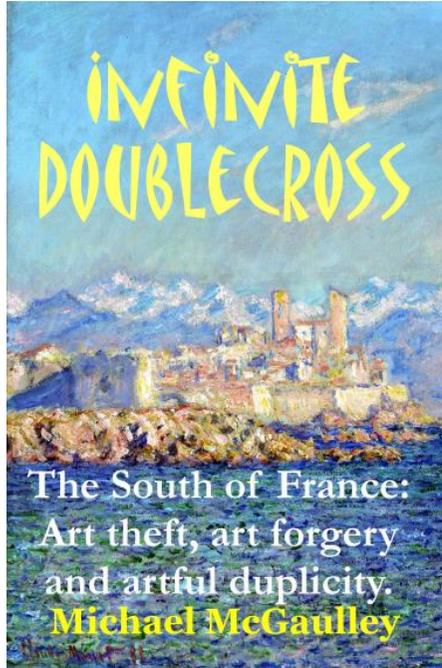


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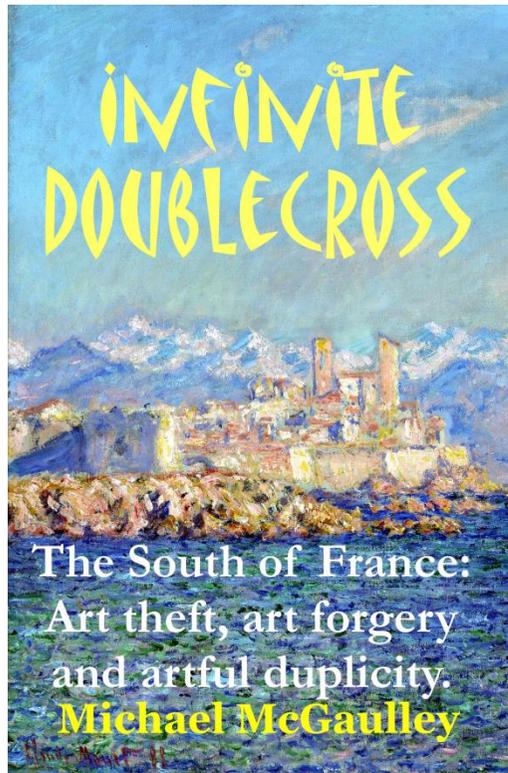
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Apologies for any technical glitches that may have crept in in “translating” these pages from book form to this sampler edition

You are welcome to pass this sampler on to others.

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The image on the cover is adapted from the painting, “Antibes, Afternoon Effect,” by Claude Monet in 1888. Of this painting, Monet wrote, “*I am painting Antibes as a small fortified town glistening golden in the sun, and standing out against the beautiful blue and pink mountains.*”

The Château Grimaldi is at the center of the painting. Picasso lived and worked in the Château for a while after World War II. It is now used as a museum, mainly for the works of Picasso, where an early scene of *Infinite Doublecross* takes place.

The font used on the cover is Matisse, styled on the work of Henri Matisse, 1869-1954, who, like Pablo Picasso, worked in the south of France. “*When I realized that every morning I would see this light again,*” Matisse wrote when he first came to Nice, “*I couldn’t believe how lucky I was.*”

PART ONE

Fool me once

Chicago, Saturday, 9:05 A.M.

EMILY CEDERQUIST was exhausted after a red-eye flight back from San Diego, but Bridges' words snapped her alert: "Morgan will be managing the new CommerBank project, so she and I flew down to Atlanta Monday to finalize things."

Morgan! That's my project! I brought it in!

Bridges is double-crossing me! Again! Bumping Morgan up to take it over!

She glanced around the conference table. The others were in T-shirts and sloppy blue jeans. She wore a crisp pink sport blouse and creased slacks: this was business, she felt, and for business one should dress like a professional.

She knew they were watching. They knew the game he was playing. Here at TAG you had co-workers, not friends. That was the way Bridges set it up—a constant Zero-Sum Game. For someone to get ahead, someone else had to get shafted. It made for constant competition. And it made it easier for him to control by fear and manipulation.

It was TAG's ritual Saturday morning staff meeting, "the only time we can all get together," as he explained at least once each month. Bill Bridges was the managing partner of the Chicago office of TAG, originally The Alexandria Group, a consulting firm specializing in custom software for banks and mutual funds.

Take some deep breaths, Emily. Be sensible. Think it through.

But I've always been rational, I've always thought things through!

Maybe thought too much, been too sensible!

And where has always being sensible gotten me? Taken for granted—that's where it's gotten me!

She stood. The room went still. "There's an old saying," she said, struggling to keep her voice calm. "Fool me once, it's your fault. Fool me twice, it's my fault."

Vertigo

EMILY PAUSED BY A WINDOW with a view across downtown Chicago to the rich blue of Lake Michigan. Sixty-six stories up, with nothing but a clear pane of glass ahead, the effect was dizzying.

She stepped back to look at the person reflected in the tinted glass—the very tired-looking person. A hair less than 6 feet, still lean despite the seven pounds she'd put on this year from a diet of machine snacks and late-night pizzas to fuel the string of 16-hour days.

Her hair, shoulder-length chestnut with strands of natural copper, glowed in the morning sun, and her eyes Wedgewood blue—the gift of her father's Scandinavian genes. Back home, in Minnesota, most of her female cousins had the same look, some flaxen blond, others chestnut.

She saw, all too clearly now, that she was no longer the bright kid just out of college. She'd be 28 next month, practically in the shadow of 30—as her mother made a point of reminding in their weekly phone calls. Her life was slipping away.

Slipping away while she was sealed in offices like this, working on other people's crises.

Lake Michigan was azure blue and inviting. A bank thermometer down on the street level read 72 degrees. A perfect late-summer day, a summer that she'd been too busy to enjoy, and now another weekend cooped up in the office

My life is passing me by. And I'm letting it happen.

She felt sudden vertigo, and rocked forward involuntarily, as if pulled outward. She drew back and saw the imprint of her forehead on the glass.

She flicked on her laptop. It only took a couple of minutes to type the letter, print it out, and sign it.

THE DOOR OPENED, and Bill Bridges stormed out. He was 41, thick and stocky, a college linebacker now 30 pounds over his playing weight, but still as aggressive as ever.

He jerked his thumb toward his office, grabbed another cup of black coffee along the way, then dropped into the big leather chair behind his desk. He didn't invite her to sit. That was fine: there was nothing to talk about. The letter said it all.

“So you walked out of my staff meeting to gaze out the goddam window? What the hell was that performance supposed to mean?”

“Thanks for asking, but no, I wasn't taken ill, just overtaken by a bout of reality.”

“The hell're you talking about?” He knocked back some coffee. The grey rings around his eyes were even darker than usual, and the veins stood out on his neck as they did when he was stressed—which was most of the time. Stress was always in the air at TAG. She almost felt sorry for him. Almost.

He slammed the cup back onto his desk. “The bottom line is, don't you ever do that to me again. Don't *ever* walk out of one of my meetings.”

“It'll never happen again, I promise you that.” She slid the letter onto his desk. He ignored it.

“Better read it,” she said, now even more sure it was the right decision.

He scanned it quickly, and it was almost funny the way his scalp drew back across his head as he slumped back into the chair and reread it.

Then he stared at her, his face blank. “The hell are you doing? CommerBank really wants you for the project. You're not on it, they'll walk. They're expecting you in Atlanta on Monday morning. They— we—I—the firm really need you there.” He threw the letter onto the desk.

“That's your problem, not mine. Not anymore. As the letter said, I'm giving four weeks' notice, but since TAG already owes me the six weeks of vacation time you never let me take, I'm gone as of now.”

He stared at her, and she saw the pressure inside slowly deflate, leaving him somehow shrunken. Then he nodded. “Okay, looks like you

got us by the balls, so go ahead and squeeze. What is it you want? You're upset because—"

"What I want? What I want is to get away from being manipulated and double-crossed."

"I've always been good to you, brought you along," he said, his hands spread wide.

"You know very well that it was my work that brought in the CommerBank business: a referral from Jerry Anders at Western Savings. Larry Cooper asked for me, *specifically* asked for me, and you know it."

"Hey, you'll be on the team, you need a little more seasoning, it's just that—"

"On the team? Not good enough. We went through this before, back in April, with the Continental Fund project. You told me then—you *promised* me—that I'd manage the next one. Well, next time has come and gone, and you double-crossed me again. Fool me once, it's your fault. Fool me twice, it's my fault."

Cold metal

EMILY DROPPED the box of office stuff at her apartment, then changed into shorts and running shoes and headed out to walk the parks that stretched for miles north along Lake Michigan—the parks she'd been too busy to enjoy.

Now, out in the sun and air, away from the claustrophobia of the office, she felt a last-day-of-school kind of freedom.

She was still shocked at the way she'd reacted this morning. “The Ice Princess”—that's what they'd called her back in school because she'd always come across as cool, rational, analytical.

But I hadn't been cool and rational this morning.

What's happening to me?

Tired, very tired. Too much stress, for too long.

Tired of being taken for granted.

Tired of being manipulated and used.

Tired of being betrayed.

SHE REACHED FOR HER PHONE to call Porter, then remembered: she didn't have a phone any longer, she'd turned it in when she left TAG. She'd buy one tomorrow. And a laptop, too.

She walked along the lake-front, on the look-out for a pay-phone.

It'd blow his mind, hearing from her this early on a Saturday. She'd had a total of two totally free weekends since New Year's, and one of those had gone to visiting her family over Easter.

The wedding was now only five weeks away. Five weeks from today.

Maybe it was just as well that she'd quit TAG. Now there would be time to get things ready . . . and a lot less stress..

She finally found a pay-phone. Porter's line was busy. Of all times. She didn't leave a message.

His apartment was in a high-rise along the lake, another half-hour's walk, but today was perfect for walking, and for once she had plenty of

time. The fresh air and exercise felt good, and it felt even better to be free of the office and deadlines and pressure and squabbling and double-crossing.

SHE FOUND ANOTHER PAY PHONE a block away from his place. The line was still busy. At least that meant he was home.

From the lakefront, she cut through the parking area to his building. It was a safe area, but you could never be sure. Porter kept a pistol in the bedroom, in case of a break-in.

She rode up on the elevator with a mother and a baby in a carriage. They hadn't talked about children: that was another of the topics he always seemed to back away from.

She paused at his door, wondering if this was such a good idea. Maybe she should forget about surprising him. She'd never dropped in like this before.

She slid the key into the lock.

But Porter wasn't sitting at his computer, and the living room blinds were drawn. His land-line was off the hook.

Something smelled wrong as she stepped inside. Someone had been smoking.

Odd. Very odd. He loathed smoking. He was an account manager at an ad agency, and had even refused on principle to work on a campaign for one of the tobacco companies. It would have been a big promotion, a chance to work in Asia. It was one of the things she admired him for.

Then she knew what it meant, and she wanted to run away, to let things be as they were.

You can't run from it! Confront the reality!

She moved softly toward the bedroom. They were asleep in the bed.

She stood, frozen. The woman stirred and opened her eyes. She gasped when she saw Emily, then bolted for the bathroom—naked. Very big on top.

Porter rolled over and saw her. She couldn't read his expression in the dim light. He pulled himself up in the bed. "So you finally took a Saturday off."

Infinite Doublecross

She reeled back against the doorframe. “How long . . . how long has this been going on?”

“You're never here. You're always working, always rushing out of town.”

“I can't believe you could do this to me! I thought . . . I thought you loved me.”

“Look,” he said, pulling on a robe. “Linda and I, we're just friends, just hanging out together, nothing to get bent out of shape about.”

“You call this ‘hanging out?’ With a wedding in five weeks?” She turned so he wouldn't see the tears welling up in her eyes, blinding her.

She groped for the drawer she used for the things she left there: a sweater, a pair of slacks, a bathing suit. She would take them and never come back.

But this was the wrong drawer, and her hand closed on the cold metal of his revolver

Galerie Vera

Washington. Noon.

Vera de Cochin-Jessup closed her checkbook, glanced at the nearly bare walls of her gallery, then slipped to her office in the back and fixed herself a vodka on the rocks.

I'll have lunch soon, she told herself. She hadn't brought anything to eat, though. She never did. But she never forgot to bring a bottle.

It was so utterly depressing to see how everything had crumbled again. This time there seemed no way out, no way at all.

Her gallery, *Galerie Vera*, occupied half of the ground level in a brownstone on the fringes of Georgetown, in an area the developers hadn't discovered yet. For a couple of wonderful years, it had been *the* significant gallery in Washington, and the money flowed.

But then the troubles began. Troubles always seemed to follow her.

Now there wasn't enough to pay next month's rent, not for the gallery, not even for her flat. She'd been down before and managed to bounce back. But never down this far. Now all her bridges were burned— not just in Washington, but in New York, London, Paris. There was no one anywhere she could touch up for a little loan. Now the important people wouldn't even speak to her any more, the bastards.

Only a miracle could save her now, and she didn't believe in miracles. The closest thing to a miracle she could hope for was the jar of sleeping pills she'd hoarded . . . a painless way out when the time finally came. Probably soon.

She heard the chime as the front door opened. Hardly anyone visited the gallery these days, only occasional tourists looking for cheap posters. It seemed pointless now, but she had nothing else to do, and the apartment was even more depressing.

She took a couple of quick swallows and felt the reassuring warmth of the icy vodka, then peered through the one-way mirror that gave her a view of the display rooms. A man, early 30's, tall and lean, wandered

around the gallery. She'd spent her life sorting out those with money from those not worth bothering with, and his lumpy suit told the story.

But he looked interesting: rugged good looks, a strong chin, dark curly hair. She went for strong men, when there weren't any rich ones around. These days, everyone had credit cards.

She checked herself in the mirror, pleased with what she saw: a white Ungaro dress, set off by a red, blue and gold Hermes scarf—both old, but still exuding class and quality. She still looked prosperous, despite everything. It paid to buy quality.

She was 46, but looked a decade younger. She'd had the sense to stay out of the sun after reaching 20, so her skin was still fresh, with the peaches-and-cream complexion of the Jessups, the English side of her family. She was 5'2" and still barely over 100 pounds, with flowing blond hair.

Despite everything, despite the hangovers, despite the pointlessness of it all now, she spent an hour every morning exercising to keep her figure, and she still spent a fortune on her hair. From long before her arrival in Washington she had made a point of buying only designer clothes—until her credit cards were all maxed out. For her, it was part of the game: if you didn't look the part, you definitely had no hope of playing it.

She took another quick swallow, then another, hoping it would calm the desperation she was feeling. She couldn't afford to let the panic show.

Then she made her entrance, pausing at the top of the little staircase.

ROGER STODDARD handed her a business card. It identified him as David Thompson, a partner with a large Baltimore law firm. It was modeled on one he'd picked up a couple of weeks ago.

He saw the interest in her eyes, but missed seeing her finger run along the back of the card to check whether it was engraved. It wasn't.

"We just got a new case, my law firm did," he began. "We're looking for a consultant to work with us, somebody that really knows the art business. Your name was suggested to us."

“Really?” She tried to keep the excitement out of her voice. Perhaps there really were miracles! “Suggested by whom?”

“One of our clients, somebody I can’t name. Question’s this: suppose I came to you with a bunch of really top-quality paintings to sell. Think you could find a buyer for them, somebody with ready cash?”

“How much cash? What kind of paintings?”

“That’s what I need your input on. Let’s just say we’re talking a lot of money, maybe seven figures.”

She turned away, hiding her excitement by pretending to straighten a picture. Someone was liquidating a collection! And this bumpkin of a lawyer was handling it! Sheep ready for a shearing!

“Please,” she smiled, gesturing to one of the easy chairs at the back of the showing room. She hurried up to her office and got a bottle of her best wine and two glasses, pausing long enough to rinse her vodka glass and set it out of sight.

She wished now she hadn’t had the vodka. She needed her wits about her on this one. I’ll hold back on the wine, she resolved.

“Let me just ask you this,” Stoddard said when she returned. “What I need is some buyers that’ve got real money to spend on paintings— say a million or so. That’s what I need, any ideas?”

She smiled and took a sip of wine. One mustn’t seem too eager. “I trust you won’t repeat it to a soul, but several very prominent people have recently asked me to handle their art investments. They have immense sums, truly phenomenal amounts of money ready to invest, waiting in banks, ready to move after the right pieces.”

He stared at her for a moment, and she wondered if he would fall for it.

He let the silence hang in the air, let her wonder, before saying, “I think you’re exactly the person I’m—I mean my law firm – is looking for. Let’s talk about it over lunch.”

“But the gallery. My clients—”

“Forget the damned gallery. Close it and throw away the key. We’re talking about more money than you’d make here in a thousand years. Come on, I’ll buy lunch.”

Underground market

STODDARD FOUND A CAB, and named an Afghan restaurant in Georgetown.

