



TO FEAR  
*the*  
DAWN

A NOVEL

SEAN YOUNG

# **To Fear the Dawn**

**SEAN YOUNG**

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*For my wife, Carolyn*

# **To Fear the Dawn**

## To Fear the Dawn

Manantau Scofield dived through the open door in a military-style roll. He crouched, pressing his back against the rough concrete wall, and pointed his nine-millimetre Beretta into the darkness. Silence. He glanced from left to right, searching for any sign of life. Nothing. It was like staring into a void.

The door should not have been open. Where was everyone? Lightning flashed outside, illuminating the empty hallway for a moment before plunging it back into darkness. *One, two...* The thunder was explosive. Scofield moved with the crash, using it to mask any sound he might make. He shot through the archway into the lounge and dropped to his knees.

His heart pounded in his chest. Adrenaline electrified his senses. He listened. Still no sound. Torrential rain battered against the roof and windows, but inside the home an eerie stillness hung. With no light to speak of, vision was useless. He concentrated all his nervous energy in his ears.

Nearly two minutes passed. But for the drumming rain outside, the mansion remained shrouded in ghostly silence. A second flash of lightning cracked the sky, illuminating the room for an instant. Three lifeless faces stared back at him from the opposite end of the room. Scofield's stomach knotted. It was a scene from a horror movie. The heads were tilted at unsightly angles and their expressions were hideous masks of terror. The lightning vanished, engulfing the room in darkness once more. One second, two seconds. The thunder exploded outside and, again, Scofield rolled under its cover. *Never remain in your last position.*

Dead! The grotesque picture of his superior's corpse was etched in his mind like a surreal sculpture. Garrick Slater had been murdered. And everyone else at the Johannesburg cell. How was it possible? Did the Hypatia conglomerate's tentacles already stretch this far?

Scofield shook his head as if to clear it. The thought was too terrifying to accept. If they had infiltrated Interpol's most clandestine operations then there was nothing they were no longer capable of. They were truly unstoppable. Nobody knew the whereabouts of the cells. Each one operated autonomously. How in Hades had they traced this cell? Had Cape Town been taken out too?

Lightning flashed again. Scofield scanned the room, taking in as much information as he could in the brief flicker. Slater and the two others had been shot in their seats at the opposite end of the room. Their bodies leaned at impossible angles and trickles of blood cut across their faces like stained-glass windows in some hellish church. A fourth body lay face down on the floor to his right. The multiple-murder had the organisation's unmistakable signature written all over it. Only the *Sons of Molech* could have pulled this off.

Scofield sighed and stood up. The need for silence had long since passed. He moved across to Garrick Slater and felt the man's wrist. It was an action born of habit. There was no pulse. Hardly surprising. The freakish stare told him all he needed to know. Something bothered him, though. He frowned and shook his head, as if trying to dislodge the thought.

The body was cold. *What was it?* Another flash. Scofield's gaze flicked towards the dining room. Footprints! The carpet was covered with mud. It had only started raining ten minutes before. And these men had been killed hours ago. He dropped to his knees and scrambled for cover behind the blood-soaked sofa, his heart racing.

He clenched his teeth and waited. An eon passed. Why had the killer not fled the scene? Or had he? Scofield strained his ears in the darkness for any sign of the assassin's presence. He had to be there. Nothing. Perhaps he was upstairs, or outside.

Scofield allowed the minutes to stretch by. Still no sound. Yet, he waited, delaying the moment, straining any predator's patience to breaking point. All the while, he listened – for a breath, a light scrape or rustle of clothing as someone changed position. Nothing. Finally convinced that no danger lurked, he moved under the cover of darkness. Staying low, he edged forward on his knees using his left hand for balance. His right hand held the gun erect, ready to fire.

Halfway across the floor, glass crunched under his knee. He felt the sting as the shard sliced his patella. Almost simultaneously, there was a slight cough from the dining room and two slugs smashed into his chest.

The bullets ripped through his torso like flaming meteors. Recoiling from the force, he rolled to his right and smashed into a vase against the wall. This time he saw the flashes and returned fire in mid-roll.

Scofield reached the safety of a chair and used it for cover. He forced his breathing to slow in an effort to control the inferno in his chest and, once again, listened for the shooter. The man was a wraith. It was as if he'd never been there. *Escape*. Scofield couldn't afford to tangle with the assassin. He had to warn the other cells. And he had to get his information to Cape Town – or London. It was plain that the Johannesburg cell had been obliterated. Hypatia had their number. The others had to know what had happened.

Quietly as he could, he headed back to the hallway, using the chair for cover. The killer came through the archway in a shadowy blur. Scofield fired off a small burst of rounds, tracking the man's trajectory. Sparks flashed where they ricocheted off the walls. The man's silenced weapon coughed twice more and Scofield felt the sharp thud as another bullet tore into his left shoulder.

*Move now*. If the intruder got to his feet, he was as good as dead. He dived for the coffee table and upturned it, using it for cover. He smashed it into the chair behind which the intruder had landed and shoved in an attempt to crush his attacker.

The intruder slipped from behind the chair like a cat and sprang around the table. A gun-barrel glinted in the darkness. Scofield lashed out with his foot. The weapon spun from the killer's hand. It flew across the room and clattered against the wall. The man came at him with the savagery of a serpent.

Scofield lashed out at the man's groin and clawed for his eyes with his fingers, but the assassin was too quick. Fortunately, he was now between the killer and his gun. He pushed the man back and levelled his own weapon.

The killer unleashed a blitzkrieg. Scofield fired blindly, but couldn't tell where the next striking limb would come from. The man ripped the gun from his hand and Scofield felt his finger snap under the trigger guard.

He lashed out at the assassin's knee in desperation and the man went down. Scofield spun away, diving through the wood-paned window. Glass and wood shattered under his weight.

The deafening roar of his own gun erupted behind him and a shower of bullets ricocheted off the floor. *Run.*

He raced for his car. Why had he parked all the way around the back? A bullet rebounded off the wall as he turned the corner. He ducked and rushed for his vehicle. Scofield struggled with the key in the ignition. The engine turned for a moment, then sputtered and died. On his second attempt, it roared to life.

He spun the vehicle around, heading for the main gate. The assassin rounded the corner as he approached it. Lightning flashed across the sky in a cruel fork. It illuminated the killer's freckled, boyish features for an instant. A quick twist of the wheel. He aimed the vehicle at his assailant. The man dived for cover, but Scofield's windshield shattered in two places. The bullets lodged in the passenger seat.

He veered to his right and careened down the tree-lined driveway. Rain splattered against his window as the vehicle gathered speed, obscuring his vision. Scofield fumbled for the wipers but failed to find them in the darkness. No time! He drove blind until the gates loomed out of the darkness ahead of him. Bullets smashed through the rear window just as he reached the corner. There was a shriek of tyres as the car slid out of control. Manantau Scofield struggled with the wheel. A burst of searing pain rocketed through his injured shoulder down his arm and across into his chest. He gasped and blinked in an effort to force back the blackness that began to encroach on his vision. With Herculean effort, he clenched his teeth and ignored the agony, holding the vehicle through the turn.

The vehicle's tail spun out when he reached the road and he geared down to gain traction. Then he gunned the motor. Free at last he raced down the street. He spun round the first corner to avoid any more shots. After two blocks, he turned again in case the killer had continued the chase on foot. Headlights glared out of the darkness ahead of him. He raised a hand to shield his eyes. That was when he felt the final bullet. It struck him at the base of the neck.

Manantau Scofield groaned in agony. In his rear-view mirror, he saw the vehicle already making its turn. He twisted the wheel, turning left, then right. Another left found him on a narrow dirt road. He switched off his lights and pushed on in the darkness until he spotted a fallen tree. In a flash, he swung off the road. His ancient Beetle bounced across a ditch that flanked the narrow track. He twisted the wheel back and slid in behind the tree.

He waited for more than twenty minutes. His pursuers never appeared. What now? Cape Town was out of the question. He could already feel the effects of his injuries. He didn't have much time left. Scofield grimaced at the realisation. He'd never see another sunrise. That was what he'd miss the most. Sunrise was the most beautiful time of day. Especially in Africa.

His fist clenched on the wheel. The information had to be saved. And he could think of only one man he could pass it on to. It was a long shot, but he was out of options. He sighed in resignation and struggled to reach his mobile phone.

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"Gallagher, is that you?" The voice on the other end of the line hissed like a dying serpent.

Nicholas tensed, suppressing the urge to pull the phone away from his ear. "Who is this?"

"Willow. We need to meet. Be at *Tuxedoes*, Rivonia in fifteen minutes." The man sounded as if he'd run a marathon, and the silence that ensued was broken with laboured gasps for air.

Nicholas felt his stomach knot. *Of all the bad timing! I don't need this.* He took a breath before replying. "Now's not a good time. Can we make it tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow will be too late. It has to be now. There are things —" the words choked off and ended in a retching cough. Several seconds lapsed before the man resumed. "There are things I need to tell you."

Nicholas shook his head. His lips curled in a sardonic smile. “Willow, it’s eleven o’clock. I’ve had a lousy day, and my wife’s expecting me home in half an hour.”

“I have information about the Pentagon deal you just lost. No charge this time.”

Nicholas jolted at reference to his lunchtime meeting. Annoyance immediately turned to intrigue. *How could Willow know about that already! And for free.* Information about the Pentagon deal would be worth a fortune. No. It went deeper than that. Willow sounded terrified. Nicholas chewed his bottom lip as he came to a decision. “Okay, I’ll be there. This had better be good.”

More heavy breathing. The man sounded like an overworked rasp. “Make sure nobody follows you. They’re probably watching you as we speak.”

Nicholas glanced out of his office window. A fork of lightning arced across the shrouded sky. Ridiculous. *Nobody could reach you here.* On an impulse, he pressed a button on the remote. The blinds closed across the windows. Why did Willow always make him so jumpy? “I’ll see you in fifteen minutes.”

He replaced the telephone on the receiver and rose from his teak desk. He had a sudden involuntary shiver. The room had become rather chilly. *Cursed air-conditioning.* After donning his jacket, he reached for the phone again.

“Hello?”

“Hey, beautiful,” Nicholas smiled at the sound of the voice on the other end of the line.

The tone brightened. “Hi, darling. How’s it going?”

After nearly five years of marriage, the sound of Jessica’s British public-school accent still enthralled him. “Don’t even ask.”

“That bad, huh?”

“Well – we lost the Pentagon contract, for a start.” Nicholas clenched his teeth. Simply verbalising the defeat rekindled his contempt for the slimy American bureaucrat who had cost him the deal.

There was a pause. “How much?”

“Three and a half billion.”

“U.S.?”

“Uh-huh.”

Another pause. “How much was he asking for?”

“A hundred thousand US.”

“Was Peter with you?”

“Naturally.”

“And what did he say?”

Nicholas shook his head and smiled. “You know Peter. He reckoned I should slip the money under the table and be done with it.”

“Well, I guess we won’t starve. There’ll be other contracts.”

“I guess.” Nicholas grimaced. “Then I got a call a few minutes ago – from Willow – just as I was wrapping up.”

The silence settled like frost over their conversation. “And what did he want?” she finally replied.

“I have to meet with him right away. He says he has information I might be interested in.”

“You’re going to meet him *now*?”

*Here it comes.* Nicholas held his breath and tightened his grip on the telephone. Her sudden rise in pitch and sharp tones spoke of a coming lecture. *Try to keep it short.* “I’m afraid so. I thought I’d better call and let you know I’ll be home late.”

“I don’t like him, Nicholas. He’s mixed up in something and it’s dangerous.”

“This could save the Pentagon deal. I can’t pass it up. I won’t be long, I promise.”

She sighed. “Okay. I’ll wait up.”

Her tone was sulky, but the lecture was over. Nicholas smiled. "How's Jared?"

"He's fine. The phone woke him. He's jumping up and down, to speak to you."

Nicholas chuckled. "Let me talk to him."

A rustle. "Hello?"

"Hey, big guy. How're you doing?"

"Fine."

Nicholas smiled. The telephone was a new toy for Jared. It made conversation painfully reserved. "And what did you do at nursery school today?"

"I drew a picture."

"A picture! Of what?"

Suddenly Jared became animated. "I drew a picture of our jet at the airport. And you and me and mommy were there. And Hughes, the pilot. And it was flying to Disney World!"

"Disney World! Is that where you want to go?"

"Mommy hung it on the fridge."

"That's great. When can I see it?"

"Daddy? When you coming home?"

"Soon, big guy. And then I'll look at your jet, okay? Will you call Mommy again for me?"

Another rustle, then Jessica came back on the line. "Come home soon. He's been on at me all evening."

"Just as soon as I'm done with Willow. I promise."

"Um – Nicholas. I hate to spoil your day further, but I got a call from Father McCain's office today. They said it was urgent."

Nicholas winced. "What is it this time? An orphanage – an old age home?"

"That's not fair, Nicholas."

He sighed, accepting the light rebuke. The priest seldom asked for money and when he did, it was always for a good cause. The incessant calls that came in waves two to three times a year were for something far more excruciating than financial assistance.

"He invited us to a service again, didn't he?"

"They didn't say. It was a new guy that called. He just asked if you could phone back."

"They've been calling all week, leaving messages. I guess I'll have to get back to him some time."

"Wouldn't it be easier to just give in and go?"

"It wouldn't help. A visit would only encourage him."

She chuckled. "Well, I've done my duty. You've got the message, so I can sleep with a clear conscience."

Nicholas laughed too. "Let me get this meeting over with and come home. I'll see you in an hour – two at the most."

"Till then. Love you."

"Kiss Jared for me." Nicholas replaced the telephone on the receiver and quickly shut down his computer. He made his way to the elevator, passing several offices en route. Only one was still occupied. Nicholas stuck his head through the open door.

"Cheers, Peter. I'm off. Don't stay here all night."

Peter Solzsenheim raised his hand in a half-hearted wave, but didn't look up from his monitor. Nicholas nodded. The man was clearly still upset about the luncheon fiasco. *One hundred thousand lousy dollars*. It was chicken feed. All he'd needed to do was slip the leather brief case under the table and the contract would have been theirs. But he'd balked. Peter would never understand. Nicholas wasn't sure he understood it himself. *Lawrence would have approved*. That was the only consolation. He owed it to his friend – or to his memory, at least.

Leaving Peter to stew, he headed for the elevator and down to the basement. It was practically deserted at this hour of the night. His footsteps echoed off the whitewashed walls.

Nicholas shivered. He couldn't help the furtive glance over his shoulder as, once again, his thoughts turned to his conversation with Willow. *They're probably watching you as we speak.* Who were they? In two years, Willow had never revealed that secret.

The silver Maserati GranTurismo gleamed under the basement's harsh fluorescent lights. It was parked a good thirty metres away. Nicholas glanced over his shoulder a second time and cursed the fact that he hadn't found a parking bay closer to the elevator.

*Just relax. Nobody could get past security without a valid card.* But this knowledge failed to slow his heart rate or stop the thin film of perspiration that formed on his forehead. Why did he tolerate Willow's nonsense? Like Jessica said, the man was obviously involved with dangerous people. On the other hand, his information was always accurate and, in the world of international finance and technology deals, information was everything.

He reached the vehicle and sighed as the engine roared to life. Two levels up, he waved at the security guard. The man saluted and lifted the boom. Nicholas glanced at his rear-view mirror as he sped away. There was only one other vehicle in the street. A dark sedan with square headlights – that was all he could make out.

*Make sure nobody follows you.* He kept an eye on it until he reached the on-ramp. Was he being followed? Absurd. Any vehicle leaving Computer Park at this hour would be headed for the freeway. It was the quickest route home, no matter where you were going. Nicholas tried to keep his eye on the vehicle, but lost track of it in the traffic behind him.

Probably nothing. He turned north, heading for Rivonia. The ten-minute drive gave him a chance to clear his mind. He took the off-ramp and headed into the heart of Rivonia's nightlife district. Even in the middle of a *Highveld* thunderstorm, the pavements danced with chic clubs and trendy sidewalk cafés. Nicholas slowed down, giving way to a group of people crossing the street. Women in their early twenties. They wore a variety of fashionable denims and short tops that revealed sculpted waistlines. *Still not a patch on Jessica.*

Finally, the giant structure with a pink neon sign bearing the name *Tuxedos* came into view. An air of seedy elegance oozed from the building.

The high-priced, luxury vehicles lining the parking lot should have looked out of place against the garish neon backdrop above the door. Instead, they only served to complete the picture. He grimaced and hunted for an empty space. Willow was usually more selective when choosing a rendezvous.

A scruffy-looking parking attendant rushed to point out one of the few spaces remaining. Nicholas swerved to avoid running over the man. *Parking attendant – a flattering title for what amounted to a beggar.* It had become almost impossible to go anywhere in Johannesburg without being accosted by someone expecting a buck to 'keep an eye on your car'.

The man beamed and pointed first at his own eye and then at Nicholas' vehicle. Nicholas gave the traditional thumbs up sign to the eager ruffian and headed for the main entrance.

The interior was garish and artificial, with midnight blue carpeting and mini spotlights lining the walls and ceilings. That, coupled with the disco lights on the stage, gave it the appearance of a casino.

Nicholas groaned inwardly as his eyes acclimatised to the dim light. The reception room's south wall was a series of mirrored panels that reflected the glitzy lighting of the main hall. As he entered, one of the panels swung open. A tall man emerged from the room beyond. He was dressed in a well-tailored navy suit and had a neatly trimmed moustache and haircut to match. Expensive jewellery gleamed in the artificial light and his polished Caterpillars shone like ebony.

“Mr Gallagher! It’s an honour to have you in our club.” The man spoke with only the slightest trace of an Afrikaans accent and acted as if Nicholas was a regular customer. He held Nicholas’ gaze just a little longer than necessary as he shook hands.

Nicholas shuffled in discomfort. This was the price of being a member of South Africa’s social elite. With his face constantly in the newspapers and on television, it was difficult to go anywhere without being recognised. “Good evening, ah –”

“Danille.” The manager reached out, taking Nicholas by the arm. “Have you booked a private lounge, or are you meeting a party?”

“Meeting someone. He would probably have booked in the name of Willow.”

The man winced. “Sorry to tell you we’ve had no calls from Mr Willow this week. Are you sure he booked?”

Nicholas shrugged. “Perhaps he didn’t. It was a last minute sort of arrangement. I can wait at the bar.”

“Mr Gallagher, I wouldn’t hear of it!” the man exclaimed with a wave. “If you’re not going to be very long, I can squeeze you in near the stage. It’s a private lounge – booked by a partner in one of Johannesburg’s eminent legal firms, and he never arrives on time.”

Without a moment’s hesitation, the man led Nicholas into the main hall. The room was littered with high steel tables. Groups of rotund men in creased, collared shirts milled about. Most of the patrons had removed their jackets and some had already lost their ties.

Several bars, lined with an army of waiters, flanked the gigantic hall. Nicholas watched in mild amusement as the waiters bustled between the bars and tables carrying a flamboyant array of cocktails and shooters.

“Here we are.” The manager ushered him into a small lounge near the edge of the stage. “The seating’s more comfortable, although your angle to the stage isn’t great.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Nicholas dismissed the man’s concerns with a wave. *Like I care.* The performances were supposed to be extremely artistic and, according to the country’s most respected critics, made all sorts of deep political and social statements, but when you got right down to it they were little more than an upmarket strip tease.

It was an ideal meeting place for Willow as the hall was dark and the blaring music that accompanied the incessant parade of performers would drown out all conversation from unwanted eavesdroppers.

The manager seated Nicholas in one of the comfortable armchairs, fussing over him like a concerned grandmother. “I’ll send a waitress and have the reception staff look out for Mr Willow.”

The waitress arrived in less than sixty seconds. She was pert, with shoulder length, blonde hair. “Anything to drink, sir?”

“Nothing yet, thank you. I’ll wait until my appointment arrives.”

It was another ten minutes before Willow appeared. Nicholas caught sight of him long before he reached the lounge. The man’s gait seemed rigid and he fixed Nicholas with a granite stare. He’d wrapped a giant trench coat tightly around his body.

Nicholas frowned. It struck him as odd that Willow would dress so warmly in the stuffy atmosphere of *Tuxedoes*.

Willow stepped into the lounge and slumped down in the armchair opposite Nicholas. He nodded in greeting, but said nothing. Instead, he slid a piece of paper across the table between them.

“What’s this?” Nicholas asked, reaching for the crumpled sheet. He frowned as he read the note. It contained a name – *Bancroft & Mellencamp* – and a clearance code of some sort. He recognised the name. It belonged to a well-known attorneys’ firm. In fact, they did a lot of work for one of his company’s subsidiaries.

And the code – a file reference, maybe? He frowned. At the bottom of the sheet were the words *Clifton – Partner*. The large, shaky letters looked like they'd been written by a child.

Willow leaned back in his chair, gasping for breath. His face was drenched in sweat and his movements seemed feeble as he struggled to loosen the buttons on his coat.

"Are you alright?" As he asked the question, Nicholas noticed a dark stain on the white shirt beneath the trench coat. It was the colour of a mature red wine. His breath choked in his throat and he stared in horror at the crimson tide spreading across the man's shirt.

Before he could say anything, the waitress returned. "Would you like me to take your order now, sir?" She addressed Nicholas first. Then her eyes wandered towards Willow.

Nicholas panicked. "Johnny Walker on the rocks," he cut in quickly, "a double. And my friend will have a Castle Light." He reached into his jacket pocket and whipped out his wallet, offering the woman a large denomination note. He was desperate to draw her attention away from Willow's injuries.

"Right away, sir," the waitress smiled.

*Relief.* "Quickly please. I have another appointment in half an hour. The change is yours."

The woman practically rocketed from the room, clutching the note in her right hand. Nicholas held his breath. As soon as she'd left the lounge, he rounded on Willow.

"What's going on?" he demanded. "You should be in hospital."

"No time," Willow croaked. "It's too late for that now, anyway."

"Who did this to you?"

"I'm sorry, Nicholas. I couldn't tell you before." The man paused. Even those few words had worn him out. His breath came in short, painful gasps.

"Look, Willow. I —"

"My name's not Willow. It's Manantau Scofield."

*Scofield?* "Are you involved in something illegal?"

Willow grimaced in what sounded like a chuckle, but could have been a cough. "There's no time. Everything you need to know is in that document."

"This document?" Nicholas waved the small piece of paper in confusion.

Willow's breath rasped in Nicholas' ears. He made a mammoth effort to speak. "Go to the attorneys. They'll give you what you're looking for."

Nicholas rose from his seat and stepped towards the door. "Look. I don't know what you're involved in, but we're through. Understand? Don't ever try to contact me again."

Willow leaned forward, grasping Nicholas by the arm. Nicholas tried to shake him off, but even in his weakened state, the man's strength was astounding. Willow's grip felt like a vice.

"Sit down," he hissed. "I'm with Interpol. The people we're after – they're powerful men. And they've marked you. Don't ask me why. My unit was taken out earlier this evening. Go to the lawyers. Get the information. It's the only thing that will save you now."

"Why me? Why not give it to someone else?"

"Haven't you been listening? There's no one else left." The man's gaze bordered on lunacy. He released Nicholas' arm and slumped back into the armchair.

"What am I supposed to do with this? I'm not an investigator. I don't even know who you are!"

Willow panted for breath. "Contacts – for Cape Town – London. All in the documents. Reach the other cells. They'll help you."

Before Nicholas could reply, the waitress returned with the drinks. Nicholas shot from his seat and stepped between her and Willow. "Thank you." He forced a smile as she placed the glasses on the table. He waited until the woman had left, then turned to Willow again.

"Who are these people? Who are you investigating?"

Willow made no reply. He wore an expression of slight amusement, but the vacant stare was unmistakable.

Nicholas felt like he'd just been punched in the solar plexus. Should he call for help? Useless. Willow was beyond helping. It suddenly dawned on him that he might even be implicated in this man's death. Willow – Scofield – was an unknown entity.

He stared at Willow's corpse. It all felt so unreal. He needed to call the police – and he needed his lawyer. Exhaustion suddenly overwhelmed him. What a day. All he wanted was to go home. The rest could be sorted out in the morning. *Call the police. Give them your details and tell them to call you tomorrow.*

He decided to head for reception. As he turned, he spotted the fallen note. Picking it up, he noticed the words scrawled in large pencil letters on the back. AVOID POLICE!

Nicholas shook his head. Ridiculous. He felt like he'd been dragged down some twisted rabbit hole into a macabre fantasy world. *Who lives like this!* He needed to get outside where the air was clear.

*No!* Nicholas sank back into his chair. He took a deep breath to calm his nerves and collect his thoughts. A man is dead. First notify management. They would call the police. But what about the note? Nicholas chewed his lip, considering the problem. Irrelevant. Regardless of Willow's paranoia, the police had to be notified. They'd sort it all out.

He glanced across at the waitress. It took a few moments before she made eye contact. The moment she did, he raised his hand to get her attention.

The woman was there in a flash. "Can I help you, sir?"

Nicholas sighed. "I'm afraid there's a bit of a situation here. Can you call the manager for me, please?"

The woman shuffled from one foot to the other. Her concern was obvious. "Is there something I can do for you? If there's a problem, I'd be happy to sort it out."

Nicholas waved a hand. "It's nothing you've done. I just need to talk to Danille. Call him for me, please. It's rather urgent."

The woman hesitated for a moment, then nodded. Danille arrived within minutes.

He beamed at Nicholas as he entered the booth. "Is there a problem, Mr Gallagher?"

Nicholas swallowed. His throat felt parched. "I didn't want to upset your waitress." He pointed at Willow as he spoke.

"Wha —!" The manager's face went pale.

Nicholas shrugged and shook his head. "He didn't look well when he arrived, but it was only when he unbuttoned his jacket that I saw what had happened."

Danille stared at Willow's corpse in bewilderment, but said nothing. Nicholas stepped forward and took the man by the arm. "We need to call the police. Can you do that for me? I'll wait until they get here."

The man nodded dumbly. He stared at Willow for a moment longer before coming to his senses. "Er – I'll call them immediately."

The man quickly headed for his office. Nicholas reached for his drink. His hand shook slightly as he lifted it to his lips. He took a large gulp of the whiskey and sank back into his seat. All he could do now was wait for the police to arrive. They'd sort it all out when they got there.

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"Mr Gallagher?" Nicholas looked up. Two men stood at the entrance to the booth.

"Yes?" He eyed the men.

The one on the left smiled. "I'm Detective Kleynhans and this is Detective Henderson. You reported a murder?"

Nicholas glanced at his watch. He was stunned. Barely two minutes had passed since he'd alerted Danille. "You guys didn't waste any time."

The man nodded. It was as if he'd anticipated the question. "Actually, we were right outside. The truth is, we've been following this man for some time."

Nicholas nodded. It made sense. Scofield had to have been involved in something shady with the type of information he had access to.

The second detective stepped forward. "Look, there's no need to keep you here any longer than necessary. I'm sure you'd feel a lot better talking to us at home than here. Our officers will take care of this." He waved his hand toward the corpse. "Why don't you come with us? We've just got a few questions. We'll give you a lift home and prepare your statement in the car. The rest, we can sort out in the morning."

Nicholas nodded. He was desperate to get away from this place. "Thanks. It's been a lousy day."

Outside, the men led him to a dark sedan. Nicholas glanced about. There didn't seem to be any other police cars in the parking area.

"Where are your officers?"

"On their way. As I said, we were right outside. They'll be here shortly." Detective Kleynhans opened the back door for him while the other man hopped in behind the wheel. As soon as Kleynhans was in the passenger seat, they headed back towards the freeway.

"Where do you live, Mr Gallagher?"

"Ruimsig. The quickest way is if you take the Fourteenth Avenue off-ramp."

Kleynhans nodded and his colleague gunned the motor. As they pulled out of the parking lot, Nicholas saw the first blue-lights arrive. Henderson raised his hand and waved at the officers pulling in. The men were obviously preoccupied. They didn't return the greeting. Within minutes they were on the freeway, speeding towards Nicholas' home.

The detective reached into his pocket for a notepad. "What was the nature of your meeting with Mr. Scofield?" Kleynhans asked.

Nicholas shrugged. "I used him from time to time as a private investigator. His information was invaluable to me in my business dealings."

The man nodded. "And your meeting tonight?"

Nicholas shook his head. "A business deal went sour this afternoon. I refused to pay a bribe, and lost a massive contract. Willow contacted me —"

The man looked up sharply. "Willow?"

"That's what he called himself. I'd never heard of Scofield until tonight."

The man jotted down a note in his book and nodded. "Go on."

"He said he had information about the deal. I don't know where he got it, but I thought it might be useful, so I agreed to meet with him."

"Did he give you the information?"

"No." Nicholas shook his head. "He simply gave me a piece of paper with a code of some sort. I have no idea what it meant."

"Have you got the paper with you?"

Nicholas reached into his jacket pocket. He'd forgotten all about the note until now. He pulled it out and handed it to the detective. The man glanced at it and frowned.

"You'd better get into the left-hand lane. The off-ramp is coming up." Nicholas pointed at the overhead sign.

The driver made no move.

"Did you hear me?"

The man glanced in his rear-view mirror and made eye contact.

"I said you'll need to —" The car shot by the off-ramp at 120 km/h. Nicholas sighed in exasperation. "If you take the next off-ramp, you can cut back through Beacon Road. I'll direct you to my house from there."

Kleynhans nodded at Nicholas. His eyes gleamed like those of a predator. “Do you have any idea what this note means?”

Nicholas felt his heart-rate increase. The nerves on the back of his neck prickled in warning. “If you don’t get into the left-hand lane, you’ll miss this turnoff too. Can we discuss this again in the morning?”

The driver said nothing. His eyes remained riveted on the road ahead. Nicholas watched helplessly as they passed the second off-ramp. He swallowed. “Look, I’ve co-operated with you guys as best I can, and I’ll continue to assist you. But right now, I’d just like to go home, okay?”

Kleynhans turned back to him again. “Mr Gallagher, this is extremely important. Do you know what this note is about?”

A chill ran through Nicholas’ bones and he felt a thin film of sweat break out on his forehead. “No, I don’t. Can I see your identification?” *Idiot! Why hadn’t he asked to see it back at the club?*

“There’s no need to be difficult, Mr Gallagher.”

Nicholas clenched his teeth. “It’s a very simple request, detective. And, one I have every right to make. Your ID, please.”

The man sighed. “I have no interest in playing cat and mouse with you, Mr Gallagher. You’ll answer our questions one way or another.”

The glare was chilling. Nicholas stared into the eyes of a cobra and realised that those eyes would be the last he ever saw. “You’re going to kill me, aren’t you?” His voice quivered slightly as he spoke.

The man’s lips curled. “The only question is how long I’ll take. That’s up to you.”

They passed two more off-ramps before the driver slowed his vehicle and moved left. Nicholas gazed ahead at the approaching off-ramp. They’d reached an unsavoury part of town. One rife with crime. Large open fields flanked the highway – fields where a gunshot would go unnoticed and where screams for help would not be investigated.

Nicholas glanced at the road ahead in terror. Then he glanced at his kidnappers in the front of the car. His thoughts turned to the dark sedan he’d seen earlier that night. *How could he have been so obtuse?*

He considered his options and his pulse quickened all the more. To stay with these men meant death. That left only one course of action. Adrenaline surged through his body at the thought of what he had to do. *I can’t! You must.*

Kleynhans turned back to him. “Mr Gallagher —”

The car slowed a little, heading for the freeway off-ramp. *Is it slow enough? No time!* Nicholas lurched to his left and ripped up the door-lock. He slammed his shoulder against the door and leaped from the speeding vehicle.

*Roll!* Nicholas made no effort to break his fall. Air exploded from his lungs under the force of the impact. The rough surface shredded his clothes and seared his skin.



## Chapter 2

Nicholas rolled to a halt some fifty metres behind the vehicle. Ahead of him, tyres screeched. He jumped up and raced for the verge. His limbs still worked, thank goodness.

He tumbled over the side and slid down a muddy embankment. At the bottom, he turned and ran away from the vehicle. Unseen branches slashed at his face. Nicholas held up his arms to shield his eyes.

He heard shouts behind him – and a gunshot. He didn't even glance back. He had to find a place to hide, but where? Suddenly, the ground fell away beneath him and he tumbled headlong into an abyss. Water splashed around him and his cheek smashed against a rock. He felt his head snap back and his spine arched under the jolt. No time! He pulled himself to his feet and scrambled up the bank on the other side.

On an impulse, he turned left, following the river back towards the highway. A moment later, he saw what he'd hoped to find. Two giant openings loomed out of the darkness – tunnels to carry water under the motorway. Nicholas ripped off his shoes to mask his sound and proceeded barefoot into the tunnels.

He slowed his pace. His only chance now lay in silence. Besides, if the starless night had seemed dark, the tunnels were blinding. Nicholas felt his way for what seemed like an eternity. He kept his hand against the rough concrete wall and moved one step at a time into the hovel. Many minutes later, he felt, more than saw, a gleam of light ahead of him. Slowly, inch by inch, the light took form and he saw the exit. He slipped his shoes back on and stepped out of the tunnel, hoping fervently that his kidnappers weren't waiting for him on the other side.

He glanced about nervously, but the area seemed deserted. As quietly as he could, he moved up the slope, out of the river that had been his salvation, and headed back towards the road. Once he had it in sight, he turned and headed back towards the off-ramp.

Nicholas found a secure spot with lots of shrubs and trees behind which he could hide. He glanced across the highway and saw his kidnappers' vehicle, still parked on the verge. He shuddered. To his right, he saw lights. A gas station with a twenty-four hour shop. On the roof was an ancient Cessna military propeller aircraft, painted in gaudy colours.

An easy landmark. Nicholas reached for his phone. Inside his pocket, he felt the shattered remains of the instrument. His heart fell. He stared again at the lights of the gas station across the street. There were pay phones there, but he dared not risk making a call while his kidnappers were still in the area.

Nicholas tossed the broken pieces of his mobile phone aside and waited. Nearly twenty minutes passed before anyone returned to the vehicle. He couldn't make out who it was, but he saw only one shadow. The man took the wheel and started the engine. He took the off-ramp, crossed the bridge and got back on the highway, heading in the opposite direction.

Nicholas breathed a sigh of relief. He rose to head for the gas station, then stopped. *One man.* Where was the other? He crouched back down in his hiding place and waited. Nearly half an hour passed, and nothing happened. He saw no sign of his second kidnapper.

He was on the verge of rising from his hiding place when the dark sedan reappeared. It took the off-ramp as before, and headed for the gas station. The driver emerged and lit a cigarette. In the light, Nicholas saw it was the one called Henderson.

He waited for nearly two minutes. A second figure emerged from the shadows at the edge of the building. Kleynhans had been waiting for him. Henderson said something to his companion, but the man shook his head. They glanced about, then hopped into the vehicle and drove off.

Nicholas sighed and massaged his temples. His hand shook violently. He felt too terrified to move. His breathing came in short, shaky gasps and his legs felt like jelly. He was unable to rise from his hiding place.

An hour passed, then a second.

Finally, Nicholas felt strong enough to make the journey across the street and find a phone.

Other than some attendants huddled in the cubicle, the gas station seemed deserted, thank goodness. He snatched the nearest phone and punched in the numbers for his company's twenty-four hour support line. He was rewarded with a soft ringing on the other end of the line. One, two... He counted the rings, desperate for someone to pick up.

"Infotec International, how may I help you?"

"This is Nicholas Gallagher." He battled to control the shake in his voice.

The voice suddenly became crisp and business-like. "What can I do for you, sir?"

"I need you to transfer me to Peter Solzsenheim's office."

"Are you sure he's there, Mr Gallagher? It's just gone 3 am."

"I know what time it is! Just put me through to his office. He'll be there."

"Right away, sir. Sorry."

Three more rings. Four – five. Maybe Peter had left after all.

Suddenly, the ringing stopped. "Hello?"

"Peter! Am I glad you're there."

"Nicholas?" Peter sounded alarmed.

Nicholas forced himself to calm down. He realised that his voice bordered on hysteria. "I need your help."

"What's the matter?"

"Can you pick me up at the gas station on the Golden Highway off-ramp?"

"In Jo'burg South?"

"The same! How quickly can you get here?"

The man hesitated. "Give me half an hour."

"Good. I'll see you then." Nicholas checked his watch. He could only hope that his kidnappers didn't return before Peter got there.

Nicholas skulked in the back of the twenty-four hour convenience store until the classic Porsche 911 Carrera pulled up. It was the indigo blue of an African night sky. He shot from the shop. Peter's lopsided grin turned to shock when he saw Nicholas' dishevelled appearance. He pulled past him and into one of the parking bays near the shop.

Before Nicholas reached him, he'd climbed from the car and was limping towards him. Peter Solzsenheim was a scrawny man with wiry, blond hair that no amount of gel would ever keep flat. The creased shirt and dark chinos draped from his frail frame like a scarecrow's rags. The limp was the result of a slight deformity. His left leg was nearly an inch shorter than his right.

"What happened to you?" Peter spoke without making eye contact. He still gazed in horror at Nicholas' tattered suit.

"Long story." Nicholas sighed. "You'll probably read about it in the papers tomorrow."

Peter frowned, then nodded. He was many things, but curious was not one of them. He wouldn't pry. Nor would he buy a paper in the morning.

"Let's get you home."

Nicholas tensed and shook his head. "Not home, Peter. If I go back there ... it would only put my family in danger."

Peter raised his eyebrows but said nothing.

Nicholas clenched his jaw. *My family!* "Can I borrow your phone for a moment?"

Peter nodded and tossed his mobile phone across to him. Nicholas dialled his home number.

"Jess!" He exploded with relief at the sound of her voice.

“Nicholas? What’s the matter? You sound distraught.”

He shook his head. “I’m fine. A bit of trouble at my meeting tonight.”

“What sort of trouble?” she asked. Her tone was wary.

“I don’t want to get in to it now. Listen. I won’t make it home tonight, okay?”

“Nicholas, what’s going on?” Her voice trembled in trepidation.

“Nothing I can’t take care of. Will you listen to me?” He paused. When she didn’t answer, he continued. “Get some extra security at home tonight. Will you do that?”

“Where are you, Nicholas?”

“Will you arrange for the security?”

“Yes! Now will you tell me what’s going on?”

Nicholas sighed and massaged his temples. “I wish I knew, Jess. Don’t worry, I’m safe. I’m with Peter now. We’ll talk again in the morning, okay?” Nothing. “Did you hear me?”

“Yes.” She hesitated. Then her tone softened. “Stay safe – promise?”

Nicholas grinned. “I promise. Love you.” He hung up the phone and turned to Peter. “Would you mind if I borrowed your car for the night? I’ll drop you at your house first, of course.”

The man didn’t even pause to think. He merely shrugged and tossed Nicholas the keys. Then he turned back to his car, heading for the passenger side. “You drive. I was sick of work anyway.”

“Thanks.” Nicholas was grateful for his friend’s lack of curiosity. He was in no mood to talk at the moment.

They drove to Peter’s home in silence. The man lived in an upmarket condominium apartment in Sandton, a plush suburb north of Johannesburg. Nicholas headed inside and cleaned himself up as best he could. He borrowed a pair of shorts, a T-shirt and Hang Tens. The sandals were a loose fit, but they would have to do.

“Thanks, Peter,” Nicholas sighed.

“No problem.” The man stared out of the window for a moment. “You’re definitely not going home, then?”

Nicholas shook his head. “I can’t – not until I’ve sorted this out.”

The man nodded. “I’ll call Jessica and tell her you’re okay - and that you’re not out having a torrid affair or anything.”

Nicholas grinned. “I don’t care what they say about you. You’re a champion in my book.”

Peter smiled and opened the door to let Nicholas out. “I won’t ask you what’s going on, but... look after yourself, okay?”

“Will do.” Nicholas shook his friend’s hand and headed for the car.

He found a hotel no more than ten blocks from Peter’s home. It was an exclusive establishment right in the hub of Sandton’s business district.

“A suite, please.” He addressed the concierge behind the counter.

“Certainly, sir. How will you be paying?”

“Cash,” Nicholas replied. Credit cards could be traced and he didn’t want any unexpected visitors during the night.

Once in his room, Nicholas flopped down on the bed and contemplated his options. As far as the law was concerned, he’d just fled from a crime scene. He’d have to answer for that. However, Willow’s note had said to avoid the police.

He’d ignored that warning once and it had nearly cost him his life. He was not about to run that risk again. The answers lay in the documents at Bancroft & Mellencamp. Nicholas scribbled the code down on a piece of the hotel’s writing paper. He’d never truly appreciated his mental ability to retain numbers. It was just something he’d always been able to do. He was grateful for that ability now. Below the reference number, he wrote down the words *Clifton – Partner*, just as they’d appeared in Willow’s note.

He thought again about the police. He'd have to approach them eventually. But he'd do it on his terms. With his lawyer present – and with Willow's documents safely in his possession. Nicholas rose and put a *Do Not Disturb* sign outside his door. He'd need his rest. He had an appointment in the morning.

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Bancroft & Mellencamp, Attorneys was situated in a large chocolate-coloured building just south of the Sandton Mall. Nicholas was far more cautious than he had been twelve hours earlier.

After buying a new suit and shoes in the mall, along with some personal items, he'd headed back to the hotel. A quick shave and a shower had done the rest. He still sported a few grazes from his evening's escapade, but he looked respectable enough to meet with the attorneys.

He passed the entrance several times from different directions. Each time, he carefully scanned the street for any sign of people watching the building. Every stationary vehicle with passengers caused his heart to pound and forced him to circle the block once more. After about fifteen minutes of circling, he found his way to a parking garage around the corner and walked two blocks to the attorney's firm.

He took the newly purchased mobile phone from his jacket and glanced at it once more. *Why on earth hadn't Jason called yet! Where was he?* Nicholas checked his watch. Ten past nine. He'd left two messages the previous evening and called his mobile phone twice before seven that morning. When the attorney's offices had opened at eight thirty, the receptionist had explained that Jason Kreeley was hunting on his game farm in *Mpumalanga* and out of cell phone range.

That explained why the man hadn't called back the previous evening, but they'd said they expected him back that morning. Surely, he would have received the messages by now. Nicholas stopped and glanced up at the building. There was nothing else for it. He'd fled a murder scene the previous evening and desperately needed to explain himself. He'd go and make his statement to the police, but not before he'd seen Willow's documents.

The lobby had a strong security presence with a front desk where everyone was forced to sign in and out. Nicholas signed in under a false name and headed up the elevator to the fifth floor.

The attorney's reception was a spacious room with leather furniture and a coffee table stacked with current copies of *Financial Mail*, *Time* and *Getaway* magazines. The reception desk was a wide mahogany affair with room for four staff members. Only one person was currently behind it.

"Can I help you?" The smile was professional, as was the dress. Behind the woman, through a large glass window which bore the firm's logo in engraved letters, was an impressive library stacked with leather-bound journals.

"Mr. Clifton, please." Nicholas smiled with a confidence he didn't feel. For all he knew the man didn't even exist.

The lady reached for the phone. "Who shall I say is here?"

"Nicholas Gallagher." There seemed to be little point in lying about that. The security guard downstairs might not recognise him, but there was no way he would fool a partner of the law firm.

As he turned to take a seat, he noticed a small closed circuit television set. The camera was obviously trained on the lobby – Nicholas recognised the security guard and the desk where he'd signed in.

A handy trick, he thought. It meant that the firm could never be caught unawares if well-known clients arrived unexpectedly. It gave them at least five to eight minutes to alert personnel and make arrangements for the client's arrival.

The receptionist called the office and, before long, ushered Nicholas through to a boardroom, or War Room as she referred to it. The man that arrived was far younger than Nicholas had expected.

"Mr Clifton?" he asked, raising his eyebrows.

"No, sir," the young man grinned. "I'm an associate in his department. Mr Clifton is in a meeting. He asked me to convey his apologies and set up an appointment."

There was something about the man's inflection on the last word that struck a chord of annoyance in Nicholas.

"If I had the time to arrange an appointment, don't you think I would have done so? This is an emergency and it shouldn't take more than a few minutes of his time. Fetch your boss from his meeting and tell him there is something I need to discuss with him."

*Once again, that condescending smile.* "I'm afraid that's not possible, sir. Is there perhaps something I can help you with?"

"Is your surname Clifton?"

The man turned slightly pink around the ears, but gave no response.

"Then no."

Nicholas turned to stone. This was a negotiation and silence was a weapon. Years of experience had taught him that whoever spoke first would lose.

Silence made the discomfort unbearable, and the young associate was hopelessly outclassed.

"I think perhaps —"

"I think perhaps you should call your boss," Nicholas interrupted him.

The man fixed Nicholas with a cold glare. "I was going to suggest security."

"Not if you're hoping for any future with this firm." The threat was vague, but strong enough to intensify the associate's insecurity. The man had no idea who Nicholas was, or what power he might hold over the firm.

The silence hovered like a loaded gun. Nicholas could almost see the conflicting thoughts running through the young man's head.

Finally, the associate capitulated. "I'll just see if he's available."

He returned a few minutes later with the partner in tow. Clifton was in his late thirties, with thinning hair and crow's feet around his eyes that made him look more like a forty-year old. The million-dollar smile was probably what had earned him his place in the firm, but the eyes revealed a razor-sharp mind, well able to deliver that smile's promises.

"Mr Gallagher." The man had a firm grip. "Sorry to keep you waiting. How can I be of assistance?"

Nicholas withdrew the slip of paper with his scribbled notes and handed it to the man. Clifton gazed down at it. His smile vanished and he stared at it with a furrowed brow for a few seconds. Finally, he turned to the associate who had returned with him.

"Please go and tell Mr Joseph that I'll be a few minutes. Then go down to archives and request the Willow file."

The attorney didn't speak again until his associate had left. "How is Mr Willow?"

"He's no longer with us, I'm afraid."

Clifton nodded. It was as if this eventuality was not completely unexpected.

Nicholas continued. "Are you aware of the file's contents?"

There was a moment's hesitation. "Sorry. I never saw the information in that file. It was entrusted to me as a sealed document. Every few months, someone would arrive and add to it,

but it was always resealed. Only people who present the code are allowed access. That's all I know."

Nicholas nodded. It was a few moments before the man spoke again. "I'm sure the documents will tell you what you need to know."

"Can I take them with me?"

The man shrugged. "As long as you know the code, they're yours to do with as you please."

Nicholas glanced at his watch. "How long will this take?"

"A while. The documents are in a strong room and can only be retrieved by certain personnel. They will only hand it over to you in my presence and you need to sign a document to the effect that they were sealed when you received them. Can I order you some coffee or tea while you wait?"

"Thank you." Nicholas took a seat at the far end of the table where he could keep an eye on the door.

It was nearly ten minutes before the associate returned, this time with a middle-aged woman in a grey suit. After he'd signed for the documents, the woman handed Nicholas a thick envelope, sealed with silver wax and a strange indentation that looked like some ornate coat of arms.

"We'll leave you alone for a few minutes," Clifton said, rising to leave.

"Never mind," Nicholas replied. "I'll read them later."

He was anxious to leave as soon as possible. Their reaction surprised him. Clifton seemed curious, but it was the young associate that seemed most perturbed by the unexpected turn of events.

"Are you sure you wouldn't prefer to read them here? This is, after all, a secure environment."

"That won't be necessary." Nicholas rose to leave. The desperation in the young attorney's eyes worried him. *What was the man up to?*

He ignored it, shook hands with Clifton, and headed for the lobby. The feeling of paranoia welled up in him once more. His eyes darted from corner to corner of each room he passed, wary of any potential danger.

As he passed the reception desk, he glanced up at the television trained on the lobby and noticed several men in dark suits. Their hair had the short, spiky look of presidential guards in American movies. An uneasy feeling crept over Nicholas. One of them glanced across at the camera and Nicholas recognised the man called Henderson from the previous evening.

Without hesitation, he turned around and headed back to the War Room. He felt his hand starting to shake again. Clifton had already left, but the young attorney and security woman were still there.

"Where's your boss?" Nicholas asked gruffly.

"In his office down the hall."

Nicholas nodded in the direction that the associate had pointed. "Let's go."

He headed out of the room immediately, forcing the attorney to follow. Nicholas found the partner's office near the end of the hall. The door was ajar and there were clients inside with him. Nicholas knocked on the door. The attorney looked up with an annoyed expression.

He turned to his clients, quickly excused himself, and met Nicholas in the passage. "I have other clients with me —"

"This won't take long. I'm afraid these documents are rather sensitive. I do a lot of work for governments and military organisations around the world and I fear for their safety. Is there a back door you could let me out by?"

"I'm afraid not."

"Let me put it this way. Every building has alternate entrances – delivery areas, service elevators and the like. I want you to let me out through one of those exits."

"I'm afraid that's impossible. It's simply not allowed for security reasons. If you would feel happier, I can have a security guard escort you to your car."

"It wouldn't do any good. Your security guards are not equipped to handle the type of people we might encounter. You'd only be putting their lives in danger."

The attorney remained obstinately silent. Nicholas could see that the man wasn't going to budge.

"Perhaps you should call your senior partner. Tell him the owner of Infotec International is here and would like some special assistance."

The attorney sighed. "Mr Gallagher, your request is, frankly, unreasonable and violates all sorts of security regulations. If I could help you I would, believe me, but it is simply not possible."

"Fine. Do you mind if I use one of your phones?"

Clifton shrugged "Go ahead." He turned to the associate. "Escort this gentleman to the War Room, Vaughan, and show him where the phone is."

In the War Room, Nicholas called his financial director. "Sheldon!" he said. "I have a small problem here. Bancroft & Mellencamp Attorneys – do you know them? Good. Can you tell me how much we spent at that firm in the last year?"

A quick conversation ensued, in which Nicholas explained his problem. When he was done, he hung up with a satisfied nod.

Vaughan, the associate was inquisitive. "What would you like to do now?"

"Now, we wait."

Nicholas quickly calculated the estimated time. Two to three minutes for Sheldon to make a call to Bancroft & Mellencamp's senior partner. Then another two to three for the partner to call Clifton. He reckoned that it would be about eight minutes before the attorney entered the War Room. He was cutting it fine. The suits were already in the lobby.

Clifton was there in five. His prior confidence seemed to have been shattered and any hint of an argument had vanished. Wealth certainly had its privileges, Nicholas thought, but he felt sickened at the thought of what he had just done.

He'd threatened to pull his business, which only amounted to a fraction of his legal costs from a relatively small, but successful, firm of attorneys. He had used his wealth and power to force a less fortunate person to agree to an unreasonable request, but he had been left with little choice.

"I'll have security escort you to the parking garage downstairs." Clifton seemed only too eager to please.

"Thank you. I'd also appreciate it if your associate could accompany us?"

Clifton seemed puzzled, but was in no position to argue. "Very well."

The associate protested. "Sorry, Mr Clifton. I have a rather urgent —"

"It can wait!" Clifton was shaken and his temper frayed. It silenced the young man.

That done, Nicholas and Vaughan followed a security guard down two flights of stairs and through a door, which led to a dusty concrete passage. The tiles on the floor were cheap and durable. Many had already been cracked or chipped by the constant traffic of heavy goods through the passage. A service elevator took them down to a basement level that visitors and staff would ordinarily never see.

There was a fairly long hike up a wide, winding driveway that catered for small trucks and light delivery vehicles. At the top was a heavy, barred gate, manned by a guard who unlocked it for them. Nicholas thanked the security guard and headed out to the street beyond.

He turned back when he saw Vaughan making a hurried escape. "Where do you think you're going?"

"To my office." The young man was surprised.

"You're coming with me."

“What!”

“I’m not done with you yet. Come!”

The man hesitated. His expression was a picture of rage, but he had little choice. He followed Nicholas for the two blocks back to the parking garage where he had left Peter’s car. Nicholas was terrified that the young man might return and alert the thugs in the lobby that their prey had escaped.

He left it until the last possible moment before allowing the man to leave. “Alright. You can go now.”

“Just like that?” The man was stunned.

Nicholas didn’t bother to respond. He hurried into the parking garage in search of Peter’s Porsche, anxious to get away from the scene as quickly as possible. The documents under his arm could wait. Once he found the vehicle, he jumped in and with screeching tyres that echoed through the dark concrete chambers, rushed into the street beyond.

As he drove away, he glanced in his rear-view mirror. The young associate stood where Nicholas had left him. He held a mobile phone to his ear.

*Idiot!* Nicholas berated himself. Now his enemies would have his car’s number plate.

Nicholas shook his head and turned the corner. No matter. Even if the man had alerted Henderson and his friends down in the lobby, by the time they got to their vehicles, he would be long gone. But what if he wasn’t? The doubt gnawed at the pit of his stomach like a savage rodent.

### Chapter 3

Nicholas gunned the motor and ran the amber traffic light ahead of him, anxious to put as much distance between himself and his pursuers as possible.

He travelled for another ten minutes before allowing himself to relax. Once convinced that nobody had followed him, he found his way to *Brightwater Commons*, a local shopping complex built around a small-town streetscape theme. The centre was relatively quiet as it comprised mainly restaurants and received most of its traffic after sundown.

He wove his way past groups of tourists looking for trinkets and mementos to take back home as gifts for friends and family. He didn't even bother to look at the name of the coffee shop he finally chose. It was practically empty and he took a table in the back corner, where he could read the documents in relative peace.

"Can I get you something to drink, sir?" Nicholas jolted. He hadn't heard the waiter approach and, in his current state, he was ill-prepared for surprises.

In an effort to recover, he glanced at the menu. "A cup of coffee and a croissant, please."

"Will that be all?" the waiter smiled.

Nicholas nodded, waiting for the man to leave him in peace. As soon as the waiter left, he ripped open the manila envelope. He quickly scanned the documents. The first few pages contained details about the cells Willow had mentioned. Cape Town, London, Paris, Amsterdam - even Rome and Zurich. The documents outlined contact procedures that read like a spy-novel.

What on earth was Willow investigating? Nicholas flipped past the first few pages to a second sheaf that contained information about the people under investigation. The group was simply called *Hypatia's Children*. The name meant nothing to him, but the revelation caused him to shudder. Surely, it was not possible. No group of people could wield this much power. He studied the documents in growing disbelief, barely acknowledging the waiter when he returned with Nicholas' order.

After reading only a quarter of the information, Nicholas made his decision. He was going to the police. He paid for his meal, leaving the croissant and cold cup of coffee untouched, and headed for the parking lot. It was on his way out of the mall, that he noticed the newspapers in local news agency window. His picture was splashed on the front page of every publication. He froze, reading the headline in disbelief. BILLIONAIRE WANTED FOR MURDER!

Beads of sweat broke out on his forehead and his hand started to shake again. He wanted to run. What were they saying about him? He glanced around to see if anyone had noticed him. It was impossible to tell. He had to leave. No. First he needed a copy of the newspaper. What if the cashier recognised him? Would she call the police? *The police!*

Nicholas struggled to gain control of his panic. He needed to think. First, however, he needed to get away. Newspapers could be obtained anywhere and such a public place was dangerous. He quickly headed for his car.

Nobody followed him from the mall, but that didn't stop Nicholas from glancing in his rear view mirror every few seconds. He meandered through the suburbs in search of a quiet shop that might sell newspapers. Eventually he found a café where he purchased a copy of *The Star*. He drove six blocks before parking in a quiet street where he read the article.

The story briefly outlined Nicholas' escapades of the previous evening. He was implicated in the murder of one Manantau Scofield.

The story described Scofield as a local private investigator with strong ties to the city's underworld and crime syndicates. It was rumoured that the man was involved in drug trafficking and prostitution, as well as a variety of smuggling operations.

As a PI, he was in a unique position to mix with both corrupt police officials and the leaders of various crime syndicates without raising suspicion, and had drifted naturally into a life of crime even as a river follows the path of least resistance on its journey to the ocean.

The story concentrated on Scofield's suspected crime activities and mentioned that he had been involved in smuggling illegal computer hardware from the Far East. Where the products came from was vague, but the article seemed to imply that Nicholas might have been involved as a respectable front in getting *Grey Products* into the market.

The journalist told the story of Nicholas' erratic behaviour the previous evening. The waitress and manager had both been interviewed and explained how Nicholas had arrived and the odd circumstances under which he had left. Nobody had seen him leave, and now Nicholas was the prime suspect in the murder and was wanted for questioning.

Nicholas paused, taking a deep breath as he decided what to do next. He reached for his phone and called Jason Kreely again. The receptionist informed him that the man had still not returned from his hunting trip and might not be available until the following morning.

"I don't care where he is!" Nicholas shouted into the phone. "Get a message to him and tell him it's urgent."

How could Jason not be available? It had been years since he'd needed a lawyer so urgently and this was the first time in his life that reception was unable to put him through immediately.

He needed to talk to someone, but who? The police would be looking for him by now. He couldn't go home or to his office. Even his friends would be watched. He needed someone who would sympathise – who knew him – but whom the police would never suspect him of approaching.

He knew just the person. Nicholas quietly started the car and headed for Parktown.

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The old, stone church was deserted when Nicholas arrived. It stirred conflicting memories in him as he traipsed the grounds, hunting for Father McCain. He stopped to gaze at the giant jacaranda tree for a moment. It had been in bloom on the day of his wedding. He still had one of the pictures on his desk at work. Jessica had looked radiant against the backdrop of purple flowers that hung on the tree and littered the neatly trimmed lawn below like a royal carpet.

It had been stark and bare when he had returned nine months later. The vibrant branches that had hung heavy with flowers in the spring had turned barren, having shed their flowers and leaves to expose the dull, brown bark beneath. The cloudless sky did little to alleviate the icy breeze that blew across tawny lawns and lifeless flower beds. There was little moisture in the air, as the city got its rain in summer. Not much survived through the bitterly cold *Highveld* winters.

Although he had only set foot inside this church twice in his entire life, they had been the happiest, proudest and most excruciating days he could remember. Seeing the buildings and gardens filled him both with joy and an inconsolable sense of loss.

He knocked on the door of the office, but there was no answer. After peering through several windows and calling, he decided to go around to the back and see if he could find anyone. Eventually, he found a gardener who directed him to the manse next door.

A rusty metal gate led to the adjacent home. Nicholas opened it and headed around to the front door.

He had to knock several times. Someone was home, however, as he could hear the television blaring from the lounge. After his third attempt, the volume dropped and footsteps echoed in the hallway.

The man who answered the door was tall, but stocky. His curly blond locks were neatly trimmed and he sported a goatee that had slight traces of grey. Nicholas guessed the man's age to be early to mid-thirties. However, what struck him most were the penetrating grey eyes that seemed to search the depths of his soul.

"Can I help you?" The man enquired. His speech had the slightest trace of an American accent and he wore a navy New York Yankees T-shirt.

"I'm looking for the minister. Is he in?"

"I am the minister."

Nicholas was slightly taken aback. "No, I meant – my name is Nicholas Gallagher. I was looking for Father McCain?"

The man's gaze suddenly betrayed a hint of hostility. "Father McCain is not here. Can I help you with something?"

"I'm afraid it's personal and extremely urgent. I need to see him as soon as possible. Do you mind if I wait until he gets back?"

"It'll be a long wait." The hostility was no longer veiled. It was plainly evident.

"Can you tell me where he's gone?" Nicholas was becoming annoyed at the man's attitude.

"He passed away several days ago. The funeral was held late yesterday afternoon."

"Passed away?" Nicholas echoed the man's words. "That's impossible. His office called me only yesterday."

"And the day before that, as well as five times the previous day and three times the previous evening. That was me. He'd been sick for some time and had asked me to contact you. It was his wish to see you once more before he died."

Nicholas shuffled in discomfort. "I'm a busy man and we were never particularly close. He's a minister; he performed the ceremony when my wife and I were married —" Nicholas was defensive, but he hesitated and his voice softened before he finished the sentence, "– and he buried my parents."

The minister's face remained impassive. "Well, I assume you're not here to pay your last respects. What do you want today, Mr Gallagher?"

Nicholas boiled with fury. "What makes you so certain I'm here because I want something?"

The man chuckled. "Let's not kid each other. You're here because you need assistance. We both know it. So spit it out."

"To you? You've got to be kidding. Father McCain was a minister. I'm not about to spill my guts to some two-bit hack." Nicholas turned to leave

The man grinned. It was as if the insult was completely lost on him. The hostility was gone, however, and the smile was genuine.

"Now that's what I'm looking for. You never truly know a man until you've seen him angry. How can I help?"

This only served to increase the feeling of guilt that the man had instilled in Nicholas. "You keep thinking I need something."

The minister shrugged. "Everyone who walks through the doors of a church does so because they have some sort of need. Besides, I read the morning paper." The charming grin that accompanied the words made it impossible to take offence. Nicholas relaxed for the first time and the minister extended his hand.

"I'm Decklin Kanabas, Father McCain's replacement."

Nicholas tried to hide his smile, but the pained expression on the minister's face told him he had failed.

The minister shrugged and smiled. "Yes. It's a problem I've had to live with my whole life, but especially since I became a minister. Father *Dope*, Rev *Joint*, the *High Priest* – I've heard it all."

Nicholas smiled at the minister's self-effacing humour. Kanabas ushered him into his home. The lounge had been decorated with a bachelor's touch. The inexpensive furniture was arranged for functionality, rather than aesthetics. The parquet floor had a small rug which gave the room a touch of warmth, but that was where it ended. There were no plants and the only pictures on the wall comprised a surfer catching a wave and a mountain climber dwarfed by the size of the peak he was attempting to scale. Both had been cut out of magazine centrefolds.

The offending television was a large flat-screen affair and, although the sound had been turned down, the final scenes of *Die Hard* were still playing out as they entered. The minister flopped down in a chair, picking up the remote control to stop the video as he did so.

"Preparing for your Sunday message?" Nicholas asked in mock innocence as he nodded toward the screen.

"It's my day off," the minister replied by way of explanation. "I'm quite a fan. I've watched that movie fifteen times."

Nicholas frowned. "What's the point if you already know how it ends?"

Unperturbed, Kanabas waved his hand, "Oh, please. All movies are predictable. If you're honest, you know exactly what's going to happen. It's the journey that's exciting. Like when the lift doors open and the bad guys see the body of their comrade slumped on the floor, with a note pinned to him that says 'Now I have a machine gun'! Those are the moments we live for in cinema."

Nicholas raised his eyebrows. The minister grinned and Nichols averted his eyes. It was as if the man had read his thoughts. If he had, he made no comment on it.

"Coffee?"

"Yes please." Nicholas waited while the man shot through to the kitchen to refill his own cup and get Nicholas something to drink. Everything Rev Kanabas did seemed to happen with gusto. When he returned, he was all business.

"Now, how can I help? What was it you came here for?"

Nicholas took a sip of his coffee. He frowned briefly. The beverage tasted like bile. He replaced the cup on the table and took a deep breath. "I didn't kill that man in the papers. We barely knew each other and I certainly had no idea that he was involved with any crime syndicates."

The man nodded, but made no reply.

Nicholas related the story of the documents he'd received that morning, but quickly saw that the minister didn't believe a word he was saying. He reached for the envelope and tossed it across the coffee table for the man to take a look.

The priest opened it and pulled out the wad of notes. He quickly scanned the documents, but it was apparent that he was as equally disbelieving of their content as he was of Nicholas' story. "Hypatia's Children. Is this some weird charity cum blue-chip conglomerate I don't know about?"

Nicholas offered a weary smile and shook his head. "I've never heard of them. Maybe it's a smaller concern."

Kanabas shook his head. "I doubt that. With the kind of power these documents claim Hypatia's Children wields, they couldn't be anything less than a blue-chip."

"Frankly, it's not credible. A secret organisation playing God, perpetuating the Apartheid government in order to continue lining its own pockets with Africa's natural resources?"

“Then they orchestrate the demise of the Nationalist government and usher in the ANC’s march to power by mobilising their media empire to bring about the change? It’s ridiculous. Where’s the motive?”

“Other than the perpetuation of their own wealth and power?” Nicholas said.

“True, but to what end? They would have been wealthy enough to begin with, so why bother? Mr Gallagher, I can’t possibly see what this has to do with the events last night.”

Nicholas shrugged. “Perhaps he suspected that I was involved with them somehow.”

It was Kanabas’ turn to shrug. “The way I see it, this document is meaningless. It has nothing to do with the newspaper article, or what happened to you last night. If you’re innocent —”

“I am innocent,” Nicholas said firmly.

The priest shrugged and nodded. “All the more reason to hand yourself over to the police. There is nothing to be gained by running from them. You said this guy was wounded when he arrived, right?”

Nicholas nodded.

“So, any coroner worth his salt will be able to tell the police that this man was shot hours before he entered the premises of that club in Rivonia. It’s simple. You’re in the clear and you can go back to work by the beginning of next week.”

“It’s not that simple. I ran.”

“I thought you said you were kidnapped?”

“The police don’t know that. As far as they’re concerned, I fled the crime scene.”

“You have an explanation for that. You’re covered in cuts and bruises and your friend picked you up forty miles away without your car. The injuries confirm what your kidnappers put you through. I’m sure the manager and waitress will testify that you didn’t have those marks on you when they last saw you – after you’d alerted them to the fact that this man was dead. Reasonable doubt.”

Nicholas knew the minister was right, but fear from the past twelve hours of tension still gripped him. “Well, what about those accusations in the paper? They make me look like a criminal.”

“That’s just speculation on their part; not evidence. If I were you, I’d sue them for the shirt off their backs. I’m sure your lawyers will have a field day with them after what they’ve printed.”

Nicholas was beginning to feel a little stupid. He realised that fear had clouded his judgment and that most of his fears were unfounded. He shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

Again, it was as if the minister could read his mind. “There’s no need to feel bad about this. The events last night would probably unnerve the best of us and make us act irrationally.”

Kanabas was right. There was nothing to be gained by running. Besides, Nicholas knew he would be caught eventually. Fear had prevented him from facing reality, however. Decklin Kanabas was a ready ear and more than willing to indulge Nicholas, but he was adamant. The only safe path lay in going to the police.

Finally, Nicholas realised he couldn’t put it off any longer. He rose from his seat. “Thank you for your time, Reverend. You’ve been a great help.”

“There’s a police station not far from here. Would you like me to go with you?”

Nicholas shook his head. “No thanks. I can do this. I don’t need you to hold my hand.”

The man shrugged. “As you like. If you need anything, give me a call.”

Nicholas shook hands and headed for his car. In the absence of a mobile phone, he rummaged through Peter’s glove compartment and found an old map book. The police station was only eight blocks away. Nicholas revved the engine and headed for the station.

He was three blocks away when he passed the stationary police vehicle. He shot a nervous glance at the car and noticed the flashing lights switch on. His gut wrenched, but he kept driving. *Maybe it's nothing.*

He kept his eyes on the rear-view mirror, however. The vehicle pulled out and followed him. The siren blared but only for an instant. A voice called through the bullhorn on the vehicle's roof. The words were impossible to make out through the distortion, but the instruction was obvious.

An image of the legal associate back at Bancroft & Mellencamp flashed through Nicholas' mind. He'd been so convinced the man was calling his hunters in the lobby, it had never occurred to him that they might pass his vehicle's description and licence number on to the police. He shook his head in despair. Handing himself over voluntarily would have looked better when he stood in front of a judge but now that was a pipe-dream. How would he fight these people? He'd never felt so out of his depth.

Nicholas thumped the wheel in frustration and pulled over. Two officers leaped from the police vehicle, brandishing their handguns. "Get out of the vehicle! And keep your hands where I can see them," the one on the left shouted.

Nicholas opened his door and exited slowly. He kept his hands held high so as not to alarm the officers in any way.

"Nicholas Gallagher." The man's tone dripped with menace. "You're under arrest for the murder of Manantau Scofield." He spun Nicholas roughly against his car and jerked his hands behind his back. The cuffs clicked into place and the officers shoved him in the back seat of their vehicle.

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The police station was clean, but austere and filled with a variety of people. Some were merely getting forms stamped, while others were laying more serious charges.

"This way." The arresting officer guided Nicholas through a side door. In the next room, the man opened another door leading through behind the desk. He then took Nicholas down a series of passages until they reached the cells. He locked Nicholas in a cell along with several drunks, sleeping off their previous night's debauchery. Raucous snores and the unmistakable scent of stale alcohol clogged the air.

*I'm in a prison cell.* The thought terrified him, but he didn't have long to think about it. Two uniformed men arrived within minutes. The older of the two was blond with a moustache that made him look about thirty, though Nicholas guessed he was more likely to be about twenty-five. He carried the dossier that Nicholas had given to the desk sergeant.

"Good morning, Mr Gallagher." The policeman sounded pleasant, almost friendly. "I'm Inspector Van Heerden and this is Inspector September."

Nicholas looked at the second man. He was of dark complexion, about five foot with tightly curled hair.

"Morning," the man nodded politely. He had the distinct accent of the *Cape Flats*.

The first inspector spoke again. "We'll just quickly take your statement and then make arrangements for your lawyer to get you out of here. You have no history of criminal activity and I'm sure there's no reason to keep you here unnecessarily until a court date is set."

The man was far too sugary for Nicholas' liking. "I'd prefer to have my lawyer present when I make my statement, if that's alright."

He could see the disappointment on the inspector's face. "Very well. If you'll just come with me, I'll arrange for you to make a call."

Ten minutes later, Nicholas was impatiently tapping a scarred wooden desk filled with mountains of paper, a computer and an ancient telephone. The implement still worked with a dial, something Nicholas hadn't seen since he was about eight years old.

He was calm, but firm with the receptionist. "This is Nicholas Gallagher again. I want to talk to Jason Kreely, and I want to do so now. I know he's been away, but he must be back in cell phone range by now. So get him on the line."

"He's just arrived back, Mr Gallagher." The woman sounded as relieved as he felt. "I'll put you through right away."

Nicholas thumped the desk with his forefinger while he waited for his lawyer to pick up. "Kreely here."

Nicholas' relief was explosive. "Jason! Where have you been! I've called every number in the book trying to get hold of you."

"Nicholas? What happened last night? I only got your messages when I landed at Jo'burg International half an hour ago. Then I saw the headlines in the papers. I tried to call back, but your cell phone was on voice mail so I came straight to the office from the airport."

"I'm in trouble. Can you come to the Parktown police station?"

There was a moment's hesitation. "Did you hand yourself in?"

Nicholas swallowed and shook his head. "They found me before I could. I've been arrested for murder."

Another moment. "What have you told them?"

"I'm not stupid, Jason. When can you get here?"

"Good. I'm on my way. I'll be there in twenty minutes."

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Morning traffic stretched twenty minutes to forty. Nicholas waited in the cell that smelt like an abandoned brewery. Finally, the inspectors returned. They were rather less friendly than they had been the first time.

"Your lawyer's here. Come with us please."

They led Nicholas to a bare room, empty apart from an ancient desk and a pair of wooden chairs. Jason Kreely looked sombre, but fairly relaxed. He could afford to be, Nicholas thought. He wasn't the one sitting in prison.

Kreely waited, staring the policemen down until they left the room. "Right, Nicholas," he said, "what happened last night?"

"I didn't do it. He'd already been shot when he arrived."

The attorney opened his brief case. Nicholas noticed several different newspapers, all undoubtedly with his face on the front pages. He knew Jason Kreely. The man would have already read all of them before he walked into the police station.

"What on earth were you doing with this guy in the first place? He's a known smuggler with contacts in the Far East. Computer hardware, software piracy, drugs – this doesn't look good, Nicholas."

"I didn't know anything about that! He gave me sensitive information on a few occasions."

"Industrial espionage?"

Nicholas frowned and shook his head. "Nothing like that. You know how it is in big business deals. Bribes and blackmail are part of the deal. If my competitors didn't play fair, I found out about it and exposed them. This guy helped me do that."

"Do you have any proof of this?"

"Of course I haven't. Do you think Scofield got his information via the Yellow Pages? He didn't explain his methods and I didn't ask. I paid in cash and that was the end of it. I didn't even know his real name until last night."

Jason sighed and massaged his temples. "Okay, let's go through what happened last night. Then we can bring in the inspectors and you can make your statement. They won't even start with bail proceedings until they have that."

Nicholas related everything to his attorney, starting with the phone call he had received and ending with his trip to the police station. The only thing he left out was his trip to the parish in Parktown. He didn't want to insult Jason by pointing out that he'd sought legal advice from a minister. Their relationship transcended business. Over the years, they had become firm friends.

Jason Kreely shook his head. "I wish I'd been there for you last night, Nicholas. I'm sorry."

