

It's time to make things right. It's ...

Time

for a

Hero

K e n D o n a l d

Time for a Hero

Ken Donald

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Dedicated to Ken

His tales of fighting in the jungle can no longer be shared.

But, to his friends and family, he will always be a hero.

ONE

2016

Vicki Denham watched her father approach the white cross where his grandfather was buried. *Harry Denham. Killed, August 1944.*

Twenty years old and a life full of promise cut short. A pregnant wife at home in England, awaiting his safe return one day. A day that would never come.

Vicki followed respectfully, a few steps behind.

“How did he die?”

“He was killed in the fighting, like so many others.”

It was a lie, but he had no wish to bring the painful truth back to life.

The answer seemed to satisfy her, and she glanced back to check on her mother, who was content to stay on the gravel path, in her wheelchair. She had started to put on a little weight, now that she was in her fifties, but she was still a beautiful woman. A fact that she was confirming to herself with the small mirror she had removed from her designer handbag, resting in her lap.

“I would have liked to have met him.”

Hearing her father’s words, she turned to look at his strong, chiselled face. She reflected on what a handsome couple her parents made, but she knew they were not in love. As a child she hadn’t realised this. But now, as a grown woman, in a loving relationship with her fiancé, she knew that the mutual respect her parents shared had nothing to do with love.

Not for the first time, she couldn’t help wondering why they were still together. Had her father stayed out of a sense of duty? How many times had the ex-soldier told her that duty mattered above all else?

Was it because of the accident? Her mother had been knocked down by a car and left paralysed from the waist down. Even as a child, she had detected a look of guilt in her father’s face. She dared to ask him once – why do you feel guilty? But he said she was wrong. From that moment on, the subject was closed.

Eventually, they made their way to the car and drove back to the chateau. It

was owned by a French couple who were trying to restore it to its former glory. To fund the project, they were running it as a modest hotel. It was early days, but the accommodation still held a certain charm.

“I don’t know what possessed your father to book us into this place,” said Tanya Denham, eyeing the wallpaper. “It’s not like him to organise things when we go away.”

“I suppose he thought it was handy for the cemetery,” said Vicki, doing her best to defend her hero.

“I suppose,” said her mother grudgingly. “And that’s another thing. Why on earth did he suddenly want to visit his grandfather’s grave? He’s never shown any interest in coming here before. So why now?”

The daughter had grown tired of her mother’s moaning and walked to the sash window to take in the grounds. She tried to change the subject.

“That lake across the way ... do you think it belongs to the chateau?”

“How should I know?” said her mother irritably. “Why?”

“It looks like dad’s heading over there.”

“Oh, for goodness sake. We’re supposed to be having lunch in twenty minutes. What on earth is he playing at? Go after him, Vicki, and find out what he’s up to.”

“I’m not going to spy on him, mum.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, I’m not asking you to spy on him. Just remind him that we’re supposed to be having lunch. He’s probably forgotten. Unless you’d like me to go.”

And with that, Vicki’s mother held up her arms and gestured towards her wheelchair, as if to illustrate how such a thing would be clearly impossible.

Reluctantly, Vicki made her way down the chateau’s winding staircase and headed towards the pretty lake. She found her father staring at the ground, and she was about to call after him, when she noticed something at his feet. From where she stood, it appeared to be some sort of plaque, set into a large rock. She was at a loss as to what to do, and was about to return to the chateau, when her father brought his hands up to his face. She rushed over, and he turned at the sound of her footsteps, crunching on the gravel path.

She was about to call out and ask if he was all right, when she suddenly stopped and gasped. He was looking directly at her, but something was different. Something she had never seen before in all the years she had known him. His eyes were full of tears.

Instinctively, she ran towards him and brought her hand up to his face.

“Are you okay, dad?”

“Yes, sweetheart. It’s just been emotional, going to the cemetery today. I never knew the man, but somehow it got to me, that’s all.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure. Now, let’s get back to your mother. I bet she’s been complaining about being late for lunch.”

They headed to the bridge that crossed the empty moat, surrounding the chateau, and Vicki suddenly had an idea.

“Do you mind if I meet you inside? I just need to get something from the car.”

“Sure. But don’t be long, otherwise you’ll get me into trouble with your mother.”

He headed off, in the direction of the chateau’s main doors, and Vicki waited until he’d gone inside.

Feeling somewhat guilty and rather silly, she ran back to the lake and headed for the plaque where her father had been standing a few moments ago. It was only when she was less than a foot away that she realised it was a grave. It was the burial place of a young woman - a former owner of the chateau.

In Memory of a Beloved Daughter

Alice Schmitt

Born 2nd August 1966

Died 19th July 1998

Vicki instinctively looked over her shoulder in the direction of the chateau, as if she could somehow see her father and read his mind. She desperately wanted to know the reason for his tears.

Were they for his grandfather? Or were they for Alice Schmitt, beloved daughter?

TWO

June 1941

Harry Denham felt guilty because he was happy. Who in their right mind could be happy with a war going on? But he couldn't help himself. He was seventeen and fit and, most importantly, he was dating Valerie. And Valerie was gorgeous. The prettiest girl in the village. Just the thought of the kiss they'd shared, after the dance, caused his heart to flutter. One day the war would end, and they would be married, have children and live happily ever after. Of that he was convinced. Such was the confidence of youth.

He'd even found work to earn money so that he could treat her the way she deserved. In peacetime it would have been considered dangerous work, but not now. His older brother was a navigator, flying bombers over Germany, where an airman's life expectancy was measured in months, if not days. So, no, you couldn't really call working on a roof dangerous. Even one four storeys high.

He was repairing the leaky roof of the large manor house, owned by Lord Faversham, whose bark was worse than his bite. The poor man had recently lost his son, who had flown Hurricanes, defending Britain from invasion. Since then His Lordship had mellowed and had recently taken a shine to young Harry. They were sharing a pot of tea in the conservatory.

"You're not thinking of going into the RAF like your brother, are you?"

"No, sir. I want to join the army and march all the way to Germany."

"I like your spirit, young Harry, but never forget that war's a hellish thing. And this one has no end in sight. Don't be in too much of a hurry to throw your life away. I hear you're going out with Valerie Johnson. Damn good going, sir."

Lord Faversham slapped Harry on the back and roared with laughter. It was infectious, and Harry joined him. His Lordship had always been direct and never minced his words. Harry assumed such confidence came with wealth and privilege.

"Yes, sir. I'm very lucky."

"Damn right. My God, if I were forty years younger ..."

Faversham left the thought hanging in the air and Harry's mind boggled, preferring not to think of what His Lordship's intentions would be if their roles were reversed. Harry simply blushed.

“Dear God,” said Faversham, shaking his head, as he contemplated Valerie awaiting his presence in his bed. “Life’s for living, lad. Don’t hold back. Do what comes naturally, in case you never get the chance again. My boy died a virgin, I think. It’s a damn shame.”

Harry went red in the face and all he could offer in reply was a nervous smile. Faversham seemed to drift off, before pulling a hip flask from his pocket and adding an unidentified alcoholic beverage to his tea. He looked up and closed his eyes.

“If we had but world enough and time, this coyness, lady, were no crime.”

Faversham opened his eyes and saw Harry staring at him, looking confused. He decided to explain.

“Written by some damn poet whose name I can’t remember. But it’s one of my favourites for trying to get a reticent young lady between the sheets, what? If that doesn’t work, I throw caution to the wind and ask them outright: What are you doing, blast you, saving it for the worms? Ha!”

His Lordship helped himself to another healthy sip from his flask. This time he dispensed with the tea altogether. Harry plucked up the courage to speak.

“Was that how you bagged Lady Faversham, sir?”

His Lordship went bright red in the face and stared at Harry aghast. The young seventeen-year-old feared he’d gone too far and would be fired on the spot. But then Faversham suddenly burst out laughing. The laughter eventually turned into a coughing fit, and, for a moment, Harry wondered if the old man was about to have a heart attack. Eventually he calmed down enough to form a coherent sentence.

“You’re not far off, young Harry. Of course, the fact that I owned a bloody big mansion didn’t hurt my case any.”

His Lordship gave Harry a nudge and a wink to punctuate his witticism, and this time it was the youngster who let out a laugh, partly out of relief that he hadn’t overstepped the mark.

“Seriously though, Harry, I’m sorry I haven’t been able to pay you a fairer wage for the roof repairs.”

Harry began to interrupt and assured his employer that he had been more than generous, but Faversham raised his hand to stop any dissent.

“No. You’re a damned hard worker, lad. If I got in a professional roofer he’d probably take one look at this sprawling mess and rob me blind. That’s the trouble owning a country seat - everyone thinks you’ve got money to burn.

But the truth is the damn thing's a millstone around my neck. And then there's the bloody war, of course. It's not like the last affair, when you could still buy whatever you wanted if you had the money. This time I've got a damn ration book like everyone else. But it's how it should be, I suppose."

"What's in the flask?" asked Harry, trying to change the subject.

"Whisky. Why, do you want some?"

"Yes, please."

Harry drained the rest of his tea and held out his empty cup. His Lordship poured him a tiny amount of alcohol and the youngster couldn't help looking disappointed. Faversham tried to explain.

"You've got to go back up on to the roof after this. Can't have you tripping over your own feet and ending up through the ceiling. I'd never forgive myself. Besides," he said, tapping his flask, "I'm not made of bloody whisky."

Faversham stared at Harry and the older man's eyes began to glisten. Suddenly, he stood up and bawled.

"Damn it, I want you to finish this roof, even if it takes the whole summer, and I'm going to pay you properly."

Once again, Harry began to protest, but Faversham ignored him and left him alone in the conservatory. The boy looked around, not knowing what to expect. Five minutes later, His Lordship returned, carrying a small object in his hand.

"Do you know what this is, young Harry?"

"No, sir."

"Then let me tell you, sir. It's a cigarette case, although you wouldn't know it, to look at all these damn jewels plastered across the bloody thing. Ghastly-looking, if you ask me. I've never liked it."

Harry didn't agree. It was beautiful.

"It's yours."

Harry stared open-mouthed and couldn't speak.

"I was going to give it to young Bertie before the bloody Nazis killed him. Still, probably just as well. The damn thing would have gone up in flames, like him."

Faversham shook his head vigorously, as if he immediately regretted his words.

"I can't accept it, sir. It wouldn't be right."

"You *can* accept it and you will. I'll be deeply offended if you don't, lad. It's a family heirloom and I was saving it for my boy. But he's not coming

home, and I want you to have it.”

Faversham thrust it into his hand.

“Thank you, sir. Very much.”

The words seemed pathetically inadequate.

“It’s what I want to do. I’m a damn sight happier knowing you’ve got it instead of some distant relative popping out of the woodwork when I finally croak. But promise me one thing, will you, boy?”

“Of course, sir, anything.”

“Don’t sell it until after the war. Keep it with you. It might even bring you luck and save your life. And when you do sell it, make sure you get a fair price. Just because I don’t like the look of the damn thing doesn’t mean it’s not worth a great deal of money.”

“My God, sir,” said Harry, his hands suddenly shaking at the thought of what represented ‘a great deal of money’ to His Lordship.

“God’s got nothing to do with it, lad. I was just lucky. Born into the right family. But now it’s yours. Use it wisely and it could set you up for life. Get this blasted war out of the way, marry young Valerie as a wealthy man, and let her show her appreciation in the best way she knows how. You lucky bastard!”

Harry worked on His Lordship’s roof until it was almost dark and promised to be there bright and early the next day. On his way home, he kept removing the cigarette case from his pocket, trying to convince himself it wasn’t just a dream. Was he rich now? Or had the old man simply toyed with him, offering him some worthless trinket to get his roof done on the cheap. The jewellery certainly looked genuine, but what did he know? But then he remembered there was a way to find out and he ran the rest of the way home.

As soon as he arrived at his house, he raced upstairs and removed a volume from his father’s set of encyclopaedias, hoping to satisfy his curiosity. Who the hell was Fabergé?

THREE

August 1944

It was the first time Lance-Corporal Harry Denham had found the time to sit and rest in weeks. The farmhouse was ridiculously peaceful, but the time to think was not always welcome. It gave you the chance to remember. To remember your beautiful, pregnant wife, waiting for you back home in England. And to remember the terror you had felt, when you and your mates had been thrown on to the beaches of Normandy, at the mercy of the German defences. And to remember the shame you felt, when you realised, the following day, that you had soiled yourself without even realising it.

But who could really have blamed him. It had been his first taste of war. He remembered the relief he had felt when he and his friend had found what they hoped was a safe spot on the beach.

“Shall we try heading over . . .”

His friend had never finished the sentence. One minute he was alive, a fit and healthy twenty-one-year-old, and the next, the back of his head was missing, and he was nothing but a lump of dead meat. Life had become ridiculously fragile. You were never more than seconds away from your last breath, and blind luck was the only thing keeping you from the darkness of eternity.

Be careful, my love.

Those were the last words his wife had spoken, before he'd been shipped to the south coast of England, not knowing where he would eventually end up. How silly those words seemed now. *Be careful*. How could you be careful when death waited for you at every turn? But he was glad she'd said the words. It showed she cared, and that was the only thing keeping him sane in a world that had gone mad.

But part of him almost wished he had no wife and child waiting for him. He had so much to lose, and it only added to the fear. Far easier to be a single man, he thought, with nothing to fear except losing one's own life. No one to leave behind to grieve. Survival was such a terrible responsibility. There were times when, if he hadn't been thinking of his new family, he would have crawled up into a ball and let the worst happen. He almost hadn't cared. But he

had to survive – for them.

Thank God the farmhouse had been unoccupied. The remnants of a meal sat on the kitchen table, together with an empty bottle of wine. He and his fellow soldiers had polished it off within minutes of securing the house. A quick inspection revealed that German soldiers had vacated the farmhouse just before they arrived. Harry and his men had been lucky. If the Germans had only known, the British soldiers were almost out of ammunition.

But his gratitude to God was premature. He suddenly heard shooting, out in the courtyard at the rear of the building. He leant against the kitchen table and reached for his rifle, just as the door sprang open. A German stood in the doorway, breathing hard, his eyes almost manic. He looked as frightened as Harry, and the Englishman knew that if he grabbed his rifle it would be as good as suicide. But he almost reached for it anyway.

Back home, he had seen children lying bloodied in the rubble of the London blitz, and pride made him want to fight to the bitter end – his gun in his hand. He saw himself as a heroic figure, defending his country with his last breath. But then he remembered her words.

Be careful, my love.

The truck was heading east. To Germany, naturally. He had heard the rumours that Montgomery wanted to spearhead an attack into the Fatherland and beat the Russians to it. But the Americans were cautious and insisted on attacking on a broad front. Whatever was decided, it looked like he was going to beat them to it. He and two of his fellow survivors were prisoners of war. Not an ideal situation, but at least he was still alive. He had kept his promise to his wife and child.

He reached into his pocket and acknowledged the comforting feel of his cigarette case. His wife had said he was a fool to take it with him when he was going to war. It was worth more money than they could ever dream of. It represented their future. Perhaps he should have left it in her safekeeping, after all. The chances of him holding on to it until the end of the war now seemed slim at best.

It will keep you safe, young man. Without it I wouldn't be alive today. Keep it with you until the war is over. Then use it to raise the family Bertie never had.

Faversham's kind words were still entrenched in his thoughts. He had

promised to do as the man had asked and he couldn't go back on his word. So, he kept it on his person and hid it as best he could. But now, surely, he would have to relinquish it. The idea of handing it over to the Nazis filled him with almost as much dread as the thought of dying. His family's future in the hands of the enemy. If he got the chance, he would bury it somewhere safe. A fleeting hope, perhaps, but it was all he had.

And then the truck stopped. He and his two comrades nervously peered out when the two guards opened the rear door. They pointed to an open field and mimed smoking a cigarette with their hands. It slowly dawned on the British soldiers that they were stopping for a break. Some fresh air and a smoke. Time to stretch their legs after hours in the truck. Perhaps some Germans weren't so bad after all.

"Bollocks. I've run out of fags."

Harry reached into his pocket and took two cigarettes from his case, before handing one to his friend.

"There you go, Rob."

"Cheers, mate." Robert Wilson nodded at the case. "Good luck holding on to that."

"I know."

Harry was desperately looking for somewhere to bury his treasure when a German staff car pulled up. An officer in an immaculate uniform alighted from it, while his chauffeur held open the door. Their guards, who had been leaning against the side of the truck, enjoying their own cigarettes, quickly stood to attention. The officer was clearly angry and barked at them. Harry wished he spoke German, but even with the language barrier, he knew this latest development did not bode well.

The officer marched briskly towards them and Harry found himself paralysed with fear. Worst of all, he realised he was still holding his cigarette case in his hand. He tried to return it to his pocket, but he was too late.

"You! What is that in your hand?"

The officer spoke perfect English.

"Just my cigarettes."

Harry had tried to sound off-hand, as if the case was unimportant. But it was futile. The German had already spotted the jewels encrusted in the lid.

"Hand it over!"

He held out his hand, and when Harry hesitated he slapped the Englishman across the face. Reluctantly, Harry handed over his family's future.

“Thank you,” said the officer with a mocking smile. “This looks extremely valuable. Unfortunately, you won’t need this where you’re going. I’ll tell you what I’ll do.”

The officer was smiling broadly, as if he were sharing a joke. Harry didn’t know what to make of the man. He said nothing and let the German continue with his charade.

“I will look after this for you until the end of the war. And then I can return it. When we are all friends again.”

The officer took out a notebook, opened it, and stood there with a pencil, poised in his hand.

“I will write you a receipt, just so there is no misunderstanding. What is your name, soldier?”

Harry had no choice but to play the man’s game.

“Denham.”

“First name?”

“Harry.”

The officer scribbled a few notes on the paper and held it up for Harry to read.

“There, you see. All above board, as you English say. This says I am holding your property for safekeeping until the Allies surrender. I have even signed it, see?”

Harry squinted to read the name.

Major Hermann Schmitt.

The officer turned and began to walk away. Suddenly he stopped and faced the three British soldiers. He clicked his fingers and tapped the side of his head.

“Silly me. I knew I was forgetting something.”

And with that, he reached down to the holster on his hip and withdrew his pistol. It finally dawned on the allied soldiers that they were about to be executed. Two of them turned and ran, but Harry lunged forward, possessed by a hatred he had never experienced before.

By the time Harry reached the major, the German officer had already shot one of his comrades in the back, and he was just taking aim at Wilson, when Harry’s body crashed into him. The shot went wild, but Wilson fell anyway.

Harry’s momentum knocked the breath out of the German officer. The cigarette case was still in his hand and he brought up his arm to defend himself. The case pressed against his cheek and one of the jewels scratched his face,

drawing blood. Harry reached for the man's balls and twisted with all his might, producing a satisfying, high-pitched scream.

The guards had finally woken up to the situation and manhandled Harry, pulling him off the officer before he was killed. While they held Harry, Major Schmitt leant over and retched. Breathing deeply, it took him several minutes to recover from the awful pain in his testicles. When he was finally able to turn his attention back to Harry, he smiled. To Harry, a smile had never looked more menacing.

“Hold him still!”

The guards made sure they had a firm grip on their prisoner.

“That was excruciating. Allow me to return the favour.”

Harry braced himself for a kick to his own family jewels. But then the true horror of what was about to happen became all too clear.

The officer aimed his pistol at Harry's groin and fired. The Englishman went down, screaming. The German stooped and thrust something into Harry's jacket pocket.

“Here, you nearly forgot your receipt.”

The officer barked an order to one of the guards, and the man ran off towards Wilson, still lying face down in the grass, pretending to be dead.

“He knows you are faking,” whispered the guard.

Wilson tried not to react when the guard had spoken to him in English. But he could still hear the screams of his friend and couldn't help but grimace, as he waited for the inevitable bullet in the back of the head.

“Relax. We are not all murderers. Some of us are real soldiers. Stay absolutely still until you are sure we have gone.”

And with that, the German fired his rifle into the ground, inches from Wilson's head. It was deafening, but he managed to keep completely still, knowing his life depended on it.

He heard the guard return to the officer and words were exchanged. The sound of the truck and the car, leaving the murder scene, competed with the screams of his friend Harry. Feeling as though he had died and been resurrected, he clung to the grass as if it was his mother's apron strings. In the end, the screams of his friend stirred him into action.

Mercifully, the Germans had gone. He ran over to Harry, fearing the worst. Blood soaked the man's trousers. He knelt and touched Harry's arm, knowing there was nothing he could do to save him. Harry grimaced and looked into his eyes, pleading.

“End it, Rob. Please.”

Private Robert Wilson shook his head, looking confused, although he knew exactly what Harry wanted him to do.

“I’d do it for you,” cried Harry.

Harry’s screams pierced Wilson’s head, and he brought his hands up to his ears, trying to hide from the hellish sound. Harry looked at him as if he had let him down. It finally gave him the resolve to do what had to be done.

He removed his jacket and rolled in into a ball, before holding it over Harry’s face. His wounded friend struggled, and his muffled screams could still be heard through the coarse cloth. Eventually, after what seemed like hours to Wilson but was in fact less than a minute, Harry stopped fighting and his body went limp. He was finally at peace.

Wilson released his grip and knelt there, crying. Eventually, he stood, and looked around to see if anyone had witnessed him killing his friend. He felt hollow inside, not knowing what to do next.

Without thinking, he reached down and retrieved the receipt Harry’s murderer had placed in his victim’s pocket. He walked across the field, heading west, hopefully into the folds of the British army, waiting for him to re-join the ranks and fight another day.

Unless, of course, he had died on that God-forsaken field and he was already in Hell.

FOUR

Up until D-Day, when the Allies successfully landed on the French mainland, Schmitt had been enjoying the war. And why not? The Germans were lording it over their defeated neighbours and, more importantly, he wasn't on the Eastern Front. He'd heard the stories. If what the returning wounded said was true, it was a living hell out there.

And then there were the fringe benefits. There were the pretty women, who couldn't say no. Not unless they wanted a bullet in their head for being uncooperative. And, of course, there were the other spoils of war. He had amassed quite a collection of treasure, the pinnacle of which was the remarkable cigarette case. What an ordinary British soldier was doing in possession of such an artefact, he couldn't imagine, but it didn't matter. The man was dead, and now the case belonged to Schmitt.

But now the Allies were less than a day's march from the chateau, where he had been fortunate enough to set up his quarters. It was a pretty and comfortable place, and he would be sad to leave. But he wasn't fool enough to stick around until the British arrived. The zealots in the ranks could fight to the bitter end if they wanted to, but he had other plans. The war was over for Germany, any fool could see that. He wasn't going to throw his life away in a futile gesture, not when peace was waiting around the corner.

The problem was, what the hell was he going to do with his sizeable collection of valuables? Piling them into a truck and heading east was too risky. Nobody knew about his little nest egg, and he wasn't about to trust any of his men now. No, there was only one answer to his problems. He needed to find a safe place to secure his loot where no one would find it. But where? He didn't want to hang around the chateau any longer than necessary, so he couldn't go far.

In desperation, he decided to wander around the grounds and simply hope for inspiration. He briefly considered burying his collection beneath a recognisable tree but decided it would be back-breaking work. Besides, he would be out in the open and someone was bound to spot what he was up to. No, he needed somewhere safely hidden away. As he slowly made his way back to the chateau, he paused at the bridge, leading to the main entrance of the building. It spanned the chateau's moat, long since dried up. The exposed trench even sported trees and mature shrubs.

On instinct, he clambered down the bank and walked the length of the moat. He had almost travelled full-circle and was approaching his starting point, when he noticed a small hole in the rocks, almost hidden behind some shrubbery. The hole was at waist-level, and he crouched down to peer inside what appeared to be an abandoned cave. It was dark and difficult to see inside, but Schmitt's heart soared. The hole was just large enough to crawl through, and he'd be able to take his wonderful collection of jewellery and paintings with him. There were even loose rocks, strewn around the entrance, so he could brick it up, once he'd secured his treasure.

Schmitt took a calculated risk and waited until nightfall. He posted men some distance away, along the only road, with orders to give him advanced warning if the Allies made an early appearance. It took him almost three hours to drag the four crates of goodies to the bottom of the moat, place them in the cave, and cement the stones into place. For good measure, he tied up the large bush so that it hid his handiwork.

Schmitt briefly considered taking a few of the more portable items with him but decided against it. He wanted to travel light and concentrate on getting through the final days of the war unscathed. And, with any luck, his valuables would be waiting for him, safe and sound, after the war.

Once back at the chateau, he quickly got on the radio and recalled his men on lookout duty. While he waited for their return, he washed and ordered the rest of his men to prepare their transport.

He'd persuaded his influential father to pull some strings back in Berlin, and he was heading home. With any luck, he would remain one step ahead of the enemy, and stay alive long enough to enjoy his good fortune.

FIVE

December 1945

It had taken him the whole day and a lot of money to travel to the modest little cottage on the Devonshire coast. But it was something he had promised himself he would do as soon as he arrived back in England. He hesitated before knocking the door and felt rather foolish. For the past year he had been in a killing war. Surely a visit to a dead man's widow couldn't faze him. And yet, as he reached out to the small wooden door, he noticed his hand was shaking. He knocked anyway.

The door was answered by a tall man in his fifties, wearing a thick coat. Wilson guessed he had decided not to heat his house in the daytime, coal still being in short supply. He quickly took in the man's strong jaw and thick black hair. This was Harry's father, no doubt about it.

"Mr Denham?"

"Yes. How can I help you?" he asked warily.

Wilson was wearing his de-mob suit and it was a couple of sizes too big for him. Harry's father clearly wasn't used to strangers arriving at his door.

"I'm sorry to bother you, sir. My name's Robert Wilson. I fought alongside your son. We landed at Normandy on the same boat."

Denham senior almost jumped in the air, as if he'd been electrocuted, and he offered Wilson a beaming smile.

"Good God, Robert, Harry wrote about you in his letters. Come in, dear chap, come in and make yourself at home."

Wilson's host pumped his fist vigorously and practically dragged him through the hallway into a cosy lounge. He immediately headed for the fire and lit the small pile of coal sitting there.

"Let's get you warmed up. I'll just light this and then Mrs Denham will make you a nice pot of tea."

"Please, sir, don't go to any trouble."

"Nonsense. Here, let me take your coat. Sit yourself down. Get comfortable. Miriam!"

Harry's father shouted out the name without taking a breath. Wilson assumed that Miriam was Harry's mother. Spritely footsteps could be heard,

making their way down the stairs, and a handsome woman with prematurely grey hair appeared at the door.

“What on earth is so ...”

Miriam Denham stopped in mid-sentence at the sight of Wilson, sitting in the only armchair in the small lounge. Wilson quickly stood up and offered his hand.

“Say hello to Robert, Miriam. He fought with Harry across the Channel, teaching the Germans a lesson they’ll never forget.”

Miriam took his hand and smiled, although Wilson couldn’t help noticing a certain wariness in her eyes.

“Could you make us all a nice pot of tea, dear. We’ve got a lot to talk about.”

The tea duly arrived, and, after the usual pleasantries, Wilson told his hosts about the times he and their son had shared, fighting on the beaches and, later, driving the Germans back towards Paris. Mr Denham wanted to know every detail, as if he couldn’t get enough, but his wife seemed content to let him take the lead. Her husband appeared to want war stories, whereas she yearned to know about the trivial, more human moments. Wilson did his best to satisfy them both, and always put a positive slant on things, not mentioning the fear he and Harry had felt almost every step of their journey into France’s heartland.

Wilson didn’t mind talking about the fighting. He knew that the most difficult subject was waiting in the wings. But he couldn’t help thinking that nobody wanted to talk about Harry’s final moments. By ignoring his death, perhaps they could all pretend it had never happened. Eventually, there was a lull in the conversation. Wilson took a deep breath.

“Is Harry’s wife here, sir? I was hoping to meet her and Harry’s boy.”

“She’s popped out with little Malcolm in the pram. She generally takes him for a stroll along the sea-front in the afternoons. She should be back any minute,” said Miriam.

As if on cue, a key could be heard turning in the front door. Wilson detected the sounds of a struggle, and he presumed his friend’s widow was manhandling the pram into the house.

“I’ll go and tell her you’re here,” said Miriam.

She returned moments later with a pretty woman, a baby in her arms, wrapped in a white shawl. Wilson stood once again and offered his hand. There was an awkward moment, when the new mother shifted the weight of the baby so that she could offer a free hand in return. Wilson did his best to admire

the baby but felt uncomfortable and didn't know what to say.

"We've got lots of stories to tell you, Valerie. Robert here's been kind enough to share with us his life in the army, standing shoulder to shoulder with Harry."

Wilson couldn't help thinking that the father's manner was quite formal, and at odds with the small seaside cottage. He wondered what the man did for a living, so far from any city or large town.

"Killed in action. That's all it said."

Valerie's words roused him from his thoughts.

"I'm sorry?"

"The telegram we received, notifying us of Harry's death. That's all it said."

Valerie failed to hide the bitterness in her voice.

Miriam reached for the pot and poured Valerie a cup. She looked a little embarrassed. Harry's father decided to fill the silence.

"We lost so many of our young men. I suppose the army didn't have the time to go into detail for every individual."

"No, I'm sure," said Valerie, her cheeks going red. "Just the time to send them to their deaths."

"Valerie," said Miriam, gently admonishing her, "Robert is our guest."

Valerie took a seat on the sofa next to her in-laws, facing Robert. She fussed over the baby, avoiding his gaze.

"I'm sorry, Robert. I'm still having trouble coming to terms with what happened. I know we were at war, but it doesn't make losing Harry any less painful."

"Of course. There's no need to apologise."

The awkward moment had passed, but now Wilson's courage was beginning to desert him, and he was tempted to make his excuses and leave. But he'd come all this way and they deserved to know the truth.

"I was there, when he was killed."

Robert's words, spoken in a whisper, seemed to fill the room. The Denham family looked at one another, clearly stunned. Before they had time to react, he dropped his second bombshell.

"Harry saved my life."

Harry's father seemed to sit up at this, his back erect. There was the hint of a smile on his face, and his eyes had watered. It was as if the news pleased and saddened him all at the same time.

“Good God, Robert, tell us what happened.”

Wilson steeled himself and cleared his throat. The trio stared at him from across the room, hanging on his every word.

“We’d occupied a small farmhouse and taken the opportunity to get some rest. The Germans were supposed to have been long gone, but they turned up out of the blue. It all happened so quickly, they’d overwhelmed the damn place before we knew what was happening. Um ... sorry, sir, for cursing.”

“Don’t trouble yourself, lad. After what you boys have been through you can curse all you want, as far as I’m concerned. Please, go on.”

“The top and bottom is that only three of us survived. We couldn’t get to our rifles in time and the Germans took us prisoner.”

Once again, the Denham family shared a look. Robert could tell this was all news to them. He decided to press on.

“And they treated us pretty well until an officer arrived.”

“What happened?”

Valerie leant forward when she asked the question. The sight of her clutching Harry’s baby caused Wilson’s next words to stick in his throat. Instead, he reached his right hand into his jacket pocket and brought out a crumpled piece of paper. Harry’s father noticed it was splattered with blood. Wilson straightened the paper and passed it to him. A confused look appeared across the man’s face.

“It looks like some kind of receipt ... for the cigarette case?”

This time it was Wilson’s turn to look surprised.

“You knew about the case?”

“How could we forget?” said Miriam cryptically.

Harry’s father stood up and walked over to the fireplace. He prodded the coals with a poker, even though it was burning nicely. Wilson could tell he was distressed. The man turned to face Wilson and took a deep breath.

“It was a gift from a former employer of Harry’s. Lord Faversham. No doubt you could tell it was expensive?”

Wilson simply nodded and let the man continue to explain.

“As could I, when I found it in Harry’s bedroom.”

Harry’s father paused and looked at his wife, as if he were searching for moral support. He brought his hands up to his face and rubbed his brow as he spoke.

“I’m ashamed to say that I thought Harry might have taken the cigarette case without permission. So, I went to the manor house and asked Lord Faversham

if he'd mislaid it. If he'd said yes, I had some notion of explaining that Harry picked it up by accident and asked me to return it. I didn't want Harry to get into trouble for a silly moment of weakness."

He glanced at his wife again, as if he were seeking reassurance that he'd done the right thing. Miriam simply stared at her hands, clutching her tea cup. He continued regardless.

"Anyway, Lord Faversham told me not to be so stupid ... he could be an abrupt man, His Lordship. He said it was a gift and I told him it looked expensive. He said it was ... very. I said I couldn't let Harry accept such a gift and he became quite angry. Said he'd be offended if I tried to return it. So, I left it at that. Harry never knew what I did, or that I knew about the case."

"It's just as well," said Miriam, an accusatory tone to her voice. "He would have been mortified if he'd known you thought he was a thief."

"I know, Miriam, I know. And I regret what I did every single day. I just didn't want the young lad to get into trouble."

Wilson felt bad that he'd inadvertently stirred up bad memories. Unfortunately, things were about to get a whole lot worse. The older man read the receipt for a second time.

"Who is this Major Schmitt?"

"He was the officer who turned up when our guards let us out of the truck to stretch our legs. He helped himself to the case."

"And gave Harry a receipt?" asked Mr Denham incredulously.

"To be honest, Mr Denham, I think the officer was unhinged. He was toying with us, you see."

"I don't understand," said Valerie, still on the edge of her seat. Wilson decided to get it over with.

"The officer drew his weapon, intending to kill us all in cold blood. Me and Bradshaw ran. Bradshaw was shot in the back, and the bastard tried to shoot me too, but Harry tackled him, and he missed. That's why I owe Harry my life."

Wilson waited, letting his words sink in. Harry's father wanted the details.

"What happened then?"

Wilson gulped, but managed to get his words out.

"The officer shot Harry. I was playing dead, and he ordered one of the guards to polish me off. But he let me get away."

Wilson had already decided not to tell them the gory details of Harry's death. He knew it would serve no purpose.

“My goodness, lad, what a terrible ordeal you went through.”

The older man’s words almost broke his heart. He’d lost his son, but he still had the capacity to feel Wilson’s pain.

“So, Harry was unarmed. I mean, this Schmitt shot him in cold blood. Murdered him.”

The accusation came from Valerie, and if she hadn’t been holding her baby, Wilson was sure she would have jumped from her seat.

“Yes.”

“Well, isn’t that against the Geneva Convention? I mean, isn’t it counted as a war crime? This German needs to pay for what he did.”

Miriam placed a comforting hand on Valerie’s arm, but she continued to stare intently in Wilson’s direction.

“I reported what happened to my superiors, but, as far as I know, nothing has been done.”

“Why on earth not?”

“Terrible things went on over there, I’m afraid. War brings out the worst in people. And, of course, the Allies have bigger fish to fry.”

“You mean this ghastly business about the concentration camps,” said Harry’s father, shaking his head, as if he’d lost faith in humanity.

“Exactly.”

“What a world we live in,” said Miriam, sighing deeply.

“He was going to sell it, you know, when he finally came home,” said the older man.

Mr Denham noticed the confused look on Wilson’s face and decided he ought to explain.

“The damn cigarette case. Lord Faversham had made him promise to keep it with him during the war. God knows why. But he planned to sell it as soon as he came home, so he could provide for Valerie and the baby. Well, it’s never going to happen now.”

“Was it really that valuable, sir?”

“Yes, it was. I did a little investigating when I discovered that Lord Faversham had given it to Harry as a gift. Let’s just say it was enough to buy a comfortable home outright, with a healthy chunk of change to spare.”

“And now it’s in the hands of that murdering German,” said Valerie.

“That’s if he’s still alive,” offered Wilson.

There was a pause in the conversation, as if the trio were all lost in thought. Finally, Valerie spoke up.

“If there’s any justice, he’ll be six feet under. Either way, I can’t help wondering, what did he do with the cigarette case?”

SIX

1950

After five years of peace, Germany was finally starting to get back on its feet. And Schmitt's company, inherited from his father who had died during the allied bombing of Berlin, was doing well. But if it were to thrive, it needed a serious injection of cash. Most frustrating of all, he knew exactly where to get his hands on a veritable treasure trove. That was if those thieving French bastards hadn't beaten him to it. As he sat in his comfortable office, he thought back to that fateful day, when he'd done his best to protect his precious war souvenirs.

What had seemed like a masterstroke, all those years ago, now appeared foolish – almost naïve. Naturally, once France had been liberated, the chateau duly returned to its rightful owners. During those desperate times, when the Allies were intent on killing every German soldier in sight, he had been so preoccupied with his own survival that he obviously hadn't been thinking clearly. Gaining access to the chateau, now that it was occupied, was going to be difficult at best.

And then there was the appalling thought that the owner of the chateau might have accidentally stumbled upon his buried treasure. The very idea didn't bear thinking about. But he'd kept his eyes and ears open in the right places and felt sure that if the items in question had suddenly resurfaced and ended up on the open market, he would have known about it.

He'd waited long enough and, over the next few months, he formulated a variety of plans that would gain him access to his hard-won possessions. Unfortunately, whatever idea he came up with was fraught with risk. And it was then, just when he felt like raging with frustration, that good fortune shined upon him once again. The chateau came up for sale.

He couldn't believe his luck. Naturally, the place didn't come cheap, despite its run-down condition, but the investment would be worth every single French franc. So, he offered the full asking price the very next day and secured the property. Within a couple of months, he would be the proud owner of a French chateau, and what was buried at the foot of the moat would be enough to pay for the cost of the chateau ten times over.

Oh, yes, thought Schmitt, helping himself to a glass of champagne he had

been saving for just such an occasion, happy times are ahead.

French bureaucracy being what it is, it took Schmitt over four months to finally get hold of the keys to his newly-purchased piece of French history. And when he drove the whole family to his latest acquisition, he even began to feel a little nostalgic. Not that he'd admit any such thing to his wife. He started to think back to the countless French women he had enjoyed in the splendid surroundings, but his lips remained firmly sealed.

Schmitt's wife might have been as equally nonplussed to know that the boot of their car contained, among other things, a rather large sledgehammer. Her husband had come prepared. He had already explained that they would be booking into a nearby hotel, until he'd had time to fully inspect their new country retreat. Once they'd eaten and his family was settled, he made his excuses and headed straight for the chateau and the foot of the moat, tools in hand. He couldn't bring himself to wait a second longer. He needed to know he hadn't wasted a sizeable amount of money on a run-down chateau for no reason at all.

That night, only an hour before the sun went down, Schmitt hauled the sledgehammer to the entrance of the cave, together with a pair of large gardening shears. The area appeared relatively undisturbed and his excitement grew. He hurriedly cut the shrubbery away, until his arms ached. Reluctantly, he was forced to sit and catch his breath before he continued.

He wielded the sledgehammer and made a hole large enough to accommodate his powerful torch. When he peered inside, he gasped. The cave appeared to be strewn with rocks and precious little else. Had the treasure already been found? But then he caught a glint of metal, as the beam of his torch penetrated the detritus. Eventually, Schmitt realised what had happened. Rocks had fallen from the roof of the cave, all but burying his hidden artefacts. Hopefully, there wouldn't be any significant damage.

Schmitt stepped away from the entrance of the cave, let out a whoop and punched the air. He had survived the war, inherited his father's successful business, and now he would be even richer. Who knew where it could end? The sky was the limit.

As the ex-major considered his good fortune, he paid not the slightest thought to the men and women he had murdered to obtain his new-found wealth. In his life he had held firm and seized his opportunities when they

arose. Right and wrong had no bearing on the matter. He had won, and those that had crossed his path had lost. That was simply the way of the world.

SEVEN

1976

Malcolm Denham had always known that his father died a hero during the war, saving Robert Wilson's life. His mother had told him when he was a young boy and said he should feel very proud. That was why he had joined the army, straight from university. But he had soon become disillusioned. It wasn't the army's fault, it was just that he'd been born at the wrong time. He spent his career yearning for a war to raise its ugly head, but fate denied him.

Not that he hadn't had his own brush with death in Aden, where guerrillas were hell-bent on killing British officers. He'd been a Royal Marine, sent to man road-blocks on the main roads into Crater, which had become overrun by hundreds of Arab fighters. He and his men had come under fire from snipers, occupying a nearby fort. A bullet had missed him by inches. He hadn't had time to be afraid, or even to fight back. By the time he realised what had happened, an armoured car had silenced the snipers with a well-placed shell. Not much of a war story to tell his son, and the British left Aden in '67 earlier than planned, with their tails between their legs.

Civilian life was even worse. Working for an oil company, travelling the world, had sounded good on paper, but he'd soon become bored. At the end of the day, he was nothing more than a pen-pusher, and the opportunities to cover oneself in glory were in short supply.

But everything changed on the day his mother read a small article in the Times and told him what really happened to his father.

At first his mother had tried to cover up her mistake, when she became alarmed at the news that an expensive Fabergé cigarette case had come up for sale at a well-known London auction house. But Malcolm knew that something was wrong and prised the truth out of her. Eventually, that day was to haunt her for the rest of her life.

"I can't believe what I'm hearing. You mean my father was shot dead in cold blood while he was a prisoner of war?"

"Yes."

“And you even know the name of the man who shot him? How?”

Valerie sighed deeply and got up out of her chair. She walked over to her jewellery box and retrieved an old, faded scrap of paper, before passing it to her son.

Malcolm read it, confusion etched across his face.

“This is some kind of receipt for a cigarette case, like the one you just read about in the paper. I don’t understand. Where did this come from?”

His mother looked away before answering.

“It came from your father’s body. Mr Wilson gave it to us, the day he visited when he returned from the war.”

“You’re not making any sense. Why did he have this on him?”

So, his mother told him everything. She told him how his father had been given the case by Faversham when he was seventeen years old. She told him how it was very valuable. She told him how his father had kept his promise to Faversham and taken the case with him when he landed in Normandy. And she told him how a German officer took the case and shot his father, even though he was unarmed.

Suddenly the horrible truth dawned on him, and he stared at the receipt in his hands, his mouth open in disbelief.

“Major Hermann Schmitt. Is this the bastard that killed him?”

Malcolm’s yell echoed within the confines of his mother’s small drawing room, and she put her head in her hands and cried.

“This is why I didn’t want to tell you. What is the point of dredging up painful memories?”

Malcolm inwardly cursed himself for becoming so emotional. He hadn’t given a thought to how upsetting all this must be to his mother. He quickly tried to control himself. The last thing he wanted to do was upset her, but the revelation that his father had been murdered had hit him like a thunderbolt.

“I’m probably just confused, Malcolm. It was all so long ago,” said Valerie, doing her best to cover her tracks. “It probably isn’t even the same cigarette case.”

“But it matches the one you said my father owned exactly,” said Malcolm as calmly as he could, while he reached for the newspaper.

“There could be hundreds like that for all we know.”

“Maybe,” he said, for his mother’s benefit, but he sincerely doubted it.

He decided to change the subject and tried to make it look as if the matter was forgotten. But he could tell from his mother’s face that she wasn’t fooled.

When he finally kissed Valerie good-bye, he headed to his car and gave a friendly wave before setting off. A few moments later he parked around the corner from her house and just sat there, thinking.

This bastard Schmitt had murdered his father thirty years ago and, for all he knew, had lived unpunished ever since. As if to add insult to injury, he had stolen his father's precious cigarette case, a gift he had planned to sell so that he could provide for his wife and child. And now, if he read things correctly, the case had suddenly come on to the market. The question was, could the sale possibly leave a trail that would lead to his father's murderer? Malcolm clenched his jaw and he could taste blood in his mouth, where he had inadvertently bitten his cheek. It only served to fuel his anger.

His father had died, knowing that his killer now possessed all he'd ever owned. A legacy he had intended to use to provide a better life for his wife and unborn son.

"Well, Major Schmitt," said Malcolm through gritted teeth, even though there was no one else to hear the promise he was about to make, "You'll regret killing my father. The son is all grown up ... and he's coming after you."

EIGHT

To say that Schmitt was disappointed in his son Franz, would have been a gross understatement. When, years before, he had set him up in the chateau and shown him the secret cave of valuables, his orders had been very explicit. On no account should any of the precious items be sold without his permission. Schmitt senior was also to be consulted as to exactly how items were placed on the market. Caution was to be observed at all times. So, when news reached him in Germany of the sale of a Fabergé cigarette case in London, he could not contain his anger.

Having to take time out of his busy schedule to return to France did nothing to improve his mood. Travelling overnight, he finally arrived at the chateau in the early hours of the morning and one of the staff informed him that his son was still in bed. Schmitt brusquely dismissed her and headed up the stairs to the recently refurbished master suite. His daughter-in-law was away, and he found Franz in bed with another woman.

“Father!”

His son cried out with a mixture of surprise and shock. He glanced across at the woman next to him, who had drawn up the sheet to hide her nakedness.

“I wasn’t expecting you,” said Franz, sitting up and trying to appear as dignified as possible.

“Clearly,” cried Hermann, pointing at the woman. “You! Get out!”

The woman cowered at the sight of the older man, glowering in her direction.

“But ... but I’m undressed.”

Her voice shook, and she clutched the sheet tightly around her neck to emphasise the point.

“Get out, or I will come over there and throw you out, you fucking whore.”

The woman’s bottom lip trembled, and she looked as if she were about to cry, but then thought better of it. She brought her feet down to the floor and tried to pull the sheet with her, but it was firmly tucked into the bed. In the end she was forced to clutch her arms in front of her and run to her clothes, strewn across an expensive antique chair. She was about to make her way to the bathroom to dress, but Schmitt senior’s bawling voice stopped her in her tracks.

“Not in there, you stupid bitch. That way.”

Schmitt pointed to the corridor and for a brief instant the woman thought about protesting. The idea of exiting the suite completely naked and meeting a member of staff filled her with dread. But one look at the older man's snarling face caused her to change her mind, and she made a hurried exit. The door had hardly closed before Schmitt's son was speaking again.

"Let me get dressed, so that we can talk properly."

His father sneered at him.

"No! You stay right there, you idiot. That way, when I've finished listening to your pathetic excuses, I can cut your balls off and feed them to the dogs."

His son sat back against his pillow and smiled. The action surprised his father.

"Franz, would you be kind enough to tell me what you find so amusing?"

"I find *you* amusing, father."

Schmitt's blood pressure soared, sending his face bright red. His son had never spoken to him like this before. Franz continued to twist the knife.

"Your precious gems were all stolen. And yet you stand there, trying to take the moral high ground when I decide to use my initiative."

"Initiative? Were you using your initiative when you raped that girl and I had to pay off the family to get you out of jail? I should have left you there to rot, you ungrateful bastard!"

"But you couldn't do that, could you, dear father? Not when I know all about your ill-gotten gains. I'm sure the police would have all sorts of questions to ask if they suddenly knew about your sordid little stash."

Schmitt was grateful he wasn't armed. His anger was such that he could have happily shot his son where he lay - and damn the consequences. He forced himself to calm down and decided to teach his foolish son the facts of life.

"That cigarette case you decided to help yourself to is a one-off. It could raise awkward questions."

"You are being unnecessarily cautious. It has been in our family's possession for over thirty years. The people at the auction house were completely satisfied that the case belonged to us."

"Of course they were, you damn fool. The greedy shits are only interested in their commission. A sizeable amount, from what I have heard. The bidding was somewhat lively, to say the least."

"It sold for more than we could have hoped for," said Franz, trying to keep the conversation on an even keel, now that his father no longer looked ready to

commit murder.

“And might I ask why you suddenly needed such a large amount of money? My God, haven’t you already got enough with all this.”

Schmitt waved a hand at the expensive furnishings surrounding him.

“The running costs here are incredible ...”

Schmitt took a menacing step forward and bellowed at his son.

“Don’t insult my intelligence by lying to me. You did not need the money for running costs. You have enough income to take care of daily expenses. So, I will ask you again. Why did you need the money?”

Franz sighed and instinctively grabbed the sheet to make sure his genitals were adequately protected.

“I’ve had a run of bad luck ...”

“Gambling!” barked Schmitt, not letting his son finish. “I knew it. When are you going to learn? It’s a fool’s game. I didn’t go through what I went through, just so you could fritter it all away on a roulette table. What with that and your wife’s expensive shopping habits, I’m surprised I have any money left at all.”