Vera knew the place. The food was quite good, but she'd hoped for something more upscale, a place where she'd be seen by the people who mattered, let them to know that she was on the way back up again.

She decided not to push it. This was an opportunity she couldn't let slip away.

The waiter led them to a secluded booth in the rear, and she realized that it had all been arranged in advance. How could he be so sure I'd come with him?

"There's something I'm curious about," Stoddard said as soon as they were settled. "Probably you know the answer."

"Perhaps," She was feeling the combination of the wine on top of the vodka. It slowed her down, now of all times when she had to be on the top of her form.

"I hear about these big art thefts every so often," he said, "millions of dollars worth. All those paintings that get stolen – what happens to that stuff?"

"Stolen art?" She fingered the silk of her scarf. What an odd question. Was he trying to test her? She shook her head. "I have no idea. In any case, you were asking earlier about people with money to—"

"No," he cut in, "let's talk about this. You're in the art business, you must hear rumors. It seems every month or so there's a big art theft, a couple million bucks worth taken here, ten million or fifty million there. These guys aren't taking these pictures to hang over the mantelpiece. So what happens to the stuff? Who buys it all?"

Vera took a deep breath. She wanted to get on with things, not chatter on about stolen art. If he was representing an estate, then she wanted to lock herself into the deal as soon as possible.

“Some stolen pieces pass under-the-counter, so to speak. A good bit of it is quietly ransomed back to the insurance companies, which are usually willing to pay a certain percentage, no questions asked.”

“What percentage?”

“How would I know?” she snapped, then caught herself and smiled. “After all, my business is selling art, not stealing it. I believe it’s ten or twenty percent.”

“You’re telling me there’s no underground market for stolen paintings? That’s not what I’ve heard.”

Would he ever get to the point!

“Oh, there definitely is a market for stolen art, most definitely. A very sizeable market, as a matter of fact. Measured in dollar volume, the traffic in stolen works of art ranks in international crime behind only drugs and arms! And perhaps money laundering! I find that absolutely incredible!”

“Yeah, I’ve heard that, too. Probably we read the same article. But what I want to know is, who buys it? After all, if it’s stolen property, they can’t display it or sell it, can they?”

The waiter—small and wiry, with a huge black moustache—brought their drinks. Stoddard had ordered a light beer. Vera forced herself to take only a token sip of the vodka-tonic, then put it back: she needed her wits about her on this one.

“Who buys stolen art?” she repeated when the waiter left. “One does hear rumors in the trade. It’s said that certain collectors don’t mind stolen art. All they care about is possessing the paintings, and have no interest in selling. One of those collectors, so the story goes, is a certain Russian Oligarch who has cash to burn. But I think it’s more likely that the Columbian cocaine lords are behind some of the thefts. There are rumors, too, that the trade in stolen art, the drug trade, and the trade in illicit armaments are intertwined.”

“Why’s that?”

“It varies. Paintings would be useful as collateral. They’re compact, portable, and incredibly valuable. A top painting, a Picasso, say, or a Van Gogh, is far more valuable, ounce for ounce, than gold. Then, too, these drug dealers may want them as toys, as status symbols. They all

have their mansions and their dozen Mercedes and private jets and helicopters. Perhaps they feel that a personal collection of Picassos or Van Goghs is the only way left to show off. And then there are those ”

“Nah, forget the drug people. The arms dealers, too. They’re too dangerous to get mixed up with.”

That puzzled her, but she let it pass, and said, “There are rumors that the Mafia, and the Japanese equivalent of the *Mafia*, the *Yakuza*, may be holding stolen paintings with the view that they will be even more valuable in the next century. And not to forget the Russian Oligarchs and the Russian crime gangs.”

“No, stay the hell away from the *Mafia*. The *Yakuza*, too. And definitely out of sight of the damned Russian crime gangs—they’re real trouble, too.”

Now she was baffled. She indulged herself in another sip of the vodka-tonic. “Oh, David,” she said, forcing a smile. “Surely you’re not interested in buying stolen art.”

THE SMILE, ALONG WITH THE WAY HE LEANED BACK in the chair, told her that she had very seriously misjudged him.

“Let’s quit dancing around,” he said. “I’m not really a lawyer. That was just to test you out. What I’m really looking for is somebody with the right contacts to help me sell some paintings.”

“If you’re not a lawyer . . . Are these paintings from a private collection?”

“Yeah, you could call it a private collection. *My* collection.”

“*You* have paintings to sell?” The thought of this bumpkin in his cheap suit having significant paintings to sell was ludicrous. His type would only be interested in pictures of naked women silk-screened on black velvet.

“I’ll be getting them. Good ones. But I’ll need some buyers with big money to spend, really big money, millions. Maybe some rich Arabs, or one of those Russian Oligarch guys—they’re tough, what I hear, but they’ve got money.”

“You’ll be getting the paintings? From what source?”

“I’ll be stealing them. With your help.”

IRA

The Limerick Pub, Washington.

When Johnny McDevitt heard the question, he took a sip of lager, his mouth suddenly dry.

“The IRA?” he echoed, forcing a laugh despite the panic he felt. Was this it, the way it ended? “For the kind of IRA you're looking for, it's a stock-broker you'll be needing.”

Stoddard slipped a folded \$20 bill from his shirt pocket and stuck it under a salt-shaker. “IRA—Irish Republican Army.”

“Ah, those lads, they're all out of the business these days, don't you keep up with the news? Truce with the Brits, some years ago.”

Stoddard shook his head. “I hear they're still around, still accepting contributions.”

McDevitt scanned the mirror over the bar for unfamiliar faces that might be moving in around him. Things seemed normal enough. “Suppose,” McDevitt said, groping his way, “just suppose I did come upon someone from the IRA. What is it you'd be wanting?”

“You don't want to know,” Stoddard said, now upping the ante by sliding a \$50 to join the \$20 under the salt-shaker. “Make the call, and I'll make it worth your while.”

McDevitt shook his head and forced a smile, stalling for time to think. He was a tall, beefy Irishman in his early forties, a big sandy-haired guy with the look of a football player 20 pounds above his prime. He worked part-time at the Limerick as a bartender.

He'd seen the fellow around the Limerick a few times recently, but all he knew was that he'd been a good tipper.

It wasn't unusual for customers to ask him if he could find a few minutes to give some advice on what to see when they visit Ireland. They usually made it worth his while, so he usually took a break and brought a couple of pints of Harp lager to loosen them up and make them more generous.

Now he wondered what in hell he'd gotten himself into by agreeing to talk with this one. McDevitt had an American passport and an American driving license, but if the authorities ever looked too deeply into them, the truth would come out: they had belonged to an American from Boston who went to Ireland to die of AIDS so he could pass on his papers for the sake of the Cause.

McDevitt took another long swallow of lager, studying the fellow over the rim of the mug: tall and lean, with thick, dark hair and the kind of boyish face that women seemed to go for. But there was something about him that bothered McDevitt, an arrogance in the way he moved and spoke that made him think of soldiers. And cops.

McDevitt rolled around in the chair, scanning the mirror over the bar again. "Why me? Why come to me with this? What makes you think I'd know the IRA?"

"You're Irish." He slid another \$50 bill under the salt shaker, beside the bills that McDevitt hadn't touched. "I figure you know a lot of people."

"I don't even know your name," McDevitt probed, wanting to know more, but reluctant to get in too far.

"Sullivan. Jack Sullivan," Stoddard said. He reached into a different pocket for another \$50, and put it with the others.

McDevitt looked at the bills on the table. He looked up at Stoddard again, then at the money again. He took another swallow of lager. When he set the mug down, he picked up the bills and stuck them into his shirt pocket with practiced ease. "I'll make some phone calls, but no promises."

MCDEVITT SLIPPED OUT of the Limerick by the back door, and went down the block to use a pay phone at the hotel. He couldn't use his cell, and the phone at the pub might be tapped for drug deals. He couldn't afford to make a mistake. He'd done eight years in a British prison, and had no intention of going back inside.

Things had settled down in Ireland now, but the Brits were still looking for him for his part in bombing an Army barracks. The amnesty didn't cover that. If they found him, he'd go away for life.

"There's a fellow here asking some questions I don't like the sound of," McDevitt told Matt Gilligan when he reached him. "Get over here, fast as you can. Follow him when he leaves. Find out what you can— his car license number, where he lives, that sort of thing."

"You can count on it, Johnny," Gilligan replied. Matt Gilligan was also wanted by the British. He was earnest and reliable, but dumb as a post.

McDevitt went back to the Limerick and worked the bar until he saw Gilligan slip in and take a table by the door. Gilligan was a little fellow, with milky white skin and carrot-red hair.

The red hair made him too noticeable. "Wear a hat when you're operational," they'd told him time and again. But Gilligan usually forgot. Or didn't give a damn. Which was the trouble with most of them, McDevitt thought: dim-witted romantics with a death wish.

McDEVITT PUNCHED OUT for the night, then stopped to fill a couple of fresh mugs of Harp to bring back to the table.

"I found someone for you, Mr. Sullivan. A friend of a friend." He glanced at the salt shaker and the pile of bills. Stoddard took the hint and slid another \$50 onto the table. McDevitt didn't reach for it.

This time Stoddard had to dip into his wallet for another bill. He hadn't expected it to take this much. "What did your friend say?"

"He's a suspicious sort. He thinks you're asking strange questions. He's thinking you're a federal agent." McDevitt laughed, but his eyes stayed hard. "But I don't think you're FBI or ATF. They wouldn't be daft enough to try your approach."

Stoddard shook his head. "I'm not FBI, ATF, nothing like that. I just want some information."

"That's easy enough to say. Anyway, the person I reached says to find out what you want," McDevitt said. "The thing is, he doesn't understand what it is you want of the IRA."

“I'll deal with him directly.”

“You won't get the chance. He won't talk to you until he knows more.”

Stoddard hesitated, then leaned forward and said softly, “What I want is weapons, small arms. Delivered in Europe. I'll pay cash.”

“What's that to do with the IRA?”

“The IRA's been running guns to Europe for decades. From what—”

“That was a long time ago. Things have changed. In any case, you can go just across the river, into Virginia, and buy all the guns you want. So why are you talking to me?”

“You're missing the point. I need them in Europe, not Virginia. You—the IRA—have the kind of expertise I need, to deliver them where I want them. I'll make it worth your while.”

“Before they'd deal with you, they'd surely want to know what you'd be using the weapons for.”

Stoddard shook his head. “Nothing that can ever be traced back.”

McDevitt emptied his glass, staring at Stoddard over the rim. “You're asking me to violate federal law, and that's something I don't do. I don't like the idea of prison. I don't deal nose-candy, and I damned well don't deal guns.”

He reached over and picked up the fifties that Stoddard had tucked under the shaker. “But if you were to stop back, say a week from tonight, who knows? You might just find someone wanting to buy you a beer.”

Mr. Slash

THE EVENING'S RAIN had given way to a light mist by the time Stoddard left the Limerick. The mist reminded him of the umbrella he'd been carrying earlier, and he went back in for it, nearly bumping into a little guy with milky-white skin and carrot-red hair just coming out the door.

Back outside, he left the umbrella furred, and headed for his car, a couple of blocks away on a side street. He was sleepy now from the beer, his ears ringing from the music in the pub.

He came alert when two shadowy figures stepped out from behind a van, blocking his path. "Got some change, man?" A knife glinted in the light of the street lamp.

He sensed a third moving in from behind. In his time in the Army, Stoddard had spent endless hours in unarmed combat drill, and the moves were automatic. He pivoted, and chopped upward with his elbow. The blow broke the mugger's jaw-bone, and he fell, grunting in pain.

The other two moved in fast. Tyrone Roberts, known in the streets as Mr. Slash for his skill with a blade, came in low, hands gyrating in a slow, hypnotic rhythm. Mr. Slash had been on the streets since he was 14, except for the five years, off and on, in on various jails and prisons.

Mr. Slash waved his brother Curtis to close in from the other side. Curtis had his own knife out now. He was only 13, but useful sometimes.

Stoddard feinted left, drawing Curtis off balance, then punched the long point of the umbrella into his face. Curtis yelled and clutched at his eye, his knife clattering away on the wet street.

Stoddard grabbed Curtis's elbow and swung him into Mr. Slash. It happened too quickly for Slash to turn the knife away, and the shiny blade cut through Curtis's jacket to enter his chest. Curtis fell, a pink froth forming on his lips and chin, the sign of a punctured lung.

Mr. Slash backed away. This wasn't going at all right.

Stoddard drove the umbrella at his face, but Slash swept it aside with his left hand, then drove in with the right, the silver blade flashing in the dim light.

Stoddard danced aside. But his foot caught on a piece of broken sidewalk, and he fell onto the wet pavement. He tried to roll away. A parked car blocked his way, and he was trapped.

Slash, grinning, came in fast, and drove his knife at Stoddard's heart.

Stoddard kicked, and his foot caught Slash under the chin as he dove in for the kill. Slash's head jerked back hard, and the base of his skull snapped his spinal cord. He was dead before he hit the pavement.

McDEVITT WATCHED it from half a block away, and was very damned impressed with the performance. A man who could handle three muggers that easily knew what he was doing.

That, added to the fact that he had doubled back into the Limerick checking for a tail, convinced him that he was a professional: leaving the umbrella behind was the sort of thing pros were trained to do.

But he couldn't understand why in hell a pro would have come to the Limerick looking for guns in the first place. It was a daft idea. Guns could be arranged anywhere in Europe, given the right contacts, so why fiddle around in a bar with someone you don't know from Adam?

Something else going on, that was obvious enough. But what?

It didn't sound like an FBI or ATF set-up—the approach was too clumsy for them even at their worst. But someone who would put out money like that to get an introduction wasn't just playing bar-room games.

He couldn't afford to take anything for granted. He had no intention of making a mistake that would put him back into a British prison for the rest of his life.

But there just might be an opportunity here.

He left it to Matt Gilligan to follow the man back to his car, a battered old BMW, and got the license plate. That was all they needed for now, enough to trace who the hell the man really was.

The Leadership

THE NEXT DAY, McDevitt took the information about the man he knew as Jack Sullivan and his interest in guns in Europe to his Control Officer.

The Control Officer's name was "Joe." McDevitt guessed, from the fussy, prissy way he handled himself, that Joe was probably either a priest or an undertaker.

Joe was an undertaker in an Irish neighborhood in Baltimore.

Joe passed the license plate number to one of his connections in a network of first and second generation Irish who still sympathized with The Cause, and were willing to do whatever they could to help.

From the plate number, they learned Jack Sullivan's real name: Roger Stoddard, and got his address in Northern Virginia, as well. He was renting in a complex of garden apartments that had seen its best days.

The Leadership fed the information to some of the sympathizers around the area. A police detective in Baltimore ran the name through the FBI computer network: Stoddard had no police record other than a handful of speeding tickets over the years. A private detective in Washington tapped into his sources: data from credit bureaus, from Stoddard's government personnel file, and from some discreet interviews posing as an executive recruiter.

With the information that came back, they pieced together a picture of his life.

Roger Stoddard, they found, had been born around Boston. He hadn't been much of a student, though he was a pretty good quarterback on a second-rate team. After college, he went into the military, where he found his niche. Beginning with Officer Training, he finished every school at or near the top of his class. He made it into the Rangers, and earned outstanding ratings, even though he was a little too independent to suit his commanders.

Stoddard's main interest from the start was in commando operations, and spent three years with the Rangers. But he broke a leg in a night operation. That ended his Army career, and he was released on a medical discharge with 20% disability, and explained the slight limp. Now he was 31, and divorced.

It seemed that all he had ever wanted to be was a soldier, and that was all he was ever good at. He drifted for a year.

Finally, an Army buddy helped him get started as a stockbroker. People liked him because of his clean-cut All-American appearance, and his friendly, confident manner. But he pushed his luck, churning customer accounts to boost his commissions. At the first downturn, it caught up with him, and his clients found themselves stuck with junk.

He moved on to another brokerage, but the same pattern followed. "You don't really give a damn what happens to the client once you have their money, do you?" his manager asked as he was firing him. One of Stoddard's clients, a widow, 73, had lost \$53,000 to his bad advice.

Stoddard laughed. By now there was no reason not to tell the truth. "You got it."

But he hadn't expected to get fired again, at least not so soon. He was in hock up to his ears with car payments on his old BMW, the lease on his apartment, and the clothes and furniture that he had bought on credit.

He'd tried selling cars on commission, but the market just wasn't there.

He took his last paycheck and drove up to Atlantic City. He'd been going there to play the tables for a weekend every couple of months. Having every cent riding on a roulette wheel wasn't quite as much fun as going out on a night commando operation, but it was the next best thing. Stoddard loved risk, and never felt as alive as when he was right on the brink.

One weekend he got lucky, and the numbers wouldn't stop coming right for him. He cleared \$50,000, and got out when he sensed the power leaving him.