Nicholas shrugged. "It's not like you could have predicted this. Now, how do we go about getting me out of here?"

Jason shuffled his papers and shook his head absent-mindedly. "It's a fairly straightforward procedure. You give the police your statement, we go to court. We'll ask for bail, the prosecutor will oppose it. We'll haggle a little and the magistrate should set bail at a couple of million."

"It's that simple?"

"More or less. You're well known and hardly a flight risk. The bail will be high because of your financial situation, but the rest is just a formality. I'll have you home in time for dinner. Anything else you'd like me to do for you?"

Nicholas nodded. "Can you call Jessica for me? She's probably sick with worry. The police were difficult about letting me use the phone. I think I used up all my Brownie points in getting that call through to you."

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It was much later that afternoon that Nicholas received the call from his attorney. A short, stocky prison guard with a lisp called him from his cell and told him he had a phone call.

"Jason?"

"Nicholas." The attorney's voice was tense.

"What's the matter?"

The man sighed, as if searching for the right words. "Nicholas, what's going on? I can help you, but I need you to be honest with me. There's nothing I can do if I don't know the truth – and by that I mean all of it."

"What are you talking about?" Nicholas was becoming annoyed.

"I called the police station and asked them for a copy of the folder you gave them. They've never heard of it. It doesn't exist."

It was as if he had been stabbed in his stomach. When he spoke, the words sounded like the dull monotone of a talking doll. "That's ridiculous. I gave it to them. Someone must have it. Did you ask the inspectors I gave the folder to?"

The man hesitated. "That avenue won't help us, Nicholas."

"Of course it'll help us!" Nicholas exploded. "I gave them the documents. They must be somewhere."

Kreely's voice remained calm. "It won't help us because I can't talk to them. They were called out to investigate some break-in late this morning." He paused for a moment. "Nicholas, I'm afraid they've been killed."

*Killed! This wasn't happening.* His throat was suddenly dry. "How?"

"The details are sketchy. I had an acquaintance make some enquiries at the local station. It looks like an organised crime syndicate. They arrived on a routine call, but it turned out the place was littered with Mandrax tablets. There was a shootout, and both the inspectors died at the scene."

Nicholas stared out of the window. He couldn't believe this was happening. "Check their offices. Filing cabinets. The documents must be somewhere."

"I've had the police station scoured from top to bottom, Nicholas. The documents aren't there."

Nicholas' forehead broke out in the thin film of sweat. Was it possible his enemies were that powerful? Who was this unseen foe who could arrange the deaths of two officers and remove a document from police premises at a moment's notice?

"Did you hear what I said?"

Nicholas realised he'd not listened to a word his attorney was saying. "Sorry, what?"

"I asked if anybody else knows about the document."

"Of course – the partner at Bancroft & Mellencamp. He'll confirm it."

"I've already spoken to them. Clifton suffered a massive coronary at lunch today. He's at Olivedale Clinic. Obviously, he's in no condition to talk right now. Word is he may not pull through."

Nicholas shook his head. "They did it. Someone doesn't want him to talk, Jason."

Jason Kreeley sighed. "Nicholas, this is crazy talk. Clifton's had heart problems for years. His secretary confirmed that. You're making this sound like a conspiracy."

"Sound like! What else could it be? Everyone who's had anything to do with that document since breakfast has ended up dead, or nearly."

"Except you."

The anger burned like fire in his gut. "Are you suggesting I killed these people?"

"I'm not suggesting anything." There was a hint of annoyance in his attorney's voice. "Nicholas, I'm here to help. But I need to know the whole truth from you. If you're holding anything back —"

"I'm not holding back, Jason. Someone's trying to set me up. And if you can't get that through your thick skull, *you're* no good to me. Now you be honest. Should I be looking for another attorney?"

That patient sigh again. "There's no need for that, Nicholas. How long have we been friends?"

"I don't need a friend right now, Jason. I need an attorney. And if you can't do the job, I'll find someone who can."

"I can do the job. Did you meet with Vaughan Knight this morning?"

Nicholas thought about it for a moment, but the name meant nothing. "Who's he?"

"One of Clifton's associates."

"Freckled jackass, with red hair and a grey suit?"

"I don't know what he looks like, but I read his statement to the police. He claims he dealt with you this morning."

"That'll be him. He brought the documents out, but I think he's in cahoots with them. Don't trust him."

"He claims there's no such document. Says you came in there ranting on about some secret file and shoved a meaningless code under his nose. Then he says you insisted on seeing Clifton and finally forced him to escort you out the back way. Is that true?"

Nicholas slumped forward and massaged his temples. "There were suspicious-looking characters down in the lobby. I didn't want to risk losing the documents."

The other end of the line remained silent for a long time. When Jason Kreeley spoke, his voice was gentle, as if trying to pacify a child. "I called and asked Vaughan about the documents. He told me he'd never seen them." The line went quiet for a moment, as if Jason was searching for the right words. "Nicholas, I have to ask this and I need you to be completely honest with me."

"Fire away."

“Are you taking drugs at all?”

“What!”

“Nicholas, this is not an accusation. It’s just that this type of paranoia is a typical symptom. People start using these things and the next moment they’re convinced that they’re being followed and —”

“Jason, I’m not doing drugs, alright! And this is not something I’m making up. There was a real dead body in that club last night – not something from my imagination. He was murdered, Jason. And the same people that killed him are after me. Are we clear?”

Jason’s voice carried an edge of frustration. “Alright, I believe you. I had to ask.”

Nicholas didn’t reply.

“Nicholas? Are you there?”

He sighed. “I’m here.”

“Do you want to see a doctor – a psychologist or something?”

“I don’t need to see a stinking psychologist! I know what I saw.” He clenched his teeth. Perhaps he should tell him. *No*. His enemies might be listening in on the conversation. “Jason, tell me there’s a way out of this.”

The man sighed. “I won’t lie to you, Nicholas. It doesn’t look good. The police report says this guy, Scofield, was shot *inside* the club. The waitress says it looked like you two were having an argument. You were the last person seen with him before he died and you bolted from the club.”

“I didn’t bolt. Two officers escorted me —”

“Officers that the police have no record of. Nobody saw you leave with them, Nicholas. As far as the police are concerned, you ran. Understand that. I’ve got to present this argument in court, and all I have so far is your word. That’s not going to fly with the judge, Nicholas. I’m going to need more.”

Nicholas bit his lip. *No*. He’d only reveal the minister when the time was right – not before. “We’ll chat later. In the meantime, do your job and get me out of here.”

He slammed the phone down and called for the guard.

## Chapter 4

The courtroom swarmed with press by the time Nicholas' guards ushered him through the door the following morning. He glanced at the front row and spotted Jessica behind Jason Kreely. She forced a smile and Nicholas nodded in greeting. He locked his gaze with hers and mouthed the words. *Love you.*

She choked with emotion and sniffed through blurred eyes.

"This way, Mr Gallagher," the guard on Nicholas' right took his arm and ushered him to his seat next to Jason.

Nicholas ignored Jason and turned to embrace his wife. They'd had no contact since his arrest. Jason cleared his throat and Nicholas turned.

"Am I ready?"

Jason smiled and nodded. "Open and shut. Like I told you, this is a formality. Nothing more. The state will oppose bail – you know. Basically haggle for the cameras back there." He jerked his thumb towards the reporters that crammed the courtroom.

"It's that easy?"

Kreely smiled again. "Don't worry. I've done this a thousand times."

Everyone rose when the magistrate entered. Nicholas examined him. He was of medium height and slightly plump. His temples were laced with grey but his moustache was snowy-white. He took a seat and everyone else in the courtroom followed suit.

He glanced about the courtroom with a bored expression and allowed his gaze to rest on the state prosecutor. "What have you got for me, counsel?"

The prosecutor rose. He was surprisingly young. Nicholas leaned across and whispered to Jason, "I thought they'd get someone more senior for such a high-profile case."

Jason shook his head. "I told you. This is a formality – and they know they're going to lose. Better to humiliate a junior in front of all this press. They'll bring the big guns in later."

"State versus Gallagher, your Worship. Mr Nicholas Gallagher is charged with culpable homicide."

The magistrate nodded and turned to Jason. "I assume the defendant requests bail."

Jason rose from his seat. "If it pleases the court, your Worship, we request that Mr Gallagher be granted bail immediately and be allowed to return to his family pending trial."

The magistrate nodded and turned back to the prosecutor. "And I assume the state opposes bail."

The young prosecutor pushed out his chest. "Your worship, Mr Gallagher is a serious flight risk. He's a man of means and if allowed to leave prison he could —"

"That's ridiculous, your Worship. My client is hardly a flight risk. His family is here, his home is here, and his assets in South Africa run to billions of rands."

"Those billions only represent a fraction of his international fortune, your Worship," the prosecutor countered. "Yes, he might feel their loss but that's a small price for his freedom."

Jason actually laughed. "If the State feels he might flee, the court is welcome to revoke his passport. I have it with me and will hand it over now if you like."

“Your Worship, a man of Mr Gallagher’s means could find other ways out of the country.” The whites of the prosecutor’s eyes flashed in terror. Nicholas glanced at Jason’s quiet composure and smiled inwardly. The youngster was hopelessly outclassed.

The magistrate waved his hand. “I think I’ve heard all I need to. It’s obvious what’s going on here and I’m in no mood to indulge attorneys while they strut for the press. Bail is denied and Mr Gallagher will remain in custody pending trial.”

Nicholas whipped round and gaped at his attorney. Jason was in shock.

“Your Worship, I —” Jason stammered.

“I’m not interested in your arguments, counsel. Bail is denied and this court is adjourned.”

“But, your Worship —” Jason Kreeley tried to protest.

The magistrate raised his hand. “Not another word. The defendant will be sent to a suitable facility where he will await trial.”

Nicholas clenched his teeth in rage. He glanced across at his attorney. Jason shook his head and shrugged an apology. It was unthinkable. Nicholas couldn’t leave his house without a flurry of press about him. It was ludicrous to insinuate that he was a flight risk.

“Don’t worry. We’ll fight this, Nicholas.”

Nicholas glanced over his shoulder. Jessica Gallagher glowered at Jason from her seat. Her eyes pierced his chest like needles.

It was over in moments. The magistrate rose and left the court and press erupted in his wake.

“Excuse me, sir.” A bailiff waved to get Jason’s attention. “I’m sorry. I’ve got to take Mr Gallagher back to his cell.”

Jason nodded with a blank stare. He packed his briefcase and followed Nicholas and the guards through the side door. Jessica Gallagher intercepted them.

“What happened in there, Jason?” Her contempt was barely kept beneath the surface.

“I wish I knew. This has never happened to me before.”

She took a deep breath. Her knuckles turned white as she clenched her fist in an attempt to control her anger. “Alright. Tell me how we fix this. I want my husband home with me tonight.”

Jason shook his head and glanced at Nicholas. “That’s not going to happen, Jessica.”

“Don’t tell me that!” Her pitch suddenly lifted two notches, and so did the volume.

“Jessica, please try to understand.”

“I won’t try and I won’t understand. We’re not paying you to explain things to us. I want my husband to sleep in his own bed tonight. Not in some rat-infested cell.”

“Jessica, please. I feel bad enough as it is, but I can’t undo what the magistrate has done. Tomorrow I’ll lodge an appeal. I’m sure we can get this decision overturned, but it’s going to take time. Shouting at me won’t bring Nicholas home any sooner.”

She covered her mouth and stared at the floor. “I can’t believe this is happening, Nicholas. How, in the name of all that’s holy, did you end up in jail?”

Jason put his hand on her shoulder. “As I explained to you over the phone, it doesn’t look good. The witnesses, the reports – they all say the same thing. The victim was killed inside the club, and Nicholas fled the crime scene.”

Jessica Gallagher took a deep breath. “You don’t believe him, do you?”

“It doesn’t matter what I —”

“No, Jason, it does matter. You have to convince a judge —”

“A magistrate.”

“Don’t interrupt me! I don’t need a legal thesaurus. I need a lawyer who will convince your *magistrate* that my husband is innocent. Do you understand that?”

Jason closed his eyes and sighed. “Yes, I understand. And yes, I’ll get him out of there. Are we done?”

She sniffed. Nicholas noticed for the first time that her eyes brimmed with tears. In an instant, all Jason's animosity melted. "Don't worry, Jessica. We'll get him out." He turned to Nicholas and nodded. "We'll get you out."

She swallowed and nodded. Then she took a shaky breath, "I need to go with him, Jason."

Jason Kreeley shook his head. "Jessica. We've been over this already. You won't be doing him any good."

"I need to be with him." Her eyes pleaded like a child.

Nicholas gazed at his lawyer. He felt the same way. Jason tried to be as gentle as he could. "Look. I've explained this to both of you. If you walk in there—" he hesitated and shook his head. "It's a different world inside a prison. The inmates operate on animal instinct. That's why they're there. They see a woman like you, there's no telling what they'll do to Nicholas."

"But if I just—"

"No, Jessica. You have to do what's best for Nicholas. Can you do that for him?"

She hesitated, then nodded. "It's just so hard." Her voice was little more than a squeak. The anguish gnawed at the pit of Nicholas' stomach. Jason forced a smile and glanced at him. "You'll see each other. Soon."

The guards pulled Nicholas towards the door. Jessica clasped his hand in parting. Then she glanced at Jason. "Call me as soon as you hear anything."

Jason forced a smile. "Will do."

She remained rooted in her spot, holding his gaze as the bailiffs ushered him out of the court room. Nicholas swallowed. The evidence against him was overwhelming. He'd seen what his foes were capable of and he shuddered at the thought of their power. How was he going to tell Jessica that he might not be home for many years to come? If ever.

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Decklin Kanabas sipped a cup of black coffee and pored over the morning paper. In the background, the blaring television broadcast the opening scene of *The Last Boy Scout*. For the moment he wasn't interested in the movie; this was the nineteenth time he'd watched it and he could quote most of the quips and one-liners by heart.

What interested him was the most recent article concerning Nicholas Gallagher. **GALLAGHER BAIL APPEAL DENIED**. Decklin stared at the headline. His concern for the man increased with each passing day.

He glanced at the pile of newspapers on the floor. Every one carried the story. *The Sun* had even begun to hint at the idea of a conspiracy. According to their article, someone had murdered Nicholas Gallagher's arresting officers the same day they had taken him into custody. The article openly suggested, by way of a quote, that someone didn't want the world to know what those men had learnt.

Decklin shook his head. *The Sun* always hinted at conspiracies. Yet he couldn't help wondering why the two people who had spoken directly to Nicholas at his arrest had been silenced. The second issue was even more puzzling. It wasn't what the newspapers said, but what they didn't say.

Not a single reporter had mentioned Nicholas' documents during the entire saga. Could it be those documents that had brought about the policemen's deaths? If so, why hadn't Nicholas called him? He'd seen the documents and could corroborate the story. Decklin couldn't put his finger on it exactly, but he felt uneasy about the trial. It was a feeling he couldn't shake. He decided to do something about it.

He turned down the sound on the television and reached for his phone. It was early, but his secretary would already be in. She answered after only three rings.

"Rosy?"

“Yes, Father Kanabas?”

“I’ve – ah – decided to go to the conference today.”

She hesitated for a moment. “Oh!”

Decklin smiled. “Don’t sound so surprised. These things can happen, you know.”

“Sorry. I just —”

“Thought I’d sooner gargle wasps?” *Silence*. “Something’s come up. I need to talk to a colleague and he’s bound to be there.”

“Well, Bishop Seath will be pleased to see you there.”

Decklin winced. “If I’m lucky, he won’t know about it.” *Fat chance*. Bishop Seath was the embodiment of God’s all-seeing eye.

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Decklin arrived at the World Trade Centre in his battered Toyota Corolla. The dents and rusty patches testified to its age. He found an open bay near the rear of the parking lot and headed for the main building. He glanced at his watch. *Late*.

Fortunately, the doors were still open. After scrounging a program from one of the hostesses, he made his way into the auditorium itself. The room was massive - able to seat over five thousand delegates. He found a spare seat and nodded at the white-haired minister who graciously moved up one space to make room for the latecomer.

The speaker droned on for over an hour. Decklin constantly scanned the crowd, hunting for Reginald Carcer. He needed answers and Reggie would be able to furnish him with the information he wanted.

He spotted the man mere minutes before the speaker closed. Reggie was seated way over on the other side of the auditorium, dressed in a navy blue suit. He had one of those nondescript faces that seemed to melt in a crowd.

Decklin endured the rest of the speech until the group finally broke for tea. He was forced to move so that other ministers could get out of the aisle and ended up pressing himself against the wall. He tried to manoeuvre across to the next section and intercept Reggie, but found himself fighting the tide.

Eventually he left by the nearest door and skulked in a corner outside. He craned his neck to locate his colleague. At one point, he spotted the man but Reggie quickly disappeared in the crowd once more.

Decklin never saw him again during the break and decided to head back into the hall early in the hopes of catching the man en route back to his seat. Reggie appeared just before the second session began. When he saw Decklin, his face cracked into a broad grin and he headed over. “Decklin, how’s it going?”

“Well thanks, Reggie. Yourself?”

The man shrugged. “Same old same old. What brings you to the conference? Run out of excuses?”

Decklin grinned. His loathing for these events was well known among his colleagues and he was regularly called through to the Bishop’s office and reprimanded for non-attendance.

“Something like that. Actually, I needed to talk to you. Otherwise I probably wouldn’t have come.”

Reggie raised his eyebrows. “Sounds serious. You want to hook up at lunch time?”

“I’d rather talk sooner than later. Can we skip off the next session and head for the Steers across the street? Burgers are on me.”

The man hesitated, but Decklin could see he’d won. Reggie nodded. “Let me just get my things.”

Twenty minutes later the two men sat in the Steers diner, each with a large cola in front of them while they waited for their food to arrive.

“It’s about a congregation member. He’s in Benoni prison.”

Reggie nodded. He was one of the few ministers outside who was allowed into the prison, having obtained a prison pass many years ago and established a ministry to the inmates.

“What’s his name?”

“Gallagher.”

Reggie glanced up sharply. “The computer billionaire?”

Decklin nodded.

“I didn’t know he was a member of your congregation.”

Decklin winced and shrugged. “He’s not really. He was married in the church and his parents were buried there, but that was while Father McCain was still alive.”

“So how did you come to know him?”

“He was in need of some counselling, as you can imagine. I was the one that suggested he hand himself over to the police.”

Reggie suddenly looked very serious. “It was the right thing to do. I would have done the same.”

Decklin was suddenly alarmed. “Then why are your eyes telling me I did the wrong thing, Reggie?”

The man hesitated. “You didn’t do the wrong thing. Prison’s a funny place. Nobody knows why some things go the way they do.”

Decklin opened his mouth, but shut it quickly as the food arrived. Time slowed to a trickle while the waiter fussed over their cutlery and produced an assortment of condiments. Finally, the man left them alone and Decklin picked up the conversation again.

“Stop beating about the bush, Reg. What’s happened?”

“Nothing’s happened – yet.” The man frowned and stared into his drink, deep in thought. “The word already out among the prisoners is your friend is never going to see the end of his trial. Somebody there has it in for him. It’s just a matter of time.”

Decklin leaned forward and slapped the table. “They’re going to kill him! Who?”

“Nobody tells, Decklin. That’s the rule in prison. They allude to the goings on and leave it to you to read between the lines. My guess is the Twenty-eights have been paid to take him out.”

“The Twenty-eights?”

“They’re a prison gang – like the Mafia on the inside. Their reach extends to every prison in the country. Once they’ve got it in for someone, no prison is safe.”

“Who told you this was going to happen?”

Reggie leaned back in his chair and took a deep breath. “People in prison are nameless. It wouldn’t help if I gave you a name. He’d just deny it if ever confronted.”

“But surely you could report it to a warden or something. If you know a man is about to be killed, it’s your duty —”

“I don’t know anything, Decklin!” Reggie interrupted him and this time his voice was sharp. “And don’t tell me how to minister to prisoners. I’ve been doing this for twenty years and I know which battles can be won and which ones can’t.”

“Have you even spoken to him?”

“Of course I have. You don’t hang a dying man out to dry. You save his soul – snatch him from the fire, so to speak.”

Decklin snorted. “He’s not some cancer-ridden patient lying on his death bed, Reg. You don’t just pray for his soul and hand him over to the Lord. A crime is about to be committed.”

“And what do you suggest we do?”

“You tell the warden – move the prisoner. Something.”

Reggie shook his head. "If that would help, I'd have done it long ago. Trust me. The warden already knows. He's as powerless to stop this as I am."

"How can you possibly know that?"

"Like I said, I've been doing this for twenty years. You think I haven't learnt how things work in there?"

"You could at least warn him."

Again, Reggie shook his head. "Think about it Decklin. All you'd end up doing is making his last days intolerable. What you're suggesting is nothing short of cruel. He can't stop the tide any more than the warden or you and I can. Why make his time any more miserable than it already is?"

Decklin shook his head. "If you won't do anything, yourself, will you at least get me in there?"

"And break the trust of men I have been working with for anywhere between five and ten years? Forget it."

"So you won't help me?"

"If I could I would. You have to understand, the men who told me this stand to lose their own lives if it comes out that they've blabbed. Besides, if I bring you in there, they'll simply turn to stone. You'll get nothing out of them. It's best to leave things as they are."

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Nicholas awoke at the distant sound of a clanging door. He opened his eyes, but it made little difference. He could barely see the edge of his bed in the shadowy cell. The slits between the bars on his door were little more than slightly lighter shades of black. There may have been a moon outside, but the prison's interior was like a dank cellar with the door fastened shut. He could hear, however. Things moved in the night and he'd learnt to sleep lightly. Even now, he could hear the scuttling of tiny feet as some sort of unidentifiable vermin moved about the floor.

He shivered slightly and pulled the sack-like prison blanket to his shoulders. It smelled like dirty socks and provided all the comfort of sandpaper. Prison was certainly the great equaliser, he reflected bitterly. All his money and power outside were worthless to him in here.

Nicholas had heard about the corruption inside prisons, but so far had experienced none. The guards had refused to treat him any differently from the rest of the prisoners and had become openly hostile at even the hint of a bribe. He hadn't been allowed so much as a telephone call outside his legal rights.

If anything, they seemed more ruthless with him than most of the other criminals in the establishment and had taken pleasure in taunting him with the threat of bringing some of the more hardened criminals to visit his cell in the night.

Nicholas understood all too well, what such a visit might mean. The thought terrified him, but so far, their threats had been empty. On two occasions, the night staff had woken him in the small hours by jiggling keys in the lock. They had rattled the door to his cell, but it had been nothing more than their sick idea of a joke.

He refused to give them the satisfaction of showing his fear, but he'd cowered under his blanket, waiting for the moment to pass. The worst part of prison was how powerless it made him feel.

He'd discussed the incidents with his lawyer, but the man had told him to keep quiet about it. A complaint laid with the warden would achieve little, as Nicholas had no proof. It would merely be his word against that of the guards. In fact, such a complaint might even annoy them enough to want to teach him a lesson and invite more serious aggression.

“The best thing you can do is keep quiet and show no fear.” Those had been Jason Kreely’s words.

*But you’re not the one stuck in a cell while potential rapists rattle the keys outside your door.*

He longed for Jessica. Not a minute went by that he didn’t think of her. Jason had advised against bringing her to the prison, even in visiting hours. The mere sight of her would cause enough jealousy among the guards and other inmates to make Nicholas a target. *The price of marrying a supermodel.*

Nicholas had been incredulous at the outlandish statement, but Jason Kreely had been firm. “Forget everything you understand about human nature, Nicholas. These people have no moral compass; that’s why they’re here. And remember, the guards are not much better than the inmates. There is very little difference between the two. Don’t give them a reason to bully you. If you do, they will torment you until you break under the strain and then silence you before you have a chance to speak.”

“Why can’t you get me out of here?” Nicholas had been on the verge of tears. It was unlike him, but weeks of stress and constant threats on his body and very life were beginning to take their toll. Not to mention the fact that he stood to spend the best years of his life in prison.

Nicholas had to constantly remind himself that not everyone was his enemy. He’d actually fired Jason at one point and accused him of conspiring with the courts against their case, before coming to his senses and apologising. Jason had been gracious and never mentioned the incident.

The idea of a conspiracy still hovered over Nicholas like an oppressive tyrant. He was unable to shake the idea that other prisoners were watching his every move, as if waiting to strike the moment a chance presented itself. He tried to convince himself that they were merely curious of the newcomer, but it was impossible.

He felt like one fighting the tide. Willow’s documents had vanished and so had his witnesses, the policemen he’d given the documents to. He had considered mentioning the Anglican minister to Jason, but was afraid that Kanabas might meet the same end as the policemen. Decklin Kanabas was his only hope and Nicholas refused to risk giving him up to the people who had put him in prison and sealed his fate.

One thing prison had taught him was to trust nobody. He wouldn’t even risk a phone call, as his movements and conversations could be monitored far too easily inside the prison walls. When the time came, he would contact Kanabas, but not before.

Nicholas knew enough about the law to know that he needed to be proved guilty beyond reasonable doubt. It was a long shot, but if a priest could testify and be convincing enough to a judge – even one who was perhaps less than impartial – he still had a chance.

Footsteps interrupted his thoughts. Three or four sets. He held his breath as they approached his cell. They stopped outside and once again, he heard the keys jingling, searching for the lock.

He had played out the scenario every night since the first incident and knew what he needed to do. With quivering hands, he reached for the loose slat carefully positioned near the top of his bed within easy reach. All the while, he wished fervently that this was just another sick prank on the part of the guards.

The slat had been easily concealed. It had, in fact, been a handle from a broken broom. Nicholas had been told to get rid of the item and had quietly slipped the handle down his collar and the upper part of his right leg. One became inventive in prison. It had taken several nights of scraping, but he had managed to sharpen the broken end to a point and kept it hidden under his mattress.

*“Kom ryk seun, come rich boy. It’s time to work for your money.”* Constable van Rensburg. Nicholas recognised the guard’s voice. The man had tormented him from the moment he’d arrived.

Several chuckles echoed in the darkness. Some were the voices of guards, but others were of a more sinister timbre that bore the mark of prison inmates.

The keys rattled in the lock once more. Nicholas closed his eyes tightly. Then he heard the click. This was no joke, he realised. This time he faced the real thing.

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Instead of returning to the conference, Decklin Kanabas headed for the Johannesburg municipality. A quick trip to the Town Planners office told him all he needed to know. After that, he returned to the parish where he received a long list of messages from Rosy.

“One of the messages was from the Bishop,” she said. “He said it was urgent and that you were to contact him immediately when you came in.”

Decklin nodded. Reggie had moved quickly. He thanked Rosy and went through to his office where he reached for the phone.

“Bishop Seath’s office.” Decklin winced. The prim voice of the man’s secretary always grated on his ears.

“Hi, Paula. Decklin Kanabas here. I understand the Bishop was looking for me?”

“Ah, Father Kanabas. What have you been up to this time? He didn’t seem at all happy when he returned from the conference.”

“You know me, Paula. Can’t stay out of trouble for more than ten minutes.” Decklin tried to be friendly, but he really wasn’t in the mood.

“I’ll put you through.”

It was several minutes before the Bishop picked up the phone.

“Seath here.” His voice had a permanent croak, probably the result of years spent behind pulpits with inferior microphones. It was also subdued. Bishop Seath never raised his voice. His displeasure was always conveyed through underlings, like Paula. It was a trait that tended to annoy Decklin, who preferred direct confrontation.

“It’s Decklin Kanabas. You wanted to speak to me?”

“Kanabas? I understand you were speaking to Father Carcer during the lunch break today.” The man also never referred to anyone by their first name.

Decklin rolled his eyes. Reggie would have given a one hundred percent accurate account of the events, that was certain.

“We were having lunch at the time, yes.” Decklin made his point. Both men knew it had not been during the official luncheon and he was in no mood to play cat and mouse games with his superior.

“Quite. Nice of you to join us this morning.” That was his roundabout way of admonishing a subordinate for not staying for the full conference.

Decklin steeled himself for another session with Paula. She would convey the Bishop’s displeasure once the conversation was over.

Decklin wondered briefly what devious means his boss would use to ensure that he was transferred back to the secretary before hanging up.

Seath continued. “He also tells me that you have concerns regarding one of his charges in the Benoni prison.”

“I enquired about Nicholas Gallagher. Reggie told me that there is a contract of sorts out on the man. Apparently, some inmates have it in their heads to see he never leaves the prison walls alive. I was wondering what the church’s stance on the matter would be.”

“Father Carcer has assured me that he’s doing all he can.”

“Well, *Father Carcer* is not doing enough. It seems to me that a nice eulogy and a quick prayer to send the man on his way are more the work of the Pharisee than of the Good Samaritan.”

The silence on the other end of the line told him that he could expect another call from Paula in the morning. When the man finally spoke, it was in measured tones. Even Bishop Seath was battling to maintain his cool exterior in the face of Decklin's outburst.

“I think it would be best if you didn't get involved in the matter, especially in the light of your, ah, history. Father Carcer is more than qualified and I feel the church should leave it in his hands.”

“I didn't realise that he had become an undertaker.”

“Kanabas, give me your word that you will stay out of this Gallagher matter. I don't want you involved.”

Decklin sighed. “I already asked him if he would get me inside, but he refused.”

“I know. Your word, Kanabas.”

Again, he sighed. “Okay. I won't ask him again. I won't even mention the subject to him.”

“Good. Now, I feel we should arrange an appointment. Sometime tomorrow, perhaps. Could you make it at around ten?”

“I'll be there.”

“Fine. I'll put you back to Paula so that she can put it in my diary. See you tomorrow.”

Bishop Seath transferred the call back to his secretary. Decklin shook his head. *So that's how he managed it.* Now it was time for the real grilling. Paula would follow the Bishop's instructions to the letter. Not one detail would be left out. He could also expect a lecture on his lack of respect when he arrived at the Bishop's office the following day.

On the other hand, he'd made no promises regarding Nicholas Gallagher. The only concession he had made was that he wouldn't bother Reginald Carcer with the matter again – something he'd never intended to do anyway. The Bishop was satisfied and yet, Decklin hadn't really promised him a thing.

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The heavy, iron door swung open and there was the shuffle of feet as somebody entered the cell. Nicholas quietly pulled the broom handle from under his mattress and curled up in the corner to defend himself.

It was laughable. What chance did he stand? He heard the body moving towards him in the darkness. Nicholas waited until the man came within range and swung the stick as hard as he could in an arc, aiming for the man's head.

He was lucky. There was a loud crack as the handle struck something solid. The man screamed and recoiled.

“What's going on?” In the commotion, one of the guards switched on a flashlight, shining it through the narrow bars of the cell.

Now he could see the figure. He was a huge brute of a man and, although Nicholas could not see his face with the light shining from behind, he could sense the man's rage. With an animal-like roar, the man lunged across the cell at Nicholas.

Nicholas had reversed the stick, hoping to use it as a sword, but his terror caused near paralysis. He merely cringed, holding the stick in a defensive pose. Although the man could see him vaguely in the shadows, the total darkness, followed by the sudden light had affected the vision of both protagonists. Nicholas couldn't move. He merely cowered in the corner.

The man lunged at Nicholas and the broom handle's point caught the prisoner in the solar plexus, just beneath the breastbone. That alone would never have been enough, but in

lunging, he forced the back of the stick into the corner, jamming it down against the top of the bed.

With the stick now properly anchored and two hundred and fifty pounds bearing down on it, it suddenly became a dangerous weapon. There was an explosive gasp as the point penetrated the man's torso.

In the torchlight reflections, Nicholas could just make out the whites of the man's eyes. There was no anger now. Only pain and fear. A moment later, there was an agonised groan and the man lurched back, pulling the barb from his flesh.

There was a gush of dark fluid. The bloodied point had penetrated at least two inches. Nicholas stared in horror at the damage he had wrought. He heard keys jingle as guards fought to get inside to the injured man.

When they did, they ripped Nicholas from his bed, pounding his head and torso. Nicholas curled into a foetal position, covering his head and face, enduring the blows. After a minute or so, the men stopped. They quickly retrieved the injured prisoner, making sure that they removed the crude weapon from Nicholas' cell, and dragged the attacker off to the infirmary.

Nicholas raised himself into a sitting position. The floor was cold and wet where his own blood mingled with the inmate's. His hands quivered from the overflow of adrenaline as he reached for the foul toilet bowl at the far end of his cell. Nicholas retched. Very little bile came up, but his stomach heaved all the same.

When he was done, he moved across to the basin and rinsed his mouth with the trickle of tepid water that he was able to coax from the rusty tap. He cleaned himself up as best he could and returned to bed. Initially, his breath came in sobs as he battled to gain control of his breathing. It was nearly twenty minutes before he was able to breathe normally. He spent the rest of the night awake in his cell, wondering when, or if, they would return.

One thing was sure. This night, he had made himself a mark. Until now, his enemies had been imaginary, but tonight they had become real. It was only a matter of time before they returned and, next time, he would not have a broom handle to defend himself with. He decided to call his lawyer in the morning. He didn't care any longer. The man had to get him out, no matter what it took.

## Chapter 5

Nicholas was drenched in sweat as he heaved the hefty weight. Fifty kilograms on the bench press may not have been much for a serious body builder, but then Nicholas could hardly consider himself to be in that league. Gym was something he and his wife did in the privacy of their own home to maintain a certain level of fitness and health.

“You can do it, *Soutie*,” his companion urged him.

The swarthy man above him was cut from an entirely different cloth. Under normal circumstances, Nicholas would never have even known the man’s name, but then these were not normal circumstances.

Prison required friends and Nicholas had learnt this quickly. He was not in a prison designed for white-collar criminals. Being accused of murder, he had been sent to *an appropriate facility*. Those had been the magistrate’s words and Nicholas’ hatred for the man had not diminished over time.

An appropriate facility was one filled with the most violent types of criminal Nicholas had ever known. He had heard about such people in various news bulletins on both radio and television, but coming face to face with them had gripped his heart with terror.

He had been careful not to show his fear, however. The inmates, like dogs, seemed to sense fear and this immediately drew aggression. He needed protection and quickly. This could not be sought from the guards; that had been the first lesson. They were not always around and couldn’t be relied upon to protect an individual.

More frightening were those guards who were more than willing to turn a blind eye if a suitable agreement could be reached. Nicholas had found an ally in *Bakkis*. The name was a nickname, but everyone called him that and Nicholas had never learnt his real name.

The man was about six foot four and weighed one hundred and forty kilograms. He had been a local farmer and was currently serving an effective five-year sentence for murdering one of his farm-workers. The details were sketchy as the man still proclaimed his innocence and was unwilling to discuss the case.

He had taken a liking to Nicholas for some reason and dubbed him with the nickname *Soutie*. The name, an Afrikaans term for English speaking South Africans, was an affectionate one, despite its vulgar origins.

It was fortuitous, perhaps that the man had sought Nicholas’ friendship. Few of the other prisoners liked Bakkis, but they also feared him. Nicholas was interrupted by one of the guards.

“*Ryk seun!* Rich boy!”

He carefully replaced the weight and sat up to look at the guard. It was Saturday and the warders generally left them alone on weekends. “Yes, sir?” he said, standing up. It was with chagrin that he realised how much the past few weeks had changed him. Three months earlier, he would barely have acknowledged the man.

“You’ve got a visitor,” the man jerked his head in the direction of the exit.

*Who could it be?* Nicholas didn’t bother asking. It would have been impertinent. Surely not his attorney. Jason never worked on weekends. His wife? He doubted it. Nicholas was

immediately on his guard. He followed the man with trepidation, watching every corner for possible attack. They walked through the wide passages, but there were too many people. After being led through several locked gates, they finally arrived at the visitors' section. It was outside the main building in a dusty courtyard with several cracked concrete tables surrounded by matching benches.

He gazed around the courtyard, hunting for hidden foes, but none were to be found. Finally, his eyes fell on the stocky figure in the corner. The man smiled when Nicholas met his gaze.

"Father Kanabas!" Nicholas loped over, taking the man's outstretched hand.

"Nicholas," the minister smiled. "You look a mess."

Gallagher winced. Most of the injuries had healed, but the bruises remained. "You should see the other guy's knuckles."

The man produced two giant burgers and ice-cold colas. "I'd have packed beer, but the wardens frown on it, I'm told."

"So would the church, I imagine."

The minister grinned. "You're thinking of Pentecostals." He handed Nicholas a burger. "You seemed surprised to see me."

Nicholas bit into the delicious bun and wolfed down his first mouthful. "I don't get many visitors in here."

"Apart from family?"

Nicholas shook his head. "Not even my wife. My lawyer managed to convince her that she'd be doing me more good than harm by staying away."

Decklin grinned. "That couldn't have been easy."

Nicholas chuckled grimly. "Jason said she nearly tore his right eye out of its socket the last time they discussed it."

Nicholas allowed himself to relax, simply enjoying the meal. It was the first time in weeks that he'd been able to take his mind off his predicament and Decklin Kanabas seemed to sense that.

Finally, Nicholas broached the subject. "So what brings you here? It certainly isn't the breathtaking view."

Decklin became serious. "Something's come to my attention. A colleague of mine told me your life is in danger."

Nicholas contemplated the man's words as he chewed on his last mouthful of fries. When he had finished, he tapped his bruised cheek. "I don't need a weatherman to tell me when it's raining buckets. You've got to watch yourself every day in this place. People get killed for standing on someone's toes."

"This seemed more sinister than that – as if someone had a contract on you, or something."

"Why would somebody do that?"

Kanabas shrugged. "I don't know, Nicholas. But this guy knows things. He's been running weekly meetings in Block A for the past twenty years. Something's going on in here and you've become a target."

"That's ridiculous. He couldn't possibly know something like that."

"Really? I see you've spent a lot of time convincing yourself."

"And by that you mean —"

"Why haven't you called me?"

Nicholas was taken aback by the sudden change in direction. "I'm sorry?"

"I read the papers, remember. Not a word has been mentioned about the document you showed me. I assume you gave it to the policemen who took your statement when you were arrested."

"Yes, so?"

“So, the only two people who have officially seen it are dead. Doesn’t that strike you as odd?”

Nicholas remained silent. Somehow, to hear his own thoughts spoken aloud by another made the idea even more terrifying. Until now, nobody had believed him. It was a strange sensation to realise that it was even more frightening that someone did.

Kanabas continued. “I’m the only other person who has seen the documents; your only remaining witness. Why hasn’t your attorney contacted me?”

“He will in good time. When I’m ready.”

“Exactly. You’re afraid the conspiracy is true. That’s why you had to protect my identity and the fact that I know about the document. The Lord knows I had my doubts, but now I have to admit it. And you know it’s true. If you wait for your trial, win or lose, there’s no way you’re leaving these prison walls alive.”

Nicholas shook his head in frustration. “Believe me, we’ve tried everything. There’s no way I’m getting out of here before my trial. I’ve hired the best legal team in the country. They couldn’t believe it when bail was denied. Since then, they’ve written to everyone except Santa Claus begging for my release, but no luck. There are no more avenues to pursue.”

The minister thought about it for a moment. “The justice system isn’t going to come through for you. They’ve proved that. Now if it were me, I’d head to a church meeting tomorrow morning. The guards don’t pay too much attention on Sundays and many of these meetings are held in laundry rooms, or halls with open air courtyards, much like this one.”

He gazed up at the low gutters surrounding the visitors’ courtyard. “I imagine a man could shimmy up one of those gutter pipes without too much trouble and the guards wouldn’t even notice. You could probably make it all the way across the roof without even being spotted. Then, if you were careful, you might be able to get to one of the visitors’ cars and hide in it. I reckon it would be at least two hours before the guards raised the alarm. A man could get a long way in that time.”

Nicholas was stunned. “Do you realise what you’re suggesting?”

Decklin Kanabas shrugged. “I’m just saying, if it were me —”

Nicholas stared at the man in shock. “What kind of priest are you?”

The man’s gaze was steady. “One with a keen sense of self-preservation – and one who cares when an innocent man’s life is threatened.”

Nicholas shook his head. “There’s no way. It’s impossible.”

“Has prison already affected you so badly that you can’t take a simple risk? I thought business was about making risky decisions every day.”

“And you think this is the same thing?”

“It’s an option.” Kanabas held his gaze.

“One that leaves me without a life. I’ll be on the run, with nothing to go back to.”

The man’s expression softened, “You don’t have a life now. I don’t know when this thing’s going to happen, but rest assured, it’s on the agenda. They’ll probably try a few forays first, you know, create a few enemies on the inside. That way, when it happens, nobody will be blamed. You gave some prisoners a reason to take you out; no questions need to be asked.”

Nicholas stared hard at the table, allowing the idea to sink in. *Create enemies first*. It was already happening. The agenda had already been set in motion. How much time did he have left?

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The trailing vehicle appeared just as Decklin Kanabas left the prison. He couldn’t be sure at first, as the road was long with very few turnoffs. The beige sedan made the same turn as him, but it was on to the freeway after all. Almost everyone would use the freeway.

He drove at a steady pace, just under the speed limit. There was no need to alert the followers – if that was indeed what they were – to the fact that he knew they were there. He headed towards the airport. At the Linksfield off-ramp he slowed down, taking the slipway. The car followed.

It was as if they didn't even care whether he spotted them or not. At the top, he kept looking left and right, even back over his shoulder, although not directly at his pursuers. He was just a man unsure of his bearings. The light finally turned green. He waited before turning left. After a few metres, he pulled to a stop. Several vehicles passed by, including the beige sedan. As soon as the road was clear, he quickly did a U-turn and bolted back towards the on-ramp.

Glancing in the rear view mirror as he made the turn, he noticed the sedan making a sharp turn about 100m down the road ahead of him. He gunned the motor in an effort to get well ahead of the other vehicle. The engine screamed in protest and the speedometer jiggled just below 180km per hour mark.

He kept a sharp eye on the rear-view mirror, but had already rounded the bend before the sedan came into view. He remained tense, with his foot jammed against the floorboards of his vehicle. Twice, the pursuing vehicle came into view and, each time, Decklin could see that, despite his frantic speed, they were quickly closing the gap.

He hit the next off-ramp with the speed of a streaking bullet, slowing for the turn but ignoring the red traffic light that blocked his passage. He now found himself in unfamiliar territory, flying blind. He took the first street to his right, then raced through two more traffic lights before turning left again. A couple more turns found him in the middle of the suburbs, surrounded by rambling homes with large gardens and high walls around the perimeter.

He took a more direct path now that he had shaken off his pursuers, heading away from the freeway behind him. The car was a target; he needed to get rid of it but he didn't want to find himself stranded on the street either. As a pedestrian, he would also be noticed and, if spotted, he would be unable to run from a driven vehicle.

Finally, he spotted a shopping centre. It was small as malls went, but certainly large enough to get lost in. After parking the vehicle, he headed into the mall where he grabbed an ice cold cola and a small packet of groceries before heading for the parking lot on the far side of the building. Now he blended with the local environment. A man in a shopping mall with a packet of groceries was as inconspicuous as a camouflaged soldier in the bush. Getting home would not be difficult.

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“Yes?” The grey haired butler who answered the phone didn't bother with etiquette. He listened briefly. “Where did you find it?” There was another pause. “I understand. Yes, I'll tell him, but he won't be happy.”

After hanging up, he turned to Luther, seated behind the mahogany desk. Luther raised his eyebrows. “And?”

The grey-haired man's expression was dour. “They lost him near the airport. The car turned up at a local shopping mall, but the driver never returned for it.”

Luther glared at the man through narrowed eyes. “I assume they traced the vehicle's plates.” Luther's voice was soft, like the low peal of distant thunder.

The grey haired man broke eye-contact and gazed out of the window. “The car was rented, of course, under a false name – the same name that was entered on the register at the prison incidentally.”

Luther followed the butler's gaze and spotted two guard-dogs patrolling the expansive lawn outside. They were giant *Boerboels*, South African Mastiffs, dark tan with bull-like heads. He

felt a kindred spirit with the beasts. They never barked but he could tell from the simple way they held his gaze that they were deadly.

He turned his thoughts back to Gallagher and his mysterious visitor. “And the fingerprints?” The organisation had suspected from the very beginning that Nicholas Gallagher would have visitors they might want to know about and arrangements had been made with the prison wardens. It was standard practice on visiting days to take prints of all visitors who entered the prison grounds and copies had been easy to come by.

The butler grimaced and shook his head. “He’s a professional – way too good for simple minded prison wardens. All the prints were smudged in such a way as to be worthless to a trained eye. The bumbling fool who took them probably didn’t even notice anything was amiss.”

Luther glowered at the prison-guard’s incompetence. “He must have left some trace, surely.”

“There was a report about a stolen car at the shopping centre where he disappeared. It happened about the time he was there.”

Luther rose from his seat and faced the man with a thin smile. “Let me guess. The vehicle disappeared without a trace.”

“Actually, it was found at Johannesburg International Airport – abandoned.”

This time Luther’s smile conceded grudging respect. “He might as well have waved a wand and disappeared before their very eyes. He could be anywhere by now.”

The butler shrugged. “He’ll turn up again. People like him always do.”

Luther’s lips curled in a sinister smile and sat down again. “Maybe this one will make a worthy adversary for once.”

The butler shook his head. “I’m afraid it will be someone else. I received orders from London earlier this afternoon. You’re wanted back in Europe immediately.”

Luther felt a flash of irritation. “Gallagher’s not been terminated yet. And this new ally is another complication —”

The butler shook his head. “They don’t care. Gallagher is safely ensconced in prison. Nobody will believe his story now. The council feels your talents will be wasted on this case. You’re headed back to London tonight.”

Luther rose from his seat, bristling at the man’s insolent tone. “I don’t take orders from you, old man. And if you think —”

The man swallowed and shrank back. However, he held Luther’s gaze with frightened determination. “The orders are not mine. They come directly from the priest.”

Luther clenched his teeth. He so badly wanted this kill. But the priest would not be argued with. He inclined his head and then gazed out of the window once more. “*Pour notre mere.*”

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Nicholas finally reached the front of the food queue and offered his bowl for the waiting food. He had learnt on the first day not to use a plate. The first man dipped his serving spoon into the silver tub and shook a giant dollop of stiff, sticky maize porridge into the bowl. The glutinous white blob steamed slightly. It smelled of nothing and yet it was slightly unpleasant.

*Undercooked.* Like the rest of the prisoners, Nicholas had quickly learnt that prison food was cooked badly in a myriad of different ways. Sometimes the *pap*, porridge, was dry and crumbled in the fingers. On such days, each lumpy mouthful had to be forced down with large quantities of liquid. Even the tasteless, watery sauce that was dished under the name of meat was generally not enough to prevent a prisoner from choking on his food.

Other times, the unsavoury gifts came with a dark crust of burnt flakes that even the most daring failed to get down, but the worst *pap* of all was the grainy mixture of undercooked flour with the texture of glue that stuck to the roof of one's mouth and made its slow passage down the throat like molten lava, each mouthful being forced down with repeated swallows.

Nicholas moved on to the meat dish. This was a chocolate brown mixture of unidentifiable lumps floating in large quantities of liquid. A thick layer of oil coated the surface of the dish. A large ladle full of the bubbling mixture was sullenly thrown over the *pap* by a prison chef with thick sweaty arms and stubby fingers.

Chef was not a term employed by the prisoners when referring to the staff that worked in the kitchens. They were generally referred to as fitters and turners, the joke among the prisoners being that chefs generally took good food, fitted it into a pot and turned it into unpalatable slop.

Prison was far less formal than he had imagined it would be and the official mess hall was nowhere near large enough to accommodate all the inmates. Generally, prisoners found a sunny spot, if the weather was good, and ate in small groups, seated on the ground, on steps or leaning against a wall. When the weather was bad, they crowded into the mess hall and surrounding passages or returned to their cells and ate there.

Nicholas took a few mouthfuls. He ate with a spoon, but this was a luxury that many prisoners could not afford. His cutlery and crockery had been brought in for him from outside the prison by his attorney, but many of the prisoners ate from plastic tubs, using their fingers to mop up the hideous oily gravy with large chunks of the disgusting *pap*.

He soon gave up on the food; his heart just wasn't in it. It was Saturday and nearly a week had passed since his visit from the Anglican minister. It had been a week of terror, haunted by imagined enemies lurking at every corner. When awake, he had spent every minute glancing over his shoulder, waiting, anticipating the ever-imminent attack. His nights had been sleepless and fraught with nightmares in which he dreamed of jingling keys and dark shadows carrying all manner of hideous weapons. Every time he awoke in an icy sweat, having been roused in the nick of time before imminent death. What would happen when he didn't wake up in time, he wondered?

He spent his days working out in the gym, playing soccer with fellow prisoners on the dusty quad or immersing himself in his work, sweeping out the kitchens and passages to take his mind off the danger he was in, but he realised he was slowly losing his grip on sanity.

A guard's voice roused him from his reverie. "*Kom, julle. Dominee is hier.* Come, you lot. The minister's arrived!"

Anyone who came to prison and preached the gospel was called a *Dominee*, but the man was actually no more than a lay preacher, a volunteer from one of the local churches who had rite of passage to preach in the prison. He had spoken to Nicholas on one or two occasions, when Nicholas had joined the party on a Saturday more out of boredom than anything else. The man was, in fact, a mortgage broker, but on Saturdays he was a *Dominee* and was accorded respect by the prisoners and wardens alike.

Nicholas quickly threw his food into a trash can and joined the party being led through to another cell block. This was one time when rules were relaxed slightly and prisoners were allowed to move between cell blocks without any written permission or bureaucratic control. There were not many of them – they totalled about fourteen in all – but to handle the paperwork for fourteen prisoners to transfer them from one block to another simply so that they could attend a church service for an hour was more trouble than it was worth to a warden, and paperwork was generally ignored.

The guard arrived at the gate, which was unlocked by a second warden who checked them over, counting them roughly and then moved them on to the service in the next block. They passed a quad where the inevitable Saturday football match was being played, and then

moved on towards a tuck shop where more wardens gazed with disinterest at a small queue of prisoners lined up to buy crisps and soft drinks in an effort to rid themselves of the aftertaste of their lunch.

They had reached a quiet part of the prison, and were ushered into a small open quad. Several other prisoners were waiting anxiously for the *Dominee* to arrive. He appeared in due course, dressed in an expensive suit. His shoes sparkled in the sun and made Nicholas glance down at his own. They had certainly cost more than the *Dominee's* entire outfit, but they looked cheap and scuffed next to the man's pristine appearance.

Under his arm the man carried a giant leather bound Bible, stuffed with copious notes that Nicholas suspected had been frantically scribbled down during the previous Sunday sermon when the man had sat in church and "borrowed" the message from a true minister of the gospel.

He came with a small entourage; two fellow volunteers, who would be at hand to pray for the sinners' salvation at the end of the service, and a scruffy looking individual with long hair and a large guitar case in his left hand. The entourage all wore tight denim trousers and t-shirts. The casual clothing was a stark contrast to the preacher's formal attire. All their pockets were flat, Nicholas noted, indicating that wallets and other valuables had been left in the car outside or – more likely – at home.

The service began with a lengthy prayer, after which the ruffian with long hair extracted his badly tuned instrument and led the group through half an hour of chorus songs. The prisoners clapped and danced, joining in with gusto when they were able to remember the words to the choruses.

Nicholas slipped from the room and stood quietly in the quad outside. Nobody noticed, as the minister and volunteers were too lost in worship and none of his fellow prisoners cared. The guards had thankfully retreated from the din of the guitar and raucous voices and were now inside the building, leaving the small quad deserted. Every now and then, they peered through the door as they walked past but, for the most part, they paid little attention.

Everything was just as Decklin Kanabas had predicted. How had the man known? Nicholas allowed his eyes to wander to the roof that surrounded the courtyard. Low, he noted. Kanabas was right. How easy it would be to scale one of those drain pipes and pull himself onto the top. The roof was flat which meant that, once he was up there, nobody would be able to see him from the courtyard below.

Easy! Why, then, was he so terrified of making the attempt? Conflicting thoughts battled with one another as he gazed longingly at the low drain pipes that surrounded the quad. If it was so easy, why had nobody attempted it yet? On the other hand, prisoners escaped every week. He read about it in the newspapers all the time, so maybe it was that easy after all.

The music in the background faded and the insurance salesman began his sermon. It was well rehearsed, Nicholas noted, and the man was doing all he could to captivate his audience with profound words and theologies that would change their lives forever. It was a futile effort, however. With the entertainment over, many of the prisoners lost interest and one or two quickly joined him outside, reaching for cigarettes or simply chatting quietly amongst themselves.

His window of opportunity had closed and Nicholas resigned himself to another week of prison life. Now that the music had stopped, the guards reappeared, venturing into the courtyard where they could feel the sun on their faces. They left the prisoners alone, keeping to themselves as they chatted and smoked cigarettes.

Eventually, the service ended. The volunteers sprang into action, praying with prisoners, each of whom brought his own tale of woe. The conversations generally followed the same theme. The prisoners had been wrongfully convicted and begged the volunteer to put in a word with the prison authorities to arrange for an early release. The volunteers in turn

listened with empathy, prayed with sincerity that God's will be done in the situation, and made empty promises that they would mention it to the *Dominee* who was the only one with any real influence among their number. He would know who to talk to.

Finally a guard returned to take them back to their own cell block. It was not the same guard who had brought them to the service, Nicholas noted. These small details were all important. His trip had not been wasted. All he needed to do was survive another seven days. There would be another service the following week.

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The following week passed with interminable slowness. Each day brought with it new depths of terror and despair. A second attack occurred on the Tuesday. The prisoner that had attacked Nicholas in his cell several weeks earlier returned from the infirmary. For a few days, he had remained aloof, but Nicholas had seen the man watching him. It was as if he never took his eyes off Nicholas, waiting for his opportunity.

His chance came one afternoon, while Nicholas was mopping the kitchen after lunch. The fitters and turners had made themselves some food – not the slop they prepared for the rest of the prisoners, but large steaks and deep fried chips – and left Nicholas and two others to clean up the kitchen.

As soon as they had a chance, the other two men skived off to smoke a cigarette, leaving Nicholas alone in the kitchen. He hadn't bothered to look up when he heard the footsteps as he simply assumed it was his fellow cleaners returning to mop the floor. By the time he spotted them, it was too late to flee, or even to call out.

The giant who had entered his cell in the small hours was there, but this time he appeared with two friends. "You know why we're here, *ryk seun*." There was no finesse and no attempt at humour. The man simply glared at him with undisguised hatred. Nicholas immediately backed away, brandishing the mop as a weapon. "You know what happened last time," he warned the man, but it was a pathetic attempt to instil fear in them. The three men advanced on him and he knew he didn't stand a chance. Any one of them could have disarmed and subdued him and they all knew it.

He thrust the mop at the first prisoner who came at him, catching the man in the face and drenching him in soap and dirty water. With a curse, the man ripped the feeble weapon from Nicholas' hands and cast it aside. Then the men were upon him like a pack of rabid dogs. Nicholas struggled, wrenching in their grasp. He fought like a tiger, but was quickly borne to the ground.

He felt his shirt rip, followed by the rending of his trousers as the men turned him around and slammed him face down on the steel table. In desperation, he lashed back with his foot at the man behind, but barely grazed the convict's shins.

The man cursed and cuffed him on the ear for his trouble. Nicholas was frantic, but defenceless in the power of the two men that pinned his arms. As he felt the weight of the brute pressing up against his exposed buttocks, he turned with savage fury on the man who held his right arm. Using the only weapon left to him, he sunk his teeth into the convict's wrist. There was a shriek of pain and the man suddenly released his grip.

Everything happened in a blur. Nicholas reached for the cage-like grid in the deep fryer with his freed hand. There was a sizzle as he pressed the scorching instrument into the face of his second attacker, branding the man's cheek with a criss-cross of burns that immediately blistered.

Thus freed, he turned to face his one remaining attacker. In his panic, he had dropped the heated grid. As he swung around, the deep fryer loomed in front of his eyes. He snatched it and heaved the contents at his foe.

The appliance jerked in his hands as the power cable brought it up short. This was followed by deep, searing pain as the sweltering liquid splashed over his hands. It was his antagonist, however, who caught the full force of the oil directly in his face and chest. There was a hissing sound and he seemed to turn monstrous as giant blisters suddenly formed on his cheeks and lips. In an instant, his hair seemed to recede as it sizzled and shrivelled in the face of the intense heat.

The man's confidence dissolved as the oil soaked through to his scalp, cooking the flesh on his skull. Nicholas slipped, falling to the floor and again felt the intense pain as the oil burned his own legs and hands. In agony, he rolled to escape from the searing liquid. Then he watched in horror as his attacker sank to his knees. Losing consciousness, he plunged into the pool of oil that covered the floor beneath him, jerking involuntarily as scorching puddle reached up through his clothing and onto the tender flesh beyond.

Nicholas awoke in the infirmary with bandages on his hands and legs where the oil had seared his flesh. The first person he saw was a male nurse.

"Welcome back." The man wore a kindly expression. "You were out for a long time."

"What happened?" Nicholas croaked, trying to examine his wounds.

"I wouldn't worry about those wounds," the man assured him. "They'll heal in a couple of weeks. That oil saved you from a fate worse than death." The man smiled at his own feeble attempt at humour.

Nicholas smiled too, in relief, and then glanced fearfully around the ward. "What happened to the others?"

"Two of them will be okay. The one you bit was released twenty minutes ago and the other will be out by tomorrow. He's bandaged up now, but the burns will heal as quickly as yours. The scars you gave him won't, though. He'll probably spend the rest of his life looking like he slept on a tennis racquet."

"And the last?" Nicholas had to know.

The man hesitated. "He's been taken to a state hospital. We don't have the facilities."

"You've treated me, haven't you?"

"Yes," the man nodded. "But his case is different. He caught the full force of that oil in the face and chest and it was well over two hundred degrees. Nearly twenty percent of his skin surface has been affected. I hope you've got a good lawyer."

"You think I'll need one for this?"

"Manslaughter is a serious offence."

Nicholas swallowed. He was relieved that the man no longer posed a threat, yet the thought of having killed someone with his own hands was repugnant. "He'll be alright. The hospitals have good facilities."

The words were spoken with little conviction. State hospitals had a reputation for hideous facilities and inept staff that stole the blankets off patients' beds if given the chance. He would never willingly entrust his own health to such an institution.

The nurse was little help. "I doubt that. I suggest you get ready for another long, drawn-out court case. He won't survive three days."

"But there's a chance, right?" Nicholas asked anxiously.

The man smiled, seeing the pleading in his patient's eyes. "There's always a chance," he nodded grudgingly. But Nicholas could see the lie in the man's eyes. As far as the nurse was concerned, the offender was as good as dead.

He was released from the infirmary the following day and returned to the laundry the next Saturday. This time, he gazed longingly at the drain pipes and the roof, but no matter how low they looked, he didn't feel physically up to attempting an escape.

The following week was one filled with inquiries as well as statements and countless trips to the chief warden's office. His attorney was present at all the meetings, but the inevitable

court date was set. The prisoner's life still hung in the balance and the state prosecutor wasn't sure whether he would lay charges of manslaughter or assault against Nicholas.

*How had it come to this?* Nicholas wondered at the fact that several weeks earlier he had been a well-respected businessman and an upstanding member of the community. Now his life had spiralled out of all control. He was drowning under a torrent of criminal charges with murderous convicts on his left and right, eating food that wasn't fit for dogs, defunct and powerless.

The following week, he felt better and knew what had to be done. He had resolved the issue in his mind and was ready to take the necessary risk. As usual, he accompanied the handful of prisoners to the laundry room in Block C. The *Dominee* and his entourage arrived like clockwork, but this week was different. The scruffy guitarist with the long hair was not present and the weekly worship was a dismal affair, led by the *Dominee* himself in faltering notes with the inevitable Bible clamped firmly under his arm.

With no music, none of the prisoners really felt able to enter into the spirit of worship, which meant that the guards were able to venture into the courtyard and enjoy the sunshine instead of having to skulk inside where they could make themselves heard above the usual din.

With his avenue of escape cut off, Nicholas was forced to return to his cell after the service. It was when he arrived back in his cell that he found the note under his pillow. It was short and to the point. *Watch your back and say your prayers. You won't see another Sunday.*

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The following Saturday, Nicholas joined the band of men who religiously attended the weekly service. It was with relief that he saw the guitarist arrive among the band of ministers. The group trooped in to the laundry and took their seats as usual. As soon as the music began, Nicholas slipped out of the room and into the courtyard. By now he knew the routine well. He had only a few minutes to make good his escape.

Luck was not going his way, however, as he noticed a guard had left the building and was taking a cigarette in the courtyard. This was unusual, but Nicholas pretended to disregard the man. He stood quietly by the door, listening to the music while trying not to glance in the guard's direction. The man drew on his cigarette a while longer and finally disappeared inside.

The music had slowed, however, which indicated that the worship was coming to an end. It was always the same. Some fast songs, followed by three slow ones and then the message, at which point the courtyard would be filled with prisoners and guards.

How many slow songs had they played? Nicholas couldn't be sure, as he had been constantly distracted by the guard in the courtyard. What if the guards were watching and saw him? All would be lost if he was captured in an attempted escape. There was no time to think and he acted on an impulse.

Even as he reached for the drain pipe, he heard the music come to a halt. Nicholas clambered frantically up the drain pipe, using the rivets in the walls as foot holds. Finally, he managed to get a grip on the gutters at the top. They had been burned hot by the sun and scalded his hands, which were still tender from the burns several weeks earlier. He was desperate, however. This was his last hope of escape. He disregarded the pain and pulled his body over the edge of the roof.

It was only once he was on top of the roof that he realised the full power of the heat. He had pressed his body flat against the corrugated iron plates that were riveted to the roof and felt the pain searing through his clothes and burning his gut.

Quickly, he slithered away from the edge, making sure he was well beyond the edge before he dared to stand. His pulse raced at the audacity of what he had just done, but he forced himself to keep moving. A quick glance around revealed that nobody could see him where he now stood and he rose into a crouching run, heading for the northern side of the building complex.

Nicholas felt nauseated with fear as he approached the edge of the building, but needn't have worried. Ironically, all the security measures were deeper in the building and he now found himself over the office section where the wardens and visitors gathered before heading into the prison proper. He would still need to cross the perimeter fence which was electrified and topped with deadly razor wire. It was also patrolled by guards, but that was hundreds of metres away and, for the time being, he was able to move unchecked.

Nicholas spied the ground from the roof's edge. In the parking lot, he would easily pass for a visitor, dressed in casual denims and a dark T-shirt. The only danger of being spotted was while he dropped from the roof, so he did this quickly.

Once on the ground, he immediately headed for the car park. There were several vehicles but, true to form, they were all locked. Finally, he spied a *bakkie*, an open-backed, light delivery vehicle with a tarpaulin over the back. He passed two guards en route to the vehicle and was forced to check the desire to run and hide. They glanced casually in his direction but left him alone, assuming he was a visitor.

How much time did he have before his escape was discovered? Once that happened, the guards would cease to be casual and would begin searching in earnest. Solitary figures wandering around the grounds outside the prison might quickly be remembered and an all-out man-hunt would begin to bring back the escaped convict.

When he reached the vehicle, he quickly undid the straps that held the tarpaulin in place. He was relieved to find that the back had room and slipped under the cover, refastening what straps he could. It was impossible to refasten all of them from underneath, however and he was forced to leave the rest to fate. The loose straps might be discovered – or they might not – when the owner returned.

It was an hour and a half before he heard the owners returning to their vehicle. They chatted in Afrikaans and it was evident from their conversation that they had spent the morning with their son who was clearly an inmate.

Nicholas held his breath as they opened the doors and entered the vehicle. He had covered himself with sacks and tools as best he could, but he knew that even a cursory search of the vehicle would reveal his presence. If the guards so much as lifted one corner of the tarpaulin, he would probably be discovered.

The vehicle finally started and he felt it move under him as the driver reversed out of the parking bay. It followed a circuitous route back to the main gate. Nicholas swallowed in an attempt to still his pounding heart. He had staked his future and possibly his very life on the laziness of the gate guards.



## Chapter 6

His luck held. It was, after all a Saturday, when families came and went. The prison bosses were enjoying their weekend and the guards were resentful of the fact that they had to stand duty while their superiors got to spend time with their families and friends. Why should they bother to search every vehicle?

It was only once the *bakkie* accelerated and Nicholas realised that they were on the open road beyond the prison walls, that he began to breathe properly again. He risked a peek from under the tarpaulin, trying to get his bearings and see which direction they were headed in. He discovered that the couple had turned west, skirting the city along the southern bypass.

The vehicle travelled for twenty five minutes before it came to a halt. Nicholas waited quietly as the man and his wife emerged from the vehicle. He heard the doors slam shut and waited several minutes for the noise of their conversation to recede before peeping from beneath the tarpaulin.

He found that they had stopped at a small shopping mall. As surreptitiously as was possible, he extricated himself from the vehicle, relieved that nobody seemed to notice him. Once sure that he had not been seen, he turned and headed for the gas station across the road.

His clothes had become caked with filth from the back of the pickup truck. He knew that, right now, he was at his most vulnerable. Any moment, his escape would be discovered and broadcast on every radio station in the country. If somebody recognised him, the police would be notified and it would all be over.

He needed help and could think of only one person that would not turn him over to the authorities.

There were pay phones near the gas station that flanked the shopping centre. He had no money, but that was where he headed. He found one of the attendants and explained his predicament. He was stranded and needed some money to make a call. His friend would bring money and pay the man back if he could loan him a couple of rand to make a phone call.

The man was dubious, but finally relented and gave Nicholas a few coins. He quickly found a phone book and located the number of the local Parktown parish. The number for the manse was included and Nicholas placed the call.

"Hello?" Decklin Kanabas answered the phone after several rings.

"Reverend, it's me. I need your help." Nicholas' voice was frantic.

The man hesitated before answering. "Where are you?"

"I'm out, but I've got no transport and no idea where to go."

"Where exactly?"

"How should I know?" Nicholas was suddenly annoyed. "I've been stuck under a tarpaulin for the past half an hour."

"Okay, calm down. Are you near the freeway?"

Nicholas glanced over his shoulder at the concrete road behind him. "Yes."

"Good. Can you ask someone what the name of two streets are near there?"

"Hold on." He summoned the attendant who had lent him the money for the call. After a brief conversation with the man, he came back on the line. "Snake Street and —"

“That’s fine, I know the off-ramp. It’s easy enough to find. Head out there in about twenty-five minutes and pretend to hitch-hike east. Back towards the prison.”

“You want me to hitch-hike back towards the prison.” Nicholas spoke the words in a monotone. *Had the minister lost his mind?*

“If they discover you’ve escaped, they are going to head out from the prison with a fleet of police cars in every direction. They’re going to be looking for someone headed *away* from the prison, which means they’ll drive right by you. Is that what you want?”

Nicholas suddenly understood the minister’s reasoning, but the thought of exposing his presence on the freeway like that was abhorrent. “Can’t you just pick me up here?”

“The attendants have already seen you and will recognise you in the morning papers tomorrow. My car is old, battered and bright yellow. Do you think that fact will be forgotten when they make their statements to the police?”

“What about the freeway? Hundreds of cars will pass us along the way.”

The minister was unconcerned. “Drivers seldom pay attention to their surroundings and hitch-hikers are hardly cause for alarm. Trust me. They’ll barely notice your existence. Just stick out your thumb and they’ll drive right by. There’s no way they’ll associate a forgotten hitch-hiker travelling east towards the prison with the escaped convict they see in the papers tomorrow. I’ll see you in twenty-five minutes.”

With that Kanabas hung up the phone, giving Nicholas no time to argue. He stared incomprehensibly at the phone for a moment before the attendant brought him back to reality.

“Is he coming, your friend?” the man asked and Nicholas realised that he had some explaining to do.

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Twenty minutes later, he reached the freeway. Turning east, he headed back toward the prison he had just escaped from. His negotiations with the pump attendant had become heated when Nicholas tried to explain that he would pay the money back later. He had finally been forced to part with his shoes before the man had been mollified. In a gesture of goodwill, the attendant had found an ancient pair of grease-covered sandals in the back which he offered to Nicholas in exchange.

The shoes were uncomfortable, but it was better than walking barefoot on the sun-baked tarmac that would have reduced his feet to cinders within minutes. He dutifully followed instructions, sticking out his thumb every time a car passed. None stopped and he didn’t expect them to. Johannesburg’s roads were violent and fraught with crime. It would be a stupid driver indeed who stopped to pick up a lone hitchhiker on the city’s freeways.

Within five minutes, he saw the battered yellow Toyota Corolla pull to a halt ahead of him and he raced to jump into the vehicle. Kanabas winked and nodded in greeting, but wasted no time pulling away and merging with the racing traffic. They had almost arrived back in Parktown before the first news bulletin announcing Nicholas’ daring escape was reported on the radio.

Instead of heading for the manse, the minister stopped at a nearby house in the upmarket suburb. He used a remote control to open the gate and entered the large property which was surrounded by high walls. Once the gate closed behind them, they were private from the street and Nicholas could emerge from the vehicle unseen. Decklin ushered him into the expensive home which was neatly furnished, with modern, leather furniture in the living room and wide comfortable beds.

“All yours for the next four weeks,” Decklin waved his arm expansively around the room.

“Whose house is this?” Nicholas asked.

“A congregation member. They asked me to look after it while they went overseas. They won’t be back until after New Year. You’ll be safe here until then.”

The minister suddenly changed tack. “You must be starving. I’ll go get us some food. Don’t pick up a phone or stick your head out of a window until I get back.”

Nicholas followed instructions, and took a quick shower while the minister was out getting lunch. He then took a tour of the house. It had five bedrooms, a private gym and a Jacuzzi, but the room that captivated his attention was the study. It was small, with a single desk and a book rack against the wall. However, the item that held all his interest was the desktop computer.

It had been months since he had laid eyes on one, let alone been allowed access to it. This was more than just a useful tool. It was an extension of his very soul. Ten minutes ago, he had been on the run and penniless, but a simple computer and a telephone line suddenly put unlimited resources at his disposal. It would empower him and put him in touch with the world outside. It could even be used as a weapon. He was still gazing lovingly at the machine when Decklin Kanabas returned.

“Giant cheeseburgers and fries with Coke,” he boomed as he entered the house.

Immediately, the computer was forgotten. Nicholas realised that he was starving and dashed downstairs to join the priest in the lounge. Once ensconced in a reclining leather chair, relishing junk food, with the television on in the background, Nicholas allowed himself to relax.

It wasn’t long before Decklin reminded him of his predicament, however. “Have you thought about what you’ll do next?” the minister enquired.

Nicholas shrugged. “I can’t go home. I thought of heading for Cape Town. The document mentioned another investigative cell there, with protocols for making contact. If I can reach them I’ll hopefully have the witnesses I need to clear my name.”

“You’ll need money.”

Nicholas shook his head. “That won’t be a problem. They have a computer upstairs. I’ll start tomorrow with the arrangements. By Monday morning I’ll have more money than I know what to do with.”

The minister looked uncomfortable for a moment. “They’ve frozen your accounts, do you know that?”

Nicholas grinned. “South Africa doesn’t have jurisdiction in Switzerland, the USA or Japan. Those accounts will be open. Trust me, by Monday morning, money won’t be a problem.”

The minister was not convinced. “Nicholas, be careful. These people have long arms. If they can reach you in prison —”

Nicholas laughed. His old confidence was beginning to return and it felt wonderful. “Do you know how I made my money, Reverend?”

The minister shrugged and shook his head.

“Digital communications security. I developed a communications technology that is both impenetrable and untraceable with existing technologies. It has an encryption system so powerful that it would take the fastest computers in the world hundreds of years to crack, if they could keep track of its whereabouts. Did you know the Internet used to be a US military application before it was made public?”

“I’d heard, but I thought it was just a rumour.”

“It’s a fact. ARPANET was the original. It was funded by the Advanced Research Projects Agency, an arm of the US Department of Defense. Ever wonder what the US military use now?”

“You’re kidding, right?”

Nicholas grinned. “Trust me. When I start transferring money, nobody will be able to trace the transactions.”

“They can still trace the cash when it’s transferred,” Kanabas countered.

Nicholas shook his head. “You don’t amass an international fortune that runs to nine zeroes without learning how to hide a few pennies here and there. It’ll take some work, but believe me, by the time I’m finished, there is no way they’ll be able to trace the money.”

