

Pegasus

Richard Jefferis

Richard
the
Writer

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aka Richard The Writer.

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www.richardthewriter.download

Chapter One

“Hey Mum,” I said when she finally answered the phone. “How’s it going?”

“Rachel?” she said, sounding faintly puzzled. “What’s happened?”

“It’s me, Mum,” I said, suppressing a flash of irritation. Rachel was ‘the good daughter’ and I, well, I wasn’t Rachel. “Cathy.”

“Oh hello dear,” she said. “I’m not long off the phone to Rachel.”

“And how is my darling sister?” I asked, looking around casually as I sat on the bench. There was a man, ohh maybe 30 metres away, slowly walking towards me and talking on a mobile phone.

“Tired,” said Mum. “Little Joshie’s teething and having trouble sleeping which is keeping Rachel awake as well.”

“Oh that’s not good,” I said. “Where’s Adam? Can’t he help?”

“He’s off on one of his overseas trips.” said Mum. I could sense her unspoken question about when I was going to get myself ‘a good man’ and settle down and produce grandchildren but she’d never be able to bring herself to ask a question like that. She was too afraid of what answer she might get if she asked me about men.

Ahh, right,” I said, watching the man who’d been slowly walking towards me. He’d stopped and was staring out to sea with his phone to his ear. He was sideways on to me with the phone this side so I couldn’t see his face. More importantly, I couldn’t see if his mouth was moving. Maybe he was just standing there pretending to be on the phone.

“So where are you now?” asked Mum, in a sort of resigned voice.

“Dubai,” I said.

“Dubai?” she repeated. “That’s out in the Middle East, isn’t it?”

“United Arab Emirates,” I said. “Very hot and dry.”

“So it's a holiday then, is it?” she asked, a hint of hope edging her voice.

“No,” I said cheerfully. “I'm working. I'm at the Kitten Klub in Fountain Street for the next four weeks.”

I heard her sigh so I knew what was coming. The man on the phone, incidentally, took a quick step backwards and turned sharply to face me. I tensed slightly, even though he was still a good twenty metres away.

“It's such a waste, you know,” she said.

“What is?” I asked, even though I didn't need to. We'd had this conversation many times before. The man scowled at me and gesticulated with his arm then said something to the phone. Maybe he was on a call after all.

“Your business degree,” said Mum. “All that time and effort and for what, eh?”

“There's nothing wrong with dancing, Mum,” I said, still watching the man out of the corner of my eye. His head dropped and he turned and started slowly walking back the way he'd come. I relaxed a little.

“Ballet, perhaps,” she said, “but ...” and she tailed off. Even now she couldn't bring herself to say the words 'exotic dancer'.

“Oh Mum,” I said, “it's just dancing and the money's awesome. Maybe in a year or two I'll look for something else but I'm only 27.”

“And your clock's ticking,” said Mum. “Don't forget that.”

“But the alarm hasn't gone off yet,” I said. “Anyway, maybe I'll get pregnant and have to give up dancing.”

I heard her sharp intake of breath at that. Intriguingly the man had stopped walking and was staring out to sea again. He moved his

phone to the other side and I could see his lips moving although I couldn't hear his voice.

"Your father's well," she said, changing the subject. "He's just had another pay rise and he's thinking of getting a new car."

"That's nice," I said. "What's he thinking of getting?"

"I don't know," she said. "One of those new thermopile ones, I think."

"I've heard good things about them," I said then added, just to be a little mischievous, "there's lots of them here in Dubai. The place is full of them. All those rich Arab playboys."

"You will be careful, won't you?" asked Mum. "After all, you do hear stories."

"What sort of stories?" I asked.

"About girls who go to places like that," she said uncomfortably.

"You mean places like Dubai?" I said.

"Yes," she said. "You will be careful, won't you."

"Of course I will Mum," I said, trying to be reassuring although if she knew the truth she'd be a lot more worried. "Well, I'd better go. I think the courier's arrived to take me to the hotel."

"When will we see you again?" she asked.

"I've another contract in Berlin when this one's finished," I said, frowning. Berlin? Why did I say Berlin? "I should be able to squeeze in a couple of days when I get back and before I leave."

"That'll be nice," she said. "Well, I'd better let you go. Do be careful, dear. You know what those Arab men are like."

"I'm always careful, Mum," I said. "Love you."

“Love you too, dear,” she said and we both hung up.

I closed the app on my iPad which routed my phone calls so it looked as though I'd phoned from Dubai in case anyone was tapping Mum's phone. The odds of that were fairly small but not zero so it's best to be careful. I looked around casually, as you do when sitting on a bench overlooking the sea, and, yes, the man was still there although he'd moved closer. He was still talking on his phone though. I pulled my jacket tighter around me as the wind off the Irish Sea was chilly and gusty even though this was May and tried not to feel a little guilty. Sadly I always did after talking to Mum but it had to be. She was so ashamed of me that that she'd never, ever, say a word to anyone about where I was or what I was doing, which was just perfect. Ohh, she'd tell Dad I'd phoned and that I was well but that's it and to be honest he wouldn't want to know any more details either. It was a good cover story, actually, being a stripper in the world's fleshpots. If she knew the truth she'd be so proud she wouldn't be able to keep her mouth shut and that would put us all at serious risk.

The man started walking towards me along the concrete path then paused while he stabbed his phone with his finger. He stared at it for a few moments then slipped it into the pocket of his raincoat.

“Relatives, huh,” he said as he drew level with me.

“I'm sorry?” I said, looking up at him. I frowned to suggest his unexpected comment had caught me by surprise and that I didn't know what he was talking about. I didn't know, of course, but a comment, any comment, wasn't wholly unexpected as I was here to meet someone.

“I was on the phone to my ex,” he said, pulling his phone out again and waving it at me. “Bloody bitch is giving me a hard time.”

“Oh yes?” I said. This wasn't what I expected to hear but I'd give him a few more moments.

“That's right,” he said and dropped onto the bench beside me. “She's now saying that she wants 80% of my assets and full custody of the kids.”

“Well, that's not very nice,” I said. Maybe he was just a guy under a little stress who wanted to talk. I glanced around but there was no one else on the path. Or off it, come to that.

“No,” he said. “Not nice at all. My name's Darren, by the way.”

“Kelly,” I said. “So were you married long?” I probably shouldn't have asked as it would likely lengthen the conversation but I daresay my ongoing guilt over my parents was a factor. Hell, if I could help someone with a minute or two of chat and letting them blow off steam it could only be good.

“Seven years,” he said, shoving his hands in his raincoat pockets and sitting back with his legs splayed. I guess he was in his mid thirties and looked reasonably clean and tidy.

“That's a while,” I said.

“Yes,” he said, looking at me. “Either too long or not long enough, depending.”

It was a strange thing to say but I took it to mean that if the relationship was going to break down he'd have preferred it to have happened some time previously but that he'd rather it didn't break down and lasted for many more years to come.

“So you didn't split up with her then,” I said.

“Nah,” he said. “She left me.”

“Ahh, right,” I said. Well, what else can you say? Ask for salacious details?

“Good riddance,” he said and curled his lip.

I wondered if he meant it or if it was just bravado. Either way I just nodded. Even if he'd been a lot more attractive I didn't want to get involved.

“I saw you on the phone,” he said, nodding towards my shoulder bag.

“You looked serious.”

“I’m always serious,” I said, which was actually true which felt strange as I rarely speak the truth. It’s safer not to. “But, yeah, a relative as well.”

“Your ex?” he asked.

“My Mum,” I said with a wry smile. Seriously? Was he going to try to pick me up?

“Almost as bad,” he said with a snort. “Better than mothers-in-law though. So on a break from work, are you?”

“I am working,” I said. “Jesus,” I thought. “He *is* going to try to pick me up.”

“What do you do?” he asked, leaning a little towards me and putting an arm, uncomfortably, on the back of the bench.

“I’m a plain clothes cop,” I said, straight-faced. “Serious Crime Squad.”

It seemed to have the desired effect as he pulled back slightly and dropped his arm.

“Oh right,” he said. “So no point in asking if you fancied a coffee then Kelly.”

“No, no point at all, Darren,” I said. “Unless you want to buy coffees for all of us.”

“All of you?” he said, suddenly looking nervous. He glanced around. “Umm, how many?”

“Twelve,” I said.

“Wow, for real?” he asked, looking around again.

“For real,” I said, “although you won’t see anyone. At least, not yet.”

He stared at me, obviously trying to work out what I meant. Then the penny dropped and he realised he was in the middle of something he really didn't want to be in the middle of.

"Right," he breathed and nodded a couple of times. "I'd best be off then."

He caught sight of someone who'd appeared on the path a little way past the line of parked cars and surreptitiously jerked his thumb at her a couple of times while looking at me with an unspoken question in his eyes. It was obvious what he was asking.

"Could be," I said noncommittally. "Umm, don't look back."

"Mum's the word," he said, looking at the woman again. He sat up so he was poised on the edge of his seat.

"Give my regards to your ex," I said. "Hope it all works out for you."

"What?" he said, looking back at me with a puzzled frown.

I just smiled and hitched my bag round a little as though preparing to make a move myself. He flinched and stood up.

"Umm, nice talking to you," he said, looking down at me. Then he looked at the woman who was walking towards us. "What did she do?" he whispered.

I hesitated then beckoned with my finger. He moved closer and bent down. I confess I like it when men respond when I beckon.

"Best you don't know," I whispered. "Bye bye Darren."

He jerked upright and looked at the woman again. She was now roughly where he'd been standing making his phone call. She looked to be a little older than me and her dark brown hair was getting tousled by the gusts. She saw me looking at her and pulled a packet of cigarettes from her pocket. She fumbled with it as she kept on walking.

Darren looked back at me then nodded and walked away, pulling his raincoat tightly around him. I had to smile.

“Excuse me,” said the woman, pausing a couple of paces away from my bench. She waggled a ciggie. “Do you have a light?”

“Smoking is bad for you,” I said.

“Yes, we’re a dying breed,” she said with a nervous smile.

“What do you smoke?” I asked.

“Mercury International,” she said. “Want one?”

She held out her packet of cigarettes, ordinary Benson and Hedges, and I took one.

“Thanks,” I said, rummaging in my bag. “I have a lighter in my bag but I think it’s run out.”

“Oh well,” she said. “You could always get another at café 33 in Almond Street.”

“That’s a good idea,” I said, pulling out my lighter.

“Hopefully there’s enough left for two,” she said and sat down while I lit both our cigarettes.

“Awesome,” she said, blowing out a cloud of smoke. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” I said, speaking through my own wreathes of smoke.

She smiled and pushed her hair back then got up and walked off.

“So,” I thought to myself, “café 33 at 2 o’clock. I wonder where Almond Street is.”

I sat there for a while smoking and watching the cold grey Irish Sea roll in and wishing I really was in Dubai where it would at least be

warm and dry. Liverpool was so not one of my favourite cities. A middle aged, mildly overweight balding man in a designer tracksuit jogged towards me, if you could call it jogging. He was breathing heavily and trying to hide it. He glared at my cigarette so I ostentatiously blew a cloud of smoke at him.

“That stuff'll kill you,” he wheezed, pausing to bend over with his hands on his knees.

“So will jogging,” I said and took another puff.

He tried to raise the energy to say something else then gave up and half jogged half staggered away. I wondered if he'd actually make it to the end of the path which was at least 200 metres further on. He did but it was close. He slumped over the roof of a car while I wandered over to the nearby bin to get rid of my ciggie.

According to my phone Almond Street was a twenty minute walk away, only involving two corners, and it was now just after one so I set off, walking casually and admiring the view, as best I could. Almost anywhere else, with the possible exception of the South Cardiff industrial areas, had better views but that's the way life is. I paused for a quick pee at the Public Conveniences at the end of the path. The jogger was by now sitting in his car working up the energy to turn the ignition key. One of the toilet cubicles had a large handwritten sign on it ~

**Out of Order
apology's for the
inconvenience**

“Inconvenience in a convenience,” I muttered and giggled while I peed. Kind of stupid really but you have to take your amusements where you find them. The error with the apostrophe was just plain annoying though.

Even going slowly and looking in all the clothing and shoe shop windows I was still there by twenty to two. I hadn't been followed, incidentally, which is why I'd looked in the shop windows. I don't buy clothes often as I prefer to travel light but women are expected to look in clothing and shoe shop windows and few, if any, shop windows

don't reflect to some extent.

Almond Street looked to be a perfectly ordinary street with the usual complement of shops and café 33 looked to be a perfectly ordinary café with just two tables under folded umbrellas outside. It was well chosen as it was almost directly opposite a bookshop with a variety of enticing looking books on display. I paused outside the bookshop, checking out the titles and the reflections, then went inside and picked up one of the ones on display. I read the back cover, it was about zombies which didn't interest me in the slightest, then flicked through a few pages while simultaneously checking the street. Everything looked perfectly ordinary. No one was sitting outside the café, unsurprisingly given the unpleasant weather.

With relief I put the book back and strolled out of the shop. I looked both ways before crossing the road as I didn't want to be run over, either accidentally or on purpose, then walked inside the café. Four of the tables were occupied. A couple with a kiddie at one, a retired couple at another, a solitary man at a third and four white haired old ladies at the other. All were busy stuffing their faces and chatting, except the solitary man obviously. He was reading a local newspaper and sipping black coffee. Two others were getting takeaway coffees at the counter so I waited, half leaning against the display of disgustingly sweet looking slices, tarts and cheesecakes and checking out the guy reading the newspaper from the corner of my eye.

"Small cappuccino with low fat milk," I said when my turn came.

"Have here or takeaway?" asked the harassed looking girl.

"Takeaway," I said and paid for the coffee.

The man looked up and glanced at me, careful to display no more interest than any normal guy looking at a woman.

"There you go," said the girl, plonking a cardboard cup down in front of me.

I nodded and picked it up then threaded my way to the back of the café, making sure I passed the table with the solitary man at it. He

glanced up as I passed.

“Excuse me,” I said. “Is that the Mercury paper?”

“Why yes,” he said, managing to look surprised.

“Sorry,” I said. “I just wanted to see if my advertisement has come out yet.”

“Let me have a look,” he said, turning to the Classifieds page. “What was it for?”

“A statue of a horse,” I said, “with wings.”

He nodded and scanned the ads.

“Would this be it?” he asked, pointing randomly with his finger. “A Pegasus figurine in excellent condition?”

“That's the one,” I said. “Can I have a look?”

“By all means,” he said, taking a briefcase off the other chair.

I sat down and pulled the paper towards me.

“Hello Pegasus,” he said softly.

“Hello Mercury,” I said, even more quietly. “What have you got for me?”

Chapter Two

Mercury just smiled. I'd met him three or four times before although I had no idea what his real name was, just as he didn't know mine. Regardless, we still had to go through standard procedures as it was possible that one or other of us were look-alikes trying to infiltrate or usurp the system. After all, you'd only need to have a superficial resemblance to one of us to get away with it. It wasn't like we were intimate with each other so I'd know if he had a mole on the side of his willy or I had stretch marks. I didn't incidentally.

"Are you finished with my paper?" he asked.

"Oh, yeah, sorry," I said and pushed it back across the table.

"Thanks," he said, taking it. He folded it in half and put it neatly on top of his briefcase.

"Would you like some sugar?" he asked, nodding at my coffee.

"Please," I said, "but sweetener, not sugar."

He took three of the sweetener sachets from the little dispenser that had the table number on it as well as sugar, salt and pepper sachets and slid them across to me. It all looked perfectly natural and I smiled appreciatively before glancing around to see if anyone was watching us. The mother of the kiddie was wiping milkshake off its face while dad checked his phone. The retired couple were gazing solidly out of the window and chewing on what looked like toasted bacon sandwiches. Three of the four elderly ladies were deep in some discussion and the fourth was looking our way. I let my glance pass over her then looked towards the door as someone else came in – a black man in a Council donkey jacket – then looked back at Mercury. Out of the corner of my eye – eye corners are vital pieces of equipment in my line of business – I noticed the old woman look over at the black man then reach for her handbag and pull out a hankie. I took the opportunity to palm the sachet of sweetener which didn't have serrated edges and picked up the other two.

"Weather's a bit drab for the time of year," said Mercury.

“Oh isn't it just,” I said, ripping the ends of the two sachets and tipping them in my coffee. “I can't wait for the weather to warm up.”

I scrunched up the empty sachets and tossed them on the table like any ordinary messy customer. Mercury would go in a minute or two and I'd stay until someone came to clear away his empty cup and, of course, get rid of the used sachets. I stirred my coffee slowly and kept an eye on the elderly lady who'd been watching us. The odds were she was just curious but you never know. One of the others said something to her and she turned to look at the speaker. I casually scratched an itch at the base of my throat and let the other sachet drop down inside my shirt. I could feel it, caught precariously by the lacy edge of my bra, which was why I wore bras like that and carefully ironed them so the lace lifted slightly off my skin.

“The weather will get better,” said Mercury. He tapped his paper. “They say there's a high pressure area coming over from Germany.”

“Has to be good,” I said, twisting round in my seat so I could cross one leg over the other and, at the same time, settle the sachet a little more securely. “Germany hey. I was in Berlin a few years ago. A guy I knew took me to the Oktober Fest.”

“Ahh, I've heard of that,” he said, swirling the dregs of his coffee. “I've not been to Berlin although I did once go to Hamburg. It was many years ago though.”

“Hamburg, hey?” I thought. “That means it must be Adonis or Callisto.”

Callisto is a bugger of a code name. It's nigh on impossible to work it into a casual conversation. Mercury's easy – could be a newspaper or a reference to a thermometer for example – and Pegasus is a common name for all sorts of businesses from freight to accounting software but Callisto? Nah, that's a bugger.

“I knew a guy at Uni,” I said, noting the black man trying to pull open the door with four takeaway coffees in his hands. “I think he was from Hamburg. Gorgeous looking guy he was. Bit of an Adonis although he was more interested in my friend Kylie.”

“Oh tell me about it,” said Mercury with a grin. “The good looking ones are always interested in someone else.”

Bummer. Was he saying it wasn't Adonis? Fortunately the couple with the kiddie chose that moment to leave and the dad opened the door for the black man. The black guy flashed a gleaming smile – why is it black people never seem to suffer from tooth decay? – and they all went out onto Almond Street.

“Still no great loss,” I said. “I'm sure he wasn't the right man for me.”

The elderly lady was looking over at us again as she put a small piece of cheesecake in her mouth. Was she watching or just nosey? The retired man was now doing something with a pocket calculator and his wife was watching him.

Mercury frowned and thought for a few moments.

“Actually he might well have been,” he said. “If she'd been a real friend Kylie would have made way for you and this Adonis fellow.”

Ahhh! So it was Adonis!

“You think?” I asked as he swallowed the last of his coffee.

“Definitely,” he said by way of confirmation. “If only for a day so you could find out how he felt about you.”

“Well, OK,” I said, confirming the assignment.

“And with that I have to leave,” said Mercury, putting his cup firmly back on its not colour coordinated saucer. “It was nice meeting you.”

He picked up his briefcase and newspaper and gave a casual nod before leaving. He held the door open for a couple of youngish women with a baby then let it swing shut behind him. The old lady watched him go then transferred her attention to the baby.

I gave my coffee one last stir then braced myself to take a mouthful. I hate sweeteners. They give a faint chemical taste to whatever they're

in. Fortunately the coffee was pretty foul and hid the taste of the sweeteners which was a relief. Foul tasting coffee I'm used to.

So, I had twenty four hours to get the delivery to Adonis in Hamburg, did I? Shouldn't be too much of a problem although a direct flight was out. If the delivery was to be intercepted that meant whoever would be intercepting was expecting a delivery to Hamburg and would be monitoring the airport for flights from England. On the other hand, knowing a professional would be doing the delivery they might not be expecting such an amateurish strategy as a direct flight to Hamburg. On the other other hand it would be foolish for a professional to try to behave like an amateur. Amateurs are unpredictable and we've forgotten how to be truly unpredictable. We can only be unpredictable in predictable ways, unfortunately.

"Finished with this?" asked the girl who'd served me. Her hand hovered beside Mercury's cup and saucer.

"Oh, yes thanks," I said and took another swig of my foul coffee as I watched her pick up the sweetener sachets and drop them in the coffee cup. She moved on to the table where the couple with the kiddie had been sitting and put some more scraps in the cup before heading back to the kitchen.

Still, twenty four hours. That meant I could get an overnight ferry if I wanted, which in turn meant either getting the train from London or driving to one of the other ports, probably Harwich and cross to the Hook of Holland, which would be a little more awkward as I'd have to hire or steal a car. A motorcycle would be more fun but there's a higher risk of an accident and you can't sleep on a motorcycle the way you can in a car.

I finished my coffee and headed back to the counter, leaving the cardboard takeaway mug on the table.

"Excuse me," I said when the girl looked up. "Do you have a toilet?"

"Nah," she said, shaking her head. "There's a lavvy in the mall at the end of the street though."

“Ahh, thanks,” I said. I gave her a smile which wasn't reciprocated and left.

I glanced around, as I always do as a matter of routine, and half noticed a familiar face on the other side of the road turn away from me. I didn't react. I just walked up the street for a couple of paces then turned to cross the road. Fortunately there was a car coming so I was able to wait for it to pass and scan the people on the other side.

“Interesting,” I thought as I spotted someone in a raincoat and with a haircut very similar to Darren's looking in the shop window beside the bookshop.

It might not have been Darren but if it was then it suggested he was a bit of an amateur as he should have stayed by the bookshop for plausibility. Peering in a ladies hairdressers wasn't a good strategy as men tend not to do that. As I crossed the road, hoping he'd turn so I could see his face, I wondered whether or not to confront him. I decided not to as there were other people on the street and, since he didn't turn around, he might well not be Darren. He could just be some innocent bystander checking to see if his wife was finished having her hair done.

Still, I walked fairly leisurely towards the shopping mall at the end of Almond Street and made no attempt to lose Darren, if indeed it was him and he was following me. One of the key elements in losing a tail is checking you are actually being tailed. If that person isn't tailing you then it's a wasted effort and may distract you from someone else who actually is tailing you. Needless to say I checked and no one else was following me. Nor, I should add, did the man outside the hairdressers. I reached the mall all on my own.

The Directory just back from the entrance told me the toilets were on the ground floor beside the Management Office. There was only one other person in the toilets when I went in and she took no notice of me although I noted her as a matter of subconscious routine. I slipped into a cubicle and put the seat lid down. It would be deeply embarrassing and potentially disastrous if I had to report back that the goods entrusted to me had been lost down a toilet bowl. These things do happen but, as yet, hadn't to me.

I took off my jacket and hung it on the hook on the back of the door then, carefully, hoicked my shirt out of my skirt. The sweetener sachet didn't fall out. I undid the front of my shirt and plucked the sachet from the lace trim of my bra. I gave it a wipe with some toilet paper then laid it on the paper on the toilet seat cover. I heard a couple of footsteps then the door groan open so I guessed the other woman had left. There were more footsteps before I heard the door close so someone else had probably come in. I paused for a moment, ready to snatch up the sachet and flush it down the bowl if anyone tried to force an entry but no one did. Instead I heard a cubicle door further down the line close.

Obviously the sachet wasn't a sweetener sachet. There'd be little point in using someone like me to take a sachet of sweetener to Hamburg since there'd be millions of sweetener sachets readily available in that city. The sachet was, in fact, a sliver of silicon about the same size as a sweetener sachet but only half the thickness. Embedded inside the silicon, or so I understood these things as my job was simply one of delivery, was a minute sliver of more silicon which held data. In fact the silicon sachet could accommodate something like thirty of these slivers and I had no way of knowing how many there were. It wasn't my job to know anyway.

I took off my shirt and hung that on the hook as well then took off my bra. Not long after I'd been recruited I'd been treated to a boob job. Two, in fact. The first was a minor breast reduction to make room for the second which was a boob enhancement. The net result was that my boobs stayed at 34C but now contained silicon implants such as they would have if I'd been 32A before. To what purpose I hear you ask? Well, cunningly disguised by natural creases in my skin under my boobs were small slits, one under each boob. By an astonishing coincidence the sweetener sachet was just the right size to fit that slit. Lifting one boob, the left one since I'm right handed, and fiddling with the irritatingly flexible sachet I slipped it inside, underneath the silicone of the enhancement. With the boob back in its natural position the sachet would now appear to an x-ray or ultrasound to be just a part of the boob enhancement silicon. An MRI scan would pick up the detailed outline of the sachet as it was far more sensitive than x-rays but there's no way I'd ever have an MRI scan with one in place. In an emergency, say I'd been run over or something, I might be

obliged to have an MRI scan while unconscious but the risk of that was slight. Needless to say the silicon implants can't be detected by hand.

It was actually a pretty effective way to smuggle small items. Not much use for heroin or weapons but that wasn't my field. Granted there was the potential for the slits to open accidentally, as when my boobs jiggled when going over a bump in the road or while exercising but that was easily overcome by wearing a decently fitting bra. The only other time the sachets could be at risk was during enthusiastic man-handling during intimate moments but I made sure such things never happened when I was working.

I got dressed again then flushed the toilet and went out to wash my hands. I studied myself in the mirror and I looked entirely as I always looked. Going back into the concourse I got out my phone to look up how to get to the main train station in Liverpool.

“We meet again,” said a familiar voice beside me.

I turned and there was Darren. The raincoat and haircut looked to be the same as the man at the hairdressers.

“Hello?” I said, pretending I didn't recognise him. A good strategy generally anyway as guys get over-confident if they think you remember them after a fleeting moment. I do remember them but not for the reason they think.

“Remember me?” he said. “The embankment path?”

I stared at him as though trying to place him although in reality I was wondering how to play this. On the one hand he could be following me to get at what I now carried but he could just as easily be a horny lonely guy looking for a sympathetic woman. Actually the latter was the more likely as there are millions of horny lonely guys looking for sympathetic women and relatively few enemy agents. It didn't help that what I carried was in my boobs and those were what most guys were after anyway, regardless.

“Are you following me?” I asked, opting for the challenge approach.

"I'd follow you anywhere," he said, smiling. He also seemed a little nervous which suggested he either wasn't an enemy agent, in which case he'd be focused on his strategy, or I was his first job. Given he'd waited outside a ladies hairdressers that possibility needed more consideration.

"Why?" I asked.

"Ahh," he said and flushed slightly. "I, umm, ..." Clearly he hadn't thought this through.

"Well?" I said. I'd have looked him in the eyes but his eyes were now looking at the faux-marble concourse floor. Ordinarily I like a little nervousness in a guy as the over-confident types really piss me off but I was now working and couldn't afford to be empathetic. I quickly glanced around in case he wasn't working alone but no one seemed to be paying attention.

"I'm sorry," he said, taking a tentative half step backwards. "I didn't mean to, um, ..."

I just stood there, looking at him. Maybe he was just trying to get a date after all.

"Can I have your phone number?" he blurted.

I started to laugh, which embarrassed him even more.

"Sorry," I said, putting my hand on his arm without realising. "I didn't mean to laugh at you." I realised my hand was on his arm and snatched it away.

"That's OK," he said, lifting his eyes to look at my chin.

"07 700 900 938," I said, as I couldn't decide if he was just a guy or an enemy. If he was the latter then giving him my phone number would help me keep track of him. If he wasn't, well, he was just a guy and I'd give him the brush off later when I'd decided.

"You what?" he said, his eyes jerking up to meet mine.

“My phone number,” I said. “07 700 900 938.”

“Shit!” he breathed.

“Bye bye,” I said and turned to walk away.

“Just a sec,” he said and pulled out his phone. “07 700 what?”

“07 700 900 938,” I said, “for the third and last time.”

“OK, OK,” he said, hurriedly adding my number to his list of contacts. He looked up and beamed at me.

“Happy now?” I asked, feeling quite amused.

“Awesome!” he said. “Umm ...”

“Now what?” I said and turned back to face him again.

“Can I phone you?” he asked.

“What do you think?” I said. “Bye bye.” I turned and walked away.

Maybe fifteen paces away my phone started ringing and I stopped walking to get my phone out of my bag. The display showed a new number so I figured it was Darren's. I turned and looked back and, sure enough, he was standing there with his phone to his ear. He waggled it at me, the phone not his ear, so I hung up and gave him the finger. To his credit he laughed.

Chapter Three

Time was a significant factor. Ideally I'd fly to Stockholm, mainly because there was a nice restaurant there which I hadn't been to for a while, then down to Amsterdam, over to London then Berlin, Hamburg, Geneva and finally, if there ever was a finally, Madrid. The main point being that those were significant cities frequented by business people and politicians. I could be making one delivery or several and no one would know which was the important place or places. At the same time, the odds of seeing the same face by coincidence on even two of those legs was minuscule and three or more would be certain confirmation I was being followed. Being major centres, if I was being followed, I also had lots of options. Cost, by the way, was never a consideration. Never once in my time with the Department had the 'B' word, budget, ever been mentioned nor did I have to submit expense claims. I figured they had some system for countering fraud but hadn't given it much thought.

Alas I only had twenty four hours to get to Hamburg which meant no wasting of time. Even flying takes a lot of time since you have to arrive at the airport early and spend more time getting from the airport to wherever. A simple example: It takes only 55 minutes to fly from London to Amsterdam but you have to be at Heathrow at least an hour beforehand. It'll probably take a couple of hours to get to Heathrow even if you're in London already and a couple more to get from Schiphol to your destination. More if it isn't in Amsterdam. So, a 55 minute flight in reality takes at least 6 hours. Granted changing planes at an airport only means crossing to another concourse but that also makes it very easy to be tracked.

The first leg of my journey was pretty much preordained. I had to get the train from Liverpool to London as that was the quickest way to get there and didn't need any ID. Once in London I'd get another train out to the southern suburbs, to avoid the traffic, then acquire a car and drive to Dover to cross on the channel ferry as a foot passenger. It would be foolish to try to take a stolen car on the ferry because of the bureaucracy and a British car on the Continent would be easier to follow. In Calais I'd find another car, drive to Antwerp then get a train to Bremen then another car to Hamburg. All in and assuming the ferries and trains were running reasonably on

time I figured 22 hours or thereabouts. Also, with two lengthy train journeys and the ferry there'd be ample opportunity to get some sleep. It wouldn't matter in the slightest if I was an hour or two late either but I prided myself on the fact that I'd never once been late with a delivery.

I'd just got off the train at Swanley, in South London and conveniently close to the M20 motorway to Dover, when my phone rang. It was that Darren again! I rejected the call and ambled out to the station car park, hanging back so the other people who'd got off there could get their cars. Once the car park was deserted I walked along the ranks of parked cars looking for something fairly new and Chinese. Interestingly most of the cars were older electric models with a scattering of petrol ones which suggested that either the people of Swanley couldn't afford newer models or, entirely possible, they used old cars to get to the station. Station car parks are notorious for car thefts. Still, there were a few newish Chinese cars and I selected a clean 2038 Seng Yong in pale blue. It was the sort of car someone looking like me would be expected to drive so I wouldn't look incongruous. I'd already scanned the car park for anyone watching but, just in case someone was and I'd not spotted them, I marched up to the car as though I owned it. My little iPad had a nifty app on it for bypassing the on-board security, which sadly only worked effectively on newer Chinese cars, and the door opened welcomingly. I slid in to the driver's seat and set the controls to manual drive. I could get into older cars but that generally meant fiddling around with the locks and made it obvious the car was being stolen.

I reversed out of the parking slot and paid for the time at the barrier using a generic credit card in the name of Deborah Jones then drove for a couple of kilometres out of Swanley where I chanced upon a deserted lay-by. Popping the bonnet I found, after a minute or so of searching, the on-board computer board and, with the aid of my very useful little iPad, disabled the on-board navigation and tracking system. This would mean that an alert was sent to the owner but there was a good chance they'd not get the message for a while. More importantly, as and when they did contact the police, the car couldn't be tracked any further than the lay-by.

I dumped the car in the ferry port car park and managed to get on

the ferry that was leaving barely minutes later. It wouldn't have been a big issue to wait for the next as the ferries go every hour but the waiting area for foot passengers at Dover is drab and depressing. I splashed out on a dinner of fish and chips on the ferry, since it was now dinner time, and wondered if I should call Darren back. After all, it had been three hours or so since I'd rejected his call and he hadn't called again. I may have hurt his feelings. Then I wondered why I was wondering if I'd hurt his feelings. After all he was either just a guy on the make or an agent trying to infiltrate or track me. Either way I shouldn't care about his feelings. In the end, replete on overcooked battered fish and thin brown oblongs of some unidentifiable paste euphemistically called 'potato chips', I texted him apologising and saying I was on my way to Rome for a holiday. If he was just a guy then no harm done but if he was an agent then a little disinformation wouldn't hurt.

Unsurprisingly he texted back almost immediately wishing me a lovely holiday and asking when I'd be back. I anticipated being back in England within 48 hours so I texted back saying in a week. Ten seconds later he replied asking if I'd have dinner with him in a week's time. So far he was showing all the signs of being just a guy. I ummed and erred for a couple of minutes then went to the toilet as the fish and chips were sitting heavily and I kept giving little fishy belches. The ferry docked in Calais while I was in the toilet so, while I was waiting to disembark along with the handful of other foot passengers, I texted back 'maybe'. He texted back a big smiley face and I laughed.

It was on the train from Antwerp to Bremen that my plans went awry. Obviously, being a professional, I had contingency plans but the sight of a vaguely familiar face on the carriage as I passed through on my way to my seat set off alarm bells. Fortunately the train wasn't crowded and there was no one in the seat next to me although there was a couple sitting across the aisle and people in the rows immediately behind and in front of me.

I sat there while the train pulled out of the station thinking about the face. It was a fairly unremarkable face with no particular distinguishing features other than being male and a little swarthy but something had triggered my brain. After all, the world is full of slightly swarthy male faces. Hell, three or four of my teachers at

school and a couple of ex boyfriends had had slightly swarthy male faces although I was fairly sure he wasn't any of them.

After a few minutes I pulled out my phone and fired up my iPad. The call routing app was still set to route calls through Dubai so I left it as it was and phoned the Department's computer. Trains, at least the big inter-city ones, have their own internal call routing systems and I didn't want anyone to know the computer was being accessed from the Antwerp-Bremen train. In fact the guy who'd triggered me could possibly have been Arabic so a data-link from Dubai could suggest a local search for him. As I was browsing through the excessively long list of known operatives who were swarthy and male the door at the end of the carriage slid open. I glanced up and froze. There he was. He didn't look at me but in the second or so that I looked at him I realised I could add another search parameter ~ male, swarthy and good-looking. I didn't though as he walked along the aisle peering out of the windows. Quite why he was looking out the windows wasn't clear as it was now dark outside but I shut my call down in case he looked at me as he passed.

In fact he paused when he drew level with me and leaned on the back of the spare seat beside me to look out of the window. I studiously ignored him, as you do, while watching his reflection in the window. It was clear that he was taking a good look at my face while pretending to look out the window. Interestingly he didn't look at my legs or my boobs which most guys in that position would have done.

“Scusi,” he said mildly and smiled then moved away.

I counted to ten then glanced behind to see him go through the sliding door at the other end of the carriage. I reconnected my call then started the search again with the new parameters ~ male, swarthy, good looking, bad teeth.

That narrowed it down to about fifty or so candidates. I went through all of them then went back to the 17th in the list. It was almost certainly him. OK the picture was poor quality, obviously taken on the fly and the man was partially obscured by someone else with their back to the camera. It had been taken six years previously but looked to be the same man. If it was then he was an operative for Islamic

State with three known aliases and a couple of suspected ones. He only had one killing to his name that was confirmed but he was also suspected of involvement in three bombings, two in the Rossiya Block and one in the Yazhou Block. That latter being the most recent and only last year. In fact I remembered it. The Christian State embassy in Mumbai had been fire bombed with four security staff being burnt to death. It had briefly figured in the news being considerably less important than the cheating of a major movie star on her husband with a B-list singer. More significantly a report had circulated within the Department speculating about a shift in focus by Islamic State from Russia and its satellites to Asia. Nothing much else had happened since so it seemed that the shift in focus either hadn't happened or was still very much in the planning stages.

That didn't answer the big question, however. Why was an Islamic State operative known to specialise in either the Christian State or the Rossiya Blocks or, conceivably both, be interested in me, a courier for the Europa Block? That tended to suggest three possibilities. Either the man wasn't the man on our database or he was interested in something else and not me or what I was carrying was of significance to him and the Islamic State Block.

The first two were of no consequence to me. Mistakes and coincidences happen all the time and there's no sense in getting uptight about them. The third possibility was serious, however. Couriers like me weren't used for trivia. We, and there were twelve of us in the Department, were used for data so sensitive it couldn't risk being sent by other means. After all, anything sent over a phone or data link could easily be intercepted and, with the advent of quantum computers, any form of digitised encryption could now be broken. Worse, if a data link was intercepted it was virtually impossible to know if it had been done or who by. If I was intercepted there was a fair chance what I was carrying wouldn't be found and, if it was, we would at least know it had happened and perhaps even have some idea of who by. The data I was carrying could have been sent to Hamburg in seconds over a computer network or phone link but with a high risk. I was a lot slower but the risk was minimal.

Manuel, which is how I thought of the man as one of his aliases had been Manuel Santos of Lisbon, didn't reappear but then he didn't

need to. He now knew I was on the train and where I was. Granted I could change seats but I'd still have to be in one of the front two carriages as he'd be keeping a close eye on the interconnecting door. The only real question was his intent. Was he just going to try to follow me or was he going to wait for a suitable opportunity then try to retrieve what I was carrying? A secondary problem was whether or not this was a chance encounter. It was entirely possible Manuel was on the train for some other reason and had recognised me as I had recognised him. Perhaps, after getting a closer look at me he had whiled away a few minutes browsing his own databases to find out who I was and, assuming he now knew I was a courier, he'd track me to find out where I was going. The other possibility was that he knew in advance that I was carrying data to Hamburg and had taken this train on the off-chance of spotting me or someone else had alerted him. Either way it implied a leak. Still, that side of things wasn't my problem. I'd alert the Department and someone else would investigate.

I got off the train at Bremen, acting naturally as that's what I do best even though I hadn't let myself sleep just in case. I paused in the shopping concourse to check my phone, as a surprising number of other people were doing, including Manuel I noted as I glanced around. I dropped my phone back in my bag and moved off towards the bus depot and sensed Manuel following me. After a few steps I stopped and looked around for a sign to some toilets. Manuel didn't stop walking but, as I headed off to the toilets he veered that way as well. Staying natural I went into the toilets and washed my hands, checking my fingernails were intact in case there was any rough stuff.

Obviously I couldn't carry any weapons. They were too easily detected by security scanners and rarely needed. They were also cumbersome, had a tendency to fail at the wrong moment and didn't fit in with my concept of travelling light. That said, in my break between school and Uni I'd had a rather unpleasant encounter outside a night club which led to me joining the local karate club and, later, the Uni karate team. I wasn't particularly good, having only reached the Red belt level which is two levels down from Black belt, but Red is also known as the self-defence belt because people who've reached that level are able to defend themselves effectively against most attackers and that was all I'd ever wanted. Then, when I joined the

Department, they taught me a few of the less honourable ways of repelling attacks.

Perhaps more usefully though, the Department supplied my fake nails. They were replaced monthly by a special little section in the Department that worried about these things because, aside from being conventional looking fake nails about a centimetre long they also had a very fine razor sharp sliver of some Kevlar/acrylic blend in each tip. They also had the advantage of not needing to be filed although they could be painted with any nail polish I fancied so long as it didn't have glitter in it. I'd also learnt the hard way not to pick my nose or scratch too vigorously. So far the only practical use I'd made of the nails was to open parcels without a knife or scissors and slice salami.

When I came back out Manuel was studying the Outbound train schedule on the giant board. I gave it a quick scan and noted the train to Hanover that departed in eleven minutes was standing at platform 14.

"Ahh, platform 14," I said, just loud enough to be heard by Manuel. "Good."

I then made my way to the ticket machines and keyed in Hanover and selected Single, Tourist. I paid the machine and put my phone against the whatever its called so the machine could give the ticket details to the phone. As I walked away, towards platform 14, I saw Manuel go up to the ticket machine at the far end and busy himself with it. Acting just like any other traveller towards the end of the morning rush hour I wandered over to platform 14, waved my phone at the barrier and walked to the fourth carriage before getting on so Manuel had time to catch me up. He got into the third carriage which was a bummer as I'd been hoping to sneak back a couple of carriages and jump off the train as it started to move away. Instead I sat down next to the door and watched the connecting door in case he came through. He didn't but I did catch a glimpse of him checking I was there through the window of the connecting door.

Someone blew a whistle, old technology but still in use, and the train lurched as it began to move. One minute late, not that it mattered. I instantly jumped up and out through the door onto the platform. As

the train gathered speed I watched the third carriage to see if I could see Manuel but I didn't. With a bit of luck he hadn't noticed me jump off the train. That done I marched off to the car park and stole another car.

Irritatingly I couldn't just drive to Hamburg. Manuel may have seen me get off the train and even if he didn't he may check I was still on the train at any time. It would be stupid to assume he wouldn't know I was missing until I didn't get off in Hanover. There was a good chance he'd make contact with someone else at the Bremen station and I wouldn't have any idea who that person would be. They could even have followed me out of the car park. So, I got onto the ring road around Bremen then turned off towards Oldenburg. At the next shopping centre, fairly quiet as most people would be at work, I abandoned the car and took another one. Then I drove back into Bremen and swapped it for a third. All very time consuming and irritating but necessary.

I'd never seen the woman at the rendezvous point in Hamburg before but she was carrying two mobile phones which was the identifier.

"Guten tag," I said, my conversational German being adequate for occasional clandestine meetings. I can't read or write the language though. "Ich bin neugierig." (*I am curious*)

"What about?" she asked, in German as well.

"Why do you carry two phones?" I asked.

"In case I need to speak to myself," she said with a smile.

"Oh, I thought it might be because you need one for flying and one for your horses," I said.

"That too but let's keep it our secret," she said.

"Where next?" I asked, satisfied she was my contact. I didn't need to know her name.

"I'll drop you," she said so I abandoned my car. I arrived at my

destination later than I had expected but still half an hour early which was good. My reputation was remained intact.

Chapter Four

“Ahh Pegasus, you are looking well,” said Adonis as a minor flunky ushered me into his office.

Adonis was a bit of a misnomer, but then all our code names were. I wasn't a horse and could only fly with the aid of an aeroplane. While by no means lacking in the manly charms, Adonis was a heavysset man in his late fifties, balding and had the air of a bureaucrat which was some way off the Ancient Greek concept of male beauty as youth, athleticism and a good head of hair figured prominently. Still, we had known each other for some time and were on friendly terms which is more than I could say for others in the Department. We weren't one big happy family despite what several of my recruitment interviewers had said. Who assigned code names I had no idea but they probably had a sense of humour, as evidenced by Aphrodite in the Oslo office who was a closet homosexual male.

“Thank you,” I said. “You are too. New offices, I see.”

He waved for me to sit down so I did.

“Yes, we were kicked out of the old offices a few months ago,” he said. “The Department of Internal Cooperation needed the extra space so we shifted to Environment. They no longer needed the top three floors in their building. Still a bit of a mess, I'm afraid, hence the redecorating you may have noticed.”

I had noticed a couple of painters having a smoke and chatting on my way in but hadn't thought much of it.

“Nice view though,” I said, getting up to look out of the bomb-proof flexiplas window. From the 22nd floor the view over Hamburg was quite nice, particularly with the Elbe river and woodlands in the distance.

“It gets old quickly,” he said, “You have my package?”

“Ahh, yes,” I said. I shifted over to a corner so he didn't get over-excited and undid a couple of buttons. Removing the sachet was a lot

easier than inserting it. A quick squeeze in the right place and it slipped out.

“There you go,” I said, putting it on his desk.

“Thank you,” he said and picked it up with a tissue. I found that a little insulting the first time as it implied he was concerned about the risk of infection or something but I'd since learned that it was to protect any fingerprints on it. They were checked after every delivery and there should only be mine and those of the person who'd passed the sachet to me, Mercury in this instance. Anyone else's and alarm bells would go off. The sachet might even self-destruct for all I knew.

He slipped the sachet into the special little reader beside his computer and, after a couple of seconds, pronounced the sachet was 'safe'. I shrugged since I knew no one else had touched it.

“So how was the trip?” he asked. “Uneventful?”

“Actually, no,” I said and proceeded to give him all the details of my encounter with Manuel.

He sat frowning all through my recital then asked a few clarifying questions. He didn't take notes as everything was recorded as a matter of routine.

“And you are certain he was watching out for you?” he asked after calling up Manuel's details from the database.

“No,” I said. “As I said, it could have been a chance encounter but he certainly recognised me.”

“Hmm,” he said and sat back, thinking.

“Did you identify anyone else?” he asked.

“No,” I said.

“Did you see any sign of him before Antwerp?” he asked.

“No,” I said, “and I’m certain I wasn’t followed from Calais.”

“Hmmm,” he muttered. “Why Antwerp though?” His finger started tapping on the arm of his chair. “Why would someone like Manuel be on the train from Antwerp to Bremen? Was he on a job in Antwerp and had finished or was he going to a job in Bremen or somewhere else?”

I didn’t answer because I had nothing constructive to say.

Abruptly he leaned forward and picked up his phone.

“Adonis,” he said when someone answered. “Can you spare me a few minutes?” Pause. “Yes, now.”

Whoever it was must have agreed as he put the phone down and sat back gazing sightlessly at me so I got up and went back to the window. I’ve always liked a nice view.

Within thirty seconds the door opened and I turned to see Callisto. She was in her usual severe but beautifully tailored suit that always made her look a little like a dominatrix. I think it might have been a combination of the suit, her shoulder length absolutely straight red hair and matching red lipstick and nail polish but I’m no expert on dominatrix fashions. It could simply have been her manner as she had a commanding presence. Both she and Adonis were Heads of Sections although it wasn’t in my job description to know which sections although I had a fair idea they were both to do with operations.

“Ahh, Pegasus,” she said, closing the door silently behind her. “Welcome. You have the package, Adonis?”

“Yes,” he said. “But there’s a complication.”

Nothing changed in her expression but I sensed she’d turned a little inward as Adonis explained about Manuel.

“Show me,” she said, going round to look at Manuel’s details on the screen.

“Hmm,” she said after reading it. “Interesting. What's Islamic State doing in Antwerp?”

“That's what I'd like to know,” said Adonis.

“Perhaps IS is planning to target Europa now,” said Callisto, moving over to the other chair and sitting down. “There's been little activity by them in the Yazhou Block.”

Politics hadn't been my favourite subject at school but I knew that over the last fifteen to twenty years the world had shifted from many largely independent countries to six tightly grouped power blocks. Europa was essentially what used to be Europe. Yazhou was China, Japan, India and the surrounding Asian countries. Rossiya corresponded to a large extent to what used to be the Soviet Union. Islamic State was the Middle East and Alkebulan pretty much all of Africa. The Christian State Block was the USA, what used to be Canada but was now the 51st state of America and all the countries in South America. Some places, primarily Australia and New Zealand didn't fit in with the geopolitical structure as they're essentially geographically within the Yazhou region and ambiguous politically, as they could just as easily be in Europa or Christian State.

Christian State, incidentally, was so named because the USA had been taken over by hard right White Christian groups after successfully gerrymandering key electoral districts by forcing through legislation that allowed a district to be separated into discreet areas that didn't join. This meant pockets of their opponents could be grouped into one or two districts and their supporters split into several districts, thereby allowing the multiple supporter districts to outvote the one or two opponent districts regardless of the number of actual voters. Once fully in place the Christian Unity, as they called themselves, had effectively nobbled any chance of opposition and had, or so I'd read, gained a substantial majority in both Congress and the Senate as well as the Presidency. Those majorities had been sufficient to put through amendments to the Constitution which meant, when everything settled down again, that the USA now had a fascist government that couldn't be removed. The absorption of Canada followed soon afterwards together with alliances with the fascist governments in South America and the overthrow of the remaining democratic

governments. Presumably to emphasise their disagreements with the Middle East this new power block chose to call itself Christian State.

It was largely because of this that the Europeans, who didn't want to get involved with fascism again, chose to strengthen the European Union and name their block Europa. Yazhou, the Chinese name for Asia, and Alkebulan, an African name for Africa, had their own motivations.

"It's all because of that damned Civil War in America," said Callisto quietly. "If they'd had the good sense to simply battle it out between the Left and Right political factions it would all be over with now."

She must have seen my look of incomprehension and rolled her eyes.

"Don't you know anything of current affairs or history?" she asked.

"Not really," I said. "I leave that to you guys."

"Typical," she said and twisted to face me. "You know how Christian State arose, don't you?"

"I know the basics," I said. "The Christians took over the government."

"If only it was that simple," she said. "You've heard of Christian Unity?"

"Of course," I said. "I'm not that stupid."

"No, of course you're not," she replied. "I didn't mean to imply any insult. The reality is that Christian Unity is anything but united and that's the problem."

"How do you mean?" I asked, frowning.

"Christian Unity is an alliance of right wing Christian groups and White Supremacists," she said. "They came together to achieve their overarching objective which was to save, as they saw it, America from non-whites, feminists, homosexuals and anything else they could think

of. Once they achieved that they started to turn on each other in order to gain control for their own particular group. As a result the situation in that Block is dire because, while there is civil war, it's not a simple civil war between two opposing sides but a war between thirty or more different competing ideologies. A straightforward civil war would have finished years ago when one side or the other won but this can't. No one faction has sufficient strength or influence to subdue all the others."

"Oh," I said. "That doesn't sound too good."

"Well, it's not good for them certainly," she said. "It does have one or two advantages for us, however."

I raised my eyebrows in a silent question.

"Arms sales, for example," she said. "This is the first time since, ohh, the middle of the 20th century that we've been able to sell arms to America. Their own production facilities have been badly hit."

"OK," I said. "I can follow that. Umm, why are we talking about it though?"

"Because of this Manuel," she said.

"That I don't follow," I said, frowning.

"Islamic State has been focused on Christian State for a long time," said Adonis. "So why's Manuel in Antwerp, following you?"

"Was it just a coincidence?" asked Callisto, "or is it indicative of a change in focus?"

"You think Islamic State might now be targeting Europa?" I asked. "Why now? What's changed?"

Callisto looked at Adonis who looked back at her. They seemed to reach an unspoken agreement.

"Not Europa," she said. "Alkebulan."

“Alkebulan?” I exclaimed. “Why would Manuel be in Antwerp if he was targeting Alkebulan? There are no African embassies there, are there?”

“No,” she said slowly, “but you were there.”

“Me?” I said in surprise. “I’ve nothing to do with Alkebulan.” Then the penny dropped. “Ohh, my delivery was about Alkebulan, wasn’t it.”

“Yes,” said Callisto. “Which is an interesting coincidence, isn’t it. An Islamic State agent just happens to be in Antwerp at a time when Islamic State is changing focus and you are passing through with significant information related to Alkebulan.”

“So you think I was targeted?” I asked. “It wasn’t just a coincidence?”

“What do you think, Adonis?” she asked.

“I don’t believe in coincidences,” he said. “That’s why I called you in.”

“I’m glad you did,” said Callisto. “I don’t believe in coincidences either.”

“But they do happen,” I said.

“Not at this level,” she said.

“But it might not have been him,” I said. “After all, the photo is at least five years old and not particularly good.”

“Why are you arguing, Pegasus?” interrupted Adonis. “You are a highly experienced courier and you felt the resemblance to be enough to take significant evasive action and to report it. You thought he was Manuel as well.”