JOE CARRIED THAT INFORMATION to the Leadership, and in 24 hours got back to McDevitt with \$1,000 for expenses. “We want you to follow up on Mr. Stoddard. You've been trained. You know what to do. Find out what he's up to. Perhaps we can let him do the work for us, then move in and take it away from him.”

A COUPLE OF DAYS LATER, Stoddard led them to his next step: his recent contact with Vera de Cochin-Jessup. Joe took that lead to another supporter of the Cause, a small-time lawyer in downtown Washington, and asked him to check out Vera and *Galerie Vera*.

It took a couple of days, and when the information came back, it told him everything about Vera—except how she fitted into Stoddard's plan. And what that plan was.

Only child

VERA WAS THE ONLY CHILD of a French mother (the de Cochins had crossed the Mediterranean from France to Algeria in the 1850s), and an English father (Jessup) who had first passed through Algeria during World War II.

The de Cochin family had developed one of the better vineyards in Algeria and lived very well, in the colonial fashion. But Algeria was the first focus of the wave of Arab nationalism that followed the war, and after 15 years of escalating terrorism and fighting, French President de Gaulle finally made the decision to pull out in 1962.

Along with the other *colons*, the de Cochin-Jessups lost everything. Vera's mother and father, and nearly a million others of French ancestry who had colonized Algeria over the previous 130 years, had left Algeria that summer of 1962, allowed only one suitcase each after days of heated misery crowded together at the docks, waiting for boats to take them back to impoverished lives in mainland France.

Her family settled in the mountains behind the French Riviera and tried without much success to re-establish the vineyards. That was where Vera obtained her early education . . . along with her ability to project a French or an English background as the circumstances shifted. As the child of former colonials, she was a *pied-noir*, never fully accepted back into French society, yet inheriting the stinging anger of the others who had been forced away from their homes and sources of wealth.

But there had still been the Jessups, her father's family. The money on that side was all gone, but at least they were able to arrange a good education in art and art history in England and France, thanks to old family connections.

The same connections had gotten her into the right circles in London and Paris, and opened doors for work after she got her degree. First at the Courtauld in London, then at the Louvre. That had enabled her to run in the right circles.

She enjoyed living well too much to be satisfied with museum wages, so moved on for a spell at Sotheby's, the auction house, until she hooked up with a rich, married, male "friend," who got her a good apartment and a wardrobe of the latest fashions.

But that arrangement didn't last long. Two marriages came and went, and she got good settlements from each. She moved to New York with her second husband.

When that marriage ended, she came to Washington. With a little help from her friends she set up *Galerie Vera* on the fringes of Georgetown, adding the small touch of spelling it in the French style, with one L, to convey that certain *je ne sais quoi*.

The gallery thrived, and Vera became a player in the Washington social scene courtesy of introductions by her male friends. A particular friend was Jerry Strong, society accountant, who created some miraculous tax-sheltered schemes, along with some clever methods of avoiding sales taxes.

Then it went wrong for Jerry Strong and his clients, and soon for Vera. The tax shelters that Strong created fell under IRS scrutiny, and his clients were hit with whopping penalties. In exchange for her testimony against Jerry Strong, the charges against Vera were dropped.

But Washington neither forgot nor forgave. The corporate clients quietly dropped her, hoping that the shareholders wouldn't learn how much of their money had been squandered on overpriced second-rate stuff. The important people in Washington art scene stopped coming to her openings. The promising young artists who'd been in her stable moved to other galleries.

She had stuck it out, stubbornly determined to survive. Even then she made it even then she might have made it had she not talked to a *Washington Post* reporter when she'd too much to drink at a party, saying, "I quite agree with Andy Warhol, or was it Marshall McLuhan? Art truly is whatever you can get away with."

Now she was down to her last few hundred dollars, and was months behind on her apartment rent, gallery rent, and credit card bills.

Working dinner

STODDARD LET VERA STEW for a few days to let her worry that she'd lost the chance, then phoned her at the gallery on Wednesday.

She invited him to dinner at her apartment that night. She could control things better on her turf. She lived on the second floor of a Victorian brownstone near DuPont Circle, a big step down from the flat in Spring Valley she'd had to give up when things started going bad. She'd managed a good deal on the lease here by sleeping with the agent, but he was gone now, and she didn't have enough for next month's rent.

Something would have to break soon. Soon. Or never.

SHE STOPPED AT Sutton Place Gourmet for dinner—he was a beef man, she was sure of that. The tab took a big bite out of her remaining cash.

When Stoddard arrived, she was wearing a silk blouse and skin-tight slacks from a little shop in Paris, shoes by Ferragamo, and perfume she'd brought back from Paris when she still had money.

Stoddard—though she still knew him as David Thompson—arrived wearing a checkered sport shirt, tattered blue jeans, and running shoes. Just about what she expected from him.

She fixed him a drink. She made her own weak, for once. Tonight she needed her mind absolutely clear.

“I get the sense you're military,” she probed.

“That so?”

“You seem very military in your bearing, your manner.”

“Let's keep to business.”

“I just want to get to know you.”

“Why?”

“So I can understand you, work better with you.” She took a sip of her drink and held his gaze over the top of the glass. “Besides, to be quite frank about it, you seem . . . you seem like a very fascinating man.”

“We’ve got business to talk about.”

“At least tell me how you found your way to me.”

“I read about you in an old *Vanity Fair* at the dentist’s.”

“That horrid magazine. They—the media—are vultures, always looking to see who’s up, so they can drag them down.”

It had been a gossipy piece that painted Vera as a scheming, manipulative, snobbish social climber who made a point of knowing the important people, and wasn’t shy about using them. When Stoddard read it he knew immediately that she was perfect for what he had in mind.

He invested \$500 on a private detective to dig up some background on her. It turned out that she was even better than he could have hoped.

HE GOT TO BUSINESS AFTER DINNER as Vera served an apricot liqueur.

“The idea’s this: we hit the best museum around, whatever it is, you tell me. Basically we pull a raid on a cache of art, just like it was a military objective. Work with a bunch of ex-commando types, go in fast, accomplish the objective, then haul ass out and dissolve into the environment.”

In the days since their last meeting, Vera had researched the major art thefts of the past few years, to get a sense of what had been done successfully. Museums were quickly being forced to tighten security. The days of the amateur art thief were past.

But a fast commando raid on a museum—that had not been tried, not by people who really knew what they were doing. It sounded insane, but she had nothing to lose. If it worked, wonderful. If not, there was still that little jar of sleeping pills.

But if it did work, then he was thinking too small. If it worked with one museum, why not three? Why not a half-dozen?

But she would lead him there step by step.

“It’s perfect, absolutely perfect,” she said, her mind already generating other possibilities. “I do so want to be part of it.”

She touched her glass to his. “To our success.”

Then she said, “And you want me to suggest a possible target, yes?”

“Right. But not Washington, not anywhere in the U.S. From what I’ve been picking up, most American museums put guards everywhere, keep the bastards off welfare, I suppose. Also all sorts of electronic security. I was thinking of Europe.”

“I know the perfect spot.”

“Tell me.”

“How can I be sure you won’t just use my information and cut me out?” Most of the time she spoke with an upper-class British accent, but now she let her French accent come through. Men found that sexy, and stopped thinking clearly.

“You’re part of it, you can count on that. Provided you come up with something useful.”

She clasped his hand momentarily. A little touching always worked wonders with men. “It’s such a fabulous opportunity! I’m so glad we’ll be working together!”

She reached over and quickly kissed his cheek, then backed away to refill their glasses. When she was in the kitchen, she loosened another button on her blouse. She hadn’t worn a bra.

She brought some books over to the walnut coffee table, and sat beside him on the sofa, leaning forward. She had planned this out earlier, so that moving closer to him would flow naturally. She was wearing the last of the perfume she had brought from France.

The books were folio-sized, containing color reproductions of Impressionist and Post-Impressionist works. In the next ten minutes, she pointed out several paintings that had recently sold for at least a million dollars each, and some for as much as \$100 million and more. “These very paintings, or others by the same artists, are all to be found on the *Cote d’Azur*. Ours for the taking.”

“*Cote d’Azur*? The French Riviera?”

She watched his response over the next few minutes as she expanded on his original idea. His expression told her he’d had no idea of the real possibilities. Now he was dazzled.

With a little finesse she could end up with most of it for herself, and he'd never realize the difference! It was so far beyond his expectations that he'd be as happy as a pig in wallow, whatever he got.

She leaned back and snuggled herself into the L of the sofa. She sipped from her glass, holding his eyes over the rim. Her tongue slid along her upper lip. "After this, the hard work begins for both of us. But now we must celebrate our accord, yes?"

STODDARD DIDN'T HEAR her slip out of bed in the middle of the night and move softly into the living room where they had left their clothes—as she had planned.

His wallet told her everything: his real name, his address, even where he worked, and, thanks to an ATM receipt, how much he had on deposit—\$47,412. Interesting. A lot of money to keep in a bank account.

She got the number from his Virginia driver's license, and even his Social Security card, which he was foolish enough to carry.

She copied the numbers and expiration dates and security codes from his Visa and Master Card. If nothing else, she could charge some things to him, and he'd probably never know how it happened.

His pay stub told her that he was a salesman at a used car dealership in the suburbs. She phoned there the next morning, after he left.

"Mr. Stoddard is no longer employed here," the receptionist said. She had some kind of accent Vera couldn't pin down.

"No? When did he leave?"

"A while ago, a month or two. I don't know."

From that point, she locked her gallery, and spent her time working her Rolodex, phoning anyone who might be able to help her connect with the right kind of buyers.

Not many would even take her calls. For those who would talk, she developed the story line that she was closing her gallery to assist in liquidating some major European collection. If they could introduce her to potential buyers, "a very generous share of the commission" would be theirs.

Infinite Doublecross

Several laughed in her face and hung up. None had any worthwhile ideas.

But there was plenty of time; she would find good buyers yet. It was one of the lessons of her life: there were always fools with more dollars than sense.

And if none turned up, then at least she would milk Roger Stoddard for enough to carry her a while, until something else came along.

Things were looking up.

Kinky Old Girl

“KINKY OLD GIRL, she is that,” McDevitt said when he first played the CD for Joe, his control. They had managed to get into her apartment before Stoddard’s visit and set up recording apparatus borrowed from a private detective in the group Joe knew. “That horny bastard doesn't know what he's up against with her. She's already leading him with a ring through his nose.”

“Not exactly his nose, eh?” Joe responded. It was the first time McDevitt had ever heard anything like humor from Joe.

They were meeting in an apartment they borrowed from time to time from a supporter, in one of the anonymous high-rises just across the District line in Silver Spring. There were a couple of hundred flats in the building, and underground parking, so no one noticed who was coming or going. The apartment was swept for bugs each time it was used, and there had never been a sign of interest.

Joe snapped the CD out of the machine. “Do you have what you need off this? I want to keep it.”

Was Joe kinky? McDevitt wondered. He did look like the sort who kept a collection of dirty books. “I don't want it, it's incriminating. Better to burn it in case the federals ever get interested in us.”

“Don't worry, I'll get rid of it, but I want some other people to hear it first. I think you're onto something very significant. I want to get you some more funds to work with. I think this may prove to be worthwhile for us — for the Movement.”

“THERE IS SOME POTENTIAL FOR TROUBLE,” Joe added before they separated. “You need to know about Vera’s history. Our people—loyal supporters of the Cause—did some checking on her. She’s got a reputation for milking the people around her, the men around her. She can’t seem to leave well enough alone. She tends to be a little too greedy, a little too smart for her own good. There’s a chance, a very

strong chance, she may try something like that with Stoddard. If it blows up, you need to be prepared to get out fast.”

“Stoddard does sound like a babe in the woods, compared to her.”

“He also gives himself credit for being a great deal smarter than he really is. To be sure, he’s over his head with Vera. If she follows her usual pattern, she’ll use him, then try to push him aside.”

McDevitt recalled seeing Stoddard in action against the three muggers that first night. “I think Stoddard’s a hard bastard. If she plays games with him, and he catches her at it . . . ”

He left the sentence hanging in the air unfinished. Then he said, “I get the feeling it wouldn’t bother him a bit to . . . ”

“To do what?”

“They make a matched pair. If it’s true, what you suggest, that she’s looking for a chance to cheat him, and it strikes me it’s his intention to kill her in the end, so he gets it all and so she can’t talk.”

Reconnaissance

OVER THE NEXT COUPLE of weeks, Vera closed her art gallery and apartment, generating enough from a final sale of the paintings and antiques to catch up on her back bills, and even clear a couple of thousand.

Knowing that Stoddard had \$47,000 sitting in cash in a bank, she told him she needed \$20,000 in expense money, but settled for half that. She flew to Nice via Paris, glad to leave Washington behind her.

She settled on a big chain hotel in Nice, one filled each night with different bus-loads of tourists. That way, she would be less likely to bump into anyone she knew from her years in France, and the staff wouldn't pay her any attention. If things went wrong with Stoddard's plan, she didn't want there to be anyone who could link her with the thefts.

She picked up a rental car, and spent the next five days visiting the museums and collections along the coast.

She had known from the start that the Picasso Exhibition in the Grimaldi Museum in Antibes would be their first priority. It was housed in an old fortress overlooking the Mediterranean, a place where Picasso had lived and worked for a while after the War. This year, the museum was hosting a special exhibit with works by Picasso and some of his contemporaries and predecessors on loan from museums and collectors around the world. It was a treasure trove, ripe for the taking.

Stoddard agreed, but insisted that she set up some Plan B operations, just in case the Picasso fell through for them.

But as she visited other collections, she realized that she had created a problem for herself. She had told Stoddard that the Riviera was packed with multi-million dollar paintings. It seemed reasonable at the time.

But once she got to France and looked around, she realized how few really first-rate paintings these museums held. There were some very

good pieces in private collections, of course, but those were hard to locate. And the security systems would be far better.

What the museums did have were plenty of secondary works—works by lesser painters, or the less-important pieces of the major artists. A lot of these were valuable enough, with open market values ranging from \$500,000 to \$1 million or more.

Actually, it came to her, these lesser pieces were even better targets. They would be much more marketable, as stolen works, than the major paintings. For every \$10 million painting, there were hundreds worth \$500,000 to \$1 million.

A major Picasso was easily recognized around the world.

If one were stolen, everyone in the trade would know it. In a sense, it would be worth less than nothing: no one, other than a cocaine lord, would buy it because it could never be resold on the open market.

But it was different with the less valuable, less known paintings. Because there were so many of them, they could be sold relatively easily, even though stolen.

She had promised Stoddard multi-million dollar paintings. Would he accept anything less?

IT TURNED OUT TO BE A NON-PROBLEM. He flew in the following weekend, and they spent three days revisiting the museums she had targeted. Vera wore a dark wig, sunglasses, and floppy straw hat that hid her face; he got the point, and bought himself a big hat and big sunglasses. Together, they looked like any other couple there on holiday.

He was interested in the art collections only as military objectives. He didn't give a damn about the paintings themselves, other than a curiosity about how these little pieces of colored canvas could be worth so damned much money.

His focus was on practical things: How to get into the museums at night without setting off alarms. How many guards there were, and where they would be positioned. What kinds of security devices were in

place. What escape routes were available. How and where diversions could be set up to confuse and delay the police.

He went through the Grimaldi Museum on the sea in Antibes a couple of times, scouting out the security. The Museum was based in the castle where Picasso had lived and worked for a while in the 1940's.

“We can do it,” he reported back to Vera.

He looked at the dozen museums and private collections which Vera targeted as back-ups. He narrowed it down to six which he felt they could pull off without too much risk. One was excellent, three others were okay, they'd hit the other two only as a last resort.

AT DINNER on the final night. Vera accepted his decisions on the places he targeted as priority, and on those he decided to pass up. “This would be the first target. If all goes well, no others would be needed.”

“It's best not to be greedy,” she agreed. “After all, the items I've pointed out in just these six collections have a market value of perhaps \$50 million. The buyer will pay five to ten percent of value. Therefore, if we hit all six museums, we can count on as much as two million dollars for each of us, after expenses. I think it's far better to be content with that than to take the risk of losing it all, and going to prison as well.”

“Yeah, I can make do with a couple million, no problem there.”

How naive he is, how low his sights are, she thought. In reality, if the paintings she had targeted could be sold on the open market, they would be worth at least \$150 million. At least.

But that was on the open market. One obviously couldn't bring these stolen paintings to be auctioned at Sotheby's. Still, she was confident that buyers could be found who would be willing to pay significantly more than the 10% of market value the insurance companies would offer.

Perhaps as much as 20%. Twenty-percent of \$150 million would leave her quite comfortably fixed, thank you.

She would be in no rush to sell the paintings. All she needed at the start was someone willing to buy one or two of them, yielding enough

cash now to pay Stoddard off and be rid of him. And enough for a comfortable life for herself, of course.

Then she would be patient, spreading the sales out over years, getting the best price each time, minimizing her risks.