“And when it arrives?”

“I’ll just walk into the bank and collect it. Risky, I know, but it’s a chance I have to take.”

The minister shook his head. “Listen to me, Nick.” Nicholas winced. He hated being called that. “If you show your face in public right now, it’ll be the last time. Is there any way I can fetch it for you?”

Nicholas stared at the minister for a long time, before answering. “You’d be breaking the law.”

“And?” the minister shrugged.

“Doesn’t that bother you? You’re a minister, for crying out loud!”

Decklin Kanabas sat forward in his chair. He was aggressive and Nicholas realised he’d touched some deep nerve. “Listen. The money you’re transferring belongs to you, right? We’re not stealing it from anyone?”

Nicholas shook his head and the minister continued. “Let me tell you, these laws that have been passed concerning you are for the benefit of some unscrupulous elite who are abusing their power. What we’re doing is illegal only because they say it is. We’re not doing anything immoral. What *they’re* doing is immoral. And I will not answer to their immoral abuse of the law. I answer to a higher, moral law, so my conscience is clear. Now tell me where I need to pick up the money.”

Nicholas stared at the preacher. *It’s nice to finally get to know you, Reverend Kanabas.* “Why are you helping me like this?”

Kanabas threw his arms up. “Look, if you don’t want my help —”

“It’s a fair question,” Nicholas shot back. “You’ve stuck your neck out for me far more than was required of you. I’m just asking. Why?”

The minister shrugged. “Why did the Samaritan help the dying man who had been robbed on the road to Jericho?”

Nicholas smiled. “Are you my Good Samaritan, Reverend Kanabas?”

Decklin shrugged. “I was there.”

“You’re a good man, Decklin.”

“You can call me Father Kanabas.”

“Only if you promise not to call me Nick.”

“Fine. I promise not to call you Nick unless I’m deliberately trying to annoy you – and you can call me Decklin.”

They had bonded and both men felt uncomfortable. Nicholas decided to ease the tension by changing the subject.

“You know, I’m starving. They don’t feed you in prison. I wish you’d bought a second burger.”

“Ask and ye shall receive!” Decklin exclaimed and reached into the packet beside his chair. He slid a second giant polystyrene box across the coffee table to Nicholas.

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Russ Lambert slowed his vehicle and turned right, coming to a stop at the prison’s main gates. His vehicle proudly displayed the flashing blue light, proclaiming its official status and the prison guards scurried to open the gates.

He waved at the guards as he entered, shaking his head at the incompetence. They could at least have checked the boot, he thought to himself as he entered the facility. He found a parking space near the admin block and then headed for the main entrance on foot.

At least that guard bothered to ask for identification, he noted. Detective Lambert reached into his jacket pocket and produced his badge. "I'm here to see the Chief Warden."

"In connection with?"

"Your latest escaped convict. The twentieth this year, I believe."

The guard's expression was hostile, but he didn't say anything. *At least you know how to read.* Russ Lambert noted that the jailer had noticed that his visitor outranked him. Even though they were from different departments – and there was a lot of friction between departments – the man at least showed him the courtesy befitting his station.

A second warden ushered him through to the main reception. There, he was left in the care of a uniformed woman who appeared to be more interested in the book she was reading than the phone on her desk.

When she finally reached for the phone, her conversation was short. "Detective Lambert here to see you, warden... Yes, sir. Yes, I'll tell him."

When she hung up, she turned to Lambert. "The warden will be with you shortly. Would you like to take a seat?" She waved vaguely at the sparse furniture against the wall.

"I'm fine, thanks," Lambert shook his head.

The receptionist made him wait fifteen minutes before the warden was prepared to see him. Eventually the buzzer rang. The receptionist answered the call and turned to Lambert. "The warden will see you now."

"Thank you," Lambert answered with gratitude he hardly felt.

He rapped on the door and opened it immediately. "Warden Boatman," he greeted the man seated behind the office's solitary desk.

The man rose and extended his hand. The smile was canned. "Pleased to meet you, detective —?"

"Lambert; the same name your secretary gave you when she put the call through outside."

The smile vanished. Russ Lambert now found himself outranked, but then he had never been given to observing etiquette unless it worked in his favour.

The prison warden released his grip and retreated behind his desk. "What can I do for you detective?"

Russ Lambert took a seat without bothering to wait for an invitation. He leaned back, extending his legs and clasped his hand behind his head. "You can start by telling me how Nicholas Gallagher managed to get past five locked gates, some forty armed wardens who are paid to check identity and search everyone passing through their stations, by the way, and slipped over a ten foot high barbed wire fence with electric wiring that is patrolled by men with guns and dogs."

The warden frowned. "We're not exactly sure how he escaped."

"And what about the nineteen before him. Do you know how they escaped?"

"Many of those have been caught and returned to prison."

"Of course they were; it's *my* job to catch them. Your job is to see that I only have to do my job once. But you're not doing your job, so I have to waste my time chasing after criminals who ought to be safely locked away."

"My staff is very competent and this prison is extremely well run." The warden's voice was slowly rising.

Lambert guffawed. "I doubt that. Twenty escapes in a single year is less than exemplary – unless we've begun building our prisons with revolving doors."

"Tell me, detective. Are you here to investigate me and my staff?"

Lambert smiled and shook his head. "My superiors will do that. Part of their investigation will rely on my report, however."

"Well, I'd hate to keep your superiors waiting." The warden's tone was icy. "What do you want from me?"

Lambert sighed. "For starters, I want a list of every guard on duty the day before yesterday. I also want to know who visited prisoners the day Gallagher escaped. More to the point, I want a list of every vehicle that came and left through those gates. Then I want to interview any prisoner who was close to him."

"Wouldn't you like to examine the scene of the crime?"

Lambert grinned. "And where would that be, exactly?"

"Cell Block B is where he was housed. I'm sure you'll find it is locked down tightly and impossible to escape from."

"I'm sure it is now. Unfortunately you trying to save your career is not going to assist me in my investigation. While you're offering me the guided tour and telling me how difficult it is to escape from here, the fact remains that Nicholas Gallagher has vanished. I dare say that if your guards had been as alert on Saturday as I'm sure they are right now, this would not have happened."

Boatman grimaced, but he maintained his calm. "So where would you like to start?"

"Get me one of the wardens who works that block regularly. I want to know the name of every prisoner that was on friendly terms with Gallagher. Then I want to interview them."

They worked from the warden's office and several hours passed before Lambert had the names of all the prisoners who knew Nicholas Gallagher. There were very few. It seemed he had kept to himself for the most part.

The third interview was with a prisoner who called himself *Kleinboy*. Kleinboy brought a new revelation. Nicholas had become a churchgoer in recent weeks. It seemed that he had begun to attend weekly meetings that were hosted by a Pentecostal group in cell Block C. A few quick calls got them the number of Harry Sterios, the mortgage broker who hosted the meetings each week. Over the phone, the man informed him that Nicholas had, indeed, attended over the past several weeks and had, in fact, missed only one service while in the infirmary.

More guards were called in and more questions asked, before the people responsible for transferring prisoners between the cell blocks the previous Saturday were located. As often happened, there had been a shift change a little after lunch and different guards had been responsible for getting the prisoners to and from the church service.

One of them was currently on duty and they called him in.

"Constable, I understand you took the prisoners from Block B across to Block C for the church service on Saturday?"

The man hesitated and Russ Lambert tried to put him at his ease. "Don't worry, constable. We know all about it, including the fact that no records were logged of the prisoners' transfer. I understand that paperwork is a bind, especially when it's only for an hour or two. I'm only interested in whether or not Nicholas Gallagher was one of the prisoners transferred. We're trying to work out where he escaped from."

He decided not to advertise the fact that there would be another investigation and that this constable's dereliction of duty might very well land him in an inquiry.

The man seemed to relax. "Yes. He was among the prisoners that went across."

"You're sure?"

The man nodded and Lambert continued. "Out of interest, how can you be sure he was there? It was a couple of days ago and there were surely several prisoners among the group."

“He was definitely there.” The man was emphatic. “All of us know Nicholas Gallagher. He sticks out from the group with his fancy clothes and so on. He really looks out of place in prison. You notice him when he’s in a room.”

“Good. Excuse me one moment.”

Lambert turned and picked up the telephone. He dialed a number.

“Constable Arliss please.” Lambert waited while the man was called to the phone. When the man picked up he continued. “Constable Arliss? Sorry to bother you like this on your day off. This is Detective Lambert calling from Benoni prison. I’m calling in connection with the escape of Nicholas Gallagher on Saturday afternoon. Simple question. I understand you were responsible for getting the prisoners back from the church service in Block C that afternoon?”

He paused as the man confirmed this, then continued. “Was Nicholas Gallagher among the prisoners you transferred back to Block B? He wasn’t! Are you sure?”

Another moment’s hesitation. “You didn’t see him hanging around the area at all? Alright, thank you, constable. You’ve been a great help.”

Russ Lambert put down the phone and turned back to the constable in the room. “Can you describe the room where the church service is held?”

“It’s in the laundry. Not very big. The room has only one entrance, which opens up into a courtyard. The only entrance to the courtyard is through a door on the opposite end. It’s convenient, as we only need to guard the door. We can see every prisoner going in or out, so it’s easier to keep track of large numbers.”

Lambert thought about this for a moment. “Is there a guard stationed in the courtyard itself?”

“Sometimes, but not always. If it’s raining, or too hot, we generally sit inside and just watch the door.”

“Good. Thank you constable. You can go. I’ll call you again if I need you.”

The man left and Lambert turned to the chief warden. “Competent staff, I see. Extremely well run.”

The man shifted uncomfortably in his seat, but made no reply.

Lambert continued. “How are we coming on that list of vehicles on the premises on Saturday?”

The man reached for his phone and barked at his secretary. “Where’s that list of cars I asked for? Well tell them to hurry up. I asked for it half an hour ago already!”

Coffee was brought in while the men waited another twenty minutes for the vehicles list to arrive. When it did, Lambert gave the list a cursory glance. There was a large assortment of vehicles, but the one that stood out was a Bantam pickup truck. It was the only one that had come through the gates before Gallagher’s disappearance and left after he had escaped during the church service.

“Now what does that tell you, Mr Boatman?”

The prison warden shrugged. “Why don’t you tell me? You seem to know everything.”

“Everything? Not yet. But I will soon enough. Why don’t you call the guard who was on duty at the gate at —” he looked at the sheet of paper, “2:35pm?”

More calls were made and another round of coffee was brought in before there was a knock on the door and Constable van Rensburg entered.

“Constable van Rensburg,” Lambert greeted the man without bothering to rise. “I understand you were on gate duty between 13h00 and 16h00 hours on Saturday?”

“That is correct, sir.” The man was subdued.

“Did you search every vehicle that entered and left the premises on your shift?”

“That’s the regulation, sir.”

“I know what the regulation is, constable. My question is *did you do it?*”

“Yes, I did.”

“More to the point, there was a Bantam *bakkie* on the premises that left at 14h35. Did you search that vehicle?”

The man shrugged. “I don’t remember the car, sir. Lots of vehicles come and go on a Saturday.”

“Let me put it another way, constable. The vehicle’s owners are required to write down their identity numbers, registration numbers and phone numbers.” He waved the sheet at the man. “I have all those details on this piece of paper. In the next ten minutes I’m going to call and ask them to corroborate your story. I’m sure they’ll remember very clearly whether their car was searched or not, so I suggest you tell me the truth.”

The man hesitated again. “It’s possible the car wasn’t searched.”

“So you didn’t search all the vehicles then?”

The man glanced at the chief warden, who seethed in his chair. “Not all of them. Sometimes, if there’s a queue, you have to make a judgment call.”

“I’m sure you do.” He dismissed the man with a wave of his hand and reached for the phone.

The detective quickly dialled the number on the sheet, fervently hoping the person had written down the correct number.

“Cargill’s residence.” The phone was answered by a woman with a crisp voice.

“Good morning, Mrs Cargill. This is Detective Lambert, calling from Benoni Prison. We’re searching for an escaped convict and I was hoping you would be able to answer some questions. It could help us with our investigation.”

During their quick conversation, Lambert learnt that the vehicle had definitely not been searched and that it didn’t have a canopy, but a tarpaulin, which could easily be lifted. They hadn’t gone directly home, but had stopped at a local shopping centre near their home to buy groceries. After getting the name and address of the centre, he thanked her and hung up.

“And now?” the warden asked carefully.

Detective Lambert rose and extended his hand. “I’m done. I suspect he scaled the wall and escaped across the roof. Then he probably hid in the back of that vehicle.”

“What makes you so sure of that?”

“Several reasons, actually. Gallagher is not a career criminal. I doubt he knows how to scale barbed wire fences, or disable electric ones. It’s also unlikely that he knows how to break into a vehicle, so he would have chosen the easiest possible escape route. Two months here would certainly have convinced him that the guards’ complacency and incompetence was worth risking his freedom against. After all, if caught, he had nothing to lose. A few extra months on his sentence wouldn’t affect him one way or the other, and he could always try again.”

“Do you think you can catch him?”

“It shouldn’t be difficult. He’s desperate and an inexperienced criminal. He’ll leave tracks that even you could follow – maybe.”

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Lambert followed the woman’s directions and ended up at the local Spar convenience store, just off the highway. He found a parking bay, exited the vehicle and examined the surroundings. There was a gas station near the far end of the parking lot and Lambert noticed that it had several pay phones around the side.

He took a quick trip over to the gas station, where he flashed his badge and asked who had been on duty the previous Saturday. As it turned out, it was the same shift that was on that day. Some pointed questions revealed that a strange man had, indeed, appeared from the shopping centre. He seemed wealthy, by the look of his clothes, although they were quite dirty, but he didn’t have any money on him.

He had ended up trading his shoes and belt for a couple of rand to make a phone call. After that, he had headed in the direction of the highway.

Detective Lambert immediately headed back to the office. From there, he placed a call to another department.

“Jack!” he exclaimed when the man picked up the phone. “Russ Lambert here.”

“Russ! How’s it going, you old dog. Haven’t heard from you for a while.”

“I know. I’ve been busy up North, tracking a serial killer for the past six months. Now, suddenly they pull me off that case to come and find some poncey rich kid that managed to slip out of Benoni Prison under the guards’ noses.”

The man chuckled. “So what can I do for you?”

“You know the people over at Telkom better than I do. I need to trace a call that was made some time between 14h35 and 15h30 on Saturday at a particular call box. It’s situated at a gas station near a shopping centre out Alberton way.”

The man took a breath. “There’s a lot of call boxes out that way, Russ. Can you be more specific?”

“555-1045. Specific enough?”

The man chuckled. “Sorry. That’ll do nicely. It’ll take me a couple of days. Everything happens slowly at the phone company.”

“Try to light a fire under them. This guy’s not particularly experienced, but he’s got money. If he thinks quick enough, he could probably buy himself a passport and a ticket out of the country in seventy two hours.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” Jack promised.

Despite his promise, it was still five days before he called back with a list of numbers.

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Pierre Duboise stared quietly at the bank of computer monitors against the wall of his office at Interpol’s headquarters in Lyon. He tried to ignore the anxious faces seated around the coffee table at the far end of the room.

“Any luck yet?” the man from London asked.

Pierre frowned and shook his head without taking his eyes off the screens. The man’s continuous interruptions were beginning to annoy him. *Five times in the last hour! That’s once every twelve minutes.* One more interruption and, superior or not, Pierre would have him forcibly removed.

This office was his private kingdom and he didn’t enjoy having his space invaded at the best of times. But when his visitors had the audacity to question him while he was trying to work!

His temper was frayed. He’d been on alert for the past twelve hours. Ever since the news of Nicholas Gallagher’s escape from the prison in South Africa. The suits from London never said what the man had done wrong. Simply that he was wealthy and a *computer whiz*, as they put it.

Since his personal accounts had been frozen, the South African authorities suspected he might try to access accounts illegally beyond his own borders and that made it Interpol’s business. Since then, every machine at Pierre’s disposal had been monitoring banks all over the world.

Initially, he had accessed the South African bank where Gallagher had his account. From there, he’d launched a modified web crawler to hunt through every account that had ever had dealings with Nicholas Gallagher. Within a few hours, the crawler had begun to return results and, within eight hours, Pierre felt confident that he had found every bank account owned by Gallagher and his subsidiary companies.

Then came the second wave; finely-tuned spyware applications that would quietly monitor activity on the accounts and immediately send alerts back the moment any activity was discovered. These applications ran as hidden files on the computer systems they had been installed on. The users and security programs would remain oblivious of their presence as they quietly took control of their host machines.

Within ten hours of Gallagher's escape, Pierre had full control of his accounts throughout the world. If the man made so much as a balance enquiry, Interpol would know where and when it took place within thirty seconds of the transaction. Pierre fed this information into a powerful processor purchased from the FBI. The software was designed to track and project a person's movements based on their profile and credit card transactions.

Pierre's attack was two-fold. First, he would monitor Gallagher's activity on the accounts and feed the processor the information in an attempt to pin-point his current location and project where he might head next. Second, he would trace the funds as they moved and watch every leg of their journey. If he could keep track of the funds, Interpol would know where Nicholas Gallagher intended to collect the money and they could intercept him at the collection point.

"Any luck?"

Pierre bristled. "*Monsieur*, I might have more luck without constant interruption. Perhaps you'd rather wait in the cafeteria downstairs? I can call you if I spot anything."

"Watch yourself, Duboise!" His superior's tone was sharp.

Pierre ignored him. The reprimand was for the benefit of the London suits – not because his boss truly had any strong feelings about Pierre's insubordination. The men from London had arrived unannounced and their orders had stretched far beyond the bounds of international law and Interpol policy. Hacking into banks and placing spyware on their systems! But the orders had come from on high and Pierre wasn't in any position to argue. Besides, it wasn't every day he got the chance to hack into some of the world's most secure systems. He relished the opportunity.

His eyes flicked across the bank of screens once more. The applications monitored patterns, searching for anything unusual. If they discovered an out of the ordinary pattern, they would immediately analyse and interpret it. For the past two hours, he'd found reasonable explanations for every transaction. Nicholas Gallagher was not online yet.

*It's only a matter of time, my friend. Then you and I will do battle.* The computer alerted him to a new pattern. The sum was for \$510.59. The hardware hummed slightly, tracing the transaction. A quick analysis showed that the transfer was legitimate. A simple hardware purchase between two companies.

Pierre froze, and narrowed his eyes. He'd noticed something the computer had not. Quickly, he typed a request for information into the system. The results came back almost instantaneously. Two payments had gone to the same company within a matter of minutes, but they had been processed at different banks.

Reason told him that all cheques would be processed through a single accounts department and that the department would send a single driver to deposit all the cheques at once. One bank – not two! Something was amiss.

He quickly entered more information into his processor. The results came back within minutes. Hundreds of similar discrepancies appeared on his screen. And they had begun to occur no more than forty five minutes earlier.

Pierre cursed and dived forward in his seat. While he'd been carefully scouring the accounts, his prey had already whittled away over six hundred and fifty thousand US dollars from under his very nose. He immediately began tracing the transactions. This was not easy as the money had already travelled through over twenty different accounts.

He took a risk and switched all his processing power to handle information on only those twenty accounts. There would be others, he was sure, but he was equally convinced that all the processing power in the world would not locate those transactions. Pierre stared at the screen with a thin smile. He had waited his whole life for an opportunity like this. Now he had found it. He'd finally met a worthy opponent.

He spent the next twenty-five minutes examining every transaction, searching for the tiniest flaw, but none was apparent. He was able to track many transactions coming in to the accounts, but none went out.

"Where have you put the money, *Monsieur* Gallagher?" He spoke gently to the bank of monitors as he hunted for a likely transaction.

Pierre was becoming tense. He realised that the money would not remain in the accounts for long. It was on the move and he was unable to trace it. He found it inconceivable that the transactions could be so hard to track while they were obviously happening in front of his very eyes.

It was another twenty minutes before he noticed a new pattern. Two of the accounts began to slow down. Fewer transactions were being processed through them and this reflected in the statistics. Within another five minutes, three more of the accounts had slowed.

Pierre typed frantically, entering information into the processor. Another two accounts began to slow down in their number of transactions. It was almost imperceptible. In fact, no accountant would have noticed it if examining the bank accounts. It took a machine programmed to look for the tiniest flaws to find such a pattern.

He had tried everything, but he was losing this battle. By now, the trickle of money had come to a halt through no less than eighteen of the twenty accounts. If he didn't find out where it was going, the trail would soon run dry.

Finally, some results popped up on one of his monitors. Pierre breathed in relief. He had found a likely account. He traced it to a bank in the Cayman Islands. Their security systems were state of the art, but they posed little problem for him. Within ten minutes, he'd gained full control of their system. His fingers blazed across the keyboard.

"Any luck?"

"Get out!" Pierre screamed. He kept his gaze riveted on the screen.

The hour-glass mouse pointer taunted him for the best part of thirty seconds. At last, the number flashed up on the monitor. Pierre's fingers danced across the keyboard in an effort to access the account. And suddenly, the connection broke.

He cursed under his breath and tried to reconnect. Connection Failed. Perhaps the machine had been restarted. He waited thirty seconds and tried again. Connected. Pierre's heart leaped. He was back online. As quickly as he could, he entered the number for the account. Pierre's shoulders slumped and he released a slow, exasperated sigh. The account no longer existed.

He turned back to his two remaining accounts. They were still processing transactions. It was impossible. The money appeared to be untraceable. He considered following a single transaction, but realised the futility of such thinking. He had a less than one percent chance of selecting one initiated by Gallagher.

He checked all the accounts that money was being sent to, but none seemed likely. There were hundreds and to track each of those companies' accounts would lead to tens of thousands. Nicholas Gallagher might send the money through five accounts before transferring it to a single account: each level increased the number of accounts he needed to keep an eye on exponentially to the point that even his equipment could not track it.

It was while he was watching the last few coins trickle from the very last account that he realised what was happening.

“Clever, *Monsieur*,” he whispered. A large amount had gone to a furniture company that didn’t belong to Nicholas at all.

Pierre leaned back and clasped his hands behind his head. With a satisfied sigh, he spun his chair around to face his boss who stood sentry at the door.

“Did you do it?” the man enquired.

Duboise nodded. “We have him. He’s converting the money into physical assets.”

A quick call set the wheels in motion.

## Chapter 7

Nicholas sat back and stared at his computer screen. He had a couple of hours to rest now, before any more work was required. The items had been purchased and the addresses of the various auctioneers given for delivery. By the time the accounting departments realised that they had bought items that had never arrived, the auctions would long since have ended and the money would be transferred into new accounts that could not be traced to him; they had only been opened a few hours ago and would be closed before the sun set. Their sole purpose was to receive a single cheque from the auction, wire that money to an account in the Cayman Islands and then close themselves.

The virus-like applications he had created and slipped into the banks' various systems would perform the transactions, close the accounts and then destroy themselves. This would cause the system to hang, or generate an error of some sort, but that would be solved with a simple restart of the machine. Of course, in doing so, the user would wipe any trace left behind in the system, thereby covering Nicholas' tracks. He decided to take a break and have a cup of coffee.

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The following morning, Nicholas was roused by the sound of a door opening downstairs. Normally, he would have been awake far earlier, but he had not slept well in prison and had spent most of his weekend transferring money all over the globe. Once the task was completed, he had allowed himself to relax for the first time and had fallen into a deep sleep.

He gazed groggy-eyed at the alarm clock next to his bed. It was already nine o' clock. Nicholas shot from the bed and splashed some water on his face and hair. The icy water drove the fatigue from his body and he headed downstairs.

"Did everything work okay?" He was too anxious to greet the man who grinned at his spiky morning hair.

"Eight hundred and thirty thousand US dollars is a lot of money. And when you convert to South African Rands —" He tossed two briefcases at Nicholas. "You'd need to do two more trips to the bank to collect the balance and I wouldn't recommend that."

Nicholas frowned. "Even if they traced the money to the auctioneers, there's no way they would have been able to wade through the paperwork fast enough to trace it back to us."

Decklin pursed his lips. "Too risky. A cash withdrawal of that size will have raised flags with the authorities. They'll be watching the account now." He waved vaguely at the two briefcases. "There's 4.8 million rand in there. Something tells me you'll get by."

Nicholas shrugged and glanced at the giant bundle of bags under the priest's other arm. "What's that? You look like Santa Claus."

Decklin smiled. "Some clothes and stage props. I thought you'd need them, since you only have three weeks to get out of this place. That leaves us twenty-one days to make you disappear."

Nicholas fell upon the bag, delighted to see the new clothes that Decklin had bought for him. They were a far cry from the style that he would have chosen for himself, but he was

grateful nonetheless. He grinned and nodded at the minister when he saw the new pair of shoes.

“How did you know my size?”

“Lucky guess,” the minister shrugged.

Nicholas suddenly frowned as he pulled a box of dark brown hair dye from the bag. “And this?”

Decklin Kanabas was ready for the question. “Listen, Nicholas. You can’t hide here forever. And when you walk out of that door you can’t afford to look anything like you do right now. I can’t go with you, so you have to be prepared. There’s more.”

Nicholas dipped his hand into the bag again. He was astounded at the items the minister had bought for him. “Creatine!”

“Best on the market. And don’t forget the Whey protein powder in the bag next to it. Three weeks of that stuff along with heavy weights and a strict, high protein diet, that demands six meals each day and your own family won’t recognise you. From now on, you’ll be spending two hours every afternoon in that gym upstairs. And no nancying about with light weights either. I want maximum weight and low repetitions.”

Nicholas began to understand Decklin’s odd taste in clothing. It wasn’t that the minister had bought unthinkingly. In fact, quite the opposite. Decklin Kanabas had been thinking all too clearly when he had chosen the outfit. Suddenly, Nicholas could see himself with a newer, firmer body in the clothes that the minister had chosen. They would fit the new image quite nicely and he would be transformed. He dived back into the bag with gusto and pulled out a bottle of Instant Tan.

Decklin explained. “We don’t have time to get you a real one. This’ll work in the short term.”

“I don’t see a razor here.” Nicholas grinned.

“I thought a beard would look quite fetching. It’ll also add a few years.”

Among Nicholas’ new acquisitions were several pairs of sunglasses, all of different shades and styles, contact lenses that had nothing to do with improving one’s eyesight but that would instantly change his eye colour to any one of several hues, and assorted theatre props that included stick-on scars and fake tattoos.

Decklin explained. “Those won’t bear up under scrutiny, but they should fool the average person passing you in the street and that’s what matters.”

Several weeks passed like a whirlwind. Nicholas saw his new friend every day. The man made sure that Nicholas worked out until his muscles burned like an incinerator, pushing him to extremes that he had not previously believed possible. The harsh daily regimen coupled with large quantities of muscle builder and a strict diet transformed Nicholas’ body before his very eyes.

He didn’t expand and become a muscle-bound giant, but gained one or two kilograms of pure muscle and the muscles that were there swelled and firmed into sculptured cuts that none of his friends or family would ever associate with him.

Once the Instant Tan was added, he looked like a new man. The hard bristles quickly grew out, forming a full soft beard that transformed his appearance. After several lessons from the minister in the application of hair dye to his head and beard, Nicholas barely recognised himself in the mirror.

His evenings were spent writing down everything he could remember from the documents that had been stolen. They had included contact points and codes as well as protocols for making contact. Many of the cities had been international, which made no sense, but the nearest contact point was in Cape Town. Nicholas knew that was where he would head as soon as he was ready.

On the third morning, Decklin Kanabas made a substantial withdrawal from the cash in Nicholas' brief case. Nicholas was getting used to the idea that Decklin did not fit his stereotyped idea of what a minister should be, but the man proved that he could still shock Nicholas when he reappeared with a fake driver's license. He pried it apart like an expert and, after a couple of snapshots with a digital camera and some doctoring of the photo on the computer, a suitable replica of Nicholas' new persona was placed in the document and re-laminated to look like new.

"Where did you learn to do all this?" Nicholas asked.

"Time for your daily workout." The minister evaded the question.

Nicholas decided not to press the point. The man obviously did not want to talk about his past, but Nicholas couldn't help wondering what kind of past would give a man the skills that Decklin had displayed so far.

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Russ Lambert eagerly snatched the paper and ripped it from the fax machine. It contained a detailed list of telephone numbers and addresses that had been called from the gas station's pay-phone. He put the mobile numbers to one side and concentrated on the rest. Some were long distance or placed to local poorer township communities, which he figured he could disregard. Gallagher would have called a peer; someone who could offer him assistance, probably transport.

If he was clever, it would be someone with whom he only had vague contact, that the police wouldn't immediately suspect and keep under surveillance. It certainly wouldn't be family, or his attorney.

One call stood out, made to a number in Parktown. It belonged to a local church and was listed in the phone book as the number for the manse. Lambert circled the address in red ink and reached for a map book.

He arrived at the church at roughly three o'clock that afternoon. The secretary was polite and ushered him through to the minister's office immediately.

"Good afternoon, detective." The minister came around his desk and shook Lambert's hand. "Can I offer you some coffee?"

Lambert shook his head. "I'm fine, thanks."

"Well, what can I do for you?" The man waved him towards a chair.

"I'm tracking an escaped convict, Father, and I hoped you could assist me with my investigation."

The man seemed puzzled. "You think I can assist you with your investigation?"

"I believe he may have contacted your residence on Saturday afternoon, just after his escape."

"What's his name?"

"Nicholas Gallagher."

"The computer billionaire!" The minister leaned forward in his chair.

Lambert nodded. "Did he call you on Saturday afternoon?"

Kanabas thought about it for a moment. "Someone called here. I don't know if it was him. He didn't give his name, but he was looking for Father McCain."

"Father McCain?"

"My predecessor. He passed away several weeks ago."

"And this caller asked for him?"

The minister nodded.

Lambert jotted a note in his pocket-book, "Do you have any idea why Nicholas Gallagher might have wanted to speak to Father McCain?"

The man shrugged. "They knew each other, that I know. Father McCain was bedridden for several months before he passed away and I visited him regularly. He definitely had a soft spot for the man. I remember, he asked me several times to make an effort with Gallagher. He believed that the man just needed the right prompting to come into the fold."

Lambert jotted a note on his pad. "Did you ever speak to the man?"

The priest's smile was cynical. "I tried to contact him a few times, on Father McCain's behalf, but he never bothered to return the calls. In truth, I didn't try as hard as I might have. I've always felt that seekers need to make their own decision without any prodding from people like me. Father McCain was more of an idealist."

"Do you know how they knew each other?"

"I don't think they knew one another very well. Mr. Gallagher got married in this church and paid for its refurbishment. I think his parents were buried here too, but other than those two occasions, I don't think he ever attended a service."

"What did you tell your caller when he asked for Father McCain?"

"I told him the man had passed away and asked if I could help in some way."

"And his response?"

"He seemed rather taken aback. Surprised. First he wanted to know who I was and when I had taken over as minister of the church. Then he said it was alright and that the call was personal. After that he hung up."

"How long was the call, roughly?"

The minister shrugged and blew through pursed lips, calculating the duration of the call. "No more than a couple of minutes."

"You didn't think it was odd, the fact that he stayed on the line so long after you'd told him the man he wanted wasn't available?"

"I thought it was odd that he was looking for Father McCain to begin with. I took over before Father McCain passed away and nobody's asked for him for several months now. Other than that, I didn't give it much thought at all."

Lambert nodded. "Well, thank you for your time, Father. If I have any more questions, I'll call you."

"Feel free." The minister rose to shake his hand.

Russ Lambert left the church, thinking about their conversation. The minister's story seemed quite plausible and could easily be verified by speaking to members of Nicholas' family, as well as his friends. That was the route he would take, he decided.

## Chapter 8

Finally, the three weeks were up and it was time for Nicholas to leave his temporary haven. This time he was armed, however. He had a briefcase full of cash, a laptop computer that allowed him to stay in touch with the world at large while keeping him mobile and a new appearance that no policeman in the country would associate with the face emblazoned on the front page of every newspaper. He also carried a mobile phone with a start-up kit SIM card that Decklin had purchased from a street-side vendor – untraceable.

They spent the final day eradicating every trace of Nicholas' presence from the home. While Decklin concentrated on the living area downstairs, Nicholas went through the bedroom, study and bathroom. Once he had removed the last vestige of evidence, Nicholas hoisted the trash-bag over his shoulder and headed for the kitchen.

"I'll take that," Decklin reached for the bulging refuse bag.

"Not to worry," Nicholas grinned. "I think I can manage."

"It's not your ability that concerns me," Decklin gripped the bag more firmly. "Nobody is supposed to be in this house so why would there be trash outside it in the morning? Tomorrow is garbage removal day and this will look less conspicuous in the neighbour's bin."

Nicholas sighed in understanding. "And you don't want to risk anyone spotting me outside the house." He silently berated himself for his own stupidity.

Decklin grinned. "Now you get the picture." He hefted the bag over his shoulder and stepped outside.

The following morning, Decklin arrived well before sunrise to drive Nicholas to the airport. The silence in the car was uncomfortable. Nicholas was too nervous to engage in much conversation and Decklin appeared awkward at their parting.

"I only wish I could go with you, but it's impossible."

"You've already involved yourself far more than was expected," Nicholas assured him.

"There's still so much that could go wrong!"

Nicholas smiled. "I'm ready, thanks to you. I can cope from here, so don't worry."

"If you need anything —"

"I'll call!" Nicholas interrupted.

The minister nodded. "Just be sure to dial my new mobile number. I don't want any more calls from Detective Lambert."

"I'll be careful. I had a good teacher." Nicholas forced a smile. "Although I'm sure you didn't learn that stuff at a theological college."

The minister smiled, but made no reply. It was still not something he was prepared to talk about. They continued in silence to the airport. As they approached, Decklin finally broke the stillness.

"Right, this is it. From here, you're on your own. Now remember what I told you."

"I remember. I won't take a plane. Arrival and departure times are too predictable and easy to monitor."

"Good. And stay out of elevators. They're traps."

Nicholas nodded, adopting the tone of a child reciting instructions given by his mother before going on a trip. "And I'll always sit with my back against a wall, where I have a clear view of my surroundings and nobody can sneak up on me."

"Remember to stay alert. A good view of the surroundings is worthless if you don't pay attention to what's going on. And lastly?"

"If I suspect there's danger, I'll run. I can never be too paranoid."

"Don't you forget that, Nicholas. Paranoia is your ultimate survival compass. It'll save your life every time. If you suspect you're being followed, you probably are. If it feels like someone's watching you, stake your life on the fact that it's so and bolt."

"I know, I know, I've heard this a thousand times over the last three weeks," Nicholas protested.

"Well hear it again. If your alarm bells start ringing, get away and do it fast. Don't go back for anything – computers, phones, money can all be replaced. Your life is the only thing that matters."

"Decklin, let it go. I've got it, okay?" This time Nicholas raised his voice.

Suddenly the minister was angry. "I won't let it go, Nick. The advantage is all theirs, don't ever forget it. They can fail time and time again, and it'll cost them nothing but frustration. The first time you fail, you're dead. Get that!"

The minister's words were harsh. Nicholas felt as if he'd been slapped. He realised that the repetition of the lessons had dulled his senses. The minister was ensuring that he be brought back to the reality of his situation. All their role playing over the past weeks had been a game. Now he was about to enter a real world, with real bullets. Suddenly the thought terrified him.

It was as if Decklin could sense his fear. His voice softened slightly as he spoke. "You're scared. Good. Now you're ready."

With those words, he pulled the car into the drop-off zone and reached over, offering a farewell handshake. Nicholas clasped his hand in a firm grip. His voice trembled as he spoke.

"Thanks for everything, Decklin. I can't ever repay you for what you've done for me."

The man nodded. His expression was gruff, but his voice was soft when he spoke. "Good luck."

After hiring a vehicle at the airport, Nicholas made the journey to Cape Town over two days, stopping overnight. He didn't want to arrive in the city after dark and be forced to hunt for an hotel in unfamiliar surroundings.

It was lunchtime when he arrived and he quickly found a mall where he bought a map of the city along with a booklet that listed local Bed & Breakfast establishments and hotels. B&Bs were better as they were far less formal and difficult to track residents to.

The house, called *Tranquillity*, lay nestled in the lush forests of *Hout Bay*, one of Cape Town's affluent suburbs. Once settled into his room, he quickly went through the contact procedures as he'd remembered them. He felt a little nervous, but fairly confident that he could recall the instructions. Since early childhood, Nicholas had found that he only needed to read something once in order to recall the finest details of the document. He could still remember many of his childhood stories word for word and was able to recite pages from books he hadn't read in years.

He had been stunned by the revelation of the documents in that file and knew he would never forget the words they contained. It was with a little trepidation, however, that he picked up his mobile phone. He followed Decklin's instructions not to use a land line that could be traced, and made the call.

There was an answering machine, which was what he expected. The instruction was simple, asking for a number, with the promise to call back. Nicholas first recited a code and then left the number for his mobile phone. After that he left the house and walked down to the beach where he found a restaurant and ordered lunch.

It was after ten o'clock that evening before the call was returned. The caller was brief and to the point. A code was given. It was the one Nicholas expected. He responded with a code of his own. There was a moment's hesitation, and Nicholas held his breath.

Finally, the stranger spoke. "Come to the jetty at Simon's Town at 8 a.m. tomorrow. There's a curio shop at the top, near the pier. Purchase a red scarf from there and drape it over your shoulders. Then go to the end of the pier and wait."

The man hung up before he could reply. Nicholas flooded with relief. He had made contact! In a world of foes, he had found an ally who could prove his innocence and help him get his life back. In the morning, he would learn who his enemies were and why they had singled him out. He slept soundly that night.

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Nicholas awoke early the following morning and headed for the rendezvous, making sure he arrived in plenty of time. He did not want to risk being late. He parked his rented vehicle several blocks away and walked to the harbour. It was 07h30 when he arrived at the jetty.

The shop did not open for another half an hour and Nicholas was the first client through the doors. He quickly purchased an appropriate scarf, draped it over his shoulders as per his instructions and headed out to the end of the pier.

It was early and a crisp offshore wind blew against his face as he marched down the pier. Tranquil swells lapped against the giant breakwaters of the tiny harbour that was littered with both military and recreational craft. Simon's Town was a Naval town, with a training base for new recruits and a rich naval history. It was also an extremely expensive suburb of Cape Town and many of the residents kept their private yachts and pleasure-craft moored in the local harbour.

Apart from seagulls that hovered quietly overhead or squabbled with one another over scraps of food left by the myriad of tourists that frequented the area, the area was quite deserted. The end of the pier opened into a large square platform with a wooden bench and a huge, chest-high block of concrete that was about eight feet long and five wide.

He discovered that the pier wasn't quite deserted. There was a lonely fisherman huddled behind the giant concrete block. The man was thin, grizzled, about sixty-five, and wore drab but warm clothes that indicated he had been there most of the night. It had been at least four days since he had last shaved and his face was covered with salty bristles. The man shuffled slightly and glanced at Nicholas briefly before staring back at his unmoving line.

Nicholas returned to the other side of the block and took a seat on the wooden bench. The slats were bleached by the sun and several were broken or missing. It made for an uncomfortable seat. Nearly half an hour passed before he saw any movement on the pier. Two men approached and Nicholas watched as they moved down the jetty. They stopped about halfway down, however, and opened a locked gate that led to some steps, which in turn led to a paddleboat against the pier's edge.

His eyes followed the two men as they paddled out into the harbour, heading for one of the sail boats moored there. The boat was called *Evita* and was one of the vessels closest to the pier. When they reached it, the owner boarded while the other man headed back. Nicholas passed the time by watching the owner prepare for his voyage. The man stowed several items below while bringing other items out on deck. He was already beginning to cast off when Nicholas noticed a lone figure approaching from the shop above.

The man looked out of place. He was dressed in an expensive suit and wore shoes that, even from this distance, glittered in the sun. He moved with purpose and Nicholas could see that, though he dressed like a businessman, there was a hardness in the eyes that would not be seen

in any boardroom. He moved with catlike alacrity. As he approached, he seemed to observe Nicholas with detached interest.

Nicholas rose as the man approached. It was only when the man was a few feet away that Nicholas noticed a flash of recognition in the man's eyes. It was gone in an instant, and Nicholas began to wonder if he was imagining it, when he saw the gun appear.

There was no time to think. He dived across the few feet that separated them, catching the man's gun hand and throwing him off balance. All the work Decklin Kanabas had put Nicholas through over the past few weeks was truly paying off. Not only did he display immense power, but the heavy weight training had, in fact, increased his speed and reflexes.

The killer was taken by surprise, but only for a moment. An instant later, he twisted free from Nicholas' grip, but not before the weapon clattered to the concrete. A swift upper cut jarred Nicholas as the man's fist connected with his chin. He tumbled back on his haunches and rolled to his feet as the man calmly reached to pick up his gun.

There was no panic and no hurry. The man even paused to straighten his suit where Nicholas had creased the collar. It was clear Nicholas was dealing with a professional and no amount of weight training would ever protect him from this man.

In panic, he dived around the large concrete slab. The singing bullet rung in his ears as it ricocheted off the slab just behind his head. There had been no sound of gunshot, Nicholas realised. The weapon had to have a silencer.

He needed a diversion, something to distract the man for an instant. The fisherman was there and Nicholas decided to bundle the old man into the water. If the killer believed he had dived into the water, he might gain the precious seconds needed to push the man over as well.

Without another thought, Nicholas lunged at the fisherman. It was that lunge that saved him. Nicholas had already flung himself at the fisherman when the man pulled a pistol from under his blanket. Nicholas snatched at the weapon, twisting it back on its owner. In the struggle, a shot rang out. The fisherman's eyes went wide with shock and he toppled into the water.

Nicholas didn't bother to look over the edge. He snatched at the man's giant fishing knife and quietly pressed himself against the concrete slab. The killer on the other side came around slowly, but he was not alert. He had placed too much faith in his companion and underestimated his opponent.

That gave Nicholas just enough time to lunge. The killer reacted faster than Nicholas anticipated, grabbing Nicholas' left hand as he reached for the gun. He twisted the limb painfully as he brought up his knee, slamming it into Nicholas' stomach.

The knife was unexpected, however, and Nicholas managed to slam it into the man's torso, feeling the hilt thud against flesh. He immediately ripped the weapon from his hunter's body and stabbed again. There was a cry of agony and Nicholas thankfully heard the gun clatter to the pier.

He plunged the weapon again and again, until all movement ceased. Finally, he stopped. A wave of terror suddenly engulfed him as he looked at the man he had just killed. In horror, he flung the knife into the water. As he did so, his hands began to shake, but his mind forced him on. *Move. There is no time for shock.*

Nicholas turned to run, but adrenaline had heightened his senses. As he rounded the block, he heard the ricochet of the bullet on the slab near his shoulder. He dived like a meerkat ducking for cover.

Once again, there had been no sound of a shot. The sniper was using a silencer and could probably take pot shots at Nicholas all day. It was suddenly apparent how stupid he had been. The pier was a perfect trap. Even though he had managed to overcome the first two killers, his stalkers could hold him there indefinitely while they sent more assassins to deal with him. Those who came next would not be as careless as the first two. They now knew their prey

was dangerous and would proceed with caution. Luck had played a huge role so far. Nicholas had caught his would-be killers unawares, but his advantage would not continue for long.

Suddenly, he saw his redemption. There was a commotion on the yacht, *Evita*, and shouts of alarm erupted from the dinghy. Nicholas saw the small paddle craft coming about as the boatman headed for the body fallen in the water.

He quickly came to a decision. Snatching the fallen gun, he slipped it into his belt. Then he began to hail the oarsman, urging him to get there quickly. Once he could see that the man was heading for the floating body, he quickly dived into the water, heading for the corpse himself. Nicholas swam as deeply as he could, using the water above him as a shield. He knew that it would be unlikely that the gunmen could see him from their position because of the sun's reflection off the water.

His surroundings darkened slightly and Nicholas glanced up. The body floated above and to his left. The boat had just reached it and had passed above him. Nicholas swam up, being sure to keep the boat between him and the shoreline. As he surfaced, he pulled the gun from his belt and thrust it into the oarsman's face.

"Leave him," he snarled.

The man jumped back in shock, instinctively putting his hands in the air. Nicholas glanced over at the yacht. He saw that the vessel was almost underway.

"Head back to that yacht over there, and don't try anything foolish."

The oarsman didn't argue. He simply snatched his oars and rowed as quickly as he could, heading for the yacht he had just returned from. Nicholas didn't bother trying to board the dinghy as that would have made him a target again. Instead, he clung to the side using the wooden structure for cover while waving the gun menacingly at the occupant.

By the time they reached the yacht it had already cast off and was coming about, heading for the open water. As the vessels passed one another, Nicholas thrust the gun back into his belt and quickly swam for the departing yacht. He managed to clutch the ladder at stern and felt his speed increase as the vessel tugged him through the water.

He clambered aboard and pointed the gun at the surprised yachtsman. "Keep moving," he growled, forcing the man to turn back to his task of leaving the harbour.

"Take it easy." The man was surprisingly calm. "I'll do whatever you want."

Nicholas found that he was gasping for breath. "Just get out of the harbour."

"We'll need to hoist the sail."

"Forget the sail!" he growled. "Keep the motor running and get me out of here."

The man did as he was instructed. Nicholas glanced over his shoulder. The dinghy's oarsman was rowing frantically, headed back for the pier. That left mere minutes before he alerted the authorities or, worse, the assassins' accomplices. The yacht would not remain a safe haven for long. Nicholas quickly found the ship's radio and ripped it from its mounting, heaving it overboard. "Where's the spare?"

"It's down below. Not easy to find."

Nicholas moved over to the hatch. It was held in place by a clip with a lever to open it. "Got a hammer?"

The man nodded and pointed at a storage compartment. His movements were slow and deliberate. The man was obviously making sure that he didn't excite Nicholas in any way. Nicholas relaxed and moved to the compartment. A moment later, he had the hammer. A few blows disabled the latch so badly that it would take half an hour at least to get it open again. He quickly replaced the hammer and heaved the toolbox overboard.

By now they had cleared the harbour. "Which way do you want me to go?" the yachtsman asked quietly.

"That way," Nicholas pointed to the port side.

The man obeyed without a word. As the harbour receded, Nicholas allowed himself to relax. They had travelled for several minutes before he spoke. "I'm not going to hurt you. I just needed to get away from there. You were my only hope."

"I see." The sailor nodded, but never took his eyes off the water ahead of him. Although he was calm, Nicholas could see the slight quiver in the man's lip when he spoke.

They sailed on in silence for another three minutes. Nicholas kept a wary eye on the harbour. It was only a matter of time, he knew. A beach lay ahead of them. If only he could reach it in time. There were several surfers out in the water and a few people were already laying out towels and umbrellas on the golden sands flanked by banks of rock.

He glanced back again and spotted the expected motorboat exiting the harbour. His limited sailing experience told him the vessel was fast. She would catch up with them in a matter of minutes.

He glanced back at the beach ahead of them. It was slim but it was his only hope. He flexed his wrist, testing the weapon's weight in his hand and approached the yachtsman. "How close can you get me to the shore over there?"

The man gulped. "Not very. The bottom falls away slowly here."

"Well get me as close as you can." He glanced back anxiously at the approaching motorboat. It was gaining faster than he had hoped.

Nicholas drove the fear from his mind and turned his attention to the beach ahead. The yachtsman steered his vessel in closer to the shore and they passed within twenty metres of the surfers out on the water.

Nicholas glanced back again. The motorboat was gaining. As the yacht drew abreast of the surfers, He moved towards the bows, out of his pursuers' line of sight. Then he launched himself from the boat and struck out for the surfers.

"Help!" he called. It was a moment or two before the people heard him.

Two of them quickly turned and paddled across to him. "What happened, bro?" the leading surfer called as he approached.

"Help me!" Nicholas yelled again, allowing himself to sink beneath the surface for a moment.

The surfers wasted no more time with stupid questions. They had Nicholas on the shore within two minutes. Allowing the surfers to drag him from the water, he glanced back at the yacht he had just abandoned. The yachtsman had wasted no time coming about and the vessel was already headed back to the harbour. The chasing motorboat was now on a course to intercept and would reach the vessel in a minute or less.

"What happened?" The surfer repeated his earlier question. Nicholas guessed the man was no more than seventeen.

Nicholas pointed at the rocks over at the far end of the beach. "Water washed me off the rocks. I'm fine now. Thanks for your help."

He quickly removed his shoes and socks, as well as his shirt. They would take a while to dry. Nicholas glanced back at the yacht. The motorboat had now reached it and two men clambered aboard. The yachtsman was waving his arms and pointing towards the beach. Nicholas allowed the small group of surfers to gather about him, forming a screen against prying eyes. From among the group, he watched the motorboat come around. It spun its nose shoreward and then lurched towards the beach. He gulped and quickly thanked the surfer again. Then he broke away from the group and headed for the steps that led to the road. He had made a spectacle of himself and people were staring. Realising this, Nicholas wanted to get away from there as quickly as possible.

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As he walked, Nicholas thought about the morning's events. The police would already be at the harbour and would soon learn from the yachtsman where their suspect had jumped overboard. A chill ran down his spine as it dawned on him that he had just become a killer. He was suddenly terrified at the thought of what he had done. Still more frightening was the realisation that he could do it again if the need arose. What had happened to him? Had the past few months changed him so much?

The early morning sun was already hot and his thin shirt dried quickly. Within minutes, Nicholas was able to pull it on again. He felt the cool dampness against his skin. He also noticed the blood stains that proclaimed his guilt. It marked him, he knew. He would have to get rid of it.

His trousers would take longer to dry as they were made of thick denim. Nicholas quickly headed to a local street market where he bought a pair of shorts to replace his sodden trousers. It was when he reached for his wallet that he realised he hadn't thought of everything. The notes were sodden and even the wallet bore the mark of the salt water that had invaded every crevice.

Soaking wet notes would be cause for comment and would draw attention to him. He quickly bought a new shirt as well, and pulled it on over his shoulders. Then he disappeared around a corner where he extracted the remaining notes from his wallet and held them in his hand, allowing them to dry in the sun and the light breeze.

The money dried quickly and Nicholas soon found himself another shop. This time he looked slightly less suspicious as his shirt was unstained and the notes were drier. He bought a different shirt, a pair of shorts and some beach sandals. Discarding his shoes in a local alley, he donned the sandals instead, and headed for a local coffee shop. Ten minutes later he exited the bathroom, looking far more respectable. He had rinsed the salt water from his hair and his new clothes were dry.

Nicholas had little appetite for food but knew he had to blend in. He ordered a cup of coffee and a toasted croissant with ham and cheese. While waiting for his meal, he allowed the remaining notes to dry properly in a sunny spot on the seat next to the window. Half an hour later, he emerged from the restaurant looking like the stereotypical tourist. His T-shirt displayed a beautiful outline and advertisement for Table Mountain, Cape Town's biggest tourist attraction. He stopped off at another shop where he purchased a mini camera. A cap and a money bag completed the transformation.

That done, Nicholas strolled back towards the beach where he might find transport out of the area.

Getting a ride wasn't difficult. After a quick negotiation with a pair of local fishermen it was arranged. The poorer communities were always far more willing to help and far less suspicious than their more affluent neighbours.

He gave the men two hundred rand each and offered the driver his mini camera. The men wasted no time and led him directly to their rusty dented vehicle. They drove him to the city centre where it was easier to find a cab to take him back to *Hout Bay*. He had the cab driver drop him off at the main business centre among all the shops and restaurants near the beach and, thus certain that his tracks could not be traced, headed back to the B&B on foot.

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Russ Lambert put down the phone and glanced at the large brown envelope that had been placed on his desk. He reached for it and ripped open the seal. Inside, he found a large photo of a man he had never seen before, well-muscled, tanned, with dark brown hair and a full beard.

He raised his eyebrows and looked inside the envelope again. The information on the piece of paper galvanized him. He shot up from his desk and yelled across at one of his colleagues. "Kevin, I'll be back shortly. Just got to make a quick trip down to the identikit lab."

Kevin glanced up from his desk. "What's up?"

Lambert tossed the photograph onto his colleague's desk. "Someone's up to no good."

"Who is this?"

"The note claims it's Gallagher. I'll have the identikit people run Gallagher's mug-shots and superimpose this hair and beard. See if we find a match."

"Looks like someone's keen to help you catch him."

Lambert fixed his colleague with a grim look. "But why! Think about it. I was two steps behind the Polokwane Strangler last week, and they pulled me off him to go after some first-time offender who is the criminal mind's answer to Mickey Mouse. Now someone who knows I'm on the case is sending me anonymous tips. That means they have contacts inside the police, not to mention some clout with the guys upstairs. Who wants this guy so badly? And why?"

Kevin shrugged. "Beats me. Maybe it's just a hoax."

Lambert nodded. "One way to find out."

A short while later he arrived back at his desk and slipped the photographs into his briefcase.

Kevin raised his eyebrows. "And?"

Lambert pursed his lips. "No hoax. I'm off home. Got to pack for Cape Town. It looks like our Nicholas Gallagher has been a busy boy. He's left a trail of dead bodies on the Simon's Town pier and hijacked a yacht to make his escape."

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On his arrival in Cape Town, Russ Lambert headed for the Simon's Town police station to go over the files and read statements taken from witnesses. The evidence led him to Fish Hoek beach, where some questioning uncovered a group of surfers, one of whom had fished a man fitting Gallagher's description out of the water the previous day. The surfer showed him which way his suspect had headed. In the town, the trail vanished.

After thinking about it a while, he made another call to check with all the local cab companies and public transport systems. While he waited for them to come back with information, he considered his suspect's options, putting himself in Gallagher's shoes.

Gallagher would probably not take public transport, as the police would be on the lookout and would monitor those avenues of escape. Public transport was also too infrequent and unreliable. The man would want to be gone as quickly as possible.

Car theft was unlikely. Nicholas Gallagher was not a thief. He wouldn't know how to steal a vehicle. He might have tried to hitch a ride, but that was also risky. The most likely option would be to prowl the beach-front or the harbours and try to get a ride there.

Lambert decided to try the harbour first. Within minutes of arriving, he learnt that two of the local fishermen had given a stranger a ride into Cape Town the previous morning. They had been boasting about the money they'd been paid and flashing about the mini camera the man had given them.

He found the pair in a local harbour cafeteria. It was on the far end of the docks – the working end where few tourists ever ventured. The two men were at a table with some friends and all of them were hunched over polystyrene trays filled with battered hake and freshly fried chips.

They spotted Lambert the moment he entered and eyed him all the way across the restaurant floor.

“Gentlemen,” Lambert flashed his badge. “Mind if I join you?”

The men shook their heads, but their eyes were untrusting. Lambert smiled, trying to put them at their ease. “Don’t worry. I’m not here to arrest anyone. I’m just looking for someone and I understand you might be able to help me.”

He reached into his jacket and pulled a copy of the picture taken on the pier. “I’m told you gave a stranger a lift into Cape Town a couple of days ago. Is this the man?”

The men gazed at the picture he slid across the table. Eventually, one looked up and nodded. “*Ja*, yes that’s the man. Did he do something wrong?”

Suddenly the men were eager to learn more about the stranger. This added a new twist to the story that might keep them in the limelight a little longer among the local fishing population.

Lambert decided to humour them. He still needed information and, without revealing any more than would appear in the afternoon paper anyway, might be able to get them to open up.

“Let’s just say he’s wanted for questioning. There’s a couple of dead bodies at the pier in Simon’s Town and we think he might have some information regarding the men’s deaths.”

By the time he had finished chatting to them, he knew that the men had dropped Nicholas Gallagher off near the station in town. This was a blow. There were many different types of transport congregated at that point. Gallagher might have taken a train, bus or taxi, or even hired a vehicle from there.

Again, Lambert was forced to guess his suspect’s thoughts and movements, eliminating the unlikely and following the more probable avenues. He immediately ruled out trains as the security, even at the smaller stations, was relatively good and too easy for police to monitor. With only one or two exit points at any given station, police could easily monitor all the stations along a given line without too much manpower required.

Buses might be better as they served most suburbs and would be able to drop a person within walking distance of their destination, but bus services were too unreliable and infrequent. Gallagher would have been terrified and would almost certainly have kept moving. It was highly unlikely that he would be prepared to wait up to thirty minutes for a bus. That left cab and car hire. Car hire would be easy to trace. He placed a quick call to the Simon’s Town station and asked them to follow up with all the local car hire companies at the station.

While they took care of that, Lambert headed for the taxi rank outside. He was quickly able to locate a list of the local taxis that had been present on the day Gallagher had arrived. After flashing the picture about a few times, he located a cab driver who had given his suspect a ride.

“Can you give me a ride to the same spot you dropped him off at?” Lambert asked the driver.

The man regarded him with suspicion. “You going to pay for that ride?”

Lambert chuckled. “As long as you give me a receipt so I can claim it back from the taxpayers.”

The man shrugged. “Okay. Hop in.”

The ride took him over the mountain pass and into the suburb of *Hout Bay*. The driver finally dropped him off near the harbour. By now Lambert’s stomach was screaming its protest, so he headed for a local steak house to order lunch. As soon as he had taken his seat, he placed another call to the Simon’s Town station.

“Rosita? Detective Lambert here again.”

“Hi, Detective.” The woman was barely able to hide the affection in her voice. “I’ve got that list of car hire companies for you, but it’s not good news.”

“Don’t worry about it. He took a cab through to *Hout Bay*.”

“*Hout Bay*! How do you know that already?”

"Not important. I'm having lunch at the moment. If you can you get me a list of all the B&Bs in this area before I've had my dessert, I owe you dinner. We can go to the restaurant of your choice."

"Now, now, Detective. Don't go making promises you can't keep."

"I'm free tonight and I can keep it. I have an expense account and this is police business. You're wasting time, Rosita. My main course will be here any minute."

"Give me a few minutes." The woman didn't bother to say goodbye before hanging up the phone.

Lambert grinned and glanced up at the waiter who arrived with his drink. He was only half-way through his main course when his mobile phone rang again.

"Rosita! What have you got for me?"

"Get a pen handy," the woman giggled.

There were over twenty-five listed, but only three of them were within less than five minutes' walk of the area where the cab driver had dropped him.

"You're a wonder, Rosita."

"I know. You can pick me up at seven."

"Deal, but I'll need an address."

"You're a detective. I'm sure you can find it."

Lambert chuckled. "It would be a gross misuse of police resources."

After lunch, he struck out for the nearest B&B. That was a worthless exercise. He left with nothing. The second was equally fruitless. Nobody there recognised the man in the photo.

At the third, he met an elderly lady who introduced herself as Mrs Guthrie. She welcomed him into her home and offered him a cup of coffee. When he slid the picture across, she immediately gasped in recognition.

"Yes. That's Mr Carlisle. Such a polite young man. I hope he's not in any trouble."

"Well, we'd like to ask him some questions about some trouble down in Simon's Town. Is he still here?"

"I'm afraid not. He left a few days ago."

"Did someone fetch him, or did he leave on foot?"

"Oh, a taxi came for him. It was quite early in the morning."

"Did he use your phone, or did he have a mobile with him?"

The woman shook her head. "I don't think he used our phone. No, I'm sure I would have remembered. He must have called from his room."

"And you don't have telephones in the room?"

"Oh, good heavens, no. It's far too expensive. We have a pay phone in the communal lounge, but nobody ever uses it. Everyone seems to have cell phones these days. I don't have one myself, but all the children seem to carry them in the shops."

"I've noticed," Lambert grinned at the woman. "Tell me, do you have a phone book in the room?"

"No, but we put telephone lists on all the bedside tables. It's easier for our guests if they have a list of useful numbers all in one place."

"Would you mind if I had a look at the list?"

"No, no. Of course not." The woman immediately rose and bustled off to reception. She returned with a pamphlet. Lambert glanced over the document until he found a cab company. It was the only one listed.

He reached for the phone and called. The number was in fact a mobile number. It turned out that the cab was owned by an owner-driver. The man remembered picking a passenger up from Tranquillity B&B. Mrs Guthrie treated Lambert to another cup of coffee while he waited for the driver to arrive.

Late that afternoon, the cabbie dropped him off in Sea Point.

"This is the spot?" Lambert asked the man.

"The exact spot." The man nodded.

Lambert shook his head. *Sometimes, they just make it too easy.* "Did you see which direction he went?"

"No. He stood and waited for me to leave. Unusual."

Russ Lambert was always amused at how unusual ordinary things appeared to be when he was interviewing eye witnesses. Whenever he appeared on a crime scene and began interviewing people, everyone was a sleuth.

The cab driver left him and he gazed about the area. Sea Point was a bustling cesspool, where two walks of life collided, mingling to form a colourful street life. Most of the local homes were owned by wealthy, respectable business people. It also contained several upmarket holiday hotels where accommodation and anonymity could easily be found. On the other hand, prostitution and drugs had become booming industries, much to the consternation of the local home owners.

Lambert glanced about, looking for a suitable hotel. He found one and went inside. The hotel was secure with armed guards and locked gates blocking the lobby. He flashed his badge at the woman behind reception.

"I'm hoping you can help me. Do you know if this man rented a room here for a couple of nights?" He slid the picture of his suspect under the bars behind which the receptionist cowered.

"Our customers generally rent rooms by the hour." The woman didn't smile or blush as she spoke.

Russ Lambert felt the blood rushing to his face in a hot flush. "Oh, I see. Um. Well, thank you anyway."

He beat a hasty retreat, smiling at his embarrassment as he returned to the street. It was only when he reached the pavement outside that he noticed the woman following him. She had dark brown hair and her face was covered with heavy, cheap makeup that made her look older than she really was. The short dress and the saucy jacket proudly proclaimed her profession to the world.

"Can I help you?" Lambert's voice was cool.

"I couldn't help overhearing," the woman said. "The man you're looking for. Is there a reward for him?"

"There might be." Lambert hadn't decided yet whether or not to announce to the press that a reward would be offered. His commander gave him a lot of leeway where rewards were concerned. "What can you tell me?"

"He picked me up on this very street. I can tell you which hotel I took him to, if you're interested."

Lambert grinned. "I'd be very interested. Your name?"

The woman smiled back. "Sam."

"Well, Sam. Lead the way."

"You'd be taking me off the job for about half an hour. My rate is five hundred an hour, minimum one hour."

Lambert winced. "You bleed me dry, Sam."

"Then there's also the matter of the reward."

"And if there isn't one?"

She shrugged and shook her head. "I have so many customers. Eventually one hotel begins to look like another. My memory quickly becomes shaky."

Lambert chuckled. "Tell you what. There is a reward. I'm not sure how much, but it won't be less than five thousand – if the information leads to this man's capture. As for the five hundred, I could simply arrest you now for soliciting a police officer and take you down to

the station for questioning. We could hold you for up to twenty four hours. How much would that cost you in lost income?"

The woman hesitated, considering her options. Finally she sighed. "I suppose I could waive the five hundred."

"Good girl. Now, where did you take him?"

The woman led him ten blocks west. Finally they arrived at a large run-down hotel. She gave him the names of the reception staff who had been on duty when she had booked the room, as well as the room number.

"What makes this client stick out in your memory so well, if I may ask?" Lambert enquired of the woman.

The woman frowned and shook her head. "He was an odd customer. The whole appointment was weird. You remember things like that." She didn't elaborate and Lambert was afraid to ask. He could always make more enquiries later, after examining the room.

Once he'd taken down the woman's details, with the promise of following up should a reward be forthcoming, he entered the hotel. It was similar to the previous establishment with dark red carpets and high security doors. Security cameras videoed everyone entering and leaving the lobby. Those would come in useful.

After flashing his badge, the staff became eager to help. A good relationship with the local constabulary was essential to their continued profitability. Their clients were not the type of people who appreciated constant raids and police harassment. If an officer was prepared to be discreet, they would do everything in their power to assist him with his investigation. In return, the police tended to leave them alone to get on with business.

As expected, nobody had noticed the man enter or leave. This was because rooms were usually booked by the prostitutes. It was an easy way for clients to ensure anonymity.

The booking records were quickly retrieved. They reflected that the room had only been occupied for an hour. The next booking had been exactly one hour later. The room had also been cleaned, which meant that the suspect had probably left within forty minutes or less. Lambert realised that his best bet was probably the closed-circuit television.

It took a while to retrieve the tapes and Lambert spent the next hour watching the arrival and departure of customers through the lobby area. He recognised Gallagher's new persona as he walked through the lobby entrance, following Sam as soon as she had made her booking.

He grinned at his good fortune. Gallagher had gazed about, taking everything in. He had even stared directly into the video camera as he approached the security gate. *Idiot!* Lambert loved trailing amateurs; they made his job so easy.

Twenty minutes later, he watched Sam exit the lobby. Sitting forward in his seat, he waited in anticipation for Gallagher's departure. Which way would he turn in the street outside? The camera could tell him that much. After that, he would have to begin guessing again. The next forty minutes of watching proved fruitless. Gallagher never reappeared.

## Chapter 9

Nicholas exited the cab in Sea Point and waited for the driver to disappear before making a decision as to where he should head next. Once the cab was safely around the corner, he glanced about. He noticed the hotel a few metres away. It was a seedy-looking building and the cheap sign above the door indicated what type of establishment it was.

That gave him an idea. He had most of what he needed in his bag already. He made a quick trip to a supermarket across the street and exited shortly with several new items that he would require. Then he headed for the hotel he had first noticed. After accosting the first available woman he could find, a price for her time was negotiated.

The woman quickly turned towards the hotel, but Nicholas stopped her. "Not here, Sam."

"Why not?" The prostitute was surprised.

"I have my reasons. There must be a similar hotel somewhere nearby."

She nodded. "There's one ten blocks from here, but it's more expensive. It'll cost you an extra hundred."

"That's not a problem." Nicholas dismissed her objection with a wave of his hand.

"Whatever." The woman shrugged and headed west.

Nicholas followed her at a discreet distance and waited outside while the woman headed for reception and booked a room. He examined the lobby as best he could from outside while she made her booking.

Once she turned, he entered the lobby. Walking slowly, he glanced about, taking in every detail. There was only one camera and Nicholas examined it minutely. The camera was stationary, he noted, and could easily be avoided on the way out.

He followed the woman upstairs, checking constantly for cameras. He found two more, carefully noting their positions without bothering to hide his face or conceal himself in any way. Finally, he checked the room for any cameras. This was his field of expertise. Security was something he understood and deception was a skill he had learnt from his military clients.

Once sure that there were no cameras in the room itself, he took his bag and headed for the bathroom. A short while later, after extracting what he needed, he emerged with his original bag and handed it to the woman.

"In exactly thirty minutes, I'm going to slip another two hundred rand under this door. Once you've taken it, I want you to take this bag and leave immediately. If I see you when I walk out of the bathroom, the bedroom, or the hotel, I'll take the money back. Understand?"

The woman seemed puzzled, but nodded. "What's in the bag?"

"Nothing that will get you arrested. Have a look if you like."

She left nothing to chance and unzipped the bag, rifling through the clothes and personal items it contained. Just a normal travel bag. The woman shrugged and nodded.

Nicholas shut himself in the bathroom and immediately got to work. Extracting items he had bought at the store earlier, he cut his beard with scissors, and then shaved the remaining bristles. After cleaning the basin thoroughly, he pulled the natural red dye from the new carry bag and applied it.

He waited a few minutes, then checked the time. *Thirty minutes exactly.* He slipped the notes under the door and felt the tug as the woman eagerly grabbed them on the other side. Ear pressed to the crack, he listened carefully as she exited the room.

As soon as the cycle was complete, he was able to rinse his hair and dry it with a towel. He had been sure to purchase a towel at the local supermarket as he did not want to leave any tell-tale signs on the hotel equipment. The effect was pleasing. He had gained ten years in the transformation. He spent a few minutes drying his hair with a mini hair dryer purchased for the job and then began to clean up. Nicholas had to ensure that no trace was left of the work he had done in the bathroom.

Once convinced that nothing had been left that would alert the cleaning staff, he packed all his cleaning utilities into a new bag and made his way back to the bedroom. There, he changed into new clothes. He now wore a cheap suit with shiny leather shoes, the only items of clothing he had bothered to keep. He applied the new contact lenses and checked the mirror. His eyes were now a striking emerald colour. The last prop was a wide-brimmed hat. That would hide his new hair-colour from prying eyes.

He hunched his shoulders and affected a slight limp. Once satisfied that it would not alert the security guards, he was happy. He knew where the cameras were and would ensure that they only captured his image from behind. They would never see the flaming red hair and, if the films were examined later, he would look like a middle-aged or elderly gentlemen leaving the hotel. He crammed the items he'd bought into a large briefcase.

Finally, he was ready. Nicholas picked up the brief case and exited the hotel. He limped down the passage at a sedate pace, never once glancing at the cameras. He headed for the lobby where a security guard opened the barred gate for him. The man eyed Nicholas with a disinterested gaze that showed zero recognition. In the dingy light, it was unlikely the man would recall a single detail of his face if ever questioned.

Nicholas glanced across at reception as he passed the lobby camera. It was a casual movement that nobody would question, but one that effectively hid his face from the camera. Once out in the street, he headed for the beach.

There, he found public toilets where he could complete his transformation in peace. He removed his cleaning utensils from the briefcase and stacked them behind the toilet in the cubicle. They would vanish within minutes. The first beggar or street urchin that entered the cubicle would make off with the bounty.

He then removed his jacket and hat. He hung the clothing on the door as he exited. These, too, would disappear in minutes. By the time he left the public bathroom, he looked like a trendy young businessman, typical of the type found on the Atlantic Seaboard. Thus transformed, he headed for a more reputable hotel.

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Nicholas called ahead and booked a suite in the name of one of his subsidiary companies. The firm was well known in Cape Town and no questions were asked. He stopped to have lunch at one of the many restaurants in the area and finally headed for the hotel late that afternoon.

He explained that his luggage was being sent on and would arrive the following day. Then he headed upstairs for his suite. It was bliss to return to a lifestyle he knew. Nicholas first took a long shower and then flopped down on the bed and slept. It was late evening before he awoke. He ordered a toasted chicken and mayonnaise sandwich from room service and then did what he'd desperately wanted to do every waking moment since breaking out of prison several weeks earlier.

He dialled the number into his mobile phone. It rang five times before it was answered.

“Gallagher’s residence.” The voice on the other end of the line rang like angels’ voices in his ears.

“Jessica.” His voice choked with emotion.

“Nicholas!” His wife sobbed with relief. “Thank goodness you’re safe. Where are you?”

“Best I don’t say. Your phones are probably bugged.”

“Nicholas, listen to me. The police have been here day and night. Everyone’s looking for you. I’ve spoken to Jason. He says the best thing you can do is hand yourself over to the police. We can fix this.”

“Jessica, I’ve already handed myself over to the police and look where it got me. Do you know they were trying to kill me in prison?”

“Please, Nicholas. Running won’t solve anything. We can’t live like this. You won’t even be able to come home.”

“How’s Jared?” Nicholas tried to change the subject.

“He’s fine, but he’s also scared. He knows the police are looking for you, Nicholas. Last night he asked me if you were a robber. Please, can’t you end this?”

Nicholas sighed. “That’s what I intend to do, Jessica. Now don’t worry about me. I’m fine.”

“Should I call my father? Maybe he can exert some pressure.”

“He’s all the way over in England. Even he couldn’t put pressure on the South African judicial system. Besides, I think pressure has already been exerted by people far more powerful than your father.”

“Nicholas, you’re scaring me. You’ve never sounded so paranoid.”

“Jessica, you have to believe me.”

“I wish I could, but it’s so outlandish.”

“People are after me, Jessica. There is some powerful group of individuals that has it in for me – I don’t know why. They’re manipulating the press, the police and even the judicial system to destroy me, and I intend to fight back.”

“You know, Nicholas, I’ve read drugs can do this to a person —”

“I’m not on drugs!”

“Please listen to me, Nicholas. We can get you help. Maybe it’s just a chemical imbalance, or a tumour or something. Jason assures me that he can probably get you transferred to a medical facility.”

“You mean a mental institution?”

“It’s not what you think, Nicholas.”

“Do you know what they’ll do to me in there? They’ve probably got doctors who’ll fry my brain with chemicals!”

“Nicholas, are you listening to yourself? This is crazy talk!”

He stopped as he tried to gain control of his breathing. It was chilling to realise that his wife was making sense. “You’re right. I’m sorry. I never meant for any of this to happen. Jessica, I’m going to fix this.”

