give our friend Captain Follet and his men a bit of exercise.'

Margaux smiled, 'You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Paul.'

'I know, I know. But the man will need all the exercise he can get, if he's going to spend the remainder of his working life in a colonel's leather chair.'

'It's Commandant Follet, Paul, not Captain. He'd be extremely annoyed to have been demoted in your mind.'

'Oops. Another inexcusable "faux pas". I really must be more careful with official titles,' he smiled ruefully.

'And, Paul... Once your pal has enjoyed a lovely free holiday and, in the process, has emptied my bank account...?'

'I'll get it filled up again, William,' He smiled. 'Don't worry.'

I laughed, and sipped some of Margaux's wine, 'Ah... Yes, Margaux. This is certainly more what the doctor ordered.'

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'Thank you, William. You'll do better next time, I hope.'

She gazed at me. 'If not, I'll tell mum.'

'Oh No! Anything but that,' I laughed. 'She'll scold me and lecture me for hours on end.'

'That'll do you good, William,' she said. 'One needs a full reset from time to time.'

Paul finished his meal and put down his knife and fork. He leant down and picked up his bag. Opening it, he handed me a bank card in his name. 'And William. I would like you to use this up here for the moment,' he noted the code on a slip of paper and handed it to me. 'That'll also give the impression that I am still staying here.'

'You are staying here,' I said.

'Was... staying here.'

'Margaux looked up, 'What's the plan, Paul?'

The man smiled, 'I think I ought to go and have a chat with my old friend Mister Seppa.'

'In Finland?' she frowned.

'Exactly. I'll see what he can turn up for me.'

'If he wants to help,' she said.

'The only way to find out is to go and ask. And Men like Seppa don't communicate via telephone or e-mail,' said Paul.

Margaux frowned, 'And what do we do, while you're having fun with your old friend?'

Paul smiled, 'You find Blache.'

### Chapter 12 : Follet Investigates

Commandant Follet sat gazing across his desk at his right-hand man, Lieutenant Ouiseau. For the last few weeks, he had adopted the behaviour he expected would be required of him if promoted to the grade of Colonel. He'd then be four steps above Ouiseau instead of two. However, in the coming reshuffle, the Lieutenant now appeared to be very well placed for promotion too. His move would be to the grade of Captain, so there might be a status quo after all.

Anyway, Follet's new communication method meant he did not share things with Ouiseau as transparently as he usually did.

This was weighing on him at present, because the man often provided him with valuable suggestions when they discussed cases together. He had a quick mind and a way of rapidly seeing through the complexities of any situation and pinpointing the essential facts. An invaluable man, in fact.

For this reason, Follet was wondering whether he should not put off his strict "need-to-know" methods until he was actually and officially promoted.

As it was, it was Ouiseau who broke the ice, 'It's a bit odd, commandant,' he said.

'What's odd?'

'The instructions, sir.'

Follet sighed and gazed once more at the message he'd received from the divisional general, his present N+4.

They had been formally ordered to concentrate all their



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efforts on locating Doctor William Stone. At the same time, they were ordered to drop tracking down both the man passing himself off as Monsieur Blache, his driver and also the Man Grubber. That could wait, apparently. Lastly, the meeting at my house, what it was about and who took part in it was entirely off bounds.

Lieutenant Ouseau shrugged, 'We've enough men available to do all the jobs at the same time, Commandant.'

'I know that as well as you, Lieutenant,' He sighed. 'But those are the Major's orders.'

'The Major's sir!?' he exclaimed with a raised eyebrow.

'That's right. Right from the top.'

'It's highly unusual. I mean the order coming directly from so high up,' he said.

'It was the minister last time,' smiled Follet, 'That was two more steps further up.'

'Big trouble in the air,' frowned Ouseau. 'Political too by the sound of things.'

Follet sighed a long, sad sigh. 'That's what's worrying about it.' He blew out his cheeks. 'At any other time, it would have stimulated me and I'd no doubt have felt extremely flattered to be contacted by such illustrious people.'

'That's understandable, sir.'

'But why now? Just while our promotions are being vetted.

The documents may even already be lying on the Major's desk awaiting signature.'

Ouseau pulled a face, 'I agree, Sir. Just when everything has quietened down for once and the service is running smoothly.'

Follet snorted, 'And there's nothing we can do about it.'

'Do you have to report back directly to the Major, Sir?'

'No. But he wants that damn conceited assistant of his in the loop. All communications are to be copied to him.'

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'A failure would have a detrimental effect on our respective chances of promotion,' sighed Ouiseau. Follet blew out his cheeks, 'I'd have used stronger words to describe the situation.'

'As you said, Sir, there's nothing we can do about it.' He lifted the pile of files resting on his knees and placed them on the desk in front of his chief. 'I got out the files concerning Stone, Sir. They're certainly worth a look.'

'Know your enemy, Eh!'

'Yes, Sir.'

'Anything interesting?' sighed Follet.

Ouiseau pulled a face, 'Unexpectedly eye-opening, Sir.'

'Ah!'

'Yes, Sir. A man with a highly unusual past. What we used to call a colourful Past.'

Follet frowned. 'Can you give me a summary, or do I need to read it all myself?'

'It'd be wise to go through it yourself, Sir. But I can give you a short version, if you like.'

'Long, is it?'

'Long and complicated, Sir. Unusually so?'

Follet nodded, 'Some coffee while we're going through it then?'

Ouiseau nodded in agreement.

Follet called through the open door, 'Joseph. Do you think you could rustle up a couple of big mugs of coffee, please?'

The man looked up and gave a thumbs-up sign, stood and left the office in search of the drink.

'Let's have it then,' said Follet, nodding to the Lieutenant.

'Well, Sir. Stone is a Brit. He has a Chemistry degree from the University of Southampton. Then a doctor's degree from Grenoble, followed by a job at one of the big consultancy firms. Grenoble too. Apparently extremely good at his job.'

'Married?'

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'Yes, Sir. To an academic, too. A respected professor of History, with a chair at Oxford University, if you please.'

'Phew! A lot of brains in the family then,' said Follet as he was handed his coffee.

'Yes, sir.' Ouseau sipped some of his coffee, 'Thanks, Joseph.'

The man smiled and left them to their work. He, too, was hoping for promotion in the coming weeks.

'Any children?'

'Yes, sir, two, still very young.'

'So, what's a boffin like that doing writing songs and living in an isolated place like Autrans. I would have expected him to be rushing about the globe making piles of money.'

'Well, Sir. He used to, but apparently, the file says he took a year's sabbatical, to try his hand as a songwriter, and never went back.'

'That's astonishing, Ouseau!'

A wry smile spread across the Lieutenant's face, 'If that was the only astonishing thing in these files, Sir.'

'Ah!' frowned Follet. 'You'd best go on.'

Ouseau nodded. 'Stone didn't give up chemistry. He continued to work on a freelance basis from his place at Autrans. His wife did more or less the same thing. However, her professorial contract requires her to be present at Oxford often.'

'And the kids?' asked Follet.

'Often lumped onto Grandparents, Sir.'

'Ah. Well, that's certainly far from a classical background, but nothing extraordinary.'

'No, Sir. The strange stuff comes after.'

'Does it!'

Ouseau nods. 'Our doctor Stone has been mixed up in some extremely odd affairs. Interestingly too, that man Douanier and his assistant crop up in all of them.'

## The Songwriter

Follet frowned, 'What do we know about the man Douanier?'

'Apart from him having an impressive list of extremely high-level and powerful acquaintances, Sir?'

Follet sighed, 'If I had a fraction of those, I wouldn't be sitting here worrying about promotion prospects.'

'No, Sir. Well, Paul Douanier is head of a special tax evasion Group directly under the orders of the Minister of Finance.'

'Why doesn't that surprise me... And what does he actually do for a living?' asked Follet.

'His job is tracking down people who have secreted away large sums of money in tax havens,' Sir. 'Money which should normally be held in French banks and paying tax to the French government.'

Follet nodded, 'What sort of sums are we talking about? Millions?'

'Oh no, sir!' Ouseau chuckled? 'Much more than that. Apparently, there are presently between five hundred and nine hundred billion euros hidden away like that. All making money for tax haven banks. His job is to get it back.'

'Nine hundred billion!?' gasped Follet.

'Yes, Sir. Billions, not Millions.'

'Great Gods. No wonder he's got so many contacts.'

What went through Follet's mind was that a man dealing with sums like that must be drawing one hell of an annual salary. The sort of salary that would make even a Major's salary pale by comparison.

Ouseau continued, 'The estimated income loss for the French economy has been estimated at nearly one hundred billion euros. In fact, if all the sums secreted away were where they ought to be held—in French banks, Sir—there would be no need at all to search for ways of reducing state expenditure. The entire system

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would run perfectly smoothly. The national debt could be soaked up quite rapidly, too, Sir.'

Follet frowned 'All because humans are damn greedy, Ouseau. What on earth can it matter if you have one billion or two, or even twenty? You can't spend it all in a lifetime, anyway, can you?'

'No, Sir. You'd have to spend forty million euros a year for fifty years running to get through two billion.' He smiled. 'That's a hundred thousand for pocket money every day.'

Follet shook his head, 'Nine hundred billion euros! It defies the imagination.'

Ouseau nodded, 'Well, that's what Paul Douanier does, Sir.'

Follet sighed. 'And what about Stone's affairs then?'

Lieutenant Ouseau closed the top folder and opened the second. 'Well, the first affair on record was that business of the gold ingots hidden at the outbreak of the last world war. By a Parisen businessman, Sir.'

Follet nods, 'Ah, yes, I remember. They discovered it stacked up in a big recess constructed under a water trough somewhere. Quite incredible. Sitting there for eighty years right under everyone's noses.'

'Exactly, Sir. And it was our Doctor Stone who found it.' 'Really!?'

'Yes, Sir. And at Autrans too, believe it or not. Apparently, that's when he decided to take up residence there following the coup.'

'Well! Well! Well!' said Follet.

'And Paul Douanier and his assistant were involved too, Sir.'

Follet was following this carefully, 'Ah. I see. Tax evasion. Yes, of course. I can understand that. Go on.'

'Well, Sir, a gang led by a woman from Finland was also after the gold. And she almost got it, too. Nearly killed Stone in the process. Twice apparently.'

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'So, we now have our link with Finland, then,' said Follet.

'Yes, Sir.'

'What more do you have?'

'Well, Sir. The Finn was captured and imprisoned with a life sentence in Finland, but someone helped her escape, via Russia. Amongst other things, she went after Stone and his wife, looking for revenge.'

'I have more and more difficulty coming to terms with all this, Lieutenant. Having met Stone, I mean.'

'I agree, Sir. He doesn't strike one as the Buccaneering type. But there it is.'

'What happened?'

'The affair is very complicated, Sir. Political rivalry in Finland. Multiple murders, Mafia involvement, a counterfeit oil painting network, Mysterious explosions in the Belledonne mountains and finally the attempted murder of Stone's wife at Marseille.'

'Great gods, Ouiseau!' Gasp'd Follet.

'That's not all, Sir.'

'Not all!?'

'No, Sir. Then came the Canadian mass murder affair. The worst ever on the American continent.'

'The What!?'

Lieutenant Ouiseau sipped some of his coffee and glanced at the harassed face of his superior.

'Do you think the minister is aware of all this, Sir?'

'Of course he is.' Follet frowned. 'Well, I damned well hope so. Tell me the rest, please.'

'Well, Sir. A half-maddened lover of a ruthless, scheming Canadian woman framed Stone, Sir. He held the woman responsible for the deaths of his two children. He knew Stone to be working on the standards committee that regulates the handling of certain extremely toxic gases. The man decided that as a fitting revenge, he'd organise the murder of nearly five hundred people, including all the woman's friends,

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family and relatives, leaving her alive and alone. For this, he used a nerve gas Stone had studied. It is called Agent Vx, Sir, horrible stuff. A litre of Agent Vx could wipe out the entire population of a place as big as Grenoble.’<sup>3</sup>

‘He didn’t get away with it, I hope.’

Ouiseau frowned. ‘His plan worked perfectly, Sir. What is more, those killed formed a large part of the upper-class Jewish community of the region, of which the woman was part.’

‘What!?’ exclaimed Follet.

‘Yes, Sir. The result was that the Mossad went after Stone, as did the Canadian police and several other groups whose interest it was for Stone to be eliminated.’

‘Great Gods!’

‘And somehow or other, he survived and proved his innocence too, Sir,’ he paused then went on. ‘You might remember the name of the American detective who helped Stone prove his innocence.’

Follet shook his head, ‘No, can’t say I do.’

‘The most expensive around, they say, Sir. Fennel. Dike Fennel. Odd name...’

‘I just don’t believe it, Ouiseau. All this is just too incredible for words.’

‘On the face of it, yes, Sir. But it’s all perfectly true and clearly documented by both French, Canadian, Finnish and British police services.’

‘Bloody Hell!’ cried Follet. ‘And we’re landed with the latest of this man’s wild adventures! Murders included.’

‘It’s difficult to imagine being landed with a worse case, sir,’ said Ouiseau.

‘My God!’ groaned Follet.

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<sup>3</sup> See « Agent Vx » by the same author

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'The man seems to be a sort of magnet for international madmen, Sir.'

Follet shook his head sadly, 'And Mad women too.'

'Exactly, sir.'

Follet pulled a face, 'And we're searching for the man because he is accused of murdering a young woman in Finland, who had just finished recording some of his own songs there for a major French record company.'

'While the girl's mother was shot in his home at Autrans,' added Ouisseau.

'Given his past, this smells like one more frame-up. What do you think?'

Ouisseau nodded, 'That's what it looks like.'

'If so. Why go into hiding?' asked Follet.

'Either he really did kill the girl, or perhaps he's hiding from someone else? The person who carried out the murder.'

'That's a possibility. So why does that man, Douanier, and his assistant turn up so conveniently?'

'No idea, Sir. Maybe Stone called him in to help.'

'So where is Douanier now? He's been called off the case.'

'My information is that he left Autrans and flew directly to Helsinki. That's in Finland.'

'I know where Helsinki is. What on earth is the man doing there?'

'Not investigating the case, of course Sir,' smiled Ouisseau.

Follet sighed. 'Naturally, as he's been called off by the PM.' He sighed, 'And his assistant?'

'Disappeared, Sir.'

'How did I guess that...'

'There's always the possibility that the person who killed the girl and the mother has finished the job and killed Stone too, Sir,' said Ouisseau.

'If so, why haven't we found the body. They didn't go to the trouble of hiding the others, did they?'



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'Perhaps that was to send out a warning to some third party, Sir.'

'Follet nodded, 'Yes. That's a possibility. Something to do with this meeting we are not supposed to investigate.'

'As I said, Sir. There seems to be politics in the air.'

Follet sighed and pulled a face.

As they sat mulling this over, a gendarme knocked at the door.

'Come in. Got something for us, Pierre?'

'Yes, Sir. We've got some feedback about Doctor Stone's bank card use.'

'Already!?' said Follet. 'That was fast. Well, let's have it.'

'Well, Sir. As we were informed, he does seem to have been at Courchevel. His card was used there several times.'

'Well, that's something. Any idea as to where he is now?'

'Yes, Sir. The card was used later in northern Italy. Venice, in fact. Then the day after that, on the motorway in Croatia. He might be heading towards Greece, Sir. It looks as though he is heading for a hideout somewhere down that way.'

Follet glanced at the large-scale world map on his wall.

'He can go a very, very long way from there. Who knows, he might even be heading for India.'

'India, Sir!' exclaimed Ouiseau.

'Just an example, Lieutenant. There are so many possible destination countries down that way.'

'But if he keeps using his card, we can trace him,' said the gendarme.

Follet shrugged, 'If... he keeps using it? He could easily decide to disappear by setting us a false trail down that way, and then double back. Or even hide on one of the Greek islands.' He paused. 'There are far worse places to disappear into for the winter season,' the Commandant nodded.

That's a very long drive, though, Sir,' said the gendarme.

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'Follet nodded. 'Yes, but you wouldn't find it so long if you had a life sentence for murder hanging over you.'

'Or a murderer after your blood,' added Lieutenant Ouiseau.

The gendarme pulled a face. 'No, sir, I wouldn't.'

Follet frowned, 'What about information from the frontier police?'

The gendarme frowned, 'Well, Sir. It appears that he must be travelling under a false identity. There is no mention of Doctor Stone from any of the frontier crossings into Switzerland, Italy, Slovakia or Croatia. That implies that he must be carrying a very good, forged passport to be able to do that.'

Follet smiled, 'That's very interesting. Who would have thought that of a simple chemist from Autrans...'

'Yes, Sir.'

'Well, thank you, Pierre. Please keep me informed if you receive any further information.'

The man nodded and left them.

'Sir?' asked Ouiseau.

'Yes.'

'Do you think it would be worthwhile contacting the record company in Paris?'

Follet thought about this and nodded, 'To see if there might be something in the contract conditions which would help us, you mean?'

'Yes, Sir. And in that way, we could also investigate the man Gruber, without giving the impression that we were doing so.'

'Good thinking, Lieutenant. Yes, we can start with that. If the man's name really is Gruber, of course, which I'm more and more inclined to doubt.'

'Would you like me to deal with it, Sir?'

Follet nodded, 'Yes. Personally, though, and as soon as you can.'

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'That'll be immediately, Sir,' smiled Ouseau. 'I'll get on with it straight away.'

## Chapter 13 : Sophie Lemone

**M**argaux glanced at me over our breakfast table.  
'Any idea of how we go about finding the elusive  
Monsieur Blache, William?'

'My mother said it was bad for my digestion trying to have  
ideas before finishing breakfast,' I replied.'

'She told you that when you were six years old.'

'They say that good, sound advice is timeless, Margaux,' I  
replied.

Margaux stood up and grabbed my jumbo mug of coffee,  
'I can help you finish breakfast rapidly if that'll help.'

I made a move to grab the mug, but she slipped around to  
the far side of the table.

I sighed and returned to my place, 'All right, I'll apply my  
little grey cells to the case before us.'

'That's better,' she smiled, handing me back my cup.

'Well, we could ask Adjudant Mercier to put out some  
feelers.'

Margaux shook her head, 'He'd have to be very careful as  
the case has been officially handed over to

Commandant Follet. Follet is seven rungs higher up the  
ladder and will not appreciate anyone rocking his little  
boat, what with a big promotion on the horizon.'

'No. That's certain,' I agreed. 'What Follet needs is for the  
case to be solved by his own team and as promptly as  
possible. There are certainly other names on the list of  
candidates for promotion, and a slip-up might just tip  
the balance in the wrong direction. For him, that is.'

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'He wouldn't thank the man that did the boat rocking,'

Margaux raised her perfectly trimmed eyebrows to underline this comment.

'Mercier could at least call Follet's number two, Lieutenant Ouseau,' I said. 'The man might let drop a name, if they'd found out. That would be more than enough to be getting on with. Paul's boss could do the rest easily, I expect.'

'Yes. He could do that without arousing anyone's attention,' nodded the young woman.

'Can't you dig about in your department's database, yourself and see if you can turn something up?' I asked.

Margaux shook her head. 'Too risky,' she sighed. 'I already thought about that. The trouble is that we'd have to log in, and any number of people in admin have access to that information. Log-ins are checked daily. The entire department will know by now that we've been put on enforced leave. And naturally, there's always some clever employee who will consider that my Logging in while on holiday is unusual and start asking questions. Worse still, if he were to mention the fact to a colleague, heaven knows where the information will end up.'

I shrugged and finished crunching on my toast. Then an idea came to me, and my face lit up. Margaux noticed this.

'Ah Ha! Eureka!' she smiled. 'I do believe that the famous Doctor William Stone has just had an innovative idea. Am I mistaken?'

I laughed, 'No. But it's not such a brilliant idea really.'

'And perhaps Doctor Stone would like to share that idea.'

'He would,' I put down my mug. 'Why not ask Sophie. Sophie Lemone, I mean. I bet she could help. Or at least her mysterious and elusive chief could.'

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Margaux gave me a thumbs-up sign. 'Of course. Yes.

Why on earth didn't I think of that?'

'Because, Margaux, you're not an internationally renowned and brilliant research scientist,' I smiled. 'It's as simple as that.'

'Of course, of course. What was I thinking of?

I nodded to her, 'That is what internationally renowned and brilliant research scientists do for a living, Margaux.

That's what sets them apart from the rest of humanity.'

Margaux humoured me, 'I forgot. Silly me. But the idea is great. Have you got her phone number?'

I nodded and took out my phone to find the number.

'I'd better call,' said Margaux. 'One never knows. Perhaps your phone is already under surveillance.'

I frowned, 'Really!?'

She shrugged.

'Yours might be under surveillance, too,' I said.

She shook her head. 'Oh no,' she smiled. 'Not this one.'

I gave her a quizzical look, and she shrugged back. 'Got that number then? I'd better send a text message. She probably won't recognise this number.'

'Why should she recognise your number anyway?' I asked.

'Oh!' Margaux was evasive. 'She just might. That's all.'

Sophie and I had met at the very beginning of the adventure, which led to the crazy hunt for almost a billion euros of gold ingots.

I had been invited to an open day at the HQ of the French music copyright association in Paris. The pompous little man who had received us in a vast office overlooking Paris had immediately aggravated me by his excessively condescending manner. I had reacted extremely badly and said what I had on my mind. This was stupid and not at all my usual way of behaving. Anyway, the silly remarks I made created an entirely unexpected effect. They gave several people listening

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the impression that I might know something important to them.

They suspected I had information about the whereabouts of a vast hidden stock of gold ingots.

The stylish and highly polished Mademoiselle Sophie Lemone was one of those people. Like Margaux, the young woman was always perfectly and expensively turned out and invariably sported an elegant little Rolex watch which was worth more than my entire recording studio and my guitars together.

She worked for an occult international finance company, which the finance departments of countries around the world had been trying to track down for several years.

However, Sophie's boss, a woman in her early sixties, and her wide-ranging organisation were always two or three steps ahead of them.

On that occasion, Sophie, however, had been requested by her invisible chief to cooperate with us in our combat against the terrible Finn, Lida Niemela.<sup>4</sup>

Lida Niemela wanted the gold to bribe half the minor politicians in Europe and then to commit crimes we only dared guess at.

Sophie Lemone was a slim, disarmingly frail-looking beauty with blond hair expertly cut in Garçon style. However, that frailty was only skin deep, and woe betide anyone who tried to take advantage of it.

I liked her a great deal, as did my Wife, Sally. Sophie had once called Sally my red-haired tornado.

She had said that, like a tornado, it takes a particular set of conditions to start her off. However, once set off, the damage caused defies imagination.

The ruthless criminal Lida Niemela learnt that, to her disadvantage, when she pointed her gun in my direction a few years ago... The act was witnessed by

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<sup>4</sup> *The full story can be found in the Novel "BAIT" by the same author*

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many locals from Autrans, including several rugged lumberjacks. This was before we married, and from that moment on, they were cautious not to offend her in any way.

Not more than ten minutes after Margaux sent her text message, her phone rang.

'Is this a social call, Margaux?' asked Sophie.

'Not exactly.'

'OK. I'll phone back on another phone.'

There was a short pause, and Margaux's phone rang again.

As always, Sophie wanted to get straight to the point without wasting time. This habit had off-balanced and unnerved a good number of would-be boyfriends over the years. Perhaps the word "suiters" would be better. In any case, it saved them from wasting their time on hopeless approaches.

'I hear you're at Autrans, with Paul and William again.'

She said as an introduction.

Margaux's eyebrows shot up. 'How on earth do you know that, Sophie?'

I could imagine Sophie making a tiny and immensely elegant shrug of her shoulders accompanied by the slightest shake of her head.

'We keep our eyes on the news.'

'News!?' cried Margaux. 'What news?'

Sophie ignored this, 'Is something up?' she paused. 'I heard that Paul was off to Finland. This isn't something to do with that Lida Niemela, is it?'

Margaux shook her head in astonishment, 'How do you know Paul's in Finland?'

'The news again,' said Sophie and I could almost see the wry smile she must have allowed herself.

'Well,' said Margaux, 'That crazy woman is a thing of the past as far as we're concerned.'



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'Really?' replied Sophie. 'Oh well... Is William with you?'

'Yes. Shall I put the phone speaker on?'

'As you wish.'

'Here goes then.'

'Hello William,' she said.

'Hi, Sophie.'

'In trouble again, I hear.'

I sighed, 'You must have grown much bigger ears than I remember you having, to have heard so much.'

'Bigger ears wouldn't suit her, William,' said Margaux.

'They wouldn't fit under her hair either.'

I heard a slight chuckle, 'A great number of small ears hear a great number of small things. So why have you dist...' she started, but checked herself. 'Why have you called me?'

I laughed, 'Why have we disturbed you?'

'Sorry, William. I was still in ultra-pro mode. Go on. I presume you need help in some way.'

'I'll explain the situation, shall I, William?' said Margaux.

'Go ahead.'

Margaux explained the situation in her usual precise way, and I kept quiet because I knew that this was precisely the sort of clear and concise description that Sophie would want.

When she had finished, she waited for Sophie's reply.

When she did, she said something I hadn't expected:

'Why choose William?'

Silence fell while we pondered this point.

As no one replied, Sophie went on, 'Have you upset anyone recently, William? Someone important, I mean.'

'Upset someone!?' I said. 'What's that got to do with anything?'

'William. Your affair smells like an exceedingly well-prepared frame-up. Why then choose an unknown songwriter, come scientist in a place like Autrans?'

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I shrugged, 'Because the place is quiet, I suppose.'

'There are millions of quiet places in Europe, when one has the funds and the brains to set something up like this.' There was another pause, 'So as I said, why doctor William Stone of Autrans? A British scientist living in France.'

Margaux was a little taken aback because she had simply wanted to ask Sophie if she would recognise one of the identikit images. 'We have identikit images of the main people involved. If I send you copies, do you think your people could have a look?'

Once more, Sophie made the reply she wasn't expecting, 'What makes you think these are the main people involved, Margaux?'

Margaux let out a big sigh.

'I heard that, Margaux,' she laughed. 'Sighing out loud is not very professional.'

I intervened, 'Why do you always say things which mess up our reasoning just when we think we have the affair sorted out, Sophie?'

'Because I'm fond of you,' she chuckled. 'Anyway, send me the images and I'll see what our...' she paused searching for the right word. '...what our service can turn up.'

'Send me your e-mail address and I'll do it immediately.'

'There was a ping, and looking down at her phone, Margaux nodded, 'Got it.'

'Perfect,' said Sophie. 'And William?'

'Yes?'

'I'd advise you to run through your recent consultancy contracts and requests. Try and see if there's anything that might explain your being singled out for such an elaborate frame-up.'

'All my files are in my office at home, and I expect the place is being watched.'

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'Haven't you got those on Dropbox or some other cloud backup?' she asked.

'No,'

'So, Doctor Stone. You'll have to find some way of getting someone to slip in and get the laptop,' she said.

I sighed, 'Not a laptop, I'm afraid. A whacking-big, high-power tower PC. Extremely powerful for my computer simulations, but definitely not portable.'

'Oh! You geeks!' she chuckled. 'Well, you'll have to sneak in and copy the files to a USB stick, won't you?'

I shot an astonished look at Margaux. 'I'll have to burgle my own home, in other words.'

'If we were there, your old friend John Hastings would be pleased to do it for you. He's excellent at that sort of thing,' she paused. 'Unfortunately, he's detained by something a little delicate in Ireland at the moment.'

'I'll see what I can do on my own then. I'll have to sneak across country, though. If the place is being watched, the road would be the worst way to go by.'

Margaux pulled a face. 'And there must be almost a metre of snow in the fields beside your house.'

'I shrugged, 'A job for cross-country skis then.'

I heard Sophie chuckle again, 'Sounds like good fun in store, William. You'll enjoy that. Anyway, send me the pictures and I'll see if we can help you.'

'Thanks, Sophie,' said Margaux.'

'Be careful, you two,' said Sophie. 'We don't yet know who is really behind all this. So, it's best to assume that William is in danger, and not only from the police.'

'Will do,' I said.

'Remember that madman who set you up for that mass murder in Canada with Agent Vx nerve gas\*. You seem to attract people looking for a scapegoat, don't you?'

I shivered at the memory of that affair and of being pursued by several groups of killers right up to the

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isolated "Lac Perdu" in the Canadian forest wilderness.  
'Ok. I'll be double careful.'<sup>5</sup>

'Yes. Be that as it may. I'm waiting then. See you soon,'  
And with this she rang off.

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<sup>5</sup> *This adventure is described in full in the novel "Agent Vx",  
by the same author*

## Chapter 14 : Mr Seppa

**M**ister Seppa placed his big hands palm-down on the round marble Bistrot table, stretched his broad shoulders back and nodded, 'We meet again, Monsieur Douanier.'

'We do indeed,' replied Paul. 'You are looking very well.' 'You too, always as tanned as a sailor. I hope your trip was agreeable up into our cold climate. I find that Marseilles is preferable at this time of year, don't you?' Paul nodded, 'As long as there are no wild Finns on the rampage.'

Seppa shrugged, 'A sad case that.' He shot a glance at Paul. 'You've not come about her, have you?'

'No. You seem to be handling things nicely.'

The man seemed older than the last time they had met, but his smile was still genuine. 'I hear that our friend Doctor Stone is in troubled waters once more. Perhaps you've come about that?'

'How on earth do you know that?' frowned Paul. 'Nothing's been published about it.'

Seppa shrugged and smiled, 'Why does that man insist on getting mixed up in so many dangerous affairs. My wife says that he must do it deliberately to impress his wife. Or his mistress.' Seppa shrugs. 'But of course, he doesn't have mistresses.' He nodded. 'A sagacious move. I have heard all about his wife.'

'No. No mistresses,' said Paul.

'Mistresses and peaceful existences don't go together,' smiled Seppa. 'However, your friend Doctor Stone seems to have a talent for avoiding a peaceful

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existence even without the help of mistresses. He certainly has a gift in that direction.'

'How did you discover about the present affair, Mister Seppa?'

The man chuckled happily, 'Oh, you know how it is.

Retirement leaves one plenty of time to exchange views and chat about the latest news with old friends. I have plenty of old friends scattered about our continent, as you can guess.' He rubbed his gnarled, bumpy nose with a finger. 'We keep each other up to date with current events.'

'And one of these friends of yours is in France then,' frowned Paul.

'Several of them, in fact. But rest assured, any information we share is entirely for personal consumption.' At this, he chuckled again.

'I won't ask for names, of course,' said Paul.

'No. Of course you won't. So, I expect you'd like to get down to brass tacks, as the British say.'

'I would. So, you have heard about the present trouble William Stone has got mixed up in?'

'As I said. The subject has been debated amongst our little circle of old pros.'

'Have you heard about the diamonds?'

The old man stiffened, 'Diamonds!? No. Just about a couple of murders.'

Paul smiled, 'Ah. So, your contacts missed that bit then.'

Then Paul nodded to himself, 'We didn't mention that part to the police. I suppose that's why you haven't heard about it.'

'I have now,' said Seppa, leaning forward. 'So, I suppose this is important to the case and that you're going to clarify the point.'

'Exactly. It seems to us that William Stone was set up very professionally.'

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'That won't be the first time,' said Seppa. 'Well planned, was it?'

'Very.'

'Ah ha!' said Seppa, 'That will narrow things down a bit. There are not that many excellent pros around these days.'

'Well,' continued Paul. 'They made up a compelling story, including a fake recording contract for the girl, and sent them off to Kuopio, to record Stone's songs in the studio there.'

Seppa nodded, 'Kuopio! Nice and quiet at this time of year, up there. Nice and cold too.'

'I'll show you the photos of the murdered Girl and her mother, and the other guy they found in the forest.'

Seppa nodded briefly, keeping his cool gaze on Paul's face.

'But' continued Paul, 'It seems that someone took advantage of the arrangement to smuggle some very valuable diamonds out to France and into Finland.'

'How valuable?' asked Seppa.

'Twenty to twenty-five million euros.'

Seppa nodded slowly, 'Nice haul. And they got away with it?'

'Yes. Then they tried to set William up by putting twenty grand of heroin in his guitar case. It appears that the customs were tipped off in advance, too.'

Seppa smiled, 'So, someone obviously wanted your friend Stone put in cold storage for a while. How did he avoid that?'

'He's a research scientist and notices things others don't. He gave the drugs to the hotel receptionist...'

Seppa held up a hand, 'And that damn idiot took an overdose and ended up in hospital. Then he spilt the beans to the local police. He smiled. 'That part I do know.'

'I thought you would.'

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'But you seem to have neglected something, Paul.' He said using the Christian name for the first time.

'No. I don't think so.'

'You forgot to mention that the recording contract was planned in order to get Stone out of the country. Someone wanted to use his house for a secret meeting.'

Paul threw his hand up, 'How on earth did you find that out!? No. Don't tell me. Friends.'

Seppa smiled, 'That's it. Friends. I have them everywhere.'

'For personal use only!'

'That's it. But Paul... What do you want from me? Why come all this way to chat with an old, decrepit, retired man?'

'Whose leg are you trying to pull?'

The old man shrugged, 'So?'

'Well, there are far too many odd details about this affair for it to be a simple smuggling case.'

'Political Intrigue, you think. Not my line, you know,' said Seppa. 'Perhaps several non-related affairs. Like Russian Babushka dolls.'

Paul shrugged, 'The Russian association can't be ruled out.'

'No,' said Seppa. 'Not with twenty-million-euro diamonds. How was it done?'

'They were disguised as cheap costume jewellery and unsuspectingly worn by the young singer.'

'No doubt, a young person who wouldn't even know a real diamond if she saw one,' said Seppa.

'Exactly. Well, the diamonds were purchased from Switzerland by a wealthy French family quite recently. They were almost immediately stolen, smuggled to Finland by innocent and unsuspecting couriers and have probably made their way to Russia.'

'Interesting.'



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'Have you heard anything about that?' asked Paul, leaning forward.

Seppa shook his head. 'No, nothing. And that implies that they were delivered to the right place with no hitches.

Had they gone "missing" on the way, there would have been trouble, and we'd certainly have heard about it.'

'That's what I thought,' said Paul. 'Can I show you the photos?'

'To see if I recognise anyone?'

Paul nodded.

Seppa frowned, 'Where did the diamonds come from. I presume they were sold via a dealer, but who sold them to the dealer?'

'We don't know,'

'It might help to know that, though. One never knows.

Anyway, let's see the photos.'

Paul spread the identikit images of Gruber, Blache, and his driver on the table.

Seppa took out his reading glasses and scrutinised them.

He shook his head. 'No. Never seen any of these men before. Do you want to leave them with me? I could ask around.'

'Amongst your friends?' smiled Paul.

'Naturally. What about the girl?'

Paul next spread out the photos of the girl lying in the snow and her mother dead in my studio.

Seppa's brow furrowed with anger, 'Who's going around killing innocent kids and their mothers? How old was she? Eighteen? Nineteen? If I could lay my hands on those guys, I'd teach them what is and isn't done in the profession.'

'I am wondering if it was not another ploy to incriminate William. Add drug smuggling to that and he'd be lucky ever to get out of prison.'

Seppa nodded, 'A dirty trick. Who do you think is behind the diamond smuggling?'

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'The obvious candidate would be Gruber.'

'The guy Blache? Is he involved?'

'We don't know yet.'

Seppa brought the photo of the young woman up close.

Her ear lobes are badly scratched. I presume the diamonds were earrings then.'

Paul Nodded.

Seppa smiled. 'And these earrings were painted or coated, I expect. An old trick that.'

'Yes. My assistant recognised them as being stolen from the Parisian family.'

'If they are, then twenty million would be a bare minimum.'

He glanced at Paul. 'Can I keep these two, too?'

Paul nodded, 'And there's one last photo. A man was found dead in the forest. Possibly unrelated, but that makes a bit too much of a coincidence.'

Paul placed the last photo in front of Seppa.

'Ah!'

'Know him?' asked Paul.