LATER, IN BED, she played one of her cards: “There's so much about you I don't understand, Roger. You were a stock-broker for a while, then you were doing very well with the car dealership, you made a very nice—”

“Hey, hold on! What's this Roger stuff,” he interrupted, sitting up in the bed, suddenly alert. He hadn't told her anything about himself. Not Roger. Not his job. Nothing. The less she, the less anybody, knew the better.

She gently eased him onto his stomach and began massaging his back. “Of course I know about you, Roger Stoddard, I checked. I'd have been very foolish if I hadn't. You know who I am, so I need to know who you are. That way, we remain balanced, so we protect each other.”

She wanted him to know that from the start: Don't walk away from me, don't sell me out . . . or I'll do the same to you.

AS HE WAS LEAVING the next day, Vera said, “You must swear to me that there will be no violence. The French are sometimes a strange people. They will find it amusing when the art is taken, *très drôle*. Most will rather enjoy the idea. They'll envy you the money you make, but they'll also be pleased to see someone finally besting an insurance company. They'll like that. But it will be quite a different matter if anyone is killed or seriously injured. Then they'll turn against you. Do you understand?”

“Yeah, sure, don't worry, no violence.” He wasn't planning any shoot-ups, but if he got into a tight spot, he sure as hell had no intention of standing still to be arrested.

Geneva, London, Al Senour

AFTER LEAVING NICE, Vera passed through Switzerland. She chose Geneva, as it was in the French-speaking part of the country, where she was comfortable with the language.

She opened a pair of numbered bank accounts, one to feed into the other as insurance against the money ever being traced.

She wondered if the two layers offered enough insulation if anything went wrong, but there was no one she could ask. And if she did ask, someone might remember her later.

It would have surprised her to know that Stoddard had been smart enough to figure the same system for himself.

After a day in Geneva, she flew on to London. Her priority now was to find a buyer for some of the art, someone who could come up with a million or so at this point. Enough to bankroll the rest of her plan. Enough so she could pay off Stoddard and be rid of him.

A day passed, then two, then three, and she found herself no closer to finding a buyer for the paintings.

She began by working her old contacts, but few of them would even take her phone calls. Even if there had been interest, she had no real idea how to approach the subject she had in mind. How do you ask someone if they want to buy some stolen paintings—even worse, paintings *to be stolen*?

She had been too eager, had spoken too fast with Stoddard, she realized now. Even if the art were clean, not stolen, finding buyers with millions to spend would not have been easy. But for stolen paintings, who, other than drug dealers, would be interested? For that matter, who could she trust not to turn her in to the police? She had enemies, she knew that.

AT LAST, SHE GOT A BREAK. She phoned back to Washington for messages, and found that an urgent call had come in from Abdullah

Rakeh. He was the pathetic little vice-consul at one of the Arab states' embassies.

Not worth a trans-Atlantic call, she felt, then changed her mind. There was just a chance that he had come up with someone worthwhile, after all.

Abdullah was at first disappointed to hear that she was in London, because a friend was in Washington whom he very much wanted her to meet, Gawbi Al Senour.

THE NAME AL SENOUR catapulted the project into another order of magnitude.

Gawbi Al Senour's father was Sheik Rafik Al Senour, one of the Arab "consultants"—men who shuttled between the Gulf States, Europe, America, China and Japan, making introductions, setting up deals.

Deals for drilling rights, deals for hundred-million-dollar projects for prefabricated factories, schools, hospitals, even whole cities to spring up in the desert.

But most of all for armaments deals, opening the doors for the salesmen of fighter planes and high tech missiles. Fees in the tens of millions, sometimes more, were not uncommon, according to the newspapers.

Al Senour had referred to himself as an "investment consultant," but in fact he was a middleman, a fixer, working on commission. He made the introductions . . . and the payoffs for the western companies who wanted the business badly enough. Tens of millions of dollars, split among four or five influential families, could easily be hidden in the costs of a new city being built from scratch in the desert.

Sheik Al Senour tended to operate quietly behind the scenes, so the media could only guess at his earnings. Some articles pegged him at a modest twenty to thirty million annually in fees; others speculated that his take was perhaps ten times that, or even more.

Over time, he found ways of tapping in on the oil wealth flowing from the mid-east, and even more on the dollars flowing back.

He had three sons and five daughters. The oldest son died at age 6. Before Al Senour died—of throat cancer at 61—he provided for the daughters, then divided the balance evenly between the sons. The amount was shrouded in desert secrecy, but the most-likely estimates figured that the sons split around \$100,000,000.

A grave mistake, as it turned out. The oldest son, Motar, inherited the canniness and financial skills of his father. Rafik inherited only the money, but none of the intelligence and savvy. To his face, his older brother referred to him as a stupid playboy.

That stung, and Rafik set out to make a name for himself, which he did—as a stupid playboy so desperate to make a name for himself that he could be conned into one losing investment after another. Between those investments and high living expenses, he had managed to turn his inheritance into around half of what it was at the start.

VERA IMMEDIATELY OFFERED to fly back to Washington to meet Gawbi Al Senour, but Abdullah said he would check on Gawbi's plans and call her back. “We will fly over tomorrow to see you, Gawbi and I,” Abdullah told her an hour later, pleasure and triumph in his voice at having arranged a trip for himself.

Abdullah was a scavenger, Vera realized, trying to attach himself to Gawbi. As soon as she got Gawbi's confidence, she would show Abdullah up for what he was. That would better cement her own position.

Dwarfed

GAWBI AND ABDULLAH arrived in London the next day in time for dinner, and picked her up in a chauffeured Rolls for the ride to an overpriced French restaurant in Mayfair.

How characteristic of them, she thought. So much money, so little taste.

Gawbi Al Senour was a small man, not much taller than Vera. Though his face had the dark, craggy hawk-like good looks she had seen in the photos of his father and brother, Gawbi's eyes betrayed his insecurity. A moustache and goatee made him look younger than he was: 25. His suit was Saville Row, but badly in need of a pressing.

She had spent a few hours on-line reading up on Gawbi and his father. Gawbi's passions seemed to be chasing blond movie starlets and collecting expensive cars. A couple of years ago, he and some of his friends had taken to racing their Ferraris and Lamborghinis around some of the staid squares in Kensington, managing to smash up their cars along with those parked in the area. The problem was solved by writing a few checks.

Because of the low profile that his father had kept, there was only rumor and gossip, but the stories generally agreed that Gawbi had a trust fund, administered by a London bank, that supposedly paid him five million per year. If he needed more, he called his brother Motar, who was usually willing to pay to keep this embarrassment of a brother out of his sight, and out of the newspapers.

Gawbi had a collection of cars, mostly Ferraris and vintage Corvettes at the home he kept in California. Now it was said he was beginning to build another car collection in Europe.

Good. Very good. First, it showed he was into collecting: she would just change him from collecting cars to collecting paintings. Second, the cars could be converted into cash. Some he could sell quickly, others he could take loans on.

GAWBI HAD LITTLE TO SAY at the start, so Vera kept up the conversation with a flow of stories of how she had helped clients invest wisely in art, and how quickly those paintings had doubled and tripled in value. The stories were all lies, but he'd never know the difference.

As he drank more wine, though, Gawbi opened up, and she realized just how accurate her first impression had been: his intelligence matched the dullness of his eyes. That opened up a whole new range of possibilities.

She recognized, too, that Gawbi was also particularly insecure—natural enough, she felt, for a son dwarfed by the shadow of a world-class father. That would make things much easier for her.

AT THE END OF THE EVENING, as the Rolls was bringing her back to the hotel, she mentioned that she would “of course need operating expenses to get the project moving.”

“Yes, yes, of course,” Gawbi said, pulling out a thick wad of bills. He handed her half, and the other half to Abdullah “with gratitude for bringing Vera and I together.”

Abdullah took the wad, but the expression beneath his smile showed that he had been hoping for a partnership.

She counted the bills as soon as she got back to the hotel. It came to just under \$15,000. The next afternoon, a messenger arrived at her hotel with a thick envelope containing about \$100,000, spread among dollars, pounds and Euros.

Businesslike manner

GAWBI AL SENOUR got back in touch with Vera a couple of days later, while she was still in London. “I have some good friends who might be interested in joining in our little investment.”

She had suggested the first evening that he might want to bring a few “very trusted friends” into the venture with him, “discriminating people with a good bit of venture capital.”

She put the names he gave her with a private investigations agency. She explained that she was writing a book for an American publisher on the lives of the very rich young Arabs, and paid in cash.

She rejected two of the names Gawbi suggested. The trust account of one was too closely watched: she didn't want to raise anyone's suspicions. The other was being sued for divorce after a six-month marriage to an American actress. The wife's attorney would be watching his financial dealings.

Gawbi came up with three more names: she took two of them, but rejected the third because the report on him indicated he was too intelligent. She didn't want anyone who might ask questions.

The five potential partners she settled on were of a type with Gawbi: playboy sons from the Middle East, young men whose interests focused on fast cars, fashionable drugs, women, gambling. “Gawbi and the Five Dwarf-brains,” as Vera thought of them.

Vera programmed Gawbi with the things to say in convincing his friends to make an investment that would not ripen for years. Given their life-styles, the odds were that none of them would live twenty years. That was crucial, as it would be very awkward indeed if they were around to realize what she had done to them.

Four of the five agreed to join the partnership at once, and the fifth joined when he learned the others were in.

“WE MUST HAVE THIS set up in a legal, businesslike manner,” she said when she met with them. To accomplish that, she suggested the name of a solicitor, an old lover of hers. She knew him well enough to be sure he wouldn't mind doing something a little on the shady side, and who could be counted on to keep his mouth shut.

The solicitor drew up the papers for an investment partnership. They based it in the Bahamas, where the authorities keep their nose out of the financial affairs of international firms. Gawbi wanted to call the firm Art Investments International, Ltd., but the solicitor suggested discretion—“a lower profile”—so it became AII, Ltd., with its headquarters a file drawer in the office of a Solicitor in Nassau.

AII, Ltd. then opened a numbered Swiss account with a bank in Geneva. Codes were set up so the funds could be transferred by telephone to another Swiss account. This second account would be Vera's. From that account, she would channel payments to Stoddard, Edleigh, and one other key person—a Frenchman, his name yet to be determined. And of course she sent all that remained to her own account in Geneva.

Opening capitalization of AII, Ltd. totaled just over \$2 million, which the five partners scraped together from various sources: gambling winnings, cash on hand, loans from friends and cooperative banks, the sale of cars and jewelry, mortgages on their various houses scattered in resort areas, London, Paris, Hollywood, the Riviera. Under no circumstances were they to approach their fathers or trustees for additional money: “We must be discreet,” she told Gawbi, “we don't want the press to get any hints.”

The Solicitor passed the \$2 million through accounts around the world before it came to rest in the primary account in Geneva: that way, he assured Vera, it would be so well-laundered that no one could ever trace the money back to its sources.

She talked the partners into advancing her \$500,000 immediately, then another \$500,000 before the first art theft. For “expenses,” she told them.

The Solicitor was paid \$200,000 for a couple of days' work, along with the bonus of a weekend with Vera in the Cotswolds.

Infinite Doublecross

VERA DIRECTED PAYMENTS to the accounts of Stoddard (\$200,000), Peter Edleigh (\$100,000), and a French person she found by tapping her old contacts (\$200,000).

Of the remainder, she put \$700,000 into her own numbered account, supposedly double-insulated, in Geneva, and kept the remaining \$100,000 in a readily-accessible account for daily expenses.

Laundering

VERA MET with Gawbi every couple of days in London while the details were being worked out. She found him loathsome, but this was too important to let feelings get in the way, and there were details to attend to.

She made a point of radiating charm for the couple of hours they were together. Normally they met over lunch, never going to the same place twice. She didn't want to be remembered by any restaurant staff as the woman who was having an affair with a young Arab.

As she expected, Gawbi eventually got up his nerve and made a pass: "You want to make love in bed with me now?" But she was able to pass it off, with no hard feelings.

Most days the meeting was brief. She programmed him with the tasks he needed to attend to, and dealt with any difficulties that had arisen since their last meeting.

SHE WAS CAUGHT OFF-GUARD when he began one luncheon with, "There is a very big problem."

"Yes?" she smiled, overcoming the sudden sick feeling that the whole operation could fall apart.

"One of my friends, one of the partners, asked me how we are going to get our money out of this investment. Since the paintings will be stolen, how can we sell them without going to jail? Who will want to buy them?"

She smiled, warmly, reassuringly. "Do you have any idea of how many pieces of art are stolen in France in a typical year?"

He shrugged. "A hundred? Two hundred? Maybe a thousand."

"Between six and seven thousand pieces. And, mind you, that's in France alone. England loses at least another five thousand in a year. In Italy, the figure is even higher: in some years, 10,000 pieces disappear. Of the art that is stolen, less than ten percent is ever recovered."

A wide, vulpine grin broke across Gawbi's face. "Good odds, yes, very good." Then his face darkened again. "But still, how do we get our money back?"

"Several ways. First, there will be collectors who are desperate for what we have. After all, there are only a limited number of Picassos and Cezannes and Matisses in existence, and since the artists are dead there will never be any more. Most of the very best have already been taken out of circulation by museums and large private collectors, and are not for sale at any price. Yet there are collectors who absolutely must have a first-rank Picasso. Regardless, they are willing to buy, at any price."

"Do you know some of these people?"

"Of course," she lied.

"Perhaps some of them will be prepared to buy soon?"

"I am certain they will. It would not surprise me at all to find that you have offers within a few weeks that *absolutely dwarf* the money you have invested with me!"

"That would be very good if we can begin making our profits soon. It would be difficult for my friends and I to continue making these sacrifices for long."

She smiled, and nodded sympathetically, hoping the contempt didn't show. She would be very surprised if Gawbi was living on less than \$20,000 per week. There was plenty more there, and she would be back for the rest as soon as things got under way.

"A PRIVATE PURCHASER drawn by the publicity is one possibility," she continued, "and I will, of course, be putting out feelers to find these offers if they come. But there are other ways of marketing, as well. When the time comes, I'll help you get the paintings to Switzerland."

"Why Switzerland?"

"The Swiss are pragmatic people. It's much easier to deal in art there. Under Swiss law, if you hold a stolen painting that has since passed through someone else's hands, you are considered an innocent purchaser and would not be prosecuted as a receiver of stolen goods. Thus all you need to do is appear to buy the paintings in Switzerland."

Was that still true? she wondered. It didn't matter.

Gawbi frowned, overwhelmed by so much confusing information. "But we will already own the paintings. Why would we then want to buy them again?"

"To launder them."

"Launder them? You mean clean them? But why?"

"No, launder the trail, so you appear to hold them as an innocent purchaser."

His blank expression told her he still wasn't getting it, so she broke it down further. "Keep in mind how many paintings are stolen each year—thousands upon thousands, of which only one in ten are ever recovered. Thus each year there are more and more stolen paintings floating around. You can see that it becomes an impossible task for the authorities to keep up with the flow. There are gallery owners who, for a fee, will take a painting, and resell it to another dealer, who'll sell it again, and so on, until you can buy it back safely in a phony transaction. That is, no real money passes at any point. Each dealer in the chain could say that he failed to recognize it as stolen, and there would be very little risk to them, even if they were caught. And as for you and your friends, so long as you appear to be innocent purchasers, you would get good title."

"You mean our title would be even better—*stronger*—than the persons they were stolen from?"

"Exactly," she lied. "So long as the paintings stay in Europe, continental Europe. But you must never bring them to England or America."

He grinned rapaciously, finally comprehending. "Then once I have bought it from myself, then I can sell it again for full price. Wonderful!"

She nodded. "You're very quick, Gawbi. You have a nose for these things."

Actually, he had overlooked the key point, as she expected. His clear title would depend on appearing to be a good faith purchaser. Each hand they passed through in making his purchase look legitimate would also be a hand expecting payment— and would be attached to lips that could tell secrets.

BUT LET HIM BELIEVE how rich the paintings were going to make him someday. It would be decades before he could safely hold the paintings openly. Once she had his money, then she would point out the risks in selling early.

Playboys tended not to live long lives. The odds were that Gawbi and all of his friends would be dead through car crashes and drug overdoses long before they dared show the paintings.

If they did survive and try to sell the paintings?

Then there would be a problem. She would have to go underground, change identities, hire a bodyguard. It would be an inconvenience, but well worth it for the millions at stake. Gawbi's two million was only a starting point: the real money would come on her side deal, the one behind Stoddard's back.

In any case, if there were a problem, it wouldn't ripen for twenty years. At least.

The Artful Forger

THE NEXT MORNING, as Vera was putting on her make-up, she realized how Gawbi's blissful stupidity opened up another dimension of opportunity.

Stunned by the possibilities, she dropped back onto the bed to think it through. It *could* be done! She *could* pull it off!

And she wouldn't need Stoddard for this part!