“Jason said —”

“Forget what Jason said. He has no concept of what’s going on here. You’ll see, Jessica. I’m going to expose these people and get my life back.”

“How do you intend to do that, Nicholas?” He could hear the trepidation in her voice. In all the years of their marriage, this was the first time she had sounded scared of what he might do.

“Never mind. I need you to do something for me, though.”

“What?”

“Get yourself and Jared out of the country. Go to your parents in England or something. Just stay out of harm’s way.”

“Nicholas, we’ll be fine. There are police monitoring the house around the clock – looking for you, by the way. Nobody can hurt us. It’s you I’m worried about.”

“Jessica, have you listened to a word I’ve said? These people aren’t bound by the law. They can have those police removed with a phone call. I can’t do anything until I know that you and Jared are safe. Please listen to me.”

“No, Nicholas.” She suddenly became forceful. “I don’t know what you’re mixed up in, or what’s going on in your head right now, but I am not leaving my home.”

“Jessica, please. Just for a few weeks.”

“It’s not going to happen, so drop it.”

Nicholas recognised the tone in her voice. It was exasperating. She was a stubborn woman when she chose to be. Her independent nature was something he found attractive, but they had bumped heads like this over issues before. Right now, he was no more capable of convincing her to leave than she was of getting him to hand himself over to the police.

He sighed and massaged his temples. “Alright. Just promise me you’ll look after yourself. Keep the doors locked and increase the security guards. And don’t let anyone in the house.”

Her voice softened. “I’ll do that. Now, will you listen to me for a moment?”

“Jessica, you know I love you more than life itself, but I can’t hand myself over to the police. Not right now.”

“Nicholas, you can’t stay on the run forever.”

“I know. But I can sort this out. I’ll prove my innocence and then return home. Trust me.”

“I do trust you, Nicholas. I don’t believe a word of what they’re saying on the news. You couldn’t have done the things they said.”

“What things?” He was suddenly alarmed.

“You haven’t seen the news?” He could hear the relief in her voice. She hadn’t wanted to believe the news bulletin but, until she heard the shock in his own voice, he knew she hadn’t been sure.

Was she that convinced he’d lost his mind? He realised that it wasn’t so far-fetched. Only a few months earlier, when he’d read the documents for the first time, it had sounded crazy. He remembered how only a few weeks ago, he’d thought Decklin Kanabas insane when he’d told him that his life was in danger. In fact, even the minister had considered the plot crazy until he’d seen how the pieces of the puzzle fitted together.

Nicholas knew that, somehow, he had to convince Jessica and get her to leave the country with their son. The thought of their lives being in danger was terrifying.

“No, I haven’t. What are they saying?”

“They said you’re in Cape Town and that you’re leaving a trail of bodies in your wake. They said you killed a fisherman and hijacked a yacht.”

“Don’t believe a word, Jessica. Like I said, they can manipulate the press to suit their own interests. That fisherman was a trained assassin.”

“You were there!” Her voice rose in panic and Nicholas feared she might become hysterical. “Oh, Nicholas.”

“Jessica, listen to me. I didn’t mean to hurt him. He pulled out a gun and I was forced to defend myself. It’s the truth.”

“Nicholas, he was sixty-seven years old,” she wailed. “He’s been a resident of Simon’s Town for forty years. They interviewed his granddaughter, for heaven’s sake! Come home. You need help.”

“No, Jessica. They’re lying. Trust me. I’m going to prove them wrong.”

She calmed her voice, trying desperately to reason with him. “Nicholas, people are dying. Innocent people. Nobody can help you while you stay in hiding like this. I’m afraid of what might happen to you. The police will find you, Nicholas, and in your state there’s no telling

what you might do. Don't give them an excuse to shoot you. Hand yourself over and let's sort this out rationally."

He didn't reply.

"Nicholas? Are you there? I can help you, if you'll only let me. Talk to me, Nicholas, please."

It was a while before he spoke. "I love you Jessica. Talk to you soon."

Nicholas hung up the phone and stared at the television. The screen was blank. A thought occurred to him and he glanced at his watch. The late night news was due to start in a few minutes. Nicholas reached for the remote.

The news began at ten and Nicholas Gallagher found himself the main subject of the headlines. The story was recapped, pretty much as he remembered it. The yachtsman was interviewed, as well as the fisherman's family.

It was his pictures that horrified him most of all, however. Two pictures were shown. The first was a picture of the real Nicholas Gallagher, but the second was a clear shot of him standing on the pier that morning.

With fear that turned his bones to icicles, he realised how well prepared his invisible foes had been that morning. Not only did they have snipers and professional killers, but they had taken photographs of him and published them within a matter of hours. How far did their power reach?

A knock on the door interrupted his thoughts. A waiter arrived with his sandwich. Nicholas quickly paid the man and then attacked the crispy brown slices with delicious creamy filling. The chicken was hickory-smoked, which gave the sandwiches an extra special tang.

As he ate, he thought about what to do next. Cape Town had proved fruitless, but there were other points of contact. The document had mentioned several, including London, Paris and Amsterdam. There had been more, but those three were the ones he felt confident enough with when it came to the protocols for contact.

It would be no use trying to contact his only allies with incorrect protocols, as they would simply disregard him, or worse, treat him as a threat. Nicholas could not afford to alienate the only people who could vindicate him.

The trouble lay not in contacting them – he knew he could do that – but in getting to those countries. Although he had travelled all over Europe, he knew nothing about avoiding the law. Borders would have to be crossed. He would need accommodation and many of the hotels required proof of visas and registration of entry with local authorities before they would take a booking.

Nicholas had already experienced a taste of the power his unseen enemies wielded and had no idea how far their tentacles reached in the countries he would need to travel through. He would have to avoid customs for a start and would need to know what to say if accosted by law enforcement officers.

He needed someone who could find their way around, who knew where to go and what to do in such situations. Nicholas didn't have to think for long. There was only one person who could assist him.

Nicholas' ability to read individuals and choose the best candidate for any position was an essential talent for someone in his position as head of a multi-billion dollar company. Decklin Kanabas had proved his resourcefulness.

Despite the man's priestly appearance, there was more sinister side to the preacher than met the eye. Nicholas was in no doubt. Rev. Kanabas was the man he wanted.

The irony was not lost on Nicholas. He was about to embark on a clandestine, highly illegal, course of action and the best person he could find to help him was a man of the cloth. He made his arrangements quickly. They started with a trip to a photo booth where he acquired some black and white pictures of his newest appearance.

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The following morning, Nicholas made another call to his wife. The conversation was a subdued re-enactment of the previous day's chat and it left Nicholas frustrated. They did, however, reach a compromise. Nicholas agreed to consider handing himself over to the police if his wife would at least consider leaving for England. She said she would think about it and that they could chat again the following day.

After that, he got busy with the day's tasks. Once he had altered his driver's licence and added his new picture, Nicholas ordered a cab and checked out of the hotel. A short while later, he arrived at the station where he proceeded to the Avis counter.

Nicholas kept a wary eye on the policemen that milled about the entrance to the car hire company. There were more than usual, he thought, but ignored this. He entered the reception area and headed for the first available assistant, a young woman with blonde hair and stunning blue eyes. Her smile would not have been out of place on the company's advertising billboards. She was everything that their advertising promised in terms of friendliness and efficiency.

"Could I see your driver's licence please?" She smiled, looking up from her typing as she entered information into the computer system.

Nicholas slid his licence across the counter. The woman glanced at it and began typing furiously again. For a brief moment the smile faded and a shadow fell across her expression. Involuntarily, she glanced up at Nicholas as if searching his eyes for something.

He blinked, having been caught unawares, but her smile suddenly reappeared. "What price range were you looking for?" the woman enquired.

"I'm not particularly fussy. Anything that will get me to Johannesburg, preferably with air-con. You know how hot the *Karoo* can get."

"Of course." She smiled and went back to her typing.

After a minute or so, she stopped. "Would you excuse me for a moment?"

"Sure," Nicholas nodded.

The woman turned and headed through the door to the manager's office. For the first time, he began to feel uncomfortable. He'd rented plenty of cars in his time and this was not usually how things worked. The woman was breaking an established routine and that made him nervous. He glanced over at the police, but they were chatting amongst themselves and paid no attention to him.

The woman was back within a few minutes and began typing furiously once more, with the ever present smile. Presently she said, "Your car will be ready in a few minutes, Mr Carlisle. If you'd like to take a seat?"

"What car am I getting?"

The smile vanished. "I beg your pardon?"

"My car. What type of vehicle is it?" Nicholas smiled, but his eyes bored into her.

"Um." She swallowed. "It's a, umm, Honda – Ballade. Silver Ballade."

She had recovered, but not quickly enough. Nicholas panicked. There was no car and he had given her the best part of ten minutes to alert the authorities. He glanced over at the group of policemen. Even as he gazed across at them, he saw one holding a police radio to his ear. The man listened and then repeated something to his colleagues. All of them turned and gazed across that the car-rental agency. The facade was glass and there was no place to hide. Nicholas turned and bolted for the door.

"Don't move!" the leading officer called. The policemen weren't running. Instead, they had their weapons levelled at him.

Nicholas didn't stop to think. He swung back into the reception room, ducking as several shots were fired. Glass shattered about him as bullets smashed tiny holes in the signage.

The shots ceased as Nicholas came between the police and the assistant. None of them would dare risk hurting a bystander. Sensing his momentary advantage, he launched himself over the counter.

He wasted no time barging through to the manager's office. In fact, the rear of the office was a short passageway with several doors. The one at the end led to a service corridor and Nicholas raced down the passage, passing a bathroom door. At the end, he came to a barred gate that led to a courtyard filled with trash cans. He slammed into it, but came to a sudden halt. The gate was locked.

Nicholas turned and raced back, heading for the bathroom, desperate to find some way of escape. At least, the bathroom door was unlocked.

Shouts echoed from the passage beyond. He stopped briefly, noticing a mop and bucket in the corner. As quickly as he could, he jammed the mop between the adjacent wall and under the door handle. He wasn't a moment too soon. As he turned to look for an exit, he heard someone reach for the door handle. The mop held and the door refused to budge. Moments later, a body slammed against the door.

The panel shuddered in its hinges and the mop creaked under the strain. It would never hold up to the onslaught.

"Stand back. I have a gun," Nicholas yelled at the officers outside. He desperately wished that was true.

There was a scuffling of feet as the officers moved away from the door. A moment later one of them called to him.

"Give yourself up, Mr. Gallagher. There's no way out of there."

Nicholas gazed about the room. A quick examination of the windows showed that they were also barred. There was, however, a loose board that allowed access to the ceiling. He climbed up on one of the toilets and, from there, was able to reach the thin dividers. Once on top of those, he was able to straddle them and reach the loose board. Pushing it aside, he grabbed the edge and swung himself into the ceiling.

The board crashed to the floor but he ignored it, grasping for the roof trusses in order to pull himself up. Once inside, he leaned his head back out and yelled again.

"Don't try to come in here. I'll shoot!"

With that final warning, he began to slowly make his way across the ceiling, using the roof trusses to support his weight. The ceiling was hot and dusty, as well as cramped. He tried to move as quietly as possible, heading away from the police in the hopes that they would not hear him and divine his intentions.

The glow grew dimmer the further he moved from the entrance, where he had opened the board. Even allowing his eyes to grow accustomed to the scant light helped little, as there was barely any illumination to work with at all.

Nicholas crouched, moving from timber to timber, feeling his way across the expansive ceiling. A noise near the far end arrested his attention. It sounded like the low hum of an air conditioner. He felt sure that if he could reach it, there would be a similar entrance to the one he'd used. Maintenance would require easy access to the machine in case it broke.

After what seemed like hours, he reached the machine. He felt his way around, hunting for a loose board that signified an exit point. Finally, he found it. Heaving a sigh of relief, he suppressed the urge to rip it back and breathe in the fresh air below. Instead, he moved it back slightly, forming a crack through which he could peer unobserved. The area below was another bathroom, but it seemed unoccupied.

He risked moving the board back further. Poking his head through the gap, he stared down into the tiny room. He could tell by the elaborate items that lined the basins and neatness of the room that this was a ladies' bathroom.

Once sure that the room was unoccupied, he let himself down through the exit and dropped to the floor. On landing, he froze, listening for any sign of his pursuers. After nearly a minute, he stole across to the door. Opening it a crack, he peered out into the passage beyond. It was dark and paved with rough concrete, similar to the one he'd left the police in on the other side of the building.

The passage reeked of antiseptic. Nicholas entered it and made his way to the exit. This one wasn't locked and he was able to exit into the courtyard outside. The yard was large and littered with trashcans and rubble. The walls were six-foot high and topped with tunnel-like razor wire. There was no way over the fence and the only gate was chained and locked.

Nicholas decided that his best hope was to exit through the gate. He rummaged through the trashcans until he found a thin steel pipe. He then extracted half a brick from amongst the rubble and headed for the gate. All he needed was leverage.

Sticking the pipe through the loop of the lock, he twisted it. Then, holding it fast on one end, he smacked it with the brick on the other. The combined weight of the brick and the leverage of the pipe snapped the lock with surprising ease.

Nicholas was amazed that it had been so easy. He quickly unwrapped the chain from the gate and exited the yard. He was too afraid to risk returning to the station to get a cab. Instead, he walked, finding his way into the city centre as quickly as possible.

There, he found a shopping centre where he took a table at one of the quieter restaurants. Only then did he reach for his phone.

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Decklin Kanabas was in his office, preparing his sermon for the following Sunday, when the phone rang. It was the old mobile phone in which he had installed a new SIM card from a Start-up kit purchased from a street vendor.

Nicholas. He was the only person who had this number. Since the police had found their way to his church office in Parktown it stood to reason that Gallagher's unknown enemies probably knew about him too. Kanabas would not have been surprised to find that his phones, both at the office and the manse, had been tapped.

"Nick. How's it going?"

"Not well, Decklin."

"Tell me."

"They found me. I've no idea how, but they were waiting for me at the Avis offices when I went to hire a car."

Kanabas sighed. "You're becoming predictable, Nicholas. I see they got a picture of you."

"They were waiting for me when I tried to make contact with Willow's lot here in Cape Town."

"The police?"

"Definitely not the police. They had at least three professional assassins. Two on the pier and a sniper in one of the houses on the hill. They must have taken a picture and sent it to the police."

"Then it wouldn't be difficult to track you. Police probably went and waved it around a few of the local car hire agencies. Once somebody recognised you, they would have pulled the name you were using from the computer and flagged it as wanted. Simple."

"Well, what am I supposed to do?"

“Remember, Nicholas, never do the same thing twice. You’ve hired a car once under that name. Don’t do it again. You need to think outside the box to stay ahead of these guys. I assume you haven’t used this phone to call anyone else?”

“Of course I haven’t. I used a different phone to call Jessica the other night.”

“You called your home!” the minister exclaimed in exasperation.

“Don’t worry. I used a burner phone like you taught me and got rid of it immediately.”

Decklin grunted. “That’s something, at least,” he conceded.

“I’m running out of options, Decklin. I can’t use public transport, I can’t hire a vehicle. What am I supposed to do? I need to get back to Johannesburg and we need to talk.”

“About what?” Decklin suddenly felt alarmed.

“I’d rather see you face to face. Just tell me how I can get there.”

He sighed. “Okay. This is what you need to do.”

Decklin ran over the instructions twice to make sure that Nicholas understood.

“Thanks, Decklin. I’ll see you in a couple of days.”

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Nicholas called around until he found a company that manufactured license plates. He made his way there and bought a pair with a fictitious number that he simply made up. He also bought himself some double-sided tape, a screwdriver and pliers. From there, he headed for the nearest beach, as per Decklin’s instructions.

He quietly made his way along the shore until he spotted some surfers out on the water. Nicholas left the beach, heading for the nearest car-park. There, he began to search among the vehicles. He was beginning to despair when he noticed a rust-covered Ford Cortina. The car had a rack for boards and it wasn’t locked.

Decklin had explained that surfers often took the chance of leaving keys in their vehicles rather than under a towel on the beach. They placed undue trust in the parking attendants who watched the vehicles in the hopes of receiving a donation.

Nicholas strolled up to the vehicle and tried the door. It opened and he hopped in. Decklin had told him where to look. He dropped the sunshade slightly, but found no key. He quickly checked the passenger flap and found the key slipped in above it.

Turning, he noticed the inevitable parking attendant approaching. *Just act like you own the vehicle.* Decklin’s words echoed in his head. Nicholas reached into his pocket and withdrew a small silver coin, offering it to the man as he approached. The parking lot attendant actually assisted Nicholas, directing him in an effort to prove his worth and helping him pull out of the parking bay. Nicholas offered a quick thumbs-up as he drove away.

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Cliff Sutherland ended the call on his mobile phone and glanced at his lieutenant.

Kelvin Hughes narrowed his eyes. “What was that all about? Sounded serious.”

Cliff shrugged. “Could be something in it. On the other hand, it could just be some sicko’s idea of a joke.”

“What is it?”

“That was head-office. They say someone called and warned them there’d be an incident at the Gallagher residence tonight.”

Hughes shook his head. “I had this during the World Parks Conference down in Durban a couple of years back. Joker said someone was going to blow up the hotel.”

“Were they serious?”

Hughes grimaced. "Nah! Just some prankster who didn't get a pony when he was a kid. Probably thought it would be funny and that nobody would track him down."

Cliff chuckled. "What did they give him?"

"Six months. Hope this jerk does the same."

Cliff glared through the guard-house window, allowing his gaze to sweep across the breadth of the estate. He sighed and took a sip of his coffee. "He'll do worse if I find him before the police do. Still, better check all the posts and make sure everyone's extra-alert tonight."

Hughes reached for his radio. "Will do, skipper."

Cliff rose and headed for the door. "I'm going to do the rounds. Spot check the guards and see to it they're doing their jobs. Keep an eye on the perimeter cameras. If one of them so much as flickers, I want the dogs loose on it in ten seconds or less."

Hughes laughed. "And I'll keep an eye out for any new 'delivery guys'."

Cliff smiled. "Don't joke. Nine times out of ten, the oldest trick in the book is our undoing. In fact, as of this moment, no vehicle goes through that gate."

Hughes nodded and turned to his control panel. "Locking down as of now. Have fun telling the Ice-Queen she's just been made a prisoner in her own house."

Cliff grimaced. It annoyed him when his staff poked fun at the clients. However, in Jessica Gallagher's case, it was an apt title. Many clients became familiar, or even friendly, with their bodyguards. However, Jessica Gallagher seldom stooped to acknowledge the mere mortals assigned to her protection. "I'll tell her we've had a warning and are locking down. If anyone needs to speak to her, they can phone it in."

Cliff left the guard-house, heading for the perimeter fence. He jogged across the fifteen acre garden and found his first team manning the perimeter fence in the south-east corner. "Delta one nine." He murmured his code and the men lowered their weapons.

"Hey, skipper. What's up? Radio said we're moving to high alert."

Cliff nodded. "Prank call. I want to move you back near the house just in case. Let them try to breach the perimeter fence. They'd still have to take out three cameras and get past a multitude of electronic security devices. I'd prefer to concentrate our manpower as close to the family as possible."

He waited while his men moved in towards the main home and then jogged across to the opposite end of the property. Within twenty minutes all his men had taken up new positions, without any radio contact. Cliff nodded. Anyone listening in would have no idea where his sentries were now placed.

Satisfied with their positions, he headed back to the surveillance room. Three guards remained glued to their monitors while another three sat off to one side, playing a game of cards.

"All okay here?" he asked Hughes.

His lieutenant nodded. "Eyes riveted to the screens and we change shifts every fifteen minutes so that nobody's concentration breaks."

"The gate?"

"Shut down and covered with heavy artillery. Anyone tries to break that barrier tonight and Lenny will put them in orbit."

Cliff nodded. "Well stay awake. We've still got ten hours of this before our shift changes."

"About that —"

Cliff held up his hand. "All taken care of. I've already alerted head office that the first guard I don't recognise in our relief team gets a slug between the eyes. I'm not taking any chances."

Hughes sighed through pursed lips. "I guess that means none of us are going home in the morning."

Cliff nodded. "No personnel changes until further notice."

He left the room again and went to check on the house. A quick perimeter check showed that all the entrances were properly secured and covered by his teams. Cliff extracted his mobile phone and called head-office back. "Home secure and team is on high alert. All well at the residence."

Cliff checked his watch. Eleven thirty-seven. An icy breeze wafted across the man-made lake that dominated the Gallaghers' landscaped gardens. He shrugged his jacket collar up around his ears to ward off the chill.

His watch alarm beeped again at precisely two AM. *Time to check in.* He glanced at the cloudless sky. Only five hours left until the relief arrived. Then he gazed back at the home. All quiet. Cliff reached for his phone to check in with head-office. As he did so, the house erupted in an earth-shattering explosion.

Cliff recoiled in shock. Blinding flames leaped from the downstairs windows. He raised his arm to shield his eyes from the blaze. The heat was palpable and shards of glass fell like rain on the lawn not ten feet from where he stood.

Cliff gaped in horror at the flaming windows on the mansion's ground floor. Then a second blast rocked the other end of the house.

*Impossible!* Cliff rushed towards the home. He didn't waste time pondering how the arsonist had breached his perimeter. Only one thought consumed his being. *Get the family out.*

The house was already in chaos. Flames burst from almost every window on the ground floor. Half his men rushed to form a fire-line while the other half faced outwards, weapons at the ready, to thwart any would-be intruders.

"Get inside, for pity's sake!" Cliff yelled. "The wife and kid are in there."

Two of his men had already begun throwing their weight against the front door. It didn't budge but an alarm started blaring somewhere inside the house. Cliff shook his head at the irony. His own security measures were now working against him. The doors and windows were designed to withstand a serious assault but they had also turned the house into a trap.

"Help!" A distraught voice cut through the blaring alarm and roar of flames. Cliff looked up. Jessica Gallagher screamed from behind her barred bedroom window.

*There must be a way in!* Cliff Sutherland examined barred windows on the ground floor. The entire living area had become an inferno. Then, with a jolt, he saw that the blast had knocked out the bars on one of the living-room windows.

No time to think. He ripped off his coat and used it as a glove to grab hold of the broken bars. Even with his coat's protection, the metal seared his palms. Cliff ignored the pain and bent them wide enough to get inside. Then he dived through the broken window.

The room inside was clouded with dense black smoke and the heat blistered the skin on his cheeks and hands. He covered his face with his jacket and surged through the inferno. Flames licked at his torso, but he suppressed the pain. He staggered through the debris until he found the stairs. Flames licked the banister and smouldered on the landing's carpet. Cliff was stunned at how quickly the fire had spread. It had already reached the second floor.

He rushed up the stairs and veered left. At the end of the passage, he found the main bedroom. "Mrs Gallagher! I'm right outside," he yelled.

"Forget about me." She sounded frantic. "Take my son!" The woman bordered on hysteria.

Cliff twisted the handle and heaved a shoulder against the door. Inside he found Jessica Gallagher crouched by the window, clutching her son in her arms. The boy wailed in terror while his mother held his face to the window so that he could breathe fresh air from outside.

"Mrs Gallagher, there's no way out here. You have to come with me."

"Take my son!" she gestured hysterically towards the window.

"It's alright," he said, gently lifting the boy in his arms.

"This way!" she made a frantic heave against the bars outside the open window.

"I can get you out, but you have to come with me."

That seemed to galvanise her. She turned and stared at him. "Here," he offered her his jacket. "Put this over your face. It'll keep out the smoke. She did as she was told and took his hand.

He pulled her to her feet and pressed the whimpering child's face into his shoulder to protect him from smoke inhalation.

She didn't say a word but held the jacket against her face and headed out to the passage. Cliff felt his chest wrench. In her negligée she looked impossibly beautiful. *Get it together, man. You've got a job to do.* "Come on, son," he whispered, trying to calm the boy.

"Mommy!" the boy wailed, reaching for his mother.

"It's alright!" Cliff tried to comfort the child. "I'm taking you and your mommy out. You have to be brave now. Okay?" He draped a shirt over the boy's head and turned to face the flames once more.

With Jessica Gallagher in tow and her son in his arms, he rushed down the passage heading back to the stairs. At the landing, he halted, aghast. A wall of flame blocked their path and a giant crack ran across the stairs about half-way down. Cliff hesitated, weighing up his chances. They might beat the flames, but if those stairs didn't hold up...

The landing appeared to groan and, a moment later, the stairs gave way. Panic overwhelmed Cliff as his escape route collapsed in an earth-shattering boom of smoke and rubble.

Jessica Gallagher tugged at his arm, as if to head back to the room they had just left.

Cliff shook his head and glanced about while he gained control of his emotion. "This way!" He turned and headed for the other end of the house. He led them through the home's private gym where the flames hadn't reached yet.

The gym featured a banister that overlooked the giant indoor swimming pool below. "This the deep end?" he asked Jessica. She glanced at the water below and then nodded in understanding.

"Good. We'll have to jump. From there, we can make our way back to the living room. The bars were blown out there. It's the only way out." He gazed over the banister. "Think you can do this?"

Jessica Gallagher made no reply. She simply clambered over the banister.

Once on the other side she reached back for her son. "Here. I'll take him."

Cliff handed the boy back to his mother.

She took the child in her arms. "Hold your breath, sweetie, and block your nose like this," she whispered.

*Brave lady.* Cliff hopped over the banister himself. Before he was over, the woman had already plunged into the swimming pool below.

Cliff hit the water a moment later. It was deep, thank goodness. The pool felt abnormally warm, already heated by the blaze. His feet touched bottom and he pushed up. Jessica Gallagher had already reached the edge. She was out of the water before him but came to a halt when she saw the flaming living area.

"What's the matter?" Cliff halted behind her.

She glanced at him, eyes wide with fear. "I can't cross that. I don't have any shoes."

He glanced down at her bare feet. "Give Jared to me."

He took her son in his right arm. Then he hoisted her over his shoulder, fireman-style, and raced through the gauntlet of flames to the broken window. The opening was little more than a distant haze, obscured by billows of smoke. His men were there with ready arms waiting to assist. Cliff passed the boy through first, then Jessica.

The smoke enveloped him and he staggered back, choking on the acrid fumes. He spun around, losing all sense of direction. In his stupor, he bumped a wall. Behind him he heard

another crash. More falling rubble as the mammoth home collapsed under the force of the blaze.

Cliff fell to the floor gasping for breath that wouldn't come. The fumes choked him as surely as a garrotte around his throat. Time lost its meaning. He had no idea how long he lay there. Then he felt hands lift him. They carried him a few paces and stopped. More hands reached for him. A scrape. A bump. *Fresh air!* Cliff gulped in the sweet breath of life. He felt the grass and dew on his face and hands. Another breath – and then he retched.

"You're okay, skipper." Kelvin's voice sounded like a distant echo in his head. *His head!* Cliff's temples pounded like cracked pistons. He rolled onto his back and stared into his lieutenant's face. The man leaned over him with a concerned grin.

Cliff forced a weak smile and tried to sit up. "Are they okay?" he croaked.

Kelvin nodded and helped him to his feet. "They're both fine."

Jessica Gallagher held her son close to her chest and stared at Cliff in concern. The flimsy negligée still clung to her body from the water.

She stepped toward Cliff and smiled. "Thank you, Mr. Sutherland," she whispered. Then she leaned over and put one arm around his neck and kissed his cheek.

And then the moment passed. Jessica stepped back and became the formal mistress he had always known. "Would you please arrange for a car? I'd like to get my son to a hospital and see that he's okay."

Cliff nodded. "Right away, ma'am."

He turned to Kelvin and held his hand out. Kelvin said nothing. He merely handed Cliff a new mobile phone. Some of his men led Jessica away and Cliff gazed after her. Hughes' smirk caught his eye.

Cliff scowled. "What are you grinning at?"

His lieutenant shrugged. "I have to know. What's it like to be kissed by a supermodel?"

Cliff grinned for a moment then shook his head. "Fetch one of the cars. We'd better get them to hospital and have them seen to. In fact, get two extra vehicles. I want some men to accompany us and make sure no *accidents* happen en route to the hospital."

"What about you? That fire didn't make you any sexier."

Cliff shrugged. "All in a day's work. I'll be fine once the blisters heal."



## Chapter 10

Nicholas was exhausted when he reached the rectory in Parktown. After ditching the car at a shopping mall, he'd walked an hour and a half across town to Decklin's home.

Decklin was obviously expecting him. He was at the door in seconds. He raised his eyes at Nicholas' dishevelled appearance. "You don't travel very well, do you? Or has first-class just gone way downhill?"

Nicholas managed a weak smile. "I'm more used to private jets. These economy-class walking shoes just aren't the same."

The minister led him through to the living-room. "Cold pizza is all I've got. Hawaiian or pepperoni. Take your pick."

The offer of food rang like angels' voices in Nicholas' ears. "Both sound great," he sighed and flopped onto the sofa.

"Both it is!" Decklin yelled down the passage, already on his way to the kitchen.

After wolfing down the pizza and a cup of Decklin's dreadful coffee, Nicholas headed for the guest bedroom and was asleep within minutes.

He was an early riser, but found Decklin at the dining-room table eating breakfast when he awoke the following morning. The minister was poring over the morning paper. He was in a sombre mood.

"What's the matter?" Nicholas asked, noting the minister's concern.

"It's your wife." Kanabas slid the newspaper across the table.

Nicholas stared in horror at the picture that dominated the front page. It was an aerial shot of his home, but the structure was nothing more than a smouldering ruin.

"Are they alright?" He snatched at the paper.

"They're okay. Apparently your security guards managed to get them out of the house. They were taken to hospital and treated for smoke inhalation, but they're fine."

"I have to call them." Nicholas rushed through to the bedroom where he found his phone.

He fumbled briefly, dialling the number for his wife's mobile. She picked up almost instantly.

"Jessica!"

"Nicholas." His wife's voice flooded with relief.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

"And Jared?"

"We're both fine. We took up smoking for a few minutes last night, but it didn't work out. We've decided to quit. The doctors agree it was a bad idea."

Nicholas smiled at her weak attempt at humour. "Thank goodness you're safe. What happened last night?"

"I don't know, Nicholas. The police say it was arson. They suspect the perpetrator used napalm or something like that."

Nicholas bristled at the news. "I thought security were monitoring the house!"

"They reckon it was an inside job. Whoever it was knew the security system inside and out, and there was no forced entry. Probably one of the staff."

“Any idea who?”

“The only staff member unaccounted for is O’Toole, the groundsman. He’s missing.”

“Impossible! He’s worked for me for years. He was at Infotec International before I even met you.”

“The police are convinced it was an insider and he’s the only one they haven’t spoken to yet.”

Nicholas shook his head. “I told you, someone’s out to destroy me. Do you believe me now?”

“I’m sorry I doubted you, Nicholas.” She hesitated for a moment, then whispered, “What are we going to do?”

Nicholas swallowed. “Will you take Jared and join your parents in England? I can’t sort things out here unless I know you’re safe.”

She hesitated, but only for a moment. “I’ll go. We can have the jet ready by this afternoon.”

“Good. I’ll call you later, once you’ve arrived.”

He hung up and saw that Decklin Kanabas had followed him through to the bedroom.

“How are they?” Decklin enquired.

“Fine. They’re not hurt, at least. She’s taking our son to her parents in England.”

Decklin nodded. “Good. Now switch off that phone.”

Nicholas frowned in confusion. “What?”

“You can be sure they’re monitoring her phone. They can track you now.”

“They can’t track me. This is a burner phone. The number is untraceable.”

Decklin switched to his patient voice. “You called her on her own phone, so they know what number you used. It won’t be a difficult leap for them to guess who called. Mobile phones work like radios. As long as they’re on, they broadcast a signal to the nearest tower in the network. How do you think the network finds the right phone when someone calls the number?”

Nicholas gasped. “They know which tower I’m closest to.”

“Exactly. And they can probably triangulate and place you to within two city blocks. As long as that phone is on, they have a tracking system which they can follow.”

Nicholas switched the phone off immediately. The priest continued. “Now, what was it you wanted to talk about?”

Nicholas re-told Decklin everything that had happened in Cape Town.

“Sounds like your friends got there first.”

“It would seem so,” Nicholas agreed. “There are other contact points, though, but I’ll need your help.”

Decklin glowered but held his gaze. “What can I do that you can’t?”

“I need to get out of the country. To Europe. I have no idea how to slip through customs, cross borders, or anything like that. I need someone who can find their way around.”

Decklin clenched his jaw. “And what makes you think I can help you?”

“I know you can, Decklin. I’ve watched how you operate. Please. I need your skills.”

The minister averted his gaze. “What skills would those be?”

“Let’s not play games, Decklin. You don’t want to talk about your past, fine. But I need your help. There are three points of contact that I can remember from the document I showed you. London, Paris and Amsterdam. I don’t know how to reach those cities without using a standard airline. I’m moving in circles I’ve never moved in before. You know those circles. You know your way around.”

The minister thought about it for a moment. Finally, he shook his head. “I can’t believe you’re asking me to do this. I could get five years just for helping you, do you know that?”

“You’ve already helped me. This is just —”

“That was different.”

“How!”

“Your life was in immediate danger. Someone had to help. The police certainly weren’t doing anything.”

Nicholas held the minister’s gaze. “My life’s still in danger.”

Decklin scowled and shook his head. “It’s different now. You’re free, and you’re mobile. You could run now and they’d never find you.”

Nicholas snorted. “Oh, please! How long do you think I’d last out there? It’s only a matter of time before the police catch up with me. Then I’ll be right back in prison, where I started. My life expectancy right now is three weeks at best.”

Decklin Kanabas stared at the kitchen table. It was several seconds before he spoke. “Okay. I’ll help you. But only to get out of the country. I’ll hold your hand as far as the airport, or whatever transport we can find. Once you cross the border, you’re on your own. Understand?”

Nicholas heaved a silent sigh of relief. “Thanks, Decklin. You’re a life saver.”

Decklin shook his head. He was still angry. “I’m a minister, do you realise that? My colleagues get called into the mission field to help starving children in Africa. And what do I get? I get to help a wanted felon across international borders in his attempt to flee the law. What kind of calling is that?”

Nicholas grinned. “The Lord works in mysterious ways, my friend.”

Kanabas was not amused. “I’m not convinced this is the Lord. That’s what scares me.”

“Decklin, you know I’m innocent. That’s a good enough start, isn’t it?”

“You don’t even believe in God, do you?”

Nicholas shook his head. “Let’s not go there, Reverend.”

Decklin threw up his hands in despair. “An atheist! Why on earth would God call me to help an atheist evade the law?”

“You offered your assistance before I ever asked, remember that. And you’re the only person who can help me now. Don’t leave me stranded, Decklin. I need you on my side.”

The minister shook his head. Then he waved his hands in surrender and rose from the table. “You want some coffee?”

“What, so you can at least prove to the police that you tried to poison me before you helped me escape?”

Decklin chuckled. “Something like that.”

Nicholas shrugged. “Anything to help you with your alibi.”

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Russ Lambert disembarked from the plane and headed for the arrivals terminal. He didn’t bother with luggage as he had everything he needed in his carry-on. Kevin was waiting for him at domestic arrivals.

“That was a quick trip,” the man grinned.

Lambert rubbed his fatigued eyes. “Looks like Gallagher was too fast for me. And he’s a quick study too. Now he’s apparently learnt to steal vehicles.”

Kevin raised his eyebrows. “You think he’s hired a professional?”

Lambert shrugged. “It’s the only explanation. He didn’t learn these skills surfing the Internet.”

“So how did you trace him back here?”

Lambert frowned, and shook his head. “Another tip-off. Anonymous caller said they’d seen a man fitting his description in Rosebank.”

They reached the vehicle and Kevin hopped into the driver’s seat. “But you don’t believe them.”

Lambert shook his head again. "For one thing, I know he changed his appearance in Cape Town. So the photograph on the news was already obsolete. For another, I know his family was attacked last night. As soon as I heard about it, I made a call and requested all records of any calls made to his wife's mobile phone in the last twelve hours. A call came in this morning – unknown number, sold across the counter on a Pay-as-you-go some time after he escaped from prison. Screams burner phone."

"Gallagher?"

Lambert lifted his eyebrows in acknowledgement. "And the call was placed from somewhere near the Rosebank tower."

Kevin nodded in understanding. "So you think your anonymous tip came from someone with access to those records."

Lambert grimaced and nodded. "I do. Nicholas Gallagher is fighting with some big players – and I'm beginning to wonder if he's as guilty as we've been led to believe."

Kevin glanced at him in astonishment. "You think he's innocent!"

Lambert shrugged. "I don't have any proof yet. It's a hunch." He stared out of the window for several seconds before he continued. "Then again, my hunches usually pay off."

Kevin appeared uneasy. "So I'm guessing you're not headed home for some rest."

Lambert shook his head. "Olivedale Clinic. That's where his wife and son are recovering."

Kevin nodded. "Olivedale it is." He turned left, heading for the highway.

Half an hour later they pulled into the car-park of the private medical clinic. Kevin glanced at his watch. "I'll wait here. Probably better if you go in alone. Less intimidating."

Russ grinned. "You always were a lazy wretch."

He left his colleague in the car and headed inside. At the reception desk he flashed his badge.

"Mrs Gallagher, please."

The agitated nurse frowned and grumbled at length about patient privacy but allowed him into Jessica Gallagher's private ward. Lambert had seen photographs of her in magazines and on billboards, but those pictures paled in comparison to the real thing.

"Inspector." Her smile was radiant and his breath caught in his throat.

She appeared not to have noticed. "Is this about my husband, or about what happened to me last night?"

"Er – your husband." Lambert finally found his voice.

She nodded. "Then I think you'd do better to speak to our lawyer." The words were polite, but firm.

Lambert hesitated. "Ma'am, I think the attack on your home last night may have had something to do with your husband."

Her demeanour suddenly turned hostile. "If you're suggesting that my husband had anything to do with the attack on our home —"

"No, no, no, not at all." *What are you doing!* He berated himself for acting like a schoolboy. He couldn't help himself. He felt some unfathomable desire to please her. "I don't believe he had anything to do with it." He hesitated again. "I'll come clean. I'm the detective that's been assigned to bring him back in. However, my investigations have led me to believe that your husband may have been framed."

Hope flared in her eyes. "You think so?"

He nodded. "I can't tell you why I believe this, but the evidence I've uncovered all seems to point to it."

Her lips twitched in a hopeful smile. "You can prove Nicholas is innocent?"

Lambert smiled, "Maybe. As soon as I'm back at the station, I'll write my report and begin investigating in a new direction. Now I know what to look for, I think I'll find the culprits in due course."

She shook her head and her eyes glistened. "Inspector, I don't know how to thank you."

"Mrs Gallagher, I need your help. Can you think of anyone who might bear a grudge against your husband? Someone powerful – well connected in government and business?"

She blinked, and shrugged. "There could be literally hundreds of people who fit that description. You don't build a company that size from nothing without making a few enemies on the way up."

Lambert nodded. "I'll need a list of names. Anything will help."

"Of course. I'll have his secretary put something together and get it couriered through to your offices later today." She seemed positively buoyant.

Lambert realised that he was probably the first ray of hope she'd seen since her husband's arrest. It felt good to know that he was the source of her happiness. "Here's my card. If you think of anything, call me – day or night. I'm going to the station now. I'll keep you posted with developments."

She beamed at him. "Thank you, inspector. I can't tell you what this means to our family."

Lambert left the ward and headed for his car. He waved at Kevin, still behind the wheel, but the man was looking the other way. It struck Lambert as odd that his colleague would not keep an eye on the hospital's entrance. A glint to Russ Lambert's right caught his attention – sunlight reflecting off a mirror – or a lens. A moment later, a puff of smoke rose above the glint and a flaming shard ripped through his chest.

Lambert lurched back, gasping in agony. Two more slugs tore into his torso. He tried to shout for help, but no words came. He staggered left, and fell to the ground. He gazed at Kevin, still seated behind the driver's seat. The man stared resolutely in the opposite direction.

Behind him, shouts erupted, and then running feet. Already, his vision was beginning to fade. So cold! He'd never believed he could feel so cold. He felt his breath coming in short, sharp gasps. And then his breathing stopped and his world was shrouded in blackness.

His final thought was of Jessica Gallagher. The thought of failing her hurt more than the slugs in his chest – more than death's bony fingers that entwined his soul.

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"Come on. We've got work to do." Decklin motioned to Nicholas as soon as they'd finished breakfast. He headed for his car outside.

Nicholas hopped in the passenger seat. Decklin glanced across from the driver's seat. "How much money do you have on you?"

"A few thousand, why?"

"That should be enough." He drove a few blocks until he found a group of men milling on the side of the road. They were there every day and could be found in most of the city's suburbs; migrant workers, unemployed and looking to earn a day's wage. Generally, they found work as gardeners or helping people move furniture.

The men rushed towards their vehicle, beaming in the hope of being chosen. Decklin glanced over them and selected one who was of a darker complexion than the rest. It indicated that he might be an illegal immigrant from a country further north.

The man jumped in and Decklin left the rest behind them on the street, waiting for the next job prospect to come along.

"What's your name?" Decklin greeted the man.

"James," the man replied.

"Where are you from, James?"

"Zimbabwe."

"No work there?"

*"Eish!"* The man used a typical African expression. Loosely translated, it meant *'oh, boy'*. "There is no work in Zimbabwe. No food. My family is struggling."

"How much do you charge for a day's work?"

The man shrugged. "It's not for me to say. You must say." This was the African way. South Africa's laws concerning minimum wage meant very little to people in his position. He was probably in the country illegally and his family back home were starving. He would take whatever was offered.

"How would you like to earn five hundred rand?"

*"Hau!"* Five hundred."

Decklin nodded. "I need a gun, James."

The excitement on the man's face turned grim. Decklin was asking far more than the man ought to give. On the other hand, five hundred was a sum beyond a migrant worker's wildest dreams.

Decklin let the man consider his options, while he stared out of the window. Finally, the man spoke. "You know the taxi rank?"

The minister nodded. He knew the informal conglomeration of mini bus taxis that served as the main mode of transportation for South Africa's poorer classes. "Show me."

He followed the man's instructions. He parked several blocks away and told James he would meet him back at that point. After the man had left, he turned to Nicholas.

"Drive around the block and wait out of sight. Turn your phone on and wait for my call. If you don't hear from me, go back to the manse. I'll meet you there. I'll only make the purchase if I feel comfortable that our James hasn't called the police."

"And if he has?"

"I'm sure he misunderstood me. I'm a minister. I would never try to buy something like that, not even legally."

Decklin waited until Nicholas turned the corner and the vehicle was out of sight. After a quick glance about, he hid the money under a bush a few feet away, weighing it down with soil so that it wouldn't blow away. He didn't want to be found with five hundred in hard cash if James returned with the police.

The man arrived with a companion about fifteen minutes later. The second man was shorter and more smartly dressed. James nodded at Decklin, but didn't bother to introduce the two. In such transactions, names were generally not required and all three understood this.

"You have something for me?" Decklin enquired carefully.

The second man was wary and glanced about, looking for any watchful eyes that might indicate that this was a trap. "How much do you have?"

"How much do you charge?"

"Two hundred for a hand gun. More for automatics, but they'll take more time."

"You can give me a hand gun now?"

In reply, the man pulled back his jacket to reveal a small Glock 29 10mm auto pistol.

"Do you mind?" Decklin held out his hand.

The man whipped out the weapon and, after checking that it was empty, offered it to Decklin. The minister examined it thoroughly. The gun seemed to be in good working order. He handed it back.

"Just a moment." By now Decklin was convinced that the man was a genuine dealer. He bent down and reached under the bush slowly, so as not to alarm the man.

The gun-dealer stood by nervously with a hand on his belt as Decklin emerged with the money. He relaxed when he saw the cash.

Decklin offered him the two hundred, after dusting it off. The man nodded and gave him the gun without another word, and left. As soon as he was out of sight, Decklin paid James his five hundred and told him he could leave. Then he called Nicholas.

“Okay, come and fetch me. Quick as you can.”

Nicholas arrived in under thirty seconds. “Did you get it?” he asked as Decklin hopped into the passenger seat.

Decklin lifted his coat and showed Nicholas the weapon. Nicholas nodded. There had never been any doubt in his mind. Decklin was the man he needed.

“Head for the city centre,” Decklin said. “There’s still lots to be done.”

Nicholas followed Decklin’s instructions, heading for Hillbrow. They found a parking bay near the main square. The area was a melting pot of people and cultures. Filthy beggars in rags and drug addicts mingled with more affluent business people who worked nearby and were headed for the local bakery to buy their lunch.

The pavements were clogged with street hawkers selling everything from fresh fruit and African crafts to mobile phone start-up kits and jewellery. A man approached Nicholas and offered him a watch. The name proclaimed it as a Rolex, but Nicholas knew better. He shook his head and broke eye contact, leaving the man to find another dupe. They headed purposefully through the square, ignoring the vendors eager to barter their fake or stolen jewellery and sunglasses, and up some stairs at the opposite end of the square. A beggar slumped at the top with his hand outstretched, a travesty of a gatekeeper.

The man’s eyes were glazed as he stared at the two men. “Have you got *twenny* cents?”

Nicholas shrugged and walked past. The man never moved from his spot, simply stared at his next mark, repeating the words mechanically as another pedestrian entered his world.

Nicholas found himself in a new world. It was a surreal place that he would never have believed existed a mere thirty kilometres from his home. It was as if the top of the stairs, where the gatekeeper stood at his post, was an invisible doorway to a universe that operated on different rules.

“Down the rabbit hole,” Nicholas murmured.

A group of boys loitered near the entrance to an alley. They were passing around a small tube of glue and taking turns to inhale the fumes. One of the boys wore a girl’s dress and had plastered his face with heavy makeup, making it plain to any observer how he earned his money. Not one of the boys was more than twelve years old.

“Don’t those children have any place else to go?” Nicholas was incredulous.

“They’re street children,” Decklin replied. “That alley is probably their home. If they have parents, you don’t want to meet them. Abuse and drugs are rife in homes here.”

Another man leaned against the building, not far from the children. His face was etched with deep wrinkles and scars – lines created by the harsh conditions of the world in which he lived. A small blanket covered his legs. The filth it was coated in made it impossible for Nicholas to guess what the cloth’s original colour had been. A bony knee showed through one of many holes in the material. The knee was the same colour as the blanket. The man clutched a brown paper bag in one hand and half a loaf of white bread in the other.

“Is that what I think it is?” Nicholas murmured.

“If you’re thinking methylated spirits filtered through a half-loaf then, yes, it’s exactly what you think. It’s the cheapest form of alcohol and probably the only type he can afford.”

Nicholas shook his head in wonder. He’d heard the stories, and even read about the place, but this was the first time he had come face to face with the reality of life in Hillbrow. “How did you learn about this area?”

Decklin smiled. “Our church runs a soup kitchen not far from here. We meet every Friday and give soup and bread to anyone who wants it.”

“Decklin, I think we should leave here.” Nicholas was becoming nervous. Some of the people in the area, like the wino and the children, looked harmless, but there were others who appeared more dangerous.

Nicholas noticed that, apart from the ever-present prostitutes, there were also young men. These were better dressed, but their eyes spoke volumes about a lifetime of violence that had led them to this world.

Decklin seemed not to hear and kept walking. They hadn't gone many blocks before Nicholas spotted a group of five youths approaching. They all wore similar looking caps and were dressed like American rap artists. He guessed their ages ranged between fifteen and eighteen.

"Decklin, I really think we should leave."

This time the minister replied. "Just stay behind me and keep out of the way." He kept walking.

The gangsters didn't bother to disguise their intent. They approached Decklin who was in front. Within a moment, the group had surrounded them and knives appeared from beneath their clothing.

## Chapter 11

“Just relax,” said the oldest mugger. He held a flick-knife to Decklin Kanabas’ throat and was obviously the gang’s leader.

In a flash, the minister reached up with his right hand. The youth had no time to react and the knife clattered to the floor. Decklin twisted the gangster’s wrist violently, causing such pain that his knees buckled. At the same time, he produced the gun from under his jacket and slammed it into the boy’s throat, just under his chin.

This display of aggression was all the prompting the rest needed and the gang vanished in an instant, scooting up an alley as they raced away, leaving their leader to the mercy of his assailant.

Decklin watched them flee, then he addressed the boy. He spoke in measured tones, deliberately trying to calm him down.

“I don’t want to hurt you either. Understand?”

The youth nodded. His eyes stared fearfully into Decklin’s, never breaking his gaze.

The minister continued. “Good. Actually, I need your help. If you’re prepared to stick around, I can pay you well. How would you like to earn five hundred for half an hour’s work?”

The boy regarded him with suspicion. “What kind of work?”

“I need to find someone.” Decklin pulled the boy to his feet and released him. Now that the youth was talking, he reasoned that he would be less likely to run.

“Have you got the money on you?”

“No, I don’t have the money on me, do you think I’m stupid? Who walks around here with five hundred in cash?”

After thinking about it for a moment, the youth nodded. “Where do you want to go?”

“I need passports, preferably international. About four or five should do it.”

The boy laughed. “Where do you think you’re going to get four or five international passports?”

Decklin shrugged and turned to go. “Then I guess we’ve come to the wrong place.”

“Wait.” Decklin turned back and the boy continued. “Maybe I can help you. What if I get you one or two British passports and the rest South African?”

“It’s a start,” Decklin replied, then motioned to the boy. “Lead the way.”

With the local gangster as their escort, the streets suddenly became safe for the two men. They followed him for several blocks. Finally, he stopped outside a scruffy-looking building. The broken sign above the door had once been a neon light. Now, it was only possible to see the letters during the day. They advertised to local residents that this was a bar called JT’s. The bar was practically empty when they entered, but it still smelled of stale smoke, sweat and beer from the night before.

“Wait here,” the youth instructed them, indicating a wooden table with hard slat benches.

The two men slid into their seats and waited while the boy headed for the bar. After a brief conversation with the barman, the boy returned, joining them at the table. “I called the owner. He’s on his way down.”

Some fifteen minutes later, a rotund man with dark greasy hair joined them at the table. He looked as if his origins had been a mixture of African and Portuguese. Probably from Mozambique, Nicholas guessed.

"You look for passports," the man growled. Nicholas was unable to place the accent. The stubble on his chin indicated that he hadn't shaved for three days, or bathed, for that matter. Even the cigarette stub that dangled from the corner of his mouth failed to disguise the odour that emanated from the sweat-stained shirt clinging to the man's back and biceps.

Decklin nodded. "What have you got?"

"I got South African ID, South African Passport, driver's licence —"

"We're looking for international passports. British, USA, Australian."

The man sighed, rubbing his chin. "I got British – two, but is expensive."

"How much?"

"Five hundred"

"For both?"

"Each."

Decklin considered this. "Is that all you can offer us?"

He shrugged, "I got South African."

Decklin sighed and glanced at Nicholas. Then he turned back to the man. "How much for South African?"

"One hundred."

Decklin grimaced. "I guess that'll have to do. Okay. We'll take two South African and both the British passports. I'll need a professional who can replace the photographs and change the names slightly. Can you help me with that?"

"I'll give you a number. You got money?"

Decklin reached into his jacket and produced one thousand two hundred rand in new notes. The young gangster's avarice when he saw the notes was not lost on Decklin. He waited while the chubby proprietor disappeared, then glanced across at the boy.

"Don't get any ideas, son. You're going to lead us all the way back to the square and my gun is going to be aimed at your spine the whole time. One wrong move and you'll never walk again. On the other hand, if you behave yourself, it'll be the easiest five hundred bucks you ever made."

The man returned with the passports and a piece of paper with a phone number. Decklin carefully paged through each booklet, ensuring that they were genuine. Once satisfied, he handed the man the money and they left.

"Now remember what I said." Decklin shoved the boy ahead of him.

They followed the young man back to the square, passing the gatekeeper en route.

"*Twenny cents?*" whined the man, holding out his hand, fixing each of them with a blank stare as they passed by.

When they were in the square itself, Decklin pulled a wad of fifties from his jacket pocket. He counted out ten and gave them to the gangster. They watched as the boy disappeared up the stairs. Then they headed for the car.

Nicholas drove while Decklin made a call from his mobile phone. He switched on the Bluetooth feature so that Nicholas could hear the conversation through the radio speakers. A gruff voice answered the other end of the line.

"Yes?"

Decklin took a deep breath. "I'm told you do artwork for people."

There was a moment's hesitation. "What sort of artwork do you need?"

"Just some basic portraits. Think you could take a look?"

"I think I could fit you in. How does twelve o'clock sound?"

"Sounds great. Where do you want to meet?"

“Do you know where the university is?” the man asked.

“I’ll find it.”

“Good. At the east end, there’s a café opposite the campus, with some parking bays out front. Inside there’s a cafeteria. Take a table for four. Order the Russian Sausage and chips, they’re good. I’ll find you.”

Decklin and Nicholas did as they’d been instructed. Within fifteen minutes the man arrived. He was dressed like a student and Nicholas doubted whether the man had seen his twenty-first birthday. He had a soft bag slung over his shoulder. It was filled with textbooks.

“Is this what they’re teaching at university now?” Decklin grinned.

The young man smirked. “Hey, a student’s got to make a living somehow. Did you bring the, ah, artwork?”

“Right here.” Decklin slid an envelope across the table. It contained the passports and several photos of Nicholas with different hairstyles and colours.

The student opened it and peered at the contents. “This shouldn’t take long. When do you want them by?”

“How’s tomorrow sound?”

He threw back his head and laughed as he slipped the envelope into his bag. “I’m a genius, not a magician. Four documents will take me at least two days.”

“Two days to slap a couple of photos into the books and change some P’s into B’s?”

“I’ve got to study in between as well, you know. I do this in my spare time.”

“Right, give them back,” Decklin shrugged.

“Excuse me?”

“I asked for a professional, not some two-bit hack. Give them back.”

The man grinned. “How about tomorrow evening?”

“You can do them by then?”

“I’ll make a plan.”

“Will this place be open?”

“No. Call me at five o’clock. I’ll tell you where to meet me.”

“How much will it cost us?”

“Five thousand.”

“What! That’s extortion.”

“Look. This isn’t some two-minute job we’re talking about, okay? Have you seen the visas and stamps on these? On one of these passports, it indicates that you never left South Africa. Would you like to explain that to a customs official?”

Nicholas was impressed. The man had barely glanced at the documents.

Decklin shrugged. “Okay. We’ll talk again tomorrow, but it had better be good.”

“It will be. Call me at five.” The man rose and left them to finish their lunch.

As soon as he was gone, Nicholas glanced at Decklin. “How can you be sure he won’t just take the books straight back to the people we bought them from?”

“He won’t. Our five thousand is worth far more than the money they’d pay him for the passports. Besides, I know who he is now.”

“How’d you manage that?”

Decklin produced a student card from his pocket. “This fell out of his bag.”

Nicholas raised his eyebrows. “Fancy that.”

Decklin grinned. “His name’s not Jeff. It’s Callum and if he doesn’t show tomorrow, I’ll tell him that. Plus I’ll quote his student number. He’ll get this back, along with the five thousand when he shows up with the passports tomorrow night, otherwise it goes with an anonymous letter to the police. That’s our insurance.”

Decklin rose from the table. “Let’s go home.”

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Back at the house, Decklin Kanabas put on the inevitable Bruce Willis movie – Hudson Hawk this time – and flopped down in his Lazy-Boy armchair. Nicholas stayed for most of the movie before disappearing to bed.

He was woken several hours later by the sound of stealthy footsteps in the hallway outside. Must be Decklin, he thought, as he heard the footsteps head up the passage towards the main bedroom. Suddenly, he jolted upright in his bed. The sound of muffled gunshots emanated from the main bedroom.

Nicholas slid from his bed and moved across to the cupboard as quietly as possible. His stomach trembled and his breath came in shaky gasps as the adrenaline began to course through his veins once more. He was not a moment too soon. The door to his bedroom flew open and a gunman fired a volley of rounds into Nicholas' bed.

The man was thrown off balance as he realised his mark was not there. Nicholas launched himself from the right, where he was screened by the cupboard's bulk. He swept aside the gun and managed to throw the man off balance.

His advantage was short-lived, however. The gunman recovered like a cat. He brought his knee up, slamming it like a pylon into Nicholas' solar plexus. All the fight vanished in an instant and Nicholas fell to the floor gasping for breath that refused to come.

The man snatched up his weapon. Nicholas clawed at the assassin's gun hand, but he was hopelessly outclassed. The man caught his hand and Nicholas felt the sharp pain as his wrist was twisted violently behind his back. A knee slammed into his right kidney with a force that caused Nicholas to go limp with pain.

Nicholas groaned. The man twisted his left arm around behind his back. The killer now had both of his arms disabled in some sort of thumb lock behind him, rendering them useless. Then he felt the steel press against his skull.

The expected shot never came. The man grunted and suddenly released Nicholas as he turned to face a new attacker. Nicholas rolled over and saw that Decklin had, somehow, miraculously survived the encounter with the other assassin and rushed down the passage to assist him.

Decklin went straight for his opponent's eyes. The man shrieked in pain and dropped his gun to protect the sensitive organs. Decklin gripped his ears with ferocious power while gouging his thumbs like corkscrews into the man's sockets. He let go as the man brought his hands up to his eyes and silenced his screaming with a short, but powerful, knuckle thrust to the man's windpipe.

Nicholas kicked the gun away as the killer fell in a writhing heap. Decklin rose and put a finger to his lips. "If two were inside, they probably have more guarding the exits."

"What are we going to do?" Nicholas rasped back in a hoarse whisper.

Decklin ignored the question. Instead, he glanced at the assassin. "Is he dead?"

Nicholas bent down and checked the man for a pulse. "No."

"Good." Decklin seemed relieved by this.

He moved through the house quickly, avoiding large windows until he reached the telephone. He made a quick call to the Flying Squad, the country's immediate response unit of the police force, and reported the crime.

"Are you crazy!" Nicholas whispered when he realised what the minister had done. "They'll recognise me."

"Don't worry. We won't be here when they arrive."

The two men waited sixty seconds before they heard the sirens whining in the distance. The police were approaching. Decklin flung the back door open and dived through. He moved low and at an angle in case any gunmen still lurked out there. There was nobody, however.

The assassins had already fled. Nicholas followed and the two men jumped the back wall into the neighbouring yard.

“Wait!” Decklin put a restraining hand on Nicholas’ arm as they landed.

He had barely spoken when a streaking shadow emerged from a large kennel against the wall. The dog didn’t make a sound, which made it even more frightening. Decklin spoke quietly to the animal, affecting a playful tone and went down on one knee to greet it. The dog slowed down and trotted up to him, sniffing and wagging its tail.

“You two know each other?” Nicholas was relieved.

“I’m a friend of the family,” Decklin replied. “But he doesn’t like strangers and he’s dangerous.”

The two men moved through the garden and scaled the wall at the far end where they reached the street at the other end of the block.

“This way.” Decklin bolted down several blocks until they came to a main street. It teemed with restaurants and people. At last, they were able to relax as they mingled with the late-night traffic. Decklin stopped at a twenty-four hour pizzeria, where he ordered two large pepperoni pizzas and a couple of tall, ice-cold colas.

“How can you be hungry at a time like this?”

“We need to blend, Nicholas. The area will be crawling with police, and possibly assassins, for the next hour. They’ll be looking for people who are out of place, who don’t fit in. What they won’t be looking for is a couple of guys enjoying a pizza. We’re off the streets and we blend in now. Nobody’ll find us here. We’ll give it an hour or two, then find a hotel for the night.”

Nicholas nodded in acknowledgement. Once again, Decklin had proved that he was the guide Nicholas needed to lead him through this clandestine world in which he now found himself.

The following morning, Nicholas awoke to the sound of conversation. He looked up and saw Decklin seated on the couch at the far end of their suite. He was on the telephone.

“Hey, Jeff. How are you coming with those documents of ours?”

Decklin waited while listening to the man’s response.

“We have a slight change of plan. I’m going to need a different set of photographs on two of them.” Another pause. “No, the first two are fine. Can you get here a little earlier? Yes, I’ll bring the photos. Okay, meet you at twelve.”

Decklin hung up and gazed across at Nicholas.

Nicholas frowned. “Don’t you ever sleep?”

Decklin had a haunted look about him. He disregarded the question. “It looks like you’ll have me tagging along after all.”

“Meaning?”

“Police I can deal with, but now your faceless friends have found my home. They know I’m involved. I’m no longer safe there. The only option is for me to come with you.”

Nicholas grinned. “What brought this turn around?”

Decklin picked up a copy of the morning paper, rolled it and tossed it across the coffee table. Nicholas grabbed the paper and glanced at the headline. Once again, his face graced the front page. This time, however, the story centred around an attack on the Parktown Anglican church rectory.

The article revealed that, when the police had arrived, the men who had tried to kill them the previous evening had posed as residents and claimed they had been attacked. An ambulance had rushed them to the Johannesburg General hospital where they had vanished after having their injuries attended to.

In the meantime, the police had established that the person in residence was Rev Decklin Kanabas. No picture was available yet, the article asserted, but it mentioned that the minister

was wanted for questioning in connection with the search for Nicholas Gallagher. The journalist quoted a nameless source who stated that police suspected Rev Decklin Kanabas of harbouring a fugitive and that the minister was now a 'person of interest'.

Nicholas looked up as he finished reading the article. "Are you going to contact the police? Tell them your side of the story?"

Decklin shook his head. "I'm not that stupid. The die is cast now. There's no going back."

Nicholas tossed the newspaper onto the coffee table but said nothing. Decklin Kanabas had become a part of the conflict, whether he liked it or not. There was nothing to say.

The minister smiled and shook his head. "I have no idea how I'm going to explain this to Bishop Seath."

At midday, they met the student and part-time counterfeiter at a local coffee shop in Rosebank. Decklin had borrowed some of Nicholas' wigs and false beards. After shaving, he had taken several pictures at a local photo booth and selected some of the best ones which he gave to the man.

Callum glanced at the photographs and raised his eyebrows. "These are good. I can work with them."

"Can you still have these done by tonight?"

The student shook his head. "Not a chance. You'll have to wait until tomorrow."

Decklin nodded. "We'll need something else from you, Callum."

The man raised his eyebrows at the name. "And that is?"

"British pounds. As many as you can get us."

The young man nodded. "Hold on a second." He excused himself as he extracted his mobile phone. They never heard his conversation, as he left the table. When he returned, he nodded. "How does three thousand pounds sound?"

Decklin chuckled. "That depends on how many Rands you want for them."

Callum grinned. "I won't lie to you. You'd get a much better deal at a legitimate *Bureau De Change*, but my friends promise not to ask any awkward questions."

Decklin shrugged. "Then I guess we don't have any choice."

The young man nodded. "I'll bring them tomorrow. I'll need one hundred and eighty thousand rand."

"A hundred and eighty thousand!"

"I told you. These notes don't come cheap, but they're legitimate and they can't be traced."

Nicholas stopped Decklin's next objection. "Don't worry about it. We'll bring the money."

After they left, Decklin rounded on him. "Do you have any idea how much money you've just wasted?"

"Forget it, Decklin. Once we're in London, we can get some more. Unlimited resources, remember?"

"You won't have unlimited resources for long, the way you're —"

"Decklin." Nicholas held up his hand. "Let me worry about the money, okay? You just concentrate on getting us out of the country."

Decklin shook his head and heaved an exasperated sigh. "Extortion. That's what it was. I can't believe you let him bully us like that."

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Cliff Sutherland opened the rear door of the limousine for Jessica Gallagher outside Olivedale Clinic. "Glad to see you're feeling better, ma'am."

"Thank you, Mr. Sutherland." She let her son climb in first, then entered behind him. Cliff glanced once more about the area and then hopped in himself. He was well aware of the fact

that a police officer had been killed outside the building the previous day and was taking no chances.

"I've done as you instructed," he said, once he'd settled into the back seat. "Your plane will be ready at seven this evening. By tomorrow morning, you'll be safe on British soil."

She nodded. "Thank you. I still can't believe that my home is demolished."

Cliff took a deep breath. He felt awful. Her home had been all but destroyed, and on his watch. If she or her son had died, he would never have forgiven himself. "I'm sorry, Mrs Gallagher. I've been in contact with the police, but there's still no word on the culprit."

She sighed and stared out of the window. "They still suspect O'Toole?"

Cliff shrugged. "It had to be someone with access. And, as he's the only person they haven't spoken to —"

Jessica shook her head. "It's not possible. O'Toole has worked with Nicholas since before we were married. He loves Jared. He would never —" her voice trailed off and she gazed out of the window again.

Cliff pursed his lips. "All I know is what the police tell me."

"Can you take me back there?"

He was astonished. "To your house?"

She nodded. "I'd like to see it once more before I leave."

He shrugged. "I guess. But I warn you – it's not pretty."

She nodded. "I understand."

They drove to the house in silence. Once there, she left her son in the limousine with the driver, and headed over to the ruins. Cliff followed several paces behind her. The house was a shell. The roof had caved in and the walls were little more than blackened rubble. Jessica's eyes roved the ruins. Most of the window bars remained intact where the walls hadn't collapsed. Only two windows gaped wide and unprotected. The lounge window, through which they had escaped the blaze, and the main bedroom window from which she and Jared had called for help.

Jessica stared thoughtfully up at the open hole. Then she turned to Cliff. "Looks like you risked your life for nothing, Mr Sutherland. We might have escaped through that window after all."

He forced an awkward grin and glanced away. "Just doing my job, ma'am."

She nodded. "Thank you again. Our family can never repay you for what you've done. But if you ever need anything —"

He bowed his head. "It's been an honour to work for your family."

She turned and headed through the garden, following a path that led along the lake's edge. A small island with a gazebo jutted out of the water, some twenty yards from the shore. The only way to reach it was with a small rowing-boat, moored by the jetty further along the bank. The path led through a mini-forest of fir trees that opened into a glade. Another large structure, built along Victorian lines, stood in the centre of the clearing.

Several cats sunned themselves on the patio outside. "My babies," Jessica crooned and rushed for the closest feline – a large tabby with a mangled ear. She knelt on the verandah and cuddled the animal. Several other cats approached, begging for her attention.

She glanced up at Cliff. "You'll see that they're cared for while we're away?"

He nodded again. "The keeper will be here every day to make sure they're fed. I told the guards to accompany her for security reasons, but there's no reason to refuse her access." He frowned, hesitant to pry, but curiosity overcame caution. "If I may ask, why do you keep so many cats here?"

Jessica smiled, scratching a sleek Siamese under its chin. "My husband's allergic to them. When we were first married, I kept some in the house, but it was impossible. His eyes would

water and his throat would clog up so badly, he was barely able to breathe. So I built them this retreat.”

She played with the Siamese some more. “Over the years their numbers have swelled. But I simply can't bear to part with any of them.” She glanced up at Cliff. “You think I'm odd, don't you?”

Cliff shook his head. “Not at all. My mother's a cat-lover too. Never could turn away a stray. I grew up in a house that never had less than seven cats running around at any one time. Sometimes as many as twelve.”

She pursed her lips before replying. “Then you're one of the few who understand. Nicholas doesn't. But he's a great husband. Never begrudged me my love-affair with these animals. Even if he never understood, he's always been supportive. He struggled through his allergy in silence for the first few months of our marriage, until we built this for them.”

She glanced at her watch. “Well, I'd better not stay here all day. We can head for the hangar. I'll wait in the executive lounge until we're ready to depart.”

Cliff escorted her back to the limousine and, from there, on to Lanseria, Johannesburg's international airport for private air-traffic. After they'd parked the limousine in the Gallaghers' private hangar, he followed Jessica up to the executive lounge and took up his sentry-post at the door.

It would be a few hours before the Lear was ready for its flight and he wanted to be sure that Jessica Gallagher and her son remained safe until they left South African soil. After that, they'd be someone else's responsibility.

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Callum was a true artist. After examining the minutest detail on each of the four passports, Decklin proclaimed them to be worth every penny. He even appeared to be a little mollified at the outlandish price they had to pay for their British Pounds. It took Decklin two days to make the necessary arrangements.

When the two men entered Lanseria International, Johannesburg's preferred airport for light aircraft and private jet charter. Nicholas was barely able to control his breathing.

“Are you sure about this Decklin?” he whispered. “We stand out like a heliograph. Everyone's staring at us!”

“That's the idea,” Decklin's reply was quiet and calm. “Just keep your chin up and the cane out ahead of you. Feel your way forward, like we practised.”

Nicholas took a deep, quivering breath and swept the white cane ahead of him. He closed his eyes, hidden behind dark sunglasses, in an effort to make his performance more authentic, and allowed Decklin to guide him. Terrifying images flashed through his mind. He was a regular at Lanseria and, therefore, knew that the heavy police presence was well beyond normal. They were looking for him and Decklin. It was the only reasonable explanation. What if the disguise didn't hold up? The more he considered it, the less confidence he had in the priest's plan.

“Excuse me, officer.” Decklin's voice penetrated his dark thoughts. Nicholas opened his eyes for a moment and realised his worst fear. Far from avoiding the police, Decklin had led him right into the bear trap. Nicholas now found himself facing no less than five uniformed officials.

“Yes, sir?” one of the police officers stepped towards them. The man was young with short, sandy hair.

“Can you tell me where the departures lounge is – and a check-in counter for that matter? My colleague and I have a flight booked to Botswana and I've never flown by private charter before.”

“The counter is that way, sir,” the policeman gestured. “And you’ll find the departures lounge a little further down the passage.”

“Thank you, officer,” Decklin shuffled uncomfortably. “I don’t suppose I could impose on you further? I need to sort out our luggage but my colleague here would be a lot more comfortable waiting in the lounge. Obvious reasons.”

The police officer smiled, “Not at all, sir. I’ll escort your friend to the lounge and you can meet him there.”

Nicholas tried to swallow but his tongue grated against a parched throat as Decklin handed him over to the enemy. The policeman’s gentle grip felt like a vice on his arm. “This way, sir.”

He desperately wanted to turn his head to see where Decklin had gone but dared not do anything to arouse suspicion. “Thank you, officer,” Nicholas choked out the words.

As they moved towards the lounge, his terror gave way to nervous bemusement. He no longer felt every official’s eye boring into him as he moved. People looked but quickly averted their gaze and went on their way. Officials glanced in his direction but paid little heed to one of their own guiding a blind man through to the departures lounge.

The lounge was largely empty. Nicholas thanked the officer again after the man guided him to a large leather sofa and ensured that he was safely seated.

“I’ll look out for your friend when he’s done sorting out your luggage. Don’t worry. We’ll let him know where you are.”

Nicholas nodded and forced a smile. “I’ll be fine here. Thank you again.”

As soon as the man exited the lounge, Nicholas tugged at his shirt lapels to shift the sea of sweat that now caked his torso. The ordeal had left his nerves jagged and the adrenaline flood made his hands and breath quiver uncontrollably. However, he had to acknowledge the priest’s genius. Decklin had deftly hidden them both in plain sight and navigated Nicholas through a heavy police cordon at one of the most obvious exit points in the country for a man of Nicholas’ means.

It was a good forty minutes before Decklin arrived in the lounge. Far longer than necessary, Nicholas felt sure. The man sat a short distance away from Nicholas but ignored him. The minister only rejoined him when an escort arrived to take them through passport control and on to the hangar where their airplane awaited with a small greeting team and flight-staff.

As Nicholas approached the white Gulfstream G200 private jet, his queasiness welled up once more. They had slipped through the police cordon but his mind replayed endless movies in which the hunters chased down their prey on runways, preventing take-off in the nick of time.

He ascended the steps and boarded the plane with all the trepidation of a death row prisoner making his final journey to the execution chamber. The Gulfstream’s plush leather seats offered little comfort and Nicholas refused the proffered snacks and champagne prior to take-off. He now felt positively nauseous and any sustenance would, likely, result in disaster.

Decklin, on the other hand, had no such qualms. He stretched out on the sofa at the opposite side of the cabin and attacked the food with gusto. At length, he took a sip from his glass and relished the champagne.

“Nice to get a glimpse of your world. I could get used to this,” he raised his glass. “It’s a far cry from economy class on a budget airline, I won’t lie.”

Nicholas shook his head and gazed out of the window to take his mind off his heaving stomach. He searched for the anticipated line of police cars that would arrive to block their exit from the hangar and kept his vigil as the Gulfstream taxied out to the runway, scouring the surrounding hangars and alleys for imagined hunters.

None appeared, however and the Gulfstream surged forward and into the air. Nicholas reached for a handkerchief and mopped his brow. He glanced across at Decklin who eyed him quizzically.