Seppa nodded. 'Yes. Not my generation, of course. A small-time tough. A thoroughly nasty piece of work. The sort of criminal who would do anything for a decent fee. He has, or should I say, had no code of conduct. A killer. He favoured the Knife or, preferably, strangling. Mind you.' Seppa frowned. He would take a bit of killing. He was a big, powerful man. He must have crossed the path of someone who was clearly in another league.'

Paul nodded, 'From Russia, perhaps.'

'That's a distinct possibility.'

'Any ideas?' asked Paul.

The old man frowned. 'My first guess was that this man...'

he prodded the photo, 'was the one paid to get the diamonds off the girl and pass them on.'

'But why kill the girl?'

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Seppa shrugged sadly, 'I'd say it was likely that the girl was not quite as docile and scared as he had expected. Probably went for his eyes with those horrible nails, or for his balls. That would have been painful with those nails. Or maybe both,' A wry smile animated his lips. 'I hope that was painful. But the guy was a violent idiot. He may have gone wild and killed her.' He smiled. 'I'll get on to one of my pals to see if there's anything in the post-mortem medical examination. If she got his eyes, that will be visible. The balls, too.'

'How come he ended up dead too?' asked Paul.

Seppa shrugged, 'Loads of reasons. Maybe the client got wind of the killing and wasn't taking risks of being identified if the idiot was arrested. Maybe the fool wanted more money because of the "complication" or because he realised the true value of what he was handling. Or finally, that had been the plan from the outset.'

'Anyway, we're unlikely to get any further down the line,' said Paul.

Seppa gave a wry smile, 'Maybe, maybe not.'

'An idea?'

'Well, it's possible that the job was put out to contract, and this guy picked it up. Not lucrative enough for the bigger professional players. In that case, someone might know something.'

'That might put you at risk,' said Paul.

Seppa smiled. 'We old pros have ways of asking without anyone knowing who asked,' he said, smiling again.

'Leave it to me, I'll see what I can turn up. We might just be able to trace the diamonds to their purchaser.'

'That would be fantastic. We won't be able to do anything about it, though, but it would at least clarify the reasons.'

Seppa shook his grey head, 'But we still don't know why it was important to put Stone into cold storage. And why

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murder the mother?' He paused and frowned again.

'No, on reflection, I'm inclined to think that the Girl's death was premeditated, otherwise it doesn't fit in with the rest.'

'No, you're possibly right,' said Paul.

Seppa pursed his lips, 'Could it be nothing at all to do with the diamond smuggling?'

'Meaning?'

'What if the entire plan was to cast suspicion on the man Blache?' He paused. 'Or perhaps influence the outcome of the conference he was organising?' he smiled to himself. 'Now that looks more like political intrigue to me.'

Paul nodded, 'Yes. I had been playing with that idea too. If we knew what it was about, that would give us a clue.'

Seppa nodded, 'And if you knew who these men Blach and Gruber really were, it would help too.'

'You're telling me,' said Paul.

Seppa shot Paul a worried look, 'I hope you carry a gun, Paul. Looks like you might need it before this case is over.'

'At home, yes.'

'Not here?'

'No... Customs controls are pretty strict.'

'That's unwise, Paul. This smells of big-time money trouble.' He glanced over his shoulder, and a heavily built man at a corner table rose and came over. 'Jan,' said Seppa.

'Sir.'

'It might be wise for one of the lads to keep an eye on our friend here until he gets through customs. Could you organise that?'

'Yes, Sir.'

'Which hotel are you using, Paul?'

Paul told him,

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'Got that, Jan?'

The man nodded and left the room. He stood outside the window as he phoned to make the required arrangements.

Seppa smiled, 'I'd hate to have your death on my conscience. Especially as I'd really enjoy hearing how all this pans out.'

Paul rose and held out his hand. 'I'm very grateful to you, Mr Seppa.'

'I'll let you know if I turn anything up.'

Then Paul remembered something, 'Ah! I was forgetting.' 'Ah!'

'Yes, the restaurant on the lake, near the place where Lindsay was killed.'

'Lindsay? Was that her name?'

'Yes. Well, the girl who served William lied. She told the police that he had left the place for some time and had taken his skis. That makes them certain He killed her. Someone convinced the girl to lie. I'd like to know who and why.'

Seppa nodded and smiled happily, 'Ah! Now, in this case, my friend, I am absolutely certain that we will be able to clarify that.'

Paul held up his hand, 'Oh! No violent treatment, please. Three murders are quite enough.'

Seppa shook his head, 'No. Violence will not be necessary, Paul. I'll pop up there for a meal. I won't do much skiing, though,' he chuckled. 'Once the girl realises who is asking her questions, there should be no difficulty in getting to the bottom of things.'

'What if someone is putting pressure on her?'

'I'll find out and remove that pressure.'

'With finesse, please.'

'Naturally,' said the old man, 'With old-school finesse.'

Paul frowned, 'I hope so.'

Seppa held up a finger to stop Paul. 'Just a thought, Paul.'

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'Yes.'

'Your friend Stone. He's a scientist, isn't he?'

'Yes.'

'A freelance consultant Chemist.'

'Yes.'

'It would be wise to check out what he has been working on recently. And for whom?'

'Ah!' frowned Paul.

'Yes,' nodded Seppa. 'Maybe we are barking up the wrong tree, as the English say.'

'You mean, that it's Stone who someone wants to discredit?'

Seppa nodded, 'What if he has turned up something for a customer that the customer didn't expect. Something adverse to good commercial success, If you see what I mean.'

Paul frowned. 'Make it look as if the man is unreliable and possibly mentally unbalanced.'

'That's what I was thinking.' Said Seppa. 'It would also explain why he was not killed.'

'If William has discovered a major flaw in a customer's product which would have a catastrophic commercial impact, why not simply eliminate him before he could publish?' frowned Paul.

Seppa made a gesture with his big hand, 'I'd have a look in that direction anyway.'

'Will do. Thanks for the idea.'

'My pleasure.' Seppa smiled. 'This looks like turning out to be more fun than I expected.'

The two men shook hands again, and Paul made his way back on foot to his hotel room. He was shadowed by a tall man in a thick black anorak, his hands out of sight, thrust deep in his pockets. The flight home was the following morning.

Paul had plenty to think about.

## Chapter 15 : A Ski Outing

**M**argaux and I spent some time debating the points Sophie had brought up. I couldn't think of anyone, offhand, who might want to get at me for any reason.

That being said, I had refused a good number of propositions over the last twelve months. Perhaps one of those requests was a blind. A way of prising information out of me to decide if I was the ideal person to frame or not. It was clear that I'd have to go through my files with a fine-tooth comb and see if anything struck me as being unusual.

Margaux was standing by the glass doors that opened onto my balcony, gazing across at the church spire opposite. 'More snow on the way by the look of things,' she called over her shoulder.

I got up from the settee and went to stand beside her. The sky was grey, and the clouds dense and leaden.

I nodded, 'Yep.'

She turned her head and glanced at me, 'Almost perfect for lurking unnoticed,' she smiled. 'Only a madman would adventure out on skis in weather the likes of which seems to be on its way.'

I nodded slowly, 'Right. It's lucky I brought my gear with me, then.'

'It'll be tricky waxing your skis, though. I mean for falling snow at zero degrees. That's one thing I've learnt from you,' she said.

I shrugged, 'These are waxless skis, Margaux.'

She frowned back, 'wax less!?'

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'They have a strip of a sort of grip fibre material under the foot. They're perfect for difficult conditions. When you don't need to go ultra fast.'

'That's the first time I ever heard of such a thing.'

'The idea's as old as the hills,' I said. 'Except that thirty years ago, the strips used to ice over, and then you were in serious trouble. In those days, some skis had under-surfaces embossed with a raised fish-scale pattern. The new models are far superior in every way.'

Margaux smiled, 'So what are you waiting for?'

'I'm waiting for it to start snowing and for the light to fade a bit. That way, visibility will be at a minimum but will still be enough to see by. It wouldn't be a great idea to have to use a head torch, would it?'

Margaux nodded, 'Have you got one?'

'Naturally,' I smiled. 'I use it when I go running late. It gets incredibly dark on the forest tracks when there's no moon.'

At about four in the afternoon, I decided that conditions were about as good as I could hope for. Giant snowflakes had begun to float leisurely down, and this, added to the failing daylight, would make observation extremely difficult. Even seasoned watchers would not be keeping such a careful lookout under these conditions.

I had laid my skis on the balcony to bring them to the same temperature as outside. Once I had donned my shoes and warm clothes, I grabbed the skis and poles and headed for the door.

As I turned the handle, Margaux's phone rang. She listened and just replied OK. Then she turned to me. 'Sophie has something for us. She won't talk on the phone. Her boss has asked her to come over and give us the information in person...'

'In person!?' I started. 'Where is she?'



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'She "was" in Geneva. She said she'd be with us by about six this evening and expects me to put her up and for you to feed her. She smiled and wiggled her eyebrows. 'So, you'd best hurry up, William.'

I nodded and made to turn.

'And William. None of your lumberjack juice, for Sophie.

Better bring back one of your better bottles with you.'

I took the lift down to the basement level rather than to the reception. From here, an underground tunnel led under the road and up into the old Hotel swimming pool, which was still made available to people renting the flats. From here, I opened the door and stepped out into the big back garden. The gate in the old stone wall opened out onto the road behind the building, out of sight of the square and anyone who might be looking out for me. Outside, the snow was coming down hard and fast, and the dark was falling rapidly. Visibility was limited to five or six metres, so I was confident of going unnoticed as I crossed the road.

I entered the field opposite and put on my skis. I carefully skirted the field and came out opposite the closed cross-country ski centre, which would not officially open for another month.

Before adventuring out from the cover of the dry-stone wall, I waited. A car was slowly approaching me, its headlights illuminating the curtain of snowflakes. I crouched down and waited for it to pass, crunching prudently through the deepening snow.

Once it had disappeared around the bend, I skied across the road then behind the main ski centre building along what would soon become the main cross-country ski track.

Luckily, the snow had already been well packed down by the tractor, so I could ski easily. From here, I headed straight towards the far side of my house, across the field which ended at the end of the cul-de-sac. In this

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way, my arrival would be invisible to anyone watching. Reaching the wooden fence, I removed my skis and heaved myself over into my back garden. I was thus hidden by the outbuilding and able to get to the front door unobserved.

I glanced across at my neighbour's house, which was only just visible through the curtain of falling snowflakes.

I leaned my skis against the wall and unlocked the door as noiselessly as I could.

Stepping inside, I just stopped myself from stamping off the snow noisily and instead brushed my boots on the mat. I also stopped myself from snapping on the lights in extremis and locked the door behind me.

I immediately saw that the place had been ransacked. Draws were open, and the cupboard doors were ajar. Most of the books from the bookshelf were scattered on the floor. Someone had been searching for something, but I was certain that they would not have found what they were looking for.

I made my way to the bookcase against the far wall, stepping carefully over the books on the floor.

My certainty that any crucial documents would not have been found was because the visitor would not have searched either my office or Sally's. This is because the corridor leading to the two offices we had built was concealed by the bookcase, and that had not been moved.

Only Paul and Margaux were aware of the existence of these two large and comfortable rooms. Only they knew how to activate the locking system I had devised, and I was not a little proud of it. One had to lift the middle shelf and tilt it backwards. This opened two separate hooks, one which held the bookcase to the wall and a second which blocked any sideways movement. Once operated, the entire bookshelf could

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be rolled smoothly and silently to the right on eight wheels. I had used some worn out ones from my inline roller skates.

Since our encounters with a number of ruthless criminals in the past, we had thought it a good idea to have somewhere safe to hide quickly if needs be.

I lifted the shelf, slid the bookcase aside, and stepped down the corridor to my office.

Had someone taken the time to compare the number of windows seen from outside the chalet with the arrangement inside, he might have noticed a discrepancy. However, since the renovated barn was an unusual shape, nobody had ever spotted it.

As it was, the wide office windows opened onto the field at the back and were not visible from the road.

Furthermore, they were on a part of the building nearly four metres above the ground and also sported sturdy wooden shutters which were kept closed when the rooms were not in use.

Nothing had been touched.

The shutters were closed, but even so, I avoided turning on the lights. Instead, I used my runner's headlight and pulled open the drawer containing my bits and pieces.

I pocketed my backup hard drive and my diary for the last two years.

I resisted the temptation of turning on my PC, closed the door, switched off my headlights, and moved back into the sitting room.

I stepped into the kitchen and, opening a cupboard, selected an excellent bottle of red wine, which I slipped into my small rucksack. I then returned to the sitting room.

As an afterthought, I went down the steps into my recording studio. Here too, the drawers had been gone through. However, only music-related documents were kept here.

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My MacBook Pro laptop had gone, and I cursed. The loss was not a big problem because I only used it for connection to the internet and as an extra display. My main computer, the one on which my ten thousand euros' worth of music software and tools were stored, was fitted into the equipment rack against the far wall. It was bolted onto the rack at the bottom underneath my racked microphone amplifiers, compressors and reverb units. Luckily, it didn't look like a computer at all, but more like a power supply. It also weighed nearly twenty kilos. Not an easy thing to make off with, even if one knew what it was and could find the tools to unbolt it.

I sighed with relief on seeing it there.

It was a Mac Pro. I wouldn't have wanted to fork out another fifteen thousand euros on a new one. Above all, the idea of reinstalling all the software and reconfiguring a new one was daunting.

In the sitting room, I quickly replaced the books on the bookcase and closed the drawers and cupboards.

All this had taken me longer than I had counted on, and I had been in the house for almost an hour.

Before unlocking the front door again, I zipped up my anorak and pulled my woollen hat down over my ears.

Dark had almost fallen as I stepped out of the front door.

Glancing up, I cursed on finding that the snow had ceased and that a nearly full moon was now illuminating the snow-covered landscape.

I doubted that anyone would notice my tracks across the field. I decided that even if they did, they'd think that someone had come across the field and then skied up the road.

As I turned to grab my skis, something unexpected happened.

Dark having now fallen, the automatic outdoor lamp detected my movement and snapped on the spotlights,

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illuminating the forecourt. I cursed and turned to run for the cover of the outhouse.

However, before I had taken more than a couple of steps, there was a loud crack and something crashed into my poles, jarring them from my hand.

'Great Gods!' I cried, dropping onto my stomach in the snow as another crack was heard. There was a ping as something hit the stone wall of the outhouse.

Someone was shooting at me. Shooting at me from the first-floor window of my neighbour's house.

I scrambled on hands and knees across the forecourt and into the protection of the wall.

Then, suddenly, my neighbour's side door opened, and a wide shaft of light lit the garden between us.

I ducked around the corner as I saw a someone emerge and train a rifle in my direction. There was another crack, followed by the whine of a bullet ricocheting off the stone wall not a metre from me.

Almost at the same time, I saw another shaft of light from the front door on the other side of my neighbour's house.

Someone came running down his front drive and turned towards my house.

I realised that if this person also had a gun, I would be trapped between the two.

I dashed across the garden and leapt into the field.

Seconds later, I was skiing like the wind in darkness across the field.

Behind me, I heard a loud cry in some unrecognisable language. I did, however, recognise the word ski.

Someone was coming after me and coming after me on skis. This was very bad news indeed.

Someone who knew how to shoot a rifle and also how to use cross-country skis in a chase was very bad news indeed. The person was likely to be either from an

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alpine army service or, worse still, a Biathlon competitor.

In both cases, I would not be in the same league.

My only chance was to utilise my detailed knowledge of the terrain and hope to outsmart any pursuer.

My neighbour must either be away or else he was being held hostage while someone used his house as an observation post.

My only hope was either to get back into the village and hide, or to head into the forest and try to outmanoeuvre the pursuer. I didn't make the mistake of imagining that this was a man, because I knew that there were just as many women as men in that sort of field.

In any case, even a woman would be able to outski me on a prepared track.

Luckily, here the track was neither prepared nor well known to the person on my heels.

Almost immediately, I heard a car roar into life and spotted the headlights heading back towards the village.

The two obviously knew how to cut off my route back into the populated part of the village. My only choice, then, was to head into the forest.

Whoever was on my tail, I knew that the person would have to sling the rifle onto his back to ski. This meant that even if he or she got within sight of me, he'd have to stop, unsling the gun and then stabilise himself before shooting. That would give me time to get out of the line of sight.

The main difficulty was that to get onto the winding part of the track, I'd have to take the steep uphill track of the famous "yellow" track. This was the one that had been used for the nineteen-sixty-eight, Olympic games. This was the track which had brought Autrans to the forefront of cross-country ski stations.

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But, for someone like me, this was bad news. Skiing at full tilt up that short passage was an enormous challenge and one I never did when anyone was around to observe. If I managed to get to the top without collapsing, I was justifiably proud of myself.

But today, I had no choice. If my pursuer reached the base of the climb before I reached the summit, I was essentially doomed from the start.

The person would have a clear line of sight, with no obstacles or trees. Furthermore, he would have ample time to unsling his (or her) rifle, stabilise himself and make a nice clean hole in my head.

I didn't have much choice.

As I reached the bottom of the climb, I turned and spotted the pursuer skiing at top speed across the field.

My heart sank.

I recognised the perfection of the movements. The perfection of a highly trained athlete. If I failed in that attempt to beat the climb, I was a dead man.

Thank God I had chosen the waxless skis. They would grip the snow perfectly. They would be slower, but I would be able to put all my energy into the climb and forget the possibility of slipping backwards.

I dashed up the steep slope, lowering my head but being careful not to lean forward, which would reduce the grip on the snow. I put all my strength into the effort, and that's when my years of training and lessons paid off.

My heart was soon racing, and perspiration was running down my face. I would have usually taken my warm hat off, but I had no time. I pushed harder than I had ever done on my poles and, for once, had the impression that I was doing it as a competitor does. My abdominal muscles were soon screaming, which was another sign that I was way above my normal level of effort. Only my legs felt normal. Perhaps because they

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were in better trim thanks to my many, many hours of mountain trekking.

I had almost reached the summit when I turned and saw that the follower had reached the base of the rise. My heart sank when I saw the silhouette stop and swing the rifle off his shoulder.

Another three metres and I'd be over the lip of the rise, but would that be soon enough? The person might miss a targeting shot, but certainly not the second.

Luckily, these people train on fixed targets at fifty metres distance.

I was now about a hundred metres off, and I was moving. However, as I neared the top, I bent my head forward to protect it and also leaned forward to keep my heart and vital organs as low as possible.

This is the worst thing to do when skiing uphill. My skis slipped from under me, and I fell flat on my face.

At the same instant, with a zipping sound, a bullet flashed above me and embedded itself in the tree beside me. Snow immediately cascaded down onto me and, briefly hidden by this, I scrambled over the lip on my hands and knees.

I had reached the summit alive.

Those who have ever watched a biathlon contest will know that, no matter what the steepness of the slope, the competitors always climb it with impressive speed.

I knew this and guessed that I had less than thirty seconds' lead, counting the time required to sling the rifle back over the shoulder.

As I raised myself and set off again, I glanced over my shoulder down the slope.

The person following was a woman.

As she stretched up to shoulder her rifle, her silhouette was outlined against the white snow. The hips were clearly those of a woman and not the slim shape of a man.



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This was a mixed blessing. Women were less rapid on skis than men and less dynamic, but they were also lighter.

I set off again. I needed to get onto the winding passages as soon as possible. Here, the woman would not have time to stop and take aim before I was around another turn of the track.

A trained biathlete would also be far better than I am, especially on easy downhill sections. They were used to going extremely fast and were able to avoid obstacles even at top speed. I needed to get onto terrain where this sort of athlete never ventured. That meant off the prepared tracks and into dangerous passages with as few straight passages as possible.

The woman would certainly not try to catch me up and attempt to overpower me. I was sure that I would be equal to that.

Of course, if she had a handgun or was trained to use a knife, that would be quite another case.

I had got my breath back and dashed off along the wide track. I needed to reach the winding part before the woman reached the lip of the climb. She would not be out of breath as I was, and would be able immediately to accelerate along the flat portion. The heavy rifle on her back wouldn't slow her down at all. Biathlon athletes are used to it. I had to count on my small advance and the time it would take her to unsling the rifle and aim.

As I at last entered the winding part, I glanced over my shoulder. The woman was only a hundred metres behind and skiing impressively.

I took the first sharp bend and as soon as I was out of sight, I dived down to my right, straight into the forest.

This was utter madness.

The slope was at least forty-five degrees, and the snow was much thinner. I flashed within a few centimetres of

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the outstretched branches of an old fir tree, then somehow avoided another which bared my path. I skidded sideways and set off at an angle, ducking every few seconds under branches and the stubs of dead trees. I had no time for thought. I just flew down through that unmarked track with only one objective. Staying alive.

Above me, I heard an oath. My follower, even though a far better athlete, was weighing up the risk.

She instinctively knew the dangers involved in following me. She knew that she could easily outdistance me on a track, but

guessed that I was leading her onto terrain more favourable to me than to her. As I turned to avoid another tree, I spotted her silhouette sprinting off along the track, much further off.

She had, no doubt, decided to outdistance me along the track, and then to stop and to pick me off through the trees.

A few metres further down, I came into a clearing and saw her stop higher up and unsling her rifle.

'Oh God!' I gasped.

The woman would have a direct and unobstructed line of fire down the slope. I was headed straight for the clearing, and she was already preparing her shot from fifty metres higher up the hill, her right elbow resting on her hip to stabilise the rifle.

In a fraction of a second, I would be dead.

I desperately span my skis in a skid brake, and at the same instant, the noise startled an owl resting on the branch just above my head. The vast bird spread its wings and shot out into the clearing, followed shortly by me.

A shot rang out, then another, and I knew that the Owl had been the unwitting target.

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I scrambled back into the cover of the trees through the deep snow and set off again down the slope in the opposite direction.

Soon, I was out of range, and above all, way from any parallel and easy tracks.

I came out eventually into the field overlooking my chalet. From here, I followed the edge of the forest until I reached the main road.

I crossed this then, hidden by the darkness and the heavy snow, skied across to the far side of the village. From here, I made my way to the back garden of the flats from the back way, near the town hall. Here I removed my skis. Hid them behind a tree, climbed over the stone wall, and dropped into the garden. Only here did I stop to catch my breath. I was covered with perspiration, panting and having difficulty breathing, and my heart felt as though it would soon burst. I bent double and pressed my fist into my belly, where a cramp was almost crippling me.

I remained for a few seconds, then set off across the garden and into the swimming pool area. From here, I took the lift up to our floor and finally pushed open the door.

I was immediately brought face-to-face with a young woman. What I noticed first though, was the gun levelled at my chest.

### Chapter 16 : Sophie in Autrans

I stood riveted to the ground, staring at the gun barrel levelled at me.

Then suddenly I relaxed.

‘Sophie!’ I cried. ‘Great Gods! Put that gun down, for heaven’s sake. It might be loaded...’

The young woman shook her head and smiled at me. ‘Of course it’s loaded.’ Her short blond hair seemed almost white, lying close to her head. As usual, she was simply but immaculately dressed. She was wearing a Dior jacket over a thick white cotton shirt, made, no doubt, from some scarce material. Her indecently expensive little Rolex peeped out from the cuff. To complete this, she was wearing jeans, which were undoubtedly not Levis and trainers, which were certainly not Nikes.

She gazed at me, ‘What on earth have you been doing, William?’ she gasped. ‘You look exhausted.’

Then she frowned and glanced at the door, wiggling her little revolver, ‘Are you being followed by any chance?’

I shook my head, still breathing deeply, the perspiration running down from under my ski hat over my cheeks. I blew out my cheeks and shook my head. ‘That was a close shave.’

Margaux appeared from the kitchen, ‘William!’ she gasped. ‘What on earth has happened?’

I closed my eyes for an instant and sighed, ‘The chalet was being watched. At least two, armed people were holed up in my neighbour’s place. He must be away, I suppose. One of them took a potshot at me from the window as I left. Several pot shots in fact.’

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'Hell!' cried Margaux.

'Go on, William,' said Sophie. 'You didn't get in that state sauntering back home.'

'I was chased.'

'I can see that,' smiled Sophie.

'It was a woman. A biathlon athlete, I think.'

'Oh God!' breathed Margaux.

'You're telling me! The way she skied and the ease with which she unhitched her rifle and used it leaves little doubt. A competitor or an army sniper, I'd guess.' I paused to catch my breath and wipe the perspiration from my face.'

Margaux dived into the kitchen and came back with a hand towel. 'Take your anorak and that horrible hat off and dry yourself, William.'

I did as she said and then went on, 'I thought I was going to die of an exploding heart. The second person drove his car around to cut off my escape towards the village, so I had to head for the forest.'

'On skis?' asked Sophie.

I nodded, 'I was forced to take that steep bit straight up the hill behind the ski centre. She nearly shot me, but I slipped and fell just at the right moment. Thank God I did.' I pulled a face. 'I heard the bullet whistle over me and hit a tree.'

I passed the towel around the inside of my collar. 'Then the woman came after me on skis and chased me into the forest.'

Sophie frowned, 'You wouldn't stand a chance against a trained biathlon skier. She'd outdistance you in no time.'

'You don't have to rub it in, Sophie. I'm very lucid concerning my abilities on skis. Luckily, I knew that she'd need a good straight line of fire to hit me and between six and ten seconds to stop, aim and shoot. Even though the track I took is winding, there are

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several places where she could attempt to bring me down. So, I dived straight down into the forest.'

'Down into that hellishly steep part? That was crazy, William,' gasped Sophie. 'In deep snow, too!'

'I hadn't any other choice. Anyway, it was less of a risk than waiting for the woman to find the ideal spot for a bit of target practice,' I replied.

Margaux nodded, 'And somehow you outsmarted her.

Trying to outsmart a professional killer is not something one often gets away with. Well done, William.'

'No,' agreed Sophie. 'Because a pro would never expect a normal run-of-the-mill human being, to throw himself down a deathtrap, like William seems to like doing.'

Margaux chuckled, 'No, that's true. But I seem to remember you succeeding in such tasks at least once before,' she said.

I wiped my forehead again, which continued to run with perspiration. 'I never thought I was capable of skiing so fast up hill. Or of avoiding so many trees on the way down through the forest.' I smiled. 'A scary experience that I wouldn't recommend to others. But anyway, help eventually came in the shape of an owl.'

'An Owl!?' cried Margaux. 'Now what?'

'Yes. An Owl. I frightened it from its perch just when I was about to come into the woman's line of fire. That startled her and gave me a few vital seconds to double back.' I blew out my cheeks. 'A very close shave, that. Anyway, from then on, there was no way she could catch up with me. She didn't know the tracks well enough. What's more, she wouldn't have risked following me with the rifle on her back.' I nodded. 'It could easily have snagged on an overhanging branch. And if she fell, it would put the sights out of alignment and make the rifle unusable.'

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'You seem to know an awful lot about biathlon rifles, William,' frowned Sophie.

'Naturally. We have a biathlon training track up here for the regional team,' I said. 'I've had a go at it a few times.'

Margaux handed me a big glass of water. I drank deeply, 'Thanks.'

'Who on earth was shooting at you?' exclaimed Sophie.

'I've no idea. I heard the woman shout or swear. It sounded like Russian or something like that. Eastern Europe anyway.'

Margaux nodded, 'The Russian Biathlon team have been banned from all competitions, as you probably know. And they are all world-class marksmen and skiers. Maybe they're used for that sort of mission to keep them in training.'

Sophie frowned. 'It's difficult to determine nationality from a few oaths, though. 'It could be one of many. It couldn't have been Chinese or North Korean or that sort of dialect, William?'

'No, definitely Eastern Europe.'

'Not German?'

I shook my head.

Sophie shrugged, 'What about Finnish?'

'Oh no.' I said, 'Nor Norwegian, Swedish or Danish. They sound very different.'

'But who would want to kill you, William?' asked Sophie.

I shook my head, 'No idea. However, I must admit that this worrying affair is steadily becoming more complicated. What's certain is that someone has got into my chalet and gone through my stuff.'

'Really!?' frowned Margaux. 'Not your business files?'

'No. Whoever it was, he didn't find the hidden passage to the offices, thank God. But they turned everything else out and took my music laptop.'

'Anything on it?' asked Sophie.

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'Nothing apart from the lyrics of my latest four or five songs.'

'No open link to a cloud storage or anything like that?'

'No. All that's on the main music computer, and they didn't find it. It's a rack-mounted Mac Pro and doesn't look like a computer at all. Anyway, all my consultancy files are on the PC in my office.'

Margaux was frowning. 'So now, not only are the Finnish and French police after you for double murder and drug smuggling, but now we have someone trying to kill you too.'

Sophie chuckled, 'Never a dull moment around Doctor William Stone.'

'True,' smiled Margaux.

'Do you remember the first time we met, William?'

I frowned.

'It was in Paul's safe-house in that narrow cobbled road at Saint-Antoine-L'Abbey.'

'Ah, yes.'

'You were hobbling about like a ninety-year-old farmer. If I remember, you had just been chased then, too. Thirty kilometres across the Vercors mountains. By an armed killer again. You seem to make a habit of that sort of thing.'

I smiled, 'My God! Yes, how could I forget? I couldn't walk properly for a week.'

'He does it to keep fit,' smiled Margaux.

I suddenly thought of something more. 'Hell! I'd better call the gendarmerie. They need to check out my neighbour's place. What if the poor man's been shot?'

'I'll do it,' said Margaux.

As she did this, I sat down on the sofa, unlaced my ski shoes, and peeled off my anorak, which was soaked with perspiration on the inside.

I turned it inside out and went into the bathroom, where I hung it on a hanger in the shower.



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Coming back, Margaux said, 'They've gone around to check the place. André will keep us up to date.'

'Do you think it was the same people who burgled your place and who tried to shoot you, William?'

'No Idea. Why shoot me anyway?'

'Any sign of a break in, William?' asked Sophie.

I shook my head.

She frowned, 'You've got high security locks on your front door, haven't you.'

'Yes. Very expensive too?'

'So, it looks like the person who visited your place had a key,' Sophie pursed her lips. 'Like the man who borrowed your chalet for his secret meeting...'

I shook my head, 'That man would have had more than enough time to go through everything thoroughly while he was there. What's more, if he did, he put everything carefully back in its place afterwards. And... he left the place extra tidy. He even washed the dishes and glasses they used.'

'Not the same team then?' said Sophie.

'Unless he sent someone less careful back for something,' Suggested Margaux

'That's a possibility,' I said. 'But I'm not convinced.'

Sophie frowned, 'Unless,' she said. 'Unless there are *two* more groups involved. One of which was looking for something that they didn't find.'

'And the second?' I asked.

'The second group don't want that thing found.'

'Ah. Yes, I see,' I said. 'They fear that the people searching for this unknown thing will come and pressure me into handing it over. And what better way of avoiding that than by eliminating me?'

Sophie smiled. 'Exactly. You got it, William. So, what is it that you have that is so important?'

Margaux sat down beside me. 'Well, Sophie. This afternoon, we were debating whether one of William's

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consultancy jobs might be involved in the business with Blache and Gruber. So, I asked him to sneak over, under the cover of the snowstorm and bring back the backup disk of his recent work.

'Snowstorm!?' said Sophie, glancing out at the village square, now bathed in pale moonlight.

'Unfortunately, it didn't last as long as we had hoped,' I groaned.

'Ah! I see. And that's where the trouble kicked in.'

'Exactly.'

'Never count your chickens until they're fried...,' laughed Margaux.

'Anyway, you're still alive and you also now know you can outwit an Eastern Bloc biathlon champion.'

Sophie leant over and tapped me warmly on the shoulder.

'The others know that too, now. Pity that. They'll be careful not to underestimate you next time.'

'I could have done without learning that the hard way,' I said.

'Oh! By the way.' I leaned over, lifted my rucksack and extracted the bottle of wine. 'Mission accomplished,' I smiled.

I handed the bottle to Margaux, who glanced at the label.

'That'll do,' she nodded. 'Perfect to go with what I've prepared.'

'Which is,' I said.

'It's a surprise.'

I shrugged, 'Do you mind if I have a shower before we discuss this any further?'

Sophie raised her eyebrows and glanced at Margaux significantly, 'I'd say that that would considerably improve the quality of the atmosphere in here. If you see what I mean.'

Margaux laughed, 'Agreed. I was beginning to think we had a problem with the drains...'

'Very funny,' I said, heading for the bathroom.

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Half an hour later, clean and refreshed, I returned to the sitting room, where Margaux and Sophie were sipping from glasses, 'Some Porto, William?'

'I'll have a beer,' I replied. 'I could drink an ocean.'

From the kitchen fridge, I brought back a can and served myself. I took a long draft of the cold liquid and leaned back. 'Any news from the Gendarmerie?'

Sophie shot a Look at Margaux, who pulled a face. 'They found your neighbour, safe and sound.'

'Where?'

'Trussed up in his garage.'

'Great Gods!' I cried.

'He said he'd been there since yesterday evening.'

'What!?' I exclaimed.

'And he agrees with you. Possibly Russian or perhaps Ukrainian. It could be something else, of course. He says there were two of them. Two women, and clearly both professionals in his opinion, because they knew exactly how to immobilise and tie him up. No hesitations, he said. Well organised, too.' Margaux nodded at my astonishment. 'He says that it was obvious that they could easily have killed him, but for some reason, decided not to.'

'How is he?' I asked.

Margaux shrugged, 'Adjudant Mercier says he is in surprisingly good shape. He says he seems to be getting used to being around murderers and criminals.'

'He went a very unhealthy colour when we found Mrs Blache dead, though,' I said.

'Who wouldn't?' said Sophie. The young woman leaned forward and gazed at me. 'You'll be pleased to know that we did make a bit of progress on our side, concerning your songwriting contract friends.'

'Really?' I said. 'And who is "we"?'

Sophie smiled, 'Our team. Boss included...'

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'Come on, Sophie, don't keep us waiting,' said Margaux.

'William has had enough excitement for one evening.'

'Well,' she said. 'Your Mister Gruber from the record company is not who he professes to be.'

'I already know he didn't work with the record company,' I said.

'Ah,' smiled Sophie, 'You're wrong there. A Mr Gruber did work for them. And for many years.'

'They swore no one of that name or description was on their payroll.'

'Naturally, William,' she said. 'Because he died several years ago.'

I nodded, 'Ah! Of course. One more person using a dead man's past and identity.'

'The original Mister Gruber was a well-known and respected talent scout for the company. He's known for discovering a number of the top names now on the French music scene. He was also responsible for the marketing of some big American stars across Europe.'

'Great! But that doesn't get us very far, does it?' I said a little disappointed.

Sophie tapped my knee, 'Don't be so disappointed, William. There's more.'

'Ah?'

'Yes. We activated our network, and what do you think they discovered?'

'Come on, Sophie!' cried Margaux. 'Or you'll have to sleep on the balcony.'

'Well, your friend Gruber seems to be what we used to call a man who lived by his wits. The sort of man who would tell you he was involved in the import/export business.'

'A smuggler,' I suggested.

'He wouldn't like that way of putting it,' Sophie chuckled.

'He comes from the German-speaking part of Switzerland. From Zurich, to be more precise.'

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'Switzerland once more,' I nodded. 'Why doesn't that surprise me?'

'His job involves importing or exporting more or less anything that needs to enter or leave a given country with a minimum of attention being paid to it.' Sophie looked at me and raised her eyebrows. 'Does that say anything to you?'

'I expect that might include cargoes of things such as diamond earrings,' I said.

'You'd be unlikely to find anyone better qualified at arranging such things, William,' she said. 'At least that's what our information is. A man to be trusted with delicate issues of the kind.'

Margaux was frowning, 'A man to be mixed up in murders too?' she said. 'I wouldn't have thought the two activities were compatible.'

Sophie shook her head, 'I agree. He doesn't seem to have ever been mixed up in anything murky. He's just extremely clever about keeping valuable cargoes out of the line of sight of customs and other legal organs.'

'Drugs?' I asked.

Sophie shook her head, 'No. He leaves that to people who enjoy a lot more danger. Same thing as with Arms trafficking. But stolen paintings, gold ingots, ... That sort of thing is straight up his avenue. Smallish cargoes, with extremely high value.'

