



JACK THOMPSON

C'EST

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a RAJA WILLIAMS novel

C'est la Vie

Jack Thompson

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Prologue

Margaret Browning strolled along the Rue des Écoles, enjoying a holiday in Paris which her husband Phillip had been promising her for the past two years. Usually Dr. Phillip Browning's academic commitments as ranking professor of literature at King's College London in Westminster took precedence in their lives, leaving little time for holiday. However, a hastily convened conference in Paris on a newly discovered written work by nineteenth century French author Guy de Maupassant, and his wife's persistence had finally won out. Today Phillip was somewhere inside the Institut de France, giddy over the possibility that a de Maupassant story had gone undetected for over one hundred thirty years and reeling with the opportunity to be one of the first to study it. Such a once in a lifetime happenstance overwhelmed and absorbed the professor completely, dimming the rest of the world and leaving his wife Margaret free to shop on her own. The day before, a small antique shop had drawn her interest, but a scheduled dinner with her husband's colleagues had delayed her chance to explore it until now. As she neared the shop, she phoned Phillip, catching him waiting for the museum preservation room to finish preparing the next batch of documents he was to study.

"Margaret, I trust you have found something to entertain you," said Phillip. He well knew how excited his wife was to be in Paris.

She was about to launch into an animated rundown of the places she had visited, when she spotted his wry humor. Without missing a beat, she said, "Why, yes, Phillip, although I may have to hire an extra cab to carry all the expensive antiques I have purchased."

Phillip smiled. He and Margaret knew each other too well. "Where are you now?" he asked.

"I've just arrived at that shop you pulled me away from yesterday. They will surely have some bargains ... oh dear." The shop had all the curtains drawn together and the sign on the door read FERMÉ. Margaret looked at her watch, hoping it might be a short dinner break. Then she cupped her hands and peeked in through a gap in the window curtain. "Oh, dear Lord," she said.

“What is it, Margaret?” asked her husband, hearing the alarm in her voice.

Margaret never heard him. Her phone had already dropped to the sidewalk. Inside the shop, she saw a man strapped to a wooden chair. Two men held him roughly by the shoulders. Another man with a horrific tattoo on his neck stood in front of the victim, alternately firing questions at him in French and pistol whipping his face.

Margaret could do nothing but stare like a passerby at an accident, frozen by the sheer brutality of the scene. Her husband continued to call her name from the phone lying at her feet, but it was a faraway dream.

Finally the man with the tattoo forced the barrel of his gun into the other man’s mouth and pulled the trigger, splattering blood and brains on the men holding him.

The loud blast snapped Margaret from her trance. She backed up into the street. A small blue car screeched its tires, barely avoiding her, and the driver laid heavily on the horn. Margaret turned toward the car and watched the driver’s mouth move angrily as he passed by. Then Margaret remembered what she had just witnessed and she looked back to the shop, hoping that no one inside had noticed her.

An arm yanked aside the window curtain and she was face to face with the tattooed man. The evil in his gaze cut her to the bone. As adrenalin took over, Margaret turned and ran headlong across the busy boulevard, careening off the hoods of several cars before reaching the other side. She looked back and saw two men dart out of the shop across the way, guns drawn. She knew they were coming for her. With nowhere to run, she stood helplessly, resigned to a certain death.

Suddenly a blue and white police van she had not noticed swerved over to the curb in front of her and stopped. The side door opened.

“Montez! Montez!” said the officer in the van.

Needing no translation, she darted inside. The door slammed shut and the van sped away into the flow of traffic.

“Thank you so much,” said Margaret, to the two uniformed police officers who were in the back of the van with her. “You saved my life.

Those men..." Her voice trailed off.

"You are safe now. What did you see?"

"I don't know. A man with a tattoo."

"Could you recognize him?"

"I will never forget his face. He shot a man. He killed him."

The policemen spoke to each other rapidly in French.

There was an explosively loud crunch, and Margaret was thrown violently into the wall of the van. The van rocked and spun around, skidding to a stop. Woozy from a bump on the head, Margaret slumped to the floor. She tasted blood. One of the policemen was lying next to her, his head twisted at an odd angle. She heard shouting from the front, then gunshots. The other policeman opened the side door and stepped out, disappearing to the rear. More gunshots, then nothing.

A long ten seconds later, a man in a black ski mask appeared in the side door opening and climbed into the van. When he reached down toward her, Margaret passed out.

Chapter One: The Panicked Professor

Sitting at his desk, the police inspector gazed wistfully at a picture of a woman holding a small boy in her arms. It was a picture from a happier time. His son was now twelve, and he had not seen him for six months. Not since his wife had gone to “visit” her family in Alsace Lorraine and taken Lucien with her. The note she left had seemed innocent enough at the time, but had turned out to be a prelude to a full divorce. Personnel cutbacks in the police force had made his case load so heavy he barely had time to call, much less attempt any sort of reconciliation. Of course, that was the problem, according to his wife Claudia. He saw it another way. Her late evenings spent with a certain young assistant curator at the Louvre were not about art appreciation. Did she not think he had earned his inspector’s badge?

As he stared at the picture, he wondered how much taller Lucien had gotten since he had last seen him. Now that his case load had lightened, he would have to take a few days off to go see his son.

The inspector’s assistant rang the intercom, breaking his reverie.

“Yes, Claude?”

“There is a professor on the phone—he says something has happened to his wife.”

“What has happened?”

“He doesn’t know. But he is quite panicked. He’s here from London over at the Institut de France where he is studying something—an old book.”

The inspector knew that the professor’s wife had probably gotten lost in the city. Foreigners always had difficulty with the Parisian streets. Most likely her phone had gone dead. Simple. However, he also knew that a British citizen could create a lot of trouble for him if the misunderstanding wasn’t handled quickly. The French and the British were never more than one or two incidents from a full blown diplomatic war. He didn’t need such trouble, especially now. “All right, Claude. I will see to it. Where is the professor?”

“He’s in the security offices of the institute. They are having difficulty calming him down. He’s still on hold.”

“Put him through.” The inspector sighed. Perhaps his wife was right about his being too absorbed in his job. But, all that was going

to change. He had a plan. He would show her.

"Hello, hello?" said a distressed voice.

"Professor Browning? This is Inspector Gilliard of the Paris police."

"Inspector, you must help me. My wife. She has gone missing."

"When did you last see her?"

"This morning."

"Paris is a big city. It has been less than a day, perhaps—"

"She is not just lost. Something awful has happened."

"Have you tried calling her?"

"Of course. Do you take me for an idiot?"

The inspector refrained from any comment. "I ask only whether you have tried every means to reach her."

"Yes, I am sorry. I am terrifically fearful that something has happened to Margaret. She was on the phone. Then suddenly she was gone."

"Perhaps her phone went dead."

"You are missing the point. Something happened while she was on the Rue des Écoles. I could hear it in her voice."

"What is that?"

"Fear."

The inspector sat up in his chair, immediately interested. There had been several calls about gunshots on Rue des Écoles. He had two officers checking it out, but had not gotten a report yet. "Where did you say?"

"The Rue des Écoles. Margaret was at an antique shop—gold antiques—Les Antiquités D'or. I think it was near the College of France."

"Just a minute, *s'il vous plaît*," said Gilliard, switching to the assistant. "Claude, where was the report of gunshots?"

"Rue des Écoles, near Rue de Beauvais."

"Close enough. Have we gotten an update?"

"Nothing yet from the detail you sent to check it out."

"Send them to Les Antiquités D'or."

The inspector switched back to the professor. "*Excusez-moi*. You say she was near the antique shop on Rue des Écoles?"

"She was right there at the shop. We had seen it the day before and—it doesn't matter. Please help me."

"I think you had better come to the police station."

"Oh no. Has something happened? Is Margaret all right?"

"I don't yet have any information. Should I send one of our cars to pick you up?"

"That will not be necessary. The security director here at the museum said he will arrange a ride."

"Very good. I will see you soon. Don't worry, we will find your wife." After the call the inspector winced. He hated to make promises he wasn't sure he could keep.

As soon as Dr. Browning stepped into the reception area of the police station, he started right in. "My wife Margaret. She is gone." Although he stood in front of the officer at the reception desk, he spoke to no one in particular. He didn't care if anyone understood English. "She is always very careful. Something terrible must have happened. I never should have left her alone in this terrible city." He rubbed his face, desperate to brush away the fear and panic that choked him.

"*Monsieur, s'il vous plaît,*" said the officer, pointing to a long wooden bench across from his desk.

The professor had no intention of sitting down. "Is anyone going to help me find my wife?" he said loudly.

"Professor Browning," said a new voice from behind him. Intimate knowledge of how upset a man could be over losing his wife tempered Inspector Gilliard's voice. "I will help you. Please come with me."

Professor Browning whirled toward the voice, eyes wild and desperate. Seeing kindness and calm in the inspector's eyes gave him hope. "Yes, yes, whatever you need," he said, and obediently followed Gilliard down a hallway and into another office.

After sitting in the plain wooden chair in front of the inspector's desk, Professor Browning took a deep breath and asked, "What have you found out? Where is my Margaret?"

Inspector Gilliard paused, knowing he must choose his words carefully. "We do have witnesses who confirm her whereabouts on Rue des Écoles at the time you spoke with her." Gilliard did not want

to give any details of the brutal triple murder inside the very antique shop where Margaret Browning was shopping. "We have not yet located her, but I'm confident we will. We did find her cell phone." He placed a black smart phone on the desk.

Phillip Browning recognized the phone. Margaret kept it with her at all times. It was a running joke between the two of them that she would leave him before she would leave that phone. His heart pounded in his chest. "Witnesses? To what?"

"There is no need to panic. We are investigating every possibility. It is standard police procedure."

"You haven't seen panic. I may be merely an academic with no sense of your police work, but I'm an intelligent man, Inspector. And I know you are keeping something from me. This is my wife we are talking about, please."

"There has been a murder in the vicinity. Not your wife," the inspector quickly added. "There is likely no connection at all."

"Oh, dear God," said the professor.

The inspector had the same sentiment. He did not mention that a witness had seen a woman fitting Margaret Browning's description getting into a police van near the scene. Or that the van had been found several blocks away, along with three dead policemen and no sign of the woman. The Director-general was already raining fire on the police department to find the killer. He couldn't let the professor find out the connection.

"Do you know of any reason your wife would be in trouble?"

"No, of course not."

"Has she been to Paris before?"

"No."

"How were the two of you getting along?"

"What are you getting at?"

"I am looking for a reason for her disappearance. Sometimes with a spouse the cause is, how shall I say it, closer to home."

"I assure you that our marital relationship had nothing to do with her disappearance. Moreover, it is none of your business. I demand you do something to find my wife. Otherwise, I shall be forced to go to the British Embassy."

The inspector's attempt to sidetrack the professor had blown up in his face. He said stiffly, "I have a half dozen men tracking down every lead. We will find her. Let us do our job. You should go to your hotel in the event that she shows up there." Gilliard called the front desk and arranged for a car to take the professor home. When an officer came to escort the professor, Gilliard said, "I will personally contact you as soon as we know anything. I have your cell number."

Once outside, Professor Browning refused to go back to the hotel. "Take me to the British Embassy or I march right back inside."

The officer decided bringing the professor back into the station would be worse for his career. Ten minutes later he dropped the professor at the front gate to the embassy.

Using the intercom, the professor gained entry into the embassy compound by briefly explaining his predicament. The main hall of the building was decorated with intricate gold leaf that was at least one hundred fifty years old and the walls displayed portraits of English kings going back even further. On another day he might have felt compelled to study them more closely. Today he barely noticed.

A pleasant young woman hustled out to meet him. "Professor Browning, I presume," she said, offering her hand. "Please, follow me. The deputy ambassador is eager to see you."

The expressed urgency gave the professor hope. He followed the woman into an office no less ornate than the hall. The queen looked down from the wall behind a small man seated at a desk that seemed too large for his petite stature.

"Deputy Ambassador, this is Professor Phillip Browning," said the woman. "Professor—the Deputy Ambassador, Reginald Hamm." As the men shook hands, the woman left the room, closing the heavy carved wooden door behind her.

"Please be seated. I have received word from the police that you think your wife has been the victim of foul play."

"Not think. I know." Browning told his story to the ambassador who listened intently.

The ambassador nodded frequently until the professor paused for a breath. "I have been assured that the local police are searching city wide for her as we speak," said the ambassador, continuing to nod. "I'm sure she will turn up soon."

The professor knew patronizing when he heard it. "Look—Deputy Ambassador, is it? The police are hiding something from me. They mentioned a murder. I want you to force them to cooperate. I demand it," he said, raising his voice to a volume he was not comfortable using.

"I can understand your frustration. But you must keep in mind it has only been a few hours. There is a matter of police protocol. I will check into the investigation." The ambassador kept nodding, like one of those bobble-head dolls. "I will stay in close contact with the inspector who is handling the case. Otherwise, there is nothing I can do. My driver can take you to your hotel."

Just like that Professor Browning found himself walking back down the hallway to the front of the building. Only hours ago he had been passionately engaged in his research while his wife Margaret enjoyed Paris. Now she was missing, maybe dead and being referred to as "the case." Staggered by the realization no one was going to help him, he steadied himself against the wall beneath a portrait of Prince Charles. He remembered a news story about a man who, after being refused insurance, went berserk and shot up the company offices. Maybe it was a good thing he didn't own a gun.

The pleasant woman greeted him in the entry hall and walked him to the door. Just outside, she grabbed his arm gently. "Here. Call this number. My brother met him at Oxford. He can help." She slipped a card into his jacket pocket. "I'm so sorry. I hope your wife turns up safe."

Before he could say anything she turned and went back inside.

The diplomatic car pulled up in front of the steps. "Sir, where are you staying?" said the driver as he opened the rear door.

"The Hotel Regina."

"Very good, sir."

The rage had passed, and the professor sank into the car's soft leather seat, finally giving in to the hopelessness he had been resisting. He idly fingered the business card in his side pocket. What could this one man, a stranger at that, do for his Margaret? He let the card go. He would have to do something himself.

When the driver drove off after dropping him in front of his hotel, Professor Browning lingered near the door, waiting for the car to

disappear from sight. Then he asked the doorman to hail a taxi.

“Rue des Écoles—Les Antiquités D’or shop, *s’il vous plaît*,” said Browning, as he climbed into the vehicle.

“Yes, sir,” said the cabby, recognizing the professor’s English accent. When the taxi drove past the antique shop there were two policemen posted outside. Barricades and crime scene tape blocked the sidewalk on both sides.

“Pull over here,” said Browning, once they had passed by the shop. He handed the driver too many euros and scanned the crime scene. The driver folded the money and quickly drove away. A closer approach revealed a yellow evidence marker on the ground outside the window of the shop. Browning recalled the moment when he lost contact with his wife, and imagined the phone landing where the marker now stood. “Unrelated murder,” he said out loud, but under his breath. That is what the inspector had said. He was lying. When one of the policemen guarding the shop took notice of him, the professor turned and walked away from the scene. He stopped half a block away and sat down at a small outside cafe. Realizing he had no plan and no clue what to do next, he pulled the business card from his pocket.

The card featured an embossed gold crown over a falcon holding a sword in the upper left corner. The name Raja Williams was printed across the middle of the card. Beneath was a phone number. As a scholar of literature, the professor couldn’t help noting that the font was 14 point Baskerville Bold. He had no idea who this Raja Williams was, but he needed help. He pulled out his phone and punched in the number.

Chapter Two: Prayer for an Angel

For a long month after the Randall Hope case in Los Angeles had ended, Raja stayed close to his home on the north end of Clearwater Beach in the Tampa Bay area of Florida. The fallout from that case was still raining down, including the resignation of the California governor, and a number of congressional investigations into fraud and misuse of government monies. It was a long month because his beloved Tampa Bay Rays were in a slump, dropping from first to last in the American League East. Raja dutifully attended the home games, yelling encouragement from his box seats behind the home dugout. However, lately he could barely stand to see the hangdog faces on the players as they trudged back from home plate after what were all too frequent strikeouts.

Raja loved the underdog status his Rays held due to being in the small-market town. As a private detective, he appreciated the challenges someone small could face in a world of mega-corporations and heavily armed governments. For that reason he spent his time and fortune leveling the playing field for those who needed a hand.

Raja was walking out of Tropicana Field after a satisfying come-from-behind win over the Yankees when Gloria called.

"Well?" she asked.

"A rally in the ninth gave us a win in a squeaker," said Raja.

"Irie, irie, bwoy. Glad to hear dat. Maybe you not so happy after I tell you about da call you got today." Gloria was the one person who sat between Raja and the requests that came in for his help. Although starting out as a housekeeper and house sitter of sorts that Raja needed because he was a bachelor who traveled frequently, Gloria had become a trusted confidante and adviser. As word of Raja's role as an investigator in the fiasco last month involving the governor of California spread, the volume of calls coming in made it necessary for Raja to use Gloria as a filter. She was a Jamaican woman who reminded him of his childhood roots in the Caribbean and kept him grounded.

"I promise I won't hold it against you, Gloria."

"Don't be foolish, bwoy. I just be warning you. A man called from overseas. Says he can't find 'is wife."

"Did you ask him the obvious question?"

"Why he still looking? Don't be no smart ass, bwoy. He sounds real bad. I think you should talk wit 'im. Real bad." If there was one thing Gloria could sense, it was true human suffering. There was a legend among the Jamaican people about their first ancestor Loka, an angel who had the task of painting the heavens. When the gods had criticized his work, he cast himself down to earth in a fit of suffering and self pity. Although the gods refused to bring him back to heaven, they gave him the gift of empathy so that he could better understand his own fate and also help others. Legend or not, Gloria had the gift. No one could fake being troubled. She always knew.

Raja trusted her judgment and asked for the phone number.

"Yes, Mr. Williams. I do so appreciate your returning my call."

"Call me Raja. And you?"

"I beg your pardon. The dire circumstances have apparently compromised my manners. My name is Browning. Dr. Phillip Browning. I have a desperate situation that needs resolving. I was given your name and number. Excuse my presumption, but I was told you could help."

"It has been known to happen. Where are you and what exactly is the situation?"

"I am in Paris, France working with the museum here on—well, that isn't important. My wife Margaret has been here with me on holiday and she has disappeared. There must have been witnesses, but the local police claim to know nothing. Apparently there was a murder nearby no one wants to talk about. I am getting no cooperation despite going to the British Embassy here in Paris. I'm afraid I had nearly given up when a kind woman at the embassy gave me your card. She said that one of her relatives knew of you from Oxford University. You attended?"

"Yes."

"I teach at King's College London."

"About your wife. Was there any reason for you to expect trouble?"

"No, no. Nothing."

“Perhaps your work. What do you do?”

“It is rather unlikely to be my work. You see, I am a professor with a PhD in literature. I came to Paris to study a newly discovered text from the nineteenth century. I’m afraid it isn’t very interesting to anyone outside of a small group of highly specialized academics, and certainly without any controversy I am aware of that would endanger either myself or my wife. I brought Margaret along for a holiday. She went out shopping for antiques. Then she was gone. Please, Mr. Williams, I need your help. I am far from being a wealthy man, but I assure you, I will arrange to pay you whatever is required. On my honor.”

Raja already knew he was going to help Dr. Browning. The back of his head had been buzzing long before he called the professor. He had an ability for reading people and an internal sense for trouble that served him well in his chosen profession. However, it came with a price. The bigger the trouble, the more his head would ache. Right now there was a full percussion section pounding in the back of his skull. He would be taking this case. “Payment won’t be necessary,” said Raja. “You can cover some expenses if you would like, and provided I can help you, you will agree to return that help at some future time should I call on your services. Is that agreeable?”

“Yes. You have my word, and my deepest gratitude.”

“We shall see. I will make arrangements to be in Paris by tomorrow. I can reach you at this number?”

“Yes. Should I arrange to pick you up at the airport?”

“No need. I will see you day after tomorrow. I’ll call you once I’m on the ground in France. Meanwhile, stay in your hotel in case Margaret contacts you there.”

“I’m getting quite tired of hearing that, but I will do as you say.”

Raja called Gloria to make preparations for his trip to France. That included notifying Mickey, his pilot. Mickey O’Toole had been flying food and medicine to the needy in Africa when Raja first met him. Now he worked full-time for Raja flying his custom Hawker 1000 wherever a case required. When Mickey wasn’t taking Raja somewhere he ran paid charter flights on the side and maintained the jet.

“Gloria, can you find out where Mickey is? I’m going to need him.”

“Already spoke to ‘im, bwoy. He just got back from a charter to British Columbia. He will have the plane serviced and fueled for a flight to France by early morning.”

Raja laughed. “So you knew I would take the case.”

“What me see, you see,” said Gloria, which was her way of saying they think alike.

Next Raja called the one person he wanted with him on all his cases. That is, if she wasn’t off on some crazy adventure of her own.

She answered right away. “Yo.”

“Vinny, it’s Raja. You busy?”

“Always, boss, you know that.”

“We have a case.”

“Tell me it’s in London. The Olympics are happening there as we speak.” Vinny was partial to athletes, having dated a few, and having a martial arts black belt herself.

“Sorry. Paris, France. You ready?”

“Born ready, you know that, Raj. When do we go?”

“Daybreak if the plane’s ready. But, I do have some research you can start on tonight, if you are willing.” Vinny had amazing computer skills, and was a top hacker who had once worked for the U.S. government until she purposely made herself more trouble than they could handle so they would cut her loose. Now she was a valued partner on all Raja’s cases.

“You know I can go all night if you need,” said Vinny. She also had the good fortune of being one of those rare individuals who only need two or three hours of sleep a night to regenerate completely.

“Come by the house,” said Raja. “I’ll give you what you need.”

“That’s what she said.” Vinny loved to push Raja buttons with the hipster lingo she was constantly picking up on the internet.

“Let me rephrase that. Come by and I’ll have the information you’ll need for your research.” With his Oxford education, Raja’s language sensibilities were an easy target. Despite her teasing, Vinny was his best friend.

Later at his home on the north end of Clearwater Beach, Raja outlined what they knew. “Professor Browning has lost his wife Margaret. There was a murder coincident with her disappearance.

My contact in Paris also says there is a manhunt underway for a cop killer.” He handed Vinny his notes.

“I’m on it, boss.” Vinny insisted on calling Raja boss, despite the fact he saw them as equals. She pulled out her iPad. Despite its small size, it gave her access to everything she needed, including the customized cloud computing programs she had designed.

Raja could still not get his wits around the revolutionary nature of cloud computing. Although he had purchased a state of the art computer setup for Vinny, including a huge interactive screen with all the bells and whistles, she preferred her iPad.

Raja made one more call. He left a message, as always, saying he would be in Paris on a case within twenty-four hours.

Gloria came in to report that Mickey would have the jet ready an hour before dawn. “You gonna take care a dat man, okay bwoy?”

“We will do our best,” said Raja.

“Make sure your best be good enough.”

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Chapter Three: Rude American

Raja, needing more sleep than Vinny, had gone to bed at midnight. Vinny worked through the night on her computer, researching everything she could find on the scene in Paris. She woke Raja well before daybreak and they drove to the St. Petersburg - Clearwater Airport where Mickey was waiting with the jet.

A sling shot takeoff got them airborne. The grueling twelve hour non-stop flight gave Vinny time to brief Raja on what she had discovered.

"What did you find out about the Brownings?" asked Raja.

"They seem like a nice couple, and I found no reason for either to be involved in anything illegal. Financials are clean, no skeletons I could find. Whoever grabbed Mrs. Browning had their own fish to fry."

"Ransom?"

"No way."

"But why her?"

"W-P-W-T."

"What?"

"WPWT. Wrong place, wrong time. I think she was completely non sequitur to whatever is going on. She's a red herring, boss."

"Okay, what else?"

"The murdered shopkeeper and his two employees could be a robbery gone bad. Margaret Browning was in the vicinity and may have witnessed something. However, I think the cop killer is our best lead."

"How does that tie in?"

"That's just it. I don't know yet, but a report mentioned a woman fitting Margaret Browning's description at the scene where the policemen were killed. I pulled that off a local media interview, but the police are keeping the report under wraps."

"Good work, Vinny."

"True dat, boss." Vinny explored more of the data she had gathered and began modifying the Venn diagram program she used during their investigations. Afterward she and Raja both grabbed a nap.

Landing in Paris required clearance through the customs service and the Gendarmerie, the French military police. The Le Bourget Airport was small and served private jets and planes almost exclusively. However, even with Raja's connections it took two hours, thanks to the new international bogeyman, terrorism. It was already after three in the morning Paris time when they got to the parking garage where Raja kept one of the many sports cars he owned. He never met a classic sports car he didn't like, and kept them in many cities. No one else knew how many he owned, and he had lost count at twenty-five. He and Vinny climbed into the burnt orange 1969 Porsche 911S that he called Napoleon and headed to Paris. The car's throaty hum eased the headache that told Raja they were heading straight for trouble on this case. Vinny shook her hair out of the Rays baseball cap she often wore, letting the wind blow through. Certainly pretty enough to be a runway model, she preferred hacking computers to haute couture.

They arrived at 33 Quai Voltaire where Raja maintained a flat on the top floor. Simply decorated, it provided a base of operations. A wide bay window looked out over the Seine River and the Louvre Museum stood visible to the right across the river. After settling in, they talked about the case.

"I've got a line on the inspector who is handling the investigation, if you can call it that," said Vinny. "Most of the police and media attention is on finding whoever killed three French policemen. Mrs. Browning has been lost in the shuffle."

"We will change that," said Raja. "What's the inspector's name?"

"Pierre Gilliard."

The next morning Raja called the British Embassy to grease the wheels with the Paris police. Although no police force likes outside interference with their business, the French were particularly insular. Raja had earned a little sway with the British Royal family, having pulled one princely ass out of a nasty fire a couple of years back. It was a story he had sworn not to repeat, but one which got him a direct order from London into the British Embassy in Paris instructing them to use their pull to open the door to the French police, a notoriously tight-lipped bunch. God save the Queen. While giving the British Embassy time to push the message through proper channels

and down the chain of command, Raja called the professor at his hotel.

"Hello," said Professor Browning.

The dull lack of expectation in Browning's voice told Raja he was rapidly losing hope. "It's Raja Williams. I'm in Paris. I'm already working on finding your wife and I wanted to meet with you." Raja didn't think the professor had any more pertinent information, but it would certainly raise the professor's spirits if he felt useful. There is nothing like the feeling of helplessness to drive a man into apathy.

"Yes, yes. Where should I meet you?" said Browning. He sounded better already.

"I'll pick you up at your hotel. Wait out front. Bring any pictures you have of Margaret. Give me about fifteen minutes."

"I'll be waiting."

Waiting was another thing that could sink a man emotionally. After hanging up, Raja made a mental note to leave promptly. "Vinny, I'm heading to Professor Browning's hotel. Then to the antique shop. After that I'll go to the police station. Get me the addresses, would you?"

Vinny knew that going to see the professor was an unnecessary side trip, but she said nothing. No matter how intent Raja was on solving a case, and he could be very intent, he never lost sight of the client's feelings. It was a characteristic Vinny admired.

"I'll download the addresses to your GPS," she said.

"Next we need to find some sign of Margaret Browning. Right now she is a ghost."

"Don't use that word with the professor," said Vinny.

"Good catch."

Professor Browning stood at the curb when Raja pulled up. He climbed into the Porsche and presented Raja with a folder.

"What's this?" asked Raja, looking at the thick folder.

"It's every picture of Margaret that I could find on the computer. I had to get them printed in the hotel office, so the quality could be better."

Raja flipped through the pictures. The professor had gone overboard, which Raja knew he would in his frazzled state. There

were at least thirty pictures of Margaret Browning, enough to make a whole picture album.

"If you need more I could have someone back home email them."

"I think these will do. Good work. You should pick out three recent shots we can use for identification." He handed the folder back to Browning. There was nothing like purpose and contribution to raise a man's spirits. "Now I want you to show me the spot where you last spoke to your wife."

"In front of the antique shop?"

"Yes. I've got it in my GPS. Hang on." They drove to Rue des Écoles and parked. The crime scene tape no longer blocked the sidewalk, allowing Professor Browning to lead Raja directly to the entrance of the shop.

"There was a marker right there. I think it was where Margaret dropped her phone when she was talking to me. I know it was."

Raja looked up the street in both directions, noting which way the police van must have been heading to arrive at the location where the three policemen were killed. He noted the packed rows of vehicles parked on both sides of the narrow street. He looked at his watch.

"What exactly did your wife say?" asked Raja.

"I've been going over that in my mind. She said only, 'Oh, dear Lord.' That's it, nothing else. Like she had been startled by something bad. Something shocking. It's the only circumstance that would cause her to take the Lord's name in such a way. She is an extremely pious woman." Tears welled in the professor's eyes.

"I understand. Anything else?" asked Raja.

"No, that's all." After a long pause Browning said, "She didn't deserve this." Now he sounded angry.

"You are right," said Raja. "Okay, that will help. Next I will be going to see the inspector."

"Let's go," said Browning.

"No. I'm going alone once I drop you off." Raja knew that bringing the professor along would put too much pressure on the police inspector. "I have other work for you." On the way back to the hotel, Raja had to come up with something to keep Browning busy. He called Vinny at the flat.

“Do you have that list of television stations covering all the investigations?”

“I can put one together.”

“Good. I’m going to need that for the professor. He’s going to help us.”

Vinny understood. “I’ll have it in three minutes. You should also have him map out his wife’s possible routes on the day she disappeared. That will keep him busy.”

“Perfect.”

“I’ll send the data on the media to your phone.”

“You’re the best.”

Vinny smiled. She knew she was.

When his phone trilled, indicating a message, Raja had the professor copy the list of TV stations.

“I need you to watch the news and note any details on your wife’s case or the case of the three murdered policemen.”

“Do you think they are linked?”

“Perhaps. That’s what we will determine. I also want you to draw a map of all the possible routes your wife could have taken the day she went missing, including any possible stops along the way.” Raja gave him an email address and asked him to send the map when he was finished. That would keep him busy, at least for a little while.

After dropping off the professor Raja drove to the police station alone, parking in front of a massive stone building that housed the Paris police and other government offices. The building oozed government authority and red tape. Raja hoped he could find a good guy to work with inside. In any government bureaucracy there are always a high proportion of stoppers—people who see their primary job as getting in the way and preventing action. The trick is to find a helper—someone who has not lost sight of the true government function of helping people to get on with their lives. Raja called them “good guys.”

Once inside Raja informed the officer at the front desk who he was. After two phone calls and a lot of chatter back and forth, the officer sent him through to the next layer of bureaucrats. He was about to repeat his story when a tough looking man in plain clothes interrupted him.

“Monsieur Williams?”

“Yes.”

“This way.” The man turned with no further communication and walked toward a hallway expecting Raja to follow.

Raja followed down the hall and into a small office containing an old wooden desk that was cluttered with stacks of folders and a small, very old computer monitor. The policeman pointed to the solid wooden chair in front of the desk and Raja sat down. They exchanged a few awkward sentences in French about Mrs. Browning and the antique shop murders.

Then the French policeman said, “It would be better for both of us, I think, if we spoke in English. I am Inspector Gilliard.” Knowing the American custom, he extended his hand for a handshake. Like many Frenchmen, the inspector had been raised to think of Americans as arrogant, vulgar and uneducated. However, experience as a police inspector gave him the opportunity to meet a wide variety of people. He had learned not to be too quick to judge a person and found that doing so often dulls one’s perceptions. “No offense to your French. You speak it well—for an American.”

Raja shook his hand and said, “I learned from a Haitian girl in my youth. Granted, it is certainly not Parisian French.”

“Perhaps language is not all you learned from her, no?” said the inspector, hoping to throw Raja off balance.

“What about the shopkeeper?” asked Raja, ignoring the innuendo.

The two eyed each other like fighters circling in the ring.

“As I said,” continued Gilliard, “no one seems to know what the shopkeeper had in the safe. The two other employees who worked there and also might have known are both dead. Whatever it was, it must have been valuable enough to kill three people over.”

“Perhaps. Perhaps not.” Raja was not going to assume anything.

“They are dead, are they not?”

“Provided your coroner is competent, I would have to agree. That they are dead appears to be all that you know.”

Seeing that Raja would not be easily deflected, Gilliard changed tactics. “I can give you all the reports on the antique shop murders, if that would help.”

"I would appreciate that, Inspector. As you know, I am most interested in recovering Professor Browning's wife—preferably unharmed. And I will do everything I can to assist you. What I would like to understand is why a simple shopkeeper was tortured to obtain what would have to be a meager amount in his safe."

The inspector was running short on patience. "You are here only as a courtesy to the British ambassador. If you intend to insult our police work, I'm sure he will understand my cutting your visit short."

"I don't think he will. One of his citizens who was in police custody is now missing, possibly dead, and the French police refuse to cooperate. No, he will certainly not understand. *Comprenez vous?*"

Now the inspector turned an ugly shade of red, but somehow he held his tongue. He did not like being baited, but the Director-general himself had ordered him to cooperate with the American.

Seeing no disagreement with his statement, Raja continued. "I'm more interested in the woman who was observed at the scene where your three officers were shot. It was Margaret Browning, was it not?"

The inspector had the look of a cornered animal. Raja would not have been surprised had Gilliard leaped at him and bitten his throat.

Instead, Gilliard sighed and said, "Yes, I believe it was."

Raja only nodded, waiting for more. He made a mental note to have Vinny look into the inspector.

"The whole sequence of events has me puzzled," said Gilliard, shaking his head. It was an obvious attempt at obfuscation.

"Then you can imagine how puzzled Professor Browning must be. And distraught."

"We are looking into a number of things, including the professor. I did not see the point in upsetting him any further."

"Or alerting him. You are considering him a suspect, are you not?" Raja knew the compulsion police everywhere had for investigating the victim of the crime.

Gilliard had other reasons for trying to keep the details under wraps, but said, "We are looking into the professor's background and his reasons for coming to France."

"And?"

"We have found nothing suspicious," said Gilliard.

"Then it seems we are on the same page."

“Look, Monsieur Williams, we have three dead police officers and a missing British citizen. As you can imagine, there is a great deal of pressure to find the killer. We can overlook no one.”

“I would like to see the autopsy and ballistics reports.”

“I’m afraid that is information I cannot release at this time.”

“Can not or will not?”

“The terrorist division of the Gendarmerie has taken control of the investigation and has locked down the reports until they complete their review. There is nothing more I can give you.”

Raja wasn’t going to get anything more. “You have already helped more than you know,” he said. Then he promptly turned and left the room.

Once Raja was gone, the inspector dialed his phone. “Yes. His name is Raja Williams. He is pushing hard on the woman’s case ... No, he’s going to be trouble. Make sure you keep her out of sight.” He ended the call.

Raja knew it wasn’t unusual for the police to stonewall his intrusion into their turf. They were very territorial. As a private investigator, it came with the job. Besides, no one likes a johnny-come-lately outsider marching in the front door and making trouble. He would have to find another way in. Once he was outside the police station he called Vinny.

“Did the inspector appreciate your helping him with his investigation?” asked Vinny, always the optimist.

“Like a kick to the groin. I had to threaten an international incident to get any information. All in all, it went better than I expected.”

“Always the master of gentle persuasion,” said Vinny, knowing Raja’s penchant for the boots first, storm trooper approach.

“He’s hiding something, but I don’t know what—yet. You find out anything?”

“The shopkeeper’s funeral is on Sunday. So far I’ve found no witnesses to the antique shop shooting. I’m not sure where we go with that one.”

“We go to the funeral. Margaret Browning’s disappearance has to be connected. Besides, funerals are always a good place to meet people. What about the cop shootings?”

“The reports are not accessible anywhere online. The Paris police need a serious tech upgrade. I had to download some ancient programs just to access their main system. Did you get any hard copy forensics reports from the inspector?”

“Not a chance. They are deliberately keeping that data under wraps.”

“CYA?” asked Vinny.