“You’re exaggerating, father, and you know it.”

Schmitt was exasperated at his son’s new-found confidence and was determined to wipe the smug smile from his face.

“Perhaps. But I’m not going to let you dig into our family’s wealth as if it is a bottomless pit. Instead of just thinking about yourself, you should consider young Anton’s future. The powerbase I have created must live on through coming generations, and I won’t let you destroy my legacy through your own selfishness. With that in mind, I will be keeping a very close eye on my spoils of war from now on.”

“But ...”

“And remember this, Franz,” said Schmitt, not letting his son finish. “If the original owners of the cigarette case come looking for whoever stole it, they’ll most likely end up here.”

“I’m not the one who stole the damn thing.”

“No. But if this ‘initiative’ of yours comes back to bite us, I’ll be more than happy to throw my loyal son to the wolves.”

Franz opened his mouth to speak but could not find the words. His father was already making his way to the door to leave. Schmitt left his son with a parting shot.

“Don’t bother getting up. Why don’t you stay in bed and play with yourself? It’s all you’re good for.”

When he was alone, Franz cursed his father and decided the man was being paranoid. Surely no one would be interested in the damn cigarette case after all this time.

NINE

Malcolm Denham prided himself on being a gregarious man. He knew how to get on with people, and how to earn their trust and respect. It was what had made him a good officer in the army, and it had served him well in his civilian life too. He liked to network, creating contacts as he went along. When he walked into the auction house in London that had sold a rare Fabergé cigarette case, one of those contacts was about to become very useful indeed.

He had decided to go to the auction house in person, not wanting to be brushed off by some lowly employee on the phone. He believed in face-to-face meetings whenever possible. Eye contact made all the difference as far as he was concerned. A quick look at a plan of the building, thoughtfully displayed in the entrance, revealed that it was split into two. All the offices where the administrative work was conducted were on the first floor, while the ground floor consisted of a large warehouse and a storage facility to house the daily influx of new stock.

Malcolm decided to head for an office on the first floor that said it was open for public enquiries, but he had to walk through part of the warehouse to get there. When he thought about it later, his visit might well have been far less successful had he not been forced to take the route that he had. Just as he was about to make his way to the only stairway, he noticed a brown-coated figure, manhandling what looked like a large figurine into one of the company's storage areas.

“Sergeant Taylor?”

At the sound of Malcolm's voice, the man turned, just as he was trying to push a door open with one foot, while he guided the figurine with his knee. His mouth opened in shock.

“Good God, Captain Denham, is that really you?”

“Taking the Lord's name in vain as usual, Sergeant, I see. Here, let me help you with that.”

Malcolm ran forward, held the door open, and followed Taylor into the storage area. The man placed the figurine on to the edge of a table, where it wobbled and nearly fell to the floor. Taylor quickly put out his hand to ward off a potential disaster, but the delicate artefact finally settled.

“Remind me not to sell anything valuable in this place, if that's an example of how the staff look after a client's family heirloom,” said Malcolm, smiling

broadly.

“It was just such a shock, sir, seeing you out of the blue like that. It’s a damn pleasant surprise, mind.”

“What’s it been? Eight years?”

“Nine. But who’s counting?”

“And how are you keeping, Charlie? Life treating you well?”

“I can’t complain, sir. Keeping busy, you know.”

“Charlie, it’s Malcolm, please. We’re not in the army now.”

“Well, that might take some getting used to. Old habits die hard, as they say.”

“I miss those days, back in Aden, don’t you, Charlie?”

“I’ll say. It’s the comradeship I miss more than anything else. We looked out for one another. Of course, it’s all very different on civvie street.”

“I couldn’t have put it better myself.”

Just then, a pompous-looking supervisor turned up, eyeing the figurine, sitting on the edge of the table.

“Taylor,” he snapped. “You were told we need that figurine up front, ready for this morning’s sale. We haven’t got time to wait around for you to pull your bloody finger out. Now, get a bloody move on. And that’s your last warning!”

The man was about to leave, when Malcolm grabbed him by the arm. He wanted to lay into the ignorant prick but restrained himself for Taylor’s sake.

“I’m afraid I’m responsible for Mr Taylor’s delay,” said Malcolm, and his clear, authoritative voice caused the supervisor to pause. He looked at the new visitor’s smart suit and realised he might have overstepped the mark, speaking the way he had in front of a potential customer.

“I’m sorry, sir, but the public aren’t allowed to come into the storage facility. If you head to the reception area above stairs, I’m sure someone will be happy to help you.”

“I’m sure. However, before I leave, I would like to say a proper goodbye to Sergeant Taylor. After all, it’s not every day you meet a man of courage who’s willing to brave enemy fire to help his comrades. Were you ever in the army?”

“Look, sir, that’s not ...”

“It’s a simple question. Did you ever serve in Her Majesty’s armed forces?”

“No. I did not.”

“That does surprise me, a man of your undoubted skills at leadership.”

The supervisor looked at the visitor, not knowing how to respond. Malcolm didn't give the man a chance to gather his thoughts and turned to Taylor.

“What time do you get off for lunch, Charlie?”

“One o'clock.”

“I saw a decent pub around the corner. Do you fancy meeting for a pint and catching up on old times?”

“That would be great, sir ... um, I mean, Malcolm.”

“Excellent. I'll meet you out front at one. Anyway, apologies for holding you up. The delivery of this figurine is obviously a matter of life and death, and we've faced that dilemma more times than we care to remember, eh, Charlie?”

And with that the ex-Royal Marine left, giving the supervisor a look that showed nothing but contempt.

TEN

Malcolm Denham had been expecting a young woman with a friendly smile to be manning the reception desk but, instead, he was presented with a balding, middle-aged man in an ill-fitting suit who looked like he was having a miserable day. When Malcolm's prepared charm offensive failed to brighten the man's mood, he began to suspect that the employee's downcast outlook on life was probably his default setting.

The ex-soldier tried everything from begging to bribery in the hope of finding the identity of the cigarette case's seller, but with no success. The downtrodden office-worker simply kept insisting that the owners wanted to remain anonymous, which was their right. It was the company's policy to treat such details as privileged information. Such material would only be released if a crime had been committed and it formed part of a formal enquiry. Even then, the police would be required to have the necessary legal documents, giving them the right to access the said information. Thank you and good day.

Malcolm had been sorely tempted to grab the little squirt by the throat and beat the information out of him, but he knew that wasn't the answer. Even if it worked, he would only end up getting arrested and his mission would have been scuppered at the first hurdle. Frustrated and angry, he left the office and headed for the stairs. He needed a drink.

By the time he reached the entrance to the building it was several minutes past one, and Taylor was waiting for him. Malcolm was already regretting suggesting a pub lunch, not being in the mood after his unsuccessful morning. But he refused to let his old comrade down and put on his best game face, as if he couldn't wait to catch up on old times. Hiding his true feelings was a skill he had picked up as an officer in the army. Even when things were tough, you never showed any weakness to the men. *Never let them see you bleed*, his mentor had always reminded him.

The pub wasn't half-bad, as it turned out. There were separate booths with comfortable, leather seats, where you could get a little privacy. Not being smokers, he and his wife usually avoided pubs like the plague, but drinkers with cancer sticks appeared to be in the minority on this occasion, and consequently there was a sufficient supply of breathable oxygen to make the experience tolerable. Both men ordered fish and chips and a pint of lager. Having suggested going to the pub in the first place, Malcolm insisted on

paying.

The ex-captain tucked into the battered cod only to find it was cold. He felt like taking it back to complain, but, after his session with the miserable excuse for a man back at the auction house, he didn't have the energy or the will. Taylor had smothered his repast with liberal quantities of tomato ketchup and didn't seem to notice that the fish apparently hadn't seen the inside of a frying pan.

"So, how's life treating you, Charlie?" he asked, happy to forget his own problems for a while.

"I have a daughter now. She's just starting school."

"That's great news. So, you're married now."

"I was. My wife died."

Malcolm felt like kicking himself.

"Oh God, Charlie, I'm so sorry."

"Just one of those things, I suppose. She'd been having these headaches and thought it was nothing to worry about, but it turned out she had a blood clot. She went into hospital and never came out."

"Jesus, Charlie, you've been through the ringer. How have you coped?"

"Emily kept me going."

"That's your daughter?"

"Yeah. I had to keep it together, for her sake. At least I've got a steady job, even if it means I'm forever biting my tongue around that jerk in the warehouse. I just keep reminding myself I'm doing it for Emily. If it weren't for her, I'd have punched his lights out and told him to stuff his bloody job years ago. How about you, sir? Any family?"

Malcolm smiled at Taylor's continued inability to drop the 'sir'.

"My wife and I have a little boy ... Sam. Ten years old and he's already dressing up like a soldier and asking for toy guns for Christmas."

"Chip off the old block, eh?"

"Something like that. To be honest, I don't really know why I had a hankering to join the army. Perhaps it stemmed from when I was a small boy, listening to stories about my father landing on the beaches in Normandy."

"They were a different breed back then, that's for sure. Sometimes I think young people today don't know they're born."

"Anyway, I never really got a chance to thank you."

"For what?"

"Well, like I said, I wasn't really a natural for the army and I was still

pretty green behind the ears when we were shipped off to Aden. But you let me make my mistakes and covered for me in front of the men until I found my feet.”

“Any sergeant worth his salt would have done the same.”

“I’m not so sure. I think if I hadn’t been lucky enough to end up with you on my team, things might have turned out very different.”

“I was just doing my job.”

Malcolm took a sip of his beer and sat back, looking at his old friend and comrade with a thoughtful look in his eye.

“Have you ever been to Wales, Charlie?”

Taylor let out a short laugh and looked puzzled by the question, coming as it did out of left field.

“I went there on holiday a few times when I was a youngster.”

“What did you think of it?”

“It was nice enough, I suppose, when the weather behaved itself. Lovely beaches, if I remember rightly. Why do you ask?”

“There’s a friend of mine, works at the large refinery down there. Owes me a favour. I was on the phone to him a couple of days ago and he said he was looking for someone to take charge, inspecting the pipes. Not complicated, but it’s a responsible job because they can’t afford to make mistakes. It pays bloody well. Better than a job moving stock in an auction house, I expect.”

Taylor smiled and shook his head in disbelief.

“Sir. Are you saying what I think you’re saying?”

“Yes. I think I can get you the job if you want it. You could make a hell of a good life down there for you and your daughter.”

“I don’t know what to say, sir.”

“Just say yes, if it’s what you want.”

“I don’t think I could ask you to go out on a limb for me like that.”

“I wouldn’t be going out on a limb. My friend needs someone reliable and trustworthy who’s willing to work hard. You fit the bill as far as I’m concerned. How much notice would you have to give at the auction house?”

“A month,” said Taylor, still in shock, and I’ve got some holiday leave owing too.”

“How about selling your house?”

“I rent a small flat, so it’s the same deal.”

“Property’s a lot cheaper down there. You’ll easily afford to buy a nice place on what they pay you.”

Taylor stared at his ex-captain and his eyes moistened, knowing that his life

had unexpectedly arrived at a turning point and his daily struggle could soon be over. He felt he must be dreaming and he shook his head, as if the act could return him to reality. He took a sip of his beer by way of celebration.

“You know what, sir?”

“What?”

“I think this pint of lager might be the best I’ve ever tasted in my life.”

ELEVEN

It was nearly two o'clock when the barman ventured over to retrieve their plates. When he saw that Malcolm's meal had hardly been touched, he thought he'd better make a polite enquiry.

"Everything all right, sir?"

Malcolm hadn't the heart to tell him the chef didn't know how to cook for shit.

"Yes, fine, thank you. I just wasn't as hungry as I thought."

The man shrugged and walked away. Malcolm was about to get ready to leave, when Taylor spoke up.

"Hold on, sir. You've got to at least let me buy you a drink."

Malcolm wanted to decline. He'd had a wasted morning and was eager to show his face at the office before heading home. But he didn't want to hurt Taylor's feelings and said he could stay for one more. Taylor quickly headed for the bar and, when he returned, Malcolm thought of a question.

"Don't you only get an hour for lunch?"

"Doesn't matter now, does it, sir? What are they going to do, fire me?"

"Well, I suppose I'd better call *my* office. That way at least one of us will hold on to his job. Is there a phone here?"

Taylor hoped Captain Denham was joking, after all he'd done for him. The last thing he wanted was to get the man into trouble.

"There's one back there," he said, pointing to the door that led to the toilets.

Taylor watched the ex-officer search for change in his jacket pocket, before heading to the phone. A couple of minutes later he returned, looking somewhat relieved.

"The job's yours."

"What do you mean?"

"I just phoned my friend at the refinery. When I realised you might be putting your job at the auction house at risk, I thought I better check I was as good as my word."

"And this friend of yours offered me the job over the phone, just like that, without even an interview?"

"Like I said, he's a friend and he trusts my judgement."

"Sir, I don't know what brought you to my little corner of the world, but

I'm glad it did. This has been one day I won't forget in a hurry."

Taylor took another sip of his drink and decided to ask his ex-captain a question.

"By the way, I forgot to ask. Why *did* you come to the auction house?"

"It's a long story. Turned out it was a waste of time anyway."

"They hadn't got what you were looking for, I suppose."

"No, I'm not in the market for antique jewellery or anything like that. In fact, all I was after was a little information, but they weren't very obliging."

"What sort of information were you after, sir? That's if you don't mind saying."

"I just wanted to know the identity of the person who sold an expensive cigarette case last weekend."

"That Fabergé piece?"

"You remember it?" asked Malcolm, suddenly interested.

"When something sells for that kind of money, it's hard to forget."

"Do you know who was selling it?"

"No. They wanted to remain anonymous. 'Property of a Gentleman' was on the docket I saw. Typical nonsense you see every day around that place."

"Well, it was a long shot I suppose."

"This seller's name ... is it important to you?"

"You could say that."

Taylor looked at his new-found saviour, trying to read his face. Malcolm couldn't decide if he ought to tell Taylor the truth. What the hell, he thought. What have I got to lose?

"I think the cigarette case once belonged to my father. And whoever stole it, murdered him for it. So yes, the seller's name would be of interest to me."

"Jesus, sir. When was this?"

"More than thirty years ago, during the war."

"And you think whoever sold this case had something to do with your father's death?"

"Maybe. At least they might be able to lead me to whoever killed him. That's if they're still alive. It was a German officer serving in France, when we had the Nazis on the run."

Taylor drained the rest of his glass.

"I'll find the name of the seller."

Malcolm couldn't hide his surprise.

"Can you do that?"

“I’ll find it somehow. It can’t be that difficult.”

Malcolm smiled and finished his own beer.

“You’re a good man, Sergeant.”

“So are you, sir. So are you.”

TWELVE

Returning late to the auction house, Taylor was subjected to a stream of abuse from his supervisor. From day one the man had had it in for him and Taylor never knew why. Knowing he no longer needed to hold on to his job, he would have liked nothing more than to tell the supervisor to go fuck himself, but he bit his tongue one last time for Captain Denham's sake.

Once the verbal onslaught was finished, he returned to his duties, while he planned out his strategy for accessing the information his captain was after. The problem was, the file containing the identity of the anonymous seller was safely locked away in a filing cabinet in the supervisor's office. That too was locked, when the office was unoccupied. Taylor had regularly watched the self-important prig wandering around with his keys, constantly checking doors and windows. The man must be paranoid, he decided. But he wasn't going to let Captain Denham down. He would break into the office and force the cabinet open if he had to, but that would be a last resort. Fortunately, he had another idea in mind.

The supervisor's secretary had been showing an interest in Taylor for months. They got along well, often making fun of the more serious and elderly members of staff. But she was his junior by nearly ten years and shared a house with three other women, living on a diet of takeaway food and alcohol. She also spent every evening in the local wine bar, followed most nights by disco dancing at a variety of nightclubs. Their respective lifestyles couldn't have been more different. Taylor had always been attracted to her, but he hadn't made a move because he knew it just wouldn't work. Besides, he had to think about how such a relationship might impact on his young daughter. But now things had changed.

He didn't want to simply use her and ruin a good friendship but, he reminded himself, he would soon be moving over a hundred miles away. What would it hurt to have one last fling before he went off to pastures new? Even so, he couldn't help feeling guilty, knowing that he had an ulterior motive. Ignoring his doubts, he headed for her office on his coffee break.

"Hello, gorgeous, how's life treating you?"

Stephanie, or Steph, as she preferred to be called, pointed to a large glass of water, sitting on her desk.

"Rotten headache. My ears are still buzzing from the club last night. I

swear they're getting louder all the time."

"I don't suppose the four gallons of cider you threw down your neck helped much either."

"Hey, you cheeky bugger."

"Steph, can I tell you a secret?" he said, leaning into her desk, a conspiratorial look on his face.

"Oooh, yes please. I love secrets."

Steph placed her elbows on the desk and rested her chin in her hands, her eyes wide in anticipation.

"I've got a new job, over in Wales," said Taylor, determined to be as honest with her as he could.

"Oh."

Taylor couldn't help feeling bad when he saw the look of disappointment on her face. It was clear she was genuinely upset he was leaving.

"Better money, you know how it is. I've got to do what's best for Emily."

"That's what I like about you, Charlie ... you're a good father. In fact, you're a good man all round."

But Taylor didn't feel like a good man. In fact, he felt like a bit of a shit. In the end, he decided he couldn't use Steph to get what he wanted, no matter how important it was.

"I wouldn't be so sure," he said.

"What do you mean?"

Taylor stood back and took a deep breath.

"I came here to ask you out for a drink because I've got a problem you might be able to help me with."

"And that's the only reason you've got for asking me out?"

Steph looked hurt, and Taylor realised that trying to be honest had only made things worse.

"No. I like you, Steph. I've been wanting to ask you out for months."

"So, why haven't you?"

"I'm too old for you and I'm a stay-at-home dad. I couldn't keep up with the sort of lifestyle you lead. You need a lad your own age."

"Well, since we're being honest, I'll tell you you're wrong. I don't want some 'lad', I want you. And I'd pretty much love to be a stay-at-home girlfriend, if I got the chance. But I suppose it doesn't matter now, if you're clearing off to Wales."

Taylor was stunned. He had totally misread the situation all this time and

had missed a golden opportunity to have a relationship with a lovely young woman. His next words seemed to come out unbidden.

“How about we go for a drink anyway?”

“And what happens when you’ve gone?”

“Well, it’s not as if I’m off to the other side of the world. As soon as me and Emily are settled, why don’t you come and stay? I’m sure Emily would love some female company, instead of having to just make do with her boring old dad.”

“Do you really mean it, Charlie? We could go out properly? Boyfriend and girlfriend?”

“If it works out, why not?”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“How about just telling me what night we’re going out and when to pick you up?”

“Does tonight at seven sound too keen?”

“No, that sounds great.”

“See you then.”

Taylor made to leave the office, but Steph stopped him before he reached the door.

“Hold on. What about that little problem I could help you with?”

Taylor paused before answering.

“I can’t ask you now. It wouldn’t be right.”

“Yes, it would, now that I’m your girlfriend.”

Steph gave him a cheeky smile that he found incredibly sexy. He took a quick look down the corridor to make sure it was empty before he went back inside and closed the door.

“It must be a very personal problem,” said Steph, glancing at the closed door.

“It is, but that’s not why I needed privacy.”

“So why ...”

Steph didn’t get a chance to finish her sentence because Taylor had pressed his lips against hers. She enjoyed the kiss and was sorry when it finally ended.

“Now I’m *really* looking forward to tonight,” she whispered, gently stoking his cheek. “So, tell me, what can I help you with?”

“I need to find something out for a friend of mine.”

“What?”

“I need to know the name of the person who sold a cigarette case last

weekend.”

“That expensive job that Napoleon was supposed to have owned?”

“Yes.”

“Is that it?”

“Yes. But it’s marked as confidential. The identity of the seller is locked away in your boss’s filing cabinet.”

Steph looked at her watch.

“Coffee break’s nearly over. He’ll be heading back from the kitchen soon. We’ll have to be quick.”

And with that she led the way down the corridor to his office. Taylor had already noticed her tight white blouse but now, when she stood up, he realised she’d chosen a particularly short, tight skirt to go with it. Her stiletto shoes made her legs look wonderful, as usual. He almost couldn’t wait until seven o’clock.

“Keep watch,” she said.

Steph knocked on her boss’s door and entered without waiting. Taylor tried to look as inconspicuous as possible and knelt to tie his shoe lace. He was left guarding the door for only a minute, and, as soon as Steph re-emerged, they headed back to her office.

“Any luck?” he asked, hardly able to contain himself.

“The seller was a man named Franz Schmitt.”

“Any address?”

“Yes, it’s some sort of castle in France. Here, I’ll write it down for you while I still have it fresh in my mind.”

As soon as she handed over the piece of paper with what he needed, Taylor gave her a long, passionate kiss.

“You’re a good girl.”

Steph gave him another cheeky smile and licked her full, red lips.

“Don’t count on it.”

THIRTEEN

When Malcolm received Taylor's phone call, he thanked the man profusely and wished him good luck with his new job. But his heart was pounding, and he ended the call as quickly as he could, making some excuse about being overdue for a meeting.

As soon as he'd heard his ex-sergeant mention the name Schmitt, his mind had been going into overdrive. He just hadn't expected it. After all this time, to suddenly find a direct connection to his father's murderer was almost too good to be true. The first name was different – Franz instead of Hermann – but there was no way it could be a coincidence. It was almost like finding a smoking gun.

So, who was this Franz Schmitt? A relative of Hermann Schmitt? A son perhaps? Was the father even still alive? He wondered how the family could be so blatant, even after all this time? That was if the son knew how his father got hold of the cigarette case in the first place. Or perhaps these people thought they were safe and that nobody had lived to witness the murder. But then, why remain anonymous when putting the case up for sale?

Malcolm's head began to spin. He had to stop letting his thoughts run away with him. The time for guesswork was over. He needed to know more. So, he headed for the company's library and searched the shelves for what he was looking for. As he removed the large atlas from its resting place, he noticed his hands were shaking. He placed it on the table where employees sat to research into new oil-drilling sites. He turned to the index at the back and searched for the postal town Taylor's new girlfriend had handed to him on the scrap of paper.

Once he'd found what he was looking for, he turned to the page indicated and realised he was looking at a large-scale map of northern France. He ran his fingers along the grid lines until they met. It was an hour or so out of Calais – two at the most. Unfortunately, the map wasn't detailed enough for him to find the precise address. Although some chateaus were listed, he presumed these were the larger ones, open to tourists. The one he was after was clearly privately owned. And then he noticed how close it was to Rouen. It couldn't be, he thought.

Like any boy whose father had died fighting bravely in a war, he had wanted to know every detail. What battles had he fought in? Where was he

stationed? How many of the enemy had he managed to kill? Of course, he now knew that his mother had hidden the details of his father's death from him all this time, but he had always known *where* he'd been killed - a few miles outside of a town called Rouen.

And now his father's prized possession had suddenly appeared. Put on to the market by a man with the same name as his father's murderer. A man who lived, according to the address that Taylor had given him, a stone's throw from the very place where his father was murdered. Coincidence? Maybe, but not likely.

Malcolm could hardly contain himself. He replaced the atlas on its shelf and left the building without even telling his secretary. His car was parked in its usual place and he got behind the wheel and headed home. As he put the key into the door of his house, he suddenly made the alarming discovery that he had no memory of the journey.

He ran up the stairs, taking them two at a time, and headed for the bedroom. His wife was at work and Sam was still at school, so he had the house to himself. He opened the wardrobe and pushed aside his shoes to reveal a built-in safe where he kept the deeds to the house and other important papers. He removed a key from his jacket pocket and opened the safe. He ignored the papers and reached for what he was looking for, wrapped in a cloth at the back.

Malcolm sat on the bed, laid the bundle down, and opened the cloth to reveal an old service revolver, together with a box of ammunition. He thought back to the time, about ten years ago, when he had found it hidden in a rebel house in Aden, after he and his men had arrested the occupants. For some reason he had kept it for himself. It had been a foolish thing to do and he could have got into a lot of trouble, but he'd simply thought of it as his very own war souvenir. So, he'd sneaked it back to Britain and it had remained hidden in the back of his wardrobe ever since. He had never thought he would ever need it – that is, until now.

He thought of his father's murderer, living a long and happy life, with a son of his own. A wealthy man perhaps. Wealthy enough to own his very own chateau. And only now had he found it necessary to sell the case he had stolen - the case that was the only thing of value his father had owned. And this Schmitt clearly thought he'd got away with it. But he was wrong.

The murdered man's son was going to put things right.

FOURTEEN

Malcolm immediately cursed himself when he made the mistake of telling his wife what his mother had shared with him. The problem was that they knew each other too well, and Susan had been able to tell that something was bothering him. And he had to admit that being able to share the incredible tale had helped relieve some of the pent-up stress he'd been feeling, ever since he'd learnt what had happened to his father.

It took him only a day to make the arrangements, and Malcolm told his wife that he'd been unexpectedly called away on business. After what he'd shared with her, he simply had to hope that she wouldn't suspect what he was up to. It was summer, and he decided to catch the hovercraft at Dover. He deliberately picked a busy time of day to cross the Channel, in the morning, and he booked a day-return ticket, pretending he was heading to France to buy duty-free drink. But he had no intention of returning that day.

As he went through passport control, the customs people paid little attention to his small bag, which contained little more than a change of clothes. He did his best to appear calm, even nonchalant. But the revolver and ammunition, taped firmly to the small of his back, was a constant reminder of the dangerous task he had set himself. That was another reason he had chosen the hovercraft instead of the ferry. He just wanted to get the risky part of the trip over with as quickly as possible.

Forty minutes later he set foot on French soil. Once he'd hired a car, he removed the revolver from its uncomfortable home in his back and placed it in his jacket pocket. A quick look at the map reassured him that he knew where he was headed, and he left Calais behind.

It took him nearly two hours to reach the small village he was looking for, and he stopped at a pleasant café, where he ordered something to eat and a pot of strong coffee. He briefly thought about asking for directions to the chateau, until he realised how foolish that would be. If something went wrong, the last thing he wanted was to leave a trail leading right back to him. Besides, his schoolboy French was barely up to the task.

As he sipped his coffee, he tried to focus his mind. He admonished himself for having no clear plan in place, but this had partly been deliberate. He hadn't wanted to over-think what he was about to do, in case he lost his nerve. Up until now, he'd been running on adrenaline, hot on the trail of a murderer. The

thought of what he would do when he caught up with the man had, until now, been buried away in the recesses of his mind. But now that the moment had nearly arrived, he was forced to face reality.

He was woefully unprepared. He was armed, but he didn't even know if his father's murderer lived in the chateau. Assuming this Franz Schmitt was his son, would he lead him to his father, if he was alive? And how much did this Franz know? He might be totally ignorant of his father's past sins.

And what if he did find the father at the chateau? Wilson had said that Hermann Schmitt looked to be in his late twenties when he'd shot his unarmed prisoners. That would make him a man in his fifties today, if not sixty. Even so, did that make him exempt from justice? And what form would justice take? A bullet in the brain?

Malcolm had no intention of walking up to the man and killing him. That would make him no better than his father's murderer. Besides, that would be too easy for Schmitt. He needed to face up to what he had done, in court. No, he would make a citizen's arrest and drag the man to the police station. But would the police take him seriously? It had happened so long ago, and it had been during the war. What evidence did he have to back up his claims? Suddenly, the whole idea of seeking justice seemed foolish.

Malcolm paid for his lunch and noticed the café also acted as the local shop. He bought a map that he'd spied hanging up behind the counter and headed for his car. He opened the map and soon found the chateau he was looking for, no more than thirty minutes away.

He felt the comforting bulge of the revolver in his jacket pocket. He would get the evidence he needed, somehow. He put the car into gear and headed for the chateau.

FIFTEEN

As he drove, Malcolm had visions of walking up to the doors of the chateau and bursting in, yelling like a madman, gun in hand. But, when he finally found the French castle, he was confronted by sturdy iron gates, leading to a long driveway. The chateau itself was hidden from view by a small forest of mature trees. He briefly contemplated skulking through the woods and waiting until dark, before breaking into the grand house, but soon dismissed the idea. He had no real proof that the owners were related to his father's killer and he needed to know more. He decided he had to confront whoever resided in the chateau and find out the truth for himself. The gun was merely a precaution. *Hope for the best and plan for the worst.* Military training not forgotten.

He took in his surroundings and spotted an intercom bolted to one of the walls that supported the gates. It was almost hidden by ivy, growing up the ancient brickwork. He got out of his car and walked up to it. Taking a deep breath, he pressed the button and held it there for several seconds. He could hear a buzz, coming from the small speaker. A minute almost elapsed with still no answer, and he was about to try again, when a tinny voice could be heard emanating from the speaker.

“Oui?”

Whoever had answered the intercom spoke in French. Another hurdle to cross.

“Excusez-moi. Parlez vous Anglais?”

“Yes.”

“Hello, my name is Malcolm Denham. I wonder if I might be able to speak to the owner of the chateau.”

“Do you have an appointment?”

It was a woman's voice. Not young. He assumed he was speaking to a member of staff.

“No, but I have travelled a long way to get here. This is a personal matter and I am sure the owner will wish to see me.”

Malcolm had no reason to believe that this was true, but he didn't relish being refused entry to the chateau after having come all this way. He could always resort to plan B, of course, and break in, but now he might have tipped his hand. Anything he decided to do from this point on would have added risk.

Eventually he got a reply.

“One moment please, monsieur.”

Inside the chateau, the housekeeper left her duster on the large dining room table she had been polishing and headed for the lounge, where Hermann Schmitt was taking his afternoon coffee. She knocked the door and waited until she was given permission to enter. The Schmitt family had very precise rules when it came to how members of the household staff should conduct themselves.

“Sir, there is a gentleman waiting at the main gate who would like to see you. He says it is a personal matter.”

“Does this man have a name?”

The housekeeper was used to the older Schmitt’s manner. He had the habit of holding his head back to talk down to her, even when seated in his chair. Whenever he spoke, he gave the impression that he regarded her and the other members of staff with disdain. But his son paid her well and she tolerated it, doing her best to keep out of his way.

“He said his name is Malcolm Denham. I think he is English.”

Schmitt stiffened, and his eyes widened. For a moment, the housekeeper thought she detected something in the man’s face she had never seen before - fear. But as quickly as it had appeared, the look had gone, to be replaced by the usual smug expression.

“With the name Malcolm Denham, I would say that is a safe assumption.”

“Yes, sir,” was all the housekeeper could bring herself to say.

“Tell my son to join me.”

“Yes, sir. And what shall I say to the gentleman at the gate?”

“You will tell him to wait,” said Schmitt angrily, as if it were her fault that the man was there at all.

“Yes, sir.”

The housekeeper returned to the intercom and brusquely told Malcolm to wait a few minutes, until the owner was ready to see him. Before Malcolm could ask *how* many minutes, the housekeeper had gone. She ran up the stairs to the study where Franz was dealing with his paperwork and told him his father had requested his presence. Her task complete, she eagerly returned to her polishing, annoyed at the visitor for spoiling her day.

When Franz entered the lounge, he found his father standing by the large fireplace, deep in thought. The older man hadn’t noticed his arrival and he had to cough to attract his father’s attention.

“You disobeyed my orders and, as a result, we now have to face the consequences.”

Franz couldn't believe it. Had the old man brought him downstairs just to have another rant at him? The cigarette case had been sold and there was nothing they could do about it now. He needed to let it go. And now, here he was, speaking in riddles.

“What consequences?” he asked, determined to get this over with.

“It appears we have a visitor, waiting at the main gate.”

“So?”

“So, his name is Malcolm Denham. Does the name mean anything to you?”

His father knew it did. The name Harry Denham was etched into both of their memories - the man Hermann Schmitt had killed, before stealing the cigarette case.

“A relative? A son?”

“Quite probably. We will need to find out.”

“What are we going to do?”

Franz couldn't hide the panic in his voice and his father was disgusted.

“Pull yourself together, Franz. What have I always tried to teach you? Maintain control, assess the situation, and always think logically.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good, now fetch the small pistol and holster I keep in my study and arm yourself too. Oh, and bring me my father's old walking stick.”

“But why?”

“We haven't time for damn fool questions. Just do it,” the older man snapped.

Franz ran upstairs and did as instructed, returning a few moments later. He had a pistol tucked into the waistband of his trousers and passed the other, together with the stick, to his father. The holster had been specially made, and he watched as his father tied it around his left ankle, before tucking the small .22 handgun inside. Franz just shook his head. It was typical of his father to plan for every eventuality. It explained the curious holster, the false passports sitting in his study, the back-up generator in the basement, and the copious amounts of petrol stored beside it.

The older man held the stick and practiced limping across the room. He also affected a stoop, making him look somewhat older than his fifty-six years. Once he was satisfied with his new appearance, he barked out the rest of his instructions.

“I want you to remain out of sight when we invite this man in. I will deal with him, but I want you to stay by the door, ready to assist me. If all goes well, I will be taking our uninvited visitor for a tour of the chateau’s grounds. I will signal you when you are needed. Understood?”

“Yes, sir,” said Franz, relieved that he wouldn’t have to do any of the talking. His nerves were shot. Even so, the thought of what his father might ask him to do when he ‘signalled’ him, forced bile up into his throat. His father’s next words did nothing to alleviate his fears.

“Now, go and tell the housekeeper to open the gate for Mr Denham. It is time to clean up this little mess you’ve created.”

SIXTEEN

When the gates finally opened, and Malcolm drove down the long driveway, he couldn't help but be impressed by the sight of the imposing chateau that confronted him. It was not only the size of the building, but the colour that took his breath away. It was made from a stone, as white as chalk, that contrasted sharply with the green of the trees within which it nestled. The moat, apparently empty, only added to the fairy-tale quality of the vision created by the architect. He drove over a bridge to a courtyard where a handful of expensive cars were parked on one side, opposite a selection of more modest vehicles on the other. Owners and staff segregated, Malcolm thought.

An elderly lady was standing on the curved steps to the main doors, waiting for him. He parked beside what he assumed was one of the servants' cars, tapped the revolver in his pocket and opened the driver's door. His mouth was bone dry. As he approached the woman he smiled. It wasn't reciprocated.

"This way, please."

The elderly lady entered the chateau without looking back, assuming Malcolm would follow. He was led through a magnificent hallway, with a grand set of stairs, leading up to an equally impressive galleried landing. The woman turned left, opened another panelled door, and motioned for him to enter.

He walked into a large, beautifully appointed room with a fireplace that would have looked equally at home in a room twice the size. Malcolm quickly scanned his surroundings, looking for any dangers lurking amongst the antique furniture. But the room was occupied by only one man. He sat in a large armchair, a walking stick by his side, his legs covered with a tartan blanket. His back appeared to be bent forward, and thick reading glasses were delicately perched on the end of his nose. Everything he saw indicated that the man before him was elderly and frail.

But Malcolm wasn't prepared to take anything at face value. His host, if indeed it was Hermann Schmitt, would only be in his fifties. Hardly the age one expects a man to be knocking on heaven's door. And this man sported a deep tan, indicating he spent a great deal of time outdoors. The blanket too could be nothing but a prop. Perhaps it even concealed a weapon. He decided to take no chances and reached into his jacket pocket. He pulled out the

revolver and pointed it at the man seated in the armchair. To his credit, he didn't flinch.

"Are you going to kill me, young man?"

"Not unless you do anything stupid."

Franz was listening at the door, his pistol in his hand. He'd been about to burst into the room, firing, and let out a quiet sigh when he realised that the danger had passed, at least for the moment.

"How can I help you?"

Malcolm found the man's calm demeanour unnerving. Had he been expected? Was he missing something he shouldn't? In the end he decided to keep his wits about him and do what he had come here to do.

"You can start by telling me your name."

"It is Schmitt. I am German," he said, as if his heavy accent hadn't been proof enough of that.

"First name?"

"Hermann."

"Were you in the German army, during the war?"

"Of course. I achieved the rank of major."

The hairs on the back of Malcolm's neck stood on end. The man was being too co-operative. Something wasn't right.

"Do you remember a British soldier by the name of Harry Denham?"

"No. Why should I?"

"Because you murdered him in cold blood."

"That is a very serious accusation, young man. This man ... Harry Denham – am I to understand that he was a relative of yours?"

"He was my father."

"I see. And what makes you think I murdered him?"

"There was a witness."

For the first time, Schmitt's calm manner appeared to desert him, and he shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

"A witness?"

"Yes. Private Robert Wilson. You tried to shoot him and missed. You ordered one of your men to finish the job, but he tricked you and let Wilson escape. Apparently, some of you still knew the meaning of human decency."

Schmitt quickly digested this new information. He had always suspected that the theft of the valuable cigarette case might come back to haunt him one day, but he had been confident that he would never be held accountable for the

killing of the three British soldiers. Now he realised his confidence had been misplaced. He watched Malcolm's hand shake, as he gripped the revolver more tightly. Schmitt decided he needed to tread more warily from this point on.

"If you believe this to be true, and, let me tell you categorically it is not, then why have you waited all this time to confront your father's murderer?"

"A lot of unarmed prisoners were killed during the war ... on both sides, I'm sorry to say. And Schmitt is a very common name. Finding the actual murderer would have been nigh on impossible. That is, until my father's cigarette case came up for auction."

Schmitt did his best to maintain his composure, while inwardly cursing his idiot son.

"A cigarette case?"

"Yes. A very special and valuable cigarette case. By Fabergé. It was a gift to my father from Lord Faversham, in England. He kept his promise to Faversham to take it with him when he landed on the D-Day beaches. And it was still in his possession until you took it from him and gave him that ridiculous receipt. Wilson found it on his body."

Schmitt was suddenly transported back to 1944. He remembered how he'd enjoyed taunting Harry Denham before killing him. Now the scribbled receipt seemed such a foolish idea. It was time to put his plan into action. To do that, he had to keep close to the truth, but leave room for doubt.

"I admit I did take the cigarette case."

This time it was Malcolm's turn to be shocked.

"You admit it?"

"Yes. But I kept it all these years to remind me of those troubled times. I made a terrible mistake."

"Is that what you call murder? A mistake?"

"I did not murder your father, young man. We struggled, and he was shot accidentally."

Schmitt had taken a calculated risk. He had shot Harry Denham in the groin and left him to bleed to death. Private Wilson must have witnessed that. But the wily ex-major was banking on the fact that Wilson would not have shared the gory details with the man's family. Judging by Malcolm's reaction, it looked as though he was correct.

"I don't believe you. Wilson told my grandparents it was murder, pure and simple."

Schmitt continued to watch the man's hand shake. He liked to think he was a good judge of character. Denham, the son, did not have it in him to avenge his father's killer. At least not with a bullet. But the man wanted justice, quite understandably. And Schmitt would offer him just that.

"I am glad that you came here," said Schmitt, surprising Malcolm for a second time. "My past deeds have been weighing heavily on me. It is time for me to atone for my sins. I deny killing anyone except in combat. And I am willing to defend myself in court, if you insist on accusing me of murder. But I did steal from the dead. More times than I care to remember. Please, let me demonstrate my sincerity by showing you my spoils of war. They have been a burden around my neck."

Schmitt didn't wait for Malcolm to reply and got up from his chair. He leant on his father's stick, pretending to be unable to stand unaided. He maintained his stoop and made heavy weather of placing his reading glasses in his jacket pocket. Malcolm stepped back and took careful aim.

"Why should I go anywhere with you?"

"That is simple. These items I speak of are well hidden, believe me. I doubt anyone could find them unless they knew where to look. But I will show them to you. At least then you will have some evidence to present to the authorities that will prove my guilt ... of theft. And if you wish to continue making these ridiculous charges of murder, so be it. I cannot convince you otherwise, I'm sure. I will be acquitted of murder, believe me, but this way at least you can be sure that I will be charged for stealing during the war."

Malcolm was tired, and his mind felt sluggish. He couldn't fault the logic, yet something told him he was being played for a fool. But *he* was the one with the gun, and he was younger and stronger than the man leaning on his walking stick. He didn't want to, but, if Schmitt made a wrong move, he would have no hesitation killing his father's murderer. No doubt he would face charges himself, but it was a matter of justice.

"You lead the way," he heard himself saying.

Schmitt did as he was told, leading the Englishman to the main doors. Franz had retreated beneath the stairs and, as soon as they left the chateau, he checked his pistol and followed them to the moat.

He didn't know what it was like to kill a man, but he guessed he was about to find out.

SEVENTEEN

Malcolm had an uneasy feeling, as if someone were watching him. Perhaps it was the housekeeper, but when he turned to look back at the chateau, no one was there. It was slow going, following Schmitt, as he led the way down a steep slope to the bottom of the empty moat. The soil was dry, but still treacherous if you weren't careful where you trod. The fact that Schmitt made it unaided got the alarm bells ringing, and Malcolm wheeled around, aiming his revolver at the lip of the moat. An empty blue sky stared back at him. It took over ten minutes to reach a mound of shrubbery, which Schmitt proceeded to beat with his stick, until it revealed a stone wall.

"Everything is in there," said Schmitt, pointing at the wall.

"What's behind there?"

"It is an old cave."

"Is this supposed to impress me? There could be nothing behind this wall for all I know."

Schmitt gritted his teeth. He wasn't used to be spoken to in such a way, but he needed to maintain the façade of a feeble old man. He used his stick to roll back a few loose rocks that had been placed against the wall, revealing a sledgehammer, half-buried beneath the earth.

"Be my guest," said Schmitt, pointing at the hammer with his stick.

"Do it yourself."

"I cannot. I am not a well man."

Malcolm cocked his revolver and pointed it straight at the man's head."

"You'll be a hell of a lot sicker if I put a bullet in your skull. Now, pick up the hammer and get to fucking work."

Schmitt sneered. He couldn't help himself. He contemptuously threw away his stick and picked up the hammer, weighing it in his hands.

"Don't even think about it," said Malcolm, taking a step back. "I'd hit you between the eyes before you got that thing anywhere near me."

Without warning, Schmitt swung the hammer at the wall, sending loose rocks flying in all directions. One missed Malcolm's foot by only a few inches. He took a further step back and Schmitt smiled as he continued to plug away at the wall. All pretence of being unfit had been abandoned, and the former soldier soon created a hole large enough for an average man to crawl through. He threw the hammer on the ground without waiting to be told.

“There,” said Schmitt, gesturing to the newly-made hole. Look for yourself.”

This time it was Malcolm’s turn to smile.

“You must take me for a fool. You first.”

“You wish me to climb inside?” asked Schmitt incredulously, as if the idea were ridiculous.

“It’s either that or I look myself ... after I’ve stepped over your corpse.”

Schmitt gave a huge sigh, as if he were totally exasperated by the whole situation.

“Very well.”

Schmitt put both arms into the gap and pulled himself through. Malcolm waited until the man’s feet disappeared inside. He heard the German’s voice echo within the cave walls.

“Come and see for yourself. It’s all here.”

Malcolm didn’t move.

“Step away to the rear of the cave, away from the entrance.”

“As you wish.”

Malcolm could hear movement emanating from the cave before Schmitt called out.

“I have done as you said.”

The sound of Schmitt’s voice sounded more distant now, and Malcolm had to assume that he’d done as instructed. He took another look around before approaching the mouth of the cave and peered inside. A dim figure stood on the far side, hands raised.

“You see?” cried Schmitt. “It is perfectly safe. Come and look for yourself.”

Malcolm couldn’t help letting out a laugh.

“Thank you for the invitation, but I think I’ll pass. Grab a handful of your loot and hold it up near the entrance to the cave so that I can see.”

Malcolm heard more movement from within the cave and, moments later, Schmitt’s face appeared in the gap.

“Here. These are some of my favourite pieces. Unfortunately, the art work is too cumbersome to show you.”

From where he stood, Malcolm could see that Schmitt was holding what looked like a large necklace in one hand, and some smaller items of jewellery in the other. He approached the cave for a better look.

That was when he heard the sound. A metallic click.

EIGHTEEN

Malcolm threw himself to the ground a fraction of a second before he heard the shot. Adrenaline pumped through his body, and he was unsure whether he had been hit or not. All he knew was that his gun-arm was still working, and he twisted round to fire at his unknown assailant. As he did so, he suddenly saw movement out of the corner of his eye. Hermann Schmitt had got hold of a gun from somewhere. Why hadn't he searched the man? That was a mistake. He fired in the general direction of the younger Schmitt, hoping for a lucky hit.

Franz also fired, and a sudden pain in Malcolm's chest told him that luck had deserted him. He knew he'd been seriously hurt, but the adrenaline dulled the worst of the pain. He wasn't going to give up without a fight and he raised his gun to fire.

Incredibly, his attacker burst out laughing. Malcolm didn't give himself time to wonder what the man was up to and pulled the trigger. But nothing happened. He looked at his hand and saw it was empty. Somehow, the shock of being shot must have caused him to drop his gun and he hadn't even realised. The absurdity of his situation caused him to laugh. The dark humour of a soldier - a defence mechanism against the horror of war.

The younger man looked about the same age as himself - in his thirties, certainly. And there was the same disdainful look he had seen in the older man. Schmitt's son, no question about it. He had been aware that a son existed. Franz Schmitt - the seller of the cigarette case. He should have known that he might be around somewhere. Before he had time to curse his own foolishness, he turned at the sound of the older Schmitt, clambering out of the cave.

His father's murderer stood there, grinning, as he admired his son's handiwork. An amused look appeared in his eyes. It was the same look Malcolm's father had seen, the moment Schmitt wrote out the ridiculous receipt over thirty years before. The German spoke with the same mocking tone he had used on Harry Denham.

"I really think you ought to take a look at my humble collection for yourself, Mr Denham."

Schmitt gestured towards the cave.

"And what if I decline your kind offer?"

The effort of talking caused him to have a coughing fit.

"I think it would be for the best. I want you where you won't be able to

cause any more trouble, while I send my son to call the police.”

“Trouble?”

The one-word answer was all Malcolm could manage and he laughed, succumbing to another bout of coughing.

“Hand me your keys,” said Schmitt.

Franz pointed his pistol at Malcolm, illustrating he had no choice in the matter. Reluctantly, Malcolm got to his feet. His vision suddenly deserted him, and it took a few moments before it returned. He fumbled in his pocket for his keys and handed them over. He hadn’t the energy to wonder why Schmitt needed them. The thought of walking the few steps to the hole in the cave and climbing through seemed a Herculean task but, somehow, he manoeuvred his body through the small gap.

“Move to the rear of the cave and lie against the wall, Mr Denham. Rest yourself.”

Malcolm decided he had little choice but to obey. Besides, he was going to collapse any second anyway. Once he was settled, Hermann Schmitt’s smug face appeared through the hole. He was holding his son’s pistol.

“Did Mr Wilson ever tell your grandparents exactly how your father died?” asked Schmitt, as if he were making idle chit-chat.

“No,” was all Malcolm could manage to say. He was beyond playing games.

“Well, fortunately I am in a position to enlighten you. I shot him in the groin like a dog and left him to bleed to death, screaming in agony.”

Malcolm felt a force surge through his body. His pain was forgotten, and his legs shook, as he forced himself to stand. A shot rang out, as Schmitt fired, and a bullet struck him in the stomach. But the unknown force kept him moving forward and Malcolm was determined to pull Schmitt into the cave and break his neck with his bare hands.

Another deafening shot filled the cave. Malcolm knew that he had been hit in his torso again, somewhere. And this time it brought him to his knees. His whole world was nothing but pain now, and he prayed for a release. His vision was fading once more, but he managed to look up at the sound of rocks being placed into the mouth of the cave. He tried to focus and was rewarded with the sight of Schmitt and his son, carefully replacing the stones that had been removed, one by one.

“Sweet dreams, Mr Denham. We will leave you in peace.”

NINETEEN

“Go to the workshop and fetch whatever we need to cement these stones back into place.”

Schmitt gave the command as calmly as if he were ordering lunch. Franz stared, wide-eyed.

“Are we going to just leave him in there?”

“Unless you have a better idea.”

“But he’ll stink.”

“Good. Perhaps it might make you think twice before helping yourself to my possessions without my permission. Now go.”