Though it was not yet ten in the morning, and she was wearing only a dressing gown and half of her make-up, she called room service to have a bottle of champagne sent up for a celebration. This was going to be very, very big, indeed!

Very big indeed! Gawbi Al Senour took care of one part of it: finding a fool with enough money to get the enterprise going, enough to allow her to pay off Stoddard and get him out of the way.

But there was a limit to what she could get from Gawbi.

The real potential would come if she could manage to sell the same paintings twice, maybe three times. That would bring the big payoff.

THE NEXT STEP was obvious. She took a taxi that evening to a wine bar just off the King's Road, Chelsea. Nothing had changed in ten years: Peter Edleigh was at his usual spot, tonight chatting up what seemed to be a pair of Swedish au pair girls.

Peter still dressed the part, just as in the old days. Pleasantly seedy in a distinguished way, the calculated image of a painter: flowing hair, a loose-knit baggy sweater stained on one cuff with a touch of oil paint.

But he had put on weight. The once sharply-chiseled angles of his face had filled in, and now he had a bit of a paunch. He, too, had become middle-aged.

Still, she thought, he might be as creative as ever in bed. After the business was arranged.

She took one of the side tables, and waited for Edleigh's eyes to meet hers in the mirror. When she saw the flash of recognition, she smiled and beckoned a finger at him, once.

The girls went off to the loo before long, and he walked over to say hello.

“Kiss the little girls good-by, Peter. Tell them you'll ring them tomorrow, but now you have some important business to tend to. They'll understand, and come visit you tomorrow night instead.”

He laughed and helped himself to a glass from the bottle on her table. It was one of the better Algerians. “Drinking from the old country, eh?”

“I do resent giving those thieves my good money. Algerian is hard to find in the States.”

“What brings you back, old girl? It's been years.”

“Get rid of your little friends, and then we'll talk. I have a lucrative proposition, potentially very lucrative, to share with you.”

“Better still,” Edleigh said, “why don't you come along with us? You were always kinky. Pleasure before business. We can always talk later.”

Genius of the Double-Cross

PETER EDLEIGH had three rooms in a red-brick row house in Baron's Court. Vera had forgotten how grim London housing could be.

The third room was his studio. At least it was bright, thanks to the big window looking out over the garden of a house across the way.

After the Swedish girls left in the morning, Vera took a few minutes inspecting some of his works. "No more 'Legends,' I see."

A decade earlier, at the age of 37, Edleigh had finally come to the inescapable realization that as a creative artist he was a failure. Ironically, that recognition was the breakthrough to his first real money from painting.

In his youth at the Academy, the teachers had praised his "technical competence" and assured him that the rest would come with experience and maturity.

He believed it, because it was what he wanted to hear. He believed it though his twenties and into his thirties, and he scrimped and hustled and did what he had to in order to support his "work." He taught painting, he did some stretches with commercial art houses and even ad agencies.

All the while, he spent his Sundays, summer and winter, at the artists' row along the Bayswater Road by Kensington Gardens. Along with a couple of hundred other hopeful artists, he strung his works up along a spot on the park fence that he rented for a few pounds each quarter.

THAT STRETCH OF FENCE on the Bayswater Road was Peter Edleigh's gallery, his show-place, his chance to be noticed.

But in a decade and a half no one significant had ever noticed. Each Sunday he made just enough from sales to tourists to scrape by until the next week. In time, it became obvious even to him that he was never

going to make it. But by then he had gone too far down the art track. There didn't seem to be anything else he could do in life.

But it was at his little stretch of the Bayswater Road that he discovered his real talent. He found himself one week too fed up to do anything creative: he was burned out, depleted, facing the undeniable fact that he had invested his life in a quest that was never going to pay off. As a finger exercise, he dashed off a couple of canvasses in the style of Picasso, signed them "Pierro." To his surprise—and annoyance—they both sold in the first hour that Sunday. The tourists went for his quick little copies, and ignored his real work.

The hell with it, he decided. If that's what the fools want, let them have it. It was time to start cashing in.

The next week, he did nothing but "Pierros," and again sold out. In the following weeks, he did some "Legends" in the style of Leger, a "Basque" based on Braque, and a couple of "Duffanys" that attempted to capture the vibrancy of Dufy. He decided to be creative in the signatures, not push his luck, though it would have been just as easy to forge the signatures, as well.

These were, technically, not forgeries in the eyes of the law. He didn't attempt to pass the works off as genuine, nor did he try to replicate any particular painting. From his days at the Academy, he had been a superb copyist. But now he went beyond mere copying and tried to get inside the mind of the artists, spring-boarding beyond what they had actually painted to create new works that they might have done.

The new approach paid off, and before long, he was able to trade his old Mini for a Thames van that made it easier to transport the canvasses each week. He still brought along some of his own originals, but he usually had to carry most of those home again on Sunday evening, while the Pierros, the Legends, the Duffanys sold out.

By then he was facing the truth about himself: his only real talent was as a mimic, a copyist of others' works. Somehow, in a way he couldn't really understand, he had a facility for reading what the original artist had been trying to do, and then replicating that original—not just to copy, but to go beyond to what the artist intended. In some

cases, he could even springboard from what the artist actually did to what he might have done, had he thought about it.

THE TURNING POINT for Peter Edleigh came when he spotted one of his “Basques” on display in a gallery in Kensington. It was selling for £1500 pounds. He had gotten £50 for it and considered himself very fortunate indeed. A couple of days later, when he passed the gallery again, the Basque was gone. “Some Americans bought it,” the clerk told him.

The following Sunday, a man stopped by his stand at the Bayswater Road with a roll of £100 notes. From that point, Edleigh's paintings were signed “Picasso” and “Dufy”, and not “Pierro” or “Duffany.” From that point, too, he no longer spring-boarded to create the paintings that his models might have painted: now he copied, as exactly as possible.

And from that point, he began tasting the joys of prosperity without spending his Sundays on the Bayswater Road.

THE GOOD LIFE lasted two years. He traded the Thames van for a second-hand Volvo, and then that for a new Mercedes. He found a nice cottage in Kent, and took holidays in Ibiza, Sardinia, the Greek islands.

It all came to an end at three in the afternoon one September day. He answered a knock at the door, and found a pair of Detective Inspectors from Scotland Yard, along with a couple of uniformed officers, and a search warrant.

He was lucky: he got off with a few weeks in the lock-up, and a warning: no more forgeries.

Unfortunately, at that point he was £20,000 in debt, having taken for granted that his golden goose would live forever. By the time his creditors finished with him, he was lucky to afford another old Mini, some paint and canvas, and a month's rent on a cheap bed-sitter.

But in the process, he had become a cult hero. *The News of the World* paid him for an “as-told-to” story.

He got the press clippings of his arrest and trial framed, and hung them on the fence beside the paintings as a kind of pedigree. He changed his signature to “Pierro” Edleigh, and found that people now were willing to pay £400 or £500 for his own originals—paintings that previously he had barely been able to sell at all. No longer was he a forger, now he was an artist in his own right—based on his press clippings as a master forger.

He was comfortable enough again, but the taste of the big money had spoiled him. Thus he was primed for Vera's proposal when it came.

IT WASN'T THAT Vera trusted Peter Edleigh. She trusted no one, just as others had learned never to trust her.

It wasn't trust, rather it was that she had a kind of confidence in him. Not because of his honesty; honest he was definitely not.

She was confident she could trust him—up to a point—because his horizons were as narrow as those of an old dog by a warm fireplace. Peter, she was convinced, now wanted only to be comfortable. He had taken his risks and gotten burned—which cost him time in a British jail. Now he would be content to do her work and bank his share, and not be greedy for more.

After the Swedish girls had hurried off in the morning, they sat over a pot of tea while she told him her plan, though leaving out names and details.

He let her talk, and when she was done, he laughed and said, “Well done, old girl! You are a genius, indeed—a genius of the lucrative double-cross.”

Then he turned away quickly, pretending to make a fresh pot of tea, hoping that she hadn't seen the idea that flashed in his eyes. Her plan was insane: one couldn't do what she was asking, certainly not in that kind of time-frame.

But it opened the way for something that would work, something he could pull off, on his own. Play her game for a while, bring her along, then cut her out. With any luck, she would never even realize what had happened.

A FEW DAYS AFTER Vera's visit, when Peter Edleigh was in Paris scouring the art shops and flea markets looking for vintage canvasses, an idea dropped into his head. "What the hell, in for an inch, might as well be in for a mile," he told himself. "She'll never know the difference."

He phoned Vera's number in the States to tell her that he had done the preliminary research, but had found he would need to have the originals in his possession for a few days after each operation.

"Why?" she objected. "We agreed that you'd do up the copies in advance."

"I need to have the originals in hand to double-check that my copies are totally accurate," he lied, hoping she wouldn't think it through.

She resisted, saying that it was an absurd request, that it caused impossible risks in delivering the stolen paintings to him and then getting them back. But he held firm that he absolutely had to have the originals, and finally she gave in and agreed to find a way of getting them to him. For 48 hours after each theft, no longer.

That was fine, he agreed. Forty-eight hours was more than enough time.

Trouble

IT WAS NIGHT on the other side of the world as Gawbi's brother, Sheik Motar Al Senour, climbed aboard his Gulfstream G650 at Hong Kong International Airport

Increasingly the plane was his refuge from the difficulties that surrounded him these days, most of them compounded by the global slowdown that seemed endless.

Al Senour and his clients had built up enormous cash reserves over the years, and had leveraged that cash into investments around the world that at the time had seemed interesting speculations with the potential of returns averaging 500%. It was the magic of leveraged investments: a small investment of your own could be multiplied many times over by other people's money, and when it was time to cash out, the little people would be content with what they got, leaving the big returns to those like Al Senour and his friends who'd had the big vision to create the opportunity.

But no one had counted on the global slowdown, and no one had counted on all the speculations becoming troubled at the same time, nor troubled for so long.

Motar Al Senour had managed to keep his house of cards standing for years, further enhancing his reputation as the financial wizard who never failed, the smart son of the legendary Sheik Rafik Al Senour.

But now he was in trouble, weeks away from the puff of wind that could blow down his house. Ironically, it was only a small puff—a \$50 million note due by the end of November. Pocket change in the flush days.

If he could somehow get past this, if he could somehow come up with the \$50 million in time, there was a good chance he'd make it. But if he couldn't meet the note, then that would crack his aura of financial infallibility.

That's all it took: one crack, and then the vultures all over the world would be upon him, ready to tear him and his holdings to shreds.

HE HAD COME TO HONG KONG hopeful that one of his old contacts there would advance him the \$50 million. But Chen had laughed at Al Senour. “You are leveraged to the hilt. You hold much on paper, but own nothing. All of it is mortgaged to others. The truth is, if the papers were called you would not have enough left to buy yourself a meal. Come to me then, and I will buy you a very good dinner for old times' sake. But I can give you nothing now. You have no security to offer me, so anything I advanced you would be gone forever.”

What Chen said was true, Al Senour, knew. Indeed, it was even worse. He was not only over-extended, but over-extended several times over. Thanks to the sharpest lawyers around the world, he had found ways of borrowing two and three times against the same properties.

Even his plane, his refuge, his most indispensable working tool, was at risk. Al Senour had felt a rare moment of pity for his father's old rival, Adnan Khashoggi, when his plane had been taken away from him for unpaid fuel bills. An American creditor had obtained a judgment, then sent a team to the Bahamas with it when they learned Khashoggi was overnighing there. The team included pilots, and while Khashoggi slept, they presented the judgment to local officials and flew the plane away, leaving him stranded.

Now that same kind of total humiliation could happen to him.

“WHERE FROM HERE?” the pilot had asked when Al Senour returned from his meeting with Chen.

“It's not clear yet,” Al Senour replied, determined to keep up the facade. The reality was, he was out of ideas. There was no place else, no one else, that would advance him the money he needed without security of some sort.

There was no one who would loan him the money he needed. But there was one person from whom he could *take* the money: his stupid, profligate brother, on the other side of the world.

He spent an hour in his office in the back of the plane, then told the pilot, "London."

A DAY EARLIER, when he arrived in Hong Kong, his first move had been to set his lawyers looking for ways of overturning the trusts that his father had set up for Gawbi. He had given Gawbi a share equal to that given to Motar, but for Motar it had been outright—a vote of fatherly confidence in his ability.

Gawbi's share had been locked away in impregnable trusts to protect Gawbi from his stupidity, extravagance, and unerring knack of falling under the spells of the wrong people.

Now, for the sake of the Al Senour family honor and fortune, there had to be a way to get that money away from Gawbi.

Within 24 hours, the lawyers were back with the news that only days earlier Gawbi had cleaned out his reserves for the year. He had borrowed against himself . . . for what possible purpose?

"Three days ago? But why? How could he spend it all?"

"That will take time to find out, given bank secrecy."

Within hours, the lawyers were back with the news that Gawbi had sold his nearly-new Ferrari the previous week, and had taken out a \$1,500,000 mortgage on his California house.

"Trace the money. Trace it quickly."

As soon as he was off the phone with the lawyers, he contacted the security firm in London he and his father had dealt with for years.

"There is the matter of our outstanding billing," the firm's Managing Director said. He had heard recent rumors of trouble around Sheik Al Senour, and had no intention of losing money, even for such a good client.

"An oversight," Al Senour said. "I will personally see that a check is delivered to your offices within a few hours. I would bring it myself out of personal regard for you, but am in Hong Kong as we speak."

Al Senour explained what he needed done. The Managing Director, who had been in the British diplomatic service in his early career, said, "Gawbi is a very trusting young man."

Michael McGaulley

“He is also, to be frank, a very stupid and naïve young man, and has suddenly drawn large amounts of money, large even by his standards. I need to know where that money has gone. Move quickly, but be discreet. Be very discreet.”

PART TWO

Picasso

EMILY'S FINGERS closed on the icy metal of the pistol. She was surprised at how heavy it was. Surprised, too, at how naturally her fingers found their way around the handle to the trigger.

"No!" she screamed to herself. "*No. Don't do it! Leave now! While you can!*"

"Linda and I, we were just hanging out together, nothing serious, just having a little fun," Porter said. "Besides, you're never here, always working."

Something in his voice told her he was laughing at her.

Everything seemed to be happening in slow motion. She turned. Porter saw the gun in her hand and tried to dive under the bed. Her index finger twitched on the trigger once, twice, and his body jerked as the bullets hit, then slid to the floor.

She backed away, stunned at what she had done. He lay still, his lifeless eyes staring at her. She threw the pistol back into the drawer and ran out of the apartment and down the endless flights of stairs.

Fingerprints! She raced back up the stairs and into the apartment. Already his body had gone pale, as white as the sheets. She yanked open the dresser drawer to wipe the gun, and a black snake sprang at her.

She jolted awake, her heart pounding, her mouth dry.

She didn't know where she was. She swung her feet onto the floor, then yanked them up, thinking the snake might be there.

Then she knew: In France. In the old town of Antibes. On the Mediterranean.

All that with Porter was a month past now—that awful Saturday: First the scene at TAG, then finding Porter and the woman. But still the nightmares kept coming.

NOT NIGHTMARES so much as alternate versions of reality, a reality that had been only a nerve-twitch from coming true. She had

held the gun in her hand, feeling the cold and the heft, then—thank God!—had dropped it back into the drawer. She grabbed her things and ran out of the apartment.

She had not spoken to Porter after that. She sent back the engagement ring by FedEx, and deleted his calls when he tried her answering machine in the days before she moved.

He had even called her mother, pleading for her to “talk sense into Emily.” Her mother, bless her romantic heart, had told him, in no uncertain terms, who had been lacking sense.

It still hurt to think of how she’d been played for a fool. It turned out that he’d been playing around not just with this one, Linda, but with a half-dozen others, maybe more. Whenever she was out of town, which was most of the time.

It would be a very long time before she could trust anybody again.

SHE CHECKED THE CLOCK: a little after 1 A.M. The only sound was the gentle splashing of the waves onto the shore below.

She got up for a sip of water, and found herself drawn to the window and the view of the sea and the fortress.

It was hard to believe this was real, not just another dream. This really was the Mediterranean rolling in to the shore just below, the French Riviera, the Côte d'Azur, the Azure Coast.

And that really was the Château Grimaldi, the castle, hundreds of years old, where for a few months after World War Two, Picasso had lived and worked in Antibes. He had left some paintings behind as a kind of rent. Over the years, benefactors added to the collection, and the Château had evolved into a Picasso museum.

A special exhibit had been running this summer, a three-month festival of Picasso and contemporaries, and the Grimaldi Museum's own holdings were augmented by works on loan from around the world, covering all periods of his work over a long career.

Emily had never had much time, or, for that matter, much interest in art. But she had resolved that this trip was a time to break out of old ruts, to expand horizons, to reinvent herself. Coming here seemed a

good idea, a chance to try something new, then spend some time on the Riviera beaches.