“True,” I admitted. “So you think there might be a leak in England?”

“It will have to be investigated,” said Callisto. “In fact if we don’t investigate that fact will certainly be leaked and it’ll look suspicious as

Manuel will undoubtedly have reported encountering you and your subsequent actions by now even if it wasn't a planned encounter."

"Well, OK," I said. "So you want to start with me? While I'm here?"

"I think not," she said. "You received the package at 14:07GMT yesterday. There wouldn't have been time to organise an operative to be in Antwerp when you arrived there and I don't see how you'd know of its contents. The leak must have been prior to that."

"By that reasoning it couldn't have been Mercury either," I said. "He probably didn't have the package for more than an hour or two himself."

"Perhaps," said Callisto. She stood up and smoothed her skirt then looked at Adonis. "Are we done here?"

"You still intend to go ahead?" he asked.

"I see no reason not to," she said. "We can be fairly certain IS do not have the data so in that respect nothing has changed."

"True," said Adonis after thinking about it for a few moments.

"But you will keep me informed of any developments or new information?" she asked.

"Naturally," said Adonis.

"Good," said Callisto. "Have you any further need of Pegasus?"

"Not at this time," he said. "She's all yours."

"Right then," I said, getting up myself. Clearly Callisto had another delivery for me although I didn't speculate about where it was to be delivered. Her packages went everywhere. "Until next time, Adonis."

Callisto's office was on the same floor as Adonis' but on the other side of the building which meant Callisto must have left her office as soon as she'd hung up from Adonis since she'd managed to get all

that way in barely thirty seconds. I was amused to see her office was a little bigger than his although her view looked out over the centre of Hamburg.

“Shut the door and sit,” she said without bothering to look at me as she went around her desk to her chair. Despite the extra space her desk was as empty as Adonis'. Just a computer, headset and a printer. She didn't even have a coffee mug.

“I have a delivery for you,” she said, looking at me.

“OK,” I said, standing up again. “I'll just go to the toilet and douse myself with antiseptic.”

I always carried a little bottle of antiseptic as I liked to clean my boobs before inserting and after removing sachets. You never know where the things have been. The sachets I mean, not my boobs. I always know where they've been.

“Not that kind of delivery,” she said, waving me to sit down again.

“I'm afraid that's the only kind I do,” I said. “That's my role. We have other people for bigger packages.” They were ex-military types, carried weapons and usually travelled in convoys since deliveries that weren't information were usually large pieces of hardware.

“Yes, I know,” she said. “It's not that kind of delivery either.”

“Oh,” I said, a little nonplussed. “What is it then?”

“A person,” she said, sitting perfectly upright. I couldn't see behind her but I was certain no part of her back touched the back of the chair.

“A person?” I exclaimed. “I don't deliver people.”

“This is a special situation,” she said. “Calling for special skills.”

“And I don't have those skills,” I said. “I've always worked alone. Personnel movement calls for bodyguards, travel permits and

whatever.”

“I am aware of this,” she said. “But this is to be a clandestine delivery and you are a specialist in clandestine deliveries.”

“But not of people,” I said. “I’ve never delivered a person before.”

“Granted,” she said, “but you are without question our best courier so you shouldn’t have too many difficulties.”

“Well, maybe,” I said, my resistance dropping a little. Hey, I’m as open to flattery as the next person. Especially from Callisto who wasn’t known for gratuitous flattery. “So, who is it?”

“I’ll introduce you shortly,” she said, finally sitting back a little. She probably thought her mission had been accomplished. “There is something you need to be aware of first.”

“What’s that?” I asked.

“There is some uncertainty about when delivery is to take place,” she said.

“Shouldn’t be a problem,” I said. “My schedule’s not that busy. Send the request through the usual channels when you know and I’ll come over. This person is here, aren’t they?”

“Yes,” she said. “The thing is we need you to take receipt now.”

“Excuse me?” I said, starting to get alarmed. “You mean you want me to take this person with me now and stay with them until you let me know when and where to deliver them?”

“In a nutshell,” she said. “Although you can’t keep her here in Germany. It’s not safe.”

“Her?” I said, surprised. “You mean she’s a woman?”

“I don’t see that that makes any difference,” said Callisto, frowning. “Or do you have some particular bias against women?”

“Not at all,” I said frowning. I had a feeling I'd fallen into some kind of trap. “Makes no difference to me.”

“Good,” said Callisto. “Then it's agreed.”

“Hold on, hold on,” I said, feeling under pressure. “Let me get this straight. You want me to take this woman from here and keep her with me until you let me know what to do with her?”

“Yes,” she said.

“This is ridiculous,” I said. “What about my other deliveries?”

“I don't see how they will be affected,” said Callisto. “Simply take her with you. The important thing is that you don't let her out of your sight.”

I started to laugh.

“This is a joke, isn't it,” I said. “My job is to carry small packages of data which is why I've got these things in my boobs. I work alone and travel alone. I don't take people with me.”

“This is not a joke,” she said, not smiling to emphasise the point, not that she smiled often anyway, “and as I said, this is a special situation. I should also mention, although I was hoping to avoid this and rely on your good nature, that this is an order, not a request.”

“Oh really?” I said, feeling a bit annoyed. “On whose authority?”

“Elrond's” she said. “One moment.”

She leaned forward and tapped something into her computer. A second later my phone pinged.

“Read it,” she said.

I stared at her for several seconds then slowly got out my phone. There was a message waiting. It was from Elrond, the Head of my Department. I read the message through twice but its contents were

unambiguous. I was temporarily assigned to Callisto for the duration and I was to continue my normal deliveries 'where feasible'.

"What does 'where feasible' mean?" I asked after digesting this.

"It means if a delivery isn't feasible when accompanied then you are to reject it," said Callisto, staying leaned forward. "It is important to maintain a sense of normality throughout and you suspending all deliveries would be suspicious."

"So would rejecting a delivery," I said. "I've never done that before."

"There's always a risk," she said, "and you are conversant with risk. Now, if we are quite clear on this I'll go and get your ... package."

"Doesn't look like I've got a lot of choice, have I," I said with a touch of bitterness.

"Indeed," she said, standing up. "A moment."

She returned quickly with a young woman in tow. She looked to be about 20, possibly even a little younger.

"This is Fortuna," said Callisto making the introductions. "Fortuna, Pegasus."

I jumped up and Fortuna and I studied each other.

"Hello," she said, holding out her hand.

"Hello," I said, shaking it as I'm not a rude person even when I've been outwitted and bested.

"Excellent," said Callisto. "I think that's all for now."

"How soon do you think I'll be delivering Fortuna?" I asked.

"Perhaps a day or two, perhaps longer," said Callisto, staying by the door.

“OK,” I said figuring a day or two shouldn't be too onerous. “Right, any special instructions?”

“Beyond keeping her safe and delivering her, no,” said Callisto, “although any dietary requirements and so forth you can sort out between yourselves.”

“OK,” I said and looked at Fortuna again. She had dark hair in a ponytail with a fringe that hung down to just above a pair of surprisingly green eyes. She looked both hopeful and nervous at the same time. “Well then, we'd best be off. Oh, one more thing. Where am I to deliver Fortuna?”

“That is as yet uncertain,” said Callisto, “but someone will contact you in due course.”

Chapter Five

Still a little befuddled I stood in the empty corridor and looked blankly at Fortuna, my mind still coming to terms with the speed of what had just happened. She smiled, more nervously than ingratiatingly, and shrugged her shoulders slightly.

“I need a cigarette,” I said, breaking the silence that was beginning to get uncomfortable.

“There is a smoking room down there,” she said, pointing to the end of the corridor.

“Do you smoke?” I asked, turning and heading that way.

“No,” she said, “but it was where I was waiting for you.”

That was a bit of a bummer. It was bad enough that I had to have a companion for the next day or two but one who sent silent vibes of disapproval every time I lit up would be irritating.

“Does smoking bother you?” I asked, spotting a door labelled ‘Recreation Room’ in German.

“No,” she said. “Not really.”

“What does ‘not really’ mean?” I asked, pushing the door open. The room was deserted and smelled of smoke. As recreation rooms go it clearly wasn’t up to much as the only table had a pack of playing cards held together by an elastic band and a chess board. Other than that there were a handful of chairs, several ashtrays and someone’s rucksack. Oh, and a large extractor fan fitted into one of the windows.

“Nothing really,” said Fortuna. She went over to the table and started fiddling with the white queen. “I just thought ‘no’ on its own was a bit abrupt.”

“Right,” I said and plonked myself down in the chair furthest from the extractor fan. Its whirr, even though it was quiet, was irritating me. I got out a cigarette and lit it then looked at Fortuna again.

She was probably older than my first impression although she still looked a little younger than me, maybe 25, and she had only light eye shadow which enhanced her green eyes. She was wearing a grey hoodie with something dark underneath, jeans and green running shoes. Interestingly she also wore fairly large earrings, probably 5 or 6 centimetres long which were shaped like a figure 8 and had bright abstract swirly patterns of blue, red, white and purple.

“So what's all this about?” I asked after a couple of drags on my ciggie.

“I'm afraid I can't tell you,” she said. She had a slight accent but I couldn't place it. Certainly European though.

“Yeah, I figured as much,” I said and laughed. It came out a little more harshly than I'd intended. It had been a silly thing to ask since in my line of work you never, ever, ask what it is you're delivering or why but in this instance I felt a need for some sort of explanation.

She hesitated then dropped the queen back on the chess board and came over to sit beside me.

“I may be wrong,” she said quietly, “but I sense some antagonism in you.”

“Only some?” I said then regretted it. I was a professional courier and it was my job to deliver things, intact and on time. Granted this particular delivery was out of the ordinary but it was still a delivery and wasn't her fault. Well, probably not. She was probably as much a pawn of Callisto or someone higher up as I was.

“How can I make things easier for you?” she asked. “I know we will probably not become friends but it would be good if we can work together with sympathy and understanding.”

I blinked a couple of times at that. Friends? Sympathy?

“What I don't understand,” I said, taking another drag, “is why me? I do data deliveries not personnel.”

“I do not know,” she said, “but perhaps that is itself the reason why.”

“I don't follow,” I said, my eyes narrowing.

“I know little of what you do or how you do it,” she said, “but I suspect that you are known for delivering data so if there is someone with you that person is likely to be ignored. Most likely she is a friend or a stranger who happens to be sitting beside you. For a personnel specialist, however, that would be very different. The person with them is likely to be of great interest for that is their role.”

“Well, I suppose,” I said and blew out a cloud of smoke.

It did make me wonder why Fortuna needed that extra level of security through disinformation. It suddenly crossed my mind that I might have been drawn into an operation against the Department by some faction within the Department, perhaps even led by Callisto or Adonis since he seemed to know about it. I squashed that line of thought quickly though as it reeked of paranoia and really a subject fit only for a movie. Reality was hard enough to keep a grip on without inventing internal enemies.

“For my part,” said Fortuna, still watching me with those big green eyes, “it is enough that you are the best at what you do. That pleases me and makes me feel secure. Trust is important here, is it not?”

“Umm, yes,” I said, feeling a little embarrassed. Flattery twice in one day?

“I promise I will not get in your way,” she said, her face open and sincere. “I will do everything I can to help. I am not your enemy, Pegasus, and I trust you with my life. Can you trust me? Just a little? Please?”

Oh
Fuck

I stared at her as my ciggie smouldered unnoticed between my fingers. “Keep her safe” Callisto had said. Was her life really at stake here? I started to feel my antipathy dropping away. Hell, I had a job to

do and ... and I was beginning to like her. Damn it!

“Umm ...,” I started then yelped as the burning bit of the ciggie touched my fingers. Instinctively I flung the butt away and stuck my fingers in my mouth.

Fortuna jumped to her feet and picked up the butt. She dropped it in the ashtray then sat down again.

“Sorry,” I said, feeling foolish. “It burnt my fingers.” I held my fingers out to show her and felt even more foolish.

Fortuna took my hand and kissed the tips of my fingers.

“A little pain, quickly gone,” she said and let go of my hand.

“Wow,” I said, tucking it behind my other hand for safety.

“I did wrong?” she asked.

“No,” I said. “I just wasn’t expecting that.”

“That is what friends do, no?” she asked.

“Umm, I guess so,” I said, wondering what was going on here. Usually I only had to expose my boobs to take receipt of a delivery but I felt my feelings and emotions were being exposed here. That side of me was normally well protected.

“Good,” she said.

“Yes,” I said and gave myself a little shake to settle my mind back in place. “Right.”

I wondered whether or not to have another ciggie then decided I would so I got one out and lit it.

“Time to talk business,” I said. “Callisto said to get you out of Germany quickly. Is that right?”

“Yes,” she said. “It is not safe for me to be here.”

“And where would be safe?” I asked.

“For the moment anywhere else,” she said.

“Hmm,” I said, wondering at the ‘for the moment’. It seemed likely that whatever was going on had originated here in Hamburg, or perhaps Berlin, and whoever we were up against were still not fully aware of the situation. “Well, we’re not far from Denmark. Shall we go there?”

“It is up to you,” she said, smiling again. “I am completely in your hands.”

Oh joy.

“Denmark it is then,” I said. “Oh, do you have any passports?”

“Yes,” she said. “In my sack,” and pointed to the rucksack that sat on the chair beside the door.

It hadn’t occurred to me she might have any luggage as I never carry any. When I need a change of clothes I buy some more and dump the old ones rather than wash them. A constant supply of new clothes and no laundry ~ the perfect job!

“Can I see them?” I asked.

“Of course,” she said, getting up and fetching the rucksack.

“Is that all your luggage?” I asked as she rummaged through it, “or is there more?”

“This is all,” she said.

“Good,” I said in relief. At least we didn’t have fourteen suitcases to deal with as well.

“Only one?” I said in surprise when she handed me a passport.

“Yes,” she said. “Should I have more than one?”

“Um, I suppose not,” I said. I had nine myself but I only took one on any particular delivery as officials get upset if they search you and find other passports. Having nine though meant I didn't build up any travel patterns. I even had one in my real name but that was safely locked away in a bank deposit box.

Her passport was standard European, certainly good enough for any border or security check. Hell, it could even have been genuine. Marie Charlotte Brigitte D'Escala, born Paris, 2013, making her 26, just a year younger than me. Height 1m62, hair black, eyes green, occupation student.

“Student of what?” I asked, looking at her hologram. The resemblance was good, just how a passport should be. I hoped the biometric information on its little chip matched as well.

“Politics and political history,” she said.

Ask a silly question, I guess.

“Umm ...” I said, wondering if I shouldn't really ask as it could open up a nasty kettle of fish, “is Marie Charlotte Brigitte D'Escala your real name?” None of my nine fake ones had two middle names.

“What do you think?” she said, raising an eyebrow.

“Good,” I said, dismissing the problem. “Can I call you Marie? It's easier than Fortuna and more natural if we're overheard.”

“Of course,” she said. “What shall I call you?”

“Elaine,” I said, “Elaine Lewisham.” It had the advantage of matching my passport for this trip and there was no way I was giving her my real name.

“Elaine is a nice name,” she said. “It goes with your windswept hairstyle.”

Well, OK. My hair wasn't windswept, incidentally. It was naturally just a thick mop that went down to my shoulder blades. It would be impossible to style without hours of straightening and not worth the effort. I liked it that way and it needed little attention beyond occasional shampooing and conditioning. When I wanted a fancy hairstyle I put it in a ponytail. It also had an added benefit in that if I needed to make an adjustment to a sachet in one of my boobs and there was nowhere to hide I could just bend my head forward and let it hang as a screen while I groped myself. The same applied if I needed to obscure my face when there was a security camera. As an added precaution I carried a few pieces of nicotine gum to change the shape of my lips. You never know when facial recognition is being used and the same face crossing the same border several times under different names would be suspicious.

"Thanks," I said then switched to my passable French. "And do you speak French?"

"Yes," she said in French, "and with a Parisian accent."

Which was true. Speaking French she sounded much like most people in Paris that I'd had dealings with although her English didn't have a French woman's accent. Still, your average border guard wouldn't have that level of nuance.

"Do you mind if I go through your bag?" I asked. "I know it's a bit personal but we can't risk being stopped because you have some contraband or seditious material."

She might even have a gun or some other weapon but I hoped not.

"I understand," she said, handing over the rucksack. I quickly went through it, relieved to find only a few clothes and toiletries, all with French labels, a couple of books, both in French and neither in any way seditious so long as we stayed away from Christian State. I also found, again with relief, a packet of condoms with one missing. It had crossed my mind when she kissed my fingers that she might be a lesbian. Leaving the items on the floor I checked the seams and straps and they all passed inspection. That's not to say she wasn't carrying anything she shouldn't but it would need an x-ray machine to find it.

All in all she was well prepared. If it turned out we'd have to go to Christian State I'd make sure she junked the books as one was feminist and the other a historical analysis of the rise of Christian Fundamentalism in the 21st century. Given that it very probably contained more than a few facts it would certainly be deemed 'undesirable' and would get her kicked out immediately.

“OK,” I said, handing the now empty rucksack back to Marie. “Looks clean enough. We'll stop at a supermarket soon and get some sanitiser to spray on in case there's any residue from fruit or anything banned at a border.” Or drugs I thought but didn't say.

I left Marie to repack her bag while I had another ciggie, although what I really fancied was a coffee. Unexpectedly there was the sound of a bird tweeting which meant I had a message on my phone. It was from my agent about a possible dancing contract overseas, my agent being in London and in actual fact the Coordination Centre for the Department.

“Bugger,” I said, staring at the phone.

“What is the matter?” asked Marie, stuffing the last of her knickers in the rucksack.

“I have a job,” I said. “This could be a bit of a problem.”

I contemplated leaving the room then decided not to bother. Marie already knew about me.

“Pegasus,” I said when my call was answered after three rings. Quite cleverly, I thought, the system was designed to randomly wait before answering so that the number looked genuine. Sometimes it even rang out and went to voicemail.

“You are in Dubai?” said a male voice. I could almost hear the frown.

“No,” I said. “Germany.”

“Good,” he said. “Can you be in Berlin by 20:00 today?”

"I'm not sure," I said and thought about it. OK, I could easily be in Berlin by 8pm but did I want to be? I had Marie to worry about now.

"Destination?" I asked. It was always possible the package was bound for Hamburg which would be spectacular.

"Copenhagen," he said.

That was an interesting coincidence. I was planning on taking Marie to Denmark and, in case you didn't know, Copenhagen is the capital of Denmark. Perhaps there was someone in Coordination with higher than usual intelligence who'd anticipated my movements. Or perhaps not.

"Authorisation?" I asked. Usually I didn't bother to ask as someone with the appropriate authority must have authorised the delivery otherwise Coordination wouldn't be pushing it on to me but I was curious.

"Elrond," said the voice.

I breathed a sigh of relief. Elrond, the Head of my Department, knew about Marie and he certainly had higher than usual intelligence. He could easily predict I'd take her to Denmark.

"Accepted," I said. "Contact?"

"Diana," said the voice.

I blinked in surprise then remembered that Diana was the Roman Goddess of hunting as well as a girl's name. She was also the Goddess of Virginity although that would be difficult to work into a casual identification chat. No one goes up to a stranger and says 'are you a virgin?' At least not in my experience.

"Confirm Diana, Berlin, 20:00," I repeated to confirm the details.

"Confirmed," he said and disconnected.

"We're going to make a little detour to Berlin," I said to Marie. "Then

we'll go on to Denmark. I have a delivery but it seems straightforward and shouldn't inconvenience us."

"OK," she said. "Are we leaving soon?"

"Now," I said.

"Could I get something to eat first?" she asked. "I haven't eaten since this morning."

"Of course you can," I said. "It'll take a little while to find a car anyway. All packed?"

"Yes," she said and followed me to the lifts. The two decorators were still on their smoke break which suggested Germany's reputation for efficiency was on the decline.

"Actually, no," I said as a thought struck me. "I need to ask Callisto something. You wait here. I'll be back in a minute."

"OK," said Marie, settling her rucksack more comfortably over her shoulder.

I'd gone maybe twenty paces back up the corridor before I stopped and turned around then went back.

"Actually no," I said. "Callisto said I'm not to let you out of my sight. You'd better come with me."

"But we're still in the building," she said, frowning.

"True," I said. "OK then. Wait here and don't go anywhere else."

I'd have insisted but it suddenly occurred to me that Marie might not like Callisto's answer to my question.

"I won't move," she said, glancing over at the decorators.

I again hesitated as the decorators may not be what they seemed but it was probably too subtle for enemy agents posing as decorators to

be idle layabouts. They'd be busily decorating, I was sure.

"Great," I said and hurried off again.

"Enter," said Callisto when I knocked on her door.

I went in and she looked sternly at me. Perhaps she was puzzled but she only ever seemed to have two expressions, stern and relieved. Relieved wasn't appropriate here since I was back again too soon.

"A question," I said and she gave a slight nod.

"If I have to do a delivery while Fortuna is with me," I said, as there was no need for Callisto to know about my booking – if she needed to know she'd already know without me telling her. "And there's trouble, what's my priority? Fortuna or the delivery?"

"What were your instructions?" asked Callisto.

"Umm, keep her safe and deliver her," I said.

"Then do so," said Callisto. "Data can always be resent or cancelled. There is only one Fortuna."

This was the answer I'd been hoping for but you never know. Fortuna may have been expendable if the data was important enough.

"Great," I said. "Thanks."

I left and went back to the lifts speculating on exactly how I could keep her safe if there was a serious attempt to snatch her. Personnel specialists were trained for this sort of thing whereas my training was primarily focused on avoiding confrontational situations and running away quickly if and when they arose.

And, just to add the icing to the cake, when I got back to the lifts I found Marie happily chatting with the two decorators as though she didn't have a care in the world.

Chapter Six

"I must ask you not to do that," I said as we went down in the lift to the ground floor.

"Do what?" asked Marie, watching the changing floor numbers on the little screen above the lift door.

"Talk to strangers," I said, slightly exasperated.

"Oh," she said then, three floors later, "Aren't I supposed to act naturally?"

"Yes," I said, "but you don't know who strangers are."

"Well, obviously," she said, glancing at me. "That's why they're strangers. Anyway, we're still in the building so they'd have been cleared."

"Granted," I said, "but that doesn't necessarily mean they haven't got another agenda. People can and do infiltrate the organisation from time to time. Anyway, that doesn't matter. We'll be outside in a moment and you can't trust anyone."

"Not even you?" she asked with the beginnings of a grin.

"Well, you have to trust me," I said as the lift came to a halt and the doors opened, "but only up to a point. I may have an agenda as well. You can't be certain."

"You know, that only makes me trust you more," she said as we walked past four armed security guards.

"Hush," I said quietly as we approached the reception desk. My phoned pinged and, moments later, Marie's did too, surprising me as I didn't know she had one. I checked my message which merely confirmed my exiting the building and the time. I nodded at the woman behind the desk and she completely blanked me which was encouraging. Inquisitive security staff are a pain. We passed through the scanners and out onto the pavement. It was pleasantly warm.

“I think there's a café up there,” I said, pointing up a side street a little further down. “We'll get you something to eat there.” I'd noted it when I'd been dropped at the building earlier.

“OK,” she said.

We went in and I grabbed a vacant table at the back, well away from the windows.

“What would you like?” asked Marie, grabbing the menu.

“I'll have what you're having,” I said. “Give me your phone.”

“What for?” she asked, looking at me in surprise.

“I need to check it,” I said.

She looked blankly at me for a moment then took it out of her hoodie pocket and passed it over. I quickly checked tracking was disabled – it was – then got out my iPad. When I say iPad, I mean the thing that looked and behaved like an iPad but had had its innards removed and replaced with a Department approved board. It did all the things iPads do but had a few extra features such as the call routing feature I used to make my calls appear to come from Dubai. I ran an app, put in my code and let it chat with Marie's phone.

“I'm having schnitzel with fries,” announced Marie, having taken very little notice of what I was doing to her phone beyond a cursory glance at my iPad. “Is that OK?”

“Sure,” I said.

“Can I have my phone back so I can order?” she asked.

“In a minute,” I said.

“What are you doing?” she asked, putting the menu down.

“Checking your phone,” I said.

“What for?” she asked.

I hesitated for a few moments until the iPad flashed up 'CLEAN'.

“Unapproved apps,” I said, wondering why she was asking. Didn't she know about this sort of stuff already? “Unapproved circuits, non standard batteries, that sort of thing.”

“Oh,” she said, frowning. “Umm, why?”

“There could be additional tracking devices inside,” I said. “Perhaps even a hidden recording app that bypasses the battery and transmits what we're saying.”

She looked at me and her eyes widened.

“Are there?” she asked in a hushed voice.

“No,” I said and ran another app.

“Now what are you doing?” she asked, craning her head to try and see.

“Checking your contacts and their numbers against our database of undesirables,” I said, watching a list of names and numbers scroll quickly up. The list disappeared, leaving one name and number.

“How do you know Jean-Claude Pascale?” I asked, scanning the attached details.

“He's a friend from University,” she said. “Not a close one.”

“Why's that?” I asked.

“He's an Animal Rights activist,” she said. “OK I don't agree with experimenting on animals but he was arrested for attempting to set fire to a research lab a few years ago.”

“Twice,” I said, “amongst other things,” and deleted Jean-Claude from her contacts. Maybe animal rights activism was a cover for some other

form of activism. Better safe than sorry. I added myself as a Contact then rang myself. After two rings I hung up.

“There you go,” I said and handed her phone back. “I’ve added myself as a contact, by the way. Under Elaine.”

She took it then laid it on the table and looked suspiciously at it.

“Are you sure it’s safe?” she asked.

“As safe as anything is,” I said with a reassuring smile. “Never forget your most important tools though.” Using the missed call I added Marie as a contact in my own phone.

“What’re they?” she asked, picking up her phone.

“Your brain and your gut,” I said. “If something doesn’t feel right, trust your gut and check it or walk away.”

“Ohhh,” she said, picking up her phone again. “You mean like with those decorators?”

“No,” I said. “I didn’t have a gut feeling about them. Not talking to strangers is just a general principle. Order the food. Can you pay for it or do you want me too?”

“That woman put some money on my phone,” she said, her fingers busy.

“Which woman?” I asked, suddenly alert.

“The one who introduced me to you,” she said.

I relaxed. Callisto putting credit details on the phone was OK. Someone else, definitely not. It was fairly easy to track someone’s movements through their purchasing locations and with a bit of practice and intuition predictions on where the phone was going next could be made. If payments went through the Department’s payment system they were fully sanitised and laundered before any banks got involved. I was also pleased Marie had sufficient awareness to not use

code names in public.

Marie wolfed her schnitzel and fries when they arrived and I slowly ate about half mine while thinking. Although there were trains from Hamburg to Berlin I didn't want to take one as I'd been in Hamburg for several hours and Manuel or one of his cronies may have caught up and be monitoring the station. This meant a car which shouldn't be a problem as no one can monitor every car in a city. It was now a little before 3pm local time and the drive shouldn't take more than 3 hours which meant we'd be in Berlin by 6 or thereabouts. Allow an hour to meet this Diana at the check point then make the rendezvous and do the pickup. Any sensible person going to Copenhagen from Berlin would either fly or drive to Rostock and get the ferry to Zealand but I always tried to avoid doing what a sensible person would do. I picked up my iPad and changed the call routing app from Dubai to Geneva then called up a map of Germany since I wasn't that familiar with Denmark. From memory though, the security at the border at Padborg consisted of a couple of unmanned buildings by the side of the motorway which meant I could drive through rather than change cars and get a ferry further up the coast.

"Ready?" I asked when Marie pushed the last french fry into her mouth.

"Yes," she said.

I dumped the uneaten half of my schnitzel into a paper napkin and wrapped it then put the rest of the fries in another. Cold fries aren't very nice but if anything should go wrong they were better than going hungry.

"Come on then," I said, dumping both bundles in my bag. "Let's go."

"Where are we going?" she asked, grabbing her rucksack and following back outside.

"To find a car," I said.

"You mean a taxi?" she asked, "or are you going to steal one?"

“Oh, steal is such a nasty word,” I said. “I much prefer acquire or appropriate.”

She laughed. A couple of streets away she nudged me.

“You see that black BMW?” she whispered, nodding in its direction. “The guy got out and went in that shop without locking it.”

“He could have done from inside the shop,” I said, ignoring the BMW. “Anyway, never take opportunities when they come up. They could have been created on purpose.”

“You mean he deliberately parked there and left it unlocked so we'd take it?” she asked, stopping walking to look at me.

“Could be,” I said, continuing walking. “Was he a swarthy looking man?”

“No he was blonde,” she said, catching up.

“Not that it matters,” I said and went round the corner. My usual choice, a newish Chinese sedan, was parked near the corner. It could have just been what I'd said to Marie but my gut said no so I walked past and chose a Japanese hatchback further up the road instead. It's dangerous to build up patterns.

My iPad did its usual trick but, being Japanese rather than Chinese, I had to use a metal hairpin to short circuit the door alarm. Inevitably the alarm went off but fortunately the door opened so I used my nails to cut through the plastic surround near the hinge and neatly snipped the wire. That didn't work so I snipped the other one and the alarm stopped.

“Damned Japanese crap,” I said in German to a passerby who was watching. He laughed and muttered something about Mercedes which I didn't catch but agreed to anyway.

Marie put her rucksack on the back seat and got into the passenger seat. I pressed the Start button to power up the accessories and found my way to the navigation system.

“Groningen,” I said when the system asked my destination.

“Why are we going to Groningen?” asked Marie.

I held up a finger and, encouragingly, she shut up.

“Drive,” I said and the car obligingly indicated and smoothly pulled out after a car had gone past.

“Groningen?” mouthed Marie silently.

I got my phone out and keyed in 'it's to the west and we're going south'. I showed it to her then deleted it. She pointed at the dashboard computer console and raised her eyebrows. I nodded and she sat back with a thoughtful look on her face.

On the western edge of Hamburg I told the car to pull in to a supermarket car park and popped the bonnet to do my usual trick with the onboard computer. That done I hopped back in and took over the controls since the auto-pilot got disabled as well as the navigation and tracking.

“You can talk now,” I said, pulling out of the car park and heading south towards Berlin. “Just don't say where we're going in case there's a secondary system in the car.”

She frowned and nodded but didn't say anything.

* * *

Diana was understandably concerned when I turned up at the checkpoint with another person. He was visibly reluctant to do the recognition exchange but I went through with it anyway. Then he told me to wait while he went away and called someone while keeping a close eye on us.

“It's good luck your friend can drive,” he said when he came back. “It's a long drive from London.”

“Yes,” I said. “But good fortune has always travelled with me.”

He nodded and pursed his lips then, clearly deciding Fortuna was acceptable, he gave me the location of the rendezvous.

At the rendezvous Gollum had clearly been forewarned as she made remarks about both Fortuna and Pegasus and I called Marie 'my precious girl'. She then slipped me the sachet without Marie noticing. I'd been wondering about how to slip the sachet into place with Marie around since knowledge of my hiding places was triple top secret. After all, if I was caught with a delivery I could easily end up with a double mastectomy as they tried to extract the data packets. Without anaesthetic most likely as well. Not a risk to be taken lightly even if they did kill me afterwards. In fact it would be pointless killing me first as they may need to take things further if they didn't find the data. She solved the problem by saying she needed the toilet, not unreasonable since we'd driven 300 or so kilometres without a break.

"So this is what you do normally?" asked Marie as we headed back up north. I was aiming for Lubeck, a little to the east of Hamburg, as I didn't want to go back into the city again. It's only worth pushing your luck when you've got no choice. From Lubeck it was an easy drive to Padborg on the border.

"Yes," I said.

"It seems a bit pointless," she said. "Going all that way to talk nonsense for a couple of minutes."

"Someone has to do it," I said, pleased she hadn't picked up on the transfer.

"Why?" she asked.

"It could be vitally important," I said as a police car blasted its siren behind me. I edged over and slowed down a little and the police car shot off up the road. "OK it wasn't this time but you never know."

"So what do you do if it is important?" she asked.

"We talk nonsense for longer," I said. "It's all codes you see."

“Ahhh,” she said and thought about it. Two kilometres later she remarked that I must have a good memory.

“Actually no,” I said. “A good memory is a disadvantage as someone could fill me with chemicals to empty my mind. What happens is the conversation is recorded then digitally translated into a different code.”

She nodded several times rather slowly as she digested this rubbish. I'd made it up on the spur of the moment as, being who I am, I didn't trust her as much as she trusted me, or claimed to. I slowed down again as the police car, or one just like it, had pulled a van over and the cops were starting to take everything in the back of the van out. Maybe the van was suspected of carrying drugs or smuggling people or exotic animals or maybe the policemen were just bored and looking for freebies. Either way both Marie and I scrutinised them as we drove past as other people's misfortunes are always interesting.

“So where are we going now?” she asked.

“Copenhagen,” I said.

“So you can deliver the recorded conversation?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said.

“So why not just send it by email?” she asked. “It's been encrypted.”

“Because encryption can be broken,” I said.

“But if it's nonsense code phrases what does it matter?” she asked.

“Ahh,” I said, realising she wasn't dumb after all, not that I'd thought she was. “Good question.”

I carried on driving while trying to think of a plausible answer. Nothing immediately came to mind.

“You're not going to tell me, are you?” she said after a while.

"It's safest if you don't know," I said, relieved.

"Because that conversation was about me?" she asked.

"We'll never know," I said. "I just do the deliveries. I don't know what I'm delivering though."

"Hmmm," she said and sat silently for the next hundred kilometres or so.

"Aren't we going to Copenhagen?" she asked when we passed a brightly lit direction sign a few kilometres past Lubeck and I didn't turn off.

"Yes," I said, "but we're going a back way."

"Because it's safer?" she asked.

"Yes," I said.

"Good," she said. "So, what, are we going to drive through the night or something?"

"No," I said. "I'm getting tired and I need some sleep. We'll cross the border then find a hotel or motel for the night."

"Great," she said. "This is kinda fun, isn't it. Like going on an adventure holiday."

"Actually yes, it is," I said. I'd always enjoyed travelling and seeing places and, in all honesty, I never gave any serious thought to being intercepted and killed or worse. It was more a game of cat and mouse and, even though I did take that seriously, nothing particularly unpleasant had happened to rupture the thrill. Even conning my family into thinking I was a stripper and virtual hooker was exciting and I sometimes had happy little daydreams of revealing the truth to them one day and mum and dad saying how they'd never really believed it and how proud they were of me.

"We're coming up to the border," I said, shaking Marie. She'd dozed

off a while back.

“Ohh,” she said, rubbing her eyes. “Which one?”

“Denmark,” I said. “I don't suppose you speak Danish, do you?”

“Sorry, no,” she said and yawned then stretched her arms out in front of her.

“I was just curious,” I said. “Most Danes speak English or German so it's no big deal.”

“Can we stop and get something to drink?” she asked. “My mouth's furry.”

“We'll look for a hotel in Padborg,” I said as a sign saying the border was one kilometre ahead flashed past. A few moments later the 'You Are Now Leaving Germany' sign appeared with the border control building beside it. A little way further on was 'Welcome To Denmark'. Two people came out of the building on the Danish side and one of them stepped into my lane and waved a torch up and down.

“What the hell?” I exclaimed, slowing down.

The torch stopped going up and down and started making jabbing movements to the right, indicating that the person holding the torch wanted me to pull off the road.

“Shit!” I exclaimed and quickly debated whether to pull over or speed past. I decided to pull over as I'd more than likely hit the person with the torch. A nationwide manhunt would not be beneficial whereas there was a good chance this was just a random search. Even if it wasn't we could probably bluff our way through.

I pulled up behind another car, leaving enough room in case we had to make a break for it, then wound down the window. The one with the torch played the light over the front number plate and the other shadowy figure circled round behind. He or she looked to be carrying a rifle of some sort but it was up, not levelled at the car.

The one with the torch came over to the window and shone the torch in my eyes.

“Just a routine passport check,” he said in faultless German and shone the torch on Marie. “Your identity papers please.” Then the torch flicked to check there was no one on the back seat.

“Yes,” I said, trying to get my passport out while unable to see from the afterimage of the torch in my eyes. I felt Marie twist around to get hers from her rucksack. I handed mine to the man and we both waited while Marie found hers. She passed it to me and I handed it over.

“Please get out of your vehicle,” he said, stepping back. “Both of you.”

Chapter Seven

“Elaine Lewisham?” asked the man, looking at my passport. I heard a car door slam but I was focused on him and didn't look around.

“Yes,” I said.

“You are British?” he asked, looking up from my passport.

“Yes,” I said. It's usually a good policy to keep answers to officials short and to the point.

“And you are Marie D'Escala?” he asked, looking at Marie. “French?”

“Yes,” she said as the car parked ahead of us moved away with a crunch of gravel.

He looked down at his computer screen, smaller than my iPad, then looked up at me again.

“Why are a British woman and a French woman driving a German registered car to Denmark without the registered owner?” he asked.

I heard another car pull up behind us and some voices.

“We're going for a holiday in Copenhagen,” I said. “The car is my boyfriend's. He lives in Hamburg.”

I metaphorically crossed my fingers and hoped the owner of the car wasn't particularly old or a woman.

“Why is he not with you?” he asked, looking at Marie again. Maybe he was wondering where her boyfriend was or what the car's owner would be getting up to with two youngish women.

“He is working,” I said. “He will be flying up on Saturday.”

He nodded and studied both our faces again. Then he walked over to discuss this with another man who was talking to a girl who'd got out of the car that had pulled up behind us,

“Go and stand beside the passenger door,” I said quietly to Marie. “I don't like the look of this.”

She nodded and casually ambled around the car. She leaned against it and watched the traffic going past.

Yet another car was directed off the highway and pulled up behind the one behind us. The man our man was talking to looked over at it and said something. I couldn't make out the words but he sounded irritated. A second girl got out of the passenger seat of the one behind us and walked around to stand next to the driver. Our man nodded and walked back.

“You may go,” he said brusquely and thrust our passports at me.

“Thank you,” I said, taking them.

I got back in the car and handed the passports to Marie who'd got in as well.

The officer was still standing there, looking down at me through the open window so I smiled and said “bye bye”. He frowned slightly so I drove off before he changed his mind.

“Shit!” I exclaimed a few hundred metres down the highway. “Shit! Shit! Shit!” I thumped the steering wheel as well.

“What's the matter?” asked Marie.

“They're looking for us,” I said, checking the rear view mirror.

“What?” exclaimed Marie. “Looking for us? How do you know?”

“Did you see who was in the car in front of us?” I asked.

“I think it was two people,” she said. “Why?”

“Men or women?” I asked.

“The driver had long hair and a dress,” she said. “I didn't really see

the other one.”

“I bet she was a woman as well,” I said. I paused, studying the wing mirror as a car rapidly caught up with us from behind. “The one behind us had two women.” It zoomed past, well over the speed limit. I slowed down a little in case it was being chased and we got caught up in it. “I’ll bet they were just pulling over cars with two women inside.”

“How would they know before they pulled us over?” she asked.

“Probably all the border crossings have been alerted,” I said, speeding up again as there was no sign of a police car chasing the speeder. Then I slowed down again when I saw a sign to the centre of Padborg and followed the turn-off.

“No, I meant how would they know there are only two women in the car?” she asked. “We were going quite fast before we got pulled over. How would they have seen? Do you think the car told them?”

“Oh I doubt that very much,” I said. “Most likely there were cameras just before the German border point.” I hadn’t known that and filed it away in my memory as little snippets like that can be very useful.

“Oh,” she said. “But that doesn’t mean that anyone’s looking for us though. Maybe they’re looking for two women criminals or something.”

“Yeah good point,” I said a little sarcastically. “We’ll just assume that and carry on until we get arrested. Thank God the car hasn’t been reported stolen yet.”

“Can’t we just carry on anyway?” she asked. “They said we could go so they obviously didn’t know our names.”

“They’re stopping cars with two women,” I said. “This car will be reported stolen sooner or later and their computers will show it was recorded at the Danish border being driven by two women. That means they’ll get our names, photos and biometrics and that we’re probably heading for Copenhagen.”

“Why did you tell them that?” she asked. “I did wonder.”

“Because I'm stupid,” I said. “I don't know Denmark well and Copenhagen was the only place I could think of where tourists would go.”

“What about the fjords?” she asked. “We could be heading for the fjords for a holiday.”

“They're in Norway,” I said, “not Denmark, and we're on the wrong route if we're heading for Norway. We've got to get another car and some different clothes.”

Actually we were going to need different passports as well but that would have to wait. More importantly it was now after midnight and Padborg was a smallish place. No shops were open and the few car parks I'd seen were more or less deserted. I saw a sign to the station and followed it. There might be some cars waiting for overnight travellers.

“I wonder who is looking for us,” remarked Marie, looking out of the window.

“That's what I'd like to know,” I said, spotting the station. It was dark and deserted but there were four cars in the car park. I slowed down to a fast crawl and went in. None of the cars were Chinese but there was an old petrol engined Saab that would do. I parked beside it and told Marie to get her rucksack while I broke in and hot-wired it. I spotted another suitable car heading out of town so we swapped it for the Saab.

“How many more are you going to take?” asked Marie as we drove off in the Renault.

“As many as I can,” I said, heading back out to the highway.

“Why?” she asked. “Oh, look! There's a hotel!”

“We can't stay in a hotel tonight,” I said. “The risk is too high since we'll have to show our passports.”

“Oh, so where are we going to sleep?” she asked, looking anxiously at me.

“In the car,” I said. “And to answer your other question the more cars I take the muddier the trail will be, plus I don't want a petrol or electric car. I want to find a thermopile car.”

“Why?” she asked.

“So we don't have to stop for fuel or to recharge,” I said. “Petrol stations and charging outlets have surveillance.”

“But don't thermopile cars need to refuel?” she asked.

“No, that's the whole point,” I said, spotting a new model Seng Yong on someone's driveway. “They have tiny nuclear fuel cells that last longer than the car. You stay here.”

I pulled over three houses down from the Seng Yong and got out. Leaving the door slightly ajar I listened carefully. Apart from the distant sound of traffic on the motorway it was silent and there were no lights on except for a house some way further on. There were no people walking their dogs either.

I slipped off my shoes which had low heels on them that made faint clicks as I walked despite their rubber tips. I opened the car door again and got my iPad out of my bag and put the shoes in. Marie was watching me with a mildly confused look on her face.

“Stay here until I come back,” I whispered. She nodded.

I backed out of the car and pushed the door almost shut then looked around again. All was quiet. There were street lights but the one nearest the Seng Yong was obscured by a large tree beside the driveway and most of the car was in shadow. I walked over, trying to be silent but look like someone out for a late night walk. I marched past the back of the car into the shadows then quickly zipped up the side. Sadly the owner had locked the car so I had to use my iPad. On the other hand, they hadn't installed a secondary alarm system so no raucous squawks split the night air. I slipped in the driver's seat then

hesitated. There was no one around and no signs of life. No dogs barking, no TV sounds, nothing. I popped the bonnet and got back out to disable the onboard computer rather than leave it until later. The car's last known location, parked outside the owner's house, would give no clues as to where it went next.

Very gently I shut the bonnet and sat on it to lock it in place as quietly as possible. Back inside I slipped it into reverse and gave it a little power. It rolled back with just the faintest of whirrs. I pulled up in front of the Renault and hurried back to Marie. She had her rucksack and my bag on her knees and opened the door as I approached. I grabbed it in case she was going to slam it shut but she didn't. She just scurried over and got in the Seng Yong. I was too late to stop her slamming that door and the echo seemed to roll off the houses and rebound back at me.

"Oh shit," I muttered and jumped in the driver's seat and slammed the door shut myself before speeding off.

"So this has got a nuclear reactor in it, has it?" asked Marie, peering round. "Where?"

"I don't think it's a full-on reactor," I said, "just a fuel cell although I don't really understand how these things work. They've only been around three years or so but they're starting to get quite popular."

"I've never had a car," said Marie, trying to look under the dashboard, "although I can drive. I haven't even heard of thermopile whatsits. What about radioactivity?"

"They'll be well insulated," I said, taking a left turn to get back onto the motorway. "I think the cell is in the back somewhere. It usually is."

"Oh," she said, twisting to look in the back.

"Calm down," I said. "Radiation poisoning's the least of our worries right now."

* * *

Something woke me with a start. I sat there for a moment, disorientated, then remembered we were in the car among a copse of trees a few hundred metres from the motorway. Then I realised Marie was crying which was a nuisance.

“Sorry,” she muttered when she realised I was awake.

“What's the matter?” I asked, keeping my voice down.

“Nothing,” she said and sniffed noisily.

I couldn't hear or see anything, other than Marie and a few headlights on the motorway in the distance, but I was reluctant to turn the interior lights on. I could see her profile in the pale light of the moon though. Her head hung low and she looked to be wiping her eyes. I needed her back on-line as quickly as possible so I decided to take the sympathetic approach.

“You can tell me,” I said softly, feeling with my hand for her hand. I snagged the pocket of her hoodie which confused me for a moment but I got free and touched her hand. Her arm tensed for a moment then her hand stole into mine.

“It's nothing,” she muttered and sniffed again, a long dragging sniff which suggested she'd been crying for a while.

“There's nothing to cry about,” I whispered and leaned back so I could get my other arm around her shoulders. Her back went rigid for a moment then she twisted around to almost face me.

“What is it?” I asked, gently pulling her closer. How people made love in the front seats of cars I'll never know. There just isn't the room, not even in this car which was a decent size, and there are gadgets everywhere.

She resisted for a moment or two then she started crying again and buried her head on my shoulder.

“I'm so scared,” she whispered, “so scared, so scared.”

“There's nothing to be scared of,” I whispered, stroking her back as best I could. My other hand was bent awkwardly back as she was still holding it and it was beginning to hurt. There was also the danger of my nails cutting her palm. I worked my hand free and started to stroke her head.

“There, there,” I whispered, “everything's going to be just fine, you'll see. You have a good cry and let it all out. Elaine will look after you, you'll see.”

“I wish ... I wish ...,” she started then her tears began to flow freely. I kept stroking her back and her hair as best I could although my stomach muscles were beginning to cramp from the awkward twisting. I shifted my knees round so they were jammed up against the centre console which helped a little. Then a cramp started in my calf. I gritted my teeth and continued to hold her until her crying began to ease.

“Are you feeling a little better?” I asked. I felt her nod then she sat up, her elbow digging painfully into my shoulder.

“Sorry,” she said in a little voice.

“That's all right,” I said, twisting my body back into a more normal shape. The pain in my waist started to ease and I rubbed my calf. “No harm done.” I was tempted to get out and walk around for a bit just to check no harm had been done but I resisted the urge.

Marie fumbled through her pockets then blew her nose on the sleeve of her hoodie.

“That was so not cool,” she muttered. “Sorry.”

“Do you want to talk about it?” I asked.

“I can't,” she said and twisted her head to look at me. “I was told not to tell anyone anything.”

“By Callisto?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said quietly. “And the others.”

“What others?” I asked. If they were all in the Department then OK but maybe one or two weren’t.

She shook her head.

“That’s OK,” I said, patting her arm. “I only need to know what I need to know.”

“I want to tell you,” she said, reaching for my hand again. “I really do.”

“It’s all good,” I said. “You can tell me when it’s safe to tell me.”

“But will I ever be safe?” she asked.

“Of course you will,” I said. “I’ll make sure of that.”

“I know you will, Elaine,” she said, squeezing my hand. “You’re a good person. It’s just that since I, well, since it started I’ve been moved from person to person and everyone keeps telling me I’ll be safe but no one tells me anything and I’ve no one to talk to and I just feel scared all the time and I wish I’d never started and nothing’s like what I expected it to be and it’s all horrible and scary and I don’t know what to do. I can’t even use my real name anymore.”

Well, that was a positive at least. At some point someone had given her a new identity which made things a little easier. The rest was a bit of a worry. Since what started? Why had she been moved from person to person? Who or what was making her scared? A lot of questions and no answers.

“Well, that’s the way it goes,” I said, deciding it was time to be matter of fact again. “That’s the nature of this business.”

“Your business,” she said. “You’re part of it and you know what you’re doing. I’m not and I haven’t got a clue.”

Interesting. So she was an outsider was she?

“So is there anything you can tell me?” I asked. “Anything at all that might help me keep you safe?”

She shook her head.

“Not even who might be trying to find us?” I asked. “That would help as different groups have different methods. Are the police after you?”

That would help explain why the border control people had stopped us, although there was no guarantee they had been border control people; with an official looking uniform and a strong nerve you could be anyone you wanted to be. Plus I'd never seen or heard of border control at the Danish-German border being manned before.

“Not the police,” she said and wiped her eyes again. “I'm not a criminal. At least I don't think so.”

That was interesting too. If she'd killed someone or was involved in drug smuggling she'd know she was a criminal. That suggested it might be political, especially as the Department wouldn't get involved with a day-to-day crook. And, if it was political then very possibly one of the other Power Blocks might be looking for her. That could explain Manuel's appearance as well since this, whatever it was, was bound to have started before I arrived on the scene.

That's not to say another government department wasn't looking for us as inter-departmental rivalries happen every now and then but I probably wouldn't have got involved if it was inter-departmental. I was too specialised for that. Still, there was little point in pushing her. I'd find out what I needed to know when I needed to know it. It was enough for the moment that whoever was looking for us was working for another Block which meant fairly unlimited resources but at the same time heavy restrictions. Agents from another Block had to be careful when working inside Europa, just as I had to be much more careful on the odd occasions I worked outside Europa.

“Have you slept?” I asked.

“A little,” she said. “Then I woke up scared.”

“Yeah, that happens to me sometimes, too,” I said. “Do you think you’ll be able to get back to sleep?”

She shrugged.

“Right then,” I said. “No point sitting here frightening ourselves. May as well be proactive. Let’s head off for Copenhagen. Then we can see about getting some more clothes and food and come up with a plan.”

And maybe Callisto will have decided what I was to do with Marie, which would help. And there was that delivery to make in Copenhagen. I hadn’t forgotten about it.

Chapter Eight

We stopped for breakfast in a nice little café in the outer suburbs of Copenhagen. Most of the on-the-way-to-work crowd had already got their breakfasts and take-away coffees and had departed leaving us more or less alone and sitting on a comfy couch in a back corner. Marie was slumped against the arm rest with her eyes closed and I was sitting beside her with my feet on another seat cradling yet another black coffee. Neither of us had slept much that night, having decided to press on to Copenhagen. I'd had virtually no sleep the night before either, in the train from Antwerp. Still, I had jobs to do and decisions to make and sleep would have to wait.

The first decision was also the easiest. I had to deliver the sachet to Cyclops, that was a given, but should I report the stoppage at the border and my suspicion that they may not have been genuine border control officials? After all, when I thought about it on the drive, the man hadn't asked me who the owner of the car was. I'd said he was my boyfriend but I didn't have a clue what his name was so I'd been relieved when he didn't ask. On reflection though that suggested the man hadn't actually accessed the registration database. I'd given a plausible explanation and he couldn't admit he didn't know the owner's name either.

Technically I should report it but it wasn't, as far as I could see, related to the delivery to Cyclops. There was no obvious reason why pairs of women in cars were being stopped when the delivery was being made by me. This meant the potential interception wasn't strictly within Cyclops' domain. The two women aspect strongly suggested the stoppage was related to Marie and that was in Callisto's domain. The trouble was, I wouldn't be reporting back face to face with Callisto which meant a tedious time setting up a secure phone link with her via my dancing agent.