'And this man. Has he a name?' I asked.

Sophie smiled, 'A good number. But in his hometown of Zurich, he is officially known as Herr Braun.'

'That doesn't help us much,' I said.

'Ah, but it does,' said Margaux. 'We know where he is and what he does. It's also probable that he has links with the jewel merchant who sold the Diamonds. Probably not his first assignment for them either.'

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Sophie nodded. 'Now that we know about this part of the mystery, we will be able to start unravelling the rest. We can also send someone to have a quiet chat with him.'

'I prefer not to know about that,' said Margaux.

'No?' said Sophie. 'Me neither.' She sipped some of her aperitif. 'Didn't you say that Paul had gone to have a chat with Mr Seppa?'

'Sophie!' exclaimed Margaux. 'You wouldn't set an ex-mafia man on him?'

'No, I wouldn't. But Paul might accidentally let the man's name slip, mightn't he!'

I frowned and put my glass down on the coffee table. 'But don't forget, this man Braun was here at Autrans when Mrs Blache came here. He must have been the one who summoned her back. And he was the last person to see her alive.'

Margaux pursed her lips, 'We don't know that.'

'Don't know what?'

'That he was the last person to see her alive, William. But if he wasn't a murdering type, as Sophie seems to have discovered, then someone else killed the woman, didn't they.'

I shook my head, 'He knew she was on her way back up here. And he knew where I lived, and someone had to let her in, didn't they?'

Sophie shook her head, 'That man was no cold-blooded murderer. Just a very clever and experienced...'

'Import/export agent,' I suggested. 'Blache must have passed him the key. I can't see any explanation.'

Margaux shrugged, 'So Gruber lets her in and tells her to wait because the person detailed to kill her missed his bus and would be a little late...'

'Blache's driver carries a gun,' I said. 'He admitted to that.'

Sophie shrugged, 'I carry a gun too,' she said. 'But what if we're making a mistake in our reasoning.'

'Yes?' I said.

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'We are assuming that Mr Blache knew that the man passing himself off as Grubber was Braun.' She paused. 'But we do not know that's true, do we?'

'Ah! I see. Blache possibly thought that he was dealing with the original Grubber all along.' Then an idea came to me. 'I remember Blache saying that he was going to call in a favour from an old friend in the music industry. Maybe the original Grubber was the friend.'

Margaux pulled a face, 'If that's true, then there's even more to this complicated affair than we expected.'

'More!?' I exclaimed.

Then Sophie shook her head sadly, 'In that scenario, it would point to Blache having nothing to do with the diamond smuggling. That he was being set up too,' She paused. 'It also suggests another possibility. Perhaps, neither of the two men has anything to do with the deaths at all. Perhaps both were being framed. Just like you, William.'

Margaux nodded, 'And getting Gruber or Braun up here on the sight of the murder, puts another nail in his coffin.'

Sophie nodded, 'Yes. All that seems to fit together nicely. It's an interesting alternative scenario. But' she paused. 'It means that someone else is manipulating the entire cast, like a huge and morbid puppet show.'

I shook my head. 'This is too much. Too complicated and too mysterious for words.'

Margaux pulled a face, 'This whole affair is becoming uncommonly complicated. If someone is manipulating all this, it would take one hell of a brain and one hell of organising.'

I frowned and shook my head, 'What on earth could be worth going to such a huge amount of trouble for?'

Sophie raised her eyebrows, 'In my experience, huge amounts of trouble usually equate to huge amounts of money.'

Margaux nodded, 'Yes. Who's money though?'

### Chapter 17 : Claire-Bérénice

**A**nne-Laure rang the front doorbell and stepped back to wait. She needed to discuss the upcoming photography contest that she had accepted to preside over. She needed someone to help her obtain some authorisations, and she knew that the woman she had come to visit had some valuable contacts. However, this was not the real reason for her visit. The woman she could hear approaching the door from the opposite side was Claire-Bérénice Bodet. She was the woman who had been burgled for the diamond earrings and ring.

Paul had phoned and asked Anne-Laure if she could find a convincing excuse to try to find out more about the theft.

As this request coincided with one of the duller times of the year for the wives of wealthy businessmen, it provided a welcome distraction.

Anne-Sophie and Claire-Bérénice had met socially on several occasions, but they had radically different personalities. There was no enmity between the two; they simply had different circles of friends and different pastimes.

Claire-Bérénice was slightly younger than Anne-Laure but looked older. This was due to her somewhat outdated outlook on clothes, hairstyles, and makeup. Added to this, she had heavy features and a tendency to roundness about the waistline and an almost startling ampleness of bosom.



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Anne-Laure resembled more of a slip of a girl in comparison. Claire-Bérénice had once been heard to comment that, in her opinion, Anne-Laure would profit from a bit of feeding up.

The door was opened, and after the unescapable multiple cheek-kissing, Anne-Laure was led into the sitting room. Through a series of wide windows, the comfortable and expensively decorated room opened out onto a long, landscaped garden. A grand old cedar tree growing against the far wall obscured the view of the house beyond.

There was a preservation order on that tree, so no matter how much the neighbour complained about it cutting off the morning sun, it stayed where it was. Having broached the subject of the photographic contest and obtained the promise of help, Anne-Laure moved on to the real object of her visit.

However, these things need to be taken in gentle steps. The first was to talk about children.

Anne-Laure knew that the woman's youngest daughter, Brigitte, had done a degree in the history of art. A total waste of time and the state's finances, in Anne-Laure's opinion. She agreed that the country might need a few new people in the field, of course, but not thousands every year.

Anyway, Brigitte had quickly realised that to have any chance of getting a job, she would need something to give her a competitive advantage over any other candidates. For this, she came to the conclusion that it would be a good idea to learn Chinese.

She guessed that there are not many art historians around who speak fluently both French, English, and Chinese.

Anne-Laure thought that there couldn't be many jobs in that field that would require such qualifications either.

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So, the young woman had signed up for a year in the Art school at Dalian University.

Why she chose Dalian, rather than the prestigious university in Beijing, Anne-Laure had never learnt.

Anne-Laure smiled at Claire-Bérénice, 'And how is little Brigitte getting on in Dalian?'

She was immediately surprised by the change which came over the woman's face. The smile vanished, and she bit her lip.

Anne-Laure frowned, 'Is anything wrong, dear?'

The woman rapidly took hold of herself again and shook her head, laughing an obviously forced laugh, 'Oh.

She's getting on well enough, but things are so...' She paused, searching for a word. 'Things are so different. Very rustic.'

'Rustic!?' frowned Anne-Laure. 'I thought she was in the special college for foreign students.'

Claire-Bérénice shook her head. 'Thank goodness for that. Even so, I had to complain and pay extra so that Brigitte could have a little electric heater in her room.

She has frost on the *inside* of the windows. They're not even double glazed.'

'Good heavens!'

'Anyway, most of the students are not foreigners. They're the children of well-to-do Chinese families.'

'Not quite Oxford University standards, then.'

'And that's only part of the trouble. Do you know they don't have a separate toilet,' she stared at Anne-Laure.

'Not a separate toilet!?'

Claire-Bérénice shook her head. The shower has a double function. Turkish loo and shower.'

'Euh!' Anne-Laure shuddered.

'And' the woman continued, 'The thing regularly gets blocked, and then ...'

'Disgusting!'

'And the doctors... Useless. It's very worrying.'

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Anne-Laure was watching the woman closely. There was something odd in her manner. She was clearly on the defensive, but why?

'Has she managed to do any tourism?' asked Anne-Laure.

The woman closed her eyes and sighed. Something was clearly not as it should be. After a pause, the woman swallowed and passed her hand over her forehead feverishly. 'She went for a few days skiing in the north... Some frozen lake or something'

'The Heavenly Lake Ski Resort at Changbaishan?'

nodded Anne-Laure. 'My husband went many years ago. He went canyoning in the hot spring river in mid-winter, at minus twenty degrees C.'

'Oh dear!' Claire-Bérénice was clearly highly disturbed.'

'There's something wrong, Claire,' said Anne-Laure. 'What is it?'

The woman shook her head sadly. 'It's nothing.' Nothing important really. I just get so worried, you see. It's so, so far away. And the doctors are so useless...' her voice faded away.

Anne-Laure leaned forward, 'But that's not what's worrying you, is it? Is she alright?'

The woman leaned forward and buried her face in her hands. The sound of a sob filtered from between her tightly closed fingers, and Anne-Laure jumped up, sat beside her and put an arm around the woman's shoulder. 'What's wrong?'

The woman shook her head and didn't answer.

'Anne-Laure frowned, 'She's not got herself pregnant?'

The woman shook her head, and Anne-Laure continued.

'She hasn't gone missing, or something like that.'

There was another sob.

'Has she been abducted. Taken hostage or something like that?'

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Claire-Bérénice cried out and grabbed Anne-Laure's hand, but remained silent. Now her face was streaming with tears.

'What on earth is going on, Claire?' cried Anne-Laure.

'Come on. Out with it.'

The woman shook her head, 'I can't.'

'Can't what?'

'I can't tell you. I mustn't tell anyone...'

'What on earth are you drivelling on about? Has she or has she not been abducted?'

The poor woman gazed at Anne-Laure in desperation and nodded. Then she burst into tears.

'My God!' cried Anne-Laure, 'What's going on?'

'I can't tell you,' she sobbed. 'I promised. Otherwise...'

'Otherwise!? Why can't you tell me? Where is she?'

'I don't know. I don't know. Oh my God!' she shook from head to foot, and Anne-Laure tightened her arm on the woman's shoulders.

At this very moment, the woman's phone rang, and she almost leapt into the air, 'It's them!' she cried. 'Keep silent, if they know I'm with someone...'

Anne-Laure frowned at the woman and made a gesture of zipping up her lips.

As Claire-Bérénice lifted her phone to her ear, Ann-Laure leaned in and placed her own ear on the rear of the phone and listened.

'Hello Mum. It's me.'

'Briggitte!' cried the woman. 'Are you all right?'

'Mum. They tell me to speak only in English. If they don't understand what I'm saying...'

'Yes, yes,' cried the woman. 'I understand.'

There was a pause, and the sound of voices in the background.

Brigitte's voice came back, 'They say don't try to have this call traced because they will be moving me every day as they have for the last days.'

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There was another pause, and Brigitte said in French 'Mon oeil. Sorry sir! Ouch, my eye. I got something in it. Have you got a tissue?' There was a pause, and Anne Laure frowned, glancing at Claire-Bérénice. She mouthed "Mon Oeil?"

Then Brigitte's voice came back over the phone. 'Sorry, Mum got something in my eye... You understand?'

'Yes, dear. Are you all right?'

I'm allowed to walk in the walled garden twice a day for almost an hour. It's very cold. They cleared a path in the snow all the way around the big, tall, walled garden.'

There was another pause while the girl was obviously clarifying what she had said.

Then she came back on, 'But as they tell me to say...'

There was an unusually long pause, and then she continued. 'We won't be staying here, but moving on every day. That's a pity because I get plenty of exercise here,' she said. 'I jog around the high-walled garden twenty-five times a day. That gets my 5km in per day. It's a pity we won't be staying here in Changbaishan. Mon oeil !' She cried. 'Sorry, sir. 'My Eye. I've got something in it.'

There was another pause.

'Brigitte, are they feeding you properly?'

'Oh yes, Mum. Don't worry. Plenty of food. Good too.

They get it in from a hotel or something. A warm bedroom too, which is a rare commodity in normal Chinese homes, as you know. There are loads of them. Bedrooms, I mean.' There was another pause, and the girl was clearly listening to some instructions.

'Yes, sir. I'll tell her. Mum?'

'Yes, dear.'

They say if you keep quiet for the next week, then I'll come to no harm.' There was a pause. 'I believe that too, Mum. Apparently, you are to say absolutely

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nothing to anyone about some sort of jewels. They won't tell me more, but that appears to be the crux of the matter. Just keep the affair a secret, and I won't be harmed. Got that?'

Anne-Laure leaned forward and caught Claire Berenice's eye. She mouthed the word, "Diamonds", and pointed to her ear lobes.

Claire-Bérénice nodded.

There was another Pause, and talking could be heard in the background again. Then Briggite's voice came back.

'That's all for today, Mum. They want me to make sure you understand that we'll be moving on again tomorrow. Got that? It's essential for them that you understand this point. You do get it, don't you,' she insisted unnaturally heavily.'

'Yes. And tell them not to worry. My daughter's safety is worth far more than a few jewels. Tell them that. I'll tell no one.'

'Bye, Mum.' And with this, the line went dead.

Claire-Bérénice put down the phone and burst into a seemingly uncontrollable series of sobs. Anne-Laure hugged her and waited.

Gradually, the sobbing subsided, and after some time, the woman sat up, shook her head and wiped the tears from her flushed face.

'This is terrifying. It's horrible. I can't sleep. I can't eat. This waiting is eating me away.'

Anne-Laure looked Claire-Bérénice in the eyes, 'Claire.'  
'Yes.'

'Listen to me. That is obviously something to do with the diamonds that were stolen from you.'

The woman nodded sadly.

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'And someone has taken Briggite a hostage to ensure that you keep some detail about them secret. Is that it?'

'Yes,' she sobbed.

'Well, Claire. I know exactly who you need to see.'

'I can't,' wailed the woman. 'They'll hurt my little Brigitte.'

'Claire!' scolded Anne-Laure, 'This person already knows about the diamonds.'

Claire-Bernice gazed at Anne-Laure in surprise. 'He knows? How?'

'He'll explain. But he knows where they came from, where they were transferred from after being stolen, how and by whom they were smuggled out of France to Finland and finally where they went after that. He also knows their exact value and also that you could never have afforded them.'

The woman gazed at Anne-Laure in amazement, 'What!?''

Anne-Laure put her arm around the woman's shoulder and hugged her. 'You really need to talk to Paul Douanier, Claire, without delay.'

## Chapter 18 : A Holiday in Sicily

**C**ommandant Follet leaned forward and punched the intercom button. 'Can you ask Lieutenant Ouiseau to come in, please, Angèle?'

A few minutes later, a knock on the door announced the man's arrival.

'Come in,' called Follet.

Marcel Ouiseau opened the door and came over to his boss's desk, 'Sir?'

'Sit down, will you,' said Follet, sorting out the papers before him. 'Any news?'

'Yes, Sir. Doctor Stone still seems to be heading southwards.'

'Where's he now?' frowned Follet.

'After crossing northern Italy and entering Croatia, he's arrived in Dubrovnik near the southern end of the country, Sir.'

'Do you think he's going into Montenegro? And thence to Greece?'

'No, Sir. That's what's odd.'

Follet blew out his breath, 'What isn't odd with this business!?' he exclaimed.

Ouiseau raised his eyebrows. 'His bank card has been used to purchase a Ferry ticket, Sir. Across to Bari by the look of things.'

'Back to the south of Italy!? For heaven's sake! What's the man up to now?'

'That's not all, sir.'

'I'm not sure I want to hear this,' sighed the commander.'



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'After landing in Barri, he must have crossed over from the east coast to the west one, Sir. There, he has purchased another ferry ticket from Salerno.'

'Great Gods! Where to now? Not straight back to France, via Marseilles.'

Ouiseau chuckled, 'No, Sir, to Sicily. Palmero, to be exact. About fifteen degrees centigrade at this time of year, Sir.'

'Sicily!?' exclaimed Follet. Then his face brightened. 'Yes. I can understand that. What better place to hide out? He glanced at the man opposite. 'He wouldn't have family or Sicilian friends down there, would he?'

'None that we could trace, Sir.'

Follet sighed again.

'But' went on Ouiseau, 'There's something else. His phone has been used from down there.'

'Really!?', Follet frowned. 'Now that's odd. I wouldn't have expected the man to do that. Got a location?'

The Lieutenant nodded, 'Yes, Sir. A hotel on the coast.'

Follet glanced at the Lieutenant, 'What's our standing with the local police at present?'

Ouiseau pulled a face, 'Not good at all, Sir. Since the mess up in August.'

'Bad, then or plain terrible.'

'The second, Sir.'

Follet sighed, 'I know that I've already said this several times already, but Why Now!?''

'It could have happened at a better time, sir.'

'You're telling me.' He sighed. 'Ever been to Sicily, Lieutenant?'

'Yes, Sir, twice. There's a direct flight from Basel.'

'If I asked nicely, lieutenant, would you accept to go and arrest the man?'

Ouiseau brightened and sat up, 'With pleasure, Sir.'

He knew perfectly well that their man could easily move on. He could easily just jump on another ferry and head

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back to France by sea. He could also take the flight to Basel, Frankfurt or several other destinations. He knew that if he had already crossed several frontiers on false papers, they must be excellent ones. So even international air travel would be no problem.

Ouiseau weighed up the interest of bringing these points to his boss's attention but decided against it.

Palmero at this time of year would be a nice change, even for just a few days.

'I could take the first flight tomorrow, Sir. Unless we get more information.'

'Good man,' smiled Follet.

'Once you've got him in cuffs, I'll ask the Colonel to call the chief inspector at Palermo. He'll have no choice but to help then, will he?

'No, Sir.' Replied Ouiseau, who was not as certain as the commandant as to the probable outcome of such a call.

'I'll see about the tickets with Angèle, straight away, Sir.' Follet nodded and turned his attention back to his files.

The following day, Lieutenant Marcel Ouiseau travelled to Sicily, business class. The departmental secretary, Angèle, got him one of the last available tickets, and the commandant waved away the extra cost. This was a must-do situation.

The weather was perfect in Sicily as he made his way from the airport to his hotel near the seafront. Leaving his suitcase lying on the bed unpacked, he set off almost immediately. He ordered a taxi at the reception desk and provided the driver with the destination.

The trip took them ten minutes or so due to a traffic holdup, but Ouiseau was in no particular hurry.

He had been kept up to date by the head office. The phone was being used regularly. And it was still at the same location.

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Luckily, most professionals in the tourism business speak some English in Sicily, which is lucky, because Sicilian is a bit of a strain for the majority of foreign travellers.

Paying off the taxi, he strode up to the reception desk of the hotel, which had been indicated by the tracking service. It was certainly not the sort of place he would have chosen himself. But then again, he wasn't a fugitive...

The receptionist, a beautiful, tanned girl of twenty or so, smiled encouragingly at him. Until he showed her his police ID, that is. She then unexpectedly lost most of her mastery of the English language.

After an annoying bit of dialogue, he got her to realise that he wanted the manager and fast.

This, of course, provoked the opposite effect as hoped for, and it was only a quarter of an hour later that the manager appeared, followed closely by the scowling girl.

The Lieutenant explained his mission and took out the photo. Both people leaned over it. Ouiseau watched their faces closely as they did so. Lying to the authorities was standard, everyday practice here in Sicily, so one had to try to outsmart the locals.

However, he didn't notice even the slightest flicker of recognition on either of the faces gazing at my photo.

'No,' said the manager. This man has not stayed with us,' he smiled. 'It's a pity, because it would have been a pleasure to deceive you about it.'

The pretty girl sniggered, 'Oh, now that's very amusing,' she said.

'You are absolutely certain?' asked Ouiseau.

'I'm sorry to say that I am,' smiled the manager.

'A dangerous criminal, I hope,' he chuckled.

Ouiseau shook his head, smiling without meaning to. 'Just a wanted man with a couple of murders attributed to him.' 'Just the two?' exclaimed the manager. 'A beginner, then.'

## The Songwriter

Ouiseau shot the man an angry look, and leaned forward, 'There's just a small problem, though.'

'There often are,' agreed the manager. 'Sometimes big problems too.'

'His phone was traced to your hotel.'

The pretty girl frowned, 'To this hotel!?''

'Yes.' Nodded Ouiseau. 'And believe it or not. It was still located here, earlier today.'

'Located here!?' said the manager. 'That is impossible, even for a Sicilian.'

The pretty girl glanced at the manager, who shook his head sadly. He held out his hand. 'Give it to me.'

Ouiseau looked on with astonishment.

The girl passed her hand under the counter and brought out a new Apple iPhone with a Union Jack back cover.

She placed it on the counter.

'Would this be the phone?' asked the manager, pushing it towards Ouiseau.

The pretty girl glanced at the Lieutenant, 'A customer left it here the day before yesterday. I sent an e-mail to his address, but I've received no answer.' She hesitated, then went on. 'So, as it wasn't blocked and as it's far better than mine... Well, I thought I'd use it until it was claimed.'

'Couldn't you have phoned the home number in the contacts?' grumbled Ouiseau.

The girl shook her head, 'There aren't any contact numbers. And no messages or anything. No photos.'

Nothing. The memory is empty.'

'Wiped clean,' nodded the manager. 'Not such a beginner after all. What was his name?' he said, turning to the girl. She opened the register and ran her finger down the few names present at this time of year.

Lieutenant Ouiseau smiled, 'So you actually keep a register?'

The manager chuckled. 'Naturally. That's the law.'

Perhaps sometimes we forget to fill in all the details. But

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that's a rare thing and it's never deliberate, you understand.'

'Of course.'

'His name was Stone.' Said the Girl. 'Doctor William Stone.' She nodded. 'A scientist.'

'But this photo is of Stone!' said Ouiseau.

The manager nodded with obvious satisfaction, 'Definitely not a complete beginner then. That's clear.'

'When did he leave?'

'This morning.'

'For where?' said Ouiseau.

The manager shrugged and turned to the girl 'Did he say anything about his plans?'

The girl shook her head. Then she shot the manager a look, and he gave an almost unnoticeable nod.

Well,' she added, 'While he was paying, I did notice a ticket in his wallet. A ferry ticket, I think.'

'A ferry ticket?'

The girl nodded. 'At least, I think so.'

'Which direction? Did you notice?'

The girl shook her head. 'Sorry. No. It was hidden by the other things.'

Lieutenant Ouiseau debated whether it was worth the trouble of trying to get them to create an identikit picture of the man who had stayed under the name of William Stone.

However, he knew that, firstly, the local police would create numerous difficulties. Secondly, these two Sicilians were quite likely to deliberately create a false image.

This would take hours and serve no purpose.

The Lieutenant nodded to the manager and turned on his heels. He decided to walk back to his hotel along the seafront. He would, naturally, have to report back to his boss.

The commandant was really not going to like discovering that they had been tracking the wrong man all along.

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He would not like learning that they had been outsmarted and manipulated by the man Stone. Having sent his Lieutenant off to Sicily, business class for nothing, would annoy him considerably, too.

The fact that I could be absolutely anywhere, was not the sort of information Follet would enjoy passing on to the higher spheres...

Especially not now.

'Oh God!' sighed the Lieutenant.

In any case, he reflected, he would not have to report back until the following day. Not only this, but his return ticket was for the day after that. Business class again. Lastly, the hotel was a four-star one, and... Well, one shouldn't look a gift horse in the mouth, should one?

The Lieutenant crossed the road and turned along the front to stroll back to his hotel, to start his forced holiday.

As he did, a man in dark glasses sitting on bench glanced up from his newspaper.

Taking his telephone from his pocket, he sent a text message to a certain Paul Douanier. "Mission accomplished".

Several thousand kilometres away, Paul smiled to himself. Maybe Commandant Follet will be more open to discussion and possibly a collaboration now.

## Chapter 19 : The Plateau de Mollière

I stood gazing through the window at the village square two floors below. The snowplough was clearing the road of the night's fall, and two men in orange anoraks and trousers were at work with snow shovels. After each heavy snowfall, they repeated the same action. First, create a wide pathway across the square, then dig out passages linking this to each shopfront. This done, the paths were salted to reduce the risk of ice. Work of this sort started while most people were still at the breakfast table. It began with clearing the access to the primary and elementary schools. I had always been astonished how such a modest population were able to produce such numbers of offspring. Furthermore, they seemed capable of maintaining the rhythm on a seemingly permanent basis. By five years old, most knew how to ski, both cross-country and downhill. By ten, there was little they didn't master technically. They learnt so fast because they were utterly fearless and flashed down slopes and around hairpin bends with the assurance of champions. When it came to school lessons, however, they were just like everyone else. One needed to be an extremely talented and charismatic teacher to hold their vacillating attentions, once snowflakes started drifting past the schoolroom windows. I abandoned my thoughts in this direction and turned back to the room full of people.

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Paul had returned from his discussion with Mr Seppa in Finland and was expecting news from him later in the day.

I shook my head and smiled as he explained the diversion he had created using my bank card and cell phone.

'Poor Commandant Follet,' I chuckled. 'I bet that annoyed him.'

'It was supposed to, William,' said Paul. 'I needed him to convince himself that working alone on this is a bad idea.'

'Lieutenant Ouiseau must be pleased anyway,' smiled Margaux. 'A few days paid holiday in Sicily, must have been an agreeable and welcome break from routine.'

Paul nodded, 'Ouiseau is a good man. Anyway, I've a meeting with the commandant tomorrow and I'll see what comes out of that.'

'Do you think he'll agree to let us in on the investigations?' asked Sophie.

Paul shrugged, 'Who knows? Anyway, I think I'll be able to give him food for thought.'

Margaux nodded, 'It's a complicated situation for him. To start with, he knows that the powers that be, have ordered us off the case, for reasons he doesn't understand. He, himself, has been told to drop investigating Blache and Gruber and to concentrate on finding William. He doesn't understand the reason for that either. Finally, he knows that a major slip-up would jeopardise his upcoming promotion.'

Paul nodded, 'Yes, and the man will have realised that there's something political behind all those odd orders.'

Margaux nodded.

Paul then turned to me, 'He probably hasn't heard about the shooting incident up here yet. But when he does, he'll probably come up himself, Lieutenant Ouiseau being temporarily detained elsewhere...' he smiled.



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'Have you primed the Gendarmerie, Paul?' I asked. 'About me, I mean.'

He nodded, 'I explained my objectives, so they agreed that a little subterfuge on their part might help smooth the way to a mutually helpful collaboration.'

Sophie frowned, 'But this commandant is no fool, I suppose?'

'Oh no,' smiled Margaux. 'Fools don't make it that far in the "Gendarmerie National".'

'So,' I added, 'Once he has interviewed my neighbour, he'll put two and two together and guess that someone else is looking for me too.'

'Yep,' nodded Paul. 'He'll also guess that those others don't want you found and interrogated.'

I blew out my cheeks, 'Yes. That's roughly the idea I got too.'

'And,' added Sophie, 'He'll probably conclude that, for a very good reason, Doctor William Stone came back to Autrans to get something from his home.'

Margaux nodded, 'Something that the people watching didn't want him to get.'

I smiled, 'And the bonus is that he will assume that it was me who outsmarted him. The result, I expect, will be that his opinion of me, as an outwardly insignificant scientist, will need some re-evaluation.'

We all laughed.

Paul got to his feet and came over to the window, 'We'll let him believe what he likes in that respect. I certainly won't put his back up by telling him that it was my doing.'

'That would be a tactical error,' Sophie said, smiling from the sofa.

'However, once I've told him about Blache's little subterfuge, Gruber's role and finally, the diamond smuggling, of which he is ignorant,' said Paul. 'I believe we'll be on the right track.' He smiled. 'Mister Seppa is

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investigating the Girl from the lakeside restaurant in Finland, and then I hope we'll be able to understand why she lied.'

Sophie nodded, 'Given all that information, A man like that will realise that the whole thing is one enormous frame-up. He'll also start questioning the idea that William is behind the murders.'

'Yes,' agreed Margaux. 'And he'll start having second thoughts about his orders and why they were given to him.'

'Exactly,' said Paul. 'And from there to accepting a collaboration is but a short step away.'

'But what about William?' said Sophie. 'He can't stay here indefinitely.'

Paul was watching the men on the square, trying to cut a passage through a great pile of compacted snow pushed against the barrier by the snowplough. 'No, he can't. The gendarmerie has done some snooping for us. Apparently, both roads out of Autrans are being watched.'

'In that case, it's only a question of time before they discover my hideout,' I frowned and then smiled as an idea struck me. 'I know!'

'You know what?' frowned Margaux. 'I fear the worst.' I chuckled. 'I'll walk out of here.'

'Walk!?' gasped Sophie. Do you have any idea how much snow there is?'

'I nodded. 'I do. I've been through the forest quite recently. Remember? And I also now know exactly the best route out of here and down to safety in the valley.'

'Not via the tunnel du Mortier?' said Margaux, frowning.

'Surely that exit will be kept under surveillance from the far end.'

I shrugged, 'I'm not going to make that error twice.'

The Tunnel du Mortier was drilled through the mountain to the north of Autrans to provide an additional route up to

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Autrans for the 1968 Olympic Games. However, the access route was swept away by an avalanche in 1971, but after reopening a second avalanche destroyed another part of the access road in 1992. In 2017 forestry vehicles, hikers and courageous cyclists were authorised to use it but in 2021 third avalanche closed it again. It's still closed. The tunnel itself is in good repair as it's never used.

But being out of use consequently makes it extremely easy for a single man with a rifle to watch. An absolute death trap of a place for a hunted fugitive.

I was almost caught there some years ago when attempting to escape on foot from Lida Niemela's gang.

SEE THE PHOTO GALLERIES AND MAPS HERE :

[https://stephen-william-rowe.com/1\\_024.htm](https://stephen-william-rowe.com/1_024.htm)

No, to leave the plateaux without being spotted, the only way was up through the forest and down one of the steep tracks to the Isère valley beyond.

In summer, I had already done this, but we were now in winter, and the deep snow would make the outing extremely perilous.

In the snow, the route north down the cliff face via the "clé" pass would mean almost certain death without ropes and full mountain climbing gear. And in any case, this route could be watched from below by the same person surveying the Tunnel du Mortier.

To the west, I could climb through the forest to either the "Montbrand "ass" or the "Pierre Taillé pass", at about 1,600 metres in altitude. Reaching either of them would

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be hard going, but without any real dangers. However, once over the summit, there were several very steep passages which would be terrifying in deep snow.

Finally, to the east, there was the very steep, zigzagging track up through the forest to the "Plateau de la Molière". The altitude was about the same as the passes, but from the plateau, a track led down directly to the hamlet of Engins. This route was far less perilous than the others, except for one nasty section.

Moreover, this part was south-facing, and with a bit of luck, the sun would have kept it clear. Once at Engins, a narrow road led directly down to the main road to Grenoble. From here a regular bus service picked up passengers for Grenoble, and I doubted that anyone would be watching this exit route.

I explained the various alternatives to Paul, Margaux and Sophie, who watched me, open-eyed.

'And you really intend to attempt something as mad as that!?' cried Sophie.

I shrugged. 'Either way gives me more chances of survival than if I get shot through the head.'

'Which is the easiest route, William?' asked Sophie.

'The one via the plateau de Molière is marginally easier,' I replied. 'But the climb is a really stiff one in the snow. And it's as easy as hell to get lost on the way down the far side in the forest,' I paused. 'If it's snowing and dark.'

'In the dark!?' cried Margaux and Sophie in unison.

'He's gone completely mad,' added Margaux.

I sighed and came over to the sofa where they were sitting. 'If that woman who chased me on skis has military training, as I suspect she has, then she'll be holed up somewhere nearby. She will have studied the Ordnance Survey maps carefully and will know the passages out of the plateau. She'll have a trained eye and will be surveying the most obvious routes with

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binoculars. Even if I managed to get an hour's start, someone trained like she certainly is, could narrow that by half, and a well-aimed bullet would make up the extra half hour in two seconds.' I glanced down at the two women. In the snow, I'd stand out like a sore thumb. The woman would simply have to choose the right spot to pick me off from. And voila, the bullet in the head...'

'You could wear a white anorak and trousers,' suggested Sophie.

'I haven't got a white anorak,'

'That can be arranged, easily enough,' smiled Margaux.

Paul turned back from the window, 'But, William,' at night you'd need your head lamp and the woman spot that even more easily.'

'I won't use one.'

'Are you completely crazy, William!?' gasped Sophie.

'That would be suicide.'

I shook my head, 'No, not at all. On the uphill section, the risk is minimal as long as there is a bit of moonlight. I'll be going very slowly because the snow will be deep in the forest. It'll take ages, but at least I won't get too hot. Then, as soon as I'm over the ridge, I'll be out of sight, and I will be able to use the lamp. That's lucky because that's where the complicated part starts.'

Paul glanced at me, 'I see that you've already chosen your route.'

I nodded, 'Yes. The easiest way. That's the one that a pro would be trained to avoid.'

Paul nodded, 'Yes. A prudent move.'

I was thinking fast as I processed my idea, 'But the important part is not to be spotted crossing the plateau. The woman will know that to reach any of the passages, I'll have to come out into the open until I reach the edge of the forest. So, we'll need a diversion.'

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'Diversion!?' said Sophie.

'I'll explain later.'

'The white clothes I'm going to get you will help,' said Margaux. 'But where will you head for?'

'My flat in Meylan, just the other side of Grenoble.'

'But surely that'll be under surveillance?'

I chuckled, 'Ah ha! No. It has been rented out for years, ever since I came to live up here in Autrans. An agency at Grenoble deals with the rental contracts, so my name is never associated with it.'

'Except in the rental agency records,' frowned Margaux.

'And' added Sophie, 'In the government's tax records.' She nodded. 'Someone might be aware of that.'

'That's a possibility,' I agreed, 'But no one except the agency knows that the last tenants vacated the place last week and that the painters are due to come in next week to redecorate.'

'Well thought out, William,' nodded Paul, running his hand through his silver-grey hair. 'Anyway, if someone with access to official records is involved, he will have already checked the place out.'

'He or she,' corrected Sophie.

'Or she,' agreed Paul. 'Sorry.'

Sophie gave him a curt nod.

'All I'll need to take is my laptop and the hard drive, and something to eat and drink during the little outing,' I smiled.

'And something warm in case you get stuck. A sleeping bag,' said Margaux. 'A white one. We can't risk going to your place to get yours,' She paused. 'I'll buy a one from the sports shop on the square or at Villard de Lans. A white anorak too.'

'All that'll have to fit in my rucksack though,' I said.

She nodded, 'Coming with me, Sophie? We can have a look at the diamond rings while we're there. I expect that've got a nice selection,' she chuckled.

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The two young women pulled on their anoraks and left us, to clarify my diversion plans and my intended route.'

'I'll lend you one of my spare phones, William,' said Paul as the front door closed behind the girls. He took out his bag and rummaged through the contents. 'Here. This one is perfect for the purpose. It's really a GPS, but it's got a satellite phone included,' he handed it to me. 'I suggest we program your intended route into it now. It's got a backlit screen, so you'll be able to check your position if you have any doubts.' He nodded. 'And it has an SOS function which I'll program. In case of need, you hit the button, and it'll send your GPS coordinates to my cell phone.'

'Great,' I said. 'Let's get this sorted.'

That evening, we ate a hearty meal after which Sophie made me a large thermos flask of hot tea and enough sandwiches for a small army. I loaded my rucksack, checked the GPS, and took out my deep snow trekking poles and snowshoes.

I added my pair of ice axes and crampons, just in case I encountered a dangerous ice sheet on the way down.

The anorak Margaux had purchased was a surprise. It was reversible, with a fluorescent orange interior and a white exterior, and above all, extremely warm. This was all the better because I guessed that the temperature at the top would be at least minus ten degrees centigrade. There would also be a good wind blowing up there, too.

At about seven thirty, Sophie and Margaux set off, and half an hour later, Paul shook my hand and set off himself. I waited another twenty minutes, then slipped out via the back door. I pulled the white hood up and tightened the cords to close it around my face.

With my white ski trousers and a white towel wrapped around my rucksack, I was virtually invisible against the background of snow.

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I headed off across the snow-covered fields, and within thirty minutes, was skirting the edge of the snow-loaded forest. I worked my way cautiously along the track to the point from which the climb began. As I reached it, I stopped and turned back.

I smiled as I spotted a light bobbing along through the forest on the far side of the valley. That would be Paul, Phase one of the diversion plan was under way.

As I watched, a second lamp came into view. It was moving towards the steep climb, which would bring it onto the track Paul was following. That light was moving fast, and I was certain that I knew who was wearing it. My plan had worked.