She left the exhibit wondering why Picasso was considered such a big deal, thinking maybe his real talent had been in manipulating the media into making him larger than life, over-rated and over-paid. People paid millions for these: a news article she'd read before coming here noted that one of the Picassos on display had sold for \$150 million, and two others for over \$100 million each.

Absolutely incredible, she thought. How can any painting be worth so much money? But of course value is set by what people will pay for it.

But the day had been interesting; it was fun just to go in the old Château and look around.

She'd bought something at the museum shop she knew she'd treasure the rest of her life, a memento of this day, this journey: a reproduction of the Monet painting, *Antibes, afternoon effect*. It had appeared here on loan a few years ago, Monet's image of this very place, the Château Grimaldi.

Monet was definitely more to her taste than Picasso.

She wandered the waterfront in front of the museum later and spotted this little hotel just a few steps away. Her room had a view out over the village ramparts to the sea. It was over her budget, but how often would she have the chance to sleep overlooking the Mediterranean?

Beyond that, the Château and the area around had been built on the foundations of the ancient port city of Antipolis, first founded by the Greeks in the Fifth Century, BC. So she was spending the night on the spot where people had been living for 2500 years, maybe longer.

THE FLOODLIGHTS WERE OFF now, and the Château and the fortifications seemed as shadowy and mysterious as if this were a night centuries or even millennia ago. She wondered about the battles that had been fought here, and about the men who had died trying to scale these walls.

A shadow moved. At first it seemed a trick of the eyes, or maybe another nightmare. Men, dressed in black, moving in the shadows. Ghosts of the soldiers killed here?

Then one of the men swung a rope with a kind of giant fishhook attached to the end; the hook caught the edge of the stone wall with a grating crunch. He tugged on the rope, then pulled himself up the wall like a mountain climber.

She fumbled in her bag for the camera. There just might be enough light.

Two more men ran across the narrow street and pulled themselves up the rope, and she snapped a half-dozen quick shots.

She grabbed for the room phone, not leaving her spot by the window. No dial tone. She jiggled the cradle. Nothing.

“Qui? Q'est que c'est ca?” It was the old man at the desk, his voice thick, as if he had been sleeping.

“Police! Vite! Vite!” she said. He wanted to know if there was a problem. She said no, just tell the police a robbery is in progress at the museum. He hung up, and she wondered if he had understood her French.

Assault team

BERTIE DERHAM headed the assault team, his cell-phone linked to a headset so he could stay in instant contact throughout the job. He kept the phone line open. If something went wrong, there wouldn't be time to dial up and hope the call went through.

The woman on the other end—Stoddard told Derham he had no need to know who she was—spoke English with an accent that mingled French with a tinge of snooty British upper-class. She was out there somewhere safe, supposed to be monitoring the police radio frequencies, just in case something went wrong.

Derham didn't like that, he didn't trust a woman to stick around if trouble developed. But he didn't have the choice. She was French, so Stoddard said, and she'd be listening in on the police radio calls.

"We're over," Derham whispered into his microphone. She was clocking their elapsed time.

Vern Billy—leave it to the bloody Americans to come up with a name like Vern Billy—was tasked with getting through the only window that wasn't wired into the alarm system.

The window was nine feet up, and looked impregnable. But whoever set up the security system didn't understand that what was impossible to everybody else was just an inconvenience to the assault team.

Vern Billy, a wiry guy all arms and legs, piggy-backed on California's shoulders, grabbed hold of the window ledge with one hand, and cut through the glass of the window to reach in and unsnap the latch.

Once he scrambled through, he dropped a nylon line, and California—another of those stupid damned American names—pulled himself up.

The night remained quiet, no police klaxons in the distance, not even a passing car. Derham hauled himself up the rope and went through the window, head first.

"We're in," he whispered into the phone. "Confirm you're there."

“Where else would I be?” Vera snapped. She held a handkerchief over the mouthpiece, hoping it would disguise her voice if the police were taping this.

The clock was ticking; the team moved fast to get the job done and get the hell out of there.

The three members of the assault team had gone through the museum as tourists earlier in the week to get a sense of the layout. They knew exactly where to go and what to grab, because somebody had worked out which of the paintings were worth bothering with and which not. Derham wondered if that was the work of the French woman, whoever she was.

He had made a point of reading up on the museum, and had a good sense of what was on display there, and what it was worth.

It puzzled him at first why they weren't taking the really valuable pieces, the ones that were supposed to be worth \$10, \$20, \$100 million and more.

Then he got it: the really valuable pieces were too well known. They could never be sold, not even for a tenth of their value. They could only be ransomed back to the insurers. But that was risky. In a ransom operation, every communication was a danger point.

The more Derham saw, the more impressed he was at how bloody well this had been thought through. It had been set up by somebody who was obviously a hell of a lot smarter than Stoddard.

He figured he'd play along for a while, find what other operations were planned, then cut himself a better deal. Maybe grab the whole thing.

“Get out! Get out!” the woman screamed in his ear. “Someone saw you entering and called the police. “Take what you have and leave now!”

“Christ!” Derham muttered. They hadn't even been inside a full minute. “Are you certain of that?”

“Yes I am certain. Are you insane? Get out while you can! Police are on the way!”

He moved fast, grabbing the key paintings now, just cutting the wires, not worrying about disabling the alarms.

Infinite Doublecross

“You listen to me now,” he said into the phone as he moved. “One, don’t you ever, ever call me insane. Two, you stay on the line, because if you don’t, if you run and let us down, I’ll hunt you to the ends of the goddam earth, you understand?”

“Just move! *Vite! Vite!* They’re taking it seriously. Now at least two police cars have been dispatched and are on the way. Get moving!”

A couple of shots

EMILY THREW HER CLOTHES ON, keeping watch by the window, her camera ready in case the men came out.

The night remained still, no sound of police klaxons. Had the old man at the front desk understood? Or had he set the phone down and dozed off again?

She fumbled in her bag to find her cell phone. Then she thought: This is Europe, they don't use 911 here! What is the French code for emergency calls?

Still no sound of police.

She grabbed the phone and camera and ran down the winding staircase to the hotel's back door, the door she had used in bringing her things in from the car.

She stepped through that door into the dark alley, feeling suddenly vulnerable. Now she wasn't just a watcher, now she was part of it, now there was no going back.

Get the license number of their van. Too late. Something moved at the top of the fortress wall, a head silhouetted against the night sky.

She snapped off a couple of shots as a man scrambled over the wall and rappelled down the rope. Another form appeared at the top and lowered a large black bag on another line.

The man already on the ground grabbed it and raced to the van parked, nose out, across the narrow road. He ran with an odd, rolling stride. Had he hurt himself in the fall, or was one leg shorter than the other? And was that a blond pony-tail? But it was a man, no question of that, a man with a blond pony-tail and a definite limp. He'd be easy to identify.

He threw the bag into the back, fired the engine, and pulled out of the parking spot. Now, in the better light, she saw it was a Mercedes SUV. The police will want to know that, she thought, zooming in for a close shot of the car's license plate.

Infinite Doublecross

The two other men were down now, and she got a couple of shots of them as they scrambled into the car. Now she heard the hee-haw of police klaxons converging from two directions.

Media

EMILY CUT THROUGH a labyrinth of medieval alley-ways and emerged on the square in front of the museum, lit now by the flashing blue lights of a half-dozen police cars.

She spoke to one of the officers setting up a line around the front of the museum. He was 40-something, with a broken nose and a black walrus moustache. He shooed her away.

“You don't understand,” she tried to explain in French. She was rattled, and it was hard to come up with the right words. “I saw the whole thing! I was the one who called the police! I can describe the men!”

He shook his head and turned away.

She circled and tried to approach from another direction, but another officer ran over to block her way. “I need to speak to someone! I saw the whole thing! I have photos!”

He waved her away. “Get back, or you'll be arrested.”

“You aren't listening. I saw the whole thing. I have photos.”

“I warned you, yes?” the policeman said. She saw his face twist with anger, and slipped away before he could grab her.

Someone appeared at her side. A young man, wearing a white shirt and black vest—the uniform of French waiters. “You say you have photos, yes?”

“Yes,” she responded, suddenly wary.

“I have an uncle. He will listen to you. He's not like these. Pfft! These are stupid street cops. My uncle, he's a detective, you can talk to him.”

He led the way to a café. She was surprised that it was still open.

“Sit, please,” he said, indicating a table by the door. “I am Jean-Paul. I will make the quick phone call, and be back in a little instant.”

He snapped his fingers, and in a moment a waiter brought her a mineral water. It helped, her throat was dry.

Jean-Paul returned in a couple of minutes and sat with her. “My uncle, he is on the way.”

Ten minutes later, a Citroen station wagon pulled up in front of the café, the logo of *Nice-Matin*, the local newspaper, painted along the side. Two men jumped out. One ran to the police lines, the other headed to the café.

Jean Paul stood and hurried over to talk to him, a man in his 40's, silver-haired, paunchy. He looked at Emily, then turned back to Jean-Paul and nodded.

"This is my uncle," Jean-Paul said, bringing him over "Monsieur Sabitaille."

"But you told me your uncle was a detective. This is a journalist."

"*Nice-Matin* is the best newspaper here," Sabitaille responded, pulling out his press card. His ID photo seemed to have been taken ten years and thirty pounds ago. "I will listen to your story, then I will pass it on to my friends in the police."

"I should tell this directly to the police."

"You have photographs, so I am told," Sabitaille interrupted. "Of the robbers caught in the act, yes?"

"A dozen or so shots, as well as some in movie mode."

"Let us be reasonable. Suppose you do talk to the police. They have already turned you away, even threatened you with arrest. But now suppose they for once have the intelligence to listen to you. Then what? They will thank you by confiscating your camera, and then you will end up with nothing."

He paused, then added, "But if you sell your pictures to *Nice-Matin*, we can be very generous. And of course we will immediately pass the pictures on to the police."

"How generous?"

Sabitaille took her elbow and guided her to the car. Jean-Paul followed. Sabitaille peeled off some bills. Jean-Paul took the money and disappeared into the night.

"Now we can do business, you and I," Sabitaille said, opening the door of the station wagon. The photographer squatted and snapped a series of shots of her talking to Sabitaille. She caught a glimpse of herself in the car window and wished she had taken a little more care with the brush.

SABITAILLE DIALED a number on his cell phone, spoke rapidly, then turned back to her. “For your photos, and your story of what you saw tonight, we can pay you €200. That is perhaps, what? Around \$250 American, yes? But now we must talk quickly, so I can make the deadline for the morning's paper.”

She almost said yes, then paused. She didn't want to be taken advantage of again. “That's not enough. I need twice that. Plus the cost of my hotel room, since I'm not getting any sleep.”

Sabitaille nodded, “Yes, okay. €500. But now we must talk.”

Police Judiciare

IT WAS AFTER FOUR when Emily got back to bed, and nearly eight before she woke to find that someone had slid a copy of the morning's *Nice-Matin* under her door.

ART THEFT THWARTED AT ANTIBES PICASSO MUSEUM Thieves Escape with Minor Pieces, Under €2 Million Eye-witness Alerted Police

Three of her photos were splashed across the front page, but the men were unrecognizable, their faces squashed by nylon stockings pulled over their heads.

Sabataille had written up their interview as her eye-witness account, and got it mostly right.

But some bad news: there were a couple of photos taken of her negotiating with Sabataille, and she looked dreadful—hair askew, eyes wild.

Madame, the owner, caught her as she entered the small breakfast room. “Ah! I was just calling your room. It is nothing to be concerned about, but two detectives are here to talk to you about what you saw last night. I know both men. It's nothing unusual. You are not a suspect, of course, merely a witness, and they need to have on record a statement from you.”

“That's really ironic. I tried twice to talk to the police on the street last night, but they shooed me away. If they'd only listened then, they might have caught the men.”

“I am not surprised,” Madame shrugged. “Those last night were street police, not always the smartest of men. Their job was to maintain order, and that is all they thought of. These men today are from the national police, men of quite a different order. They are PJ— *Police Judiciare*, Judicial Police— the elite. Like your FBI.”

THE POLICE INTERVIEW took less than ten minutes: there wasn't much to say beyond what they had already read in her account in *Nice-Matin*, and the detectives were eager to get on to other things.

At the door, one of them turned to say, "I understand you took some photos of the men you saw last night. But rather than turning them over to the police to assist the investigation, you sold them to a journalist."

He let that hang in the air.

Was that supposed to be a question?

"As I told you: when I tried to make a statement last night, one of the officers threatened to arrest me. Someone, a waiter I think, overheard me, and introduced me to the reporter from *Nice-Matin*. He bought the photos that the police weren't interested in."

"Do you still have those on your camera?"

She nodded. "He said he would pass the photos on to the police, but if you want to download copies now, that's fine with me."

WHEN THE POLICE LEFT, Madame brought fresh hot croissants, then insisted on scrambling some eggs. "I know how you Americans love your eggs for breakfast."

"There is the matter of the television people," Madame mentioned as she poured a second glass of orange juice.

"Television people?"

"Ah yes, there are three crews outside waiting to interview you."

"Interview me? But—I don't have anything to say for television, especially not in French. My French is not very good. I was hoping to improve it while I'm here."

Madame smiled. She was perhaps 55, with a thin face and a long narrow nose. "You will do very well with the news people, I'm sure, an intelligent young woman like you. And your French is very good . . . good for an American, that is. But perhaps you would do me a small favor? When you talk to the television, perhaps you would stand so that the hotel's sign is visible in the background, yes? We are a small family hotel, and the publicity would be very helpful, you understand?"

MOST OF THE QUESTIONS echoed those asked by Sabataille of *Nice-Matin* last night. Then one reporter asked, “Would you recognize the men if you saw them again, perhaps on the street?”

“Not likely, as they were wearing stocking masks.”

Then she remembered a detail: “Actually, one of the men was quite distinctive. He had a blond pony-tail, and he ran with a very distinctive stride, his head bobbing. Maybe one of his legs was shorter than the other.”

As she said it, she realized that was something she had neglected to tell the two detectives.

When she came back inside, Madame looked troubled. “I wonder, should you have said that you could recognize that one man? He might consider you a danger, don’t you think?”

Eminence

THE DRIVE from Antibes to Nice was only a few miles along the coast, but the traffic was stop and go once she passed the airport and entered onto the highway that ran alongside the bay.

The sun was bright in an intensely blue sky, and the sea was an even richer deep blue. No wonder, she thought, that the French called this the *Cote d'Azur*—the blue coast—with a sky like that and a sea to match. Tall palms waved in the breeze; banks of multicolored flowers radiated color as if lit from within.

THE HOTEL EMINENCE was a small, family-run place on a side street between the railway station and the sea. The building, she guessed from the style, dated from what they termed *La Belle Époque*, the end of the 1800's when Nice was being discovered as a resort.

Madame checked her in with a smile—a pleasant change from the dour semi-tolerance she had experienced at some other French hotels. She even spoke English well, but deferred to let Emily practice her rusty French.

The inside seemed little changed in design over the decades, with a curving marble staircase to the upper floors, and narrow halls with slightly sagging floors. The old-fashioned flowered wallpaper left no doubt that she really was in France.

She quickly unpacked, then stepped onto the small balcony for a look, determined not to waste a moment of a day like this. The balcony overlooked the hotel garden, compact and formal in the French style, with distinct places for each type of flower, and with each shrub neatly trimmed. There were two orange trees, and four small palms. The fronds of one of the palms brushed against the wrought-iron railing of her balcony.

The garden, sheltered on each side by four and five story stucco buildings, was an oasis in the heart of the bustling city—the warm

sunshine glowed on the pastel stucco buildings, and it was as if the colors radiated from the walls into space.

She forced herself to take a deep breath and stay still long enough to enjoy the experience. It had been a month now since she left Chicago, and it still took effort to slow down and readjust to a life not dominated by the crush of one impossible deadline after another.

She paused a moment, tempted to call her mother back in Minnesota, maybe even e-mail a quick photo to show her where she was. She was staying at the Eminence because her mother had recommended it . . . after a quick look through her souvenirs from the European trip she had taken between college and marriage.

But France was seven hours ahead of Minnesota time. Mother would probably still be asleep. She'd call tonight for sure.

SHE HAD A QUICK LUNCH—a *Pan Bagnat*, a Nice specialty, a sandwich of *Salade Nicoise* on a crusty roll liberally sprinkled with olive oil. Before the first bite, she took a picture to send her mother.

She went back to the hotel and locked her phone and wallet in the room safe, changed into swimming gear, and headed for the Mediterranean.

The brilliant sun streaming out of a cloudless sky charged her with energy, despite the lost sleep. She walked slowly, letting the salt-tanged breeze blowing up from the sea balance the warmth of the sun on her skin.

She paused in every block to drink in the sight of the flowers and hedges along the way, glowing with surreal color in the brilliant sunshine, the warm rays bringing out the heavy perfumes.