“Do you ever stop worrying about things? How you built and run a multi-national corporation, I’ll never know.”

Nicholas grimaced, “It might surprise you to learn that my day-to-day business decisions don’t normally determine whether I get arrested and live or die before sunset. The stakes right now are a little higher so how about you cut me some slack?”

“Fair enough,” the priest shrugged. “But we’re airborne now. Try to relax a little.”

“We’re still inside South African airspace. The authorities can force us to turn around any time they like,” Nicholas countered.

Decklin sighed and pressed the intercom. He received no reply but an air-hostess appeared in their cabin in a matter of seconds. Nicholas quickly slipped his sunglasses back on as she entered.

“How can I assist, sir?” she enquired, looking at Decklin and Nicholas in turn.

“I’m interested,” Decklin smiled. “Do these in-flight entertainment devices show maps of where we are and pictures of the ground below us?”

“Of course, sir,” the woman smiled. She stepped forward and offered Decklin a quick demonstration on how to use the system.

As soon as the woman left, Nicholas removed his glasses and glowered at Decklin “A grown man, and you can’t figure out how to operate one of those things?”

Decklin grinned, “Of course I can. But having her in here saved me from your incessant whining for —” he glanced at his watch, “— four minutes and thirty-seven seconds.”

Nicholas broke their gaze and glared at his table. A sick-bag taunted him on the otherwise empty surface. He flicked on his own entertainment system and tuned in to the map screen that showed the Gulfstream’s position over Africa. Now that he finally had something to occupy his attention, he stared at the screen in sullen silence, gritting his teeth as the on-screen animated airplane inched its way ever closer to the border line between South Africa and Botswana.

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Despite his fears, the Gulfstream jet crossed the border and exited South African airspace without incident. Nicholas allowed himself to relax a little, although he still felt unable to eat anything. He ordered a bottle of sparkling water in an effort to rehydrate and soothe his churning stomach.

Sleep eluded him on the flight. He tried to watch some of the in-flight movies, but none of them was able to assuage the gnawing pit in his stomach. Would the authorities be waiting for him when he landed? What if his travel documents were flagged and he got apprehended at passport control? The flight became a torrid routine of seat-shuffling and channel-surfing, followed by short periods of cabin-pacing interspersed with numerous trips to the wash-room to splash water on his face in an effort to ease the tension.

Time dragged its heels until, eventually, the sun peeped above the clouds. Its warm rays set the candyfloss landscape ablaze in a pastel kaleidoscope just below the Gulfstream’s wingtips. Nicholas peered down from the airplane window in trepidation, seeking a glimpse of British soil. It was not to be, however, as the cloud-cover formed an impenetrable blanket, obscuring the earth below.

Finally, the Gulfstream began its descent through the cloud-bank. When it emerged, the atmosphere had morphed from the kaleidoscope into a dismal grey. Nicholas caught his first glimpse of the box-like rooftops, dense forest and lush fields surrounding Farnborough

airport. The airfield serviced private jet charters and lighter aircraft in South East England and was a little over an hour outside London.

Nicholas' mouth was dry and his nerves shattered. His ears clicked, adjusting to the change in pressure and when he blinked, his eyelids felt like crusty sandpaper against his corneas.

"You should eat something," Decklin, refreshed from a good night's sleep, leaned across the aisle and offered him a bacon roll.

"No thanks." Nicholas shook his head. The mere thought of food made his stomach heave all over again.

When the plane touched down, Nicholas steeled himself for another trip through hell. Decklin assisted him off the plane, keeping up the charade for the in-flight staff. He kept the glasses on but didn't bother with the cane which he had broken down and slipped into his hand luggage. As soon as they had left the cabin crew behind them, Nicholas removed the glasses and entered the United Kingdom as a rather bleary-eyed traveller.

"Switch to your red book." Decklin flashed his own passport at Nicholas as they headed to passport control.

Nicholas held his breath and flashed his passport, at the uniformed customs official. The man barely acknowledged them. He simply waved Nicholas through along with a handful of other British travellers, returning to their homeland.

Once through, Nicholas blinked and glanced at Decklin.

The man grinned. "Nothing to it."

Nicholas felt his knees go weak with relief. They'd made it! Decklin Kanabas had smuggled him out of South Africa and brought him safely onto British soil.

"You hungry, now?" the minister's eyes twinkled.

"Starving!" Nicholas headed over to the deli and ordered two chicken-mayonnaise sandwiches while Decklin checked at an information booth for directions to the nearest taxi-rank. He'd already finished his first sandwich when Decklin returned.

"Where to now?" Nicholas bit into his second sandwich. It was the best meal he'd ever tasted.

"There's a hotel just outside the airport. A taxi can drop us there. It won't do to have him take us direct to the station. I don't imagine people who travel in private jets would resort to economy rail travel on landing. Might raise suspicion. Once we're at the hotel, we'll grab a coffee, wait an hour or so, then order a different taxi to take us to the station. From there, we'll head through to London Waterloo and find a hotel in the city."

The trip was uneventful. Decklin was being overly cautious but the past few days had taught Nicholas to trust the priest's judgment. When they arrived at their destination, the London sky was grey and a light drizzle splashed his face.

Decklin glanced at him. "Well. Let's find a hotel and then meet these allies of yours."

Nicholas nodded. "Before we do that, I need to call my wife. I have to know if she made it here okay."

Decklin thought about it for a moment, then nodded. "I should probably check in with Bishop Seath too. Better we do it from here than our hotel room. We don't know how far your friends' arms reach yet."

Nicholas frowned. The minister's loyalty to his Bishop seemed odd. However, he knew that Decklin would no sooner talk about that than he would about his past.

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It was a huge relief for Nicholas to learn that Jessica and Jared had arrived safely in London. Jessica was happy to be back with her parents and even relented in her insistence that Nicholas hand himself over to the police.

Once both he and Decklin had completed their calls, they turned their attention to the London cell mentioned in Willow's documents. The major difficulty in making contact was one of anonymity. Nicholas feared that the cell had been reached and already destroyed, just as the Cape Town and Johannesburg ones had been. Without mobile phones, they would be far easier to trace and the contact procedure required them to leave a number.

Decklin solved this problem. He ran his finger through a London hotel guide that he picked up from a WHSmith book store. "Bayswater Royal Hotel. That looks as good as any for our purposes."

They made their way to Bayswater where Decklin waited in a pub across the street from the hotel, while Nicholas entered and checked into the hotel. Once he had settled into his room, he joined Decklin at the pub.

It was warm and smoky, with a thick, dark red carpet and wood-panelling. By the time Nicholas arrived, he found Decklin Kanabas munching his way through a large plate of bangers and mash with mushy peas.

"It's not lunch time yet."

"Sue me." Decklin spoke through a mouthful of mashed potato.

Nicholas grinned and sat down.

Decklin waited while a waitress took Nicholas' order, then said, "What room number are you in?"

"Room two-twenty-five."

"Good. And the one opposite?"

"Two thirty two."

"Got the number?"

Nicholas tossed a matchbox with the Bayswater Royal logo and phone number across the table.

The minister shoved it in his pocket and nodded. "I'll find another hotel for tonight and join you tomorrow. Don't leave your room until I fetch you."

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They finished their lunch and parted ways. While Nicholas headed back to his hotel, Decklin walked several blocks south. There, he found another hotel and checked in for the night. The first thing he did on his arrival was whip out the match box Nicholas had given him.

He quickly placed the call.

A young woman answered the phone. "Bayswater Royal Hotel, how may I help you?"

"I'd like to book a room for tomorrow, please."

"Of course," the receptionist replied. "Your name, sir?"

Decklin had his passport handy. This was the first time he was using his alias and he didn't want to trip over the name when he gave it to her. "Jacob Boxeleigh. I'd appreciate it if you could book me room two thirty-two. It's just that I stayed there last time I was with you."

The woman was surprised. "That is a double, sir. Will you have someone staying with you?"

Decklin was forced to think fast. "No. I like the extra space."

"I'll try, sir," the woman replied. "It has a lovely view."

Decklin didn't agree or disagree. He'd already surprised her once and wasn't about to say anything that might give her cause for questions later. "I'll be arriving tomorrow."

"Hold on a moment."

He waited while the woman checked her bookings. She was back on the line within seconds. "It's available, Mr. Boxeleigh. How long will you be staying with us?"

“About three weeks,” Decklin replied.

“Thank you. We’ll see you tomorrow.”

The following day, he bought himself some luggage and new clothes. Nicholas had arrived with nothing more than a travel bag the previous day and Decklin wanted to look as different as possible. The success of their ruse had to lie in their differences.

He checked in a little after lunch time. As soon as he had dumped his suitcase, he emerged from his room. After checking that the passage was empty, he knocked on Nicholas’ door. Decklin didn’t wait for Nicholas to answer but slipped back into his own room immediately, leaving the door wide open.

He heard Nicholas emerge from his room. A moment later, Nicholas entered Decklin’s room and shut the door behind him.

Nicholas nodded at the second bed. “That’s a boon.”

Decklin nodded and grinned. “Otherwise you’d have been sleeping on the floor. Did anyone see you?”

Nicholas shook his head. “There wasn’t a soul in the passage. I made sure.”

Decklin was relieved. They now had an empty room which they could use as a decoy in case things went horribly wrong while making contact.

Decklin quickly ran over their self-imposed rules again. “From now on, we never cross the passage between rooms. If we need to check the other room, we’ll leave this one, head downstairs on some pretext and then return to that room, or vice versa. We’ll never leave together. If we need to go somewhere, we’ll leave between ten and fifteen minutes apart and then meet up at a designated point.”

Nicholas nodded. “I think we’re ready.”

“Good,” Decklin glared through narrowed eyes. “Go do your stuff.”

Nicholas took the stairs down to reception. He gazed longingly at the elevator as he walked past it but he recalled the minister’s words. *Avoid elevators. They’re traps.* He tipped the concierge ten pounds to place an advertisement in the Daily Mail on his behalf. The number for the hotel was given and Nicholas’ room number would be used. After that, he returned to Decklin’s room.

“Done?” Decklin raised his eyebrows in question.

Nicholas flopped down on a chair. “Now we wait.”



## Chapter 12

Lajé Jaffa leaned on the rail on the ferry deck and gazed out at the Thames River banks. To her left, she could see the London Eye. A shadow moved to her right. She didn't bother to glance across at the man. He took up a post several feet away.

"Hello, Collins," she murmured without glancing in his direction.

"Lajé." The man's voice was soft. He stared out at the water as he spoke.

She waited. Nothing. Eventually, she could bare the silence no longer. "Are you going to tell me why I've been summoned to London, or am I supposed to guess?"

Several seconds passed before the man replied. "They sent me because they thought it best that you hear it from a friend."

She swallowed. This could only mean bad news. She forced herself not to look at him, however, and waited nearly thirty seconds before responding. "That doesn't sound good."

The man took a deep breath. "I'm afraid Manantau Scofield has been killed. I'm sorry. I know how much he meant to you."

It was a blow, and it was all Lajé could do to keep herself from turning to face Collins. She swallowed again. The news left an empty pit in her stomach but, otherwise, she felt strangely unmoved. Would she ever be able to cry again? "How did it happen?" Her voice remained calm and steady.

"The details are sketchy, but we've established from the local newspapers and police that the man involved was arrested – Nicholas Gallagher."

She nodded, almost imperceptibly. How could Manny be dead? The man was larger than life. He'd taught her all there was to know about survival in the world of espionage. There was more though. "You didn't need to call me to London to tell me this. Someone could have got word to me through the cell in Paris."

The man cleared his throat. "We suspect there's a leak here in the organisation."

Her smile was thin. It was inevitable that someone would break. Hypatia had long tentacles. "What's happened?"

"The cells in South Africa have both been destroyed. And Gallagher was involved in both instances."

"And now he's been arrested."

"Wrong. He escaped from prison, then wiped out the Cape Town cell."

*So that's why they summoned me.* "You want me to head for South Africa."

"Wrong again. Our latest sources tell us he's arrived in London and is trying to make contact."

Her brow furrowed slightly. "He has our contact procedures?"

"The procedures he's using are a little out of date, but yes."

"You have no idea how he came by them?"

"There are – several theories. We have to make contact with him, and London wants our best operative on the job. That's why they've called you."

She smiled again. "Manantau was like a father to me. After my sister —" she hesitated, gaining control of her emotion. "It'll be a pleasure to eliminate this man."

Collins hesitated. "There's a catch. We suspect this might cause a problem. HQ doesn't want you to eliminate Gallagher just yet."

The rage boiled in her heart, but she forced herself to remain calm. "Are you out of your mind? The man's destroyed two of our cells already, and now he's threatening our very nerve centre. You want me to let him live?"

"One of the theories," the man paused. "... some of our analysts suspect that Hypatia has framed Gallagher. They think Scofield might have given Gallagher the information willingly and that he's trying to make legitimate contact."

"Impossible! Manny would never have entrusted contact procedures to an outsider. We have policies in place – fail-safes to be used if a cell is taken out. Gallagher is a murderer, and he must be killed."

"Look, I'm only the messenger. Argue with the council, if you want, but don't be under any misapprehension about your orders. The council want Gallagher taken alive." The ferry slowed and headed for the jetty. "I have to go. When the waiter brings your bill, you'll find the address for London's HQ. Read it, then burn it. They're expecting you at 16h00 hours this afternoon. You'll meet with Gallagher in the next seventy-two hours."

The man joined the small crowd already queuing to disembark. Lajé stared out at the water. She had her orders. But sometimes the council asked too much. After everything Hypatia had taken from her – and this Gallagher was one of them. How *could* she let him live?

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The call came two days later. Nicholas made one of his routine visits to the front desk.

"Any messages?" he enquired politely. He usually spent most of the day away from the hotel and swung by the desk on his return.

"Yes, sir," the clerk smiled. He couldn't have been more than twenty.

Nicholas raised his eyebrows. "A reply to my advert?"

The man fetched a slip of paper and handed it to Nicholas. The message was innocuous and had nothing to do with the advert. His friend, Jack, had called to confirm their appointment at *The Mongol*.

"Do you know where this is?" he asked the clerk.

"It's a pub, sir. Over at Charing Cross. Nice place."

"Thanks." Nicholas turned to leave.

"Guess your secretary never got hold of you," the man said cheerfully.

Nicholas jerked his gaze up from the piece of paper. "I'm sorry?"

"Your secretary. She called and said you were in a meeting and might not be coming back to the hotel – I gave her the message. Then she told me to keep the message here in case she missed you."

*Don't panic. Just act as if everything's under control.* "Oh, right. Thanks." Nicholas forced himself to remain calm. He quickly headed up to the room to tell Decklin.

"What on earth are they playing at?" Decklin wondered as Nicholas related the news.

Nicholas' glare bored into the thick woollen carpet of their suite. "There's only one explanation. We're dealing with multiple players here."

Decklin nodded, digesting the idea. "Problem is we don't know who's who. Did your allies place the call, or was it the great unknown foe? This meeting could be our salvation, or our undoing."

Nicholas glanced out the window. A grey drizzle spattered against the double-glazed panes and the dark clouds outside conjured an early twilight. He bit his lip for a moment, considering their options. "We could just skip off now. Never make the meeting."

The minister shook his head. "Where would that leave us?"

"Nowhere," Nicholas sighed. "We'll be running for the rest of our lives." He rose from his chair, suddenly angry. "I'm sick of these people, and I'm sick of hiding from them."

Decklin nodded slowly. "Agreed. But, if we have to face them, I'd rather it was on our terms."

"Look. In Cape Town, I faced them on my own and survived."

"In Cape Town, they were unprepared. They assumed they were dealing with some mollycoddled rich kid who would bend whichever way the wind blew. They didn't expect to run up against a man who would kill their people and hijack a passing yacht."

Nicholas winced. It pained him to be reminded of what he'd done. "Even I didn't think I was capable of that."

"Exactly. They underestimated you and it cost them. You'd better believe they won't make that mistake twice."

"But this time we've got help. Okay, we don't know who's who in the game, but no matter who made which call, one of those parties was not the people who want us dead. Somebody else will be at that pub tonight and that someone is an ally. This time, we know the people we're looking for will be at that meeting. It's worth the risk."

Decklin sighed. "You don't really believe they can kill you."

Nicholas jerked as if Decklin had slapped him. "Where'd that come from?"

"It's a common psychological reaction, Nicholas. When a person survives a particularly traumatic experience – one that's life threatening – they often react with fearless bravado. They begin to think they're immortal in some way and can't be killed."

"That's not what's happening here!"

"Really? You should listen to yourself. If we're going to go into this place, I want to know I'm not walking in with some lunatic who believes he's invulnerable."

Resentment boiled in the pit of Nicholas' stomach. "Would you prefer it if I went by myself?"

"No. You'll need all the help you can get."

The relief was almost palpable. Nicholas grinned. "So we go together."

Decklin's smile was weary. "I'm going to take a shower. Make sure I look good for my funeral. You may want to take this opportunity to make right with God. You may meet Him tonight. Why don't you check in the bedside drawer? I'll bet Gideons still stock hotel rooms here in England."

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The pub wasn't difficult to find. A quick trip on the Underground put them within a few blocks of their destination. The icy blast that struck Nicholas as he emerged from the warmth of the underground was a shock. He pulled his jacket tightly around him to ward off the cold. He was grateful for Decklin's shopping spree two days earlier. The minister certainly thought of everything. He reached into his pocket and extracted the beanie and scarf.

"Put those away," Decklin growled. He stared at the ground as he spoke, hunching his shoulders against the icy wind.

Nicholas glanced at the minister in irritation. "What was the point of bringing them, then?"

"They're our safety-net, in case things go wrong tonight. Keep them in your pocket. I don't want to see them until we need them."

Nicholas shook his head and shoved the items back in his coat pocket. The man obviously had his reasons. Decklin's every action was made with meticulous forethought. It was pointless arguing.

He was relieved when he finally entered the warm smoky atmosphere of *The Mongol*. The pub was dimly lit, with dark wood panelling on the walls. It was unusual. The décor was very English while the cuisine was Mongolian. Queues of people flocked to load their bowls with assorted vegetables, strips of raw meat or fish and a variety of herbs and sauces. A chef grilled the food in front of his patrons, using two long sticks to turn diced beef and assorted vegetables before scraping it into the bowl and handing it back. The savoury aroma permeated the entire restaurant.

A waitress ushered Nicholas and Decklin to a booth. It was one of the few empty tables left. "Can I get you anything to drink?" The waitress's accent was northern.

"I'll have an ale, please," Decklin replied.

Nicholas raised his eyebrows. "Champagne on the flight over. Ale in the pub? I thought you guys didn't drink."

Decklin grimaced. "That's Pentecostals. I told you that before."

Nicholas ordered a lager. He couldn't face the prospect of drinking an insipid warm ale. They'd no sooner placed their orders when Decklin rose from the table and went to look for the bathroom. He was back within minutes.

"They've chosen their rendezvous well." His tone was tense. "The bathroom windows are barred so the only exit is the way we came in. Right now, we're chickens in a coop."

The drinks arrived several minutes later. Nicholas' was a crisp golden colour with a pristine, white head. The glass was frosted with condensation. Decklin's had no head and was the colour of molasses.

"Will you be eating?" the waitress asked.

"Perhaps later," Nicholas replied. "We're waiting for some friends to arrive."

They waited for over half an hour without any sign of their appointment. Finally, the waitress returned. Nicholas waved her away, assuming she simply wanted to replenish their drinks, but she produced a cordless phone instead.

"Call for you, Mr Gallagher."

Nicholas froze. *How did she know his name?* With a gently quivering hand, he reached for the phone.

"Hello?"

"Hello, Nicholas. How's Decklin doing? A long way from his parish, isn't he?"

Nicholas took a deep breath. His enemies had planned the meeting very carefully. The use of first names was deliberately chosen to instil fear. It was the voice, however, that was the most terrifying. It was the same man who had called him in Cape Town.

"How did you find us?"

"We have eyes everywhere. You can't hide from us, Nicholas. I see the minister has already checked the bathroom, so you know there's only one door. There's the kitchen too, of course, but rest assured, we have that covered as well."

"Covered?"

"Snipers, Nicholas. And trust me, they won't miss like they did on the jetty in Simons Town, so don't try anything stupid. We have people inside the pub. If you get up from your table, you're dead. Understand?"

Nicholas decided not to waste time with stupid questions that the man would never answer. "If you're so well prepared, why haven't you killed us already?"

"All good things, to those who wait," the man chuckled at his own joke.

"Really? Why don't you point one of them out to me?"

The voice suddenly became harsh. "Get up from that table and you'll find out."

Nicholas sighed in defeat. "What do you want?"

“We’ll let you know in due course,” The voice relaxed once again. He was back on track and following his script. “Just sit tight and don’t leave your table. It’s the only way you’re leaving that pub alive.”

The man hung up. Nicholas didn’t skip a beat. Without looking at Decklin, he pretended to continue his conversation on the phone.

“Decklin, don’t look at me. They’re watching our every move. Get a waitress’s attention. I need the emergency number for the police.”

Nicholas continued his imaginary conversation while Decklin accosted a passing waitress.

“Do you know the emergency number for the police? You know, England’s equivalent for nine-one-one?”

The waitress was astounded. “Nine, nine, nine. Why?”

Decklin winked at her and grinned. Then he turned to Nicholas. “You owe me five pounds.” He turned back to the waitress. “He insisted it was nine, one, one. Could you get us two more drinks? Ale for me, lager for him.”

Nicholas didn’t even glance at the waitress as she left. Instead, holding the instrument to his ear, he felt his way around the keypad, dialling the number while he continued mouthing syllables into the phone. He hoped desperately that he was convincing enough to any observers.

”Nine, nine, nine, what’s your emergency?”

Nicholas didn’t even wait for her to finish. He affected an Irish accent as he spoke into the phone. “I’m from the IRA, and this is your lucky day. A bomb will go off in a pub called *The Mongol*, at Charing Cross on the Thames River, in exactly ten minutes. You’ve been warned.” He hung up immediately, allowing the woman no time to ask any further questions.

Decklin’s smile was thin. “You might be arrested for butchering the Irish accent, but it was probably convincing enough. Now, I guess we wait for the sirens.”

Nicholas nodded. “Then we bolt while they clear the building.”

They didn’t have to wait for long. Within minutes, Nicholas heard the approaching police vehicles wailing in the distance.

Decklin spoke quietly. “When the time comes, we need to do a quick chameleon act. They saw us enter with jackets and they know our hair colour. That’s what they’ll search for in the crowd. Get your beanie and scarf ready and, when the time comes, shed the jacket. That way we have a better than even chance of giving them the slip when we exit the building.”

The police descended on the pub like a blitzkrieg. Pandemonium erupted. People jumped from their seats and stormed for the door, despite the officers’ efforts to control them.

Decklin and Nicholas rose from their table, carrying their jackets with the scarves and beanies hidden underneath. Nicholas’ eyes scoured the hordes seeking out their hunters. He spotted a likely mark over by the bar. The move was almost imperceptible, but the man glanced furtively in their direction as he rose, reaching for his umbrella.

Nicholas glanced at his watch and spoke quietly to Decklin. “Found one. Nine o’clock. Man with the dark umbrella.”

Decklin appeared not to even glance at the man. His eyes simply swept the room as he rose from the table. “Ten feet to his right,” Decklin replied. “There’s a woman with dark hair who’s been shopping at the same store.”

He was already walking away. Nicholas gazed casually in the woman’s direction. She paid them no attention at all and he was loath to agree with Decklin. However, the umbrellas were identical, he had to admit.

“We’ll steer clear of the umbrellas then, shall we?”

Decklin’s nod was barely perceptible and he never turned around. Nicholas was amazed at how perceptive his companion was. The man didn’t miss a thing. Once again, he wondered where he had learned his talents. Not in theological college, that was certain.

In a move so casual Nicholas nearly missed it, the minister tossed his jacket aside, allowing it to land unnoticed in a booth to his right. He reached up and donned the beanie, pulling the woollen cap over his golden locks, and flipped the scarf across his shoulders as he merged with the panicked crowd. Nicholas followed suit, keeping his head down to hide his face.

Decklin travelled with the crowd hurtling through the pub's doors into the street beyond. He moved like a weathered sailor in the midst of a storm, quietly controlling his own direction in the face of the raging forces about him. The tide of panicked humanity and uniformed officers surged across the street, ducking for cover. Dogs barked and the blinding lights of police vehicles and ambulances assaulted Nicholas' eyes. He followed Decklin's lead across the street and into the shadows.

It was as if they'd simply dissolved in the crowd. Somehow, Decklin constantly managed to be in a place where the police and authorities simply weren't looking.

Once across the street, he turned left, heading back towards the pandemonium. He approached a policeman who was cordoning off the area.

"What's happening in there?" he asked with casual interest.

"Please stand back, sir."

"Why's everyone running out the pub? Was there a shooting inside?"

"Please get behind the cordon, sir," the police officer insisted.

Decklin ducked under the tape, holding it for Nicholas to follow him through. The bobby continued his work, spreading the net as other officers arrived to herd the restaurant's patrons to a place of safety where they could be questioned and make their statements.

By now, a crowd of bystanders had begun to gather. The police were trying to separate the restaurant's patrons from the casual observers, and Nicholas found that he and Decklin had somehow slipped from the one group into the other.

Decklin struck up a conversation with a group of strangers, surmising as to the cause of the ruckus. Nicholas could only gaze in awe. A moment ago, they'd been alone. Now they were part of a large group.

Within minutes, the bystanders began to lose interest in the proceedings and started to drift away, among them the group that Decklin had so quickly befriended. He and Nicholas strolled off with the rest of the group, chatting about the event as they did so. They had walked nearly eight blocks before Decklin bade their new friends farewell and veered off, heading back towards the Underground.

"Well, London was a bust." Decklin's expression was one of disgust. He glanced behind them to see if they were being followed. "What's next?"

"Back to the hotel, I guess."

"Forget the hotel. They'll be watching it now."

"But what about our things?"

"We'll get more things. Right now we need to find another cell before these guys destroy them all – if they haven't done so already. Where are we headed?"

"Paris." Nicholas replied with little confidence. Cape Town had been a disaster. His incident with Willow in Johannesburg gave him some idea of what had happened there. He thought of the documents he'd so readily handed over to the police – now in the hands of Hypatia – and cursed his own stupidity. How could he have allowed this to happen? Johannesburg, Cape Town, London. They'd all been compromised. What would make Paris any different?

Decklin echoed his thoughts. "And if Paris proves futile?"

Nicholas shrugged. "There's still Amsterdam and Rome. After that – I've no idea. Maybe Zurich."

The minister sighed. "We can but try. Things must go our way at some point."

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Lajé Jaffa moved with purpose. She headed past Buckingham Palace and then across the adjoining park, down tree-lined lanes. Gallagher and his friend had proved more elusive than initially anticipated. And she'd had them in sight. If only she'd been allowed to kill them.

She reached the end of the park and turned right, heading into a residential area. She found the block she was looking for, but walked on past it. Nobody had followed her through the park, she was sure of it, but caution was still called for. After doubling back twice, she was satisfied and stopped outside the block of flats.

A uniformed doorman with grey hair and a benign smile opened for her. "Unit number, ma'am?"

"Four twenty, please." Her English had only the slightest trace of an accent, but it would have been difficult, if not impossible, to place.

The residents were expecting her and the doorman pushed the floor number on the elevator and ushered her in. On the fourth floor, she exited the elevator and turned left. The passage had ornate tiles and double glazed windows that offered an extravagant view of the palace.

She stopped outside number four twenty and rang the buzzer. Collins answered the door. His hair was dark brown, laced with grey at the temples, and he wore a charcoal suit. He nodded in greeting.

Inside, five men sat around a mahogany table in what should have been the dining room. The décor was more reminiscent of a boardroom, however. The expressions around the table were grave. At the opposite end of the table, the chairman nodded in greeting. He wasted no time with pleasantries. "We know things went wrong, and we're not looking for excuses or explanations. Just tell us what happened."

Lajé shrugged. "There isn't that much to tell. The police raided the pub shortly after their arrival. I'm sure Gallagher orchestrated it somehow. He received a phone call. I'm guessing someone tipped him off to the fact that we were inside. Then they disappeared. One minute they were there, the next they'd vanished. I checked at the restaurant afterwards and learned they'd left their jackets behind. That explains how they changed their appearance to an extent."

"What it doesn't explain is why they weren't taken with the rest of the restaurant's patrons to make statements at the police station. We have people there who could have helped us bring them in alive."

Lajé shook her head. "I don't think there's any chance of that. I could have eliminated them in the pub, but alive —"

The man to her left scowled. "We've been over this. Your orders were to capture Gallagher alive. I can't help wondering if your personal issues around this matter haven't perhaps clouded your judgement."

"I beg your pardon!" Her tone was sharp.

There was an uneasy shuffling around the table. To the chairman's right, a dour man with a thin wrinkled face spoke. "Lajé, we're concerned. All indications are these men work for Hypatia. In light of what happened to your sister, I can understand that you want revenge, but we need to find out what they know. And to do that, we need to bring them in unharmed. Are you able to do that?"

Lajé shrugged. "If you think otherwise, reassign me. I'm sure there are others who can manage the Gallagher matter."

The chairman cleared his throat. "Come now, people. We're all tense, what with everything that's happened. Nobody questions your abilities, or commitment, Lajé. Just understand our

concern. The longer these men are allowed to move freely, the more dangerous it is for us. Now, where do you expect them to head next?"

"They've already eliminated the cells in South Africa. And now they've made their first attempt on London. Their next stop has to be the continent. I've placed scouts at the airports, the ferries and at the channel tunnel. The second they get there, we'll have them."

"And if they slip by your scouts? How do we find them then?"

"My money's on Paris. That's where I'll be. It doesn't really matter, though. We know their *modus operandi* now. Wherever they head, they'll make contact using the outdated channels of communication. We'll pick them up that way and intercept them. Either way, we'll neutralise them at their next port of call."

"Good. That's what we like to hear. Next time we speak, I want them in our clutches. Understood?"

"Understood," Lajé nodded.

"Thank you for your time. And keep us posted."

The interview was over. Although the chairman hadn't dismissed her, she knew it was time to leave. Lajé rose quietly and followed Collins from the room.

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"She's on her way out." The freckled predator gazed in rapt admiration at Lajé as she left the building. "Shall I take her now?"

"Not yet, Luther. I want the cell. We can leave her for later."

Luther scowled. He'd been watching the woman for days now – and she had a reputation among his peers. How he longed to bring her under his control and show her the true power of Hypatia.

"Stay at their HQ. I want to know who enters and leaves. We'll let you know when we're ready to go in. Are you sure she didn't see you?"

Luther smiled. "She doesn't have a clue. I followed her all the way from Charing Cross. Even sat next to her on the Underground. Her hair smells like honey."

"I'll only warn you once. Don't toy with her. That rose has a deadly thorn."

The man's tone lit a spark of irritation in Luther. "Trained by the great Scofield himself." He found it impossible to hide the sarcasm in his tone. "Are you forgetting I'm the one who killed him? Don't tell me how to do my job. I answer to *Molech*, and nobody else. Understand?"

The man on the other end of the line grunted. "Just keep sight of your objective. When the time comes, you can have the Jaffa woman to do with as you please. Until then, concentrate on the cell in London."

Luther smiled. "I can do that. And I'll hold you to your promise. When the time comes, Lajé Jaffa is mine."

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The young businessman sat on a slatted bench on the sidewalk overlooking the Dover ferries. Every now and then, he offered the Daily Mirror in his lap an idle glance, or poured himself another cup of insipid tea from the flask next to his briefcase. He was far more interested in his surroundings, however, and scrutinised every person passing by. There were others, he knew that. Even though he couldn't see them, they were there. That knowledge made him all the more watchful. There'd be a bonus for the man who spotted the marks first.

He glanced at his watch. It was nearly time. In exactly two minutes, he would rise and move across to another, equally innocuous, vantage point and someone else would take his place on

the bench. He wouldn't look back. It was the rule. None of the men should recognise one another.

Another glance at his watch. Time to move. He quickly packed the newspaper and flask into his briefcase and headed for the ticket office. He found the nearby coffee shop and selected a table from which he could view every passenger arriving for the trip to Calais. This was the worst position of all. Although it offered a close-up view of the marks, it was also the most limited vantage point. Someone else was bound to see the men first.

It was ten minutes in when he noticed the two men stroll into the coffee shop. The descriptions didn't quite match, but then, he'd been told the marks had a penchant for disguise. He listened intently. It was the accents that gave them away. Pure South African. He reached for his mobile phone and placed a call.

A woman answered. "Yes?"

"Dover Ferry. I think I have them."

"You're not sure?"

"I'm relatively sure. The descriptions don't match, but then you said they were adept chameleons."

"Follow them. I want them in sight all the way to Paris. I'll arrange for a shadow in Calais. In the meantime, I'll get someone to take over your position at the Ferry in case you're wrong."

"Understood. I'll call you from France."

"Let me know when you arrive in Calais."

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Nicholas and Decklin made the trip from Dover to Calais without incident. There, they hired a car and made the trip to Paris. It was an hour into the journey that Nicholas noticed Decklin's constant glances in the rear-view mirror.

"Someone following us?"

Decklin shrugged. "It's hard to be sure. Not a single car. But every time the vehicle I suspect is trailing us turns off, another one replaces it. As if a new sentinel is taking up position."

"You're just being paranoid."

Decklin grinned. "I wouldn't be if people weren't always following me."

"Maybe you should let me drive for a while."

"I'm fine."

"You think I can't watch cars?" Nicholas was suddenly defensive.

"I think you're not paranoid enough – and I think you'll keep driving on the wrong side of the road."

Nicholas chuckled. "Suit yourself. How do you propose we get rid of them?"

"There's no rush. Out here it would be almost impossible to lose them anyway. We might shake off the driver, but a helicopter would find us again in five minutes."

Nicholas turned in surprise. "You think they have access to aerial pursuit?"

"The car following us now is a police vehicle. I'd put nothing past these people. They seem to have access to just about anything."

Nicholas was stunned and, for the first time since his escape from prison, felt utterly helpless. "Decklin, they controlled everything in South Africa. The police, the press – even the judicial system. Now you're saying they have the same clout here in France. How do we fight these people?"

The minister sighed. "I don't know, Nicholas. I can tell you this though. We don't have any choice. You and I didn't pick this fight. They did. And they'll keep on at us until we lash

back at them in some way. We have to show them we can hurt them and, man, am I looking forward to that day.”

Nicholas managed a weak grin. “What happened to ‘turn the other cheek’, Reverend?”

“We did that in Jo’burg and they simply struck the other cheek.” He turned to Nicholas with a wicked grin. “It says nothing after that.”

## Chapter 13

They found the station in Paris and handed over the vehicle. A quick trip across town found them at the Hilton hotel.

“Right,” Decklin said. “You know the drill. Nobody should see you enter a booth. Don’t spend more than five minutes in there. And remember to leave your bag behind. Wait for fifteen minutes, then hail a cab. I’ll meet you outside.”

They quickly found the bathrooms where Decklin waited, pretending to wash his hands while Nicholas entered a booth, satisfied that nobody had watched him enter. There, he ripped off the wig and moustache. He reached into his bag and extracted a pair of denims and a clean shirt.

*Remember your jewellery. It’s the little details.* Decklin’s voice echoed in Nicholas’ ears as he changed. He quickly removed the watch and his wedding ring, stuffing them in his pocket.

A new pair of glasses broke the lines, changing the shape of his face, and a handful of hair mousse completed the disguise. The entire process had taken just over five minutes. He emerged and went to wash his hands and face, removing the last remnants of his previous appearance.

Nicholas didn’t even acknowledge Decklin. The minister turned and entered the booth he’d just vacated. Nicholas headed for the lounge. He waited for fifteen minutes, as instructed. Decklin never appeared. At length, Nicholas rose to hail a cab. At the door, a frail catholic priest blocked his way. This afforded Nicholas a moment to glance back across the lobby. He still saw no sign of Decklin.

Out in the street, he hailed a cab. It was only as he entered the vehicle that he noticed the priest again. The man suddenly moved a little faster. Pushing Nicholas over, he forced his way into the cab.

“What the – Decklin!” Nicholas laughed with relief. “I watched you for nearly five minutes crossing that lobby floor and didn’t recognise you.”

The priest grinned. “Holy men are always a great choice for disguise. Somehow, people look right through us.”

The driver took them across town where they found another station and headed for a hotel outside the main city centre. From there, they followed the contact procedures once more.

The call came after three days. Nicholas and Decklin wasted no time. They checked out of the hotel immediately and hunted for more suitable lodgings with easy access to rail travel as well as airports.

“Let’s get to the rendezvous early,” Decklin said. “This time we’re going to be the ones in control.”

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Lajé Jaffa froze in mid-sip of her café latté. She was surprised to see the marks arrive so early. The meeting wasn’t until five o’clock. She reached for her mobile phone.

“Yannick? Get a move on. They’re already here.”

“We’re still twenty minutes away.” The voice at the other end of the line sounded strained. “This traffic is *mer*—” the voice cut off and a horn blasted in the background.

Lajé smiled. “Relax. I’ll keep an eye on them until you get here.”

“Do you want me to call when we arrive?”

“No.” Lajé caught her waiter’s attention and motioned for her bill. The man nodded and headed for the cash register. “Just take up your positions. You know what to do.”

She paid for her coffee and rose to follow Gallagher and his companion. They were good – or one of them was. The shorter, more heavysset one constantly played the game, doing everything in his power to throw her off. He stopped regularly, pretending to window shop while glancing back up the street hunting for shadows. He feigned confusion, changing direction in the hope of flushing out an unwary stalker.

And he constantly changed his pace, or entered shops to observe passers-by through the windows from the inside. He even searched the unlikely places, looking not only directly behind him but watching the crowd across the street.

The men headed for the Seine. They circled the block, then made their way back to the rendezvous. It was all she could do to remain inconspicuous, but she managed to keep them in sight. Once there, she alerted the scouts. They wouldn’t be ready yet, which was as well, since the two men were checking out every vantage point and escape route for possible observers.

After several passes, they entered the Bistro. Both men took a seat and placed an order with the waitress. From there, they took a good long look at the area outside. *Hunting the hunters*. Lajé felt quite safe, observing them from behind several fashionable mannequins in the boutique across the street.

Their waitress returned with two coffees. Gallagher finished his first and rose from the table. He walked up the hill, moving away from the river this time, while employing the same counter moves as his companion had earlier. She wasn’t fooled, however. The real danger remained in the Bistro across the street. Lajé smiled. Gallagher’s companion quietly scanned the street. A decision had to be made. Should she stay here and watch the stocky one, or follow Gallagher to see what he was up to?

*This is clearly important. One waits, while the other heads off, and both are extremely anxious that the one leaving isn’t followed.* Gallagher had to be trailed. But how? The men had laid a trap by entering the Bistro. For the first time, she realised how clever the ruse had been. If she’d remained on the street, they would have spotted her easily from inside the Bistro. On the other hand, by entering a shop, she had cornered herself and was forced to reveal her presence by leaving and following Gallagher.

Gazing down the street, she saw a small group of people heading in the same direction as Gallagher. She quickly snatched a blouse from its shelf and paid for it at the checkout. Then, with her purchase in hand, she exited the boutique and turned towards the river, the opposite direction to Gallagher.

She suppressed the temptation to glance either up the street after Gallagher, or in the direction of the Bistro. She didn’t need to look at the Bistro to know that the stocky man’s eyes were following her every move.

The moment the Bistro was out of sight, Lajé crossed the street. She dropped the packet with the blouse into a waste bin and then shed her heavy jacket, tossing it onto a nearby bench. Without breaking her stride, she gathered her long dark locks and pinned them into a simple bun, changing her appearance quickly, but effectively.

Now she was moving in the same direction as Gallagher. She walked right past the Bistro, risking a glance at the second mark while he still had his back to her. The man still patiently scrutinized every person passing by. She walked right by him, but didn’t dare look back. She would not give him the privilege of seeing her face. From behind, she would be

unrecognisable. Without the jacket or shopping bag, and with her hair tied back, he would never realise she was the same person from the boutique.

Gallagher was far ahead and she would have to make a move to catch up. As quickly as possible, but without doing anything to rouse suspicion, she began to close the gap. The man walked for nearly ten minutes before stopping at a public urinal to relieve himself. Lajé waited, gazing at the assorted necklaces and rings in the nearest jewellery store.

Presently, she looked up. She was shocked to see Gallagher coming back towards her. She had no choice. She would have to walk right by him. She kept her head down as he approached and moved past him without a glance. Then she crossed the busy street and turned around, following him once again from the opposite side.

At this point panic began to set in. What had she missed? Had the men spotted her earlier? She cursed her own stupidity. Why hadn't she stayed with the other? She knew he was the more dangerous of the two. If anything was going to happen, surely he would be the one to do it. Suddenly, she was convinced that Gallagher's trip had been a ruse to tear her away from the scene.

What had his friend been up to while she'd been away?

Lajé decided to forget about Gallagher. She suddenly increased her pace, walking briskly back towards the Bistro. She passed Gallagher on the opposite side of the street, but didn't bother to look back. He would hardly be checking ahead of him for a tail, anyway.

She remained tense all the way back to the Bistro. As she approached, she glanced at the table where she had last seen Gallagher's companion. As expected, it was unoccupied. Quickly, she scanned the crowd on the opposite side of the street.

She caught a glimpse of the man just as he turned the corner near the river. Her heart missed a beat. Lajé couldn't believe her luck. She exulted and moved to follow him. He had a long lead but, if she was lucky, she would reach the corner before he disappeared. There was no time for caution. She ran, crossing the street at the first opportunity. When she reached the corner, she searched for the dark black jacket and beanie. She spotted the man crossing the street at the other end of the block.

He was moving quickly now, not even bothering to check for a tail. *Arrogant*. That was his mistake. It would cost him dearly. Lajé knew what had to be done. She felt inside her handbag and withdrew a tiny syringe. The needle was still capped. It would remain so until called for. Her instructions were clear. London wanted to take Gallagher alive. Even if she eliminated this one, she could still deliver Gallagher and keep the council happy. This man had almost eluded her. She refused to give him another chance.

Gallagher was out of sight for the time being, but he was Yannick's responsibility now. Without his friend, Gallagher would be taken soon enough. The scouts could keep an eye on him for the time being. Lajé continued, closing the gap on her prey. The man turned a corner several blocks further along. Lajé was no longer concerned. She was now close enough to keep him in sight.

Increasing her pace, she reached the corner just in time to see the man enter a bar further up the street. She hesitated outside. It was a seedy-looking establishment. The door-frame was covered in grime and torn pieces of old advertisements lined the walls on both sides. After a moment's hesitation, she entered. The smell rose to greet her well ahead of the several seconds it took her eyes to adjust to the dim interior. It was a wall of stale sweat and beer.

She zoned in on the mark who was headed for a far corner with no light. He took one of the few remaining empty seats and sat with his back to the door. *Stupid*. One should always choose a position that afforded the maximum visibility while offering the greatest cover. The moment had arrived. It was time to eliminate the threat. These men had already come too far and knew too much. First the threat. Then she'd return for Gallagher.

With a slight flick of her thumb, she removed the cap on the syringe needle. She was careful. *Micotil*, an antibiotic for cattle, was deadly to humans. Even a small dose would be fatal. The man would feel a slight prick. He'd become dizzy and nauseous, and finally collapse. After that, death would come in minutes. Even if he got to hospital, it wouldn't help. There was no known antidote for the drug.

Lajé moved forward, ignoring the drunken cat-calls from the men near the entrance. She only had eyes for her mark. Slowly, she approached the man. Her stealth was almost instinctive. He would never see it coming. He turned to summon a waitress when Lajé was only a few feet from him. She froze. Suddenly horror engulfed her. *A trap!* Who was this man? Where was the other?

She clutched the syringe with white knuckles and considered her predicament. This was the wrong person. Had the mark swapped clothes with this man earlier, or had she simply made a mistake? No. There was no mistake. These clothes were identical to those Gallagher's companion had worn earlier. They must have switched.

She'd walked right into the lion's jaws. Was it too late to escape? Lajé quickly turned to leave the bar, only to find her way barred by a gigantic Frenchman.

"Can I buy you a drink, *mon chérie*?"

The man's noxious breath billowed in her face. "No, thank you," she replied politely and tried to step around him. There were hoots and guffaws from his companions. The man blocked her path. She frowned and tried to step to her left but the man refused to take the hint.

The Frenchman reached out and caught her by the arm, then pulled her back roughly. His smile was more sinister now. Lajé's eyes flashed in anger. She didn't wait for him to speak. Instead, she smiled sweetly while reaching for his middle finger.

"Why don't we go back to your place?" Her murmur was enticing, but loud enough for his companions to hear. A chorus of cheers and whistles erupted from the group. At the same moment, she wrenched the man's middle finger, twisting it around to the back of his wrist. Dropping her voice to a whisper, she added, "One wrong move and I'll snap your finger like a twig."

The man gasped in agony. Lajé spun him gently towards the door, guiding his arm behind his back. They left the bar amidst cat-calls from the man's friends. Once outside, she turned right, heading back towards the river. She refused to let the man go until she was sure she was out of danger. When they turned the corner, she spoke again for the first time.

"No means no. Understand?" She twisted his finger again, gently toying with the inflamed joint. The man gasped again, nodding in understanding.

"Good," she continued. "Now, perhaps, you'll think twice in future before accosting women in bars."

As a final farewell, she wrenched once more. There was a howl of pain and the joint snapped. She didn't let go immediately, choosing to prolong the agony by gently twisting the broken finger this way and that.

Finally, she let the man go. He collapsed on the pavement in a torrent of curses, nursing his injured hand. Lajé turned away and headed back for the rendezvous.

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Nicholas approached the restaurant close enough to check whether Decklin was there. He wasn't. That was no surprise. He had said he wouldn't be there. Checking left and right for anyone following him, he quickly crossed the street, heading for a block of flats on the opposite side.

Reaching inside his pocket, he removed an old credit card, hoping desperately that it would work the same way it had back at the hotel. Decklin had kept him practising all night. The lock looked similar, but he was nervous.

There was no need. The card pushed back the latch easily and the door swung open. Nicholas glanced at the credit card. It truly does open doors, he thought with a wry smile. The operation was so smooth that he hadn't even woken the security guard behind the desk. Nicholas quickly moved through the lobby and found the stairs at the opposite end. He headed up, thankful for the rubber soled shoes Decklin had picked out for him back in London.

At the top floor, Nicholas repeated the process with the credit card, opening the door that led to the roof. From there he commanded a perfect view of the restaurant below, as well as the Seine and all the way up the road he'd taken to throw the woman off their scent earlier.

Then he watched. *Don't show yourself until I get back.* Those had been Decklin's words. The idea was to flush out their stalkers and hopefully take one. Risky, but Nicholas knew it was the only way they'd ever learn anything. He'd given up any hope of actually making contact with his allies through this process. If he was lucky, he'd live long enough to learn who was trying to kill him and why.

Twenty minutes passed. The traffic on the street was far thinner below and it was easy to pick out individuals in the waning light. There were very few loiterers, as far as he could tell. A uniformed policeman wandered up and down the river bank, walking his beat. He was Nicholas' main suspect. *Never trust a man in uniform.* Decklin's words echoed in his head. He remembered how easily Decklin had deceived him in the priest's outfit back at the Hilton hotel across town.

His eyes moved left. Two lovers walked hand in hand along the banks of the Seine. Nicholas watched them for a while until they finally entered a building across the street. His eyes wandered back to the policeman, and then across to an elderly gentleman hobbling along the river bank. The man stopped at a park bench. He drew a plastic packet and spent a few minutes tossing the contents to a flock of ducks near the water's edge. Once it was empty, he returned the packet to his pocket and began to read a newspaper. The pages fluttered in the light breeze and the ducks squabbled over the scraps of bread in the water. Nicholas' eyes were still on the elderly man when he felt an icy blade press quietly against his neck.

Nicholas froze. How was this possible! Decklin had been certain nobody but the woman was following them. Not a soul had entered the building below. That was certain. Part of the reason they'd chosen this particular position was that the slight L-shape of the building gave him a clear view of the doors below. Nobody could enter or leave without being observed.

"Turn around. Slowly." The accent was foreign, but the voice had a ring of professionalism that Nicholas found unmistakeable. He'd heard voices like that in many a boardroom negotiation. It was the timbre of someone in complete control. This man would not be flustered. Every move would be cool and calculated, and nothing Nicholas did would surprise him.

Nicholas did as he was told. When he turned, he was shocked for the second time. The second person on the roof was the woman with the mousy brown hair that he'd seen entering the building opposite with her lover earlier. At least he now knew who held the knife to his neck. The woman had a gun and she looked as competent as the man behind him sounded. He was in the hands of professionals now.

"Where is your friend?" The man nudged Nicholas as he tied his arms behind him.

Nicholas remained silent. He didn't know, but he refused to tell them that. The woman's gaze bored into Nicholas as she searched his eyes for some clue. Finally she shrugged.

"It doesn't matter," she said, looking directly at Nicholas. "We can pick him up later. He won't get far."

Her accent was definitely French. A thousand thoughts flitted through Nicholas' head, powered by adrenaline. Where were they taking him? The couple edged him back down the stairs, then took the elevator to the basement. From there, they made their way to a storeroom. The woman reached under a shelf against the wall and pulled at a hidden lever. The panel swung back, revealing a hidden door.

The passage beyond was as dark as Sheol. The woman extracted a flashlight and pointed the beam at the ground ahead of him. All the while, the man kept the knife pressed against Nicholas' larynx. At the far end, they opened a door leading into a similar storeroom. The woman exited first, checking that the coast was clear before inviting her companion to join her.

"I wondered how you managed to enter the building," Nicholas murmured.

"It's an old passage. One of many dug by the Resistance during the war," the woman answered.

"What do you want with me?" Nicholas ventured.

The knife pressed slightly harder against his throat. "We want you to keep quiet and to do as you're told." The man's voice was menacing.

The woman stepped forward and held her gun to Nicholas' head, while her companion shed his jacket and placed it over Nicholas' shoulders to hide the fact that his hands were tied behind his back. He also fastened the button second from the top to prevent Nicholas from shrugging it off.

Once that was done, he transferred the knife to Nicholas' back. "I can kill you just as easily from here as I can by slitting your throat, so don't try anything," the man growled in Nicholas' ear. "When we get to the road, there will be a car waiting for us. You will get in, or we will leave your body to cool on the pavement. Understand?"

Outside, the icy breeze felt like shards of glass, slicing through the jacket that hung over Nicholas' shoulders. His breath came in trembling gasps. What could he do? He agonised over the question, but the sharp point of the blade against his back instilled caution.

Nicholas gazed towards the river, looking for some means of redemption. The policeman was still walking his beat, but he was facing the wrong way. *If only I could make eye contact.*

"This way." His captor shoved him towards a battered Citroën. Patches of rust showed through the faded blue paint, but the engine sounded quiet enough. Although there was a driver, Nicholas could barely make out his hunched form through the dust-coated windows.

He followed his instructions, but his eyes remained riveted on the policeman's back. The man was beginning to turn. *Just a few seconds.* As the man turned, Nicholas held his gaze, silently willing the law-man to look at him. Their eyes met and there was a flash of recognition.

"*Vous, là! Arrêt,*" the man called. Nicholas didn't understand the words, but his captors clearly did.

In their moment of distraction, Nicholas lunged, shoving the man into his female accomplice. As he did so, he saw a weapon appear in the police officer's hand. Before he had a chance to fire, however, there were three deafening blasts just behind Nicholas' shoulder. The policeman crumpled in mid-stride, clutching his chest. He fell face-down and his back erupted in scarlet.

Nicholas turned and gaped in horror at the man behind him. Where the gun had come from was a mystery. The kidnapper rose from his knees and turned to face Nicholas. Events were quickly falling into place – like a puzzle. The policeman had recognised him. The man hadn't even glanced at Nicholas' kidnappers. Had his captor just saved his life?

"Get in." The voice was urgent, but the hostility seemed to have vanished. The woman was already in the front passenger seat.

Nicholas hesitated. He had to escape – or did he? Before he had made up his mind, he heard a footstep.

“*Pour notre mère,*” there was a quiet menace in the words that emanated from no more than six feet away.

Nicholas turned and jolted in shock. The voice had sounded young, but the face was aged. It was the duck-feeder who had read his newspaper on the park bench earlier. The paper was no longer there. Instead, Nicholas gazed down the barrel of a 357 Magnum.

His captor moved first. The man levelled his weapon and dived between Nicholas and the old man. Both guns fired simultaneously. The old man gasped and folded, and Nicholas’ captor crashed to the ground. Nicholas heard the gasping breath of his would-be killer. Enraged, he lunged at the man.

“Who —” He stopped in mid-sentence. The man was no more than fifteen. All the lines and wrinkles were nothing more than makeup. The dyed hair, the stoop, the baggy clothes; they were all an ingenious disguise.

“Who are you?” Nicholas asked.

The boy simply chuckled. A thin, crimson line trickled from the corner of his mouth. “You work for Princeton. You’ll learn nothing from me.”

Nicholas stared helplessly into the assassin’s eyes. The boy’s breathing became shallower and then his eyes glazed over. Finally, the breathing stopped.

It was then that Nicholas heard the rasping breath to his left. He turned to look at his kidnapper. The man reached out suddenly and grasped his arm. He tried to pull away, but the vice-like grip drew him closer.

“You must – must – tell her.” The words were uttered in broken whispers. “Must tell her.”

“Tell her what?”

“When she comes for you.”

“Who!”

“Tell her – Yannick saw your innocence.”

“What are you talking about? Who is Princeton?”

“They kill – *pour notre mère*. Who is not ... not against us ... is for us.”

Nicholas felt bewildered. “I don’t understand.”

“Tell her. This sentence... will save your life.”

The Citroën’s engine roared. Nicholas spun to look at the vehicle. The woman was inside. She seemed to be beckoning him. Panic suddenly overwhelmed him. He rose and ran, rushing away from the Seine. He raced like a whippet for several blocks before he finally came to his senses. What would people think? This was no way to melt in a crowd.

Gasping for breath, he glanced about wildly. There was a shopping mall across the street. It looked old from the outside, but the signage was modern. Nicholas clenched his jaw in determination. He could disappear there. He negotiated the inevitable traffic jam and entered the building on the opposite sidewalk. His hands were still tied. He’d simply have to live with the inconvenience. There was no way to untie them.

Nicholas forced himself to remain calm and ambled through the mall, emerging on the other side as a composed businessman. With the jacket still hung over his shoulders, his tied hands would hardly be noticed by a casual observer. It was a long way back to the hotel but, once there, Decklin would assist him.

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Lajé arrived back at the rendezvous. Her step faltered for a moment as she gazed upon the pandemonium outside the restaurant. Police were everywhere and reams of bright tape cordoned off the pavement outside. Uniformed officers and police photographers in plain

clothes pored over the blood-stained pavement, photographing the crime scene with the inevitable chalk marks. *Who had been killed?* She pushed her way between an army of press to get a better view of the scene. Two sets of chalk marks. Gallagher and his companion? There was another cordon on the other side of the street, near the river. Who had fallen there?

She had to contact her superiors. Lajé dreaded informing them of yet another failure. Who were these men? Her superiors had said they might be unwitting amateurs, yet they acted like professionals. Cape Town, London, now Paris. Three meetings that she knew of – and a trail of bodies. Bodies of professional killers.

It didn't make sense. These men were systematically wiping out investigative cells in every country they entered. Had Gallagher and his companion gone rogue? Was the Hypatia Conglomerate killing it its own? Or were they the decoys, used to flush out the Interpol cells while leaving others to wipe them out?

No matter. Gallagher and his companion were somehow involved – wittingly or not. They were a danger and they had to be stopped. She needed to convince the council in London. Lajé continued along the banks of the Seine, hunting for a secluded sidewalk café. Her eyes flitted back and forth. Somewhere out there, Gallagher's companion was watching her. She could feel his eyes trailing her every step. No matter. When he revealed himself, she would eliminate him. She found a coffee shop about eight blocks further up.

Once inside, she drew a mobile phone from her handbag and placed a call to London. Nearly thirty seconds passed. Lajé frowned. They never took this long to answer their phone. Maybe she'd dialled a wrong number. She disconnected and tried again. Another thirty seconds. She was about to hang up when someone picked up the receiver at the other end.

There was no greeting. Just a deep, rasping breathing on the other end of the line.

"Hello?" Lajé was confused. "Is this –?" She stopped herself. *Never give out that number – not to anyone.* "Vixen One here. Have I come through to the right number?"

"Vixen One." She could almost hear the relief in the man's voice.

"Collins! Can I speak with the director?"

"He's dead." The man on the other end of the line coughed. "They're all dead."

"What happened! Is this you, Collins?"

"London – HQ compromised. Assassins. Killed them all. In our own headquarters."

"What about you? You've survived."

"No." Another pause as the man struggled for breath. "Too late for me now. I – could barely reach the phone."

The words sent a chill down Lajé's spine. She decided not to waste time with stupid questions. "Is there another contact in London?" Her voice was calm, hiding the rage she felt.

"No more contacts. London's been – compromised." The man paused to catch his breath. "Kill them, Vixen One. As many as you can. Then run. Hide. We've lost. Nothing will stop them now."

Lajé leaned forward in her seat. "Collins, I need the contact protocols. Other cities! Give me a name, a number – something."

There was silence. Lajé couldn't be sure, but she thought she'd heard a bump. Maybe the man had dropped the phone.

"Hello?" She waited, but there was no response. She listened intently, but no more sound emanated from the other end of the line.

Finally Lajé hung up. The man was dead. London HQ was destroyed. Those people had been her family for the past five years. They had taken her in, trained her. Helped heal the pain of her past. They had given her a reason to continue living, when she could think of no reason. Now they were gone.

She didn't know who was directly responsible, but she would find out. At least she knew where to begin. Gallagher and his friend would not escape this time. She would find them

and, when she did, she would break them. They would tell her all they knew and, when they were done, she would destroy them.

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Decklin strolled along the banks of the Seine, on the opposite side of the street. The woman was good, but the switch had shaken her badly. And the thug she'd exited the bar with had occupied her attention for too long. She'd become shoddy. He found her easy to tail.

All that was left now was to follow her. See who she met with. If he could get her alone long enough to extract the information he needed, the Paris rendezvous would not have been in vain. The thought sickened him, but she left him with little choice.

How had it come to this? Decklin swallowed. He'd sworn he would never return to this life. But Nicholas' enemies had forced his hand. Where would it end? The memories tormented him. Soon the nightmares would return.

He shook his head in an effort to clear his thoughts. *Focus*. The woman had picked up her pace. Decklin did the same. What would he do when he took her? What if she wouldn't talk? Of course she wouldn't talk. Would he have the stomach to break her silence? *Please, God, don't let me go back to that place*.

He already felt it. How quickly the old man revived, making the last ten years nothing more than a sham. Reverend Decklin Kanabas. What a joke! All it took was one tiny spark and he found himself returning to his old ways like a dog to its vomit.

The woman stopped. Decklin halted too. He followed her gaze, and what he saw caused the blood in his veins to turn cold. A police cordon – and bodies. At least two sets of chalk-marks decorated the Paris sidewalk. He glanced back at the woman.

The shock of seeing those marks had galvanised her. She was already on the move. Only, now she was sharper and more difficult to follow. Decklin kept pace with her for a few blocks. Then she turned a corner and vanished.

He glanced about. Should he try to locate her? No. That's just what she'd want him to do. She'd be on the lookout for a tail now and any attempt to follow her would only reveal his own presence. Better to run. That was the agreement. If anything went wrong, he and Nicholas would meet back at their hotel.

What if Nicholas hadn't made it? No matter. That couldn't be helped. Decklin continued on foot for three blocks. Then he hailed a taxi. Once he was sure nobody was following him, he allowed himself to relax a little. Perhaps Nicholas was already back at the hotel. *If not?*

He'd call the Bishop. Bishop Seath was the only living person who knew who he truly was. And his weekly calls to the Bishop were the only thing that kept him sane. It was strange. Bishop Seath was one of the most annoying individuals Decklin had ever met. The man seldom had a good word to say about him and constantly made his feelings known through his secretary or other underlings. And yet, in this predicament, Seath had been nothing but understanding.

Decklin disembarked four blocks away from the hotel and walked. If Nicholas wasn't there – well, he'd wait as long as he could. And if the man didn't arrive – he would do what he had always done. Run.

Decklin waited for nearly an hour and a half. His constant pacing was broken by cautious peeks out of the window from behind closed drapes. He cursed his conscience that made him break his own rules. He should have left already.

The door rattled and Decklin whirled about, expecting some unknown foe to dive through it. Nicholas stumbled into the room.

"Where have you been!" Decklin demanded.

"Not now, Decklin. Just get my hands untied," Nicholas panted.

He strode through to the bedroom and flopped face-down on the bed. Decklin struggled with the ropes for a minute, then gave up. He quickly fetched a pocket knife and sawed through the harsh strands.

Finally, the bonds snapped free and Nicholas groaned in relief. "Thank you," he murmured. Then he stood up and headed for the mini-bar.

Decklin glanced at the closed door. "What happened back there?"

Nicholas didn't answer at once. He opened the fridge and gulped down a full bottle of spring-water. After washing his hands, he returned to the room. "They got me. I got away. And I learned enough to make me more confused than ever."

He glanced about the room and noticed for the first time that all Decklin's belongings were packed. "Going somewhere?"

The minister averted his gaze. "I thought they'd taken you. I had to look out for my own skin. I suggest you pack too. They probably know where we are."

"They're dead."

Decklin glared at Nicholas. "You killed them?"

Nicholas shook his head. He went to the bar and fetched another mineral water. "There was a shootout. One of my captors took a bullet in the chest but not before he killed the two shooters." He hesitated for a moment and shook his head. "It's a funny thing but – I think the kidnapper saved my life."

Decklin raised his eyebrows. "Why would he do that?"

Nicholas shrugged. "I don't know. He said the strangest thing. *Who is not against us is for us*. Then he said to repeat this sentence – that it would save my life."

Decklin frowned for a moment. "Those words are a biblical reference. From one of the Gospels."

"Any idea why a known kidnapper and killer would quote from the Bible?"

Decklin shook his head. "All I know is we'd better get out of Paris. Our enemies know we're here. And now that the rendezvous was a bust, there's no reason to stay."

"The police will be looking for us as well. One of the dead men was an officer with the *Sureté*."

Decklin sighed. "Great. I guess we can look forward to another fifteen minutes of fame, with our faces all over the news again."

"All the more reason to get away from the city."

"They'll be watching for us, you know. Every station, every bus depot."

Nicholas grabbed his carry-all and began packing. "You'll find a way out. That's why I approached you."

Decklin nodded bitterly. "Yeah, you sure saw through me. Get your things. We need to get away from this hotel. Then I need to make a phone call."

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It had just grown dark outside when the blonde woman entered the hotel. She was a stunner and Francois impulsively straightened his jacket and pulled his shoulders back. She was not the type of client that usually frequented the establishment.

"Hello, Francois." The woman smiled.

She'd read the name from the tag on his lapel, but his heart leaped. What mattered was that she'd taken the trouble to do so.

"How can I help, *madame*?"

"You have a resident here – Garrick Curshaw. I'm his secretary and I have some urgent information for him." She waved a folder. "He has a business meeting this evening and it's imperative that I get these documents to him."

“I’m afraid *monsieur* Curshaw and his associate have already checked out. You missed them by a few minutes.”

The woman looked crestfallen. Francois felt for her. “Perhaps you can catch them before their meeting,” he suggested.

“Of course. Thank you, Francois.” Her smile was forced, he could tell, and it failed to hide her disappointment.

Francois couldn’t help but feel concern for this damsel. He so wanted to help her. “Can you not call your boss on his mobile phone?”

Her smile was sad and she shook her head. “I wish I could but he just got a new phone and forgot to activate international roaming. I know they were meeting at a restaurant, but they never told me which one. They were waiting to hear from their client. After that they leave and I won’t be able to contact them until they call me from their destination. It’ll be too late then. I don’t even know which hotel they’re headed to.”

Francois only thought about it for a moment. He could help. It meant bending the rules a little but the woman was clearly distressed. “They did mention the name of a hotel. *Alpen-Rösli*. If that helps.”

Her face flooded with relief. “Thank you, Francois. That helps a lot. I’ll tell them what a great help you were when I see them.”

Francois beamed with pleasure at earning the gratitude of such a beauty. His eyes remained glued to her figure all the way out of the lobby and into the street, until she turned the corner and disappeared.



## Chapter 14

The street was dark. It reflected Lajé's mood. *Alpen-Rösli*. That would be Zurich – or perhaps Munich. There were cells in both those cities, but she had no way of contacting them now that her connection in London had been destroyed. She would need to scour the papers and look for anything that resembled the codes she knew. It wouldn't be easy and it would be dangerous. The cells would be extra-cautious and extremely suspicious of strangers. It was understandable under the circumstances. They had an unseen enemy. One who knew their every move and was systematically destroying them one by one.

Something bothered her, though. Gallagher and the minister were far from stupid. They'd proved to be ingenious and were good at covering their tracks. Why now, after all the brilliance they'd displayed, would they be so careless as to drop a clue to their destination within earshot of a desk clerk who would almost certainly be questioned by the police, or their hunters, within an hour of their leaving?

It didn't make sense. Unless – she was becoming more convinced by the second that it had been a subtle ruse. A carefully contrived act of stupidity, designed to throw their hunters off the scent. The longer she hunted them, the more respect she grew for her prey. Whose idea had it been? The minister. It had to be him. Gallagher was brilliant in his own way, but the minister was the truly devious mind.

She'd made her decision. There was no way they were headed for Zurich. Where, then? Munich, Berlin? The hotel name was distinctly German. There might actually be such a hotel in those cities. Probably not Berlin. That left Rome and Amsterdam as the most likely candidates, but Amsterdam was closer.

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A tranquil hush embalmed the old stone church. Despite a constant flow of tourists, the awed silence remained a permanent fixture. Sunlight filtered through the stain-glass windows on the South side of the building, transforming the beams into a kaleidoscope.

Rev Vance Mickleton adjusted the white collar on his neckband shirt. After a moment, he glanced at his watch. He lingered for another two minutes before heading for the crypt.

The steps leading to the underground room were narrow and the room itself was cramped with a low ceiling and whitewashed walls. Dim electric lighting gave the room a certain ambience, but it was stark.

Vance was barely able to suppress the knot that formed in his stomach amidst the confined environs. He shuddered as he took a seat on one of the narrow shelves carved out of the crypt's walls. *Why here of all places?* He knew why. It was ideal, as the room was isolated and impossible to reach without alerting anyone inside.

Steps echoed in the room, proving the point. Vance glanced at his watch again. Luther was on time.

There was a hesitation, followed by the sound of the door closing. Vance shuddered once more. They were now completely shut in. The steps resumed and a young man appeared. He was dressed in the robes of an Anglican priest.

*"Pour notre mère, for our mother."* Vance greeted the man.

*"Pour notre mère."*

Vance relaxed slightly. "Nice outfit. Where did you find it?"

"Costume shop." Luther's voice was little more than a whisper. He didn't smile, or offer any greeting. He merely took a seat next to Vance.

Vance eyed the man. He looked so young – so innocent. It didn't seem possible that this was the legendary *Son of Molech*. The boyish features and dark freckles seemed out of place in a killer with such a reputation.

Luther stared at the floor, making it impossible to read his eyes. "Your instructions were to give me information, Reverend, not to search my soul."

Vance stiffened. "Sorry. Force of habit. Part of my profession, I suppose."

The man didn't look up. "The information."

*Still no smile or eye contact.* "Are you sure we won't be interrupted?"

"I placed a 'No Entry' sign on the door outside before I closed it."

Vance nodded. "Very well. The mark has proved more resourceful than we suspected. He's survived encounters in Cape Town, London and Paris. We've lost some men in the process. The Organisation now feels more drastic measures are called for."

Luther's jaw-muscle twitched for a moment. "They should have listened and allowed me to stay in Johannesburg from the beginning."

"On what seemed like a routine elimination? Gallagher was a businessman – no more. A few notes in the right hands should have taken care of him before he ever stood trial."

"And now they want me to take care of him – a mere businessman?" the voice hissed like a serpent's pit.

Vance cleared his throat to ease the tension. "The situation's changed. He's learned to kill, slip across borders undetected. He's gained access to false passports and he's getting close to the Interpol units."

Luther glanced up for the first time. "My sources led me to believe those units distrusted him – that they believed he was part of the Organisation."

"Paris changed all that. He very nearly reached them. In fact, they tried to rescue him from our assassins. We killed one of the operatives, but two others escaped. He's getting better with each new contact; it's only a matter of time before he eludes us completely."

The man nodded and stared at the floor once more. "Who's on the case?"

"We're not sure. The operatives were unknown, but the job had all the signs of belonging to Lajé Jaffa."

The corners of the assassin's mouth twitched in the beginnings of a smile. "I saw her in London. Followed her to their headquarters several days ago. Any idea where Gallagher is headed next?"

"Amsterdam."

"You're sure of this?"

"The priest is keeping us informed. He's got someone very close to Gallagher."

"Police been alerted?"

"Yes. They've been well briefed. If they see the suspect, they've been given a number to call. As far as they're concerned it's an Interpol case. From there you take over."

"And the woman?"

"One of our informants spotted her at Schiphol Airport in The Netherlands. That's her last known location."

The man nodded. "Then she's headed for Amsterdam. That's where I'll find her."

Luther didn't bother to acknowledge Vance with a greeting. He merely rose and headed up the steps. Vance watched him leave. He forced himself to wait five minutes before he rose and exited the crypt.

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Lajé Jaffa arrived in Amsterdam and made her way to the Dörfling Hotel. Once there, she purchased a copy of every newspaper she could find and scoured the personals. It was Thursday when she finally saw the advert, written in Dutch. The codes made sense. They were similar to the London codes and immediately stood out to her trained eye.

The number happened to be that of her own hotel. She headed down to the desk. The clerk was young and impressionable and she quickly deduced that the men had registered under assumed names. A quick trip to the room proved they had never stayed there. They'd be calling in for messages.

She called the hotel in reply to the advert and tried to arrange a meeting, but the desk was firm. Their instructions were to take a message. The men would call back. After several attempts, Lajé was left with little choice. She would have to leave a number or risk losing them altogether.

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"We've got a number!" Decklin's face was triumphant.

Nicholas smiled. "Your bluff worked. Finally, the hunters have revealed themselves."

Decklin winked. "Well, I've done my bit. Time for you to do yours."

"That's the easy part. Where's the nearest internet café?"

The café was small, but it would serve their purposes. Nicholas adjusted his false moustache slightly. Hopefully the security cameras would reveal little about their identity. He took a seat at an empty work-station and logged on.

"What are you doing now?" Decklin leaned over his shoulder.

"Scanning available IP addresses. Every computer linked from Amsterdam's Telecom's company to the outside world broadcasts one. Once I've got a list, I can try to find one with lax —" Nicholas stopped.

"What is it?"

Nicholas grinned. "We're in. Want to place any overseas calls? They're free."

"Funny. Let's just get the number and get out of here."

"Relax. They don't even know we're there yet."

"You can tell?"

"Right now, I've accessed some low-level clerk's computer. The guy's currently working on it and doesn't have a clue."

"How do you get to the main computer?"

Nicholas frowned. "Give me a minute, okay? These things take time. Do you want me to alert them?"

"Sorry."

Several minutes later, Nicholas sighed. He leaned back and looked at Decklin. "Got a pen handy?"

He glanced back at the address displayed on the screen with a smug grin. Decklin scribbled frantically behind him. Five minutes later, they exited the shop.

Decklin waved the piece of paper in his hand, "Now all we need is a map of the city."

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They rented a houseboat moored on the banks of the Amstel River. It offered a magnificent view of the Amstel Inter-Continental Hotel. More importantly, it afforded them a perfect view of the upmarket residential block from which the call had been placed the previous day. Decklin gazed quietly from behind the blinds, keeping a close watch on the people entering and leaving the building.

“Any activity on the phone?”

Nicholas glanced at his laptop’s monitor and shook his head.

“You sure it’s not broken?”

Nicholas smiled. “I modified a spyware application and placed it on the Telecom company’s mainframe. Every call she makes appears on this monitor. Trust me, she’s not calling anyone we don’t know about.”