“That’s what I’m thinking, but I don’t know who’s covering for whom. I’m coming back to the flat. We are going to need to gather more intel before we make our next move. Keep digging.”

Raja got into his Porsche and drove off, never noticing the blue Peugeot sedan that pulled out and followed, staying several cars back.

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Chapter Four: Nightmare

At first everything was dark. Not the darkness of a pleasant moonlit night, but the heavy, palpable black that paints a nightmare. And yet, Margaret knew she was awake. She could feel the cords that bound her bite painfully into her wrists when she struggled to free her hands. The hard edges of the seat back dug into the inside of her arms. She shook her head and felt nothing covering her eyes. Why couldn't she see? Panic choked her, and she struggled in vain, only tightening the cords and hurting herself more. When the impulse to scream rose up in her throat, she clamped it down quickly, fearing what response her cries might bring. She had no idea where she was or who had taken her. Or why. She tried to recall what had happened, but the oppressive blackness pressed in from all sides, preventing her from focusing her thoughts.

A concentrated mental effort brought one picture into her mind—an image of a man—Phillip. Yes, her husband Phillip. Her beloved Phillip. She said a short prayer. Where was Phillip? Another wave of panic crashed over Margaret and she sank back into unconsciousness.

Chapter Five: Life is a Cabaret

At the Paris flat Raja poured himself a glass of The Macallan, his favorite single malt scotch, from a heavy crystal decanter. He sat back on the black leather sofa to consider what they knew about the case, hoping to figure out more before the shopkeeper's funeral in three days. "I find it strange that there were no witnesses near the antique shop at the time of the murders or Margaret Browning's disappearance. Broad daylight on a fairly busy street. That makes no sense."

Vinny plopped down next to him, grabbing his glass. She sniffed it, wrinkled her nose and handed it back to him. "Perhaps something has silenced them," she said.

"Or someone. Who owns the antique shop?"

Vinny bounced up and walked over to the large glass screen of the new computer setup that Raja had put in for her use. She waved her hand and a picture opened on the screen. "The shop is listed under the name Corinne Reneau. She is the younger sister of Claude Reneau."

"The shopkeeper who was tortured and shot?"

"Yes. She dances at the Cabaret d'Artois in the eighth district."

"It seems odd for a dancer to own an antique business. What exactly is this Cabaret d'Artois?"

"It's a club with shows, bands and topless dancers."

"Topless? You mean a strip club?"

"Down, boy. Not by the American definition. In Paris the line is blurry between legitimate dance and strip entertainment."

"Well, if I see boobs I'm thinking strip club."

"Men and breasts." Vinny shook her head. "You know, other than feeding babies, they are udderly useless."

"I beg to differ. Don't spoil that for me."

"Dude, I wouldn't get too excited. No poles, no lap dances. It's more like a show in Las Vegas."

"I bet there is prostitution."

"Most likely. It is still a legal profession in Paris."

"Sounds like we should investigate further."

"Why did I know you would say that."

“Vive la France.”

The drive to the eighth district took them through the red light area of Paris. Although prostitution was legal, there were limits. You didn't often see the streetwalkers you find in most American cities. Pimping was a crime, as was solicitation. The girls of Paris worked indoors as courtesans for the most part, getting their clients in clubs or hotels. It was a French cross between out of sight, out of mind and don't ask, don't tell.

Raja drove past the club and parked around the corner. He had decided to keep Vinny undercover in Paris, partly because of the possibility of police involvement, and partly because of the throbbing in his head that grew as they worked this case. He still hadn't gotten over nearly losing her to that psychopath Fernando in Los Angeles during their last case.

The Cabaret d'Artois stood on a small street away from the main arteries of the city. A large neon sign jutted out high above the entrance to the three-story brick building. A fire-engine-red canopy was decorated with black silhouettes depicting women in various poses. Although more artful, it reminded Raja of the chrome mudflap girls seen on the back of big-rig trucks in America.

Despite being early afternoon, music pulsed from inside the club. Vinny went in first. Raja waited one minute and followed along a narrow red-lit walkway that sloped downward to a basement floor. The floor flattened out at the bottom and opened into a spacious hall with thirty-foot ceilings. Black metal catwalks crisscrossed above them, holding banks of spotlights for the show.

On the ground, a large black and white checkered dance area with a wide curved stage at the far end dominated the hall. Many small circular chrome tables for customers encircled the dance floor. Second floor balconies looked down from three sides of the hall, providing private seating with a view of the stage and the floor below. The balconies were divided into twenty-foot sections, each section separated from the next by small round platforms that hung between the balconies. Each had room for a single, spotlighted dancer. Raja noted the wide expanse of blacked-out glass on the second floor above the stage which he figured to be a one-way mirror behind which management could inconspicuously survey the club. The

cabaret reminded Raja of the retro dance club in Miami where Vinny had once dragged him for one of her dance-a-thons. That girl loved to dance.

Right now the place was empty, with only a few girls practicing dance moves on the stage, and a smattering of customers drinking at the tables, attended by one waitress in a skimpy form-fitting black and white French maid outfit. Canned dance music thumped through the sound system.

A small group of men sitting in a booth at the rear of the club were involved in a serious conversation. The one doing most of the talking was a burly man in his thirties who had a bold tattoo of a nasty three-pronged blade tipped in blood running up the side of his neck. Two other men in business suits listened intently. The last in the group was a small bald man with round wire-rimmed glasses who was busy making notes in a ledger while the others talked.

Raja drifted over to the bar unnoticed, leaving Vinny to do her magic. And magic it was. Although Vinny was probably attractive enough to headline for Victoria's Secret, most of the time you would never know it to look at her. She wore little makeup, and usually dressed like a tomboy; her baseball cap was a constant companion. She much preferred computer screens to camera flashbulbs. However, when it was needed, she could strut her stuff with the best of them. Today she had come prepared. She took off her jacket, slung it over her shoulder, and brushed back her strawberry-blond hair. She had already knotted her shirt above her waist revealing her toned abdomen. Tight jeans and high heels finished the look. By the time she sashayed halfway across the dance floor most heads were turning, and she had the undivided attention of two men who had been standing in the wings, but now moved toward her.

"*Bonjour, Mademoiselle,*" said the first one to reach her side. "My name is Luc. You are a dancer, yes?"

Vinny laughed and flirted overtly, and told him that while she had done some dancing, she was only looking for a waitress job.

The second man, Marcelo, arrived and spoke to Luc. Then Marcelo told Vinny to wait while he went to talk to the manager. He walked to the booth in the back. Raja watched how Marcelo waited and did not interrupt until the man with the tattoo had finished

speaking and looked up. He was the boss. He listened as Marcelo explained, then looked toward Vinny and waved her to approach. Luc walked her to the back table. The tattooed man looked her up and down twice and smiled widely.

"I am Bruno Laurent, the manager of this cabaret. And you?"

"Livinia."

"Livinia, a beautiful name." He looked her over again. "So apropos. You need a job, and I need a waitress. When can you start?"

"You are the boss," said Vinny passively, knowing that men like Bruno liked to think they own and control women.

"Good girl," said Bruno. "I need you here Friday night, on the floor at nine. That's when the first show starts and the place gets busy. You work until four in the morning. Luc will fill you in on the rules and show you where to get a uniform. You will make most of your money from tips, so I'd pick a small uniform size if I were you." Bruno laughed, but not a laugh that puts someone at ease. Rather, it made the hair stand up on Vinny's neck.

Luc walked her into a large room that had a long counter with mirrors and chairs on one side, and lockers on the other side. A few randomly placed couches sat in the middle of the space.

Luc explained the waitress operation. "We use a tab system for many of the regulars, and the rest pay as they go. Any time you have a question about a customer's payment, come and see me." He showed Vinny where the waitress uniforms were kept and made no attempt to leave, hoping to watch her undress and try one on.

Vinny picked one that was her size. "This one will do," she said, hanging it back in an empty locker. She turned the key to lock the door and pulled it out.

"Don't you think you should try it on first?" said Luc, sounding much too eager.

Vinny cocked an eyebrow and said, "Nice try. I'll be back Friday night."

Raja was waiting outside when Vinny came out. Making sure they weren't being watched, they walked around the corner, climbed in the Porsche and drove off.

"Okay, I'm in," said Vinny. "But I don't like that place, Raj."

"I understand, however, we need you on the inside. And we better keep you undercover for a while."

"You should see the outfit I have to wear. Not much for cover. The things I do for you, Raj."

"Not for me, but now you have piqued my curiosity."

Vinny punched him. "Curiosity? I have a different word."

"Be nice, Vinny. Remember, you are doing it for the client."

Vinny glared.

"In the meantime, I need to break through the thick-headed blue wall." That is what Raja called the extremely insular position most police departments took in protecting their own. "Or whatever color it is here among the French police."

Raja drove to his flat on Quai Voltaire and dropped off Vinny. "Do some of your computer magic and see what you can find out about the policemen who were killed. I'm going up the official chain of command to shake the tree."

"Better watch out for falling fruit," said Vinny.

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Chapter Six: Raja Goes to Bat

Certain that Inspector Gilliard was hiding something, Raja's first stop was at the Gendarmerie. They were the military branch of police who had jurisdiction over internal security matters in the police department, among other specific areas like terrorism threats and riot control. The three policemen who were killed would certainly be on their radar. Whether they would tell Raja anything was another matter.

Inside the government building, Raja checked in with the uniformed receptionist. "My name is Raja Williams. I am an American investigator who is here assisting on a kidnapping case. I have information on the three policemen who were shot and killed." The truth was he needed information, but he had to get his foot in the door first.

While he waited Raja called Vinny. "Any luck on the dead policemen? I could use some information to trade."

"There are sparse reports on the shootings available. I did find an ongoing investigation into police corruption that included two names you will be interested in."

"How did you—I shouldn't ask. Who are they?"

"Inspector Pierre Gilliard and Bruno Laurent, the manager of the club."

"That seems like an unlikely pair."

"Their connection was not clear."

"That's okay, I can use it. Keep digging."

When the officer at the front desk got an internal call he looked up at Raja.

"Gotta go," Raja whispered and ended the call to Vinny.

"Monsieur Williams."

Raja stepped up to the desk.

"Do you have any weapons?"

"No."

"Very good. Wear this badge. It will get you through the first scanner." The officer pointed. "Wait on the other side. Someone will meet you shortly."

Raja pinned the visitor badge on his collar, and walked through the arch of the scanner at the far side of the room. He paused until the light went green, and continued on through. Now he would have to bluff his way through the live screener who would be next.

A man walked briskly out of a side hallway and made a beeline to Raja. He moved like he was late for something. Average height and weight, dressed in a pressed uniform, he fit Raja's idea of the perfect bureaucrat to a T.

Raja smiled. This would be a piece of cake.

"*Bonjour*. Mr. Williams?"

"Yes."

"Follow me." The man turned abruptly and hurried off.

A silly song from Alice in Wonderland popped into Raja's head. *I'm late, I'm late, for a very important date. No time to say hello, goodbye, I'm late, I'm late, I'm late.* Raja smiled, remembering that it was the white rabbit who sang the ditty, just as the man disappeared around a corner. Raja hurried to catch up.

"Yes, come along now. The captain is very, very busy." The white rabbit indicated an open door. Apparently he was merely an usher. Raja reached the doorway and stepped inside. The white rabbit closed the door behind him.

"You will have to excuse Jean-Luc. What he lacks in manners he more than makes up for in efficiency," said an attractive but serious-looking woman sitting behind a desk. She stood up. "*Bonjour*. You are Monsieur Raja Williams. My name is Captain Milan. I will be conducting this interview."

Raja didn't like the sound of that at all. "Okay," he said.

The woman shook Raja's hand. She had a firm steady grip that said I'm in control. She was all business. The fact that she called it an interview did not bode well. Strike one.

Raja was not prepared for a challenge. He had to shift gears. He put his other hand on top of hers and smiled. "Thank you for taking time to see me," he said, trying some not-so-subtle Raja Williams charm.

The woman managed easily to resist his attempt, and withdrew her hand. "Please sit down," she said. She pulled out a keyboard, preparing to take notes of their interview. Strike two.

All Raja had left was the direct approach, something he was more comfortable using. "I am here helping the police on a kidnapping case."

"I know why you are here. You are the American who was hired on the Margaret Browning disappearance."

"Yes. I was hoping to get your help on the specifics of the three policemen who were killed. I'm sure the cases are related, but I'm getting no help from the police. If you—"

"And rightfully so," she said, cutting him off at the knees. "You said you have evidence on the policemen who were murdered?"

Getting information from someone is often incredibly easy. Most people, by nature, like to talk. It's just a matter of finding the right prompt. Or giving a little tit for tat. Of course, when you have nothing and are bluffing, it's strictly finesse. Something like fly fishing. You have to drag the bait lightly and hope for a bite. "Not actually evidence. Information. I have reason to suspect that the case involves Bruno Laurent, the club manager, and Inspector Pierre Gilliard, of the French police."

Captain Milan showed no surprise at the mention of the police inspector. "Those are serious accusations, Monsieur Williams. What evidence do you have?"

Now Raja was busted. "I am still working on that. I was hoping for your help—"

"And fishing for information. I do understand, Monsieur Williams. I'm afraid your bait will not catch any fish in these waters. Do you have anything else?"

When your bluff is called all you can do is fold. Raja stared at Captain Milan, trying to recall why she seemed so familiar. It was his fifth grade teacher, Mrs. Hess. After a long pause Raja said, "No," feeling like the schoolboy who has been caught without having his homework done. He had nothing. Strike three.

The gendarme captain pushed an intercom button. "Jean-Luc, will you escort Monsieur Williams to the front entrance?"

"Right away, sir." Five seconds later the white rabbit hurried into the office and hustled Raja back out the way he had come in.

"I'll take that badge now," said Jean-Luc, once they had walked through the last metal detector. He turned and hurried off, as usual,

looking like he was late.

Wham, bam, no thank you, ma'am, and Raja was out of there.

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Chapter Seven: Back to the Drawing Board

Raja arrived back at the flat with his tail between his legs.

“So?” asked Vinny.

“So, nothing. My visit wasn’t as successful as I had hoped. That woman was cold as ice. I’m still shivering.”

“What woman? You were supposed to be going to the Gendarmerie, not out on a date.”

“You’re right. I went to the Gendarmerie. And trust me, it was no date. No question about that. I got nothing. How did you do?”

“I’ve come across some interesting facts.” With her hand, Vinny opened a file on the glass screen. “I’ve been studying the activities at the club. I also hacked into their books for the past few months. The income on the club records from alcohol sales exceeds their restocking amount by a factor of five. That’s just what is on the books.”

“Watering the booze?”

“Of course. But they couldn’t get away with diluting the drinks that much. My theory is they are selling drugs and reporting it on the drink tab. Designer drugs are a common sideline for nightclubs, but I have no idea where they are coming from or how they get into the club. I’ll find out more when I start working there.”

“We can work the old inside-out game,” said Raja.

“Say what?”

“It’s a basketball term, where you—never mind—you work undercover inside the club to find out how the drugs are dispensed, and I’ll work outside the club tracking down the supply lines.”

“Bam shizzaam.”

“Exactly.” Although Raja was starting to understand more and more of Vinny’s lingo, he wasn’t quite sure if that was a good thing.

“I am just wondering how doing all this will help us find Mrs. Browning,” said Vinny.

“Ahh, you doubt me, grasshopper.”

“Not doubt, dude. Just a statistical improbability. I VAP’d it, and it looks like a long shot.” Vinny pulled up the data probability analysis program she had designed that displayed results as a complex Venn diagram of circles. She called it VAP, for Venn Analysis Program.

The circle that represented Mrs. Browning showed up far away from the circle for the club, with tenuous connections through Corinne and her dead brother. “There has to be missing data and people.”

Raja smiled. “Rule number three,” he said. While Raja appreciated Vinny’s computer programs and logic, and there were many occasions they helped solve cases, he knew there were things that could not be explained by logic. His intuitive sense often defied logic and yet broke cases. And the headaches that haunted him whenever they got close to a particular kind of evil could not be analyzed with zeros and ones. Raja thought of it as inside and outside the box thinking. Both had their place and use.

“Rule number three: Trust your instincts,” said Vinny. She was the one who had started numbering them and calling them Raja’s Rules. Raja felt that first impressions and gut instincts were raw feedback that rarely lie. Sometimes you just know.

Raja and Vinny held a deep respect for and unwavering confidence in each other’s skills. Because neither of them invalidated what the other could do, they operated as an extremely competent and effective team. Right now Raja felt the club was the key to finding Margaret Browning. “I’m sure you will find the data and the people you need.”

“True dat, boss,” said Vinny. “I found several illegal activities local to the city that may be tied to the club. One is the pill trade—ecstasy and other designer drug pills—that are moving through the night clubs for ‘social use.’ Odds are we will find them at the club, although not the kind of large volume trafficking that would get people tortured and killed. I also found no busts on record for the club. That could mean the drug dealing is a relatively minor activity, or that it is under police protection, or both.”

“Sounds like a good lead to follow. Anything else?”

“Prostitution is well established, but as I said before, courtesans are legal in Paris.”

“What about the police corruption angle?”

“The word is that there are cops with ties to organized crime, but what’s new? I’m still digging on that one. I’m also digging for dirt on your friend Inspector Gilliard. Nothing yet. And I’m betting that the club manager, Bruno Laurent, has his fingers in any illegal pies we

turn up. He appears to be one nasty dude. There are a half dozen beatings in the police records with his name attached, although no arrests.”

“Do we have anything else on the policemen who were killed?”

“I have tapped into the Gendarmerie computer system for traffic on that case. For all the media pressure and man power on that case, there is not much progress being made. And still no sign of poor Mrs. Browning.”

“I think another visit to the local police is in order.”

“Could you try making friends this time?”

“I just might. Maybe I can show the inspector how helpful we can be.”

“Good luck with that. I’ll work on the police shootings.”

Raja showed up at the police station just before dinner. Officers were coming in for a shift change. He followed them in and stepped up to the officer on the front desk. “I’m here to see Inspector Gilliard. Raja Williams. He knows me.”

The officer picked up the phone, then hung up. “Second door on the left.” He pointed.

Raja made his way to the inspector’s office. The door was open.

The inspector was at his desk. He sighed deeply. “I am sure there must be a good reason for you to be here. For the moment, I just can’t think of one.”

Raja sat down across from Inspector Gilliard. “I know we got off to a bad start, but I am really on your side. I am trying to help.”

“Easy to say, not so easy to prove. I heard about your visit to the Gendarmerie.”

Raja was surprised by that news, but kept his cool. “I see.”

“As I’m sure you are aware, there are a number of sensitive overlapping investigations that make this a difficult time to bring in someone from the outside.”

Raja loved that word “sensitive” that was so popular with government types. Like someone was going to get their feelings hurt if anyone found out. It sounded like the typical excuses he ran into so often when dealing with any U.S. government agency. Why would France be any different? The one thing that made governments so vulnerable was the one thing people in government couldn’t resist

doing. That was hiding their dirty laundry for political reasons. One secret requires another, then another, then ten more and eventually, with everyone hiding something from everyone else, no one is left with enough integrity to keep the show on the road.

Raja decided to sidestep the whole thing. "Since we talked last, I found out a little about the drug trade in the clubs of Paris. Designer drugs like ecstasy or amphetamines. I might be able to help the police on that, if you are interested."

Inspector Gilliard was more than happy to get the nosy American onto something else besides Margaret Browning. "Yes, club drugs are a problem in Paris. What have you found out?"

"I'm looking into how they launder their money through the clubs. It would help to know who controls the drug traffic locally."

"Narcotics is not my area, but I believe his name is Bruno Laurent. He runs the Cabaret d'Artois. You know of it?"

"Yes, in the eighth district."

"Correct. Bruno has managed to avoid arrest so far, mostly through threats, from what I have seen. He is a rough character, not one to be trifled with."

"What about suppliers? Are they local?"

"Probably. Let me look up a file." The inspector fiddled with his computer and then the printer in the corner of his office began to whir. He walked over and when the machine stopped, he tore off a page. It was a list of five names and addresses. "These are suspected to be local traffickers who distribute for Bruno. They are small time, but they may get you to the suppliers."

Raja took the list and left. He had the distinct impression the inspector was sending him on a wild goose chase. But he had another rule he liked to follow: Go wherever the investigation takes you. There is always a reason. Perhaps one day it would get him killed, but so far, following that philosophy had given him a near perfect record of solving cases. Of course, it helps a lot if the person sending you on your way is actually trying to help, not get you killed. In that regard, the verdict on Inspector Gilliard was still out. Regardless of his doubts, Raja punched the first address into the Porsche's GPS.

The picture of the private detective hunched down inconspicuously in his car watching a location with a camera or binoculars might seem cliché, but it was something every detective had to do at some point on nearly every case. The increase in security cameras posted in public areas made it less necessary, provided you could hack the system, but thank God there were still places out of the reach of cameras. Those places required a personal presence.

Surveillance can tell you a lot. Who was coming to a location, with whom. Who was leaving, when and with what. In most investigations, these are vital bits of data used in solving the case.

Because his bright orange Porsche didn't make the best surveillance vehicle, Raja parked around the corner from the first address on the list, and took up a spot across the street from the building near the entrance to a small city park. His small but powerful 100x camera scope fit into his palm, drawing little attention.

It didn't take long for his target to show up. Vinny had sent pictures of the dealers to Raja's phone for use in identification. Raja confirmed that the man walking up the opposite side of the street was Jules Masson, a small time hood with a penchant for sampling the drugs he sold. Jules called it maintaining product quality, but everyone else knew he was a hop head. Dealers like him did not last long. It made him vulnerable, something that Raja was counting on. Because it also made him paranoid and unpredictable, Raja would have to be smart. He watched as Jules crossed the street a block away, his head and eyes darting around suspiciously in a way that made him obvious to everyone but himself. Raja had to approach him without startling him into a fight or flight reaction.

As Jules neared his door, Raja walked up slowly, "*Bonjour, s'il vous plaît.* Do you speak English?"

Jules spun around, his eyes flashing feral fear.

Raja smiled innocently. "I'm a little lost," he said, trying to sound like an American tourist.

Jules relaxed and his eyes shifted to resentment. "Americans. Yes, I speak English. Where are you going?"

By this point Raja was only a few feet away. He decided it was time to tell him the truth.

"Listen. I know you are Jules Masson. I am not here to cause any trouble. I am not the police. I am here to ask a couple of simple questions." Raja kept his hand in his pocket, feigning he had a gun.

Jules stared at Raja's pocket. "Questions about what?"

"I'm trying to find out where the club drugs come from."

Jules laughed. "And I would know this how?"

"I don't want to sell or buy drugs. I'm not trying to compete."

"Then what the hell are you doing?" The dealer was getting angry.

"I'm looking for someone. An innocent woman who is missing. And I need to know who supplies those drugs. In fact, who knows, helping me may increase your business."

"It may also get me dead."

"If you are referring to Bruno—"

"If you know him, then you don't need me. And you never spoke to me. Right?" Jules dropped into fear at the very mention of Bruno.

"I want to know where he gets the drugs."

"That I don't know. He controls the supply, but the rumor is it's a local lab. If I knew I could buy direct." Jules started getting an idea but thought better of it. "No, I don't want to know. Who did you say you are?"

"I didn't," said Raja.

Jules looked over his shoulder. Two rough characters were approaching. They looked like enforcer types who weren't interested in making a new friend. Jules sneered. "I think I'm done talking to you."

Raja turned and walked away. The uncertainty of Raja's identity kept any of the three men from following, giving him time to turn the corner, get in his car and drive away. He crossed off the first name on his list, and looked at the rest. The idea he was chasing a wild goose came back. Assuming the drugs were manufactured in Paris, he needed some way to narrow the search. He needed Vinny.

He pressed Vinny on the speed dial. "Vinny?"

"Yeah, boss."

"I met with our first suspect on the drug dealer list. Swell guy. I didn't get much, but he says the designer drugs are manufactured somewhere in Paris. Do we have any way to locate the place? It is most likely a warehouse."

"I'll input some parameters on the ingredients and equipment needed and do a search. Give me thirty minutes."

"No problem there. I'm heading to the next name on the list. It's near the Seine River, off the Champs-Élysées."

"I'll call you as soon as I have any data on the location of the drug factory."

Raja drove south for ten minutes, and after circling the Arc de Triomphe he swung onto the Champs-Élysées going toward the river. The arch was an impressive symbol of French pride representing important military leaders and victorious battles from France's history, and Raja could feel the rich history as he tooled along the axis that eventually arrived at the Louvre Museum complex. Raja loved the Louvre. It was a magnificent place where the creations of a thousand of the greatest artists in man's history lived on.

As he exited from the Champs-Élysées and headed to his next address, reality set in. Unfortunately, where he was going the only culture he would run into was the one based on developing and selling an ever-widening variety of chemical highs, that dark underbelly that exists in every large city, where drugs and death are far too common companions.

Raja found the second address easily. It was located across from a popular bakery, Poppa Maseau's. As Raja walked from a discreet parking spot around the corner, the delectable smell of sweet croissants and other pastries overwhelmed his nose. Realizing the distraction would be too great, he walked into the bakery to buy something to eat. There were shelves covered with pastries of all shapes and colors. Clearly, there was an artist at work. Sure enough, he spotted a small man outfitted in chef gear who was intensely absorbed in his work in the rear. Raja asked the girl behind the counter if he was the baker, but she didn't understand, being light on English. Instead he pointed to a croissant and held up two fingers.

The girl smiled and nodded, and after sprinkling both with powdered sugar, placed two of the indicated pastries in a bag. After paying, Raja began eating one of the croissants while watching through the plate glass window for the dealer to show his face. With so little intelligence on this dealer's patterns, he had no idea when to expect him to arrive. Raja preferred catching him outside on the

street. Going up directly and knocking at a door, especially where illegal activities were involved, was an invitation to get shot. An encounter on the street out in the open was usually less provoking, and most criminals were severely allergic to attracting attention to themselves in public.

Raja practiced his fledgling French on the cute counter girl while he waited and watched.

Within half an hour Raja had eaten both his croissants, and had bought and started on a third. They were amazingly light and delectable. He established that the counter girl's name was Nicole, and his attempts at conversation were successful enough to move their relationship into that awkwardly flirtatious and blushing stage. She was amazingly light and delectable, as well. Things had heated up to the point where Raja was efforting to dial it back to simple friendly conversation when he spotted a large hulking man walking on the opposite side of the street. Andre Golette was an unusually tall Frenchman with a classic Charles de Gaulle nose that stuck out like a hawk's beak from the front of his face. He loped along with a purposeful stride, his open full-length overcoat floating in the breeze he created.

Raja reluctantly dropped his half-eaten croissant into the trash bin and tossed a quick *au revoir* to Nicole, bringing a quizzical frown to her face. The door to the shop opened and closed behind Raja with a bang before she had thought of something to say.

Andre was followed by two smaller men who strained to keep up, like two baby ducks waddling behind a parent. Raja had a bad feeling about accosting this group on the street, preferring to watch and follow discreetly. The three men turned down a small alley in the middle of the block, presumably to reach a rear entrance to the flat.

Raja waited until they were out of sight, then raced across the street and pressed up against the building, staying out of the line of sight from the second floor windows.

Raja decided on a risky ploy. He would pretend to be sent by Jules Masson, the dealer he had already met with, to discuss joining forces with Andre in order to squeeze out some of the other dealers. He would especially mention Leon Julian. Vinny's intel showed that Andre hated Leon over some perceived insult involving Andre's

sister. Raja hoped Andre's greed and hate for Leon would get him over the hurdle of too many questions, and establish enough favor to get information on the location of the drug-making lab. Of course, any number of random factors, such as Jules and Andre having had a recent falling out, could blow the plan up in Raja's face.

Raja approached the front door, not wanting Andre to think he had been watching his arrival. He knocked three times slowly, and stood back, thinking calm thoughts.

The peep hole opened for a couple seconds, then snapped shut.

"I am here to see Andre," said Raja, through the door. "I have a proposal from Jules Masson."

The door opened to a taut chain. "What do you want?" asked half a face peeking out from behind the door.

"I want to see Andre. I have a message from Jules. A business proposal."

The face disappeared for a moment and the door closed. There were muted voices. Then the door reopened wider. "Come in," said the man who now had a whole face and a large gun pointed at Raja's chest. It was one of the ducklings who had arrived with Andre.

Raja stepped through the door without hesitation, thinking *I'm all in*. It was number five of Raja's Rules: Go all in. He knew that once you commit to a course of action, you must follow through one hundred percent. Doubt or hesitation will get you killed.

Once Raja was inside, the man closed the door behind him, never turning the gun away. Without a word, he pressed the barrel against Raja's back and padded him down for weapons. "Straight ahead," he said, pushing with his gun. Although Raja did not carry a weapon, he was skilled at using them. He had discovered that while guns were a decided advantage in a shootout or an all-out battle, in up close and personal situations, having a gun often gave the holder a false sense of security that was a tactical disadvantage. Raja was very proficient at taking a weapon away from someone else if push came to shove. Today he hoped there would be no shoving.

Raja walked into the back room where the man known as Andre the Giant sat alone on a couch. Despite being grossly large, Raja noticed his face had an almost angelic quality that was enhanced by the high tenor voice that should never have come out of such a large

body. The effect was weird, like Andre was channeling the lead in the Vienna Boys' Choir. It didn't help to know that Andre's other nickname was the Angel of Death.

"*Bonjour*, Monsieur—" He waited for Raja to fill in the blank.

"Williams. Raja Williams."

"You say you have a proposal from Jules. How is that possible?"

Raja felt the ice under his feet cracking. *All in*, he thought again. "I have recently begun working for Jules. He would like to strike an alliance with you in the hopes that together you might squeeze out competitors like Leon Julian."

The flash of hatred on Andre's face was obvious, but strangely softened by the angelic voice. "Go on."

"Perhaps together we could even move up the supply chain."

Andre laughed heartily, sounding like a weird combination of man and child. "Take out Bruno? Jules has been sampling too much of his own product."

Raja thought he might have pushed too far. He had to think quickly. "We heard there are investigations ongoing that may put an end to Bruno's reign."

Again the weird laugh. "Police investigations? I think your boss underestimates Bruno and the support he has from the police themselves. That could prove fatal."

Raja was walking farther out on the already thin ice. "Not if we get control of the manufacturing line. Do you know where the drugs are made?"

"Of course. But that does one little good if the police are protecting the operation."

"Would not the police protect the operation if you ran it?"

"I suppose." The hook was set. It was now or never.

"In any event, we would like to do some observation. Call it idle dreaming. Where is the lab?" Raja waited.

"It's the warehouse on Rue Guillot in Montrouge, just outside the city proper. But, you better tell Jules to be careful or Bruno will make your dreams permanent." Andre laughed fiendishly at his own joke until he began coughing and waved Raja out of the room.

Raja wasn't going to argue and left. He had the data he needed and no bullet holes. It's what he called a good day.

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Chapter Eight: Showtime

Vinny took a taxi to the club just after dark on Friday night to start her new waitress job. Cabaret d'Artois was already filling up with customers. She made her way to the dressing room behind the stage. It was a large open room with lots of mirrors, makeup counters and chairs that didn't afford much privacy. Vinny squeezed into the French maid outfit consisting of a low-cut stretch midriff blouse that didn't hide much, and a much too short black skirt. The gartered black stockings were all that kept her from feeling naked. She looked at herself in the full-length mirror and adjusted the outfit as best as she could. She felt like she should be in a low budget porn film.

"*Bonsoir*," said a brunette dancer who had come in and was putting on her costume nearby. "You've got a great pair of legs, honey. Bruno is going to want you up on the stage."

"I'm only a waitress."

"Sure you are. My name is Coco."

"Livinia—Vinny."

"Which is it?"

"Vinny."

"Vinny it is," said Coco, laughing. "You just wait, honey. You've got the legs. But, be careful with Bruno. That is between you and me. Do not tell him I warned you."

"My lips are sealed. He's trouble, you say?" asked Vinny, fishing for more.

Coco looked around, making sure they were alone. "Mean is more like it. Whatever you do, do not try to make nice with him. Believe me, you don't want his kinda rough."

"You're up," said a short redheaded waitress who had just come in and plopped heavily into a chair nearby. She looked at Vinny. "I hope you are ready. They love to pinch."

Vinny had never been prudish about her body, but one hour into her shift and she felt like she needed a shower. The only time she got any relief from the groping customers was during the floor shows that played every two hours. The first show was at ten o'clock, featuring male and female dancers who performed a variety of

mesmerizing choreography set to loud, pulsing music. The finale of each set, always the popular can-can performed by a topless chorus line, held nearly all eyes in the club. Even during the floor show, with everyone else watching the girls on stage, the occasional creep was drunk enough or emboldened enough to make a grab for a waitress's girl parts. Vinny handled most of it like the professional she was, although there were more than a few men in the club that first night who never knew how close they came to having their heads handed to them by one pissed off blond French maid.

The action in the club was too crazy for Vinny to do much investigation while she was on the floor serving drinks. However, Vinny had a break just after the midnight show, giving her time to snoop around. She had noticed waitresses dropping small packets onto tables or into customers hands when serving drinks. That had to be how the drugs were being distributed. She had to find a way to get a few samples. She identified two particular waitresses, Oceane and Freda, and waited until one of them headed to the back on a break. Freda, an athletic brunette who looked like she might have done some bodybuilding, turned in her receipts and headed to the dressing room. Vinny followed and sat down next to her. Vinny began rubbing her head.

Freda took the bait. "What's the matter, *chère*, rough night?"

"My head is killing me, and my feet aren't doing much better," said Vinny. "I don't think I got enough sleep last night. I'm dead tired already."

Freda reached into her apron pocket and tossed a small packet on the table in front of Vinny. "Take one of those. It'll give you the boost you need. But only one, you hear?"

"What is it?"

"Nothing dangerous. You heard of drone?"

"No." Vinny had in fact heard of it. Drone was short for Mephedrone, a nasty variation in the amphetamine class that was popular as a club drug.

"It's a mild form of speed. Just what a girl needs to get through a long night."

Vinny held up the square plastic packet and looked at the contents. There were two pale blue tablets inside. "How much do I

owe you?"

"Never mind. Just keep it to yourself, okay?"

"Sure, thanks." Vinny got up and went into the bathroom. She pocketed the pills and came out a minute later.

"Remember, only one until you get used to them. Give it a little time," said Freda, "and you'll be feeling a lot better."

Vinny nodded and, after adjusting her outfit in the mirror, went back out onto the floor to waitress. Just after one in the morning Bruno sneaked up behind her. "How is your first night, *chérie*?" he whispered intimately in her ear.

Vinny could feel his hot breath, and the hair on her neck stood straight up. She steeled herself and turned around slowly. "So far so good," said Vinny, trying to back away from Bruno. He grabbed her at the elbow and pulled her closer. "I've gotten no complaints from the customers. Let's keep it that way, *ma chérie*." He squeezed hard deliberately and then let go.

"Thank you. I'll do my best," said Vinny. Picturing several ways she might cripple Bruno allowed her to smile while she said it.

Bruno smiled back and walked away.

At four in the morning Vinny's shift finally ended. The bar closed and the customers began thinning out. Her feet felt like lumps of throbbing lead. She had pulled three hundred euros in tips but at a steep cost to her sense of decency. Her estimate of blisters and bruises said that she had one for every single euro she had earned. She sat down and watched the other waitresses and dancers changing into street clothes, too tired to do the same herself.

"First night?" asked a gorgeous redheaded dancer who sat next to her wiping off rouge.

"How could you tell?" Vinny chuckled at hearing the disgust in her own voice. When she looked up the redhead was smiling.

"Antoinette," said the redhead by way of an introduction. "Are you a dancer?"

"Everyone else seems to think so," said Vinny.

"It's how Bruno operates. He doesn't usually hire waitresses. He only hires girls he wants to dance. Thinks he can charm them into it. More like scare them. Although it does pay better. You'll see."

The metro train got Vinny within three blocks of Raja's flat, and she dragged herself the rest of the way on foot. Raja was sound asleep. Vinny was soon to follow.