She savored the sights and smells of the tiny shops she passed. *Epiceries* exuding the scents of ripe fruit and pungent cheeses. *Boulangeries* marked by the clean odors of crusty bread. A newsstand. A garage. A toy store. A *patisserie* heavy with the thick sweet aromas of cakes and delicacies. Restaurants broadcasting the aromas of soups and sauces that had been simmering for hours.

THE BROAD EXPANSE OF THE BLUE MEDITERRANEAN came almost as a surprise, and she paused in the shade of a palm tree to take it all in.

The beach curved in a giant arc around the bay—the Bay of Angels, it was called—extending from the airport at one end of the bay to the remains of an old fortress perched on a pine-strewn knobby hill above the sea. The mountains behind marked the way to the Italian border.

The traffic light changed, halting the flow of traffic along the *Promenade des Anglais*, and she crossed with the throngs to the broad, palm-lined promenade above the beach.

As far as she could see, there was an unending flow of strolling tourists and bumper-to-bumper strings of cars and buses.

Some sat on rental deck-chairs reading in the sun, or gazing at the sea. Others peered back at the apartment buildings and hotels across the street, ornate structures gleaming in the bright morning sun like sugary wedding cakes.

A few late risers took lunch on the apartment balconies, or sat over coffee and newspapers on the garden terraces of the hotels and cafés, gossiping and watching the young people pass on their way to the water.

She moved along with strolling crowds, enchanted by the beauty of the day and the multi-colored sea: rich azure blue farther out, then green, silvery closer to shore.

Holiday excitement crackled in the air, an excitement generated by the interaction of the sun, the sea, and the crowds.

The strollers seemed to make up a cross-section of the world.

Sailors in whites.

Dusty young travelers with backpacks and sleeping bags.

Couples walking hand-in-hand. Some were young, others into their 70s and 80s.

Families of two, three and sometimes four generations. Older people dressed for a different era—the men in coats and ties, the women in dresses and hats, and some even wearing gloves.

Others, older still, being pushed in wheelchairs by nurses or spouses.

There were petite, style-conscious French. Casually dressed Germans. Loose-gated Americans, bigger still, and even more casually dressed. Precise British. Raucous Australians. A smattering of swarthy Mediterraneans—Greeks, Algerians, Arabs, Israelis. Sleek Orientals. Groups of Arab women in black *djellabahs*, some with their faces covered by veils, one woman even wearing a gold mask in place of a veil.

Africans in tribal robes sold hand-carved wood and ivory pieces. Local photographers cruised with instant cameras and a baby monkey or snake to use as a prop.

A continuous stream of humanity . . . all affecting to be unaware of the others, yet watching those others, and watching as well to see whether they in turn were being watched.

THE FOCUS OF ATTENTION was on the beaches below; from them radiated a perceptible sensuality. Bronzed bodies baking in the sun. Couples stroking sun cream on each other in long erotic strokes. Topless girls in monokinis. Tanned beach attendants strutting among sunbathers on mattresses.

The shore was divided every couple of hundred feet by fences, alternating public beach areas with elaborate, privately-operated beaches that offered food service and showers, and rented mattresses and umbrellas.

Renting an umbrella seemed like a good idea. With her fair skin, she couldn't risk a sunburn the first day here.

Most of the private places seemed to be filled with an older crowd, forty-plus, and most of them couples. Others had music going, and she didn't want that: she had come for the sea, not for a night-club in sunshine.

She settled on a place that seemed quiet, the patrons not so pompous. Most of the women were topless, but she wasn't ready for that now. If ever.

She began with a swim. The water was cool, but pleasant enough, and she got in 20 minutes swimming back and forth along the shore.

Later, a wizened little woman in red passed along the beach peddling the a afternoon paper, the *Nice-Soir*. The headline story was still last night's art theft, so she bought a copy. There had been no arrests yet. This paper was apparently not affiliated with *Nice-Matin*, as it was not using her photos. There was a photo of *Commissaire Principale* Bertrand Bouchette, who had flown down from Paris to take over the investigation. He was a short, squat man glaring at the camera.

She read a little until the sun, the swimming, and the salt air made her eyes heavy. She turned on her stomach and dozed under the shade of the umbrella.

Beach bums

“YOU JEOPARDIZED THE MISSION, you put us all at risk because of your stupid goddam hair,” Derham said. “And your goddam limp!”

The four of them—Derham, California, Vern Billy, and Jorgensen—had gathered in the warm sun at the beach in Nice after getting some sleep. It stretched for miles around the broad bay that framed Nice. The shoreline was made of pebbles, not sand, and the water hissed through the rocks when the waves receded. They were off by themselves so they could talk without being overheard.

“Did you bloody well hear what I said? You jeopardized the mission, you put us all at risk, you dumb shit, because of your stupid goddam hair,” Derham said.

His voice was soft. Derham didn't need to talk loud to get respect from the other three, because they had all seen the type. You had to be a little crazy to be a commando, but some guys went over the edge and became really crazy. Derham was one of those, and they tried to stay out of his way.

They didn't know, nor had Stoddard learned before he recruited him, that Derham had spent a year in a psych ward while the British military decided whether or not to prosecute him for what he'd done on a mission in Afghanistan.

He was British, with sandy hair and a plain, pale lumpy face. It was the kind of face you'd forget almost at once—an asset in undercover operations, and one of the reasons he had been selected for SAS service.

But the eyes were unforgettable: icy blue, expressionless, slightly out of focus, never blinking.

“Yeah, I heard,” California said, “but I been wearing my hair long like that most of my life, since I got outta the service.” He was 41, with a pot-belly, and, until a couple of hours ago, a sun-bleached pony-tail that reached to the middle of his back.

Even with the sunglasses he wore day and night, he looked a little crazy, and had the dreamy, formless way of speaking that said he had burned away a lot of brain cells over the years.

The limp was a reminder of the time, floating on a cocktail of drugs, he had climbed out of a van going 60 on a freeway to do some push-ups on the roof.

“I don't care how many years you had that hair,” Derham said, “the point is you were ordered to get it cut off, and you didn't, and now this little blond dolly has seen enough that she might recognize you, and that puts all at goddam risk.”

Derham looked around at the others and shook his head. A bunch of misfits. None of them swift, just the kind of dumb grunts who filled out armies. Not commando material, any of them. Maybe California had been, years back, when he was a SEAL, but since then he'd doped away a hell of a lot of brain cells.

“Hey, man, listen—”

“No, you bloody well listen to me,” Derham cut in, his voice still controlled, his face expressionless. “Where I came from, the SAS, Special Air Service, best unit in the world, we didn't sod about with orders. We did what we were told. Or faced the consequences.”

“Aw hell, lay off, will ya? I've cut it now, what more you want? I feel like a freak without my hair, had it 10-15 years, more'n that. But now it's gone, and the chick wouldn't know me if she saw me.”

“You saw her on the news. She described you, the pony-tail and your limp. She nailed you. Now people see you walking, they'll wonder if it's you.”

A vendor passed selling bottles of beer from a cooler. Derham flagged him down and bought one. California thought about saying that drinking was against orders, too, then figured he'd just as soon have a beer himself.

Vern Billy passed on beer. He'd been dirt-poor all his life and wasn't about to blow money on overpriced drinks. He wanted to go home after this job with enough to set himself up in something at home, maybe buy into old man Jenkins' car repair shop.

Then it was Jorgensen's turn. He saw them looking at him, watching to see what he'd do. He wanted a beer, he craved it, but the others wouldn't like that. They knew he had a drinking problem, a problem big-time, and he was along for one mission, to fly the copter. There'd be hell to pay if they thought he was drinking before flying. Especially with Derham.

"I'll pass," he said, and took an Orangina soda instead.

AN AIRBUS took off from the Nice *Cote d'Azur* airport at the far end of the bay, the noise blocking conversation until it had banked out over the Mediterranean.

"Look, you're pissed at me," California said after downing half the bottle in one go. "And I guess maybe you got a point, I shoulda cut the hair."

Derham didn't reply. California added, "But it seems to me the person you really got a problem with is the chick who called the cops. She's the one really fucked up the operation last night. Not for her, we'd a got all the paintings, no problems with the cops, we'd all be finished, got paid our bonuses, be safe and on the way home."

"I do indeed have a problem with her, and perhaps I'll deal with it," Derham said. "But the fact is—"

"Hey, guys," Jorgensen said, "let's cool it. We're all upset, good reason. But we've still gotta work together, so there's no point in fighting amongst ourselves."

"I got no problem with that," California said.

The name had stuck when he was in Kuwait, talking about how he wished he was back home in California. When he finally did get back, only a little shot up, he bought the Harley he'd dreamed about his whole life, and the name California seemed a pretty good handle.

"Right," Derham said nodding. "But have I made my point clear? That no more balls-ups will be tolerated?"

"You got it," California said. Vern Billy nodded.

"Agreed on that, but let's also agree not to make any waves about that girl, Emily, the American," Jorgensen said.

“She says she could recognize California,” Derham responded, “and that puts us all at risk.”

“Yeah, but—”

“She’s a danger to the operation, to *us*,” Derham said, then stood and walked down to take a dip in the sea.

Recruiting Derham

WEEKS BEFORE HE CONTACTED VERA, Stoddard invested in a couple of ads in a blog that catered to would-be “security consultants”—a euphemism for mercenaries and soldiers-of-fortune. He was still forming an idea, and wasn't yet sure he would go ahead with it, but it seemed worth spending a little to have people lined up, just in case. The first ad read,

Building a crack commando team to fight international terrorism. If you were Delta Team, Special Forces, LURP, SEAL, SAS, etc., and still have what it takes, tell us why you think you're good enough to be part of it.

The second ad was much the same, though calling for a helicopter pilot with combat experience.

He got 43 responses. That surprised him. It told him there was a buyer's market for this kind of talent.

He put the letters aside until he had met Vera and was reasonably sure the project would be a Go. Then he phoned a secretary he knew from Navy BUPERS—Bureau of Personnel—and suggested a drink after work. The drink stretched on to dinner and breakfast, and she got him printouts of the top American candidates' service files.

By the following evening, he had pared the list down to three pilots and ten commando types, all of whom had combat experience in Iraq or Afghanistan. He wanted guys who had been proven, and wouldn't crack under pressure.

Phone calls over the weekend further winnowed it down, as he cut out any who sounded drunk or stupid. Or too intelligent. He didn't want any of them poking around and asking questions.

Two of the most promising were Europeans, one French, the other British. He hadn't expected responses from Europeans, but they raised interesting possibilities.

ON HIS WAY BACK from the trip to the Riviera with Vera, he stopped off in London to meet the Englishman, Albert “Bertie” Derham.

In his e-mail response to the ad, Derham claimed that he had spent four years with the British Special Air Service, the SAS. That impressed Stoddard, as the SAS was generally considered the best commando group in the world, the model for most of the teams that had been set up in the 1970's and later to combat terrorism.

Stoddard had been through commando training with the U.S. Army Rangers, but was in awe of the British SAS. He had gotten hold of a bootleg video of the original BBC coverage of the recapture of the Iranian Embassy in London back in 1980. He'd watched it dozens of times, marveling at the speed and precision with which the SAS team had carried off the operation while working in the center of London in broad daylight.

Even now, every time he watched the tape, he got chill-bumps from seeing such a fantastic piece of work: Black-hooded figures rappelling down from the roof of the Embassy, tossing “flash-bang” stun grenades through the windows to disorient the terrorists, then bursting through the windows and walls to rescue two dozen hostages from the armed fanatics holding them. All this within seconds.

If Derham had been SAS, Stoddard figured, then you could be sure he knew his stuff and could be counted on. Besides, he'd probably have some good ideas, SAS techniques that could strengthen the operation.

He met Derham in a pub near Piccadilly Circus.

Bertie Derham, at 5'10” and about 180, was shorter and heavier than Stoddard but he was solid, and walked with the confident springiness of an athlete in prime condition. His hair was sandy, his face unremarkable, one you'd forget almost at once. That was a definite plus, as Stoddard had read that the really prime commando groups, like the American Delta Force and the SAS, selected partly on the basis of ordinariness of appearance, so they could blend into civilian environments without being noticed.

Derham's eyes, though, were unforgettable, chilling even to Stoddard: pale icy blue, expressionless, slightly out of focus. They put Stoddard off at first. Then he decided, what the hell, you had to be a little crazy to be a commando.

They got a couple of pints of ale, and found a corner in the back of the pub where they could talk freely. Once he got used to the eyes, Stoddard decided Derham was okay. He sure as hell had been around. He told of joining the Grenadier Guards at seventeen, then at twenty-four being accepted into the Special Air Service. That was a distinction in itself; he'd heard somewhere that only one in twenty managed to make it through the SAS screening and training process.

"How come you got out of the service so young?" Stoddard asked when they were working on their third pint.

It seemed, in that first instant, that Derham was going to come across the table at him. "Hey, mate, that's none of your—"

Then he caught himself. "Right, I guess maybe it is your business, under the circumstances. Fact is, I got in a little trouble. With a woman. She made a fuss, the Major decided the SAS didn't want the publicity, and they wanted to transfer me back to my old regiment. Well, I wouldn't be having none of that, it'd be a real come-down after SAS, don't you know. But the SAS takes care of its own. They let me out with a medical retirement, not as good as what I'd have gotten if I'd stayed in my full time, but comfortable enough."

Somehow it didn't ring true to Stoddard. Soldiers were always knocking up the local women, and he didn't see the SAS demanding celibacy. Besides, from what he'd read of the SAS, it was normal to go back to the regiment after a few years. No one could sustain the SAS pace indefinitely.

Most suspicious of all, no government gives away medical retirements as a gesture of kindness. But there was no way of checking on it: he knew that the records of former SAS types were permanently sealed for reasons of national security.

A lot of Derham's other stories were lies, as well, Stoddard realized as he talked on. He really had served in Afghanistan -- those stories all

rang true. But the rest were second-hand adventures, full of the kind of mistakes that someone who had really been there would not make.

Still, Stoddard felt, what difference did it make? War stories were like fishing stories—you had to expect a little embellishment here and there. So what did it matter if the guy wanted to build himself up a little? It only showed how eager he was to be part of the operation.

Stoddard had no way of knowing that Derham had been given a quiet discharge from the SAS and the service for psychiatric reasons midway through his second tour of duty in Afghanistan.

Stoddard suggested a base pay of \$2,000 per week, with a \$2,000 bonus at the end of the operations. Derham laughed in his face. He sensed that Stoddard was impressed by his SAS experience, and had no intention of selling himself cheaply. In the end, Derham got it up to \$5,000 per week, plus a \$20,000 bonus.

Besides, in his SAS training, Derham had learned to speak fluent French, and that might come in very handy.

IT WAS EASY ENOUGH AFTERWARDS for Derham to follow Stoddard back to his hotel at Russell Square. A couple of £10 notes to a bellman got him Stoddard's name and home address from his registration, and he began working out how he could cut himself in for a bigger piece of the action, maybe even cut Stoddard out of it altogether.

Crazies, liars, and misfits

AFTER SIGNING ON BERTIE DERHAM, Stoddard flew back to Washington and took another look at the replies sent in by the Americans who had responded to his ads.

They were a sorry lot, he felt, either young kids who'd never seen any real combat, or old farts who'd been in Iraq, Afghanistan or even way back in Desert Storm, and turned out to be losers and misfits once they got back to the World.

He made some calls, and found the guys he wanted were free to meet any time. That meant they didn't have anything else going and would be desperate enough to work cheap and not ask questions.

He caught a morning jet from Washington Dulles to San Diego. He checked into a hotel, then drove over to meet with Eric Jorgensen, the copter pilot with the best credentials.

Jorgensen had suggested they met at a cocktail lounge overlooking the bay. That was a bad choice, Stoddard realized as he walked in. It was only early afternoon, and Jorgensen was already staggering.

Jorgensen was tall and lean, with prematurely grey hair and rugged Scandinavian good looks. Except for his haunted eyes, he could have been an actor in afternoon soap operas.

But the eyes reflected too much of what they had seen. Jorgensen's eyes made Stoddard uncomfortable. Looking in them, you saw fear, guilt, self-loathing, despair.

Jorgensen had flown AH-1 Cobras, little 2-man attack helicopters, in the operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Since then, he'd flown in Alaska on the pipeline, had done a lot of work with drilling rigs in the Gulf of Mexico, and had been on a couple of extended assignments with oil companies in the Middle East.

Stoddard didn't need to ask why, with his experience and contacts, he had to be looking for another job: Jorgensen's drink was vodka, neat.

But he was the only chopper pilot with real combat experience who had responded to the ad. Stoddard signed him on, figuring he could keep him dry for a couple of weeks—that was all he needed.

They agreed on \$1,000 per week, plus a \$5,000 bonus. Stoddard was surprised at how cheaply he was willing to work. But there wasn't much of a job market for alcoholic pilots.