Franz slouched off like a petulant child. After having dispatched Denham, effectively saving his father’s life, he had expected praise to be heaped upon him. But he should have known better. Gratitude was never high on Hermann Schmitt’s agenda.

But Franz was too elated to care. He had been terrified when Denham turned and fired his revolver. But, now that he had beaten the Englishman and come away unscathed, he was filled with a feeling of euphoria. He once heard his father and his friends discuss such feelings, when they shared old war stories, but now he knew exactly what they meant. He may never have been in the army, but now he had felt the taste of combat. Perhaps his father would begin to treat him with the respect he deserved.

When he returned with the items they needed, the two men began to seal the entrance to the cave. As they worked, Franz couldn’t contain himself any longer.

“Did I do well, sir?”

“Don’t fish for compliments, Franz. It is very demeaning. If you had shot our intruder in the back, you could have saved yourself a lot of trouble. You were lucky. Do I have to remind you that this man’s visit was a direct result of your careless behaviour? And we are not out of the woods yet. We do not know who else might know of his visit to our chateau. If we receive a call from the police, we will have to deny ever seeing him. I will fire the housekeeper. She is the only witness.”

“What about his car?”

“That is why I asked for his keys. When we have finished here, I will go and search it. Make sure the housekeeper is out of the way while I do.”

It took an hour to repair the wall, and they met in Franz's study after the older Schmitt had examined the car.

"As I suspected it is a hire car. There are also tickets for a day-return on the hovercraft from Dover to Calais. The man was probably trying to avoid undue interest by the customs people. When the police are notified of his disappearance, they are bound to discover that he travelled to France. I will return the car to Calais, perhaps even drop it back at the rental office, if I can. Hopefully, they will assume Denham returned it in a hurry."

"I can do that," said Franz, feeling a new-found confidence.

His father quickly demolished it.

"I will do it. That way, we'll avoid any stupid mistakes."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Dear boy, I couldn't care less."

TWENTY

Susan Denham didn't begin to worry until perhaps the third or fourth day. The oil company her husband worked for operated in every corner of the world, and she was used to him having to travel abroad at a moment's notice. But, even when sent off to the remotest of locations, he always found time to call and reassure her that everything was well. Sam was missing his father too, and his first words every day when he returned home from school were: "Has dad phoned?"

After the fifth day without hearing from Malcolm, she couldn't stand it any longer and decided to call his office. She spoke to Melanie, his secretary of more than eight years. Melanie and her husband had been to the Denham home the previous New Year, when the family decided to arrange an impromptu party.

"Are you sure he's working overseas, Susan? I was told he decided to use some holiday leave that was owed to him."

Susan's heart began to race. Her first thought was that Malcolm was having an affair. But she immediately felt ashamed for even considering it. They were still deeply in love, and Malcolm was a caring and attentive husband. And then her fleeting feelings of anger turned into fear. What had happened to him? Was he hurt? Or worse?

"Susan. Are you still there?"

The voice on the end of the line brought Susan back to the present.

"Yes, I'm sorry. I was just lost in thought."

"I hope I haven't spoken out of turn. If you'd like, I'll speak to Mr Anderson in personnel and get back to you."

"If you wouldn't mind, Melanie, that would be great."

Malcolm's secretary was as good as her word, and less than five minutes later the phone rang.

"I've checked with Mr Anderson, Susan, and he says Malcolm is on leave until the end of the week."

"Oh God."

"Is everything all right? Is there anything I can do?"

"No, don't worry, Melanie. I'm sure there's some simple explanation. You know what Malcolm's like. He can be so absent-minded sometimes."

"I'm sure you're right."

There was an awkward silence, while they both tacitly acknowledged the lie they'd just shared.

As soon as the conversation was over, Susan headed to her bedroom without really knowing why. Her eyes automatically settled on the doors to the wardrobe on the other side of the room. She walked over and brushed Malcolm's shoes aside, revealing the safe. Malcolm always carried the key, but they had a spare - just in case. If only she could remember where it was. She stared at the shoes she had pushed aside, and it prompted her to head for Malcolm's sock drawer, by the side of the bed. She rummaged inside and found the spare key resting at the bottom. Hurrying back to the safe, her worst fears were realised.

The revolver had gone.

TWENTY-ONE

Susan Denham hesitated before calling the police, but only for a moment. Had Malcolm taken the revolver because he was in some sort of trouble? If he was, then why hadn't he told her? He knew she loved him and would forgive him almost anything. But if he wasn't in trouble, why would he take his old gun? Protection? Suicide? To kill someone? She was totally in the dark and she pictured the man she loved, hurt and needing her help. So, she called the police. If she was doing the wrong thing, she decided that Malcolm couldn't blame her. If he didn't want the police involved, then he should have told her what he was up to.

Detective Inspector Turner tried to show concern and an eagerness to help, when Mrs Denham was finally led into his office. He promptly took the appropriate form from the department's large collection, and fed it into his typewriter, together with the required carbon copies. But he felt like telling the woman the facts of life. Her husband had simply decided he'd had enough and left her. He'd seen it before, dozens of times. All you had to do was look at the statistics. Perhaps the bloke had got hold of a false passport and bugged off abroad with a leggy blonde, like that politician who'd been in the news. He knew that was what he felt like doing sometimes, if only he could have got hold of a leggy blonde.

But Turner kept his reservations to himself and dutifully filled out the form, cursing later, after Mrs Denham had left, when he realised the carbon copy hadn't worked. In the end he was forced to write the second copy out by hand.

He started his investigation by calling round all the local hospitals, even though Mrs Denham had said she'd done so already. He'd made the mistake once before of believing a family member who claimed to have done some of the groundwork. When he'd instigated a county-wide search, only to find that the person they were looking for had checked in for an operation without telling anyone, his colleagues hadn't let him live it down.

So, when his enquiries to various hospitals brought no results, he felt justified in alerting major airports and seaports, particularly since Mr Denham had already been missing for several days. Knowing the way things generally worked, he was rather surprised to receive a positive result from the alert later that same day. The man had travelled on a day-return ticket from Dover to Calais four days before, but, according to the records of the company that ran

the hovercraft service, he had not made the return trip. As far as they knew, the man was still in France.

Upon hearing this, Turner's next order of business was to contact the relevant authorities in Calais. This time he had to wait two days before they got back to him, but he didn't mind because they'd clearly been very thorough. They had searched through their records and confirmed that a Mr Malcolm Denham arrived in Calais on the date in question. It was also discovered that the man had hired a car from a local firm. This had only been flagged up because the firm had made some enquiries, hoping to clear up a mystery. Apparently, the car Mr Denham hired had been returned to the company's car park without being formerly checked in. When Turner asked if they were sure the car had been used, he was told that the milometer indicated it had travelled nearly two hundred miles.

This left Detective Inspector Turner with a puzzle. If the facts were correct, then Mr Denham probably made a journey of approximately a hundred miles, then returned to Calais, left the car in a hurry, and promptly disappeared off the radar. Had something happened to the man? An accident perhaps? Turner realised he would have to contact hospitals in France - an altogether more daunting prospect. And what if the French medical fraternity had no knowledge of a Monsieur Denham? What then? Had the man simply run off with a *French* leggy blonde? Had he in fact driven the car or had someone else? And if so, why? The questions just kept piling up and Detective Inspector Turner was developing a headache.

He scribbled some notes in the thin file on his desk and popped it in his drawer. He would decide what to do tomorrow. His wife had promised him steak and chips tonight, and he was playing in the final of the local darts championship. With any luck, Mr Denham would turn up at the family home in a few days with a plausible explanation for his absence, and Turner could close the file and forget about it.

He wasn't to know that the file wouldn't be closed for a very long time.

TWENTY-TWO

When Susan Denham was asked by Turner if she could think of a reason why her husband had suddenly decided to travel to France without telling her, she said she had no idea. She was informed that Malcolm had apparently hired a car, in which he had travelled nearly two hundred miles before returning it. When the policeman left, she sat alone in the quiet of her home and processed what she had been told.

France.

As soon as Detective Inspector Turner had said the word, her mind had raced. Just before he'd left, Malcolm had shared with her the story of how his father had been murdered in France, during the war. And he'd told her about the man's prized possession, the Fabergé cigarette case, that had been stolen from him by his killer. The German officer had never been caught and she had been able to tell that the thought haunted her husband. Could his trip to France have possibly had anything to do with events from so long ago? Surely, she was letting her imagination run away with her.

Susan got up from her chair and made her way to the kitchen. There was a bottle of gin, sitting by the breadbox. She poured herself a large glass and drained it. Tears welled up in her eyes. All she wanted was to see Malcolm home, safe and sound, but it was clear the police were drawing a blank as to his whereabouts.

Should she tell them about the cigarette case from thirty years ago and about her father-in-law's death during the war? Could it possibly have any bearing on her husband's disappearance? Or would they simply laugh at her for her foolishness?

And that was when she was struck by another thought. What if Malcolm had gone after his father's killer? Did the fact that he hadn't returned mean that the murderer had killed him first? Would the police be able to find this man? Somehow, she didn't hold out much hope of that. Turner hadn't exactly inspired her with confidence.

And then there was Sam to consider. He was only ten years old, but she knew he would join the army as soon as he was old enough. He talked of nothing else. His father had brought him up on stories of war and glory and fighting. What would happen if she told the police of her suspicions and the whole sad story came out in the open? What would Sam do if he thought his

father and grandfather, his heroes, had been killed by one man?

No, she would keep her ridiculous imaginings to herself. Telling the police wouldn't bring Malcolm back. It would only open old wounds and cause the family, what was left of it, unnecessary pain. The tears came again and wouldn't stop. She just wanted Malcolm home, in her arms. Forget about the war and cigarette cases and brutal German officers. No good could come of it.

She poured herself another large glass of gin to draw a line under the matter. But her mind wouldn't rest, and there was one question she just couldn't let go.

Malcolm's father had been killed in northern France. She wondered how far the site of the murder might have been from the town of Calais.

A hundred miles, perhaps?

TWENTY-THREE

Susan Denham knew that her son was going to be a very different man from his father, even though he was eager to follow in the older man's footsteps and join the army. Malcolm had graduated from university with a degree in his back pocket before he joined the Royal Marines as an officer, whereas Sam took very little interest in his studies at school and was determined to leave and enlist at the earliest opportunity. Not that Sam didn't read. It was just that his choice of subject matter was somewhat limited. Unarmed combat, weaponry, survival skills - these were the areas of human knowledge Sam couldn't get enough of.

Physically too, there was a marked difference. Where Malcolm had been tall and lean - six feet four inches in his bare feet - Sam never quite broke the six-foot barrier and was more muscular and well built. And, unlike many teenagers, he wasn't prepared to take his athletic body for granted. Much to the surprise of his friends, he refused to take up smoking or even to try it, and he only drank alcohol when there was an opportunity to meet members of the opposite sex, to give him the courage to speak to them. Not that he needed to utilize sparkling conversation, because his rugged good looks invariably encouraged the prettiest girls to gravitate in his direction. The fact that he wasn't interested in having any kind of relationship only seemed to make him more attractive in the eyes of his female admirers.

If his mother had been asked to pinpoint the moment her only son started to get into trouble, she would have said it was around the time he'd become interested in a certain regiment in the British Army - the SAS. It had started the day he'd watched the news on television, showing live pictures of soldiers from the SAS storming the Iranian embassy to free hostages being held prisoner. When she asked him why he was so fascinated by the men in their balaclavas, he said it was their professionalism. They had clearly been trained to face danger head on, and they'd got the job done, picking out the terrorists and killing them on the spot.

Susan had never told her son about her suspicions concerning his father's disappearance. After all, that was all they were - suspicions. And, as the years passed, the mystery of Malcolm Denham's whereabouts was never solved. But sometimes she couldn't help wondering if she'd done the right thing, especially

during those moments when Sam asked if it had been his fault that his father had left.

She also suspected that the lack of a father-figure was what had led to her son's fall from grace. She was mortified the day the headmaster of his school had threatened to go to the police. When the details of Sam's misdeeds finally emerged, she was almost relieved that he was fast approaching the age when he could fulfil his ambition and join the army.

The headmaster had called Sam to his office, where the head of the physical education department - a large man who had once been an international rugby player - was waiting to administer the cane. But when his back was turned, Sam had reached down to his ankles and pulled the man's feet from under him. The ex-rugby player's face duly smashed into a cabinet, breaking both of his front teeth. By the time the headmaster had stood up to intervene, Sam had retrieved the fallen cane his PE teacher had dropped and struck the headmaster across the face, slicing his cheek and drawing blood.

In the end, the headmaster agreed not to involve the police, but Sam was expelled. Mrs Denham got the impression that he and the ex-rugby player wanted the whole incident swept under the carpet. Being overpowered by a schoolboy when trying to administer punishment would have been more than a little embarrassing, to say the least. Besides, corporal punishment in British schools was about to be outlawed, and the last thing the school needed was a heroic figure among the student population, acting as a beacon of resistance.

Sam's school days were reaching an end anyway, and the expulsion only succeeded in hurrying things along. At long last he was able to join the army, as he'd always wished, and he suddenly felt a huge sense of freedom. And when, a few years later, Sam successfully became a proud member of the SAS, he was in his element. While many of his fellow soldiers found the selection process too arduous to bear, he thrived on the hardship.

The only thing he lacked was a war to fight in. But good fortune was about to shine on him once more. Kuwait had been invaded and the Gulf War was about to begin.

TWENTY-FOUR

1990

When General Schwarzkopf gave his reasons for choosing the SAS to complete the task at hand, the assembled soldiers felt nothing but pride in their regiment.

The Iraqi leader, Saddam Hussain, had ordered his army to fire Scud Missiles into Israel, with the explicit aim of involving the Jewish nation in the conflict. His hope was that this would stir other middle eastern nations into supporting the Iraqi cause. And it nearly worked. The Israelis were champing at the bit, and it was only when the Commander-in-Chief assured them that the SAS was going to be given the mission of destroying the offending missiles, that they agreed to take a back seat, at least for the moment. Such was the regiment's reputation.

Sam was part of a group of eight men, deployed behind enemy lines in the Iraqi desert. They travelled light, using two jeeps, armed with their personal weapons and enough explosives to demolish any Scud Missile launchers threatening to cross their path. The mid-day heat was oppressive, so, during the day, they camped in what hollows or gorges they could find, hiding from prying eyes. Instead, they moved at night, under the cover of darkness. But now, instead of the heat, they had to contend with freezing temperatures. The intelligence bods, sitting on their comfortable camp beds back at base, had failed to realise how cold the night-time desert could get at that time of the year. But Sam had done his research, and he'd bought a set of thick woollen coats from some locals in Saudi Arabia before they'd set out. From that moment on, much to the annoyance of the officer in charge, many of the men deferred to Sam as the de facto soldier who knew what he was doing.

Sam's small band of men eventually managed to find one Scud Missile site during their stay in Iraq, and the officer decided he would join the demolitions man to destroy the target. The rest of the men remained on a small hill some distance away, hidden behind what rocks they could find. Sam estimated there were more than fifty Iraqi soldiers camped around the missile site, and he suggested holding off until the middle of the night, when the defenders would be at their lowest ebb. But the officer ignored his suggestion and he and the demolitions man headed off into the darkness. They never came back.

Sam and the rest of the men patiently waited for them until, without warning, all hell broke loose. Dozens of Iraqi soldiers charged towards their position and the men turned to Sam. Their transport was at least thirty minutes away and they wouldn't get to it in time. Sam made a calculated decision. The Iraqis, heading up the hill, were most likely conscripts, charging headlong, assuming there was safety in numbers.

“Let's take the fight to them.”

Sam had spoken the words so matter-of-fact, the rest of the men were unsure whether he was serious, until he ran forward and knelt, firing his weapon into the mass of men. His five comrades instinctively followed suit, and within minutes the Iraqis were retreating in disarray.

“I'll cover the rear. Head back to the jeeps.”

The men did as they were told and made it back unscathed. Sam joined them ten minutes later.

When it was all over, Sam now knew what those who'd seen combat meant, when they'd said a gunfight was better than sex. He had never felt more alive, and he and the rest of the men formed a bond that would never be broken. And he wanted more. He almost felt ashamed, when he found himself hoping that the war would last forever. He decided then and there – he would never quit the army.

But the war didn't last forever. And the day when he would leave the army was fast approaching.

TWENTY-FIVE

Before leaving for Iraq, Sam Denham had done something he had promised himself he would never do. He had started a relationship with a girl called Tanya from his home town. Perhaps the fact that she was the prettiest and sexiest girl he'd ever seen had had something to do with it. They had fun together and the sex was unbelievable. In the days before he left for Iraq, they rarely emerged from between the sheets. She said she was on the pill, but she got pregnant anyway. Perhaps she had been lying or careless. Or perhaps the pill couldn't cope with their incessant love-making.

Before he left, he learnt that he was soon to be the proud father of a baby girl. Tanya decided the child would be called Victoria. Or Vicki, for short. She thought the name sounded elegant. She liked elegance. She wanted to live in a large, elegant house in the leafy suburbs, and she wanted to throw dinner parties. She was aware it couldn't happen on the wages of a soldier and a part-time hairdresser, but things could change, she decided.

When Sam returned, he instantly fell in love with Vicki, the new girl in his life. As he stared at the helpless bundle in his arms, he secretly vowed to love and protect her for the rest of his life. He would always be there for her. His own father might have left him when he was nothing but a child, but he would never do that to his own pride and joy.

Sam set about doing most of the things Tanya asked of him. He bought the nicest house he could afford. A two-bedroom terraced house in an area of the town that was relatively safe to bring up a young child. It was small, but he decorated it to Tanya's exact specifications. But the one thing he would not do, no matter how much she begged him, was leave the army. And, for the first few years, she appeared to be satisfied.

When trouble started brewing in Kosovo, and it looked like British forces would become involved, Sam hoped to be a part of it. But Tanya wanted him to put his efforts into making a better life for his family.

It was a sunny day when he and Tanya had their hundredth argument about the life he had chosen. But this was the argument that would change their lives forever.

TWENTY-SIX

1997

The couple had decided to spend one of their precious afternoons together as a family at a garden centre out of town. Tanya liked to keep the garden looking pretty - as did Sam. It was good for Vicki to have somewhere nice outside to play. Vicki chose her favourite plants to go around the lawn and, because it was a nice day, they sat outside and had tea and cakes together. While they ate and drank, Vicki constantly hugged and kissed her father. Tanya smiled. Vicki had always worshipped him. But it only served to remind her of why she resented his life in the army. How could he leave them both to fend for themselves for so long?

“I don’t want you to go.”

Tanya had said the words the moment Sam had strapped Vicki into her child seat and got behind the wheel of their car. He didn’t even have to ask her what she meant. They’d had the same argument so many times before.

“Let’s not start this again, Tanya. Not now. We’ve had such a lovely day. Let’s not spoil it.”

“Me, spoil it?”

Sam had seen the same look on Tanya’s face a hundred times before. She was digging her heels in and wouldn’t be fobbed off. In a vain attempt to head off a full-blown confrontation, he glanced back at Vicki’s smiling face, hoping the thought of upsetting their daughter would deter her from continuing.

“Let’s wait until we get home,” said Sam, reaching for the ignition key.

“What difference will that make? You’ll just do what you want to do and leave us.”

Sam noticed Vicki’s ears prick up at this. She was getting to the age where she was starting to understand that her mother didn’t like daddy being a soldier. The thought that Tanya was making Vicki believe Sam was deserting her made him angry.

“I’m going wherever they send me,” he said as calmly as he could, holding back for Vicki’s sake.

“Even if Vicki and I don’t want you to go?”

Tanya had tears in her eyes and he looked back to see Vicki wide-eyed, not

fully understanding what was happening. He didn't know what to do. Tanya wasn't playing fair. The enclosed space of the car seemed to only make the whole thing worse. He thought he could hear every breath they took and even the sound of Tanya's tears, running down her cheek. The awkwardness only ended when Tanya suddenly undid her seat-belt, opened her door, and ran off.

Sam was taken completely by surprise. He got out of the car and called after her, but she kept on running. He wanted to go after her but knew he couldn't leave Vicki. His daughter looked so lost and vulnerable it almost broke his heart. So, he stayed by the car and watched Tanya disappear.

She had left the car park and was walking on the public road. The garden centre was on a nasty curve in the road and she walked on the left, facing away from traffic, relying on the drivers to avoid her.

Sam was spared from seeing what happened next. He heard the screeching of tyres and the terrible noise of metal on soft, delicate flesh. His heart came up into his mouth and he began to shake, more frightened than he'd ever been on any battlefield. In that brief instant, he knew.

Lives can be shattered in a fraction of a second.

TWENTY-SEVEN

It had been a year since the accident. It was midnight, and Sam was sitting on the sofa in the small lounge of his two-bedroom home, staring at his wife's empty wheelchair. He'd just carried her upstairs to bed and he was exhausted. He let out a four-letter word to fill the empty room.

“Fuck.”

There was no energy in the word. No venom. He merely said it out of habit, whenever he was alone. It helped to get him through the day.

He began to contemplate four-letter words. Fuck. Love. Hate. Care. He reached out for his daughter's dictionary, lying on the shelf beside him. Within the confines of his home, everything was in reach. Never more than a few steps away, he thought. Big houses were over-rated.

His daughter's dictionary was well used because she enjoyed reading. She had an unquenchable thirst for books. She could read books that children much older than her would struggle to cope with. She was intelligent and gifted. He was so proud. And she was his world.

He looked for the word 'love'. The dictionary offered some suggestions as to its meaning. Affection, adoration, fondness, devotion. He thought of his daughter. That sounded about right and summed up his feelings for her. But what about Tanya? He looked for other offerings. Passion, ardour. He had felt those once. The dictionary had more – worship, adore. Could he honestly say that was true?

He found 'hate'. He read more definitions – despise, abhor, detest, dislike. He thought about his life. Yes, he would certainly agree that 'dislike' was not too strong a word. Army life and the 'high' of pitting himself against the enemy were a distant memory. Now he had a new career, and that brought him to the next four-letter word.

Care – upkeep, maintain, watchfulness, concern, worry, anxiety. Sam nodded to himself. Vicki's dictionary was right on the money. Tanya required maintenance - she deserved nothing less. And Sam would provide whatever she needed – the maintenance, the upkeep, the watchfulness. But upkeep, day after day, cost money - there was nothing he could do about that. The worry and anxiety came for free, but he kept those to himself. For the sake of Tanya, but mostly for Vicki.

Fuck – no need to look that one up. He just needed the word to keep his

sanity. He used it now, over and over. Fuck his piece-of-shit house. Fuck his empty bank account. Fuck the credit card debt. Fuck the only bathroom, at the top of steep, back-breaking stairs. Fuck the steps leading to the front door. Fuck the fact that his mother was dying of cancer. And, most of all, fuck the fact that he felt powerless.

Tomorrow he would be visiting his mother, who required care of a different kind. Since her illness, she had been bed-bound and required professional care - twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week - paid for by the sale of the family home. And now she had been shipped off to hospital, probably for the last time.

Yet her mind was as sharp as ever, and tomorrow she would tell him a story. A story about a murdered prisoner of war and a son who sought revenge and failed. It was time for the grandson to make amends.

TWENTY-EIGHT

Sam made it to the hospital in under two hours - a record. He had stopped his off-roader from falling apart by sheer force of will, and it hadn't let him down. Visiting time was limited to two hours, and he had promised Tanya he would be home to cook her evening meal.

He was in time to feed his mother lunch, but when one of the nurses brought a plate of food from the kitchen, Susan shook her head.

"I'm not hungry, dear. Thank you."

"But you know what you've been told, Mrs Denham. The doctor has said it's very important you try to keep your strength up."

"I know," said Susan. "But I need to speak with my son."

"Well, you can still chat while you eat," said the nurse, refusing to take no for an answer.

"I'll try my best."

The nurse passed the lacklustre meal to Sam and left, giving him a beaming smile.

As soon as the nurse had gone, Susan nodded at the bedside table.

"Put that vile concoction over there."

Sam did so, trying not to breathe in the smell of the baked potato. He hadn't eaten, and he was hungry. Personally, he didn't think it looked too bad. He'd certainly had worse in the army.

"You're very unhappy, aren't you, Sam?"

His mother's words, coming as they did out of the blue, shocked him, and he was momentarily lost for a reply.

"What makes you say that?"

"I'm your mother, Sam. And a mother always knows. You haven't been happy for a long time."

Sam was taken aback. He thought he'd done a good job of hiding his feelings. Clearly, his mother's body might have failed her, but her mind didn't miss a trick.

"I've always been able to tell that you blame yourself for what happened to Tanya, but I've never understood why."

Susan stared at her son and it made him feel uncomfortable. She wanted an answer. He recalled how the doctors had told him she hadn't got long to live. He decided she deserved the truth, so he told her.

“I upset her, and she ran off into the road.”

“How did you upset her?”

His mother clearly wasn't going to let it go.

“She wanted me to leave the army, but I wouldn't.”

“But she got her way in the end, didn't she?”

“That's not fair.”

Susan wasn't used to her son admonishing her and she realised she must have overstepped the mark.

“No, you're right. I'm sorry. But she knew what you did when she married you. It was part of who you were. It's not as if you told her to run off into the road without looking where she was going.”

Sam gave her another look that said she was on thin ice. She decided to drop it and move on to what she really wanted to say.

“Isn't it a struggle, looking after Tanya and raising Vicki too?”

“Not as much of a struggle as living in a wheelchair.”

Susan could tell she'd put her son on the defensive, but she was determined to finish what she'd started.

“How about financially?”

“We get by.”

“Are you satisfied with that? Just getting by?”

Sam didn't know what his mother was trying to do. So far, she had only succeeded in putting him in a bad mood. He was beginning to regret having come to visit at all.

“I've told you before, I'm not having any money from you.”

“I'll be gone before it runs out,” she reminded him.

“And maybe you won't,” said Sam testily, unwilling to spar with her anymore.

“What about your grandfather's money?”

Sam just looked at her, utterly confused. Perhaps her mind wasn't in such great shape after all.

“You're not making any sense. What money? My grandfather was killed in the war when he was twenty years old. He didn't have any money.”

And that was when his mother told him everything that had been kept secret over the years. She told him about the stolen cigarette case. She told him about his grandfather's murder at the hands of Major Hermann Schmitt. And she told him about her suspicion that his father had gone looking for revenge, losing his life in the process.

Several times Sam tried to interrupt, but his mother shook her head and continued to share with him her remarkable secret. He couldn't help wondering if the doctors had pumped her full of drugs and scrambled her brain. The whole story was incredible. When she finally finished, over two hours had passed. Tanya wasn't going to be happy if he'd wasted his time listening to some foolish fairy tale.

But what if it were true? What if his father hadn't just deserted him? What if he and his grandfather had both been murdered by the same man? It was too incredible to take in. He had thousands of questions but chose one.

"If dad knew what happened to my grandfather, then why did he wait all that time to find his murderer?"

"He didn't know, until his mother told him what had happened, just before he disappeared," said Susan, shaking her head.

The desperation in her voice began to convince Sam that everything she had said was true.

"And somehow I think he found out where this Schmitt lived and went after him."

"In France?"

"Yes. Near where your grandfather was killed."

"But that's a bit of a coincidence, isn't it?"

"Maybe. Maybe not."

Sam didn't know what his mother was thinking but decided not to pursue it. Instead he tried a different question.

"If this is all true ..."

"It is, Sam, I swear it."

His mother's eyes were desperate now. He decided he needed to calm her down.

"I believe you. But why tell me now?"

Susan let her head fall back into her pillow. She licked her lips and asked for some water. Sam poured her a glass and, once she'd taken a sip, she answered his question.

"I've always played it safe in my life, and look where it's got me," she said, looking around the hospital ward, as if that were all the evidence she needed. "When you couldn't wait to go to war and risk your life, I thought you were crazy and reckless. But at least you had the courage to follow your dream."

Sam didn't know what to say. It was the first time he'd heard his mother

approve of his career choice. But she had more.

“And you were good, I know that. Your father was a good officer too, but he wasn’t a born fighter like you. God knows where you got it from.”

“Perhaps I got it from you?”

For the first time, Susan smiled, and for one glorious moment she looked young again. Somehow it made Sam happy and sad at the same time.

“I’m fighting to stay alive, I suppose. And, before I die, I need to know I did everything I could to make things right.”

“Make things right?”

“That was why I needed to know if you were happy, Sam. Do you think you can give your dying mother an honest answer now?”

Sam was about to lie again but couldn’t bring himself to do it.

“No, I’m not happy. But I’m going to keep going, for Vicki and Tanya.”

“Thank you for telling me the truth. I can see in your eyes that it was difficult.”

Sam nodded, hoping the inquisition was over, but his mother kept staring intently into his face and spoke again.

“Sam, what went through your mind when I told you your father was murdered?”

Susan grinned, as if she knew the answer already. He had no choice now but to speak the truth.

“I wanted to kill his murderer. If it’s all true, I think I might even go looking for him.”

He stared at his mother, trying to gauge her reaction, but he was dumbfounded by her reply.

“I *want* you to find him. He has avoided justice long enough.”

Now it was Sam’s turn to grin. The terminally-ill woman, sitting in her hospital bed and unable to move, was acting the part of an avenging widow, sending out a hit man to do her bidding. But, in this case, the hit man was her son. When he heard her next words, it was as if she had read his mind.

“God forgive me. Does that make me an awful mother? I could be sending you to your death.”

“I won’t die,” he assured her.

She ignored him and nodded to a set of drawers by her bed.

“Reach into the top drawer.”

Sam did as he was told, already suspecting what she was up to. He pulled out a box.

“Open it.”

He removed the lid and stared at his mother’s diamond necklace.

“Do you remember when your father gave me that? The receipt should be underneath.”

Sam searched and found it.

“Take it and sell it. It will pay for your trip to France. And for any expenses you might have.”

Sam let her words hang in the air, while he thought of what expenses she could have in mind.

“Are you sure?”

“I’ve never been surer. Besides, I don’t think I’ll be wearing it anytime soon. In a way, it’s kind of fitting. Your father paid for it, and you’ll be using it to find his murderer.”

“Thank you.”

Sam put the necklace and the receipt in his jacket pocket.

“Kiss me before you go.”

His mother always asked him to kiss her. It was one of her rituals.

“Make sure you eat your next meal,” he said, struggling to find the right words.

But his mother surprised him again.

“Are you really a good soldier, Sam?”

“Do I have to still be honest?”

“Of course.”

“No, I’m not good. I’m the best.”

“I’m glad.”

He leant over and kissed her on the cheek. Her hand reached up and touched his. He gripped it tenderly, knowing full well what a monumental effort it had been for her to make the gesture.

“Take care,” he said, heading for the door.

“Sam.”

When his mother called his name, he turned back to hear her final words.

“Make things right, Sam.”

He nodded, and she watched him walk away, hoping she hadn’t sent her own son to his death.

TWENTY-NINE

Having stayed so long at the hospital, Sam was forced to deal with the early evening traffic, but at least it gave him time to think.

He stopped at a garage for petrol and bought the largest bunch of flowers he could find, hoping it would go some way to placating Tanya when he finally arrived home. And he bought Vicki some sweets, just so she wouldn't feel left out. A few hours later, he was opening the front door to his home, armed with his peace offerings and a story he hoped would explain the trip to France he was already planning. He could hear someone working in the kitchen.

"I'm sorry."

Sam held out the flowers and was surprised to see Tanya's sister, stirring something in a saucepan.

"She's in the lounge, Sam," said Nicola, staring at the flowers. "Are they for me?"

Nicola smiled and winked. She and her husband had married only the year before, but it never seemed to stop her shamelessly flirting with her brother-in-law.

"They're for Tanya," said Sam, stating the obvious and pretending not to notice her low-cut top.

"Well, I hope they work. But, knowing Tanya, I wouldn't count on it. Still, that's what you get for marrying the wrong sister."

Sam quickly headed for the lounge, worried where the conversation might lead next.

"I'm sorry," said Sam again, finally addressing the right sister.

Tanya ignored the flowers.

"Where have you been?"

"To see my mother, like I told you."

"So, why are you so late?"

Sam realised that Tanya wasn't going to make it easy for him.

"She had something to tell me, and it took longer than expected."

"I hope for God's sake it was important, because I had to call Nicola to give me a hand. How do you think that made me feel?"

"I'll go and put these in some water and I'll explain everything."

Tanya didn't reply, and Sam asked about Vicki, as he made his way back to

the kitchen.

“She’s having tea at her friend’s house,” said Tanya without looking in his direction, clearly still upset.

As Sam entered the kitchen, he passed Nicola, holding a plate of spaghetti bolognese.

“This is for Tanya. Yours is still on the stove, lover.”

Nicola gently brushed his cheek with her hand, and he quickly thanked her before helping himself to his food. Tanya’s sister finally left, leaving the two of them to enjoy their meal.

“Can you put the TV on?” asked Tanya.

The kitchen was too small for a dining table, forcing the family to eat from trays in the lounge. It was possible to cut the atmosphere with a knife, but Sam decided not to resort to switching on the television. They needed to talk.

“My mother needs me to do something for her. That’s why I was late.”

“Do what?”

“She needs me to go to France.”

“France? You’ve got to be joking, right? We haven’t had a holiday since God knows when and you want to clear off to France? For how long?”

“I don’t know exactly, but a few days at least.”

Tanya threw her knife and fork at her plate.

“Look, if you’re taking some fancy woman away for a dirty weekend, why don’t you just say so and stop making up ridiculous stories. It’s just embarrassing.”

Sam tried not to lose his temper and took a deep breath.

“I’m not making up stories. Just let me tell you what my mother asked me to do and, if you don’t believe me, you can call the hospital and ask her yourself.”

That seemed to satisfy Tanya, but Sam realised that if she took him at his word, he would have to speak to his mother first.

“So, go on. I can’t wait,” said Tanya sarcastically.

Sam launched into his prepared story.

“Apparently, some distant cousin in France has died and left the family a considerable amount of money.”

This seemed to get Tanya’s attention and she sat up in her chair.

“My mother wants me to go out there to make sure it all goes smoothly.”

“Wait a minute,” said Tanya, now clearly taking an interest in the conversation. “Don’t lawyers usually take care of all that.”

“Yes, but because this relative lived in France, my mother wants me to go

there, just in case there are any problems. She thinks there might be some other relatives waiting in the wings, trying to put a spanner in the works.”

“How much money are we talking about exactly?”

“A lot.”

“What’s a lot?” asked Tanya, warming to the subject.

“Enough to set us up in a new life. Enough to get us a house that’s right for you.”

“But who’s going to look after me while you’re gone?”

“We’ll pay for a helper.”

“And where exactly would we get the money for that?”

Sam reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out his mother’s necklace.

“Your mother gave you that?” asked Tanya, knowing it was Susan’s most treasured possession.”

“That’s how serious she is about this. It could change our lives forever.”

Any worries Sam had about his wife refusing to let him go were swept aside with her next words.

“When do you leave?”

THIRTY

Sam was not looking forward to contacting his old friend. It wasn't that he didn't enjoy his company, it was just that ever since leaving the regiment, he'd deliberately cut off all contact with anyone who reminded him of happier days. But he'd kept tabs on those he'd formed a close bond with, like Jim Stabler, who was now a sergeant in the MPs – the military police.

Tanya was out with her sister, shopping and drinking – their favourite pastimes - and Vicki was at school. So, he picked up the phone, knowing he could say what he had to say without worrying about being overheard. He dialled the number of the barracks where his old pal was based and waited to be put through.

“Hi, is that Jim?”

There was a moment's hesitation on the other end of the line before he got a reply.

“Jesus, Sam, is that you? I can't believe it. How long has it been?”

As soon as he'd heard Sam's voice on the telephone, Stabler was immediately transported back to his time in Iraq. Happily, he'd come home without a scratch, but he knew that without Sam by his side things might have been very different.

“Too long, mate. I'm sorry I haven't got in touch before.”

“Hey, mate, it's a two-way street. We all get too busy and let things slide. I decided to give you some space ... you know, after what happened.”

Sam wasn't surprised to hear what his friend had to say. He was a good man – which only made him feel guiltier.

“How's Tanya. You both still happily married?”

“Yeah.”

There was a pause, as both men reflected on the lies they'd just told. Stabler had met Tanya and knew she and Sam were growing apart even before the accident.

“And Vicki?”

“She's doing great,” said Sam, more enthusiastically. “She's really bright. Keeps coming top of her class at school.”

“That's amazing. Makes you wonder who the real father is.”

“Fuck off.”

The men laughed, as if the years had melted away and they were still in

Iraq.

“And now you’re an MP?” said Sam, eager to get to the point of the call. “I seem to remember you telling me MPs were just a bunch of twats.”

“Yeah,” said Stabler. “I guess I must be a twat.”

“Hey, are you looking for an argument?”

The men shared another laugh, before Stabler put his friend out of his misery.

“Have you called to ask for a favour?”

“Is it that obvious?”

“I’m a policeman now, remember?”

“That’s why I called. I need some information.”

“Anything you want, mate, you know that.”

Sam felt a lump appear at the back of his throat. He’d forgotten how much he’d missed the comradery the army provided. You just didn’t get it on the streets back home.

“This will sound strange, but I’m looking for a man named Hermann Schmitt.”

“German, by any chance?”

“Yeah. Hey, you really are a policeman, aren’t you?”

“Don’t get too cocky. I can always change my mind.”

“Yeah, he’s German. Fought in World War Two. He was a major.”

“He’d be in his seventies now at least, wouldn’t he?”

“Yeah.”

“Is that all you’ve got? Just a name?”

“I know he fought in France against the British.”

“Didn’t the British fight mostly in northern France?”

“Yeah, if I remember my history right. The Yanks were further south.”

“Still, doesn’t narrow it down much. Schmitt is like Smith back here. I bet the name’s as common as muck.”

“The thing is, I reckon he lives in France now. Probably no more than an hour or two from Calais.”

Sam heard Stabler sigh.

“You’re right, mate, this does all sound a bit weird. What’s it all about?”

Sam launched into the lie he’d already prepared.

“My mother’s trying to track down some long-lost relative.”

“How is your mother?”

“Not doing too well, I’m afraid. She hasn’t got long.”

“Jesus, I’m sorry. I always liked your mum.”

“She liked you.”

Sam began to feel another bout of guilt. Was he using his dying mother to get his friend to help him? He shrugged the feeling off. Jim had already agreed to help. Besides, he was doing this for his mother. A lie, he knew, but with a kernel of truth.

“And this German is some kind of relative?”

“Not exactly. But my mother and I think he knows the relative. So, that’s where I need to start.”

“I’ll see what I can do. When do you need this?”

“I’ll be heading for France as soon as you find what I’m looking for.”

“You’re going to see this German personally?”

“Yeah. Can you help?”

“I’ll get right on it. We liaise with the local police all the time. I know a bloke down at the station who works as a glorified filing clerk. But he can find things out quicker than the chief constable. He seems to know everyone. Of course, France is a little out of our jurisdiction, but hopefully I’ll get back to you later today.”

“That’s fantastic, mate. I owe you one.”

“No, you don’t. I’d probably be lying dead in the Iraqi desert if it weren’t for you, so this is nothing.”

“You’re exaggerating, but I still appreciate it.”

“Hell, I’d come along with you, if I weren’t stuck behind this fucking desk. It’d be like old times.”

Sam was almost tempted to persuade his mate to take some leave and join him. Perhaps he might need a wingman. But he knew he had to deal with whatever was waiting for him in France alone.

“Instead of contacting me, could I call you instead?” asked Sam.

“Sure, if you’d like. I’ll be in the office until nine. Better phone just before I leave. That way, my friend at the cop shop is more likely to have got back to me.”

“Cheers, mate. Speak to you then.”

Sam put down the phone and walked into the kitchen to put on the kettle. Next to it lay a velvet cloth, containing a pretty diamond necklace. It was time to sort out his expedition funds.

THIRTY-ONE

Sam headed into town and sought out the most respectable-looking jewellery shop he could find. When he presented the necklace to the girl behind the counter, together with the receipt, saying he was looking for a buyer, she went to the rear of the shop to find the manager. A well-dressed man in his late fifties approached the counter, smiling warmly, while the girl stood a discreet distance away, watching the proceedings.

“My assistant tells me you have a necklace you are looking to sell,” said the man, rubbing a hand through his well-groomed hair.

“Yes,” said Sam, opening the velvet cloth to reveal the necklace in all its glory. “It belongs to my mother, but she’s too ill to sell it herself. She’s asked me to get the best price I can.”

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear your mother’s ill, sir.”

“Thank you,” was all Sam could think of to say.

“Well, let’s take a look.”

The man produced a small magnifier from his jacket pocket and examined the necklace.

“Hmm. Well, the diamonds are certainly of an excellent quality. And the gold is 24 carat, I believe.”

“That’s good, right?” said Sam, wishing he’d had time to do a little research.

“Very good, yes.”

“Would you be interested in buying it?”

The man was still smiling.

“Very much so, yes. I’d have no problem at all selling this. Of course, I would need to make a little profit ... for the shop,” he added.

“How much would you be prepared to give me for the necklace?”

The man searched the spotless glass counter for a notepad. He reached over and slid it towards him, before writing a figure down. Methodically, he turned to notepad around, so that Sam could read the number. Why he couldn’t just say the amount, Sam didn’t know. Perhaps it was some form of jeweller’s etiquette.

Sam tried not to show his surprise. The amount was far higher than he had expected. He had to suppress a smile.

“In your opinion, would you say that is a good price?” said Sam, realising

he was asking the wrong person.

“Well, I suppose that’s not for me to say, sir. I’ve been in this business for many years now, and I would certainly say it’s a fair price. But you’re more than welcome to try elsewhere if you think you can achieve a better offer.”

Sam didn’t have the time. He needed to trust the man in the well-tailored suit.

“No, that won’t be necessary, Mr...?”

“Mr Selby, sir. George Selby.”

“And your name, sir? We will need to issue you a cheque.”

“I was hoping for cash.”

“It’s rather a lot of money, sir. We don’t keep that sort of amount in the shop. But I can pay some in cash, if that would be agreeable. The high street banks are only a stone’s throw away. You could pay the cheque in as soon as you leave. It should only take three days to clear.”

Three days, thought Sam. At least that would give him time to sort out everything for his trip. As he mulled it over, the manager took it as a sign that Sam didn’t think the cheque would clear. He assumed the athletic customer on the other side of the counter was a military man. He just had the look.

“I hope you won’t take offence, sir, but I don’t think you’re the sort of man I would dare cheat out of such a large sum of money. At my age, I value my health. I still have all my own teeth and I would certainly like to keep it that way.”

The man was still smiling, and Sam grinned.

“It’s a pleasure doing business with you, Mr Selby. A cheque will be fine. And I’m sure you’ll be able to hold on to your teeth.”

As Sam headed for the bank, he calculated that with his new windfall he would be able to pay off all his credit card debt and his overdraft. And he would still be left with more than enough for travel expenses. He would set plenty aside to pay for Tanya’s care, although he would pay that directly, leaving a more limited budget in the bank. He knew Tanya’s weaknesses all too well. She was just as likely to decide shopping for clothes was more important than paying for a nurse.

The off-roader would need a service, but he could do that himself, now that he could afford the parts. As for accommodation, he planned to stay in cheap

hotels, but he would buy some camping gear, just in case.

That night, he told Tanya he'd bumped into an old friend in town and was meeting him at the pub for a quick drink. He wouldn't be long. As expected, Tanya didn't take it well, but she tried to be on her best behaviour, now that an inheritance appeared to be on the cards.

Sam headed for his local and ordered a pint so that Tanya would be able to smell the alcohol on his breath when he returned. He wasn't going to be long, which he hoped would go down well with his wife. All he needed was a phone and some privacy. He knew there was a payphone right outside the pub. He downed his drink, made his way to the phone, and called his friend in the military police.

"I think I might have found what you're looking for," said Stabler without waiting to be asked, clearly pleased to have come through for his friend.

"Great stuff. What have you got?"

"There's a village near Rouen, about the right distance from Calais. It has its own chateau. That's a castle, right?"

"I didn't know you were bilingual."

"Fluent, mate," said Stabler, refusing to take the bait.

"What about it?"

"Well, it looks like someone's playing happy families over there ... three generations, all living in the same place."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, according to French records, Chateau Blanc is occupied by the Schmitt family. The son, the father and the grandfather – Anton Schmitt, Franz Schmitt, and one Hermann Schmitt, who happens to be seventy-four years of age and served in the German army during the war. He held the rank of major. Apparently, he was billeted at the chateau when the Germans occupied the country, and now he lives there. Fucking poor taste, if you ask me. I bet the locals aren't too chuffed ... especially the ones who still remember the bad old days."

"Jim, this is brilliant stuff. I can't thank you enough."

"I told you, there's no need. The boys from the regiment have to stick together. When do you leave?"

"In a few days."

"Good, that'll give me time to mail you all the info. Unless you'd like me to bring it over myself. I could be there in a couple of hours."

"No, don't worry. Post it. That'll be fine."

Sam hoped he hadn't been too quick to reject the idea of a visit. In truth, he was ashamed of the way he existed. He didn't want Stabler to see how his life had taken a nose dive. Still, that was all about to change.

"But let's meet up when I get back," said Sam, hoping to repair any damage done. "I'd love you to meet Vicki. At least she'll learn not every bloke looks good in uniform."

"Good one. Anyway, let me know how it all turns out."

"Sure. And, mate ... thanks again."

"No sweat."

Sam left the phone box and headed home, hoping Tanya would be pleased with his return, earlier than expected.

But he didn't hold out much hope.

THIRTY-TWO

At thirty years of age, Anton Schmitt exuded strength and confidence, and his grandfather had always instilled in him the importance of both traits if he wished to achieve his goals. Not that he had many. Unlike his father, he had not been expected to work for the family business or to manage the chateau. He was a man of privilege and he enjoyed it, because it left him free to indulge in his two hobbies – alcohol and women. Not that he had expensive taste in either. He shunned the French wine his father had a taste for in favour of German lager. He had his favourite brand imported in large kegs, from which he drank copious amounts daily. And, being relatively young, his body hadn't succumbed to a belly just yet.

In fact, he used much of the free time with which he was blessed to work out in the gym he'd had created within the chateau. He was eager to maintain his muscular physique so that he could pursue his second hobby – women. He had a penchant for large-breasted, sexy women from poor backgrounds, who appreciated the cash he was willing to throw in their direction. On occasion, he visited the red-light district in Paris, but generally he preferred one-night stands with women who didn't feel the need to charge. Often those he chased were so drunk on the alcohol with which they had been plied, they hardly knew what they were doing. And the more casual sex he had, the harder he found it to go without. It was an addiction that wouldn't end well.

His father and grandfather turned a blind eye to his predilections when he agreed to marry someone who would at least give him an air of respectability. The unfortunate woman chosen to fill the role was Alice Dubois, the daughter of a doctor and a university professor from Rouen. She was neither large-breasted nor poor, but Anton pursued her ruthlessly. It was what his grandfather wanted, and since he was the one who sponsored his lavish lifestyle, he decided to put his baser desires aside for once.

Not that the task was distasteful. Alice Dubois might have had a slim and pert body, instead of being voluptuous and well-rounded, but she was exquisitely beautiful. No one could deny that. Her strong cheek bones, perfect lips and flawless skin were impressive in and of themselves, but they were accompanied by lustrous auburn hair and hazel-coloured eyes that mesmerised whoever had the good fortune to gaze at them

It had been a mystery to her parents that their daughter ever contemplated

dating a man like Anton. He may have been wealthy and lived in a large chateau, but they thought his charming veneer hid a coarse nature, and they found his use of money to try and impress their daughter to be uncouth and crass. Her father made the mistake of mentioning the fact that Anton's grandfather had been part of the German army of occupation during the war. Indeed, there had been rumours that he had mistreated French citizens and had ordered the execution of resistance fighters. Only an arrogant man, he said, would dream of living in a country he had once invaded.

But her father's misgivings only succeeded in driving Alice into the arms of the charming Anton. Her father was being xenophobic, she said, and was making the mistake of blaming the sins of the grandfather on the grandson. A ridiculous position for an educated man to take, she told him.