The armed killer had spotted the light. Her maps would have shown her that the person she took to be me, was heading for the "Clè Pass". She would assume that I was aiming at getting back down to the Isère valley that way. A few seconds later, I heard a car roar into life and saw it shoot off out of Autrans. The second woman would head down to Grenoble, thence around the base of the Vercors range to the place where the track would end. This part of my diversion plan was working too.

Paul was making sure that the headlamp flashed in all directions so that it could not be missed.

The armed skier would not be within shooting distance before he started the steep uphill section, where she would have to abandon her skis.

I smiled and turned off the track and trudged up the steep incline. The moon was out, but a thin veil of high cloud made the light diffuse and just sufficient to see clearly. Luckily, under the close-growing trees, the ground was only lightly covered with snow, so the going was not too arduous, and I made good progress, regardless of the cumbersome snowshoes.



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Within minutes, I was perspiring heavily inside my anorak, even though the temperature must have been close to minus ten.

After a quarter of an hour, I paused at the top of a small clearing and tuned to observe the opposite side of the valley.

The skier was closing rapidly, but Paul had already left the main track and climbed a good way up the slope. At this moment, the skier reached the uphill track herself, and the wild flashing of her headlamp showed that she had stopped and was removing her skis. She would also remove her ski shoes and put on some boots; otherwise, running up the slope would be impossible.

I set off again, checking my watch. Ten minutes later, I stopped again. I could see the woman's headlamp bobbing up and down as she climbed the steep slope. Two or three hundred metres further up, I could see Paul's lamp. Then suddenly it disappeared.

I smiled to myself. He had reached the Rendezvous point.

Then just as suddenly, two other lamps appeared bobbing down the slope from higher up. Sophie and Margaux were on their way down. Their lamps bobbed down, racing towards the running woman, now a hundred metres below them.

She must have spotted this because suddenly her lamp was extinguished.

My plan was working to perfection. The woman would have hidden in the forest at their approach. She would be astounded to see two young women working their way down the slope and chatting animatedly to each other as they went. As soon as they were past and far enough down the slope, the woman returned to the track, now ploughed up by their snowshoes, and headed back up after Paul.

## The Songwriter

The girls had made it right up to the pass, and the woman would carry on following the tracks, assuming that Pauls were obscured by them.

As soon as she was past Paul's hiding place, he returned to the track and ran back down it to catch up with Margaux and Sophie.

It would take the woman another thirty minutes to reach the summit in the deep snow, and by that time, my three friends would be back in the village, heading for the flat.

Once the woman reached the top, she would start down the track only to find that the snowshoe marks stopped abruptly.

I supposed that she would conclude that the two women had made a nocturnal outing to the summit and that the person she was after had taken some other track.

As I reached the three-quarter mark of my uphill passage, I paused and saw that the woman was already working her way slowly back down.

I was pleased with myself. She would go slowly and check everywhere for the point where Paul had left the main uphill track. She would eventually spot his hiding place and realise that he had doubled back.

She would certainly curse in whichever language was hers and carry on cursing Doctor William Stone all the way back to her lodging.

By the time she reached the village, I would be over the ridge and onto the Plateau du Mollière.

It was just after eleven o'clock when I panted up the last incline and came out onto the wide white sheet of snow which marked the end of my climb.

I was running with perspiration inside my clothes, but dared not unzip my anorak, because the wind was strong and exceedingly cold.

Far below me, the lights of Grenoble were spread out in a wide disk, showing just how high up I was.

## Stephen William ROWE

Looking up, I saw to my dismay that ominously dark clouds were approaching from the west. This looked like more snow.

This was the worst scenario possible. I might now be able to turn on my headlamp, but in a heavy snowstorm, it would be virtually useless.

Above all, I wanted to get down from the exposed plateau before the snow came. One never knew how long a storm would last or how much snow it would bring. It was possible that it would render the difficult passages impassable.

I cursed; I'd have to do everything possible to get past that passage while there was still time.

I took out Paul's GPS and checked my position.

By memory, I knew almost exactly where I was, but I wanted to confirm that the GPS was in sync with me.

It was, so I checked the compass setting and set off down the slope.

This place was very exposed, and the combination of sun, wind, and cold night temperatures had hardened the fallen snow, making it relatively easy to go.

In half an hour of careful progress, I reached the point where the main difficulty occurred.

I checked the GPS and was relieved to see that we both agreed about exactly where I was.

I took no risks here because I was perfectly aware of the dangers.

The wind would have whipped most of the loose snow off the track, and the alternating periods of sun and bitterly cold nights would have created thick patches of ice lightly covered with the last fall. Snowshoes would be insufficient here and would not provide sufficient grip on the ice. I could easily slip on a hidden patch of ice and end up smashed against a tree trunk or precipitated over a ledge onto the rocks below.

## The Songwriter

I glanced up at the darkening sky. The moon would soon be hidden, and I didn't dare think of taking that passage in a snowstorm with only my headlamp for light.

I sat in the snow, removed my snowshoes, and fitted my ice crampons firmly under my boots. I then took out my ice axes and fastened the wrist bands. It wouldn't do to lose one halfway down.

Finally, I tightened my rucksack against my back to avoid it moving and set off.

At first, going was easy and the crampons bit into the hardened snow. Then, as the slope became dangerously steep, I turned and started to edge my way down backwards.

This made going very slow but allowed me to use both ice axes to give me extra grip. Every few steps, I had to stop and look around to check my direction, but at least there was no risk of slipping.

At least, that's what I thought. As I reached the end of the tricky part, I came onto an exposed rock.

My crampons slipped across the smooth rock, and I fell on my face, held in place by the two ice axes. Then, I heard, and felt, an ominous grating noise. The sheet of ice above me detached itself from the rock and I went sliding backwards down the slope on my stomach. Instinctively, I bent my legs up behind me, knowing that if I hit a rock with my two legs extended, I'd break both of them and probably my hip as well.

I lashed about with the ice axes, trying to get a hold and slow my fall. One of them caught a block of ice and spun me sideways. This almost immediately gave way, and I careened off, bumping on the snow surface. Had it not been for the snow, my ribs would have been shattered by the repeated impacts. Then suddenly I was no longer in contact with the ground.

I gasped. So, this was the end. I must have gone over the edge and would smash into the rocks in a few seconds. I

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waited for the crash, followed by the acute pain, and hopefully by oblivion.

Then suddenly, I hit something soft and elastic, and I came to a halt as if I had fallen onto a deep pillow.

I hardly dared to move, but slowly opened my eyes then carefully turned my head.

I had landed smack in the middle of the heavily laden outspread branches of a massive pine tree.

I found myself about five metres above the ground, swaying gently up and down on a bed of snow-covered pine branches.

Below me, several jagged rocks pointed their sharp edges in my direction. If I slipped off the branch, I'd be smashed by them.

I gradually inched my way along the branch, towards the trunk, but as I did, the snow cascaded from it down to the ground. However, I eventually managed to grasp the exposed part of the main branch and hauled myself towards the trunk.

I dare not use my feet, because this might kick off the remaining covering of snow, which gave me much of the support.

The branch was at least fifty centimetres across, and I heaved myself onto it and took stock of the situation.

My ribs ached, but none seemed to be broken. Other than that, my shoulders were painful from being jarred by the use of the ice axes during the slide.

Looking down, I was dismayed.

I was five metres up, and the massive trunk was smooth, without a single branch or even a stub below me.

I clearly couldn't stay up here, so the only solution was to attempt to use my ice wall climbing technique to get down it.

If I slipped, I knew I'd end up on those horrible, jagged rocks below, and that would be the end of the story.

## The Songwriter

Gingerly, I unstrapped my rucksack and swung it out and dropped it into the deep snow, where it stuck firmly. I then bent double over the thick branch and let my feet dangle over the edge.

From this position, I kicked into the exposed bark of the trunk with the spikes on the front of my right-hand crampon. Then, easing myself free, I gradually transferred my weight to the anchored foot.

It worked, so I let go with my right hand and dug my ice axe into the soft bark. I was careful not to go too deep as I'd have to get it back out to move down.

I tried the position and then, with a resigned sigh, let go of the branch with my left arm and prayed that I could manage this exploit.

I quickly dug my left-hand crampon into the trunk thirty centimetres lower down and dug my left-hand ice axe into the bark.

Getting my right-hand crampon back out of the bark took a bit of doing, as I had dug the spikes in deep. However, working my foot from side to side, I eventually freed it and, letting myself down, kicked it back in forty centimetres lower. I followed this movement with the ice axes and made my way cautiously down the trunk. It took me fifteen minutes to struggle down those five metres of tree trunk, but I managed to do it and get down alive. I would never have thought of doing anything of the sort under normal circumstances, but I was relieved that I had taken the risk.

At the base of the ancient tree, the ground was almost clear of snow, being protected by the multiple layers of outstretched branches reaching fifty metres above me. I was perspiring from the effort, but I guessed the temperature was well under zero.

At this very moment, the moon was finally totally obscured, the wind dropped off, and snow began to fall.

## Stephen William ROWE

Not the gentle falling of a few flakes, but a curtain of the stuff. This was going to be a heavy fall, and in the dark, progress would be both perilous and excessively difficult. I'd have to wait either for it to stop or for daylight, whichever came first.

I retrieved my rucksack and leaned it against the huge tree trunk.

Pulling out my new white sleeping bag, I zipped myself into it and propped myself up against the tree, using the rucksack for a cushion.

By the time I checked my watch, it was nearly one o'clock and I was hungry. I checked the GPS and was relieved to see that I was only a few kilometres above the hamlet of Engins and three from the main road down to Grenoble. It would be easy to reach it as soon as there was enough light. There were coaches down from the plateau hourly, so I'd soon be out of this mess and back in civilisation.

The sandwiches, which had seemed far too plentiful, were more than welcome, and the thermos of hot tea made for a strangely agreeable meal. Such unexpected moments of peacefulness in such isolated places are rare, and I leaned back against the great tree and sighed.

Then, astonishing as it may seem, I slept.

## Chapter 20 : Catching the Bus

Pale daylight was filtering through the spreading branches above me when I woke. My neck was stiff, but I was warm and comfortable inside the cocoon formed by the thick anorak and the alpinist's sleeping bag. I had kept my dark glasses on all night to protect my eyes from the cold, so the only part of my body which was a little cold was my nose. I rubbed it and was relieved to discover it had not frozen.

The snow had ceased to fall, but gazing between the branches, I realised that the fall had indeed been heavy. At least half a metre of fresh snow lay around me. The sky had cleared, and the early morning sun was already glinting and flashing off the frost crystals which had grown on the fresh snow surface.

I stood and stretched, still inside my sleeping bag, then began to unzip it.

Suddenly, I heard a buzzing sound and ducked back.

'Damn it!' I exclaimed. 'A drone!'

Through the branches, I could see the thing high in the sky. It was scanning the snowfield down from the "Plateau du Mollière". After having been outsmarted, the women must have spotted my tracks across the fields at Autrans and guessed where I had headed.

The heavy snowfall had been a blessing in disguise, because there would be no sign of my snow boot tracks.

The drone was obviously filming the region and gradually heading my way. The person controlling it could be



## Stephen William ROWE

either up at the top of the plateau on skis or down below me, possibly even at Engins.

Now that would be awful news because, as long they kept the drone up, I would be trapped here.

However, I guessed that the woman on skis would have chosen the top route. Here she would be in her element, and given her professional training, wouldn't hesitate to ski down the way I had come.

This was a dilemma because if she spotted me from above, she would be on me within minutes of downhill skiing.

On the other hand, if she were below me at Engins, then she just had to wait for me to walk into a trap.

Whichever the case, a crack shot like her could pick me off at a hundred metres or even two hundred.

After all, the first shot only needed to disable me to give her time to get close enough to finish the job.

As the drone came closer, I realised that the woman would be checking for possible hiding places. The pro that she was would naturally recognise this tree as a perfect place to weather out the storm.

I immediately zipped back up my white sleeping bag, covered my rucksack and threw myself face down in the snow.

The drone would not be able to get under the branches, but it could circle the tree and see what was underneath them.

I froze as the humming came closer and the thing whirred around the outside of the tree. It paused for a few seconds in one place, and I held my breath.

I knew that if it suddenly shot off or dropped to the ground, this would signify that I'd been spotted.

I waited and listened.

Then the sound moved slowly away, and I breathed again.

## The Songwriter

The machine carried on down the slope some way, then rose high into the sky, and headed up the slope.

That's where the woman must be, on the "Plateau du Mollière".

The critical question now was, would the woman ski down this way, or would she return to Autrans?

I assumed that she would not be convinced that I had not come the way I had. She knew that my tracks would have been obliterated by the snowfall.

However, if she came this way, she would spot me if I tried to make a run for it and could shoot me easily from above.

If I remained where I was, she would check out the place and that was that...

So, I prayed that she'd go back to her hideout.

I got up, unzipped my sleeping bag and rolled it into my rucksack. I then hurriedly ate the last sandwich and drank the remainder of the tea, which was still warm.

There remained a short section of ice-covered track, so I put on my crampons and took my Ice axes. I'd change into my snowshoes once over this passage. Then I hitched my rucksack on my back and stepped forward under the branch. Suddenly, I froze and jumped back.

'Hell, and damnation!' I groaned. High up the slope, I saw the woman carefully navigating her way down the hill on skis.

I was wrong about her choice. I was also trapped.

I knew that there was no way I could escape a pro on skis by running in deep snow. And she was clearly heading in my direction.

I debated hand-to-hand combat for a few seconds, but realised that I'd have no chance against a pro. She would have a choice of a knife or a handgun, and I'd end up dead whichever she chose.

Then I knew what to do.

## Stephen William ROWE

Taking a broken branch, I brushed some of the newly fallen snow over the traces I had left under the tree. Then I moved around to the far side of the massive trunk, away from her direction of approach. I tightened my rucksack against me and approached the tree. Reaching up, I dug my ice axes into the bark, then kicked my left crampon into it. I lifted myself from the ground and dug my left crampon in.

Within minutes, I was high up. I chose one of the spreading branches still heavily covered with snow, and from just above it, I kicked it vigorously. The snow it held cascaded down and perfectly covered the remaining tracks I had left.

I then rapidly clambered up above the next wide branch and stretched out above it. From below, I hoped my white clothing would hide me from observation.

As I got into position, I heard the swish of the woman's skis as she came down through the deep, fresh snow. Then suddenly she came into view, skirting the tree. She came to a stop a little lower from where she could see under the branches, and I saw her draw a gun from her pocket.

If she used it, the sound would be heard from the village, but I doubt if anyone would be able to catch a pro on skis.

The woman stepped sideways up the slope on her skis, frowning as she observed the area.

I turned my head away so that the white anorak hood was facing her, seven metres above her head.

I waited.

I waited several minutes while she carefully checked out the spot.

Then there was a new swish of skis, and she sped off down the slope towards the village.

I sighed and started my slow way back down the tree trunk.

## The Songwriter

I guessed that the woman had given a rendezvous to her partner down on the main road to Grenoble. From there, God knows where they would head.

Anyway, for the moment, I was out of danger.

I glanced at my watch. The time was nearly seven o'clock and I knew that a coach left Lans-en-Vercors at about eight. That gave me plenty of time to get down to the main road via Engins.

The way down was uneventful, but exhausting because the deep, fresh snow made going very difficult, even with snowshoes.

Once at Engins, I removed my snowshoes and made my way through the sleepy hamlet in my boots.

As I went, I reflected that, whatever the reasons, someone was making a considerable effort to ensure that I was not allowed to reveal something.

I could not imagine what that something was, but it was clearly something extremely important.

Was this something to do with politics?

Try as I would, I could not see anything I had done, heard, or studied that could merit such drastic measures.

If money were involved, the sums in question must be truly colossal to explain three murders and potentially mine as a fourth.

Perhaps I would find the answers in one of the consultancy files on my hard drive. Something which had seemed unimportant or uninteresting to me at the time.

I eventually reached the bus stop on the main road just as the snowplough was making its downward passage towards Grenoble.

There was a long line of cars following it as it opened the road.

I remained hidden behind the shelter until they had all passed. Then I took off my anorak and turned it inside out, transforming it from white to orange.

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I found a snow shovel behind the shelter and, leaving my rucksack out of sight, moved around to the front to wait for the coach.

A little further up the road in the "Furon Canyon" and sparkling in the rising sun, I could see the gigantic organ-pipe-sized icicles hanging from the rock walls.

Each time I heard a car approaching, I lifted the shovel and began digging at the accumulated snow. To anyone passing, I was the image of a council worker clearing the bus stop for early commuters.

I doubt whether the shelter and the surrounding pathway had ever been so well cleared.

About fifteen minutes later, I heard the roar of the coach and turned to signal for it to stop.

I held out my arm as it approached, and the driver slowed. Then, spotting my shovel, he smiled, waved, and accelerated.

I was dumbfounded. The idiot had taken me for a bona-fide road cleaner.

I pushed back my hood and whipped off my dark glasses, waving my hand frantically at the receding coach.

At this very instant, a car shot past, and a woman glanced at me.

I froze. It was the skier, who shouted something out.

The driver involuntarily slammed on the brakes, which is absolutely the last thing to do when driving fast on an icy road.

The car spun around in a circle and then continued down the slope spinning on its axis.

There were metal barriers along the roadside, and the car bounced off these several times as it went.

There was no way it could be controlled or stopped.

But when it had gone about a hundred metres, a snowplough appeared coming up the road.

There was no way the car could avoid this.

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It smashed into it the point of the snowplough blade, the wedge crunching directly into the driver's door. The vehicle was cast to one side like flotsam and smashed into the metal barrier which separated the road from the precipice beyond.

As I stood gazing, a van came down the road from the hamlet and started to turn right, heading up the road. The driver couldn't see what was going on from where he was. I waved my arm to attract his attention and pointed up the road, while making a hitchhiker's thumbs up. The driver nodded and made a sign with his hand to come over.

Then I spotted movement down the road. The passenger door opened, and the woman stumbled out. She was dragging her rifle after her. Seeing this, I grabbed my rucksack and darted across the road.

I glanced back at the woman who was now raising her gun to shoot. Then suddenly the snowplough door shot open, and a huge dog hurled itself through the air at the woman.

She just had time to spot it an instant before she shot. The massive dog hit her in the chest, and she tumbled backwards, dropping the rifle. She hit the protective railings, but the dog came back at her, and she stepped backwards and overbalanced. She toppled over the barrier and disappeared from sight into the ravine.

I ran to the passenger seat, pushed my rucksack into the back seat and sat down, panting.

'Going up to Lans?' I asked.

The man nodded. 'I'm on my way up to Saint Nizier.'

'Even better,' I said. 'I'd better send the wife a message to let her know I'm on my way.'

'Always keep the women informed,' the driver smiled.

'Avoids difficulties later.'

I took out the GPS com Phone and sent Paul a message.

'All OK so far. On my way down via "Saint-Nizier". Bad car

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accident at Engins. Tell the Gendarmerie that both women are armed but out of action. Get there quick!

'OK, that's done.' I smiled.

I knew that there were two coaches an hour down to Grenoble from Saint-Nizier, and no one would look for me on that route. Not now.

What's more, I'd be able to alight before reaching Grenoble, then take a tramway across the town centre to my flat.

I decided to stay orange-clad for the moment, a good camouflage.

The driver dropped me in the centre of the little village of Saint-Nizier du Moucherotte, and I wandered over to the bus shelter to wait.

I guessed that no one would be following now, but I was not going to take any unnecessary risks.

As I waited in the cold morning sun, I frowned, "I hope that dog is OK", I thought.

## Chapter 21 : Consultancy Reports

I had to stop off at the agency before going to my flat because they had all the sets of keys.

I explained that I wanted to spend some time considering some structural changes I thought might be interesting to make in the kitchen and bathroom.

They handed over the keys, and I set off.

I had rented the place out, fully furnished, so I would be able to stay there as long as necessary, and remain hidden from any pursuers.

On arrival, I slung my rucksack onto the bed, then went straight back out to the supermarket.

I did not intend to spend the nights here in my sleeping bag, so I needed some bed linen, and I also needed a change of clothes.

I smiled to myself, because I'd be using one of Paul's bank cards for the purchases.

I returned an hour later, heavily laden with carrier bags full of food and another with the bed linen, some pyjamas, underclothes and jeans, plus tee shirts and jumpers.

I pushed open the front door and sighed. I'd always loved this flat, with its uninterrupted views of the Belledonne mountain range. There were few better locations around, so I had decided to rent rather than sell. One never knows what the future holds, and this place had three bedrooms, so even now, with our two small children, it was still quite big enough for us.

By this time, it was approaching midday, so I decided to call Paul and bring him, Margaux, and Sophie up to date.



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This done, he told me that the ambulance had picked up the two women. They were both in a bad state. The driver had a broken hip and a fractured shoulder, while the other one had multiple fractures of both legs and ribs. They'd both live but wouldn't be able to give evidence for some days.

Luckily the snowplough driver was a man from Autrans who had known us during the Lida Niemela affair. He was a man who knew how to hold his tongue and was asked to temporarily forget about the presence of a rifle.

'You seem to attract dangerous women like a magnet, William,' chuckled Paul. 'Margaux and Sophie are going to love this. We'll drink to your health this evening. Champagne, I think.'

'Me too,' I laughed. 'Champagne too. But mine will be on your account. Thanks.'

I heard a little laugh, 'Don't worry, William. The boss agreed to any reasonable expenses.'

'Like flying to Finland when he told you to drop the subject?'

'He knows that I sometimes have trouble with my memory, especially when I get worked up about something,' he said. 'He'll forgive me. Anyway, neither he nor I can expect any promotions. There are no jobs higher in our sector.'

'When do you see Commandant Follet?' I asked.

'This afternoon. If he doesn't let us on board with all these recent developments, then I'll have to assume that he is mixed up in the affair in some way. For that sort of man promotion's more important than a few insignificant breaches of the law.'

'I hope so,' I said. 'Anyway, after eating, I'll start searching through my files.'

'Great,' replied Paul. 'Will it take you long?'

I thought about this for a moment, 'At least a day, maybe two. There are five years of consultancy records to

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wade through. Fifty or sixty that I actually worked on and almost as many that I eventually turned down.'

'That's a lot,' said Paul.

I shrugged, 'Some reports are very short. A page or two,' I said. 'But some have between fifty and a hundred pages. Mind you, that's including references and calculations.'

'Can't you just check through the executive summaries?' he asked.

'That's what I'll do first. But the key might be linked to something that I didn't think was important at the time of writing.' Considering this point, I nodded to myself. 'Yes... Maybe that's it. Something that I wrote about and forgot. Something that would immediately ring a bell if the subject came up again.'

'In the press or something like that?' asked Paul. 'Some sort of scandal?'

'A big scandal,' I said.

'Huge; I'd say,' said Paul.

'Yes. Maybe, that's the motivation behind all this,' I replied.

'Well, William,' said Paul. 'Keep in mind the negotiation meeting that Mr Blache organised. And the diamond smuggling. They might all be completely separate affairs, but there might be a link somewhere.'

'Will do, Paul,' I said. 'But first a good shower, then food, then work.' I paused. 'Damit!'

'What's the trouble?'

'I forgot to buy a towel and soap...'

'And a razor and... ' I heard him chuckle. 'Go and bend my old plastic again, William.'

I laughed, 'I'll get back to you tomorrow morning.'

'OK, William. Good luck.'

That afternoon, well fed, clean, freshly shaved and attired in brand new, albeit cheapish clothes, I sat at the table looking out over the rooftops at the snow-covered

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mountains in the distance. What an incredible view! I thought. No wonder I fell in love with the place the instant the agency opened the front door for me to visit it so long ago.

I plugged in my laptop and transferred the contents of the hard disk to it.

I pulled a face when I noticed that the total size exceeded forty gigabytes.

I waded my way through the first year's set of consultancy jobs, but this took me longer than I had expected because I was forever pausing to run over the topic in my mind. There were some really interesting things that I had almost forgotten, and I knew that any of these topics might hide an unsuspected link.

By evening, I had run through almost two years of my job and called it a day.

I knew from experience that my subconscious mind would continue sifting through the data all night and might uncover something my conscious mind had not noticed.

It was clear that the rest would take me all the following day. This didn't trouble me, because I was comfortable in my old flat and confident that I would not be disturbed.

Margaux had informed Sally, my wife, that I was safe in my flat and had explained what was in the wind.

She was still in Dubai, and Paul had reassured her that I was out of danger. He also mentioned that he might have a task for her to perform before she came home. He'd let her know as soon as things were clarified.

When I asked what the task consisted of, he became evasive. He said he'd be able to tell me once he had some information he was waiting for.

That evening, I cooked myself a "roti de porc" with some potatoes. I also treated myself to half a bottle of some absolutely excellent Bordeaux red wine, paid for by Paul's boss. I completed the meal with the superb

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chocolate cake, washed down by my favourite crémant d'Alsace, which I find superior to champagne.

Just because someone else was paying, didn't mean I had to choose an expensive champagne which wouldn't have gone so well with the dessert.

I went to bed early and slept perfectly, waking as the clock marked nine o'clock.

I made myself coffee with the old machine, which I had left five years ago. While it was doing its job, somewhat slower than in the past, I walked down to the boulangerie and brought back some hot baguettes and croissants. It was just like the old days, when Sally was still my beautiful, red-haired childhood friend. Before we realised that we loved each other.

It took me back to the days before I left my job and before I became caught up in the search for hidden fortunes in gold ingots.

After breakfast, I sat at the table once more and laboriously worked my way through another year of my consultancy work.

Nothing, so far, seemed worthy of the trouble that had been stirred up. Indeed, nothing translated into a product which might produce the huge profits I expected would trigger so much concern.

After my midday meal, I moved on to the following year. This started about eighteen months ago.

In mid-afternoon, I came across something associated with a major money-spinning company. However, this was a study which the company had decided not to pursue.

I had been well paid, but I was disappointed that they had abandoned plans to explore the subject further.

I was disappointed because there was a lot of money in this field, and I'd have liked to get a foot in the door of this market.

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I worked until about five o'clock and decided to finish the final six months' worth of job the following morning.

I closed down my laptop, then wandered down to the boulangerie to buy myself one of their famous chocolate cakes for my dessert. I could finish the roti de porc with the second half of the Bordeaux and would relax with a book I had purchased at the supermarket.

Once back, I poured myself a glass of Crémant d'Alsace and sat on the sofa, gazing out at the Belledonne mountains as they gradually turned from white to pink in the setting sun.

My mind went back to the job I had been thinking about. The company that had commissioned the study was one of the world's leaders in the air-conditioning market. A household name, but far better known in the field of large-scale Heating, ventilation and air conditioning installations, HVAC, as specialists call it. The markets are for Airports, High-rise office buildings, Hypermarket malls and similar large-scale projects. They were now making fortunes in the cooling installations for large-scale computer servers and data centres.

The company were said to control a large part of the world market.

I frowned. Now what was this market worth? A lot, I knew. But just how much?

I went over to the table, carried my laptop back, and set it on my knees.

Within seconds, I had my answer, which was as unexpected as it was astonishing. The global HVAC market was valued at well over 300 billion euros.

I hadn't realised how enormous the market was and was amazed at the figures. Not only that, but the company I had worked for was one of the leading players and was said to have a yearly turnover of more than 30 billion euros.

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Now, that was really big, big money.

The four big players were from Japan, China, the USA and Ireland. Next came ten smaller companies with incomes of between five and ten billion euros a year, scattered around the world.

The company's CEO, with whom I had dealings, must have been drawing a salary in the region of a hundred million euros, taking into account stock options and all other benefits. What's more, his directors would all be in the multi-million-euro salary category too.

Enough to kill for, I mused.

Yes. Here was a serious contender. At least this area of Heating, ventilation and air conditioning was something I should take a second look at.

I needed to see exactly what I had done for the industrial giant and if there could be a link with the present affair.

I needed to think this out carefully and see if the negotiation organised at my home could have anything to do with this company.

If so, why would a representative from the Gulf states be involved?

Furthermore, why would so many people want me out of the way?

Why would my friends Paul and Margaux be called off on the one hand, and why had Commandant Follet been ordered to concentrate all his efforts on finding me, while ignoring Blache and Gruber?

Decidedly, I had some serious thinking to do.

As I sat gazing out of the window, I noticed the reflection in it of the landline wall phone. I got up and lifted it out of its cradle. There was a hum. The thing was still active and had not yet been disconnected. Now this was excellent news.

I dialled Margaux's number, and when she replied, I explained that this would be an excellent way of

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communication. The line was associated with the last tenant's name and would thus be secure.

'Any information about the Man passing himself off as Blache?' I asked.

'Well, William,' she replied. 'Sophie has got some information back from her HQ. It seems that he is exactly what he says he is.'

'A negotiator?' I said, a little astonished.

'Yes. And a very good one. One of the very best, apparently.'

'At least that's one bit of truth at last.'

'I'll pass you over to Sophie. She'll explain.'

'Hello William,' came Sophie's voice. 'We didn't have much trouble there. The photos were identified almost immediately. Not by the police, of course, because men like that take trouble to remain permanently under the radar.'

'I'm not surprised,' I said.

'But' she continued, 'His reputation is absolutely top class. He works for governments and international industrial groups from all over the world.' She paused. 'He seems to be the "go to" man when delicate negotiations are required. Both political and Financial.'

'And this man has a name too?' I asked.

'They vary. He comes from Holland but is understandably rarely at home. His driver-bodyguard has been with him for years, too.'

'And his brother with a music shop?' I asked.

'That was a nice touch, I thought,' chuckled Sophie.

'Sorry?'

'A very carefully prepared bit of camouflage, William. He is just as professional as his boss.'

'Great Gods!' I exclaimed. 'He was so convincing. I fell for it one hundred per cent.'

'If you do a job, it's best to do it right,' she laughed. 'An excellent team.'

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'Hell!' I exclaimed.

'But don't worry. Your lovely guitar and your studio microphones are the real thing. AND they are yours to keep.'

I shrugged, 'Not ruthless murderer either then?'

Sophie shook her head, 'Heavens No. They make fortunes avoiding situations which could lead to thousands of people getting killed,' She paused. 'Oh, and helping people make fortunes too.'

I sighed and frowned. 'So, I can summarise the situation by saying that these three people were just getting on with their normal day-to-day business. On one hand, they wanted to use my chalet for some highly lucrative negotiation. On the other hand, the Gruber man wanted to take advantage of the situation to do a little 'import/export' of a few diamonds. All clean and above board...'

Sophie nodded, 'Except that there seems to be one or more likely several other more desperate teams of individuals trying to exploit these ongoing deals for a much more sinister end.'

'Great Gods!' I exclaimed.

'An excellent reason to remain in hiding for the moment, don't you think?'

I did.



## Chapter 22 : Paul and Mr Follet

Commandant Follet got to his feet as his secretary opened the door and announced Paul.

'Monsieur Douanier Sir,' said the young woman.

'Thank you Angèle.'

As the door closed quietly behind her, Follet moved around his desk and held out his hand, 'Pleased to meet you, Monsieur Douanier.'

He didn't add, "I have naturally heard everything about you", because that would be a tactical error, giving the other man the advantage.

'The pleasure's mine, Commandant. Thank you for sparing the time,' Paul smiled, shaking the man's hand. 'I know you're particularly busy at the moment.'

'Take a seat, please,' Follet indicated a chair, then moved back behind his desk. 'How can I help you?'

Paul smiled, 'The question is more, how can I help you, I think.'

Follet knew all about Paul and his reputation, so he didn't take offence as he usually would have.'

'That remains to be seen,' he paused and looked at Paul. 'At present, one of your best friends happens to be my principal suspect for two murders.'

Paul nodded, 'That's very true. Furthermore, your assistant, Lieutenant Ouiseau, is at this very moment trying to catch him down in Sicily.'

Follet started, 'How on earth do you know that!?''

'Unsuccessfully too, I believe,' added Paul.

Follet glowered at Paul, 'You've got access to inside information, I see.'

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'Not in the slightest, Commandant. The information comes from my own sources, I assure you. One of my associates happens to be in Sicily at present.'

Follet shrugged, 'I suppose that in your line of work, keeping tabs on the comings and goings, especially of non-residents, is standard practice.'

'Exactly,' smiled Paul. 'One has to be present to open a new bank account before one can transfer funds into it.'

'And this associate keeps an eye on any such activity, does he?'

Paul nodded, 'But in this case, he just happened to be on holiday down there at the time.'

This was perfectly true, and Paul smiled inwardly at the thought that Lieutenant Ouiseau was in Sicily simply because this associate had led him there.

'So,' said Follet. 'Now that's cleared up, what can I do for you?' He gazed at Paul. 'As far as I know, you and your assistant have been officially called off the case. My information is that the order originated from a particularly high level. Is that correct?'

'It is,' nodded Paul.

'So, for the moment I can't see what you can do for me.'

'Having my hands tied, you mean.'

'Yes.'

Paul nodded slowly, 'Well, as I have just proved, even with both hands tied I still have access to sources of information in many places around the world. I have been ordered not to use these resources to investigate this affair, which is a pity. The entire subject has been left in your hands.'

Follet sighed, 'Yes. It has. And this particularly tricky mission could have come at a better time for me.'

Paul smiled at Follet, 'I heard about that.'

Follet frowned, 'Heard about what?'

'That your promotion papers are presently sitting in the to-do tray on the chief's desk.'

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'How do you know that?' he said.

'No doubt pending the outcome of the present affair,' continued Paul. 'Your lieutenant's too, I'd guess.'

'Have you got spies everywhere?' gasped the man.

Paul chuckled, 'No. It's just that our bosses are old friends.'

'Ah!' nodded Follet. 'And I wonder if your boss is upset about being short-circuited.'

'Oh no. For the moment, we don't think the affair is linked to tax evasion. However, it might be.' He paused. 'Because of the diamonds, for example...' He let this sink in.

Follet frowned, 'The diamonds!? What diamonds?'

'And of course one has to consider the significance of the fake recording contract.'

'The what!?' cried Follet.

'And a French girl kidnapped in China.'

Commandant Follet's eyes grew rounder and rounder.

'Not to mention the false declaration of the serving girl in Finland, and to cap it all, of course, the third Murder.'

'Third Murder!?' gasped the man, lifting his hand in a wild gesture. 'What on earth are you going on about?'

Paul shrugged and pulled a face. 'It really is a pity that my hands are tied, especially when one of my best friends has been accused of something he didn't do. Even more so that he stands to end up in prison with a life sentence, possibly in Finland.'

Follet was giggling at Paul, 'Are you trying to tell me that Stone is Innocent?'

Paul laid his two forearms on the table and looked Follet straight in the eyes, 'I am telling you that he has been framed.'

'Framed?'

'Framed, as part of some extremely elaborate plan. A plan which seems to particularly interest the top politicians

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of our country, including the Prime Minister and the President.'

'What!?' exclaimed the commander.

'An elaborate plan in which both the man passing himself off as Blache and the one using the identity of the deceased Gruber are part.'

'This is getting too difficult to follow,' groaned Follet.

'And... To conclude, the fact that you have been ordered to drop the investigation into both those men implies that the powers that be do not want the roles of the two brought to light.

'I don't believe all this,' cried Follet.

Paul leaned forward, 'My interpretation is that you and your service are being deliberately pointed in a direction which will ultimately lead to failure.'

'What on earth are you implying?'

'If you ever managed to catch William Stone, which I doubt, He'll be tried and condemned.'

'Which would be perfectly normal,' said Follet, a little riled because he couldn't see where all these complicated issues were leading.

Paul sighed, 'You are an intelligent man, Monsieur, and more than worthy of promotion to \*\*\*\* Grade.'

'Thank you very much,' replied Follet testily.

'But ' continued Paul. 'Not long after the hypothetical arrest, he will be shown to be innocent...' He allowed this to sink in. 'Your team will be shown to have made hasty and incorrect assumptions...'

Commander Follet allowed himself to fall back in his chair, puffing out his cheeks, 'And bag goes my long dreamed of promotion.'

'Well merited,' nodded Paul

'This is all unproven,' said Follet.

Paul nodded, 'And the powers that be, will have their scapegoat ripe and ready to be skinned...'