The stopping of pairs of women also suggested a leak somewhere in the system so my reporting of the stoppage would confirm, if it got back to the source of the leak, that I was involved and travelling with Marie. What was confusing the issue was that the people at the border didn't know who to stop, only that two women were travelling together. If it was a full blown leak then they'd know about my

involvement and would have both Marie and my names and descriptions. Something here didn't add up right and I was reluctant to report the incident to anyone until I had a better idea of what was going on. It didn't help that I found Callisto a little intimidating and I didn't want her thinking I was falling down on the job. Decision made ~ don't report it.

The second decision was more difficult. Again it related to the stoppage. Those people now had mine and Marie's passport details. OK, if they were genuine border control people that wasn't too big an issue but if they weren't they now had our details. Both instinct and training said I should get new passports in different names but therein lay problems. The normal procedure was to go through the Department but that would take at least two days and another courier would be needed to get the documents out to us. And, if there was a leak within the Department then the leaker would know our new identities soon enough, perhaps even before we did. That meant I had to get new passports myself and bypass the Department. Not the correct protocol but needs must. One problem was that I didn't know Copenhagen well enough to have contacts in the underworld. I knew where to go but not who to look for when I got there.

Intimately related was the technicalities of getting new passports. Each passport has a hologram of the person and a chip containing some biometric information. Now, it's fairly straightforward for someone with the skills to shift the hologram and biochip from one passport to another – and we could use the ones in the passports we currently had. The difficulty lay in getting hold of passports to insert them into. OK, it would be easy enough to hang around the airport and steal a couple of passports to use and they would be good enough for registering at hotels and minor security checks. But, and this was a big but, they couldn't be used to catch a flight anywhere or at a serious security check as the stolen passports would have been reported stolen and that fact would flash up instantly.

I didn't know how much travelling we still had to do, perhaps Marie's delivery point was Copenhagen or somewhere we could get to by car or train but it might not be. Time and distance may force us into having to take a plane and it wasn't impossible that I might have to deliver her to somewhere in another Block. And, to add another tiny

little twist, once Marie was delivered I'd have to get myself back to the UK. The internal border crossings within Europa were usually not manned and security was lax but the Brits still insisted on full security checks for incoming visitors. Going back on a stolen and modified passport would cause a few problems and would require the Department to get involved which they never liked doing. It wasn't impossible either that I might have to get Marie into Britain as well. I did know how to get into England without going through security but that would mean stealing a boat in France and I wasn't a good sailor. Still, it could be done.

So, as a minimum I had to find someone who could transfer the holograms and chips and, ideally, someone who had a store of new passport blanks to put them into *and* who had the skills, or knew someone who did, to insert the new passport details into the relevant national database so they seemed genuine and weren't marked as stolen. There were people with such skills but finding them could be a chore.

The biggest difficulty was Marie herself. In fact she was the biggest problem of all. It didn't bother me in the slightest to go wandering through the underbelly of Copenhagen asking the sort of questions that the people who knew the answers didn't want to answer but what to do with Marie while I was doing it? I couldn't leave her in a hotel room until we had the new passports and were able to get hotel rooms. I couldn't leave her in the car as a) in the areas I'd be going to someone sitting alone in a car would be suspicious and she might have disappeared by the time I got back; and b) whoever was looking for her just might spot her anyway. I considered finding an empty house and leaving her there for a while but the owner might turn up or a neighbour report a break-in to the police. Leaving her in a café or pub was also fraught as I could be a while and the café or pub could close and throw her out. Also, since she was an attractive girl on her own, someone might try to pick her up which could lead her to panic and God knows what would happen then. It was a quandary.

What was also preying on my mind was that Callisto had said I should find out when and where to deliver Marie in 'a day or two'. It had already been twenty four hours without a peep from Callisto so, assuming two days was the limit I should hear soon. Maybe it would

just be better to make the delivery to Cyclops then disappear into the woods for a day, hoping the delivery of Marie would be nearby and soon. On the face of it it was quite a desirable solution, but that too had difficulties. The odds were that I wouldn't be delivering her to Copenhagen and the longer I left it before sourcing new identities the more likely our current identities would be established. Sooner or later someone would link the report of a stolen car with the car stopped at the border with two women in and the connection made. And, of course, it may take longer for the decision to be made and for Callisto to contact me. Hell, it was even possible she was taking a few days off sick and I wouldn't know for some time. Hopefully someone else would tell me but that in turn would raise the question of whether or not I could trust them and that it wasn't a trap.

I'd been thinking about all this for most of the time I'd been driving and, with the delivery time for Cyclops only an hour and a half away, it was crunch time.

"Come on," I said, tapping Marie's shoulder. "Time to go."

She looked at me blearily and yawned.

"Where are we going?" she asked, pushing herself upright. She looked at the cold coffee that remained in her mug and wrinkled her nose.

"Shopping," I said. "We need more clothes."

I'd been wearing mine since before Liverpool and they were barely presentable. Marie's casual outfit of hoodie and jeans was better but only just. Also, as I'd noticed when we went into the café and hadn't mentioned, there was a jagged slit in the back of her hoodie. One of my fingernails must have snagged the material when I was stroking her back. Aside from both of us looking disreputable we needed to change our appearances. Which reminded me ...

"Give me your earrings," I said, holding out my hand.

"Why?" she asked, giving me a puzzled look.

"They're easily identifiable," I said. "We need to get rid of them."

“But my dad gave them to me,” she said, fingering one protectively.

I sighed. Sentimentality has its place but it can also get you killed.

“OK,” I said, picking up one of the paper napkins. “I’ll wrap them and put them in my bag.”

Reluctantly she handed them over and I put them away.

“And let your hair down,” I said. “It’ll change the shape of your face. We’ll get some clips and other makeup later so we can do more but it’ll be a start.”

She pulled a face but acquiesced. With the elastic band gone her hair fell below her shoulders and, once arranged around her face, made quite a difference. Hair dye and a restyle would have been better but it would do for now.

We left the café and walked to a shopping mall further down the road. That had been one of the reasons I’d chosen that café since there would be plenty more cars in the mall car park. The other reason was that the checkpoint for Cyclops’ delivery was barely half a kilometre away, the other side of the mall. I stopped beside a garbage bin and made Marie throw away all her clothes in her rucksack, other than her underwear. Who knows who’d seen her in those clothes before she joined me?

We went in the first clothing shop that wasn’t excessively trendy and I got her to choose a smart but fairly casual business suit and some low heel shoes to match. I chose business trouser suit, but with medium high shoes with narrow heels, so we looked like office colleagues. I hung on to her hoodie, t-shirt, jeans and trainers as she’d need them later, and put them in her rucksack. I made her throw away her socks though, a rather garish green pair emblazoned with avocados and the words ‘totally smashed’ in English, as they were too easily identifiable and were a bit smelly.

“Perfect,” I said, studying her when she came out of the changing room. “I wouldn’t recognise you.”

“Thanks,” she said, checking herself in the mirror. “Do you like this song?”

I'd been dimly aware of piped music playing in the background but hadn't registered that it had changed.

“It's OK, I guess,” I said, not really focusing on it.

I listened for a few moments. Actually it was typical of the rather mawkish ballady songs that had become popular in the last couple of years. Hollywood had started making remakes of remakes of profitable movies fifteen or twenty years before and, even though Hollywood was now on its last legs and no longer a force to be reckoned with, the music industry had abandoned any pretence at creativity and was just re-releasing old pop songs. This song, about a sailor whose true loves were the sea and the ship he sailed in and probably not the girl who waited for him, was easy listening but I didn't relate to it as the only thing that waited for me after my voyage was the prospect of a dinner date with a recent divorcee with baggage whose name escaped me for the moment. Maybe I wouldn't bother going back to England.

“It's Lolita's Seemann,” said Marie, her head cocked as she listened. “Did you know this was the first German language song to enter the US Billboard Top 40? Back in the 1960s?”

“How on Earth would you know that?” I asked in surprise. Actually I was more surprised that any foreign language song had ever entered the US music charts but that was by the by.

“Oh I heard it on the radio somewhere,” she said vaguely, smoothing her skirt. “You think these shoes are all right?”

“They're fine,” I said, dismissing the music. “Are the shoes comfortable though? We've got a bit of walking to do.”

“Yes,” she said. “They don't pinch.”

I paid and we walked to the checkpoint. Vesta, who did our identity check conversation, did little more than glance at Marie and comment

that her outfit must have cost a fortune, had clearly been forewarned that Fortuna was with Pegasus which bothered me a little. It wasn't unreasonable but on reflection I wondered if maybe I should have kept her in her jeans and hoodie until after the meetings. Cyclops also knew of Fortuna but insisted she stayed in the corridor while I made the delivery. That made me a little nervous as it could have been a set-up but I in turn insisted the door stayed open so I could see her at all times and she wasn't snatched. Cyclops wasn't best pleased but if she made any sort of complaint I had my instructions to fall back on.

Back at the mall we went to another café to have some lunch and more coffee.

“OK,” I said quietly, after our food had arrived. “This is the plan for this afternoon.”

“We have a plan?” she asked.

“We always have a plan,” I said. “It may not look like it but there's always a plan.”

“OK,” she said, looking serious. “So what's the plan?”

“We need to get some new passports,” I said. “Our current ones are too much of a risk now. That means I have to find someone to help us.”

“Won't the people you work for help us?” she asked, quite sensibly.

“There isn't time,” I said, not wanting to give her all my reasons. “Anyway, when we're done here we're going to go into the Nørrebro district which is a pretty rough part of town.”

I didn't think it necessary to tell her than even the police only went there in groups or that the headquarters of the Copenhagen Hell's Angels had been there until the police, armed and in large numbers, evicted them a few years ago.

“OK,” she said. “Umm, how rough?”

“Very rough,” I said. “It's where most of the crooks and nasties in Copenhagen hang out.”

“Oh,” she said, pursing her lips. “Is it safe?”

“That's why I'm telling you in advance,” I said. “No, it isn't safe but I have to find someone who'll get us new passports. The thing is I can't leave you anywhere while I do that so I'm going to have to take you with me.”

She just looked at me, her burger forgotten on her plate.

“There shouldn't be any trouble,” I said. “We're going after we finish here and it's only in the evenings that the crazies come out. First things first, I want you to change back into your jeans and hoodie. That's so you won't stand out. OK, you won't fit in as you won't be recognised but not standing out is important. You shouldn't attract too much attention.”

“And if I do?” she asked.

“Stay close to me,” I said, “and if anything happens to me, get the hell out and call this number and tell them Pegasus is down.” I showed her the number of my dancing agent in London in my Contacts list but she didn't even look at it.

“What do you mean, Pegasus is down?” she asked, her eyebrows furrowing intently.

“It means I'm out of action and you're on your own,” I said. “They'll get someone out to you very quickly.”

“Oh,” she said, starting to look scared. I waggled my phone and slowly she got her phone out and added the number to her contacts.

“What's the International Adult Dance Agency?” she asked.

“My cover,” I said. “Don't worry about it. What's important is you call them and they'll come to get you.”

“You're an adult dancer?” she asked. “Like a stripper or something?”

“Well I'm certainly not a child,” I said. “Don't get distracted.”

“But you think there'll be trouble?” she asked, putting her phone beside her plate.

“No, I don't think there'll be trouble,” I said, mentally crossing my fingers. “This is just a precaution.”

“Ohh,” she said. She thought about it and her scared expression slowly gave way to one of general anxiety.

“What are you going to wear?” she asked. “You threw away your other clothes. Won't you stand out?”

“I need to stand out,” I said. “I need to attract attention. In fact, with a bit of luck I'll attract all the attention and hopefully you, just another chick in a hoodie, won't be noticed.”

“I wish I was more like you,” she said, fiddling with a teaspoon. “You must have nerves of ice. You never get scared, do you?”

I had to laugh.

“Of course I get scared,” I said. “Being scared is important as it gives you focus. What I don't do is panic. Being scared is good, panicking is bad. Panicking is for amateurs and I'm a professional. I've been trained to suppress panic. OK that doesn't mean I always know what to do in any given situation but it does mean I consider all my options and don't do something stupid. Finish your burger.”

Chapter Nine

“What do you need all that for?” asked Marie as we left the bank. I'd got 20,000 euros in cash out, all in 2,000 euro notes.

“I need some cash to flash around,” I said, folding the notes and putting them in the breast pocket of my jacket. Phones were a convenient way to pay for things but they didn't attract avaricious eyes the way crisp high denomination notes did. Gold would have been better but you can't pay your bar bill in gold. The bar tenders don't like it.

“Why?” she asked.

“So people know I'm there for a reason,” I said. “We don't have time to network.”

Being early afternoon in a city there was, as is always the case in real life and never the case in a movie, nowhere to park. We cruised round the Nørrebro district probably three times before I spotted someone leaving and slid deftly into the spot. From where we were I could see two bars and there was another just around the corner. There were others as well but they were a little further away.

“Right,” I said, slipping off my shoes. “Remember what I said. When we go in, make for one end of the bar and stay there. Order something if you want but don't drink anything alcoholic. We'll probably end up going to several bars and you can't afford to get drunk. And don't talk to anyone. Just ignore them if they talk to you.”

“I remember,” she said and watched me unscrewing the tips of the heels for a moment. “What are you doing to your shoes?”

I'd bought an expensive pair which had screw-on rubber tips to the heels rather than cheap glued on ones. That way I could put the tips back on later.

“Getting them ready in case I need to step on any toes,” I said.

“Won't that hurt without the rubber?” she asked.

“Absolutely,” I said and grinned. I slipped the tips in my side pocket. “Ready?”

“I guess,” she said and got out of the car. I got out too and teetered for a few moments. I wasn't that used to narrow heels and the missing tips meant the shoes tipped backwards slightly. I walked up the pavement a few paces then walked back to get used to the feel.

“All good,” I said as Marie watched.

I paid for six hours parking in advance. I had no idea how long we were going to be and I didn't want the car clamped or towed away because the time had run out. Six hours should give us time to visit every bar in the district although I hoped we wouldn't have to.

“We'll try that one first,” I said, pointing to the nearer of the two bars in sight. “Put your hood up.”

I marched into the bar as though I owned the place then stood there looking around. It was fairly narrow but went back some way. There were tables on one side, opposite the bar itself, and maybe two thirds of them were occupied. Mostly by couples, two men or a man and woman, but one had four people and two had only one person. They all looked up as I stood there. Ten seconds later Marie sidled in, took a quick look around and scuttled furtively to the far end of the bar. No one seemed to take any notice of her. The place had a mildly disreputable atmosphere and she fitted in rather well.

I glanced at her but otherwise ignored her and walked briskly over to the bar. The barman also ignored Marie as I was the better looking prospect and said something in Danish.

“Diet coke,” I said, rather loudly, and casually dropped one of the 2,000 euro notes on the bar. He picked it up and scowled since a coke was probably only 20 or 25 euros and he'd use up most of the change in his till. I turned my back on him and glanced around the room again before sitting down on one of the bar stools.

My entrance had certainly worked. Virtually all of the customers were now looking at me although the eyes of most slid away as mine passed

over them. I wondered what they were thinking ... rich bitch or prospective client? Hopefully the latter.

It wasn't to be. Ten minutes later I was still sitting there, my diet coke slowly warming up. Despite the pile of notes and coins the barman had managed to scrape together still sitting on the bar where he'd dumped them no one had come over. I was still getting glances but my gut told me they weren't of any real significance. Still, it was asking too much of the universe to let me get lucky at the first attempt.

Marie was watching me from the far end, hunched over a beer although I was pleased to see she hadn't drunk any. She'd raised the glass to her lips several times but the level in the glass hadn't dropped. I tossed my hair back, the prearranged signal, took a sip of the coke and scooped up the notes, leaving the coins on the bar. I stuffed them casually into my pocket and left. Fifteen seconds later Marie sidled out.

I didn't say anything, just walked the hundred metres or so to the other bar in the street, Marie walking behind but not too close. This place was also long and narrow and had cheap linoleum on the floor which felt sticky. It too had tables along one side and the bar on the other side. The barman even looked like the other barman's brother, a little older and with a pot belly.

Again I stood there for a few moments while Marie came in and took up her position. As I stepped over to the bar the door opened again and a man walked in. I sensed rather than saw that he took no notice of me and a quick glance saw him slip into one of the empty tables near the entrance. Again I ordered a diet coke and slapped a 2,000 euro note on the counter. Again the barman scowled. Again I sat on a bar stool and looked casually around the room. It was all much the same as the previous place but the man who'd come in just after us was studiously looking out of the window. I twisted round as the barman dumped my drink and change on the counter then looked at the man from under lowered eyelids while I took a sip.

Bingo! He'd been in the other bar. He was of average looks and build although his hair was over long. He was probably in his early 40s and

looked a little old for his jeans and brown leather jacket. I sat there, fiddling with my packet of cigarettes although I didn't light one as smoking isn't permitted in Danish bars and I didn't want to be asked to leave. Irritatingly he took no notice of me whatsoever and, after twenty minutes, I decided he must have just got bored with the other bar and come to this one for a change. These things do happen.

Irritated, I tossed my hair back and picked up the notes on the bar and left. Marie followed me out.

"There's another round the corner," I said and marched off, Marie tagging along. As we went round the corner I looked back and brown jacket man was just coming out of the bar. I instantly stopped walking and lifted my leg so I could check my heel. It was fine but I wanted to give him time to see where I was going. Sensibly Marie kept walking. I gave the shoe a wipe with my hand then went around the corner. This street ran alongside some sort of canal and there were a few motorcycles parked on the canal side opposite the bar. One of them had been customised with long front forks and high handlebars but the others looked like normal large bikes.

This time Marie went in first as I was a couple of paces behind her. The room was larger than the other two and the bar stuck out into the centre so the tables and seating were in a U shape and gave the bar two sides to serve from. There was also an annex on one side, presumably the building next door, which had a couple of pool tables and several men in ratty leather jackets and chains were playing. There weren't as many people in this bar though and Marie chose to go to the end of the bar nearest the pool room. Again I ordered a diet coke and slapped a 2,000 euro note on the counter.

Intriguingly the man in the brown leather jacket came in. He looked around, went over to the pool room and peered in then walked over to the bar and sat down with two bar stools between us. Marie was several stools beyond him with another man sitting between them, drinking shots, and looking very morose. Brown jacket man ordered a beer while I made use of a small mirror in my bag to preen myself. This gave me the opportunity to look at the other patrons as I fiddled with my hair.

“Blah di dah den blick,” said the brown jacket man, leaning towards me. It could have been Danish but it could just as easily have been Martian.

“I'm sorry?” I said in English, looking at him.

“Ohh you are English?” he said, getting up and walking to the stool next to me.

“Yes,” I said. It seemed a fairly uncontentious reply while I waited to see what he said next. After all, it could be that he just fancied me. I noticed someone walk up to the bar past the man drinking shots but I was focused on brown jacket man.

“So what's a nice girl like you doing in a dive like this?” he asked, smiling. Yes, he really did say 'dive'.

“Trying to get out,” I said and took a sip of coke.

He stiffened ever so slightly and a wariness came into his face.

“So, you don't like it here?” he said, raising an eyebrow.

“I'd rather be home,” I said. “In England.”

“So why do you not go home?” he asked. “You are stuck here?”

“Yes,” I said, sensing he was the one. “Passport problems, you know how it is.”

“Yes indeedie,” he said. “So why you not go to the English Embassy?”

“I can't,” I said. “They don't like me.”

“How could anyone not like such a beautiful woman as you,” he said and leered a little.

“Bugger,” I thought. “He's just another perve. Shit.”

I grimace and turned back to my drink. I sensed him about to say

something else when I heard Marie's voice distinctly say, in German, "get your fucking hands off me!"

I jerked around just in time to see her throw her drink in a man's face. He didn't like it and backhanded her across the face, knocking her hoodie hood back. I jumped off my stool and ran over to grab the man's arm as he pulled it back to hit her again. He snarled as he lunged round to hit me and I grabbed him by the throat, my exquisitely sharp nails sinking into his flesh a good half centimetre. It was a bit like squeezing cream cheese, except for the several days of rough stubble and his bad breath.

"Leave her alone," I snapped, also in German. "She's mine."

He grimaced then tried to head butt me, his greasy shaggy hair flopping around his face. I leaned backwards and grabbed his crotch with my other hand. I could feel the material of his dirty jeans giving way as my nails sliced through.

"Don't even think about it," I snarled, "or I'll slice your balls off." He froze.

I sensed someone behind me and shifted round slightly so I was ready to lash out with a heel and not lose balance if I had to.

"That's better," I said and quickly glanced behind me. It was one of his pool playing buddies, holding a pool cue. Unfortunately he wasn't holding it as though he was about to play. He was gripping the thin end with both hands and was about to swing it at my head so I lashed out with a foot and stabbed him in the thigh with the heel. He dropped the cue, which Marie caught, and bent over, clutching his leg and swearing. To add insult to injury, Marie smashed the cue over his head and he collapsed on the floor. The cue broke.

I hadn't let go of the first man, however, and my movements had caused blood to start trickling from his throat from the five punctures amongst all his tattoos. I tightened my grip a fraction and he started to wheeze and grip my forearm. I could hear some laughing but ignored it as it was probably my imagination playing tricks in the heat of the moment. The biggest problem facing me was how to end this

without killing the guy.

“Put him down,” said a gravelly voice.

I glanced at the speaker and Marie raised the broken half of the cue.

“Says who?” I asked.

“Sven Magnussen,” he said, fairly mildly given the circumstances. “President of the Copenhagen Bullshitters.”

I twisted to look at him more closely and saw he was amused rather than angry. He was also wearing much the same filthy jeans and leather jacket with chains as his buddy although his hair was blonde and close cropped.

“This ends now?” I asked.

“This ends now,” he agreed so I let go and his buddy collapsed on the floor clutching his neck. Interestingly all three were wearing heavy motorcycle boots so if I'd stepped on their toes with my heels not a lot would have happened.

“Better get them to a hospital,” I said, waving at the two on the floor.

“They're just idiots,” he said and suddenly raised his arm. I lurched backwards but he only clicked his fingers and pointed at the two. A couple more appeared from the pool room and dragged them away.

“Don't come back,” he said in a casually menacing way. “I may not be so generous next time.” He glanced at Marie then turned and went back to the pool room.

I watched him go then looked at Marie.

“What happened?” I asked.

“He just came over and grabbed my boobs,” she said. “I tried to ignore him but I wasn't having that.”

“Understandable,” I said and sighed. “Well, I suppose we'd better go. I don't think Sven's going to put up with us much longer.”

I turned around and the man who'd been drinking shots was gone. He'd probably legged it the moment trouble started. Interestingly the man in the brown leather jacket was still sitting there, watching us.

“Buy you both a beer?” he asked as I tossed 300 euros onto the counter.

“That's for the cue,” I said to the barman then “No, we're leaving,” to the man. I headed for the door.

“Was it something I said?” he asked, holding his hands out in mock surprise. He got off the stool and stood beside me as I held the door open for Marie.

“You want passports?” he whispered.

I blinked then called Marie back.

“We're going to have a drink with this nice man,” I said.

“But not here,” he said. “Sven and the boys can get a bit touchy.”

“Where then?” I asked.

“Maybe you prefer coffee?” he asked and nodded at Marie. “She never drinks her beers.”

“Coffee would be nice,” I said, glancing out the door in case more bikers were arriving.

“There is a café further along,” he said. “My name is Lars.”

“I'm Angie,” I said, “and this is Betty.”

“Nice,” he said. “Come with me.”

We followed him up the street to a café which had quite a few

customers although none were sitting at either of the two tables beside the canal. Lars motioned for us to sit at one of them and went inside to order.

“That was a bit out of character,” I said in English, sitting down.

“What do you mean?” asked Marie, sitting with her back to the water.

“You were scared to death last night,” I said, “then got involved in a bar fight. Doesn't quite fit the image I've built up of you. Nice little French girl caught up in things beyond her control.”

“That's what scares me,” she said, watching a car go past. “All this cloak and dagger stuff really freaks me out but guys in bars I'm used to.”

“They weren't your ordinary guys in bars,” I said.

“I've been to bars like this in Paris,” she said. “That wasn't the first pool cue I've broken.”

“Well, well, well,” I said, nodding my approval. “I'm impressed. You have hidden depths, I see.”

She just smiled and nodded her head towards Lars who'd just walked out of the café with three take-away cups in his hands.

“Oh, and don't drink the coffee either,” I muttered. “He may have slipped something in them.”

Marie gave me an indecipherable look then stood up so Lars could sit in her chair, next to me. She pulled one from the other table over and sat watching us both.

“There,” said Lars, putting a mug in front of me and another in front of Marie. He glanced around then lit a cigarette before dropping his voice. “So you are wanting the passports, yes?”

“Yes,” I said, matching his quietness. “Two.”

“For you and for the little ragamuffin, eh?” he asked and laughed. “Cigarette?”

“No thanks,” I said. “We don’t smoke.”

“But they’re yours,” he said frowning. “I took them off the bar when you went to play with Benny.”

“Which one was Benny?” I asked, deciding to take one after all. It was unlikely he’d been able to adulterate them in the time although I rejected the one offered and took another. He nodded to acknowledge I knew the game.

“The one with the sore throat,” he said. “I may be able to help you. What exactly is it you want?”

Chapter Ten

I casually glanced around and flicked the ash from my cigarette on the ground.

“Two passport blanks,” I said, not looking at him, “the holograms and biochips transferred from others, the names and ID numbers on the chips edited and the national database updated.”

He whistled softly and leaned back.

“The blanks I can do,” he said, “and the chip and the hologram are easy. I can do those myself. The databases are more difficult.”

I just sat there watching the people at the tables on the other side of the road. Marie pulled her hoodie a little more tightly around her face.

“But I might know someone,” said Lars. “It’ll cost though.”

“How much?” I asked, still not looking at him.

“What nationality blanks?” he asked. “I know where I can get some Danish ones and maybe a couple of Swedish but if you want German or English or anything else that will take time.”

“Danish will be good,” I said since it didn't actually matter and time was of the essence.

“Okie cokies,” he said. “I can have them for you in, oh, two maybe three days.”

“Today,” I said firmly and turned to look him in the eye. “Today or not at all.”

He blew out his cheeks and tried to look sad.

“I’ll pay a premium,” I said encouragingly.

He looked thoughtful then said “I need to piss.” He got up and walked

away.

“So it's not happening?” asked Marie.

“He's almost certainly gone to phone his friend,” I said. “Do you want a coffee?”

I tossed the two coffees Lars had got us into the canal and went to the café for replacements. I got Lars one too in case he was back before I was. He wasn't but turned up moments later with a happy face.

“It's on,” he said, sitting down. “You can have them tonight.”

“Database update included?” I asked.

“Yes,” he said. “Danish makes it easy. Let us say three bitcoin for the pair, including my friend?”

“Agreed,” I said even though that worked out at about 450,000 euros. Expensive but it wasn't my money.

“I do like you,” he said, smiling broadly. He took a small notebook out of his pocket. “What names do you want?”

“Suggest some,” I said. “I don't know Denmark very well.”

“Ohh,” he said, tapping a pen on the notebook. “Ella's popular, so's Astrid, Olivia, Clara, Freya, Josephine.”

“Freya,” I said. “I'll be Freya and my friend will be Astrid.”

“Surnames?” he asked.

“Whatever's most common,” I said.

“OK,” he said, thinking. “Freya Larsen and Astrid Pederson. How's that?”

“Perfect,” I said and got out our existing passports. “Tweak the dates of birth of these but don't go too far off. I haven't time to make myself

look 45.”

He smiled and tried to take the passports. I hung on to them.

“And what guarantees do we have?” I asked.

“None,” he said with a shrug, “but what guarantees do I have you won't come to collect them with the police, eh? You haven't even paid me yet.”

That was the right answer as there were no guarantees in this business. Any promise of anything else would be pure bullshit.

“OK,” I said, releasing the passports. “Half now half on collection.”

“Agreed,” he said and pocketed the passports and his notebook before pulling out his phone.

I got mine out as well and transferred 1½ bitcoin to him. He fiddled around with his phone for a minute or so and I wondered what method of laundering them he used.

Bitcoin, you see, have many advantages including instant transfer but one big disadvantage. Every transaction is logged and is publicly searchable. There are a number of ways of getting around this. One common method is what's known as coin mixing, in which you dump your bitcoins in a pool and take the same number out again at random, less a small commission, so your final coins are untraceable. The disadvantage is that at any given moment the pool could be quite small, making it possible they could still be traced. You've no way of knowing however until someone comes knocking on your door. A better way, which was used by the Department, is to swap the bitcoins for other coins, such as Minties which have complex algorithms and use dummy accounts to mash up the list of transactions, known as the 'block chain'. There are other ways, of course, including chain hopping, peel chains and multi-wallets. Lars looked like a coin mixer but you never can tell.

“We won't meet here again,” he said when he was happy with his laundry.

“Where and when?” I asked.

“I have a lockup,” he said. “I’ll text the address.”

“No,” I said, putting my hand over his phone. “Write it down.”

He shrugged and got his notebook out. I checked I could read his scribble then asked what time.

“Ten tonight,” he said.

“And will the database have been updated?” I asked.

“Yes,” he said. “Oh and what places of birth?”

“Copenhagen,” I said, “for both of us.”

“But where in Copenhagen? What suburb?”

“Somewhere nice and respectable,” I said. “Not Nørrebro.”

He chuckled.

“Hellerup,” he said. “Hellerup and Gentofte. Both nice areas but not too wealthy.”

“OK,” I said. “Anything else?”

“No, that’s all I need,” he said.

“There is one more thing,” I said, as he started to get up. He looked at me. “I want the old passports back.”

“When I get the rest of the money,” he said.

“And you don’t keep any records,” I said firmly, staring at him.

“No use to me,” he said. “Anything else?”

“See you at ten,” I said.

He smiled again and sauntered off.

“That seemed very easy,” said Marie.

“Yes,” I said, “until we turn up and find this place doesn't exist. Then we'll be stuck here with no passports at all.”

“Oh,” she said and frowned. “What do we do then?”

“I'll have to get on to my boss,” I said, “which could take a few days. Have you got a nail file?”

“I think so,” she said taken aback. “In my rucksack. What do you want a nail file for?”

“I've got dried blood under my fingernails,” I said. “Come on, let's go.”

* * *

Fortunately the car was still where we'd parked it so I cleaned my nails and did a drive-by of the address Lars had given me. Impressively it actually existed and was in a fairly quiet area on the far side of Nørrebro. I then drove out to the coast a little to the north of Copenhagen where we stopped for ice creams and to admire the view.

While Marie dozed in the passenger seat I got on to an online hotel booking site, having changed my connection routing app to Copenhagen airport. I browsed for a while until I found three hotels close to each other in the same street near the centre of town. Using the website I made a booking for a twin-single room for three nights, starting tonight, using the old passport names of Elaine Lewisham and Marie D'Escala. Then I had a ciggie and watched the sea for ten minutes then booked two rooms in the third of the hotels in the names of Freya Larsen and Astrid Pederson for two nights and paid for those as well. After collecting the new passports my plan was to go to the first hotel and leave the car there then walk to the third hotel and get a good night's sleep. We wouldn't be able to register at the first hotel as our old passports would be unusable but if we were

being tracked then the booking and the car at the first hotel would confuse the issue. It was even possible that whoever was tracking us would just assume we arrived late and the formalities of booking-in would be done later. Even better, they might think we were there for the three nights. The odds of making a connection between Elaine and Marie in one hotel to Freya and Astrid in another were very small and we'd pick up another car in the morning, or maybe get a train somewhere. I was too tired to think about it.

At half past nine I parked around the corner from the lockup and left Marie in the car with strict instructions to blow the horn if anything untoward happened. I found myself a spot in the shadows and waited. The side street with the lockups was deserted although a fair number of cars and pedestrians crossed the far end where the main road was. The lock-up itself had a faint light around the edges of the door suggesting someone was inside but no one arrived or left. It was tedious and the time dragged but eventually 2 minutes to ten arrived so I went back to get Marie.

"All looks quiet," I said softly, as voices carry at night. It's something to do with the greater density of the air once the sun has gone down. "Let's go in. Oh, and whatever you do don't touch anything inside. We don't want to leave finger prints."

She was still in her hoodie and jeans as I didn't want anyone to see her in her business suit. That would be Astrid Pedersen's image. We slowly walked to the lock-up trying to look as though we had every right to be there.

Bang on ten o'clock I tapped three times on the door with my elbow. Strictly speaking it was a conventionally sized metal door cut into a two-vehicle wide roller door. A flap opened at roughly eye level and a shaft of light spilled out. Moments later there was the sound of a lock being undone and the door opened. I was tensed and ready but it was Lars.

"Come in," he said, glancing up and down the side street.

We went in and he latched the door behind us. It was immediately apparent what Lars' day to day occupation was. Much of the lock-up

was taken up with a large bed and a couch in front of two walls with hotel-like decoration and a nice carpet. Much of the rest of the area was taken up with lighting units and a couple of moderately expensive looking movie cameras on tripods. Opposite the bed, against the lock-up wall, was a shower unit, a toilet and sink, a table with a large mirror and a wardrobe although it was unlikely that the actors and actresses being filmed wore much in the way of clothes.

“It's a living,” he said apologetically when he saw my face.

“Whatever works for you,” I said. “Our passports?”

“Over here,” he said, going over to the corner where he had a desk and an expensive looking laptop with two large video displays.

He picked up an envelope and handed it to me. I opened it and there were two nice but not too new looking Europa passports with Denmark embossed on the fronts. I opened one and studied it. The hologram was of me and the name was Freya Olivia Larsen, born in Gentofte, on 12th May 2011 which made me now 28. Marie's was much the same, except hers was Astrid Maja Pederson, born Hellerup, 7th November 2014.

“I thought they looked wrong without middle names,” he said, “so I put some in. Was that OK?”

“Good thinking,” I said, checking the initials had no attention grabbing significance. FOL seemed meaningless although AMP was the name of a large company but that shouldn't get anyone excited.

“You want to check the biochips?” he asked, pushing a chip reader over.

“Thanks,” I said since my little iPad didn't have that facility. It was going to have in the next update but not yet.

He selected an app on the computer screen and I held my new passport in front of the reader. After a few milliseconds my details flashed up and I checked the name and passport number matched those of the passport itself. The other details looked to be OK

although I have no idea what my fingerprints or retinas actually look like. They'd passed scrutiny before and there was no obvious reason why he'd change them. I checked Marie's and hers too was fine.

"Pretty good," I said, handing the passports and envelope to Marie. She looked at them both, something everyone does when they get a new passport, then stuffed them in her hoodie pocket.

"And the Danish Passport Register has been updated?" I asked. I had no practical way of checking directly and it seemed unlikely Lars would have access through his computer.

"Naturally," he said picked up his phone. "The rest of the money?"

"Haven't you forgotten something?" I asked.

He tried to look puzzled but he actually seemed a little nervous.

"I'm sorry?" he said, holding out his hands a little.

"The old passports," I said.

"Ahh," he said and ran his hand through his hair. "I thought we might have a little chat about those."

"What sort of chat?" I asked, knowing exactly what he meant. The question was what to do about it. I glanced at Marie who was a couple of paces away following the conversation with a puzzled frown. She was out of range which was good.

"It seemed to me that they are important to you," he said. "Perhaps very important."

Well, yes they were. Even though they no longer had the biochips, no bureaucracy would miss the opportunity to record the chip data every time the passports were checked. This meant that, in the wrong hands, the passport numbers could be used to retrieve the biochip data and a search made for other passports with matching data. This wouldn't be done ordinarily, just imagine the amount of computing power needed to check every passport against every other passport,

but if someone went to, say the police, and said this passport was used to create a fake passport then just such a check could be made. If they also told the police the new passport details the check would take milliseconds.

“Yes, they are,” I said. “So, um, what are you saying?”

“Perhaps another couple of bitcoin important?” he said, rubbing his chin and looking expectant.

“Yes,” I said, thinking about it. “It would be worth that.”

“Good,” he said, relaxing.

“Except I don't have the money,” I said, making up my mind. “The three bitcoin were all I had.”

“Oh, I'm sure you can find some more,” he said. “Since it is important.”

“Maybe we can come to some other arrangement,” I said, licking my lips suggestively and undoing the top button of my shirt.

“Umm ...,” he said, watching my hand.

I stepped towards him and glanced at Marie.

“Maybe even both of us,” I said, quietly and jerked my head towards the bed. “A little party, maybe, just the three of us.” I undid another button and got closer. “Maybe you would like that, hmm?”

He went wide eyed and licked his lips in anticipation as I lifted my face for a kiss. Then I stamped down hard on his foot with my heel and, in the same hip hop movement, rammed my knee in his crotch.

He half screamed, which wasn't a problem as the lock-up was undoubtedly soundproofed to some extent, and dropped to his knees trying to clutch his genitals and foot at the same time. My heel snagged on the bones of his upper foot, jerked me off balance and pulled my shoe off my foot. I bent down and jerked the shoe out and

put it back on my foot. He slumped to the floor, moaning, his face contorted. I knelt down beside him and delivered a hard punch to his temple. He grunted and spasmed a few times then lay still.

I hesitated for a few moments then stood up and looked at Marie. She was white faced and shaking.

“Is he ... is he ... dead?” she stuttered, her hand over her mouth and her eyes staring.

“Probably,” I said, “but we won’t know for sure for a few minutes.”

A wave of tiredness came over me and I fumbled my way to the chair in front of the desk and collapsed into it. My first killing. I wanted to throw up.

“I think he's still breathing,” whispered Marie, edging towards the body.

“Could be,” I said, forcing myself to be detached and clinical. “The movies have it all wrong,”

“What?” she exclaimed, staring at Lars contorted face.

“In the movies,” I said, focusing on the technicalities, “someone touches the assailant's neck for a moment and says 'he's dead!' which is pure bullshit. Even if the heart is working normally it takes a while to find the pulse and if it's stopped you could spend a minute or two searching before you decide there isn't a pulse.”

During my training we always referred to them as 'the assailant', never 'the victim'.

“But he's still breathing!” she exclaimed. “Look!”

“What actually happens,” I said, focusing on how it had been explained to me, “is that a severe blow to the temple shatters the thin bone in that area and ruptures the artery that lies beneath. This leads to internal bleeding in the brain and, perhaps after a few seconds or perhaps a couple of minutes, the respiratory system shuts down. Brain

death occurs when the brain is starved of oxygen but even that isn't immediate. Depending on how long the assailant can hold their breath, brain death won't occur for perhaps another two or three minutes. Only then is the assailant actually dead and we'll know that because the muscles will suddenly go limp and the bladder void itself."

As if on cue, Lars' body collapsed a little and a dark puddle appeared around his crotch.

"Now he's dead," I said dispassionately.

I got up, went calmly over to the toilet and threw up.

Chapter Eleven

I flushed the toilet, wiped my mouth with some toilet paper and knelt there for a few moments trying to clear my mind. I glanced over towards Marie who was still standing beside the body, staring at it. I got up and strode towards her but she backed away, her face fearful.

“Are you going to kill me too?” she asked quietly. “I’m a witness.”

I stopped and gaped at her in astonishment.

“Don’t be so stupid!” I exclaimed, my emotions not entirely under control yet. “I’m protecting you for fuck’s sake!”

She stared at me then the fear left her face as she realised what I was saying.

“Did you have to kill him though?” she asked. “It was only money.”

“It wasn’t the money,” I said and looked down at the body. He was already becoming an ‘it’ in my mind, just a nasty mess on the floor. “He’d have continued to try to extort us for as long as he could find us then he’d sell the details to someone else. OK, he’d almost certainly not go to the police but he’d very likely try to sell them to those bikers or some criminal organisation with more resources. Aside from putting you at risk that could become a problem for the Department.”

“Oh,” she said and looked at the body again. This time with a hint of something. Contempt possibly or dislike at least.

“Cloak and dagger stuff,” I said, studying her face. She was getting a grip on herself again which was good. “And sometimes the daggers have to be used. He died because he was stupid.”

“How do you mean?” she asked.

“Look at all this,” I said, waving my hand to encompass the bed and equipment. “He was certainly on the fringes of the criminal world if not fully embedded. These weren’t the first fake passports he’d

produced and only a fool would try it on with serious crooks. There are plenty out there who'd have killed him slowly as an example and enjoyed doing it."

"Well there's that," she said and gave a little shudder. "At least you were quick. So what do we do now? How do we get rid of the body?"

I breathed a sigh of relief. She was in control of herself again. OK, she'd probably have a few bad dreams for a while, as I would, but that would pass. Fortunately she hadn't had hysterics.

"We don't," I said. "It's almost impossible to get rid of a body so we'll leave it here. It'll be a while before the smell gets out and this a quiet area. We have to find the old passports though."

"Wouldn't he have hidden them somewhere else?" she asked.

"I doubt it," I said, looking around for some rags or cloths. "He would have intended to give them back when he'd got the money." I couldn't immediately see any so I went over and wrenched the sheet off the bed and ripped a few pieces off. "Here, take these and start searching. Make sure you don't leave any fingerprints on anything."

I held out a couple of pieces and she slowly took them then gave a little shake and started to go through drawers. She ignored the body on the floor although she was careful not to step in any of the urine or blood. I watched her for a few moments then squatted down and went through Lars clothes in case he had them on him. He didn't so I went back to the toilet and washed my hands and flushed the toilet twice more. There was a half empty bottle of bleach behind the toilet so I rinsed the toilet bowl with bleach and flushed it again before rinsing my hands with bleach and washing them again. Then I wiped down the sink, the toilet, the seat and my shoe heel with toilet paper soaked in bleach then flushed the paper down the toilet. Then I emptied the bleach in the toilet and flushed it again. It was probably excessive but I felt a lot cleaner myself afterwards.

Marie found the two old passports fairly quickly. They were in a drawer beside the laptop, suggesting Lars hadn't expected any significant trouble getting more money out of me. There were several

USB memory sticks in the drawer as well which I gathered up and put in my pocket. There were four Danish passport blanks, two Swedish and one Finnish in a small metal safe in the bottom drawer which I opened using the keys from his pocket. I left them alone.

“Why are you taking the USBs?” she asked.

“He could have stored the passport details,” I said. “Maybe even copied the holograms and biochip data. Did you touch anything with your bare hands?”

“No,” she said.

“Right then,” I said, grabbing the laptop and the cloths we'd been using. “Let's go.”

I turned off all the lights before easing the door open and scanning the street. There was still activity at the main road end but all was quiet otherwise. I motioned for Marie to come out and she scurried off to the car. I double checked the self-locking had worked then followed. Back at the car I was surprised to discover barely twenty minutes had passed. It had seemed a lot longer.

I drove a few kilometres and pulled up beside another canal. There were warehouses on the other side of the road and no pedestrians so it seemed likely no nosey neighbour would be watching from behind a curtain. I screwed the rubber tips back in my heels then used a wet wipe to wipe off the traces of blood and gore that oozed out. I'd got the wipes to wipe down the interiors of the various cars we'd used to get rid of fingerprints and body oils but they're good for cleaning shoes as well. The bleach had taken a lot of the dye off the heel leaving it streaky and funny looking so I made a mental note to get some new shoes in the morning.

I told Marie to change from her hoodie and jeans into her business suit while I tossed the USB sticks in the water. Then I laid the laptop against the curb and let the car roll over it so it broke. A few twists and yanks broke it completely so I tossed those bits in the canal then Marie's trainers. A little further down the road was a delivery bay between two of the warehouses. Checking there was still no one

around I went part way down the bay and burnt Marie's clothes, the cloths and the two old passports. I felt exhausted.

We drove to the first of the three hotels and I parked in the hotel car park. We then walked to the third hotel and checked in. The new passports passed their first test as no alarms went off. Giving Marie strict instructions to lock the door of her room and not unlock it for any reason, including a fire, without my permission I went to my room, stripped off, had a long shower and went to bed. I was just drifting off when I received a text message. It was only Marie, asking if I believed in God. I texted back "No" and went to sleep.

I didn't have any bad dreams. I'm pretty sure I didn't have any dreams, I was too tired. I did however wake up thinking about Lars but I revisited my rationale, reviewed my own performance – satisfactory, probably couldn't have done much better under the circumstances – then dismissed the incident from my mind. I collected Marie, checked she'd had an uneventful night and took her to breakfast.

"So what was all that about God?" I asked when we'd got our coffee and food.

"You mean my text?" she asked. "I was just curious."

"Seems a funny thing to be curious about," I said.

"Well," she said, spreading honey thickly over two slices of toast, "I was thinking about, umm, what happened and wondered if God's hand was involved, what with you doing what you do and everything."

"So you believe in God?" I asked.

"Yes," she said.

Lots of people do so it wasn't surprising. After all, the Pope's in Europa.

"So do you see God's hand in it?" I asked.

“I think so,” she said seriously. “After all, you were sent to protect me after what I did so if God didn't approve you wouldn't be here or we'd both be dead or something like that.”

“Well, maybe,” I said. “So what did you do?”

“I'm not supposed to tell you,” she said, looking at me over her toast. “I will if you want me to but I'm not supposed to.”

“Then don't,” I said firmly. “We have protocols and procedures for a reason. It's not all down to God, you know, unless you think God had a hand in setting up the Department as well as the need for having an organisation like that.”

“Hmm,” she said. “Could be.”

“Stop,” I said, holding up my hand. “No way am I getting into a discussion about free will and God's will and all that crap over breakfast.” Actually I didn't want that at any time, not just over breakfast.

“So you think it is all crap?” she asked, looking intently at me.

“Coffee,” I said, pointing to our food. “Bacon, eggs, toast, honey. Prioritise.”

She snorted and resumed eating her toast.

“And cigarettes,” I said, finishing my coffee. “Eat up. I need a ciggie.”

She shovelled in the last of that piece of toast and stood up, the other piece in her hand. I was pleased to see she was sorting out her priorities to align with mine. Out in the mild sunshine in the car park I was just lighting a ciggie when my phone jingled.

“Awesome!” I exclaimed when I saw it was from my dance agent. “At last!”

“What is it?” asked Marie.

“Hopefully delivery instructions for you,” I said. “Won't be a moment.” She frowned and I moved several paces away out of habit before calling back.

“Pegasus,” I said when my call was answered. This time it was a woman.

“You are at Copenhagen airport?” she asked.

“Close enough,” I said since that was where my call was being routed from.

“Can you make a delivery to Warsaw?” she asked.

“Is this from Callisto?” I asked, frowning. Warsaw? Why would Callisto send Fortuna to Warsaw? It was close to the Polish border with Rossiya Block and, I would have thought, a bit too risky.

“No,” she said.

“Then reject,” I said. No way was I going to do a delivery to Warsaw and drag Fortuna along with me.

“Confirm reject,” she said disinterestedly.

“Confirm reject,” I said. “Question.”

“State your question,” she said.

“Have I any communications pending from Callisto?” I asked.

“That is negative,” she said. “Confirm.”

“Confirm negative,” I said and wrinkled my nose. It was close to forty eight hours now. What was taking so long?

The call was disconnected and I stared at my phone for a while.

“Problem?” asked Marie coming over.

“Just another delivery,” I said, taking a drag on my ciggie. “I turned it down so there’s no need to worry.” I blew out a cloud of smoke and took another drag.

“Why would I be worried?” she asked. “Oh, I wanted to ask you. Should I be calling you Freya?”

“Actually it would be sensible,” I said. “We need to get used to using our new names even though it shouldn’t be for too long.”

“That’s what I thought,” said Astrid, formerly Marie. “So nothing from Callisto?”

“No, not yet,” I said. “Which is a bit of a difficulty. We ought to keep moving but I don’t know where would be best to aim for.”

“How about Italy?” she asked. “I’ve been meaning to visit Rome but never got around to it.”

“Then definitely not Rome,” I said, crushing my butt under my foot and lighting another. “It could be predictable.”

She stared at me for a few moments.

“I suppose this is how my life is going to be from now on,” she said and slumped.

“Maybe, maybe not,” I said. “In the short term definitely and possibly in the medium term but long term no. The political situation can change very rapidly and you’ll become just another ordinary person. You should know that, being a student of politics.”

“I never studied politics,” she said as we both watched a couple come out of the hotel and head for their car. “I did psychology and management.”

“You shouldn’t have told me that,” I said. “You should have stayed in character.”

“How do you know Astrid didn’t study psychology?” she asked.

I looked at her in surprise since that was a very good point and a mistake on my part.

“Did you?” I asked.

“I must have done,” she said with a smile, “since it's part of the new character I'm building.”

“Awesome,” I said, getting rid of that ciggie as well. “You're going to be just fine, I can tell. Come on, let's go shoe shopping. There's a shopping centre a kilometre or so up the road.”

We got me some shoes to replace my bleached ones and Astrid some because the ones we'd bought the day before were pinching her feet. Then we went for coffee and cake while I decided what to do next. Staying in Denmark probably wasn't a good idea since there was always the possibility of running into Sven and his buddies by accident and Benny and his crony might well be actively looking for us as well. Lars' body could potentially be found at any time although there was little if anything that could tie us to that. It didn't help either being two Danish nationals who couldn't speak a word of Danish. It would be less of an issue outside Denmark. I didn't want to go further into Scandinavia either. Finland bordered Rossiya and Sweden and Norway were big places on the edge of Europa which would be more isolating. France might be an option as much of it is some distance from Paris where Marie might be recognised although Astrid may never even have been to Paris. Still, France opened up a number of possibilities, including Spain, Portugal, Italy and Switzerland.

It was in the middle of all this pondering that my agency messaged me again.

“Pegasus,” I said, calling back.

“Copenhagen airport?” asked a different woman's voice. They always did this as it was a way of double checking it was me.

“Yes,” I said even though we weren't actually at the airport.

“I have a message from Callisto,” she said.

“About bloody time!” I thought but said “Ready.”

“Message begins, request explanation for payment of one point five bitcoin to Danish pornographer, message ends,” she said.

What?? I'd never been asked to justify any expenditure before. OK I often explained things in debriefings to justify a course of action but the costs themselves were considered irrelevant.

“Pause,” I said and looked around the café as I thought about it. Interestingly it had only been 12 hours or so since the payment which meant Finance must have jumped on it very quickly. In fact almost instantly if they'd managed to identify the recipient before the coins were laundered, assuming he did launder them. Maybe he was even more stupid than I thought which was unlikely as we clearly hadn't been his first customers for nefarious transactions. Still, I couldn't immediately see any reason why I shouldn't explain.

“Response,” I said. “Emergency passport renewal, message ends.”

“Pause,” said the voice. Why we didn't just say 'hold the line' I don't know but the Department had a reason for everything. They probably made one up on those occasions when they didn't have a reason but I do have a cynical streak.

I tapped my finger on the table while waiting and looked around again. No one was taking the blindest bit of notice which was both good and bad. After all, two young women sitting alone could reasonably expect to be looked at. Then again the few men in the café were with women so they were probably their wives or something.

“Direct communication with Callisto,” said the voice. “Transferring.”

This sounded serious. Ordinarily all non face-to-face communications went through the agency. I considered going to the toilet for some privacy but decided not to. Here I could see who was listening but I couldn't inside a cubicle.

“Callisto,” said Callisto. I recognised her voice.

“Pegasus,” I said dropping my voice a little more.

“Why did you need to acquire fresh passports?” she asked.

I quickly explained about being stopped at the German-Danish border in roundabout terms as this was a public place then mentioned that the purchase had had its own excitements.

“Do you want a cleaner?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said, thinking that would be useful so I gave her the address. “Any news on my fortune?”

“Not as yet,” she said which was a bummer, “although I think it's time you moved on.”