THE NEXT MORNING, Stoddard drove up to Redlands to meet with another prospect. His name was Jack Rafferty, but he said he hadn't been called anything but “California” since he joined up at 19, a kid who talked about nothing but his home state.

He was a big, beefy guy, 6' and 220, middle-aged and paunchy, with a significant limp and sun-bleached pony-tail reaching to the middle of his back, along with an ever-present pair of mirrored sunglasses to hide a pair of drug-ravaged eyes. He arrived on a beat-up Harley-Davidson.

California said he had been farming up in the mountains, skipping over the fact that his farming consisted of growing marijuana in remote areas of the mountain national parks.

He looked a little crazy, too. But he'd been a Navy SEAL. To Stoddard, that was evidence he could handle himself in a tight spot. Besides, he'd been cross-trained as a medic, as well as in demolitions and electronics. Stoddard figured those might be useful skills to have on the team, and hired him on.

He seemed to be desperate for cash, so Stoddard offered only \$1,000 per week, plus a \$5,000 bonus. California took it without haggling.

STODDARD CAUGHT A RED-EYE back to Washington, got a couple of hours sleep, then drove out to West Virginia to check out Vern Billy Blodgett. They were to meet at a McDonald's. Vern Billy was an hour late, as he'd had to hitch a ride after his old pick-up blew a tire and he didn't have a spare.

He was short, lean, and wiry, with stringy black hair that looked like it hadn't been combed for a week. His moustache was ragged and thin, like a teen-ager's, even though he was over 30. He wore a dirty red Valvoline baseball cap, a battered Army fatigue jacket, dirty blue jeans and ankle-high work boots. His big metal belt-buckle read, "Viet-Nam! I served my time in Hell!"

His eyes were small and mean, like snake eyes. Not intelligent, but crafty.

Stoddard had known dozens of good soldiers like him, products of the Appalachians, slow learners but good shots, men who could go all day without tiring, who didn't ask questions, and who could climb like monkeys. Stoddard took him on at the same rate as the other Americans, \$1,000 per week, plus the promise of \$5,000 at the end.

"You weren't in 'Nam," Stoddard said at the end, indicating the belt-buckle.

"No, but my Daddy was, and I learnt a hell of a lot from him, from what he done in 'Nam."

HIS NAME, Stoddard told them all, was Colonel Thompson. He led each of them through a secrecy oath that implied they would be working for the U.S. Government, then got them to sign an employment contract with Deltarms Corporation.

He'd made up the company name, and copied the contract out of a book. He figured that, if they even thought about it, they'd assume that Deltarms was a CIA front and not ask too many questions.

Threat

VERA HAD BEEN PHONING Stoddard from early morning onward, but he hadn't picked up. She refused to meet him face-to-face now that the operations were under way. They each bought pre-paid cell phones, paid for in cash. If the police listened in, there wouldn't be any way to trace who was on the line. Nor would the police be able to trace her even if they arrested him and got his phone.

She sat on the hotel balcony, overlooking the busy *Promenade des Anglais* and the sea beyond. With the traffic noise and the sound of the waves she wasn't concerned about being overheard.

Stoddard finally returned her calls just before three.

"I am very disappointed," she said. "What you got was almost insignificant. You missed the really good items, the very ones I pointed out to you as most worthwhile."

"Too bad, but that's the way it is. So we move on to Option B."

"Your Option B, as you call it, is settling for second best. In any case, now there will be more risk. Now they'll be on guard everywhere along the coast."

"My guys are flexible. We'll cope."

"That American girl, the one who saw your people, she has moved to a small hotel in Nice."

"Why are you telling me that?" he asked.

"Didn't you see her interviewed on television? She said she could recognize one of the men from his strange walk."

"Shit! She said that? I didn't see that, don't speak French, you know that."

"She is staying now at the Hotel Eminence in Nice, a small hotel in the Musicians district, near the rail station. I leave it in your hands."

"How do you know that? Any case, what's this, 'leave it in my hands.' The hell you mean by that?"

"I simply called the hotel in Antibes and told the woman I was a reporter wanting an interview. I do speak French like a native, keep that

in mind. It seems that the American—Emily—had already made a reservation at the place in Nice . . . at someone's recommendation, the lady said."

"I don't understand why you're telling me this. What's your point?" Stoddard was standing in the afternoon sun, and it was hot in the glare against the stone wall behind him. The flow of traffic made it hard to hear.

"The point is obvious. She is a danger."

"Danger? Hell, it was a fluke. She happened to look out a window. A chance in a million."

"She saw your men. That makes her a threat. She can identify them. That puts us all in jeopardy."

"You still haven't said: Just what is it you're suggesting?"

"I have told you where she is staying. Need I say more?"

"You were the one who said no violence."

"I meant nothing overt—no shoot-outs, nothing of that sort. But accidents happen, especially to tourists."

He laughed. "You're tougher than I gave you credit for."

"If that's a compliment, *merci*," she replied, thinking, You have no idea how tough I really am, you foolish little man!

"When're we going to get together? Just talking to you I get turned on."

"It's the same with me, of course," she lied. "Soon. When all the work is finished. Then we will go away together for a few weeks, yes?"

"That's too long to wait."

"You will take care of her soon, yes? Today? For my sake?"

"I'll check her out."

"Do more than just check her out. Deal with her. She is dangerous to us."

"Maybe she'll just move on, go to Italy or someplace."

"That would be the best thing. For her. But we can't count on it."

VERA HUNG UP, FRUSTRATED. Maybe he wasn't going to be as easy to manage as she had expected.

Michael McGaulley

She switched to her second cell-phone and dialed a number.

If Stoddard wouldn't get the girl out of circulation, then there was someone who would.

Evening

EMILY HAD DINNER at *L'Etoile d'Argent*—The Silver Star—a small, family-run place a few blocks from the hotel. Despite the name, it was a two star place, on its best days.

She got a table outside in the balmy evening air, and the *prix-fixe* dinner was at least as good as most of the hotel meals on her business trips in the States. *Soupe de legumes, pommes vapeur, epinards, boeuf*—it sounded better in French than vegetable soup, boiled potatoes, creamed spinach and roast beef.

But she felt lonely, and wondered what she was doing roaming around Europe. She had called her father before leaving the hotel, catching him on the golf-course—or, more likely, from his slurred speech, in the club-house. “I still can’t believe you quit your job to go playing hippie.”

“I needed a break, some time off to get perspective.”

“That’s nice, if you can afford it. But jobs aren’t so easy to find these days, you should know that.” He was in the club-house, no doubt of that now. He was tight by nature, the grim Scandinavian blood in his veins. He’d never been demonstrative, never really affectionate when she was growing up. But not rude like this.

A lot of it, she understood now, was that he’d been a Child of Children of the Depression. His parents had been through the bad times in the 1930’s, and they had drilled into him the insecurity and rigidity that had come from growing up in those uncertain times. He had internalized their anxieties, never feeling secure, forever avoiding risk, driven on an unending quest for stability and security.

Which was why his first real job after college and a short stint in the reserves had been with a bank, and why he’d stayed with the same job for all those years: it was safe, stable, secure.

Secure until the merger-fever came along, and he was pushed into early retirement. And that crushed him: managing the bank had been his life, his security. Suddenly gone.

He'd gone off the rails then, taken up with a woman barely older than Emily. Then the divorce.

Looking back, maybe the divorce was the best outcome for them both, Mother and Dad. They had never been suited for each other. He, the dour Swede; she the romantic. Never in accord, and each bringing out the worst in the other.

THE PRIX FIXE menu included a small carafe of house red wine. She finished it, telling herself it would help her sleep without the nightmares that had been plaguing her for all these weeks.

She was finishing *le dessert*, a cup of yogurt, part of the Prix Fixe, when the French ladies at the next table—a mother, 50ish, and daughter maybe 20, both down from Paris—invited her to have an *apres-diner cognac* with them. That cognac became two, as she felt obliged to reciprocate.

And she learned something French: if the cognac is less than the best, which this was, then hold a cube of sugar in your mouth as you sip, and that works magic.

SHE GOT BACK to the hotel later than planned, tired after losing so much sleep at Antibes last night. But she did want to call her mother to tell her that she was staying in the Hotel Eminence.

“Emily!” her mother exclaimed. “Thank God you called! I’ve been trying and trying to reach you all day!”

Her breath caught. “What—What’s happened?”

“You’re famous! Those pictures you took, the ones of the art thieves, they were on all the networks today—the robbers of course, and some pictures of you, as well. You looked as though you’d just rolled out of bed. Had you?”

“It was the middle of the night, Mother.”

My photos on all the networks? So Nice-Matin passed them on, syndicated them, probably got big money for them. And I got barely enough to pay the hotel bill!

“You said you tried to phone me all day? What number were you—”

“Oh, *Emily!* Can you believe it! I was phoning your old number, the one in Chicago. I completely forgot your new phone, your Europe phone. How silly, how absurd of me.”

“Moving on, Mother, you’ll never guess where I’m staying in Nice.”

“I most certainly hope you’re at the Hotel Eminence. How wonderful. I wish . . . I wish I were there. No, take that back! I don’t want to intrude. It’s just that, well, that is a wonderful part of the world. Such a romantic spot, the sun, the sea, the flowers.”

“Romantic? You’re making me wonder if you had a romantic interlude here, Mother,” Emily said, then immediately wished she had not. Too much cognac.

“*Moi?* Your mother having a romantic interlude in France? How can you even think such a thought! In any case, it was a very long time ago. Just enjoy yourself. Enjoy it for all it’s worth, and then you can come back and get on with the rest of your life.”

TWO MINUTES LATER her phone rang. It was her mother calling back. Emily clicked on, hoping it wasn’t again going to be the biological clock sermon.

“I forgot to tell you— No, that’s not true. I didn’t really forget, I just didn’t want to say it, but it is your life, and I should . . . well, whatever.”

“Sorry, Mother, but I have no idea what you’re trying to tell me.”

“Porter has been calling again. Several times, actually. He wants me to talk you into, as he put it, ‘listening to reason.’ He acknowledges he made a ‘little slip,’ that’s the way he put it, and wants you to give him a second chance.”

Emily forced a deep breath, then another. “He’s wasting his time, and yours, Mother. Next time he calls, if he calls and I hope he doesn’t, just hang up.”

“Maybe it was just a last little fling before the marriage?”

“I found out later that was by no means his only so-called ‘little slip’. You know the saying, ‘Cheat me once it’s your fault; cheat me twice it’s my fault’. That’s where I stand. No second chances.”

Upper Corniche

HE PAUSES on the climb back down.

The coastline of the Riviera stretches out, a thousand feet below. Clusters of colored lights shimmer on the dark waters of the Mediterranean. Triangles of light outline the riggings of the yachts moored in the bays.

Directly below, at the tip of the peninsula of Cape Martin, the lighthouse flashes its beam across the water.

The heavy warm aromas of the flowers drift up to mingle with the cool scents of the pines and shrubs. His tension dissolves into the gentle evening air.

Then he sees the flashing blue lights of three police cars weaving along the twisting coastal road and onto Cape Martin below, the sound of their klaxons faint up here on the mountain.

This Upper Corniche road is deserted at night, narrow and remote as it winds around the jagged red rocky mountainsides. His mood shifts, and he suddenly feels vulnerable in an eerie world of jutting rocks and windswept trees. He scrambles back down the slope.

A car rounds the blind curve fast, breaks hard, then backs up to pull in behind his BMW.

Two men climb out and shine flashlights into the open convertible.

He ducks behind a scraggly pine, not sure how to play this. A rock gives way under his foot, starting a gravel slide. Beams from their flashlights stretch out and find him.

He runs, trips on an outcropping, and falls.

The men are upon him before he can scramble to his feet, and he feels the barrel of a pistol jammed hard into the base of his skull.

“Police,” one says, flashing a badge. Handcuffs snap on, pinning his arms behind his back.

They drag him to their car, frisk him, then shove him into the back seat.

“Votre nom, Monsieur?”

PART THREE

Night Manager

EMILY BACKS AWAY until she's trapped against the windows. She cries for help, but no one hears.

He runs at her, yelling, "You'll never get away, never!"

"Help me! Please! Somebody help!" she screams.

He flicks a lighter and touches the flame to the letter he's holding. The paper flares up, and he tosses it at her.

She pulls back to escape the flame and feels the glass dissolve behind her. She grasps for the window-frame, for the edge of the building, for anything, but her fingers miss, and she tumbles into the air 66 stories above the streets of Chicago.

"Help me! Help me!"

An arm reaches out and she grabs for it. A man. She throws her arms around him, desperate. But he loses balance and he's tumbling out the window with her.

Now she's not in Chicago, not hanging over the edge of skyscraper. Now she's in a room somewhere, and a man stands in front of her, gripping her shoulders. He is bare-chested.

She lashes out. Her knee hits his leg, and he stumbles back against the armoire and slides to the floor.

"Who are you! Get out!" she screams. "Help! Help!" She's wearing only panties in the warm evening, no top. She pulls the sheet up around her.

"Are you okay?" he asks.

"Who are you? Why are you in my room? Get out!"

"You were screaming for help. I climbed across —from my balcony to yours. I'm in the next room."

Knocking at the door. "Mademoiselle! It is here the night manager. Is something all right—not all right, that is?"

She hesitated, looking at the man still sitting on the floor where he had fallen. "I . . . I had a dream, a nightmare."

A babble of outraged voices in the hall. “Mademoiselle, I should — I must come in to see that all is really . . . really safe with you,” the manager said through the door.

Now the man on the floor was laughing. He rolled to his feet. He was lean and muscular, and wore only a pair of boxer shorts.

“I tell you I’m fine,” she called back to the manager. “There’s no need to—”

“But I must come in and see for myself. A man—he could be holding you with a knife to your throat. It is for your own protection.”

She waved to the man in her room, pointing back to the open door to the balcony. “I need a moment to put on a robe,” she called to the manager.

The man in the room blew her a kiss, still laughing, and disappeared out the balcony door.

She saw the shadow as he climbed back over the balcony railing, then pulled on a long T-shirt before opening the door.

The night clerk was a friendly old man with silver hair, a big white moustache, and a large red nose. Now he wore bed slippers.

“See?” she said. “I’m fine. I was having a nightmare, that’s all.”

A dozen people, maybe more crowded behind him, trying to get a look into her room. “Thank you, everyone. I’m so sorry if I . . . if I woke you.” *Just go away!*

The door next to hers opened. It was the man. “What’s happening?” he asked.

He’s American, Emily realized. It was coming back to her now, the nightmare of Bill Bridges throwing the burning letter at her, the sense of falling off the window ledge.

“All is well, pas de problem,” the night manager said, “everyone back to bed. *Bonne nuit.*”

***End of the sample of
INFINITE DOUBLECROSS***

Michael McGaulley

Thank you for reading this sampler. I hope you will want to read the complete book, which is available via various sellers, including Amazon. It is available in both ebook and print editions.

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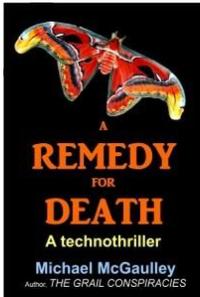
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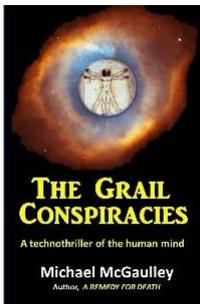
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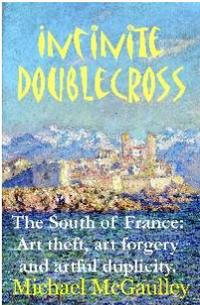


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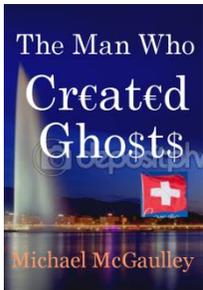
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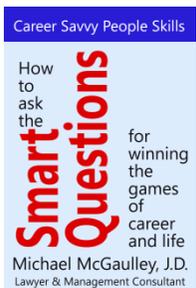
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Career Savvy People Skills Series

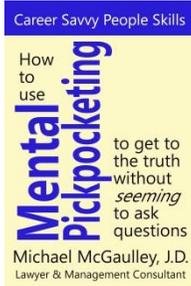
“You’ve got to be aware of the games that are being played. You don’t have to play the games yourself, but you do need to recognize when they are being played against you.”

Like it or not, the reality is that games, probes, and subtle competitions—and not to forget office politics! —are facts of life in most organizations.



Smart Questions provides the tools for looking through to what’s really going on in situations, on spotting the “real rules”, on focusing on what really matters and staying out of unnecessary confrontations, and on selecting the best option under the circumstances—and defending it if challenged.

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When you ask a question, *most* of the time, *most* people will do their best to tell the truth.

But not always. Sometimes simply to ask a question is to give the game away because it alerts the other person to what you're really after, and hence raises a flag on what they may want to fudge, avoid, or distort. (Or even tell a fib!)

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