## Stephen William ROWE

Follet remained silent for a few moments, drumming his fingers on the table. Then he looked up at Paul, 'Why are you telling me this?'

Paul pushed back his chair a little, leaned back and stretched out his legs. 'My hands are tied.'

Follet shook his head, 'The knots seem to be exceedingly loose on the rope.'

Paul chuckled, 'My chief, never was much good with knots.'

A wry smile crossed Follet's face, 'Ah! I see. Didn't want to cut off the circulation. Is that it?'

'Probably. We've known each other a long time. He knows all about Doctor Stone, too. Like me, he has absolute confidence in the man's honesty.'

Follet nodded, 'So, I'll repeat my opening question. What can I do for you, Monsieur Douanier?'

Paul sat up straight again and nodded, 'I am proposing a collaboration with two initial objectives.'

Follet leaned forward, 'I'm listening.'

'The two objectives are firstly to prove William Stone's innocence and keep him out of prison.'

'And secondly?' asked Follet.

'To avoid you and Lieutenant Ouiseu being used as scapegoats.'

Follet smiled, 'I'm all for the second, but the first...'

'Don't forget that I have a wide network of collaborators around the world who can supply information to which you will not have access,' said Paul. 'I suspect that even if you request the assistance of foreign services, those requests will meet with a great number of complications.'

Follet frowned, 'You mean, someone is filtering the information to which I have access.'

Paul nodded, 'For a reason I do not yet understand, the entire affair must be seen to rotate about William Stone. It is to look like a very unpleasant murder pact. I expect that

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all sorts of sordid details will pop up to make it look blacker and blacker for the poor man.'

'He's being framed, you mean.'

'You too, monsieur. You too.' Paul raised his eyebrows. 'So, what about this collaboration?'

The Commandant frowned and shook his head sadly, 'You're implying that for the men at the top, this affair is more important than the petty promotion of a mere policeman. An insignificant pawn!'

'That's about it,' shrugged Paul. 'But together, we can outsmart them.'

Follet gazed at Paul, 'OK. I agree to a collaboration. What have I got to lose?'

Paul jumped up and ceased the man's hand. 'Great!'

Follet nodded and a faint smile crossed his face, 'I have a feeling that I might enjoy this, after all.' he paused. 'How about some coffee or tea while you fill me in.'

'Tea for me, please.'

Follet punched the intercom, 'Could you bring us two big mugs of tea, please, Angèle?' Then turning to Paul, 'Will Early Grey be all right?'

Paul nodded.

'Two mugs of Earl Grey, the Angèle. Mind not to over infuse it.'

The two men waited for the tea to arrive, then got to work.

'You have no objection to me taking notes, I suppose?' said Follet.

'No,' smiled Paul. 'Just don't write my name anywhere.'

'I'll mark it with a "PD" for Paul Douanier.'

Paul shook his head, 'better just use the letter, "P".'

Paul started by disclosing the information he had just received from Mr Seppa in Finland.

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The girl from the restaurant had received an unexpected late-night visit at her flat. Once she had been made aware as to who was requesting the information, her initial refusal to say anything evaporated. When she was additionally assured that that same person would provide adequate protection, should it be required, she opened up. Apparently, her testimony that William had left the restaurant on skis at the time when the singer was murdered was a lie. She was Korean and had been coerced into saying this by a woman from her own country. She was told that if she did not do as ordered, her parents, who lived in North Korea and her sisters in the south would be tortured.

She admitted that William had not left the place and, furthermore, that she had seen him arrive on skis, directly from the lake. When he left, she said she watched him ski directly away from the coast toward the island.

'So, you see, Commandant. William Stone could not have killed the singer. And obviously, he could not have killed the mother.'

Follet nodded slowly, 'A nasty frame-up. I'll have to pass this on straight away.'

Paul shook his head. 'No. That would be the worst thing to do. If you do, the people behind this affair will immediately change plans. Wait until I've explained the rest. Then you'll understand what we're up against.'

Follet frowned, 'So, it looks as though you're right. Firstly, Stone is innocent, and secondly, he has been cleverly framed.'

Paul nodded, 'Yes.'

Follet glanced at Paul, 'And how did you get hold of this information. Not even the Finnish police have got wind of it.'

Paul shook his head, 'I'm afraid I can't tell you. I gave my word. In any case, the girl will confirm the information

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to the police when we are good and ready. From now on, she'll be well protected until the right moment.'

'Protected by?'

'Sorry,' smiled Paul.

'And what about all the rest?' asked Follet.

Paul smiled and then spent a quarter of an hour running over the facts as he understood them.

The Commandant took notes as Paul spoke, asking him to stop from time to time so that he could note everything down clearly. When finished, he puffed out his cheeks.

'Now. Let's see if I have got this right.'

Paul nodded.

The Commandant shuffled his pages of notes.

'So, to start with, the man masquerading as Blache really is a professional negotiator, and a well-respected one at that.'

'Yes.'

The man masquerading as Gruber is a criminal specialising in what we can loosely call illegal import/export, or a sort of illicit merchandise shipping specialist.'

'Correct.'

'He sets up a fake recording contract and sends the Girl and Stone off to a studio in Finland.'

'Right again.'

'The man Gruber organised the transport of some extremely valuable stolen diamonds, disguised as stage jewellery worn by the Singer Lindsay Blache.'

'Yes.'

'Blache organised a recording contract and studio job in Finland so that he could use Stones' chalet for some tricky negotiation, of which we have no knowledge.'

'Correct,' nodded Paul. 'I suspect that it is this negotiation which interests our politicians.'



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Follet nodded, 'Let's keep to the facts, if you don't mind.'

Paul smiled, 'As you wish.'

'The diamonds you mention were stolen from a French couple, whose financial situation would not normally permit them to purchase.'

Paul nodded.

'The couple's daughter, who is holidaying in northern China, is taken hostage to keep them quiet.'

'Yes.'

'Then the Girl Blache is murdered, in a forest in Finland, and the diamonds disappear. Her mother is called back to Autrans and shot.'

Paul nodded again.

'Then, someone replaces the drying crystals in Stone's guitar case with drugs and tips off the customs.'

Paul smiled, 'To ensure that he doesn't leave Finland and make it back to Autrans.'

'This is all a bit fantastic,' groaned Follet, shaking his head. 'And to cap it all, the daughter of the French family is taken hostage in China.'

'Right again,' said Paul. 'In a place on the front line with North Korea, to be exact.'

Follet frowned, 'Is that significant?'

'Possibly,' he paused, then added, 'The girl from the restaurant in Finland was Korean.'

'Ah! Yes,' The commander made a note and went on. 'And the nasty small-time thug who is thought to have killed the singer is found dead in the forest, nearby.'

Paul nodded.

Follet looked down at his notes, 'You say you have information that Blache and his driver have returned to Holland and Gruber has returned to Switzerland.'

'Zurich, to be exact. The German-speaking part.'

'Then we have the shooting incident at Autrans and the hostage taking of Stone's neighbour.'

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Paul nodded.

Follet sighed, 'Someone tried to burgle Stone's chalet, and the two mercenary women took a pot shot at this person, then chased him or her across the cross-country ski tracks.'

Paul nodded, 'And the lack of a body implies the woman did not catch this burglar.'

Follet blew out his cheeks again, 'Then we have a car accident with two foreign women, one who drew a rifle and was attacked by the snowplough driver's dog. Both women are now in the hospital. Both were carrying guns and knives, both refused to speak, and neither had any sort of identification.'

Paul nodded, 'The car was stolen.'

Follet shrugged, 'from Alsace.'

Paul glanced at the Commandant. 'I'd put experienced guards on those women's hospital rooms if I were you. They sound like seasoned pros.'

Follet nodded and made a note. 'I'll double the guard.'

'Good precaution,' smiled Paul

'But we don't know why someone tried to burgle Stones' chalet.'

'No,' said Paul, 'But it looks like it was to retrieve something important. Something that these two women were paid to avoid coming to light.'

'Humm. Yes.'

'Well, you seem to have got the main things clarified,' said Paul.

'The main things!?' gasped Follet. 'Because there's more!'

That's enough to be going on with for the moment,' said Paul reassuringly. 'You want facts.' The rest is conjecture.'

'Right,' nodded Follet, 'But One thing I don't understand is why Stone drove all the way down from Courchevel through Italy and Croatia, then back by ferry to the south of Italy and then across to Sicily. And then, how he

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managed to swap identities with another man and disappear.' He paused and frowned. 'When I think about it, though, he could have swapped identities anywhere along the route.' The man pulled a face. 'Hell! The man could be absolutely anywhere.' He paused again and glanced at Paul. 'He might not even have left France in the first place, for that matter.'

Paul shrugged, 'As you say, he could be anywhere.'

'You wouldn't know where he is, would you?' he asked slowly.

Paul shrugged again. 'Over the years, William has picked up a lot of self-preservation tricks from pros. He'll no doubt explain it all when this is all finished.'

'Unless he is already dead,' said Follet, closely watching Paul's face for any significant reaction.

Paul pursed his lips, 'Time will tell. So, let's discuss how we are to go about this...' He paused. 'But our hands are tied while that girl remains a hostage in China.'

That night, a fire broke out at Grenoble's "Hopital du Nord". It was confined to the story where the two injured mercenary women were being held.

The entire floor was evacuated, but when the fire was out and the count made, the two women were found to be missing.

'Damn it, ' groaned Commandant Follet when he was informed.

## Chapter 23 : The Hostage

**A**nne-Laure opened the sitting room door and Paul stepped in. Claire-Bérénice was already there, gazing through the windows at the falling snow. It rarely snows in Maison-Laffitte nowadays, and when it does, it disrupts everything. Hardly anyone bothers to equip their car with snow tires, so the roads become the scenes of massive traffic jams. Sensible people leave their car in the garage, but the few who don't, or can't, cause havoc. Paul came by the underground, then walked the rest.

He shook the snow from his coat outside the front door, banged his shoes, then rubbed them vigorously on the door mat.

He had known Margaux's mother, Anne-Laure, and her husband for many years, and they exchanged warm kisses.

'This is Claire-Bérénice, Paul.'

They shook hands.

'Some coffee, Paul?'

'I'd prefer tea, if you don't mind, Anne-Laure.'

Once installed in a comfortable armchair with his steaming mug, he smiled at the worried-looking woman. 'Anne-Laure has told me about your problem, Madam, and I think we'll be able to help you.'

'Really?' cried the woman. 'I'm so worried.'

Paul smiled at her, 'I'm certain that no harm will come to your daughter as long as these people continue to think you have told no one.'

'Are you sure?'

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Paul nodded, 'In my experience, this sort of job is subcontracted out to non-professionals; people who need a little extra to pay the bills. They see themselves as a sort of temporary paid minder. So, if things look like going wrong and they run the risk of having the police on their tails, they'll chuck her out and disappear.'

'Is that true?' frowned Claire-Bérénice.

Paul nodded, 'I can't be absolutely certain, but the discussion you had on the telephone gives me that impression.'

'Anne-Laure told you?'

'Yes, but there are a few points I need to clarify before I can decide on the best way to tackle the problem.'

'I understand,'

'But first let me explain what we know.'

The woman nodded.

Firstly, we know that the stolen diamonds came from Switzerland, but the dealer will not tell us where he got them from. It's possible that the company do not know. They are valued at between twenty and twenty-five million euros.'

'How much!' gasped the woman.

Paul nodded, 'We also know that an elaborate set-up was organised first to disguise them as cheap stage jewellery, then to give them to a singer en-route to Finland. The young lady went to a recording studio in a small town in the Finnish forests, accompanied by her mother and a very good friend of mine.'

At this point, he shot Anne-Laure a warning look and edited the true story.

Someone was waiting and stole the diamonds from the singer, and they were passed on to another transporter. We don't know where they went from here. However, it's clear from the abduction of your daughter

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that they have not yet arrived at their intended destination.' he paused and sipped some of his tea.

'My friend was then framed, with the intention of getting him imprisoned and out of circulation. Paul pulled a face. 'Someone also concealed drugs in his guitar case and then tipped off the airport customs officials.'

The woman was following this open-eyed, 'This is astonishing.'

Paul knew that she would find it much more astonishing if she knew the full gory details.

My friend is now on the run from the police, and we are trying to find a way of proving his innocence.'

'And the Girl? The singer, I mean.'

Paul hesitated, 'Well, it seems that she was just an innocent carrier, so let's get back to the question in hand.'

Paul would do all he could to avoid the woman learning that there were already three deaths associated with those diamonds. 'We think that there is some complex affair in the background and that the stolen diamonds play a role. For the moment, we don't know what it is.'

'And what do you hope to do for my daughter?'

Paul lifted his hands in a gesture of despair, 'Well, to free her naturally.'

'To free her! She's in China!'

'I know. We'll have to go and get her.'

'Go and get her!' gasped Claire-Bérénice. Then she gave Paul a hard, searching look. 'Who are you, Monsieur Doaunier?'

Paul smiled, 'The less you know, the better, madam.'

The woman nodded, 'I see.'

'Now,' said Paul. 'Anne-Laure tells me there were some odd comments during the phone call.'

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Anne-Laure nodded, 'Yes. She was told to speak in English, but at several points she pretended to accidentally talk in French.'

'Really?' said Paul.

'Yes. At several points, she seemed to be pretending to have got something in her eye.'

Paul smiled, and she said, 'Mon oeil,' I suppose.

Claire Bérénice started. 'How did you guess?'

'Because I'd do exactly the same thing.'

Anne-Laure nodded, 'Yes, that's what I thought. Literally translated into English, which means my eye, but in French it means, "Don't believe a word of it",'

Paul smiled, 'So she was telling you not to believe the passage before or after.'

'That's what I thought,' said Anne-Laure.

'And that was the part about them regularly moving Brigitte from place to place,' said Claire Bérénice.

'Which I suppose means that they are not. That they are staying in the same place all the time.'

Paul smiled, 'Which is perfectly in phase with the idea that she is being "minded" by someone in their home, or in a hotel. That makes our job infinitely easier.'

He picked up his cup and sipped some more tea. 'Next,' he said, 'Apparently, she said that she was in good health, and getting exercise by jogging around the garden.'

'Yes.'

'As gardens are rare in that part of China, the place must thus belong to someone wealthy,' said Paul.

'I see what you mean,' said the woman. 'That will narrow things down.'

Paul nodded, 'Yes. And she also talked of a path having been cleared around the inside of a high garden wall.'

'Yes.'

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'Gardens are rare, but high-walled gardens are even rarer,' he smiled. 'Finally, the dimensions she indicated via her daily jogging distance, are a cunning way of giving us the size of that garden. A clever and courageous girl you have there, madam.'

'But we have no idea of where she is. China is so big,' wailed Claire-Bérénice.

Paul shook his head, 'In another part of this affair, which I won't go into, we find a link with Korea,' he glanced at the two women. 'Now, North Korea happens to be just the other side of the frontier from the ski resort where she was on holiday,' he paused. 'Changbaishan, wasn't it? The place where they have that ice sculpture festival.'

Anne-Berenice nodded. 'Yes. She sent me some photos of them.'

He paused. 'I think they prepared the coup and kept her where she was.'

'You think so.'

'I do,' he smiled. 'And Anne-Laure told me that she heard some odd clanging noises in the background.'

'Yes, that's true,' said Anne-Laure. 'It reminded me of something.'

Paul smiled and took out his phone. 'Listen to this. Is this the same sort of noise?'

He pressed the sound recorder playback button and passed the phone to the woman.

'Yes. Yes!' cried Claire-Bérénice. 'That's it. That's exactly what we heard.'

Paul nodded. 'And you have both heard it plenty of times, too.'

They gazed at him, and he chuckled. 'That's the noise made by a ski lift.'

'Of course!' cried Anne-Laure. 'Now I understand why you were so sure they hadn't left the town.'



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He smiled. 'Not only that. But I'll be astonished if our specialists can't locate the hiding place with considerable precision. We have a good idea of the size of the house we're looking for and the dimensions of the garden. We also know about the presence of a high garden wall and finally the town in which it's located.

Aerial photographs and a good expert should tell us everything we need to know.'

Claire-Bérénice gazed at Paul open-mouthed. 'You are incredible, whoever you are,' she cried, rushing over to hug and kiss him.

'I select my friends carefully,' smiled Anne-Laure.

Paul sighed and sipped some more hot tea, 'Our experts are already studying the subject, and I'd be surprised if they haven't discovered the place before this evening. Then all that remains is to go and retrieve her.'

The woman's brow clouded. 'But how can you do that. It'll be dangerous.'

Paul shook his head. 'In cases like this, which are not linked to terrorist organisations, I expect that your daughter will have one or perhaps two "minders". As I said, these won't be professional criminals. The pros won't want to spend days penned up looking after a mere woman. We just have to get in and out while the main organisers are away.'

Anne-Laure frowned, 'But you'll have to get someone out there and that'll take ages.'

Paul smiled complacently. 'I have already thought about that. It just so happens that I have two trustworthy people nearby. I was just waiting for confirmation of my ideas before contacting them. Then we go into action.'

'Good heavens,' cried Claire-Bérénice. 'This is exactly like a thriller at the cinema.' She shook her

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head sadly, 'Except that my poor daughter is in the thick of it.'

Paul got to his feet, 'Well, I've got a lot of things to do, so I'll be off. I want to get things moving before midday.'

'Midday!?' cried Claire-Bérénice. 'Today?'

Paul nodded. 'Yes. And please call me instantly if you get more information. And... he gave a nod to two women, 'Record all your conversations, please.' I advise you to practice doing it straight away, just in case.'

With this, he took his leave, leaving the two women to discuss their surprising interview.

## Chapter 24 : Mr Blache is Angry

**M**onsieur Blache was not happy. He was, in fact, furious. He was scowling down at the front page of the Times. This showed a photograph of an attractive woman of Arabian origin, exquisitely dressed and made up. The photo showed her smiling, surrounded by a group of equally exclusive-looking people on the steps of the Scala de Milan. Dark had fallen, but the photographer had perfectly captured the Multifaceted sparkling of the woman's jewellery. These consisted of a pair of magnificent diamond earrings and a matching ring. Below the photo, in large print, one could read, "Wife of Saudi businessman Wearing Stolen Jewels".

He had scanned the text below and had sworn several times. The section of the text he was reading went on, "The well-known wife of a Saudi businessman has been interrogated by the Italian police concerning the magnificent diamond earrings and ring stolen from a wealthy Parisian family last month. The jewels are rumoured to have been valued at twenty-five million euros. Our reporter has been informed that the jewels in question were a gift from the CEO of the Japanese Air Conditioning Giant "JACOV", with whom her husband was negotiating a takeover deal. It is not yet clear how they came into his possession."

The article went on to discuss a mass of details which Blache knew to be false. He knew this because he had invented a good part of them.

What he did know to be true was that the negotiation had immediately collapsed, and the Emirates businessman had withdrawn his proposition.

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This meant that all his efforts to smooth the way towards a mutually beneficial deal had been for nothing. More important still, his large commission had evaporated into thin air.

The CEO of "JACOV" had firmly denied ever having anything to do with the present. The diamonds had nothing to do with him.

Nevertheless, he was suspected of being involved in the theft of the extremely valuable jewels, and the Japanese police had been requested to investigate and collaborate with the French.

Blache didn't believe this for an instant.

Firstly, the CEO of a vast international group wouldn't throw money around like that. Secondly, for months, the man had been doing everything he could to maintain a low profile until the deal was sealed. Thirdly, any presents would be made after the signature of the deal, not before.

The Young Woman sitting in front of him nodded.

'Interesting, is it not?'

He shot her a look and glanced at his assistant.

Sophie Lemone smiled, 'Would you be interested to learn a little more about the diamonds?'

He shrugged, 'Honestly, Miss Lemone, I'm not sure it's worth my time.'

'No?'

'My fees and commission have just disappeared, and months of careful planning have been wasted.'

Sophie smiled, and the man's assistant gazed at her with appreciation. She was an exquisite woman, and he'd very much have liked to get to know her. However, her manner was icy and professional.

Sophie had travelled to Holland the previous night, and he had agreed to meet her at the Hotel Sebastians.

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She nodded. 'I appreciate and fully understand your annoyance,' she said. 'But there are some details of which you are presently unaware, which might lead to you being hounded by the press just as much as this poor woman in Saudi Arabia.'

Blache frowned at her.

'These details have not yet been communicated to the police.'

'What has this to do with me?' he scowled.

'I'll explain, shall I?'

'That's what we're here for. To listen to what you have to say,' said the man.

Sophie nodded, 'Exactly. Firstly, I'd like to ensure we are in phase. So, to enable you to organise your negotiation meeting, you needed to take on the identity of Monsieur Blache, father of Linsay Blache, from Meylan, near Grenoble?'

'That's correct. It was necessary. But how did you discover that?'

Sophie permitted herself a smile but did not reply. 'This was a necessary move to help convince William Stone to take on the songwriting project for the girl, Linsay?'

'Right again.'

But your real name is Dekker. Rob Dekker?'

The man nodded.

'And you are by profession a negotiator?'

'All correct so far.'

'Before I go on, could you tell me who suggested the choice of Mister Stone's Chalet at Autrans for this meeting?' asked Sophie.

'There's no harm in telling you, now the thing has collapsed. I was searching for somewhere totally unknown to anyone in the business. The negotiation was to be kept absolutely secret because the sum involved was in the fifty billion euros range.'

Sophie nodded, 'Yes, we worked that out.'

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The man went on, 'As you now know, Saudi Arabia wanted to gain a strong foothold in the Air conditioning and ventilation sector. The front man was a well-known businessman, but money came from...' he paused, 'Several other sources.'

'And could you tell me who suggested this specific location?'

Dekker nodded, folding the newspaper and setting it aside, 'That was my old friend Monsieur Gruber. I had already contacted him about the recording contract for Lindsay.'

Sophie frowned, 'But why!? After all, she wasn't related to you in any way.'

'Ah! Yes, of course. You know nothing about that, do you.'

He paused. 'But surely that's of no interest with respect to the present affair,' Dekker looked at her keenly.

Sophie returned his gaze, 'It may well be. You'll understand why, once I've explained. So, what was your relationship with the Blache family?' she paused. 'You are aware that the father is dead?'

Dekker sighed. 'Yes, of course. It goes back a long way. Back to our beginnings in the negotiation business.' He paused. 'Are you sure this is necessary?'

Sophie nodded, 'Go on, please.'

'Well, Monsieur Blache was my driver and general assistant for many years. He was an excellent man and helped me out with numerous complicated affairs.

Unfortunately, he had a terrible accident when pruning his apple trees. He fell from the top of a ladder and broke his neck.'

'We discovered that,' said Sophie. 'And of course you are certain that it was an accident?'

Dekker gave Sophie a long, cold stare. 'I hope so.'

'But you are not one hundred per cent certain, are you?' said Sophie.

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The man shook his head slowly and let out a sad sigh, 'No. Not one hundred per cent.'

Sophie sighed too, 'And that's why you looked after the girl and her mother.'

'Yes. I checked how much money Lindsay's mother had in the bank account. I topped it up so that they would be able to finish paying off the mortgage and live comfortably. I also purchased a chalet in the Alps in the name of the girl's father, which they only very recently discovered.'

'And the record contract was an extra way of lending a helping hand?'

Dekker smiled, 'Yes. I knew that Lindsay loved singing and that her mother was keen on pushing her as far as possible. I also knew that Lindsay had not got an original enough style or a head-turning voice. What she needed was an album of really original songs. Something sufficiently different to attract the attention of radio programmers.'

'And that's when you heard about William Stone?' said Sophie.

'That was Gruber again. He spotted a brilliant opportunity to sort all the details out in one move.'

'Impressive,' agreed Sophie.

'Yes,' nodded Dekker. 'Pure genius in fact,' he frowned. '

And all wasted because of those damn diamonds.'

Sophie pursed her lips prettily, 'I wouldn't be surprised if in the near future, your name pops up in connection with them.'

'What!?' gasped the man.

Sophie shrugged, 'You'll understand soon.'

'I hope so. I expect that's why you came all the way up here to talk to me.'

'Exactly,' smiled Sophie. 'And I suppose that the idea to choose Finland for the recording session came from Gruber, too.'

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'Yes. A clever move again.'

'But you haven't seen your old friend Gruber for several years, have you. I mean, met physically.'

'No. That's true.'

Sophie picked up her shoulder bag and took out a photo. She glanced at it and pushed it across the table to Dekker, 'Do you know this man?'

Dekker leaned forward, and his assistant came over and gazed down. 'No. never seen him.' He shot a look at his assistant, who shook his head.

'Who is he?'

Sophie stretched her narrow shoulders back, 'His name is Monsieur Braun. He's from Zurich.'

'And what has he to do with all this?'

Sophie took out a second page of official paper and slid it across to the two men.

'A death certificate!?' cried Dekker. 'The man's dead?'

'Read to the bottom of the page,' said Sophie.

Then Dekker exploded. 'What the hell!?' he cried, jumping to his feet. 'Gruber dead!?'

Sophie nodded.

'When did this happen? I exchanged e-mail with him only a week ago.'

'Look at the date, mister Dekker.'

The man read the details, and his face went pale. 'What in the name of the devil is all this? It says he died years ago. That can't be true...'

Sophie pushed the photo back towards him, 'This is the person you have been communicating with for the past month or so. Mister Bruan, of Zurich.'

'I don't believe it! Only Gruber could have set up that contract. He had the contacts. He knew everyone of importance in the music industry. We did several jobs for them.'

Sophie nodded, 'Mr Braun is a very clever man. The contract was a fake. The record company have never



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heard of him or of Linsay Blache. And the studio in Finland is still waiting to be paid.'

'Great Gods!' he gasped. 'But why go to all that trouble?'

'He was using you, mister Dekker. He was clearly paid to do this by someone, but we don't know who, yet.'

'What on earth for?'

'For the diamonds, Mister Dekker.'

'The diamonds!?'

Sophie nodded. 'After they were stolen, they were disguised as costume jewellery and given to Linsay Blache. Unaware of anything, she transported them to Finland for him. There they were taken from her and continued their route via Russia and eventually to the Saudi woman.'

'Great Gods!' spluttered Dekker...

'In fact, they were not really stolen.'

'Not really stolen!? How can something not really be stolen?'

'It seems that the diamonds were given to the French couple specifically to be stolen. A sort of masquerade,' said Sophie.

'What on earth for?'

'To create a huge scandal.'

Dekker blinked, and he shook his head, 'I don't get this at all.'

'The couple were ordered not to say a word about how the diamonds came into their possession and why they had not been properly insured,' continued Sophie. 'To ensure they obeyed these orders, their daughter was taken hostage and hidden in northeast China.'

'China!?' gasped the man. This is just too much to grasp.'

Sophie sighed a long, sad sigh and gazed at the two men facing her, 'I'm afraid there's more. And rather bad news.'

'Worse than losing a six-million-euros commission?'

'Yes...'

'Oh God! Now what?'

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'To start with, and I'm really very sorry to have to tell you this,' she paused. 'I'm afraid Lindsay Blache is dead.'

Dekker leapt to his feet, 'Dead!'

Sophie nodded sadly, 'I'm afraid her body was found in the forest in Finland.'

'During that fake recording session?'

'It wasn't Fake, mister Dekker. They actually did record the songs. They're excellent too.'

'But for god's sake!' The man had turned a deathly pale.

'How on earth did the poor girl die? Of cold, something like that?' He shook his head in disbelief. 'Poor girl.' He frowned. 'And her poor mother.'

'She was strangled,' said Sophie.

'Strangled!' gasped Dekker. 'Strangled? I don't believe it.

Who in the name of God would want to strangle an innocent girl like Lindsay? It defies comprehension.'

The man's assistant, who had been following the discussion with a deepening frown, growled, 'That guy Braun. That's who did it.' He said menacingly. 'I'll get that guy and tear out his damn guts.'

Sophie glanced across the table at the man. 'That won't be necessary, I'm afraid. His body was found by the Swiss police this morning. In the bath at his flat.'

'Drowned?' the man asked.

Sophie shook her head. 'Oh no.' There was a short pause while the two men watched her face closely.

'He had been cut to bits, arms, legs, head, torso. And all the bits lay out neatly in the bath to drain. All appendages, such as the ears, were cut off and laid on top.'

The two men turned even paler than they had already been.

'My god!' groaned Dekker.

'Even the police surgeon was shocked,' nodded Sophie.

'A highly professional job, done with an exceedingly sharp knife by someone who knew exactly how to separate each member neatly.'

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'My God!' groaned Dekker. 'Why do such a horrible, inhuman thing?'

Sophie made a gesture with her hands, 'The most likely reason would be as a warning.'

'A warning to whom?'

'To you.'

'Me!'

'And to anyone else considering investigating the affair, me included,' said Sophie. 'I must admit I'm not altogether happy about that.'

Dekker shook his head slowly, 'Lindsay's poor mother! How on earth will she be able to survive such a tragedy?' he looked up at his assistant. 'We'll have to go and see her at once.'

The man nodded. 'I'll see to the tickets.'

Sophie held up her hand, 'I'm afraid that won't be possible.'

Dekker got to his feet, 'I'll do what I damn well please, Miss Lemone.'

Sophie sighed and gazed at the man sadly, 'I'm afraid the mother is dead too.'

Dekker dropped into his chair, 'Dead!'

Sophie nodded. 'Shot through the head.'

'Murdered!'

She nodded, 'In the chalet belonging to William Stone. Just after you left.'

The two men gasped.

'The police have not released the information yet, but we believe that the facts will quickly find their way to the man you were negotiating with from Saudi Arabia. Soon after that, we expect the fact to appear in the international press.'

Both men stood transfixed, dazed by the information.

Dekker closed his eyes, shaking his head slowly.

'We've been set up, boss,' said his assistant slowly.

Dekker nodded, 'Set up by some bloodthirsty bastard.'

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'Someone who needs to discredit you,' added Sophie. The man gazed at her, 'Someone who wanted to make absolutely sure that that bloody deal fell through.' 'That's what it looks like,' said Sophie. 'But why?' Dekker shook his head. God knows! Someone who had it in for me, or for the Saudi guy, or the Japanese company CEO.'

'Or a competitor, boss,' said the second man. 'It doesn't make sense,' said Dekker. 'The diamond trick would have been a clever trick. Well thought out and well executed. But why kill anyone at all?' He paused. 'There was no need for that. And that poor kid and her mother.' He sighed. 'My god!'

Sophie got to her feet. 'Those murders are being attributed to Mister Stone. He's also been framed for drug smuggling.'

'Drug smuggling!?' gasped Dekker. 'Never!'

'It looks like Gruber's doing,' said Sophie. 'But that man may only have been a pawn in the game.'

'A dead pawn,' said Dekker's assistant.

'Where's Stone now?' asked Dekker.

'Hiding,' said Sophie.

'Any idea of who could be behind all this horrible business?' asked the man, gazing at his hands, which were trembling.

Sophie shook her head, 'We are hoping you will be able to help us.'

Dekker got to his feet, 'I'm going to the bar. I need a stiff drink.'

## Chapter 25 : Consultancy Projects

**W**aking early, I lay on my back for a few moments, frowning and disoriented. Then I remembered I was back in my old flat. During the night, my subconscious mind had been at work, and I decided to check something it had thrown up before washing and breakfast.

The little grey cells had reminded me that I had not been commissioned directly by the Japanese Air Conditioning Giant “JACOV”. I had, in fact, been contacted by the owner of a British consultancy company, who had offered to subcontract me the job. I also remembered that, a year earlier, I had met the man and that he had tried to entice me to join his team. I refused steadfastly, firstly because I enjoyed being my own boss. Secondly, because the man himself was a ruthless, money-grabbing opportunist. I suspected that he was the sort of man who would readily to lie or falsify any report if this brought in extra cash. He was a thoroughly unpleasant man and one to be kept at arm’s length at all times, which is what I did.

What I wanted to do before breakfast was to check the details of the contract I had signed with him.

I knew by experience that he wasn't the sort of man to leave any loopholes in the legal aspects linking me with the report.

In other words, he would have made sure that he could take the credit if everything went well. On the other hand, I would be blamed if anything went badly wrong.

I quickly located and checked the contract, which I had taken the precaution of annotating. I had made a number

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of notes to make it easy for me to find the critical parts if required later.

I skimmed through these and nodded with satisfaction; everything was as I remembered.

Then, as an afterthought, I decided to see what the man was up to at the present time. I typed his name into the search engine.

Suddenly, I sat up with a start.

I blinked and quickly logged into my "The Times" web account to double-check the information I'd stumbled upon.

The Times article confirmed everything. The man was dead.

He had been found drowned in the bath at his luxury Kensington flat.

The police had not ruled out foul play...

I smiled to myself, drowning oneself in a bath would take some doing...

Clearly, I would have to review the study I had done for him in detail.

Then I noticed a picture in one of the side columns. It showed an elegant Arabian woman standing in front of the Scala. It wasn't the woman who attracted my attention, but the earrings she was wearing. I clicked the image and fell back in my armchair. The headline ran, "Wife of prominent Saudi Arabian businessman wearing priceless stolen jewels."

I read the text and shook my head in amazement. 'So that's where the damned diamonds were headed for!' I exclaimed out loud.

There was a link to a second article, which was even more astounding. The headline read, "JACOV shares plummet after collapse of secret sell-out deal with Saudi businessman, following stolen diamond-gift scandal".

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The text also cited a rumour that the sell-out was triggered by the discovery that for years “JACOV” had been using an illegal gas in its refrigeration units.

The CEO was quoted as vigorously denying the allegation.

In the finance section of “The Times”, an article described the free fall of the share prices, which had fallen by fifty per cent in the last two days. As a consequence of this, the “Times” analyst predicted the high probability of an aggressive buy-out by one of “JACOV’s” international competitors.

As my coffee was brewing, I sent Paul, Margaux, and Sophie a screen copy of the information I had found.

I added, “That makes four murders. I did a report for JACOV. If these things are connected, then I’m probably also on the short list for elimination.”

Sophie texted me back, “Five murders now... Gruber was found dead in Zurich. Make sure you stay well hidden.”

I blew out my cheeks. This was all getting too much for me. Anyway, I was relieved that Sally was well out of the way for the moment.

I pulled on my anorak and strolled along to the boulangerie for some croissants and a baguette. As I walked, I turned the whole affair over in my mind.

I was now convinced that the entire business had something to do with the “JACOV” deal.

That must have been what Blache was negotiating at my chalet.

Why my chalet had been chosen, I had no idea. Because I had actually done some work for the company, perhaps.

This implied that the complicated business with the diamonds was also linked with this. However, I couldn’t see why Blache would have tried to sabotage his own negotiation. He obviously had far too much to lose.

Since my first encounter with the man, I had researched the topic of negotiation fees. I had discovered that in such

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huge mega deals, the negotiator could charge up to one part in ten thousand of the sale value. This would have put his commission in the region of ten million euros. No, that man was counting on the deal going through. After all, that was his job, and this must have been one of the very best of his career.

I instantly rejected the rumour about the use of internationally banned coolant fluids for the refrigeration plants.

I had studied the company's products during the preparation of my report and knew the allegation to be false. To an expert, the existing designs were obviously based around the use of modern replacement gases in place of the older banned ones.

In any case, I still had a complete set of the design drawings in my data. I could check that out later.

I suspected that the rumour was a trick set up by a competitor to try to drive the share prices down even more. This added scandal would also make certain that the Saudi businessman didn't have second thoughts about the deal.

I nodded to myself.

Yes. The whole affair smelt more and more like an underhanded manipulation to destroy the reputation of "JACOV".

That being said, I couldn't see how all the murders fitted in, if they had anything to do with it at all.

After breakfast, I settled myself comfortably at the table and plugged in a second large PC screen.

I needed the extra space to bring up the various documents and plans and to keep them visible.

Then I opened my report and started to read carefully.

An hour later, I had finished.

I had been commissioned to give an expert opinion on the use of an innovative surface treatment process for critical system elements. The proposed treatment would enable



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the redesign of several components, including the heat exchangers and fan blades.