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Chapter Nine: Margaret Meets Her Captor

When Margaret awoke for the second time, light streamed into the room from a window above her on a side wall. She was alone in a small, plain, bare room with shelves running floor to ceiling on three sides. They were empty. She guessed it might be a large pantry or storage room. The high ceiling and crown molding told her it must be in a substantial, large house. Margaret had no idea how long she had been there. Although it might have been only one day, the empty knot in her stomach said two or three was much more likely. She was ravenous and dehydrated. She twisted her hands painfully, but the straps tying her hands behind her back were not going to come loose. She opened her mouth to shout for help and managed only a strained croak that would never penetrate the solid walls. There was nothing she could do but wait.

Margaret thought about why she was there. It certainly couldn't be for ransom. She and her husband had a moderate amount of savings, but nothing near the prize that she conceived would be necessary to drive someone to commit such an act. Her husband Phillip, bless him, was a passionate man only about his books and studies. He had no political connections and he certainly had no enemies. Other than offending one of the other professor's wives who was being intolerably smug in bragging about her own husband's accomplishments, neither did Margaret.

Margaret couldn't remember how she had gotten into the room, or what she had been doing before she was taken captive. She had a vague recollection of shopping, of walking on the streets of Paris, and then nothing. The void in her memory was disconcerting.

The isolation and complete sense of helplessness had finally driven her down into a wooden lethargy when the door suddenly opened. A man of about thirty stepped into the room. He strode quickly to her side. Margaret felt too apathetic to bother resisting or being afraid. The man reached behind her and began loosening the straps. "*Sacré bleu*," he said, more to himself than to her. Then he turned and walked out of the room. Margaret saw the gun attached to his belt as he spun around. She finished untying the strap and freed her hands, rubbing them to regain proper circulation. The red marks on her wrists felt worse than they actually were.

The man returned with a glass of water and handed it to her. "Don't drink too fast," he advised, but Margaret ignored the advice and began guzzling. She gagged and choked some of the water back up. Margaret peered up at the man like a child who has spilled something and expects punishment. He ignored the spillage and bent down to untie the strap binding her feet together. Margaret had the momentary urge to smash him with the water glass but, recalling the gun he carried, thought better of it.

After releasing her feet, the man stood up and faced Margaret. His forehead wrinkled as he appeared to be mulling something over. His hand twitched nervously near the handle of his gun. "Do not try to escape," he said, emphasizing the order. Then he turned and left as quickly as he had arrived. Margaret heard the door bolt click solidly as he locked her in the room.

A short time later Margaret heard the bolt slap back out of its hole, and the door opened again. This time the man held a portable tray table with food on it. He placed the table down in front of her. "Please take your time," he said, sounding sincere.

"I suppose it wouldn't do you much good if I choked to death, now would it?" said Margaret.

"You don't understand."

"I understand you have brought me here against my will. I demand you release me immediately." Margaret had passed right through the fear stage. "I insist you let me contact my husband."

The man looked annoyed and exasperated. "I'm afraid you are in no position to demand anything. You are lucky to still be alive. For now, that will have to be enough. You will stay here."

Margaret studied her captor's face. She had recently read a book proposing the theory that there are common genetic markers that cause identifiable physical characteristics found in most criminals. Right now she wasn't buying it. He looked normal enough. He could have been one of Phillip's colleagues or the husband of one of her bridge club friends. She supposed the indifference he showed toward her was a product of his criminal nature. She forced herself to remember that he was a person with a father and mother, just like she. "I don't know your name," she said quietly.

"Didier," he said, just as quietly. "Didier Perrin."

Margaret suppressed the panic rising in her chest. Her mind raced. She had watched enough kidnapping thrillers on the BBC to know what that meant. This man had shown her his face and now he had told her his real name. She was sure of it. No matter how decent he appeared, that could only mean one thing. She would not get out of there alive. She tried to make eye contact, but Didier refused. She could cry and beg for her life, but not yet. That would be her last resort.

Didier turned away from her and left the room, bolting the door behind him.

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Chapter Ten: Best Laid Plans

For the first time in months, Vinny slept a whole night's worth. When Vinny woke up it was eleven, and Raja was already gone. A long shower washed away the hands from the previous night's gropings and the long sleep had fully recharged her batteries.

Vinny had collected samples of three different drugs selling at the club that she needed to get analyzed. Using the police lab without knowing how extensive the corruption ran in the police department was out of the question. If the lab was compromised, the word could get back to Bruno and she could end up dead. Instead, Vinny found a small independent lab in the phone book. Offering twice the asking price got her priority service. After dropping her samples at the lab, she spent the rest of the afternoon researching.

She called Raja.

"Vinny, how was your first night?"

"Don't ask. I slept until eleven."

"No way."

"Way."

"That bad, huh?"

"Worse."

"Did you find out anything at the club?"

"I've got samples of three drugs currently being tested. Don't worry, I didn't use the police lab. I also figured out how they launder the drug money. It's ingeniously simple really. The customer gets one dose of a designer drug for use at the club handed to him by a waitress. There is no money exchanged, therefore no 'sale' that takes place. Separately, the booze tab is adjusted to reflect the drugs bought, marked as drinks. Even with forensic accountants going over the club's books, there's no way to connect the money with the drugs."

"Maybe that's what makes the squirrely little accountant so valuable."

"That could be."

"What were the drugs that you turned up at the club?" asked Raja.

"The samples I sent for testing were called Drone, X and Cloud Nine, all designer drugs. That doesn't mean that's what they were."

Many designer drugs were originally created in the pharmaceutical company labs, but shelved in favor of other chemical variations. There are hundreds, maybe thousands of them, that have slight chemical differences from already banned drugs that keep them legal for years. Governments have caught on more recently, but keeping up with the science is next to impossible.”

“Who thinks up the names?”

“Good question. The names make them popular with the kids. Ecstasy, Smile, Cloud Nine, just to name a few. The truth is, often times the actual drug sold under a particular name varies widely. That is what makes these so-called designer drugs especially dangerous. It is buying a pig in a poke. We’ll see what the lab says they actually are. How’s your investigation going?”

“I may have located the drug lab. Of course, having an address and getting the police to do anything about it are two entirely different things. I’m going to find out how much the Paris police want to stop the local drug trade.”

“Sounds like a plan,” said Vinny. “I also found some traffic on our missing woman, Margaret Browning. There is a lot more interest in locating her than I first thought. But, none of it is showing up on official channels.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve got an RF capture program running through satellite that is keyed to any reference to her. Some of the traffic is between local hoods, some between police officers. All on private lines.”

“You can hack all that?”

“Yeah, dude. P-O-C.”

“So, we have the criminals and the cops looking for Mrs. Browning, but on the sly. Why the low profile? And what is so important about a British woman on holiday in Paris?”

“I was hoping you could answer that one, Raj.”

“Okay, Vinny, find out whatever else you can. I’m down at the narcotics division, waiting to see someone. I’ve got a raid to plan. Gotta go.”

The narcotics division was run by a Captain Rochefort, a famous fixture in the Paris police department. He had been running narcotics for over ten years as the one exception to the policy of frequent

assignment changes that was needed to keep the division clean. His integrity was considered beyond reproach. He had initially doubted the information from Raja, but on the recommendation of Inspector Gilliard, he had agreed to meet.

"Bonjour, Monsieur Williams," said a young officer. *"Follow me."* The officer led Raja to an open room full of desks. On one side of the room, a raised platform held a commanding view of the entire room. A tough angular-jawed man with salt and pepper hair sat behind a large wooden desk on top of the platform. He looked to be over fifty, but had the physique and presence of a much younger man. It was Captain Rochefort. He preferred a spot in full view of his men rather than a private office out of sight. He had learned from his days in the military that men do not respect a commander they cannot see. He waved for Raja and the officer to approach using a three-step stair on the side.

"You are the private investigator who brings me the gift of intelligence information on a major drug lab in my city. You are not Greek, are you?" The captain was referring to the Greek gift of the Trojan horse that felled Troy.

"No, sir."

"Good, then let's hear more. Sit down."

Raja outlined the data he had collected so far, including what Vinny had discovered at the Cabaret d'Artois.

"You are American, are you not?"

"Yes."

"And you have been in Paris how long?"

"Less than a week."

"Impressive. If you don't mind, I will need time to talk with my officers to get their input and bring them up to speed. If your information fits with what we already know, then we will proceed."

"Thank you, Captain." Raja knew that was as far as he could push it today. One of the difficulties of crashing the party as an outsider was that any detective work you did, especially if it was good, inevitably made someone in the police department look bad. Raja pegged the Captain as a straight shooter, and decided his best play was to give the Captain enough room to make the idea palatable to his men.

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Chapter Eleven: Dancing Madly Backwards

Another grueling night of the same at Cabaret d'Artois gave Vinny the chance to meet more of the staff. The younger girls were sure they were on their way up in the world, and more than a few of the older ones were on their way down, but they were a decent group for the most part. Corinne Reneau was nowhere to be found. Coco told Vinny that Corinne had been taking time off because of her brother's death. None of the other girls knew much about Corinne aside from her having a personal relationship with Bruno.

Halfway through the night Vinny met the little bald man who had been sitting with Bruno when Raja and Vinny first visited the club. He was hanging around the dressing area when Vinny took her break, carrying a black ledger.

"*Bonsoir*," he said softly. "You are the new girl, yes?"

"Yes." Vinny looked at the strange little man. He seemed like such an unlikely character to be in a Parisian cabaret. But every business needs a bookkeeper. The small black eyes that peered over his reading glasses looked like buttons and gave off no emotion.

"Livinia, is it not?"

"Vinny works for me."

"I like that—Vinny. I am Henri Duchamp." He made no attempt at the usual French embrace and kiss she had come to expect, especially from men.

Vinny assumed he was shy. "What do you do here, Henri?"

"Nothing very important. I keep some of the books." He held up a ledger that she had noticed was a permanent accessory to his wardrobe. "I trust you are getting along with the other girls?"

"Yes. So far they have all been helpful and nice."

"Good. If you need anything, please don't hesitate to ask me. I am more resourceful than I look, and you never know when I may be able to help."

One of the other girls came in and affectionately kissed the top of Henri's head. "I see you have met Henri," she said. "He is a sweetheart. All the girls rub his head for good luck. I swear, it does seem to work. And he is right. He can be helpful. When my twins

were sick and I was short on money, he got me a badly needed raise.”

“Lise, the young ones are doing well, I hope?” asked Henri.

“Healthy and happy, thanks to you,” said Lise, rubbing his head as she left. The girls all liked Henri and treated him as a sort of lucky mascot. Vinny noticed that, although he didn’t seem to mind, he did not appear to take any pleasure from it either. Asking Henri about the club got nothing but vague answers. Apparently his nose was too buried in his books for him to notice what was going on.

Throughout the night, Vinny met and talked to the other waitresses and as many of the dancers as she could to find out more about the club. There were VIP clients who sat in the balcony or had private booths on the side. Vinny watched a wealthy Arab spending money like it was water, or to make a better comparison, oil. She remembered stories she had heard about when the Arab oil industry had first exploded, and there was so much money that small towns would have fifty-gallon drums full of money sitting out in the town square for anyone to use. Here in the club, many of the patrons liked to spread their money around either to attract girls or just to show off. Vinny tried to get closer to the wealthy Arab, but Luc stepped into her line of sight and shook his head slowly, warning her away.

“I thought I might get a big tip,” said Vinny, when she reached Luc. “He looks like he could afford it.”

“That is Sheik Barafa from Saudi Arabia. He is strictly off limits to you, for now. Of course, when you prove yourself to me, I can set you up with some of the other heavy hitters.” He smiled in a way that made it clear how she could prove herself. Luc was trying to follow in Bruno’s footsteps, but Vinny doubted he had the stones or the nasties to pull it off.

“That’s all right. I’ll make do.”

“Suit yourself,” said Luc. “You don’t know what you are missing.”

“I think I do.”

Luc got red-faced and stormed off. Vinny was right about the stones.

Vinny watched one of the courtesans expertly reel in an older man who looked like a conservative business or government type. She danced with him closely until his motor was humming, then pulled

away as if she remembered an appointment she had somewhere else. Seeing his chance about to evaporate, he went for it, offering her money and asking her to accompany him upstairs. She looked at her watch impatiently to up the ante, and he undoubtedly offered her more money to persuade her to make a schedule change. Finally she smiled and took his arm. This was not the type of client who was going to sneak up the back stairway. Instead, he walked slowly and proudly to the main stairs with the girl on his arm, enjoying the rare chance to be seen in public with such a beautiful young woman.

For the most part, the courtesans kept to the third floor. Vinny met one named Yvette during her break. Yvette was arguing with Bruno near the back stairwell to the third floor. Vinny couldn't hear what they were saying but the conversation ended with Bruno slapping the girl in the face. She came into the dressing room crying.

When she sat in front of a mirror to fix her makeup, Vinny could see the red welt rising on her cheek. Bruno had hit her hard. When Yvette noticed Vinny watching, she said, "What are you looking at? Have you never seen a man hit a woman?"

"Sure, but that doesn't make it right," said Vinny.

Yvette tried to laugh but ended up wincing instead. "*C'est la vie, chère, c'est la vie.*"

"What is his problem, anyway?" asked Vinny.

"He thinks I am holding out on the money I earned from a client."

"I thought that was your money?"

"Don't I wish. No, Bruno takes the lion's share. And he always thinks the girls are cheating him."

"Pot—kettle—black," said Vinny, referring to the old adage.

"Huh?"

Vinny thought about attempting a translation. "Never mind." The idiom didn't translate to French easily. Besides, Vinny remembered she was there to dig up information, not to start a revolt among the girls, despite her natural urge to rise to their defense. That would have to come later. Right now she wanted to explore the third floor.

Her chat with Yvette revealed more about the club's operation. Some of the customers were regulars who had specific courtesans that they came to see. The customer would pay for a room on the third floor and then request a certain girl. If available, the girl would

bring them a key and would meet them upstairs at an agreed upon time. The rest was between the girl and the client.

"Are you going upstairs now?" asked Vinny.

Yvette nodded.

"I'll walk you up. I heard there are rooms for rent—just for sleeping. I'm not a courtesan—not that there's anything wrong with that." Vinny looked at Yvette, hoping she was not offended.

Yvette laughed. "That's all right. A courtesan's life is certainly not for everyone. Yes, there are small rooms in the back. Come on, we better hurry. You don't want to take too long a break. Bruno won't like it."

The third floor was primarily the domain of the courtesans, of which there were seven, including Yvette. There were two sets of stairs leading to the third floor, one allowing for discreet access from the rear of the building without being seen going through the club. Although the French had little objection to extra-curricular sexual activity, there were still those who insisted on discretion. Vinny and Yvette passed several rooms where the sounds reaching the hallway made it clear that they were being used. Vinny noted that there was a man posted at the top of the rear stairs.

"This is my room," said Yvette, stopping in front of the door numbered six. She opened the deadbolt with a key. Inside there was a small anteroom followed by a large bedroom that featured soft indirect lights and a large round bed.

"Do you stay here? I mean to sleep."

"Yes, although not all the girls do. The rooms aren't used until evening. Michela and Francoise both like to get away from work when they can. They share a small flat just east of here. They still end up spending a lot of their time here. Those are their rooms." Yvette walked out and pointed to two rooms across the hall. "Come on. I'll show you the regular rooms. I warn you, they aren't much."

At the end of the main hallway were two small wings on either side with doors on the outside wall. Yvette opened one. She was right. With a small daybed, dresser and one chair, each room amounted to little more than a glorified closet. The single tiny window high on the wall gave it the feel of a monk's room in a monastery, or

a jail cell. When Vinny backed out of the room, she bumped into a solid male body.

It was Bruno. "You would be better off with a room like Yvette's," he said. "Of course, that would require—"

"I don't think so," said Vinny, spinning out of Bruno's reach. "I've got to get back downstairs. Thanks for showing me the room, Yvette. I'll think about staying here." Vinny headed for the stairs, hoping not to have caused any trouble for Yvette and not to have raised any suspicions. Remembering the welt under Yvette's eye, Vinny also decided that, when the time was right, Bruno would pay dearly for his brutality.

Chapter Twelve: The Funeral

On Sunday morning Vinny was back to her usual two hours of sleep. Despite her late night at the cabaret she was already up and making breakfast when Raja woke up.

"I still don't understand how you can do that," said Raja.

"What?"

"Sleep two hours and look that good."

"Thanks, Raj." Vinny pretended to curtsy. "It's a gift, and a curse. I spend a lot of time by myself."

"How was your second night at the cabaret?" he asked.

"Better than the first. I guess I'm getting numb to the creeps. Still not much fun. I have shown great restraint, I'll have you know."

Raja knew how Vinny hated men objectifying her. She took it as a personal insult to her very being. The intensity of her objection had its roots in some long-buried family situation that Vinny never talked about. He had seen Vinny drop a large man over a lot less than she had to endure at the cabaret. "Maybe I should go down there to keep an eye on you."

"I'd rather you didn't, Raj."

"As you wish." He knew Vinny could handle herself.

"I would really like to help the other girls. Some of them have it pretty rough."

"All in good time. First we need to find our missing Brit, Mrs. Browning."

"I've found out nothing about her at the club. And the girl Corinne hasn't shown up yet, although there is talk about her having some kind of relationship with Bruno Laurent."

"She will be at the funeral today, I'm sure."

Although both Vinny and Raja attended the funeral, they came separately to maintain Vinny's cover. Raja arrived alone in the orange Porsche. He turned onto the cemetery grounds and followed an asphalt drive lined on both sides with low arching magnolia trees. The effect gave him the slightly claustrophobic feeling of driving through a tunnel until he emerged onto an open plateau with a parking lot.

From there Raja could see people gathering below near an open rectangular hole in the ground. Rows of folding chairs were arranged neatly along both sides and a podium stood at one end of the open hole. A clergyman led a procession of mourners from the chapel that sat on a hill above the grave site. Six pallbearers marched slowly and solemnly behind carrying the coffin containing the dead shopkeeper. A solemn chant accompanied the caravan. For some reason the scene reminded Raja of a time as a boy he sat and watched a trail of ants carting a large dead bug over the dirt toward their anthill home. Raja shook off the odd mental picture and walked directly down the incline toward the grave.

Vinny had come with Yvette, the courtesan who was rapidly becoming her new best buddy at the club. Unbeknownst to Yvette, Vinny had several cameras rigged so she could take pictures of everyone at the funeral for their investigation. One was a bracelet watch she could activate by flexing her right wrist. She hid another one in the mourning corsage she wore on her left wrist. She was already snapping pictures as people arrived when Raja spotted her.

"Who's your girlfriend?" asked Raja in her earpiece.

Vinny ignored him until she could separate from Yvette. "I'm here with my new BFF Yvette. She works at the club."

Raja scanned the hillside, noticing more people arriving from the parking lot. Two he pegged as undercover policemen, and another group of men had the hardened look about them that comes from a life of doing bad things to people, or from paying for the same behind bars. "Seems the shopkeeper was either an extremely popular fellow with a wide circle of friends, or there are others here with the same idea that we have."

"I'll take door number two," said Vinny, flexing her wrist and snapping photos of the men. She pointed to three new arrivals. Inspector Gilliard walked across the grass with two other junior detectives, making no pretense about being cops. The rough-looking men bristled when they saw them.

"This could get interesting," said Raja.

"Doubtful," said Vinny. "Funeral rules." One of those unwritten rules of engagement between cops and robbers was not to engage in outright confrontation in a church or at a funeral. Of course, police

being police and criminals being criminals, there were plenty of massacres perpetrated by one side taking advantage of the expectations of truce. That was not as likely to happen here in France, a mostly Catholic nation, where religion was important, at least on a Sunday.

“Since we are here, I want you to note that when my time comes, I do not want a funeral, or a service,” said Raja. “I want you to throw a kick-ass, everyone-gets-hammered party and celebrate my departure all night. Then toss my ashes into the sea at dawn and get on with your life.”

“Noted, Raj. But, could we skip talk of your death wishes for the moment. Dude, I can’t believe you would try to steal the spotlight from a dead guy.”

“Yeah, what was I thinking.” Raja turned his attention to an attractive woman walking behind the clergyman in the procession. “So, the girl in the black veil. Is that the shopkeeper’s widow?”

“No, he wasn’t married. That’s his sister, Corinne.”

“She looks very upset.”

“Duh.”

“I’m just making an observation.”

“I know what you are doing,” said Vinny. Raja was a sucker for a woman in distress.

The procession reached the grave site and the pallbearers carefully placed the coffin down next to the opening in the ground. When Bruno Laurent arrived with his two hounds, Luc and Marcelo, in tow, Vinny moved far from Raja to prevent jeopardizing her cover. Raja noticed how the shopkeeper’s sister, Corinne, physically recoiled slightly when Bruno approached her. She sat down in the front row of seats between an older woman who also wore a veil and a teenage boy who turned out to be her younger brother. Raja recognized the Catholic vestments of the priest who took his place at the podium and readied himself to begin the final service.

The graveside ceremony was formal and short, ending with the priest saying, “May his soul and the souls of all the faithful departed through the mercy of God rest in peace.”

After the coffin was lowered into the ground, several of those attending tossed dirt on top, including the shopkeeper’s sister

Corinne. Raja waited until she finished her personal goodbye to her brother and walked back to stand with her family while the grave was being filled in.

A small bald man in a neat suit approached the family with his hat in hand and offered condolences.

"Henri Duchamp, from the club," said Vinny in Raja's earpiece.

"Doesn't look like the club type."

"He's just a bookkeeper."

Raja nodded almost imperceptibly.

After several girls from the club paid their respects, two young men in much too flashy suits approached the family.

"Who are they?" asked Raja.

"Just two dorks from the club. Luc and Marcelo."

Finally Raja saw an opportunity to approach Corinne and her family. "I'm sorry for your loss."

"Not as sorry as my brother," said Corinne.

Raja was surprised by her quick retort.

The woman removed her veil. "I don't believe we have met."

When Raja saw her face, he remembered what he loved about French women. Corinne had exquisite alabaster skin, wavy auburn hair and one of those wonderful pouting French mouths that made all the artificially-enhanced ones look ugly and cheap. Today her natural beauty was marred by a red nose and puffy eyes. She was obviously devastated by the death of her brother.

"My name is Raja Williams. I'm a private detective who is investigating the events of your brother's death. I would like you to answer some questions," he said, blunt as usual.

"Not today," she said.

"You may be of great assistance. We can talk tomorrow, then?" Raja was deliberately pushing her. He studied her face.

She showed no sign of guilt, but her grief shifted to fear, not the anger he had expected. "I suspect that might be dangerous and foolish of me."

"I'm only trying to help," he said.

"Then I am certain that is dangerous and foolish of you." She turned and walked away. Two men Raja did not recognize closed rank behind her effectively blocking him from pursuing Corinne.

After paying respects to the grieving family, Raja stepped away. Shortly afterward, Inspector Gilliard approached him. "I heard that the leads I gave you didn't pan out as well as we hoped."

When Raja heard "we," he could barely resist challenging the inspector on the spot. He doubted that Gilliard had wanted anything to come of the leads, but Raja played along. "Bad timing, I suppose. When your anti-narcotics team raided the warehouse the place had already been cleaned out."

"As you Americans say, timing is everything."

"Maybe they were warned," said Raja, unable to hold back. Raja knew someone had tipped off the drug makers to the police raid. Most likely it was the police themselves, maybe even Inspector Gilliard.

The inspector bristled slightly, but suppressed any verbal reaction to the comment. "Better luck next time," he said and walked away.

Another odd piece of information had come from the warehouse raid. Although there were signs in the warehouse of cutting drugs and pressing pills, there were no signs of actual chemical manufacturing. The drugs had not been created there. That would require more investigation.

Raja located Vinny. She was talking to the priest who had delivered the funeral ceremony. Raja circled them until Vinny noticed him, then he tipped his head toward a long table covered with photos and mementos of the dead shopkeeper.

The two of them stood at the table looking at photos until they were alone.

"You suspect Inspector Gilliard?" asked Vinny.

"He hasn't given me a reason not to," said Raja.

"Did you find out anything from the sister?" asked Vinny. "I mean besides the color of her eyes."

"Not really, she was unwilling to talk. Afraid to talk is more accurate. Something has her spooked."

"Or someone. Probably Bruno. He is a beast with the girls at the club."

Raja looked over at Corinne as she consoled an older woman who was probably her mother.

"I've got photos of everyone at the funeral," said Vinny. "I can identify them when I get back to the flat. I've got the day off. I'll have Yvette drop me there."

"They are green," said Raja.

"What are?"

"Corinne's eyes."

"Of course."

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Chapter Thirteen: Raja's Big Bust

Raja spent half of Monday trying to get the narcotics division on the same page with him regarding the intel he had on the drug lab. Because of constant rumors of big shipments or new drug labs, the narcotics officers involved were always competing for police resources. A big bust could make an officer's career, and put him on track for a promotion. Raja's frustration brought him back to Captain Rochefort's desk.

"I see that you are a man on a mission," said the captain. "I respect your passion."

"I just do not want to miss an opportunity to take down a major drug operation."

"Nor do I." The captain called one of his lieutenants and spoke to him privately.

"But Capitaine—"

The captain continued to speak in his ear.

"Yes, but—"

Again, the captain would not be turned away.

Finally the lieutenant said, "Yes, Capitaine," and marched off.

"You will have your raid," said Captain Rochefort. "I have ordered it to be carried out no later than seven tonight. Lieutenant Brevard will fill you in when he returns. If you encounter any delay or problems, you will come and see me directly. The lieutenant knows that, as well. This will happen."

"Thank you."

"I hope I will be thanking you, Monsieur Williams. In any case, it isn't often that a civilian takes such an interest in our police mission." The captain returned to his paperwork.

When Lieutenant Brevard returned, he informed Raja they would raid the warehouse at five o'clock.

"We already have covert surveillance in place at the target site. They have observed no traffic in or out so far. But that doesn't mean much. Often the men working in a drug lab stay there around the clock. Partly to get more drugs made, partly for security reasons. We will find out if your information is right soon enough." The lieutenant did not sound convinced.

"Who will be in charge of the raid?"

"That would be me."

"I would like to go along."

"You can, provided you remain a safe distance away."

"I can do that," said Raja, not sure if he would. Having nothing to do but wait, he called Vinny.

"The raid is on for five," said Raja, sounding like an excited schoolboy.

"Do you want me to come along?" asked Vinny. She liked to be in on the action.

"No way. You have to maintain your cover. I can handle it. I'm going to be watching mostly anyway. These guys seem like pros."

"Well, I would be careful just the same. I've been looking into the police who were shot. All three were on the radar with the internal affairs office of the Gendarmerie. Nothing definite, but there do appear to be some bad police in this town."

Raja walked outside where no one could overhear him. "What about Inspector Guilliard?"

"Funny you should ask. He has been putting money into an account with a different name for some time. It has grown considerably. I'm still tracking down the details. He has had three separate interviews at the Gendarmerie in the last month, as well. I haven't found out about what—yet."

"That's all the more reason I want you to stay undercover. I'll be fine. Good work, Vinny. Keep digging."

"Okay. By the way, I'm going to get a room on the third floor at the club."

"Oh, I see. That's where the courtesans work, isn't it? You might be taking this undercover role a little too far."

"Dream on, Raj. They also rent regular rooms. I think it will help me gain the trust of the staff and find out more."

"If you say so."

"Shut it."

Lieutenant Brevard came out the front door.

"Gotta go," said Raja, ending the call.

"I've been looking for you, Monsieur Williams. Time to go. Come with me."

Raja rode with Brevard and one other junior officer who was assigned to watch Raja and keep him out of trouble. They arrived a couple blocks from the warehouse where Brevard went over the last minute instructions with the two assault squad leaders and set the exact timetable for the raid.

"You are going to stay here," he said to Raja. Despite the urge to object, Raja simply nodded in agreement. The next thirty minutes were excruciating for Raja. He liked to be in the action, front and center. He heard no gunshots, so either the raid was extremely effective, or it was a complete bust.

Raja heard Brevard's voice on the radio to his babysitter.

"Okay, you can come up now. And bring Monsieur Williams." He gave no indication as to what had happened.

The officer drove around to the warehouse entrance and Raja jumped out. Lieutenant Brevard was already outside the building.

"What happened?" asked Raja.

"See for yourself."

Raja went inside and stopped in his tracks. The warehouse was empty. There were several officers following their drug sniffing dogs through the building, but there was no manufacturing equipment, no raw materials or finished drugs, and certainly no people to be found.

Brevard walked up behind Raja. "There was something here. See the bolts on the floor and the fresh scratches in the concrete. Some heavy equipment was moved very recently."

"I can't believe it," said Raja.

"Don't feel bad. It happens sometimes. Bad information."

Raja didn't think that Andre the Giant had given him bad information, at least not deliberately. Someone had warned the drug lab, and Raja was convinced there were cops involved.

"We'll have our forensic team go over the place," said Lieutenant Brevard. "We still may find out something useful. Otherwise, we might as well go. Come on." Brevard put his hand on Raja's shoulder. The drive back to the police station was a quiet one.

Raja didn't know what to say to Captain Rochefort. "I'm really sorry. I thought—"

"We all thought, or we wouldn't have tried the raid. Don't get me wrong, I'm mad as hell. But, the trouble with tracking down drug

dealers is that wherever there are dealers, there are just too many drug users. Like dogs and their fleas. On the positive side, there are always addicts willing to snitch on dealers to keep themselves out of jail. On the negative side, there are just as many who snitch on the police to the dealers to curry favor with and get extra drugs from them. Add to that mix the fact that narcotics police officers have to be rotated often due to the corrupting influence of readily available drugs and large amounts of cash, and it is a lot to expect any organized drug bust to come off as planned. So, Monsieur Williams, it was no shock to me to hear that you burst into an empty warehouse. It comes with the territory. Lieutenant Brevard reported that there were signs that some sort of drug operation had been there, but the who and what were long gone. We are determined to find them."

The captain's words, kind as they were, didn't make Raja feel any better. He didn't know who yet, but he knew someone was having themselves a good laugh at his expense. He never minded having to do the police's job for them. He understood that when he stepped on someone's toes, they resented and resisted his interference. But when the police, entrusted to protect the citizens and their freedom, used their position to help the criminals commit more crime, Raja took it as a personal affront. Since this whole goose chase had started with Inspector Gilliard, Raja decided he would start there. He called Vinny.

"So, am I talking to the new French hero?" she asked.

"Not exactly. The warehouse was empty."

"No freaking way."

"Yep. I'm so far from hero that I doubt I'll get any further help from the police."

"That so totally sucks," said Vinny. "What do you think happened?"

"Dirty cops happened."

"Do you know who?"

"I have an idea. Give me everything you have on Gilliard."

"Here are the deets: Pierre Gilliard, age fifty-one, married fourteen years. One child, Lucien, age twelve. He is an inspector with the National Police working in the major crimes division. He has approximately twelve thousand euros in his personal account in

Paris. However, I traced small amounts he transferred to a bank account in Luxembourg. That account has over two hundred thousand euros in it under the name Margot Cheroux. So far I haven't found the connection, but the money he transferred came from an old personal account in his home town. The account in Luxembourg has grown considerably in the past year. There is no way the money is coming from an inspector's salary."

"So he's dirty?"

"I can't say for sure. It does look that way. He certainly is hiding something."

"Good enough."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to thank him for the leads."

"Raja." Vinny knew how Raja felt about crooked cops.

"Don't worry, mom. I'll be well behaved and keep my manners in. It would help a lot if you could find out more about the internal affairs investigation."

A trip to the police station where Inspector Gilliard worked gave Raja time to cool off and analyze his position. If Gilliard was dirty and trying to throw him off, he could turn that to his advantage. A little detective Aikido might be called for. That's what Raja called backtracking the compulsive attempts by criminals to misdirect attention in order to find what they are hiding.

While Raja was in route to "the 36," as the National police headquarters at 36 Quai des Orfèvres was known, Inspector Gilliard was on another private call.

"I did as you asked ... Yes, the warehouse was empty ... I don't think Monsieur Williams will be getting more help from the Paris police any time soon ... I don't see why we can't get rid of him now. He's more trouble than he's worth ... Okay, if you say so." The inspector ended the call, but was clearly unhappy.

When Raja arrived at the station, he asked for Inspector Gilliard. He was sent back into the inspector's area.

Claude, the inspector's assistant met him. "*Bonjour*, Monsieur Williams. I'm afraid the inspector is not here."

"Perhaps that isn't a bad thing today."

"What do you mean?"

“Did you hear about the so-called bust?”

“Yes, it was unfortunate.”

“Unfortunate. An interesting choice of words. Unfortunate for whom?” Raja could not hide his contempt.

“If you are implying what it seems, I can assure you the inspector is a very good and very honest policeman.”

“I hope so.” Raja left the police station unsatisfied. This case was beginning to feel like a tar baby. The harder he pushed the more he got stuck. The problem was finding someone he could trust. A change in tactics might be required. The Samurai were a noble warrior class in Japan who, because they adhered so strictly to a code of conduct, gained power and respect among the people. So much so, that when out in the countryside, a single Samurai was the law, and his decisions and actions were unquestioned and final. While Raja usually liked working with the local police, maybe it was time to go Samurai.

Chapter Fourteen: The Czechoslovakian Brothers

While Raja was occupied tracking down the drug trade in Paris, Vinny continued to work the club, observing more of the routine. There were the Czech Brothers, at least that is what Vinny called Marcelo and Luc, the two twenty-something macho men she had encountered on her first visit to the club. The pair reminded her of an old Saturday Night Live comedy video in Raja's collection that featured two foreign brothers who thought they were God's gift to American women. It was one of Vinny's favorites. "We are two wild and crazy guys," they would always say. The slick hair and tight pants made Marcelo and Luc look the part. They even wore the over-the-top gold bling, and spent half their time at the club wagging their tongues and other body parts at the girls.

However, both also had specific duties in the hierarchy of the club. Marcelo was Bruno's watchdog, reporting on the courtesans' activities to him. Bruno was a control freak when it came to the women. He had a long list of things the girls must and must not do. Marcelo used that fact to get laid by blackmailing the girls who were unfortunate enough to get caught violating Bruno's rules.

Luc kept track of certain key customers, including any VIPs who frequented the third floor, whether they were there for sex, drugs, or both. Unbeknownst to the clients, he maintained a logbook and collected pictures and other incriminating evidence to be used for extortion or, in the case of government officials, securing protection for their criminal operations. In the short time she had been working at the cabaret, Vinny noted and covertly photoed many significant patrons. Among those were several men she later identified as mid-level bureaucrats in the government, and a handful of wealthy Middle Eastern men.

After meeting most of the waitresses, dancers and courtesans, Vinny concluded that the girls appeared to be willing or unwilling, knowing or unknowing, but relatively minor players in any illegal activities going on at the club. Bruno was the big dog, and he ruled with sadistic intimidation.

Well after midnight Vinny watched Luc go into the room behind the dressing area with his logbook and come out empty-handed.

Later she sneaked into the room on her break and with some thorough searching located a floor safe in the back corner under a table and rug. Seeing she would need the right equipment to get into the safe, she replaced the rug and table.

"I see you have discovered our true value here at the club," said Yvette, when Vinny emerged from the back room.

"Luc's logbook?" asked Vinny.

"Yes."

"What do you know about it?"

"*Chère*, I have been a star in that little book for some time. Once, when Luc came to my room to collect a piece of clothing left behind by a particular politician I had been servicing, I saw him writing in his little book. I followed him down here and watched, as you must have done. I never saw that particular politician in the club again after that night, but I'm certain he heard from someone at the club. Did you know we have never been raided by the police? That isn't due to clean living. There are hidden closed circuit TV cameras in all the third floor rooms. Only video, no sound, but pictures tell all the story Bruno needs. But, not to worry, he couldn't have anything on you. Not yet anyway."