“And you’re sure they can’t trace the messages to us?”

“No possible way. *If* they find the spyware I put on their network, and *if* they can trace it, they’ll trace it to a web server in London. From there, they may be able to trace the account, but it’s a dummy record with a false address, registered under a fictitious name. Since we’re connecting remotely, from a mobile phone, there’s no way they could pinpoint our position.”

Decklin was not easily convinced. “Could you find us?”

“It would take me weeks.”

“Then so can they.” The minister nodded, as if glad he’d been proved right, and gazed out of the window.

“Like I said, it would take me weeks. We’ll be gone long before then. Why don’t you stop worrying and keep an eye on the building?”

“She’s done nothing for three days. No calls, no visitors. What’s she up to?”

“Probably waiting for our call.”

Decklin snorted. “If we were stupid enough. The moment we call, she’ll have a trace on the line – probably some sort of triangulation system to pin-point our whereabouts if we use a mobile phone. The police will be all over us before we could hang up the receiver.”

“Wait!” Nicholas straightened in his chair. “She’s on the line.”

Decklin turned from the window. Nicholas noted the anticipation in the minister’s eyes.

“How long before we get the file?”

“Give it a few minutes. As she speaks, the application will rip the audio and record it to a wave file. Once the file’s compressed, it will send, but it might take several minutes before the email comes through.”

Nicholas rose from his seat and headed for the galley. “Coffee?”

“I’ll make it.”

“Not a chance. I’ve tasted your coffee.”

Decklin winced. “I can’t help it if I’m the only person who knows how to brew the stuff properly.”

“Just keep an eye on the building. She might have finished her call by now and she could leave before we get the file.”

Decklin turned back to the blinds while Nicholas finished boiling the kettle. By the time he returned, and settled down in his seat, the email had arrived. Nicholas eagerly opened the attachment and the two men listened to the conversation.

Decklin frowned “Dutch. Can you make head or tail of it?”

“Hold on.” Nicholas opened a Text To Speech application and ran the audio file through it. Within a few seconds, the text appeared on-screen.

“So, you can’t speak Dutch but you can *read* it?” Decklin’s voice dripped sarcasm.

Nicholas disregarded him. "Watch and learn, my son." He quickly copied the text, then opened Google Translate and pasted the text in there. A moment later, the English translation appeared.

"Just a pizza delivery." Nicholas snorted in disgust.

Decklin nodded in approval. "My kind of gal."

Nicholas rose from his seat in exasperation. "So we wait."

The minister shook his head. "I say we move. We've been watching the building closely for three days now. If anyone was out there looking for us we'd have seen them by now."

"How do you plan to get in?"

Decklin grinned. "Watch and learn, my son."

It was nearly forty-five minutes before the pizza-delivery van arrived. Nicholas followed Decklin's lead. They exited the boat, heading for the building on the opposite side of the street.

They arrived at the entrance just behind the delivery boy.

"Number fifty-seven!" Decklin exclaimed.

"You know her?" The youngster smiled.

"Old friends," Decklin explained and pushed the door as the security buzzer sounded, opening the lock. "Do us a favour. She doesn't know we're coming. How much was this pizza?"

"Eight Euros."

"Here. Let me pay for them and I'll deliver them to her door. I'll slip you an extra five as a tip."

The boy beamed and handed Nicholas the pizzas while Decklin rifled through his wallet for the right coins.

"Thanks. Stay down here in the lobby for five minutes, just in case she's looking out the window for you. I don't want her to suspect a thing." Decklin winked and the lad grinned. The boy was a willing conspirator in the joke.

Nicholas and Decklin headed for the elevator and made their way to the fifth floor. The unit was third on the left. Decklin knocked. Someone moved inside. Nicholas heard a bump.

"Who is it?" the woman called.

"Pizza delivery," Decklin replied.

The lock clicked and the door swung back. Before the woman had a chance to open the door properly, Decklin rammed his shoulder into it. The woman shrieked and sprawled backwards on the floor.

Nicholas dived around the minister and pinned her left arm to the floor while Decklin grabbed the other.

"Stop that screaming!" The minister placed his hand against her throat and pressed gently, choking off the scream. "Good. Now be quiet, and I'll let you breathe."

Nicholas stared into the woman's eyes. She was in her mid-thirties, slim, with hazel eyes. He didn't recognise her, but that mattered little. Her breathing came in short fearful gasps and her eyes switched frantically between the two men.

"What do you want from me?" she asked.

Neither of them had a chance to answer. There was a blur of movement and Decklin somersaulted forward. Nicholas turned to face the unexpected attack. All he saw was a dark brown, knee-length jacket and a leather boot.

The boot's heel jarred against his jaw with a crack. He felt surprisingly little pain, but the shock and force of the blow were overwhelming. His head snapped back and his spine arched under the blow. Nicholas hit the floor just as Decklin began to rise. The man flung himself at the woman, but she was too quick. In a lithe movement, she side-stepped and struck with her knee.

The minister's head snapped back and, before he was able to react, the woman dropped to her haunches and drove her fist into his throat. Decklin collapsed in a spluttering ball of agony, choking for breath. Nicholas was in a daze. The world seemed blurry and movement seemed to slow down.

*Get her. Must subdue her.* These were the only thoughts he could muster, but his own movements were even slower than Decklin's. He barely managed to struggle to his knees before the woman jumped over her companion and landed yet another blow on his jaw with her boot.

He sprawled backwards on the floor. By the time he managed to raise himself, the woman had drawn a small handgun and had levelled it at his head.

She nodded towards Decklin who was still gasping for air. "Take your friend over to the sofa. Move!" Then she turned to the woman who had answered the door. "Did they hurt you, Marlize?"

The second woman shook her head as she rose from the floor. "I'll live. They surprised me, that's all."

"Good. I'll see that the money's wired to your account in the usual way. You'd better make yourself scarce now."

The woman nodded and fled, slamming the door behind her.

Nicholas glared at their captor from the sofa. This one, he recognised. She was the same woman who had followed them in Paris – the same one they'd seen in London at the restaurant. The hair colour had changed, but her features were unmistakeable. She was a striking woman. Under different circumstances, Nicholas would have called her beautiful.

There was no beauty in her now, however.

"On your knees – both of you." Her voice was low and calm.

"Who are you?" No reply. "What have we done to you?" Nicholas felt bewildered.

She twitched the gun-barrel slightly. "On your knees."

He knew what that meant. South Africa was a country rife with vehicle hijackings and violent crime. This was an execution-style killing that he'd read about all too often in the local newspapers. This woman was going to kill them and he didn't even know why.

She didn't say anything more. She didn't even gloat in her victory. Just a simple instruction and a bullet in the back of the head.

"Why didn't you use the gun from the beginning?" Decklin's throat was red and swollen and his voice sounded like that of an old man.

"You still had my friend. I needed to separate you first to avoid a hostage situation. Turn around and get on your knees."

Nicholas glanced across at his friend. The minister's eyes narrowed in some sort of calculation. He'd seen that look in his friend's eyes several times before. Even when all hope was lost, Decklin Kanabas would find the one path to freedom. He stared at the woman, then at the gun. His eyes seemed to take in the distance between them. Then the embers in the minister's eyes died. The man looked down and did as he was told.

What was Decklin up to? Nicholas couldn't believe his friend was giving up that easily. And yet. Nicholas watched the minister closely. It was over. He could see it in the man's eyes. Decklin Kanabas had given up hope.

Nicholas felt devastated. Was this it? Had the past few months simply been for this? He refused to accept that his life would end this way; with a meaningless killing in a foreign country by a woman he didn't even know.

"On your knees." The woman brandished the weapon. There was a deep-seated hatred in her eyes.

Nicholas gazed at the weapon longingly, measuring the distance between them. There was no way he could save himself, but perhaps he could distract her long enough to save his

friend. The realisation began to dawn on him. Was this what Decklin had been considering? Was the minister prepared to lay his life down for someone he'd barely known for a few months?

Nicholas reached the same conclusion, however. He'd never make it. The woman was a professional and she kept well back. Guns were only valuable if you kept your distance. They were worthless in close combat. She would kill them both before he could make half the distance across the floor.

Maybe if he did as he was told, he could bring her in closer. If she came right up to him and placed the weapon against his neck, perhaps there was a chance. In his heart, he knew this would not happen. The woman was too good. The entire thing had been carefully planned.

She'd been in complete control from the very beginning. Everything they'd done had simply played to her hand. She wouldn't make a mistake now. *Tell her when she comes for you. These words will save your life.* The words of a dying man echoed in his head. Is this what he had meant? It was worth a try. There was nothing left to lose.

"Who is not against us is for us." Nicholas spoke the words quietly. He gazed into the woman's eyes, searching for a sign of hope – some reprieve.

She blinked.

Had he scored a point? He couldn't be sure. "Who is not against us is for us," he repeated.

The woman hesitated. "Who told you to say that?"

Yes! "Yannick. He said to repeat those words when you came for us."

The woman's eyes showed fear for the first time. Until now, there had been no hesitation, but Nicholas could tell she was beginning to break. Decklin started to turn.

"Don't move!" The woman stepped back and levelled the gun at the minister's head. He froze.

"Yannick said he saw my innocence at the rendezvous in Paris. He told me to repeat those words – that they would save my life."

"Yannick is dead. Everybody is dead. You killed them. Why should I believe you now?" Her hand began to tremble and her eyes betrayed her uncertainty.

Nicholas swallowed. "I've seen more death over the past few weeks than I care to think about." His voice broke but he continued speaking. "I don't know which killings you're talking about, but I'm truly sorry. Yannick said they kill *pour notre mère*. I don't know what that means, but one of the men you're referring to uttered those words as he pulled the trigger. I didn't kill him. Yannick did – as he took the bullet that was meant for me. He's the only reason I'm alive today."

The woman stared at him for a moment. Then she let her gun hand drop.

Nicholas heard the sigh of relief from Decklin next to him. He slowly became aware of his own thumping heart. His pulse was racing and he felt the icy sweat trickling down the side of his neck.

The woman sighed. "What else did Yannick tell you?"

"Nothing. He'd been badly wounded. It was all he could do to give me the code. Who are you people?" Nicholas tried to rise.

The woman raised her weapon in a flash and levelled it at his head. "Sit down," she hissed.

Nicholas did as she instructed. "We're not trying to hurt you. I don't know what I can do to prove that but it's the truth."

The woman's hand trembled and she stared at the floor for a moment. After several seconds she appeared to come to a decision. "Tell me who you are first. Everything, from the very beginning."

Nicholas took a deep breath. "It started about two months ago. A man I knew only as Willow contacted me with the promise of information about a multi-billion dollar deal I'd just lost."

The woman frowned. "Willow?"

"It was a code name. He said his name was Manantau Scofield."

"Scofield!"

"You know him?"

She nodded. "He was the reason I nearly killed you. Manny was like a father to me. He trained me and many others with me. I heard they'd sent him to Africa. So he *was* working with you."

Nicholas shook his head. "Long story. I had no idea who he really was until the night he died. He had very little time left when he reached me. I guess that's why he entrusted his information to me."

He told her about his arrest and the events that led him to his first encounters with her.

When he was done, she took a deep breath and lowered her weapon.

"My name is Lajé Jaffa. I'm a special investigator for a secret branch of Interpol. We were formed by a man called Enrique Duvalier. He had evidence that pointed to a conspiracy among an international group of financiers and businessmen, although what they were up to, he couldn't say.

"He recruited from Interpol and Mossad. Nobody was told anything and even Interpol wasn't informed. Duvalier believed the consortium had infiltrated Interpol and that the men in power couldn't be trusted. He was right. When they found out about us, they demanded that he reveal everything. When he refused, they arrested him. He committed suicide in prison. There was evidence that he'd been tortured."

"Why didn't his recruits disband?" Nicholas asked.

Lajé grimaced. "Duvalier was too smart for them. He didn't just recruit good police officers. He recruited people who had been hurt by the Organisation – and he used outside funding. We all had good reason to hate the Hypatia conglomerate. Duvalier confirmed what many of us had suspected all along. These unknown financiers had somehow been involved in the pain we'd suffered."

"And what was your pain?" Decklin enquired.

Lajé stiffened. Her gaze was penetrating and it was several seconds before she replied. "Not me – my sister."

"What happened?"

She shook her head. "It doesn't matter now. They've won. London, Paris, Johannesburg. All our units have been destroyed. My superiors in London even told me that Washington and Sydney had been breached before our pocket was destroyed."

Nicholas searched the woman's eyes. Would she answer the question that burned in his soul? "Who are these people? What's their agenda?"

The woman shook her head. "We're still not entirely sure. Our investigations have revealed very little. The difficulties are compounded by the fact that their power transcends borders. They have representatives in every country in the Commonwealth and even beyond that. *Something* ties their interests together – we just don't know what."

"You must know something. How long have you been investigating these people?"

"A little over five years."

Nicholas bit his lip in exasperation. "And this is all you know?"

She swallowed and shook her head. "I'm a field operative. I find information and feed it to my superiors. They're the ones who analyse it – match it with other information – and follow the trends. Now they're dead, and most of what we've learned with them."

"Do you have any idea what they could have wanted from me?" Nicholas was desperate to learn something – anything.

"You?" She shrugged. "Until a moment ago, I believed you were one of them."

“One of them! They’ve been trying to kill me for months. Why would they want me in their organisation? I have nothing to offer them.”

“I’ve read your dossier, Nicholas Gallagher. You’re very much their type of player. You’re wealthy – twenty-seven billion US dollars, I believe?”

“Twenty-three. That’s what Fortune Magazine said. What does that have to do with anything? Surely they don’t need my cash.”

“You’re also a major player in the IT industry. Our sources have revealed that the Organisation has been on a major drive over the past four years to recruit what they’re calling the *New Money*. People who have amassed vast fortunes in a relatively short space of time. Almost all these people are in the technology industries.”

“But to what end? I’d never have joined their cause. I didn’t even know these people existed. Why would they try to destroy me?”

The woman shrugged. “I wish I knew.”

“You have no clue?”

“Duvalier did. He had an informant who indicated that something big was in the pipeline.”

“So how do we get in touch with this informant? Who is he?”

“Again, I wish I knew. Someone deep inside the Organisation who grew a conscience, perhaps. He told Duvalier we were on a time-table. Hypatia’s Children have spent generations placing people in influential positions, writing laws that look after their own interests. When Duvalier began recruiting, his informant told him the wave had begun.”

“You said that was five years ago.”

“Not so long in the great scheme of things. We’ve managed to trace this organisation back to the seventeenth century.”

Nicholas gulped. More questions! When would he get some answers? “Any idea what the words ‘*Pour notre mère*’ mean?”

“For our mother. It’s some sort of code – we know that. Usually employed by their assassins. We don’t have any clue what it alludes to. What we lack mostly is names. We suspect many companies and the families that run them, but we have no concrete evidence. Nothing we can use to prove a conspiracy.”

Nicholas smiled. “I have a name.”

“What name!”

“Princeton.”

“That’s all?”

“It’s more than you seem to have.”

“Is it an organisation, a building?”

Nicholas shrugged. That’s all I know. The assassin who tried to kill me laughed when I asked him who he was. He claimed I worked for Princeton and refused to tell me anything. I thought maybe Princeton was your organisation.”

“It couldn’t have anything to do with the university?”

“I can’t see how. Are you telling me you’ve been working on this case for five years and don’t have so much as a single name or suspect?”

“I have many suspects; many names. What I don’t have is any concrete link to their activities with Hypatia’s Children. As far as I can tell, they’re legitimate businessmen. Nothing more. Some of them appear to have been involved in bribery or corruption at one time or another, but it’s nothing more than mundane white collar crime. Insider trading, that sort of thing.”

“So you don’t have a single name that you can tie to the organisation directly.”

“I have one. A family in Italy.”

“And you know for certain that they’re involved in this conspiracy?”

“In some way. We’re not sure how they communicate with the people in power, but they’ve brokered several deals that put new governments in power.”

“Such as?”

“Your country, for one.”

Nicholas thought of the dossier he’d lost at the police station, and understanding dawned. “This Italian family brokered a deal with the ANC?”

She inclined her head. “They used intermediaries – wealthy connections in India and China but, yes. They became unhappy with the previous government. It was an embarrassment and a burden. So they looked and found a reasonable alternative. Duvalier told my superiors that they treated South Africa as a test run for something greater.”

“A test! For what?”

She shrugged. “No idea. But the test worked. They found their new pawns and then mobilised their resources to pave their way to power. All worthy opponents were discredited in the local press. Secrets and hidden agendas were exposed as, one by one, all the ANC’s serious opponents were removed. Criminal investigations were set in motion. Yet, after the elections, none of the accusations were proved, and many were simply disbanded.”

Nicholas shook his head. “They’d achieved their objective and could allow the public to forget about the alleged crimes.”

“Exactly.”

“Who is this family?”

“You can trace their heritage back to the 14th century. Further, I imagine, if you did a little digging. The first prominent name was Galleazzo Vicini in Milan around 1335.

“Vicini’s descendants became land barons, acquiring massive areas of land around Milan and the Italian lakes. The family still owns property on and around lake Como today. Geleazzo’s grandsons built a banking empire that stretched from Venice to Bruges.

“Mario Lanzo Vicini expanded the family’s interests further in the early 1900’s. As the family patriarch at the time, he diversified and began manufacturing parts for motor vehicles and then for aircraft engines. Much of their produce was sold to the likes of Fiat. That left them well positioned to capitalise on both world wars, which they did.

“After the Second World War, they began to incorporate the manufacture of farming equipment – tractors and the like. Now, three generations on, the family owns interests in aviation, shipping, electronics and even the textile industry. They export goods to over twenty countries and spend much of their time commuting between Milan and the economic powerhouses in Zurich and London. They also have strong ties with the wealthiest Italian-American families in the USA.”

“It’s run by his grandchildren?”

“One of his great-grandchildren. Marco Vicini, the incumbent patriarch is the younger of two brothers. The oldest, Lorenzo, forsook his interests in the family heritage to pursue a career in the ministry. He’s a Cardinal in the Roman Catholic Church and lives in Vatican City.”

“So he left the empire to his brother?”

“Against his father’s wishes. He was the heir apparent and left under a cloud. The family encouraged church attendance, but they felt their place in the church was on Christmas and Easter and that their obligation ended with their sizeable annual donations to the church. They never intended for their children to become so fervent as to forsake their wealth and heritage.

“The brothers rarely have any contact with each other now. The last time was at their grandfather’s funeral three years ago. Our agents were there. We even managed to obtain invitations to the private gathering back at the family palace on the Lake Como island where Vicini Senior. was buried. Our man witnessed an argument between the brothers. Lorenzo

disapproves of his brother's ostentatious lifestyle and has never been afraid to voice his opinion. He was escorted from the premises by security."

Nicholas sighed. It was as if a weight had been lifted. For months, he'd been running, hiding, constantly aware of a hidden enemy tracing his every move. Now, that enemy had been unmasked. He had a face – a name – and that, at least, made his foes tangible.

Rage quickly followed relief. These people had hunted him across two continents. They had robbed him of his life, separated him from his wife and tried to kill not only him, but his family as well.

"I want to meet this Marco Vicini. I want to look into his eyes and hold a gun to his head – make him feel the pain he's caused me."

Decklin protested. "You're not going to take this man's life, Nicholas. He's not worth it."

"I have no intention of killing him. I just want him to experience what he's put me through. Just for a moment, I want him to experience true fear. To know that another person holds his life in the balance and could end it on a whim. Once I've heard him beg for his life, I'll let him go, but I want that pleasure."

Lajé shook her head. "I'm not sure I can offer you the opportunity. Vicini is the one sure link we have to Hypatia's Children. By confronting him, we'd be forced to reveal our hand."

Nicholas chuckled. "Look around you. Do you think we have a hand to play? There's nothing left. You have nowhere to go and neither do we." The bitterness dripped from his tongue.

A quiet buzzer sounded in the next room. Lajé tensed. She turned towards the door and cocked her weapon.

"What is it?"

"Security system. It tracks every movement of a potential intruder. It's how I knew you were coming and managed to get to the apartment across the hall before you arrived." She looked worried. Nicholas could see the fear in her eyes.

"Should we be afraid?"

Lajé nodded. "I've set up triggers all over the building. He's only tripped one. Normally any entry at the doors or windows would be detected. This person has slipped through all of them."

"Where is he now?"

"That buzzer is my last line of security. He's already on this floor."



## Chapter 15

Lajé headed for the bedroom, beckoning Nicholas and Decklin to follow. Opening the cupboard, she grabbed a semi-automatic rifle and several magazines, all filled with rounds. She switched on a portable television which, it turned out, was rigged to a closed circuit camera set up in the hallway.

Nicholas shook his head. They'd never really had any hope of catching her unawares.

"Keep an eye on that screen. The second he comes into view, wave through the door."

She returned to the lounge and took up a position behind the sofa. There, she kept her gaze riveted on the bedroom's entrance, anticipating their signal. Nicholas turned his attention back to the screen. The passage remained empty outside. Several minutes passed.

Nicholas didn't dare make a sound. Maybe it was a false alarm. He glanced at Decklin and motioned towards the empty screen, shaking his head. The minister simply shrugged.

Suddenly the intruder was there. The man slunk against the passage wall. Nicholas waited until the intruder was right outside the door, before he signalled to Decklin. The minister immediately waved from the bedroom door.

The room erupted in gunfire. Lajé emptied her first magazine in three controlled bursts. Nicholas peered from the bedroom door. He was amazed at her control. The bullets had exited in three likely spots, all around the door's edges. She'd shot high and low, aiming at both head and knee height.

He listened. Silence. They waited for several minutes, but nothing could be heard from the passage beyond. Nicholas turned back to the screen. It was blank. Either the intruder had located and disabled the camera, or Lajé had damaged it with a stray bullet.

Several minutes passed. Decklin caught the woman's gaze and motioned towards the door, offering to have a look. She raised her hand and shook her head. Decklin shrugged and stepped back. As he did so, his heel hooked a lamp-stand. There was a thud as the stand tilted, but didn't fall.

A single shot exploded in the passage outside. The bullet ricocheted off the wall mere inches from Decklin's head. Nicholas dropped to the floor in shock.

He began to hyperventilate and terror's tentacles gripped his heart. But for the fact that the wall blocked the intruder's line of fire, Decklin would have surely been dead. What sort of man could fire blind through a door based on the sound of a lamp falling and miss his mark by a hair?

From where he stood, Nicholas had a clear view of the front door. He dived across the floor, seeking the cover of the bedroom wall where Decklin stood. Bullets erupted about him, tracking the sound of his movement as he rolled. Inside the apartment, Lajé fired another burst of rounds.

Nicholas rolled to his feet. He was panting and his hands trembled. He glanced at the minister, but Decklin was a picture of calm. The minister quietly reached for the telephone beside the bed and held the receiver to his ear. He winced and shook his head, placing it back on the hook.

They both gazed out at the living room. Lajé lay on her back, weapon pointed at the sky. It was then that Nicholas heard the sirens. They were distant, but getting closer.

The sound brought blessed relief. Nicholas closed his eyes and slowly released the air from his lungs. Outside, there was more gunfire, but it was less terrifying now that he knew help was on the way.

Within minutes, the sirens stopped outside. Nicholas heard car doors being slammed. There was a lot of shouting and the sound of running footsteps. No more than a minute later those same footsteps echoed in the passage outside. Someone yelled instructions in Dutch.

More noise. Then silence. Then someone called outside the door. The words were French. Nicholas didn't understand, but Lajé yelled back a reply. More instructions. Then she turned to Nicholas and Decklin.

"It's over. We'll be safe out there now."

"They're going to arrest us," Decklin whispered.

"Don't worry. I can take care of things. Just walk out with your hands in the air and don't do anything stupid."

Nicholas moved towards the door. It was nothing more than a splintered wreck, but the lock was still intact. He unlocked the door and walked out slowly, holding his hands high so as not to alarm anyone.

Outside, the passage swarmed with police uniforms. The men had guns and Nicholas could tell they were on edge. He gazed about, hunting for the killer who had been outside in the passage. Either the man had already been taken downstairs, or he'd escaped. There was nobody in custody.

Decklin exited and, behind him, Lajé came out. Officers immediately surrounded the three of them and cuffed them. From among the crowd, a freckled man with penetrating grey eyes and youthful features stepped forward. He was not in uniform. Instead, he wore a charcoal suit and a dark trench coat.

"Detective Cummings, Interpol." The man flashed his badge. "You have proved difficult men to pin down." The voice betrayed the man's age which Nicholas had initially guessed to be no older than nineteen. He had to be in his late twenties, at least.

Nicholas frowned. The man was certainly not French. His English was flawless. "And you are?"

The man smiled. "I was first on the scene. Fortunately these fine officers arrived to assist me. Otherwise, I fear you might have escaped yet again."

Fear gripped Nicholas' chest once more. He stared into the man's mocking eyes. Was this how it would end? Their hunter flashed a badge and the local police simply bowed and scraped, handing the prisoners into his charge?

Lajé stepped forward. "This is an outrage," she spat at the man. "Do you realise you've just blown four years of undercover work?"

"Excuse me?" The killer stared at her in surprise.

"Lajé Jaffa. Interpol Special Branch. I've been working on these two for the last six months. Then, two days before they're due to arrange a meeting with their suppliers, you show up, shooting like John Wayne and blow four years of undercover work. I'll have your badge for this, Cummings."

The man raised his eyebrows. "You're with Interpol?"

"My badge is in my coat."

He stepped forward, but Lajé spun away and spoke to one of the uniformed officers behind her. "Don't let this idiot touch me. You take it out."

The officer reached in and withdrew a purse from her pocket. Inside, he found the badge. He read it and smiled. "It's true. She's senior to you, *mijnheer*."

Lajé jiggled her handcuffs. "Now get these things off me."

The police quickly removed her cuffs. Once they were off, Lajé truly sprang into action. She drew a notebook from her pocket and faced the assassin. "Right. Give it to me. I want to know what branch you're with, your commanding officer – everything. By the time I'm done with you, you'll be back in uniform, walking the beat in Morecambe."

When she was done, she turned her back on the senior officer. "Right. I'll need two officers to help me get these two down to the station."

The killer stepped forward. "I'll help. This is my collar."

"You stay out of my sight." Lajé pointed a finger at the man. Then she turned to the officer who had uncuffed her. "If he so much as glances in our direction again, I want him arrested for obstructing justice. And don't think I'm joking. We were on the verge of blowing an international crime syndicate wide open and this imbecile has just set our case back by half a decade. If he steps out of this passage, you arrest him, understand? Or I'll have your badge as well before I'm done." She stopped and pointed at two other officers. "You two, come with me."

The policemen stepped forward leading Nicholas and Decklin by the arm. They followed Lajé, heading for the elevator. Once inside, Lajé pressed the button for the ground floor.

The doors had no sooner closed when she moved. The first blow caught the officer near Decklin in the throat. The second spun to face her but he was too late. He'd barely moved when Lajé kicked him in the groin. The man's eyes widened in shock and he doubled over in pain. She followed up with a chop to the base of his skull. The policeman crumpled to the floor, unconscious.

Lajé pressed the button for the next floor and then reached for the keys on the fallen officer's belt. She quickly uncuffed the two men. "This way."

Decklin glanced back at the two officers in the elevator. "This how you treat all your new acquaintances? It's very rude."

The woman smiled, but made no reply. She led them to a fire escape at the back of the building. They were on the first floor and quickly made their way down to the alley. Within two blocks, they found some bicycles unattended.

Twenty minutes later, they reached the station. Lajé looked at the two men. "Where to now?"

"Milan." Nicholas was firm. "That's where we need to be."

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Lajé used her contacts in Amsterdam and hired a mini-van to take the three of them to Milan. As the car was rented under an assumed name and, as neither she nor Nicholas nor Decklin made the rental, the car could not be traced to them. Lajé knew her way around Europe and managed to avoid the main thoroughfares between the Netherlands and Italy.

It made for an uneventful, albeit slower, journey. Lajé used the time to brief Nicholas and Decklin on all she knew about the Vicini family. After their arrival, it took nearly three weeks of preparation before Decklin felt ready to confront Marco Vicini.

They stopped their rented mini-van near the woods opposite the stately mansion on the outskirts of Milan. It was impossible to see the house from the street as the large gardens were surrounded by monstrous walls.

"You're sure this is the best spot?" Decklin looked to Lajé for confirmation.

Her eyes scoured the walls for a few seconds before she nodded. "This is it. You ready?"

Decklin gazed at the wall through narrowed eyes. The giant structure formed an ominous silhouette against a large yellow moon. He'd examined it several times already. Once in a leisurely jog around the perimeter and at least three times with binoculars from various

angles. It looked derelict, with vast patches of missing plaster, and had clearly not seen paint for several generations.

"Don't be fooled," Lajé had told him. "It's the Italian way. Nobody spends money on the outside of their buildings."

One thing still bothered Decklin. He had no idea where the security cameras and other devices were positioned. They were out of options, however. He'd simply have to trust Lajé's judgement.

Lajé pulled away and turned down a side-road where they'd be less visible. Then she turned to Nicholas. "Are we online?"

Nicholas nodded. "The phone's going crazy at the moment. I've been receiving zipped audio files almost every five minutes for the past two hours."

Lajé offered Decklin a large newspaper clipping. "I found this in the evening news. It's the most recent photograph I could get. Taken eight months ago at a fashion show in Paris."

Decklin glanced at the photo. "It'll do."

"And watch out for the dogs. I can't guarantee how long I'll keep them distracted for."

Decklin gazed once more at the wall. "I'll be careful."

"Good luck." Lajé emerged from the vehicle.

Decklin couldn't help admiring her slim figure. She wore a tight fitting track-suit and Nike sneakers. Lajé donned a pair of earphones and switched on the Apple iPod attached to her hip.

His heart beat faster as he watched her embark. He glanced at his watch. Twenty minutes. In precisely that time, Lajé would flick a switch hidden beneath the iPod. She wouldn't hear anything different, and neither would anyone else. The dogs would go crazy, however, as the high-pitched note would carry to every corner of the grounds. With any luck, that would keep the beasts at bay for several minutes, allowing him the opportunity to get over the walls.

Twenty minutes later, Decklin was ready.

He turned to Nicholas. "Got a spare credit card with your name on it?"

Nicholas frowned. "What for?"

"A little present for Hypatia's Children. Something to let them know it was you who struck the blow."

Nicholas grinned and reached for his wallet. He extracted a Coutts World Silk Mastercard and handed it to Decklin.

Decklin glanced at it and raised his eyebrows. "I pegged you as an American Express Black Card holder. Is this a step down or a step up from the Rockefellers?"

Nicholas faked a smile. "Cute. You asked me for a card with my name on it. I've given you one."

Decklin glanced at the card again. *NF Gallagher*. "What's the F stand for?"

"Francis. You ever tell anyone, I'll just deny it."

Decklin grinned and stuffed the card in his bag with the rest of his equipment. He emerged from the vehicle and slunk through the shadows and then across the street. He headed for the wall where he hunted for the scratch Lajé had made earlier in the week. This was important. It was the one spot she'd identified where both security cameras were likely to have a blind spot.

Decklin glanced up at the sheer height. Although the wall was flat, centuries of broken bricks and missing plaster had created a multitude of cracks and hand-holds that one could use to climb it.

It was tough going in the dark. Decklin panted as he struggled to find his grip. Inch by precious inch, he moved up the wall. When he reached the top, he felt for the hole he'd identified. It was large enough to get a hand into.

He ran his palm along the lip of the wall until he located the crack. Once his hand was in, he twisted it and bunched it into a fist, effectively locking himself into the wall. *Good.* That left his remaining hand free to deal with the wires on top.

He lifted his head and peered at the cabling. First, the electric wires. They were easily taken care of. Decklin reached into his bag and extracted insulated wire with copper clamps. He attached the clamps to the electric fencing. Then a quick snip of the wires and the current was running through the insulated cabling. Quite safe to touch - or crawl over.

The second problem was trickier. Decklin examined the thin wires that ran about an inch above the wall. Motion sensors. Anything more than the weight of a bird would set off the alarms and have security swarming like enraged bees around the breach. Decklin had packed a special piece of equipment to overcome this security feature. From his bag, he withdrew a large plank. The plank had movable clamps that allowed him to move the legs into a specific position, thus creating a bridge over the sensitive wires. Once the bridge was in place, more clamps would hold it in position, fastening it on both sides of the wall.

It took nearly ten minutes of careful work, but Decklin finally slithered over his makeshift bridge, between his insulated electric wiring, and dropped lightly onto the Marco Vicini estate.

He felt a rush of adrenaline course through his veins. He hadn't felt this for years. Climbing cliff faces and jumping out of aeroplanes with teams of skydivers could only do so much for an adrenaline junkie. This was the real thing! One tiny mistake here and his life would be over. He could almost feel the very presence of death in the atmosphere – and he revelled in it.

After a quick check for additional security measures, he headed for the Vicini mansion. He was careful to check for motion sensors and cameras, however. They were everywhere, but always in the predictable places. That was the problem with the truly good security companies, Decklin grimaced. They always put their toys and gadgets in the best possible positions. Predictable and easy to spot if you knew where to look.

Finally, Decklin arrived at the house. It was a mammoth Tuscan-style villa. An assortment of official-looking limousines and luxurious sports cars surrounded the fountain in the parking area.

He moved around to get a better view of the front door. It was manned by swarthy security personnel who wore their pristine black suits like armour. Decklin spotted the thin, tell-tale wires that hung from the men's ear-pieces. *With matching watches, I'll bet! Hi-tech radio devices.* The crew-cut hairdos spelled military training and not one of the guards weighed less than three hundred pounds.

Two of the men were checking invitations as guests arrived. Decklin decided to check the back instead. There, he found the servants' entrance. It was another world. None of the glitz of the main entrance to be seen here. This entrance was functional, with wide doors for easy delivery. The suave evening dresses and diamond-studded jewellery were replaced with uniformed waiters and chauffeur staff.

The one similarity, however, was the presence of the bouncers. The men were cut from the same mould as those at the front door, complete with ear-pieces and gold watches. Even the servants had to present some sort of pass to gain entry.

Decklin chewed his lip. There had to be another way in. He moved around the side of the house until he found a likely entry point. Up on the second floor there was a balcony. More importantly, the curtains were open, offering him a full view of the room inside. Decklin scaled the wall and then approached the wide, double doors. He moved with caution. A quick glance revealed infra-red heat sensors that would have to be taken care of before he could enter safely.

Decklin got to work. He drilled several holes in the glass panes of the door, then extracted some window putty from his pocket along with two laser beam buttons he'd picked up at a local toy store. He widened the holes and then stuck the beams in place, using the putty. He carefully aimed a single beam at each infra-red eye. It would take a few minutes for the eyes' surfaces to heat up. After that the devices would be useless, as they wouldn't even pick up a human torch

While waiting for the laser beams to do their work, Decklin examined the doors. They also had sensors, although these were far easier to take care of. The sensors were simple magnets – one on the door, one on the frame. As long as the door remained closed, the magnets attracted one another, keeping the circuit closed. If the door was opened, the circuit would break, triggering the alarm. Decklin extracted Nicholas' credit card from his bag. He glanced at the name again. NF Gallagher. The card would be left in place – a quiet message designed to increase the fear factor. He slipped the magnetic strip into the crack above the door. The credit card effectively took over the job of the door's magnet. Once he'd secured it in place, the door could be opened safely. Decklin picked the lock, then glanced at his watch.

By now the lasers should have done their work and rendered the infra-red sensors useless. He pushed the door open a crack and held his breath. No alarms. That didn't mean they weren't ringing. He moved to the balcony and waited. After five minutes, nobody had appeared. *Safe to move.* Decklin slipped a mirror through the crack in the open door and checked for any additional security devices that might be lurking against the wall.

He was rewarded with a reflected camera, positioned to take in the full sweep of the room. The only area it missed was located directly against the external wall. That was enough, however.

Decklin slipped through the door and slithered along the wall, positioning himself under the camera. He removed an instamatic camera from his bag. A relic from the eighties, he reflected but the best tool for his purposes. He lifted it until it was just beneath the security camera. Angling it to approximate the security device's view, he snapped a shot of the room. The old camera whirled and clicked, and finally spewed out the printed photograph. Initially the picture was blank. He waited a few minutes, allowing the photograph time to display.

He then attached it to a bracket. Now for the tricky part. He'd have to work fast. Security might tolerate a brief break in transmission, but if it lasted more than a second or two, they'd become suspicious. Holding the bracket ready, Decklin reached up and pulled the plug from the camera, just enough to short the connection.

Wiggling the plug slightly, he slipped the bracket with the photo over the camera lens. The short would cause an intermittent signal to be transmitted to the security monitors. If the picture appeared warped, or moved in any way during that time, the security personnel should – with luck – simply put it down to the faulty signal.

One ... two seconds. The bracket was in place and Decklin pressed the plug home to restore the signal. The camera now reflected a beautiful photograph of the office. Decklin held the bracket as still as he could, while he fastened it to the lens.

Once again, he slipped from the room out onto the balcony and waited for several minutes in case security decided to investigate. When nobody arrived, Decklin re-entered the room. He pulled a tuxedo from his bag and quickly changed.

A glance at the mirror against the wall told him he was ready to face the enemy. Decklin moved to the office door and opened it a crack, peering into the passage beyond. It was empty and Decklin strode out. First he headed in the wrong direction, but he quickly found his way to the landing. There, he realised why the top floor was so empty. Two security guards stood at the stairs on the ground floor, effectively blocking all access to the upper floor.

Decklin paused. He'd need to find another way in. Perhaps another staircase? Not likely. If security guards blocked the main staircase, any others would be blocked as well. He headed for the bedrooms. Just maybe. He remembered seeing this feature in several houses among the wealthy back in the States. Perhaps it would have been installed here too.

He opened a door and entered one of the bedrooms. It had that empty, showroom quality of a room that was not used unless guests arrived. He didn't waste time examining the décor; he was only interested in the wood panels against the wall. On the third panel, Decklin was rewarded. As he pressed it, the panel swung back, revealing a narrow metal pipe. A laundry chute. It would be a tight squeeze, but it would probably take him.

Decklin held his breath and slipped feet first into the narrow entrance. The pipe was smooth and cold, but it was also steep. He slid down easily enough and emerged at the other end into a basket full of dirty clothes. At least the landing was soft. Decklin glanced about nervously. The room was empty. It was a risk he'd been forced to take. If anyone was down there, he'd have been caught and the game would have been over before it had even truly started.

He moved to the door. Locked! Decklin reached into his pocket and withdrew his lock picks. It only took a few seconds to unlock the door and slip out into the passage beyond.

Decklin allowed himself a small sigh of relief. He was now on the ground floor, deep inside the Vicini mansion. Hopefully, he'd passed the last ring of security and could finally mingle with the guests.

Steps behind him. "Can I help you, sir?"

Decklin froze. Then he turned slowly. The man was young, and dressed in a waiter's uniform.

Decklin forced a smile. "I was looking for the bathroom. Can you tell me where it is?"  
*Lame! That's the oldest line in the book.*

Decklin's heart thumped like a jack-hammer. If he had no right to be here, the lie would be so patently transparent that a child would see through it.

The man smiled. "Second door on the right, sir."

Decklin breathed again. He felt an icy trickle of sweat run down his chest under his starched shirt.

"Thank you. And not a moment too soon." He bolted for the door. Once inside, he washed his face in cold water and dried himself with a towel. His cheeks were still flushed when he checked in the mirror.

Too bad. It would have to do. Decklin exited the bathroom and headed toward the noise. He stepped out of the passage and into a large reception area. A waiter passed by and Decklin quietly lifted a glass of champagne from the man's tray. He moved towards a second waiter and accepted a proffered *vol au vent*.

Finally, he allowed himself to relax. He was among the guests now and could appear inconspicuous. He moved about quietly, observing, hunting for his prey. It was nearly fifteen minutes before he laid eyes on Marco Vicini.

The man was chatting to a group of chubby middle-aged men, all in matching penguin suits with a variety of drinks and cheroots dangling from mouths and fingers. They were seated on plush leather couches around an antique card table near the bar.

Decklin found a waiter and helped himself to another pastry. *Just be patient, lad. Your chance will come.* His patience ran out when, after an hour, he had still not found an opportunity to confront the man.

Vicini was constantly surrounded by hordes of people seeking his attention and bombarding him with endless compliments and questions. Finally, the man was lured away by a small group – two women and a man – who dragged him across to a painting against the far wall. Their speech was animated as they pored over the artwork and gesticulated, pointing at various elements of the painting.

It was a Picasso. From his Blue Period. Decklin couldn't remember the name, but the piece was worth a fortune.

Decklin finally gave in and decided to interrupt them. He marched up to the group and affected a rather strong American accent.

"Sorry to interrupt, folk, but there's a rather urgent message for Mr. Vicini. Could I bother you for a moment, sir?"

The man looked puzzled, but moved with Decklin as he led the man away by the arm.

"What is this about?" The man's English was flawless.

"Not here. We need to speak in private." Decklin spoke softly, leading the man to the wide sliding doors that led onto the veranda.

Several groups of people milled about the area. Decklin led the man past them and down the steps.

"Look, what is this about?" Vicini protested.

"It's about your brother. And it's extremely important."

"I haven't spoken to my brother for years. Nothing that concerns him would interest me." He pulled back.

Decklin kept a firm grip on the man's arm. "You may want the world to believe that, but we both know better." He smiled as he spoke the words and deliberately slipped out of his American accent for the shock value.

The words had an extraordinary effect on the man. Vicini said nothing, but his eyes were wide with shock. "Who are you?"

Decklin realised his words had struck a deep nerve but he had no time to dwell on the implications. He nodded towards the garden. "Come."

Marco Vicini followed like a lamb. Decklin led him to a clearing where he stopped to face the man.

When Decklin looked into the man's eyes, Vicini suddenly became defiant. "Are you going to tell me what this is about?"

Decklin sized the man up. He sensed fear, as well as anger. What had precipitated that? The mention of his brother? He had very little, so he decided to play his trump. "I'm sure you'll understand when I say the words *pour notre mère*."

Vicini recoiled. Air exploded from his lungs and his knees sagged for a moment. Then he staggered backwards.

The sheer terror reflected in Vicini's eyes made Decklin a little nervous. *What had he done?* What did those words mean that they struck such a chord of fear in the heart of a man so powerful?

"What's the meaning of this – intrusion? I've been loyal to the cause my whole life. There can be no reason —"

"There's reason enough. Did you know that the Interpol units already suspect you? They have evidence of your involvement. Who knows what they've already uncovered?"

"That's no reason for such drastic measures. Surely we can do what's been done before; expose a minor legal or ethical infringement. I can be declared an embarrassment to the business community and the courts can order my interests confiscated. We can sell off the empire and other families can step in and take over the helm. That's how it's always been done!"

Decklin shook his head. "It's too late for that, I'm afraid. You've revealed too much. This is the only course of action left to us." *What course of action!*

The man looked defeated. "So you choose to sacrifice me. To our Mother."

Decklin shrugged. "As you say."

"And what of the documents?"

"They'll be taken care of."

“They’ve been entrusted to my family for generations.”

“And now they’ll be entrusted to others.”

Vicini shook his head. He suddenly looked like an old man. He quietly sank to his knees. When he looked up at Decklin, his cheeks were moist with tears. “Kill me quickly. Consider me a willing sacrifice. I will die for our cause, and I will be brave.”

*So that’s what the words meant.* Decklin thought back to Nicholas’ explanation. When he’d heard the words, they had been uttered by a teenage assassin just a moment before he pulled the trigger.

He was suddenly revolted with himself. He’d threatened a man’s life – made that man believe he was about to die. He had to leave.

“Close your eyes,” Decklin instructed. “And don’t move from that spot. You won’t feel a thing, I promise.”

The man did as he was told. Decklin backed away. He gazed in horror at the man patiently awaiting his execution. As soon as Decklin found the exit path, he turned and fled. He raced through the grounds, heading for the main gate.

The gates were huge wrought-iron affairs painted black with a guard-hut on the left. *Pull yourself together, son. You still need to get out of here.*

He waved for the guard, who popped his head through the window.

“Sorry, my friend. I’m afraid I’ve had a little too much to drink, so I ordered a taxi. Don’t want to take a chance on driving home.”

The man nodded. He was clearly far less worried about the guests leaving than he was about those arriving. He opened the gate for Decklin who slipped through. As soon as he was outside, he pulled a mobile phone from his pocket and switched it on.

“Nicholas, I’m at the main gate. Haul over and get me out of here.”

“You okay?”

“No. I just threatened to kill a man.”

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“He’s on the line!” Nicholas was jubilant. It had taken less than half an hour before Vicini placed the call.

“What’s he saying?” Lajé jumped up from her seat and raced Decklin to the desk where both crowded behind Nicholas to get a view of the screen. They paused as the call was answered at the other end.

“That’s Marco Vicini’s voice,” Decklin murmured.

“What’s he saying?” Nicholas didn’t understand a word.

“He wishes to speak with the Monsignor,” Lajé answered.

“Who?” Decklin looked to Lajé for an explanation.

She shrugged and shook her head.

Nicholas strained his ears, trying to pick up something from the conversation. He couldn’t understand the man’s response, but it certainly angered Marco Vicini. He raised his voice and became positively aggressive.

Presently, there was a pause, and then a new voice came on line. It was deep and had an authoritative quality that even Marco Vicini seemed to recognise. Nicholas didn’t understand the language, but the tone was unmistakeable.

Marco Vicini suddenly became subservient. “*Sí – sí, sí.*” Nicholas ached to know what the instructions were, but he kept quiet, giving Lajé the space to listen and absorb everything being said. Questions could come later.

The conversation was short and to the point. Within two minutes it was over and the unknown speaker hung up.

“What did they say?” Decklin sounded as anxious as Nicholas felt.

“The stranger is obviously Marco Vicini’s superior.”

Nicholas’ heart pounded with the excitement of their coup. “We’re getting close. I can feel it.”

“Apparently, Vicini shouldn’t have called that number. After reprimanding him, the other man simply told him to follow the usual channels, but Vicini wouldn’t have it. He blurted out everything, and what he said must have shaken the man because he began asking some very pointed questions.”

“Such as?” Decklin asked.

Lajé shrugged. “The man asked Vicini about something called the *Tanit Documents*. Vicini told him they were untouched.”

“Anything else?” Nicholas felt his stomach quiver with excitement.

She shook her head. “But they found your credit card, Nicholas.”

Decklin grinned. “That must have shaken them up a bit.”

Lajé nodded. “We struck very close to the heart. Whatever the *Tanit Documents* are, Vicini’s superior told him to move them.”

“Where – and when?”

“They’re already on the move. Vicini’s boss was plain; the documents can’t stay in that house another minute. They’ll be in Zurich by the time the banks open.”

“Did you get the name of the bank?”

“Vicini Bancaire Privée,” Lajé grinned.

Nicholas looked across at Decklin. “We need those documents.”

Decklin stared at him for a few seconds before the full understanding of Nicholas’ implication struck. “No.”

“Decklin, you’re the only one who can do it.”

“Forget it, I’m not doing it.”

“Decklin, be reasonable. We need those documents.”

“No, Nicholas. Are you forgetting? I’m a *minister*.”

“Who, I’m betting, knows how to break into banks.”

Decklin shook his head. “That’s something I’ve spent the last ten years of my life trying to forget. You’re not going to dredge it up now.”

“Come on, Decklin. You’re in too deep already. If these people find you, they’ll kill you along with me. You already know way too much.”

“Irrelevant. I’m not breaking into a bank.”

Nicholas threw his arms up in supplication and turned to Lajé. “Will you look at it? This man helps me break out of prison. Then he teaches me how to avoid the law, buy false passports, slip across borders – and now, on the brink of a breakthrough, he balks.” He turned back to Decklin. “This is the most important clue we’ve got to date, you do realise that?”

“It’s not that simple, Nicholas.”

“What’s so complicated? It’s no different from entering Marco Vicini’s house.”

“There’s a world of difference. This is theft, plain and simple. Do you know what kind of sentence that carries?”

“I’m not asking you to steal a million Swiss francs! It’s a document – information, nothing more.”

“Do you even realise what a slippery slope we’re on. I just threatened to kill a man!”

“Inadvertently threatened —”

“And that makes it okay? No. I have to draw a line somewhere, Nicholas.”

Nicholas rose from his chair and headed for the kitchen. “Of all the times you pick to grow a conscience.”

“There’s another way, you know,” Decklin called after him.

Nicholas turned back. "Tell me."

"We could find out who this unknown person is that Vicini called. That might lead somewhere."

Nicholas thought about it for a moment. "I doubt it'll help, but we can try." He looked at Lajé.

She had been strangely silent while the two men had argued. When Nicholas glanced at her, she shrugged. "Worth a shot. It can't hurt to know who it is that one of Europe's wealthiest men is so subservient to."

"Okay." Nicholas seethed, but he sat down at the computer once more. Since he'd broken the codes to the telecom company's system, getting in had become easy. He was through in less than ten seconds.

From there, things became more difficult. "Unlisted." Nicholas glanced at Decklin, who peered over his shoulder.

The minister was unfazed. "It must be listed somewhere."

"I'll try secure listings." Nicholas punched the keyboard on his laptop and searched the database again. "Nothing." He paused before typing again.

"Wait. Here's something." Nicholas' heart began to beat faster.

"What is it?" Lajé was also engrossed in the proceedings. Nicholas felt her breath on his neck.

"High security area – unlisted numbers." He punched keys, but was thwarted once again. "Codes required. We don't have a high enough security level."

"Can't you break it?"

"Probably, but it could take hours."

"What about tracing it through the billing system?" Decklin suggested.

Nicholas was impressed at his friend's astuteness but refused to acknowledge it. He sighed in exasperation. "I guess it's worth a try." *Accessing the documents would still be easier!*

Ten minutes later, he still had nothing. Nicholas felt exasperated. "Unlisted! It's got to be here somewhere."

Fourth and fifth searches still revealed nothing.

"You're telling me this number isn't even on their billing system? Who is this person?" Decklin's tone had lost its earlier confidence.

Nicholas turned and glared at him. "Someone who doesn't want to be found, perhaps?"

The minister ignored his unspoken accusation. "So there's no way in at all?"

Nicholas grudgingly conceded. "There's always a way in. If the system won't show us, we'll simply scour the raw data. It'll take a while, but —" Two minutes later, he was inside the main database server, looking at the data itself.

"Found anything?"

Nicholas scowled. "I might, if you didn't keep interrupting."

There were a multitude of tables to sift through. Finally, Nicholas found what he was looking for. He cursed.

"What now?"

"The records are encoded."

"Can't you break them?" Decklin wasn't letting up easily.

Nicholas sighed again. "Anything can be broken, given enough time. The question is, how much time have we got?" He quickly threw together a script to crack the code, connected it to the database and began running through the numbers.

"What's the chances?"

Nicholas watched the screen with a patience born from experience. "We'll see. The records are small, which should make the code easier to crack." It took ten minutes before the first records began appearing on the screen.

The number finally popped up on the screen. “Bingo!” Nicholas exulted.

“Got it?”

“It belongs to a secure exchange just outside Vatican City. Let’s see.” Nicholas hammered away at his keyboard once more. “Oh, no.”

“No luck?” Decklin sounded glum.

Nicholas was dumbfounded. “It belongs to a residence inside Vatican City, or at least—” He glanced back at the screen. “What on earth!”

“Did you find something?” There was an edge of excitement in Decklin’s voice.

“Get your things!”

“Our what?”

“Your things. They found us! There was a trace on the line.”

“Didn’t you have counter-measures in place?”

“Of course I did, what do you think I am, stupid?”

Decklin made no reply. He dashed through to the bedroom and grabbed his bag.

“Get mine too,” Nicholas yelled after him. He was frantic. Their enemies must never know what they had learned. He snatched a small screwdriver from the desk drawer. Then he opened the back of his laptop and extracted the hard drive.

He used a bedside cabinet to smash the drive to bits. After throwing several smaller pieces into the fire, he took the remains and slipped them into his coat pocket. Nicholas was in a daze. He had set top-quality scramblers and counter-measures in place. The first thing he’d done was mask his IP address, and yet, they’d traced him in minutes. *Who were these people?*

Decklin and Lajé arrived with the bags. Then the three of them rushed to the basement to find their car. They halted at the bottom of the steps.

“No good,” Decklin whispered, pointing at the official-looking vehicle parked at the far end of the basement. Two shadows hunched over the dashboard.

“How did they get here so fast?” Nicholas was dumbfounded.

“Special police unit,” Lajé answered. “They’re all over the city. The nearest vehicle was probably no more than a couple of blocks from here when the radio call went out.”

“Well, at least that gives us a fighting chance,” Decklin murmured, turning back up the stairs.

“Meaning?”

“If they’re reduced to calling local police units, it means they probably have limited manpower in this area. All the exits won’t be covered – only the most likely. If we slip out a side door, chances are they’ll never spot us.”

Outside the building, the trio made their way to a local restaurant where they found several Vespas parked in the street outside. Decklin selected two, hot-wiring one for Nicholas and one for himself and Lajé.

“I think we should split up. Double our chances of making it out alive. If they catch one of us, the others might at least have a fighting chance. Let’s meet at the Piazza.”

“Any restaurant in particular?” Nicholas asked.

“There’s a place called Luigi’s.” Lajé was the only one who knew the city well enough. “It’s easy to find. We can meet there. Good luck.”

## Chapter 16

Decklin followed Lajé's directions and found the Piazza in just under half an hour. They parked at the far end and then walked to the restaurant, blending with the sidewalk traffic.

"Looks like Nicholas hasn't arrived yet," Decklin murmured as they found a table.

Lajé shrugged. "He doesn't know the city as well as I do. Probably had to stop and consult Google Maps on his mobile every few blocks. He'll be here soon enough."

A waiter appeared.

Decklin placed the order. "Two café lattes, please."

Lajé raised her eyebrows. "You didn't even check with me."

"It's what you always order," he grinned.

She smiled at him over her menu. "You noticed. I'm impressed."

Decklin glanced at his watch once more. "When's Nicholas going to get here?"

"He will. Give him some time." Then she changed the subject, "Decklin, tell me why you're so averse to visiting this bank in Zurich."

He shook his head. "Long story." *That smile again.*

"We've got time."

He swallowed. "Too many bad memories. Before I became a minister, I was not a good person, Lajé. I robbed banks, had connections in the US Mafia. Crazy stuff."

She seemed to take the information in her stride. "So what happened?"

"Too much heat. I eventually fled the country no more than two steps ahead of the FBI."

"South Africa?"

He shook his head. "Brazil. South Africa only came much later."

"So you went to Brazil. And then?"

He sighed. "Ever heard the saying 'a leopard can't change his spots'?"

"More banks?"

He shook his head. "Too high-profile. I took to petty thievery – stealing from the wealthy homes in Rio de Janeiro. It was easy money. I stole paintings, valuable antiques, things of that sort and fenced them through my contacts back in the US."

"So what stopped you?"

He sighed and glanced out of the window. "I killed a man – or at least I thought I had. For three days, I believed he was dead. Couldn't live with myself. I found a Catholic priest and confessed. Then I handed myself over to the police."

"Only to find out the man had lived," she completed the statement.

Decklin nodded. "It was like seeing the sun rise for the first time. I felt God had given me a second chance. In prison, I converted – and I made a close friend of the priest. He visited me every week. The charge was assault, so I only got a short sentence."

Once again, her smile lit up the room. "And you left prison a changed man?"

Decklin chuckled. "I wish it was that simple. I served my time – three long years. But the prison officials were corrupt. They were running all sorts of scams inside and expected the prisoners to participate. Those that didn't were ostracised. Of course, when the time came for

my release, they were terrified I'd blow the whistle, so they planted drugs in my cell. That got me another ten years."

"Ten years! How did you manage?"

Decklin shook his head. "I paid for my crimes – three years in a Brazilian jail is no picnic. I wasn't about to serve time for crimes I'd never committed. Christian or not, I was getting out of there. I escaped and got myself a false passport. Odd name, Decklin Kanabas but beggars can't be choosers. Then I headed to South Africa. Before I left, I went to the Catholic priest again.

"He helped me in a way. Gave me the name of a contact in South Africa who I should call when I arrived. I met the man and the rest is history. He's the only person in that country who truly knows my past."

"A priest?"

"A Bishop – although not Catholic. He's the person who helped me become an ordained minister of the Anglican church. I studied in Grahamstown and graduated four years later as Father Decklin Kanabas. I've been a minister ever since."

Lajé stared quietly at her coffee cup for a moment before replying. "This bank in Zurich would be nothing like those robberies in your past, you know that."

Decklin shook his head. "I can't go back to that life, Lajé. Do you know what I felt when I jumped the fence into Vicini's property? Exhilaration. It scared me to realise it. I'm that close to going back. I actually enjoyed that life – the excitement. To rob a bank again." He shook his head. "I'm scared of what it might do to me. I don't ever want to be that person again."

"Decklin, I'm the last person to tell you what to do, but these are evil people. Vicini and his kind —" She turned away and shook her head.

He narrowed his eyes. "What do you know about them?"

"I can't." She swallowed and her eyes brimmed with tears.

Decklin felt his heart wrench. "What did they do to you?"

She looked down and shook her head again.

"Lajé." He reached across the table and took her hand. "If there's something I need to know you have to tell me. Did they hurt you in some way?"

"Not me." She stared at the table for several seconds. "They killed my sister."

"Your sister?"

"I had a twin."

"And you know for certain it was them?"

"I have all the proof I need."

"Then go to the police. The authorities can —"

Her smile was bitter. "What can the authorities do, Decklin? They own the authorities. That's why I was recruited. Duvalier knew that these people had infiltrated even his own organisation to the highest level. Our unit was designed and trained to fulfil one purpose only. We had to expose them for what they truly were."

"And now?"

She shrugged. "For all I know, I'm the only one left. I can't return to Interpol. It would be like running into the lion's jaws."

"So what are you saying, Lajé?"

"I think you know. That document may be our last hope. It's all we have."

Decklin took a long sip of his latte. *Cold!* He stared out of the window.

Before he replied, Lajé spoke again. "You know, Decklin, the Bible tells us that God works all things together for good. Isn't it possible He could use the talents you meant for evil?"

"And when did you become an expert on the Bible?" He regretted the words the moment he said them.

Lajé glanced down at the table. “You think I’m a killer, and that puts me beyond God’s grace. There’s more to me than what you see, Decklin.”

Decklin took a long time before replying. Finally, he looked back at her and sighed. “My best friend at seminary was called into the mission field. He runs a home in Zambia for children orphaned by AIDS. From the moment I became a minister, I always wanted to be a missionary in Africa, did you know that? But no, that would be too easy. No, no. God wants *me* to rob a bank.”

Lajé bit her lip and looked out of the window. Decklin wasn’t fooled, however. “You think I can’t see that smile?”

Her shoulders started to shake, but no sound emanated from her lips. Decklin gave in and chuckled too.

“I’m sorry.” Lajé finally controlled her laughter. “It just sounded so funny.”

Decklin smiled and gazed out of the window once more. “You’re right. It does.” Then he turned serious. “But this is what troubles me, Lajé. Why would God call me to help an atheist, like Nicholas, rob a bank?”

Lajé shrugged. “I don’t have the answers you’re looking for. What prompted you to help him in the first place?”

Decklin shrugged. “He needed help. They would have killed him otherwise.”

Lajé sighed. “Sometimes, you just have to see a thing through to understand why things happen.”

Decklin grunted. “I suppose.” Then he nodded towards the street. “Looks like our wayward friend has finally decided to join us.”

Lajé’s eyes twinkled. “Will you give him the good news, or should I?”

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Decklin slid into the vacant seat next to Lajé. “It’s impenetrable.”

Nicholas gazed out of the window at the giant building across the street. “There must be some way in. Those windows up there —”

“Won’t help you. I could get up there, and I could get in, but it wouldn’t do any good. The vault with the safety deposit boxes is underground. It would take twenty hours at least to break through those walls, assuming we had the right equipment, which would take months to get.”

Nicholas leaned back in his chair. “So it’s hopeless.”

Decklin sighed and nodded. “It’s extremely high tech.”

Nicholas glanced up sharply. “Come again?”

“They’ve got every security system known to man in that place. Fingerprint and retinal signature devices, face recognition software, you name it.”

“Really?” Nicholas grinned.

“I know what you’re thinking, and it won’t work. They have the ultimate in anti-hacking networking.”

“Which means I designed it.”

“You didn’t.”

Nicholas glanced at Lajé in mock respect. “Look who knows so much.”

Decklin shook his head. “They’re not using technology. They’re using common sense.”

“Won’t help them. No system is impenetrable. The only sure way to stop a hacker is to disconnect your phone line.”

Decklin took a sip of his coffee. “Now you’ve got the picture.”

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but didn’t we phone the bank this morning to ask for their physical address?”

“Indeed we did, but that’s just their office network. Their vault security system is housed in a separate section, with no outside access. No telephone lines, no intercom. They don’t even use external power cables. The entire system runs off generators buried deep in the building’s foundations.”

Nicholas grinned. “Well now I’ve got to try. Even if only to prove you wrong.”

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“I’m sorry, *Monsignor*. I thought you should be the first to know.”

Lorenzo Vicini closed his eyes and massaged his temples. “When did it happen?”

“Weeks ago. It was only when they discovered the security breach that they began to investigate, your Eminence.”

“Don’t call me that,” Vicini snapped. “Save it for public display.” He walked to the window and gazed across the square at the giant dome of St Peter’s Basilica. His voice was icy calm, but inside, he boiled with rage. “So tell me. How exactly did Gallagher breach an isolated network, with no outside lines?”

“It’s all there in the report, *Monsignor*.”

“But you’ve read it,” he turned back to look at his aide.

The man inclined his head. “I have.”

“So tell me. No technology is allowed in or out – no discs, no memory devices – not even mobile phones are taken through those doors. And yet the system was breached and the *Tanit documents* stolen – handed over, in fact. In normal banking hours. By honour-bound employees of the bank.”

The man cleared his throat. “*IoT* technology, sir.”

“What’s that?”

“The Internet of Things,” his aide explained patiently. “The security offices have their own kitchen. The kitchen has a vending machine —”

“So what?” Vicini snapped.

His aide sighed. It was not a weary sigh, but rather more fearful. “So...many modern appliances are network enabled. They ship with Bluetooth, or some similar technology these days. Unlike infra-red, which requires line of sight, these devices can talk to one another through walls if necessary. They generally have a range of ten feet.”

“Get to the point, Lucio.”

“Your Eminence – *Monsignor*.” The man bowed his head. “The security network’s kitchen backs onto an outside kitchen, which in turn has a vending machine of its own. All these devices were supplied by the same company and all of them are network enabled with Bluetooth technology, forming a network throughout the building.

“Gallagher hacked into the bank’s network, as we expected he would. He knew what he was looking for though, and sent out a crawler programme – I think that’s what they call it – to enable Bluetooth on every computer he could find. Once he’d done that, he located all the vending machines throughout the building. From there, he hunted for any other networks that these wireless devices might have access to.

“As it turns out, the offending vending machine was within a ten-foot radius of a security network computer. Once he found that, it was all over.”

Vicini blinked and rubbed his chin. “But surely these technologies have security in place.”

“They do, but nobody thought to protect their system from a glorified fridge that sells chocolates and soft drinks.”

Lorenzo Vicini stroked his chin. “Whoever is in charge of that network’s security, I want him terminated.”

Lucio nodded. “I’ve spoken to the bank. He’s already been fired.”

Vicini lashed out at the sideboard dresser, smashing a lamp and a porcelain vase to the floor. "I said *terminated!*" he screeched.

"Yes, *Monsignor*. At once. I'll ...er... I'll just get someone to clean this up."

Vicini took a breath, struggling to regain control of his temper. "Yes. Thank you, Lucio. Have you told my brother yet?"

"Not yet, *Monsignor*. I came straight to you."

Vicini nodded. "Contact him. Tell him to arrange a meeting with the rest of the financiers. Gallagher will know who they are by now. They must move to protect their interests."

"At once, *Monsignor*." Lucio turned to leave.

"And, Lucio?"

"*Monsignor?*"

"Mobilise every law enforcement agency on the continent. I want them to search every hotel, every hostel, every lodging house, until they find Gallagher and his companions. Understand? *Find them!*"

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"How did it go?" Nicholas stood up from his desk as Decklin entered the room.

Decklin tossed his briefcase across to the sofa and grinned. "Like a dream. In and out. They didn't so much as blink when they handed me the box."

"Yes!" Nicholas exulted.

"I don't know how you did it, Nicholas. They actually bowed and scraped like I was royalty."

Nicholas grinned. "Simple, once we found our way onto their remote network. I used the fingerprints and retinal data you gave them when you deposited your fictitious diamonds and transferred that data onto Vicini's account. Simple switch of ID's in the database. The only difficult part was locating Vicini's account in the raw data. At least we knew roughly when the deposit was made."

"Well, would you like to do the honours?" Decklin pointed at the briefcase. "You've earned it."

Nicholas snatched up the case. He couldn't believe the moment had finally arrived. After all his troubles, he was about to learn who his enemy was. He placed the briefcase on the desk and opened it. His breath quivered in anticipation of what he might learn.

The size of the file alone was overwhelming. "I'm going to need help with this."

Lajé peered over his shoulder and gasped at the staggering amount of paper. "I'll get the coffee on."

"Better order room service too. We're going to be busy for a long time."

Decklin approached and sighed through pursed lips. "And I was thinking we could celebrate – take in some of the sights, you know."

"No such luck, Father." Nicholas grinned. "Better get out your reading glasses."

They spent most of the night poring over the documents. Silence was broken only by trips to the kettle and the arrival of room service.

"This is crazy." Nicholas murmured as he finished a section of the file. "It reads like a work of fiction."

"Don't you believe it." Lajé looked up from her paper. "It's as real as we are. So much of what I've learned about them is finally starting to make sense."

"But if this is real, then these people have been around for hundreds of years. I mean, look at this."

He moved across to Lajé and pointed out a section he'd underlined in pencil. "This is a detailed description of how a small group of families orchestrated the colonisation of the

entire globe. The Americas, Africa, even Australia, were nothing more than their plan to bring the resources of uncivilised continents under European control. Specifically theirs.”

“Uh-huh. Think about it. Who controlled the Dutch East India Company? Those families would have made a fortune.”

“It wasn’t just them. There were the British, the Portuguese, the French and the Spanish. All of these nations built global empires. And this document would indicate that, while those nations waged war on one another, the financiers were all in cahoots, working together to bring about a common goal.”

Decklin interjected. “Why not? These people are not bound by national borders and party politics now. Why should it have been any different back then?”

Nicholas paged back a few leafs. “There were wars among the group though. Battles for power within. Look here. It says that, at some point, the balance of power shifted from Holland to England. Certain families fell from grace and others stepped in to fill the void.”

“When did this happen?”

“It’s not exact. Probably a gradual erosion of the power base in Amsterdam, but you can almost see it happen as you read the history books. Just look at South African history. The Dutch colonised it, right? And built up a huge empire, controlling the Cape of Good Hope for generations. Then suddenly, in 1820, there’s a mass influx of British citizens. The British took control of the Cape at some point – don’t ask me exactly when, I’m not a history buff. But the point is that suddenly, British citizens were colonising the world. Africa, America, Australia.”

“Bear in mind, those sent to Australia were hardly willing participants.”

“Doesn’t matter. They may have been sent to Australia as prisoners, but who controlled the penal colony?”

“Once there, the convicts were set to work, rebuilding their lives. They built homes, farmed the land, mined the minerals, subdued the natives. And where did all their newfound wealth and materials end up? Back in Britain.”

Decklin cut in. “You should have a look at these documents. It’s an eye-opener, I can tell you.”

“What does it say?”

“These people reckon they’ve controlled the American Presidency since – well, as far back as anyone cares to look. Only seven US presidents have won the election without the backing of these people. It’s all here. Ties to Freemasonry, the Kennedy assassination —”

“What did they have against Kennedy?”

“Nothing, as far as I can tell, other than the fact that he wasn’t one of them and they couldn’t control him.”

“So, even today, they control the globe,” Lajé whispered. “They own the politicians and the military, not to mention the police. They run the media, write our laws and control our education.”

Nicholas frowned. “Come on, that’s a bit much. Nobody could possibly wield that much control.”

Lajé raised her eyebrows. “Really, Nicholas? So how’s your defence going back in South Africa?” She didn’t wait for him to answer. “Take a look at this. The history of your country all laid out, as if on some divine chess board. Orchestrated and played out to some master plan.” She tossed the document on the table in disgust. “These people think they’re gods.”

“I just don’t buy it. They’re powerful, sure, but nobody can have the degree of control you’re talking about. It’s just not possible.”

“Read the document, Nicholas. It’s all there. South Africa is the largest producer of diamonds in the world. Ever wondered why it’s illegal to own uncut diamonds in South

Africa? Because Hypatia's Children say it's illegal, that's why. They wrote the laws that perpetuate their own power."

"But laws change. Governments change. My country is testimony to that fact."

She waved a hand towards her file. "It's all in here. The Apartheid government was nothing more than a pawn in their hands, and when they were done with it, they spat it out like used chewing gum. Yes, they saw the writing on the wall, but they controlled it every step of the way. They looked for, and found, their new champions and struck a deal. They financed the revolutionaries in their fight for freedom, and when the time for change came, they swept all opposition aside and paved the ANC's way to power. They control the new politicians as much as they controlled the old. Nothing's changed for them."

Nicholas shook his head. "It still doesn't answer my question. Why me?"

"Wait a minute." Decklin held up a hand as he pored over his document. "I have it here. It's marked under *Technology Barons*." He paused as he read on.

Nicholas gave him a minute to read but he was desperate to know what Decklin had learned. "What is it? What does it say?"

"This is all about a question they posed back in the 1980s, called the Technology Question. They call this group the Technology Barons – new money, they call them."

"Me?"

Decklin glanced up at him and nodded. "You. In the second half of the twentieth century, they recognised a new era, like the industrial revolution, only this was a technology revolution. Unfortunately, while they were able to control the industrial revolution, this new revolution happened too fast.

"They managed to keep control of computer hardware, microchips and motherboards, but software giants boomed faster than they could keep up. Multi-billionaires were created overnight. New fortunes were born and a new power-base was built – one over which they had little, or no, control. They've spent the last twenty-five years working to bring this power-base back under their command."

"Ridiculous! The IT industry would never fall for such nonsense."

"They've made more inroads than you think. Their *modus operandi* is always the same. First, they lure the mark with the promise of money, or power. If that doesn't work, they induce the person to commit some sort of crime and revert to blackmail. If that fails, they opt for character assassination. Actual elimination is only used as a last resort. Experienced anything like that?"

Nicholas shrugged. "Who hasn't? You don't become a billionaire without someone trying to bribe you, or involve you in some crime, or other. It's an occupational hazard."

"One big difference."

"Which is?"

"You never caved. Many people – good people – would have given in and fallen to the temptation, but you never did. Why is that, Nicholas?"

Nicholas shrugged. "It's hard to explain, but – you never met Lawrence."

Decklin frowned. "Lawrence?"

"My partner. We built Infotec together in the early years. You'd have liked him. He was the genuine article. Truly devout in his faith. He would have no truck with any form of dishonesty. After he died, I felt —" Nicholas sighed as he remembered. "Well, I guess I felt I owed it to Lawrence to run the company the way he would have run it."

Lajé reached over and took Nicholas' hand. "How did he die, Nicholas?"

Nicholas shrugged. "Pointlessly. It was the night of my bachelor's party. He dropped me off at home, called Jess from there to let her know I'd got back in one piece – he was always good about that. She'd made him promise before that he wouldn't let the guys get out of hand – no girls jumping out of cakes, or anything like that.

“Then he hopped in his car and headed home. Two blocks from his house – bam! Drunk driver came out of nowhere. Shot a red light. The doctors said Lawrence died on impact. Felt like I’d died that day too. He would have been my best man.”

Decklin nodded. “So, you’ve spent your whole career working for Lawrence.”

Nicholas nodded. “Pretty much. Do I bribe this official, what would Lawrence do? Do I cheat on my company’s tax returns, what would Lawrence do?”

Decklin’s smile was bitter. “It’s no wonder they wanted you dead.”

“What?”