“So do I,” I said. “What did you have in mind?”

There was a long pause while she thought about it.

“I suggest Bern,” she said after a while.

“OK,” I said. Switzerland had been one of the places I'd been thinking about.

“Take the train,” she said. “I expect there's one leaving for Hamburg soon.”

“Is that a good idea?” I asked, since I'd picked up Fortuna in Hamburg. It seemed a bit risky taking her back there. Then again, if we had been tracked to Copenhagen the trackers wouldn't be expecting us to go back there.

“Yes,” she said. “That way we can get together for a chat before you change trains.”

“You miss me that much?” I asked intrigued that she wanted to talk about something without going through the agency or on a phone

line, however secure.

"I miss all my friends," she said which I took to mean she wanted to see Fortuna as well.

"How nice," I said, confirming the meeting. Since it would take place between changing trains she clearly intended to meet us at the station or close by. "There's a nice coffee shop near where you live." I didn't have a clue where she lived and hoped it wasn't near the station.

"Let's meet up there then," she said. "It'll be most convenient." Ahh, the main coffee shop in the station then.

"I'm looking forward to it," I said. "See you then." I waited a few moments in case she had anything else to say but she disconnected.

"We're off on our travels again," I said to Astrid when she looked enquiringly at me.

"Where are we going now?" she asked as I looked at the train timetables.

"Hamburg," I said, dismissing the train that left in fourteen minutes since we'd never make it in time. "In an hour and three quarters. Fancy another coffee?"

Chapter Twelve

We got taxis to Copenhagen station as it was easiest and unlikely to be a security risk as the odds of a usurped taxi driving past a shopping mall just as we were leaving were pretty small. It would have needed someone to be inside the mall monitoring us and in contact with a waiting taxi so it could swoop in at the right moment and beat any other random taxis that happened to be cruising by. I say 'taxis' because I got the first to take us to a supermarket a little out of town where we bought some soft drinks, hopefully lemonade as there were bright yellow lemons printed on the cans, and snacks for the train. Then we got another taxi to the station. I paid for both taxis and the food by cash since I still had a stack of euros then paid for train tickets to Hamburg in cash as well. I saw no point in getting tickets all the way through to Bern as there was no need for anyone to know that.

We only just got there in time for the train as the rides and the supermarket had taken longer than I expected. The train was fairly full as well which surprised me. Why were so many people going from Copenhagen to Hamburg? Still, it wasn't crowded. There were plenty of seats but we had to share our section of the carriage with some other people. I dumped Astrid in a window seat and took the seat next to her so no one sat too close to her. The opposite window seat was taken by a pinkly scrubbed young man with a bit of a weight problem. He wore a new but dull suit that couldn't disguise the contours of his body and his collar and tie added at least one more chin to his collection. We also had the inevitable elderly couple, sitting across the aisle, travelling for the sake of travelling. Four years previously public transport had been made free to pensioners throughout Europa so it was a cheap way of them occupying their time and seeing more of the world. Previously such benefits were only available in specific countries to their own pensioners.

The train departed for its six hour journey on time at 11:49. Astrid and I chatted casually about nothing in particular, the fat man glowered out of the window for a while then busied himself with his phone and the elderly couple got stuck into some sandwiches and a thermos of coffee. It looked like it was going to be a dull, uneventful trip which is just how I like it. After a while Astrid turned inwards and

gazed quietly out of the window as the Copenhagen suburbs changed to the Danish countryside. I watched too, for a while, as Denmark is quite an attractive place.

What was bugging me though was that something was going on and I had very little idea what it was. This whole business with Astrid was decidedly unusual but the explanation – that someone travelling with me would be largely ignored as people like me always work alone – was plausible but what was it about Astrid that made her so important that normal procedures had to be broken? And had there really been any security issues or was it more a matter of simple paranoia? Paranoia is endemic in this line of work and we're trained to see threats in the most innocent of situations which increases any underlying paranoia lurking in our personalities. Thinking about it I was a little surprised to find there were really only two incidents. The sighting of Manuel on the train from Antwerp and the pulling over of women on the Danish border. The other incidents, the bar fight and my killing of Lars were a direct consequence of Manuel and the border but they could just as easily have been the result of my paranoia.

Both the fight and Lars arose from my desire to obtain new passports. If I hadn't wanted new passports we wouldn't have gone looking for a forger and Benny wouldn't have seen Marie and taken a fancy to her. For certain if any agents from another Block wanted to snatch Marie they wouldn't have used a bruiser like Benny nor been so ineffectual. The mere fact that Benny went up to Marie and groped her was pretty conclusive that it was just a random 'bad boy' thing. No one with any common sense, let alone training, would do such a thing. Equally Lars attempt at extortion was simple greed. If he was working for another Block he'd have handed over the new passports and given the details to his controllers without us ever being aware of it. Demanding more money simply alerted me to a problem and he paid the almost inevitable price.

Another aspect of my early training had been almost the opposite of self-reflection. It is counter productive to dwell on actions taken, aside from learning from them for the future, as actions cannot be undone. 'Do it, accept it, move on' was the general attitude but was one man dead and two injured simply a consequence of my over-paranoia? It

could have been worse as well. There had been at least six other bikers in that bar and, while I can handle one or perhaps two assailants six men were too many for me. If Sven had reacted differently Marie and I could both be at the bottom of the canal. Had I actually put Marie at serious risk when there had been no real need? It bothered me. Much more so than the killing of Lars. That was perfectly justifiable given the circumstances and he was, to put it bluntly, merely collateral damage but taking Marie *into* harm's way was another ball game. Had that been truly justified?

The business with Manuel was a little strange. OK, I'd half recognised a swarthy man on the Antwerp train and he did bear a striking resemblance to a known Islamic State agent in our database but the database image was poor quality so I could have been mistaken. This, incidentally, was why we were trained to 'do it, accept it, move on' so we didn't waste our time dwelling on past events and undermining ourselves. I shouldn't be dwelling on it now but both my brain and my gut were telling me that there was something funny going on. Why should the sighting of a possible enemy agent provoke that reaction in Adonis? And, yes, while I'd never heard of border checks on the German-Danish border they probably did happen from time to time and none of the border officers I'd seen when we were pulled over looked in any way swarthy, not that being swarthy was indicative of anything in particular. Hell, even Astrid looked a little swarthy with her black hair and slightly dark complexion.

But was it a coincidence that after bumping into Manuel while on my way to deliver a sachet that turned into collecting Marie – was there even any data in that sachet? – I was stopped on the border with Denmark after being sent there to make the delivery of another sachet to Copenhagen and that delivery had been at the request of Elrond himself, the head of my Department? Was it all just coincidence? Had there been a leak? Was there some sort of major operation going on involving the broader Europa Intelligence Network? Or a small independent operation involving a handful of people?

It didn't help that it was highly unusual for people of the rank of Callisto to talk to lower rank operatives such as me via a phone link and bypass the normal channels. Face to face meeting happened all the time but again, why was I going to be having a face to face

meeting with Callisto in a public place in Hamburg? And, come to that, why was Finance following up on my spending? To the extent that they tracked cryptocurrency transfers? And why report it back to Callisto anyway? If there were concerns over my spending – maybe they suspected I was stealing the money for myself or something like that – why not take it up with my boss or with Elrond, my boss' boss. Why Callisto? Was it even possible I was deliberately sent to Copenhagen on a wild goose chase in order to flush out Lars for some reason and Callisto was using the bitcoin payment as a way of checking on me? Was Finance even now trawling through the hundreds of millions of bitcoin transfers to follow the flow of money to whoever Lars was sending it? It didn't seem likely but something was going on and was Marie really so important that several branches of the Intelligence Network across several nations within the Europa Block were more worried than they usually were? And, if so, why me? I was just a data courier for crying out loud! I carried data inside silicon inside my boobs. I didn't ever get involved in the serious espionage stuff. It was, quite simply, way outside my pay grade and training.

And Marie/Astrid? She was around my age and, even though she spoke English, French and German she seemed too young and, I don't know, too innocent maybe to be a major player. People like Callisto, yes. Twenty plus years in Intelligence, a Director of Operations in Germany, who knows what pies she had her fingers in and what secrets she held in her head? But little Marie?

I glanced sideways at her but she'd plugged in some earbuds and was gently nodding her head to some music while watching the scenery go by. Could she really have half the Europa Intelligence world all excited with agents from Islamic State hot on our trail? It was a mystery.

About halfway through the journey the train stopped at Kolding for a few minutes. A number of people got off and some more got on. I'd deliberately chosen the rearmost carriage so the rest of the train and its passengers were ahead of us. There was no clear guidance on this sort of thing; some said it was best to be in the middle so you had more options for escape should something untoward happen, others said it was better to be at one end so your attention didn't have to be divided. I was one of the undivided attention subscribers. You can

scrunch yourself up in your seat and pretend to be asleep while keeping watch. You can't do that if you have to keep watch in opposite directions.

Anyway, as the train pulled out of Kolding I nudged Astrid and muttered that I was going to the toilet for a pee and a ciggie and she was to stay put. The fat gentleman opposite was now reading a book which, judging by its size and cover seemed to be a weighty treatise on international jurisprudence. I suspected he found it as boring as I would have done as he kept yawning and squishing his chins together. The elderly couple had finished their sandwiches and hot drinks and were sharing a bag of some sort of individually wrapped sweets. She was reading a novel, he was leafing through a travel guide to Hamburg and the narrow table between them was littered with sweetie wrappers. All three seemed engrossed, to some extent or another, in what they were doing and paid neither of us any attention.

According to the sign, in English, French, German and Danish, there were toilets in every second carriage although it didn't say if there were any in this carriage. I got up and looked along the length of the carriage and couldn't see a sign indicating there were toilets so it seemed likely they were in the next carriage. I casually scanned the other passengers as I passed but they seemed to be, on the whole, ordinary people. There were a couple of youths with spotty faces and safety pins in their ears and eyebrows but they were both giggling over their phones and showing each other what they were looking at.

I opened the connecting door at the end then the connecting door to the next carriage and let it slide noisily back behind me. Just as I did so a man disappeared through the connecting door at the other end. There was something about him, even though I only saw his back, that triggered alarm bells so I hastened to the far end and pulled open the connecting doors. He was a couple of paces from the far end and there was something in the sway of his shoulders and general shape that looked familiar. He pulled the connecting door open and glanced to the side momentarily. It was Manuel! OK, I didn't see his full face, only his profile, but it was definitely Manuel. He also had the right build although he wore different clothes to when he was on the Antwerp train which wasn't particularly surprising. I was wearing different clothes as well.

I stopped chasing him and slid into a vacant seat, surprising the man sitting across the table. He looked me over as men do then went back to his phone. Why was Manuel on this train? It was possible that seeing him on the Antwerp train was a coincidence but on the Copenhagen-Hamburg train as well? Unlikely. But if he was looking for me or Astrid, why was he going away from us? He hadn't been in our carriage before Kolding so maybe he'd got on there but if he'd got on further along the train he'd be checking the carriages at the back. If he'd got on the second to last carriage wouldn't he have checked the last carriage before searching the rest of the train? The man with the phone looked over at me again and, from the corner of my eye, I could see he was checking out my hair and boobs. I ignored him as this was fairly normal behaviour for most men and, frankly, the presence of Manuel on this train worried me. How had IS managed to track our movements in Copenhagen so quickly? By rights they should still be staking out the hotel where I'd left the car. To be on this train said they'd linked Elaine and Marie to Freya and Astrid and tracked us through the mall and supermarket to the station. That in turn meant that Lars had to have passed on information about our new identities which in turn suggested Lars had known who we were before seeing us in the bars in Nørrebro. And that suggested that Elrond's sending me to Copenhagen was deliberate and that the border stoppage wasn't chance. Quite possibly their failure to identify and stop us alerted them, whoever 'them' were, that we'd be looking for new passports and they'd alerted Lars who'd come looking for us. Perhaps even the bikers had been part of it although it was difficult to see how.

On the other hand, Finance had alerted Callisto to an unexpected and large bitcoin payment which could very likely have been for the purchase of new passports. Callisto had then broken protocol to find out and, once confirmed, could have instigated a biochip match search to find our new identities. It would have been a reasonable assumption that the new passports were Danish which would have speeded things up. Even if she hadn't she did tell us which train to get and Manuel could easily have been sent to check.

The man cleared his throat and leant over. He said something in Danish which could have been anything but, judging by his expression, was some sort of pickup line. Anyway, I don't speak

Danish so I just looked blank, shrugged my shoulders, said “Espagnol” and left. The last thing I wanted was some guy thinking I was in any way interested and following me and the odds of him speaking Spanish were slim.

I was tempted to go back to our seats and hustle Astrid off the train at the next station, but we were expected in Hamburg at around 5:30 in the afternoon. I wanted to make that meeting as I wanted to see how Callisto reacted when I told her about Manuel being on the train. I made my way forward through the train looking for Manuel. It was a bit of a risky thing to do as he would undoubtedly recognise me from the Antwerp train but I felt it would be unlikely he'd actually do anything. Presumably the primary target was Astrid so aside from being confirmation she was nearby Manuel would very likely just blank me and then follow me when I returned to the end carriage. In all likelihood though, if there was trouble I'd lose since he was a known killer and almost certainly had hand to hand fighting skills well beyond mine. He might even have a gun or tranquilliser. He was also a man and bigger and stronger than me. On the other hand there were plenty of other passengers so starting something wouldn't be a good idea, particularly as someone might well step in to help a defenceless woman who was being assaulted which would escalate things.

Manuel wasn't in the next carriage either. As I went through the connecting door I glanced back and, to my relief, the man who'd spoken to me wasn't following me. I spotted Manuel in the fifth carriage, sitting in an aisle seat with his back to me. Same clothes, same hairstyle and, when he glanced out the window, the same profile. I walked casual to the far end of the carriage, hesitated as though changing my mind then turned and walked back.

“Twat!” I exclaimed in my mind although I managed to keep my face expressionless. Now I could see his entire face the man wasn't Manuel. Similar build, same hairstyle, same swarthinness but this man's face was a little broader, his lips plumper, his eyebrows a different shape and, when he looked at me and smiled, his teeth were pretty good. I smiled back, as you do when a stranger smiles at you, and walked past. Then I ducked into the toilet and had a much needed pee and, with the window open as the no-smoking sign was in six

languages and had a picture of a cigarette with a red cross on top of it in case anyone couldn't read, had a smoke.

Then I made my way back to our seats in the end carriage, scanning every face just in case. None rang any alarm bells. The fat gentleman opposite Astrid had dozed off with a hand holding his book open precariously on his belly, the elderly lady was looking out the window and her husband had fallen asleep.

“You were gone a long time,” remarked Astrid, pulling out her earbuds. “I was wondering where you'd got to.”

“Just went for a walk to stretch my legs,” I said. “Everything OK here?”

“Sure,” she said. “No problems.”

“Good,” I said.

She put her earbuds back in so I got my phone out and started browsing our database of IS operatives. After all, just because he wasn't Manuel it didn't mean he wasn't an IS operative. They had hundreds of them.

Chapter Thirteen

Two women in official looking uniforms with German State Rail Security emblazoned on their shoulder patches got on at Padborg Station. This had the feel of normality as Padborg was just before the border with Germany. Certainly no one else in the carriage seemed bothered. They both got into the last carriage and the older, a mature woman with greying hair and a stern no nonsense expression to match Callisto's, announced in German that this was a routine random ticket and identity check. The younger, probably in her 30s with wisps of blonde hair sticking out from under her official cap scanned the carriage and locked her eyes on Astrid. She marched over, staggering slightly when the train jerked into motion, and barked "passport, ticket" at her.

Astrid jumped when she appeared in front of us as she still had her earbuds in and had had her eyes closed. She fumbled for her passport and phone so I handed mine over. The blonde looked at me, raised an eyebrow then read the ticket on my phone and flipped to the hologram in my passport. The grey woman stood back, watching.

"You are Danish?" she asked, in German. German is, incidentally, an excellent language for sounding terse and official. Even 'I love you' ('ich lieber diect') sounds like a mortal threat.

"Yes," I replied, in German as well.

"What is your business in Hamburg?" she asked.

"We are going to a sales conference," I said.

"For which company?" she asked.

"BMW," I said, BMW being the first German company that came to mind. In such situations it's best to let the mind free associate and run with that as a momentary hesitation is suspicious. Why would you hesitate over the name of the company you worked for? Fortunately BMW was a global corporation with outlets in Denmark.

She grunted and snapped my passport shut. She handed it and the

phone back to me and clicked her fingers at Astrid in the same movement. The fat man had his passport and ticket at the ready and the older gentleman was slowly looking through his carrier bag. He probably hadn't expected a passport check.

Astrid handed hers over silently, a slight crinkling around her eyes suggesting some tension. The blonde inspected both.

"You travel together?" the blonde asked, in French.

"What?" asked Astrid in German, frowning.

"You travel together?" she asked again, this time in German.

"Yes," said Astrid. "To Hamburg."

The blonde sniffed, glanced at the grey haired one then handed back her phone and passport and stalked off, ignoring the fat man and the couple. I saw her stop and speak to someone else further along but I couldn't see who because of the seat backs.

"Very good," I said quietly to Astrid, watching the two officials.

She typed something into her phone and tilted it towards me.

"why french?" it said.

I leaned over her to peer at something through the window and whispered "Marie is French," then sat back. The fat man was reading his book again.

Astrid typed again. "so they were looking for me?"

I nodded and she looked worried. The two officials were now going through the connecting door to the next carriage, having only checked us and someone else four seats away.

"I'm just going to the toilet again," I said. "Won't be long."

She nodded then unplugged her earbuds and stuffed them in her

pocket. I got up and sauntered down the aisle, taking a good look at the people four seats away. Interestingly there was a youngish woman in a dress with medium length dark hair and glasses. In general terms she could have been taken for Astrid. I went through the connecting door and paused by the toilet door as though it was occupied. The officials, although by now I was approximately 95% certain they weren't German State Railway Security officials, were talking to a pair of young women with a superficial resemblance to myself and Astrid. While I waited for the toilet to become free the officials moved on, ignoring a couple of black women of our age group, all males and older women. They stopped beside another youngish woman who looked a little like me. The lack of randomness in their choice of who to check shifted my dial to 100%. I breathed a sigh of relief. Freya Larsen and Astrid Pederson were still unknown. Whoever these security people were they were looking for faces, not names.

It was also a validation. I hadn't been paranoid and dragged Marie through Nørrebro for nothing. Someone with sufficient resources and manpower really was looking for both of us. It probably wasn't Yazhou Block or Alkebulan Block as none of the people I'd seen so far were Asian looking or black but that wasn't conclusive as there were people who looked European in both regions. That still left the Islamic State, Christian State and Rossiya Blocks though which was plenty enough. It also tended to rule out an internal operation within Europa as, although I hadn't told Callisto our new identities, she'd instructed me to get this train and no doubt fully expected we would so there'd be no need to send people to find us on it.

There wasn't even any real question about what to do. We were on a moving train so short of jumping off we were stuck here. Moreover, we didn't seem to have aroused any suspicion so the best option seemed to be to sit tight. It was possible the two women would reach the other end of the train and, since they hadn't found us, might decide to come back and re-check likely candidates in which case I'd have to improvise but there was a good chance they wouldn't, unless they knew for certain we were on this train.

I didn't actually need the toilet so I went back to Astrid and gave her my reassuring, happy face. She looked relieved and had the good sense not to ask any questions. About twenty minutes later we

approached Schleswig Station so I asked her to swap seats with me. She did and I settled myself leaning against the window. A few people got off, although I couldn't see the full length of the train, and quite a few got on. As we pulled out of the station I spotted the two security women having a discussion on the platform. The fact they hadn't come back to recheck tended to suggest that they didn't know for certain we were on this particular train.

We pulled into Hamburg approximately one minute behind schedule and there was the usual rush as people gathered their things and vied for pole position before the doors opened. Then they surged down the platform trying to out-walk each other so they'd get to the turnstiles slightly ahead of other people. We hung back, however, as it's never a good idea to get stuck in crowds. It had never happened to me but I'd heard of another courier who'd been jabbed with a needle by someone behind her in a crowd. She'd felt faint and leaned against a wall for a moment then someone had kindly offered to help her to her car. She'd then lost consciousness and around fifteen minutes later found herself naked in an alley nearby with her clothes shredded, her bag in pieces and her passport and wallet missing. It could have been a simple assault as both her data sachets were intact but she hadn't been raped which tended to suggest the removal and shredding of her clothes was a search for something rather than sexual.

Once the crowd had thinned Astrid and I made our way to the ticket barrier, were approved as people who'd travelled with valid tickets and free to roam Hamburg. We stayed in the station, however, and made our way to the café which occupied a large room and spilled out over a vast area of the main concourse, delimited by insubstantial looking plastic barriers. The café was heaving with people with seemingly every table taken and people sitting on suitcases or simply propped against walls.

Near the centre of the over-spill sat Callisto, all alone at a table meant for four. She was reading something on her laptop and there was an aura about her that kept other people from encroaching too closely on her space. I nodded approvingly because the best way to avoid being overheard in a crowded area is to be in the centre. With so much general chatter, noise from trains, public announcements, luggage being dragged and what have you even a focused directional

microphone can't distinguish you from the background noise.

We hung back for a few moments while I scanned the people looking for anything suspicious but, since there were quite a few blacks, plenty of Asians, a couple who looked as though they'd just arrived from the steppes of Siberia and more than a scattering of Arabic looking people, it was impossible to say who looked suspicious and who didn't. Certainly no one seemed to be giving us more than cursory glances. We threaded our way between the people and tables to where Callisto was sitting and I dumped my bag on the table and sat down. Astrid slid into another seat and held her rucksack protectively on her knees.

Callisto looked up, glanced at me then studied Astrid before turning back to me.

"Update me," she said, barely moving her lips.

I talked for probably three minutes, updating her on what had happened since we'd left her office barely 55 hours before. She listened carefully.

"We checked with Danish Border Security," she said when I'd finished. "There was no road block on the border at Padborg that evening. I will check with German State Rail also but I suspect that too was not authorised. The man you identified as Manuel was identified yesterday in Hamburg and was seen to board a plane to Copenhagen. Tell me more about the man you identified at Kolding."

"I didn't identify him," I said. "I thought at first he was Manuel and followed him but he was not. Subsequently I searched our database and found perhaps thirty who were similar but not close enough to make a positive match."

"Did you record those thirty?" she asked.

"Yes," I said.

"Give me the list," she said.

I found the list on my phone and transferred it to her laptop. Astrid just sat there, looking faintly bemused.

Callisto looked through the list, her lips pursed. She raised an eyebrow at a couple and nodded at a third.

“Interesting,” she said, closing my list.

“Can you give me any information about who is behind this?” I asked.

“Would you like something to drink?” she replied. “Perhaps a cake or something to eat.”

“Not for me thanks,” I said and looked at Astrid. She shook her head.

“I would like some more coffee,” said Callisto. She retrieved her wallet and took out a 50 euro note and placed it on the table in front of Astrid. “I have things to discuss with Pegasus that do not concern you. Would you be so kind as to get me a short black, no sugar?”

“Sure,” said Astrid, glancing at me for approval. I nodded and Callisto frowned. It must have annoyed her that Astrid sought my approval to carry out her instruction. Astrid got up, clutching the 50 euros and dumped her rucksack on her chair. I shifted my chair round so I could see her as she took her place in the queue for the coffee machines.

“We have identified a significant increase in both CS and IS communications traffic,” she said quietly. “There has also been an increase in Rossiya traffic and perhaps the beginnings of an increase in Yazhou and Alkebulan traffic. Analysis is still ongoing but our friend's name has appeared within that traffic.”

“As Marie?” I asked, leaning forward.

“Both as Marie D'Escala and her real name,” said Callisto, “as well as Fortuna.”

“And my name?” I asked.

“Yes,” said Callisto, “including one in a communication reporting a

sighting which, based on the time of the transmission, may well have been Manuel.”

“Is that all?” I asked, since such a report was inevitable.

“Sadly no,” said Callisto. “There have been a number of communications speculating that you are travelling with Fortuna. We have intercepted nothing as yet that suggests the speculation has hardened into anything definite. However, Fortuna is known to be travelling with a single female companion so it is only a matter of time.”

“I see,” I said thoughtfully. “Where is my name coming up?”

“Primarily CS and IS traffic,” she said. I stiffened.

“Both?” I asked. That seemed ... excessive.

“Yes,” she said. “And Pegasus has cropped up in Rossiya, Yazhou and Alkebulan traffic as well.”

Jesus!

“Just Pegasus?” I asked.

“According to the traffic analysis,” said Callisto, “CS and IS both believe your current alias to be Elaine Lewisham. I presume that is no longer true as you both have new passports?”

“Correct,” I said. “Do you want our new aliases?”

“No,” said Callisto. “Our own traffic is being monitored. Incidentally, the mess in Copenhagen has been cleaned and the contact of that person has been eliminated.”

“You mean the one who updated the passport register?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said. I noticed Astrid was now second in line for the coffee machine she was queuing for. “Finance have identified no other contacts as yet.”

“Good,” I said, my mind still somewhat in shock that all five power blocks seemed to be talking about me in one way or another. This was so not good. “So, ahh, what is so significant about Marie?”

Callisto fixed me with her beady eye.

“How long have you been with us?” she asked.

“Just over five years,” I said. “Five and a half or thereabouts.”

“And yet you still ask such questions,” she said. “Perhaps this is not your vocation after all.”

“My bad,” I said, holding up a hand in apology. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have asked. I’m just stunned at we’re cropping up in all five Blocks. I thought it was just IS that were after us.”

“Doubtless because of Manuel,” she said. She glanced around and saw Astrid step up to the coffee machine. “There has been a change of plan. We consider it to be too dangerous for you to be solely responsible for Fortuna. A specialised team is being assembled and you are to deliver her to that team.”

“So you no longer have faith in me?” I asked. That was a bit of a blow to my self esteem as I’d never had a job taken away from me before.”

“We have great faith in you, Pegasus,” said Callisto. “Your actions in Copenhagen are more than sufficient proof of that.”

“So why I am being taken off her then?” I asked.

“For the very reason you expounded when being given this assignment,” she said. “You are not a specialist in personnel protection or transfer despite your many and varied skills. You were entrusted with this assignment because we believed that Fortuna would stay anonymous by virtue of her association with you as a data courier. The traffic suggests that that anonymity will shortly end, however, if it has not already done so. It is time for the specialists. Indeed you are to be commended for maintaining that anonymity for as long as you have.”

“OK,” I said, not entirely reassured but it was unlikely I’d actually get a ‘thank you for a job well done’. “So what happens now?”

“You will take Fortuna to Amsterdam,” she said. “Centre will notify you of your contact when you arrive.”

“Amsterdam, hey,” I said, thinking about it. That shouldn’t be too much of a problem. It was a straightforward drive or we could take a train or a combination of both. “Timescale?”

“Maximum forty eight hours,” said Callisto. I saw Astrid pickup the coffee and collect the change.

“How much can I tell Fortuna?” I asked as she started to thread her way back.

“Nothing as yet,” said Callisto, “although she can know she’s going to Amsterdam. There’s one other thing. I’ve arranged for you to have support.”

“What kind of support?” I asked as Astrid put the coffee in front of Callisto and laid the change neatly beside it before sitting down.

“You will be met at Bremen,” said Callisto, nodding her thanks to Astrid.

“Are we going to Bremen now?” asked Astrid. “I thought we were going to Bonn.”

“Change of plan,” I said. “We’re now going to Amsterdam but we’re meeting someone in Bremen first.”

“Is Bremen on the way to Amsterdam?” she asked, an irritated look on her face. “All I seem to do these days is move from place to place. When can we stop for a while?”

“We’ll stop in Amsterdam,” I said. “There’s a safe house there we can use, and yes, Bremen is on the way to Amsterdam.”

“Awesome,” she said, cheering up.

“Why Bremen, incidentally?” I asked. “Why not here, in Hamburg?”

“Unfortunately no one is available here in Hamburg,” said Callisto. “But Aragorn is in Bremen and has been alerted. Do you know her?”

“Only by reputation,” I said. “Aragorn, huh?”

“Who's Aragorn?” asked Fortuna.

“Someone like Pegasus,” said Callisto, “only even better.”

“So why are we meeting her?” asked Fortuna. “I like Pegasus.”

“That's a good question,” I said, since I was curious myself. If it was to get an update on the situation Aragorn seemed a bit of an overkill.

“Aragorn will accompany you both to Amsterdam,” said Callisto. “An additional safety precaution and one which will likely isolate you from those looking for two women travelling together.”

“A fair point,” I said then hesitated, choosing my words carefully. “Ahh, in the event of a difference of opinion in some particular situation, umm, whose will take precedence?” Another big advantage of working alone.

“I'm sure you will find Aragorn's opinion entirely reasonable,” said Callisto, “although if you feel sufficiently strongly about it I'm sure you both will work out something appropriate.”

Bugger. That meant I had to do what I was told and if I didn't I'd need a bloody good reason. Still, Amsterdam wasn't that far away.

“And that concludes our meeting,” said Callisto, shutting her laptop. “Any questions?”

“Should we get new identities?” I asked.

“Those will be provided in Amsterdam,” said Callisto. “Nothing else?”

We both shook our heads so she abruptly got up and left without

saying goodbye.

“She didn't touch her coffee,” said Astrid. “Snotty bitch.”

I didn't respond as I was inclined to agree but didn't want to vocalise it.

“So, Amsterdam, hey,” she said. “I quite like Amsterdam.”

“You've been there before?” I asked.

“Once,” she said.

Good, she wasn't likely to be recognised by anyone then.

“Great,” I said. “I think we'd better go and get some more clothes then we'll take the train to Bremen. After that we'll see what this Aragorn wants to do.”

Chapter Fourteen

Even though it was around 6 in the evening there were some shops open near the station. Half an hour later Astrid and I emerged from the station toilets looking like tourists in flat shoes, skirts, blouses and coats, all in forgettable pastel colours. I wore a knee length skirt and a light raincoat with a belt and Astrid a bomber style denim jacket. She'd also chosen a baker's boy style cap and stuffed most of her hair inside. I tied mine back in a messy ponytail and cheerful headscarf. We dumped our old clothes and my shoulder bag in some nearby garbage bins and donated Astrid's rucksack to a homeless guy camped outside the station. Our few belongings now nestled inside tote bags.

I'd checked the train timetable and Hamburg to Amsterdam required a change of trains at Duisburg. Working on the assumption that the opposition knew by now we were headed for Amsterdam it made sense to at least head off in that direction. My plan was to get tickets to Duisburg, pick up Aragorn at Bremen, the next stop after Hamburg, then hop off the train at Munster, the next stop after that. At Munster we'd find some alternative transport, probably a car, and head back towards Hamburg to circle round and enter Holland from the north. The addition of a third person at Bremen should cause some confusion and might even mean our disappearance at Munster may go unnoticed for a while.

The Duisburg train was very similar to the one from Copenhagen, unsurprisingly since both were run by German State Rail who liked uniformity. It had seven carriages and the seats were arranged in blocks of eight with two pairs each side of the central aisle and each pair facing the other pair across a narrow table. As well as the passenger carriages it had something euphemistically termed 'a restaurant car'. It wasn't a restaurant. It was a carriage much like the passenger carriages but with one block of seats removed and replaced with chilled vending machines for sandwiches and cold drinks.

As before I hustled Astrid into the the last carriage and grabbed a pair of seats almost at the back which faced forward. The train wasn't crowded as it was early evening and the workers had already left and the party goers still some way from leaving. The train sat and

hummed to itself for a few minutes then the whistles and door slams started in preparation for departure.

At the last moment a man jumped off the escalator to the platform and ran over to the train. I half saw him from the corner of my eye and watched as he wrenched open the door in the centre of the carriage. He stumbled as the train started moving and grabbed a seat back to stop himself falling out. Safely stable again he pulled the door shut and tidied his jacket which had got ruffled around the shoulders. That done, he glanced round the carriage and a small alarm went off in my belly. I hadn't seen his face up to that point and he was of average build and fairly nondescript. I kept watching him while making some remark or other to Astrid and it was clear a small alarm had gone off in his belly as well.

After glancing round the carriage he started to move up the carriage toward the next one then stopped and looked around again. There was the briefest of hesitations as his glance swept over Astrid, too long for a complete lack of interest and not long enough if she'd taken his fancy. He then nonchalantly sauntered along the carriage, completely ignoring us and sat in one of the seats immediately behind us, on the other side. We hadn't sat there ourselves as there was a canoodling couple who clearly wanted to be left alone.

I couldn't immediately place why an alarm had gone off. He was an average looking guy, not particularly good looking but not particularly unattractive either. He had shortish blonde hair and looked fairly fit but, frankly, so do a lot of German men. Certainly I didn't half recognise him as I had Manuel but he had a look about him, something undefinable, much like an off duty cop. I pondered for a few moments then started going through the Department's database only this time looking for Christian State operatives. It was a fair bet that, if he was in our records, that he wouldn't be Islamic State or Yazhou.

I found him 20 minutes later. Chuck Bradman alias Brad Cooper and a couple of others. Known to have participated in two bombings for Christian State in Europa along with a handful of minor operations but a fairly recent addition as nothing was known of him more than three years previously. He was generally more of a bag-man for

someone else rather than a primary in his own right. Interesting. What was Chuck doing on the Hamburg-Duisburg train and why was he on his own? That didn't seem right.

"This seat's rather uncomfortable," I said to Astrid. I squirmed a little to help justify the remark. "Let's move to another."

"Mine's fine," she said, "but sure, if you like."

We got up and moved a couple of seats further along. Chuck leaned forward as though about to get up then, when we sat down again, he leaned back and looked out of the window. I'd really only moved us so we'd be out of earshot but his action suggested he was going to move as well. On the whole, when you've identified a potentially hostile actor it's best to keep them where you know where they are.

We were still a good twenty minutes away from Bremen and it was highly unlikely that Chuck would do anything before then, especially on a moving train. His role was most likely observational but, as he rarely worked alone, his primary could well be somewhere else on the train. It could even be that Chuck had got his orders late and had had to rush to catch the train. More to the point, if I went exploring and took Astrid with me he'd be sure to get up and follow. I didn't feel he was an immediate threat, at least not until we were nearing Bremen so I told Astrid I was going to the toilet and left her on her own.

It was in the next but one carriage that I saw him. Clarence Tucson, a middle aged black man with greying hair over his temples. Quite a dapper man and known to have participated in two kidnappings and a hijacking. I'd actually met him, or at least he'd been pointed out to me, a couple of years previously when I was making a delivery and my contact had aborted because Clarence had been in the vicinity. I was fairly sure he didn't see me so I backed away and returned to my seat.

So, two Christian State operatives on the same train as myself and Astrid, one known for kidnappings and the other known for helping out as and where required. What were the odds they were going for a nice relaxing holiday somewhere? Bullshit. We'd been 'made' and the clock was ticking. What to do about it was the real question.

I checked my phone and we were still 12 minutes from Bremen. The best thing to do would be to sit tight and make contact with Aragorn. Her addition to our little party would swing the odds more in our favour as I doubted my abilities to fight off two trained operatives and it would put Astrid at risk anyway. Fortunately it was unlikely they'd try to snatch Astrid directly from the train as there were too many other people. They might at Bremen in the confusion of people getting on and off the train but that was an iffy prospect as well. Their most logical strategy would be to wait for Duisburg which was the end of the line and everyone would be getting off. Then follow us and make the grab away the station with its crowds and security staff and ideally near a waiting vehicle.

The other issue was what to tell Astrid. It would be sensible to explain the situation and warn her but, on the other hand, she wasn't trained and could easily panic and do something stupid and unpredictable. Stupid I could probably deal with as everyone does stupid things from time to time but unpredictable, well, how do you prepare for something unpredictable? Also, without training and practice, it's hard to sit still and act carefree when you know something is about to happen. OK, Chuck knew who we were and very probably he'd updated Clarence as well but they didn't need to know we knew who they were.

There could even be a third operative on the train. I'd spotted Clarence and backed off but there could be someone else further along. It was a worry and in retrospect I should have checked but that would have allowed Clarence to spot me. 'Do it, accept it, move on'. What's done is done and can't be undone so work around it.

So, I made casual conversation with Astrid and waited out the remaining few minutes until the train arrived in Bremen. Needless to say Chuck did not get off and six teenagers got on. They took over the section of seats which was good as they were noisy, in high spirits and sprawled across the aisle which would make things more difficult for Chuck as and when he made a move. A few moments after the train moved off someone opened the connecting door, saw the teenagers and rapidly retreated. A couple of minutes later a tall, slim blonde probably in her late 30s opened the door. She looked at the teenagers and visibly winced then spotted Astrid. She closed the door

and came over to sit in the aisle seat opposite me across the table.

“The youth of today,” she said, glancing disparagingly at a boy who was spraying the contents of a drink can at a girl who was screaming and trying to protect her face and hair. “It makes you want to get on a horse and fly away, does it not?”

I laughed and wondered, for the umpteenth time, how to work 'Aragorn' into the conversation casually, not that anyone would hear with all the screaming and ribaldry going on behind us.

“Yes,” I said, “but that's better than kids in low spirits.”

“Indeed,” she said. “They remind me of that scene in Lord of the Rings when Frodo and his compatriots go to the Inn of Barliman Butterbur.”

I've never read Lord of the Rings nor seen any of the various attempts to film it which was undoubtedly remiss of me since so many of our code names came from that book as well as Greek and Roman mythology. Anyway, I had no idea what that scene was about so I took the risk.

“Is that the scene where they meet Aragorn?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said. “Like now.”

“Excellent,” I said. “I'm Pegasus and this is Fortuna.”

“I am Aragorn,” she said, smiling briefly. “Update me.”

She dumped her bag on the table and it gave a slight thud, more than an ordinary bag should do. I wondered if she was carrying a gun and, if so, why, but refrained from asking.

“It is my role to deliver Fortuna to Amsterdam,” I said, lowering my voice. “I'm informed that there are people who would actively prefer that this does not happen. I have identified two on this train.”

Astrid looked alarmed and started to look around but I put my hand

on her arm to stop her. I got out my phone and found the details for Chuck, as he was the closest and showed it to Aragorn. She read the details so I gestured towards the back of the carriage to show her where he was then found the details of Clarence.

“This one is two carriages along,” I said then put my phone away.

“I see,” said Aragorn. She sat back in the seat and looked remarkably calm. “Do you have a plan?”

“I was thinking we’d get off the train at Munster,” I said. “We can pretend to be going to the restaurant car and hop off at the last moment. Then find a car and head for Assen then down to Amsterdam.”

“A good strategy,” she said, “but I think Duisburg would be better.”

“That’s where they’re expecting us to go,” I said, frowning. “Duisburg is where we’d change trains to go to Amsterdam.”

“I am aware of that,” she said. “The longer we conform to their expectations the more likely they are to settle in to their expectations.”

“Seriously?” I said, wrinkling my nose. We’re trained not to rely on expectations and it was a fairly safe bet our opponents were as well. It’s the oldest trick in the book to go along with expectations and lull the opposition into a false sense of security and, as a result, is one of the most guarded against.

“I do not joke,” she said frowning. “I do not have the sense of humour.”

“That’s a shame,” I said as I’d found having a self of humour to be invaluable. If nothing else, I’d got past a couple of security checks by sharing a joke with the official.

“Besides, I have made arrangements for a car to be waiting for us in Duisburg,” she said. “It will be easier than taking one and less risky.”

I had to raise my eyebrows at that. A prearranged car? There was a good chance it had already been identified and people put in place to follow it. Especially if it was one known to be part of our fleet.

"I really think that's not a good idea," I said. "A waiting car will almost certainly have been identified, especially if they're planning on taking us at Duisburg. It would be much safer to grab one at random in Munster."

"Your safety is not my concern," said Aragorn, "and you are free to do as you wish. I, however, am charged with getting Fortuna to Amsterdam and that is what I will do."

"Excuse me?" I said, scowling. "I am the one charged with getting Fortuna to Amsterdam. You're here only to support."

"I think not," said Aragorn. "My brief was to take charge of the delivery and that is what I will do. With you or without you."

I was about to make an angry retort and tell her to bugger off but bit it back. There was a germ of sense in her proposal, a small one but one that would likely sound reasonable to a review committee composed of life-bureaucrats who'd never actually been on an operation.. Such people liked to think they were good at the game of cat and mouse but in reality it was a game of cat and mouse and rat and dog with any number of fleas and lice thrown in for good measure. Besides, at the back of my mind was what Callisto had said. At least if I went along with Aragorn she'd stay on my side and if needs be I could snatch Fortuna myself and get her out of harm's way while the nasties chased Aragorn. The trick is to be aware and not be taken by surprise and I was certainly aware now. Duisburg and trouble lay ahead. Maybe while she was getting the prearranged car I could hustle Fortuna away.

"So what's the gun for?" I asked, taking a stab in the dark.

"What gun?" asked Aragorn, frowning.

"The one in your handbag," I said.

“I don't have a gun,” she said.

“OK, my mistake,” I said. Yeah right. What else sounds like a heavy lump of metal? Not a lipstick that's for sure.

“So, we are agreed?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said. “Duisburg it is.”

After all, we had to go somewhere and Duisburg was at least on the way to Amsterdam, more or less. As to whether we'd be taking Aragorn's car though, that was more up in the air and I'd decide later. Aragorn had been thrown in the deep end with this so I'd give her the benefit of the doubt.

“Good,” said Aragorn. “Have you eaten?”

“Not for a while,” I said as we'd finished our snacks not long after leaving Hamburg. I defy anyone taking snacks for a long trip not to eat them almost immediately.

“Neither have I,” she said. “Come, we will go to the restaurant car and on the way you can show me this Clarence Tuscon.”

“No problem,” I said as Chuck had almost certainly let Clarence know by now that we'd been joined by someone else. He might even have identified her by now as well.

We stayed in the restaurant car for the remainder of the trip as it was in the centre of the train and Aragorn was one of those people who subscribed to being in the middle rather than at one end. Chuck decided it was time to eat as well and joined us, although he went to the end of the restaurant car. Clarence stayed put where he was. I had a little scout around and didn't spot any others.

The train pulled into Duisburg a minute ahead of schedule despite leaving almost two minutes late. I stayed seated and Astrid stayed seated with me so Aragorn sat back down and waited. When it was close to becoming a stalemate about who would get off first, Chuck got off rather than make it blindingly obvious he was waiting for us

which showed his lack of experience. What he should have done was get off quickly then hang back, looking for his wallet or something. Anyway, we got off and made our way through the ticket barrier. As it was just after 10pm the station was relatively empty. Clarence was some way ahead and, for some strange reason, I saw Chuck join him. That was bad tradecraft as it confirmed they were both together. If we'd only identified one or other it made the other stand out. On the other hand they'd probably both realised we'd identified both of them. Either way they both walked out the main entrance to the station without giving us a second glance which was odd.

"So where's this car?" I asked, veering towards the side entrance.

"This way," said Aragorn, heading towards the main entrance.

Astrid paused, wondering which of us to follow.

"I really don't think that's a good idea," I said. "The two bogeys went that way."

"We're going out the main entrance," she said. "The car park's that way."

"You what?" I exclaimed. The frigging car park??? Talk about making it easy for the opposition. It was probably plastered in tracking devices by now.

"You heard me," said Aragorn, opening her handbag.

"You must be mad!" I exclaimed as Astrid edged towards me. "You put the damned car in the god-damned car park?"

"Where else would you put a car?" she said, showing me a gun inside her handbag. She pushed it back down but kept her hand on it. "This way," and she pointed the handbag at Astrid.

Chapter Fifteen

The situation was so ludicrous I was tempted to just take Fortuna and walk away. Seriously? Fire off guns in a major railway station? German State Rail security would be on Aragorn in seconds and the State Police only a minute or two behind. And, if she did shoot, her only options would be to kill Fortuna on the spot, which seemed pointless given all the effort they were making to capture her, or injure her, which would mean the State Emergency Service would be only seconds behind the police and Fortuna would be whisked away to hospital. Stupid really and Aragorn, if her reputation was anything to go by, wasn't stupid. That meant the gun's purpose was to frighten – which is really all hand guns are much good for anyway.

In that sense it was working as Fortuna was clearly frightened. She'd seen the gun in Aragorn's handbag and was now frozen to the spot. I quickly moved in front of her and put my arms on her shoulders as if to comfort her.

“Don't worry,” I said. “No one's going to shoot you.” I gave her a protective little hug and whispered “run when I say” in her ear. Whatever happened we needed to get out of the station and away from Aragorn.

“Silence,” said Aragorn and pulled me away from Fortuna. I let her, acting as though I was cowed which I wasn't. This situation was actually a lot less dangerous than the bar in Copenhagen with the bikers since there were at least six of them and armed with pool cues and probably knives and a few other odds and ends.

“The car park,” said Aragorn, waving her handbag a little in that direction. “Move.”

I took Fortuna's hand and led her across the concourse with Aragorn a couple of paces behind, just out of reach. Not that I'd do anything as I wanted to get outside and into the darkness. Hand guns are inaccurate at the best of times and hitting a moving target in the dark with a hand gun inside a handbag would be a virtual impossibility. It would be hard enough for a trained sniper with night sights. That, coupled with the fact that hand guns tend to snag when pulled out of

clothing or bags, meant we were relatively safe as the first shot or two would most likely go into the ground. I daresay Aragorn might shoot from inside her bag but she'd then have no chance of aiming and the metal frame of the bag or some object inside would deflect the bullet anyway. It might even set the bag on fire.

As we approached, the sliding doors opened and a couple of women walked in. They paid us no attention whatsoever and then we were through to an area with a couple of waiting taxis. Further down was a bus, waiting to pick up passengers. On the other side of this area was the car park. Large, well lit and semi-deserted which was a bummer. If we made a break for it there Aragorn would have plenty of time and light to get the gun out and take aim properly.

“Turn right,” she said from behind.

Dutifully we turned right and there was an annex to the car park, running along the side of the station. I guessed it was primarily intended for freight deliveries and pickups as there were a couple of semi-trailers parked at the far end but there were two or three cars parked on the street side. More importantly the annex was separated from the main road by a line of trees and bushes and the only lighting was from the street lights the other side of the trees and a bright spotlight down at the loading end which lit up a semi-circle around the semi-trailers and very little of the annex itself.

I could see Clarence waiting on the corner of the annex. His arms were loose and there wasn't a gun in either hand. If he was armed then it would be inside a pocket or under his armpit, more snagging. Further down I could make out Chuck's blonde head reflecting light from a street light as he walked through the gloom towards the cars. As we walked over to the annex Clarence started walking down as well, keeping level with us. Chuck had stopped by the closest car and was opening the side doors.

As Fortuna was on my right I deliberately stumbled and let go of her hand. She stopped and looked over at me just as Aragorn gave me a shove. I used that shove to stumble slightly to the right and took Fortuna's hand again, only this time from the other side. She was now between us and the trees and bushes which is what I wanted. OK

Clarence was that side as well but I'd deal with him shortly. As we got closer to the car where Chuck stood with the rear door open and his hand on the top of the frame I aimed towards it. I squeezed Fortuna's hand three times, hoping she'd realise it was a signal to get ready.

"You want us inside?" I asked when we reached the car. I turned to face Aragorn and put my hand on the door frame beside Chuck's.

"Yes, get in," she said so I half turned then launched a back swinging kick aimed at Aragorn's head while at the same time I grabbed Chuck's hand on the frame and dug my nails in hard. He cried out and clutched at his hand while my foot failed to connect with Aragorn's head. Instead it caught her upper arm and threw her off balance. Finishing the turn I shoved Fortuna hard towards the bushes and yelled "run, run!"

Clarence jerked forward abruptly, reaching inside his jacket for his gun. Chuck tried to slam the car door on me so I jabbed in the direction of his eyes with my nails and launched myself at Clarence, bent over so my shoulder caught him in the belly then jerked myself upright so he flew over my shoulder. Fortunately he wasn't a big man or I'd have done myself a serious injury. I heard a shot as I took off after Fortuna but I didn't hear the whistle of a bullet so Aragorn's shot must have gone badly wide. There was a second shot as I dived into the bushes but I didn't hear that bullet either.

I crashed through and spotted Fortuna several paces away to the right. She'd stopped and was looking back anxiously so she'd probably heard the shots as well.

"Keep running," I shouted, "that way," and gesticulated off to the right along the outside of the car park annex.

She headed off after a moment's hesitation and I caught up with her almost immediately. I grabbed her hand again and urged her forward. It must have taken a few moments for Aragorn to come to terms with the situation but I heard someone crash through the bushes behind us and glanced back. Aragorn was now on the pavement and was raising her gun, free of the handbag, to take aim. We were now in a well lit street so I launched myself into the bushes again, dragging Fortuna

after me. This time I did hear the bullet, not as it whined past but as it slammed into a tree a good metre away from us. Like I said, hand guns are pretty inaccurate as they have short barrels and need a steady hand. Even breathing can throw your aim off.

Back in the annex we found ourselves just behind the third of the parked cars. I pulled Fortuna down just in case Clarence was looking our way. Chuck almost certainly wasn't as I was fairly sure one of my nails had punctured an eyeball. It had felt like only three of the four fingernails had hit bone. I could hear Aragorn's feet running along the pavement behind the bushes and what could have been Clarence jump through the bushes further back where their car was.

Off to my left was the closest of the two parked semi-trailers so I ran that way, half dragging Fortuna with me. We were almost at it when I heard another shot and something pinged off the side of the cab at least two metres away. Her aim wasn't improving. We ducked round the back of the semi-trailer then hurried between the trailer and the station wall towards the cab end. I glanced through the gap between the trailer and the cab and saw Aragorn running almost directly towards me and gesticulating for Clarence, several paces behind her, to go to the cab end of the other trailer. He now had his gun out as well. Just at that moment my phone pinged to say I had a message and I saw Aragorn's head jerk round.

I pushed Fortuna underneath the trailer, down beside the huge tyres. It was very dark there as the trailer blocked what little light there was. I squeezed myself into the gap between the cab and the trailer, beside the big exhaust stack, and pulled the belt of my raincoat off. Fortunately the cab had been standing for a while and the exhaust was only warm to the touch.

I just saw a movement as Aragorn appeared from the front end of the cab. She must have looked down the length of the trailer and not seen us.

"Damn," I heard her mutter then, louder, probably to Clarence, "you check further along. I'll check underneath these."

I heard a foot scrape and edged ever so slightly forward. Aragorn was

bent over and using the torch in her phone to peer under the cab. I flattened myself behind the exhaust stack as she edged forward then heard her sharp intake of breath as she saw Fortuna crouched behind the front tyre of the trailer.

“Out,” she said, standing up. “Now!”

I jumped on her, wrapping my belt around her neck. We fell to the ground, her body under mine, and I wedged one elbow behind her neck and pulled as hard as I could with the other. She started to gasp but it takes a long time to strangle someone so, using the belt as leverage, I rammed her head against the wall twice. That seemed to do the trick as she stopped struggling although she was probably only unconscious. Her phone was underneath her body so the torch was hidden but her gun was where she'd dropped it. I whispered for Fortuna to come out and, while she was doing that I put my phone on silent so it didn't alert Clarence if another message or call came through. I noticed Aragorn's gun on the ground beside her and picked it up.

“Is she dead?” whispered Fortuna, looking at the dark shape of Aragorn between the wall and the trailer.

“Shhh,” I whispered, holding up my hand. I was trying to hear any movement from Clarence. It was asking too much for him not to have heard Aragorn's struggles and gasps and to not investigate.