When Anton proposed on the banks of the River Seine in Paris, Alice accepted. Anton was greatly relieved, because the strain of being on his best behaviour was taking its toll. Now all he had to do was throw money at an expensive wedding and he could relax, happy in the knowledge that he had fulfilled his grandfather's wishes and married someone who would be a credit to the family.

After the wedding of Mr and Mrs Anton Schmitt, the groom's enchanting façade soon began to fall apart, and Alice realised she had made the most dreadful decision of her life. Naturally, Anton was eager to return to his former ways. In fact, he discovered that his recent abstention from casual sex had only succeeded in heightening his passion. He felt an almost animalistic instinct to satisfy his desires and he saw no need to restrain himself.

It was only later, after he had committed murder, that he wished he had.

THIRTY-THREE

Anton hired the housekeeper's assistant without the permission of his father. But when Franz complained about the high wage Anton had offered to a girl so young and inexperienced, Hermann Schmitt sided with Anton. Although Franz was supposedly the manager of the estate, he knew full well that his father had the final say. He was the one, he constantly reminded his son, that had purchased the chateau in the first place. And Hermann Schmitt enjoyed ignoring his son's opinions. It served to remind his weak offspring how disappointed he was in him. Besides, just one look at the eighteen-year-old from the village, whom Anton had chosen to employ, told the proud grandfather all he needed to know. The girl's housekeeping skills were not what she was being paid for.

The seventy-four-year-old Schmitt had never been faithful to his wife, even in their first year of marriage, and he knew that Anton was a chip off the old block. When he spotted Adele on a step-ladder in the dining room, cleaning a chandelier, he had to admire his grandson's taste. She was wearing a uniform of sorts, with a short skirt, no doubt bought for her by her new employer. As he continued to make his way to his study, he wondered if he might be able to convince the young woman of the benefits of having an affair with an older man. If Anton ever tired of her, it would be worth bearing in mind.

If he'd only known, his grandson was not sharing a bed with the newest addition to the household staff. Anton had spotted the pretty girl with the wonderful curves at a café in the village, and she had been accompanied by her boyfriend, with whom she was clearly besotted. But, despite being more than ten years older than the object of his desire, Anton knew he had to have her. And, having experienced a life of pure indulgence thus far, what Anton wanted Anton got.

So, he had offered the young Adele a job at the chateau, and the money the wealthy German had put on the table was just too good to turn down. The teenager never suspected Anton's real intentions. The man had made the offer in front of her boyfriend and, besides, he was a grown man with a beautiful wife. What was there to suspect?

When Anton suggested to his wife that she should spend the day in Rouen, to catch up with old friends, Alice was more than a little surprised. Only the other week, when she had made the same suggestion herself, her husband had

flown into a rage, telling her she needed to grow up and put her old life behind her. However, she didn't argue the point. Their relationship had deteriorated to such an extent, she jumped at any opportunity to be apart from him.

Anton's father and grandfather had already left the chateau for a business trip, together with their wives, leaving only the gardener and the housekeeper in the way. When Anton suddenly offered the couple a day off on full pay, they were easily persuaded, and they knew better than to question the young man's motives. They had witnessed his regular bouts of temper first hand. When the housekeeper asked if she should tell Adele about this unexpected piece of good news, Anton assured her that he would do so himself.

Once he was sure that he and Adele were the only two people left in the chateau, he sought her out, and found her dusting the dressing table in his bedroom suite. The youngster failed to notice him, loitering by the door. He used the opportunity to ogle her unashamedly, admiring her thick, but shapely legs, and the way her large breasts jiggled, as she worked her duster across the table's surface. Eventually Adele turned around, preparing to move on to her next chore. When she saw Anton, standing there, she let out a yelp.

"Oh, my goodness, sir, you startled me."

"I was just admiring your workmanship. You're very talented."

"Thank you. Well, I better get on and start cleaning your father's room."

Despite only having been employed at the chateau a few weeks, Adele was already very wary of the younger Schmitt. It wasn't the first time she had caught him watching her, and she found the way he leered more than a little disturbing.

"There's plenty of time for that," said Anton. "You see, I feel it's the duty of a good employer to get to know his staff personally, and we haven't had much of a chance to chat. For instance, how's that boyfriend of yours?"

"He's fine," said Adele warily.

"What does he do? For a living, I mean."

"He's a student."

"Oh, that's a shame. A pretty girl like you deserves spoiling."

"He spoils me in other ways."

"Does he?"

Adele was quickly becoming very nervous. The man was acting more strangely than usual, and she could tell he'd been drinking. She wondered if the housekeeper or Mrs Schmitt were within shouting distance. She made to leave the room, but Anton blocked her way.

“Could you let me past, please.”

Anton didn't answer and rubbed his chin, as if he were thinking.

“Adele, before you go, would you mind straightening the bed.”

“But I've just made it.”

“Yes, but you know how particular my wife is. She complained about the way the sheets weren't tucked in properly only the other day.”

Adele knew he was talking nonsense. Mrs Schmitt was a lovely woman, and the two of them had even become friends. But Adele did as she was told and walked over to the bed to see what could be done. Anton followed behind her.

It was just as she had reached the foot of the bed, that she felt the man's hands on her shoulders. With surprising strength, he turned her round so that they were facing one another and pressed his lips against hers. She struggled to get away, and when he held her head in his hands, she lashed out with her foot, catching him on the shin.

The pain she caused seemed to trigger something in her attacker, and Anton growled like an animal. He pushed her on to the bed and pinned her arms down, while he used his legs to try and force hers apart. But Adele was young and strong, and she managed to keep her legs firmly together.

To Adele it felt as though the struggle would never end, and she used the opportunity to cry out for help. The man on top of her let out a laugh and she feared the worst - he knew they were alone. He tried to kiss her again, but when he drew near she bit his nose, causing him to cry out again.

Anton roared at her and, when she recoiled, he turned her over on to her front before she knew what was happening. He brought her right arm behind her back and wrenched her wrist up as high as it would go. The pain was excruciating, causing her to scream. She began to sob.

“If you keep struggling, I'll break it, do you hear me?”

Anton yanked Adele's wrist another inch up behind her back to make his point. She cried out even louder.

She felt his other hand reach down under her skirt. He caressed her buttocks, before pulling her pants down around her thighs. Adele hoped he would release her, to remove them completely. If he did she would turn and kick him where it hurt. When she was finished with him, he wouldn't want to even look at another woman. But he didn't let her go.

Now she could hear his free hand, struggling to undo his trousers. When he tried to force her legs open for a second time, she still resisted, but he twisted

her arm again, and she had no choice but to give in. She hoped her underwear would stop him, but he brought his hand round her waist and forced her to raise her backside.

When he entered her, she begged him to stop, but to no avail. After only a few thrusts, he came inside her. She was disgusted, but also relieved that the terrible nightmare would soon be over. But his orgasm seemed to continue forever, and he growled like an animal. She felt his dead weight on her back, when he finally relaxed, but he kept her arm firmly twisted behind her back.

Adele had long since given up struggling, and the man who had just raped her seemed to sense it. He climbed off the bed, and she tried to move her arm, so she could sit up. But the pain was so bad that at first she couldn't move. Eventually, she managed to roll over on to her back. Anton was standing, looking down at her and grinning. The sight disgusted her. Now that it was over, she felt nothing but rage. She would tell the police and the bastard would go to prison for what he'd done.

“Don't look at me like that, young lady. What did you expect, walking around with a body like that? I'm only flesh and blood.”

“You fucking bastard!”

“I'm sure you're on the pill, and I'll pay you to make up for it, don't worry. I'll pay you a lot and you can treat yourself to something nice.”

It was only then that she realised his trousers were still round his ankles. He looked down too.

“Like what you see? Perhaps you can get me interested again.”

To her horror, he climbed on the bed, and brought his groin up to her face, until he was inches from her lips. She looked up into his eyes and smiled. Anton was overjoyed at her response and smiled back, nodding enthusiastically.

Adele opened her mouth and reached up. But, at the last minute, she lunged forward and took one of his testicles into her mouth, biting down as hard as she could.

The high-pitched scream that emanated from the back of the man's throat didn't seem human. When she released him, he instinctively brought his hands down in a vain attempt to nurse his injury. In that moment, Adele leapt off the bed and charged for the door.

Despite the blinding pain that threatened to engulf him, Anton charged after her. But Adele was too fast for him, and she'd reached the landing before he caught up with her. As she approached the marble staircase, he punched her in

the kidneys, and she tumbled down the stairs, almost reaching the bottom.

Anton continued headlong after her, preparing to lay into her once again and teach her a lesson. But when he finally reached her, she lay inert, sprawled upside down, staring wide-eyed at the ceiling. Her neck seemed to be pointing in an unnatural direction and blood trickled from the corner of her mouth.

Anton stood there, listening to the sound of his own breathing. He looked down at the front of his trousers, where a bloody patch was forming. Now that it was all over, the pain came over him in waves, and for a moment he thought he might faint. He stared at the blood with fear in his eyes, and he glanced over at the lifeless body of the girl who had tried to take his manhood. He spat on the marble step, inches from her face, and yelled.

“Bitch!”

THIRTY-FOUR

Anton remained on the staircase, surveying the carnage around him, and he briefly experienced a feeling that he had been spared up until that defining moment in his life – blind panic. It lasted all of ten seconds, but then he managed to calm himself, and thought back to the stories his grandfather had shared with him of his time during the war, when he had been forced to deal with whatever was thrown at him. He recalled the older man's words when he had thumped his fist on the table, to emphasise the importance of what he was telling his young listener.

“In times of stress, do not waste your energies on useless emotions. Instead you must act! Yes, formulate a plan of action, if you have the time, but, once that is done, you must act and carry out that plan, methodically and meticulously. Show no weakness, and success in life will be assured.”

Anton looked at his watch. He had several hours before his wife would return from Rouen. Time enough to make ‘a plan of action’ and carry it out – methodically and meticulously.

His initial instinct was to take care of the body, but the pain in his groin threatened to overwhelm him. Bile collected at the back of his throat and he thought he might vomit at any moment. Therefore, the first order of business was to tend to his injuries as best he could.

He returned to his bedroom suite and headed for the bathroom. When he looked in the mirror above the sink, the first thing he noticed was the bite mark on his nose. He was in so much pain below his waist, that he had completely forgotten about the injury to his face. But it was superficial and would have to wait, at least for the moment.

He leant on the edge of the bath and gently lowered his trousers. His scrotum was torn in several places but, much to his relief, his right testicle still seemed to be attached to his body. In the end, there was very little he could do to repair the damage. He tried bathing the wound, but it only succeeded in sending a fresh wave of pain through his body. Even the slightest movement was agony. He spotted a jar of cotton wool on a shelf in the corner that belonged to his wife. He emptied the jar, and packed the contents inside his underwear, hoping it would offer him some protection as he moved around.

Item two on his agenda was the removal and disposal of the body. A variety of solutions presented themselves and he forced himself to consider

each in turn before making his decision. Weighing the body down and dropping it in the reservoir, half an hour away by car, was one. Too complicated, he decided. Burying it in the forest that bordered the grounds of the chateau was another. But there wasn't enough time to dig a deep enough hole, and no guarantee that the body wouldn't be discovered. Besides, he wasn't sure he was up to hours of hard labour, what with his wounded groin.

And then he remembered the cave his father and grandfather used to hide their ill-gotten gains. But he immediately rejected the idea because the body would be discovered the next time either of them decided to delve into their treasure trove. He could have almost cried with frustration.

But then he punched the air.

“Of course!”

He remembered a second cave, still in the moat, but at the rear of the chateau. It was much smaller than the one his grandfather had used to hide his trinkets, but certainly large enough to hide a body.

He made his way to one of the outbuildings on the other side of the courtyard. He tried to run, but soon realised that was out of the question. However, he found that if he walked, keeping his legs apart in an unnatural waddle, he could move without too much additional discomfort. Inside the building was a small trailer the family used to carry logs from the forest. He emptied it and wheeled it up to the chateau. There were six steps leading to the main doors, but he carefully pulled the trailer up, one step at a time. Once inside, he loaded the body on to his newly-acquired mode of transport.

It took him over two hours to wheel the body to the mouth of the cave, open the bricked-up entrance, place the body inside, and re-seal it. All the while, he'd kept looking at his watch and listening out for the sound of his wife's car, all too aware of the mess waiting inside.

But his luck held, and he continued with his plan undisturbed. He washed down the marble stairs of any blood, removed the blood-stained sheets from the bed, taking them to an outbuilding to burn later, and cleaned the bathroom where he had tended to his injury.

After putting a plaster on his nose to hide the unsightly bite mark, he left a note for his wife, saying that he had suddenly been called to Paris on family business. He didn't care whether she believed him or not and knew full well that she would welcome his absence in any event. As it happened, the note was partly true. He was going to Paris, but not on family business. He needed to see a medical student he'd once shared a room with at university. He had the

feeling that the injury to his testicle was not the sort of thing you took to the family doctor. If his old roommate asked any awkward questions, he would blame the injury on his clumsy wife.

Hopefully, he had just got away with murder – methodically and meticulously.

THIRTY-FIVE

Alice was pleased that she had managed to get her favourite table in the garden of the café. It was in the shade and it was already a warm summer's day, even though it was only mid-morning. Also, it was set apart from the other tables and she needed time to think.

It had been nearly two months since the disappearance of Adele, but Alice couldn't help worrying about her. Despite the age difference, they had become good friends, and she had enjoyed her sense of humour and cheerful spirit. After all, there was precious little of that on offer in the chateau. Alice's friends had often remarked how wonderful it must have been to live in a large castle. But, with three miserable generations of the Schmitt family occupying the place, it wasn't large enough as far as Alice was concerned.

If Adele's disappearance hadn't been such a serious matter, she would have rather enjoyed the embarrassment of the family, when they were forced to admit the French police into the sanctuary of their home. The first time a detective visited, she listened with interest when Anton explained that he had given the staff the day off on the day Adele vanished. She couldn't help remembering that it was also the day he had practically insisted she visit her friends in Rouen. A generous gesture that had struck her as totally out of character at the time.

She had caught her husband leering lasciviously at the young Adele on more than one occasion, and her first thought had been that he'd somehow frightened the poor girl off. But she quickly realised that made no sense at all. Adele was still living with her parents – where would she have gone? Besides, if she was uncomfortable around Anton, she could have simply quit her job.

The boyfriend had come under suspicion for a while. It was his habit to meet up with Adele on her way home from the chateau when she finished work. But on that day, she failed to meet him at their usual spot, on the edge of the village, and he went straight to her home, thinking he might have missed her somehow. Her parents didn't become worried until later that evening, when she had still failed to return and hadn't telephoned to say where she was.

From what Alice could make out at the time, the detective in charge of the case was more than willing to put the girl's disappearance down to some sort of falling out within the family. The rebellious teenager had probably

absconded to the capital in search of bright lights and excitement. It happened all the time. But, eventually, under pressure from Adele's parents, the police returned to the chateau when it appeared that Anton might well have been one of the last people to see the girl alive.

Alice still remembered the undisguised anger in Hermann Schmitt's face, when Franz agreed to let the police search the chateau without a warrant. The family had nothing to hide, he had insisted. And, as far as the police were concerned, it appeared that he was right. They could find nothing that would indicate Adele had met with foul play at her place of work and found no trace of the girl's presence in the Schmitt family home.

So, why did she still have the awful feeling that her husband could have had something to do with Adele's disappearance? If the police were satisfied that he was innocent of any wrongdoing, then why wasn't she? Dark thoughts began to form in her fevered imagination and she shook her head to suppress them. Thank goodness I'm alone and no one can see me, thought Alice, and she let her eyes wander around the garden to confirm there were no witnesses to her erratic behaviour.

And that was when she saw the handsome stranger at another table look away, pretending he hadn't seen her.

THIRTY-SIX

Sam was feeling guilty for the second time in as many days. Initially, it had hit him as soon as he set off for France. For the first time in years he felt alive. He was alone, on the road, with money in his back pocket and a mission to complete. It was the closest he'd got to his old life in the army in years. But, he reminded himself, he'd left his family behind - abandoned them to fend for themselves. Something he had promised he would never do.

Despite his misgivings he'd pressed on, heading for the ferry at Dover. The future happiness of his family was the reason he was going to France, he reminded himself. If his mission was a success, he would take back the fortune that had been stolen from his grandfather. And he would return home in a position to give his wife and daughter the kind of life they deserved.

But now he was feeling guilty for a far less noble reason. He had finally arrived in the village where Hermann Schmitt's chateau was supposed to be located, and he had stopped at the only café to quench his thirst and get his bearings. But instead of concentrating on the job in hand, he was allowing himself to be distracted by the sight of an attractive woman. As he reached for his cup, he noticed his wedding ring, glinting in the sunshine. He was spoken for. The problem was, he thought, as he glanced over for a second time, that didn't stop her being the most beautiful woman he had ever seen in his life.

While he admired her, the woman suddenly shook her head for some inexplicable reason and looked up, noticing him for the first time. There was an awkward moment as he turned away and pretended to be reading a newspaper a previous diner had left on his table. He couldn't help feeling foolish because the paper was in French and he couldn't understand a word.

The moment passed when a young boy of about eight years of age emerged from the café and fell, cutting his knee. He got up and ran towards the pretty woman. She hugged him and set about examining his injury. Shortly afterwards, the owner of the café came out to see what all the noise was about.

The man headed towards the boy and let out a laugh. He and the woman proceeded to conduct an animated conversation, but Sam could only make out the occasional word. From what little he could gather, he guessed that the boy was the owner's son and the man was feigning disappointment that his offspring had gone to the woman for help. Sam no longer bothered trying to hide his interest, and he admired the way she hugged the boy. Despite the

language barrier, it told him that here was a kind and caring soul.

Once the woman had retrieved a plaster from her handbag and applied it to the offending knee, the lad seemed to be satisfied that his injury no longer warranted the howls he'd treated the customers of the café to moments before. Now that the owner no longer had to worry about his son, Sam got up from his chair so that he could pay for his drink.

It was then, just as the conversation between the woman and the owner was coming to an end, that he overheard something that stopped him in his tracks. Perhaps he had imagined it, but he could have sworn that he'd recognised the name 'Schmitt'. His French was so poor, he was forced to admit that he might have been mistaken, but he decided it might be too good an opportunity to miss. Without giving himself time to change his mind, he walked over to the woman's table.

"Pardonez-moi, madam. Parlez-vous Anglais?"

"Yes, I do. You're English?"

"How could you tell?" asked Sam, smiling warmly.

Alice looked the handsome man up and down. He was wearing a tight tee-shirt that showed off his athletic torso. One of his bare, muscular arms sported a tattoo of a dagger. His hair was cut short, and he wore denim jeans and worn, comfortable trainers.

"Lucky guess," said Alice, returning the smile.

"Are you from around here?"

"Yes, why?"

"I was wondering if you might be able to help me. I'm looking for a chateau."

Sam thought he saw a reaction when he'd said the word 'chateau'. A slight widening of the pretty eyes - the sensual lips parting, to reveal perfectly white, flawless teeth. She quickly recovered.

"Any particular one. I believe France has quite a few."

Sam smiled again. He decided it was easy to smile in her company. He felt like he'd known her for years. He already knew so much about her. She was kind and witty and incredibly beautiful. Sam enjoyed looking into her eyes so much, he wanted the moment to last forever.

"The chateau I'm looking for is somewhere nearby, I think. It's called Chateau Blanc. I presume it's white."

"And you said you didn't speak French," said Alice, giving him a mischievous grin.

Sam couldn't help laughing again.

"I'm sorry, I lied," said Sam, happy to share the joke. "Actually, I probably know at least a dozen French words. 'Blanc' is one of them. Impressed?"

"Very. And you're right, it is white, when it's clean. It's made from a chalky type of rock."

"So, you do know where it is then?"

"I hope so. I live there."

Sam pretended to be surprised, although it was what he had suspected when he'd heard the name 'Schmitt'. But now he was left with a problem. He would have to explain his interest in the chateau.

"Really?" said Sam, acting taken aback. "It's not open to the public then?"

"Why? Are you interested in eighteenth century French architecture?"

When she said the words, Alice continued to look Sam up and down, but focused on the tattoo. Sam realised he didn't look the part of a tourist, visiting historical buildings. He smiled, enjoying the to-and-fro of the conversation. Talking to the woman he'd only just met seemed like the most natural thing in the world.

"Ah, now you're making judgements based on someone's appearance."

"Yes, I am," admitted Alice. "And, looking at you, I would've said you're a soldier, on leave, looking for fun and excitement ... not a three-hundred-year-old chateau."

The woman's mention of a soldier gave him an idea.

"You're almost right. I was in the army, and so was my grandfather, during the war. He was killed just outside the village, close to the chateau. I was hoping to see the place for myself."

"Oh, I'm sorry," said Alice, clearly worried that she might have said the wrong thing. Sam didn't want to spoil the moment and was eager to put her at ease.

"Don't be. Obviously, he died without me ever knowing him. It's just something I've always wanted to do and never got around to. I heard the owner of the café call you Schmitt. That's a German name, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is. Don't tell me, you speak German too."

Alice was smiling again, much to Sam's relief.

"No, lucky guess." Sam's eyes dropped to the wedding ring on her finger. "Let me make another guess ... you're married to a German."

"Well done," said Alice, pointing to Sam's wedding ring. "And you're married to an Englishwoman."

“Yes, I am. My name’s Sam.”

He held out his hand and Alice accepted it.

“Alice.”

“Alice Schmitt,” said Sam, as if he were trying out the sound of her name.

“And it’s Sam ...?”

Sam hesitated, but decided to take a calculated risk.

“Sam Denham.”

Alice didn’t appear to react to the name. If the men in the Schmitt family were responsible for the death of his grandfather and father, the woman seated before him didn’t seem to be aware of it. Relief washed over him, and he was surprised by his reaction.

“Well, Sam Denham,” said Alice, getting up from her seat. “I would invite you back to see the chateau, but that would mean you’d have to meet my family, and I wouldn’t want to inflict that on anybody. I think it would be a far more pleasant experience if you just drove by and admired it from a distance.”

From what she had said, Sam assumed she wasn’t happily married, which pleased him. Alice picked up her bill, preparing to leave.

Sam tried to think on his feet. In the army he’d always believed that meticulous preparation was the key to success in any mission. He needed to know the set-up at the chateau before he acted, and this woman would be an invaluable asset. He desperately needed to see her again. But, even as these thoughts ran through his head, he knew he was trying to justify his actions. The bottom line was that he was incredibly attracted to her. Wanting to see her again had nothing to do with his mission.

“I hope we meet again sometime.”

Sam hoped he hadn’t sounded desperate.

“That would be nice, but what would your wife say?”

“I came here alone.”

“Oh, I see.”

Alice paused, as if she was processing this new piece of information before deciding what to do with it. She repeated her question.

“But, if she were here, what would she say?”

This time Sam was the one who had to stop and think before answering. His instincts had been right. This beautiful woman was not only kind and caring, she also wanted to do the right thing. She might have been unhappily married but she didn’t know about Sam, and she was putting him on the spot.

“She wouldn’t care,” Sam lied, and he couldn’t help feeling ashamed.

“Why not?”

Sam realised she was deliberately trying to give him a hard time. He hoped it was because, like him, she was sensing something special between them.

“We’ve grown apart. I’m sorry, I know this looks terrible ... you know, coming up to you and chatting you up like this. Believe me, I’ve never done anything like this before.”

“What, never?”

Sam was pleased she was still smiling. It encouraged him to persist.

“Well, not since I’ve been married.”

“Where are you staying?”

Alice’s question and the change of subject momentarily stumped him.

“Um ... I haven’t booked into anywhere yet. Is there a hotel in the village you could recommend?”

“Yes, because it’s the only one.”

“Well, that sounds just what I’m looking for. Perhaps I’ll try there,” said Sam, grinning again and trying his best to end the conversation on a more light-hearted note. To his relief, she laughed.

“Why don’t I show you where it is, and I can help you book in. Unfortunately, the owner doesn’t speak English. But perhaps the French word for room is one of the dozen you happen to know?”

Alice beamed. The word ‘chambre’ suddenly popped up from Sam’s long-forgotten memories of school.

“No, I don’t think it is,” said Sam. “Perhaps I do need some help. Where exactly is this hotel?”

THIRTY-SEVEN

“Do you have any luggage?”

Alice noticed that Sam was carrying nothing but his wallet and a pair of sunglasses.

“In my car,” said Sam, pointing to his rusty off-roader. He opened the door, reached inside, and pulled out a large rucksack.

When he saw Alice eyeing the mud-splattered backpack, he shrugged.

“I left my designer suitcases at home. Thought I’d be camping, since I don’t know the French word for ‘room’. But now I’ve got my own local guide.”

Alice crossed the road and Sam followed. When they turned the first corner, they came to a grand house with a large gravel driveway. Impressive iron railings separated it from the pavement. Alice stopped at the gate.

“Is this it?” asked Sam.

“Yes.”

“But, there’s nothing to say it’s a hotel.”

Alice pointed to a small sign that had once been tied to the railings. It was lying on the pavement, face down. Sam stooped down and picked it up. The glass was cracked and the printed card inside had faded. Sam could just make out the word ‘chambre’, but the rest was unintelligible.

“Chambre. That’s the French for room, right?”

“Well done. The rooms are actually very nice. I know the owner and he’s just spent a fortune redecorating the place.”

“I’m surprised he had any money left over, once he’d paid for the sign,” said Sam, eyeing the board he held in his hand.

Alice giggled and held her hand up to cover her mouth, as if she was embarrassed. Sam wondered if she wasn’t used to having fun. He hoped he was wrong.

When they entered the main hall of the building, a large grey-haired man with a goatee came out from behind a reception desk and walked over to hug Alice. Everyone in the village apparently adored her. Sam wasn’t surprised. Words were exchanged in French, while Sam looked on, feeling a little useless. Eventually, she turned to him and translated.

“Unfortunately, all the rooms are taken. But Pierre says he’s converting his summer house into accommodation. It isn’t quite finished, but he could let you have it at a reduced rate, if you’re interested.”

“Sounds perfect.”

Sam wasn't just being polite. He presumed the summer house would be in the garden. He noticed that it was possible to walk around the sides of the building to reach the rear without going through the hotel. If he needed to come and go as he pleased, without being noticed, it could be just what he was looking for.

Alice turned and said something to the owner, who called through an open door into a back room. An attractive and shapely girl in a black skirt and white blouse emerged, and the owner handed her what Sam assumed was the key to the summer house. The girl and Alice acknowledged one another, as if they were already acquainted, but Sam couldn't help detecting a frostiness between them. He wondered if they already had a history.

The girl led the way to the rear of the house without speaking, but Sam didn't follow. He wanted to arrange to meet Alice again before she left. But, to his surprise, she trailed after the girl and beckoned Sam to follow.

“I might as well make sure you're properly settled. After all, you're here on my recommendation.”

Sam didn't argue and brought up the rear. The trio headed for a large glass door that opened out into the garden. Once outside, they walked to a timber construction at the bottom of a long path. When they finally reached the door to the summer house, Alice turned to the girl.

“Merci, Cloe.”

Alice held out her hand, indicating that she would take charge of the keys. Some more words were exchanged, and Cloe grudgingly left them alone, but not before giving Sam admiring glances. An extra button on her blouse appeared to have come undone, revealing her generous cleavage. Sam was sure it hadn't been on display in the hotel, and he couldn't help wondering if she had exposed her wares deliberately.

“Friend of yours?” asked Sam, once Cloe had left.

“Hardly,” said Alice with no further explanation.

She opened the door to the summer house and they both entered to find themselves in a room with a double bed and two bedside tables, but nothing else. The light, hanging from the rafters of the ceiling, had no lampshade. Another door led to a small shower room, with a toilet and a corner sink, barely large enough to wash in. Opposite the shower room was a built-in wardrobe, generously stocked with no less than two hangers.

“Pierre wasn't kidding when he said it isn't quite finished, was he?” said

Alice.

“It’s not a problem. I thought I might end up camping, so this is luxury.”

“Well, I suppose my work is done and I’ve rescued you from a night under canvas. I hope you have a good night.”

Sam knew he needed to find out more about the set-up at the chateau, so he decided to make another move before Alice disappeared for good.

“Your work isn’t quite done, I’m afraid.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve got to have dinner tonight and I don’t speak French, remember? I won’t know how to order anything without my local guide. I’ll probably starve to death. Why don’t you come back around seven and you can choose the restaurant? My treat.”

Alice looked thoughtful, as she headed for the door.

“I’ll see if I can get away. But I can’t promise anything.”

“Fair enough. And if I don’t see you,” said Sam, not wanting to push it any further, “thanks for all your help. You’ve been great.”

Alice smiled and headed back to the house.

“I’ll be waiting, fingers crossed,” said Sam, calling after her.

Alice waved good-bye. He watched her leave, hoping she would return. And, he admitted to himself, it wasn’t just because of his mission.

THIRTY-EIGHT

Cloe Bernard could hardly contain her anger, as she walked to the other end of the village, where she lived with her parents. By rights, she should have been the one living at the chateau, if it hadn't been for that bitch from Rouen. Until Alice came along, Anton hadn't been able to keep his hands off her. She'd practically moved into the converted barn within the chateau's grounds, satisfying Anton's baser desires, night after night. And then one day, out of the blue, he'd suddenly announced that he was seeing someone else, and he dumped Cloe like so much discarded rubbish.

So here she was, making the walk from her job at the hotel to her parents' home for the thousandth time, unable to afford even a small place of her own. Today had been the final straw. For the first time in years, a deliciously handsome man turns up at the hotel, looking for a place to stay, and who should be fawning all over him, but Madam Alice Schmitt. The greedy cock-hungry bitch. As if she didn't have enough already, playing the part of the lady of the manor up at the chateau.

Cloe was so wrapped up in her maelstrom of resentment, that she almost didn't spot the white BMW, with its personal registration number, parked at the village's only petrol pump. The pump had been there since the end of the war and was mostly used by locals. The makeshift counter where customers paid was set up in the converted dining room of the owner's house. Cloe approached the car and settled her curvy frame on the bonnet, letting her legs swing freely over the edge. She didn't have long to wait until the owner of the BMW returned to his vehicle.

"Cloe, what the hell do you think you're doing?"

Anton Schmitt spat out the words with such venom, the young chambermaid almost slipped off the shiny paintwork. But she managed to maintain her precarious perch and looked back at the red-faced Anton with enough defiance to convince him that he ought to think twice before shoving her off his car.

"There was a time when you'd have invited me on to the back seat," said Cloe, parting her legs just enough for Anton to get the message.

"Unfortunately for you, those days are long gone. In case you've forgotten, I'm a married man now."

Her ex-lover's words stung her deeply, but Cloe was too proud to let it show. Instead, she smiled, and she relished the effect it had on the German's

arrogant confidence.

“It’s funny you should mention that. It just so happens I bumped into your wife today.”

Anton reached for the driver’s door of his car.

“I haven’t got time for this nonsense. Now, get off my fucking car.”

He got in behind the wheel and started the engine. Cloe quickly stepped off the bonnet and grabbed the door of the car before Anton had time to close it.

“I saw her at the hotel, coming out of a man’s room,” she said quickly, before he had time to slam the door. She had decided to bend the truth and she was pleased when it had the desired effect.

“Who’s room? What the hell are you talking about?”

Anton was clearly flustered, and Cloe smiled, enjoying her sweet revenge.

“An Englishman. An extremely handsome and muscular Englishman.”

“You lying bitch.”

But Cloe’s confident smile told him she was telling the truth.

“I don’t suppose this fictitious Englishman of yours had a name.”

To save face, he was desperately trying to ridicule her, but Cloe’s next words would change everything.

“As a matter of fact, he has. I checked the register, just in case you might be interested in who your wife’s fucking behind your back.”

Anton snarled and was about to get out of the car to slap Cloe across the face, when the owner of the garage suddenly appeared.

“Everything okay, Monsieur Schmitt?”

Anton sat back in his car and managed to regain his composure.

“Yes,” he snapped

He barely glanced in the garage owner’s direction, and the man retreated to his home, realising it wasn’t worth his while getting involved. He knew the rich man’s reputation. Anton had already turned his attention back to Cloe.

“Tell me the man’s name, damn you.”

“He’s called Sam Denham.”

Cloe hadn’t expected her revelation to mean anything to Anton, save for the fact that it provided him with ammunition with which he could interrogate his wife when she got home. So, when the German almost jumped out of his seat with shock, she was as startled as he. This was even better than she had hoped for. Clearly Anton knew this Denham. Perhaps he was one of his wife’s ex-lovers.

Cloe braced herself, expecting another barrage of insults. But Anton

appeared lost in thought, and his eyes stared off into the distance, as if he were totally unaware of her presence. He suddenly grabbed the door and slammed it shut, almost ripping Cloe's arm out of its socket. The engine of the BMW roared, and it sped away, showering her in gravel. A sharp piece of stone cut into her tights, causing her shin to bleed. But Cloe didn't care, and she continued to smile, as she watched the expensive car hurtle towards the chateau.

Her work was done.

THIRTY-NINE

When the housekeeper asked Anton if he would be joining the rest of the family for dinner, the grandson rudely ignored her and continued charging up the stairs, taking them three at a time. He ran headlong into his bedroom suite to find Alice, sitting at the dressing table, brushing her hair.

“Why were you in that man’s hotel room today?”

Alice turned to face him, failing to hide her fear. Her husband had yelled at her in his native German. A sure sign he was about to fly into one of his uncontrolled rages. Her mind was spinning. One minute she had been sitting in her room, in quiet contemplation of her pleasurable encounter with the handsome Englishman, and the next, she was facing a violent interrogation at the hands of her husband.

She faltered, as she tried to make sense of what was happening. Clearly her husband had found out about her casual assignation with the Englishman. How, she didn’t know. But nothing had happened. Not that she hadn’t been thinking about what it would have been like if it had. Perhaps that was why she was feeling guilty. But, she reminded herself, Anton couldn’t possibly have a clue what was going on in her own mind. His reaction was totally out of proportion.

“What on earth are you talking about?” she asked, trying to stall for time so she could gather her thoughts. But it only succeeded in fuelling his rage.

“You know exactly what I’m talking about. You were seen coming out of Denham’s room this afternoon. What business did you have with him?”

Anton’s words only served to add to her confusion. Her husband knew Sam’s name. And the way he’d said it - it was as if he already knew who he was. Had they met? How did he find out the name anyway? And then the answer suddenly came to her - Cloe. Of course. Who else would have been able to tell Anton Sam’s name? Armed with this new realisation, she decided to go on the offensive, in the hope of warding off any more questions.

“Now I understand. That slut Cloe from the hotel has been filling your head full of nonsense. She’s just jealous because you married me instead of her. Not that that stopped you from screwing her, even after we’d met.”

Alice had no proof to back up what she was accusing her husband of. It was just something she’d suspected all along. It was the way Cloe acted around her. Call it a wife’s intuition. But any idea that she had won a moral victory paled into insignificance almost as soon as she’d accused him.

Anton lunged at her, closed his fist, and punched her in the face. The force of the blow knocked her off her chair, and she lay on the floor, holding her hand to her lips. The corner of her mouth was already swelling up, and she could taste blood, where she'd bitten into her cheek. She began to cry, and Alice desperately hoped that her husband would suddenly be filled with remorse and beg for forgiveness for what he'd done. But his next words only added to her pain.

“Tell me what business you had with him or, so help me, you'll be sorry.”

He loomed over her, his fists still clenched, and she had no doubt he meant what he said.

“He's just on holiday here and he was looking for somewhere to stay. All I did was help him find the hotel.”

“So, why were you in his room?”

Even through the terribly pain, she still had the presence of mind to realise that something was wrong. She had thought that Anton was playing the part of the outraged husband, intent on discovering the sordid details of his wife's affair. But now she realised she was wrong. It was as if he genuinely wanted to know why she and Sam had met, and whether they had slept together was almost irrelevant. If she hadn't known better, she would have said Anton was scared.

“How old is he?”

The odd question and change of tack momentarily confused her, and she struggled for an answer. She began to get up from the floor to stall for time.

Anton lashed out with his foot, kicking her in the ribs. Alice had never experienced such agony and struggled to breathe.

“How old is he?”

Alice heard Anton yell the question for a second time but was physically unable to respond. Fearing he might take it as a further sign that she was unwilling to co-operate, she held up her hand and nodded, to show she wanted to answer. Eventually she managed to reply, but it came out as a hoarse whisper.

“I don't know ... thirty, maybe.”

Mercifully, this seemed to satisfy him, and he rubbed his fingers across his chin, as if he were lost in thought. He appeared oblivious to the fact that his wife was lying on the floor, curled up in agony. Somehow, she found his callousness almost as distressing as the physical pain.

His eyes suddenly focused on a family portrait, hanging on the bedroom

wall. Three generations of the Schmitt men stared arrogantly into the distance, apparently intent on achieving some goal they had set themselves, while their wives looked on admiringly. Alice had never liked the damn thing.

Anton nodded to himself, as if a decision had been made and his resolve had returned. He dashed out of the room - a man with a purpose.

Alice's relief was overwhelming. Her instinct was to simply lie there, nursing her wounds, and hope it was all just a terrible nightmare from which she would eventually awaken.

But something inside her urged her to get up, despite the pain. She rolled over and got to her knees, but when she tried to stand, she immediately doubled over in agony, and she heard one of her ribs pop. She knelt until the pain subsided to the point where she could catch her breath. She tried again, but this time she was careful to stoop, and she managed to stay on her feet.

The door to the bedroom was open and she headed for the landing. Her only thought was to get to her car and drive away. But, as she approached the top of the stairs, she heard muffled voices coming from the study of Anton's grandfather. The door was slightly ajar, and she cautiously made her way towards it. The pain made it difficult to concentrate, but she was able to hear the older man's voice.

“So, now the grandson has come to avenge his family. In that case, we had better organise a welcoming committee.”

FORTY

Alice cursed the gravel of the chateau's large courtyard, crunching loudly underfoot as she stumbled towards her car. She'd grabbed her keys from the hook in the hallway where she habitually kept them. It was all too easy to lose things in a forty-room chateau. But she hadn't dared return to her bedroom to retrieve her handbag, and she was forced to escape with only the clothes she stood up in. And escape was what it was. Every step of the way her ears strained for the sound of Anton, chasing after her, before he dragged her back inside.

Thankfully, he must have still been otherwise engaged, because she made it to her car unhindered and drove it down the long driveway to the main gates, careful not to rev the engine and attract unwanted attention. Once she was on the narrow country lane that led to the village, she began to relax, but this only succeeded in allowing the pain in her ribs to return with a vengeance. Yet, somehow, she managed to force the Citroen around the sharp bends and reached the hotel fifteen minutes later.

She waited in the car to make sure no one was around, before heading for the side gate that led to the rear garden. As she approached the summer house, she prayed that the Englishman was waiting for her, as he'd promised. She didn't think she had the strength to walk another step. She knocked the door with her fist and looked around to see if anyone was watching, but the garden appeared to be devoid of guests, despite the late evening sunshine.

When Sam answered the door, it only took him a second to realise that something was seriously wrong. He quickly reached out to her and gently led her to the bed. She tentatively sat on the edge, but when she tried to lie flat, she was met with a wall of pain and cried out.

"What happened?"

"Anton, my husband ... he went crazy," was all Alice could manage to say.

"I'll just be a minute. Hold on."

Alice didn't have the strength to protest, as she watched him leave the summer house and head for the gate to the garden. He returned a few minutes later with a khaki bag made from some kind of canvas. He quickly undid a cord that appeared to be the only thing holding it in one piece. A whole range of medical supplies spilled out on to the bed.

"I was trained to apply field dressings in the army. Now, apart from the

face, where did he hit you?"

"He kicked me in the ribs," she said, clutching her midriff.

"Fucker. Now, try to be brave while I take a look and assess the damage."

Without waiting for an answer, he reached down to the blue sweatshirt she was wearing and pulled it away from her jeans as gently as he could. Alice took a sharp intake of breath when he turned her body to get a better look.

"You've got a bruise covering most of your torso. I wouldn't be surprised if the bastard hasn't fractured a couple of your ribs."

"I heard something crack," said Alice, recalling the terrible moment her husband had turned on her.

"I've got some bandages I can use to bind your mid-section, but the main thing to watch out for is any internal bleeding. You really need to see a doctor."

"Maybe later," she gasped.

"Okay. In the meantime, take one of these," said Sam, passing her a pill from a plastic container, together with a glass of water.

"Is it a painkiller?"

"Yes."

"I hope it's a strong one."

"Nuclear. We carried them with us in Iraq. That's why I've only given you one."

'Iraq', he'd said. He had fought in a war and he would protect her. She started to relax. Alice gratefully swallowed the pill, and Sam waited for it to kick in before applying the bandage. He reached up to her face and examined her mouth. Despite the pain, she felt a thrill when his fingers touched her lips.

"It looks like you've still got all of your pretty teeth. The guy obviously can't punch for shit."

"It didn't feel like it at the time," said Alice, trying not to smile and re-open the wound on her cheek.

"Let me clean it up for you. Brace yourself, it might sting."

He reached for an ointment from his pile of goodies and soaked some cotton wool. As he dabbed it on her wounded cheek, she watched his intense blue eyes concentrating on the task. He was so close, she could smell his hair. He must have just taken a shower, she thought. Despite the pain emanating from her swollen lips, she felt like pressing them against his.

Cloe didn't care if the owner had said she couldn't smoke during her

break, after the day she'd had she needed a fucking cigarette. She knew her boss was busy in the kitchen, overseeing the preparation of the evening meal for the house full of guests, so she headed to the far end of the garden, on the other side of the large apple tree that she used to shield her from prying eyes.

She was about to light her fifth cigarette of the day, when she thought she could hear voices, coming from the summer house, and she couldn't help becoming curious. The owner hadn't got around to putting a phone in there yet, and she'd thought the Englishman was alone. Using the tree for cover, she got off the garden bench she had been using for her illicit break, and quietly worked her way over to the side of the summer house, facing away from the hotel. The temperature in the timber structure tended to climb in the warm weather, and she noticed that the new guest had opened all the windows to let in some fresh air. She could hear a woman's voice.

“Somehow, Anton knew about our meeting today. He wanted to know why I was with you.”

“What did you tell him?”

“I told him the truth, that I just helped you to find a hotel. But he was acting weird. It was as if he knew who you were. He wanted to know your age.”

Sam walked over to his closet and started throwing clothes into his rucksack.

“We've got to go.”

“Now?”

“Right away. They know where to find me. It's not safe.”

“They? What's going on? I don't understand.”

“There's no time to explain right now. Can you walk okay?”

“I think so. That pill you gave me must be doing the trick.”

“Okay, let's go. We'll take my car.”

“Where are we going?”

“Somewhere we can talk, where nobody can find us.”

“My parents have a small holiday cottage between here and Rouen, by the river. We could go there.”

“Sounds perfect. Let's go.”

Sam bundled his medical supplies into his bag and slung it across his shoulder. Alice managed to stand unaided and Sam let her take his arm, as he

guided her along the side of the hotel to his car.

Cloe couldn't resist peeking around the corner of the summer house to watch them leave. Luckily, they didn't look back and failed to notice her.

She lit a cigarette and leant against the wooden frame of the summer house, smiling as she watched Anton's wife sneak off with her English lover.

FORTY-ONE

Anton returned to his bedroom, confident that his wife would be waiting for him, licking her wounds. So, when he found the room empty, it only served to worsen his mood. He ran to the window and looked down into the courtyard. Her car had gone. He ran out of the room, roaring with rage. He stopped dead when he saw his grandfather standing at the top of the stairs, blocking his path.

“Where are you going?” demanded the older man.

“The fucking bitch has run off. I’m going to get her back.”

Anton had lowered his voice. He knew better than to yell in the presence of his grandfather.

“From where?” asked Hermann Schmitt calmly.

Anton stuttered, as he tried to gather his thoughts.

“The ... the hotel. She might have gone to meet this Denham again.”

“Control yourself!”

His grandfather barked the order and Anton found himself standing to attention.

“I’m sorry, sir.”

“The men of this family do not let their emotions run away with them. We will stick to the plan we just agreed. I have already telephoned Karl Weber. The last thing we need is you blundering over there half-cocked. These Denhams have crossed swords with our family twice before, to their own detriment. And, if we keep our heads, this young man will suffer a similar fate. Do I make myself understood?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good. We will wait to hear from Herr Weber and, in the meantime, we can organise that little surprise we discussed.”

“Are they on their way?”

“Yes.”

“How many men?”

“More than enough to take care of this Sam Denham, don’t you worry.”

“Perhaps they could tie up any loose ends, too.”

“What did you have in mind?”

“You and your men shot traitors in the war, didn’t you? Even female ones.” Hermann Schmitt smiled, and the abrupt change in the older man’s

demeanour gave Anton hope that his emotional outburst was already forgotten.
“You know, dear Anton, I think there’s hope for you yet.”

It took Alice and Sam forty-five minutes to reach the holiday cottage by the river. They could have got there faster, but Sam took it steady so that his injured passenger was as comfortable as possible. The cottage was a small stone-built affair, surrounded by trees, with a small garden that led to a beach of pebbles, beneath a pretty waterfall. The sound of the water spilling over the rocks was calming and hypnotic. Unfortunately, from a soldier’s point of view, the place was a nightmare when it came to defending against unwanted visitors. The small wood offered numerous places to hide, and the sound of the water would effectively mask the approach of any would-be intruder.

Once inside, Alice led them into a rustic kitchen with a large table in the centre. Sam helped Alice to sit down on a wooden chair, placed his rucksack on the floor, and pulled out the canvas bag of medical supplies. Alice could hear him rummaging through, looking for what he needed, before he reached over and strapped a band around her upper arm. He proceeded to inflate it, and Alice realised he was taking her blood pressure.

“If your blood pressure drops, it could be a sign you’re bleeding internally. Let me know if you start to feel weak or dizzy. How far is it to the nearest hospital?”

“There’s one in Rouen, less than an hour away. But I’m feeling okay.”

“I just want to err on the side of caution. I’ve seen men with injuries like yours go downhill fast. It’s not worth taking any chances.”

“You’d make a wonderful nurse, you know that?”

Alice smiled, grateful for the way he was fussing over her. She hadn’t felt so cared for since she was a child.

“I guess I am, in a way.”

“In what way?”

“My wife’s in a wheelchair. I have to help her with whatever she can’t do for herself.”

His revelation suddenly brought her back to the reality of the situation. Here they were, two strangers who knew virtually nothing about one another, suddenly thrown together through circumstance. Yet, in the space of a few hours, the Englishman had shown her more care and affection than her husband

had ever done. The man back at the chateau had suddenly become the enemy, and her instinct had been to run into the Englishman's arms. She felt guilty because the mention of his wife had upset her - even made her feel jealous that the woman in the wheelchair warranted all his attention, when she wanted him for herself.

Alice had no way of knowing that Sam had deliberately revealed aspects of his personal life. He needed to find out as much as he could about Alice's life at the chateau, so he wanted to start a dialogue. His gambit worked.

"I'm sorry. It must be very hard for both of you."

"It is. And it's even more difficult when you have very little money."

"Oh," said Alice, not knowing what to say and feeling a little embarrassed. But Sam was simply preparing her for the conversation he knew they needed to have.

"My family was wealthy once, in a way, before my grandfather was murdered."

"Oh, my God. Do you know who murdered him?"

Alice had blurted out the question but had a terrible suspicion she already knew the answer. Sam stared directly into her eyes and confirmed her fears.

"Hermann Schmitt."

FORTY-TWO

Karl Weber had been a detective in the city of Munich for over twenty years. Time enough to see men he'd put away for murder, robbery and rape be released, only to return to their old ways. So, when he cracked an industrial espionage case and came to the attention of the owner of the company under threat, he took the job offered him as head of security.

When Hermann Schmitt moved a large part of his business to Rouen, in France, he took the reliable ex-detective with him. Unfortunately, Frau Weber did not enjoy her new life abroad and headed back to Munich. When Karl refused to give up his job and join her, she sought solace in the arms of a neighbour, who had recently become divorced, and announced to her husband that the marriage was over.