“Don’t you see? You’re a textbook case. They tried to bribe you with money and power, but you didn’t bite. They tried to induce you to commit a crime, but you weren’t interested. They practically crucified you in the press but even that would have come to nothing. In the end, you left them no other recourse but to kill you.”

“Decklin, what are you talking about?”

“Your name. It’s in this document.” He tossed the paper across to Nicholas.

Nicholas pored over the document. He was stunned. “This is dated years before I got involved with Willow.”

“Exactly. I guess Willow saw the same traits in you that they did, which is why he approached you.”

Lajé rose. “We still need names. I vote we get another round of coffee and then get on with these documents.”

An hour later, Decklin broke the silence. “Gotcha!”

Nicholas looked up. “What have you found?”

“Names! Lists and lists of names. We’ve got them, Nicholas. We finally have them.”

Nicholas scrambled across to Decklin and peered over his shoulder. Lajé was there a moment later.

“Pick your country, and I’ll tell all,” Decklin grinned.

“How about the States?”

Decklin flipped a few pages and then whistled. “This list represents some of the most powerful men in the United States of America. Look at this – oil barons, entertainment industry, arms manufacturers.”

“England?”

“Over here.” Decklin pored over the document. “Unreal. We’ve got all of them. Every name you could ever want.”

“You’re forgetting something,” Lajé interrupted.

“Which is?”

“What do you do with the names now that you’ve got them? Who do you report this to?”

“We go to the authorities. Governments, police, the press.”

“And tell them what?”

“Isn’t it obvious? This is an international conspiracy. These megalomaniacs are trying to take over the world.”

“Lajé is right, Decklin. They’re not taking over the world. They accomplished that hundreds of years ago. During the Renaissance, maybe even earlier. They own the police, the politicians and the press. We’d be playing right into their hands. In fact, the only people who’d believe us are the nutters out there who already think the world is run by alien lizards.”

Decklin sighed and sank back in his seat. “So it’s over? There’s no way to fight these people?”

“I wouldn’t say that.” Nicholas gazed back at the piles of documents spread across the coffee table. “We have enough information in these documents to bury these people, but it will take time to get to them. The only way to do it is to release the documents in small doses – through the internet, through rogue journalists. It’ll take years, but we can do it.”

“And where do we hide in the meantime? They’ll find us, Nicholas. They’ll destroy these documents, just as they destroyed Willow’s files. What you suggest might slow them down, but it will never stop them.”

“It will after we take out their rudder.”

“What rudder?”

“First you’ve got to look at what these documents are not telling us. Have another look. The list is endless. It mentions the world’s most powerful industrialists, financiers and politicians, but it’s a list of dossiers on these people that could destroy them if leaked through the right channels.”

“So?”

“Who controls this list? I guarantee you, whoever does is not included in it. Those are the people we’re after.”

“You’re saying there’s a group of people that controls the most powerful families around the globe? Not possible.”

“Why?”

“Because, Nicholas, what would they use to control them? There’s nothing you could offer the people named in these documents. How would you instil fear in them? How would you command their loyalty? Look at yourself. They took away your reputation, your freedom, in fact your very life with a couple of telephone calls.”

“I don’t pretend to have all the answers, but know this much. These people, powerful as they are, are being controlled by others. Find the puppeteer, and we’ll destroy them all.”

“Okay, say it’s true. The person, or people, pulling the strings won’t be found anywhere in these documents. How do you propose we find them?”

“Someone will tell us. These documents reveal more than who our enemy is. It also tells us who our allies are.”

“Of course. You were listed as a priority enemy of the organisation. There were others.”

“Exactly. Perhaps they know something we don’t. At the very least, they might point us in the right direction.”

Decklin nodded. “Let’s get to it. We can safely assume that anyone who is an enemy of theirs can probably be treated as a friend. Let’s get those names.”

Two more hours passed. Nicholas took a breath, rubbed his eyes to clear the blurring, and glanced at his companions. Decklin was immersed in a pile of papers and didn’t look up. Lajé glanced up when Nicholas stirred. Her eyes were bloodshot and she looked pale, but she managed a smile. “More coffee?”

“I guess.” Nicholas nodded towards the window. “Sun’s up. Perhaps we should order breakfast while we’re about it.”

Lajé rose and stretched. “I’ll get the kettle. You get room service.”

Nicholas rose too, embarrassed by the cracking sound of stiff joints. *How did Lajé make it seem so effortless?*

Food arrived half an hour later and even Decklin stopped long enough to wolf down a couple of croissants with slices of smoked ham and mozzarella cheese. He was the first to dive back in. Nicholas felt guilty and joined him. Lajé headed for the bathroom to freshen up and rejoined them twenty minutes later.

“Yes!” Decklin finally exclaimed. “This you’ll be interested in.”

“Someone we know?” Nicholas was afraid to feel too hopeful.

“We don’t know him, but the pieces are finally falling into place. There’s a whole dossier devoted to public enemy number one. They want him even more badly than they want you, and that’s saying something.”

“His name?”

“Joshua Princeton!”

Nicholas fell back in his seat. *You work for Princeton*. He could still hear the hostility in the child-assassin's voice.

Joshua Princeton. A name – a person. On the organisation's most wanted list. "I don't care what it takes. If they want him this badly, he must know something important. We have to find him."

"Any suggestions?"

Nicholas thought about it for a moment. "There's a solicitor I know in London. He's done some investigative work for me in the past, on and off. I'm sure he'd be able to dig something up."

Decklin turned back to the documents. "Give me a moment. I'll get you all the information they have on him." Nicholas waited while Decklin examined the folder. "Says here he's deceased. Died in 1959." Nicholas' heart fell. "Then, five years later, they begin a giant man-hunt. As if something happened to make them believe he'd surfaced again."

"That'll do." Nicholas reached for the phone. He had to Google the attorney's name, but the telephone number was easy enough to find.

Within five minutes, he had the number and placed the call. "Hi, Jack? Nicholas Gallagher here."

"Nicholas! Where are you? I've been following some horrendous story in the paper about you."

Nicholas sighed. "Trust me, that story is fabricated. Not a word of truth in it. Jack, I need your help."

"With what?" The man sounded cautious.

"I'm looking for information about a missing person."

"His name?"

"Joshua Princeton."

"And who's Joshua Princeton when he's had a bath?"

"I'm afraid I can't give you any more clues than that. Sorry."

Jack sighed. "Listen, Nicholas. What's this about? The papers say you've left a trail of dead bodies in your wake from Cape Town to London, with Paris thrown in for good measure. If this guy's going to turn up as another statistic, I don't want anything to do with it."

Nicholas chuckled. "No chance of that, Jack. The man I'm looking for died forty years ago, or thereabouts. I'm just looking for information about his death. Think you can do that for me?"

"Sounds safe enough. Sure, I can do it. What sort of information do you want?"

"Be great if you can put together a report with the details surrounding the death or disappearance of anyone called Joshua Princeton. About forty to forty-five years ago. Probably England. If you come up blank, try the US or Australia. With a name like Princeton, he's bound to be of British decent."

"It'll take a couple of days. Where can I contact you?"

"I'll call you day after tomorrow. Thanks, Jack. I'm in a bind here. Your help means a lot."

"This information. Will it get you out of your problems?"

"I don't know. I'm hoping."

"Right, you are. Call me on Wednesday. I'll do what I can."

Nicholas hung up.

"Well? Will he do it?" Decklin enquired.

Nicholas shrugged. "Said he'd try. I'll call him in a couple of days."

"So what do we do until then?"

"Nothing we can do besides pray."

Decklin raised his eyebrows. "I thought you didn't believe in that sort of thing."

Nicholas sighed. "I'm coming around. If this doesn't work, I don't know what I'll do."

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Decklin maintained that it would be best if they didn't leave the hotel, so the three of them remained cooped up together in their suite. While he agreed with the minister's decision in principle, Nicholas felt like a caged wolverine. He tried to examine the documents on several occasions but, each time, his thoughts turned to Joshua Princeton. In such moments, his gaze would fall on the phone and he lost all will to read any further.

Finally, the moment arrived. "Better make that call." Decklin didn't look at Nicholas. He was engrossed in a baseball match on satellite TV.

Nicholas glanced at his watch. "Suppose so." It was almost the close of business in London. He moved to the phone in his room and dialled. "Hi, Jack?"

"Nicholas. How're you doing?"

"Anxious, thanks. Any news?"

"I've got some information, though I can't see what good it'll do you. When do you want to collect it?"

"Can't do that, sorry. Can you email it to me?"

"I guess so." Jack sounded surprised. "What's the address?"

Nicholas gave the man a Yahoo address he'd set up no more than an hour earlier. "Can you send it now?"

"Hold on a mo'." Frantic typing. A pause. More typing. "Done."

Nicholas already had his laptop online, using a mobile phone. A click of the mouse, and the machine began to download its mail.

Decklin jumped up from his seat. "What are you doing? Isn't this how they traced us in Italy?"

Nicholas frowned. It always annoyed him how ignorant people were of the Internet and its inner workings. He held his hand over the phone's mouthpiece and glanced at Decklin. "This is completely different. Last time we hacked into a server that had security built in. It was designed to trace anyone hacking into it. Right now, I'm connected to a standard mail server from a remote location, using a legitimate means of contact. Do you have any idea how many thousands of nameless users are connected to that machine at the moment?"

Within thirty seconds, the mail popped up in Nicholas' Inbox. He spoke into the phone once more. "Got it. Thanks. Send the invoice to my office in London. Cheers, Jack, and thanks again."

Nicholas rushed through to the lounge. "It's all here. We can move."

"Great." Decklin switched off the television set.

"Where's Lajé?"

"Downstairs, settling the account. She headed for reception the moment you picked up the phone. Got your bag?"

Nicholas hoisted up a carry-all and slung it over his shoulder. They met Lajé just outside the door.

"That was quick." Decklin raised his eyebrows.

"Let's hope it was quick enough. I saw an official-looking car pull up just as I finished paying up."

"They found us already?" Nicholas was angry.

Decklin shook his head. "Totally different, huh? Thousands of nameless users."

Nicholas shook his head. "There must be some other explanation. I'm telling you, there's no way they could have traced us from that mail download. How do we get out of here?"

Lajé grabbed his arm. "This way."

"You're using the side door?"

Lajé frowned. “Do you want everyone to see us leave? We’re dressed casually enough, and there’s plenty of traffic by the pool. Also an exit.”

## Chapter 17

They found a cab and headed for the airport. There, they found another hotel, a small, family-run affair, where they were able to book three rooms. *Bliss*. Nicholas longed for a piece of his own space again.

After a shave and a shower, he switched on his laptop and opened the attachment from Jack Harrow's email. There was a quiet knock at the door.

"It's open." Nicholas didn't look up from his monitor.

Lajé entered, carrying three polystyrene cups of steaming coffee. "Got this from the cafeteria across the street. Here you go." She handed him a cup.

"Thanks." He turned back to the screen. "There's some information here. Not a lot, but perhaps enough to go on."

"Likely candidates?"

"He's found three names. The first disappeared in a skiing accident thirty-nine years ago. It was little more than a mix-up at the hospital, though. A local rescued him and nursed him back to health. Snow storms and lousy communication were to blame. The man turned up again four weeks later when his rescuers finally made it to the nearest village and reported the incident. He's alive and currently living in Bath."

"So, not likely, then. And the second?"

"Joshua Princeton, the second. Born 1913, studied at Cambridge, where he became involved with a group of radicals and joined some sort of Communist group. He was very outspoken against capitalism, which is ironic, considering the family fortune he was to inherit. After university, he continued campaigning against capitalism, got involved with the wrong crowd and ended up in a mental asylum after a particularly bad LSD trip from which he never recovered."

Decklin frowned. "Do you believe that?"

Nicholas shrugged. "Can happen. I've heard that if you have a bad trip with that drug, the nightmare, or vision, or whatever it is can stay with you for years. Long after the effects of the drug have worn off. Some people have never recovered."

"So what do they say happened to him?"

"Apparently, he was sent to an institution where he was cared for and money was paid from a family trust. They say he died two years ago in the institution."

"Any family left behind?"

"A sister. Her sons still run the family business. Shipyards, it says."

"And the third?"

"At first, I thought him the least likely. He disappeared about five years before the time we're looking. Nothing unusual. His private yacht, *Black Sabbath*, sank in the North Sea during a storm."

"Unfortunate but not unusual. Wrong year, for a start. Why haven't you written him off?"

"His ship turned up five years later. Found by the British Oceanographic Institute during a survey."

"And?"

“The ship was way off course. It came to rest miles away from its last reported location.”

Decklin shook his head. “That’s surely no great surprise. Storm, strong winds. If his equipment was broken, he might have even reported his position incorrectly.”

Nicholas shrugged. “Possible. But the salvage company reckoned the equipment was intact. They claim there was no reason why the ship should have gone down. The report suggested the vessel had been scuttled.”

Decklin stroked his goatee. “They’re reaching. They can’t possibly know what happened on that yacht. Besides, these things happen all the time. Wealthy playboys buy yachts, but never bother to learn how to sail them. The first time they get caught in a squall, they panic and the vessel goes belly-up.”

“The document says Princeton was a supreme skipper. He’d been sailing since the age of twelve and had won several awards.”

“So you think you’ve found our boy?”

“The most telling details are the dates. Princeton became public enemy number one the same month the newspaper article appeared reporting that his boat had been recovered.”

“Where was it recovered?”

“Near Whitby. I suggest we head there and see what we can find.”

Decklin shrugged and looked at Lajé. “I’ve got nothing better to do. You?”

She shrugged and nodded. “I’ll book our train tickets. We can head for Calais and hop the ferry back across the channel to England.”

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Dark clouds hung over the coastal town of Whitby. Nicholas gazed down at the harbour. The sea was rough, flashing white spray up against the breakwaters as the waves assaulted the coastline.

He gazed up from the grey waters, taking in the ancient Abbey that crested the hill at the opposite end of the harbour.

“Whatever we’re looking for, we’ll find it down there.” Nicholas pointed at the pier.

Decklin shuffled forward. His eyes followed a small replica of Captain Cook’s vessel, laden with tourists who braved the rough waves in their quest to follow in the great seafarer’s footsteps, if only for a few minutes. “No time like the present. We’ll want to steer clear of the tourist traffic down there and find the working end of the harbour.”

They followed the path down to the harbour itself, then moved inland, crossing a swing-bridge that took them to the other end of the river. From there, they continued inland until they found a group of fishermen tending their boat. The boat looked much like its crew – ancient and weathered, with a toughness hewn by countless voyages into the North Sea.

“Hi, there.” Decklin dropped lightly from the walkway to the pier.

“Good day to yer,” one of the men answered. A few of the others raised their hands in greeting. Some stopped work and gazed at the trio in silence that was more inquisitive than hostile.

“Sorry to trouble you,” Decklin continued. “I was hoping you might be able to assist us with some information. We’re doing some research into salvage operations and missing vessels, particularly during the mid ’60s.”

The man who had greeted them removed a woollen cap and scratched his head. “You won’t find many around here who was working the dock back then, lad.” He nodded back towards the other side of the docks. “There’s a museum t’other side of the harbour. You might find something there.”

A murmur of agreement from the crew.

Decklin pursed his lips and shrugged. "I don't think the kind of information we're looking for will be available in any museum. We were hoping to find people who were actually working here round about 1960."

The crewman replaced his cap and rubbed his grizzled chin as he watched a seagull fly past. "Any ships in particular?"

"There was a privately owned vessel, called *Black Sabbath*. We have a particular interest in her."

The crew murmured in recognition of the name. A second member spoke. He looked like he was about seventy-five. "I know the vessel you're after. Disappeared in the great storm of '59. They recovered her a few years later, though."

Decklin nodded. "So I hear. We're looking for some information on her owner – a Mr Princeton."

The skipper chuckled. "You and half of Scotland Yard."

Nicholas raised his eyebrows. "Scotland Yard took an interest in his disappearance?"

"Aye. They spent weeks here talking to anyone who was out on the docks that day."

"Did they talk to you?"

The man shook his head. "I was too young. Only started working the docks in '68. But I remember them talking to some of the old-timers."

Decklin cut in. "It seems unusual that people remember the incident so well. I thought it was just a run-of-the-mill sinking. Why all the interest?"

The skipper shook his head. "A lot of queer goings on back then. Like I said, I was too young to remember much, but Scotland Yard took a lot of interest in a five-year-old shipwreck. Talk of the town for months. And that really got Crackpot Crenshaw going, I can tell you."

"Crackpot who?"

"Jim Crenshaw. He got his nickname after '65. Had some crazy ideas about a conspiracy back then."

"A conspiracy related to the *Black Sabbath*?"

"Naw, it was to do with a fellow who lived in Whitby for a few months, then disappeared. But talk to Jim for a few minutes. He's bound to find a link to your *Black Sabbath* if you press him." The sailors on the vessel chuckled at the joke.

"You mean this man's still alive? Is he here on the docks?"

"Naw, too old now. Doesn't come down here much. You'll find him in the small cottage at the end of Abbot's Walk, if you want to talk to him."

"Thanks very much," Decklin smiled. "You've been a great help."

"Don't thank me, lad. I've not done you any favours. Crackpot Crenshaw'll bend your ear for as long as you're prepared to listen, if you keep the pints coming. But you'll not get any useful information out of him. When you're done, try the museum, other side of the docks. They might have what you're looking for."

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The cottage was easy to find. It had that quaint beauty that comes from years of neglect. Nicholas picked his way along a cobbled pathway and knocked on the door.

Several minutes passed and Nicholas knocked twice more before he was rewarded with a shuffle and the jingle of keys inside the house. The lock turned and the door opened. The man who answered was slightly built and had a thin wisp of greying hair. White stubble covered his creased chin and pale blue eyes looked like they'd been bleached by the sun.

"Can I help you?"

"Mr Crenshaw?"

"It's Jim to me friends, lad. What can I do for you?"

"We were hoping to chat to you about a ship that disappeared back in '65 – *Black Sabbath*. I understand you were working at the harbour back then."

The man's eyes widened at the mention of the name. "You from the Yard?"

Nicholas smiled. "No, sir. We're just doing some research on missing vessels from that era."

"Well come on in. What are you standing out here for? I'm sure you could do with a cup of tea."

Several minutes later, the three of them were seated in the man's parlour. The seats were rough, but comfortable. Each of them sat with a steaming mug of tea as the old man regaled them with tales from his youth.

"So you spoke to the detectives back in the early seventies."

"I did. I told them they were investigating the wrong murder, for a start."

"Ah, yes. You mentioned the young man who disappeared around the same time."

"That very day, lad. He vanished on the very day the *Black Sabbath* was lost in the storm."

"You're sure of this?"

"No mistake. I remember it like it was yesterday."

"What was the man's name?"

"Lawton. Cecil Lawton. Appeared in Whitby about six months before the tragic day. Kept to himself, mostly. Strange man, he was. Never talked to anyone. Wouldn't even answer the door if you knocked. Then, one day – up and vanished. Never a word of goodbye to anyone. Just disappeared and never heard from again."

"And you think it had something to do with the *Black Sabbath's* disappearance."

"You don't ignore coincidence like that. That's what I said to the men from The Yard when they came here."

"Do you know if they ever followed it up?"

The old man shrugged. "Must have. They spent long enough interviewing me. Came back five times, they did."

"Do you know if they interviewed anyone else?"

"Most of the people who were out on the water that day. Nobody was able to help them much. *Black Sabbath* went down and wasn't seen for five years. Nobody gave it a thought until The Yard appeared."

"But you did."

The old man nodded and tapped his temple. "Not much gets by me, son. That boat went down and on the very same day young Cecil Lawton vanishes without a trace. Something strange going on back then."

"Do you remember who was out on the water that day?"

"Well now, let me see." The old man narrowed his eyes in concentration. "Few fishing vessels – can't recall exactly when they came in. Most of them returned well ahead of the storm. Then there was the vicar, of course. He always went out fishing on his days off."

"The Vicar?"

"Used to be one of the vicars up at the Abbey. Can't remember his name now. He got caught right in it, I remember that. I was out on the docks that day and I remember watching him limp home. Boat took a pounding, I can tell you. I was amazed he made it in. Never thought he was that good a sailor."

"Do you know where he is now?"

"Up with St Peter would be my guess." The old man grinned. "Fair bet, him being a vicar and all."

Decklin chuckled. Nicholas pressed the man. "Did he have any family – wife, children?"

The old man thought for a moment. "Wife passed away before he did. They had a daughter though. She left Whitby some years back."

Nicholas' heart leaped. "Any idea where she went?"

"Married the new vicar over at Aislaby. Probably still find them in the manse, if you ask me."

*Fantastic!* "Do you know which church?"

The old man chuckled. "You won't have to look far in Aislaby. Only one church there as far as I can remember. Woodbine's the name. You'll have to ask around Aislaby to find the manse."

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The manse was a stone cottage not far from the church. "Mrs Woodbine?" Nicholas greeted the lady who answered the door. He guessed her to be in her mid-sixties.

The lady beamed at Nicholas, Decklin and Lajé. "Good day, young man. And how can I help you?"

"We're doing some research into the disappearance of a yacht called the *Black Sabbath*. Mr Crenshaw down in Whitby said your father was out on the water the day the boat disappeared."

The woman pursed her lips. "Mr Crenshaw should also have told you my father passed away several years ago. I'm afraid you've wasted a trip."

Nicholas nodded. "He did mention it. We thought that perhaps you might remember something about the incident, though. Did your father ever talk about it?"

The woman brightened. "Well, come in. You're in time for tea. Why don't you sit down in the parlour. My husband is out visiting a member of the parish, so I haven't gone to much trouble. I'm sure I can rustle up something from the pantry, though."

Nicholas shuddered to think what the lady might have presented if she'd had time to prepare. Tea was served in beautiful porcelain cups with a floral pattern. It arrived with mouth-watering chocolate cake, jam tarts that melted in his mouth and assorted pickles and cheeses, all served with delicious home-baked bread.

She scooped several pork pies onto each of their plates. Decklin was the only person who was able to do the meal justice.

"It's nice to see a young man with such a healthy appetite." The lady beamed at Decklin and offered him yet another pork pie. "The blueberry pie should be warm now. I'll just go and get it."

She returned with a steaming pastry and proceeded to cut thick slices and dish them onto each of her guests' plates.

"Just a small piece for me," Nicholas smiled.

The lady beamed and dished a slice as large as any of the others. "It's so nice to have some company for a change."

"So you don't remember your father ever mentioning the *Black Sabbath*?"

"If he had, I'm sure I would have remembered. What a dreadful name for a ship," the lady shuddered

"Anyone else he might have spoken to?"

Mrs Woodbine shook her head. "Not that I can think of. Most of his friends and colleagues have passed away. It's possible he made mention of it in his journals though."

"He had a journal?" Nicholas forced back his elation. *Don't hope for too much.*

She beamed. "Never missed a day."

"I know it's personal, but this is extremely important. Would you mind if we had a look at those dates in his journal?"

She frowned and waved a hand. "It's not all that personal. My father had no dirty laundry to hide. I think it's wonderful that young people like yourselves take such an interest in the past. What year did you say this ship disappeared?"

"Nineteen sixty-five. In January."

"Just hold on a minute. I keep his journals in my husband's study. I just love to read them. So many beautiful memories."

She returned a few minutes later with a leather-bound book. Nicholas paged to the 12<sup>th</sup> of January and skimmed the record. It spoke of the storm and his struggle to make it home. The minister described the lashing waves and relentless wind in the minutest detail, but made no mention of the missing boat.

At the end of the passage, one small paragraph stood out. *Cecil Lawton stopped by to say goodbye. He'll be travelling to Liverpool, where he intends to catch a boat to America. I'll miss him, but I understand his reasons for leaving. From the moment he arrived, he hoped this day would come. Now it has and I shall never see him again.*

Nicholas shrugged. "Well, I guess that puts the ghost of Cecil Lawton to rest. Perhaps we should tell Mr Crenshaw the mystery's been solved."

The minister's wife looked puzzled. "You know Cecil Lawton?"

"The man Mr Crenshaw has been going on about all these years. Apparently disappeared under mysterious circumstances. It seems he said goodbye to your father before heading to America."

The woman laughed. "Has Mr Crenshaw been on about it all this time? I'm afraid I've lost touch with the goings-on in Whitby. It's a few miles away, but I only go there for shopping, or to visit a few old friends. If I'd known, I'd have told him."

"It does seem odd, though, doesn't it? His leaving so suddenly. Did your father know him well?"

She smiled, remembering. "Nobody knew Mr Lawton very well. Kept to himself, he did. My father visited him once or twice. Just doing his vicar's duties. Invited him to a service, but I don't think Mr Lawton ever came. Not the religious type, I suppose."

Nicholas stared at the record. Something about it intrigued him. He had the profound sense that there was more to the story. "Mr Crenshaw said that Cecil Lawton arrived in the area about six months earlier. Would you mind if we had a look at those dates?"

She shrugged. "Not at all. They're in another book. I don't expect you'll find much about him, though. As I said, my father never knew him all that well."

She returned with another leather-bound book. Nicholas flipped back about six months and skimmed the journal. Nothing. "No mention of him here." He flipped back several more pages, but still found no information on Cecil Lawton. One name did stand out, however. "Who was Rose Tarlton?"

The lady shuddered. "Oh, that was a dreadful story. Had us all scared silly, it did. For months, none of the young ladies were allowed out alone."

Nicholas raised his eyebrows. "What happened?"

"Kidnapped, she was. Beautiful young girl, and one day she just disappeared."

"Was it for money?"

"Oh, no. She was an orphan. Lived with her aunt and uncle, and they didn't have two pennies, poor folk. But they were a good sort and they raised her well."

"Any idea why she was kidnapped?" Nicholas flipped back through the pages. The girl's name appeared on every one.

"Nobody knows. No reason, no explanation. They never found her."

"Your father seems to have been fond of her."

"Oh, he was," the lady smiled. "Always had a soft spot for children, he did – especially for Rose, since she'd lost her parents. When she grew older, she taught Sunday school. Father

was devastated when she disappeared. Cried and prayed in his room for days, he did. Wouldn't eat, couldn't sleep."

Nicholas skimmed the pages. They bore testimony to the man's grief. He wrote as if he'd lost his own daughter. The story was intriguing. It contained police statements, quoted newspaper articles and related much of what the local townsfolk said on the matter. Then, the newspaper quotes began to disappear, followed by the police reports. It seemed the case had gone cold. No clues came to light and nobody had any idea what had happened.

Presently, even the locals stopped talking about it, but not a day went by when the old minister didn't mention her in his journal. It was as if he never recovered from the loss. Something about the incident had touched the man deeply, that much was clear. Then, one day, the records simply stopped.

"This is puzzling." Nicholas frowned and stared at the pages.

"What is it?" The woman was surprised.

Nicholas shook his head and gazed down at the pages again. "Do you mind?" He rose and moved across to sit next to the lady on her sofa. "Look here." He pointed at the journal. "He writes about her every day, from the day she disappeared. His hurt is plain, and it never seems to heal. Time did nothing to change his feelings. Look here." He pointed at a record under the 19<sup>th</sup> of August 1964. "This piece is every bit as moving as the records he wrote mere days after she first disappeared. Then," he flipped the page to the following day, "nothing. He never mentions her again."

The woman frowned in surprise. "It does seem strange. I've never noticed it before."

"Do you read the journals often?"

"From time to time." The woman smiled in her nostalgia. "So few people read these days. And the past is so important."

Nicholas read the record again. Nothing. It was only then that he noticed the tell-tale blemish in the journal. The cut was so fine, that it was almost impossible to see, but it was there. Nicholas felt a chill run through him as bits of the puzzle began to fall into place. The idea seemed outlandish – and yet so plausible.

"Mrs Woodbine, have you ever shown this journal to anyone else?"

"Oh, to one or two family members, perhaps. But nobody's interested, really. The children of today just don't see the importance of reading. It's all computers and television for them." She shook her head and Nicholas noted the sadness in her eyes.

"Nobody else?"

She shook her head. "Not that I can think of."

"Tell me, would your father have shown these journals to anyone while he was still alive?"

"Oh, I shouldn't think so."

"Scotland Yard investigators, perhaps?"

She seemed genuinely surprised. "Why should he do that?"

Nicholas shrugged. "Just making sure."

"He wouldn't have shown these to anyone while he was alive. They were his private journals. I only began reading them after his death. And I can't see the harm in letting someone see them. There's nothing private in there."

"No there isn't. That was removed."

"What?" The woman seemed shocked. "Where?"

Nicholas pointed to the thin strip right near the journal's spine. "See that line there? A page was removed. Just one page. Which means that the August 20<sup>th</sup> record was rewritten a day later."

"But why would he do that?"

Nicholas tried to reassure the woman. "Mrs Woodbine, I believe your father had something to hide, but not in a bad way. He kept a secret for someone, and he took it with him to his grave. I believe that secret saved a man's life – maybe several lives."

"What secret? Does it involve Rose?"

Nicholas nodded. "I'm not sure exactly how, but I believe she may still be alive."

"How can you be so sure?"

"I'm not. It's just a hunch. I'll have to do some digging. By now the trail's so cold, we might never find them."

"It just doesn't make sense. My father wasn't the sort —"

"Mrs Woodbine, I assure you, your father did what any decent man would have done. If he'd ever revealed his secret, the man he was protecting would have died – and possibly Rose as well. Will you promise me something?"

The lady nodded. She still seemed shocked by Nicholas' revelation.

"Please don't tell anyone about this missing page. And don't ever show this journal to anyone either. This is a secret your father meant to keep buried. Honour his wish in that."

She seemed almost fearful as she nodded. "If you say so, Mr Gallagher. Should I tell my family?"

"No. Don't tell them about this, don't tell them about us. We were never here, and I never saw this journal. Understand?"

The old woman seemed perturbed. "You want me to lie about this?"

Decklin leaned across the table. "Mrs Woodbine, there's no reason to lie to anyone. As long as you never show this journal to another living soul, nobody will ever ask you about it."

Nicholas interrupted. "We have to go now, Mrs Woodbine. Thank you for a lovely tea and for all your help. You've answered a lot of questions."

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"Do you mind telling me what that was all about?" Decklin asked as soon as they left the manse.

Nicholas got into the passenger seat of their hire car. "Rose Tarlton and Cecil Lawton were one and the same."

"That's insane!" Decklin exploded.

"Is it? The man writes about her every day in his journal then, suddenly removes a single page and never mentions the girl again – just about the time that Cecil Lawton arrives in Whitby."

"He barely had any contact with Lawton. That much is obvious from his journal."

"Exactly. So why would Lawton specifically stop to say goodbye? And even if he did, why would the priest bother to mention it in his journal the way he did? He seemed to know an awful lot about a man's reasons for staying – not to mention leaving – for someone who barely knew him."

"That's true," Decklin conceded. "But why all the secrecy? Why would Rose Tarlton disappear for nearly three months, then reappear, masquerading as a man? And what could she possibly have to do with Princeton and his disappearance?"

Nicholas shrugged. "Can't answer the whys but I can tell you this; it all fits neatly into place for me."

"Alright, sketch me an outline."

Nicholas sat up. "Okay, here's the basic plot. Rose Tarlton disappears – we don't know why, but let's assume it has something to do with Princeton. Princeton is planning to do a disappearing act at some point in the not too distant future."

"You still haven't explained her link to Princeton."

"I can't. Only she can explain that. Shut up and listen. She plans to assist Princeton in his vanishing act – easily done, since everyone already believes she's dead. She makes use of an old and trusted friend – one who will keep her secret and who she can trust completely. Nobody can know she's alive, so she poses as a man and lives in the village where she can meet the minister openly without arousing suspicion."

Lajé nodded. "All the while biding her time. Waiting for Princeton to make his arrangements."

"Exactly. It has to be done right – and it has to be believable. Finally, the day is right. A storm is predicted on the very day that the minister would normally go out fishing. Princeton sails his yacht out to Whitby, scuttles it in the storm and hops a ride back to the harbour, after broadcasting a fictitious location in his SOS. It explains how the minister made it back safely. Jim Crenshaw was surprised he'd survived. It would have taken a master sailor to navigate through that storm and the vicar didn't have the ability. But Princeton did. He got them back safely and hid in the boat until dark."

Decklin rubbed his goatee. "It's thin, but possible. So you think they left together?"

"They must have. Let's skip forward five years. The boat is found and Hypatia's Children – Vicini and his cronies – realise the numbers don't add up. Princeton's disappearance was a smokescreen and it dawns on them he might still be alive. With their resources, they trace his whereabouts to Whitby. There, they scour the area, searching for him. They must have investigated Cecil Lawton."

"Stupid if they didn't," Decklin agreed.

"What do they turn up? Nothing. Lawton's gone. So is Princeton. In their shoes I would jump to the conclusion that Lawton and Princeton are the same man. I'd search every record in the archives for either of these names."

Decklin shook his head. "Lawton was already around before Princeton disappeared. I'd search for two men travelling together."

"Exactly, and we'd both be wrong. Scotland Yard never turned up anything because they were looking for the wrong people. Now had they been looking for a man and a woman – probably travelling as a married couple – things might have been different."

Decklin took a breath. "Okay, I'm not sold yet, but I'll rent the idea for a while. Any way we can investigate it?"

Nicholas nodded. "Another search through government records. We know they left Whitby on the 12<sup>th</sup> January 1965. Probably would have taken a day at least to reach Liverpool. So we begin searching at the 13<sup>th</sup> of January and go through all the records for the next two to three weeks."

"You're suggesting we hack into government records again?"

Nicholas shook his head. "Too long ago. I'll give Jack Harrow another call. He can check into it for us."

"So we're looking for couples that left for the USA on or since the 13<sup>th</sup> and never returned."

"Exactly."

"That won't be a short list."

"It'll take time." Nicholas reached for the phone.

"Mr Harrow's office," the receptionist's voice sounded shaky.

"Hi. Can I speak to Jack, please?"

"I'm sorry, sir. Something terrible has happened."

"What's wrong?" Nicholas' hand began to tremble.

"Mr Harrow has been murdered. Shot in his office last night." The woman began to weep. A moment later, a male voice came on the line.

"This is Inspector Clarkson. May I ask who is calling?"

Nicholas hung up the phone and turned to Decklin. “We’d better get out of here. Jack Harrow was murdered last night. The police will almost certainly trace this number.”

As they quickly packed their belongings, Nicholas was unable to shake the conviction that Jack had died for helping him.

## Chapter 18

“What now?” Decklin sat between Nicholas and Lajé on the back seat of the intercity bus heading for York.

Nicholas glared out of the window, barely cognizant of the purple heather that lined the narrow English road. “Well, we can’t find the records ourselves and I don’t know anyone else in England who can check this for us. More than that, it would be unfair. Hypatia’s Children have made it very clear that anyone who helps us does so at the risk of their own life.”

Decklin thought about it for a moment. “There is another option.”

Nicholas dared not hope too much. He raised his eyebrows nervously.

Decklin continued. “Maybe we can’t check the records on this side of the Atlantic but if we contacted someone on the other end to check records of ships arriving from the UK...”

Nicholas chewed his lip. “We’d still be risking that person’s life. If our enemies learn that he’s helped us ... on the other hand.”

Decklin glanced at him sharply. “What? You know someone who might help?”

Nicholas nodded. “I’ll make a call when we arrive in York. I know a guy. No family. He’s a private investigator who’s done some work for me.”

After arriving in York, they found a pub with a spectacular view of the cathedral. Once seated, Nicholas made the transatlantic call. “Linden!” he greeted the deep American drawl that answered the phone. “Nicholas Gallagher here.”

“Nicholas! Good to hear from you. I’ve seen your face on a lot of newspaper recently.”

Nicholas winced. “Don’t remind me. Listen, I need a favour.”

The man chuckled. “Favours cost money. You have enough?”

Nicholas smiled. It was a standard line that the man used every time he called. “Yes, I have enough. But think hard before taking this job on. It’s going to be your last.”

There was a pause. “And what’s that supposed to mean?”

“I’m not kidding, Linden. The last guy who did this type of work for me ended up dead in his office. You think about it. I’ll understand if you say no.”

“Talk to me. What’s the job entail?”

Nicholas took a deep breath. “Okay, here’s the deal. Thirteenth of January 1965 or any time up to three weeks after that, a couple left Liverpool on an ocean liner, headed for America.”

“Probably Boston or New York. That’s where most of those old English ships made port on US soil.”

“That was my guess. I’m looking for a young couple possibly travelling as newlyweds. They were probably registered as tourists with some sort of return ticket. Only they never returned to Britain. They disappeared somewhere in the USA. Think you can find them?”

The man chuckled again. “Talk about your proverbial needle. You want me to dig up Jimmy Hoffa while I’m at it?”

“No,” Nicholas didn’t even crack a smile. “Just the honeymooners.”

The man cleared his throat. “And how much is this worth to you?”

“One million US dollars up front. That’s to cover your expenses. You’ll need it to buy a new identity as well. I have a further fifteen million in a Zurich bank account. It doesn’t

require a name, or even a signature. All you need is an account number and a code. Take the job on and the money is yours. Only one condition.”

“Yeah, what’s that?”

“Your word that you’ll disappear the moment you mail me the information.”

“You’re serious about this.” The man sounded genuinely surprised.

“Very serious, Linden. I don’t want your blood on my conscience. I’m asking you to risk your life. Believe me, if I had any alternative, I’d take it. You’ll probably be safe provided you disappear quickly.”

The man gave it a moment’s thought. “Okay. Wire the first million. I’ll do my disappearing act before I start work on this thing. That way, by the time anyone gets wind of it, I’ll already be gone. You’re lucky. I’m sort of between girlfriends at the moment. It’s a good time to skip town.”

Nicholas grinned. “That’s why I asked you. Good luck.” Nicholas hung up the phone and met Decklin’s gaze.

The priest shuffled uncomfortably. “I’m not keen to go chasing all over the globe. Any way we can avoid going to the US?”

Nicholas looked at Decklin. “Travel hasn’t bothered you before. You don’t want to go back to America?”

Lajé gazed out of the window. She had suddenly become deeply interested in the cathedral’s architecture. Decklin sighed. “You know me as a minister, Nicholas, and that’s what I am. But it’s not what I was when I lived there. I’m still wanted in the US.”

Nicholas leaned his elbows on the table. “For what?”

“Theft. You’re looking at the most notorious cat-burglar in the USA in the last two decades, saved by grace and called into the ministry. In my past, I broke into art galleries, banks and some of the most secure private residences in North America. I stole items valued at in excess of fifty million US dollars, and fenced them through contacts in the mob.”

Nicholas stared at Decklin. He felt dumbfounded and could think of nothing to say.

Decklin blushed and grinned. “You seem surprised.”

Nicholas shrugged. “I suspected. It had to have been something like that. The skills you displayed weren’t learned in seminary. But I never imagined anything on so grand a scale. Contacts in the mob?”

Decklin shuffled in his seat. “I took a couple of wrong turns early on in life. Things went from bad to worse.”

“Ever kill anyone?”

Decklin shook his head. “Not my style. Actually, it was my undoing. I – ah – attacked a man in his residence. He very nearly died. I thought he was dead and turned myself over to the police in Brazil.”

“You served jail time?”

“Long story, but yes.”

“Why didn’t you tell me this before?”

Decklin gazed across at the cathedral’s entrance. “I had no reason to. In my line of work, I deal with people like you every day. You were just another arrogant fool who’d got himself into some trouble and ran to the nearest church for help. People like that, as soon as they’re out of the mess they find themselves in, they disappear and don’t come back – until the next time.”

“That’s what you thought of me?”

Decklin grinned. “Was I wrong?”

Nicholas smiled and glanced out of the window himself. “I guess not. So why did you help?”

“You were in way over your head. I was the one who told you to go to the police. When I heard you were marked in prison, I felt responsible. One thing led to another.”

“And now?”

“Ever since I fled Brazil, I’ve pushed people away from me. Past like mine, a man can’t be too careful. You’re the closest friend I’ve had in nearly a decade.”

Nicholas glanced back at the priest. “I don’t fancy a trip across the Atlantic either. Linden should find what we need. York’s a big enough place. We can camp out here until he comes up with something.”

Decklin gazed at Nicholas in hope. “You’re so sure he’ll find something?”

Nicholas nodded. “If anyone can, it’s Linden. This guy’s a bloodhound.”

“And you think he’ll come through? He won’t just take your money and run?”

Nicholas sighed. “I suppose it’s possible. But he and I go back a while. He’s always been honourable in the past. We’ll just have to wait and see.”

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The report arrived several weeks later. A simple email with a number to call.

“Linden! Got that information for me?”

“Piece of cake. Took some time to go through all the records, but money greases the wheels, right?”

Nicholas smiled. “And the names?”

“I was surprised. Less than you’d think. Most of the couples that arrived from Liverpool were either US citizens returning home, or tourists who went back to England within a couple of months. About nine couples were emigrating. I have my finger on the send button. Just read me that code and account number and our business is concluded.”

“That’s great. Here it is.” Nicholas read the number over the phone.

“Right, you are. I’m sending the mail now. I’ll stay on the line until you receive it. Once I hang up the phone, that’s the last time you’ll hear from me.”

Nicholas connected his laptop. The mail was waiting and he quickly downloaded, then skimmed it. The list contained names and destinations, as well as backgrounds on the people Linden had been able to trace. One couple stood out immediately. They’d arrived in New York on Ivernia III of the Cunard Line within weeks of the incident in Whitby. Linden had been able to find no information about them initially.

“Gotcha! Thanks, Linden. It’s all here. Enjoy your retirement,” Nicholas exclaimed.

“Will do. Always a pleasure doing business with you.” The line went dead.

“That easy?” Decklin arrived with a cup of coffee and placed it on the desk next to Nicholas.

“I told you. The guy’s a bloodhound.”

“So who are we looking for?”

“Mr and Mrs Haverston.”

“And you’re sure because —”

“It would seem that, until they’d boarded that ship, Mr and Mrs Haverston didn’t exist. Linden checked both sides of the Atlantic and could find no information on them. They claimed to come from Chester, but there was no record of them anywhere in the voting rolls or the municipal records. No record of the marriage – they claimed to be going on honeymoon. And most important, no record of their return to England. They were due back in two months.”

“So we’ve found our boy. Looks like your man’s done his homework.” Decklin peered over Nicholas’ shoulder.

Lajé looked up from the TV magazine she was engrossed in. “What does it say?”

Nicholas glanced up from the report. "Linden is a genius. He makes it look easy but, trust me, it wasn't. He'll find anything on the flimsiest of trails. I've used him to dig up dirt on competitors, look into the shady pasts of politicians I've dealt with. He's armed me with information on people even the FBI doesn't have."

Decklin cut in, pointing at a paragraph three quarters down the page. "It seems one of the couples returning to America shared the same table as our man Princeton, also known as Haverston, and his bride. After chatting to the old lady, she produced a postcard from the Haverstons. They sent it from Mexico."

Nicholas continued. "Linden wasn't so easily fooled. He was certain the postcard was a ruse to throw any pursuers off the trail. I told him Princeton was a sailor, so he figured that Princeton, or Haverston as he now called himself, would have purchased a yacht to get out of the country."

"It took him a few weeks, but he found a likely candidate. A young English couple purchased a yacht called *Lucky Lucy*, no more than a few weeks after the postcard was sent from Mexico."

Lajé tossed her magazine onto the coffee table. "Haverston?"

"They were travelling under the name of Jones, but Linden is convinced they were the same couple."

"Why?"

"He had a hunch – and I trust his hunches. Once again, he did some guesswork and figured they wouldn't head for the Caribbean. Too close to the US and too easy to trace. He gambled on Princeton's sailing abilities and guessed they'd try for a transatlantic voyage. They turned up at Pitcairn Island a few weeks later. The yacht's name had changed – it was called *Phantom* - but they were still travelling under the name of Jones."

"After that, the yacht disappeared for ten years. Since neither the yacht nor its owners were ever reported missing, nobody bothered to look for it. The *Phantom* turned up again in July 1975, when a diver happened upon her in the Seychelles. No bodies were found and nobody was able to trace the name. It was simply there."

Lajé leaned forward in her chair. "You think they drowned?"

"Not likely. I think Princeton knew exactly what he was doing from the moment he set sail in England. He didn't go that far only to drown in the Seychelles. He had money and the yacht almost certainly had a life raft. I think he scuttled the ship and sailed the life raft for the nearest island in the archipelago. He's probably still there."

"What makes you say that?"

"The Seychelles are a wonderful place for people with means. There are bundles of small, privately-owned islands, up for grabs to the highest bidder. They're quiet, with no passing traffic. A man can get lost there for decades if he chooses to."

"How do you know this?"

Nicholas shrugged. "I've been there once or twice."

"You own an island in the Seychelles?"

Nicholas shrugged. "So, I like a little peace and quiet for a few weeks in the year."

Decklin chuckled. "How do we find him?"

"I'll call my lawyer in Victoria. Have him look into purchases around 1965. It won't be registered in any name we recognise, but if you know what you're looking for, it's easy to spot the fake."

"Fake?"

"Probably a dummy company. A lot of directors funnel money through their companies. It moves through a series of subsidiaries, who may even own shares in the parent company, until it ends up purchasing a jewel in the Mediterranean or an island in the Seychelles. The property is registered to a company, but it's nigh on impossible to trace it back to the source."

It would take a team of forensics accountants to find out who actually spent the money to begin with.”

“You think Princeton did something like that?”

“Probably, but not nearly so sophisticated. Remember, he wouldn’t want to use company money. He was using private funds – probably cash, so he would have bought the property through a dummy company of some sort. Now we know what we’re looking for, it should be fairly easy to trace.”

The Seychelles contact called back within a week. Nicholas put the phone down and grinned. “Four probable properties. All owned by companies of dubious origin.”

“How so?”

“Shelf companies. Accountants start them, but they exist on paper only. Books are kept and returns are submitted to the receiver annually, to give the appearance of legitimacy, but in fact, the companies don’t exist. Then a client comes along and buys one. They go to their local bank and ask for a loan. The first thing the bank manager asks for is books for the last two to three years. Owner can happily supply said bank manager with financials that look sound and go back for five years, even though the company was only started yesterday.”

“And all these islands are owned by such companies?”

Nicholas nodded. “Want to go to a tropical island?”

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Nicholas stared at the island through a pair of binoculars he’d picked up in the duty-free store at Seychelles International Airport, on the island of Mahé. The azure water glistened in the sunlight and palm trees waved to a lazy rhythm in the light breeze.

“This has to be it,” Nicholas murmured.

Decklin leaned against the rail of the small motorboat. “Why? None of the others proved worthwhile.”

“Exactly. This is our last chance to find Joshua Princeton.”

The island was no more than a few acres in size with a glistening white manor home cresting the peak. Nicholas sighed, taking in the pristine beach that ran around the north side of the island and the jetty with one small motorboat and a larger fishing vessel. Fear tickled the back of his neck. What if he was wrong? Had they come all this way for nothing?

The motor dropped to idle as the boat approached the dock. Decklin rose and grabbed the rope while their skipper edged towards the pier. The motorboat slowed until it drifted lightly against the faded tyres. Decklin leaped like a cat onto the pier and secured the line. A moment later, Nicholas and Lajé had joined him.

Decklin looked at Nicholas. “Where to now, son?”

“He’ll tell us, I’m sure.” Nicholas nodded at the young man approaching. He was dressed in a dark suit that looked quite out of place in the tropical setting.

“This is private property. I’m afraid you’ll have to leave,” the man seemed rather more hostile than necessary.

Nicholas suppressed his excitement. No need to get too worked up. Most of the owners valued their privacy and had staff ensure that no uninvited guests appeared. “Is this the Princeton residence?”

For a moment, a shadow passed across the man’s face. It was quickly replaced with outrage. “No, it isn’t. It’s Haverston, and the owner isn’t taking calls.”

*Haverston!* Nicholas smiled. He exchanged a knowing look with Decklin. “Well, we’d like to meet with Mr *Haverston* anyway, if it’s all the same to you.” He took a step forward.

The gun appeared as if by magic. Nicholas froze, but Lajé reacted like a cat. She stepped to her right, out of the fire-line, snatched the weapon and twisted it back on its owner. A moment later, she levelled the gun at the man's head.

Decklin stepped forward. "Like candy from a child. Now perhaps you'll take us to your boss?"

For a moment, the man offered them nothing but a sullen glare. Then he turned, without a word, and led the way towards the house. Nicholas and Decklin allowed Lajé to walk in front, keeping the gun levelled on the man. Instead of leading them up to the house, the guard took a path through a grove of palm trees and headed for the beach.

The white sand was deserted, but for an ancient deck chair and a large fishing rod. Seated on the chair was a man with leathery skin and silver wisps of hair. His head turned at their approach, but his expression was impossible to make out behind the teardrop sunglasses that masked his eyes.

"Sorry, Mr Haverston," the butler mumbled. "They overpowered me. There was nothing I could do."

The man rose from his seat to face the intruders. His movements were nimble considering his age. "It's alright, Jefferson. I'll deal with this." His voice carried a deep ring of authority, as did his bearing. Nicholas fought the instinctive desire to drop his gaze. Instead, he straightened and held his chin high, keeping his gaze firmly focussed on the man's sunglasses.

The stranger ignored the gun. He looked first at Nicholas, then Decklin. "May I ask what this intrusion is about?"

Nicholas addressed the man. "Yes. We're looking for a Mr Princeton. Know anyone by that name?"

The shoulders sagged and the man removed his sunglasses. Nicholas looked into the clearest blue eyes he'd ever seen in his life. "I haven't heard that name in over fifty years. I always knew you'd catch up with me."

Nicholas was stunned. No fight, no denial. Just simple acceptance. "That's it? Fifty years and that's all you have to say?"

The man shrugged. "What do you want? I've been living on borrowed time since the moment I set sail into the North Sea. Fifty years was more than I'd hoped for. Let my butler go. This has nothing to do with him. After that, do whatever you want."

"*Pour notre mère*, for our mother?" Nicholas threw the phrase out.

The man actually laughed. "Nothing you can do will frighten me anymore. I've made peace with my maker. I'm ready to meet him."

Nicholas glanced at Lajé and caught the look in her eye. He nodded and she lowered the weapon.

"Mr Princeton, perhaps we should explain. We're not who you think we are."

The man's forehead creased. "Then who are you?"

"My name is Nicholas Gallagher. I'm a businessman from South Africa. Several months ago, my life got turned upside-down when a man gave me an envelope with a list of the wealthiest and most respected families in my country, implicating them in some sort of conspiracy."

The old man nodded, but said nothing.

"These people ruined my life. They threw me in prison, destroyed my reputation – even tried to kill my wife and son."

The man swallowed. "They survived?"

Nicholas nodded.

"Count yourself lucky, son. Your family's one of the few. Several months, you say. It's a miracle you're still alive. So what brought you to me?"

Nicholas held the man's steady gaze. His heart fluttered like a frightened sparrow. After all this time, he could finally hear the answer to his questions. "I want to know why. I want to know who they are. And I want to know how to stop them."

Princeton nodded in understanding. "Come up to the house. Let's get you something to drink. I don't have any alcohol, I'm afraid. Never touch the stuff. But Jefferson mixes a pretty mean fruit juice cocktail." He turned to the butler. "Jefferson, prepare the guest bedrooms, and have Chef do something special for dinner. We'll be having guests this evening."

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The view from the patio was spectacular. Nicholas leaned against the rail and allowed the light breeze to tickle his face and chest. He glanced across at Decklin, seated next to Lajé on a *chais longue*.

Decklin took a long sip of his Pomegranate Mojito Mocktail and nodded towards the large sliding doors. "Looks like the moment's arrived."

Princeton had changed into a pair of Navy chino trousers and light polo shirt. He fetched a drink from the tray on the table and strode over to the rail where he joined Nicholas.

The man stared out at the ocean for a long time before he spoke. "The why part is easy. They want to control things – the world. And you threatened that power base, Nicholas." Princeton took a sip of his fruit cocktail and continued. "I've watched the news closely over the past several decades. Always wondered what they'd do with the dot com billionaires. It's like the industrial revolution all over again. Only faster and much bigger."

Nicholas frowned. "I don't understand. Put all of us together and you still don't have a fraction of the wealth these people have accumulated."

"That's not the point. Information Technology boomed out of all control. Nobody could have predicted its rise, or the speed with which it did so. I've read about men who built empires worth billions in four years or less. Previously, it took generations to create that kind of wealth. Think like they think. If you could build something that big in four years, what could you accomplish in thirty?"

"I still don't understand. What threat did we pose? Why go to all that trouble?"

"Because they're on the brink, Nicholas. They're so close now they can taste it."

"The brink of what?"

"New world order, Nicholas."

"*Illuminati*?" Decklin asked.

The old man chuckled. "That name's a bit of a joke in their circles. Don't go bandying it about, you'll embarrass yourself."

Lajé spoke for the first time. "You talk of a new world order. That makes no sense. As far as I can tell, these people already run the globe. If my information is correct, they've been doing it since the Renaissance."

"Oh, they're a lot older than that."

"What's their agenda, and why are they after you?" Nicholas asked.

The man smiled. "Their agenda? To understand that, you have to go back to the beginning. Where it all started."

"Sixteenth century?"

"Way before that. Do you know why they call themselves Hypatia's Children? How they command such loyalty from their members?"

Nicholas shrugged. "Hypatia represents something. An ancient deity of sorts? Egyptian? God of —"

Princeton shook his head. "Close but no. Hypatia was a person. She was martyred for her faith in pagan gods. The war they fight isn't physical, nor is it financial. Their agenda is

spiritual. They worship the ancient gods and consider Hypatia the mother of their neo-pagan faith.”

“They worship her?”

“Not her. They worship many different gods. Hypatia is simply the figurehead they’ve chosen. Their original priestess, if you will. They’ve been forced underground by Christendom and Islam for nearly two thousand years. It’s taken them that long to rebuild their power base. And, in their minds, it all began when Christians murdered Hypatia in ancient Alexandria. They’re angry, Nicholas.

“Now they own the world’s natural resources. They own countries, politicians, police. The press, the entertainment industry and education systems are in their hands, and for the past three generations they’ve bombarded the public with images of their new world.

“For the first time in two millennia, the dominant forces on the globe are beginning to question their religious roots, and now Hypatia’s Children are ready to rise and take their place in the world. To claim their inheritance, so to speak.”

Decklin rose from his seat. “That’s their agenda? To usher in a new religion?”

“Not new. It’s older than you know. Paganism has been around longer than Christianity – even longer than Judaism as we know it today. This is a war, Nicholas. And you got caught in the crossfire. I suppose you all did.”

Nicholas shrugged. “What’s the big deal? If they want their temples, why not build them? We believe in freedom of religion, freedom of expression.”

Princeton shook his head. “How dull this world has become. You’re exactly the sort of person they’ve been trying to cultivate. I’m amazed they couldn’t turn you into one of their own.

“Picture the world under the Roman Empire, and before that. Temples abounded. Thousands of gods were worshipped. Mystic cults dabbled in everything from harmless rituals to orgies. Even infant sacrifices in certain ancient cities. Then came Christianity. Israel’s God took His place on the world stage. At first His ascent did little to affect the masses. Pagan rulers slaughtered Christians in their droves and persecuted them for their faith, but they were unstoppable. Eventually the temples began to empty. Finally, the scales tipped. Christian leaders became more powerful than the *paganii*. Instead of remaining victims, they became the aggressors and tore down the pagan temples. They destroyed the figures of ancient gods in Rome’s Pantheon and replaced them with images of the saints, consecrating the building as a church.

“A new breed of ruler had entered the world, and it was no longer fashionable to be *pagani*. Do you know how little of the old religions’ information remains? Christians eradicated it. They burned the literature, and obliterated the idols.

“Now it’s payback time. Left unchecked, these people will do the same to any religion that persists in its monotheistic belief. A hundred years from now, maybe even as little as fifty, there won’t be a church left in Western civilisation. Every image of the crucifix will be gone. After that, the Jewish nation will be decimated – wiped out from the earth permanently. Once the West has returned to paganism – once Judaism is vanquished – they will unite with the east and squeeze the life out of the Arab nations, until Islam is destroyed.

“Then Hypatia’s Children will rise in all their glory. The old religions will reclaim their place in the world and a nightmare will begin that is beyond your comprehension.”

“This is insane,” Nicholas protested.

“Is it? I think you’d better start believing. Your grandchildren could very well grow up in a world where mothers sacrifice their babies to appease the gods. Where orgies are practised as an everyday part of holy worship. They’ll see virgins sacrificed annually, if not on national television then via streaming video over the internet, at events like Halloween and what you

call Christmas and Easter. Of course, those holidays will be changed back to their original names.”

“It’s not possible. The laws won’t allow it.”

Princeton suddenly became angry. “Wake up, Nicholas! It’s already happening. Who do you think writes the laws? These people mould young minds in schools the world over. Already, prayer has been banned in schools throughout America. Church denominations are appointing practising Wiccans as bishops in England. It’s only a matter of time before pagans are running these organisations completely. And then comes the tipping point.”

Nicholas shuddered. The man spoke with such conviction. *He was so believable.* “How do you know all this?”

Princeton hesitated. “Because I planned it.”

It was as if he’d been slapped. “You did what!”

“That’s right. I planned the entire thing.”

“You were one of them?”

The old man inclined his head in agreement. He said nothing, staring at Nicholas’ shoes.

Nicholas gazed out at the gentle waves lapping the island's shore. “How deeply were you involved?”

Princeton sighed. “As deep as you can get. You have to understand how the organisation works. Most people follow the money. That’s why they never unearth the truth. It’s a smokescreen. Means to an end, nothing more.”

“I thought the money was everything. Isn’t that why they’re after me?”

The old man shrugged. “Yes and no. They control the funds, to be sure. But the financiers are low-level operatives. Very often, they don’t even know who their master is. Look at it this way. If you’d joined, you would have been inducted into some sort of secret society – Freemasons, Skull and Bones, Rosicrucians, it doesn’t matter. They’ve infiltrated all of them at the highest level. Every one of them belongs to Hypatia.”

“And the financiers – they control the politicians?”

“Yes. Call them the go-betweens if you like. The financiers decide who rules the nations, who stays in power. That’s how they control education, police, military, press – you name it.”

“Then who controls them?”

“The priesthood. Only the most loyal and faithful *paganii* financiers and politicians are allowed to rise to the top of those organisations. There, they rub shoulders with the pagan priests. Some of the more eligible families even send their children into the priesthood. That’s the Council of Five Hundred. They run the organisation world-wide. They control as many facets as possible. Of course, there are always independent organisations. Usually children experimenting with witchcraft, Satanism or full-blown pagan worship. Those that show potential are brought into the fold. Above them is the Council of One Hundred and Sixty-Nine. They control the assassins.”

Nicholas glowered. “I’ve met some. How are they controlled?”

“Assassins are chosen from the most faithful among the Temples of Molech.”

Decklin frowned. “Molech?”

“A Palestinian fire god. God of war. One of the many gods referred to as Baal in the Old Testament. They’re special. Fanatics to the cause who kill without compunction. They’re motivated by something most Christians have never understood. There’s a dog-like loyalty that’s unwavering. They care little for money or any carnal lusts, although every desire is fulfilled for those faithful to Molech. They’re treated like royalty. And feared as the organisation's enforcers.”

“And above them?”

“The Council of Thirty-Nine. These are the most fervent believers, all from the old families. Many of these people can trace their lineage all the way back through the Dark Ages.”

“How have they survived for so long?” Nicholas asked. He no longer doubted the truth of Princeton's claims.

“The priesthood has been around since the Pharaohs, Nicholas. The sudden rise of Christianity whittled away its power-base, but many rulers remained loyal to the old religions. The priests went into hiding. They married royalty and taught their children to pay lip service to the new power. But, all the while, they instilled in them a true understanding of where their roots lay. They maintained their influence over the royal families of Europe and the Tsars of Russia.

“Royal dynasties rose and fell, but the money remained in the hands of an elect few families, and those families remained loyal to their roots. They survived the Dark Ages and the Renaissance. Through the discovery of the New World and the passages to the East, they gained control of the colonies and expanded their empire across the globe.”

Nicholas frowned. “And you were one of the Thirty-Nine?”

“No. Even that council is subject to a higher power. The high priests of the most powerful temples in the world. The Council of Thirteen. I was the chairman of that council.”

Nicholas was stunned. “How did you escape? And why? What could possibly have turned you?”

The old man smiled. “You obviously never met Rose. If you had, you wouldn't ask that question.”

“You're referring to Rose Tarlton, I presume?”

Now the man positively beamed. He nodded his head vigorously. “Oh, she was a feisty girl. We needed a virgin for Molech. She was to pass through the fire. They kidnapped her and brought her to Yorkshire. That's when I met her. I've never met anyone so fearless. Death didn't frighten her in the least. The only look I ever saw in her was pity. Right up to the moment I held her over the furnace.”

“You were the high priest performing the sacrifice?”

The man nodded. “To my shame. But it never happened. There was a rockfall and the furnace caved in, dousing the flames. It was a bad omen. We'd already had our fair share that morning, what with the idol falling flat on its face and shattering. We called off the ceremony and returned her to her quarters.

“I knew it was her God causing all the trouble. In my own temple, at that. Afterwards, I went and spoke to her. She shared the story of the crucifix with me. Her faith was so transparent – so real. Unlike anything I'd ever known. The love in her eyes was what finally swayed me. That night, the high priest of Molech fell on his knees and declared Jesus Christ the God above all others. In less than half an hour, I renounced everything I ever knew.”

“And then you helped her escape.”

“That was the easy part. I wrapped her in a carpet and told everyone I'd killed her in her room. Nobody would dare question my claim. My escape had to be constructed more carefully. The moment they realised I'd turned, they would have murdered me. The worst months of my life were those last few spent pretending to be the high priest of Molech. She made all the arrangements and put me in contact with the priest in Whitby. Once I set sail, I knew there'd be no hope of return – and I was grateful.”

“The records indicate that you left England posing as a married couple. What happened to her after you got to America?”

“As you can imagine, after so powerful a conversion, my feelings for her were inevitable. The Lord only knows why she settled for me, though. The priest married us that very night in the Abbey at Whitby. We've lived together on this island for the best part of fifty years. She passed away nearly two years ago.”

Nicholas nodded in understanding. “So that's why they want you so badly.”

Princeton nodded. "It was the ultimate betrayal. If I could have shown them the truth I would have, but I was too weak. Escape was my only option. I never learned Rose's bravery."

The truth brought a chilling reality to Nicholas. "And now they've come full circle, ready to usher in the old ways. Is there any way to stop them?"

Princeton shook his head. "You can't stop them any more than you could stop Christianity in this world. As long as there are sincere believers, paganism will survive. All you can do is slow them down."

"Tell me how."

Princeton smiled and shook his head. "If there was an easy way, don't you think I'd have done it? The only way is to expose the priesthood. They're the driving force behind the organisation. Neutralise them, and you'll slow them down. Remove them and you leave the ship without a rudder. Do you have anyone to help you?"

"Other than the three of us?" Nicholas shook his head.

Princeton nodded. "There's a man at Interpol – Duvallier. I've lost contact with him, but he can be trusted. Find him —"

Lajé shook her head. "Duvallier is dead. He started a secret investigation unit that operated as autonomous cells throughout the Commonwealth. Unfortunately, Hypatia's Children got to him. They tortured him but he never broke. The unit survived his death and continued its work until recently. However, a few months ago, it was compromised. The cells have all but been destroyed."

The old man was astounded. "How?"

Nicholas cleared his throat. "My fault, really. A list of codes came into my possession and I handed it over to the authorities. That was before I believed any of this. We suspect they've been using the codes I gave them to destroy the cells one by one. As far as we know, Lajé Jaffa is the only surviving operative."

The old man's expression clouded. "Nicholas, you don't have much time. I watch the news – Sky, CNN. A constitutional amendment is about to be passed in the USA that will change the world forever."

"What amendment?"

"A revision of presidential power. Recent acts of terror against the United States of America have primed the American people for a pseudo police-state. This will give the American president unilateral authority that will allow him to do just about anything – even disband the Senate." He stopped and gazed out at the tranquil waves once more. When he spoke, it was more to himself than to anyone else. "It's like the Roman Empire all over again."

Nicholas brought him back. "But that would create an American dictator."

Princeton whipped his head around and blinked. "Not a dictator, Nicholas – a Pharaoh. The next elected US president will have the power to declare himself President for life. And, by the end of his term, he'll have the legal right to pass the title on to his children."

Nicholas did a quick mental calculation. "We still have time. The next election isn't for another three years."

Princeton shook his head. "That's irrelevant. The amendment is all-important. Once it's ratified, the final stage of their march to power will be set in motion. Hypatia will be unstoppable."

"Do you know who the next president will be?"

The old man shrugged. "Fifty years is a long time to be out of the loop. Whoever he is, I doubt he'll be American-born. Probably of European origin."

"What makes you say that?"

“The amendment contains clauses that we never put in the original draft. Among other things, it amends the law stating that the president must be born on US soil to qualify for office. The only reason they’d do that is if their champion was born elsewhere.”

“And when he becomes president?”

Princeton shrugged. “Beginning of the end. He’ll use the might of the US military to crush the Middle East and usurp their control on oil. But not before he breaks relations with Israel and allows her neighbours to annihilate her. By the end of his first term, the Jewish nation will be obliterated.”

Decklin shook his head. “It’s just not possible. The UN would never allow it.”

Princeton snorted. “The USA and Great Britain have already proved they can defy the UN. In a recent test, they declared war and invaded a foreign nation without UN sanction – in fact in defiance of UN policy.”

“That was different. Their information gave them legitimate grounds —”

“And who do you think fed them the information? Hypatia’s Children orchestrated the entire thing. I’ll stake my life on it. It was a trial run for the real thing, and it passed off without a glitch.”

It was a chilling thought. And Nicholas realised that it was all too plausible. His throat suddenly felt very dry. “And in the West?”

“The freedom of speech and freedom of religion laws are already stacked against Christianity. By the end of his first term, it will be illegal to broadcast any Christian message on the airwaves, or over a public address system. Taxes will be imposed on churches and ministers breaking the law will be imprisoned and silenced. By the end of his second term, Christianity will be outlawed completely.”

“Surely someone can prevent that.”

“Not after amendment is ratified. He’ll be well within his legal and constitutional rights to silence anyone who opposes him.”

“But what about the Senate?”

“I told you – he can disband the Senate. He’ll probably humour them for a while, but if they become too troublesome, he’ll simply step up the programme and remove them earlier.”

“And then?”

“He’ll declare himself president-for-life. And, if he doesn’t declare himself emperor, his successor will. By the time his successor dies, they’ll both be deified and the Pharaonic dynasty will be re-established. The US president will become a god and will be worshipped by nations.”

Nicholas shook his head. “How much time do we have?”

“My guess is, Hypatia’s Children already have enough members of both the Senate and House of Representatives in their pockets to propose the amendment. It will be submitted within the next two weeks.”

Nicholas swallowed. “Tell me where I can find the priesthood. Where are they hiding?”

Princeton shook his head. “You’ll never stop them on your own. You’ll need help.”

Lajé cleared her throat. “There might still be others like me – Interpol agents who survived the massacre. We could go to England and try to reach them.”

Princeton frowned. “Well, don’t waste time.”

Lajé glanced at Nicholas. He winced and shook his head. “I could try to book a private charter but that could take anywhere up to four days.”

Lajé nodded. “Could I use your phone?”

The man was incredulous. “You want to try to reach them from my house!”

Lajé smiled. “I want to book our plane tickets back to the UK.”

Princeton nodded. “Of course. There’s a phone in the study. Jefferson will show you where it is.”

She returned fifteen minutes later. Nicholas raised his eyebrows. "Did you arrange them?"

She nodded. "I couldn't get us all on the same flight at such short notice. I've booked two tickets for tomorrow morning. Decklin and I will fly out then. Your flight leaves twenty-four hours later. We'll meet you when you land. Hopefully, by that time, I'll have made contact."

The following morning, Nicholas bade his friends farewell at Princeton's jetty. Jefferson took the helm and ferried them back to the mainland.

"Godspeed," Nicholas murmured.

Princeton nodded in the dim morning light. "Better pray to God they find the people they're looking for."



## Chapter 19

"Anything?" Decklin leaned forward, perched on the edge of his seat. Lajé didn't look up. Her eyes were riveted to the personal ads.

"Nothing," she murmured. Her jaw muscles clenched, then relaxed. Finally, she flung the paper onto the floor in frustration. "It's over."

Decklin let out a long sigh. "Well, it was a long shot. We knew that before we left the Seychelles."

He gazed out of the hotel window. The water of the Thames reflected London's city lights through the dull twilight drizzle.

Lajé shook her head. "I just can't believe they're all gone. Surely there must be *someone* out there trying to make contact."

He reached across and touched her cheek. "It's not your fault, Lajé. You've done all you can."

"No," she said. "There must be more we can try." She reached for the paper again. As she lifted it, a headline on a different section caught Decklin's eye.

He frowned and reached for it, quickly scanning the article. "I think I've found our answer," he grinned.

Lajé looked up. Her eyes sparked with hope. "What is it?"

He held up the page, turning it so that she could read the headline. The accompanying picture was a head-and-shoulders shot of Cardinal Lorenzo Vicini. "Says here that London is hosting an inter-faith summit Friday next week. Apparently Cardinal Vicini has arrived early. He's one of the key speakers and has some meetings planned prior to the conference."

Lajé stared at the photo as if in a stupor.

"Didn't you say there was some bad blood between the Cardinal and his brother?" Decklin prompted her.

She shrugged. "I suppose it's worth a shot. He probably won't even see us."

Decklin reached for the phone. "He can only say no."

He found the number for the Hilton, where the article said the Cardinal was staying. "Can I have His Eminence Cardinal Vicini's room, please?"

"And who should I say is calling, sir?"

"Father Kanabas." He smiled at Lajé's shocked expression, and put his hand over the phone. "They're more likely to put a man of the cloth through," he whispered.

"Just one moment, Father." The line beeped and then began playing some unidentifiable generic tune. Presently the line clicked and someone picked up.

"Hello?"

"Cardinal Vicini?" Decklin asked.

"No, this is his aide speaking. Can I assist with something?"

Decklin paused. "It's a personal call. It concerns his brother."

The man hesitated. "Hold on a moment, please." Decklin glanced at Lajé and shrugged.

After a moment, a second voice came on the line. "Good evening, this is Cardinal Vicini."

“Your Eminence. My name is Decklin Kanabas. I'm a parish priest from South Africa, and I need your help.”

The man appeared confused. “I'm sorry. Do I know you?”

“No, but I've met your brother.”

The man cleared his throat. “I'm afraid I haven't spoken to him for some time.”

“I know. It's why I hope you'll be prepared to help me. My options are limited, I'm afraid. You're my last resort.”

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“Lorenzo Vicini's agreed to help us, Nicholas.” Lajé was barely able to contain her excitement over the phone. Nicholas smiled.

“What did he say?”

“He's invited us to a private meeting at a friend's home in Kensington. I think he suspects his brother is involved in something sinister, but he doesn't have any proof.”

“That's fantastic!” Nicholas couldn't help shouting. “When are you going to meet him?”

“In about two hours. We'll fill you in tomorrow morning when we collect you at Heathrow.”

Nicholas winced. It was a long time to wait. But it was for the best. They'd agreed that Decklin and Lajé should keep their whereabouts in London secret. “Until tomorrow, then. It looks like something's finally going our way.”

He hung up the phone and headed through to the dining room. Joshua Princeton was already seated at the table, and the aroma of roast pork wafted from beneath the silver serving dish in the centre of the table. Princeton's expression was anxious. “Any news?”

Nicholas grinned and nodded. “Looks like we've finally found an ally – and a powerful one at that.”

“Duvallier's people?”

Nicholas shook his head. “Better than that. A top-ranking member of the Vatican. Cardinal Lorenzo Vicini.”

Princeton turned pale. “God save us. Did you say Vicini?”

Nicholas nodded, but the man's reaction was alarming.

“Nicholas, you have to stop them. They're walking into the lion's jaws.”

“No, no. You're thinking of Marco Vicini. This is his brother, Lorenzo. He left the family to go into the ministry.”

“I know who he is!” Princeton spluttered. “Didn't you hear a word I told you on the veranda yesterday? The financiers are low-level operatives. The real power rests among the priesthood.”

“But that's pagan priesthood, Baal, Molech —”

“And where do you think those people hide?”

The blood froze in Nicholas' veins as realisation dawned. “In the church!”