As usual, the objective was to make the parts cheaper and easier to manufacture, thus boosting ever-dwindling profit margins as prices fell worldwide.

My analysis turned up some extremely troubling results.

The surface treatment in itself would indeed allow "JACOV" to attain the objective desired and even improve overall performance. The new process would also permit the use of cheaper and widely available raw materials.

The gains resulting from this innovative surface treatment would thus be even greater than initially planned.

However, there was a major disadvantage that everybody had overlooked.

I showed in my report that under the very special conditions existing inside such systems, over time, the surface treatment would degrade. This would be accelerated by the high fluctuations in temperature between cooling and heating periods and the presence of condensation from humid air. Also, the mechanical vibrations caused by the compressors and fans would accelerate the degradation process. The result would be that an extremely thin layer of the material might detach itself from the treated metallic parts. However, being only a few micrometres thick, the microscopic flakes would be blown through the fans, which would fragment them further. The tiny particles would thus be carried out with the air into the buildings.

In itself, this was not a problem; they would be invisible.

A very serious problem existed, however.

This was because these invisible particles would be breathed in by the people in the buildings.

The trouble was that scientific studies published in "Nature" magazine indicated that in the long term, the presence of such materials in the lungs of test animals leads to cancer.

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My recommendation laid all this out clearly, both in the conclusions and above all in the executive summary. I proposed that the innovative surface treatment process should be avoided at all costs.

I pointed out that in the near future, the process would, in all probability, be made illegal for all applications in which it might come into contact with humans or animals.

I read through my recommendation several times.

This was the sort of situation in which I was always cautious.

My clients were always at liberty to ignore my recommendations. However, if they did, I had made sure that my responsibility could never be invoked.

I made a careful check, which confirmed that I had sent a registered postal version to the boss of the consultancy company and had kept a backup proof of all the emails I had sent, which outlined my concerns regarding the proposed treatment.

I sat back and sighed.

I was satisfied that my report would prevent the company from making a huge mistake, which would lead to unimaginable problems in the future.

Had I not pointed this out, it would have been simply a question of time before trouble started. Five years, maybe ten.

Then, if a single case of unexplained lung cancer were spotted and air samples were taken, all hell would be set loose...

The consequences would have been world-shattering, considering the number of installations that would have been produced and commissioned since then.

No. I had assuredly done my job well and avoided a worldwide crisis.

I made myself a mug of tea and carried it back into the sitting room. The sun had now swung over the tops of the

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Belledonne mountain range and was sparkling off the snowfields and jagged white peaks.

One thing that was troubling me was that I had no proof that my report had actually been forwarded to the research director at JACOV.

I therefore decided to have a look at the final design drawings of the existing systems. While working on the report, I had been given access to the professional contractor's website. This gave pros access to the detailed installation instructions, plans and operation manuals. I guessed that my authorisation would have been removed, but I might still find the overall plans. I searched through my files and eventually found a link in my notes.

Amazingly, the link still worked, and clearly no one had troubled to update the access authorisations.

After wading through several folders, I found what I was looking for: the up-to-date drawings of the system on which I had been working. This was the company's best-selling product line and had made several billion euros for them.

I noticed that the drawings had not been updated for two or three years, which was a good sign.

It meant that they had not changed the design to integrate the dangerous surface treatment process.

However, when I found the page dealing with the refrigeration block, I blinked and sat up.

I could hardly believe my eyes. This was exactly the design I had worked on.

The shape of some of the specific parts was unmistakable.

I racked my brain. Could they have found some other trick? Perhaps another way of surface treating the parts or some innovative process, I hadn't considered?

I checked the image files concerning the spare parts, and there it was —the proof. Part number KP 65-023 B.

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Underneath the part was the code name of the surface treatment I had recommended should be banned.

I was flabbergasted.

Not only had they gone ahead, but they had started production two years before asking for my expert opinion.

I let myself fall back in my chair, then sat up suddenly.

Was this the reason for the sell-out deal? Was the objective to get out while the going is good?

Before someone discovers the truth?

Perhaps they had already had trouble and had bought off the people behind the complaint. Now that would not surprise me, given the enormous profits being made. A company valued at over fifty billion euros could hardly afford to have such a fact come to light.

This was too incredible for words. I could not come to terms with the astonishing idea.

Then another idea struck me. Was this why the boss of the consultancy company had been murdered? To keep the secret until the deal was signed? Until the money had changed hands?

Maybe the stupid, greedy idiot had guessed what had happened and was trying to blackmail "JACOV".

I nodded to myself. Yes. No, that would be perfectly in phase with the man's foul mentality.

In the back of my mind, however, a doubt hovered.

I could not imagine the CEO of such a hugely successful international company taking the huge risk of murdering someone.

I shook my head slowly, gazing from one of my computer screens to the other. No. That was not at all reasonable.

There must surely be something else going on.

Perhaps top management was not aware of the looming danger.

What if they had not been informed of the results of my report?

But they must know. Otherwise, why sell out?

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I sent all this information to Paul, Margaux, and Sophie and waited for their reply. When it came it contained another surprise. Mr Seppa had followed up the death of the thug assumed to have Killed Lindsay Blache. He informed Paul that a “specialist” had been sent specially from China to deal with the “tidying up job” as he put it.

While I sat going over and over my conclusion to check my reasoning, another idea hit me. That greedy money-grabbing fool must have been worried that I would guess what was afoot and attempt to bribe him. Could it be that it was he who had hired the two mercenary women to remove me from the equation? Or was there something more? Something none of us could see at all.

## Chapter 26 : Sally in China

I gasped and gazed at Paul.  
'You want her to do what!?'

Paul shrugged, 'Jenny just needs a bit of help with the shipping arrangements.'

'Shipping arrangements!' I shook my head in astonishment. 'That could be terribly dangerous, Paul!'

Paul shook his head, 'Jenny will do all the tricky bits. As you know, she is a seasoned professional. Nothing will go wrong.'

Paul had just informed me that he had requested the assistance of my wife, Sally. She had agreed, which didn't really surprise me.

'You want her and Jenny to sneak into that freezing ski resort in northern China...'

'Changbaishan National Park,' interrupted Paul. 'Some excellent Olympic-level ski slopes there, if you're interested.'

'They won't be doing any skiing as far as I understand.'

Paul nodded, 'That's not presently on the schedule.'

'You want Sally to rush up there from her conference in Singapore. Join up with that American agent Jenny in Beijing, then dash to Changbaishan, where the average temperature is minus twenty and rescue a French hostage.'

Paul smiled. 'Sally seemed highly enthusiastic.'

I sighed, 'I bet she did.'

'Don't forget that Jenny is one of the best. She already saved Sally's life in Prague, if you remember.'

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'Yes, I remember,' I sighed, 'But that was in Europe and in mid-summer. This is in an isolated town in China in winter.'

Paul gazed at me. He knew I would have to have my say and get it out of my system. He also knew, as I did, that there was nothing I could do once Sally had decided on a course of action.

He leaned forward across the bistro table in Grenoble centre, where we had met. From where he was sitting, he could survey all the comings and goings and make sure that he had not been followed. He wanted to make sure that I could remain hidden until I had completely unravelled the mystery of my consultancy job. The recent murder of the man who had commissioned the study from me for the Japanese company made this precaution even more essential.

It was clear that someone was tidying up loose ends., Hopefully, however, I was not known to be one of those loose ends, because the murdered man had certainly submitted the report in his own name.

However, it looked like professionals were behind this, and professionals like to be sure of things. They would want to know if any of the man's staff had helped him prepare the report or had typed it up for him.

Those people would be on a blacklist on which it would be unhealthy to find one's name.

Paul sipped some of his coffee, constantly scanning the scene around us for inconsistent behaviour.

'Our experts had no trouble in locating the place where the girl is being held,' he said. 'The information that the girl cleverly worked into her phone message made it a breeze for our experts,' he smiled.

'Clever girl,' I nodded.

'Yes, she was, and luckily, we have a Chinese woman in the area who helps us from time to time with tax fraud investigations. Apparently, the house belongs

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to a wealthy businessman, Chen Jiang. The man lives in Beijing and hardly ever goes up there. She checked out the place and informed us that the place is being surveyed by a single woman. Another woman and a tough-looking guy visit the place once in the morning, then early evening. She says that they bring in the European-style food from the Hyatt Regency.' Paul paused. 'I booked rooms for Sally and Jenny at the same hotel. The "Hyatt Regency Changbaishan" is right in the centre of the ski resort. A nice place and very expensive.'

I shrugged, 'That doesn't make it any less dangerous? What if the local police are mixed up in it?'

'They aren't, William.'

'So, Jenny coshes the guard, and they carry the hostage off to the hotel and hide.' Is that it?

'I doubt that Jenny will need to use a cosh,' smiled Paul.

'She won't shoot the woman!?' I exclaimed.

'Of course not, William. We're not savages, you know. The woman will just be immobilised.'

'Shooting the woman would do that,' I frowned.

Paul shrugged, 'Jenny's a pro. It's not my place to dictate to her how to deal with the situation. Her job is to get the girl and transport her to safety.'

'In the hotel,' I added.

Paul shook his head, 'No.'

'No!?' I cried.

'No. The hotel reservation is a blind. The three women will leave by plane immediately. We need them out of China before the other two guards come in the morning.'

'That's wild,' I said. 'And probably impossible.'

Paul smiled. 'Sally takes the direct flight from Singapore to Beijing, arriving at five thirty-five in the morning, where she will meet up with Jenny.'



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The two take the eight o'clock flight to Changbaishan, where they book into the Hyatt Regency carrying fake luggage.' He smiled. 'Expensive Fake luggage too, to keep up appearances. Then, that evening, once they've got the girl, they'll have about twelve hours to get out of China before the cry goes up.'

'And Bobs-your-uncle!' I groaned.

Paul shrugged, 'My contact there will have a taxi waiting. They'll drive straight to the airport, which should take them a little over an hour, given the current weather conditions. From there, they fly directly to Shanghai on the 22:20 night flight, arriving there just after 1:00 in the morning. Then they take the six-fifteen flight to Dubai, where Jenny has set up a safe house for the girl.' Paul smiled. 'Satisfied, William. They'll be out of the country two hours before the balloon goes up.'

I nodded.

Paul smiled again, 'Took a bit of organisation, but our team are used to that sort of thing. The smaller the team, the easier it is, too. They will fly to Dubai with Emirates Airlines, which will be one hundred per cent safe, especially as the girl will be travelling on a false passport.'

'What about Sally?' I asked.

Paul shrugged, 'She'll come on straight back to Paris.'

'But,' I said. 'By then, the cry will have gone up. Those Chinese guys will have someone waiting.'

Paul nodded. Firstly, we purchased separate tickets for each leg of the journey. There will be nothing to indicate that Sally will not stop at Dubai with the other two women. She'll take the morning flight back to Paris at six-fifteen.'

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And what if someone is waiting in Paris? At the airport. They'll have had time to work out what has happened. They'll guess where she came from via the hotel records.'

'Sally won't be going through customs at Paris, William.' Smiled Paul. 'At least not via the normal channel. That's all arranged. We know how to do that sort of thing when we have the police on our side. Which incidentally we now do.'

I pulled a face, 'I'm worried though. Do you really think this will work?'

Paul chuckled and looked down at his Rolex. 'Well, William,' He smiled. 'I'm now certain of it.'

At this moment, his phone pinged, and he smiled and chuckled again.

My own phone pinged too, and I took it out.

There was a message from Sally, "Hi darling. Back in Paris. Had a great time in China. Dropping in to chat with Anne-Laure and get some sleep. Love you..."

Paul burst out laughing. 'I told you it would work.'

'You devil, Paul!' I cried.

The man became serious once more. 'Great. Now that the girl is safe, we can really get to work.'

I was right though. Some people *were* waiting for Sally at the airport in Paris. Not only this but they immediately spotted the girl with masses of bright red hair sling her rucksack on her back as she came through customs.

The two heavily built Chinese looking men followed her across the arrivals hall. Outside, their car was waiting with a third man at the wheel, just behind the taxis.

As she left the building, she shot a quick look behind her and suddenly started jogging off down the road.

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The two men exchanged looks and set off behind her. They were well-trained men and did not intend to lose sight of the red hair which was visible for kilometres. The man started the car and began to cruise slowly, keeping well behind, ready to close in once the others caught her.

But as they went on, the girl suddenly darted across the road and headed back down the entrance route, which was a one-way road. The driver cursed, stopped and signalled the two men to get after her.

The girl carried on and gradually quickened the pace as she went, her red hair flailing behind her in the wind.

Then she reached a straight section and accelerated. The men did their best to follow but were soon perspiring and struggling to keep up.

Then the road climbed steeply, and the girl put on a sprint, leaving the two men struggling to keep up. However, they were no match for the girl, who reached the top while they were hardly a third of the way up. She turned into the long-stay car park and sprinted away at top speed along the flat passages between the parked cars. Coming to the top, the two men just had time to spot a flash of red as it disappeared out of the entrance in the distance. They pulled up and more or less collapsed, puffing and coughing from the unexpected effort.

'What in the name of god was that!?' the taller one said.

'A red lightning bolt.' Puffed his companion. 'The boss is not going to be happy.'

About a kilometre further on, the girl stopped and looked around.

She let out a peal of laughter, unhitched her rucksack, and opened the top pocket. Then, with a quick movement, she whisked off her red wig and

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rammed it on top of the polystyrene beads filling the ultra-light backpack.

She opened the boot of a parked car, threw the rucksack in and moved around to the passenger seat.

She was still laughing to herself as she opened the door and nodded to the driver, who smiled back. The back of her tracksuit came into view. Marked in big blue letters, one could read FRANCE. This was the French Olympic ten-kilometre cross-country running champion.

'Will Sally be alright now, Grandad?' she smiled.

Paul's chief smiled back, 'Yes. Perfect. Thanks, my little one.'

## Chapter 27 : Mr Yamagishi

**M**ister Yamagishi smiled a rather melancholy smile, sighed and nodded slowly to himself. He had been tidying up his desk and preparing for his trip to France.

His two suitcases were packed and waiting for him. The "JACOV" building was emptying fast as the end of the day approached. He had given his entire staff the following day off to celebrate the fiftieth birthday of the company's creation. He had also given every single employee a bonus amounting to six months' salary.

He had also instructed the finance department to transfer half a million euros to Mr Braune. This was compensation for the several month's work he had undertaken in preparing the failed negotiations.

He smiled, imagining the wave of celebrations that would be rocking the capital that night.

Mr Yamagishi had been CEO of "JACOV" for more than twenty-five years and had amazed industrial analysts by surviving so long in that position.

What these analysts did not know, and in fact no one at all knew, was that it would be impossible to remove him from the chair of CEO.

This enviable situation was entirely his own doing, and there was nothing underhanded or illegal about it. Just a clever bit of investment.

Over the years, he had become one of the best-paid CEO on the planet. From his beginnings twenty-five years

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earlier, he had quietly used a large part of that income to purchase shares in JACOV.

As the company flourished and his other investments flourished, he steadily increased his part of the share until he became the principal shareholder of the company.

At present, he owned thirty-five per cent of them.

It was therefore Mr Yamagishi who controlled decisions, including who held the job of CEO.

However, no one knew of this.

He had carefully disguised his identity by placing the shares in a private company owned by an investment foundation.

He owned them all under the maiden name of his wife.

The man had been understandably annoyed when the deal with the Saudis had fallen through.

The sale would have yielded him a substantial profit.

He shrugged; that was life. At least business life.

'He had also pulled a face when the share value plummeted.

Even so, fifty per cent of fifteen billion euros was more than enough to carry him through the remaining thirty years or so of his life. Two hundred and fifty million euros a year should cover all his needs, even in Saint Tropez.

That Chinese bastard, from "China Air Conditioning", had already approached his foundation with an offer of purchase, above the going price.

He smiled as he considered this and chuckled to himself, two things he very rarely allowed himself the pleasure of doing. He had given an order for the offer to be accepted, and the money had already been transferred to his Swiss bank account, which was also under his wife's maiden name.

The other principal shareholders would follow suit before the price shot down further, and the company would be Chinese before the following day was over.

'Oh well!' he mused, 'I had a good run for my money.'

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Most people around Mister Yamagishi felt sorry for the man.

Over the last three years, they had seen him age fast. The worries associated with the job were taking an undue toll. This is why speculation had been rife that he would soon be replaced as CEO.

Then, when his wife had left him, taking his two children with her, the ageing accelerated. His shoulders became increasingly hunched, and he shunned the company of friends more and more.

They were even embarrassed when he travelled to Europe and returned after a ridiculous hair transplant. So many ageing Japanese men were doing this nowadays in an attempt to regain some semblance of youth. But they would not have expected this of Yamagishi. People who knew him sighed sadly, and those who didn't laughed.

They laughed even more when he took to drink.

What they did not know was that all this was fake.

It was all part of one of his characteristically well-thought-out and planned projects.

Everything had started five years ago.

At this time, Yamagishi was troubled by the pressure being put on the juicy market by new competitors.

These included companies from the USA, Ireland, and other European countries, and especially from China.

He needed to reduce costs and boost profit margins. He certainly wasn't going to fall into that stupid trap of having his components manufactured cheaply in China.

He needed innovative changes made.

For this, he needed innovative engineers and those, regardless of what people think, are extremely rare products of humanity.

Above all, he needed an innovative and forward-thinking head of research and development.

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Someone with the exceptional charisma and the talent enabling him to find and to gather around him a team capable of preparing the future.

He hired an international headhunting company from the UK for the project. They were sworn to secrecy and paid an enormous fee to make sure they honoured this condition.

They had come up with three names, one of which caught Yamagishi's eye. This was the name of a woman, Isa Koch.

The woman was the recent and inordinately ambitious assistant director of research at one of his competitors in Germany.

Yamagishi had seen her speaking at an international workshop on environmental questions in Kyoto. She had impressed him.

A week later, she received an offer, which she accepted almost immediately.

A few months later, she travelled to Japan and started weeding out inadequate elements from his ageing research staff.

She then employed a host of top-notch young scientists and engineers and initiated a comprehensive search for avenues of improvement.

Her primary objective was to increase profitability while maintaining or surpassing performance in line with competitors.

Her own scientific background in materials science brought her first major success.

This was an innovative method of surface treatment.

The results of the test she made proved the value of the new approach. It also allowed the company to spread purchasing of raw materials for sensitive parts over a much larger number of countries.

This would avoid any trouble caused by monopolistic sourcing.



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Within a year, Isa Koch had transformed the company's products and had effectively bolstered it against the competition for many years to come.

Then she was offered a job that she could not refuse, so she left JACOV and moved back to Europe.

She had completed the task Yamagishi had set her, so he did not attempt to hold her back.

She would have moved on sooner or later, clearly aiming for the job of CEO in some industrial company or other.

However, nine months later, bad news arrived in the form of a research paper in Nature.

One of his most curious young scientists had pointed it out to his boss, who had personally brought it to Yamagishi's office.

The new surface treatment was potentially carcinogenic, and it was precisely the one Koch had pushed.

Yamagishi immediately realised the danger and silenced both the young scientist and his boss by means of huge bonuses. They were vowed to silence in the CEO's office pending the discovery of a solution.

He gave the two men the job of discovering everything about this surface treatment and a way of avoiding its impact on humans.

They were removed from the central research centre, given premises outside Tokyo and provided with all the funds they required. They were also paid extremely enviable salaries under the condition of total secrecy.

However, Yamagishi knew that the damage was done.

When Isa Koch's name was touted as the upcoming CEO for his main German competitor, he knew the end had come.

He had been outmanoeuvred. The woman was clearly a mastermind of sabotage.

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He guessed that she had known exactly what she was doing from the moment his offer arrived from the head-hunters.

He guessed that she had secretly struck a deal with the board of directors of the German company, or more likely, with the principal shareholder, a well-known French businessman.

Yamagishi knew that she alone now held the reins controlling the future of his company.

Once the catastrophic risk to public health was made public, his company would collapse. Not only that, but a never-ending series of court cases would ensue, and he and his company would be ruined.

Everything depended on how long she waited before pulling the pin from the grenade.

Yamagishi, a businessman, approached the situation in a businesslike manner.

He travelled to Germany and met Isa Koch secretly.

They came to a mutually lucrative agreement.

She would receive a large payment ostentatiously covering bonuses due. She would also be supplied with an exhaustive list of all JACOV's customers and full contact details of their directors.

For this, she would delay disclosing the problem until the deal with the Saudi Arabian company had been finalised.

They had shaken hands on it and parted amicably.

Yamagishi was understandably impressed by Isa Koch.

In the meantime, Yamagishi had set about preparing the future. His future.

He arranged for his wife to leave him, taking their children with her. The rumour was that he had become obsessed with work and had begun to mistreat her. Some said he beat her.

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After this, she had travelled around the various watering places of the planet, then had disappeared from the radar.

His children were already in Europe and had been there for many years. He had arranged for their secondary education to be carried out in the best secondary school in Paris. His daughter then went to Oxford University and obtained a degree in modern History under the famous Professor Sally Cameron.

His son chose a degree in mechanical engineering at Cambridge, obtaining a brilliant first. The boy was clearly an upcoming name... He had immediately been snapped up by a large industrial company in Ireland.

The family had been supplied with an extra set of papers and passports in their mother's maiden name, and his children had always used this identity outside Japan. Things like this are easy to arrange when one has almost unlimited funds. After all, what are a few hundred thousand euros when one has ten billion?

He then began to age...

His hair transplant was fake. He remained virtually bald but wore an exquisite wig, hand-made for him in Milan. He outwardly took on a great deal of weight, thanks to gradually packing out his clothes a little more each month. His increasingly pronounced hunched shoulder was one of the easiest aspects to master. So were the apparently stronger and stronger glasses he wore, offset by cleverly designed contact lenses. These came for the world's best man in Geneva.

The final overall ageing effect was simply due to mastery of make-up.

He learnt the trick from an out-of-work Parisienne theatre make-up artist, who had quarrelled with the trade union. The unions made sure that the doors of all the nation's theatres would remain closed to her. She didn't care. Yamagishi paid her more than for ten years of

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drudgery, to teach him all the tricks, then to keep quiet about it.

So, as he sat in his chair for the last time, he reflected on all this.

Yes, he had had a good time at the game, and at fifty-five years old, there was plenty of time left to enjoy life.

He admired the woman who had engineered his downfall. A brilliant mind. He would keep an eye on her future. Maybe he'd send a message from time to time, who knows.

He smiled. That damn Chinese idiot was about to get one hell of a surprise. At least that was the agreement with the German woman, Isa Koch.

Mr Yamagishi lived in a comfortable European-style house built on a large, secluded plot in the most desirable region just outside the city. Once he had picked up his two suitcases from the left luggage desk at Tokyo International Airport, later that evening he paused and sent a text message.

Another phone beeped, and a man nodded and set off in his car. By the time Yamagishi made his way through customs and showed his passport in the maiden name of his wife, his luxury villa would be in flames.

The fire had been planned by the very best professional available, and there was absolutely no way that the fire brigade would be able to extinguish it.

Nothing would remain of his extremely valuable possessions, his expensive cars, or his personal papers.

A day later, police would discover the remains of a body in the ruins.

A huge ritual dagger would also be found embedded between the ribs. Harikari would be assumed. People would nod in approval. A most fitting and honourable solution to the terrible series of professional and personal catastrophes with which he had been burdened.

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The body was not his, of course. When one possesses a personal fortune in the billion-euro range, all these things can be arranged.

Ongoing secrecy would also be guaranteed by regular payments to those who had helped him engineer his disappearance. Yamagishi was at heart a generous man, but also a prudent one.

To the public and press, the stress of work, his separation from his wife and children, his declining health, and the failure of the sale, along with the associated diamond scandal, had been too much for the poor old man.

Yamagishi's private secretary had known Isa Koch well and decided that the woman ought to be informed directly.

"I regret to have to inform you," went the e-mail, 'That your past employer, Mister Yamagishi, died in the fire of his home yesterday. It appears that the stress of recent personal and professional events was too much for him.' Isa frowned down at the message.

Now this was certainly unexpected.

Yamagishi had not seemed the sort of man to commit suicide at all. Not the type at all.

Even when they had met to negotiate their agreement, he had seemed to be taking everything as an unpleasant but inevitable business arrangement.

She shrugged.

One could never really know what was going on inside someone else's mind, could one?

'In any case, ' she told herself, 'This would save her the trouble of having to deal with Yamagishi herself.' She hadn't enjoyed having been forced to remove that English consultant. But the stupid man was far too greedy. He had discovered that she was the one responsible for recommending the new surface treatment process, which led to JACOV's fall. He attempted to blackmail her with this information. Attempting to blackmail someone who

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can pay for Europe's top hit men out of her pocket money, was an enormous error.

'Ah well,' she smiled, 'Back to work. Fortunes don't make themselves...'

## Chapter 28 : The Furon Canyon

Lieutenant Ouiseau took a seat and nodded to me across the bistro table. Paul had called me and had fixed up the meeting. He explained that he had reached an agreement with Commandant Follet and that they were now working together, albeit secretly. My guess about the consultancy was correct, and that the Lieutenant would explain everything in detail.

The man ordered coffee and smiled. 'You took some finding, Mister Stone,' he said. 'Where were you all the time?'

I shrugged. 'Hiding,' I said. 'I might need to use that hideout again someday, so you'll excuse me if I keep the location a secret.'

'Understood,' said the man. 'You do seem to have a habit of getting into scratches.'

I sighed, 'I can assure you I'd much prefer not getting into them.'

'That's not hard to believe,' he chuckled. 'Anyway,' he said as his coffee arrived, 'Paul asked me to bring you up to date.'

The man talked for half an hour, with me interspersing questions.

The entire affair seemed far too crazy to be true.

This was because none of us was aware of the role played by the cunning German woman, Isa Koch and her company.

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Why would anyone suspect sabotage on such a vast scale?

To almost everyone, the collapse of JACOV was the catastrophic result of an inexcusable technical mistake. We did not know either, who had leaked the information to the press.

'All those innocent people killed, for this! I groaned. 'How terrible greed is.'

Lieutenant Ouiseau frowned, 'Yes, that too, too true. But there remain two problems.'

'Two more problems!?' I sighed. 'Will this never end?'

'Well, we have not yet discovered who was responsible for the death of the head of the consultancy company. It wasn't the Japanese guy or anyone else we have had dealings with.'

'Which means that the killer is still at large,' I said.

'Yes.' Said Ouiseau. 'And we are hoping that that person does not know of your role in drawing up the report.'

'Great!' I groaned. 'And the second problem.'

'Ah! Yes. That's rather more serious.'

'More serious than a killer on the rampage?'

'Yes. Two killers on the rampage.'

'Two more!?' I gasped.

Ouiseau nodded. 'The team sent to catch your wife in Paris has not been located. We have their photos, but they've gone into hiding.'

I frowned, 'But if they've heard about the collapse of the entire set-up, they'll disappear for good, won't they?'

Ouiseau pulled a face. 'We are worried that they may not have access to the information. If that's the case, they will carry on doing what they are being paid for.'

'Which is?'

'Catching your wife and making her pay for messing up that hostage plan.'

'Oh God!'



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"Where do you think they are?" I asked.

Ouiseau frowned, 'We expect that they will try down here. By now, they will certainly have discovered who she was and where she lives.'

'Oh God!' I gasped.

'Where is she now?' asked Ouiseau.

'On the train from Paris. I'm expecting her in a few minutes now. Unless the train is late, of course.'

Ouiseau pulled a face and turned in his chair to survey the surrounding hall. 'We'll have to be very careful.'

I glanced at him with alarm, 'You don't think they're already onto her?'

The man shook his head, 'I hope not. But she is rather easy to spot in a crowd, isn't she? They could easily be keeping a lookout for a redhead at the various train stations in Paris.'

I nodded, 'And be here waiting for her when she arrives. Oh God!'

'They wouldn't try anything here,' said Ouiseau. 'There are far too many people around.'

'You mean that if they are, they'll be watching and then follow her home.'

The man nodded, 'And then they could do their job comfortably, when they are ready.'

'Oh God in heaven. How do we solve this?'

'Where's your Car?' asked Ouiseau.

'In the underground car park, on the other side of the station.'

'If we can get you there, without anyone spotting her, then you can get away and up onto the Vercors plateau.'

I nodded. 'There'll be hardly anyone on the road, what with all this snow. I'd be able to spot any follower easily.'

'That's what I was thinking,' said Ouiseau. 'Then we could have a reception party waiting somewhere.'

I nodded, 'Yes. The "Croix-Perrin Pass" would be perfect for a trap.' I smiled, relaxing a little. The truth is

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that the idea of leading a couple of Chinese murderers into a trap appealed to me.

'Ouisseau took out his phone. 'I'll tell you what we'll do. Give me your number. When the train arrives, I'll stay in the background and watch. These guys will be professionals, so you certainly wouldn't see them watching.'

'Right,' I said. 'Got it.'

Ouisseau smiled. 'If I spot them and they follow you, I'll call. If I do, you'll know what to do.'

I nodded. 'They might try to get at us in the car park.'

'I'll be close behind, and I'm armed and prepared. But I suspect that they will want to see where you're headed and take their time, as I said. They will know where you live and probably have their car ready, parked near the station.'

'OK,' I said.

'Then, if I see them follow, I'll alert the Police in Autrans, and they'll have plenty of time to set the trap.'

'Great.'

As I said this, I heard the announcement on the intercom.

'Let's go,' said Ouisseau, and he wandered over to the counter, paid his bill, and sauntered out into the main hall.

I followed, being careful to appear unconcerned, and walked over to the main door through which Sally would arrive.

I sent her a text message, 'I'm waiting by the main door. Some complications so be ready to move fast. Will explain.'

A few seconds later, my phone beeped, 'Oh hell! Now what? Don't worry, I'll be ready...'

Then my phone beeped again. This time it was Ouisseau. The message said, 'Have spotted the two watchers. Will follow you.'

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There was a squealing of brakes, and a metallic grinding noise, and the train appeared and slowed to a halt.

As soon as the doors slid open, a horde of passengers came rushing out, headed for the taxi rank.

Then I spotted Sally, her red hair visible far down the platform. She was keeping close to the wall of the station and as out of sight as possible. As she approached, I took her small suitcase and grabbed her hand. 'Let's go. Quick.'

I rushed her, winding through the crowds and down the steps, to the underground passage which led to the car park.

I knew that the watcher would have taken up a position some way from the entrance to be able to watch both exit doors at the same time.

This would give us several seconds' lead, because they would have to make their way through the thick jostling, suitcase laden crowd, before reaching the stairs.

As we reached the bottom of the stairs and began to run in the direction of the car park, my phone beeped.

I didn't need to read the message. I knew it meant that Ouseau had seen us being followed. He would be close on their heels, and I knew that our followers would be too occupied to notice his presence a few paces behind them.

We reached the car park, and I shot a glance across the space while dropping into my seat. The men had probably realised where we were headed and had gone directly to their car.

They'd be waiting, ready to follow us when we emerged from the exit ramp.

I drove out and, telling Sally to keep an eye open for our followers, took my favourite route across the town.

This was neither the shortest nor the most direct route to the bottom of the climb, but the one I always took. The advantage was that not very many people took it, making

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it easier for Sally to spot anyone following. She folded down the sunscreen and angled the courtesy mirror so that she could see the road behind.

After a few turns, she said, 'A car with two men is following us. They're keeping well back, though.'

I nodded, 'That's what Lieutenant Ouseau thought would happen. Then I smiled.'

'Something funny?' frowned Sally.

'Ouseau has phoned the police in Autrans. He says the men will want to know where we go. Then they'll choose their time to come and get you.'

'Brilliant!' she said. 'And why do they want to get me?'

'He says for punishment.'

'Punishment!?'

'Yep. You went and upset all the hostage plans. Someone wasn't happy.'

'What!'

'I'll explain later. Anyway, Ouseau is preparing a reception party for them at the "Croix-Perrin" Pass. As soon as we go through, the police will block the road behind us and arrest the men. They are wanted for....' I paused. 'They are wanted for some other stuff.'

'Other stuff?' said Sally, her red hair partially covering her face.

'I'll explain. Now I have to concentrate on the road.'

We had reached the bottom of the road, which wound up onto the Vercors plateau, and some snow still remained here. It would be much thicker higher up, because it had begun to snow again.

I drove as fast as I dared. There was no real need to drive fast, but I wanted to maintain a reasonable distance between the two cars.

As I had suspected, there were hardly any cars on the road at all. I was concerned that it might occur to the men following us that here was a rather unexpected chance to

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get their job done quickly. They probably had both guns and rifles.

If they could close in on us enough, a marksman could easily pick me off. That done, Sally would be a sitting target.

But they did not close in.

The driver was probably not used to driving on snow. At this thought, I accelerated a bit. I knew I could manage this easily. My car had both four-wheel drive and four new snow tyres.

Sally shot me a look as she felt me accelerate.

'Careful,' she said.

I nodded.

The followers lagged behind, and I smiled, 'I wanted to see if they were any good at driving on snow,' I said.

'Fact proved,' she said, glancing into the mirror.

We carried on like this up to the hamlet of Engin, then came to the entrance to the Furrion Canyon.

The snow was thick here, and I spotted the car behind skidding once or twice.

'This'll give them a bit of a scare,' I said with a smile.

Then Sally suddenly shouted, 'Watch out, William!'

Just around a right-angle bend, as we took the straight section, one of the enormous tree-trunk-sized icicles came crashing down in the distance.

'Oh hell!' I cried. 'Let's hope we can get over the ice.'

As I said this, another came crashing on top of it.

I skidded to a halt, and the car spun round and struck the metallic barrier. The pile of ice fragments was at least a metre high, and there was no way the car would get through it.

The car following us had just rounded the bend and had slowed on seeing us blocked.

'Quick,' I cried, leaping from the door and getting the car between me and the oncoming one.

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'Come on, Sally,' I shouted, 'Over the ice. We'll have to run for it.' She nodded and scrambled up the slithering mass and slid down the far side.

I followed her over, and we looked back. The two men had alighted, and the driver was opening the back door. I winced at shot Sally a look as the man drew out a rifle.

I looked behind us. The road was straight and unblocked.

'We'll have to get into the forest, Sally.,' I said. 'We'll be sitting ducks if we try to escape that way.'

Over the metal barrier to our right, the ground fell to the noisy rushing waters of the "Torent du Bruyant". This was where it came dashing out of the narrow, steep-walled "Bruyant Canyon", which met the wider "Furon Canyon" at right angles.

We rolled ourselves over the barrier and slid down the steep, short slope in the deep snow. From here, we ran to the shallow, freezing waters and waded across, gasping as the icy liquid filled our shoes. The rocks and boulders above the waterline were frozen over, and we slipped numerous times.

However, one heeds neither freezing waters nor painful falls when one's life is at stake.

The men spotted us, and the one with the rifle stopped to take aim.

Seeing this, I dragged Sally down and we scrambled along deep in the snow, our hands frozen by the icy waters and the subzero snow surface.

As we ducked, there was a crack, and a bullet whistled above us and ricocheted off the rocks a little way off.

We dived behind the first tree and, keeping as low as possible, paused, rubbing our hands vigorously.

I glanced at Sally, 'Let's make some snowballs,' I whispered. 'We'll throw them over there,' I pointed eastwards. 'Then, immediately, we scramble the opposite way and get behind that big rock.'

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She nodded, and we got to work.

'I think the guy with the rifle will stay up there to keep us covered, and the other will come for us with his handgun.'

Sally nodded. 'Once in the cover of that boulder, we can make a run for it up the canyon. We'll be faster than that guy with the gun.' she said.

'Yes,' I said. 'He doesn't look like an athlete to me.'

'Agreed,' said Sally, squeezing her snowball hard.

But then something, an idea, hit me. 'Sally,' I groaned. 'We'll never make it up the track at the far end in this snow. We'll be trapped.'

Sally shook her head, 'We have to try. It's that or die here.'

I nodded, 'Ready?'

She nodded.

'We throw at three, OK?'

She nodded again, 'One, two, three.'