Sure enough I heard the quiet crunch of a foot on gravel come from somewhere behind me. Most likely he'd doubled back on the other side of the trailer and was trying to sneak around the back. I held the gun up at arm's length, pointing towards the back of the trailer and thumbed my phone so the torch was ready to light up when I touched the icon.

Sure enough, a couple of heartbeats later a faint darkness edged round the back of the trailer. It was quite dark and Clarence was black so I wasn't expecting any better. I flashed my torch on and shouted “freeze!” and caught a glimpse of his face as he pulled back suddenly. I turned the torch off and, bent double, I walked as quietly as I could towards the back. Sure enough, a small darkness appeared

as he tried to peer around then there was a scrape as his gun touched the side of the trailer. I lashed out with my foot at the dark patch and I heard him grunt so I leapt around the back corner of the trailer. His fist caught me in the belly and as I staggered I rammed my elbow into his face then lashed out with the gun to catch him on the forehead. He grunted and shook his head then came for me again but this time I was a little way from the back of the trailer not up against it so I was able to get my leg up and kicked him in the chest. He fell back against the trailer door and I followed up by hitting him on the side of his head, banging it against the trailer. He slumped slowly to the ground then fell forward.

“Come on,” I called quietly and Fortuna emerged. I couldn't see her expression.

Aragorn groaned and started to move a little so I grabbed Fortuna's hand and we hurried off back up the annex. We'd lost both our tote bags getting away from the car and I wanted mine back as it had my iPad in it as well as my passport and wallet. Things we'd need if we were going to do anything more than walk. Astrid's passport was in a pocket of her jacket and hadn't fallen out as the button was done up.

Chuck must have been in some pain as he was curled up on the back seat of the car clutching his head and moaning. He half sat up as he became aware we were there so I slammed the door shut and left him to his misery. He wasn't my problem, after all. My tote bag was on the ground beside the car and Fortuna's was over in the bushes. I dropped the gun inside, just in case, then I glanced back down the annex. I saw Aragorn emerge, clutching the wall for support. I dragged Fortuna through the bushes again, hopefully for the last time, then we walked towards the entrance to the main car park, straightening our clothes and dusting ourselves down. Fortuna had a graze on her knee, most likely from getting under the trailer and we both had a couple of minor tears in our skirts from the bushes. My belly hurt but that was of no consequence and she'd lost her cap.

A couple of police cars turned into the station as we walked over to the taxis. They both went through the car park and turned into the annex.

“What's going on?” I asked the driver of the taxi at the head of the rank. He knew what I meant as he was watching the police as well.

“Someone heard some shots,” he said, glancing at me then Astrid. “I was listening to the police radio, see. Couple of minutes ago it was.”

“Oh wow!” I exclaimed. “Do you think it's a robbery or a drug deal gone wrong?”

“Most likely a robbery,” he said. “Freight depot's down there. So was you girls wanting to go somewhere then?”

“A decent hotel,” I said. “Not too expensive and not too close to the station. I don't like the sound of shots being fired.”

“Half a mo', love,” he said, slipping back into his driver's seat. He turned up the radio and we listened for a few moments as the police called for backup and two ambulances.

“Sounds like a bit of excitement,” said the taxi driver, grinning over at me. “Surprised you didn't hear anything yourself, seeing as how you were down that way. I saw you walking up here.”

“I did hear something,” I said, “but I thought it was a car backfiring or something. Anyway Helga fell over crossing the road and hurt her leg so we were more involved with that.”

“Ohh, poor love,” he said, looking at Astrid. “She's not looking too good actually, is she. Bit pale and shaken. You want me to take you to a hospital?”

“No she'll be fine,” I said. “Just a sit down and a hot drink will do although if you could stop off at a pharmacy for some antiseptic cream it would be good.”

“Will do,” he said. “Hop in. There's a pharmacy just up in Kammerstrasse. We'll go there first.”

“Great,” I said, helping Astrid get in. She probably didn't need help but it looked better and helped with the driver's sympathy. Just as we

pulled away two more police cars turned up, closely followed by an ambulance.

* * *

The taxi took us to the Kaufmann Hotel, four or five kilometres from the station. It was an older style hotel made of brick rather than the more modern concrete ones. We got there just before eleven and the lady on the desk gave us a twin single room on the third floor then took some delight in telling us that the restaurant had closed and wouldn't re-open until six in the morning.

I found a pizza shop that was still open and willing to deliver this late while Astrid was having a shower. She then put some cream on her graze and I left her watching TV while I had a shower.

"So what do we do now?" she asked when I emerged, trailing the scent of wildflower body wash behind me. She'd thoughtfully made some coffee while I was showering and mine had cooled sufficiently to drink. I opened the door to the verandah and lit a ciggie, wrapped in a large fluffy towel.

"I need to report this to the Department," I said. "Aragorn must have been turned so there'll be a lot to do checking her past operations."

"What about me?" she asked.

"Not a problem," I said. "I was going to take you to Amsterdam before Aragorn got foisted upon us and I still will. This was just a blip."

"Some blip," she said, sipping her coffee.

"Par for the course," I said flippantly. I was winding down after all and felt entitled to a little flippancy.

"I couldn't do what you do," she said, looking seriously at me. "It's just too ... oh, I don't know, too dangerous, too full on."

"Oh it's easy," I said, blowing out a cloud of smoke. "You just search

for the hero inside yourself then, when you've found it hang on to it.”

“Yes, you are a hero,” she said. “That's twice you've saved my life.”

“No, I'm not,” I said, suddenly feeling disgruntled. A hero? Nah, that wasn't me. “I just make deliveries. I leave the heroics to other people.”

“Sure you do,” she said. “But you make sure the delivery arrives, don't you. Whatever it takes.”

“That's what I do,” I said, shrugging. “Where's those pizzas?”

“They'll be here soon,” she said, watching me. “Am I just another delivery?”

“Absolutely,” I said, tossing my ciggie butt over the verandah rail, no doubt in contravention of multiple hotel and civic by-laws. “I'm going to phone the Department.”

“OK,” she said.

I got my phone out and saw I had two more messages as well as the one I'd received in the car park annex. I opened the first to find it was from my dancing agency. I was to contact them immediately, triple-A priority. The other two, at ten minute intervals, were the same. Clearly something important had happened and I had a pretty good idea what it was.

Chapter Sixteen

“More trouble?” asked Astrid. The TV show was some sort of folk music from rural Germany and she'd been watching listlessly with the sound very low. She was probably still in a mild state of shock.

“Maybe,” I said, “but maybe not. Most likely it's just confirmation of what we already know.”

“Oh,” she said and watched a man and a woman in leather shorts slapping each other's faces in time with a faint beat. “What do we already know?”

“Aragorn,” I said, putting my phone down to deal with later. It was protocol that after a third triple-A message went unanswered no further communication would be forthcoming and my status would be flagged as XP, meaning Expired Pending. In other words I, and by association Fortuna, would be presumed dead, pending confirmation. They'd be looking for us, of course, but it would be assumed that any more messages would go straight into the hands of whoever had expired us. Until such time as I got in touch we were now effectively non-people which was useful as I needed to think.

She looked over at me then down at her coffee then back at the TV.

“What do we know about Aragorn?” she asked quietly.

“She has either been turned,” I said, “and is now most likely working for Christian State since Clarence and Chuck are both CS, or she isn't Aragorn. Of the two I'd prefer that she's been turned.”

“Why?” asked Astrid.

“People do get turned from time to time,” I said. “It goes with the territory. Could be money, could be some secret she had was used to blackmail her, could even be she's got some moral reason but that doesn't matter. What matters is that it was just our bad luck that she got the job of getting us to Amsterdam. What worries me though is if the real Aragorn has either been captured or killed and this woman substituted because that means CS knew Aragorn was being sent to

help us which means there definitely is a leak and probably quite high up as well.”

“Oh,” said Fortuna and rested her chin on the rim of her mug while she thought about it. She, too, was wrapped in a fluffy towel. “Why high up?”

Just at that moment there was a thump on the door. Fortuna jerked and spilt coffee all down her chest and I jumped up and hurried over to the door. I peeped through the little lens set in the door and it was a scruffy looking young guy with long hair and a bored expression. He held a large square red bag balanced on one hand. Most likely the pizza had arrived but you never know.

I opened the door, poised to slam it in his face and jump out the way but the guy just leered when he saw I was in a towel and that one leg and hip was showing through a gap.

“Pizza,” he said, slowly tearing his eyes away. They locked on to Fortuna sitting beside the TV and rubbing her chest where the coffee had spilt. “Whoa, far out babe.”

Clearly he thought he'd interrupted us doing something interesting. I caught a whiff of something decidedly earthy coming from the joint he held in his other hand and concluded he was partially if not completely stoned which was why he was still standing there, swaying a little, and not giving us the pizzas. We were probably lucky he'd even managed the lifts and found the room.

“How much do I owe you?” I asked.

“Oh yeah,” he said, transferring his gaze back to my leg although it was a wonder he could even see it as his eyes were a little dilated and unfocused. Maybe my leg was so fascinating because it was multi-coloured or something. “It's in the bag.”

He seemed pretty far out of things so I took the bag off him and put it on the suitcase rack beside the door. I pulled back the flap and got out the two pizza boxes. The top one had €160 scrawled on it so I fished a 200 hundred euro note out of my wallet and gave it to him.

“Keep the change,” I said.

“Hey, like awesome, babe,” he said, beaming at me. “Keep it real, hey.” He turned and ambled up the corridor trying to stuff the money in his hip pocket and repeatedly missing. I called him back and handed over the now empty bag.

“I got you a Hawaiian,” I said, shutting the door and putting the security chain on, “but you can have meat lovers if you'd rather.”

“Hawaiian's good,” she said, reaching for the proffered box. “Do you think that guy's safe to drive?”

“Probably not,” I said, dismissing him from my mind. The pizza wasn't exactly hot but it wasn't cold either so I sat down and started eating it.

“So you were saying,” said Astrid around a slice of hers.

“What about?” I asked. “Oh, yeah. No. If someone took Aragorn's place then there must have been time to find out what was happening and set up a plan. That couldn't have been done in a couple of minutes. They probably found out before we did since I'd say it was virtually impossible to organise three people and get them to Bremen with enough time to get the real Aragorn out of the way and organise a car in Duisburg in the time it took us to get to Bremen from Hamburg. Most likely they got word not long after the decision was made to send Aragorn to help us which could have been a few hours earlier.”

I had another mouthful. It wasn't too bad although the BBQ sauce was a little strong. Fortuna was looking a little brighter as the grease and carbohydrate started to work its magic in her system.

“And that means the leak, if there was one, had to have been at a fairly high level,” I said. “If it was one of the Comms people then there wouldn't have been time but if it was one of the people involved in making the decision or maybe the next level down then there would have been.”

“So who do you think it was that leaked?” asked Astrid.

“May not have been a leak,” I said. “Could be Aragorn simply jumped on an opportunity. Anyway, I don't know who was involved in making the decision. Maybe the leak came from Callisto herself. I don't know.”

“No,” said Astrid, chewing thoughtfully. “I wouldn't think it was Callisto.”

“Why not?” I asked. “Maybe she'd already had this planned and was just waiting for an opportunity to pass us on to Aragorn.”

“Well, I suppose,” said Astrid, “but I was with Callisto for three days before you got involved and she could have passed me directly over to Aragorn but she didn't. She passed me to you instead. Besides she's the only one who knows the truth about me. She wouldn't leak it. There's too much at stake.”

I stopped munching and stared at her but she was busy picking off a juicy looking piece of pineapple.

“What do you mean, the only one who knows about you?” I asked.

“Exactly that,” said Astrid, popping the pineapple in her mouth. “Quite a few people know what I had but only Callisto knows about the other thing.”

“OK,” I said slowly, putting down the crust of the pizza as I don't like the crusts. “So, let me get this straight. You had two sets of information or whatever and one set is already known about by several people in the Department but the other is only known to Callisto, yes?”

“Sort of,” she said. “Callisto knows about it but doesn't know the details.”

“Right,” I said, frowning. “And this second set must be pretty important then. If the first set was that important it would have been leaked by now, if there is a leaker, and we wouldn't have all these

people after us. But why would they be after us if they don't know about the second set?"

"I'm not sure," said Astrid, "but I'm guessing Callisto can't handle it all on her own. I do know she's spending all this time setting up a group to handle it when I do eventually give her the details. Maybe word has spread that there's something big involving me and that's why people are looking for us."

"OK," I said. "So what you're saying is that you've got something that could be huge but no one knows exactly what it is, yes?"

She nodded.

"And Callisto knows in general terms but doesn't have the last few details which make everything possible?" I asked.

She nodded again.

"Will I get into trouble for telling you this?" she asked.

"Nope," I said. "For sure I won't be telling anyone, not that I actually know anything to tell since it's all very vague. So, umm, this thing only you've got? Would it be something CS would want to know?"

"Absolutely," she said.

"What about IS? Rossiya?" I asked.

"Yup," she said. "Pretty cool, huh," and she laughed.

I sat and thought about it and it did make some kind of sense. I hadn't told Astrid that Callisto had told me about increased communications traffic involving Fortuna across all the Blocks but if word was spreading that Europa, and Callisto in particular had something mega and was making preparations to do something with it or about it then everyone else would want to know even if they didn't know what it was all about. And if only Fortuna had the key to it all then it was open season on her. After all, there were plenty of chemicals available which would unlock her mind. And, it occurred to

me, it was entirely possible that if another Block couldn't actually get the details they might kill Fortuna to prevent any other Block having what they didn't have. After all, if you don't know what Fortuna knows then making sure no one else knows if you can't know could well be a motivating factor.

“Jesus!” I exclaimed when I finally thought it through.

She half smiled and shrugged. “Sorry.”

“What for?” I asked.

“Getting you involved in all this,” she said.

“You didn't,” I said. “Callisto did.”

I thought about it some more and decided that it was important to know about Aragorn sooner rather than later. If she had been turned, well, that was no biggie. Granted there'd have to be an investigation and damage control but as far as Fortuna was concerned that was more or less the end of it. If, on the other hand, it was a high level leak then Fortuna was still up to her neck in risks and my taking her to Amsterdam and dumping her on the specialist protection team could actually do more harm than good.

I pushed the rest of my pizza away then lit a ciggie.

“Make some fresh coffee, would you, Astrid?” I asked, picking up my phone.

“Sure,” she said and jumped up to collect my mug.

I juggled my phone in my hands for a few moments uncertainly then picked up my iPad and set the routing app to Dusseldorf. It wasn't that far from Duisburg and we could have gone straight there after the fracas with Aragorn. It never hurts to add some disinformation to the mix.

“Pegasus,” I said when a man answered my call to my dance agency.

“You are in Dusseldorf?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said.

“AAA priority message awaiting delivery,” he said.

“Give me the message,” I said.

“Message begins, Terminate all contact Aragorn immediately stop extract Fortuna immediately stop Fortuna safety highest priority stop Callisto message ends.” he said.

“Reply,” I said.

“Ready,” he said.

“Message begins,” I said, “Fortuna safe, Aragorn plus two incapacitated, await instructions message ends.”

He repeated the message back to me which I confirmed then we hung up. I watched the time on my phone screen and nineteen seconds later the agency messaged me again which was pleasingly quick.

“Pegasus,” I said as Astrid put a mug of coffee beside me and went to sit down.

“You are in Dusseldorf?” asked the same man's voice.

“Yes,” I said.

“Connecting you to Callisto,” he said.

“Hello?” asked Callisto. She sounded a little breathless so maybe she'd run to the phone. “Pegasus?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Is Fortuna safe and uninjured?” she asked.

“Apart from a graze on her knee,” I said, not for one moment

expecting she'd show any concerns for me.

"Thank God for that," said Callisto with relief in her voice. I was surprised as I've never heard her sound so emotional before. "What is the status of Aragorn?"

I quickly explained that Aragorn and two CS operatives had tried to capture us at Duisburg station and that all three were now in the hands of the police.

"So," I said when she'd noted the details to follow up with the police, "was Aragorn turned or removed?"

"Aragorn was found dead in a garbage bin in Oldenburg," said Callisto, her voice under control again.

Oldenburg? From memory that wasn't too far from Bremen which suggested she'd never got as far as Bremen. For sure if she'd been killed in Bremen they'd have left the body there not waste their time dragging it to Oldenburg.

"So we have a leak," I said flatly.

"Enquiries are already underway," she said.

I wanted to ask if she had any suspects already but didn't. There's no way she'd tell me. In fact I'd probably never know, unless someone suddenly went missing and I probably would never hear about that. I worked largely on the outside, making contact here and there with certain individuals. The vast majority of administrators and clerical staff were on the inside and I never met them. Still, it was a relief that Callisto was onto it.

"Instructions?" I asked.

"Your status?" she asked, finally acknowledging I might have been injured in the car park.

"Fully active," I said.

“Excellent,” she said and paused as if thinking. “Are you still able to reach Amsterdam?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Then continue as before,” she said. “We need Fortuna under specialist protection.”

“Alone?” I asked. The last thing I wanted was another 'helper' foisted on me and certainly not before the leaker was found. Ideally not after that either.

“Alone,” she confirmed, “unless you want support?”

“No,” I said. “Security has been breached and may be again.”

“Agreed,” she said. “Notify Centre when you reach Amsterdam for delivery details.”

“No,” I said. “I want to know who will be in the protection team. In advance. Now.”

“You're out of order, Pegasus,” she said. “You do not need to know that.”

“Wrong,” I said. “I do need to know. I'm not risking handing over Fortuna to enemy agents.”

“That will not happen,” she said, her tone sharp.

“Oh yeah?” I said. “Like Aragorn didn't happen?”

I could feel waves of antipathy down the phone but she didn't say anything.

“Very well,” she said after what seemed like an eternity. “Trivia will be team leader.”

“Who else will be in the team?” I asked, racking my brains to remember if I'd ever met a Trivia before. Trivia was, in case you're

interested, the Roman Goddess of crossroads. An unfortunate code name in this business but surprisingly apt since Amsterdam was going to be a literal crossroad as well as a metaphorical one in terms of Fortuna and, quite possibly, my career.

There was a pause as she, presumably, looked up the details.

“Charon and Gimli,” she said.

“Ahh,” I said. “I don't know any of them.”

“You don't need to know them,” she snapped.

“Sorry,” I said. “I will not take Fortuna into a possible trap. Not under any circumstances.”

I could almost hear her jaw clenching over the phone. Perhaps more importantly I could see Astrid watching me with some relief on her face.

The tension grew as the silence continued then Callisto must have realised the sense of what I was saying. Either that or she'd figured out that she could lay all the blame on me now if it all went belly up.

“Very well,” she said, her voice back to its normal level of terseness. “How do you want to play this?”

“I want two positive visual confirmations of each of the three team members from people I know,” I said.

“Are you serious?” she asked, naked disbelief in her voice. “I don't think there'll be anyone you know who also knows these people. That's not how we operate.”

“Maybe not,” I said, “but that's what I want or I won't deliver Fortuna.”

Something I hadn't thought through was what to do if this didn't work. Maybe we could both go to a South Pacific Island and get married or something, not that that particularly appealed. Astrid was

a nice girl but my inclinations went the other way. Maybe she could dive for pearls or something instead and I could sell them on the beach to hunky rich guys.

She sighed, Callisto not Fortuna since Fortuna didn't know what I was thinking.

"I'm getting too old for this," said Callisto and I almost, but not quite, felt a small measure of sympathy. "Very well. I'll do what I can. You get Fortuna to Amsterdam and I'll get something organised."

"No," I said. "I'm not leaving Dusseldorf until I know who will be doing the visual identifications and the place where we all meet." After all, the snatch could take place at the contact point where some person unknown to me was to tell me where to go. Also, if anyone came looking for us in Dusseldorf it would be a while before they figured out we weren't there. A South Sea Island was starting to look like an attractive proposition.

"You realise your future with the Agency is becoming questionable," said Callisto.

"I didn't ask to be given a personnel delivery," I retorted, "but I'm damned well going to make absolutely certain I make the delivery intact and into safe hands. If you can't handle that then maybe it's your future that's in question not mine."

OK, that should pretty well seal my future. Well done Pegasus. At least mum would be pleased when I found a 'proper job'. Assuming I lived that long.

"Make contact in one hour," said Callisto, her tone of voice perhaps a little less than friendly. Then she broke contact.

Chapter Seventeen

Astrid went to bed shortly after that. She was tired, unsurprisingly, and emotionally a little wrung out. She'd not mentioned Lars since but it was inevitable that it would stay in her mind for a while. She might even blame herself which would be foolish as Lars' actions had been his own choice but it can take a while to grasp that fully.

I, on the other hand, had to stay up for a while as I had to contact Callisto again, and not the least of my worries was the possibility, small but not negligible, that an attempt might be made by my own Department to try to kidnap Astrid and get her away from troublemaker me into safe, reliable hands. It helped that I'd pulled a shoulder muscle, probably when fighting Clarence, and my belly muscles still ached from where he'd punched me. Fortunately the prospect of a kidnap attempt wasn't imminent as Callisto thought we were in Dusseldorf rather than Duisburg and I'd paid for the hotel, taxi and so on in cash so there was no payment trail either.

What Astrid had told me did prey on my mind however. If she wasn't bullshitting me then what she carried in her head was unbelievably important. I speculated for a while on what it could be but my imagination simply wasn't up to it. Here's the thing though. Callisto knew what it was but lacked some vital piece of information, whatever it was in Astrid's head, so she was unable to actually act on it directly. According to Astrid she was assembling a team but they couldn't do anything until Astrid set them loose. Still, it did explain one thing – why it was taking so long to decide on where and when Astrid was to be delivered. My delivering her to Amsterdam wouldn't be the final destination either. It was merely a transfer to better protection for Astrid. It must be quite difficult to assemble a team to perform some task when you can't tell the team what it's all about and you can't let the opposition know when or where the team is being assembled or even that it is being assembled or who might be in it since identifying members could give away clues. No wonder Callisto was a bit tetchy.

I pondered all this for a while, eating the rest of my pizza and a piece of Astrid's in the process then gave up and dug Aragorn's gun out of my bag. I dislike guns generally and don't carry one ordinarily but the situation was getting more complex and it just might come in handy.

Inevitably another major defect of guns came to light immediately. The damned thing only had one bullet left in it. I don't know why guns have such a following since you have to carry half a ton of spare ammo everywhere you go otherwise it's just another ornament and not a particularly nice looking one at that. I gave it a clean though since it would be ironic if I decided to fire the one bullet and the wretched thing blew up in my face. Judging by the state of the torn off strip of cloth I forced through the barrel, Aragorn hadn't cleaned it for a while. Then again, she was very likely from Christian State or at the very least a sympathiser and over there guns have more rights than women so maybe she wasn't worthy to clean it, who knows.

At seven minutes past midnight, bang on one hour after Callisto hung up on me, I renewed contact with a moderate amount of trepidation. The situation was getting out of hand and could easily escalate dramatically. Fortunately it didn't and the fates came down on my side. Callisto curtly informed me that no two people who knew me, Trivia, Charon and Gimli could be found. But, and this was a very important but, my own Head, Elrond, could visually identify Trivia and Gimli and so could Vulcan, a senior section leader I'd once met in Oslo. Further checking had found Triton, a personnel specialist, was also identifiable by Elrond and Vulcan and was being brought in to replace Charon. No doubt Trivia, the team leader, wouldn't be too impressed but I was. It couldn't have been easy to go through all the tens or hundreds of thousands of inter-connections to see who'd met who over the years and then get two pretty high up important people to drop everything and travel from opposite sides of Europa because some low level wonk (me) was getting uppity. Fair play to Callisto for even trying and full marks for succeeding. She also, and this would probably give her nightmares, broke with protocol and informed me that all eight of us ~ her, me, Fortuna, the two high ups and the three team specialists ~ would get together at 4pm in the cafeteria at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam for the handover. I went to bed happy but didn't sleep as much as I'd like because of my aches and pains, indigestion from too much greasy pizza and a few possible scenarios playing out in my mind which needed planning for.

Fortuna woke around seven thirty in the morning. She stumbled blearily out of her bed to go to the toilet and spotted the gun I'd foolishly left on the table. In a mild state of alarm, thinking something

had happened during the night, she tried to wake me but couldn't because I'd finally fallen into a deep sleep. Even more alarmed she got a tumbler of very cold water from the bathroom and threw it in my face, causing me to react instinctively and lash out. Fortunately I missed but this didn't put either of us in an overly happy state of mind. When everything had calmed down I took her to breakfast in a café a few doors down from the hotel and, over decent quantities of caffeine, carbohydrates and nicotine, I explained what the revised plan was. We then went shopping, since our clothes had various marks and tears from the previous night as well as some dried blood and grease and oil from the semi-trailers.

A few moments with the Internet provided me with the location of another shop that specialised in wigs. We got a taxi since it was the other side of Duisburg and spent an entertaining three quarters of an hour trying on different wigs and laughing at each other before going back to the hotel and applying makeup that better suited our new hair colours and new personas. I also used half a roll of toilet paper padding out another bra I'd got which was one cup size bigger. By this time it was approaching midday so I acquired a rather nice Lexus from the hotel car park rather than waste time roaming the streets and we made haste towards Amsterdam. We abandoned the car not far before the German-Dutch border as it was quite likely the Lexus had been reported stolen quite quickly and replaced it with a big heavy six seater parked in a side street.

I chose the six seater in case we had to smash our way through any border check since we now looked nothing like our passport holograms and, even if we did, the names of Freya Larsen and Astrid Pederson were probably known to all and sundry by now. As it was no one tried to stop us, hopefully because they'd be thinking we were heading to Amsterdam from Dusseldorf which is a different route to that from Duisburg. We reached the outer centre of Amsterdam around two thirty and abandoned the six seater as well and got a taxi to the Rijksmuseum. I'd been there before and parking was horrendous. The Rijksmuseum ~ the Dutch national museum and packed with Dutch art and history ~ was in Museumstraat and there were a number of other museums and art galleries in the immediate vicinity, including the Van Gogh Museum. The area was always packed with tourists trying to imbibe some Dutch culture, school kids

having their culture dumped on them, artists trying to learn the secret skills of Dutch Masters, street performers and the usual motley collection of pickpockets, con men, thieves and hookers, most of whom had arrived by car or coach.

I immediately dragged Astrid into the Rijksmuseum bookshop and she chose a weighty tome about the eminent Dutch artist Vermeer appropriately entitled *Close To Vermeer*, English edition, and published by the Museum at the knock down price of €380. For myself I chose the current edition of the Museum's scholarly journal, *The Rijksmuseum Bulletin*, which was a snip at €60.

Thus armed we reached the cafeteria around 3:15 and I settled Astrid at a table on her own with a milkshake and a muffin. I sat three tables away, partly because the cafeteria was quite busy and partly because I didn't want to be too close to Astrid but still be able to monitor her and anyone who approached. She looked her part perfectly. A demure school teacher type in a plain brown skirt and a neat in no way provocative blouse with fairly short dull red hair, makeup that made her look a good few years older and reading glasses with the lenses pushed out. I, on the other hand, was now bustier, with long wavy blonde locks and tight office-girl clothing that was not too tarty but would definitely attract a lot more attention than Astrid's outfit. On her own and with the Vermeer book she wouldn't catch anyone's eye but close to me she just looked dowdy and, most importantly, be completely overlooked. I sat and watched the people milling round and having their snacks while pretending to read *Recent Acquisitions: Women in the Rijksmuseum Collection* in The Bulletin. I got more than a few looks but, critically, didn't spot anyone giving Astrid more than a cursory glance.

Around twenty to four a man and a woman came into the cafeteria. They were both in their early thirties and were dressed in a fairly nondescript way but both looked fitter than you'd expect for art lovers. They looked around and chose an empty table near the middle of the cafeteria and sat down without ordering anything. My gut told me they were likely candidates and their timing, placement and manner tended to confirm it. A couple of minutes later another man appeared, carrying three drinks. He put them on the table then appropriated the table next to it as the people there got up and left.

Unusual behaviour – getting drinks for people but sitting somewhere else – but probably not apparent amidst the general bustle. I figured they were the specialist team we were there to meet.

Around ten to four Callisto appeared, accompanied by Elrond, my Department head. They acted like a couple and discussed where to sit while making sure they looked at everyone in the room. Callisto's eyes passed over Astrid without any reaction and neither of them recognised me. They were, however, recognised by one of the three specialists who hailed them and moved the second table closer to the first and rearranged the seats so they could all sit together. To anyone watching they looked like a group who were getting together again after exploring the Museum. One of the guys went off to the serving area, presumably to get them something so they didn't look out of place in a cafeteria.

And so we sat there. Myself and Astrid at our respective tables, studiously reading and ignoring the others and the five of them around two tables with three empty seats, trying to make casual conversation. It was apparent that both Elrond and Callisto had forgotten much of their field craft and they were overly stiff and straight faced. The minutes ticked by and both Elrond and Callisto checked their phones several times. Once someone tried to take one of the spare seats but were stopped.

It was almost twenty past four when Vulcan turned up, looking harried and a bit dishevelled. He spotted Callisto and the others and immediately went over and appeared to apologise for being late. Callisto dismissed his apologies with a wave of her hand and checked her phone again. Elrond leant over and said something to her and she clearly replied “I don't know” even though I couldn't hear her. He must have asked where we were or something. Vulcan smoothed his hair and tidied his suit jacket then looked around expectantly. They'd also virtually given up taking to each other.

I gave it a couple of minutes, just feeling the ambience of the cafeteria, then stood up and gathered my things. Astrid glanced over and I brushed some hair out of my eyes to let her know this was the moment. She turned the page and carried on reading about Vermeer. I took my empty mug over to the collection point then headed for the

entrance, weaving around a couple of tables so I passed near the group. As I drew level I put my hand in my bag as though looking for something then, with a big beam on my face, I slipped neatly onto one of the two spare seats.

“Hello everybody,” I said brightly as they all looked at me in surprise.

“That seat's taken,” said Callisto firmly.

“Yes,” I said happily. “By me.”

I pulled out the gun and laid it on the table then quickly pulled off my wig and put it on top of the gun to hide it. They'd all seen it, however, and my point was made, especially as none of them knew it only had one bullet. I kept my hand on the gun while fluffing out my own hair and smiled.

“Hello Pegasus,” said Elrond. He at least looked pleased to see me.

“Hello Elrond,” I said. “How are you?”

“I'm good,” he said.

“Where's Fortuna?” asked Callisto, frowning.

“You know, I'm not entirely sure,” I said. “I think she may have gone to the toilet. Hello Vulcan.”

He smiled as well and nodded acknowledgement.

“You were told never to let her out of your sight,” snapped Callisto, albeit quietly.

I just stared at her and Elrond waved his hand, palm flat, as if to quieten her down.

“The main point, I think, is that Fortuna is here, is she not?” he asked.

“Perhaps,” I said, and nodded at the trio of specialists who were watching me. “This them?”

“Yes,” said Elrond very quietly. “I confirm they are Trivia, Gimli and Triton.”

“Thanks,” I said and glanced at Vulcan.

“Yes they are,” he said, matching Elrond’s quietness. “Trivia, Triton and Gimli.”

“How nice,” I said, greatly relieved. I looked around the cafeteria and no one seemed to be paying us any attention except Fortuna, which was understandable.

“The delivery?” said Callisto, raising an eyebrow at me.

“Just a sec,” I said and leaned back and scrunched my wig into a ball with the gun inside and stuffed it in my bag. That was the signal and Astrid slowly closed her book and got up. She was looking worried again.

She came over and stood behind the one remaining chair.

“Hello,” she said in a quiet voice. It sounded a little shaky as well.

“I didn’t recognise you,” said Callisto, studying her. Vulcan and Elrond were too although, I suspected, more out of curiosity than anything. They’d probably never seen her before. The three specialists, though, were trying to play it cool and pretend they already knew her.

“Is this Fortuna?” asked Vulcan, glancing at Callisto.

“Do you want her to take off her wig as well?” I asked.

“No, that won’t be necessary,” said Callisto. “I confirm this is Fortuna.”

There was a general sigh of relief around the table.

“So we’re done?” I asked, standing up.

“Yes,” said Callisto then, very stiffly, “thank you for your efforts.”

“My pleasure,” I said.

I glanced around the table, hoping the specialists were as good as they were supposed to be, then nodded at Elrond and Vulcan. I was turning to go when, totally surprising me, Astrid gave me a big hug.

“Thank you,” she whispered. “Thank you for everything.”

I gave her a one armed hug back as my bag was in my other hand and trapped between us and the table.

“Look after yourself, kid,” I said. “You’ll be fine.”

She let me go and I turned and walked out of the cafeteria without looking back.

It was overcast outside, unsurprisingly since it had been overcast when we’d arrived, and I walked rather aimlessly over to the canal that fronted the Museum. I felt a little, I don’t know, empty inside, rudderless, purposeless. I didn’t feel like this after a normal delivery but this one had been very different. After all, I’d had Fortuna with me for six days and I’d killed someone and beaten up five others protecting her. That does create some sort of bond no matter how hard you try to fight it. Anyway, she was now gone from my life, no longer my responsibility. I lit a ciggie and gazed down into the murky waters of the canal, wondering if I’d ever see her again.

“Probably not,” I muttered to myself.

“Probably not what?” asked Elrond behind me.

I whirled round, almost stabbing him in the chest with my ciggie.

“Sorry, I didn’t see you there,” I said.

“No problem,” he said, brushing some ash off his tie. “I, um, wanted to have a word with you before you left Amsterdam.”

“Oh yes?” I said, holding my ciggie well away from him.

“When Callisto contacted me last night,” he said, leaning casually against the balustrade, “she was quite, shall we say, unappreciative of your conduct on this matter.”

“Oh,” I said, feeling drained. Was I now going to get a reprimand? Maybe even the sack?

“I made a few enquiries,” he said, “as Fortuna is a very rare and important acquisition, which you doubtless appreciate by now.” He half smiled, watching me closely.

“I rather figured that,” I said and took a drag on my ciggie. “So what did Callisto say?”

“Oh that doesn't really matter,” he said. “What matters is what I'm going to do about it.”

“Right,” I said and took a deep breath. “So what are you going to do about it?”

“Give you a commendation,” he said. “Purely internal of course, you won't get a mention in the New Year's Honours List or anything but a commendation none the less.”

I blinked in surprise. Maybe I wasn't going to get the sack after all.

“You've done a superb job,” he said, still watching me. “And, despite what Callisto thinks, you did absolutely the right thing insisting on visual confirmation of the team. The consequences of another Aragorn would have been incalculable. Fortuna is vitally important, not just to us but to the whole of Europa and it's entirely down to you that she is safe and well.”

“Oh, um, thanks,” I said, embarrassed. “Just doing my job really.”

“Indeed,” he said and patted me on the shoulder. “You look tired.”

“It's the makeup,” I said even though I was tired. “It was for a blonde,

not me.”

“And very well done there as well,” he said. “I didn’t recognise you. Neat trick too with the gun. That put the wind up them. Anyway, you deserve a holiday. I’ll tell Centre not to give you any more deliveries for a week or two. That OK with you?”

“Oh, um, yes,” I said. “A holiday would be nice.”

“Excellent, excellent,” he said. “Well, I must be off. Once again, a good job. You have my personal thanks as well, by the way.”

“Thank you,” I said and watched as he started to walk away. Then he turned and came back.

“Nearly forget,” he said, sounding embarrassed. “Freya Larsen is a liability now,” and he took an envelope out of his inside pocket and handed it to me. “Perhaps I’ll see you again in a few weeks.”

He marched off and I opened the envelope. It was another passport and I flipped the cover to see who I now was. Emma Jane Frampton, apparently, born London on 17th April 2012, making me almost my real age again.

“Cool,” I said and put the passport in my bag. I felt the gun so I got it out, still wrapped in the blonde wig and just held it loosely in my hand for a few moments.

“Well, goodbye Astrid, Marie or whatever you name is,” I muttered and tossed the wig into the canal. “It was nice to have met you.”

Chapter Eighteen

I got home around nine that evening, the UK now being on summer time so it was the same as Holland. Manchester airport still hadn't got around to starting the renovations they'd been planning for at least five years and Arrivals was still a bleak and depressing place. I didn't have any luggage – I never do – and was able to swan through the formalities with almost no fuss. What was a little worrying was that one of the sniffer dogs that go around sniffing people and their bags for drugs and what have you remembered me and gave a friendly wag of welcome. I made a mental note to tell the specialist little department within the Department that dreams up gadgets and other sneaky little odds and ends that it could be useful to have something that disguises our smell. Fortunately I don't travel through other airports often but I invariably come home through Manchester Airport. Might be an idea to change that habit as well.

My house was where I'd left it, unremarkably since I'd only been away three weeks or so. The front door was unlocked so I pushed it open and wandered upstairs to my room. A few years back, when I was a student at Manchester Uni I'd rented a room in that house, along with two other students in the other bedrooms. Actually I had that room for two years and had got very fond of it so I was a little devastated when the landlord announced, in the middle of my finals, that he was selling the house and going back to Jamaica. I shouldn't have been really since I'd finished my studies and had already been recruited by the Department so, in the normal run of things, I'd have been leaving anyway. But, when my last exam was finished and I was sitting in my little nest wondering what was going to become of me, I phoned the estate agent on impulse.

The long and the short of it was that if I combined the smallish inheritance I'd received from a not long departed auntie and a slightly larger loan from the bank of mum and dad I could put a deposit on the house. After giving it careful consideration for at least three minutes I then phoned the agent back and made an offer. Two days later it was accepted which left me with the problem of where to find the rest of the money. I had an income as I was working for the Department but a note of inner caution suggested that maybe it would be a good idea to not let the Department know I was buying a house

or the address. Even then, innocent newbie that I was, I had a gut feeling there might be a time when I didn't want the Department to know where I lived. As my training progressed I also discovered that leaks and security breaches, while rare, were not unknown and other people and organisations might well have an interest in where I lived too.

So, as I couldn't get a mortgage without giving my employer's details, I was in a bit of a quandary. Figuring I had nothing to lose I decided to put what little tradecraft I'd learned by then into practice and set up a dummy company, employing myself as the bookkeeper. I then submitted my mortgage application to the bank which held my student account. In due course the bank emailed the company wanting confirmation of my employment, salary, length of service and so forth so I created a cute little letterhead for the company, which offered AI based secretarial services incidentally, and emailed back giving myself a salary more than enough to meet the mortgage requirements and saying I'd worked there for 2½ years. It was only after I'd sent the email that I realised that, in my enthusiasm, that I'd inadvertently claimed I'd been there 2½ years even though the company hadn't existed until 2 days before my application for the loan. I then spent three weeks or thereabouts expecting the Fraud Squad to break down my door.

Of course, I still had at that time an incomplete understanding of human nature. I realised after my loan application had been approved that the bank's computers had checked the company existed and had checked I worked there via separate algorithms and neither algorithm had talked to the other about dates. Consequently, when the application went to a human for final approval – and it may well not have done as the house was fairly cheap, relatively speaking – the computer's judgement was accepted as infallible and no questions were asked. Strangely the bank didn't seem to notice that the account I had with them as a student had never had much money in it even though I had, allegedly, been earning a decent wage for over two years while apparently also being a student. Perhaps they thought I had another account with another bank for my salary but if they did they never asked for details. Still, the experience added to my growing awareness that computers did what they were programmed to do and that people expected them to be right all the time despite the gaps in

the programming and that can be exploited.

I daresay that technically I did perpetrate a fraud but since I had every intention of paying the mortgage and have, in fact, paid off about ten years worth of repayments over the intervening five years, there was no victim which seems a crucial factor with fraud. I dare say also, should the bank ever find out, it wouldn't be in their interests to do anything as they'd stand to gain more from letting me pay off the mortgage than foreclosing.

Importantly though, I owned a house and no one knew about it, apart from my parents and the bank. Even more importantly it was a house I loved and felt safe and secure in. It also gave me a small independent income as I knew I wouldn't be spending much time there so I continued to rent out the other two rooms to students and employed a property agent, using a different name to my own, to handle the students and any repairs and maintenance that were needed. I kept my old room for myself and, on the odd occasion when I bumped into one of the tenants, let it be known that I was a doing research into archaic Gaelic romantic literature. It's a subject that seems to fascinate no one and usually kills the conversation when I mention it which is ideal as I know nothing about it whatsoever. I don't even know if the Ancient Welsh had romantic literature.

That said, I still worked for the Department and had to take precautions in case the place was ever associated with me as a courier. To that end I spent a considerable amount of money, my own which was painful, installing a fancy security system on my room which notified me if anyone tried to gain entry. I didn't bother for the rest of the house since it was a) student accommodation so any overt security would be suspicious and b) it was occupied by students so there were people coming and going most of the time, including parties at least twice a week during term time. I'd been alerted to intrusion attempts several times but each time it had been a drunk or stoned student trying to get in the wrong room. They usually tried to push the door open then stared bemusedly at it when it didn't then wander off. One chap didn't. He just lay down outside my room and went to sleep instead.

So, I got home around nine to discover there were no parties going on

which was a bit of a relief as I was feeling tired and a little drained. My shoulder and belly still hurt so I was looking forward to a bath. There was some music, some sort of lugubrious wailing chanting type music, coming from the ground floor room but it didn't make its way up the stairs to my room which was at the front. I let myself into my room and hesitated for a moment for the facial recognition system to recognise me and not message me to say I was an intruder breaking in. I didn't switch off the system, however, as it's always useful to know when an unexpected visitor turns up when I am there. Those few seconds while they assess the door for security could prove to be vital.

I stood in the middle of the room for a while just absorbing the atmosphere and letting its energies infuse me with relaxing calm. Everything was familiar, unlike the endless hotel and motel rooms I usually stayed in, and the room was filled with my stuff. None of it particularly exciting but when your life is filled with things bought or stolen and dumped soon afterwards things like the few clothes I'd had for years, my old textbooks, other books and DVDs I'd bought – and kept – took on a greater significance. They held an aura of stability, of permanence, of belonging, both of them to me and of me to them. No photographs of relatives or friends though, that would be pushing things a bit far.

Dumping my bag on the bed, single unfortunately as the room wasn't big enough to be livable in with a double bed, I went downstairs to the kitchen and made myself some hot cocoa using milk I pinched from Carmel's shelf in the fridge. While the milk was heating I nicked some of Tiffany's bread and butter and made some instant noodles which were my own as I only kept a basic stock of dry and tinned foods.

Taking the lot back up to my room, I settled myself in my armchair – so old it fitted the curves of my thighs and bum perfectly – and dug my personal iPad and phone from my desk drawer. I left them both off and in the drawer when I was away as they were in my name and held much of the minutiae of my personal day to day life. I munched on some still slightly crunchy noodles while the iPad checked the fingerprints of the third finger of my left hand and the ring finger of my right hand before connecting to the computer that sat in the base

of an old weather vane fixed to the roof. Someone might get in and take the room apart but no one, hopefully, would go up on the roof to check out a rusty old weather vane. Once confirmed as me I checked the logs of the room's motion activated camera.

No one had been in the room, as they'd have activated the outer layer of security but my training had drummed into me that you can't be too careful. Besides, the house was student accommodation and the internal camera was sensitive enough to pick up mice scurrying across the floor or nosing around on my desk. A couple of times I'd come back to find there'd been mice in the room which was good as it allowed me to get them dealt with before they became an infestation. This time though the logs showed nothing had moved while I'd been away. That done, I turned on my phone and found I had several messages. One from my mum, one from the phone company telling me my credit was about to run out and another telling me it had been automatically renewed. There were also two others from a guy called Brendan I'd met on my last return home. The first asking if I wanted to go out that evening – sadly almost two weeks previously – and the second the next day saying that since I hadn't replied to the first I presumably was not that interested and he wouldn't bother me again unless I contacted him. All very polite but then he was quite a nice guy.

I thought about it for a few moments then rang him. He didn't answer and the call went to his voice mail. I left a message apologising for not replying earlier but I'd been called away because of an exciting new find in the world of archaic Gaelic romantic literature and had forgotten to take my charger. However, I was now back home, fully recharged and, by an amazing coincidence, free the following evening if he was interested. He still hadn't rung back ten minutes later so I curled my lip at the phone and took my empties downstairs to the kitchen.

“Hey Cath,” said Carmel, looking out from the fridge as I went in. She was dressed in the usual oversized t-shirt and baggy pyjama bottoms that she lived in when she wasn't elsewhere. She occupied the ground floor room behind our communal living room. “So you're back then?”

“Sure am,” I said, going over to the sink. “I owe you for some milk.”

“Ohh that was you, was it?” she asked, straightening up with a milk carton in her hand. “I thought it was that bloody Tiffany again.”

“Nope, definitely me,” I said. “I’ll get you some more tomorrow, OK?”

“No probs,” she said, grabbing the milk from Tiffany’s shelf. “So how long you back for?”

The toaster pinged and four slices of toast slowly emerged from the top. They were supposed to jump up joyfully but the toaster was probably as old as I was. I hadn’t bothered to do any refurbishment, other than replace the rotten wooden sash windows throughout with modern aluminium ones, since the place had to stay in character.

“I’m not sure,” I said, “but there’s a forum on Welsh literature I’m going to in a couple of weeks.”

“Oh you have all the fun,” she said, smearing some sort of herbal spread over her toast. It looked as bad as it smelt. “Met any cute guys recently?”

“You are joking,” I said. “Cute guys and romantic literature are mutually exclusive.”

“Tell me about it,” she said. “One hint of romance and the buggers run like foxes.” She laughed and licked some of the spread from her fingers. “Want some?”

“No, I’ve just eaten,” I said, rinsing my plate and bowl. I left them on the drying rack along with all the other dishes that no one bothered to put away.

“Well, see you round,” she said and went back to her room. The wailing chanting music gave way to something not much different but with a slow drum beat.

I went back upstairs and popped into the bathroom to start my bath going then headed back to my room where I stripped off my clothes and dumped them in a pile beside the door to be put in the rubbish later. I didn’t want to keep them. I put on my dressing gown, nicely

threadbare in places, and my special little packet of Ylang Ylang bath salts and my fairly expensive brand of shampoo and conditioner. I didn't leave them in the bathroom as they were too good for students. I was about to hop in the bath when I heard my phone ping.

"That's strange," I muttered, frowning. "Why's Brendan texting on my work phone?"

Still, I was planning on a nice long soak in the bath so I nipped back to check what he'd said. It would be even nicer soaking in the bath if I could look forward to a date the following night. In my line of work a social life is more of an aspiration.

"Are you back from Rome yet?" said the message.

"What?" I muttered, frowning. "Who is this?" I texted.

"Darren," said the message that appeared thirty seconds later. "I'm sad you didn't put me in your contacts." It was followed by a sad face with rivers of tears coming from its eyes.

"Who the fuck's Darren?" I muttered, staring at the phone. Then I remembered that guy who'd asked me for my phone number in that shopping mall in Liverpool. His name was Darren, wasn't it? I might even have told him I was going to Rome but a lot had happened since then.

"Darren in Liverpool?" I texted back.

"Now I'm sad you seem to know a lot of Darrens," he replied, this time with two sad faces but no tears, "but yes I'm in Liverpool. Where are you?"

I went back into the bathroom and turned the taps off. The water was a tad hot but it would cool down soon enough. I tossed in a handful of bath salts then added some more for good measure then positioned my ashtray on the edge of the bath, beside my cocoa, and got in, still clutching my phone which probably wasn't a good idea. I leaned over the side of the bath and put the phone on the floor and covered it with my towel.

“Darren in Liverpool,” I said, thinking. I lit a ciggie and pondered. If this was that guy in the shopping mall I'd only given him my number so I'd be able to keep some sort of track of him if he had been following me. Since I'd seen nor heard nothing since, I figured he probably wasn't following me. Certainly Liverpool had been before I collected Fortuna. Oh yeah! It all came flooding back. I'd run into him on the path beside the Mersey, near the docks. He'd said something about an ex wife then left and I'd run into him at the shopping mall a little later. I seemed to remember he'd asked me to dinner and I'd stalled by saying I was going to Rome. Interesting. He was texting me a week later so presumably he still wanted dinner.

What to do about it though. Liverpool wasn't that far and I hadn't had a social date with a guy for a while. Then again, Brendan was still a distinct possibility and, I had to admit, was still in my mind whereas Darren had slipped out of it. But if Brendan didn't get back to me ...

“Blackpool,” I texted Darren. OK I was actually in Manchester but Blackpool was roughly as far from Liverpool as Manchester and I hate having to tell the truth. I was long out of the habit.

“From the sublime to the ridiculous,” he texted back, showing he had a little class. “So what about dinner?”

“OK,” I texted back after stubbing out my ciggie and having a swig of cocoa. “When are you next in Blackpool?” No harm in playing a little hard to get.

“I can be there in an hour,” he replied, a little optimistically as it was over a hundred and fifty kilometres but I do like enthusiasm in a man when it comes to dates with me.

“I can be in Liverpool on Monday,” I texted, deciding I'd played hard enough to get but at the same time leaving things open for Brendan. Hey, two dates on two consecutive nights – that hadn't happened since I left Uni.

“Awesome,” he texted. “Where shall we have dinner?”

“Surprise me,” I replied then, because I'd forgotten arranging a date

can be more complex than setting up a clandestine rendezvous, I added “let me know Mon pm where to meet you and when.”

“Will do,” he replied, along with a happy face showing lots of teeth in a grin. “So how was Rome?”

“Great, see you Mon,” I texted, hoping he'd not reply. I really really wanted a long hot soak. Undisturbed. It didn't help I couldn't remember offhand what name I'd given him but I'd worry about that on Monday or blame him for getting it wrong. That works too.

He did reply, but it was just a string of half a dozen happy faces so I left it at that and relaxed into my not quite as hot as it was bath. Then Carmel barged in, wanting to use the toilet.

Chapter Nineteen

I woke up feeling refreshed and invigorated. My belly pain had subsided to being just a little tender to the touch and, when I got out of bed and stretched, there were only a couple of twinges in my shoulder. Sadly I now had a bruise where Clarence had punched me which might intrigue Brendan for a few moments that night if things went according to plan but probably not. I peered out the window at the clouds that threatened rain and subconsciously noted no one was standing suspiciously on the pavement. It was so automatic to check that I wasn't even aware of it anymore. Irritatingly there were no messages on my phone but it was entirely possible Brendan hadn't woken up yet.

I disappeared into the bathroom for a quick pee and, checking myself in the mirror, I thought I looked a little puffy. More alarmingly I also spotted a couple of grey hairs but, after closer inspection, it was more a trick of the light. The puffiness wasn't though so I resolved to go for a run and, in the afternoon, go to my karate club for a session. That would help sharpen me up a bit as I'd felt I was a tad too slow in the car park in Duisburg; I shouldn't have hit Aragorn's shoulder rather than her head. In fact it would probably be a good idea to go to the club every day while I was on holiday. Aizley, the club president and instructor who didn't quite manage to qualify for the 2028 Olympics, could be quite acerbic if she felt you weren't living up to the standards she thought you could achieve. She might even have some tips about how to fight someone when the back end of a semi-trailer got in the way.

I put on my running shorts, singlet and shoes then popped into the kitchen for some fuel. I was a little surprised to see a thin woman wearing a loose t-shirt that only just reached the tops of her thighs. She was leaning against the fridge with her eyes closed, her close cropped head resting against the top of the door. Aside from a lit cigarette drooping from her lips she had two studs in her nose, one each side, a safety pin in the corner of her lower lip, some sort of bar through the bridge of her nose and a little human skeleton dangling from one ear. Intriguingly she was also wearing a choker made from bent nails and the tattoo on the bicep of the arm I could see said 'fuck the revolution'. She had a few other tattoos but they were mostly

coffins, skulls, headstones and assorted other Gothic style art. I'm no expert on tattoos but they looked to be expensively done rather than cheap high street jobs and were quite in keeping with her black lipstick and deep purple eye liner.