Karl coped with this set-back to his personal life by throwing himself into his work, with the result that his remit greatly expanded. So, when the wife of Herr Schmitt's grandson was apparently abducted by a foreigner with a grudge against the family, he was naturally his employer's first port of call.

When he arrived at the chateau, Hermann Schmitt took him to his study to explain the situation. On the way, as he passed through the grand hall, he couldn't help but notice, through the open doors to the impressive lounge, that Franz Schmitt was talking to several unsavoury characters, gathered around the fireplace. As far as he could tell from the brief glance he was afforded, there were five or six of them, all relatively young, well-built men in their twenties or thirties, several of them wearing loose-fitting leather jackets. They reminded him of the football hooligans he'd regularly had dealings with when he was a police officer. They looked German, and he wouldn't have been surprised if their jackets concealed all manner of weapons.

"Who are those men downstairs," he asked Schmitt, as soon as they were in the privacy of his study.

"I have employed those gentlemen to provide personal security for my family. I'm not taking any chances while some English lunatic is on the loose."

Karl couldn't help thinking it was a little over the top, but he bit his tongue. It wasn't his place to criticise his employer. Instead, he had a suggestion.

"I could always ask Legrand and Dupont to keep an eye on the chateau, if you'd prefer, sir," he said, offering up the two deputies that worked for him.

"No, Karl, that won't be necessary. It has all been arranged. Besides, the

men downstairs have their own special talents.”

Karl didn't doubt they had, and the thought left an uneasy feeling in his stomach.

“What would you like me to do to help, sir?” he asked, determined to change the subject.

“As you can imagine, my grandson is tempted to take matters into his own hands. However, I would much prefer to gather all the information we can before anyone does anything rash.”

“According to your phone call, you know where this Englishman is staying, and you suspect he has your grandson's wife with him.”

“Correct.”

“Well, if you'll forgive me, why don't you simply call the police?”

“I will, if it becomes necessary. However, in the meantime, I would rather handle the matter privately, without involving the French authorities. I cannot rely on their impartiality.”

“I'm afraid I don't understand.”

“You see, this man wrongly blames me for the death of his grandfather during the war. If we involve the police, God knows what wild accusations he might come up with. Although I am a citizen of France, in many ways I am still an outsider. Don't forget, Weber, that Germany once occupied this country and some of my French peers have stubborn memories from that time. So, for the moment, I would appreciate it if you could handle this matter as discreetly as possible. Understood?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good.”

“Do you know the Englishman's name?”

“Yes. Sam Denham.”

“Well, if there's nothing else, sir, I'll head to the hotel in the village. That seems like the place to start.”

“Agreed.”

“What would you like me to do if I find them?”

“Simply let me know if they are still at the hotel, or, if they've left, try to find out where they went and report back to me. I will handle the rest.”

“Yes, sir. I'll call you as soon as I find anything.”

When he left the study, one of the men he had seen downstairs was now stationed at the door. As he walked to his car, across the large courtyard, he noticed two more were positioned outside, and he saw them in his mirror,

watching him as he drove away.

The ex-detective had interrogated enough suspects over the years to know that the little tale Hermann Schmitt had spun him about a lunatic Englishman just didn't ring true. And as for his employer's so-called bodyguards – well, he knew a bunch of thugs when he saw one. But he continued heading for the hotel in the village where this supposed kidnapper was holding the grandson's wife against her will.

Instinctively, he checked his mirror to see if he was being followed, but he could see no headlights behind him. He caught sight of his unshaven reflection, staring back at him, and he cursed to himself.

“Jesus, Weber, did you ever get the feeling you were being used?”

FORTY-THREE

When Sam told Alice the story he had learnt from his mother, about his grandfather being shot in cold blood while he was a prisoner of Hermann Schmitt, her face flushed red and she shook her head. Sam wasn't sure if her gesture denoted disbelief, or if she was simply sickened by what he'd shared with her. But when he went on to explain how his grandfather's captor had stolen his valuable cigarette case, she stared at him wide-eyed with shock.

"Was it a Fabergé cigarette case?"

"Yes."

"When we were dating, before we were married, I remember Anton showing off to me one day about how his father had put one up for auction in London that fetched an incredible sum of money. But when I asked him where Franz had got it from, he became evasive and simply said it was a family heirloom. Somehow, I could tell he was lying, but I thought no more about it at the time."

"Did he say when his father put it up for auction?"

Sam leant forward, and somehow Alice could tell that the answer to the question meant a great deal to him. She frowned, as she did her best to remember.

"I don't know exactly, but it must have been a long time ago because Anton was only a boy at the time. So, it was in the seventies, I guess."

Sam grimaced.

"What's wrong?"

"My father disappeared in the seventies."

"Disappeared? What, you mean he left you and your mother?"

"That's what I always thought until my mother told me what happened to my grandfather. Now it all fits. He must have seen the case had come up for sale and traced it back to the Schmitt family."

Alice frowned and stared at the table, as she tried to gather her thoughts and catch up with Sam's train of thought.

"What are you saying ... that he came to the chateau to confront Anton's grandfather?"

"Yes."

"And you think Hermann killed him?"

“Hermann ... or Franz. Or both.”

“Good God.”

Sam waited while Alice digested what he had shared with her. He watched as she continued to shake her head, as if it were all too much to take in. And then, suddenly, her face hardened, and he braced himself for what he knew was about to come.

“And now you have come to avenge them both. But you needed to find out what you were up against before you went blundering into the chateau.”

She physically recoiled and leant back in her chair, trying to put as much distance as she could between them.

“You bastard! You used me!”

The owner of the hotel smiled when Karl Weber approached the reception desk, no doubt anticipating a polite enquiry into the availability of a room. But his face dropped when the ex-detective revealed the true nature of his business. Fortunately, having worked in Rouen for more than a few years, Karl’s French was up to the task.

“Monsieur Schmitt, from the chateau, has asked me to locate his grandson’s wife. He suspects she might be here, in this hotel.”

“You mean Alice?” asked the owner, genuine concern on his face.

“You know her?”

“Of course. But I can assure you she is not a guest at this hotel. After all, why would she require a room here, when she has over forty of her own at the chateau?”

The owner smiled, pleased at his own witticism. But the return of his happy demeanour was short-lived when Karl continued to explain.

“Monsieur Schmitt believes she is staying with a guest ... an Englishman called Sam Denham.”

The owner pulled a face and almost spat on the floor in disgust.

“Ah, I was hoping I would never hear that name again. I went to all the trouble of opening my summer house, and he repays me by leaving without a word.”

“Are you sure he’s not planning to return?”

Instead of answering, the owner turned and yelled through an open door behind the reception desk.

“Cloe!”

A few seconds later the curvy young chambermaid emerged.

“Yes?”

Karl noticed that the girl appeared to be angry. He wondered why.

“You saw Monsieur Denham leave. Are you absolutely certain he took all of his belongings with him?”

“Yes, I told you.”

The owner turned back to Karl and shrugged, as if that were the end of the matter.

“Was Alice Schmitt with him?”

Karl addressed the question to Cloe, and it appeared she was about to say something, when the owner answered for her.

“No, monsieur, you have been misinformed. She was with the gentleman earlier in the day, when he checked in. That was the only reason I offered him the summer house, as a favour to Alice. Fool that I was.”

The owner shook his head, as he contemplated how unfair life could be.

“May I see this summer house, just to make sure?”

Karl was certain there wouldn't be anything in the room that would lead to the whereabouts of Sam Denham and Alice Schmitt, but he had an ulterior motive for asking.

“Do what you like,” said the owner rudely, as he headed for the dining room to check on his dinner guests.

Before he disappeared, he shouted over his shoulder.

“Cloe. Show him where it is.”

Karl's plan had worked and, as Cloe led him through the garden to the summer house, he took the opportunity to question her alone.

“When I asked if Alice Schmitt was with the Englishman, you were about to say something.”

“Maybe,” was all she said cryptically.

“Well, was she with him?”

“What's it worth?”

Karl realised she wanted payment for her co-operation and sighed. As far as he knew, he had no expense account.

“How much were you thinking?”

“A thousand francs.”

“A thousand francs, just to tell me if Alice was with the Englishman when he left?”

“No. A thousand francs for what else I know.”

“I’m not sure. What makes you think I’d be interested?”

Cloe licked her lips and sneered before answering.

“Would you be interested if I could tell you where they went?”

Karl reached for his wallet and counted out a thousand francs into Cloe’s open hand, wondering if Schmitt would consider refunding him without a receipt.

FORTY-FOUR

Sam had retreated to the other side of the kitchen to give Alice some space. She had a right to be angry, so he decided to let her get it out of her system and hope she would calm down.

“So, your nice story about wanting to see the chateau was just bullshit. You came here to act out some twisted vendetta and used me to help you do it.”

She clutched her abdomen and pointed to her swollen cheek.

“I hope you’re proud of yourself.”

Sam’s head dropped, and he looked down at his feet.

“I’m so sorry. If I’d known I was putting you in any kind of danger, I wouldn’t have come anywhere near you.”

Alice could tell that Sam was genuinely mortified about what had happened to her, and his contrite response to her accusations took the wind out of her sails. Perhaps she was being too harsh. Besides, when she first saw Sam, she had wanted him to approach her. Was she being a hypocrite?

“It’s not really your fault, I suppose. It was that bitch Cloe who must have told Anton I was with you.”

“Cloe? You mean the chambermaid?”

“Yes. And one of my husband’s many conquests. She’s just his type.”

“You mean slutty?”

For a second, they stared at each other, then Alice burst out laughing, until the pain in her ribs forced her to stop. Sam was pleased she had taken the joke in good spirits, and it had the added bonus of breaking the tension that had existed between them moments before.

“Are you saying I look like a slut?” asked Alice, still smiling.

“Hardly. You’ve got too much class. But if he likes a bit of rough so much, why did he marry you?”

Alice laughed again but quickly stifled it, desperate not to aggravate her injuries.

“Bit of rough? Is that what they call girls like Cloe back in England?”

“Yeah, some blokes do. But not me. I’m a gentleman.”

Sam offered her a cheeky grin and it was infectious. She grinned back.

“Anyway, don’t be so quick to judge a book by its cover. I can be a slut too, when I want to be.”

As soon as she’d made the joke she regretted it but, for some reason, Sam

seemed to bring out the naughty girl in her. She wondered if she had gone too far when she saw him blush. But then he met her stare.

“And sometimes, I’m not always a gentleman.”

This time it was Alice’s turn to look embarrassed and there was an awkward silence. She decided it was time to change the subject.

“How do you know Hermann killed your grandfather?”

Sam shook his head, to rid his mind of a slutty Alice and ungentlemanly behaviour.

“There was a witness.”

“So, couldn’t you have Hermann arrested for a war crime? Do they still try ex-soldiers for that sort of thing, after all these years?”

“Yes, but not very often. Anyway, it’s not going to happen. The witness died a few years ago.”

“Oh. So, what about the cigarette case? Can you prove it belonged to your grandfather?”

The more time he spent with Alice, the more she impressed him. Not only was she beautiful and funny, but she was sharp too. She was also clearly desperately trying to help him, even though they’d only just met. When she’d used the name ‘Hermann’ so freely, he had felt a pang of disquiet at the thought that she’d lived with his family’s nemesis for so long. But now he knew she was firmly in his camp.

“It was a gift from some eccentric lord he used to work for. It would be difficult to prove it used to belong to my family. It was so long ago, and it was only in my grandfather’s possession for a few years.”

Alice slumped in her seat, clearly disappointed. Sam found it endearing. She slapped the table with her hand, her mind still coming to terms with what else he’d told her.

“If what you think is true, and Hermann killed your father, then what do you think he did with the body?”

Sam frowned, and Alice mistook it as a sign that she’d been too tactless.

“I’m sorry. Is it too difficult to talk about?”

“No, it’s not that. It’s just that you’ve hit the nail on the head. Without a body, I can’t prove a thing.”

“So, did you just come here to kill the whole family?”

Sam was momentarily taken aback by the sudden accusation coming from her lips. But he decided it was a fair question, under the circumstances, and decided to risk being honest with her.

“I thought about it, yes. Or, at the very least, I felt like beating a confession out of Anton’s grandfather. But, much as I’d like to do just that, I know it would be dumb. I’ve got a wife and daughter at home who need me. It wouldn’t be fair to them if I got myself put away for murder.”

Alice felt a pain inside, but this time it wasn’t from her injuries. For a reason that was hard to explain, she already felt a connection with the man standing before her. And the casual reminder that he had a different life, with someone else, hurt her. She was married too, of course, but that had now come to a violent end. And Sam had rescued her, like a white knight on his steed – isn’t that what they said? She felt childish and selfish. But she would help the handsome Englishman with the kind eyes because she wanted to. Because she cared about him.

“I think I know where we might find your father’s body.”

FORTY-FIVE

Karl Weber was now surer than ever that he was being misled by his employer. According to the chambermaid, it had been Alice Schmitt herself who'd suggested her parents' holiday cottage as a place to go to. Hardly the actions of a woman who'd been abducted against her will. That was if Cloe was telling the truth and he hadn't wasted a thousand francs for nothing. But he quickly rejected the thought. The hotel worker might not have been the brightest person in the world, but she must have realised that deceiving him wouldn't have achieved anything. He would find out she was lying as soon as he checked out her story.

And with that in mind, he found a telephone in the village and called Hermann Schmitt at the chateau. He explained that Denham was no longer staying at the hotel and asked for the phone number of Alice's parents. When his employer asked why he needed it, he said he was simply following up a lead. For the moment, he decided not to tell him about the cottage, not until he knew what was really going on.

Once he had the number, he called the parents' home in Rouen. He had already planned what he was going to say.

"Hello. Is that Monsieur Dubois?"

"Speaking."

"I'm a friend of your daughter's husband, Anton."

"Yes."

The man sounded curt, and Karl was worried that getting what he needed might be harder than he'd expected. Alice's father certainly didn't seem to be impressed by the fact that he was supposed to know Anton. Quite the opposite in fact.

"Yes, well, my wife and I are supposed to be meeting Anton and Alice at your holiday cottage, by the river, and I've rather stupidly lost the address they gave me. So, I was wondering if you might be able to help me out."

Monsieur Dubois could detect a German accent in Karl's voice, which certainly seemed to suggest the man on the phone was genuine, but he was still confused.

"Are you sure? Alice didn't tell me she was intending to stay at the cottage. She usually lets us know beforehand."

"Yes, but I think it was more of an impromptu kind of thing. They suddenly

decided they wanted to show us the area around there. They've often told us how pretty it is."

"Really? That's quite surprising. I wasn't even aware that Anton had visited the place. But then again, when it comes to what the Schmitt family get up to, we're always the last to know."

Karl didn't know how to reply. Clearly, there was some sort of rift between the two families and the ex-detective had no wish to get involved. The Frenchman's next question almost made him despair of ever finding an answer to his question.

"How did you have my number, by the way?"

Karl felt like putting the phone down but decided to persevere and tried to think on his feet.

"My wife and Alice were thinking of planning a shopping trip in Rouen, the next time she visited you. Helen needed the number to arrange where to meet."

Karl held his breath, bracing himself for another one of the man's incessant questions. He didn't have to wait long.

"Helen? I don't remember Alice mentioning any Helen?"

Years in the Munich police force had taught Karl the importance of patience, and he resisted the temptation to tell the wary older man to get lost. So, he kept quiet and waited to see what Alice's father decided to do. Either he would tell him what he needed to know, or he wouldn't.

Eventually the man on the end of the phone told him the address of the cottage and Karl stifled a sigh of relief. He thanked Monsieur Dubois for his help and promised to remind Alice to call her mother and father when he saw her. Once he'd put the phone down, he wondered if the suspicious man would telephone the chateau to check on Karl's story. If he did, it could cause problems.

Karl quickly headed for his car and reached for the map on the passenger seat. Alice's father had said the cottage was not far from a town called Grisors. He looked at his watch. It was nearly nightfall, but he should be able to get there in an hour on clear roads. He started the car and left the village.

Sam had checked on Alice's bruises and he saw nothing that rang any alarm bells. Her blood pressure was still fine, and she said that any light-headedness she'd felt had gone. Sam put it down to the shock resulting from recent events.

They had retired to the lounge where they could sit more comfortably in the high-backed sofa they had pulled up to the log fire. An unopened bottle of wine had been discovered in the kitchen and Alice was on to her third glass. She insisted it helped her with the pain.

“What makes you think my father’s body might be there?”

Sam had been intrigued by Alice’s description of a cave, hidden away in the recesses of an empty moat. It sounded like just the sort of place a body might go undetected for years. He’d heard stories of French chateau owners, burying family treasure to hide it from the Nazis during the war.

“I’ve overheard Hermann and Franz talking about something being buried in the caves, but, from what I could make out, they were discussing some mysterious treasure, not a body. Hermann was warning Franz not to go into the caves without his permission.”

“You said caves. Is there more than one.”

“I think so. I’ve never seen them for myself. The bottom of the moat is pretty difficult to get to and I’ve had no reason to bother until now.”

“Until now?”

“You’ll need me to show you where they are, if you’re going to prove your father was murdered.”

“That’s not going to happen. It’s too dangerous.”

“You mean you’re not going to even try.”

“I didn’t say that. I’m going, but I’ll go alone. Besides, you’re hardly in any shape to go clambering around an empty moat in the dark.”

“Not now. But I might feel better tomorrow.”

Sam didn’t want to risk spoiling Alice’s good mood and decided to drop the subject.

“Let’s sleep on it.”

“Together?”

She’d opened her mouth without thinking. Perhaps I *am* a slut, she said to herself, and the thought made her smile.

Sam took it as a sign that she was toying with him.

“If we did that, you’d *really* have some internal injuries to worry about.”

“Promises, promises.”

They both laughed. Alice was incorrigible, he decided, but, as he examined her beautiful face in the light of the fire, he knew he had never felt so attracted to a woman. He placed his empty glass on the hearth and turned to bring his face close to hers. Alice could sense that he was about to kiss her, but he

stopped himself. Had he suddenly remembered his wife and daughter? His next words revealed what had spoiled the moment.

“I think I heard a car.”

FORTY-SIX

Karl Weber hadn't seen the cottage nestling in the trees until the last minute. Alice's father had told him it would take at least five minutes along the dirt track before he reached the family's holiday home. He was wrong. Karl had done it in three. But it was too late to do anything about it now, and he quickly turned off the engine and the lights, and coasted on to the grass, hiding the car behind a clump of trees. Hopefully, he hadn't given himself away.

The sun had already dipped below the horizon and he got out of the car, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the darkness. He cursed the sound of the engine block, ticking loudly as it cooled after the long drive. Keeping to the woods, he had to use a small pencil light to check his footing as he made his way towards the cottage. Even with the aid of the torch, it was almost impossible to avoid the hundreds of broken twigs strewn on the ground, and twice he heard a loud crack that he was sure could be detected above the sound of the river.

Eventually, he reached the cottage. It had thick stone walls with small wooden windows, through one of which he detected a flickering light. He guessed that the occupants were either using candles to light the room or had lit a fire. He wondered if the cottage was linked to the main electrical grid. It wasn't the sort of question he'd thought to ask Alice's father when he'd spoken to him. Or maybe the couple inside were just being romantic. Whatever the reason, the scene before him didn't suggest he'd discovered a kidnapper's lair. But he had to make sure, and he approached the window, being careful to keep low and out of sight of anyone looking out. Once he was pressed against the stone wall, he inched his head higher, until he could see inside. A sofa had been drawn up against the fire, but its back faced him and he was unable to see if anyone was sitting in it. He was about to crouch back down, when he thought he heard a sound behind him.

“Stay where you are and keep down. I'm going to check it out.”

Alice did as she was told and huddled deep into the sofa, even though she thought Sam was being paranoid. Nobody knew where they were.

Sam quietly eased his way out of the cottage, through the back door, and headed for a part of the wood he had earmarked when they arrived. It gave him

an excellent view of the cottage and the path leading up to it. Because he and Alice had been sitting in the firelight, his eyes were already adjusted to the darkness. He kept perfectly still – and waited.

He couldn't see any car, but he thought he heard the snap of a twig above the sound of the waterfall. Moments later a figure emerged from the edge of the wood, about thirty feet from where he was standing. He watched the man switch off his torch and make his way to the cottage, crouching, as if he could make himself invisible. *Amateur hour*, thought Sam, but he knew he'd been lucky. He'd let his guard down and if a couple of professionals had wanted to, they could have finished him off without breaking into a sweat. Civilian life had dulled his instincts.

The figure was straightening up to look through the window into the room where Alice was waiting. Sam decided it was time to act and hoped that the man was alone. He sprang from the cover of the woods, barely making a sound and, just as the man began to stoop, he bent down and reached his arms around the man's ankles. At the same time, he used his forward momentum to thrust his left shoulder into his victim's lower body.

The man fell forward and instinctively put his hands out to stop himself from landing on his face. But Sam didn't give him time to recover and stabbed him in the small of the back with his knee, winding him. With all his strength, he brought the man's right arm behind his back, making it impossible for him to raise himself off the ground. Now up close, Sam realised his victim had long hair. Another mistake. He grabbed a handful and pulled back the man's head. He had the intruder where he wanted him and could break his neck like a twig. He literally held the man's life in his hands.

He had a decision to make.

Karl hadn't known what hit him. But he'd been struck with such force, he wouldn't have been surprised if he'd collided with a truck. He hit the ground with a thud, scarcely able to breathe, let alone talk. But he wanted to talk – desperately. And when his head was wrenched back, and he felt his neck about to snap, he wanted to beg for mercy. He knew when he was outclassed. But all he could do was close his eyes and pray he wouldn't die.

Karl tried to concentrate on his breathing, hoping his voice would return. He thought he could hear a door opening, but he was unable to turn his head to

look. And then he heard a woman's voice.

"Are you okay?"

For one glorious moment, Karl thought the woman with the sweet voice was talking to him, concerned for his welfare, but then he realised she had spoken in English. It was hard to think straight, especially when whether you lived or died was at the whim of your assailant.

"Yeah, do you know him?"

Karl heard footsteps and a pair of legs in expensive jeans and high heels suddenly came into view. The owner of the legs bent down and stared at his face. Karl tried to look harmless, which wasn't difficult, considering his predicament, and he noticed that the woman staring at him was very pretty. If his neck was about to be broken in two, it was nice to have something lovely to look at, he thought.

"No, I've never seen him before. You're not going to kill him, are you?"

They were the nicest words Karl had ever heard.

"Depends on if he does anything stupid."

"I won't," Karl managed to say, but it came out as a croak.

"Alice, can you go inside and look in the side pocket of my rucksack. You'll find a bunch of cable-ties. Bring me a couple."

For the first time, Karl hoped he might live. He realised his attacker was going to restrain him. When he was in the police force he was only issued with a single pair of handcuffs, so he used to carry cable-ties, just in case he had to take more than one person into custody.

A moment later Alice returned, and Karl felt his other arm being brought behind his back. His wrists were bound together, as were his ankles. He didn't resist. But he couldn't walk, and he was wondering what his assailant had planned, when the man physically picked him up and dragged him into the house. Karl was over seventy kilos and he knew what strength his attacker possessed to lift him off the ground so effortlessly.

The woman switched on a table lamp, indicating that the cottage was hooked up to the grid. It was the first time he managed to get a look at his attacker, and he was face-to-face with an athletic, short-haired man whose eyes were constantly alert. A military man, Karl would have guessed. He was just beginning to think that the worst was behind him, when the military man spoiled the moment.

"I could have broken your neck out there, but I let you live," he said, pointing to the garden. "You've got five minutes to persuade me not to change

my mind.”

FORTY-SEVEN

“Any chance you could untie my wrists and legs, so we can talk properly?”

“None whatsoever.”

Karl had thought it was worth a try but hadn't held out much hope. Even so, he gave it another go.

“I think you might have broken something when you pinned me to the ground.”

“Perhaps you should have thought of that before you decided to trespass.”

As he spoke, Sam roughly opened his prisoner's jacket and fetched out his wallet. It contained cash, credit cards, a driver's licence and an ID-card for the man's place of work.

“Karl Weber,” said Sam, reading from the ID. “Electronique Intelligente.”

“That's one of the family's businesses ... based in Rouen,” said Alice.

“So, you work for Schmitt. I have to say, Karl, this isn't looking too good for you,” said Sam, throwing the ID across the table until it hit Karl in the chest and landed in his lap.

“I'm head of security at the company, but I used to be a policeman.”

“What exactly are you keeping secure by snooping around here?”

“I was sent by Herr Schmitt to find his grandson's wife. He said she'd been abducted by an Englishman.”

Alice gave a humourless laugh.

“Does it look like I've been abducted?”

Karl returned her stare and nodded at her swollen cheek.

“How did you get that?”

“Perhaps you ought to ask your boss's precious grandson.”

“Your husband did that to you?”

Sam thought the man looked genuinely surprised, but he didn't rule out that it could have been an act and he was trying to save his skin.

“We're asking the questions, Weber. How did you know where we were?”

“The chambermaid at the hotel told me.”

“And how did she know?”

“I don't know, but it cost me a thousand francs.”

Alice eased herself into a chair, wincing before she spoke.

“That sounds like Cloe. She was probably snooping around the summer house. He could be telling the truth.”

“What were you supposed to do when you’d found us?” asked Sam.

“Just report back to Herr Schmitt.”

Karl tried leaning forward, but it was difficult with his hands tied behind his back. He worked his mouth before speaking, trying to moisten it.

“Could I ask a question?”

“You can ask. It doesn’t mean we’ll answer.”

“I don’t wish to be indelicate, but are you two having an affair? Is that why Herr Schmitt is looking for you?”

“Is that what he told you?” asked Alice, and Karl could tell she was annoyed at the suggestion.

“No,” said Karl, turning to Sam. “He said you’d got a vendetta against the family. He thinks you blame him for the death of your grandfather.”

Sam eyed Karl up and down. He was starting to think that the ex-policeman might be telling the truth after all. He decided to do the same and see where it led.

“My grandfather was a prisoner of war, and Hermann Schmitt shot him in cold blood and stole an expensive cigarette case that belonged to him.”

“And you’ve waited all this time to come here and do something about it?” asked Karl incredulously.

“I didn’t know until last week. My mother kept it from me.”

“Can you prove any of this?”

“No. The only witness is dead.”

“So, why are you here ... to put a bullet through his head and take back your precious cigarette case?”

Sam paused, grinding his teeth. He was being goaded and he didn’t like it. He felt like punching Karl in the face, but the man’s hands were tied behind his back. If he ever sank that low, he knew he’d be no better than Schmitt. So, he took a deep breath and waited for his anger to evaporate. Alice could sense his frustration and decided to take up the reins.

“They killed his father too.”

“What?”

Sam stood up and walked to the window. He leant his hands on the thick stone wall and stared into the darkness. Alice took it as a sign to continue.

“The cigarette case was sold for a great deal of money by Franz.”

“Herr Schmitt’s son?”

“Yes. And when Sam’s father discovered this, he was able to trace the sale back to Franz at the chateau. So, we think he came here to confront them and

they killed him.”

Alice and Karl couldn't see, but Sam was smiling. When Alice had used the word 'we', as if they were both already in this together, he found it unbelievably touching. He stared at his reflection in the window and saw a man who had never been in love. Was he falling in love now? He continued to stare into the glass, and the mirror-image of Alice and Karl stared back. She was so, so beautiful. And not just on the outside. But then the reflection vanished, to be replaced by Tanya and Vicki, pleading with him to come home. He rubbed his eyes to wipe away the thought. He was tired, but he needed to focus. He had to keep reminding himself that he was doing this for his family. For a better life.

“When was this?”

Karl's words brought Sam back to the present.

“Over twenty years ago. My father disappeared when I was just a boy.”

“But you don't know if that's what happened. I mean, you have no proof.”

“But we can get it,” said Alice enthusiastically. “I think I know where they might have hidden his body.”

“Where?”

She looked over at Sam, wondering if he minded her telling Karl what they had in mind. He simply nodded.

“In one of the caves at the bottom of the moat that surrounds the chateau.”

Karl lowered his eyes and stared at the table, as if he were trying to digest what he'd just been told. Sam watched him carefully, still unsure whether the ex-detective could be trusted. After all, he worked for the man he had come to punish.

“So,” said Karl, “you're planning on going to the chateau to search these caves for the proof you need.”

“We might be,” said Sam cautiously.

“Or are you simply going there to kill the man who murdered two members of your family?”

“Does it make a difference?” asked Sam, deliberately testing his prisoner.

“Yes. I might work for Herr Schmitt's company, but I was a policeman once. Helping you to find evidence of a murder to take to the authorities is one thing. Taking the law into your own hands and executing someone is quite another.”

Sam couldn't help letting out a laugh.

“Forgive me, Mr Weber, but you're hardly in a position to help anyone at

the moment.”

Karl smiled back and decided it was time to prove his captor wrong.

“I can help you get into the chateau.”

“Perhaps I don’t need your help.”

“You think you can handle the Schmitts all by yourself, I take it.”

“Nothing’s ever certain but I’m going to try.”

The reality of the situation was suddenly hitting home for Alice and she decided to speak up.

“Hermann had a vault built in the basement of the chateau. He keeps a lot of money there. Anton couldn’t help showing off to me and took me down to see it, hoping to impress me. But next to it I saw a gun cabinet with rifles and pistols.”

“So, they’re armed,” said Karl, using Alice’s revelation to bolster his argument. “Still feeling confident?”

“I’ll take my chances.”

“Do you have a gun?”

Sam stared back at him and grinned. Alice looked at his handsome face, fixated. His mischievous grin was what had attracted her to him when they first met.

“I didn’t have one when you came blundering in here, but it didn’t seem to matter then.”

“Yes, but I was just one man.”

“One man, or three. I’ll still take my chances.”

“Yes, of course,” said Karl, nodding as if in agreement. But he was smiling, and Sam could tell he had something up his sleeve.

“But how about nine men? Would you still take your chances?”

“Nine?” said Sam, trying to hide his surprise and not give Karl the pleasure of knowing he’d shocked him.

“At least.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

Karl pulled a face that said the pain in his arms and legs was sapping his strength.

“I tell you what,” he said, pausing for effect. “Why don’t you untie me, and we can discuss how you’re going to get into the chateau.”

“Why should I untie you?”

“Because, if you don’t, how can I be your inside man?”

FORTY-EIGHT

It was getting late and Hermann Schmitt had expected to hear from his head of security by now. In the meantime, he had taken all the precautions he could. He, Franz and Anton were all armed with pistols, as were the six men he had hired. Three were patrolling the grounds around the chateau, and the others were inside – one for each of the bedrooms the family used. He had decided that at night, when they were asleep, would be when they'd be at their most vulnerable. So, he had explained to Franz and Anton that they would have to remain alert during the day, while the men took turns resting, so that they could be on guard through the night.

It was not an ideal situation and the older Schmitt was the first to admit that they could do with more men. But even the presence of the six bodyguards they already had was becoming intrusive, and the women of the family had started to complain. They'd also questioned the sudden need for the extra security. They were aware of the large amounts of money that was stored in the basement, but they failed to see what had changed. Hermann hinted that threats had been made but, when asked, was reticent to offer any details. However, he knew he would not be able to keep up the pretence for long. To be on the safe side, he persuaded his wife and daughter-in-law to go to the family's town house in Munich. All he could do now was sit in his study, by the phone, waiting for Weber to call.

In the end he became too impatient and couldn't wait any longer. He was sick of sitting there, feeling like prey at the mercy of a predator with his own agenda. So, he picked up the phone. The last time he'd heard from his head of security, the man had wanted the telephone number of Alice's parents. He wanted to know why and dialled their number.

Alice's father answered. Hermann had hoped it would be her mother who picked up the phone, since the two men detested one another. But he needed some answers and did his best to be civil.

“Hello, Bernard, Hermann Schmitt here. Are you keeping well?”

Bernard Dubois was immediately on his guard. The men had only spoken when forced to at rare family gatherings, and the Frenchman knew that Herr Schmitt was not the sort to make a social call.

“I'm fine, thank you, Hermann. And you?”

“Good, good. I am sorry to bother you, but I was wondering if you might be

able to help me.”

Ah, here it comes, thought Bernard. The real reason for the call. It hadn't taken long.

“Yes?”

“A man in my employ told me he needed to speak with you earlier today and asked for your number. I was so busy at the time, I foolishly gave it to him without enquiring why he wanted it, and it's been bothering me ever since. So, I was wondering if you've received a call from someone you don't know, out of the blue.”

My God, thought Bernard, Schmitt must want something badly. He'd never heard the man admit he could have made a mistake before.

“Would this employee of yours also be a friend of Anton's?”

Schmitt had to think quickly and decided that Weber must have used that as a cover story.

“Yes, that's right. I hope he didn't make a nuisance of himself. What did he want?”

“Don't you know?”

At any other time, Schmitt would have sworn at the fool and slammed the phone down. He'd just explained to the idiot that he was in the dark.

“No,” said Schmitt.

The German was as curt as usual, but Bernard shrugged it off. He was used to it.

“Well, I thought it was a little strange at the time, but I went along with it. He said he was supposed to be meeting Alice and Anton at our holiday cottage and had forgotten the address.”

“Did you give it to him?”

“Of course,” said Bernard, determined to prove that Schmitt wasn't the only one who could be curt and rude.

Schmitt paused for several seconds while dozens of thoughts paraded through his mind. Weber must have suspected that Denham and Alice were at her family's holiday cottage. Had he gone to investigate? If he had, enough time had passed for him to find out if they were there and report back. So, why hadn't he called?

Schmitt needed to know the address of the cottage. Alice might have had it written down somewhere, but he didn't want to risk searching, only to come up empty. It was easier to continue lying to her father.

“We have a bit of a family emergency, Bernard, and I need to contact

Anton.”

“Nothing too serious, I hope.”

“No,” said Schmitt, trying to be as patient as he could.

“There’s no phone out there, I’m afraid.”

Just give me the fucking address.

“Perhaps you could give me the address, Bernard.”

Schmitt muttered curses to himself, while he listened to the sound of Alice’s father, thumbing through an address book. Didn’t the damn man know the address of his own cottage, for Christ’s sake?

Eventually, Bernard found what he was looking for and gave Schmitt the information he needed. Once Schmitt had copied it into a notebook, he slammed down the phone without saying good-bye. Bernard heard the dial tone, indicating the conversation was over, and, for the hundredth time, he couldn’t help wondering why Alice had decided to marry into such an awful family.

FORTY-NINE

Three generations of Schmitt men sat facing one another in the grandfather's study. The father and son had been summoned as soon as Hermann had finished his call to Alice's father.

"But if this Denham and Alice are at her family's holiday cottage, she must have gone there willingly," said Franz, looking pointedly at his son. "It looks like your womanising has finally pushed her away for good. And now she's shackled up with a man who'd like nothing better than to see us all dead. What a mess."

"Have you finished?" said Hermann, sick of his son's whining. "If you have, perhaps we could turn our attention to more pressing matters. Such as how to best protect the family."

Franz stared at the carpet, unable to look his father in the eye. Anton nearly smirked at his father's weakness but thought better of it. At times like this, he knew it was far better to let his grandfather do the talking. He and his father's presence were just a formality anyway. His grandfather had already decided what he was going to do, and they wouldn't have a say on the matter. His suspicions were soon confirmed.

"Let us assume, for the moment, that Alice and Denham have absconded to her family's cottage," Hermann began. "And let us further assume that, having discovered this, Weber headed over there to investigate. If that is the case, then we have to ask ourselves why he has not reported back."

"Maybe he didn't find anything and went home. Perhaps he's planning on calling in the morning," said Franz.

Anton shook his head. His father was his own worst enemy. Knowing his grandfather like he did, he was sure the older man would have already thought of that. Besides, his father should have known better than to interrupt when the man was in full flow. Hermann glared at Franz, proving the point. He continued as if Franz hadn't spoken.

"I have telephoned his home and there is no answer. Besides, I gave him explicit instructions to report back to me as soon as he discovered anything, no matter how insignificant."

"So, why hasn't he?" asked Franz, not knowing when to bite his tongue.

"Assuming the worst, which I find to be a useful approach, we must consider the fact that this Denham has somehow outwitted my head of security

– a man of not inconsiderable talents. If that is so, then it should serve as a warning that the grandson of the Denham family is made of sterner stuff than his predecessors.”

Franz helped himself to a large glass of his father’s schnapps and continued to interrupt.

“Well, if that’s the case, we’ll simply have to employ more men to watch over the place.”

Hermann Schmitt looked at his son with undisguised disgust.

“For how long? Do you intend to just sit here, cowering, while you wait for this Denham to make a move? What kind of a man are you?”

While Franz looked for a suitable retort, Anton decided to try and get into his grandfather’s good books. He had already worked out what was on the older man’s mind.

“I think we should go on the attack, sir. We know where he is. Let’s take the initiative and nip the problem in the bud.”

“Nip the problem in the bud?” said Franz, smirking. “Is that a euphemism for shooting the man in the head?”

“If that’s what it takes.”

“Words are easy, Anton. Are you volunteering to go and kill him?”

Anton paused for a second. He knew how killing Malcolm Denham had affected his father. But Anton had no such qualms. No, what gave him pause was fear. He had met Karl Weber and knew he was a man of experience. And yet the younger Denham must have got the better of him. But Anton did not dare show his fear in front of his grandfather and spoke up, trying to instil a confidence in his voice.

“No problem. I can take a couple of the men with me.”

Anton immediately regretted adding the caveat. It suggested he hadn’t the courage to face the man alone.

“But if you’d rather handle this without bringing in outsiders, sir, I’ll do it alone,” said Anton, trying to cover up his earlier blunder.

“This is no time for bravado,” said Hermann, and Anton was unsure if it was meant as an insult. “If we decide to do this, then we’ll do it properly and make sure the odds are in our favour. We will send three men to this cottage to take care of Mr Denham and bring Alice back where she belongs. There is no need to risk the lives of family members.”

Anton could have wept with relief but did his best not to show it. He was determined to grab on to the lifeline his grandfather had just thrown him.

“Will they do it?” he asked.

“I’m sure they will. If we pay them enough.”

“But what if Denham’s murder is traced back to us?”

Franz watched his son, as he tried to cover his own back. One minute he’d apparently been willing to head over there, guns blazing, and the next, he was prepared to let others do the job, provided the trail didn’t lead back to him.

“It will not be murder, dear Anton. Using my connections with the local authorities, I have procured licences for the six gentlemen and they are legally carrying handguns. We are concerned for Alice’s well-being. As far as we know, she has been abducted by a foreigner who has threatened the family. We are merely following up a lead from my investigator, with the intention of calling the police when Alice has been found. If Denham is killed while my men try to protect her, it would be most unfortunate. But it certainly would not be murder.”

“What if they fail and Denham hands them over to the police?” asked Franz.

Anton was glad his father had asked the question. It was on his lips, but he’d been too afraid to ask.

“Then our story still holds. Good God, man, this is not one of your cosy little business ventures. There are no guarantees. You are a Schmitt. Be a man and act like one.”

Suitably admonished, Franz took a healthy swig of schnapps, inwardly cursing two generations of his family at once.

“If we are agreed, I will make the arrangements.”

Hermann dismissed the younger members of the Schmitt family and called in the man guarding his door. He was the older and more experienced member of the team. Schmitt also knew him to be ruthless and easily swayed by large sums of money. The perfect man for the job.

“Remember,” warned Schmitt, “my grandson’s wife mustn’t be harmed.”

“What about the Englishman?” asked the man, failing to suppress a smile

“That is an entirely different matter.”

As he spoke, Schmitt handed the man an envelope containing more money than he’d ever seen.

“This is for you and the two men you think best suited to the task. The other three will remain here and continue to protect my family. Get the job done to my satisfaction and that will be doubled. How you distribute the remainder is entirely up to you. Do we have an understanding?”

The man headed for the door, a smile plastered across his face.
“I understand perfectly, sir.”

FIFTY

Karl tried to remember a time when he had felt so relieved, but he could not. In the space of an hour, he had faced the prospect of death and been trussed up as a prisoner, and now he was sitting, drinking coffee, prepared for him by Alice Schmitt. He massaged his weary limbs, now free of their restraints. He knew he wasn't completely out of the woods just yet, and he had to convince Denham that he'd been used and knew nothing about the killings of the Englishman's father and grandfather. He had to gain the man's trust.

Sam waited until Karl had a chance to get comfortable and drink a sip of his coffee, but he was eager to get down to business.

"Do you know these men that Schmitt has hired as protection?"

"Before we get into that, I think there's something else you need to know."

"Oh, yes?" asked Sam suspiciously, and Karl could sense the man's body tense.

"Yes. To find out the location of this cottage I telephoned Alice's parents. But I got their number from Schmitt."

"Did you tell him why you needed it?"

"No, but I'm overdue reporting back. He might have called them himself and put two and two together."

Sam immediately stood up from the table, put out the light and stepped outside, braving a sudden downpour that had just been unleashed. He returned after a couple of minutes.

"It seems quiet out there for the moment, but that doesn't prove a thing. The rain could mask the sound of anyone approaching through the wood. This place is so isolated, we're sitting ducks. I just got lucky with Mr Weber here," said Sam charitably.

"Do you think they'll come after us?" asked Alice.

"It's a possibility we can't afford to ignore. We've got to get out of here right now."

"I'll go and get my car and meet you on the track," said Weber, making his way to the front door.

Sam let him go, knowing he had no choice but to trust him now. Grabbing his rucksack, he started filling it with his possessions for the second time that day.

“Are you up to this?” he asked, turning to Alice.

“I think so.”

“Good. Then let’s go.”

They headed for Sam’s four-by-four and the ex-SAS man helped Alice into the passenger seat. He quickly gunned the engine and drove along the rough track to the end of the wood. When they got there, Weber’s car was nowhere to be seen, and for a moment Sam thought the man had double-crossed them. But then, in the glow of his headlights, he saw the ex-detective standing on the track, flagging them down. Sam wound down his window, and Karl had to shout to be heard above the sound of the rain.

“My car’s stuck in the mud, you’ll have to give me a tow.”

“We haven’t got time for that. Every minute we stay here puts us at risk. Get in, and maybe we’ll come back for your car when it’s light.”

Sam’s car was a two-door, and he had to get out and push his seat forward to let Weber into the back. The man hesitated but climbed in, realising that Sam was right. As soon as he was back behind the wheel, Sam pressed the pedal to the floor and headed down the track to the main road, three minutes away.

They had nearly made it, when a car suddenly turned off the road and headed towards them. Sideways on, it had looked like a saloon, but now, staring into its headlights, it was no longer possible to tell. But Sam decided to gamble, hoping he’d been right. He thought of Weber’s car, stuck in the mud, and it gave him an idea.

He quickly spun the wheel to the right and headed across the grass. He was forced to slow down, but his old off-roader lived up to its name and kept going. When he looked in the mirror, he saw that the car had turned to follow on behind. At first it seemed to keep pace with them, and Sam wondered if he’d made a mistake about it being a two-wheel drive. But then the headlights stopped moving and fell away into the distance. The sound of a shot could be heard, followed by a thud, as a bullet hit the car’s bodywork.

“Is everyone okay?” yelled Sam, concentrating on keeping his old car moving.

“Yes,” said both passengers in unison.

“I think it’s safe to say whoever’s in the car isn’t friendly.”

Alice was too terrified to respond, and silently willed the car to keep going, hoping to put as much distance between the two vehicles as possible. But all too soon they reached the boundary of the property. Sam drove into the wood and stopped.

“Alice, listen to me. I want you to get out here and hide among the trees. If you hear them coming your way, the road is just there, on the other side of the fence, and you can climb over and flag down the first car you see.”

“I don’t know ...”

“Please, Alice, just trust me. I’ve got a plan. But I don’t want to give them time to get organised.”

She looked into his blue eyes and he nodded reassuringly.

“Everything will be okay, I promise.”

She got out of the car and found a suitable spot to hide, behind some trees, close to the fence.

Once she was settled, Sam revved the engine and put it into gear.

“Karl?”

“Yes?”

“Put your seat-belt on and make sure it’s tight.”

“Why? What are ...?”

Before Karl could complete the question, he was thrown into the seat, as the car sped off.

The leader of the trio, with the thick envelope of cash safely stowed away in his coat pocket, kept throwing the BMW into forward and reverse gear, hoping to free the car from the quagmire surrounding it. But every time he thought he’d managed to extricate them from their muddy prison, the tyres lost their grip and the car slipped back into its default position.

“Rear-wheel-drive piece of shit,” cried one of the other men helpfully.

The driver stopped revving the engine and turned to the man who had complained about the car’s roadworthiness.

“What the fuck did you shoot at them for? I told you the woman mustn’t be harmed. Now the guy knows we’re trying to kill him.”

The man simply shrugged.

“Both of you. Get out and fucking push.”

Reluctantly, the two gunmen did as they were told, opting for the front of the car, to avoid getting painted in mud thrown up from the moving rear tyres. The driver watched them squinting against the glare of the headlights, as they grabbed the bonnet and prepared to push. Suddenly they turned away, alerted by a sound behind them.

Sam's four-wheel-drive lurched away from the shelter of the trees and headed straight for the stricken car. He could clearly see the two figures standing in the glow of the BMW's lights and they turned at the sound of his approach, drawing their weapons.

"Get down!"

Karl didn't have to be told twice, and he lay low, clutching his seat-belt for dear life. Sam took one last look to make sure he was on course and then did the same. He knew full well that most bullets could travel through the thin panelling of modern cars with ease, but an engine block was a different matter. He kept his foot on the pedal and braced himself.

Despite being prepared, Sam still felt the pain in his abdomen, as the forward momentum of his body was halted by the belt, strapped across his waist. Above the crunching sound of metal against metal, he heard someone scream, and, at first, he thought it might be Karl. But he had no time to think and he was already unstrapping himself and reaching for the handle of the door.

He emerged to find one of the men lying dead across the bonnet of his car. The man's legs had been crushed between the two vehicles and were bent at a grotesque angle. But the other man had managed to jump clear and was reaching for his pistol, lying in the grass where he'd dropped it during his mad rush to avoid being killed.

But Sam didn't give him the time to get to it and charged at him. The man turned to face the threat, but Sam had already built up enough momentum to destroy any defence the gunman had in mind. The instincts he'd learnt, years before, kicked in, and he brought the heel of his hand up, under the man's chin, snapping his head back. At the same time, he splayed out his fingers, making a claw, and dug them into his victim's eye sockets. He knew he couldn't afford the luxury of holding back. Not with another armed man in the mix. The man's body went limp beneath him, his neck broken in two. But before Sam could turn his attention to the man in the car, he heard someone cry out.

"Drop it, or I'll shoot."

Confused, Sam turned to look in the direction of the BMW, assuming the command had come from the third gunman. Did the man think he was armed? He looked over to his own car and saw Karl, half of his body hanging out of the door, the rest of him still trapped in the rear. He was holding his hands out

before him, as if he were aiming a handgun.

And the ruse had worked. The third gunman had been about to shoot Sam in the back and had hesitated. But now he was looking straight in Karl's direction. Slowly, understanding dawned on his face, when he realised the ex-detective was bluffing and his hands were empty. An evil smile came to his lips and he turned, before firing at the trapped figure.

Sam didn't have time to see if Karl had been hit, and he was already closing the distance between himself and the gunman. The man had chosen to leave the door to his car open, in the hope of partially shielding his body. But the ex-special forces soldier used it to his advantage and kicked it shut with as much force as he could muster. The door slammed on the gunman's legs, causing him to cry out in pain. He managed to hold on to his pistol, but it wasn't pointing in Sam's direction.

Sam grabbed the man's gun-arm by the wrist and smashed it repeatedly against the bodywork of the car, until the man couldn't maintain his grip any longer and dropped his weapon. The gunman's eyes stared helplessly, stricken with fear, and he made the mistake of turning his head in search of an escape route that wasn't there. But Sam was trained to exploit any error the enemy was foolish enough to make, and he grabbed the back of the man's head, slamming it forward into the door-frame of the car. The first time the man groaned. The second time, he fell to the ground like a rag doll, dead.