We hurled our snowballs. Immediately, a series of gunshots rang out. However, we were already hidden behind the boulder and dashing for the cover of the forest at the mouth of the little canyon.

Here we stopped for a few seconds to check we were being followed.

'William!' gasped Sally, grabbing my Arm. 'Look!'

As I watched, high above the two men, something was moving. The shock wave created by the gunshots had destabilised one of the enormous icicles.

The noise of the torrent covered the cracking sounds as it broke free, and a ten-ton block of pointed ice came hurtling down.

The two men were directly below it and completely oblivious.

The man with the rifle put the sights to his eye to shoot, but as he did, the ten-meter-high column of ice hit him.

The pointed end went straight through his chest and crushed him onto the ground. Then the ten tons of ice

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behind it smashed down, splitting him almost in two. A fraction of a second later, his mutilated body disappeared under a massive pile of ice.

The second man was knocked backwards by the impact and leapt to his feet. He turned to run, but the shock waves created by the impact had freed more ice. He glanced up, but that was the last thing he did.

A curtain of slightly smaller icicles came crashing down on top of him, and he too disappeared under a hundred tons of broken ice fragments.

Sally and I gazed, dumbfounded and panting.

I grabbed her and pulled her towards me, folding my arms around her, 'God in heavens!' I cried.

'William,' she laughed nervously. 'We really will have to stop meeting like this...'

We made our way back to the car, and I called Lieutenant Ouseau as we went. He was on his way up behind the gunmen, and the police were on their way down from the pass.

I pulled out the blankets from the boot, and we wrapped them around us.

We walked towards the huge piles of ice.

Looking up, I could see that everything which could come down had. The rock walls had been purged of ice.

Reaching the piles, we came up short. A patch of red was diffusing slowly outwards through the snow and ice fragments.

Sally turned away. 'How horrible!'

I nodded, and a wry smile crossed my face.

'Something funny?' she asked.

'I was just thinking, that's what comes of messing with a redhead.'



## Chapter 30 : Mr Chen Jiang

**T**he CEO of "China Air Conditioning", Mr Chen Jiang, smiled down at the document lying on the table before him. It was an official letter from the Minister of Commerce inviting him to a one-to-one meeting at the ministry in central Beijing.

The Minister obviously wished to congratulate him in person for the spectacular takeover of his Japanese competitor JACOV. This manoeuvre meant that his company was now the world leader in the field. Perhaps there would even be an award to go with the praise. Chen Jiang was all for praise and medals, but he much preferred money and power.

He had put on his best custom-made Italian suit and a carefully chosen tie. However, he had been careful to make sure that his clothes, whilst of the most excellent quality, were visibly inferior to those worn by the Minister. One never knew what mood a top politician would be in, and taking unnecessary risks was not something Chen Jiang did.

His driver was waiting in the underground car park and opened the passenger door as he emerged from the private lift.

The impressively wide Dong Chang'an Avenue would be blocked at this time of day. However, the CEO had cancelled all other meetings for the afternoon. This one was far too important to require rushing and unnecessary stress.

Chen Jiang had never been personally invited to the ministry before and was impressed. He was, also all,

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impressed by the number of armed policemen guarding the entrance to the Minister's offices.

Even the Minister's secretary's door was guarded.

It would take a commando to get anywhere near the man.

Chen Jiang was nodded to by the secretary and led by an exquisitely dressed aide to the Minister's door.

After a short wait, the outer door opened, and they stepped down a short corridor to a baize inner door where the aide knocked.

This was opened, and Chen Jiang was admitted into the vast office.

The Minister himself was at work behind his desk.

Everything here was in European style, and one could have been in almost any country in the world.

Chen Jiang had expected the man to get to his feet and come around the desk to congratulate him.

In this, he was disappointed.

The Minister glanced up and, giving his aide a look, pointed to a chair.

Chen Jiang was a little taken aback by this unexpected behaviour, but assumed the Minister was dealing with some unplanned for trouble.

Chen Jiang knew all about such troubles. They were part and parcel of his everyday life.

The aide made a move to leave, but the Minister glanced up and shook his head. He also nodded to the guard to remain inside the door.

After a few moments, the Minister sighed, sat up and looked at Chen Jiang.

Jiang knew well enough to hold his tongue and wait for the Minister to talk first.

The man laid his two forearms on the tabletop.

'Mister Jiang,' he started.

'Mister Minister?'

'I have heard a great deal about you recently.'

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Chen Jiang bent his head deferentially, 'I hope I have given satisfaction,' he murmured.

A wry smile crossed the Minister's face, 'Given satisfaction?' he repeated. 'Well, I'm not sure that's the word I would have employed.'

Jiang held his tongue.

'I have heard about your takeover of JACOV.' He paused. 'Yes. I have heard a good deal about that.'

Jiang remained silent.

'I was somewhat saddened that the Chairman of that company took it so badly, though.'

'Took it badly, Minister?'

'Yes, Jiang. He committed hara-kiri and burnt his house to the ground.'

Jiang was surprised that the man had reacted so violently. It seemed out of character. However, he frowned, 'I'm very sorry that he should have taken it so badly, Minister.'

'He took the honourable way out, Jiang,' nodded the Minister. 'That action clearly shows the extraordinary courage of the man. Such things require an extremely strong mind.'

'Yes, Minister. But after all, business is business.'

The Minister nodded. 'Yes. That is so.' The man paused. 'It is true that you have a reputation for being a hard and ruthless man where business is concerned.'

Jiang smiled, 'There is no place for weakness in international business, Minister.'

'It would seem not,' replied the Minister.

'Even your suppliers seem to live in fear of you and your decisions, Jiang.'

'It keeps them on their toes, Minister. It also makes sure they do not attempt to charge more than the product is worth, or to reduce quality.'

The Minister nodded, 'Remind me Jiang. How many people do you employ in China?'

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'Twenty-five thousand four hundred, Minister,' said Jiang proudly straightening his back.

'Twenty-five thousand! And how many suppliers who work exclusively for you?'

'Roughly two thousand, Minister.'

'So many!' frowned the minister.

'I pay them all a fair wage, Minister.'

'Do you?'

'Yes Minister.'

'How many were employed by JACOV, Jiang?'

'Roughly the same number, minister. About Twenty thousand.'

'That'll make nearly fifty thousand employees under you now, Jiang.'

'Yes minister,' replied Jiang, proudly.

The Minister gazed at the man for a few seconds, then continued, 'I have also heard about a number of the activities surrounding this takeover.' he paused and twisted one of his wide PC screens towards him. He studied this for a few moments.

'I have also received complaints.'

'Complaints Minister!?' said Jiang.

He was not in the slightest surprised at this. The Japanese Minister of Commerce would almost certainly have been annoyed by the aggressive takeover.

'The Japanese minister, sir?' he said with a wry smile.

'No, Zho. Not the Japanese Minister. I have heard nothing whatever from Japan.' The man pursed his lips. 'I have the impression that the Minister will be rather pleased to get the company off his hands in a manner of speaking.'

'He wasn't angered, Minister.' Asked Zho, surprised by this.

The Minister shrugged, 'I wouldn't know, Jiang. I have heard nothing from anyone in Japan, at least not yet.'

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Jiang was surprised. This sort of thing usually caused a considerable amount of political posturing.

'No, Jiang, but I have heard from the French.'

'From the French, minister!?'

The man nodded, 'From their Prime Minister.'

'The French Prime Minister!'

'And from the Finns, Jiang. And the English and from the Saudi Arabians.'

'And the Swiss, Minister,' added the aide.

The minister nodded. 'Ah yes. I had forgotten the Swiss.'

Chen Jiang sat up, and a worried look crossed his face.

The Minister nodded, 'It seems that your methods of acquiring JACOV have been seen as being somewhat unconventional.'

Chen Jiang froze. How on earth had anybody linked him to any of those activities?

The Minister nodded, 'I have to admit that the idea of torpedoing the negotiation with the Saudi Arabian Businessman was cunning.'

'Thank you, Minister.'

'Taken alone, that would have been an excellent manoeuvre, and I would have commended you for it.'

'Thank you, Minister.'

The man sighed, 'However, Jiang, the French didn't take kindly to you abducting one of their subjects and holding her hostage in your house at Changbaishan.'

'I can explain the necessity of that Minister.'

'You can do that later, Jiang.' He glanced at the screen again. 'You won't have forgotten that Changbaishan is right on the border between China and North Korea.'

'No, Minister.'

'Good. But you won't have heard that the French sent a woman to free her and carry her back to safety.'

'No Minister. But now that the takeover is complete, that is of little consequence.'

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'Is it not?' the Minister said. 'We shall see... You will not have heard that this French woman, an amateur for your information, was accompanied by a second woman.'

Jiang shook his head.

'This second woman was an agent from the USA.'

'An agent from the USA!'

'Yes, Jiang. From the USA. So, your little plan is causing quite a lot of waves. Big waves to be exact.'

Jiang was at a loss for what to say. 'I'm very sorry about that, Minister. I'll do all I can to help.'

The Minister glanced at him, 'I'm certain you will, Jiang. Naturally, the Saudi businessman plans to sue. But of course, that's just a question of money, is it not?'

'Yes, Minister. That can be tidied up easily.'

'Can it?'

'Yes, Minister.'

The man nodded, 'Good.'

Chen Jiang relaxed slightly and sighed inwardly. After all, this might not be as bad as he had begun to fear it would be.

Then the Minister became grave, 'I believe you employed a Swiss national named Mister Gruber to organise the rather complicated affair surrounding the diamonds used to sabotage the negotiation. Is that correct?'

'Yes, Minister,' said Jiang, realising that he was in trouble. Deep trouble.

'The Swiss ambassador came to see me yesterday, Jiang.'

'Minister?'

'Yes, Jiang. You see, this man, Mister Gruber was found dead in his bath in Zurich. He had been chopped to pieces like the carcass of a pig. Each part was neatly cut from the rest and piled up artistically to drain. A professional job, Jiang. A professional butcher's job, in fact.'

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Jiang's shoulders slumped, but he kept silent.

'The Swiss are furious, Jiang. They have found the man and interrogated him. A Romanian, in fact. The Swiss interrogation method seems to function almost as well as ours, Jiang.' The Minister paused. The Romanian admits being contracted by a Chinese person named Wang. It seems probable that this person Wang is in fact you, Mr Jiang.'

Jiang remained silent; he guessed that the discussion was being recorded and that anything he said would be used against him.

'The Minister nodded, 'The same butcher was also responsible for the murder of the French Girl,' he glanced at the computer screen, 'An upcoming young singer, Lindsay Blache,' There was a pause while the minister consulted a document on one of the screens. ' This killer also dealt with the elimination of the small-time crook who took the diamonds from the girl.' He glanced up at Jiang. 'Was that intentional, Jiang?'

Jiang shook his head. 'No minister.'

'He improvised, I suppose.'

'Jiang hung his head.

'But you allowed the small-time thug to plant the drugs in Doctor William Stone's baggage,'

'In his guitar case, actually, Minister.'

'In his guitar case!'

'Yes, Minister.'

'And to tip off the customs so that he would be accused of the murders and the drug trafficking. '

'Just to give me time to get the takeover finalised?'

'Naturally. Well planned and executed,' sneered the Minister. 'Well, the French prime minister didn't appreciate that little refinement either, Jiang.'

'I'm sorry about that, Minister.'

'Are you? I wonder.' He paused. 'Then you sent two mercenaries from your hometown here in China to track

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down and catch the French woman. You guessed that she would know the whereabouts of Stone and that you would be able to squeeze the information out of her.'

He glowered at the now trembling Jiang, 'The French did not appreciate that at all. But you see Jiang, they were expecting such a move and tricked your men.' He sighed. 'Their plan was excellent and not only allowed the woman to get away but also permitted them to take an excellent series of photos of the two men, which they sent us.'

Jiang knew the end was near but remained silent.

Those men followed your instructions and tried to catch the woman on the route up into the Alpes.

But, Jiang, they underestimated both the woman and her husband.' The minister gazed at Jiang's downturned head. 'You won't have heard yet, but the two men are dead.'

Jiang started and looked up, 'Dead Minister! Two of our country's most experienced hit men?'

'Yes Jiang. Stone dead,' The minister frowned. 'All the same; I can not understand why the young singer's mother had to be murdered. Can you explain that please.'

Jiang sighed but kept his eyes on the ground before him, 'To ensure that the Saudis didn't reconsider their offer, Minister.'

The minister shook his head sadly, 'Business again.'

'Yes, Minister.'

The Minister smiled across at his aide, 'This is an extremely interesting affair, don't you think?'

The aide nodded, 'Yes, Minister. Highly educational in fact'

'Yes. This sort of affair teaches one a great deal about human nature.'

'Yes, it does, Minister.'

'So,' frowned the Minister, 'As I see it, your aggressive takeover of JACOV has cost the lives of four perfectly innocent people, Jiang.'



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The Minister's aide coughed, 'You're forgetting the Englishman, Minister.'

The Minister nodded, 'No. That was not due to Jiang.' 'Englishman!?' said Chen Jiang, 'What Englishman?'

The Minister frowned. 'Yes, the English prime minister is furious about that.' Then he turned to Jiang. 'But of course you know nothing about that side of the "Jacov" affair, do you?'

'What side of the JACOV affair, Minister?'

The Minister nodded. 'I don't suppose you have seen the midday news.'

"No minister. I've had meetings all morning, then came straight here.'

'No, I guessed that, otherwise you would not be here.'

'Minister!?'

'Have you seen the share prices today, Jiang?'

'Not since yesterday afternoon, Minister.'

The Minister smiled as he turned his second PC screen so that Jiang could see it.

'Look at the share price of JACOV, Jiang.'

Chen Jiang leant forward and froze. 'What in the name of God!'

The Minister smiled. 'JACOV's shares, which is of course now part of your own company, have fallen by seventy-six per cent and are falling still.'

Silence fell as the Minister typed on his keyboard. No, Mister Jiang, take a look at your own company shares.'

Jiang leant closer and let out a long groan.

The Minister allowed himself a wry smile, 'Fallen by sixty-eight per cent, and still falling.'

He gazed at the prostrated Chen Jiang, 'Your entire empire has collapsed, Jiang. And your company will very soon be completely bankrupt.'

'But How!?' cried the man. 'How? Why?'

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The Minister smiled as he watched the man in front of him squirm. 'Because the CEO of JACOV, Mister Yamagishi, was a great deal cleverer than you, Jiang. He left you a poisoned present. He outmanoeuvred you by a thousand miles.'

'For god's sake, how?'

The Minister smiled, 'It seems that, unfortunately for you, you also attracted the attention of the best criminal investigation brains in France, Jiang. Even though they are not Chinese, I have to admit that they have shown themselves to be absolutely brilliant thinkers. An honour to their country. Unlike you, Jiang.

'But minister...'

'Shut up, Jiang. All those innocent people's deaths, all that manipulation and all the political upheaval that you've created for nothing. Nothing at all, Jiang. You are totally ruined, and you have seriously damaged the reputation of your own country.'

Jiang made to speak, but the minister silenced him with a wave of the hand, 'And to cap it all, Jiang... I now have twenty-seven thousand more unemployed people to deal with. Twenty-seven thousand more overnight...'

He stood and signalled to the guard, who opened the office door. 'And now you will have to pay for that. And you will have to pay for it in a way that the entire planet will see. Two armed guards entered and took up position beside Jiang.

The Minister turned to his aide, 'Give the man the report. He'll have plenty of time to discover how he was outmanoeuvred and how he brought shame and discredit to his ministry.'

Then he turned to the slumped-down CEO of "Chinese Air Conditioning". 'You will be tried and condemned extremely harshly within the coming month.' The minister stood and glowered down at the cringing man. 'And you

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might like to reflect on the fact, Mr Jiang, that unlike much of Europe, the death penalty still exists here in China.'

He turned to the guards, 'Take him away.'

The two hefty men grabbed Jiang and lifted him to his feet. The men marched him through the double doors and down the corridor.

As they closed behind him, the Minister turned to his aide 'Get me the French Prime Minister, then prepare calls to his English, Finish and Saudi equivalents. I need to do some careful diplomacy and do it quickly. They'll want to see that we have taken firm measures, and they will want proof of our taking the matter extremely seriously.'

The aid nodded, 'Minister...'

'Yes.'

'If I might suggest it, it would also be a strategically valuable move to call your Japanese counterpart.'

The minister sighed, 'Yes. Good idea. Before he hears the information from the press.'

'Yes, Minister.'

'Set that call up too, please.'

'Yes, Minister. 'Shall I call the...'

The Minister silenced him with a wave 'I'll have to see him in person this evening. We will have to see about saving our own skins too.'

'We do indeed, Minister.'

The aide left, and the Minister sat down behind his desk and took out his notes, in preparation for the series of extremely delicate discussions to come.

### Chapter 30 – Business as usual

**M**argaux, and Anne-Laure stood gazing at Claire-Berenice over their brimming champagne glasses. The woman had organised a party to celebrate her daughter's homecoming at their home in Maison-Lafit.

Margaux and Ann-Laure were in reality gazing at Claire-Berenice's diamond earrings and ring.

She was laughing happily as they clinked their champagne glasses together. 'The jewels have been very officially returned to their legal owner,' she shrugged. 'The Saudi Arabian Ambassador brought them around personally. With an armed guard too.'

'But' cried Anne-Laure. 'Are they really yours to keep then?'

The woman shrugged again. 'According to all the official paperwork, including payment receipts, we purchased them from a famous Swiss jeweller,' she said. 'What's more, the numerous police reports, clearly indicate that they were stolen from here too,' she smiled. 'So, they must be mine, mustn't they?'

The three women sipped some champagne for a few moments in silence.

'Reassure me though. You're not intending to go wandering around Paris wearing a fortune like that, are you?' cried Anne-Laure. 'That would be utter madness.'

Margaux sighed and looked at her mother sadly, 'Of course she won't, Mum. She's not a complete fool.'

Claire-Berenice sighed. 'No. It's a pity, though. But I suppose they'll have to spend most of the time in a bank vault somewhere. I'll just wear them on very special

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occasions. Even then, I'll probably have to be accompanied by a bodyguard,' She pulled a face. 'How difficult it must be for the wives of extremely wealthy men. I'm glad I'm not one.'

Margaux shot a warning look at Anne-Laure, who was about to say something about this point.

Clearly, her husband had not yet felt it necessary to inform her of their recent change of fortune. Officially declared fortune, that is.

With a slight inclination of her head, Margaux indicated Paul, who was chatting quietly to the woman's husband. They were standing a little apart from everyone else, talking intently together by the windows giving onto the snow-covered gardens.

Unbeknownst to all except Paul, Margaux and her Anne-Laure, the man was vastly wealthier than official records led one to believe.

His riches had been secreted away, but Margaux had eventually discovered where this was.

He had come to an agreement with Paul to bring back to France the considerable fortune he had amassed, which would be deposited in several Parisian banks.

Up to then, he had also secretly been the principal shareholder of the German HVAC company employing Isa Koch.

Paul had negotiated a special low tax rate and waived legal procedure on the condition that he sold those shares and invested the funds derived in France.

The man was only too glad to do this, because the HVAC market had recently become highly toxic and unstable. Unexpectedly, he had been approached by an anonymous buyer who had taken them all for ten billion euros.

It was he, too, a friend of both the French and German ministers, who had suggested that the police be held off searching for Blache and Gruber while the various

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business crashes were being played out. He had pointed out that, after all, European competitors in the field would be the major winners following the collapse of the present two world leaders.

All in all, the mess had turned out to be highly advantageous to the European economic situation. Consequently, the ministers were willing to turn a blind eye concerning the man's homeward bound wealth. After all, almost overnight, Europe had become home to companies holding seventy-five per cent of the world's Heating, Ventilation and Air-Conditioning market.

**M**ister Yamagishi's wife was sitting on the wide stone wall at the end of her garden. She was gazing down at the Mediterranean Sea sparkling far below at the base of the cliff. The woman had purchased the luxury villa not far from Cannes the previous year for sixty million euros. The previous owner was Talia Kauffman, a wealthy Canadian widow, who had recently remarried. The woman had been mixed up in the terrible Agent Vx attack in Montreal. Apparently, the house held sad memories for her.

The woman's brother was leaning against the three-foot-wide stone wall, which ran along the entire cliff-side edge of her vast property.

It had been beautifully built by the best stonemasons in the south of France at precisely the right height for comfortable leaning.

He was watching a large luxury yacht listlessly, as it slid westwards across the Mediterranean, towards Cannes. He turned to a young woman, who was sitting up on the wall beside him, 'Perhaps I ought to have one of those.'

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The girl pulled a face, 'Too much hassle,' she said.  
'Hassle?'

'Having one of those is worse than keeping up a castle. There are always things going wrong and problems with staff and papers and visas, and God knows what. That sort of hassle.' She jumped down from her sitting place and rubbed her bottom. 'Hard those rocks.' Then she continued, 'If you want a quiet life, find a friend who's got a big one and then cadge a stay on it when you want.'

'You seem very knowledgeable about such things,' said the man, who looked remarkably like a much younger and far healthier version of the poor Mister Yamagishi.

'That girl Margaux's father has got one Dad. He's going to sell it. Too small for you, though. Only ten cabins...' She laughed.

The man scowled at her. 'Please remember to call me "uncle", not Dad.'

'Ah! Sorry... Uncle.'

The girl's mother glanced at the young woman. Are you still "considering options"? It's been seven months since you got your degree.'

'Winter's the worst possible time,' the girl replied.

'That's what you said about autumn.'

The girl shrugged, and her mother went on, 'Your two options are either to find a job or to find a husband.'

'Mum!' gasped the girl. 'Don't be so horrid. Marriage! That just isn't done nowadays. At least not at twenty-three years old.'

'But, what on earth can you do with a degree in History anyway?' sighed the mother.

'From Cambridge University, Mum.'

'From anywhere.'

The man smiled, 'I'll leave you to it,' he said. 'I'm off for a workout at the gym. I have to build up the old, failing body. That instructor is absolutely brilliant. Look.' He smacked his almost flat stomach. 'He's working miracles.'

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'How that woman coaxed him over from Montreal, in the first place, I don't know,' frowned Mrs Yamagishi.

Her official brother shrugged, 'Women have ways...' he smiled and wiggled his eyebrows.

'Da... sorry Uncle!' she cried. 'After all, he's gay.'

'Is he?' frowned the man. 'Are you sure?'

'For heaven's sake Da.... Uncle. It sticks out like a sore thumb.'

'What does?' he asked with a wry smile.

'Da... Uncle! Really!' gasped the young woman. 'You ought to be ashamed of yourself.'

He chuckled, 'That's the new ME.'

'I dearly hope not,' sighed Mrs Yamagishi.

Now, while he was not undergoing body renovations with the help of the Canadian gym owner, Mr Yamagishi was fully employed.

He had been investing.

He had already acquired twenty per cent of the shares of a certain German HVAC company. The one that employed Isa Koch, in fact.

Within the month or so, he would have the controlling hand, then he would sit back and let things develop a little.

When the time was ripe, he would anonymously send the shareholders and the board of directors a copy of the consultant's report on the surface treatment, which ultimately led to the downfall of JACOV. He would also provide the proof that it had been Isa Koch who had deliberately engineered the changes. Then he would release the information to the press.

He smiled. That ought to put an end to the woman.

If it didn't, he would release the proof he had turned up, showing her to be responsible for contracting out the murder of the English consultant.



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By then, he would have positioned someone ready to take over the reins. That person would be someone he could have absolute confidence in.

Through the Chinese ministry of Finances, Mt Yamagishi had already purchased, the abandoned JACOV production sites across Japan, for next to nothing. They were more than relieved to get these out of their hair.

In a year or two, when the time was ripe, as principal shareholder, albeit anonymous, he would recommend expanding via this Japanese base.

Then the adventure would start all over again.

He smiled to himself and set off down the hill on his electric motorbike to the gym.

sa Koch, CEO of the leading German HVAC company, was hunting for a new assistant research director.

In her days with JACOV, she had made some outwardly unimportant engineering design changes. However, these changes ensured that all the companies' critical parts could be directly replaced by the German competitors' products. She had been proud of that little refinement. It ensured that her present company would have a decisive edge over the other contenders for retrofitting the health-endangering JACOV systems. She now felt that it was time to push forward once more and to bring some innovative products to the market. For this, she needed new blood in her teams and had set Europe's best head-hunters to work.

They had immediately spotted a brilliant young man working his way up in one of her Irish competitors. His name popped up all over the place.

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The man was clearly brilliant, energetic and above all an innovative thinker. Educated in Paris, then a "First" in Engineering Science from Oxford University with a specialisation in mechanical engineering.

Here was precisely the sort of profile she was looking for.

In a way, the young man reminded her of herself at the beginning of her industry career. Tough, flexible, and forward-thinking. Not a man to let dust settle under his feet.

The young man also reminded her of someone, but she couldn't put her finger on it.

One of the people she had met during her time in Tokyo with JACOV.

Anyway, she mused, all these Japanese men tend to look more or less the same...

Blissfully unaware of the looming danger, Isa Koch stepped contentedly forward into the trap that Mr. Yamagishi had prepared for her.

## 31 – Epilogue

**T**he front door opened, and Doctor William Stone stepped in, followed by an icy blast and a flurry of snowflakes. The flames in the blazing wood fire wavered for an instant, then straightened their backs and stood erect once more. William plumped down the armful of logs he was carrying and tossed one into the flames.

‘Brrr,’ he said. ‘Minus twelve again!’

The room of the chalet at Autrans was warm, full, and humming with conversation that evening.

The assorted group of acquaintances had just arrived back from a solemn event at the Lyons police headquarters.

They had been invited to the official promotion ceremony of Commandant Jean Follet to the rank of colonel. They had also met the man’s wife for the first time, and she turned out to be a charming woman.

Earlier in the day, Lieutenant Marcel Ouiseau had also received his promotion papers directly from the Major. He was from now on to be addressed as Commandant Ouiseau, a superior officer at long last, and well merited, the Major had said. The man had been very favourably impressed by the handling by Follet and Ouiseau, of the recent delicate affair. He was unaware of the part played by Paul and Margot, which was normal, as they had received strict orders to leave the topic well alone.

Monsieur Dekker had done us the honour of attending our evening, and after profuse excuses, had got into some deep discussion with Follet. The two men had taken their glasses and a bottle of champagne. They had installed

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themselves comfortably downstairs in the armchairs in my recording studio. Music was now filtering up through the door, and I could hear the two men periodically laugh rather more loudly than was their habit.

His big news was that Margaux's father, Antoine, had heard the recordings of my songs with Lindsay Blache and had loved them. Together with Mr Dekker, they had decided to publish the album as a posthumous homage to the memory of the young singer. Dekker had financed the employment with a small part of JACOV's generous compensation payment. He'd brought in France's top modern music orchestrator and arranger, as well as the cream of the session musicians available. The result was astonishing, and I had difficulty in realising that I was the composer.

The media had seized the spectacular story of Lindsay's murder in the snow in Finland with relish. Within hours of its release, the first song was making waves on the nation's radio stations.

As a direct consequence, requests for collaborations with me were already pouring in from well-known singers and unknown would-be stars alike.

Mister Dekker had also set up a new structure which he had named the "Lindsay Blache Foundation". This was aimed at helping young unsigned singers. It would help them find the right songs to enable them to approach record companies with professional-quality products.

I wished him well in this project.

I had had enough experience with overenthusiastic parents to want to get too closely involved with such a project. That being said, I doubted that I would be able to avoid getting roped in. After all, I told myself, there are far greater dangers in the world than overenthusiastic parents...

It promised to be good fun too, so...

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My neighbour, now completely recovered from the stress of the recent events, was chatting with Adjutant Mercier. Both seem relaxed and happy to be included in our little evening.

I had reserved all the holiday apartments at the Maison Mairie Barnier, so nobody had to worry about driving back down through the Bourne Canyon in deep snow and in the small hours of the morning.

Colonel Follet had been particularly appreciative of this, having recently sampled that adventure.

As the light faded and night fell, Sally and Margaux cleared the long table and brought out plate upon plate of food.

She sent me off to the wine cellar with our friend the gendarme André Arnaud, and we returned carrying armfuls of my better wines.

Margaux glanced at the labels and nodded, 'That'll do,' she nodded, shooting me a wry smile.

Paul, who was standing nearby talking with the colonel's wife, glanced at them too as I pulled the first cork and gave me a thumbs-up sign. Then, turning, he took the corkscrew from me. 'I'll do this, William. You circulate. After all, that's the host's job.'

On the sofa in the mellow light of the log fire, Sophie was chatting with a clearly highly appreciative man. It was Mr Dekker's driver/assistant, who turned out to be infinitely better educated and cultivated than his outwardly burly aspect gave one to think. I also learnt that he actually *did* have a brother with a music shop in Paris.

Sophie was clearly taken with the man, and that was extremely rare.

I shot a look at Sally and inclined my head in their direction. She smiled and nodded back.

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It was high time Sophie took a little more interest in the opposite sex, she had said earlier, before everyone arrived.

There was one cloud on the horizon, however. The two women who kept my neighbour hostage and had tried to kill me several times had not been found. They had been spirited away during the hospital fire, regardless of their serious injuries, and had disappeared. They were obviously highly valued operatives of some criminal organisation or other. They were now probably convalescing somewhere quiet, awaiting their next mission. I hoped I wouldn't be associated with it...

When, at half past one, the last visitor took his leave the icy wind had subsided, and the snow had stopped. The clouds had disappeared, and the sky had become a vast, glittering dome, filled with billions upon billions of stars.

William and Sally Stone pulled on their thickest anoraks and gloves, and, taking their snowshoes, set off in the moonlight across the silent, snow-smoothed expanse.

They climbed slowly until they reached the edge of the forest. Then, ducking under the heavily snow-laden branches, they turned and stood gazing down at the sleeping village below them.

Everywhere, moonlight shimmered and sparkled off millions of frost crystals as they gradually grew upward from the snow-covered surfaces. This most secret and incredibly beautiful of scenes is rarely, if ever, witnessed by anyone other than hungry foxes, owls, and a few imprudent rabbits.

The stars were astonishingly bright in the crystal-clear, sub-zero sky as the couple stood, hand in hand, watching the scene in the deep silence of the night.

A fox suddenly appeared, snuffling its way along the forest edge, a little further along. It paused for an instant,

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glanced in their direction, then, considering them to be of no danger, resumed its hunt.

After a moment, Sally turned to William and smiled, 'Do you know what it is that I love so much about Autrans?'

William turned away from the view to look at her, 'Tell me,' he smiled.

'I love it, because it's always so, so peaceful...'

The two burst out laughing, and the happy sound spread out in waves upwards into the infinite space surrounding them.

The fox stopped and glanced at the two humans for an instant, then returned to work.

The End.

## Chapter 30 – ANNEXES

The following four annexes describe William Stone's early life and his meeting with both Sally and Margaux.

They also describe his early contacts with music and his studies **and** clarify the characters of these three people.

### Annexe 1: Meeting Margaux

**W**hen I became old enough to realise what was going on around me, my father was a well known studio potter. My mother was a sort of interior decorator, but mainly my mum. Dad made plates, bowls, vases, mugs and jugs then my mum made them look what the day's fashion demanded.

I had no idea as to how they came to be doing this, and I assumed that most other parents must do more or less the sort of thing.

A friend at primary school told me that his dad made bridges. When I asked where he kept them all and if I could go see them, he said he only drew them.

This had impressed me considerably more than building them because I'd been building bridges myself for ages. I knew from experience how easy this was once you'd got the hang of it. On the other hand, I had never been able to draw one correctly.



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We lived in what I now realise was most people's idea of an idyllic location. It was the sort of place and way of life that is generally assumed no longer to exist. To me, this was a completely everyday existence, and I naturally believed that all the inhabitants of the world lived in very similar surroundings.

In our case, "home" was just across the river from Arundel Castle in West Sussex, in the south of England, and the village is called Burpham.

For me, it consisted of "The George" inn, the Saxon Church of 'Saint Mary', the vicarage and a few flower-flooded village cottages of which ours was one of the average-sized ones.

Finally, there were also the famous cricket grounds.

I had only to skirt the cricket pitch to reach the edge of the fast-flowing Arun River. From Burpham, the river continued on its last meandering five miles to the sea at Littlehampton.

I remember calculating that a stick thrown into it's centre would reach the sea in about an hour. However, my father warned me that it would take me more than three times that to walk to the same point along the riverbank. When, I put this to the test, nearly ten years later and in mid summer I thanked God that the far end boasted a well-stocked pub.

From the riverbank, one had a magnificent view of the impressive grey mass of Arundel Castle, a mile away across the Arun floodplains.

Although today this seems extremely unlikely, Arundel was a fully fledged seaport until 1750. I didn't really believe this until years later, my best friend, Sally, a history expert, explained the history of the region to me.

I went to school in Arundel.

When weather, flooding and parental permission permitted, I would use our tiny rowing boat to cross the Arun, then ride to school over the marshes on my bike. On my solitary way home, I frequently stopped off to watch the

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swans and their fluffy little cygnets on Swanbourne Lake. Getting chased by furious males and sometimes having a leg snapped at by powerful beaks was not an infrequent conclusion to such visits.

At all other times, I biked the long way around. This provided me with sturdy legs and lungs, as well as a healthy suntan.

In the wet season, I'd sometimes bike it up to Ambly Wild Brooks at weekends to check out the extent of the flooding. I would then rush back home to recount the fantastic story breathlessly to my father, as he worked quietly at the pottery wheel.

The "George", and admittedly the adjoining cricket grounds, always attracted a never-ending flux of visitors to this out-of-the-way rural site.

To me, this implied a never-ending succession of pretty well-dressed girls. These girls, once bored by the adults' presence, tended to wander about the village looking for things to do. Their parents loved the place because, assisted by excellent meals and good beer, they felt that no harm could possibly come to their offspring in such a tranquil hamlet. Of course, very few of them realised that the Arun River flowed but a few hundred yards from where they sat. However, nobody ever drowned there, and no dramas ever came to mar the reputation of the place.

Our cottage had a large garden, mainly taken up by long vegetable patches at the back. Almost every day during the summer months, I was allotted some task or other there, either weeding, tending, or gathering. The front garden, however, was my mother's domain, and woe betides it if I was observed loitering around here, 'with intent...' It was some fifteen or twenty feet deep and crisscrossed by narrow flagstone paths between high walls of scented flowers. My favourites were the sweet peas, and there always seemed to be millions of them to my young eyes.

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In my early years, I was allowed to play for hours on end, invisible, in this high jungle of flowers, as long as I promised not to touch anything with a flower or a bud on it.

We had several cats of various colours and characters, but none of them took much notice of me, preferring the quasi-infinite expanses of the countryside that surrounded us. These members of the family produced litters of kittens almost yearly, which was always a novelty, occupying the months until they were adopted. The furniture naturally took the toll of the repeated onslaughts of razor-sharp young claws and teeth. Consequently, all the table and chair legs were prematurely 'aged'. My mother had long since given up the unequal battle of scolding them away, so now the sofas and armchairs were covered with shawls which we changed as they became too ragged even to pass off as being artistically shabby, or even 'rustic'.

It was at this period of my life, and in this very garden, that I unexpectedly started to fall in love with France. One lovely summer morning, as I lay hidden, as usual, driving an articulated lorry along a dusty track, I heard an unusual musical accent coming from the narrow road running outside our fence.

'Ah! Que c'est beau, que c'est beau! Mais regarde-moi cela! C'est simplement magnifique, et le parfum, la perfection'

'Antoine! Regarde là.'

I shot up like a jack-in-the-box and found myself staring at something so astonishing that my mouth hung open in amazement.

'Bonjour Jeune homme.'

I stood riveted to the ground, unable to say anything.

I had never seen anything so remarkable.

A tall, slim woman stood smiling at me. She was dressed in a way I'd never seen before, like a queen from a picture book. She had masses of magnificent chestnut hair which cascaded over her tanned shoulders, shining stuff looking

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soft and smooth. Her hair shone with a strange depth, just like the polished chestnut I always carried in my pocket as a good-luck charm, God only knows why.

'Look, Margaux isn't this beautiful.'