"Hello," I said brightly and noted the kettle was already on.

She opened her eyes and looked at me before saying "hey".

"Just visiting are you?" I asked, checking to see if Tiffany had finished her bread. She hadn't so I nicked a couple of slices and put them in the toaster.

"Michaela," she said, limply holding out her hand. "Pleased to meet you."

She had some writing tattooed on the back of her hand, in that fleshy part between the thumb and first finger. I couldn't read it because the writing was upside down. What was more surprising was her accent was very definitely wealthy home counties, probably Surrey. I guessed her style of presentation was a statement of rejection of her Baronet father or similar.

"I'm Cathy," I said, shaking her hand. "The landlord." I only said that to see how she'd react.

"Hey," she said, opening her eyes fully. She pushed herself upright as the kettle clicked. "So this fabulous place is yours then?"

"Yes," I said.

"It's just so amazing," she said. "So neo-Marxist, so ... so ... retro Keynesian in its pseudo minimalist abstraction. Almost a complete vindication of the rejection of European commercialism, but in a post-colonial ratatouille mash of outmoded 20th century facile urban development in parallel with but contrasting the excesses of The Establishment." She put finger quotes around 'The Establishment' and the element of sarcasm in her voice suggested she wasn't wholly in favour of it.

“Oh yes,” I said blinking. I couldn't see quite what a vegetable stew had to do with urban development and wondered what she'd say if I revealed I was one of the chains that held 'The Establishment' together. After all, you can't have much of an Establishment if it has no data. Still, she made me nostalgic for the black and white simplicity of student life. I also kind of liked that my little mid-terrace house was 'retro Keynesian'. It was home but 'retro Keynesian' gave it an added gloss.

“I like you, Steph,” she said, pointing a finger at me. “You're keeping it relevant. Radical but subdued.”

“I'm pleased to hear that,” I said, watching as she poured hot water into a couple of mugs of dried noodles. She'd probably taken them from my stash but I didn't begrudge her. After all, 'radical but subdued' sounded pretty cool as well. “So who are you visiting?”

She put her hand flat on the bench while she stabbed at some of the noodles with a fork. Now I could see it properly, the tattooed writing said “eat my fear” which was intriguing. The words were tattooed upside-down so she could read them rather than for someone else to read and suggested that at some time in the past she'd been through some major trauma. To the extent that she needed to 'eat her fear' and, perhaps worse, needed a constant reminder to do so.

“I've forgotten her name,” she said, licking some droplets of the noodle broth from her fingers, “but she's that horny bitch upstairs.”

“Ahh, Tiffany,” I said, partly because only me and Tiffany lived upstairs and, judging by the succession of visitors she probably was pretty horny. I hadn't known she was bi-sexual though. Maybe she'd just run out of men in Manchester.

“Yeah, something like that,” she said and smiled. Despite all the tats and nails and coffins and the rest the smile made her look very vulnerable. Almost as though she'd set out to look tough as a cover for something else. Quite possibly her projection of herself was related to eating her fear. “Hey, nice meeting you Beth.”

She wandered off, a cup of noodles in each hand, and I watched her

go up the stairs. She kicked Tiffany's door with her bare foot and the door opened. It closed very firmly behind her, shutting the rest of the world out.

I lathered honey on my toast and took it outside to eat while my tea cooled enough to drink. As far as I could tell the entire street, comprising as it did of two long terraces of narrow 1930s red brick houses, must be 'retro Keynesian'. Certainly they all looked much the same although a few people had been creative with their front doors. Leaving my mug and plate on the low wall that bordered the three foot wide front garden I limbered up then set off on the six kilometre run I used to do every day to get to uni. I won't say I got there in record time but it was quite satisfactory so I turned round and ran back home again. The uni hadn't changed appreciably so there was no need to look around.

I took a shower, got changed then scowled at my phone because Brendan still hadn't replied. I was beginning to get the feeling he'd moved on which was irritating. Darren hadn't texted on my work phone either. OK he wasn't due to until the next day but it would have been courteous to have texted good morning or something.

"Hello?" came my dad's voice when I rang them.

"Hey dad, it's me, Cathy," I said. "How are you?"

"Oh hello Cathy," he said. "I'll get your mother," and I heard the phone thump as he put it on the sideboard. I sighed as he always did this. He didn't approve of me to the extent he didn't really want to talk to me although he didn't go so far as to blank me totally.

"Hello Cathy," came my mum's voice. She sounded a little cautious as though she didn't want the neighbours knowing I was ringing.

"Hi mum," I said, sounding cheerful because I was. I was used to their little ways. "How're you?"

"Oh, mustn't grumble," she said. "How is Dubai?" She made it sound like an infectious disease.

“Too hot,” I said. “Too dry. Hey, listen. I’ve quit my job at the Kitten Club. It wasn’t working out right.”

“You’re not pregnant, are you?” asked mum dubiously.

“Nooo, of course not,” I said with a laugh. “I just don’t like it here so I quit.”

“Oh yes,” she said, doubtless pleased I’d quit but afraid I was moving on to something similar or worse. “So, umm, you have another job or are you going to ...” I knew she meant “... going to get a decent respectable job,” but she petered out.

“I’m off to The Samarkand in Morocco,” I said. “It’s twice nightly shows but the money’s better. The men are a bit more upmarket as well I’m told. Not so touristy.”

“That’s nice, dear,” said mum. “When do you start there?”

“In a week or so,” I said. “Hey, I was thinking, you know, if you’re not too busy, of maybe coming to see you both next weekend.”

“Oh we’re not doing anything,” said mum. I could tell she was pleased to be able to see me again even though she didn’t approve of me. “We never do. The whole weekend or just one day?”

“I was thinking the whole weekend,” I said. “It’ll be nice to catch up.”

“I’d better give your old room a clean then,” she said thoughtfully. “Your father’s been using it to store some things but they can easily be moved.”

“There’s no need to go to any trouble, mum” I said. “I’ve been living in anonymous hotels for yonks. It’ll be nice to have some real home clutter again. Will Rachel and Joshie be around?”

“I think they’ll be in London,” said mum, sounding a little vague. Rachel approved of me even less than my parents did as ‘my lifestyle’ as an exotic dancer didn’t correspond with what she thought a middle level bank executive’s wife’s sister should be. “Adam’s got a conference

in London and Rachel's going with him."

Which was bullshit, of course. No way would a bunch of bankers want wives and toddlers cramping their style.

"How nice for her," I said. "I'm sure she'll love every moment. Bankers know how to have a good time."

I didn't have a clue as I don't move in those circles but I figured exotic dancers would know what bankers got up to when they weren't conferencing.

"I'm sure she will," said mum. "Will you be here Friday or Saturday?"

"I'm not sure," I said. "I'll need to go home first and check on things. Can I let you know later in the week when I get back?"

"Of course, dear," she said. "When are you coming back?"

"I'll probably be on a flight on Tuesday," I said. "Great, I'm looking forward to seeing you both again. Will you do a roast? I haven't had a roast for ages."

"We always have a roast on Sundays," said mum. "You know that."

"Well, you might have changed," I said teasingly since dad had a nice little rut he was very comfortable in. "You know, experimented with one or two radical innovations."

She laughed and we exchanged farewells and see you soon.

"Right then," I said to myself. "Time to do a bit of shopping then off to the club. What shall I have for dinner?"

The mention of a roast had given my taste buds something to get excited about but it really wasn't worth doing a roast just for myself. There was still the possibility of going out to dinner as well although the sod still hadn't got back to me so the likelihood was fading. I lit a ciggie and tossed culinary ideas around for a while then decided on mince and rice since it was tasty and could be easily abandoned and

chucked in the fridge if Brendan left things to the last minute. I grabbed a shopping bag and my wallet and locked my door behind me. I hesitated on the landing for a moment but there was absolute silence coming from Tiffany's room so I figured they must be asleep. Then my phone pinged to say I had a message. It wasn't my personal phone as I had that with me and the ping had come from inside my room. I unlocked the door and went back in, hesitating as always for the facial recognition system to catch up.

"I wonder if Darren's going to back out?" I thought, reaching for the phone. Then I stared at it in surprise. "Why are they calling me? I'm on holiday for crying out loud!"

"Pegasus," I snapped, rather rudely, when a woman answered.

"You are in Dubai?" she asked. I'd reset the app in my iPad since mum expected me to be in Dubai and someone just might be tapping her phone.

"No, Sheffield," I said, since the Department still believed my home address was my parents.

"We have a delivery to Lisbon," she said.

"No can do," I said. "I'm on holiday."

"Confirm reject," she said.

"Confirm reject," I said and hung up.

I felt mildly miffed Elrond hadn't got around to informing Centre that I was on leave. Then again, it had been less than twenty four hours and he probably deserved taking Sunday off. Elrond forgiven I grabbed my bag and left again.

The bloody phone went again while I was still on the landing. I toyed with ignoring it but that might trigger a triple-A alert and all sorts of problems further down the line. After all, I was technically on call twenty four seven and it was possible I might get nobbled by the opposition while I was on holiday. I had to respond, if only to show I

was alive and well.

“Pegasus,” I said after going back inside.

“You are in Dubai?” the same woman asked.

“Sheffield,” I said. “Still on holiday.”

“AAA priority message awaiting delivery,” she said without even a hint of amusement.

“You what?” I exclaimed, frowning in surprise.

“AAA priority message awaiting delivery,” she said remorselessly.

“Jesus,” I said. “OK, give me the message”

“Message reads Imperative you accept delivery to Lisbon stop Callisto message ends,” she said.

OK maybe Elrond hadn't told Callisto either although I was surprised she was even still talking to me.

“Reply,” I said.

“Ready,” she said.

“Message begins,” I said. “Am on holiday stop refer Elrond stop Pegasus, message ends.”

She read back the message and I confirmed it then we hung up. I stared at my phone for a few moments, wondering what was going on. Was this related to Fortuna? I couldn't imagine why since she was now in the care of a team of specialists but Callisto wanting me to go to Lisbon so soon after our little get together in Amsterdam seemed too much of a coincidence.

Nothing happened so after a while I put the phone down. Maybe Callisto had got the message I was on holiday and was finding someone else to do the delivery. I waited a little longer then got up to

go shopping again. At the door I hesitated then went back to get my phone. The bloody thing went off again just as I was locking my door. This was fast becoming ridiculous.

“Pegasus,” I said, barely concealing my irritation.

“You are in Dubai?” asked the same woman. She must get so bored asking that question all the time.

“Sheffield,” I said with a sigh.

“AAA priority message awaiting delivery,” she said.

“Who from?” I asked, my frown deepening.

“Elrond,” said the woman.

I damned nearly swore at her even though it wasn't her fault. That bloody Callisto had gone over my head. I figured she was doing it deliberately to take her revenge. What to do though? I couldn't exactly refuse to accept a message from the Head of my Department.

“Give me the message,” I said and heaved a sigh.

“Message begins, Imperative you undertake delivery Amsterdam Lisbon stop all leave cancelled stop pickup soonest stop Elrond, message ends,” she said.

“Fuck,” I said.

“Is that your reply?” she asked.

“Oh, shit, no,” I said, a feeling of impending doom coming over me. “Pause.”

This must be to do with Fortuna since it was Amsterdam and Callisto. Callisto normally operated out of Hamburg and could still be in Amsterdam. What the hell had gone wrong? And why me? Even if they'd been hit and Fortuna snatched from the specialists, I wouldn't be the one to contact. We had other specialists for countering such

things. Still, Elrond was my boss and he was giving me a direct order. Worse, he was cancelling my holiday. Bastard.

Reluctantly I brought my mind back into operating mode. It was only just after one in the afternoon so I could be at London Heathrow by five, meaning I could be at Schiphol Airport in Amsterdam by seven tonight.

“Reply,” I said. “Copy Callisto.”

“Confirm reply Elrond, Callisto,” she said.

“Confirmed,” I said. “Message begins, accept delivery stop arrive pickup general location seven pm this day stop advise checkpoint location time stop Pegasus message ends.”

She read the message back and I confirmed it then hung up.

“Bugger,” I said, reaching for my ciggies. “Bugger, bugger, bugger!”

I lit one then picked up my shopping bag and folded it on my knees, trying not to speculate since I had no useful information to inform me. Then my phone went. My personal one this time. It was only Brendan, saying he'd love to see me again and this evening was just perfect. Just frigging perfect.

Chapter Twenty

Before I left my place I dug out my little stash of passports since Callisto had more or less admitted there was a leaker. This meant that the identity of Emma Jane Frampton, given to me only the day before by Elrond, could already be known and Emma returning to Amsterdam so quickly would be suspicious. I had three other identities which I'd never used and kept them for 'just in case' situations. Alice Natalie Taylor was the oldest with just nine months left to run before the passport expired. The hologram was passable, although my face looked a little babyish and my hair was a lot shorter, but it seemed to me that an identity created so long before would be likely to be overlooked. Things were happening in a rush and it was likely that no one would bother checking back as far as four years.

I arrived at Schiphol Airport at a little after seven in the evening, knowing only that I would be met. A very unsatisfactory situation that bothered me as I like the security of having to fence with someone to check out their code name. Those few seconds of fencing also let me get a feel for them in several other ways. Not only whether they are genuine or not but how reliable they seem, how well they fit in with the surroundings, how quick thinking they are and so on. If something untoward happens at the checkpoint having that feel for the contact affects how I act and react. Obviously I go through life on the basis of expecting the unexpected but it helps to have an expectation to set a benchmark for unexpectedness.

What was unexpected was that when I emerged from Arrivals into that area where friends and relatives are waiting to meet and greet whoever they are picking up there was someone holding an electronic placard about the size of a standard piece of paper. Actually that wasn't unexpected as often someone is sent to collect a business traveller or a tour guide is meeting people joining a tour. What was unexpected was that the placard had an image of a winged horse flying through light cloud and the words PEGASUS TOURS in friendly green lettering. It wasn't encouraging that the man holding the placard was fairly tall with dark hair, heavy shadow around his jowls and olive skin. He could have easily passed for an Arab or an Italian or even a Russian. If he was my pickup then he was a pretty poor

choice given the possibility that IS and, potentially, Rossiya could well be looking for me since the leaker might well know by now that Pegasus had been recalled to the case.

I ignored him and the placard, of course, as it struck me as just too blatant. I marched past and kept on going for maybe another ten paces before stopping and looking around as though I had expected someone. Then I backed up to stand against the wall to wait, watching the man closely from the corner of my eye. He wasn't paying particularly close attention to the people emerging from Arrivals which was understandable if he was waiting for me since they were mostly from another flight that had landed a little earlier and had picked up their suitcases. I don't carry luggage so I was one of only a handful from my flight to have come through so far.

Still, I was supposed to be met and there was no one else around giving any indication of looking for me. Certainly no one would put out an announcement over the tannoy as no one knew I was travelling as Alice Natalie Taylor. So, I waited and watched.

After a while more people started to come through from Arrivals and some I recognised from my flight. The placard man perked up and edged forward, holding his placard up against his chest. None of the new arrivals took any notice of him and still no one was taking any notice of me. After half an hour or so of nothing happening I decided to make it happen.

I walked over and pointed to his placard.

“Are you waiting for me?” I asked in English.

“Are you Freya Larsen?” he asked, clearly wondering where I'd come from since I hadn't come out of Arrivals.

“Yes,” I said.

“Then I am for you,” he said, smiling. “My name is Jan, I am your driver. Please, our car is this way. Where are your bags?”

“I don't have any,” I said. Jan is a common Dutch name and I

suppose, at a push, he could have been Dutch. Still, Freya Larsen? Nah. Callisto would know about Emma Frampton. "I'm only here for a short visit."

He turned and started leading the way across the brightly lit concourse to where the signs pointed to the car park.

"And is this your first trip to the city of Amsterdam?" he asked.

"Yes," I said. "I've been meaning to visit for years but never had the opportunity. Are we going straight to the office or has a hotel been organised?"

"I was told only to take you to the office," he said. "Doubtless arrangements have been made for the night."

Very probably they had been and I doubted very much that those arrangements included a comfy bed and a choice of movies.

"I'm sure they have," I said. "So, are you Dutch, Jan?"

"Yes," he said, holding a hand out so I could precede him through the automatic sliding doors.

"You don't look it," I said, marching through. "I thought all the Dutch were blonde."

"Ahh," he said following. "My family is originally from the Dutch East Indies."

Well, that was plausible. Not all Indonesians look Asian and two or three generations of inter-marrying can have significant impacts.

"So where's the car?" I asked.

"On level three," he said. "Would you prefer the lifts or the stairs?"

"Oh the lifts," I said. "It's been a long day and I'm exhausted." I wasn't but hey, disinformation never hurts.

Several other people, laden with bags and chatting happily, got in with us and I moved to the back of the lift while Jan pressed the button for level three. The others pressed the buttons for levels two and four as well. We got off on level three and I hung back to let Jan lead the way. As is generally the case the car park was pretty deserted although there were echoes of voices and distant car sounds. Intriguingly the corner of the car park Jan led me to seemed deserted as well. Surely he wasn't working alone?

It turned out he was. When we reached the car it unlocked itself and he opened the rear door so I could get in. I smiled my thanks and nodded and, as I stepped past him, I quickly turned and kneed him in the crotch. As he doubled up I chopped him on the back of the neck and he slumped to the ground. Too easy, really. Almost embarrassing.

I looked around but no one was watching so I heaved him onto the back seat, nearly doing myself an injury as he was heavier than he looked and not particularly cooperative. While he was still out cold I went through his pockets but he had nothing on him, apart from a packet of tooth whitening chewing gum. Certainly no ID or anything to indicate who he was or who he worked for although he had a dull grey remote for the car in his pocket which I took. Then he groaned and started to move so I chopped him again on the back of his neck. I pulled off his shoes then took his trousers off, as it's much easier to do that without shoes. I ripped the trousers into pieces and tied his arms behind his back at the elbows, as it's impossible to twist your hands that far up to untie yourself, then his ankles and knees. Finally I stuffed his socks in his mouth, gagged him with the last piece of his trousers and pushed him off the seats so he lay awkwardly in the well behind the front seats.

I shut the back door and opened the front so I could go through the glove box. He hadn't had a phone on him and there was no paper ticket for the car park or any cash so, by elimination, there must be something in the car otherwise he wouldn't have been able to exit the car park. Well, he could always have smashed his way through the barrier but that would have made me suspicious had I innocently got inside. Elimination seemed to work as there was a phone in the pocket of the driver's door along with some plastic wrap with traces of sandwich still on it and a chewed apple core. I used the wrap to pick

up the phone then wrapped it properly and put it in my bag. Callisto would know someone who could scrape some information from it. That done I locked the car, left the remote on the top of the driver's side front tyre and headed back to the main concourse.

I went to the nearest café and ordered a coffee then sat down at one of the tables. It was now just after eight and I needed to report in and explain the situation.

"Pegasus," I said guardedly when someone answered as there were people not far away.

"You are in Dubai?" he asked.

"Schiphol," I said. "Message to Callisto, double-A priority." This didn't seem worthy of a triple-A rating. After all, Jan hadn't put up any sort of a struggle.

"Ready," he said.

I paused while a couple dragged some overloaded bags past my table in search of somewhere to sit.

"Message begins," I said. "Encounter at Schiphol stop rabbit in the bag stop request alternate travel arrangements stop Pegasus."

He read the message back and I confirmed it. 'Rabbit in the bag' being Department-speak for a captured assailant who is being held. If he'd got away it would be 'rabbit on the run'.

I sat back and sipped my coffee while awaiting a reply, watching the people. It wasn't that busy as the early evening rush was over and it would likely stay quiet until the late night flights, and hence cheaper and more crowded, started to arrive. For some reason it was a while before my phone pinged and I'd nearly finished my coffee. I thumbed the message to check it was from Centre then glanced up to see one of the guys who were supposed to be looking after Fortuna walk past the café, heading for Arrivals.

I immediately hurried after him, my phone clutched in my hand. He

showed every sign of just being there to meet someone but I kept my distance just in case. At Arrivals he checked the Arrivals display, looked at his phone then wandered over to one of the cold drink machines and got himself a Coke. Then he wandered back and joined the few people waiting at the Arrivals area.

“Surely he's not waiting for me?” I wondered from my vantage point.

I loitered for a few minutes then walked past him, looking at the screen of my phone but watching him from the corner of my eye. He noticed me, it would have been difficult not to, and came over.

“Hello Emma,” he said, touching my arm. “You got out quickly.”

“Who are you?” I asked, turning and giving him a frosty look, as you do when a stranger touches you.

“Jim Lee,” he said, half smiling. “Don't you remember me?”

“No,” I said. “Remind me.”

“Ohh, now you're just making me feel small,” he said, waving his hand at hip level. “A real dwarf.”

Actually that was pretty good, Gimli being a dwarf in Lord of the Rings.

“Ohhh, now I remember,” I said, clicking my fingers. “You were with that other guy at the museum. The one who thought everything was trivial.”

“That's right,” he said, “and you were with that girl, the one who flew by with the horse.”

“So what do you mean, I got out quickly?” I said, satisfied he was Gimli and he knew I was Pegasus.

“Your flight's only just landed,” he said.

I had to laugh. All our communications protocols and procedures and

someone had told him the wrong time.

"I was on an earlier flight," I said, since it was easier than trying to explain someone had stuffed up.

"Oh, right," he said. "Not to worry. Shall we go to the party now?"

"Is it far?" I asked. "Only I left something in the car park which needs checking on."

"No, only twenty minutes or so," he said. "Umm, if you don't mind me asking, what is it?"

"Your predecessor," I said bluntly which made him frown. "Where are you in the car park? I've got to make a call. I'll catch you up."

He gave me the details and left. Unsurprisingly the message waiting for me simply wanted more details so I decided to wait until we arrived so I could tell Callisto directly. I probably should have left the windows of Jan's car slightly open but then again, with smelly socks in his mouth and a gag that covered his nose as well he probably wasn't breathing all that heavily.

We pulled up outside a perfectly ordinary building in Amsterdam-Oost. It was one of your standard Amsterdam four story red brick block of apartments flanked by other four story red brick blocks of apartments with more on the other side of the road. I dare say if you lived there you'd be able to tell them apart. I followed Gimli inside and we went up the stairs to the second floor. There was an apartment on each side of the stairwell and Gimli knocked on the door of the one on the right. He went in and I followed, taking care to stumble and fall heavily against the door. There was a grunt and someone came out from behind the door, rubbing his chest.

"Sorry," I said brightly. "Who are you?"

"Backup," said Callisto, appearing in the doorway of one of the bedrooms. "Come in."

I went in and she closed the door behind me.

“So what happened to Trivia and Triton?” I asked.

“They're next door,” she said. “Tell me about this encounter.”

“Someone was waiting for me at Schiphol,” I said. “He knew about Pegasus and the name Freya Larsen and he also knew which flight I was on. Gimli turned up for the one after.”

She scowled and swore a little in German which I took to mean that the source of the leaks was closer than she'd expected.

“And the rabbit?” she asked.

“A man calling himself Jan,” I said. “He's of Middle Eastern appearance and claimed to be originally from the Dutch East Indies which may be true but I wouldn't be surprised if he's IS. He met me with a car. I left him inside the car but I've brought his phone.” I gave her the phone as well as the car's registration number, make, model, colour, where to find it if it was still there and the location of the remote.

She got on her phone and relayed all the details to someone else who would, presumably, go and fetch the car and have a quiet little chat with Jan. Then she picked up the phone, still in its sandwich wrapper, and left the room.

We sat and eyed each other for a good few moments after she came back. She didn't appear to be in the best of moods.

“I presume I'm here because of Fortuna,” I said after a while.

Callisto's nostrils flared and her jaw clamped.

“Yes,” she said, introducing a new level of terseness to her conversational style.

“Right,” I said. “Umm, where is she?”

“Next door,” she said.

“With Trivia and Triton?” I asked.

“Amongst others,” she said.

“Right,” I said and waited for her to become a little more forthcoming.

Someone who hadn't been in the living room when I'd arrived came in to the bedroom. I say bedroom but it had clearly been turned into Callisto's office with the bed pushed unceremoniously into a corner out of the way. This person didn't introduce himself but he had Jan's phone in a plastic box with several cables hanging from it. Clearly he was a techie. He glanced at me and Callisto nodded.

“Definitely IS,” he said. “We're still working on the data but the fingerprints match a known driver from the Embassy in Amsterdam.”

“Figures,” I said and they both looked at me. “He wasn't trained,” I added, shrugging.

The techie looked curiously at me, clearly wondering who I was and what I'd meant. Callisto cleared her throat – she managed to do that tersely as well which was a neat trick – and jerked her head. He fled.

“So, this delivery,” I said. “The usual or Fortuna again?”

“The damned girl simply will not cooperate!” exclaimed Callisto, her scowl deepening.

“Ahh,” I said. “Umm, in what way?”

“She says there are too many people here,” said Callisto. “She doesn't feel safe.” She managed to say the word 'safe' with fairly extreme contempt. “I've explained that CS and IS are definitely looking for her and probably Rossiya but it doesn't make the blindest bit of difference. She refuses to leave her room even though it is essential we get her to ... her destination and she won't come out until you are here. Apparently she seems to think only you can protect her and that she needs protecting from us as well as all the others which is absurd. Simply absurd. I've explained that we can take her there whether or

not she goes willingly but that doesn't seem to make any difference and when we tried she struggled so much she almost got hurt.”

“No wonder she didn't feel safe here,” I managed to refrain from saying. It also crossed my mind that the use of chemicals to extract whatever her little secret was had been threatened but I wasn't suppose to know that much. Still, I was mildly pleased that they hadn't just gone ahead and done it anyway.

“I see,” I said instead. “So my task here is to accompany you all to Lisbon and keep Fortuna happy and reassured.”

“In a nutshell,” said Callisto.

She pulled a sheet of paper from a small notepad and wrote for a moment then handed it to me.

“Barcelona not Lisbon,” it read, although her handwriting was worse than mine.

I glanced at her and she nodded and scratched the tip of her nose gently.

“Shit,” I thought. “The leaker's in this apartment!”

Chapter Twenty One

“So, do you have a plan?” I asked. I scrunched up the piece of paper and popped it in my mouth. It was pretty tasteless and I chewed it a little before swallowing.

“Of course I have a plan,” snapped Callisto. Then she closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “I apologise but you can't begin to imagine how stressful this situation is.” She opened her eyes again and glanced at me. I just sat there in a semi-shock. Callisto apologising?

“To business,” she said, pulling herself together. “There are currently six operatives in these two apartments. Three more will arrive during the night. Umm ...,” and she glanced at her laptop, “Shelob, Chimera and Lares. Do you know any of them?”

“No,” I said.

“Hmm,” said Callisto, pursing her lips. “No matter. At approximately ten tomorrow morning the twelve of us, that is the nine operatives, myself, you and, of course, Fortuna, will take three cars and, following an indirect route, drive to Lisbon. Four operatives will be in the lead car, four in the tail car and one with the three of us in the middle car. The expectation is this will take three days.”

“OK,” I said slowly, thinking a three car convey would be easy to follow. It shouldn't be too hard to also separate them and isolate the middle one. “And my role?”

“To keep Fortuna happy and cooperative,” said Callisto. “That is why I'm putting only one operative in the car with her. She seems to have developed an irrational antipathy towards them.”

I had a suspicion Callisto being in the car with us for three days straight wouldn't be too helpful in reducing that antipathy but that was by the by.

“And sleeping arrangements?” I asked, wondering how I was expected to get Fortuna to Barcelona while stuck in the middle of a convoy going to Lisbon with ten pairs of eyes watching us.

“There will be opportunities for unscheduled sleeping and eating breaks en route,” said Callisto.

“I see,” I said.

Off the top of my head I reckoned that it was probably somewhere around 2500 kilometres from Amsterdam to Lisbon direct and would involve four border crossings. Taking an indirect route would, naturally, be a lot longer and could involved a couple more borders. Three days was ambitious to say the least.

Callisto just watched me as I thought about it.

“Well, OK,” I said. “When can I see Fortuna?”

“Now,” said Callisto, getting up. “She’s in the apartment next door.”

I followed her out of this apartment and across the stair landing. She paused at the door to the apartment opposite then tapped on the door in a cute little code. Someone opened the door and I spotted a woman on the other side of the room with a gun pointing at us. She had a two-handed grip and the gun was at eye level so she probably wouldn’t miss.

We went in and the door closed to reveal a man, also brandishing a gun. Another man, at the far end, standing beside a closed door, also had a gun but he was holding it at waist level. They seemed to be taking their jobs seriously. At the sight of Callisto all three put their guns away.

“This is Pegasus,” said Callisto.

The woman I recognised as one of the three I’d met at the Rijksmuseum although I didn’t know her name. I was more focused at the time on Elrond and Vulcan recognising them than assigning labels. The other two I hadn’t seen before.

By the look of it the place was a two bedroom apartment and Fortuna was very probably in the bedroom with the closed door. The other bedroom door was open and I could see the feet of someone asleep

pushing up the bedclothes. That meant that there were at least four operatives there and possibly another in the kitchen although I didn't hear any noises. All the windows had blinds that were pulled down and there was an armchair pushed in front of what was probably the door to the verandah. All very cosy.

Callisto nodded at the man beside the bedroom door and he knocked on it.

"Bugger off!" came Fortuna's voice, only slightly muffled by the door.

He took no notice and opened it part way. Callisto moved across and pushed the door fully open.

"Oh not you again!" exclaimed Fortuna, although I couldn't see her behind the door. "What is it this time?"

"You have a visitor," said Callisto.

"Tell them to get lost," said Fortuna forcefully. "I don't want to see anybody!"

Callisto beckoned me over so I went in. Fortuna was sitting on the bed, staring at the wall, a look of grim determination on her face. She was, incidentally, wearing a pair of tracksuit pants, a man's checked shirt and trainers on her feet.

"Hello," I said brightly. "How you doing?"

Her head snapped round and she stared at me. She looked pleased to see me then suspicion clouded her face.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded.

"Good question," I thought to myself. I wasn't entirely sure either.

"I'm here to try to smooth things out," I said and put my shoulder bag on the floor beside the door.

"Then you're wasting your time," snapped Fortuna, folding her arms

defensively and resuming staring at the wall.

“Aww, ain't we friends no more?” I asked.

Something in my voice made her look at me then her face closed in again and she resumed scowling at the wall.

“Can you leave us alone?” I asked Callisto. She was looking at Fortuna with a blank expression. She nodded abruptly and left the room.

I pushed the door shut and looked around. The bedroom was fairly spacious but only had a bed, a closet, a table and an upright chair. On the table was a smallish stereo unit, a small stack of DVDs, a few magazines and a plate with some stale looking sandwiches. Over the bed was a window with the blind drawn and there was another window, also with the blind drawn, on the wall at right angles to the bed. It was almost as stark as a prison cell although it didn't have a toilet. That was presumably somewhere else in the apartment.

That said, the room could easily be bugged so I got out my trusty little iPad and wandered around checking. Fortuna watched for a few moments then frowned. She opened her mouth to say something and I put a finger to my lips. She closed it again.

“Sweet,” I said when I was done. “It's clean. No listening devices.”

Of course, not finding a bug didn't mean someone isn't listening. An ear to the door may be old tech but it works well enough. Fortuna studiously ignored me while I browsed through the DVDs. They seemed to be mostly Dutch pop songs of the early thirties although one was a selection of light classical music. I selected one of the pop DVDs and put it in the stereo. Some bouncy happy music started and I turned up the volume a little.

“So what's been happening here?” I asked, lowering my voice and moving the chair over so I could sit beside Fortuna.

“They won't let me do anything,” she said, sneaking a look at me. “They just keep me in this room and won't let me out except to go to the toilet. They even wanted to have someone in this room with me all

the time but I managed to stop that.”

“That’s not too good,” I said, lifting the edge of the blind over the window so I could peer out. I couldn’t see much as it was dark outside and the light was on inside.

“They wouldn’t even let me keep that book you got me at the Rijksmuseum,” said Fortuna. “They said it was an encumbrance and made me leave it behind. That really pissed me off because it was very interesting. I like Vermeer. Now all I’ve got are those crappy magazines. And all they do is boss me around all the time, giving me orders and shit. Arrogant bastards! They can go to hell! It’s like I’m their prisoner or something. Anyway, I don’t trust them.”

“Yeah, that’s the impression I got as well,” I said. “And you’re right not to trust them.”

It took a couple of moments for that to sink through her antagonism then she twisted to look properly at me.

I put my finger to my lips then turned the stereo up a little louder.

“I’m going to get you away from here,” I said quietly, “but I need you to understand the situation.”

Her face lost its look of bulldog determination and became more like that of the Fortuna I knew.

“Callisto is on your side,” I said. “You can trust her. She’s just in a very difficult position at the moment. She thinks there’s someone in one of these two apartments who’s relaying information to the outside.”

“You mean a spy?” asked Fortuna in a whisper. “Who?” She looked over at the door as if in expectation the spy would come bursting in at that moment.

“Yes,” I said, “but she doesn’t know who. I think that’s why she’s got so many people here and has clamped down on security.”

“So what's going to happen?” asked Fortuna.

“Well, the plan is that you're going to be taken to Lisbon tomorrow in a secure convoy,” I said.

“Are you coming too?” asked Fortuna, frowning.

“Yes, but we're not going to Lisbon,” I said. “That's just a deflection. Somehow, and I don't know how yet, I'm going to get you away from the rest of them and get you ... somewhere else. The convoy will carry on to Lisbon thinking you're still with them so the spy will be feeding back the wrong information.”

Well, I hoped that was the case. All I actually knew was that Callisto had written 'Barcelona not Lisbon' on the piece of paper. The rest was all my own imagination but I didn't really see what else Callisto could do. It was also possible that Callisto was the spy and this was all one giant subterfuge but my gut told me it wasn't. Callisto was behaving like someone actually in a tight situation, not someone pretending to be in a tight situation.

“For real?” asked Fortuna.

“For real,” I said. “Have you eaten recently?”

“No,” she said. “They gave me some sandwiches and some of those disgusting raw fish things the Dutch eat but I refused to eat them. I drank the coffee though.”

“Well, you need to eat,” I said, my own belly protesting as I hadn't eaten since my toast and honey that morning.

I got up and opened the door. Three pairs of eyes locked onto me.

“Where's Callisto?” I asked after glancing around.

“She's gone back to her office,” said the woman.

“OK,” I said. “Can we get some pizzas delivered?”

“No,” she said. “That would be a security risk.”

“That’s a shame,” I said. “I’ll go and have a chat with her myself then.”

I pulled the door shut and the woman escorted me across the lounge to the door. I was pleased to hear the bouncy music coming from the bedroom so it was unlikely anyone had overheard us talking.

“She’s going to cooperate,” I said when I was ushered into Callisto’s office.

She breathed a sigh of relief.

“But we want some pizzas,” I said. “Not those crappy sandwiches.”

“Getting food delivered would reveal this location,” she said.

“So send someone out,” I said. “It’s not like you’re short of people here.”

“You are sure she’s going to cooperate?” asked Callisto, her eyes narrowing.

“Yes,” I said, “but it’s difficult to cooperate on an empty stomach.”

“Oh very well,” she said. “Give me a few minutes to organise things.”

I nodded pleasantly then hurried back to Fortuna. The three pairs of eyes watched my every step as I crossed the lounge and slipped into Fortuna’s room.

“Pizza’s on the way,” I said and flicked the lights out.

I jumped over to the window on the other wall, rolled up the blind part way and peered out. It was much easier to see out with the lights off and I could make out a road and parked cars and so on, even though it was a fairly dark overcast night.

“What are you doing?” asked Fortuna, coming over to look out as

well.

“Just watching what happens,” I said.

Nothing did happen for a couple of minutes, apart from a couple on bicycles cycling past. Then there was a wave of light in the area around where I thought the main door to the building was. A man stepped out and I recognised him as the techie. The door closed and the light disappeared. I knew where he was though and that made it easier to distinguish his shape in the darkness. For some reason he waved, not a big arm wave, more of a wrist wave, then walked off, hopefully in search of pizza. More importantly however, I caught a glimpse of what could have been a return wave from a dark patch beyond the doorway.

“Good to know,” I remarked and let the blind down again.

“What is?” asked Fortuna.

“Someone's watching the front of the building,” I said and went to kneel on Fortuna's bed. Hopefully whoever it was was one of ours but who knows, maybe the techie was the spy. Either way, the road exit was covered which made things more difficult.

From the side window things were a lot clearer. The building next door was only perhaps three metres away and there were a few lights on. Between the buildings was an alley with a row of garbage bins. I counted sixteen which made sense. The building had four floors with two apartments on each floor so, assuming one garbage and one recycling bin per apartment, that made sixteen. More importantly none of the bins were big enough to hide behind and the lights from the rooms lit up enough to show no one was lurking. There was a cat, sitting with one leg in the air while it washed its bottom but, to the best of my knowledge, we didn't use cats as operatives since they refused to be trained. Tell a cat to do something and it will simply ignore you. It won't even do the opposite of what you said since the cat knows it could be manipulated like that – if you know something will do the opposite of what you say then simply say the opposite of what you want. Cats have us taped.

"Hmm," I muttered and inspected the window. Unfortunately it was a sealed double glazed unit and couldn't be opened. It could probably be smashed but that would make a noise, unless it was toughened glass in which case it would be nigh on impossible to break. The frame however was aluminium. I worked a finger nail between the glass and the bottom frame and tried to bend the aluminium but it was too strong and wouldn't bend.

"Bummer," I muttered, dropping the blind again. I went over and flicked the light on again.

"What's wrong?" asked Fortuna.

"We can't get out the windows," I said, "and even if we could there's someone out there. Also, there's four people out there," and I nodded towards the door, "and I'm guessing there's three on watch at all times which means we can't go through the lounge. There's a chair blocking the door to the verandah which is certain to be locked and there's probably someone watching the landing and stairwell."

"Can't we break the window?" asked Fortuna. She hefted the chair to make her point.

"Maybe," I said, "although it might be toughened glass. Either way it'll make a noise and they'll come rushing in."

"Oh," said Fortuna, crestfallen. "So what are we going to do?"

I was actually quite impressed at how quickly she'd fallen in with what I'd said about getting her away. She really must trust me rather than assuming I was just stringing her along to get her cooperation.

"I ... don't know yet," I said rather than admit I was completely clueless. There was a ducted heating outlet on the wall but it wasn't big enough for either of us to crawl through and probably only led to something hot and high up rather than a nice big exhaust vent at ground level. "By the way, are you still Astrid?"

It could make things difficult if we did manage to get away but she was still identified as Astrid Pederson, who was likely now known to

all eleven billion people on the planet.

"No," she said. "Callisto gave me a new passport."

"Awesome," I said. "Where is it?"

"I don't know," she said. "I threw it at her."

I might have guessed.

"Where were you when you threw it?" I asked.

"Over there somewhere," she said, pointing across the bedroom.

"And where was Callisto?" I asked.

"Beside the table, I think," she said. "I wasn't really paying attention."

I got off the bed and pulled the table away from the wall. There, on the floor, half hidden by Fortuna's tote bag which had been pushed under the table, was a passport.

"Sweet as," I muttered and picked it up.

"Rosa Helena Ramos," I said, flicking through it. "Born in Coimbra."

I had no idea where Coimbra was but, since it was a Portuguese passport and Portugal is a pretty small country, I figured it wasn't that far from Lisbon.

"Hang on to it," I said, handing it to Fortuna. She took it and looked at it herself.

"Rosa Helena Ramos," she said. "I kind of like that. Rosa Helena."

I glanced sharply at her as she'd said 'Rosa Helena' with a distinct Spanish/Portuguese accent and it sounded much better than when I said it but she didn't notice. She studied the other details in the passport then stowed it away in her tote bag.

"I'm Alice Natalie Taylor," I said, slightly miffed it didn't sound anywhere near as good as Rosa Helena Ramos.

"Hello Alice," said Rosa with a grin.

"Or Nat," I said.

"I like Alice better," she said. "Where's the pizzas? I'm famished."

"Oh they'll be here soon," I said and went over to kneel on the bed so I could inspect the window again. "Flick the light off, would you."

Dutifully Rosa went over and turned off the light just as I started to roll up the blind again. Something at the bottom twinkled and caught my attention and I hesitated.

"Turn the light on again," I said, peering intently at the window frame.

Roughly where I'd forced my fingernail between the glass and the frame were some scratches in the the glass.

"Interesting," I muttered, just as someone knocked on the door and called, "Pizzas!"

Chapter Twenty Two

Rosa was clearly hungry as she wolfed three quarters of her pizza before stopping and announcing she didn't like chilli chicken with barbecue sauce. I, on the other hand, thoroughly enjoyed my satay beef and onion pizza. I then sat and eyed her pizza as she slowly finished it since I still felt a little hungry.

"I might be able to get us out of here tonight," I said quietly, after changing the DVD again.

"How?" she asked, tossing her empty pizza box on the table.

"Not absolutely certain yet," I said. "Need to do a bit of experimenting first. I'm just not certain it's the right option."

"If you can get us out then get us out," said Rosa with conviction. "I hate it here and I don't trust any of these bastards."

"Well, there is that," I said. "We don't know who is the spy and it's possible there may even be more than one. On the other hand, Callisto seems to have a plan that gives opportunities for us to get away."

"How'd you mean?" asked Rosa, wiping her hands on the track suit pants they'd given her.

"Well, Callisto plans to take a convey to Lisbon," I said. "She said there'd be unscheduled meal and rest stops. I figured she meant we'd be able to get away from the convoy then."

"And maybe we won't be able to," said Rosa. "After all everyone else in the convoy will be stopping too."

"True," I said thoughtfully, "and it'll be fairly obvious when the convoy starts to move off that neither of us are there. Unless, of course, Callisto plans to put a couple of other people in our place but if that's so there'd have to be a scheduled stop to pick them up. And that means there'll be a couple of extra people for a while which will probably be pretty obvious as well. Hmm. I wish she'd let me know

her intentions better.”

“Maybe she's just winging it,” said Rosa. “Maybe she doesn't have a plan at all and is hoping you'll come up with something.”

“Well, that's a possibility as well,” I said, considering it, “although I don't think she has that much faith in me.”

Rosa just snorted.

“And it gets worse,” I said. “I know she plans to take the convoy on a roundabout route but with so many people and cars there is the possibility that at least one of them has a tracking device. For sure it would be sensible to leave whoever she thinks is the spy behind but that person might be able to slip a tracker into someone's bag or under one of the cars or whatever. And there's something else that worries me.”

“What's that?” asked Rosa.

“Well, if we assume that Callisto does have a working master plan,” I said, “and we skip out tonight that might throw everything into disarray and cause CS or IS or whoever to ramp up finding us and the convoy will become irrelevant as a decoy.”

“How likely is that?” she asked.

“Can't say,” I said. “On the other hand, the decoy convoy may work perfectly but CS or whoever attacks the convoy before there's a stop where we can get away in which case the convoy is again pointless.”

“You wanna know what I think?” asked Rosa.

“Of course,” I said. “That's why I'm discussing this with you.”

“Just you and me,” she said, wagging her finger between us. “We work best on our own. All these other losers just get in the way and complicate things.”

The “we work best on our own” rather amused me but she had a

point. I was trained as a fully independent self-reliant courier. Teamwork wasn't one of my skills, nor was coordinating with other people. And, on that point, Rosa seemed fairly happy and content in her role as a package to be delivered. She might get scared and panicky but she did what I told her to. In this multi-person scenario, however, she'd already proved herself resistant and uncooperative and who knows what further resistance she might put up or how uncooperative she might become when the convoy was underway. My assignment, as always, was to make a delivery intact. It was, as Elrond's instructions had made clear, to deliver the package to Lisbon. Granted the destination had now changed to Barcelona but he had not instructed me to cooperate with Callisto or be under her command. And Elrond was my boss, not Callisto. She wasn't even in my Department. She was simply the Director of something in Germany.

"Hmm," I muttered, wondering how all that would stand up under a Review Committee Hearing. Probably not too well but on the other side of the coin I had almost infinite latitude in how I operated. My role was to deliver. End of story.

"What?" asked Rosa.

"It may all be moot anyway," I said. "If I can't get us out of here then we're stuck with the convoy. Go and stand by the door and don't let anyone in."

"Why?" she asked.

"I need to do an experiment," I said.

"OK, cool," she said and jumped up to lean against the door.

I knelt on her bed again and pressed one finger nail hard against the glass. I dragged my finger down a little way and leaned in to study what I'd done. Sure enough, as with the marks where I'd tried to lever the aluminium away, there was a scratch in the glass. My tough Kevlar/acrylic blend fake fingernails seemed to be sharp enough and strong enough to cut glass. Not something I'd ever tried before but at the end of the day a cutting tool is a cutting tool and I did have ten of

them.

I peered out of the window and there were fewer lights on in the apartment block across the alley; it was getting late and very probably the people who lived there had to go to work in the morning. I couldn't really see because the window didn't open but it looked as though there was no light coming from the room below this one. Maybe whoever Callisto got these apartments from had the ground floor ones as well or maybe whoever lived there was still in the lounge watching TV.

“OK,” I said, getting off the bed. “I think it's on.”

“You mean ...?” and she mimed jumping out the window with her fingers.

“Yes,” I said and she beamed at me.

Now I'd started on a path the only real question was when to do it. While there were still lights on or wait until all the lights were off? What if some lights didn't go off? What if there was someone in the apartment below and they were about to go to bed?

Well, there seemed no great benefit to delaying indefinitely. It was also possible that Callisto had done a bit of misinformation on me and was intending to set the convoy going in the middle of the night rather than at ten in the morning.

Someone rapped on the door and tried to open it but Rosa pushed back. Then someone tried again harder and she slid forward a few centimetres. I beckoned with my hand to let them in and she stepped away from the door just as one of the guys in the lounge put his shoulder to it. He burst in and nearly crashed into the table.

“What's going on?” he demanded suspiciously, righting himself.

“I was leaning against the door,” said Rosa tartly. “Weren't you ever taught to knock and wait?”

“And what's that blind doing up?” he snapped, ignoring Rosa. “You've

been told never to put the blinds up. It makes you an easy target.”

“No easier than a shadow on the blind,” I said mildly.

He glared at me then marched over and pulled the blind down firmly.

“Don't do it again!” he ordered, looking at me then Rosa then me again.

“So why are you in here?” I asked. “We don't need you.”

“Just a routine check,” he said.

“So you've checked,” I said. “Why are you still here?”

His eyes narrowed.

“Where are you sleeping tonight?” he asked gruffly. Clearly he didn't like having his authority challenged.

“With her,” I said, jerking a thumb at Rosa. His eyes widened. “Go away. We want to go to bed.”

He looked at the single bed then looked at Rosa then me then marched out, no doubt bursting to tell his buddies what would soon be going on in the room.

“I see what you mean,” I remarked when the door was shut again. “Officious little bastard, isn't he.”

“They're all like that,” said Rosa vehemently. “I hate them.”

“No worries,” I said and listened at the door. There wasn't much happening the other side as far as I could tell.

Of course, getting out was only one aspect of the situation. It was entirely possible, nah highly likely, that Callisto wanted to know where we went and had a tracking device somewhere. It wouldn't be on me since I'd not long arrived and Rosa was the important one anyway. I got my iPad out again and ran it over Rosa's tote bag. Not a beep.

Then I ran it over Rosa and it beeped. I tried again more slowly and it beeped around the waistband of her tracksuit pants.

“Get 'em off,” I said.

She pursed her lip then slipped off her trainers and dropped her pants. I took them and slit the waistband with a fingernail. Inside was a tiny little sliver of plastic attached to a length of wire. I pulled it out and dumped it in one of the pizza boxes then ran my iPad over the pants again. Nothing. Just to be sure I double checked her trainers and shirt before letting her get dressed again.

That little job done, I beckoned Rosa over to take up her post at the door again then switched off the light. I made my way back to the bed and let the blind up fully. Then I set to work dragging my fingernail down the edge of the aluminium surround. I did that twice, all round, then pressed the glass gently close to an edge. It held so I did the cutting twice more. This time when I pressed the glass there was a faint crack.

“Awesome,” I thought and worked my way around the bottom and sides of the window, pressing with a knuckle. The top I left until last and only worked on that when I had a couple of fingernails of my other hand safely under the bottom edge. That way, when the top edge broke away the entire pane wouldn't crash to the floor. I let the pane down slowly and leaned it against the wall at the foot of the bed.

The window was double glazed so the second pane was more difficult. There was a good chance it would fall outwards and smash onto the ground below. This would mean noise and broken glass around where we would be jumping. I paused and gave it a few moments thought then started cutting again, only this time leaving a couple of centimetres intact on each side, roughly half way up, to support the pane. Again I pressed with a knuckle to break all the edges except my two security points, then paused and listened and watched to see if anything was happening outside. Nothing was so, with a little anxiety, I readied one hand at the bottom of the pane to catch it when the last two sections broke and pressed with the heel of my other hand at the top so it pivoted. With two almost simultaneous cracks the last two sections gave way and I managed to catch it at the bottom and curl

my fingers over the top so it didn't fall into the alley. I held it there for a couple of heartbeats just to make sure then carefully lifted it into the room and propped it up with the other pane.

“Awesome,” I muttered then stuck my head cautiously out. The night was cool and fresh with a hint of rain. More importantly no one came round from the front to investigate the noises and no one was watching from any of the windows in the building opposite. Also, conveniently, there was no light from the bedroom of the apartment below. On the other hand, the ground looked a lot further away than it had when the glass was still in place and a couple of the rubbish bins were almost directly underneath the window which could be awkward.

I backed off the bed and went to over to Rosa who was still leaning against the door.

“I've got the glass out,” I said very quietly as the current DVD had finished. She nodded and I figured she already knew that as she had been watching me. “Get your bag.”

She came away from the door and retrieved her bag while I picked up my shoulder bag and started another DVD going. As always my bag had my iPad, wallet and so on inside. I got Rosa to kneel on the bed and lean out so I could explain what was coming next.

“Bloody hell,” she muttered. “It's a long way down.”

“It's only three metres,” I said. “Not far at all if you do it the right way.”

“So what's the right way?” she asked.

“Sit on the sill,” I said, “then swing your legs out. Then twist around so you're facing back into the room and take your weight on your arms. Then lower yourself so you're hanging from your hands then let go. That way it's only a metre or so to the ground.”

“Oh joy,” she said. “What if I'm not strong enough?”

“Then you’ll fall further,” I said, “but keep your knees bent so when you hit the ground your thighs absorb the impact. Shall I go first or will you?”

“You can,” she said quickly.

I gave her the option in case she needed to go first to get it over with but, in all honesty, I wanted to go first as I knew I could land in the gap between the bins. That way I could shift them before Rosa tried. If she landed on a bin there’d be a lot of noise and she might hurt herself.

“No problem,” I said. “Watch what I do and try to do the same.”

I was about to say “and before you jump, drop our bags down to me,” but changed my mind. If she had a little panic attack and jumped before dropping the bags there was no way we could go back for them. We could hardly go in the front entrance and try again. Instead I grabbed one of the pillows and stuffed my bag inside then carefully dropped it so the bag landed on the pillow. iPads don’t like being dropped from a height. It landed on one of the bins with a bit of a thud but not enough to draw attention. The alternative was to drop it in the gap but me landing on top of it would do more damage. I dropped Rosa’s bag on top of mine.