Vinny wasn't sure what to say. She couldn't afford to blow her cover. "I—really—"

Yvette assumed Vinny was afraid of getting caught. "Don't worry. I won't rat on you for snooping around. No reason for me to make trouble. Besides, I'm not sticking around this place that much longer. I met someone."

"That's great," said Vinny, eager to change the subject. "Anyone I know?"

"Doubtful." Yvette smiled. "*Mon poire*."

"Pear?"

"He calls me his peach, I call him my pear. As soon as his divorce is final, we are going to get out of Paris and move to a small farm north of Marseille. I know that sounds naive, but it is for real. We are very much in love."

"No doubt."

"So, do what you will, Vinny. But please, don't get caught. Bruno is very unforgiving."

“No one seems to like him much.”

“For good reason. He is a bastard.”

“I understand he can be rough—”

“He is that—but that’s not what I’m talking about. He—”

Marcelo walked into the dressing area and Yvette dropped the conversation topic.

“How was your shift?” she asked Vinny, trying to sound casual. Once Marcelo was out of earshot, Yvette said, “Bruno is pure evil. I’ll tell you more when we can be sure we are alone.” With that Yvette left the room.

When Vinny went out for her next shift on the floor, there were two groups of Arab men seated in private booths. Luc saw Vinny looking, and approached.

“You see, there is where you could be making some real money. You know how much of a tip that group gives in one night? Why don’t you let me help you, *chérie*?”

“Help is good. It’s the price of your help that I’m not willing to pay.”

“Too bad,” said Luc, already eyeballing another waitress. He approached her and made the same offer, but apparently with better results.

Vinny watched as he fondled the girl’s bottom and sent her to work one of the private booths. One woman’s disgusting pig is another woman’s sugar daddy. *C’est la vie*.

Chapter Fifteen: The Hunt for Mrs. Browning

Despite her picture being plastered all over the Paris news broadcasts, and the combined efforts of two police departments to find her, Margaret Browning had not been located. There had been no ransom demand, no indication of where she had been taken or why. Even Raja and Vinny had as yet found no good leads that directly pointed to her location or to whoever took her.

The sizable reward being offered by the British Embassy got plenty of response, but no results. The police had received the usual overload of sightings, many of them ridiculous, like the man who claimed she was abducted by an alien spaceship that landed on top of the Arc de Triomphe, or the woman who said she looked out her front window one morning and saw the earth simply open up and swallow the missing woman whole. While some reports sounded credible, none had gotten the police any closer to finding the missing woman.

However, the police departments were not the only ones looking for her. The word on the street was that a much larger sum of money than that posted by the British Embassy was being offered in cash to anyone who had information on Mrs. Browning's whereabouts, no questions asked. Despite all the attention, no one had found her.

When the weaselly drug dealer Jules Masson arrived back home after making a drug delivery to one of the clubs in his district, there were two men he didn't expect waiting in the living room of his flat. He recognized Baston and Revel, two French policemen who Jules knew were on the take and working with Bruno. Despite knowing that, Jules didn't like or trust cops, especially these two. He looked around in a panic, but his own two men were nowhere to be seen.

"What are you doing here, Baston? You can't just—"

"We can do whatever we want, Jules. You ought to know that by now. We are the police. Come in. Sit down." Revel dragged Jules over to a chair and roughly forced him to sit.

"Hey, I'm going to tell Bruno. I don't think he will appreciate you coming here to beat me up."

Baston smiled. "Maybe it hasn't gotten through your drug-addled brain yet, but we don't take orders from Bruno. Besides, we aren't

going to beat you up. We just want to know what you told Raja Williams.”

“Who?” asked Jules.

Revel, who held Jules by the top of the shoulders, dug his fingers into the soft tissue where the nerves ran.

Jules winced in pain. “Revel, please.”

“Yes, Revel, don’t hurt him,” said Baston. “He wants to tell us what he knows. Isn’t that right, Jules?”

“Yeah, that’s right,” said the terrified drug dealer, nodding vigorously. “Let me think. You must be talking about the American. I did see him. But I didn’t tell him anything.”

“Jules, you do not want to make Revel angry,” said Baston.

“Okay, okay. He wanted to know where the drugs were made. But I gave him nothing, I swear. I told him to get lost.”

Baston knew that Jules Masson was too scared of his own shadow to play tough with anyone, but he let it go. “What did the American say about the British woman?”

“What woman?”

“Jules,” Baston said threateningly. “Do we have to play like this?”

“I don’t know where she is.”

“If I find out you are lying,” Baston looked up at Revel who squeezed Jules again.

“I’m not lying. The American said he was looking for her, that’s all. I don’t know anything but what I seen on TV. She’s missing, that’s all I know. Why the hell do you care anyway?”

“We just need to find her.”

“I don’t know nothing about her,” insisted Jules.

“Okay, okay,” said Baston, patting Jules gently on the face. “If you hear anything, I better be the first person you call. And you better go easy on the drugs, man. You’ll eat up all your profits.” The two policemen laughed out loud. After opening the closet and showing Jules where they had stashed his missing henchmen, Baston and Revel left the flat.

It took two hours for Jules to calm down, partly due to realizing he had escaped serious damage, and partly due to the third, or was it the fifth, line of coke he had snorted. Jules had lost track. He was beginning to feel pretty lucky when, from the back room where he

sat, he heard a loud knock at the front door. One of his men opened the door for Bruno Laurent. Bruno whispered something to the man who then motioned for his partner to follow, and the two walked out leaving Bruno and Jules alone in the flat.

Jules heard the door shut. "Who was it?" he asked, from the next room.

Bruno stood silently, putting on his black leather gloves.

"I said who—" Jules stopped in his tracks and in mid-sentence when he saw Bruno.

"*Bonsoir*, Jules. I understand you had some visitors earlier today?"

Jules' first impulse was to run, but there was nowhere for him to go. He sighed heavily, knowing his luck had suddenly turned for the worse.

"Where is the woman?" asked Bruno.

"I don't know."

"Where is the woman?" By the time Bruno was done, Jules had spilled everything he knew. He even made some stuff up, but it did him little good. Despite having much greater powers of persuasion, Bruno left having learned little more about the whereabouts of Mrs. Browning than the two cops. He did confirm that Baston and Revel, two of the cops who were supposed to be working for him, were instead working behind his back. He also came to realize that Jules Masson was a weak link in his organization that he could no longer afford. Not one to waste efforts, Bruno decided to make an example of him. It was always good to put a head on a pike once in a while to keep the rest of his people in line. Two days later, the police found Jules Masson behind a bright green dumpster in the alley where his own men had dumped his battered body.

Chapter Sixteen: Out of the Frying Pan

Once Raja had gotten the address for Corinne Reneau, the dead shopkeeper's sister, it was only a matter of time before he found himself standing at her door. Like the proverbial moth to the flame, Raja had an unreasoned desire to help damsels in distress, and the more beautiful they were, the less reason he displayed.

So it was that Raja found himself in the hall outside Corinne's flat, telling himself that she might be the key to solving their case, and several other justifications for being there. When his conscience had been sufficiently massaged into submission he knocked at her door. There was no answer. He knocked again, this time louder. When no one came he tried the door out of habit and found it unlocked. He decided it wouldn't hurt to look around. He let himself in quietly, turning to close the door. When he turned back around, a large round object was rapidly approaching his head. Only Raja's lightning-fast reflexes enabled him to deflect the blow. He sidestepped and grabbed the object, which turned out to be a solid iron skillet, as it went by, and pulled hard, bringing his assailant toward him. Without ever letting go of the pan, he wrapped his other arm around the assailant's throat. After a moment's orientation, he realized it was Corinne and loosened his grip on her neck.

She coughed once, and said, "I thought you were—someone else."

Raja hefted the heavy iron pan. "From the size of this, I'd guess it is someone you are none too fond of."

"I'm frightened," she said. "Please hold me."

Raja put the pan down and wrapped his arms around her. He could feel her trembling and looked into her green eyes. "Who are you afraid of?"

"A bad man."

"Who?"

"Bruno. Bruno Laurent."

"I keep hearing that he is not a very nice man. Why not keep your door locked?"

"I'm afraid it would do no good. Bruno has a key."

When Raja looked at her quizzically, Corinne broke down and told him how she had come to start a relationship with Bruno.

"When I began to waitress at the club, he was kind and generous. Before long he offered me a spot as a dancer. The girls tried to warn me, but I had my own dreams. I thought he—" Her voice trailed off, and she looked at the floor.

"You could change the locks," said Raja.

"That would never stop a man like Bruno." Corinne shivered at the thought of him.

Raja could not stand to see a woman abused by anyone, especially a beast like Bruno Laurent. "It's okay. I'm here now." He held her tightly in his arms and she seemed to melt right into him. As Raja engulfed her universe, he felt the heavy burden of dread and despair that weighed her down. Corinne deserved a better life than one filled with terror, pain and loss. His work on this case might change that for her. Then again, it might not.

However, right now he had priorities. He was smack in the middle of an investigation and he had yet to find Margaret Browning. He had to keep himself on task. Raja remembered a line from a movie spoken by a beat cop at a crime scene to the gathering curious onlookers. "Move along, there is nothing for you to see here." Hoping to follow that advice himself, he made one fatal mistake. When Corinne turned her face up toward his, he took one last look at her perfect French mouth. A mouth he wanted to taste. Anyone would. One kiss couldn't hurt anything.

Raja awoke the next morning alone in Corinne's bed. The delicious combination of chocolate and coffee drifted in from the kitchen. Corinne was humming a light melody. He breathed deeply and savored the scent as he recalled the passion that had erupted between them the night before.

A phone ringing interrupted the dream. He realized it was his phone and looked at the caller ID. It was Vinny.

"Vinny, I found the girl," said Raja, sheepishly.

"No kidding, MaGoo, you've done it again. I suppose I should say well done, on that count. Would I be correct to assume you are still at Corinne's place?"

"Yes, I am."

"Of course. Have you discovered anything beyond the location of her birthmarks?"

"As a matter of fact, I have. She knows who—let me call you back." He ended the call and got dressed.

"I have to go," he said.

"Oh, no," said Corinne. She was standing by the stove in an oversized T-shirt and nothing else. "I had quite a surprise planned for you this morning." She glanced at the chocolate melting in a pot on the stove and smiled.

She was a beautiful girl. Raja walked over to her. "I will be back," he promised, kissing her gently on the lips.

Corinne held him tightly, and he waited until she let go.

"I have to work," he said.

"Yes, your case, I know."

"Can I see you later?"

"I will be here," said Corinne. "I'm not ready to go back to work."

Raja didn't know exactly how Corinne fit into his case, or even if she did, but he was convinced that, rather than a player, she was more a victim of circumstance. Around Bruno there were far too many of those.

On the way back to his flat, Raja began to get some perspective on his new situation with Corinne. He was reminded of one of his rules of investigation: Don't sleep with the client, and its corollary, don't sleep with the suspect. Those two simple ideas alone could prevent most of the worst entanglements a private investigator could get himself into on a case. So much for closing the barn door now. Vinny was going to read him the riot act when he got home.

When Raja walked into the flat, he was prepared for the verbal assault he knew was coming. Vinny was busy at her computer and did not even look up. She wasn't going to make it easy for him. He preferred the frontal assault. Much like quickly tearing off a band aid, it hurt for a moment but then was over. Now he was stuck with the whole thing just hanging there over him. She was good.

"Hey Vinny," he said.

"Hey Raj," said Vinny. As far as Vinny was concerned, Raja Williams was the kindest, most ethical, and most caring person she had ever known. He was not without his flaws, and Vinny made

certain to tease him about those as often as possible. However, she also knew he had a blind spot with the ladies that he wasn't ready to deal with. Not yet, at least. So she decided to say nothing. It was better that way. For now. For him.

"So, any luck on the research?" he asked.

"Oh, yeah. I am rockin' the Buddha. I found out that the club is listed under a corporate ownership that runs through several jurisdictions around the globe. I don't know where it ends yet. However, I did find out that the antique shop that appeared to be owned by Corinne Reneau is only on paper. I found a separate legal filing in another jurisdiction that signed over a controlling interest to the same corporation that owns the club."

"So we have our nexus. Who ultimately owns the corporation and what does it mean?"

"I-D-K. But I am working on it."

The possibility that Corinne might not be involved in any of the criminal activities they had uncovered brought much needed relief to Raja. Otherwise, he was heading for trouble.

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Chapter Seventeen: Streetwalker

After spending hours trying to get more files on the policemen under investigation by computer, Vinny gave up. She went to the club to rent one of the rooms. The bartender told her that Marcelo handled the rooms.

"You want a room upstairs?" asked Marcelo.

"A little one. Just for sleeping." Vinny wanted to cut off any opportunity for Marcelo to make his usual lewd comments. It didn't work.

When they got to the third floor, he made his pitch. "*Chérie*, you have all the right equipment to make good use of a courtesan's room." He stopped in front of the door marked with a brass five. "Why don't you let me show you how easy it can be?"

"In your dreams," said Vinny.

"You are already there," he said, smiling.

"Eeww, gross. Just show me the room I asked for."

"*C'est la vie*," said Marcelo. He walked to the end of the hall and around the corner with Vinny following. Using one of a pair of keys he opened a door. It was one of the tiny closet-rooms Vinny had seen before.

"This will do," she said.

"Your choice," said Marcelo, shrugging. He took one key off the ring and was going to keep the other.

"I want the other one, too," said Vinny, taking the second key from his hand. "And if there is another key, I suggest you don't try using it. It would be a grave mistake."

Marcelo smiled. "You share the bathroom at the end of the hall." He pointed to his right. "Towels and sheets are in the bathroom closet."

Vinny went inside her room and closed the door. She had nothing against aggressive men, in fact sometimes they could be a lot of fun. But, she could smell a male chauvinist a mile away. And to Vinny, that was a very bad stink.

Vinny had to get into the police files, and she wasn't going to do it over the internet. Their system was too archaic. Most of it wasn't even hooked up to the internet. She would have to get inside the

police station to access their system. She smiled. There was one surefire way for her to get inside the station. She would have to get herself arrested.

While the private practice of prostitution was legal, solicitation on the street was not. The recent crackdown in Paris should make getting arrested a piece of cake. The question was what to wear. The clothes make the hooker. The French maid outfit she wore to waitress was too outrageous. Her street clothes were too Vinny. She needed to go shopping. Yvette would know where to go.

Vinny walked down the third floor hall to Yvette's room. She was about to knock, when she heard voices inside. One of them was a man. It was too early for a client from the club. Vinny pressed her ear to the door. She couldn't make out the words but it sounded like an argument. If Bruno hurt Yvette again, Vinny was not going to let it go. The voices calmed. The argument was over. Vinny tiptoed back down the hallway and took up a position where she could peek around the corner and watch. A few minutes later the door opened and the voices got loud enough for her to hear.

"I'm sorry, Yvette. You know how I feel about you being here."

"Yes, but it is better if we wait until we are ready to go."

"It won't be long, I promise," said the man. "Then we will be set for good." He embraced Yvette, kissed her and then brushed back her hair while he looked at her with admiration.

That's when Vinny recognized who the man was. It was Inspector Gilliard from the Paris police. Vinny turned away slowly behind the wall, mouthing the letters O-M-G. She peeked again and saw the inspector walking to the rear stairwell that led out the back of the cabaret. Vinny hurried back to her room. This was big. Huge. Ginormous. She had to tell Raja now.

"Yeah, Vinny. What's up?"

"You'll never guess who just left the cabaret after visiting one of the girls."

"No, I won't."

"Come on, try."

"Inspector Gilliard."

"Bam shizzaam. How do you do that?"

"No way. That was right? I WAS just guessing."

“Right on the money. That’s not all. He is the mysterious boyfriend Yvette has been talking about. The one she is planning a trip with. I heard him say they would be all set soon.”

“The inspector must be expecting a windfall. Do you think he’s working with Bruno?”

“I-D-K.”

“We had better find out.”

“Okay, boss. Right now I’m going to go clothes shopping with Yvette. I’ll see what I can learn from her.”

“Shopping? That sounds like your kind of assignment. And I’m out here slaving away.”

“I’m only going to find an outfit to get arrested in.”

“That I’d pay to see.”

“You don’t have enough money. I’d better go.”

“Keep me in the loop.”

“Always.” This time Vinny knocked on Yvette’s door and asked her where to go shopping for clothes.

“I haven’t been shopping for weeks. I’ll take you myself,” said Yvette, excited to go on an outing.

They drove to the shopping district and got out of the car. “So what exactly are you looking for?” asked Yvette.

“Wild, hip, young, hot,” said Vinny. “Take your pick.”

“No formal gowns then?”

“Nope.”

“Okay, follow me.” Yvette led them down a small street with boutiques on both sides and stopped in front of one with the sign that read Chat Qui Rit. It meant the laughing cat.

“You want young and hot, then this is the place,” said Yvette.

After looking around inside, Vinny began trying on tops and skirts. When she found a combo she liked, she modeled the outfit for Yvette.

“I hate to say this, considering my profession, but you look like a streetwalker.”

“Great. That’s exactly the look I was going for.” Both Vinny and Yvette laughed out loud. “Come on, what else will I need to complete the look?” asked Vinny. She tried on a scarf.

“Way too conservative. You need flashy. Maybe something with feathers or sparkles.” Yvette held up a red boa. “And we need makeup if you want to get this right.”

Although they were becoming fast friends, Vinny had no luck getting any more out of Yvette about Inspector Gilliard besides the fact the two had been dating for six months and were planning to leave Paris in the not-too-distant future. Yvette was obviously trying to keep the relationship quiet. However, the two girls did have fun getting Vinny’s look just right for a Parisian streetwalker. By the time they were done Vinny had nailed the part. Yvette had no idea what she was up to. Vinny asked the clerk to wrap up the clothes she had worn into the store so she could wear her new outfit. As soon as she got outside, she was turning heads. The girls laughed at the rubbernecking men.

“You are not going to have any trouble attracting attention, if that’s what you want to do,” said Yvette. She drove them back toward the club. “You know, Vinny, I’ve had more fun today than I have in a long time. Why don’t we go up to my room? I’ve got a bottle of Beaujolais I’ve been saving. We can drink some wine and I’ll tell you stories from my adventures at the club that will make you laugh so hard you will pee yourself.”

“Love to, Yvette, but I can’t tonight. I have a date with destiny. Drop me off at the Hotel du Mont Blanc, will ya?”

Although Yvette was confused, she knew every girl had her secrets, and did as Vinny requested.

Vinny waited until Yvette drove off and was out of sight. Instead of going into the hotel, she walked up to Boulevard Saint-Michel, a main artery where she would more likely be seen. Recalling an old film noir movie she had seen, Vinny spotted a conspicuous street lamp and struck a provocative pose underneath. It didn’t take long for the first car to pull over.

“*Chérie*, come with me,” said a smiling young man in a black Citroen.

Vinny told him to get lost, and he shrugged and drove away.

An older man pulled over and said only, “*Bonsoir*,” and began licking his lips compulsively while ogling Vinny.

Vinny shook her head and waved him off, feeling disgusted. Where were the police when you needed them?

She got her wish a few minutes later when a small police van pulled over twenty yards up from her spot. Another car had stopped for Vinny, and she made a show of walking over to talk to the driver. The man leered at her half-exposed breasts.

Before he could say anything, Vinny said, "Dude, if you can break away for a second, you might want to look up the street."

The man did, and when he saw a policeman getting out of the police van, he sped away nearly running over Vinny's foot in the process. She shouted and shook her hand angrily, until she saw she had the attention of the policeman, and then she stepped back onto the sidewalk and waited.

The policeman strolled up to her in no apparent hurry. "You know we are cracking down on the girls out here. Even the pretty ones." He smiled.

Vinny realized he was simply flirting and might not even arrest her. She had to do something. She waited until the policeman got close enough and then kicked him hard in the leg and turned and removed her shoes as if preparing to run.

It gave the policeman plenty of time to recover and grab her arm. "Hold it right there," he said, no longer smiling or flirting. "You are going to come with me. I'm placing you under arrest."

It was the first time Vinny was happy to hear those words. She smiled to herself briefly, but made a tough face when she turned to face the policeman. "Come on, a girl has to make a living, doesn't she?" she said, pretending to struggle.

"I will handcuff you if you insist on giving me trouble."

"I bet you would like that, wouldn't you?" said Vinny.

"Come along." He dragged her toward the police van where a second policeman was waiting. He was older and appeared to be the senior of the pair.

"What have we got here, Ben?" He looked Vinny up and down. "You sure you want to take her in?"

"Yes. She assaulted me. I think I'm bleeding."

The older policeman laughed. "She doesn't look too dangerous to me. Seems like a shame to arrest such a pretty girl."

"I wouldn't get too close if I were you, sir," said Ben.

"You wouldn't hurt me would you, *ma chère*?"

"Nope," said Vinny, smiling pleasantly.

"See?" said the senior officer.

That only made Ben more determined to arrest her, just as Vinny hoped it would. He opened the back of the van and pointed for her to get in.

When the two officers were in front, the older one said, "Okay, Ben, but you get to do all the paperwork." He winked at Vinny through the screen window.

When they arrived at the police station, Vinny noted all the computer terminals available as she was taken into custody and booked for solicitation. She gave her real name, knowing she wouldn't be in the system. It was one of the benefits of being a hacker with her level of skills. She could erase any record in nearly any computer system. Ben took her into the back where they had holding cells, putting her in one with another woman.

Vinny found out the mousy little woman's name was Celeste. She had been picked up for shoplifting. The dark circles under her eyes and excessive nervousness meant she was probably an addict who was already in withdrawal from whatever she was on.

Vinny had run into her first problem. She had to get into a cell by herself. When one of the policemen walked by, Vinny stopped him.

"Look here, officer. This woman is withdrawing from something. She doesn't look well. She should have medical attention before it gets bad."

The policeman looked at Celeste. "There is nothing I can do. Either she should not take drugs, or she should not get arrested. *C'est la vie*." He shrugged and walked away.

Vinny needed to get herself isolated. Just then two policemen came down the hall on either side of a rather large woman who was swearing at the both of them and struggling. When they shoved her into the cell with Vinny and Celeste, Vinny noticed that one of the policemen had a scratch on his cheek and the other was flushed from exertion and his shirt tail was pulled out. The woman scowled and gave them the finger as they walked away.

Vinny decided this woman would do nicely. As soon as she caught the woman's eye, Vinny mocked up the most hostile tone she could, and said, "What are you looking at?"

The woman glared, but seeing Vinny's slender frame, chuckled and did nothing.

"I'm talking to you, you big oaf," said Vinny. "The ugly cell is down the hall."

The woman sneered hatefully, then stormed at Vinny like an angry bear, rearing back a huge ham of a fist to bash Vinny senseless. Although the woman outweighed her by at least sixty pounds, she was no match for Vinny. One lightning-fast blow from the heel of Vinny's hand to the woman's nose sent her staggering backward and then a second later blood began to pour. Mousy Celeste screamed at the top of her lungs, and before the large woman could recover, two policemen had arrived at the cell.

Celeste pointed at Vinny. "She started it. Sh-she's crazy. Get me out of here."

Vinny just stood there with her hands on her hips and smiled.

After assessing the situation, one of the policemen opened the cell while the other stood ready with his baton drawn. Celeste tried to bolt.

"You stay," said the policeman, catching her and pushing her back with his baton. "You come with me," he said to Vinny, who stepped out compliantly. The other officer escorted her around the corner and down a narrow hall to a row of small empty cells. After putting her inside one, he punched a keypad and the cell's lock engaged.

No one had searched Vinny very thoroughly. Perhaps due to a shortage of female officers, or perhaps because Vinny's skimpy outfit didn't have a lot of hiding places. She waited long enough to make sure she would not be disturbed, and then pulled out a small device she had strapped to her upper thigh. It was a custom RF decoder she had created for her plan. The individual cells had keypads, but the security system had an overriding electronic RF signal to lock down the whole place in an emergency. Of course, Vinny could make that work both ways.

Five minutes later she had the security code for her cell and overrode the door lock, freeing herself. As she sneaked along the

hallway she heard voices and ducked into the first open door she could find. It turned out to be a cleaning supply closet. Vinny left the door cracked enough for her to see and hear. Two officers talking about a case went by and turned down a hall leading to the evidence room. Vinny slipped out of the closet and hurried down the hall to a small empty office she had seen on the way in marked Comptabilité. It was the accounting office. She went inside and closed the door behind her.

A computer terminal sat on the small desk. The finance records would definitely be on a closed internal system. Vinny hoped it would also get her into the server where the case files were kept. Sitting at the computer keyboard on the desk, she pulled up a screen with code. The system was an antique in computer years, but she knew it well. After calling up a page with folders, she clicked on open investigations, and got a pop-up security screen requiring a password. The device she brought could do a random entry search, but repeated password tries would likely lock her out and trigger an alarm. She pulled up another system screen and typed code. Vinny knew where there would be a record in the memory cache of recent actions. Once she found the file she was looking for, she hacked the password in less than a minute. Going back to the pop-up security screen, she typed the password, and was in. After downloading the two case files she wanted onto a flash drive, she searched for other internal traffic, keying for Inspector Gilliard and Margaret Browning. She downloaded the results, and logged off the system, then she erased all evidence of her activities. The whole thing had taken only ten minutes. Vinny strapped the device and flash drive back to her thigh and readied to leave.

A woman's voice got loud right outside the door, and the doorknob moved slightly. Someone was about to enter. Vinny rushed over and pulled open the door from her side, and looking confused, said, "This isn't the bathroom."

The accounts officer stood there with her hand in the air and her mouth open, but said nothing.

Vinny said, "Excuse me," and hurried past her and down the hall toward the front. She was planning to simply walk right out through the front door when something stopped her in her tracks. Straight

ahead talking to one of the policemen was Bruno Laurent, the club manager. She ducked back into the hallway and listened. When she heard her name she knew she was in trouble.

Vinny hurried back to her cell, going inside. She heard Bruno and the officer coming down the hall. She had to get the door locked before they got there. Fumbling with the decoder, she finally found the code for the lock. The press of a button engaged the lock just before the two men appeared. She strapped the device to her thigh and dropped her skirt to hide it just as Bruno stepped into view.

“Beautiful as an angel, *chérie*. But always the devil, as well. I heard of your predicament, and came to get you out. I told the officer it was a misunderstanding, and that you worked for me as a waitress.”

Vinny knew right then there were police on Bruno’s payroll. It was the only way he could have found out about her arrest so fast. She had what she came for, so she played along. “Yes, a terrible mistake. It was kind of you to come help me.” Vinny knew kindness was not a characteristic that described Bruno, and hoped her cover was not blown.

The policeman opened the cell and Bruno took Vinny firmly by the arm. “Come along,” said Bruno squeezing harder than he had to. “Do you need me to sign any paperwork?” he asked.

“No, I’ll take care of it,” said the policeman, and just like that Bruno and Vinny walked out of the station.

Vinny was still not sure if her cover was blown, but played it cool, waiting to see what Bruno would do next.

“As you can see, *chérie*, I do take care of my girls. But, you do not want to try to work the streets of Paris alone. It can be a very dangerous place. The next time won’t go as well, I promise you. Do you understand?”

“Yes. You’ve made your point.”

“Good. Then you can find your way back to the club. I have other business and you have made me late.” He squeezed her arm again for good measure, then let go and walked away.

Relieved to be free of Bruno, Vinny began walking to the Metro, but after enduring several honks and cat-whistles, decided she would take a cab. No sense stirring up the natives.

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Chapter Eighteen: Sexual Healing

While Vinny was busy on her escapade into and out of police custody, Raja went back to see Corinne as he had promised. During their first night together Raja had been especially gentle. In fact, although they had made love, he had held her quietly in his arms much of the night. Her recent abuses at the hands of Bruno were fresh wounds that needed healing. He knew she was making progress when he knocked and this time Corinne greeted him without weapon in hand.

Raja held out a single white rose.

"Raja, it's beautiful." Corinne kissed him on the cheek and took his arm, walking him into the dining room. There she had set out a romantic dinner for the two of them.

"I take it we are staying in tonight," said Raja.

"Yes, if you don't mind." She smiled coyly.

Of course, Raja didn't. He was infatuated with her vulnerable charm.

"I thought we could get to know each other better," said Corinne, pulling him over to the sofa in the living room. "We can sit and talk while the duck is cooking."

"Duck?"

"Yes, Canard à l'Orange. It is a recipe my mother taught me. I hope you will like it." If Corinne made it, there was zero chance Raja wouldn't like it.

"Smells wonderful. What do you want to talk about?" he asked.

"I want to explain about my situation with Bruno."

"Corinne, that is not necessary."

"I know." Corinne looked at the floor.

Raja realized that it would help her to talk about it. "Yes, I guess I have been curious. Please tell me."

"Well, when I met him, I really thought he was a different person. A decent person. When I first came to the cabaret, he seemed so helpful. When he offered me a chance to dance, that dream of mine was finally happening. I guess I fell for him." Corinne's eyes stayed on the floor. Raja could see the shame on her face.

"That's understandable," he said. "Go on."

“Things went downhill pretty fast.” Corinne stared out into space and then shivered compulsively. “He is a brutal man. I tried to break it off, but Bruno is not one who takes no for an answer. That’s why I was so frightened when you came to my flat the first time.”

“Uh-huh.”

“He forced himself—” Corinne began to choke up. “He raped me.” The tears flowed freely. “I’m so sorry.”

Raja held her hand and let her cry on his shoulder for a long time. Finally he said gently, “We better get a towel.”

Corinne laughed, nervously at first, then she cried a bit more and finally had a full blown belly laugh. “I don’t know why I’m laughing. It just seems so funny now.”

“Look what you’ve done to my shirt,” said Raja, pointing to a large wet spot.

That made Corinne laugh harder, and she laughed until the whole subject seemed unimportant. “I better check on the duck. It might be ready.” She went to the kitchen.

“It certainly smells ready to eat,” said Raja.

Nothing more was said about Bruno. Over a romantic dinner they talked about trivial details from their lives, as lovers sometimes do.

“Before I was born, my mother had been expecting a girl,” said Raja. “The island doctor was a hoodoo man who was supposed to know such things. My mother called me Regina during the entire pregnancy. When I popped out and surprised her, she was casting around for a name. She suggested the obvious, Reginald, as the male version of Regina, but my father had an uncle by that name whom he absolutely hated. He looked up at an old bottle of molasses sitting on the shelf. It was a keepsake from the family company. The label read Rajah Molasses—Fit for a King. And so I had my name.”

“I’m really glad you were not a girl.”

“Yes, it worked out well.” He smiled.

Corinne talked about growing up in the Rhone Alps region of France close to the Swiss border and how she dreamed of coming to Paris and becoming a dancer. “I must have watched *An American in Paris* a hundred times. I so wanted to be Leslie Carron and dance with Gene Kelly.”

“I can’t compete with that. On the dance floor, my feet have a mind of their own. And they are not inclined to talk to each other.”

That night they made love again and Raja remained as gentle as he had been the night before. But, this time Corinne was aggressive and free in her lovemaking. Her eyes had a fire that burnt away the sadness that had been there the night before. By the time they fell asleep, the morning light was already peeking into the bedroom window.

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Chapter Nineteen: No Means No

Vinny spent the day going through the files she had copied from the police station. Although there was definitely evidence of small time corruption in the police department, there was one file that talked about major arms and drug dealing, both indicating that there had to be corruption higher up in government circles. Someone had tried to delete all copies of that file. Vinny only found it because a copy had ended up in the accounting backup by mistake. That's the problem when an organization has to investigate its own corruption. Like a snake trying to eat its own tail, it doesn't go down very easily.

Another detail that came out of Vinny's new research was the repeated mention of someone called the Scorpion. No other name, just the Scorpion. He was supposed to be some kind of major international crime figure, but one who had never been specifically identified. From what Vinny could gather, most of the investigation reports had concluded that the Scorpion was a rumor, merely an urban legend. Vinny wondered what Raja would have to say about that. She couldn't wait to tell him. That is, if she could pull him away from his new girlfriend. Raja was so predictable when it came to women. Too bad he couldn't see it himself. Another phone call to him got Vinny nothing but his voice mail.

Later Vinny went to see Yvette on the third floor. There was still the matter of Inspector Gilliard, and his connection with this whole mess. Maybe he was this mysterious Scorpion. That would be rich. A police inspector. More likely it was someone like Bruno. When she stopped outside Yvette's room, Vinny heard the sound of crying coming from inside. When she knocked, Yvette opened the door. Yvette looked scared, but she wasn't the one crying.

"What's going on?" asked Vinny.

"Come on in," said Yvette, looking up and down the hall to make sure no one else was there. Sitting on the bed was a girl who looked young, maybe sixteen years old. Her eyes were swollen and there were marks and bruises on her arms and legs.

Vinny's mothering instinct kicked in. "What the hell happened to her," she asked.

Yvette did not answer immediately.

"Yvette?" said Vinny.

"There is something you don't know about that's been going on at the club," began Yvette.

"No shit, Sherlock," said Vinny. "Dish."

"You have seen the rich Arab men who frequent the club."

"Yes."

"Well, in certain Middle Eastern cultures young white women are considered highly desirable. Historically, there has been a strong demand in some countries for women of European stock to be procured as wives."

"Are we talking about harems?"

"In some cases, yes."

"This girl can't be more than fifteen or sixteen years old."

"That's plenty old in many cultures. Too old in some."

"Gross. Are you kidding me right now?"

"I wish I were. Some of the youngest girls who show up at the club are offered and sold as wives or consorts to wealthy foreign men."

"That's just slavery. That is illegal."

"Not everywhere. And remember, money can buy a lot of privacy. Some of the girls even go willingly with the promise of a good life."

"Some good life, being someone's sex slave. That is just so wrong."

The girl on the bed burst into tears.

"What is your name?" asked Vinny, sitting down and putting her arm around the girl.

"Maggie," the girl managed to say between sobs.

"Don't worry, Maggie, it's going to be all right." Vinny could see the girl was almost in shock. "Lie down and rest for a bit."

Maggie rolled over compliantly. When Vinny got up, Maggie said, "Please don't leave."

"Don't worry, I'm not going anywhere. We'll be right in the next room. Get some rest."

The girl laid her head on the pillow.

Vinny took Yvette out to the small front sitting room. "Even being sold into slavery doesn't explain the bruises. What happened to her, Yvette?"

“Some of the Arab men insist on sleeping with the girls first to ensure they are virgins. Maggie refused.”

“And the bastard beat her?”

“No. He simply rejected her and told Bruno what had happened. Bruno is the one who hurt her for embarrassing him to a client. He raped her as well and told her to get out. He is the bastard. I found her in the hall crying and brought her into my room. She is probably lucky he didn’t kill her.”

“Bruno is not going to be as lucky with me,” said Vinny.

“Please don’t make any trouble,” said the girl who now stood in the doorway.

“Don’t worry, Maggie. Your troubles are officially over,” said Vinny. “We need to get you a place to stay away from here. I know just the place. Yvette, will you let me borrow your car?”

Yvette handed her the keys.

“When I get back we are going to talk,” said Vinny. Vinny helped Maggie clean herself up and then drove her to Raja’s flat.

“You can stay here for the time being. It is completely safe. Do you have family in Paris?”

“No, my parents live in Dijon.”

“What are their names?”

“Please don’t call them. They will be furious.”

“Oh, don’t worry, I won’t. You are going to have to do that. I want to check if they have filed a report with the police. Names?”

“Benjamin and Codette Sarron.”

“Okay then. There is food in the fridge. Help yourself to anything you need. Here’s my number if you need it. And when you feel ready, you should call your family. I promise they won’t be mad.”

“Are you leaving?”

“Yeah, but no sweat. I’ll be back.”

“Please don’t go.” Maggie was panicking.

“I have to work.”

“Couldn’t you call in sick or something? I’m too scared to be alone. Please.” Vinny knew what that felt like. She called in to the bartender at the Cabaret d’Artois, and had him relay to the head waitress that she was too sick to work.

“Bam shizzaam. I’m in for the night.”