The accent of the English word was inexpressibly fascinating.

Then suddenly, a girl with the same lovely hair, features and tan, popped into sight and observed me. She was about the same age as me.

'Yes,' she said. 'He is beau.'

'Non! Pas le garçon, la maison, les fleurs.'

« Ah, oui !» She seemed less enthusiastic and kept staring at me.

Naturally, I blushed red. At least I felt like it.

All of a sudden, I heard a light laugh from behind me, and my mother stepped with springing strides towards the gate.

'Bonjour, madame,' said my mother.

I turned and gaped at her, and she burst out laughing.

'Eh oui! mother speaks French too.' She held out her hand to the vision, 'Madeleine Stone,' she smiled.

The woman took her hand, 'Anne-Laure,' she said. 'And this is my husband, Antoine, and my daughter, Margaux.'

The two chatted on in French animatedly for what seemed to be hours, my mother gesticulating and the other gesturing with even greater enthusiasm as if they had known each other all their lives. During this, I stood riveted to the ground, unable to do anything with such an unexpected scene going on around me.

'Entrez. Entrez donc. Come in, please.'

And then this vision and her 'Antoine' were in the garden, washed along by my mother's enthusiasm.

'Mais! Madeleine is a French name, n'est pas?'

'Yes. My parents spent many years in the south of France. I was born there, at Sanary Sur Mer, to be precise.'

This was another piece of new information for me.

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They stopped to admire the perfume of some of my mother's favourite sweet peas. 'Oh! absolument magnifique!' exclaimed Anne-Laure.

However, Antoine butted in, 'Sanary was a port. Especially in those days. What did your father do there?'

'Antoine!' exclaimed his wife. 'Don't be so nosy. Really! I'm sorry, madam. I'm afraid he has no manners. His work has distorted his appreciation as to what is and is not done outside the boardroom, or barracks, as I sometimes feel it should be called.'

Antoine shook his head with a wry, twisted smile.

'Please call me Madeleine,' said my mother, and don't worry. I like people to be direct. It saves so much time, don't you think?'

'I do!' exclaimed Antoine, shooting a victorious look at his wife.

'My father was a sculptor.'

More news for me.

'Ah! I might have guessed it!' chuckled Antoine with his incredible French accent.

'I would have been astonished if you had told us that he'd been a fisherman.'

'He managed to scrape a reasonably good living at it. My mother was a nurse.'

The daughter, Margaux, dragged behind them, swivelled her head to scrutinise me, still riveted to the spot. They then all disappeared around the side of the cottage, towards the rose gardens at the back, and cries of astonishment floated back to me, punctuated by all sorts of French exclamations.

As soon as they had disappeared, I sat down on the rough stone doorstep. I then crept carefully to the corner of the wall and peeped round it. My father was just emerging from the pottery, wiping his hands on his potters' apron. What amazed me was that he, too, was talking fluently in the same strange language. He led them across the garden to our monumental stone table in the shade, and my mother

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went off to make tea. This stone table was, in fact, quite famous. It was built from the ancient grinding wheel of a long-abandoned local flour mill. It had reportedly taken eight strong men to lift it onto its resting place on an old oak tree trunk. Some forty years later, it is still there and will undoubtedly remain there long after the house has eventually fallen into ruin and crumbled away.

This sort of tea-time assembly was a little too much for me, so I crept out of the garden and took refuge in my favourite hideout in the adjoining woods until I heard my name called. Drawn by a keen curiosity, I made my way hesitatingly back to find them gathered around the gate, exchanging goodbyes.

Then the most amazing thing happened. The French lady bent down and kissed me on my cheek, and I froze like a little bronze statue. Before I had time to catch my breath, or even to become flushed, another warm pair of lips was pressed against my cheeks, those of the little Margaux.

Then they were gone.

Some French word came floating back to me through the flowers, 'Enfin, c'est vrai maman, il est vraiment beau, ce garçon.'

My father broke into laughter and hugged my mother.

Later at dinner, when I asked my mother to explain, I turned crimson with embarrassment, and my parents exchanged smiles pretending not to notice.

The following summer, we spent two weeks in Paris, staying with the French couple. The daughter, Margaux, was away on the Mediterranean coast at Banyuls-sur-Mer, with an aunt. This suited me perfectly because I was not yet used to the company of girls.

Their house was a large rambling old place in Rueil-Malmaison, with towering trees, extensive lawns, but far too few flowers for my tastes. Nevertheless, I spent hours exploring the vast gardens and discovering hidden secrets

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in the numerous dark cellars and outhouses. In one of these underground caverns, I even came across a mushroom 'plantation' which I found almost magical and full of unknown mysterious presences. At one of the dark sides of the house, I discovered a wire-mesh enclosed machine, humming with a dozen or so whirling fans. This fascinating discovery turned out to be an air conditioning system, explaining why the house and, especially, the bedrooms always seemed fresh and comfortable, even in the hottest summer nights.

During this first stay, I gradually got used to being kissed and even being kissed by men, which, after a while, came to seem normal behaviour. We visited all sorts of marvellous places, so numerous that I lost track after the first two days. We visited Gardens, museums, art galleries, monuments, restaurants, bistros, but what I preferred were the old steep sloping paths and narrow roads of the older parts of Paris.

My mother and father seemed quite at home here and were familiar with much of it. I never asked how this was, but it all seemed quite reasonable and seemed normal to me.

This was, in fact, my first-ever real holiday, and I did not even reflect on the fact that I was in another country. I knew we had taken the ferry and crossed a lot of water, but that was all. The people there seemed permanently happy and smiling. All the women seemed beautiful, the men were splendid and friendly, and the girls were mainly dressed like little princesses. Luckily, at the time, however, I couldn't understand what these little girls said to each other. Otherwise, I would undoubtedly have been unhappy and have felt frequently snubbed. So, in this, I was lucky to be allowed to remain in happy ignorance, untouched by the snobbism and conceit of the little French upper-class demoiselles.

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Here in France, my mother dressed very differently from her usual cottage attire and spent hours with her new friend trying on magnificent clothes in lovely, perfumed shops. I became unconditionally proud of my mother in her beautiful dresses and of her elegant poise.

Thinking back, there is little doubt in my mind that the two kisses at Burpham and those two dreamy weeks in Paris sealed my future for me.

Everything that happened in later years and many of the important decisions I took were influenced by the seeds sown at this time.

After this first holiday, we went to France almost every year, frequently spending time with my parents' friends in Paris. I rarely met Margaux, who always seemed to be away somewhere in the south of France. I did, however, see photos of her, which became increasingly magnificent as the years passed.

Consequently, by the age of fifteen, I was fluent in spoken French, read it easily and wrote it acceptably well. Strangely, though, I never really thought about it other than it being my holiday language.

I had no idea what the husband, Antoine, or his wife did when we were not there or where their apparent financial ease came from. I do remember my father saying once that he came from Israel, but I had no idea where this was, and I didn't much care if the truth was told.

As it turned out, many years later, this was to play an unexpected part in one of the most remarkable periods of my entire life.



## Annexe 2: Meeting Sally

**B**arely a month after I met with Margaux and her parents, I met Sally Cameron. That summer was warm and, as usual, seemed infinitely long. But in those days, they always seemed never-ending. Every morning, once my gardening chores were completed, I hurried around the cricket pitch and through the band of trees down to the river. I was always on my own because all the boys that I knew lived miles away. I never had any real friends to play with. However, this didn't trouble me, because I was never bored. Nature supplied me with more things to do than would fit into any single day.

As usual, I threw my clothes onto the dry earth and waded naked into the cold water. Keeping close to the bank under the overhanging trees, where there was hardly any current, I started to play with the numerous floating objects around me. I was soon lost in one of the adventure stories I was always inventing for myself. I had just turned towards the other bank to check that no angry swans were bearing down on me when I was hailed from behind.

'Hello.'

I turned to see a girl of my age, looking down at me from the top of the bank. She had masses of bright red hair and hundreds of freckles.

'Hello,' I stood up and smiled, my hands dripping with mud.

'Oh! You haven't got any clothes on,' she said.

'No, they'd have got wet.'

We stood and looked at each other. 'You're all white in the middle,' she commented.

## The Songwriter

I looked down, having never thought about this before, 'I wear shorts most of the time, I suppose.'

'And your willy too! Isn't it a funny thing!'

I looked, but couldn't see anything especially funny about it, except that it was white too, like the rest.

'I suppose that's like hair. Some people have straight hair and some curly.'

She spluttered, 'You haven't got a curly willy though,' and broke into a laugh.

The little girl had an irresistible laugh, and I followed her cue.

'A curly Willy! ha ha ha.'

'Like a pig's tail!' I exploded.

We shook with laughter, and I slipped on the mud and fell down, swallowing water as I did. I came up spluttering, and the little girl laughed, even louder, holding her sides.

When we eventually calmed down, I said, 'Why don't you come in? The water's just right.'

'I haven't got a costume.'

'Neither have I, have I?'

'Oh, all right.'

She slipped out of her dress and underclothes and skipped into the water.

'Oh! It's cold.'

'Only at first.'

'What's your name?'

'William.'

'And yours.'

'Sally.'

'But I think I prefer to call you Curly, though,' she said. At this, we both flailed about with mirth, both swallowing enough water to fill a fishbowl. After a while, in one of the lapses, I said, 'You've got loads and loads of hair.'

'I know.'

'And it's very red.'

'Yes. Like my mum.'

## Stephen William ROWE

It seemed hours before a melodious voice reached us from above, 'Sally?'

'Over here, mummy.'

Then a tall figure with an even more fantastic display of red hair appeared through the undergrowth. The flaming apparition stood, with hands on hips, and observed the two of us sitting, muddy, in the shallow water.

'Well! Now what have we got here?' she laughed. The same musical laugh as her daughter.

We both stood up and walked towards her.

'Well, well!' she exclaimed, looking us both up and down.

'Look, mummy. Isn't he white in the middle?'

'It's because of my shorts,' I added.

We stood before her stark naked.

'Well,' she smiled, 'you're all wet now.'

'That's all right. I live just over there.'

I picked up my cotton T-shirt.

'Here. You can dry yourself with this. I can just run home and get dried there. We've got towels there, you know.'

'Oh really?' Sally's mother smiled. 'That must be nice.'

Then she looked down at me. 'You had better put your shorts back on first, though,' she said as she bent to dry her daughter. 'Beware of stinging nettles!'

Sally and I burst into laughter.

'Come on, Sally. Time to be going. Goodbye, young gentleman.'

'His name is William,' said Sally, looking up at her mother, who nodded.

'Goodbye, William.' And they disappeared back through the trees toward The George.

'Goodbye, Curly,' Sally called over her shoulder.

'Bye, Sally.'

And that is how I met Sally Cameron, who, twenty years later, would save my life.

From that time on, we met almost every other week.

## The Songwriter

Weeks then turned into months and then into years, and our friendship never really altered, from that day to this.

When we got a little older, our parents imposed bathing clothes, but other than this, little changed in our innocent and uncomplicated relationship. As we grew, we started taking walks, then longer and longer walks, so that I could show her my favourite spots and discoveries. We once walked all the way round Arundel Castle via the woods, and I taught her how to sneak in by the back way, without paying.

Her parents quickly gave up trying to dress her up for their outings to The George Inn and gave way to more practical jeans and T-shirts. Our parents met from time to time for a beer at the pub or tea in our garden, but we never concerned ourselves with them. I don't think they were ever very close, but apparently, my relationship with Sally made for a special bond between them.

Casting my mind back, I don't think I ever really thought of Sally as a girl, or later as a young woman, and I suspect that she felt the same about me. How this came to be, I don't know, because I soon had every reason to think about females in other terms.

Sally grew increasingly more beautiful as the years passed. Her hair grew longer and thicker, and if that is possible, redder. Wherever we went together, heads would turn to observe the boy with the redheaded girl.

Regardless of the passage of time, the nickname 'Curly' stuck, though. However, when she was displeased with me in some way, she called me William. If, however, she was just in an ironic mood, Willy was the name she used.

In any case, when I eventually went to university, we were still on the same excellent terms. We remained so, through all sorts of strange and unexpected events.

When I eventually moved to Grenoble, Sally frequently came and spent holidays with me. We must have walked over half the Alps together.

## Stephen William ROWE

I used to joke that we were unlikely to get lost because her red hair acted like a beacon and must be visible at a range of at least 10km, and probably even from orbital satellites.

As I said earlier, the warm days and evenings provided a never-ending supply of pretty, well-dressed and bored girls. The boys seemed to keep away, for some reason, which I never grasped. This was probably because the draw of the river was far greater than any other emotion.

Anyway, at six years old, these girls proved quite entertaining playmates, albeit somewhat bossy, when it came to choosing games. I don't think I was handsome and certainly not well-dressed, but most often I merely happened to be the only boy around.

As I grew older, our games became less varied and from twelve onwards, they were invariably connected with physical exploration.

The girls remained bossy, but this meant that in a short space of time, I learnt a great deal about how girl's bodies work and above all, what they liked boys to do. By fifteen, I had extensive experience and knowledge of what I was required to do with the various tools at my disposal. I had also learnt that it was a far better plan and usually more entertaining to plead ignorance, and sometimes even innocence.

So, when I attained the venerable age of seventeen, there were not many tricks I didn't know about.

Reflecting on that time, it seems remarkable that I managed to avoid becoming overbearingly arrogant about this. Mind you, that may be because I had no close friends to share this with or to show it off to.

### **Annexe 3 : My Studies and Music**

**I**n the long sitting room at Burpham, we had a very good, albeit shabby, upright piano. Apart from my aunt during her visits, nobody ever played.

My Aunt was a mixed personality, who laughed and joked all day, drank surprising quantities of wine, and became instantly melancholic as soon as she opened the piano lid. The sadder the tune, the better she seemed to like it and the more often she played it.

My mother sometimes remonstrated with her about this, encouraging her to play something lively and gay. While she did occasionally accept this challenge, she would start full of energy, but inevitably, melancholy would slip back into her interpretation, even when the pieces were composed in a major key.

She could make even the brightest movements of Handel's Water Music sound like an elegy for the death of some forgotten medieval queen.

My Aunt was the elder of my mother's sisters and seemed extremely old to me in those days. She usually came to stay at Christmas and Easter, and sometimes during the summer. Her choice of music and style of interpretation inevitably had a profound influence on my musical tastes in later years. I remember to this very day the time when she brought home a boxed set of the Messiah, in the version by Christopher Hogwood and the Academy of Ancient Music. I had never thought that anything could be so magnificent. I couldn't imagine how someone could have conjured up out of thin air, such musical perfection. It was as though it had always existed, like the huge Cullinan Diamond, lying hidden in the earth's

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depths, waiting patiently for someone to discover it and bring it out to be admired.

My Aunt's favourite occupation was sitting quietly, watching other people work. She did this very conscientiously, never neglecting to include each of us in her daily round. She would sit in the garden for hours, watching my mother tend the flowers, and watching her while she prepared our meals. She would sit by my father while he did what studio potters do, 'potter' I suppose, and watch me play when she could locate me.

This behaviour didn't trouble me while I was playing in the garden or splashing about in the river, but she would have been less welcome when girls were involved.

We got along very well together, and she seemed to get along well with Sally, and, above all, never made the embarrassing comments that some adults feel it is their duty to make. She was simply content to tag on to whatever was happening, without the slightest desire to criticise constructively or otherwise. She always gladly lent a helping hand whenever asked, and after all, it was no trouble to the family at all. This characteristic is doubtlessly why my parents always made her welcome.

I don't know where she lived during my youth, but I remember being told that she had a big flat in one of the nice parts of London. As I never went to visit her, I don't know much about her life away from Burpham.

My introduction to playing music occurred completely unexpectedly when I was about eleven years old.

One peaceful July evening, I was playing in the front garden when one of my dad's oldest friends turned up in his battered old van and, with my father, heaved an electric piano out of the back. I was informed that this was for me, and it was accordingly humped up to my room, installed, plugged in, tested, and that was that. This instrument had been on the road with a group for years and was a genuine Fender-Rhodes. It was as battered and damaged as the

## The Songwriter

van in which it had been delivered and was decorated with innumerable beer-glass stains. There were also so many cigarette burns along the front edge of the lid, that it looked like some medieval carving work.

Even today, it smells of cigarettes and stale beer, which might explain why when I was old enough, I preferred draft cider or wine and never took to smoking.

The fact that this was a legendary brand of instrument meant nothing at all to me. Still, I managed to smile and appear suitably impressed and grateful. The only problem with the keyboard was that both the top five and the lower three notes didn't work. This had never been a problem for the group because they only seemed to use the middle three octaves anyway.

Once the testing was finished, my father and his pal went off to the George for a glass of beer or four, and to reminisce about the good old days. For my part, I sat on the stool and gazed at the new addition to the room's furniture, not knowing what to think about it.

The best thing about this instrument was that I could plug in a pair of headphones. This possibility meant that nobody ever knew how poorly I played and how long I stumbled through tunes before they became recognisable as music. I only ever unplugged them when I was confident that I had got enough of the chords perfect and the timing roughly correct.

Over the years, I must have spent thousands of hours messing about in my bedroom with this instrument. It's still there today, more than 30 years later and still works perfectly, minus the same eight notes.

Unfortunately, though, my aunt insisted straight away on my having proper lessons. However, and luckily for me, the task of coaxing a teacher out to our isolated village, on a regular basis, proved a difficult one. Consequently, I was eventually permitted to teach myself, or, as my aunt put it, mess about.



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I must have started writing songs when I was sixteen. I certainly have a few pages of sheet music dated just before my seventeenth birthday. The lyrics were quite good, given my age and scant knowledge of the outside world. I seemed to have a talent for extrapolating from my limited universe into a much wider one. It may have been some other manifestation of this same talent, which, many years later, attracted me to scientific research.

So, music and especially songwriting gradually became my companions during my period of serious studies. This certainly helped me keep stress at bay during the more difficult passages.

My A-level exams didn't cause me much trouble or even much stress. This was because, at the time, I didn't take any of this very seriously. My parents never put me under any pressure and didn't seem to pay much attention to me. This, of course, was incorrect, and I now know that my progress was closely monitored, and covert discussions were held with my various teachers.

One day, when my mother mentioned further studies, university, and the choice of subject, I simply said, 'OK, chemistry.'

'Chemistry?' my dad said.

'Yes, I'd like to design perfumes.' I was sitting on the garden bench between my parents, who were sipping a chilled Provence rosé wine, in tall, dew-beaded glasses.

They smiled at each other across me.

'OK., ' said my dad, 'Where?'

'Southampton looks nice,' I commented.

'Not Oxford or Cambridge?'

'Southampton seems just as good technically and is much closer home. I could easily get home at weekends.'

My mother turned and studied me, 'Don't you want to enjoy university life and have a bit of fun?'

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'Getting blind drunk, or playing at being an intellectual, isn't my idea of fun. It's quiet here, and I have my piano and the garden and the river and walking.'

'And Sally,' added my mum with a wry smile/

'But please remember, William,' interrupted my dad, 'your mother is a snob, so Oxford would certainly be a good move. Politically speaking.'

'Really!' exclaimed my mum. 'But are you sure? Not Oxford, William?'

'No. Southampton suits me. I can always stay over there for weekends if ever it looks like being worth it.'

As it turned out, it was very rarely worth it.

So, I'll skim over this period also because I took the studies in my stride. I won't pretend that I found it all easy, but I just got down and worked at it when required. I also found that, as it had been during my early experience with girls, the tactics of admitting a lack of understanding produced just as good results with my professors. Asking for help and then demonstrating application, inevitably provided me with the reputation of an enthusiastic and hardworking student. I was thus usually on good terms with most of my university teachers, whom I respected in turn.

The years slipped by in the same easy way as the rest of my life had been, and without seeing it come, the finals were on me and just as quickly over. After the results, I was approached by one of my favourite teachers and asked if I had ever considered the option of postgraduate studies.

I said I hadn't.

Would I be interested?

'Yes, I would.'

Would I be interested in studying abroad?

'Yes, I would.'

Did I speak a foreign language?

'French fluently.'

Was I still interested in the perfume industry?

'Yes.'

## Stephen William ROWE

'Ever heard about Bio-Active molecular synthesis?'

'No, sounds interesting though.'

'It is.'

'Anything against Grenoble?'

'No.'

'I'll sort out a grant then.'

And that's how the rest of my life started.

This decision also triggered a chain of apparently unconnected events, which led to some unexpected events for which I was unprepared.

During this time, my best friend Sally had been studying history at the University of Oxford.

This subject had been her passion since she was about sixteen. Like me, she had always been a hard worker and sailed through her studies with little real trouble. Like all passionate people, she never considered study as being work, so she didn't count the hours passed in clarifying a given event, its origins and its consequences.

Our frequent treks together were often punctuated by her historical digressions. These could sometimes last for an hour or more, if we failed to reach our destination, or if the pub we had aimed for proved to be closed.

When we did reach one of these desirable halts, even when crowded, a little clearing usually seemed to form around us. Either we smelled strongly of the road, or Sally's flaming red hair and passionate discussion scared people away. While she chatted on, she was often actually putting into words and testing out ideas and theories that had formed themselves, of their own accord, in some corner of her subconscious mind. Sometimes she would suddenly break off in mid-discussion when unexpectedly coming up against a defect in her reasoning. We would then walk on in silence for some time, while she would mull this over.

Generally, with a little laugh, or sometimes a sigh, and a slight shake of her mane of hair, she would admit defeat.

## The Songwriter

'Wrong again! More thought required there, don't you think, your honour?'

The truth is that we were never bored together. One of us always had something to say or some thoughts to share.

Our fields of study were indeed worlds apart, and this is undoubtedly one of the reasons why we rarely disagreed.

She, too, had been offered a PhD and seemed poised to accept it. At the time, I couldn't imagine what a thesis in history could include, where it would lead her, or even what use it could be to society. I would undoubtedly have criticised this as a waste of time and money if it had been anyone other than Sally.

Anyway, the subject she had been offered was to address the case of "Art Confiscation and Related Crimes during World War Two".

This thesis was to be a joint one with the Modern and Contemporary History Department of the famous Sorbonne University in Paris.

Although neither of us mentioned this, this coincidence of locations influenced our decisions to accept our propositions.

However, there were unsuspected consequences of her choice of topic, which neither of us could have predicted at the time.

## **Annexe 4 : Moving to France**

**M**y last summer before leaving for France was as timeless and unending as usual. I spent the long, warm, humming days wandering around the peaceful countryside. Some afternoons I spent dozing in the shifting dappled shadows under a twisted oak, listening to the wind swishing amongst the leaves high above. On other occasions, with legs stretched lazily out under weather-aged inn tables, I spent peaceful hours with a pint or two of draft cider and a ploughman's lunch.

One morning, when the sun came shining through my bedroom windows, I occupied myself happily composing slow, melancholy melodies with heart-rending lyrics. The peaceful tiredness of my solitary homeward tramps through tall green ferns in the gathering dusk was inseparable from this period. Each day's end was punctuated by the quiet, dreamy evenings in the garden, amongst the perfumes of sweet peas, roses and peonies.

The only notable event that summer was the unexpected replacement of the cottage's original windows with top-quality double-glazed ones. A contractor friend of my father did this almost free of charge, using 'leftovers' he had accumulated over the years, from his housing estate contracts. The main consequence of this was that nearly every window was different, either in style or in colour. This modification gave the cottage a curious cock-eyed look, which turned out to be entirely in keeping with the place, so my parents didn't bother about it.

Some of the windows were even soundproofed, lending an uncanny quietness to the rooms where they were

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installed. My bedroom was one so equipped, and I often ended up leaving the window ajar to be able to hear the birds in the garden. In any case, this made the place much cosier during the colder periods of the year and cut the heating bill drastically. This advantage is not to be sniffed at when you count on selling handmade pottery for a living.

Strangely, though, my parents never seemed to have financial problems, nor did they discuss them.

I knew that the cottage had come from my great-grandmother on my mother's side, who had purchased it as a summer retreat, but that's all I knew really. So, I thought, at some period, there had been money in the family, but I never troubled myself with what produced it.

The weekend before leaving for France, Sally and I set off for a trek, heading north to Amberly, then east across the downs to Washington, south to Findon and then back west across the downs to home. All the fields had by now been harvested, and the golden stubble of the remaining stalks seemed to make the land appear much more arid than it was. Our path wound on along a chalk-scattered path over the top of Springhead hill, with views all the way down to the sea.

'You ought to put a hat on Sally.' I smiled

'Why's that?'

'You're likely to set the whole place on fire.'

She glanced at me askance.

I ruffled my hair and pointed to hers.

'Funny boy,' she laughed, walking on.

This arid scenery inevitably reinforced the sensation of thirst, prompting an unplanned detour from our main route to a popular pub along the way. The extra miles this added to our walk also necessitated longer than planned-for rests.

We had initially intended to push on as far as Chanctonbury Ring, to see if we could spot any sign of the devil or his recent work. Unfortunately, however, a

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Ploughman's Lunch accompanied by a couple of pints of draft cider put an end to that part of the project.

So, by the time we eventually skirted Harrow hill, dragged wearily back along Perry ridge and down into Burpham, it was already late on Saturday evening.

My parents were used to my very approximate notion of the passing of time and had waited for us before eating. Even then, they sent us off to shower before allowing us to sit down to dinner. It was therefore after nine when we reassembled in the garden around the grinding-stone table, where we managed to do the honours to a bottle and a half of cold French rosé.

On occasions like this, Sally usually stayed the night, was put up in the spare bedroom and always overslept the following Sunday morning. My mother seemed to know instinctively when Sally would appear. She would be seen setting out her coffee cup, bread, butter, and homemade jam, a short time before the red-haired figure appeared around the kitchen door. If I were already off somewhere, my mother would take the tray out to the stone table, and they would sit chatting together until I returned.

On this last evening, after our peaceful dinner, my mother was lying back in an armchair reading 'Jeeves in the Offing.' She had every single book by Wodehouse, and they were all well-worn. My mother would choose at random among the hundreds of paperbacks the two of them had accumulated over the years. Many were second-hand with faded covers and a musty smell. Still, my mother defended herself by saying that the words inside the covers meant the same, however much you paid. There were so many to choose from that an entire wall was lined with bookshelves from floor to ceiling. Those searching for a serious book to study would, however, have been disappointed because no intellectual authors found a permanent abode in our home, except for a few travel books and technical stuff about pottery or plant care.

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At this moment, I was reading a book describing the mountain treks around Grenoble, and Sally was engrossed in a history magazine. My father was sipping some of his best Armagnac, sitting on the stone bench outside the kitchen door, watching the evening shadows.

My mother was chuckling to herself over her book, then stood up, came over to where I sat and pointed to a phrase on the page she was reading.

I read, "Miss Wickham, Jeeves once said to me. Lacks seriousness. She is volatile and frivolous. I would always hesitate to recommend as a life partner, a lady with such a vivid shade of red hair." My mother placed her free hand on my shoulder, 'absolute rot, don't you think?'

I shot a rapid glance up at her face, then over at Sally, whose burnished red hair shone under the warm light of the reading lamp. My mother smiled to herself and went back to her chair, without waiting for or expecting an answer.

These were the memories of that last summer, which I carried with me as I embarked on a new phase of my life.

Before taking up my residence at Grenoble, I had promised to spend a few days with my parents' friends in Paris. I was always given a comfortable bedroom when visiting them in their sprawling house, and I invariably slept, ate and drank excellently.

Paris is a place where I've found it nearly impossible to become bored, so the few days of this stay passed all too quickly. For once, I had the pleasure of meeting Margaux again. I had often seen her photos, so I was aware that she had grown into a lovely young woman. However, the pictures hardly did justice to the girl herself. She had become a magnificent example of the young Parisienne, on whom much money and time had been spent. Her gorgeous chestnut hair was just as I remembered, except that there seemed to be more of it now, and it shone as if each strand had been individually polished.



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Margaux was slightly shorter than her mother, but just over five feet six, which was perfect for me. I prefer not to talk about her profile, and even better, not to think about it, because it belonged to the stuff of dreams. Her face was a lovely oval shape, and her skin was flawless, smooth, and soft-looking. However, it was her eyes that drew attention, which were startling. Their colour was darkish brown, and they had golden filaments running outwards like an image of the sun when the core has been masked with smoked glass. Her nose was in perfect proportion to her other features and neither long and straight like her mother's nor large and curved, like her father's. Her smile was a magnificent and disarming thing, filled with seemingly thousands of little white teeth. She was simply but elegantly dressed in white linen shorts and shirt, over which she wore a soft black jacket. The sleeves of the jacket were rolled up with expert precision, and the shirt was carefully opened, showing just the correct amount of tanned skin. Her hands and tanned arms were thin and elegant, and her fingers were perfectly manicured. Her legs were long, well-proportioned, and also perfectly tanned, while on her feet she wore white leather sandals.

Her mother stepped quietly into the room from the garden, carrying a bunch of some leafy stuff, which looked like a smaller version of rhubarb.

She glanced at me knowingly, 'Yes, I have to agree with you, William. I do think I've done a very fair job with this one,' She smiled. 'I might perhaps have made the lips slightly thicker, but the smile takes up too much space as it is.'

'Maman! Really! Stop it!'

Margaux took me by the arm, 'Viens, come with me before she succeeds in embarrassing one of us.'

Her mother smiled, 'That would be almost impossible in your case, Chérie.'

## The Songwriter

'Stop it, Maman!' Margaux led me through the kitchen and out into the garden at the back of the house, under the light shadow of a group of three ancient weeping willows.

A swing had been fixed to one of the higher branches, and kicking off her sandals, she slid onto it and pushed off backwards with her long legs. I pulled one of the deck chairs across the lawn, from where they had been assembled in a neat circle, and eased myself down into it.

'So, what have you been doing with yourself?' she asked. 'I've already got most of the basic stuff from Maman. But certainly not all the important bits.' On the return swing, she looked down on me. 'For example, why go to dirty Grenoble, when you could stay in your lovely cottage at Arundel?'

'Burpham,' I corrected.

'Same thing, seen from here.' As she waited for my reply, swinging back and forth, her hair fell back behind her, then waved forward, completely masking her face.

'Isn't all that stuff heavy to carry around with you all the time?' I nodded.

'Don't try to change the subject. Anyway, over the generations, the family genetic stock has evolved to provide us with powerful neck muscles. What interests you so much about my hair.'

'I suppose I must still be under the spell of the kiss on the cheek you gave me when we first met.'

'Ah, I thought so! So, you've been in love with me ever since. Eh bien, c'est la vie,' she smiled wryly. 'Yes, that's life, I suppose,' I laughed.

'I'm doing that all the time, you know. It's most unfortunate. It frequently causes me the most dreadful spasms of remorse. But I can't help it. I'm made like that, I suppose.'

'Yes, it must be most distressing to have been landed with such a troublesome gift.'

'Yes. But I struggle along somehow,' she said.

## Stephen William ROWE

'Luckily, you have your mother to support you when the going gets too hard for you.'

Margaux abruptly stopped the swing and gazed at me. 'The going never gets too hard for me, William.'

This unexpected reaction startled me, but some years later she was to more than amply prove the truth of it.

She pushed off again and started to swing slowly, some of the softness returning to her eyes, and added, 'So?'

'OK, so why a PhD, and why in France? Is that the question?'

'That's it. I'm all ears.'

'Well, firstly, I just like learning new things.'

'You like challenges?' she suggested, stopping swinging again for a few seconds.

'No. It's the understanding of new things I like.'

Margaux nodded and kept on swinging while I tried to adjust my position in the deck chair. She had that peculiar gift of looking at one with a small smile and a specific tilt of the head, which gave the impression that she had devoted her entire attention to what one was saying.

'But I'd never really thought about research before. When my professor asked, I accepted before I even thought about what it meant. Then, when I had thought about it, I was, above all, amazed that anyone had even thought of proposing it to me. It doesn't mean learning things that other people have known for centuries, but trying to explain things nobody understands yet.' I struggled out of my chair and started wandering back and forth in front of Margaux, just out of reach of her outstretched legs as they swung outwards. 'I don't know if I'll be any good at it,' I continued, 'but once I understood that that was what a PhD was about, how could I resist?'

She made a typically French exclamatory noise, which is impossible to describe without it looking silly in words. 'No, I can imagine that.'

## The Songwriter

'I've never heard of the subject he proposed before, but, well...'

'You just jumped at it, like a little boy at an unexpected present...'

'Ha! Yes. You're probably right.'

'Don't explain the subject, please! It's too hot. But why Grenoble?'

'That's where the lab is. My professor collaborates with the national labs there, as well as the CNRS, which is a fairly straightforward explanation. I just said Yes once, and all the rest just ran on from there.'

'You're a bit of an adventurer, really,' she hesitated.

'No,' I said. 'More like a little boy running after butterflies and not paying any attention to where he's going.'

'What a lovely metaphor!' She jumped off the swing in mid-air, landing lightly on her feet, and looked me straight in the eyes again. 'Let's go in and see when dinner will be ready. Come on.' She put her arm through mine as we walked. 'Yes. A little boy with a big heart...hum...! I'll have to keep an eye on you, or you'll be getting into all sorts of trouble all alone down there at Grenoble.'

Well, she kept her promise, but despite that, I still managed to get into some pretty tight spots.

At about seven, we assembled under the trees for an aperitif. Margaux and her mother were dressed in simple (for them) comfortable clothes, worth several months of my grant each, I guessed. I suspect that the idea that clothes could be made out of anything, but natural fibres had probably never occurred to either of these two women.

Antoine arrived home from work at that precise moment and was bending down to kiss his wife, still in his suit, as I crossed the grass to join them. He smiled and tapped the arm of the deck chair beside him. He slipped off his jacket, hanging it with practised care over the back of one of the unused chairs in the perfect circle I had broken up earlier. As usual, he kept his tie on rather than dragging it off as a

## Stephen William ROWE

sign of the end of a day's work. However, this didn't seem to trouble him, even given the mid-summer heat.

I don't think I ever saw him sweat. It was as if the temperature was just right for him, rather than sweltering hot. Perhaps he had been born directly in a three-piece suit, and that from time to time, he merely moulted into a new one. At the time, he must have been about fifty and almost ten years older than his wife. He had heavy features, but his bronzed face was more lined by smiling and laughter than by frowns. Time had, by this time, robbed him of almost all his hair, and all that remained was a narrow silver band on each side of his head.

He was shortish and round without being fat, and his tailor-made cotton shirts minimised this even more. I assumed that he worked as director or president of one or other of the large international groups that have their headquarters in the expensive western suburbs of Paris. I was right in this respect, but it was only years later that I discovered his true line of work, which came as a great surprise and turned out to be helpful in the end.

He was the sort of person who asked questions while somehow giving the impression that one should not take the liberty of asking him any. As his wife and daughter, he was extremely good at making one feel at ease and that whatever one had to contribute to a discussion was a valuable addition. Luckily, they were all so at ease in their expensive clothes that I never felt out of place in my relatively cheap English ones.

Anne-Laure suddenly leaned over to her daughter and pushed back the girl's hair. 'I'm not sure that those earrings aren't just a little too showy, Chérie.'

'They are gold, you know.'

'Naturally, dear. But they are just a fraction too big, don't you think?'

'I think they are perfect. William. What do you think?' asked Margaux.

## The Songwriter

'Ho, Ho! Leave the poor boy out of your fights, ladies.'  
Her father interrupted.

'Too big!' she gasped.

'A fraction bigger than that and they would be almost common!'

'Common? Papa!'

Antoine smiled. 'On anyone else but you, they might just be considered fractionally too big, but on you, they are just perfect. Don't you agree, William?'

'That's certainly what your mother meant, Margaux,' I improvised.

Anne-Laure shook her head with a wry smile and sighed deliberately loudly.

'Honestly! Men!'

**The End.**

## Stephen William ROWE

### *Author's Note:*

*If you've enjoyed this book, you'll find the other adventures of William Stone my novels, "Bait", "Hate" and "Agent Vx".*

*You might also enjoy the two "Three Men in a Panic" books, which describe the amusing adventure of a trio of retired friends.*