Once he was sure the man wasn't going to cause any more trouble, Sam raced over to his car to check on Karl. The man had saved his life and he wanted to thank him from the bottom of his heart. The lights of the BMW still illuminated Sam's car and he reached in to help his new partner out of the rear seat.

But when he looked inside, he was greeted by the sight of blood, oozing from a wound in the ex-detective's neck, and Karl's lifeless eyes stared back at him, unable to receive the gratitude Sam had wanted to offer.

FIFTY-ONE

The antique clock on the mantelpiece struck two. It was the middle of the night and the men of the Schmitt household were still awake, gathered around the huge log fireplace, drinking schnapps. One of the three remaining bodyguards Hermann Schmitt had hired guarded the door. Another was seated in the hallway, keeping a close eye on the main entrance to the chateau, and the third was patrolling the immediate vicinity outside. Bright exterior lights illuminated the formal gardens, and the darkness of the moat and grounds lay hidden in the distance.

“We should have heard from them by now,” said Franz, nervously pacing up and down in front of the fire.

“I am well aware of that,” replied his father irritably.

“Well, doesn’t that concern you?”

“Worrying solves nothing, Franz. When will you finally learn that?”

“That’s all very well, but the fact remains that we’ve sent three armed men to deal with this Englishman and heard nothing back. Now, either they’ve pissed off with the money you gave them or...”

“They wouldn’t dare,” insisted Hermann confidently. “Besides, they knew the fee would be doubled upon their return.”

“Exactly,” cried Franz, growing in confidence, now it was clear his father’s plan had failed. “So, the most likely alternative is that the Englishman has killed them before they killed him!”

“You’re being hysterical, Franz. We have got the better of these Denhams twice before, remember. You are jumping at shadows.”

“Am I? I think you’re both burying your heads in the sand and underestimating this man. And don’t forget Karl. Where’s he? Unlike those thugs you sent on a fool’s errand, he was a trained detective, and this Denham still somehow got the upper hand. Don’t you agree, Anton? Speak up.”

Anton couldn’t fault his father’s logic, but he wasn’t about to say so in front of his grandfather.

“I say let him come here. We’re ready for him,” he said, hoping to demonstrate a confidence he didn’t feel.

Anton’s grandfather nodded.

“I agree.”

“You think those three thugs out there will protect us?” said Franz,

gesturing to the door. “What makes you think this Denham won’t put those in the ground like the rest? You’re deluding yourselves.”

“I don’t hear you coming up with any suggestions,” said Anton, biting back.

Franz drained his glass and leant both hands on the mantelpiece. When he spoke, he was staring into the orange flames, dancing above the logs. He hadn’t the courage to look his father in the eye.

“I say we get the hell out of here.”

“You mean run away?”

Hermann glared at his son. As he continued staring into the flames, Franz could feel his father’s eyes boring into him.

“Why not?”

“Why not? Because you’re a Schmitt, that’s why not. Thank God the Cold War is over. If Germany had to rely on men like you to defend the Fatherland, all would be lost. Fortunately, your son has more of a backbone than his father.”

Franz slowly turned to face his father and sneered.

“I am well aware that I am a disappointment to you, father. You remind me of the fact every single day.”

Anton could tell that the two men were on the verge of coming to blows. Although he wouldn’t have admitted it to anyone, he was scared. There was a threat out there somewhere, and the last thing they needed was to fight among themselves. So, he decided to intervene and get the conversation back on track.

“We couldn’t run forever. We’d have to face up to this Denham sometime.”

“I’m not suggesting we run forever,” said Franz, pleased that his suggestion was being considered. “We could go to the police and let them deal with him. Then, once he’s out of the way, we can resume our lives as if nothing happened.”

Hermann Schmitt let out a derisive snort.

“Now who’s being deluded, Franz. The police? My God, are you mad? And what happens when they start investigating? This Denham will be able to put forward his side of the story. And who knows what that bitch Anton married has planned.”

Anton stiffened at the insult but said nothing. If his grandfather ever learnt of the beating he’d given her, the older man would probably blame him for sending her straight into Denham’s arms. But Hermann hadn’t finished.

“We have too many bodies buried to involve the police. And you both know I’m not speaking figuratively,” said Schmitt, staring pointedly at his son

and grandson in turn.

“So, we just wait?” said Franz, shaking his head, but knowing his father was right.

“Yes, we wait. And we remain prepared and alert. Must I remind you that this Denham is one man and there are six of us, armed and ready?”

The younger men shook their heads.

“Then we are agreed?”

Hermann stared at his family, waiting for an answer.

“Agreed,” they said in unison.

“A toast,” said the older man, raising his glass.

“To the Schmitt family.”

The three men knocked back their drinks, but the older man’s apparent confidence had failed to brighten the mood of the others. So, he decided to end matters with a motivational speech.

“I killed one Denham in the war as if he were a cockroach. And I killed his son when he had the temerity to come to my home, seeking revenge. And, together, we will welcome the grandson, when he deigns to visit us, and send him the way of his forefathers.”

Hermann Schmitt downed the rest of his drink with a flourish and headed for his study, leaving father and son to seek solace from the warmth of the fire. Neither dared look at the other in case the fear, deep within, showed in their eyes.

FIFTY-TWO

Incredibly, the engine of Sam's four-wheel-drive was still running. He got behind the wheel and drove it carefully towards the spot where he had left Alice. He parked it a short distance away, hoping not to spook her into jumping the fence and heading for the main road. With any luck, she would realise that only Sam's car could make it across the muddy field, and that he would be the one driving it. He got out and slowly approached her hiding place.

"Alice! It's me. Sam. It's okay to come out now."

After a few seconds, during which Sam assumed she was checking that he was alone, she emerged from the trees and rushed towards him. She threw her arms around him and buried her head in his chest. It seemed so natural, a warm glow spread through his body, despite what he'd just been through. Having just faced death and come through unharmed, he felt elated. It was the same sensation he'd experienced in Iraq, and he'd almost forgotten how intoxicating it could be. He felt alive and wanted to hold Alice's head in his hands and kiss her. But he resisted.

"What happened?"

"They're dead," said Sam, knowing there was no point in trying to protect her from the truth. She would see for herself soon enough.

"What about Karl?"

Sam shook his head, indicating that Weber hadn't made it. Alice cried out and clung to him even tighter. When she eventually pulled away, there were tears in her eyes. Sam had wanted to tell her the ex-detective had saved his life but realised it would only make things worse. Perhaps he would tell the man's family, if he lived long enough to meet them. He wasn't to know that the ex-wife no longer cared.

"Do you think Hermann Schmitt sent those men to kill us?"

Alice's words brought Sam back to the here and now, and thoughts of heroes and right and wrong and whether anybody gave a shit anymore were forgotten.

"Yes ... well, to kill me, at any rate. But they didn't seem too worried if you got caught in the crossfire. In which case, we need to get you somewhere safe."

"What about you?"

"I'm going to the chateau."

“Alone?”

“Yes.”

“I’m coming with you.”

“That wouldn’t be a good idea. I’m not going to be responsible for you getting hurt. This is my battle.”

“Your battle?”

Sam detected the wild anger in her eyes, and quickly realised he should have handled things with more tact.

“It was my grandfather and father they killed.”

“And who’s ‘they’? Hermann? Or is it Hermann and Franz? And what about Anton?”

“He would have been just a boy back then.”

“So, after you’ve acted as executioner and killed his grandfather and father you’ll be even, and Anton will be spared.”

Sam ignored the sarcasm in her voice.

“I might not kill him, but I’ll make him wish he never laid a hand on you.”

“And that’s supposed to make me feel better?”

Sam took a step back and massaged his stomach, feeling the injury caused by the seat-belt, now that the adrenaline had worn off.

“Are you hurt?” said Alice, concern in her voice.

“It’s nothing. Look, we need to get moving.”

To Sam’s surprise, Alice got in the car without giving him an argument. He got behind the wheel and drove back to the dirt track, trying to give the BMW a wide berth so that she wouldn’t see the carnage he’d left behind.

“Shouldn’t we report what happened to the police?” asked Alice.

“Later.”

“You mean after you’ve killed your family’s murderers.”

The note of sarcasm had returned to her voice.

“You were the one who said I’m going there to kill them.”

“And you’re not?”

“No. I’m going there to persuade them to go to the police and confess what they’ve done.”

“Persuade? And what if they don’t want to be persuaded?”

“That’s their choice.”

Eventually they reached the main road and Sam headed towards the village, before putting on the heater to help dry them off. He shifted uncomfortably in his seat and reached into the waistband of his jeans, pulling

out a pistol.

“Did you get that off one of those men?”

“I don’t think he had any further use for it.”

They drove along for several minutes in silence, until Alice had another question.

“According to Karl, Hermann hired six of those thugs. That means there must still be three of them back at the chateau.”

“You’re a maths expert as well as multi-lingual?”

Alice ignored his attempt at humour.

“And, of course, the Schmitts will be armed too.”

“I suppose. Does that make six altogether?”

Sam’s mischievous grin had returned, but this time she just gave him a look, warning him to be serious.

“Two against six. I suppose it could be worse.”

Sam shook his head.

“Two? Make that one ... just me.”

“One against six? What chance have you got?”

“In the army we used to call that a target-rich environment.”

“Anyway, it’s two against six.”

“No, it’s one.”

Silence returned, and five minutes went by, as they watched the empty road ahead of them. Sam relaxed, pleased to have finally won the argument. He looked across at the passenger seat and Alice’s eyes were closed. Sam assumed she had fallen asleep and turned his attention to the road. A few seconds later the silence was broken, when Alice whispered in his direction, her eyes still closed.

“*Two* against six.”

FIFTY-THREE

With little traffic on the roads and the rain starting to ease, it took only seventy minutes to reach the chateau. Sam parked in a passing place on the narrow country lane and they could see the main gates of the Schmitt home in the distance. Alice had stubbornly insisted on remaining in the car, and, short of physically manhandling her, Sam hadn't been able to think of a way to persuade her otherwise. On the one hand, he couldn't help admitting that he needed her to find the cave where she suspected he might find his father's body, but, on the other, she was injured, and he didn't want to be worrying about her safety when the risks were so high. Despite the assurances he had given to Alice at the cottage, he was a realist and the odds were stacked against him. It didn't matter how good a soldier he might have thought he was, he was pushing his luck. And luck was half the battle, he reminded himself.

"Before we go in, I want to lay some ground rules."

"Whatever you say."

Alice was smiling, and he wanted to shake her and tell her how foolish she was being. Perhaps the fact that she had lived with the family had convinced her she wasn't in any danger. But he knew otherwise and he wished he could knock some sense into her. On the other hand, she'd proved she was a strong and resourceful woman and he had to hope that continued.

"We'll keep well away from the chateau and stay in the dark. Luckily there's no moon, but there's just enough light for us to manage without torches on open ground."

"Check," she said, giving him a salute.

"I haven't finished, and, for the love of God, will you take this seriously?"

"I am."

Her smile had gone, and he realised she was using humour as a defence mechanism. Inside she was probably terrified. It only made him feel even more protective of her.

"Okay. You said the gate opens electronically."

"Yes, but you need a remote control. I keep one in my car."

"Well, that's our first problem right there. I can climb the fence, but you'd never be able to manage it with the injury to your ribs."

"The gates can be opened once you're inside. There's a switch on a post a few metres away from the gate."

“Oh, good.”

Alice could detect his disappointment, and she realised he had probably thought he'd found a way of leaving her in the car.

“See, I told you I'd come in useful.”

Her smile had returned.

“Don't get cocky. Once we're in, you can remind me how indispensable you are by leading me to the cave. Do you think it will be bricked up?”

“I don't know. I told you, I've never seen it.”

“It probably will be. I'll take something with me to open it up. You said you thought there were two caves?”

“Yes.”

“Could there be more?”

“I've no idea.”

“See, you're not quite as indispensable as you thought you were.”

“What about when we find the cave?” said Alice, ignoring his jibe.

“I'll look around while you stay hidden at the top of the moat. If you see any sign of someone coming, give me a whistle and hide.”

Alice pursed her lips together and blew until a weak, high-pitched sound emerged.

“It'll have to do.”

Alice pulled a face, pretending to be insulted.

“Okay, are you ready?”

Alice gave another salute and he shook his head as he made his way to the back of the car. From a tool box he retrieved a large handle that fitted on to a jack. He weighed it in his hands and decided it would have to do. He leaned back into the car and reached for the pistol he'd placed between the seats. He checked the magazine one more time and slipped it into the waistband of his jeans.

“Wait by the gate, out of sight.”

As she made her way, Alice looked back to see Sam throw the jack-handle into the grounds of the chateau, before clambering over the eight-foot metal railings. He ran to the driveway and flicked the switch Alice had told him about. The gates slowly opened, but Alice joined him as soon as there was a large enough gap for her to make her way through. Sam flicked the switch for a second time and made sure the gates had begun to close before telling Alice to lead the way.

Fortunately, the lawns were well manicured and as flat as a bowling green,

so there was no risk of either of them tripping in the dark. By the time they reached the edge of the moat, their eyes had completely adjusted to the limited amount of light. Clambering down into the moat was a different matter, and it took them almost twenty minutes before they found a track sufficiently wide enough for Alice to attempt it. Once they arrived at the bottom, Sam reached into his jacket pocket for his pencil torch. He hoped the light it produced couldn't be detected from the chateau.

It took them a further ten minutes to reach the rear of the moat, where Alice thought at least one of the caves was located. But the whole area was overgrown, and they were just about to give up, when Alice spotted a sledgehammer lying on the ground.

“What do you think that's doing there?”

Sam lifted it up to take a closer look.

“I'd say it would be ideal for knocking down a wall ... say, to a cave?”

“Why leave it there?”

“Saves lugging it back to the chateau, I suppose. It's pretty heavy.”

Sam used the handle of his jack to pull back the bushes, hiding the side of the moat. He revealed a wall of irregular stones, cemented together.

“This looks like it might be it. We're quite a way from the chateau but I'm going to have to make a noise breaking through this. The fact that we're in the moat might deflect some of the sound, but I wouldn't count on it. Especially in the middle of the night. Do you think you can make it back up to the top without a torch?”

“I can try.”

Sam noticed the confidence she'd displayed earlier had deserted her, and he tried to give her some encouragement.

“Just remember to stay out of the light, and if you see someone heading this way, give me a whistle and hide.”

“Got you.”

He watched her stumbling off into the dark alone and had to fight an urge to run after her. She looked so vulnerable, clutching her ribs, he wanted to protect her, and he almost decided to forget about the cave. But he quickly realised he'd come too far to turn back now, so he picked up the sledgehammer and smashed it against the wall. The sound of metal against rock seemed to resound along the full length of the moat, making him cringe. He stopped and listened for any sign that someone might have heard. But it was still deathly quiet, save for the hoot of an owl in the distance. So, he raised the hammer again,

smashing it against the rock for a second time. And a third. And a fourth.

It took eight swings to create a hole large enough for him to get his arms through and reach inside the cave. He shone his torch, but it wasn't powerful enough to illuminate the black hole within. Reaching for the jack-handle, he passed half of it through the whole and used the rest as a lever, to dislodge the surrounding stone and brick. Eventually he managed to make an aperture large enough for him to crawl through.

He forced himself to wait until his breathing had returned to normal after his recent exertion. And he listened. The hoot of the owl could still be heard, but there was no whistle. Perhaps Alice had tried to warn him when he'd been hammering at the wall. Should he climb to the top of the moat and check it out for himself? In the end, he decided he didn't want to waste any more time. It would be light in a little over an hour.

Sam crawled through the opening he had just created and switched on his torch. Something bright and shiny reflected back. He bent over to investigate and found a gold necklace, partially wrapped in a cloth. As he drew nearer, he realised it wasn't alone. There was jewellery of all kinds. Against the wall he spotted large rectangular objects wrapped in more of the same cloth and tied with string. He felt the one closest to him and guessed they were paintings, mounted in fancy frames.

"My God, there must be a fortune here."

As he whispered the words, he turned and continued his search for more treasure, but his foot hit an object, lying on the floor of the cave. He knelt and shone his torch to investigate. A skull stared back at him, partially clad in skin, mummified by the dry atmosphere of the cave. The remains of a suit still covered the skeleton, as if preserving the dignity of the person to whom it had belonged. Sam's heart was in his mouth, as he ran his torch down the length of the body, until he noticed, under the rib cage where the pocket of the cadaver's jacket had rotted away, lay a leather wallet.

His hands shaking, Sam reached for the wallet and carefully examined it. There were a few francs still poking out, clearly not worth removing when a veritable treasure trove existed only a few feet away. Sam felt behind the money and found what he was looking for. A photograph of a pretty woman and a small boy, proudly holding her hand. A lump appeared in his throat and he felt like crying. Instead, he offered an apology long overdue.

"I'm sorry, dad, for ever doubting you. I should have known you never would've deserted us."

Sam placed the photograph in his coat pocket and stood up. He had found what he was looking for. It was time to leave and call the police. He turned and examined the valuables strewn across the floor of the cave. Had a Fabergé cigarette case once been amongst them?

He returned to the necklace and examined it. In the dark, it looked very much like the one his mother had given him to sell. But he was no expert and he had no idea what it would be worth. Enough to give him and his family a new life? Maybe. He thought of stuffing his pockets with whatever he could find but, after finding his father's body, the idea only made him feel grubby. The necklace would have to do. If it wasn't enough to replace his grandfather's legacy, at least he would be able to give it to his mother to replace the one she had given him. He turned to face the opening of the cave, ready to crawl through and return to the moat.

But then he stopped and stood absolutely still, when he heard the unmistakable sound of someone pulling the shrubbery away from the mouth of the cave.

FIFTY-FOUR

Sam inched slowly towards the wall, next to the opening, and pressed his body against the rock. He reached for the jack-handle he had left there and raised it above his head. Had Alice got tired of waiting and come to see how he was getting on? The light from a torch suddenly illuminated the inside of the cave, and Sam had to press his body further back to make sure he couldn't be seen. Alice didn't have a torch, unless she'd found one from somewhere. But he couldn't call her name. All he could do was wait and see what the person with the torch did next.

Any doubts he'd had that the inquisitive visitor to the cave might be Alice were quickly dispelled when three shots rang out, almost deafening him. Bullets ricocheted off the walls of the cave but failed to hit him. Sam braced himself. Whoever had fired might have thought it was a way of making sure the cave was empty before entering. If that was the case, then they didn't know their business. The only sure-fire way of clearing a room was to chuck in a grenade or set fire to the place. You learnt that in basic training, for God's sake.

But clearly the owner of the gun hadn't attended basic training, and a hand, clutching a torch, slowly made an appearance. But Sam waited and held his breath. He thought the owner of the torch would angle it into every corner of the cave, while he kept his head firmly outside. That would be the smart move. But the man wasn't smart.

Another hand appeared, this time holding a gun, but Sam still waited. His patience was rewarded when the man's head appeared, as he prepared to pull himself through the hole. Sam didn't hesitate and brought the jack-handle down in one swift motion. There was a loud crack as it struck the man's skull. A shot fired, when he involuntarily pulled his trigger finger. His neck no longer supported his head and his face hit the dirt of the cave floor. Almost in the same instant, the gun and torch fell from his hands.

Sam knelt and picked up the torch, shining it into the man's face. His tongue protruded, and blood oozed from his mouth and his nostrils. There was no pulse. Sam wasted no time. He needed to get out of there. He dragged the body into the cave and placed it on the opposite side to where his father's body rested. He couldn't bear the thought of them lying together.

He resisted the temptation to climb outside, and instead forced himself to

stop and listen. If someone else was out there, he would be a sitting duck. But, mercifully, there was only silence and he crawled through, relieved to finally be out in the open. He worked his way out of the moat to find Alice, but she was gone. He called her name but there was no reply. With no other option, he worked his way to the front of the chateau.

As he approached the building, careful to remain in the shadows, he took stock of what he could see. Another man, wearing a long coat and presumably armed with a pistol beneath, nonchalantly walked around the chateau, as if he were a sentry. If that was his assignment, thought Sam, then he was doing a piss-poor job. For one thing, he was standing in the full glare of the outside lights for all to see. The man obviously hadn't heard Sam's hammering, or his colleague's futile use of his weapon. Sam ignored the guard for the moment.

Instead, the ex-soldier tried to see into the ground floor windows. But the angle was all wrong. The occupants had left the curtains open, so he found a suitable tree and began to climb. As he steadied himself on a branch, he squinted for another look. Soon it became clear why the curtains hadn't been drawn. Whoever had left them open wanted him to be able to peer inside. Three generations of the Schmitt family stood, warming themselves by the fireplace.

And there amongst them, her hands tied behind her back, stood Alice.

FIFTY-FIVE

Sam climbed down from the tree and walked towards the main doors of the chateau. The would-be sentry was still standing there, scarcely twenty metres away, totally oblivious to his presence. Sam could have shot him dead before the man even knew what was happening, but that wasn't an option. He was too close to the chateau and the sound of the shot would alert the whole household.

He stood facing the man, taking care to remain hidden in the darkness. He parted his legs, removed the pistol from the waistband of his jeans and aimed it in a two-handed grip at the brightly-lit figure. Determined not to startle the man more than was necessary, he spoke in a clear and calm voice.

“I have a gun pointed at your head, but I won't shoot if you do exactly as I say.”

The man couldn't help but react to the sound of Sam's voice, apparently coming out of nowhere. He instinctively backed away towards the doors of the chateau, his eyes wide, staring into the darkness. Sam was reminded of a rabbit, startled by the headlights of an oncoming car. The man in his sights was even foolish enough to bring his right hand to the front of his coat, within reaching-distance of his gun.

“If your hand moves another inch you're going to die.”

The assertive words, spoken with a confidence that told the man it was not an idle threat, caused him to freeze on the spot.

“Good. Now, I want you to slowly walk towards the sound of my voice without making any sudden moves. Do you think you can do that?”

The man simply nodded.

“Okay, start walking.”

Sam watched the man's every move, as he left the glare of the chateau's lights and hesitantly made his way into the darkness. It was amusing to see the perplexed look on the man's face, as he walked, not really knowing where he was going. Sam didn't give him time to let his eyes adjust to the inky blackness.

“Carefully grab the lapels of your coat and hold it open.”

The man jumped, suddenly realising that Sam was standing only a few feet away, but he did as he was told. When he opened the coat, he revealed a pistol

in a holster, attached to the belt of his trousers.

“Now, slowly take your left hand and undo your belt and pull it free of your trousers. If your hand goes anywhere near your gun you’re dead.”

Again, the man did as he was told, with the result that the holster, together with its contents, fell to the ground.

“Good. Now, take five steps back.”

As the man retreated, Sam retrieved the pistol from the holster and held it in his other hand, all the while watching his prisoner like a hawk.

“Where’s your friend?”

The man didn’t answer.

“Look, I’ve already killed your other four associates, so one more isn’t going to make any difference. If you don’t want to die, tell me where your friend is.”

The man hesitated, but only for a second, while he tried to digest this latest piece of information.

“He’s in the hallway guarding the main doors from the other side.”

“What’s to stop him from blowing your head off the next time you go back into the chateau?”

The man hesitated again.

“For fuck’s sake, I haven’t got time for this,” said Sam angrily.

The man watched in horror as Sam took aim with the gun in his right hand, ready to execute him. Instinctively, he raised his hands in the act of surrender and blurted out the answer Sam was looking for.

“We have a signal. I knock five times and then he unlocks the door.”

“You don’t have a key?”

“No.”

This time it was Sam’s turn to hesitate, while he gathered his thoughts and formulated a plan.

“What’s your name?”

“Hans.”

“Well, Hans, let me ask you a question. How long do you think it takes a man to pull a trigger?”

“A second. Maybe less.”

“Let’s agree on ‘less’. So, let’s say I walk behind you to those doors over there with a gun pointed at your back, what do you think would happen if you pulled some shit and tried taking it off me?”

Hans didn’t answer at first, so Sam waited.

“You’d kill me before I got the chance?”

“Correct. So, what we’re going to do is walk over to those doors, where you’re going to knock five times and wait for your mate to open them. Got it?”

“Yes.”

He had to hope Hans didn’t do anything foolish. If he did, Sam had already decided to shoot him in the back and melt away into the darkness until someone came out to investigate. Fortunately, his prisoner behaved, and they made it to the door. Hans turned his head slightly and saw Sam nod. He knocked five times. Footsteps could be heard approaching the door, followed by the sound of a key turning in the large brass lock. A tall, heavy-set man answered, smiling at his friend. But then he spotted Sam and instinctively brought his hand inside his jacket to reach for his gun. Sam aimed the pistol in his left hand at the tall man’s head.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you. I’m quite prepared to kill you both if you don’t behave.”

The new man stepped back, his hands raised in an act of submission. He was clearly a little quicker on the uptake than his friend Hans, thought Sam. He spotted an open door off the hallway that led to a large dining room. A quick glance confirmed it was empty.

“Both of you, slowly walk into the room over there,” said Sam, nodding his head in the direction of the open door.

While their backs were turned, he placed one of the pistols into the waistband of his jeans and reached into his coat for a set of the cable-ties he’d brought with him. Once they were in the room, he told them to stand in the middle and threw one of the ties at Hans.

“Tie your friend’s hands behind his back.”

While Hans did as he was told, Sam quickly glanced around the room. It was heated by some old metal radiators. The sort he had huddled against as a schoolboy on long winter days.

“Now, step away from him.”

Keeping his pistol squarely aimed at the taller man, Sam relieved him of his gun.

“Okay, Hans, now tie him to the radiator,” said Sam, throwing him another cable-tie.

Once the taller man was secure, Sam got Hans to turn around and he tied him up the same way to another radiator.

“Where’s the nearest toilet?”

Hans smirked at Sam's question.

"Nerves getting to you?"

"Just tell me where the fucking thing is."

The anger in Sam's voice wiped the smile from Hans' face.

"There's one at the rear of the hallway, underneath the stairs."

"And the Schmitts ... have they been holed up in that lounge all night?"

"Yes."

"Are you boys going to keep quiet, or will I have to come back here and get some target practice?"

As he said the words, Sam pointed his pistol at various parts of their bodies.

"We won't give you any trouble," said the taller and smarter man.

"Good."

With that, Sam left the two men and headed into the hallway. The stairs were made of marble and curved up to the first floor, creating a large covered area beneath them. Tucked into the corner was a door. Sam entered and found himself in a large guest cloakroom, with two sinks and two separate toilet cubicles. He thought it was more the sort of set-up you would have expected in a hotel rather than a private home. He headed for the furthest cubicle, placed two of his three pistols in the bin, and waited. He had already decided that he would give it half an hour. If no one showed, he would come up with something else. Only six minutes had gone when he heard the door to the cloakroom open.

Someone entered and immediately headed for one of the sinks. Sam heard a heavy sigh and water began running from one of the taps. He peered out to see a man of about fifty, with black hair swept back, wearing an expensive-looking suit. He was a little overweight, and his bulging cheeks gave him a childish appearance, despite his age. He splashed water on his chubby face. Sam stepped out from the cubicle and used the sound of the running water to mask his approach. The next time Franz looked up into the mirror, he saw the reflection of Sam standing behind him, pointing a pistol at the back of his head. His jaw dropped, and he feared he might be about to soil himself.

"My name's Sam Denham, and you must be Franz. I believe you met my father, just before you buried his body at the bottom of your dirty fucking moat."

FIFTY-SIX

Franz felt his knees threatening to give way, and he leant his hands against the vanity unit to stop himself from falling. At first Sam thought the man was stupidly reaching for his gun, but quickly realised he was drunk, when he smelt alcohol oozing from every pore. It became clear that Franz was no threat and Sam grabbed the back of his head and slammed his face into the mirror while he took his pistol from him. It was in a fancy shoulder-holster. Sam thought it went with the slicked-back hair.

“Are you going to kill me?”

Franz’s words were full of despair, but Sam detected a sense of relief too. As if the man were finally glad the whole thing was over.

“If you want me to end it all for you with a quick bullet you’re out of luck. I’m taking you and your father to the police, so they can charge you with murder. Then you can sit in a French jail and think about what you did while you rot.”

Franz sighed and tried to swallow, but his mouth was too dry.

“For what it’s worth, I didn’t want to kill your father.”

“Save it for the police.”

“He was armed, you know.”

“Who?”

“Your father. He had an old revolver ... an ancient-looking thing. My grandfather cleaned it up and kept it. He’s carrying it now.”

At first Sam was going to call Franz a liar and tell him to shut up. But then he remembered the old service revolver his father had shown him as a boy. He’d kept it in a safe at the back of his wardrobe and explained to him that it wasn’t a toy. Perhaps he’d been afraid that his young son’s fascination with guns would have got the better of him and he’d get into the safe somehow.

“Is your son with him?”

Sam watched Franz as he tried to focus on Sam’s reflection in the mirror. There were tears in his eyes.

“Yes.”

“And Alice, too?”

“Yes.”

Sam wondered if it would be a good idea to wait for one of the other men

to answer the call of nature but decided against it. He hadn't slept for two days and he was tired. He remembered the words he'd used to his fellow soldiers when they'd taken on the Iraqis hunting them down. *Take the fight to them.*

"Franz, I think it's time for me to hand you over to the police. But first, you and I are going to persuade your father to join us."

A look of terror returned to Franz's jowly face.

"Are you mad? He'll never let you take him. Why don't we go now, fetch the police and come back?" he said desperately.

"No. Your father murdered my grandfather and my father. This is something I have to do myself."

"But ..."

Sam didn't let Franz finish and grabbed him by the scruff of the neck, before leading him to the door of the lounge.

"Do you think your son will get involved? As much as wife-beaters disgust me, it's you and your father I've come for."

Franz thought before he answered.

"I don't know. He acts tough for his grandfather's sake but it's just a front. My guess is he'll try and save his own skin."

What a family, thought Sam. If it hadn't been for his father's murder, Sam could have almost felt sorry for the weak man, trembling in front of him. But it was time to act. Sam took a step back, still holding Franz in front of him. He made sure he had a firm grip on his pistol, raised his leg and kicked in the door.

Sam knew that what happened in the first few seconds of any attack could spell the difference between success or failure, and he had to rely purely on instinct when deciding how to react. Adrenaline kicked in and, just like in Iraq, time mercifully slowed down.

He watched Anton turn to see what had caused the ear-splitting crash. And he saw the man's cowardly nature take hold, as he hid behind Alice, using her as a shield. But he hadn't reached for his gun and Sam ignored him, deeming him not to be a threat.

But the older man, with the greying hair and the proud face, was another prospect altogether. He already held a gun in his hand, pointed in Sam's direction. Even in the fraction of a second Sam had at his disposal, he recognised it for what it was – his father's revolver.

Feeling cowardly himself, but knowing there was no alternative, he held Franz's limp body in front of him, while he pointed his gun steadily at Hermann

Schmitt's smug face.

"Drop it, Schmitt. It's all over."

Sam watched as the older Schmitt smiled.

"You lack the same quality as your father, young man. And his father before him. Ruthlessness. Unfortunately for you, I do not."

In that instant, Sam couldn't believe what was happening. Hermann Schmitt aimed the revolver he had taken from Malcolm Denham's dead body, twenty years before, and he fired. And he fired again, and again.

Within the confines of the room, the noise was deafening. It was hard for Sam to tell, but he believed that Franz was dead by the time the second bullet hit him. The third was fired into a corpse. But the fourth hit Sam in the shoulder, throwing him back against the wall. He looked down and could see that his pistol had fallen from his grasp. He watched, as Schmitt pulled back the hammer on the revolver, calmly preparing to finish him off.

Sam thought of the myth that said your life flashed in front of you before you died. But all he saw was a twenty-year-old soldier, doing his duty and fighting to stop the Nazis from taking over the world, murdered by a German officer. And his father, desperate to avenge him, only to die in a dark and dusty cave at the bottom of a moat.

A primeval scream erupted from his throat, and, despite the agony in his chest, he charged at the man holding a revolver that rightfully belonged to his father. Schmitt fired, but he'd been so taken by surprise when the wounded Sam had suddenly lunged at him, that the bullet only caught his target in the arm.

And suddenly the crazy Englishman was on him. Sam had grabbed the revolver and Schmitt was about to fire again, but the younger man had already turned the barrel away. Schmitt watched in horror as Denham ignored his wounds and brought the revolver up to the ex-major's face. The seventy-four-year-old couldn't resist, when a vice-like grip forced his mouth open and inserted the barrel. He felt one of Sam's fingers press on his own, against the trigger.

Schmitt's world exploded, and the killer of Harry and Malcolm Denham ceased to exist.

FIFTY-SEVEN

Even though he was wracked with pain in his shoulder and arm, Sam had kept a count of the bullets fired from his father's old service revolver. Three fired into Franz, two into himself, and the one that he had just used to tear Hermann Schmitt's skull apart. Six in all, and his pistol lay out of reach where it had fallen to the floor, by the door.

He rolled over on to his back, his upper body supported against the edge of a large sofa. Alice looked on helplessly, her arms still tied behind her back, and Anton's dark eyes stared into his, as he aimed his gun squarely at Sam's head.

While he waited for death to come, Sam gave a mental shrug. Everyone's time comes, sooner or later. He would never see his daughter again, but he consoled himself with the thought that, when he left the world for good, he had succeeded in taking the murderers of his family with him. So, as his chest rose and fell, gasping for air, he waited for Anton to issue the final coup de gras.

Anton knew the formidable Englishman was no longer a threat, and he enjoyed the sheer look of surprise on the man's face, the moment he placed his loaded pistol on the mantelpiece behind him. Not that he wouldn't have enjoyed killing him, but he was a pragmatic man and prided himself on being able to choose the road that served his personal ends. And, right now, that road required that Sam Denham remain alive.

"While my grandfather and father have been trying to plan ways of getting rid of you, I've been using my time more wisely and doing a little research."

Sam lay there, unable to speak. His vision was starting to blur, and he was feeling faint and cold. Blood loss, he thought. The bastard doesn't need to put a bullet in me - he knows I'm going to die anyway. Alice screamed and ran over to kneel beside him. But her hands were still tied behind her back and she was unable to help.

"For God's sake, Anton, let me call for an ambulance!"

"I will, provided we all have an agreement. As I said, I have been doing a little digging and I know you have a wife and child - and a disabled wife at that. They need their husband and father. But you are the one who is the intruder here. When the police arrive, I am willing to say you acted in self-defence and they are certain to believe a family member. When the truth comes out about what my father and grandfather did, I am sure the authorities will

understand your motives for coming here. For you, it is a matter of justice, is it not?"

"Please, Anton," screamed Alice, unable to watch Sam suffer any longer. But Anton continued in the same measured tone.

"Alice says you intended to take my father and grandfather into custody and deliver them to the police. Is that true?"

Sam only had the energy to nod.

"I will back you up on this, provided neither of you decide to level any accusations at me. After all, it was not I who murdered two members of your family."

Just the one who beat up his wife, thought Sam, but he simply nodded, knowing he didn't have much time left.

Mercifully, Anton reached for the phone and made the call, asking for both an ambulance and the police. A man had been seriously injured, he said, and he believed there were several dead. Sam observed not a flicker of emotion on the man's face at the mention of his dead father and grandfather. The grandson was certainly keeping the family's callous streak alive.

"Fucking untie me!"

Alice had stood up and turned her back on Anton to make her point. He reached for a knife, sitting next to the pistol on the mantelpiece, and cut her free. She immediately ran to Sam and checked his wounds. Blood was oozing from his chest, just below the shoulder, and she reached for a cushion from the sofa and removed its cover, placing it on the wound and holding it there, desperate to stem the flow.

"How many bodies are there, by the way? Just out of interest."

Sam was too weak to respond even if he'd wanted to.

"Just shut up, Anton," said Alice, sick of his smugness.

"It's no matter. The police will find out soon enough. But you should be more grateful, Alice."

"Grateful? What the hell for?"

She didn't bother turning to look at him when she answered. Instead, she concentrated on keeping Sam alive until the ambulance came.

"You'll be a rich woman. I own the chateau now."

"Do you think I'll stay married to you a moment longer after what you did?"

"No, I suppose not. What will you do ... run away with Mr Denham here? Oh no, you can't, can you? He's already spoken for. You wouldn't want to take

a man from his little daughter and his crippled wife, would you?”

If she had to listen to one more word, Alice thought she might go insane. Tears filled her eyes, as she looked down at Sam, struggling to breathe. His face was ashen. Mercifully, she suddenly heard a siren in the distance.

“I will go and open the gate,” said Anton.

Once they were alone, Sam winked.

“If I didn’t have to keep my hands pressed against this wound I’d kiss you, but I don’t want to risk you bleeding to death,” said Alice, gazing into Sam’s eyes.

The mischievous grin she thought she’d never see again had returned, and for the first time Sam managed to whisper a few words.

“It ... it would be worth it.”

FIFTY-EIGHT

Alice remained at the hospital for two days, until she was told by the doctors that Sam would recover from his injuries. The loss of blood he had suffered meant that it had been touch and go for a while, but she was assured that he was now stable. The paramedic in the ambulance had informed her that Sam might well have died, had she not done such a good job at the chateau, stemming the flow of blood. The bullet to his chest had missed his right lung by millimetres, she was told, and pieces of bone had been found both there and in his arm. But they had been removed, together with the bullets which, fortunately, hadn't fragmented.

Eventually she returned home to wash and change clothes, and she even managed to get a few hours' sleep. The police, together with a forensic team, were still camped out at the chateau, trying to make sense of the devastation all around them. A separate team had also been sent to the holiday cottage, by the river, where a further four deaths awaited investigation.

Both she, Anton, and the two bodyguards had been taken in for questioning, but had been released, pending further investigation. However, they were all warned not to leave the area, and Anton paid for Hans and his colleague to stay at the hotel in the village. Alice was pleasantly surprised when her husband was as good as his word and supported her version of events. For her part, when a detective enquired about the injury to her face, she didn't tell him about the beating she had received from Anton. For the moment, protecting Sam was her overriding concern.

She and Anton had agreed to remain together at the chateau so as not to give the police something else to be suspicious about, but they lived separate lives and avoided any unnecessary contact. Which was not overly difficult, considering the size of their home. Alice asked the doctor at the hospital to contact her the moment Sam was well enough to receive visitors, and waited for Anton to leave the chateau, so that she could carry out the task she had planned.

It was the following morning when, after breakfast, she looked through her bedroom window to see Anton's car drive out of the courtyard and head for the main gate. Where he was going she didn't know and she didn't care.

She immediately headed for Hermann Schmitt's study and found the key to the vault in the basement. The bruising to her ribs had virtually healed, and she

ran down the stairs, praying that Anton hadn't had the lock changed without her knowing. Mercifully, the key fit. Inside, the wall where Herman had stored his collection of weapons was bare, and Alice presumed they had been removed by the police. Her heart sank. Had they taken everything? She stood before the large metal cabinet in the corner of the vault and opened the door, breathing a sigh of relief. The money was still there. The large briefcase she had remembered seeing the last time Anton had shown her the vault was still there, and she opened it and filled it with cash. She had intended taking exactly half of whatever was there, but there wasn't enough room.

Later, as she drove into Rouen, she became aware of the beads of sweat running down her back. She was extremely nervous, and her heart was racing. But whether it was because she was worried about carrying such a large sum of money, or she was terrified what Anton would do if he knew she had taken it, she didn't know.

When she finally parked her car and entered her bank, it was as if a great weight had been lifted from her shoulders. When she asked to see the manager, who had been a friend of hers at university, he was all smiles as he led her and the briefcase into his office. She was expecting all sorts of questions to be asked when she showed the man the large stack of cash she intended to deposit in her account, but she was pleasantly surprised. He was more than happy to vouch for her honesty, and merely made some vague noises about the people from the tax office always poking their noses in where they didn't belong. She thanked him and left, but not before asking him to arrange a banker's draft, made out to the person named on the piece of paper she slid across his desk.

Although Sam's doctor had not called her at home, she couldn't bring herself to drive back to the chateau just to wait. So, she drove over to the hospital and hoped she would be able to look in on Sam anyway. When she got there and asked one of his nurses how he was doing, the woman informed her that he was well enough to receive visitors.

The police had insisted when he was brought in that he was given a private room, and Alice was told that he was still there. As she walked down the corridor, she noticed that now there was a uniformed officer stationed outside his door.

"Is it all right to go in?" she asked him, smiling sweetly.

"Could I ask your name, madam?"

"Alice Schmitt."

"From the chateau?"

Although they were in Rouen, the policeman had said the word ‘chateau’ as if it were the only one in France. Ever since the press had descended on the grand mansion where so much violence had taken place, it had become the talk of not only the town but the country. Alice wondered if it would now be forever infamous.

“Yes.”

“I suppose it would be all right. But Inspector Moreau is on his way, so you might not have long.”

“Thank you,” said Alice, still smiling, and she entered the room before he had a chance to change his mind.

Sam was sitting up in bed, his right shoulder and arm covered in bandages. The remains of a meal sat, half-eaten, on a bedside table. He looked across and smiled, as if he had been expecting her. Unable to stop herself, she rushed over to the bed and kissed him on the lips.

“There,” she said, “I told you I would kiss you, and you didn’t even have to bleed to death to get it.”

Sam suddenly looked serious.

“They tell me I might well have done, if it hadn’t been for you.”

Alice didn’t know what to say and simply blushed. Sam raised his left arm and stroked her cheek, where the swelling had almost gone.

“I see you’re a lot better too.”

“Yes.”

“The nurses told me you stayed at the hospital when I was brought in, and I wanted to say thank you.”

“There’s no need.”

“Where are you staying now? Here in Rouen?”

“No, at the chateau.”

Sam stiffened and stared at her.

“Is Anton still there?”

“Of course.”

“But ... are you sure you’re safe?”

“Yes. The police are still there. Besides, he wouldn’t dare touch me now, not while all this is going on.”

“The police are still there? I suppose I left you quite a mess to sort out, didn’t I?”

Now it was Alice’s turn to become serious.

“There’s a policeman outside and a detective is on his way, so I don’t think

it's over, just yet."

"Is Anton keeping up his end of the bargain?"

"So far. He's enjoying being the lord of the manor. Hermann left him the chateau in his will."

"He's certainly a piece of work. It was almost as if he had it all planned from the beginning, as soon as he knew I was on to them."

"I know what you mean. His own father and grandfather have been killed and I swear he doesn't care. If anything, he's acting as if you did him a favour."

"I suppose I did, in a way. He might not be guilty of murder, but I don't trust him. I'd feel a lot happier if you weren't at the chateau."

"It's okay, I know what I'm doing. But we need to talk, before the detective gets here."

"About what?"

"About what Anton and I have told the police."

"The truth, I hope."

"Anton denied knowing his grandfather had stolen the jewellery and paintings they found in the cave, but I suppose he had no choice. The police took it all away, including the necklace that was in your coat pocket."

Alice spotted the disappointment on Sam's face, but pretended not to notice.

"I told them you took it as evidence. I'm not sure if they believed me, but I thought you should know."

"There you go, saving my neck again."

"He denied knowing about your father's body too. Like you said, he was a young boy when Franz and Hermann committed the murder. But he agreed with the police that that's what must have happened and understood why you had come to France to find out the truth."

"Very magnanimous of him. What about the hired gunmen? How did he explain them?"

"He said he knew his father and grandfather were worried that someone was out to get them but insisted he didn't know why. As far as he was concerned, the men were just bodyguards, and Karl Weber was an investigator sent to find you."

"What about the mess at the cottage?"

"I explained how Karl had sided with us and that the other three had come to kill us. They know Karl was shot by one of the gunmen and that they were killed in self-defence. I was there, remember."

“And the chateau?”

“Same thing. I told them you were looking for evidence. It wasn't trespassing because I was with you. And I told them you killed the other man and Hermann in self-defence, just like at the cottage. The fact that they found Hans and his friend tied up worked in your favour and supported my story.”

“And Franz?”

“Anton confirmed to the police that he was shot by his own father. It was the only time he showed any emotion, but I could tell it was an act.”

“So, as long as I'm singing from the same hymn sheet, it's all behind us?”

“With any luck.”

“I'm glad, because my head is spinning.”

Sam reached over for a glass of water and started drinking.

“But, before the detective arrives, there's one more thing we need to talk about.”

Sam stopped sipping from the glass and raised his eyebrows, wondering what was coming next.

“Yes? What about?”

“Us.”

FIFTY-NINE

“First, I want to say sorry.”

Sam shook his head.

“Alice, you’ve got nothing to be sorry about. If anything, it should be me saying sorry to you for all the trouble I’ve caused.”

Alice waved her hand to brush his protestations aside and continued to apologise anyway.

“I saw that man heading to the cave and I tried to warn you, but you couldn’t hear me. So, I walked over to the lip of the moat and that was when the one called Hans spotted me and dragged me into the chateau. If only I’d been more careful, you might not have got hurt.”

“That’s crazy. I’m the one who dragged you there in the first place.”

“Well, sorry anyway.”

They were both silent and avoided making eye contact, neither of them wanting to be the first to bring up the subject of their future. Eventually, Alice was the one to break the ice.

“Have they let your family know you’re safe?”

“My family don’t even know I got shot in the first place, and I’d like to keep it that way. Vicki’s too young to understand and it would only worry Tanya unnecessarily.”

Alice tried to remember if Sam had already told her their names. Hearing them now felt like a kick in the stomach and she couldn’t explain why.

“Have you spoken to them at all?”

“Not yet.”

“Perhaps they’re worried. Maybe you ought to call Tanya to let her know you’re coming home soon.”

“We don’t know that yet, do we? Besides, I’ll have to tell her I’ve failed. I’ve spent the last of what we had getting down here and I’ve got nothing to show for it.”

“You avenged the death of your father and grandfather,” Alice reminded him.

“Tanya won’t care about that.”

She thought Sam had never looked so sad, and it was the first time she felt she had an insight into the sort of woman he was married to. *I care*, she wanted to tell him. Her emotions were all twisted in knots. She was sad because Sam

was sad but pleased that his marriage was fragile. And there was guilt for feeling that way.

“I have something for you,” she said, reaching into her handbag.

She handed over the banker’s draft. Sam stared at it for several seconds, as if it were an alien object that had just dropped from the sky.

“What is this?”

“Hopefully, it’s a new future for you and your family.”

Sam shook his head.

“I can’t accept this.”

“I’m not taking it back. The money belongs to you anyway. I took it from Hermann’s safe. And in Franz’s study I found the catalogue listing the sale of your father’s cigarette case. It was worth the same amount as what’s written on that cheque, give or take a few thousand.”

Sam wanted to keep refusing but knew he was being disingenuous. Besides, to give his daughter the life he wanted for her, he was prepared to swallow his pride.

“Thank you, Alice. I can’t begin to tell you what this will mean to us.”

Us. If only he knew how much that little word hurt.

“Are you sure you won’t get into trouble? What if Anton finds out you’ve taken the money?”

“I didn’t take it all. Besides, he owes me. And, if the worst comes to the worst, when he buys my half of the chateau, he can take it out of that. I’m a rich woman now, remember?”

“It’s funny, but now you’ve reminded me you’re rich, you suddenly look even prettier.”

He punctuated the sentence with his mischievous grin and she couldn’t help but smile.

“What if I were poor?”

“I’d still love you.”

Sam felt like kicking himself. *Love.* He’d said the word. The last thing he wanted to do was hurt her. What was he thinking? But then she shocked him.

“It’s strange to talk about love, isn’t it, when we haven’t even slept together.”

Sam looked down at his bandaged chest and reached out to touch the scar on her cheek.

“It seems that ever since we’ve met, one of us has been incapacitated. But you can fall in love anyway, I suppose.”

“I know I have.”

Sam smiled when she spoke, relieved that she had admitted she loved him. But then he thought of his wife, unable to walk, and his daughter, who worshipped him, and he felt fear too. He knew he needed to be honest with Alice. She deserved nothing less.

“Once this is over, I have to go back to England.”

“I know.”

“With this money I’ll be able to make a new life for Tanya and Vicki.”