“Thank you, so much.”

Vinny set Maggie up in her room. It didn't take long for Maggie to fall asleep. Vinny went out to the living room and called Yvette.

“Maggie is too freaked out for me to leave her alone tonight ... Yes, I already called in sick. Okay if I keep the car until tomorrow? ... Thanks.” Vinny didn't know when yet, or exactly how, but she knew there would be retribution for Bruno. Crimes like his do not go unpunished forever. She would see to that herself, if necessary. And enjoy it. First, she had to find out more about the human trafficking operation. There might be more Maggies when there should not be any.

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Chapter Twenty: Single White Females

Raja had stayed at Corinne's until mid the next morning. When he got back to the flat, Vinny and he sat down to compare notes and plan their next moves. There was still no discussion of Raja's now flowering romance with Corinne, other than the most cursory comments. Vinny brought up what she found on the mysterious Scorpion.

"Besides being mentioned in the French police files, I found more on the Scorpion at Interpol. He even has a file in the CIA. For years, there were rumors that one man controlled several major crime activities that ran through Paris but touched many parts of the world. No one knew for sure who he was, or even whether he was a Frenchman. When spoken of, he was called simply the Scorpion. He got the name because, like scorpions who are photophobic and hunt primarily at night, the Scorpion had not been seen or photographed by anyone. Certainly no one has seen him and lived to tell. Additionally, any competitors who came along to challenge him had a habit of turning up dead with no clues as to who killed them."

"Sounds like a fitting name."

"The police have no specifics on his identity, not even a nationality. After years of trying, most police organizations have decided, at least officially, that the Scorpion is nothing more than a bogeyman conjured up somewhere along the way by some small time hood to frighten his rivals."

"How far back is he mentioned?"

"The first police report was nearly twenty years ago. There have been less in recent years. However, in the criminal underworld, the idea the Scorpion exists has never completely faded. Whenever one of their kind died under even slightly mysterious circumstances, the legend of the Scorpion rises again. I found numerous reports to that effect in police interviews. Foolishly ambitious criminals dreamed of finding and killing him, hoping to take his place as a kingpin crime boss. Those died under mysterious circumstances. Most others pray they will never have to face him."

"So you're telling me that the French police and the National Gendarmerie, not to mention Interpol and the CIA all have files on

this guy and yet they have decided he really doesn't exist?" said Raja. "I don't think so."

Vinny knew Raja would be intrigued. "There are rumors, of course, and there are theories, but not one picture or shred of evidence exists, and not one witness who is alive can testify as to who the Scorpion is or whether he is for real. He's like the anti-celebrity celebrity. A man who is famous, or infamous, as it were, but who doesn't want to get his picture taken or be seen in public."

"That would be refreshing if he weren't reputed to be responsible for more crime and misery than nearly any other man in the last twenty years."

"True dat. I wasn't trying to romanticize him. Well, maybe a little." Vinny had a major rebel streak in her.

"What else?"

This was Vinny's chance to tell Raja about Maggie, who was still sleeping in Vinny's room.

"Last night at the club I came across a girl named Maggie. She was brutally raped by Bruno Laurent."

"Did you report it to the police?"

"I will, in due time."

"Vinny, it's not safe for her to stay there."

"I knew you would agree."

"Vinny. What did you do?"

"Like you said, I couldn't leave her there."

"Vinny."

Just then Vinny's bedroom door opened and a teenage girl in a bra and panties staggered out yawning, and walked into the bathroom across the hall, shutting the door behind her.

"I take it that's your Maggie?" said Raja.

"Yes. I knew you would understand."

"I understand you better get her into some clothes before she sees me and freaks out."

"Right away, boss." Vinny grabbed a pair of jeans and a shirt from her room and after knocking on the bathroom door, took them inside.

When the two came out Raja was pouring a second cup of coffee from the kitchen. It looked like they were going to have a busy day.

Maggie felt compelled to repeat her story to Raja, and he listened patiently. As much as he wanted to get Maggie justice for what had happened to her, he knew Vinny had something else in mind. When Maggie had talked through the whole incident twice and was much less agitated, Raja suggested that she look for something to eat. When Maggie went into the kitchen, Raja looked at Vinny.

“Okay, so there is much more to the story,” Vinny said. “Apparently the club is selling girls to foreign men who are looking for wives—slaves really. Like for harems. Because Maggie refused to sleep with one of the buyers, Bruno beat her up. Bad for business, and all that crap. The point is, this is a human trafficking operation run right out of the club. And the girls are young. Maggie is only sixteen. It’s white slavery, Raj.”

Raja had been on enough crusades of his own to know when Vinny was on one. It is damn hard not to throw yourself full tilt at a problem when human rights are being so grossly violated. In fact, it was a principle Raja tried to follow. One of Raja’s Rules, as Vinny called them. “Which rule would apply here, Vinny?”

“That would be number six: If you see a bad situation, don’t ignore it. Do something about it.”

“Ah yes, good old number six. So, what do we do about it?”

“I have already done some research on the men I have identified from the club. I also crosschecked for other Arabs who have visited Paris more than once over the past year. Two names popped up. One is an elderly man who has a daughter and her family here and who has been coming here for over a decade. I ruled him out. The other one has some sort of import export business run out of Dubai. His name is Yarif Assad.”

“That would give him the means. What about opportunity?”

“Assad has been in Paris every other month bringing a shipment of oriental rugs. I have found no filing indicating that he is shipping anything out of Paris.”

“Good work Vinny. Is he here now?”

“The customs record shows he brought a shipment in last week. According to the French customs official website, the estimate is about three days to clear a shipment through customs this time of year.”

“Where?”

“His company owns a commercial riverboat for the leg between Rouen and Paris. The *Alhambra* is moored upstream on the north side of the Seine near the Port de la Concorde. Three containers were unloaded at Dock 21 for inspection.”

Raja had already decided he would look into the trafficking. But he liked to tease Vinny. “So, I suppose you want me to go all the way down there just to check it out,” he said, dramatically.

“Thanks for volunteering,” said Vinny, cheerfully. “I’ll stay here and do some more research. Maggie can help me.”

“Help you what?” asked Maggie, coming out of the kitchen with a plate full of grapes and cheese.

“I’ll show you later. That looks good. Can we share?”

“It’s your food, Vinny,” said Maggie.

“Actually it’s mine,” said Raja.

Maggie looked nervously at Vinny.

“He’s just kidding. Eat all you want. It comes with the flat, anyway.”

“Do you have any wine?” asked Maggie.

Raja frowned before he remembered where he was. Wine was like Coke to a Paris teenager. You could even buy wine in France at the age of sixteen. “In the pantry.”

“Bam shizzaam. We’ll have a party. After Raja leaves.” Vinny looked at Raja.

“Yes, I was just going,” he said. He knew Vinny was right. After the nightmare Maggie had been through, a little girls-only fun was just what the doctor ordered.

Chapter Twenty-one: Raja and the Rookie

Raja took the details on Assad and his shipment, and drove to the police station. Despite the problems he was having with the police, he wanted to keep them in the loop, if only to find out anything they knew about Assad or white slavery.

The officer at the front desk recognized him. “*Bonjour*, Monsieur Williams. Are you here to see Inspector Gilliard?”

“I’m looking for whoever would handle a human trafficking case.”

“One moment.” The officer made a call. “Someone will be out shortly.”

Raja sat down to wait. He hoped he could find someone more cooperative to help him. That hope evaporated when Inspector Gilliard came out to meet him. He was sure Gilliard wouldn’t normally handle this type of case, but the inspector must have left instructions with the front desk to call him if Raja showed up.

It was clear Gilliard was anything but happy to see Raja. “You are a very determined investigator, Monsieur Williams. Perhaps we should have you on our payroll.”

“I am just trying to help where I can.”

“Come on. Let’s talk in my office,” said Gilliard.

Once in the privacy of the inspector’s office, Raja laid out the details of the ordeal that Maggie had been through.

“How did you get this information?”

Raja wasn’t going to tell anyone about Vinny yet. “It was reported by one of the courtesans at the club. I believe her name is Yvette.” Raja knew that would impinge on the inspector.

Gilliard sat up and got interested. “Where is this young girl now?”

“Not at the club. She is safe, for now, recuperating. However, the situation is much bigger than one girl. What I have stumbled across is an underground slave trade, specializing in finding young women to become wives for wealthy men. I would like help from the police department.”

“What is it you expect us to do?”

“First I’d like any information you have on one Yarif Assad. He is a Dubai businessman who comes here regularly.”

“Is he involved?”

"That's what I am trying to determine. Have you heard of him?"

"No." The inspector made a call. "Claude, can you get me anything we have in the files on Yarif Assad? He's a Middle Eastern businessman."

"I also may need your help with surveillance."

"What makes you think he is involved?"

"He comes to the club regularly. He imports rugs to Paris monthly. That gives him opportunity. Call it an educated guess based on facts." Actually it was a probability algorithm Vinny had done, but he couldn't mention that.

"Pretty vague facts. I can't give you many resources based on that. And we won't be doing any searches, I can assure you. We have our privacy laws here, as well."

"I'm glad to hear it. At this point, I was only planning to do some observation."

"From what I have seen of you so far, Monsieur Williams, I'm not sure you are capable of ONLY observing anything."

"That's why I was hoping you could spare an officer. Someone who could keep an eye on me. Make sure I don't overstep my bounds."

"That is the smartest thing you have said so far." When Claude brought the files on Assad, Gilliard said, "Is Officer Montagne in the station?"

"Yes sir, I just saw him at his desk."

"Send him in here. Okay, let's see what this Assad has been up to." The inspector looked through the file. "He has a clean record personally, although I can't say the same for his ship's captain and some of the crew. That's not unusual for sailors. They don't seem to be able to stay out of trouble. Our terrorist division did flag him and check him out, but he's not currently under watch."

A young officer with short wavy brown hair and blue eyes knocked on the open doorway. "You wanted to see me?"

"Yes, Remy, come in," said Gilliard. "This is Raja Williams, a private investigator from America. He has a lead he is following on a human trafficking operation. If you are not in the middle of another case, I was hoping you could go with him and help."

"He wants you to babysit me," said Raja. "Keep me out of trouble."

“Yes, as you say, babysit. Knowing our laws, Officer Montagne can make sure you do not endanger yourself by violating them.”

“I’m going to the docks in east Paris,” said Raja.

“I know the area. Sure, I could take you,” said Officer Montagne.

“Take this file. It doesn’t have much, but it’s a start.” Gilliard handed the file to the officer. “You can go over it here. I have to go out for a few minutes. I’ll be back.”

Raja looked through the file. Other than showing dates of entry into Paris, which Vinny already had, there wasn’t much. This would have to be an on-the-ground, seat-of-the-pants operation all the way. Raja’s favorite kind.

While Raja and the officer discussed a plan, Gilliard went outside to make a short phone call on his private cell phone. “The American is here again ... No, nothing about the woman. Now he is chasing down a lead on a human trafficking operation. He knows about Assad ... But, he is the bull in the china shop. I don’t know if letting him go is such a good idea. I could stop him ... As you wish.”

When Gilliard returned to his office, Raja was ready to go.

“I’ll have to keep that,” said Gilliard, putting his hand out for the file.

Raja handed it over. “One other thing. Does he have to be dressed like that? We are doing covert observation.”

“Remy, do you have civilian clothes here?”

“Yes, sir. I’ll go change immediately.” Officer Montagne returned quickly, looking more the university student than policeman.

“Okay, Monsieur Williams, let’s get going,” said Montagne, unable to contain his excitement.

“Call me with an update, Remy,” said Gilliard. “Regularly.”

“Yes, sir.” The officer was young, and Raja figured he had not had much chance to work in the field. Although Officer Montagne might not bring much experience, there was a lot to be said for plain old enthusiasm. Raja liked him already.

Chapter Twenty-two: On the Waterfront

"Do you want me to drive?" asked Montagne, as Raja and he walked down the sidewalk outside the police station.

"I'd prefer to take my car, Officer. This way."

"Please, call me Remy."

"Okay, Remy. Call me Raja."

"Great, Raja. Where is your car?"

"Right up here." Raja pointed to the classic orange Porsche parked ahead of them.

"Magnifique!" Remy walked around the sports car, admiring it.

"Remy, meet Napoleon, my 1969 Porsche 911S."

"*Bonjour*, Napoleon." Remy bowed his head.

Raja and Remy drove east across Paris.

"If you don't mind me asking, how did you come to have a car named Napoleon?"

"That's a fair question. I love old sports cars and keep them in different cities around the world. Los Angeles, New York, London, Hong Kong."

"How many do you own?" asked Remy.

"Quite a few. Actually, I've lost count. Anyway, I keep this one garaged just outside Paris near the airport. Napoleon was a small but powerful man who conquered much of the world. This is a small but powerful car that can conquer almost any road. I guess Napoleon seemed appropriate."

"Works for me," said Remy. Something about the officer's enthusiasm reminded Raja of Vinny. He had a feeling she would like this Remy.

"I have a friend I want you to meet," said Raja. "Remind me—later."

"Sure. You are going to want to turn soon. It's coming up—right—there." Remy thought they had missed the entrance, but Raja downshifted and made the turn easily.

"You were right about naming this car. I would love to drive such a vehicle, just once."

Raja smiled. He loved the feel of the road you got from these old sports cars. A half hour of driving got them into an industrial area of

the city where the commercial riverboats docked to unload their shipments. Raja drove across a bridge to get onto the north side of the Seine. Looking down from the bridge, he could see hundreds of containers peppered along the docks. It was not inconceivable that a container of women slipped in without being noticed.

"We need to find Dock 21," said Remy, looking at the paper Raja had given him.

"Piece of cake," said Raja. They cruised slowly along the access road checking numbers.

"There," said Remy, pointing.

Raja pulled over and turned off the car. "Now what?" he asked. "How do we get in?"

"We need to find a customs agent," said Remy. "They have full jurisdiction on the docks. There." He pointed to a man cradling a machine gun who looked like military.

"That's a customs agent?" asked Raja.

"Yes. The unfortunate byproduct of terrorist activity. Many of the agents carry automatic weapons."

"Good thing I didn't try to sneak in."

"I think that is why I'm here. Come on." They walked up to the agent and Remy showed him his badge. "We were tracking a fugitive who may have come down here. We just want to take a quick look."

"Good thinking, Remy."

"I hate lying, but that was the only way we could get onto the dock short of them finding a dead body."

"No need to create one of those," said Raja. He followed Remy who followed the machine gun toting customs agent onto the docks.

"If anyone unauthorized came onto the docks, we would see them," said the agent. "And stop them, with force if necessary." He patted his weapon and did not smile.

Raja looked at the agent. Why was it that governments insisted on putting insanely deadly weapons in the hands of insanely deadly men?

Raja walked toward the edge of the dock weaving through the containers. He was a tiny child lost among a world of giant colorful rectangular building blocks. "I don't know how you could see anyone. Or how you could keep track of all these containers."

"There are surveillance cameras everywhere," said the agent. "And every box gets a coded RF sticker for identification. The stickers are monitored, logged and counted daily. Trust me, nothing and no one gets in or out of this place."

"That is impressive."

"I'll say," said Remy. "Do you really think someone could bring women in and out of here without being seen?"

"No, I don't. But that doesn't mean it isn't happening. Come on, I want to see if we can find the containers Assad left."

The two men walked the rows until Remy found the name *Alhambra* on the side of a container. "Over here."

Raja worked his way around to the voice. It was like a maze. Remy had already located another container with the ship's logo on it. Both kept looking. "Here," they both said at the same time.

"I found another one," said Raja.

"So did I," said Remy. Indeed, they had located a fourth container from the ship. "You must have gotten the wrong number of containers."

"Could be," said Raja. He would have to check with Vinny. "Let's check for any more." A thorough search turned up no more containers with the *Alhambra* logo.

"I have a couple questions for the customs agent." They found him patrolling near the entrance. "So what happens to the containers after they clear customs?" asked Raja.

"Do you see those two cranes?"

Raja shielded his eyes so he could look up at two tall derricks rising above the docks.

"One of those loads the cleared boxes onto a railroad car and they go to the train yard where they are unloaded and distributed by local trucks. Then the trains loop back here and the empties are loaded onto the ships."

"Aren't some containers filled and shipped out again?"

"Not here. These are empties only. And they are checked. The loaded export containers leave from a different dock only after they clear customs inspection."

"What about any leftover containers?"

"What do you mean?"

"When you load the incoming containers onto the railway cars, what happens to the leftover containers?"

"With our tracking system there shouldn't be any. If there were, they would be seized by customs, until the error could be found and corrected. I thought you were looking for a fugitive. Why all the questions?"

"Just curious. You are doing a very good job. Officer Montagne, we should write a commendation on—what was your name?"

"Cartier. Officer Lucas Cartier."

"Make a note," said Raja, as they walked away.

"I work Dock 21," called the agent, as Raja and Remy were leaving.

"They seem to have pretty tight security there. What do you think?" asked Remy.

"It's all about options," said Raja.

"Options?"

"We eliminate as many options as possible and what we are left with has to be the method they are using to transport the girls."

"How do we do that?"

"We start with what we know."

"We know that Assad has unloaded his containers onto the docks."

"Not precise enough."

Remy thought for a few seconds. "We know Assad unloaded four containers onto Dock 21."

"Precisely. We need to check on that with my associate." Raja made a call. "Yeah, it's me," said Raja. "Who else were you expecting? Never mind. I need you to recheck the number of containers logged into customs from the *Alhambra*." Raja waited. "Okay, thanks. I have to go."

Turning to Remy, he said, "My associate double-checked the count and only showed three containers logged in."

"How would he have access to that information, anyway? And who is this associate of yours?"

"How and who are unimportant at the moment. I know it is reliable information. You will have to trust me on that."

"Okay, so what does it mean?"

"It means someone in customs is helping our Mr. Assad. It also means there is a high probability that Assad is bringing something into Paris besides rugs."

"You know all that? I can see why you are so successful as a private detective."

"What makes you think I'm successful?"

"Well, that's what Inspector Gilliard implied."

"What else did he say?"

"Only to watch you closely because I might learn something."

"And that's all?"

"Yes. And, with you owning all the cars and such, I just assumed you were successful."

"You must watch out for assumptions. They often taste like egg."

"Huh?"

"Getting back to our task, make a note. We are going to find out what comes in that fourth container. But first, let's figure out how the women are being taken out of Paris."

"That's easy. They are loaded into an empty container and put back on the ship."

"Remember, the agent we talked to said that all the empties are checked."

"Yes, but you said yourself Assad has help on the inside."

"True, but getting live women back out through customs would require too many people to be in on it. Buying or blackmailing one customs agent is one thing. A whole group is not likely. And, any noise the women made would attract attention. Too many random factors for that to work consistently, which it apparently has been doing to date. I think that Assad has to get the women onto his own boat directly."

"How?"

"That's what we are going to find out. We need a better view."

Raja drove them onto the overpass bridge where they parked. They got out. It was a bird's eye view of the river and the docks.

"This is certainly a better view," said Remy. "What are we looking for?"

"Means and opportunity."

"What do we do?"

“Look.” The two men watched the activities on the river for an hour. They could see all the activities at the docks as well as watch the ships as they sailed off. “Okay what did you see?” asked Raja.

“I saw one riverboat arrive and unload two containers and two more ships leave after picking up two containers apiece.”

“Anything else?”

“The riverboats sailed away without stopping.”

“Good. Anything else?”

“No.”

“Exactly.” Now Raja sounded happy.

“That’s good?”

“Of course. We have eliminated several options. It would be too obvious if a smaller boat were bringing the women out to the larger ships, since that does not routinely happen. There is one thing you did not see when the riverboats left.”

“How would I know what I did not see?”

“Think about what ALL ships require.”

“Crews.”

“Already on the ship.”

“Supplies.”

“Possibly, but they might have enough.”

“What then?”

“Fuel. The departing riverboats must have been fueled before arriving at the dock. That’s where the women are getting on board.”

“That’s brilliant,” said Remy. “The women are already on board when the ship docks to unload its goods. No one would suspect.”

A phone call to Vinny confirmed that the ships refueled first because there was more room to maneuver at an earlier spot in the river.

“Let’s go. We need to see first hand.”

Raja and Remy drove to the refueling station to do observation.

“Just as I thought, there is no customs security here,” said Raja. “Those guards are there to protect the fuel tanks but that’s all. This is where the girls get onto the riverboat.”

Vinny called to report that containers from the *Alhambra* had just been cleared through customs.

Raja and Remy raced back to the docks and resumed their position on the bridge overlooking the operations below. They watched the crane loading containers onto the train cars that sat near the docks. It would be some time before they got to the four containers from the *Alhambra*.

"Shouldn't we search the containers now before they leave the dock?" asked Remy.

"Could we do that based solely on our deductions?"

"No, we couldn't." Remy was disappointed.

"We also wouldn't know where they are going. We need to track them and determine where that one extra container goes."

As they watched from the bridge, Raja noticed all traffic had stopped coming across. Then he saw the flashing lights of police cars approaching from both sides. Their sirens were off.

"We are about to have company," said Raja.

Remy looked both ways. "That is odd. It looks almost as if they were coming for us."

"You are nearly correct. They are coming for me."

The police cars bearing down on them swerved and stopped blocking the bridge. Several officers got out and trained weapons on Raja and Remy. Two men in gendarme uniforms approached from one side of the bridge.

"I'm a police officer," said Remy, stepping forward and showing his badge. "What's going on here?"

"We know, Officer Montagne. Please stand aside."

"Raja Williams, you are wanted for questioning at the Gendarmerie regarding terrorist activity and espionage."

Raja slipped his car keys to Remy and whispered, "Follow the containers."

"This must be a mistake," said Remy.

"There is no mistake," said the gendarme. "We will take it from here. You can go back to your station."

The second gendarme handcuffed Raja.

"That is completely unnecessary," said Remy. "Raja is here with me, working on a case."

"It's okay, Remy," said Raja. "Looks like you got your wish." He nodded at the orange Porsche. "Take care of Napoleon for me, will

you?"

Remy closed his hand on the keys and nodded blankly, still in shock from the sudden turn of events.

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Chapter Twenty-three: Raja Interrupted

The ride to the Gendarmerie was a stony, quiet one. The two gendarmes made no conversation with Raja or each other. Raja sat in a small metal cage, chained to one side, the epitome of persona non grata. He was a possible terrorist, after all. Raja played along and said nothing to antagonize either of the officers. Tensions in France were running high, especially since the recent overt murders of four French school children and several policemen in Toulouse by a self-professed extremist.

This wasn't the first time Raja had come under scrutiny since 9/11. As a frequent world traveler who made a habit of poking his nose into criminal activity almost everywhere he went, it was par for the course. He never got used to it. The absolute power of a government only becomes real when it is aimed directly at you.

The government van turned into the garage under the building, stopping at a secure entrance. After the gendarmes extracted Raja from the van, they signaled to the man in the guard house who electronically opened the gate. The gendarmes walked Raja through and into the building. Two long hallways and two more electronic checkpoints brought them finally to a row of three small cells somewhere deep inside the building. One gendarme unlocked Raja's cuffs while the other stood guard over the proceedings. After Raja entered the cell, the officer closed the door. It locked with a buzz and a clank. The officer tested the door for good measure and the two men left Raja alone.

No one had spoken during the entire trip, not a good sign. Raja didn't know what falsehoods had been concocted against him, but the timing was certainly suspect. Someone wanted him out of the way. The first person he thought of was Inspector Gilliard.

Raja had no way to contact Vinny, which was probably a good thing for the moment. She got pretty outraged when it came to heavy-handed government actions, and might do something to make his situation worse than it already was. On several previous occasions, he had to talk her out of executing a jailbreak on his behalf.

Of course, if push came to shove, having someone of Vinny's passion and skills in your corner was a very good thing. Right now he even regretted not letting Vinny implant a tiny tracker on him. Although she had been so excited about the idea, it made him feel like a family pet or a prisoner. Vinny had insisted it was only for his protection, and that only she would know the frequency to find him if he got into a jam. Maybe his current situation fit the bill.

For now, Raja simply waited. Having a high international profile and a number of prominent government figures indebted to him was reassuring. He expected that he would be dealt with fairly quickly. At least he hoped so. God help you these days, if you were nobody but a John Q. Citizen. All bets were off for expecting any legal rights since 9/11. It wasn't that there weren't already places where any government could "lose" you if they really wanted to. Now it was just easier. Now you could label a guy a terrorist, and everybody nodded and went about their business while he rotted in a cell.

As the hours ticked past, visions of being locked away in some dank underground cell began to creep into Raja's head. Maybe he wasn't as well connected as he thought. More likely an enemy was better connected. Much later than Raja expected, an officer came and opened his cell.

"Turn around," said the officer. Raja did so, and the gendarme cuffed his hands behind him.

"Is this necessary?" asked Raja.

"It is standard procedure," said the officer. "This way." The officer took him to get fingerprinted and photographed. Another more thorough search turned up nothing of interest.

"I don't suppose asking for legal representation would do any good?"

"You have not been arrested," said the officer. "You are merely being detained."

Raja loved the many ways legal hairs could be split when it came down to it. And the euphemisms. "Why the fingerprinting, if I'm not being arrested?" He knew the answer before it came.

"Standard procedure," said the officer.

Next stop was an interrogation room. The walls were drab green and the floor a dull grey linoleum. Raja was cuffed to a heavy metal

table bolted to the floor in the center of the room. He looked around but there was nothing to see. The room was devoid of decoration. After waiting over an hour, Raja smiled. Maybe they planned to bore him into confessing. When the door finally opened several hours later, Raja perked up until he saw who walked in. It was Captain Milan, the very woman who had kicked him in the teeth the last time he was in the Gendarmerie attempting to get information. The ice queen would have fit right in as an interrogator in one of those old black and white World War II films.

"I see you have managed to find your way back to us, Monsieur Williams."

Raja recalled the last time he had been to the dentist. This was going to be worse. He unclenched his jaw and said, "Yes, Capitaine."

"Do you know why you are here?"

"I'm sure I could come up with something, but I'd rather you just tell me and put me out of my misery."

"I have several reports in front of me. Gun running in Africa. Illegal flights in and out of Afghanistan. An unauthorized armed raid on a labor camp inside a country not favorable to the West. These certainly appear to be serious acts that could be added up to terrorism, depending on one's point of view." Captain Milan paused to let the communication have an effect.

Raja knew exactly what she was talking about, but they were far from acts of terrorism. Nonetheless, it did sound bad, even to him. Knowing he wasn't going to charm his way out of this mess, he estimated his options. A desperate phone call to the right person might work, but he knew he likely wouldn't get one. He needed a plan, something he was sorely lacking at the moment. He had to say something, and opened his mouth to speak.

"I am not finished, Monsieur."

Raja closed his mouth and sighed. Bad just might get worse.

"As I said, these could sum up to terrorist acts from a particular view, which I am quite certain they were meant to do." Again she paused.

Raja said nothing.

"Do you know what is NOT in these reports, Monsieur Williams?"

"No."

“Any reports that are less than five years old. Finding that odd, I made a thorough examination of all the information available on these events. The complete data revealed that, in fact, your actions saved lives. Innocent lives. That is MY view.”

Raja was beginning to warm up to Captain Milan.

“Turn off the recorder,” she said looking at the camera in the corner. The red light went off. “Someone has tried to, how do you Americans say, railroad you. I will not be a party to it. And, I will find out who is behind this action.”

Raja would have bet good money against such a favorable outcome, and lost. Now was certainly no time to complain.

The captain called for the guard. “Uncuff this man. He is cleared to leave on my authority. You are to personally make sure he gets his belongings and gets out the door. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Capitaine,” said the guard, unlocking the handcuffs.

“I would prefer not seeing you in here again, Monsieur Williams, especially under similar circumstances. Remember, you will remain on the terrorist watch list. Fate can be a very fickle mistress.” With that, Captain Milan turned and exited the room.

Not one to tempt the gods, Raja kept his mouth shut and followed the officer until he was clear of the building. Only then did he call Vinny.

Chapter Twenty-four: Remy Plays Detective

Lieutenant Montagne had watched helplessly as the gendarmes loaded Raja into their police van. One by one, the other police cars left the bridge and still Remy had not moved. Finally, after normal traffic was restored on the bridge as if nothing had ever happened, a loud car horn snapped Remy's mind back into gear. There was little he could do about Raja's predicament. Raja Williams was in the hands of the gendarmes now. Even if he wanted to, Remy was in no position to influence the outcome. He was lucky not to have gotten hauled in himself. The gendarmes were all business, especially when it came to terrorism. He probably should go back to the police station, file a report, in triplicate of course, and return to the pile of paperwork that perpetually filled the basket on his desk. That would be expected. That would be the safe thing for him to do.

Remy jingled the keys in his hand. He looked at the sleek orange Porsche sitting on the side of the bridge. On the other hand, he and Raja had done a great job of uncovering a smuggling operation. The opportunity to find out what was in that fourth container and where it was going stood right in front of him. As a policeman, wasn't it his duty to follow such a lead? Remy smiled. And, of course, it would give him the chance to drive that wonderful little car.

Having settled the issue to his satisfaction, Remy positioned himself at a vantage point on the bridge where he could see all the activity on the dock below. He located the spot where they had found the four containers from the *Alhambra*. Remy was fairly certain he knew which ones they were. A large crane was methodically picking up containers and loading them onto railroad flat beds, at a rate of approximately four per hour. He had no way of knowing when the particular four he was interested in would be loaded. He also didn't know which one was carrying contraband. He wished Raja were there.

As the hours rolled by, he realized the planning necessary to do long term surveillance. He had no food, and was afraid to go for any lest he miss something. His stomach was growling loudly. Also, with four containers to follow and only one of him, he had to hope he would be tracking the right one. Again he thought of Raja, assuming

that he would know what to do. Remy thought about calling the station for additional help, but decided against it. With everything that had happened, he might be recalled immediately.

Despite having just met Raja, Remy felt a fierce loyalty to him for several reasons. First, he had learned so much about doing investigation from Raja in such a short time. It was more than he had learned in two months of police training or from his superiors in a year on the job. Second, Raja had given him the opportunity to get out into the field where he longed to be. When Remy joined the police force he never imagined he would be sitting behind a desk shuffling papers. The most important reason was the way Raja treated him as an equal and as a friend. Remy knew that whatever Raja had done, he could not be a terrorist. Maybe breaking this case would help the gendarmes to see that as well. Now it was up to him.

The worst part of doing a lengthy surveillance was needing to go to the bathroom. Remy found nothing useful in the car, and searched unsuccessfully along the edge of the bridge for a suitable container. Not a day went by that Remy didn't see and reluctantly ignore someone who was littering, as he had been instructed to do by his superior. Where were the litterers when you needed them? Finally the moment arrived when he was going to pee, one way or another. There was a small service platform attached just below the outer edge of the bridge. There he would at least be out of sight of the drivers on the bridge. Remy climbed down onto the platform and peed off the side. The wind dispersed the liquid into the air below, and he held to the idea that it was all vaporized long before reaching the ground where some unlucky pedestrian might be walking.

Having relieved himself, Remy settled in for a long night of watching. Just after midnight the crane plucked the first of the *Alhambra* boxes from the dock. As the crane slowly swung the box over the flatbed railroad car, Remy could see the logo on the side. This was it. He had plenty of time to make a plan. From the bridge he could see the train tracks heading off to the south toward the railroad station stockyard where cars and containers were transferred to other trains heading to other cities, or the contents were unloaded onto trucks for local deliveries. He would wait until the train was moving and in route to the stockyard. He had mapped

out a direct route that would get him to the train yard in time to determine what happened to his containers.

Remy waited until all four target containers were loaded before he hopped into the Porsche. When the train finished loading and had begun to move, he drove off the bridge and swung onto the road that ran south near the tracks. The growl of the car's exhaust put a smile on Remy's face. He raced along the dark road to make sure he reached the stockyard first, nearly hitting a delivery truck while peering over toward the rolling train.

The stockyard was a huge expanse with several cranes like the ones on the docks. There was a mishmash of tracks and roads, allowing for railroad cars to be uncoupled and rerouted to other tracks, and for trucks to reach the containers for loading. There was no sign of security. Remy slowed the Porsche to a crawl and rolled silently into the stockyard. He had noted the engine number stenciled on the train coming from the docks—number 564. Most of the stockyard area was dark, with spotlights only lighting up places where men were unloading container contents into trucks. Remy pulled into a shadow and parked to wait. Within minutes he heard the approach of a train. As it passed through a lit area he saw the number 564 on the engine. The train stopped. A half dozen cars were uncoupled from the middle section and routed onto a side spur. The rest of the cars were reconnected, and the train resumed moving. Remy ran across the stockyard to check the containers that remained. They included the four from the *Alhambra*. All but one of the containers were taken off their railroad cars by crane and placed onto a loading dock. The last one remained untouched. Thinking that must be the one with the contraband, Remy made his way closer, staying in the shadows. The car and container sat in the dark. Remy pulled out a small pen light and walked around the car. This was one of the *Alhambra* containers. It had to be the one he was looking for.

Remy made his way back to the Porsche and pulled closer where he had a clear line of sight to the single container. Workmen unloaded the other containers under the bright floodlights of the loading dock, making four piles of what looked like rolled up Oriental carpets. Four delivery trucks pulled up one after the other and the same men loaded each one until the dock was empty. After the

trucks departed, the crew turned off the lights and left the stockyard. Remy watched as two other containers were unloaded at a site several hundred feet away. When the crates had been loaded onto trucks, the workers turned out the lights and left. The stockyard was now quiet and dark.

Remy waited another half hour but nothing happened. Puzzled, Remy got out of the car and made his way to the remaining container car just to double check. The *Alhambra* logo, a pair of camels on either side of a stylized minaret, was clear in the beam of his penlight. The fourth container was still there untouched.

Remy heard the crunch of boots on the train yard gravel from behind him. The sound was not far away. He switched off his pen light and pressed up against the side of the railroad car, just as three men walked by.

"I don't see why you need to unload this now," asked one of the men. "And why the heavy weapons?"

"You are being paid to work the crane, not ask a lot of questions," said another man. Remy could see moonlight reflect off what looked like an automatic weapon. "As I said, my employer wishes to keep a low profile. He has competitors who would like to get their hands on his merchandise. These are rare antiques. Can you work the crane or do I have to find someone else?"

The voices faded as the men moved past the car. Remy heard the sound of the crane motor start up and was about to make a run for better cover when bright light exploded all around the car. He dropped down and rolled underneath.

"Turn that off," said the man with the gun. The light went out. Remy crawled behind one of the large train car wheels and waited while the crane lifted the container and deposited it onto the dark loading dock. A truck pulled up with its headlights off.

Remy sneaked closer and saw the gunman hand the crane operator a thick envelope, presumably a large amount of cash for fifteen minutes work. Three other men efficiently loaded crates from the container into the back of the truck. When they finished, one of them slammed the rear of the truck shut and they climbed into the truck's cab. The man with the weapon walked up to the driver. "I'll follow you to the warehouse," he said, and the truck pulled out.

Remy scrambled back to the Porsche. By the time he got out of the stockyard, the gunman was already ahead of him in a small black Peugeot. Remy followed the cat's eye taillights of the little car at a safe distance. Soon the car was cruising across Paris on the Champs-Élysées. Remy saw the truck just ahead of the Peugeot. Two right turns off the main road put them into a warehouse district outside the city. The plain brick buildings stood in stark contrast to the beautiful monuments seen along the main road that highlighted Paris.

The French had a right to be proud. Paris was a modern European city with more than its share of history and culture. Writers like Descartes, Voltaire and Montesquieu inspired many across the planet, and fueled a push for freedom unparalleled before their time.

What's more, the Louvre controlled more original art than any other public museum in the world. Old King Louis the Fourteenth might have been a pompous ass, but his appreciation for culture knew no bounds. From his reign forward, France had been at the forefront of art and culture through the centuries.