I climbed out the window and hung from my hands while shifting across so I was directly over the gap between the bins then let go. I landed safely and grabbed the bags and the bin and shifted the bin out of the way.

Looking back up I could see Rosa’s shape leaning out of the window, watching.

“Come on!” I hissed.

Her shape disappeared then reappeared as she stuck her bum through the window. Then she slowly and cautiously got one leg out then the other. Then she stayed motionless for a while, balancing on her hips.

“Come on!” I hissed again, a little louder and more urgently.

I could almost hear her gulp as she started to lower herself then her arms gave way and her trainers scraped down the wall. She landed with a distinct thump and a little gasp then over balanced into the other rubbish bin. It scraped on the ground as it shifted twenty or thirty centimetres. The cat, which I thought had gone, screeched and shot off up the alley.

“Are you OK?” I whispered, helping her up.

“Sorry,” she whispered back. “My arm gave way.”

I heard a footstep and froze, pushing Rosa back against the wall.

“Just a bloody cat,” said a voice quietly. “Jesus you're twitchy tonight.”

“I'm sure I heard something,” said another voice, just as quietly.

A torch light flashed and fixed on the shifted bin then slowly made its way up the alley. The cat's eyes glowed green as it sat further up and insolently stared back at the torch.

“Yeah, reckon it was just a cat,” said the second voice. “Got to be a lot of rats round here, all these bins.”

The light went off and there were a couple of footsteps again, this time going away. I let out my breath slowly. One thing was certain, it would be difficult to exit the alley that way as there were at least two people there. Hopefully the alley wasn't a dead end and we could get out the other way. Only one way to find out.

“Come on,” I whispered and headed off up the alley, carrying both bags. We moved cautiously and, as I'd hoped, the alley went past a tiny grassed area that was probably some sort of garden between apartment blocks, then past another building behind the one we'd been in. Beyond that was a road.

I made Rosa hang back as I checked to see if there were any pedestrians or people watching then handed her her bag.

“Looks all clear,” I whispered then froze when I thought I heard a

faint scrape coming from the alley behind us.

I studied the alley thoroughly, searching for any sign of movement – movement is easier to see in the dark than shape – but couldn't see anything. Maybe it was another cat or a rat. Or maybe someone had seen us and was following. I lead Rosa out of the alley and into the street then quickly ducked back inside the alley. The light from a distant street lamp didn't penetrate far. Did I see the tiniest of movements? Or was it just my imagination?

I took a couple of small steps down the alley, every sense on full alert.

“What is it?” whispered Rosa behind me.

“Shh!” I hissed. “Stay back.”

“What did you say?” she whispered, coming up close behind me.

I waved my hand urgently behind me to shut her up and concentrated on the alley. A light gust of wind came down and a scrap of paper beside one of the bins danced for a moment then lay on the ground again. That must have been what I'd seen. I relaxed slightly and started to back away towards Rosa and the street.

“Don't move,” said a male voice, seemingly from one of the rubbish bins. “I have a gun.”

Then I heard the metallic sound of a gun being cocked.

Chapter Twenty Three

Part of the dark shadows of the wall of the alley peeled away and came towards us. A black haired man with a dark face, dressed in black. I heard Rosa mutter “oh shit”, in French for some reason. It was apparent the man hadn't lied as he had a black gun in one hand which glinted in a stray shaft of light from the distant street light.

“Get against the wall,” he said with a slight accent.

I backed off until I came up against the wall of the alley, Rosa beside me.

He stepped forward and I saw his face; heavy and fleshy with a thick black moustache. A face clearly not used to smiling. He had a Turkish/Bulgarian look about him. He gestured upwards with the gun so I put my hands up. After a hesitation Rosa dropped her bag and did the same.

He stared intently at Rosa for a good fifteen seconds then shifted to stare at me then back at Rosa. He seemed a little confused then he grunted and pulled a phone out of his pocket. He rang someone taking very quick glances at his phone as he operated it but staying focused on us. His gun didn't waver a millimetre. Someone answered and there was a brief, terse discussion in a language I didn't recognise. Certainly it wasn't Turkish or Russian but it was similar in many ways. Perhaps Bulgarian or Ukrainian. Somewhere in that region at any rate. Intriguingly I got a sense from the music of what was being said that the man was asking for instructions.

Then he hung up and took a photograph of Rosa with his phone. She gave a little squeak as the phone flashed. He fiddled with the phone, probably sending the photo to whoever he'd been speaking to but a little awkwardly as the gun was in his right hand and still didn't waver. I figured he was probably left handed. That done he slipped the phone back in his pocket. Then we all stood there staring at each other.

“Now what?” I asked after a few seconds.

“We wait,” he said.

“What for?” I asked.

He just stared expressionlessly at me. Now I was confused as well. If Rosa was being snatched, why wasn't she being snatched? Surely another Block would have been better prepared? On the other hand, if this was a simple robbery why weren't we being robbed? And why did he take a photo of Rosa? Why not me? Could it be we'd inadvertently stumbled in on some other operation by chance? It didn't make sense.

Perhaps a minute went by then a car pulled up at the entrance to the alley. Someone got out and walked around the back of the car. It was another man, perhaps even the brother of the guy with the gun since they looked very similar. The new man glanced along the alley then at us then moved closer to Rosa. He shone a light in her face and peered at her. Alarmed, Rosa glanced at me but the first man had carefully stayed out of reach and Rosa was between me and the other man.

“You are Marie D'Escala?” he asked.

“N-n-no,” she stuttered nervously.

“Astrid Pederson?” he asked.

Rosa shook her head.

The man scowled.

“Who are you?” he demanded.

“I, I ...” said Rosa, her voice shaking. She glanced at me in panic.

“Oh shit,” I thought, “she's only bloody forgotten her name!”

“Her passport's in her bag,” I said. “Her name's Rosa Ramos. What's going on?”

“And you?” he said, shining his light in my face. “Who are you?”

“Alice Taylor,” I said. “Who are you?”

“Not Freya Larsen?” he asked.

“No,” I said. “I’m Alice and she’s Rosa. Listen, we don’t have much money but there’s some cash in my bag. And my credit cards. You can have them too.”

He grunted and went to talk to his buddy. I was pretty sure it wasn’t a random robbery since it wasn’t playing out right but the offer of money had confirmed it. Neither of them were the slightest bit interested. Nor were they interested in us as women which was a shame. If they were then they’d have come within reach and I could do something about it.

They seemed to reach agreement and the guy with the gun shifted a little further up the alley.

“Get in the car,” said the other man.

“Why?” I asked. “Where are you taking us?”

“Get in the car,” he said. “Now.” He pulled out a gun to emphasise his words.

“OK, OK,” I said. “No need to get excited. We’ll get in the car, OK.”

I cautiously lowered my hands and gave Rosa a push with my hip. She jerked and dropped her hands. I picked up her bag and gave it to her and the man with the car stepped back out of range then turned to open the back door of the car.

“In there,” he said and backed off towards the front of the car.

“Come on,” I said quietly to Rosa. She stumbled forward and when she reached the car she looked back at me.

“It’ll be fine,” I said. “They obviously think we’re someone else. Get in.”

She got in and slid over behind the driver's seat. I got in beside her and made sure my shoulder bag was out of the way.

The man who'd arrived in the car put his gun away and got in the driver's seat. The other man got in the front passenger seat and twisted awkwardly to point his gun over the seat at us. I instantly lashed out with one hand, raking my nails across his face, and grabbed his gun with my other hand, forcing it up. The gun went off, deafeningly loud in that confined space, and blew a hole in the roof. The man gave a loud "ahhh" and clutched his face, hitting himself on the head with the gun in the process. Rosa, to her credit, reacted very nicely and grabbed the head of the man in the driver's seat and yanked it back as hard as she could. The head rest stopped his neck being broken and he scrabbled, trying to wrench her hands away.

This is another disadvantage of guns. People who rely on guns actually do rely on them when they shouldn't. The man in the passenger seat, in great pain, blinded by blood and awkwardly positioned, should have just punched randomly back at me since he'd have almost certainly hit me as I was barely centimetres away. Instead he stupidly wasted an eternity trying to get his gun round the head rest to shoot me. He failed of course and I was able to smash his hand and gun into the head of the driver, knocking him unconscious. I then gave the passenger a hefty chop to the throat and he collapsed back against the dashboard choking and gasping.

"Run!" I said forcefully to Rosa and jumped as quickly as I could out of the car, which isn't that easy. She scrabbled with the door on her side, trying to find the lever to open it so I reached in and grabbed her by the scruff of her neck and dragged her out my side. I could hear feet coming down the alley – probably the guards at the front of the apartments we'd escaped from. They may have heard voices and ignored them but a gunshot couldn't be ignored so they'd be coming to investigate. Anyway, Rosa's bag fell out and I grabbed that then shoved Rosa up the street. She took off in a half run, half fast walk and I turned to check the men in the car. The driver was moaning but looked to still be out of it and the passenger was clutching his throat and trying to find his gun and wipe the blood from his eyes at the same time. I glanced up the alley and saw two shadows walking slowly and cautiously down. I took off after Rosa, now a good thirty metres

up the road. A few lights had come on in the buildings as well so no doubt the police would be here shortly.

I caught up with Rosa maybe a hundred metres or so from the car and we took a few left and right turns then, unexpectedly, found ourselves on a brightly lit street with lots of cars and people. On the other side and up a little bit was a building that looked like a theatre or cinema with a crowd of people streaming out. I slowed to a casual walk and Rosa fell in beside me. According to my phone it was, surprisingly, almost twenty past eleven. I thought it was later. The party people in Amsterdam-Oost were still out and about enjoying themselves.

“Do you fancy an ice cream?” I asked, spotting a Hagen-Das ice cream bar.

“What?” asked Rosa in surprise.

“An ice cream,” I said, “or would you prefer a burger or something.”

“I don't believe you,” she said, stopping to stare at me. “I really don't believe you.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, stopping as well. A youngish but well dressed man bumped into me and I apologised but he didn't really notice as his attention was wholly on a blonde in a very tight, very short dress a couple of metres in front of him. Her attention was on the shaven headed tattooed man walking beside her. I had a feeling there was a back story behind the trio but it wasn't any of my business.

“You just beat up two thugs with guns,” said Rosa, “and now you want to stop for an ice cream!”

“Well I had a little help,” I said mildly. “You didn't do too badly yourself. I just thought you could use a little fat and sugar to counter the adrenaline. Oh, and thank you for your help. It was an awkward situation.”

She just stared at me as a few more people walked past. We got some

curious glances but nothing of significance.

“Pistachio,” she said after shaking her head a couple of times.

“Great,” I said. “Do you want a wafer with that?”

“Of course,” she said. “How else would you have it?” and stalked into the ice cream bar.

It was quite busy and we queued for a while before ordering. I got tubs to take away as there weren't any seats available. I had strawberry with chocolate sauce and two wafers and Rosa had mint sauce on her pistachio.

“Don't you suffer from adrenaline?” she asked as we rejoined the people walking the street.

“No,” I said. I stuffed a little wooden spoonful of pink ice cream into my mouth. “I get an adrenaline pump of course, it's basic biology, but I'm trained to use it not fight it.”

“Oh,” she said. We walked on a little then, deceptively casually, she added, “so you think I did good, huh?”

“Yes,” I said. “A garrote would have been better but you didn't have one. You did brilliantly.”

She beamed and ate some more green ice cream.

“I knew you'd do something,” she said, a little proudly. “I was ready.”

“Awesome,” I said. I wanted to tell her never to do that again and to leave everything to me as she'd potentially be a liability but I didn't want to break her euphoria. That's a side product of adrenaline as well.

“So who do you think they were?” she asked. “I don't think they knew who we were.”

“Oh for fuck's sake,” I exclaimed, suddenly realising. I stopped

walking and started to laugh.

“What?” she asked, looking at me as though I’d gone mad. “What did I say?”

“Oh Jesus,” I said, seeing her face. I started to laugh again.

“What?” she said plaintively. “Why are you laughing at me?”

“I’m not laughing at you,” I said, trying to pull myself together. “It’s just that it all suddenly made sense.”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“They did know who we were,” I said. “They just couldn’t believe it.”

“Huh?” she asked.

“Come on, let’s keep walking,” I said. “I’m pretty sure they were from Rossiya Block. For sure they were both Central Europeans but not Russian. Maybe Ukraine or Belarus. Whatever. Anyway, I think they were staking out the safe house you were being held in. Maybe they were planning on snatching you later tonight or maybe they were just going to follow the convoy in the morning. Here’s the thing though. Instead of sitting nice and snug in the safe house being guarded by a bunch of Europa security people we staged a break out and walked right into their arms. I bet they couldn’t believe their eyes. They probably thought we were decoys out to trap them or something. That’s why the first guy took a photo of you and sent it to his boss who came to check who you were.”

“Oh my God!” said Rosa, stopping to look at me again. “For real?”

“I’d say so,” I said. “They were all geared up for whatever it was they were planning and then we broke out of the safe house and went straight up to them. What kind of idiots do that?”

“No wonder they were confused,” she said, starting to laugh. “I would have been too.”

"It's interesting they were Rossiya though," I said, scraping the last of my ice cream from the tub. I looked around and spotted a garbage bin.

"Why's that?" she asked, walking to the bin with me.

"That means Rosssiya's on to us as well as CS and IS," I said. "They knew your names from France and Denmark."

"IS?" said Rosa, frowning. She looked at me then into her tub before tossing it in the bin. "IS knows about us as well?"

"They tried to grab me when I arrived at Schiphol," I said. "Callisto's techie confirmed the guy was IS."

"Oh my God!" she exclaimed. "What happened?"

I gave her a brief summary of what had happened at the airport although I didn't bother to mention Manuel on the Antwerp train. That was before I'd collected Fortuna and may well have been unrelated. Walking on I lit a ciggie. Ice cream is very nice but it doesn't have quite the kick of a dose of nicotine and tar.

"Wow," said Rosa. "IS huh."

"Yes," I said. "Which makes you pretty special. CS, IS and Rossiya. I wouldn't be surprised if we get a visitation from Yazhou and Alkebulan soon. Word's spreading."

"You'll manage," said Rosa confidently. "That's, what?, one dead and five, six, now eight out of action. You're a super star."

"How do you get eight?" I asked, frowning.

"The two bikers, those three at that station, the guy at the airport and those two," she said. "That's eight, isn't it?"

"Yeah but the bikers don't count," I said, since they were in actuality members of the public not employees of one Block or another's intelligence services. "Nor does Lars."

“Of course they do,” she said. “You were protecting me from them.”

“Well, I guess,” I said, spotting a car park that was nearly full. I debated for a moment then decided against it. The evening was ending and cars were leaving the car park so there was a decent chance any car I targeted would be reported missing very quickly. It would be better to find a car on a side street where the owners were safely tucked up in bed.

“So what do we do now?” she asked.

“We find a car and get out of Amsterdam,” I said. “Then we find somewhere to sleep and in the morning we get some new outfits.”

“OK,” she said happily. “Whatever you say.”

I glanced at her wondering where the girl who'd taken on Callisto and six specialist personnel operatives and won had got to but she was looking round and enjoying the walk.

“Let's try down here,” I said as we reached the end of the shops. There was a road off to the left that was lined with more apartment blocks and, importantly, parked cars. We walked along it for a while then Rosa grabbed my arm.

“What about that one?” she asked, pointing to a very nice current model Chinese sports car. It was very sleek and looked mean and fast. I had a vague recollection that that particular model had an independent turbine for each of its wheels and was capable of over three hundred and fifty kilometres an hour. It was a rich kid's fantasy car.

“No way,” I said emphatically. “Every traffic cop will target us on principle. It's a speeding ticket on wheels.”

“Oh,” she said and pouted.

“That one's much better,” I said, pointing to a rather drab two year old family sedan a little further on. The cops wouldn't look at it twice.

“Boring,” announced Rosa.

“Yes,” I said. “Very boring and very inconspicuous.”

I pulled out my iPad and checked it was still working after being chucked out of the window. It was and I had the doors open in seconds. ‘Unknown Identity’ flashed up on the screen then, a couple of seconds later ‘Welcome’ followed by ‘Please state your destination’. I disabled auto-drive and the screen blanked. I drove back to the street with all the shops and pulled over in a convenient parking space and popped the bonnet. The street lights made it a lot easier to disable the on-board navigation and tracking system.

“Look what I found,” said Rosa when I got back in the car.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“It’s an old road atlas,” she said.

“Oh yeah?” I said. “How old?” Road atlases weren’t much use these days since virtually all of Europe was mapped online and readily accessible.

“Dunno,” she said, flicking back to the title page. “Doesn’t say but there’s an inscription that says ‘Happy Christmas Willem’ and it’s dated 2031. Isn’t that sweet?”

“I guess,” I said. “Keep it though, it might come in useful.”

“OK,” she said and tossed it on the back seat.

I drove off and, after a couple of wrong turns, found the main A2 heading for Utrecht. More importantly it headed South which was where we wanted to go and there was every chance we’d find a motel or hotel somewhere along it although I wanted to get some distance from Amsterdam before we stopped for the night.

I drove at slightly below the speed limit as it didn’t attract attention but at the same time wasn’t too slow. It was perhaps fifteen kilometres later that I realised that there was a car some way behind that had

been there for a while and wasn't catching up and overtaking or getting further behind. I watched it for a while in the rear view mirror and it seemed to stay comfortably where it was. Other cars overtook it and came between us then overtook us but this one stayed at a consistent distance.

Chapter Twenty Four

I drifted the car up so we were going about fifteen kilometres an hour over the speed limit. The traffic was light but I quickly caught up with the car ahead of us and overtook it. Seconds later the car that might be following us overtook it as well. There was no obvious reason why it had speeded up but then again there was no obvious reason why I'd speeded up either. Puzzled, I cruised the car at the higher speed for a few ks then let the speed drop to about fifteen kph under the speed limit. The car behind slowed down as well. If nothing else it meant it wasn't running on auto-drive. The driver was actually driving the vehicle him or herself. That was kind of unusual as well, especially on boring highways.

"Hmmm," I muttered.

"What's up?" asked Rosa. I'd thought she'd dozed off but maybe she'd just been quietly watching the dark countryside and occasional village roll past.

"I think we might be being followed," I said, keeping an eye on the rear view mirror.

She twisted round to look out the rear window but there wasn't a lot to see. Just a smattering of headlights behind and tail-lights on the other side of the highway.

"How could we be being followed?" she asked. "We left those two in that car then wandered around before taking this one. No one knows what car we're in."

"That's what I thought as well," I said. "Unless someone was watching those Rossiya guys and followed us around Amsterdam-Oost afterwards. It's possible, I suppose, we were spotted taking this car but ...," and I shrugged in the darkness.

"It all looks quite ordinary to me," she said.

"Yes," I said, "but watch the car behind." I speeded up again, this time to about twenty ks over the limit.

“It's falling back,” she reported. Then, a couple of seconds later, “oh, no, it's catching up again.”

“Exactly,” I said, watching in the mirror. I let the speed drop down again and a few seconds later she reported that it had got closer then dropped back again.

“I wonder if it's some of Callisto's people,” I said. “That would make sense. I'd be astonished if she doesn't know we've gone by now and maybe she's sent a car to keep an eye on us.”

“But how would they know this car?” asked Rosa, twisting back forward again in her seat.

“The only thing I can think of,” I said, “is that the people at the front of the apartment block who came to investigate the shooting must have realised we were involved and followed us straight away but I didn't spot anyone tailing us as we walked or when we stopped for the ice creams.”

An image came into my mind of the youngish guy in a suit who'd been so intent on the blonde and the man she was with. It hadn't felt right at the time. He was too intent and she was with someone else anyway. Maybe the guy in the suit had actually been following us. Mind you I hadn't noticed him later but there'd been quite a few men in suits and it was the blonde that had made him distinctive. For sure, if he had been following us he could have contacted Callisto, if indeed it was Callisto, and had a car in the vicinity. When we took this car he could easily have had his car only a few seconds away and my stopping to disable the onboard computer would have given them a chance to catch up.

Actually, thinking about it, that could apply to any other Block who had people watching. Maybe Rossiya had someone watching the two who'd accosted us. That would make sense if they had an operation in progress. They'd undoubtedly had several people and vehicles all ready to go. On the other hand, Callisto may have anticipated me breaking Fortuna out that night and had forewarned the people out the front. That explanation had the added benefit of accounting for why no one had yet tried to contact me to find out what I was up to.

But, if Callisto was running it then she'd know what I was up to and very possibly wouldn't try to contact me. It was also entirely possible that CS or IS had people watching and had taken advantage of the scuffle with the Rossiya people to close in.

Hell, it was even possible that CS or IS or anyone else really, including the police, had simply been watching the Rossiya people to find out what they were up to without realising Fortuna was nearby.

Or maybe we weren't even being followed or we were being followed by a couple of guys who'd spotted a couple of cute girls in a car and were following us for the fun of it. Or maybe it was a psychotic serial killer who'd chosen us for his next thrill and was simply biding his time. As I've probably mentioned elsewhere there's a strong element of paranoia in this job. Still, as I always say, just because you're paranoid it doesn't mean they're not out to get you. Time to find out.

"Have you got your seat belt on?" I asked as we passed a sign saying the exit to some little place I'd never heard of was 2km ahead.

"Yes," said Rosa. "I always wear a seat belt."

"Good," I said. "Things might get a little bumpy in a minute. Hang on tight."

I let the exit lane go past then, at the last moment and without indicating or slowing down, suddenly pulled a hard right and shot off up the exit ramp. I touched the brakes briefly as I didn't want to skid then lurched round the roundabout and shot off towards the town. Then I slammed on the brakes so I could see what happened next. Sure enough a car came screeching round the roundabout and damned nearly rammed into the back of us. I floored the accelerator pedal and our car shot forward again. The car behind hesitated a moment then accelerated as well and resumed its position some fifty metres behind.

"We're definitely being followed," I said as Rosa let go of the handle just above the passenger door and pushed her hair out of her eyes.

"Who by?" she asked, bending to look in the side mirror.

“I don't know,” I said, “but whoever it is doesn't seem to care that we know they're following us.”

That might suggest Callisto but equally it could be that backup vehicles were on their way and the car behind couldn't afford to lose us until they arrived. When they did it would then simply disappear and a team of vehicles changing places and with some ahead and some behind would take over. They'd be a lot more difficult to spot.

Anyway, we were approaching the town so I kept to the speed limit. The last thing I wanted was a couple of cop cars joining in the fun. Having an accident or running down a pedestrian probably wasn't a good idea either.

On the edge of the town I pulled up at a red traffic light. The tail car pulled up behind us, perhaps five or six metres away. I could just make out a shape in the driver's seat and there may have been one in the passenger seat. Importantly the car looked fairly powerful so I probably wouldn't be able to outrun it if we went back to the highway. A car drove across the intersection but nothing else was coming so I dumped the accelerator then backed off slightly to control the wheel-spin, and shot across the intersection before again slowing to the speed limit and cruising to the next set of traffic lights. The car behind did much the same and again pulled up some way behind me.

I smiled at the idea he probably thought I was some sort of nutter and was wondering if he was following the right car. Still, this was a small town and these lights were at the edge of what seemed to be the central shopping area. Ahead were shops, all closed and mostly with their lights turned off, and, in the street lighting I could see a couple of roads leading off on each side. The odds were they'd have only a couple of shops in them before becoming residential streets.

“Take you seat belt off,” I said, releasing mine, then screeched forward again as the lights changed. This time the car behind was expecting something like that and was slower to follow. This time, however, I didn't slow down. I kept accelerating until I was almost level with the first of the roads off to the left then slammed on the brakes and, with the tyres screaming, shot round the corner. The car fishtailed a little but I spotted an empty space outside a house a little way down and

aimed for it with the brakes hard on. I managed to kill the lights just before the other car shot around the corner. I dragged Rosa down so she was scrunched up across the centre console and flattened myself on top of her.

I heard the other car whine past at speed and cautiously raised my head enough to see out over the dashboard. It came to a stop at an intersection, probably a road that ran parallel to the shops road, while the driver debated which way I'd gone. Then he turned right and slowly drove off. I'd have done the same under similar circumstances as the car I was following would probably be heading back for the highway and a fast exit.

I counted to ten in case he came back then eased myself off Rosa. She groaned and sat up, rubbing the side of her chest.

"Oww, that hurt," she grumbled. "You could have warned me."

"Sorry," I said, opening the car door and listening for the sound of another vehicle. I couldn't hear one but that didn't mean the other car wasn't in the process of turning round to come back looking for us. "Out, now."

She scowled at me but grabbed her bag from the back seat and got out, still rubbing her chest.

"Leave the door slightly open," I said, grabbing my bag and getting out as well. The sound of car doors shutting can carry a long way on a quiet night and the other car could well be nearby listening for any clue as to where we might be.

I pushed my door to then, as gently as I could, pushed it tight. It clicked but wasn't as loud as I expected. An open driver's door would be easily spotted if the car drove past again. OK he probably had the registration number memorised but why make it easier?

I heard the sound of a car turbine cruising and made Rosa squat behind our car out of sight. Sure enough the car following us had done a U-turn and was cruising back along the parallel road but fortunately he was investigating further along rather than coming

back down to where we were. Assuming he'd get to the end then rejoin the shops road and come back this way I hurried Rosa up to the intersection and turned left to follow him. He probably wouldn't be back this way for a while.

I spotted another suitable car and pushed Rosa into one of those weeping willow type trees that was overhanging a low fence not far away. I broke into the car, checked it was working and disabled the tracking and navigation before fetching her. Then we got in and headed back to the A2 and Utrecht. I did see some headlights behind us but they were crossing this road so either it wasn't the car that had been tailing us or whoever it was was now systematically trawling the streets in the hope of finding us again. He'd find the car sooner or later but we'd be long gone and in an unknown vehicle.

I had planned to stop somewhere for the night on the way to Utrecht but it was now after one in the morning and no country hotels would still be open. Also, the anonymity of a big city was attractive so I decided to drive all the way to Utrecht instead. With Rosa asleep in the passenger seat I drove around until I saw the signs for Utrecht Airport then pulled over in a residential area and called for a taxi to pick us up from an address in the next street. I then woke Rosa and we abandoned the car and made our way to the address I'd given the taxi company. When it arrived I told the driver to take us to the airport and he kindly deposited us at the entrance to Departures. I paid him off in cash then dragged a semi-comatose Rosa to a café and fed her coffee and, perhaps ironically, a Danish pastry. We sat and watched the red-eye passengers wandering around for a good half an hour then made our way to Arrivals and waited for people to start coming through from a flight from, also somewhat ironically, Manchester Airport. We mingled with them and got another taxi, this time to a hotel not far from the Airport Hotel. The Airport Hotel itself was a little too obvious but hotels nearby also get people checking in at all times of the day and night and don't get upset.

After a good refreshing sleep and a bath each we took the hotel shuttle bus into the centre of Utrecht for a decent, if slightly late, lunch then went clothes shopping for comfortable clothes as we had a long drive ahead of us. I paid extra attention to the people around us as it seemed apparent we had been followed through the streets of

Amsterdam-Oost and I hadn't spotted anyone. I didn't this time either. We were just another couple of girls clothes shopping amid hundreds of other women clothes shopping. We made use of the toilet facilities in a shopping mall to get changed and redo our makeup, keeping things understated. There's a time for drawing attention and a time for fading into the background. There were a couple of lads sitting at a café nearby ogling the girls but when we came out of the toilets they virtually ignored us which was good. We went to a different café and had some coffee. No one paid us any attention although an older gentleman two tables away kept staring at Rosa's legs when his wife wasn't looking.

The best place to get another car was the airport long term car park since there'd be a huge selection on offer and the owners were likely to be away for a decent amount of time. Sadly lots of car thieves are also drawn to airport long term car parks so when someone tries to get out without the right parking ticket the people running the car park tend to get excited and insist on checking registration documents and licences. OK, you can try to sneak out by closely following another car through the barriers before they close again but that's always dodgy. Airport long term car parks always have surveillance cameras at the exits and we'd be spotted soon enough. Not a biggie for a thief whose sole aim is to appropriate a nice car and get it to some lockup where it would be resprayed and have ID numbers removed or simply stripped for parts but a problem if you're planning on driving it around for a while as we were.

The mall's own multi-story car park was also not an option as it was fourish when we decided to move on and shoppers and office workers would be coming back for their cars. We might get lucky and have a couple of hours before the car was reported stolen but probably not. Late afternoon is a bad time for car thieves. Mid morning is best or late evening. I tossed around a few options in my head then decided to stay another night in Utrecht. People searching for us would most likely assume we'd moved on and there'd be more than enough ordinary day to day car thefts to check out in case we'd taken one to keep them busy.

I also debated whether or not we should get replacement passports but decided in the end not to bother. The two Rossiya men had only

talked about Maria D'Escala and Astrid Pederson so Rosa Ramos wasn't widely known. OK I'd told them Rosa's name but I'd put them out of action shortly afterwards so it was unlikely they'd passed that snippet on. Callisto knew our new names, of course, and, one would have to assume, so did the spy but there's always a risk to everything and there was a better than even chance Callisto had kept those details very quiet. I also didn't know Utrecht well enough to know where I would be likely to find someone able to produce acceptable passports. I only rarely delivered to Utrecht. Mostly my deliveries to Holland were either Amsterdam or The Hague. I did know certain people in Amsterdam but it seemed a backward step to go there again.

So, we emerged from the mall, again with no one taking any notice, and wandered around for a while until we found a quiet hotel out of the city centre. It had a heated indoor swimming pool which was deserted so we had a fun time skinny dipping and pretending we were on holiday. Back in our room I found one of my training videos on their streaming service so we sat and watched it. The movie, *The Day Of The Jackal*, wasn't as good as the original book by Frederick Forsyth, but despite being made way way back in the 1970s it's still by far the most true to life movie ever made about the planning and execution of a clandestine single person operation. I was given it to watch on my first day of training and my trainer and I discussed various aspects afterwards. The movie was also occasionally referred to as my training progressed and we got deeper and deeper into the actualities and realities of the shadow world. Most movies of that nature are full of action and drama and have very little in common with reality. I'd seen more action in this little escapade with Fortuna than I had in all my previous five years on the job and even all that was nothing compared with the endless shootouts, blow-ups, fights and what have you of the movies.

In the morning we went out and I stole yet another car. I do sometimes wonder just how many of the thousands of car thefts each day all over Europa are actually done by intelligence operatives rather than criminals. Nah, actually I don't wonder that. It's just part of the job.

Chapter Twenty Five

That morning we had a leisurely breakfast in a café between the hotel and a shopping mall two streets away. I'd picked up a handful of tourist leaflets and what I thought was a 'What's On In Utrecht' pamphlet from the hotel reception. In our role as tourists we sipped our coffees, nibbled our croissants and flicked through the leaflets. It was then that I discovered the 'What's On' pamphlet was in fact a huge single sheet roughly the size of a motorway advertising poster, carefully folded in that special way that only the printer knows so it can't be re-folded neatly. In the end I gave up, roughly screwed it up into a ball and left it on the table for someone else to deal with.

Wandering through the mall's underground car park I spotted a woman, middle aged and respectably dressed, leaving her car and heading for the lifts to the shops. She was in a good mood and walking moderately slowly with an expectant air. Clearly she was heading for a leisurely morning of shopping and quite possibly meeting someone for lunch. If she'd needed to get, say, a new pair of tights on the way to work, she'd have moved a lot faster and with a focused 'get out of my way' expression. I took her car, a newish Ssong-Kia, since she wouldn't be needing it for quite a while.

Given that I'd found and removed the tracking device in Rosa's track suit pants, and later dumped the pants anyway, then managed to lose the people who'd followed us from the safe house mid way between Amsterdam and Utrecht it was difficult to see how anyone could have picked up our trail. In fact I'd done my damndest to not leave a trail. I paid cash for everything, used multiple taxis from different companies and so on. Still, we were travelling on passports that were now three days old so it was possible that those names, Rosa and Alice, were known and checks of the two hotels we'd stayed at could have located us to the general area. Theoretically at least the area could now be swarming with CS, IS, Rossiya and Europa people with their eyes peeled and comms links crackling with unused energy.

I didn't spot anyone though.

We left Utrecht heading for Arnhem just in case then I made a series of random turns solely to try to spot anyone else making the same

turns before heading South again. No one did although someone did beep angrily when I unexpectedly cut in front of him to make a sudden left turn. I pulled up at a rest area between Eindhoven and the Belgian border so we could use the toilets and noticed a man leave his BMW and head for the food court. Conveniently the BMW had Belgian number plates so we abandoned the Ssong-Kia. Although it was unlikely there'd be any checks at the border the Ssong-Kia could have been reported by now and a Belgian car re-entering Belgium shouldn't cause any suspicion. I swapped cars again about twenty k after the border on the road to Antwerp just in case and headed off in the general direction of Arlon, near the Luxembourg border.

"Can I have one of your cigarettes?" asked Rosa as I ignored the turnoff to Luxembourg and instead took the one for France. We'd swapped cars again in Arlon.

"What for?" I asked, surprised. "You don't smoke."

"I just want to try one," she said.

"Well, OK," I said and got one out for her. She lit it then blew out a tiny cloud of smoke before screwing up her nose.

"So what's the point?" she asked, studying the burning tip.

"Of what?" I asked.

"Smoking," she said. "It doesn't do anything and tastes unpleasant."

"It's better if you inhale," I said, amused.

She put the ciggie to her lips and sucked in a massive amount of smoke then, with a determined expression, sucked it deep into her lungs. Moments later she started coughing and spluttering and waving her hand in front of her mouth as smoke went everywhere.

"Bloody hell!" she gasped when she could speak again.

"Maybe not so much next time," I said.

Gingerly she took a very small suck and inhaled. She held her breath for a couple of seconds then let it out again without coughing.

“That's better,” I said.

“Oooh,” she muttered, her focus turning inwards. “I feel all tingly.”

“That's the nicotine in your bloodstream,” I said. “It'll pass in a few moments.”

She took another drag then suddenly thrust the cigarette at me.

“I don't like it,” she said through a cloud of smoke.

“No problem,” I said, taking it. I took a puff but, because I'd been smoking for years, I didn't get the tingles.

“So why do you smoke?” she asked.

“I'm an addict,” I said, flicking the ash out the window.

“Oh,” she said. “So what got you started?”

“Oh that's easy,” I said. “When I was fourteen I desperately wanted to be one of the cool kids at school so I sneaked off and got a packet when I was doing the weekly food shop with my mum. Then I spent the weekend practising so I looked like a hardened smoker when I went back to school on Monday.

“Did it work?” she asked. “Did you get to be one of the cool kids?”

“Actually, yes,” I said. “I was never pretty enough to be one of the alpha chicks but I looked tough enough to be one of the rebels and they were pretty cool. The smoking helped. We used to hang out behind the swimming pool at breaks and I soon learnt the right things to say. The boys started noticing me then as well which was the whole point anyway since I'd been noticing them for a while.”

“Is that what got you into this business?” she asked.

“Boys? God no,” I said.

“No, I meant being tough and one of the cool kids,” she said.

“Maybe, I guess,” I said. “Anyway, we don't really talk about ourselves.”

“How do you mean?” she asked.

“Personal information,” I said. “Could be dangerous. The less people know about me the better.”

“You mean like your real name and stuff?” asked Rosa.

“Exactly,” I said. “If people know that then they could track me down at home.”

“Oh,” she said and thought about it. “But surely telling me about your school life wouldn't make any difference?”

“Oh you'd be surprised,” I said. “If you know which school I went to, or even just which town the school was in, it wouldn't be too hard to find out who was in which clique around the time I'd have been there and get names. Once you have a name other things become easier, especially with schools.”

“Why especially with schools?” she asked.

“They keep records of where you go after school,” I said. “Especially if you go to university since the numbers of those going on to uni after school are part of their performance statistics. So, if you were trying to find me you could find out which uni I went to, what I studied and follow the trail from there.”

“So did you go to uni?” she asked.

“No,” I said, even though I had. She didn't need to know that sort of thing. “I left and got a job.”

“This one?” she asked.

“God no,” I said. “I was only 16. I got a job pushing burgers.”

“Did you really?” she asked.

“What do you think?” I asked.

She thought about it then laughed.

“Nah, you're not the type,” she said. “I bet you did go to university.”

I just smiled and started looking for another car since we'd breezed through the border into France with no trouble.

“I couldn't do what you do,” she said a while later. “I get confused and have to sit and think about things. You know, get it straight in my head then figure out what to do and how to do it. You just do what you need to do when you need to do it.”

“That's just practice,” I said. “I had a lot of training and I've been doing this job for a while.”

“So you think I could be like you?” she asked.

“Well, probably not like me,” I said, “since you aren't me. But, yeah, you could probably do this sort of thing. It's not usually like this, you know.”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“It's been non stop since we met,” I said. “Normally I just pick up a package and take it where it needs to go and very little happens. Mostly it's just enjoying the travel and staying calm which you seem to be able to do.”

“Nah,” she said. “I'm scared most of the time. I feel safe with you though.”

“Thanks,” I said. “I'd hate to think I made you scared.”

We made another car change mid afternoon and I let Rosa take over

the driving. I hadn't seen anything in the least bit suspicious and absolutely nothing had happened at the border crossings into Belgium and France. We'd just driven through like any other section of road. Although my unconscious is always on the alert my conscious was relaxing the further we got from Holland so it seemed reasonable for her to take a spell at driving.

She'd been going for perhaps forty five minutes when I got a text message.

"It's probably Centre," I said, reaching for my phone. "I've been wondering when they were going to start checking up on us."

I opened up my messages expecting to see one from my dance agent but instead it was just a phone number. It looked faintly familiar so I opened it.

"Oh frig!" I exclaimed, staring at the message. It said 'How about the Golden Lotus in Barrymore Street at 7?'.

I'd texted Brandon on Saturday when I got called away to Amsterdam apologising for having to cancel our not-quite-arranged date on Sunday and he hadn't got back to me by the time I'd left home. I was fairly sure I'd never hear from him again since he'd be thinking I was giving him the run-around which was a shame as I wasn't doing it deliberately. I had, however, forgotten that Darren was going to text me on Monday afternoon about where to meet for a date in Liverpool that same evening. So much for two dates on two consecutive evenings. No dates on any evening was how it was turning out, which was the norm. Tip, if you want to meet guys and have a rich social life don't go into intelligence work. You'll meet a lot of guys admittedly but it won't just be your mother who thinks you shouldn't date them. The Government won't like it either.

"What's the matter?" asked Rosa.

"Oh just guy trouble," I said, wondering whether or not to text Darren back and cancel.

"Boyfriend or husband?" she asked.

“Neither,” I said. “Just some guy wanting a date.”

Actually that pretty much summed Darren up. OK he could well be a great guy but he had baggage and I wasn't particularly keen on the idea anyway. I sighed and deleted the message.

“So are you married?” asked Rosa.

“We don't talk about personal lives,” I said.

“So you're not then,” she said.

“I may be, I may not be,” I said. “We don't talk about our personal lives.”

“OK,” she said then after a pause, “but do you want to be?”

“Rosa,” I said firmly. “Watch my lips. We don't talk about our personal lives.”

Actually telling her to watch my lips probably wasn't a good idea as she was driving but it didn't matter since she didn't.

“Sorry,” she said then glanced furtively at me. “Are you angry with me?”

“No,” I said, wondering if I'd been too quick to delete Darren's message.

“Cool,” she said. “So what about boyfriends?”

“Enough!” I exclaimed.

She frowned and pouted at the same time which wasn't a pretty sight.

“OK, OK,” she said. “Husbands and boyfriends are off limits. I get it. So who's this guy then, just a shag?”

“Oh frigging hell,” I said in exasperation. “He's just a guy I met a while ago. He's been pestering me for a date. That's all.”

“Hey, cool,” she said with a smile. “So why won't you go out with him?”

“Who said I'm not going out with him?” I asked.

“You deleted his message,” she said.

“You talk too much,” I said. “Concentrate on driving.”

“It's an empty straight road,” she said. “Nothing to concentrate on.”

“Good time to practice your Zen concentration then,” I said.

“So why won't you tell me?” she asked.

“Oh for fuck's sake Rosa,” I snapped angrily. “You really don't get it, do you. If I tell you anything about my personal life someone might get killed as people look for me while trying to find you. OK. This isn't a game.”

She froze which was unfortunate as we were approaching a bend but she recovered before I had to jerk the wheel.

“Sorry,” she said in a small voice. “I wasn't thinking. Are you angry with me?”

“That's OK,” I said, calming down and regretting my outburst. “And no, I'm not angry. It's just that you've got this massive secret that everyone seems to want and things are dangerous. I have to be ultra careful, you see. It's nothing personal. If it was just us I'd tell you anything you wanted to know but it isn't.”

OK I probably wouldn't since I was naturally secretive but she didn't need to know that either.

“Yeah,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper. “Sorry.”

We sat in silence for a couple of kilometres then I asked if she was still OK to drive. She said she was so we carried on going, still in silence.

We stopped for the night at a little hotel on the edge of Chambery, having skirted Geneva which is in the little pointy bit of Switzerland that sticks out into France. It had once been an old farm house with stone walls, a cheesery and no internal plumbing or electricity. Someone, in the long distant past, had ripped out the cheesery, reworked the various rooms into eight comfortable bedrooms and installed plumbing and electricity. Since then little maintenance had been done but the plumbing worked after a fashion and so did the electricity if you were patient. It was a nice place but too far off the tourist routes these days to be viable.

Rosa insisted on a room to herself and I agreed since absolutely nothing untoward had happened and there were seven others to chose from as we were the only guests. It was unlikely we'd be tracked there as France is a big place when you have to do almost random searches. Admittedly the various people looking for us would be fairly sure we were heading South towards Spain and Portugal but even so there were thousands of roads heading South and we might not even be driving. We could be on a train or we could have flown over to England and head for Portugal that way.

It was close to the Spanish border that the shit hit the fan.

We'd changed cars yet again in Toulouse, this time to a smallish Renault, and Rosa still wasn't particularly chatty with me. I was occupying my mind trying to count just how many cars I'd stolen since I'd arrived in Hamburg and met Rosa but lost count. Certainly it was well into double figures. When this was all over it would probably be a good idea to spend an afternoon in the Department's clinic getting my fingerprints scrubbed off and new ones cut as the police in several countries would be building up a nice little database from the ones on the cars they'd recovered. I wiped down every vehicle before abandoning it, except the one after the car chase between Amsterdam and Utrecht, but it's easy to miss some here and there. The procedure itself was fairly straightforward as the old prints were removed with acid and the new ones cut with a fine laser but the one and only time I'd had it done my fingertips and palms were sore for several days.

Anyway, we were driving from Toulouse towards Andorra when a

truck coming towards us flashed its headlights several times. Incidentally, I wasn't intending to cross into Andorra. The principality had been neutral in both World Wars, had refused to join the old European Community and only with the greatest of reluctance and under a great deal of pressure from France and Spain had agreed to be part of Europa. Andorra was very hot on preserving its independence and one result was that it fiercely protected its borders with full security checks on every visitor despite the fact the your average London street gang wouldn't have too much difficulty invading. My plan was to skip round Andorra to the East and cross into Spain while hopefully those searching for us search to the West.

A couple of cars not far behind the truck flashed their headlights and then another truck. There was nothing behind us to cause alarm so it was almost certain that there was something up ahead that these vehicles were trying to warn us about.

I slowed down and explained what was happening to Rosa. She'd been curled up in the passenger seat engrossed in a French novel she'd found at the motel. A kilometre or so further on there was a lay by big enough for a couple of trucks which had a small toilet block as well. It was deserted but I pulled in anyway. Rosa went off to use the toilet and came back very quickly.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"It's disgusting," she said. "Hasn't been cleaned for years by the look of it and the seat's been smashed."

She went off in search of a suitable bush and I decided I could wait a while longer. Rosa had finished by the time a truck ground to a halt just past us in the lay by. The driver got out and gave us a nod as he hurried over to the toilet then, just as Rosa had, hurried out again. He didn't bother with bushes though. He just stationed himself behind the big back wheels of his truck. I waited until he'd reappeared before walking over.

"Hello," I said. "How's the driving?"

"Much as usual," he said suspiciously, looking at me then over at

Rosa.

"I meant back there," I said, and jerked my thumb in the direction we'd been going. "People coming this way have been flashing their headlights."

"Ohh," he said, shrugging the way the French do. "There is a pop-up road block a few ks back, just outside Carcassonne. They are stopping everyone and searching for the illegal immigrants."

"Oh right," I said faintly bemused. "Get a lot of illegal immigrants round here, do you?"

"I know nothing of illegal immigrants," he said, "but never before have I been stopped around here but yesterday I was and again today."

"OK, thanks," I said. "I was just curious. Safe driving."

He glanced over at Rosa again then headed back to his cab.

"There's a road block up ahead," I said going back to Rosa. "They're stopping and searching every vehicle."

"So what do we do?" she asked.

"Well, it could be the police," I said, "since apparently they're looking for illegal immigrants, but I doubt it. Most illegal immigrants come in from Africa and up through Spain not the other way around and we're a bit too far from the coast if they're being shipped here. I think it's another Block looking for us."

Chapter Twenty Six

I studied the map on my phone. Carcassonne was indeed a few kilometres down the road and was a fairly small place. There were some roads that came off this main road and went directly to the village so we might be able to bypass the road block. On the other hand, whoever had set up the block might well be checking the other roads as well.

However, if we backed up a bit we could take the road down to a tiny village called Axat which was on the edge of the Parc Naturel Régional des Pyrénées Catalanes which spread across the Spanish border and became the Capçaleres del Ter y del Freser. The map also showed that there were a number of tracks that criss-crossed the Parc including one that went all the way to the border and beyond. The Renault, while no 4WD built for cross country driving, should be able to cope with a track big enough to warrant being included on a map. Allowing for twists and turns the border seemed to be no more than 80km. The next town after the border, Dòrria, was maybe another 20km and Barcelona another 60km or so after that. We still had a couple of hours before sunset so we should be able to make it to Dòrria by then which would mean we could hole up in Barcelona for the night. It wasn't a huge decision.

We headed off for Axat and found the start of the dirt track. The going was good for the first five or six kilometres then the track started to incline quite steeply as we headed into the peaks of the Pyrenees. While the scenery was magnificent the track was, to put it bluntly, crap. The first few kilometres had been tolerable but as we got higher the track became more and more rutted with sharp bends, deep holes and sections where we could only crawl in second gear. At one point we had to drop into first gear to get over a short but particularly steep hump. In the rain it would have been impossible for the Renault to get through. Getting to Dòrria by sunset was becoming increasingly unlikely although, once over the highest parts, it would be mostly downhill.

We reached a plateau as the sun touched the distant horizon and the track levelled off although its quality didn't improve. Actually plateau is the wrong word. It was more of a flattish valley with peaks towering

above us to the West. The track ran along the bottom of the valley most of the time and we were some way above the tree line. The tops of the peaks still had snow on them and we had the heating going in the car. Ahead there were no peaks, only undulations, which suggested we'd reached the highest point of the track. All around was thick grass and wildflowers interspersed with rocks and the occasional little stream. It was breathtakingly beautiful.

"That's a funny looking bird," said Rosa, peering off to the left.

"Where?" I said, taking my eyes off the track for a moment to look.

"Over there," she said pointing.

"How strange," I said when I saw it. "Maybe it's some sort of mountain eagle."

I concentrated on the road again and managed to get our speed up to a bouncy 45kph.

"It seems to be coming straight for us," commented Rosa a few moments later.

I slowed down again so I could look at the bird. It certainly was strange. Its wings were absolutely straight and horizontal and its body had an almost boxy look to it.

"Oh no," I exclaimed. "Please tell me it isn't."

"Isn't what?" asked Rosa, tearing her eyes away from the bird to glance at me.

"A frigging drone," I said, slowing down even more. "Jesus, just what we need."

"A drone?" exclaimed Rosa, looking back at the bird.

I started to speed up again and the bird swung a little to the side so it began to get ahead of us. It was difficult to see as we were bouncing around all over the place but as our paths merged and the bird got

closer it became obvious it was a drone. Not one of those little things that kids play with but a big one, either commercial or military. It had to be at least two metres across and had six rotors.

I'd got us up to around fifty kph with the drone keeping pace but a hundred metres or so ahead then it suddenly slowed and dropped down.

“Oh my God,” exclaimed Rosa, “we're going to hit it!”

The drone speeded up again as we got close. Not close enough to be at risk of hitting it but close enough to see the camera unit slung from its underbelly with a long telephoto lens pointing right at us. It seemed the drone was trying to see who was in the car.

Getting off the track wasn't an option as there were no other tracks and the grass and rocks would slow us to at best a walking pace with the risk of getting bogged down in some hidden pitfall. The only thing to do was either make it crash or try to outrun it. Fortunately drones have a limited top speed as they are designed to be small and manoeuvrable. The weight of the camera and lens would slow it down too.

“Hang on tight,” I said and grimly pushed down on the accelerator.

The operator of the drone must have been taken by surprise. They'd probably expected the car to slow down or stop so our sudden surge forward brought the drone perilously close to the windscreen. It suddenly shot up in the air and disappeared over the roof. I couldn't tell if we'd hit it or not as the car was bouncing round like a bucking bronco and jerking us all over the place but the windscreen didn't shatter.

“Can you see it?” I shouted at Rosa as my head banged against the door window yet again.

She managed to twist around to peer out of the back window and stay reasonably steady by wrapping her arms around the headrests and pushing her shoulder into the side of my seat.

“We’re losing it,” she cried, then, “owww” as her head banged into the roof. She shook her head then cried, “no, it’s catching up again!”

I grimly floored the accelerator, my knuckles turning white as I held on to the steering wheel and fought for some control. The speedometer crept up to 80kph and the poor little Renault took off and flew for a moment then crashed heavily back down, bottoming out its suspension. I had a vague memory that some of the fastest drones could get up to 75kph.

The sun had almost set and the shadows stretched forever, making it difficult to see the worst of the ruts but I could see there was a bend up ahead.

“It’s dropping back!” cried Rosa, now wedged almost entirely between the two seats. “We’re losing it!”

I was too focused on the track to reply then, as we went around the bend, there was an almighty thump and my side of the car hit me from underneath. There was a momentary silence then the windows on Rosa’s side shattered and the screeching began as we landed and slid. It seemed to take an eternity, although not long enough to scream, before the back end of the roof collapsed into the back seats. There was a momentary pause then the car fell sideways and collapsed onto the ground.

“Ooops,” I said then unpeeled my hands from the steering wheel.

I took a couple of deep breaths, trying to bring my brain back online then something smashed into the side of my head. It was Rosa, trying to extricate herself from where she’d landed, half in the front, half in the back, wedged between the seats and still with her seatbelt on which made it difficult to move in any direction.

“Hold on,” I said, “just let me ...”

Unfortunately her hip was wedged on top of the release for my seat belt so after fumbling for a few moments I gave up and simply sliced the seatbelt away with my fingernails. My door opened, albeit rather stiffly, and I got out then turned back to help Rosa out. It took a few

efforts and more slicing of her seatbelt but we managed.

“Are you OK?” I asked. We were in twilight now but there was enough light to see there was no blood squirting from anywhere. I had a couple of little nicks from where the nails of my forefingers had cut into my thumbs from gripping the steering wheel so tightly but they were minor.

“I think so,” she said. “My head hurts and my shoulders hurt and my leg hurts.”