“I’m glad.”

“But there’ll be a hole in my life without you.”

Alice thought she might cry and had to look away to control herself. Her voice cracked when she spoke.

“You have a choice to make.”

Sam knew what she was saying, and it only strengthened the feelings he had for her. She wasn’t the type of woman to split up a family, but neither was she willing to play the part of a mistress, only seen when the husband could get away.

“Can you give me a little time, Alice? You know, to go home and make things right before we plan the future?”

“Yes, a little time.”

“How long will you stay at the chateau?”

“Anton and I are avoiding one another, and I’ll just stay until I can get settled somewhere else.”

“In France?”

Alice looked him in the eye when she answered him.

“Maybe.”

“Alice”

Sam held her hand and she waited patiently to hear what he had to say. But, just at that moment, Inspector Moreau entered the room.

Alice stood up, preparing to leave. She would find out what Sam was going to say the next time she visited.

But she never would visit the hospital again. Both of their lives were about to change forever.

SIXTY

Driving back to the chateau from Rouen, Alice found it hard to concentrate on the road. Her mind kept wandering, while random thoughts invaded her consciousness. One minute, she thought of Sam telling her he loved her, and she felt as giddy as a schoolgirl, desperate to tell the world. And the next, she imagined Sam returning to England to the waiting arms of his wife and daughter. Would he kiss them? Would he tell them how much he'd missed them? Would Alice be nothing but a distant memory? A secret never to be spoken of. The thought made her feel sordid somehow.

But there was something else troubling her. It was something Sam had said when they were talking about Anton.

He might not be a murderer, but I don't trust him.

Might not be a murderer? It was just a figure of speech, she knew, but it bothered her. For days she had been thinking of nothing but killers and dead bodies, but one person's face always appeared to her. Adele's face - her friend who had worked at the chateau and mysteriously disappeared.

Alice thought of the body of Sam's father, lying in a cave undiscovered for twenty years. Sam said he thought his father had deserted him when he was a boy. He'd disappeared, but now they knew he'd been dead all along. And Adele had *disappeared*. Was she dead too? But, if that were true, where could her body be? She wasn't in the cave, resting in peace with Malcolm Denham. But where there was one cave, there could be another. And when two family members turn out to be murderers, there could be a third.

When Alice finally arrived at the chateau, she was relieved to find that policemen were still wandering the grounds in search of clues they might have missed. The news of the multiple murders was still captivating the nation, and no expense was being spared to bring the investigation to a satisfying conclusion.

As she got out of her car, a detective informed her that they would be there until the following morning but promised they would endeavour to be as unobtrusive as possible. He wasn't to know that, with her suspicions refusing to leave her, she welcomed their presence.

The staff who had worked in the chateau for so many years were long gone,

never to return. The police would be gone tomorrow. And, before the sun was down, so would she. She simply had to hope that would give her enough time to do what needed to be done – find that second cave.

Inspector Moreau had never known a case like it. So many deaths, and yet not a single person left alive to charge with murder, or even manslaughter. The press had constantly badgered him, demanding to know when he planned to make an arrest, and even his superiors found it difficult to believe that no one could be found to blame for the bloody mayhem that had visited the quiet corner of France.

But, no matter how good a detective he believed himself to be, Moreau could only work with the evidence he had before him. Two of the killings had taken place in front of witnesses – Anton and Alice Schmitt. Both insisted that Denham had killed Hermann Schmitt in self-defence, and, incredibly, that Franz Schmitt had been deliberately killed by his own father. Since Anton Schmitt was an immediate member of the family and had no reason to lie for Denham, it was testimony that was hard not to believe.

At the site of the cottage by the river, it was established that Karl Weber was shot by one of Schmitt's hired gunmen, now dead. As for the three gunmen themselves, incredibly they appeared to have been killed by Denham without him firing a shot. So, while Alice Schmitt could not testify to the details of what happened, having been hiding in the woods at the time, she was adamant that the men had arrived at the cottage, intent on killing them. Anton Schmitt, meanwhile, denied all knowledge of this and claimed that his grandfather must have given the men these orders in private.

This left the killing of the man in the cave as the only one with no witness, other than Denham himself. Alice Schmitt testified that she had seen the man approach the cave but was unable to warn Denham. The Englishman claimed that the gunman fired several shots into the cave without warning and that he struck him as he tried to enter the cave. The evidence found at the scene - bullet casings and the like - seemed to confirm his story.

The partly mummified body found in the cave was identified as belonging to Malcolm Denham, the father of Sam Denham, who had disappeared around twenty years ago. This also did much to establish the veracity of the Englishman's claims. As for the veritable treasure trove discovered in the cave with the body, initial research seemed to indicate that the majority was

illegally obtained by Hermann Schmitt during the occupation of France. When this was reported in the press, it inflamed public opinion and did little to evoke sympathy for the death of the one-time major in the German army.

The investigation was concluded by the time the doctors at the hospital informed Sam Denham that he was well enough to leave, provided he did nothing too strenuous to aggravate his wounds. Inspector Moreau attended the hospital on the day of Denham's release, and gave him the news that he was not being charged for the deaths of the men he had killed, and that his claim of self-defence had been confirmed by the evidence and the testimony of Anton and Alice Schmitt.

"It seems that the death of Hermann Schmitt is not particularly upsetting to the people of France, in spite of the fact that he made this country his home," explained Moreau, as he drove Denham to the airport.

"Why are you so eager for me to leave?" asked Denham, when he realised what the detective had planned.

"You have become somewhat of a hero in certain circles and members of the press are eager to interview you."

"I'm not interested in talking to reporters."

"I am glad to hear it."

"Before I leave I want to see Alice."

The detective took his eyes off the road to look at Denham as he spoke.

"It would be better for all concerned if the Schmitt family were given time to recover from recent tragic events. Wait until things have, how you say, cooled down."

"Can I at least call her?"

"You may do as you wish once you are back in England."

"What about my car?"

"I have made arrangements for it to be delivered to your home, free of charge."

"It seems you've thought of everything."

"I hope so. This case has been a burden, I'll admit. The national coverage has been such that it has the potential to make or break my career."

"I see," said Denham, finally understanding the policeman's motives for packing him off to England.

"Yes. Fortunately, things have been resolved and, for the most part, everyone is happy."

"Happy?"

“Yes, happy. And I would hate for anyone to spoil things.”

“In what way?” asked Denham, unwilling to let the man off the hook.

“I have spent a great deal of time questioning Anton and Alice Schmitt, and I would like to think that I have cultivated a sound insight into their respective characters. Monsieur Schmitt, I believe, is a man who would be capable of almost anything if it furthered his interests.”

“Does ‘anything’ include murder?”

“It cannot be ruled out.”

“And what about Alice?”

“Well, there lies an anomaly. I do not believe you could find two people more different in character.”

“I don’t think I’d argue with you there.”

“And I have observed the love and attention she has bestowed upon you while you have been convalescing,” said Moreau, glancing across at his passenger once again.

“She is a very caring and thoughtful person.”

“And extremely beautiful. It is a combination that is difficult for a man to resist. Even one with a wife and daughter of his own.”

Sam felt Moreau’s eyes boring into him as he watched the suburbs of Paris growing ever nearer.

“What is your point, Moreau?”

“My point? I have no point. It is just that my mind is awash with illicit affairs and jealous husbands and violent men who are prepared to kill to get what they want.”

“You think I intend to kill Anton Schmitt?”

“It is only the imagining of a detective with an overactive mind, I admit.”

“And this is why you’re so eager for me to get on a plane?”

“Let’s just say I like to play things safe and not tempt fate, just when things are going so well.”

Moreau pulled up to the loading bay outside the front of the airport and got out to help Denham with the rucksack he had been living out of since arriving in France.

“Well, I’m sure you’re eager to get back to your family, Monsieur Denham. Have a pleasant flight.”

SIXTY-ONE

As he stepped out to face the grey skies above Heathrow airport, Sam examined his wallet and couldn't help thinking it was ironic. He possessed a cheque that would make him rich, and yet he barely had enough cash to get him home. Nevertheless, he decided to splash out and persuaded one of the taxi drivers waiting for fares to take him all the way to his home town of Hereford for a reasonable fee. He was unable to face the thought of heading into London to catch a train. Besides, now he was back in the UK, he couldn't wait to see Vicki.

Despite his eagerness to get home, he asked the driver to drop him off in the centre of town, a little over four hours later. He had an important errand to run. He headed straight to his bank and, when he produced his impressive cheque at the counter, the cashier called for the manager. A tall, thin man in a smart suit emerged from his office and invited Denham inside.

"This is an extremely large sum of money, Mr Denham."

The man's voice had a distinct nasal quality and his manner was somewhat aloof. Sam took an instant dislike to him.

"I would have to agree with that," said Sam, waiting for the manager to get to the point.

"I'm sure you understand, Mr Denham, but, what with the amount of money laundering that goes on these days, I need to ask you what this deposit into your account is regarding."

Sam's arm was still in a sling, and there were several abrasions and scars on his forehead and cheek that he had sustained during all the excitement in France. When Sam didn't answer right away, the manager made a big thing of clearing his throat and coughed before continuing.

"I see you've been injured, Mr Denham. Nothing serious, I hope."

Sam guessed that the manager had already pegged him as some sort of criminal.

"Not really. Just a couple of bullet wounds."

He knew he wasn't helping his cause, but he enjoyed the reaction it elicited from the pompous pen-pusher seated opposite. The man stared wide-eyed and sweat appeared on his top lip.

"Oh, my goodness."

Sam had had enough.

“Look, the cheque is completely legitimate. A gracious lady presented it to me because her father-in-law mistakenly sold something valuable that belonged to my family. She gave me this money to compensate for our loss.”

“I see. What did the father-in-law sell?”

“None of your business.”

Sam was about to walk out with his cheque and open an account elsewhere, but he didn't want to go through the hassle. On the other hand, he was finding it difficult not to reach over the desk with his good arm and break the man's nose – maybe improve the sound of his voice.

“I was only ...”

“Are you going to let me pay the cheque into my account or not? If you have any suspicions, you are more than welcome to contact the police and they can get in touch with Madam Schmitt in France. I'm sure they'll thank you for wasting their time.”

When Sam returned to the cashier to pay in his cheque and fill out the appropriate forms, he withdrew a healthy sum of cash to treat the family and celebrate his return.

Sam's regiment had been based in Hereford and, when he left the army, the family decided to remain there. When he arrived at his terraced home, he'd almost forgotten how small it was. He thought back to Alice's mansion in France and decided that you could've fitted his whole house into the hallway of the chateau. Since leaving the army to care for Tanya, he'd constantly struggled to keep their heads above water. But all that was about to change.

He still had his key and let himself in. Tanya was sitting in her wheelchair, watching television. She looked up to see him standing there.

“God, you're back. How did you get on?”

Sam had removed his coat and his injured shoulder was clearly visible, but Tanya didn't seem to notice. Sam bit his tongue. *Un-fucking-believable*. But then he detected footsteps, eagerly running down the stairs, and Vicki's voice could be heard crying out. She burst into the room.

“Daddy! Daddy! You're home!”

She was about to rush into his arms, but then she noticed the sling.

“Are you all right, daddy? Are you hurt?”

“Nothing for you to worry about, sweetheart. Clumsy daddy just fell over, that's all.”

He knelt on the floor and his daughter hugged him. He tried to release her, so he could get a good look at her, but she refused to let go. In the end, Sam

decided to pick her up and he walked over to his armchair and sat her on his knee, as if he'd never been away.

"How have my girls been?"

"I came top in my reading test again, daddy," said Vicki, hugging him.

"Who's daddy's clever girl?"

Vicki leaned up and kissed him on one of his scars, to make it better. He turned to Tanya.

"Where's your sister. I thought she was supposed to be looking after you when the nurse isn't here."

"Good question. She's bugged off somewhere again. I've hardly been out for days. I'm sick of being stuck in."

Sam couldn't keep it in any longer.

"Well, that's all about to change."

For the first time since he'd arrived, Tanya began to look animated. She sat up in her chair and gave him her full attention.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you know how you've always wanted to live on the coast, in Devon?"

"Are we going to the seaside, daddy?"

"Better than that, sweetheart. We're going to live there."

"Do you mean it? Did you get the money?" said Tanya, wheeling her chair closer. Sam noticed she had broken one of her perfectly manicured nails in the process and hadn't even noticed.

"I got the money."

"How much?"

"Enough to buy us a big house, overlooking the sea."

"Wow," cried Vicki, and even Tanya let out a whoop.

Their excitement grew, and Sam promised Tanya they'd put the house on the market right away and start looking for their dream home. He wanted to share their joy, but a sadness tugged at his heart, spoiling the moment.

He needed to get out of the house and make a phone call to the woman he loved.

SIXTY-TWO

Once the police had said their goodbyes the following morning, Alice headed to her bedroom and waited at the window, overlooking the courtyard, hoping to see Anton get in his car and drive off. Since they weren't speaking to one another, she didn't know if he had an appointment elsewhere, so she simply had to hope for the best. She didn't care where he went, just so long as he left her alone in the chateau.

But lunchtime came and went, and his car was still there. Her bags were packed, and she had already made her mind up that she would leave well before nightfall. There was no way in the world she was going to spend a single night alone in the chateau with her husband. So, she kept staring from her bedroom window, willing him to leave, but another hour passed and there was still no sign of him. In the end, her impatience got the better of her.

Picking up her two suitcases, she headed down to the courtyard, relieved not to bump into Anton along the way. She placed the cases in the boot of her car and got behind the wheel. As she drove off, she couldn't help feeling that Anton was watching her from one of the chateau's numerous windows. If he was, she hoped it wouldn't matter because, once she'd left the courtyard and crossed the bridge over the empty moat, she would be out of sight. Once she was across, instead of heading for the driveway, leading to the main gates, she carefully eased the car on to the grass and drove around to the rear of the chateau, being careful not to rev her engine and draw Anton's attention.

A few minutes later she had reached the track leading to the bottom of the moat. The last time she had been here, she reminded herself, was that fateful night when she and Sam had found the cave. With her injured ribs, she had struggled to get up and down the track unaided, but now, fully mended, she had no problem navigating her way to the moat's floor.

When she reached the bottom, she noticed that it was muddier than before, due to the constant coming and going of the police. She realised that they must have cut back some of the bushes, because she found the mouth of the cave right away. Of course, the last time it had been dark, and they'd only had the light from a torch to guide them.

She passed the cave and used a fallen branch to prod through the greenery. It took her nearly an hour of searching until she found something that looked promising - a stone wall similar to the one that had blocked the entrance to the

cave, but much smaller. What made it stand out from the other brickwork was the cement - it looked as if it had been put there far more recently.

She hadn't thought to bring any tools with her and hoped that the sledgehammer she and Sam had found near the cave was still there. She ran back and was relieved to find it, lying in the long grass where Sam had left it. It was too heavy for her to carry, and she was forced to drag it back to the wall she'd just found. Once there, she wondered if she had the strength to even lift the hammer, let alone use it to knock down the wall.

She strained and lifted it on to her knee, before hoisting it on to her shoulder. The weight of it hurt, but she managed to swing it and hit the wall, crying out with the effort. She looked at the wall and saw that the blow had barely scratched the brickwork. She almost wept with frustration. She gritted her teeth and, using her anger to provide the strength she needed, she swung the hammer for a second time. When she looked at her handiwork, one of the bricks had become dislodged and the surrounding cement had started to crumble.

Encouraged, she swung the hammer for a third and fourth time. Without stopping to analyse her progress, she swung again, hoping that she'd finally managed to find a technique that worked. But the effort was too much, and she dropped the hammer on the ground. She stooped and rested her hands on her knees, barely able to catch her breath. The tee-shirt she wore was soaked in sweat and her back ached. She began to wonder if she'd damaged one of her weakened ribs.

Alice looked at the wall, not holding out much hope, but three of the bricks had fallen into an opening behind the wall. She peered in but was unable to see through the darkness. She had a powerful torch but cursed when she realised she'd left it in the car. She began to run back up the track, but soon realised she was out of breath and was forced to slow down and walk. Five minutes elapsed by the time she returned to the wall. She shone the torch through the newly made hole, but still couldn't make out what was inside.

In frustration, she kicked the wall with the heel of her shoe. One of the bricks began to give way. The freshly made hole had weakened the wall. She kept on kicking and, twenty minutes later, had made an opening large enough for her to crawl through. She felt hot, sweaty, battered and bruised, and she was already looking forward to a long, hot shower when she got to her parents' house that night. But she had done it. She was through.

She crawled into the hole, using her torch to guide her. Inside there was

barely enough room to stand, and the cave was far smaller than she had expected. That was why it only took her a few seconds to find what she was looking for. The brief feeling of triumph she experienced from knowing she had been right quickly vanished, when the significance of the ghoulish discovery hit home.

Before Alice even had time to make sense of her feelings, she recognised the hair on the skull of the partially mummified body. Having been buried in the cave relatively recently, it was remarkably well preserved. Adele was still wearing her uniform, and Alice thought she recognised her friend's rings, still hanging on two of the bony fingers.

Alice wanted to investigate further, but the gruesome sight and the enormity of what she'd found made her want to vomit, and she hurried out of the cave and into the daylight. She breathed in huge gulps of fresh air until the nausea had passed. She decided she had no time to waste and headed back to her car. Once she could get to a phone in the village, she would call the police and tell them what she had discovered.

When she reached the top of the moat, she got in her car and headed for the front of the chateau. Just as she reached it, a car came through the main gates and headed towards her. She quickly jumped out of her Citroen and hid behind one of the bushes that lined the driveway.

She peered through the greenery to see the car entering the courtyard. Despite the brief glimpse she'd had, she recognised the driver. It was Hans, one of the two gunmen Sam had spared and tied up in the dining room.

Once he was in the courtyard, she knew the driveway was clear, and she returned to her car and prepared to leave. But then something made her hit the brake and bring the car to a halt. What on earth was Hans doing here? What business did he have with Anton? Whatever it was, she knew it could be nothing good. Now, more than ever, she knew how Anton's evil mind worked.

Forget it, she decided. She would just tell the police when she called them about the body. Let them find out what he was up to. She reached for the handbrake, but her hand refused to release it. She now knew her husband was capable of murder, and yet he had let Sam, a man who had killed his family, walk free. Of course, he'd saved his own skin in the process and become rich, but even so. Turning the other cheek just wasn't in his nature. And now he was meeting with a man who had already proved he was willing to kill for money. And what if Hans was gone by the time the police arrived? Sam was only a ferry-ride away.

Alice switched off the engine and headed back to the chateau. The body in the second cave now proved that Anton had murdered her friend. Was he about to kill Sam too? There was only one way to find out.

SIXTY-THREE

By the time she reached the courtyard, Hans had already parked his car and entered the chateau. Alice opened the main door as quietly as she could, stepped into the hallway, and listened. For a few seconds she could hear nothing, as her ears adjusted to the sudden quiet of being inside. Then there were voices, loud but distant. They were coming from upstairs and she climbed up to the landing on tiptoe. She thanked God that she had come straight from the cave and was wearing sensible shoes, instead of her high heels. The door to Anton's study was open, so she pressed herself against the wall, hoping that she wouldn't be seen, and edged as close as she dared.

"I don't know where he lives but give me a day or two and I'll find out. I'll fill you in when I call you and give you the go-ahead."

Alice put her hand to her mouth to stop herself from crying out at the sound of Anton's voice.

"What about my fee?"

"Here," said Anton, and Alice heard a drawer being opened. "I'll pay you half now, and the other half when the job's done."

"Why don't I take him out when he's alone. Hell, after what he put us through, I'd do it for free."

"He outsmarted you the last time you crossed paths. What makes you think he won't do the same again?"

"This time he won't be expecting me," protested Hans, his professional pride clearly hurt.

"Just do what we said. Torch his place and make sure no one gets out."

Alice wanted to scream but forced herself to keep listening.

"Shit. A little girl and a fucking cripple. Is it really necessary?"

"He murdered my family, I'll just be returning the favour."

Alice wondered if Hans was going to refuse to do it and she inched closer.

"I want the rest of the cash in that drawer ... for expenses."

"If I give it to you, will you do it?"

"Yeah, if I hear from you in a day or two with the details. If I don't, I'm keeping this for my trouble."

"Good, now get"

"What's your wife's car doing on the driveway?"

Alice felt blood in her mouth, and realised she'd just bitten her lip without

realising.

“I don’t know. I checked the courtyard a while ago, before I asked you to come over. I thought she’d left.”

“Do you think she knows what you’re up to?”

“Let’s find out.”

Alice didn’t wait. She ran to the stairs and descended to the hallway in a matter of seconds.

“Alice!”

Anton’s cry rang out behind her, but she didn’t look back. Once she was through the main doors, she ran across the courtyard, heading for the bridge and then to her car. But shots suddenly rang out and gravel sprayed up all around her. She turned and glanced up to see Anton, leaning out of his study window, a pistol in his hand.

She had no choice but to turn back and head for the other end of the courtyard, where Anton wouldn’t be able to see her. But, as she did so, Hans emerged from the chateau and gave chase. Trapped, she ran to the nearest outbuilding she could find. It had a small door that had been wedged open.

What happened next took but a few seconds, and Alice was at a loss to know why she did it. Perhaps it was anger, or perhaps it was fear. Or perhaps it was because the killer giving chase was going to murder the man she loved.

Once inside, instead of charging to the other side of the outbuilding to be cornered like a rat in a trap, she skidded to a halt and pressed against the wall by the open door. The last time she had been there, she remembered seeing an axe, resting against the wall. She looked down and saw that it was still there. She picked it up and weighed it in her hands. It was heavy but, compared to the sledgehammer she had wielded less than an hour before, she could handle it.

She steadied her breathing and listened to the rapid footsteps crunching on the gravel, as Hans ran after her. She brought the axe round in a two-handed grip, and the second a shadow fell across the doorway she swung it. The axe was extremely sharp, but if Hans had been wearing a thick coat, she doubted whether it would have done more than wind him and produced a flesh wound. But it was a warm day and he was wearing nothing but jeans and a thin tee-shirt. The axe stopped him dead, and his jaw dropped, as his hands fell to his stomach to find the axe buried there. Alice watched him fall to his knees, looking up at her, shock and disbelief plastered across his face. Blood was everywhere, even on her hands and arms, all the way up to her shoulders. She screamed and ran out to the courtyard.

She wanted to lie down and crawl into a ball and pray that the nightmare wasn't really happening. But she knew her life was still in danger, and she crossed the courtyard to look up at Anton's study window. He wasn't there, and a perverse part of her almost wished he'd been waiting to fire a bullet at her head and put her out of her misery.

With no thought other than escape, she ran to the bridge, crossed it, and headed for the car. A shot rang out, kicking up dirt at her feet. She realised Anton had been waiting out of sight, ready for her, but she managed to make it to her car. The driver's door was still open, and the windows were down as a concession to the heat of the day. She leapt behind the wheel and could have wept when she saw the key still in the ignition. She had feared that Anton might have already removed it but realised he probably hadn't had time.

Alice started the engine, hit the clutch, and slammed the car into gear. Just as she hit the pedal and started to pull away, Anton leapt through the open window of the passenger door. He grabbed at her arm, and she was forced to relinquish the gear stick. She was still in first gear, and the engine roared as she kept her foot to the floor. Anton continued to claw at her, and it felt as though her arm was about to be wrenched from its socket.

With her other hand on the wheel, she desperately tried to keep the car on the driveway, and soon the main gates loomed up ahead. A second later, they passed the automatic sensor and the gates slowly opened.

Anton inched his body further into the car and for the first time Alice noticed he was no longer carrying his pistol. She assumed he must have dropped it as he reached into the moving car. The space between the gates was wide enough for two cars to pass through, but she edged further and further to the right, bringing the Citroen's passenger door ever closer to the right-hand gate, edge on. Anton's lower body, from his waist down, still hung outside the car, his feet occasionally scraping on the ground, sending showers of gravel into the air.

Alice risked removing her hand from the wheel and reached over to change into second gear so that she could pick up some speed. The car lurched forward, and Anton turned his head to glance through the windscreen, wondering what Alice was doing. A look of horror appeared on his face, as he saw the edge of the solid metal gate racing towards him.

When the gate struck the lower half of his body, he let out a high-pitched scream. The force of the blow caused the car to lurch to the right and strike the gate, before coming to a stop. But Anton's body had already been ripped from

the car and Alice looked down at her arm to see bloody scratch marks, where he'd desperately tried to cling on.

She reversed the damaged car and prepared to race off down the quiet country lane. But, when she looked in her rear-view mirror and saw Anton's damaged body lying on the driveway, she paused. Without really knowing why, she reversed the car, got out and walked over to where her husband had landed. His left leg sat at a hideous angle, his hip clearly having been broken in two, and his torso was bent back, almost at right-angles to the rest of his body. His dead eyes stared into space. Alice slowly walked to the car, reversed it down the driveway to his waiting body, and hit the switch on her remote control to close the gates.

The chateau had witnessed two more violent deaths, and she had saved the man she loved for a second time. But now he was with his family and she just wanted it all to be over.

She knew what she had to do.

SIXTY-FOUR

What Alice was planning to do was not rational at all, she knew that. The rational thing to do would be to go to the chateau, pick up the phone, and call the police to tell them what had happened. Simple. But, since Sam Denham had entered her life, nothing was simple anymore. And how could she be rational, when her mind felt like a receptacle overflowing with stress, fear, shock, and heartbreak. But there was one thing she did know – she couldn't take anymore. The thought of facing the police with their incessant questions and suspicions filled her with dread. The nightmare needed to end - and it was going to end today.

With a strength she didn't think she had left in her, she dragged Anton's wrecked body to her car and manhandled him into the passenger seat. Blood got everywhere, but now she knew it did not matter. She secured the corpse with the seat-belt, which she couldn't help thinking was somehow perverse. Once the body of her late husband was strapped in, she got behind the wheel and slowly drove across the grass to the rear of the chateau, where she had parked earlier. It was as close to the cave as she could get, and she had an unpleasant task to perform.

It took her over an hour and she worked on pure adrenaline. She vomited no less than three times, brought on by her disgust with the task and herself. Once it was complete, she was forced to sit on the grass and lean against the car until she caught her breath. She began to wonder if she had the strength to move at all, but, somehow, she forced herself to stand.

Alice stumbled twice as she made her way back to the chateau and, once inside, she headed for the basement. She collected what she needed from the vault and headed for the generator Hermann Schmitt had installed for emergencies. Lined against the wall was a row of eight-gallon cans, loaded with fuel. She tried to lift the nearest one and her heart sank. She had no alternative but to manhandle it up the stairs to the hallway, but then she remembered there was a trolley sitting idle in one of the outbuildings. Ten minutes later she had found it and brought it back to the hallway. She loaded the can on to the trolley and, reluctantly, headed back to the basement to retrieve another. She needed plenty of fuel for what she had in mind.

Unfortunately, the trolley didn't make the transportation of the fuel cans as easy as she had hoped. There were still the stairs to negotiate outside the main

doors and it was tough going, dragging the wheels across the gravel and uneven grass. But eventually the fuel was where she wanted it to be, next to her car. She opened the door and lifted the cans for one last time. Mercifully, they became lighter as she poured more and more fuel on to every corner of the car.

Once she had finished, her body gave up on her and she collapsed. Lying flat on her back on the grass, she stared up at the blue sky and contemplated what she was about to do. It was then that she realised she lacked a vital ingredient and was forced to return to the chateau one last time. She needed a flame, and headed for Anton's study, where he always kept a supply of cigars and boxes of matches. When she helped herself to a box from her dead husband's personal supply, it somehow seemed fitting.

But now it was time to return to her car one last time and end the nightmare once and for all.

SIXTY-FIVE

Sam found Vicki and Tanya's excitement infectious. Living in a comfortable home by the sea, custom-built to cater to his wife's needs, would certainly improve their quality of life. And there would be enough money left over to start a business and provide a real future for his daughter. Perhaps he would buy an old barn and convert it into a holiday cottage they could rent out. Eventually, if all went well, he could buy another, and then another. Perhaps, when Vicki was older, she would choose to join the family business – maybe even live in one of their new barn conversions, nearby.

But the dream of a new life failed to make him happy. Since returning to his family, Sam had done his best to control his emotions. He had put Vicki to bed and read her one of her favourite stories, and they had laughed and giggled together before she finally fell asleep. It had been a precious moment. One that he had missed more than he'd realised. Even Tanya's mood had improved. When Sam ignored his injuries and carried her up the stairs to the bedroom, she kissed him to show her gratitude. It had been the first time she had seen the upper floor of her small house for days. But now he was downstairs and alone, and the ache he had been feeling in his heart threatened to overwhelm him.

Yes, he was back in the bosom of his family. But now there was a massive hole in his life, and the reason he felt that way suddenly struck him with blinding clarity. He had fallen in love and he would never be truly happy unless he and Alice were together. He pictured Alice's smile and the idea of never seeing her again was too much to bear.

Sam looked up at the ceiling, as if he could see into the bedrooms of the two people he had sworn he would never abandon. And now, thanks to Alice, he had the means to give them the life they deserved. Was he being selfish, wallowing in self-pity and thinking only of his own happiness, when he should be pleased with the way things had turned out?

Surely there was a way for everyone to be happy. They would move to Devon and live by the sea. He would start his business and make a future for Vicki. Tanya would no longer live in fear of being helpless, and the comfortable surroundings of their new life would ease the tensions between them. But he wouldn't live a lie any more. He wanted to be with Alice and he would ask her to move to England so that he could still see Vicki every day and be there for Tanya if she needed him. It was a lot to ask of Alice, he

admitted, but he knew she felt the same way about him, and he hoped that would be enough to make her leave France behind and start a new life in England. After all, it wasn't as if Devon was on the other side of the world.

Sam looked at the clock on the wall and saw that it was approaching midnight. But he was tempted to pick up the phone and call the chateau anyway, just to hear her voice. He reached for it but stopped himself at the last minute. He was being foolish. The poor girl needed time, after all they'd been through. He couldn't just phone out of the blue and put pressure on her like this. It wasn't fair. No, he would give it a few days. In the meantime, he would keep busy and start contacting estate agencies in Devon. He couldn't wait to see Tanya and Vicki poring over photographs of prospective homes. He'd put the house on the market but, now they were wealthy, they didn't even have to wait for the sale to go through. Maybe he'd find them somewhere nice to rent in Devon while they searched for their dream home.

His decision made, Sam headed upstairs to bed. He would give Alice a few days to recover before he called and tried to persuade her to move to England.

The last thing Sam wanted to do was leave his family again so soon, but he needed to see his mother to tell her what had happened. His car still hadn't arrived from France and he was forced to pay for a taxi for the four-hour round trip, but at least it gave him a chance to catch up on his sleep.

He was shocked by how much his mother's health had deteriorated since his last visit, but her eyes were bright and alert when he told her what had happened in France.

When it was time to leave, Susan Denham smiled at her son.

"Your father would have been proud of you."

Sam returned the smile and kissed her goodbye. Once her son had left, Susan vowed to follow his example and fight for her survival. The fifty-two-year-old made a valiant effort but, six months later, she smiled at the thought of her son having a second chance to be happy and closed her eyes for the final time.

SIXTY-SIX

In the end, using every ounce of self-control he possessed, Sam waited a week before phoning Alice at the chateau. He called first thing in the morning, after he'd taken Vicki to school, but before Tanya was awake. His wife had always been a late sleeper. When there was no answer from the chateau, he tried an hour later. And, whenever he managed to get a moment alone, he kept trying. By the end of the day, with still no answer, he was beginning to regret his decision to wait a week.

When Vicki and Tanya finally went to bed that night, he called the chateau again. It was late, but he didn't care, and he was prepared to face Anton's wrath for disturbing him, just so long as someone answered the damn phone. But no one did.

So, the next day, Sam dropped Vicki off at school, rushed home, and spent the entire morning trying to find the number of Alice's parents. After all that had happened, he wouldn't have blamed Alice for leaving the chateau for good. Eventually, he managed to get hold of the number and stabbed the digits out on his phone, desperate to finally hear Alice's voice.

After four rings it was answered by a man Sam presumed was Alice's father.

"Oui?"

From the single word, spoken after a long sigh, Sam could tell that the man was tired, as if he hadn't slept.

"Hello, I'm very sorry to bother you. Do you speak English?"

"Yes, how can I help you?"

"My name's Sam Denham, a friend of Alice's, and I've been trying to get hold of her, but there's no answer at the chateau. I was wondering if you'd know where she might be."

"You're Sam Denham?"

"Yes."

Although they'd never met, it was clear that Alice's father knew his name. Sam was annoyed with himself for not thinking things through before calling the Dubois family home. Of course Monsieur Dubois knew who he was. Sam had almost got his daughter killed. Despite the man's tiredness, he sounded angry.

"You have a lot of nerve calling us like this, after what you've brought on

this family.”

Sam hadn't expected to be welcomed with open arms, but he couldn't help thinking that the man's reaction was undeserved. After all, he'd rescued Alice from the clutches of the Schmitt family, and she had come through the whole ordeal alive and well.

“I'm not sure what you mean.”

“Why did you ever have to come here? It's all your fault!”

“What's my fault? I don't understand.”

That was when Monsieur Dubois told him the tragic news and Sam's world collapsed.

“She is dead, Mr Denham. My precious daughter is dead!”

There was a loud click, as Alice's father slammed down the phone, leaving Sam to listen to a monotonous dial tone, a soundtrack to his own personal hell.

SIXTY-SEVEN

Even during the Gulf War, under fire, Sam had never allowed himself to succumb to panic. His training and his personal disposition had always provided him with the means to control his fear. But this was different. Sitting alone in the quiet of his tiny home, he suddenly felt trapped and enclosed. He was a man of action and he needed to move.

He reached for his keys and headed for the street. He hadn't thought to put on his coat, but the cold air felt good. It brought him out of his funk and helped him to think. His heart raced, and he ran, in the hope that he could leave his cares behind. But it was impossible. Questions invading his mind refused to give him a reprieve.

Could Alice really be dead? Her father's words were simply words like any other. *She's fine, she's happy, she's sad, she's alive, she's dead, she died of cancer, she was murdered.* Just words. But words can make someone happy, or strike fear into their soul. It is the price we pay for being human. Whisper to a dog that he has cancer and is about to die, and he will lick your hand as if nothing has changed. Running through the empty streets, Sam found himself envying the dog.

But he needed to know what had happened, no matter how painful the answer turned out to be. And the only person he could think of who would give him the answers he sought was Inspector Moreau. He decided he would call him, but then changed his mind. He needed to speak to the man in person. That was the only way he could guarantee finding out the truth. He owed that much to Alice, at least.

Sam picked up his pace and headed for home. He had to find someone to look after Tanya and Vicki, and he hoped his sister-in-law would oblige. He would make some excuse to Tanya about having to return to sign some papers before they could get their hands on the money. That should placate her. Fortunately, he hadn't told her the cash was already sitting in his account.

Once inside, he picked up his credit card. He was a man of means now, he reminded himself. He picked up the phone to order a taxi to take him to the airport. By hook or by crook, he would be in Rouen by the end of the day.

It was late evening when the French taxi driver dropped him off at the police station in Rouen. Sam headed straight to the main desk and explained that he needed to speak with Inspector Moreau as a matter of urgency. If the man had already left to go home, he held out little hope that they would let him know how he could be reached, and Sam had already resigned himself to a long, frustrating night of waiting in a hotel room. But, as luck would have it, Moreau was working the night shift and Sam was directed to the detective's office.

He arrived to find a cramped, smoke-filled room, containing several desks with hardback chairs, but they were all empty, except for one. Moreau looked up, a pungent cigarette in his hand, delivering smoke up to the ceiling, adding to the cloud already there.

"Ah, Mr Denham. I thought I might have the pleasure of your company again."

"Is it true? Is she dead?"

"Please, take a seat," said Moreau, pointing to the nearest chair.

After his long journey, Sam didn't feel much like sitting, but sat down anyway, just to hurry things along.

"Yes, I'm afraid it's true."

"How? What happened?"

Moreau looked into the tired, haunted eyes of the Englishman, and couldn't help feeling sorry for him. He could tell that Alice Denham's death had hit the man hard. They were obviously closer than he had suspected. Now that things had ended so tragically, he even felt a twinge of guilt for having sent the man back to England. To make amends, he decided to bend the rules and share the details of an open investigation.

"The deaths occurred at the chateau."

"Deaths? You mean there was more than one?"

"Yes. A man and a woman, now identified as Anton and Alice Schmitt, and a man by the name of Hans Becker, one of the hired thugs you crossed paths with before."

Sam was surprised at the death of one of Schmitt's hired gunmen, but ignored the revelation, desperate to cling on to the one vital detail that offered hope. It was why he had made the long journey to France.

"You said 'now' identified. Why, is there some doubt?"

Moreau immediately shook his head and took a last drag on his cigarette, before crushing it into an ash tray on his desk. It joined a pile already sitting

there.

“Don’t get your hopes up, Mr Denham. The couple died in a fire in Alice Schmitt’s car and the bodies were consumed in the flames. But they have been identified as belonging to a man and a woman. They can tell by the pelvic bone, apparently.”

“My God. If the bodies were that badly burnt, surely they could belong to anyone.”

“The fire was deliberately set using a large amount of fuel, it is true, but some of Madam Schmitt’s jewellery was recovered.”

“That doesn’t prove anything,” said Sam, suspecting he was clutching at straws.

“I realise this must be very painful for you, Mr Denham, but we must face facts. After the deaths of Hermann and Franz Schmitt, their wives immediately moved back to Germany to be with their respective families. The staff also refused to work there, and so Anton and Alice Schmitt were the only occupants of the chateau at the time of these deaths. If the man and woman aren’t Anton and Alice, then who are they?”

Sam knew the man was right but refused to give up just yet.

“What happened to Hans Becker?”

“He died from a severe wound to the abdomen.”

“Caused how?”

“Apparently, he was attacked with an axe in one of the outbuildings.”

“Good God. And what do you make of that?”

“I’ll freely admit that we aren’t precisely sure what happened. But I think it is probably safe to assume that he was killed by either Anton or Alice Schmitt before they too were killed.”

“In that case, who killed *them*?”

“My personal belief is that one of them killed the other and then committed suicide.”

“There are less horrific ways to commit suicide.”

“I agree. But it is more common than you might think.”

Sam leant forward and placed his head in his hands. He rubbed his face to wipe away the fatigue, and to obliterate the thought that he had lost the woman he loved. It succeeded in neither.

“Who do you think did the killing and who committed suicide?”

“It is possible that we will never know, but the medical examiner tells me, from what he was able to recover from the fire, that Anton Schmitt was

severely injured before his body was consumed by the fire.”

“Does the examiner think he died from his injuries before the fire?”

“He cannot tell. There is so little to go on. But a great deal of blood was found on the chateau’s driveway, near the main gates.”

“Anton’s blood?”

“Again, we have no way of knowing.”

“It sounds to me like you’re not very sure of anything at all.”

As soon as he’d said the words, Sam felt ashamed. The detective had been more than forthcoming. He tried to put things right.

“I’m sorry, Inspector Moreau, you didn’t deserve that.”

Instead of answering, the French detective reached for his cigarette, but realised that he had already put it out. He gave Sam a thoughtful look.

“Why are you here, Mr Denham? I mean, what is it you want?”

“The truth.”

“Which I have just shared with you, as far as we can ever know the truth, given the evidence we have.”

“And you’re saying the truth is that Alice is dead.”

“Based on the evidence, yes. I might have known Madam Schmitt for only a short period of time, but I pride myself on being a good judge of character, and I could tell she was a very kind and caring woman. I can see how it would have been all too easy to fall for her charms and want her to be alive. But if the body of the woman is not Alice Schmitt, then who is it? And where is Madam Schmitt now?”

Sam didn’t respond to the detective’s questions because he didn’t have an answer.

“Can I see Alice’s body?”

“There would be very little point. Nothing is left but a few fragments of bone. I am not a superstitious man, Mr Denham, but if ever a family were cursed, I would have to say it would be the Schmitts. Count yourself lucky that you have not perished along with them.”

“I don’t feel particularly lucky, Inspector.”

“Go home, Mr Denham. Go home to your wife and daughter and try to forget the tragic events of the last few weeks.”

“And what about Alice?”

“You must forget her too.”

“What if I can’t?”

“All you can do is try. After all, what else can you do?”

After thanking the detective for his time, Sam left the police station and walked the streets of Rouen, a man lost.

The detective's words of wisdom echoed in his ears but did nothing to mend his broken heart.

SIXTY-EIGHT

2016

Her father and mother had gone into town after lunch, because Tanya had insisted she wanted to do some shopping. ‘So this won’t have been a totally wasted trip,’ she had said, displaying her usual insensitivity. Vicki had feigned a headache and said she would go back to her room. Before leaving, her father had come up to see if she was all right, and she had felt a slight twinge of guilt for lying to the man she adored but convinced herself it was for a good cause. The sadness she had detected behind his eyes, ever since she was a little girl, had come to the fore today at the graveside, and she wanted to know the reason why.

As soon as she was sure that her parents had left for the afternoon, she headed down to the reception desk of the hotel, in the large and splendid hallway. The owner of the hotel, Monsieur Lambert, smiled as she approached the counter.

“Can I help you, madam?”

“Yes. This morning I spotted a headstone in the grounds, over by the lake. I noticed the lady who’s buried there died when she was only young.”

“Yes. Thirty-one, I believe.”

From the way he’d said it, she wasn’t sure if Monsieur Lambert agreed that it was young, which was surprising, since he looked to be in his sixties.

“That’s right. I was wondering why she’s buried there.”

Monsieur Lambert’s face immediately dropped, as if he found the whole matter distasteful.

“She was the owner of the chateau, madam, about twenty years ago. That was before it became a hotel, of course.”

“How did she die, do you know?”

“Some sort of fire, I believe.”

Vicki had the distinct impression that Monsieur Lambert was reluctant to discuss the woman’s death and decided to try another approach.

“The reason I’m asking is that I’m somewhat of a history buff, and I find these sort of things fascinating.”

“Buff?”

“Yes. Sort of a hobby.”

Monsieur Lambert gave a huge sigh.

“You sound like my wife.”

Since arriving at the chateau a few days before, Vicki had only ever seen the owner on his own, talking to staff and guests, and had assumed his wife was away somewhere.

“Your wife?”

Instead of answering, Monsieur Lambert had a question of his own.

“Do you really want to know what happened to Alice Schmitt?”

“Of course.”

“Come this way,” said the owner, pointing to a door at the rear of the counter that Vicki assumed led to his living quarters.

He opened the door and she followed him into a grand lounge with a huge fireplace. French doors led to private gardens, with a large patio and gentle slopes leading from one level to another. It reminded her of the sort of set-up her father had built for her mother, back in Devon. She had been half-expecting Monsieur Lambert to take her to where he kept a shelf of books about the history of the area, or maybe to a display of pictures and photographs of previous occupants of the chateau. So, she had to hide her surprise when she was greeted by the sight of a woman of about sixty, lying on a sofa, next to which was a smart new mobility scooter.

“Felix, what do you ... oh.”

The woman suddenly looked up from the newspaper she was reading and spotted Vicki, standing behind her husband.

“I have a little treat for you, Marianne. Someone who is interested in the history of the chateau.”

Marianne looked Vicki up and down, over her reading glasses, while her husband began to make his way back to the reception desk.

“You are very lucky, madam,” he said, his hand resting on the door handle. “You will find my wife knows more than you will ever learn from any stuffy history book. Just don’t let her get carried away, now she finally has someone with whom she can share her obsession. She has a very active imagination.”

“It is just as well, being married to you!” yelled Marianne, but her husband had already left.

Vicki felt embarrassed, suddenly finding herself stuck in the middle of a marital row, but Marianne was all smiles, and pointed to a comfortable armchair, sitting across from the sofa, next to the fireplace.

“Please, sit down. Just ignore the silly old fool. Running the hotel is all he

thinks about ... and all he's good for!"

Marianne had shouted the insult at the closed door, but Vicki doubted if her husband heard it. Madam Lambert noticed Vicki eyeing the mobility scooter and clearly thought she better explain.

"I have arthritis. And, of course, I am married to him. Two handicaps in my life," said Marianne, pointing at the closed door through which Felix Lambert had just left.

Vicki stifled a laugh and Marianne began to enjoy having a captive audience.

"Fortunately, I have this," she said, pointing to her scooter, "and this."

She waved a hand at the French doors and the garden beyond.

"The scooter gets me around when my arthritis is bad, which is most of the time, and the garden offers me an escape from him," she said, jutting her chin in the direction of the door. She patted her knees, as if to say she was ready to begin.

"Now, what is it you'd like to know?"

Vicki leant forward.

"As I said to your husband, I'm interested in the lady, buried in the grounds. Alice Schmitt," said Vicki, in case there was a grave somewhere else she hadn't spotted.

"Ah, my favourite topic," said Marianne, and her eyes lit up. "Now I know why that stupid husband of mine was warning you about my so-called overactive imagination. I just hope you are a better listener and student than he."

Vicki nodded enthusiastically, even though she didn't know what she was letting herself in for. She just had to hope the eccentric woman, lying prone on her sofa, covered in patchwork blankets, wasn't somehow deluded, as her husband had claimed

"But, before I begin," said Marianne, doing her best to sit up, "what is your name, my dear? That fool of a husband didn't introduce you."

"Vicki. Vicki Denham."

Marianne bolted upright so quickly, Vicki couldn't help wondering if the woman's previous inactivity had been an act.

"Denham, did you say?"

Vicki was shocked by the woman's reaction, as she stared at her visitor wide-eyed. Marianne's next words did nothing to settle her.

"Would you, by any chance, be related to a man call Sam Denham?"

Vicki was almost lost for words. As far as she knew, this woman, lying confined to her room, had never met her father.

“Yes, he’s my father.”

“Good God in heaven, it can’t be. Please, my dear, fetch me a glass of water before I faint away.”

Vicki quickly poured a glass of water from a decanter, sitting on a table next to the sofa. She noticed her hands had started to shake. There were only two possible explanations for the woman’s dramatic reaction to her father’s name, she decided. Either this woman was a lunatic, or her father had been hiding some dark secret from her all these years.

A secret that was about to be revealed.

SIXTY-NINE

Much to Vicki's surprise, Marianne Lambert suddenly rose from the sofa unaided, and headed for a small cupboard in the corner of the room. She retrieved a pile of what looked like photograph albums and a couple of newspapers, before laying them on a dining table, set in the middle of the room. She eased herself on to a chair and pointed to another, beckoning Vicki over.

By the time Vicki approached the table, Marianne had already opened one of the books to reveal it was indeed a photograph album. Vicki noticed it was crammed with photos, newspaper clippings and other assorted documents. The newspapers were crisp and worn and clearly several years old. Marianne had thoughtfully placed one of them on the table in front of Vicki's chair, already open at the article she wanted her to read.

Vicki made herself comfortable, thanked Marianne, and stared down at the newspaper. As she had expected, it was a French newspaper and there were three separate articles on the same page. At school she had almost chosen French as one of her A Levels but had switched to English Literature at the last minute. This was one of those moments when she regretted her decision. But, within the first article, she could pick out the name of the chateau. She looked at the top of the page and noted the date the paper was published – July 1998. She would have just been a young girl at the time.

Vicki knew she would have to ask Marianne to translate the article for her but tried to get the gist of what it was about. A name jumped out at her and she couldn't wait any longer.

“Marianne. Is this about my father?”

“Yes, at least in part.”

Marianne pulled the paper towards her and Vicki thought she was going to read out an English version of the article. But, much to her annoyance, the woman covered it with her arms and shook her head. Was she angry that Vicki couldn't read it for herself? But then she explained.

“I am wondering if I am doing the right thing. If you know nothing of this, then it is because your father has deliberately kept it from you. Perhaps it is not my place to tell you these things.”

Vicki's relief that she wasn't being castigated for her ignorance of the French language, was replaced with a concern that she would not be able to

find out about Alice Schmitt and her father. She thought carefully before she spoke.