However, the underside of France included a steady underground drug trade that at times fed a large portion of the Western world's illicit market. Made famous as the French Connection in the 1970's, the drug trade waxed and waned in size and visibility, but never disappeared completely. The more recent government push to completely criminalize prostitution had also bred a growing underground for those illicit services that were provided primarily through clubs.

However, the club scene was a glossy layer of thin ice that covered a much deeper and more terrible river of human degradation and waste made up of the heroin and drug trade along with human trafficking and slavery. Most people who think of slavery as something from the distant past are shocked to find out that there are more slaves in the world today than there were at any prior point in history. And since the Taliban were knocked out of power in Afghanistan, the heroin trade has roared back with a vengeance.

Remy hung back until both the truck and the Peugeot had driven into the warehouse through a garage entrance and the door came down quietly behind them. From the outside, the place looked dark

and unoccupied. Remy noticed the windows had all been blacked out.

Now what should he do. He had nothing he could report to the station that would get so much as a search warrant. Nothing but the conclusions of an American detective who was now being held under suspicion of terrorist activity. Remy had to get a look inside. He parked and looked for a way in. A survey of the exterior found one tilt window open. Remy found a small crate in the trash and set it down under the window. Pulling himself up he shined his penlight in. It was a bathroom. With his light in his teeth he managed to wriggle himself through the small window and onto the floor inside without making too much noise.

He listened at the door but heard nothing. Opening the door a crack, he could see he was on the far side of the warehouse away from most of the action. Despite the dark appearance from outside, the interior was well lit and buzzing with activity. The truck was sitting next to a conveyer track of rollers. Several crates were being rolled into a second small room. Remy could not yet see what was in the crates. He worked his way behind a row of stacked boxes and followed along until he was around the back side of the room. He leaned on the outer wall and felt heat coming from inside. Peeking through a rear window he saw that the source of the heat was a high-temperature tunnel oven that was baking ceramic Liberty statues as they moved through on a metal conveyer. At the entrance, a man was taking small packages from one of the crates and stuffing one into the open bottom of each statue. A second man was attaching a ceramic piece to the bottoms and placing the statues on the conveyer. Once baked in the oven the contents would be sealed inside and undetectable. The rolling tunnel oven allowed for precise temperature control so that whatever was inside would not be damaged. Remy had a good idea what that was, but he needed proof. Sneaking around the other side got him behind the truck. He waited until the men walked a crate along the conveyer toward the oven room and swung himself up and into the rear of the truck.

Most of the crates held green ceramic statues. He searched until he found a smaller crate toward the front of the truck. Prying up the lid revealed it was filled with brick shaped packages. There had to be

fifty in the crate. He grabbed one and put it into his jacket pocket. As he worked his way toward the rear he felt the back of the truck flex downward. Someone was climbing up. Remy ducked behind the closest crate, pulling his legs in just as one of the men climbed aboard. Remy held his breath. If he was discovered, he was dead. He felt his heart pounding in his ears and hoped it wasn't as loud as it seemed to him. The man in the truck slid one of the ceramic crates toward the rear edge of the truck.

"Do we need more dope?" the man asked his partner on the ground.

Remy prayed for the only answer that would guarantee he was not found.

"Not yet. We're good. Let me give you a hand." The man jumped down from the truck. The two moved the box onto the rollers.

Remy finally breathed. He stuck his head out and saw the two men walking back toward the oven room, pushing the box between them. He slid out of the truck and worked his way back to the far end of the warehouse, staying low behind a row of stacked boxes. Finding a door that worked, he was back outside with the evidence he needed.

Remy called the station. "This is Officer Remy Montagne. I need to speak to Inspector Gilliard urgently."

The inspector is not here at this time of night. "This is Sergeant Garret. Where the hell have you been, Remy? I have a duty roster that says you have been missing since midday."

"I can explain later. Right now I have an urgent matter. I found a warehouse full of heroin. We need to raid the place now."

"Whoa, there. You're going to have to talk to narcotics. Do they know about this?"

"Thanks, I'll call them." Remy was so excited he forgot that his division didn't even handle drug trafficking cases. He dialed the narcotics division.

"This is Officer Remy Montagne from major crimes. I need to talk to whoever is in charge."

After a long wait, a voice said, "This is Lieutenant Brevard. What's this about?"

"I was on a stakeout with Raja Williams today. We were looking into a smuggling operation at the docks."

"Wait a minute. Raja Williams? The American?"

"Yes."

"This is his idea?"

"Yes. He's the one who figured it out, but then when he got arrested by the gendarmes—"

"Hold on, Officer. You say he got arrested?"

"Yes, but that is not the point. I followed the lead we uncovered and it took me to a warehouse in Courbevoie. This is a major drug smuggling operation and I need backup."

"Okay, slow down. This sounds all too familiar. We tried this once before based on the American detective's information. That turned out to be a colossal waste of time."

Remy had learned one thing from Raja. What's true for you is what you see. "I am standing on the corner of Rue de Minimes and Avenue de l'Europe holding a kilo of heroin from inside the warehouse. Inside the building I saw a crate full of heroin. A lot. We have maybe a couple of hours before the smugglers finish packing up their shipment and are gone. Are you in or not?"

There was a long silence. "Give me the address again. I'll need one hour. Do you know how many men are inside?"

"I counted six. But they are well armed."

"Okay. Stay out of sight until we get there. Don't do anything heroic."

"Hurry."

True to his word, Lieutenant Brevard showed up just under an hour later with two fully-armed assault teams. Remy met them around the corner.

"You stay outside," said the assault team commander. "Let us handle it." The teams made a coordinated and timed entry into the warehouse from three sides. Remy heard three bursts of shots fired, but that was over quickly. The assault team had more men and better weapons. After the first two smugglers went down, the rest dropped their guns and surrendered. The raid was a smashing success with no policemen injured. By the time they finished, the police had found over two hundred kilos of heroin with a probable

street value between twenty and thirty million dollars. The statues being used to hide the drugs were destined for New York City and places beyond. From the records that were eventually found, it looked like the smuggling operation had been in business in Paris for over three years, having made nearly a dozen previous shipments. It was the biggest drug bust in France in ten years and Officer Remy Montagne was to be given special credit and commendation for its success.

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Chapter Twenty-five: Free at Last

After his release from the Gendarmerie, Raja called Vinny to arrange a ride. He didn't have a number for Remy Montagne, and knew nothing of what had taken place at the warehouse.

"Vinny."

"Raja." Despite the early hour, Vinny was already up.

"Guess what."

"You are at Corinne's." Vinny was in no mood to hear about Raja and his new love.

"No."

"You have a new girl friend."

"Vinny."

"Maybe you should just tell me."

"I was arrested."

"Are you kidding me right now?"

"I wish I were."

"Now what did you do?"

"I didn't do anything. It was some trumped up terrorist alert."

"Terrorist?"

"The key phrase is trumped up. I'm out now, but I don't have Napoleon. Any chance you have a way to pick me up?"

Vinny still had use of Yvette's car. "Where are you?"

"Down the street two blocks from the Gendarmerie on Rue Saint-Didier."

"I'll be right there." Vinny picked up Raja and they drove back to the flat. Raja explained the unexpected help he got from Captain Milan in securing his release. When they arrived, the flat was empty.

"Where is the girl?" asked Raja.

"She called her parents and they picked her up. I think she will be okay, eventually. But we must stop the slave traders. Did you make any progress on that, I mean, before you got arrested?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact. That's what we were doing when the gendarmes crashed the party."

"We?"

"Remy and I. He's the officer that Inspector Gilliard assigned to help me."

“Inspector Gilliard? Are you sure it was meant to help?”

“Well, he was supposed to keep an eye on me, for sure, but Remy is a great guy. Very bright, too. You’d like him.”

“And where is this Officer Remy now?”

“It’s Officer Remy Montagne, actually. I don’t know. I left Napoleon with him down at the docks. And, I think we uncovered more than just the white slavery operation.”

“There has been police chatter this morning about a heroin drug bust at a warehouse in Courbevoie. No names yet.”

“Heroin—that makes sense. I bet that is Remy.”

Vinny typed something on her computer. She waved her hand and a map appeared on the screen. There was one flashing red dot. “Well, it looks like the Porsche is parked at the police station right now. I can track it with the GPS.”

Raja called the police station but Remy wasn’t in the major crimes division. Raja recognized the voice on the line was Claude, the inspector’s assistant. “Claude, this is Raja Williams. Any idea where Remy is now?”

“Monsieur Williams, I thought you were—”

“Arrested? Rotting in jail over at the Gendarmerie? Let’s just say it was a mistake.” Raja suspected that the inspector might have had a hand in getting him arrested, but now wasn’t the time to get into it.

“Well, Remy is over at *les stupes*—sorry—that’s what we call the narcotics division,” said Claude. “They just wrapped up a huge bust.”

“Thanks.”

Vinny drove Raja to the narcotics division building.

“Pull over here,” said Raja. “and let me out. You can’t come in, Vinny.”

“What, no girls allowed?”

“You are still undercover. Wait for me, and please stay out of sight. You have your iPad. Do some research. I’d really like to know who set me up to look like a terrorist. I will be back as quickly as I can.”

Inside *les stupes*, as they called it, the atmosphere was one of giddy celebration. It isn’t every day that the police take down a major drug operation.

Raja stood at the front desk. “I’m looking for Officer Remy Montagne. My name is Raja Williams.”

The desk sergeant made a call, and Raja could see a group of policemen talking casually in the next room. One of them picked up the phone and then looked up at Raja. Several men waved for him to come in but Remy came out first.

“Raja, are you all right? Did you hear what happened?”

“Yes and yes. But I didn’t get the details.”

“Well, everything you said was spot on. I followed the contents of the fourth container to a warehouse in Courbevoie. After I found the heroin, I called it in. We raided the place and recovered two hundred kilos of uncut heroin. They were hiding the drugs in Liberty statues for export to the United States. The captain estimates it is worth over twenty million dollars on the street in the U.S.”

“That is quite a raid.”

“The Captain says it is the biggest in over a decade. We were just planning a celebration. You should come, too.”

“Have you mentioned the original reason we were at the docks—the white slave trade part of Assad’s operation?”

“You know, with all that has happened, I didn’t think of it. But after the drug bust, don’t you think he will be scared off?”

“Perhaps, but I hope not. If Assad does decide to cut his losses and go home, we are going to find bodies in the Seine. We must hope he’s greedier than he is cautious. After losing all that money on the drugs, Assad is not going to be inclined to take a double hit on the girls as well. Your bust was at the warehouse, far away from the docks. And if I’m right, the girls are already on board the *Alhambra*. We need to watch that ship. I’m hoping the ship won’t leave Paris until they collect the empty containers. When the ship docks for the containers, that will be the best chance to bust them and keep the girls alive.”

“We should tell Captain Rochefort to stay clear of the container at the stockyard.”

“Good thinking, Remy. You should be the one to tell him. After all, you are the hero of the day.”

“Well.” Remy was embarrassed.

“By the way, when you were reporting what you found, I don’t suppose you mentioned my help in the matter.” Raja knew that under

the circumstances, mentioning his name would only have hurt Remy's credibility.

"I certainly did. I told them it was all your idea."

"How foolish but decent of you, Remy. You are good man."

"Oh yeah, did I mention that Captain Rochefort said he is putting in a request for my transfer to the narcotics division? With a promotion and a pay upgrade included."

"Well done, Remy. You deserve it."

"All thanks to you, Raja. I just followed your instructions."

"Credit where credit is due. You did a hell of a good job."

Remy beamed. "Thanks." He was very excited. "I'll go see Captain Rochefort immediately. Anything else you need?"

"Like you said, the police must steer clear of the empty container at the train yard. If Assad doesn't think we are onto his human trafficking operation, he will want to keep everything business as usual. You said three of the containers left Paris by train. We need to find out how soon those containers will be returned. We need round-the-clock covert surveillance on Assad's ship. I have an idea how we can catch whoever is helping the smugglers at the dock, but we can set that up when the containers all get returned to the dock to be picked up."

Remy met with Captain Rochefort who agreed to follow the plan. He was more than willing to provide the surveillance, considering the success of the drug bust. Remy returned to Raja, who waited in the front.

"Everything is set. We coordinate through Lieutenant Brevard. He's the one who helped me on the bust."

"Good. So, you must keep in close communication with Brevard. It may be a few days or even a week before the containers arrive back in Paris. Oh, and give me your phone number." Raja input it into his phone. "When the containers arrive back at the train yard, you must call me. Until then we wait."

"Sounds great." Remy was ready to return to his celebration.

"There is one more small matter," said Raja, smiling.

"Napoleon."

"Yes. How did you like driving the Porsche?"

"It was better than I dreamed. Such a great car. I parked it outside the station. I'll take you to it now."

"Not necessary, Remy. You go have your celebration. And thanks for taking care of Napoleon. You have the keys?"

Remy looked at the keys and handed them over reluctantly.

"Don't worry, you'll drive Napoleon again before you know it."

"Don't I wish."

Outside the station, Raja scanned the area to make sure he was alone, and then pushed his hair back twice. It was the signal he always used to tell Vinny the coast was clear. The little white Ford Mondeo pulled out of a discreet parking spot a block away and crept toward Raja. He walked directly toward the car and got in, and they were gone.

"Sorry to have to leave you out here, but we must maintain your cover. I'm still not sure who we can trust. Until we know, we tell no one."

"As you wish, boss. How did it go?"

"Remy is a brave young man. And a good policeman. The drug bust took down over twenty million dollars in uncut heroin. Now we have a plan in place to knock out the slave traders as well."

"Great. What can I do to help?"

"There is some info you can probably help find. I would like to know how many girls are involved in the current shipment. Any data you can get will be helpful. But, be careful. Mostly I need you to stay on top of the cabaret and its activities and keep an ear to the ground. We haven't tied Bruno to the drugs but I'm betting we will. I'm going to shake things up. There's Napoleon." Raja pointed to the orange Porsche parked on the side of the police building. "Here is good." Vinny pulled over and let him out.

"Remember, Vinny, low profile. I know how bad you want this. Let's take one step at a time. Find out if there is any more chatter on Mrs. Browning. Professor Browning must be out of his mind by now. I should go see him."

After Vinny drove off, Raja got in the Porsche and punched in the hotel where the Brownings were staying. Vinny had gotten him a new phone. Raja changed his mind about going to see the professor. There wasn't much to report on his wife. Raja checked his voice

mail. He had several messages from Professor Browning he hadn't heard. He picked one and hit the dial caller button and waited.

"Hello, this is Professor Browning."

"This is Raja Williams."

"Thank God you are calling. I left you ten messages."

It wasn't ten, but the point was moot. "I saw that. Believe me when I say, I was indisposed."

"So, have you found Margaret?" The professor asked tentatively, fearing bad news.

"Not yet, I'm sorry to say. I know it is no consolation but I am working on finding her."

"I don't understand. She could not just disappear without a trace. What am I to do?"

The melancholy in the professor's voice made Raja sad. "You need to stay positive. No news is good news. I will find her. There's really nothing else you can do to help the investigation. You should go back to your project at the museum. Keep yourself occupied."

"I don't know if I can."

"Give it a try, Professor. I will call as soon as I have any news." What Raja wasn't saying was that it appeared Mrs. Browning had fallen into a black hole, and at this juncture of a typical kidnapping case, the likelihood was that she was buried at the bottom of it.

Chapter Twenty-six: Raja on the Rampage

Raja went back to his flat and poured himself a couple fingers of The Macallan, his favorite scotch. There were too many things in play on this case, and too many players. Professor Browning was right. His wife's continued missing status did not make a lot of sense. If she was dead, where was her body? And if she was alive, where was she? Who had her? And why? Raja had more questions than answers. He still didn't know what part she played. It had all started the day that Corinne's brother was killed. He had to find out why he was killed. He needed to talk to Corinne. Although she claimed no knowledge of any of her brother's activities that would get him killed, she might know more than she realized. It also didn't hurt that Raja was eager to see her again. He drove to Corinne's building.

The first thing that Raja noticed when he reached Corinne's flat was that the door was not locked. After what he had found out about the way Bruno had terrorized her, and Raja's insistence that she lock the door, he knew she would never leave it open. The knot that formed in his stomach could not distract him from the throbbing ache in his head. "A sure sign of bad mojo," his grandmother used to say back in Jamaica when he was a little boy. He would sit on her lap and she would tell stories he didn't understand, trying to pass on the wisdom she had learned. "De stomachache ez one ting, de headache anudder. But together das a sure sign of de bad mojo. Remember dat, bwoy."

Raja remembered it now as he turned the knob slowly and went inside Corinne's flat. He closed the door behind him out of habit, while he strained to hear her moving about or humming as she liked to do. The silence made his head hurt more. When he got to the living room, he saw an overturned table and chair. There had been a fight. The bedroom door stood open and Raja forced himself to walk in that direction. He stared at the floor when he entered, like not looking would somehow change the outcome. He gently shut the bedroom door behind him. He noticed that the full-length mirror on the door was cracked, and when he looked up at it he saw her in the reflection. Corinne was lying spread eagle on the bed with her tongue hanging out. Raja forced himself to turn around. When he

moved closer he saw that Corinne's eyes were wide open. They were dull and grey, not the lively green he remembered. That's when he realized she was gone.

Raja slumped onto his knees. When the room began spinning he got up and staggered into the bathroom, knowing what was coming next. After he threw up, he stood at the sink and washed his face. When he looked in the mirror, a grey, anguished face stared back at him. He pulled out his phone and called Vinny.

"What's up?" she said cheerfully.

"Corinne is dead." The heaviness and the finality in Raja's voice told Vinny that he was devastated.

The best thing she could do was get him to talk. "What happened?" she asked.

After a long lag, Raja said, "He killed her. She did nothing to him and he killed her." The lack of emotion meant he was shutting down.

"Are the police there?"

"I haven't called them. There's nothing they can do."

"Hold on," said Vinny. She dialed the number for Inspector Gilliard. Claude answered.

"Yes. There has been a murder ... Corinne Reneau ... At her flat on Rue de Lourmel. Raja Williams is there now with the body. Tell Inspector Gilliard. Please hurry." Claude tried asking questions. Vinny ignored them and switched back to Raja, but he had already hung up.

Raja walked back into the bedroom. Looking at Corinne's lifeless body sickened him, but he told himself that the outcome was not going to change. He needed to be the detective now and analyze the case evidence before him. Steeling himself, he studied the scene. Corinne's blouse was torn and she was naked from the waist down. Raja knew he shouldn't touch anything, but he couldn't refrain from covering her torso. His DNA would certainly be found all over her flat, so a little more wouldn't hurt. The marks on her neck indicated that she was violently strangled, probably after being sexually assaulted. The bruises and cuts on her face indicated that whoever did it was angry, and her broken nails said she fought back, at least for a while. After studying the scene, Raja usually visualized the

crime being committed. In this instance, he could not yet bring himself to do it.

The police arrived at the scene—first a pair of uniformed officers, followed ten minutes later by Inspector Gilliard.

The inspector took Raja into the living room.

“Don’t touch her,” said Raja to the officers before he left the room.

“They won’t,” said Gilliard. It was obvious to him that Raja had more than an acquaintance with the girl. “You want to tell me what happened?” he asked, pulling out and turning on his recorder.

“I found her,” said Raja, looking at his watch, “about thirty minutes ago. Pretty much the way you see her now.”

“Did you touch anything?”

“Other than covering her a bit, no.”

“You knew her—personally.” It was a statement.

“Yes, we were intimate.”

“Today?”

“No.”

“When was the last time?”

“Two days ago.”

“Did you do this?”

“No, Inspector, I did not do this. But I know who did.”

“Who?”

“Bruno Laurent.”

“You know this how?”

“I just know it.”

“You know that won’t help me.”

“It’s good enough for me,” said Raja. The look in his eye was a red flag the inspector had seen many times.

“If that’s all, I need to go.” Raja got up to leave.

The inspector grabbed his arm. “Don’t do anything foolish, Monsieur Williams.”

“I do foolish things every day; why should today be any different?”

“Perhaps I must take you to the station to make a complete statement.”

“You have my statement now. So, unless you are planning to arrest me, I would like to go.”

The inspector thought about doing just that. He looked over Raja's hands and arms, finding no wounds. "No arrest. But stay in Paris and out of trouble for the moment, yes?"

"Yes." As far as Raja was concerned, the only one who would be in trouble was Bruno. There were always times during a case when things got a little too up close and personal for Raja. It was one reason he was so effective. He connected with people without reservation. Contrary to popular belief, maintaining an objective view on a case did not mean being distant. Some of the most important facts only surface after an intimate and close look. However, there was a potential liability when he got too close, especially with a beautiful and vulnerable woman like Corinne. If Raja had an Achilles heel, it was his knightly defense of a wronged woman. And you can't get much more wrong than dead. Vinny was convinced it would get him killed one day, and she had talked to him about it to no avail. Today just might prove her right.

By the time Vinny arrived at the crime scene in Corinne's flat, Raja had already been gone almost an hour. She had been calling him continuously but getting no answer. She tried again. Again voice mail. It was a bad sign. She had hoped to get there while he was still grieving, but she was too late. Now he would be in revenge mode, and probably already at the club.

Raja stormed the Cabaret d'Artois like the Americans hit the beach at Normandy, making no attempt to hide his fury. The large security guard inside the entrance smelled trouble right away and stepped in front of Raja to block his path. A swift blow to the man's Adam's apple ended any interest he had in challenging Raja, leaving the man choking on the ground. Once inside the main room, Raja scanned for the target of his rage, finally locking onto a booth near the back. The floor show was on stage, and the pulsing dance beat only amplified the pounding in Raja's head which, by his way of thinking, would find relief only when Bruno had taken his last breath. By the time Raja made his way through the crowd, the entrance guard had already alerted Bruno, who stood waiting.

Raja paused to assess his options, knowing that Bruno would not be one to fight his battle on his own. Several men were making their way through the crowd toward him from both sides. Raja knew

where the scratch on Bruno's cheek had come from. When Bruno sneered at him, Raja lost control, bull-rushing the last fifteen feet that separated the two men.

Raja's feet stopped moving and his body shook uncontrollably as he realized he had been hit with the electrodes of a taser. Despite willing himself forward toward his enemy, his muscles refused to respond. When he fell to the floor the crowd pulled back from him forming a perfect circle. Raja looked up helplessly as Bruno calmly took the taser from Marcelo's hand, and bent down toward Raja's face.

"You have made a serious mistake," said Bruno, jamming the device into Raja's chest. The second jolt from the taser turned out the lights.

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Chapter Twenty-seven: Margaret and Didier

Margaret had now been in a state of suspended animation from her normal life long enough to realize that her captor was not the evil villain she had first assumed. The many damp English nights of winter she spent curled up in bed with a good suspense thriller had laid the groundwork for her overactive imagination to create and embellish speculative nightmares in the darkness of her subconscious. At first, Margaret's imagination had run wild. Despite being well past midlife, she had envisioned being forced into some sort of perverted sexual activity, or being tortured to the brink of death.

Yet, many details had been poking their way out from behind these fantastic scenarios that belied such evil intent. For one, Didier, as she had grown accustomed to calling him, had gone to great lengths to ensure she was fed regularly. While she was still being tied up, since that first day Didier had taken care to ensure her bonds were loose enough to prevent pain or damage.

Margaret was even starting to admire the house she was being held in. The high ceilings and exposed wood beams reminded her of the church in Exeter where she had grown up. She even began to fantasize that this might be a retirement villa that she and Phillip owned in France, a place where they might winter. Of course, she had read about the Stockholm Syndrome and how captives often begin to lose their proper sense of orientation. She felt strongly that wasn't the case. At least, for her sake, she hoped not.

"Who are you working for?" she asked Didier.

Nothing.

"You aren't really a kidnapper, are you, Didier?" Margaret waited but got no response, and the no answers did not do much for Margaret's peace of mind. Didier ignored her questions and seemed intent on keeping her in the dark about the whys and wherefores of her mysterious and extended captivity. Margaret reasoned that there must be some sort of intense manhunt taking place that kept Didier from carrying out his plan, whatever that was. However, because he left the house every day for long periods of time, he certainly wasn't hiding out here as she would have expected if he feared being

caught. Nothing made any sense. She could not imagine what was really going on. That was worst of all. With no data to go on, she only had her imagination.

Margaret had tried being disagreeable. Not being mean-spirited by nature, she pretended she was Glynnis Silver, her neighbor back in England. Glynnis bitched about everything. The weather was too cold or too hot, too wet or too dry. The children in the neighborhood were too noisy or too quiet. Every day when Mr. Silver arrived home from the office, Margaret was always bemused to see him park and trudge into their house, only to come back out again to move the car up or back another foot or so in the driveway in order to meet some imagined requirement that his wife demanded. Margaret could sometimes see Glynnis following him around the house, harping to him that he didn't listen to her. Margaret figured the poor man probably prayed for the day to come when he lost his hearing.

Playing Glynnis, Margaret tried her best to annoy Didier into telling her something. She complained about the food, saying it was too hot or too cold or too spicy or too bland. She said the bed was too hard, the blankets too scratchy, anything she could think of to exasperate her captor. Didier took it all like a stoic and never said a word.

Then Margaret tried being nice and agreeable, thanking Didier for his kindnesses and the care he had taken. She told him that she had long since forgiven him and would love nothing more than to invite him and his family for a visit to England when she and Phillip returned there.

Nothing had worked. The man was a bloody robot.

Chapter Twenty-eight: Man in Black

They say that sometimes when a person dreams, he is trying to make sense out of unresolved events that happened while he was awake, a sort of imaginative mental workout of some pressing problem. Raja never bought into the whole dream thing. However, just now he found himself lying face down on a beach towel nearly asleep, the sun's rays warming him from above. A handful of cold water splashed on his head and back, shocking him awake. He heard a woman laughing, and turned to see Corinne running back toward the water. "Come get me," she shouted gleefully, pulling the string of her bikini top as she ran into the surf and dove under a wave. Raja got up and walked to the water's edge, picking up the top and squinting in the bright sun.

Corinne stood up on a sandbar, shaking her breasts as a tease, and then dove into the water swimming farther from shore.

Raja smiled for a moment, but the smile left quickly as his eyes caught movement in the water. The sun reflecting from the surface made it hard for Raja to see. He dropped his sunglasses down over his eyes. There was something dark that was moving in the water. Something heading toward Corinne.

Raja yelled to her as loud as he could, but she was still swimming. Corinne stopped and looked back, treading water.

Raja waved frantically, pointed and yelled for her to come in. She waved back and laughed, thinking he was playing around. The dark shape was moving fast toward Corinne. The odd thing about the dream was how helpless Raja felt. He was an excellent swimmer, good enough to make the university team at Oxford as an alternate, but something was keeping him from diving in and swimming out to Corinne. No matter how much he wanted to save her, all he could do was watch.

A hard slap across his face woke Raja up, if you could call the groggy and blurry state he was in awake. The sun, the beach and Corinne were gone. He tried to focus but something wet was in his eyes. Tasting the liquid told him it was blood.

"Where is the woman?" asked a voice from the blurry figure in front of him.

The last real thing Raja remembered clearly was looking up at Bruno Laurent's snarling grin and feeling rage and frustrated helplessness. Raja shook his head, sending pain up the back of his neck, but clearing enough blood from his eyes to see Bruno Laurent, the man who had killed Corinne, standing directly in front of him. Raja strained at his bonds violently with no result. He didn't know where he was, but apparently his situation hadn't changed very much.

"Where is the woman?" repeated Bruno.

"Even if I knew, do you really think I would tell an ape like you?" said Raja, mustering as much attitude as he could under the circumstances. He needed time to clear his head.

This time Bruno swung his leather-gloved fist hard into Raja's jaw. The jolt sent blood splattering and a sky-full of stars flashed all around Raja. He resisted the urge to pass out, instead spitting blood on the floor. For the first time, he noticed the armed men that fanned out behind Bruno. A row of high shelving stood on either side of the entire group. They were in a warehouse.

"I don't think you understand the situation you are in here, Bruno. Kill me and I promise, you will die. Don't kill me and I promise, I will kill you. The whereabouts of Mrs. Browning are the least of your concerns."

Bruno laughed. "Is that what you call the American spirit? You are a fool. Take a good look around you, Monsieur Williams. This is the last place you will ever see." Bruno swung again with his other fist, sending blood flying from Raja's face in the opposite direction.

A loud crash echoed from somewhere in the distant corner of the warehouse. Bruno stopped to listen. There was no further sound, and no sign of anyone else in the building. Bruno pulled a large hunting knife from his belt. "Gerard, go see what that was," he said to one of the armed men standing beside him. Gerard and a second man cocked their automatic weapons and stomped off into the main aisle, turning toward the source of the sound.

Bruno turned toward Raja. "I will find your Mrs. Browning whether you help me or not. It is only a matter of time, for her and for you. It would make your death a lot quicker if you talk now. I am getting

bored enough, as it is.” He fingered the edge of the knife. “Quick and easy, isn’t that how you say it?”

“Suit yourself, Bruno. Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

Bruno cocked his head, listening. The two men he had sent to check out the warehouse had gone completely silent. “Gerard? Max?” His own voice echoed, but there was no response.

Turning back to Raja, Bruno fingered the knife and said, “Time to end this.” Suddenly three grey canisters sailed up and over the right hand row of shelving and exploded into smoke when they hit the ground.

The armed thugs whirled in the direction where the smoke grenades had come from and fired blindly. By the time they stopped the area was filling with thick smoke.

A sharp sound from the opposite direction drew their fire. The roar and confusion of automatic weapon fire and the smoke obscured the appearance of a lone man at the end of the aisle. He strode forward, firing single shots from each of his two handguns that took down the thugs one by one with unerring accuracy and efficiency. The automatic fire stopped, and the smoke began to clear revealing a blond-haired figure dressed in black. Bruno’s men were already down on the ground. Only Bruno was still standing. He had darted behind Raja, and now gripped Raja by the hair with one hand, pressing the large knife to his throat with the other. Still thirty feet away, the blond man never hesitated, striding straight toward Bruno and Raja.

Although the gleeful look on Bruno’s face said he had fully made the decision to cut Raja’s throat, he never had a chance to move. The blond man fired one shot that drilled through Bruno’s throat and severed his spinal cord, leaving him instantaneously paralyzed and moments away from death. The knife fell harmlessly from his hand, clattering on the concrete floor, and Bruno’s other hand slipped from Raja’s hair. Bruno’s face was expressionless, there being no time for him to mentally register what had already happened, and then his body slumped lifelessly to the floor.

After confirming that none of the other men would be getting up, the blond man holstered his guns and finished closing the distance between himself and Raja.

Raja's smile looked bizarre through all the blood and wounds. "Damn, Claus, that was awesome," he said. "Is it any wonder why I pay you the big bucks?" Claus was a former Israeli assassin who was indebted to Raja, and who insisted on shadowing Raja on his cases, acting as a sort of dark angel whenever Raja needed help.

"You don't pay me any money," said Claus, without so much as the hint of a smile. The man had absolutely no sense of humor. Claus picked up the hunting knife and cut the ties binding Raja to the chair.

"Not the point, my friend," said Raja, rubbing his wrists. "Very true, but really not the point."

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Chapter Twenty-nine: Last Man Standing

After Claus released Raja from his bonds, he made sure Raja wasn't mortally wounded, and that the bad guys all were. Raja turned around for no more than a few seconds, and when he turned back, Claus had disappeared without another word. Raja knew better than to look for him. When Claus disappeared, nobody was going to find him. Raja called him the chameleon savant. Claus had an otherworldly ability to blend into his environment. Raja had asked Claus once if he would teach him the trick, and Claus had simply said, "There is no trick," and that was the end of it. Whatever it was, it enabled him to stay off the grid since leaving the Mossad years ago.

Despite knowing Claus for many years, Raja actually knew little about him or his activities. He was a ghost who came and went at his own choosing. Raja never called him, but he would show up in the middle of a case at critical times. How Claus knew when those moments came was another secret he never revealed. Claus made a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma look like a clear glass of water.

Raja was now alone among the living in the warehouse. After a little exploration, he found a bathroom on the other side of the warehouse with running water and a stack of brown paper towels, and he began cleaning himself up. The damage looked worse than it was, although some stitches and a couple butterfly bandages were going to be required. He checked his teeth with his tongue and fingers, and found none missing or chipped and only a couple that were looser than he remembered them being.

When Raja heard approaching police sirens, he finished cleaning up and walked out into an open area of the warehouse. There would be no sense surviving what he'd just been through only to get shot by a skittish rookie policeman.

The sirens got louder and louder, and then stopped. A minute later the place was crawling with armed policemen. "Hold it right there," said a policeman decked out in full RAID assault gear. Raja put his hands up slowly.

"Get down on the ground."

Raja complied, kneeling and making no sudden moves.

Two more policemen arrived, keeping their weapons trained on Raja. The first policeman pushed him forward onto the ground and zip-tied Raja's hands behind his back. When he saw the damage to Raja's face, he asked, "What happened here? Who did this? Is there anyone else in the warehouse?"

"Which question do you want me to answer first," asked Raja, trying to be patient.

"Is there anyone else here?"

"Only some dead bad guys."

The officer motioned for the others to search the place. "Did you kill them?"

"No, but I'm sure glad somebody did, or I would be dead, too."

Once the assault team had secured the place, two plainclothes policemen approached from the far side of the warehouse. When they got closer, Raja recognized that one of them was Inspector Gilliard.

The inspector recognized Raja, as well, and when he got closer, said, "I see you have been keeping yourself busy, Monsieur Williams. However, I'm not sure the activity agrees with you."

"Very funny. How about cutting me loose, Inspector."

"Not so fast. According to the report I have, you are the only person alive in the middle of what looks like a massacre. I think you must answer some questions, yes?"

"Hey, I'm the victim here."

"So you say. Those dead men we found might argue that point."

One of the other policemen approached the inspector and whispered in his ear.

"It seems we have hit the jackpot. Bruno Laurent is among the dead. Along with seven other of his nastiest employees. I thought you didn't carry a weapon. How did you manage that?"

"I didn't."

"But you don't deny going after Bruno. You did exactly what I told you not to."

"Yes, I did go after Bruno at his club for killing Corinne Reneau. The bastard. However, things didn't go so well. I woke up tied to a chair in this warehouse."

"Then you admit you wanted to kill him?"

"Of course I did, but I didn't kill him."

"Who did?"

"That's a good question. I couldn't say."

"Yet, you were here."

"Sure, but there was a lot of smoke. Oh yeah, and Bruno was using me for a punching bag. Over there somewhere." Raja pointed to the rows of shelving. "He would have killed me, I'm sure. I must have passed out. When I came to, they were all dead and I was free."

"Were you dreaming?"

"As a matter of fact, I was. What does that have to do with anything?"

"You must have been dreaming. How else can you explain how the magic fairies sneaked into the warehouse, killed everyone, untied you and flew away? Come on, Monsieur Williams, why don't you tell me the truth?"

"I'm sticking with the magic fairies."

Inspector Gilliard was angry. "You know a lot more than you are saying. I could lock you up for at least a month just for being in this warehouse."

"Do what you need to do. I'm telling you the truth. I didn't kill anyone. You said it yourself. I don't carry a gun. Where is the gun I used?"

The inspector was furious. He pulled out his pocket knife and cut Raja loose. "I promise you, we will search this entire area for a weapon. And perhaps you won't mind if we do a gunpowder residue test to be sure you haven't fired a weapon." He motioned for one of the uniformed officers.

"Test away," said Raja. The officer took Raja by the arm.

"Take him directly to the station. Don't let him out of your sight until we get results on the gunpowder test. If it's positive, book him for murder." The officer dragged Raja toward the door.

"One more thing," said the inspector. "Provided you are telling the truth, I recommend that you leave Paris as soon as possible. I am certain it would be the healthy thing for you to do."

Raja didn't answer.

The officer took Raja back to the station where the gunshot residue test came up negative. After reconfirming with Inspector Gilliard, the officer drove Raja to the hospital emergency room and arranged for him to get patched up.