“But nothing's broken?” I asked.

“Don't think so,” she said. “What happened?”

“We must have hit a rock or something,” I said, going round to inspect the other side of the car. By the look of it the car had slid on its side, ripping and smashing that side to pieces then come up against a large rock which had clipped the back end of the roof, collapsing the side struts. Fortunately the front end of the roof had missed otherwise we'd both be dead. The driver's side front wheel was a shattered ruin and, by the look of it, that half shaft had broken as well.

“Well, that's a bit of a bugger,” I said then looked in the sky. There was no sign of the drone although it had undoubtedly seen us crash.

“So what do we do now?” asked Rosa, rubbing her shoulder and her leg at the same time.

“We have two choices,” I said, pulling open the rear passenger door on the driver's side. “We wait for help or we walk.”

My bag, which I'd shoved partly under the driver's seat was now on the shelf behind the rear seats and was covered in broken glass. I fished it out and shook off the glass. It had a tear and some scratches but seemed OK. The bag itself wasn't important though. I fished out my iPad and phone and checked them both. The were both working which was a relief. There was no sign of Rosa's bag though. It was probably some way back among the ripped, torn and smashed

undergrowth and very likely ripped, torn and shredded itself.

“Who's going to help?” asked Rosa. “There's no one here.”

I sighed and tried to force myself to think clearly. It's not that easy when you've just crawled out from a car wreck.

“Well,” I said slowly, thinking it through. “The drone would have seen us so it depends on who was operating the drone, I guess. If it was the police then they'll be sending an emergency crew although it's getting dark now. I wouldn't want to drive all the way here in the dark.”

“And if it wasn't?” asked Rosa, trying to get pieces of glass out of her hair without cutting her fingers. She wouldn't anyway since car glass is designed to shatter into little pebbles with no sharp edges but maybe she didn't know that.

“Oh I don't know,” I said tiredly. “I guess, well, ohh, that thing was trying to get a picture of us, wasn't it? Before it went over the roof?”

“I think so,” said Rosa, screwing up her face. “I don't really remember. It all happened so fast.”

“I'm pretty sure it was,” I said. “It had cameras and was staying low in front of the windscreen.”

“OK,” said Rosa. “So you think it saw who we were?”

“I expect so,” I said. “For sure the damned thing didn't hang around afterwards. Maybe if they were looking for us they'll send some people out but if they weren't then maybe they won't bother. After all, they might be held liable.”

“Oh,” said Rosa. “So we either stay and wait for help or we stay and wait to be captured or we go somewhere else, yes?”

“Sounds like a fair summary,” I said, “although we don't want to be found by anyone and neither of us has any serious injuries. It's bloody cold as well.”

“Yeah,” said Rosa. “Did you see my bag anywhere?”

“It's somewhere back there,” I said, pointing along the new track torn by the car as it slid. “If we follow it back to the track we might find it.”

“OK,” said Rosa. “How far do we have to walk?”

“I'm not sure,” I said. “It's probably twenty kilometres to Dòrria though. Maybe more.”

“Twenty kilo ... you are joking!” exclaimed Rosa. “I can't walk that far in these.” She lifted a foot to show me the thin, flat shoes she was wearing. She didn't need to as I was wearing the same. We'd got them to look touristy, not expecting to do any serious hiking.

“Haven't got a lot of choice, have we,” I said. “Anyway, we might come across a tractor or something on the way. There must be a reason for this track after all.”

She just glowered at me then turned and limped off towards the track. We did find her bag not far from the track but it had been pretty well shredded and ground up by the glass when the windows had shattered. Her passport, the only thing of any significance in the bag, was more or less confetti. Still, we'd deal with that problem as and when we came up against any security checks.

We stayed on the track since it would have been the height of foolishness to leave it and try to walk cross country in the dark. If anyone did come to the crash site and decide to keep going to try and find us we'd get plenty of warning as it was so quiet even an electric engine would be heard some distance away and we'd see the lights. As my head cleared it also occurred to me that if the people who'd sent the drone, and it was most likely the people who were operating the immigrant road block since that would still be in range, they might well wait until daylight before sending the drone to look for us. On the other hand, they might even now be changing the camera to an infrared sensor and the drone would be back soon. Still, we'd probably hear it although I had no idea how to hide our heat signatures other than to set fire to the countryside.

We'd walked maybe two kilometres, maybe three, getting ever more chilled in our thin clothing, when the track started to head consistently downhill. By the look of it we'd crossed the highest point and were now heading down into Spain. The moon was coming up and was casting a ghostly silver grey hue to everything. It was a little under a half moon but it made it easier to see the track and saved me having to use the torch in my phone. I'd charged it and the iPad the night before and the phone was still at 80% and the iPad at 95% but I preferred to save those for when we really needed them.

"I haven't heard any streams," said Rosa as we trudged along. "You'd think now we're going downhill there'd be a stream or two, wouldn't you?"

"We might still be too high up," I said. "Why?"

"I'm thirsty," she said. "Thirsty and cold and hungry. And my shoulders hurt and my feet hurt."

"Me too," I said, "but there's not a lot we can do about it at the moment. Try thinking warm happy thoughts."

"I tried but it didn't work," she said.

"OK," I said. "Try thinking how cold it is in the Arctic. It's a hell of a lot warmer here so you'll feel better off."

"Is that what you're doing?" she asked. "Thinking about the Arctic?"

"No," I said. "I'm thinking about the Stoic philosophers."

"Why?" she asked. "Philosophy seems a pretty weird thing to be thinking about."

"Not really," I said wondering if my eyelashes were really icing up or if it just felt that way. "The Stoics taught that if you can't change things then you should accept them as they are and make the best of it."

"Oh," she said. "So you're basically just telling me to shut up then."

“Not really,” I said, “although if you can change things I hope you do tell me.”

“I was going to,” she said, “but you started rabbiting on about philosophers.”

“You were going to what?” I asked, skirting around a large pothole.

“Tell you how we can change things,” said Rosa.

“OK,” I said. “How can we change things?”

“We can go to that house over there,” she said.

“Oh yeah, very funny,” I said, not looking up. The ghostly glow from the moon made things look like they were coated with ice. They probably weren't since the area in daylight looked like it hadn't rained for a while but it certainly felt like it.

“I'm not joking,” she said. “There's a house over there. Up that path.”

“Where?” I said, lifting my head.

“Over there,” she said, pointing.

“Bloody hell!” I said, staring at the house. “Where did that come from?”

OK, it wasn't a hotel but it was definitely a building. A stone one by the look of it and it had windows so it probably wasn't a cow shed or something. I stopped and pondered for a few moments since the cold was slowing my brain down.

“So what do you think?” asked Rosa. “Shall we go and see if anyone's there?”

It seemed highly unlikely that anyone searching for us would have built a stone house although it wasn't beyond the realm of possibility that the drone had been operated from here. If that were the case though then it was probably a farmer checking his land rather than

CS or IS operatives. This place was so remote though I couldn't imagine why anyone would bother.

"OK," I said so we changed direction and started trudging along the path to the house.

"If there's anyone there," I said, "then we're just tourists who crashed our car and looking for help."

"Which is more or less true anyway," said Rosa. "Shall I knock or will you?"

I knocked then Rosa knocked then we both knocked. No lights came on and no one opened the door. I left Rosa standing there while I walked all round the building, noting it had a smallish garden at the back which confirmed it wasn't a cow shed. The back door was locked as well and all the windows were tightly shut.

"Looks like no one's here," I said when I got round the front again. "There are no vehicles either." I rattled the front door again then pounded on the door. Still nothing. I got my phone out and used the torch to inspect the lock. It was a simple barrel lock, easily opened with a hairpin.

"Have you got any hairpins?" I asked, shining the torch at Rosa.

"No," she said. "I didn't bring any. What do you want a hairpin for?"

"To pick the lock," I said. "It's an old fashioned one, not electronic, so my iPad won't work. Are you sure you don't have a hairpin or a paper clip?"

"I knew I should have got some paper clips when we stopped for lunch," said Rosa sarcastically. "Why would I be carrying paper clips?"

"You never know," I said, trying the door handle again in case it had magically unlocked itself.

"Why don't you have any hairpins?" she demanded. "You're the

professional. Don't you carry a lock picking toolkit at all times? Anyway your hair's a lot longer than mine."

"I prefer hair clasps or scrunchies," I said, "and I do carry a lock picking kit. It's just that it doesn't work with old locks like this."

"So you're saying you can't get us in?" she asked. "Wow. I thought you could do anything."

"No," I said. "I'm saying I can't pick the lock. I can still get us in though."

"How?" she asked. "Climb on the roof and wriggle under the tiles?"

"I don't expect it has tiles," I said, "but old fashioned problems have old fashioned solutions."

Then I smashed a window with a convenient rock.

Chapter Twenty Seven

No one came running. Not surprising really since no one answered our knocking on the door but plenty of people don't answer door knocks after dark. I listened for a few moments then climbed in. Broken glass crunched under my shoes so I told Rosa to wait until I'd opened the door rather than risk cutting her feet. It was dark inside but the door was easy to find as it was near the window. Perhaps more out of habit than anything I tried the light switch and, surprisingly the lights came on. It made sense after I thought about it since the house was undoubtedly off-grid and used solar. Just in case anyone came by I pulled the curtains shut.

"See if that heater's working," I said, spotting a large fake-log electric fireplace, "then see if there's any food in the kitchen. I'm going to have a look around." It wasn't impossible that whoever lived here was cowering in one of the other rooms.

It didn't take long to check each room as there were only four. The lounge, where we'd come in, a single bedroom, the kitchen and the bathroom.

"All clear," I reported to Rosa.

"I found some cans of soup and there was bread in the freezer," she said, getting a saucepan out of a cupboard. "Is that OK or do you want some meat defrosted?"

"Soup would be great," I said, looking round the kitchen. It had a fancy stove, fridge, freezer, microwave, toaster, what looked like an air fryer, a food mixer, the list went on and on. This was no farm labourer's shack, this was a rich person's weekender or hunting lodge ...

It only took me a minute or so to find the guns. They were where I expected them to be ~ propped up at the back of the wardrobe in the bedroom. One was an expensive hunting rifle but it was the other that grabbed my attention. A Krieghoff 28 gauge double barrelled shotgun. It was old, perhaps even as much as fifty years, but it was in immaculate condition. It was probably a family heirloom and had

been lovingly cared for. The wooden stock gleamed and, when I broke it open and peered down the barrels, they were spotless. Even better, there were several packets of 28 gauge birdshot cartridges, twenty to a packet, on the shelf at the top of the wardrobe.

I'm not a big fan of guns as they're generally more of a nuisance than anything but if I have to have a gun then a shotgun with birdshot would be my choice. There are virtually no moving parts to break, no sights to snag, no magazines to jam. They don't even need aiming. Each birdshot cartridge contains 62 steel pellets which, when fired, spread out in a cloud. Just point it in roughly the right direction and you're pretty much guaranteed a hit or two or three. A sawn-off shotgun is even better since it's a lot lighter, less unwieldy and, because there's very little barrel, the spread of pellets is a lot wider.

The odds were that the drone would be back sooner or later and the rifle would be useless. It only fired one bullet at a time and since drones are mostly empty spaces the bullet would likely just go through it without hitting anything. With 62 steel pellets though, or 124 if both barrels were fired, it didn't stand a chance. With a grin I kept the shotgun and slipped a cartridge into each barrel. I put a couple more cartridges in my pocket just in case. Any more would be plain greedy. I had a look at a shelf of books in the bedroom and they were all in French which suggested we hadn't yet crossed the border into Spain. Still, it couldn't be far.

Rosa was still in the kitchen and the smell of chicken soup was permeating the air. I propped the shotgun against the door frame and went to warm myself in front of the fire. Rosa had turned it on to maximum and it was pumping out wonderful heat although there was a draught from the broken window. I skipped back into the bedroom for a blanket and hung it over the curtains. It cut out most of the draught.

"Ahh, there you are," she said, coming into the lounge with a tray with two bowls of steaming soup, two big mugs of coffee and several pieces of toast. I sat in one of the comfortable armchairs and she passed me soup and toast before sitting in the other.

"You're not eating?" I asked after a couple of mouthfuls. She was just

sitting, staring into the fake fire. She gave a little jump then slowly had a spoonful of soup. I watched her for a few moments then turned back to mine. She'd had a hard day after all.

"I'm a defector," she said quietly and very unexpectedly.

I froze, thinking that this was a trap and I was about to be attacked or captured or something then called myself an idiot. If she was a defector from Europa she wouldn't be here, under my care. She'd be in whichever Block she'd defected to or dead.

"I'm sorry?" I said, mostly because I couldn't think of anything else to say.

"I'm a defector," She said, this time more strongly. She looked over at me with her serious face on and nodded.

"Ahh," I said. Then something to say occurred to me. "Why did you tell me that?"

"It's what you said yesterday," she said, watching my face. "About not talking about ourselves. That's been bothering me. You're putting your life on the line to protect me and it seems wrong that you have no idea why."

"Well that's the way it goes," I said. "I only need to know what I need to know. Nothing more."

"Aren't you curious though?" she asked, her soup forgotten.

"Of course," I said. "I'm only human after all, but like I said, I don't need to know."

"Well, I want you to know," she said. "I'm a defector. I defected from Christian State to Europa."

"So you're American then?" I asked. It surprised me as she had no trace of an American accent.

"No, I'm Venezuelan," she said. "From Caracas."

“Ahh, so that explains your accent,” I said.

“Yes,” she said. “I was brought up speaking Spanish but I also learnt Portuguese and Italian because my family ran several big stores and Venezuela has a lot of Portuguese and Italian communities. In fact I have an ear for languages and I can speak all the Romantic languages and the Germanic ones.”

“So how many's that then?” I asked.

“Eight,” she said. “That's why I was recruited by the International Office when I was only seventeen.”

“What's the International Office?” I asked, wondering if she'd been recruited as a trainee spy.

“What you in England call the Foreign Office,” she said. “I was a translator to begin with then after a year or two I was sent to the CS Embassy in Paris as a multi-lingual secretary. The computers were having trouble with translations, you see, since they couldn't handle idioms properly so they needed people for that.”

“How do you mean?” I asked, remembering my soup.

“Ohh, I don't know,” she said. “Umm, well, the Americans would send out memos saying things like 'escalate this downstream' and the computers would try to translate it literally into French or German or whatever and make an incomprehensible mess of it.”

“Yes, I can understand that,” I said. “So you defected because of idioms?”

She laughed, more from anxiety I think than because she found what I said funny.

“No,” she said. “It took a couple of years to really understand but I was appalled at what was going on.”

“Are you sure you want to tell me this?” I asked.

“Yes I do,” she said. “It’s become important to me that you understand. You’ll find out I’m a defector sooner or later but I don’t want you thinking it was because of money or I was being blackmailed or anything like that.”

“Actually I’d probably never find out you’re a defector,” I said. “That’s not the sort of thing I need to know.”

I don’t think she heard me because she didn’t answer, just stared at the fake fire for a while.

“I was a Christian,” she said quietly. “I still am. I was brought up Catholic but that doesn’t really matter. I was happy to go into Government service because I thought we were all working together to spread the Word of God and ultimately make the world a better place because of it but I was wrong, completely wrong.”

Again I didn’t know what to say so I didn’t say anything. Just quietly put my empty soup bowl down and toyed with a cigarette.

“I was excited when I arrived in Paris,” she said, still staring into the fire. “I had my own apartment, a job, no parents to stop me doing things. It was fun. At first I was in the general pool of secretarial staff doing routine translations and transcribing the minutes of routine meetings and so on. Then after a couple of years I was moved to the Office of the Head of Operations.”

“That’s the Christian State Head of Operations in Paris?” I asked, suddenly alert.

“Yes,” she said, “but he was the Head of Operations for the whole of Europa, not just France. There were Directors of Operations in the Embassies of each of the other countries in Europa but they all reported to the Head of Operations in Paris.”

“I see,” I said, leaning forward. This was getting quite interesting.

“As I said,” she continued, “I thought I was doing a very important job in helping spread the influence of Christianity since Europa is now mostly secular and non-believing. Like yourself. You told me you

don't believe in God.”

She glanced over and I nodded. She sighed then resumed gazing at the fire, her soup forgotten.

“Even though you are not a Christian, umm ...,” and she gave a little laugh. “I don't know what to call you. You have so many names.”

“Call me Kelly,” I said. “That's my real name.” It wasn't, of course, but I wasn't going to give my real name away gratuitously. I wasn't the one having a crisis of conscience.

“Thank you, Kelly,” she said. “Thank you for trusting me. It means a lot. My real name is Sofia. Sofia Delgado.”

OK my conscience now felt a slight twinge but I suppressed it.

“Even though I'm not a Christian ...?” I prompted.

“Ah yes,” she said. “Even though you are not a Christian do you know what the Christian Virtues are?”

“Umm, aren't they compassion and kindness and things like that?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said. “The main ones, of course, are Faith, Hope and Charity but the others are Wisdom, Fairness, Moderation, Kindness, Humility, Patience, Temperance and Chastity.” She ticked them off on her fingers.

“All very good virtues,” I said, although I had my doubts about Chastity. “If everyone stuck to them the world would definitely be a better place.” And I'd be out of a job I didn't add.

“Exactly,” she said, “and that was what I thought we were working for. Do you know the Sins?”

“Umm, I know there's seven of them,” I said.

“Oh there are a lot more than seven,” she said, “but they include

lying, deceit, hatred, slander, pride, greed. All those things and more.”

“OK,” I said.

“Well, as I got more involved with the Office of the Head of Operations,” said Rosa, “the more I came to see that what they did was focus on the Sins not the Virtues. They'd have meetings where they came up with new lies, new ways of slandering people in Europa, distortions, falsehoods, untruths. Fake news stories about horrendous suffering and deaths of women who'd had abortions, falsehoods about gangs of black people rampaging through the streets and terrorising neighbourhoods, gay people having orgies with young children, cannibalistic politicians, transsexual people going on drug induced psychotic rampages and things like that. They'd even have some of their so-called 'better ideas' sent out to focus groups for refining and then testing them on the public in small groups before releasing the falsehoods widely.”

“What on Earth for?” I asked even though I already had a fair idea.

“Sometimes to simply try to change people's attitudes and opinions,” she said. “Sometimes to distract them from something worse that CS was doing or going to do but always to stir up hatred against the people and groups that those in power didn't like. Have you ever heard of the Sin of Empathy?”

“Actually yes,” I said. “I've never understood how it could be a sin though.”

“It cannot be a sin,” said Rosa. “Everything in the Bible is about compassion and kindness, caring for other people. It is not possible for empathy to be a sin because empathising can only make you more compassionate, more caring, and yet they have declared it a Sin. Why? Because if you empathise with someone they regard as the enemy then you are more likely to let those people survive and that weakens their power but really the Sin of Empathy is aimed at stopping people from not accepting their lies and deceptions. They have invented a Sin solely in order to make their own sins look virtuous. Did you know there is a team of theologians in America whose sole purpose is to find catchphrases in the Bible that can be taken out of context and

misquoted so they sound like the Word of God but in reality are to be used to justify the most horrible acts and policies?"

"No, I didn't know that," I said.

"It's true," she said. "And it sickens me. Everything I believed in they were turning upside-down simply to grab more power, more wealth, to destroy others. Not help them lead a more virtuous life but to destroy them because they don't fit in with the so called Christian Way, a view of Christianity that they have created for themselves that has little or no resemblance to Christianity as shown by God. A Christianity based on hatred, greed, selfishness and oppression. Not one of them has any Christian virtue. It is all a charade." She paused and seemed to notice her soup then looked at me with an almost resigned expression. "So that's why I decided to defect. I don't want any part of such a deception."

I remained silent. After all, what could I say? Well done?

"They think of themselves as virtuous," she added. "They come up with all sorts of names to justify things to themselves. Like 're-framing the narrative'. It sounds almost like a good thing but it's still lying. Or 'perception management'. That's a good one. You create a fake conspiracy or identify a terrorist group that doesn't actually exist then spread it out to the public through 'perception management' so people believe what you want them to believe. It's all one gigantic deception, lies bundled together with fabrication, falsehoods and facts so twisted and altered as to be unrecognisable. Do you know what really gets me angry?"

"I can't imagine," I said, since she seemed angry enough about what she'd told me to defect.

"Much of what they do," she said, "isn't even intended to be believed. It's simply playing with people's perceptions of the world so they are never sure what is really happening. Everything's constantly being shifted and changed to undermine their stability. Anyway, I'm going to reheat my soup. Would you like some more?"

"Not for me thanks," I said, "although another coffee would be nice."

She wandered back into the kitchen and I pondered what she'd told me. None of it was surprising really. People who begin to achieve power often change the stance that got them into power initially in order to maintain and increase that power. Once they get to the top or near the top it would be surprising if any of their original beliefs still existed. But then, I'm pretty pragmatic and cynical. Rosa, by the sound of it, was an idealist and for that I admired her. She'd thrown up her life, her family, her career for those ideals.

"The thing is," said Rosa, coming back with two coffees and a bowl of hot soup, "I have become one of them myself."

"Excuse me?" I said in surprise.

"Yes, you are surprised," she said, sitting down and looking at me.

"You hated what those people did and what they stood for, so you defected," I said. "How does that make you one of them?"

"Surely you know a defector will only be accepted if she brings information with her, Kelly?" asked Rosa. "Just turning up at a foreign Embassy and asking to become a citizen is emigration, not defection."

"Well, true," I said. "Couldn't you have simply emigrated to Europa rather than defected?"

"I would not have been permitted," said Rosa. "Aside from all the knowledge I acquired as a secretary in the Office of the Head of Operations, about eighteen months ago I was transferred to Personnel and gained knowledge of many of the CS operatives who work in France. It would not be possible for me to emigrate. Equally I could not stay so defecting was my only option."

"I see," I said. "So it's all this knowledge you bring with you that makes CS want you back and IS and Rossiya want to get hold of you?"

It seemed unlikely. The sort of information she'd mentioned was the sort of stuff our espionage specialists routinely extracted through the 'normal channels' and occasionally, if it was particularly juicy, I

couriered around.

“No,” she said then paused to slurp some soup. “That information I have already passed to Callisto and was only ever a sweetener, a tasty morsel to get my foot in the door. But in the process I, too, became a liar, a deceiver. Not to mention the hatred I now have for those who pretend to be Christians but aren’t.”

“Whoa, hold up here,” I said in alarm and held my hand up. “Are you saying you lied to Callisto? You gave her false information?”

“No,” said Rosa. “Everything I have passed on has been the truth. I’m talking about what I haven’t passed on yet. Callisto knows of it but can’t access it yet until I tell her how.”

“Ahh, right,” I said. “And that’s what CS, IS and Rossiya are trying to find out about? The ‘something big’ that Callisto is keeping very quiet that they all want to know?”

“Yes,” she said and dunked some cold toast in her soup before eating it. “You see, I have something that could bring down the entire CS network throughout Europa and it’s my hatred that is making me use it. In that way I’m like those I am looking to destroy.”

“And Callisto knows this?” I asked.

“The secret or my hatred?” she asked.

“The secret,” I said. “I imagine your hatred was apparent when you were talking to her about defecting.”

“She knows of it,” said Rosa. “She can see the potential, the power, but only I know how to get at it. That’s why she’s gone to such efforts to keep me safe.”

“I see,” I said. “I hope you’re not planning on telling me. You’ve told me too much already. I don’t need to know any of this stuff.”

“But I want to tell you, Kelly,” she said. “I can empathise with you, having to keep me safe without knowing why. It must be very

frustrating and difficult.”

“Not really,” I said. “I never know what's in any of the deliveries I make but I make damned sure they're delivered and, if I have to, I'll put my life on the line.”

“It's a shame you aren't a believer,” said Rosa, putting her empty soup bowl down. “You demonstrate many virtues.”

“And many sins,” I said. “Lying and deceit go with the territory.”

“Nonetheless I will tell you,” said Rosa, settling back in her armchair. “What do you know of SIDs?”

Chapter Twenty Eight

“Sudden Infant Death Syndrome?” I said, puzzled. “Surely you're not going to tell me that's another right-wing conspiracy theory?”

“Nooo,” she said, “SIDs, umm, you know, security IDs.”

“Of course I've heard of them,” I said. “They're everywhere. Pegasus and Fortuna are security IDs.”

“I'm not explaining this very well,” she said, frowning. “I mean inside computers.”

“I'm sure there are millions inside computers as well,” I said. “What of it?”

“No, no, no, let me explain,” she said, waving her hands irritably. “Years ago, after I first started with the Embassy, I began to realise just how many millions, no, tens or even hundreds of millions of documents were stored in the computers. Not just documents but images, sound recordings, videos, databases, reports, meetings, plans, invoices, everything. And every one of them had permissions which restricted who could access them and what they could do. It dawned on me just how massive and complex it all was, especially databases as different people could only access certain records in the database but not others. OK?”

“OK,” I said, wondering where this was going and whether more coffee would be needed.

“Then one day it occurred to me that sometimes account names have to be changed,” she said. “Like when someone gets married or something. That would mean every permission on every file would need to be changed to their new account details.”

“I'm sure it doesn't work that way,” I said. “That could take forever and errors would be made.”

“Exactly,” she said. “So after thinking about it for a while I asked a guy in the IT section who I was friendly with. He told me that

whenever a new account is created it's given a huge number which is its security ID and the permissions and account details all link back to that number. Change the account name and it still refers to the security ID so the old permissions don't need to be updated."

"Makes sense," I said.

"But this is the thing," she said. "Every single one of those security IDs has to be unique otherwise permissions and account details could get mixed up. So, when a new account is created the computer system creates a new unique ID for it and when an account is deleted that ID is still kept so the system knows not to use it again."

"Well, obviously," I said. "Where are you going with this?"

"Here's the thing," she said. "When I decided to defect I was looking around for information I could take with me and then it occurred to me. What if someone actually had an account with the same security ID as someone else."

"And?" I asked.

"Well, what do you think would happen?" she asked.

"I imagine the system would pick it up and set off alarms," I said.

"But it doesn't," she said. "My IT friend explained that too. There are so many SIDs it would be a huge waste of computer processing capacity to be continuously checking for duplicate IDs since the system knows there won't be any because every ID is unique. So what would happen?"

"Umm, well, I guess then that the people with the duplicate SIDs would be able to access each others files even though they shouldn't," I said.

"Exactly!" she said, sitting back with an air of satisfaction at having thoroughly explained everything.

"Umm, so what?" I asked, still mystified. "Duplicates can't happen so

what's the big deal?"

"The system can't create duplicates," she said. "But someone with the right skill and knowledge can."

"You mean your IT friend?" I asked.

"Yes," she said. "He took a bit of persuading and I had to sleep with him several times but in the end he did it."

"Did what exactly?" I asked.

"He created a harmless little account for me on the system," she said. "A generic one for use by occasional temporary users of the system then he wrote a little app that deleted the account's SID and replaced it with the SID of the account for someone else."

"Jesus!" I said, astonished at the audacity of the idea. Hell, the audacity of the girl to have thought of and implemented it. "Did it work?"

"We tried it with my account," she said. "The generic account ended up with my permissions and no alarms went off. Nothing was even logged except the usual logging of me opening one of the personnel files I was supposed to be able to open."

"Do you still have that app?" I asked.

"No," she said. "My friend deleted it since the system does run periodic checks for unauthorised apps as well as viruses and so on."

"But you have a way of contacting him and getting him to put it back on again if you needed to?" I asked.

"I suppose I could," she said, "but it would be very difficult."

"Yes, I suppose so," I said, "and knowing you've defected he'd probably be very unwilling to help you again."

"Well, maybe," she said, grinning. "But I did video us in bed together

several times and before I left I told him and said I'd send copies of the videos to his wife and the Head of IT as well as details of what he'd done with the computers and that I'd defected with the information. So if he ever tells anyone he'll lose his wife and job and probably be tried for treason as well."

I burst out laughing.

"Jesus, Rosa," I said, between laughs, "you really do have a natural talent for this sort of thing, don't you."

"Oh, you haven't heard the best part yet," she said, smirking in a rather ugly way.

"And what's that?" I asked.

"After we'd tested the app with my account," she said, "and before he deleted the app we used it to copy another account's SID to the generic account."

"Whose account?" I asked, suddenly getting serious.

"The Head of Operations," she said and shrugged.

I just stared. Then stared some more.

"Holy fuck!" I breathed after a while. "I mean, whoa!" and tried a little rapid breathing to slow my heart down. "You mean *THE* Head of Operations? The guy who's Head of all the operations all over Europa? Not some low level Head of Plumbing Operations or anything? THE Head?"

"Yes, the Head of Operations," she said. "The one who's in charge of all operations throughout Europa."

I buried my head in my hands and curled up with my head between my knees trying to think through the implications of this. The Head of Operations would have permission to access every single little detail of every operation ever carried out, every operation currently being carried out, every operation being planned and every operation that

was still just a vague proposal. He'd also have access to all kinds of other data including purchase requisitions, hiring and firing, policy decisions, reorganisations, even redecorating. Jesus! And not just within France where he was based. Every country in Europa and every country allied with Europa. Hell, he'd even have access to data back in Christian State and very possibly about operations the CS had done, were doing or will do in the other Blocks insofar as they might relate to Europa.

This was ... unbelievable, incredible, stupendous ... I didn't know any superlative that was superlative enough.

"And you've given this to us?" I asked after what seemed like an eternity. "To Callisto?"

"She knows what you do now," said Rosa. "But she doesn't know the account name or the login biometrics for that generic account. Only I know that. Not even my IT friend knows because I changed the account name afterwards."

And that explained everything.

What Fortuna had in her pretty little head was by far the biggest more important asset Europa had ever had. Even knowing something this big existed without knowing any of the details would mean that IS, Rossiya, Yazhou and Alkebulan would be desperate to find out what it was. And, given CS knew Fortuna had defected from them, they would be freaking out. Panicking about what she could possibly have taken with her.

It also meant Callisto and whoever else was involved had to be awesomely careful. Not only in protecting Fortuna until she revealed the account details but in setting things up so that as much information as possible could be grabbed and analysed before CS found out and started checking SIDs and closing down the generic account's access. No wonder Fortuna was constantly being moved with no apparent final destination. The effort involved in setting up a team of hundreds of technicians and analysts fast and in secret was, quite frankly, beyond my comprehension.

As the implications slowly sank in I realised that not only had Fortuna given us deep access into CS operations, she'd also given us deep access into what CS knew of Europa's operations, both against CS and the other Blocks, and, incredibly, what CS knew of the operations of IS, Rossiya, Yazhou and Alkebulan, at least within Europa. Even more, as the Head of Operations almost certainly had permissions to edit some if not all files then whoever was using this generic account could also edit the files and plant a huge amount of misinformation.

I didn't get much sleep that night. It wasn't long before I realised something even more important. Fortuna had this information in her head but I had been chosen to be the one to protect her. Me. And all on my own, assuming Callisto's team of specialist personnel operatives in Amsterdam were just a decoy. That was one hell of a responsibility even though I wasn't supposed to know what I was responsible for. Rosa, of course, slept like a baby, secure in the knowledge that I was protecting her. Bloody hell.

We were both achy the next morning which was inevitable as crashing a car does things to your muscles they wouldn't normally be asked to do. Before we left, just after dawn, I debated about whether or not to leave some money behind to compensate the owner for the loss of their heirloom shotgun. I decided not to in the end as leaving money would be suspicious as it would otherwise be a straightforward break-in and theft. We did, however, take some food and water. The house, incidentally, now we could see it properly in the light, was sited on the edge of a small lake. It was an idyllic spot for a get-away lodge. The sort of place I'd like to retire to one day.

We carried on walking along the track, scanning the skies for any sign of a drone. Rosa spotted it first, coming in from the North, roughly from the direction of Carcassonne. It most likely had gone to the crash site then followed the track to the house and checked for any signs of life. Not finding any it was now continuing in the direction of the track but following a zig-zag path. Doubtless it was scanning some way each side of the track as well.

I got Rosa to lie down in a thick patch of grass a little way off the track for safety then stood on the track with the shotgun hidden behind me. I waved several times at the drone before it noticed and

came over to investigate. I stayed stationary with a smile on my face, trying to look like someone out for a walk who'd noticed the drone, waiting for it to come within range. Unfortunately shotguns have only a limited range so I waited as it cautiously approached, the telephoto lens locked on me. I must have been recognised since it continued to come closer then the lens started shifting from side to side as though it was looking for Rosa. If they'd been looking for someone else – illegal immigrants, people growing drugs or whatever – I'd have been dismissed. Still, when it got to about twenty metres away I whipped out the shotgun and blasted the dratted thing.

It flew into the cloud of pellets and one of its six rotors shattered. The drone lurched to the side as the other five tried to compensate and started rising so I let fly with the other barrel. Two rotors on the other side disappeared and the thing went into a drunken spin before crashing into a tree. It collapsed on the ground with three of its rotor arms broken and one rotor still whirring, trying desperately to lift it off the ground. Then it shorted out and seized.

There were no markings on the drone itself but I used a fallen branch to wedge inside the body through one of the broken rotor arm sockets and forced the casing apart. Most of the components had no markings either but one circuit board had Integrated Logistics Inc printed on it. It wasn't conclusive as one of the other Blocks could be using a CS circuit board in their drones but it seemed likely the drone was being operated by CS. I took a photo of the drone and the circuit board with my phone then Rosa and I continued walking.

We probably walked fifteen kilometres or so but in the late morning we came across a farmer heading for the town of Dòrria who was only too happy to give us a ride in his battered pickup truck so he could complain at length about the agricultural subsidies given by Europa that were clearly intended to benefit French farmers at the expense of Spanish farmers. We totally agreed with every word which pleased him no end and he got his son to drive us to Barcelona for petrol money, which goes to show how old the son's pickup truck was. I was pretty sure it was older than me.

Iglesias, the son, deposited us at a hotel on the edge of Barcelona a little after one in the afternoon and, once he was out of sight, we

walked on a little further to a café and had some much needed coffee while I phoned Centre.

“Pegasus,” I said when a woman answered.

“You are in Seville?” she asked. I'd set my phone routing app to Seville, which was in Spain but close to the Portuguese border, just in case. That way if anyone, including Callisto, was able to monitor my phone they'd think we were still heading for Lisbon.

“Barcelona,” I said. “Checkpoint details required for delivery.”

“Pause,” she said and the phone went dead.

Rosa reappeared with our coffees and a couple of rather sickly sweet looking confections. I had a forkful and felt the sugar hit course through my veins. As far as I could tell the thing was made of pure sugar with a few drops of food colouring to brighten it up.

“Pegasus,” said the woman suddenly.

“Here,” I said.

“Checkpoint as follows,” she said. “Minotaur, Almuerzo con Sasha in Via Laietana, 1430 hours local time. Confirm.”

I confirmed the details, pleased that my contact was Minotaur. I'd met him several times in the past. Then I checked Almuerzo con Sasha on the Internet since I'd never heard of the place and, literally translated, it meant 'lunch with Sasha'. It was a rather swanky up-market café and was indeed on Via Laietana. It also closed at 3pm so we got a taxi rather than waste time with public transport and neither of us felt up to walking another ten kilometres.

“Is that him?” whispered Rosa when we walked in. She half nodded at a middle aged slim man with a goatee sitting alone at a table at the back. He was studying an iPad with a mug and a partially chewed salad roll thingy on a plate next to him. There were several other people in the café but half the tables were empty as the lunch crowd would have long gone.

“Shh,” I whispered back and went over to the counter to order some more of those sickly sweet things that had turned out to be surprisingly nice.

I gave the girl the number of the table next to Minotaur and we sauntered over, admiring the blond wood furniture and the abstract murals on the walls. Minotaur glanced up as any man would when two women sit at the next table then looked back at his iPad.

“Excuse me,” I said, pointing to the iPad. “Have you got the weekend's bull fighting results there?”

“Yes,” he said, looking at me. “Don Esprillado once again proved how skilled he is with the bulls.”

“That matador is fast becoming a legend,” I said. “A myth.”

“Indeed,” he said, “although I prefer the horses myself.”

“Yes, one or two of those are also legendary,” I said. “Flying in the face of tradition.”

He smiled.

“And it is our good fortune to witness that,” he said. “Hello Pegasus, Fortuna.”

“Hello Minotaur,” I said. “Delivery point?”

“I am to take you there myself,” he said. “It is some distance.”

“Oh,” I said frowning. This was a break with protocol.

“I know,” he said, dropping his voice to almost a whisper. “But there is heavy security.” He glanced towards the window.

I glanced that way as well and saw Scylla come in. Another face I'd seen several times at various Spanish checkpoints. He ignored us as he ordered a takeaway sandwich from the counter.

Just at that moment my phone pinged. I glanced at it and saw I had a message from Centre. This was a tricky situation. Minotaur and Scylla could well be on the level but if so, why was Centre contacting me at this moment? Perhaps they were warning me about Minotaur and/or Scylla. If I took the message however, this might warn them, if they were in fact now working against me, and could lead to difficulties. I could cope on my own but I had Fortuna barely inches away and who knew how many others were outside.

"I expect that's your boss," said Minotaur conversationally. "Probably asking you to bring something nice back with you."

Why would Minotaur mention my boss? The only thing I could think of was that Centre had a message for me from Elrond and that Minotaur knew about it. Did that mean Minotaur was trustworthy though? Perhaps his source had warned him that I was going to be warned? I hesitated for a few moments then decided it was all too implausible, especially the timing. If Minotaur knew Elrond would be warning me he'd have known for some while and Elrond would have warned me earlier, not left it until the moment contact was made. I phoned Centre.

"Pegasus," I said quietly when the same woman as before answered.

"You are in Seville?" she asked.

"Barcelona," I said.

"Direct communication with Elrond," she said. "Transferring."

"Elrond," said Elrond after a moment's pause.

"Pegasus," I said, lowering my voice even further.

"I'll see you soon," he said. "Don't worry. Your driver is entirely trustworthy."

"Great, thanks," I said and he hung up.

Scylla paid for his sandwich and took it outside.

“Right,” I said, standing up. I wasn't entirely convinced but my options were limited. “Let's go for a drive.”

Chapter Twenty Nine

If this were a movie Minotaur and Scylla would each have a vehicle parked directly outside the café. This was real life though and Minotaur's car was forty metres down the street with a parking ticket under a windscreen wiper and Scylla's was in a supermarket car park around the corner.

There was a stranger sitting in the driver's seat of Minotaur's car and Fortuna and I got in the back. The stranger was neatly but casually dressed and wore sunglasses. He gazed stonily straight ahead as we got in and Minotaur retrieved the ticket. I wouldn't be surprised if the man had sat stonily ignoring the parking warden until he or she lost patience and issued the ticket. Anyway, Minotaur glanced at the ticket then tossed it in the foot-well.

It took a couple of minutes before we got under way as Minotaur had to coordinate by phone with Scylla who had managed to get blocked by a delivery truck making several attempts to reverse into the supermarket unloading bay. He arrived eventually, with three other people in his car all dressed casually, wearing sunglasses and staring stonily out the windows. Minotaur forced his way out into the traffic behind Scylla, getting a few beeps of protest in the process, and the pair of cars headed off down Via Laietana,

“Where are we going?” I asked.

Fortuna didn't have any sunglasses but she followed the pattern and stared stonily out the window as well.

“To a town called Montgat,” said Minotaur. “It's about ten kilometres North of Barcelona, on the coast.”

“And what is at Montgat?” I asked, surreptitiously getting my phone out and calling up directions. Our little convoy was going in the right direction even if it wasn't following the exact route the phone was suggesting.

“There's a holiday resort there,” he said. “For tourists. It is closed for renovations and we have taken it over.”

If that was true it made sense. A large team was going to be needed to handle whatever information could be obtained once Fortuna revealed those last vital details. Having the team in one location would make coordination a lot simpler. Security too. Still, I remained tense and alert. I couldn't tell how Fortuna felt but maybe she was happy things seemed to be coming to an end.

To my relief we pulled up beside a long section of construction fencing which almost entirely obscured a two story building big enough to be a hotel. Encouragingly there was a large gaily painted but faded sign out the front which read Jardines de los Peces Complejo Vacacional. Roughly translated it meant Gardens of the Fishes Holiday Resort which seemed entirely appropriate as it was on the coast in a nice area with a beach. They probably offered boat trips and scuba diving as well. Papered over the top of the sign was a notice saying 'Under Renovation ~ Reopening May 2041'.

A couple of Scylla's people jumped out and removed a section of the fencing. Our driver drove through and pulled up outside the main entrance to the resort. As soon as we were through they replaced the fencing. By the look of it the resort had once been quite nice. There were extensive gardens along the frontage and the driveway that were now somewhat overgrown. The main building itself clearly needed some minor repairs and repainting and someone was replacing the glass in one of the ground floor windows. The few other buildings I could see also looked run down and neglected.

More importantly Adonis, Callisto's colleague from the Hamburg office, was standing at the top of the steps to the main entrance waiting for us. He greeted us then conferred with Minotaur for a few moments then ushered us inside. Reception was a mess. It was littered with computer and power cables lying haphazardly all over the floor and two harried looking technicians were trying to organise them into neat bundles. Several other people were stepping around the cables studying multi-meters and other bits of equipment.

"Excuse the mess," said Adonis. "Everything's chaotic at the moment. Come into the office."

We went into what looked to have been the Resort Manager's office.

The original comfortable furniture had been shoved into a corner and three grey office desks brought in to supplement the original wood desk. All four desks had computers, printers and various other gadgets.

“Can I offer you refreshments?” asked Adonis, waving a hand at a small refrigerator with a kettle and mismatched mugs on top.

“Not for me, thanks,” I said, glancing at Fortuna. She shook her head.

“Well, take a seat,” said Adonis, dragging over a couple of cheap looking office chairs. “Elrond will be here in a moment. He was called away to check something.”

“I rather expected Callisto to be here,” I said, sitting down.

“She should be,” he said, “but she's in hospital at the moment. I've been called in to help coordinate things.”

“Hospital?” I asked, raising an eyebrow. “Is she sick?”

“Perhaps we'd best wait until Elrond is here,” he said. “How was your trip?”

“Are you to debrief me or should that wait for Elrond as well?” I asked.

“Ahh, I asked only out of politeness,” he said. “Elrond will debrief you.”

I nodded and shut up.

“Will I be staying here?” asked Fortuna.

“For a few days,” said Adonis. “Once things are under way then you'll be moved to a more permanent, safer location.”

She nodded and looked a little anxious. Whether it was about getting things under way or about the more permanent location I couldn't say.

“Ahh, there you are!” exclaimed Elrond, marching in. “I was told you both had arrived. Excellent.”

“Pegasus was asking about Callisto,” said Adonis.

“What did you tell her?” asked Elrond, sitting behind the Resort Manager's desk.

“Only that Callisto is in hospital,” said Adonis.

“Right,” said Elrond. He gazed at me for a few moments.

“You don't strictly need to know this,” he said, “but it is entirely due to you that Fortuna is safely here now. Callisto was shot twice during an attack on one of the convoys. Her injuries are relatively minor and she is expected back in two or three days.”

“On the convoy taking Fortuna to Lisbon?” I asked, frowning.

“Yes,” he said. “It's fortunate that you removed Fortuna from that situation in advance.”

“Do we know who by?” I asked.

Elrond pursed his lips for a moment then said “CS.”

“Interesting,” I said. “I rather thought the mole was CS.”

“Why do you think there was a mole?” asked Elrond sharply.

“Callisto implied it,” I said. “She gave me written instructions to take Fortuna to Barcelona but continued to talk about Lisbon.”

“I see,” he said. “Well, you were right, but the mole was IS, not CS.”

“Didn't you say the attack was CS?” I asked.

“Yes,” he said, “but they'd been watching the apartment in Amsterdam-Oost and followed the convoy after it left. The mole reported one of the other convoys to IS and they attempted an

interception in France.”

“So how many convoys were there?” I asked.

“You don't need to know,” said Elrond, “but I don't expect it matters now. There were six, each with people who looked broadly similar to you both.”

“Ahh,” I said, nodding. “So I imagine the routes of each convoy were revealed only to certain people.”

“Yes,” he said.

“So did you identify the mole?” I asked.

He thought for a moment and conceded that they had.

“Who was it?” I asked.

“That you definitely do not need to know,” he said, “but it went as high as Assistant Deputy Director.”

“Interesting,” I said. “By the way, Rossiya were also watching the Amsterdam-Oost apartment.”

“How do you know?” he asked, leaning forward.

“When Fortuna and I left in the middle of the night we were intercepted,” I said and briefly described what had happened. “We got away but wasn't it our people who came to investigate?”

“No,” he said, frowning thoughtfully. “They must have been CS. You know, that rather explains something.”

“What's that?” I asked since it was very rare to get explanations and I wanted to keep the momentum going.

“We wondered why CS attacked the Amsterdam-Oost convoy,” he said. “We weren't able to have substitutes for you both because it was too difficult to swap you over with a suspected mole in the apartment

but they still attacked even though neither of you were there. It wouldn't surprise me if they thought the presence of Rossiya people was confirmation and that you both were disguised or something. That would also account for why they attacked as soon as the convoy assembled. They were afraid Rossiya would get in first."

"And that could explain the road blocks and drones at the Spanish border," I said and briefly explained what had happened there and showed him the photos of the drone's circuit board. "Having failed in Amsterdam-Oost they must have figured out I'd taken Fortuna independently and was taking her to Lisbon on a roundabout route so they set up the road blocks to the East of Andorra rather than to the West."

"You know I rather think you might be right," he said thoughtfully. "We were puzzled that CS only made the one attempt. It makes sense for them to regroup and try a different tactic."

We spent another hour and a half debriefing then I was sent on my way with instructions to enjoy the holiday I hadn't had after getting Fortuna to Amsterdam. Fortuna was a little emotional to be left behind without her protector but she knew it was the end and accepted it. The good news is that I was able to get a plane back to my house in Manchester and was home a little before midnight. The bad news was that Carmel and Tiffany, my student tenants, were having a party that lasted most of the night.

Chapter Thirty

Approximately four weeks later:

My phone went just as I was sliding into a nice hot bath. I groaned since I was exhausted but checked anyway. It was Centre, of course, wanting me to do three deliveries, to Venice, Vienna and Budapest. All in the same day, if possible. I explained it wasn't possible but 36 hours should be achievable. They agreed and graciously allowed me to get a plane to Barcelona to make the pickups.

This was the reason why I was exhausted. Ever since the last two days of my holiday had been cancelled the number of deliveries had exploded. Two at a time was now commonplace and three wasn't that unusual ~ Venice, Vienna and Budapest not being that far apart. Many times I'd carried four sachets in my boobs and on one occasion six. There was a rumour going around among us couriers that three relatively recent retired couriers had been called out of retirement to help with the additional workload and training of the two new recruits was being fast-tracked.

"Good for you, girl," I muttered and wallowed in my bath.

Clearly what Fortuna had delivered was working and vast amounts of data was coming across that needed disseminating. And, in the process, I'd gained a couple of commendations for my work which I could add to the one I'd received when I was ten for my project on plant life in and around a local pond. One day, perhaps, my parents might even see the commendations. They'd certainly been proud of the pond one.

I let my mind drift to Adam, who I'd met in my second holiday week and with whom I'd managed to squeeze in a couple of dates since. I'd not heard from either Brandon or Darren since running out on them to go to Amsterdam, unsurprisingly. With a bit of luck I'd be able to find some time for Adam when I got back from Budapest since he was cute. He thought I was a high powered saleswoman for a multinational computer company since I could now talk about SIDs with authority. He didn't know much about computers but he seemed to like self confident assertive women which was cool with me.

I swear I was only in the bath for a minute or so but it was suddenly cold. I heard footsteps running up the stairs so Tiffany must have slammed the front door, waking me. I pulled the plug to let some of the water out before I ran in more hot water and, over the gurgle, I heard my phone ring.

“Hey, maybe that's Adam,” I thought and leapt out of the bath, leaving it to drain away completely.

I wrapped a towel round myself and hurried into my room and snatched up my personal phone. It wasn't ringing. Bugger. It was my work phone. Double bugger.

It wasn't Adam who'd rung as he didn't know my work number. Nor was it Centre. It was just a number and I didn't recognise it. I plonked myself down in my chair and inspected my bath-wrinkled fingers while waiting to see if whoever had rung was leaving a message. My fingernails had, incidentally, been replaced with fresh ones and the technician had been impressed I'd cut out a glass window with them. The nail I'd used was quite blunt as a result but it had withstood the misuse and she was impressed.

No message was left so I put the phone down and used my iPad to check flights to Barcelona. Then the phone rang again. Same number.

“Hello,” I said, answering it.

“Hey, Kelly!” said a girl happily. “How's it going?”

“Who is this?” I asked, a little frostily.

“It's me, Sofia,” said, presumably, Sofia.

“Sofia who?” I asked.

“Oh come on Kelly, stop playing around,” she said in an amused voice. “Surely you haven't forgotten me already?”

I frowned and searched my memory. The only Sofia I could think of was Sofia Delgado, aka Fortuna, but surely she wouldn't be ringing.

“Sorry,” I said. “I don't know any Sofias.”

Come to think of it, I don't know anyone who knew me as Kelly. It was a name I used sometimes when I had to give a name casually.

“Sure you do,” she said. “We went to Barcelona together.”

Shit. It *was* Fortuna!

“How did you get my number?” I asked.

“You put it in my phone,” she said. “Jesus you've got a bad memory!”

I sat and searched my memory again. I had actually put my number in her phone when I first met her in Hamburg. I'd put hers in mine as well but deleted it when I delivered her to Amsterdam. If I'd thought about it I'd have assumed she'd delete mine as well. Clearly she hadn't.

“Oh yes,” I said. “I'd forgotten.”

“So how are you doing?” she asked. “Keeping you busy are they?”

“Yes fairly busy,” I said. “Umm, so why are you ringing me?” It didn't sound like an emergency but you never know.

“Oh I just wanted a chat,” she said. “Hey, you'll never guess. I've finished with that thing in Barcelona and they don't need me anymore. I'm in England now, in Nottingham. They gave me a house and found me a job with some publishing company that makes Language Training software for schools.”

“Sounds like fun,” I said.

“Nah, it isn't,” she said. “I've only been there a week and I'm bored to tears already. And I've got three bodyguards assigned to me as well but they're really boring too. They're really old, like in their forties or something.”

“Yeah, you really shouldn't be talking about these things on an

unsecured phone,” I said, since hers wasn’t secured. “There are protocols you know.”

“I was told I couldn’t make personal calls through Centre,” she said and I clenched my jaw. Now she was talking about Centre on an unsecured phone! Jesus!

“Listen, I’ve got to go,” I said. “I’ve got to go to work in a few minutes.”

“Oh sorry,” she said. “Hey, I really only rang to see if you wanted to get together sometime. Go clubbing or something.”

“I’d love to,” I said, wondering how to get out of this. “But I’m really busy at the moment.”

“Maybe next weekend?” she asked hopefully.

“I’m pretty sure I’m working next weekend,” I said.

“So where’re you going next?” she asked. “Somewhere awesome I bet.”

“I really can’t talk about that,” I said. Surely someone had had a chat with her about security protocols?

“Hey, listen,” she said, her voice sounding excited again. “I’ve had this really cool idea! Why don’t we work together? You did say I had a natural talent for this stuff, after all. I’ll talk to Elrond and get rid of these three losers then I can help you with your deliveries and you can be my bodyguard again! That would be so cool! What do you think, hey? It’ll be fun! Just like old times! Totally awesome! What you reckon?”