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ISBN-13: 978-0692710265 (Champlain House Media)

ISBN-10: 0692710264

ASIN: B01N0MGTDDB

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.*”

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## 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."

Everything seemed to be happening in slow motion. She turned. Porter saw the gun in her hand and tried to dive under the bed. He was naked. No surprise, the woman had been naked, as well.

Her finger twitched on the trigger once, twice. 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. A giant black snake sprang at her. She screamed, but her feet wouldn't move.

SHE JOLTED AWAKE, heart pounding, mouth dry.

She had no idea where she was. She swung her feet onto the floor, then yanked them up, away from the snake.

Then it came together. She was in France. In the old town of Antibes. On the Mediterranean.

All that with Porter was weeks 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 might-have-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'd grabbed her things and run 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 left Chicago.

He'd 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. That really was the Mediterranean rolling in to the shore just below, 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 and had left some of his 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, with the Grimaldi Museum's own holdings 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.

At the museum shop, bought 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.

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.

## ***Life-ending***

### **Chicago, six weeks earlier**

**THE END OF HER OLD LIFE** began with a Saturday morning staff meeting following a red-eye flight back from San Diego. 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! CommerBank! 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 Bridges was playing. Here at TAG you had co-workers, not friends. That was the way he 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. 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.”

SHE PAUSED by a window with a view across downtown Chicago to the rich blue of Lake Michigan. Sixty-six stories up, the effect was dizzying.

She stepped back to look at the person reflected in the tinted glass—a 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; 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 little performance of yours 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. "What do you think you're 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."

She paused at the door to add: "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”—they'd called her that 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 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 the luxury 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. She really needed someone to talk to.

Not just someone, Porter.

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 landline was off the hook.

Something smelled wrong as she stepped inside. Smoking! Somebody 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."

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.

## ***Assault team***

EMILY BLINKED AWAY the memories, and forced her attention to what was here and now.

The floodlights had been turned off, and the Château and the fortifications seemed as shadowy and mysterious as if this were a night centuries 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 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.

BERTIE DERHAM headed the assault team, his cell-phone linked to a headset so he could stay in instant contact throughout the job.

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, monitoring the police radio calls.

*“We're in,”* 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 a team of commandos.

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 planned. 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 in the works, then cut himself a better deal. Maybe grab the whole thing.

"Get out! Get out!" he heard the woman screaming 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.

"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 CLOTHES ON, keeping watch by the window, 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 what she'd said? 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, 911 doesn't work 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.

Something appeared at the top of the fortress wall, a head silhouetted against the night sky.

She snapped 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? 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.

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

SHE 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 bit 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.”

*End of this sample of INFINITE DOUBLECROSS*

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