While Raja waited for the nurse, he found a pay phone and called Vinny. Before he could say anything, Vinny jumped down his throat.

"Where the hell have you been? Stay in communication, keep the lines tight, isn't that what you always say, Raj? Well?"

"Vinny, I'm at the hospital."

"Say what?" Her tone changed immediately.

"I'm okay. Bruno is dead."

"O-M-G, you killed him?"

"No, although I would have, given the chance. However, I am quite sure he was going to kill me. A timely visit from Claus took care of Bruno."

"Is Claus there now?"

"Need you ask?"

"True dat. How bad are you hurt?"

"Minor cuts and bruises. But, I could use a ride. My Porsche is probably still parked behind the club. You know where I keep the extra key."

"Which hospital?"

"It's the Hôpital Lariboisière, on Rue Ambroise Paré."

"I'll be there in twenty minutes. Make that ten."

"No hurry, Vinny. Really, I am okay. Vinny?" She had already ended the call.

True to her word, Vinny showed up at the hospital in ten minutes. Raja had gotten three stitches in two different places and two butterflies on his eyebrow. He looked like someone's favorite old Raggedy Ann doll that was well past its expiration date and had been lovingly stitched together. The nurse was giving him antibiotics when Vinny walked in.

"Jesus, Raj. You look like someone tied you to the back of their bumper and drove away."

"Don't make me laugh, Vinny. I'll pop a stitch."

"Do you want painkillers?" asked the nurse.

"No thanks. I've got scotch at home to take care of the pain."

“Try to rest a few days, Monsieur Williams,” said the nurse. “Besides lacerations and bruises, you suffered a mild concussion. Are you going to drive him?” she asked Vinny.

“Yes ma’am.”

“Good. He may have some blurred vision. Keep an eye on him for the next twenty-four hours.”

Vinny put her arm around Raja to help him walk out of the emergency room.

“I’m not crippled you know.”

“Shut it.”

When they reached the car, Raja walked straight to the driver's door.

“No way, Jose,” said Vinny.

“Napoleon needs me.”

“Napoleon can wait. You heard the nurse. You need to rest.”

Raja didn’t protest. He wasn’t feeling as strong as he put on. The drive to the flat was a quiet one. Although Vinny had several lectures she was prepared to reel off, she was just happy Raja was okay and still mostly in one piece.

Back at the flat Raja sat on the couch sipping a drink. Vinny worked on her computer.

Half an hour later Vinny found a report circulating on the police lines. It was the latest terrorist watch bulletin that had the name Raja Williams on it.

“O-M-G,” said Vinny, upon finding the report on Raja. “W-T-F.” Vinny fully expected others to act decently and sanely, despite encountering repeated evidence to the contrary in the world around her. Her refusal to compromise with her innate faith in people was one of the characteristics that made her such an asset to Raja. Otherwise, a life investigating crime could get rather grim. “I can not believe it,” said Vinny. “You are still on the terrorist watch list. Some crap about flying into Afghanistan from western Pakistan, and running weapons into Africa. All of it years ago. BLAH, BLAH, BLAH. I thought you said that Captain Milan took care of that.”

It is a well known fact that the police often focus their investigations on the victims of a crime rather than pursuing the perpetrators. Sometimes they incorrectly target someone who was a

witness or simply an innocent bystander. The biggest errors are made when the police target someone who is trying to help solve a crime, such as a private investigator or a reporter. It happens more than you might think. There are more than a few people in prison for a long time due solely to their proximity to a criminal investigation. Raja called it the crime of being there.

Because Captain Milan of the National Gendarmerie had told him he would still be on the watch list, Raja was not surprised when Vinny discovered the report circulating along the police channels naming Raja as a suspected terrorist on the to-be-watched list. Knowing how Vinny would react, he had deliberately withheld the details of his encounter at the Gendarmerie.

Raja knew the PR ploy well. Tell a lie, wrap it in a half-truth to make it easier to swallow, and send it out on enough channels so that each one starts to confirm the story to one another. Once again, the crime was being there. The truth was, Raja had flown in and out of Afghanistan, but only to rescue a Hindi family that was trapped and hunted by the Taliban. And his pilot Mickey had flown weapons into Africa, but only enough to get the badly needed medicine and food past the rebels and into civilian hands. And even that was all before Mickey started working for Raja. Thankfully, Captain Milan had been thorough and intelligent enough to see through the outpoints.

"Is it a red or yellow alert?" asked Raja.

"Yellow." That meant to be watched only.

"Don't sweat it, Vinny. I've gotten used to it. As long as it stays yellow there won't be any problem."

"Well, I don't like it." When it came to Raja, Vinny was a protective mother hen.

"I'll tell you what. Why don't we just solve this case and then we can blow this French popcorn stand." Vinny's penchant for slang was rubbing off on Raja.

"Bam shizzaam," she said, smiling at his attempt.

"Have you found anything more on Mrs. Browning or the crooked cops?"

"No, but there is a report on one of your drug dealer pals. Jules Masson was found beaten to death. No leads on who did it."

"I'm not surprised. That guy was a disaster waiting to happen. Sounds like more of Bruno's handiwork. Nobody is going to miss that bastard."

"True dat, boss," said Vinny, thinking of the girls at the cabaret.

"I think I'm gonna go lie down. You be okay out here?"

"No prob. Get some rest."

Raja did just that, and thankfully he did not dream.

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Chapter Thirty: Down the Garden Path

The next day Raja was sore but his head was a lot clearer. Vinny wasn't so sure, but Raja convinced her he was ready to go back to work.

"I'm sure I could rest for a week, but we still haven't found Mrs. Browning. You weren't there to hear her husband. He is one lost puppy."

"Okay, but no more gunfights for a while."

"I was thinking about doing some nice quiet surveillance."

"On who?"

"Inspector Gilliard."

"You think he might be the Scorpion?" asked Vinny.

"I don't know. But I'm convinced he's in the thick of it. Bruno was too much of a loose cannon to be running a major crime operation in the shadows for all those years. Have you found out any more about Gilliard?"

"I still haven't connected him to the woman on the bank account."

"See, he is hiding something. And who knows how many other accounts he has. I still haven't heard from Remy on the ship we are watching, so I thought maybe I'd put eyes on Gilliard for a while. Some nice relaxing surveillance couldn't hurt."

"Raj, I'm not sure you can do nice or relaxing. Remember, you had a concussion. No rough stuff. You let me know if you find out anything. Promise."

"I promise. You should get back to the club. All hell must be breaking loose over there with Bruno out of the way."

After Vinny dropped herself off near the club, Raja climbed behind the wheel of the Porsche and headed for open road. He needed to clear his head, and driving always worked. Raja cruised the Champs-Élysées west past the Arc de Triomphe eventually making his way onto the Boulevard Périphérique, the Paris beltway. There he opened the throttle, weaving through the traffic at high speed as he circled north around Paris. He left the beltway heading south, stopping when he reached the Basilique du Sacré-Coeur, a fabulous Catholic Church and basilica that was constructed on the highest point in Paris. He parked and climbed the many steps. It was one of Raja's favorite

places in Paris, with its panoramic view of the city. He drank in the sights like cool lemonade. It was on this very spot more than a century earlier that Archbishop Guibert had had his vision as clouds dispersed over the panorama and said, "It is here, it is here where the martyrs are." That had inspired the construction of the church on the top of Montmartre.

Raja thought about where the case had taken him so far. He wondered where Mrs. Browning was at this very moment, and whether she was destined to be a martyr herself. And, if so, to what cause. That he would find her, he had no doubt. Whether she would be alive was a different story. The drive and the view renewed his determination to make just that happen.

As the day wore on, Raja drove to the 36 to take up a spot to watch and wait for Inspector Gilliard. Vinny had already identified Gilliard's vehicle and plate number. Raja parked where he could see the policemen leaving for the day. In the late afternoon he spotted Gilliard's Renault pull out of the parking garage and head north across the river. Raja stayed as far behind as he could. Gilliard took a turn and drove past the Louvre complex. Raja sped up to close the distance as Gilliard rounded a circle near the Jardin des Tuileries, the huge palace garden created when the Louvre served as the palace for the French king. When Raja reached the other side of the circle, Gilliard was already getting out of his car, having parked in a small spot designated for official use only. Raja had no choice but to drive past, parking at the next place he could. He ran back to the circle in time to see Gilliard disappear into the garden grounds behind a row of hedges. The exertion had taken its toll on Raja, blurring his vision, and starting a dull ache in his temples. Nonetheless, he followed Gilliard, who turned left crossing the grounds in the open. Raja hung back moving along a row of sculpted trees, a common sight in Paris. Gilliard was moving toward the south side of the grounds, near the Seine river. He turned right onto the last walkway along the row of tall hedges that edged the grounds. The area was open and Raja was forced to cross to the hedge and then move slowly losing sight of Gilliard as he rounded a curve where the path circled a large concrete pedestal topped with a statue of a sphinx. Resisting the urge to race ahead, Raja maintained his

pace. When Raja reached the statue, he peered around it and saw a park bench ahead of Gilliard where a man sat alone. With his vision still blurry Raja could not identify the man. Gilliard sat down next to him. It was the perfect spot for a clandestine meeting. The open area made it impossible to get close enough to monitor the conversation without being seen. Raja ducked behind the statue and called Vinny.

"Hey, Raj. How's your relaxation going?"

"Very nicely. I'm taking a stroll in the Tuileries Garden. It's a beautiful place."

"Are you in trouble?"

"No. I'm following Inspector Gilliard. He is meeting with someone."

"Who?"

"I don't know. I can't get close enough to see. That's why I'm calling. Any chance you have access to surveillance cameras?"

"Let me check." Vinny diddled on her computer while Raja checked to make sure the men were still there. "No go. Nothing other than the entrance on the Louvre side."

"Any ideas?"

"Can you get a picture?"

"I didn't bring a camera," said Raja.

"And you call yourself a detective. How about your phone? I could use my face recognition software and we might get lucky."

"That might work. How close do I need to be?"

"Under sixty feet. Forty would be a lot better."

"Okay, I'll see what I can do. Stay tuned."

Raja estimated that the distance from the statue to the bench was easily over one hundred feet away. He couldn't approach in the open, and the hedge was too thick to get through, at least where he was. Working back about fifty feet, he found a gap in the hedge that he could get through. The backside of the hedge was close to a metal railing on a small wall overlooking a busy road. He would have to squeeze along between the hedge and rail. Then he would need to get lucky and find another opening in the hedge closer to the bench where the two men sat.

Raja moved as quickly as he could, knowing he might not have much time. Once he had gotten nearer to the bench, he stopped and strained to hear voices. The traffic noise behind him made it hard to

hear. He needed to be closer. He would have to take a chance when he found a hole in the hedge. As luck would have it, there was a sizable gap just ahead. He made it to the gap and eased his way to the front side of the hedge. He was less than ten feet away from the two men on the bench. He listened through the traffic noise and could only make out the unknown man say that someone is dead. Pulling out his phone he leaned forward to attempt a shot. His blurred vision made aiming the phone difficult and while he tried to adjust to a better position, he accidentally hit the button. The phone camera feature made a loud, recognizable clicking sound. Damn gadgets.

“Did you hear that?” said the voice Raja still didn’t know.

Raja scooted back from the front of the hedge.

“It came from over there,” said Gilliard. The men stood up.

Raja backed up against the railing. He had no time to squeeze along the hedge. He made a snap decision and vaulted over the railing onto the narrow sidewalk below. The impact hurt his head and his eyes blurred. Staggering back he stepped off the curb into traffic. A large tour bus rushed by inches away from Raja, the driver standing on the horn the whole way. Raja reacted and jumped back onto the sidewalk, pressing his body up against the wall just as Gilliard poked his head through the hedge. Raja held his breath with the inspector right above him.

“I don’t see anyone,” said Gilliard, looking both ways along the railing. “It must have been a bird.” Then he disappeared back into the hedge.

Raja waited a few seconds more and breathed a sigh of relief. He followed the wall until he reached a place where he could climb back up. By that time Gilliard was long gone and so was the mystery man he met at the bench. Raja checked his phone but all he had taken was a picture of the grass. So much for an ID. Inspector Gilliard was up to something all right, however, Raja had no idea what it was.

Raja felt sick to his stomach and decided to can the surveillance. Vinny was right. He needed to rest. He walked back to his car and drove off. He was too stressed to notice the little blue Peugeot that pulled out behind him.

After driving home Raja poured himself a glass of scotch and sat down. Before he could finish the drink he fell asleep on the couch.

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Chapter Thirty-one: Meet the New Boss

Vinny arrived back at the club and went to the third floor to find Yvette. "I wanted to thank you for the use of your car."

"I was glad to help. Did you hear what happened?" asked Yvette.

"To Bruno? Oh yeah. Couldn't happen to a nicer guy."

Yvette looked confused over Vinny's phrasing and use of sarcasm.

"I mean good riddance to that bastard."

"That I understand. And I agree."

"So, what's going to happen at the cabaret now that Bruno is gone?" asked Vinny.

"Marcelo is taking over as the manager. Henri says the word came in from the owner this morning."

"By the way, who is the owner?"

"I don't know, I've never seen him," said Yvette. "Rumor is he's some rich guy from Rome."

Vinny had been having trouble tracking down the owner through the maze of corporation she had run into during her research. There was a deliberate attempt to hide the owner, and so far it was working.

"Marcelo may not be much improvement in my opinion," said Vinny. "Of course, not beating and raping underage girls would be an excellent start."

"Marcelo is a cad, but he's no Bruno."

"I guess we will see."

"Well, you can see. I'm not going to be here much longer," said Yvette.

"No?"

"My Pierre says he has things just about handled. Then we are gone for good."

"Oh yeah, your Pierre." Vinny thought about what she and Raja had found out regarding Inspector Gilliard. Yvette might be in for more trouble than she could handle, especially if he turned out to be the Scorpion. Vinny decided that when the time was right she would make sure Yvette got out safely. Now wasn't that time.

Vinny went back downstairs to the dressing room to get ready for her night on the floor. The little accountant came in while she was changing, but turned around and waited respectfully until she was dressed.

“*Bonsoir*, Vinny. It is good to see you again. I heard about what happened to that young girl—and that you helped her—what was her name?”

“Maggie.”

“Yes, Maggie, poor thing. Is she okay?”

“She will be. She is home with her parents in Dijon.”

“I suppose, with Bruno now dead, there will be no further liability to the cabaret. I mean legally and financially.”

Vinny stared at the little man. Leave it to an accountant to worry about lawsuits and money when a young girl’s life has been shattered. “Maggie has not even told her parents. I don’t know if that girl will ever recover from what Bruno did to her,” said Vinny, ignoring Henri’s insensitive comment. “As far as I’m concerned, his death couldn’t have come soon enough.”

“You are right, of course. It is terrible what some men are compelled to do. On a better note, it is my understanding that Marcelo is taking over as manager of the cabaret. Perhaps he will be a better boss.”

“Don’t count on it, Henri. Here comes the new boss, same as the old boss.”

“I suppose, *ma chère*. Then again, one can always hope for improvement.”

Vinny didn’t see hope as the agent that was needed, but she wasn’t going to argue. She smiled, and Henri went about his business. Now that Bruno was gone, Vinny was determined to make sure things would be different.

After her first shift serving tables Vinny took a break. Marcelo came through the dressing area while she was freshening up.

“I didn’t think I would see you here again,” said Marcelo. “I’m happy to see I was wrong. You really make that uniform.”

“Look all you want, but hands off.”

“Of course. You know I’m the manager now.”

“Yes, I heard about your big promotion. Don’t let it go to your head.”

“I wanted to let you know that if you need anything, anything at all, I’m your man.”

“All I need is for you to treat the girls right. Do you think you can do that, Marcelo?”

“Of course, of course. I like you, Vinny. Just remember I’m here for you.” Marcelo was loving his newfound power.

“Yeah, I’m good, thank you. My break is over. I have to go back on the floor.” Vinny was happy to get away from Marcelo, but on her way out into the cabaret with all the grabby customers she realized it was out of the frying pan and into the fire. Twice during breaks Vinny went back to the dressing area, hoping to get the chance to break into the secret safe in the back room. She had brought her equipment and stashed it in her locker. Safe cracking was different from hacking, but Vinny had a universal knack when it came to getting into places she wasn’t supposed to go.

The problem was opportunity, or rather, the lack thereof. There were few times when girls weren’t in the dressing area, and fewer still when curious male eyes weren’t coming by hoping to catch sight of the beautiful girls. Frustration was not something Vinny accepted easily. Even as a child her parents had given up on hiding anything from her, and out of necessity opted for teaching her very early on about everything she might come across. It had established a mindset of expecting open and free access to everything that permeated her life. Being thwarted only made Vinny more determined she would have what was in that safe. It was only a matter of time.

Chapter Thirty-two: Dinner for Two

Raja didn't wake up until after ten the next morning. He had slept for nearly eleven hours, needing every minute. His ordeal with Bruno had taken more out of him than he realized. He took a long, hot shower hoping to wash away the pain from his wounds. The physical damage he had sustained at the hands of Bruno was already healing nicely, but the same couldn't be said for his heart. Raja had made a strong connection with Corinne in their short time together. It was typical of how life went for him. He was wide open to other people in a way that allowed him to see and feel things others missed. Although usually a boon to his investigations, it could sometimes be a curse in his personal life. Not everyone could tolerate the kind of intimacy that comes with the empathic power Raja possessed. And empathy was a two way street that could be especially devastating when tragedy struck. Corinne's death had hit him hard.

After his shower, Raja dressed and then discovered he had turned his phone off. He had two voice mails, and two texts. The texts were from Vinny and the first voice mail as well. The last voice mail was the one that riveted his attention. The caller ID was blank, but the voice sounded vaguely familiar. Raja was sure he had heard it before but couldn't recall where. The man's voice said that as of noon today, Margaret Browning would be available specifically to Raja Williams. The message instructed that he must tell no one and must come alone. It included an address in the country just outside Paris. Further instructions insisted that he should keep her in his care until he heard from the caller again. The man never identified himself.

Raja looked at his watch. It was already twenty-five minutes past noon.

At nearly the same time Inspector Gilliard had just ended a private call. When he walked out, his assistant Claude stopped him.

"Did you hear? Monsieur Williams was put under red alert status on the terrorist watch list." Gilliard knew what that meant. A red alert suspect was considered armed and dangerous constituting an immediate threat, and was to be apprehended as soon as possible,

using whatever force was deemed necessary. It gave police wide latitude in the determination of necessary force.

“When did you get the terrorist bulletin?”

“I didn’t, actually. Lieutenant Baston made a point to mention it to me when he and Revel were leaving.” Claude looked for something on his computer. “There it is now. Raja Williams. Odd thing, though, I didn’t even think they knew Monsieur Williams. Did you? Inspector?”

Inspector Gilliard was already gone.

For Raja, the drive to the address took only fifteen minutes in the Porsche. The location was a small villa just outside Sevrans, a town northeast of Paris proper. As Raja turned into the long driveway, a dull ache began in the back of his head. It was the one he got when there was going to be trouble. Unsure of what to expect ahead, he parked along the driveway and walked across the lawn toward a small gazebo, using the trees for cover.

There was a wide curved hedge that separated the yard from a circular drive and fountain that stood in front of the villa’s entrance. Raja followed a stone path that led from the gazebo to a passage through the hedge. Walking through brought him to the edge of the driveway, where he stopped and scanned both ways before he stepped out. The last hedge he went through almost got him killed.

Moments later a car pulled up from the driveway and stopped next to the fountain. Two police officers jumped out and walked toward Raja smiling.

Raja wasn’t expecting anyone from the police. “What are you doing here?” he asked. His head was throbbing.

“I believe I can answer that,” said a voice from behind Raja.

Raja turned. “You,” said Raja, his head now throbbing fiercely.

Inspector Gilliard stood at the hedge. With his gun pointed toward Raja, Gilliard fired twice before Raja could even react. Raja could not believe he wasn’t hit. When he heard two thuds behind him a moment later, he spun around.

The two officers lay motionless on the ground, their drawn guns next to them.

“What the hell,” said Raja, stunned by the events. “You killed them both.”

“Would you rather I let them kill you? A simple thank you would do. You are lucky I still have a steady hand with a gun. Otherwise those two would have killed us both and then they likely would have killed the English woman.” Gilliard holstered his gun and walked past Raja to the two fallen men. He pulled out their ID’s. “Baston and Revel. They must have been working for Bruno.”

“You mean you’re not?”

“Me? A crooked cop?” Gilliard laughed. “Not likely. Are you a crooked private eye?”

“No.”

“Well then, now that we’ve settled that, we should go find Mrs. Browning.” The two men advanced to the main house cautiously. The door was unlocked. Gilliard drew his weapon again and nodded for Raja to go first. Raja opened the door and rushed inside. He stopped in his tracks, dumbfounded by what he saw.

Mrs. Browning was sitting at a dining table that was draped with a fine linen tablecloth. In front of her was a beautiful dinner setting complete with candles and a bouquet of yellow daffodils. She was enjoying a meal of beef bourguignon, one of her favorites. After washing down a bite with a drink of water from a crystal goblet, she looked up pleasantly and said, “What took you so long? I expected you here much sooner. I’ve already eaten more than I should. Look at the wonderful meal Didier prepared especially for me. I think he felt guilty about the dreadful fright he put me through.” She took another bite. “I just can’t stop myself. Mmmmm. The wine sauce he made is so delicious. The recipe is from his home town in the Burgundy region. That Frenchman can certainly cook.” Margaret took another bite.

Raja pinched himself to make sure he wasn’t dreaming. Then he started to laugh.

Inspector Gilliard smiled. “So you see, my annoying American friend, sometimes all is not quite as it seems.”

“You knew about this, didn’t you? And who is this Didier?”

“All in good time, Monsieur Williams. I believe there is a man who will want to see his wife as soon as possible.” The inspector made a phone call.

While they waited for Mrs. Browning's husband to be brought to the villa, Margaret explained that she had finally convinced Didier that she would not try to escape if he would explain to her what was going on. After he explained the situation she agreed to cooperate fully.

The arrival of Phillip Browning at the villa launched a joyous celebration of the long-awaited reunion of husband and wife. Margaret was waiting outside. The tears flowed freely from them both and more than a few flowed from the eyes of the men who were there to witness the event.

"My little potato," cried Phillip when he saw his beloved Margaret.

"Pinky," she returned with equal affection. Neither cared that strangers heard the most intimate nicknames they used only for each other. After kissing profusely for several minutes, Professor Browning asked his wife how she was.

"I'm quite well, all things considered," she said. "You are just in time to share a meal inside."

Phillip looked at her quizzically.

"I'll explain all about it later," said Margaret. "For now, some thanks are in order, don't you think, Phillip?" The two turned their attention to the others.

"Mr. Williams, I cannot thank you enough for what you have done for me," said the professor. "As I said, name your fee. You have certainly earned it."

"Seeing you reunited is pay enough. Besides, I cannot take the credit." Raja looked at Gilliard.

"Yes, yes. Inspector Gilliard. You also have my undying gratitude," said the professor.

"Now, come with me, dear," said Margaret. "It's a dinner for two. The beef will get cold." Margaret dragged her husband toward the door.

After the professor and his wife went inside, Gilliard and Raja discussed the circumstances of Margaret Browning's captivity. Raja began to see Inspector Gilliard in a new light.

When the English couple came out, Inspector Gilliard instructed the policeman who had driven Professor Browning to take them to their hotel and stand guard outside until further notice.

“Is that necessary?” asked the professor.

“There may be no need for concern, but in light of today’s events, we will do it just the same,” said Gilliard. “We will need Margaret down at the station at some point for a statement, but that can wait. You two should sleep in your own bed tonight.”

More policemen arrived to help Inspector Gilliard with the bodies. Raja called Vinny to fill her in on the latest events.

“So, Inspector Gilliard is not the villain we thought?” asked Vinny.

“Apparently not. He saved my life, no question there. The rest I don’t yet fully understand. But he is definitely one of the good guys.”

Vinny was relieved for her new friend Yvette. She had been dreading the devastating disaster it would be for Yvette if Gilliard turned out to be the Scorpion.

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Chapter Thirty-three: A Day at the Docks

The next day Raja got a call from Remy Montagne. The three containers that had left Paris were now back at the train yard near where the fourth container sat. Since originally dropping the containers at the dock, the *Alhambra* had been anchored two miles up river and the crew had been on shore leave. The policemen watching the ship reported that the crew was back on board and it looked like they were readying the ship to weigh anchor. Yarif Assad himself had not been seen and his whereabouts were unknown.

"Kidnapping and human trafficking put the operation on this case squarely in our division," said Remy. "In fact, Inspector Gilliard is planning to come along, if that's okay." Remy knew that the two had been butting heads.

"No problem there," said Raja. "I was wrong about your inspector."

Remy was relieved to hear that. He had a lot of respect for both men. "We have a man waiting near the docks," he said, "and another watching the train yard. I'd like to know what plan you have in mind for this raid."

"I'll meet you at the station and tell you all about it." On the way Raja called Vinny. She still hadn't been able to get an opportunity to crack the safe, but continued doing other research. The test panels she had run on the club drugs came back with some curious results.

"The drugs are pharmaceutical grade, with their chemical formulas matching exactly some reported test variations of drugs that were eventually approved and legally marketed," said Vinny. "I also looked at the police evidence taken from your original fail on the warehouse bust."

"Don't remind me."

"The results from that raid may turn out to be an important piece of the puzzle. There was evidence of cutting and packaging but not manufacturing. That was why I couldn't locate the warehouse. I think the drugs may have come directly from a pharmaceutical lab. There are hundreds of test drugs that are shelved and not sold. Since they are not documented for regulation and sale, they might not be subject to the same level of monitoring."

“Are you saying the pharmaceutical company is selling them directly to the black market?”

“I don’t know about directly, but it is a thought worth pursuing.”

“When we wrap up our case you should turn all your research over to Captain Rochefort in narcotics. I’m sure he would be interested.”

“Sounds like a plan, Stan.”

“Right now I’m heading to the police station. The ship will be on the move soon. Anything else?”

“The phantom corporation that owns the club and antique shop traced to Luxembourg but I lost the trail there. Whoever set things up really didn’t want to be found.”

“Sounds like our elusive Scorpion. Okay, Vinny. Keep your eyes open. I’ll touch base later.”

Raja drove to the 36 and met with Remy and Inspector Gilliard. Captain Rochefort sent Lieutenant Brevard to assist, as he had a lot of experience with police raids.

Raja looked at Gilliard. “Good to see you again, Inspector. You know, I still have some questions you might be able to clear up for me.”

“I’m sure you do, but I will have to explain later.”

“Monsieur Williams, we have been putting our attack plan together,” said Lieutenant Brevard. “Remy tells me you might have a few suggestions. Now would be the time. From what I understand, we will raid the ship at the dock when it is picking up containers. However, you don’t expect any contraband to be in the containers.”

“If my theory is correct the women are already on board,” said Raja. “The containers are simply the slight of hand used to distract attention. The empties will be checked before loading, which, while keeping everything looking legit, will be moot, since the girls will already be on board the ship. I studied the film from the refueling depot, and that’s where I believe the girls were taken onto the ship. However, I am certain the smugglers have help from someone on the customs crew at the dock. My main concern is how to flush him out.”

“If the women are already on board the ship as you say, and the containers are now empty, then our co-conspirator has no further

role to play,” said Brevard. “When we raid the ship he will simply stand back and do nothing, and thus avoid detection.”

“Exactly. We must give him a role and the urgency to act.”

“We warn the customs office ahead of the raid,” said Remy.

“Right you are, Remy. But we must time it perfectly. We don’t want to endanger the girls. It must be when the ship is close but not yet anchored, so the agent has urgent reason to warn them away. Then we watch and listen. As soon as our traitor makes contact, we then must have the means to force the ship to the dock where we can board her quickly and rescue the girls.”

“We have the river police patrol,” said Gilliard.

“Good. However, they must be close enough to be effective, yet out of sight until we need them.”

“*Les stups* has two unmarked speed boats that are small enough to hide and fast enough to close quickly when needed,” said Lieutenant Brevard.

“That will work.”

“I’ll arrange it,” said Brevard.

“How will we know when the customs man contacts the ship?” asked Remy.

“I am having my associate monitor any calls by phone or radio,” said Raja.

“Your associate?” asked Gilliard.

“Yes.” Raja smiled. “That’s something I will have to explain later. As I said, we will monitor all calls and also watch the ship.”

A call came in for Inspector Gilliard.

“I think we have our plan,” said Brevard.

“That’s good,” said Gilliard, “because all four containers have been loaded on the train and the train is heading to the dock. We have to move now.”

The team gathered into two vehicles and drove to the dock. They parked right on the same bridge where Remy and Raja had first surveilled the smuggling operation. From that spot they had a panoramic view that included the dock, the train tracks and the river. Lieutenant Brevard coordinated the assault team that was standing by below.

The first thing they saw was the ship as it made its way along the river toward the docks. The train carrying the containers was still nowhere in sight, but that wouldn't matter. They just had to time this well.

"Are the speedboats alerted?" asked Raja.

"Yes, and standing by," said Brevard. "Just give me the word."

"Good. Who makes the call?"

"That would be me," said Gilliard.

"Remy, you keep eyes on the ship," said Raja. "Let me know exactly what it is doing." They waited what seemed an interminable time and the ship finally slowed for its approach to the dock.

"The ship is fifty meters out and slowing," said Remy.

"Should I call?" asked Gilliard.

"Not yet," said Raja. He called Vinny. "Are we monitoring?"

"I've got a live-time feed. I will capture any calls instantly."

"Thirty meters," announced Remy.

"Inspector, now you can make the call," said Raja.

The inspector dialed quickly. The phone rang twice. "Come on," he said.

"Customs," said the voice on the other end.

"This is Inspector Gilliard from *le crim*. I am calling to alert you to a RAID team that is preparing to board the ship that is approaching Dock 21."

"What? Why wasn't I informed earlier?"

"I'm sorry we got a last minute tip."

"The dock is our jurisdiction. There is protocol."

"I'm afraid there isn't time. Lives are at stake. You are welcome to assist. My team and I will be on the dock shortly." The inspector ended the call.

"Perfect. You better get down there, Inspector."

The inspector jumped in one of the cars and raced over the bridge and down to the dock.

"Status on the ship?" asked Raja.

"Still closing on the dock very slowly," said Remy.

"Well?" Raja asked Vinny. "Are you monitoring?"

"Yes, but nothing yet. Hold on—there's a shortwave signal." Vinny repeated the message she heard. "Police raid coming. Do not dock."

Repeat, do not dock.”

“We’ve got him,” said Raja. “Lieutenant, send in the boats.”

Brevard radioed the two speedboats. They zoomed into view ahead and behind the ship.

The ship's captain cranked up its engine with the thought of running.

“This is the police,” said a loud voice from the PA of the forward speedboat. “Kill your engines and drop anchor, by order of the National Police.”

The ship had no choice but to comply, cutting its engines and dropping the anchor. The RAID team moved onto the dock once the inspector arrived.

The lieutenant called for a larger police river cruiser to join the party, just for good measure. Remy, Raja and Brevard did not relax until they saw Inspector Gilliard and three officers walking up the gang plank onto the ship.

“So far so good,” said Remy, watching through binoculars. “Our men are on board.”

“Nothing more to do up here,” said Raja. “Let’s go down and see if they need any help with searching the ship.”

Inspector Gilliard and his team swarmed onto the vessel.

The captain came out on deck to protest. “What is the meaning of this? We have our customs papers in order, all properly signed and dated.”

“Stand aside,” said Gilliard, ignoring the captain’s protests. “Call your crew up on deck. We are searching this vessel from top to bottom.”

Gilliard instructed two of his RAID team to assemble and guard the crew on the deck while he and the rest of the officers began their search.

When Raja, Remy and Brevard reached the dock, the customs agents were huddled together. One stepped forward.

“I’m going to report this breach of protocol,” said Victor, the agent in charge at Dock 21.

“Me thinks the agent doth protest too much,” said Raja. “Watch them,” he said to Brevard. “One of them is a traitor. He’s got my

vote,” said Raja pointing to Victor. The customs agents looked around at one another suspiciously. “Remy, you are with me.”

Once on board the ship, Raja and Remy went below to find Inspector Gilliard.

“How are we doing?” asked Raja, when they found Gilliard in the engine room.

“Nothing yet. We’ve been over most of the ship and found no sign of the girls. Are you sure they are here?”

Raja looked around the engine room. There was nothing there he didn’t expect to see. He recalled the security footage from the fueling depot. He scanned the engine room again looking for what was missing. “Is there a separate storage area for engine supplies?”

Remy had studied the spec sheet and diagrams of the ship. “No, everything should be in this room.”

Raja had seen a half dozen oil drums loaded onto the ship at the fueling depot. There was only one in the engine room. “Has anyone seen oil drums?”

“Yes, outside the galley,” said one of the policemen. “I assumed they were for garbage.”

“Show me,” said Raja. The officer led them to the hall outside the galley. Five fifty-gallon closed drums stood along the wall.

“I sure hope the girls aren’t inside. They would suffocate in minutes,” said Remy.

“Not necessarily.” Raja looked at the raised rim along the top edge. There were holes punched all around the underside to provide air. The holes could be hidden by the metal strap that bound the top on the drum, a strap that was not now on any of the drums. Raja sniffed at the holes, smelling the faint but distinct odor of chloroform. “I believe we have found the girls.”

Five young women were removed from the drums, none more than eighteen years old. They were all nearly unconscious from the chloroform, but began to revive within half an hour.

Inspector Gilliard returned to the dock and approached the group of customs agents. “We know one of you tried to warn the ship. We weren’t sure which one until now. Fortunately, the ship’s captain was more than happy to tell me for a consideration of leniency. Lieutenant Brevard, you should take Victor into custody.”

Victor wanted to run but his own men, heavily armed as they were, would probably have shot him dead for his treachery. Bravery wasn't Victor's strong suit. He hung his head while Brevard cuffed him.

"We've got five young ladies on that ship who have been through quite an ordeal," said Gilliard. "How fast can we get a couple medical emergency units here, Sergeant?" He directed the question to the customs agent who was next in command at the docks.

"Right away, sir," said the sergeant. He radioed for help.

"As for the *Alhambra*, if I know my customs regulations, you should be seizing that vessel, isn't that right, Sergeant?" asked Gilliard.

"Yes, I'm certain you are right." The sergeant sent his men to secure the vessel.

Remy and Raja stayed on the ship with the girls until the medics arrived. They were traumatized severely, but didn't appear to be physically damaged. Nonetheless the medics insisted they go to the hospital to be checked out.

"What do you think will happen to them?" asked Remy, as he and Raja walked down the gangplank.

"They are young enough to get past this experience and go on with their lives," said Raja. "Hopefully those lives will take a better direction."

Raja and Remy watched as the ship's crew was marched past them and into police custody. The man running both the heroin and white slavery operation, Yarif Assad, was conspicuously absent.

"Do you think we will ever get Assad?" asked Remy.

"I wouldn't say never, but my guess is that he is probably already out of France and outside of your jurisdiction. However, on the plus side, it is doubtful he will be back anytime soon."

Chapter Thirty-four: Holiday Memories

Margaret and Professor Browning stayed in their hotel for two days renewing their marriage. Their second honeymoon started at Hotel Regina, the mid level hotel where they stayed upon arriving in Paris, and took an unexpected upward turn from there. The French National Police, at the request of Inspector Gilliard, had moved them to the upscale Hotel Concorde La Fayette, including a suite on the thirtieth floor that gave them a spectacular view of the city. The city considered that the bizarre circumstance of Margaret's entire experience was a lawsuit waiting to happen, but there was little reason for concern. The Brownings were not so inclined. The drama, despite being harrowing for both of them, had provided a much needed spark to their relationship. The professor had even been heard whistling in the halls, something he hadn't done for years. And when Phillip had climbed into the jacuzzi with his wife, Margaret had nearly choked on the complimentary cocktail she was drinking. Neither of them had the slightest intention of suing anyone for any reason. In fact, they were planning to stay in Paris an extra week.