Princeton rose from the table and waved his arms frantically. “Get on that phone and stop them, for pity's sake!”

Nicholas tried to swallow. “I can't. I have no way of contacting them until I arrive in London.”

Princeton smashed his fist against the table in frustration and rage. It was nearly thirty seconds before he spoke. “You have to leave.”

“Now?”

“It's too risky for you to stay. If Hypatia's Children find you – you're safer away from the island.”

“What about you?”

Princeton shook his head. "I don't matter, Nicholas. I've had fifty years more than I deserved. Pack your belongings. I'll arrange some food and have Jefferson take you to the mainland. With luck you'll slip by them at the airport."

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The home looked like a hotel. Decklin studied the imposing stone building. The giant oak door opened before he had a chance to knock.

"Father Kanabas?" Even the butler's accent dripped with aristocracy.

Decklin nodded.

The man smiled. "Cardinal Vicini is waiting in the study."

They handed the man their coats. Two bodyguards appeared, blocking their path. "You'll forgive us, Father," the butler smiled. "Due to his Eminence's high profile, we must search you for weapons. You understand."

Decklin glanced at the bodyguards. They disregarded him. Instead, their eyes raked Lajé's body with hungry looks. He fixed the butler with a defiant gaze. "If you're suggesting that those two are going to run their hands up and down this lady's —"

"Oh, good heavens, no," the butler chuckled. "We have a simple metal detector around the door. I merely meant that if you have any rings, or mobile phones, you'll have to remove them."

Decklin relaxed. Moments later, they entered the study. A frail man with greying hair sat behind the desk. He beamed as they entered the room. "Rev Kanabas, it's a pleasure to finally make your acquaintance. And your lady-friend? Ms Lajé Jaffa, I presume?"

Decklin froze. "How do you know —" he glanced across at Lajé. She crouched like a tigress, ready to strike.

Vicini waved a dismissive hand. "It'll do you no good, Ms Jaffa. The weapons aimed at your backs would render you immobile before you could make it halfway across this floor."

Decklin sagged in defeat. "Am I to assume that we've finally seen the true face of Hypatia's Children?"

The man smiled. "Very astute, Father. But I didn't bring you here to discuss my ingenious cover. Now suppose you tell me where I can find Nicholas Gallagher?"

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Nicholas was morose on the flight back to London. Joshua Princeton's words haunted him during the entire trip. Would Decklin and Lajé even be there to meet him when he disembarked? He could only hope.

In his mind, he ran through the names and locations Joshua Princeton had given him. Yorkshire, Wales and Sussex. Some of the most respected families and most expensive real estate in the United Kingdom. All the information meant little, however. With no evidence or help to get the authorities to investigate, his hands were tied.

The plane finally touched down and Nicholas headed for customs, flashing his passport at the officials as he entered the United Kingdom. He was too preoccupied with his companions' fate and barely noticed the customs official step forward at first.

"Excuse me, sir?"

Nicholas looked up, startled. "Yes?"

"May I see your passport, please?"

"Of course." Nicholas handed the man his book. He felt uncomfortable and became acutely aware of the passing stares.

The man glanced at the document for a moment. Then he looked at his companion and nodded. "If you'll just step this way, please." He motioned towards a side booth.

Nicholas didn't budge. "May I ask what this is about?"

"Just a routine check, sir," the man smiled

"Routine! It's an outrage." *You're protesting too much!* Nicholas struggled to bring his fear under control.

The man was calm, but firm. "We just want to ask you a few questions, sir."

Nicholas glanced about wildly, desperate for any excuse not to go with them. "Well can I get myself some cigarettes first?"

"This is a no smoking zone, sir. It wouldn't help."

"Well, can I, at least, get some nicotine gum? I just got off an eleven hour flight."

"We'll get some for you. Now will you step this way?"

They ushered Nicholas through an official looking door with a sign that said AUTHORISED PERSONEL ONLY. One of the guards waited outside while the other followed Nicholas into the room. The guard closed the door and motioned to a comfortable sofa. Nicholas glanced about the room. There wasn't much to work with. Apart from the sofa, there was a table with a cheap lamp and a water dispenser in an adjoining room. He'd have to act fast, before reinforcements arrived.

He ran his hands through his hair and sighed. "How about that gum?"

The guard turned back to the door and called down the passage, "Baz! Can I have a packet of your nicotine gum? I've got a guy in here who is desperate for a fix."

While the man's back was turned, Nicholas snatched the small spotlight-lamp from the table and placed it on the floor. He switched it on and carefully pressed it up against the sofa fabric.

The man returned with a small packet of nicotine gum. Nicholas stood up to accept the gift. Moving to the opposite end of the sofa, he faced the guard, drawing the man's attention away from the empty table. "Right, you had some questions for me?"

The man nodded. He appeared relieved that Nicholas was prepared to co-operate.

"We simply want to verify your papers, that's all. Where do you live in the UK?"

"Bracknell." Nicholas coughed, quietly spitting the gum back into his hand. He needed to keep his wits about him and a sudden nicotine rush would not help his cause since he had never smoked in his life.

"Place of employment?" the guard continued.

Nicholas smelt the first acrid wisps of smoke. The lamp was beginning to weave its magic against the sofa fabric. "I'm self-employed. Could I have a glass of water, please?"

The man sighed and turned to fetch some water. There was a crackle as the sponge and fabric ignited. As soon as the man's back was turned, Nicholas slipped from the sofa and hid behind it. The fire spread quickly and by the time the guard turned back, there was nothing but an empty, smoking chair.

Nicholas crouched behind the sofa in anticipation of the man's reaction. He listened for the approaching footsteps. Which way would the guard go? The footsteps moved right. At least now he had a weapon.

In a flash, he spun the couch and ran the flaming end into the guard. The man shrieked and began slapping at the flames that licked his limbs.

Nicholas turned and ran the couch towards the door. It was predictable that whoever was outside would enter the moment they heard a shout from inside. The second official stepped through the door into a wall of flame.

It was frightening how quickly the sofa burned. Nicholas lunged it towards the approaching guard in the doorway. The man tripped and fell headlong onto it. The guard's reaction was primal. All thoughts of securing his prisoner evaporated in his effort to escape the inferno.

Nicholas seized his opportunity. He jumped onto the sofa and through the flames to freedom. In the passage outside he glanced back to see that the first guard had recovered and was pouring water from the dispenser over the flames.

He didn't bother to take in any more, but raced down the passage and out of the door. Outside, he found two more officials blocking his way. "Help, please! Fire," Nicholas beckoned back towards the flaming sofa now jammed in the doorway further down the passage.

The two men rushed to assist. As they did so, Nicholas melted into the crowd. It was all he could do to fight the impulse to run. That would only make him stand out.

Instead, he shoved his hands in his jacket pockets, hunched his head down and strolled in the midst of the crowd, heading towards the arrivals terminal as if waiting for a friend. The door flew open behind him, slamming hard against the wall, but he didn't look back. The guards' first instinct would be to search for him in the opposite direction. *Trust your gut.* Nicholas' heart raced. He felt exhilarated – and terrified. What had he become? Four months ago, he would have found such a stunt unimaginable. And yet, he'd managed it without a word of advice from Decklin. He'd controlled the situation, used the limited resources available and escaped. *You've learned to think like a criminal.* It was a chilling thought.

Five minutes. That should be enough time. Nicholas glanced at his watch. He removed the jacket and strolled towards the exit, making sure he steered clear of watchful security types.

The exit beckoned. He exulted in his freedom. A moment later his world crashed.

"Nicholas Gallagher? Nicholas Gallagher. Would you please contact your wife immediately?" The words blared over the public address system.

He froze and listened as the message was repeated. The menace was too real. There was no way this was a bluff. They knew he was there. They'd even used his real name. He hurried out of the airport terminal and found a taxi. After a quick trip across town, he found a public phone and dialled the number with a trembling hand.

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"Nicholas?" His father-in-law came on the line.

"Where's Jessica?" Nicholas felt too worried to bother with pleasantries.

"They've taken her, Nicholas. And Jared too." The old man sounded like he was on the verge of tears. "What have you gotten involved with?"

Nicholas clenched his teeth, but ignored the question. "When did this happen?"

"Three days ago," the man spluttered. "I've been sitting right by the phone ever since. Where have you been?"

Nicholas sighed. *Jess taken! And Jared – my son.* "I've been arming myself with information. At least I finally know who and what I'm dealing with. Have they contacted you? Left any messages?"

There was a rustle of papers. "They left a number. Said you should call it."

Nicholas repeated the number back, committing it to memory. "Did you call the police?"

"Of course I called the police!" the old man snapped. "My daughter and grandson have been kidnapped."

*Stupid!* "Bill, you have no idea what you're dealing with. These people are beyond the reach of any law. There's nothing the police can do. Keep that number handy in case I need it again."

"I had the police put a trace on it."

Nicholas shook his head. Was the man hearing a word he said? "Like I said, it won't do any good. It's probably Voice over IP number that routes incoming calls to a server. They could answer that call from anywhere in the world. The number's location is useless."

“Nicholas,” his father-in-law was pleading with him now. “They’ve threatened to kill Jess and Jared if they don’t hear from you. Their instructions were for you to call and leave a number where they could reach you. I only pray it’s not already too late.”

“Don’t worry.” Nicholas wished he could feel as reassured as he sounded. “Thanks, Bill. I’ll call them right away. They won’t do anything until they hear from me.”

He hung up the phone, praying fervently that he was right.

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It was 11h20 when the phone rang. Nicholas awoke from a fitful sleep.

“Mr Gallagher.” It was the same slick voice that had called him in Cape Town and the London pub. The man affected a hurt tone. “You’re making me think you don’t trust me.”

“Explain,” Nicholas couldn’t hide his hostility.

“Our message was clear. Leave a landline number and then wait there until we contact you.”

“Which is exactly what I did.”

“You’re not at that number, Nicholas. It’s a number at your London office, set to forward to a mobile number, which is lying in a safety deposit box at Waterloo station. Forwarding from phone to phone makes it very difficult to track you down.”

Nicholas scowled. “The fact that you know this proves me right in my paranoia. Where’s my wife?”

“All in good time, Nicholas. All in good time.”

He felt nauseated. The jerk was actually enjoying this. “Either I talk to her now, or we have nothing to talk about.”

The voice became a little harder. “Nicholas, you don’t hold any of the cards here.”

“On the contrary. I have names, addresses – everything. Temple of Molech mean anything to you?”

There was a pause. Nicholas exulted. He’d struck a nerve. “See, I’ve located an old friend of yours. Joshua Princeton has given me all sorts of juicy information about Hypatia’s Children. And the constitutional amendment that’s about to be proposed by the US Congress.”

Another pause. After a moment, a new voice came on the line. “Gallagher? I have no interest in Princeton or anything you think you’ve learned from him. We’re not playing around here. I have your wife and son. The first time you put a foot out of place, one of them dies. You won’t know which until the police find the body. Understand?”

“Okay,” Nicholas calmed his voice. “Just remember that sword cuts both ways. Anything happens to them, your bargaining chips are gone. Then it’s my turn. Understand? I have enough information to bury you.”

The man ignored his threat. “Task one. Be at Waterloo station in one hour – no more. There’s a telephone booth right outside the food court. When it rings, pick it up. If you don’t – you know what’ll happen. Don’t test me on this.”

Nicholas opened his mouth to reply, but the phone went dead. There was no time to decide and no more threats he could make. Waterloo station was almost an hour away. If anything went wrong with the train schedule, it would all be over.

He snatched his coat and headed for the station. It was a tense journey spent staring at his watch. He made it with only minutes to spare. When the phone rang, Nicholas snatched it up.

“Gallagher here.”

“Good. Now we understand each other. Get a ticket to Stafford. As of this moment, we have you in sight. Deviate from our instructions in any way and a family member dies.”

“What do I do when I get there?”

“You’ll receive your instructions on arrival. No tricks now. Don’t talk to anyone, don’t call anyone. Don’t post any letters, or switch on your laptop. And if I see a mobile phone in your hand —”

Nicholas glanced around.

“Yes, that’s right. We can see your every move. Better hurry. Train leaves in fifteen minutes.”

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It was dark when Nicholas arrived in Wales. He was exhausted. The kidnappers had run him all over the countryside. They’d forced him to dump his laptop and mobile phone in the River Sow at Stafford. Since then, he’d been through a public swimming bath, a change of clothes and a strip search. After crossing into Wales, a man in a dull grey trench-coat accosted him and forced him into the back of a rusted mini-van.

Tinted glass disguised the aluminium panels welded across the windows on the inside. The atmosphere inside was claustrophobic and Nicholas resigned himself to his fate as the van weaved and jolted its way over mile upon mile of bumpy road.

The vehicle finally ground to a halt and the doors opened. Trench-coat stepped in and placed a dark cotton bag over Nicholas’ head before ushering him out of his mobile prison. More voices joined Trench-coat. They led him through a door and down a long passage. Footsteps echoed off stone walls. They travelled down several flights of stairs and then more passages. Finally, they thrust Nicholas through a door, leaving him to land on a shaggy carpet.

Nicholas rolled onto his back and goaded his captors. “Just so you know, this is useless. You think you’ve got me? You haven’t.”

“Your bluffs won’t work.” A voice growled near the door. “We know you haven’t called anyone. There’s nobody you could have given the information to.”

“On the contrary. My friends and I made a deal. We were to meet at the London Eye by no later than twelve-thirty this afternoon. If either party didn’t arrive, we agreed the other party would publish the information with the relevant newspapers and authorities. Your power isn’t that far-reaching. It’s over for you.”

The man chuckled. “And you think your friends will come looking for you? Where would they start?”

“Llangollynn Castle would be my guess.” There was a sharp intake of breath. Nicholas nodded. He’d touched a nerve again.

The man didn’t bother to reply. The door slammed shut leaving Nicholas to struggle with his bonds. Then he felt the soft touch of a woman’s hand.

“Jess?”

The noose around the bag loosened. “No, it’s Lajé.”

Nicholas’ slumped back on the thick carpet. It felt like falling into an abyss. He blinked as his eyes adjusted to the light. The walls were solid stone. The room had no windows and the only way in was through a heavy oak door. The floor was carpeted but the furnishings were stark. Two double beds and a sofa pressed against the far wall.

Nicholas gazed at Lajé in defeat. “Any idea where we are?” He was suddenly less sure than he had been when talking to his captors.

Lajé shrugged. “Nobody let us see where we were taken. We could be anywhere.”

He glanced across at the sofa and saw Decklin. “We’re in the UK, I know that much.”

Decklin sighed. “Well, that’s something. Lajé and I weren’t even sure of that much. They put us on a plane.”

Nicholas struggled to his feet. “How long have you been here?”

“Since yesterday.” Decklin rose and moved to the door. He peered through the keyhole and then returned to the sofa. “Any idea what they intend to do now?”

“Some sort of ritual, probably. I spoke to Princeton after you left. He’s convinced they’re about to launch their final onslaught with this constitutional amendment. He also says, for something that important, they’re bound to make some sort of sacrifice to ensure success.”

Footsteps outside interrupted their conversation. Keys jingled in the lock and the ancient door opened with a creak. Several guards entered and, in the midst of them, Peter Solzsenheim. The man was dressed in a long black robe.

“Peter!” Nicholas gaped at his friend in astonishment.

“Hello, Nicholas.” There was no smile. Only hostility in the man’s gaze. “You’ve given us quite the run-around over the past few months.”

“Wha— you’re involved in this?”

Peter replied with a heavy sigh. “My time is precious, Nicholas. And you’ve wasted too much of it already. Now you’re back in the coop, so to speak, perhaps we can get on with the business at hand.”

Nicholas launched himself at the man but the guards were too quick for him. “Where are Jess and Jared?”

Peter inclined his head. “They’re in the next room.”

Nicholas struggled in the guards’ grip. He clenched his fists until his knuckles turned white. “If you’ve hurt them, so help me —”

Peter waved a dismissive hand. “They’re both fine. For now.”

“I want to see them.”

“That’s just not possible.” Peter shook his head.

“You’re going to kill us.” Nicholas stared into Peter’s eyes, searching for the truth.

The man averted his gaze only for a moment. “I’m afraid so. You understand. There’s just too much at stake to let you live.”

“So why go to all this trouble? Why not just take us out back and put a slug in each of us?”

Peter Solzsenheim raised his eyebrows as if the thought appealed to him. “We have to know what you’ve learned – who you’ve spoken to. There’ll be loose ends to tie up. That could take several weeks. You mentioned over the phone that you met with Joshua Princeton. Was that a bluff, or did you actually find the man?”

“A bluff.” Nicholas held his gaze.

Solzsenheim sized him up for a moment, then smiled. “That’s why I had to come myself. Eight years I’ve spent in boardroom negotiations with you, Nicholas. You might fool others but not me. Your tells are subtle but I’ve learned to read them all.” He paused for a moment. “I’m impressed. We’ve been searching for him since before I was born. So where is he?”

Nicholas looked away. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Peter stared at him for a moment, as if searching for the truth, then shrugged. “Have it your way. We’ll learn the truth one way or another.”

“You’re going to torture us?” Nicholas sneered.

The man actually chuckled. “Nicholas, this isn’t the Dark Ages. A good dose of Sodium Pentathol will reveal all. You won’t feel a thing.” He turned to go.

“Peter? Is that your real name?”

The man turned back and shrugged. “Does it matter?”

“You’re on the Council of Thirteen, aren’t you?”

The man blinked but recovered quickly. “My, my. Uncle Joshua has been telling stories, hasn’t he? They call me *The Priest* and, yes, I’m the chairman of the Council of Thirteen – High Priest of Molech, fire-god of the Middle East.”

“So where does Hypatia fit into all of this?”

The man lifted his eyes as if enraptured. His voice took on a lilting tone. "Hypatia is the mother of our faith. She died in defence of the old religions. And she's the reason we exist today. The gods we call on are Molech, Zeus, Isis, Astarte, Tanit..."

He halted for a moment and fixed Nicholas with an accusing glare. "See, unlike you, we can worship our gods in all their aspects and under all their names. And just because I choose to serve one, doesn't mean I can never call on another."

"And sacrifice your children to all of them," Decklin cut in from his position by the sofa.

The man rounded on Decklin. "You know nothing of infant sacrifice."

"I know evil when I see it. Sexual debauchery, murder, virgin sacrifice – it's all there in your history. How do you live with yourself?"

"As if you have room to talk, Reverend," Peter spat the words at his audience. "Have you looked at your Christian history recently? It's what my god requires. I don't question. I simply obey."

Peter's eyes shone with fanaticism that Nicholas had never seen before. Where was the goofy-looking computer geek he'd known for the past eight years?

"And what will that lead to, Peter?" Nicholas was desperate to try and make the man see some sense.

"Our gods will show us the way. The final steps are already in motion. Tonight we will make our sacrifice to Molech and Hypatia's Children will claim their rightful place in the world. It's over, Nicholas. Nothing can stop us now."

"Then together, we will usher in the New Age. Even as we speak, legislation is being tabled to silence Christianity for good in North America. Once passed, it will be irreversible. The courts will interpret this legislation our way and, within a year, no Christian will be entitled to speak publicly in America."

"At the same time, new freedom of expression laws will give weight to the minority voices of hundreds of the old religions who can then rise up and make their presence felt in the USA."

Decklin's smile dripped with cynicism. "And as the USA goes, so goes the world."

Peter nodded. "It will take time, but the building blocks are all in place now."

"And the infant – yours?"

Peter grimaced and shook his head. "This is a special occasion, unprecedented in our history. I thought it more fitting to sacrifice offspring from the loins of Molech's enemies," his eyes bored into Nicholas as he uttered the words.

Nicholas lunged at Peter once more, but the guards flung him back. "Peter! You can't do this."

The man turned his back on them and headed for the door. "Peter!" Nicholas screamed after him. "I'm begging you. I'll do anything. Peter!"

Peter Solzenheim stopped and glared at him. "I offered you that chance, Nicholas, and you refused. It's too late for that now." He turned and strode from the room. The door slammed shut and the lock turned. Nicholas rushed to it and banged his fist against the heavy wood. "Peter!" He yelled until his voice was hoarse. When he could shout no more, he sank to his knees. "You can't," he sobbed quietly, leaning against the heavy oak panels.

He felt Decklin's strong hands around his chest. The minister lifted him from the floor like a child. Nicholas' knees felt weak. His cheeks were moist with tears. Decklin half-carried him to the sofa. Nicholas came to his senses and shook Decklin's hands off. He rounded on his friend. "Why didn't you do something?"

Decklin's expression was stern. "Nicholas, get a hold of yourself. There was nothing we could do. Alright?"

"We have to stop him, Decklin." Nicholas felt the hysteria rising once more. "My son."

Decklin shook him roughly by the shoulders. "Listen to me! Listen to me. We'll try, alright? But this isn't helping anyone. None of us could stop that man from walking out of here. Now get a grip. If you're going to save Jared, you have to calm down and think."

Nicholas clenched his fists. His thoughts turned to his wife and son in the next room. He shivered for a moment, as if wracked with fever. Then he took a deep breath and regained control of his emotion. When he looked up, he felt icy calm. He stared into his friend's eyes. They glinted back like steel.

"You have a plan." It wasn't a question. He knew Decklin well enough by now.

The minister grinned and winked. "Just waiting for you to show up, my friend." Then he stood up and glanced at Lajé. "It's time. We'd better make our preparations. Start with a prayer, I think."

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They moved the bed closer to the door, then rolled the blankets and made a makeshift dam around the inside of the door.

"Fill those trash cans with water." Decklin nodded towards the two bins against the wall. He glanced at his watch. "Time to get ready. They'll be here any minute." He took the raw cable from the extension lead and tied both ends to the copper door handle. Nicholas stood at the other end of the room, his hand ready on the switch.

They heard the approaching footsteps outside. Decklin peered once more through the keyhole and nodded. "Like clockwork," he murmured.

Nicholas waited in anticipation as the key turned in the lock. Decklin suddenly dived for the bed and dropped his hand as a signal. Nicholas flicked the switch. There was a clatter of breaking crockery on the other side of the door.

*One, two, three.* Nicholas counted. Then he flicked the switch back to the off position. *One, two.* He counted in the darkness. He heard the first splash, followed by a second. Once again, he flicked the switch back on. *One, two, three.* He flicked it off again.

The door swung open and light from the passage spilled into the room. Nicholas dashed for the exit but Decklin and Lajé were already there. Each of them reached for a guard and relieved them of their weapons. The electric current had knocked all fight out of the guards. Neither of the men put up the slightest bit of resistance.

Decklin grinned. Both guards were drenched where the water had soaked through their clothes and one had burn marks on his palm. They glared up the barrel of one of their own weapons, now in Lajé's steady grip.

"It worked!" Nicholas exulted.

"Course it worked!" Decklin exclaimed in mock disgust. "When your friend keels over for no apparent reason, the first thing you do is dive down and help him."

Nicholas grinned. "Right into the puddle churning with enough electricity to light up a small city."

Decklin nodded for the two men to enter the room. "Let's fetch your family and get out of here." He tossed a key across to Nicholas.

Nicholas wasted no time. He dashed to the next room, praying that Peter had been telling the truth. With trembling fingers, he fumbled with the lock. It took him nearly ten seconds to realise the door was already unlocked. He cursed and barged into the room.

"Jess! Jared!"

"Nicholas!" Jessica rose from her seat by a dresser in shock.

He choked with emotion and relief at the sound of her voice. "Are you alright?"

"Daddy!" Jared rushed into his arms. Nicholas swept him up in a giant bear-hug.

Jessica swallowed and nodded. "We're both fine. How did you find us?"

“Long story.” He took her by the arm and shot a nervous glance at Decklin who stood guard by the door. “We’ve got to get out of here. They’re planning something unspeakable tonight.”

He rushed her from the room, herding Jared ahead of them. Outside, they met Lajé.

“Introductions can wait.” Nicholas picked up his son and looked at Jessica. “Do you know the way out?”

Jessica shook her head.

“We’ll wing it.” Decklin took charge and headed up the passage.

“Wait!” Jessica called after him.

She hurried back into her room, returning a moment later with a small makeup bag.

“That’s what you went back for?” Decklin was incredulous. He looked to Nicholas for support.

Nicholas simply shrugged. “Ask no questions. When you’re married, you’ll understand.”

Jessica was unable to hide her concern. “Nicholas, what’s going on? What’s this all about?”

“You were right about Willow,” he whispered, making his way up the now-deserted passage.

“I warned you about him.” Tears of rage welled in her eyes.

Nicholas shook his head. “It was dangerous. But he wasn’t the cause. I’ve been marked by these people since before I met him. Before we were even married.”

“What!”

“Peter Solzsenheim. He’s in this up to his ears. In fact, he orchestrated the entire thing. Like I said, it’s a long story. I’ll tell you everything once we get out of here.”

“*Peter!* What could he possibly have to do with this?”

Nicholas shook his head. “More than you could possibly fathom.” The words dripped like bile off Nicholas’ tongue. “He’s *so* fired.”

Jessica stared at him as if he’d gone mad. They rushed for the end of the passage and began to ascend the stone steps.

Nicholas reached out and took her hand. The landing was deserted. Silence enshrouded the mansion. The stairs emptied into a large hall, filled with antique furniture. The sculptured ceiling was painted with the twelve signs of the zodiac. The painting was at least five hundred years old. Yet another clue as to how long the organisation had been around.

The door they’d entered through clicked shut behind them. Nicholas turned and found himself staring at nothing more than plain wood-panels.

“A hidden doorway leading to the dungeon area. Even if we’d gotten word out, nobody would have found us.”

He moved to the window and gazed out at the grounds. They were, in fact, in a castle. From the zodiac room, he gazed across a square courtyard. The castle stood three storeys in height. It was a fabulous sight and Nicholas couldn’t help catching his breath at the superb architecture. They moved through a drawing-room with medieval décor. At the opposite end, they found a staircase that led down three storeys to an exit.

Decklin slipped through first. Once he was sure the coast was clear, he beckoned to the others to follow. They dashed across the courtyard, heading for the huge wrought-iron gates and freedom. Outside, they found yet another courtyard with another set of gates at the far end.

Leaving their fate to chance, they rushed for the gates. Outside, they found themselves in an official-looking parking area, filled with diplomatic vehicles.

“Looks like someone’s having a big do,” Decklin murmured. He glanced about to see if anyone had spotted them. Then he turned and headed for the wood that flanked the castle walls, finding cover in the underbrush. Just as they reached the tree-line, a shrill horn erupted from the building behind them.

Decklin halted and glanced back over his shoulder. "Better get our skates on. That sounds like an alarm."

He led them into the wood, doubling back along a false path probably created by deer. Nicholas followed, ignoring the stinging branches that snapped back at his face in Decklin's wake. The minister halted ten minutes later where the path crossed a stream.

"This way," he beckoned. "Better throw them off our trail as best we can."

Nicholas felt this was unnecessary, but chose not to argue. This was why he'd approached Decklin in the first place. The man knew what he was doing. After trudging a mile through muddy water that chilled his legs to the bone, Nicholas was beginning to lose his confidence.

Jessica was the first to complain. "Is this really necessary? Jared will freeze in this water."

Her answer came from an unexpected source. The sound of baying hounds filtered through the undergrowth. It was a long way off, but it sent a chill through Nicholas that had nothing to do with the icy water. Decklin's foresight had been nothing short of remarkable.

"This way." Decklin pulled himself into a tree and clamoured through the lower branches. He found his way through two more trees before dropping to the ground nearly fifteen yards from the stream's edge.

Lajé followed suit, trailed by Jessica and Jared, with Nicholas bringing up the rear.

Decklin found another path heading east. It was wider and afforded faster travel than the deer-path they had taken earlier. He didn't stay on the path for long, however. After travelling for another mile, he took a narrower path that split off to their left.

The path led through some of the densest forest Nicholas had ever seen. After a fifteen-minute hike, it opened up in a clearing. Decklin held up his hand and put a finger to his lips. Nicholas peered through the undergrowth and saw the outline of a small stone building. It didn't look like a cottage - more like a gazebo. The ancient walls formed a series of arches around an open patio, with a small wooden door leading to the interior. It looked vaguely familiar, but Nicholas couldn't remember where he'd seen it before.

The building appeared deserted, apart from the giant tabby sunning itself on the narrow porch. The cat bore the scars of many battles and its left ear was a shredded mass of skin and matted hair. The acrid odour in the air spoke of more cats inside. Decklin skirted the building while Nicholas kept a sharp eye out for any human presence.

They managed to cross the clearing without incident. Nicholas entered the underbrush at the far end with a profound sense of relief. After another hour of hiking, the perimeter wall loomed ahead of them.

"Well, we're not in Utopia yet, but once we jump that wall we're off their land - hopefully," Decklin announced. When they reached the wall he scaled it just enough to peer over the top. "There's several farm houses over there and a road. Looks like there's a village not far beyond that. Once we get there, we'll be safe."

"Stop!"

The voice was harsh and Nicholas turned around and stared down the barrel of a Beretta handgun. He gaped in disbelief at the open makeup bag lying at Jessica's feet. "Is this a joke, Jess?"

She sighed. "I didn't want you to find out, Nicholas. I told Peter it was cruel and unnecessary. We don't hate you. But you just wouldn't listen. And now you leave me no choice. I'd hoped the guards would catch up with us but your friend was just too smart, wasn't he?"

She kept the gun levelled on them and punched some numbers into a mobile phone. "We're at the South wall. Near Harcourt Cottage."

Both rage and confusion battled for supremacy in Nicholas' mind. "Jess, why are you doing this?"

She flicked away a lock of golden hair that fell across her right eye. “Too many generations have worked to bring this about, Nicholas. The world is ripe for change, and I won’t let you destroy everything we’ve worked for.”

Decklin cut in. “Nicholas, if we’re still here when her cronies arrive, it’s all over. Understand? Now or never, pal.”

Nicholas glared down the barrel of Jessica’s weapon. He made no reply.

Decklin turned and reached for a handhold in the wall. Nicholas barely saw the barrel move. The shot cracked like a whip. The bullet sang past his ear and he heard a cry of pain behind him.

Nicholas turned in time to see Decklin tumble to the ground, nursing a bleeding hand. He rounded on his wife in rage. “What is wrong with you, Jess? He’s trying to help us.”

Jessica smiled, but her eyes were glazed over with the same look he’d seen in Peter Solzsenheim earlier that evening. She licked her lips and pointed the gun at him once more. “Oh, we tried to bring you in, but you just wouldn’t listen. Perhaps you should know the truth, Nicholas.”

He blinked. The nausea welled up in him as he realised that, for the first time in his life, he was seeing his wife’s true nature. How could he have been so obtuse? All this time, she had been one of them. The realisation was abhorrent.

“The truth is, we’ve been watching you for nearly ten years. When your company began making waves internationally and you and Lawrence made your first couple of billion, we realised something had to be done. Peter was still fairly junior in the priesthood back then and had the skills, so he decided to infiltrate your company himself.

“He told us you could probably be salvaged, but Lawrence was beyond our reach. Finally, they brought me in. Nothing I did was of any use, though, as long as Lawrence was around. Peter and I realised we’d have to get him out of the way before any work on you became effective.”

“So you had him murdered!” Nicholas seethed with loathing.

Jessica nodded. “And then you went to pieces. We tried for years, but you refused to break. I never anticipated that Lawrence’s death would have such a profound effect on you. Well I’ve had enough, Nicholas. I’ve spent years trying to make you the man I need you to be.”

“You know what they plan to do with Jared?”

She nodded. “It was my suggestion.” She reached down and ruffled her son’s hair. “I’ve explained it to him. He’s going to be a brave little boy and pass through the fire, into the arms of Molech. He knows his bravery will make the world a new and better place.”

Her words filled Nicholas with revulsion. He found it difficult to believe that his feelings for Jessica could change so quickly.

“You’re sick, you know that?”

The sound of approaching footsteps interrupted them. Five men appeared, moving along the boundary wall. Nicholas recognised the one in front. He was the freckled assassin they’d met in Paris.

“Took your time, didn’t you, Luther?” Jessica’s tone was harsh.

The man inclined his head in deference. Was it possible she was that high up the ladder? “We got here as fast as we could. Everyone was busy with preparations for tonight.”

Jessica’s glare was glacial. “I’m well aware of what’s happening tonight. In fact, I’m the one who should be preparing for it. Instead, I’m stuck doing your job. Get them back to the castle and make sure there are no mistakes this time.”

The man inclined his head again. “Yes, priestess.”

She tossed her head and turned away, taking Jared by the hand.

“Priestess!” Nicholas exclaimed. “Of what precisely?”

She looked back over her shoulder. “I’m the high priestess of Bastet. Lioness Warrior, goddess of Egypt and defender of Pharaoh. And I have a ceremony to prepare for. Goodbye, Nicholas.”

Jessica headed back down the path towards the cat-building. The guards stepped forward and bound the three of them with handcuffs. The first guard shoved Nicholas towards the path along the perimeter wall. Decklin had trouble with his footing and tripped. One of the guards kicked him and dragged him roughly to his feet.

## Chapter 20

Peter Solzsenheim glanced at his watch and frowned. Jessica was late. The Temple of Molech was already filling up with delegates from all over the globe. The most important night in their lives and she was late!

"I thought I'd find you here," a voice interrupted his thoughts.

Peter recognised the Germanic accent. He turned and bowed his head. "Your Highness. Or would you prefer Mr President?"

The man grinned. "Senator will do for now. The US elections are still three years away, and I'm not even eligible to run for office yet."

Peter shook his head. "You're too modest, your Highness. The joint resolution has been drafted and Congress is poised to propose the amendment in a matter days. Senator Teagle's already swung the vote in the senate, so it's merely a formality. By this time next week nothing will stand between you and the Oval Office."

The man's eyes twinkled. "There's still the elections."

Peter laughed out loud. "You think we'd lose?"

The man shrugged. "It has happened before."

"And the culprits were dealt with. It won't happen again."

The man smiled. "You've achieved much since you became high priest of Molech, Peter. We're all deeply in your debt."

Peter inclined his head. "Remember that when Pharaoh chooses the advisors in his court." Then he grinned. "Our ancestors would scarcely believe it. That the high priest of a Hyksos god would reinstate the Egyptian bloodline on its throne."

The senator chuckled. "The irony is not lost on me. But two millennia have taught us that we share a greater enemy. Obviously, Re is my first responsibility, but we're all here to pay tribute to your god today. Nobody can deny that Molech is the one who brought us here. Speaking of which, where is the high priestess of Bastet?"

Peter sighed. "I've been wondering that myself. Will you excuse me while I go and see what's keeping her?"

He swept from the temple, and three underlings immediately took up position in his wake. Peter moved through the labyrinth of narrow passageways until he arrived outside Jessica's room. The guards were not at their post. Peter felt the first twinge of concern.

He knocked on the ancient oak door. A faint pop sounded from behind the prisoners' door. Peter glanced to his left and noticed the water on the floor. He rushed into Jessica's room. It was empty.

Concern turned to panic. "Open the door to the prisoners' room!"

One of his aides rushed to find a spare key. He was back in minutes. The man shoved it in the slot and grasped the door-handle. He released it with a gasp of agony, then groaned through clenched teeth, nurturing a seared palm.

"What is it?" Peter demanded. Then he noticed the blisters etched on the man's hand.

He turned to a second aide and growled. "Open that door."

The man used his tunic to turn the scorching handle. A burst of flames exploded through the opening. Peter gaped in shock at the furnace inside. Two charred bodies half rolled from the room. *The guards!* The first clutched the end of a raw piece of electric cable while the second hung on to his comrade.

"Idiots!" Peter bellowed.

Louis, his third aide, reached for the closest corpse.

"Don't touch him!" Peter clutched the man's robe. "That cord could still be live. Do you want to end up the same way?"

The man pulled back and Peter nodded towards a passage running off to the north. “Get the guards from their sleeping quarters to put out this fire,” Peter spat. “Then send a team after the prisoners. And tell them if they don’t return with the priestess they’ll be taking a trip through the fire of Molech themselves.”

Having issued the instruction, he turned and stormed back to the temple. He forced himself to remain calm. No need to alarm the guests. The sons of Molech would do their duty. They would return with Jessica before anyone realised something was amiss. Back in the temple, Peter smiled and nodded, bantering with guests who queued up to congratulate him.

Louis returned twenty minutes later.

“Did you find her?” He kept his voice subdued.

Louis bobbed and twittered like a nervous sparrow. “My lord, none of the guards were in their quarters. It seems they’re already out looking for the prisoners. The fire’s spread to the passage and we don’t have the man-power to douse it.”

Peter sighed. He excused himself and followed Louis back to the prisoners’ quarters. The passage outside had become a barrage of flames impossible to breach.

Peter cursed silently. “Get some help from the temple. We’ll need water and enough men to form a fire-line.”

Louis winced. “My lord. You don’t think it would be better to get the delegates out of the Temple? We can still use the other exits if we —”

Peter subjected his aide to a scorching glare that cut off his suggestion in mid-sentence. “I’m not about to run the risk of our guests screaming *bad omen* on the very night Molech takes centre-stage. The fire-line, Louis!”

“Yes, my lord.” The man turned to go.

“Louis!” He called after his aide.

“My lord?”

“See that you don’t alarm the guests at all. Nothing will go wrong tonight. Understand?”

The man inclined his head. “I understand, my lord.”

By the time his men returned, the passage had become a firestorm. Peter Solzsenheim stared at the flames in disbelief. How could fire spread that quickly in a building made of stone? He heard the creak of timber above him. The support beams were beginning to give under the strain.

“My, lord, we have to leave,” Louis pleaded.

“No!” Peter suddenly boiled with fury. “This is my night. Nothing will take this away from me.”

The wall advanced. Firefighters shrank back from the flames until even the passage to the guardroom was blocked.

“Please, my lord!” Louis begged. “We’re losing ground. Soon the remaining exits will be blocked and then what?”

“Molech will save us,” Peter growled. *Molech!* Why had he allowed this to happen? And in his own temple! It had to be a test. After all he’d worked for; Molech would never let him fail now.

The creaking overhead grew louder, and Peter heard the first sounds of wrenching wood. The building groaned like a wounded beast.

“My, lord —”

“We will fight!” Peter yelled before Louis could finish his sentence.

The wrenching grew louder and ended in a deafening crack. Peter gasped. It sounded like a pistol shot. The crack was followed by a rumble and an avalanche of stone. More cracks followed with more rumbles. Then the passage walls began to tremor.

Shrieks emanated from the temple and footsteps thundered up the passage. Peter clenched his teeth. He’d never hide the truth from the delegates now.

He glanced back towards the temple. “We’d better head them off at the exit passage. Tell them there’s been a minor mishap, but that everything’s under control.”

Louis rushed ahead down a side passage to intercept the fleeing guests. Peter followed at a more sedate pace. He found the way blocked with fallen rubble. Even through the dust-cloud, he could see the smouldering embers of wood and flames.

Peter realised, with horror, that while he’d been fighting the fire outside the prisoners’ quarters, it had already spread through the support beams, weakening the entire structure. A chilling reality began to creep through his obsession. He turned to Louis. “Are there any escape routes left?”

They headed down a second passage that led back to the temple. It was pointless trying to pacify the guests. Shrieking men and women scrambled over one another to escape the inferno, but there was nowhere to go. Every passage ended in a wall of flames. The senator and his wife made a dash for freedom, but the heat and smoke overcame them. They tried to turn back but collapsed over a pile of rubble. Peter stared at them, transfixed by their plight.

“This way, my lord!” Louis dragged him against the tide of humanity. Peter felt like a salmon trying to swim upstream. In the temple, his aide led him to a fountain and doused his robe with water. Peter Solzsenheim covered his face with a piece of torn fabric from his cloak.

Eight guards joined Louis and formed a circle around Peter Solzsenheim. He felt safer with them around him. They were all sons of Molech, the most loyal among his troops. Together, they turned and made their dash for freedom. He passed the bodies of fallen comrades, stumbling over them in the ash-filled passageways. He rushed past fellow delegates struggling against the smoke and heat. His guards simply shoved them aside.

When he could go no further, the sons of Molech assisted him. They ran the gauntlet of flames, but it was impossible to break through. Time and again, Peter found his way blocked by fallen timber and rubble. The guards fought gallantly, clearing a path for their leader, but their efforts were futile.

The searing heat scorched his hair and skin. Peter battled for each breath. He dared not remove the fabric that covered his face. One by one, his security guards fell away, succumbing to the flames. Louis was the last to fall and then Peter found himself alone. He could barely walk but he stumbled on, through the smoke and rubble, anyway. Burning lungs screamed for fresh air.

Twenty feet from the exit, he found his way blocked by yet another broken beam. His clothes sizzled in the flames as the water he’d drenched himself with evaporated in the heat. He grabbed the beam and heaved, but it refused to budge.

Peter turned his attention to the stones. If he could just move a few of them... He bent down and shifted one. Several more rolled in to take its place. After removing five stones, he felt exhausted. He panted and stared at his bleeding hands. He tried to move the beam again. Nothing. Once more, he bent to the task of removing the stones. Hopeless. The fire’s heat scorched his back and neck. Peter stared in horror at the inferno about him.

The hem of his coal-black robe smouldered and burst into flame. He kicked at it, trying to douse the blaze, but it was hopeless. A sleeve caught fire, then the collar. Within minutes, the flames engulfed him. Peter leaped in terror at the beam blocking his path. His voice joined the chorus of agonised cries in the passage behind him.

The fumes throttled his larynx like bony fingers of death. Peter sank to his knees, retching in an effort to clear his throat. He gazed hopelessly at the world around him – his kingdom. Had it all come to this? The men and women in this temple represented the very cornerstone of his organisation. It wouldn’t survive without them.

He was suddenly filled with an utter sense of desolation. He called on Molech for the thousandth time, but received no answer. Molech was powerless to stop this. *Where will you go? What awaits you on the other side?*

The thought filled him with terror. Why had he not cleared the temple when he'd had the chance? He couldn't face Molech, or Ashtoreth, or any of the gods like this. He had failed them and they would not tolerate failure. None would offer him any solace. None would save him from his fate.

The flames enveloped him and he stumbled to the ground. He stared helplessly at the exit. Twenty feet – a lifetime away. In that moment, when his terror was at its zenith, he heard the crash. Yet another support gave way and, for an instant, Peter felt the cool breeze against his face. This was followed immediately by the explosive force of the flames. Invigorated by the fresh, oxygen-rich air, the fire exploded in a giant mushroom that filled the entire passage. Peter Solzsenheim's final breath was a searing ball of flame that melted skin and scorched his lungs. He sank to his knees and his world turned black as he stepped into eternity.

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Luther and his accomplices followed a series of wide paths that offered little opportunity for escape. Finally, they emerged from the canopy of trees. A giant plume of smoke rose into the sky and, a few paces ahead of them, Jessica emerged from the flaming building. Behind her, people raced to and fro, forming fire-lines and doing battle with the inferno.

She stared at Nicholas, her face filled with agony. Flames leaped from the giant structure, although the fire seemed to be contained in the wing they'd escaped from.

"Oh, Nicholas," Jessica wailed. "The temple. What have you done!"

At first he didn't understand. Then it dawned on him. They'd been locked in a hidden dungeon – a temple area where rituals and ceremonies could be performed without fear of discovery.

All those cars in the driveway. Priests and devout believers from all over the world had converged here. The most powerful men and women in the organisation had probably been congregated in the temple when the fire started.

Nicholas gaped in horror. The building he and the others had escaped from was an inferno. Glass shattered and flames burst from windows in the turret's lower levels. Smoke billowed from every opening and the building groaned like Leviathan in its death throes. He gazed mystified at the carnage. The turret appeared to sway gently, like a sapling blown in the breeze, and then, with a deafening rumble, the entire wing crumbled in on itself.

The resounding crash achieved atomic proportions and the smoke cloud filled the skyline above the ruins. As the dust began to settle, a silhouette emerged from amidst the cloud. One giant pillar remained standing with charred remains of a cross-beam in the upright.

He turned and saw Jessica's horror. Tears brimmed in her eyes as she stared in disbelief at the sight. "That was the Temple of Molech. My parents were inside there," she whispered. She turned on him. "What have you done?" she shrieked.

Nicholas made no reply. There was nothing to say.

For several minutes, the entire group stared at the building in silence. Luther brought them out of their trance. "The prisoners, priestess?"

"Kill them," Jessica's voice was glacial. She stared at the plume of smoke rising from her temple.

"And the boy?" The assassin glanced at Jared.

"Leave him with me. A terrible atrocity has happened here. The gods must be appeased." She stared once more at the pillar of smoke.

The man hesitated. "I'd like to have the woman if I may."

Jessica rounded on him. "I said kill them! They've wrought enough destruction for one night. If word of this loss gets out to the followers —" she shook her head. "As it is, we've lost everything. The Council of Thirteen – One Hundred and Sixty-nine. They were all inside. We're all that's left."

The assassin inclined his head. "Where do you want to do it?"

Jessica didn't even deign to look at them. "Take them to the Records Room in the castle. Nobody will see you there."

The man bowed. Then he nodded to his henchmen. The first guard nudged Nicholas with his automatic rifle.

"Daddy!"

Nicholas turned and gazed with anguish into his son's fearful eyes. The guard struck him across the temple with the butt of his weapon, forcing him to turn away. One guard led the way. Decklin, Lajé and Nicholas shuffled after them while Luther and the remaining three guards fell in behind.

Decklin caught Nicholas' glance as they entered the castle's west wing. The minister's head barely moved. He glanced quickly from Nicholas to the guard ahead of them.

Nicholas clenched his jaw and dropped his eyes in acknowledgement. His heart assaulted his breastbone. He had no idea what Decklin had planned, or when the signal would come. But he had implicit faith in his friend. When the signal came, he would throw all of his hopes on the minister.

Was Lajé in on it? He had no idea. If Decklin had managed to communicate with her, Nicholas hadn't noticed. His tongue grated like sandpaper against the roof of his mouth. How on earth were they going to overpower five guards, bound as they were?

He followed the leading guard through the castle's passageways. Time slowed to a trickle and Nicholas tensed in anticipation of Decklin's signal. What would it be? He hoped desperately that he wouldn't miss it.

They approached a corner and the leading guard disappeared around it. Nicholas stepped around the corner. Decklin and Lajé were right behind him. As they rounded the corner, it happened.

"Now!" Decklin screamed.

The guard ahead of Nicholas swung around at the shout, but Nicholas surged forward, slamming into the man's torso with his shoulder. The guard sprawled ahead of Nicholas who tripped and fell headlong onto him. He struck the man's midriff and heard the expulsion of breath followed by a gasp as the winded man tried to fill his lungs again. Nicholas rolled to his right, desperate to get out of the line of fire.

As if by some miracle, Decklin snapped his hands free of the steel cuffs that bound him. He dropped to the ground and spun just as the first guards rushed around the corner.

The passage erupted in deafening rapid-fire, but the shots were high. Before the men were able to adjust their aim, Decklin flung a handful of fine dry sand into their eyes. They staggered back, temporarily blinded. Decklin rushed the men like an enraged bull, spreading his arms to bring the group down in a heap.

Nicholas pulled himself into a sitting position and reached for the automatic rifle next to the fallen guard. He tried to pull himself to his feet, but his movements were sluggish.

Luther flew into view. Nicholas' jaw dropped in disbelief. Unlike his companions, the man kept well away from the corner, coming in wide with his weapon aimed low. His first shot skimmed between the falling bodies and struck Decklin in the wrist.

He aimed his second shot at Lajé who was already on the floor. The woman moved with serpentine alacrity. The first bullet ricocheted off the floor. She somersaulted backwards, rolling through her cuffed hands with the grace of a gymnast.

The floor sparked again and the ricochet echoed up the passage. Lajé spun in what Nicholas could only describe as a break-dance move. Her limbs lashed out, propelling her into the spin and hooking a fallen weapon as they did so.

Instead of trying to fire the weapon, Lajé flung it at the assassin. The rifle arced through the air like a boomerang. She swung to her feet with effortless buoyancy.

Luther's third shot ricocheted off the flying weapon a moment before the rifle struck the barrel of his own gun. Before he was able to recover, Lajé was upon him. Her foot went high, as if aiming for his chin, and then suddenly smashed downwards, striking the gun barrel. The weapon fired a brief burst and the assassin cried in pain. Blood gushed from his thigh.

He'd barely raised the barrel an inch when Lajé's foot struck a second time, snapping his index finger like a twig in the trigger guard. She lashed out again, enhancing his agony as she spun the now useless weapon, twisting the broken digit back the other way.

Luther lunged, trying desperately to engage her in a wrestling hold, but she spun away like an arrow in flight. Her foot struck the weapon again, smashing it to the ground and bringing the helpless assassin down with it. Luther's face was flushed and the veins in his neck bulged in pain.

Lajé kicked again. The man gasped in agony and the weapon finally flew free from his grasp. He shot to his feet, falling into a fighting pose, leading with his good hand while protecting his injuries.

As he rose, Lajé fell to the ground. She rolled and lashed out at his knee, buckling his supporting limb and bringing him to ground once more. She was on her feet before him, striking as he rose from the floor.

There was a loud crack and his left knee snapped under the force of her momentum. The man bellowed and tried to grab at her again but he was clumsy and unable to move, his left leg now limp and useless. She evaded his grasp and lashed out at his face. The assassin's nose erupted in blood.

Lajé dived and rolled, coming to her knees with the barrel of his fallen weapon clasped in her cuffed hands. As his head came forward again, she smashed the butt of the gun into his exposed throat. Nicholas winced at the hideous crunching sound of cartilage buckling under the blow's force.

Luther choked and coughed up more blood, but he shot forward in a desperate attempt to grab a hold of her and bring his strength to bear. This time, power and sheer strength of will overcame Lajé's cat-like speed and Luther's hands closed around her throat.

Lajé was not to be outdone, however. His grip had barely taken hold when her hands shot up between his. Simple leverage overcame all the assassin's power and she broke his grip. She reached out and grabbed his ears, plunging her thumbnails deep into his pale eyes.

The man screamed like a ghoul and clawed at the pain, clamping her wrists and wrenching her thumbs from his sockets. The fight was over, however. He had a hold of her wrists, but was blind, and Lajé simply pounded his groin with her knee repeatedly until he let go.

He collapsed in a whimpering heap, unable to move for broken limbs. Nicholas noticed that the man's femur protruded at an unsightly angle from his thigh.

Lajé stared at the assassin for a moment, panting with the effort, her wrists still bound in their steel cuffs.

The guard was coming to on his right and sat up. Decklin still struggled with the remaining three guards, grunting as he pinned them to the ground in a giant bear-hug.

Nicholas swung the weapon in his hands towards the guard next to him and pulled the trigger. The weapon flew out of control, emptying its final rounds into the ceiling. From that range it was impossible to miss, however, and the guard gurgled and sank back under the force of the first three bullets that ripped through his torso.

The gunfire startled the three men wrestling with Decklin enough to allow Lajé to come to the minister's aid. Her first well-placed blow below the ear left the nearest guard unconscious.

He let go of Decklin's uninjured arm and the minister struck his second antagonist in the throat. The man sprawled on the floor leaving Lajé and Decklin both free to deal with the last guard. The man stared at his fallen comrades for a moment and came to a decision. He raised his hands and backed away. Decklin reached for the nearest gun.

All his usual benevolence had vanished. "Where's the Records Room?" he snarled.

The man pointed down the passage and Decklin nodded. "Lead the way. And take some of this human refuse with you."

The man grabbed Luther and another one of his comrades. He half-dragged, half-carried them to the room. There, he extracted a key from Luther's belt and opened the door.

"Inside," Decklin nodded.

The man did as he was told, depositing the injured men on the floor.

"Good. Now the others."

Once all the men were inside, Nicholas locked the door. "Jared. We have to find him. I only hope we're not too late."

Nicholas dashed through the castle in search of his son. The building was a labyrinth of passages and stairwells. *Where had she taken him?* He dared not call for fear of alerting an enemy to his whereabouts. He'd passed several servants but, thus far, they had disregarded him. That would all change if he began yelling.

He shot through an ancient ballroom, and then through a dining hall. The room was decorated with ancient sculptures and works of art. When his eyes fell on the far wall, Nicholas froze. He stared at a giant picture hanging above a plaque. The picture was of an ancient stone structure, surrounded by arches and a porch littered with cats. Below, the plaque read: "Temple of Bastet". An emblem of the goddess with the head of a cat was etched in the ancient wooden door.

The picture filled him with horror. He knew now why the building had looked so familiar. Jessica's Victorian gazebo was a replica of the stone temple. It was identical in structure and shape to the building in that picture.

Nicholas felt nauseated. All this time, and he'd never known. His wife had built a temple to the Egyptian goddess in his own garden. How could he not have seen it? He knew where to go now. At the far end of the dining room, he found an oak door leading to the courtyard. He exited the wrought-iron gates and headed for the woods.

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Nicholas didn't find the temple so much as stumble upon it. A frantic race through the woods in the dying light had made any systematic search impossible. He stumbled up the steps with a heaving chest and aching calves.

The temple was quiet and there wasn't a cat in sight. However, the stench of feline waste testified that this was the building he sought. A candle-glow beckoned and Jessica was inside. Clad in a flowing white robe, she towered over their son's inert form. Jared lay face-up on a stone table, small and inert. Nicholas choked back the terror. His pounding chest froze in mid-gasp. Was he already too late?

Jessica headed across the room, offering Nicholas his first unimpeded view of Jared. The child's tiny hands and feet were bound with leather cords and a large sacrificial knife with an ornate ivory handle lay near his elbow. Nicholas tried to catch his breath and force himself on but his knees gave way and he sagged to the floor.

From his crouched position, he examined Jared, searching for the slightest movement, breathing – anything! As he pushed himself back to his feet, Jessica returned to the table, this time with a large reed basket. She placed the basket at the foot of the table and lifted the lid. A moment later, a monstrous head emerged from the basket. Jessica distracted the beast with one hand and quickly gripped its neck from behind with the other. Once she had it in a firm grip, she removed the writhing Egyptian cobra from its basket and slung the coils over her shoulders.. She held its head aloft and goaded the beast with a small glass vial, coaxing the venom from its deadly fangs.

“Jessica!” Nicholas finally found his voice and screamed in anguish.

She whirled around in shock. “Nicholas? How did you – don’t come any closer!” She whirled around, brandishing the beast like a weapon. It fixed its gaze on Nicholas.

He froze, terrified for his son. “Jessica, think about what you’re doing. This is our son. Please. He’s a child.”

Her eyes brimmed with tears as she held the serpent over Jared. “A child is called for, Nicholas. The old gods are about to rise, and they require the ultimate sacrifice. I’m giving them my best, my only.”

“Jessica, for heaven’s sake! Hypatia’s Children are finished. The Temple of Molech has been destroyed and your precious councils with it. No sacrifice will change that now. Get that thing away from him. I’m begging you. It’s over.”

“It’s never over!” she whispered fiercely.

Nicholas immediately regretted his statement. Her expression betrayed a tenuous grasp on sanity. Even the slightest provocation might push her over the edge.

“Don’t you see, Nicholas? Look around you. My gods are real. I can see them – touch them – and they respond to me.”

Nicholas wrinkled his nose at the temple’s ammoniac stench. “They’re vermin, Jessica. Nothing but worthless animals.”

She smiled, but sheer hatred was reflected in her gaze. “This worthless animal holds the power of life and death over your son. Taunt her if you will.”

“And you would take our son’s life – for this?”

“I didn’t take it, Nicholas. You did. He could have gone to the best schools. Could have been raised in the temple, but you wouldn’t have it. Even after his death, Lawrence’s hold over you was too strong. *You* destroyed our family – our home. Not me.”

“Jessica, you’re sick. You need help.”

She raised her eyes heavenwards. “Bastet will help me. She’s my strength – my source.” Daring Nicholas with her gaze, she returned the beast to its basket. After deftly placing the lid behind the serpent’s head, she popped it closed and fastened the ties, ignoring the bumps and shudders that the enraged animal unleashed on the inside of the basket.

That done, she snatched up the knife and dipped it into the venom-filled vial. Nicholas launched himself at his wife but she kicked the basket across the floor towards him. One of the clips snapped and the serpent shot from its confines in a coil of fury. The beast unleashed all its frustration on Nicholas. Its bursting hisses sounded almost like a dog and it struck repeatedly and with deadly intent. Nicholas stumbled back in terror. His back struck steel and he grabbed it to steady himself.

The steel rocked slightly and Nicholas realised with relief that he had found a loose-standing candelabra. He spun it around like a weapon, defending himself against the cobra’s relentless attack.

The animal hissed in anger and struck again. However, this time, Nicholas struck a blow of his own. The candelabra caught the animal side-on and pressed it to the ground. Nicholas raised and struck again, closer to the head this time. Three more strikes ensured that the snake was well and truly dead. Nicholas crushed its skull to make doubly sure.

He tossed the candelabra aside and turned his attention back to Jessica. However, she was halfway across the room and his legs were beginning to shake in the terrifying aftermath of his duel with the serpent. Jessica simply turned her back on him. She dipped the knife into the vial one more time and raised it aloft over their son.

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Where Decklin Kanabas came from, Nicholas never knew. The man streaked into the temple from a side door. He tackled Jessica with the force of a freight train. She shrieked and the sacrificial knife arced through the air.

Their bodies collapsed in a heap on the temple floor and Jessica's screams filled the room. Nicholas lurched forward and rushed to his son.

"It's alright, Jared. Daddy's here. Nobody can hurt you now." Jared was unconscious but at least he was still breathing. Nicholas cradled the inert child in his arms. He whispered words of solace over and over in his son's ear. Then he began working on the knots in the cord that bound him.

He barely heard his wife's crazed shrieking as she struggled with Decklin on the floor. The world closed in around Nicholas until it was merely him and his son. He gently unfettered the boy and massaged his raw and swollen wrists.

He held Jared tightly to his chest once more. Finally, a movement brought him out of his reverie. He looked up to see Decklin approaching. The man looked distraught.

"Get him out of here before he comes to," the priest said quietly.

Nicholas glanced at his wife's inert form. Blood gushed from two deep cuts in her forearm and another where a long shard of glass protruded from her torso. Her breathing came in stifled gasps.

Decklin glanced across at the unmoving coils on the floor. "Was there poison in that vial she was holding?"

Nicholas nodded.

The priest sighed. "Paralysis is setting in. Only the right antidote will save her." He turned back and knelt next to Jessica. He shook her gently, trying to get her attention. She responded but Nicholas was unable to hear what she said.

"Go!" Decklin's voice was more urgent and he began pumping her chest with his palms.

Nicholas felt Jared move for the first time and quickly rushed the boy from the room. As he exited, he glanced back. Decklin bent forward, offering the kiss of life, then continued pumping Jessica's chest to keep her heart going.

Outside, Nicholas found a soft patch of moss where he laid Jared down. The boy was still not awake and he turned his attention back to the temple. It was a full twenty minutes before the minister emerged from the building. The man's stare was vacant. He walked as if in a dream and only met Nicholas' gaze when he was a few feet away. He said nothing and merely offered a short shake of his head, then averted his eyes.

"She didn't make it," Nicholas turned, as if in a dream, and stared at the temple's forbidding entrance. Decklin's gaze remained catatonic.

"You did all you could," Nicholas assured him. He rose and picked up his son, then backed away from the scene so that Jared wouldn't have to see it.

Decklin followed, staring at the ground in stunned silence.

"Decklin," Nicholas called gently once they had left the gruesome scene behind.

Decklin Kanabas glanced up sharply. He looked surprised, as if he'd just seen Nicholas for the first time. Nicholas reached out and clasped his friend's shoulder. "You did all you could."

The man coughed and nodded dumbly.

“You saved my son,” Nicholas spoke gently. “There was nothing more you could do. Jessica was beyond saving.”

Tears welled in the priest’s eyes and he collapsed to his knees, sobbing uncontrollably.

Nicholas shuffled uncomfortably for a moment, allowing his friend the space he needed. Finally, he stepped forward. “Come on. It’s not over yet.”

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They made their way back to the castle where they found Lajé waiting for them outside the Records Room. Nicholas was amazed at how easily they were able to move about the grounds.

He puzzled over it for several minutes before he realised that the servants were just that; underlings who had little knowledge of what went on behind hidden doors and secret panels. Many foreign dignitaries were at the castle today and nobody questioned a stranger’s right to be there. He quickly came to a decision. He wanted his life back and the way forward lay in the Records Room.

Lajé kept an eye on the injured guards while Nicholas and Decklin sifted through the records. The Records Room was a paper blizzard, but Nicholas discovered that all the records were indexed on a local computer. The index was encrypted, but it took no more than a few minutes to break.

He was stunned. The records contained lists of names – faithful followers of the cause from every walk of life. There were politicians, royal families, military leaders and police officials. Many of the records contained information that pointed to hard evidence of crimes committed by these people - evidence that could be used as blackmail to keep them in line should they ever waver in their faith.

“Here’s what we’re looking for,” Nicholas murmured.

Decklin came from across and peered over his shoulder. “Gloucester. Chief of police?”

Nicholas nodded. “Local station. Makes sense to keep someone handy in case anything goes wrong on the home turf. They wouldn’t want outsiders sticking their noses in here.”

“Well, let’s give him a call.” Decklin reached for the phone.

“Augustus,” Nicholas used the man’s code name over the phone.

“Who is this?” The man seemed wary.

“You’re needed at the castle. We’ve, ah, had an incident.”

Suddenly the tone became brisk. “Right away, sire. Do you need men?”

“As many as you can bring with you. Only the most trustworthy, though.” Nicholas held his breath. Had the bluff worked?

“*Pour notre mère.*”

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“What an unholy mess!” Chief Gloucester shook his head in dismay. He’d arrived with eight officers in tow.

Nicholas nodded in agreement. The terror gnawed at his stomach. How would he bluff his way through this? There was still so much to do and the ruse would only carry for so long. But it was the only way to end things. He cleared his throat. “Obviously we can’t cover this up. I only want it kept quiet until we’ve moved the records. Can you do that?”

Gloucester’s gaze wandered across the room. “I’ll have a guard posted at the main gate and make sure nobody enters or leaves. That work for you?”

Nicholas smiled and nodded. He placed a call to his offices in London and had a plane flown up north. The unmarked DC-9 converted cargo vessel landed on the estate’s private

airstrip three hours later. It took nearly twice as long to get all the documents loaded into the plane. Nicholas held his breath and kept Gloucester with him for the duration, desperate to avoid any unwanted questions. Finally, they loaded the last document.

Decklin eyed the vessel with a worried expression. "You think that thing will get us back to London in one piece?"

Nicholas frowned. "What type of plane could you rustle up on less than an hour's notice?"

Decklin shook his head and then followed Lajé who was already making her way into the tiny passenger section.

Nicholas watched them board. Then he turned to the local chief of police. "Thank you, Gloucester. Get it as tidy as you can. And remember, I was never here."

The man beamed and bowed in respect. "Never saw you in my life, sir."

Nicholas boarded the plane. He stared out of the window as the aircraft taxied about. Chief Gloucester stood stock still and saluted as the plane lifted from the runway.

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"Senator?"

"What is it?" Teagle boomed from behind his desk.

"Telephone call, sir. They're on the VIP line and insist they speak only to you."

Teagle's eyes narrowed, then he nodded. "Patch it through."

His forehead creased with worry. Was something wrong? He hadn't expected to hear from the council until after the amendment was proposed the following afternoon.

The telephone buzzed on his desk. He let it ring and took a deep breath, gathering his thoughts. "Teagle here," he finally answered.

"I don't like to be kept waiting."

"And I don't like it when I don't know who I'm speaking to," Teagle drawled in his Mississippi accent.

*"Pour notre mère."*

Teagle nodded, satisfied. "The amendment for Hypatia," he responded with his half of the code.

"Good." The caller acknowledged his response.

"May I ask what this is about?" Senator Teagle couldn't help but feel anxious. The call was unexpected and, in his experience, unexpected was never good.

"Our position on the amendment has changed. We need the vote go the other way."

"The other way!" Teagle exploded.

"Correct."

"But we've been working on this for months – years, in fact. We submit the proposal tomorrow afternoon."

"Then you'd better get on the phone to the Senate as well as the House of Congress and inform them, hadn't you?"

Teagle ran his fingers through his thinning, grey hair. "Forgive me. I know it's not my place, but could I ask for an explanation?"

"No you couldn't. Our position's changed – that's all you need to know."

"It just doesn't make any sense. We've been planning this for months."

The voice became harsh. "Your job is not to question, Teagle. You follow orders or suffer our wrath. Understand?"

"But my political career will be over. All my credibility in the Senate —"

"Your career is of little consequence. This is for a greater good. Think of it as a sacrifice – your contribution."

"The amendment was to be my contribution," Teagle grumbled.

“Enough! You’ve been given the order. Either the vote goes the other way tomorrow afternoon, or certain pictures will come to light regarding your involvement in some racially motivated murders back in the late seventies. The gown looks quite fetching – pity your hood slipped off.”

Teagle gulped. “That won’t be necessary. My loyalty has never been in question. I’m surprised, that’s all.”

“See that you don’t disappoint us.”

The line went dead.

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Back in London, Nicholas hung up the phone. Decklin entered the room, blowing on a steaming cup of coffee and raised his eyebrows.

“So?”

Nicholas grinned. “Piece of cake. The amendment is history. It never happened.”

“Any more calls to make?”

Nicholas glanced at the file of sheets on his desk. “A few. The justice department in South Africa and maybe some countries in Europe. I thought I’d instruct a Chief Justice or two that Nicholas Gallagher and Rev Decklin Kanabas should be cleared of any wrongdoing. Bring new evidence to light, that sort of thing.”

Decklin chuckled. “The power’s already going to your head. What do you intend to do with those documents?”

Nicholas shrugged. “I thought I’d keep them long enough to restore some sort of balance. You know – undo the work Hypatia’s Children have done. And once I’ve eroded their power base enough, I’ll burn them.”

Decklin nodded. “Do it sooner than later. I’d hate to see you become like them.”

Nicholas sighed. “Words to live by. Where’s Lajé?”

“I left her brooding down in the building’s canteen about half an hour ago. She’s pretty cut up and wanted to be alone.”

Nicholas smiled and gazed wistfully out of his office window. The view was breathtaking. Across the Thames, he could see Big Ben and, beyond that, Westminster Abbey. “I’d have thought she’d be happy now everything’s over.”

Decklin nodded, then his gaze became distant. “In a way, I guess. On the other hand, Hypatia’s Children became her whole life. After they murdered her sister, everything she did revolved around their destruction. No family, no friends. The only thing that kept her going was revenge. Now she’s accomplished that, she’s left with nothing.”

Nicholas glanced back at Decklin. “She’s still got us.”

Decklin’s sigh exuded extreme weariness. “I hope that’s enough.”

Nicholas nodded. His thoughts were still clouded by the events over past few months. His own life had also been shattered by Hypatia’s Children, as had Decklin’s. It would take a long time for the wounds to heal. Perhaps someday he’d be able to piece it all back together again. Right now it felt like a vortex from which there was no escape. On reflection, he knew exactly how Lajé felt.

## Epilogue

“Get up, you lazy lay-about!” Decklin’s bellow rocked Nicholas' mind, dragging him from his slumber.

Nicholas winced. *Does the man never sleep!* “Alright, I'm coming.” He groaned, rolling onto his side.

Decklin banged a cup of coffee down on Nicholas' bedside table.

“Get that stuff away from me.” Nicholas croaked. His voice had the texture of a savage rasp.

The minister grinned. “Don't worry. I didn't make it. Your kitchen staff did it for me.”

Nicholas sighed with relief and reached for the steaming beverage. Decklin turned and opened the curtains. The blinding light caused Nicholas to wince once more.

“Can't you do anything slowly?”

Decklin shook his head. “Not in my nature. Now get up. We're going to be late.”

“Relax. The service doesn't start for another four hours.” He rubbed his eyes, forcing the last vestige of slumber from his body.

Decklin ignored his protests. “I'll catch you downstairs in the dining room. Fifteen minutes.”

When Nicholas trundled into the dining hall, Decklin was already there, arm-wrestling with Jared. The minister feigned agony, pretending to struggle against the boy. Jared giggled in triumph as he forced Decklin's arm onto the table.

Nicholas grinned and nodded at the giant plate of bacon and eggs. “You've already started, I see.”

Decklin grimaced. “If we'd waited for you we might have starved to death. Wouldn't we, Jared?”

Jared smiled the awestruck grin of hero-worship, but said nothing. Nicholas took a seat at his table and reached for a puffy croissant. A uniformed waitress appeared with a steaming pot of coffee. She poured without being asked. “Thank you, Florence,” Nicholas nodded at the woman.

Then he turned to Decklin. “Nice suit. I guess you'll be ready in fifteen minutes or so.”

Decklin shook his head. “Not with a breakfast like this. Do you always eat like you live in a hotel?”

Nicholas shrugged. “A privilege of wealth. It's ostentatious, I know, but it's amazing how quickly you get used to it. Of all the rooms in the house, this was the one I missed the most.”

Decklin glanced about the room. “Well, they certainly did a good job fixing it. You'd never know it was burned to a cinder, would you?” He quickly changed the subject. “Hurry. You're not even dressed yet.”

Nicholas chuckled. “Decklin, the church is less than an hour's drive away – and you've still got three hours before you have to do anything.”

“You say that, but I've yet to see you make a service on time,” Decklin glared in accusation.

Nicholas chomped on his pastry. He waited until he'd swallowed before replying. “I'll be on time today. I promise.”

They arrived at the church with time to spare. The building looked spectacular and the gardens looked the way Nicholas always wanted to remember them. The jacaranda tree was in full bloom and its flowers blanketed the lawn beneath it in purple. He glanced at the building's entrance. Ushers stood at each side of the door smiling and nodding at people who entered in their droves.

"You ready?" he glanced at Decklin.

His friend smiled. "Never been more ready in my life. You got the ring?"

"Right here." Nicholas patted his pocket.

They marched through the doors and took their seats at the front of the church. "Now don't you dare look out of that window," Nicholas instructed his friend. "I'll keep an eye out for her. You just sit there nice and quiet and wait."

He spotted the car right on time. A beautiful white limousine. However, people were still arriving and the car headed around the block. The bride arrived twenty minutes late. A very respectable time, Nicholas thought.

"She's here," he whispered. The organ struck its first note and all eyes turned to the arched, wooden doors.

Decklin gasped. Nicholas smiled. Lajé looked radiant – angelic, in fact, and Decklin seemed unable to stop smiling. In fact, he didn't stop smiling for the rest of the afternoon. It was early evening when the couple finally left the reception, hosted at Nicholas' home.

The guests formed a tunnel, linking hands with one another. Nicholas made sure he was at the end of the queue. He wanted to be the last person to say goodbye. He caught the glance and shy smile of the young woman opposite him, and smiled back.

He was used to such glances by now. As a wealthy, unmarried male, he was hot property among the single ladies in the small Parktown congregation and enjoyed frequent invitations from older couples anxious to introduce him to their daughters.

*Still too soon, though.* It had been nearly a year, but the repercussions of Jessica's betrayal still hung heavy on his heart whenever he thought about it. *Will I ever learn to love again? Possibly.* He glanced at the young woman across from him. She met his gaze, and then looked down with another shy smile. Nicholas smiled. *Probably.*

He turned to watch Decklin and Lajé make their way down the tunnel of linked hands, stopping to say goodbye to each person in turn. When they reached Nicholas, Lajé squeezed him in a powerful hug.

Nicholas laughed. "Careful. I'm still terrified of what those hands can do."

"Not any more, Nicholas," she replied with a throaty chuckle. "Unless Decklin doesn't learn to behave himself."

Nicholas kissed her on the cheek. "I wish you both a lifetime of happiness." The words felt awkward. He was never sure of what to say in these situations. "You both deserve it."

"Thank you." She smiled at him and stepped aside to let Decklin through.

The minister seemed equally awkward. "I – er – thanks for everything, Nicholas." He waved his hand vaguely at the fairy-lights that glittered off the man-made lake, forming a romantic backdrop for the canopied dining area. "The reception, the honeymoon. Everything."

Nicholas nodded. "You're welcome." He reached for Decklin, smothering the minister in a giant bear-hug.

When they broke, they shook hands. Decklin seemed too overcome with emotion to speak and Nicholas felt forced to ease the tension.

"So," he said with a casual air, "will I be seeing you in church tomorrow morning?"

Decklin threw back his head and laughed. "Not on your life."