“My father is very protective of me, it’s true, but now I think the time has come for me to help him. I found him crying at Alice Schmitt’s graveside and he hoped I hadn’t noticed. But I did, and I need to know what this is all about if I am to do what’s right. If you are worried about my feelings, don’t be. Nothing you tell me can diminish the love I feel for my father. In my heart I know he is a good man and I will only reveal what you tell me if I think it will ease his sadness.”

“You place a lot of responsibility on my shoulders, young lady, but if that is what you wish, I will tell you what you want to know.”

“Thank you, Marianne. You are very kind.”

Satisfied with Vicki’s explanation, Madam Lambert removed her arms from the newspaper and glanced at it before turning to her avid student. Vicki got the impression that Marianne didn’t even have to read the article and already knew it off by heart.

“Eighteen years ago, there were a number of deaths at this chateau, including that of Madam Schmitt.”

“Oh, my goodness. And was my father here when it happened?”

“Yes, he was.”

Vicki could tell that Marianne was still having doubts about recounting the events of eighteen years ago. She gently touched her hand.

“Please, Marianne. I must know.”

Marianne placed her hand flat on the newspaper, as if she could absorb the details contained within, and sighed before she began.

“It was a national story at the time, but complicated, and the police deliberately gave very little away. One of those who was killed was the owner of the chateau at the time ... Hermann Schmitt.”

“Killed how?”

“He was shot.”

Vicki wanted to gasp, but she kept her emotions in check. She didn’t want to give Marianne another excuse to keep the story to herself. Marianne’s reticence had already aroused Vicki’s suspicions, and she decided to make things easier for her.

“Did my father shoot him?”

“Yes. Yes, he did. But, according to witnesses, it was in self-defence.”

Marianne had spoken quickly, clearly eager not to alarm Vicki. Relief

washed over her, and Vicki tried to appear unfazed.

“Witnesses?” was all she could manage to say.

“Yes. Alice Schmitt was one of them.”

“So, she wasn’t killed when this happened?” asked Vicki, pointing at the newspaper.

“No, that happened several weeks later.”

Vicki was getting ever more confused and felt like screaming at Marianne to blurt it all out, instead of drip-feeding her facts one at time. She decided the best thing to do was to remain quiet and let the woman tell what she knew in her own time. And it seemed to work.

“The other man that was shot was Franz Schmitt, Hermann Schmitt’s son. But he was shot by his own father.”

It took every ounce of willpower that Vicki possessed not to react, but she managed to keep calm and simply waited for Marianne to continue.

“Another man, hired by Hermann Schmitt, was killed by your father, but again it was in self-defence. Apparently, the man had a gun and tried to shoot your father.”

Vicki was quickly becoming overloaded with information. It might have all happened nearly twenty years ago, but the thought that her father had put himself in such danger was still a frightening one. She had heard stories of his exploits during the Gulf War, mostly from her father’s old army pals, but somehow this all seemed worse. Perhaps it was the fact that she was sitting in the chateau where the terrible bloodshed had taken place. Little did she know that there was more to come.

“Two other bodyguards were found by the police, tied up to radiators in the dining room. Apparently, your father somehow overpowered them.”

Vicki couldn’t control herself anymore and had to vent her feelings.

“I can’t believe I never knew anything about this.”

“You should not blame yourself,” said Marianne, patting Vicki’s hand. “Although it was a national story in France, it was probably only reported very briefly in the foreign press. The police did their best to keep the investigation as low key as possible ... no one likes their local area to be associated with death and murder. And remember that your father was never convicted of any crime.”

“But why did my father come here at all?”

“He came to find out what happened to his father ... your grandfather.”

“I thought he left the family and disappeared, some time back in the

seventies.”

“He did, but he was murdered. Your father found his body buried in a cave, at the foot of the moat.”

“Oh, my God.”

“We should stop, my dear. I can see this is all too much for you to take in. I knew I shouldn’t have told you.”

Vicki quickly took control of herself and was determined not to react in a way that would distress Marianne again. She would bottle up any emotions until after she had learnt all there was to know. She could always fall apart when she was alone.

“No, I’m okay, really. Please, just tell me the rest,” said Vicki, deciding she would not interrupt again, no matter what.

“If you’re sure.”

Vicky simply nodded.

“There were four more deaths earlier that day, at the holiday cottage of the Dubois family ... that was Alice’s maiden name. Three more hired bodyguards, apparently, and an ex-policeman who worked for Herman Schmitt. Your father was unarmed.”

From what Marianne had just said, she could only presume that her father had killed these men too, but she didn’t dare ask. Instead she asked about Alice.

“And you said Alice was killed a few weeks later?”

“Yes. Again, here at the chateau. Along with her husband, Anton Schmitt, and one of those men that Hermann Schmitt had hired.”

“Killed how?”

“The hired man was killed with an axe, and Alice and Anton were supposedly found burnt to a crisp in her car.”

At this point Vicki very nearly broke the promise she had made to herself and cried out. But she found the strength to maintain her composure. Despite the horror of what she had just been told, one word that Marianne had uttered lodged itself into her consciousness.

“Supposedly?”

Marianne shook her head and waved her hands as if she wanted to halt the proceedings right there.

“As much as I hate to admit it,” she said, “perhaps my husband is right. I should not share with you my own suspicions of what happened. I might well be wrong, and it wouldn’t be fair on you. Not when you have a personal

connection because of your father.”

“But you have been kind enough to share so much with me already. What can it hurt?”

“That was different. It is all on record and you can see the evidence for yourself.”

Vicki was an astute woman and a good judge of character. She could tell the woman sitting opposite her wanted to share her pet theory, despite her words. All she needed was some reassurance.

“I promise not to be upset by what you share with me. I am sure I can tell the difference between a theory and wild supposition.”

“What I have is not wild supposition, I assure you,” said Marianne, and Vicki could tell she was now itching to tell her.

“I’m sure it isn’t.”

Marianne sat up, as if she were about to make some important pronouncement. After all the stories of murder and bloodshed, Vicki thought there was nothing else that could shock her. But Marianne’s next words proved her wrong.

“I believe Alice Schmitt did not die in that fire.”

SEVENTY

It took Vicki a while to digest the enormity of what she had just been told. She had come looking for information about Alice Schmitt, the woman who was apparently buried within the grounds of the chateau, because it had been clear to her that her father mourned her death. She had merely wanted to understand, so that she could share the burden her father carried. And after all that Marianne had told her about what her father had gone through, all those years ago, she had started to think she understood the reason for his sadness.

But this was different. What if it were true? What if the woman her father had once loved were still alive. It threw up so many questions, Vicki didn't really know where to begin. But perhaps she was getting carried away. This might just be the ravings of some mad conspiracy theorist. Even Marianne's own husband clearly didn't believe her. Vicki decided it cost nothing to hear what she had to say and asked the obvious.

"What makes you think she is still alive?"

"I did not say that, but, as it happens, I do believe she is."

"But I don't understand. You told me the police said she burnt in a fire."

"In fact, they said 'a woman' burnt in the fire. From the bones that remained, all they were able to do was identify the gender of the victim. They failed to prove that the body belonged to Alice Schmitt."

"But, if it wasn't her, then who was it?"

Instead of answering the question, Marianne's body sagged, and she looked at the sofa.

"I am getting a little tired, I'm afraid. I need to lie down."

Vicki couldn't help but feel nervous. Had the woman taunted her with her suspicions, only to let her down at the last minute?

This time Marianne needed help getting to the sofa - the sudden burst of energy she'd experienced earlier apparently spent.

"Whose body was it?" asked Vicki, not giving the woman a chance to change her mind about telling her.

"I have no proof, you understand."

"I understand."

Marianne paused, as if she were still unsure whether to continue. She gave a huge sigh before she spoke.

"Some years before, a young girl from the village who worked at the

chateau went missing. No one knows what happened to her.”

“And you think it was her body that burned in the fire?”

Vicki immediately regretted the scepticism in her voice, but it only served to spur Marianne on.

“Her skeleton, yes. I believe she was murdered by Alice’s husband and buried somewhere in the chateau grounds.”

“Why do you believe that?”

Vicki didn’t want to sound as if she were deriding the woman’s theories, but she had to know it wasn’t just a figment of her imagination.

“My cousin was the housekeeper here when Adele disappeared. She told me how Anton Schmitt used to make the poor girl feel uncomfortable. She told me other stories too, and it was clear to me that this Anton was a vile man.”

“Even so, that doesn’t mean he killed this girl ... Adele, did you say?”

“Yes. And that is true. But my cousin told me that Schmitt sent the staff home on the day Adele disappeared. Apparently, this was highly unusual and totally out of character.”

“That’s still not proof.”

“I agree. But what my cousin did not tell the police was that Anton was the last person to see Adele alive. She had asked Schmitt if she should tell Adele about the day off, but he said he would do it himself. Yvette has felt guilty ever since about not speaking up.”

Vicki was still not convinced, but she had to admit that this wasn’t just some crack-pot theory dreamt up out of nowhere. She still had a dozen questions she wanted to ask and didn’t let up.

“So, you’re saying that Alice must have somehow found out about Adele’s murder and put the body in the car, hoping the authorities would believe it was her who died in the fire.”

“Exactly. You are a bright young woman, Vicki. If only my husband had the wherewithal to understand.”

Vicki could tell that Marianne was flattering her to get her on her side.

“Even if all this really happened, what makes you think Alice is still alive?”

“Again, I have no direct proof, and she has never been seen since her supposed death.”

Vicki suspected Marianne had something up her sleeve and was just enjoying the moment, so she played along.

“But I bet you have some more evidence that the police have missed.”

“I do. You see, my brother lives in Rouen and he is a neighbour of Alice’s parents.”

“They’re still alive?”

“Yes. And my brother is a good friend of the Dubois family. He went to their home to pay his respects when Alice died, and he even went to her funeral.”

“I see,” said Vicki, unsure what this had to do with Alice still being alive.

“He told me how distraught Monsieur and Madam Dubois were, quite naturally. In fact, Emma Dubois was quite inconsolable, and my brother says she wept continuously, whenever he visited the home.”

“That is hardly surprising. It must be terrible to lose one’s own daughter. Especially at such a young age.”

“Yes. But it is what happened little more than a month after the funeral that is more than strange.”

“What was strange?”

“My brother visited the home, just as he had done so many times before, and he told me that it was as if a great cloud had been lifted. The couple were transformed, and the outward appearance of their grief had all but disappeared.”

“But isn’t that the way it is with bereavement? It just takes time to find a way to cope.”

“Perhaps. But it was the suddenness of the transformation that aroused my brother’s suspicions.”

“I take it you think they discovered that their daughter was still alive?”

“Yes, but there is more.”

Vicki was on the edge of her seat. She wasn’t quite ready to admit that she believed Marianne’s theory, but she was captivated by the story nonetheless.

“Something else your brother found out?”

“Well done, Vicki, you are quite correct. You see, Alice had a god-daughter with whom she was very close, until she married Schmitt and moved into the chateau.”

“I’m not sure I understand,” said Vicki, when Marianne had paused, a smile on her face. It was clear the amateur sleuth was in her element.

“This god-daughter lives in Switzerland, with her husband. Now, this is where it gets interesting. Suddenly, after Alice’s parents seemed to have miraculously recovered from the death of their one and only daughter, they began to make regular trips to see this god-daughter in Switzerland – a woman

with whom they had previously had very little contact. In fact, my brother says they have been visiting her ever since. Now, Vicki, what do you make of that?"

Marianne grinned, and Vicki couldn't help but smile back.

Vicki looked at the photograph album, lying open on the table, and saw a picture of a strikingly pretty woman staring back at her.

"I say that Alice Schmitt is alive and well and living in Switzerland."

SEVENTY-ONE

Although she was pleased to have convinced the young Englishwoman that her suspicions were based on facts, Marianne became decidedly nervous when Vicki asked if she would telephone her brother in Rouen to see if he knew the address of Alice's god-daughter in Switzerland. But when Vicki convinced her that she would treat any information she received with the utmost discretion, Marianne agreed to help.

Vicki had an important decision to make. As she made her way to her room to think about what she had just been told, she decided she only had three distinct choices. One option was to simply forget all about it. Perhaps Marianne Lambert was deluded, as her husband had claimed, but Vicki refused to believe it. The woman had been too convincing.

Another possibility was that she could share what she had just found out with her father, once he returned to the hotel. And she admitted that was what she would have done, if it hadn't been for Marianne's ultimate bombshell. Telling her father that she knew he had once loved another woman who had died in tragic circumstances was one thing, informing him that she suspected the woman might still be alive was quite another. Especially when she had no proof to back up her claim. To do so would just be cruel.

And then there was the third and most exciting option, although she had to admit it was a long shot, to say the least. What if, she asked herself, she went to Switzerland, somehow found Alice Schmitt alive, and reunited the woman with her father? Wouldn't that be the greatest gift she could ever give him?

But what on earth was she thinking? Even if such a thing were possible, how could she even consider it? Had she no respect for her mother's feelings? She might know in her heart that her parents were no longer in love, but that didn't mean her mother wouldn't be devastated if Sam left her for another woman. Especially one he had been harbouring a secret love for all these years.

Perhaps she was worrying about nothing anyway. What were the chances of her finding a woman who had managed to fake her own death and had succeeded in not being discovered for eighteen years? And even if, by some miracle, she did find her, would she even want to see Vicki's father? She had probably started a new life of her own with someone else. And what would that do to her father if he ever found out? It didn't bear thinking about.

But Vicki knew, in her heart, that she couldn't just forget all about it - not now that a seed of doubt about Alice Schmitt's death had been planted in her mind. She had to at least try and find this woman. And if she failed, she could tell herself she had done her best to help her father in his hour of need. But if she succeeded and the terrible truth was that Alice had simply moved on and forgotten all about her father, it would remain a secret that she would never reveal.

Perhaps the most terrifying prospect of all, was the possibility that she would succeed and discover that Alice was still in love with her father. She would be initiating something that could have far-reaching consequences.

One thing was sure. No matter how slim her prospects of success were, she had to speak with her mother before she left. There was something she needed to discuss with her that she had been putting off for far too long.

SEVENTY-TWO

The next morning, after breakfast, Vicki found her mother sitting in the gardens of the chateau, drinking coffee and reading a magazine. Her father had said he was going to take another walk around the grounds. She wondered if he was sitting on the same bench, staring at Alice Schmitt's grave. Vicki sat down at her mother's table.

"Mum, I've got a really big favour to ask."

Tanya looked up from her magazine and took off her reading glasses. She hated wearing them and always removed them the moment she finished reading. Vicki looked at her mother and wondered how she had managed to reach her fifties without gaining a single wrinkle. As far as she knew, her mother hadn't been anywhere near a plastic surgeon. She was still very pretty, and Vicki had always been aware of the male attention her mother attracted wherever she went. She sometimes wondered if the fact that her mother was in a wheelchair increased her appeal - as if her beauty was unexpected and thus more enticing. It was a ridiculous thing to think. Why couldn't someone be beautiful, just because they were in a wheelchair?

"If you want to spend the day with your dad, that's fine with me. I'm quite happy sitting here and relaxing. Felix is looking after me."

Vicki wasn't surprised that her mother had the owner of the chateau at her beck and call. She always had a way of getting men to do what she wanted.

"No, it's not that. I've just had a message from my friend Sarah and she needs to see me. Some sort of family crisis."

"Well, that's not a problem, is it? We're heading home tomorrow anyway."

"But that's the problem. She lives in Switzerland."

"Switzerland? How will you ..."

"I thought I might be able to borrow the car and pay her a quick visit from here."

"But that will take days and we're supposed to be leaving tomorrow."

"Well, that's the favour, mum. Would you and dad mind staying on here until I get back. I'll be as quick as I can, I promise."

Tanya thought for a moment and eyed her surroundings, as if it would help her to decide. Although the family owned their own holiday cottage business, they hadn't had a break in years and she was enjoying the change.

"Felix!"

Monsieur Lambert immediately emerged from the French doors of the chateau, as if he'd been waiting for the next command from his disabled English guest.

“Oui, madam?”

“If we wanted to stay on for a few more days, would that be a problem?”

“No. On the contrary, it would be a pleasure to have your company.”

“Oh, aren't French men so charming,” said Tanya, turning to her daughter. “Are you sure you don't want to change your mind about Max and find a nice Frenchman instead?”

“Mum!”

Monsieur Lambert smiled, soaking up the compliment. Sometimes Vicki wished she had the charm of her mother, but she tended to be more direct with the opposite sex, like her father. Fortunately, now that she was engaged to Max, she no longer had to worry about flirting. Once Felix had left, Tanya shrugged her shoulders.

“If it's okay with your father, it's okay with me.”

“Thanks, mum, I really appreciate it, but there was something else I wanted to talk to you about.”

“What?”

“Dad.”

“Oh, what about him?”

Vicki paused and tried to collect her thoughts before continuing. The last thing she wanted to do was hurt her mother's feelings, but she had to get things out in the open before she left for Switzerland.

“Are you and dad in love?”

Tanya had been about to flick through her magazine while Vicki talked, but the question shocked her, and she dropped her reading glasses on the table.

“What sort of question is that, Vicki? Of course we love each other. We've been married for nearly thirty years.”

Vicki realised her mother was going on the defensive, and she already had the feeling she was walking on eggshells. She decided to say what she'd come to say and braced herself for her mother's response.

“I don't think dad's been happy for a very long time.”

Tanya let out a snort and looked around at the empty tables, as if they would provide an answer to her daughter's questions.

“Look, what's this all about? Have you two had a row or something?”

“No, of course not. But I know dad, and I can tell he's not happy, deep

down.”

“And I don’t know him, I suppose?”

Vicki realised they were on the verge of having a row. She decided to put her mother on the spot.

“Do you think he’s happy?”

Vicki expected her mother to simply snap back at her and tell her she was talking nonsense. But, instead, her mother’s body seemed to sag in her chair, and she stared into the distance. Her eyes were glistening, and a tear threatened to trickle down her cheek. Vicki couldn’t help feeling awful about what she was doing.

“Vicki, you’ve got to understand something. When you were very small, things were hard. Your father loved the army, but I wanted him home, with us. Then I had my accident, and everything changed. Your father felt guilty and blamed himself, I know that. And I’m ashamed to say I let him. I wanted him home, and when I became paralysed I needed him more than ever. And you needed him too, sweetheart.”

Vicki found herself having to hold back her tears. She could almost see her mother’s mind working - acknowledging that she might have done the wrong thing, but, at the same time, justifying her actions by claiming it had been for Vicki’s sake too. Tanya continued to explain, unable to stop herself, now that she’d finally opened up.

“And when your father left the army, it only made things worse and I realised I’d made a terrible mistake. But it was too late by then. Sam thought he had to make amends and devoted his time to caring for you and me. But we had very little money and no matter what we did, we didn’t seem to be able to climb out of the hole we found ourselves in.”

“Was that why dad came to France all those years ago?”

“Did he tell you about that?”

“No.”

“I’m surprised you remember. You were only a little girl.”

Vicki thought it best not to tell her mother about her talk with Madam Lambert.

“How could I forget? When dad came back, everything changed.”

“That’s right. We’ve never told you this, but someone stole something from his grandfather, during the war. Your father came here to get it back.”

“I always thought we’d inherited the money.”

“That’s what we told you. It was easier than explaining what really

happened.”

“Do you know what really happened?”

“Not really,” Tanya lied. “I was just relieved to have your father home safe and sound.”

“Dad came through for us, didn’t he?”

Vicki’s question seemed to take her mother by surprise and she took a moment to answer.

“Yes, he did.”

“Don’t you think we owe him something in return?”

“What do you mean?”

“Doesn’t he deserve a chance at happiness, if it’s out there?”

Tanya looked her daughter in the eye before speaking.

“What are you trying to say, Vicki?”

“Perhaps it’s time we let him go.”

A tear finally escaped from the corner of Tanya’s eye and rolled down her cheek.

“To be with someone else you mean?”

“I’m deeply in love with Max and I know how desperately sad I would be if I couldn’t be with him.”

“Not everyone falls in love, Vicki.”

“What about you and dad?”

“Perhaps it’s too late for us.”

Vicki rose up from her chair and hugged her mother.

“Maybe it’s not too late for either of you, mum, you never know.”

Tanya looked at her daughter, trying to read her face. Vicki kissed her and whispered in her mother’s ear before she left.

“Perhaps it’s time to set one another free and find out.”

SEVENTY-THREE

If Vicki had only known, she was experiencing the same feelings her father had over eighteen years before, when he had gone to France in search of justice. She had already negotiated the outskirts of Paris and was heading for the Swiss border. She had her passport, she had a full tank of petrol, and she had the open road laid out before her. She was embarking on one last adventure alone, before she settled down as a married woman. And it felt good.

She even had company, in the shape of the friendly female voice emanating from her Satnav, informing her that the entire journey should take no longer than ten hours, traffic permitting. The flat landscape of northern France was gradually giving way to rolling hills and jagged mountains, and she planned to find a pretty place to stop and have a late lunch. She was determined to enjoy the journey and pushed aside doubts about whether she should be going to Switzerland at all.

Marianne Lambert had been as good as her word and contacted her brother to find out what he knew about Alice Schmitt's god-daughter. And it appeared that he was as inquisitive as his sister, because he not only knew the woman's name, but also where she lived. Rachelle and David Gessner lived near the town of Zermatt at the foot of the famous Matterhorn. Apparently, they owned and ran holiday chalets, and when Vicki had learned this, she was struck by the coincidence. If Alice was indeed living with her god-daughter, she was apparently in the same line of work as Vicki's father.

As thoughts turned to her father, she felt guilty that she had left the chateau without saying good-bye. But she had been worried about telling him her plans. They were so close that he could invariably tell when she wasn't being honest with him, and she'd feared that he might have stopped her going on her trip. So, she'd ended up deceiving him again. She just had to hope it was all worth it.

Was it going to be a wasted journey? Or was she about to make a discovery that could turn the lives of her family upside down?

Sam was worried that he was becoming a little morbid. He'd visited Alice's grave every single day since they'd arrived at the chateau. And now here he was again. But they were going home to England tomorrow and he

wanted to say good-bye. He couldn't say why he found comfort in being there, watching over Alice's burnt bones buried six feet below, but he did. Perhaps, if he had time before they left, he would pay Alice another visit tomorrow.

He had been so lost in thought, he hadn't heard the footsteps crunching on the gravel path. He turned around to see the owner approaching and was shocked to see Tanya in her wheelchair being pushed ahead of him. Sam suddenly felt guilty, sitting in front of Alice's grave. Like a man caught committing adultery.

He quickly got up from his bench and headed in their direction, hoping to intercept them before they got too close. By the time he reached them, they had drawn up at a pair of deckchairs, placed under the shade of a tree. Tanya was the first to speak.

"Thank you, Felix. It was really kind of you to help me."

"Always a pleasure, Tanya," said Felix, and Sam could have sworn the man gave him a dirty look before he headed back to the chateau.

Sam's feelings of guilt intensified. He should have been the one helping his wife around the chateau's grounds, not Monsieur Lambert. He had also noted that his wife and the owner were already on first name terms. It was just another sign that he had been neglecting his wife - just to stare at a grave.

"Do you want to go back to your bench?"

Your bench? Was that a dig at his expense, or was he overreacting?

"No. It's probably more comfortable here, in the shade. Do you want to try one out?" asked Sam, pointing to the deckchairs.

"Why not?"

Sam lifted Tanya out of her wheelchair and placed her in the nearest deckchair as gently as he could.

"Do you want me to nip back to the chateau and order us some drinks?" asked Sam, trying to ease his guilt.

"Maybe later. I was hoping we could have a little chat."

Sam was immediately on his guard. Whenever Tanya decided she wanted 'a little chat', it usually spelt trouble.

"Sure."

Sam turned the other deckchair around to face hers and sat down.

"Vicki not with you?" he asked, hoping to delay the inevitable.

"That's partly what I wanted to talk to you about. She's taken the car to visit a friend."

"Oh. I didn't think she knew anyone around here."

“She doesn’t. This friend lives in Switzerland.”

“Switzerland? How long’s she going to be gone?”

“A couple of days.”

“But we were supposed to be leaving today.”

“I told her it would be okay. I hope that was all right.”

Sam didn’t know what he found more of a surprise - the fact that Vicki had decided to suddenly desert them, or that she’d gone to Tanya and not him to get the go-ahead. It was Sam that was usually her first port of call when it came to asking for a favour.

“She said her friend’s name is Sarah. Did you know she had a friend called Sarah who lives in Switzerland?”

“It’s the first I’ve heard of it.”

“What do you think our clever little daughter is up to?”

“Beats me. So, it looks like we’re stuck here for a few more days.”

“I don’t mind if you don’t. I like it here. How did you find out about it?”

“The usual way, on the Internet. Besides, it wasn’t too far from the cemetery where my grandfather’s buried.”

Sam didn’t like lying to Tanya, and the way she was looking at him made him feel uncomfortable. Her next words confirmed that he was right to have had misgivings. His wife had been testing him.

“I know you’ve been here before, Sam. I’m in a wheelchair, but that doesn’t mean I can’t read newspapers like everyone else.”

Sam just looked at her, and he didn’t know what to say. Eventually, he found the words.

“I didn’t tell you what happened because I didn’t want you to worry. Besides, I wasn’t sure you cared, as long as I came back with the money.”

Sam was annoyed at himself for what he’d said. It might have felt that way at the time, but it was unfair of him to bring it up now. Yet Tanya surprised him again.

“I’m sorry for the way I behaved back then. I made a mistake asking you to leave the army and for blaming you for this.”

She looked down at her legs, hanging over the edge of the deckchair, and she pointed to her wheelchair.

“I *wanted* to take care of you.”

“I know you did. But it was out of a sense of duty and guilt, not love. And I let you.”

Sam looked away from Tanya’s stare. He knew he should tell her she was

wrong and that he loved her, but he couldn't bring himself to say it.

"It's okay, Sam, it works both ways. I haven't loved you the way you deserved."

Sam eventually found the strength to look his wife in the eye.

"Why are you telling me all this now, Tanya?"

"You have our daughter to thank for that. Before she left, she spelt out some home truths and I think she's right. We need to let one another go and find a love we both deserve. If it's not too late."

"It's been too late for a long time now."

As he said the words, Sam looked at Alice's grave. He cursed himself for a second time. Tanya had caught him off-guard.

"Perhaps you'll find someone else," said Tanya.

She turned to look at Alice's grave as she spoke, and she smiled when she noticed Sam's look of alarm. Had she known all along? *I read the newspapers like everyone else.* Tanya would have read about Alice and what happened to her. She could easily have put two and two together. Before he had time to torture himself any more, Tanya interrupted his thoughts.

"What I'm saying is, I think Vicki is right, it's time we set each other free."

"Is that what you want?"

"I never thought I'd be the one to say this, but it's the right thing to do."

Sam reached over and stroked Tanya's knee. She couldn't feel his touch, but she smiled anyway.

"Shall I get those drinks now?"

"That would be nice."

As Sam walked back to the chateau, Tanya looked over at Alice's grave and shed a tear.

SEVENTY-FOUR

Vicki was beginning to wonder if the woman inhabiting the Satnav had lied to her. What had started out as an adventure was quickly becoming an arduous ordeal. Even though she had deliberately set off from the chateau in the early hours of the morning, the sun was already low in the sky by the time she saw the sharp peak of the Matterhorn in the distance. As the terrain became more mountainous, so the roads became more difficult to negotiate, and Vicki was feeling so tired, she was finding it increasingly difficult to concentrate.

In the end she was forced to stop - not only to rest, but also to collect her thoughts and attend to her appearance, which she decided must be looking a little ragged after her epic journey. In the distance, she could see the orange glow of lights springing up in the pretty chalet-style homes of Zermatt, but she knew that the holiday complex lay a few miles beyond. She had parked the car at a popular view-point and several tourists had stopped to watch the sunset. Vicki was tempted to lie on the grass and join them, while she fell into a blissful sleep, but she forced herself to stretch her aching legs one last time and got behind the wheel.

When she finally arrived at the entrance to the complex of chalets, nestling in the mountains, she looked at her watch to see that she'd only been driving for a little over thirty minutes since leaving the view-point. But it had felt a lot longer. She found a parking area set aside for guests and was relieved to get out of the car again. It was already dusk, and she wondered if she should have booked into a hotel in Zermatt and waited until the next day to arrive at the complex. But she decided she wouldn't have slept a wink, knowing she was so close to finding the answers she was seeking.

Taking one last deep breath, she headed for the reception area. It was in a large chalet, with a pine ceiling and clean, whitewashed walls. The counter was constructed from stones, while a roughly-hewn tree trunk served as a desk top. The room was deserted, but a small table lamp on the end of the counter illuminated a bell. Vicki rang it and waited. On the third ring a woman eventually arrived.

"Can I help you?" she asked in French.

Vicki guessed the woman was about forty. She was attractive and had a friendly smile. Her hair was tied back in a pony tail, adding to the youthful appearance.

“I hope so,” said Vicki, returning the woman’s smile, despite her tiredness. “I’ve come a long way to get here.”

Vicki spoke in English, assuming the owner of holiday chalets who received guests from all over Europe would understand her. The woman instinctively turned the pages in a large book, open on the counter top.

“I thought all of our guests arrived at the weekend. Are you a friend of one of the families already booked in?”

“No.”

“I’m very sorry, but we don’t have any vacancies. We usually take bookings on-line or over the phone. I could call a friend of mine who owns a guest house in town if you’d like.”

“No, that won’t be I mean, yes, perhaps later if that’s okay,” said Vicki, suddenly remembering she needed a bed for the night. She wasn’t looking forward to the prospect of searching door to door now it was dark.

“Later?”

Vicki was tired and realised she wasn’t making much sense. She didn’t want to risk annoying the friendly woman on the other side of the counter and decided to get to the point.

“Yes. I didn’t come here looking for a place to stay.”

“Oh.”

Vicki could tell the woman’s patience was wearing thin. She braced herself and took a deep breath.

“I’m looking for Alice Schmitt.”

After travelling so far, Vicki’s biggest fear had been that the journey would turn out to be a total waste of time. But now she knew it wasn’t. Vicki prided herself on being very perceptive and she had the ability to pick up on the tiniest movements in people’s faces. On one of the few occasions when her father had shared memories of his life in the SAS, he had told her she would have made an excellent interrogator. Nothing seemed to get past her.

And this was one of those times she was glad it was one of her talents. The woman behind the counter tried to hide it, but the suddenness with which Vicki had delivered the name, out of the blue, had had the desired effect. Her eyes had widened, her mouth had opened a fraction of an inch, and she had rested her right hand on the counter to steady herself. Vicki had feared that the woman

would show no reaction at all, or simply puzzlement, but she hadn't. She knew the name Alice Schmitt. Of course, her words said otherwise.

"I don't think we have a guest by that name," said the woman, recovering quickly and thumbing through the book in front of her.

"She's not a guest. She's your god-mother."

It was a guess on Vicki's part, based on the age of the woman with the pony tail. The woman's sharp intake of breath confirmed Vicki was right.

"I think you've been misinformed, Madam?"

Vicki could tell that Rachelle Gessner was trying to think on her feet. She had to feign ignorance when it came to the name 'Alice Schmitt', but she needed to know who this young Englishwoman was, descending on her little patch of Switzerland late at night.

"Denham. Vicki Denham."

Vicki had deliberately emphasised her last name. If Alice Schmitt had been sheltering here for the past eighteen years, the woman on the other side of the counter would most certainly have heard Sam Denham's name. Rachelle Gessner's reaction was priceless.

"Oh, my God, you must be ..."

Her eyes were as wide as saucers and she brought her hand to her mouth, as if she were trying to stop herself saying anything more.

"His daughter," said Vicki, finishing Rachelle's sentence for her.

"Please, come through to the lounge."

Rachelle didn't wait for Vicki to respond and led her through a door until they came to a room with a large stone fireplace, although it wasn't lit as it was a warm evening. There was a mezzanine that ran along the length of the lounge, and steps led up to what looked like a library. Table lamps reflected off the pine walls, giving the room a warm glow. Two large, comfortable sofas faced one another, by the fireplace. A man with glasses and a beard sat on one of the sofas, doing a crossword. He stood up when they entered the room.

"This is my husband, David," said the woman with the pony tail, telling Vicki what she already suspected. "And I am Rachelle. David, this is Vicki Denham."

"Pleased to meet you," said David, in what sounded like a German accent. Vicki assumed he was Swiss. "Are you a guest ...?"

David Gessner stopped in mid-sentence and stared at his wife.

"Denham, did you say?"

"Yes," said Vicki. "I'm Sam Denham's daughter."

Vicki watched Rachelle fall into the sofa, as if her legs no longer had the strength to support her. David Gessner looked like he wanted to do the same but took the hand that she offered.

“Do you have any proof?” asked David, and Rachelle snapped at him.

“It’s her, I can tell.”

“No, that’s a fair question,” said Vicki, hoping to stave off an argument, and she reached into her bag for her passport.

“Here,” she said, offering it to David.

He gave it a cursory look and handed it back.

“Why are you here?”

“I’ve come to see Alice Schmitt, if that’s still her name.”

“And what makes you think she’s here?”

Vicki began to explain but Rachelle cut her off.

“You must be tired after your long journey. We have one chalet that’s empty until the weekend, and you’re welcome to stay there tonight if you don’t mind the mess. The cleaners won’t be in to get it ready until tomorrow.”

“That’s very kind,” said Vicki, confused. “But what about ...”

“I’m sorry, we don’t want to talk about it.”

“But ...”

“Please, the chalet is open and it’s on top of the hill above the parking area. The couple who rented it only used one of the bedrooms, so you’ll be able to find a bed with clean sheets.”

“Can’t we just ...”

“We’ll speak to you tomorrow, Vicki,” said Rachelle sternly. “It’s too painful to talk about right now. Alice isn’t here.”

“Then where is ...”

“She died a long time ago.”

SEVENTY-FIVE

Vicki was confused by Rachelle's sudden coolness towards her but bit her tongue. If the woman didn't want to talk to her there was nothing she could do and, having been offered a place to sleep for the night, she had no wish to antagonise her further. Before leaving the couple to their own devices, she offered to pay for her lodgings, but Rachelle said that the chalet was empty anyway and, if Vicki was happy with the mess, she was welcome to spend the night there free of charge.

Once Vicki had thanked them and picked up what few belongings she had brought with her from the car, she headed for the chalet. When she opened the door, she was immediately struck by how pretty it was. Far from being messy, everything appeared to be clean and tidy, indicating that the previous occupants had been considerate guests. She climbed the stairs to check out the bedrooms. The master suite had been slept in, but the second bedroom was almost the same size. A balcony ran the full length of the chalet and she suspected that she would be greeted by a spectacular view the following morning when she awoke.

It was just a shame that she was too tired and upset to enjoy it. She headed for the kitchen and was pleased when she found some tea in a jar in one of the many cupboards. Ever the English girl, she was dying for one last cup before she collapsed in the large comfortable bed that awaited her. The lounge contained sofas, just like the ones in the Gessner's chalet, and Vicki collapsed in the nearest one, sipping her drink.

Lacking the energy to return to the kitchen, she placed her cup on the large coffee table in the middle of the room and tried to summon up the willpower to make her way to the bedroom. It was then that she thought she heard the front door open. Sitting in a strange house, she couldn't help feeling nervous. Was it an intruder? She quickly decided it must be Rachelle. Had she changed her mind and decided to talk to her? Vicki turned her head, ready to greet her with a smile.

A pretty and elegant woman with shoulder-length brown hair stood in the doorway, smiling. She had a kind face and she was dressed in stylish jeans and a white tee-shirt, over which she wore a linen jacket. Vicki tried to guess her age and initially would have put it at only a few years above her own, but then she realised the woman in front of her was nearer to her father's age. It was all

academic anyway, decided Vicki. She recognised the woman from her photograph.

Standing before her was Alice Schmitt.

“I hope I didn’t startle you.”

Vicki’s tiredness was forgotten but she still couldn’t speak. The shock of seeing the woman everyone assumed was dead, standing there alive and well, was overwhelming. She made a few noises from the back of her throat, but words refused to come out. It had the effect of making Alice laugh.

“You must be Vicki ... Sam’s daughter.”

Vicki nodded.

“You’re just as pretty as I thought you’d be. But, of course, your father was a very handsome man. Still is, I imagine.”

“You’re really alive,” said Vicki, finally finding her voice.

“Yes, I am. And I’d really like to know how you found out, if you feel up to staying awake for a chat.”

“Are you kidding? That’s why I drove all the way here. If I make you a drink, do you promise not to disappear.”

Alice laughed again.

“I promise. Coffee for me. Milk, no sugar.”

It was the fastest cup of coffee Vicki had ever made and she returned to the lounge moments later, where Alice had already sat down on the sofa facing hers. The two women eyed each other up as they drank, not saying a word. Alice broke the silence.

“So, how did you know I was here? You’re the first person to turn up looking for me since I disappeared eighteen years ago. I’m just curious how you knew.”

“I had a little help from the owner of the chateau.”

“Chateau Blanc?”

“Yes. We’re staying there. It’s a hotel now.”

“We?”

“Yes. Me and my parents.”

“Sam’s there?”

Vicki noticed Alice’s eyes seemed to sparkle at the memory of Sam Denham.

“Yes.”

“What are you doing at the chateau?”

“Ostensibly, dad booked it so that we could visit my great-grandfather’s grave.”

“Ostensibly?”

“Yes. I think dad wanted to return to the chateau so that he could feel closer to you. He visits your grave every day.”

Vicki tried to read Alice’s expression. There was sadness and a sense of loss, but also a hint of joyfulness, as if she treasured the thought of Sam needing to be with her.

“I think he’s still in love with you.”

Alice’s eyes immediately glistened, and she stared into her coffee cup.

“He’s the only man I’ve ever loved.”

“There’s no ring on your finger. Have you never met anyone else?”

“No. That’s the problem when you meet the man of your dreams ... no one else will do.”

“So, why did you disappear?”

Alice looked up from her cup and stared directly into Vicki’s eyes. She smiled, as if it were a ridiculous question.

“You wouldn’t understand.”

“Try me.”

Alice sighed.

“For one thing, your father was taken.”

“But how do you know he wouldn’t have left mum to be with you?”

“I don’t. But you of all people should realise I couldn’t have asked him to do that. It wouldn’t have been fair.”

“Mum and I would have survived.”

Alice smiled, but it was tainted with sadness.

“Forgive me, Vicki, but that is easy for you to say now, as a grown woman. But you were only a child then. Your father knew what it was like to be left by a parent at a young age. He had no wish to put you through the same thing. And don’t forget your mother. She depended on him.”

“Then I suppose I should thank you that I had a father to love when I grew up. But you should know that I could always tell there was a sadness he carried, deep inside ... even though he tried to hide it. Now, of course, I know he had a broken heart.”

Alice shook her head.

“That is a very painful thing to hear.”

There was an awkward silence, and the two women placed their empty cups on the coffee table while they both gathered their thoughts. Vicki was the first to speak.

“Why did you fake your own death?”

“Believe me, I have asked myself that question every single day since I escaped from the chateau.”

“Escaped?”

“That is how it felt to me at the time.”

There was another moment of silence and Vicki chose to give Alice the time she needed.

“If I tell you what happened, do you promise not to judge me?”

“Of course. I know some of it, and, from what little I do know, it sounds like you went through hell.”

Alice nodded, and tears welled up in her eyes. Vicki detected a sense of relief in Alice as her body became less tense. She was clearly grateful that Vicki seemed to understand.

“On the day I was supposed to have died, I discovered my husband planned to murder you, Sam and your mother.”

Vicki was grateful she had placed her empty cup down because, if she hadn't, she was sure she would have dropped it. The more she learnt about the events of eighteen years before, at the chateau, the more she found the whole thing unbelievable.

“Murder us? How?”

“Arson. He paid a man called Hans Becker to burn your house down.”

“The man who was killed with an axe?”

Alice gave Vicki a look that said she was impressed.

“You *have* done your research, haven't you?”

“Who killed him?” asked Vicki.

“I did.”

Vicki looked at Alice, not knowing what to say. Alice decided to explain.

“He was trying to kill me. They knew I'd overheard their plans. Anton had also murdered a girl that worked at the chateau.”

“Adele.”

Alice sat back, astounded.

“How do you know all this?”

“Madam Lambert, the owner of the chateau, put two and two together and came up with a theory.”

“I suppose I should be thankful that Madam Lambert does not work for the police.”

Both women smiled.

“Was it Adele’s body in the car?”

For the first time, Alice appeared ashamed, and her eyes looked down at the floor.

“Adele was my friend and I hope she forgives me for what I did. I think I must have been insane at the time, after all that had happened.”

“I’m sure she would understand. After all, you were the one who discovered her murderer.”

“Yes. My own husband.”

“It was his body in the car?”

“Yes. I killed him ... but it was in self-defence, I swear.”

“You don’t have to prove anything to me, Alice. I read the newspapers from the time. I know what sort of people you were dealing with. You were lucky to come out of it alive.”

“Thank you. That means a great deal to me.”

Vicki looked at her surroundings and the darkness of the night stared back at her through the window.

“How did you stay hidden for so long?”

“I took some money with me when I disappeared. I left most everything else behind. When I arrived here, Rachelle and David agreed to let me stay. I even invested in the business and they let me pay my way by working here. Of course, I changed my name. Somehow, I have remained undetected. Until now.”

Vicki wanted to know more about what happened all those years ago and about Alice’s life since then. But there was something even more important she had to ask her, if only she could find the words.

“You saved our lives that day, when you stopped your husband and his hired killer from carrying out their plan.”

“At least there was one good thing to come out of that day.”

“You saved my father’s life more than once.”

“And he saved mine too.”

Vicki took a deep breath and led the way to the question she was desperate to ask.

“I’m not a child anymore, I’m a grown woman. And my mother and father have decided to live separate lives.”

“What are you trying to say?”

“I’m saying you wouldn’t be a home-wrecker anymore.”

Alice stared at Vicki, as she tried to come to terms with what Sam’s daughter was trying to tell her.

“Come back with me, to the chateau, and mend my father’s broken heart.”

SEVENTY-SIX

Sam helped Tanya get ready and even kissed her when she insisted on making sure her nails were perfect before they went down to breakfast. She soon realised that the fears she had been harbouring, since their talk about getting on with their own lives, had been unfounded. If anything, Sam had become even more attentive and they were enjoying each other's company. They decided to take their coffees out on the patio when the sun broke through the clouds, and Tanya chose that moment to share her news.

"Vicki left me a message on my phone this morning. It said she's already left her friend's house and she should get here some time tonight."

"I don't expect she'll want to head home after driving all that way, so we'll have to rough it here for another night," said Sam, sipping his coffee and raising his head to soak up the morning sun.

"It's a tough life," said Tanya, smiling.

"I think this French air agrees with you. You're looking particularly ravishing this morning."

"Flatterer."

Tanya wondered what Sam was up to, and she saw him hesitate before continuing.

"What are you thinking?" she asked.

"Do you remember that party we threw for Vicki a few years ago?"

"Yes, why?"

"One of her male friends was in the next room to where I was sitting, describing in graphic detail what he'd like to do to you. If I'd had a few more drinks, I would probably have gone in there and knocked his block off."

Tanya laughed.

"Do you remember his name?"

"Why?"

"Maybe I'll look him up."

"I wouldn't bother. You deserve better."

"You're still looking out for me, aren't you? You just can't help yourself."

"Perhaps I'm being clumsy about it, but that's what I'm trying to tell you. I'm always there for you, if you need me."

Tanya reached across the table and stroked Sam's hand.

"I know you are, but it's nice to hear you say it."

When Sam said he needed to go for a run, to work off the rich French food they'd been eating for the past few days, Tanya watched him as he set off for the room to change.

She was sad that their marriage had to end, but she knew she was doing the right thing.

Vicki found the journey back to the chateau far less stressful than the one she had undertaken to find Alice Schmitt, only the day before. This time she had company.

Initially, when she had sprung her surprise on Alice and asked her to travel back to the chateau to be reunited with her father, the former wife of Anton Schmitt had said she needed a night to sleep on it. It was not something she could decide to do on the spur of the moment, she insisted.

But, early the next morning, Alice had returned to the chalet with the news that she had decided to go back to France, after eighteen years of hiding. Because she had escaped abroad and changed her name, Alice now had no passport, but she assured Vicki that wouldn't be a problem. Switzerland was in the Schengen area and there were no permanent passport controls. Once they set off, not only did they share the driving, but they also shared their lives, with the result that, as they came ever closer to their destination, the respect they felt for one another grew.

And, by the time they reached the chateau, they had become friends.

When it turned seven o'clock and they still hadn't heard from Vicki, Tanya said she was tired and wanted to go back to the room. Sam said he would have one last walk around the grounds before it got dark, and if Vicki still hadn't arrived by then, he would wait up to make sure she was back safely before heading to the room. Without really thinking about what he was doing, Sam headed for the bench beside Alice's grave and sat down. It was his last chance to be with her.

Alice felt a shudder go down her spine when she got her first glimpse of the chateau. Eighteen years had done little to erase the memories of that terrible day, when she had felt compelled to leave her old life behind. As Vicki parked the car in the courtyard, Alice was surprised how little things had changed. The empty moat with its secret caves, the huge iron gates that had torn

Anton's body in two, and even the outbuildings where Hans had received a deadly blow from the axe she had held in her hands – all still the same. Mercifully, Vicki brought Alice back to the present.

“If you're happy to wait here, I'll go up and try to explain to my mum and dad what I've been up to for the past two days.”

Vicki opened her door and was preparing to step out of the car, when Alice grabbed her by the arm.

“Are you sure we're doing the right thing, Vicki?”

“I'm sure,” replied Vicki with a confidence she didn't feel.

“But what about your mother?”

“She wants dad to be happy as much as I do.”

“Yes, but it's hardly the same. She's his wife.”

“I told you, she's ready to let him go, and we'll both still be there for her. She knows we'd never dream of abandoning her.”

Vicki realised she still had her own doubts and was trying to convince herself as much as Alice. But there was no turning back now.

“If you're sure.”

“I'm sure. I'll go up and do my best to prepare them.”

“Easier said than done.”

“I know. It's not every day that someone comes back from the dead.”

Vicki got out of the car and stretched to ease the ache in her back.

“I'll try not to be too long. Why don't you head for the garden and stretch your legs, and I'll come and get you when I'm ready?”

Once Vicki had gone, Alice decided to take her advice and headed for the little lake, beyond the moat. It had always been one of her favourite spots.

As she approached, she spotted a lonely figure, sitting on a bench, staring at the ground.

Sam Denham continued to stare at Alice's grave, unsure why it comforted him. It was starting to get dark and he decided he should really head back to the chateau. But he wanted to stay for just a few more minutes, and that was when the hairs on the back of his neck stood on end. He sat up, overwhelmed by the feeling that he was being watched.

A woman was standing some distance away, staring in his direction. It was impossible to see her face in the fading light, but she possessed a poise and elegance he found strangely familiar. He wondered what she was doing there.

Perhaps she was a fellow guest, exploring the grounds, unsure whether to encroach on his space. So, he waved, hoping to reassure her. She waved back and headed towards the bench. Sam stood up and turned to face her. As she drew closer, he could see her shoulder-length brown hair, framing a beautiful, kind face. A face he had fallen in love with eighteen years ago.

Sam liked to think of himself as a realist. A practical man. When he had been in Iraq, facing death every day, he had wanted to believe in God, but could only bring himself to trust what he was able see and hear and touch. Part of him also wanted to believe that a loved one lived on after they passed away, but he suspected that death represented the end of their soul as well as their body.

But now he had to face the fact that the world was not as he had thought. Far from being governed by the Laws of Nature, it was a place where miracles happen. A place where the person you loved more than anything else in the world can come back from the grave and reach out to touch you.

The miraculous vision stretched out her hand and stroked his face, and when he reached up and held it in his own, the vision spoke.

“Hello, Sam.”

Sam felt giddy and wondered how his legs continued to support him, but he found the strength to hold Alice in his arms and kiss her, as he breathed in the smell of her hair.

He had a thousand questions but, for now, it was enough to know that his sadness had gone for ever.



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