When Margaret got the call to come to the police station to give her statement, Phillip had insisted on coming along. A small part of that insistence was his concern for her safety but a much greater part was his newfound sense of companionship. The truth was that for the first time in years Phillip could not bear to be apart from his wife.

A police van arrived to pick them up at the hotel. The irony was not lost on Margaret. The short and disastrous ride she had taken in a police van the day her ordeal started was a big part of the reason they were standing at the concierge station in one of the premier Paris hotels. While the Brownings rode to the station, Inspector Gilliard called Raja Williams. Despite his misgivings about having the American loose in Paris, he had to admit Raja had been instrumental in the progress being made. Perhaps his unorthodox methods would be of help again.

"I've got the Brownings coming in for a statement," said Gilliard. "You said you wanted to be here."

“Yes, I believe we have not yet determined why our Mrs. Browning became so important in Paris. Thanks, Inspector.”

When Raja arrived, the Brownings were waiting to see Inspector Gilliard.

“Hello, Mr. Williams, I didn’t expect to see you here,” said the professor. “Margaret and I would like to take you to dinner, if you have the time. It would give us the chance to properly thank you.”

“I would enjoy that if we can leave it open for the moment. I have a few loose ends to tie up.”

“Yes, that should be fine. We’ll be here another week, at least.” He looked at Margaret and they both giggled.

“The inspector is ready,” said an officer who had just walked up. “Follow me.”

When the Brownings got up, he said, “You, too, Monsieur.”

Raja followed the Brownings into what looked like a small conference room. From the one way glass on one wall he surmised it was actually a hastily converted interrogation room. Despite the obvious rapture that had engulfed the Brownings, the police were still concerned about lawsuits, and Gilliard was given direct orders to do nothing to antagonize the Brownings. The artwork on the walls looked familiar to Raja. It had come from the inspector’s office. The typical hard interrogation chairs had been replaced with cushioned upholstered ones.

Inspector Gilliard did the interview with Phillip holding Margaret’s hand. She outlined what the police already knew. She had been out shopping and had returned to the antique shop she had seen the day before. What she saw next had horrified her. The problem was she remembered little of the events other than seeing the tattoo on the killer’s neck, which she could describe in detail. There was no question it was the tattoo worn by Bruno Laurent. Everything else was a blur or a complete blank. With Bruno now dead, Inspector Gilliard was about to conclude the interview and let the Brownings leave. Sensing that, Raja asked Gilliard if he could speak to him privately. Gilliard asked the Brownings to wait, and excused himself. Outside Raja opened the door to the viewing side of the one way glass and extended his hand to Gilliard.

“How did you know?”

"I remembered the pictures from your office." Gilliard and Raja looked into the room where the Brownings sat. "What do you think?" asked Raja.

"I think that woman has been through enough. Bruno must have known she saw him and he was behind the attempt to kill her. Now he's dead. That's what I think. I have a feeling I shouldn't ask, but I will. What do you think?"

"I think there is more."

"More what?"

"That's what I'd like to find out."

"You think she knows more than she's saying?"

"No. But, I think she saw more."

"If she hasn't remembered by now, the memories must be repressed."

"I may be able to do something about that."

The alarm bells started ringing in Gilliard's head. "Hold on now. Are you a trained psychologist?"

"No."

"Well, then, at least, let's bring in a professional. We have one in the building. I think he even does hypnosis."

"Whatever you want, Inspector," said Raja.

Gilliard called in the forensic psychologist, a Dr. Sands. After Gilliard gave him the rundown on Mrs. Browning, he asked, "Do you think it could be a repressed memory?"

"Not exactly. We call it psychogenic amnesia," said Dr. Sands. "It is a form of dissociative amnesia where the patient, having experienced trauma, created a fugue state separating herself from the events."

"But she clearly remembers the tattoo."

"Fascinating," said the doctor. "She has sublimated the tattoo as a fixated symbol. I must make a note." He scribbled into a small notebook.

"I need to know if you can do anything about it?" asked Gilliard.

"Well these things can be unpredictable. However, a hypnotic trance may give us access to the memories."

The doctor went into the room with Gilliard and Raja.

"Mrs. Browning, we would like to try something, if you are willing," said Gilliard. "On the chance there might be additional data you can't recall, I would like to have Dr. Sands try hypnosis."

"Will it be safe?" asked the professor.

"Oh yes," said the doctor. "I am a professional with a degree in hypnotherapy from Vienna. It will be perfectly safe, I can assure you."

Dr. Sands sat down in front of Margaret. "I need you to relax."

The doctor tried several varied techniques but could not induce an effective trance.

"I don't think this is going to work," said Margaret.

"Yes, I agree," said her husband. "I think we should stop."

Gilliard said, "Dr. Sands, is this going to work?"

"Obviously these memories are much too traumatic to be reached at this time," said the doctor. "You see, the brain uses the amnesia as a defense mechanism. It is also possible that Mrs. Browning is one of those strong-willed individuals who is resistive to hypnotism. It is a little known and less understood fact. As I said, it is difficult and sometimes unpredictable."

"I take it that is a no."

"Inspector, I think I might be able to help," said Raja.

"What do you have in mind, Raja?" asked Gilliard.

"I can assure you, sir, that this woman will not be hypnotized," said Dr. Sands.

"I don't need to hypnotize her," said Raja. "I just need to talk to her." He looked at Inspector Gilliard.

Gilliard nodded his approval.

Raja looked at Mrs. Browning. "Margaret, would you mind talking to me for a couple minutes?"

"No, not at all," said Mrs. Browning.

"I need everyone to clear the room," said Raja. "You can stay, Professor, but please sit there and be quiet."

"Okay, let's give the man some space," said Gilliard. He dragged the protesting doctor from the room.

Raja told Margaret to relax, but stay alert. Then he had her concentrate on the tattoo, which was all she could see from the incident at the antique shop. "Is anything happening?" he asked.

"No, I just see the tattoo."

Raja asked her to recall something from before the incident and then after, back and forth, until suddenly the incident went into motion and began to replay in Mrs. Browning's mind.

"I see something else now," she said.

"Tell me what you see?"

"I am looking through the curtain at the shop window."

"Go on."

"Yes, I'm looking through the curtain and I see the man in the chair. He is hurt. Then I notice the man with the tattoo. It is the man whose picture you showed me."

"Bruno?"

"Yes. He has the tattoo on his neck." Margaret opened her eyes. "It was horrible. He beat the man."

"I understand. Close your eyes. Okay, continue."

Margaret did. "Bruno said something I couldn't hear. Then he looks back behind him. Someone else is there. Another man. Bruno looks back as if to get approval. When the man nods, that's when Bruno shoots the poor man in the chair. There was blood everywhere. Uggggh."

"The man who nods, what does he look like?" asked Raja.

Margaret squeezed her eyes closed for a few more seconds. "He is a little man."

"Yes. Go on."

"A little bald man with round glasses."

"Okay, Margaret, we are done," said Raja. Margaret opened her eyes.

Raja's head pounded with the realization of who Margaret was describing. He turned to the glass. "Did you get all that?"

Through the intercom, Gilliard's voice said, "I sure did. Mrs. Browning, you were very helpful. Professor, you can take Margaret back to the hotel. I'll have an officer drive you."

Raja had to warn Vinny. He had already stepped out of the room and called her phone.

Chapter Thirty-five: The Scorpion

Vinny had been trying for days to get access to the floor safe she knew contained key evidence. Finally an event arrived that even the cabarets couldn't ignore. It was a religious holiday in Paris celebrating a French priest who had sacrificed himself to turn the tide of an important battle, making him a martyr and earning him Sainthood. The club was empty. Marcelo had chased everyone out for the day and locked the place up. Vinny had decided it would be the perfect time for her to break into the safe she had located in the floor of the back room. She had waited for Marcelo to leave and then broke in. With everyone out of the place it wouldn't matter how much noise she made. She was in the back preparing her safe-cracking tools, when she heard a noise. Someone else was in the next room. She covered her tools with a rug and walked out.

"Vinny, I didn't expect to see you here today," said the little accountant, Henri Duchamp. "You should be going to church, yes?"

"I guess I'm not that religious," said Vinny.

"Like me, you are an independent soul. Yet, you are a caring soul. I see you have taken a liking to the girls."

"For sure."

"And you want to help them, yes?"

"No question," said Vinny.

"I have grown fond of them as well. But you must understand. Everyone has their place, their role in the world. Some people exist simply to be used and thrown away. Others are there to use them. *C'est la vie*. It is as you say, the law of the jungle. Take yourself, for example." Henri peered at Vinny with his beady, dead-black eyes.

When Vinny's phone rang, she saw it was Raja, and excused herself to answer it, walking across the room.

"Raj."

"Are you at the club?" he said, sounding urgent and uncharacteristically serious.

"Yes. I'm—"

"Listen. I found our man. It's Henri Duchamp, the accountant. He is the Scorpion. He may be there now. Vinny, I want you to get out of there."

Vinny stiffened momentarily when she heard Henri's name, and then she made an effort to relax. When she turned to look for Henri, her head exploded in pain when Henri's pistol slammed into the side of her jaw. She dropped like a sack of potatoes, and everything went black. Henri calmly picked up the phone that had fallen to the ground. He could hear Raja shouting. Smiling, the Scorpion shut off the phone.

When Vinny came to she was tied to a small theater chair. Both her arms and feet were bound tightly, and tape covered her lips. She could taste blood in her mouth and feel the spot where her teeth had cut into her cheek. She was now on the third floor balcony of the club. Henri was nowhere in sight. She struggled but could only loosen the rope on her ankle a few inches. The rope on her wrists wouldn't budge. It wasn't enough to get free.

"I apologize for leaving you alone, *ma chère*. I had business to attend to," said Henri. "Your friends will be here soon and I wanted to be ready for their arrival. I placed high-explosive charges at each of the critical supports for this entire building. All connected to this." He showed her a small silver box with a dial, several buttons and a glowing green light. He turned the dial and pushed one of the buttons. The light turned to red. "There. I've set the timer for three minutes."

Vinny's eyes got wide.

"Don't worry, I haven't started the countdown yet. We will wait for Monsieur Williams and Inspector Gilliard to arrive. The three of you have caused me a great deal of trouble and although I myself abhor excessive violence, I must indulge just this once. The Semtex explosive I have placed will bring this entire building down. It is an impressively destructive material, and I used twice as much as required just for good measure. You will all die. It will be quick if not painless." He pursed his lips feigning remorse. Running the barrel of his gun down Vinny's cheek, he said, "It is a shame to waste such a beautiful woman. *C'est la vie*." Then he smiled. "Of course, I will have time to escape out the back."

Sounds and muffled voices echoed distantly from below.

"Ah, there they are, right on schedule. You know, I have never liked the acoustics in this cabaret." Henri peeked over the railing,

making sure not to be seen.

Vinny strained at her bonds, but they gave no further.

Henri set the silver control box carefully on the ground. He pressed another button. The red light began to flash. The countdown had begun.

Vinny's mind raced. She was on the third floor. Even if Raja could get up there, it would be too late. She had to warn Raja. With the tape over her mouth she could moan, but even if they heard that from below, it would just bring everyone up to where she was, and to their deaths. Vinny looked at the box and Henri standing over it. Once Henri left, she could not free herself fast enough to disarm the box. Even if she did free herself, it was likely that there was a relay on the bomb that could not be disarmed from here anyway.

That left only one option.

Henri nodded to himself, satisfied the countdown timer was working. "Time to say *adieu*," he whispered, and turned toward Vinny.

Vinny had slipped out of her shoes and stood up, still strapped to the chair. She ran straight at Henri, leaned forward and slammed her shoulder into him. The gun popped out of his hand, landing on the carpet a few feet away. The two of them teetered a moment at the railing, and then Henri regained his balance. He grabbed Vinny by the shoulders, the friendly accountant's face now twisted with vicious hatred. He threw Vinny back, slamming her into the wall. He spun around, scanning the carpet until he spotted the gun. He ran over, bending down to pick it up. When he turned back, Vinny, still tied to the chair, was barreling toward him again. This time she rammed her head directly under his chin. The two hit the railing and flipped over into empty space.

Raja and Gilliard had walked around the stage and into the back when they heard the loud crash. Running out, Raja saw Vinny lying up on the stage in a chaos of rope and wood. She wasn't moving.

Raja vaulted onto the stage and raced over to the tangle of arms and legs. There were too many limbs for one person. He looked closely and saw Henri lay underneath Vinny, his head jutting out at an extreme angle that told Raja his neck was broken. The sight of blood trickling from the corner of Vinny's mouth made Raja's chest

tighten and he stopped breathing. His head thumped painfully. His eyes so blurred with tears that he didn't notice when Vinny's eyelids began to flutter.

Vinny moaned urgently.

The sight of her moving released the death grip that had clamped on Raja's chest. He breathed, wiped his eyes and knelt beside her. Gently, he began to slowly peel the tape from her mouth.

Vinny's eyes bugged out, and she jerked her head to pull the tape off her mouth fast. She had no idea how long she had been unconscious. "Get out!" she shouted.

"I was just trying to help," said Raja, apologetically.

"No, get out. There is a bomb. You have to get out of here. NOW!"

Raja knew better than to argue with Vinny. He scooped her up off the floor of the stage and ran toward the front entrance, yelling for everyone to get out. Gilliard heard the warning and shouted to the rest of his officers, who ran outside.

The sound of the explosion was muffled underground, but rocked the sidewalk nonetheless. Moments later the walls of the club began to slide downward and the entire structure collapsed into itself. Dust and debris plumed upward and outward from the area. At a safe distance away on the far side of the street Raja gently placed Vinny on the ground, and after protecting her face with his jacket, covered his eyes and mouth with his shirt tail. Once the debris settled and the air began to clear, the cabaret was gone, buried under a pile of rubble.

Chapter Thirty-six: Margaret and Phillip

Although the Brownings were enjoying each other's company more than they had since the early days of marriage, they were both determined to take Raja Williams and Didier Perrin to dinner. The problem was that Didier was in the arrest phase of his whole operation, an operation that had begun when one of the never seen Interpol techies who listen to countless hours of chatter had come across a cryptic message. A short message had been left on a French ministry official's voice mail that originated from a source that was being tapped by the terrorist watch division. What seemed a random series of numbers would have gone unnoticed in the sea of information had it not been for the savant ability the information analyst had with numbers. The sequence started with what turned out to be a Swiss bank account number, and ended with a series of numbers that on a keypad spelled out the word scorpion. The number in the middle was assumed to be an amount of money. Interpol had sent Didier on assignment in France to investigate.

The Brownings persisted and managed to wrangle Raja, Vinny and Didier together at a restaurant near the Louvre.

"So, we finally meet," said Didier. "Raja Williams and his partner, the renowned Livinia Moore."

"Renowned?" said Vinny. She had gone to great lengths to remove her name from any place it appeared in government files.

"There is still something to be said for paper files, Miss Moore. Your exploits with a computer are known at Interpol."

"Call me Vinny," she said.

"*Bonjour*, Vinny," said Didier. "I am honored."

The Brownings arrived at the restaurant a few minutes later. Margaret was excited to see Didier again. Although she had explained the circumstances of her captivity to Phillip, he was still reluctant to see the Interpol agent as the hero she painted him to be. However, Margaret was excited, and these days that was good enough for him.

"Hello, again," said Margaret. She was in good spirits and looked years younger than she had the last time Raja saw her. "I'm so glad you could make it. Remember, dinner is on us," she said.

Once the group had settled in at their table and ordered, Margaret said, "Now, Mr. Williams, I suppose you must have some questions about my adventure with Didier. Unless you have already heard all the details." Her choice of words and enthusiasm made it clear that any trauma she had experienced was now a forgotten memory.

"I have not," said Raja. He knew Margaret wanted to tell the story and he had unanswered questions.

"Well, you see it all started when I—I suppose you already know how it started. Let me see. After I witnessed the horrible murder, a police van came out of nowhere and picked me up. Then a frightening man in a mask killed them and took me captive. However, as Didier explained, it was the policemen who intended me harm, not the masked man, who by the way was Didier."

"I am curious," said Raja. "How was it that the police van was there so conveniently that day?"

"The police on Bruno's payroll were there to make sure there would be no surprises from legitimate police," said Didier. "Realizing what had happened they intercepted Margaret, fully intending to kill her once they took her to a remote location."

"Which is the reason I am so grateful to Didier for saving my life. Although, at the time he did a professional job of frightening me."

"Second question, Didier. How did you happen to be there that day at that time?"

"What was unknown to all but one trusted contact at Interpol was that Claude Reneau was working as an informant for me. In fact, he left me a message that he had a lead on the identity of the Scorpion that unfortunately I never heard until later. When I got near the shop I spotted the police van and stayed back. I recognized the policemen as three men we had already determined were on Bruno's payroll. I arrived almost simultaneously with Margaret, and saw the whole thing unfold. Knowing the crooked cops would surely kill her, I did the only thing I could."

"And thank God he did," said Margaret. "Didier had run into such a rat's nest of corruption reaching into so many places, he couldn't trust anyone to keep me alive. Bruno's men, the police, and who knows who else was trying to find and kill me. At the time I didn't appreciate his treatment, but in retrospect Didier kept me alive."

“Once Bruno was dead, I thought you would be safe with Raja,” said Didier. “I also thought I knew who all the dirty cops were, but Baston and Revel had somehow stayed under the radar despite being two of the worst. I almost got you both killed. Thank goodness Inspector Gilliard was paying attention.”

“Yes, I suppose I should be thanking him,” said Raja. “Although, it seems obvious that he did not like having me around.”

“True. He was one of the few men who had been completely vetted by Captain Aimee Milan of the Gendarmerie.”

“So that’s why he was interviewed so often,” said Vinny. “He wasn’t suspected as a crooked cop.”

“No. He was helping me. He saw Raja as a loose cannon who would interfere. I saw things differently, and used Raja to help forward my investigation. I had a man following you, did you know that?”

“Nope,” said Raja.

“I’m not surprised. He’s one of the best. He was driving a little blue Peugeot. Gilliard is right about one thing. You are a loose cannon. But without you and Vinny we never would have found the Scorpion.”

“Hey, what about me,” said Margaret. “You’d never have known without me.”

Didier said, “Margaret, I will be eternally grateful to you.”

“Yes, and you must come visit us in England, isn’t that right, Phillip?”

“Yes, of course. You are all welcome any time.”

Chapter Thirty-seven: Pierre and Yvette

Raja and Vinny met Inspector Gilliard and Yvette at a restaurant on the Quai de la Tournelle, along the bank of the Seine River. It was an exclusive restaurant, but Gilliard knew the manager. They had a window table with a spectacular view of the Notre Dame Cathedral. Vinny was decked out in a beautiful blue dress that Raja bought her to make up for the outfit she was forced to wear at the cabaret. They all sat down.

"Where is Didier Perrin? I was hoping he would make it as well," said Raja.

"He's wrapping up all the arrests from the investigation he has been running," said Gilliard. "Right now he is working with Captain Aimee Milan from the Gendarmerie. I believe you know her, Raja."

"Do I? That is one tough lady. An intelligent and honest policeman, though."

"There are a rare few of those around Paris." Gilliard was making reference to the fact that Raja had suspected Gilliard of being crooked. He let Raja off the hook, asking, "What shall we drink?"

"I like my women sweet, but my wine dry," said Raja.

"How about a nice Cabernet Sauvignon?"

"That would be awesome," said Raja. The girls agreed.

Once they had their wine, Gilliard opened the discussion. "I know you two have questions, and I promised you some answers, so perhaps now would be the time."

"Now that I met Didier and understand why you were preventing me from finding Mrs. Browning, a lot has been cleared up. Obviously your connection to the cabaret centered on Yvette. But the secret bank account in Luxembourg?"

"My wife has been—"

"Ex-wife," said Yvette.

"Excuse me, *ma pêche*. My ex-wife has been out of love with me for many years. I think she only stayed because being an inspector's wife has given her a certain social prestige that she craves. Other than that, we are but two ships passing in the night. I do miss my son Lucien."

"That is sad," said Vinny.

"*C'est la vie*. But do not shed a tear for me, *ma chère*. We live, we love. Just not each other. But I have found a love to share." Gilliard smiled broadly, a rare and uncharacteristic look for him.

"Yvette," said Vinny.

"Yes. We met three years back during the citywide crackdowns on prostitution. Although you might think it an unlikely pairing, we are, how do you say, peas in a pod."

"But what about the bank account in Luxembourg?"

"Now that my divorce decree is finally official, I can tell you. The bank account you found is an investment for our future. Rene, my best friend from childhood, is a banker in Luxembourg who has been helping me. When my mother died, he was the executor under probate for her estate, which, albeit modest, did provide enough seed investment. I added what little I could, and Rene did the rest. He is quite skilled with money, as I'm sure you noticed."

"So, you have been waiting for the divorce, not a final payoff," said Vinny. "At the rate the account grew, I was sure you were taking bribes or drug money."

"No, but thanks to my friend Rene, I have enough money set aside for the day I can retire with Yvette to a quiet village somewhere far from Paris."

"But who is Margot Cheroux, the name that was on the bank account?" asked Vinny. "I could not connect it to you."

"Margot Cheroux is Rene's mother, and he is a bank signatory on the account. Of course, I had to hide all my mother's money from my wife's greedy lawyers, so everything was deposited into that account which could not easily be traced to me. I am happy to pay for anything Lucien needs, but I am not willing to contribute any further to my wife's irresponsible dalliances. Let her earn her own way, or find a legitimate husband to support her, if she can."

Vinny could see that Gilliard had been hurt, and changed the subject. "Do you know where in France you want to go?"

Gilliard and Yvette looked at each other.

"As a matter of fact, Pierre and I have talked quite a bit the last few days," said Yvette. "A lot has happened."

"Like the destruction of the cabaret," said Gilliard. "We agreed to take that as the definitive end of Yvette's recent career."

"Yes, and since all that has happened, Pierre has revisited retiring."

"What's this?" asked Raja.

"Well, with my divorce fully settled, a great deal of pressure is gone. More than I realized. And I think my biggest urgency for wanting to leave was to get Yvette far away from the cabaret. Now perhaps we will stay in Paris a bit longer. My interest in bringing criminals to justice has also been revitalized, in no small part thanks to you, Raja."

"Me, what did I do?"

"It's not so much what you did, which as you know, I found annoying on occasion. It's what you didn't do. You didn't give up. As much as I hate to admit it, you reminded me that one's mission can never fail if one never quits. I believe I still have a mission here in Paris."

"Glad to be of help," said Raja. "Pierre, I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship."

"You know, I have seen the movie," said Pierre.

"All the better to appreciate the sentiment."

"Good for you, Pierre," said Vinny. "Perhaps Raja and I will see you again on a case in the future." The immediate frown on Gilliard's face made everyone laugh.

"Not too soon, *s'il vous plaît*," said Gilliard.

The group ate a delicious dinner and chatted idly. Finally, when things had wound down, Gilliard waved to the waiter who brought a bottle to their table.

"I brought a little something of my own. It's a calvados made in the village where I was born. An old family recipe." He had the waiter pour everyone a glass. "Watch out," said Gilliard. "If you are not used to it, you better sip it. It's hot and a little rough, the way I like my drink and my women." He winked at Vinny.

"Now I have met your mysterious associate," said Gilliard, picking up his glass. "To Vinny. Brilliant, brave and beautiful." He looked at Raja. "You are a lucky man."

"Not me," said Raja. "Vinny is a wild spirit that I doubt any man could tame. I don't think any man should. Some things need to be free."

“Perhaps, but we have a saying in France. *L’amour est une force majeure de nature*. Love is a force of nature.”

“Vinny is quite a force majeure all by herself,” said Raja.

“Perhaps, my friend, however, *Quand on veut, on peut*. When one wants, one can.”

“You know, Pierre, we have quite a few sayings in American English, as well,” said Raja. “Love conquers all. Where there’s a will, there’s a way. Don’t eat the yellow snow.”

“And where do you think the best ones come from?” said Gilliard. “France, of course.”

Everyone laughed at that exchange, and they all drank and had a great time.

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Chapter Thirty-eight: Final Fallout

Two of Vinny's least favorite people from the club were the two young men she called the Czechoslovakian brothers, Luc and Marcelo. They were both pigs who took advantage of the girls and hid in the protective shadow that Bruno provided. Nonetheless, Luc and Marcelo turned out to have redeeming value after all. The two of them had accumulated a tome of information on a number of leading citizens who, besides frequenting the club's third floor, had been involved in everything from receiving bribes to providing police protection for criminals. Luc, in particular, was more than willing to provide the details for a reduced prison sentence and the chance to see daylight while he still had some of his precious golden curls left.

Included in the arrests was an inspector-general of the Gendarmes who had been responsible for, among other things, the terrorist red alert on Raja that had almost gotten him killed. Captain Milan had insisted on making that arrest herself. In the end, another five low-level policemen on the Paris police force who had provided information to Bruno were arrested. The worst of the corrupt policemen, including Baston and Revel, were now dead.

The wide net that Didier had cast during his investigation caught several low-level local Paris politicians who had been paid to look the other way when crimes were committed. And when the gendarmes finally arrived at the home of Jacques Normandeau, the worst of all the corrupt politicians got what he deserved. As a deputy for the Minister of the Interior who held sway over both the National police and Gendarmerie, Normandeau had taken over five million Swiss francs in bribes for helping certain criminals circumvent the immigration regulations, all deposited to a private numbered Swiss account. As if that wasn't enough, Normandeau had greedily profited directly from the human trafficking ring and heroin trade. Needless to say, Jacques Normandeau would be spending a long time in the French national prison.

While these and other shake-ups were happening, Raja and Vinny were winding down their activities. There was something to be said for karma. Despite suffering injuries of both a physical and psychic nature, Raja and Vinny were feeling relatively good. Vinny spent time

with Yvette helping the girls from the cabaret find new work, and Raja burned a lot of gas driving his Porsche through the country outside Paris taking in the atmosphere.

Finally, Raja made special arrangements for what had become a tradition. He and Vinny strolled along the Quai des Tuileries, not far from where he had followed Gilliard to his clandestine meeting with Didier Perrin. Whenever his investigation was completed, Raja liked to do what he called an aesthetic cleanse. He would find an appealing art experience that would be intense enough to allow him to let go of whatever unpleasant things he had experienced during the case, rather than having them stuck to him forever. Tonight would be a private after-hours tour of the Musée de l'Orangerie, a museum known as the Sistine Chapel of Impressionism. The museum itself was actually built around and featured the six-foot-high collection of Monet's *Waterlilies* that filled two galleries, and included an array of works by other impressionist masters and French artists like Renoir, Picasso and Matisse. Although Vinny didn't often appreciate Raja's taste in art, she had consented to come along tonight. The two had been forced to work separately for so much of the case in Paris that Vinny needed the chance to renew the bond that made them such a dynamic duo. That connection had helped solve cases and saved both their lives more than once.

The two of them walked together through the museum silently, Raja taking the lead. Sometimes he would stop and look at a painting for a long time and Vinny began to duplicate and understand what Raja saw in the artwork, and the power it had to elevate the soul. After hours in the museum, they were finally exhausted but ecstatic, what Raja called aesthetically cleansed. They thanked the curator's assistant who had opened the museum for them at the insistence of someone high in the French government.

Epilogue

After Raja and Vinny arrived at the Le Bourget Airport, they unloaded their bags from the limousine. As they watched the car drive away, Vinny said, "Hey Raj, I wanted to ask why we took a limousine to the airport. I'm certainly not complaining, but why not bring Napoleon? This is where you store him."

Raja smiled. "I left Napoleon with a friend."

Earlier that morning, when Remy Montagne had arrived at the police station, and sat down at his desk he found a small envelope with an embossed falcon on it. It was addressed only, *Remy*. He opened it and pulled out a note. Across the top it read, *Follow these instructions*, which he did. He went to the police parking level two. Standing in the middle he walked exactly one hundred steps and stopped. He checked the note again, which read, *What do you see?* He looked around. There stood the orange Porsche. There was a second note tucked under the wiper blade. The note had only one word, *Well?* Remy tried the doors but they were locked. Likewise the trunk. He walked around the car and then looked at the note again. He smiled. A check of the wheel wells revealed the keys hidden above the right rear wheel. Remy opened the door and climbed into the driver's seat. There was a letter on the passenger's seat. It was handwritten.

Dear Remy,

It was a pleasure working with you on our smuggling case. I'm sure we saved many lives. You are an excellent detective who will be running the 36 someday, of that I have no doubt. On a more personal note, Napoleon mentioned how much he enjoyed your driving, so I thought you two would be a perfect match. The papers are in the glove box. He is all yours.

Take care and stay in touch.

Your friend always,

Raja

"I hope it was a good friend," said Vinny.

"No doubt about it, Vinny. A good friend, indeed."

Vinny and Raja walked to the plane. Mickey stood at the bottom of the stairs waiting to greet them.

"It's good to see you two again."

"Good to be seen," said Raja.

"Ditto," said Vinny.

"I've been watching the satellite feed on the plane," said Mickey. "It's been all over the news. Here and in the states. You two must have been busy."

"You have no idea."

Mickey looked at Raja's stitches and the bruise on Vinny's jaw. "It looks like you both took some heavy hits."

"You think?" said Vinny, sounding uncharacteristically snide.

"You'll have to excuse Vinny," said Raja. "She dove three stories onto a hardwood stage floor. Then the whole cabaret building blew up. I don't think she is back to her good-natured self quite yet."

"All I can say is you guys sure know how to party."

The three boarded the Hawker 1000 jet, and while Mickey prepared for takeoff, Raja sat back in his seat and sighed. It was the first time he had fully relaxed since they had touched down in Paris. He was tired, and the case had taken its toll. He thought about Corinne.

After the plane had taken off and leveled at cruising altitude, Vinny sat down across from him. "Penny for your thoughts," said Vinny.

Raja didn't answer for a long time. Then he said, "You know Vinny, there is so much in this world that needs fixing. Sometimes I wonder if what I do will ever make a difference. A real difference."

"You certainly made a difference with those girls on Assad's ship."

"True."

"And with Professor and Mrs. Browning."

"I suppose. But I couldn't help Corinne."

"You can't measure your deeds by whether everything is fixed. Sometimes there is a lot that needs fixing. And that might require a lot more good deeds. Did your deed help someone? That is the only measure, dude."

Raja looked at Vinny. Sometimes she surprised him with a wisdom that transcended her years. "You make an excellent point. Which reminds me, Vinny, I've been meaning to ask you something."

When you were up on the third floor of the cabaret and jumped off that balcony, by all rights you should have died.”

“Yeah, so what?”

“So, why did you do that?”

“I don’t know. I guess I panicked.” Vinny sipped her drink and pretended to be interested in something she saw out the window on the horizon.

Raja looked at her and smiled. He knew better. She had done it to save him.

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### **Note from the Author**

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Following is the prologue of Book Three in the Raja Williams Series.

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## **Swimming Upstream**

### **Prologue: Lost in the Woods**

Laura Bachman was an excellent skier. She had been skiing since the time she could walk, or so the story goes. In fact, her earliest life memory was her father catching her after she slid down the small embankment near her childhood home on the outskirts of Seattle, Washington. At the time, she was wearing her first tiny pair of skis. She had heard her father tell the story at dinners and parties more times than she could count. To hear him tell it, she was a born natural, ready for competition right from the start. As Laura recalled, she barely managed to stay upright for all of four feet. Now, on a normal day she commanded the skis effortlessly like they were an extension of her body. Today, however, the skis were heavy and awkward.

Laura was usually very cautious and over-prepared when she ventured on one of her cross country skiing weekends through the hills around Mount Rainier. Preparedness was a characteristic she had always possessed, but one that was honed razor sharp during her days at Stanford Law School. It proved to be one of the reasons she was hired right out of school at the prestigious Seattle firm of Lowenstein, Giraldi & Kraft. She came in prepared and wowed a senior partner in her interview. Know before you go, look before you leap, plan for all possibilities—these were the mantras of Laura's life.

Normally she would never go skiing without a buddy, that being the unwritten rule for any excursion into even moderately unfamiliar terrain. She preferred backcountry, a form of cross country skiing done far from the commercial areas of Mount Rainier. There were no trails or lifts, no nearby ranger to rescue you from trouble. You never knew when you might run into an unfriendly animal, step on a snake, sprain an ankle, or encounter any of a hundred other difficulties that Laura had thought out beforehand and fully prepared for.

On this occasion, when her roommate and co-worker at the firm, Amanda Perkins, had canceled at the last minute, Laura decided to go it alone. She needed the time away from the rest of the world.

Ben had been ragging her about her lack of commitment to their relationship, and the walls were closing in. The mountain was always her cure for any troubles, and she had gone skiing on so many occasions over the years that she knew Mount Rainier National Park better than most of the rangers.

For that reason, it was also unusual for Laura to get lost, and yet she had done just that. Perhaps she was distracted by regret about her fight with Ben, replaying the conversation over and over in her mind and trying in vain to make it end without the harsh words she had spoken. She had also been shaken by something she learned the day before, something that severely unbalanced her normally low center of gravity. She tried to forget what she had seen, but it was a three alarm fire whose bells would not stop ringing.

Laura felt a strong sense of urgency to get off the mountain as soon as possible. Perhaps it was the expected cold of night approaching. The temperature could shift drastically. Laura had, of course, checked and double checked the weather reports for the area which called for a cold front to settle in later that night. Despite wearing a thermal jacket made of high-tech NASA material, she felt an unpleasant chill seeping into her body. She was in a hurry. That's why, when she ran out of snow a mile back, she dumped her skis on the ground and continued on foot through the thick woods. An hour later she was still in the woods with no end in sight. Her growing desperation set her pulse racing and her head pounding. About ready to give up, she spotted a light through the trees ahead. Although dim and a long way off, to Laura it was a blazing beacon of hope. Assuming it was a house, she rededicated her muscles to making it at least that far.

Laura stumbled out of the woods into a clearing that was actually the backyard of someone's home. With only one hundred yards of ground between her and the light, she could now see it was a spotlight on the back porch. By the time she had closed half the distance to the house she felt numb, and her breathing was labored.

Laura stopped, gathering her strength for the last fifty yards. When the back door opened and a man stepped out into the light, she was certain her luck had changed. She staggered forward as the man picked up a wheelbarrow full of firewood near the woodpile in

his backyard, unaware of her presence. He turned the wheelbarrow toward the house.

“Help,” she shouted, but it came out sounding much closer to a rasping whisper. Nonetheless, the man heard her cry in the crisp night air and looked up. As Laura staggered toward him his first thought was to wonder what a drunk person was doing in his backyard. She continued moving erratically toward him until she finally stopped in her tracks, stood unnaturally stiff and erect for a fleeting moment, and then pitched forward to the ground like a felled tree.

The man let go of one handle of the wheelbarrow and it tipped over spilling out all the split cedar logs he had loaded. Barely noticing, he dropped the other handle and ran to her side. Pulling off his gloves, he checked her neck carefully in several spots, but found no pulse.

The likelihood of a twenty-nine year old woman in her prime and in good health falling over dead was improbable. The fact that she was a near Olympic-level athlete in peak condition made it impossible.

However, there was no doubt that Laura Bachman was dead. More than likely, the twenty-four inches of a Beman hunting arrow sticking out of her back had something to do with it.

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## About the Author

Jack Thompson is a professional writer, finding voices in a number of different genres. So far he has written a wide variety, including children's stories, fairy tales, science fiction, paranormal romance, political thrillers and mystery detective stories. He's even written a book of poetry. As an avid reader he has enjoyed an even wider variety from classic Greek literature to modern horror.

According to Jack, whether reading or writing, what makes a story great is how well it communicates to the reader. Whether presenting him with a hero he wishes he could be or a villain he chooses to hate, the characters must relate to the reader on a personal level. A reader will leave a good story in an improved condition. He may have learned something new about the world or himself, or simply been well entertained. That's why Jack writes.

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